The Hush of War

by zeitgeistic (faire_weather)

Summary

Voldemort has made a bargain with Harry to stop killing muggles and muggle-borns (when at all possible, of course) in exchange for Harry's cooperation. While Harry thinks he's using the time to find a way to defeat the Dark Lord, he will realize that Voldemort is always one step ahead, and so long as he isn't killing anyone...what's the big deal? He has bigger things to worry about now, anyway. Includes dementors, pureblood culture, the prophecy, what exactly happened with Lily's sacrifice, magical breakthroughs, children Death Eaters, and portraits of family. Final pairing: H/D. Sequel to Black, in the Smothering Dark. Beta'd by laureen@livejournal.

Notes

There are some dark, morally questionable, and reprehensible themes in this work. While I have tried to write the story in a way that allows the reader to suspend their disbelief, it should not be taken to mean that I endorse the depicted attitudes. You'll know them when you get to them. Some of these themes may be triggering.

See the end notes of Chapter One if you'd like to be forewarned. Skip them if you'd rather
not.

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DO NOT REPOST OR ARCHIVE THIS FIC ANYWHERE. (I can't believe I am having to put this notice up again. What happened to fandom etiquette?) ty

See the end of the work for more notes.
The History of Warfare

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Warfare (n): 1. the waging of armed conflict against an enemy, 2. an active struggle between competing entities

Ron was not at dinner, which should have been the first sign that something was wrong, but Harry, so caught up in a discussion of the pros and cons of performing a Wronski Feint during bad weather, and Hermione, so absorbed in a bit of light reading, hardly noticed. Seamus sat next to Harry and positioned a fork to hover vertically above a bowl of mashed potatoes.

"Harry," Seamus said, accent thick in his excitement, "you gotta remember that your visibility's gonna be like...I don't know, really shoddy. You could come up on the ground and not even realise it 'til your head is buried under the dirt and your legs are twitchin'."

Harry looked at him askance as he shovelled another bite of steak and kidney pie into his mouth. He swallowed and said, "Seamus, when's the last time you performed a feint of any kind?"

Seamus looked a bit shifty, which was not altogether unusual: Seamus was usually pretty shifty, actually. He'd gotten along famously with the twins, after all. "You know I haven't," Seamus said with a scowl. "I'm not a Seeker, anyway."

Harry considered the fact that in fifth year Seamus hadn't been much of a Chaser either. Seamus seemed to pick up on Harry's line of thought because he said next, "I've been practising. You've gotta replace Katie and Alicia—I'm gonna try out."

Harry looked at him dubiously, which he was allowed to do because Seamus knew how badly he'd performed in fifth year. "Good luck," Harry said, grinning.

Seamus gave him a mocking, narrow-eyed glance. "Won't need it," he said. On the other side of him, Dean leaned forward and gave Harry a significant look.

"Everyone knows the Irish can't play Quidditch," he said good-naturedly.

Seamus grinned and elbowed him suggestively, which Seamus was wont to do on occasion—or often, actually. "Beaters, huh? I hadn't even thought of that. Might be fun—I have a natural talent for handling thick wood and feisty balls."

Dean rolled his eyes. "That was really bad—even for you." Harry nodded sadly in agreement.

"Oh honestly, Seamus," Hermione said exasperatedly from Harry's other side. All three boys turned to look at her, eyebrows raised. Harry would have thought, by then, that Hermione had grown accustomed to crass boarding-school boy humour. Obviously, he had been wrong.
"What?" Seamus said defensively.

Hermione pursed her lips and Harry settled in for a lecture on the proper etiquette used around ladies.

"I could have come up with a better pun," she said, and then turned back to her book: it was well over a thousand pages and she was reading them so quickly that the words blurred to Harry's eyes. All three boys burst out laughing.

"Of course you could have," Dean said. "But yours probably would have included something frightful about beating balls. Everyone knows about how you like to manage Ron."

"Bet Ronnie likes it too," Seamus snickered.

Hermione scowled. "Where is Ron?" she asked, looking up and down the table. Harry followed her glances, frowning.

"I don't know," he said. "He was in the dorm when we came down. He said Neville had forgotten something for his Herbology thesis and he was going to take it to him first."

Hermione looked at him, then at her watch, then back to Harry. "Well it's a quarter 'til and he's still not here. Certainly it can't have taken him forty-five minutes to drop something off at the greenhouses…?"

Harry shrugged. "Doesn't matter," he said, standing up. Dean, Seamus and Hermione followed. He grabbed a few rolls off the table and wrapped them in a napkin. "We can just bring him something back and if he's still hungry later, I'll let him use my..you know...to go down to the kitchens."

Hermione neglected to say anything about how, as Head Girl, she could not advocate such an expedition, which proved just how curious the situation was to her.

After all, Ron never missed a meal.

Harry stumbled into the dorm room and landed on top of Dean with Seamus landing on top of him. The Irish boy had gotten it in his head that they should play levitating leap frog up the stairs and Harry had been in too good a mood to tell him it was a bad idea—which it had been, judging by the state of things.

They'd done well going up the seven main staircases, and Dean had even convinced Hermione to leap over all of them once—for self-levitation practise purposes, of course—but Harry had lost control of his Wingardium Leviosa at the top of the stairs leading to the boys' dorm and fallen on top of Dean. Seamus, thinking this was probably better than the game itself, used it as an excuse to fall on Harry.

They lay sprawled in a laughing heap inside the door until Dean started to complain about Harry's armpit being in his face.

"Seamus, stop rutting," Dean said exasperatedly. "I can feel it all the way down here, you pervy sod."

"Harry doesn't seem to mind," Seamus said. "He's writhing like he likes it."

Harry lifted his head from the floor. "You mistake my resigned squirming to get away with writhing," he said blankly. He was very glad that Hermione had gone on up to the girls' dorm instead of following them up to talk. None of them would ever live it down if she had seen any of this.
Seamus finally lifted himself up and Harry and Dean untangled themselves from each other, still giggling occasionally.

They stepped all the way in the boys’ dorm, shut the door behind them, and finally saw Ron. He was sitting, white-faced on the edge of his bed, staring at nothing. Harry had a moment of embarrassed guilt at having been caught in such a position with Dean and Seamus before he realised that Ron had noticed none of it. He was not white-faced from seeing them sprawled suggestively on the floor—it was for an entirely different reason.

Harry just didn’t know what that reason was.

"Ron, mate, what's wrong?" Dean asked, plopping down on his bed. Seamus crawled up the ladder to his own bed and lay down, staring down at Ron. The year before, he’d been able to talk Dean into converting their beds into bunk beds, and Professor McGonagall had not made them change it back. Seamus called it the Fort.

Ron didn't move, didn't acknowledge them at all. He hadn't seemed to have heard. Cautiously, Harry walked over, sat next to Ron, and put his hand lightly on his redheaded friend's shoulder. Ron jerked and looked at Harry. His eyes were abnormally large, almost as large as Luna Lovegood's.

"Malfoy," Ron said hoarsely.

Harry furrowed his eyebrows. "What did he do? Did he say something about your mum again?"

Ron shook his head slowly. "No."

"Erm…did he call you Weasel?"

"No," Ron said in that same hoarse voice. Harry exchanged looks with Dean and Seamus. He was running out of ideas. Altercations with Malfoy usually followed the same agenda: taunting family and then ending with a riveting bout of name-calling.

"Well did you get into a row with him at all?"

"No," Ron said.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Then what did the little ferret do?"

"He saw me," Ron said, completely ignoring the jibe. He paused and then added, very slowly, "He saw me having a bit of a drink, and he reported me to McGonagall. She wrote my mum."

Harry inhaled sharply. He’d thought that Ron had run out of firewhiskey in their first week back and so had said nothing about his friend's increasingly bad habit. He'd hoped that with enough time without alcohol, Ron would forget about it. He reckoned he had been wrong.

"You got caught?" Seamus asked, scandalised. "How’d you get caught?" He leaned further over the bed and stared down at Ron in curiosity. "You must have been doing it in plain sight for Malfoy to catch you."

"Greenhouse Four," Ron said, nodding. He'd seemed to get a bit a colour back by now, but he was
still so pale that every one of his freckles stood out in stark contrast. Seamus sighed in exasperation.

"Really, mate," Seamus said, "you should have known better. Malfoy's taking Herbology too; of course he'd be there tonight." Dean craned his neck over the side of his bed to stare up at Seamus. Seamus looked down at him defensively. "What? So I like to see men getting their hands dirty."

Harry sniggered, totally forgetting the situation at hand. "You would," he said.

"Even Neville?" Dean asked, lips twitching. Seamus sneered at him playfully.

"She took my prefect's badge away," Ron continued slowly, bringing all of them back to the conversation. Harry gaped.

"Bollocks," Seamus said. "Now one of us is gonna have to do it."

"Shut up, Seamus," Dean said. Harry gave him a thankful look. Ron hadn't been paying attention, but it still wasn't the time for jokes. He seriously doubted McGonagall would pick Seamus as Ron's replacement anyway. Most likely, it would be Dean.

"It'll be okay, Ron," Harry said, patting him awkwardly on the back. Ron glanced at him.

"No it won't."

Harry bit his lip. "Ron—you really shouldn't be drinking as much as you do anyway. Especially not when we've got Potions essays due."

"This is a regular thing?" Dean asked. Harry looked significantly at Seamus and then back to Dean. Dean got it in one. He promptly closed his mouth.

"I'm out anyway," Ron said, flopping back on his bed. "McGonagall confiscated my last bottle." He sighed heavily and then pulled the duvet over his head. "I'm just going to go to bed. Maybe I'll wake up tomorrow and this will all have been a bad dream."

As soon as Ron's curtains were closed, Seamus scurried back down the ladder and into Dean's bed to talk about Ron, but Harry was suddenly feeling just as tired as his friend. He padded back over to his bed, pulled off his shirt, and went to sleep, still wearing his trousers.

And to think, he had thought this year would be easy.

Harry woke up sweating and breathing heavily. He sat up in his bed in Gryffindor Tower and fumbled for his wand to cast a Tempus spell, groaning at the time. It was only eleven-thirty, but he’d been waking up like this almost every night since he’d arrived back at Hogwarts on September first, nearly two weeks ago, and knew that he wouldn’t get back to sleep. He didn’t know why the dreams unsettled him so much, but they did, and always left him feeling horrible in the morning.

Vaguely, he wondered why he hadn’t had these dreams so often while he was still staying at River House over the summer, and then remembered that many of his nights had been occupied with Voldemort. They weren’t now: Voldemort was temporarily satisfied with him. He’d left him alone thus far.

But perhaps his mind was trying to tell him something. He lay back in his bed, trying to go back to sleep, but after fifteen minutes, realised it wasn’t going to happen. Of course he wouldn’t be that lucky.
He just couldn’t get them out of his head once he had them each night. If only he could make out whom the voice belonged to, or remember what they told him once he woke up—then maybe he’d be able to forget about it.

With a sigh, Harry stood up and rummaged through his trunk for his map. Perhaps some wandering would tire him out enough to sleep. He pulled the map out and activated it, scanning the castle for any late night lurkers that might impede his exploring.

A black dot moving around in the dungeons caught his eye. He hadn’t thought once of Malfoy since he’d gotten back to Hogwarts, but seeing him wandering around brought back memories of the night Voldemort had come for him. He remembered Malfoy's strange, crazed eyes and cringed.

Why was he surprised? He hadn’t been wrong when he'd generalised Malfoy as a future Death Eater all those years ago, he just hadn't known to what extent Malfoy would be one. Clearly, Malfoy was just as mad as Bellatrix Lestrange or Fenrir Greyback, who Harry had heard stories of from Professor Lupin.

Malfoy was so strange; it was obvious to Harry that he had no preference whatsoever what happened to the wizarding world, so long as he got to Avada Kedavra without discrimination. Malfoy, Harry thought, would kill his own mother without a second thought, and do it messily at that. Of course, Harry could be wrong. He didn't think he was though.

He was certain, now more than ever, that every time Malfoy had played a dangerous prank on him, he really had been trying to kill him. Harry snorted in bitter amusement as the little black dot paced up and down the dungeons. What was wrong with him? Why was he so amused by this?

Harry looked out through his curtains at the other boys. Neville had come in sometime after Harry had drifted off, and was now snoring almost as loudly as Ron. Ron—Harry glanced at his sleeping friend and frowned.

He should have done something sooner, but he hadn't thought it was so bad. He still didn't, really: all the muggle men his Uncle Vernon invited over for dinner during the summers drank just as much as Ron. But they were grown men, Harry thought. They didn't have studies to worry about—or dark lords either.

“Well,” he said quietly to himself, looking back down at the map. “What could it hurt?” Ron was snoring so loudly now that he figured he could slam the dormitory door and no one would notice it.

Hermione would fix it, Harry thought as he grabbed his invisibility cloak and headed out of the dorms. She would probably have Ron's guts for garters in the process, but at least she would know what to do. On his way to a little corridor in the south dungeons, Harry pulled the cloak tighter around himself and repressed a shiver as he thought of how horrible Ron's day was going to be in the morning.

From two week’s worth of listening to Hermione revise (and revise again) the prefects' round schedules, Harry knew that Draco Malfoy patrolled the dungeons from nine p.m. to midnight every Sunday and Wednesday night—and then wandered around for an hour or so more just because he could. After seeing Malfoy at the Death Eater meeting over the summer, Harry suspected that the Slytherin probably did it for the chance to be cruel if he happened to catch someone out after hours.

Hermione, as Head Girl, patrolled as well, but he was fairly sure she did it for the love of rules.
Harry had refused to even think about this since the start of term because Malfoy was just such a pain in the arse that he couldn’t muster up the patience for it, but he wouldn’t be getting back to sleep again that night, and he might as well do something productive. Maybe Malfoy would surprise him. Maybe Malfoy wouldn’t be such a little bastard. Harry doubted it.

He was under the invisibility cloak when Malfoy sauntered by, and he stepped out behind him, pulling the cloak off and tucking it away. “Malfoy,” he said, slipping his hands in his pockets and trying to look unassuming. Malfoy whirled around and sneered at him.

“Out after hours, Potter?”

Harry smiled benignly, and said a little silent apology to James Potter. “I’m not a Potter, Malfoy,” he chided gently. “You know that. Everyone knows that.”

Malfoy narrowed his eyes, and took a step closer. “You’re not worthy of being a Black,” he sneered. “It’s quite the scandal.”

Harry shrugged again. “Maybe not,” he agreed easily, but didn’t say anything more. The fact alone that Malfoy had yet to take points or draw his wand showed that he was at least a little bit intrigued by what Harry had up his sleeve, whether he wanted to admit it or not. Harry had all night; he wasn’t going back to sleep. He could wait for Malfoy to direct the conversation.

It didn’t take Malfoy as long as he’d suspected it might. "I caught the Weasel indulging himself in the greenhouses tonight," Malfoy said, sneering. "He lost his badge."

Harry frowned. "You think he didn't tell me?"

Malfoy shrugged. "Just wanted to make sure you were aware of it."

"I am," Harry said.

"Is he heartbroken?" Malfoy asked with feigned concern.

"Worried more about what his mum's going to say, I'd think," Harry said flatly—this was turning out just as he'd expected: Malfoy was going to be a prat until one of them lost his temper and started a fight. It was not going to be Harry, he decided stubbornly.

Malfoy snorted. "Disgraceful."

There was a long silence, during which Harry only stared blandly at Malfoy before the Slytherin finally broke. "What do you want, Potter?" Harry raised his eyebrows, smiled coolly, and waited. "Black, then," Malfoy corrected with a sneer.

"What do you think of Voldemort?" Harry said, non sequitur, head cocked innocently to the side. He had no idea what he was doing really, but he knew that Malfoy would eventually become a Death Eater and be under Voldemort’s control, or he would strike out on his own—probably killing everyone in the process. Harry had a vested interest in keeping that from happening, as he assumed he would be one of the first to go.

There was no way Malfoy would ever defect to the Light side, but that didn't bother Harry as much as it might have before. Better to have Malfoy on Voldemort's side than on no one's. He would be much less dangerous under the Dark Lord’s control.

Malfoy gaped at him, but managed to collect himself quickly. Harry could see the warring emotions under Malfoy’s mask of indifference and impatience, but suspected that he would be one of the few
who could. He might not be friends or even friendly acquaintances with Malfoy, but he knew him—knew his facial expressions—when he was angry or excited, plotting or bored.

Malfoy had nearly as many facial expressions as any one of Harry’s lively Gryffindor friends, and definitely more than the other Slytherins. Even Crabbe and Goyle were better—and then Harry had a thought: was the dumb shtick their way of hiding their emotions? Harry mused over that for several seconds before turning back to the blond. Right now, Malfoy was confused and angry; it showed all over his face.


Harry smiled. “Yes,” he agreed. “I think so, too.” He took a moment to bask in wonder at how Malfoy had finally called him by the right name, and then said, “But do you think all the muggles should be killed?”

“Of course,” Malfoy sneered, rolling his eyes at what he assumed was merely ignorance or Gryffindor righteousness. “Muggles are vile, filthy creatures. They should be wiped off the face of the planet.”

Harry nodded, having expected that. “I suppose that’s one solution,” he said with a shrug. Malfoy was spouting off excuses his father had fed to him for years. That was what Harry would need to correct, so that Voldemort would accept him, and Harry wouldn’t have to worry about a rogue elitist psychopath.

Malfoy, again, gaped at him. “The Golden Boy thinks that muggles should be eradicated?” Malfoy questioned. His face showed his doubt—no control whatsoever.

Harry shrugged. “No,” he said. “I think that muggles should be ignored so that wizards can spend their time doing more productive things—like eliminating squib births, thinking for themselves, and replenishing the bloodlines so that magic doesn’t die.”

“You want to kill off the squibs?” Malfoy asked, eyebrow raised. He looked intrigued, of course. Another set of people he would have an excuse to kill, Harry assumed.

“No,” Harry said, rolling his eyes, “I want to prevent them from being born, so that kids don’t have to grow up feeling like they don’t belong.”


“Like with muggleborns,” Harry added helpfully.


“Only that without muggleborns, all magic would eventually die out,” Harry countered. Malfoy opened his mouth to respond, but Harry cut him off. “Voldemort—”

Malfoy flinched. “Stop saying his name.”

“The Dark Lord,” Harry corrected, smirking at Malfoy’s look—he knew full well that only Death Eaters and sympathisers called Voldemort by that title—“says differently.”

Malfoy scoffed. “Even the Dark Lord can’t prevent squibs from being squibs. They’re just born that way,” he insisted. “And how would you know what the Dark Lord says?”
Harry withheld a smile. Malfoy was going to be difficult, but Harry had accepted this task, and who knew? Maybe it would add some excitement to what was starting out to be a rather boring year.

It didn’t matter that they believed in different things; he would try to get into Malfoy’s head—whether Malfoy realized it or not—and then he would see where that took him. Malfoy would probably still become a ruthless arsehole, but Harry had always expected that, and maybe, just maybe, he could make Malfoy into slightly less of a prick.

He ignored Malfoy’s question. He wasn’t stupid.

Malfoy was intelligent and could possibly become a powerful ally, but Harry would not tell him anything sensitive unless he could trust him absolutely. And that meant he was likely to never tell Malfoy even so much as his birthday. He wouldn’t trust the git if his life depended on it—especially if his life depended on it.

“You should have more faith in your master, Malfoy,” Harry said quietly. “And you should start thinking for yourself, instead of letting your father do it for you. I’ve seen you in the library—always studying. You aren’t stupid, so stop being so ignorant.”

Malfoy flinched, stunned, and opened his mouth slightly, but did not speak. It seemed, for once, that he’d been rendered speechless. Harry gave him a polite nod, turned and walked away.

“The Dark Lord’s cause is not ignorant,” Malfoy finally said, but Harry could tell that he was reluctant. He paused and turned back around to face the Slytherin.

“No,” Harry agreed. “Not anymore.” And then he spun back around and trekked back up to Gryffindor Tower. He might be able to get some sleep tonight, after all, and hopefully, he wouldn’t be too tired to hold Quidditch tryouts in the morning.

Harry didn't give a shit about what Malfoy did with his life, but he never backed down from a challenge.

Harry walked into the Great Hall. It was only seven a.m. by the time he’d gotten ready for the day, but he was not at all surprised to find his best friend, Hermione, already perched at her usual place on the Gryffindor table with a book in her hand.

Ron had been gone when he woke up, which was extremely unusual, as Ron always slept in, and it left Harry feeling wary of what the day would bring. He wondered if Hermione knew yet; how fast did Prefect news travel to the Head Girl? Would McGonagall have already spoken to her? Harry didn’t know.

Hermione didn’t notice his entrance until he slipped into a seat across from her, and began filling his plate with breakfast foods.

“Morning, Harry,” she said softly. She didn't look up from her book and she didn't smile at him like she usually did. Harry winced. She knew. “You don’t look like you slept well,” Hermione continued. She flipped another page in her book. This was how she dealt.

“Death’s brother, sleep,” Harry returned with an awkward attempt at matching her casualness. He thought of his night time conversation with Malfoy, and wondered if that constituted as an arguable reason for not sleeping well.

“Virgil said that originally,” she stated. She began buttering a piece of toast with her free hand.
Finally, she set the book aside and gave Harry a calculative look, no doubt wondering how much he knew and how to broach a mutually dreaded subject. Harry certainly wasn't going to be the one to bring it up, but he did wonder where Ron was.

Harry gave her a pained smile and went back to his own breakfast. They could both dance around the subject by repeating platitudes, but it wasn't going to make it any easier.

Hermione cleared her throat, and Harry tensed, waiting.

"Professor McGonagall cornered me this morning before breakfast," she said, rather heroically all things considered. Harry wondered how long she would hint and tease before she finally came out with it.

Not long, apparently, because she immediately followed with, "And how long have you known?"

Harry tensed further. "Known what?" he asked in a pathetic attempt to seem innocent. Hermione wasn't that stupid; Harry didn't know why he'd even bothered to try, but he just didn't want to talk about this uncomfortable subject. Ron would take care of it, and then they could go on as usual. She gave him a condescending glare.

"You know what I'm talking about Harry Black," she said. It made him jump—he still found himself unprepared to be called by that name. The first two weeks of classes hadn't been bad—none of his professors seemed to have had a problem remembering to call him 'Mr. Black'—well, except for Snape—but he had been prepared for it then. He hadn't when Hermione called him by it. "I know you know."

Harry shrugged noncommittally. "Where's Ron?" he asked.

Hermione slammed her buttered toast down on the table. It landed buttered-side down with an awkward squelching noise and Harry stared at it to avoid staring at Hermione. She leaned her head very close to his in an attempt at privacy, even though the Great Hall was virtually empty.

"You know what I'm talking about Harry Black," she hissed, as if she didn't know which name would intimidate him the most and finally decided to use every one she could think of. Harry flinched, thinking it sounded absurd, and hoping no one else ever called him that. "You knew! You knew all along. Ron was acting strange this summer—and when I thought about it, I realized you were, too. Were you doing it too?"

Harry lifted his head from where she'd jerked it level with her own. "No," he said indignantly. "I've got more important things to worry about than getting pissed."

"Then why was Ron doing it? Why did you let it go on?"

"Who says I knew anything about it?" Harry asked.

Hermione snarled. "I am not a fool, Harry. Quit playing me like one."

"Fine," Harry muttered, resigned. "Yeah, I knew."

Hermione looked as if she couldn't tell whether to be triumphant at having gotten the information out of him or horrified at what the information was. "I knew it," she said. And then, "Why was he doing it?"

Harry had a faint idea, but it seemed so stupid even to him that he was reluctant to repeat it to Hermione. He took a tentative bite of his breakfast, stalling for time, but Hermione shoved his plate
away and once he had swallowed what was in his mouth, he had nothing left to occupy himself with. "I don't know," he said.

Hermione gave him another look. "Bollocks!" she hissed, still leaning very close to him. She was staring at him with narrowed eyes and Harry realised that she looked even more intimidating than ever before. "Tell me." It was not a request; it was an order.

"I think he fancies you," Harry said, scratching his neck uncomfortably.

Hermione rolled her eyes in exasperation. "That’s lovely, Harry, but why was he drinking so much alcohol? Why was he so dependant on it that he couldn't stop once he got back to school?"

"You're the smart one," Harry sneered. "You tell me."

Hermione slapped him.

Then gathered her things, and walked right out of the Great Hall. Harry stared at her retreating back, feeling like a huge prat and wondering if that was how Malfoy felt every single day of his life. He glanced across the hall to see if the Slytherin had actually made it to breakfast himself, and instead, his eyes landed on a rabbity-looking brown-haired, brown-eyed Slytherin. Theodore Nott caught his eye and stared.

Harry looked away and quickly followed Hermione out of the Hall.

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"I'm sorry," he pleaded as he finally caught up to Hermione on the third floor. They had Defence with Hufflepuff first thing on Mondays and Wednesdays, so he had known, relatively, where to find her. She ignored him, swinging her bag over to her other shoulder and staring resolutely ahead as if she hadn't heard him at all.

"I'm sorry," Harry repeated again. He was struggling to keep up with her pace, even after six plus years of Quidditch. "Look—," he said, grabbing her shoulder and forcing her to stop. She spun around with a magnificent scowl and crossed her arms over her chest, looking as if she would tap her foot if it weren't a gesture so beneath her.

"I knew," he said plaintively. "You're right, I knew, but I didn't think it was so bad. Yeah, it made me uncomfortable, but how the hell was I supposed to know it was such a bad thing? My relatives had a few glasses of wine every night with dinner and my uncle's business partners did, too."

He sighed and ran his free hand through his hair. "He did it a lot over the summer—every night, I'd reckon, but," he looked around as if to find something to help him explain, but found nothing. "But it was never really my thing. My da—Sirius has a brandy every now and then, but it wasn't nearly as much as Ron did. I just thought Ron had a taste for it. Like sweets," he finished lamely.

Hermione snorted humourlessly. "Like sweets?" she asked. Harry shrugged uncomfortably. Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "Honestly, Harry, if you didn't think it was all that bad then why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't think it was my place to tell you."

"But it would only be 'not your place' to tell me if Ron was doing something he ought not to be and you were protecting him from me. Don't you agree?"

Harry looked at her warily, and refused to answer. He hated being backed into a corner. 

"If you didn't think Ron was doing anything wrong," Hermione carried on, "then it wouldn't have mattered who knew, would it? It would have been me learning something new about my friend, wouldn't it?"

Harry shrugged. "I guess."

"So you knew it was wrong," Hermione deduced.

Harry looked at her sharply. He hadn't really meant that. He had meant—well, he really didn't know what he meant, Harry realised.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Hermione asked again.

"Wasn't my place," Harry repeated. Honestly, if they were going to go through this again—

"You knew it was wrong, and you knew—even if it was only subconsciously—that Ron needed help. Why did you hide this for him? I know you must have—Ron is about as subtle as a troll in an antique shop. He would have ousted himself already if you hadn't been guarding his back."

"I snuck him up to my room to sleep it off while Fred guarded the door," Harry admitted. It was practically impossible to keep secrets from Hermione, and with that, he suddenly got the horrifying thought that it was likely Hermione was going to find out what he had been up to as well. He struggled to keep his expression from changing. Now was not the time to think about that. "And I gave him a hang-over potion once."

"Why did you have a hang-over potion?" Hermione asked suspiciously.

Harry narrowed his eyes at her. This wasn't about him, and he was damned if he was going to let it get turned around. The consequences of Hermione on an Inquisition could be more than just a little bit damaging. "My dad gave it to me on my birthday, but I didn't drink enough to need it."

"Why was he doing it?" Hermione asked abruptly. Harry rubbed his eyes tiredly.

"I told you. I don't know, but once, when he was at it in the drawing room while I talked to my grandparents' portrait, he told me that he loved you."

Hermione snorted. "Right, Harry."

"That's what he said," Harry said defensively.

"Ron doesn't love me," Hermione said flatly. "I don't think he knows exactly what he wants, but it's certainly not me. I'm everything he doesn't like: rules, logic and not a fan of Quidditch."

Harry shrugged. Love could be funny like that, or so he had always thought. Maybe he was wrong, but he didn't think that sort of thing mattered when you were in love. But maybe Hermione was right; maybe Ron really didn't know what he wanted. The bell in the North Tower sounded the hour, and they hurried into the Defence classroom just as the professor was shutting the door.

Ron was not in class either. Dean, Seamus and Neville were saving the two of them seats near the back and from the look on Neville's face, Harry knew that he had been informed about what happened in the dormitory the night before. Harry gave them a weak smile as he led Hermione to the table across the isle from theirs. They smiled faintly back.

On the opposite side of the room, the Hufflepuffs had no idea what was going on; Justin Finch-Fletchley and Hannah Abbott even seemed to be clueless. Harry supposed that it wouldn't be too
long before they found out. If McGonagall didn’t announce it to them, then Malfoy surely would.

He saw Zacharias Smith leaning back in his chair next to Justin Finch-Fletchley and looking at him, eyebrow raised. The two of them had eaten dinner together with Harry’s father and Zacharias’ parents over the summer and then lunch at Merlin’s Magic Mushroom, but Harry didn’t think that made them friends.

The fact that he’d seen Zacharias’ mother, Yasmin Smith, at a Death Eater meeting, however, did mean he would have to keep an eye on him. He gave Smith a similar glance and turned back to the front just as their new professor cleared her throat.

"Good morning," Professor Sinclair said, smiling. She was a woman of about thirty-five years with black hair, blue eyes, pink cheeks and a warm smile, but Harry got the feeling that she wasn’t as kind as she looked. She would have to be at least a little hardened to be a Death Eater.

He wondered, knowing that Smith’s mother was a Death Eater as well, how many other students knew about her. There were certainly more students in the school with Death Eater ties than he had originally thought. Strangely enough, it didn’t bother him. He reckoned that everyone had their secrets…and how macabre a thought was that, he wondered. He also deluded himself into believing that those families had good reasons for joining Voldemort.

"Good morning, Professor Sinclair," the class echoed back. She smiled brightly at them.

"It is a good morning, isn’t it?" she continued, Harry liked that about her: she was always so bloody cheerful. "My husband floo-called last night," she said.

That was another thing about her: she liked to tell her classes amusing anecdotes about her husband, Vlad, a Russian wizard who had gone to Durmstrang, but had always failed his Dark Arts classes. He just didn't have a knack for them, apparently.

The class tittered in expectant amusement. They had only known her for two weeks, but whenever she mentioned her husband, it was sure to be a laugh.

"Some colleagues invited him to go hunting in Romania this weekend," she continued, propping herself on the edge of her desk and grinning mischievously. Harry wondered who those 'colleagues' were. "He caught a rabbit, and they were going to have it for dinner, but when he tried to cast a skinning spell, it backfired and shaved his head instead. He looks ridiculous," she ended fondly.

Harry laughed along with the rest of the class. Even Hermione looked like she wanted to crack a smile, but she absolutely refused to do so, and instead stared down at her blank parchment. She didn’t like Professor Sinclair as much as everyone else did. She assumed (rightly, though Harry would never tell her) that Mercy Sinclair was a Death Eater or at least a sympathiser if she could be so blasé about the Dark Arts.

"So, yes," Professor Sinclair continued jovially once the laughter had died down, "it is a very good morning for me…but maybe not for my husband, who left his wool cap on the kitchen table."

There was more scattered laughter and then the professor hopped off the desk and stood facing the class with her hands behind her back.

“Now that I’ve sufficiently ruined my husband’s terrifying reputation for the morning, let’s get down to business. I know that each of you has taken at least five years of History, and that some of you are still taking it, but today I would like to give you a bit of a history lesson anyway.” The class groaned, and she added with a smile, “Oh, hush. I think you’ll find it interesting. We’ll be covering the history
of warfare.”

Hermione’s hand shot up and Professor Sinclair smiled patiently. “Yes, Ms. Granger?”

No matter what anyone said about Hufflepuff loyalty, Zacharias despised—loathed, hated even—Justin Finch-Fletchley with so much raging enthusiasm and fervour that sometimes he found himself coming this-close to pushing him down the stairs or over one of the banisters in Hufflepuff Den.

He wished that Finch-Fletchley had not been such an out-of-shape layabout and had joined the house Quidditch team; there, Zacharias could have easily bumped into him just-so, so that Finch-Fletchley fell from his broom. There were no padding spells on Quidditch pitches. If you fell, you splattered—unless a professor managed to slow your fall in time. The likelihood of that was even less than Granger managing to free all the house-elves.

Zacharias didn’t hate Finch-Fletchley because he was muggleborn; in truth, Zacharias didn’t care one way or another about them. He hated Finch-Fletchley because he was an obnoxious, lazy, brown-nosing, self-righteous little git. He should have been in Gryffindor, but even Potter—Black, Zacharias corrected himself—was better than that. He hadn’t thought so at first, but after being forced to dinner with him over the summer, he’d realised that he wasn’t so bad. He wasn’t so great either, but at least he wasn’t so bad.

Finch-Fletchley on the other hand—well, Finch-Fletchley really was as bad as Zacharias thought—he’d spent over six years sharing a dorm room with the wanker; he would know. Finch-Fletchley was one of those muggleborns who absolutely refused to be quiet. He picked a different cause to advocate daily, fluctuating between the mundane and the outrageous, but always, underneath, insisting something even worse: that muggleborn wizards were just as good as pure-blooded or half-blooded wizards.

Zacharias didn’t have a problem with that, per se, but he did have a problem with the way Finch-Fletchley went about it. No one, really, other than a select few, actually gave a damn about whether someone was pure-blooded or not. Most of the pure-bloods felt the same as Zacharias: they just didn’t care so long as the muggleborns weren’t arses about it and didn’t compromise their world or family traditions. But Finch-Fletchley went out of his way to make sure he was noticed—as a muggleborn.

Zacharias had a problem with this because Finch-Fletchley, usually, was wrong. He’d entered the wizarding world after spending ten years with absolutely no idea it even existed, only to pretend he was an expert on wizarding culture and traditions.

Finch-Fletchley liked to study (bits and pieces) of wizarding folklore and then brag about how much he knew. However, like muggle folklore, wizarding folklore was just that: folklore. It had no basis in reality. There had been, despite Finch-Fletchley’s avid arguments to the contrary, no wizard named Merlin. Ever. It was folklore...a bedtime story, but it was still part of their culture.

Zacharias’ favourite rant was when Finch-Fletchley would start talking about what a great wizard Merlin had been—about all the noble things he had done, about how he was a half-blood. That far back, even the Malfoys couldn’t trace their lineage, Finch-Fletchley had once said pompously.

And what was even better, Zacharias thought, was that even the folklore of Merlin didn’t make him out to be some altruistic all-powerful bloke. Even folklore suggested he would have been a Slytherin.

Because he had nearly been late for DADA, Zacharias was forced to sit next to Finch-Fletchley in
class. Finch-Fletchley smiled at him. He'd been trying to win Zacharias over since day one—because he had the convoluted idea that to bring down (hardly-existent) pure-blood superiority, he needed to befriend them. But Zacharias had grown up around dark magic, and he knew enough to suss someone out before offering any sort of alliance. Finch-Fletchley had not passed the test.

The new Defence teacher was a woman that his mother had had to dinner on many occasions as Zacharias was growing up. She gave him a quirky smile as he slid into his seat and then turned to face the rest of the class. Beside him, Finch-Fletchley scowled, dumbly assuming the professor had smiled at Zacharias because he was pure-blooded (and if rumours were correct, descended from Helga Hufflepuff—but that was really of no importance).

"Yes, Ms. Granger?" Professor Sinclair asked.

Zacharias turned his head slowly. No doubt Granger would have questions before the class had even begun. He wondered what a class would be like if Granger decided to save her questions for the end—see if they were actually covered in the course before she asked them. Zacharias suspected she might be surprised.

"How would you define the history of warfare?" Granger asked. "War has been around since before recorded history, wouldn't it be a bit risky to generalise it all into one history?"

Professor Sinclair smiled; Zacharias wondered how she put up with it. "Ah, very good question, Ms. Granger. You are absolutely right. Perhaps I should have worded that better. What we will, in fact, be discussing is the history of wizarding warfare and the common denominators in those wars."

"But how can we know that every war since the beginning of wizarding history is being covered?" Granger continued unrepentantly. Zacharias saw Black put his head in his hands next to her, and smirked.

"We can't," the professor shrugged. "But we can discuss what we are sure of."

Granger's hand fell.

"Now, who has read the chapter I assigned last Wednesday?" A scattering of hands soared back into the air and Professor Sinclair frowned. "You could at least lie to me," she said frowning. "It wasn't that boring was it?"

The class tittered; even Zacharias smiled. He liked her; he really did.

"Well it probably was," Professor Sinclair allowed. "It was chapter one, for those of you who didn't even bother to check the syllabus, and it was an overview of what would be covered in the book—probably the least intimidating chapter in the book, I would hazard. What it covered," she said, her voice rising, "was the Ten Wars. Who can tell me what the Ten Wars were?"

Zacharias raised his hand before Granger could because no matter what she believed, monopolies on answering questions in class were very gauche.

"Mr Smith?" Professor Sinclair called.

Zacharias sneered at Finch-Fletchley before he answered because he hated him, and for no other reason. Finch-Fletchley didn't notice. "The Ten Wars," Zacharias said clearly, "were the defining wars of British wizarding history. They were each wars that resulted in extreme change for the British wizarding world."

"Very good, Mr Smith—five points to Hufflepuff," the professor smiled. "Now, who knows what
each of those wars was called?"

Granger's hand shot up and Professor Sinclair acknowledged her. "The Ten Wars included, in chronological order: the Roman Occupation, the War of Muggles, the Derbyshire Devastation, the Falmouth Famine, The Iceland Battle, the War of 1212, the Clover Wars, the Goblin Rebellion of 1612, Pax Britannica and World War II."

"Excellent, five points to Gryffindor, Ms Granger," Professor Sinclair nodded.

"Why isn't the first war with You-Know-Who not on that list? Or World War I?" Dean Thomas spoke up suddenly. The professor gave him a grin.

"Because then it would be the Eleven Wars and eleven is not a strong magical number," Professor Sinclair answered.

Chapter End Notes

Potentially triggering themes in the story: child abduction
Scare Tactics
Chapter by faire_weather

Chapter Summary

This chapter revised 04/16/11.

Scare Tactic (n): 1. A strategy using fear to influence the public's reaction.

McGonagall was waiting for them when they got out of Defence class at eleven that morning. She stood imposingly outside Professor Sinclair's classroom with her hands on her hips, watching the students file out. When Harry exited with Hermione, she stepped forward.

"The Headmaster would like to see the two of you in his office immediately."

"Is it about Ron?" Hermione asked anxiously.

McGonagall gave her a strict glare. "You will see when you arrive, Ms Granger. I'll remind you that I am not your secretary." Hermione blushed and they followed her through the corridors to the gargoyle that guarded Professor Dumbledore's office. "Blood lollies," McGonagall said with no little amount of distaste.

Harry entered first and Hermione and McGonagall followed him up the spiral staircase. "Come in!" Dumbledore called before they even reached the door. Hesitantly, Harry turned the handle and pushed the door open. There were three empty seats in the Headmaster's office, but Ron was still not there.

Harry fought to keep himself from glaring suspiciously at Dumbledore as he took his seat. He still had unanswered questions about what happened to his father. He didn't think Dumbledore was going to answer them now, though. Hermione sat down quickly next to him but McGonagall remained standing, as if she refused to weaken herself in front of any of them. She stood next to Dumbledore's desk with her arms crossed across her chest and her lips pressed into a thin line. The third chair remained empty.

Dumbledore smiled pleasantly at the two of them over his desk, and Harry stared back politely. He was not about to play Dumbledore's little games; he wanted to know what was going to happen to his friend and Dumbledore had damn well better tell him. Hermione trembled next to him, but seemed to be thinking along the same lines; she remained quiet as well.

"Good morning Mr Black, Ms Granger," Dumbledore finally said after several moments of silence. From the corner of his eye, Harry could see McGonagall narrowing her eyes. "How do you find your newest Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher?"

Harry shrugged. "I like her. She's interesting."

Hermione huffed. "Her husband practises Dark Arts!" she said.
"Ms Granger," Dumbledore said complacently, "I'm sure that you will find that Professor Sinclair's husband does not practise Dark Arts, as he has thus far been unable to master a single Dark Arts spell."

Hermione muttered something that sounded like 'but he's still trying', and then said louder, "What about Ron? What's going to happen to him, Professor?"

"Ah," Dumbledore nodded. "We get to the meat of it all. I admit, I had hoped we could enjoy a bit more of the small talk, but if you insist—"

"Albus!" McGonagall growled. "My students have other classes to attend. Please get to the point."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Very well, Minerva. We shall get to the point as soon as—yes, here he is! Come in, please!"

Theodore Nott, Head Boy walked in, staring suspiciously at Professor Dumbledore. He was tall and weedy looking—as if he'd grown too fast for the rest of his body to catch up—and had plain brown hair and plain brown eyes. If Harry hadn't known that his father was one of the Death Eaters that was arrested after the battle at the Department of Mysteries, he would have said that Theodore Nott was utterly plain and unassuming.

But this particular Nott was not Marked, Harry knew. He had always distanced himself from the other Slytherins, never getting too involved with Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle or Zabini. He even seemed to dislike the Slytherin girls. He was never rude or cold to them, as far as Harry could tell, but he was not welcoming either. He had always been the wallflower.

"Welcome, Mr Nott. I'm so pleased you could join us," Dumbledore nodded.

Nott gave him a bland smile and sat in the unoccupied chair. "Thank you, Headmaster. I would have been here sooner, only Professor Snape just informed me. May I ask what this meeting is about?"

Harry felt his eyebrows furrow. So the Head Boy didn't know already? Malfoy hadn't even told him? Harry noticed that Nott had refused to give either him or Hermione a condescending look and realised that Nott was probably even more distanced from the other Slytherins than he'd originally thought. Perhaps all Slytherins weren't stupid after all.

"No one ever wishes to indulge in a nice chat," Dumbledore bemoaned. McGonagall narrowed her eyes. "Very well, Mr Nott. We are here to decide on a replacement for the male seventh year Gryffindor prefect. As Head Boy, you are entitled to voice your opinion and cast your own vote in the matter—as are Ms Granger, myself and Professor McGonagall, as Gryffindor Head of House."

Nott nodded slowly. "What happened to Weasley?"

Harry clenched his fists and beside him, Hermione tensed. He didn't want Ron's humiliation brandished around for the entire school, but, he supposed, with Malfoy having been the one to catch him, that was probably too much to hope for.

"He violated clause 6.5 in the Hogwarts Handbook for Perfect Prefects," Dumbledore answered sadly. Harry had no idea what this meant, but apparently, Nott did because he nodded in recognition.


Harry bristled.
"What do you mean disgraceful?" Hermione said, beating Harry to it. Nott looked over at her placidly. "I'm sure it's no more than the Slytherins get up to on a regular basis."

Nott's lips twitched in faint amusement. "I meant no offence to your friend, Granger, only that, as a prefect, he was setting a very bad example for the other students." It sounded almost snarky, but the words were so that Hermione could not argue against them. She sat back in her chair gruffly and folded her arms like McGonagall. Nott looked back to the Headmaster, who had watched the short proceeding in calm disinterest.

"So who are you suggesting to replace Weasley?"

Harry knew as soon as the words were out of Nott's mouth. No wonder he had been invited to attend this meeting. They were going to suggest him, but did he really want to be a prefect? In the beginning of fifth year, when Ron had become prefect, he had been jealous, but—but…did he really still want it?

He would, obviously, have to learn the entire *Hogwarts Handbook*, and if it was full of clauses like that, he wasn't really sure he was up for it. Plus, he was Quidditch captain this year and that was certainly going to be time consuming.

Not only that, but Ron would be jealous of him. He would probably resent Harry for taking over his job.

"We are suggesting Mr Black," McGonagall spoke up. Hermione immediately agreed, and Nott shrugged and nodded.

"I don't want it," Harry said quickly. Everyone turned to look at him.

"You don't want it?" McGonagall asked.

Harry shook his head. "No—no, I'm Quidditch captain already; give it to someone else. Someone who won't get in trouble, I'd say."

Hermione snorted and McGonagall looked like she wanted to laugh—Dumbledore did laugh. "Very well, Mr Black," Dumbledore said, and Harry noticed that he was being very careful not to call him by his first name as he usually did when it was just the two of them.

"How about Longbottom?" Nott spoke up. Harry and Hermione turned to him quickly. Had a Slytherin really just suggested that they make Neville the new Gryffindor prefect? It was unheard of! But then—Neville would probably be delighted, and surely his grandmother would be as well.

"Neville would be perfect," Hermione agreed. Dumbledore smiled and turned to McGonagall.

"Minerva, would you fetch Mr Longbottom? He should be on his way to lunch, if I'm not mistaken."

McGonagall nodded briskly and strode out of the room. "How are your studies coming, Mr Nott?"

Dumbledore asked when she was gone.

Nott cocked his head to the side. "Fine, thank you, sir."

Dumbledore nodded. "I'm sure your grandparents are very proud of you." Harry's ears perked up; did Nott live with his grandparents now that his father was in gaol? Or maybe, since his father was a Death Eater, Nott had always lived with his grandmother. Harry didn't know, but if his mother was dead or gone, then it was possible. Harry suspected that at least some of the Death Eater parents had no desire to do any parenting. It was very interesting.
"They are, sir," Nott nodded. "My grandmother was Head Girl when she was at Hogwarts."

Dumbledore nodded sagely. "Yes, I remember Kathryn very well. She was an excellent leader."

"I'll tell her you said so, Headmaster," Nott replied politely.

Dumbledore smiled and turned to Hermione. "And you, Ms Granger? How are you finding your duties? Satisfactory?"

"Yes, sir," Hermione answered immediately. "My parents were ever so pleased to hear it. As dentists, they would not have been able to send me to public school, so they never imagined that I would be offered such an opportunity."

Harry noticed that Nott's attention perked up when Hermione spoke, but he couldn't figure out why. He shrugged, figuring it unimportant, just as McGonagall reappeared in the doorway with Neville right behind her. He looked nervous—as if he knew he had to be guilty of something to be called to the Headmaster's office, but couldn't think of what he'd done wrong. He was certainly thinking of what his grandmother would do if she were to find out he'd gotten into trouble.

"Mr Longbottom!" Dumbledore welcomed happily. He conjured another chair—this one thick and comfortable looking—and Neville sat warily, looking around at the occupants of the room.

"Hello, sir," Neville said shyly. He put his school bag in his lap as if he were trying to shield himself from them and sunk back into the chair. "Hi Harry, hi Hermione. Nott," he added, as an afterthought. They nodded back to him and McGonagall resumed her stance by Dumbledore's desk.

"Mr Longbottom," McGonagall said without preamble. "You have been nominated to take over Mr Weasley's prefect duties for the remainder of your time at Hogwarts."

"What?" Neville squeaked.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Yes, Mr Longbottom. Do you accept, or would you prefer we seek a different candidate?"

Neville's eyes went wide. "No—no, sir," Neville said quickly. "I'd love to do it. My gran would be so proud."

McGonagall smiled. "I'm sure she will be, Mr Longbottom." Neville grinned, coming out of his shell. "Now that that's settled," she continued, "here are your badge, your handbook and a schedule of rounds. You, of course, will be taking over Mr Weasley's. Any questions you have can be answered by either Mr Nott or Ms Granger." The two in question nodded at Neville and he smiled back at them—even at Nott.

"Thank you," Neville said softly, staring at the shiny prefect badge. He pinned it reverently to the front of his robes and stared at it some more. "Thank you," he said again, this time louder and with more conviction.

McGonagall nodded and dismissed him, along with Nott, to go over rounds schedules and any questions Neville might have. "Now," Dumbledore said, once Harry and Hermione were the only students left in the office. "I believe you were concerned about Mr Weasley."

Hermione leaned forward. "Yes," she said quickly. "Where is he? He wasn't in class. He's not been expelled has he?"

Harry jerked to attention. Surely they wouldn't expel Ron for something so silly would they? Just a
few detentions, surely?

"Of course not, Ms Granger," McGonagall said. "Mr Weasley will be serving a month's worth of
detentions with Mr Filch. He's in the Infirmary with his parents right now."

Harry winced in sympathy for his friend. "Why's he in the Infirmary?" he asked. "He's not sick, is
he?"

"Not as such," McGonagall answered. "But Mr Weasley's parents felt that he should understand
what he nearly got himself into. I believe Madame Pomfrey is using scare tactics to show him the
consequences of overindulgence as we speak."

Harry frowned. How odd. "Can we see him?"

McGonagall exchanged a look with Dumbledore and he nodded. "I think that will be acceptable."

Harry and Hermione stood immediately. "Thank you," Hermione said quickly. Harry gave them a
smile and they slipped out of the Headmaster's office without another word.

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"What do you think?" Harry asked once they were off the spiral staircase and walking towards the
Hospital Wing.

Hermione looked at him sharply. "I think that the both of you are idiots," she said plainly. "And I
think that Ron is going to be in a whole lot of trouble."

Harry bit his lip—he knew she was right. He didn't even want to imagine what Mrs Weasley had
said to Ron when she found out. The sad, disappointed look that Mr Weasley had probably given
him would have been just about as bad, Harry thought. Desperate not to think of that until he
absolutely had to, he cast around for another topic.

"What do you think of Professor Sinclair?" he asked. He knew she was a Death Eater, but he wasn't
particularly worried about her hurting anyone this year. From what he understood, she was only here
to gather information, and he didn't care about that really. He wasn't going to help her certainly, but
he wasn't going to try to stop her either. He figured that if anyone was stupid enough to give away
information around her, then they were probably too stupid to lead a war as well. He didn't think
Dumbledore would be talking.

Hermione looked at him askance and tossed her school bag onto her other shoulder. "I think her
husband's pathetic."

Harry snorted. "Yeah—but it's kind of funny."

Hermione rolled her eyes but Harry could tell she was fighting back a smile. "Perhaps," she allowed.
"Today's lesson was rather interesting, I thought," Hermione continued in a much brighter voice.
"Did you read the chapter?"

Harry looked down at his shoes, muttering, "I might have skimmed it."

"Honestly, Harry!" Hermione exclaimed. "It's a really interesting book. I finished it the first week
back. That chapter's really just an overview, but it's an interesting overview. You should read it."

"Well, what did it say then?" Harry asked.
"Well," Hermione said. "Chapter one was about the Ten Wars, like we talked about in class. And then the subsequent chapters discuss each of those wars in detail and various spells, potions, techniques and stratagems that were used—how they're all similar and how they differ. It's very interesting."

Harry gave her an amused look. "Is it?"

"Of course," Hermione answered immediately. "Those wars were very important for the wizarding world. Each of them affected the wizarding world in such a profound way that normal life was forced to alter—people had to change the ways that they lived, Harry…the foods they ate, the magic they used, the languages they spoke in—just about anything you can think of was affected by one or more of those wars in one way or another."

Harry hummed in a detachedly-interested sort of way. He could not remember a time when war of any kind had ever been remotely interesting to him. He supposed it was the effect of being at the centre of a budding one for over six years.

When they reached the Infirmary, yelling could be heard from inside. Harry paused and exchanged a nervous glance with Hermione. It would be Mrs Weasley giving Ron a ferocious tongue lashing: apparently she had been giving it to him all morning and it was lunch time now. With more bravery than he was actually feeling, he pushed the door open and they stepped inside.

Ron was sitting on one of the hospital beds with his head bowed in his hands as Mrs Weasley stood shouting beside him. Mr Weasley had a definitely disappointed look to his face, but he remained calm.

Ron looked up when he heard the door opening and the barest hint of a smile passed his lips as he saw Harry standing there, but it immediately vanished when he noticed Hermione as well. He, obviously, knew that she would be no better than his mother.

Mrs Weasley paused long enough for them to approach the bed: Harry could see the dried remains of Ron's grief on his cheeks and his eyes were as red as his hair. He politely ignored it.

"Hey, mate," Harry said.

Ron nodded shallowly. "Hi Harry…Hermione," he added quietly. Hermione had not started in on Ron yet, but she would probably wait until Mrs Weasley was finished anyway.

"Hello, Harry dear," Mrs Weasley said, giving him an uncharacteristically brief hug. She turned and did the same to Hermione before slipping down into the chair next to Mr Weasley. Harry and Hermione took up post on the end of Ron's bed.

"I just don't understand why," Mrs Weasley said plaintively.

Ron shrugged, looking miserable, but did not speak. Hermione carefully reached out to place her small hand on top of Ron's in a comforting gesture, but Ron didn't even seem to notice it.

"You still won't speak?" Mrs Weasley continued flatly. "Still have nothing to say for yourself, do you?"

Ron shrugged again and Mrs Weasley hoisted herself from the chair with alarming speed.

"Very well," she huffed. "Your father and I need to speak to Madame Pomfrey and the Headmaster anyway. You're very lucky that you weren't expelled, Ronald. I just don't know what to do with you—even Fred and George have never caused this much trouble." Ron flinched at this and his head...
dipped even lower back into his hands. Mrs Weasley gave one final desperate huff of resignation and directed Mr Weasley out of the hospital wing.

Harry cleared his throat when they were gone and felt Hermione shift on the bed next to him. "All right, Ron?" he asked lowly.

Ron was still for several seconds before nodding mutely. "All right, Harry," he sighed. He cleared his own throat and then said, feigning casualness, "Have they replaced me yet?"

"Neville," Hermione said softly. "Neville's going to take over your duties for the rest of the year."

Ron nodded into his hands. "Neville will do a good job, I expect."

Harry and Hermione nodded, though Ron didn't see it since his face was still mostly hidden by his hands.

"Do you think they'll take me off the Quidditch team?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "Don't know, mate. I'm postponing tryouts anyway. I suppose it'll depend on whether or not you can make it to practises—what with your detentions for the next month," he added lamely.

"What were you thinking?" Hermione finally asked the question she had been saving while they got the pleasantries out of the way. It didn't sound as accusing or condescending as Harry had expected it to.

Ron shrugged again. "You ever have the feeling you've got little Dementors living in your head?"

Ron finally looked up at them. He shrugged. "Like you'll never be cheerful again," he explained. "Like everything you do is still not enough to accomplish whatever you need to accomplish, but you don't even know what you're meant to be accomplishing in the first place so you're confused too. Like you've got no purpose except finding a purpose and even if you do it's just a never-ending circle of finding a purpose so you can have a purpose but once you've found it, you're just as bad off as before because your only purpose was to find a purpose in the first place. Does that make sense?"

Oddly enough, "Yes," Harry said slowly. "I think so."

Hermione nodded slowly. "It does," she said. "But what brought this on?"

Ron shrugged again. "Does it matter?" He looked at them fiercely, and added, "Are we even going to live through this war? Does it matter what we do now?"

Harry inhaled sharply and thought of Ginny and Sirius and his mother and…Voldemort. "Yeah, Ron," he said, almost smiling. "We are."

"Are you sure?" Ron asked.

Harry nodded immediately. "Yeah. Even Trelawney couldn't have predicted this one. We're going to make it." Hermione looked at him oddly, but Harry's statement had served its purpose: Ron laughed —feebly, but a laugh all the same.

"That's not helping much," he admitted.
Harry favoured him with a bright smile. "Don't worry Ron," he said. "I promise everything will be fine."

Ron sighed. "What am I going to do? I'm such a fuck-up."

"Ron!" Hermione said. "Don't say that!"

"The language or the sentiment?" Ron asked sullenly.

"Either!" Hermione said. "You're not a...well, you're not one, and Harry and I are going to make sure you get better, aren't we, Harry?"

"He's not sick, Hermione," Harry said.

"Well, just the same," Hermione said stubbornly. "I'm going to go look some things up. From what you've said, it sounds like you might be suffering from depression, though I don't know what would have caused it...and, well, I better be off," she finished in a rush, and then she was gone from the Infirmary and Harry was left staring at Ron.

"My parents are so disappointed," Ron said to Harry.

Harry cuffed him playfully. "I'm not though."

Ron chuckled. "Yeah, but you didn't raise me 'to be better than that'."

"And thank Merlin for that," Harry said. "It's not so bad, Ron. You just shouldn't have done it at school. You just gotta know when to stop."

Ron shrugged. "I suppose. The way Madame Pomfrey was going on, I might as well have been dying. She's a scary woman."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, she is." He pulled his legs under himself and leaned back on his hands. "So, what really caused all this?" he asked seriously.

Ron looked at him sharply. "I told you," he said.

Harry shrugged. "But was it the truth?"

"What's the truth but what everyone believes?" Ron asked instead.

Harry studied him carefully. "Fine," he said, and then added, "but what if you wanted everyone to believe something else? What if you wanted to change the truth?"

"Get a strategy and do it, I reckon," Ron answered.

"Like chess," Harry added helpfully.

Ron nodded. "Like chess," he affirmed.

"You were always really good at chess," Harry said.

"I still am."

Harry grinned. "I know." A clock chimed somewhere and Harry looked up. "I gotta go. I've got Potions next and I need to get my books first. Are you going to be in classes tomorrow?"
Ron nodded and stared down at his lap. "Yeah."

"Fancy a game of chess tonight then?"

Ron looked up at him and his lips quirked slightly. "Yeah—yeah, that would be good."

Sometimes—often, actually—Slytherins enjoyed teasing each other to a degree that was equal to or worse than the teasing they offered the other (lesser) houses. Theodore Nott, though he tended to stick to himself, was no exception to this rule.

He was on his way to Potions Monday afternoon when he saw Malfoy—who was a disgrace to House Slytherin in Nott’s opinion—snarling and sneering with Crabbe and Goyle—who should have been Hufflepuffs. They were too loyal for their own good. He sidled up next to the blond, put on his most condescending smile, and said casually, “Disappointed?”

Malfoy turned away from whatever amazing stunt he was about to pull to give Nott a disinterested look. It was feigned, of course, Nott knew. He was better at reading people than Malfoy would ever be; Malfoy had so much trouble controlling his emotions that he spent most of his time hiding his own reactions instead of looking for others’ reactions.

Nott hoped, for the sake of the wizarding world in general—and not muggleborns or house-elves or any other creatures wizards of the light favoured—that Malfoy didn’t know too much Dark Magic. He was a liability if he did.

"With what?" Malfoy asked.

Nott shrugged as they walked towards Professor Snape’s class. "Oh I don’t know; I just thought Daddy might be upset that you didn’t make Head Boy."

Malfoy sneered. "And you’ve come to rub it in, have you?" he asked and then laughed harshly. That, too, was feigned. "Well, since Father is currently residing in Azkaban, I’d imagine that he neither knows nor cares whether or not I made Head Boy."

Nott chuckled. "Don’t pretend to be daft, Malfoy," he said. "It doesn’t suit you. Your father is as much in Azkaban as I am, and you know it."

Malfoy’s mouth twitched and Nott realised that Malfoy had not known that anyone knew of his father’s release. It was still not in the papers. He smiled patronisingly.

Malfoy sneered at him, showing a row of white teeth and Malfoy’s one noticeable physical flaw—other than being too pointy: his canine teeth were crooked and pushed further forward than the rest of his teeth. When Nott was younger, his teeth had been crooked too, but his own father wasn’t such a muggle hater that he refused muggle treatments.

There was no wizarding equivalent to a dentist, so when Purvis Nott discovered a little family owned practice called Granger & Granger Dentistry in London when Theodore had been ten, he’d immediately set out to have his son put in braces. Several hundred galleons (converted to muggle pounds) and a year later, Theodore’s teeth were perfectly straight. And Malfoy’s weren’t.

In first year, when the other Slytherins had asked why Nott had such straight teeth, he’d told them all that it was just good blood. Nothing had ever pissed Malfoy off quite so badly, not even Potter.

Later, Nott had learned Granger’s last name, and he’d wondered if the same muggles had been her
relatives, but then remembered the way her teeth had been before she’d had Pomfrey correct Malfy’s jinx, and realised it was impossible; muggle dentists would not have let their child walk around with teeth like hers had been.

But—then he'd heard Granger say her parents were dentists today, and it really wasn't all that important, but it made Nott realise what a small world it was—even including the muggles. There really weren't enough pure-bloods to continue the magical race without new blood. It was a shame that Malfoy had never gotten his teeth fixed—he might have known that otherwise.

“What is it, exactly, that you want, Nott?” Malfoy finally asked. They were very close to Potions now and Crabbe and Goyle were trailing slowly behind them, even though they didn't have Potions.

Nott took a moment to delight in the fact that Malfoy kept glancing at his Head Boy badge, and was probably now wishing that he’d paid more attention to Theodore when he had the chance. He had not known, due to his own inability to notice things, that Nott’s marks had almost always been equal to Granger's, and thus, several points higher than Malfoy's.

“Nothing,” Nott said blandly. “How was your summer?”

Malfoy sneered at him and continued walking towards potions. "About as exciting as yours, I'd imagine, Nott."

Nott shrugged noncommittally. "Mine was fine, thank you for asking. My grandparents and I travelled."

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Exciting."

"We met Zacharias Smith's aunt in Belgium. She's an auror. Small world."

"Smith the Hufflepuff?" Malfoy asked disdainfully. "Honestly, Nott."

"He's a decent bloke," Theodore said. "You should expand your contacts. I'd imagine even you would like him. A bit like you, actually: blond, wealthy and too arrogant for his own good."

Malfoy sneered just as they reached the potions classroom. "As opposed to you, Nott, who is plain, non-confrontational and disgraced aristocracy?"

"Not having so much gold that it'll never be spent in three generations is not the definition of disgraced, Malfoy."

Malfoy stopped in the doorway. "We all have our own beliefs, Nott."

"Of course," Theodore said easily. "Only it's a shame that some of us are so simple-minded that we can't form our own beliefs and thus have to plagiarise the beliefs of our parents." He gave Malfoy a barely polite smile and brushed past him into the mixed-house classroom, taking a seat next to Granger because she and Potter were less annoying than Finch-Fletchley.

He could feel Malfoy scowling at his back, and knew that his scowl only increased when he realised that the only seat left was with Justin Finch-Fletchley and Hannah Abbott.

Harry came very close to rolling his eyes when Theodore Nott—the Slytherin who associated with muggleborn students just because it pissed Malfoy off— took the vacant seat on Hermione's other side in Potions. He had seen him eyeing her inconspicuously a few times since classes had started.
Theodore’s father was a Death Eater, but he was still in Azkaban as far as Harry knew, and Harry was pretty sure that Voldemort hadn’t sent Nott on a mission to seduce and kill his best friend, so he decided not to threaten Nott just yet. He could look all he wanted as long as it didn’t bother Hermione, but he did glance up and give Nott—who was staring—a look that said he would threaten him, and follow through with those threats, if he wasn’t careful.

Nott raised an eyebrow at Harry, and then set about retrieving his cauldron, brown hair tipping into his eyes as he leaned over to light a fire under it.

Snape swooped in then and began the roll call, which Harry thought was a total sham. Snape had a very keen memory, and to think that he would forget who should and should not be in any of his classes was absurd to the point of irrationality. Snape's eyes lingered only for a moment on Harry when he sneered out 'Black, Harry' and put a little check next to his name.

The Potion Master’s eyes scanned the classroom maliciously. It was a very small class—so small, in fact, that it combined all four houses and still had less than twenty students. Snape, of course, was not bothered by this. In fact, he only allowed students who had scored an O on their OWLs to take the class, and when Harry had walked in the first day back in sixth year, with a letter from Headmaster Dumbledore, Snape had not been best pleased.

Harry had only scored an E on his Potions NEWT, and had only gained admittance with a petition to the Board of Governors. Even then it had been iffy. He had slid into the class on a loophole: it was not written anywhere in the school charter that NEWT level students were necessarily excluded from a class because they had not scored an O. A student could take a class so long as they made a passing mark in that subject on their OWLS—other than that, it was up to the school, student and professor to decide.

Harry had never been happier to have Dumbledore at his back and a member of the Board.

Other than Harry, Hermione, Nott, Malfoy, Finch-Fletchley and Hannah Abbott, the class included Zabini and Parkinson from Slytherin, Ernie Macmillan, Padma Patil and Anthony Goldstein from Ravenclaw and Dean Thomas. Snape looked at all twelve of them disdainfully.

"Pass up your essays on the healing properties of Norwegian Nettles and get out your cauldrons," Snape said. "We're starting an advanced form of potion making today that relies on your skills with Arithmantic equations." Here, he smiled nastily, and added, "I do hope that each of you harbour at least a passing talent with that study; otherwise, you will fail this term."

He gave Harry a significant look, but Harry didn't react. On a whim, he had decided to finally take up Beginning Arithmancy this year after four years of Hermione prodding him to do so.

The beginning class had been so small that it was combined with the Advanced class, and Professor Vector had given all the new students a basic run-down on the study and loads of homework over the past two weeks. Harry knew the basics and whatever he didn't, he was pretty sure Hermione or Professor Vector could explain to him.

He passed his essay to Hermione, who passed theirs to Nott to pass up to the front, and got out his cauldron. He would pass this class—he was not about to let Snape ruin his chances of being an Auror, if he still wanted to be one after leaving school, anyway. Sixth year, he had barely scraped an A for the class, but he was determined to get an E this year, and Snape would not goad him into less.

"Now, before we begin the actual brewing, can anyone tell me what an Arithmantic Potion is and its
three bases?"

Hermione's hand shot up.

"Anyone?" Snape asked, ignoring her. Hermione stubbornly kept her hand in the air. "Fine—Granger?"

"Arithmantic Potions," Hermione said, "are potions that require the use of Arithmantic equations to brew properly. The three bases, at least one of which is used in every Arithmantic potion, are Hellebore and Norwegian Nettles, Mugwart and apple seeds, and Liverflowers and frog eyes. These three bases are the only possible ones because no matter what proportions are used to combine them, they always magically result in a pH of zero. No other ingredients will produce that result."

Snape sneered at her. "I didn't ask you to tell me why those are the only possible combinations. Five points from Gryffindor for your impetuousness, Granger." Hermione pursed her lips but did not comment. Snape continued.

"Who, besides Granger," Snape added, "can tell me the effects of adding different quantities of Hellebore and Norwegian Nettles to a potion, and the significance of this as it relates to Arithmantic Potions?"

Hermione scowled and gripped her quill tightly. When Snape directed his eyes around the classroom, she leaned into Harry and said, "I just answered that question." Harry held back a snicker—for Hermione to admit she didn't know something was hilarious, but that Snape had expected her to answer anyway was just too ironic.

Padma Patil raised her hand, but she was the only one to do so. "Different proportions of ingredients in Arithmantic potion bases can decide whether or not the potion is volatile and to what degree. In Arithmanic Potions, this variance follows Salazar's Supposition, a theory by Salazar Slytherin that says that if A equals B but does not equal CD then A equals DC when B is irrelevant or non-existent."

To muggles, Harry thought, that would not have made any sense at all. Hermione made a little 'oh!' sound next to him and started scribbling furiously in her potions journal. Harry had never heard Salazar's Supposition before, but even though it sounded paradoxical to him, he reminded himself that this was the magical world and things often didn't make sense.

Snape gave her a blank look. "And what does this mean?" he then asked the class. Theodore Nott's hand went up; even though Hermione probably knew what it meant by now, she was refusing, on pure stubbornness, to give Snape an opportunity to degrade her. Snape acknowledged Nott.

"It means, sir," Nott said plainly, "that if one combination of ingredients biologically equals the combination of other ingredients but does not equal the combination of two sets of combinations, then the first combination equals the possibility of a fourth set of ingredients when the possibility of the third set is not biologically possible."

"Excellent explanation, Nott," Snape said. "Five points to Slytherin." Malfoy grinned maliciously, but Nott only nodded and wrote a few things down in his journal. Harry stared at his own journal. Perhaps he'd gotten in over his head. That had made no sense to him, and he wasn't sure it, logically, made sense to anyone else either, though the students who had already taken Arithmancy seemed to accept it readily enough. He wrote down the equation and the explanation anyway.

Maybe Hermione would define it in 'muggle mathematics' terms for him after class. Having grown up in the muggle world, he still accepted that he could not divide by zero, among other 'ridiculous'
notions. He wondered if it was just as hard for the muggleborn students.

"The potion we will be beginning today is called the Draught of Derbyshire. It was used to end the Derbyshire Devastation in 921, a battle that began in Derbyshire and escalated across the Isle until it resulted in total war for magical Great Britain. This potion renders the drinker full and satisfied for one month.

"We are only starting the base today, so you will need Hellebore and Norwegian Nettles. Instructions are on the board. You will be working with those at your table, as the ingredients are expensive and I do not wish to spare more than is necessary while the idiots among you fail attempt after attempt. Begin."

Harry looked at Hermione in faint amusement. "Do you think," he whispered, "that Snape will ever actually give us a lecture instead of expecting us to teach ourselves?"

Hermione sighed and closed her potions journal. "I've never held with Divination, Harry," she said flatly, "but I suspect even Trelawney could predict the answer to that." Harry snorted, and to his surprise, Nott did too. They both looked over at him and he shrugged, unconcerned.

"I agree," is all he said, and then he stood up and went to the supply cabinet to gather their ingredients. Harry felt his surprise mount. Had it been Malfoy, or any other Slytherin really, they would have insisted on Harry or Hermione gathering the ingredients. Nott had done it without even being asked.

Nott came back several minutes later and Harry and Hermione stared at him as he set them on the work table. "What?" he asked when their eyes had not left him after a reasonable amount of time. Harry exchanged a glance with Hermione and then they looked back at Nott. "What?" he repeated, looking up.

"You're interesting," Hermione said slowly. Nott's eyebrows rose slightly. "No one ever notices you, but you made Head Boy, so your marks had to be exceptional."

"Gloating is for the weak," Nott said, and perhaps even pointedly. "For those who cannot obtain what they want with their own power."

"But definitely a Slytherin," Harry added, mostly to Hermione.

Nott shrugged and they put away their cauldrons. They would only need Nott's since his was the biggest and they were only making one potion. "I never said I was sorted incorrectly."

Hermione copied down the directions from the board and looked at the two piles of Hellebore and Norwegian Nettles, deciding not to comment further. Harry followed her lead.

"Why doesn't it say whether to chop, cut, dice, slice, tear, powder or pulverise?" Harry asked suddenly.

"It doesn't matter," Nott answered. "With Arithmantic Potion bases, the shape and size of ingredients only matters to which type of potion you are trying to make. Since we'll be making an anti-hunger potion, we should cut the ingredients larger than usual, as larger things are more filling."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, but the nettles are too big for the cauldron, so we should at least chop them."

"Exactly," Nott said. Harry looked at them, sighed in resignation, and pulled a few nettles towards him. This would be good for him, he thought. He was never very good at getting the ingredients the
right shape and size. He started chopping haphazardly, and delighted in the fact that this base was so imprecise that he could safely let his mind wander.

Hermione and Nott followed suit and Harry lost himself in chopping. His mind filtered to the dream he had had the night before—the laughter and the strange time changes in it. It had been like watching something on fast-forward. He ran out of nettles a few minutes later, dumped them in the simmering cauldron and started on the Hellebore. It was already fairly small.

"Should we cut these at all?" Harry asked, gesturing to the Hellebore. Hermione looked up at him just as she and Nott dumped their nettles in.

"No, they're small enough. Let's just put them in." Harry tossed them in and sat back, satisfied. With Nott and Hermione working with him, he probably wouldn't have to completely understand the Arithmancy at all. It was going to be a much better term than Snape had hoped for.

Their cauldron had been simmering for nearly ten minutes when Nott suddenly jumped up. Harry looked up and saw him landing on Malfoy. Hermione was levitating something away from their cauldron with a frown on her face, but Nott was much more interesting. He was straddling Malfoy with the tip of his wand pressed into his pale neck and scowling fiercely. Apparently, Malfoy had had the notion to sabotage their potion. Harry was a bit surprised that he would do it to another Slytherin.

"Do you know what kind of reaction that would have caused, Malfoy?" Nott sneered, still sitting on Malfoy's chest. Malfoy spat in his face.

"You suicidal wanker," Nott said. "You aren't that stupid, are you?"

"Mr Nott!" Snape growled. "Please remove yourself from Mr Malfoy's person immediately."

Nott didn't even look up. "He levitated a sprig of mint leaf over our cauldron, Professor," he said calmly. Snape paled and stopped his advancement on Nott. Several in the class gasped. Harry frowned in confusion.

"What would that have done?" Harry whispered to Hermione.

Hermione was very pale too, now that he really looked at her. "Mint leaf has an irrelevant pH—" she began.

"You would have blown up the entire classroom, Malfoy." Nott was growling. Malfoy stared back at him defiantly. "That means you would have been nothing but blood splatters on the wall just like the rest of us."

"Mr Nott," Snape said again, his voice much lower and shallower than before. "That will be enough." Nott growled and slowly stood up, though he kept his wand levelled at Malfoy. "Mr Malfoy," Snape continued, "direct yourself to the Headmaster's office. I am not up to dealing with you at present."

Malfoy shot Snape a strange look, sneered, grabbed his bag and left the classroom. Snape stood motionless for several moments before shaking himself out of whatever his thoughts had been and facing the class. "Place your cauldrons on the simmering shelf and leave. You are dismissed for the day." As an afterthought, he added, "Your homework is forty-five centimetres on the effects of adding an irrelevant pH ingredient to the base of an Arithmantic Potion. Due Wednesday."
Ron showed up at dinner that night looking tired and shame-faced. There had been a prefect meeting after Arithmancy to inform the other prefects of the situation and introduce those who didn't know him to Neville. He was received warmly by most, only Malfoy giving him a hard time. Malfoy's actions in Potions, according to Hermione, had also been discussed, but he had only been given a warning and a stern talking-to by Dumbledore. Harry didn't think this was very fair, and neither did Hermione, so they both refrained from alerting Ron to what had happened. He would probably learn about it himself eventually anyway. News travelled very fast at Hogwarts.

This meant, sadly, that it had only taken a few hours for the entire school to know what Ron had done to be stripped of his badge. A silence settled over the Great Hall when he entered, but it picked up again when Ron sat himself across from Harry and Hermione and started filling his plate.

"Ron!" Seamus exclaimed, jumping up and slapping him on the back. "Glad to have you back, mate."

Ginny pursed her lips at her brother, but other than that, his welcome back at the Gryffindor table was genuine and excited. He gave everyone a fake smile and started in on his bangers and mash.

"You missed a really good story in Defence," Harry said, trying to brighten him up.

"That woman," Hermione began, looking up from her book only at the mention of the class, "has a crass sense of humour. Honestly! I can’t believe she tells students about how her ‘lovely husband’ tried to skin a live rabbit and ended up shaving his own head instead."

Ron snickered genuinely. "Did he really? Poor old Vlad," he mourned, smiling.

Harry nodded enthusiastically. "You have to admit, Hermione, that you sort of pity a man who’s tried his whole life to use dark arts and only managed to hurt himself in the process. It’s kind of sad."

"It’s not sad!" Hermione huffed, slamming her potions book closed, which she had been referencing for her essay. Harry saw Nott, sitting at the Slytherin table, mouth ‘feisty’ from the corner of eye and barely restrained a sneer. Nott was fairly decent, but Harry still didn't trust him. “It’s one less dark wizard we’ll have to fight in the war,” Hermione added quietly.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Do you honestly think every dark wizard joins Voldemort? Or that only dark wizards do?” Harry asked her, ignoring Ron’s melodramatic shudder. Hermione gave him a look that
clearly said she did, and Harry decided then that it would probably be best if she never found out
what he had done over the summer.

“So what did you do in the hospital wing all day?” Harry asked suddenly. Ron looked wistfully at
his half-full plate and slumped.

"After you guys left, Pomfrey ran a whole bunch of tests on me to see if I’d developed a dependency
on alcohol, and then she told me some more gruesome stories that only kind of related to drinking at
all, and then she asked me about my home life. It was horrible. And boring," he added.

"Oh!" Hermione said suddenly, rummaging through her school bag. "I did some research after I left
the Infirmary and wrote to my parents asking for advice. Their owl came this afternoon, and—" she
huffed in frustration and then triumphantly pulled out a huge stack of papers, pamphlets and
 parchments. "Here," she said, shoving the stack at Ron.

"What's all this?" Ron asked warily.

Hermione beamed at him. "I think you might be depressed," she explained. "These pamphlets and
notes will help you identify whether or not you are, using a series of well-researched and statistically
proven question-and-answer guides, then depending on what kind of depression you have if any,
will show you the best steps to take to eliminate or control the problem without resorting to binge
drinking."

Ron looked at her incredulously. He cleared his throat, and said, "I didn't binge drink. I drank all the
time."

Hermione shrugged. "It could be really severe. Look over it, will you?"

Ron looked at Harry instead, then, but finally nodded. "Yeah, alright. I'll read them." Hermione
beamed again.

After dinner, Harry and Ron settled in for the promised game of chess while Hermione went up to
her room to study. She had her own room this year since she was Head Girl and this was something
that Ron greatly resented. Secretly, Harry thought it was because Hermione had had a private room
for two weeks and had not yet invited Ron up for a bit of 'independent study'.

They had only been playing for fifteen minutes or so, but Harry was already losing spectacularly. He
moved his last knight a few spaces and sat back, arms crossed, frowning. He had looked the board
over carefully and had not seen any possible threats for moving his knight there, but Ron always
managed to find one.

Harry didn't even bother trying to check Ron's king anymore: it was useless. Nowadays, he just
moved his pieces around to whatever spot looked good at the time. He liked to see how long he
could last before Ron beat him as opposed to actually trying to beat Ron. Ron was unstoppable: if
anyone could beat Ron at chess, Harry would like to meet them, and possibly get a few tips from
them.

Predictably, Ron's queen came out of nowhere and demolished Harry's knight. Harry was down to a
bishop, his queen—which he tended to hide near the back of the board—a few pawns and his king,
of course.

"I don't want to be black anymore," Harry sighed dramatically, dropping his head in his hands. He
was absolutely dreadful at chess. He had no sense for strategy. "Black's going to lose."
Ron snorted, "Only because you're playing black."

Harry scowled. "I'd like to see you do anything with the pieces I have."

"I wouldn't have lost so many," Ron retorted, amused.

Harry gave him a mocking look. "Of course not," he sneered, "because it's obvious you're so much better than me. I don't see how you can stand playing all of us. You beat us like it's nothing—me especially—it's got to get boring."

Ron shrugged. "It does."

Harry crossed his arms. "Then why do you do it?"

"I dunno," Ron said. "I figure that if I play you enough you might get better, and then I'd have a decent opponent. It's a challenge for me."

"I've got a challenge for you," Harry said sarcastically. "I'd like to see you beat me playing this side."

Ron frowned. "After you've backed yourself into such a corner?"

Harry nodded smugly. "Yeah. Think you could win it from my side?"

"Of course," Ron snorted. "Let's switch then. I'll still beat you playing black."

Harry looked at the board dubiously. Ron's white pieces were all there, save for a pawn or two, and were looking much more appealing than the measly few black pieces on the board. Ron was an excellent strategist, but Harry didn't think even he could pull himself out of this one. "Okay," Harry said eagerly.

They stood and switched chairs, and Ron moved the black queen forward three places. Ten minutes later, he sat back in his chair smugly, and declared, "Checkmate."

Harry closed his eyes very slowly.

Harry held Quidditch tryouts the next day. He wanted to replace Kirk and Sloper if he could because they were absolutely dreadful, but he didn't want to single them out, so he held full-tryouts with every position available—even his own. Ron would again be trying out for Keeper as Professor McGonagall had not barred him from the team, which Harry was fairly happy about. Ron would never be as confident as Oliver Wood had been, but he was still pretty good. His confidence had soared during sixth year and he had helped them to secure the Quidditch Cup that year.

The turn out was great, Harry decided, as he looked over at all the hopefuls gathered around the pitch. It was a Tuesday afternoon and all classes were over for the day so everyone had the opportunity to attend.

"I want everyone trying out for Chaser over here," Harry said loudly, "and everyone for Beater over there," he pointed to the opposite end of the pitch. "Everyone trying out for Keeper or Seeker stay where you are for now."

"What if we want to try out for more than one position?" Seamus called from the back of the crowd. Harry grinned and hoped that Seamus didn't embarrass himself too badly this go round.

"You and Dean want to try for Beater and Chaser?" he asked. The two in question made their way
forward, dressed in standard-issue Quidditch robes and looking excited.

"Yeah," Dean said. Both he and Seamus had brand-new Radio Flyers flung over their shoulders—bright, shiny red brooms from the new Radio Broom Company that had only released their first model over the summer. Harry hadn't seen any before, but Ron told him that they were midline brooms with no bells or whistles, but quite aerodynamically sound.

"Get with the Beaters," Harry said, deciding. "You can switch up afterwards. I want to run a few drills to see how the potential Chasers work with the potential Beaters."

Seamus nodded and they hurried off to the other end of the field, joining Sloper and two third year girls. Harry frowned—Kirk was nowhere to be seen; maybe he didn't want to play anymore anyway. Oh well.

The group of prospective Chasers was much larger, Harry noticed. Ginny had played the last two years and done an excellent job so Harry was fairly sure he would keep her around, but he still needed two more Chasers to make up for Alicia and Katie, who had left the year prior. There was a petite girl with black hair that Harry couldn't remember seeing before standing next to Ginny, a few fourth years and a fifth year also.

Harry saw Ron standing awkwardly with the two other people trying out for either Seeker or Keeper and called him over.

"You're better at this than I am," Harry said when Ron jogged up. "Fly up with me and help me pick."

Ron grinned at him and mounted his broom. "Chasers and Beaters on your brooms," Harry yelled and immediately all of the potentials soared into the air. Harry released the Bludgers and grabbed the Quaffle. He and Ron drifted up and stopped in the middle of the gathered flyers.

"We'll be scrimmaging, but there won't be a Keeper guarding the goal posts yet because I just want to see how well your throw is and how well you balance one-handed on your brooms. I'll let Ron divide you into teams and we'll play when I blow the whistle."

He nodded to Ron and soared up a bit higher to get a better view. He wasn't exactly sure how to hold a Quidditch tryout, so he hoped he was going about it the right way. Ron joined him a minute later and Harry watched as the players spread out on the field.

"Ready?" Harry asked. Ron nodded and gave him another grin. Harry dropped the Quaffle straight down and blew the whistle.

The black haired girl that had been talking to Ginny earlier was the first to it. She swiped it up and swooped under the opposing Chasers instead of going around them to the side, as many other Chasers tended to do. Harry gave her credit for that: it saved time and was effective; the other Chasers had not expected it.

Ginny flew over them, using the same tactic and then flew under the black-haired girl who dropped the Quaffle straight down into Ginny's hands, again confusing the other Chasers who had obviously expected her to toss it to the Chaser on her left. Ginny threw the Quaffle into the goal and scored.

Everyone watching in the stands cheered and Ron smiled smugly. "I think Ginny's still a good prospect," he said to Harry.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, and that other girl, too—what's her name? I've never seen her before."
Ron shrugged. "I dunno," he said just as the black haired girl feinted to Ginny and scored again. The third Chaser on their team swooped in to catch the Quaffle and tried to toss it back to her team-mates, but was blindsided by a Bludger from Seamus on the opposite team. "Damn, Seamus is rough."


Ron snorted. "Yes, Wood."

Harry cuffed him and directed his attention back to the game. The other Chasers had finally managed to score a goal, but were nowhere near as good as Ginny and the black haired girl. More importantly, they seemed to work exceptionally well together, as Angelina, Katie and Alicia had once. That was very important.

Ginny had possession of the Quaffle and was zooming back down the field again but Dean and Seamus zeroed in on her and blocked her path with their bats, as the Bludgers were on the other side of the field at the time.

"That was clever," Harry said to Ron.

Ron nodded quickly. "Yeah—they didn't have time to locate a Bludger so they just used their bats."

"And it's not a foul—" Harry said.

"Unless they actually touch her with their bats," Ron finished with him, grinning.

"Very clever," Harry repeated.

Jack Sloper was Beating for the other team, and holding his own, but tended to catch and throw the Bludger instead of hitting it. Being so heavy, and having a mind of its own, it rarely went where he intended it to, but he did have a good arm, Harry thought.

("I think that's enough," Ron said despondently. "Ginny and the black haired girl should Chase, and I like Seamus and Dean as Beaters, but I don't see any other Chasers that are really good enough."

Harry nodded towards his left. "Watch Sloper," he said. Ron followed his gaze just in time to see Sloper accidentally drop his bat, take a Bludger to the stomach, and then, in his rage, hurl it back where it came from. It soared through the goal post.

"Damn," Ron said bluntly. "That takes a bit of strength."

Harry nodded silently and blew his whistle. The scrimmage stopped and the players all flew up to meet Harry and Ron while Hermione, who had been watching in the stands, charmed the Bludgers back into the box. Harry grinned, even though he was too high for her to see it. He hadn't even known she was there.

Sloper had a definite sheepish look about him as he took his place with everyone else. He was rubbing his stomach and looking at everyone but Harry.

"I think I've made my decision for the positions of Chaser and Beater," Harry said without preamble. "Beaters are going to be Dean and Seamus."

"YES!" Dean and Seamus exclaimed simultaneously. They high-fived each other and did a few unsportsmanlike loops on their brooms. Seamus gave Harry a smug look that clearly said 'I told you so', and Harry snorted. Sloper's face fell and Harry, feeling sorry for him, decided not to let him suffer any longer.
"Oh don't start whinging, Sloper," Harry said, "you're still on the team."

"Yeah, as a reserve," Sloper mumbled.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Well, yeah, I'm going to keep you as reserve Beater, but I think your real
talent lies with Chasing. You've got an amazing arm, so you'll also be one of our starting Chasers."


"Yeah, you throw better than you hit, and Ron and I both saw you put that Bludger through the goal
without a bat. That was pretty good."

Sloper grinned smugly and ducked his head, probably blushing.

"Ginny," Harry said, turning to Ron's little sister and trying to ignore the leer she sent him. It was
entirely discomfiting, and she didn't seem to care at all. Harry was sure that if she didn't stop looking
at him like that very soon, everyone—most importantly, Ron—was going to know what they had
done. He didn't like the thought of that. "You're still on the team, you hag," he added playfully. She
laughed and fluttered her eyelashes at him, laughing even harder when Ron hit Harry on the head.

"What was that for?" Ron asked indignantly. "Why are you calling my sister a hag?"

"She was leering suggestively at me!" Harry said defensively, rubbing his head. Ron made a
disgusted face and apologized.

"Sorry, mate. She deserves it then." He sneered at Ginny and added, "Gross."

"Alright, you two," Harry said, pointing to two fourth year girls, "are Reserves." They nodded, only
looking slightly disappointed. He scanned the players for the black haired girl and finally found her
drifting slightly apart from the rest of the group in the back.

"You," Harry said, calling the girl. She looked up, staring at him emotionlessly. He gestured her
closer and she drifted over to him without much fanfare. "I've never seen you before. What year are
you?"

"Sixth," the girl answered quietly. Harry didn't think anyone but him could hear her, not even Ron.
"My family transferred me because of, ah, complications in France. This is my second day at
Hogwarts." Harry, suddenly, knew exactly who she was. It was unmistakable now that he looked
closer at her. She had black hair and grey eyes like his father.

"You're one of the Lestrange girls, Alsace or Lorraine?" Harry asked. And then, "You were sorted
into Gryffindor?" he asked incredulously.

The girl scrunched up her nose. "It's al'-zas," she said, stressing the pronunciation. "And yes. You
are one of my cousins, Harry Potter."

Harry frowned. "I go by Black now, actually," he said. Alsace shrugged. No one else seemed to
have heard them talking, which was probably good as Harry wasn't looking forward to Ron
knowing that one of the Lestrange sisters was going to be on their Quidditch team, though he figured
Ron would find out anyway momentarily.

"Is your sister in Gryffindor, too?" he asked.

"No," Alsace answered. "Headmaster Dumbledore sorted her into Ravenclaw. She's very smart."
Harry wondered if she meant that Dumbledore had actually picked their houses instead of the Sorting Hat, but decided not to ask. It was odd, but not really important.

He turned to face the rest of the team. "This is Alsace Lestrange," he said, ignoring the gasps he heard, mostly from Ron. Many people were still unaware of the names of most of the Death Eaters so it didn't cause as big of a stir as it might have, and Ginny didn't seem overly surprised. "She'll be our third starting Chaser."

He paused, looked down at the ground where the other Gryffindors and Hermione were watching curiously and then said, "I want starting and reserve players to stay in the air. Everyone else is dismissed. Thank you for trying out."

Ron tried to corner him, but Harry was having none of it. He wanted this tryout session over with, and then—maybe—he, Ron and Hermione could discuss this further in the common room—away from listening ears.

"Harry!" Ron hissed.

"Not now, Ron," Harry said. "We'll talk about this after practise. You're first up. Get at your goal."

Harry watched the rest of the tryouts with only half a mind. Ron saved all but two of his goals and did much better than the other two players who were trying out. No one wanted to tryout for Seeker, which was fine with Harry because he didn't want to sit through any more than he had to, so he blew his whistle a final time and watched as everyone gathered around him.

"Ron, you're still on. You," Harry said, pointing to one of the others who had tried out for Keeper, "are reserve. Ginny, you're reserve Seeker, and that's it," he said bluntly. "First practise is next Saturday at ten. I expect everyone to be here, dressed and ready on time."

Harry flew down to the ground, followed closely by Ron and Ginny and landed roughly on the stands next to Hermione. "We need to talk," he said to her, and then flew off towards the changing rooms.

Something caught his eye on the way though, and he paused to look more closely. Someone was sitting under the stands. Upon closer inspection, Harry was not surprised to see that it was Malfoy. He frowned, looked over his shoulder to make sure the rest of the team—old and new—was headed towards the showers, and flew down to the ground, landing feet from Malfoy.

"Doing a bit of reconnaissance, Malfoy?" Harry asked archly. Malfoy didn't seem at all chagrined to have been caught. He shrugged.

"Know thine enemy," Malfoy said dully. He looked altogether exhausted, and for a moment, Harry wanted to take pity on him and be nice, but he just couldn't bring himself to do it. Malfoy was probably evil, after all, and whether or not Harry was willingly working with Lord Voldemort, he wanted nothing to do with evil. He was trying to get rid of it, anyway he could, not encourage it.

Harry pursed his lips and tossed an errant lock of hair back from his face.

"What were you really doing here—other than sulking of course?"

"Can't a member of a rival team watch his enemies' tryouts?"

"I wasn't aware that it was encouraged," Harry responded. "I'm actually surprised that you're still on a rival team—what with you having just tried to blow up half the dungeons yesterday. Isn't attempted murder grounds for taking you off a Quidditch team?"
"The Headmaster doesn't think so," Malfoy said, and the grin that he gave Harry—fake and condescending or not—did very strange things to the Gryffindor's stomach.

Harry raised his eyebrows, trying to cover his sudden dizziness with nonchalance. "So you were trying to kill us all then," he deduced.

"Of course," Malfoy said, rolling his eyes. "Don't you think I live for suicide missions like some raving Gryffindor?"

Harry suddenly grinned. "You weren't!" he crowed. "You had no idea what the mint leaf would do, did you?" He chuckled, shaking his head. "So what did you think it would do?"

"Of course I knew what it would do!" Malfoy said indignantly, but Harry didn't buy it. He could tell Malfoy was flustered by the look on his face; it was obvious he hadn't expected the conversation to turn this way, and it was obvious that he really hadn't had any idea what the mint leaf would do. Harry smirked. "I knew it would cause an explosion," Malfoy said a moment later.

"Maybe," Harry allowed, still grinning, "but you didn't know it would cause a big explosion. I bet you thought it would just cover us in some nasty gunk didn't you? You just don't want to admit that you didn't know how it would react."

Malfoy sneered, showing his teeth, and stood up. "Fine, Potter. I thought it was just going to singe your stupid face."

"Black," Harry said.

Malfoy was almost in a spitting rage by now. He glared at Harry, his mouth twitching as if he wanted to say something more but couldn't think of anything, so instead he bent down and gathered up his things, which had been sitting on the grass. Harry watched him silently, enjoying the way Malfoy's entire body trembled in anger. Something shiny next to Malfoy's school bag caught his eye.

"So you do have a sweet tooth," Harry laughed. "All those packages your mummy sent you really were chocolates. It's kind of funny to think you're actually human enough to like sweets."

Malfoy growled and snatched up the sweet wrapper, refusing to look at Harry. "Of course," he said. "Only self-righteous arseholes like you can like chocolate, is that it?" His hands were shaking and he was having trouble picking up his things because of it. Harry bent down, picked up a second Chocolate Frog wrapper and studied it.

"You know," he said casually, as a piece of parchment slipped through Malfoy's shaking fingers, "Ron's finished his Chocolate Frog card collection. He's thinking of sending in a list of new ones for the company to make so that he can collect more. I suggested a Death Eater collection. What do you think of that, Malfoy?"

"You can't have my picture, Potter," Malfoy hissed, finally stuffing the last of his things into his bag.

"Oh, I don't want your picture, Malfoy. You're not a Death Eater."

"How would you know?" Malfoy snarled, looking up.

Harry smiled blandly at him. "But if you want to give us a picture of your father...a short bio—things he likes to do, favourite foods, pet names, et cetera, that would be lovely."

Malfoy flung the other Chocolate Frog wrapper at Harry. It fluttered to the ground in front of his feet. "Fuck off," he said, and stormed away, leaving Harry grinning underneath the stands. He started off
towards the changing rooms when Malfoy was out of sight.

Everyone was already in there when Harry walked in and started to undress. Dean kept casting speculative looks at Alsace as she stripped out of her Quidditch gear and Seamus kept casting speculative looks at everyone who wasn't Ginny or Alsace, but mainly Harry.

"I think I like the idea of these changing rooms," Seamus said loudly when Harry pulled his t-shirt over his head. Harry stared at him blankly, daring him to continue, and Seamus did. "Think they ought to separate the girls from the boys though."

"I don't," Dean and Sloper said at the same time.

Ron turned around from his locker just in time to see Ginny un-strapping her shin guards and shuddered. "Oh god, I do," he said, turning back around quickly. Ginny sneered at him and retreated to one of the shower stalls to finish undressing.

Harry, Ron and Ginny showered in record time and were meeting Hermione by the fire in the common room before they knew it.

"What's this all about?" Hermione asked.

"I don't want to talk about it here," Harry said.

Hermione frowned at him. "Fine, we can go to my room," she said and led them over to the stairs leading to the girl's dorms. She tapped her wand against the wall in a complicated motion and gestured for them to follow her. Ginny did, but Harry and Ron, remembering the time Ron had slipped down those same stairs, hesitated.

"We can't go up there," Harry said.

Hermione frowned. "Honestly," she said. "Seven years and you think I haven't figured out the counter-charm yet?" Ron frowned.

"You didn't tell us when you did?" he asked indignantly.

"If I had, I would have had to deal with the two of you in my room at all hours," Hermione answered. "Now let's go!" she said.

Harry and Ron bustled to follow.

Hermione's Head Girl room was about the same size as Harry and Ron's dorm, but since it only had one bed, wardrobe and desk, it was much roomier. There was a sitting area near the fireplace with comfortable looking chairs and a thick rug that Ginny sprawled out on. On the opposite side there were two doors, one of which Harry assumed led to a private toilet.

"Where's the other door go to?" he asked Hermione as he sat down in one of the chairs. Hermione took the other one and Ron laid down on the bed right next to it.

"The main hall," Hermione answered as if Harry should have known that. "Students need to be able to reach me at anytime, you know. Not just Gryffindors. That door is for students from other houses."


"Now what's going on?" Hermione asked.
"One of the Lestrange sisters is in Gryffindor," Ginny said. Hermione frowned.

"Since when?"

"Yesterday, apparently," Harry said tiredly.

"I can't believe there's a Lestrange in Gryffindor," Ron said harshly. "She doesn’t belong in Gryffindor!"

"Dumbledore sorted them. The other one's in Ravenclaw."

"But she didn't sleep in my room last night," Ginny said.

"And Harry let her on the Quidditch team!" Ron roared. "I can't believe you, Harry! She's a Death Eater's kid! She's probably one herself! And if you let her on the team she'll have all that time to watch you! She could turn you over to You-Know-Who!"

"Ron, shut up!" Hermione said. Harry was very thankful for that. There had been entirely too many people talking at once and it had begun to give him a headache—even if Ron was the main one talking. He was doing entirely too much of it, and it wasn't solving anything. "Now," Hermione said when Ron finally quieted, "is that true, Harry?"

"Yes," Harry said, daring her to argue with him. Alsace Lestrange was an amazing Chaser and there was no way he was going to take her off the team. Ron had liked her, too, before he knew who she was. He didn't see what the problem was. She couldn't help her name or her parents, but Harry had other reasons to keep her around as well. Of course, he couldn't tell anyone else those reasons, but he had them nonetheless.

"Well," Hermione said.

"Well what?" Ron asked. "There's no 'well' about it, Hermione. She's got to go."

"Ron, you said she was good, too," Harry reminded him. "And she works well with Ginny."

"Well, what if Ginny doesn't want to 'work well' with some Death Eater?" Ron snarled.

That was a fair point, Harry decided—though he doubted he would change his mind just because Ginny didn't want to be on the same team as the Lestrange girl anymore. He turned to look down at Ginny sitting on the rug and raised his eyebrows expectantly. Ron and Hermione followed his gaze.

"Well?" Harry asked.

Ginny shifted uncomfortably. "She is a good Chaser," Ginny allowed. "And she seemed nice enough."

"See?" Harry said.

"Harry," Hermione sighed. "Ron does have a point."

"And so do I," Harry said, frowning. "She's good. She and Ginny were the best out there. I'm not compromising my Quidditch team because she might sell our game strategies to Voldemort."

"Harry, that's not funny," Hermione said fiercely.

"I'm not laughing," Harry pointed out flatly. "But this is Quidditch."

"It could be your life, if you aren't careful," Hermione said.
Not really, but Harry hadn't considered how to argue that point. Alsace Lestrange was no threat to him, he knew, but he was the only one who knew. "She's not a threat," Harry finally said.

Hermione looked at him blankly. "How do you know?"

Harry fidgeted. "I just do," he said.

Ron flopped back on the bed in exasperation, but Harry saw, out of the corner of his eye, both Hermione and Ginny giving him speculative looks. He was becoming very uncomfortable in this room. It seemed like it was getting too hot, but he couldn't be sure.

"I'm not taking her off the team, and that's that. I only brought it up so you would know," he said and stood. He looked at everyone in the room firmly, then turned and walked out, taking the door that led to the main hall instead of the one that led to the Gryffindor common room. He needed some space to think.

It was getting dark, but Harry didn't care.

He had been walking aimlessly around the Hogwarts grounds for an hour when the owl came. It was big and grey with huge orange eyes and Harry had never seen it before, but he knew exactly who it was from judging by the handwriting on the envelope. His father had written him.

Harry grinned as he untied the letter from the owl's leg, patting it on its head since he didn't have any owl treats with him. "Sorry," he told it, shrugging. The owl gave an indignant hoot and soared off to the owlery for a rest. Harry watched it go, smiling. Finally, something to take his mind off everything that he didn't want to think about.

He felt like a fraud. He felt like he was doing something he really shouldn't be doing, but he couldn't see any way around it. He could very well be both saving and damning the world at the same time. It wasn't a comforting thought, but it was what most of his thoughts were lately, and he hoped that this letter would offer him a reprieve. He just didn't want to think about Lestrange sisters or Death Eaters or Malfoy anymore. Ever.

Carefully, Harry pried off the wax seal and withdrew the letter. It was written on a very fine, very smooth piece of parchment with an engraved letterhead that depicted the Black family crest. Harry frowned; he was certain that Sirius hadn't had any stationary like that before. And surely he didn't need to use it to write a letter to Harry; Harry knew where he lived, their floo address and certainly Sirius's full name. He rolled his eyes, deciding not to worry about it.

Harry,

Not that I know much about parenting, you know, but I had hoped that it was customary for children to write to their fathers at least once every two weeks. As it's been that long since you left for Hogwarts, and I have not yet received a letter from you, I have decided to be the bigger man.

How are classes? Do you like Arithmancy? I was always pants at it—I only took it three years, but I got an A on my OWLs, so Professor Vector probably wouldn't have let me continue to NEWT level anyway. Is he still teaching that class? I would think so since the year I took it was only his first year. He can't be that old…

How's Snivelly Snape treating you? Are his classes just awful? It was bad enough
having to be in the same class as him in school, but I just can’t even imagine having him teaching me—or anyone really. I bet it’s dreadful.

This is an awful letter, I know. I’m sure you can tell I’m skirting the real issue here, which is that I would really, really like to know what’s going on with all that…stuff. You know, Harry, I’m really worried. I keep getting these little thoughts that are saying that this is just like the Tri-Wizard Tournament, only without an actual tournament, Barty Crouch Jr, or dragons.

What I mean is, I’m worried that you’re being led into a trap or something and I’m not going to be around to watch over you. Maybe I should relocate closer to Hogwarts. There’s probably a room to rent in Hogsmeade—I could look into some investing, maybe. I still haven’t decided on anything…

Are you sure you’re okay? Harry, maybe I should talk to Him—you know, just to ease my nerves. I don’t think I’m overreacting, but that might be a sort of suicide mission. I keep trying to think of what James or your mother would have done in my place. James, definitely, would have locked you up in your room and not let you out until Voldemort died of old age. I doubt that’s going to happen.

Lily, on the other hand, would probably have gotten so pissed off that you were being targeted in any way that she would have marched right up to Voldemort and slapped some sense into him. I’m not sure how he would have taken that. I wouldn’t have been surprised if she walked away from it. She could charm just about anyone.

What I’m saying is, I’m an awful father that I think James would have been too overprotective that I’m not as charming as your mother I don’t have either of those options. Harry, I don’t want to say too much in a letter, but I want you to remember Regulus. I would have done it to protect him, and I’ll sure as hell do it to protect you, but the problem is that I think you wouldn’t even need my protection—what I could offer anyway. I doubt it would have helped Regulus much either. I’m not happy about this, but then again, I don’t see either of us having any other options.

River House is too noisy without you. I know most parents say that the house is too quiet without their kids, but they don’t have Ginger…and Morty, who’s a real wailer. Harry, this kid’s got lungs the size of the Channel, and without you around, Ginger thinks it’s okay to be as loud as she wants. Fred and I are building a men’s retreat in the back garden to take up time and get away from Ginger. It’s kind of like a tree house fortress. I think Fred slept in it last night. You can see it when you come home for holidays. We’ll do manly things like puff cigars in monogrammed smoking jackets.

When’s the first Hogsmeade weekend? If you’re not too cool to spend a Saturday or Sunday with your new-old man, I’d like to join you. And your friends of course. It might take my mind off these weird dreams I’ve been having again. I’m going to try to send another letter to Moony now; this owl seems to be getting confused, so I’m going to try renting a falcon from the post office.

Love,
Sirius
Your Dad

Dad

Harry folded up the letter and tucked it in his pocket. Well, he thought, it certainly hadn’t taken his mind off anything, but it had added new things to think about. Looking at his watch, he realised that it was nearly time for dinner. He had been outside for entirely too long. He sighed and headed back
towards the castle, deciding that he could still put this off. Maybe if he just ignored everything long enough it would go away.
Cold War

Chapter by faire_weather

Chapter Notes

This chapter revised 04/16/11.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Cold War (n):** A state of rivalry and tension between two factions, groups, or individuals that stops short of open, violent confrontation.

Hermione was already at dinner when Harry got there, but Ron was once again nowhere to be seen. She frowned at him when he sat across from her and stuck her nose in a book, successfully ignoring him. Harry cleared his throat hesitantly.

"Where's Ron?" he asked with a decent interpretation of cheeriness in his voice.

Hermione glanced up briefly. "He already ate. He had to start his detentions tonight."

"I thought they weren't starting until next week," Harry said, trying to keep the conversation going.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at the interruption; she had been working all week on a lengthy essay for Ancient Runes. "Professor McGonagall changed her mind because Filch decided he needed some filing done immediately."

"That doesn't sound too bad," Harry said.

Hermione sighed harshly and closed her book. She obviously didn't want to talk to him right then. He couldn't blame her: he hadn't been exactly chipper last time he'd seen her. He supposed that people got fussy when other people stormed out of their bedrooms, but he was smart enough not to bring it up.

"He's got to alphabetise all the student records dating back to the 1500s."


"As you should be," Hermione said. "That was very rude of you, and you could at least have listened to what we had to say."

"I did," Harry insisted. "Plus, Ginny agrees with me."

"Ginny doesn't count right now," Hermione said. Harry frowned at her. "What I mean is," Hermione continued, "this is something that seriously upsets Ron. You know how his family is."

"Ginny's part of his family," Harry added helpfully.

Hermione narrowed her eyes again. "Harry, you're being contrary just to be contrary."
"I'm not!" Harry said.

"I know," Hermione stressed, "that just because she's Bellatrix's daughter doesn't mean that she's automatically a Death Eater, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't be careful, Harry."

Harry came very close to blurting out something that he shouldn't have, but caught himself just in time. "I know," he said.

"Good," Hermione said.

"Good," Harry said. They looked at each other for several seconds, and then Harry ventured, "So are we okay?"

Hermione smiled at him after only a moment of hesitation. "We're okay."

"Good," Harry repeated. The chattering of all the students in the Great Hall suddenly faded out, and Harry looked up to the front of the room to see what was going on. Professor Dumbledore was standing up behind the Head Table waiting complacently for silence.

"Good evening," Dumbledore smiled when everyone was quiet. His blue eyes were twinkling merrily, which probably meant he had something up his green-striped sleeve. Harry frowned at the thought; there was no reason for him to keep feeling so disgruntled when the Headmaster didn’t tell him everything. Dumbledore wasn't bad, he was just enigmatic, and Harry knew he had everyone’s best interests at heart. He wasn’t evil for having something up his sleeve. If anyone was evil, it was Voldemort, and Harry still associated with him.

He cringed internally. The thought of it sounded so much worse than the reality of it.

He was sure, now that he thought about it, that Dumbledore had a very good reason for keeping whatever secrets he had from Harry, and just because his father thought he'd been sent on a suicide mission didn't mean it was true—and anyway, Sirius had been given an opportunity to say no.

But it also didn't mean that Harry wasn't determined to find out what the hell was going on.

Sirius was known for overreacting—even Harry could admit that, and Harry would never get anywhere if he alienated himself from the leader of the Light side. He wanted to help unite the wizarding world—and he was sure Dumbledore did, too.

Harry smiled to himself and murmured 'Good evening' back to Dumbledore along with the rest of the students. This war was over before it had even begun—the rest of the world just didn't know it yet. The thought left him with a happy little smile on his face, and he turned it towards the Headmaster as he made his speech.

"Yesterday evening, Hogwarts welcomed two new students," Dumbledore continued happily. "They arrived late last night from Beauxbatons and will be finishing their sixth and seventh years here with us, as their family has relocated from France. I would like everyone to give Alsace and Lorraine Lestrange a very warm welcome."

Dumbledore gestured behind Harry, and Harry turned to see Alsace and another petite girl who looked exactly like her walk hesitantly into the Great Hall side by side. They made their way to the front of the hall and stopped in front of Dumbledore. The students clapped politely, and though it had only been two years, Harry realised that most of the students had forgotten that Lestrange was a Death Eater name. He chuckled humourlessly to himself and clapped along with the rest of the hall.

"Alsace," Dumbledore said, and Alsace gave an elegant wave, "has been sorted into Gryffindor. Her
sister Lorraine will be in Ravenclaw, according to the Sorting Hat." The Ravenclaw and Gryffindor tables erupted into applause.

Dumbledore raised a hand for silence again and the students complied. "Alsace has also just informed Professor McGonagall, who informed me, that she was made Chaser for the Gryffindor team this afternoon, and Professor Flitwick tells me that Lorraine has made second piano accordian chair in the Hogwarts orchestra. What wonderful starts for our two new students!"

"I expect all students to help the misses Lestrange familiarise themselves with the nuances of the castle. Should you see either of them wandering the wrong way or lost, please give them a hand. You may join your tables now, ladies, and your prefects will show you to your dorms after dinner," he added to the two girls.

They nodded, hugged briefly, and separated to join their tables. Harry looked at Hermione stubbornly and waved for Alsace to sit next to him. She slid into the empty space next to him and smiled faintly.

"Hi," Harry said. Hermione smiled at her, but said nothing, which Harry couldn't really argue with. Hermione usually tried to welcome everyone, but he wasn't surprised that she was wary of the Lestrange sisters. Bellatrix had tried to kill them in fifth year, after all—and she'd certainly killed someone, though neither Harry nor Sirius knew who, yet.

"Hello," Alsace said. She stuck her hand out to Hermione and said, "I am Alsace Lestrange, and you are?"

Hermione couldn't very well ignore her, and Harry grinned into his hand as she was forced to take Alsace's hand and introduce herself.

"Hermione Granger," Hermione said primly. "I'm Head Girl." Harry bit into a roll to keep from grinning.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Alsace said. Harry noticed, belatedly, that Alsace didn't have even a hint of a French accent.

"I heard you live with your grandmother," Hermione said. Harry tried to kick her shin, knowing exactly where that line of questioning was going, but Hermione deftly moved her leg out of the way as if she knew what Harry had been planning to do. He scowled at her across the table and chewed harshly on the roll.

"Yes," Alsace said. "And our grandfather as well. Our parents are in Azkaban," she said bluntly. Harry looked at her out of the corner of his eye and saw that her jaw was set determinedly, daring Hermione to say something derogatory. Harry pulled his foot back. Alsace could handle herself. Several students scattered around them turned and looked with undisguised surprise.

"Oh," Hermione said, chagrined. Harry would have loved to see this moment continue, but he suddenly sensed someone standing behind him and turned around. Theodore Nott was there, tall and gangly, with his hands clasped in front of him and his lips pursed as if he were nervous.

"Granger," he said. Hermione looked up and frowned.

"Nott," she said.

Nott shifted uneasily and transferred his attention to Alsace. He stuck his hand out gracefully and she took it. "Theodore Nott," Nott said, lightly kissing her fingers. "Head Boy." Alsace smiled in amusement and introduced herself to him.
"Anyway," Nott said, redirecting his attention to Hermione with a sudden burst of—possibly—bravado. "I need to speak to you."

"About what?" Hermione asked suspiciously.

"Prefect business," he said.

Hermione gathered up her things immediately. "I'll just get Neville then," she said.

"No need," Nott said. "Just Head Boy and Head Girl."

"Oh," Hermione said. "Well, all right." Nott nodded and walked out of the hall, Hermione hastening to follow.

Alsace looked at Harry when they were out of sight. "I have not been at Hogwarts very long," she said, "but even I know that Heads never meet without their prefects."

Harry frowned, watching the empty doorway. "What do you suppose he wants?" he asked, and then frowned again. Why was he asking Alsace? As if she would know what went on at Hogwarts already.

Alsace snorted delicately and said nothing.

After seeing something truly horrifying enough times, one's reactions become blunted to them, as Theodore well knew. It skewed your perceptions and the line between good and bad, right and wrong, would become so grey that one wouldn't be able to tell it from the white or the black. That might've been one of Malfoy's problems, having been raised mostly by his stern, possibly now-deranged father with only minor influence from his mother, who Theodore, admittedly, knew hardly anything about.

This was also true for less radical situations, and even though Theodore's father had been absent enough of his life that Theo had been forced to suffer through only a few truly macabre experiences, he was still hardened enough to not react when Granger gave him a wholly suspicious look upon arriving at the old Charms classroom he had chosen to hold their discussion in.

Slytherins, as a rule, were always looked upon with suspicion and even though Theodore had never done anything even remotely vulgar or camp in recent years—save for, maybe, not putting Malfoy out of his misery—he accepted this constant lack of trust as a true Slytherin should. That didn't mean that the awkward, chagrined feeling he felt at Granger's hard eyes was easier to bear, though.

The old Charms classroom was hardly ideal for chatting and planning, but Hogwarts didn't have a prefect's study, so it was all he had. Perhaps he should suggest such a room to the headmaster—it wasn't as though the school didn't have room to spare.

"Well?" Granger asked. She had positioned herself on an old rickety-looking desk and was looking at Theodore expectantly. He wished that he could explain why he felt so inferior under her gaze. He was raised to be better than that—surely a hard look from some girl shouldn't rattle him so much. His face remained expertly blank, and he prided himself on this, as Malfoy, had he been in a similar situation feeling similarly, would surely have defaulted by now. "What's going on?"

"Your parents are muggles, aren't they?" Theodore asked. He wanted to slap himself right afterwards because it was such a stupid question to ask. Everyone knew Granger's parents were muggles. His grandmother had taught him to better handle strange situations. She would have pinched him for
such a pitiable opener.

Granger narrowed her eyes. "If you've only brought me here to insult me for being muggleborn, then you can save your breath. I don't care what you've to say."

"No," Theodore said hastily. "Not at all. I don't have anything against muggles."

"Really," Granger said. It was not a question. More, it couldn't have been more obvious that not only did she not believe him; she thought his entire existence beneath her. Theodore wanted to scowl terribly, but that wouldn't get him anywhere with Granger, and he wanted her assistance.

He suddenly had the odd feeling that it was vital to not only his plans for Head Boy, but also for something that he couldn't explain just yet, that she believe him. He showed her his teeth. "Look," he said gawkily, with his lips still spread in an uncharismatic grin.

Granger looked at him strangely. "At what?"

"My teeth," Theodore said through them. "They're straight." He was very glad that none of the other Slytherins were around for he would surely be ostracised at great length for such a display. What in Dagda's name was wrong with him?

"And?" Granger prompted.

Theodore closed his lips in frustration. "Teeth usually aren't naturally this straight, Granger," he said flatly.

"So what?" Granger asked rhetorically. "So you used a spell to straighten them. How does that prove you don't have anything against muggles?"

Theodore wondered, for one agonizing moment, if she was mocking him or if she truly didn't understand. He didn't think it was all that hard to figure out—especially for a muggleborn girl who had dentists for parents. He really didn't want to say it though; there might be more questions and then he would be forced to go into great detail about the whole process, which, undoubtedly, would end up with him telling her he had suspicions that it had been Granger's own parents that fixed his teeth.

He heaved a great sigh and sat down on a desk opposite her. "There are no spells to change bone structure, which, technically, is what fixing teeth would be. I had brackets when I was ten."

Granger's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "How interesting."

He was seriously starting to regret inviting Granger to talk by now. This was not going at all how he had planned it to go. "Quite."

"I would think," Granger continued carefully, "that someone with parents of certain, ah, affiliations, would protest such measures."

Theodore had to give her credit for how she had worded that statement. It was said like a pureblood, with a perfect mix of tact, careless small talk and veiled insult. The delivery needed work, though.

"If you're saying that you didn't think that my father, since he's a Death Eater, would use muggle remedies to fix his son's teeth, then I'm sorry to disappoint you. More important than alienating muggleborns to my family is the illusion of perfection. I cannot help my ungainly stature," he said wryly, "but my teeth were fixable. It was a logical solution—even more pleasing as it frustrates the other Slytherins to no end."
"Why?" Granger asked curiously.

This time, Theodore did roll his eyes. Sometimes, the cleverest were also the most oblivious. "Because their teeth aren't perfect, obviously. Don't you think that would cause a bit of jealous contention?"

"Not at all," Granger said. "But then, everyone has their own values."

Theodore took a moment to consider what life would be like without the constant pettiness that surrounded him. He imagined it might be nice for a while—until he got terribly bored of everyone being so cheerful.

He cleared his throat. "Regardless, I didn't go to all this trouble just to show off my teeth—especially since I found subtle mockery more effective than obvious boasting”—so if you are now sufficiently satisfied that I am not here to insult you, then could we continue with the intended discussion?"

Granger studied him with calculated eyes, and then asked slowly, "And that would be?"

Theodore barely restrained from sighing in relief. He pulled a magazine from his school bag and held it out to Granger. "My grandmother subscribes to *Witch's Home Journal,*" he explained, "and I nicked this from her sitting room."

Granger flipped through it curiously, but found nothing that explained why Theodore was showing it to her. Theodore moved to sit next to her on the desk, checking first that it would hold both of them, and then reached over to flip a few more pages. "There," he said, pointing at a particular article. "It's the October issue and this year they wrote something up about how muggles celebrate All Hallows and the night before. Halloween, it says."

"I'm familiar with the term," Granger said dryly.

Theodore huffed. "I would imagine that you are, Granger, granting that you were raised as a muggle." He peered at her, eyebrows raised in amusement. "What I was actually doing, as you would know had you been raised to be a Slytherin," he admitted ruefully, "was checking to see if I had the name right without actually admitting that I don't know for certain."

Granger, surprisingly, laughed. "Is that how your lot works?" she asked. "I had wondered. How much work and extra stress it must be to dance around subjects all the time."

"Quite," Theodore said blandly. "Anyway," he gestured back to the magazine, "this is what I wanted to show you. They've got this elaborate write-up on what muggles do to celebrate this 'Halloween', and I thought it was really interesting because it's so different from the way we celebrate it when we're with our friends and families."

Granger perked up, but Theodore, knowing what was probably coming, waved her off. "I'm not explaining it right now. I was thinking that we could organise a gala."

"A gala," Granger said slowly. "Don't you think that would be a bit over-the-top?"

Theodore scrunched up his nose. "A fancy-dress party then," he amended.

"So what's this got to do with me then?"

"Well," Theodore said slowly, "I was thinking that this party could be muggle-themed...you know, to make things a bit more interesting. Our celebrations are usually based much more on our religion.
Not here at Hogwarts, of course—since there are so many muggleborn students that the Board of Governors doesn't want to offend—but when we're with our families. Dumbledore tends to keep things simple with sweets and pasties."

"I, also, was aware of that," Granger said, "having eaten those same sweets and pasties myself."

Theodore rolled his eyes, not even noticing that in the time since he had been talking to Granger, he had almost completely relaxed—something he would have never done around the other Slytherins.

"The point is that we've never been able to have traditional celebrations while we're at school, and, frankly, I'm a bit board of feasts. Since we can't risk offending the muggleborn students, we can't do a traditional party—but we can try to have a muggle-themed one. It might offend people like Malfoy, but most of the other students would be intrigued enough to give it a go."

"I'm surprised that you're not worried about offending Malfoy," Granger said.

Theodore scoffed. "A house divided cannot stand, but a dungeon with factions only weakens the foundations," he said philosophically.

"It would be better to have strong foundations, I would think," Granger noted.

Theodore couldn't argue with that, so he only shrugged. "I don't lay claim to the quote; you can attribute it to Wendell Wiggins, fifteenth century Master of Charms. At any rate, would you be interested in trying to organise this? I question the reliability of this article—I'm not wholly convinced that muggles are strange enough to go to great lengths to scare and steal pumpkin pasties from other muggles on Halloween. I'm hoping that you can help make this as authentic as possible. We could work out all the details then submit a proposal to the Headmaster."

Granger laughed again. "The article's not that far off," she admitted, scanning the rest of it. "It's not as commonplace as it used to be, but we—that is, muggles—do dress up and go begging for sweets."

"Ghosts and everything?" Theodore asked, directing her to one particular line: 'costumes including those of ghosts, muggle Aurors, princesses and witches.'

Granger nodded. "How do they make themselves translucent without the magic then?" Theodore asked curiously.

"They don't," Granger said. "They put white bed sheets over themselves."

"That's outlandish!" Theodore exclaimed.

Granger gave him a wry look. "No worse than the outfits they come up with for witches," she said. "When I was six or seven, I dressed up as a witch, and my costume was quite different from what we actually wear."

Theodore looked at her curiously. "What was it like then?"

Granger smirked. "A big, black rimmed hat with a long, warty nose, and green skin. I also had a black Victorian era mourning dress on and carried a kitchen broom and a plastic cauldron."

"You can't make potions in a plastic cauldron!" Theodore said, outraged. "I've seen this plastic stuff before. It melts when it gets too hot. You're just asking for trouble."

"Of course," Granger said dryly. "But muggles aren't often found making potions. It was a prop—"
not real. I carried the sweets I got in it."

Theodore leaned back on the desk looking thoughtful. "Muggles are strange," he said slowly. "Interesting, but strange."

Granger shrugged. "We seem strange to them, I assure you. When I got my Hogwarts letter, my parents were a bit thrown. Diagon Alley that first year was a nightmare—my father was jumpy the whole time and my mother was astounded that people still dressed like muggles used to in the 1500s."

"We don't dress like we're from the 1700s," Theodore said.

"Cravats?" Granger asked dubiously.

"It's improper to go without a cravat at certain social functions," Theodore said plainly. Granger merely looked at him. "So—what do you say, Granger?" Theodore asked at last. "Do you think it would be a good idea?"

Granger shrugged. "I'm sure all the muggle-born students would appreciate it—might remind them of their childhoods. If you think the purebloods won't be angry with it then by all means, let's do it."

Theodore smirked. "Bugger the purebloods."

Hermione giggled, and said, "Language, Nott!"

It was very late when Lucius arrived at Ard-Mhéara looking very pleased with himself. Voldemort had been staring at the spot on the cliffs where the fading sunlight hit the rocks and made them glow bloody red, but the rocks were black now and he could see nothing from his window except his own hideous reflection.

Edward Yaxley, an old friend who was not an old friend because Voldemort did not have friends, had left only moments before. They had gone to school together when Voldemort had been Tom Riddle, though he had only known Yaxley through his sister. He'd been in Ravenclaw and two years Voldemort's senior, but they had gotten along well enough.

Yaxley would—and had, on occasion—follow Voldemort to the ends of the earth. Not because he was especially fond of him—even if he had been before Voldemort had gone mad, but because he was old now, just like Voldemort, and he had nothing else to live for without the Death Eaters. And because he didn't give a damn about other people, anymore. He cared only for his beasts.

Voldemort couldn't blame him. He had no illusions about himself; he knew that he was cruel and heartless and that he had disposed—horribly—of more people than he cared to remember, but he wasn't the only person—was he even a person anymore?—to do that. What were people, when it came down to it? Nothing but an insignificant blip on the timeline of the world.

At one time, Voldemort had had a plan. It had been a plan that he and Yaxley thought up themselves, would carry out themselves, and dispose of the evidence themselves. By then, Voldemort had already removed his father from this world and had no compunctions about murder. The problem was—and he might be hypocritical for this, but he didn't particularly mind—that he had compunctions about someone else murdering someone that he happened to be fond of.

He had ever only been fond of one person. Perhaps two, if one was willing to get into a semantics argument about it, but Voldemort didn't think anyone—other than the Brat-Who-Lived—would be
willing to do so.

Somewhere along the line, the plan had gone pear-shaped. Voldemort didn't remember when, but he did remember that when he first realised it, Edward Yaxley hadn't said a word. He had always been too complacent for his own good—he never minded taking the long way, so long as, eventually, he got results.

Yaxley had been waiting over forty years for results. He had no dreams of immortality or power like Voldemort did, but Voldemort admitted to himself that he wasn't too excited about staying alive forever either. He couldn't even remember now why the notion had caught his fancy to begin with. *More time*, he finally remembered; he had wanted more time to do what he needed to do.

He had got distracted somewhere along the line.

Two years ago, that wretched fool Dumbledore had said something profound about love to him. He hadn't been listening at the time; he couldn't remember what it was. Just as well; Voldemort had no interest in profound statements anyway, but he did wonder if it had been true. Dumbledore was wont to wax poetic about love all the time; the only problem was that Voldemort couldn't remember what love was. He found that he didn't particularly care; the last time he had remembered, it had been a gut-wrenching feeling.

Voldemort didn't have time for gut-wrenching feelings. They were troublesome and distracting—he would know, of course: they had distracted him. It was better that he didn't remember. He was old, he had never been too terribly fond of life—for himself or anyone else—and he just wanted to be able to tell himself when it was all over that he had accomplished something noteworthy.

It didn't have to be anything anyone *liked*, but he was owed at least a paragraph in the history books. He'd earned that at least. He didn't have to worry about that. Yaxley had been by only moments before: the Dementors were restless, and he would have his paragraph.

"And I can die when I'm done," Voldemort murmured to himself.

The apparition wards sounded in Voldemort's head and he turned slowly, knowing that no one without a Dark Mark would be able to apparate inside, but not knowing which of his Death Eaters was foolish enough to show up unannounced at a time like this. It must have been well past midnight.

"Lucius," Voldemort said flatly. Unlike his obnoxious little rival, he did not offer Lucius tea. Sometimes, Lucius infuriated him so much that he knew he would not be able to still his hand from actually dropping cyanide in it.

He was arrogant, and he was infuriating, but he was heartless as well—especially when it came to defending his family—and heartless was necessary sometimes. Lucius was necessary sometimes. "What do you want?"

Lucius bowed quickly and rose, looking flushed and overly excited, which, in Voldemort's memory, either boded very well or very badly—depending on the circumstances. He was in no mood for games; it had better bode well for him tonight or he just might offer Lucius a cup of tea.

"It's done, Milord," Lucius said proudly.

Voldemort's face twitched and his eyebrows would have risen had he had any. "Indeed?" he asked. "After all this time—I have given you a year and you have finally finished your assignment. Very good, Lucius," he sneered.
Lucius's face tensed in either indignation or fright; it was always very hard to tell with him. He was so proud that even condescendence from his master angered him. How very unfortunate that it had been bred into his brat of a son. Voldemort put up with a lot from his Death Eaters—much more than many would expect—but he was loathe to add another presumptuous little brat to his ranks. But perhaps—yes, perhaps Harry could do something about the boy. He did seem to have a certain affect on him.

He was getting entirely too old to deal with it, and his original mission was so far from being accomplished that sometimes he came very close to forgetting what it was. He never did—completely—but he had strayed and he had become mad from it. That he knew he was mad changed nothing—at least he knew it now. His sanity was slowly returning to him, though he did not know why, and now each of his cruel decisions was made with clarity instead of mind-fogging anger. He should not have been able to regain his clearness of mind, all research agreed. This sanity is how he realized how replaceable Lucius actually was.

The problem with having followers, he thought, was that you had to offer them something in return for their allegiance, and oftentimes, the prices were radical.

"I would like a debriefing before you take me to them," Voldemort finally said. He sat down at his desk and poured himself—not Lucius—a cup of tea as Nagini slithered into his lap.

Lucius remained standing even though there was an available chair across from Voldemort's desk. He would have offered Severus a seat, even though Severus was a traitor, if only because Severus knew enough to at least act humble in front of him.

Lucius cleared his throat arrogantly. "Milord, I apologise for the delay, only not having an artefact similar to the book Hogwarts uses made it difficult—"

"The important parts, Lucius," Voldemort interrupted.

Lucius nodded. "Very well, Milord. There are two-dozen total—all of them under the age of two."

"All confirmed?" Voldemort asked.

"Yes, Milord," Lucius nodded. "Narcissa and I confirmed them personally."

Voldemort leaned back in his chair and absently stroked Nagini's scales. They were cold to his touch, but then, his own skin was usually cold as well. Twenty-four children, all magical, all muggleborn; it was an exciting thought. Twenty-four magical children who would be raised as wizards and not muggles—twenty-four magical children less who would enter the wizarding world at eleven not knowing anything about their lives—like him.

"And the appropriate people?" Voldemort asked. "All the muggles that were aware of their existence? Documents?"

"Narcissa and I researched thoroughly, Milord," Lucius said. "We have followed these same muddbloods for the past year—making sure they were magical, studying their families and the places they ventured. All of the muggles have been Obliviated and all of their documents destroyed. They will never know that they had muggle children at all."

"Acceptable," Voldemort decided. "Where are they now?"

Lucius breathed a quiet sigh of relief. It almost brought a smile to Voldemort's face. "The Manor,
Milord. We have collected them over the past fortnight. The house-elves are tending to them now."

Voldemort nodded slowly.

"Milord?" Lucius ventured slowly. Voldemort looked at him expectantly. "If I may be so bold—"

Voldemort wanted to roll his eyes; Lucius was often too bold for his liking "—what will you do with
the mudblood children?"

Voldemort considered him. He wondered what Lucius expected him to do with them. Surely, Lucius
didn't think he would waste so many resources only to kill off two-dozen magical children? It was
insane even by Voldemort's standards. Possibly amusing, but still insane.

"Two will be delivered to the families of two Death Eaters. Their wives are barren." How charitable
of him, Voldemort mused to himself. He frowned as he realised that he would be providing
happiness to others, when he himself knew none. A small price, in the end. "A ritual will be
performed which will make the children blood-family. They will be raised never knowing that
anything is amiss."

Lucius was obviously fighting back a grimace. He had not expected that. "And the others, Milord?"

"The others will be left at the British Wizarding Orphanage in Derbyshire. As you well know,
Lucius, there are actually no orphans there," he smirked, "as so many pure-blood families find
themselves childless." He chuckled darkly and then added, "I'm sure they'll be snatched up in no
time."

"But they're mudbloods," Lucius said, finally allowing his grimace to show. "Milord," he added
belatedly.

Voldemort cocked his head slightly to the side. "Not if the adoptive families choose to perform the
blood-relation spell."

Lucius looked like he wanted to argue. Voldemort would be very surprised if he did—Severus was
the only one who had ever dared to do so, other than Yaxley, but Yaxley had always been a special
case.

"I would like to see them," Voldemort said when it was clear that Lucius still did not have the
fortitude to dispute him. Lucius nodded, and they apparated to Malfoy Manor.

Various house-elves hustled to take their cloaks, and Narcissa rose from the settee she was perched
upon and curtsied when she saw him. He nodded to her as she led him and Lucius through a door
and into a mass nursery.

Voldemort stared at the children. They were all being tended to by a hoard of flustered house-elves.
Most were sleeping, but a few whimpered or cried. It was a new experience for the Dark Lord. He
had not been around crying children before unless he was about to cast the Killing Curse at them.

The last, actually, had been the Boy-Who-Lived, and Voldemort was amused to recall that he hadn't
cried at all. Lily Evans certainly had, but he had given her a chance and she hadn’t taken it. Pity. The
boy called Harry Potter had stared at him with big green eyes, shaken his rattler and then lifted his
arms to be picked up. Nothing had ever pissed Voldemort off quite so much.

"Here they are, Milord," Lucius said uselessly. Voldemort walked slowly around the room, looking
over each child and testing—just to make sure because Lucius was sometimes an idiot—that they
were all magical. When he was satisfied that Lucius hadn't for once cocked everything up, he
nodded.
"That one," he pointed at a little blonde girl with light hair that looked close enough to the barren wife of one of his Death Eaters, "and that one," he pointed to a boy that fit similarly, "will stay here. Someone will be by to collect them and take them to their proper places within the week. The others will be taken to the orphanage. I don't care how you do this or who you have assist you, but you will not be seen doing it. Is that understood, Lucius?"

"Of course, Milord," Lucius said quickly. Sometimes, Voldemort had to admit to himself that he grew tired of all of this 'milord' business, but he only had himself to blame for it. Yaxley, of course, would have a good laugh over it if Voldemort ever told him, but he had no plans to do so.

He nodded, dipped his head politely to Narcissa, and dis-apparated.

Ron was studying his pamphlets dejectedly when Harry went up to bed the next night. He was beat, having spent all afternoon and evening in the library finishing his Potions essay on mint leaf. Who would have thought that such an innocuous little plant could be so deadly? Aunt Petunia made sweets with mint leaf at Christmas—it was just unheard of.

In fact, it was unheard of. The more time Harry spent reading up on Arithmantic potions and the effects ingredients with irrelevant pH values had on them, the more he was certain that Malfoy hadn’t known what he was doing. Mint leaf in particular was usually used to negate the properties of an improperly made potion. In many potions—excluding Arithmantic ones, of course—mint leaf would only revert a base back to water. How it did this, Harry didn't know, but magic did a lot of unexplainable things.

He had, during his research, only found one mention of mint leaf in regards to Arithmantic potions. He had also only found one mention of mint leaf having an irrelevant pH value. Odds were that Malfoy was just trying to sabotage their potion, not kill them all—or even singe his face, as he'd claimed.

This, fortunately or unfortunately, did not hold to what Harry had thought of Malfoy at all. He had to hand it to him though; Malfoy didn't do anything by halves, even his mistakes.

That Hermione and Nott had known what mint leaf would have done only said that they knew more than they probably should have. Harry found that after all that, Malfoy just seemed more pathetic than ever.

"Alright, Ron?" Harry asked, flopping down on his bed.

Ron looked up and grimaced at him. "These are horrid," he said, gesturing hopelessly at the pamphlets. "I don't know what Hermione expects me to learn."

Harry leaned over the empty space between their beds and glanced at the pamphlets. There were moving diagrams of livers and kidneys, and several charts. He shrugged. "Who knows," he said. "Just read them so you'll be prepared if she quizzes you."

Ron snorted. "Will do," he said. "Ginny came by looking for you earlier," he added, picking up a different pamphlet and skimming it disgustedly. "I told her I didn't know where you were."

"What did she want?" Harry asked absently.

Ron shrugged. "Don't know, mate." He rolled over on his side and stared at Harry. "Lavender was with her," he added.
Harry's eyebrows shot up sleepily. "Yeah?" he asked with no little amount of amusement. "What did Lav Lav want?" he teased.

Ron tossed his pillow at Harry and then growled when Harry wouldn't give it back. "She asked if we were going to Hogsmeade next weekend. Apparently, Parvati's going to be studying. She wanted to come with us."

Harry snorted. "What did you tell her?"

Ron rolled onto his back and shrugged. "I said I reckoned she could if she wanted."

Harry was silent for several minutes. "What's Hermione got to say about this? She's not very fond of Lavender, you know."

"Don't know," Ron admitted. "Things have been…tense. She didn't really talk to me today."

Harry hummed noncommittally. "She'll come around," Harry finally decided.

He heard the rustling of sheets as Ron settled in and shut the hangings around his bed. "Maybe," Ron said after several minutes.

Harry closed his eyes and slept.

Chapter End Notes

"I can die when I'm done" is, of course, a line from that Gnarls Barkley song "Crazy".
Open Conflict

Chapter by faire_weather

Chapter Notes

This chapter revised 04/20/2011.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Open Conflict (n):** 1. an active, often violent, fight, battle, or struggle 2. discord of action, feeling, or effect; antagonism or opposition, as of interests or principles

Hermione had not taken well to Ron inviting Lavender along to Hogsmeade the following week, and, strangely enough, had an unexpected project come up that just couldn't wait. She would have to miss Hogsmeade. *Perhaps another time*, she told Ron apologetically the following morning.

What was even worse, Harry thought as he shoved his essay on mint leaf into his school bag along with his DADA and Arithmancy books, was that Seamus and Dean wouldn't even be there for comic relief. Harry was going to be forced to spend an entire Saturday with only Ron and Lavender—because if he backed out, too, then that would be a date, and Ron had pleaded with him that morning to not let it be a date.

Harry cursed Seamus and Dean for back-talking Professor McGonagall. Sure, they could spend a day doing lines in detention on Saturday, but he was going to have to suffer Lavender Brown.

Professor Sinclair covered the Roman Occupation of Great Britain in Defence Against the Dark Arts class. Harry grudgingly admitted to Hermione after class that it was rather interesting, even if they weren't learning any new spells yet. He sat between Hermione and Ron at a desk in the back and watched Zacharias Smith sneer at Justin Finch-Fletchley while Sinclair told them about Hadrian, a wall that wasn't very tall at all, and how the British wizards didn't take too well to it being put up.

Apparently, it had disturbed some national wards and every qualified wizard in the UK had to come and help reset them. It had been time consuming, but one good thing came out of it: new wards. That was why it was noted as one of the Ten Wars: after seeing what a disaster the national wards became, British wizards re-styled them and came up with new theories that could conform to new, big architectural developments, and it had even led to the formation of Diagon Alley, in a roundabout way.

Professor Sinclair's theory on defence was that in order to fight a war—and she had given Harry a pointed look when she said this—then you needed to know the history of wars. He didn't know how wards would help him, but the theory was interesting.

In Potions, Harry turned in his essay to Professor Snape and he, Hermione and Nott continued brewing the base to their Derbyshire Drought. It was a very slow process, and even though Malfoy kept to himself the entire class—most likely due to quelling looks from Professor Snape—Harry was antsy. After writing an entire essay on mint leaf, he now knew more than he ever would have wanted to know about the plant. And it was a whole lot more frightening to brew an Arithmantic potion.
when he knew that one wrong step could blow up the entire school.

Perhaps, even more frightening than the actual brewing process, was that Malfoy wasn't the only one getting piercing looks from Snape. It wasn't as if Harry were a stranger to those kinds of looks from Snape, but the ones he received that day shook him up down to the bone and sent strange, coursing little shivers down his spine whenever he noticed them. He was very thankful at those times that he was partnered with two exceptionally good brewers—otherwise, there was no telling what would have happened every time Harry caught Snape staring in his peripheral vision.

After lunch, he had Arithmancy. He had been moved into the advanced class at the beginning of term because there weren't enough new students in the beginning class. It was hard, and he wished that he hadn't taken the class after all, but it was too late to drop it now. The bright side was that he had Hermione in that class. The gloomier side was that Theodore Nott and Malfoy were in it, along with Zacharias Smith and Blaise Zabini. Nott seemed to be everywhere he looked nowadays, which was odd to Harry since he had gone seven whole years without ever noticing him.

That Theodore Nott suddenly became a fixture around Hermione as well over the following days did nothing to help matters. Ron, in a moment of clarity, actually noticed this. He didn't follow the three of them around, but occasionally Harry would look up and notice Nott staring at them, or Nott would call Hermione away to talk about prefect business, and none of the other prefects would be required. It made the days counting down to Hogsmeade with Lavender Brown even more unbearable.

Ron was cranky and Hermione crankier. Harry felt like he was being pulled into two different directions, and no matter how often he told Ron that Hermione and Nott were just organising a Halloween party together, Ron still refused to get over it.

He set his bag down on the desk in Arithmancy class and flopped into his chair with a sigh. Ron was in Divinations right now—suffering through Professor Trelawney—and Harry admitted, if only to himself, that he was thankful for the break. He was so tired of playing go-between.

Hermione sat down next to him a few minutes later with a tired smile. "How are you doing in the class?" she asked him.

Harry shrugged. "We haven't really done anything difficult yet," he said. "So far, it's just like maths in muggle school."

Hermione beamed at him. "Isn't it interesting how the two correlate so flawlessly? But don't get too comfortable. After we finish reviewing, Professor Vector will have us starting on higher Arithmancy, and not only is it difficult, it's illogical! I was reading chapter ten last night in our book and some of the formulas were just so odd. They made absolutely no sense."

Harry grimaced. "If it's anything like Salazar's Supposition," he said, thinking back to Monday's Potions class, "then it's going to be a nightmare."

"That's not even the worst of it," Hermione said, biting her lip.

Professor Vector came in then and put his valise on his desk, sufficiently stopping Hermione in her lecture-tracks. He was tall, stout man with short, greying hair and thin lips. "Afternoon, class," he said plainly. Vector wasn't exactly harsh, but he was bland—everything he said was concise. He didn't smile much, but he didn't sneer either which made him a sight better than Snape.

"We're starting a group project next week, so today we will be reviewing the basic equations you will need to complete it. You'll be paired with someone from a different house for today's work." He glanced down at the roll and added flatly, "Because the headmaster thinks unification is the key to
success after school."

Harry looked at Malfoy and prayed that they didn't end up together. Of course, their options were limited. There were only sixteen students in the entire class—none of which were Ravenclaws, as they had all been placed in the Advanced-Squared class, which Professor Dumbledore had probably thought was a clever name for a really advanced maths class.

Professor Vector looked down at his roll again and then shrugged to himself. He called out a series of names, ending with, "Black and Nott, Granger and Zabini, Malfoy and Smith. There you go—change seats."

Harry looked heavenward and smiled. Out of all the options, he supposed Nott wasn't too bad. Malfoy and Smith would probably tear each other apart before the end of term, but Zabini, fortunately for Hermione, didn't seem too bad either. Harry never saw him hanging around Malfoy or Parkinson so that had to count for something.

Harry, feeling magnanimous, picked up his stuff and moved it over to Nott's desk. "Nott," he greeted, watching with glee as Malfoy and Smith both refused to move to the other's desk.

Nott nodded his head once. "Should be interesting," he said, gesturing towards the two boys. They were still glaring at each other.

Harry hid a snort behind his hand. "They can both be such ponces when they want to," he said.

Nott smirked. "Malfoy wants to all the time," he noted, as if it were a personal joke. "It's really nice having a room to myself this year; at least I don't have to share with him."

"What are the other three like?" Harry asked. "Crabbe, Goyle and Zabini."

Nott raised his eyebrows. "Zabini's not so bad when he's not trying to get into someone else's bed, but Crabbe and Goyle are entrepreneurs and I grew weary of them always trying to sell me stuff long ago."

Harry looked at him sharply. "What?" he asked incredulously. "Crabbe and Goyle? I was under the impression that they weren't the brightest galleons in Gringotts."

Nott rolled his eyes. "They're not," he said. "They're both mildly autistic. Can't tie their shoes, but they can pick your stocks for you. Why do you think they spend so much time around Malfoy? Malfoy's daddy's been paying them to arrange his investments since they were seven."

Harry looked at him dubiously. "What are the odds that they can both manage money that way?"

"Pretty decent," Nott said shrugging. "They're cousins." When Harry made no understanding gesture, Nott continued. "Inbreeding, Black. Their parents were first cousins. Most families stick to second or third cousins."

Harry hadn't thought that it was as bad as that. It was a little bit nauseating, actually.

"When Misters Malfoy and Smith have decided which desk will be more appropriate for their continued learning, we will begin," Professor Vector spoke up blandly. He didn't seem at all perturbed. Harry looked behind him at Hermione, sitting complacently next to a grinning Zabini, and smirked. She gave him an amused look back.

Finally, Malfoy picked up his stuff and huffily moved it over to Smith's desk. Smith sat back, folded his arms across his chest and smiled smugly. Malfoy pretended not to notice.
"Is it true you tried to blow us all up, Malfoy?" Smith asked loudly.

Malfoy sneered at him. "Only you and Potter," he said.

"Mr. Malfoy," Professor Vector interrupted blandly, "I must ask that if you desire to eliminate one of your fellow students that you refer to them properly, as student deaths require a multitude of paperwork—signed in triplicate—and proper identification will speed those matters along. Efficiency is key."

Malfoy looked at him incredulously while the rest of the class snickered.

"If any of you read the paper this morning—which I doubt," Vector continued, "you will know that, last night, twenty-two magical children, assumed muggle-born, were delivered to the Derbyshire Orphanage."

"What?" Hermione asked quickly.

Professor Vector raised his eyebrow in her general direction and ignored her. He clasped his hands behind his back and began pacing slowly around the classroom. "Yes, it's true. Twenty-two of them.

"I suspect," he continued, "that this was not the result of twenty-two muggle parents all deciding they'd rather not have children after all, thanks. In fact, if you will look at the board, you will see that I have offered several equations dictating the odds of this."

Harry looked at the board, down to his book and back up at the board. Beside him, Nott was furiously copying down the equations, but Harry didn't even know where to start. There were signs and symbols that weren't used in muggle maths and there were numbers written backwards and upside-down and cross-ways—some of them going so far as to merge with other numbers and signs to become strange things like the cosine of 'sevenine'.

"Bloody hell," he whispered.

Nott looked up. "Problems?"

Harry shook his head. "No, fine thanks," he said casually. "Only, none of this makes a bit of sense."

Nott looked like he might want to smile. Instead, he only pushed his book aside and leaned over Harry's, pointing out everything and actually explaining it the muggle way. It was as if he actually understood why it was so difficult for Harry to grasp all those concepts. By the end of the class, Harry grudgingly admitted, if only to himself, that not all Slytherins were wankers like Malfoy. Or Voldemort.

That night, Harry went up to the Astronomy Tower to write a letter to his father. The common room was crowded that time of night and he didn't want to chance anyone walking by and seeing something they shouldn't.

The only problem with this was that Malfoy was already there when Harry arrived.

He was ripping sheets of paper from his journal, balling them up, throwing them over the balustrade and setting them on fire with his wand as they fell. Harry slowly walked over, trying to catch the words that Malfoy was muttering to himself, but realized it was futile. Malfoy was muttering in French, and Harry didn’t understand a word of it. He wished just now that he’d had parents that forced him to learn a second language when he was younger, even if he never would have used it
“I didn’t know you spoke French,” Harry said by way of greeting—since neither he nor Malfoy ever really greeted one another anyway. The Slytherin started, and dropped the journal on the stone floor.

Malfoy, it was obvious to tell, was torn between making a sarcastic reply and ignoring him completely. In the end, he settled on “I learned French before I learned English. All Malfoys do.”

Harry cocked his head sideways, and studied Malfoy for a moment before replying. “My dad says Blacks learn Welsh, though it seems stupid to me since they haven’t lived at the property in Wales in centuries. It would have been interesting to have grown up learning all that stuff, though.”

Malfoy turned around and sneered at him. “All the sudden you’re a specialist on Black family history, are you?” he scoffed. “How bourgeois of you. My mother was a Black, and she passed her history on to me; I’m sure I know more of your family than you do.”

Harry shrugged. “Probably,” he said. “I’ve only had a summer to learn about my family; your mother’s had at least forty years. You probably know more about the Potters than I do, too.”

There was a silence that was neither comfortable nor awkward after that. Malfoy went back to muttering in French, and after a long moment, Harry lay down on the stone floor, tipped his head back, and stared at the stars. He wondered, with amusement, how a certain tilt of the earth on its axis could bring a change that allowed him and Malfoy to spend five minutes alone together without drawing wands.

Finally, when the curiosity became too much for him, Harry lifted his head back up to look at Malfoy and said, “What’s got your knickers in a twist anyway?” Malfoy was still muttering.

“Excuse me?” Malfoy asked incredulously. Maybe no one had ever said anything like that to him before and he was rife with astonishment, or maybe he was just always indignant. Harry allowed himself a small smile. He hated Malfoy, yes, but he could be such a riot sometimes.

One day, maybe Harry would learn to tolerate him enough to fight on the same side of a war with him. He swallowed a laugh—and one day, maybe Zacharias Smith would admit he used bleaching charms on his hair.

Harry shrugged. “You’re obviously hacked off,” he said. “Letter from home?” he ventured, nodding at the stationary journal.

Malfoy scowled. “Oh yes, I’m sure the great Harry Potter—”

“Black,” Harry corrected.

“Whatever,” Malfoy said.

"Not a letter then," Harry decided.

Malfoy rolled his eyes and *Incendio’d* a wadded-up paper ball of rejected words.

"How are you doing on that Arithmancy project?" Harry asked, pulling out a sheet of parchment and self-inking quill. He supposed writing a letter in front of Malfoy was better than a whole common room of Gryffindors.

Malfoy tensed. "Zacharias Smith is a fool," he growled. The parchment in his hand spontaneously caught fire and he dropped it hastily. Harry pretended to ignore it; Malfoy would have to be seriously
pissed off to have accidental magic at this age.

Harry grinned down at his blank letter. "I think he's a lot like you actually," he teased. "Blond and snotty."

"And wealthy," Malfoy muttered to himself.

"What was that?"

"Piss off, Black," Malfoy said louder.

Harry shrugged and turned back to his letter. It was a lot harder to write than he was expecting—and he had been expecting it to be quite difficult to begin with. What did you say to a man you had only recently found out was your father? And only met him not long before that? He struggled with the greeting for several long minutes. It was still strange to think of Sirius as—not Sirius...as Dad.

Dear Dad,

Classes are fine. I was moved into the advanced Arithmancy class because the beginning one was too small—which is good, I guess, because Hermione's in it too, and she can help me with my homework. I reckon it's really good that I decided to take the class this year because we're doing Arithmantic potions in Snape's class. Did you ever take NEWT potions? I don't suppose you did.

Anyway, it's kind of hard because the formulas don't make any sense, but it's better because they're not as exact. I don't have to chop my ingredients just right for the potion to work. And they take a long time to brew so I have plenty of time to make sure it's right before I melt my cauldron.

Speaking of potions, Malfoy almost blew up the entire school on Monday. He tried to add mint leaf to our potion, and it would've reacted badly to the base or something—you'd have to ask Hermione—and caused a huge explosion. Dumbledore didn't do anything because he didn't think Malfoy knew what he was doing.

I don't think he did either. The more I watch him, the more I realise what an idiot he is. He's pretty smart, but he's as reckless as a Gryffindor...no common sense. I don't know how he made it into Slytherin, really.

I haven't heard from Him since I got to Hogwarts, which is probably good because I'm feeling really weird about everything. I'm wondering if I can really help people this way or if I'm condemning them. I feel selfish because one of the biggest reasons I decided to do it was so I wouldn't have to fight anymore. Does that make me selfish?

I'm safe now, but is everyone else? Hermione and Ron—I reckon they're part of the package. I think they're safe too, and you, of course, as well, but what about everyone else? Between you and me—sometimes I don't really even care anymore, and it scares me. I'm tired of feeling like everyone else is my responsibility.

And I guess that's what worries me. But, you know, the wizarding world needs to grow up. Even muggles don't rely so heavily on other people like wizards seem to. If this were happening in the muggle world, it would be over by now. Muggles wouldn't have sat back and watched. Or maybe I'm just bitter.
"The big thing, I guess, is I don't really have a plan. I have no idea what to do. I'm just kind of floating along hoping everything will go away if I ignore it long enough. I set myself a task That Night, and I'm trying to follow through with it, but it was a spur of the moment thing...I didn't really put any thought into it. I was just pissed off at Malfoy—well, maybe I just wanted to have something to hang over his head. Or to put my mind off everything else.

I reckon I do now, but I'm not even putting a lot of effort into it. Mostly, I think I'd just like to get through school. Maybe everything will just go away by then.

Anyway, I miss River House and Ginger and Fred and you, of course. Ron's lost his prefect badge—he got caught drinking firewhiskey behind the greenhouses, but I imagine you've already heard that from the Order. Neville took his place, but Ron and Hermione are kind of tense with each other right now.

In fact, she's not coming to Hogsmeade with us Saturday because Ron invited Lavender to come. It's going to be horrible. You should come out with us for a bit. Lavender's real fond of Professor Trelawney so we can predict things with her.

Ron wants to talk to the people at Honeydukes and see what it takes to get new Chocolate Frog cards made. I asked Malfoy if I could get a picture of his dad the other day and he didn't take that too well. Maybe you've got pictures of Bellatrix at Grimmauld Place.

Snape's a nasty git as usual, but he hasn't said much to me this term. I think he's waiting me out.

That's about it, I think. I hope to see you on Saturday.

Harry

"What are you doing, Black? Writing in your diary?" Harry looked up from re-reading his letter and offered Malfoy a condescending look. Malfoy was staring down at him with his hands on his hips and what looked like a blood-flavoured lollipop in his mouth—if the thick, red, gelatinous fluid on his lips was any indication. Harry wanted to gag.

"Of course, Malfoy. I was writing about my crush on you. Do you want me to read it to you?" Harry asked sarcastically.

Malfoy gave him an odd look and removed the lollipop from his mouth. "Really," he said flatly.

Harry rolled his eyes, and ignored the niggling reminder of how his body had reacted to Malfoy after Quidditch tryouts. "No, not really, Malfoy." He looked at the pile of ashes at Malfoy's feet and then to the glowing red tip of Malfoy's wand, still hot from his run of curses and hexes. "All finished then?"

Malfoy sneered. "I'm out of paper—unless you're offering your love diary."

Harry laughed. "You just want to see if I really wrote about you, don't you?"

Malfoy's eyes flashed and he thrust his wand out towards Harry, angry. "I do not!"

Harry's wand was out just as fast, aimed directly between Malfoy's eyes. "Dare you," Harry said. "Dare you to do it. You've always wanted to."
Malfy was breathing heavily, half crazy as usual lately. He's mad as a box of frogs, Harry thought. That Malfy might just be angry or intimidated never even crossed his mind—he'd seen the crazed look on the Slytherin's face over the summer, and no other explanation seemed valid.

"Come on," Harry said, stepping forward. The tip of Malfy's wand pressed against his forehead, warm and sharp against his skin.

Malfy snarled. His mouth opened and his lips began forming words, maybe of the Killing Curse, but no sound was coming out, and Harry wondered if maybe Malfy was too mad, even for himself.

He punched Malfy instead, just as a precaution. A fierce, wild right hook that caught Malfy right in the jaw. Malfy tumbled and Harry followed him down, straddling his stomach and knocking both of their wands across the stones in the process.

They rolled, punching and kicking. Malfy managed to gain the upper hand several times, but Harry, with a bit more bulk from a summer of actually eating, always regained it. It was when Harry, furious out of his mind, hauled Malfy up by the collar of his robes and shoved him that things took on a decidedly more dangerous turn.

Malfy stumbled backwards, thighs hitting the balustrade, and flipped over it. His hands gripped the ledge below just in time, but it was a near thing. Harry's heart was beating quickly—thinking that it was quite possible he'd just killed someone—and he was never so thankful that Malfy had seeker skills.

He rushed over and stared down at Malfy—warring with his mind over whether or not to reach down and help him. Malfy was hanging over the edge of the tower, holding on with both hands and glaring up at Harry with flashing grey eyes. It was familiar even as it was unfamiliar. He wouldn't put it past Malfy to pull them both over, but he couldn't just leave him hanging over the side of the Astronomy Tower like that; he'd fall to his death, and Harry would be sick with guilt for the rest of his life...and probably in Azkaban to boot.

Harry had no idea what to do, but his anger and his instincts carried him on, urging him to do as he eventually did. He braced himself and leaned over, stretching his arm out.

"Come on," he said, but Malfy—in his fear or humiliation, or both—looked at the outstretched hand like he had no idea what to do with it. "Malfy," Harry said, heart racing, "come on, you're going to fall."

"Fuck you, Potter," Malfy snarled in a breathless voice. He tried to spit at Harry, but the angle was all wrong, and his shallow, frightened breathing kept him from putting much force behind it anyway; the spittle hit the stones or was picked up by the wind. Harry watched the little droplets zoom out of sight, and his heart gave a lurch to think of Malfy doing the same thing.

"Malfy," he tried one more time, stretching to reach even further. "Please, grab on." The Slytherin sneered at him, but his fright finally overcame him, and he carefully pried one white-knuckled hand from the ledge. Harry took his hand quickly, and they both watched, stunned as the very rock Malfy had been holding broke away and tumbled to the ground—seven or eight storeys below.

Harry pulled, but their hands were sweaty with adrenaline and fear, and if he didn't get the Slytherin up soon, he would slip away. Malfy's feet struggled to find purchase, to help push himself up; one wrong move, and Harry would be following him over. His wand was only four or five feet away, but there was no way he could get it now.

"Come on, pull yourself up," Harry said, gritting his teeth. “All that Quidditch has to be good for
something." Malfoy's struggling and swaying would soon make it impossible for Harry to hold on.

"Trying," Malfoy said, gritting his teeth. At last his foot found purchase in a small crevice and he pushed, and Harry hung his other arm over the edge for him to grab—he was staying on top of the tower by sheer determination now, and the sweat sticking his hair to his forehead proved his own fear.

"Pull," Malfoy said then, and Harry did—clenching his abdominals for any extra support, he was never so thankful for the both of them to have been athletes. Malfoy's teeth were bared in exertion and the look on his face was fiercer than any Harry had ever seen before, but his determination was a gift right now, because it finally got him over the edge. Malfoy pushed up with his toes and the momentum carried him over.

They landed sprawled and heaving on the floor. The stones were cold in the autumn chill, but they shivered for a different reason entirely. Above Harry, Malfoy struggled to regain his breathing, even as his arms wobbled and threatened to give out completely. Harry clenched his sweaty fists and tried to ignore the realisation that death was a lot closer than even he thought. *Malfoy could've died,* he thought. He nearly did.

"Thought—," Malfoy finally said, voice breathless and shaky, "I thought that was about it." He took another deep breath and rolled off Harry, arm draped over his eyes and chest heaving.

Harry tried not to notice the absence his body left, and said instead, "Me, too."

Malfoy glanced at him from beneath the cover of his trembling arm. "I thought you would have let me fall," he said hesitantly. "One less Death Eater to contend with when it gets personal."

"It's already personal," Harry said.

Malfoy shrugged. "He refused me anyway."

Harry was silent for a moment, thinking. He thought that Malfoy had just told him something extremely personal, something that left him vulnerable and exposed, and he wondered why. "Do you know why?" he finally asked.

Malfoy tried to laugh, but it turned into a coughing fit instead. "He thinks I'm mad," he finally said, then shrugged as if it made no difference to him. Harry wondered if it did.

"I'll tell you why," he offered. "You can't handle the responsibility. Being a Death Eater isn't just about going around terrorising muggles and mudbloods—there's a point behind it all, and you've got to believe in it and be able to control yourself before you can be a Death Eater. Otherwise you'll just be another Bellatrix Lestrange—mad as a hatter and respected by no one. How would you expect to win people over to your cause if you can't even function in society?"

"You just said 'mudblood'," Malfoy said slowly. It seemed that that was the only thing he was able to understand. It was strange the way Malfoy's mind worked.

Exasperated, Harry heaved himself up from the cold floor, and walked over to their discarded wands. Picking them both up, he returned to Malfoy and stared at him for a moment. "One day, Malfoy," Harry said, looking down at him, "you'll figure it out. One day, you'll realise that you can't get your way by being a little pissarse all the time, and when that day comes, I expect you'll be initiated."

"Sometimes I think you're pretty smart, but then you always go and say something stupid. I wish you'd try to figure out how to be a person…a better person," he amended. He left the Astronomy Tower without a backwards glance. He could
have been wrong, but Harry thought he might've seen a flicker of understanding flash across Malfoy's face.

Was Malfoy finally catching on? Harry couldn't be sure, but he hoped so. It was getting a little lonely having no one that he could talk about everything with, and he thought that maybe if Malfoy would only grow up a little bit, he could be that person. Maybe.

This was a place that Sirius had hoped to never see again. Just crossing to the island on the ferry sent shivers down his spine; the first time he'd made that trip felt like a hundred years ago and yesterday all at once. His fingers twitched and he hoped that would be the extent of his breakdown—at least until he made it home.

At the gates, Sirius pressed his hand against a flat, square stone and waited, wrapping his cloak tighter around him and doing his very best to ignore the way the wind seemed to scream in his ears. Everything was so surreal and frightening here. How had he survived it for all those years?

A bland, automated voice rang out, "State your name and purpose, please."

Sirius opened his mouth and tried to speak, but his voice came out cracked and hoarse. He cleared his throat. "Sirius Black. I have permission from the DMLE to visit a prisoner." A prisoner, he thought with a shudder. It hadn't been that long ago that he was one himself. He was starting to regret asking Kingsley for permission to speak to Peter. What would it accomplish anyway?

Sirius shook his head; he didn't need to do this. It would serve no purpose. He turned to go.

"Access permitted. Step through the wards."

He felt an opening manifest in the wards and the magic urging him forward; he began to panic—they were going to lock him up again, he just knew it.

"Step through the wards immediately, please," the automated voice continued, giving him a magical push.

Sirius twisted and struggled against the magic pushing him through the gates, but it became agitated with his indecision. He was given a rough shove and found himself on his hands in knees, coughing up the filthy dirt from his lungs.

Sirius heard a creak and looked over his shoulder just in time to see the gates bang shut behind him. The opening in the wards closed with a sucking, whooshing sound and then all was quiet except for his ragged breathing and the screaming wind. He was still for several minutes, trying to catch his breath.

"Nothing for it," he whispered to himself. He was a Gryffindor. He could do this. He was just overreacting. Sirius picked himself up from the ground, dusted off his business robes, and walked forward on shaky legs.

The path up to the actual fortress was agonizingly long and dismal. It didn't curve, but continued forward in a strict, straight line that led directly to the huge iron doors. He walked very slowly, but it seemed to take even less time than it had the first time.

Of course, the first time he had walked this same path, he had been manacled and escorted by three Aurors—all of them former colleagues that he had gone to Auror Academy with. Derek Abbott had been a friend of his; the grim, sad look on the blond man's face at the time had not affected Sirius at
all. At the time, he had not known what Azkaban was like; he had been resigned, sad, but not frightened. It was only later that he understood and became scared.

He was frightened now, and Derek Abbott was dead, he'd heard: killed in a Death Eater skirmish only days after escorting Sirius through those gates. He had a daughter, Sirius seemed to remember. He wondered if Harry knew her, or if she even really existed. Maybe his mind was playing tricks on him.

At the iron doors, Sirius didn't even have to knock. They swung open with a grating sound that echoed through the stone walls of the prison like an omen. A bad one, without a doubt.

Someone stepped from the shadows—there wasn't much there except shadows, Sirius noted—and lowered their hood. He forced himself not to panic—not to go for his wand just yet.

"Black, Sirius," a woman said dully. Sirius tried to make out her face, but it was almost blurry, as if her features had dulled so much that she barely looked human anymore. He wondered how long she had worked as an Azkaban guard—if she had a family, or if her life existed only in this depressing, overwhelming prison. "Please surrender your wand."

Sirius handed it over hesitantly—handle first as his father had once taught him—and fidgeted. He was defenceless in this place.

The woman conjured a box and placed his wand inside it before banishing it somewhere. He couldn't help it—Sirius began to panic then. Where had his wand gone? What did she do with it? How was he ever going to get back out of this place?

"Your wand," the woman said, "will be returned to you when you exit the prison doors. You will request it by stating your name once the doors have closed behind you." The automated voice, Sirius suddenly realized, had not been automated at all. It was this woman—this dull, lifeless woman in front of him—who had spoken to him at the gates. He cringed.

"Th-thank you," he managed, nodding slightly.

"Prisoner ANI-5391-P is located on floor three." She handed him a small, square tablet and stepped back again. "The key will direct you to his cell and back out again once you've finished. You have thirty-five minutes," she continued, and with a short, dull nod, returned to the shadows and someplace Sirius could not see.

He looked down at the tablet in his hand and it began to heat in his palm. On instinct, he muttered "Peter Pettigrew" and stumbled as the tablet jerked him forward by his arm. It led him through corridors and hallways—each of them darker than the one before—up stairs and down again. Every time the air around him began to rapidly cool, the key would jerk him in another direction, and he was very thankful that it was keeping him away from the Dementors. He wasn't sure he wouldn't faint should he happen upon one, and unconscious and wandless was no way to be around a Dementor.

What might have been ages later, the key jerked him to a stop and cooled in his hand. Sirius looked up, seeing the plaque above the cell: ANI-5391-P. It was Peter's cell. There were no bars on this cell like there had been on his, and Sirius suddenly understood why when he glanced up and down the corridor. This was the animagus section of the prison.

All of the cells were enclosed in thick glass with only small slot at the bottom to admit food. Sirius could feel the wards on it: should anything living ever pass through it, they would not make it far. He shuddered, imagining what a horrible end it would cause and very thankful that no one had known
he was an animagus at the time of his own imprisonment.

The cell looked empty, but it wasn’t, Sirius knew. He looked around him for some place to sit and was surprised when a stool appeared. Hesitantly, he sat.

"Peter," he mumbled. "It's me, Sirius." There was no movement from the cell. It looked much as his own had—dim and grey with only a ratty grey mattress on the floor in one corner, two dirty basins in the other: one for water, the other for waste, and a crumpled thin blanket on the floor.

Sirius cleared his throat and pulled several things from his pocket. "You liked word games in school," he said. "Crossword puzzles…encryptions…jumbles." Why was he even saying all of this? It made no sense. "I was never very good at them." He laughed suddenly, but it was not a happy laugh. "Good thing Fudge didn't know that, or else he never would have handed over that Daily Prophet several years ago."

How grim his thoughts were, Sirius realized. "I found a large book of them at the bookstore near my father’s family's house. You remember that place—the four of us stayed there over Ostara one year, when my mother was visiting family in Spain."

Still no movement from the cell. Maybe this would be easier if Peter never responded anyway.

"I brought it for you. And a few pens," he added hastily, slipping them carefully through the door for food. "They'll last longer than a quill and ink, I think, and since your father was muggleborn, I'm sure you know how to use one."

Sirius cleared his throat again, looking at everything he had extracted from his cloak. "And a few magazines," he added. "Um, and I remember the food being especially…um, bad here, so I brought you some sandwiches. Corned-beef. You liked those," he said, nodding. "I remember."

He passed everything through the door, closed it again, and rubbed his eyes with his fingers. "I've been having these dreams," Sirius said, hands still covering his eyes. He spoke into his knees, not even sure if the sound would make it to Peter's ears, but having to say it anyway.

"They're about Lily, I think. I can never see her but I can always hear her. Do you remember when she would sing to Harry when he was a baby? No matter how loud he cried, a few words from Lily and he would be calm…staring up at her with those big green eyes. James never could get him to stop and neither could I.

"Remus was always too afraid to try," he added with a chuckle, "but the thing is, when you talked to him, he would stop crying then, too." Sirius asked. He looked up when he heard movement.

Peter was sitting in front of the glass, chewing one of the sandwiches and flipping through the word games book. He picked up a pen and un-jumbled a word half-way through. Sirius stretched his neck to see: GORE MUSE to GRUESOME.

He shuddered.

"Why was that?"

Peter looked up. "Why was what?" He sounded like he hadn't spoken in a month, and he probably hadn't.

"Why were you able to make Harry stop crying?"

Peter shrugged. "Good with kids," he said, and unscrambled TERMITE URN. It was TIME
TURNER. "Good with spellings, too," he added, almost to himself.

"You knew, didn't you?" Sirius asked.

"Knew what?" Peter asked obligingly.

Sirius looked at his hands again. "Knew about me and Lily."

Peter smiled, and it looked a bit wistful. "Everyone knew about you and Lily," he said.

Sirius' blood ran cold. "Surely not every—"

"Maybe not everyone," Peter amended thoughtfully as he changed SEANCE SPOOK to SNEAKOSCOPE. Sirius let out a relieved breath. "But Jamie probably knew," Peter added. "Don't know for sure, but I'd say he did."

"What?" Sirius asked breathlessly. "What makes you think so?"

Peter shrugged and bit his sandwich. His mouth was still full when he answered, "Jamie was pretty clever."

"Did you know Harry was mine?" Sirius asked after a few minutes of mostly silence—filled only with occasional pleased sounds from Peter as he unscrambled yet another word. His heart was beating so rapidly that he thought it would explode any minute now.

Peter shook his head. "Nah, not for a while anyway. Always looked so much like James, you know, but I had my suspicions after a while. Never knew for sure until recently, though."

Sirius stared at him. He was very close to asking if Peter knew anything about Sirius falling through the Veil and the circumstances around it, but something stopped him. He didn't know what, but it wasn't like Peter would have those answers anyway. He really had no prepared questions, he just wanted to talk to Peter, and he didn't know why.

He supposed he really was a Gryffindor.

"Why did you do it?"

Peter didn't ask what he meant this time, but he didn't answer immediately either. "I felt like it," he said at last.

Sirius scoffed. "You felt like it." It wasn't a question.

Peter shrugged. "I had my reasons," he said. "And they're my reasons."

Sirius wanted to punch him. His fists clenched and his nails dug into his palms, and he thought the only way to make his anger go away would be to leave or at least get the conversation away from the people he loved and had loved, but he could do neither. Stubborn, stubborn Gryffindor, he thought to himself.

"I'm worried about Harry."

"I would be too, if I were you."

Sirius' blood, which had never quite warmed since stepping inside the fortress gates, froze in his veins. "What?" he breathed.
Peter shrugged. He seemed to be having trouble with one of his jumbles. He was sounding out various words under his breath and making notations on the side of the page.

"Harry's in a very precarious situation, isn't he?" Peter said absently, scratching his chin. "All of this could easily go very wrong. Consorting with a madman, straddling two sides of a very steep fence, seemingly giving up his morals, dealing with the news that his father wasn't really his father…makes one wonder how long it'll be before he cracks…or someone else cracks him." Peter mumbled a few more words under his breath and then added, "And of course, the Dementors are breeding, too."

Too stunned to reply to anything else, Sirius said, "The Dementors won't start breeding until this summer."

Peter shrugged and scrunched up his nose in frustration. Whatever word he was working on was giving him a lot of trouble. "So says you. They seem a bit restless to me, but then again, who am I to judge?" He looked up and flashed Sirius a mocking grin.

"Who indeed," Sirius muttered.

Suddenly, Peter started laughing. "Oh my!" he exclaimed, still laughing. He was clutching his stomach and shortling in a high-pitched rat-like squeak. "Oh my, indeed! How ironic!"

"What?" Sirius growled. "What's so damned funny to you?"

Peter scribbled something in his book and turned it to face Sirius, who leaned over enough to read: DEEM TORN: DEMENTOR.

Sirius shuddered, but before he had time to process anything else, Peter was standing and pressing himself against the glass as if he were trying to attack Sirius. "They're coming," he said. His sticky breath fogged the glass and he grinned slowly, showing all of his yellowed-teeth.

Sirius stood up very quickly and backed away. "Who?" he asked.

Peter started laughing very softly. "They'll be here much sooner than you expect," he said. The words sent chilly tremors through Sirius' body and he unconsciously hugged his cloak tighter to his body, trying to fight off the coldness they caused. "Much, much sooner."

"Who?" Sirius asked louder. "Who will be here? Be where?"

"Does it frighten you to think that I'll be much safer here than I would have been out free in the wide world?" Peter murmured. "Are you frightened yet?"

"Of what?" Sirius begged. "Who's coming?"

Peter laughed darkly. "How quickly you've forgotten. I imagine that once they're here, you'll remember soon enough."

Sirius shivered and screamed, "WHO?"

"The Dementors," Peter answered softly. "They're coming, Sirius, and when they do, it'll be such a massacre," Peter said, and Sirius screamed.

Chapter End Notes
1. DMLE – The Department of Magical Law Enforcement.
No Man's Land

Chapter by faire_weather

Chapter Notes

This chapter revised 06/03/2011.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

No Man's Land (n): 1. An area between opposing armies, over which no control has been established. 2. An area of uncertainty or ambiguity.

Friday night, Harry didn't get much sleep. He was more shaken after the confrontation with Malfoy than he let on. After, somehow, making it back to Gryffindor Tower, and then to his dorm room, he collapsed on the bed, pulling the curtains shut but neglecting to remove his clothes. He was shivering and his heart was still beating frantically even hours later.

Malfoy had nearly died. Died, Harry's mind exclaimed. He didn't give a toss about Malfoy in general, but to see someone—someone else, he amended—die in front of his very eyes was more than he thought he would be able to take. He was so tired of death, and Malfoy's near-death made his very blood run cold.

It bothered him so much that he tossed and turned for hours before he fell asleep. But even then, he was to get no rest. He should have cleared his mind before he went to bed. He should have practised his Occlumency; he should have learned it. If he wanted to get any sleep this year, that was.

But the Occlumency wouldn't have helped him much from his strange, surreal dreams that night. They weren't from Voldemort anyway—Harry just didn't know who they were from. He was to get very little sleep that night, and so, on Saturday morning, when Harry woke to the feeling of something sharp and pointed prodding his back, he was rightfully annoyed.

He grunted and tried to swipe at whatever it was that was poking him, but it evaded his capture. He rolled over onto his stomach with a mumbled 'hmmphno', tugging his blanket up around his neck.

He was poked again.


"Harry," Ron said, far too loud for that early in the morning. It couldn't have been later than ten. "Harry, get up. Hogsmeade today."

"No," Harry said, burying his head in his pillow. "Dun'wanna."

"You promised," Ron said. "C'mon, Harry. I told Lavender we'd go with her."

Harry harrumphed and rolled onto his back to glare at Ron through bleary eyes. Ron poked him in the stomach with his wand. "C'mon, Harry. Get up."

"I don't wanna go to Hogsmeade with Lavender," Harry said, trying to roll back over again. Ron caught his shoulder and tugged him back. "Ron," Harry pouted, trying to focus his sleep-addled
eyes, "it's early."

"It's eleven," Ron said. He stepped back, smiling mischievously and yanked Harry's blanket off the bed. "And besides," he continued as Harry yelped and scrambled to find warmth somewhere amid all the chilly air, "Rosmerta's got a new gimmick: buy one get one butterbeers on Hogsmeade weekends when you participate in the new 'Hogsmeade in Hog Heaven Shop-Off'.

Harry stared at Ron incredulously. "What are you, an Owl-vertisement? You sound like one of those 'happy-housewitch' voices that come in the Sunday edition Prophet selling cleaning charms."

He gave up going back to sleep with a sigh and rolled out of the bed, vaguely searching for some clean trousers. Harry cast a glance out the window: it looked pretty cold—maybe a jumper and his frock coat, too, he decided. "Besides," he added, sticking his leg into a pair of trousers—he wasn't even sure if they were his, and checking the tag in the back…yes, they were Neville's—he pulled them on anyway, "what's this 'Hogsmeade in Hog Heaven Shop-Off' you're yammering about?"

Ron had retreated to his trunk to rifle through it for something or other. He looked over his shoulder at Harry and shrugged. "Dunno. Dean told me about it this morning when he got back from breakfast. Said it was in the paper—something about the Hogsmeade shops coming together to raise money for the orphanage…now that it's actually got orphans in it sometimes."

Harry zipped up Neville's trousers and pulled his newest green Weasley jumper on. "And?"

"And you get discounts," Ron said excitedly. "All of the shops are participating. For every ten knuts you spend in any shop, you get two knuts off your purchase, you know? So, basically, ten knuts worth of Chocolate Frogs or Bertie Bott's only costs eight; get it? And then another three knuts goes to the orphanage."

Harry found his frock coat stuffed under his bed—when had he put it there?—and shook the wrinkles out before pulling it on over his jumper. His hair fell into his eyes as he was buttoning it up, and he thought, not for the last time, that he was being pretty hasty when he wouldn't let Sirius cut more of it off. It was a bloody nuisance.

"But I thought all the babies were already adopted out?" Harry asked as he popped the last button in the hole. "A waiting list or something. I thought they were all gone within a couple of days."

Ron made a muffled 'aha!' sound and finally retreated from his trunk, holding his autumn cloak in his hand. He shoved his arms through as he replied, "Oh yeah! You were already asleep last night when the special edition paper came in…what's with you sleeping so much, by the way?" In his excitement, Ron continued without waiting for an answer, "twelve more came last night! Isn't that crazy? The orphanage is already processing applications for them, but they're cautiously optimistic that more will show up, so, since they didn't have a lot of money for baby necessities lying around, they appealed to the communities and Hogsmeade, Diagon Alley, Fairyfield and West Elfshire all came up with fund-raising ideas."

Harry stared at him. "'Cautiously optimistic'?

Ron grinned sheepishly. "That's what Dean said. He said that's what his step-dad says that about things at work. He's an actuary, whatever that is," Ron finished with a shrug.

Harry exhaled forcefully, not entirely sure what to think about all of these children appearing at the Derbyshire orphanage seemingly out of no where. He had his suspicions, and he just hoped that he and Ron could make it off the grounds before Hermione found them. They would never hear the end of it—especially Ron, since they weren't exactly speaking at the moment.
"Well, let's go then. If Hogsmeade's having a sale, I want to go look in all those shops we never went to before."

Ron gave him a disgusted look. "But they're mostly book and robe shops."

Harry rolled his eyes. "You got me up when I was having a really good sleep, I've got to spend a day with Lavender Brown, and you want to deny me this?" he asked with a raised eyebrow. "Maybe I should let you go to Hogsmeade with Lav-Lav alone…"

"No, no!" Ron said hastily, slapping Harry on the back cajolingly. "Don't be so hasty there, mate. Won't be a problem. We'll spend all day in Hubbard's Haberdasheries if you want."

Harry gagged. "The day I start knitting with Hermione is the day that I let Colin Creevey photograph me snuggling with Gilderoy Lockhart."

Lavender was waiting for the two of them at the foot of the stairs in the Entrance Hall wearing a lavender frock with a caraco over it. Harry rolled his eyes, thankful that they were still high enough up that Lavender wouldn't be able to see his expression. When she did see them, she beamed in Ron's direction, patted her coifed hair, and rushed over to the landing.

"Ron! …Harry!" she added belatedly. Harry wasn't all that insulted over it, and he gave her a vacant smile, wondering how long it would be before he ran into the other boys so they could whisk him away from this nightmare. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and absently looked the other way as Ron and Lavender exchanged exuberant greetings.

When they finally set off down the road to Hogsmeade, Ron had his arm draped over Lavender's shoulders. It took forever for them to finally make it to the little town, but that may have been due to Harry's extreme reluctance to spend any amount of time in the company of Lavender Brown. Thank Merlin his father would be joining him today.

"What about you, Harry?" she said, effectively cutting him off from his thoughts.

Harry looked up, startled and entirely uncomfortable. "What about me what?" he asked warily. There was no telling with Lavender.

Ron cleared his throat. "Lavender's my new partner in Divinations, you know—now that you aren't taking it any more," he added, somewhat accusingly. "Trelawney switched us up so that we could 'learn to read'," he finger-quoted, "new subjects. Anyway, we were reading palms last week and I actually read Lavender's correctly, and she started telling me about all the interesting predictions she'd made over the years."

Harry furrowed his eyebrows, wondering how he could voice his next question at least somewhat politely. He gave up quickly: "So?"

Lavender rolled her eyes and Ron gave him a playful nudge in the ribs. "Lavender was asking if you'd ever made any correct predictions."

Harry gave Ron a look that clearly said 'You know quite well what my predictions were', but, seeing Ron's pleading look, decided to play along. He affixed a beatific grin to his face and said, "Oh sure!"

"Really?" Lavender asked, bunching up her skirts to huddle closer. "What was it?"

Harry leaned in conspiratorially. "It was in the beginning of fourth year," he said. "Ron and I were
using the Ouija board and when I asked if Ron was a natural redhead, it spelled out 'As above, so below'—then, the next morning, Seamus had stolen his clothes while he was in the shower and Ron had to get back to our dorm with only a loofah, and sure enough—

"Ow! Hey!" Harry laughed.

Lavender was pursing her lips, but it looked like she wanted to laugh too—and was maybe a little bit intrigued. Ron, on the other hand, was still trying to whack Harry on the head, as he was wont to do lately. Harry stuck his tongue out at him and bounded off towards Hogsmeade, yelling over his shoulder, "You'll never catch me, Red!"

To Harry's utter relief and astonishment, Ron didn't even try. When Harry finally made it to the edge of the little town, he looked over his shoulder once more only to see Lavender leaning in towards Ron's ear and grinning maniacally while she whispered something in his ear. Ron was blushing madly and Lavender hitched her skirts up just a little bit more as she delivered the final assault. Whatever she was saying, Ron was definitely more interested in it than he was in chasing Harry.

No skin off his back, Harry thought. He wanted to meet up with his father anyway, and the less time he had to spend with Lavender the better. He stuck his hands into the pockets of his coat and wandered through the streets, easily bypassing the other students as he tried to decide where he wanted to go first.

It was just as he was staring into the window of Hubbard's Haberdasheries—the shop where Mrs Weasley got all of her supplies for making Weasley jumpers—and wondering if maybe he should start knitting after all—just to throw the boys in the dorm off—when he felt a heavy hand land on his shoulder.

Harry tensed, and prepared for a fight until he realized that he recognized the way that hand felt on his shoulder and the strange scent that went along with it: sort of earthy with undertones of expensive cologne and wet dog.

He turned, grinning brightly. Seeing his father after a month at school made him realize exactly how much he had missed him. "You came," he said to Sirius.

Sirius was grinning back at him with—and here, Harry jolted to realize it—Harry's own smile. So, he'd gotten his smile from his father too, not just his nose. The thought sent a warm tingle up his spine. "Of course," Sirius scoffed.

He was dressed like a pureblood wizard—or at least a pureblood wizard who was just recently starting to act the part—in navy blue robes with his hair tied at the nape of his neck, but Harry was relieved to see that the same mischievous aura Sirius usually had was still there. He had no idea why his father was going through so much trouble to act like this, but Harry thought he was okay with it so long as he was still the same person underneath.

Sirius nodded behind Harry. "Going to start making your own Black jumpers?" he asked cheekily. "With a big red H on them?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Maybe. I was thinking of starting off with something easy though—like a choke collar for you." Sirius cuffed him lightly and they started walking absently.

"I've missed you," Sirius said, looking like he might blush any minute now. "Little Morty is getting pretty big, too. I think Fred's close to an aneurysm, but he seems resigned to his fate. Maybe even welcomes it."
Harry laughed, wondered why they were having small talk, and pulled his father into the next shop. He didn't even know what was sold there, but maybe if they got away from the crowds his father would tell him what was on his mind.

Harry let his father guide the conversation, filtering through his new Quidditch line-up, the Lestrange sisters' strange after-term appearance, classes and his friends before Sirius finally cleared his throat meaningfully.

Harry continued to study the gaudy little globe in his hand while, at the same time, he pretended not to notice the way the atmosphere had suddenly tensed very sharply. Harry turned the little trinket in his hand, watched the way the dusty light filtering in from the windows made it look like it would gleam if only it weren't so tarnished, and waited.

"Been having any strange dreams lately?" Sirius asked.

Harry looked over his shoulder only to find that his father was staring fixedly at an old oil landscape. He shrugged, trusting that his father would sense the gesture because even if his back was turned, Sirius was very aware of Harry right then, and said, "I always have strange dreams."

Sirius glanced at him and then returned to the oil painting. It was a scene of rocky crags at sunset and St Elmo's Fire danced along the tops of them as each wave hit before starting the sequence again. "Not the...you know...not those."

"The visits?" Harry asked pointedly.

"Yeah—not those...Other weird dreams."

Harry set the little globe back down and turned fully around. " Weird how?" he asked.

Sirius sighed, looked up, cast a speculative glance at the shopkeeper and ushered Harry out the door. As soon as they were back amongst the crowds, Sirius swept his wand in an inconspicuous circle around them, casting a silencing charm, and said, "We're much less likely to be noticed in a crowd, ironically enough."

"What's this all about?" Harry asked as his father forced them to maintain a leisurely stroll through the streets.

"I went to Azkaban," Sirius said.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I know; everyone knows."

"No—no, I mean I went back. I visited Peter."

"Wormtail?" Harry said furiously, looking around to make sure no one was paying attention to them. They might have a silencing charm around them, but that didn't mean he wanted people watching them right now.

"Yeah," Sirius said, nodding. "Yeah—I just had a feeling, you know? So I went to visit him and he talked."

"I imagine he would," Harry said tersely. That damned rat was probably desperate for company.

"Well, I imagined that he wouldn't," Sirius said pointedly. Harry raised his eyebrows, silently questioning. "Peter never talked unless he wanted to; I didn't think he'd speak at all."
"So?" Harry asked.

Sirius grimaced. "I've been having these dreams," he said, not looking at his son. "Every night the same one. Over and over and over again."

Harry was suddenly a bit more interested. "What about?"

Sirius glanced at him quickly. "Your mother."

Harry grimaced. "I don't think I want to hear about these dreams," he said, barely refraining from gagging.

"Be serious," Sirius barked, and it startled Harry so much that he was tempted to say something stupid like 'How can I? You're Sirius' just to take the edge off. He swallowed instead, and waited for more of an explanation.

"Look," Sirius said, stopping them in the middle of the street and completely ignoring the frustrated shoppers who then had to walk around them. "I am about to tell you a very condensed version of what I know, and then I'm going to tell you a very condensed version of what I think, and then I want a very condensed version of what you think, is that clear?"

"As a bell," Harry muttered. He had to admit, if only to himself, that his father's mood swings made him uncomfortable sometimes.

"I had a brother, your uncle Regulus, who was two years younger than me. When I was about thirteen, we had a falling out and by the time he joined the Death Eaters when he was seventeen, I hadn't spoken to him in two years. Six months after he joined, I got an owl from him that said one word: 'Sorry'. He disappeared a week later and that was when I had 'that conversation' with Lily. Lily started acting shifty, told me not to worry, and then you were born and I couldn't worry about much else with all the jealousy I was trying to fight.

"My parents declared Regulus dead when his name faded on the family tapestry—which is spelled to respond to the blood of a certain person, so it's pretty hard to fool. If the blood tied to that name disappears—or dies, in other words—then the name fades. So, Regulus is dead, right?" Sirius said, all in a rush.

Harry opened his mouth to respond, but his father started speaking again, as if he were trying to get everything out before he forgot it or lost track or something. Harry snapped his mouth closed and tried to keep his eyes from widening.

"Right, so a decade and a half passes, I'm out of Azkaban, working with the Order again, and in your fifth year, I'm sent on a mission to help recruit the New England Light Wizards. The problem with this? Someone was there. Someone was at Grimmauld Place with you and the rest of the Order, learning their secrets and maybe passing them on, maybe not, but the point is, someone was there. And that someone wasn't me."

Harry frowned, just as a snooty witch and her two small children glared at them for standing in the middle of the street. He tugged his father's cloak until they were standing in an alley between two shops.

"And this is what you know?" he asked.

Sirius nodded, jaw tensed and looking determined. "I've been trying—subtly, well as subtly as I can—to figure out what was going on, but no one's talking. All anyone says—and everyone says this—was that I was at Grimmauld Place two weeks after Christmas until 'I rushed off to save you at the
"Then what in Merlin’s beard is going on?" Harry asked.

"I see you've been trying to ignore it as well," Sirius noted wryly. Harry glared at him.

"Who was there?"

Sirius sighed and glanced at the shoppers again; no one was paying attention at all, so caught up were they in the Hogsmeade in Hog Heaven sales. "This is where we get into the speculation."

"Go on," Harry said.

Running a hand through his hair and thoroughly messing up his neat ponytail, Sirius said, "Grimmauld Place was under a Fidelius which means that only those who were told the Secret could have gotten in."

"So it was an Order member?" Harry said.

Sirius grinned, looking feral and very much like his animagus form. "Or," he stressed, "unless it was their home. You can't hide a home from its family. That's why no one ever had to actually tell me the Secret. It was my home—the place I considered Home even if I'd rather not have."

"That means it could have been Bellatrix or Narcissa Malfoy! They're family."

“No. They never lived there. It was never their home. The only people who could have benefited from that caveat were me, my mother, my father or my brother."

"But they're dead," Harry said. He wanted to stomp his feet; everything was always so complicated. Why couldn’t, just for once, he forget about all the strange things that happened to him and his and just live? Why couldn't anything ever be simple?

"Corpus delicti," Sirius said.

Harry did roll his eyes then. "Hippogriff shit. You said yourself that Regulus' name faded from the tapestry. He's dead."

"He is now," Sirius muttered, looking thoughtful.

"What do you mean by that?" Harry said.

Sirius looked up sharply, as if Harry's sharp words had torn him from some important contemplation—they probably had. "Well, someone fell through the Veil in the Department of Mysteries, Harry, and it sure as hell wasn't me."

The strength of Sirius’ words startled Harry enough to shut up for a minute and think about it. "You're certain you were in America at the time?" he asked. "You weren't Obliviated or anything?"

"Hadn't thought of that," Sirius admitted, "but if I had been, my memories of that time would be fuzzy and disjointed—and they certainly aren't; I remember everything clearly. Plus, if I really was at the Department of Mysteries, how am I still alive?"

Harry bit his lip, trying not to think of how torn up he'd been in the months following that night. He shuddered, and then forced himself back to the present. "I don't know," he admitted.

Sirius nodded, but he didn't look all that excited to have proved his point. Instead, he looked weary,
and Harry knew the feeling.

"So you think it was...somehow...Regulus," Harry said, even though he already knew that was what his father was thinking.

"Fits," Sirius said with a shrug. "The only things I can't work out are where he's been all this time, why he looked like me, why he bothered looking like me, and why he went after you at the Ministry."

Harry shuddered. "You don't think he was trying to capture me?"

Sirius' eyes narrowed. "Maybe..."

"But?" Harry asked.

"It was just something Ginger said the other day—probably nothing."

"What?" Harry insisted. They'd been standing under a silencing spell in the middle of a busy Hogsmeade for entirely too long. Someone was bound to notice them sooner or later. Probably sooner.

"She said there had been house elves at River House not long ago—maybe as recently as two years ago."

Harry's eyebrows shot up. "So Regulus was hiding out at River House? What of it?"

"I don't think he stayed there for very long, but I bet that if he was there, he visited the tapestry. And figured everything out for himself, Harry added to himself. Was that how Voldemort had known?"

"Why would he do that?"

Sirius shrugged. "Regulus was sentimental like that, once. He used to like to sit in the drawing room at Grimmauld Place and stare at that tapestry. He always wanted to know more about his family."

"So why would that mean he wasn't trying to capture me for Voldemort?" Harry asked.

"Because you would have been family," Sirius said as if it was obvious, and, Harry realized, when he thought back, it was obvious. At the very beginning, his father had told him how important family was. It would have been more likely that Regulus—"Was probably trying to save you, if it was him," Sirius finished Harry's thought.

Harry shuddered.

"But he looked just like you," Harry said. "At the Ministry...that time. I swear it; it was you! I know what you look like and it was you. I would have bet my last galleon on it.

"And don't even say Polyjuice," Harry added quickly when his father opened his mouth. "The Order was around that place all the time. They would have noticed if you were gone or were constantly brewing or...or, even, where would he have gotten the ingredients?"

"I wasn't going to say Polyjuice," Sirius said. Harry frowned at him, but somewhere in the back of his mind, he noted that their tempers were nearly exactly the same. "I was going to say—"

"Harry!"

They both looked up quickly. Ron and Lavender were standing just outside the confines of the
silencing spell, eyebrows raised and obviously thinking that Harry had done something naughty and was getting a thorough dressing down. Sirius sighed and removed the spell.

Harry smiled sheepishly at Ron and Ron, in turn, waggled his eyebrows, laughing at Harry’s apparent punishment.

"Hey, Sirius," Ron said. "How’s it going? Harry acting up?"

"Always," Sirius said dryly. "Who’s your friend?" he asked, successfully turning the conversation away from them. Ron blushed down to his elbows and mumbled something that might have been 'laundry' or 'Gallagher' or, if you stretched it, 'Lavender'.

Harry snorted. "Dad, this is Lavender Brown. She's a Gryffindor in our year. Lavender, Sirius Black."

Lavender was blushing just as much as Ron by now. She produced an unexpectedly perfect curtsy and held her hand out for Sirius, who took it without a thought, and kissed it lightly. Harry rolled his eyes and Ron nodded in agreement.

"Nice to meet you, Mr Black," Lavender said. Harry wanted to gag. Ron looked like he might want to punch something.

"And you, Lavender." He paused, looked around, and added, "Who’s up for ice cream? I hear there’s a sale on today to raise money for the Orphanage. On me."

Voldemort’s drawing room was lined with framed parchments all notarized with the Ministry Seal. Sometimes, when he was frustrated or irritated or covered in blood and just dying for a cup of tea, he would retreat to his drawing room and stare at the walls and the framed papers they held.

Tom had never taken a fancy for art. But these documents and notices—they were different; they were art to him. They were like awards—certificates—that he treasured. He wondered, sometimes, if that was insane of him.

Request for Registering of an Animagi Form;
Request for Registering of a Dark Gift: Parseltongue;
Request for Registering Practice of a Dark Gift: Possession;
Request for Registering Practice of a Dark Gift: Necromancy;
Request for Registering of an Animagi Form, Second Notice;
Third Notice;
Seventh Notice;
Et al.

But he treasured one above all else.

Permission for use of an Unforgivable Spell
The way he saw it, if a governmental body would stamp 'approved' on an application like that, they deserved what they got. It had been a passing fancy to apply in the first place; he hadn't expected to be approved, but his sense of humour worked in strange and pithy ways.

What was even more amusing was that he had applied using his birth name, taking care to fill out the application in full and with utmost care. The small print at the bottom declaring *Any deliberate omissions or misrepresentation on this application will result in immediate denial or revocation of license* had given him several hours of amusement.

So, Voldemort filled it out, taking care to make his handwriting legible and his answers truthful and detailed. *Name: Tom M Riddle. Date of birth: 31 December, 1926. Occupation: None.*

That had given him pause. He remembered thinking, at the time, that he certainly hoped having no paying vocation would not result in his application being dismissed. He then remembered how heartily he had laughed after he thought so.

*Have you ever been convicted of a violent crime? If yes, please explain. No.*

Which was the truth, of course.

*Please explain, in detail, your reasoning for applying for this license.*

In 1966, Tom had gone through a bit of dire straits, being at once feared and spat upon by the general populace. He was not so much a threat then that his name was both anathema and evocation on the tongues of wizard-kind, but he did not dare venture out very often. He was biding his time, arranging alliances and gathering followers.

The result of this had been his house-elves, having been acquired by gifting from various devoted servants, raising the livestock that they would cook for meals. Explaining that he was a hermit who needed food to survive and rarely ventured out into the cities had not, actually, been a lie. It must have been one hell of a pity story, but Voldemort couldn't recall the exact wording he'd used. He remembered that the Ministry bought his husbandry story without so much as a check up, and that had been that.

The permit arrived via owl-post two weeks later. Voldemort was so pleased and shocked that he *Avada Kedavra'd* two muggle backpackers traipsing too close to his property line that very afternoon. Their bodies turned up on the shores of the Orkney mainland a week later, which had baffled Voldemort to no end. He had no earthly idea how the currents could have taken them there, much less so quickly.

Since Harry didn’t get much sleep Friday or Saturday night, he wasn’t very surprised that Sunday was the same. If it wasn't Malfoy keeping him up at night, it was those strange dreams, and so it was with little optimism that he fell into his bed Monday night.

When he, quite world weary and distracted, materialized in front of Voldemort that night, he was overcome with a sharp, lingering sense of bitter amusement. Of course, when he most needed some sleep and some time to come to terms with everything on his mind would be when his subconscious mind decided he needed to speak with that madman the most.

He had been back at Hogwarts for barely a month, and already, Voldemort was haunting his dreams again…or would have been if Harry could only sleep instead of projecting himself out like this all the time. He sighed to himself and looked about the room.
It was different from the usual room Harry found himself in. This one was more of an office, and there were certificates and placards on the walls. Dozens of them, Harry noted with twitching lips. Voldemort's study looked like a Head Healer's office with all of these framed papers.

Voldemort, facing one of the walls with his hands clasped behind him, had not noticed his arrival. He seemed to be more and more distracted as time went on. Harry cleared his throat.

"I know you're there, boy, you need not announce yourself."

Harry's lips twisted into a sneer and he contemplated making faces at the back of Voldemort's head, but he decided he didn't want to push his luck. His heart still beat rather frenetically whenever he found himself near the dark lord. He took a deep breath and waited.

It was many minutes later before Voldemort, running his finger absently over one particular certificate, spoke again.

"Have you seen the newspaper recently?"

Harry rolled his eyes, but only because Voldemort was still facing the other way. "Some of it, yeah."

"The cover story?"

Harry scratched an itch on his thigh and shrugged. And then he wondered how he could feel an itch on his thigh to begin with; he wasn't even really here—or there, as the case may be, so what—

"I cannot hear you when you shrug," Tom said pointedly.

Harry jumped. "Then you, er…how did you know I did, then?"

Finally, Voldemort turned around, but Harry wished that he'd stayed the way he was. He'd almost forgotten the red eyes. They blinked at him slowly, like a snake's, and Harry bit his lip, waiting.

"They're calling it the Derby Dozens," Tom said, ignoring Harry's question. "Three dozen magical children between the ages of three months and three years have shown up at the British Wizarding Orphanage in Derbyshire." He paused for a moment and then added, almost as an afterthought, "There've been no orphans to spend more than a few weeks there since the Derbyshire Devastation of 921, after which it was opened, incidentally."

Harry looked around until he found a place to sit, and then flopped down tiredly. "I heard about that from Ron this morning. I thought there was only thirty-four total, though."

Tom smirked. "There were twenty-four to begin with; then twelve more. Two have been dispatched elsewhere."

"Dispatched?" Harry asked, a little warily.

"Adopted," Tom clarified.

Harry shuddered, wondering just who had adopted them. "So there really were thirty-six, then? That's really going to upset Professor Vector when he finds out. It'll ruin all his equations."

"He won't find out," Voldemort answered, sounding almost amused. "I'm sure they've already undergone the Blood Rite." Harry gave him a blank look, which was not uncommon. Voldemort sighed and explained, "It is a form of ritual which merges the blood of a person with the blood of one or more people, essentially making them family. If done at an early enough age, the child who the
Rite is performed on will take on the physical traits of the people adopting it. For all intents and purposes—both magical and otherwise—the child will be a blood relative."

"Why would someone do that?" Harry asked. It seemed absolutely absurd.

"Because," Voldemort hissed, becoming impatient, "The magical race is dying out and purebloods are finding it harder and harder to conceive. They want children and they want the children to be theirs."

Several things were starting to click into place for Harry. He stood up very suddenly and began pacing. "So you're—basically—admitting that you stole these children from somewhere, and I'm guessing they were muggle-born because no pureblood is going to give up their child," he snarled to the floor, hands gesturing jerkily. Voldemort hummed an acknowledgment, not seeming guilty or upset at all.

"You can't just take kids away from their parents!" Harry said. "It's not right!"

"They won't notice they're gone."

"Of course they will," Harry said. "They're muggles, not ducks! They don't just forget that they've had a child!"

"They've been Obliviated," Voldemort said. He rocked back and forth on his feet slowly and unperturbedly, having expected this outburst from the beginning. He would teach this child to understand that the world is not black and white, and he would be patient—as patient as he could be—while he did it. Voldemort was determined. "And the families, too, of course," he added.

Harry snarled. "What about the mothers? They carried the child, went through labour, loved them… you can't take that away! It's not right."

"Not everything good is right."

"That doesn’t mean anything!"

Voldemort smiled—slowly, like a predator. "Exactly, my child. You have such fierceness in you that I sometimes worry you will never learn, but it is times like this that remind me why I began this game, and it is times like this that I know we will not fail.

"The world is not black and white, poppet. Sometimes you seem to understand that, and sometimes you don't. One day, you will learn, and one day, you will know." Harry opened his mouth to yell something else, but Voldemort held up a hand and tsked him into silence, like a bad dog. He gritted his teeth and waited.

"These children, had you read the papers, have already been adopted by families that have been on waiting lists for years. Every family that received one of these children has passed numerous exams—mental health, physical health—and proven that they are both financially and emotionally capable of raising a child.

"And now," Voldemort continued, "those children will be raised by parents that have desperately wanted them, be well-fed, well-clothed, well-educated. They'll grow up knowing not only our culture, but foreign languages, mathematics, logics, philosophy. How can you say it is not right to give these children this opportunity when they had little or none before? All but two of these children came from lower class families, but even if they hadn't," Voldemort added, "they are still better off."
He stepped forward to make sure he had Harry's full attention, and finished in a low hiss, "And furthermore, they will be loyal to our world. They will not be divided between our world and the muggle world. They will never be a risk."

"And now that you've heard this, you will ruminate on it until you understand."

Voldemort stepped back quickly and Harry felt himself shoved back into his own body. He woke with a gasping inhalation and jerked up in his bed. All around him, the dorm was silent, but Harry shivered as a chilly wind hit his chest. Seamus had left the window open again, the stupid wanker. Harry got up to close it, and then climbed back into his bed, hoping he'd be able to get some sleep this night.

At least he hadn't dreamed of that chilling voice.

Over the next three weeks, as summer finally gave way and mid-October brought autumn to Scotland, seventy-two presumed-muggle-born children were left at the doors of the British Wizarding Orphanage in Derbyshire. Except for the first lot, they were always delivered in groups of twelve, and they were always left with no note and no traceable magical signature.

The Ministry tried to trace them back to their muggle-born parents, but it was a futile effort: all documents and memories had been erased or destroyed. It was a very thorough job. And furthermore, the Blood Rite—one of only three legal blood magics—had been begun on every one of them, making their DNA impossible to trace. The only thing left for the adoptive parents was to add their blood to the ritual and finish it off.

There was simply no way to give the children back, so they were given forward, as it were. The magical community was somewhat divided on the subject, though the factions were uneven and pithy in their numbers. The populace vacillated constantly. On the one hand, these children had been kidnapped, but on the other hand, they would, if all went well, be joining the magical world at age eleven anyway.

And if they didn't—if their muggle parents forbade it—then they would only become an exposure risk when their magic remained untrained. And then there were all of the pureblood couples who had longed for children and been given none. They wanted to be parents.

Even Mrs Weasley had written Ginny saying that she'd spoken to Amos Diggory just the other week and he'd told her he'd just finished filling out an application. He and his wife had spent two years mourning Cedric before they decided that they were ready for another child. When Mrs Diggory found that she could bear no more, they'd been heartbroken once again—but then all those children had started showing up, and 'wouldn't it just be the cat's pyjamas if there was one left for them?'.

Harry began to admit, if only to himself, that he hoped Mr and Mrs Diggory received one. The children were hardly in the door of the orphanage before they were out again, though, and the Diggorys had been placed on the waiting list.

Voldemort showed no intentions of stopping the deliveries, and Harry started to wonder just how many muggle-born children there were in Britain. Already, a whole year's worth of children had been adopted out; how many muggle-born children, exactly, never got to come to Hogwarts?

It was astonishing to Harry, who hadn't thought there were that many. In his year alone, there were only about a hundred students, and only a quarter of them were muggle-born. Ninety-four children had been adopted out within the last month—all between the ages of three months and three years—
and all of them had been muggle-born.

That meant that there were loads of muggle-born children in Britain alone who were not receiving their magical education. Harry shuddered at the thought. He didn't want to know what his life would have been like without Hogwarts.

So, in the end, the Ministry gave it up as a bad job, thinking, basically, *que sera, sera*. They stopped trying to trace the children back to their rightful parents, and they stopped trying to interfere in the adoption process.

Hermione read the paper religiously every day during this time, and surprised Harry quite astoundingly when she waffled over whether or not she approved of this.

"It’s horrid to take them away from their families," she said at lunch one day, "but still—it would have been fascinating to grow up in the wizarding world. I would have had the opportunity to learn so much more, and if I'd never known I was adopted—well, there's no use thinking about it." She had seemed very guilty and upset about saying this, but stuck her chin out stubbornly just the same. Harry had hidden a small smile.

It was the Saturday before Halloween when Harry ran into Malfoy again. He was just finishing up the second Quidditch practice of the season, quite delighted with the way his team was turning out, when he caught site of Malfoy's cotton-blond head beneath the stands. Harry rolled his eyes and followed the rest of his team into the changing rooms.

Ron had taken to dressing and undressing in the back corner because Alsace and Ginny dressed on either side of Harry near the front and he didn't want to accidentally see his sister's bits. Somehow—women's intuition or something—Alsace had figured out Harry's preferences and decided that she'd rather him see her naked breasts and groin than Sloper, who always tried to sidle up next to her but never managed.

Harry didn't much care. He was just glad that the other boys in the dorm didn't care. If he'd been in the muggle world, he wasn't sure that he would have fared as well. All the same, except for Jack Sloper and Alsace, there were no problems with the co-ed changing rooms. And Harry appreciated this more than ever on that day.

After showering, the rest of the team trudged back to the castle, but Harry'd nicked his broom on a stray Quaffle during practice and he wanted to patch it up before following. The thing about that was that broom caulk tended to catch lint from clothing and so over the years, Harry had learned that it was best to do it wearing as little clothing as possible.

So it was probably a very good thing that Alsace somehow reasoned out his sexuality. She might've been offended otherwise when she stepped out of the shower only to find Harry sitting naked on the bench polishing his broom.

Ron would have cracked some lewd joke here.

But instead, she only raised an eyebrow, grabbed a towel, which Harry belatedly realized she hadn’t had before, and started drying off.

"You chose a good team," she said as she was scrubbing her hair. "I like playing with this team much better than my team at Beauxbatons."

Harry looked up, still stroking his broom stick suggestively; it couldn't be helped, he thought with a mental eye roll. Brooms needed to be polished immediately after patching. He was very glad this
wasn't Hermione standing in front of him. She would have been as red as a Weasley.

"Did you have houses there? At Beauxbatons?"

Alsace shrugged and started drying off her body. Harry nearly choked when he saw her partially dried hair. It was sticking up everywhere; she looked like she'd just been electrocuted. He wondered if she would teach Hermione whatever spell she used to make her hair straight because it was obvious that it wasn't that way naturally.

"Of a sort," she finally answered. "We were grouped by ages, but there were four Quidditch teams. You had to try out, but the Quidditch instructor placed you randomly." She snorted and then added, "I was on les Cygnes."

Harry looked at her questioningly.

"The Swans," she translated. "All of the teams were named after pretty birds."

Harry laughed and began dressing as he finished up with his broom. His own hair was still wet from his shower and he gratefully caught the slightly damp towel Alsace tossed at him—with perfect aim, no less.

They both dressed in silence, but began chatting again as they were leaving the changing room. Both Alsace and her sister missed their grandparents back in France, but they were adjusting well enough. The food, she said, was the most difficult thing to get accustomed to. The food at Beauxbatons had been much better.

Harry laughed at this, thinking it strange. When he first came to Hogwarts, he had never tasted anything quite as good as the food here. He was just telling Alsace so when a flurry of movement caught both of their eyes.

"Cousin," Alsace said as they walked by the stands. Harry snorted and greeted Malfoy the same way. It was true, after all. Malfoy, apparently, didn't like to be reminded though. To be honest, Harry didn't like seeing Malfoy. It made his stomach turn just remembering what had almost happened.

"Don't call me that," the Slytherin said, stepping out from behind the stands and sneering down at Alsace. "Nor you," he added, turning his attention to Harry. Harry shrugged, breathing slowly to ease his nausea, and moved to walk around Malfoy, but Malfoy stepped back in front of him.

"Mr Malfoy," Alsace relented in a patient, yet highly bored voice, "Harry and I were on our way back to the castle to discuss our Quidditch strategies in greater detail. Now, laissez-nous tranquille, s'il vous plait."

Malfoy smirked and crossed his arms over his chest. "Non."

Harry, who had no idea what was being said, bit his lip and watched warily. Alsace, for all she spoke perfect English, apparently spoke perfect French, too. It wasn't surprising; she'd lived her entire life in France. But she was getting a little bit angry now, Harry could tell.

"Tu me gonfles..." she said.

Malfoy shrugged, looking smug. "Have you told the Golden Boy here what your mummy does for work?" he asked her instead. It was obvious, by the way he switched to English, that he wanted Harry to hear this part.

"Harry knows who my mother is," Alsace said, reverting back to English as well. She looked at him
out of the corner of her eye and said, "He nearly put her back in Azkaban himself. At any rate, he
gave her enough of a fight to slow her down."

Harry nodded. Bellatrix Lestrange had been picked up by Kingsley Shacklebolt not long after the
fight at the Ministry.

"Then you better watch your back around him," Malfoy warned. "Before you know it, he'll be
asking for pictures of her to put on his Chocolate Frog cards."

Harry couldn’t help laughing when Alsace turned to him with raised eyebrows. "It's for Ron—you
know, our Keeper?"

"I am aware of our team mates' names, Harry," Alsace said.

Harry shrugged. "Well, anyway," he said, "He's collected every Chocolate Frog card ever made, and
now he doesn't know what to do with himself, so I suggested that he put some together and send
them in to see if the Chortling Chocolate Company would make them. You know…so he can collect
more."

"And you suggested Death Eaters," Alsace said.

Harry shrugged again. "All the famous people are already on cards; why not the infamous people?"

"Or the people who need to be caught?" Alsace added with a raised eyebrow. "Like my father?"

"Your father's in Azkaban," Malfoy said. Harry had forgotten Malfoy was even there, but he was
grateful for his outburst all the same. He had just been about to say the same thing, and seeing how
much of an idiot Malfoy looked by saying so, Harry was glad he had been beaten to the punch.

"So is yours," Alsace said archly. Harry snorted. Everyone but the press seemed to know that Lucius
Malfoy was out of Azkaban.

"Well, it doesn't matter," Harry spoke up. "If they're in Azkaban, we have to have a release signed
by an adult family member to put them on cards, and if they're not in Azkaban, no one's going to
send out pictures of their family, so it's pretty much a wash."

Alsace looked back at him with another of her sharp raised eyebrows. "Are you so certain?" she
asked. "I have only met her a few times, but I imagine that nothing would please my mother more,
and my father wouldn't care either way. Come, Harry," she added. "We'll go to my room and you
can pick out some pictures for these cards of yours, and then I will tell you their favourite puddings."

"But—we'd need the release form," Harry said, confused. Was she really going to do this? How
strange. Alsace only grabbed his hand and tugged him around Malfoy.

"No matter," she said over her shoulder. "I'll owl it to my grandmother. She'll sign it. It will give her
a laugh."

Harry followed, only turning around once to see that Malfoy was still standing exactly where he had
been, staring at the ground and worrying his lower lip. He was thinking about something. Harry
didn't think he'd ever seen anyone look quite so innocent as Malfoy looked right then, and that
thought set the nausea rolling back into his stomach full force.
1. Ducks, I've heard, though I didn't bother to corroborate this information, cannot count past three, and so if they have four ducklings and lose one, they never notice.

2. I think everyone knows this, but "Que sera, sera" basically translates to "Whatever will be, will be".

3. "Corpus delicti" – 'Corpse'. In law, the objective proof that a crime has been committed. Basically, it's the evidence, not necessarily a body, but what Sirius means here is that no body was ever found, and thus there was no death.

4. *laissez-nous tranquille, s'il vous plait* – "leave us alone, please." (It's been a while since I took French. This is from memory (and my French books), so please correct me if any of it is incorrect.

5. *Tu me gonfles* – "You're getting on my nerves." Basically. Literally, "You make me swell."

6. A 'caraco' is an 18th century lady's coat that fell to the mid-thigh. You can see one here.
Logistics

Chapter by faire_weather

Logistics (n): 1. The aspect of military procurement, distribution, maintenance, and replacement of material and personnel. 2. The management of the details of an operation.

Theodore Nott stood just inside the Entrance Hall with his hands in his pockets because it was a bit draughty near doors and windows in the castle. He supposed that was one reason he liked living in the dungeons so much. Everyone assumed they were always damp and cold, but they weren't.

Underground rooms tended to stay roughly the same temperature year-round, and that meant the Slytherin dormitory was always moderately temperate. Of course, they used warming charms and cooling charms occasionally, but there was never any shivering or sweating.

There were also no windows. And because of this, there were no drafts. Theodore felt rather stupid actually, and that wasn't something he felt very often. He should have remembered that the Entrance Hall would be colder than the dungeons. He should have brought gloves.

*He shouldn't have to be waiting,* he amended irritably. She should be here by now. Theodore tapped his foot once against the stone floor and stopped; it echoed too loudly.

The door opened behind him, and he turned his head over his shoulder to see who was entering the castle. Eyebrows rising, Theo watched Harry Potter—as most everyone still called him—stomp in, looking bemused and rather detached from reality in general.

"Black," he nodded. Theodore had been raised to have at least some manners, after all.

Potter looked up sharply, just as a tiny waif of a girl followed him inside. One of the Lestrange girls, Theodore realized. Potter blinked several times behind his glasses and then smiled very slightly as the Lestrange girl stopped next to him.

"Nott," he said, stopping a few feet away from him. "What are you doing here?"

Surprisingly, it didn't sound too suspicious, maybe only curious. Nott always knew Potter had more sense than Malfoy gave him credit for. Not too much more, but a bit at least.

"Waiting for your housemate," Theo answered, craning his neck a bit to see if Granger would possibly be following them in. Where was she, anyway? She didn't seem like the type to be late. Theo narrowed his eyes; perhaps she wasn't what he thought at all. Perhaps he'd misjudged her. He felt disappointment settle into his bones at the thought. *Was there no one who wouldn't disappoint him?*

"Hermione?" Potter asked curiously. "Why?"

Theo looked back in time to see the Lestrange girl—Alsace, most likely, if she was around Potter—rolling her eyes. He gave her a warning look and turned back to Potter. He didn't like the way such an obvious Slytherin was in Gryffindor—it felt like he had those Heebey Jeebey things that Lovegood always talked about crawling underneath his skin to think that she could so easily give away all their secrets.
"The Halloween party we've been planning is this Saturday. Haven't you heard? Everyone's talking about it."

"Really?" Potter asked, looking genuinely surprised. Theodore wondered what rock he'd been under for the past month.

"Really," Theodore answered just as he was about to give in to the urge to tap his foot again. "There are some last minute—"

"Theodore!"

Theo looked up and quickly fought off a relieved smile. Granger was rushing over, and from the looks of it, had just come from the library. That still didn't excuse her tardiness, but Theo would let her have a chance to explain before he wrote her off.

"Sorry," she muttered as she slid to a stop. "Madam Pince wouldn't let me check out the books I needed until I returned some of the other ones I had out. She said I was over my limit."

"But the limit is fifty..." Theodore said dubiously. So, she was late, and then she was going to lie to him. His respect for her was dropping by the minute.

Granger looked distraught. "I had fifty-one out; Madam Pince said she had no idea how I snuck the extra one past her, but she wasn't very happy, any case."

Potter snorted; Theo had forgotten that he and his Lestrange girl were even there, and was relieved to be reminded before he said something he wouldn't want anyone but Granger to hear.

"What?" he snapped.

Potter smirked at Granger. "You managed to get fifty-two past her in third year."

"I know," Granger said in dismay. "That rule is silly anyway."

So she wasn't lying, Theo realized. The disappointment he'd felt earlier faded away and he was very ready for Potter and Lestrange to make their exit, so he quickly changed the subject.

"So are you coming to our Halloween party?"

"Oh, yes!" Granger added excitedly. "You have to come, Harry; it'll be fun. Fancy dress, you know. I've already picked my costume out."

"I, er, don't have a date," Potter said sheepishly.

"Well, you could just ask—" Granger started.

"I don't really want to ask, Hermione," Potter said pointedly. Granger seemed to catch on, and Theodore did only seconds later, and he had something to say before Granger could offer herself up as a pity-date.

"So you're like Malfoy then?" Theo asked casually.

Potter scrunched his eyebrows up in confusion. "What?"

"You know," Theo said. "Like Malfoy."

Potter opened his mouth to ask another stupid question, but the Lestrange girl spoke up, just as Theo
hoped she would.

"Gay," she said. "Queer as a sixteen-sickle coin."

At that word, Potter had a sharp coughing fit, which Granger efficiently ended with a couple pats on the back. "Er, thanks," he mumbled to her. She beamed at him, and that smile, with all of those perfectly straight, white teeth sealed the deal for Theodore. He had to get Potter and his Lestrange away immediately—

"Good. Harry will be my date then. He has already seen me without clothes and I know that he will keep his hands to himself," Lestrange spoke up. Theodore gave her an appraising look just as Granger made a small sort of relieved, sort of shocked sound.

"Very good!" she said. "Harry, you can come with Alsace. Now you don't have an excuse. You should start planning your costume right away—and speaking of which, Theodore, if we don't get finished with the planning, there won't be a party at all!"

"—Er, right," Theodore said quickly, and then mentally slapped himself for his verbal fumbling. Why was it that he couldn't speak straight around Granger? "Well, it was lovely seeing you Black, Lestrange; but Granger and I must be off."

When Granger grabbed his hand and started tugging him away to the Prefect Lounge, he was so shocked that he almost missed the acknowledging nod from Alsace Lestrange. His respect for her jumped up several notches. It was still no where near the respect he had for Granger, but it was some just the same.

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"Somehow," Harry said as he and Alsace began climbing the stairs, "you manipulated that conversation—the one with Malfoy as well, now that I think about it. I'm not sure how, but you did just the same."

The sudden thought of Malfoy again nearly sent Harry into a panic—or maybe just a fit of pique. Malfoy was gay? Could Harry do nothing that Malfoy could do as well? Was there no end to their strange backwards similarities? It was almost offensive to Harry that he couldn't even have this one thing without Malfoy having it as well, as absurd as the thought was.

"There is no such thing as manipulation," Alsace answered. "Only people overly susceptible to suggestion."

"But you didn't make any suggestions," Harry pointed out.

"Of course I did," Alsace said. "I just did not phrase them as suggestions."

Harry wanted to say something stupid like 'oh', but he wasn't sure what good it would do, as he already looked seven times a fool today. Fortunately, they were approaching the Fat Lady as he mulled this over, and Alsace never seemed to need a response to anything she said. She asked very few questions, and even those that she did ask, it seemed as though she weren't expecting a reply.

"Mimbulus Mimbletonia," Harry said when they reached the door. The password had been that since two days after Neville was made prefect. It was decided—after he'd forgotten the password twice in two days—that it should be something he would always remember.

'After all,' McGonagall had said, 'it was absurd to have a prefect who couldn't get into his own common room'. Neville had then been given carte blanche to pick the new password—something he
wouldn't forget. His original choice of 'Snape is a git' lasted two full days before McGonagall tried to enter the common room and had to utter it. That she was trying not to laugh as she finally stepped through was telling. Harry, who had been lounging on one of the couches at the time, still wondered if she really said it or had it changed before she entered. Nevertheless, it looked as though Mimbulus Mimbletonia was the password for the rest of the year. Harry hoped Malfoy didn't find out.

Since Hermione had shown him and Ron how to avert the jinxes on the stairs to the girls' dormitories, Harry was able to make it up to Alsace's room with no difficulties. Almost everyone was at Hogsmeade now that Quidditch practice was over—something Harry was quite thankful for—so the room was empty when they entered.

"I have some pictures in here," Alsace was saying as she dug a small jewellery box out of her trunk. She flopped rather gracelessly on the bed and gestured for Harry to join her as she opened it. "I only have a few," she added, handing a stack of photos over, "but I'm not really partial to any of them. You can take whichever ones you want."

Harry looked through them, trying not to wince every time he saw Bellatrix Lestrange's leering face looking back at him. That was, of course, until he came across one particular picture. It must have been taken right before his parents were killed, as it showed Bellatrix and Rodolphus, each holding one of their infant daughters, and sort of—smiling. Not really a smile, Harry thought to himself, but they looked…happy…ish, he amended.

It was several seconds before he realized he was staring too long, and he quickly flipped to the next photo, a portrait-style photograph of Bellatrix that looked to have been taken around the same time, but was recognizable enough to be used. The one following was a similar style photograph of Rodolphus and Harry pocketed them both, careful not to crease them.

"You sure you don't mind?" he asked again.

Alsace shrugged. "No. I would like them back if it's possible, but if it's not, I won't be upset."

Harry nodded. "Alright then. I'll give them to Ron so he can get started designing the cards…maybe the distraction will keep him out of trouble," he muttered to himself.

Alsace quirked her lips and stood from the bed. "He's probably getting into trouble right now, you know," she said, looking at the clock on her wall. "We still have four hours to spend in Hogsmeade; do you want to see if we can find costumes? I can tell you about my parents on the way—for your cards, of course."

Harry agreed with a nod, unable to think of anywhere else to be, even though he still felt awkward after having seen a picture of Bellatrix LeStrange that was so incongruous with his impression of her. She was still a cold-hearted murderer, he knew, but it was strange to see proof that she loved—or had once loved—someone. He could still see her strange half-lidded eyes blinking smugly up at him, as if to say: *These two are mine.*

By the time he shook himself out of those thoughts, Alsace had successfully manoeuvred both of them down the stairs and half-way to Hogsmeade. He cleared his throat, realizing now that he wasn't so deep in his musings that the silence felt awkward.

"So—their favourite foods?" Harry asked. He wasn't exactly sure what kind of information he should get for a Chocolate Frog card, but all of the others that he'd seen listed noteworthy achievements and ventures along with random trivia. Being a Death Eater certainly wasn't something to be proud of, but it was certainly noteworthy to an extent. At least to the Ministry. Probably.
Alsace laughed next to him. "I've no idea."

Harry was floundering with this conversation, and it had only just begun. How was he supposed to ask questions like 'So, how many people has your father done away with?' Alsace, ever the manipulator, saved him in the end.

"I don't know much about them, actually," she said. "I do know that both of my parents joined the Death Eaters the summer after they left school. That was in 1962 or 1963, I think. To be honest, I don't even know their birthdays, but my calculations show they were roughly ten years older than Lucius Malfoy, which matches what I know of Nariccisa Malfoy." She shrugged and focused her attention forward as she continued.

"During the last visit my father was able to manage without being followed by the Aurors, he told me he didn't really know my mother all that well until five years after they joined. He said they were partnered together for their first mission—which was, incidentally, a mission to Alsace & Lorraine to meet an informant. Back then," she added in explanation, "Death Eaters had to prove themselves competent before they were allowed to participate in important matters. It usually took about two years, he said, but both he and my mother were apparently rather stupid when it came to things like blood and gore, and—"

"What?" Harry interrupted incredulously. "How is that possible?"

Alsace shrugged. "They were sheltered."

"Sheltered," Harry repeated dubiously.

Rolling her eyes, Alsace said deliberately, "Yes, sheltered. Your father's branch of the Black family was much more…astute than my mother's side. My mother's family was the black sheep of the Black family, really. They were less wealthy, less politically inclined and less intelligent in general. Nothing was expected of them so they never bothered, as my father will tell it. And as for him, his parents were on temporary exile from the French Ministry at the time of my uncle Rabastan's birth. Something regarding illegal farming practices. They were being closely watched at all times during his adolescence."

"Oh," Harry said, deflated. "Right. Go on."

"Well—this is sort of humorous in a tacky sort of way—they both did so well during the raid that Voldemort, in a fit of good humour, declared that they worked better together than any other two of his Death Eaters and married them that very night."

"I'm sorry?" Harry sputtered.

Alsace shrugged. "It might not be true, but both of my parents told my sister and me the same thing. Apparently, Voldemort collects licenses and certificates; it's quite possible that he is the most legal man in Britain. He, apparently, has a license or a permit for just about everything, marrying included."

Harry opened his mouth, but couldn't think of a single thing to say.

"As for hobbies," Alsace continued, smiling at his befuddlement, "my father held the title for Snooker Champion of England three years running in his early twenties, scored nine O's on his NEWTs, speaks seven languages—English, French, Greek, Bulgarian, Turkish, Latin and Hebrew—and was offered a spot on the Quiberon Quafflepunchers at the age of eighteen, but turned them down because he didn't want to wear bright pink robes. He ended up working for a now-defunct
broom-making company as a test-flyer.

"As for my mother," Alsace added, "she was an over-achiever, I've heard. Apparently, she was so
disgusted by her family's status she spent the early years of her life trying to prove everyone wrong.
In her fifth year, she applied and was selected for a foreign exchange program with the Salem
Institute in America. The program, incidentally, only lasted a year because of something that
happened while she was there. I don't know any of the details, only that it was a huge mess.

"When she returned, she befriended Severus Snape, a second-year at the time, and the two of them
developed a potion that was able to multiply the effects of spell-casting, so that if it was used over
and over, it could make an absolutely perfect spell. It won the Young Potioners Award in 1973, but
was rather useless in everyday dealings since it was so cumbersome, so never gained much
popularity.

"Two years after leaving school and joining the Death Eaters, her parents died, both of Tuberculosis,
which is curable if you actually bother to see a Mediwizard, and she inherited their chair on the St.
Mungo's board, ironically. That position deferred to me, as older daughter, at her first incarceration.

"She speaks two languages—English and French—is passable at wandless magic, often wandlessly
levitates herself instead of walking—I don't know why—smokes muggle cigarettes, owns eleven
percent of Honeydukes, scored ten O’s on her NEWTs, is an accomplished ventriloquist and recites
Shakespeare when she's nervous."

"…That's…that's pretty interesting," Harry mumbled.

"They also changed our nappies and fed us in the middle of the night for a year."

_They were real people, she meant to say_, Harry thought. She was trying to tell him that her parents
were people, and if he were honest with himself, Harry would have admitted that they sounded like
pretty stand-up characters, until you learned their names. Until you learned that—

"They also killed people. A lot of people."

"Yeah," Harry agreed quietly. They also killed people. They sounded alright until you learned their
names and realized that they also killed people. It was a stunning thought. These people, who had
daughters and a hell of a lot more NEWTs than Harry would ever get himself, would rather kill
people than raise their children.

It was one of those times that Harry hoped he was looking at the problem with too Gryffindor an
attitude to see everything clearly. He hoped that he was overlooking something important that would
make him realize that he was wrong about the Lestranges because right then it was just too tragic to
think the way he did. He cleared his throat, intending to say something reconciliatory or witty, but a
hand on his arm stopped him.

"Don't bother," Alsace said, looking only slightly sad. "We're here anyway, and look, there are your
friends." She pointed to a group of Gryffindors a ways off. All of the boys in his year except for
Neville, who would be joining Hermione and Nott for the Halloween part briefing, and several of the
girls were there. He narrowed his eyes when he saw Ron's bright red hair, wondering why his friend
didn't bother to invite him along, and then felt guilty for thinking it, as he hadn't thought to invite Ron
either.

"Right," he said stupidly.

"You should join them; I can find something for us to wear myself—oh! I never even thought to ask
"if you minded. Do you?"

"About the Halloween party?" Harry asked, blushing slightly. "Not really. I would never have asked anyone else, you know, and you're not so bad."

"For the child of a Death Eater, you mean," Alsace said shrewdly.

Harry, even though he'd spent the last thirty minutes listening to her talk about her Death Eater parents, hadn't really ever thought of her as the child of a Death Eater. Even now, when he did, he was ashamed to realize that he didn't hate her on principle. It felt like he was betraying Gryffindor House, even though they must have had a different driving force before Death Eaters came about.

His thoughts were now so muddled and abstract—thanks to Voldemort's strange and confusing manipulations—that he waffled over his feelings about dark lords, Death Eaters and wars so often that his most common feelings were of indifference. He wondered then if that had been Voldemort's initial plan—if he'd wanted Harry so overwhelmed that he couldn't think straight. If that was so, then he'd won already.

That thought wasn't as chilling as it should have been. In fact, it wasn't chilling at all, and that was worrisome. He was making excuses in his head all the time regarding Voldemort and even now his brain supplied him with a new one: So what if Voldemort's won? He's really not so bad, so long as you don't get in his way. And he seems to like me. Sort of.

It sounded cheap, even to him.

"Or maybe not," Alsace spoke up musingly. She favoured him with a calculating look, nodded once, and then started walking towards the village. Over her shoulder, she called, "I'll pick out something suitable for you and have it delivered by next Saturday. Go have fun with your friends."

So Harry did.

When he reached the group of seventh year Gryffindors, the first thing Harry noticed was that Seamus was far too excited and Dean far too resigned for any good to come of the afternoon.

Ron was holding Lavender Brown's hand, and that only served to solidify Harry's assessment of the situation. He studied them for nearly a second before Seamus, in all his exuberance, noticed him.

"Harry!"

And then all eyes were turned to him, including Ron's, who had the grace to look sheepish. Harry gave him a look that said they would be discussing it later and turned an easy smile back to Seamus.

"What are you lads up to?" Harry asked, stuffing his hands in his pockets to mask the discomfort he felt at seeing Ron so cosy with Lavender. Seamus ambled over and threw an arm over his shoulder, suddenly reminding him of that time at the beginning of term when they had played Levitating Leap-Frog and Ron had screwed up pretty badly. He hoped history wasn't about to repeat itself.

"Dean says if I went as a Leprechaun it would be too predictable," Seamus said in a dramatically dour voice. "Tell him he's wrong, Harry. Tell him Leprechauns are as good as anything for fancy dress parties."

Harry fought a grin. "I'd be lying."
"Wanker," Seamus said, smacking Harry on the head. "What are you going as then?"

Harry shrugged. "Don't know. My date's picking something out," he said to a chorus of Atta boy, Harry and Who's the lass? He ignored both.

"Typical male," Lavender sniffed from Ron's side. "Ron and I are goi—"

"Ron asked you to go with him?" Harry interrupted, and then immediately felt sorry for doing so. But damn, Hermione was going to be hacked off.

Lavender narrowed her eyes and said deliberately, "Yes. And we're going as Guinevere and King Arthur." She paused and then turned to Seamus, adding, "Finnigan, you can be Lancelot."

Seamus scoffed and waved his leprechaun costume around. "Like I'd want to sleep with you, Guinny. I'd rather be short and stingy any day."

"Shall we have a butterbeer?" Harry interrupted before Lavender could start screeching.

"Not a chance, Harry, my boy!" Dean exclaimed, throwing his arm around the shoulder Seamus wasn't currently occupying. "We're all seventeen now, and we're having a real drink."

He stopped and looked around the town speculatively, nodding when he'd decided on a location. "At the Red Lion, which is, if I say so myself, suitable enough for the lot of us."

"But, erm…" Harry said, tilting his head slightly towards Ron. "You know."

Ron grinned. "No worries, mate. I won't touch a drop. I'm not that stupid. McGonagall said she doesn't care how old I am; if she catches me again she's having me expelled and I'm not risking that for a game of Snap."

Fifteen minutes later, Harry found himself staring down a glass full of bubbling red liquid, knowing this stuff wasn’t going to be a thing like brandy or firewhiskey and hoping he didn't make too much a fool of himself. On either side of him Dean and Seamus were counting down from three with devilish smirks. Harry shot Ron an apologetic look as he fought to keep the forlorn look off his face as he watched even Lavender getting excited by the drink in front of her.

"One!" Everyone yelled and Harry tipped his drink back with the others, wincing as it tickled his throat going down. Anything that felt that nice would be something to regret later. Even as he swallowed the last of the funny drink, he felt his eyes get a little heavier and his mood go from neutral to listlessly delighted. The drink bubbled in his belly and he rubbed it absently.

"It tickles!" Lavender giggled, poking at her own stomach. "It's like a little Puffskein's pawing at my insides."

Harry had to agree, even though he felt a little silly about it.

"Tis nothing," Seamus declared. "We've got to try all ten of the specialty shots, so keep your head on. It's tradition."

"Whose tradition?" Ron asked.

Seamus swivelled his head to give Ron a properly disappointed look, and said only, "Honestly, Ron."

"Right, next one is the Lion's Mane," Dean said as he skimmed the list on the far wall. "Think we should just buy all of them now so we don't have to keep getting up? If the rest are anything like this
Seamus pulled a handful of gold from his pocket, removed a coin from the pile and said, "Here's me. Pony up, lads." Lavender coughed, and he added, "And lasses."

When Ron and Dean returned with the drinks for everyone a few minutes later, Harry had to take a deep breath before he was able to breathe properly. There were now thirty-six little glasses of liquid in varying shades of red sitting among them at the table. No way in muggle hell that he'd be able to finish them all. Seamus slid one in front of him with a strange, heretofore unseen leer, and Harry decided he was going to give it a sporting try.

"Matches your mouth, mate," Seamus said. It sounded stupid even to Harry's pleasantly tingling ears, but it sent a jolt of something as fiery as the first drink coursing through his body and he shivered. "All together now," he added to the rest of them.

As the countdown progressed, Harry watched Seamus from the corner of his eye and couldn't help the second shiver that ran down his spine when Seamus yelled 'One!' and his red tongue darted out to the rim of the glass. Belatedly, Harry tossed back his drink, seconds behind the rest of them. Six glasses later, Harry's fingers were shimmying like snakes in front of his eyes. He watched them with detached interest and wondered if Seamus' fingers were doing the same thing. It was a thought worth pursuing.

"A sickle says Harry's the first to drop," Ron spoke up from across the table. He grinned ear to ear as he added, "Even Lavender's looking better."

Harry held up two of his snake-like fingers and gave Ron the two-fingered salute, but it looked so funny with wiggly fingers that he couldn't stop the giggles. "Easy, mate," he heard Seamus say from his right, and then everything went sort of fuzzy and purple and nothing made much sense.

"What do you think about the orphans?" Sirius asked. He was standing by the window in the Headmaster's office looking down at the grounds and trying to figure out which questions to ask. The problem was that he had so many of them; he couldn't seem to ask a single one of them. At least they had already gotten the lemon drop formalities out of the way.

Dumbledore sat behind his desk, leaning back in his chair and watching his former student idly. He said, "What do you think about them?" and waited for an answer.

Sirius turned and leant against the window sill. "Sort of undecided, you know? I mean, everyone knows where these kids are coming from, but we can't exactly give them back, and…"

"And?" Dumbledore prompted.

"I don't know. It's true that the children are all magical—what was the final count this morning? A hundred-forty-two, I think—and if the families have been Obliviated, which they obviously have been…” Sirius shrugged.

"You think that because no one will miss these children, but since so many magical families want them, that it is okay."

"Not so blunt as that," Sirius replied with a slight wince. "But, you know, I'd reckon these kids have a right to be here more than they have an obligation to be there, you know?"

Dumbledore sighed and leant forward. "What is it, Sirius, that is really on your mind?"
Sirius huffed and sought a chair to sit in. When he found one, conveniently comfortable, chintz and directly across from Dumbledore's desk, he flopped down sulkily.

"Am I real?"

Dumbledore laughed. "Are you real?" he asked with a chuckle. "I should hope so."

Sirius huffed again. "You know what I mean, Professor."

Dumbledore threaded his fingers through his long beard and twirled them as he thought. Finally, he looked up and said with a regretful look, "I must admit that I am not certain." Sirius sunk into his chair and Dumbledore continued, "Professor Snape and I have conducted every test available, and all results prove that you are, in fact, alive and who you claim to be.

"The problem with this is that I was quite sure you were, this time last year, dead." He chuckled again, and Sirius sulkily remarked in his head that it was not funny.

"You certainly didn't put up much of a fight when I got Harry this summer," he said instead.

Dumbledore frowned sternly. "Do not think, even for an instant, Sirius, that the situation was not closely monitored by myself at all times. And that includes, I might add, some of your more questionable activities." Before Sirius could even have a chance to worry about the consequences of some of the spells he performed over the summer, Dumbledore continued with, "Furthermore, after several weeks—I assume after your parentage was acknowledged by Harry, and let me add here what a surprise that was—the wards that protected Harry at Privet Drive were suddenly and permanently transferred to your estate. I needed no further proof."

"Really?" Sirius asked, eyebrows up to his hairline with surprise. "I had no idea."

"Surely you felt them?" Dumbledore asked.

Sirius shook his head. "No. And I even keyed Harry to the main wards. We spent a week on them—we should have felt something like that, especially since we were paying so much attention to them."

"I wouldn't worry over it," Dumbledore replied easily. "It is quite possible that the transfer happened during a moment of extreme emotion on the part of both of you. You could have quite easily missed the transfer during such a time.

"What is more intriguing," the Headmaster added seamlessly, "is that several hours after the wards went down at Privet Drive, I received an owl, of all things, from one Mrs Petunia Dursley, who stated, quite frantically, that 'something was wrong. She could feel it in her bones.'"

"And strange even further," Dumbledore continued, leaning forward and raising his eyebrows, "is that if Petunia Dursley—a woman with no magic whatsoever—could feel the fall of the wards, then certainly Voldemort could feel it. Which brings to mind the question of why the Dursley house is still standing."

Sirius had a fair idea of the answer, and concentrated on keeping that thought as far away from the front of his mind as possible. He cleared his throat and said, "How did that woman come by an owl?"

Dumbledore smiled in amusement. "I should imagine Arabella Figg loaned her one."

"Right," Sirius said. He coughed and then took a deep breath, preparing to explain something he only half understood. "Professor, I've been thinking about all of this, you know, me apparently dying..."
and coming back to life, and I've got a sort of theory…"

"Yes?" Dumbledore asked with out-of-character interest. Sirius took a moment to study his old headmaster, wondering exactly how much this problem was bugging him. Dumbledore had a tendency to pretend he thought a problem of no consequence until he had a reasonable explanation. Sirius supposed this was a defence mechanism of sorts—something to keep his enemies from thinking him flustered.

"Well, you remember my brother Regulus, don't you?"

"I've never forgotten a student," Dumbledore said proudly. "Although I think there was this one girl that I quite fancied when I was still a boy, but—"

"Anyway," Sirius interrupted, ignoring Dumbledore's disappointed frown, "he disappeared right after leaving school, and we all knew where he went, but—"

"Your brother is dead, Sirius," Dumbledore said consolingly.

"Yeah, now he is," Sirius huffed. "Hear me out. If Regulus really was, somehow, alive, he could've walked right into Grimmauld Place. You know that he wouldn't have needed the Secret if it was his home. He could have been following me around that house for months—studying my habits and routines—and when you sent me on that mission, he could have followed me there, figured out that I wouldn't be returning for a long while and decided to be me for a bit."

"If he was Polyjuicing himself into you, Sirius, Mad-Eye—"

"I'm not suggesting Polyjuice, Dumbledore," Sirius growled, frustrated. He stood and began pacing back and forth across the room, thinking. "There's other ways. And besides, we always looked a lot alike. It wouldn't take much to make him look exactly like me—I'm not sure exactly what it would take, but it wouldn't take much of it."

Dumbledore folded his hands in his lap and followed Sirius' circuits with his eyes. "And where are you suggesting he's been all this time?"

"I told Harry yesterday," Sirius answered, "that the house-elves mentioned that other house-elves had been at the house within the last two years."

"Not the original family house-elves?" Dumbledore questioned.

Sirius shrugged. "Perhaps, but my house-elf said that their presence disappeared abruptly. Not as if the whole lot of them died. As if they just left, and house-elves don't just leave without instruction to do so. You know that."

Dumbledore stroked his beard thoughtfully, nodding to himself. "Supposing you're correct," he said, "how do we explain the problem of Regulus' name fading from the tapestry? If memory serves, that only happens when one dies."

Sirius shook his head. "Only when the blood dies."

Dumbledore's eyebrows went up expectantly. "I admit that I am not as learned in that area as I would like to be," he hinted.

Sirius stopped at the window he was previously looking out of and exhaled loudly. "He could've been someone else. He could've become someone else."
"Such as?" Dumbledore prompted.

"Well, me," Sirius replied, as if it should have been obvious.

Dumbledore sighed. "And why would Regulus wish to be you, Sirius?"

Sirius shrugged and said pointedly, "Maybe he wanted out."

"That still doesn't answer the question of how, exactly, he would have become you."

"That's what gets me, too," Sirius admitted, frustrated. He tugged on the ends of his hair, as if it would somehow make his brain start functioning properly, and said, "I can think of a dozen rites and rituals and spells and sorceries that would make him almost me—including that damned blood rite that's being performed on all those orphans—but none that would make him exactly me—or exactly not him, either."

Turning and looking directly at the Headmaster, Sirius asked, "You never noticed that it wasn't me in that house? Never thought anything 'I' did strange?"

"I thought everything you did strange," Dumbledore admitted with an enigmatic smile, "but nothing you did seemed out of character."

Sirius grimaced half-heartedly at the jibe. "And that mission I was on?"

"What about it?" Dumbledore asked.

"Was it a suicide mission?" Sirius asked bluntly.

"Certainly not," Dumbledore replied immediately. "You knew and accepted the risks before you left. We needed someone to do it and you were the only one available. I gave you numerous opportunities to say no, and you never once took them. I suspected, however, that if anyone would be able to complete it, it would be either you or Professor Snape, and both of you have used dark magic."

"And what about when I supposedly came back from it?"

Dumbledore narrowed his eyes slightly at the hint that he had been negligent. "You proceeded to give me a full report which, if I might add, included names, dates, places and a lengthy contract signed by two members of the Light Wizards who promised aid if we so required it."

"What?" Sirius asked incredulously.

"Indeed," Dumbledore said with a satisfied nod. "I've since contacted both wizards and confirmed their alliance. It is legitimate."

Sirius slumped back against the window. "Who in all seven hells would've been able to do that?"

"Not your brother?" Dumbledore asked, unwrapping a lemon drop and slipping it into his mouth.

Sirius pursed his lips. "He's done just as much dark magic as I have. They wouldn't have let him near them. And besides, why would he bother?"

"Perhaps he wanted to present a good case. Coming back empty handed might not have looked so good to him. And as I said before, just because those wizards abhor dark magic doesn't mean they can't also feel intent. Your—or Regulus'—presence would have made them physically nauseous because of the dark magic residue, but it wouldn't have been unlikely that they tolerated you if you
caught their interest. They are not as ruthless as rumour would have everyone believe."

Sirius narrowed his eyes at the headmaster. "Are you playing Devil's Advocate with me?" he asked shrewdly. "You seem to have jumped on my theory quite quickly."

Dumbledore shrugged. "You've thought it out well and I can see how it would be possible. Additionally, it is the only theory we have to go on right now, and I prefer something to nothing," he said with a carefree grin.

"Right," Sirius said, for lack of anything better. "So, er...should I be doing anything in particular then? About all this?"

Dumbledore studied him critically for several seconds. "Have you reassured Harry?"

"Yes," Sirius said immediately. "I've told him everything."

Dumbledore nodded, satisfied. "Then I suggest you let me see if I, or any of my contacts, can solve the riddle of your continued existence. I do, however, have something else you can help me with."

"I'll not go to America again for all the galleons in Gringotts," Sirius said right away. "Dreadful place."

Dumbledore chuckled. "I shouldn't think that this mission will lead you there."

Sirius waited. Dumbledore did not continue, so, rolling his eyes, Sirius bit: "Alright, where will it lead me?"

"Hopefully," Dumbledore said, "to your friend Remus Lupin. He's missed his last rendezvous and no one in the Order has been able to locate him as yet."

Sirius' blood ran cold. "What?" he stuttered. "He's not dead, is he?"

"No, not dead," Dumbledore said with a shake of his head. "After your interesting reappearing act, I had charms made for every Order member. They are not as useful as I would like, however, because they only report whether or not one is dead or alive and which public house, if any, they are at in Britain. Works devilishly well for locating Mundungus Fletcher, but not so much for everyone else."

Dumbledore nodded to a shelf across the room that housed thirty or so little purple stones, all pulsing light gently. "Which reminds me that I will need to make one for you as well."

"Of course," Sirius said, "but what about Remus?""

"Hopefully, you will find him," Dumbledore said. "It is almost time for dinner now, but if you could meet me here in the morning, we can get started. It should only take about twenty minutes to brief you, and then you can be on your way."

"Right," Sirius said, nodding. "Good idea. Maybe I'll just have dinner with Harry tonight while I'm here."

Dumbledore chuckled and tilted his head towards the window. "I do not believe that he will be making it to dinner tonight, I'm afraid. Possibly not even breakfast."

Following Dumbledore's gesture, Sirius looked out the window and narrowed his eyes at the sight of his son and four friends stumbling merrily back towards the castle. "That little beast," he muttered under his breath. "He should know better than to stumble around the grounds like that."
"Indeed," Dumbledore said with amusement. "Wonderfully good thing that it's Minerva's turn to supervise the Flying Club on the other side of the castle at exactly this time today, wouldn't you say? Terrible business if she were to catch them."

Sirius frowned in a fatherly sort of way. "Is that Ron Weasley? Isn't he on probation for this very thing?"

Dumbledore craned his neck slightly to look. "It seems to me as if he's the only half-sober one of the bunch."

"Devilish little bugger," Sirius muttered as he watched Harry sling his arm over another boy's shoulder and open his mouth widely for what appeared to be the chorus of an Irish drinking song. Sirius shuddered, remembering how badly his son sang. Definitely didn't inherit his mother's talent. Shame.

"I think this is one of those moments that I would have let Lily handle, had things turned out the way I would have liked them," Sirius said to himself, only a little sadly. He sighed and turned back around to face the headmaster. "Right, well I suppose I'll be on my way then. I'll come by tomorrow at half-nine."

Dumbledore nodded. "Splendid."

Nodding as well, Sirius turned and made his way for the door. He was just turning the handle when Dumbledore spoke up again.

"Oh, and Sirius," the headmaster said. "Perhaps you should teach Harry Occlumency. I never knew you were so proficient, and he could certainly do with a proficient instructor in the field."

"Interfering old man," Sirius muttered as he slid out the door.
Ceasefire
Chapter by faire_weather

Ceasefire (n): 1. An order to stop firing. 2. Suspension of active hostilities; a truce.

Harry woke with a start and the echoing ring of that strange singing still reverberating in his ears. He groaned and absently rubbed at his scar, even though he knew, subconsciously, that it wasn't the cause. He hadn't gotten much sleep at all, and his head was pounding—from what, he didn't know. Surely, it was too early to be awake.

Sighing heavily, Harry rolled over, landing squarely on top of something that was very definitely not his mattress. He cracked an eye open warily.

And only saw his hair, doing a fine job of covering his eyes. Huffing from the throb of his head and frustration at being awake in general, Harry angrily swiped it from his face and focused sleep-bleary eyes on the offending object. The offending Seamus, he realized with some puzzlement.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Harry asked, throat scratchy and strangely raw.

Seamus mumbled incoherently, and Harry noticed two things in quick succession: Seamus was drooling onto his pillow and the both of them were undoubtedly naked. Completely. Realization crept into Harry's mind about the same time that he figured out why his throat hurt, why his head hurt and why his bum felt not unlike it did several times over the summer after a night of watching Aurors in Love. Harry poked Seamus urgently.

Eyes cracking open slowly and then immediately closing again, Seamus rasped a pathetic "Morning," and then immediately rolled over to hide his head under the pillow—far away from the harsh sunlight.

Harry took note of his headache—obviously the result of being so thoroughly drunk the night before—the intense morning sunlight and the fact that he wouldn't be sitting well for some time, and asked huffily, "What's so good about it?" There was no need to ask what they did the night before; Harry was well aware. Seamus had been openly bisexual—supposedly leaning more towards gay—for three years now, and with Harry not exactly secretive about the magazines in his trunk, there was no surprise that they had ended up in bed together after some heavy drinking.

Moreover, he found he wouldn't mind a repeat performance—only, maybe without being hung-over the next day. He'd never considered Seamus as a possible boyfriend, or even lover, but after the fact, it didn't seem like such a raw deal.

That Seamus was gay was just another fact of life; the wizarding world was so strange sometimes: their numbers were dwindling rapidly, and that seemed to Harry like something that would make homosexuality looked down upon, if only for the lack of offspring.

If the scramble over the orphans was anything to go by, Harry should have been terrified of being gay, but as it was, it was very well tolerated—if not exactly encouraged. There had been half a dozen boys in Harry's class alone that were openly gay, and he'd never thought a thing about it. No one had, really; if he'd been in the muggle world, while he most likely wouldn't have been ostracised for it, he certainly wouldn't have been given this much acceptance.

And to be fair, it wasn't even really acceptance; it was on the same par as heterosexuality—it just
wasn't given any thought, so normal was it considered. If he wasn't beginning to feel so nauseous, he might have smiled at his rare good fortune.

"Didn't say it was good," Seamus mumbled from beneath Harry's drool-covered pillow. "Just said it was morning." He pulled his head out and stared down the bed, at the general location of his bum. "Good gods above, below and in-between, Harry. My arse hurts like nothing else."

Harry snickered softly, momentarily forgetting his own aches and pains. Unfortunately, there were echoing snickers from outside the curtains around his bed. Harry sat up quickly and reached for his glasses on the bedside table. He had found that he was unable to break the habit, even if they weren't exactly necessary any longer; it was a defence mechanism.

"Ron?" Harry asked cautiously. "Tell me it's just you out there." Sure, there was nothing wrong with being gay, but being caught after a shag by the lads was never a good thing—Harry would have been just as embarrassed if he'd had a bird in his bed.

"Try again!" Dean crowed from outside the curtains.

Harry groaned. "You, too?"

Seamus lifted himself all the way up and stuck his head out, saying, "C'mere, you wankers; there's blokes trying to get some fecking sleep, and you eejits are nattering on like me mam. Fecking hell," he added once he'd pulled his head back in, "I got Harry in the nip."

The snickering started again, even as Harry fought to control his blush. "Shagged out?" Dean asked with a laugh.

Seamus rolled his eyes and replied, leering at Harry, "More'n one way."

"Shut your gob," Harry said, tossing the drooly pillow at Seamus' face in embarrassment and irritation. "And keep your spit in your mouth when you're in my bed."

"Invitation to return, is it?" Seamus smirked.

"Hate to interrupt this—admittedly touching—moment," Ron teased loudly, "but afternoon classes start in ten minutes, Harry, and you've got Snape today."

"Fucking hell," Harry yelled, tumbling out of the bed and sparing no time to be embarrassed over being found in bed with Seamus. The other boys didn't seem to mind, and he could fret over them hearing about the sex later—perhaps in Potions, when he would be floundering to brew his Arithmantic Potion. He scurried around, trying to find his pants. "I missed DADA?"

Ron, who was sitting on Dean's bed, watching with amusement as Harry scrambled to dress, nodded smugly, and said, "Hermione wasn't pleased."

Harry looked over as he was zipping up his trousers and asked just as smugly, "Speaking to you, is she?"

Ron scowled as Dean laughed and said, "Not hardly, but she was pretty vocal about your absence. Said she was going to cast the inebriating and the sobering spells on you over and over in rapid succession until you figured out that hangovers were more than drinking was worth."

"Didn't say anything about my not drinking, though," Ron added sulkily.

"Probably 'cause you were not-drinking with Lavender Brown," Seamus added from Harry's bed.
He'd made no move to get dressed, and was instead lounging there with the curtains pulled open, watching the proceedings.

"Shut it, Finnigan," Ron said. Seamus shrugged as much as he could with his arms crossed behind his head.

Harry was buttoning his shirt when something else occurred to him. "Does Neville know?"

"Nah," Ron said. "He was up and out before the sun this morning—working on his thesis for Advanced Herbology today."

"Good," Harry said with a relieved sigh. The last thing he needed was Neville having a moral conundrum over whether or not to report them, given his new status as a prefect.

"Nine minutes," Ron said loftily.

"Fuck!" Harry said again, running for the door.

"Good luck with Hermione!" Ron yelled as the door was closing. The snickers started again from inside the dormitory and Harry only barely avoided tumbling down the steps when he realized just how much luck he would need with Hermione today. Fucking hell, indeed.

The first thing Snape said when Harry skidded into the Potions classroom was 'Oh, fabulous: Potter's here,' in a wholly out-of-character voice. As the class snickered, Harry could only focus on how he hoped to Merlin that Snape hadn't somehow used *Legilimency* on him when he came in and seen what he and Seamus had done the night before.

He kept his eyes down on the way to his desk, partially to prevent Snape from reading his mind and partially because he'd seen Hermione's death glare from the corner of his eye and, with it, he wasn't wholly convinced that she didn't have a little Basilisk blood in her.

Harry slid gingerly into his aisle seat next to Hermione. He never would have thought that he would prefer sitting next to a Slytherin, but Theodore Nott was on the other side of her and of no use to him as a battlement. Even worse, Malfoy was sitting in the aisle seat directly across from him. If he'd only arrived sooner, he could have possibly avoided all of this entirely. But he would have had to have made it to DADA for that to have happened.

Harry quickly scanned the area to make sure no one was paying any attention to him any longer before he whispered to Hermione, "Have I missed anything?" She turned her nose up and scooted a little closer to Nott on the bench.

Frustrated with how bad the day was already turning out to be, Harry pursed lips, whispering louder, "Wouldn't it be terrible if all three of us failed this assignment for lack of cooperation?"

"It would indeed, Potter," Snape breathed into Harry's ear. Harry jumped, having not even noticed the professor coming up behind him, and scowled. "Five points from Gryffindor for unnecessary chatter—now get to work."

"I would, sir," Harry gritted out, "only I have no idea what I should be doing."

Snape straightened up and sneered down at Harry in one go. Raising his eyebrows considerably, he said, "I am unsurprised. Five more points for coming to class unprepared." He walked away without a backward glance, but the Slytherins all snickered quietly. Even Nott—the prat.
"I can't believe you, Harry," Hermione hissed as soon as Snape was back at the front of the classroom. Harry rolled his eyes; better they get this over with immediately so that they could possibly work on the potion. He really needed to pass this class—if only to piss Snape off.

"Sorry," he muttered.

Hermione was unimpressed. "Where were you this morning?" she asked, as if she didn't already know the answer. Harry answered, if only to get the conversation moving.

"Sleeping."

"And why were you sleeping so late?" she whispered back.

"Hung-over," Harry said. Nott snorted, and Harry leaned around Hermione to glare at him. "As if that's not something you and your Slytherin mates don't experience often enough."

Nott gave him a serene look. "Certainly not on school days," he said, and then added, "and certainly not without having plenty of hangover potions on hand. Really Potter."

Defeated, and unable to think of anything suitable to reply as his headache seemed to have returned with the mention of a hangover, Harry sat back on the bench.

"What kind of messages are you sending Ron, drinking like that when you know he's recovering from it himself?" Hermione added in a low hiss. Harry wanted to say something about not broadcasting Ron's business to all and sundry like that, but no one was really in hearing range except Nott—who already knew—and Malfoy—who had found Ron to begin with.

"He didn't have any," Harry replied sullenly, and it was true—so far as he remembered anyway. But the truth of that was that he didn't remember much at all after six or so drinks. The night before with Seamus was only returning to his mind in vague, disjointed snatches of memory, but it seemed like it had been fun none-the-less. His lips quirked slightly as he thought he would definitely like to try it sober. He'd like to fully remember it, anyway.

"What are you smirking at now?" Hermione whispered furiously.

"Seamus," Harry replied without thinking. Immediately, he blushed bright red—it was entirely possible that Hermione—and certainly Nott and Malfoy—had not known about that. He glanced to his left to make sure Malfoy hadn't heard their conversation, and was relieved to find him working diligently on his potion.

Hermione's eyes narrowed shrewdly. "I seem to recall Seamus also not being present for DADA this morning." When Harry looked over at her, he was chagrined to see that Nott was leaning forward, eagerly listening to this bit of the conversation, even as he continued to crush ingredients for the next part of their potion.

Harry cleared his throat. "Er—I wouldn't know. Wasn't there, you know."

Hermione narrowed her eyes even further. "I do know—so where, exactly, was Seamus this morning?"

"Asleep?" Harry tried.

"Where?" Hermione volleyed back.

Harry winced, and that was all the answer she needed. Nott snorted again and went back to giving
his full attention to their potion, obviously satisfied with the information supplied.

"I can't believe you didn't tell me that you and Seamus were seeing each other," Hermione said. Her eyes flicked to the front of the class, where Snape was beginning to walk the room, and then back again. "We'll discuss this later, but I hope that one of you at least remembered to cast a protection charm."

Harry sighed and tried to remember if they had or not. He was pretty sure Seamus had, but he couldn't be certain. "So what are we doing today then?" he asked, gesturing to their potion.

Already Hermione was back to ignoring him, so Nott answered quietly, without even lifting his eyes, "Continuing the Draught of Derbyshire, of course. Today we have to add the second layer of the potion, which will float on top of the base for two weeks. After fourteen days—if made correctly—it'll congeal, and then we use a specific Arithmantic formula to combine them. Once that's done, we'll have fifteen minutes to determine the new Arithmantic formula created and apply it before the potion is ruined."

Harry gaped. "No one ever thought to write it down?" he asked, terrified at the prospect.

Nott and Hermione rolled their eyes together. "Of course not," Nott answered. "It's different every time because of the different proportions used when brewing bases."

Harry frowned. "Then why couldn't we all just use the same proportions, since it doesn't matter for the bases?" he asked.

"Because," Nott answered slowly, "humans make mistakes. It would be impossible to get the exact same proportions on any two potions. You can get very close, but never exact. That's why we use maths."

Harry's mouth made a little 'O' and he felt himself blush again. He would never understand potions. Or magic in general, probably.

"You should be helping," Hermione added, and passed a pile of moonwort to him. "This layer, unlike the base, must be very precise. Powder the moonwort until it's a fine, shimmery powder and don't let any of it touch your hands. The oils from your skin will ruin it once it's powdered."

"A fine task for me," Harry muttered as he scooped some into his mortar. His headache was intensifying with just the thought of focusing so much on such a mundane task.

Hermione only glared. Harry set to work. He'd only been working for a few minutes when he got the feeling of being watched. Odd how that happened, Harry mused as he surreptitiously tried to figure out who was watching him. It was strange that one could feel something intangible like being watched. Nevertheless, he could, and it was making him nervous. He cast his eyes upwards without raising his head.

It was Snape.

The professor was staring at him, head still bent slightly from where he had been marking essays. Their eyes locked for several seconds, and Harry was startled enough by the blank look on Snape's face that he forgot to not make eye contact. In the end, it didn't matter—Snape never tried to enter his mind. Harry wasn't sure whether that was a good thing or not, but as he saw Snape's eyes flicker over his face, he could do nothing to look away.

A knock on the door drew Snape's eyes away and a sneer immediately fell over his face. "Enter!" he barked.
Zacharias Smith, the only seventh year prefect not taking potions, came in, not at all looking as if Snape intimidated him. He probably didn't, Smith being such a cocky bastard. "Professor," Smith said politely. Harry, whose eyes were still flicking back to Snape every second or two, noticed that Snape was very close to rolling his eyes. Harry didn't blame him; Smith might have been passably polite, but the arrogance still rolled off him in waves.

Snape remained at his desk, the raising of an eyebrow the only response he offered.

Smith began to fidget, much to Harry's amusement. Clearing his throat, he finally said, "The headmaster has asked the Head Boy and Girl to his office immediately, sir. There's to be a meeting."

Snape was not in the least impressed. He cast his eyes sardonically towards Harry's table and then back to Smith. Harry glanced at his partners and cringed. Gods above, if he were left alone to work on this potion, none of them would make it out of the dungeons alive. From the looks Nott and Hermione were giving him, they agreed.

"We are in the middle of a rather complicated potion, Smith."

Smith's chin lifted slightly. "I understand, sir, but it's quite urgent."

"And what could be so urgent as to require two of my students during class time?"

"Ministry official," Smith said with a slight edge to his voice.

Snape smirked. "Your mother's come to visit? How lovely." He stood, cast another glance around the classroom, lingering a moment longer on Harry, and came to a decision. A surprising one, at that. "I expect she's here to discuss educational matters; as it happens, my budget for the coming year is prepared and I should like to speak to her myself."

"But sir—"

Snape glared nastily at Smith. "Mind what you say, Smith. You're taking one of my students to speak to a Ministry official—your mother or not—and as head of his house, I've a right to be there. I assume Professor McGonagall will be there for Ms Granger, yes?"

"Yes, but—"

"Very good," Snape said and then turned to the class. "All of you, apply the appropriate stasis charm to your potion and return your cauldrons to the shelves. Class dismissed."

"What the…" Harry muttered incredulously. They still had over an hour left of class. Snape had never once dismissed them early. He glanced at Hermione, only to find her looking back at him already. He whispered, "What's going on?"

"I don't know," Hermione admitted, but she didn't sound very worried. "Yasmin Smith works for the Department of Education at the Ministry. I'm sure it's just a yearly check in."

Nott grinned. "Hardly," he put in. "She's here to scout."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

Nott shrugged, looking slightly amused. "Think about it Potter. You've met her, or so Smith has said. Said his family came to your house over the summer for dinner."

"Yeah, so?"
"I'll tell you one thing," Nott said quietly as he applied the stasis spell to their potion. "Yazzy Smith loves nothing so much as her son, but she loves every one else's children almost as much. She's devoted her entire career to ensuring that students learn as much as they can at school; now you tell me who's going to need schooling in the years to come."

"The orphans," Hermione whispered suddenly. Nott nodded, smiling at her, which Harry thought was odd to see—even if he already knew they were friends of a sort. "But won't the families adopting them be able to ensure they're properly educated?"

Nott gave her a look. "Well of course, but not every family who adopted one of them is absurdly wealthy. Some of them already had a child or two before the adoptions. Many of the families have been on waiting lists for years, and many of those families are middle-class. Working families. Who's going to educate the children before they come to Hogwarts?"

"Lots of people's parents work," Hermione pointed out.

"And those children are usually taught by their grandparents. I've lived with mine for most of my life, but some of the families being granted adoptions don't have that option for one reason or another. We don't have pre-Hogwarts schooling in Britain...yet. While places like Southern Europe and America have day schools for working families—and for the children to learn social skills—England is very traditional; we've maintained a home-schooled environment, until the age of eleven, for centuries."

The three of them were now putting the last of their supplies back in their bags. "So what does Smith's mother expect to accomplish?" Harry asked.

"A day school," Hermione inferred, glancing to Nott for affirmation. He nodded and she grinned. Turning back to Harry, she said, "I'll bet she wants to establish a primary school now that England will have so many children in need of one in the next few years. She's here to get ideas."

"And advice," Nott added. "Word has it that she's not very fond of Dumbledore, but she respects him and thinks him quite wise, if a little too old-fashioned for the good of things."

Harry gaped. "Dumbledore's not old-fashioned. Isn't that what makes him so unpopular sometimes?"

Nott laughed softly as the three of them hefted the cauldron up and began walking it towards the back of the classroom. "Hardly. Dumbledore's philosophies—especially the ones pertaining to this situation—have been around for centuries. Wizards have been angling to get muggle-born children into our world before Hogwarts for nearly a century, but Dumbledore maintains that they should be allowed time with their families."

"They should!" Harry hissed, looking around to make sure no one was following their conversation. He looked to Hermione for confirmation, but she seemed to be thinking about something.

"And then once they've finished school," Nott said, somewhat sarcastically, "they'll be torn between this world and their other. That's not very safe. That's why we have magic restrictions when we're not at school."

Harry remembered his father mentioning something like this over the summer. Everything, lately, was all coming back to the beginning.

"And we'll feel like we're betraying our families if we want to stay here," Hermione added quietly.

Nott looked at her fondly, if a little sadly. "Yes, exactly." They stared at each other for only half a second, but it was enough to make Harry uncomfortable, especially as he still had a huge cauldron in his hands. Nott cleared his throat and added, "But you belong here."
The words were said as if to generalise all magical people, but from the way Nott was still looking at Hermione, it was obvious whom he was speaking to.

Harry cleared his throat as the three of them hefted the cauldron onto the shelf. "Well, I guess it's a good thing that at least these kids won't have that problem," he said hesitantly.

He was still a little unsure how Hermione felt about the whole orphan thing, even though she seemed to be a little wistful about it—as if she'd wished she had been one of those kids—one of those kids who wouldn't have to make the same decision she would eventually have to make—and one of those kids who wouldn't feel so out of place when they eventually got to Hogwarts.

"Yes," Hermione agreed softly. "At least they'll—"

"If you're quite finished," Snape interrupted from the front of the classroom. All three of them jumped, startled.

"Yes, sir," Nott called back. "Sorry, sir." The other students were already filing out the door, and Nott and Hermione hurried to follow. Harry walked slightly slower, contemplative and unsure yet again.

Something he'd thought to be morally questionable, if not despicable, was turning out to be a relatively good thing. He wondered if children born as squibs would eventually come to be secretly…traded, of a sort…back to the muggles. He wondered if wizarding families, who wouldn't be Obliviated like the muggles had, would willingly give up their magic-less children if it meant they could possibly live a better life—without all of the stigma attached to be a squib—if wizards would switch children out, perform the blood rite on both of them so there were no questions. He wondered, even more, if squibs would stop being born if there weren't so much inbreeding.

He was so lost in thought that he had not even realised he was the only student left in the classroom, and furthermore, he didn't see Snape waiting impatiently for him by the door. His schoolbag was slung over his shoulder, and he nearly dropped it in shock when the professor's cold hands gripped tightly to his shoulder.

"Sir?" Harry asked, eyes wide.

Snape narrowed his eyes at him, and leaned down from his considerable height to hiss quietly in his face. "What, exactly, are you up to, Potter?"

For the first time, Harry had no idea what Snape was referring to. His mouth worked, but he thought of nothing to answer, save for a rather pathetic, "I don't understand…"

Snape sneered and leaned in even closer, "You are playing a very dangerous game, Mr Potter."

He had to lean back just to focus on Snape's face, the professor was so close, and as he did, he fought to maintain not only his balance, but his head. He only vaguely understood what Snape was talking about, and even then, he had no idea why Snape had decided to bring it up then—in a doorway in the dungeons of all places—anyone could hear them.

Maybe that's what Snape wanted, Harry suddenly thought. It wasn't as if Voldemort were unaware of his probable treason; Voldemort himself had told Harry of it—there was no reason, really, for Snape to fear being called a traitor. He walked a fine line—weaving his way into both sides so that he would be victorious no matter which side was; his only saving grace being that Voldemort believed—and even more so now that he'd struck something of a deal with Harry—that he would win. The Dark Lord, really, had nothing to fear from Severus Snape because so long as it looked as
if Voldemort had the upper hand—and it most certainly did to those aware of such things, such as Harry—Severus Snape would lean more heavily on his side.

It disgusted Harry. He would rather Snape be one or the other, and right now, he didn't particularly care which. In fact, he didn't really care about what side anyone was on because it wouldn't matter in the end. All that would matter was their world, saving it, protecting it, ensuring that it survived and having the wherewithal to help do it.

So who did Snape want to hear their conversation? Harry had no idea, but he also had no time to consider it because Snape's glare was getting colder and colder by each passing second of unfulfilled silence.

"Like you, sir?" Harry asked, not quite sarcastically, but still with a sharp edge. He wondered, belatedly, if a professor could take points for his impudence when talking about such things.

Snape smiled a sinister smile that was wholly incongruent with the soft voice he answered in. "I have less to lose than you, child."

Harry inhaled slowly, trying to process everything all at once—the conversation, Snape's strange demeanour since the beginning of term, the fact that someone was probably listening—that this had been orchestrated.

"What would you have me do, then, sir?" he asked.

Snape straightened up, but his glare remained. "What are you trying to accomplish?"

Harry gaped again. Was Snape offering advice? He wanted to answer, but he didn't know how to explain all the many rushing thoughts and ideals that swam in his brain at any given time—many of them only half-formed ideas for a better world, many of them desperate questionings of his morals, but all of them unfulfilled and unanswered.

"To save the world?" Snape prompted with a sneer.

Yes, Harry thought, but then retracted it before it made its way to his mouth. He didn't want to save the world, he realises with crushing comprehension. Instead, he said, slowly, thinking carefully, "No, sir, I—I want to help the world save itself…and I want to save myself in the process, and…and I want to understand the difference between good and evil and the states in between that, and I want—I want there to be…” he paused, searching for the right word, and finally settled on one with amazing alacrity and conviction. "I want there to be balance—because, because I don't really think that there is a difference between good and evil anymore; I'm not sure that those extremes are always real."

Snape's eyebrows rose minutely, but enough was said with that small gesture for Harry to realise that he'd not only shocked Snape, he might have impressed him—even slightly—as well.

"How did you get yourself into this situation, Potter?" Snape asked, sounding exasperated.

Harry didn't even bother to try correcting people about his last name anymore. It had lasted for about a week before everyone—save a few—reverted back to Potter. He found he didn't mind it much. At any rate, he still didn't feel pure-blooded or noble or any of that other rot that went along with the surname 'Black'.

"I, erm—I have that link," he answered, pointedly pushing the red fringe from his forehead. "When you're so exhausted you can't be bothered to try blocking Voldemort from your mind any longer, sometimes you just give in, let him rant, and try to get some sleep."
Snape smirked slightly. "And is that what happened?"

"No, sir," Harry answered wearily. "He never did rant; he just talked—like a person, you know? Like a human being."

"That's hardly a reason to let a dark lord continue to infiltrate your mind," Snape chastised harshly.

"I know," Harry snapped. "But I was always so exhausted, and—and sometimes he said interesting things—things that I didn't know, or wouldn't have even thought about, but when I did think about them, they made sense, and—and I got tired of fighting. So I listened."

"And you learned?" Snape queried.

"Maybe," Harry answered, not even sure himself. Just because he knew new things, did that mean he had learned anything? He wasn't sure.

Snape crossed his arms over his chest, the glare completely gone from his face. "Have you spoken to the Headmaster about this?"

"No," Harry answered quickly—probably too quickly.

Snape raised his eyebrows again. "And why, pray tell, have you not?"

Wincing, Harry wasn't sure how to answer, but he figured, somewhere deep in the recesses of his brain, that if anyone understood why he hadn't, it would be Snape. He wasn't sure if that was a comforting thought or not.

"I don't know."

The answer seemed to be all Snape needed, for he smiled—smirked—and nodded sharply. "Then I suggest, if you are, in your infinite wisdom, open to advice, that you continue to see that the Headmaster knows naught of what you are doing."

"Right," Harry said, nodding vaguely.

Snape sneered at him once more, lifted his head, and barked into the shadows, "Mr Malfoy, you will desist lurking at once," before turning and stalking off towards the Headmaster's office for the meeting with Yasmin Smith.

Harry was still a little confused when Snape's last words registered. Malfoy? It was Malfoy who had been listening. Of all the people for that slimy git to—Harry stopped his mental ranting abruptly. Why not Malfoy? He wondered. He'd been trying to work on Malfoy since the beginning of term. Perhaps—perhaps if Malfoy knew a bit of what he was up to then it would be easier. Or perhaps harder.

And come to that, why did he even care what happened to Malfoy? He didn't have very long to contemplate it, though, because already his eyes were searching his surroundings for platinum blond hair. Malfoy took the initiative and stepped from his hiding place, startling Harry so much that he jumped. Slightly.

"Rather friendly, you and Snape, a moment ago," Malfoy prompted disinterestedly.

Harry stared at him, refusing to answer an indirect question. There were numerous things that Malfoy
could be trying to weasel out of him; Harry didn't want to tell him more than he had to—or could feasibly get away with and still make some progress with Malfoy. This was too dangerous a game; even Snape agreed with that.

There was a wait—impatiently by Malfoy and warily by Harry—until Malfoy finally gave in and stalked forward, stopping a few mere feet from Harry. He narrowed his eyes and said lowly, "I want to know what's going on."

"Going on with what?" Harry asked.

Malfoy gestured angrily. "With you…and Snape. With those unveiled threats and cryptic messages you keep imparting on me like ancient wisdom." He stepped even closer and added, "I want to know what Dumbledore doesn't."

Harry shrugged. "Nothing's going on."

"Rubbish!" Malfoy hissed. "I know you, Potter," he sneered. "You may be family now, but you'll always be Potter to me, and I know how you work. I know how you react—what you look like when you're lying, or nervous, or confused, or cocky or just pissed off. You weren't confused when Snape was talking to you just now; you were nervous. Wrong reaction. You knew exactly what he was talking about, and from the way it sounded, he's letting you get away with something you shouldn't.

"Anything Snape lets you get away with is cause for suspicion. And furthermore," Malfoy continued in a deadly whisper as he stepped right up to Harry's face, "There have been things happening that I suspect you know about, and you aren't reacting correctly."

"How am I reacting?" Harry asked in confusion.

"Like you know more than everyone else. Like you've inside information—information that Dumbledore's side wouldn't have, or wouldn't feel comfortable with even if they did," Malfoy answered immediately.

"What are you trying to say?" Harry asked slowly. He didn't think that Malfoy had figured any of that out. He didn't think Malfoy was capable of figuring that much out; if truth be told, Harry didn't think Malfoy was worth much more than mindless cruelty, ignorance and arrogance.

Additionally, Harry wasn't sure he was prepared for Malfoy to be quite so intuitive. Had he read Malfoy completely wrong from the very beginning? He began to wonder if Voldemort, whom he suspected had by now reasoned out his self-proclaimed mission regarding Malfoy, had let Harry continue, in order to teach him something.

Harry had no idea where that realisation came from, but it seemed to fit. The only thing he couldn't work out was what he was expected to learn from it. That anyone can surprise you? That was rather cheap as far as life lesson went.

But it begged the question, was Malfoy really as bloodthirsty as Harry—and everyone else, really—suspected? Was Malfoy already fit to fight a war? Mentally? Was he as cunning and intelligent as his house was originally meant to be?

The year before, due to a cryptic conversation with Voldemort, Harry had contemplated the Sorting Hat, and how accurate it was with its sortings. The conclusion he came to regarding the Slytherin students was that it was very possible that they weren't sorted into their house because of their families, but because of the way their families raised them. Were Slytherin parents more likely to
impart teachings that resulted in their children being more ambitious, more cunning, more likely to think things through from several perspectives and create a contingency plan for all of them? A simple game of Hide and Seek could be vastly different—mentally—for a Slytherin-raised child than for a Hufflepuff-raised child.

It hit him hard: Malfoy really was a Slytherin. Malfoy was infinitely more layered than anyone had given him credit—probably even more than his own father had; that made Malfoy markedly more dangerous than before, even if he wasn't really as vicious as believed.

Abruptly, he was pulled from his musings.

"I'm saying," Malfoy answered slowly, "that you know my father's not in Azkaban, even though it's not been reported in any of the papers and there are no rumours of it. You knew that before Lestrange said it, and you've had plenty of time to alert the Aurors, Dumbledore or even your little friends. You haven't done it and there are only a handful of reasons why you wouldn't have—none of which look good for someone on the Light Side."

Harry shrugged, feeling stupidly cornered. It wasn't like Malfoy could or even would do something if he figured out the rest of it. "That doesn't mean anything."

"Maybe not what you expect," Malfoy said, almost fondly. "But what it does mean is that someone told you that he was out of prison. The only people who know only make your case all the more incriminating."

"Incriminating by whose terms?" Harry asked incredulously.

Malfoy chuckled. "See? There you go; surely not by my terms: I love my father; I'd never turn him in. Not by his colleagues' terms: he's a friend. Not by his superior: he's been a very valuable asset."

The blond cocked his head, slightly mockingly, and added, "Whose terms, indeed."

"I have to get to class," Harry said abruptly.

Malfoy fell into place next to him as he turned to walk. "I'll walk you," he said with a sinister smile. "I've Arithmancy, too."

"People will talk," Harry hissed, trying to dislodge Malfoy from his side. "Stop it."

"They already have something to talk about," Malfoy said with a careless shrug. "There's orphans who're no longer orphans all over the place, and besides, we've a project together for the class, or have you forgotten? You can always tell your little Gryffindors that we were planning for it."

"What about the orphans?" Harry asked, and knew immediately he'd walked right into another trap. He gave up on trying to out-walk Malfoy, and instead focused on looking pissed off and surly about Malfoy's company, which wasn't all that hard to do.

"Well," Malfoy drawled slowly, swinging his arms back and forth in a mocking, childish manner. "How about the fact that even you could figure out that not just anyone's going to abduct Mudbloods and give them to wizards?"

Harry's ears burned at the mention of the word 'Mudblood', but kept his lips tightly pressed together. If he let himself rant at Malfoy now, there was no telling what he might say—what he might give away.

"It takes a—" Malfoy paused and waved his hand philosophically, "—a, hmm, a special kind of person, wouldn't you say, to do that. Someone with different opinions than your run-of-the-mill
"You're playing with me," Harry muttered furiously.

"No," Malfoy immediately denied, expression no longer musing, but hard and determined. "You're playing with all of us, and I want to know what's going on."

"No way," Harry said. "I wouldn't trust you as far as I could kick you—as much as I'd like to do just that."

"You listen here," Malfoy hissed, grabbing Harry by the shoulder and stopping him in the middle of a busy corridor. There were several passing students inclined to watch and see what kind of brawl they would get into this time, but Malfoy sent them along with a vicious glare. He erected an unnoticeable silencing charm around them with a twitch of his wand before continuing.

"There is a war about to happen, Potter. A fucking war, and I don't know how much your little brain can comprehend, but some of us would like to have a life on the other side of it. If you've got information that will tell me where I need to be and when, I want to fucking know it."

Harry scoffed. "You'd pick your side based on expected outcome?" That was utterly disgusting. Malfoy sneered right back at him. "As far as I'm concerned, the lesser of two evils in this situation is the one that's going to fucking win. Neither of them sounds that incredible to me right now, but it's pretty obvious that you've already put your money down. My bet is that your odds are fucking outstanding."

Harry's eyebrows shot up. "Really," he said. Malfoy only sneered more forcefully in reply. He tugged on Malfoy's arm to get him walking again; there was no reason to cause even more of a scene, and if they could blend in with the other students, the more the better.

"You want to be on my side, then?" Harry asked to clarify. What he thought Malfoy was suggesting just seemed too outlandish to be believed. "Not Voldemort's or Dumbledore's, but the one I'm on?"

"Don't spread your feathers just yet, Potter," Malfoy replied snottily as he fell into step. "I'm not saying it because I like you. I'm saying it because I suspect you're walking a fine line, and fine lines often end up having the most room to spare. Your conversation with Snape only adds to my conviction."

Harry couldn't have done it any better. Malfoy, oddly enough, had just thrown himself into his hands without Harry having to do any prompting at all. The only problem with this was that he hadn't thought it all through. For some reason, he'd wanted Malfoy on his side from the beginning—consciously or not—whichever side he was on, but he'd always wanted Malfoy on his side because he thought it was the right side to be on, not because it was the winning side.

Still, even knowing that, Harry wanted Malfoy to be with him in this unlikely war. Sometimes, you knew something wasn't right, but you wanted it anyway. Once, Malfoy had told Harry not to make friends with the wrong sort; well, Malfoy would always be the wrong sort, but that didn't seem to lessen Harry's pathetic obsession with him any.

And maybe Malfoy would change some of his ideals. Harry almost snorted at the idea. Not likely.

As the silence began to stretch, Harry decided that if Malfoy at least had it in him to be a decent person, then that would be enough for him. Harry was certainly no one to judge, but he still had the ability to pick his friends, just like he'd had in first year. He didn't have to accept Malfoy if Malfoy didn't agree with anything he agreed with—however unlikely it was that Malfoy would want to be
his friend anyway. Why was he even thinking about being friends?

Taking a deep breath, Harry finally asked, "What do you think about the orphans?"

"The orphans?" Malfoy asked, off guard.

"Yeah," Harry said. Rolling his eyes, he played one of his few remaining cards. "You know, the kids your dad's been dropping off in Derbyshire."

Malfoy smiled slowly. "I knew it," he said, almost to himself. "Pansy said I was being an idiot, but I knew this was the best option."

"I haven't agreed to anything yet," Harry reminded Malfoy sharply. They were nearing the Arithmancy classroom by now and time to get an answer out of Malfoy was running short. "The orphans?" he prompted again.

Malfoy laughed delightedly, as if he were in his own little world. It was a strange thing to see him so pleased, and Harry noticed uncomfortably that the way his face softened in laughter was more pleasing to him than it should be. He pursed his lips.

"I don't mind them," Malfoy finally said with a shrug.

"What do you mean by that?" Harry asked.

Malfoy shrugged again, still smiling slightly. "You're testing me," he said easily. "That's alright; I don't mind. I'll even go you one further and answer the real question you're asking me: How do I feel about Mudbloods.

"The answer? I don't give a shit about their blood. Magical blood is all the same; Pansy and I researched it in third year when I was on bed rest. Would I ever want to be a Mudblood? Certainly not, and for several reasons: one, there are positions of authority that can't be held by wizards not raised in a magical household—the Wizengamot, for example. Two, I love my family; I love my home and I like knowing that I'm a wizard, not a muggle, not someone who never knows for sure which world I belong in. I can trace my genealogy back to the days of the founders.

"The Dark Lord's idea regarding the orphans was the best I've seen from him. It's logical, something that I didn't see much of in his previous endeavours. That they thought far enough in advance to begin an irreversible blood rite on them is even more impressive; it means they can't be given back to their original families—it means they really are purebloods—because they're blood's been mostly replaced—and that they'll always be wizards."

"What if their adopted parents are muggle-born?" Harry asked. It was true what Malfoy had said; he really had meant to figure out what Malfoy would think about all the orphans being muggle-born. If he were honest with himself, he would admit that he'd expected Malfoy to rant about them tricking the rest of society.

"You're either a wizard or not," Malfoy said with disdain. "Two magical parents make you pure-blooded. One makes you a half-blood. None and you're a Mudblood." He shrugged.

"If you don't think there's a difference in blood," Harry finally said in exasperation, "then why do you still say 'Mudblood'?" He wanted to stomp his foot. Malfoy was such a contradiction.

Malfoy's eyebrows rose, not expecting Harry to actually say the word. "Just a general insult," he said with a shrug. "Like you'd call me a git, I'd call you a half-blood. There are wizards who really believe muggle-born blood is of lesser quality than pureblood—my father probably included—but
the only thing that concerns me is ignorance of our culture—Tracey Davis is muggle-born, but I've never called her a Mudblood. That's because she acts and thinks as a witch should act and think—not like a muggle-born transcended into a new world."

They reached the Arithmancy door just as Harry remembered to say, 'Oh'. He stood there, unsure of what to do or say next, when once again, Malfoy made it easy for him.

"I've told you my part," the blond said. "It's your turn next. You've got Snape on your side, and he's an arse even to Slytherins in the privacy of our common room; there's no reason for you to reject me now. Especially because you just don't like me."

"I still don't know what exactly you want," Harry prevaricated, momentarily shocked with what Malfoy had said of Snape. There was no way Snape was on his side.

Malfoy scoffed. Good-naturedly, even. "Your information."

"My information is worth far more than your views on magical blood," Harry answered disdainfully. Malfoy narrowed his eyes. "Believe me, Black," he said, deliberately using the name, "you'd rather have me on your side than the other, no matter what you think. And besides," he added jovially, as he opened the door and cancelled the silencing spell, "I might even be persuaded into throwing in a picture of my father for your little project. I expect we have a truce now."

Harry, stunned, followed him into the classroom. He looked around the room, seeing only two empty seats—

"Oh look," Malfoy added to him in a quietly mocking voice. "We'll have to sit together this class, shan't we? No time like the present to get started on our Arithmancy project, is there, old boy?"

Harry groaned, rubbed his eyes beneath his glasses, and hoped that he just hadn't landed himself into more than he could handle.
Sitting next to Malfoy for another Arithmancy class was just as infuriating as Harry would have expected it to be. Malfoy found a way to turn nearly every part of the lesson into an opportunity to wrestle information from Harry; Harry, in turn, found it increasingly more difficult to not fall into the traps.

Malfoy could just be so subtle sometimes—asking seemingly innocent questions and garnering information from the most innocuous of answers. By the end of class, Harry had received three dirty looks from Professor Vector for shushing Malfoy and had learned nearly nothing of Arithmancy.

As he was already behind, having been moved into the advanced class due to no other fifth- to seventh-year students taking the beginners' class, it was starting to look dire for his grade in not only this class, but for this term's Arithmantic potions in Snape's class.

The reason Malfoy offered for this, when Harry once muttered a complaint about Snape assigning work that not all his students had a prerequisite class in, was that all magical-raised children had a basic understanding of Arithmancy, like all muggle-raised children had a basic understanding of mathematics. Even Ron, Malfoy had sneered, would have been able to fumble through the advanced equations without having to take the class. More than ever, Harry hated that he'd been denied the opportunity to grow up in his world.

And that, even, was a new thought to him. Hogwarts had always been home to him, but over the course of the last year, he'd come to realise that the wizarding world in general was home to him as well. He held no remorse for his lost time in the muggle world. It was a startling realisation, forcefully interrupted with another smooth question from Malfoy.

By the time class had ended, Harry was exhausted from having to guard his conversation so much. Hermione never made it to class; Harry presumed she was still meeting with Smith's mother, so he was able to ditch Malfoy quickly when Professor Vector dismissed them.

He should go back to the common room, he knew, but Ron would be getting back from his Monday Divination class and he just didn't feel up to hearing about it. He felt guilty for the thought, but his exhaustion outweighed it.

The Arithmancy classroom was on the first floor and Harry made a split decision to go left, out of the castle, instead of right and up the stairs to the tower. It was late October, only five days until Halloween, and the air was crisp and chilly. Harry wrapped his Gryffindor scarf tighter around his neck and mouth and headed out onto the grounds, towards the lake and away from the bustle of student life.

It was a good time for flying, Harry thought, with the wind blowing gently. It would be a perfect time to practise that new move Gwydion Fionhwyrr—the up-and-coming new Seeker who was
predicted to lead the Welsh Greens to the World Cup in a year or two—had done in his first professional game last season.

In a dire-looking game against the Harpies, Fionhwyr had avoiding an impending crash with three other players by doing a back-flip on his broom underneath one of the Greens’ Chasers, catching the Snitch on his rebound—still upside-down. He and Ron had spent hours during sixth year trying to master it, and surprisingly, Ron had done better than Harry, but they both could have used some practise.

With a sigh, Harry abandoned the idea. His broom was in his room and all of the windows were locked up; there would be no end to McGonagall's wrath if he broke one trying to summon it to him. He chose a tree to settle under instead, in hopes that he could get some studying done. He needed to at least reread the last chapter in his Arithmancy text since he'd missed so much of the lesson.

The only problem with this plan was that Harry didn't understand a damned bit of it. He thought of Theodore Nott and Hermione—the only two who had been able to explain any of it to him—and wished that they were around, but then remembered that he still wasn't sure if he approved of Nott or not.

It wasn't long before he drifted off, and, with that, he found himself staring straight into red eyes.

"Do you often fall asleep so unprotected?" Voldemort asked him with a curious cock of his head. "Had I known, I would have waited for you to drift off in the park near your muggles' house," he added with a smirk.

Harry, awake even as he was asleep, needed no time to come to his senses like one often did when waking up. He blinked at Voldemort in mock confusion. "Why would you want to do that?" he asked innocently.

He didn't know what was prompting this indifference to the Dark Lord, but the more this happened, the more amusing he found it. After all, how many others could say they experienced visions from Voldemort and remained sane enough—or alive enough—to tell it? Or not tell it, as the case may be.

Voldemort smirked at him and made a show of looking around at his surroundings. It was at this time that Harry realised they weren't in the old drawing room wherever Voldemort lived, but in the exact spot he'd fallen asleep. "Are you really here?" he asked, somewhat fearfully.

He'd always known the other meetings were not conducted in the physical world since he always came to Voldemort, but Voldemort had come to him this time, and it worried him, as it rightly should have.

"Not in the way you expect," Voldemort answered. "Do you really think I could have made it onto the school grounds without Dumbledore knowing of it?"

Harry shook his head, but his doubt remained. "You're quite powerful," he offered. "I wouldn't be as surprised as I once would have been."

"Quite," Voldemort replied, and it almost seemed as if he were preening.

When he said nothing else, only stared, Harry cleared his throat and added, "How is it that you knew when I was asleep?"

"Your mind is wide open," Voldemort obliged him chidingly. "I wanted to speak to you, so I merely opened our link and waited."
"Oh," Harry said, and then, "What did you want to talk to me about?"

"You have no manners whatsoever," Voldemort said instead, and then conjured a wingback chair to settle into—right on the school grounds. Harry felt like blushing, and forced his face to cool before it became too hot. How absurd that he would feel discomfited for neglecting to be hospitable when in audience with Voldemort.

"It has come to my attention," Voldemort began after he was comfortable enough, "that the Dementors have outsmarted us."

"Pardon?" Harry asked, bewildered.

"The Dementors, you stupid boy," Voldemort said with a roll of his eyes. "My colleague, Yaxley—you know the one," Voldemort gestured vaguely. "He deals with magical creatures."

"Oh, him," Harry returned with his own eye roll. "What's he have to say about the Dementors then?" Both of them, Harry suspected, were being overly casual for this sort of conversation, but defence mechanisms were like that.

"Yaxley swears they've begun the breeding process," Voldemort said. "That shouldn't have started until the summer equinox. The whole thing is terribly overwrought with Arithmancy and whatnot—it's incredible that they've changed their schedule."

"Incredible wouldn't be the word I'd use," Harry admitted slowly. "More like 'horrifying' or 'disastrous'."

"Those as well," Voldemort admitted pointedly. "It'll be months before the Arithmantists figure it out and report it to the media. By then, the Dementors will have moved on to the second stage of the process, which, as you might fear, is the pre-feeding."

Harry shuddered. His heart was beating madly in his chest, pumping adrenaline throughout his body in response to his sudden fear. He couldn't think of anything more frightening than the Dementor breeding season.

Swallowing, he asked the important question—the one he would have avoided at all costs before Voldemort became this much of a fixture in his life. "How many…erm, people will it take to feed them?"

"Not as many as you would think," Voldemort answered. "For all of the European Dementors, it will take five hundred souls; a full soul isn't needed, and all of the Dementors used to administer a Kiss before won't need to feed."

"And what about everywhere else?"

"The Asian wizards have been using convicts for this purpose for the last three breeding seasons. They'll do the same this time and I imagine the Americans will as well after they do some research and realise what a disaster it was for the Europeans last time—when they tried to ignore it and ended up with thousands of dead. I believe they called it a plague."

"But with all this breeding," Harry said quickly, "won't the Dementor population skyrocket? We can't simply let them multiply so quickly."

"Certainly not," Voldemort said. "The Dementors have always been static in their numbers. Their race is sacrificial in that for every Dementor that will be born, not only does a human soul have to die, but another Dementor must die as well, so that all his consumed souls may be released again."
"So there will be dead Dementors lying everywhere?" Harry asked.

Voldemort smiled grimly. "Creating quite a stench of death, I imagine. Their bones are highly valued in the potion market, however."

"So what are you going to do about it?" Harry asked.

"What am I going to do about it?" Voldemort asked, eyebrows raised. "Surely you don't think this a job for one person."

"I was hoping, at least, that I wouldn't need to be involved," Harry admitted, feeling slightly nauseated.

Voldemort laughed cynically. "We shall see," he said. "Yaxley is currently drafting a list of possible Azkaban inmates to evacuate for the process. There are roughly two thousand prisoners in Azkaban right now, many who've been there for sixty years or more."

"So you're just going to do...what?" Harry asked, now getting angry. "A lottery or something? Grab a few of the ones who're insane anyway and feed their souls to a Dementor? They'll never reincarnate if you do that! If you do that, then it'll mean that these people—who've spent most of their lives in that wretched place—won't get a chance to have a new life. That's not on."

Voldemort's eyes narrowed in displeasure. "Did I not say a list?" he asked mockingly. "I believe I said Yaxley was making a list. In deference to you, and your ethics, we will be choosing inmates based on their accused crimes."

"What right do you have to play God and Executioner?" Harry asked.

"I will gladly surrender the right of judgement to you, should you so request it," Voldemort replied easily.

Shuddering, Harry shook his head and backed off; like most people, he'd rather just not know anything about it. "How will you get them out of Azkaban without the Ministry finding out?" Harry asked, thinking of Lucius Malfoy.

"That, I'm afraid, is a trade secret," Voldemort replied. "Were you more adept at Occlumency, I might've told you, but as you are not..." he trailed off, then seemed to remember something. "Have you been called to Dumbledore's office at all this year?"

"No," Harry said, shaking his head. He and Dumbledore weren't as close as they had been before fifth year. He tried not to think ill of the Headmaster, but, if only to himself, he had to admit that he was still upset about the events of that year. The real Sirius might be alive, but someone else was dead, and then there was that whole prophecy, which frightened him when he had enough time to think of it.

Voldemort nodded, looking thoughtful. "Be sure that you don't make eye contact if he does happen to do so, but for the love of Merlin," he added, "don't make it obvious that you are avoiding it. Be meek if you must. Or sullen, as is more fitting of a teenager."

Harry sneered. "I'm not sullen," he said, but took the advice to heart. He really should learn Occlumency, he thought. Even if he had to beg Snape to teach him.

Voldemort smirked slightly. "Of course not."

Feeling sullen and disgruntled because of it, Harry tugged on the grass next to him and began
systematically tearing it apart. "Draco Malfoy approached me," he said a minute later. "He suspects I'm up to something and wants to know what it is."

"I assumed he might," Voldemort replied. "He's a clever child; much cleverer than his father, I dare say." This last was accompanied by a wry twist of the lips.

Harry pursed his lips. Why was it that no one would tell him anything?

"There was nothing to tell," Voldemort answered, pointedly looking at Harry's forehead. Grimacing, Harry tried to block his mind, but gave it up as a bad job after only a minute or so of trying. When he was done, Voldemort continued, "I have simply known him longer than you, and better than you. I know his ways. You know most of my plans, theories and ideas, and those you don't know are because they are too sensitive to be stored in an un-blocked mind."

"And if I could?" Harry countered, frustrated.

"Then you would know," Voldemort replied, then amended, "most of them."

Rolling his eyes, Harry knew he'd never win this one. Instead, he brought the subject back around to Malfoy. "What's he up to?"

"Draco?" Voldemort asked, as if he couldn't read it right out of Harry's head. "He's saving himself, of course."

"Can I trust him?"

"Certainly not," Voldemort answered with a strange laugh. "That is, until you give him a reason to trust you." At Harry's confused look, Voldemort obliged him. "While most Slytherin children are brought up by their parents to behave in a Slytherin manner, Draco was not. His mother was a Ravenclaw and his father wanted little to do with him, the only ideal instilled into him by a parent was to enjoy learning. His nannies and tutors were all Hufflepuffs or au pairs—certainly not the type to preach ambition and cunning. But instead, he has a strange, corrupted sense of learning, determination and loyalty."

"Then why was he sorted Slytherin and not another house?" Harry asked. He had to temporarily disregard the information on Draco's background. Though it wasn't especially revealing or interesting, it was more than he'd previously known of Malfoy. Loyalty indeed.

Voldemort was contemplative before answering, "I truly believe that Draco was born Slytherin; it cannot be any other way—he is Slytherin, to be sure, but only by nature. You could say that he is perhaps a raw, unrefined Slytherin. It is perhaps why he is so brash at times."

Harry nodded, soaking it all in and trying to apply it to the Malfoy he knew. "So what would it take to make him trust me enough that I could trust him?"

That he even wanted that was a shock to Harry, but now that he'd admitted it to himself, he realised that it was true. Voldemort, perhaps out of some skewed sense of fondness for him, refrained from commenting on it.

"That, I cannot answer," Voldemort replied with a shrug. "I've not found it myself, might as I have tried."

"Is that why you said nothing when I refused him the Mark before school?" Harry asked. He had thought that Voldemort, wrapped around his shoulders in his animagus form, would have hissed a reprimand to him and made him give Malfoy the Mark anyway.
"Partly," Voldemort answered. "And partly because he's not mine to Mark. He never has been and he never will be, no matter how much he does or does not agree with what I do."

That didn't make much sense to Harry, but hardly anything Voldemort said ever did, so he just accepted it. Like with Dumbledore, oddly enough, Harry would probably understand Voldemort when the time came. Strange how two people so unalike could have such startling similarities.

He did, however, need a direct answer for one question, so he voiced it quite plainly. "So, what should I do?"

"Tell him what he wants to know," Voldemort replied.

Harry scoffed. "What? Just like that? You just said only a minute ago not to trust him."

"I said that you couldn't trust him," Voldemort replied dryly. "I didn't say not to trust him."

"It's the same thing!" Harry exclaimed. The only response he received was two raised eyebrows—and, Harry wondered, had Voldemort always had eyebrows? He seemed to remember the Dark Lord not having any at all.

"Fine—so I should, what?" Harry said. "Trust him with this information but nothing else?"

"With this information certainly," Voldemort said, shrugging. "Anything else at your discretion, I think."

"Why?"

"Because," Voldemort answered slowly, as if he were speaking to small child, "Draco is loyal to his family. He won't outright betray them, though he might disobey them. There is no way that he could bring anything about the two of us to light without also condemning his father. He knows this."

Harry scoffed. "Everyone still thinks Lucius Malfoy's in Azkaban. They already know he's a Death Eater."

"Perhaps," Voldemort allowed, "but this time you have me on your side, and Lucius Malfoy is my current ransom."

"Malfoy would never consider that; if anything, he'd think it would gain him favour with you to turn me over."

Voldemort chuckled. "You give him too little credit, Harry. He'll figure it out soon enough. Additionally, you've done nothing that warrants trial or arrest."

"Right," Harry said. He looked around him and saw that the sun was beginning to set, and that his arms were covered in goose-flesh. When had he gotten cold, and how had he not even realised it?

"Anything else?" Voldemort asked. Harry shook his head. "Very well. I came merely to warn you of the Dementors. I fear that you will notice strange things in the Prophet and felt I should warn you; now I must be getting back. Lucius is due by and wouldn't it be terribly embarrassing if he were to find me slumped over my writing desk, possibly drooling?"

Harry tried for a laugh, but it came out weak. He was suddenly tired.

"Oh, and Harry," Voldemort said, almost softly. Harry looked up expectantly, exhaustedly. "See that you don't get hurt on Saturday. You should know that the veil between the living and the dead is
quite thin on All Hallow's Eve; you wouldn't want to make it easy for the unrestful to…find a new home in you."

Voldemort's disappearance was sudden—a moment he was there and then the next he wasn't. Tired and irritated, Harry flopped back against his tree. This was getting to be entirely too confusing—perhaps more confusing than his Arithmancy homework. Not to mention the stupid project he would be doing with Malfoy; that alone would take the better part of the year to complete and they hadn't even started yet. He didn't even know what Voldemort meant by that parting comment.

"Harry?"

Harry sat up very quickly and looked wildly around the area. Hermione was standing several feet away, partially hidden by the overgrowth around that side of the lake, looking frightened, but as if the final piece of an elaborate puzzle had just fallen into place without her having to do any work at all.

"It's not what you think," he said quickly, which, he realised, was probably the worst thing he could have said. It, probably, was what she thought, and on top of that, the stupid thing he said was almost always a dead giveaway.

He had no idea she'd seen anything at all, anyway. Voldemort would probably have been invisible and inaudible to her and he'd just said the one thing that would have raised her suspicions. It was likely that she'd just been worried about not being able to find him. Damn it, he thought.

"What do you think I think?" Hermione asked shrewdly.

Harry winced. "I don't know."

Hermione's lips tightened into a thin line. "You were talking to someone," she said.

"I wasn't," Harry insisted. "Only myself."

Hermione scoffed. "You've never talked to yourself." Harry—remembering times in his cupboard as a young boy, when he'd been so lonely he could have sworn he heard his mother speaking to him—begged to differ. He'd certainly talked back sometimes, desperate as he was for human—or even ethereal—contact. "Who were you talking to?"

"No one," Harry repeated. "I was talking to myself."

Hermione laughed shakily; she was scared, Harry could see, but she was standing her ground. How Gryffindor of her, he thought. No wonder she wasn't put in Ravenclaw. She took a step forward, arms wrapped around herself, whether from the cold or something else, and said, "You often talk to yourself about Dementors?"

Harry didn't like that she was afraid because she was afraid of him right then. She was afraid of what she'd heard, and he realised with a sinking feeling that she'd heard a lot. Too much. Maybe enough, with what she might have heard back at Grimmauld Place, before school, to put it all together.

He was starting to get scared himself. Would he lose one of his best friends over this? The thought had floated into the back of his mind once or twice, but he'd always put it off, thinking, for some reason, that they would never need to find out. That the war could be won—even avoided—before they ever had to find out. He pulled his legs to his chest and wrapped his arms around his knees.

"They're about to breed," Harry replied. "You know that."
Hermione nodded slowly. "Yes," she said. "But not for a few more months—and Dumbledore's got a plan to avoid any loss of life."

"That's impossible," Harry muttered before he could stop himself. "Europe tried that last time, and it didn't work. Thousands of people were Kissed when only a few hundred needed to be. You can't starve a Dementor—they'll need three times as many souls to be satisfied when they finally do eat."

"What?" Hermione asked. "Says who?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't want to talk about it."

Hermione was nearly on top of him in three long strides. "I do," she said icily. "What's going on?"

Harry stubbornly remained unhelpful. "No. I'm not talking about with you."

"Then who were you talking about it with?" Hermione insisted. "Who would you have to talk to about Death Eaters and Dementors and Draco Malfoy? Who would you be asking advice from, about what you should and shouldn't tell Malfoy? What shouldn't you tell him?"

"A lot of things," Harry said. He was getting angry now and his voice reflected it. What right did Hermione have to demand this of him when she could see that he didn't want to talk about it? "He's a Slytherin and a little Death Eater; there are lots of things I shouldn't tell him."

"Apparently," Hermione grit out. "And yet, you seem to be contemplating telling him something quite important. And tell me this, Harry," she added in a low voice, "Who are you afraid Malfoy would turn you over to?"

"No one," Harry answered immediately. At least he could give Hermione one honest answer. Even if Malfoy turned Harry over to Voldemort, he wouldn't be harmed. He knew that, somehow, and even his lingering fear of Voldemort was based only on surprise and wariness, not true fear for his life or those of his friends.

Hermione took a step back. "That's what I was afraid of," she said, breathing shakily. "There's no one you're afraid of anymore. You said it yourself after the Order meeting before school—when you were talking to Sirius in the kitchen. You said, 'I'd never be a Death Eater, but you can't tell me you still trust Dumbledore completely, can you?' And you said you'd have power to veto…veto what, Harry?"

"You heard that? You said you didn't hear anything."

"I said I didn't hear much," Hermione corrected. "And at the time, even if it was a strange thing to say, I didn't think it meant anything. I didn't think it meant you were consorting with…with Voldemort!" she hissed.

Harry looked around them quickly to make sure there was no one else around. "Shh!" he hissed back. "I'm not!"

"Where did that chair come from then?" Hermione asked shrewdly.

Harry followed her line of sight to the leather wingback chair still sitting in the dying grass and inhaled quickly. _Fucking Voldemort_, he thought. He stood, not bothering to shake the dead leaves from his cloak, Vanished it with a wave of his wand, and stepped toward her. She hastily stepped back, and Harry's heart sunk.

"Hermione—Hermione, no! I'm not going to hurt you," he pleaded. "Just—just wait. Listen."
Hermione's eyes were wild, and her hand was reaching into her cloak for her wand even as he spoke, but she remained where she was—tensed and ready to strike, but she still remained.

Hastily, Harry erected the same silencing spell Malfoy had used when they were walking to Arithmancy together. He reached out to touch her arm, but she jerked it away, so he settled for looking at her pleadingly. "I'm not a Death Eater," he said.

"I know," Hermione said. She nodded once to his arm. "I've seen you in short-sleeved shirts. I know there's no Mark."

"Then why are you scared?"

"Because!" Hermione exclaimed. "Because you've been talking to Voldemort—probably through that link in your scar—and you've...you've been planning with him, or...or, I don't even know! But I know that it doesn't sound right. Why shouldn't I be scared?"

"To save people!" Harry insisted.

Hermione scoffed, showing her bravery again. "Voldemort doesn't save people," she said.

"I know," Harry said quickly. "I know, but I do, and sometimes he's willing to take another route—one that'll keep people from dying—to get what he wants done, and when I talk to him, I can convince him sometimes. Sometimes, I can get him to do what he wants to do another way."

"And when he doesn't listen to you?" she asked nastily.

Harry shook his head in frustration. "I don't know. It's never happened. Whenever I've argued enough with him, he's always compromised."

"Compromised?" Hermione asked incredulously. "Compromised? You can't compromise with people's lives!"

"I know!"

Hermione paused, mouth already open to retort, and looked at him. "What are you doing?" she asked instead, voice strangely calm.

Harry ran his hands through his hair and felt more than ever like the red dye on the end was blood on his fingers. "Trying to save the world," he said in exhaustion. The self-mockery of the statement did no escape him.

Hermione glanced around them then, as if she, too, were afraid someone would spy on them. "From who?"

Harry bit his lip. From who, indeed. He, honestly, was no longer worried about Voldemort destroying it or its people, and he still, even with their disagreements, thought Dumbledore was doing what he thought best. And Dumbledore's ideas were usually sound—to be honest, he would have thought the headmaster's idea for the Dementor breeding season was a good one. It was only that he'd heard the horror story from Voldemort first, and that he'd secretly looked it up in the library afterwards: Voldemort hadn't been lying; it really had been as bad as he'd said the last time the Dementors bred.

And how could Dumbledore not have known that? Harry couldn't answer that, but he still thought Dumbledore had everyone's best interests at heart. So who did that leave him to save the world from? The answer wasn't as surprising as it should have been.
"From itself," he finally answered.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked.

"We're dying out," he answered. "Or—maybe not dying out, but our numbers are falling. We need to not only stop that from happening, but also to increase the number of magical children. How can we do that when some pure-bloods—and even some half-bloods—are refusing to marry muggle-born wizards?"

"They should overcome their prejudices," Hermione answered immediately. "They—"

"Do you know, Malfoy told me something earlier today," Harry interrupted. "He said he's not prejudiced against muggle-born, he—"

"That's absurd!"

"He said," Harry continued, "that Tracey Davis is muggle-born and he'd never call her…you know. That word. He said that he doesn't mind muggle-born students so long as they don't hold back the rest of the class, and so long as they accept their magic and the culture that goes with it."

"Muggle-born shouldn't have to accept a whole culture just to go to school at Hogwarts!" Hermione insisted.

"And should the pure-bloods and other magical-raised students have to relearn *Levitation* charms and other first- through third-year spells just because the muggle-born students don't know them?" Harry asked.

"No," Hermione admitted. "But," she added, "if the muggle-born students would have studied like I had, they would have been able to catch up with the other students in no time."

"Maybe," Harry allowed. "Maybe not. And what about the wizarding culture? What right do muggle-born wizards have to come in and try to overhaul magical traditions and customs that have been in place for centuries?"

"They don't all do that," Hermione said.

"Some do," Harry said. "And what about the no under-aged magic rule? How fair is that to the magical-raised children that they can't learn basic spells under the supervision of a parent before Hogwarts?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "You just said that the magical-raised students were already ahead of the muggle-born students when they came to Hogwarts."

"Not all of them," Harry said. "Ron wasn't. Ron didn't know any spells, remember? Remember that first time on the train when he thought that terrible poem might be a spell to turn Scabbers yellow? He didn't even know the basics of spell-casting…he didn't even know the *theory*, when, only fifty years ago, he would have been able to do most household charms, several defence spells and a couple of trick jinxes."

"And how is Ron different from other pure-bloods?"

"Parents," Harry said with a shrug. "There are some parents who are willing to remove the magic-tracking charm the Ministry requires on all new wands. Then, there are some, like the Weasleys, who aren't, and who—no matter how good their intentions—are only holding their children back."
"The Weasleys are good people, Harry," Hermione firmly said. "The laws are in place for a reason—you can't just ignore them."

"I can't, no," Harry said. "And neither can you, but that was because we lived with muggles—which was why that particular law was put into the books half a century ago."

"Then what can you expect to do about it?"

"Right now?" Harry said. "Right now I'm doing nothing—but someone is." Hermione, by the look she gave him, didn't need to ask who that someone was. At least she didn't look scared anymore. She'd calmed herself by now, and she was actually listening. Harry had no hopes that she would immediately agree with him, but if he could get out of this conversation and still have his best friend, that was enough for him.

"I know you've been following the articles on the orphans," Harry said slowly.

"Every day," Hermione affirmed. "It's probably the only series of unbiased reporting in the *Daily Prophet* in years."

Harry neither agreed nor disagreed with that. It was irrelevant. "And I know that, even if you didn't at first, you are beginning to think that it's a good idea."

Hermione looked at her feet. "I feel terrible—it's not right that children are stolen from their real parents, but…but there are so many wizarding families who want them…and who'll take good care of them and teach them well. It's like—this really is one of those rock and hard-place situations. On one hand, I want them to be given a choice, and on the other, I can't help but wish the same had happened to me…that I won't eventually have to choose between this world and my…my family."

Harry nodded. Even though he wouldn't have to make the same choice—he had no love for his muggle family—he understood what she meant.

"And whose idea do you think that was?" he finally asked. "Something like that—that takes a lot of magical power—do you realise how exhausting it would be to begin a blood rite on a dozen children every week? This wasn't something done on a whim, I'm sure you've realised. Something like that—it takes a lot of planning, a lot of research to make sure that no muggle-born child is remembered by any muggle. Dumbledore's not doing it—or sanctioning it—so who do you think is?"

Hermione looked away. "I don't want to agree with anything He does," she said in a small voice. "I don't want to agree with anyone who thinks I'm a lower life-form than you or Ron."

"You're not," Harry said shaking his head. "And he doesn't think you are. He fears you—he, and most of his Death Eaters, are afraid that one day you'll go back to the muggle world and take all of our secrets with you…that maybe we'll get exposed, and we'll have nowhere to hide any longer."

Hermione was quiet for several long, terrifying moments. Harry didn't know whether she was thinking over what he said or thinking about what the easiest way to stop him would be. Or worse—what if she were thinking about telling Dumbledore? There was nothing—legally—that could be done to Harry. He hadn't done anything wrong—unless the Ministry wanted to try him for being an accomplice, but even that was shaky since Voldemort had been so inactive, and besides, they had no proof, or even evidence.

What if Hermione wanted nothing to do with him after this? She'd accepted a lot about him over the past year, starting with his, admittedly uneventful coming-out. Harry had not worried about most of his friends being upset over his sexuality, but as Hermione was raised as a muggle, he'd worried, at
first, that she might not approve of it. She'd thought nothing of it, though, and a load had been taken off Harry's shoulders. Even the Daily Prophet had only mentioned it in passing when they heard of it, but Hermione had also easily accepted Sirius—both being alive and Harry's father—and various other minute little things that had happened recently.

Would this prove to be too much for her? Two years ago, it would have been too much for him, too—even a year ago, he would have had a few doubts.

Hermione surprised him again when she finally looked up at him and said, with determination, "You can't tell Ron."

"I know," Harry said, fighting a smile. They were going to be okay; they—

"I mean it," Hermione said. "Ron can't know about this. It would devastate him; it would—I don't even know, but he's not ready for this. Maybe—Harry, I'm not fully comfortable with this; I'm still not sure what to think, but I'm going to think about it and consider what you've said—"

"Thank you," Harry said emphatically.

Hermione pursed her lips. "I'm not saying I agree with any of this, just that I'm willing to think about it, and should—should I have more questions, I expect immediate and honest answers."

"Of course," Harry said. Any minute, he was going to break out into a huge grin.

"In addition, should I decide in your favour, I want to be a part of this. You can't keep trying to, as you say, 'save the world' without help, and I want to be there to make sure...Harry, most of the time, I trust your judgement, but this is something I think you'll need help with. You could make a mistake so easily, and a mistake in this could be disastrous."

Harry nodded. "And if you decide against me?" he asked.

Hermione looked at him sadly. "Then I want you to Obliviate me."

"What?" Harry asked, aghast.

Hermione shook her head. "You're my friend, Harry, always. I don't want to resent you for doing something I don't approve of, and I don't want to be in danger because I know too much about something I don't approve of."

"You wouldn't tell Dumbledore?"

Hermione shook her head again. "I won't be the reason for your downfall, Harry, if you ever have one."

Harry's eyebrows shot up and an icy chill went down his spine. He didn't even know what to think, but the grin that had been waiting to show itself for the last few minutes disappeared and was replaced with the desire to look away from her. "Right," he said, desolate.

"We'll talk about this later," she said. "Right now, we need to go. I was sent down here to fetch you; Zacharias' mother wants to see you, and Professor Dumbledore has asked to speak with you afterwards."

"Both of them?" Harry asked. "Why?"

Hermione shrugged and began walking back towards the castle. "Mrs Smith asked to speak to an
assortment of twenty students, and your name was drawn from the Sorting Hat. I've no idea why Professor Dumbledore wants to see you."

Harry grabbed his school books and hurried to catch up, once again noticing how cold it was getting. He wrapped his cloak tighter around himself as he fell into step with her. "Oh," he said. "Um, Hermione—are... are we okay?"

She looked at him briefly, and then returned her gaze forward. "Yes," she said. "Either way, I expect we'll be okay."

Harry smiled, and decided that a change of topic was in order. He wasn't much for gossip, but there was one thing that had been bugging him. "You and Nott seem to work well together," he said.

He saw Hermione smile out of the corner of his eye and then quickly hide it. "He's very intelligent—and pragmatic. Not hard to get along with."

"Yes, but you seem to get on especially well with him," Harry insisted. He grinned and elbowed her lightly. "Aren't you even going to the Halloween party with him?"

Hermione huffed. "I waited for Ron to ask, but he seems to be with Lavender again, and I didn't want to go alone..."

"Right," Harry said. "Ron can be an idiot."

"I know," Hermione said.

"Erm, maybe," Harry suggested, "maybe you'd be better off with someone not prone to fits of idiocy?"

Hermione glanced at him again. "Are you... giving your blessing?"

"Is there anything to give it for?" Harry asked cheekily.

"No," Hermione said immediately. Then, "Maybe. He's not exceptionally handsome, I admit, but Theo—"

"Theo?" Harry asked with a laugh.

Hermione slapped his arm and bit her lip to hide a smile. "Theo," she emphasised, "is attractive in a boyish way, I think, and his intelligence more than makes up for the lack of well-developed biceps."

Harry laughed. "I never knew you were into well-developed biceps," he said. They were approaching the steps to the castle now and he couldn't wait to get back into the warmth of indoors—even if it did mean he had to go to a meeting or two.

"I'm not," Hermione said, and then turned the conversation around on him just as they entered the castle. "And what about you? Going with Bellatrix Lestrange's daughter—I suppose I can see how that wouldn't bother you now," she added softly, and then forced herself to perk up, adding, "but—still, she's a girl."

Harry shrugged. "I would've gone stag otherwise, if I went at all." Hermione gave him a sharp look at that. She was very insistent that both he and Ron participate in all major school functions. Harry cleared his throat. "I wasn't really interested in anyone."

"What about Seamus?" Hermione asked shrewdly.
Harry blushed. "That—I don't know. I'm not sure if that's going anywhere, and Alsace had already
asked…or, rather, told me I was going with her."

Hermione smiled. "I think I heard Seamus was going with Romilda Vane, anyway," she said,
shrugging. "She, apparently, has a fetish for gay men."

Harry shuddered. That was possibly the most disturbing thing he'd ever heard, and, having been
more than casual acquaintances with Voldemort for nearly two years, he'd heard some very
disturbing things.

"Here we are," Hermione said and stopped. They were in front of the gargoyle hiding the entrance to
Dumbledore's office. "Blood lollies," she said with a grimace and it slid back, revealing the spiral
staircase. "I have to go now; Theo and I have several last-minute details to sort out for Halloween on
Saturday."

With a timid smile, she turned and walked back the way they came. Harry took a deep breath; at least
they would be okay. He didn't want to think about how he would feel if he had to Obliviate her, so
he just focused on the fact that everything seemed to be looking pretty positive. Now, all he had to
do was face Yasmin Smith and Dumbledore. Yasmin, he could handle; she liked him fairly well.

Chapter End Notes

1. The term 'God and Executioner' got stuck in my head after reading 's excellent Snarry
Games fanfic, Help Wanted: God and Executioner. Go figure. :D
2. Au pairs are a lot like foreign exchange students. They take care of the children and
do household work in exchange for room and board with their host family.
Subterfuge II

Chapter by faire_weather

Chapter Notes

This chapter has an NC-17 slash sex scene in it, although it is not Harry/Draco yet. (That will be in another few chapters...they still aren't even really talking yet, you know.) If you would prefer not to read it, you can stop reading at the line: After leaving the headmaster's office, Harry just wanted to return to the Tower. Please be aware of and abide by the age laws in your country regarding this content.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Subterfuge: (n) 1. An artifice or expedient used to evade a rule, escape a consequence, hide something, etc. 2. A deceptive stratagem or device.

When Harry entered Dumbledore's office, he found it to be in total jovial chaos. Not only was the headmaster and Mrs Smith there, but, oddly enough, so was his Defence teacher, Mrs Sinclair, and another man, who looked to be of Germanic descent. The headmaster, along with the two women, was holding his stomach and laughing so hard his face was red and his glasses were falling down his nose as the foreign man spoke rapidly in a harsh language, gesturing to his head and face as he did.

It died down as Harry stepped into the room, clearing his throat, and Professor Dumbledore wiped his eyes with his hands. "Harry," he said with a smile. "Have you met Professor Sinclair's husband, Vlad? He's here visiting his wife and, apparently, the two are quite good friends with Zacharias Smith's mother, Yasmin, whom I believe you've met."

Harry returned a nod and smile to Mrs Smith before looking back to the Germanic man. It was hard to identify this harsh, broad-shouldered man with the silly, lovable idiot Professor Sinclair often prattled on about.

His head, on the other hand, confirmed it: He was bald, hair just growing back from what looked to be a bad trimming charm, and one of his hands was bandaged. Remembering the story about Vlad's faulty rabbit-skinning spell, Harry fought to contain a smile. He lost.

"I've heard a lot about you," he said as he extended his hand. Vlad huffed sullenly as they shook.

"I expect you have," he said in faultless English. "My lovely wife loves to air my dirty laundry."

Harry laughed. "Always in a nice way," he admitted, glancing at his petite teacher. She was grinning back at him.

"We were just catching up with an old friend," Professor Sinclair added, nodding at Mrs Smith. "But we'll be going now, and leave you to your interviews, Yazzy."

"Nonsense," Mrs Smith said, standing. "Mr Black here is the last one; we can afford to all take a walk together. I'm sure Harry would love to hear Vlad's latest story," she added, nodding at Mr Sinclair's bandaged hand.
Harry couldn't deny that, but he was loath to say it aloud. He simply nodded. Having no idea what Zacharias' mother wanted to ask him, he really didn't want to be left alone with her. He would have enough to worry about with Dumbledore afterwards.

"If you're sure," Professor Sinclair said.

Mrs Smith nodded. "Of course, Headmaster," she said, turning to him, "we'll have Mr Black back to you within the hour, and then I'll be out of your hair."

Dumbledore waved her off. "You are always welcome here, Mrs Smith."

She smiled and led them to the door. "Thank you," she said. "Harry, if you will?"

Harry followed her out the door, followed himself by the Sinclairs, and rode the staircase back to the bottom. Mrs Smith wasted no time; she started walking towards the staircases, and Harry walked with her, hands in his pockets, waiting for her to speak.

"How do you like school?" she finally asked, smiling. "What's your favourite class?"

Harry glanced at Professor Sinclair, who was walking on the other side of him with her husband. "Defence has always been my favourite," he admitted, blushing for some reason. "Even though in the past, the teachers have been…erm, not good."

"So I've heard," Mrs Smith said with a frown. "It's why I recommended my good friend Mercy, here, for the post. I've known her since we were both little girls at Beauxbatons and with Vlad here," she added with a grin, "she's had plenty of experience defending against the Dark Arts."

Vlad rolled his eyes, accepting the jibe good-naturedly, and ran his bandaged hand over his bald head. Poor guy. "You went to Beauxbatons?" Harry asked the two women. "What was that like?"

It was his professor who answered. "More organised than Hogwarts," she admitted. "Less rivalry as well, but the education is roughly the same."

"Otherwise," Mrs Smith said, "I would never have sent Zacharias here. I did want him to attend my alma mater, but Xavier—you remember my husband, Xavier, Harry—insisted he continue the tradition at Hogwarts. He alleges that the Smiths are direct descendants of Helga Hufflepuff, but I've never bothered to confirm it," she said with a shrug.

Harry exhaled heavily, wishing he'd had parents to fight over where he went to school when he first came to Hogwarts. It was an empty thought, though, and he quickly gave it up.

"Don't bore the boy with your admittedly superior mother-henning and get to the point, Yazzy," Mr Sinclair added with another eye-roll. "I'm sure he has better things to do than listen to you prattle on about Zacharias, lovely boy though he is."

Mrs Smith narrowed her eyes. "I'm afraid I feel little remorse for your unfortunate outcome in the one-on-one Quidditch game with my son two years ago. You deserved everything you got for trying to use that hand-removing curse on him while he was on a broom."

Vlad rubbed his wrists subconsciously, and Harry could see that there was a faint scar all around the un-bandaged one. He snorted.

"He deserved it," Vlad insisted sadly. "The little brat blagged me, damn it, and that's illegal, any one you ask!"
Yasmin harrumphed. "He was only a boy having a bit of fun."

"What did you do to him?" Harry asked Mrs Smith eagerly, biting his lip to keep from laughing. He could just see Smith blagging someone, even if he'd never tried it in a Hogwarts game. "For trying to take off Zacharias' hands, I mean."

"Nothing," Yasmin admitted. "But I did let Zacharias reattach the detached one. He was only fifteen, you understand, and had no experience with healing spells, but I thought it as good a time as any to learn. Xavier and I were quite pleased when it only took him eleven tries to get it right."

Vlad shuddered. "One of these days..." he said ominously, and gave Yasmin a pointed look. She raised an eyebrow and then turned back to Harry.

"So, Mr Black—"

"You can call me Harry," he said as they reached the first staircase and began climbing it. "You're a friend of my father, after all."

Yasmin smiled warmly. "Thank you, Harry; Xavier and I quite liked Sirius. He seems to be doing a rather good job of parenting, especially given how little experience he has, and there is always time to learn."

Harry nodded; really, just about any father was better than none, but he thought he and Sirius were coming on all right anyway.

"So, Harry," Mrs Smith started again, "I'm sure Ms Granger explained to you why I was here. With all of the magical children being adopted, the Department of Education at the Ministry feels that there may soon be a need for a pre-Hogwarts school for some of them—those with working parents and such. I'm here to research everything that will be needed to make this happen. What do you think about this idea?"

Harry pushed his glasses up his nose while he thought. "It sounds like a good idea to me," he finally said. "What would you teach them?"

"Ah," Mrs Smith smiled, and led them off the stairs at the fourth-storey landing. "That is something I wanted to discuss with you, and have already discussed with some other students. We at the DoE are drafting a bit of legislation that would overturn, to an extent, the under-aged magic law. It would allow children to own a learner wand at the age of three, and after passing a written and practical exam at age eleven, use—with parental supervision, of course—a real wand outside of school."

"This is very exciting, as you may imagine, and already we have support from nearly a third of the Wizengamot. But the passing of this legislation is the foundation of the day-school. It will be of no use to us if the children can't have learner wands, but the Wizengamot will need a syllabus of intended lesson plans for each age-level before they even consider accepting the bill."

"What I'm here to find out," Mrs Smith concluded, "is which areas we need to focus on and which areas the students would like to focus on most, as, perhaps, an elective of sorts."

Harry nodded, thinking. "Someone told me in Arithmancy today that most magical-raised children, before that law was passed anyway, came to Hogwarts already knowing basic cleaning charms, a couple of trick jinxes and minor defence spells."

Professor Sinclair nodded. "Yes, my oldest sister—Yazzy, you remember my sister Grace—was allowed to have a learner wand before that law was instituted. I admit I was pleased for the first few months, when the hype was still there and she was too scared to charm my hair into snakes."
"Yes," Yasmin said, nodding. "I showed Zacharias the Hide-and-Seek spell when he was five, to use in case he was ever approached by anyone…unsavoury. But I had to show him with my wand, since learner wands are still prohibited here, and a lot of good it would have done him," she added with a slight growl.

"They're still allowed learner wands in Romania," Vlad spoke up. "I had one before I went to Durmstrang."

Everyone nodded as they approached the library. "Anyway," Mrs Smith continued, "We're planning to start the three- to five-year-olds with basic potion theory—maybe teach them a few fun elixirs to get them interested in the subject—and add in basic Arithmancy, house-hold charms and age-specific defence spells at age five. Of course, all ages will be taught the theory of magical sport and have Quidditch for play time, to encourage social skills and physical fitness. Field trips, also, were something I was hoping to squeeze in."

"Field trips," Professor Sinclair mused. "That's a good idea."

Harry nodded. "I would have loved a field trip. I've never been anywhere, really."

"Yes, I think so," Mrs Smith said. "Xavier and I took Zacharias to all sorts of places when he was young. It encourages a curious mind."

"Where are you going to build the school?" Harry asked.

"Assuming everything goes as planned, you mean," Mrs Smith said with a smile. Harry nodded. "Well, that's something else I wanted to speak with you, specifically, about, Harry. Your father came to dinner a few weeks back, and after I told him about it, he volunteered a bit of land, opposite the river to your home. It's about ten acres—perfect for a small day school."

"Really?" Harry asked. That was kind of exciting, actually, to him. Perhaps, when he got out of Hogwarts, he would be able to help out until he decided what he wanted to do with his life. Being an Auror didn't sound all that great any more.

"If we can get the bill finished, we can have it—hopefully—approved by the Ministry by the end of November, and begin construction immediately. The DoE's proposed plan expects construction to be complete by mid-April, ready to open for preliminary summer classes and day-care in May."

"What about tuition?" Harry asked. "Will everyone be able to afford it?"

They entered the library, everyone automatically lowering their voices to avoid Madam Pince's wrath, and settled into a group of chairs near a window where the students rarely went.

Yasmin frowned. "That is something that my colleagues and I are having a bit of a disagreement over. They want proceeds to filter back to the Ministry, but, as everyone knows, a school should never fund its government; the government should fund the school. It might take the calling in of more favours than I am owed, but with the donation of twenty to twenty-five house-elves, and the initial costs for construction, livestock and vegetables, we can be a wholly self-sufficient school with lunch included.

"The only thing left would be the salary of teachers. It wouldn't take much to fund that if we had at least one-hundred students, and I'm sure that many prominent families will donate for endowments and scholarships."

Harry nodded. "I'll donate. I've got money from my Potter vault, and to be honest, I don't feel comfortable spending it on me."
Yasmin smiled, and strangely, reached out to pat his hair. "Harry, I'm sure that James Potter would not have minded, no matter whose son you are. From what I understand, he was quite fond of Sirius, and of you as well. He would have loved you no matter what; it's just what parents do."

"But still," Harry insisted. "I want to help. I think it's a great idea."

Yasmin smiled even more. "Thank you, Harry. I will keep you updated."

"Lovely," Vlad spoke up, checking his fingernails for dirt. "Now you've got this one enamoured with you, too. What is it with impressionable young minds and your grand ideas for the future of all children, I ask you."

"None of that, Vlad," Professor Sinclair said fondly. "If you're to be jealous, why don't you enamour him yourself, with the story of how your left hand came to be bandaged."

To Harry's surprise, Vlad blushed. "He's much too young for a story like that," he said.

Harry shook his head. "I'm seventeen," he said eagerly.

Vlad eyed him, and then finally, with a small nudge from his wife, and a grinning nod from Mrs Smith, began his story. "Well, it's like this," he said in resignation. "I'm a Lodger back home in Romania, and the lads have an annual Beasting—which is when we all put on fancy dress and pretend to be from Aurthurian legends—and we go in search of the Beast of the year.

"This year, it was to have been a Questing Beast—terrible creatures; like large, scaled, many-teethed dogs with floppy ears—"

"And the disposition of a puppy," Professor Sinclair added teasingly. Vlad glared at her.

"Terrible beasts," he reiterated. "And, as it was my turn, I was to be the main Beaster this year. Unfortunately," he added wryly, "the only known way to fell a Questing Beast is to use a bone-disintegrating spell on its legs, to immobilise it, and then bridle it to prevent it from biting you in self-defence. It's said that once bridled, they are easily tamed."

"If you can subdue them first," Professor Sinclair said quietly. Harry exchanged a smirk with her.

"Anyway," Vlad continued pointedly, "we'd mounted our Granians, located the Beast with trained Crups, and had him cornered. He was ferocious, I tell you. Wild-eyed and tensed for strike. The other lads secured the area so he couldn't escape and I moved in, wary.

"Just as I was about to cast the spell, an augury in a brush nearby let out an unholy wail, startling me, and I accidentally cast the spell on myself, only instead of disintegrating my bones, it turned them all the wrong way. They had to be re-set by hand," he shuddered. "And then it started raining...damned auguries."

"If I'm not being too bold," Harry asked, smiling, "why do you keep trying if you've never been successful in all these years?"

Vlad huffed. "I'm a stubborn old bastard—there's got to be at least one Dark Arts spell I can do. In all fairness, had my spell actually hit the Beast, it would have worked just as well as a disintegrating one."

Professor Sinclair, still chuckling, checked her watch and then stood abruptly. "I'm terribly sorry, but I've forgotten all about the time. I've a class in fifteen minutes and I have to show Vlad the way to my rooms before I do. It's been lovely seeing you again, Yazzy. Harry—try not to miss any more of
my classes."

Harry blushed, remembering why he'd missed one to begin with. "Sorry. I'll be there next class."

"See that you are," the professor said, and nodded to him. They exchanged goodbyes with Mrs Smith and hurried from the library.

"There was one last thing," Mrs Smith said when they were gone. She cast a privacy ward around them and leaned in, reminding Harry of a muggle conspiracy film.

"Yeah?" said Harry. He was quite curious as to what she would want to speak with him about that would warrant such privacy.

"It has come to my attention that you are aware of certain events my husband and I attend in our free time."

Harry's eyes went wide. She wasn't about to threaten him, was she? Certainly not—she'd known something was up with his and Voldemort's…relationship…before they even came to dinner during the summer.

"Very good," Mrs Smith continued after his confirmation, "I have been told that your education is of the utmost importance. Should you require anything at all that might assist you in such a way, or should you—and your father, if he's interested—ever wish to join us, you may contact me, or my husband, at any time via owl.

"Are we on the same page, Mr Black?"

Harry nodded, relieved. "Of course."

"Good," Mrs Smith said. She stood, ready to cancel the privacy charm.

"Wait," Harry said.

This was none of his business, really, but he couldn't help wanting to know. He'd been wondering about it for the longest time, but had never found an appropriate time to ask—and really, he could use as many allies as he could find. Or, at least, he would feel better knowing who would take his side if it ever came to it. Much as, Zacharias was a little bastard at times, any friend at all would be helpful if something…unexpected happened. Mrs Smith looked at him expectantly.

"Does—does, erm, Zacharias go sometimes? With you and your husband?"

Mrs Smith smiled at him in a very motherly fashion. "I believe that I have raised my son to be not only intelligent and intuitive, but capable of independent thought. I have not wanted him to follow the same paths that my husband and I chose all those years ago, but were he given satisfactory information, it is quite possible that he would like to come with you, should you ever invite him."

Harry made a face. "I'm not sure he likes me that much."

"Zacharias likes very few," Mrs Smith replied. "But he does not have to like someone in order to affiliate with them. I believe, Mr Black, that you—with your carefully balanced morals and aspirations—would be someone that he would be pleased to affiliate with."

"And not…the other alternative?"

"Of which do you speak, Harry?" she asked, reverting to his given name. "There is more than one
alternative, always."

"The one you chose," he clarified, nodding subtly at her forearm.

"Ah," she said. "Zacharias is not a fighter. He believes what he believes, but dislikes…getting his hands dirty, so to speak. The last two years have been relatively smooth, but…my alternative's past history makes it hard for him to reconcile. You, as the balance, are capable of earning his respect, not only his tolerance."

Harry nodded, considering. He had one last question. "You've never tried to get him to follow in his parents' footsteps?"

She shook her head. "Zacharias must make his own decisions. It is the key to a great mind—now, if that is all, I believe it is time to return you to your headmaster."

For the second time that day, Harry found himself in Dumbledore's office. It still brought back memories of their one-time closeness, and now that he had the time to think, it made him ache just a little bit. As he settled into a chair opposite the headmaster, he focused on not making direct eye contact, as Voldemort had warned him. Why he bothered, he didn't know.

He wanted to—and to an extent, did—trust Dumbledore. No matter how tricky Dumbledore might be, Harry held firm to his belief that it was for the good of everyone. Sometimes, though, Dumbledore could misjudge the good of everyone.

When he was settled, and the obligatory offer of candy and tea past, they regarded each other in silence for several moments. Not uncomfortable by any means, but considering.

"Harry," Dumbledore finally said, pulling a thick ring with a large stone set into it off his ring finger and passing it over. "What do you think of this? Bought it at silent auction just yesterday."

Harry studied it. "It's a bit, erm, a bit grand for my tastes…sir," he said, hoping he hadn't just inadvertently insulted the headmaster. That was the last thing he needed right now. To his relief, Dumbledore only chuckled.

"Not to everyone's taste, I'm afraid," he replied jovially, "but I think I should like to wear it anyway." Leaning back in his chair, Dumbledore continued to study Harry studying the ring and added, "It has come to my attention that you have been…hmm, up to no good, perhaps."

Harry turned bright red, knowing that Dumbledore was referring to all of the recent Malfoy incidents, but only because Hermione had forewarned him. "Sir, I didn't—"

Dumbledore waved him off gently. "Of course not, Harry. But perhaps the reason you and Mr Malfoy seem to find yourselves at odds so often is because you've not enough to keep you occupied."

"Sir?"

"I am thinking," Dumbledore said slowly, "that we could fix both of these problems in one go."

"I, erm…I don't understand. What's the other problem, sir?"

"Silly me!" Dumbledore exclaimed. "Forgive an old man his memory lapses. This ring, as I came to find, is cursed quite marvelously. I've spoken to Professor Vector, and he has told me that he recently
set a partner-project for your class—I believe it is to use Arithmancy to reveal and hopefully break the curse on an object?"

Harry nodded.

Dumbledore smiled further. "Good! As you have no doubt been learning in the class, when the time is permitted, Arithmancy can be used to reveal any curse on any person, place or thing. He is planning to distribute a collection of cursed knick-knacks that he’s collected for this purpose, but has agreed to allow me to contribute this ring for you and Mr Malfoy to use.

"If you agree, of course, I would like for you and Mr Malfoy to figure out how to remove the curse for me; then, I will have a new ring and you will have something other than scuffles with Mr. Malfoy to focus on."

"Of course," Harry said. He was mildly confused—couldn't he and Malfoy just use any old object for their class? Wouldn't their focus on that be just as good of a deterrent as some ring? He wanted to know more, but knew nothing else would be forthcoming, so he didn't bother asking.

"And, of course, your project will be all sorted out." Dumbledore considered, and then added, "Well—the part about getting your assignment, anyway—are you quite sure you'll not have a lemon drop?"

"No thanks," Harry said again, fighting a smile. Dumbledore shrugged and popped another into his mouth.

"There was something else," he said once he'd sucked on it for several seconds. *Isn't there always?* Harry thought, somewhat sarcastically. "Two somethings, really," Dumbledore added, "but they are somewhat interconnected."

Harry nodded. "All right, go on."

"It has been two years since I first required that you learn Occlumency, and while I relented after the initial…fiasco, I still find myself concerned that you've not learned it. You've not complained of any visions—granted, however, that lately there seems to be mercifully little to have visions of—I feel it is better that we err on the side of caution—"

"Surely you're not suggesting that Snape teach me again!" Harry interrupted, forgetting himself. It did, however, give him the perfect excuse to cut his eyes away from Dumbledore and focus on his hands.

Dumbledore grumbled good-naturedly. "Even I know when to give up a fight," he said, sighing. "No—in fact, I believe I've found a more suitable instructor. He's not, to my knowledge, ever actually taught anyone Occlumency, but I think you will have a much better experience with him, and he is quite adept."

"Who?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore looked quite like the cat who'd gotten the cream. "Your father, of course," he said with a grin. His eyes were twinkling madly behind his glasses, and Harry wanted to roll his eyes in fond amusement, but there were more important things at the moment.

"I didn't know he knew it," Harry said.

"Neither did I!" Dumbledore admitted, not at all uncomfortable with the fact. "It is probably something that comes reasonably naturally to him, and as that sort of thing is often found to be
hereditary, with the right instruction, you should pick it up easily."

"Oh—so...so how is he going to do it? Wouldn't it seem strange for him to be at the school so often?"

Dumbledore frowned. "That brings us to the second thing I wished to discuss with you."

"We haven't even finished discussing the first," Harry added helpfully.

Dumbledore gave him a mock frown for his cheekiness. "I am not quite so forgetful, yet, Harry," he said. "Yesterday, your father came to speak with me about a theory he had—one he says you are aware of...?"

Harry nodded.

"Very good," Dumbledore said. "While he was here, I expressed my worry that Mr Remus Lupin has—hopefully—forgotten to check in with his Order liaison. He agreed to undertake an assignment in locating Mr Lupin, and left this morning."

"What?" Harry said, frowning. "He didn't even tell me!"

"I believe," Dumbledore said in amusement, "that you were having a lie-in this morning. I told him that I would relay the information to you at the earliest opportunity, and provide you with a postal code, should you wish to owl him at any time."

Harry blushed. "Thank you. When do you expect him back?"

"Mr Lupin has met with every other contact thus far, and thusly has left a decent trail for him to utilise. I have hopes that your father—and Mr Lupin—will return within the month—just in time for him to teach you Occlumency over the holidays."

Harry nodded sombrely. He couldn't help it, but he was worried. He'd only just gotten Sirius back—in any capacity—and he didn't want to risk losing him again, but it was a done deal now, so he would have to wait.

He would have liked to have had more time to discuss the Regulus theory with his father, but finding Remus was altogether more important. After all, it didn't much matter how his father was alive, just that he was, and there was a possibility that Remus might be in danger...

Although, Harry reasoned, Voldemort had been lying low—at Harry's own insistence—and he'd said nothing at all of the werewolves in general or Remus in particular. It was probably just forgetfulness—even if that didn't sound like Remus at all.

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Zacharias had heard that his mother was at the school through Ernie and Hannah, Hufflepuff's seventh-year prefects, but he hadn't really expected to see her. As director of the Department of Education at the Ministry, she stopped by the school at least once a year, and corresponded with the professors frequently. It wasn't anything unusual, and he'd written to her only last week.

He was on the pitch when she found him, training up his team for the first Quidditch game of the year. He'd been made captain this year, as last year's captain had been a seventh-year. Surveying his team, Zacharias was unimpressed. Their first game, against Gryffindor incidentally, was on Saturday, and in addition to his team's lacklustre performance in past practises, he was superstitious of doing anything remotely hazardous on certain holidays—All Hallow's being one of them.
Of course, that wasn't something he would ever admit; he prided himself on his logic and intelligence. Superstition was highly illogical.

Sometimes.

Still, though they'd never said as much, he had a feeling his parents felt the same way, and if his mother—as smart and rational as she was—was wary of All Hallow's…well, that said something. Of course, he couldn't be sure that this wasn't just a subconscious way of rationalising it all.

To his right, Cadwallader hovered on his broom; looking for all the world as if the Quaffle would just fall into his hands if he waited long enough for it. Statistically, it was possible, but when playing against Gryffindor, Zacharias was loath to allow his team to give only their second best.

"Get a move on, Cadwallader!" he yelled. "You're supposed to be practising, not fantasising about your girlfriend!" Cadwallader sneered at him in reply, but at least he picked up the pace.

"The problem with Hufflepuff, Zacharias thought, is that we are often happy to merely play the game—outcome be damned."

Zacharias believed in fair play as much as the rest of them, but damn it if he wanted to beat Gryffindor just once. Diggory had done it; he'd waffled over it for weeks afterwards, but, really, it had been a legitimate win. They could certainly do it again.

The problem, unfortunately, was that Gryffindor had a handicap, and that handicap was Potter—Black…whatever. He looked at his own seeker; he'd chosen Megan Jones because she was small, light and quick on a broom, but he doubted she'd be quick enough to beat Black to the Snitch.

He would have to improvise, he supposed. Weasley had certainly gotten better at Keeping, but he was still no Oliver Wood—even Zacharias could appreciate talent like that. He should spend less time training his Seeker—since, honestly, there was little hope there—and focus more on the rest of his team.

If he could get his other two Chasers and his Beaters to work in tandem, then he would have a shot. His Keeper was already up-to-snuff and needed little help from him, save some encouragement, which was never amiss with Hufflepuffs. He even liked it himself, sometimes.

It was when he was just setting up his Beaters to do a few drills together that he heard his mother calling up to him from the ground. She was in her office robes looking up at him with a hand shading her eyes. Zacharias smiled at the interruption, instructed his team to keep trying, and headed for the ground.

"Hullo, Mum," he said. He was always in good spirits around her. Unlike many of his peers, he had no complaints about his parents. He didn't think they were over-bearing or over-protective, and he didn't worry that they would embarrass him. Honestly, he wondered why others did. Parents were just parents.

She smiled at him affectionately and wrapped him in a hug. It had only been two months since he'd last seen her, but already she looked shorter than she had in August. Was it strange that he was the one feeling nostalgic about growing up?

"How are your studies?" she asked him, and he smiled. That was always the first thing she wanted to know.

"I could be doing better in Ancient Runes," he admitted.
She frowned. "You've been taking that class for two years; how have you fallen behind?"

"I haven't," he said. "I could just be doing better. I'm only fourth in the class. I plan to spend next weekend revising."

She nodded, satisfied. "You don't have to be first in the class," she said to him. "I just want you to learn, and be happy to be doing it."

"I am," he assured her, and it wasn't a lie. Zacharias liked learning new things.

She hooked her arm into his elbow and said, "Walk with me?" to which he followed automatically, slowly cutting a path around the stands and aimlessly wandering from there. When they were a reasonable distance from the pitch, she spoke.

"Should I plan for an extra setting at the table during the holidays? Have you found a nice girl? Or boy?"

Zacharias shook his head. "You know I would have told you."

She smiled. "I know, but a mother can hope that there have been developments since her son's last letter."

Zacharias blushed. "If there are, I'll tell you straight away."

His mother hummed in acknowledgement and they continued to wander around the grounds. As chilly as it was, and as sweaty as he was, Zacharias figured he'd be getting cold soon, but he wasn't worried about it. It was always nice to see his mum.

"Harry and his father live nearby," she said. "Perhaps we could have them over sometime."

Zacharias raised his eyebrows. "Perhaps," he said.

"They're very nice people," she continued, hinting.

Zacharias couldn't help it; he laughed. "I believe," he said, "that Black is currently courting Seamus Finnigan—Marion O'Malley-Finnigan's son," he said. "So you will have to let die that scheme right away."

"Really?" his mother asked. "I've heard nothing of it from Marion."

Zacharias shrugged. "And I wouldn't go telling her, if I were you. Last I heard, she wasn't fond of Black—or Potter, as he was then—and it's only rumour, anyway. I could be wrong."

His mother huffed. "They're still very nice people. I quite like the both of them, so it is possible that we could have them over for no other reason than to have them over."

"He's all right," Zacharias affirmed. "Annoying, at times, but I can tolerate him."

"He hinted to me that he would like to be more than tolerated by you," she said.

Zacharias' eyebrows went up again. "Really," he said.

She waved her free hand vaguely. "As a friend, I assume, if he is indeed courting Mr Finnigan."

"He's made no mention to me," Zacharias said.
"Nor to me," his mother said. "Only hinted. I only bring it up because I think that an alliance with him—in some form or another—could be stimulating for you."

"In what way?" Zacharias asked. They neared the lake, and he saw Malfoy, with a couple of his Slytherins, walking in the opposite direction. He gave him a stiff nod, and continued, not bothering to see if Malfoy returned it. Sometimes he did, sometimes he did not; it was as if Malfoy respected him, but didn't like that he did. It was no matter to Zacharias either way.

"He's very handsome," his mother said, nodding to Malfoy. "And the girl—she's quite attractive, too."

Zacharias craned his neck; Daphne Greengrass. She was pretty enough, but he didn't think she would interest him beyond that. He shrugged, and with a sigh at his indifference, his mother answered his question.

"He's taken a special interest in the recent adoptions," she said.

"Really," Zacharias said immediately. That was news to him, and if what he thought his mother was saying were true, it threw a totally different light on Harry Black completely. "What view has he taken?" he asked.

"He quite approves, if I'm not mistaken," she answered. "Indeed, he seems to have the publicly desired knowledge of who, exactly, is bringing them to Derbyshire."

"Really," Zacharias said again. This would require serious thought. Though they had never directly said so, he knew full well what sort of extraneous affiliations his parents held. He had, after all, seen them both working in the gardens during the summer with their shirt sleeves rolled up. It was just something that never needed explaining.

And to hear that Black knew of it—well, it hadn't taken long for Zacharias to figure out who, exactly, was taking the muggle-born children from their muggle parents and offering them to wizarding families. If Black had inside information—and it would have to be inside information—then…well.

Perhaps it was time to finally speak candidly with his parents about their activities. No, he decided. Perhaps it was time to finally speak candidly with Harry Black about his activities. If someone with such ridiculously Gryffindor morals were consorting with people whose morals…lay elsewhere, then it was quite possible he was missing something important.

Zacharias didn't like to miss important things. Tides seemed to be changing. Which way was still unknown.

He led his mother around the Whomping Willow and began their return to the pitch. He needed to either get back on his broom or into a hot shower.

"And your school?" he asked as they approached. "How are things looking for it?"

His mother smiled happily. "So far, very good. I think we'll get it…and the learner wand bill should sail right through."

Zacharias nodded. He was glad that his mother had something to focus on like that. If she didn't have someone to care for, she could get antsy. "I'll help you, over the summer, if you like."

She beamed. "That would be lovely. Oh—and I forgot to mention in my last letter, but it will be very close to home for us; Sirius Black has pledged ten acres across the river from their house for the
school's use."

"We'll definitely have to invite them for dinner over the holidays then," Zacharias grinned. "As a
thank-you."

"And you'll bring someone home, maybe," his mother said.

Zacharias laughed. "I'll look into it," he said as they reached the pitch. "But first, I have to beat
Gryffindor on Saturday."

She reached up and ruffled his hair, but it didn't bother him since it was already in complete disarray
from practise. "Be careful," she said, and it seemed to him that she had just reaffirmed his
superstitions. After that, he would definitely be careful—but that wasn't to say that he wasn't going to
give it his all on Saturday.

"I will," he said instead, and leaned down—only slightly—to kiss her on the cheek. "I have to get
back to practise," he said, and she nodded.

"Don't forget to write."

"I won't." He never forgot to write.

After leaving the headmaster's office, Harry just wanted to return to the Tower. *Mimbulus
Mimbletonia* was still the password, as it had been since two weeks into the school year, and Harry
thought absently of Neville and how he was doing as a prefect as he gave it to the Fat Lady.

She let him in with no hassle, which was an unusual thing since her friend Violet had taken to
spending long amounts time with a rakish portrait on the second floor. Harry supposed she was
bored.

He didn't see any of his friends in the common room, so he headed for his dorm. Maybe he should
just take a nap. Hermione was probably still meeting with Nott and the prefects, which explained
Neville's absence, and there was really no telling what the rest were up to.

He wasn't sure he wanted to know—ever since Ron had sworn off alcohol, Dean and Seamus had
made it their personal mission to entertain him in other ways. In his dorm, he stumbled over no less
than three articles of clothing and, with the lights off, as he couldn't be arsed to light the torches, fell
directly onto Seamus' bed. It was still bunked under Dean's, and Harry wondered amusedly just how
much longer Professor McGonagall would allow it.

It did add a bit more space to the room, but you'd hardly be able to tell with the mess of it all. There
was a huff as he landed, not on the bed, but on another body.

"Sorry, Shay," Harry muttered, trying to pull himself up. He was hopelessly tangled in the bed
curtains, though.

"Can't breathe," Seamus gasped, but from where, Harry didn't know. There were entirely too many
covers and curtains between them. "Harry—Harry, you oaf, I can't breathe. Move your arse."

"Sorry! Sorry!" Harry said as he struggled. He only managed to untangle himself from the curtains;
the blankets were still wrapped around his feet. Somehow, after even more struggling, Harry found
himself not free of the blankets, but under them, lying directly on top of Seamus, who was looking
up at him drowsily.
"Can't let a bloke sleep, can yeh, Harry?" he said. "Got to have a go whenever you feel like it."

Harry blushed. Though he'd never admit it, he liked the way Seamus never thought to control his accent when he'd just been woken up. "Sod," he said, "directly off." He tried to push himself up, but Seamus reached up and held him there, smiling crookedly.

"No need to rush off, now that you're here," he said. Harry blushed even harder. "Aw, c'mon, Harry—don't be shy now."

"M'not," Harry mumbled.

Seamus grinned. "Yeah, you are." He pushed his hips up, and Harry bit his lip to hide his gasp. In all of his struggling—and how was it even possible to get so hopelessly tangled?—he'd not noticed that.

Seamus wanted him. Bad. He'd thought it was a one-off; the other boy hadn't mentioned anything afterwards, hadn't said that he cared either way, but—he certainly cared right now, if his cock pressing into Harry's thigh was anything to go on.

"I was drunk last night," Seamus admitted. "I was still drunk when I woke up—maybe we should see if it's really as good as my drunken mind thought it was."

"You thought it was good?" Harry asked, voice low. He could feel himself responding to every tiny little movement Seamus made, and it was driving him crazy.

Seamus' eyes narrowed. "You thought it was bad?" he countered.

Harry shook his head quickly, still blushing. "Don't think so," he said. "Was my first time with another boy, though, so I could probably use a second to compare it to."

Seamus had a feral grin on his face now. "I can still feel you from last night," he said.

Harry inhaled sharply, and before he could think better of it, leaned down and covered Seamus' mouth with his own. Seamus gasped, arching up into him and returning the kiss with enthusiasm.

Seamus' hand slid up his thigh and gripped his arse, bringing their hips even closer together. God, this was entirely too good. If just snogging Seamus made him this hard, it was probably a good thing he didn't remember much of the first time. They should lock the door or something—

"Someone could walk in," Harry gasped amid his attack on Seamus' neck. The hand on his arse slid between them and Seamus grabbed Harry's cock through his trousers, squeezing with just enough pressure.

"Got a nice cock, for being such a girl," Seamus hissed and then flipped them over. Harry let him; he had no idea what he was doing anyway. Somehow, in all of this, he hadn't noticed his shirt being removed or Seamus' hands sliding up his bare chest until his right nipple was being pinched. Fuck.

Harry scrambled to pull Seamus' t-shirt over his head, and God, the feeling of smooth, hard skin was almost too much for him. Putting Seamus on the team had been the best idea Harry ever had—Quidditch did amazing things to the body. He was probably whining and moaning like a little trollop right now, but he didn't particularly care. As Seamus started tugging on his flies, Harry had the vague thought that McGonagall could walk in right then, and he would still be struggling to help Seamus get their cocks out.

"Ah, fuck," Seamus panted and reached over Harry's head to do something unknown. "Lube—goddamnit, Dean, where'd you put the fucking lube, you wanker!" Harry had no idea where Dean
kept his lube—didn't particularly care so long as Seamus found it—and occupied his time with wrapping his fingers around Seamus' cock, stroking it like he did his own, and hoping to god that Seamus found the fucking lube. He was entirely too worked up, and if they didn't get on with it he was going to come all over himself before they even got started.

At the feel of Harry's hand on him, Seamus gave a throaty little moan and pushed his hips down—"Ah, shite!" Seamus was whining and panting just as much as Harry now, which was satisfying, especially since Harry didn't really know what he was doing. He pulled himself further up Harry's body in his continued search for some sort of lubrication—anything!—a move that put his cock right in Harry's face.

Harry didn't bother to think twice, only braced one hand on Seamus' hip and lifted his head to take as much in of him as he could. Seamus tasted brilliant—like boy—and Harry had no idea if they'd actually done this to each other or not the night before, but it was amazing all the same.

"Oh god!" Seamus whined, and Harry continued to lick and suck at the head of his cock, inordinately pleased with the breathy sounds the other boy was making, and how his hips started to tremble, even as he continued his search for lubrication. Why they didn't just use a spell, Harry didn't know, but he couldn't think of one right then anyway, and he wouldn't have taken his mouth off Seamus' cock right then for anything.

"Fucking finally!" Seamus said, and then, "Stop, Harry." Harry groaned in displeasure, not wanting to stop in the least. "Harry, stop, or I'll come."

Harry pulled his mouth away slowly, and Seamus wasted no time scrambling back down and slamming his mouth onto Harry's once more. One of his hands laced through Harry's hair and grabbed while the other tried valiantly to unscrew the cap on the lube from Dean's bedside table.

"How d'you want...?" Seamus prompted between kisses. Harry shook his head; he didn't give a damn, so long as it happened right then.

"God, just fuck me," he whined, since, with their current positions, that seemed the quickest way to something. Seamus groaned, finally getting the cap off, and coated his fingers with the lube before running them up his thigh, teasing his cock and then—

Harry moaned. Memories of the night before were flashing back now and he could remember this happening almost exactly the same way—Seamus' slick fingers circling his entrance before one slipped inside, stretching him, then another.

And now he could remember the initial discomfort from the night before, but he was still a little stretched from it, and this time he only felt how brilliant it was that Seamus was doing this to him.

Seamus pushed another finger into him, and Harry decided that that was good enough. He was so hard he was throbbing, and he didn't want to wait any longer. "Do it—fucking do it."

Groaning, Seamus pulled his fingers back and situated himself between Harry's legs. "You better not forget it this time, I swear," he said as he pushed in. Harry arched his back, realising that three fingers were quite a bit different from actually having Seamus' cock in his arse, and thought that there was no way in Merlin's name that he would ever be able to forget this.

"Won't," he said and Seamus grinned, eyes bright and blue above him. His hair was sweaty, sticking to his forehead, and Harry thought it was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen—way better than watching Aurors in Love or the Queer Quidditch series.
Harry wrapped his arms around Seamus' back and pulled him down to kiss him. The other boy's mouth was hot and wet and Harry loved every second of it, every thrust and every swipe of Seamus' tongue. And then, Seamus adjusted his angle and hit that spot that Harry had spent so much time abusing over the summer.

It was brilliant, utterly brilliant. He gasped and tightened his arms around Seamus' shoulders. Seamus noticed the change and maintained his position, pounding Harry's prostate relentlessly. "Like that?" he said.

Harry nodded, unable to speak. At least until Seamus took one hand and wrapped it around his cock, as Harry himself had done earlier to him. "Oh fuck!"

Seamus whined at the feeling of Harry tightening around him. All of his muscles were tensed and he could already feel the heat of orgasm approaching.

"Gonna come soon," Seamus panted. And then, "Come for me, Harry."

That was all it took; Harry arched his back as wave after wave of pleasure rolled through him from his belly to his toes and back again. Hot, white strands of come were shooting out of his cock, all over him and Seamus' stomach.

Seamus' eyes were fixed on the sight, mouth parted, and it only took another thrust before he was stilling, eyes closed, and coming, too.

He fell limply on top of Harry, who couldn't be arsed to care, and panted. "Good show," Seamus finally said when their breathing had evened.

Harry laughed weakly. "I know." He was sweaty, with come on his stomach and dripping from his arse, but everything was brilliant. Everything.

"I remembered all of it," Seamus admitted casually a moment later. "Suppose it's in my genes or something—being able to remember something even when I'm completely pogloaded."

Before Harry could reply, the dormitory door opened. "Smith's not got a chance," Dean was saying. "We should have another practise before Saturday, but really, it's in the bag."

"Yeah, probably a good idea," Ron agreed. "I'll tell Harry later and he can call—oh, fuck, not again."

Harry tried to refrain from hiding his red face against Seamus' sweaty chest, but in the end, he gave it up as a bad job and burrowed himself as far away from Dean and Ron as he could. One day, he resolved, one fucking day, I'll have sex and none of my friends will hear or see it.

"Bugger off," Seamus yelled, throwing his pillow at them. "I just pulled with Harry; I'm going to fucking enjoy the afterglow."

Dean and Ron left just as swiftly as they had arrived.

Chapter End Notes

1. The Questing Beast is a beast in Arthurian tales as the creature that King Pellinore is
always hunting after.

2. According to *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, Auguries wail when it's about to rain. Granians, according to the same, are flying horses.
**Counter-Intelligence I**

Chapter by faire_weather

Chapter Notes

This chapter revised 06/06/11.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Counter-Intelligence: (n)** 1. The efforts designed to prevent enemy intelligence organizations from successfully gathering and collecting intelligence. 2. The classification and control of sensitive information or the active spreading of disinformation to mislead the enemy.

Sirius didn't like to admit it—even to himself—but he was worried about Remus. It wasn't like Mooney to just...disappear. It wasn't like him not to check in with someone; he was so...conscientious.

That was a word Mooney had taught him when he started to ignore his first girlfriend, Belinda Firkins, in favour of staring at Lily's arse. Sirius remembered that because he'd blushed and told Remus not to say a word to James—who started staring at Lily's arse about a month later.

Well, he didn't truly learn the meaning of the word until Belinda slapped him in the middle of the Great Hall one day when she caught him doing it. Fortunately, James never caught Sirius staring—or feeling Lily up in a broom closet in sixth year—because he'd become conscientious after that. He hadn't wanted to lose his best mate over a bird, of all things, but...well, he hadn't wanted to lose Lily over his best mate, either. Mates before dates, and all that; and, conversely, dates before mates.

That was a long time ago, though; that was before he'd ever gotten anyone's knickers, much less Lily's...before he'd become a father. It was before he'd ever disregarded the Cardinal Rule of Mates, which was pretty obvious, if unspoken, that said, in gold probably: 'Thou shalt not seduce your mate's girl, especially if you've already ruined it with her and it's his turn to have a chance now.'

Sirius bit his lip and hoped that wherever James was, he wouldn't knee him in the groin as soon as Sirius got there. He'd never been afraid of dying before he found out about Harry, but if James could see what had been going on down here, then Sirius might as well say goodbye to a happy afterlife and resign himself to an everlasting existence of pain in his crotch.

He deserved it, he knew. He had, after all, had an affair with his best friend's wife—had, after all, been the father to his best friend's son. Darkly, he wondered if that was possibly why Voldemort was so afraid of dying: had he, perhaps, screwed around on someone?

Sirius shuddered and looked down at his map. This was no time for self-pity and regrets—mainly because Sirius didn't regret it at all, and that had always been something anyone but his own mother would have classified as a character flaw.

Dumbledore had given him as much information as he knew, along with the standard debriefing. Sirius knew that one well enough.
Mooney had last checked in with Hestia Jones in Calais, France, but had missed two subsequent check-ins with Hestia and Tonks. He was supposed to be getting chummy with a migratory pack of French werewolves in order to try to counteract the werewolves already on Voldemort’s side. Apparently, the French werewolf contingent considered unprovoked violence gauche, and were no trouble to the French Ministry or population. Usually.

There was a more pressing problem, though, and that was that disturbances had recently been reported by several French wizards and witches; they were suspected to be werewolf related, and Dumbledore admitted that he worried Remus' new pack may have accidentally stumbled across another pack—possibly one that sympathised with Voldemort.

The map Sirius was given marked all of Remus' successful check-ins along with his two unsuccessful ones. Now all he had to do was find a pattern. But that was the problem with migratory werewolves—especially French ones: they did what they pleased. They could be anywhere…in France. Sirius thought it highly unlikely that a Frenchman would willingly travel outside his own country. Had he been French, he probably wouldn't have.

He was in Calais now. That seemed to be a good enough place to start. There was a small magical community here, and Dumbledore had given him instructions on how to enter it. Entering the community, le marché, Sirius stepped into a small café there and looked around for someone who might know something of this particular pack.

It was, probably, a good thing he knew French already because the wizards here could tell he was English just by looking at him, and, really, no one liked the English except the English themselves. Or so his mother had told him, but she was a Londoner, and no one liked them either.

With a sigh, Sirius decided that the twenty-something witch behind the counter—making cow eyes at him—would probably be his best shot. Besides, he could use the flattery right now; it wasn't looking like it would be a good week.

Harry would never admit it to Ron—or anyone else, in case it got back to Ron—but he'd woken up on Saturday morning having no idea that the first Quidditch match of the season was today—Gryffindor against Hufflepuff. Or even that it was Halloween. His mother had been dead for sixteen years today, and he hadn't even remembered it.

Sure, he'd known it peripherally; he'd known the day before that the game was today. It was just that when he woke up, he wasn't excited about Quidditch, which he usually was on game days. It was possible that this was because Seamus was in his bed for the fifth morning in a row and his morning wood was pressing against his backside.

It was also possible that it was because of the dream he'd been having—the one that had woken him up with a start only moments before. He could only remember snatches of it now, which wasn't all that unusual, but he couldn't shake the feeling of restlessness he got from it. And, for some reason, he had a notion to hum.

"Morning," Seamus grinned, rolling over to face him.

Harry jumped and looked over at his bed-mate. Seamus was already dressed for breakfast. Harry had no idea how he had gotten out and back in the bed without waking him up. "What are you so excited about?"

Seamus cut his eyes down to the obvious bulge in Harry's pyjamas and back up again. Harry tried
not to blush; it was well past the appropriate time for that. "Quidditch," Seamus said. "My first game
today, you know."

"Shit," Harry said, and quickly jumped from the bed, thoughts of possible sex quickly forgotten. He
cast a quick Tempus charm and saw that he only had an hour to have breakfast and be out on the
pitch for warm-ups. "Why didn't you wake me?"

Ron laughed at him from the other side of the room. "Don't know about him, mate," he said, hooking
his thumb back at Seamus, "but I didn't want to see anything."

Harry scowled at him as he pulled his clothes on and tried to locate his trainers in the mess of their
dorm.

"Dean and Neville are already at breakfast," Seamus added. His hair was still bed-mussed, but that
wouldn't matter much once they were in the air with the wind blowing every which way.

Harry, having finally found his shoes, slipped them on and laced them. "Someone could have woken
me," he said. Ron shrugged and Seamus laughed, finally deciding to get up from the bed.

"Ready then?" Ron asked. Harry nodded and they all grabbed their brooms—Seamus' mum had sent
him a new Cleansweep only the other week. "Right, let's go. I'm starved."

breakfast was efficient, as Harry liked it to be on game days. Hermione had worked out a system the
year before to save time on game days where she filled their plates with a balanced meal before they
got to breakfast, and then put extras on her own plate for Ron—since he would probably take some
of hers anyway. After the appropriate greetings and thanks were grunted to her, she left them to stuff
their bellies as much as they could handle, quietly ignored Ron as his fingers slipped onto her plate to
snatch a kipper, and wished them luck when they were done. This sort of anti-manners was allowed
only when Gryffindor had a game, though, and Ron always managed to make the most of it.

"Good luck," she said when Harry stood. Seamus followed suit, and with a last bite of toast, Ron
did, too.

"Thanks," Harry said. He was finally feeling his usual pre-game excitement and couldn't wait to get
out on the pitch. Down the table, Ginny, Sloper, Dean and Alsace all stood as well.

"Got your banner?" Ron asked her.

Hermione held up a red and gold blazon without removing her eyes from her morning reading.

"Good. We're going to crush them," he said, nodding at the Hufflepuff table. Zacharias Smith looked
up and Harry and Ron both saluted him, smiling. It was another little tradition he and Ron had
picked up the year before: to smile and salute the other team while peping each other up with
comments about how thoroughly they would destroy them on the pitch.

Still smiling at Smith, Harry said, "Wanker doesn't have a chance." Smith nodded back to them
politely and returned to his meal. "Right. Let's go Gryffindor." As if trained—which they most
certainly had not been—the Gryffindor Quidditch team lined up and marched out of the Great Hall,
creating quite a ruckus with their strangely synchronised steps.

It didn't last long, though. As soon as they were past the doors, every one of them broke into a warm-
up run down to the pitch, with Harry and Ron leading. In the locker room, the team changed and
were quickly back outside, ready for pre-game sprints.
Harry drilled them all on their strategies, and after about twenty minutes, he was satisfied, except with his Chasers. "Ginny," he called to her across the pitch, "run your Chasers through that play one more time."

She nodded at him and directed Sloper and Alsace into position. Ron threw the practise Quaffle to her and she passed it to Sloper, who drop-passed it to Alsace, who, in turn, threw it through the hoop.

They were good, Harry knew, but they really should have worked on that play a bit more. Biting his lip, he checked his watch and saw that it was time for Hufflepuff to get the pitch for their warm-ups. "Come on," he called to them and flew back down to the locker rooms again.

Inside, they all gathered around and Harry let Ron lead the pre-game speech, go over their strategies one last time, and generally put the fear of Merlin in them, should they screw up out there. He was way better at that sort of thing than Harry was.

When Ron finished, Harry checked his watch again. "We've got about two minutes, so I want to add one more thing," he said. "Ginny—you're nearly perfect with that formation we practised, but you've been accelerating too far ahead of Sloper when you catch the Quaffle, and that leaves you vulnerable on your right side. Try to tighten it up in the game." She nodded, determined and serious.

"Right. Everyone ready?" There was a collective nod. Outside, Luna Lovegood's voice welcomed everyone to the game.

"—the gregarious Gryffindors versus the hellsapopinish Hufflepuffs!"

Harry took a deep breath; everyone else followed. "Ready?" he asked. They nodded stoically, even Seamus, who would be playing on a Quidditch team for the first time today. "Let's go."

The first game of the season was always a riotous affair. No matter who played, it was always attended by nearly everyone in the school—probably because the students were still not ready for school to be back in session and would take any opportunity whatsoever to escape the castle.

Even the Ravenclaws and Slytherins were cheering—not necessarily for either team, but in excitement over getting away from their homework for a couple of hours. Harry led his team to the middle of the field amidst screaming from every direction and stopped in front of Zacharias Smith.

"Captains, shake hands," Madam Hooch said.

Harry stuck out his hand, shook Smith's once, and gave him a cheeky grin. "Good luck, mate," he said, releasing Smith's hand. Hufflepuff didn't have a prayer.

Smith gave him a cool nod. "And yourself."

"On my whistle," Madam Hooch continued, after giving them the preliminary 'No fighting and no cheating' spiel. Smith and Harry stepped back and mounted their brooms, each of their teams following immediately. Madam Hooch blew her whistle and Harry pushed himself off the ground with as much force as he could, trying to get the best vantage point before Hufflepuff's new Seeker could grab it.

Harry didn't know the name of the new Hufflepuff Seeker, but it didn't really matter right then. She was obviously nervous, and he couldn't blame her. It was her first game. She looked at him a bit wide-eyed when she finally levelled with him, but then pursed her lips in determination and set off on a slow circle of the perimeter.
Harry nodded approvingly and set off in the opposite direction. He had a good view of the game from this altitude, and hoped to maintain it for as long as possible. It wasn't standard to have a Seeker as captain since they were usually so far away from the rest of the game, but he'd been the senior player on the team and Ron had refused it. Harry had no idea why.

It really would have been better if Ron was captain. He had a clear view of the game from his Keeper position and he was a far better tactician than Harry could hope to be.

"Gryffindor's star Keeper and King, Weasley One, easily deflects the first attack by Hufflepuff captain and Chaser, Smith—tosses the Quaffle to Weasley Two and appears to have suffered a second attack by the mysterious Netherthall, known for assaults against the nether-regions and causing extreme itching. He easily dispatches the Netherthall with a well placed scratch—"

Harry snorted and shot a grin at Ron, who was still re-adjusting himself. Ron glared at him, then at Luna, and returned his attention back to the game just in time to block another shot.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. There was probably another thirty to forty-five minutes before the Snitch would show up, and he had plenty of time to keep at least one eye on the game. As it was, everyone seemed to be in top form.

Unfortunately, everyone included Hufflepuff as well. Smith must have really worked them, Harry thought. They were playing hard and giving his team a good show for it. Even as he watched, Smith and his other veteran Chaser—Cadwallader or something—executed a perfect steal of the Quaffle from Alsace and aimed another shot at Ron. It went through, but that was okay; the game had only just begun.

Ginny took the Quaffle on the rebound and darted between the Hufflepuff Beaters to score a quick goal and they were even again.

"—against Smith—majestic in his yellow and black kit—just in time to deflect the Bludger—"

Harry passed the other Seeker, quirked a grin at her, and looked back down at the game just to see Ginny direct the other two Chasers into the play they had been working on earlier. Harry grinned, excited to see it in action.

It was a play Ginny had seen the Holyhead Harpies perform, only simplified to their skill-level, and Harry expected it to really throw Hufflepuff for a loop. On another rebound, Ron threw her the Quaffle and she dropped back, allowing Sloper and Alsace to flip and turn in front of her.

They sped over the pitch towards Hufflepuff's goal with Alsace and Sloper guarding Ginny on either side. Hufflepuff's Keeper positioned himself in the centre ring, expecting the attack to come from Ginny, but at the last minute, she sped in front of them, dropped the Quaffle to Sloper, and—

"Damn it, Harry thought. She still left that side open.

She hadn't managed to tighten up her form after all, though it was a bit better. Unfortunately, it wasn't good enough because at that moment a Hufflepuff Beater, in the right place at the right time, aimed a Bludger directly at her. It slammed into her side just as Alsace tossed the Quaffle through the left ring and she tumbled from her broom.

"Weasley Two has nobly taken a hit for her team, as Gryffindors are wont to do—"

"Time out!" Harry called, diving for the ground. Madam Hooch blew her whistle and play stopped, but Ginny was still falling. She landed hard, and didn't move.
Alsace was the first to the ground, followed immediately by Ron and Harry.

"Holy shit," Ron said, dropping to his sister's side. She was lying awkwardly, mouth slightly open, but breathing steadily enough. "Ginny—Ginny you okay?"

She didn't respond. Professor McGonagall and Hooch arrived then, bustling forward with worried looks on their faces.

Ginny was still lying on the ground, still unconscious. Madam Hooch called her name again, tapped her cheek with her hand, but she still didn't respond. Dropping down beside Ron, Harry grabbed her shoulder and shook her, and when that didn't work, Ron, panicked, slapped her across the face. Harry would have laughed any other time.

Ginny's body arched off the ground, bending almost unnaturally, jerked once, and then she fell back to the grass, still.

Harry exchanged a look with Ron. He'd never seen anything like that before. Especially from just a fall. He'd fallen from his broom more times than he could count, and he'd never done that—at least that he knew of. By the confused way Ron was looking at him, he was pretty certain on the matter.

"What was that?" he asked Ron.

Ron shook his head. "Don't know…maybe I shocked her a bit when I slapped her?" He looked back at his sister again, who was now beginning to blink open her eyes, and added, "Looks like it worked."

Dean pushed through on the opposite side and leant over her. "You all right?" he asked her. Harry and Ron exchanged another look, this one of amusement now that the panic was over. It appeared that Dean still held a torch for his old girlfriend, no matter how little interest she showed him.

Ginny nodded drowsily and tried to sit up, but her arms were a little unstable. "I'm fine," she said, even as she tried to stand, only to fall back down with a cry. "Think…I think my ankle's broken," she said, biting her lip. "And I sort of feel a little disoriented now."

Harry and Ron swore, just as Hermione made it down from the stands and pushed through them to check on Ginny. She gave them a stern look for their language and bent down over Ginny's ankle. "It's starting to swell," she said. "She needs to go to the Infirmary."

McGonagall tsked and levitated Ginny from the ground.

"We'll have to put in the reserve," Ron said, frowning. Harry sighed, watching Hermione and Professor McGonagall float Ginny off the pitch and up to the castle. This was no good at all—the game had just started and their reserve had only showed up for half of their practises. And furthermore, the reserve didn't know how to work with Alsace and Sloper like Ginny did. And since Ginny was their lead Chaser, they reacted to her moves; the reserve would have no idea how to lead them. It wasn't looking good.
"All right," Harry said. "Call her in." He re-mounted his broom and took to the air, determined to find the Snitch as soon as possible.

In the end, it didn't matter much. Smith had taken advantage of his position and directed his Beaters to focus only on Gryffindor's Chasers. With Dean and Seamus having to play the defensive, Ron was left wide open for attack by Hufflepuff's Chasers. By the time Harry caught the Snitch—effectively mercy-killing the game—the score was 270 Hufflepuff, 100 Gryffindor. They lost by twenty points, but as far as Harry was concerned, it wasn't as bad as it could have been.
Afterwards, the entire team trooped up to the Infirmary, still in their sweaty Quidditch gear. Hermione was waiting for them beside Ginny's bed, reading her Arithmancy text.

"Did you win?" she asked, but she didn't look like she had much hope for it.

Ron flopped down on the chair next to her, sighing. "Not even close." Hermione patted him on the back consolingly.

Two years ago, Ron would have thought the whole thing his fault—he had let the Quaffle in twenty-seven times, after all—but he'd learned, throughout his play, that it took an entire team to play Quidditch. Without Beaters to keep the other team's Chasers from the scoring area, it was one shot after another, and no one could have been expected to handle a rapid attack like that. Even Oliver Wood would have been tearing his hair out.

Harry nudged Ron over and sat down beside him on the edge of his chair, running his hands through his sweaty hair. "Is it broken?" he asked.

Hermione nodded, frowning. "Three hairline fractures," she said. "Madam Pomfrey's given her Skele-Mend, but she'll be asleep for the next twelve hours while it works."

"When will she be able to play again?" Dean asked, sitting between Alsace and Seamus on the next bed.

"Madam Pomfrey said she should be able to return to practise next week," Hermione said. "But she doesn't need to put a lot of strain on it before then. Just to classes and such for the first few days."

It wasn't long after that that Madam Pomfrey bustled in, exclaiming angrily over how many uninjured students were in her Infirmary and rushed them all out. Ginny would not be waking up before the Halloween party, she'd told them, so there was no use waiting around for her.

Of all of them, Dean looked the most upset by this. "Why'd she have to get hurt today, of all days?" he muttered, hands in his pockets as Harry and Seamus accompanied him back to Gryffindor. Ron had followed Hermione to the Great Hall to set up for the party, and there was really no telling where Alsace and Sloper had gone.

"Don't worry about it, mate," Seamus said, easily throwing an arm over his taller friend's shoulder. "You can go with me. We'll have loads of fun."

Harry had not known that Dean was to be going to the party with Ginny, but it certainly helped explain why he'd seemed so hopeful lately. Poor guy. Instead of saying that, Harry asked, with a shudder, "I thought you were going with Romilda, Seamus."

To his amusement, Seamus shuddered as well. "She asked me, originally, and I figured what the hell, you know? But, apparently, she got a better offer last week and gave me her regrets."

"Can't say I'm all that upset over it."

Dean cracked a smile. "I wouldn't be. That bird's barking."

No one could disagree with that. "So, what about you, Harry?" Dean continued. "Thought you and my mate here were trying it on, and now I see you're taking the Lestrange girl tonight."

Harry and Seamus glanced at each other quickly, sharing a small, shy smile. "She's stubborn," was all he said.
Dean chuckled. "What are you going as? I'm going to be a pirate—Ginny was going to be my wench, but I suppose it'll have to be Seamus instead," he added with a nudge. Seamus barked a laugh and did not seem at all opposed to the idea.

"Didn't have a costume anyway," he said. "Was going to lift some of Ron's Chudley Cannons gear and go as an idiot."

Laughing, Harry said, "I don't know what I'll be. Alsace picked something up on the last Hogsmeade weekend and the package's in my trunk somewhere." He stumbled, suddenly realising something. "I've just made a huge mistake, haven't I? I should've known better than to let a girl pick out a costume for me. What if—what if she's got me dressed up as a goblin—or the back half of a centaur?"

Seamus cuffed the back of his head. "It'd fit you, wanker."

"You calling me a jackass?" Harry asked, eyebrow raised.

"Nah," Seamus said as they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady. "Called you a wanker, didn't I?—Mimbulus Mimbletonia—And a wanker you are," he added with a leer.

"Excuse me!" the Fat Lady exclaimed, scandalised.

"Sorry!" they said.

The Gryffindors already in the common room were of the desolate sort. It had been quite some time since they'd lost to Hufflepuff, and before the game with Cedric Diggory, it had been years. Butterbeer that had been smuggled in prior to the game sat unopened, and the students focused on their homework with less than enthusiasm.

To Harry's appreciation, their reserve Chaser sat in a corner looking quite chagrined, even as she studied her Transfigurations text.

"Oh come off it," Seamus said to the room at large. His hands were on his hips and he looked quite displeased. "It was one game! We've got plenty of time to win the Cup, and we only lost by twenty points—that's nothing, really."

The younger students bit their lips, but it seemed to perk them up a bit anyway. Enough, at least, for one particularly daring second-year to pop the cork from one of the abandoned Butterbeers and take a large swig.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'd like to see this pirate costume of yours, Dean," he said as they mounted the stairs. "Actually, I think I'd like to see the wench costume even more. Seamus?"

"I am agreeing to this humiliation," Seamus proclaimed as he bounded ahead of them, "on the grounds that you will promise to play Levitating Leap Frog with me afterwards, when we are both drunk off spiked-punch and preferably naked."

Harry and Dean laughed. "And if McGonagall, on her nightly check-in, saw us naked and jumping over each other on the stairs?"

Seamus shrugged and opened the door to their room, pulling his shin- and wrist-guards off as he spoke. "It'll be the best sight she's seen in years. She'll love it."

Dean rifled through his trunk, saying over his shoulder, "She'll love it enough to give you private detentions with her for the rest of the year—ah, here we go..." He stood and tossed something in
Seamus' general direction. "You'll be a lovely wench."

"I reckon so," Seamus said, inspecting the garment with an air of distaste. He turned it over in his hands, frowning. "Doesn't leave much to the imagination, does it, this kit?"

Harry inspected it over Seamus' shoulder, noting the lace-tied corset and fluffy canvas skirt. "You'll get to have a dagger, though—maybe a pistol."

"Definitely not a real one," Dean said with a shudder. He pulled out two practise foils from his trunk and tossed one to Seamus. "Flitwick let me borrow these, but if anything happens to it," he said ominously, "you'll be helping me earn the galleons to pay him back over the summer."

Seamus turned it over in his hand and parried clumsily, grinning. "Not to worry, mate," he said. "So long as I get to play with this, I'll be your calm, loving, obedient wench of the evening."

"See that you are," Dean said, mock pompously.

Meanwhile, Harry was sitting on his bed after having retrieved the package Alsace had previously given him, and looking through its contents. The first thing he removed was a rather ordinary—if somewhat high-quality—black robe. The second, however, was something Harry was all too familiar with: a very recognisable white mask. He gaped and quickly hid it underneath his disarrayed sheets before either of his friends saw it.

*What in Merlin's name was she thinking?* Harry wondered, heart beating quicker than usual. There was no question; he couldn't—and wouldn't—go as a Death Eater, of all things. Below where the mask had been, there was a note.

> **Harry,**  
> *I hope you remembered to open this alone, as I told you to do, but you seemed preoccupied at the time, probably with whatever it was that Draco Malfoy had just said to you, and I would not be surprised at all if you forgot. It was a joke, you see. I hope you laughed, but even now, as I am writing this, I suspect that you probably won't.*

> **Do not worry; I don't mean for you to attend as a Death Eater—though imagine the stir it would cause!—but as a necromancer. Much less interesting, I know, but the subject intrigues me. I will be your Guiding Spirit, something all necromancers acquire when they first begin the Path to their calling.*

> **The Guiding Spirits are always women, always dead, and always invisible to all except the necromancer apprentice. There are, however, enough records to describe them, so I had no trouble coming up with a suitably matching costume. Most wizarding-raised students will know what we are, so we won't have to spend a lot of time explaining.**

> **The spells at the bottom will finish the effect for your costume by giving you the appropriate deathly pallor, translucent skin, and effect of wind constantly blowing your cloak in several directions at one time.**

> **Please meet me outside the entrance to Gryffindor at seven forty-five.**
> -Alsace E Lestrange

Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

"So—back end of a centaur, is it?" Seamus asked. Harry looked up to see his...lover? Boyfriend?—decked out in his wench kit, practise foil dangling from his fingers and hair—magically extended—
wrapped partially with a red scarf.

He snorted and held up the black cloak. "Nah—necromancer."

Dean rolled his eyes as he strapped his belt over a white tunic. "She's almost as strange as Romilda Vane."

Harry grimaced. "Hardly."

"No, really," Dean said, applying his eye-patch. "She's...odd."

"I want an eye-patch," Seamus said excitedly.

"Wenches keep both eyes," Dean replied, still focused on his conversation with Harry. "It's only polite...and really, who would want to go as a necromancer?"

Harry shrugged. "At least I'm not half a centaur."

"Point," Dean said. "I'd much rather be a necromancer than any part of a centaur."

Neville rushed in then, looking like he was only moments from a panic attack. "I never knew being a prefect was so much work!" he said, rushing over to his bed. He opened his trunk and started tossing his things everywhere, but it didn't make much of a difference, since their dorm was already a disaster area.

"Hermione got you working like a house-elf?" Seamus asked.

Harry snorted. "Don't let her hear you say that."

Neville looked up from his trunk only long enough to say, "Worse!" before returning to the task at hand. "She levitated me to the ceiling so I could hang all the streamers—she's mad! Surprised all my bones are still in one piece."

The other three boys exchanged a look. Hermione's magical prowess was all very well and good in theory, but it would be a cold day before any of them allowed her to levitate them anywhere, much less up to the ceiling of the Great Hall.

"Found it!" Neville said happily. He quickly shucked his school robes and began pulling on something entirely different. Something that looked suspiciously like an Indiana Jones kit to Harry, and, by the amused look he was getting, to Dean as well.

"What are you going as?" Harry asked, biting his lip. Oh, how he hoped Neville said he was going to indeed be Indiana Jones.

"Snorkack hunter," Neville said. "Luna's going to be the Snorkack." His eyes took on a strange, dreamy quality before refocusing. "I'm supposed to hunt her all through the party."

Seamus guffawed loudly. "I bet," he said. "And when you catch her?"

Neville blushed. "Snorkacks have never been caught before—what makes you think I'll catch one?"

"Never know," Dean said, shrugging.

Neville glanced at the clock in their dorm room. "Oh no! I've got to meet Luna at the Ravenclaw common room in ten minutes! Hermione's had me working since the end of the Quidditch game—" he paused, frowning a bit, and said, "better luck next time, right?"
Before they could even open their mouths to answer, Neville was out the door. Seamus looked back
down to his outfit, specifically the full skirt. "Dean," he said. "Suppose you were a lad and did me—
your forever best mate—a favour."

"What kind of favour?" Dean asked suspiciously.

Seamus removed two full bottles of Firewhiskey from his trunk and held them out. "Transfigure me a
garter or two to hold these on—at least until I make it to the punch bowls."

"Not a part of this," Harry sang, covering his ears. "If I have any previous knowledge and Hermione
finds out, I might as well be the back end of a centaur, since she'll have me gelded before I can
properly cover my bits."

Seamus shuddered dramatically. "We'll just take this out of hearing range then, since I don't want
you to be able to identify me if she asks." With an arm thrown over Dean's shoulder, Seamus led him
from the room, muttering in a low, conspiring voice.

The last thing Harry heard before they shut the door was Dean hissing, "I knew you took it, you
twat! I couldn't even have a decent wank last night, thanks to you!"

Harry snickered and lay back on his bed. He still had another hour before he was supposed to meet
Alsace, and he could use a nap. There was something digging into his back, though, and with a
growl, Harry dug through his sheets until he found it: the Death Eater mask.

His breathing hitched only once before he pursed his lips in determination and studied it, unbiased.
He'd seen masks like this one more than once, and usually in frightening situations. The last time,
however—well, the last time he'd seen one had been an altogether different experience.

He didn't even want to think about it, really. The mask was rather plain, actually. Unassuming. It was
a dull white—not even shiny—with slanted holes for the eyes, an under pronounced ridge over the
nose, and no opening for the mouth. It was plain, but maybe that was what made it so frightening—
not the mask itself, really, but the knowledge that it could be anyone's face underneath.

Curiously, Harry put it on. He had no reason to do it, really, but…he shrugged. Why not? It stuck to
his face, feeling as though it had actually become part of it, and the only indication that he was even
wearing it was that he could still feel it with his hands. A shudder went up his spine and he removed
it just as quickly as he'd put it on.

Where to put it? he thought. He would have to give it back to Alsace soon, but it needed to be put
away before then. He couldn't even imagine the sort of trouble it would cause if anyone found it.
Trouble, actually, was too mild a word. With a decisive nod, he slipped it under the mattress.

It was definitely time for a nap, and it took him no time to fall asleep. He dreamed, but the dreams
were different from his latest ones—they were normal. They moved from playing Exploding Snap
with Hagrid to kissing Seamus, who turned into Ron, to studying for Arithmancy. There was no
singing and there were no voices calling his name. Absolutely normal dreams.

And then Ron woke him up with a shake of his shoulder. "Up you get, mate," Ron said. "It's half-
past."

Harry sat up groggily, rubbing his eyes. "Sorry, haven't been able to sleep lately."

Ron gave him a sharp look. "You didn't say—was it…?"

Harry shook his head. "Nah, reckon I've just been out-of-sorts…you know, a lot's been happening."
Ron nodded his head. He was already dressed in his King Arthur costume, but he didn't look quite as excited about going with Lavender as he had before. "Right…gonna be a necromancer then?" he asked, nodding to Harry's rumpled cloak.

Harry nodded, retrieved the note from Alsace, and mouthed through the spells before actually risking them on himself. "Yeah."

"Weird girl," Ron said, shaking his head. "But then, with parents like hers…" he trailed off, frowning.

"She's only even met them a couple of times, Ron," Harry said.

"I know—I know," Ron conceded. "It's just…I can tell that things are changing, you know. It's getting down to the line, here, and even I can see that everything's not so black and white anymore. It's just…hard," he finished. "Wasn't raised to think this way."

Harry acknowledged the statement with a nod and let it pass. Taking a deep breath, he attempted the first spell and watched as his cloak was gently lifted from the ground, floating and undulating as if caught in a varying wind.

"Nice trick," Ron said, grinning.

"Bet Snape uses a form of it," Harry replied. Encouraged that he still had all of his limbs, Harry quickly cast the remaining two spells and watched as his skin became paler and thinner, and the veins on his wrists stood out in stark contrast. "Ugh—I look like I'm dead."

Ron shrugged, unconcerned. Harry supposed this was due to his being raised in a magical environment. "At least you don't smell like you're dead, and besides, you still look better than Snape."

Harry grinned back at him. "Professor Sinclair said in class the other day that all of the teachers would be coming and dressing up, too. What do you think Snape'll be?"

Ron snorted. "A boggart."

Harry laughed. "Reckon it's time to meet our dates…where's Hermione by the way?"

Ron frowned as they walked to the door. "She was going to change in the antechamber. Said she didn't have time to come up here, so she brought her kit to the Quidditch game."

"Shame Ginny's got to miss it," Harry said as they thumped down the stairs. He, actually, quite liked the effect on his twirly robes. It was nothing on his favourite frock coat, but still fun.

"Yeah," Ron said. "Bad luck." They ducked through the portrait hole and found Lavender waiting, somewhat uncomfortably, next to Alsace. Harry went over to his date and gave her a quick smile.

Alsace did indeed look like some sort of spirit—whether she was guiding, or where she would guide, was still undisclosed. She'd used the same three spells on herself, but had also used the robe spell on her hair, making it, too, look as if it were caught in a slow-motion wind-storm. She was dressed in a gauzy, old fashioned, white dress and the veins in her neck and arms stood out, but not nearly as much as her eyes—looking quite ethereal—did.

"Shall we?" Harry asked, offering his elbow. She accepted without a word. With Lavender chatting non-stop on the other side of a half-interested Ron, the four of them descended to the Great Hall.
Oh, how he had tried to get out of this.

He'd made excuse after excuse—using everything from religious grounds to the possibility of being summoned by the Dark Lord to, when all else failed, a fucking violent stomach flu—and yet, here Severus was: standing in front of his mirror and adjusting the last detail on his costume for that damned Halloween party.

After this little stunt, Granger would be asked her hand in marriage by one of his Slytherins before he let her pass his class. But, on the other hand, Severus reflected with a sneer, the odds of that were looking better by the day. Damn Nott and his damned grandmother's contemporary ideals. What had she been thinking, instilling such...virtues in him?

Severus Snape was not a baby-sitter. He was not a day-care service—no matter how much it seemed that he was at times—so why in all hells had Dumbledore insisted he chaperone this insipid event? There were plenty of chaperones already; Minerva, Pomona and Filius would already be there—along with Vector and Sinistra. That was chaperones enough.

And furthermore, Severus seethed, why was it so important that he 'partake of the festivities'? He held little affection for holidays of any sort, and even less for holidays which required something of him. All Hallow's had managed to retain a neutral stance with him until it became Halloween and he was forced to make a fool of himself. He'd never held well with fancy dress.

At least he had the early shift; he would go in, oversee the prefects as they made the final touches, find a nice corner to observe from, and stay exactly two hours. Not a minute longer. Theodore owed him for not making a fuss over this; granted, he'd not suspected he would be required to attend then, but the very idea of this get-together offended him to the very core, anyway.

House-unity indeed.

Growling in frustration, Severus flipped his cowl up and decided, at the last minute, to add one last touch to his costume. His wand swished, and everything was in place. If Dumbledore wanted him to get into the spirit of the thing, then he damned well would. Perhaps it would even keep the students away from him while he suffered this nonsense.

His shift started in ten minutes, and it would take that long to make his way to the Great Hall, so, with a final huff, Severus exited his rooms. This night had long held a tradition for tomfoolery, and even though he didn't think anyone would be stupid enough to try anything on him, he doubled-warded his doors, just the same.

Dumbledore was chatting with Minerva at the top of the stairs, and Severus stalked quietly towards them, hoping to slip by without being noticed. As he drew nearer, Minerva gave a little yelp, hand over her heart. They both turned, and Severus sighed in resignation. Lovely.

"Severus!" Dumbledore said merrily. "I thought I felt you coming."

"Good evening, Headmaster," he said, nodding. "Minerva."

"Severus, you can't use a spell like that around the children!" Minerva said. Severus barely refrained from rolling his eyes. "It will frighten them!"

"Good," Severus said sourly.

Dumbledore chuckled. "I, for one, think it could be a valuable learning experience."
Narrowing his eyes, Severus asked, "What do you mean by that?"

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled behind his spectacles, and he adjusted the red cap upon his head. "Nothing whatsoever," he said. "I must say, your costume is quite ingenious, Severus."

"Fitting," Minerva said with a frown.

Severus cocked an eyebrow. "Thank you. And who, might I ask, are you supposed to be?"

Minerva pushed her shoulders back and said, "Mary, Queen of Scots."

"Tragic," Severus said blandly. Minerva narrowed her eyes.

"I'm St Nicholas," Dumbledore said. He cleared his throat and added, "Ho, ho ho!—How does that sound?"

Severus shared a rare moment with Minerva, who was equally distressed by the headmaster's chosen character. "Like you were raised in London," he said, with no small amount of distaste.

Dumbledore frowned, stroking his beard. "I was raised in St Helens, actually." At their blank looks, he added, "In Merseyside."

"Excuse me," Severus said after a long pause. "I must attend to my duties." And he swept past them into the Great Hall, almost wishing he'd stayed around for Dumbledore's odd machinations once he saw the state of the room. It was disastrous; everywhere he looked there were orange and black streamers, live bats flying everywhere—no telling what kind of mess they would leave—gourds with faces carved into them...disastrous.

Granger was standing at the head table, discussing something—somewhat intimately—with Theodore. Severus made his way over.

"Oh my!" Granger exclaimed as he drew closer, and turned to face him, wand extended. Severus sneered.

"Put it away, Ms Granger."

Granger frowned, looking very much like she wanted to argue. Severus dared her in his head. At the last moment, she subsided, taking a deep breath. Nott was now standing a little closer to her—looking almost protective—and pursing his thin lips fretfully. Snape wanted to smirk; the poor boy didn't know what to do about it. On the one hand, there was Nott's wench, and on the other, there was every free weekend until he left school. Would standing up for Granger's skittishness really be worth all those detentions?

"Mr Nott," Snape said, "I would like a moment of your time."

To his disgust, Theodore glanced at Granger—as if to get her permission, the pathetic boy—before he followed. Severus led them to a corner relatively free of bats, produce and orange.

"Theodore," he said very slowly, and then changed his mind. He'd been planning to make Nott aware of just how much he owed Snape for putting up with this, but, something interested him further right then. "What are your intentions towards Granger?"

Nott shrugged and focused his gaze over Snape's shoulder. Theodore was one of very few students who came close to matching his height—Weasley and a sixth-year Ravenclaw being the only others. Severus thought it quite unfortunate for him, as it only made his otherwise lanky form look even
bonier.

Add that to the fact that he was utterlyplain in appearance—brown hair, brown eyes, with a nose, teeth and ten fingers—and Severus couldn't really blame him for setting his sights so low, but, honestly, Granger? Of all people...Severus didn't even know what to say. The Brown girl was less irritating than Granger.

"I like her," Theodore finally said.

Severus pursed his lips. That was an entirely unsatisfactory answer. And he hated prompting. He did it anyway, saying, "You could do much better,"—even if he didn't particularly think it true. Nott was a lot like he was as a child—standoffish and watchful, with few friends and even fewer prospects.

"She's Head Girl," Theodore said, eyes flashing for only a second.

"She's friends with Potter," Severus said.

Theodore narrowed his eyes. "Black's not so bad," he said, deliberately using the name.

"And Weasley?" Snape asked.

Theodore shrugged again. "Don't know him well; he's not in any of my classes this year."

"I imagine you will get to know him better if you move in on his...territory," Snape said.

Nott sneered. "He's had six years to move in himself, and he's not only made no effort to do so, but he's balked at Hermione's attempts. He had his chance and he lost it; I like her and I want her, and it'll be a cold day before I let a blind wanker like Weasley get in my way. If I don't get her, it'll be because she doesn't want me, not because I'm afraid of stepping on Weasley's toes."

Severus raised his eyebrows. "You seem quite passionate on this subject."

Theodore took a step back and stared right at him. "I know that you're less than fond of Hermione, Professor, but neither of us is blind and both of us know that I'll never get another chance like this. Hermione's gorgeous to me; I know that other people may see her as plain, but I'm plain, too. Blokes like me—we don't get second chances; if I've got a shot, I'm damned well going to take it."

With one last look, Nott turned and walked back to Granger, who greeted him with a toothy smile and immediately started chattering at him. Severus watched them only for a moment—seeing how Theodore subtly changed when he was talking to her. But that could possibly be due to his getting away from the effects of Severus' Unhappiness spell. It wasn't enough to make it obvious to just anyone, but for those who knew what to look for, it was.

Fine. He would leave Nott to this...potential disaster, if only because the boy's words had hit a little too close to home for him. He was certainly right: boys like them didn't get second chances. Severus knew that all too well; Theodore was much like he had been as a young boy, after all, and she had not given him a second chance.

A fifth-year Hufflepuff prefect waved her wand at a book of sheet music and three different festival songs all began playing...loudly and at once. Sneering and refusing to cover his ears, Snape decided it was time to retreat.

Right before he turned to stalk off to a nice, deserted corner, Severus saw Granger put her hand on Theodore's shoulder and lean up to tell him something over the noise. His hand automatically rested on her waist as he leaned down and that was when he noticed it. That—when Granger's gaudy
muggle jewellery caught the light—was when Snape remembered that Headmaster Dumbledore had not been wearing the ring the Dark Lord had asked Snape to keep an eye on.

Dumbledore was no longer wearing the Gaunt ring, and that was of a definite concern to Severus' continued well-being.

"Fuck," he said, and slid quickly from the hall. Damn the infernal party—he needed to get an owl off as soon as was earthly possibly, and no amount of chaperoning would keep him from it. After all, Dumbledore's displeasure was considerably easier to bear than the Dark Lord's.

"I have to go get changed," Hermione said, leaning up on her toes so he could hear her over the sudden noise. Theodore would have sneered at the Hufflepuff girl, but anything that got Hermione leaning up to him, and allowed him to put his hand on her waist in order to steady her was all right in his book.

"Of course," he said, leaning down as well. Hermione's hand was on his shoulder, and it was a nice feeling—he couldn't wait to dance with her. And he still couldn't believe she'd agreed to go with him, but Weasley's bad luck turned out to be his good luck. He was her second choice, he knew, but at least he'd been a choice.

"You've got your kit?" she asked.

Theo nodded. "Yes—I'm going back to the dungeons to change."

She smiled again. "I'll meet you at the doors then, in twenty minutes?"

"Of course," Theodore said again. The Hufflepuff finally fixed her faulty spell and the music settled into a quieter, lively beat. Hermione stood down again, and he fought a displeased frown. He'd quite liked her in that position.

"This was a great idea, Theo," she said as she stepped back and picked up the bag with her costume in it. "I think it's going to be a success."

"Well, of course," he said easily. "It's not often that I have a less-than-spectacular idea."

Hermione laughed. "Prat," she said, then turned and hurried over to an antechamber she'd set aside for changing in.

Theodore watched her go, knowing that there were very few people he allowed to make such disparaging remarks about him, and that she was definitely on the list. At least Weasley had already left to change; he wasn't about to give Hermione back to him without a fight, but he still didn't want to cause any excess trouble, and that little display, no matter how innocent it was, would have. He sighed; he was in over his head.

Or over his heels, perhaps. He couldn't decide which was worse.

Taking a last, cursory glance around the hall to make sure everything was in place, he made for the exit. Professor Snape had disappeared somewhere, and Theodore couldn't help but smile at that. It was no small secret in the dungeons that Snape was not in good spirits about this entire do.

He was surprised, actually, that Snape hadn't made mention of a debt, and Theodore owing him, for putting up with the thing when he'd spoken to him. Professor Snape was not one to let a debt slip by unacknowledged. Oh well.
He slipped through the milling prefects and their friends, and headed for his room. His Head Boy room could be accessed from the main hall, and while he usually preferred to use the Slytherin common room entrance, he was short on time tonight.

"Cognesce te ipsum," he said to the portrait guarding his door.

Hermione had insisted that he change his password from the default one assigned to his room by Snape, which was 'Up Slytherin'. It was, she said, in bad taste for a Head Boy to be so openly biased for his house, except for at Quidditch games. He should be, she'd said, someone that the younger students—from all houses—could talk to, and to have a password like that wouldn't make that easier for them.

Whatever. Theodore didn't care what his password was, so long as he knew it. And anyway, only two students from another house had sought him out. The first had been a Ravenclaw fourth year girl who was questioning her sexuality, and had chosen to come to Theodore—as opposed to Hermione or his own prefects—because she didn't want to be analyzed…just given advice.

The other had been an overly plucky first-year Gryffindor who'd been given green and silver hair by a first-year Slytherin. He'd come to Theodore, he'd said, because he wanted retribution, and he figured another Slytherin—especially one with so much power—would be the best place to start. Theodore had wondered if the boy weren't placed in the wrong house, but the Sorting Hat was never wrong… At any rate, he'd liked the boy, and given him the first-year Slytherin's class schedule. The rest, he'd told him, was up to him.

A week later, the first-year Slytherin—a normally blonde girl by the name of Pandora—was sporting red hair and freckles. Incidentally, two weeks after that, Theodore caught them holding hands underneath the Quidditch stands, but that was neither here nor there. Every now and then, she would show up with the red hair, though. He supposed she was feisty, and that their young love was sprinkled with a healthy dose of quarrels.

He entered his room with a tired sigh and shut the door behind him.

"Long night?"

Theodore rolled his neck backwards, staring at the ceiling. "Can I help you, Malfoy?" he asked in resignation. All of the Slytherins had the password to Theodore's room with the understanding that they were not to abuse the privilege, but Malfoy probably assumed that this didn’t apply to him.

As long as he hadn't gone through his things, Theo would let it slide. After all, this was the first time this year that Malfoy had bothered to come to his room at all. If he was here, then it was probably at least moderately important.

Malfoy sat at his desk, backwards on the chair; arms perched on the back of it and legs straddling it. He looked bored, which wasn't all that unusual. It took a lot to keep Malfoy's attention for very long.

"What are your intentions towards the Mudblood?"

Theodore frowned, as Malfoy undoubtedly knew he would. It was a test, but as of yet, Theodore didn't know which answer was the correct one. No matter: Malfoy would tell him eventually. Most likely before he even left the room. He smiled, showing his crooked incisors.

Theo ran his tongue over his own teeth and fought to contain a smirk. "Fine—what are you planning to do about Granger?" he relented easily. And that, in fact, was not a manipulation from Malfoy. It seemed as though Theodore had passed whatever test he'd taken.
Theodore turned his back to get his costume out of his wardrobe. Their alliance was shaky, at best. They had never really liked each other overly much, but—except for sometimes—they didn't really dislike each other, either. And Slytherin loyalty was a strange thing; Theodore trusted Malfoy enough to turn his back on him.

"You're not the first to want to know tonight," Theodore said. Hermione had wanted to go as a muggle fairy-tale—something she'd explained further to him a couple weeks ago—and after hearing the story of Cinderella, Theo had decided that one was the best. After all, what was more ironic than two of the class's plainest-looking students going as a prince and his consort?

"Snape asked too, did he?" Malfoy asked. He'd reverted to the West Country dialect he'd had when they were kids, as he usually did when surrounded only by Slytherins. Everyone played a role, it seemed; it was such a small world.

Theodore glanced over his shoulder, eyebrow raised. "Of course," he said.

Malfoy laughed and propped his chin on the back of the chair. "You going to try to pull?"

Theodore shook his head, even though he was beginning to get an odd feeling of camaraderie between them because of this conversation. His other Slytherin friends talked about girls—and boys— all the time, but this was the first time he'd ever been a contributing part of the conversation.

Locating his costume for the evening, he began pulling his clothes off to change. "I'm going to try," he said, fighting a blush. "Why do you care?"

Malfoy shrugged. "Don't, really. Just wanted to know what steps I need to take next."

"For what?" Theodore asked. That was the big question. That was the question he'd been tested for, and he knew he'd passed it, so that only left the answer. What was Malfoy planning?

"For Potter," he answered.

Theodore shrugged his tunic over his riding pants and said, "Not his name anymore."

"Yeah—I know." Reaching into his pocket, Malfoy pulled out one of those damned blood-flavoured lollies he was so fond of, and stuck it in his mouth. They didn't, Malfoy claimed, actually taste anything like blood. He apparently knew this because he'd tested it once when he cut his finger in Potions. Just sort of salty, Malfoy said of them.

"So what are you doing with Po—Black?" Theodore asked as he laced his shirt. "And what does that have to do with me fancying Granger?"

Malfoy removed the lolly from his mouth with a smack. "If you're keeping Granger busy, it'll be easier to learn what Potter's up to—"

"You noticed that?" Theo asked. "He's been acting differently, and I don't think it's all to do with suddenly knowing who his biological father is."

Malfoy nodded distractedly. "Yeah—not only that, he's pretty much confessed as much to me. I think he's been testing me all year, though, for what, I've no idea. He knows something—is part of something—and I've got to find out what."

Theodore nodded. For as much of a brash idiot as Malfoy could be, sometimes he was truly intuitive as only a Slytherin could be. "What do you think it's got to do with?"
Malfoy sneered, but it wasn't at him. "Something he definitely doesn't want Dumbledore to know about, I know that. After all, he knows my views on muggle relations—he's got absolutely no reason to think I'd join him in a fight against wizarding ideals…and even I don't think he's stupid enough to think that."

Theodore could neither agree nor disagree with that. Black seemed to be changing, very subtly, but that didn't necessarily mean that he was any smarter. Carousing as he did with Weasley, Theodore didn't have much hope for him, honestly.

"So you think he's changed sides?" Theodore asked sceptically.

Malfoy shook his head. "No—I think he's…collaborating. In such a Slytherin way, in fact, that I question my own sanity for even thinking it."

Theodore laughed, as Malfoy had meant for him to. That was enough of an alert for him to change the subject. "Well, let me know how it turns out," he said, and Malfoy knew exactly what he meant. Casually, even though it wasn't necessary between Slytherins, Theodore added, "You coming tonight?"

Malfoy nodded, standing from the chair and stretching his back. "Yeah. I'm going with Pansy since she just broke it off with that Ravenclaw bint. I told her—I said, 'Pansy, you're not homosexual; what are you trying to prove?' and I was right, wasn't I?"

Theodore laughed again. "She was trying to reconnect with you, probably."

Malfoy shrugged, grinning with his crooked teeth. "Rubbish," he said. "Just because I don't want in her quim doesn't mean that I can't appreciate her. She knows that."

Theo wasn't so sure about that, but he let the comment slide with a quirky grin. Malfoy had such a trashy mouth. And also, a taste for bad jokes. "Black's a fairy, too," he said.

Malfoy smirked. "I know," he said. "Doesn't mean you'll be setting us up, though. He's not to my taste. Don't get any ideas, Nott," he added, and left through the Slytherin common room door. Theo was left wondering what, exactly, would be to Malfoy's tastes. He'd lived with the boy for seven years, and still didn't really know what Malfoy liked.

How strange was that? Especially for a Slytherin? It was then that Theodore realised that Malfoy might be brash, but if he could conceal parts of himself like that so thoroughly, it was quite possible that he was the best Slytherin of them all. The thought left him feeling a little blindsided. With a shake of his head to clear it, Theodore put the gaudy gold circlet crown on his head and left to meet Hermione.

Chapter End Notes

1. le marché is French for the market.
2. Gelding is the process of castrating an animal, specifically horses. Ironically, it's also a tax paid to the sovereign by landowners. I suppose paying taxes is a bit like being castrated.
3. Cognesce te ipsum: part of my family motto, and also an archaic translation of 'know thyself' in Latin.
**Counter-Intelligence II**

Chapter by faire_weather

Chapter Notes

This chapter revised 06/12/11.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Counter-Intelligence: (n)** 1. The efforts designed to prevent enemy intelligence organizations from successfully gathering and collecting intelligence. 2. The classification and control of sensitive information or the active spreading of disinformation to mislead the enemy.

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The Halloween party itself was nothing to get excited over, really. Sure, it was a nice change, and the food was good, but Harry didn't really have much muggle experience with the holiday to speak of, and he knew little of the way wizards celebrated it. As it was, he felt like he was caught in-between the two worlds.

They went up to check on Ginny again before finally arriving, just as the party was starting up. She was still asleep, of course, but it was a shame she would miss it. It was even more of a shame the way Smith was giving Harry such a cocky look as he entered.

As far as fancy dress parties went, this was Harry's first, but even he could tell that it was a success. Students were dressed in both muggle and wizarding costumes, and even the professors were participating. Harry looked around for Snape, wondering what he'd come as, but didn't see him.

"You think he managed to get out of it?" Ron asked, reading his thoughts. He seemed to be having some trouble with his sword, cumbersome as it was.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know, but would you look at Dumbledore!" he added with a laugh. "He's got the wrong holiday."

Ron gave him a confused look, but was soon redirecting his attention in another direction. Hermione, dressed in a pink ball gown, was rushing towards them. Her shoes, Harry noticed, had been charmed to look like glass, and she seemed to be having trouble running in them. Harry couldn't really imagine anyone not having trouble running in things like that.

"It's great, isn't it?" she asked breathlessly. "Isn't it great?"

"It's great," Ron said. "I think—only we just got here. Where's the food?" Lavender, resplendent with her dark blonde hair set into waves and a pretty cream coloured dress, huffed.

"We're not here for the food," she said. "You just ate at lunch."

Ron shrugged. "That was hours ago."

No matter how much she complained, Harry reckoned that Lavender—from the way she looked at him—was smitten with Ron, and it was a terrible shame that he was so hung up on Hermione, who
had obviously—to him, anyway—moved on.

Nott walked up then and nodded hello. "What do you think, Black?" he asked. Harry was shocked that he'd bothered to ask him, but after their lessons together, he supposed that a certain amount of sociability wouldn't be amiss. Especially considering Hermione. Harry wondered how long it would be before Ron figured it out that he'd lost her—this time, probably, for good.

He made a show of looking around the Great Hall before answering. "You went to a lot of trouble. And everyone seems to be enjoying themselves."

Nott nodded, smiling. "Hermione had wonderful ideas."

To his left, Ron muttered something unintelligible under his breath, but Harry chose to ignore it in favour of forgoing the hostility. "She's very clever," he agreed.

Hermione blushed and turned her face away. "Well, we have to go. We're two of the chaperons until nine o'clock."

Harry nodded and followed as Alsace tugged on his hand. She'd waited patiently while they spoke, and it was her turn to do what she wanted. Waving, Harry left Ron and Lavender to do what they pleased, and allowed himself to be led.

"This is my sister," she said when they stopped. The girl that Alsace pointed to was exactly like her in appearance, only her eyes were more demure, more calculating. She was lounging against another Ravenclaw girl that Harry didn't know by name, but as they approached, she stood.

"Lorraine," she said politely, holding out her hand. She, too, had no hint of French in her accent.

Harry smiled as he introduced himself, but was quickly left out as the conversation between the two sisters became more and more excited. They switched to French about five-minutes in, and Harry, rolling his eyes, excused himself.

This was his payback, he assumed, for being such a berk to Parvati in fourth year.

Grabbing a cup of punch and a couple of biscuits, Harry retreated to the north wall, where a haunted pumpkin patch scene had been set up. He propped himself on one of the overly large pumpkins—definitely from Hagrid's patch—and leaned against the wall, sipping his drink.

It had, Harry found, definitely been 'seen to' by Seamus. There was a strong flavour of Firewhiskey; so strong that it almost overpowered the original taste. He took another sip, grinning to himself.

"What's so funny to you?" a voice asked from above.

Harry looked up at Malfoy and took another sip. "Nothing."

Much to his dismay, Malfoy took a seat next to him on an adjacent pumpkin. The Bloody Baron drifted by, looking ominous, and Malfoy gave him a wave, which was returned with a nod.

"Theodore's going after your bird, you know," Malfoy said.

Harry snorted. "She's not my bird," he said.

"Right," Malfoy said easily. "I forgot. You don't go for the fairer sex, do you?"

"No more than you," Harry said bluntly.
Malfoy's eyebrows went up, but that was the only indication that he was even remotely surprised by Harry's words. "All right then," he said, nodding in acknowledgement.

Harry, becoming uncomfortable, shifted on his pumpkin. "What is it, exactly, that you want, Malfoy?"

"You know what I want."

"I know," Harry said, "but you don't know what I want."

"And what's that?" Malfoy asked. Harry only raised his eyebrows, making a show of looking around at all the people in the room. Malfoy sneered. "I doubt anything you're up to is of any interest," he said, but Harry could tell he was bluffing.

Harry laughed. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Malfoy pursed his lips. "You would be surprised what I'm willing to believe, concerning you."

Harry glanced at him, downing the last of his drink. "I'm not telling you anything here—with so many people around."

"Smart move, Potter," Malfoy said, deliberately using the name. Harry rolled his eyes. "Shall we go elsewhere?" Harry rolled his eyes.

"Don't be such a toff, Malfoy," he said. "Everyone knows you're from Wiltshire." It was a joke, yes, but Harry had expected it to rile Malfoy up—to make him jump to his own defence, but instead, all it served to do was make Malfoy's lip quirk ever so slightly.

Malfoy stood, making a show of looking around. "Right," he said in an eerily perfect West Countries accent, "Pansy's run off with some Ravenclaw trollop; what say you and I get out of here, and take this somewhere you can answer my questions."

Harry stared at him for only a second before laughing. "All right, Malfoy," he said, standing. "All right. I'll go."

Slipping out of a side door, they exited the castle, walking, but not paying much attention to where they were going. It was cold out, and both of them found themselves casting heating charms around their persons simultaneously, which led to strange looks being exchanged.

"So," Malfoy said, once they were both wrapped in their little cocoons of warm air. He'd reverted to his usual poncy accent. "What are the terms?"

"The terms?" Harry asked, bewildered.

"The terms," Malfoy repeated snottily. "We have a truce now; I'd have thought that was enough."

"This truce," Harry said, "was a bit one-sided."

Malfoy scoffed. "It stands, nonetheless—for the time being, we’re at a ceasefire."

"Right," Harry said, fighting a smile. Malfoy was seriously batty. "What do you want?"

"Information," Malfoy said. "What do you want?"

Harry bit his lip, deliberating. To be honest, there wasn't much he wanted from Malfoy, if anything at all. Finally, sighing, and knowing that he was probably leaving something important out, he said, "I
just want you to stop being such a git to me, and I don't want to have to worry about what I tell you
to get into the wrong hands."

"Oh, you shouldn't worry," Malfoy said. He was grinning almost sinisterly.

Harry corrected himself: "I want you to swear, on your magic, that you'll never use what I tell you
against me, or any of the people I care about."

Malfoy frowned. "It's quite rude," he said, "to demand something like that from me."

Harry shrugged. "Then I suggest you think carefully about how much this is worth to you."

After many long minutes, Malfoy finally nodded, albeit reluctantly. "All right." Harry narrowed his
eyes and folded his arms in front of his chest, waiting. "Fine," Malfoy relented, "I swear, on my
magic."

Harry grinned maliciously. "And I want that picture of your father you offered the other day. For
Ron's Chocolate Frog cards. It'll look great with the pictures Alsace gave me of the Lestranges."

Malfoy sneered, but he didn't seem too bothered by it. "This had better be damned good, Potter," he
said. Harry shrugged. He had no idea, really, how good Malfoy would think what he had to say to
be.

"So—you swear, plus I get the picture, and I'll answer any of your questions. Fair?"

"Nothing's ever fair," Malfoy said. "But it's acceptable."

"Good," Harry said and took off at a run for the broom sheds. "Come on." He didn't check to see if
Malfoy followed him; he was sure that he would, and if he didn't? Well, Harry wouldn't mind much.
Fancy dress parties weren't exactly his thing, and he had to get away from the party whether Malfoy
came or not.

Sliding to a halt in front of the shed, he dismantled the locks and wards with a few swipes of his
wand, and pulled the door open.

"How'd you know the ward passwords?" Malfoy asked.

Harry smirked at him over his shoulder. "Every year since third year, Ron and I have made it a point
to watch Madam Hooch set them. She likes to do it at 4:23 in the morning on the second of
September, every year."

While the school brooms were nothing he would ever want to ride in a game, they had been
refurbished in sixth year, and worked well enough for situations like this when he just wanted to fly,
and didn't have time to go get his own broom. If the window wasn't open in their dorm room,
summoning it would be a bad idea.

He pulled the only two Stargazer 1850s from the rack and tossed one to Malfoy. Malfoy caught it
one-handed and stared at it incredulously. "These are a hundred and fifty years old," he said. "I can't
believe we still have them."

"These don't shake, though," Harry replied. "Brooms were——"  

"A lot sturdier back then," Malfoy finished. Harry frowned. "My mother collects old brooms," he
said with a shrug. "I've listened to her chatter about the falling standards in broom-making for years. I
was eight before she let me ride a new model; all of my early years were on antique brooms."
"Right," Harry said, looking at Malfoy strangely. He would have never guessed that Malfoy was the prattling type—nor, for that matter, would he ever have guessed that Mrs Malfoy was a broom aficionado. "Anyway, I don't want to talk about any of this on school grounds, so we need to get off them."

"Not scared?" Malfoy asked him, but he wasn't taunting; he was quite serious. "There're a lot of people out there that don't like you much, and on top of that, it's dark. No one would know you've left except me—do you trust me that much?" He still had that calculating, studying look on his face, and it made Harry justifiably uncomfortable.

"No," Harry said, just as seriously. "I just think you've overrated the current market value of my head."

Malfoy's eyebrows slid up slowly. "There are only a couple ways that you could know something like that," he said.

"Which is why we need to get out of here now," Harry said and hopped on the old broom. "Let's go south, but don't fly over Hogsmeade—McGonagall would never let me out of detention if she found out I left the grounds. There's something I've been wanting to see anyway."

Draco considered himself a reasonable person. Really, he did, but when Potter constantly presumed to call all the shots, he admitted himself a trifle perturbed. It was one thing for Potter to decide the rules for this little game they were playing—after all, Potter had more to lose from it, and if Draco were honest, he would also admit that it was very nice of Potter indeed to even consider telling him—but when Potter expected to be able to make every decision during this small ceasefire, well, Draco did find some fault in that Gryffindor logic.

And it was certainly Gryffindor logic—so trusting. Potter hadn't even hesitated to explain about the brooms, and that was information that Draco would be hard-pressed not to find a use for before the school year was out. Even if it was only minor mischief. As it was, though, Draco was also a very pragmatic person—even if he was a bit brash on occasions. He could admit that to himself, at any rate—especially since he was so pragmatic, and that pragmatism was all that kept him from opening his mouth and telling Potter exactly where he could shove that broom of his. And come to think of it, he'd probably already done so. Draco had briefly entertained the idea himself once before.

And anyway, Potter apparently had something interesting that he was actually willing to say to Draco. That was temptation enough for him to keep his mouth shut, at least for a while. After all, how often did Potter willingly speak to him? Civilly, at least? Draco couldn't actually remember it ever happening.

He removed a lollipop from his pocket and unwrapped it before following Potter onto a broom.

"What are you waiting for, Malfoy?" Potter asked him, exasperated, when he realised that Draco had not followed. Potter eyed the lollipop dubiously as he slid it into his mouth and Draco tried not to sneer around it at the inspection. The blood-lollies had never been a Hogwarts favourite, even in Slytherin, but Draco's mother had gotten him hooked on them as a child, and it was a guilty pleasure that he always indulged himself in these days—especially since Michael Corner dumped him for the Weasley bint several years back.

"I will return from this alive, right?" Draco asked after a moment, just to be certain.
Potter huffed loudly and swivelled his broom away. "Of course, you ponce. Get on the damned broom."

Draco narrowed his eyes at Potter's back, but got on the broom just the same, kicking off with enough force to make Potter duck as he levelled with him. "After you, Princess," Draco said with an elaborate gesture.

Potter refrained from spitting on him as he flew off, and Draco appreciated that like a parent would appreciate an infant not pissing in his face as it was changed.

They flew for a very long time it seemed—until the rolling countryside of the Scottish highlands became flat and the temperature, which was chilly to begin with, turned cold enough for Draco to start shivering on his broom. By the time they landed, his nose was running and he'd completely finished his lollipop; he was not in a good mood.

"What the fuck was this all about, Potter?" he snarled as he dismounted from his broom. They were in the middle of a big field surrounded on every side by ancient trees. The place looked as if it hadn't been disturbed in many years.

Potter was not in any rush to answer as he surveyed their surroundings, something that Draco did not approve of at all. Potter might not have many manners, but even Draco could see that Sirius Black had at least attempted to beat some into the brat.

Potter finally looked up at him, and Draco could see that the boy's face was just as wind-chapped and his nose just as runny. He grimaced as Potter wiped it on his sleeve.

"My dad donated this land to Zach Smith's mum…for her orphan project," Potter finally said. Draco was nonplussed and unimpressed. Surely Potter didn't think he'd come all the way out here just to hear about the goings-on with that twat Smith's mum.

"Come again?"

"Zacharias Smith," Potter clarified, looking around. "His mum works—"

"In the Department of Education at the Ministry, yes, I know," Draco finished for him, ignoring the odd look he got for it. "What does that have to do with the price of ice mice in Hogsmeade?"

"What do you want to know?" Potter asked him then, head cocked to the side. It seemed, that for the first time in his entire life, Draco had Potter's full attention. It was a strange, heady thing. "Do you even know exactly what it is that you want to know?" Potter continued. "Or do you just want to know something, anything?"

Sounds about right, Draco thought. He said instead, "What made you care? About the orphans? The politics of all of this? What do you hide from Dumbledore?"

Potter started walking, brushing his hands over the tips of the overgrown grasses, and Draco followed without thinking.

"Do you know who's behind all of this?" Potter asked. "The orphans, I mean?"

"Of course," Draco said, glancing at him. "We both know who's behind it. I want to know how you know it."

"Your dad," Potter said with a sideways look, apparently judging Draco's reaction to his words, "is the one dropping them off there. Your mum does the research and makes sure all necessary spells are
cast before and after the…erm, relocation?—to make sure that no one ever notices or misses the baby."

Draco could feel his blood pounding in his veins, and he was no longer all that cold. Potter knew entirely too much; if any of this surfaced, his mother would never stand a chance against the courts… unless, of course, public favour swayed in her direction, but with his father's past incarceration, that was unlikely. The Malfoy name was not as prestigious as it once was.

"How do you know that?" he asked, because, after all, it was the reason they were there—so far away from Hogwarts and in some pasture who knew where. Potter continued to run his fingers over the grass, deep in thought.

"Over two years ago," Potter said, "there was a battle of sorts at the Ministry. I'm sure you remember it," he added wryly. Draco sneered at him. He certainly remembered his father being locked up. "And during that battle," Potter continued carefully, "I was possessed by Voldemort."

Draco rolled his eyes, completely over the snide remark and wholly focused on how completely—completely bonkers—Potter seemed. "You don't expect me to believe that you're still possessed, and that you're really the Dark Lord, having taken over Harry Potter's body two years ago, yet with the same terrible fashion sense?" Draco gestured at the ridiculous red stripe in Potter's hair and then at the frockcoat that Potter had taken to wearing, which would have been a lovely coat if it weren't so obviously part of a militia uniform. Potter seemed affronted, but said nothing of it.

"Of course not," he said instead, rolling his eyes. "You never listen, Malfoy. I was going to say that it intensified a link between our minds—created by this stupid scar—and that the result of this was that I—hmm…" Potter trailed off, looking very closely at Draco. That strange feeling he got from having all of Potter's attention was back, and he fought not to let it show.

Draco raised his eyebrows, waiting.

"Well," Potter said. "The end result was that one day over the summer, a particularly bad day actually, I was lying in bed thinking about Voldemort—" here Potter paused to fend off the smirk Draco was giving him, "—and when I fell asleep, I woke up right in front of him."

Draco laughed. He couldn't help it. "If only that would happen to me whenever I fall asleep thinking about someone I fancy."

Potter gagged, but he was fighting a smile. "No, thank you. And additionally, sod directly off, Malfoy, you stupid fuck. It wasn't a dream, erotic or otherwise. It turns out that when I fought him out of my mind, intensifying this link we have, it also gave him some twisted sort of respect for me. He tried to use the Killing Curse on me a couple times when I appeared in front of him, and I think he's even tried to poison my tea, but—"

"He offered you tea?" Draco asked suspiciously. This was ridiculous; Potter was a loon.

"Poisoned," Potter said defensively, as if that should've resolved all questions. "Well—at first anyway. I was always only partially corporeal, you know, so it never worked, any of the attempts on my life."

Draco rolled his eyes: when had an attempt on Potter's life ever worked? "So, you're talking about astral projection, then," he said to clarify. Potter nodded. "And how do you know that you're not just mad?"

Potter grinned very slowly. "I was there that night," he said. "That night you were denied the Dark
Several things occurred to Draco right then, not the least of which was that Potter knew something that could get him put away in Azkaban for the next ten years. His entire body was stiff with tension, and it took him several long seconds to focus enough to recall that night, and when he did, one thing stood out more than any other.

He remembered feeling wild and feral with fear as his father, half-crazed from his stint in gaol, pushed him towards the Dark Lord—the Dark Lord he'd never before seen until that moment. He remembered that his eyes were wide with fright, but he couldn't see anything clearly, except those red eyes and that crooked, horrifying grin. He remembered the wariness he felt when he was denied the Mark—how he was so unsure whether to scream 'thank you' or look disappointed.

But what he remembered most clearly were the words, hissed at him and crackling with menace: “You are not ready, Draco Malfoy. You don’t know what you’re fighting for. But do not fret. I will make sure you know. When you return to Hogwarts, you will be given the opportunity to understand, and if you have the ability to think for yourself, you will take that opportunity and learn from it. If you do not, then you are not useful to me.”

He had been confused then. Now, though, he'd returned to Hogwarts a month ago, and yes, he'd noticed Potter's strangeness, even ignoring that he wasn't really a Potter. He’d had moments where he even suspected that Potter was the one the Dark Lord spoke of, but they were always mere moments. Never fully-formed thoughts. Never thoughts worth real consideration.

If I'm ready to be a Death Eater, then I have to find some esoteric meaning out of it all…and if not, then—then I don’t even have to do it. Yet, either way, the temptation to find out something new was strong, and whether or not he wanted to be a Death Eater, he wanted to know what Potter knew.

"What are you offering?" Draco asked. It was so windy there that he almost thought his words wouldn't be heard.

Potter seemed to understand exactly what Draco wasn't asking. "Tradition," he said, brushing the red stripe of hair out of his eyes, "requires wizards of sixteen or older to give support to the faction they advocate during civil wars."

"And if the wizard believes in neither?" Draco asked, even though he knew the answer already from growing up a Malfoy: to not help end a civil war was unacceptable; if the young wizard did not believe in either, then he must fight for his father's side, so that one day he might fight for his own. Civil wars were terrible things in the wizarding world, where one lost life could be the end of an entire family line. But that wasn't what was important to Draco right then; what was important was that Potter was offering what the Dark Lord and Dumbledore weren’t offering—he was offering peace, stability, and something new, yet traditional.

"Then one day, he will fight for his own," Potter replied.

Draco remembered looking at the Dark Lord warily, afraid that he was being set upon a trap. “How will I know who it is?” he had asked, and the only answer he’d received had been, “You will know.”

Behind them, a nest of Auguries started whimpering; Draco paid them no mind. "What are you offering?" he asked again. The traditional answer to that question repeated was—

"My family for yours," Potter said.

Draco bowed his head. He knew now; there was no room for doubt whatsoever. Harry Potter was
indeed the one he'd been told to expect—he was the one meant to train him, meant to teach him how to be a good Death Eater...however Potter might do that. And furthermore, he'd just offered Draco something so important, so—

As a little boy, he'd dutifully learned all the wizarding customs and proper etiquette for every possible situation. But the older he grew, the less he was permitted to use these lessons: it seemed that with each passing year, another wizarding colloquialism or a certain handshake or vow was replaced with something to make the increasing numbers of muggle-born wizards more comfortable.

There were just some things that should never be done away with, Draco thought. History was one of those things, and for every muggle-born who found offence in the name of a god or God or gods, and was thusly rewarded when celebrations of sabbats and season changes were banned in public places, more of their—of Draco's—history was lost.

"I believe in the old ways," Draco finally said. "And in tradition—it builds magical strength and keeps our kind closer to the god of all things."

Potter nodded carefully. "You should," he said. "You were raised to, and you should fight to keep those practises in place."

"But?" Draco asked wryly. There was always a 'but'.

"You know the answer to that," Potter said. "There are practises and traditions that are already long gone from contemporary memory by now and you have no more right to re-enforce them than anyone else has to prohibit you from practising them.

Draco frowned. "But just because I don't have 'the right' to do it—"

"Doesn't mean it doesn't need to be done," Potter finished with him, nodding.

Draco smiled slowly. "Exactly."

It was then that the whimpering of the Auguries became cries and wails, and could no longer be ignored. Draco looked at his watch, saw that it was nearly one in the morning, and jumped on his broom.

"We have to go," he said. "It's going to rain."

Potter was already on his broom and kicking off. "I know—Hogwarts is north, north-west—maybe forty-five minutes."

"Why did you want to come here anyway?" Draco asked him as they slid above the clouds, almost in time to avoid the sudden outpour of rain. Potter was shaking his head to get the water out and casting drying charm after drying charm on himself. He wasn't terribly good at them, and Draco, feeling suddenly lighter than he had in years, pointed his wand and dried Potter in a single swish. The flabbergasted look he received in return was better than a hex, he supposed.

"Erm—thanks," Potter said. Draco merely waited. "Well," Potter continued, apparently returned to his usual state of confusion, "I just think it's a really good idea," he said. "What Mrs Smith is doing, you know. Most of us have grown our magic well before we're eleven—we should be learning to use it before then."

"So?" Draco asked. "That's was tutors and parents are for."

"But not everyone can afford tutors or stay home from work to teach—and really, not every parent is
knowledgeable or even capable of teaching their kids. Anyway, I guess I just wanted to see where
the school would go…try to imagine how it'll look or something."

Draco shrugged. He couldn't care less, really.

Potter gave him a wary look, as if he knew he'd just said too much to an enemy. Draco would've
agreed under normal circumstances, but right then he was still light-headed from the decision he'd
made. So Potter was a sap? So what? If there were more sappy wizards in the world, it would
probably be a better place—in fact, it was a shame that Michael Corner hadn't been.

"Race you back," Potter said as they crossed over Perth.

Draco looked up from his musings just in time to see Potter speeding off. "Fuck—Potter! Potter, you
twat!" he yelled, trying to catch up. It was almost a lost cause on these brooms, they definitely had a
max speed.

Potter looked over his shoulder at him, stupid hair flying into his eyes and mouth and grinning like a
Hufflepuff.

"Potter!" Draco yelled again. He was finally gaining some ground, and it was only another moment
before he pulled even with the stupid boy. They followed the M90 to Perth, and angled northeast. By
Braemar, they were still even, and Draco was beginning to freeze again; thank Merlin they were
nearly there. Potter glanced at him from the corner of his eye, almost maniacal in his competitiveness,
and at that moment, Draco felt like they might have something real in common, he just didn't know
what it was just yet.

Hogwarts came into view just as Draco banged his shoulder into the other boy's, sending him
swerving to the left. He pulled ahead with a laugh.

"I think I swallowed a Midge!" Potter yelled, gagging into one hand and trying to hold onto his
broom with the other.

"It's the wrong season for those," Draco said. He was breathless from the racing, but wasn't stupid
enough to fall for that trick.

"No, I'm serious," Potter said with another hacking cough. "It's biting my throat!" Draco glanced
over his shoulder in time to see Potter spit a mouthful of blood into the hand that wasn't holding onto
his broom.

"Oh good Mer—are you having me on, Potter?" Draco asked, still zooming ahead of Potter, but
slowing down some just the same. "Potter, I swear if you're—"

Potter wiped his bloody hand on his pants and stuck his tongue out at Draco. "Just bit my tongue,
actually," he said with a grin. "See you at Hogwarts!" and then he was ahead again, diving down
towards the Black Lake and skimming over the surface, even as a tentacle slid out and provided a
ramp to swing him back into the air.

"Potter, I hate you, and I hope you die on that stupid broom!" Draco yelled as he followed as quickly
as he could.

Potter cackled jovially. "When I do," he yelled over his shoulder, "I'll make sure my epitaph says
'Did it for Malfoy'."

Draco laughed, genuinely—something he didn't do all that often. He took a forty-five degree dive
and cut the other boy off near the Quidditch pitch. They were shoulder to shoulder to again now, and
Draco could almost hear Potter's heavy breathing over the rush of the air past his ears.

When they—both too stubborn to pull up—skidded into the grass, scraping elbows and knuckles and knees, Draco was still laughing: something that he would be thinking about all weekend, and something that would confuse him for even longer.

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Lavender looked very pretty, Ron thought. He had always thought she was pretty, but tonight, when he walked out with Harry to meet her, he thought she looked exceptionally pretty. She wasn't bad at kissing, either.

"Are you having fun?" Lavender asked him, and Ron was jolted from his thoughts. He smiled at her shyly—why was he still shy around her?—and nodded.

"Yeah," he said. "You?"

Lavender giggled and grasped his hand underneath the table. They were sitting with Neville, Luna, Parvati, Padma, Zacharias Smith and Justin Finch-Fletchley. Ron didn't care much for Smith or Finch-Fletchley, but he honestly didn't think anyone cared much for Finch-Fletchley, so he didn't feel too bad about it.

Poor Padma, he thought. She had to spend the rest of the evening with him. He suddenly felt anxious—Lavender didn't think he was annoying like Finch-Fletchley, did she? He looked at her quickly, to gauge her interest, and just in time to hear her answer. He'd half-forgot that he even asked her a question.

"Of course," she said. "I always have fun with you."

Ron smiled smugly; he couldn't help it. It was times like this that he completely forgot about Hermione. Sometimes, Lavender would say something that made him feel on top of the world; Hermione never said things like that to him. Absently, he turned to search for her among the other students.

She was talking to McGonagall and Dumbledore, who both looked a little upset, and seemed to be questioning her. 'I don't know,' he saw her say, shaking her head. McGonagall pursed her lips and frowned at the Great Hall in general while Dumbledore said something undoubtedly witty and shrugged it off.

It was then that Ron saw that lunatic Nott jog up to them and stop next to Hermione, joining the conversation. He sneered at him, even though he knew Nott couldn't see him do it. It was the thought that counted.

"No one cares!" Smith suddenly hissed, and Ron turned back to his table. Smith was glaring daggers at Justin Finch-Fletchley, hands balled into fists and pressed hard into the table.

"Well, they should!" Justin returned just as angrily. He surveyed the entire table, eyes coming to rest on Ron, and added, "Shouldn't they, Ron? Even you have to admit that it's important."

"No idea what you're talking about," Ron replied easily. "Wasn't listening." Smith snorted and Lavender giggled, and Ron felt on top of the world again. Poor Padma, he thought again. She looked extremely embarrassed by her date.

"Ronnie," Lavender said. Ron looked up, only moderately more satisfied with this nickname than the one that had come before it. "I'm thirsty—would you get us some punch?"
"Course," he said. He needed to stretch his legs, anyway—maybe see how Harry was doing with his date. Ron suppressed a shudder as he rose from the table; he just couldn't understand how Harry could stand to be around someone whose own mother was responsible for Sirius'...well, alleged death.

He took one last look at Lavender before heading off; she was already engrossed in a rapid-fire gossip session with Parvati, and wasn't likely to miss him any time soon. He could go see how Harry was holding up, find out the latest Quidditch scores, and be back in time to suffer through a couple more dances. He really should have taken a leaf out of Neville's book and gotten those dance lessons, but Lavender didn't seem to mind how bad he was.

Sliding his way through the throngs of students—even some of the Slytherins looked to be having fun—Ron made his way to the refreshment table in search of punch. He found it at the end, near where Pansy Parkinson was talking to a Ravenclaw girl that Ron didn't know. He sneered and then busied himself pouring two goblets.

He didn't like any of the Slytherins, but he could keep his mouth shut tonight at least for Hermione. She'd put a lot of effort into this House Unification nonsense, and he wasn't going to be the one to cock it up; he'd leave that to someone else. And then, perhaps, when Hermione saw how mature he was being, she'd consider it a success and leave it alone.

"...have to stop," the Ravenclaw girl said in a hushed tone. "You can't keep doing this." Ron smirked as he gathered his two drinks and quietly slipped away before he was seen. Of course, leave it to a Slytherin to be constantly up to something. He had to hand it to the Ravenclaw for standing up to Parkinson like that.

Ron glanced over his shoulder one last time to see that Parkinson was glaring at the Ravenclaw girl and her eyes...looked a little bit shinier than usual. He snorted and continued on his way. He had to find Harry and tell him; it was hilarious: someone had actually called Parkinson out on her most-likely-evil deeds and Parkinson was playing the Guilt Card. Priceless.

Judging by the crowd, Ron suspected that the entire school had shown up for this event—which was really brilliant—but it meant that he couldn't see Harry anywhere. He was probably moping in some corner trying to think of something to say to his crazy date. After three circuits of the Great Hall, Ron still couldn't find him, so he just decided to go back to Lavender. She was probably really thirsty by now.

And come to think of it, Ron was too. Absently, as he was trying to find a way through the dancing students, he took a sip of his punch. He paused. And then he took another sip. This—did not taste like punch; in fact, it tasted like...Ron pursed his lips. Someone had spiked the punch.

Hermione needed to know immediately. If he were to bring something like this to her attention, it would certainly get her off his back about 'depression' and 'addiction' and other stupid things like that. He changed his course, backtracking to find her. He'd last seen her talking to Dumbledore and McGonagall, and he could see Dumbledore's tall red hat from here.

She wasn't there, though, which was a little annoying. He'd already spent twenty-minutes looking for Harry; he didn't want to spend another twenty looking for Hermione. He was about ready to give up when he noticed that the door to the antechamber Hermione had been using to store party decorations in was slightly ajar.

Of course. She was probably restocking sweet bowls or something.

He slipped inside, and took a look around, craning his neck over the various boxes in the room. She
was no where to be seen, and Ron, frowning, stepped further into the room. There was the sound of movement behind one stack of boxes, and he smiled, knowing he’d found her.

Still grinning—Hermione was going to be so proud of him—he stepped around the box, saying, "Hermione…” And stopped dead in his tracks, dropping both cups of punch. They splattered all over the floor—little red rivers like watered-down blood—but he barely noticed.

He only noticed one thing, actually: that Hermione was pressed against the side wall between two stacks of boxes and…Theodore Nott. Theodore Nott, whose hair was messier than Harry's on a bad day, whose face was shocked and red, and whose body was pressed against Hermione's back and whose hand was tangled in her curly hair. Hermione gasped and her eyes opened, and locked with his, but not before he noticed that her lips were swollen and red and that she was breathing far heavier than he’d ever seen her do.

"Ron!"

"I uh—I was going to tell you," Ron stuttered, "I was going to tell you someone spiked the punch… maybe you'd want to know…fix it or something," he said, and ran from the room. He didn't stop when he got back to the Great Hall; he kept running, passing the table he'd been sitting at and ignoring the worried call of his name from Lavender. He didn't stop until he made it all the way back to Gryffindor Tower, and when he got there, the Fat Lady didn't even ask him for the password.

At the time, he thought nothing of it, but when he finally threw himself down on his bed, out of breath and panting, he realised that his face was soaking wet, and maybe she'd been too startled by that to even bother.

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Chapter End Notes

1. Midges are horrible little insects that swarm in parts of Scotland during the summers. They attack relentlessly and have really painful bites.
Counter-Intelligence III
Chapter by faire_weather

Counter-Intelligence: (n) 1. The efforts designed to prevent enemy intelligence organizations from successfully gathering and collecting intelligence. 2. The classification and control of sensitive information or the active spreading of disinformation to mislead the enemy.

On Monday, over a week after Harry and Malfoy had flown together, he walked to Arithmancy with Hermione and Nott, while Malfoy skulked along behind them, arguing with Zacharias Smith about something inane. They were always arguing, though; usually about things that Harry didn't understand—such as the proper way to formulate an Ancient Runes table or what a constellation meant, depending on where it was at what time. Only now they argued around Harry, being as he was friends—of a sort—with each of them.

The walk was quiet and awkward, something that Harry had never experienced with Hermione. She was strangely reticent, and he still hadn't been able to get her to tell him what had happened between her and Ron. Even more strange, he hadn't been able to get it out of Ron, either. All he knew was that they were fighting—he was pretty sure, anyway—they weren't talking, and he was caught in the middle. He rolled his eyes; it was like fourth year all over again, only without Krum lurking about.

"Did you finish your homework?" she asked him. Well, Harry reconsidered, she was talking to him, but it was stilted—small-talk, really.

"Yeah," Harry said. "We just had to answer the questions at the end of the chapter, right?"

Hermione nodded. "Have you finished your Transfigurations and DADA essays for tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

"What about Potions?" she continued. "Do you understand what we've been doing in class?"

"Sort of," Harry said. He glanced over at Nott to see what he thought about all of this, but Nott was looking straight ahead and saying nothing. He'd been quiet in Potions, too, now that Harry thought about it. Harry narrowed his eyes; Krum might not be around, but Nott was, and he'd certainly had his suspicions about the two of them—

"Well, if you need me to go over it with you—"

"Did Ron find out?" Harry interrupted her, bluntly. Nott looked up quickly. So, he had been paying attention. Harry pursed his lips. He didn't care who Hermione dated, but if he was going to have to deal with Ron sulking over it, he wasn't going to be very happy.

"Find out what, Harry?" Hermione asked. She was terrible at evasion.

"Don't insult him, Hermione," Nott said quietly. "You know what he's talking about." Harry nodded in affirmation.

"How did you know?" she asked with a sigh.
Harry shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not completely oblivious, you know."

Hermione grimaced, glancing around her. "We haven't really discussed it, you know," she started. "Theo and I, I mean."

Nott raised his eyebrows. "I assumed it to be understood," he said to her. When she gave him a blank look, he added, "What? You want me to ask you to be my girlfriend?"

Hermione snorted and slapped his shoulder. "Nothing quite so frivolous," she answered.

Harry cleared his throat. "Ron?"

"Weasley saw us kissing," Nott said with a shrug. Harry winced: poor Ron. "It wasn't the way I would have wanted him to find out, but what's done is done."

"He's being ridiculous about it," Hermione added angrily. "I tried to talk to him yesterday, but he's acting like…like a git! He just sneers at me and leaves the room."

"He's pretty besotted with you," Harry said frankly.

Hermione rolled her eyes, but it was Nott who spoke, saying with a cheesy grin at Hermione, "Small world." Hermione slapped him again.

"Ron's just going to have to get over it," she said matter-of-factly. "I gave him innumerable opportunities, and, I'm sorry Harry, but I'm just not interested in him any longer." She shrugged, unrepentant.

It was then that Malfoy loped up to them, falling into step next to Nott and pounding him on the back cheekily. "Good for you, Nott," he said. Nott pointedly brushed his shirt off and gave Malfoy an arched look.

"Nice to see you again, Malfoy," he said. "It's been ever so long."

Malfoy ignored him, instead focusing on Hermione, who looked entirely uncomfortable with the attention. "So, landed one, have you, Granger?" he asked. "Nott's a respectable catch—decent standing, and his Gringott's vault isn't entirely empty."

Hermione looked disgusted, and really, Harry wasn't far from it himself. Nott, on the other hand, looked quietly amused.

"Malfoy, you disgusting insect," Hermione said. "I'm not after his money. Don't ever presume to insult me in such a way again, or I'll make that pretty little face of yours look like the back-end of a flobberworm."

"You little—"

"Malfoy," Harry and Nott said simultaneously. Malfoy sneered at both of them and then turned back to Hermione.

"I don't like you, Granger," he said instead. "I think you're a pretentious little bitch, actually, but I have some small amount of respect for Nott, so I'll temper my tongue when in your presence, but I promise you: raise your hand to me even once and I'll raise mine right back. I have no compunctions about hitting a woman—or a girl, as the case may be. Furthermore," he added, "fuck off. It was a joke, you toff."
The awkward silence from before returned; Harry wasn't sure whether to defend Hermione or laugh at Malfoy's fucked-up sense of humour. Judging by Nott's look, he didn't know quite what to do, either.

He should have known that Hermione could take care of herself, though. She proved it with her next words.

"Given that I'm unaccustomed to your admittedly lacking sense of humour," she said archly, "you'll forgive me my breach of etiquette. Also, bugger off, this is a private conversation."

"Not anymore," Malfoy said easily. "Potter's my Arithmancy partner."

"Black," Hermione and Nott said together. Harry shrugged, unconcerned. Malfoy was determined to ignore his parentage, for whatever reason, and Harry really didn't care anyway.

"Oh, and here we are!" Malfoy said, ignoring them as well. He stopped in front of the open door and turned to them with a sarcastic grin. "Here's to hoping Potter and I get the best cursed item, and you two have to deal with a jinxed bidet."

"Fucker," Nott muttered under his breath as they followed him into the room. Hermione obviously agreed, since she didn't chastise him for language.

"Actually," Harry said, as he sat down next to Malfoy at their table, "I already know what we're getting."

Malfoy gave him a blank look.

"Our item," Harry clarified, rolling his eyes. "For the project." Malfoy was so utterly frustrating, even when they had a…truce. Or whatever.

"You would," Malfoy said.

Harry waited. "Don't you want to know what it is?"

Malfoy pulled one of those terrible blood lollies from his pocket and unwrapped it. "I like surprises."

Harry sat back in his chair, disgruntled.

"Good afternoon," Professor Vector said as he entered the classroom, arms laden with papers and books. "Pass up your chapter questions, and Mr Zabini, if you would come hand out last week's marked essays?"

Harry passed his homework up with a sigh. He hadn't been lying to Hermione; he really had done his questions, but he wasn't altogether certain that they were correct. He glanced at her sitting next to Nott across the aisle, wishing that they could switch seats; Nott was really the only one who could explain this stuff to him.

"As Mr Zabini is passing back your essays," Professor Vector continued, "I'd like to take a moment, before we discuss the project you'll be properly beginning today, to discuss my thoughts on your comprehension of this chapter.

"As a whole, I was disappointed," Vector continued just as Zabini handed Harry his marked essay. Harry didn't blame the professor; he was disappointed, too. He thought he would have got an A on that essay, but he'd only scored a P.
"Our two new students this year, Mr Black and Ms MacDougal, I can understand: they were moved into this class when the upper-year beginning class was cancelled. The rest of you?" he said blandly, "Terrible. Not a single O out of the whole class."

Harry glanced over at Hermione and Nott, who were both staring so incredulously at the marks on their papers that he doubted they had even heard the professor speak. Beside him, Malfoy scoffed, muttering, "I knew I should have triple-checked the equation…such a fucking stupid mistake."

"What did you get?" Harry asked him, craning his neck to see.

Malfoy glared at him and covered his mark, but he still answered, "An A; can you believe that? It's hippogriff shit! Use the wrong formula on one single question and he takes off two whole letters!"

"I got a P," Harry said with a shrug. "Better than a Troll, I suppose."

Malfoy scoffed again. "You haven't been taking the class for four years. Also, you're an idiot; it's expected of you."

Harry rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to Professor Vector, who was still droning on about how utterly appalling the scores were.

"And so," Vector said at last, "I feel it prudent to reinstate a program I used when I first started at Hogwarts. Working with your project partner, you will be required to log three hours per week studying the worksheet Mr Zabini will now be handing out."

Zabini sighed and stood back up to collect the worksheets.

"These worksheets are similar to the ones you received in your second year. They include a study guide listing all known Arithmantic theorems and formulae plus irregular formulae and suspected theorems. The worksheet attached contains solvable and insolvable equations, which you must, as a team, complete each week. After you have spent the required three hours working on them, they will copy to your file for me to mark; if you finish the equations before your three hours are up, more will appear. Working on your partner project will not count towards the time limit. Are there any questions?"

There was a collective groan from the class, but no questions. Harry scanned the packet that he and Malfoy were given and chuckled bitterly to himself. "It would have been brilliant if he'd bothered to give this to me before. Might've made this nonsense a little more understandable."

Malfoy was not amused. "Most of these are noted in the textbook, Potter. If you'd really given a damn, you might have actually read it."

"I did read it," Harry insisted. "I just don't understand it. I mean—how can twelve to the fourth power equal a 'Middle Magic fire charm'?" he asked, waving his hand at one of the corrected answers on his paper.

"Easily," Malfoy said blandly. "All Arithmantic equations have to be worked backwards before they can be worked forwards, right? So, in the information you were given, it said that the original spell included four waves and three swishes, thus, multiplied, twelve. You got that far, right?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah."

"You were multiplying an odd, prime number by an even number. Whenever you multiply odd by even, it will always be Middle Magic. Even by even is Old or Dark Magic, so odd by odd would be…?"
"Light?" Harry guessed.

Malfoy shrugged. "New Magic, really, but they've started calling it Light Magic within the last few hundred years."

That was news to Harry, but at least it sort of made sense now. He could now see where the 'Middle Magic' part of the answer came from, but he still didn't understand the fourth power part. He'd guessed on the answer and arbitrarily come up with a 'Spell to Make Apples into Orchards'. "And the rest?" he asked.

Malfoy gestured at the parchment. "Then, it goes on to say that the outcome was twelve to the fourth power, but originally, the spell lasted seven heartbeats and two breaths, and that there were ten variations. So you start with your time indicators—the heartbeats and breaths—and you multiply again. Seven heartbeats times two breaths is fourteen. Subtract the ten possible variations and you get the fourth power, see?"

"No," Harry said bluntly. "I see where the four came from, but I don't understand how you got a fire charm."

"Oh, well that's easy enough," Malfoy said. "If your heart has beaten seven times in the space of two breaths, you can deduce that it is an adrenaline-affecting spell since the average spell is performed with the same amount of heartbeats as breaths."

"Okay," Harry said dubiously.

Malfoy gave him a look and then continued. "So, you know it's an adrenaline-affecting spell, that it's Middle Magic and that there are ten variations. That's when you would consult your supplementary text, assuming you haven't memorised all the spells as you would have been required to do, had you taken the first two years of Arithmancy."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I did sign up for the beginning class; I can't help that I got moved."

Malfoy shrugged. "Not my problem, but if you didn't understand, as most wizarding children would have," he said pointedly, "you should have asked for help from Vector." He reached into his bag and pulled out a thick book, tapping it with his wand and saying: "Middle Magic, ten."

The pages flipped and rustled, finally stopping near the end. "See?" Malfoy said, pointing to the text. "It's a voice-activated text. You can state the type of magic and the amount of variations, and it will bring up all known spells that fit."

He ran his finger down the page, searching. "This part is a little time-consuming sometimes, but there's always only one answer—at least until you get to the Advanced Squared stuff—so if you've done your equations right, you should have no trouble...and see—here it is: Middle Magic, ten variations, Fire Charm: 'An adrenaline-affecting spell'."

Harry looked over Malfoy's shoulder. "That's it?" he asked incredulously. Malfoy hadn't been lying; there were at least twenty spells on the page, but only the fire charm was listed as 'adrenaline-affecting'. "That's all I had to do?"

"Pretty much," Malfoy said.

This was absurd. This whole time, Harry had thought that, really, Arithmancy involved a little bit of skewed math and an educated guess, but here Malfoy had explained it—even better than Nott had!—all in the span of five minutes.
"So," Harry said slowly, looking at his other missed questions. "In number three, where it says the outcome is six to the negative second power…that would be…erm, let's see. It says the original spell was two flicks and three stabs, so…Middle Magic because one's odd, one's even?"

Malfoy nodded.

"And then, two heartbeats and two breaths, and six variations, so a normal spell. Two times two is four, minus six is negative two, so that's where the negative second power comes from, right?"

"Yes," Malfoy said with a pleased sort of smirk on his face. "But what kind of spell is it?"

Harry pulled his own book from his bag and said: "Middle magic, six variations." The pages flipped to the middle and stopped. "Erm…a fever-reducing spell?" he asked.

Malfoy grinned, and Harry noticed that his teeth were pink from the lollipop. "Yes, exactly. And why isn't it a wart-remover or fabric-dying spell?"

Harry glanced back at the text. "The wart-remover spell is ‘a negative adrenaline-affecting spell’, and the fabric-dying spell is ‘an assumed irregular count spell’—what's that?"

"Something too complicated to explain right now," Malfoy said.

"Oh," Harry said. "But—I was right, then? That's all I had to do?"

"Yeah," Malfoy said. "That's it; of course, in the Advanced-Squared class, it gets more complicated, but you can use that formula or a longer variation of it for almost everything we'll do this year."

"Mr Malfoy, if I may have your attention, I think that what I'm saying may be of some small interest to you," Vector said loudly.

Malfoy sneered at his desk and said, "Apologies, sir. I was explaining something to Potter."

"Mr Black may ask me any questions he has after we've discussed the project, Mr Malfoy. Please refrain from making excuses."

"As you wish, sir," Malfoy said contritely. Harry didn't buy that act for a minute, though; Malfoy was still sneering at his desk.

"As I was saying," Vector continued, once again monotone and bland. "Mr Zabini"—here, Zabini rolled his eyes as he yet again got up from his desk—"will be passing out various cursed, hexed or jinxed items, according to your skill level, for your term project.

"You will be given an information sheet pertaining to your item that lists three known factors. Your assignment for the project is to not only determine the type of spell adversely affecting the item, but also to discover a way to remove it. Points for creativity, efficiency and your physical health at the end of the project. This project will count as forty percent of your final mark, so I suggest you do not take it lightly. Assignments will be due after the holidays; that gives you two and a half months to complete it. Any questions?"

There were, again, none. Zabini stopped at their desk with his box full of items and pulled out the tacky ring Dumbledore had shown Harry the week before. The little tag hanging off it, Harry saw as Zabini set it on their desk, said 'Black, Malfoy'.

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"Don't lose a finger, Black," Zabini said, walking away.

Harry rolled his eyes.

"That's it?" Malfoy asked, looking at the ugly ring. He, apparently, was so surprised that their item was only jewellery, that he'd actually taken the lollipop out of his mouth and set it on the desk. "Jewellery? Jewellery curses are always so...so mundane!" he hissed. "Surely my skill level more than makes up for your lack, Potter...why are we getting a ring, when Nott and Granger are getting a dagger?"

Harry shrugged, disappointed for some reason. "I don't know—Dumbledore wanted us to do this. He seemed to think that it would keep us occupied."

Malfoy pursed his lips. "There better be a really outstanding curse on this ring, Potter."

"I'm not the one who picked it," Harry said defensively. The bell signalling the end of class chimed, and they started packing up.

"Slytherin has Quidditch practise tonight," Malfoy said as he stood. "Meet me in the library after dinner on Thursday to start on the project."

Harry didn't even have a chance to reply before Malfoy was out of the room. He watched him hurry through the door with a scowl on his face. Malfoy might not be acting like such a git around him right now, but that didn't mean he wasn't one.

Hermione and Nott stopped at his desk on their way out, waiting for him to finish packing everything up. He started to put the ring on his finger for safe-keeping, but stopped at the last moment. Surely, it was insanity to wear a cursed item. He stuck it in his pocket instead.

"What did you get?" Hermione asked. "We got a ceremonial dagger."

"A ring," Harry said, noticing the telling looks that Hermione and Nott gave each other. Really, how boring could removing a curse be? So what if it was just a ring; it was still a curse to remove, and that sounded pretty interesting to Harry. Sort of, anyway.

"Oh—well, I was just going to say that Madam Pomfrey said she was going to let Ginny out about this time today, so maybe you should go help her carry her things back to the Tower."

"Aren't you coming?" Harry asked, as he slung his bag over his shoulder and walked with them out of the classroom.

Hermione pursed her lips. "I think," she said slowly, "that with you and Ron, she'll have enough help."

"Oh," Harry said. He sighed. "All right then, I'll see you at dinner."

Hermione nodded as they parted ways and called, "Bring your Arithmancy book and I'll help you study."

Harry turned around, walking backwards so she could see the full effect of his grin as he said, "No need! Malfoy explained it; it's so simple, now!"

Hermione's mouth dropped, but Harry paid it no mind as he turned back around and jogged to the Infirmary.
Ron was already waiting on the floor by the door with his Divination book propped on his lap when Harry got there. The overly bright smile that Ron gave him was obviously fake, but if Ron was trying at all, then Harry knew that he certainly didn't want it brought up, so Harry played along, smiling right back.

"What are you doing here already?" Harry asked. "Divination's on the other side of the castle."

Ron shrugged, his smile turning a little more genuine as he answered. "I skipped," he said smugly. "Trelawney told me I was going to be terribly unwell, so I asked her if I could go ahead and come to the Infirmary before I got sick all over her fluffy poufs. She sent me down straight away."

Harry laughed. "What time is Ginny getting out?"

Ron stood, stretching. "Pomfrey said she'd let her out after the last class today, so I reckon right about now."

"Brilliant. I bet she's been really bored," Harry said. Madam Pomfrey gave them a stern look as they entered, but allowed them through the doors anyway, nodding them in the direction of Ginny's bed.

"Nah," Ron said. "Mum and Dad have been up here fussing over her all weekend, and the twins sent her some…questionable sweets. Yesterday, she told me that a rainbow-coloured one made everything all swirly and sparkly for hours, and that she found the meaning of life or something after she ate it…but she won't tell me what it is." Ron grinned at him, shrugging.

Harry raised his eyebrows. He wasn't sure if those kinds of sweets were legal, much less safe for giving one's little sister, but he didn't say anything. What bothered him more, actually, was that Ron had apparently been spending a lot of time up here as well over the weekend. He felt terrible: he'd been so busy—mostly trying to figure out his Arithmancy chapter questions—that he'd neglected Ron all weekend.

And it had been a weekend that Ron probably needed him around. He hadn't known at the time, of course, but…if he had been so smitten with Hermione, and then seen her kissing Nott, he probably would've wanted Ron around…if for nothing else, than just to have someone to smash things with. Or a distraction—which was probably what Ginny's hospitalisation was for Ron, actually.

Ginny was standing beside her bed at the far end of the room, muttering as she tried to stuff things into her overnight bag.

"Want some help?" Harry asked.

Ginny turned to them absently, then back to her bag. "Merlin—I know I didn't come in here with all this stuff!" she said. "Honestly, it was just a broken ankle…"

Harry glanced at all the little trinkets around her bed—a big stuffed dragon, probably from Charlie, a dangerous looking gift-basket from the twins, cakes from her parents, Ron's Chess board, and several vases of flowers. "How come I never got any of these things when I was hurt?" Harry asked archly. "I'm in here all the time, and no one ever sends me flowers!"

Ron cuffed him. "Don't be a prat, Harry," he said with a laugh. "You're not pretty enough for flowers."

Harry huffed.
"You two can carry all this, if you want," Ginny interrupted with a grin. "I'll get the dragon."

"Of course you will," Ron said indulgently. " Wouldn't want to put any stress on that ankle."


Glowing at them, Ginny plucked the dragon from the bed and started out of the Infirmary. "Indeed," she said as she was walking away. "Luckily, I have two big, strong idiots to carry it all for me."

"We walked right into that one," Ron bemoaned as Ginny flounced ahead of them; no more delicate than Hagrid. "Should've seen it coming."

Harry chuckled. "Lots of things we should've seen coming—we never learn, do we?"

Ron shrugged, attempting to reposition his load; he was carrying the shady-looking basket from the twins and trying to keep it as far from his person as humanly possible without dropping it—which might also be detrimental to hiscontinued health. "Might one day. I'm holding out hope for it, anyway." This statement was accompanied by a strange, faraway look that Harry chose to ignore, in favour of changing the subject.

"We should probably have an extra practise this week and next week," he said. "It was bad enough losing to Zach Smith, but I don't think I'll be able to stand it if I have to listen to Malfoy gloating for the rest of the year."

Ron grimaced at the reminder of that terrible game, but asked, "What d'you mean? Just punch the git and walk away."

Harry frowned as he pushed his hair behind his ear. "Can't—the git's my Arithmancy partner."

"Rotten luck," Ron said sympathetically.

Harry opened his mouth to say that Malfoy wasn't quite as bad as they'd always thought he was, but changed his mind at the last minute. Ron wouldn't believe him, and even if he did, hearing that all Slytherins weren't bad was the last thing he needed after the whole business with Nott. Instead, as they reached the top of the stairs, he said, "Yeah—you think Ginny'll be fine for practise next week?"

Ron shrugged. "Madam Pomfrey just said to stay off it for this week. She didn't say anything about next week—and besides, if you're on a broom, you're not really on your ankle, are you?"

"Guess not," Harry said with a grin. He paused to readjust the huge load of stuff he was carrying, and added, "We're gonna kill 'em." By which he meant Slytherin.

Ron nodded. "They don't have a chance."

The first night after she got out of the Infirmary, after the four other girls in her year had been asleep for hours, Ginny stared up at the canopy of her bed, unable to close her eyes. She was anxious and restless and if she stayed in that bed a moment longer, she was going to go insane. But she didn't know why, and it was making her even more anxious.

"I swear to Merlin…" she muttered as she flung her blankets off and stood from the bed.
Immediately, she was shivering, but she made no move to wrap her dressing gown around herself as she walked over to the window. She looked out: nothing.

Ginny scowled. "Fine—" she muttered to herself, not even caring if she woke her dorm-mates. "We'll go walk around the courtyard once, and then maybe I'll be able to sleep."

She quickly changed into warmer clothes, grabbed her cloak and slipped out of her dorm, closing the door behind her with a soft *snick*. It had been almost a year since she'd needed to go for a walk before she could sleep, but it would only take a quick stroll around outside and she'd be asleep in no time.

Slipping out of the portrait hole, Ginny hugged the shadows as she hurried down the stairs. At this time of night, she could go out through the side door near the Muggle Studies classroom on the first storey without anyone being the wiser.

It was even colder outside, but Ginny paid no mind to it; she was only interested in calming her strangely anxious mind so that she could get some sleep before class. After a week out with nothing to do but sleep, there was no way her professors were going to be very forgiving if she was feeling tired.

Her shoes clacked on the steps as she hopped down them, favouring her uninjured ankle as Madam Pomfrey had instructed. "At least I'm a good patient," she said.

It was very still outside: she hadn't expected it to be otherwise, but the stillness was so heavy that her anxiousness intensified. She pursed her lips and pulled her cowl up. It was only midnight, Madam Rosmerta would still be serving, and a warm butterbeer might be just the thing she needed for sleep. And perhaps the newspaper: she hadn't been able to keep up with the Derby Dozen—as they'd come to be called—since her injury.

The path around the lake and into Hogsmeade was one she'd never before taken when it was a Hogsmeade Weekend, but she thought nothing of it as she walked along. Everything was dark and still, and she could barely see two feet in front of her, but she knew the way by heart, and did not misstep. Even as she stepped through the gates and felt the protective wards ghost over her like warm fingers—something she'd never even given much notice to—did she question her actions.

Ginny's mind wandered; she didn't notice it, and when her ambling took her not to Rosmerta's pub, not even to the Hog's Head, but to a bar that—had she been paying attention, she would have not recalled having ever seen—she didn't notice that, either.

The barman had black hair, blue eyes and a clever smile. He said, "What'll you have?" without bothering to hide the look he was giving Ginny.

"A butterbeer," she said, and when he raised an eyebrow at the choice of drink—like ordering a glass of milk in a strip-club—she added, "Warm."

"Sure thing, doll," he said.

Ginny narrowed her eyes. "Piss off."

The barman frowned, straightened up from where he'd bent to retrieve her butterbeer, and looked at her intently. "What pretty eyes you've got," he said slowly as he tapped the bottle with his grimy wand to warm it up. "Don't see a too many pretty-eyed girls in here."

"It's the décor," Ginny offered blandly. "It wants updating." She hadn't bothered to look around.
The barman smirked. "I'll be sure to let the owner know."

Ginny shrugged. "Makes no difference to me," she said, and reached her hand across the counter. "Nice to have met you."

Having already begun to resume his previous activity, the offered handshake did not immediately register to him. When it did, he paused, looked up at her intensely with his blue eyes and said, slowly, "Have we met before?"

Ginny stared at him, calm, and no longer restless. "Obviously not." Her hand remained out, a pointed gesture that the barman was unable to ignore, though he looked as if he wanted to. She glanced at her still hovering hand and then back to him.

Finally, he took it—his fingers surprisingly soft and warm and clean as they twisted around hers. Her right thumb brushed over the meaty flesh of his hand, and her last two fingers crooked up into his palm. He responded, and his fingers quickly tapped something that, to some people, translated into two words: River Styx.

She pulled her hand back slowly. "Thank you."

The barman ignored it. He said, "That'll be eight knuts, for the beer, miss."

Ginny handed it over without question, grabbed her butterbeer, and slid back out the door, unnoticed by anyone except the barman—just as she had been coming in. She'd turned seventeen in August, right after Harry, but her mother had said she couldn't take her Apparating test until Christmas—this made no difference to her as she stepped and turned and found herself standing on the edge of a river.

Not the River Styx, but a river of no particular interest except that it was full of salmon, and on one side of it, there lived an old woman by the name of Mrs Stanley Whittle who put a few sheep in an area she fondly called the Elysian Fields. On the other side of that river, the side that Ginny now stood on, there was a cottage with purple smoke coming from the chimney.

A generation prior, Mrs Whittle and her Fields had been a very tongue-in-cheek joke among the more educated—and cynical—Death Eaters. After all, one must first die before Charon would ever ferry them across the River, and what better way to die than to abdicate your soul for someone else? That was why, nearly twenty years ago, the little cottage across the river had become one of twenty-five possible locations for a monthly get-together among certain Death Eaters.

It was also the place one came if they were looking to be 'interviewed' for a place in the ranks and they had no connection otherwise—what happened if the hopeful recruit didn't pass was unspoken, but understood. Needless to say, the Death Eaters spent most of these nights relaxing, drinking scotch and talking about their wives, or lack thereof. Few witches and wizards were brave enough to present themselves for such interviews; what they didn't know—that the rumours were far worse than the truth—was immaterial.

Of course, Ginny had no way of knowing this. Which was why when she walked up to the cottage door and knocked the previous noises from inside all stopped immediately—the raucous laughter, the music, all of it.

It wasn't a moment later that the door was jerked open, and she was snatched inside by the neck of her cloak and tossed unceremoniously to the floor. There were at least five people standing over her—both male and female—with hastily thrown-on masks and hoods. Two of them noticed strands of their brown hair hanging loose and quickly tucked it inside their hoods. Another still held a smoking
cigar between his knobby fingers; he coughed as he fiddled with it.

"Why are you here?" The voice was unfamiliar to her, but that didn't really say much.

"I'm here," she replied simply, pointedly. She didn't raise her head to look at them more closely; she was much smarter than that. The identity of a Death Eater was usually known only to a select few other Death Eaters, and to make an effort to discern the identity of one was at the very least rude, and at the most possibly fatal.

Her reply was accepted about as warmly as she expected it to be.

"What's your name?" the same voice asked.

"Ginny Weasley."

At this point, there was an uproar of commotion: there were people voicing both the opinion that she should be killed straight away for she was surely spying, and, conversely, that she should be taken to the Dark Lord immediately because *wouldn't it be fine to have a spy so close to Harry Potter?*

At the same time, however, Ginny was beginning to realise where she was, or perhaps, just that she wasn't at Hogwarts. The realisation came to her slowly, almost like she was waking up from a particularly good dream. She'd not had many of those lately—in fact, during her stay in the Infirmary, she'd dreamt every night that someone she loved was looking for her, but never able to find her. It had left her feeling, every morning, as if she'd been kicked in the—

She wasn't at Hogwarts.

She wasn't in her dorm room.

These weren't her year mates; this wasn't Quidditch. Someone grabbed her arms and hefted her from the ground, and as Ginny looked up only to see two dark eyes looking at her from behind a deathly white mask, she screamed.

"Let me go!"

"You came to us," said a particularly bemused voice to her left. Ginny shook her head and started struggling, but the fingers wrapped around her biceps only tightened.

"I didn't! I didn't! Let go of me!"

"What the hell's wrong with her?"

"She's mad!"

With each new bout of struggling, the grip on her arms got tighter and tighter; Ginny heard everyone around her speaking as if she were five different people—each of them listening to a different conversation—but none of it made sense. Hot tears were beginning to stream down her face, but it wasn't until she felt the sharp jerk of Apparation that she really began to cry.

Draco couldn't sleep, so he paced.

Of course, Draco often couldn't sleep, but this time, it was different. He wasn't sure exactly what it was, but something about the nonsense Potter had told him the week before made him uneasy. He'd left the subject alone in their shared classes—relishing in the knowledge that Potter was anxiously
waiting for him to bring it up—but he needed to do...something. Talk it out, perhaps.

It didn’t feel right. Potter had pledged 'his family' for Draco's—it was a monumental thing to do. Why hadn't Draco noticed the incongruity of it all then? He'd been too caught up in the moment—too excited over all the possibilities to care. His mother had always told him that he was too much of a dreamer, and here he was, proving her right.

He'd let Potter talk a whole slew of nonsense to him, and he'd barely batted an eyelash. What he needed now, he realised, was someone to set him straight. It had started off well: he'd known Potter was up to something, and he'd found out what it was, but it still didn't fit.

He remembered the night his father has expected him to be Marked; he remembered it because he'd expected to be killed. He hadn't been—and he hadn't felt any relief when he wasn't because he'd been given a...a prophecy of sorts. Someone would be sent to 'teach' him. Someone would teach him what it 'meant' to be a Death Eater. And that person was Potter.

"Rubbish."

He believed it; he believed that Potter had been truthful, but it still didn't mean that it was the truth. The whole truth anyway. So Potter had decided to join forces with Voldemort to bring about some ultimate ideal—so what? Draco didn't care. Something much bigger was going on. Draco suspected that even Potter wasn't aware of it—but really, was anyone aware of everything?

But there was one person who was likely to know more than Potter—or Draco—and he was going to find out what that person knew. Now was as good a time as any. Glancing over at the two lumps in the beds on the opposite wall, he assured himself that Vince and Greg were asleep before leaving their room. There was no telling where Blaise was.

There was a light coming from beneath the door to Nott's room, but it was no matter to Draco. Slytherins tended to stick to their own business—even if they were fully aware of everyone else's. Nott wouldn't bother him, even if he did care where Draco was going.

He probably already knew, anyway: the year before, Draco had become notorious for leaving the common room at nights to go talk to Professor Snape. There had even been a joke among his house-mates about the two of them and a questionable student-teacher relationship. Professor Snape had borne it with infinite patience, but he did roll his eyes whenever it was mentioned behind closed doors.

Draco had not been as opposed to the idea as he'd let everyone believe.

He hadn't even taken off his school robes from class earlier, but he still felt the chill of the dungeons as if he were in his flimsiest pair of pyjamas. Hurrying down the dark corridors, Draco was grateful to see that the torches were lit in Professor Snape's workroom.

He entered without bothering to knock, and perched himself on a stool across from the table Snape was working at.

"Don't speak."

"I haven't," Draco said.
"You just did. Don't speak again."

Draco opened his mouth to say that he wouldn't, and then shut it again. He glanced at the scene in front of him. His professor was bent over a cauldron, staring at a thick, gelatinous fluid—something that wasn't entirely unheard of for him. His dark brows furrowed in concentration as he silently mouthed a count for each stir. At one-hundred, he stopped and looked up at Draco, waiting.

"Explain what's going on with Potter to me," Draco said without introduction. It wasn't necessary with men like Snape—men who hated talking in general and superfluous talking specifically.

Snape cocked an eyebrow, smiling in obvious amusement. He reached behind him to pull forward a stool, and sat, arms crossed, staring back at Draco. The cauldron continued to simmer. "No."

Draco frowned. "But you know?"

Snape gave him a look. "I know what you want to know—more than that, I'm not sure."

"But you won't tell me," Draco said. It wasn't a question, more of a confirmation.

Snape shrugged his shoulders, at the same time stretching his back from the time he'd spent brewing. Very few ever saw the professor like this—all of them Slytherins, so far as Draco knew. "It's a quite a lot of information. The idea of explaining so much to you right now is unappealing."

Draco tapped his fingers on the table and used the other hand to push his hair out of his face. After a moment, he asked the question that he would have eventually got to, had Professor Snape played along from the beginning. With Snape, it was sometimes necessary to show him that you've already discerned the answer yourself before asking him how to solve the problem. It showed him, Draco thought, that you were capable of understanding, and that he wouldn't be wasting his time.

"Who's going to win the war?"

Snape grinned, and raised his hands up in a mockery of all the muggle-born who always gestured when they said 'I don't know'. "What war?" he asked, with obvious amusement. "I see no war."

Frowning, Draco propped his elbows on the table and studied his teacher. "This all sounds very anti-climatic, what you and Potter have postulated."

"And you don't approve?"

Draco shook his head. "There's no denouement. There must be denouement—otherwise, it's not really over."

"And thus," Snape said mock-philosophically, "the reason why Mr Black—the younger—isn't Slytherin." At Draco's attentive look, Snape sighed, and relented. "Fine. Do you truly wish to hear my opinion on the matter?"

"Of course," Draco said, rolling his eyes. "Otherwise, I'd have fallen asleep by now."

"Yes, I'm sure," Snape replied. "At any rate, you've asked for it, and you'll sit there and pay attention until I feel that I have sufficiently provided it.

"I first learned of Potter's involvement with the Dark Lord over the summer. It was brought to my attention, by the Dark Lord to be exact, that he had been conducting a series of metaphysical meetings and brainstorming sessions—if I may be so crude—with Potter over the course of the previous year and a half.
"He spoke frankly that Potter's stubbornness had grown on him—that he'd begun to appreciate several of the little brat's ideas. Naturally, I thought he'd gone batshit insane."

Draco snorted. "Wasn't he already?"

"Hardly," Snape replied. "Cruel and vindictive does not equate insanity. In fact, the opposite. But I digress; as it happened, Potter began, some time ago, to think that everyone was redeemable. I have no idea what brought this school of thought on, but I can assure you that it's complete hippogriff shit, and that Potter will be very disappointed when he finds out it isn't true. In the time since these intangible meetings began, Potter, apparently, forgave or forgot his one previous driving motive: that of the Dark Lord disposing of James Potter and Lily—Gods rest her soul."

Draco raised an eyebrow, but Snape only shrugged. "She was once a good friend."

"Do you suppose it's because James Potter wasn't really his father?" Draco asked. "That Potter got over it, I mean?"

"Certainly not," Snape said. He sounded disgusted when he added: "It is merely the fact that, as a Gryffindor, he feels compelled to forgive, after the appropriate amount of grieving, anyway. You must also remember that he has no memory of either of them: they were, the both of them, very impersonal ideals to him. He knows nothing of their personalities, and so it separates him from them."

Draco grimaced. "That sounds very empathic, coming from you."

Snape shrugged again, looking vaguely disappointed in Draco. "It's how he thinks—how he rationalises it—though even he is unaware of it most times, and as a Slytherin, you should have noticed it yourself."

Draco huffed. "I have done," he said petulantly, almost pleading. "I've watched him since school started back, and I still don't understand—it's like...it's like I see what he's doing, and I vaguely comprehend his reasoning, but I'm two steps away from assimilating all of the information...it's like I almost understand, but it's right there...waiting. Even when Potter told me everything himself—"

"He told you everything?" Snape interrupted. "Everything?"

Draco shrugged in annoyance at being interrupted. "How am I supposed to know if he left anything out or not? The thing is, it sounds incomplete, but I think that he thinks he's told me everything...so maybe what I'm asking is 'What doesn't Potter know that I should?'"

Snape nodded approvingly, checked on his potion, and turned back to Draco just in time to see him scratch the final line of a lightning bolt into the top of the work table with a slicing knife. Snape slapped his hand. "You know better than that, idiot: you'll contaminate my utensils."

Draco gave an appropriately abashed look. "Well?" he prompted.

Snape frowned harshly—such an impertinent little beast. "Potter isn't being swindled or led into a trap. Not by the Dark Lord, at least—he, for one, finds the boy to be 'refreshing' and has been honest with him. If he has not told Potter everything—a wise move on his part—then he has neither misled him nor lied outright."

Draco snorted again. It wasn't something he'd do outside of the dungeons, but Professor Snape knew full well of his opinions on most things, Potter especially. As he opened his mouth to further that line of questioning, Snape inserted, "Whatever it is that the Dark Lord has yet to tell Potter, he has also neglected to tell me."
Disappointment flitted across Draco’s face for the briefest of moments. Then, he smiled slyly, and said, "But, Professor, why would the Dark Lord tell you anything of importance, when practically everyone knows what a turncoat you are?"

Snape was neither amused nor annoyed. He stared blankly at his pupil. "The Dark Lord was once a Slytherin himself, if you remember, boy, and as such, he knows well the price of my loyalty. When he can pay the price, he will have it."

"What makes you so sure that he'll ever need it?"

Snape's eyebrows lifted. "If you need to ask that question, Mr Malfoy, then you are unfit for Slytherin House. I suggest you re-evaluate the priorities of a Slytherin—you have the foundation for it, yes, but in so many areas you are unrefined…like copper and tin when your classmates have been smelted into bronze."

It wasn't an insult, and Draco didn't take it as one. He knew as much himself—perhaps if he'd been raised by a proper Slytherin, he would have been a better one, but his mother had been a Ravenclaw, and she'd encouraged him to question everything—to think about everything. And where she did not know enough to instruct him she was tutored, by Hufflepuffs, or Beauxbatons' equivalent of such. He nodded, accepting the unsolicited analysis of his character, and continued with his questioning.

"I question everything," he said with a shrug. Snape nodded; he knew as much. And then, "Potter intrigues me; would you think it foolish of me to consider his offer?"

Snape didn’t have to ask what that offer had been; he’d been at the meeting after all. He smiled, looking almost sinister. "Mr Malfoy, I suspect that at this point, it could not hurt. Perhaps you might even teach him something, as well."

Draco nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, I already did—I explained basic Arithmancy to him in class today." He scrunched his nose in distaste and added further, "We’re partnered for the yearly project, and Vector gave us a ring! Can you believe it? Nott and Granger got a ceremonial dagger! But stupid Potter got me landed with a tacky old ring—I can't imagine anyone ever wanting to wear it. It's hideous!"

"Indeed," Snape said, humouring him. "Not the same ring your father wears to business meetings, is it? That hideous ring?"

Draco’s jaw dropped, incredulous. "The Malfoy signet ring?" he asked, terribly affronted. "The Malfoy signet ring is an heirloom! It's not tacky!"

Snape cackled unashamedly. "Not the same one, then?" He was obviously enjoying having got in that little jibe.

Draco closed his mouth and narrowed his eyes, only partly joking. "No—as a matter of fact, it was bigger than the signet ring—and made cheaply: a carnelian stone, or perhaps jasper."

Snape's amusement faded quickly. "Really?" he asked slowly. "Would the band be a thick, hammered gold?"

Draco nodded. "Very tacky—do you know of it? Is it very cursed? It better be exponentially cursed. I won't suffer a boring project—especially if I have to spend it with Potter."

Snape pursed his lips. "I wouldn't know," he said bluntly. "But I've seen the Headmaster wearing it once or twice."
"Hmm," Draco said, beginning to get a little more interested. He was interrupted from his internal musing when Snape turned the burner off under his cauldron and rose from his stool.

"I have somewhere I must be, Mr Malfoy, and you must return to your common room. Whether or not you sleep, however, is of no concern to me. I imagine you will stay up well into the night mulling over the entire situation."

"Most likely," Draco agreed absently. He was already rising from his stool as well, completely unconcerned that he was being kicked out. "Good night, Professor. See you in class."

"Good night," Snape said, shutting the door behind him. Draco stood in the corridor for several seconds, staring at nothing in particular. He wondered why the ring was important to Professor Snape, and why he felt the need to rush off to the Dark Lord over it, but it was only a casual interest. What really intrigued him was Potter.

Was it terrible that he couldn't wait for class in the morning so he could talk to Potter more? Surely not—this was, by far, the most interesting thing that had happened in a really long time. Still happening, even.

He sighed as he started back to his common room: he definitely wouldn't be getting any sleep this night.
Edward Yaxley stared at Voldemort, unimpressed.

"We've lost two more werewolves in the past two days, Tom," he said blandly. His wrinkled forehead was shiny with perspiration, even though it was cold enough to see his breath in front of him. He pulled his handkerchief from his breast pocket and swiped at it once. "It's not working."

Voldemort frowned, also unimpressed. "It will," he said.

"Fuck off; it won't," he said in exasperation. "You need to call them back; at this rate, we'll wipe out the entire werewolf population before the year's out."

"There's an idea…"

Edward gave him a very pointed look; he was so protective of all his magical creatures and beasts and such. Sighing, Voldemort leaned back in his chair and let his hand fall to Nagini's head, resting in his lap. He stroked her slowly, contemplating the situation as she hissed to him in little soothing intervals, almost like a purring cat. "What a lovely girl," he hissed back to her.

Yaxley was still waiting for the command to pull the werewolves, but Voldemort wasn't entirely sold on the idea yet. Certainly, no one knew more about magical creatures than his old friend Yaxley, but when it came to strategy, Yaxley had nothing on him.

"They've made no progress whatever?" Voldemort asked.

Yaxley pursed his lips. "Minimal," he answered sullenly. "It is possible that they could at least partially succeed," he allowed, "but I think it will be a Pyrrhic Victory, if at all." He leaned forward in his chair quite suddenly, nearly upsetting the fine teacup by his hand, and said solemnly, "I've got friends out there, Tom, and neither of us have got many of those left. Pull 'em back."

There was a split second where Voldemort nearly remembered the common bond they once shared, many years ago, but he pushed the thought away before it could fully form. "Pull five werewolves of your choice from the assignment," Voldemort finally decided, "but the rest will remain until the end of November. I'll re-evaluate the situation at that time."

Edward nodded, standing. The decision was good enough for the time being. "Of course," he said. He removed his cloak from the back of his chair and swung it around his shoulders, saying as he buttoned it, "It is a good idea, Tom, but I've had enough of wasting my own men. Waste someone else's men instead."

"Is it really a waste if the end result is a victory?" Tom asked, though he wasn't really interested in an answer.

Yaxley gave him one anyway: "Not if the ones who're fighting don't ever know they've won it."
With that, he was gone from the room, as solemnly and quietly as he'd entered. Voldemort only had a few moments of silence before there was another interruption.

Severus entered without aid of a house-elf or courtesy of a knock, as was custom. Voldemort had never bothered to chastise or punish him for it: Severus was afraid of very few things, and Voldemort was not one of them. He raised his eyes, waiting, as the man crossed the room.

The professor slid himself easily into the chair Yaxley had recently vacated, and drawled, "Remind me, Milord, how much you need me."

Nagini lifted her head, giving Snape a look that said she would be rolling her eyes if she could. "There now, pet," Voldemort hissed to her, patting her head. "He is only trying to be amusing, though I find it lacking as well."

To Snape, he said, "I wasn't aware that you'd done anything of note lately, Severus. Why, I believe that my good friend Yaxley has even been brewing the Wolfsbane potion for my howling friends since Hogwarts resumed classes. Perhaps you should remind me of your worth."

Snape's eyelids fell nearly closed; he accepted the taunt, but found it not to be amusing. After a moment, wherein Voldemort tried not to smile in vicious victory, Severus settled back into his chair and said only: "Potter and Lucius' son are planning to destroy that ring of yours."

Voldemort lifted an eyebrow—something that had been slowly growing in over the past three years. They were still rather faint. "Indeed?" he asked. He couldn't help the laugh that escaped him: he would like to see them try. "Whatever for?" Although, he did wonder...

"Snape shrugged minutely. "The Headmaster has convinced Varian Vector to assign the de-cursing of it to them as their quarterly Arithmancy project."

"My young friend is taking Arithmancy?" Voldemort asked with interest. "And he's been paired with young Malfoy?"

Snape nodded in answer to both questions. "Yes, and whatever little games you and Potter planned for Draco are working: that determination to solve a mystery that Narcissa put into the boy is working in your favour. He's infinitely curious about the whole ordeal."

A house-elf popped in with Nagini's weekly meal and he watched idly as she slithered off his lap, unhinged her jaw, and swallowed the otter, which had been stunned prior. "Incidentally, I understand, through Ms Parkinson's parents, that your lesson plan currently involves some amount of competency in Arithmancy."

"To my utter chagrin," Severus admitted dryly, "Potter is making acceptable progress in my class, though he is partnered with the Mudblood Granger and Nott's son, Theodore."

Voldemort smiled as he watched his snake. "Young Mr Black appears to be very bright."

Severus said nothing, but his expression said everything that words could not. Seeing this, Voldemort chuckled and turned his attention away from Nagini, who was still swallowing the otter. "Perhaps if you only opened up to the boy—"

"I'm not amused," Snape spoke up, in case it were unclear.

Voldemort returned to the matter at hand; he'd gotten under Snape's skin twice for the night—that would have to do. "Have you any idea what Dumbledore has planned regarding the ring?"
"Only that he would have it de-cursed, Milord," Severus replied dutifully. Voldemort appreciated the fact that he always understood when impertinence would not be acceptable.

"And what gives Dumbledore the impression that the ring is cursed, Severus?" he asked curiously.

Severus's eyebrows rose slowly. "Is it not?"

Voldemort cocked his head to the side and did not answer. After a moment, Severus sighed and replied, "I know only that Dumbledore believes it to be cursed. He wore it on his finger until the night I owled you that he'd removed it."

"On All Hallows," Voldemort interjected, to make sure everything was clear.

"Yes," Severus confirmed. "That was the night that I first saw him without it."

Voldemort hummed and turned again to watch Nagini with her dinner. She'd nearly swallowed the entire otter by now. "All Hallows is a dangerous night," he mused. "One must be quite careful on a night such as it."

"And May Day, of course, Milord."

"Yes, but not nearly as dangerous as All Hallows can be."

Voldemort noticed it when Severus began fitting the pieces of the puzzle together. He'd not intended to give up so much information, especially to someone as easily bought as Snape, but he was not worried that he had. Even if Snape understood what was not being said, there was still more that he would never even come close to guessing. He sat back, and sipped at his tea, which he'd neglected for the duration of Yaxley's visit, and was thusly now cold.

"It is the spirits that are dangerous on All Hallows," Snape said, watching.

They both looked up when a loud crash echoed from below. A moment later, Horvitz, Voldemort's premier house-elf, popped in, looking both proud and uncharacteristically unconcerned for a house-elf. "Master," he said, bowing. "Horvitz is being sent to tell Master that Death Eaters is brought you something."

"What've they brought?" Voldemort asked in mild interest. He could see Snape sneering at the interruption from the corner of his eye.

"A girl," Horvitz replied. "Death Eaters is saying it's a Weasley, Master." Nodding in thanks, the Dark Lord dismissed the elf, and turned back to his guest, frowning slightly in thought.

"Milord, that's my student," Snape said quickly. "She was in the Infirmary just this morning—I've no idea why or how she was brought here."

"You're sure?" Voldemort asked as he was standing. Snape nodded, following him. "How very interesting." Nagini was resting peacefully in the corner now, so he left her where she was. He started for the door, but turned back to get his tea—from the ruckus below them, it sounded like he would need it. A whispered word heated it once again, and he sipped it as they walked.

It wasn't until they reached the stairs that Voldemort realised that he had a head-ache, and had so for several minutes. There was a great deal of talking going on downstairs, and it was only adding to the throb. His good-temper faded with each advancing step he took.

At the bottom, there was a collection of his Death Eaters—each masked, but he saw them as if they
were not: he could tell them apart without thought. Elliot Parkinson crouched next to the Beauvais brothers, who were each holding the arm of a young, red-headed girl. Elliot finished checking the stability of the knots around her wrists, and then rose from the apparent Weasley girl. She was gagged, and the Dark Lord could not even make out the colour of her eyes, so red and swollen from crying were they.

Unimpressed, Voldemort lifted his gaze from the wretch on his floor and snarled at his Death Eaters as a whole: "What's the meaning of this?"

Snape, who'd heretofore remained equally unimpressed beside him, hung back from the confrontation as he noticed the change in Voldemort's mood. Voldemort noticed, though he did not care, that Severus had catalogued the abrupt change and would be considering it later, along with his new information about the ring.

"Milord," Elliot spoke for them, his dark eyes unperturbed behind his mask. "She arrived at the house on the River Styx tonight, asking to see you—calm as you please…the crying came suddenly; we don't know what's come over her."

Voldemort returned his gaze to the child once again, barely refraining from killing her on the spot for the head-ache she was most assuredly the cause of. It had been a decent night until all of this, and where was his damned house-elf to refill his tea?

"Horvitz!" The elf popped into sight in front of him, bowing slightly. The Dark Lord thrust the empty tea-cup into his hand. "A fresh cup, Horvitz—and this time, I should like it very hot; I've got a head-ache."

Horvitz nodded and disappeared again, leaving Voldemort to stare once again at the young girl sprawled across his foyer. She blinked up at him and something rushed through him—a feeling of instinct that he couldn't quite decipher, but he knew better than to ignore. "Leave," he instructed.

His Death Eaters nodded, exiting the house one by one. He could hear the sounds of their hasty disapparations outside the wards. Only Severus remained behind, as Voldemort expected him to. With a nod of his head, the child was lifted from the ground and floating behind him as he crossed to the sitting room. Snape remained by the door.

He left her hanging in front of him as he sat. She swayed lightly, as if caught by a breeze, but she was no longer crying, he noticed, and, in fact, had not been since he'd seen her—though it was probably due to the fact that she had been stunned since he first saw her. He wondered why he'd thought her to be crying the whole time. It was the head-ache, he knew—it was preventing him from thinking properly.

He banished her gag with a wave of his wand. She remained silent, floating. With a pop, Horvitz returned with his tea, and Voldemort held the steaming cup close to his face as he studied the girl. It was several moments before the low-grade stunning spell wore off and her eyes focused again.

Her mouth opened as if she were about to scream, and Voldemort prepared himself to cast a blood-thinning curse on himself to ward off his headache—but, at the last moment, she appeared to change her mind, and only stared at him, wide-eyed.

Behind her, he could see Snape watching, trying to show only vague interest. It was no use: Tom could readily tell how intrigued the man was; he was intrigued himself, after all. Why had this girl—this…blood-traitor—come looking for him? And what had caused her apparent delusions?

He knew from Horvitz's initial report that she was a Weasley, though she could have just as easily
been a Bones or a McArthur, judging by the hair. Still, he asked her her name.

"I…don't know," she replied, looking just as stunned by the revelation as he was himself. Snape shifted forward slightly, craning his neck to better hear. "I think my—," she said, and then paused, eyebrows scrunching in something not unlike fear.

"—Name is Lily," she said suddenly, and this time when she spoke, she sounded sure and confident, but also quite brash, and there was a melodic nature to the undercurrents of her voice. Her lips pursed, and her eyes narrowed in concentration, and then the levitation spell was gone, and her feet were thumping against the floor. She stood in front of Voldemort, wholly unconcerned.

This time, Severus made no effort to conceal his shock, and he moved forward and around to see her face as a snake after prey. His long, white fingers grasped her shoulder firmly and twisted her, roughly, towards him. She bore his scrutiny with a strange patience, maybe even impartiality.

"You're dead," Severus said quietly. Voldemort nearly jumped at the sound of his voice, low and sombre, something he'd never heard from the professor before. He strained to hear her reply.

She said, "Yes," and nodded.

Voldemort could not see his face from this angle, but he could see the way the man's shoulders tensed at her response. He shifted on his feet, and now he could see her face again; it was calm and serious and looked very little like the girl who'd been tossed on his foyer floor. She stared up at Snape soberly, and only looked away at the sound of Voldemort's teacup rattling against the saucer as he set it down.

"Evans," he said, when she looked at him. It was a question, but he already knew the answer, as unlikely and impossible as it was—No, not impossible, he thought. He thought back to All Hallows, and the warning he'd given to his little protégé. He asked Snape: "What did you say this child was in the Infirmary for?"

Snape, reluctantly, looked away from the girl. Voldemort felt a burn in his veins, and wondered what had caused it; he'd long since given up begrudging his Death Eaters of their vices, though he had always resented those of love or adoration; they tended to interfere.

"A broken ankle, after a fall from her broom," he said.

The redhead added, almost defiantly, "On All Hallows."

Voldemort wrinkled his nose in distaste. "I thought I was done with you." Snape looked at him sharply, but he ignored it.

The girl said, boldly, "You never told me."

Oh, Voldemort thought bitterly, the many little and large secrets you could be referring to. He wondered which she meant—whether she suggested that he knew of her erstwhile lover, or of her husband, or any one of his other little games. Or maybe she was really speaking of the other Black brother—and, oh, how he had so enjoyed keeping from her that information when she'd been a young girl, nearly twenty years ago. It had kept him cruelly satisfied for months.

He had known, through various sources, why she'd finally agreed to join him. Just like with the deceitful professor standing across from him, she'd had a price for basic obedience, and another for loyalty; he'd never needed the loyalty.
Nagini slithered into the room, looking fat around the middle, and he sat back, allowing her to curl in his lap and digest. He motioned for the both of them to sit, and they did, though his potions master seemed to have little room in his mind for discussion at the moment; his attention was focused solely on the redhead.

"You never asked," he said, then amended: "directly."

Her face remained impassive; she accepted this evenly. "You have my son."

Tom nodded. "I do," he said.

"Potter's at school," Snape interrupted, masking his confusion.

"That does not mean I do not have him," the dark lord said. Severus' lips pursed slightly. He had known this, at least theoretically, of course.

She nodded, and said, "You took him away from me." He made no reply, and she added, disdainfully, "for a prophecy." The last word was spit from her mouth like an anathema. Her lips curled in disgust for a school so inaccurate and indefinite as Divination.

He chuckled; it had not taken long for her distaste for Divination to become apparent. She had been the epitome of Ravenclaw, if a little brash. But that was many years ago, and not something to bother thinking of now.

Voldemort shrugged. "Leave nothing to chance."

Her lips quirked into what might have been a smile, at another time, but was now only a cruel smirk. "And look where that got you."

Voldemort felt his frustration, which had been building since the debacle began, reach a pinnacle. His face was hot with anger, and he lifted his hand, almost without thought, and slashed it through the air. The force of the magic, as it was too wild to be a true spell, hit her like a slap, and she jerked backwards, gasping. "Look where it's got me, indeed," the dark lord hissed. "I live and breathe, and yet there you are, a poltergeist in the body of a child."

The Weasley girl's brown eyes flashed green in Evans' rage for a moment. She stood, reached up to finger the red welt on her cheek, and spat at his feet. She was cautious enough not to do it on his person.

"I want my son back," she said. "You have the power to give that to me."

"I wouldn't," Voldemort sneered. In truth, he knew not what she spoke of. He had never been able to bring anyone back from the dead, though he had tried…but that was something he didn't like to think of. It made him feel something he'd rather not feel.

She smiled again, a smile that echoed the ethereal beauty of her life. "You will. I've got something you want, even if you don't know it yet."

Voldemort rolled his eyes, unimpressed with the histrionics of a dead woman. But it was at that moment that a great thundering head-ache returned in his skull, more powerful than even before. He was momentarily staggered by the force of it, and had to close his eyes against the light of the room, though it was only lit by candles to begin with.

"Milord?" Snape asked cautiously from somewhere to his left. He waved him off with one hand and rubbed his temples with the other.
“Professor Snape?” a small voice questioned. It was not the same voice as before, and Tom risked opening his eyes to make sure that he wasn’t hearing things. Something strange and frenetic rushed through his veins as he did so; it was still the Weasley girl sitting there, but somehow different. He didn’t know what to make of it, only that the pressure in his head was absolutely unbearable.

“Get out,” he hissed in Snape’s general direction. Snape obeyed immediately and without question, grabbing the girl and walking her quickly towards the front door, from which he would apparate her back to Hogwarts.

He waited until he heard the pop of Severus taking the girl away to call for Horvitz to bring him a pain potion. It was not until he actually removed the cork from the bottle that he realized that the head-ache had dissipated, and he felt totally fine.

Voldemort narrowed his eyes in thought, and barely even noticed when Nagini slithered off his lap to investigate a squeaking sound in the corner.

Albus decided that the best time to visit would be during the Slytherin-Ravenclaw Quidditch game on Saturday. He did try to remain impartial with all of his students, but it was fair to say that he usually fell short of that goal. It would not, unfortunately, seem odd if he failed to show up for a Slytherin—or Ravenclaw, or Hufflepuff—Quidditch game.

Thinking about this, Albus winced, but it was true: he attended all of the houses’ Quidditch games when he could, but some errands could only be taken care of on a Saturday, and it wasn’t as if he was required to go to every game; in fact, he gathered that the other three houses didn’t care whether or not he showed up.

They, unlike the Gryffindors, felt little need of him. Slytherins didn’t trust him, Ravenclaws didn’t have time for him, and Hufflepuffs were just fine without him, thank you very much.

Albus huffed. Now that he thought about it, he might be a little affronted about the slight, but—well, he was skipping their game anyway...and in regards to a Gryffindor student, no less! He chuckled to himself, enjoying the irony. There was a knock at his office door as he was rechecking his mental to-do list.

He said, “Come in, Minerva,” and rechecked his pockets for his favourite quill. It was from a lyrebird; he’d gotten it on an ill-fated apparition that ended up plopping him in Sydney, Australia. He’d meant to go to Salzburg, Austria, and he’d been hours late to the International Dragon-Slaying Association’s Annual Meet and Greet for New and Rising Members, but that had been years ago, in 1922, and his lyrebird quill was still holding up.

He checked the tip with his finger, and upon finding it to be to his satisfaction, placed it back in his pocket, patting it affectionately.

Minerva opened the door and walked stiffly in. She gave him a stern look from which he did not flinch; he’d been working with Minerva since she was eighteen and Professor Millyboggin’s teaching-aide, in 1945, which, incidentally, had been the year he defeated Gellert Grindewald (and himself in the process), and he’d had ample time to become accustomed to the old Scot’s ‘stern looks’, even though, there had been that one time in 1947, right after she had become his adjunct professor—

“Albus!”
“Yes, Minerva?” he replied easily.

“Albus, have you been listening to me whatsoever?”

“Indubitably,” he said. She gave him—well, it was a stern look, so he amended: “Not a word, no, Minerva.”

Albus believed that the strange depression of her lips meant that she was fighting a smile. He moved behind his desk to sit, situated a benign smile on his face, and retrieved a lemon drop from his Never-Empty Jar, which he’d purchased at the Weasley twins’ shop the previous July.

Minerva didn’t bother to sit: she was kitted out in her Gryffindor Quidditch robes from her stint as a Chaser from 1940 to 1944, and probably didn’t want to wrinkle them. From the awkward crease, he guessed she’d had them spell-cleaned.

“I say, Minerva,” Albus said, “have I become befuddled? I was under the assumption that Gryffindor was not playing this afternoon.”

“They aren’t,” she said, icily.

The Headmaster chuckled. She had become quite prickly since the unfortunate game against Hufflepuff. From his perch, Fawkes cooed, so Albus unwrapped a second lemon drop for the phoenix and placed it in his beak.

“Albus,” Minerva started again, this time seeming very tired. “Are you quite sure that this is necessary? It’s unseemly for you to miss a game, especially for such a frivolous errand.”

“I’ll not be dissuaded,” he said.

She sighed, and changed course. “I’m sure, in your endless omniscience, you have noticed the outlandish companionship developing between Potter and Malfoy, and, no doubt, you will also have noticed the ostensible separation among Potter and his two usual friends.”

“I have,” Albus admitted. There was a series of whizzing sounds from the widget on the far wall. He really would need to be on his way soon; it was nearly half-two.

“And?” Minerva prompted. “What have you to say on the matter?”

“I think it will do the boy some good.”

“What boy?” Minerva asked.

Albus shrugged. “All three of them, I should imagine. Harry needs to trust more, or maybe less, and Mr Malfoy needs a friend, or maybe a good influence.”

“And what of Weasley?”

Albus pressed his lips together. Yes, he’d concerned himself with Mr Weasley a great deal lately. The boy seemed to be on a downward spiral, and nothing was getting him out of his rut. “Mr Weasley needs to make his own decisions.”

“I don’t like the way this is progressing, Albus,” Minerva insisted, leaning forward slightly. “At this rate, Weasley’s going to get himself expelled. I’m sure you remember that I was forced to strip him of his prefect duties only two weeks into the school year.”

Albus frowned. He remembered. On the bright side, however—and there always was a bright side—
Neville Longbottom had taken over and was doing a marvellous job...except, maybe for the whole password situation. Albus wasn’t sure how safe it was to use *Mimbulus Mimbletonia* for three months in a row, but it wasn’t as if the Gryffindor Common Room were a fortress, so he would let Mr Longbottom continue as he pleased.

“Minerva, what would you have me do? Mr Weasley is experiencing a *Crisis,*” he said, stressing the word. “I’m sure you remember one or two from your own teenage years; I understand there was an Edward MacDonald in your year who—“

“Albus!”

“Quite right,” Albus said, nodding. Fawkes chirped inquisitively, and the Headmaster stood. “I’m afraid I must be going now. As Fawkes has so kindly reminded me, I have an engagement in twenty minutes.”

Minerva huffed and stood. “I still say you should attend the game.”

Albus looked up from transfiguring his hat into a fedora and his robes into an overcoat. “And I still say you should wear that lovely shawl Sybil gave you for your birthday.”

“It’s striped!” she said, aghast.

The Headmaster eyed the shawl she was currently wearing over her old Quidditch kit: it was tartan. He then looked down at her boots, which were spelled red and gold tartan to match. “I really must be going; I’m dreadfully sorry, Minerva.” He ushered her out the door with him. She narrowed her eyes, but went along with it nevertheless.

“See that you make it to the next game. It’s Gryffindor versus Slytherin.”

“Is it really?” Albus asked, feigning surprise. “Won’t that be interesting.”

Dumbledore arrived at the doorstep of number four, Privet Drive at exactly five minutes to three in the afternoon. The house was exactly as he remembered it from 1981—which had been a good year for lemon drops, as he recalled—right up to the absence of any wards whatsoever.

He removed his spectacles, polished them on his sleeve, and returned them to his nose: yes, he had the right house. Albus rang the bell.

“Just a minute!” came the reply.

The woman who came to the door had a pleasant smile—at least until she noticed his beard, which he had forgotten to spell shorter. Such were the ailments of old-age, he noted.

“Albus Dumbledore,” she said flatly.

Albus beamed. “Mrs Petunia Dursley,” he said, dipping his head and hat in greeting. “A pleasure, as always, to see your radiant face.”

She lifted an eyebrow, unimpressed.

“May I come in?” he asked after a short pause.

Petunia stepped back from the doorway with another flat look. He removed his hat and proceeded to
be awed by her exceptional taste in home decor, and, *Oh my goodness, what a lovely chintz print this is on your sofa, Petunia—may I call you Petunia?—is it original?*

“It’s a sofa cover,” Petunia replied. “I ordered it from a home wares magazine after Dudley spilt roast beef on the original.” She crossed her arms over her chest and followed him into the sitting room, watching him peruse her curios with resignation. For any other guest, she would have hurried into the kitchen to put on a kettle of tea, but she didn’t want to leave this one un-chaperoned around her breakables, and she suspected he would ‘magic’ something if he wanted it badly enough.

Albus sat down, setting his hat in his lap. “Lovely weather.”

Petunia sat as well, crossing her legs primly before she said, “It’s Surrey.”

Albus cleared his throat. Honestly, this woman was such a—he’d forgotten how difficult she could be. “Oddly enough, that actually brings me to the point of my visit. I had wondered if you had noticed a difference—“

“I felt the magic stop on the thirty-first of July,” Mrs Dursley interrupted. “I said as much in my letter to you that day.”

Dumbledore leaned forward, deciding to forgo the pretence of small talk whatsoever. “Mrs Dursley, I apologize for intruding on your home, but I’m afraid that the reason for my visit is quite grave.”

She blinked quickly, confused and apprehensive. “He’s—not dead, is he?”

“Oh, no,” the Headmaster replied quickly. He actually found himself quite shocked that she looked upset about the prospect, even if it was only slight. “Harry is doing quite well. He lived with Sirius Black over the summer—outside of Edinburgh; the Blacks have an estate there.”

“Oh,” Mrs Dursley said. She pursed her lips together and looked away for a moment. When she looked back, she asked, “Well, what is it, then?”

“I’m afraid that I need to ask you a few more questions about the wards. You remember from my original letter that those wards were the only thing between the Dark Lord and you. Now, my concern is that since we are both quite aware that there are no longer wards guarding this house—“

“Are you trying to tell me that you suspected someone, this—this *Dark Lord*—to have come and— and *attacked* my family when—“

“Mrs Dursley, please,” Albus pleaded gently. “I assure you that I stationed several guards around your home for the week preceding and succeeding the day the wards fell. You were in no danger whatsoever.”

“Oh,” Petunia said faintly.

Albus fought against rolling his eyes. “Yes,” he said. “My concern was that there were not even any *attempted* attacks, Mrs Dursley,” Dumbledore stressed. She looked confused. Albus sighed. “I am concerned because of the possible explanation for this; if Lord Voldemort has discontinued his manhunt for your nephew, then I need to know the reason why. This is imperative not only for his safety, but for the safety of *England*—wizard and muggle alike.”

“Oh my,” she said, pressing her hand to her mouth. “What are you suggesting?”

Dumbledore sat back again. “Nothing whatsoever; did you, by any chance, notice Harry acting strangely this past summer? Did he spend a lot of time alone?”
Mrs Dursley rolled her eyes. “Harry always spent his summers alone. It’s not as if any of us had much to do with him. He spent the summer in his room, reading mostly, when he wasn’t doing chores. He had no neighbourhood friends.”

“Did you perchance see what he was reading?”


“Franny and Zooey?” Dumbledore asked in confusion.

Mrs Dursley scoffed. “No, the other one. Catcher in the Rye.”

Dumbledore hummed in thought. “Did you ever see him talking, seemingly to himself?”

“Certainly not,” she replied immediately. “Vernon wouldn’t have held with that.”

Dumbledore sighed again. He wanted to take a look around Harry’s old room, but there was another matter on his mind that he wanted to question her on first. When he’d first received her owl on the thirty-first of July, he’d been surprised—not only that she’d had the forethought to have Arabella Figg post a letter to him for her—but also because she had actually noticed the falling of the wards around her house.

Yes, it was true that she had lived with the wards for sixteen years, but she was a muggle. Or a squib, rather. The point was that she shouldn’t have been able to feel wards dropping—even strong ones. All research—research that spanned hundreds of years—suggested that squibs, though descended from wizards, were almost biologically identical to muggles. The differences were completely inconsequential.

He cleared his throat, and asked, as delicately as possible, “Mrs Dursley, I understand that you descend from a wizarding line; have you ever experienced—“

“Mr Dumbledore,” she interrupted harshly, “I have suffered your presence and your questions about my nephew, not to mention your interference in our lives, and the constant presence of your people from your world for nearly two decades of my life. Do you know that I couldn’t even go to my own parents’ funeral, after they were killed? Do you know that I didn’t have a wand to weigh as identification for ‘such a high-profile event’? I was their daughter, and I was forced to read the newspaper clipping, and attend a ‘memorial service’ held by their mundane neighbours.

“You people have excluded me from your world for my whole life; whether or not I can feel wards fall, or find things that my husband loses, or know who it is before my telephone rings, or get set-in stains out of my son’s school uniform just by touching them does not—does not, Mr Dumbledore—mean that I would tell you, or that I have any wish—whatsoever—of being part of your world in any way.”

At that, she stormed out of the room, leaving Albus feeling wrong-footed. This was certainly not how he had expected this conversation to go. He glanced around the room, taking in the family photographs—none of which included Harry—and gathered his hat.

He had expected her to, if not be delighted by his suspicion, to at least be pleased. Who wouldn’t want to hear that they had magic, after all? Even if it was only a little bit. The problem was that she seemed to already be aware of it, and yet—yet she didn’t want it. It was rather pitiful. Well, he thought, that’s that.
It was only a second later, as Dumbledore was reaching the door to see himself out that Mrs Dursley returned. She slammed a cardboard box down at his feet. There were papers spilling out the top.

“You can take this to my nephew if he wants it. He was rifling through it the night that Sirius Black came to retrieve him, and I certainly don’t want it; I want nothing to do with you or your people, and I want no reminder of my other family—any of it.”

Dumbledore picked up the box. There was a newspaper clipping on top that mentioned the Evanses. No doubt nothing he hadn’t read at the time.

“Good day, Mr Dumbledore,” Petunia said harshly. She was standing with the door open, mouth pursed and waiting for him to leave. Dumbledore tipped his hat to her on his way out.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Mrs—”

The door slammed shut.

Harry wondered if he was the only one who had noticed how strangely Ginny had been acting. It had been a week since she’d been released from the Infirmary, and she had become increasingly more awkward around him. Once, he had been sure that she’d run the other way as he was walking up to her.

It was Wednesday, five after nine, and Professor Sinclair was just shutting the door when Ron ran in, looking rumpled. Harry grinned at him as rushed to find a seat next to him; so of course Ron had failed to notice anything amiss with Ginny—he’d looked rather harried himself since the Halloween party. Harry didn’t blame him: these days, Hermione and Theodore Nott had been looking especially sappy around each other. It was faintly nauseating, so Harry tried not to think too much of it. He could only imagine how it was affecting Ron.

The problem, Harry realised, as Ron sat down next to him, was that he wasn’t going to have to imagine it. Ron reeked—of sweat and alcohol and tobacco, which Professor Sprout grew in the greenhouses in such cases as students were stung by Billywigs or Bumblebees. Professor Sinclair gave Ron a disapproving look for being late.

Ron turned to him, maybe to say ‘good morning’ as he’d been absent from the dorms when Harry woke—which was not at all unusual lately—and Harry immediately noticed his bloodshot eyes and the batch of acne that had broken out on his forehead, probably from not washing his face or hair in a few days. He cringed, unintentionally.

Ron gave him a questioning glance.

“Mate,” Harry whispered, trying to hide his faint disgust, “you smell like the barman at the Hog’s Head.” Which was to say that Ron smelt like a goat.

Professor Sinclair said something that made the class burst into laughter, and Ron lifted an arm and sniffed at his arm pit. “Eugh—you’re right,” he admitted, then added, “Haven’t had much time to shower lately.”

Harry lifted an eyebrow, and started to ask what in Merlin’s name Ron had been so busy doing, as he’d obviously not gotten any of his homework assignments done or, in fact, made it to all of his classes lately, but the professor interrupted before he could. He couldn’t shake the feeling that Ron was relieved when Professor Sinclair told them to start paying attention or she would be forced to use
disciplinary hexes to ensure their cooperation.

Harry winced, hating, for some reason, to disappoint his DADA professor. Across the aisle, Seamus caught his eye and made a vulgar gesture. Harry blushed and quickly turned his attention forward. After the Halloween party, Harry hadn’t felt the same attraction to Seamus as he had before, and he couldn’t understand why.

Looking at Seamus still gave him the same sense of desire as before, but feeling that desire made him uncomfortable. He felt guilty, but for no reason at all. Relationships, he was beginning to decide, were far too complicated for his taste.

“We’ll of course be continuing our discussions on the Ten Wars this week, but before we get started, I do want to offer up an idea for you to mull over as a class,” Professor Sinclair said.

“As you will no doubt remember discussing back in September, the Roman Occupation was the first ‘war’ to be considered a defining battle in Wizarding History. It created the desperate need for more ambitious, more encompassing, more defined wards—can anyone tell me any of the important magical advances that were made in response to the Occupation?”

Justin Finch-Fletchley raised his hand. “Many of the pure-blooded wizards of today live in family homes with ward systems based on the original Hecatomb Ward, which was developed sometime between 100 and 150 AD.”

Across the room, Zacharias Smith rolled his eyes, sneering, and Professor Sinclair looked like she was near it herself. After several seconds of silence, Smith decided he had more to add. Sinclair nodded for him to speak.

“Indeed,” he began snottily, “the paternal line of Smiths, of which I am descended, along with several satellite branches of the family, do employ the Hecatomb Ward or a derivative of it. I would like to point out that prior to the invention of the Hecatomb, the only ‘wards’, as such, that were available included the likes of the Abra Cadabra amulet, which muggles continued to use well into the plagues, and we see how well that turned out.”

He gave a patronizing smile to Justin, and continued. “And, Professor, is it not true that our very own school founders quickly disposed of one hundred various and sundry lives to hide this castle? I, for one, took in the stories of how the Hecatomb saved Hogwarts during the War of Muggles with my mother’s milk. I’m sure I was not the only one.” Several other students around the classroom were nodding in agreement, Ron included.

Professor Sinclair was looking at Zacharias fondly, which Zacharias seemed to find quite strange. He gave her a guarded look as she said, “Well done, Mr Smith. Have twenty points for Hufflepuff.” Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see Justin fuming over this development; Honestly, Harry wondered, what is it with those two? They were always competing.

“Mr Smith is correct,” the professor said, leaning against her desk. Her black hair was piled messily on top of her head, as if she’d gotten dressed in a hurry, and she seemed wholly relaxed in front of the classroom.

“The Hecatomb Ward was the original ward set to Hogwarts and its environs, and it remains today as the most powerful and protective ward on the school, though others have been added for other purposes—such as to prevent apparation.” Harry still sometimes found it odd to reconcile her as a Death Eater, which he was pretty certain she was; she would have to be with the company she kept.

Not for the first time, he wondered what her placement here in the school was meant to accomplish;
he found it hard to believe that she really just liked children, or teaching, or both.

“Mr Smith is also correct in that the construction of the ward required the sacrifice of one hundred lives. This is true for all homes and buildings that employ the ward,” she added seriously. “In most cases, oxen or cattle were used, sometimes sheep—sometimes people, both muggle and wizard alike.”

By now, the class was listening with rapt fascination. Even those who, as Smith said, took in the stories with their mother’s milk paid attention. Most, Harry guessed, had never considered the exact toll much of their Old Magics had required. He knew from his father that all of the Black residences—and the Potter ones as well—used this particular ward, but he’d not known the cost of creating it then, only the name of it. Now that he tried to work it out in his, admittedly, limited Latin, he wondered why he hadn’t been suspicious of it before.

“Nowadays,” Sinclair continued, “there are viable alternatives to the Hecatomb that require fewer sacrifices—or none at all—and many New and Establishing Lines choose to use these instead. While they aren’t as powerful as the original, they are no doubt protective.

“Now—to my original point. I would go so far as to say that none of you have ever performed a Hectomb Ward; most buildings that need protection have already been warded by your ancestors generations ago, but you are all young adults—who is to say that one day you will not need to ward a home of your own? Or a business? Or...a school?” she added, glancing quickly at Harry. So quickly that perhaps he had imagined it.

Harry looked around the classroom, taking in the various expressions on his fellow classmates. They were utterly fascinated by the suspected development in their syllabus. To his right, Ron, oily-haired and faintly ripe-smelling, had his lips parted in enraptured disbelief. In front of him, Hermione sat next to Susan Bones, both of them whispering furiously to each other about what they guessed the professor to be proposing.

Justin Finch-Fletchley looked pale. Harry could no longer understand the reasoning for that. Two years ago, when he’d been as good as muggle-born himself, he’d been frightened and angered by magic like this, too. Now—now, he felt very detached from it. It was strange.

Sinclair said the next part in a very serious voice. “Professor Llewellyn of Ancient Runes and I have created a proposal for a field trip for our two classes. It will be an all-day event which includes a trip to Stonehenge in Wiltshire and the creation, as a class, of one Hecatomb Ward. This is not something to be taken lightly; the creation of any ward can be a dangerous process, never mind what’s involved with the Hecatomb. I have already had the proposal approved by the Headmaster.

“I would like you to take the rest of the class to think about this, and if you believe it would be a valuable learning experience,” she continued, and here, Harry saw Hermione nodding slightly, “then we will go forward with the proposal. The trip will be for all seventh years in my and Professor Llewellyn’s classes, and if you choose to go, you will be required to bring one live sacrifice.”

There was a collective gasp. For the most part, the class was too stunned to speak—especially the Hufflepuffs. Even after all that talk about the ward, they still hadn’t connected actually making one of the wards with having to see something die.

It was Ernie Macmillan, sitting next to Hannah Abbott—about whom rumours said had been on-again off-again with Ernie since fourth-year—who voiced the question on all of their minds.

“What kind of live sacrifice?” he asked warily. Ernie was a good sort—a ninth generation pure-blood, as he liked to remind everyone good-naturedly—and no doubt had a Hecatomb on his
Professor Sinclair smiled prettily, her pink cheeks flushed faintly with anticipation for the trip. It was quite obvious that this was something she was pleased with; most likely, she had never created one of the wards, either. “Nothing big,” she said. “You will of course be allowed to pick the sort of sacrifice you’re comfortable with. There is a catch, however, and I’m afraid it will be something that will prove difficult for you to reconcile: the sacrifice must be alive, and it must be something that is...well, a sacrifice. You can’t just offer up a midge you would have slapped just the same.”

“Right,” Ernie said slowly. He was nodding to himself, considering. Hannah grasped his hand beneath the desk, worrying her lip, but like a true Hufflepuff, she seemed quite determined.

“May we bring more than one?” Hermione asked, unexpectedly. Ron gave her a curious look, as if he’d only just recognized her. Indeed, they had seen very little of each other lately. They made a point of avoiding each other whenever possible. They probably spent so much time arranging not to meet, that Ginny’s strange behaviour was easily overlooked.

“Of course,” the professor said. She was obviously shocked by the proposal as well. She cleared her throat and added, “If you’re up to it, you are all welcome to do the same. I’m sure some students will abstain from participating—and that’s fine—but there will need to be one hundred sacrifices exactly; those that students can’t provide, I’ll provide myself.” She seemed a little saddened by this, though it was difficult to tell.

After that, Professor Sinclair tried to turn their attention back to the war of the week, but she had little success. Everyone’s questions returned to the Stonehenge field trip, and she gave up the lesson plan after another forty-five minutes. She let them out of class then, and the decision regarding the trip was firmly in its favour, though most, understandably, did not think their stomachs would be up for it.

They had one month to prepare. They would need their sacrifices collected, wand movements memorized, ritual simulated, and chaperones—which both professors and Headmaster Dumbledore had established were necessary—agreed upon. It all seemed very profound for a group of fifty or so seventeen-year-old students to handle.

Draco had just about had enough of waiting on Potter. Black. Whatever.

He was busying himself with reading the letter from his mother that he’d got earlier that morning, but there was only so many times one could read about some orphans before one got nauseated by the sentimentality. He’d not known his mother was so easily moved by babies.

He had learned, however, that the Diggorys, who lived in Devon, had finally been approved for an adoption, and received a two-year-old boy, whom they named Quentin. The child’s original name, according to his mother, was Martin. Narcissa had read about it in the Society pages of the Prophet, and confirmed that the Diggorys were very pleased with the child and had finished up the blood rite to make Quentin their biological heir last Friday.

Draco snorted to himself. Turning to Pansy, who was sitting across from him revising for Ancient Runes, he asked, “Why didn’t you tell me about your parents getting an orphan?”

She looked up, eyes red and weary from ten straight hours of reading, or so he assumed; she’d been in an off-mood since after the All Hallows party, and he had no idea why. He felt a little sorry for her, but she liked to leave her assignments for the last minute, and it wasn’t his fault she wasn’t
finished yet.

“I thought I did,” she said. She pushed her long dark hair off her face and gave him a curious look. “Didn’t I? I was sure I did.”

Draco waved his letter at her. His mother had written, also, about how wonderful it was that Elliot Parkinson had finally agreed to let Pansy’s mother, Eloise, pick one of the orphans. Ms Eloise had been angling for another child for several years—which Pansy had always found to be rather humorous when she wasn’t so tired from revising.

“This is the first I’ve heard of it,” Draco said, gesturing to the letter. “Mum says your mum got one two days ago.”

“Yeah,” Pansy said, nodding. She didn’t seem at all upset with the interruption. “She’ll be three-years-old sometime around Yule hols; I forgot the exact day, but I’m sure Mum’s got it all memorized.” She paused suddenly, pulled out her wand, and cast a subtle silencing spell around them.

“You know, Draco, your parents are going to a lot of trouble to get all this done—your mum especially. Did you know that all of the orphans, even the ones left at the orphanage, come with full medical and personal histories?

“Well, it doesn’t include the birth parents or any other identifying information like that, but your mum researches their birthdays and original first names—in case the adoptive parents want to keep it. Ms Narcissa even watches them for a few weeks before taking them, so she can find out what each child likes to play with, what scares them and calms them down, what magical specializations they might take to, based on their personalities—it’s really quite amazing.

“My parents, for example,” Pansy continued, now completely absorbed in the conversation, “wanted a girl since they already have my stupid brother Patrick to take the Name, you know, and they wanted someone else they could marry into a new alliance, or something.

“So Mum finally picked this toddler with blue eyes and dark hair, so the blood rite wouldn’t be too stressful on her with a big change. Her original name was Laura, but my parents didn’t think that was suitable for a Parkinson, so they changed it to Posie,” Pansy said, quirking a grin. “According to Mum, Posie likes the colour pink, doesn’t like to get dirty, and came with a plush unicorn that she insists on sleeping with.”

Draco’s eyebrows had risen during that speech, and they stayed lifted as he continued to look at his friend incredulously. “Are you serious?”

“Of course, Draco,” Pansy said, rolling her blue eyes. They looked much brighter than they had when she’d still been revising. Pansy never had held much stock in studying. Draco’s mother, on the other hand, had been a Ravenclaw, and actually enjoyed the research part of any project. He’d not known that she put so much effort into this whole orphan project.

Draco considered Pansy’s words for a moment before deciding, “She sounds like she’s going to be prissy.”

Pansy flipped her hair back over her shoulder and replied, “Of course she is, Draco. Would you expect anything less?”

Draco snorted again. “Not at all. I suppose I’ll get to find out first hand over Yule; I expect your parents will be bringing her along for Mum’s dinner party?”
“I imagine so,” Pansy guessed, nodding. She grinned, and added, “I can’t imagine that the Dark Lord would sit for her.”

It was at that time that the library doors opened, and Potter walked in, talking in a low voice with Granger. He seemed to be rather pleased, while Granger looked to be like she was preparing herself for her friend to do something extremely stupid. Business as usual, then.

Pansy saw them come in, too, and she wasted no time gathering up her books. Draco stared at her wide-eyed. “I thought you were going to stay, Pansy!”

She gave him a wry grin and shook her head. “I’ll never get done with this Ancient Runes project if I stay here and listen to you and Black bicker. Besides, I’ve still got to write my mum to see if she’ll chaperone the field-trip—”

“Young mum’s coming?” Draco asked. Pansy was carefully packing her good quills into her bag. “Why?’”

Pansy shrugged. “Because Morag McDougal’s mother’s coming and I’d sooner eat my own nose before I let that Ministry cow tell me what to do—see you later, Draco.”

Draco shuddered. Morag’s mother was definitely a piece of work. He supposed he’d write to see if his mother wanted to come as well. Pansy waved goodbye to him and he glowered, noticing that Potter and Granger were nearly upon his table, and he would have to deal with both of them alone.

“Yes Pansy,” he sighed. He supposed he would just have to accept his fate; as it stood, he would be spending a lot of time with Potter from now on, anyway.

Harry practically slammed his school books down on Malfoy’s table, quills scattering and an ink bottle rolling into the Slytherin’s elbow. Hermione sighed; she could, honestly, understand why Malfoy had always hated Harry. After all, Harry was so thoughtless so often.

Fortunately, while Hermione didn’t think that Harry had been exactly attentive when Lord Voldemort—the Dark Lord, as Harry had, unfortunately, begun to call him—brought him over to the ‘dark side’, so to speak, she didn’t think that he’d been too terribly naive. They had discussed again today Harry’s continuing alliance with Voldemort, and she was becoming more comfortable with the idea, though she was still quite utterly and truly frightened of the wizard. She thought that was reasonable: the man killed people...possibly for fun.

If she weren’t so certain of her facilities, she might question whether she’d gone crazy.

And honestly, the only reason she was going along with this nonsense was because of the orphans. After having time to consider all the angles, she’d become wholly—well, mostly—supportive of what she’d come to learn was Voldemort’s idea.

It was, in a twisted way, such a noble and considerate endeavour, and she appreciated that, while his motives were mostly self-serving, he had also considered that it would be much easier on the children to grow up in this environment. These kids, Hermione knew, were going to grow up knowing where they belonged, and they would start Hogwarts with an advantage she’d never had. She could admit to herself that she was jealous.

And, Oh, how wonderful it would have been to have grown up in wizarding society. She sighed, setting her bag carefully down next to Harry’s. He was already bickering, although only half-seriously, with Malfoy.
It was Yasmin Smith, probably, who had finally won Hermione’s support for Harry. He had explained her many positions—including the less favourable ones—and it was her quick action to start a school for these children, though she herself was a Death Eater—and in Voldemort’s Inner Circle, no less!—that swayed Hermione.

It seemed to Hermione that any person who could be such an educated, well-rounded and quick-witted woman, not to mention such a protective and doting mother, couldn’t be all wrong. In fact, when she first met Mrs Smith, she’d been quite impressed with her good sense and logical reasoning.

On the other hand, there was Harry’s flippant and unconcerned mention of Voldemort thinking it possible to give magic to squibs to consider. She wouldn’t mind being part of a project like that. It seemed to Hermione that the other side, the anti-Voldemort side—the Light Side, as some called it—was far less interested in working to better society with research and new discoveries, as ironic as that was, and Hermione was fully in support of discovering new things and solving terrible problems.

Hermione settled into her chair next to Harry and pulled out her Ancient Runes homework. Theodore was supposed to meet her later in the evening to finish up their de-cursing project, but it seemed as if Harry and Malfoy were only getting started. Obviously, Quidditch was more important.

“Right, Hermione?”

She looked up to Harry, eyebrows raised questioningly. “What, Harry?”

He frowned at Malfoy, who looked quite frustrated, then turned back and said, “Malfoy’s still being a git about de-cursing a ring. Tell him it’s just as good as the dagger you and Nott got so he’ll stop being a priss.”

Hermione winced slightly, and Malfoy snorted. She fought a laugh: somehow, Malfoy always seemed too proper to snort. “Typically,” she said slowly, “the only curses on jewellery is to protect a woman’s maidenhood or to keep her from...straying. The curses were usually aimed at male genitalia.”

Harry winced; he was not to be deterred. “That sounds bad enough to me.”

“But it doesn’t mean they were hard to de-curse,” Hermione said apologetically. “Young suitors are hard to deter; desire can breed cleverness...among other things.”

“Oh, honestly, Granger,” Malfoy exclaimed. He picked up the gaudy little ring sitting on the table between him and Harry, turning it over in his hand. “I can’t even feel a curse on it.” He said flatly. “A general air of malevolence, sure, but what family heirloom wouldn’t have that after having to stay with the same sort of people for generations? Jewellery, especially, gets prissy after a couple decades.”

Hermione reached over and plucked the ring from Malfoy’s fingers, ignoring his outraged look. “No, it doesn’t feel very cursed to me, either,” she agreed. “But you’re right, Malfoy, it feels a little malicious.”

He snatched it back from her with a sneer. “Thank you, Granger, for your insight.” He dismissed her easily, and turned back to Harry, though she wasn’t overly concerned. She’d rather be revising for Ancient Runes or figuring out what on earth she was going to offer as her Hecatomb sacrifice.

“Potter,” Malfoy was saying, “I’m telling you, we need to first establish the nature of the curse—though I’m still sceptical there even is one.”

“Malfoy,” Harry said, somewhat petulantly, “I might not be a prodigy at Arithmancy—“
“Obviously,” Malfoy interrupted.

Harry glowered at him, which Hermione thought to be less severe than it merited, and in fact looked rather fond and adoring. Actually, Hermione thought, it looked a lot like the glowers Harry used to give Seamus, at the beginning of the term.

“As I was saying—” Harry continued, and now Hermione could definitely see it. Harry wasn’t upset with Malfoy at all—and...was he flirting with the Slytherin?

She couldn’t tell if Malfoy noticed or not, but he seemed like a reasonably intelligent boy; he’d certainly always given her a run for her money as far as marks went, and he’d figure it out soon enough.

A pair of hands came around and covered her eyes. She smiled. “Theodore.”

“You didn’t even let me say ‘Guess who’ first,” he pouted.

She turned around in her chair, “Who taught you that vulgar muggle nonsense?” she teased.

Across the table, Malfoy laughed, and Harry looked to be fighting a smile and a sneer at the same time. He still wasn’t sure how he felt about her boyfriend, but Theo wasn’t too sure how he felt about her friends, either, so it all worked out.

“Nott, you’re witch-whipped,” Malfoy said with a laugh, and Theo gave him two fingers in reply, which Hermione slapped his hand for, and for which Malfoy laughed even harder.

“I may be,” Theodore agreed, flashing his white teeth in a pleasant smile. He leaned down and kissed the top of her head. “I don’t mind.”

Hermione smiled again, but as she turned back to gather her books, she noticed red hair rushing from the library. *Damn it,* she thought. *He’s never going to get over this, is he?*
15 November

Dear Son,

France is...well, it’s France, which you know means that I’m not, actually, having the time of my life, and, in fact, the only redeeming factors are the wine and the women, who are slim with pretty faces.

Currently, I’m in Pau, which is about as nice as the name suggests, and on the exact opposite side of the country, and that much further from merry old England. I have made contact with a werewolf who recognised a photo of Moony and said that he last saw him with another pack, heading for the beaches to, as he put it, ‘catch some tail’. I had no idea that Remus was travelling in such vulgar company, but I can’t fault him for it; obviously, the French are rubbing off on him.

Unnervingly, the same werewolf believed to have known me. He called me Regulus! I don’t know what to make of that, and the werewolf had no clues to offer; he admitted that the last time he saw me—Regulus—it had only been for a moment.

I’m on my way west to Saint-Jean-de-Luz, which is, incidentally, where I got my post-Azkaban wand from. The wolf fellow gave me the names of a few people there who might be able to give me some leads, so hopefully I’ll have more to tell you in my next letter.

And before I forget, it has come to my attention that you were drunk on a school night, and subsequently slept through your DADA class. I would like to remind you that I’m merely across the Channel, and not the Veil, and that I can (and will) hex your pale little arse so impressively that you’ll remember things you did in a past life if I find out that you’ve done it again, you little heathen.

Love,
Dad

She had been lobbying for months, and as soon as Mrs Smith got the certified letter from the Ministry approving the school proposal, she wrote to Zacharias and told him all about it. It came on the fourteenth of November, a Friday. He was the first, excluding his mother of course, to hear that the Firth College for Young Wizards and Witches had received Ministry sanction and could begin construction immediately.
Even as he read her letter she was contacting the Daily Prophet to schedule a Press Conference, which he had better read tomorrow when it came out. Spearheaded by her, the entire Department of Education had lobbied for the swift and full approval of their proposal, which included reinstating Learner Wands for under-eleven wizards and witches.

Of course most Old Families would continue to let their children practise with the parents’ wands, but Learner Wands would do just as well for the children of the more stringent parents, and for using outside of their homes.

In his mother’s opinion, learning should never be hindered, so it was of utmost importance that children had the opportunity to not only practise spells any time, but also be able to perform safety spells, such as the Hide and Seek spell, which not only hid a child in the event of suspicious activity, but also alerted the parents of their child’s exact location. Prior to the prohibition of Learner Wands, it had saved dozens of young wizards and witches from abduction—by both wizards and muggles—which was not uncommon in a society so small.

It was the following morning that two things happened. At breakfast, the Prophet owls soared in dropping off the morning editions of the newspaper, and then his mother’s owl followed, looking harried.

Giving Sophia a piece of his kipper, Zacharias shook open the paper; his eyes widened at the headline. It was not, in fact, the press conference his mother had given on behalf of the school yesterday afternoon, but instead:

**Maybe, babies? Not likely, letter claims**

Staff Writer

[Derbyshire] – The Derbyshire Orphanage which has been enjoying a regular delivery of young children—aged six months to three years—who are ‘presumed orphans’, reported last night that they received something else this time: a letter.

Representatives for the Orphanage declined our request to print the contents in full, but did allow us to read the letter, which was delivered to the Orphanage by private, untraceable owl early yesterday morning, and had no signature, magical or otherwise. Ministry officials are looking into the possible origins, but more worrisome is the claims made in the letter itself.

This is the first contact received by the anonymous donor, though there were initial efforts to locate him or her.

The consignment of new orphans at the Orphanage has been steadily dwindling since mid-October, due in part, the anonymous letter claims, to the Ministry for its secretive placement of armed Aurors at the delivery site. When queried about this, Ministry officials were able to give no comment.

The orphan donor “[...] will no longer be leaving magical children at the Derbyshire Orphanage, as it is felt that knowledge of their origination or their beneficiary is not necessary for the successful and happy placement of these children in new homes,” the letter reads in part.

Margaret Ghoulsby, chairman of the board at the Orphanage, said Friday, “We had noticed a decline in the delivery of adoptable children over the last month, but thought it due to the natural depletion of magical children born in the Muggle World. While it is certainly a subject which must be handled with the utmost care and consideration, it is also a sad day for the Orphanage.”
She went on to say, later in her public speech, “We hope that a resolution can be reached, as there are still hundreds of families on the waiting list, who would love nothing more than to welcome a child into their family.”

As of today, the Orphanage has received two hundred and eleven children, all of which have been adopted within a fortnight. Notable adoptions have included Undersecretary to the Minister George Pratt-Halston and his partner, Kevin Pratt-Halston of the Falmouth Falcons, who happily received Anastasia Hannah Pratt-Halston, 11 mos.; Mr and Mrs Francis Webb of the Webb fortune, who welcomed Francine (Frenchy) Webb, 6 mos., in October; Mr and Mrs Amos Diggory, parents of the late Cedric Diggory of Tri-Wizard Tournament fame, received Quentin Martin Diggory, 24 mos.; and Holyhead Harpy Jasmine (Jazzy) Jenkins, who was approved for three-year old Jamaal Jenkins in late September.

Zacharias felt a little sick to his stomach, which was unusual. What a cock-up; everyone—everyone—knew, even without solid evidence, that these magical children were stolen from muggle parents. It was unspoken, something not to be mentioned in polite company, but so what?

Eventually, unless their parents were some strange, religious fundamentals—which had been the case in one magical person in the early 1950s—all muggle-born entered the Wizarding World for schooling, and, hopefully, life. In a few cases, students received their education and returned to the Muggle World—but they didn’t stay long; they never got very far without any sort of documented education.

Zacharias sighed. What kind of triumph was this for his mother if there wouldn’t be any new children to fill the school? Looking further down the page, there was the article covering his mother’s press conference; if not for the Ministry’s cock-up, it would have been the front page headline.

Zacharias flipped his fringe out of his eyes and pushed the newspaper aside. Sophia hooted cautiously and he gave her a small smile. “Give it here then, Sophia.” She stretched her leg out for him and he untied his mother’s letter, which said about what he’d expected it to say.

She was angry, but she also said that of course they would be following through with the school, and one way or another, she would make sure that the adoptions were reinstated. Zacharias didn’t doubt that: his mother had contacts on both sides of the fence with this issue. It was only a temporary setback, but it was a setback just the same, and it made one wonder: why couldn’t the Ministry ever leave well-enough alone?

Surely there’s some better use of their resources, Zacharias thought. No, he considered bitterly, with the Ministry, there probably isn’t. His mother worked for it, of course, but as a collective, the Ministry was about as useful as a werewolf at the full moon.

As it happened, werewolves were more or less immune to the effects of Dementors. The effects, one must note—not the Kiss. To be fair, werewolves were immune to a lot of things of that sort, but at the current time, Tom had most need of their immunity to the cold and fear caused by the Dementors because they could get close enough to—well.

And generally, they were quick enough to get away again, but, as Yaxley had pointed out, their exceptional abilities were, at times, also a handicap. Several particular werewolves had been so immune to the effects, in fact, that they’d not noticed the swarm of Dementors coming up behind them until it was quite too late. Such was life.
At any rate, along with the weres, an alliance with the French Ministry—specifically their own Oureurs, who usually handled government policing, but had been apprised to the situation and their new role in it—had ensured cooperation enough to hopefully get this matter under control. Dementors were quite a distasteful group to Tom, though he expected the French—which had within the past six years renounced all political ties to the British Ministry—to feel the same about him.

Now Tom had the French wizarding government on his side, which was more than he could say about the British Ministry: obviously they wanted nothing to do with him. They were notoriously meddling and stubborn; it was their own fault that he’d been forced to halt the delivery of orphans. He had warned them twice about putting Aurors around the Orphanage in hopes of catching Lucius or Narcissa dropping the children off, but they had not listened, and he had been forced to communicate with the public instead. And the public was taking it much more seriously than the Head of Aurors had, may he burn in hell.

It was a terrible shame that he’d been pushed to such an extreme; Narcissa—not to mention her house-elf—was being run ragged trying to deal with the forty-odd children now being kept in the old nursery.

Because France couldn’t—and wouldn’t—work with the British Ministry, and because the Continental European Magical Union, CEMU, was able to foresee the dangers posed by Dementor breeding, they were willing to work with him on this issue. At one time Britain had been a member of that union, but they had reneged on the International Terrorist Suppression Act, ITSA, when Grindlewald came along, and been booted from the alliance. It was a terrible shame; CEMU had even gone out of its way to pass word on to the British Ministry about the breeding season, but the memo had been returned: the post box was full.

That was fine with him; it would make it much easier to have France’s help and cooperation, and he cared little for governmental alliances after that. It had been a week since he’d allowed Yaxley to pull five werewolves from the mission; they were all older weres who had been with Voldemort for a decade or more, but no one of any particular importance. He supposed he could, if he thought about it, remember several of them to have been wizards from his and Yaxley’s time at Hogwarts together.

No one of consequence, though.

But it was of no matter; Tom was not convinced that the werewolf mission was destined for failure; yes there was the distinct possibility that many of them would perish during it, but they were aware of the risks when they joined him. He had never—not once—led a wizard into battle without forewarning him. It was not his concern if, upon telling a man he would most likely die during a fight, that man chose to fight anyway.

Yes, Voldemort believed that even though many weres would die for it, his original plan to gather as many Dementors together as possible was a good one: well thought-out and considerate of all angles. It was for this reason that the dark lord was preparing for a rendezvous with his infantry werewolves.

He hissed twice and Nagini slithered into the room and around his legs. Voldemort smiled down at her; she had been an excellent familiar for years and years, and was always good company on trips such as these.

“Will there be heat?” she asked him curiously. He nodded and replied that, yes, France would be a bit warmer than England.

He always felt dreadful for Nagini during the cold months. For a snake so large, she had always had difficulties keeping herself warm even in the summertime. Well, he thought, somewhat sadly, she hasn’t always had so much trouble, but that way lay...not madness, but perhaps grief, which was a
madness of a different kind.

There was no time for this kind of dallying; he was already pushing his schedule to bursting. With a
turn and a crack, Voldemort disappeared from Ard-Mhėara, and the snake went with him.

Narcissa sighed, and wearily pushed a wayward curl out of her eyes.

She hadn’t been this exhausted since that week she’d spent preparing for the Ladies of England
Association’s annual Young Ladies’ Competition of Excellence. She was still sore that Eloise
Cavendish (now Parkinson) had beaten her for the award, which had included lifetime dues for the
organization and a collection of highly-acclaimed books on spell-crafting. Of course, she’d been
fifteen at the time, and her mother had purchased the membership and books for her afterwards,
anyway.

A cry cut through her moment of semi-peace, and she frowned, looking up from a letter from Draco
and into the hall, from where she knew the sound to be coming. That little brat had not given her a
moment’s peace since she snatched him up the week prior.

He had been a special case; he was the only magical child that she’d taken so far that she couldn’t
find any information on, and he was also the youngest. So young, in fact, that she’d contemplated
leaving him where he was, most likely to die from exposure, as his mother had been an unconscious
woman lying in a street in London. Or so Narcissa assumed.

The curiosity of it all had been the deciding factor in the end; after all, Narcissa had never
encountered the strangeness and tackiness of giving birth in an alleyway.

And she’d never seen skin such a strange shade—almost yellow—that she saw on that child. After
consulting Severus, Narcissa had learned that the likely cause of the terrible, constant wailing and the
jaundiced look of the baby was most likely withdrawal.

How tacky, Narcissa thought. The mother had been a potion-addict—like those tramps that always
begged for sickles on Skulking Street—and probably wouldn’t have noticed that the brat had been
taken even without Narcissa’s Obliviate.

Narcissa had never seen the temptation of opiates or stupefacients, but then again, she’d seen the
effects of badly prepared moonwort bases. Andromeda had been terrible in Potions, and had nearly
suffocated on the toxic fumes trying to brew one summer. Why on earth anyone would want to use
the very same mixture as a recreational stimulant—admittedly, prepared correctly—Narcissa had no
idea.

The opiates had probably been absorbed while still in the womb. Unfortunately, exposure to them
had most likely damaged the boy’s magic, as well. She’d located him using the same spell she did for
all the other Mudbloods—something she was pleased to admit she’d created herself—but even the
spell had known the magic was weak, and at first she’d almost ignored its callings, thinking it was
surely a mistake. Perhaps, though, she thought, his magic would grow with time. There was no
reason to say that it wouldn’t heal itself after the drugs were out of his system.

But it could take a while for that, and he was only a few weeks old even now, though Narcissa
couldn’t be sure of the exact date of his birth. Arbitrarily, she’d given him the birthday of 31 October
because it suited her mood: he just cried so damned much.
The Hallows Baby, as she called him, had reddish-blond hair and overlarge eyes. He was dreadfully unfortunate-looking, and would probably do well with that tacky Hapbouer family that always tried to weasel their way into the Society pages. They had added their names to the waiting list, as she recalled, even though they already had three children of their own.

Another cry followed the first and Narcissa gave a tiny little scream of frustration. Would that the damned Ministry would get their damned Aurors away from the Orphanage so that she could wean this brat from his drugs and get him out of the Manor.

She’d nearly been caught two nights ago when she tried to deliver the children; having to bring them all back—when she’d thought this bunch would finally be out of her hair—had been irritating.

Lucius poked his head into her study and gave her an inquisitive look.

Following her foul mood, she narrowed her eyes. “Lucius, I don’t care what you have to do to get it done, but you get this brat out of my house, and you do it before tea tomorrow. I swear to Morgan, he’s worse than Draco at his most colicky.”

Lucius cringed, no doubt remembering just how bad Draco had been with colic. Narcissa, a first-time mother at only nineteen, had harboured thoughts of sending him ‘back’ more than once.

Unlike with her best and worst friend Eloise Parkinson, who had savoured every dirty-nappy moment of it, motherhood had been something that grew on Narcissa over time. Her own mother had shown her little affection, and it had taken months of Draco’s tiny smiles and enthusiastic giggles to make her realise that she loved him—and just how much she did.

At the time, she had thought Lucius felt the same, but as she aged, she came to realise that Lucius had always loved Draco, and her as well; she had just not known what to look for.

She wondered if that made her a bad mother. Glancing down at the letter from Draco again, she frowned: his letters only came once a week now, and she was still a bit uncomfortable with how much that saddened her. When he’d first gone to Hogwarts, she’d got a letter every other day, at least.

“I’m taking care of it now, Petal,” Lucius replied. She huffed, and smiled at him, feeling embarrassed for her curt words. “My contacts tell me that the Ministry has not, even now, removed their Aurors from Derbyshire, so we’re working around it.”

Narcissa lifted an eyebrow, and asked, “How?”

Lucius gave her a seductive look. “Why, Petal, you certainly didn’t think that Derbyshire was the only orphanage in Britain, did you?”

“As a matter of fact,” Narcissa replied, “I believe it is.”

Lucius tsked playfully. “But have you forgotten, my love, that the Nimuean Nunneries, not to mention the Merlinian Monasteries, are known to accept abandoned children into their care until more suitable parents can be found?”

Narcissa smiled. “I’d forgotten, of course,” she admitted, and it was true that she had. It had been years and years since a nunnery or a monastery had received a child, and those were always squibs.

Lucius dipped back into his study and she followed him inside. He was egotistical and overly ambitious occasionally, but those were necessary characteristics in times like this, when something needed to get done, quickly, and with attention to detail. She noticed traits like that developing in
Draco, and she was always torn between trying to stamp them out and encouraging them.

Such thoughts reminded her of her son, and his most recent letter. Narcissa knew Mercy Sinclair, of course: she’d come to dinner several times when Lucius was just rising through the Death Eater ranks; Mercy had been rising as well at the time. Thusly, Narcissa had expected Draco to enjoy more dodgy experiments and spell-crafting in his Defence class, but she had certainly not expected him to not only study, but create a Hecatomb Ward.

She was quite envious that her own school years had not included anything so fantastical.

It was therefore serendipitous that Mrs Sinclair’s letter had arrived only hours later, requesting her need for adult chaperones. Of course Narcissa had replied with haste; she would never forgive herself if she neglected an opportunity to watch the creation of a Hecatomb Ward; there was only so much she could learn from studying the ones on the manor. She could certainly manage a handful of hormonal teenagers for a few hours for that kind of occasion.

Lucius was back at his fireplace, speaking with some official of some sort, who was not cooperating to his liking. Narcissa followed the curve of his back with her eyes as he bent, and recalled that it had been quite some time since the two of them had found a quiet moment to themselves.

A terrible wail came from the nursery, followed by the sound of the house-elf in charge banging his head against the floor. They were not allowed to use the wall, of course, as it would damage the wallpaper, which was turn of the century original. Narcissa slammed the door, blocking the sound and causing Lucius to jump from his floo call, startled.

That didn’t mean that she couldn’t use the wall, though. Narcissa sat Draco’s letter aside; she would be sure to finish reading it as soon as they were finished.

It seemed to Harry that he was very popular today. Or, perhaps, unpopular. In his experience, the two were about the same.

It was Saturday, and it had been his misfortune to realise ten minutes ago that he’d promised Malfoy he’d meet him five minutes ago in the Arithmancy classroom to test some theories. Malfoy’s temper was not something he held easily in check, or that Harry was able to easily soothe, and he was not looking forward to the meeting. Of course, not showing up would be even worse.

Harry had been in the middle of a game of Exploding Snap when Hermione had returned from her own study session with Theodore Nott. They had probably been doing more than studying, but it was good for house unity for the younger students to see them working together, and it had been her that reminded him of his engagement. And why, Harry wondered, had he felt so guilty about leaving Seamus mid-game to study? It was a legitimate concern; why had he had to lie about it, and tell Seamus that he had detention instead?

He felt awful, but he didn’t know why. And he was going to be late, and Malfoy was going to whinge, but that didn’t seem so bad, really.

It was therefore his further misfortune that he happened across Zach Smith on his way to Professor Vector’s classroom. It seemed to Harry that Smith had been lying in wait, which was not at all a Hufflepuff characteristic, though Harry had his suspicions about Smith only being a Hufflepuff out of family honour or some such. Tradition, maybe.

Harry suspected that he wasn’t the only one who had fiercely guided his own sorting.
“A moment, Black,” Zach said pleasantly enough. Harry glanced down the corridor—he could almost hear Malfoy complaining and insulting him now.

“I’ve really got some—“

“Don’t worry,” Smith interrupted casually. “Malfoy knows you’ll be late; he’s not pleased about it, mind you, but he’s aware.”

Harry stared at the Hufflepuff, gobsmacked. How did everyone here always seem to know what he was up to? “What kind of deranged Hufflepuff are you?” Harry asked in wonder.

Smith looked shifty, but then, he usually did. “I’m descended from Helga,” he finally said. “What kind of Smith would I be if I let that damned hat put me in Slytherin?”

Harry laughed, suddenly feeling much less rushed. Let Malfoy wait. Smith had apparently engineered this entire incident; it was the least Harry could do to listen to him. “All right, Smith, I’m all ears.”

“Let’s walk,” he said, doing just that. Harry followed, setting a leisurely pace. He knew that Smith had given up that little piece of information with the intent to get something in return—with the intention of creating a camaraderie that would make Harry feel comfortable enough to divulge whatever Zach wanted to know. It was a game Harry was coming to know, and if not love, then at least appreciate in its own way.

“I know what my mother does when she’s not working or mollycoddling me,” Smith began without preamble. He was careful not to go into specifics that any unwelcome ears might get wind of, but he left no questions unanswered for Harry. “I may be arrogant, but I’m not blind, and my mother does wear sleeveless dresses occasionally.”

“Okay,” Harry said. He stuck his hands in the pockets of his frockcoat, and continued walking, waiting for Zacharias to get to his point, whatever it was. It didn’t take long; that was the thing about Hufflepuffs—and Slytherins—they didn’t beat around the bush.

Zacharias’ blond hair was in his face, so Harry couldn’t see his expression, but he could probably imagine it. “What I’m wondering, Black, is why you haven’t put up a fuss about her, or my father for that matter. The way I see it, even Weasley couldn’t have missed all the hints and signals sent your way. You know just as well as I do how my parents spend their free time, and yet, nothing’s come of it.”

Harry’s mouth opened, attempting to make a response, but nothing came forth. He cleared his throat. “I don’t understand,” he said at last.

Smith stopped and looked at him directly. “You’ve got more going on with Malfoy than an Arithmancy project.”

Harry, for some strange reason, felt himself blushing. “I—we’re just de-cursing a ring.”

“You’re collaborating with him, though I’m not privy to the reason,” Smith said. “And he’s not the only one you’re collaborating with.” A pause, and then Zach shook his head. “I’m going about this all wrong.

“I don’t mean to put you on the spot; what I meant was that I trust my mother’s inherent logic, and the things she believes in are things that deserve due consideration—for some reason, my mother believes in you, Black, so even if you are going against everything I was ever taught you were supposed to fight for, I’ll assist you where I can.”
Smith stuck his hand out unselfconsciously. Harry cleared his throat again as he slowly grasped the proffered hand.

“You can call me Harry, you know,” he said as they shook. Truth be told, he was getting tired of all this Potter-Black nonsense.


Harry laughed. “Zacharias, then.” He turned sharply at the sound of a throat clearing behind him.

“As touching as this is,” Malfoy said, arms crossed, “I’ve been waiting on you for nearly half an hour.”

Harry gave Smith an apologetic, questioning look.

“We can talk later,” the Hufflepuff said easily. “I expect that we’ll have plenty of time.”

“Right,” Harry said, not understanding whatsoever. He followed Malfoy into the Arithmancy classroom and to the workstation waiting for them. Malfoy’s mathematical reference book sat open on the table; the ring not far from it.

“It’s not cursed,” Malfoy said once they were situated.

Harry gave him an eloquent look. Rolling his eyes, Malfoy said, “I took the ample time that you were using to not focus on the project to, strangely, focus on the project. This ring is not cursed, Potter, and if Dumbledore thinks it is, he’s more barmy than I suspected—unless he knew the whole while and just wanted to give us busy work.”

Harry plucked it from Malfoy’s fingers and examined it closely, though what he was looking for, exactly, he didn’t know. “How can you tell it’s not cursed?”

Malfoy took the ring back and dropped it on the desk, where, once it stopped rocking, started glimmering strangely in the last dregs of sunlight filtering in through the windows. The Arithmancy classroom was on the west side of the castle, and the sun setting along the horizon was casting a purplish glow to the ceiling and walls.

Soon, the torches would light, and the bizarre shimmering of the ring would be invisible to all not looking for it especially.

Harry cocked his head to the side, having seen nothing like this before, but not discounting anything—except bringing someone back from the dead—with magic. He’d seen too much by now to be sceptical any longer. “Huh,” he said. “That’s kind of pretty.”

Malfoy gave him an incredulous look. “Pretty?” he asked. “Potter, do you have any idea what this is?”

“No, not in the least, sorry.”

“Look behind you,” Malfoy said, and Harry did, gasping at what he saw. On the wall was the reflection cast by the ring, and had Harry paid closer attention before, he would have realised how odd the cut of this particular gem was: it did not reflect a prism of colours in a static, mathematical sort of way, but in a very deliberate fashion that, with the right light, as Malfoy had demonstrated, created an image on the wall.

It was a coat-of-arms; that much Harry could see, though for no family he knew of. Admittedly, his
knowledge of coats-of-arms was limited to the embroidery above the Weasley’s kitchen fireplace and the tapestry for the House of Black, though now that he thought about it, he thought he could remember a sigil on his Grandfather Evans’ lapel.

Refracted in reddish light were two entwined snakes, each striking either side of a unicorn’s neck. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Malfoy touch the ring, and the movement jostled it, sent it rocking again, so that it appeared that the snakes were moving in and out—striking again and again and again, and the unicorn was thrashing wildly, and rearing onto its hind legs.

It was like a hologram, though Harry doubted Malfoy would get the reference. Harry glanced down at the ring again, and studied the cut of the stone more carefully. One would never guess that it could create such an image, though it was certainly oddly shaped, with small chips and chinks cut out of weird places.

He looked to Malfoy for an explanation. “What family is it for?”

Malfoy leaned back on his stool until his elbows were able to rest on the desk behind him. “I had Mum look it up in one of our Lineage books, and she says that this ring belonged to the Gaunt family—they’re not spoken of in polite company, but, well.” He shrugged, quirking a grin.

Harry rolled his eyes, ignoring the way his stomach did a strange little flip at the sight of Malfoy’s strangely imperfect teeth, and said, “Yes, yes, I’m not polite company, I get it.”

Waving it off was not as easy as he expected it to be. It was so very odd to notice that something about Malfoy wasn’t, technically, perfect. Not to say that Malfoy was supposed to be perfect, of course, but he’d always given the impression that his whole family was very close to it.

To see the way Malfoy’s canines pushed forward around the rest of his teeth—it was almost startling. Perhaps that was the reason Malfoy never smiled much; perhaps he didn’t want to show off his flaws. That would be a perfectly Slytherin reaction, Harry suspected, though he wasn’t entirely sure—

“Well they were quite vulgar,” Malfoy said, interrupting Harry’s thoughts. “One of the last unadulterated branches of Salazar Slytherin’s line which remained thus simply because they refused to marry outside their own immediate household after a while. Until the eighteenth century, they were quite well respected, but that was about the time that the madness set in and the inbreeding started.”

Harry snorted, shaking himself from his former line of thought with a quick jibe. What in the world was wrong with him, noticing Malfoy like that? “As if inbreeding isn’t rampant everywhere else in the wizarding world.”

Malfoy gave him a weary look. “Potter, none of my ancestors were simultaneously brother and uncle. The Malfoys are very firm in limiting our marriages to second-cousins or further distant. Many years of research has proven this to be perfectly safe and normal.”

Harry gave him an indulgent look. “Of course. You were saying?”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. They were gray. Or blue. Harry couldn’t decide. “There’s no fucking curse on this fucking ring, Potter,” he said in exasperation. Harry was going to point out that Malfoy had already established that fact, but the blond continued. “And there’s no way that Dumbledore could have not known that.”

“How do you know?” Harry asked. Malfoy wasn’t really angry with him; Harry had no idea how he
could tell, but he liked that he could.

“Because it’s a family signet ring, for one,” Malfoy said. “As you can see by the coat-of-arms reflection it’s casting on the wall. Signet rings have spells on them that can’t be modified by anyone but the head of the family, and even those spells are limited. By the very nature of a signet ring, they’re immune to curses and hexes because they’re vital for business transactions and signing contracts and wills.”

“Oh,” Harry said dumbly. “Okay.” He looked back at the wall; the ring had stopped rocking, and the sigil was stuck in one position, with one snake striking as the other reared back.

“Also, I had Snape test it,” Malfoy added smugly. “Just to be sure.”

Harry laughed, and felt odd about the smile Malfoy gave him in return. Surely he wasn’t attracted to Malfoy, was he? Malfoy was a decent enough looking bloke, but he had nothing on Seamus, so why was Harry feeling like he wouldn’t mind spending more quality time with Malfoy when he was starting to feel so awkward around Seamus?

This was ridiculous. Malfoy was a twat; there was no reason to be attracted to him. After all, they had only even been speaking civilly to each other for a fortnight.

“So if there’s no curse on this ring,” Harry finally said, “what are we going to do about our project?”

Malfoy looked inordinately pleased with himself. “We’re going to find out what’s wrong with it, of course. It may not be cursed, but there’s definitely something off about this ring, and I suspect that we can figure out what that is with—wait for it—Arithmancy. Dumbledore’s too crafty for his own good; my guess is that he knew something was wonky with this ring, but he’s exhausted all of his own ideas, and hopes that we’ll come up with something he missed.”

Harry plonked his head down on the table. That sounded a bit out of his expertise, and this project was becoming more and more aggravating. At least Malfoy was pleased, though: he’d been awfully upset about having a boring piece of jewellery for their project.

“Alright,” he said with a sigh. “Let’s get started then.”

The next hour passed in a blur of not understanding half of the things Malfoy said due both to being so new at this particular school of mathematics, and also because Harry kept catching himself staring at Malfoy’s mouth instead of listening to whatever he was saying.

He finally broke down, when it became too much, saying, “You wanna go get something to eat from the kitchens? I didn’t make it to dinner and everything you’ve said has gone right over my head.”

Malfoy, interrupted, stopped his litany of thoughts on how they would first determine the era of magic—Old, Middle or New—affecting the signet ring, and then narrow it down to a type. He looked at Harry incredulously. “Potter, are you to tell me that instead of solving a mystery—the answer to which eluded even your illustrious headmaster—you would rather gorge yourself on pasties?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah. I can’t focus on this right now; it’s difficult for me to begin with, you know, me being such a moron, but without food, I’m liable to become irritable, and then you’ll have to deal with me when I’m in one of what Hermione calls ‘my moods’. It’s a horrible thing; I wouldn’t wish it on even you,” he added seriously.

Malfoy snorted. “Alright, Potter,” he said, and began gathering his things. Harry followed suit. “We will make significant progress on this project before the night’s over, though. I’ve got Ancient Runes
and History assignments to finish, too, and I’m not going to get behind on everything just because everything’s ‘going over your head’.”

“Of course,” Harry said, leading the way from the classroom. He felt immeasurably better just by leaving the room. Possibly, being in a less daunting space would make it easier for him to pay more attention to the project, and less to trying to make Malfoy smile again.

Draco waited as Potter spent an inordinate amount of time diddling a painted pear. Of course, there was no reason to even think of Potter diddling anything; he’d told Nott that the Gryffindor wasn’t to his tastes, and for the most part that was true, so there was no need to use words like ‘diddling’ in the same thought as ‘Potter’.

“Come on, you wanker,” Potter muttered at the pear, as it continued to wriggle on its painting and refuse entry. Draco shook his head. He couldn’t remember Pansy or him ever having so much trouble sneaking into the kitchens. One quick tap of their fingers had always had the door opening right up. Perhaps it had realised that they would stand for none of this nonsense.

The pear made little squeaky-giggly sounds of enjoyment; Draco sighed. Potter turned to him sheepishly, still tickling, and said, “Sometimes if you get its tickle-spot it won’t open for you until it’s satisfied; kind of like a cat, you know?”

“Of course,” Draco said. He pushed Potter aside with his shoulder and said, “Allow me.” The pear shrunk back from the poke he gave it, and the door swung open. Half a dozen house-elves were waiting as they descended the few stairs, and Draco wasted no time requesting a clean table for them to work at.

“And—erm,” Potter added, “could we have some tea and pasties?”

There was a series of vigorous head-bobbings, followed by the harried, blurred movements of house-elves working. It was only moments before a table and two chairs appeared in front of them, with tea and cakes already on top.

Draco sat immediately, feeling both pleased that his favourite kind of cake had been provided, and frustrated that it was taking so long to make head-way on this project.

He’d written to his mother that morning to clarify something she’d mentioned, but he’d not heard back from her yet, and now he was really beginning to wish that he had. As a young woman, she’d placed in several spell-crafting competitions, and it was those skills that he had need of most right now. Yes, he’d discovered himself that the ring wasn’t cursed, but now...now he didn’t really know what to do next.

Of course he made no mention of it, but he’d really insisted on having this extra study session on the—slim—chance that Potter would come up with some random grand idea. Rumour had it that was how Potter worked all his escapades.

He watched the Gryffindor chewing messily on an apricot tart and resisted the urge to wipe the crumbs from the boy’s lips. Honestly.

“So,” Potter said, unexpectedly. “Dumbledore’s a bit barmy on the best days, and downright enigmatic on the more frustrating. You were probably right earlier when you said that he already knew it wasn’t cursed.”
Draco tried not to preen. He couldn’t remember Potter ever saying he was right. With a struggle, Draco settled for a smug smile. Potter gave him a funny look, bit into another apricot tart, and cleared his throat.

“Right,” he said. He shook that dreadful stripe of red hair from his face and then, “I’m usually in the middle of one of Dumbledore’s convoluted plots every year: you would think by now I’d figured out how they work by now, but I haven’t, so if you want my opinion—“

“I can’t imagine anyone wanting that,” Draco interrupted, mostly because it was expected of him. In true fashion, Potter carried on as if he’d not heard at all.

“—I would say that we should ignore, for now, what’s wrong with the ring, and instead try to figure out how it’s important to the Headmaster—because it is. He wouldn’t have bothered with this little game if it weren’t.”

Draco looked at Potter incredulously. No wonder the boy was a Gryffindor; he had no sense of strategy—or common sense—whatsoever. “What?” was all he was able to manage at first. “Potter, are you daft? That’s ridiculous. We can’t sit here for the next three weeks pondering what crazy scheme that mad headmaster had up his sleeve; we’ll fail, and we won’t figure it out, anyway; do you want to know why? Because it’s busy-work, Potter.”

Potter scoffed. “Malfoy, I think I know Dumbledore a bit better than you. He wouldn’t have given the ring to us if he didn’t have a plan.”

“Hippogriff shit,” Draco said. “If you think your precious headmaster would let me get close enough to something that he thought was important to the outcome of the war effort—which, why would he involve you, if it didn’t?—then you’re just as mad as he is. If I didn’t suspect you of sedition yourself, I’d waste no time whatsoever giving whatever information I discovered from it to my father, and you damned well know it.”

Draco stopped suddenly, surprised that he’d said so much. He rarely spoke so freely with anyone but his mother or Pansy—maybe Crabbe or Goyle, when they weren’t busy managing his father’s finances. Potter knew where he stood, Draco rationalised, but he’d just directly admitted it, and in the presence of at least a dozen house-elves that weren’t under his command.

He was so baffled by his slip that he nearly failed to notice the fact that Potter hadn’t reacted to the admission at all.

A particular house-elf, looking a bit more rundown than the others, came forward at Potter’s request. She curtseyed, but her floppy ears stayed limp even after she’d risen. “How may Winky help Harry Potter, sir?” she said, and Draco was shocked to hear the exhaustion in her voice. He’d never before heard of an elf being tired—though of course they could be, he reasoned.

“Winky,” Potter said, “please tell the other elves not to speak of anything they might’ve heard said between Malfoy and I tonight. This is very important; can you do that, Winky?”

The elf wrung her hands fretfully. Draco glanced up, and noticed that every elf in the Kitchens had stopped what it was doing and was watching the exchange.

“Winky wants to help Harry Potter, sir, but Winky doesn’t think that any elves will listen to her.”

Potter’s eyebrows scrunched as if he understood whatever this odd elf meant by the crazy words she was saying. He frowned, considering, but another elf spoke up, saying, “Hogwart’s house-elves will help Harry Potter. Sir.” The rest nodded, and it was an eerie sight.
Potter nodded his thanks, plucked another apricot tart from the tray, and that was about the time that Draco realised that the stupid Gryffindor had been trying to save Draco’s arse from his own stupid mistake.

Potter looked back at him, and it was a funny thing how just at that moment, the kitchen torches flared bright enough that the uncanny colour of Potter’s eyes made Draco look away, just for a moment.

“Well,” Draco said. He felt a bit awkward.

Potter didn’t seem to notice. He said, as if the previous conversation had not been interrupted, “Dumbledore expects me to spend more time trying to figure out what he’s up to than actually work on the ring. If he actually wanted me to find out what was wrong with it, he would have set the project for just me—or me and Hermione.”

“You’re serious,” Draco said, eyebrows raised. He’d thought Potter was just being lazy.

Potter nodded. “’Course, Malfoy,” he said, rolling his eyes.

This was all very intriguing, now that he thought about it. To learn that Dumbledore didn’t expect—or want—them to find out what was wrong with it...Draco didn’t quite believe that. More than likely, Dumbledore just assumed that he wouldn’t be able to get a lick of effort out of Potter without an appropriate amount of intrigue and mystery.

Something was niggling at Draco’s brain. An idea, though he couldn’t quite catch it, as was often the case when he was first getting a brilliant idea. It was just like Potter to do something arse-backwards and—No, that was it, he thought. We have to go backwards, just like in beginning Arithmancy.

Deciding on a course of action, Draco said, “I think it would be brilliant to find out what Dumbledore’s game is, then.”

Potter quirked a grin. “Good luck with that, then.”

Draco huffed, and said, “Don’t you think it would be a bit easier to deduce what the purpose of the ring is if we knew how it was affected by magic?”

Potter seemed to consider this. “Alright, Malfoy; you win.”

Draco couldn’t help it this time; he smiled delightedly, and he didn’t even think to keep his teeth covered when he did. “Say it again,” he pleaded, laughing. “Oh, please, Potter—say it again.”

Potter grinned back at him. “No.”

Draco gathered his books. “Well, fine. Let’s go.”

Potter stood up as well. “Where are we going?” He looked longingly at the last two apricot tarts, and after a moment’s hesitation took them, too. “It’s nearly curfew—Hermione’ll kill me if I get caught after.”

“I’m going back to Slytherin to check some references on this,” Draco said, jogging up the wooden stairs and pushing against the back of the fruit painting. “I have no idea where you’re going or what’ll happen to your dead body after the—Head Girl catches you.”
Malfoy stopped short suddenly, and Harry, not exactly paying full attention, bumped into him on the kitchen stairs. He didn’t want to admit to himself that he’d enjoyed their banter, but the feeling he got when his chest bumped into Malfoy’s back was a bit different. Malfoy was standing in the middle of the doorway, blocking the exit, and Harry, who was a step lower, couldn’t see around to see what had made him stop.

“Malfoy, move your pale arse,” he said, giving him a little push. Malfoy didn’t move, and in the short span of time from when Harry bumped into him, to when he hastily stepped back down, he could feel the tenseness in the Slytherin’s back.

“Malfoy,” Harry tried again, louder.

Malfoy shushed him, and tried to step back down the stairs, but Harry was in the way, and a voice called out from the other side of the door. Harry couldn’t see anything, but he would recognise that voice anywhere.

“Harry!” It was Ron.

Malfoy finally moved forward and Harry quickly followed him up, but as soon as he entered the corridor, he wished he hadn’t. He realised now what Malfoy had been staring at: Ron was sitting on the floor underneath a bit down the hall underneath a painting of an extremely buxom woman wearing a low-cut dress. She looked quite put out.

“I was hungry,” Ron was saying, “so I reckoned I’d come get me some sandwiches, but she wouldn’t let me in.” He pointed vaguely above his head, and the witch snarled down at him, folding her arms over her chest.

Ron continued, confused, “I tickled her pair. Isn’t that what we always did, Harry? Tickle the pair, right?” He chose that moment to lift a bottle of Odgen’s Favourite Firewhiskey to his lips and drink.

Harry looked over to Malfoy, who was staring at Ron with a fierce look, but his lips remained pressed firmly together. The Prefect badge on his robe gleamed in the torchlight, and Harry felt brief sense of panic. What in Merlin’s name was Ron doing? And here, Malfoy was a Prefect, and—oh, Merlin—he had to get Ron sobered up and back to Gryffindor immediately, but what was that spell Hermione used?

Harry ran over, and Ron took that moment to better focus his eyes; he noticed Malfoy standing back, and he rose to his feet of his own accord, brandishing the firewhiskey like a weapon.

“Malfoy!” Ron exclaimed. “What are you doing here, you dirty ferret?” Malfoy didn’t answer; Ron took a few wobbly steps forward. “Have you been with Harry this whole time?” he asked shrewdly.

“Ron, shut it,” Harry said frantically. He grabbed him by the shoulders, trying to pull him back, but his friend was much taller, much heavier, and he lumbered forward.

By now, Ron was only feet from Malfoy, who was still standing against the far wall and still looking at Ron with that strange, hard look. Harry had never seen it before but he knew he never wanted to see it again. It wasn’t vicious or vindictive, as he’d expected Malfoy might look if he caught Ron drinking again, but something else entirely.

It was then that Harry realised that it had indeed been Malfoy to catch Ron the first time, and he remembered McGonagall’s dire warning then. “Please,” Harry said, directing his words to Malfoy now. “Please let me just get him back to Gryffindor—I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

Malfoy glanced at him, then back to Ron, and still said nothing. Harry’s heart was beginning to beat
rather frenetically; the weight of it all was crashing down on him full-force, and the only thing he could think was that if Ron got caught, there would be no more second chances.

“Have you been fucking Harry?” Ron asked loudly. Harry, shocked beyond measure, let go of Ron’s arms, and the redhead stumbled forward, upsetting a painting as he grabbed the frame for balance.

Malfoy looked just as stunned as Harry; his mouth opened just a fraction, and made a little sound of —something. Ron poked the Slytherin’s chest, dropping the firewhiskey in the process, where it shattered on the floor, dousing their feet and flooding the corridor in a strong smell of alcohol. “He’s with Seamus,” Ron continued. “You stay away from him, you filthy Death Eater...Why do Slytherins like to fuck my friends? You tell Nott to leave Herm-y-nee alone—he’s just as—”

“Ron!” Harry exclaimed. “Ron, please stop. Just—please, shut your fucking mouth.”

Ron looked back at him slowly, drowsily, “Did you break up with Seamus, Harry?”

Having no idea how to respond to that, except to try once again to get Ron back to Gryffindor, Harry didn’t answer. He closed his fingers tightly around Ron’s arm again, and said, “Please, Malfoy—“

“You’re sleeping with Finnigan?” Malfoy interrupted incredulously. It was the first thing he’d said since they left the Kitchens, and the last thing Harry ever wanted to hear from the Slytherin.

“What? Yes—no, I don’t know, Malfoy,” Harry said desperately. “Please—please Malfoy, just don’t report this, please?”

Ron was still staring at Harry, as if he were patiently waiting for an answer, and he wasn’t resisting Harry’s pushes as much, but that still didn’t make him any easier to move.

“You know what you ought to report, Malfoy?” Ron added loudly. “You ought to report the Head Boy and the Head Girl snogging with their robes off in the—“

“Ron!” Harry exclaimed, hoping to spare himself—and Malfoy—any details about Hermione without her kit on.

Ron ignored him, and slipped on the wet stones beneath his feet. Harry caught him before he hit the ground, but Ron didn’t seem to care, and Malfoy didn’t either. His eyes narrowed slowly, and Harry said again, “Please, Malfoy, I’m taking him now—“

“That won’t be necessary, Mr Black,” a hard voice called from behind him. Harry looked up; in front of him, Malfoy’s eyes were wide with shock. Harry didn’t even have it in him to protest any longer. He let go of Ron’s arms, and turned slowly, so as not to slip in the firewhiskey.

Professor McGonagall, a roll of essays in her hands, stared at the three of them with a hard look. “Mr Malfoy, it’s nearly curfew; please see to your Prefect duties.”

“Yes, Professor,” he said, and hurried away without a backwards glance. Harry watched him, walking stiff-backed and quickly, and tried not to think about Malfoy’s Prefect duties—or how even though he’d never told Harry he wouldn’t report it all, he hadn’t said he would, either.

Harry felt defeated, and angry that Ron still hadn’t grasped the enormity of the situation. His redhead friend was now staring at the still-life pear painting, contemplative.

Harry heard him mumbling to himself, and wondered if he’d finally remembered what kind of pear he was supposed to tickle. His suspicions were confirmed when he reached up and lightly stroked
the fruit, though the door still didn’t open because his finger had landed on the apple instead.

“Mr Black,” McGonagall said. Harry turned back to find her watching him, frowning.

“Professor?” he replied wearily.

“You understand that there’s nothing that can be done now, don’t you? It’s out of my hands. He was given a warning.”

Harry nodded, though he wanted to ask whose hands it was in now. McGonagall was right: there was nothing to be done now, but it still didn’t seem quite real—what was he going to do without his best mate? How was Ron to join the Aurors with him if he didn’t get the necessary NEWTs?

“Very well, then; you may return to your common room.”

“But Professor—“

“You are dismissed, Mr Black.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Harry said. He turned towards the main staircase, but as he reached the first step, he felt like seven storeys was an insurmountable task. He wasn’t sure he would ever make it to the top.

France was not as warm as he had expected it to be.

He gave Nagini an apologetic hiss, and she gave him the equivalent of a shrug in reply. “I am accustomed to it,” she said. Feeling remorseful, Voldemort cast a mild warming spell around her, but he knew, from experience, that it would do no good. She would just have to find something large to eat, so that her metabolism would warm her up from the inside.

“Milord!” someone called from behind him. The Dark Lord turned, took in the pretty scenery of Saint-Jean-de-Luz with mild appreciation, and nodded at the men striding up. It was Yaxley, who knew well enough to treat him with respect when in the company of others.

“Edward,” he said. Nagini slithered off to find a badger for lunch, and Tom nodded to the second man.

“Milord, this is Philippe Delacour, captain of the Oureur squad in charge of the Dementor project.” Captain Delacour gave him a stiff nod—so stiff that barely a single blond hair moved on his head. This was acceptable. The French were not so frightened or wary of him as those on his own little island were, but that didn’t mean they trusted him. Of course, the man was French, and most likely didn’t care for him simply because he was English. Just as well.

“A singular pleasure to meet you, Monsieur Delacour.” They did not shake hands: a smart decision when wizards were involved. “Could you update me on your progress?”

Delacour turned his head and stared off at a group several hundred metres off; Tom had not previously noticed them, but now that he did, he realised that they were mostly his men, and they were building. The thing that they were building was nothing like Voldemort had ever seen, and it ached with wickedness. “You English,” Delacour said roughly, “do not appreciate life as you should.”

He paused, and his eyes flickered briefly to meet the Dark Lord’s. “My younger sister,” he
continued, “once met an Englishman—she thought of little but him from that day forward. She was probably thinking of him when a pack of Polish weres sneaked up on her.”

The Frenchman nodded to a young girl among the group, standing just a bit away from the rest, and directing them from a position on the tip of her toes. She craned her neck to see around a large wizard, and turned, and it was then that Voldemort saw the long, jagged scar running down her neck and across her clavicle that her golden hair had been hiding. It looked like it had been a deep wound; Tom wondered absently how she survived it.

“Part Veela,” Delacour answered his unspoken question. “Our magic does more than attract sexual partners.”

“Impressive,” Voldemort allowed. He had met a Veela once; the effect she’d had on him had been the root of an impressive row with Calixta. She’d always been the jealous type. Next to him, Yaxley shifted on his feet, and Voldemort shared a look with him. Perhaps he was remembering the same incident.

The *Oureur* huffed sarcastically. “We already lose Gabrielle once a month thanks to you Englishmen; do not under-appreciate the value of those other twenty-nine days to me and my family.”

“Duly noted,” Voldemort said. In truth, he cared not one whit for the teenage Veela-girl, but he would not knowingly send a child to her death anyway. He sneered, and then added, “Now tell me about your work.”

To his credit, Delacour didn’t flinch. “With assistance from Monsieur Weiss, Luxembourg’s leading Runist, we are creating a threshold that will, in theory, attract the most primal parts of the Dementors in the area. They won’t be able to ignore the call of the runes, and we—with assistance from the werewolves—will be able to shackle them until such time as we can feed them and release them—hopefully sated—for breeding.”

Tom nodded slowly, considering the idea. He turned to his old friend, and said, “What do you make of this, Edward?”

Yaxley ran a hand through his grey hair. “Best shot we’ve got, you ask me. It’s not like we can put an advert in the *Quibbler* and they’ll all flock to us, no questions asked.”

“What about the shackling?” Voldemort asked. “Can you actually hold a Dementor captive? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Sure,” Edward said. “Same process they use at Azkaban and Kiljoy, only more focused. It’s all rune-work; you just got to get the right runes on the shackles, and Dementors are like viruses in that regard; one rune series might work for a handful of Dementors, while it might require a whole different formula for others.” He gestured roughly at a tall, thin man with thick glasses standing next to the Veela-werewolf. “That’s what we’ve got the Runist for. He’s quick; he can get them shackled before they realise what’s happening.”

“Good,” Tom said. He turned back to Delacour. “What will you require from my end to make this a success?”

The Frenchman reached into his government-issued work robe—which was admittedly much finer than anything British Aurors wore—and pulled out a folded parchment. “All of Monsieur Weiss’ rune-work is here; he affirms that we will need four-hundred and seven souls to feed all of the Dementors in continental Europe...four-hundred eighty-nine if we are to include those residing on the
British Isles, as well.”

“Is there a margin of error?” Tom asked, ignoring Delacour’s last, cheeky remark.

Delacour nodded. “Monsieur Weiss suggests that we have on hand no less than five-hundred fifty souls, to account for any rogue Dementors that we were unaware existed.”

“Wise,” Tom agreed, nodding again. He let his eyes rove over the group of men and women, all werewolves as far as he could tell, who were busy directing wood and stones into some pre-arranged design for Dementor-attraction. It would only be a matter of time before they were finished and the Dementors started showing up; Voldemort had no doubt that they would, either.

He glanced over Weiss’ equations; they were sound, and he wondered why he had not thought of the solution himself. Ah, he remembered, it was because I never put the thought into it. It was almost worth regretting; he had once been very adept at Runes—he had once loved working them.

“I will have your five-hundred and fifty persons,” Voldemort finally said. “It will take time to acquire them, however. Is Yuletide soon enough for you?”

Delacour shook his head regretfully. “I’m sorry, lord,” he said, showing the first sign of respect since the beginning of their conversation. “You have a fortnight, maximum, before it begins.”

There was no need to explain what ‘it’ was; Tom knew. He glanced at Edward, standing at his side. Yaxley nodded minutely, confirming the time-limit. “They are much too restless even now.”

“I was under the impression that we had a upwards of a year to deal with this before it became a crises; I was under the impression that there was a strict time frame—that Arithmantic maths were factored into the breeding time.”

Delacour looked pained. “Arithmancy is a young art, even now. The last time the Dementors bred, it was even younger. If mistakes in calculation were made then, it would affect our calculations now, and I would not be surprised if that is what’s happened.”

Voldemort glanced up, and exhaled, though it relieved none of his stress. The sun was now beginning to set over water, but the were-workers were not slowing down. “A fortnight,” he repeated. He could see Delacour nodding in reply from his peripheral vision. “I will make it happen,” he said wearily. “You’ll have your persons, though I can’t guarantee the succulence of their souls.”

“Dementors care little for taste,” Edward said quietly. And of course he would know. For all that he, like everyone else, despised Dementors and redcaps and all those other vile creatures, he loved them just as much—just as he loved his werewolves, the same ones who were building some vast, inexplicable effigy of stone and wood that even now exuded a darkness that put even Voldemort on edge.

The longer he stood near it, the more he wanted to leave. No wonder the French had required his cooperation via werewolves. They could stand this sort of thing like no human wizard could.

Tom chuckled darkly. No, Dementors wouldn’t care much for taste, would they? The few unfortunate werewolves who had already lost their lives on this mission could attest for that—but it was their soulless bodies, left behind, that had guided the researches to this one spot in the end. They had contributed much more than they probably thought.

The building site was chaotic in the way that all building sites were; there was no sense of fear among the people here, and maybe that was what was most frightening of all to Edward about this mission. The werewolves here felt safe, and they would be unprepared when the first Dementor,
called by their work, showed up to eat.

But with error, there was learning. Voldemort hissed, and Nagini slithered up to him from a hiding place nearby. She was cold to the touch, but so was he, and they had no time for creature comforts. With a turn, they disappeared.

Chapter End Notes

1. The Merlinian Monasteries and the Nimuean Nunneries are references to Benedictine Monasteries, Merlin and his downfall/love-interest, Nimue.
Pyrrhic Victory II

Chapter by faire_weather

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Pyrrhic Victory: (n) 1. A victory or goal achieved at too great a cost. 2. A victory that is accompanied by enormous losses and leaves the winners in as desperate shape as if they had lost. Pyrrhus was an ancient general who, after defeating the Romans, told those who wished to congratulate him, “One more such victory and Pyrrhus is undone.”

Sirius arrived in Saint-Jean-de-Luz sometime after sunset, but the town was alive with activity even then. He ambled through the streets, glancing into shops and pubs, not exactly sure what he was looking for, but knowing that if it presented itself, he would know. He had written to Harry that a werewolf had directed him here, and that was true, but he had little hope that he would really find Remus here, as the were had thought he might.

He thought maybe that he would find Regulus here, though. Or, if not Regulus, then something that would explain what happened to Regulus—if he had fallen through some Veil in the Ministry, or if he’d orchestrated not one fake-death, but two.

The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced that his brother was alive. Or at least had been in the past three years.

A French werewolf pack was supposedly here, looking to chase some birds. Sirius doubted that Remus would have held with that, even for a mission. Remus had been too pragmatic for that sort of thing. But—what if it had been metaphor? What if Remus and some other werewolves really were somewhere in this little city, not to catch tail, perhaps, but to catch something else?

Sirius paused, and a group of rowdy young wizards walked into him, stumbling and slurring various French obscenities as they picked themselves up from the cobblestones. What was there to catch out here?

Regulus? But there was no reason a group of werewolves would have any interest or inclination to find Sirius’ long-lost little brother; or even that anyone would expect him alive. No, he was being sentimental, and it was possible that he’d read too many of James’ muggle ‘defective novels’—or whatever they were called—back at Hogwarts. He was projecting.

And it was actually kind of cold, now that he thought about it. He shivered, and cast a quick warming charm on his cloak. For November, it was unnaturally chilly, really. ‘Colder than a Dementor’s tit’, as his mum would’ve said.

If Remus had been here, Sirius thought humourlessly, he would’ve teased him about being such a ninny when it came to cold weather. Stupid Remus and his stupid ability to withstand ridiculously extreme temperatures. If it weren’t for him, Sirius wouldn’t be out here, anyway, when he could be back in England making sure his son didn’t cock something up beyond repair—

Oh Merlin, Sirius thought suddenly. He stopped again in the middle of the street, but this time no one walked into him. What if someone else had remembered how useful werewolves could be in regards
to Dementors?

If the Dark Lord—or Dumbledore—was using his friend as Dementor bait, he was going to pitch quite a fit, damn it. Remus probably didn’t even know he was alive, but that was no reason he had to go frolicking about on some bloody suicide mission for The Greater Good or whatever it was Dumbledore prattled on about.

He remembered from his time here after Azkaban that there was an incredibly old pub near the wharfs that boasted ‘Est 986: Alive and kicking back ale for two deadly seasons!’ It was called, Sirius remembered with a grin, the Happy Dementor, and if there was anywhere that would have trivial information on the Dementors in the area and their habits, it was there.

Albus had conjured a tartan armchair in his office, and Minerva wasted no time sitting. Her shoulders slumped minutely, and for a moment, it caught even Albus off his guard. He’d never before seen her look quite so defeated, and he couldn’t blame her, of course. He felt like he’d been defeated as well. It was nearly midnight, and the weariness of a long day showed of both of their faces.

“Never—not in my forty years of teaching have I ever—!” She stopped abruptly; her mouth moved for a moment, as if she were silently completing the sentence, and then she shook her head. The anger melted away from her quietly, and Albus was left staring at a woman he’d never seen before in all of his one-hundred-plus years.

“Not even the Weasley twins,” she continued stubbornly. Her voice sounded frank, and confused, and sad.

“Perhaps you would have got around to it, had they not made the decision themselves,” Albus said, trying to bring some levity to the situation. Minerva gave him a stern look in reply, and the headmaster decided it was worth it, if only to see some of his usual Deputy Headmistress in her.

“Albus, you know I can’t ignore this,” she said, and it sounded like a plea. “He must be expelled.”

The Headmaster dipped his head once in assent. “It is as you say,” he affirmed, though, had he been the one to catch young Mr Weasley, he wasn’t sure that he would have been able to make the same decision. Of course, throwing Mr Malfoy into the mix changed things; Minerva’s hands were very close to being tied with him having seen.

Call him old-fashioned, but he’d never been able to bring himself to expel anyone, not even Sirius Black when he’d most certainly deserved it, and not even young Tom Riddle, which might one day equate to one of the bigger mistakes he made in his life.

From his perch, Fawkes trilled sadly, and Albus nodded, reaching over to stroke his ugly bald head; he’d just had a burning day. On the shelf behind him was the box of effects given to him by Petunia Dursley nearly two weeks ago. He still hadn’t made the time to go through it all, and resolved to do so soon. Perhaps. If he was able to find the time.

“Perhaps this will be a valuable experience for Mr Weasley,” Albus offered.

Minerva said angrily, “Without his NEWTs he’ll never find a decent job!”

Albus smiled enigmatically, and said, “But surely he can join the hundreds of other home-taught children completing their NEWTs by correspondence—“

“He’ll need the practicals, too, for Ministry jobs or any sort of affluent position, Albus,” she said
“Nothing a tutor couldn’t—” Albus began, but was cut-off.

“I dare say,” Minerva said slowly, “that the Weasleys will be hard-pressed to afford a private tutor for one rebellious son.”

Albus dared a small smile again. “Molly and Arthur will do right by their son—or should I say sons? What better opportunity for Molly to ensure her twins get their NEWTs as well, when she’s already committed to seeing one through them?”

Minerva reluctantly pursed her lips in thought. It was not so different from her normal look, and Albus was again pleased by the momentary transformation. Or should he say transfiguration? He chuckled to himself at the joke.

“Please do share the joke, Albus,” Minerva said, again looking sour. “I fail to see the humour of the situation.”

Immediately, he smoothed his expression back into one of passive soberness. “I was merely reminiscing,” he said, “of a particularly impressive prank committed by the Messers Potter, Black, Lupin and Pettigrew, which reminded me in turn of the Messers Weasley, which reminded me in turn of the—“

“Yes, I understand,” Minerva said. She inhaled deeply and stood, composing herself. “It must be done,” she said, more to herself than to him.

He nodded along anyway, running his fingers through his beard to detangle it. One of these days, he should have it trimmed. If he happened upon a free moment, that is, and if he were able to decide on a blunt trim or some nice layers—

“I’ll contact the Weasleys in the morning then,” she said at last, and Albus was startled out of his musings. “Shall I have them floo to your office at nine?”

“Nine would be quite acceptable,” he affirmed.

“Very well,” she said. With a final decisive nod, Minerva turned towards the door of his office and made to leave.

He stopped her as she reached the door handle, saying, “Minerva?”

She turned expectantly, like he knew she would, looking for some answer that she knew he was capable of giving, but which he refused to give because it would do none of them any good. He knew this, and it saddened him, but he said anyway, “This will not be the last trial of Mr Weasley’s life; though it pains us to do so, it is often necessary to allow those we care for to suffer, so that they might learn from it.”

She gave him a hard look, and said nothing more as she left. He could hear her heels snapping on the stone steps. She had always ignored the spell that moved the staircase, choosing instead to walk it herself. He couldn’t blame her for that; pride was often a difficult burden to bear.

“My first friend,” Severus said quietly.
Ginevra Weas—no, Lily—glanced up at him. Even in this body, he knew her, knew all of her flaws and failings and adored them just as her triumphs. Severus had come to notice, over the past week, that when Lily was there, was in control, he could see her.

With her red hair and slender body, Weasley was not so different, but sometimes, when Severus was lecturing his sixth year class, he would catch Weasley looking, and her eyes would flash green, her hair flare brighter, and her freckles would fade into translucent-white skin, and Severus would know. Ginevra Weasley, for all her escapades, had nothing on Lily Evans, who was beautiful in her quietness, in the way her mouth looked when she was this-close to figuring out some profound theory.

“My last,” he amended a moment later.

“Surely not,” she replied. She was sitting on a student desk, swinging her legs back and forth slowly, and Severus could not help but watch the muscle and sinew undulating under her skin.

They were not Ginevra Weasley’s legs anymore, though Severus had been assured that the girl was somewhat aware of what was going on. Severus remembered that patch of freckles right above her right knee from a spring study session their OWL year. It had been the last time they studied together, and somehow, he’d known this in advance, and made certain to memorise every curve and freckle of her, shamelessly stolen in glances revealed by her pleated skirt.

It was just there: above her right knee. It showed as her skirt rid up and back down again with every swing. Everything about this body was Lily.

He paused in marking his second year essays, looked up at her slender jaw and pretty eyes: “Why would I lie to you?”

She pursed her lips and looked away, as she’d always done when he’d said something that upset the feminine part of her—the part that cried and ached over hurt animals and broken hearts. She’d not been as fierce and uncaring as the Gryffindor boys had believed. Severus knew; he’d seen her cry. He’d made her cry.

“Why did you suffer like that?”

He clenched his quill in his fist and sneered at her, saying, “It was not something that could be helped.”

She, too, was accustomed to his responses when he was defensive or frightened: she ignored the sneer and said only, sadly, “You should have made friends, Sev. I was nothing special. Certainly not now; not when I’m dead.”

He wanted to say that she was; she was everything to him, and always had been, even when he’d pushed her former existence to the farthest place in his mind. “We are not all so vivacious as you once were.”

She laughed—not the girlish giggling that Ginevra Weasley made whenever she was with a beau or among friends, but the trilling, head-turning laugh that had first attracted Severus to the swing-sets all those years ago. He had known her to be a witch then because he had known the meaning of a laugh like that—of a voice like that, that was at once lyrical and tragic as it was blending and unobtrusive.

She’d had the Cadence Magic, as the old wives called it. He’d recognized her dulcet voice because his mother had had one almost as pleasant. His own smooth voice was a remnant of such a desirable talent, but he’d never been able to spell-craft with it, like Lily had.
Severus didn’t reply. He wondered, so he asked instead, “Do you—the last time I saw you, you sang
—“

“The blessing,” Lily interrupted. She smiled at him softly. “I remember; I prayed for your soul.”

He laughed suddenly, a rare thing. “I’d forgotten that your family was Catholic.”

She gave him a wry look. “It is not so uncommon in the States, this strange religion.”

Severus nodded. In truth, the year after Lily’s death, her birthday had fallen on a Sunday, and he had attended a Catholic Mass in some misguided hope of easing his suffering. It had only made it worse.

He couldn’t—wouldn’t—think of that anymore, so he said instead, “Your son wears your wedding ring.”

She nodded, unsurprised. “I’ve seen it on him.”

“You do not seem so saddened by the loss as I would have expected.”

She laughed again, but this time with less cheer. “You don’t sleep when you’re dead. I’ve had a lot longer than sixteen years to get over a marriage that was a farce to begin with.”

“But, I always thought—“ Severus began uncertainly. “After fifth year, when you took up with—it seemed—“ he couldn’t finish the thought aloud, and felt embarrassed by the strange way his voice had sounded in the emptiness of his potions classroom.

Lily said softly, “What a terrible mess I have made of all your lives.”

Severus knew of whom she spoke: the three men who had loved her and revolved around her like a frightened doe, each one watching the other circle and waiting for the first opportunity to snatch her away or at least get one of the other two out of the picture. Sirius Black had been the most aggressive of all of them—the Alpha Male—the one who’d nearly had him killed over her. He remembered the encounter with Lupin the Wolf clearly, even now, and he wondered if she’d ever learned the whole story about that, but dared not ask.

“What happened?” he asked instead.

She propped herself on her hands and regarded him strangely, worrying her lip in a way that reminded him of the terrible levitation charm she’d cast in first year. “You don’t really want to know that, Sev,” she said.

“I do,” he insisted calmly. There was so much confusion centred on Lily’s various romances. Like everyone else, he had always thought the Potter marriage to have been a happy one, if unexpected. Wandpoint Weddings were not uncommon in the wizarding world, but he had known of her affairs in school with Sirius Black, even if James Potter had not, and hearing of it had caught him by surprise, even then. Even when he hadn’t spoken to her in three years.

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“Do you remember Regulus Black?” she asked, non sequitur.

He nodded; Regulus Black had been a subtler, cleverer version of his older brother: affluent and snobbish, but with a penchant for melodrama that rivalled Draco Malfoy’s. That was not to say that Severus had disliked him, though; truth be told, he’d not had much of an opinion of him at all.

“He did something he shouldn’t have done, and Sirius wanted to save him, but we both know he would have royally botched it.”
Severus frowned severely. “I don’t understand,” he said plainly.

She said, “I never saw Regulus Black die, but they say he’s dead.”

“Of course he’s dead,” Severus said, shocked. “The Dark Lord said so himself.”

“Did he?” Lily murmured. It wasn’t really a question, even if she’d phrased it as one.

It was a moment before Severus thought to say, “And why would you have seen him die, anyway? That’s ridiculous; do you know that I always hated when you spoke in riddles—“

She laughed suddenly, a melodic thing. “Oh, Severus,” she said, “you’re one to talk.”

He ignored her. It was nearing midnight and his temper shortened with every passing moment. “Why would you have seen?”

“Why, I was there, of course,” she said. “I’d been summoned to witness the act. I’m sure you remember, Severus; you were there, too.”

“You stood next to me,” he said in dawning comprehension. “I remember smelling your perfume, and thinking myself mad.” Shock paled his face even further, making him look ghostly and ill. “Why were you there? Why were you at a Death Eater meeting?”

Her brows furrowed, and she dipped her head in some negative emotion. He could see the play of regret and something else on her face, even in the darkness of the room. She didn’t look up when she said, “I wanted Regulus to live—because Sirius needed it, but I wasn’t able to hold up my end of the bargain, so the Dark Lord didn’t hold up his.”

“That makes no sense!” Severus said harshly. “What would you have had to bargain with the Dark Lord over? And...you! With your endless righteousness and your fretting and anger at me for the people I associated with when you were too busy with Sirius Black to give me the time of—”

“Severus!” Lily said angrily. He stopped, familiar with the tone, and looked at her sourly. “If you’ve forgotten, these insults you tend to throw out when you’re angry are the very reason I stopped speaking to you to begin with. If you want to speak to me like an adult, then you may certainly ask me anything you like, however, if you’re going to continue to be a twat, I’m leaving.”

“You haven’t called me a twat since third year,” Severus said, grudgingly abandoning his ire; she was right, of course, and he absolutely hated it.

She raised one eyebrow, smiling a bit. “You deserved it then, too.”

He rolled his eyes. “What was your end of the bargain?” he asked.

She huffed in that little way she’d always done when she had to explain something more than once. “To bring Narcissa Black with me.”

“Narcissa?” Severus asked incredulously. “What would the Dark Lord want with her?”

Lily raised her eyebrow again. “I suppose, since we had already stopped talking, and you cared little for people outside of Slytherin, you wouldn’t have heard about the spell she crafted in sixth year that won two international awards. CEMU ended up buying the rights to it in seventh year.”

“Indeed,” Severus said. He glanced down at the exams on his desk that he’d yet to finish marking. At this rate, he never would, but he couldn’t bring himself to kick Weasley out when Lily was in
He looked at Weasley’s face and he saw Lily there, as if it really were her, but then he would blink, and the illusion would dissolve; he would be left looking at Ginevra Weasley, and hearing Lily’s voice come out would shock him once again.

The more he talked to her, the more he missed her. He had thought that his mourning was over, and yet it seemed that it had just begun. He looked up at her again, saw Weasley’s face, and said, “You were merely required to bring Narcissa into the fold to save the life of Regulus Black?”

Lily nodded. “Yes; one servant for another.”

“Why didn’t you just do it?” he asked.

She shrugged. “I asked; Narcissa would have none of it. She thought the Dark Mark was tacky.”

Severus grinned severely. “I never would have expected Narcissa Black to be the kind to let one of the Family die for her appearance.”

“I never told her what was on the line;” Lily said, affronted. “That wouldn’t have been fair.”

“A Hufflepuff now, are you?”

“Certainly not,” Lily said. She yawned, and glanced at the clock on the wall. “I have to go,” she said, frowning. “Ginny Weasley has to finish her Muggle Studies homework.”

She hesitated, and then added, “Sometimes I want to tell her why she’s so attracted to my son and the Dark Lord, but then I think of a hundred reasons why I shouldn’t. It’s a terrible thing, watching her suffer through it every day.” She shook her head, and hopped off the desk. “Goodnight, Severus.”

“Wait—“ he said suddenly.

The girl in the doorway looked nothing like Lily—everything like Ginevra Weasley—but he couldn’t help himself. He had to ask—

“What is it, Sev?” she asked. Then it was still really her.

“Can you—that prayer,” he said, stumbling over the words. “Do you remember it?”

“Of course,” she said. “Hail Mary, full of Grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death.” She paused, smiled softly at him, and added, “Amen.”

Severus turned away as she shut the door, and did not look up again for some time.

Molly and Arthur Weasley arrived at Hogwarts the following morning at ten ‘til nine, and walked soberly towards the Headmaster’s office. Minerva caught Arthur just as he was leaving for work at eight, and both he and his wife were still in a state of shock.

Albus was waiting behind his desk when they came in; Arthur held the door for Molly, as always: still a gentleman to his wife after all these years.

“Good morning, Molly, Arthur. I’m sorry that we must meet like this,” Albus said. He retrieved a
lemon drop from his never-empty jar and slid it into his mouth.

Molly flipped her patched travelling hood back from her face; Albus was quite surprised to see that her eyes were red-rimmed, and she was sniffling even now. He had expected the anger first, the crying after. Arthur Weasley didn’t sit, but stood behind her chair with a heavy hand on her shoulder. He was solemn; his eyes darted, focusing on nothing as he frowned.

Arthur cleared his throat. “Hello, Albus,” he said. Molly nodded, and didn’t meet his eyes.

Albus looked towards the door, and soon after, Minerva pushed it open. She stood aside, and young Mr Weasley walked nervously into his office. He was downcast; his eyes were quite red and the circles surrounding them quite dark. Albus felt a moment of pity; the boy had spent the whole night fretting over this moment, and at this point in time, there was nothing Albus could do about it, Headmaster or not. It was a terrible shame that the school Governors had such control over certain matters; extreme and repeated impropriety on campus being one of those matters.

Molly burst into tears. “I don’t understand,” she cried, “we raised him to be a good man.” Arthur patted her shoulder, and poor Ronald watched, frightened and ashamed. Turning to the boy, she begged, “Why, Ron?”

He shrugged, at a loss for words. Blinking quickly, he turned his head towards the window. “’M sorry,” he mumbled. Molly only cried harder.

“Won’t you sit, Ronald?” Dumbledore asked, and the boy did. He was still in his school robes from the day prior, and they were stale and wrinkled from him having slept in them. It was a terrible shame that this was the last time he would ever be wearing them.

Before the Weasleys arrived, Minerva had confessed to him that she suspected Mr Malfoy would not have turned Ronald in, after all, but by then, the school governors had already been informed and there was nothing that could be done. Only the paperwork was left now. And anyway, Albus was afraid that his Deputy Headmistress was only feeling guilty, and trying to assuage guilt like this was a difficult thing. He pitied her for the first time in all their years working together.

“Lemon drop?” he asked. Ronald shook his head mutely, as the headmaster knew he would. He settled back in his chair and tried to look only at the youngest Weasley. Molly and Arthur’s combined grieving was entirely too much for him at the current moment, he was sad to admit.

“Mr Weasley, you understand what is happening, don’t you?”

He was silent for a moment, but finally whispered, “Yes, Headmaster.”

“Do you wish to file an appeal?”

Ronald shook his head silently, surprising everyone in the room.

“Ron,” Arthur said, bemused, “son—why not?”

“I can’t,” Ronald said, still not looking at anyone. He stared at his hands in his lap instead. “I deserve this.”

Molly sniffled loudly, saying, “Ron, you could at least try! Don’t throw your future away like this!”

“If I may,” Albus interjected smoothly, “young Ronald is not out of options as yet, Molly. There are oodles of opportunities available to a young man of his aptitude. And of course he may certainly take his NEWTs by correspondence, with the help of a tutor.”
“Oh Arthur,” Molly wailed, “we can’t afford a tutor; what are we going to do? We can’t let Ron go without his NEWTs—“

“I’ll pay for it,” Ron spoke up. He glanced at his parents, then quickly back down to his hands. “I’ll get a job.”

Arthur’s face took on a pained expression, and Molly sniffed loudly. “Son, you’ve just made the next few years of your life so much more difficult than they had to be.” He shook his head sadly and wiped inconspicuously at his eyes. “Your mother and I wanted so much for all of you to have a good life—an easier one than ours sometimes was.”

“I’m sorry—“ Ronald said again, but Arthur cut him off.

“No,” he said sadly. “Don’t be sorry; be decisive. Your mother and I can be sorry enough for you.” He turned to Albus and said, “Ron won’t be appealing.”

Albus nodded solemnly. “Very well.” He reached into his desk drawer and retrieved a stack of parchment. Adjusting his glasses, Albus scanned it quickly, initialled here and there, and slid it across the desk, where Arthur read over it before handing it to his son.

“Sign at the bottom if you understand what it says, Ron,” Arthur instructed.

It was only a moment before the young Gryffindor finished reading and signed his name messily on the line provided. Immediately, his robes and tie, once embroidered in scarlet and gold, faded to black. The boy noticed, and the sound that he made upon realising what it meant was so heartbreaking that Albus didn’t think he would be able to stomach food for several days.

Ronald took a moment to compose himself, then carefully set the Notice of Expulsion back on the headmaster’s desk. He made to stand, but Albus stopped him, saying, “Molly, Arthur, if you wouldn’t mind, do you suppose I might have a word alone with Ronald before you depart? Minerva?”

“Of course, Albus,” Arthur said, then gathered his wife and her pocketbook, and followed Minerva, who had watched the whole ordeal in a strange, stunned silence, out the door.

“How are you feeling, Mr Weasley?” Albus asked, once they were alone. The silence left behind from Molly’s sniffling made all of the whirring gadgets in his office sound like thunderstorms.

The boy snorted derisively and looked away, saying nothing. He fiddled with his now-black tie, and upon closer inspection, Albus noticed that his hands were trembling.

“You may be frank with me, I assure you,” he continued, as if he’d never heard.

Finally, Ronald looked up, pressed his lips together harshly, and said, “Frankly, I feel like utter shit, sir.”

Albus attempted a smile. “I will send you by Madam Pomfrey for a headache potion before you depart with your parents.”

Mr Weasley laughed, but it dissolved into a cry. “What am I going to do?”

Albus rummaged in his desk and found a single Chocolate Frog. He passed it over to the boy and sat back in his desk, hands folded in front of him. “What would you like to do, Mr Weasley?” he asked.

He tried not to find humour in the fact that this was the first time any of his students had ever
accepted sweets he offered. Ronald was carefully tearing the packaging open; he examined the card for a moment, reached to lay it upon Albus’ desk, and then pressed the frog into his mouth.

The Headmaster leaned forward and examined the card upside down. He chuckled; it was his own card.

“I don’t know,” the boy said plainly. His mouth was still half-full with chocolate. “How am I—Harry, and Hermione: I won’t see them. I’ll never be an Auror wi—”

“It is only a few weeks until holidays,” Albus offered when it was plain that Ronald would not finish his sentence. “I’m sure your parents will allow them to visit.”

“Why would they even want to?” he asked. Albus frowned; had he missed something? It seemed to him that Ronald’s mourning process was off, though he couldn’t say in what way.

“You are a bright young man, Mr Weasley,” the Headmaster said. “You have much to offer.” After a moment’s consideration, he added, “We must all travel our own paths; what we think of as a divergence may in fact be our own shortcut to greatness.”

Mr Weasley looked at him as if he were barmy, but that was quite okay. Albus was accustomed to that sort of thing, and anyway, there was a certain look of comprehension about Mr Weasley now. Albus suspected that he had understood.

“What would you like to do?” the Headmaster asked again.

This time, Ronald answered. He licked the remainder of the chocolate from his fingers speculatively and said, “I don’t know. Make sweets?”

“A splendid aspiration,” Albus declared. “Might I suggest you speak to your very industrious elder brothers on the matter? Perhaps they could offer some sage advice—and, oh! If I recall, your mother is quite the pastry chef. Several years before you were born, in fact, she sent me a lovely holiday cake. If you happen to go into her sewing bag looking for the cobalt blue yarn to repair last year’s holiday sweater, and stumble upon a collection of very secret family recipes, then subsequently try your wand at baking a certain triple chocolate truffle, I would be very delighted if you remembered to send me a small piece to sample.”

“Right,” Ronald said. Slowly, a grin spread across his face, though the expression underneath was still sad. “Of course, sir—Headmaster. Thank you.”

“For what?” Albus asked, scrunching his eyebrows in confusion. Just then, before the boy could reply, there was a knock at the door, and he lifted his voice enough to say, “Please do come in, Ms Granger, Mr Potter.”

The door burst open and Hermione Granger rushed in, crying perhaps harder than Molly had, and launched herself at young Mr Weasley. “Oh Ron,” she said, “you’re such an idiot.”

He wrapped his arms awkwardly around her, and patted her back. “I know,” he said. Albus, though he had not meant to watch, could not fail to notice the tragedy of the situation, and how very much it was costing Ronald not to squeeze her much tighter. His eyebrows rose of their own volition; this was an unexpected issue, but if the rumours regarding Ms Granger and Mr Nott were true, then the separation would benefit both of them.

Behind them, Albus saw Harry lingering. He beckoned him in with a slow nod of his head, and tried to make himself inconspicuous during this terrible goodbye.
“Harry told me last night,” Hermione continued, sniffling. “I can’t believe you; you said you’d stopped. I just don’t understand what could have been so bad that you had to go and do this, you big berk.”

Harry and Ronald’s eyes met knowingly for a moment, but as Hermione was still fiercely hugging her friend, she missed the exchange, and her only response was when Ronald cleared his throat and said, “I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

Harry finally stepped forward, saying, “We’re both coming to visit for hols. We saw your mum downstairs and she said it was okay.”

“Good,” Ronald said, nodding. Slowly, he unwrapped himself from Hermione’s grip and stepped back from her. “Maybe you could use the downtime to work on your Chess moves. Maybe you could surprise me over Yule.”

“Maybe,” Harry said, grinning. “Probably not.”

“Probably not,” Ronald agreed.

Albus cleared his throat. “I believe your parents are waiting for you, Mr Weasley.”

Ronald nodded quickly. “Of course, sir.”

“Wait,” Harry said quickly. He reached into the hand-warmer pockets on his jumper and pulled out a stack of photographs. From this angle, Albus couldn’t tell what they were of. “I’ve been collecting these for you, mate,” he said. “Use ‘em for your, erm, project.”

Glancing at the top one, Ronald choked out a laugh, and stuffed them in his pocket. “Where’d you get these?”

Harry shrugged. “No worries.” He stepped forward decisively and hugged his friend hard. “Gonna miss you, mate.”

“You too,” Ronald replied, hugging back. The stepped apart, and the redhead turned to nod at the headmaster. Awkwardly, he reached forward and retrieved the Chocolate Frog card from his desk. “If you don’t mind, sir, I’d like to keep this after all.”

Albus smiled serenely. “As you wish, Mr Weasley.”

The three Gryffindors—for even expelled, he was still a Gryffindor at heart—left as one, and as the door shut behind them, Albus reflected that they had entered together, and they would be leaving together, even if it was only metaphorical. He felt very sad for the rest of the week.

It was Professor Sinclair who gave them the letter.

“It was Professor Sinclair who gave them the letter. “I knew her, you know,” she said, smiling slightly. “Many years ago when we were younger, before—you know.”

Next to her, Lorraine nodded, staring at her lace-up lady’s boots, in the same style their mother had worn in a picture they had of her from her Hogwarts days. Lorraine was sympathetic and sentimental in such ways. It was possible, Alsace thought, eyeing the scratches on them, that they were even the very same boots.
“Did you join at the same time?” Alsace asked her professor, and Sinclair nodded. Neither she nor her sister had known their teacher prior to the school year, and they were not close, but it was still the professor who had been given the letter to give to them. Of course, they were no closer to Professor Snape, either, and in fact, to none of the professors or students for that matter, so perhaps whomever sent it had just expected it to be easier to hear from another woman.

“About, yes. Within a few months, or thereabouts. Your mother,” she said, hesitating again with the weight of it all. “Your mother was a beautiful woman; you both look so much like her.”

“We know,” they said.

A moment later, it was Lorraine who thought to ask, “Why did she go mad? In Azkaban? Our father didn’t.”

Alsace cocked her head to the side. She had always assumed it was from her stint in gaol, and that their mother had just been more delicate, mentally—but Lorraine was usually very circumspect, and asked only relevant questions. “I never thought...” Alsace said in wonder.

Professor Sinclair was giving them a pitiful look, and both girls, embarrassed, turned their faces at the same time.

“You’re so alike,” Sinclair sighed. She propped herself on the edge of her desk and glanced out the window. Being on the east side of the castle, the Defence professor’s office was nearly dark already, even though the sun had just begun to set. The torches on the walls were already flickering on. “Azkaban is a terrible place,” she said.

“But,” Lorraine questioned, “were both of our parents not there for the same amount of time? Should they not both have gone mad, if one did?”

“Your mother isn’t a weak woman, in any sense of the word,” Sinclair reassured them. Though they weren’t looking at each other, Alsace knew that her sister’s mouth would be curving into the same small, comforted smile as her own.

“There are several reasons that that terrible place could have affected your mother more so than your father, one being her genes. It’s common knowledge that the Black family has always been an Old Magic family; not being able to relieve that wild energy often enough can drive one mad; it’s one of the reasons dark magic has become so reviled in the past few centuries. Do you not yourself feel irritable or anxious when you’ve gone several months without performing some sort of Old Magic? It’s like a physical ache, if left alone too long.”

Alsace shrugged; she had never thought to stop using dark magic spells: she had never seen a reason to.

“It hurts,” Lorraine said, and Alsace looked at her sister curiously. Seeing it, Lorraine said, “I wanted to know if what Grandmother said was true. Remember?”

Alsace nodded. Grandmother had always said they should never cast ‘Cold Spells’, as she’d called them—spells without emotion. Alsace had always thought she was just being sentimental, saying that young ladies should do everything with feeling, but apparently she had been serious in quite a different manner.

“Another reason,” Professor Sinclair said, startling both of them, “could have been her guilt. No one but your mother knows what was on her conscience when she was arrested, but the heavier it was, the more it would have eaten away at her.
“Had I been in her place, I imagine that I would have regretted being separated from my daughters. I expect she mourned the loss of seeing you both grow up. Family has always been very important to most archaic lines, the Blacks included.”

“Wouldn’t our father have felt the same way?” Alsace asked, brows scrunched. She’d spoken to her father only a few times; he had been in prison for most of their lives, but when she’d first met him, he had seemed like, given the chance, he would have loved them very much. She didn’t want to think that her sister and she had not meant as much to their father as to their mother.

“Of course,” Sinclair said sympathetically, “but you must understand that men feel emotions in different ways than women. Your father would have been grateful that they’d had the forethought to make living wills, naming his parents your guardians. He would have been relieved that you wouldn’t become government wards.

“I imagine that while your mother was grieving over not seeing you grow up, your father was thankful that he knew you would be safe, and cared-for and well-loved by his own parents. Men are often more pragmatic in their grievances.”

The sisters nodded in unison, mulling the professor’s words over in their minds. Plucking the letter from Lorraine’s hand, Alsace read it over again, though she doubted she would ever forget the words. Her fingers brushed over the words and letters, and she felt the indentation on the parchment from the weight of the quill that wrote it.

“How will we get to see them?” she asked. “Before it happens?”

Professor Sinclair sighed sadly. “I’m not sure, dear. I was told that time is of the utmost importance. I can...I’ll see what I can do. I’ll see if I can get Professor Snape to get you there for a few hours, if there’s time available.”

“What were their numbers again?” Lorraine asked. Alsace turned her head away; she remembered the numbers, and she didn’t want to think much about it anymore.

Sinclair replied, “Your mother is 31, and your father is 517.”

“So maybe our father...” Lorraine started to say, but stopped. Alsace appreciated it: though they knew little of their father, she did not want to get her hopes up that Rodolphus Lestrange might not be needed.

The professor knew what she was asking anyway. She said, sadly, “I have been informed that there are 489 known Dementors in continental Europe and the British Isles combined. It will be dependent on how many rogues are discovered.”

“Of course,” the girls replied blandly. Alsace unfolded the letter one last time, though it had already become worn from their continued handling of it. Lorraine took one corner of it, and they read it together.

Alsace Babette Lestrange,
Lorraine Axelle Lestrange,
aux bons soins de
M Severin Lestrange, III
Chaponost Chateau
Lyon, France
17 November

Alsace and Lorraine,

Please forgive me for having not written you before, but I have never before been allowed to send a letter, and even now I am only allowed one—I am sorry that I was unable to write you both individually.

Your mother and I have been selected from a lottery to take part in what is to be our last mission for the Dark Lord. We were informed this morning, so that we may settle our affairs, such as they are. You both are my only affairs, and your grandfather has already been elected executor of my will, though through my own errors and mistakes, much of it will most likely be seized by the Ministry in restitution.

Before you were both born, however, I opened several bonds and trust funds in each of your names, and purchased stock for you from an up-and-coming shop that I had expected to take the both of you to quite regularly. Combined, you own six percent of Florean Fortescue’s Ice-cream Parlour, though I’m not sure how much it will be worth by now. At my last foray into the free world, I was given to understand that it’s become quite popular. At any rate, you should be well taken care of, even after.

I am afraid that this will be my last communication with you, and I want you to know that I have loved you, always, and that given the opportunity, I would have liked to get to know each of you better. I have spent nearly half of my life in gaol, though, and even this, to me, seems like an escape.

I’m not worried, and you should not worry for me—or your mother. She’s on the other side of the prison, in the women’s division, so I don’t know if she was given the same opportunity to write to you as I have been, or even, I’m saddened to say, if she would understand enough to be able to write.

Please forgive the both of us for not being there for you. Be respectful to your grandparents, and be sure to ask your grandfather about your trusts; he will be able to give you more information on how much is there, your accumulated interest, when you can begin making withdrawals from it and et cetera. In addition, you will both inherit various and sundry seats and titles—Alsace, you will remember that you’ve already inherited your mother’s seat on the St Mungo’s board; look into those things and use them for everything you can.

Je t’aime,
Papa
Severin Rodolphus Lestrange IV

While Harry wanted to lie in his bed and feel sorry for himself and Ron all afternoon, Malfoy wasn’t having it. He went so far as to waltz himself up to Gryffindor, bang on the Fat Lady’s bosom—much to her ire—and demand that he show himself immediately. Hermione, who had recently become a conniving, evil woman, came up to his room to announce the Slytherin.

“Malfoy’s down in the Common Room. You’d better come see what he wants before the first years wet themselves.”
Harry, lying on Ron’s bed with his hands folded behind his head, grunted in a negative fashion. “Tell him I’ll meet him after class tomorrow. I don’t feel like it tonight.”

“Harry,” Hermione said, “I don’t think it’s healthy for you to lie about like this. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but you should go with Malfoy.”

“I don’t feel like it,” Harry repeated.

Hermione frowned. “Ron’s not dead, you know; he’s just at home.”

“I know,” Harry said.

“You need to occupy yourself so that you don’t dwell on this. Look—if you don’t want to entertain Malfoy, you could come with me. Ginny’s been wanting to see that gruesome diary from your dad’s library, and I was going to go read it with her so she didn’t have to be by herself.”

Harry glanced up at his friend, who was still hovering near the doorway. “I’d forgotten about the book,” he said. “Did you ever find anything interesting in it?”

“Other than it having been written by one of the founders of Hogwarts?” Hermione asked archly.

Harry shrugged. He wasn’t in the mood for this. He missed his friend, and even worse than that he hated himself for not spending enough time with Ron lately. Maybe he would’ve seen this before it became such a problem. Maybe if he hadn’t spent so much time fucking around with Seamus or trying to be Malfoy’s friend, he would have—Harry paused in thought abruptly. Had he been trying to be Malfoy’s friend? Or was it a subconscious slip of errant thought?

There was a sudden, loud thump from below, followed by Malfoy’s sharp voice yelling, “Potter! Potter, get your arse down here post-haste!” The sound of feet stomping up the steps alerted them to the Slytherin’s approach.

Hermione rolled her eyes as she was unceremoniously pushed out of the way. “Potter,” Malfoy said straightway. “Come along; I’ve made a major break-through.”

“I don’t want to, Malfoy,” Harry said. Ron’s bed felt entirely too comfortable to get up right now, especially if his alternative was spending time with Malfoy.

“Break-through on what?” Hermione asked. “It’s just a simple de-cursing.”

Malfoy looked at her without speaking. He turned back to Harry. “Hurry up, I don’t want to be in here if Finnigan comes back; my skin might crawl off from the thought of what you did in any one of these beds.” He shivered dramatically.

Harry’s lips quirked. “You thought about it?”

“Potter,” Malfoy warned. “You can doff your Irish Creampuff all night long for all that I care, but I don’t wish to be in the room it happens in, and we have things to do.”

“Malfoy, my best friend just got expelled,” Harry sighed, “I really don’t feel like doing much of anything, and that includes doffing, Irishmen or otherwise.”

Hermione cleared her throat. “I’m still here,” she said sternly. “And Harry why haven’t you and Malfoy finished your Arithmancy project yet? You’ve had weeks to get it done!”

“As I’ve been saying,” Malfoy chimed in, “we need to get on with this. I told you once before,
Potter, and I still mean it: I’m not getting an E in Arithmancy just because you want to have a lie in. Or have you forgotten that it’s NEWTs year?”

“I haven’t,” Harry said, eyes narrowing, “but I still don’t feel like doing anything about de-cursing Dumbledore’s stupid non-cursed ring!”

“What do you mean, non-cursed?” Hermione wanted to know. She looked from one to the other, adding, “That’s what the whole assignment’s about. Surely you don’t mean to say that you don’t think there’s a curse on the ring?”

Malfroy sighed dramatically, and finally acknowledged her, saying, “It’s a signet ring, Granger. It’s not cursed.”

From the bed, Harry could see Hermione’s eyebrows go up. “Oh my,” she said slowly, bemusedly. “Well, what on earth’s the matter with it then?”

“Don’t know,” Harry said.

Malfroy pursed his lips, and added, “I’ve made a breakthrough,” he reminded them harshly. In his obvious frustration, Harry could hear the sharp Wiltshire accent breaking through as he continued. “And if Potter could spare a moment of his self-righteous fucking moaning to give a fellow a hand with it, we might just finish this fucking stupid project—or I will, rather, seeing as Potter hasn’t yet felt a need to contribute anything—and who knows?—maybe he’ll be a little bit more interested in whatever mad game Dumbledore’s playing when I tell him that the fucking ring is fucking alive, Potter, you stupid shit.”

The silence following Malfoy’s angry diatribe was heavy with shock. Hermione gripped the doorframe with one hand as she stared wide-eyed at the Slytherin, too shocked to chastise his choice of language. “Alive?” she muttered weakly.

Malfroy’s chest rose and fell heavily. He turned, gave her an inscrutable look, and nodded sharply. “Yes, alive.”

Harry, a bit confused, pulled himself up straighter on the bed. He regarded Malfoy oddly, glanced at Hermione, but found no answers there. “How can it be alive?” he asked.

“Oh dear,” Hermione said, hand moving to cover her mouth. “Malfoy—are you quite certain?”

“Absolutely,” he said with a sneer.

Hermione frowned, but didn’t let it deter her. She moved hesitantly forward, further into the room, and said, “But how do you know?”

“It has a heartbeat,” Malfoy replied matter-of-factly.

“Not just a—“

“No,” Malfoy interrupted. “It’s not spell reverberation...nor New Magic energy return. I checked for those. And it’s sentient, I think. When I was casting the revelation spells, I felt...anxious, worried. It wasn’t me; the ring was projecting.”

“Oh,” Hermione said. She appeared at a loss, but Harry was still stuck.

“How can a ring be alive?” he asked.
Malfoy shrugged. Looking at Hermione, she seemed unable to come up with anything either. “We should check the Restricted Section,” she said decisively, seeming to have forgotten that neither she nor Malfoy cared much for the other. “Harry get your things; we can all meet in the library in fifteen minutes.”

She left without a backward glance, already absorbed in this new, astonishing mystery. Malfoy turned back to Harry, looking both annoyed and pleased with himself. “You heard her,” he said. “Get going.”

Draco had come to understand that when the Mudblood Granger said for Potter to get his ‘things’, she meant that he was to get something specific. An Invisibility cloak, as he came to find out, standing next to the entrance of the Restricted Section. Potter stood next to him, craning his head anxiously around the Restricted aisles, looking for anyone who might be lingering nearby as book after book floated from the shelves and disappeared under the cloak.

If he were honest, Draco was a bit impressed with Granger’s quick and quiet navigation of the Restricted Section, even under Madam Pince’s nose, as there were several hours before the library would be closed for the evening. She seemed to know exactly which books to grab, and where exactly they would be.

Several moments later, Draco felt an invisible someone brush between Potter and him, and he knew that she’d gathered all that she suspected they would need. He followed Potter back to their selected table in the dark corner that housed the periodical journals. It was always deserted, due to the bad lighting necessary for such fragile documents.

Granger appeared out of nowhere, arms full of at least a dozen books, which she placed charily on the table, careful to make sure none of the titles were visible to anyone who might walk by.

Draco wanted to be indignant about the Mudblood helping them, but at this point, after having realised how ridiculously unconcerned Potter was about the whole thing, he was actually a little relieved. He’d done quite a bit of work on his own, from discerning that the ring wasn’t cursed, to—accidentally—finding out that it was a signet ring and that it couldn’t be cursed, to going through all of the books his mother had sent trying to find out why it felt cursed, to speculating on what Dumbledore meant to do with it anyway. And what had Potter done, Draco wanted to ask.

Granger sat down, and immediately pulled the first book to her. “I grabbed all the books on Reverse Transfigural Animation and on Heirloom Magic, and, erm, I also saw a Necromancy book, so I picked that up, too.”

Draco raised his eyebrows at these choices. “RTA?” he asked sceptically. He had already considered Reverse Transfigural Animation when he first heard that ghostly heartbeat, and dismissed it just as quickly. Signet rings weren’t usually susceptible to that sort of tomfoolery. “You think someone turned the ring into a rhino and botched the reversal?”

Granger shrugged, passing a book to Potter before handing him the one on Heirloom Magic.

“That wouldn’t happen,” Potter interjected unexpectedly. Unexpectedly because Draco didn’t think him capable of forming any such opinion without the direct assistance and possible literal hand-holding of Granger to help him along. In his mind, he imagined her petting Potter’s head and telling him to play dead.
“Why not?” Draco asked, less because he really expected Potter to have a theory to back up his assertion, than to keep the boy occupied and less likely to have a fit.

Potter looked at him as if he were crazy. “Because it goes against one of the four laws of Transfiguration,” he answered slowly.

“Oh of course,” Granger said, closing her book decisively. “Harry’s right of course. It’s the fourth law, Malfoy: no transfigured thing can maintain life without life granted by focus.”

“I know what the laws are,” Draco said snidely. In truth, he did know them, but he was miffed with himself for not remembering such when Potter did. Though, Granger seemed to have forgotten in her own haste as well, and that mollified him somewhat. “So that leaves Heirloom Magic and Necromancy,” he said.

Potter was flipping through the Heirloom Magic book disinterestedly, paying no special attention to the delicacy of the old pages. “What about possession?” Potter asked. He paused, and tilted his head sideways to take in a gruesome illumination of a blood rite being performed on a child, which, upon closer inspection, Draco suspected to be the very one his parents began on all the orphans before shunting them off to the orphanage.

Granger was considering, though Draco dismissed it out of hand. “Impractical,” he said. “This ring’s been in our possession for several weeks, and in Dumbledore’s longer than that. The kind of energy and stamina it would take to maintain a possession that long would be physically and magically draining. I doubt anyone would stay sane long enough to do it.”

“What if they were dead?” Granger offered.

“Possession by ghost?” Draco asked. “Possible, but you forget the heartbeat.” He pulled the ring from his pocket—he didn’t feel comfortable wearing it—and set it on the table for Granger to inspect. “I casted Madam Pomfrey’s pulse-checking spell on it.”

“What on earth made you do that?” Potter wanted to know.

Draco shrugged. “Goyle’s brother sent him a hamster by post this morning, but unfortunately, it came to be at odds with its carrier along the way. He was terribly upset when I pronounced it dead. Not even the Prophet’s Business section could cheer him up, and it was the Sunday Stock Review special, as well.”

He received twin looks of horror from his table mates, and wanted to laugh, but it had been a true story, and he still felt a bit sorry for Goyle—and his stupid brother—who had been looking forward to a pet for his birthday. Draco was still considering whether or not it would be a good idea to let him pick out a new puffskein or something next Hogsmeade weekend.

“But...?” Granger began, then, “I’m not quite certain how that related to the ring.”

“Oh,” Draco said suddenly. “The ring was on my finger when I was holding the hamster. I felt the pulse as soon as I cast the spell, unfortunately not from the hamster.” He’d been terribly shocked when he felt it, and not a little frightened, but he said none of that. Still, he was wary of the ring touching him at all, even if he did suspect possession to be unlikely. He handled it with great care.

So did Granger, as she picked it up with the tip of her quill to look at it more closely. “How do I see the coat-of-arms?” she queried.

Potter cast a quick Lumos and angled it at the ring; the resulting hologram was broken along the bookshelves, but it shone so brilliantly that Granger appeared to have no trouble seeing it. She made
a small sound of surprised pleasure, even as she watched the macabre assault of the unicorn.

“It’s quite lovely, isn’t it?” she said, smiling. “Even if it is a bit...well, ghastly.” She sighed, and pulled another book towards her; this time, it was The Necromancer’s Companion, and she didn’t look at all pleased to be handling it.

“Do you suppose someone’s using it to spy on Dumbledore?” Potter wondered.

“More likely, Dumbledore’s using it to spy on us,” Draco said cynically. “He’s probably figured out some way to be in two places at once.” He eyed the ring warily, and resolved to stop Crabbe from discussing his father’s tradings in the ring’s presence. There would be no end to his father’s rage if his stocks were tampered with.

Granger didn’t even look up as she said, “Impossible. Wizarding sentience is focused on the soul; it would have to be moved to the object and without the body, it would have limited movement—in all senses.”

Draco shuddered. “Maybe not then. I would hate to be stuck in some gaudy old ring just to find out what dark secrets Potter was keeping.”

Granger shot him a sharp look, but they both forgot it in favour of Potter’s next, unknowing comment, “Maybe someone’s trapped inside, and Dumbledore wants us to get them out.”

“Their soul, you mean?” Granger asked quickly. She seemed cautiously excited. “Do you think so?”

Potter only shrugged, unaware of the possible enormity of his comment. “Could be some dark wizard was trying to get revenge and trapped someone in it,” he said. Then, suddenly, he seemed more interested in his own suggestion. He sat up quickly. “Maybe it’s Regulus Black!” he said, excited, but careful to temper his volume. “I bet Dumbledore thinks he might’ve been put in here when he defected the Dark Lord’s service—I bet he thinks he’s really here, but he just doesn’t want to get my dad’s hopes up, so—“

“Harry!” Granger whispered harshly. She looked furtively around them, but there was no one nearby, so she said, “Careful what you call Him in public.”

“What?” Potter asked, confused by the interruption.

“You called Him the...you know. That’s what the Death Eaters call him,” she reminded him.

Draco nearly choked; looking from one to the other, he was forced to ask, “Potter—Granger...knows?”

“Don’t be absurd, Malfoy,” she replied immediately. “Of course I know. Harry’s not terribly good at keeping secrets from someone who sees him all the time.” It was obvious that she was careful not to mention Weasley’s name here, though Draco suspected that he had not caught on as she had.

“Still here,” Potter said. They ignored him.

“But you’re a Mudblood,” he said frankly. He’d not meant to insult her, it was only habit. Still, it didn’t prevent the slap across his face. He snarled, rubbing it to lessen the sting. “Go fuck yourself, Granger. It’s just a word. This time, I meant no offense.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “Neither did I.” Potter smothered a laugh and Draco glared at him, too.

“He’s not so terrible as all that,” Potter added a moment later, when the tension of Draco’s staring
contest with Granger still had not lessened. Neither of them had to ask Potter to whom he referred.
“About the muggleborns, I mean. Hermione’s not in any danger from him.” A fierce, protective look
crossed his face for but a moment, and he added, “I’m certain of that.”

There was a small silence, broken soon enough by Granger’s predictable return to the research at
hand. “If there really is someone stuck in here,” she said, pointing to the ring, “then how do you
suppose we’re to get them out? Before hols?”

Draco shrugged. He had no idea.

Potter cast his _Lumos_ again and angled the ring towards the table, so that the blazon projected at such
close range was tiny, and striking in its detail. Draco watched the snakes flickering back and forth,
watched the unicorn thrashing, as if caught by surprise, as if he’d not expected it, not from these two
snakes, and wondered if it was symbolic, or if he was reading into things.

He pulled a blood lolly from his pocket—sent just the other day with his Mum’s letter—and slid it
into his mouth. Neither Gryffindor noticed, which he thought was just about par, but then Potter
looked up at him, and the snakes were reflecting purple in the black of his eyes, and Draco wondered
if maybe one of the snakes in question was not the Dark Lord after all, and if the unicorn were not...

Someone else entirely. He did not know. Potter flashed him a grin, strange and ethereal in the weird
light, and Draco licked his lips, dry from the changing weather. He felt himself trembling slightly,
and fought to restrain it. Potter looked very near to wicked at the moment, and as Draco recalled the
current situation, and Potter’s role in the Dark Lord’s life, he felt as if he had finally found the causes
he could give a damn about, though squibs and orphans and Mudbloods weren’t any part of it.

It was at that moment that Draco realised that he was ready to give his devotion to Harry Potter, and
not only because of the sinister appeal of his eyes, or because he wasn’t so trusting of Dumbledore
anymore, but because Harry Potter had found a way to get a Mudblood to sympathise for the Dark
Lord, and he’d done it without subterfuge or dissimulation, and had maintained his stupid bloody
morals in the meantime.

Draco thought that maybe he’d been waiting for this moment for a long time, for this moment when
Potter would finally realise the potential and the opportunity he had to do great things—even if those
great things weren’t always the right things—and when Draco could finally see more than just
Gryffindor in the Boy Who Lived.

Under the table, he pressed the heel of his palm into his erection, hoping to relieve some of the
pressure. He hadn’t been lying when he’d told Theodore Nott that Potter wasn’t his type: he wasn’t
—but Black was.

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Chapter End Notes

1. Wandpoint Weddings: a play on Shotgun Weddings. The term comes about from
young suitors getting young ladies pregnant and their fathers forcing them to make
honest women of their daughters with the threat of a shotgun.
Auxiliary Unit I

Chapter by faire_weather

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Auxiliary Unit: (n) 1. A civilian organization which supports the resistance movement through clandestine operations by providing the guerrilla force with food, clothing, shelter, arms, ammunition, early warning, intelligence, replacements, funds, medical supplies, and moral support.

“I think I know where Rowena went wrong,” Ginny said. It was one of the first full sentences Harry had heard from her in over a month. She had been studiously avoiding him for some time now, though he could not figure out why.

Next to her, Hermione gasped. “Ginny! I thought we decided we wouldn’t try to fool around with Ravenclaw’s Arithmancy.”

Ginny shrugged her shoulder. “You decided. I said no such thing.”

The light from the common room fire glinted off her coppery hair, and Harry twisted the tiny wedding ring on his pinkie, thinking of his mother.

“It’s dangerous,” Hermione insisted.

Harry couldn’t stand the back and forth any longer; he took the opportunity to interject when Hermione paused pre-diatribe. “What on earth are you talking about?” he wanted to know.

Both women looked at him as if he were mental. Privately, he agreed: he would have to be to encourage any sort of argument between these two fiery women. Ginny waved Ravenclaw’s skin-bound diary in his face. “Hello, Harry, are you there?” Ginny asked, as Hermione muttered, "Honestly!"

Ginny shared a glance with Hermione, then said, “Harry, we’ve been talking about Ravenclaw’s diary for weeks, now. Have you no ears?”

Harry shrugged, perturbed with her for calling him out. “Why are the two of you still so hung up on that bloody diary?”

“Harry!” Hermione gasped. “Are you quite mad, or has it escaped you that this is handwritten by Rowena Ravenclaw, not only a founder of this very school, but also the creator of handfuls of magically-revolutionary theorems, spells and hypotheses!”


“We know so little about any of the founders,” Hermione said. “She talks about her life in here.”

“I did skim through it,” Harry said defensively.

“Well,” Ginny said, “I think it’s a wonderful book. It should be published. We should—I mean,
Harry, you should have it printed. It brings life to the founders, makes them more real. Rowena talks about the other founders like they’re no one special.”

“It’s dangerous,” Hermione said again, but with less force.

Ginny rolled her eyes. “Parts of it could be censored, and anyway, it’s our civilization’s history; it needs to be shared with whoever wants to read it.”

“It spans quite the breadth of history,” Hermione added, relenting. “Did you read the entry where she officiated Godric Gryffindor’s second wedding, or when she and Helga Hufflepuff mid-wifed each other’s children?”

Harry shook his head. It seemed he’d only come across the bat-shit insane entries.

“And we may be the only people living who have a first-hand account of what really happened to — “ Ginny paused to lower her voice and lean in before continuing, “of what really happened to Salazar Slytherin!”

Hermione’s eyes went wide. “It’s true,” she whispered. “I bet we really are the only ones who know of it. How have I forgotten such a thing...?”

Harry was beginning to see their point, yet, “Doesn’t everyone have things like this?” he asked, looking to Ginny. “Even your parents have something of Merlin’s on their mantel—it’s been in the family for generations, your dad told me.”

Ginny scoffed. “It’s not real though, is it?” she said. “These days, people aren’t even sure Merlin really existed. Why, just the other day that stupid boy Zacharias Smith was arguing with Justin-Finch-Fletchley over it.”

Hermione pursed her lips, looking thoughtful. “There has been an influx of questionable evidence lately,” she admitted.

Ginny waved her off, saying, “Forget Merlin. Who cares if he’s real or not? I believe in him, and that’s all that matters to me. The important thing is that we know the school founders existed. We have letters written about them, portraits of two of them—but they were painted before the reanimation spells were created, so they never even came to life. We’ve never had anything written by them, it’s outstanding!”

“Right,” Harry said, for lack of anything better. Both girls harrumphed, and he coughed to hide a laugh. They continued to stare at him, unimpressed. Floundering, he said, “So what are you going to do with the book?”

“It’s your book,” Hermione said quickly, though it was obvious she wanted to say anything but that.

Ginny was not so subtle. “I want to correct Rowena’s mistake—I think I know where she went wrong. It was her Arithmancy, like she expected it would be, and—“

“Ginny, you can’t go trying to raise the dead!” Hermione whispered furiously. She looked around, but no one in the common room was looking at them. It was a wonder they weren’t, Harry thought.

“Well I don’t see why not,” she said petulantly. “It doesn’t have to be anyone important, you know.”

Harry looked at her incredulously, but somewhere deep inside he thought of Cedric Diggory, of...of his mother, and James Potter. Those were foolish thoughts, though. There was no way to bring anyone back from the dead; not really, not wholly or truly.
“Are you mad?” he asked.

Ginny pursed her lips angrily, turned to Hermione. “Well, don’t you think it’s worth it?” she asked. “Don’t you want to know if it can be done?”

Hermione hesitated. “Well, I...”

Harry gawked at her.

“Well, I don’t want to do it myself, nor for anyone else to do it,” she said. “But, academically...” she shrugged. “I wonder if it really was Rowena’s Arithmancy...if we have the knowledge and the means today, in modern times, to correct her mistake.”


“But,” Hermione added, “I’d rather study another of her theories.”

Ginny rolled her eyes again. “Oh, not that silly thing about how to eliminate the four transfigural laws,” she said, sighing. “Hermione, you know that’s not possible. And Rowena only thought it might be possible because that was when there were only three laws!”

“No,” Hermione said archly. “Not that one. I meant—well she mentioned once that she thought she’d figured out why muggles don’t have magic.”

Harry perked up, and tried very hard not to show how his heart had suddenly started beating at a much faster rate. “What d’you mean?” he asked quickly. “Did she say?”

Hermione nodded, and even Ginny looked interested. “She caught a muggle once,” she said, grimacing. “Before she and Helga came up with the first generation of the Hecatomb ward to keep them out.”

Ginny shuddered. “Bill told me about that once,” she said. “How they stumbled across that little spell.”

Thinking of the seventh years’ planned fieldtrip to Stonehenge, Harry tried to block all the morbid thoughts that statement brought to mind. “But what did she reckon?” he asked. “Ravenclaw, I mean.”

The girls gave him matching looks of sardonic pleasure. “Knew something would catch your fleeting interest,” Ginny muttered. “There had to be something extraordinary that you wouldn’t find dull.”

“Well,” Hermione said, “it was only a series of three entries, and her notes were a bit...scattered, as they tended to become later on, but she mentioned that she was harvesting some stormed-yew during a thunderstorm and a muggle approached her, hostile, but just as his hand connected with her forearm, lighting struck the yew tree—something she was quite familiar with, having harvested stormed-yew before—but this time, instead of the hot, burning sensation she’d always felt before, this time, she felt a pulsing, burning shock that travelled through her whole body and left her breathless.

“When it stopped,” Hermione continued, “he was dead, like the stormed-yew she was harvesting, but she was energized, and she began to wonder if muggles were made of lightning, or if lightning was a different, subtler sort of magic that the muggles had instead of the magic she knew—because it seemed to her that he’d overdosed on lightning. She said he looked the same as her brother had when he’d been shocked by the heavy unrestrained magic around their home one Solstice.”
Harry stared at her flabbergasted, because—damn it, if that wasn’t the same idea he’d told Voldemort about. He’d been sceptical himself, but Voldemort had latched onto the idea: Harry thought him insane for that, if not for all the incredible, cruel things he’d done in the past.

“Well what do you think of it?” he asked Hermione.

She beamed at him. “I think it’s wonderful!” she said. “What if that explains why there’re squibs? What if we could give them magic?”

It was an eerie feeling, Harry thought, to hear her echoing those same thoughts he’d had over the previous summer. “You would be loved by the entire wizarding world, Hermione,” he said faintly.

She frowned suddenly. “No, I wouldn’t,” she said. “Some would hate me for it, would think I was trying to do it only so I could give magic to my family.”

“Purebloods would think it was a diabolical plot,” Ginny said knowingly.

“Which is why I couldn’t be the figurehead of such a study,” Hermione continued.

“No me!” Harry said, seeing where this was going. “They wouldn’t accept it from me, either. One minute they love me; the next they hate me.”

“Not you,” Ginny said quietly.

“No, not you,” Hermione agreed, taking him aback. She was cut off from saying anything further by the sound of the portrait swinging open, the Fat Lady’s painting slamming against the wall. Lavender Brown fell in, eyes red and swollen.

Dean and Neville rose to attend to her, but she brushed them off. Her eyes scanned the room, and alighted on their small group, huddled in a corner near the fireplace. Ginny quickly stuffed Ravenclaw’s diary underneath her bum, but it didn’t matter: Lavender Brown was distraught enough that she wouldn’t have noticed it even if it’d been left out. She saw Hermione’s pitying look, and stumbled over.

“I’m sorry,” she said hoarsely, “but—please. Has he written to you? I’ve waited in the owlery all day, and nothing’s come from him.” She turned to Harry, pleadingly said, “Please, tell me, Harry. I thought he’d write.”

“Ron?” Ginny asked, confusion etched across her freckled face. It had been two weeks since Ron’s expulsion, and in that time, only Ginny had received a letter—short and terse, but loaded with big-brotherly threats to any unsuitable suitors—from him.

Lavender nodded and fell onto her knees in front of Ginny. She reached out, and wrapped her slender fingers around Ginny’s. “Did he write you?”

Ginny nodded.

“Did he say anything about me?”

Ginny opened her mouth, and Harry knew she was going to say no. She had let him read the letter, after all. Hermione knew the same thing, but she had a mind to stop it: subtly, she pinched Ginny’s arm, and Ginny quickly smiled at Lavender. “He asked how you were,” she said.

Lavender’s smile was quivery, but at least she was smiling. “Did he? And did he say anything else? Would he like me to write him? I waited for him to write first, because it’s only proper, but he hasn’t
and I thought maybe he’s frightened I won’t still care for him?”

“Oh, certainly write him,” Ginny said, nodding. “He’d love to hear from you. Of course you’re right; he’s such a cocky bastard,” she added. “Thought you’d think he was a loser.”

“He’s not!” Lavender insisted. “I’ll write him!” she declared, nodding. “I’ll do it tonight.”

“Say, Lavender,” Harry said, just as she was standing to go. She looked down at him, expectant.

“You mean pastries?” she asked, obviously confused.

“Yeah, pastries, sweets, truffles—that sort of thing.”

She stuck her nose in the air. “Of course I know how to bake, Harry,” she said. “I’m a woman.”

“It took a moment, but Lavender finally caught on, and realized that he was giving her an in with Ron. She leaned forward and hugged Harry tightly. “Thank you.” He would’ve responded, but she’d already disappeared down the hall to the girls’ dormitories.

“I’m a woman,” Hermione mocked under her breath. “Honestly. Lavender is so traditional. It nauseates me, truly, to see a woman with such potential devoting herself to a life of housekeeping and pregnancies.”

“Yes, but Ron’s quite traditional, too,” Ginny said. “They’re really a good match, if only Ron would quit mooning.” Hermione glared, and Ginny added, “No offence Hermione. I just think Ron would be happier with someone like our mum. Like Lavender.”

Hermione sighed. “You’re right of course; and I’m much happier with Theo, I admit.”

Harry looked away for a moment because he wanted to say that he still didn’t much like Theodore Nott. When he looked back, he changed the topic quickly, asking Hermione about their latest Potions assignment. Ginny quickly bored of the conversation and announced that she was going to finish her homework upstairs, which was what Harry had expected.

“She’s acting a bit strange, wouldn’t you say?”

Hermione nodded immediately. “I’ve never seen her so studious. And she’s become more manipulative than she was before. She doesn’t think I’ve noticed it.”

“For a while, too,” Harry said, thinking back. It had been at least couple weeks, and they were now in the first week of December. Outside, it was snowing heavily, and had been for three days. Even Herbology had been cancelled.

“I can’t think of anything that happened around then, though,” Hermione admitted. She scrunched her brows in thought, but shook her head after only a few moments. “No, nothing I can think of that would’ve upset her enough to create this change. What do you think it is, Harry?”

He shrugged, thinking of her sad connection with Voldemort. He wasn’t quite ready to mention it to Hermione, yet. And he didn’t think Ginny would appreciate it anyway, especially since she hadn’t wholly grasped it, hadn’t totally figured it out herself. “Could be anything. Maybe she just failed an exam, and she’s trying to make up for it.”
Hermione didn’t buy it.

“Listen,” Harry suddenly said. He glanced around the common room: there were still students milling about, but they weren’t paying attention. Just in case, he cast Muffliato on them to keep anyone from overhearing. “Is it that you want the Dark Lord as the figurehead for your study on giving squibs magic?”

“Well, I—” Hermione faltered, uncharacteristically at a loss for words. She visibly steeled herself. “I think it’s quite obvious that he is capable of charming wizards. I think that if anyone were able to get the purebloods behind this, it would be him right now. I think if he weren’t known for such cruelty, he would’ve swayed the rest long ago. Even the families that don’t support bigotry sympathize with his original purpose, to cut off this society from the muggle one.”

“They’re afraid,” Harry said. He wasn’t sure if he was defending Hermione or the wizards who were afraid of people like her.

She nodded. “I know. Which is why I think that you can do great things with this opportunity, Harry. I want to be a part of this, if you’ll let me…if He will allow it. I want to help people, but I realize that to do good, you sometimes have to do things you don’t like. Like accept Voldemort.”

He had been manipulated, he reckoned. She’d planned to tell him she wanted in, and here were her terms. They weren’t difficult to accept, so far. “What would you have me do, to have your support?” He wanted nothing more: to have Hermione fully on his side, committed and passionate about it would be a godsend.

She looked away. “I have been thinking about everything in the news a lot lately. How can I not with stories on the orphans multiplying by the day? I know what’s happening, Harry. I see what Voldemort’s doing, and I understand his reasoning behind it. Soon, in a decade, there will be no more muggle-borns. All magical children will be magically pure-blooded, or half-blooded, if you count the muggle-borns reproducing. In a decade, we will be, for all intents and purposes, wholly separate from the muggle world.”

She met his eyes evenly, determinately. “I just—I can’t leave my parents out there; I can’t just forget about them. If it turns out that this theory holds any truth, if it’s possible to give magic to squibs…or, or to muggles, I want to give some to my parents. I want them to be able to be with me, to not be cut off from their only child. They haven’t got any other family, and neither have I.”

Harry was floored. “That’s a huge ambition,” he said faintly. “How would they survive here, though? They wouldn’t know what to do with it if they had it.”

“They wouldn’t need to know much,” Hermione insisted. “They’ve lived their whole lives as muggles, all they would need is enough magic to see past the muggle worlds, and to travel, maybe enough for simple spells—barely any magic at all, really. It’s not as if they would be duelling, or using magic for every little thing like we do.”

“But how would they even get this magic?” Harry wanted to know.

Hermione looked away again. “Anything of such a high calibre requires a sacrifice,” she said.

“Surely not your magic!” Harry said.

She looked back at him fiercely. “Not all of it, not even enough to notice,” she said. “And anyway, in all likelihood, it’ll regenerate over time, anyway.”
“Hermione...” Harry said desperately.

Hermione ignored him. She said, “There’re no dentists in Hogsmeade, and they could open up a shop there to earn their living. I’ve already looked into a storefront to lease. I’ll teach them all the little basic spells they need to know, maybe Mrs Weasley would help me with those I’m not familiar with—“

“Hermione, are you sure?”

“These are my terms,” she said firmly. “I will help you, will help Voldemort. I can offer only my research capabilities, knowledge and quickness to learn, but you’ll have me on your side, Harry, and you’ll have Theo, too.”

“Nott!” Harry exclaimed. “You’ve told him about me? About the Dark Lord?”

Hermione waved her hand dismissively. “As if he didn’t already know. He’s not stupid, you understand. And his father’s a Death Eater anyway. He’s sympathetic, even if he doesn’t particularly care for Voldemort’s special brand of persuasion.”

Harry sighed. “Hermione, you know that I want nothing more than to have you on my side.”

“Then just agree to it, Harry,” she said. “Have Him agree to it.”

Harry shook his head. “He doesn’t bow to my will,” he said tiredly. “Voldemort is—he’s not as mad as we’d all like to think him. I’m not sure if I’d be able to persuade him.”

Perhaps it was the desperate, sad look in Hermione’s eyes as she thought of being forced to one day choose between her parents and her magic, both of which were deeply ingrained in her, part of her. Perhaps it was just that she was his best friend, more than ever now that Ron was no longer at Hogwarts, but when she reached out and grabbed his hand to plead her case one more time, he wished that he could make this decision himself, wished that Voldemort would acquiesce without complaint.

The connection in his scar mistook his wish for the Dark Lord’s cooperation as a wish for the Dark Lord himself. It transported him to Voldemort, as it had done so many times before, but to his horror, it had taken Hermione as well.

Her eyes were wide and she took a step back, but Harry held her hand tightly. “Don’t let go,” he said, knowing immediately how she’d been drawn along with him. He didn’t even want to think about what might happen to Hermione if she let go of him and was trapped somewhere in the astral nothingness, instead of sent back to her body at Hogwarts.

“Indeed,” Voldemort said, walking forward. He had an intent, curious look in his eye as he studied Hermione. Her fingers clamped Harry’s so tightly that he could actually feel it in this half-way state.

“Where are we?” Harry asked. They weren’t in Voldemort’s castle on the northern coast of Scotland. They were outside, somewhere not quite as cold and blustery as it was at Hogwarts. It was dusk here, where it had already been dark in Scotland, and people were building something.

“France,” the Dark Lord said flatly, offering nothing more. “To what do I owe the pleasure?” From behind him, Nagini slithered up, flicking her tongue out and through Hermione’s ankles. She jumped, but relaxed when she saw that she was not corporeal, that neither the snake nor Voldemort could hurt her here.

Harry cleared his throat, looked at his friend. She nodded, determination written across her face.
“Please, Harry?”

“Do you remember,” Harry began, “when I told you about an idea to give magic to squibs?”

Hermione stared at him wide-eyed. He’d not said anything when she mentioned Ravenclaw’s theories.

Voldemort perked up. “Ah, yes!” he said. “I’ve been pondering the idea ever since you mentioned it, and I think you’re right. It’s a matter of wavelengths that separates magic from electricity.”

“Wavelengths!” Hermione repeated in dawning comprehension. “Of course!” She nearly let go of his hand in her excitement, but Harry held tight to it.

“Hermione’s thought of the same idea,” he said. “You see, I found something over the summer; a book.”


“Rowena Ravenclaw’s personal diary, to be exact,” Harry clarified, and this certainly got the Dark Lord’s attention. “It’s a scientific journal as well as a memoir, and it seems to me that her main purpose in keeping it was to keep track of her notes regarding an attempt to resurrect Salazar Slytherin.”

Voldemort conjured three chairs, and gestured them to sit. “I admit you’ve captured by attention, Harry,” he said. Nagini slithered into his lap, and he stroked her absently, entirely focused on the story of the diary.

Hermione shocked both of them by speaking up. “She was much cleverer than even we thought. Her Arithmancy, mostly taken from Slytherin’s notes, was nearly flawless, even by today’s standard, and had this book been found earlier, by anyone of curiosity, our grasp of the subject would have accelerated at an outstanding rate. It’s a fascinating story to read, if a bit gory.”

Voldemort stared at her for a long moment, and she began to fidget. “Lord,” she added.

Harry laughed. “Don’t call him that; it’ll go to his head.”

Hermione looked up and saw that Voldemort, more human now than even Harry remembered him, was amused as well. “Sorry,” she said.

“Tell me, Ms—?”

“Granger,” Harry and she said simultaneously.

“Ms Granger,” the Dark Lord said. “While necromancy is indeed very exciting at both an academic and a practical level, what does this have to do with squibs?”

Hermione blushed. “Oh! Well, most of the journal followed her studies on resurrecting Slytherin, but she also devoted three entries to a notion that muggles were ‘made of lightning’. She thought that it was the key between our differences with muggles and squibs.”

Voldemort hummed in thought. “Yes, I’d like to see this journal.”

“Of course,” Hermione said. She paused to gather her nerve.

“Hermione would like to devote herself to studying this further,” Harry interjected, if only to save both her and Voldemort’s pride. “She wants to eventually save some of the squibs today, by
converting their electricity to magic.”

“Very altruistic of her,” Voldemort said, though he probably thought nothing of the sort, and was merely waiting for the catch.

“If we made a breakthrough,” Hermione said steadily, “I would want to attempt to give magic to my parents.”

Voldemort’s eyebrows went up. They were thick and black now, like they had been when he was a young man in the horcrux-diary. Even his lips were returning, the once grey, flat skin shaping into a handsome mouth, if still a bit on the greyish side. “Magic?”

“They’re muggles,” she clarified, less resolute than before.

A light went on in Voldemort’s face. “Oh, yes, I remember hearing that.” Then, just as incredulously, “Magic to muggles?”

Hermione straightened her shoulders. “I know what you mean to do with all these orphans,” she said, surprising the Dark Lord with the candid mention of her knowledge of his part in the scheme. “In ten years, there won’t be any more muggle-borns, and some law will come along restricting access from the muggle world. I’ll be cut off from my parents. I want them to be able to find me whenever they want; I want to give them enough magic to live here, in this world, and nothing more.”

“It’s reasonable,” Harry said, a bit hopefully.

Voldemort glanced at him, expression neutral. At last, he said to Hermione, “If I were to allow you to do such a thing, would not every other muggle-born request the same thing?”

Harry thought of Dean, and was washed in conflicting thoughts, but Hermione held her ground. She’d thought this through; he knew it with more and more certainty, and once she made her mind up on something, she rarely changed it.

“They won’t find out,” she said. “This, if successful, is the kind of knowledge that shouldn’t be widely known...like how to bring someone back from the dead.” The last was added knowingly, dangled in front of the Dark Lord like bait he couldn’t resist. Hermione knew it, Voldemort knew it, and Harry knew it.

Voldemort took it. He leaned forward in his chair, regarded her steadily. His eyes were pupiled now, and those red pupils flicked back and forth as he searched her face for any sign of trickery. “Ms Granger,” he said slowly, “do you mean to tell me that you can resurrect the dead?”

She bit her lip, wondered how far she could take it. Harry wanted to step in, to tell her to be quiet before she got herself committed to something she couldn’t follow through on, but he couldn’t. She knew what she was doing. He couldn’t stop her now, not when she had Voldemort’s undivided attention, not when he’d even forgotten to continue stroking Nagini, not when she had such a perfect opportunity to make her case.

“I have noticed a very big, very easily missed, flaw in one of the last steps of Ravenclaw’s attempt to resurrect Slytherin. I don’t know if it’s the only one, but the rest seems, at a basic level, to be sound.”

Voldemort leaned back. After a moment, he said, “Both of the topics discussed tonight are avenues I would like to consider further. I will agree, conditionally, to your request to give magic to your parents.”
Hermione gasped, stunned, but Harry squeezed her hand, attempting to ground her. “What are the conditions?” he wanted to know.

Cocking his head to the side, Voldemort seemed to consider, but all three of them knew he’d already made up his mind. “Ms Granger will submit herself to me for a period of five years, at which point, if these riddles have not yet been solved, she will have the opportunity to re-evaluate her desire to continue the research. During such time, she will obey me, and assist in my plans where needed. In turn, I will give her unlimited access to any reference printed, painted, dead or alive that she so desires.”

“No,” Harry said. “She’s not going to be a Death Eater.”

Voldemort shrugged. “I am sorry, Harry, but you of all people understand that I cannot let her run around with no loyalty to me. She could change her mind at any time, and if she knows too much, she could take all of us down with her.”

“I’d never betray Harry,” Hermione insisted. She looked sick, and he felt sick as well at the thought of Hermione with a big black tattoo.

“It is not only Harry you would be betraying,” Voldemort reminded her. “It is not unheard of for the righteousness of the mind to convince one that betrayal is for the better...is for the greater good,” he added, sneering the last bit. It was something Harry could remember Dumbledore saying, and he wondered if there was a connection there to Voldemort’s bitterness.

“Five years?” Hermione asked, and Harry gaped. She was actually considering it.

“Don’t, Hermione,” he said, but she gave him a look that clearly said, ‘shut up!’

“Five years,” Voldemort agreed easily. “I think that’s long enough to come to some sort of conclusion regarding the two matters. If you finish earlier, you’ll still be obligated. If you haven’t finished, we will work out a fair deal to continue or abort the research.”

“And after that time, if I so choose it, you’ll release me from my bonds? You’ll remove the Dark Mark?”

“I will even go one step further,” Voldemort said magnanimously, “and bind you inconspicuously, like I’ve had to do with several of my other...assistants.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

“The Dark Mark doesn’t have to be on the arm,” he said, shrugging. “It’s easiest, of course, but it can be near any main artery...or on the heart itself.” He grinned cruelly. “To have me on your heart,” he said, “I would never be far from you.”

Hermione turned her head, thinking. She studied the people hammering and sawing, and directing stones to their proper places, and thought she saw a face she recognized, but couldn’t be sure. “I want time to talk it over with Theo.”

“Ah!” Voldemort said. “I’d heard young Mr Nott was dating a muggle-born.” Harry was relieved that he’d not said ‘mudblood’. “I will allow you time to do so, though you will of course understand that I’ve hexed our conversation, and you won’t be able to speak of it to anyone else, save your Mr Nott, Harry and me.”
Hermione nodded. Harry, unable to think of anything more to refute this outlandish idea, kept his mouth shut. For now.

Suddenly, Hermione stood up, jerking Harry with her, as they were still holding hands. She didn’t seem to notice as he was dragged along behind her to the build site. “It is!” Hermione said, turning back to them. “That’s Fleur’s sister, Gabrielle Delacour!”

Harry saw her, now that she was pointing. Little Gabrielle couldn’t have been more than thirteen, even now. They were only a dozen feet away, but he knew she couldn’t see them. “What’s Gabrielle Delacour doing here?” Harry asked Voldemort.

“Obviously she’s helping to build the Dementor feeding arena.”

This time, it was Harry who felt his eyebrows rising incredulously. “You’re really doing it,” he said in wonder.

The Dark Lord nodded succinctly. “It must be done; your Dumbledore is suggesting we all stay indoors while they breed. I’d like to see that happen—especially when his precious muggles don’t know to do it.”

Hermione said nothing, but Harry knew she was putting everything together. “Why is Gabrielle helping?” she asked, attempting to be polite, though her suspicious showed.

Voldemort was unconcerned. “The Society of French Weres has agreed, along with their Ministry, to assist in this crucial endeavour.”

“She’s a werewolf!” Hermione gasped, looking to the Dark Lord for confirmation. He nodded. “How on earth did that happen? Why did Fleur never say anything?”

“Ms Granger,” Voldemort said, “I do not make a habit of learning the back-story of all the minor players in my various plans.”

She nodded, accepting if not cowed, but it was Harry who now looked as though he’d seen a ghost. He gripped Hermione’s hand extra-firmly and dragged her through, literally, a crowd of people working. Voldemort followed them more sedately, and as he was corporeal, was forced to move around them, or have them move out of his path, which was more common.

At last, he stopped, and when Hermione gasped again, he knew she’d seen it, too. “Where are we?” he asked again.

This time, Voldemort answered, ignoring the strange looks he got from the workers when he said, seemingly to no one, “Saint-Jean-de-Luz.”

In particular, one person, the one closest to the three of them at the time, looked up questioningly. “My Lord?” Remus Lupin asked, wand raised as he lifted a perfectly cut stone to the men waiting on the scaffolding above.

“There was someone who wanted to know where you are,” the Dark Lord explained in his emotionless, drawling voice.

Professor Lupin looked around, but of course could not see them. His expression was a mix of apprehension and curiosity. “Who, my Lord?”

Voldemort glanced at Harry, saw his desperate look, and turned back to Lupin, saying, “Harry Potter.”
Eyes wide, Lupin took a stumbled step backwards. He was afraid, Harry saw, but he couldn’t be sure if it was only because he feared for Harry’s life in the hands of the Dark Lord. Looking closer, Harry thought he could see in Lupin a genuine, if delicate loyalty to Voldemort—in the deferent way he addressed him, or the passionate way he did Voldemort’s work here.

The men above Professor Lupin called down for him to give them the bloody stone, and he levitated it quickly, thoughtlessly, as he stuttered over his reply. “Harry Potter, my lord? Have you, have you—obtained him?”

Voldemort smirked cruelly, equally aware of the professor’s soft-spot for Harry, for Harry’s parents, for all three of them. “Harry Potter has been mine,” he said. “Or should I have said Harry Black?”

“Harry Black?” Lupin asked. Confusion warred with a suspicion suppressed long ago, and he, in his furious thought, forgot to be properly subservient to Voldemort, forgot to say, ‘my Lord’. Voldemort forgave him, something Harry could tell Hermione had not expected.

It was painful to watch this, knowing how sad Professor Lupin had been after ‘Sirius’ died. It was terrible seeing him, and knowing he could not see him and Hermione—seeing Voldemort play this cruel little game, and being unable to intervene, to stop Lupin’s confused suffering.

“If I’m not mistaken,” Voldemort said, “He and his father found out his true parentage from a family tapestry.”

“Sirius is dead,” the professor said. He choked on the words like they were painful to say.

Voldemort smiled and Hermione did not like it. She said, “Please! Stop it; you’re being cruel.”

The Dark Lord turned to her, said, “I am known for my cruelty, Ms Granger.”

Lupin’s knees wanted to buckle, if his wobbly posture was anything to go by. “Hermione? You have her? Where is she, Lord?”

“Touch him,” Harry demanded. “You’re taking this too far. Let him see us.”

Rolling his eyes, Voldemort reached out his long, skeletally thin hand and, ignoring the werewolf’s frightened look, encircled his wrist. Lupin was overcome with a burst of dizziness as Voldemort’s power flowed through him, but when his eyes properly focused, they went wide with fright.

He was torn between saving the two of them, and feeling an unwilling, guilty hope that they would accept him.

“Harry,” Professor Lupin said. “Hermione.” He stepped forward, reached out to touch them, but his hand went right through. “What’s going on?”

“So much,” Harry said. “My dad’s been looking for you. And Dumbledore, too. He sent him to fetch you when you didn’t make your rendezvous—and you’ve been here this whole time—“

“Slow down, Harry,” Hermione said, seeing the professor's panicked look. She turned to the werewolf and said, “Sirius has been looking for you. They were all worried.”

Lupin shook his head to clear it. His voice cracked when he said, “Sirius is dead, Harry. You saw it—I saw it ha—happen.”

“He’s not really,” Harry said quickly. “It wasn’t him that—fell. It was someone else. Sirius was in America the whole time, and he found me this summer, and then we saw the tapestry.”
“So have I,” Lupin said. “And you’re not on it—neither is Sirius, for that matter.”

“Not that one,” Harry insisted, seeing the werewolf’s belief in the story waning drastically. “The one at the River House in Edinburgh—the one from his dad’s side of the family. The Grimmauld Place tapestry’s broken—has been ever since the first blasting hex broke the Eternal Updating charm on it.”

Professor Lupin was unconvinced, but had pulled himself together and apparently warded off any painful memories. “Who fell through the Veil then?” he asked pointedly. His face was a strange mix; emotions crawled over it one after the other, only some of which Harry could identify: compassion, anger, distrust. Hope. It was terrible to watch.

“My dad could tell you,” Harry said, and struggled not to react to Lupin’s flinch. He ploughed on, and said, “He’s here in France looking for you. Been tracking you since September.”

Professor Lupin's eyes widened. He lifted his hand as if about to wrap it around his forearm, but aborted the move at the last minute. It was too late: both Hermione and Harry followed the movement with their eyes, and she gasped. “Professor!”

Voldemort laughed suddenly, drawing all eyes to him. “My poor friend,” he said, addressing the werewolf. “Please do not tell me that you are hesitant to return to Dumbledore.”

“I—I serve...” his eyes cut to Harry, Hermione, and back to Voldemort before flitting madly around the compound. “My Lord,” he said, “I am loyal to you.”

“I know,” Voldemort laughed. “I know quite well, Mr Lupin. I know also how your desire to serve me wavers now that you know of your old friend’s continued existence, and have seen Harry here in person once again.”

Professor Lupin looked pale.

Hermione jumped in, and said, “Professor, just owl Sirius and meet him. I’m sure he’s close enough by now to be found, and then you could just meet up with him, and work everything out, and I’m sure he could answer your questions.”

“Owl him?” the professor repeated, dazed. “Yes, I think I will. I’ll just owl my dear dead friend, Sirius, who’s followed me all the way to southern France, and who will be delighted to cart me back to Scotland where I can discuss my wayward activities with him and Albus Dumbledore over tea with three sugars and a bowl of sherbet lemons laced with Veritaserum.”

“My, but you are a bit on the psychotic side, aren’t you?” Voldemort drawled.

Harry tended to agree. His face showed it.

“Professor, it’s quite all right,” Hermione said, glaring at Harry, and—bravely—also at Voldemort. “Just owl Sirius; he’d be delighted to see you again, and if you tell him not to tell Dumbledore straight away, he won’t. Besides, he’s—more understanding than you’d think.” Here, she nodded at Harry, and the final piece clicked into place for the werewolf.

“Harry!” Lupin exclaimed. He looked at Voldemort, who was grinning sadistically and winced at the way his fingers began to dig into his skin.

“My friend,” Voldemort said, “Harry is such a bright young man. I’m sure he can make his own decisions.”
“Professor, it’s alright,” Harry said soothingly. “The Dark Lord’s right—"

“The Dark Lord?” Lupin whispered incredulously. He’d noticed the other workers, but his lowered voice was the result of shock, and not any fear that they might overhear. “Harry, what’s going on?”

“My, would you look at the time?” Voldemort said. “I expect you should get on with that letter, Mr Lupin,” and with that, he unwrapped his fingers from the werewolf’s arm, one by one, as if he were disgusted with the whole ordeal.

Harry and Hermione disappeared to him immediately, and while they still looked on at Professor Lupin, open-mouthed in shock at Voldemort’s cattiness, the professor looked around him in despair and saw nothing but the other werewolves waiting for him to resume helping, and his lord, who did not look back as he walked away.

Harry dragged Hermione with him; she couldn’t help the painful throb she felt as she stared back at poor Professor Lupin, looking more lost than anyone had a right to. “Where are you going?” he demanded angrily. “That was awful of you.”

Voldemort rolled his eyes. “I do not have time for your pitiful miseries,” he said as they approached the pen being built. He stopped to address an old man with a world-weary look about his face, said: “How long?”

“Thirty-six hours,” the man said.

Voldemort nodded, continued walking. “As you can see, Mr Black, I’m quite busy. In two days, the preliminaries to the feeding will begin, and if you thought you knew fear before, wait until the weekend when the waves of ravenous Dementors start gliding through the towns and cities.” He stopped abruptly, turned to face the both of them. “And it will not be just one paltry weekend feast; Dementors are quite hungry, you see;” he purred. “They eat, and eat, and...eat.”

Hermione shivered. “What are they eating?” she asked quietly.

Voldemort grinned. “They only eat souls, you see, Ms Granger. And who has souls but human beings?”

“No,” she said hoarsely.

Voldemort ignored her, turned to Harry. “Harry, do you think your friend Mr Longbottom might be pleased to receive any remnants of Mrs Lestrange? I understand they were family friends—”

“What’s wrong with you?” Harry said. His teeth were clenched with anger, and he squeezed Hermione’s hand so hard that she squirmed. “You’re not like this!”

“Aren’t I?” Voldemort said sarcastically. He leaned down, put his face into Harry’s. “In less than a week, number one will be led into this arena behind me: into the waiting mouths of hundreds and hundreds of Dementors, where he will be torn, literally, apart. Have you ever seen a Dementor feeding, Harry? No? Let me enlighten you: it starts with a great unleashing of fear; imagine five-hundred Dementors. Do you remember what it feels like when a Dementor is around? Now imagine that they’re hungry, not merely curious, like those you’ve met before. Imagine that they’re releasing a certain pheromone that blocks all types of Occlumency, bypasses all charms, hexes, Obliviations—unleashes all of your greatest fears, and creates new fears for you to be afraid of, to improve your taste, to make you more satisfying.

“Now, think about five-hundred Dementors at the same time, falling upon you, and eating your fears, fighting over your soul so fiercely that your body is torn apart.”
He stood up, glanced at Hermione, white as a sheet. “Then number two is dragged in; there is no Imperius strong enough to lead anyone to that fate, nor anyone of such weak-will to not be able to fight it off—that is how frightening it is.

“I do apologize for my mood, Ms Granger, but you see, number one happens to be someone I was nearly fond of, and it is his continuing bad luck that has led him to be in this situation to begin with. It is unfortunate, but I do try to practise fairness in all of my dealings, and it would be decidedly nepotistic of me to remove him from the lottery simply because he amused me once.”

“My Lord!” someone called from the build site. Voldemort turned to see that it was the same old man as before. “You’re needed!”

Voldemort turned back to them one last time. “I am going to be very frank with you, Harry. It is in your best interest to keep your distance from me until this is well on its way to being over. I advise you to follow Dumbledore’s orders and stay inside as much as you can. I’m sure it will be all over the newspapers within a few days, but no sense in being reckless. As for you, Ms Granger, you will forget this conversation in its entirety if you have not reported back to me in seven days. I urge you to consider—”

“No, I’ll do it!” Hermione said quickly. Harry gaped, and squeezed her hand punishingly. She squeezed right back.

Voldemort looked annoyed. “This is not something to be taken lightly.”

“I know,” she said. “Just—just let me tell Theo, and, and—I’m sure he’ll know how to get in touch with you, and if not, then Harry will.”

“I don’t want any part in this,” Harry ground out.

She pursed her lips angrily, turned back to the Dark Lord before her. “I’ll be back; in two days at most.”

“That will be a very busy day for me, Ms Granger. I won’t have time to dally.”

“I’ll be quick,” she said. “Just—we are clear, aren’t we?” she asked. “You will help me give my parents magic if I can figure out how to do it?”

“Yes, yes, fine,” he said absently. “I really must go,” and with that, he waved his arm sharply down, as if hacking through the air, and Harry found himself back in the Gryffindor common room, disoriented from the abrupt and angry end to their conversation. Hermione was breathing heavily, but at least she was breathing. At least she’d made it back into her body. She looked determined.

“I have to go,” she said, standing. “I need to speak to Theo right away.”

“Hermione—“ Harry started, but Hermione cut him off angrily.

“No, Harry, this is important to me, and this is a sacrifice I’m willing—and happy—to make if it will keep me from being isolated from my family.” She was gone before he could think of anything else to say.
Dear Harry,

I got a letter from Lavender Brown today, can you believe it? Unfortunately, Mum did, too. Or rather, Mum got a letter from Lavender’s mum, who wanted to gush over how darling it was that their two children were getting along so swimmingly. Apparently, Lav’s told her mum about us, and since they live just over in Somerset, Mrs Brown’s proposed that she and Mum meet each other over hols. Can you imagine??

I don’t know what to do, you know. Lav said she’s ‘terribly sorry about being so forward’, but she had been hoping I was doing well, and would I like for her to bring me one of her famous trifles, or perhaps a fresh Lavender Pudding—her version of Plum Pudding. It’s lighter, she said. Airier? I think that’s the word she used. I don’t know. I still haven’t figured out why she thinks it’s so clever, but you know me, I’ll not turn down any form of afters. Even befores.

Anyway, Mum seems delighted that someone might be interested in me even after this. Well, she didn’t say so, but by the speed at which she whipped out the Prewett Family Cookbook, I know she’s excited. Doesn’t bother me, to be honest: I’ve been sampling Mum’s ‘no, this won’t do’s for three hours now, and it’s not a hardship. Suppose I could send you and Hermione some bread pudding, but there probably won’t be any left once Dad’s through with it.

How is Hermione by the by? I’m not sure if I want you to tell her I asked after her or not. Probably best that you don’t. I miss her, but I’ve had a couple weeks with no contact whatsoever from her, and her face is starting to blend in with Susan Bones, if that makes any sense. Since Susan had curly brown hair, you know, and I can’t seem to recall which nose belonged to which face. And what does it sound like when Hermione laughs? Because every time I think about that joke I told her last year—the one that made her burst out laughing—it’s like there’s someone else laughing instead. I can’t remember what it sounds like.

So what I guess I meant to say is that I’m getting over it. And I told Lavender that I’m particularly fond of all kinds of pudding. It’s a moot point; Mum’s just told me that Mrs Brown sent her a recipe for a ‘Brown’ Apple Cobbler by owl, and they’ll probably become fast friends before they even meet.

I started working with Fred and George at the shop the other day; they’re none too pleased with me. Turns out that Mum’s taken it into her head to have them be tutored and take their NEWTs with me, since she and dad are already fronting the expense. I’ve been cleaning lots of really smelly black stuff off their laboratory walls.

Write back soon. It’s boring here. Could use with the gossip. Even if it’s just about Potions. Or Dumbledore. Or Lavender.

Your friend,
Ron
1. Wreath money: money paid to women or their fathers by men who took their virginity in recompense, since they were not as marriageable as they would have been.
Auxiliary Unit II

Chapter by faire_weather

**Auxiliary Unit:** (n) 1. A civilian organization which supports the resistance movement through clandestine operations by providing the guerrilla force with food, clothing, shelter, arms, ammunition, early warning, intelligence, replacements, funds, medical supplies, and moral support.

Theo Nott rubbed his neck with a fond smile. It was beneath his collar, at the sensitive spot just above his clavicle; when he pressed down, pain bloomed out, slowly and with an aching throb. He pushed it with his thumb, and jumped when Hermione slapped his thigh beneath their shared desk.

“Stop it, Theo. Someone will see.”

He grinned at her; he couldn’t help it. She made him feel so foolish and flighty sometimes. “I can’t help it. I keep thinking about it.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, muttering “Men!” under her breath, but he could see the blush creeping up her neck, and knew she was remembering it, too. He felt giddy, a bit—remembered the way she had blushed the night before, and those thoughts led him to thinking further. There was a reason he was so scatter-brained this morning.

He had to turn away because looking at her was causing problems in his lower regions. It was as if now that he’d seen her without clothes, he could no longer see her clothes at all. She was wearing her school robes but it was as if they weren’t even there. All he saw was the delicate expanse of her skin—pale where the sunlight never touched, and scattered with freckles in occasional places.

Her robes were voluminous and a bit frumpy, but she breathed, and he saw her breasts rising—heaving, in his mind—and imagined that her pretty pink nipples were erect, as they had been last night in the chill of his Head Boy room. He’d tried, before, to forget that they existed, in a bid at gentlemanly behaviour, but now that he’d seen her naked, all he could think of was how no one would ever have guessed how large, and perfectly round, her breasts were. They went perfectly with her tiny waist and her round, seductive hips.

Theo did not think any woman had ever been formed so perfectly.

Even after she’d said what she came to say: that she had spoken to Lord Voldemort—that she’d agreed to a heinous span of servitude just to maybe give her parents magic. Theo hated the idea; hated that it might hinder, or altogether prevent any plans he might’ve had for a marriage bond. He hadn’t said it, though.

She was right to plan for such eventualities. It was entirely possible that her seemingly far-fetched fears of one day being cut off from her first world were possible. Probable. And Theo didn’t fear for her safety, per se. Not from the Dark Lord, whom he found to be crass and dramatic, but about on par with a crazy, homicidal uncle, as he’d spent considerable time at the Notts’ home when Theo was very young, and he’d once given him a kneazle kitten, though it didn’t last long around the hellhounds his father hunted with.

No, what worried Theo was that he’d written his Nan inquiring as to whether or not she’d be willing
to send his late mother’s wedding ring to him. Hermione was strong and determined, and likely wouldn’t be too interested in marriage right after school anyway—but she might, Theo reminded himself, and he wanted to be prepared for the eventuality at all times.

Now he fingered the ring in his pocket. It was cut in the traditional style, similar to the one he’d seen Black wearing around and had assumed to have belonged to the late Mrs Potter. The Nott ring was one of his family’s few extravagances: the males of the line had long been proponents of simplicity and pragmatism, but their wives were something they tended to splurge on. This particular ring, one of several being passed down through the generations, was the most graceful in Theo’s opinion. He recalled, as a young boy, how lovely it had looked on his own mother’s hand, and knew that when the time came it would look just as lovely on Hermione’s.

It was strange how in such a moment as the night before, he’d forgotten everything he’d ever learned in those barmy sexual health lessons they were required to attend in third year—how just the hint of her shoulder as she shrugged her cloak off could be so enticing to him—and he admitted, to himself at least, that he was worried he might’ve gotten her up the duff.

He had forgotten to perform a protective charm. She’d said nothing of it, had not performed one either, and how in the world was he supposed to have remembered when she was slithering onto his bare lap, sliding down on top of him. She’d thrown her head back almost immediately, and he’d dug his fingers into the small of her back as he fought simultaneously to resist burying his face between her breasts or coming immediately.

He would have to propose soon, just in case. Otherwise her parents might come demanding wreath money from him, and their family couldn’t afford that sort of careless expenditure.

He smiled to himself, wondering how any of that could be a bad thing, and Hermione gave him a suspicious look.

Snape entered the room in a bluster, and Hermione averted her attention directly ahead. Theo took the moment to study her speculatively.

“Ms Granger, a word after class,” Snape said as he passed their table. Theo gave her a questioning look, and she responded with a gesture he took to understand meant it had something to do with their conversation last night. He supposed he read her well.

She tore off a corner of her parchment and wrote: ‘& I’ll tell you more when I know’. He nodded.

Potions passed quickly after that; they would be finishing their Arithmantic potions soon and, if Snape deemed them safe for ingestion or at least topical application, they would be testing them. Malfoy had been readmitted to the class several days after his blunder at the beginning of the year and he still sat with Harry Black, though they seemed to conspire and smirk at each other more than do any actual work.

Snape lectured for near twenty minutes, discussed—and re-discussed—several important and often overlooked points to consider when brewing an Arithmantic potion, and then allotted the remainder of the class for brewing. Hermione pulled out their cauldron, held in stasis with more than one heavy-duty spell, and began chopping.

“Do you want me to wait for you while you talk to Snape?” he asked her quietly.

She glanced at him, smiled quickly in that harried, surprised fashion she had when she was pleased. “If you want to,” she said. “Though your nosiness is noted.”
He grinned at her, ducked his head. “You know it’s about...*that*, don’t you?” he admitted. “What else has Snape got to talk to you about? Privately? If, Merlin forbid, you’d scored an E on something, he’d tell you in front of everyone else.”

She passed him a knife and a pile of thistles. “I expected so, yes,” she said, then quieted as Snape neared the desk in front of them, where Crabbe and Goyle were responding to business letters, and reassuring worried traders that their stocks were in perfectly good shape—fluctuations in the market were normal.

Snape paused at their desk, bent to sniff delicately at the bubbling potion, and continued on without a word. Theo sieved his thistles into the potion slowly, waited to make sure it turned the appropriate colour, and said, “Have you told your parents at all?”

“No,” she said, frowning. “I don’t really want to get their hopes up about it. It’s perfectly plausible that...that it won’t work. Or that they’ll refuse. I want to have everything set in place before I even bring it up.”

Theo hummed softly. Then, hesitantly, he said, “Do you think your parents would like me?”

She turned, looked at him from beneath her pile of hair and he felt his stomach drop at how gorgeous she looked. “They’d love you,” she said. It was only a moment later that she added, “Because I do.”

Theo grinned. “Liar,” he said.

She slapped his thigh. “Shut up, you know I do, you heathen.”

Snape called for everyone to finish up, and dismissed the class. They packed their things slowly as the other students scrambled to leave for lunch. Finally, there was no one left but the two of them and their professor, who sat behind his desk staring at them blandly.

“I believe I instructed only Ms Granger to stay, Mr Nott,” Snape said.

Theo said, “Sir, with all due respect, if this is about what I think it is, I’d like to be present, assuming you and Hermione don’t mind.”

“I don’t,” Hermione said too quickly.

Snape raised an eyebrow. “Knowledge is death, at times, Mr Nott,” he said. “The more you know, the more someone can get out of you, but it is on your own head, as I’m sure Ms Granger will tell you everything directly anyway.”

“I know,” he said, nodding.

Snape hummed softly, stood and flung several quick spells at all the possible entrances, exits and vents to the classroom. He paced around to the front of his desk and leaned against it, regarding Hermione with his arms crossed over his chest. “Ms Granger, I will get straight to the point,” he said.

“As I have been informed you are aware, there will be a very special event tomorrow morning that will involve many high security prisoners being released from Azkaban into the hands of the Dark Lord for an even worse fate in several weeks’ time.

“You may further be aware that more than a dozen of those prisoners are the family of students here, including the Lestrange sisters. I have been charged with escorting them to the new holding cells so that they might see their parents once more, and was given to understand that you would be interested in accompanying me.”
“To see Voldemort?” she asked.

Snape merely looked at her.

“I would,” she said then. “If you think it will be safe to take me out of the castle.”

“Safe is not the word I would choose,” Snape said.

Theo interrupted, saying, if respectfully, “Professor, exactly who’s side are you on?”

Snape shrugged lazily, grinned. “Your guess is as good as mine, Mr Nott.”

“Professor, I only meant do you think Headmaster Dumbledore would notice I was gone?” Hermione clarified.

“I’m certain I can arrange it so that he doesn’t,” Snape said, “as I will be doing for the misses Lestrange.”

Hermione nodded, but before she could say anything further, Snape continued, “Ms Granger, are you quite sure you understand what you’re getting into?” He pulled up his sleeve and held out his forearm for their observance. The Dark Mark twisted angrily over his skin, empty eyes staring, snakes writhing.

“There is the possibility,” he continued, “however infinitesimal, that the Dark Lord would renege on his promise to release you from this bond after your time is served. And what if you are arrested for public drunkenness one weekend and are found to be carrying the Mark? Or, perhaps you would like to enter into a bond-ship with our Mr Nott; have you discussed the limitations of this Mark with your future lord? There are variations to the Dark Mark, Ms Granger. If you are determined to follow through with this, I urge you to consider all possibilities and reach an arrangement that is suitable for all involved—as I see it, that includes Mr Nott, here.”

Hermione’s lips parted, and she was unable to come up with a response for a moment. Theo was relieved that Snape had had the bollocks to say to her what he’d been too nervous to bring up. She glanced at Theo, eyes wider than normal, and that blush began to creep up her neck again. Finally, she cleared her throat, and said, “I’ll make a list of points tonight, to take with me in the morning.”

There was an awkward silence. It was finally broken by Snape, who said, “Very well,” and dismissed them from his office without further ado. They walked to lunch in silence, barely noticing as they entered the Great Hall, but Theo fingered the ring in his pocket again, and felt relieved.

With as cranky as Potter had been these last few weeks, what with Weasley being gone and something evidently happening earlier this afternoon, Draco was surprised he’d bothered to show up at all, truth be told.

It was getting quite late, certainly going on eleven o’clock as he approached the Black Lake, and he’d had to put two third years in detention on his way out here to keep up appearances. Potter was sitting back to the Forbidden Forest—one of his stupider moves—and appeared to be sulking at the lake, which Draco found to be entirely normal. His approach went unnoticed, and he sat down across from Potter with little fanfare.

“No time, for once,” Draco observed, perhaps less caustically than usual.

To his surprise, Potter chuckled; lifted his head and even cracked a grin at Draco, who was
momentarily stunned, but recovered quickly enough. “Ready to be done with this bloody ring,” Potter said. “I’ve had about enough Arithmancy for one lifetime, thank you. Should have never taken it in the first place; don’t know what I was thinking.”

Draco laughed. “I admit to being surprised to see you in my class the first day,” he said. “But it’s good you’ve taken it; you can’t really expect to get by in life without at least a basic understanding of wizard maths.”

Potter said nothing, so Draco continued curiously, “Are you going to drop it at halves? Or do you reckon you’ll take it through the end of the year?”

Potter shrugged, reached into his pocket and retrieved the blasted ring for their project. “Don’t know yet. I certainly don’t want to go back to Astronomy or Divination; maybe I’ll take Muggle Studies.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “So, have you made a breakthrough since the other day? Or has Granger, I should say.”

He found himself being punched—lightly—in the arm, and wasn’t sure if he was offended by the contact or not; for the moment, he let it slide. He grabbed the ring, held it out so he could better examine it in the moonlight, and frowned. He had no utterly idea what to do with the blasted thing. Neither did Potter, apparently.

“Hermione’s so stupid,” Potter said suddenly.

Draco glanced at him quickly. “Pardon?”

Potter stood suddenly, paced back and forth. “She’s going to take the Dark Mark,” he whispered, as if anyone were around to hear them. But the words brought a sense of foreboding to Draco, and he glanced behind him out of instinct. No one was there, but he’d known no one would be.

“She...followed me today, to Voldemort. I don’t know how it happened, but that connection I have with the Dark Lord flared up today, and when I got there, she was there, too, can you believe that?” he ranted.

Draco couldn’t, but he declined in saying so, as it seemed that Potter had not expected an answer. He continued on, voice rough and low, “She’s made a deal with the Dark Lord, Malfoy. It’s utterly insane; she thinks she’s figured out how to give magic to squibs and muggles, and she’s going to take the Dark Mark so that he’ll...I don’t know—finance the research for her and promote it, and help her with...whatever ceremony or...I don’t even know. It’s mad, Malfoy! She’s a complete nutter! I don’t know what to do.”

Draco took a moment to grasp the words, and even after he did, he couldn’t come up with a fathomable reason why any sort of thing had happened. The Dark Lord consorting with any sort of mudblood was beyond him, even one who offered to find the missing link in a great and terrible piece of magic like giving magic to the non-magical. It was something that Draco had never considered—that his cousins the Heffleby’s had never considered when all three of their children had turned out to be squibs.

“How is it even possible?” Draco wanted to know. “You can’t just give people magic,” he said. “It’s got to come from somewhere. Has she thought of that?”

Potter nodded grimly. “Yeah, she has. She’s going to use her own.”

“Pish!” Draco scoffed. “She won’t have any left.”
Potter shrugged his shoulders and flopped back onto the grass, just a dark silhouette now that he was out of the moonlight. He looked bitter. “Maybe since she and the Dark Lord have become such good friends, he’ll keep some of the Kissed prisoners around for her to use.”

“What Kissed prisoners?” Draco asked. Something was digging into his bum, and he adjusted enough to pull his last blood lolly from his back pocket, unwrapping it briskly. “There hasn’t been a formal Kissing in a decade at least; not since Gerald Hockflayer was executed in 1987.”

Potter looked at him askance. “Where do you come up with all this useless trivia?”

He shrugged, mouth full of the sweet. “My father was on the jury; anyway, what are you talking about?”

Potter seemed hesitant. “I’m surprised your mum didn’t tell you about it,” he said. “The Dementors are going to start breeding soon. In June, if I recall—but Voldemort says they’ve got to eat first, to get their energy up, I suppose. It’s supposed to start in a couple days.”

He felt his eyebrows shoot up to his hairline as a coldness ran down his spine and made his heart seize up in fear. “Beg pardon? Did you just say that it was coming up on Dementor breeding season?” He ran a series of dates through his head, trying to calculate if it was possible, if indeed it was the right year for it, but the math was too intricate to be done in his head—to be done in a day, really—and he gave up in time to hear Potter affirm his fears.

“Yeah, I did. First one in about 500 years, the Dark Lord says. And Dumbledore, too.”

“Dumbledore knows?” Draco asked, angrily. “He hasn’t alerted the papers or provided any means for people to prepare or protect themselves?”

“I don’t know,” Potter said. “I think the Order of the Phoenix is going to try to contain them until the season passes. He doesn’t want to panic the communities.”

“Panic the communities!” Draco exclaimed. “They need to be warned! They can’t suppress Dementor breeding! It’s too powerful; the magic they use is...is massive. I—it’s just beyond words how insane that is! How has no one figured this out earlier? We’ve got magical theorists that spend their entire lives determining this sort of thing, and you mean to tell me that Dumbledore knows about it, and expects his little troupe of do-gooders to prevent a frighteningly overwhelming event like Dementor breeding? You’re out of your mind, Potter! People will die all over the country. I don’t even like Muggles and I think something should be done!”

“I know,” Potter said testily. “Which is why I’ve kept my mouth shut so far about Voldemort’s premeditated mass murder; it makes no difference if they’re Death Eaters or rapists or not, that’s a cruel fate to force on anyone. I wouldn’t have wished it on even him, even before we came to terms.”

Draco’s eyes widened, and he removed the lolly from his mouth, flinging it somewhere near the lake. “What do you mean, Death Eaters? The Dark Lord’s...feeding Death Eaters to the Dementors? My father’s a Death Eater...and what about Granger? You said she’s taking the Mark.” He felt his pulse racing, and his body nearly thrummed as his blood pounded through his veins. He couldn’t remember ever feeling fear like this.

“No, no,” Potter hastened to say, and for a moment, Draco was thrown by the sympathetic look he thought he saw in the boy’s eyes. “Your father’s safe, Malfoy. Unfortunately, the Lestrange sisters aren’t so lucky. Both of their parents are in Azkaban, and both of them were selected from the lottery.”
“My mother’s sister?” Draco asked. “My mother—she’ll be devastated, and...oh, Merlin, Rodolphus, too? He’s my uncle—I...he took me flying when I was three. I remember it. Are you serious, Potter?”

He nodded, watching Draco carefully. “Snape’s taking Alsace and Lorraine to say goodbye tomorrow, and Hermione’s going with, to get her Dark Mark.” Here, his lip curled in distaste.

“But what about everyone else? Kevin Whitby’s aunt’s in gaol, and Eddie Carmichael’s brother was arrested over the summer with a Mark; what about Crabbe and Goyle? And Nott? Are their father’s meant to be sacrifices, too?”

“I—I don’t know,” Potter said. “I haven’t heard of anyone’s family being selected except the Lestranges. But I’m sure Hermione would’ve told me by now if Nott’s dad was on the list.” To himself, he added cynically, “Maybe she wouldn’t be acting so foolishly if he were.”

Draco put his head in his hands and took a deep breath, trying to slow his frantic heartbeat. “Theo wouldn’t’ve told her,” he said quietly, then: “Fuck this; I don’t want to think about it anymore. Let’s finish this bloody ring so I can be done with it.”

Potter laughed hollowly. “Wish that we could just toss the fucking thing to the Dementors instead, and let them have whoever’s inside it. Maybe it’d be one less parent dying for the rest of us.”

There was a moment of stunned silence, then, “I could kiss you,” Draco said suddenly. He jumped up, ignoring the stunned, thoughtful expression now filtering over Potter’s face, and grinned maniacally. “That’s it!”

“What?” Potter said dumbly.

“You’ve finally come up with a good idea, you pillock!” he said, reaching down to pull Potter up with both hands. The boy came slowly, like an awkward, lumbering fool, but Draco didn’t mind because he’d just solved their mystery, and possibly saved his mark in the class.

Draco danced excitedly around, taking Potter with him. “I’ll talk to Snape tonight,” he said, still grinning. “What time is Granger leaving in the morning?”

“Five,” Potter said. His face showed confusion, but he’d not pulled his hands away yet, and Draco was beginning to realise it—was beginning to realise what stupidity he’d committed in his excitement. It was only that Potter did not seem adverse to it, and Draco wondered if they could get away with something like this without either of them getting hurt. He slowed until they were completely still and facing one another. His face melted into a look of complete seriousness, and Potter’s had never strayed from it.

His heart began to race again, slowly at first, and then with mounting speed until he felt it in his neck and ears and that vein in his wrists. His face became hot; he managed to say: “Then you’ll come along with her in the morning, and I’ll meet you there with Professor Snape.”

“For what?” Potter asked hoarsely. He swallowed, and Draco watched as his Adam’s apple bobbed slowly.

“To feed our ring to a Dementor, of course,” he said.

“Is that really a good idea?” Potter said lowly.

Draco shrugged. “Better than some of the other ideas I’ve got right now,” he replied.
Potter’s fingers twitched in his hands, and Draco squeezed a little harder instead of letting go. Potter said, “Like what?”

This was it, Draco knew. And when it came down to it he was frozen with anticipation and, quite possibly, also fear. He swallowed, and said, “Like—“

“Like this?” Potter interrupted, and leaned in. Their mouths collided sharply, and not at all like seductions normally went. And in fact, Potter advanced with such force that Draco was knocked backwards, and they landed on the cold, brittle grass, with Potter sprawled all over him, and undeterred.

Draco wrapped his arms around Potter, feeling one press against a hard shoulder blade and the other tangle into thick, black hair. He pulled Potter’s mouth down to his until their lips pressed together, and Potter made no efforts to resist when Draco slid his tongue into his mouth. He moaned, and adjusted himself over Draco, propped on his forearms as he ground his hardening erection into Draco’s.

Potter pulled back, pushed Draco’s chin up until his neck was stretched out before him. He descended, licked a long stripe from Draco’s clavicle to his ears, and as the cold air blew over it, he shivered, not from the cold. Potter latched onto his earlobe and nibbled. “Definitely a bad idea,” Draco gasped.

“A great one,” Potter rasped, and moaned when Draco’s other hand grabbed his bum and ground their cocks together even harder. “Fuck—a fantastic one.”

Draco tended to agree. He flipped them over when Potter was distracted, and found himself in turn distracted by the tan expanse of skin exposed between the hem of Potter’s jumper and his trousers. He couldn’t help slipping his hand underneath, running it along Potter’s ribs.

Potter yelped and twitched beneath Draco. “Cold hands!” he said, laughing, and Draco pitied him enough to bother whispering a warming charm on both of them. “Better,” Potter said; he grinned, a completely at-ease, vulnerable expression that made Draco feel at once powerful and powerless.

“Could get even better,” Draco purred, leaning over him to slide their mouths together again. His hand changed directions, and slid slowly down the boy’s abdomen until he reached Potter’s trousers. He felt the other boy tremble underneath him and gasp into his mouth.

“Wanna suck you,” Potter gasped. “Want your come in my mouth.”

Draco groaned, dropped his head to rest against Potter’s to try and collect himself, but he couldn’t because Potter took the opportunity to reverse their positions again. Draco found his back once again on the cold grass, but it did nothing to ease the hot throbbing he felt all over his body, not least in his prick, now harder than he remembered it being in some time.

The wind blew harshly over them, but it did nothing to cool Draco’s burning skin. Potter’s face was intense, like when Draco caught thinking about something profound, but it was the look in his eyes that did him in, in the end. Potter was too passionate; he invested too much into everything, and Draco felt a moment of regret for allowing this to continue as far as it had; it would certainly end in someone getting hurt, but only if it didn’t end with both of them doing so.

The warming charm helped only moderately. Potter’s hand slipped agilely beneath Draco’s waistband, and when his cool fingers wrapped around his prick, Draco felt certain that Potter knew what he was doing. His eyes slipped closed.
“What about Finnigan?” he asked raspily, and then wanted to slap himself for it.

Potter was undeterred. “Broke it off with him,” he said. “Or rather, we dissolved when he started fooling around with some Ravenclaw.”

“Oh,” Draco said stupidly. Nimble fingers worked at the buttons on his trousers, and seconds later, they were off, and his cock was springing free—hot, and throbbing harder with each cold burst of wind or trembling touch from Potter’s hands.

He arched into it, but it wasn’t enough. It would never be enough; he reached up and grabbed the other boy’s hip, holding him still while his shaking fingers struggled with the buttons of his trousers. All the while, Potter jerked his cock like a professional.

It felt like millions of minutes had passed before Draco finally reached his goal, wrapped his fingers around Potter’s hot prick, and gripped it tightly. Above him, Potter was trembling, eyes closed, supporting himself on one wobbly arm, as his other continued with Draco. He didn’t last long, but neither did Potter, and only milliseconds after Draco felt his orgasm ripping through him, he also felt Potter’s, landing thickly on his stomach in hot, wet waves.

Potter’s arm finally gave way, and he collapsed on top of Draco. It was many minutes before Draco remembered to shove him off, and many more before he remembered that he wasn’t supposed to be attracted to Potter.

Δynthia

The following day, Severus roused himself earlier than usual in order to play escort to three sombre women in a foolish outing that, admittedly, had Severus somewhat worried that the Headmaster might notice their absences. It was not something he found himself doing often, and even less so something he particularly looked forward to.

Nevertheless, the potions master found himself stepping into the brittle cold of a December morning in the dungeons at half-four in the morning. He found himself dreading the even colder chill he would face at their arranged meeting place: the north castle entrance, only used for dramatic first-year entrances, as it was cumbersome, generally, to travel to Hogsmeade by rowing boat. It was fortunate that he did not plan to take the girls through Hogsmeade, and instead planned lead them to a nearby staff exit from the grounds, where they would be able to apparate, hopefully unseen.

The Lestrange sisters were already waiting for him, probably having slept together in one or the other’s dorm last night. They huddled under a thick, woven blanket, and their cowls were drawn tightly around their faces, but their cheeks were still red from the cold. Severus removed his pocket watch and checked the time, though he found it difficult to read in the darkness of early winter. It was a quarter-to-five in the morning, and he would give Granger fifteen minutes before leaving her behind, without the coordinates to their apparition point.

“Good morning, Misses Lestrange,” Snape said, voice still low and raspy from sleep. They nodded to him; Lorraine even went so far as to give him a fair imitation of the half-smile she normally wore in class.

He busied himself by going over the schedule of events that were expected to happen over the next few days, assuming everything went to plan. He could admit to himself that he was...vexed; anything could go wrong, not least of which could be the Dark Lord’s arena failing, or their bait—which he did not, admittedly, wholly understand—not working. If the Dementors never came to their arena in France to feed, then what would they do instead? If the Dark Lord’s bait was not alluring enough to
encourage them to travel from all over continental Europe and the British Isles to eat, what would
they eat instead? He imagined the carnage, and it caused even him to shiver. The Lestrange sisters
noticed nothing; it was cold enough, at least.

Dementor feeding, Severus thought, ought to be a...frenzied activity. Suppose that, in their pleasure,
the Dementors weren’t satisfied with their rationed prisoner? No sooner had Severus begun to
construct rudimentary plans of action for such eventualities, than the heavy wooden door creaked
open, and a dark figure stepped through.

It was, Severus noticed, five-til-five, but it was not Ms Granger that had entered, he noticed with a
start: the figure was much too slender—though, if Severus was fair, the Granger girl was actually
quite thin if it weren’t for her well-apportioned chest and hips—and moved with well-bred grace. He
knew, even before Draco removed his hood, who it was.

“Mr Malfoy,” Severus hissed, careful to keep his voice down—Minerva was a notorious early-riser
—“What are you doing here? I should not have to remind you that your own father is warm and safe
in his feather-down bed in Wiltshire and does not require a visit from you.”

Alsace and Lorraine watched with interest, but said nothing.

“I know, Professor,” Malfoy replied easily. “Potter and I have an idea about de-cursing our silly
Arithmancy project.”

“The ring?” Severus asked with some suspicion. He’d nearly forgotten about it; the Dark Lord’s
blasé reaction to its mention in October had effectively moved its importance to the back of his mind.

Draco nodded, said, “Yes, it’s alive you see, and we should like to have a Dementor eat whatever bit
of soul is inside it.” He shrugged.

The door opened once again, this time to finally admit Ms Granger, who was really pushing it by
showing up two-minutes-to-five. Unfortunately, Potter, unmistakeable with his loping walk,
followed her in. His eyes were rimmed darkly, and Severus took a moment to find pleasure in the
fact that he was not the only one sleep-deprived.

“Ms Granger,” Severus said straight away, “I did not say you were to bring friends.”

She gave him a helpless look, and said, “He was waiting by the portrait-hole when I made to leave
this morning; I couldn’t deter him, I’m afraid. That’s why I was so late.” She glanced at Malfoy, as
though just noticing his presence. “I didn’t know Malfoy was coming.”

“He’s not,” Severus said curtly.

“Sir, please!” Potter begged. Granger shushed him and, abashed, he continued more softly, “We
need to feed a Dementor with our ring, sir. It might be the only way to pass Arithmancy.”

“How tragic,” Snape replied. “Yet, I fail to see how accompanying any of us would solve your
dilemma.”

“Won’t there be Dementors there?” Draco asked. The Lestranges nearly hid their winces at the
mention, but not quite, and Malfoy noticed enough to look embarrassed.

“Have you thought this through, either of you?” Severus wondered. “How, upon completion of your
project, will you explain to Professor Vector, or even the Headmaster, how you came upon a
Dementor while at school? As Dumbledore is well-aware, the Dementors are currently in an
extremely agitated state, and it will be only a matter of days before experts alert the media as to
what’s happening. By then, it will be too late, of course, but the point I am endeavouring to make is that you will alight yourselves with some suspicion if you successfully, and without prior warning, remove a—as you say—‘bit of soul’ from your ring.”

“Soul?” Granger repeated. “Harry you didn’t say that—“ she broke off suddenly, thoughtful. Severus followed her train of thought without meaning to.

He’d never heard of any such magic that could put a living person, or even just their soul, in an inanimate object for an extended period time. It was certainly the reason the Dark Lord had asked him to look after the fate of the ring, but still, he wondered. Who could it possibly be inside it? Regulus Black? Or...no, it wasn’t Lily. Severus knew exactly where she was.

He made a note to mention this development to his lord at the first available opportunity, but for now, it was important to maintain a neutral countenance, and after years of practise, this was not difficult.

Potter seemed at a loss. “What should we do then?” he wanted to know.

Severus shrugged, and flippantly suggested, “Perhaps you should ask the Headmaster if he would have you along on his attempt to corral the Dementors, so that you might attempt it.”

To Severus’ extreme consternation, Potter appeared to be seriously considering this. He nodded. “Alright, I’ll see if I can talk to him later.”

Hermione did not in the least bit approve of Harry’s idea, which was probably why he’d been so reluctant to tell her about it before she led him to her meeting place with Professor Snape. Yes, it was a bit scary to think that there was something living in a piece of jewellery—ugly jewellery at that—but it was even scarier to think that Harry would be willing to get it out by force.

Who in the world would be living in a ring, though? And it wasn’t like they wouldn’t, if necessary, be able to free this person after they were...extracted. Hermione recalled a book she’d nicked from the Restricted Section which detailed such a thing, and while it involved the—gruesome—death of the Dementor, she doubted anyone would miss such a miserable creature. If Dumbledore really meant for Harry to save whoever was stuck inside, it would be possible this way, even if a bit—a lot—frightening for everyone involved.

And anyway, how would one even go about putting himself in an un-living object? She’d never heard of such magic, and it was against the Fourth Law of Transfiguration to boot.

She came back to herself as the wooden doors leading back into the castle snicked shut, cutting off the last draft of warm air from the heating charms inside. She shivered, and wrapped her heavy woollen winter cloak more tightly around her—it had been a birthday gift from her parents, owl-ordered from the posh Witches of Britain catalogue, and it made her even more sure that she was doing the right thing: her parents constantly reached out to her, constantly did their best to stay part of her world, the best that they could.

Professor Snape spoke quietly: “We will row to the north dock, and exit there. There is an apparition spot just beyond, for faculty who do not wish to be seen travelling to Hogsmeade to do their business.”

It occurred to her that one couldn’t apparate to or from Hogwarts, but it was probably wise that Hogwarts, a History, said as much since no doubt Harry would have taken advantage of such a loophole before.
Still, she couldn’t help thinking of how dangerous such a thing, and she wondered, “Professor, can you apparate into Hogwarts at that spot as well?”

His answer was curt as he untied a rocking boat from its moor. “No, you must floo or walk.”

Hermione stepped into the boat behind the twins, and sat down at the far end. Snape followed her, and they each took a set of oars. This time there was no giant squid to propel their little boat through the Black Lake, and as it lapped roughly against the stones of the castle wall she struggled to push it the other way.

If only things were still as easy as they’d been in first year, the last time she was in one of these boats.

Snape was surprisingly strong; he displayed no discomfort, and it wasn’t long before they were docking, and Hermione found herself tying the boat to the pier so that the Lestranges could exit. They remained silent as the grave.

“We will be travelling,” Snape said when they were all removed from the boat, “to the Dark Lord’s estate. Ms Granger, I am not able to apparate more than two extraneous persons, so you will need to understand me quite clearly.”

Hermione nodded. “I understand.”

“Not yet, you don’t,” Snape said. “Please be advised of the pronunciation when I say that we are travelling to the Bloody Foreland, and you will be arriving, hopefully, inside the Greeting Room at Ard-Mhéara.”

“Ard-Mhéara,” Hermione repeated slowly. She inhaled deeply; she’d never before performed a blind-apparition before. This would be a terrible day to splinch herself, and her nerves—already poor from a night of over-analysing her current situation—were not helping a bit.

Snape interpreted her distress. “Would you like to see it first?” he asked, and she felt a momentary flash of gratitude to him before she realised that such a thing would require an invasion of her mind. It was a small price to pay, she decided, to keep herself physically intact. She nodded.

“Legilimens,” Snape said, and she felt herself thinking of all sorts of things—all her thoughts flew up like so many papers in a whirlwind—but it was over quickly, and then she felt her thoughts being pushed back, inside, and something forcing its way in after them.

There was a promontory with a dreadfully steep drop, and a small stone castle sat on the edge, just like in those mediaeval romance novels her mother read. Water slammed against the cliffs, and when it ebbed, there were rocks below—sharp, and tall, and terrifying. The castle was so close to the edge that one hard wave could send it toppling down, and surely only magic had kept it there so far. Then the scene changed, and she was in a gloomy foyer, with a large, gaping-mouthed fireplace on one side, and nothing on the other but a circular design on the floor, made with intricate tile-work and worn from years of existence.

“That,” Snape said, withdrawing, “is where you are to go.”

“I’ve got it,” Hermione said, this time with confidence. Snape nodded once, and directed the Lestranges to him, where they each wrapped one arm around his thin waist. With a bit of fumbling, and an excessive flourish, they were gone—all of them, fortunately. Hermione hoped she would fare just as well.

She closed her eyes, and concentrated on the three Ds. A second later the air rushed from her lungs.
and she felt herself implode and explode all at once, but then it was over, and when she opened her eyes she found that she stood on the same tile-circle Snape had shown her.

Hermione exhaled, relieved.

“This way, if you please, Ms Granger,” Snape said from the doorway. The Lestranges stood behind him, sombre. He disappeared around the corner at a brisk pace; his familiarity with the house allowing him to navigate it easily, even in its imposing gloom. Hermione stumbled behind him, hands out around her as she tried, and failed, to keep from bumping into cloth-covered furniture in the dark, and scaring herself whenever she came upon a mirror reflecting her image, but in a ghastly, unnatural way.

Further back, Hermione saw light escaping from behind two large double doors, and as they approached, there were many voices, seemingly in argument. Professor Snape turned the handle, pushed the door open, and the sound amplified so that Hermione flinched.

The house was a decoy, Hermione realised suddenly. There was an entire separate house attached on the back, likely using wizard space, and the main manor hid it from anyone with a notion to explore. Snape directed the Lestranges to the side as he ducked in, and Hermione followed at a cautious pace.

A sudden jolt of magic struck her at once: her breath rushed from her lungs at the same time as her skin burned and stung and throbbed with a pain she would not have ever been able to imagine without having experienced it herself. She struggled to breathe, but a hand came down on her chest and shoved her backwards, choking her further.

She landed hard on her bum, and it was over. “W—what?” she choked out. Hermione raised her hand to her chest as she struggled to regain her breath.

“Stupid girl!” Snape snarled down at her. “Weren’t you listening? I told you to wait outside the doors.”

“I—I didn’t hear,” she gasped. Her breath was coming easier now, but her body still trembled from the aftershocks. There were five or six more faces looking down on her now, most hooded, though she recognised Voldemort and the old man who’d spoken to him in France. “Sorry,” she mumbled as she stood.

“I’d imagine so,” Voldemort drawled. “You see, you must have a Dark Mark to pass through the doors, Ms Granger. That can be easily fixed, though. I presume you have decided to proceed?”

Hermione nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Yes, my lord, in a moment,” Snape said, sneering unkindly. She pursed her lips and ignored him, knowing it was his way of saying ‘Are you really quite certain, you moron?’

Hermione nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Yes, my lord,” Snape said, sneering unkindly. She pursed her lips and ignored him, knowing it was his way of saying ‘Are you really quite certain, you moron?’

Hermione raised her chin. “Yes, my lord.”

“Very well,” Voldemort said, raising his wand.

“Wait!” Hermione said. All of those anonymous faces were still looking at her, and she felt exposed, not to mention that she’d come with a list of questions to ask beforehand. “In front of all these people?” There was a smattering of quiet laughter from the hooded Death Eaters.

“It’s a ceremony,” the old man said, bored with the whole ordeal.

“Meant to be seen,” Snape added viciously.
Hermione glared at him, said, “Well, I’m not letting you see me undressed!”

“Oh, I see,” Voldemort said. “You wished to take advantage of a less prominent Mark. Very well. We shall retire to a more private area.” To the hooded men, he added, “Yaxley, please see that our guests are comfortable; Severus, you may direct the misses Lestrange to the main library to wait until their parents arrive.”

He turned back, and studied her face for just a moment. Then, he nodded, and set off back the way they came, turning down a side corridor where there was a closed door. He unlocked it with a whisper, and the oil lamps lit as the door swung open. Hermione stepped inside, suddenly feeling cold.

Hermione reached into her robes and pulled out the Ravenclaw diary. “I brought this for you to read,” she said, handing it over. “It’s Harry’s. You’ll give it back to him, won’t you?”

Voldemort flipped reverently through the pages. “Of course,” he said, without looking up. After a moment, his forehead creased in perplexity, and, without a wand, he cast a series of spells over the book. Suddenly, he laughed. “The late Rowena was quite clever indeed, was she not? It appears that even you have partially succumbed to the hex she placed on this diary.”

“So, it is authentic, then?” Hermione asked. She’d thought so—all of her diagnostic spells had confirmed as much—but, absurdly, she found she trusted Lord Voldemort’s conclusion more so than her own.

Voldemort looked at her strangely. “Perhaps it has affected you more than I thought,” he murmured. “Yes, Ms Granger, the book is authentic. It is something I once longed to have in my possession, but I was never able to locate it. And that is perhaps because of the very nature of its defensive spells. Ravenclaw hexed this diary to seem most uninteresting to all that read it—most likely the reason I’ve never been able to get wind of its location; no one was bothered enough to remember it.”

Voldemort slipped the book into his pocket. “Now, I believe we have business to attend to. I really must be getting back before the prisoners start arriving.”

“I was wondering,” Hermione said without preamble, “how this might affect any future... engagements I might like to enter into?”

“How many do you expect to have?” Voldemort asked dryly, shutting the door behind him. It echoed loudly in the empty room.

“Just one,” Hermione said, blushing. “I mean—perhaps. He hasn’t said.”

The Dark Lord smirked. “For all you’ve learned,” he said softly, “you know so little.”

“Pardon?” Hermione asked. She was quite unsure as to whether she should be insulted or not, but was leaning heavily towards offended.

“I, too, did not understand the nuances of wizarding social practises when it was most important. I urge you to endeavour to learn and understand such things, Ms Granger, or you may find that you end up alone. It is a mistake I am very familiar with, and it has, regrettably, haunted me for me ever since.”

“Pardon?” Hermione said again, but she was waved off. Voldemort did not look directly at her, and she began to feel awkward in the following short silence.

“To answer your question,” he said a second later, “your Mark will not hinder any marriage plans,
unless you wished to complete the Last Marriage bond—which I strongly recommend against,” he added, eyes narrowed. “No matter what he or his family might tell you, Ms Granger, marriage bonds are not necessities, and are frowned upon in polite society.”


Voldemort laughed, and it echoed faintly in the tiny room. “Not as such,” he said, and said no more of it. “Have you decided upon a location?”

She remembered the Dark Lord’s chilling words from the other day, and held back a shiver. Her wand was heavy in her sleeve, and she knew many spells, but none of them would do her any good here, against Voldemort, anyway, so she tried not to worry overly much.

In a few moments, this would be over with, and hopefully Snape would tell her how to get back to the castle right away; she didn’t think she’d been able to wait for the twins to conclude their visit. She wanted to get this over with—to get away from this terrifying, towering wizard who could perform Legilimency without a wand—she’d felt him probing subtly around ever since he’d made eye contact with her—and who knew what else he could do?

She’d considered the placement carefully; his suggestion was not even considered. In the end, as she’d slipped out of Theo’s bed early this morning—only to go through the door into her room, and then the door into the Gryffindor common room from there—he’d smiled at her sleepily, and she’d remembered his claim of having had brackets put on his teeth by her parents.

“The roof of my mouth, please,” she said at last. No one would ever have a chance of seeing it there except her parents, and she could easily hide it from them—though they wouldn’t even know what it meant.

Voldemort’s eyebrow hitched up. “I was given to understand you wished it somewhere more private.”

“I don’t show just anyone the inside of my mouth,” Hermione said, and instantly regretted it. Her hands flew up, covered her mouth, and her eyes went wide. “I’m sorry, sir, I’m just nervous.”

“As you should be,” Voldemort said, lips pursed. “Ms Granger, may I remind you that I am extremely busy today? I’ve got free men breaking into a prison at this very moment to put port-keys in breakfast porridges. Once inmates start porting into my drawing room, I’m going to be even busier ensuring my men make it safely back out of Azkaban, and corralling hundreds of frightened, panicked, desperate murderers, rapists, thieves and, more importantly, Dementor dinners. For the foreseeable future, until every last Dementor in Europe eats and breeds, I will have not a single free moment. What, Ms Granger, may I ask, has prompted you to take up so much of my time if you do not, in fact, need to remove any clothing to complete this procedure?”

Hermione, by now, had backed up several steps. “I—didn’t want Snape to know where it was; I don’t trust him.”

“Don’t trust him!” Voldemort exclaimed nastily. “My dear, sweet mudblood, I assure you, Severus Snape is on your side! No matter what side you, yourself, are on, in fact! It matters not to him!”

“I figured,” Hermione said. She stood her ground, though she was shaking all the way through, and she ached more and more with each passing moment to retrieve her hidden wand. “But I’d rather not anyone know, just the same. Not even Harry. Or Theo.”
This gave the Dark Lord pause. “Hmm,” he said. He waved his hand between them and a series of glowing blue symbols appeared in the air. They counted down in no discernable manner. “Very well. Let’s do hurry, Ms Granger, as you can see, time is of the essence. Open your mouth.”

Hermione did. She closed her eyes, too, but it only made her more aware of how cold and calloused the Dark Lord’s fingers were when he pressed them against the roof of her mouth. His nails were long and they scraped against her throat. She coughed, surprised and frightened, and struggled to move, but Voldemort used his other hand to hold her head still. She whined, but he spoke, and his voice drowned hers out with ease.

The words he spoke were not English and not Latin, nor any form of Romance language at all. Nor were they Slavic or Germanic, or, in fact, any recognisable Indo-European language, which made their harsh vowels and scraping consonants even more frightening when she was restrained and a dark wizard was casting a spell on her.

Then she was on fire. Her whole body burned and burned and burned. It reached to her fingers and toes and burned, and when it had burned them up, it travelled inwards, flared in her belly, then her heart, up her neck and converged on her mouth with a final burst of agony. She screamed; it was muffled around Voldemort’s fingers, and then it was over. She collapsed.

“No my first mudblood Death Eater,” Voldemort said as he, ironically, reached down to help her up, “but certainly the most refreshing. Welcome to the fold, Ms Granger.”

Hermione steadied herself on wobbly legs. She tongued the top of her mouth, but could feel nothing —no raised, scarred mark, no heat, no pain—nothing. “Th—thank you, Lord.”

Voldemort looked at her speculatively. “I have made something for you,” he said. He retrieved an object from his robes and handed it to her. “You may use it to further your research during these trying times, where I will most likely be unable to assist you.”

“What is it?” Hermione asked warily. It was very unassuming, but she knew better than that. It was round and flat—metallic and heavy like brass.

“A fetch-key,” he said. “And quite an intelligent one, if I may say. You need not even know the name of the reference you wish to fetch, only the information it could provide. It will work on any book in existence or once-archived, and if you press it to an empty painting, it can temporarily retrieve portraits as well.”

Hermione’s eyes went wide. What a magnificent gift. “It’s just like a port-key, then?” she asked. “I just say ‘fetch this’ or ‘fetch that’ and it will come?”

“Yes,” Voldemort said. “And in addition, it will take you to me when I summon you, and return you to Hogwarts when you’re finished. ‘Port’ to me; ‘Port Hogwarts’ for the school—you will be returned to an empty, unmonitored part of the castle—I dare say you will learn your way about the more disused portions of the castle in no time at all.”

Hermione nodded. “Thank you.”

“Do not lose it,” Voldemort said harshly. “Now, be on your way. I have much to do.”

She did not need to be told twice. Hermione cleared her throat, and said shakily, “Port Hogwarts.” She hoped that Theo would be at breakfast by the time she got there; she needed to speak to him right away.
The breakouts were made early enough that the Daily Prophet scrapped their front page exposé on Drusilla Fudge’s vicious divorce from former Minister, Cornelius, and instead had a field day with the fact that an Azkaban guard had handed Bellatrix Lestrange her morning sludge, and she’d taken a bite, and disappeared right under his nose. The Auror office was unavailable for comment.

Harry folded the paper up—it had arrived for Hermione a few moments earlier, but she wasn’t back yet and he was beginning to worry. It had been three hours now that she was gone.

“Where’s Hermione?” Ginny asked, sitting down next to him.

Harry shrugged, and passed the paper to her. “She probably shacked up with Nott last night,” he said, stalling.

Ginny shook her head as she scanned the front page, a look of shock forming on her face. “No, I saw Nott this morning in the library. Alsace wasn’t in our room when I woke up, either. Do you think it’s got anything to do with this?”

Harry grimaced. “I don’t know.”

Ginny turned to him, and hissed, “Harry, are you saying you didn’t know this—,” she stabbed the front page, “—was going to happen? I thought you had a connexion.”

Harry frowned. He’d forgotten about that in his worry. “Well, yeah, but it’s not like he tells me everything, is it?”

Ginny’s eyes narrowed to slits. “You’re up to something, and what’s more, you don’t trust me enough to tell me, or even keep your stories straight. Well, that’s fine, Harry; you keep your stupid secrets,” and with that, she stomped off to sit next to Dean, who was not in the least put upon.

Hermione walked in at that moment, quite composed, if one ignored the harried expression on her face. She glanced towards the Slytherin table only for a second, and then hurried towards Harry.

Fortunately, Dumbledore and the other professors were absent from breakfast to see this unusual event—probably due to the grim affair all over the papers.

“Harry,” Hermione said, taking Ginny’s empty spot. She paused to glance over the newspaper in front of her, and then made a tiny little noise in the back of her throat. Her fingers clenched.

“Did you really do it?” Harry interrupted. He couldn’t even look at her because his stomach was so knotted up over it.

She nodded briskly; his stomach tightened, but he forced himself to calm down. It was done with now. Nothing he could do about it for five years or more. “Those poor Lestrange girls are still there,” she said quietly. “I can’t stand it. He was awful, Harry—and it hurt. So badly. I—,”

“You shouldn’t have done it,” Harry said tersely.

Hermione glanced at him, and he looked up, caught by surprise. She was crying. He grabbed her arm, and said, “Let’s go.”

She followed easily, and when, across the hall, Harry saw Nott stand up and crane his neck towards them, a confused expression on his face, he nodded, and Nott followed. Outside the Great Hall, Hermione slumped against a wall.
“Are you okay?” Harry asked.

“Hermione!” Nott called, running up. Malfoy was behind him, and Harry was surprised to find he was thankful for it. He needed the easy camaraderie they’d developed lately to take the edge off the strangeness of Hermione with a Dark Mark. It was so absurd—he wanted to laugh, but he couldn’t because right now, tears were running down Hermione’s face, and she was refusing to tell even Nott anything.

“Malfoy,” Harry said, nodding. Malfoy nodded back, brows scrunched and arms crossed as he watched Hermione. Seeing Nott with his hands all over Hermione made Harry remember the night before, and he shivered, thinking of how different Malfoy had looked sprawled out on the cold grass.

“Hermione,” Nott was saying frantically. He towered over her, but the way she was hunched in on herself made him look that much bigger, and her, that much smaller. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I can’t, I can’t, I can’t,” she was saying.

Nott looked so frantic and panicked, that Harry couldn’t help but notice: Nott really loved her, Harry realised, and felt a bit sad that he’d not seen it sooner, or that he’d didn’t have anyone who felt that way about him. Hermione still wouldn’t answer; Nott stopped, at a loss, and turned to Harry. “What did you do?” he asked desperately.

“Nothing!” Harry said.

Nott snarled; his fists clenched. “The greatest weapon a Slytherin has is his loyalty, Black. You’ve had mine so far.”

Harry’s mouth parted slightly. “What?” he said, confused. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Malfoy’s face contort with shock. The blond cast a Notice-Me-Not around the four of them, and Harry’s sense of disorientation intensified. “I didn’t do anything to her!” he said again. “Hermione’s my best friend. I told her not to do it.”

Nott snarled, but Hermione intervened, “Theo! Harry didn’t do anything,” she said, sniffling. “It’s not that.” Nott turned back to her immediately.

“Then what, Hermione?” he begged.

Hermione shook her head quickly, and took off down the hall, towards the nearest of her suite entrances. Harry made to follow, but Nott cut him off quick enough. “No,” he said, “leave her alone until I find out what’s wrong,” he said, and took off after her.

Harry found himself left standing with Malfoy. They regarded each other. After a moment, Malfoy smiled at him, though it was cautious. “Why’s she upset?” he asked.

Harry shrugged. “I already said I didn’t know. She did it, though,” he added pointedly.

Malfoy frowned. “She’s going to have a hard time hiding it during Herbology,” he said.

“I don’t think she got it there,” Harry said, recalling their conversation with Voldemort in France. “He offered her other options.”

Malfoy’s eyebrows hitched up. “Generous of him,” he said. “He must think quite highly of her for that; to wear the Mark is an honour for Death Eaters, and he doesn’t usually allow it anywhere else. It’s supposed to make you a better Death Eater by increasing your awareness of your surroundings—since you’re always careful to hide it.”
“Right,” Harry said. He pursed his lips. Malfoy started walking towards the dungeons and Harry followed. “What do you think of the breakouts this morning? I was surprised the newspapers were able to get it out so quickly.”

Malfoy shrugged. “Mum wrote this morning; she’s been so busy taking care of those orphan brats that they can’t get to the orphanage that she hadn’t even known about it, like I suspected. She’s upset about her sister, but I’m relieved that she’s taking it as well as she is.”

“I’m sorry for your mum,” Harry said.

“But not for my aunt, I reckon,” Malfoy added, smirking a bit.

Harry shrugged his shoulders, unrepentant. “Sorry, no. I don’t care for your aunt much.”

Malfoy sighed. “To be honest, I don’t either. She’s not right in the head, not anymore, and I think my mum mourns the sister she grew up with more than the woman dying soon.” He shivered suddenly, and added, “But it is a gruesome way to go, isn’t it? My father said that the Dementors will be so hungry after not having eaten for so long that they’ll probably tear the first hundred apart in the frenzy.”

Harry grimaced. “Thanks, Malfoy.”

Malfoy grinned over at him. “Anytime, Black.”

“Not Potter?” Harry asked, surprised. “You always call me Potter.”

Malfoy smirked. “I feel like I should call you by your proper name after yesterday.”

“That would be Harry, then,” Harry said, grinning. They were stopped in front of an unused potions classroom, and he took a step forward, backing Malfoy into the room.

“I’ll never call you that,” Malfoy said then. He was smiling, and Harry noticed that his lips were redder than normal. “Wouldn’t be right, after all these years.”

“After all these years?” Harry said with a laugh. He had Malfoy pressed against the desk now, and he leaned forward, pressing their lips together. Malfoy’s mouth tasted sweet, and metallic, and Harry moaned to taste him again. Now that he’d had him once, he realised he wanted him even more. He pulled away, gasping. “So we can change enough to mess about in each other’s trousers, but not enough to call each other by our first names?”

Malfoy’s eyes were half-lidded and wicked—almost the same look he’d had on his face in Potions at the start of term, when he’d nearly killed everyone with a sprig of mint. It wasn’t a murderous expression, though; it was something like nervousness, and a little bit of lust. Malfoy was so strange with his emotions, Harry thought, and he hid them well, because he’d learned early that he couldn’t keep his face blank, so he’d trained his expressions not to match his feelings.

After a moment, the blond said, “No one that knows me calls me Malfoy unless they’re angry with me, but you’ve always called me Malfoy, no matter what.”

Harry understood straightaway. He grinned, and leaned in to kiss Malfoy again. “All right,” he said, and that was all that was said for a long while.
Psychological Warfare

Chapter by faire_weather

Psychological Warfare: 1. The planned use of propaganda and other psychological actions having the primary purpose of influencing the opinions, emotions, attitudes, and behaviour of hostile foreign groups in such a way as to support the achievement of national objectives. 2. Attempts to influence the mind of the enemy rather than destroy its military.

Harry was several days later that Harry received a summons to Dumbledore’s office, presumably to talk about his and Malfoy’s progress with de-cursing the ring, but when he got there, Malfoy wasn’t anywhere to be found. Dumbledore motioned him to a chair.

“Sherbet lemon, Harry?” he asked. Harry declined. "How are you and Ms Granger getting along without Mr Weasley? Professor McGonagall mentioned to me that you escorted her from the Great Hall the other morning after she burst into tears. I hope that she’ll be alright.”

Harry looked away, unable to meet the Headmaster’s eyes. “She’s taking it harder than I thought, but we’re going to visit over hols. I think she’ll be fine once she sees Ron’s still okay.”

Dumbledore nodded, and clasped his hands together on top of his desk. “And how are you, Harry?” he asked. “You have always been so close to Mr Weasley.”

Harry shrugged. “I’m okay. I wrote him several times, but he didn’t write back ‘til the other day. I think he was embarrassed—didn’t think I’d like him anymore, but he was wrong. He’ll always be my best friend.”

Dumbledore nodded, smiling slightly. “You seem to have resolved most of your differences with Mr Malfoy, as well. The faculty reports that your disturbances in their classes have nearly disappeared.”

Harry felt his cheeks heat. “He’s not as stupid as I figured,” he allowed, and Dumbledore gave a short burst of laughter. “He figured out that the ring’s not cursed, too. It’s got a pulse.”

Much to Harry’s annoyance, Dumbledore did not seem as shocked and impressed by the news as he would have hoped. A niggling little thought in the back of his mind told him that the Headmaster had expected as much, but he stomped it down.

"And have the two of you come up with any ideas as to how to...hmm, disenchant it? I hope that you are being cautious; I myself fiddled with it over the summer and got quite a nasty shock on my hand. Fortunately, Professor Snape was nearby with some dittany—I really don’t know what I would do without his excellent services. I then decided that it would be better left to a young, fresh mind.”

Harry fought a smile. Batty as ever, Dumbledore was. Just as casually, Harry said, “We’re going to feed it to a Dementor. I expect there will be some around soon enough,” he added, this with a darker
Dumbledore frowned. He looked weary all of the sudden, and Harry felt a sudden pang of sympathy—the Headmaster meant well, and he was doing all he could to prevent a Dementor massacre; it was just that this was not a problem he should have been handling. It required a stronger stomach, and weaker morals. Harry wanted Dumbledore’s plan to corral the beasts to work—but he didn’t think it would, and Voldemort would be there when it failed.

“I never would have thought of that,” Dumbledore said after some moments. His eyebrows twisted thoughtfully, and he sighed. “It is gruesome, isn’t it, Harry?”

Harry shrugged. “Whoever’s in there has probably been in there long enough that they won’t even realise it. If they aren’t insane, they will be soon.”

“Still, a terrible fate to push on a soul,” Dumbledore said. “I admit I am not aware of what sort of experience eternity inside of a Dementor provides.”

Harry shrugged, feeling guilty all of the sudden. “Hermione says that studies have shown that only the actual Kiss is painful, and once you’re inside, you don’t even know it...and anyway, she said that all the souls are released when the Dementor dies so that they can be reborn again. We could just kill it afterwards.”

The Headmaster frowned again. “Kill it? They are indeed terrible beasts, but is it our right to take their lives for behaving as nature intended them?”

“Oh,” Harry said sheepishly. “I—I guess I just don’t like them much,” he said. All of the sudden, his feet looked very interesting to him. He could feel Dumbledore’s heavy gaze on him, but he couldn’t bring himself to look up.

“You still hear your mother?” Dumbledore asked softly. Harry shrugged. He hadn’t been around a Dementor in several years; he had no idea what he heard. The Headmaster sighed, said, “I think that your idea, gruesome as it is, is the best one we will have, Harry. It is my opinion that we act upon it as soon as possible. With your consent, we will make plans to do so when the Dementors...begin.”

“Really?” Harry said, looking up. He knitted his brows together, confused. Now that Dumbledore had pulled it apart, he felt like it was a terrible idea, and his stomach churned guiltily just thinking about it. Even at the beginning, Harry had suspected this ring was more important than Dumbledore made it out to be, but now he was sure of it. A simple school project would not have warranted such a reaction.

Dumbledore might as well have been reading his mind—though Harry knew for certain that he wasn’t—for his next words were, “I’m sure you have realized by now that I put this project to you for a purpose.”

Harry nodded. Dumbledore continued, “I believe that this silent stand-off we have with Lord Voldemort will soon come to an end. It is entirely unlike him to be so quiet, and I believe that we can expect something from him soon.”

Harry bit his lip, remembering the prophecy and the painful, sticky situation it put him in. “And I’m going to have to fight him,” he said dully. Dumbledore mistook his bland response for fear or apprehension, and Harry did not labour to correct him.

The Headmaster’s look was sad when he said, “I am afraid it will be so.”

“But—I haven’t even been trained to fight,” Harry exclaimed. He was suddenly angry; he was
expected to kill a madman—Voldemort’s actual level of madness notwithstanding—and no one had
tought to teach him any standard dueling spells or strategies. What if he’d really needed to kill
Voldemort? What if his life had really depended on it? He would have been a sitting duck, he
realized, and the realization made him furious. Again, Dumbledore mistook his reasoning.

He smiled, though it was barely visible behind his beard. “You already have the power to defeat
him,” Dumbledore said. “And you’ll soon have the knowledge.”

“And what knowledge is that?” Harry asked shortly.

“How to destroy something evil without letting it destroy you,” Dumbledore said. He waved his
wand once over his hand, and showed Harry his palm. The image of healthy skin melted away,
leaving nothing but black and blistered sores—dead and decaying as if taken over with gangrene.
“When the ring first came into my possession, there was an actual curse upon it, and its removal
required a sacrifice,” he said steadily.

“I considered removing the soul inside it myself; I thought that perhaps it was too dangerous for you
to handle; after all, look what it did to my hand...and what it will continue to do until it has consumed
me utterly—but then I remembered what happened last year, and I realized that you are already
strong enough, and that it won’t do to shelter you from this storm.

“Knowing how to free the soul from this ring will give you all the knowledge you need to defeat
Lord Voldemort, Harry.”

“I don’t understand,” Harry said. He thought briefly that the soul inside was somehow Voldemort’s,
and that Dumbledore meant killing it would kill Voldemort, but he quickly brushed that idea aside—
Voldemort’s soul was obviously inside his body; how could it be inside the ring as well? “Someone
evil’s inside the ring?” he asked instead. He remembered, vaguely, Hermione mentioning something
about Dumbledore, and asked, “Is it Grindelwald?”

Dumbledore chuckled, but the sad twist of his mouth was not hidden by his beard, and Harry knew
there was more to it. “No, I’m afraid not. Gelert Grindelwald is quite dead, and never to return.” He
replaced the glamour over his hand with a careless wave, and leaned forward intently. “I told you
that I would not shelter you, Harry, and I do mean that, but you must understand that I cannot say
any more until you have mastered Occlumency. Your father tells me that he talked with you about it,
and that you’ll have it mastered after the holidays. When I am satisfied that Voldemort cannot break
into your mind, I will tell you the rest.” The look on his face was hopeful, and Harry, in a grand
attempt at being mature, nodded.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll practice really hard,” he said earnestly. Then added, “My dad’s got to be a
better teacher than Snape. I bet it’ll be easy.”

Dumbledore laughed again, and when he reached into the little glass dish on his desk to retrieve
another sherbet lemon, Harry knew that everything would be okay. “I think that you may return to
your studies now, Harry. I appreciate you allowing me to take up your time.”

“Sure,” Harry said, standing. He felt a lot better about the whole ordeal than he had before. “So,
you’ll just let me know...when it’s time?”

“Most certainly.”

Harry nodded, and headed towards the door. “Oh!” Dumbledore called out. “One more thing,
Harry.”
“Yes, Headmaster?” he asked.

Dumbledore looked at him earnestly. “I want you to remember, Harry, that you have one great thing that Voldemort does not—love. He has never known love, and so he can never truly win. Remember to keep love around you, Harry, and you will never be defeated.”

Harry nodded and smiled, but as he descended the spiral staircase, he thought that that wasn’t true. Dumbledore was wrong. Voldemort had known love; once, he had loved someone, and even if she hadn’t loved him back, someone else did. Because the truth of the matter was that in some tiny, careless, hidden part of him, Harry loved the Dark Lord—because he understood him and was understood in return. The truth was that love was often stupid and reckless, and it disregarded fears and ethics, and often even common sense.

He wondered—could Voldemort ever truly be defeated, then?

³³³³

Sirius’ hands shook as he turned the door handle at the Happy Dementor. Inside, Remus was waiting for him. After all this searching, Remus had found him first. After all these months, Sirius had found Moony only by the werewolf’s shabby owl finding Sirius first.

The pub was mixed muggle and wizarding, which was a bit strange since the walls were covered in still pictures of actual Dementors, all tinted bright, happy, pastel colours and swirling around as if they hadn’t a care in the world. What couldn’t be seen, however, was the terrified, stupefied, bound and chained person trapped underneath them, and the strange foggy smoke rising from an unseen location below the photo wasn’t just a campfire underneath a cloudy sky—it was a soul, being consumed by a monster.

Sirius shivered. Harry's latest letter had left him feeling twitchy just being in France. If he never saw another Dementor again, it would be too soon, and he'd just as soon portkey back to England.

It was dark inside with a heavy layer of cigar smoke lingering near the ceiling. A barman was polishing a glass with jerky twists of his wrists, and didn't seem to notice Sirius enter. He had to wave at the man twice before he even bothered to look, but after that it was only a matter of pouring Sirius his ale.

Beer in hand, Sirius took a deep breath and turned around. And Moony was there—at a table in the far corner, frozen between sitting and standing, as if he couldn't make up his mind. His gold eyes were wide and feverish, and about the only thing Sirius could even make out in the late afternoon gloom, but then his mouth parted slightly, and he glanced down for only a second, and when he glanced back up again, a second pair of eyes looked up, too.

Sirius stood frozen, stuck between fear at being caught—by whom? By Death Eaters? By his last friend? By anyone; he didn't know, anymore—and the guilt he felt all the time, and he couldn't decide on just one reason.

He heard a chair being shoved roughly back, and then his eyes focused properly, and he saw that the second pair of eyes belonged to a body, now standing, but still obscured by the shadows.

"Sirius," Remus whispered. His voiced was choked, and the poor chap looked nearly overcome with nausea. "You're really alive."
"I am," Sirius said, grinning cheekily, though he didn’t feel the bravado he showed. He rushed forward—bugger being so nervous and nancy, he thought—and wrapped his friend in a hug. Moony was strong, though, and Sirius was verily squashed by the force of the werewolf’s arms around him. He wondered how many more times they would reunite like this before they finally got it right.

But then the second person removed himself from the shadows, and Sirius felt like crying and fainting all at the same time—because he’d spent the better part of two decades grieving over the death of his little brother, and now, here the bastard was, in the flesh. His cold grey eyes maybe a bit warmer, but that was probably the effects of whatever strange, devilish magic the wanker had used to keep himself alive. And stupidly, the only thing Sirius could think of at the moment was what in all seven hells his little brother—who'd slept with a stuffed dragon 'til fifteen—was doing here with a werewolf…because it would have been an understatement to say that Regulus Black was terrified of werewolves, and as a child often had nightmares of them gnawing him in half.

Sirius set his beer down, and punched him.

Regulus' head jerked sideways, and he raised his hand to touch his face, so Sirius took advantage of the opening and hit him in the gut, too. Reg doubled over, gasping, Moony rushed forward to steady him, and Sirius picked up his beer and took a seat on the other side of the table, hands shaking so badly that he worried he’d spill his drink, so he set it down again, and put them in his lap instead.

"A letter wouldn't have hurt," he said, by way of apology, though he wasn't sure to whom. Hands recovering slowly, he sipped his ale, and watched as Regulus lowered himself gently into the chair across. Remus hovered like a mother hen for a second or two before sitting down beside him.

"I meant to," Regulus answered after a moment. His voice sounded different—scratchier, maybe, rougher and calmer. Moony looked altogether too wretched to even string a sentence together. "But I waffled about what to say for a long while, and then it was…too late. They won't accept mail in gaol, you know."

Sirius shuddered. "I remember," he said shortly.

Remus cleared his throat, adjusted the collar of his jumper. "I thought you were dead," he said. "I saw you die—I..." here, he glanced at Regulus, looking both unsure and strangely heartbroken at the same time—"but then I came across Regulus, and I found out you weren't there, but I still—you were gone, and I thought you must've been really dead, and Regulus thought you were, too." Suddenly, he reached across the table and grabbed Sirius' hand, testing that he was real and alive. He pulled it back self-consciously after a second.

Sirius smirked, trying to look casual, but if his brother's silent, careful look was any indication, he failed miserably. He'd never been able to hide anything from Reg. "I owled you as soon as I got back in the country," he said instead. "I owled you as soon as I got back in the country," he said instead. "Was the first owl I sent—but it came back, and then Snivelly warned me to...to fetch Harry, and everything was so busy that I couldn't—"

"What's wrong with Harry?" Regulus interrupted.

"Nothing," Sirius said, but he remembered his son's sorry state in May, and the hideous Muggles that did it to him, and clenched his fists together to keep from killing someone. He had spent the first month of their time together focusing only on Occluding the memories from his mind—to the point, in fact, that he'd regretfully been unable to focus on anything else. Harry was fine, he reminded himself constantly—and twelve more years in Azkaban for murder wouldn't help anyone. "He's fine."

"I saw him," Remus said, voice nervous. "With Hermione Granger. I don't know how it happened,
but they were standing right next to," he paused to *Muffliato* their conversation, "to Voldemort and quite alright with the whole state of affairs. But I could only see them when *He* was touching me."

Sirius grimaced. "I know," he said. "Harry told me."

Reg narrowed his eyes. "Harry's consorting with the Dark Lord now?" he asked, sounding suspiciously like their Mum.

"Unfortunately," Sirius said. He shrugged, glanced down to watch his finger tracing the sweat-ring left on the table by his still-full mug of ale. "'Course I'd rather he make a deal with Voldemort than have to fight him. I'm sure you know all about that damned prophecy. It terrifies me to think of my son on the wrong end of an Unforgivable."

There was a stunned pause, and Sirius realised what he'd said a moment too late. Moony was the first to speak, saying, "It's true?"

"I suspected," Reg added, and Moony nodded thoughtfully. "He looked too much like Da for it to be a fluke." Then he grinned, and kicked Sirius's shin underneath the table. "You slag, you."

"It's true," Sirius agreed, eyes narrowed; that had hurt damn it. Then something occurred to him, and he couldn't help asking, "When did you meet Harry?"

But of course, he knew. He'd known all along, and he'd told this very theory to more than one person. Because the short of it was that he and Reg were so alike that Sirius could follow his scheming just as well as he could his own.

"You were me," he said instead. "You took my place when I was in America."

Regulus shrugged. "I needed something from the house."

"And ended up staying. All that time," Moony said, shaking his head ruefully. "He even smelled like you, Padfoot. I lived with him for a month, and didn't notice a thing."

"You were a bit suspicious when I didn't want to come with you for the full moon," Regulus offered.

"I thought you were miffed with me," Remus said, grinning. "You were so like Sirius, always stomping around in a strop."

Sirius rolled his eyes. He smiled at Moony, feeling happy, and for a second their old camaraderie was back, and everything was like being in fifth year again—before he nearly killed Snape for trying to kiss Lily, and Reg still spoke to him when Mum wasn't around. But then he remembered that there were Dementors out, and Lily was dead, and nothing would ever be the same again, even if he did have Harry now.

"I guess that's why I didn't smell it on you," Moony said a second later, and quite pointedly. "You were very good about covering your tracks."

Regulus ignored it, and haltingly, they began to relay the story to Sirius.

Moony started by telling of how Dumbledore sent him to ingratiating himself with the werewolves for information or leads, or anything really, and how he'd followed them aimlessly through three towns, accepted because he was a wolf, but completely uninteresting to them because he was English. They were looking for something, but they told him not what. It was in Calais that the pack ran across a second, and where he'd smelled *Sirius* all over them, but been unable to find him. So he joined with the second, and back at theirs, he'd found Regulus.
"He came right up to me and stabbed a finger into my chest like Mum used to when she caught us sneaking pasties before dinner," Reg said, laughing. He affected a high pitched voice and said, "Who do you think you are! he said to me."

"I don't sound like that," Remus laughed, and indeed he did not.

But then they became sombre, and Regulus was quiet for several moments before he continued. "I fooled everyone at Grimmauld because I was prepared. I knew a chap in America that was to alert me when you planned to come back to England, but before we left Hogwarts, I found that manky old book in the library at River House, and it had the blood rite that I used to become you after I… died.

"The truth is that I've been you for years, Sirius. I needed to die on the Tapestry, so I couldn't be Regulus Black anymore, and my first thought was that I'd rather be you, anyway." There was a moment where their eyes met and held, but it lasted only a moment, and then Regulus looked away, and Moony took several long swallows of his ale while staring at a lavender-hued Dementor photograph.

"Alright, Moony?" Sirius asked.

"Alright," he said. "I've just heard this all before, and I know how it ends." It wasn't a comforting statement. Regulus grimaced in agreement.

He said, "Lily Evans knew what I was planning, I think, because she'd made some sort of deal with Voldemort, but you knew that already, didn't you?"

Sirius shrugged, feeling profoundly guilty. "She did it to save you," he said hoarsely. He took a gulp of beer, but it did little to ease his strangled throat. "I was going to join to watch over you—because I thought you were stupid, and she knew that if I did, being surrounded by all the Old Magic would be the end of it, and I wouldn't even be able to save myself."

Reg's mouth opened in stunned surprise, and for a second, Sirius saw his own guilt mirrored on his little brother's face, and understood how Moony could have been fooled. "I never knew," he said. "I thought she was just being nice."

Even Remus gave him an incredulous look at that. "Nice?" he said.

"Well, whatever the case," Reg said—he paused and rubbed tiredly at his face. "I was past redemption—I guess I'll always be." He shook his head, looked at Sirius like he had a thousand things to say to him, and couldn't say them fast enough. "The thing is, I found something of the Dark Lord's that I shouldn't have found, and it was like a treasure map to something even more exciting, and I should have left well enough alone, but I didn't, and when the Dark Lord found out, he thought death would be too kind, so he came up with something better—something that would keep me with him, and remind me of my place."

Here, Remus shuddered visibly. "You're never going to tell me what it was that deserved such a terrible fate, are you?" he asked. It was obvious that he expected a 'no' and was quite resigned to it, though the slump of his shoulders suggested how heavily it weighed on him.

It all clicked into place quite suddenly for Sirius, and he now understood how Regulus was so at ease next to Moony—the truth of it hit him like a bludger to the head. He felt dizzy-sick with the thought of his terrified little brother, and how his heart must have beat like a snitch in fear.

"Werewolves," he murmured. Moony looked away; after a second, Reg nodded.
"I could smell the canine on him at Grimmauld Place," Moony said quietly. "If he hadn't been a werewolf, I might have noticed something because you've always smelled like canine. But then when I found him here in France, he still smelled just like you, but he looked like him."

"I've been taking a potion, trying to reverse the effects of the rite," Regulus explained. "It's not working though. I look more like I used to, but for all intents and purposes, I'm still you. I could even get into your Gringott's vault if I wanted to. Biologically, we're the same person—and sometimes I do regret it...my cock was bigger than yours."

Sirius gaped, Regulus smirked, and Remus looked away, face red. "It is not!" he said. "Mine's perfectly gargantuan."

Reg shrugged again. "Still smaller than mine."

Sirius threw several nearby coasters at him, though they tended to veer sharply before hitting his brother and most hit Moony in the nose, but it was okay, because everything was fine now—including the fact that his twice-dead brother was alive and Moony was, too.

“And I think you'll get a kick out of this,” Regulus continued when their laughter had subsided. He reached into his cloak and removed a pewter-grey Muggle cigarette lighter. “You remember these tacky old things?” he said, grinning. “Da gave them to us when we were lads. I don't know where mine went, but I found Da’s a few weeks before I went to Grimmauld Place. His activates on being stunned! Can you believe the luck? I went to help Harry that night last year, and Bella was being such a hag that I couldn’t help taunting her—"

“You should’ve known better," Sirius interrupted, heart pounding at the revelation he knew was coming. “She was always a better dueller than either of us.”

Regulus acknowledged the comment with a smile. He shrugged, and said, “You know me.” He flicked the lip of the lighter open and a tiny blue flame sprouted up. “Still, I'll never say another word about Da making us look like fools carrying around Muggle nonsense. Bella’s stunner knocked me flat, and had Da’s port-key not activated right away, I would have flown right through that death-arch."

He slipped the grey lighter, a perfect match to the two that Sirius and Harry carried, back in his pocket.

Sirius shook his head, grinning dumbly. He felt completely overwhelmed, and—how had he forgotten that there was a third port-key? But then—he turned to Remus, and said, “But if you knew that wasn’t me at the Department of Mysteries, and you knew no one went through the Veil, then why didn’t you come home once you found Reg? Or at least check in with Hestia at your last two rendezvous?

There was a heavy silence, filled only with the repetitive motion of Regulus’ finger as he traced the ring on the wooden table left by his mug, and Moony worried a loose thread on the hem of his sleeve. Finally, the silence was broken, but not by Remus. Regulus pursed his lips and gave Sirius a determined stare. “He doesn’t have to go back to England if he doesn’t want to. He’s fine here."

“Here?” Sirius said dumbly.

“With me,” Regulus clarified.

Sirius’ eyebrows shot up. “With you,” he echoed hollowly. “...I didn’t know,” he said, then: “But both of you could come home to England. You were never charged with being a Death Eater,
Regulus. There wasn’t even a huge fuss when—I mean, it wouldn’t be hard for you to just jump right back into society.”

Remus’ face was red, but he shook his head. “It’s not that simple,” he said.

“Of course it is,” Sirius said, happily latching onto the thought. “Harry and I are staying at River House; you stay there with us, both of you. Oh, and there’s even been some interesting things going on. You know the Smith family, right? Well Yasmin Smith is leading a crusade to have several day schools set up across Britain for magical children five to eleven, and the first one’s being built just across the Firth from River House. I donated the land to the school, and I think you and Remus, especially Remus, would—”

“No,” Remus interrupted. “No. I can’t come home, Sirius.” Without ceremony, he lifted the sleeve of his robe and held his arm out. The Dark Mark glared angrily back.

Apologetic and ashamed, he said, “It overrides the effects of the Change. It’s the bond. With the Dark Lord. It’s like Wolfsbane potion but without the pain. And it allows me to keep my own mind when I’m changed—I’m always aware of who I am now, and I won’t give that up.”

“You’re having me on,” Sirius said, after a moment. He glanced between the two of them, mouth twitching. “Remus, you? Never! Tell me, lads, what’s the real story?”

“That is the real story, Sirius,” Regulus said.

Moony looked away. “I was ashamed; that’s why I’ve stayed here with Regulus.”

“Is that the only reason?” Regulus muttered angrily.

“Of course not!” Remus said quickly. “You know it’s not.” He turned back to Sirius and said, “But I can’t come home, Padfoot. Not now—not yet.”

“No, I don’t want any of us to be anywhere near England when the Dementors set on it,” Regulus said.

“But you’ll be bait, won’t you?” Sirius asked them. “Because of how werewolves can resist the effects of Dementors.”

“Not bait,” Regulus said, exasperated. “But who else would you suggest to corral them in the feeding chamber? Are you going to do it? What about Harry, can he do it? Or do you think Dumbledore has few enough fears to be able to handle a swarm of five hundred or more?”

“Someone has to do it,” Remus added. “The Dark Lord’s modelling his procedure after one they used in China a thousand years ago—it was their most successful method, so we’re hoping for the best, and the Dark Lord understands that it’s dangerous. He appreciates us, Sirius, and we’re willing to do it.”

“Of course you are,” Sirius muttered. “Obviously you’re both so important to the Dark Lord that he can’t spare you for a moment.”

Regulus rolled his eyes. “No, we’re not. No one is important to the Dark Lord like that, Sirius, but he does appreciate the severity of the situation, and we’re not just cannon fodder here. I, for one, have paid my dues many times over—many full moons over, whether the Mark saves me from the effects or not—and it has earned me the Dark Lord’s ear. In fact, Sirius, it was my idea, you know? I did the research and I suggested this solution, along with so many others you and the rest of the wizarding world have seen, like the orphans.”

“Of course them, Padfoot,” Remus interjected. “Stay on track here.”

“I am on track, Moony, I am!” Sirius took a deep breath. “But I’m also overwhelmed, and shocked, and confused, and scared that my kid, my friend, my dead-brother and all the wizarding world are going to be limp, soulless shells, and I’m goddamned terrified of Dementors—so just shut up and let me fucking process it.”

“Process it,” Moony repeated slowly.

“Yeah,” Regulus said. “It’s a lot to take in.”

Sirius leaned his head in his hands. “I’d much rather take in a Quidditch game.”

Two gasps sounded from across the table, and he looked up. Moony and Regulus clutched their forearms and gritted their teeth, but it was a hard feeling to hide. Sirius had seen the call of the Dark Mark too many times to not know it.

“X X X

“No one’s going to be interested in Quidditch when the Prophet prints something like that,” Ginny said. She strapped on her shin guards and gave Dean a pitiful look. “Who’s going to watch our game when they’re thinking about the paper?”

“Bit morbid of you to rank Quidditch over Dementors swarming the countryside,” Seamus put in.

Ginny gave him a snarly look over her shoulder. “I’m not,” she said. “And the Dementor’s aren’t. It’s only that I’m always nervous before games, and knowing no one cares is making it worse.”

She pulled her hair roughly into a knot and pursed her lips. “And I was hoping the scouts would come today, too. They usually come to the last game before holidays to find talent for spring tryouts—but of course they won’t be here if some batty old Arithmancer has decided that the Dementors will breed in the spring.”

“It’s a bit scary, though,” Dean said, shivering. “My mum wrote last week about the weather being dreary at home—do you think it has anything to do with Dementors?”

Seamus rolled his eyes. “The weather’s always dreary in London,” he said.

“Especially dreary,” Dean clarified. He turned to Harry. “Do you think it’s the Dementors, Harry?”

Harry looked up, distracted. “Hmm?”

“Of course he doesn’t think it’s the Dementors,” Ginny said. She glanced at him, and added, “Right, Harry?”

“Oh right,” Harry said. “No, I mean the Prophet said they wouldn’t start until the spring, right? So there’s nothing to worry about until then.”

“Well, then what’ll happen, d’you think?” Seamus asked.

Harry shrugged, but Ginny saw the tenseness of his shoulders. “Dumbledore’s got a plan, I’m sure. I mean really—just have to stay out of the way of them, I’d say. Let them go on with their creepy
business and lock the doors ‘til they’re done.”

Luna’s voice cut through the air as she called for the attention of the spectators and welcomed them to the game. Ginny felt her stomach roil, and forced herself to take several deep breaths. Why she was so especially nervous today she couldn’t say, but she was used to being nervous and she would deal with it. “Well, that’s us,” she said, as Luna called for the teams to enter the pitch.

They filed out of the locker room into the glaring sun, with the sharp sting of winter wind bruising their faces. Ginny shielded her eyes against the sun and scanned the crowd for any sign of a Harpies scout. No luck. At least it had stopped snowing.

Alsace stepped up next to her, broom in hand and quiet as the grave. Ginny glanced at her as she adjusted the contrast on her Sunglare charm on her eyes. “You okay, Al?”

Alsace gave her a pinched smile. “I do not feel my best today,” she admitted. She glanced up towards the Ravenclaw stands where Ginny was able to quickly pick Lorraine from the crowd—she was looking just as sullen as her sister, though neither of the girls were ever overly chipper.

Ginny pressed her palm to Alsace’s forehead, just the same as her own mother did to her whenever she had the slightest headache. “You don’t feel warm,” she observed.

“In this weather, I do not see how I could,” Alsace said.

Ginny laughed, and mounted her broom. Madam Hooch’s whistle sounded and Luna’s Sonorus’d voice was already chattering. “Well just make sure you’re paying attention today—I watched Ravenclaw practising earlier this week and their Beaters are really on their game.”

Alsace gave her a small smile, and before Ginny knew it, they were both a hundred feet in the air falling into the time-tested Warrior formation as if it were instinct. Ravenclaw’s Chasers zoomed towards them and Ginny’s nervousness immediately fell away in the face of action. She always worked well under pressure.

She sped between the forefront Chasers with Alsace spinning through on the other side, and they easily separated the Ravenclaw Beaters, giving Dean and Seamus opportunity to steal the Bludgers and swipe at the Chaser with possession. The Quaffle fell into Ginny’s hand and she sped towards the goals, looking for an opening.

She noticed the Ravenclaw Keeper’s mistake right away and set up her shot, but as she pulled her arm back and tightened her muscles for the release, something hard and heavy slammed into her ribs just below her extended right arm. She sucked in a great gulp of breath and felt the momentum of the Bludger forcing her forward. The Quaffle fell from her shocked fingers, and her head slammed forward into her broom handle.

Everything went black.

But only for a moment, and then she opened her eyes—just in time to realise that she’d blacked out for a moment and it felt as though several ribs were broken, and she was feeling dizzy so she tightened her grip on her broom handle—and screamed.

Her eyes went wide and she began to panic because oh my God she was on a broom in the air and she didn’t know how to fly at all. To her right, a girl was flying in with a strange look on her face, but she didn’t have time to process it at all before the light-headedness overwhelmed her, and she fainted. Lily’s fingers loosened from the broom handle and she slipped from the seat with all the limp gracefulness of a doll.
Severus saw it the moment it happened, and he knew.

He knew his friend, too, and that was the only reason he had been quick enough with a Slow Fall spell to keep Weasley’s body from splattering on the frosted grass. She floated down in a rocking twirl like a leaf from a tree and landed on the pitch softly. Still, she’d been battered with an enchanted ball that weighed two stone, at least—there were no doubt internal injuries. Snape forced his way through the stunned crowd and was bending over her within moments, checking for vital signs.

“Broken rib,” Rolanda Hooch was saying as she poked it with her finger. Weasley moaned at the touch, and Snape winced. No one else would be able to tell that wasn’t Weasley’s voice—they would attribute it to pain or breathlessness or wouldn’t consider it at all because there was no reason to expect it was anyone else, but he knew that voice.

Dumbledore pushed through at that moment and said, baffled, “What did she say? Were you singing Severus?”

“Of course not,” he replied tersely, and Hooch guffawed. “She didn’t say anything.”

“Could have sworn I heard a C minor as I approached,” Dumbledore continued. He flicked his wand and a wooden stretcher appeared beneath the girl. “Would you be so kind as to direct Ms Weasley to the Infirmary, Severus?”

Snape eyed her critically. She would be fine—nothing a little Skelegrow couldn’t help—but he was shaken, and he used the time pretending to check her breathing to calm himself. It wasn’t really Lily up there; it was a Weasley, and Lily was dead. She would always be dead, even if she could somehow reach the living world for long enough to possess a body. It wasn’t the same as life. She was a ghost, like the Baron, and that’s all she would ever be.

He took a deep breath, tried to accept it. “Of course, Headmaster.” He sliced his wand through the air in two quick bursts and the stretcher rose, and followed him to the school. As he exited the pitch he could hear Ms Lovegood announcing Gryffindor’s reserve who would be filling in, but it went in one ear and out the other.

Poppy was waiting by the door to the Infirmary when he arrived, no doubt alerted to the situation by Dumbledore. “Broken rib?” she called to him.

“At least two,” he replied. He guided the stretcher gently through the doors and over to an empty bed, where he lowered her and banished the stretcher. “My diagnostics revealed several contusions—both internal and external as well.”

“Hmph,” Poppy said, drawing a series of runes over Weasley’s body in red and white light. “Children are absolutely ridiculous, the nonsense they get themselves into…and this one!—second time this year she’s ended up here.”

Snape stood and watched, arms crossed over his chest. Several moments passed with Poppy performing her diagnostics before she paused, and glanced at him as though she’d forgotten he was there altogether. “Aren’t you getting back to the game, Severus?”

“It’s Gryffindor and Ravenclaw,” he replied blandly, eyes remaining on the girl.

She quirked a small smile at him; he saw it from the corner of his eye, though he pretended not to notice. “The games are rather dull when one’s own house isn’t playing, aren’t they? I do try to attend
the Slytherin games every now and again, but it’s hard for me to watch the children get beat around, imaging what sorts of internal injuries they’re getting, and after so many years here, I hardly feel an association to it anymore,” she said.

“Well, good,” Minerva said, nodding. She saw Severus across the room and gave him a quizzical look. “Severus, why are you still here and not at the game?”

He rolled his eyes again. “I need not remind you of my detestation of Quidditch in general, and your house in particular, Minerva.” He snapped the paper open to separate them further and added, “Given the choice, which I have been, I would choose to spend my time in the company of one unconscious Gryffindor over team full of those that are awake.”

She was not to be deterred. “It’s taken them long enough to report on the Dementors,” she said. Poppy, accustomed to impromptu Order of the Phoenix discussions in her Infirmary, cast a perfunctory security spell on the door without even breaking her stride. “How long ago was it,” Minerva continued, “that you reported it to the Prophet, Severus?”

“Before term started,” he said. “Mid-August, if memory serves.”

Minerva scoffed. “Our society is self-destructive,” she said.

Severus did not remove his eyes from the article he was reading on Minister Scrimgeour’s alleged love affair with his assistant, Priscilla Weatherby, ‘a lovely redhead with deep blue eyes and a svelte frame’. He said, blandly, “I’m sure they wanted to check their references to ensure accurate reporting.”

“I’m sure,” Minerva replied. Poppy giggled and Severus hid a smirk behind his newspaper. She sighed and added, ‘I’ve already received two dozen calls this morning from parents. ‘Is Hogwarts safe?’ they want to know, and of course I tell them it is, but there’s only so much we can do.”

“I’m sure we’ll be fine,” Poppy said, finally speaking up. “Hogwarts has a Hecatomb, as I recall.”

Snape glanced over his paper to see Minerva nodding. “It does,” she said. “Albus and I reinforced it this summer, actually.”
Poppy glanced up. “With what?”

“Sheep,” Severus said, recalling the ward-casting—it had provided him with ample stock of ram rumen for his second year potions classes. “One hundred Scottish Blackfaces. I believe the Domestic Magic class is using the wool for their term project.”

“And the mutton I had for dinner Thursday last?” Poppy asked.

“Provided to you in the name of the greater good,” Severus answered.

Poppy shook her head, smiling. “Well I suspect that Hogwarts is quite safe with a Hecatomb from that sheep—the mutton was very tough, so the wards would be as well.”

“I do hope so,” Minerva said. Snape felt her approaching, and knew that she was reading the other side of his newspaper, where the open mouth of the Dementor glared out from beneath the headline that had caused uproar across the country. Her finger trailed across the back of his paper as she read aloud, “It says here that this is an occurrence that has never happened before, and that it was with great skill that Mister Simon Effleberry, Certified Public Arithmancer, discovered the equation that foretold the breeding.”

“I didn’t know you were certified, Severus,” Poppy put in. She’d moved on from red and white spells and was now performing a delicate weave of blues above Weasley’s head.

Snape lowered the paper. It was now obvious that neither woman would let him enjoy his moment away from screaming, bratty children. “The Headmaster knows someone who was able to file something for me.”

“Effleberry, though?” Minerva asked, lips quirked.

“Obviously I didn’t choose the name, either,” he said. “I only worked out the information that the Dark Lord provided me with in a formal report for the Daily Prophet.”

“Provided?” Minerva asked. “Surely, he…?”

Severus lowered the paper and sneered at her. “As odd as it may seem, he is of a like mind on this particular situation. I only do as I am told, Minerva.”

She waved a hand dismissively. “I wasn’t implying,” she said, “only surprised.” She took a step back and surveyed Poppy’s spell-work with a sigh. “Well, Poppy, anything to call for a benching?”

Poppy sighed, and paused her diagnostic with an Interim Spell. “There is an anomaly about her aura, but nothing actually wrong with her that I can find. I’ll continue to look, but I don’t see any reason for her to be having seizures, faints, or blackouts of any kind—have you considered that maybe she’s just been stressed over classes and distracted?”

Minerva harrumphed. “That’s enough reason to bench her as any.”

Snape would have agreed, but he didn’t have the chance. Dumbledore’s phoenix patronus flew through the wall of the Infirmary and stopped before them. It said, “The Dementors have disappeared from Azkaban, Kiljoy and Nurmengard. Kingsley Shacklebolt reports that the Ministry began a full search three hours ago, and have found no Dementors anywhere in Britain. I will call a meeting later this evening, so please empty your calendars.” Message delivered, the phoenix disappeared.

Minerva turned to him quickly, the stunned look on her face surely matching his own. “Is Voldemort —?”
“No,” Severus said before she could even finish asking. “He didn’t do this.”

Hermione never thought about what being called by the Dark Mark would feel like. It happened after Quidditch. After Ginny’s replacement, Ravenclaw trounced Gryffindor without batting an eyelash—and she was waiting in the charmed warmth of the Gryffindor locker rooms for Harry to finish showering so they could go visit Ginny when she felt it: a dull throb in the roof of her mouth that increased steadily for several minutes as she wracked her brain for what to do about it.

When the locker room was clear, save for Alsace and Harry in their respective showers, she could take it no more. She hurried over to the entrance to the boys’ shower and called for Harry as loudly as she dared. Tonguing the roof of her mouth only helped so much, and it was beginning to become unbearable.

“It is happening, isn’t it?” a soft voice called from behind her. She turned around and found Alsace toweling off her hair with a red and gold towel. “The Dementors are feeding?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione said.

Alsace sat down on the bench and began lacing up her boots. “They did say my parents would be dying soon; your face is very red and your arms are shaking—you are being called by the Dark Lord, are you not?”

Hermione hesitated; she wasn’t entirely sure what she was being told to do by Voldemort, but she needed to find out soon before she passed out from the ache of it. “Maybe,” she finally said. “I don’t know.”

Harry came out from the showers and took one look at her before swearing loudly. “You too?” he asked stupidly. His scar was an angry red underneath the fringe of his hair, and he looked as though he were in as much pain as she was. The throb of the Dark Mark intensified and she gasped—had it always felt like this for him? How had he borne it?

“What do I do?” Hermione asked.

By now, Harry had one hand pressed hard against his forehead while the other clumsily did up the buttons on his trousers. “This is about the time,” he gritted out, uncaring of Alsace’s presence, “where I pass out and go to him.” He glanced at her, brow sweating, “But you’re here now, and we’ll have to actually go, I think.”

“We will?” she squeaked.

The locker room door opened and three Slytherins entered with their hoods drawn up, ostensibly against the cold. Draco was the first to drop his cowl once he saw that the locker room was deserted. After a moment’s hesitation, Pansy Parkinson and Blaise Zabini followed. Their mouths were pursed tightly, but they looked otherwise composed.

“Pansy and Blaise were called as we were leaving the Pitch,” Malfoy said by way of greeting. Harry looked entirely too relieved to see him, but restrained himself from running to Malfoy in front of his friends.

“What about Theo?” she asked.
“He’s not Marked,” Malfoy replied.

“Neither are you,” she said.

He only shrugged, and nodded his head towards Harry, now fully dressed. “I go where he goes.”

“You can’t,” Harry began to say, but Hermione was not interested in their relationship’s strange dynamics.

“Do you know what it’s about?” she asked instead, directing the question to all of the Slytherins.

“The Dementors, I am sure,” Alsace put in.

Pansy Parkinson shook her head. “They aren’t feeding today,” she said, and her voice sounded strangely soft and careful as she addressed the Lestrange girl.

“Can we just go before Granger passes out?” Zabini cut in. “Look how blotchy her face is—she’s about to faint.” And indeed Hermione felt very near to it; near enough, in fact, that she didn’t wonder or care how Zabini knew of her own Marking, or why that suddenly made her someone worth caring about.

“He’s right, where’s your fetch-key?” Harry asked quickly. His pain appeared to have lessened dramatically since Malfoy’s arrival, and she noticed that while both Parkinson and Zabini were tense, they were not suffering as she was.

“In my rucksack,” she said, and Harry immediately tore it open to find the little metallic ball. “Get my notebook, too—the one with the research in it.” He did, and a moment later, the four of them were gathered around Hermione and her fetch-key, as she tried to remember, through the pain, what the activation word was.

Alsace stepped up quickly and handed Parkinson a tiny vial with a cork lid. She said, “If you see my parents—will you remember them for me?” Parkinson pocketed the vial and nodded. Alsace turned to Harry. “I’ll take her things to Gryffindor and say that I saw you both walking towards the Astronomy Tower, if anyone asks.”

Nausea rose in Hermione’s stomach. Her mouth was on fire, and her brain was becoming hazy. Four sets of hands were holding her upright, and she was so light-headed—

Malfoy snatched the fetch-key from her fingers. “Port!” he said, and the world flipped inside out.

She landed harshly on frozen grass, somewhere south of Hogwarts. The pain in her mouth subsided so quickly that her stomach roiled, and she leaned over, and vomited in the grass. Parkinson stepped back quickly with a sound of disgust, but Zabini was quick with a Banishing spell.

“You okay?” Harry asked, pulling her up. He and Malfoy were busy pulling her black winter cloak over her school robes to hide her from the other Death Eaters popping into the clearing.

“I panicked,” she admitted. “It’s never happened before.”

“Of course not,” Parkinson said, gazing away as if she were not paying attention, and had not, in fact, noticed that Hermione was in the midst of a Death Eater meeting.

“Being called, I meant; not panicking,” Hermione clarified with a glare. She took a deep breath and shook the two men off her. “I can put my own cloak on, thank you,” she said to Harry.
“Just put your hood up,” he said. She did, making sure that hers, like theirs, hung down over her eyes as far as possible. Zabini and Parkinson wore Death Eater masks, but she was not the only one without.

“I am afraid,” a voice drawled from behind her, “that you have already been seen.” They turned, and Snape stared at them with an appraising eye. “Not that I didn’t already know you would be here, Ms Granger, but I must remind you to be absolutely vigilant from now on.”

“What’s going on?” Harry asked.

Hermione tried not to notice how close he and Malfoy were standing, and tried even harder not to wish that Theo was here as well. Her stomach flipped over again, and she fought to restrain the nausea. What had she gotten herself into?

-stream
HIGH TREASON (n): treason against the sovereign or state.

Harry’s fingers weren’t touching Malfoy’s, but he could feel the warmth radiating from the Slytherin’s body, and in the frigid winter air, it was enough to calm him down.

“The Dementors have disappeared,” Snape said.

“As in, completely gone?” Malfoy asked. He kept his eyes focused on the ground and made sure that none of his signature blond hair showed.

Snape nodded curtly. “As in that, yes, Mr Malfoy. Now please, let us move this delightful little group to the pitch—I believe that is where the Dark Lord said he would be establishing the arena, and hopefully the warming charms.”

Parkinson was the first to fall into step behind Snape. “A pitch?” she asked. “Are we at a Quidditch stadium, Professor Snape?”

Harry and Malfoy fell back to ensure Hermione was fine—he’d never seen her react so badly to a port-key. Her face was flushed underneath her cowl, but her breathing was regular again, and she didn’t appear to be shaking any longer. “You okay?” he asked again.

His fingers brushed against Malfoy’s and he grabbed them, squeezed, and let them go just as quickly. He could see Malfoy’s lips quirking at the edges beneath his hood, but he didn’t dare do anything else to draw attention to them in this place. Their relationship would be perfectly fine among Purebloods, but that he was Harry Potter might not be. Public displays asked to be noticed, and he did not want to be noticed tonight.

“Fine,” Hermione answered.

Ahead, Zabini and Parkinson were walking next to Snape, and they caught up in time to hear Snape’s, “No, we are at a school, Ms Parkinson.”

“Which school?” Zabini asked, looking around. The other Death Eaters, having just arrived, were doing the same. “Is this one of the vocational schools? It doesn’t seem very familiar.”

“It is not,” Snape replied. “It’s new.”

“The Firth College for Young Wizards and Witches,” Harry said, realizing. “It’s the new one the Ministry approved in November. Look—you can see the firth through those trees there. We’re near Edinburgh.”

They crossed the barrier into the future Quidditch pitch, and Harry sighed. The warmth from the charmed air was enough to drain the last of the anxiety from him, and he felt calm, as he lately did, when he was called to the presence of the Dark Lord.
He quickly realized that it wasn’t his usual level of calm, and in fact, he felt entirely care-free and happier than he’d ever been. He was near to giggling—Hermione and Pansy already were—and Malfoy was looking so lovely in the pale light of gloaming that he made to kiss him right there.

Snape stopped him not a moment too soon. His fingernails dug into Harry’s shoulder as he forcefully pulled him and Malfoy away from one another. “Another time, please, gentlemen,” Snape said. “And do realize that you have just walked into a very strongly charmed circle of happiness,” he added caustically.

“Cheering charm?” Zabini asked, voice muffled behind his mask.

Snape tapped them all on the head with his wand—more harshly than necessary, Harry thought—and muttered a counter-spell. Immediately, the delirium subsided, and he was left feeling quite restless again, if at least warm.

“It would have to be much stronger than those,” Malfoy said, adjusting his robes. He looked not at all as if he’d come very close to snogging Harry in public.


“Oh!” Hermione suddenly said. Her hand flew to her mouth and her eyes grew very large. Harry followed her gaze and stopped short; Malfoy walked into him, and Harry shivered, but not from the warmth he radiated or the firm planes of his athletic figure, but from the construction before them. It was the Dementor arena.

“Surely,” Hermione began carefully, “he hasn’t built one here as well, has he, Professor?”

“No,” Snape said, at the same time that Parkinson asked, “What is it, Granger?”

“I know what it is,” Malfoy said. Harry saw him swallow heavily, and knew that he was thinking of how easily it could have been his parents walking into that deadly cage. “That’s where they’re going to feed the inmates to the Dementors, isn’t it?”

Snape did not answer for several long seconds, but when he finally did, it was so quiet that Harry wasn’t sure he actually heard it. “Yes,” Snape said.

Parkinson and Zabini shivered, and shared whispered reassurances which Harry could only partly follow; they had no family in the lottery, he learned, though it had been a near thing for Zabini’s half-brother, who only barely received parole from some misdemeanour before the lottery was instated. He pressed closer to Malfoy, and was grateful when the Slytherin pressed back against him. Outside of their protective bubble within the arena, the snow was beginning to fall again, and with it, the last dregs of twilight.

There was a hushed murmur among the crowd as the tall, angular form of the Dark Lord moved forward, hands raised for silence. Death Eaters, both masked and unmasked, gathered in tense groups—at least three hundred in total. Voldemort ascended the steps to the dais surrounding the feeding cage, creating slow, blue flashes of protective magic beneath him with each footstep, like wakes left in water from skipping stones. At the top, he turned and faced his Death Eaters with a solemn gaze.

“My Death Eaters,” the Dark Lord began, voice even, “you are not accustomed to my summoning you unpredictably. I appreciate that you each have families, jobs, and commitments that require your time and that you need notice to attend to me. I would not have called you had it not have been of the greatest importance.”
He gestured behind him, and two dozen masked Death Eaters stepped forward. “Until now, appraisal to this situation has been on a need-to-know basis; it is now a need-to-know basis for all of you, so listen carefully. The Death Eaters you see behind me are the werewolves who volunteered to accept this assignment—one which will no doubt lead to at least a handful of Death Eater deaths.

“You have all seen the newspaper, and you are aware that the Dementors will breed soon; we have known this for some time, and with the help of the were and a talented Arithmantist, we have built what we believe will prevent a massacre across the British Isles.

“Our calculations originally pointed us to a particular spot in France for this arena, but the recent disappearance of the Dementors has raised new questions, and created new problems that we were not prepared for. Earlier this afternoon, we made the decision to remove the arena to this spot—the future site of the Firth College for Young Wizards and Witches, with the permission of one of our own close to the project. This could not have been done without the extreme strength of our werewolf colleagues, and I thank them for it—you may step down,” he added to the figures behind him.

Their bulky forms walked sedately from the dais and dispersed into the crowd, but—there, yes, it was. Harry craned his head over Parkinson’s delicate figure and squinted. It was Remus Lupin, and the other masked man who walked with him could be no one but his father—the long black hair hanging from his hood, the gait of his walk and his hands gave it away.

Harry was half-set on going to them, on finding a face he could truly trust, and telling his father how much he couldn’t wait for hols so he could get away from all of this for a while, not even wondering why his father would have been dressed as a Death Eater and posing as a werewolf. He made an aborted step towards them and stopped. The two men approached another, and he was unmasked as Lupin was—it was his father. Who could the other man be, then?

“The purpose of the arena that I stand upon is two-fold,” Voldemort continued. Malfoy’s elbow dug sharply into his side and he gave Harry a fierce glare from his downcast eyes.

“Pay attention,” Malfoy muttered. “You’re being obvious.” He tilted his head towards Lupin, and then towards Snape, who was also watching the three men with great interest. Harry nodded, and set his focus back on Voldemort.

“It is assembled with a series of runes woven in with the wood, stone and mortar that will, we hope, protect those without from that within. Inside this protected area, you will have all noticed—and hopefully counter-spelled—there is a very strong Elation Enchantment. It is unfortunately necessary, as this will be the designated area for the Dementor feed expected to assuage their hunger enough to prevent a Kissing frenzy.

“If you have a family-member or friend currently incarcerated, and you have not received word that they were selected in the lottery, then you have nothing to worry about on that front; if you have received word, I am sorry for your loss, but there will be no reconsiderations on this matter.”

He stepped down from the platform with little fanfare and stared out at his audience, thoughtful. “The school being built is just on the other side of those trees,” he said. “Many families have already begun to pre-enrol their children—some of you may have done the same.

“I am told that the school will open for summer classes in June, so it is our hope that this situation will be resolved by that time. We need it to be resolved by that time. Use whatever connections you have, whatever resources you can feasibly access, whatever favours you may have allotted, and help us locate the Dementors so that we can lead them here to feed before it is too late. We are currently dialoguing with members of the Chinese department of corrections who have used this system once
before, with success, trying to discover the reason for the Dementors’ disappearance.

“Until such a time, I am advising you to refrain from doing anything that would attract a rogue Dementor to you when alone. Do not engage in activities that make you...happy...alone.” There was a smattering of snickering, and even the Dark Lord’s lips twitched, but it died down quickly under the heaviness of the situation. “And by all means, do not start or become part of a public panic.” He took one, last look around the assembled Death Eaters, and his gaze settled on their little group. “Those of you with special skills we think may be useful will feel your Marks pulsing now; please wait for me inside the tent at the far end of the pitch for extended assignments. That is all.”

Snape stared at them with some amount of disdain, but it was hidden mostly by his overall air of exhaustion. “It appears that the Dark Lord wishes to speak to you, Black,” he said, nodding to the approaching man. “The Headmaster has called a meeting on this topic and awaits my report; I must return to the school. Are you and Granger capable of returning on your own?”

“Yes, sir,” Hermione said.

“I’m staying with him,” Malfoy added.

Snape rolled his eyes, but nodded. He was too tired to argue. He stepped forward and bowed perfunctorily to the Dark Lord, who waved him up. “Milord, I must return to Hogwarts to attend the Headmaster’s meeting.”

“And give him a full report, no doubt,” Voldemort said.

Snape smiled slightly. “Perhaps not as full as it once was.” Voldemort lifted an eyebrow with interest. Snape turned to the two remaining Sytherins and held out his hands. “Ms Parkinson, I do see your father over there but he appears to be engaged; shall I return you to school?”

“Yes, Professor,” she said, taking his hand. Zabini took the other without a word, and with a sharp crack, they were gone.

“Young Malfoy,” Voldemort said, nodding to him. “You may lift your head; I always know when unmarked wizards are near. So close to my friend Harry, and you could have been no one else.”

“Good evening, sir,” Malfoy said, dutifully lifting his eyes.

“Indeed,” the Dark Lord said, but his attention was focused on Hermione. “You’ve brought the research you told me of?” he asked.

She nodded, produced the notebook Harry had got from her rucksack. “Yes, Lord, but I’ve found another reference since I last contacted you on the fetch-key, and I think it may hold the answer.”

Voldemort took the notebook with interest, and Hermione moved to him, flipped the pages until she found the right one, as if they were long-time friends—as if he were her weird uncle and not a murderous madman instead.

“Please do practice your Occlumency, Harry,” Voldemort said, eyes not looking up from his readings with Hermione. “You broadcast when you’re stressed.”

Harry felt his cheeks flushing. “I’m not stressed,” he muttered, but made it a point not to think of Voldemort as a madman again. Malfoy snickered, and he decided that if he were stressed, then he would just have to get unstressed, and Malfoy, in his infinite wit, would be the one to do it.

“Harry,” Voldemort warned. He flipped a page, and Hermione’s finger went straight back to
pointing out this and that.

“I know what you were thinking,” Malfoy whispered, smirking. “I was thinking it, too.”

“Then why aren’t you getting reprimanded?” Harry asked, annoyed.

Malfoy tapped his head. “I do practice my Occlumency.”

“And we thank you for it,” Hermione said pointedly, then went straight back to explaining the use of lightning to re-wire Squibs into Magic Users. Harry coughed, attempted to hide his embarrassment, but it did little to help. Finally, she and the Dark Lord were satisfied with their discussion, and she gave him the notebook to browse until they could meet again.

“It will keep my thoughts from focusing on our crisis,” Voldemort said wryly. Hermione was hesitant with her smile; she was still unaccustomed to his strange humour. “You three should return to the school now. I do not want you gone when Dumbledore ends his meeting. He rubbed his eyes—dark red, nearly black, nearly human, now—tiredly and added, “Three students expelled for cavorting with Death Eaters is the last thing I need right now—especially when one is Harry Potter, one is a Mudblood, and one’s father is stealing Muggles’ babies.”

Harry narrowed his eyes, but it was Hermione who kept him from speaking up. “It’s just a word, Harry,” she said. “He’s not talking about me.” She pulled the fetch-key from her pocket and held it out to them. “We need to check on Ginny anyway."

Harry nodded, and he and Malfoy reached for the key. Voldemort grimaced, and snapped his fingers, calling for his house-elf. “Horvitz,” he said, “for the love of Merlin, find my headache potion,” and the elf disappeared.

Beside him, Malfoy stiffened suddenly. Harry followed his gaze, but it was Hermione who, shocked, said, “Is that Ginny?” And indeed it looked just like her, but there was no earthly way she could have been there. The Dark Lord turned to look and gasped in pain, pressing his palm harshly against his temple.

“Are you okay?” Harry asked. He let go of the fetch-key and made to help, but the Dark Lord put him off with a vicious look and a harsh, “Go to the school!”

Hermione did not need to be told twice. She grabbed Harry’s hand and activated the fetch-key, and he was gone.

Malfoy pulled his pocket watch out as soon as they landed back at Hogwarts. “Have somewhere to be?” Harry asked. He tried to hide the interest in his voice, but his nerves were still rattled, and it was largely unsuccessful.

“My parents,” he muttered, squinting at the numbers. This particular corridor was, as the Dark Lord had once told Hermione, unused, and there were no candles on the walls to guide them. “They were going to try to deliver the muggle-borns to one of the nunneries tonight since the Aurors would be off chasing Dementors.”

Harry heard Hermione snort with derision, followed swiftly by a muttered incantation. The area around them filled with bluish light, and the shadows beneath her eyes grew dark and large; she looked nothing short of exhausted. “Not likely,” Hermione said. “The Ministry doesn’t have a strong record of logic and sensibility, much less where the public is concerned.”
“Unfortunately, you’re quite right,” Malfoy sighed. He craned his neck to peer down the hallway, but the light did not stretch far, and his preoccupation with his parents’ safety led him to abandon the mission fairly quickly. “Did the Dark Lord happen to programme the fetch-key to show us the bloody way out?” He looked at Hermione expectantly, features sharp and ghostly beneath his black hood.

“Well, no,” she said. “I guess we’ll just have to try one way and see where it takes us.”

“I’ve got the map, though,” Harry said. He pulled it from his cloak’s inside pocket and flicked it open.

“Oh, he has a map of Hogwarts,” Malfoy sneered. “How lovely—no wonder you were always able to show up where I least wanted you.”

Harry gave him a sly grin, and set the map to float in front of them with a well-placed hovering charm—he was quite pleased with it, actually; it had taken him a fortnight over the summer to get the spell right.

“Ah, here we are,” Hermione said, pointing. “We’re on the third floor near Professor Trelawney’s classroom.”

“Then we should just have to take the corridor south until we come to her office and take the left there to her classroom—and then we’ll be out,” Harry added. Hermione rolled her eyes, and he added, “What? Three years of Divination had to be good for something.”

“Merlin!” Draco exclaimed suddenly. “That’s us! We’re moving!”

“Yeah, the map does that,” Harry said, scanning. “It’s charmed.”

“That’s some fancy spell-work,” Malfoy said. “I can’t even imagine how you would begin…bet my mum would know, though. I’m going to write her and—there’s Filch.”

“Oh, no,” Hermione muttered. “He’s coming up behind us quick. We need to go—we absolutely cannot be caught tonight, dressed as suspiciously as we are.”

Harry folded the map with a snap of his wand and shoved it in his pocket. Somewhere behind them, Mrs Norris let out a warning yowl and he took off at a run. Hermione and Malfoy followed, feet thumping on the worn stone floor until Malfoy silenced their shoes with a questionable spell.

They sprinted past Professor Trelawney’s classroom—even outside of it smelled heavily of sandalwood—and cut a sharp left around the corner. The torches were lit up ahead, but there were no hiding places before them: only the vast five-storey entrance was before them with its gaping, echoing expanse of staircases and portraits. “We should split up, in case he sees us—keep your hoods up. He can’t chase all of us and if he doesn’t see our faces he might not know.”

“Which way?” Harry asked, as they neared the landings.

“I’ll go to the Infirmary, and pretend like I’m doing rounds,” she said. “You two go to the dungeons and go in through Theo’s room.”

“Right,” Malfoy said. He grabbed Harry’s hand quite suddenly, and jerked him towards the furthest staircase. Hermione darted off the other way, and they shuffled down the stairs as fast as possible, their breaths echoing in the empty gallery.

Above them, Filch shouted with excitement as he spotted their hooded forms. Hermione, at least, had
not been seen. Finally, they made it to the bottom, and Harry stared up at the huge wooden doors sealing the entrance shut, at a loss. The staircases had moved, and he was completely turned around.

“This way,” Malfoy said, pulling him away. “The Head Boy’s room’s down that way.” They rushed down another, steeper flight of stone stairs into the dungeons, where the torches’ flickering barely lit their paths—not enough to keep them from stumbling on the stones that had been dislodged from centuries of settling.

Finally they came upon the painting guarding Nott’s door, and Malfoy banged on the canvas with his fist. “Nott!” he said, as loud as he dared, “Nott—let us in, Filch is coming!”

The door swung open with a startling abruptness, and Theodore Nott pulled them both inside. His room was not unlike what Harry would’ve expected a Slytherin’s dorm to look like: a four-poster bed—larger than the ones in Gryffindor—a wardrobe, desk, chair and shelf filled with books on potions, spell creation, Old Magic, Ancient Runes and even one on muggle lifestyles, with green upholstery over nearly everything. His trunk stood open with half its contents cluttered about the room. One of Hermione’s outdoor cloaks hung over the back of the chair, and Theodore rushed to fold it as Malfoy found himself a place to sit on the edge of the bed.

“What are you doing here?” he asked. “Did you go?”

“Of course we went,” Malfoy said. He was already nosing through Nott’s things, though Nott at least appeared as though it were not uncommon. “Granger went, too.”

Nott looked away briefly. “I know,” he said. “She would have had to—she’s back, though, right?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “She detoured to the Infirmary to avoid Filch; I’m sure she’ll be ‘round any minute now.”

“What happened to Weasley?” Nott asked. “Professor Snape took her off the pitch, and he never came back to the game. She’s alright, isn’t she?”

Harry shrugged, unsure what to say. “Probably broke a couple bones. Nothing a little skelegrow can’t help,” he added with a shiver. Malfoy picked a roll of cream parchment up from Nott’s bed, and Harry couldn’t help but watch him, frowning in concentration and biting his lip as he read it. Nott only rolled his eyes before snatching it away and closing it in his Muggle Studies textbook.

“Muggles really do that to their teeth?” Malfoy asked with some amount of concern.

Nott seemed to struggle hiding a smile. “Hermione’s parents do it for work,” he said.

“What, dentistry?” Harry asked, dubious. “That’s what your paper’s on?” Nott shrugged, lips pursed to hide his amusement; Malfoy wasn’t catching on, whatever the joke was. After a moment, Harry said, “Look, thanks for letting us in, Nott, but I need to be going. How do I get back from here?”

There were doors on either side of the room and another near the wardrobe that led to the small en suite.

“You’re out of luck,” Nott said. “Filch patrols this corridor heavily until about two a.m., then the Hufflepuff 5th year prefect has it until three. Your best bet is to just take that door to the Slytherin common room and sleep in my old bed in the dorm. I doubt anyone will care, and from what I gather, Professor Snape knew where you were tonight so he isn’t likely to say anything when he does rounds in the morning.”

Malfoy gave him a speculative look. Harry studiously ignored it, but it was hard to continue doing so when Nott joined in as well. “Watch out for Blaise,” Nott said cryptically. Malfoy applied a strange
smirk to his face, grabbed Harry’s hand, and sedately led him to the opposite door—the one that led to Slytherin, to hostile students, to young Death Eaters, to Malfoy’s bed, or certain doom.

The common room was relatively empty when they entered; a handful of upper classmen were still up studying or writing papers with the latest Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes No Cramps! Quills. They glanced up as he and Malfoy entered, but paid him no mind. He was utterly uninteresting to them, even in their own common room.

The room itself was much like he remembered it being in second year: dark and green, but the furniture, at least, he could now appreciate. It was all top quality spell-carpentry; the antique wood and fabric maintained with the highest attention to detail. Where Gryffindor was garish and worn, Slytherin was lavish and spotless.

The far wall was unnerving with its huge thick-glass window looking out into the bottom of the Black Lake. The water was dark; an eerie yellow-green light wavered in and out from somewhere below, and Harry did his best to avoid looking at it as they passed. He could not shake the threatening feeling the window caused in him, though, and wearily expected his dreams to be overrun with drowning in deep, black water for the next several weeks—at least, however, it would break the monotony from those confusing dreams of nothing but singing and swirls.

The dorms were even further below ground. They must have been another five stories below by now—surely the only thing preventing a cave in on top of all the sleeping Slytherins was two-thousand year old magic; Harry was not best pleased by that.

Malfoy pressed his palm to the wood of the last dorm room and it unlocked with a click. It was past eleven, and the rest of the school was retiring by now; Harry fully expected Malfoy’s dorm mates to be doing the same, but they were all wide awake. The room was fully lit and everyone’s curtains were opened. The fireplace was currently playing the Hobgoblins’ Reunion Tour—minus Stubby Boardman—on floo disk, and Zabini was sat on the floor watching it, attempting to play along on a didgeridoo, with varying degrees of success. Crabbe munched on a pork pie, dropping crumbs all over the essay he was drafting for Divination, and Goyle scanned the paper, compiling outliers in the Wizarding England Stock Exchange’s closing report. They paid him no mind.

Above Malfoy’s bed there was a very conspicuous poster of Blodwyn Bludd, of bloodsucking vampire fame. He grinned down at Harry with hooded come-hither eyes, and sang out an experimental note from one of his more famous ‘Please let me drink your blood’ serenades. Malfoy shushed him straight away and toed Zabini repeatedly until he Muffliato’d his musical nonsense. Nott’s abandoned bed was in the corner—far away from Malfoy’s and cold and dark in its stark neatness. Harry looked at it silently, and as the day’s events truly began to sink in, his heart began to beat madly in his chest, and the gaudy garnet ring on his finger strummed a hurried pulse against his skin. He shivered, strange fear running down his spine, and when Malfoy’s hand pressed gently against the small of his back, he leaned into it with unprecedented relief. Malfoy tilted his head towards the other side of the room, and Harry followed his gaze to the bed below Blodwyn Bludd.

They flopped on Malfoy’s bed. Harry exhaled, hugely relieved to be somewhere safe for the moment. Outside, the whole world was being stalked by starving Dementors; soon, muggles would start having unexplainable nightmares, and wizards would begin locking every happy thought behind layers of Occlumency while they did the same to their homes. He felt coldness down to his bones, and did not think he’d ever be warm again.

Once, not too terribly long ago, his biggest worry had been surviving an impossible fight against a prodigy wizard with nearly a century of horrifying, esoteric learning. Now, he had to worry about his soul, as well. Dumbledore was right: there are things worse than death, and though the panic was
only forming in slow waves, it wouldn’t be long before the reality sunk in, and the whole wizarding
world was quite literally paralyzed with fear.

They leaned against the headboard of the bed and watched Blaise playing his muted music, for lack
of anything more comfortable to look at.

Blaise’s shirtsleeves were rolled up as he blew on his didgeridoo; the Dark Mark contrasted little
with his dark skin, but he wore it unashamedly exposed. Each flex of his forearm undulated the
tattoo like a wave, and he played on because he was okay.

After a while, Goyle finished his essay and Crabbe finished his finances, and they both drew their
curtains to sleep. Harry remained propped against the headboard of Malfoy’s bed, unready to commit
himself to the isolation offered by Nott’s abandoned one. There was only Zabini’s muffled music to
keep him from focusing on the frightening thoughts racing through his brain now, and when he
suddenly stopped playing and looked up at the two of them, it took Harry several seconds to notice
the change.

The fire had been extinguished and Zabini sat staring at him, strangely without any sign of hostility.
Harry blinked quickly. He furrowed his brows and said, “What?”

Zabini shrugged; his eyes flicked over to Harry’s other side where Malfoy sat, and Harry followed
his gaze. He’d thought Malfoy had been watching Blaise’s strange performance, but Harry found
that instead, Malfoy’s gaze was fixed upon a single point, and looked as though it had been for quite
some time. That point was the Owl entrance of the room—a reasonably large, square abscess at the
very top of the high ceiling that led, through a near vertical tunnel, to outside, and was used for
delivering mail.

“Professor Snape would’ve come and said if anything had gone wrong,” Zabini said in his cultured
accent.

“I know,” Malfoy replied, but his eyes remained focused on the Owl entrance. He shook himself and
turned back to them, finally. “I know,” he said again.

Zabini turned to Harry. “Weasley was there today, did you see her?”

There was no need to clarify where, exactly, he meant. Harry nodded. “Only for a moment—I
thought maybe it might not have been her.”

“It was,” Zabini said. “I recall her being taken to the Infirmary today. A very quick recovery.”

Harry said nothing, but Zabini didn’t need a second person to carry on a conversation. Slytherins
were like that. “The Dark Lord seemed taken aback at her presence, but Professor Snape did not.”

Harry had not noticed this. He frowned, but Zabini wasn’t done yet.

“I did wonder what he’s enticed Granger with, however. I always suspected that you would crack,
Black, but I never thought Granger would. What’s he promised her?”

“Lay off,” Malfoy muttered before Harry even had a change to become angry. It was hard to do so
though since Blaise seemed completely unconcerned with whatever happened. It was not as if he
were trying to bait Harry, but that he was only curious. Regardless, Zabini changed his approach.

He cocked his head to the side and studied Harry with slanted, dark eyes. “I can’t imagine a muggle-
born aligning with the Dark Lord willingly—yet, neither can I see Granger being forced, or you not
pitching a fit if she had been. So it was willingly, I would wager. Pansy thinks she’s up the duff and
that Theo’s father won’t consent to an alignment without her taking the Mark, but I don’t agree.’’

“He’s in Azkaban, anyway,’’ Malfoy added absently. “His grandmother’s in control of the estate and she’d probably let him marry a kneazle if it came down to it.”

Blaise rolled his eyes. “I did say it was Pansy’s idea. I think Granger’s got something the Dark Lord wants. He seemed particularly interested in her presence tonight. She’s found out how to do something he wants to do. To collaborate with a Mudblood barely old enough to apparate, it would have to be something outstanding; and for Granger to agree to work with him, not only tolerate your dalliances, it would have to be something she wanted, too.” Zabini leaned forward, interested. “She’s found out how to move magic, hasn’t she?’’

“Move magic?’’ Harry asked.

Zabini scoffed, misinterpreting his ignorance. “What muggle-born wouldn’t want to be able to move magic?’’ he asked. “Granger’s not so different from the rest of us.”

“No, she’s not,’’ Malfoy said. “Potter just doesn’t know the term. You’re forgetting that he was raised like a heathen.”

“Muggles aren’t heathens, Malfoy,’’ Harry bit out. “What’s moving magic, though?’’

“Exactly what it sounds like,’’ Malfoy said. He lifted his eyebrows meaningfully.

“Giving magic to muggles, you mean,’’ Harry said. “So what if she has? What’s wrong with that?’’

“So, she has!’’ Zabini said. It was the first time he’d ever seen any sort of excitement enter the Slytherin’s voice. “I suppose she means to give it to her parents first,’’ he mused, “but she deserves that much for the discovery.’’

“Why is this a big deal? It’s just a theory,’’ Harry said.

Both Slytherins gave him matching looks of disbelief. “Potter, the story of moving magic has been part of wizarding lore since the beginning of wizards. Myths have Merlin as the first and last wizard to ever do it, but there’s no proof he ever even existed so likewise there is no proof that this magic ever existed either. It’s true that magic is usually passed down genetically, but it manifests spontaneously in muggle children, too, and we’ve been looking for the reason why, and how to replicate it, forever. This would be the biggest breakthrough in our history.’’

“But it could also be our biggest setback,’’ Blaise added, and Malfoy nodded his agreement.

“Everyone can’t have magic, no matter how much we might want to give it to all of our Squib family members.’’

“Why not?’’ Harry asked.

“Because Arithmantical evidence exists that says there’s a finite amount of magical energy,’’ Malfoy said.

Blaise stood up and moved to his bed on the other side of Malfoy’s. “There is, however, Ghergen’s Theory.’’

Malfoy scoffed. “Ghergen was batty.’’

Zabini shrugged out of his shirt and slid into bed. “The stories have Merlin as pretty batty, too,’’ he said, waving his wand at the sconce above his bed. It flickered out, and they were left in darkness.
“Merlin wasn’t real,” Malfoy muttered. He jerked the curtains around his bed shut, and pulled his shirt off, tossing it to the floor somewhere outside them. He lit his wand and spelled it to hover above them. He flopped down, clearly agitated. “Are you sleeping here?” he asked curiously.

Harry stared at him, at his surprisingly wide shoulders, how unconcerned he was being near naked in front of him, his butterbeer-blond hair spread all over the pillow. Malfoy’s *Lumos* spell wasn’t perfect, and the light had a bluish tint; his chest gleamed pale and ethereal as if underwater, and the sharpness of his features was exaggerated with heavy blue shadows that made him look more dangerous than he really was. Harry’s breath caught in his throat and he cast his eyes away while he struggled to regain it.

“No,” he said quickly. “No—I should go sleep in Nott’s bed.”

Malfoy propped himself up on one elbow, and the muscles in his torso flexed in such a normal, usual way that it made Harry want very badly for this, too, to be a normal and usual thing. But that wasn’t possible with Malfoy because he was surely betrothed, or bound by some other archaic, Neanderthal-like stipulation placed upon him by generations of Malfoys who all had portraits in Malfoy Manor and expected an heir.

“Lay down,” Malfoy said, very normal and usual.

“I—,” Harry started again. Malfoy tugged his arm and Harry’s head fell to the pillow. He stared at Malfoy and wished he were anywhere but where he was. It had been only a couple of days since they’d got each other off, and he’d tried his best not to think of it, lest he find himself in conflicting states of terror and excitement. There was no way Malfoy would ever commit to him, and he could easily see himself falling for him given half a chance. That was a terrible idea.

Harry turned, and they stared at each other, noses mere inches apart. Malfoy’s half-arsed Lumos made his eyes look remarkably bright, and Harry squeezed his shut to avoid them. He was too upset, too frightened of the state of their world, to be strong enough to resist him now.

“Theo’s bed’s probably covered in leftover lube charms, anyway,” Malfoy said.

Harry laughed. “Nott? Yeah right. He probably never even orgasmed before Hermione.”

Malfoy grinned, all pointy white teeth and crinkled eyes. Harry couldn’t take it anymore. It had been hard enough holding out as long as he had. Malfoy would never make the first move again, and he would likely pretend it had never happened forever unless Harry did something first. That was just the way Slytherins worked; so Harry kissed him.

That Malfoy kissed him back wasn’t a total surprise, but it still made Harry’s stomach clench so tightly he couldn’t breathe, and it did make his eyes water—because he knew what he was getting himself into, but he couldn’t stop it from happening. When Malfoy’s hand slid up his side and curled around his waist, he pulled the other boy close, and held him fiercely.

After a moment, Malfoy pulled back—lips wet and eyes bright. He said, “I wouldn’t have been a Death Eater, before.”

“Why?” Harry asked.

Malfoy stared at him for a moment, teeth pressed against his bottom lip. “With my inherited inclination towards Old Magic, I can only tolerate so much of it before it starts becoming an addiction. Using and being around as much Old and Middle Magic as the Death Eaters use, I would have gone mad.”
“But your father’s still sane,” Harry said. “Your genetics come from him.”

Malfoy sighed. “I feel too much, my father says.” He shrugged, and continued, “He’s right. Things excite me, and they shouldn’t.”

“If I’d been a Death Eater, I would have been one of the greatest—but that would have made me one of the worst. I faked it,” Malfoy continued. “The Dark Lord understands the risks many of the Pureblood lines have for Old Magic madness, and he won’t let them in any more, so to get out of being Marked, I faked being mad in the presence of it all.”

“Why, though?” Harry asked. “It’s what you believe in; would it have really been that bad?”

Malfoy shrugged. “He would have asked me to get close to you, turn you over to him—and after long enough, I would have.”

Harry grinned to hide the fear that burst inside him. “That’s the only reason?” he asked. “No ‘I really love muggle-borns, deep down’?” He was the type to get in over his head and not even realize it until it was too late. This was as close to a declaration of love he would ever get from Malfoy—it sounded macabre, but Harry understood it for what it was worth. He knew this time; he was definitely in over his head.

“No,” Malfoy said. “Even deep down, I don’t love muggle-borns—I can barely tolerate Granger.” Then he leaned back in, and kissed Harry again, and Harry closed his eyes and just let it happen. He knew they said they’d never call each other by their first names, but in his mind at least, Malfoy was Draco now, and there was no going back.

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“Mr Potter!”

Harry’s eyes flew open. Snape stared down at him with unprecedented fury. His voice was so low and menacing that it rasped, but though he’d just now woken up, Harry had no difficulty whatsoever understanding every precise word.

“You may feel your affiliations give you the latitude to do whatever you wish, but I assure you that regardless of the Dark Lord’s unaccountable fondness for you, I do not share it, and I will not sit idly by whilst you arrogantly attempt to drag my Slytherins through the mud.”

He sat up quickly, heart pounding. “I’m not!” he said. Draco, too, was now sitting up, and he stared confusedly at the two of them. “What does that even mean?”

Snape was not deterred. “When you are discovered gallivanting with the Dark Lord, even your reputation will not save you from the backlash. I will not stand for Malfoy to be implicated along with you. If you both insist upon maintaining this ridiculous—and might I remind you, Draco: against your betrothal—dalliance, then I will insist that you maintain absolute secrecy.”

“Fuck my betrothal,” Draco muttered sleepily. “Mum’s been looking for a reason to break it for years.” Harry tried very hard to prevent his face from showing an interest in this statement, but wasn’t altogether successful, he suspected.

Snape rolled his eyes. “Whatever your feelings on the matter, you are currently under its stipulations, and with a surname such as yours, you do not need to give the media more hexes to throw at your Protego.”

Draco winced. “The Quirkes would probably sue.”
“Likely,” Snape said. Suddenly even more serious, he produced a scroll from his robes and handed it to Draco. “This came from your mother this morning. It was my intention to give it to you after breakfast, however, as neither of you deigned to show up for it, I was therefore forced to bring it here.”

Harry looked around the dorm room, which was indeed empty, and groaned. “I’m late for DADA,” he said. “Professor Sinclair is going to kill me—she’s supposed to approve our sacrifices today, and I don’t even have one yet.”

“That is not the largest of your worries, Mr Potter,” Snape drawled, and Harry noticed that he looked very tired. He extended his hand, the *Daily Prophet* having been clenched in it since his entrance, and offered Harry the paper with a sarcastic, bitter smile. “The Dementors have claimed their first victims,” he said. “Children.”

Draco looked up from his letter then. “My mother,” he whispered. “She was nearly Kissed.”

“I know,” Snape said, a strange softness to his voice. “She was fortunate that she was able to conjure a memory of such overwhelming happiness—not many could.”

Harry didn’t have to be told what that memory was; he was beginning to suspect that his mother had used the same memory when she’d been in an unwinnable situation, and that it had saved him his life. He stared down at the newspaper and felt bile rise in his throat. Even the *Daily Prophet* was above showing the faces of the lifeless orphans, but they were not above moving photographs of the clean-up wizards carrying the swaddled, limp bodies away.

The article read, in part,

*Although the Ministry of Magic assured the wizarding community in a press conference given at the Fairyfield town hall late last week that it would no longer be stationing Aurors at the Derbyshire Orphanage in an attempt to apprehend the anonymous depositor of magically-gifted children to the orphanage, events occurring early this morning suggest otherwise.*

*While there may not have been Aurors stationed at the Orphanage (The Ministry has refused comment), eyewitness reports at the Nimuean Nunnery in Fairyfield claim that a single hooded person arrived at the orphanage in the early hours of the morning with twelve swaddled baskets suspended via Levicorpus. An ambush occurred when Aurors attempted to overtake the wizard, and the baskets were dropped when the depositor’s focus was shifted.*

*An unnamed novice nun heard the noise and after realizing what was going on, attempted to shield the abandoned children from the spellfire, but within moments, despair fell upon the area and she was unable to help as rogue Dementors—see pg. 8 for coverage on the Dementor breeding situation—overwhelmed the vulnerable children.*

*The depositor, amid reflecting Auror incarceration-spells and stunners, was able to cast a Patronus of remarkable magnitude, sending the Dementors away. It was too late for some of the children, however. The depositor apparated away immediately after, and the *Daily Prophet* has received word from an anonymous tipster that Aurors are now looking for a wizard with a Patronus in the form of a deer, or possibly a dryad.*
“Your parents have a friend at the Prophet, as I recall,” Snape said to Draco. “It’s a matter of hours before a special edition is delivered painting the Auror Corps in a very bad light indeed.”

Harry snorted, stomach roiling with disgust. How could he ever have wanted to work for a government like this one? The Ministry knew that there was a big threat in the disappearance of the Dementors, and yet they had still left many of their most able and well-trained men sit idly in the dark and wait for someone to bring in some children that would have been unable to return to their original parents anyway, thanks to the Pedigree blood rite cast on them prior to delivery. He said, “She won’t need an inside friend for this. It’s disgusting, and I bet it will cause an uproar, anyway.”

Snape seemed hesitant to respond, but finally, he said, “You are forgetting one thing, Mr Black.”

Harry looked up at him curiously. Snape said, “The Dementors have not disappeared after all; they’ve merely begun scouting for food.”

“But the Arithmancy is very precise on their habits,” Draco said slowly. “You said yourself they won’t start ‘til later.”

Snape shrugged. “Then the Dementors have mutated for some reason. We do not know when they will breed now, nor where…nor do we know if their dietary requirements have changed.”

“More souls,” Draco said. “That’s what you mean, isn’t it? They may need to feed more.”

“That is indeed what I meant,” Snape agreed. He looked at them both very carefully. “I am not being ironic when I say that the world is about to become a very frightening place to be, and it is my opinion that you do everything in your power, and the power of others, to be absolutely prepared for every contingency.”

Harry’s fingers clenched around the paper, and he took a deep breath. Even this will, pass; one day, life will be less frightening.

Harry slunk into DADA and into a seat next to Hermione. She looked exhausted and barely frowned at him for his lateness. At the front of the classroom, Professor Sinclair acted as though she’d not even notice him enter, and continued on with her lecture on the ninth war of wizards, using her wand to point out areas of interest on her chalked-diagram of the effects Pax Brittanica had on wizarding Britain.

The class was generally subdued; even the hard-working Hufflepuffs were white-faced and their hands sat idly, not taking notes. Across the aisle, he could see Hannah Abbott drawing dark, swirling monsters in the margins of her parchment journal.

At one point, he scribbled a question to ask Hermione if she’d seen Ginny, but she shook her head before he even finished writing it, and penned: ‘asleep’ in her delicate handwriting. It hadn’t been Ginny, then. Zabini was wrong.

Professor Sinclair finished her lecture with a distracted frown. She erased the board with one wave of her wand, and replaced the writing with another. This time, it read: Hecatomb Ward – Procedure, followed by a series of complicated spells and instructions.

“After this morning’s paper, I doubted that we would be able to continue with our outing, but the Headmaster felt this was an important learning experience and has consented to allow us to continue. A number of your parents previously agreed to chaperone, and as you are all of age, the final decision is yours to make. However, I do hope you fully grasp the severity of our current situation.
Those of you taking advanced Arithmancy will understand why the Dementors’ recent behaviour is so alarming, but the rest of you, even, will sense the fear it’s causing.

“It’s this fear that the Dementors feed on, and it’s this fear that often prevents wizards from defending themselves against these creatures. Hecatomb wards have been known to stop Dementors from advancing, and so I believe they are an essential part of our culture and continued existence. I will not ask you for your sacrifices today; your homework is to research those that have been used before and write a one-foot essay on the type that is most successful.

“If you do not want to risk an excursion outside of the castle’s wards, or your own home, at this time, you will not be punished for not attending, but if you would like to proceed with casting the ward around Stonehenge before the holidays—and in turn, learning how to cast it over your own home—then please copy down the directions on the board. You must have them memorized by the time our port-key activates on Friday.”

Every student in the classroom copied down the directions on the board.

By now, he’d destroyed the letter from his mother, as he always did with the sensitive ones, but he knew exactly what it said, anyway. Potter might have been satisfied that Weasley wasn’t really at the meeting with the Dark Lord, but he was not, and thanks to a bit of information from his mum, he was going to find out why.

He pushed open the heavy wooden doors of the Hospital Wing and looked around. Pomfrey was nowhere to be seen; the Infirmary was empty, save for one bed. Weasley sat propped up on a stack of pillows with a *Quidditch Weekly* open in her lap—but she wasn’t reading it; the quill in her hand moved steadily across the parchment hidden inside. She looked up when he cleared his throat, and an expression of panic crossed her face before it was quickly removed.

“Hi,” she said, and Draco’s suspicions were confirmed. Ginny Weasley never would’ve said hi to him—never would have given him the blank, patient look she was giving him now. He plastered a smile across his face and walked forward. She was subtle as she closed the magazine’s pages over her letter and set it aside, but she was no Slytherin, and he noticed her subterfuge.

“How are you feeling?” he asked. If she thought that they were friends, that he would come check on her anytime she was in hospital, then he was going to get as much out of it as he could.

She shrugged, one delicately-freckled shoulder slipping out of the stark-white hospital robe. “Madam Pomfrey says ribs take longer to heal—I’m stuck on an hourly Skelegrow regimen for another day, at least.” She stuck her tongue out and made a gagging noise.

Draco gave her a wry grin, as if they were friends, and said, “I had to do the same in third year when a Hippogryph fractured my Radius—that muck tasted so bad that I sucked a Blood Lolly just to get the taste out of my mouth. Unfortunately, it was the only sweet Pomfrey kept in her Infirmary at the time, since they’re helpful for anaemia.” He removed two from his pocket and handed one to her.

“Try it, they might grow on you.”

She made another disgusted face, but took it anyway. “Anything’s got to be better than Skelegrow.”

That had been his thoughts, too, but he only smiled and nodded to her discarded *Quidditch Weekly*. “What do you think about the stabilizing charms Cleansweep is adding to their new line?”
“Well,” she stumbled, “I suppose it depends on the flyer.” A nice, neutral response.

“How about for you?” he pressed. “You have such a unique flying style that I would think you’d hate them.”

“I do,” she said, “It cheapens the game.”

“Or how about,” Draco added, “that stabilizing charms are completely illegal in professional arenas and are only used on training brooms?”

Her lips parted slightly. “There’s that,” she agreed, slowly. She narrowed her eyes, and said, “Are we even friends?”

Draco leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest, smug. “You tell me,” he said, as if he’d figured this out quite some time ago. The truth was that he’d only thought Weasley was a bit messed up in the head, or high on salvia, but he was beginning to see that it wasn’t just a change in personality—it was a change in person. Someone else was in there with Weasley, and likely had been for some time now.

“I don’t think we are; she’s fiery and I doubt she’d put up with your manipulations,” Weasley said snidely.

“I get it from my mother,” Draco replied easily.

“And who is she?” Her eyes flickered over Draco’s face and then widened ever so slightly. Draco pretended not to notice it. Whoever this was, she was just as clever as he was. “You’re a Black,” she said, then, surprised: “Narcissa.”

Draco nodded once, refusing to show interest. “My mum,” he agreed.

Weasley frowned. “Who’s your father then? You don’t look like a Rosier.”

Draco refrained from sneering. A Rosier? Was she trying to insult him? Pointedly, he said, “The last British Rosier died in the Second War.”

Weasley’s eyes went slightly wider. “Lucius Malfoy, then,” she concluded slowly, scanning his face again. “That sly git managed to break her betrothal after all.” Her lips twitched once, then she smoothed her face quickly back into neutrality.

Draco narrowed his eyes. “You seem to be intimately familiar with the situation,” he said.

Weasley glanced at him sideways and flopped back against her mountain of pillows. She sighed. “I suppose I’m not making much progress on my own, anyway. Perhaps your mum would have an idea; she was always terribly smart.”

“You knew her?” Draco finally asked. All this side-stepping was becoming annoying, and he wasn’t known for his patience.

Weasley rolled her eyes. “She was my dear friend once, years ago. I knew your aunties, too, but Andromeda never had much time for us, and Bellatrix was always such a slag.” She shrugged. “But then the world started to become a very frightening place, like it’s doing now, and I married the wrong man and ended up in hiding because of it...I never saw her again, but I missed her, and I thought of her, the day I died—hoped that your father had found a way to get her away from that absolute cunt Evan Rosier, may he rot.”
“I’m sure he has by now,” Draco allowed. “He was Kissed several months after the Dark Lord’s fall.” He leaned forward, then, “So you died in the Second War? Before the Dark Lord’s fall, I assume, if you didn’t know about my mother. She married my father two years before.”

“I was in hiding,” she reminded him, “and I wouldn’t say that I died before the Dark Lord did,” she added slowly. “To be more precise, I took him down with me, at least for a while.”

His eyebrows shot upwards in surprise. “Potter,” he said.

She smiled weakly. “I prefer Evans, really,” she said apologetically. “My marriage was a sham created for the war effort and all it did was get us both killed.”

“You didn’t move on,” Draco said. “Why?”

Her head cocked to the side, and she said, quite curiously, “How could I? You know my son; I’ve seen you with him, and I’ve never spoken to him. I watched him grow up miserably and couldn’t do a thing to help him, save comfort him in his dreams, and all these years I’ve struggled to save him. Now he’s grown, and doesn’t need saving, but I’m still here—I still can’t go, and so I realized I must stay. I’ll be here until I can find a more permanent solution.”

“You can’t just inhabit another person,” Draco said academically. “You’ll drain her of all her energy long before the year is out.”

“I’m working on it,” she said, eyes narrowed. “You aren’t to tell my son about this until I figure something out. He has enough to worry about, and Merlin knows he worries about everything.”

Draco shrugged his shoulder. “No, he ought to know.”

“It’s not your place to tell him,” Weasley said.

“It’s not my place to not tell him,” Draco corrected.

Weasley sighed. “Give me a couple of months.”

“Two weeks,” Draco countered, “But I’m telling my mother now.” She rolled her eyes and muttered something derogatory, but he chose to ignore it in favour of a swift exit. How could he not tell Black about this? He headed straight for the Owlery to send a note off to his mum. It wasn’t as if he gave much of a toss about the littlest Weasley, but if Black found out his mum was inhabiting the body of his best mate’s sister, to say that he would go bat-shit was an understatement.
Prisoner of War I

Chapter by faire_weather

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Prisoner of War (n): a person who is captured and held by an enemy during war, esp. a member of the armed forces.

The weather took a sharp turn from freezing cold to dangerously cold that night, with wind screaming through the courtyards and snow pounding against the leaded-glass windows of the castle. Flitwick and McGonagall bustled into the Slytherin boys’ dormitory sometime after the storm began and poked and prodded at the window looking out into the Black Lake. Their furious whispers were hidden behind a strong silencing spell, but the way they waved their wands over the glass and pursed their lips gave their unease away; the lake water was so cold, and the dungeons so warm by comparison that they were worried the difference in temperature would crack the glass and let billions of litres of water into the dormitories.

Spells were cast and protective barriers placed over the windows, but the Heads of Houses left with the same worried looks on their faces that they entered with.

“Students,” Flitwick said on his way out of the stone archway that hid Slytherin. “If you please, you will find temporary accommodations available for you in the old Theology corridor. Professor McGonagall and I have reinforced all of your load-bearing walls and external windows, but your safety is our top concern, and so during this exceptionally frightful blizzard, we would all feel more comfortable if you would relocate for the time being.”

Draco’s patience was running very thin, and the fact that his owl had come back with the letter for his mother unsent annoyed him further. Twenty minutes spent bribing Professor Snape to use his private floo had proved unnecessary, as once Snape had relented—only after the promise of Draco gutting the porcupines needed for third year Potions—Draco had discovered that the floo network was down due to the blizzard. Professor Snape’s cool smirk told him he’d known all along.

So he gave up, and along with Blaise, Vince, and Greg, he packed a few days’ worth of uniforms and his school books, and took up temporary residence in the unused Theology corridor classrooms —hastily refitted with old, mismatched beds in a variety of house colours. It was very fortunate that all of the Theology classrooms had fireplaces with large hearths, as opposed to the short-lived Necromancy classroom, which was located near the Ravenclaw Tower, and sent a chill down his spine whenever he passed it during rounds.

The windows in their new dormitory were wide and tall with graceful arches and precise leading between the panes. Notable pieces of theological importance were preserved in careful, delicate stained-glass murals. Draco chose the Hufflepuff-Yellow bed between the hearth and a depiction of the Dagda returning nine men to life with the handle of his club. It mattered not what window he looked from, though; the blizzard was thick enough that he could not even see the Quidditch pitch below.

He spent the evening staring into the tired yellow canopy above his bed, listening to the Wireless
signal cut in and out as it rattled off stock reports for the evening. Outside the castle, the wind was
screaming, and it took him many minutes to block it out enough to fall asleep.

He woke to much of the same. The blizzard howled on outside, and though the hearth was fiery, and
the candles resisted flickering in the draught, the castle took on an eerie coldness that he’d never
before experienced, in all of his winters in Scotland. Dumbledore stood at breakfast Wednesday and
said that indoor classes would resume that day, but reactions from students enjoying the break were
slow and unnatural. Even the professors seemed to speak much quieter.

Draco was anxious, and slightly frightened of the weather in a strange, intangible sort of way. On the
whole, snowstorms were nothing unusual, but this one was colder; he felt trapped within the castle,
as if the snow would continue to pile and pile until it reached the top of Gryffindor Tower and buried
them all alive. The post owls hadn’t come since the Sunday special that screamed of the Dementor
crisis, and Greg’s wireless had been picking up only static since Monday night. Beneath cupped
hands, mouths whispered of the storm being magical—muggle areas were being affected to a much
lesser degree.

He saw Harry very rarely during these days—on Wednesday, they sat next to one another during
Potions, but Professor Snape directed the class to brewing in silence, and Harry barely glanced at
him before setting to work. The potion master sat at his desk for the full two hours of the class and
stared, seemingly unblinking, at the same piece of parchment. Afterwards, a note tacked to Vector’s
office alerted the students that he’d cancelled Arithmancy for the day, and Harry was absent from
dinner, Draco didn’t see him again until Transfiguration Thursday morning.

McGonagall was positively warm compared to the storm. She set them to changing solids to liquids
to gasses and back again, then to states of in-between—a task that would be part of their NEWTs.
Theo and Granger caught her on one of her first rounds of observation and asked her of various
theories on transfiguring the human body in similar ways, and much to Draco’s surprise,
McGonagall allowed herself to be pulled into the conversation. The hour bell’s loud, slow ringing
startled her from it at five, and she let the class out with a bemused expression lingering on her face.

The snow stopped suddenly right before dinner that night. The ceiling of the Great Hall, confused,
perhaps, by the abrupt change, flickered among different views, as if it were a pensieve filled with
thirty different memories with thirty different people trying to look at each one all at once. He was
not the only student who avoided looking at it, and the effect was of candles being snubbed and relit
over and over in quick, harsh patterns.

At the head table, the professors spoke amongst themselves heatedly, though well-secured behind the
everlasting Muffliato established around the table. Professor Sinclair stood as pudding was being
served, and moved to the podium to announce,

“The trip to Stonehenge for the seventh year Arithmancy and Defense students will continue as
planned. Communications with several of your parents and officials at the Ministry have confirmed
that the weather is not quite as bad in Wiltshire. However, due to the inclement weather surrounding
Hogwarts and several other established wizarding areas, chaperoning parents will be apparating to
the site separately. Our portkey will depart at 9:00 precisely, so make sure you’re up in time to finish
breakfast, as we won’t be back ‘til well after lunch.”

Draco glanced across the Great Hall. Harry was as oblivious to his surroundings as a flobberworm.

“Draco,” Pansy said lowly, “Can you believe we’re leaving the castle in this weather?”

“Snape doesn’t look very happy about it,” Blaise observed.
Draco didn’t bother to even look. “Snape doesn’t look happy about anything,” he said, but it was a rote response.

“It can’t be safe,” Pansy continued. It sounded like a question. “I can’t even get an owl out to Mum...”

“Professor Sinistra said the portraits have been the only way they’ve been able to communicate outside of Hogwarts,” Blaise said. “Smith’s parents have a portrait of one of the old Hufflepuff headmasters in their house and Dumbledore’s been using it to talk to a few people. I heard it’s not snowing at all in Edinburgh...just cold as an ice mouse in an ice house.”

“So’re our new dorms,” Draco said. “I’d give my left bollock to get back to the dungeons where it never gets draughty.”

“Agrreed,” Pansy said, pulling her cloak tighter around. She shivered dramatically, and Daphne Greengrass, sitting across the table, nodded. “Mill, Daph, and I had to share a bed Monday night.”

Blaise’s eyebrows went up in interest. “Do tell.”

“Nothing to tell,” Daphne said. “It was bloody freezing. Mill’s warming charm was the best of the bunch...and it was barely temperate.” Ever the picture of decorum, Daphne’s language raised several more eyebrows. “And who knows where Tracey ran off to,” she continued. “I would bet my last galleon it was to Tony Goldstein’s dorm, though.”

“Disgusting,” Millicent said. Her nose was buried in her Charms textbook, and she barely looked up to join their discussion. “I don’t see how the two of them could even kiss without their noses getting in the way, anyway.” They all turned to look at the Ravenclaw table, where Tracey Davis had been sitting next to Anthony Goldstein at every meal since third year. Millicent flipped a page, reached down to grab a biscuit from her plate, and drifted back out of their conversation as quickly as she’d entered it.

The ceiling flickered to a thunderstorm and the entirety of the Great Hall jumped in their seats as lighting suddenly crashed above them. The floating candles died and sprung back to life, leaving the Hall in silence. Even the steady buzz of muffled words at the Head Table paused. Daphne’s nervous tittering was the only sound for several long seconds, before the clamour picked up again.

Draco looked once again across the hall, unable, it seemed, to help himself. He hated that he looked for Black in crowds now, as if he had to always know where he was. Black stared mutely down at his food, but as if he could feel Draco’s eyes on him, he looked up after only a moment. Unnerved by more than the lightning, Draco tilted his head towards the door. Harry shrugged, nodded, and went back to staring at his food. Theo sat next to Granger, gesturing at a book they had propped up between their plates. They were both oblivious to Black’s untouched food.

“I’m going to the library,” Draco said. Pansy and Blaise gave him knowing looks and didn’t bother to try and follow him. He exited the Great Hall swiftly. The students and teachers were so caught up in their own tense conversations, that they noticed little else.

The huge wooden doors leading out of the castle were locked tight, but even the Anti-Draught Charms on them couldn’t keep the cold from seeping in. Draco wrapped his cloak tightly around himself and headed for the stairs. Behind him, the Great Hall doors opened and shut with a resounding echo. Black’s footsteps tapped quickly over the stones as he caught up to Draco.

“And where’ve you been all week?” Draco asked, perhaps more tersely than necessary. The creepiness of the climate was making him paranoid about everything, and he was taking his fear out
Harry paused, and Draco couldn’t help but do the same. He turned away, dark hair falling over his eyes, and stared at the snow pounding down outside a leaded-glass window. “I’ve been unsettled all week,” Harry admitted. He turned back suddenly, eyes strangely bright in the grey dimness of the castle. “Do you think this is natural?”

“This?” Draco asked, though it was more a stalling measure than an actual question.

“Why is it only around Hogwarts that it’s snowing like this?”

“Rumours have it that the Dark Lord’s behind it,” Draco commented. “An evil plot to freeze you to death. He’s behind the Dementors disappearing, too.”

Harry managed a small, brief smile, but the effect it had on Draco was embarrassingly profound. “You know it’s not Voldemort,” he said softly, and even if Draco hadn’t known before, he did now, because he trusted Harry’s knowledge of the Dark Lord’s machinations. “Edinburgh and Eweforic Alley aren’t covered in snow, but they aren’t that big as far as magical cities go,” Harry said, “just cold. And neither is your family’s village in Wiltshire. Fairyfield is cut off from all communication like we are, and so’s Diagon Alley and West Elfshire. Why those places?”

Draco shrugged, uncomfortable with the subject matter. He hated thinking of the current weather. It chilled him in an entirely unrelated way. He felt like he was going to go mad if he didn’t do something big—his skin felt too small for his body, and he just wanted to explode and hide all at once. He’d never felt anxiety like he had this week.

“Why is no one willing to admit it’s the Dementors?” Harry asked, voice laced with frustration. Draco watched him flop down on the deep window sill and pull his knees up. Harry’s head fell back against the stone and he sat there motionless, staring dully at the top of the arch above them. Draco stepped closer slowly, and with very deliberate motions, he sat across from Harry in the window, and very definitely did not look at the snow piling up from the ground. They were one storey up, and so was the snow.

“You really think it is, then?” Draco asked. “I’ve never heard of anything like this happening during breeding season before.”

Harry glanced at him. “It’s so obvious that no one wants to admit it.” The windows in this corridor were not as securely warded as those on the other side of the castle. Snow had leaked in and melted. Harry’s foot slipped on the damp stone and bumped into Draco’s. He studiously ignored it, and when Harry didn’t move it away, he felt his insides warm up just a little bit.

“Hermione,” Harry said, voice a little rough, “thinks that they’re gathering for a...for a feast.”

Draco shivered. “They’re trapping us, like war prisoners,” he said with sudden realization.

“Not exactly,” Harry said. “More like there’re huge populations of magical people and beings in each of these places...”

“West Elfshire has the highest population of elves in all of Britain,” Draco agreed.

“And Hogwarts is the largest school on the isles,” Harry added softly. “There are seven hundred students, each with a thousand happy thoughts.” He met Draco’s eyes evenly, somewhat frightened. “It’s their gathering...they’re being drawn to us, and the concentration of Old Magic the Dementors are releasing is freezing the air around the school.”
“It’s not safe for us to leave the school tomorrow,” Draco said. And yet, his muscles ached from their tenseness...his anxiety had not allowed him to realize that his fretfulness was due to the Old Magic the Dementors brought with them.

Harry’s head tilted, and he stared through the window as if, were he to look hard enough, he would be able to see through the thick, wet cloud surrounding the school. “It’s probably safer out there than it is here, now. If they’re attracted to the abundance of happy thoughts, then a smaller group wouldn’t attract them as much.”

He sighed and looked back at Draco. “Why are you so twitchy?”

“I’m not twitchy,” Draco replied.

“You’re always twitchy,” Harry said, insulting in its matter-of-factness. “You’re just twitchier than normal.”

“I’m just restless,” Draco said. His voice was most definitely not sullen, either. “I hate not being able to figure out what’s happening with the Dementors. We have the Arithmancy to do this, and yet they aren’t acting to form—all research proves that Dementors are not sentient and therefore they should not be able to change habits. They’re made of pure magic, for fuck’s sake; how can magic change without being changed by something with thoughts?”

Black was regarding him very strangely. “What do you mean not sentient?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Oh, do pay attention in Magical Creatures. I would have expected you to lend your barmy half-giant friend half an ear, at least.”

Harry got up very suddenly, mouth pursed. “Look, Malfoy,” he said, “I know you’re scared and all, but you aren’t the only—”

“I am not scared!” Draco said fiercely.

Harry stared at him. “What’s got into you?”

“I need to do something,” Draco said. The words burst from his lips as if they weren’t even his. He didn’t know why he couldn’t control the way he was feeling. He’d never been in the presence of so much Old Magic before, but even so—his father had always been able to control himself...and his mother, too. He just needed to get a grip. Keep it together.

“Oh,” said Black. Then, “Oh.” His eyes were quite large behind his wire glasses. It was interesting to note that even in the darkness of the castle from the storm outside, his eyes were very, very green. A moment later, he appeared to collect himself, and said, “Well, come on then.”

Draco hurried after him, bemused. “Come where?”

“Up,” said Harry, and proceeded to lead the way thusly, to the main staircase in the Entrance Hall that, depending on the day of the week and the position of the moon, either led to the Infirmary corridor, the Library...or the Astronomy Tower. Draco knew right away which one it led to today.

“Do you really want to be back there again?” Draco asked. “The last time we were there together...”

“I don’t think we’re going to try to kill each other this time,” Harry said, looking back. He was taking the stairs two at a time, his long legs bounding up like a deer. Draco chased him easily, but it lessened his unease not at all. He’d not been back to the Astronomy Tower since that night, when he’d met Black there, and he was not interested in going back anytime soon. It had been one of the
most frightening experiences of his life.

He followed anyway—because it was Black.

When Harry finally pushed the door open and stepped out onto the observation deck of the Astronomy Tower, Draco was breathless, but not from climbing so many stairs. He was near to hyperventilation at the thought of what had happened here once before—and how he’d finally pulled himself back over the ledge.

The observation deck was protected from the blizzard by an elements-shield, but it only held off the snow. The wind had no trouble getting through, and this high up, its freezing chill swept over and around them with frightening speed and strength. Draco staggered after a particularly strong burst, and nearly died from the sight of Black stumbling, and carelessly grabbing hold to one of the balustrades after being similarly affected. Gryffindor that he was, Black turned, gave him a sheepish grin, and waited for him to come forward.

“Do you think there are Dementors in the Forbidden Forest?” Harry suddenly asked. Draco nearly missed it in the gale.

“Merlin, I hope not,” he said. He stared hard at the huge, black abyss that was the forest. Was there movement in there? Was it darker, more foreboding than usual?

“How long is this going to go on?” Draco asked?

“What?” Harry was staring hard at the dark splotch that was, presumably, the Forbidden Forest, and Dagda forbid, not a swarm of Dementors closing in on the school.

“This cold war,” Draco said. “My father always thought it would end when the Dark Lord killed you, and Dumbledore appears to think it will end when you kill the Dark Lord. What about the Death Eaters not privy to your connection? Or the Ministry fools who refuse to do things that ought to be done, just because they have the power to prevent it? When does this war really end, Black?”

Harry frowned, contemplative. “I don’t know. It could go on forever.”

“I’m tired of this,” Draco said. “I hate not being able to do Old Magic because it’s ‘dark’ and I hate being told I couldn’t use my wand over the summer, when I was still sixteen—or younger than that. How does one day make me mature enough to use a wand unsupervised?”

Black shrugged. “No one’s stopping you now,” he said. “And isn’t that why we came up here? No one will see you doing it here, and you need to get it out of your system.” He turned to Draco and regarded him solemnly. “Is that why you were so twitchy at the beginning of the year? Because you’d just come from the Death Eater meeting where your father wanted you to take the Mark?”

Draco lifted one shoulder in an uncomfortable shrug. “It does blind me a bit, if that makes sense. I just get the feeling that if I don’t do something wild I’ll have to jump off the tower instead.” He took a quick step closer to the edge and leaned over the balustrade. It was a very, very long way down. Twelve feet of snow would do nothing to soften the landing, as hard and tightly packed as it was.

“Stop it!” Harry said, and Draco felt him rush closer, grab his cold, gloved hand, and squeeze it tight enough to crack the bones. Harry’s eyes were wide with fear. “What in Merlin’s beard are you doing?”

“I wasn’t going to jump off,” Draco scoffed. “I don’t think I was anyway...” He turned suddenly, pulling his hand free and trying not to regret the loss. “The energy of the Old Magic just makes me feel like nothing I do will hurt me...that I need to hurt everyone else, or be hurt, maybe. I can’t
control myself!” he growled; as if of their own free will, his hands came up and pulled angrily at his hair. He felt some detach from his scalp and he shook the white-blond strands off his hands restlessly...watched them flutter down past the protective shield around the tower and be tossed away by the harsh blizzard outside.

“But your parents are around this sort of thing a lot,” Harry said reasonably, “and they do alright. You just need practise, maybe. You don’t have to let it control you.”

Draco laughed. The sound echoed hauntingly around them before the wind carried it angrily away. “I don’t have my father’s natural detachment and emotional emptiness,” he said dryly. “Nor my mother’s fine skill with Occlumency.”

Harry considered this. “Then it looks like we’re back where we started. If you can’t avoid acting on it, then you’ll just have to act on it.” He nodded to Draco’s left sleeve, where his wand was stowed. “Go on then, I know you know at least one spell of Old Magic.”

Draco gave him a wry grin. “I certainly know more than one.”

“Give it a go, then,” Harry said, rolling his eyes.

Draco considered. He hated this about himself—not that he was forced to use dark magic, because he had no scruples about that, but simply because he was forced, by a power he could not control. He hated that he could not resist this nor evade it. And yet, he’d resisted for so long after his meeting with the Dark Lord. He’d set things on fire and purposefully blown up cauldrons-full of Potions homework. He’d performed reckless, brash stunts on his broom that he would have never dared to do fully sane. None of it had worked.

Incendio was a perfectly harmless New Magic spell, developed by a housewife in the seventeenth century to light her hearth when the weather was damp, and it did nothing to appease whatever god it was that craved his use of Old Magic. He could destroy things all he wanted, and he could nearly kill himself just the same, but the apprehension had not abated until that terrible night, when he and Harry Black had almost thrown themselves off the Astronomy Tower while fighting.

Draco remembered hanging there—feeling the grainy, ancient stone of the balustrade crumble beneath his fingers; he remembered how livid he’d felt when Black walked away from him. But most of all he remembered the shaking, agonizing relief he felt after he took his wand and growled out the incantation to that one, silly little spell that his mother had used on him as a child, when they played.

His fingers and feet had become sticky, and he’d climbed up the side of the tower like a nesting dragon crawled up cliffs before its wings developed properly. If the skin on the pads of his fingers had remained stuck to the wall in his anger and inability to control his emotions like his mother did when she played ‘baby dragon’ with him, he did not notice as he lay panting with relief on the floor of the tower.

“It’s okay,” Harry said, voice oddly uneven. He was watching Draco carefully, and the Slytherin realized that he had not spoken for several minutes. “I won’t say anything.”

“It’s not that,” Draco sighed. “I hate not being able to control my own magic.”

Harry gave him a small, shy smile. “You can. Just choose to use it the way it needs to be used, instead of flying yourself batty not using it.” He reached out and grabbed Draco’s hand once again. “You can show me; I won’t judge you.”
Draco’s fingers tingled. He stared at their entwined fingers and bit his lip. “Okay,” he said lowly. Harry smiled again. “I will—let’s get out of here.”

“And go where?” Harry asked.

Draco pointed. “There,” he said, pointing out into the anonymousness of the blizzard. “Let’s go flying. Accio brooms!”

“You can’t be serious,” Harry said, though his eyes were laughing, and they danced with—was it anticipation? Somewhere below, the echoing crash of the broom shed door reverberated around them with ghostly resonance, and two school brooms barrelled towards them. Harry’s left hand shot out and grabbed one without ever loosening his other hand from Draco’s grip, and he stared at him expectantly. “Just how are we supposed to survive out in that on brooms?” he asked.

Draco’s mind felt very clear, as it had the last time he gave in and performed an act with an Old Magic spell. His body hummed with excitement at his decision. He’d never performed this spell before, but he’d read about it, and heard of it used to torture mudbloods in the first great War of Muggles. Once, it’d been a way of life for Scandinavian wizards; now it was relegated to the Dark Arts books. His magic knew how to cast this spell, even if his mind didn’t.

“Do you trust me?” Draco asked.

Harry shook his head, lips quirked. “I’d never trust a Slytherin,” he said. “But I’ll let you do it anyway.”

Draco allowed a smile in return. He was too relieved to be doing this to feel slighted. He pointed his wand at his friend, and said, very deliberately, and with a very precise swish, "Gelucruor!"

Harry gasped in fearful surprise, and his eyes went large and frightened and he slumped to the floor in a painful, writhing, mess of flailing limbs. And for one terrible, horrific moment Draco’s mind raced with only one thought: What have I done what have I done what have I done, and then: I’ve killed Harry Potter. Then his magic, temporarily sated from the use of the spell, calmed his mind, and he thought, very clearly: Harry isn’t dead. But he will be if you don’t do something. You merely forgot one step.

But first, he turned the wand on himself and repeated the curse—for that is what it was now...no longer a useful tool for men working in harsh climates. Gelucruor was most definitely a curse, if the deadly blue tint to Harry’s lips and skin meant anything. When the spell took effect, it felt like dying. It felt like his lungs had been ripped from his chest, and if only he were to look down, he would see himself hollow, bleeding profusely, and his fingers snapping stiffly off as they tried to gather his organs back in.

Stop it, he told himself. Think clearly. He did so, and with one frail, sweeping motion of his wand, he gasped out the counter-spell to the shield protecting the tower, and felt the full force of the blizzard overwhelm his body. Weak and unprepared, the gale wind slammed him hard into the opposite balustrade. The stone creaked ominously behind him, and he moved quickly away.

The wind had been terrible before, but without the shield over the observation deck, it blew through in abandon, with an unholy screech like a dying thestral. His magic was relieved but his mind was not. Harry had yet to rise.

Draco ran over, heart beating a furious, freezing rhythm against his ribcage. “Are you okay?” he asked, pressing his hand to the other boy’s neck. There was a pulse; it beat very slowly—too slowly to maintain life, though, and his skin was icy, throbbing cold to the touch. Harry’s eyes flickered
open and he inhaled shakily.

“I don’t know what I expected,” he said hoarsely, “but it sure as Merlin wasn’t that. I thought for sure you’d turned all my organs to stone, and my skin felt like I was on fire.” He pushed himself up, somewhat unsteadily, and added, “Even Crucio didn’t come close, I don’t think.”

Draco’s stomach plummeted. “Why did you let me do it?” he asked. “I could have killed—“

Harry shook his head, making an attempt at wryness though he still looked shaken. “It’s done now. I just wasn’t expecting it. I’m not angry... you needed to do something, and I was happy enough be cursed by you.”

“Still,” Draco said. He’d not felt guilt like this in some time. “I should have warned you. I wish I’d been thinking clearly enough to do it.”

Harry shrugged. He stood up and flexed his fingers experimentally. “I trusted you,” he said.

Draco smirked—hesitantly. “You did not.”

“I did,” Harry said easily. He was staring, fascinated, at his gloved fingers as the leather around them cracked. Draco frowned. He would have to fix that later, when both of them had blood warm enough to feel things again. “No reason to give you a big head and tell you that upfront though. No telling what you would’ve done to me then.” After a moment, he added, “It is interesting though. My dad’s told me stories of Old Magic wizards going mad from not using the magic, but I’d never realized that you were going mad from it yourself. You shouldn’t have waited so long.”

He looked up then and stared hard into Draco’s eyes. “Tell me you won’t wait so long again. There’s nothing wrong with using it if your body needs to, and there’s no shame in not being able to keep yourself from doing it. You can’t keep yourself from breathing either and you aren’t miffed about that, are you?”

“No,” Draco admitted. He was unaware of the soft smile on his lips at the moment, but, given the opportunity to consider the matter, he wouldn’t have been surprised: after all, he’d wanted Harry Potter for his own all his life—and he had his trust now, and he’d done something truly awful, and Harry had not run from him. “I won’t wait so long again,” he promised.

Harry nodded, satisfied, and then turned to stare out at the blizzard. It was then that he realized that the shield spell was missing, and that he was standing amid the worst blizzard in recorded magical history, wearing only a Weasley jumper. It was the blue one he got in sixth year.

“What did that spell do, exactly?” he asked warily. He looked back down at his fingers again, and now that he’d recovered a bit from the shock, he noticed the cracks in his gloves where he’d flexed them too hard. Hermione was not going to be pleased about that. This was his best pair.

“It was a spell used by men of war from Scandinavia. It made their blood as cold as the air outside so they could tolerate the snow and wouldn’t freeze to death.”

Harry grimaced. That sounded perfectly lovely. But then, as snow continued to hit his face and shoulders, and he continued to be completely unconcerned by it, he thought it was a rather useful spell. Experimentally, he pulled his gloves off and wiggled his fingers. They felt heavier and more cumbersome, as if asleep, but they gripped the school broom just fine when he said, “Up!”
Draco came closer, and, carefully, took his hand again. Harry did not look at him directly, for fear of showing the other boy all the ridiculous things he was currently feeling, but he did squeeze his fingers tighter, and feel reassured by the same dull heaviness he felt in Draco’s hand.

“Flying, did you say?” he asked a moment later. He had to clear his throat several times to get the words out.

“If you want to,” Draco said. His voice carried uncertainly in the wind, and reverberated off the tower walls several times before dying.

Harry let go of Draco’s hand and stepped up onto the ledge, arms out to balance himself against the wind. It was a very, very long way down. How had he not noticed the shield fall? He glanced over his shoulder, gave Draco an appraising look. Could he have really done something so powerful just because of a hereditary proficiency with Old Magic? A sudden burst of wind caught him by surprise and he stumbled, nearly fell, if it hadn’t been for Draco’s hand catching his jumper and jerking him back.

“Do you have a death wish?” Draco screamed at him. “You’re seven storeys up!”

Harry held up his left hand, and the broom in it. “I could’ve jumped on if I fell,” he said. In truth, he felt very light and carefree right now; falling several hundred metres before jumping on his broom and twisting away sounded very exhilarating indeed.

“You’re high,” Draco said flatly. He tugged Harry down from the ledge, and said, “You must not have inherited the Black inclination after all if one little Old Magic spell being cast on you is making you feel this uninhibited.”

“What’s that mean, then?” Harry asked.

Draco shrugged at him. “If you’re reacting that much to the spell I cast on you, then you wouldn’t have inherited the Old Magic inclination from your father’s side. The Blacks go back centuries with the family’s predilection, and very few deviate from it. Your mother’s side must have been New or Middle Magic inclined.”

Harry considered this. “How would I know?”

“Ask.”

Harry rolled his eyes, and felt his body almost follow them around, he was so boneless and heavy. “My mum’s family’s all dead, Malfoy.”

Draco gave him an extremely strange look. Then, “There’s bound to be a portrait somewhere—or personal effects, at least.” There was, in fact, now that Harry thought about it. Now that he thought to think about it, too, Harry considered. A strong gust of wind hit him at an awkward angle and sent him toppling backward once again. Draco’s eyes went suddenly wide and he rushed forward, icicle-cold hands circling around Harry’s bicep just in time to, possibly, prevent him from toppling over the side. He was going to have to work on his equilibrium.

Movement appeared; Harry was sure he saw it. He jerked away from Draco and peered out between the merlons forming the battlements of the tower. The fog and snow were thick in the air, but—there, again! Definitely movement—a Dementor? No, its movements were not smooth enough.

“Potter!” Draco said from behind him. His voice was exasperated.

“There’re wizards out there!” Harry said.
“Nonsense.”

“No, there is,” Harry insisted. “Come, look.” He thrust his arm out, no longer semi-protected by the enclosure, and felt the snow pelting his freezing forearm. His jumper was soaked straight through. “There’s two.”

Draco leaned over him. Harry could feel the other boy’s breath on the back of his neck, over his shoulder, and against the side of his face; it was icy cold from the spell and the weather, and it made him shiver. “What in Dagda’s name,” Draco breathed, “are people doing out there in this weather?”

Harry snickered. “We’re out in this weather,” he said. He heard a shout and looked again, startled. “That’s my dad!”

“Potter—” Draco began, but another shout cut him off. He’d heard it, too, this time. “What’s that?” he said instead, stretching his arm out to the dark shadow of the Forbidden Forest.

Harry’s voice was panicked: “Just the forest—“

“No,” Draco interrupted. “It’s moving.”

There was another yell from below, echoing hauntingly over the grounds. By the time it reached their ears, it was little more than the ghost of a scream, but the fear in it was unmistakable. Harry’s heart began to beat very fast and cold. Dark splotches detached themselves from the gaping abyss of the forest and moved slowly towards the figures, apparently stranded in the waist-deep snow.

“We have to get him!” he said, throwing a leg over his broom. The haziness of his mind was clearing up with alarming rapidity. He could not bear to lose Sirius again. Especially now.

Draco didn’t fight him this time. Instead he was throwing himself onto his own broom, and then they were stepping up through the merlons and jumping off into the wild, harsh blizzard.

The feeling was eerily familiar.

That was not a strong enough word for it. Four years to recover from their effects didn’t make the sight of half a dozen looming Dementors easier to stomach. Sirius pulled his wand, and fought the impending fear and desolation. These Dementors were hungry, and their thin, frightening bodies glided over the snow with only one goal in mind: him.

“Expecto Patronum!” His Patronus burst forth and rushed the nearest Dementor, pushing it back with ghostly growls and snapping teeth. There were more, though—half a dozen at the least. He turned and cast again at the Dementor approaching from behind. Fear hindered him; this Patronus was not as strong.

“Wingardium Leviosa!” He felt himself rising up from the waist-deep snow with his brother’s spell. His lycanthropy was preventing Regulus from experiencing the overwhelming dread and despair, but the strong magic was making both of them feel light-headed and their magic unstable. How long had it been since he’d been surrounded by so much Old Magic?

It was Moony who was faring the worst, though: his line only went back a couple of generations and had little time to adjust to anything save New Magic. Remus yelled, “Expecto Patronum!” but the wolf that shot out of his wand was wispy at best, and disintegrated at contact with the first Dementor. It continued to approach.
They’d apparated right into a trap, and they couldn’t maintain levitation spells long enough to escape. It was freezing cold. The Dementors closed in.

“Miss Weasley,” Severus said carefully. “Should you not be in bed?”

“I’ve been in bed all week,” she said.

In the shadows of his doorway, her face had seemed haunted and drawn; now she stepped fully into the room, and still her face was still sallow. Freckles stood out over the sharp whiteness of her skin, but they were not the abundant freckles of Ginevra Weasley. He’d known it was her, and yet...he dared not hope. Few as his morals were, it was such a terrible thing to hope for.

The steam from his cauldron rose up and gave excuse for the burning his face surely showed. He fought to prevent breathing in the fumes, but it was a protective potion, and the herbs did calm his mind, if only long enough to brusquely, awkwardly, offer her a seat. She sat at his desk, reclined in his chair, ran her finger over the plumes of his quills...Severus gripped his stirrer tightly and counted the rotations in his head.

*One Chimaera, Two Chimaera, Three Chimaera...*

He switched directions and began the counting again.

“I need advice,” she said finally.

“Ten Chimaera, Eleven Chimaera, Twelve Chimaera... “What sort of advice?” he asked. From the corner of his eye, he would have sworn he’d seen Weasley’s face flicker into...into Lily’s, but that was merely his imagination, and by the time he looked at her, she was Weasley again, if somewhat more delicate in her features.

Her lips were pursed, and she would not meet his eye. “Harry’s friend... knows.”

“Granger?” Severus asked with interest. “She is certainly more observant than the average Hufflepuff, but I don’t think—”

“No, not the witch,” Lily said. “The Malfoy boy.” She glanced up at him, uncertain. “Narcissa’s son.”

Severus nodded shortly in answer. “Evan Rosier was killed near the fall of the Dark Lord. They do say, in some circles, that it was Lucius Malfoy who did it—it appears he got what he wanted.”

She quirked a grin. “Lucius was always a git, but at least he was something to look at. Rosier was just nasty, may he rot.”

“I’m sure he has,” Severus said wryly. Then, “Draco knows?”

She nodded, a bit sheepish. “He was very Slytherin about it; you would be proud. It was the casual ultimatum at the end that did it.”

“Oh?”

“He’s going to tell his mother straight away, but he’s giving me two weeks to do something about...” she gestured vaguely at her body, “before he tells Harry.” Her face was a mixture of emotions, and even wearing the mask of Ginevra Weasley, Severus read each with ease. Foremost, there was
apprehension, but there was also fear, uncertainty, guilt...and excitement. She ached to know her son, heathen that he was, and he ached for her.

Severus removed his cauldron from the fire and applied a stasis spell. He flipped his dragon-egg timer, and turned to her. “What do you plan to do?” he asked. It was difficult work keeping the emotion out of his voice, even after twenty years of spying.

“I don’t know.” She buried her face in her hands and sighed. It crossed his mind to reach over and comfort her, but his senses returned to him in time, and he settled for watching her breathe instead. She lifted her head enough to say, “That’s the advice I need. I can’t leave. I don’t know how, and I wouldn’t now, anyway. Not now that I’ve got a chance to see him. I want to touch him and know that he’s still alive, that the Dark Lord didn’t kill him after all; I want to hug him and sing to him as if he were still a child.”

“What will happen if you are dismissed from Miss Weasley’s body?” Severus asked. He did not really want to know the answer.

The girl shrugged, face once again hidden with her hands. Her words were muffled when she said, “I’ll go back to being intangible, I suppose. Not dead and not alive, nor a ghost...I remember it almost like a dream. I wandered from place to place dazed and only half-awake. Sometimes I would sense Harry’s feelings...his fear, his sadness, rarely his happiness...and I would comfort him as best I could. I don’t know if it ever really happened, or if it was merely the dream of the dead.”

Whatever it was, she would not go back to it. He would not lose her again, if he had any say over it. It mattered not that she would run straight back to her erstwhile lover, Sirius Black. Just knowing she lived would be enough for him.

Or so he told himself.

So he sat across from her and he began to think of how to save the life of a dead woman, and, possibly, that of a young girl as well. “Can you move from body to body?” he asked after a moment.

She looked up, thoughtful. “I don’t know. I woke up in this girl’s body over Hallowe’en. Sometimes I’m strong enough to put her to sleep and let me take over, other times I lose control and I can only watch with her eyes. I don’t know how or why I got here.”

“The Dark Lord did something like this once,” Severus said speculatively. “In your son’s first year—his spirit possessed that of the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. It is possible that, in some way, with your...connection to him, that you gained that knowledge and applied it to your own desires.”

She made a face at the thought. “That’s a stretch.”

Severus shrugged. “His power is far-reaching and potent. You would have been connected to him with a very strong magical bond, and you would have both been on the same plane of existence...somewhere between unfinished business and proactive haunting.”

She grinned at him, and, reluctantly, he grinned back. “You always did have a nice smile when you used it,” she said.

He ignored this. “The Dark Lord, as you’ve no doubt realized by now, has also achieved corporal form—though his humanity will never fully be restored. The ritual used to get it back was the least of the malevolent magic he employed in his quest.”

She bared her teeth in a hateful sneer. “I have read about that event.”
Severus nodded once. “Your son is alive, though. I understand he was quite brave.”

“He should not have needed to be at that age.”

“It is done with,” he said. Her eyes narrowed, but she nodded, and so he continued. “It is now important to focus our efforts on finding the ritual the Dark Lord used and modifying it appropriately.”

“I could never,” she said. “Not with how it was used to hurt Harry. No, there has to be another way.”

“Lily,” he growled, forgetting himself, “be reasonable.”

She inhaled sharply, shocked. “Sev—”

The fireplace burst to life, and they both turned to stare at it, horrified. How had he forgotten to lock his floo? He was always so careful about everything, and now, of all times—

“Severus,” Dumbledore said, stepping easily from the flames. The Headmaster’s usually twinkling eyes were grim. His mouth was set firmly. It only took a moment for the old wizard to realise they were not alone; he turned to look at the other occupant of Severus’ office—the fifteen year old female occupant, sitting behind his desk.

“Miss Weasley,” Dumbledore added tightly. “I must assume there is a very good reason you are here...in your nightclothes.”

“There is,” she said, and Severus’ eyes went wide before he could stop himself. She’d not sounded at all like Weasley.

And Dumbledore noticed, though his reaction was very slight. After a moment’s hesitation, he turned back to the professor. “Your assistance is needed at once, Severus. Miss Weasley, please return to your dormitory immediately.”

ÌàÌà

She didn’t go to Gryffindor Tower. She waited barely a moment after Sev and Professor Dumbledore left before vaulting after them up the stairs and to the entry hall where the Headmaster was yelling a spell in a horrible language that echoed through the room. The great wooden doors flung outwards and all the snow packed against them soared away like children’s blocks hit with a heavy hand.

Dumbledore’s spell left a ditch of clean ground with walls of hard-packed snow three metres high on either side. It led straight up the hill to the castle gates, and there, she saw a mass of Dementors swarming in on three frantic figures.

Severus and Dumbledore were nearly to them already, and now she saw two people swooping in on brooms, wands out, screaming spells at the attacking Dementors. One cast a silvery wave that slammed into four of the Dementors and knocked them backwards, but it wasn’t New Magic, and so it cared naught for the three men levitating unsteadily above four feet of snow—they fell backwards and slipped partway back in the quicksand-snow.

Then the second flyer yelled and Lily saw a silvery stag erupt from his wand and charge the remaining two Dementors. James, she thought, and then, Harry! They landed on the snow and immediately sunk up to their knees. Dumbledore yelled again, and the snow flew away, dropping the
wizards on the ground.

Severus was the first to arrive, but Dumbledore was not far behind, and together they went to work checking over the three men. Harry and the Malfoy boy, Lily could now see, were staring gobsmacked at the prone men, and did not notice her running up. She turned to look, and nearly screamed—lying on the ice-cold grass were three people she had never expected to see again.

“No!” She heard Harry yell, then “Mum!” and she turned, eyes wide and alert, but he had not seen her standing there; he had not seen anything at all, for his eyes were shut tight, and he’d fallen to his knees, screaming. Behind him, as Sev and the Malfoy boy turned to see what was the matter with him, the four Dementors who’d recovered from whatever Old Magic spell Draco Malfoy had used on them, were now only a metre away.

Why has he not felt the Dementors’ cold? she wondered, and Why isn’t he casting his Patronus? she thought, along with a million other things, but they mattered naught because, still, no one had noticed the approaching pack, so quiet were they in the loudness of the blizzard. One reached out and scraped his skeletal fingers against Harry’s back and he fainted. The Malfoy boy yelped and, finally, he saw, them, but he was not quick enough, and the first leaned over her son just as Severus yelled and Dumbledore turned to see what was the matter.

"Expecto Patronum!" she sang, and her doe leapt at the Dementors, desperate and enraged with Lily’s own fear. The first Dementor flew backwards at the force of her Patronus, and the second and third followed quickly. Dumbledore brought his hands up and slammed them down with great might, and a shield sprang up around their group.

Dumbledore turned, and when their eyes locked, she knew that, even without Legilimency, he knew her secret. His eyes were hard and not at all like what she remembered from her own school years, or even later, when he’d worked so hard to keep her family safe from harm. Many long moments later, he disengaged from her stare, and, with one easy wave of his hand, conjured stretchers for the three men and Harry, and levitated them back through the ditch to the school.

As they passed her, Severus caught her eye and shook his head mutely. She pursed her lips. Not over her twice-dead body, she thought, and resolutely fell into step behind the Malfoy boy. Dumbledore continued to move the stretchers forward with nary a glance in her direction, and she took this for his tacit acceptance of the inevitable, if not permission.

It was as they entered the castle again and she felt the freezing cold over her body by its absence once inside winter warming charms, that Draco Malfoy’s eyes rolled back into his head and he, too, fainted on the spot. On his stretcher, Harry convulsed and choked and Lily felt her blood run cold.

“Severus,” Dumbledore said quickly, “What is your opinion?”

Sev was already running diagnostics; his forehead was creased with worry. A crackling flash at the end of his wand made him jump back hurriedly. “Cool them off!” he said quickly. Dumbledore reacted without question, and then there was a barrier around them, the edges frozen in ice and the warm air of the Hall steaming off the top.

“What’s going on?” she asked. They were moving again now, and she ran along behind them as quick as she could in legs much longer than she ever recalled owning. At the Infirmary, Madam Pomfrey flung the doors wide before they were even there, eyes wide as she took over the Malfoy boy’s stretcher. Lily was spared nary a glance when she followed.

In the infirmary, Harry was blue with cold. She slipped her hand through the shield; the air was freezing inside, but he was breathing regularly—knocked out along the way by a casual stunner from
the Headmaster. It was almost accidental when her fingers finally brushed his hand, but the effect was just as frightening; she had not touched him in sixteen years, but he’d been warm then—warm and soft and alive, and now—

“It must be timed precisely right,” Severus said, and she looked up to see him and Dumbledore peering closely at the readings from Madam Pomfrey’s spell.

“Are you quite sure?” the Headmaster asked, frowning.

Pomfrey looked as if she were near to fainting with worry. “You can see yourself the diagnostics,” she said.

“Indeed,” Dumbledore said. “I do not want to believe it.”

“Believe it,” Severus said harshly. “You do not have time for regrets—if they stay under this effect too long, there will be permanent damage to their nervous systems.”

Her heart was beating entirely too fast. Not Harry. “Help him!” she said. All three looked up from Malfoy and seemed to notice her for the first time.

“Miss Weasley,” Pomfrey began, but Severus cut her off.

“No, let her stay. We need her spellwork.”

“A sixth-year’s spellwork is hardly likely—"

“No,” Dumbledore said this time. His eyes appraised her sharply. “I believe she may help. She has, after all, helped save Mr Black before. Step forward, Miss Weasley.”

“The spell used was meant to be counter-spelled in an arctic environment. By bringing them inside, where the air was artificially warmed, we shocked their systems, and now they are delicate—the balance must be maintained. They must be warmed quickly, but not too quickly, and their environs must warm accordingly. Even a slight mistake could be disastrous.” Severus glanced at her, and she met his eyes evenly.

“What do I do?” she asked.

He gave her a short nod, but it was Dumbledore who answered, “Poppy—if you would retrieve two warming draughts; I will slowly adjust the shield’s temperature as we progress. Severus, how will Miss Weasley best serve you?”

Without even bothering to ask, Severus cast a winter-warming charm on her and she felt immediately hot with the strength of it. Poppy returned with the draughts and he handed them to her. “You will monitor their temperatures and make sure that they are warming at the same rate. Since they’re in shock, I will not be able to counter the spell directly until they are fully warmed, so it must be incremental. Poppy—if you will please monitor their vitals.”

At a nod from Severus, Lily shakily stepped through the icy shield, the warming charm that was making her sweat only moments before now struggled to keep the chill off her. Harry’s skin was translucent and the veins beneath his skin were so blue. She felt her breath coming shorter in panic, and struggled to regain control.

“Miss Weasley,” Pomfrey said sharply—her voice was muffled as though yelled through a blizzard, and Lily felt as though she must be dreaming all this...her worst nightmare coming true in freezing intensity. Quickly, she reached down and placed her left hand over Malfoy’s. It was rubbery and
-heavy with stagnant blood, but she prepared herself again for the dead feeling of Harry’s skin, and placed her other hand on his arm.

“He—they’re ice cold...” she said quietly.

“Administer the warming draughts evenly,” Dumbledore instructed from outside. Air steamed off her, and she tried in vain to uncap the vials without removing her hand from her son. Outside the shield, she could hear the steady hum of men slowly chanting abbreviated counter-spells—there was nothing for it, she realized, and once she’d uncapped the vials, she positioned one over each of their mouths and rubbed their lips until they were warm enough to part, and tipped them slowly in, maintaining as best she could, the speed of the chants outside.

Her warming charm, strong as it was, began to falter, and she started to shiver.

“Slow down, Weasley,” Pomfrey said. Her eyes were set on the ice-blue runes hovering above the two boys. Harry’s was beginning to pulse unsteadily. Hands shaking, she levelled his vial slightly, and the rune steadied. Severus continued to chant, and Dumbledore’s hands glowed with magic as he focused on the shield.

Slowly, the boys’ skin began to warm. Their breaths came more than once a minute. Her arms were tired, though, and they became heavy with the strain. She took a deep breath, locked her elbows and thought of the last time she’d held Harry—that night, when she’d sang “Who’s Afraid of the Big Werewolf?” to him and he’d giggled and yelled, “Mooy! Mooy!” and altogether resisted going to bed.

Harry choked on the warming draught. The liquid sprayed on her hand and steamed from her hand. “Harry!” she said, and reached for him, but Dumbledore said,

“Focus, Miss Weasley. Maintain the flow or neither will come out of this unharmed.”

“He’s choking!” she said.

Dumbledore didn’t reply. She took a deep, freezing breath and steadied the vial over Malfoy’s mouth. Then she carefully manipulated the vial in her right hand upright and pressed her three free fingers to Harry’s throat, rubbing slow, shaky circles to stop his choking. It felt like an eternity, but his choking finally stopped, and she returned to pouring the thick draught in his mouth.

When the shield finally fell, it was a shock. She began to sweat immediately. Malfoy breathed in deeply, but calmly, and she rested her hand against his cheek—he was fine. Perhaps a little chilly, but relatively normal. Harry’s breathing was shakier; her fingers ghosted against his face and she wasn’t surprised to feel his skin much colder. Panic overwhelmed her again, and her legs shook. “He’s still—still cold,” she said, barely more than a whisper.

Madam Pomfrey was the first to recover from the ordeal. She acquired another steaming warming draught and tipped it into Harry’s mouth with professional efficiency.

“He’ll be fine,” Pomfrey said a moment later. Her wand was glowing gold as she traced it over his chest. Lily sank heavily onto the mattress, pressed her hands onto her face, and breathed as steadily as she could. She did not realize how hot she was until Sev removed the warming charm from her.

“We must now attend to our three visitors,” Dumbledore was saying.

“Surely, Headmaster,” Pomfrey said worriedly, “that is a disreputable disguise. There is only one Sirius Black, after all.”
“It is not a disguise, as such,” Severus replied lowly. “I would bet my last galleon that it is someone thought long dead.”

“Ah,” Dumbledore said quietly, “we seem to agree.”

Lily did not listen much further. Harry’s even breathing was all she wanted to hear.

Chapter End Notes

1. Gelu Cruor – (most likely very badly translated) Latin for “cold blood”.
Prisoner of War (n): a person who is captured and held by an enemy during war, esp. a member of the armed forces.

Prisoner of War II

Chapter by faire_weather

The first thing Draco saw upon waking was his mother’s face—she was not as pleased to see him as she normally was. In fact, she glared down at him with lips pursed more tightly than the time the Quidditch World Cup came to England and Father had not only made her go, but put them in the same box as the Minister and his insipid, gossiping wife.

She slapped him.

“Mum—what? What was that for?” he whined. He tried to sit up, but his arms were weak and his skin felt altogether funny. Defeated, he slumped back down and looked to her beseechingly. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Symptoms would point to you having inherited your Great-Aunt Black’s lack of common sense.”

At his confused look, she leaned further down, and hissed, “Really, Draco? Gelucruor? On Hogwarts grounds?”

Suddenly, he remembered; the whole night came flooding back to him in stark, freezing detail. How long ago had that been? An hour? Two? It was daylight now, and it felt so far away. “I didn’t,” he whispered, but it was no use. He had, and saying it didn’t even convince himself.

Narcissa nodded shortly, then tilted her head slightly. Draco followed the motion and saw the people huddled around the far bed: the littlest Weasley, Harry and Professor Lupin. But there were two occupied beds, he now realized. He attempted once more to rise, this time with more success, but his mother’s hand on his arm stilled him.

“I must ask you to be circumspect if you go over,” she said quietly. “There is something I was unaware of going on, and we do not wish to cast our family in greater suspicion than we generally are.” After she’d said her peace, her fingers withdrew, and she helped him, unnoticed, to join the group on the other end of the Infirmary.

Their approach was met with thankfully non-hostile glances—even a rather warm one from Professor Lupin. Ginny Weasley narrowed her eyes at him, then turned away, back towards the supine figure on the first bed. Harry stepped aside to allow Draco inclusion, and the break in the small wall of bodies gave him room to see the face of the occupant of the second bed, propped up on his side, jaw resting in his palm as he, too, looked on at the as yet unawake person in the first bed. The two men looked remarkably similar. They looked remarkably like his cousin, Sirius Black. He glanced between them several times, trying to pick out the differences, and found none to speak of. Then, the second man glanced up, his eyes flickered to Draco, then past him, and alighted on Narcissa.

He jumped from the bed and hurried over, eyes bright with excitement. “Cissy,” he said happily, and Draco turned to see his mother’s mouth open ever so slightly—so obviously surprised that she had been unable to contain it. “I didn’t know you were here! And this must be your son...he doesn’t look
much like a Rosier—"

Narcissa’s eyes went comically wide. “He isn’t,” she managed to get out, before the comforting hand on Draco’s shoulder turned to dead weight, and he saw her eye’s flicker upwards.

“Mum!” Draco said, grabbing her before she tumbled to the stone floor. He hadn’t seen his mother faint since the time he’d broken his clavicle after an ill-advised attempt at the Wronski feint, when he was four. He’d made feint-faint jokes for weeks after, but Mum had not found them funny, and his father had said that puns were the lowest form of humour. Eyes wide, the Sirius look-alike grabbed her other side and they lifted her thin body onto the closest bed. Madam Pomfrey rushed round with a jar of smelling salts and a bar of chocolate.

The salts woke her quickly, but she politely ignored the chocolate in favour of staring aghast at the strange man. Her dramatic reaction had elicited the interest of the other group of people, but, thankfully, only Harry came over.

“Are you okay, Mrs. Malfoy?” he asked worriedly.

She gave him a polite smile. “Quite well, thank you, Harry. I was only startled; for a moment, this man sounded like my dear, dead cousin—"

“Regulus,” the man interjected, white teeth gleaming in a happy, feral smile. “That’s me.”

Her eyes threatened to roll back again, but this time Draco had the jar of smelling salts handy. “Oh, don’t you dare,” he said, pushing it under her nose. She wrinkled it in distaste, but politely did not faint again. He handed her the chocolate again, and when she shook her head, he gave her a look that clearly said that he was not above making an embarrassing scene if she didn’t eat it. His mum took it, and ate several bites, under duress.

“That wasn’t very nice of you,” Harry chided the man. “You’ve only been here a few hours and you’ve scared just about everyone so far. He turned to Draco and explained, “To spare you our Uncle Regulus’ rather verbose story-tellings, he pissed off Voldemort before we were born and was punished by being made a werewolf. He’s roamed with a pack on the continent off and on since then, coming back to England only to be a nuisance and pretend to be my father.” Turning to Narcissa, he added, “He disappeared from the tapestry with a variant of the same blood rite that has been used on the Orphans, basically becoming my father so that Regulus would be dead.”

“That’s quite a way to face your fears,” Narcissa said, after a long moment. Her voice was still weak, but she had a certain gleam in her eyes. “Do you remember when Bella gave you a plush werewolf for Yule—"

“I do,” Regulus said shortly. “I’d rather forget it, as well. It gave me nightmares for months.”

“The nightmare hex on it may’ve had something to do with that,” Mum said casually. Regulus’ eyes went abnormally wide, and Narcissa continued, “You never did steal our Mdme. Magnificent’s Most Magical Self-Tying Hair Ribbons after that, though, did you?”

The door opened and Dumbledore entered, unconcerned as usual as to everything going on around him. He came to the bed where Narcissa still sat and the three of them crowded around her. “What a lovely surprise...good morning, Madam Malfoy,” he said. Then nodded to the rest of them, “Mr. Malfoy, Misters Black.”

“Headmaster,” Mum replied, and Draco gave a tight smile.

“I wonder if I may have a word with you regarding the Dementor that your family keeps at one of
your properties.”

“We have a Dementor?” Draco asked, aghast.

“Only a small one,” his mother replied. “Nothing to be concerned about.”

Nothing had prepared Hermione for the intensity of this...this...educational experiment. That was how she convinced herself to go along with it; it was educational. She needed to know how wards worked, even if she had no intention whatsoever of ever using a Hecatomb Ward.

“Next, please,” Professor Sinclair called, and Hermione stepped forward on trembling legs. She’d seen Stonehenge before—of course she had; her parents had taken her several times—but she’d never seen it like this...never felt quite so connected to the standing stones and the magical energy around her as she did now. She knelt before the altar stone in the centre of the monument and placed her first ever copy of *Hogwarts, A History* on the soft ground in front of her. The ward would be stronger with animal sacrifices, but they were children yet, and this was merely a learning experience.

The other seventh years followed suit in alphabetical order; in her magic-high daze, she barely noticed Neville deposit a fine, extremely expensive, cutting of his prized Mimbulus Mimbletonia, or her much-loved Theo as he laid down a square of gold cloth he’d privately admitted was from his dead mother’s wedding robe. When, finally, the W’s came and went and Ron’s name was absent, her heart gave a little tug, and she smiled gratefully as Theo rejoined her in the clump of people outside the circle of stones.

“Are you okay?” he asked her, confused. “We’re not slaughtering sheep, here.”

Hermione nodded, shivering in the cold bite of the wind. “I’m fine; I don’t know what’s come over me.” She craned her neck and peered over the crowd of nearly a hundred other seventh years. “No sign of Harry or Malfoy still?”

“None,” Theo said, absently renewing their warming charm. “But Professor Snape was looking rather annoyed this morning so I’m sure everything is fine.”

She couldn’t help giggling. “Everything is fine so long as Snape is annoyed and not worried.”

Professor Sinclair called for their attention as Blaise, the last of the seventh years, set his offering down in front of the altar stone. “That is ninety-seven student offerings; myself, Professor Flitwick, and Professor Llewellyn have also provided an offering each, so we have performed the foundation of this piece of magic with one hundred offerings laid.” Hermione did not need the reminder of who the three missing students were.

Sinclair and the Ancient Runes professor, Laura Llewellyn, exited the monument then and came to stand before the students as Professor Flitwick cast a protective charm over the items so the winter wind wouldn’t catch them and carry them away.

“Who can tell me the next step in the process?” Professor Sinclair asked. Morag MacDougal raised her hand and said that next to do was the rune-work, to stabilize the magical energy around the area to be warded, so that the Hecatomb would always be evenly strong—not overpowered one day and susceptible to falling with a well-placed *Finite Incantatem* the next.

“That’s right,” Professor Llewellyn said in her quick, nasally voice. “And what runes in particular do
you think we use here, on the Hecatomb Ward?"

“How about Eihwaz?” Dean asked. “It’s used for endurance and defence.”

“Yes, and dependability, too,” Professor Llewellyn agreed, “which we would certainly want in a ward around our homes. What else?”

“Algiz, perhaps,” Pansy said slowly. “We would want the ward to be a protective shield.”

The professor nodded, smiling. “Yes, another good option in that vein. Tell me, though, what else do we want in a ward, besides defence and shielding?”

“What about hiding it, like with an Unplottable addendum?” asked Susan Bones. “We could use Laguz for that.”

“A nice idea, and certainly one to be considered if you ever cast this over your own home,” Professor Llewellyn allowed, “but perhaps not the best choice for a public monument like Stonehenge. I do believe the muggles would soon be in a panic if it suddenly disappeared.”

Susan nodded thoughtfully, and the professor gestured for more suggestions. “Come now, students,” she said. “We are forgetting a very important aspect to the ward. Arguably, we could place any of a handful of runes in this spell, but we are forgetting a very important piece of this puzzle. We have the protection, and we have the location; what are we missing?”

There was a rustle of heavy cloaks as the students shifted from foot to foot; cold and stumped. Blaise suddenly spoke up from Theo’s other side. “The human aspect,” he said. “The ward needs to be attached to the magic of a wizard or no one will be able to control it.” He paused, thinking, then said. “That would be best interpreted by the Mannaz, though I suppose one could use Ingwaz or Perthro if one wanted it to only be able to be controlled by either a man or a woman.”

“Exactly!” Llewellyn said. “And what happens when a ward is cast without the human element interwoven?”

“Hogwarts,” Zacharias Smith said from the other side of the crowd. “Given the right circumstances, and a good amount of time, the magic will gain a degree of sentience that no wizard can control, like the staircases in Hogwarts.” His mother, standing with the other chaperones off to the side, gave a pleased smile.

“Can wards like that be broken?” the professor asked.

“No,” Smith said, shaking his head. “Well, not really. Only if the ward wants to be dissolved will it allow it. When it becomes sentient, no wizard can affect it at all...so we ought to be thankful that Hogwarts loves its students.” There was a smattering of nervous laughter as the students contemplated an idea they’d taken for granted for so long.

“Very good,” Professor Sinclair spoke up. “Five points to everyone who provided an answer and seven points to Mr Smith. After much research, Professor Llewellyn has indeed confirmed that Eihwaz, Algiz and Mannaz are the appropriate runes for this ward, so now that we have our foundation in the sacrifices and our runes to shape the ward, we are only missing one vital piece to our Hecatomb, and that is the charm itself. Filius?”

Professor Flitwick was standing atop one of the fallen stones, but it only gave him another foot of height and he was still shorter than Hermione, who was one of the more petite seventh years. “As each of you will be performing the spell, if done correctly, the end result will be each of you supporting a very small piece of the ward we will place around the Stonehenge. This will feel akin to
the magical exhaustion you experience after casting several strong *Accios*, and it will go away after a few hours and a nourishing lunch, to get your energy back up. Once the new ward acclimates to its charge and settles around it, it will be able to maintain itself without a drain on your magical energy.”

He lifted his wand and demonstrated the movement. “I trust you all know your movements and the incantation?” Flitwick asked. There was a murmur of assent, and Professor Sinclair smiled at them. “Wands out then, please.”

Hermione raised her wand.

“On three!” said the Charms Master. “One! Two! Three!”

“Centum animus pro centum clausus!” said one-hundred voices. Hermione’s wand traced the shapes of the Eihwaz, Algiz and Mannaz runes with careful precision. With each successive stroke, and each repetition of the incantation, she felt the magic inside her bubbling up in excitement and flowing down through her wand arm, to the Dragon Heartstring core of her wand, where it burst forth in bright, glimmering light.

Next to her, Theo was grinning with the exuberance of casting such an old spell, and as she maintained the channelling of the ward spell, she glanced around to see that the same glimmering light was coming from every other wand—cascading over the stones and the grass of the countryside like a soft blanket, and as it travelled, the air around them became warm and comforting and it tingled as it swept over her, testing her heart and her magical strength, and deciding that she was indeed worthy of creating it.

Finally, the pull on her magic died down, and Hermione felt the last of it flow from her wand and settle into the glowing barrier around the Stonehenge. She took a deep breath, felt Theo’s arm slip around her waist in pretence of steadying her.

“Shit!” Dean breathed, voice soft with awe. Hermione followed his gaze to the fields surrounding the monument. She saw the delicate spirals of compressed grass that the wandering magic had made, and felt as if she were about to giggle, and if she did, she wouldn’t be able to stop ever. It wasn’t wheat or corn, but the grass was indeed tall enough to make out the indentions left by the Hecatomb magic.

“Oh my days,” she said.

“What is it?” Theo asked, quite confused.

“We’ve just made a crop circle,” she said. He looked more closely, eyes squinting.

“A what now?”

She did laugh then, happy and care-free from the magical high. “Nothing,” she said. “It’s a muggle thing.” She settled further back into his embrace and sighed happily. The other seventh years were milling about rather absently; even the purebloods like Zacharias Smith and Theo looked a bit dazed. The Professors were the only ones unaffected, and they moved about cleaning up the mess of glittery ashes that was all that remained of the one-hundred sacrifices.

The students found places on the now-warmed grass within their new ward and Professor Llewellyn called for a house elf from Hogwarts to bring out the picnic lunches that had been prepared for the occasion. Port-key travel would be unadvised for adolescent wizards and witches after such a substantial magical expenditure, so they were to enjoy the rest of the afternoon around the standing stones while they rested.

Hermione settled on a spot on the north side of the monument with Theo, and Seamus, Dean and
Neville joined them, too. A Hogwarts elf appeared before them and with a few flicks of his long, spindly fingers, produced a warm blanket beneath them and a Bottomless Basket of food and juice for them before disappearing with another flick of his wrist.

“That was amazin’,” Seamus said, first to stick his hand—shoulder deep—into the basket and root around for something to eat. He pulled out a large goblet of Thistle Tea and chucked it back in with a grimace. It failed to spill, and he next retrieved a bottle of Butter Beer and a plate of bangers and mash with a happy smile. “Did yeh feel it gettin’ all warm and such in your fingers?”

Hermione happily took Seamus’ discarded Thistle Tea from the basket and smiled when Theo handed her a plate of rather more healthy fare.

“I did,” Neville said. “It was wicked! Almost like the tingling you get re-potting Tibetan Tingle Tubers.”

Theo kept one arm around her waist while he ate with the other, so he noticed when Hermione suddenly tensed, and like a natural Slytherin, he didn’t react outwardly, just glanced at her with a certain look. She subtly touched her mouth with her napkin to indicate that, yes, her mouth was indeed on fire with the call of the Dark Mark.

She took a sip of tea to steady herself and made a show of glancing around at the scenery, but what both she and Theo were really looking for was indication that she wasn’t the only one being called. Several metres away, Blaise and Pansy sat stiff-backed and alert while Goyle seemed to prattle on completely unaware. Theo squeezed her waist and tilted his head towards a group of Hufflepuffs, where Zacharias Smith’s mother served tea with tightly pressed lips and occasional glances at Professor Sinclair nearby. Tea served, Mrs Smith stood with an overly bright smile and a pat to Zach’s shoulder, before moving off to the other side of the Stonehenge with the Defence professor.

The burn in Hermione’s mouth subsided to an ache as she grew accustomed to it, but it persisted, and after several more long minutes, Pansy led her group of Slytherins over to their group under the pretence of talking about a recent Potions assignment.

She sat primly next to Hermione, ignoring Seamus’ annoyed glare and Neville’s confusion when Crabbe sat next to him and offered him a yeti-milk chocolate biscuit in exchange for a half-eaten caramel cream-cake, and then proceeded to enumerate the odds of there being a second yeti-milk chocolate biscuit in one of their two baskets.

“Professor Snape expects three feet on the comparative uses of hellebore and peppermint?” Pansy said, neglecting any sort of greeting at all. She rolled her eyes at Hermione, as if they were sharing a joke, then said, “I don’t see what else there is to talk about other than those two Hufflepuff elixirs.”

Blaise smirked. “It sounds like you could do with a Draught of Peace yourself, Pansy.”

Hermione caught on immediately. “Do you think he meant for us to show the ironic effects they have when mixed with certain bases to create potions that cause positive emotions?”

“Hellebore I do understand,” Pansy said, “but peppermint? My mother washes the baby’s clothes in it; I don’t see how it can be harmful at all.”

“Overuse is thought to cause liver damage in wizards with broken hearts,” Neville spoke up, having successfully conducted a trade with Crabbe. “And as the liver is the organ of the humour blood, which is also characterized by courage, hope and desire, the irony lies in the belief that the smell of peppermint makes you happy and carefree. So, self-medicating with it can lead to a never-ending cycle of sad-happiness and happy-sadness…and of course the liver failure, which would require a
liver-transfiguration to fix. Very expensive and risky.”

“Quite true,” Blaise said. “My mother said my brother Biagio’s father was overly fond of peppermint. She found him in his study in quite a stupor, up to his pointed ears in the stuff... it was very sad that because she’d just spent the day magi-crocheting baby blankets for Biagio’s impending birth that she didn’t have the energy to get him to hospital in time, though she tried very hard.”

There was a short, heavy silence. “Right,” Theo said finally. “Very sad indeed.” Blaise offered a small, ironic smirk.

“Don’t you have another brother?” Neville asked awkwardly. “One in the Ministry?”

“Bastian,” Blaise said, nodding. “He’s the eldest.”

“And—ah—is his father—ah—still with us?” Dean wanted to know.

“I’m afraid not,” Blaise said, quite seriously. “An unfortunate splinching incident. Can’t go long without your head, I’m sad to say.”

“And what about your father?” Theo asked, amused. “Remind me of his status.”

“A rogue Dementor attack on their honeymoon in Romania,” Blaise said. “Lucky that I was conceived mere hours beforehand.”

“Lucky, indeed,” Pansy said dryly. Hermione was impressed that they’d engineered the conversation as well as they had, because surely the Dementors were on the forefront of every student’s mind who’d felt a call of the Dark Mark. What else could have been so urgent that Voldemort saw fit to alert students at such an hour of the day, when they would obviously be in classes and unable to attend to him?

But it didn’t feel the same way as it had when Voldemort had actually called her to him, and as none of the others were jumping up and finding ways to leave, either, Hermione took it to be only a warning, and so she kept alert, as Blaise and Pansy and Theo did, and as Mrs Smith and Prof Sinclair did, many metres away from them.

“I wonder,” Pansy said, fooling only the other Gryffindors, “if Professor Snape means for us to find a way to fight off Dementors with the Draught of Peace or the Elixir of Elation?”

“Dementors!” Seamus exclaimed. He shivered dramatically. “Right nasty things. I hope I never see another one again.”

“Me, too,” Hermione said, but she had a feeling that wish wouldn’t be granted for either of them. Beside her, Theo continued his wary watch on the countryside. The Hecatomb Ward would protect them; she hoped it would anyway.

Mrs Smith approached a moment later and dropped a ratty copy of Macbeth on the empty grass in the middle of their circle. “Here you go, children,” she said brightly. “One port-key back to the Hogwarts Great Hall when you feel ready to take it...and please, don’t activate it before everyone in your group is touching it,” she added.

There was a murmur of thanks from their group and she moved off to the next group, a cluster of Hufflepuffs playing Exploding Snap, with another overly nice smile. Ernie Macmillan’s mother and Michael Corner’s father were passing out port-keys as well, while the three professors spoke quietly with a small, flying Patronus that could only be from an Order member.
Pansy met Hermione’s eyes pointedly. They were supposed to spend the rest of the afternoon here, but if the chaperones were passing out port-keys already, something was definitely not right.

And she didn’t have to wait long to find out what it was; she had barely finished eating when the inherent warmth of their new ward began to falter, and coldness descended over them like a thick, damp fog. Dean was the first to see them—dark, heavy shapes that seemed to blur in and out of existence. They could’ve been mistaken for shadows, but Hannah Abbott’s scream of terror left no room for doubt. The dark shapes of the Dementors pressed forward at an alarming speed, no doubt drawn to the post-spell euphoria most of the students were feeling.

“Holy mother of Merlin,” Pansy said, standing. There must’ve been at least three dozen of them, twice as many as had ever been present during their third year at Hogwarts, but clumped together as they were, they looked like a huge black wave of death rolling in.

Blaise and Theo had their wands drawn, and Hermione belatedly drew hers as well, too shocked to react appropriately. She’d never expected to see so many Dementors at one time.

“What do you think?” Blaise was asking Theo. “A masking charm so they can’t find us, and a banishing hex to send them away?”

“Masking what?” Neville asked. He, too, had his wand drawn. “Why don’t we just take the port-key?”

“Emotions,” Pansy said shortly. She tilted her head down to Crabbe and Goyle, who still looked a bit dazed. “They can’t take it. They haven’t recovered their strength yet.”

“What good would masking our emotions do?” Dean asked. “They’re headed right for us.”

“Dementors can’t see, visually,” Theo said quietly. “They sense us by our feelings. If we block them, it might give us enough time and clarity to banish them.”

“Or,” Seamus said, as if they were all idiots, “we could cast our Patronuses.” Su Li and Mandy Brocklehurst were screaming in the background, and Hannah Abbott had fainted yet again.

Pansy sneered at him. “You can,” she said, “but some of us haven’t participated in illegal extracurricular activities, and thusly, can’t cast it.”

He shrugged at her and produced his fox Patronus after only two attempts. It sat by his feet scratching its ears and yipping angrily in the direction of the Dementors. Neville and Hermione got theirs on the first try, but she felt an inexplicable weariness after casting it, and leant further into Theo’s arm to support herself. He noticed it, but his expression, like the other Slytherins, was cool; they had decided to go ahead with the masking charm to at least make themselves less noticeable. Crabbe and Goyle stood silently staring at the foul black monsters, the spell having been cast for them by Pansy, and Hermione wondered if Slytherins used a form of this spell every day, because they didn’t look much different from their normal public expressions.

“Attention!” Professor Flitwick’s Sonorus’d voice called urgently. “Students strong enough to not be injured by port-key travel, please take the port-keys in groups of five. Students who have passed the Side-Along portion of their apparation tests and who are recovered enough to do so, please help your fellow students who cannot take the port-keys. Parental chaperones will be assisting with Side-Alongs. We will apparate to the main square in Hogsmeade; prefects will be responsible for assuring that each member of their house is accounted for in Hogsmeade. Now hurry!”
“We need to stay until all the students are safely away,” Hermione said, indicating herself and Theo.

“I can’t Side-Along,” Blaise admitted. “Someone’s got to get Greg and Vince.”

Seamus and Dean shook their heads. “We haven’t even taken our apparition tests yet.”

“I have,” Neville said, “and I passed the Side-Along part, but I’ve only done it the one time, with the proctor.” He looked nervous.

Pansy glanced quickly at the clamour around them, obviously looking for another alternative, but all of the other students who could were already port-keying and apparating away, and it was unlikely that she’d convince a Hufflepuff to take either of the Slytherins back anyway. She nodded. “Okay, Longbottom. You take Vince since he’s lighter. I’ll take Greg, and Blaise can port-key with the others.”

They apparated away, and Blaise led Seamus and Dean over to where Millicent stood with six other Hufflepuffs, none of whom would take the single port-key because there were more than five of them there.

Hermione felt Theo’s arm tighten around her waist as they were left alone without a port-key. “Do you want me to do the masking charm on you?” Theo asked her.

She shook her head. “No, I might not be able to keep up my Patronus if I can’t be happy.”

“All right then,” Theo said. “Let’s go make sure everyone gets to Hogsmeade. Hecatomb Ward or not, I don’t want to risk it with these demonic creatures.”

Draco was quite amused at the arrangements his mother made with the Headmaster, even if he valued his life enough not to mention it aloud. Dumbledore was a master of subtlety; it was indeed a shame that he’d not been a Slytherin because then Draco might’ve liked him, instead of merely tolerating him. A Dementor, indeed! He thought. The secrets his family had surprised even him some times, but he supposed it was lucky that this particular Dementor had probably saved him a detention—or worse.

“Mr Malfoy,” Snape’s voice said from behind him. Draco turned, saw the Potions professor staring at him, rage simmering within his black eyes. “Detention. My office. First thing after classes when you return from your Yule break.” Draco deflated. So much for that, but he was thankful he hadn’t been expelled, at least. He hadn’t done anything evil, per se, but just casting Old Magic at all was grounds for punishment in many circles.

He sensed Harry stiffen at Snape’s words, though the other boy was several feet away, speaking to his newly awoken father, but Snape did not give Harry detention, too, much to Draco’s—admittedly unfounded—annoyance. The Potions Master simply stalked out of the Infirmary without a backwards glance. Draco pretended not to notice when, after a desperate look at Harry, the Weaslette followed.

A small, ghostly hummingbird flew in and began speaking to the Headmaster, bizarrely, in Flitwick’s voice. “The Defence students will be returning early. Poppy may need to prepare for possible splinchings and magical exhaustion,” it said, and then dissipated into nothingness.

“If you will excuse me, Madam Malfoy,” Dumbledore said. “I must see to this, but I look forward to our meeting over the holidays.”
“Likewise,” his mum said. She waited until the Headmaster was out of the room, and Pomfrey’s attention had turned to collecting Limb Locating and Pepper-Up potions before saying, “You are quite close to Harry Black, it seems.”

Draco shrugged. “Father did say before that I should be his friend.”

Narcissa’s mouth quirked. “I recall he said that before your first year began, and I also recall your lamentations over Yule break that Harry Potter was entirely impossible to befriend, and a...what did you call him?—ah, yes, a ‘raging wanker’.”

Draco grimaced. “And Father made me accompany him to three Wizengamot sessions for it—I learned my lesson if ever there was one.”

Narcissa made an amused sound, but her face was entirely blank and pleasant when Harry came over a moment later.

“Hey,” he said, quite articulately, as per usual. Draco rolled his eyes. “Mrs Malfoy,” he added belatedly. She gave him a gracious nod in return. “So you got detention?”

“Yes,” Draco said, again quite annoyed with the whole thing.

“Mr Black,” his mother said, before Draco could get a proper rant going. “I wonder if you knew that your mother was once a good friend of mine.”

Draco almost felt the stunned wonder rush through Harry, so obvious was his excitement. The Gryffindor sat heavily on the bed opposite his mother, no attention left for anything else around him, even Draco. “Really?” he asked.

She nodded, a small smile gracing her lips. “Yes, since our first year. She had the bunk next to mine in Ravenclaw Tower; we would stay up late at night and try to create new beauty charms together...and if we came up with a working draft to a spell, it was Severus Snape’s unfortunate happenstance to be our guinea pixie.

“I believe they backfired,” Harry said, face straight, but there was another look in his eyes...one that looked a whole lot like longing, and so Draco wisely kept his mouth shut, and let his mum say as much as she liked about Harry’s mother.

Narcissa’s lips quirked. “Yes, perhaps they did. By our third year, we were owl ordering pre-spelled charms from Beatrice Beau’s Beauty Emporium. Of course, we didn’t need them, but it was fun to do.”

“Of course,” Harry said, now grinning. “And did my mum have lots of friends?”

“Very many,” Narcissa agreed. “Some from every house. She was the most sociable Ravenclaw ever to walk the halls of Hogwarts, if you ask me. Severus and she had been good friends since even before school; they lived in the same neighbourhood. She was particular friends with Alice Merrythought of Hufflepuff, and I believe that’s how she developed such an aversion to James Potter and Frank Longbottom, who began sabotaging their Herbology study sessions in our fourth year. Pixie-tail pulling, you understand.

“But my cousins Sirius and Regulus were always very kind to her, which galled James to no end. Bellatrix told me after we left Hogwarts that he was the one who paid her 17 galleons to start the ‘mud-blood’ rumour about Lily that year, so that he could then sweep in and be her knight in shining Protego charms. Men will do strange things for the woman they desire...he was a good man, though. Never think that he wasn’t, and he would’ve been a good father to you had he lived. He loved Lily
very much, but like a lot of men, he didn’t know quite how to show it, until her heart was already
given away to another—“

She stopped suddenly and gave Harry an overly bright smile. “I’m sure she’d be very proud of you,”
she said then. And after a pregnant pause, added, “I still miss her very much. She was always my
dearest friend.”

The Infirmary doors burst open then and cut off anything else Narcissa may’ve said, much to Harry’s
displeasure. He’d so longed to know more about her years at Hogwarts, but then the people bustling
into the room pushed all thought of his mother from his mind.

He rushed over to the bed where Hermione was being laid, and all but pushed Professor Llewellyn
out of the way. “What happened? Is she—? She’s not...is she?”

“Only Stunned, Mr Black,” Flitwick answered shortly. “For the pain.” He was lowering a Hermione
onto the bed and Theo Nott was standing behind him, eyes steady on the wand, as if he’d much
rather do it himself.

“Splinched herself,” Professor Llewellyn added. “Look, there,” she said, and Harry noticed the thick
bandages covering her left hand. Even now, blood was starting to seep through in dark, red patches.

“I’ve her fingers here,” Professor Sinclair said, rushing in. “She left them in the grass at Stonehenge.”

“Give them here, then,” Madam Pomfrey said. She took over the proceedings with unnatural
efficiency. “We don’t have a lot of time to get them reattached if she wants to keep full use of those
fingers.”

“What?” Nott said, face pale. “She needs her fingers! She’s ambidextrous! How will she do two
homework assignments at once if she doesn’t have both hands?”

“Move, Mr Nott,” Pomfrey said, “or I’ll put you out.”

He stepped back very quickly, and gave Harry a tense look. “What if something’s wrong with her?”
he asked very quietly. “She’s been rather pale lately, and she doesn’t eat much. What if she’s sick?
What if she’s got Welsh Wasting Disease?”

“That only happens in Wales, Nott,” Harry said, but he was worried, too. He caught movement
behind him, and turned, unsurprised to find the Dark Lord standing behind him, looking over his
shoulder as if it were completely normal.

“Don’t speak,” Voldemort said, studying Hermione’s hand with a detached air. Professors and
Pomfrey bustled around and through him without seeing him, and even Nott, right next to Harry,
saw nothing. “You don’t want them to think you’re insane, do you?”

Harry merely looked at him.

“I felt her lose consciousness through the Mark,” Voldemort explained, “and thought nothing of it
until I felt your worry come through as well. “Splinched, I see. Tsk, tsk. Such a clever, careful witch,
and yet she still manages to splinch herself. “

“Hermione’s a good apparator,” Theo said to the adults. He was getting more and more agitated by
the minute. “She never forgets a piece.”
“The Dementors could have broken her concentration,” Professor Sinclair said.

“Dementors?” Draco said, silent until that point. He left his position at his mother’s side and strode over to Nott. “What were Dementors doing there?”

“Seem to be everywhere nowadays, don’t they?” he replied absentely. His focus was too absolute on Hermione for much else.

McGonagall rushed in then, with Dumbledore following at a more sedate pace. “Granger splinched herself?” she asked, quite upset. “What did she lose? Not a leg or...dear Merlin, not her head, did she?” She peered over petite Madame Pomfrey’s head and sighed with relief. “Thank goodness, only a finger.”

“Three fingers,” Professor Llewellyn corrected. “Poppy’s put the other two back on.”

“Three!” McGonagall exclaimed. “What on earth was going on there?”

“I believe I heard that there was a number of Dementors present,” the Headmaster spoke up. He was eyeing Harry very closely, though, and Harry was doing his best to look unassuming.

“Mrs Smith informed me as soon as she arrived with Zacharias.” He exchanged a glance with Professor McGonagall and she nodded.

“Oh, an Order meeting tonight,” Voldemort guessed, most likely correctly. “Cutting it a bit close. And I believe he knows I’m here, even if he can’t see me.” Harry stiffened, the only sign he gave that he was terrified Voldemort might be right.

“Oh do relax,” the Dark Lord said. “And tell the Mediwitch not to administer that Nerve Repair potion; it has mugwort in it.” Harry tried very hard to express how much he didn’t want to do that. Hermione needed the nerves in her fingers, and allergic reactions to mugwort weren’t quite as common as a St. Mungo’s pamphlet would have you believe.

“Do it,” Voldemort said, more forcefully. “Or she may lose more than the use of her fingers.”

Harry had no idea what that meant, but it sounded an awful lot like she might die, and that just wasn’t acceptable. “Don’t give her the green one, Madame Pomfrey,” Harry said.

The mediwitch gave him a scowl. “She may not regain the use of those fingers if I don’t, Mr Black.”

“It has mugwort in it,” he said, as if that explained everything. Maybe it would to them. He was pants in Herbology, though, so he really had no idea.

“Mr Black!” McGonagall exclaimed, at the same time as Nott’s face morphed into the most broken expression Harry had ever seen on a Slytherin. Pomfrey and Flitwick were giving him matching expressions of surprise. “What are you saying?”

“I—I don’t know,” Harry said.

“Are you and Ms Granger...?” McGonagall started, but she couldn’t seem to find the right words. “Are you having a sexual relationship?”

“What? No!” Harry exclaimed. What were these people on about? Behind him, Voldemort was chuckling. He ignored him in favour of glancing at Draco for some help. And in typical Draco fashion, he diverted their attention away from Harry.

“She does look a little fatter, doesn’t she?” Draco said, nodding towards the bed.
“Hermione’s not fat,” Harry said indignantly. Honestly. If she weighed as much as a fifth year, he’d be surprised.

Nevertheless, the adults turned their attention back to the girl on the bed, studying her with some degree of thought. With an exasperated huff, Madam Pomfrey swished her wand several times over Hermione’s still form and recited a few words. A blue glow emanated from her, and then slowly formed over Theo, too.

“Mr Nott!” McGonagall then exclaimed indignantly, but Theo was deaf to her. He stared down at the blue aura surrounding his body and then at Hermione’s with such shock that Harry wasn’t sure whether to laugh or comfort him.

Draco laughed. “Well done, Nott!”

“Mr Malfoy,” Pomfrey said angrily, “Please go fetch Professor Snape’s copy of Healer John Axons’ You’ve Got Some Nerve. We’re going to have to find another way to save these nerves, and quick. Pregnant women apparating. Honestly!” Draco left without another word, and Harry was left staring at Nott’s still shocked face.

“Erm, she’s pregnant?” he asked quietly. Theo nodded without looking up. “Congratulations?”

Theo nodded again. “She didn’t tell me.”

“Maybe she didn’t know,” Harry suggested.

“Maybe,” Theo said, but he didn’t look like he believed it. Then he sank down onto the bed behind him and groaned. “My Granddad is going to kill me.”

“Her parents must be informed,” McGonagall was saying.

“She’s eighteen,” Professor Flitwick said. “We can’t.”

“About her fingers, I meant,” McGonagall said. She looked sadly down at the bed. “So young, and she had another hundred years to do this.”

Harry looked around for some guidance on how to handle this, but the Dark Lord had left as quietly as he came. How had he known?

Draco knocked on Professor Snape’s office door, but didn’t bother waiting for an invitation. As much as Granger annoyed him, he didn’t want to be the reason she lost use of three fingers. Out of breath from running the entire length of the castle and down four sets of stairs, he pushed the door open and stepped in.

“Professor Snape, Madam Pomfrey needs your copy of—” he stopped. Snape was sitting behind his desk, face livid red and Ginny Weasley was standing over him, voice hard with anger as she argued with him. They both looked up as Draco spoke, eyes wide. “So, Professor Snape knows, too,” he guessed.

“This is none of your business,” Snape said, eyes flashing.

Draco shut the door behind him. He acceded to this fact. “Granger’s splinched her fingers off, and she’s pregnant, so Madam Pomfrey can’t use the standard nerve repair potion on her. She needs your copy of—”
Snape was already at his bookshelf. He pulled a vibrant purple book from the shelf and handed it over. “Tell her the best bet is in chapter fourteen, ‘Flexible Fingers and Ticklish Toes’.”

Draco took it with a nod opened the door to leave.

“Mr Malfoy?” Snape called. At Draco’s turn, he said, “Let Mr Nott know that his presence will be required in detention for the remainder of the school year, to begin at 7pm sharp Tuesday after we return from Yule holidays. And fifty points each from Slytherin and Gryffindor for inadequate use of a contraception charm, by the Heads, no less,” he added with a disappointed shake of his head.

By lunch, Hermione was awake and informed, but Madam Pomfrey had ruled that neither she nor Harry and Draco could leave with the other students on the train back to London for holidays. They were all under observation until dinner, at which point Narcissa would be allowed to apparate home with Draco, and Sirius with Harry, and Professor McGonagall would floo with Hermione to Diagon Alley to meet her parents, who would be informed only that she’d suffered a minor magical accident. It was still uncertain as to whether she would regain full use of her fingers; she could wiggle them slightly, but had no feeling in them whatsoever. Nott had refused to leave while Hermione was still there, and his grandmother would be meeting him in Hogsmeade at dinner to apparate home with him.

“How are you feeling?” Harry asked, as soon as the mediwitch and the professors had cleared out. Nott was down in the kitchens being chivalrous and amassing a huge basket of food for her, in case she got hungry.

“Tired as usual lately,” she said. She gave him a small smile. “It’s a bit of a shock...I didn’t want to think...anyway. What’s done is done, and I’ll just have to figure out how to deal with it.”

“Nott will help you,” Harry said.

She laughed. “I know he will, but it does put a bit of a damper on things, doesn’t it? So much for going to Oxford Magical Division when I’ve got a baby.”

Harry grimaced. “I don’t know why you’d want to do that anyway.” He twisted the bed sheets nervously. “What are your parents going to say?”

She shrugged, looking suddenly a lot less chipper. “They’ll be supportive...after they’ve gotten over the disappointment.”

Nott returned then, arms laden with the most bizarre mix of fruit, vegetables, and sweets. He set them down proudly on a conjured table next to Hermione’s bed, and she gave him a smile of thanks. “I know you just got back, but Madam Pomfrey won’t let me leave, and—“

“Whatever you want,” Theo said quickly. Harry wanted to gag.

“There’re a few books in the library that I’d like to read over holidays,” she said, and then listed off a dozen books related to pregnancy and child rearing. Nott was gone again on his new mission before Harry could even blink.

“Now his family,” Hermione said, when Nott was safely out of earshot. “I don’t know what to expect from them. His father’s in Azkaban and his mother’s dead. His grandmother is fairly liberal, as far as that sort of thing goes anyway, so she will probably be open to the idea of me being a muggle-born, but she’s likely to not be very open with the both of us still being in school and
unmarried. I don’t know what to think of his grandfather at all; Theo doesn’t talk about him much.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Harry said, for lack of anything better. Then, “Just one question, Hermione: Voldemort was the one who warned me about the mugwart. How did he know?”

“I think he felt another body present when I was taking the Dark Mark. I had a bad reaction to it, and he seemed a little taken aback by it.”

“Oh,” Harry said. He fiddled his fingers, glanced at Hermione’s now wrapped in slightly thinner bandages. “I’m sure it’ll be fine,” he said, when she glanced down, too.

“Of course it will!” a jubilant voice exclaimed. They turned to the door where Sirius had just entered, Professor Lupin and Regulus following behind with equal looks of exhaustion. Sirius could do that to a person. “I’ve just spoken to your parents over the floo, Hermione—it just so happened that I walked in on McGonagall’s floo conference with them, lucky, lucky. And a nice house you have there, from what I could see through the fireplace—Georgian, is it? Your Yule tree was measly, though, so I invited your family to mine and Harry’s house for the holiday, and—you’re welcome—it’ll give you a nice safe place to hide if they decide to kill you.” He smiled, quite pleased with himself.

“It’s been a few years since we’ve had Christmas together,” Harry said, grinning at her. She smiled back.

“Which of course meant that I had to get in touch with Kathryn and Edgar Nott and see if they would like to join us with Theo—wouldn’t want them to be alone for Yule, you know. Narcissa has agreed to a cease-fire with me and won’t sell me out to the Dark Lord anymore, so I told her she and Draco could come, but Lucius could only come if he was on his best un-twatty behaviour...And I’ve also managed to convince another family to join us for a few days,” Sirius added. They gave him a curious look. “...A redheaded family?”

“Ron!” Harry and Hermione exclaimed.

“I knew you’d like that part,” Sirius said with a wry smirk. “Molly’s said he’s been behaving very well, and she’s quite pleased with his progress, so she’s letting him stay for the whole duration, and Ginny and the twins will visit for a few days.”

Hermione was practically bouncing with excitement. “Oh, this is going to be so lovely! I was getting so worried when Ron didn’t write, but this is wonderful! Thank you, Sirius!”

He left again after another minute of ‘How are you feeling’s and Harry was once again alone with his friend. This new development was...a lot to take it. He couldn’t imagine Hermione as a mother.

“I do have something else I wanted to talk to you about,” she said then. “Especially since we’ll see each other over the holidays. My research that I’ve been doing,” she said pointedly, “I think I’ve made a breakthrough on it. I want to attempt an experimental test, but I’m not sure I can now.” She glanced at her stomach to clarify, and Harry nodded.

“What have you found?” he asked.

The door opened and Theo returned then, levitating a large stack of books before him. He craned his head around them as he guided them to the conjured table next to Hermione’s bed. “All right?” he asked.

She smiled. “Yes, thank you. Theo, I was about to tell Harry about what I found.”
“In the diary?” he asked, sitting. He swirled his wand over his head and a silencing barrier melted over them. Harry cringed when it ran down his back. Nott did the ‘shady Slytherin’ routine quite well.

She shook her head. “No, the Dark Lord’s taken over that now. He thinks he can solve it from the information I gave him.”

“She wants to modify it for muggles,” Nott said.

“No, I think I already did,” Hermione said. “I know I did, actually. I want to cast it on my parents.”

“Okay,” Harry said. “So we can just do it over holidays.”

“You’re going to have to convince them to allow it, too, love,” Nott said.

Hermione grinned. “After we tell them about the baby, and they get over that, they’ll be more inclined to want to be able to move in the wizarding world. It’ll be a good motivator, I think.”

“Very sneaky,” Harry said, trying not to smirk.

“It suits her,” Nott added.

She shrugged. “I do what I must. I don’t want them out there unprotected in this.” All three glanced to the row of windows across from her bed. It was already dark, and out there, somewhere, were the Dementors of Azkaban, waiting.

Professor McGonagall strode in, snapping them out of their thoughts. “Mr Nott, Professor Snape will escort you to Hogsmeade now. Your grandmother will be arriving momentarily. Ms Granger, your floo appointment is in twelve minutes.

“Right,” Hermione said, standing. She focused on her fingers for another cursory examination. The last two only twitched, but the middle one was wiggling appropriately. “Hmph,” she said. “I can’t believe I really splinched myself.”

“Well you weren’t expecting to be taking an extra person with you,” Theo said.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. Don’t start getting sentimental on me just yet, Theo. I’m not even showing.” She strode away to fetch her belongings, pragmatic as usual.

“She is a bit,” Nott confided in a whisper. “I’m just not stupid enough to mention it.” With a conspiratorial grin at Harry, he followed her out of the Infirmary. Sirius caught the door as they were exiting, and slipped in behind them.

“Ready to go home?” he asked.

“Ready,” Harry said.
**Tactical Control**

Chapter by faire_weather

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**Tactical Control (n):** the detailed and, usually, local direction and control of movements or manoeuvres necessary to accomplish missions or tasks assigned.

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“Evans,” Voldemort said, rubbing his right temple, “I will not put up with this any longer. Leave her immediately.”

“No. You know my terms.”

“It is not too late to renege on the ceasefire with your son,” he said angrily. “I could have him killed. Easily. Very few of my Death Eaters know of our affiliation.”

Evans, ridiculous looking in the body of a teenager, shook her head, confident as she had always been. “You wouldn’t,” she said. “Not now. You need him now. And we both know that there’s more to that silly prophecy than you know.” Her lips tilted upwards, not quite a smile. “I know it, the full length of it. I could tell you—but I don’t believe in prophecies.”

“I should have killed you on the spot. A grand game it was for me to let you hide for a while, but I see now the many errors of my early years. I was too arrogant then.” He paused, considered her for a moment. At length, he said, “I am not now. I’ve discovered why your possession of this particular person galls me so; I warn you, Evans: I will kill you both to save myself the—quite literal—headaches.”

“Horvitz!” he called. The house elf materialized next to him a moment later, a tray with two things on it in his long hands: a cup of steaming tea in his favourite gilded teacup, and a vial of headache potion. This was becoming a tradition that Tom did not enjoy. He took them, and spared not a thought for showing weakness in front of Evans as he tipped the vial back, and washed it down with a large sip of tea.

“I know of your connection with the Weasley girl. It’s amazing how much you learn when you’re dead,” she said. The Dark Lord was unimpressed.

“Evans,” he said. “I owe you nothing.” His head was pounding. As much as the thought of exposing himself to his suspicious servant, he was going to have to ask Severus to start brewing his potions if the house elf’s concoction didn’t start working again. It was likely, unfortunately, that he’d developed a tolerance for this type. Wonderful.

“I was an obedient servant to you until, quite amusingly, the day I died,” she said. “You knew I would disobey an order to stand aside. I did as you bid me, and I helped you with many potions and spells. I can help you, if you will only help me in return.”

His deep red eyes narrowed further. “Elaborate.”

Lily smiled, relieved. “I found the prophecy in the library’s public records section—‘Two become one before one becomes three; the dark lord’s mate finds peace when the beasts of dark days sleep, and one becomes two or one becomes three; the choice lies with the end of the beast of dark days.’”
She pressed her lips into a firm line. “The choice can’t be made until the beasts of dark days are ended,” she said. “That’s obviously the Dementors, if you believe in this sort of thing, which you do. Belief is what gives it power. You’ve heard this prophecy before, too. That’s how you figured out Ginny was your mate.”

Grudgingly, he nodded assent. He had never liked Ravenclaws overly much. They were much more useful dead, when you could simply take their journal of research and read it at your leisure, instead of sitting through an entire dissertation on an entirely useless topic. He would’ve done that with Evans’ spell research journal, but her brat of a son saw to that quite neatly, and it likely became a pile of ash soon after, when the house caught fire.

Evans continued, as she was wont to do, even when alive, “I did some further research and I found her name—Calixta Yaxley. She died 11 August, 1951, and incidentally, 11 August is Ginevra Weasley’s birthday. You bonded to her, and now she’s Ginny Weasley. That’s why you can think clearly now. She was born around the time I died, and the effects of her death aren’t making you go mad any longer.”

Voldemort bared his teeth. “Clever, Evans,” he hissed. “You are indeed correct.”

She was not cowed in the least. Being dead apparently had that affect on a person, though it could be argued that Evans never showed a great amount of fear of him—attributed most likely to the questionable company she kept in Sirius Black and James Potter. “I researched the bond, too,” she said. “By all accounts, you should’ve committed suicide shortly after going insane. But you didn’t. You made it another thirty years, and with enough strength of mind to raise a dark army and avoid capture or injury by the Ministry.”

“Correct again,” he said. “The spell is designed so that if one party dies, the other will, too, so that they may be reborn again near the same time, and find one another once again. I was too furious with her death to succumb to the pull of the spell quite yet. I had unfinished business—avenging her.”

“Death is not a reason to let unfinished business remain unfinished,” Lily agreed. “That is why you will not convince me to leave. My son is here, and he is my business. Help me to stay here, and I will make sure my possession doesn’t drain Ginny Weasley. I will give her control—most of the time.”

Tom would have told her—once again—that he didn’t have the power to bring back the dead—much as he’d like to, but he was interrupted when his hideous house-elf popped in again. “Severus Snape to see Master,” it said.

Tom rubbed his forehead again. “See him in,” he said. The elf disappeared with a nod, and shortly after, the door to his study opened. Snape slid in, silent as always. His eyes alit on the girl, and narrowed ever so slightly.

“Milord,” he said, bowing slightly.

Tom waved him forward, annoyance lacing his voice as he said, “Yes, yes, what is it?”

“I need to go, anyway,” Evans said. “Mrs Weasley will be worried if I’m not back for dinner. She thinks I’m at a friend’s house.”

Voldemort eyed her over the rim of his teacup, and said nothing. It was still hot, but it wasn’t doing a thing for his headache. Her lips thinned as their eyes met and held, but she was the first to drop her gaze. She turned away, and stormed to the door.

“I came to update you, Milord,” Snape said from the door. He stepped to the side as she exited the
room, but Tom still easily saw the anger that washed over Snape’s face as she passed. He shut the door behind her and came forward.

“Another twelve wizards were found Kissed this weekend,” Severus said. He dropped a copy of the *Daily Prophet* on the desk in front of Voldemort. The picture on the front showed the Coroner’s division of St Mungo’s levitating a limp body towards an emergency port-key station. “Beneath the fold, you will see that there is still a public outcry over the cessation of children at the orphanage. It seems that the public now believes the Ministry has holding cells full of confiscated magical children that they won’t allow to be adopted.”

Tom chuckled. “When the Aurors are removed, I will have Narcissa continue, but until then, the Ministry may enjoy what it has caused. As for the Dementors—I fear I must admit I am at a loss. Yaxley and the Arithmancer are still working on the rune combination. Until then, there is nothing I can do to keep them from attacking. Has Dumbledore made any progress?”

“No,” Snape said. “He doesn’t want to admit that there is no other way. Currently, the Order is considering a spell that could put a single Dementor to sleep for an indefinite amount of time, but he knows we do not have the manpower to make it practical.”

Tom replaced his teacup on his desk and leaned back in his chair, contemplative. “It would never work,” he said needlessly.

“He has no idea what your plan is either, Milord,” Snape said. “There is still no news of the prisoners’ escape; the Ministry has kept it very quiet.”

“Yes, they would keep it quiet. I daresay most of the prisoners have no idea their surroundings have changed at all,” Voldemort said, indicating the five-hundred-plus ragged prisoners in his dungeons below. “A mercy killing, in the end.”

Snape nodded. “For most,” he said. Unspoken was the handful of former inmates who hadn’t yet succumbed to the maddening effects of the Dementors—those still sane enough to understand what was going to happen to them.

Severus was quiet for several moments, then, “Milord, I wondered if I might make a request.”

Tom glanced up, paying only half attention. The missing Dementors weighed heavily on his mind. “Yes?”

Snape was hesitant when he spoke. “She did tell me of the prophecy she found, lord,” he said. “I know you must have known it, as well, at least recently, and that you will now want her out of Weasley’s body.”

“I wanted her out before,” Tom said. “Evans has always been a headache; she is merely a more literal one now.”

“Of course, Milord,” Severus said. Tom stared at him with as much patience as he could call forth; Snape was never so subservient as when he wanted something. “Many years ago,” he continued haltingly, “you did say you would...spare her.”

“I did,” Voldemort agreed, “but she would not move.”

Snape nodded, but his head stayed down, and his eyes remained focused on the floor. When he next spoke, his voice was very quiet. “I trust that you did what you could, but as she is now here again...I would again beg she be spared.”
“Spared!” Voldemort said. He laughed. “She is at this very moment draining the very life from the person who once was my bonded wife, without remorse. I feel the Weasley girl’s approaching death like an ogre’s club to my skull. Constantly, I feel it, like it is my own. Constantly, I ache. I feel insanity again crawling over my thoughts because of that child dying, because of Calixta dying, and I struggle to fight it off, constantly, until at least I have finished my work. You dare ask me to spare an interference like Lily Evans?”

“I do,” Severus said tightly. “Dumbledore has always said that your greatest weakness is that you have never known love...I think that is not true. Your greatest weakness is the same as mine: that you have. I beg you, Milord. Please save her.”

“Love?” Voldemort cried. “I care not for love anymore!”

“Yes, Milord, but—“

Voldemort stood, anger pouring out of him in waves of energy that rattled the frames of certifications and achievement awards on his study walls. He stared down at the man before him with bared teeth and narrowed eyes, like a snake ready to strike at one wrong move. “Love is meaningless, Severus!”

“Perhaps we could find a way to also bring Calixta—“

“Don’t you dare speak of her to me!” Voldemort hissed. He grabbed the first thing his hand came to, and hurled it at the potions master. Hot tea sprayed across Snape’s wool robes and he jumped backwards in alarm. The cup crashed against the door behind him and shattered into a thousand tiny, gilded porcelain pieces.

Tom staggered, as if he’d been hit and the wind knocked out of him. He sunk back into his chair. When Severus met his eyes once again, Tom knew he’d grasped the gravity of the situation. While it would take an evil much stronger, or a good much greater, to destroy another’s horcrux, it was sickeningly easy to destroy one’s own, and he had done just that.

When he next spoke, his voice was a hoarse whisper. “I have but two objectives now,” he said. “To prevent the genocide of magical Britain...and to avenge my wife. I do not need love any longer.”

Tom could see Snape’s already tense shoulders tighten further. Still, the man did not look up. Love was shameful to him—a weakness; Tom understood that readily. “I believe, Milord, that Evans could help. She does not like the idea, but I am sure you are aware of ways to keep the soul tethered to the living realm; if only we could find a way to give her a corporeal body, then—“

“Find a way to give her a corporeal body,” Tom said. “Golem-making is myth! I have found no evidence in my extensive travels to suggest otherwise, and I have looked. Do you suppose that I have disposable corporeal bodies lying around waiting for someone to possess them, Severus?”

“No, Milord,” he answered dutifully.

Horvitz appeared, and began cleaning the remains of the tea and shattered cup without a word. He disappeared, and a moment later, a fresh pot of tea appeared on the desk in front of him, but the teacup provided was of plain china with a delicate asphodel design ringing the rim. He poured himself and Severus a cup, and sat back with a sigh. His hands were showing his age; only three years ago, the skin had been fresh and new, if greyish in colour.

Now, his hands were pale, lined with his true age. He looked more and more like his original self every day, and the reminder of his humanity was unwelcome. Once, he could have slaughtered mercilessly without care, and now he slaughtered without care, and thought of it as mercy—better a
quick slip into nothingness by a Dementor than thirty more years in Azkaban. And he had put them there, with his false claims of pureblood superiority that he hadn’t even believed himself. It was wizard-superiority he’d believed in, and separation from the muggles who would certainly destroy their race entirely, if they found out about the existence of magic—after they drained every one of them with demands of magic.

This month, he would be seventy-one. He was young, yet, for a wizard, but he was down three horcruxes now, and the strain of being only four-sevenths human was wearing. He was ready to achieve his objectives, or slip back into his ruthless insanity. At this point, it mattered not.

But Severus was not yet forty, and in good health. Tom had not seen him look as worn as did now, but he imagined that a similar look had been present on him sixteen years ago. Voldemort set the new cup aside; it just didn’t feel right. He hated Evans—he hated many of his Death Eaters, but her especially for her insatiable curiosity and for the last time he’d spoken to her before the night he killed her:

‘I have heard a prophecy,’ he had said. ‘About your unborn son.’ He had known right away that she knew the very prophecy; her body was poised for flight, though she stood her ground. ‘I will give you one month to settle your affairs and attempt to hide.’ And all she had said was, ‘Is Regulus safe?’ His fury must have shown clearly on his face, for she dis-apparated away after only another moment’s hesitation. It was two years later that he finally found her, and the look on Severus’ face when Peter Pettigrew scurried into the Death Eater meeting and disclosed her location was one of abject fear, horror, and misery.

He had the same look about him now, though tempered by age. He sighed. “I will hear your argument, Severus,” he said.

A greater transformation had never before taken place on that man’s face.

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Harry had missed his home. River House was nothing like Hogwarts; the cliffs overlooking the forth were steep and jagged, but the landscape was white with snow and bright fairies lighting up the bare trees, and it lacked the general magical gloominess that hung over the Scottish Highlands in the wintertime.

The snow had come down heavily, and it had been a long, cold walk to Hogsmeade, from where they could apparate home. The strange darkness of gloaming made every shadow look like a lurking Dementor, and Harry was not the only one who had been afraid. Sirius, too, had been jumpy, and even once they were safely within the walls of vicious, ancient wards, Harry didn’t fail to notice that every candle and fireplace had been lit. He had gone straight to bed after getting home last night.

Pomfrey was right, as always: he would be bone tired from magical exhaustion as his body fought, with help from several potions, to maintain a temperature equilibrium after his jaunt with Draco.

He woke up this morning feeling like an Inferi; his brain was fuzzy and he’d had dreams of Draco all night. Harry hadn’t realized how used to Draco’s presence he’d become, and his heart ached at the prospect of a whole fortnight without Draco being around. He would come over for the day on Yule, but the 21st was still several days away, and even that long was upsetting.

He was counting down the days already. With Inferi-like sluggishness, Harry pulled a shirt on and clomped down the stairs for breakfast.
His father was already seated at the kitchen table that previous generations of Blacks would only have allowed the help to eat at. He gave Harry a grin as he entered, and set the Daily Prophet aside. The front-page headline was that of the Dementors coming after the Hogwarts seventh years, though the picture was recycled from a Dementor stock image.

“I don’t know about you, but I’ve seen quite enough Dementors for this lifetime,” said Sirius.

“Agreed,” Harry said. He politely failed to notice the barely-there tremor in Sirius’ voice. Ginger, cooking breakfast at the fireplace, failed to even notice Harry’s entrance; the baby was hanging off her leg like spider monkey, talking so fast Harry couldn’t make out more than a handful of words, which all, incidentally, were food-related. Ginger looked about as exhausted as Harry felt. She ignored the chattering Morty with practised ease.

Ginger dragged the little green elf across the stone kitchen floor as she deposited a plate in front of Harry and Sirius. At last, she hushed him; Morty kept talking. Ginger’s thin lips pursed. With a sudden snap of her long, green fingers, the little elf disappeared.

Harry and Sirius both stared at her in horror. “Ginger—did you, ah, just Vanish Morty?”

“Ginger has sent Morty to his father,” she said curtly. “Baby has not been banished to Fred’s mother-elf’s house, much as Ginger would like to.” She sketched a curtsy to him, and added, “Dinner is pheasant in pear sauce. Will masters require anything else from Ginger today?”

“No, no,” Sirius said quickly. “It smells lovely. I’ll wash up.”

“Ginger will not allow masters to clean,” she said sternly. “Plates will self-clean today. Masters only need to leave them on the table.”

“Wonderful!”

“Ginger will be taking a large sleeping draught now, then. Ginger is quite sure Fred will be awake if masters need anything.” Her smile was rather wicked as she snapped her fingers and disappeared.

Sirius’ lips twitched. “I think she’s so tired she’s got her times mixed up,” he said, digging into the pheasant, “But, the pheasant does smell good; I guess I can’t argue with a good dinner...even if it’s for breakfast.” Harry snorted with suppressed laughter. “Anyway,” his father continued, “I was right about Regulus. I told you! Didn’t I tell you?”

“You told me,” Harry confirmed. “I’m glad to see you’re okay with it.”

His father’s smile faltered. “If it’s not one thing with you and me, it’s another, isn’t it, kiddo? I suppose that’s the way it works when you’re the subject of a prophecy.”

“Pish,” Sirius said. “Lots of wizards have prophecies about them. It’s just that most of those prophecies are useless. James had a prophecy about him, in fact. Said something like, ‘The son of two Potters will make the Quidditch team in his 3rd year’, though it was of course said in much more prophecy-like terms. And sure enough, James made the Quidditch team in his third year. He did try in his second...fell off his broom and broke his clavicle.”

“Well, in that case, at least we can hope things settle down soon.” Harry pushed his pheasant around. “I’m worried, though, kind of. I would’ve thought Dumbledore would have put me on a training program to defeat Voldemort by now. Do you think he knows?”

Sirius considered this. “I don’t know about that,” he said. “I think he’s more concerned about the
immediate threat of Dementors overtaking our entire population. He’s past the point of thinking that Voldemort has somehow engineered this event to his own purposes, and now thinks only that he and the Death Eaters are lying low until it blows over, at which point he will use the chaotic aftermath to attempt a takeover.”

Harry’s eyebrows were nearly to his hairline. “Well, doesn’t that mean I should be prepared for it?”

“Dumbledore believes that you are prepared, so to speak. I should’ve thought by now you would’ve realised that he believes all your training has taken place in here.” Sirius touched his chest for emphasis. “All you need is belief that your mum’s love will see you through, and one good chance to take him down.”

Sirius finished the last of his pheasant and pushed his plate aside. A kitchen rag appeared and started cleaning it right away. “That is,” his father continued, “except for one thing.”

“What?”

His dad tapped his temple. “Occlumency.”

“With you,” Harry clarified, just to be sure. He wasn’t going to even consider the idea of working with Snape again, especially since it wasn’t as vitally important now as it had been before.

“It’s still important,” Sirius said sternly. “No, I don’t usually read your mind,” he said, when the expression on Harry’s face morphed into anger. “This is the first time I ever had; I was expecting to have to push you into working at it, and showing you how easy your natural barrier is to penetrate by anyone with half a mind to do it is the best way I could think of. You’re right; Voldemort may not be your top concern any more, but you will have other concerns, and you can’t avoid Dumbledore’s eyes forever.”

“Fine,” Harry said.

Sirius was unimpressed. “Dumbledore’s coming over this afternoon, in fact, with Regulus and Remus, who are going to be taking the unused rooms in the west wing. There’s the servants’ stairs on that end that lead to the cellar, and they’ll likely want a place to sleep worry-free once a month.”

“Why?” Harry asked.

“Because werewolves tend to shape shift on the full moon...” his father said slowly.

“Why’s Dumbledore coming?” Harry clarified, rolling his eyes.

“Ah,” said Sirius. “I have no idea, but be clean for tea and put anything questionable in your Grandparents Evans’ pensieve—it’s in the chapel.”

“Okay,” he said. “Have you heard from Hermione or her parents? When are they coming? And when’s Ron coming?”

“I’m picking the Grangers up at the train station tomorrow noon. Ron will floo over around then. Which leaves us plenty of time in the morning to get a good start on your Occlumency...the last thing we need is Fudge or one of his deputies flouncing through your thoughts.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, saluting. “Will there be anything else, captain?”

“Do I detect sass in your voice, sir?” Sirius asked.
“No, sir,” Harry said, face straight. “I don’t think you’d be able to detect it, sir.”

“Scamp!” Sirius said. Harry jumped up from the table and ran for the door before his father could get off a well-aimed tickling hex. He lost him by the time he made it to the chapel on the northern side of the house, where he summarily deposited his memory of Voldemort cluing him in on Hermione’s pregnancy, his conversation with Draco two nights before, and after a hesitant moment, he added his memories of sleeping in Draco’s dorm room and the other things they’d gotten up to. He was finding it hard not to think about touching Draco more and telling him all sorts of ridiculous sappy things, so getting them out of his head might be a good start.

He went and had a shower in his en suite, happily adding a half turn of the leather and wormwood scented soap faucets that he’d all but forgotten about while at Hogwarts. This was what wizard-raised kids had to look forward to on breaks. Even the Weasleys had a rhubarb faucet. But the smell of leather reminded him of Draco. He hadn’t even noticed it before, but Draco was a Prefect; of course he would have access to the leather-scented faucet in the Prefect’s Bathroom. So much for throwing all thoughts of him in the pensieve. There was no denying it at this point: Harry missed him.

And apparently missing Draco was manifesting itself in rather more physical ways. He tried to ignore it, like he did with everything else concerned with Malfoy, but he was hard, and he wanted Draco badly.

He was hot and his cock was aching for touch, but giving in would mean that he couldn’t even get Draco out of his mind even after putting thoughts of him in the pensieve. How would he control himself when he got the memories back?

Harry stood with his face to the water, trying to control his breathing, and let the hot leather-scented water spray his body. He gave the scent faucet another turn. There was nothing wrong with liking the smell of leather and wormwood, after all. Plenty of wizards used these two shower scents.

He closed his eyes, and he could almost imagine Draco in here with him. He could remember the way Draco had smelled the morning after they’d woken up together in his dorm room, before the threat of freezing waters had sent all the Slytherins to safer sleeping quarters in the Theology wing. He had been slightly musky from sleep, but still with that underlying scent of leather, made stronger from sweating. It was altogether masculine and strong in that understated way Malfoy had of actually being masculine and strong.

Almost without noticing, his hand slipped down his torso and wrapped around his cock. The barest touch was reminding him of everything he’d done with Draco, and though the memories were only fuzzy remnants of those he’d left in the stone bowl in the chapel, they were enough to feed his desire.

Harry’s hand was slippery from the soap. It slid smoothly up and down his shaft, the hot wetness of it reminding him of Draco’s mouth on him—it happened months ago, but he could almost remember the feeling from the memory in the pensieve, almost as if it was happening now. His legs trembled from the pleasure, threatening to give out.

He leant against the warm stone wall, and thought of Draco pushing him against the wall in the boys’ shower in Gryffindor Tower and kneeling in front of him. The other boys could walk in at any moment, but Draco’s strong hands held his hips fast, and his mouth was tight and warm around Harry’s aching cock. There was no way Harry could leave, no way he could make Draco stop—he didn’t care who came in.

“Draco,” he panted into the spray. He could feel his fingers curling in Draco’s pale hair, could imagine the way the muscles in Draco’s Quidditch-toned shoulders moved as the blond’s mouth
worked his cock. Draco removed his left hand from Harry’s hip and began stroking his own stiff cock with it while his tongue lapped at the tip of Harry’s, making his legs tremble even more.

Harry opened his eyes enough to look down at Draco and see his grey eyes staring back up at him, as he slurped and sucked at Harry’s cock while jerking himself with quick and fitful strokes. The sight of it was almost too much for him. He tipped his head back against the tiles and closed his eyes, letting the water hit his face, but Draco didn’t stop, and he heard the blond whining as he neared orgasm.

Harry looked back down. Draco’s mouth tightened around Harry’s cock and his sucking became erratic and quick. The fingers of Draco’s right hand dug into Harry’s hips for stability as his left slickly pumped his long, pink cock. Draco stared up at him, his moans muffled around Harry’s cock, and then his lips slid all the way to the base of Harry’s cock and he sucked hard, and Harry felt his moaning vibrating against his cock in the back of his throat, as the wet stone floor beneath them became saturated with Draco’s hot cum. The sight of it was too much for him, Harry’s orgasm tore through him, made all the more intense by Draco’s throat swallowing around each spurt of Harry’s cum.

He staggered, barely caught himself by leaning his weight back against the wall. His breath was ragged, and he struggled to slow it. The heating charms on the water were wearing off. Harry opened his eyes.

Draco wasn’t there.

The disappointment and longing that flooded through him at that moment was undisguised; he felt the ache of missing Draco in his chest and the veins of his wrists, as if he’d never known anything quite as sad.

“Harry!” Sirius called from outside his bedroom door. “Dumbledore will be flooing over in ten minutes. I hope you’ve already hit the pensieve!”

Hands shaking only slightly, Harry reached up and turned off the wormwood faucet. He stood for only a moment in the lukewarm spray of the leather-scented one before, with a sigh, turning that one off, too.

Lying in his bed at Malfoy Manor in Wiltshire County, Draco felt about as far away from Harry as was earthly possible, though he was only a half-second of apparition away, or even a four-hour train ride at the most. Morrigan forbid, it was even only a six-hour trip on his fastest broom, if he caught the winds right.

But that wasn’t good enough. Draco pried his sticky fingers from his spent cock, and knew that he had to see Harry. The idea of sucking him off in the Slytherin showers where anyone could walk in had come to him suddenly and strongly.

He’d had to excuse himself from his father’s preparations for spending ‘An entire solstice afternoon with your mother’s unconscienced side of the family,’ and see to it right away. Draco’s trousers had been unbuttoned as soon as he’d spelled his bedroom door locked, visions of himself on his knees, staring up at Harry’s panting face and heaving chest as Draco tasted his delicious cock. It had been too much for him. He’d imagined himself becoming so turned on that he couldn’t help touching his own neglected prick, and coming all over the shower floor.
And now, the fantasy was over, and he couldn’t get the thought of Harry out of his mind. Since allowing himself to perform Gelucruor, his ability to control himself was waning. He noticed it every time his father said something disparaging, and he felt irritation before being able to ignore it. Draco sighed. This was going to be a lot more difficult to deal with than he’d ever thought.

Outside his window, the sky was dark with snow. Yule would not come fast enough.

§§§

His grandparents’ portrait still hung over the fireplace in the well-used sitting room, and his Grandmother, Laurel Evans was speaking animatedly to his father as he walked in. A warm fire crackled in the fireplace beneath her and his grandfather’s frame, and Harry was grateful for it. It was still snowing madly outside.

“Harry, my dear!” his Grandmother Laurel said, turning away from her conversation with his father, who was already seated. She turned and called for her husband, who was presumably visiting Harry’s Great-Grandfather Black in the portrait outside the library upstairs. He stuck his head around the frame and laughed with delight.

“Harry!” he said, coming fully into the frame. His salt-and-pepper moustache twitched as he smiled. “Enjoy your semester back at school?”

“It was eventful,” he said wryly.

“Sirius has already told us many of the things you’ve been getting up to,” she said. “Are you finding time to keep up with your studies with all this—‘revolution you’re starting?”

“I’m hardly leading a revolution, Grandmother,” he said with a laugh. Sirius snorted.

“Hmm,” she said. Her eyebrows were lifted in disbelief.

The floo below them roared to life and Dumbledore stepped out, bending so as not to catch his hat on the top edge.

“Hello, Professor,” Harry and Sirius said.

“Ah, Harry!” Dumbledore said. “Sirius, so good to see you again,” he added, as if they hadn’t just seen each other yesterday. He Vanished the soot from his robes with a careless wave and turned to speak to the portrait. “Mrs Evans,” he said. “Mr Evans. I trust you are doing well?”

“Headmaster,” acknowledged Mr Evans. Grandmother Evans smiled politely.

“Please, have a seat,” said Sirius. “Would you like some tea?”

Fred popped in without waiting for a reply. Morty was hanging from his shoulders and watching the serving of the tea with wide, bulbous eyes.

“Three sugars, if you don’t mind,” said Dumbledore, and Fred allowed Morty to guide a third sugar into the cup with wobbly levitation magic. It plopped into the cup, and Dumbledore politely pretended not to notice the tea spilled on his blue robes that, inexplicably, had little gold umbrellas printed on the fabric.

Sirius drew a line across his throat when Fred’s eyes grew very wide, and stopped the oncoming
punishment before it could get started.

Presumably, the Evanses were deemed safe, which was quite reasonable, because Dumbledore settled right into business. “Remus and Regulus will be along shortly,” he said, by way of small talk. “Madam Pomfrey wishes to check them over one last time to make sure the upcoming full moon hasn’t made their recovery from Dementor Effects more arduous.”

“All right,” said Harry’s father. “Ginger has set them up with access to the cellar from their rooms, so it shouldn’t be a problem on our end.”

“Wonderful,” said Dumbledore. He sipped his tea several times, then set it aside. “Harry,” he said, “I wonder if I might talk to you about Voldemort,” he said.

“Of course,” Harry said, perhaps only slightly too quickly. “What did you want to talk about?”

“I told you before that I would let you come with me—when the time was right—to destroy the ring you gave to me for safekeeping. I believe the time has come.”

“Er, right now?” Harry asked.

“What’s this got to do with Voldemort,” Sirius wanted to know.

“A good question. Harry’s, along with Draco Malfoy’s, excellent research found that the ring I now hold,” said Dumbledore, producing said ring, “has something alive within it. At first, I was spurred by your theory, Sirius, that Regulus was alive, and thought that he may’ve been trapped within as punishment for some felonious transgression. Upon further consideration and reflexion, I developed an alternative theory.

“I remembered the curious incident in Harry’s second year, something that has been nagging at the recesses of my mind since it occurred. There are any number of magics that could have created the image of young Voldemort like the diary did, including even portrait-making magic, modified to another medium. But you and Ms Weasley both indicated that the diary wrote back to you. I’d not then heard of any specific magic that would allow such a thing, but of course, it was a wise man who once said, ‘Trust not an object which thinks for itself, if it has not room to store a brain’.”

Dumbledore paused here expectantly. Harry shared a look with Sirius.

“I heard Mr Weasley say something like that, once,” Harry offered.

“Perhaps,” Dumbledore said. “I referred to the original speaker, of course. It was Madam Ravenclaw, in the year of Merlin, 838.”

“Of course,” said Sirius, as if he’d known all along. Then, “So you believe the ring is somehow related to the diary. You aren’t suggesting that...”

“I’m afraid that is exactly what I am suggesting,” Dumbledore said.

“What, exactly, are you suggesting?” Harry asked.

“I’d like to know as well,” Grandfather Evans muttered.

“There is a particular Old Magic, Harry,” said Sirius, “which can allow a man to store part of himself somewhere else—somewhere outside his own body. It was used in ancient times to guarantee the continuation of a lineage if the last heir died without issue.”
“They do say that Salazar Slytherin used it to, one might say, create his only surviving son, Samuel Slytherin. Of course, they say many things, and there is no record that I’ve found to verify this.”

Harry thought of Ravenclaw’s journal. Dumbledore may not have ever found any record, but one certainly existed.

“I believe that rather esoteric legend is where Voldemort got the idea,” Dumbledore said.

“What’s this magic called?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know,” said his father. “It was always considered too dangerous to name, like much of the magic supposedly used by Merlin, until finally the actual name and ritual was forgotten by common era wizards. It’s a legend that many believe has a strong basis in truth.”

“It’s called a horcrux,” Dumbledore supplied, surprising them both. “I learned of it during my years as a wayward miscreant who associated with quite the wrong crowd.”

Harry and Sirius didn’t even have time to be confused. Dumbledore continued as if he hadn’t, yet again, said something completely bewildering. “A man may make one by sectioning his soul—through an act of evil, such as murder—and depositing one half of it in another place, usually an inanimate object, though I have heard of one dark lady in the twelfth century who transfigured her errant lover into a servant’s bell and then stored half her soul in the bell.”

Harry tried not to show his disgust. Instead, he said, “But if you think both of those were these horcruxes, then Voldemort wouldn’t have any soul left; he’d have put both halves into something else. Now, Harry began to see where Dumbledore was going with this, and his heart was racing with worry. If the Dark Lord had indeed done that, then feeding the last half of his soul to a Dementor would destroy him—or perhaps he’d be trapped within it forever. Who would solve this Dementor crisis if Voldemort wasn’t around? Dumbledore wouldn’t admit to what had to be done, and Harry didn’t have the stomach for it himself.

“Can someone even live without a soul inside them?” he asked.

“No, I don’t think so,” Dumbledore said.

“It heals,” Grandmother Evans said quietly. They turned to look at her, and she said, “Many things wound the soul—like the dying of a loved one, or a personal failure, but the soul is resilient and it will heal, given time. It may not always return to its previously untarnished state, but the human soul is capable of wondrous healing, if a person has desire for it.” Mr Evans was looking on at her fondly.

“That is indeed true,” said Dumbledore. “And I believe Voldemort had great desire to continue on, so his soul would have mended some—at least enough for him to create a second horcrux...and if my theory is correct, to then create several more.”

“Several!” said Sirius. “How much healing can a soul do?”

“Enough to split more than once,” Grandmother Evans said. “Though each time would leave it smaller and smaller, until there was not much left. A man who did this more than twice would quickly lose his human qualities. How many times do you believe this dark lord has split his soul, Headmaster?”

“I am afraid, Laurel, that Voldemort may have performed this magic six times, leaving his soul in seven pieces, if you include what is left within him.”

“Oh god,” said Harry. “And all of them will have to be destroyed before Voldemort will truly be
gone, won’t they? The piece in the diary died when I stabbed it with the Basilisk fang.” What if he’d actually had to look for all of these pieces? “They could be anything.” And they could be anywhere. He wouldn’t stand a chance against the Dark Lord.

“You forget, Harry,” said Dumbledore, “that Voldemort’s soul would have been the most complete before making his first horcrux, the diary, which I have concluded was created with the death of Moaning Myrtle. In essence, you have already destroyed one-half of Voldemort, because his healed soul would never be as large as it was before sectioning. Each successive horcrux would be smaller and more fragile, leaving Voldemort himself and the last horcrux the most easily destroyed, once the others are gone.”

He held up the ring again, and the ugly, gaudy stone flashed in the light of the fire. “Little is known, even by historians, who Tom Riddle’s mother was, because he used his muggle father’s last name, and so there would’ve been no public wizarding record. Merope Gaunt was his mother; I know this through the Hogwarts Book of Names that lists every child age five and older in Britain who is magical. This ring has the Gaunt family crest on it, it would have been the second horcrux created, with the murders of his father and grandparents. It is the second largest piece of Voldemort’s soul, and by destroying it, we will have destroyed three-fourths of Voldemort.”

“Three-fourths,” Harry repeated. This was too shocking to fully absorb yet. Then, “So we’re going to do this today?” There was no way he was getting out of this. He was going to be a traitor to the Dark Lord, and any alliance they’d previously formed would be voided with this one act. He really was going to have to defeat the Dark Lord now, and he really was going to have to focus on learning Occlumency now. They would again be at war—and what would that mean for Draco? He would have to choose sides, and Harry had no illusions about which side the Slytherin would choose.

He had not realized how much he’d enjoyed not fearing for his life...he hadn’t realized how much he enjoyed, even, some of his time with the Dark Lord.

“We will leave immediately, if you are ready,” said Dumbledore, mistaking his hesitance for fear.

Harry swallowed heavily. He glanced at his grandparents’ portrait, and saw the concerned looks on their faces, and then to his father, who looked as speechless as Harry felt. Their eyes met only briefly.

This was the right thing to do. It was.

But that didn’t make him feel any less evil for it. When Harry spoke, his voice was shaky. “I’m ready.”

The coordinates Dumbledore gave Harry to apparate to were unfamiliar, but it was fractionally less frigid where they arrived than from whence they came, so he could only assume they were much further south than River House outside Edinburgh.

He felt the questioning probing of unfamiliar wards as soon as he landed. He paused as they studied him and Dumbledore, and took a moment to take in his surroundings. They were above a coastal town, and nearby was a medieval manor house of grey stone.

Two more cracks of apparation sounded behind him, and he jumped, wand out without even realizing it.

“Easy, Black.” Draco lowered the hood of his travelling cloak and gave him a small, tired smirk. His
mother did the same, smiling slightly, and Harry belatedly deposited his wand back in his left sleeve. The relief he felt at seeing Draco’s face was overwhelming.

“Mrs Malfoy,” Dumbledore greeted, bowing. “Draco. I’m grateful for your assistance with our task this evening. We will be quick so that you may return to enjoying your holiday.”

“Of course, Headmaster,” said Narcissa. “We keep it behind the house. If you will follow me...” She led the way to the house through a deadly looking path of man-eating magnolia trees with mandible-like branches. Mrs Malfoy dodged their enquiring limbs with ease, but Harry found it much more trying.

A hand on his shoulder made him jump, thinking one had finally got him, but it was only Draco. He relaxed, fractionally, as the blond came up beside him. But he didn’t remove his hand once they were abreast, instead his hand moved to the small of Harry’s back, guiding him through the trees. “Mum told me about the deal she made with Dumbledore, so he would overlook my, ah, indiscretion. When he flooed to say he wanted to do it today, I made Mum bring me because I was the one who figured it out anyway.” Here, he smirked.

“Is that the only reason?” Harry quietly asked. Mrs Malfoy and Dumbledore were quite far ahead, but there was no need to be careless.

There was only a brief moment of hesitation. “No,” said Draco. “I wanted to see you.”

“Here we are,” Mrs Malfoy said in her lovely, polished voice. Harry could only spare Draco one beatific smile before Dumbledore was holding the old iron gate open for all of them to pass through, and watching them with a keen eye.

The Dementor noticed their presence immediately and rushed them, obviously hungry. “If you stay close, there’s no need for a protective spell,” said Narcissa, pre-empting Harry’s attempt to save them all with a well-placed Patronus. “It is incapable of coming within ten feet of a Malfoy, so please do keep at my or Draco’s side.”

After a brief moment, which Harry judiciously used for regaining his nerve, Narcissa added, “We use it for security, as we only stay at this summer house for a few weeks each year, and the remoteness of the property makes it a prime target for thieves and vagabonds.”

“Of course,” Dumbledore agreed, ever the polite conversationalist. “One can never be too careful.”

“Yes,” said Mrs Malfoy. “The Dementor is tethered to the property with a binding spell, and the property itself is hidden with an Unplottable. So there is, of course, no danger to any muggles.”

“Wonderful,” said Dumbledore. “And I gather the beast has not eaten recently? He does look famished.”

“It has been at least two generations since a Malfoy needed to feed it,” Narcissa said carefully.

“Draco, would you like to do the honours? I understand it was your keen observation that discovered the true dark origin of the artefact,” Dumbledore said, and strode forward without waiting for either Malfoy to follow. The Dementor waited outside its invisible barrier, expecting. Mrs Malfoy stayed behind, letting Draco follow until the Dementor began retreating again.

“I think this is quite close enough,” said Dumbledore. He fished the ring out of his pocket again. Draco accepted it with careful fingers.

“Did you find out who was inside it, Headmaster?” he asked.
“There is still some debate on the matter,” Dumbledore said evasively, “but it has obviously been in there quite a long time, and his or her body would logically be long dead by now. It is my greatest hope that we are doing this poor soul a favour by allowing it release, for this particular Dementor will be destroyed during the breeding, and a new one will form from the darkness that remains after all of the souls are freed.”

“Oh,” Draco said. Harry bit his lip, feeling awful for not telling Draco this, but he was again going to have to fight the Dark Lord once this task was completed, and the less Draco knew, the less he would be obliged to reveal when Voldemort required his loyalty.

The Dementor pushed at the boundary that Draco’s blood created all around them, eager for something, anything, to eat. Draco hesitated only a moment before hurling the ring at the Dementor like a Chaser scoring. It descended on the ring with a monstrous-sounding wail that echoed all through the trees with a frightening cadence.

Neither Mrs Malfoy nor Dumbledore reacted, but Harry couldn’t help cringing. Was this what it was always like when a Dementor Kissed? Harry had never been able to hear anything over the sound of his own mother dying, but Draco’s Malfoy blood was keeping all the negative affects away, and Harry could hear everything.

“I have heard,” said Mrs Malfoy over the wail, from several feet behind them, “that a wizard Kissed is able to see through the eyes of the Dementor for several long seconds before the darkness within overwhelms him, and he loses consciousness.”

“Perhaps we will discover who it was,” Dumbledore said, quite wise to her insinuations. He had, of course, not told either Malfoy who was really inside the ring.

“Was it a Death Eater?” Draco asked.

“The world may never know,” Dumbledore said with a dramatic sigh. He was enjoying this far too much.

“Rather stupid of them to possess a little ring, all things considered,” Draco continued. “They probably got in there and forgot how to get out.”

“Maybe they were hiding from Aurors,” Harry said. Dumbledore gave him the most minute of winks. “It felt pretty dark, didn’t it, Malfoy? I bet they did something awful and had to hide out.”

The Dementor rose, and stared straight at them, hissing and yelling in many languages that neither Draco nor Mrs Malfoy understood, but Harry knew one of them, and the words that the soul of Voldemort hissed out at them were vile with hatred and malevolence, and even Dumbledore looked taken aback by some of what he heard. Harry shuddered, and wondered which of the many languages the Headmaster had understood.

Finally, the terrible wailing died down, and the ring gleamed dully in the waning winter-afternoon light. The Dementor, finally sated for at least another fifty years, retreated without a backward glance.

“Well that is one fewer Dementor to worry about when the great breeding comes,” said Dumbledore.

“Headmaster,” Narcissa said, “was that Mermish I heard the Dementor speaking?”

“I believe it was,” he said. “And a bit in Gobbledygook, as well, if I’m not mistaken.”

“There was another language I couldn’t place,” she pushed.
“Perhaps the ancient Aramaic that was used towards the beginning.”

“No, I don’t believe so. This language sounded much more primal, animal-like.”

“Ah,” said Dumbledore. “I don’t believe I noticed that one.”

“Hmm,” said Mrs Malfoy. She didn’t believe it, either. Her eyes landed on Harry, and he knew then that she’d recognized it as Parseltongue.

“Well, we’ve taken up too much of your time, Madam Malfoy,” said Dumbledore jovially. He bent and retrieved the empty ring. The red stone was cracked along the top, and it no longer reflected the light in the Gaunt crest as it once had. “I thank you most heartily for allowing us to use the services of your Dementor.”

“We thank you for feeding it for us,” she said, inclining her head.

“Wonderful! It seems we have both benefitted today, then! Harry? Shall I return you to your father now?”

“Yeah,” he said, but he turned towards Draco instead. “You’re still coming over for Yule, right?”

“Obviously,” said Draco. “My mum and your dad are going to rekindle family alliances. My father isn’t keen on it, I’ll tell you.”

Harry grinned. He loved Draco’s dryness. He still had time with Draco, before Voldemort found out. He would enjoy it while he could. “Good,” he said. “We need all the alliances we can get.”

Draco smirked, dis-apparated. And behind him, standing far back, where the Dementor had retreated only moments before, was the Dark Lord, watching Harry with cold, keen eyes. The smile drained off his face, and a great fear, one he had not felt since that night in the cemetery when Cedric died, flooded his body. He staggered back.

Dumbledore’s hand landed on his shoulder and he jumped. “Did you see something, Harry?” he asked.

“N-no,” Harry said. “I wish the Dementors wouldn’t affect me like this.”

“Perhaps when all of this is over their presence won’t be so overwhelming,” he said, but Harry knew he was not convinced. His blue eyes scanned the distance intensely, but never saw the Dark Lord, who was still there, staring back at their small group. “Perhaps I should apparate you home myself.”

Harry nodded, unable to speak.

“Very well. Ah—good day, Madam Malfoy! You have been a most gracious host!” She gave them a cautious smile, and Dumbledore’s fingers tightened on Harry’s shoulder, then they were twisting through the nothingness of the world, landing out front of River House a half-second later.

Sirius was still in the sitting room when Harry came inside, laughing heartily at some story Professor Lupin was telling. The other man was unfamiliar in his familiarity; his Uncle Regulus Black looked so much like his father, and it was hard to believe he really existed, that he’d fooled even the Order for months at a time. Harry could tell them apart, could see the key differences in their demeanours that would’ve given him away, had the two been put side-by-side before.
“Harry!” said Professor Lupin. He stood, came and shook Harry’s hand. “We didn’t get much time to talk earlier, but I’m sure we’ll be able to catch up soon. Sirius—ah, your dad—is putting us up for a while.” He turned back to Harry’s dad. “That’s very strange to say; is it still strange to you?”

“Really strange,” Sirius agreed.

Remus shook his head. “I can’t even fathom it, really, but I see it now that I’m looking for it. I suppose we all just took in the black hair and glasses, and wanted to see James when he wasn’t really there, to remember him. He really does favour you, though, Sirius.”

“I, for one, am thankful that one of us managed to reproduce,” Regulus said. “At least Mother’s portrait will shut up at Grimmauld Place.” It was strange to be around this man; his existence was so foreign to Harry, but perhaps they would have time to change that. Harry wasn’t one to turn down the prospect of more family.

Sirius snapped his fingers. “Oh! I nearly forgot. We’ll need to stop by there before you go back, to get you keyed to the wards. You know, just in case.”

“Sure,” Harry said. “Whenever’s fine. I think I’m going to call it a night, though.”

“Of course, kiddo. G’night.”

“Not even a word for your poor grandmother?” Grandmother Evans asked. Harry glanced towards his grandparents’ portrait. “I’ll visit you again tomorrow,” he said to them. “Promise, really. I’m really knackered, though.”

“Of course you will!” she said. “The Yule log will be going in our fireplace this year. Goodnight, dear.”

“G’night, all,” he said.

Harry had forgotten about that. This would be his first time experiencing a traditional wizard Christmas—no, Yule; it was strange to think of it by a different name. He left them with a wave, and trudged up the stairs to his bedroom. It might be his last Yule, too. He was going to do his very best to enjoy it, and then he was going to make sure he could really defeat Voldemort.

But his bedroom wasn’t empty when he entered. He was there, already. He would not even give Harry the peace of one Yule with his new family. None of their slowly formed amity meant anything to a Dark Lord; he would take his revenge now, and haunt Harry every day until the final battle, where only one would emerge victorious. They could not escape the great prophecy after all, could they?

“Hello,” Harry said wearily. He sunk onto his bed. The Dark Lord sat an antique chair, passed through generations of Blacks. “I don’t suppose an apology will help.”

Voldemort’s long, greyish fingers were steepled before him. He studied Harry with those vicious red eyes, glowing in the gloom of the room like those of a monster. “I felt part of myself die today,” he said finally, voice barely above a whisper. “I had thought our alliance was sacred to you, as it was to me.”

“It is,” Harry said, realizing only now how true it was. “I didn’t know what to do. Dumbledore didn’t tell me what it was until I didn’t have a chance to back out. He would’ve known…and I didn’t want to give you away. You know he would have read my mind. I’m no Occlumens.”

“No,” said Voldemort. “You aren’t.” His head tilted to the side, studying.
“Look, I’m sorry!” Harry said. “I don’t even know how to apologize for killing part of someone’s soul, but I didn’t know what else to do on short notice, and as I understand it, you’ve got more anyway.”

Voldemort’s grin was feral and sharp. “I do,” he said. “Several, in fact. One in this very room.”

Harry looked around; this room had been empty when they moved in—the moth-repellent spells had long since worn off on the furniture, and covered in bed sheets or not, they had been mostly ruined, and replaced with all new, custom furniture. There was nothing that looked like a likely candidate.

“You have not figured it out,” Voldemort said. “I do not believe Dumbledore has, either, though surely he has surmised two others. Let me see, first there was the diary, created in my seventh year; then came the ring, which your Malfoy utterly destroyed today, without a care as to whose soul might be within—I like that in a wizard: cold, calculating, obedient.”

“Draco wouldn’t have done it if he’d known it was yours,” said Harry. “He would’ve probably faked it, like I should’ve. He’s much cleverer at that than me, though.” Maybe he could at least save Draco from the worst of Voldemort’s ire.

The Dark Lord seemed to ignore him. “There are others, of course. Dumbledore was correct; I did choose to have seven parts of my soul. He did not, however, consider that I might’ve miscalculated. Dumbledore gives me too much credit. He does not believe I would allow myself to make an error.” His mouth split into a sneer.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked. “How many are there? Pieces, I mean.”

“Eight,” said Voldemort. “We have two so far. You may recall the gilded goblet I enjoyed taking my tea in. It did look rather like a teacup, yet Dumbledore, had he ever seen it, would’ve recognized it as the lost Hufflepuff’s Cup—the very cup from which Helga Hufflepuff poured the holy water of Dagda to bless her children. Then, of course, there is Slytherin’s Locket. Your Uncle got wise and attempted to destroy that one even before you were born, but he failed, and his failure resulted in his curse, that he would never be able to leave my service, for no one would employ a werewolf, and his family would most certainly cast him out. He has learned the error of his ways quite keenly.”

Harry swallowed. “Are, are you going to have a werewolf bite me?” he asked.

“Now, Harry,” Voldemort tsked, “Why would I do that? We have an alliance, and, as you said, I have more horcruxes. There is still my snake, Nagini, and a piece from Gryffindor. I do like a set, but I do not like the prospect of using Ravenclaw’s journal, which you so graciously delivered to me. Including what is left within me, that leaves us with but one unnamed horcrux.

“My great error. I had five pieces already, and the ritual started to create the sixth; it would have completed the symbolism I aimed to achieve, would have balanced it. Yet I made a mistake, misjudged a situation, and my sin of arrogance left me with both a sixth and seventh horcrux, and my soul in eight pieces. It was too much for any human to bear. It destroyed my body and left me with only the fraction of humanity I had.”

Harry licked his lips. His heart was pounding wildly. “It’s me,” he said. Everything was coming together. “You’re inside me; that’s why I understand Parseltongue...why you are able to penetrate my mind so easily. I could never defeat you without killing myself.”

“Yes,” Voldemort hissed, amusement evident. “I only realized it myself two years ago. I could not account for a missing piece, and my searching always led to you. The Gryffindor heirloom I meant to infuse with your death could even now be buried in the burnt rubble of the Potter cottage. I have not
checked. After all, I have insurance in your life.”

“That’s the only reason you wanted to have an alliance with me,” Harry said. He was unaccountably hurt. This was the Dark Lord; there was no friendship with him.

“No,” said Voldemort, surprising him. “That was a curiosity, and beneficial to us both, you cannot disagree. We have helped each other numerous times, and we have helped the wizarding world even more by not fighting one another.”

The cruelty on his face softened ever so slightly. “Harry,” Voldemort said. “Even a Dark Lord cannot rule forever. I have ensured that mistakes made in ignorance do not end my time, but there is only so much battering a soul can take, and even I am weary. You destroyed part of me today, yes, but I destroyed part of myself today, as well. In my anger, I destroyed my own horcrux in Hufflepuff’s Cup. I have but four pieces left: myself, Nagini, the Gryffindor heirloom...and you. You have defeated every piece of me that has yet fallen, in one way or another. In time, you will defeat the rest. It is in the prophecy, and one way or another, prophecies heard always come to pass.”

“But I never wanted to destroy it,” Harry said. “I don’t want to destroy the others—or you, or me.”

“I know,” Voldemort said, inclining his head. “But you do not always get what you want.”
Diplomacy I

Chapter by faire_weather

Chapter Notes

There are some religious themes in this chapter. They’re for Yule backstory and worldbuilding, so I hope they don’t come off offensively. I am certainly not trying to preach (especially since I am pretty un-religious myself).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Diplomacy (n): 1. skill in managing negotiations, handling people, etc., so that there is little or no ill will; tact. 2. the conduct of the relations of one state with another by peaceful means; tact skill or cunning in dealing with people

Harry slept in, and by the time he woke up, Sirius was already gone to pick up Hermione and the Grangers. This would be her parents’ first time flooing, which was why they took the train from London—so they would only be in the floo for a moment, instead of the three- to four-minute trip it usually took to floo from London to Edinburgh. Hermione wanted to ease them into a magical lifestyle before springing the magic thing on them, and she wasn’t fit to apparate, besides.

Ginger gave him a dirty look as he entered the kitchen. “Little Master is almost missing lunch,” she chided. Regulus and Professor Lupin—Remus, he insisted—we nearly finished.

“Sorry,” said Harry. “I can’t believe I slept this late. I must have been really knackered.”

“You were,” said Remus. “Sirius couldn’t get you up at all. He was going to see if you wanted to come with him to pick up Hermione and her parents.”

Harry yawned, thanked Ginger as she set a corned-beef sandwich down in front of him. “When did he leave?”

“Oh, about thirty minutes ago,” said Regulus. “He wanted to be early.”

“Really early,” said Remus. Harry glanced at the kitchen clock. It was only half-eleven even now. Merlin forbid he ever get this paranoid of everything—from Slytherins to Dark Lords to being late.

“Yule’s only a few days away,” Regulus said. “We still haven’t got a Yule log—Sirius thought we might bring the Grangers with us to get one, but it’s generally a family tradition, and if you would like to just go with your dad, Remus and I can entertain them while you do.”

“No,” said Harry. “Hermione’s just as much family as anyone; you both are, too, now. We should all go together.”

Remus and Regulus shared a quick glance with one another. They smiled. “Great,” said Regulus. “I’ll be in the cellar, then—unless the moths have got to them, we should have a few holiday things in there. It’s been ages since any of us saw a proper Yule.”
When he was gone, Remus turned to him with that patent, calm smile. “Sirius and Regulus both are big traditionalists, and quite religious, though they don’t show it often. When we were in school, your dad—” he broke off abruptly, looking embarrassed. “I’m sorry—this is still new to me. I’m sure it’s been a bit strange for you, as well.”

Harry nodded. “Yes,” he said. “I’m giving it time.”

“A wise decision,” said Remus. He smiled. “When we were in school,” he started again, “Jamie would always tease Sirius about the little Yule log he burned in the common room fireplace. He didn’t go home for the holiday after first year, but that didn’t stop him keeping that silly log lit, or the holly and ivy strung up around his bed fresh.”

“This is all new to me. I’ve never seen anything but Christmas at the Dursleys...and even the Weasleys celebrate Christmas, don’t they?”

Remus considered this. “Well, they do call it Christmas,” he said. “But I don’t think it’s for religious reasons—Bill and Charlie, at least, are devout. The younger ones, I don’t think they care much either way, and Molly and Arthur aren’t very religious, so they wouldn’t have put up a fuss if Ron and Ginny took on a muggle religion.”

“But what religion are they, exactly?” Harry asked.

“Oh,” said Remus. “Well, I don’t think we’ve ever put a name to it. Muggles call it paganism, but wizards don’t care for that word much, because of its etymology.”

“And most wizards are like this?” Harry asked.

Remus hmmed, thinking. “We were already separated from the muggles by the time Christianity was introduced to Britain,” he said. “And since no one cared to anger the gods, we kept on believing what we believed. Most wizards will just tell you they are devout—or not devout, if they aren’t. There are new muggle-born lines that tend to celebrate Christmas and other muggle holidays, but those are few compared to all of the old families.”

“I want to fit in with my family,” Harry said quietly. “I don’t want to be anything like the Dursleys. How do you become devout?”

Remus smiled, understanding. “Don’t forget your mother was Catholic,” he said. “American lines were more integrated with muggles for longer than wizarding families in other countries.”

“Then what difference does it make?” asked Harry.

“You see,” said Remus, after a moment, “because of our ability to do magic, the devoted among us can, given enough dedication, even make a connection to god, or speak to them. Whereas muggles need faith, wizards can get the answer to their own questions, if they put the effort in. Our gods will answer. And when it comes down to it, there is life in everything, and since god is life, then god is everywhere—in every religion. It doesn’t make a difference what you call yourself, Harry. It matters how you relate to god yourself. Just be a good person, and you’ll be fine.”

Harry looked away. “What if I’m not a good person?” he asked, thinking of Voldemort.

“You are,” said Remus. He lifted the sleeve of his robe, displaying the ugly Dark Mark beneath. His smile was self-deprecating. “Do you think I didn’t feel the same as you when I did this? We were all given life to live, and sometimes, you’ve got to make a choice to save yourself.”

“But what if people get hurt, or killed? Because I’m too scared to fight him?”
“You might be scared,” said Remus, “but you’re still a Gryffindor, and you’ve got more courage than most others would have had. What do you think anyone else in your situation would have done, with Voldemort in their heads? Do you think they would have stuck around to try to change him? To convince him that he’d be better off not killing innocent muggles? To force his Death Eaters into taking a look at their own bigotry by giving them muggle-born children to raise as their own? With that blood rite, Harry, and with that alone, at least ten ancient houses have survived another generation. The Diggorys, even—if Cedric, that eight-hundred year-old line would have become extinct, but now there is Diggory blood again. And there are others. You alone have convinced that madman to do something good with his tyranny, and he’s saved part of our culture now. You did that, Harry. You aren’t hurting anyone—you’re saving countless lives just by redirecting his attention.”

“Maybe,” said Harry. But he had something to think about now. His guilt at not fighting Voldemort was always in the back of his mind. And his excuses for not doing so always seemed like just that—excuses—but if someone as level-headed as Professor Lupin thought he did the right thing, then just maybe he had.

The antechamber floo roared to life. Harry and Remus sprang up to meet them there. Hermione was the first one through, bringing her mother through with her. The two women stepped out, and Remus was quick to steady Mrs Granger—who was much taller than Harry remembered—as she collected herself.

Hand pressed to her chest, and eyebrows lifted quite high, Mrs Granger gave them a startled smile. “Oh my days,” she said. “That was a bit like going on one of those rides at Alton Towers.”

“It gets easier, Mum,” said Hermione. She came over to Harry and hugged him. “All right?” she asked.

“Good,” he said, grinning. “You?” His question was altogether more pointed than hers had been. She cut her eyes to her mother and shook her head minutely. She hadn’t told them yet.

“Great,” she said, sounding it. “Hello, Professor Lupin.”

“Hermione,” he said. And he and Mrs Granger went about introducing themselves to another with a ‘Oh, please call me Alice’ thrown in, and Remus reminded Hermione, as well, to stop calling him Professor Lupin, as he wasn’t her professor anymore.

“So good to see you again, Harry,” said Mrs Granger. The floo came alive with green flames again. Sirius and Mr Granger landed in the grate and stepped out as the flames subsided.

“Ahh, I see you made it,” said Mr Granger to Mrs Granger. He looked quite a bit more startled than she had. Hermione apparently got her steadfast personality from her mother. “Reminds me of two summers ago—“

“Alton Towers,” Mrs Granger said. “I thought so, too.”

Sirius introduced Mr Granger—‘No, no, Clarence is fine!’—to Remus, and by that time, Regulus had heard the noise and come up from the cellar, arms full of holiday decorations. He came in and introduced himself—’My friends call me Regulus’—and then Harry showed everyone upstairs to their rooms. Hermione had a room near Harry’s, and the Grangers took the last available suite, which was in the same wing as Remus and Regulus.

“This is my favourite part,” said Harry, showing the Grangers how to operate the shower in the en suite. “This one has a twelve-scent faucet... lavender, rhubarb, nutmeg, leatherwood, clove, tobacco,
cedar, lemon, gardenia, rosemary, oak, and pine,” he said, reading the tiny engraved letters on the brass tap.

“Oh, rhubarb,” said Mr Granger. “Alice makes the most delicious rhubarb pie.”

“Oh, stop,” she said.

“Mum, you should make one this year,” said Hermione. “They’re really quite good. She makes them for us on Christmas.”

“I understand we’ll be celebrating Yule with your family,” said Mr Granger to Harry.

Harry nodded, depositing Mrs Granger’s luggage on the bed. “It’s traditional for wizarding families,” he said. “It’s my first time, too.”

“Wonderful,” said Mrs Granger. “We’ll be experiencing it together, then. Hermione’s very excited about seeing how you folk do things for the holidays. She couldn’t stop talking about it—”

“Mum,” said Hermione.

Mr Granger patted her shoulder. “Don’t embarrass the girl, Al.”

Harry shared a grin with Hermione. “If you’d like, we’re going out in a bit to gather the Yule Log and catch some fairies for fairy lights. Would you like to come?”

“Love to!” said Mr Granger. “This is such an exciting prospect for us, Harry, to see all the things our Hermione has become used to.”

“Brilliant,” said Harry. “I’ll let you get settled in; just come down when you’re ready. We’ll be in the drawing room—it was the red-painted room at the bottom of the main stairs, but if you get lost, you can just call one of the house-elves.”

“House-elves?” said Mrs Granger.

Hermione pursed her lips. Harry studiously ignored it. “They, er, they’re a bit like brownies,” said Harry.

Mr Granger laughed. “Where do we get one of those?” he said. “I’d love to have one to clean out the gutters every spring.”

Harry grinned. Perhaps that could be arranged. He shared another look with Hermione; she looked hopeful, and when he smiled at her, she smiled back. “Just call for Fred or Ginger and they’ll come.”

With that, he and Hermione left the Grangers to get settled in and refreshed. “I suppose you want to see the library again,” he said. She swatted him.

“No,” she said. “Not just yet, at least.” She paused as they reached the stairs. Harry stopped with her; she was biting her lip. “I don’t know how to tell them,” she said. “I thought it would be easy—I could let them see how wonderful magic is, let them come to the desire to live in it themselves, and then I’d tell them about—you know—and after that sank in, I’d tell them about the spell I’m developing, the one to give them some magic.”

“What’s wrong with that?” asked Harry.

“It feels so, so...Slytherin!” she said. She rolled her eyes at her own words, realizing how first-year they sounded. “I don’t want to manipulate them,” she said. “But I can’t go on not telling them about
“Well, you could wait until after the baby’s born,” said Harry.

She shook her head. “No, I need to do it while I’ve still got Voldemort’s help.”

“Why would you stop having it?” Harry asked.

“Well, in case he isn’t, you know, around,” she said.

“Why wouldn’t he be around?” Harry asked. “What? You think he’s going to...to die?”

Hermione paused, looked at him strangely. “Harry,” she said. “Of course he’s going to die. You know that.”

“I’m not fighting him, though,” he said. “I’m not going to kill him.”

“Oh, Harry,” she said, and she suddenly looked very sad. Her big brown eyes flickered back and forth as she studied his face, pitying. “Harry, you don’t have to kill him. He’s doing it himself.”

Harry looked down. That wasn’t true. Voldemort wouldn’t do that. He was becoming more human by the day. He almost looked normal now. He almost looked like ‘Tom’ and not ‘Voldemort’ now.

“So, what are we going to do about your parents then?” he said.

“Harry, are you okay—?” Hermione asked. Harry interjected before she could finish.

“Yeah, fine. Brilliant. We need to figure out your parents, though,” he said. “Sirius knows about it. I’ll make sure Regulus and Remus are in on it. I’ve begun to notice that there’s nothing that brings the Brothers Black closer together than a chance at pomp and circumstance. They’ll make sure your parents have a good time, and that’s a start. We have two weeks. We can take it from there.”

She gave him a smile, and he grinned down at her. Hermione cancelled the Muffliato and they took the stairs down to the main floor. “How are you so short?” he asked her as they walked. “Your parents are as tall as Sirius.”

She smacked his arm again. “Recessive gene, you prat.”

“Well it suits you,” said Harry. “I wouldn’t want you to be taller than me anyway. Taller and smarter? My ego would never recover.”

Sirius entered the drawing room. There was a fire in the wide hearth beneath his grandparents’ portrait, and his father, his uncle Regulus, and Remus were all gathered around it drinking mulled wine and watching floo disk recording of a recent Montrose Magpies match. “Hermione, again!” he said. “Have some mulled wine. We’re celebrating early.”

“Ah, Harry, my boy!” said Sirius, when he and Hermione entered the drawing room. There was a fire in the wide hearth beneath his grandparents’ portrait, and his father, his uncle Regulus, and Remus were all gathered around it drinking mulled wine and watching floo disk recording of a recent Montrose Magpies match. “Hermione, again!” he said. “Have some mulled wine. We’re celebrating early.”

“Oh, no, I—“

“Oh, right,” said Sirius, remembering. He passed his goblet to Remus. “Well—Remus can have mine and we can all drink hot cider instead.” He settled back on the couch, nearly upsetting Regulus’ abandoned wine when he jumped right back up again, yelling, “Well done, Maddock!”

Similar shouts of, “Stomp them, Magpies!” from Regulus, and a more reserved observation of,
“That’s Holyhead’s beaters settled, then.”

“These floo disks are brill,” said Regulus, when the fire went to a scheduled advert break. “Can you get live games on them?”

“No,” said Sirius. “Still need the wireless for that.”

Mr and Mrs Granger came in then, led by Fred, who was making a valiant attempt at not looking exhausted. He carried Morty with him, and the little elf stared over his father’s shoulder with big, bulging eyes, watching the Grangers. They watched him back, disbelieving.

“Ah, Alice, Clarence,” said Remus, standing. “We were just watching last week’s game.”

“Quidditch, is it?” said Mr Granger, peering into the fire. “Hermione’s mentioned it. Anything at all like football?” he wanted to know.

“Quite a bit!” said Sirius, and the two of them began a conversation that was spoken very fast, and involved a lot of peering into the fire with intense expressions. When Montrose scored again, both Sirius and Mr Granger cheered.

“Men will always love their Quidditch, won’t they?” said Grandmother Laurel.

Their frame, which until just now had looked only like a charms laboratory with a writing desk in the back beneath a window, now included Harry’s grandparents as well. They had returned at the noise from the Quidditch game and were seated in their usual spot on an upholstered bench at the front of the frame. Even now, Frank was sliding around to another frame across from the fireplace so he could watch the game as well.

“Good Heavens!” said Mrs Granger, who blushed at her outburst. “Forgive me,” she said to Laurel, “Hermione has told us about many of the things to expect in the wizarding world, but it’s quite a different story to actually hear an oil painting speak.”

In the landscape behind her, Frank chuckled. “Not to worry, my dear, my Laurel and I lived amongst the muggles for several years. We understand.”

“Oh,” said Harry. “Gran, Grandad, these are Hermione’s parents, Alice and Clarence Granger. My grandparents, on my mum’s side, Laurel and Frank Evans.”

“Any relation to the Grangers of Connecticut?” he asked. “Tom Granger was my Secretary when I was Minister of New England.”

“I don’t believe so,” said Mr Granger. “I can’t recall anyone in my family living in America.”

“Well, shall we?” said Regulus. He and Remus were bundled in their heavy grey fur cloaks. Sirius summoned his, Hermione’s and Harry’s from the coat closet. “Will you be warm enough in that coat, Alice?” he asked, seeing the Grangers in standard muggle winter coats.

“Oh, I think so,” she said.

Regulus shook his head. “Areas around magical communities have been very cold lately, because of some unfortunate magical occurrences. Let me get you both a fur cloak. They have warming charms.”

There were some initial polite refusals, but Harry’s Uncle Regulus was obviously born into nobility and rarely took ‘No’ for an answer. In a matter of moments, he had summoned another pair of winter cloaks that had once belonged to his and Sirius’ grandparents, and the Grangers were fully prepared
for an outing in the Dementor-chilled winter.

“They’re really laying it on thick,” Harry muttered to Hermione.

She tried to hide a grin. “I can’t say I’m not grateful.” She nodded at her parents, being led back to the antechamber floo with Regulus and Remus on one side, and Sirius on the other. “They’re quite enjoying this.”

“It’s only a short floo to the West Elfshire Inn in Dumfries and Galloway. We’ll be getting an Oak from the Ravenshall Wood,” Sirius was saying as he led Mrs Granger into the impressive floo—much more spacious than the Weasley’s own hearth.

“Would you like to activate it?” he asked her, holding out the porcelain floo powder urn to her. When he wanted to, Harry’s dad could definitely put on the charm. Alice Granger, nearly as tall as Sirius and Regulus herself, was smiling widely as she retrieved a pinch of the glittery dust. Sirius passed the jar over to Remus, who was bringing Mr Granger, and Alice tossed the dust at their feet.

“West Elfshire Inn!” she said, voice very precise—it reminded Harry of the first time he’d seen Hermione floo. The fire, previously only a smoulder, burst into flames and they disappeared.

“The floo does all the work for you, unless you just aren’t paying attention and miss your stop,” Remus was explaining to Hermione’s dad. “The grates are labelled, you see, and after the first trip when you’re too overwhelmed to see anything, you’ll catch on soon enough.” He offered the floo urn to Clarence and passed it to Regulus, who’d be coming next, with Harry and Hermione.

They disappeared in a burst of green flame. Harry stepped into the fire with Hermione, and Regulus followed, grabbing a pinch of dust and setting the pot back on the table. “How’re we doing?” he asked her.

“I wasn’t expecting them to be overwhelmed, exactly,” said Hermione. “They’re both quite adventurous. But I hadn’t expected them to be having quite this much fun. You’re doing great. You have no idea what this means to me.”

He winked at her, so very reminiscent of Sirius. “It’s good for Sirius—all of these revelations coming so soon together, and him having spent a decade in Azkaban. This—normality is good for him. He wants us all to be a big, happy family.

Harry bumped his shoulder against Hermione’s. “Me, too.”

Regulus grinned his sly, Slytherin grin, and tossed the powder into the flames. “West Elfshire Inn!”

The old barman at the West Elfshire Inn gave Hermione a toothy leer as she exited the hearth. His long pointed ears stuck up at an odd angle to his dishevelled white hair, and his black eyes reminded her distinctly of Professor Snape. Her mum and dad were waiting for them by the door, so she gave the barman no further thought.

Ravenshall Wood was full of Oaks for Harry’s family’s Yule log, but there were lots of other things there Hermione was quite keen to get hold of—some Gold Dust Lichen off the Sycamores, for example, or a few unripe Elderberries, or perhaps even a few pieces of Wych Elm bark. She retrieved her mokeskin pouch from her cloak pocket just in case.

Ahead of Harry and her, Sirius was pointing to an Ash tree and saying, “The Ash is used for Quidditch bats, and we also use it as a wand wood. It has properties of strength and flexibility.”
And just a few feet ahead of them, Professor Lupin and her mum were bending over a fairy hole, peering inside, as Professor Lupin set up a trap with his wand. “They do love milk and honey,” he said as he conjured the same. “If we catch one, it’s good luck, and he’ll bless our home for Yule.”

They left the trap there and continued further into the forest, in search of just the right tree to take their Yule log from. It didn’t take long. Harry’s Uncle Regulus, seemingly unable to help himself in the excitement, had gone ahead of them. He called back to them with his find.

“It’s perfect!” he yelled. They hastened to meet him, and indeed the Oak tree was big and old, and its branches were gracefully formed. He looked at them expectantly as they arrived. “Well, what do you think?”

“Good choice,” said Professor Lupin. His arm went around Regulus’ waist with ease. “Sirius?”

“I like it,” he said. “Harry?”

“Er,” said Harry, looking determined, but a little underprepared, like he did every Potions class. “It looks good to me.” He looked at his parents, enquiringly. “Do you think so, Mr and Mrs Granger?”

“We do,” said Clarence. “A fine tree. Now, how do we get a log from it? Will we—ah—conjure a saw?”

“Even better,” said Regulus. “No manual labour involved, though there is some tradition. To prevent the spirit that lives in the tree from cursing us, we have to give thanks. Then the spell is *Aborampute*, and the wand motion is this—” He demonstrated a steady back and forth rhythm like the sawing of a tree.

“Everyone ready?”

Hermione stood back with her mum and dad to watch. This was something she was unlikely to ever see being done again, and she was curious how it went. No—that wasn’t true. There was Theo, and Theo’s family was traditional. She might see it again with him, one year—perhaps. Settling down like that wasn’t something she was ready to think about; not when she had so many other things on her mind, like her research.

“No, no,” said Sirius, grinning at them over his shoulder. “Come on, Grangers. This is a family affair, and Hermione is Harry’s family, so you’re our family.”

Her dad chuckled, that low rolling sound she remembered from her childhood, and heard so rarely now that she spent most of the year at school. “We haven’t got wands!” he said, laughing. “Won’t do you a bit of good.”

“Nonsense,” said Regulus, and he ushered the three of them over, until they were all near the same graceful Oak branch that had been selected. “You can say the incantation with us and I’ll wager it’ll be that much stronger. We’ll have the luckiest Yule of all!”

Struck with an idea, Hermione moved between her parents and held out her wand. “Hold it with me,” she said, and her parents each put an arm around her as they covered her hand with their free one. Their spell-warmed fur cloaks pressed against her and she was overwhelmed by the realisation that she’d forgotten what it felt like to be so close to her parents.

When she was little, the three of them did so many things together; they came to every cello recital, took her to every Brownies meeting, French class and riding class—which had no doubt kept her from falling from that thestral in fifth year—on skiing trips and holidays all over the world. They loved her, and it showed. Yet, she was gone nine months of the year, and here she was back early in
the wizarding world for their Christmas break, once again. She cut her already short summers with her parents even shorter to get back among other wizards and witches, and here, now, guilt overran her academic priorities.

“Goodness, Hermione, your hands are cold,” her mum said. “Are you warm enough, love? Do you want my gloves?”

“I’m fine, Mum, thanks.”

“Are you sure, darling?” her dad asked. He was wrapping his large hand over her fingers to shield them from the cold.

Merlin, they loved her. The thought of her life being so completely separate and different from theirs after she left Hogwarts made her throat tighten painfully. They had always tried to remain active in her life, even after she left for Hogwarts and her life became so different.

“Thanks, Dad,” she said. She could have just renewed the warming charm on her hands, but how could she do that to her parents, who couldn’t compete with magic?

“On three, now,” Sirius said. “A-bor-AM-put-e. One, two, three!”

“Aborampute!” Hermione and her parents said together. She moved her wand in the specified pattern, and as their hands moved with hers, her parents wore matching looks of concentration and wonder on their faces. A large cut was forming with each successive wand movement on the tree limb Regulus chose. Before long, the branch cracked under its own weight and fell to the forest floor.

“Good show!” said Sirius.

On either side of her, Hermione’s mum and dad looked at her proudly, just like they always did. How in the world was she going to tell them she was pregnant?

Back at River House, his dad and Uncle Regulus were already in the garden sizing the Yule log down to something that would actually fit in the—admittedly large—fireplace hearth. The rest of them, not having to apparate home with a fifteen foot tree branch, had taken the floo, especially since it wouldn’t have been a good idea to apparate the Grangers just yet.

At Sirius’ request, Kreacher appeared with a piece of the last Yule log ever lit by the Black family, in the 1970s, to start the fire for this one. He handed it to Sirius with only a small grimace, but then Regulus returned to the room, and Kreacher’s already large eyes widened further. He looked between the two of them several times.

“Kreacher does not understand,” he said. “Kreacher feels three masters in this room, Master Sirius and Master Sirius’ son, but it can’t possibly be...”

“Hello, Kreacher,” said Regulus, looking suddenly very kind. It was easy to see now the Regulus from Sirius’ stories of when they were growing up—the Regulus who treated Kreacher well, even if he did want to be a Death Eater like his Cousin Bella.

“Kreacher doesn’t understand...” the house-elf said again. “Kreacher feels three masters, but Kreacher knows there are only two alive.”

“It’s me, Kreacher,” Regulus said. “Regulus.”
“Master Regulus has been dead for nearly twenty years. Kreacher knows because Kreacher tried to save him and Kreacher failed and watched Master Regulus’ name fade from the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black’s tapestry. Kreacher would have boiled himself slowly in a cauldron of hot oil, but Master Regulus made Kreacher promise not to kill himself—”

“You did save me, Kreacher,” Regulus said. “It was because of your help that I was only punished by the Dark Lord, not killed.”


“Ah, you see, that’s why you don’t quite recognise me as Regulus, Kreacher. Because when the Dark Lord had me turned into a werewolf as punishment, I used a blood rite to change me into Sirius. I wanted Mum and Dad to think I was dead, so they wouldn’t have to suffer the shame of a werewolf son.”

“A werewolf, too,” said Mrs Granger. The Grangers were helping Remus bring in the boxes of Yule ornaments that Regulus had found earlier. She was standing in the doorway, arms full of an unlidded box with gold tinsel hanging out the top. “Those are real?”

Remus came up behind her, worried. “I assure you, we pose no danger to you while—”

“Danger?” said Mrs Granger. “It hadn’t even occurred to me that you might be dangerous.” She crossed the room and sat the box gently on the floor. “Magical werewolves are dangerous?”

“Only on the full moon,” said Regulus quickly. “But we take a potion on that day that allows us to keep our human minds, so we are still quite safe, even then, as long as we drink the potion. I promise you that we’re really quite tame—”

Harry snorted. Werewolves, tame.

“If our Hermione isn’t afraid of werewolves,” said Mr Granger, following them in, “then I don’t believe Alice or I have a reason to be, either. Hermione?”

“Professor Lupin is quite safe,” she said. “I researched werewolves in third year, and not only does the Wolfsbane Potion keep them completely human mentally, but they can also be repelled by pure silver or gold, to give you time to apparate away, and like any other wizard, they can be felled by a Killing Curse.”

“That sounds dreadful,” Mrs Granger said.

Regulus swallowed heavily. “I quite agree.”

“There’s really no reason to be afraid of Mr Lupin or Harry’s Uncle,” Hermione said to her parents. “And besides, the full moon was last week.”

By this time, Harry’s uncle had talked Kreacher down from a panic attack at failing to serve his master all these years. After the elf popped back to Grimmauld Place—with a new motivation to get it cleaned up for his favourite master—Regulus leaned over and whispered to Harry, “Let’s just hope Kreacher doesn’t realise it was me he sold out to Cousin Cissy, and not his ‘blood traitor’ master. He might actually off himself in that case.”

Harry shuddered. He didn’t like Kreacher, but the cauldron of bubbling hot oil had left a very disgusting, very distinct image in his mind. He would need to get rid of it in the pensieve if he was ever to sleep again.
The afternoon was spent decorating the house for Yule, with help from the Evans portrait. Remus’ fairy trap had worked, and the disgruntled fairy was deposited on a rope of greenery made from the leaves of their Oak branch. It sat there pouting until Lupin brought it more milk and honey, at which point it quickly developed a spirit for the season and started glowing brightly.

The Grangers thoroughly enjoyed themselves. They delighted in the elf-made mulled wine and mead and Ginger’s holiday meat pies. Regulus brought the wireless in from the kitchen and turned it on for Celestina Warbeck’s annual Yule concert, who the Grangers recognised as the allegedly-muggle, Ella Fitzgerald. “I can’t believe it, but that’s her!” said Mr Granger. “I’d recognise that voice anywhere. My parents loved her.”

After dinner, Ron finally flooed over, and the adults removed to the drawing room to let them get caught up. Remus and Regulus were out getting some last minute holiday shopping done. After having gone nearly two months without seeing his best mate, Harry didn’t know whether to hug him furiously or just stand there grinning stupidly at him. Ron made the decision easy for him when he accepted a long hug from Hermione first. By then, Harry’d recovered enough to step forward and hug him, too.

“Oh, Ron,” said Hermione, and when she pulled away to let Harry go, she was blinking quickly. “How’ve you been? Have you been well?”

“Good to see you, mate,” said Harry into his hair. It was longer now, like Bill’s and Charlie’s, and he had a short beard. It scratched Harry’s neck as they hugged. “I, er, like the beard,” he said.

Ron stepped back, scratching it proudly. “Yeah? Mum hates it. Fred and George nearly complimented me on it, though, before they realised what they were saying. And Lavender says she likes—” He stopped suddenly and looked at Hermione.

“Oh, Lavender likes it?” Hermione said. Her voice wavered only a bit.

“Hermione...” Harry said.

“I’m sorry, you’re right. I have no right to be jealous. I’m happy for you, Ron. Are you happy?”

He gave her a small smile. “Mostly, yeah,” he said.

They were always going to be like this, Harry thought. As if, in some other universe, they were actually meant to be together, instead of being the worst possible match imaginable. Watching it all over again was almost sad. He didn’t want them doing this to each other. Hermione was good with Nott, much as Harry didn’t want to admit it at first.

“Let’s go up to my room,” he said, in an attempt to diffuse the situation.

Once there, Harry and Ron flopped onto the bed, and Hermione took the chair by the window. “I wrote you every week,” Hermione said. “Did you get my letters?”

“I was kind of busy,” Ron said. “Mum’s put me and the twins in an accelerated NEWT tutoring group so we can sit them in the spring. Oh, and guess what—Dad’s convinced Dumbledore to let me come take Potions on Mondays and Wednesdays because—”

“But you hate Potions,” Harry said.

Ron shuddered, “I do,” he agreed. “But I really need to get this Potions NEWT, and Mum doesn’t think our tutor is qualified in that subject, and she’s convinced Snape’s the best potions master in all of Great Britain, so I’m stuck.”
“Why do you need a Potions NEWT?” Hermione asked. “You’re not thinking of going to university, are you?”

“Not as such,” Ron said. “I’m actually taking an apprenticeship. He says he’ll take me on if I get three NEWTS and if Potions is one of them.”

“Who?”

“Mr Honeyduke,” Ron said. “I thought about what you said, Harry, about making Chocolate Frog cards with Death Eaters on them, as a public service announcement, but then I thought—why give the idea away when I could make my own sweets with collectibles and make loads of galleons? I’ve been working with Fred and George at their shop after our tutoring sessions, and they’re helping me design the charms for the cards, then we’re going to package them with dark chocolates and call them Dark Chocolate Wizards. We might even expand if these do well—I was thinking of having sweets shaped like dark magical creatures, and we’d have an identification collectible card with those, too. Instead of making cards for good wizards and witches, we’re going to do sweets for scary things! I’m going to be a confectioner!”

Harry shared a glance with Hermione. After hearing all the things Ron had been doing since being expelled, Harry sleeping with Malfoy or Hermione being pregnant didn’t seem like such a big revelation. “That’s brilliant, Ron,” Harry said.

Ron grinned at him. “I know.” His smile faltered. “I’ve really missed you guys, though. I know I didn’t write back as much as I should’ve, but—it wasn’t easy. I know I sound like everything’s fine, now, and for the most part it is, but I felt like I had a Dementor in my head for the longest time—Mum took me to St Mungo’s after we got back from Hogwarts, and you were right, Hermione. I had a magical imbalance, and it was making me feel like everyone was out to get me and nothing ever went right. They did a spell to even out my magic, and that helped a lot, but I’ve got to go back every week to have it done, until my magic remembers how to balance itself without a spell to help. Every time I get a little bummed, I get scared that the Dementor’s coming back, and I just have to keep telling myself that it’s normal to be sad sometimes, but I still have to try to be happy, and not let myself be sad all the time. Lavender’s helped with it, a lot, actually. She wrote me nearly every day, even when I didn’t write back—she would just tell me the silly things that happened to her that day. She came over yesterday when she got home, and brought me a meat pie, and Mum loves her, so I’m going to try to let go of you, Hermione, and see if there’s anything there with Lavender after all.”

“Oh,” said Hermione. “Right—good idea, Ron.” She looked away, out the window, for a moment. When she looked back, she was composed. “We would never have been right for each other,” she said. “And I’m happy with Theo. I do love you, though, Ron. I always will.”

“The way that I love you both,” Harry said, clarifying.

Hermione nodded. “Yes, that way. I just want us to all be friends again, and go back to the way things were—without the hormones.”

He grinned. “Well, Mondays and Wednesdays, we can. Dumbledore’s letting me come early to have lunch at Hogwarts, and I can stay through dinner to use the library when you’re all in Divinations or Arithmancy.”

“That’s great!” Hermione said.

“So what’s been going on with you two?” he asked.

Harry glanced at Hermione. No time like the present, he thought. “Well, I’m kind of seeing Malfoy,”
he said.

Ron’s jaw dropped. “Mate, you’re having me on,” he said.

Harry shook his head. “No. It’s—well, it’s not really an official thing, but it seems like it’s going that way. His family’s coming over tomorrow, by the way—”

“His parents, too?” Ron asked, aghast. “Harry, they’d kill you as soon as look at you!”

“Actually, Sirius invoked this pure-blood family thing. Narcissa’s his cousin, you know, and it’s Yule, so we all have to put differences aside for the holiday, or else there will be great dishonour and magical repercussions.” He said the last part rolling his eyes.

Ron looked thoughtful. He even scratched his new beard a little bit. “There is that,” he agreed. “Is Malfoy still a great twat, though, Harry? Because I won’t promise not to hex him if he says anything about my family.”

“He’s a twat, for sure,” Harry said, “but I don’t think he’ll say anything. He’s not really that kind of twat anymore.”

“Well, if you say so,” Ron said, doubtful. “I’ll have a go at being nice to the git for you, Harry.”

“Oh, Ron!” Hermione said. She was grinning so widely that Harry thought her face might split in half. She ran over, jumped on the bed, and hugged him. “I’m so proud of you.”

He cheeks were a little red when she pulled away. “I suppose Nott is coming, too?” he asked her. Hermione nodded. “Is that okay? I can always floo him and—”

“It’s fine, Hermione,” Ron said. “You’re happy. I’m happy for you. I can try to like the bloke for you.”

“Ron,” Hermione said again. Her eyes were getting misty again.

“I could have my dad invite Lavender and her mum over, too,” Harry said. “We can make a big thing of it. And, maybe Dean—is Ginny still seeing Dean?”

Ron scrunched up his brow. “I don’t think so,” he said, thinking. “She’s been writing about Luna a lot, lately, so—”

“Well, we can have Luna and her dad over, too,” Harry said. He frowned. “I think the Smiths are coming over, as well.”

All three of them made a face. “He’s such an annoying boy,” Hermione said.

“A right arsehole, last I remembered,” said Ron, less inclined to be polite about it. He stood up, saying, “Mind if I use your loo, Harry? I need a piss.”

Harry waved him to the en suite on the other side of the room, and Ron disappeared inside, shutting the door behind him. Harry glanced to Hermione, eyebrows lifted. “Are you going to tell him?” he asked.

“Of course I am,” she said. “He’s taking everything so well that I’m afraid to ruin it, though. Do you think he’ll be angry?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “It seems like he’s grown up a bit, but he’s Ron, you know. He’s got a
temper.”

Hermione bit her lip. “Well, what about the other things...the Dark Lord, and...oh, Harry, he still hasn’t even seen Regulus or Professor Lupin...”

“We can’t tell him about Voldemort,” Harry said. “He will have a fit if we tell him about that.”

“But he’s our best friend,” Hermione said. In the loo, the toilet flushed. “We can’t just not tell him,” she whispered quickly.

Harry pursed his lips. “Maybe,” Harry said.

The door opened, and Ron stepped out, smiling. “Wow, Harry, you’ve even got a lavender tap in there. We’ve just got rhubarb back at the Burrow. How did I not notice this when I was here before?”

“Uh, no idea, mate,” Harry said. Ron’s face darkened momentarily, remembering, but he recovered quickly.

“Right,” he said. “I remember.” Then, “I’m hungry. Hey, Harry, does your house-elf have any more of those meat pies?”

“Ron, you just had supper before you came over,” Hermione said.

“But everyone knows it’s good luck to eat a meat pie for all twelve days of Yule,” he said. “You don’t want me to be unlucky, do you?”

“Of course not, but—”

“Good! So, Harry?”

Harry rolled his eyes, but nevertheless, called Ginger for a warm meat pie for Ron. She brought it with three butterbeers for them to enjoy. “I haven’t had one of these in ages,” said Hermione. “It was last year, at least.”

“Really?” said Ron. “Fred and George take me to lunch in Diagon Alley every day I work the register at their shop, so I get them all the time now.”

“Lucky,” said Harry. “We’ve missed the last two Hogsmeade weekends...seventh year is really busy.” He said the last part with a sigh.

“Sounds like it,” said Ron. “Lavender’s taking six classes! I can’t even believe anyone would take six classes in seventh year. She’s apprenticing under Twila Tatting, you know, that posh old witch who owns Twilfit and Tatting’s in Diagon Alley? Says she wants to be a sartorialist,” he added, finger quoting the word.

“Lavender sounds, er, very motivated,” Harry said.

Ron seemed to realise he was carrying on about LavLav a bit much, and wisely redirected the conversation before Hermione had a chance to get annoyed. “What about you, two, then?” he asked. “Still planning on being an Auror, Harry?”

Harry considered the fact that he was currently very outside the law, or at least he would be if anyone had ever indicted Voldemort on any charges, and didn’t think the Auror programme would want much to do with him anymore. “I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t think so.”
Ron nodded, and shoved another bite of meat pie in his mouth. “I always figured you’d get tired of this dark wizard fighting after a while and realise you had other skills.”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up. “Ah, thanks, Ron. I haven’t really given any thought to it.”

“Well, I met a bloke who works for the Cleansweep Company a couple weeks ago. They have a business arrangement with the twins’ shop, so he comes in a lot. If you were ever interested in broom-making, then I could give him your name…”

“Harry would be dreadful at that,” Hermione said, laughing. “Can you imagine him sitting down and focusing intently on a delicate task for hours at a time?”

“Come to think of it,” Ron said.

“Oy!” said Harry. “I’m not an idiot, you know.”

“Not an idiot, no,” Hermione said. “But your attention span leaves something to be desired. You’d do well in something more active, or at least something that wasn’t always the same. Teaching, maybe.”

Harry shuddered. “I don’t even know everyone’s name in our mixed-house Arithmancy class. Can you imagine me trying to deal with thirty or forty teenagers? No, thanks.”

“And you, Hermione?” Ron asked. “You never would say what you and McGonagall talked about in career counselling.”

“That’s because she had no idea what to suggest for me,” Hermione said. “She was disinclined to recommend a Ministry position for me because she assumed, rightly, that I would find the organisation’s innate...bigotry distasteful. And obviously I’m not interested in a trade craft like wand-making or curse-breaking. I was thinking of maybe going into spell research or magical genetics, maybe. I’ve not decided.”

“Spell creation is a lucrative field, if you go into research,” Ron said. “My Uncle Bilius did it.”

“I’m really leaning towards magical genetics, actually. The Oxford University Magical Division has a magi-science programme that specialises in genetics, so I’d like to do research on squibs. Of course, I’d have to get a nanny, but I don’t think that will—”

“A nanny?” Ron said, suddenly alert. “Why’d you need a nanny?”

Hermione’s mouth hung open as she realised what she’d just said. “I was going to tell you,” she said. “Today—I really was.”

“You’re...?” said Ron. Hermione nodded slowly. He sat back heavily against the headboard of the bed. “You really do love him, then,” he said.

“I—well,” Hermione said. “I’m not sure, I suppose so? Why do you say that?”

“If you didn’t love him or if you were really opposed to having a baby at all then you wouldn’t have—you know. Your magic wouldn’t have let it happen.” He shrugged again. “That’s what Mum always said, anyway, could have been an old witch’s tale, but how many orphans and unwanted children have you seen in the wizarding world?”

“None,” Hermione said after a moment. “Only the ones that have been taken from muggle parents.”
“No wonder the population is so low,” Harry said.

“I don’t think that’s the whole story,” Hermione said, finding something academic to latch onto.

“So,” Ron said. He was looking a lot tenser than he had when they were just talking about one day getting jobs. Harry’s heart twisted for his friend—it was one thing to say you were letting go, and try to move on with your life; it was quite another to see that decision had already been made for you. He couldn’t come back in a year and hope that things had changed, that maybe they could try then.

“A baby.”

“I just found out Friday,” she said. “I splinched myself apparating.” She lifted her hand up and showed where there was still an angry red slash across the last three fingers.

“Splinched?” Ron said. His face was pale. “Thank gods only your fingers.”

Hermione looked away. “Yes, thank God.”

“How far along are you?” Ron asked.

“Not far,” Hermione said. “Three weeks, maybe.”

Ron added it up on his fingers. “So about the end of July then?”

“That would only be eight months, Ron,” Hermione said, rolling her eyes. “August.”

You really need to see a mid-witch, Hermione,” he said. “I don’t know how you do things in the muggle world, but in the wizarding world, it’s only eight months, and you’re going to be quite surprised in July if you don’t.”

“I will, obviously!” she said. “I have to tell my parents first, don’t I? And I sent off for some pregnancy books through owl order. They should come right after Yule—hopefully discreetly packaged.” Then, “Eight months, really?”

“Maybe magic speeds up the development,” Harry said. “Wizards do live longer than muggles, so it’s not surprising this could be different, too.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” said Hermione. Harry could already see the gears working in her mind; she’d not realised that magical pregnancies could be any different than the muggle ones she was used to hearing about. She stood from the bed. “I’m feeling rather tired all of the sudden,” she said. “I think I’ll go read in bed for a bit. Goodnight, Ron, goodnight, Harry.”

“Night, Hermione,” they said.

When she was gone, Harry turned to Ron. “Are you going to be okay, mate?” he asked.

Ron raked his fingers through his hair, sighing. “I’ll be fine,” he said, and Harry knew he meant it. “It was just a shock. I’ve missed so much, being gone. You and Malfoy, wow. I don’t know how you put up with the prick.”

Harry shrugged. “He kind of grows on you after a while.”

“Like a wart, yeah,” Ron said, laughing. “And then you have to use one of Madam Primpernelle’s Wart Removing Potions that come in pink-tinted vials with bows tied ‘round the corks to get him off.”

Harry grinned. “He’s a git, yeah, but I like him,” he said. Then, “What about you and Lavender? Is it
serious, do you think?”

Ron shrugged. “I’m going to give it a go,” he said. “I do fancy her, I do, but she’s not Hermione.”

“No one is,” said Harry. “But Lavender seems to like you a lot, and you get on with her.”

“Yeah,” said Ron. “I’ll give it a go with her after the holidays, when I get to come to Hogwarts twice a week. We’ll see what happens then.”

Harry smiled. “Good for you, mate. I just want you to be happy.”

Ron smiled back. “You, too, Harry. Even if it is with Malfoy.”

The following morning, Harry was roused bright and early for his first Occlumency lesson not with Snape. While they made some progress, he was still by no means an Occlumens; still anything was better than another lesson with Snape. His father was going to look into some different teaching techniques since Harry was raised by muggles and couldn’t inherently understand the meaning of clearing his mind like other wizard-raised children could.

Ginger made everyone a huge Yule breakfast, and by the time Ron was on his second plate, he’d woken up enough to notice the two extra men at the table. He was introduced to Regulus, and delighted at the story of the Black family port-key, which had activated when Bellatrix stunned Regulus and took him back home. “That’s brilliant!” he said. “I wonder if the twins could make Weasley port-keys...”

“Perhaps I could make some Granger ones as well,” Hermione said, looking to her parents.

“That’s a brilliant idea!” Lupin said. “I can help you with that, Hermione, if you’d like. Alice, Clarence? Would that be something you would be interested in? Personal port-keys?”

Hermione’s parents looked to each other, seeming quite surprised, but pleased. “I—well, of course,” said Mr Granger. “Would they work for us? We don’t have any magic, you know,” he added, unnecessarily.

“I’m sure we could figure something out,” Regulus said. When the Grangers were no longer looking, he gave Hermione a sly wink, and she smiled.

“Does anyone have any last minute shopping to do?” Sirius asked. “I need to nip into town for a gift for the Notts and the Malfoys.” He said the last name with a slight frown, obviously thinking of his dislike of Lucius.

“The Notts are Theodore’s family,” Hermione said to her parents. “I wrote to you about him, remember?”

Mr Granger was grinning. “Can’t wait to meet the chap,” he said. “Anyone who’s captured your attention must be someone special, sweetheart.”

“Right,” Hermione said. She looked back down at her plate, nearly untouched, and didn’t bring Theo up again. “And Harry’s seeing the Malfoys’ son,” she added. “You’ll meet him today, too, Dad.”

Harry glared at her for her choice in redirection, but across the table, Uncle Regulus had snorted into his tea, and was now masking it as a cough in his handkerchief.
“Quite all right!” he was saying. Alice was patting his back worriedly. “Down the wrong pipe, is all!”

With Regulus settled, Mrs Granger turned to Harry. “And what’s the lucky young man’s name?” she asked.

“Draco,” Harry said. He tried not to be sullen about it.

“Total wanker,” Ron added. He pushed another rasher into his mouth with gusto. Mr Granger snorted, but luckily didn’t have any tea in hand.

“Oh dear,” said Mrs Granger. “Surely not. Harry, I’m sure he’s a lovely young man.”

Harry hid a smirk behind his napkin. “Thanks, Mrs Granger,” he said. “I do have some shopping to do, actually, Dad,” he added. “Hermione and I didn’t get to the last Hogsmeade weekend so we never got a chance to do it.”

“We’ll make an afternoon of it, then,” he said. “Everyone else won’t be arriving until evening, so we can show the Grangers around Eweforic Alley, and you three can do your shopping. Would that be all right, Alice, Clarence? Interested in seeing wizarding Edinburgh?”

“Sounds lovely,” said Alice. “I’ll get our coats.”

“Nonsense,” said Regulus. He whipped his wand out and summoned the expensive vintage fur cloaks to them. “Keep these cloaks, won’t you? The bugbear fur cloak looked fetching on you, Alice, and it’s a lady’s cloak—we won’t get any use out of it in this family, will we?” He winked at Sirius and Harry to make the point.

“Oh, we couldn’t possibly,” said Mr Granger.

“No, no,” said Sirius. “I insist. Regulus is right; we’ve all got winter cloaks already, and these will just start collecting doxies if you don’t take them. You’d be doing us a favour.”

“Merlin, they’re good at this,” Hermione said to Harry, voice low.

“Good at what?” Ron asked. Harry leaned around Hermione to lift an eyebrow in Ron’s direction. “What are they on about?”

Hermione lifted her napkin to her mouth to hide as she said, “Trying to make my parents fall in love with the wizarding world. I think I’ve found a way to give them a little magic.”

Ron’s jaw dropped. “Pull the other one,” he said.

“Not much,” Hermione said. “Just enough to see things hidden from muggles, and maybe a few household spells. Enough so they could make and use potions, that sort of thing.”

“Right then!” said Sirius, standing. “To Eweforic Alley—Moony, are you and Reg staying here?”

“We’re waiting on a floo call from Philippe Delacour, actually,” said Lupin. At Sirius’ confused look, he added, “About the annual werewolf gala taking place at the Firth College...”

“Oh, right,” said Sirius, but he didn’t look pleased about it. “All right, then. Ready?”

“Is that Fleur’s brother?” Ron asked as they followed Sirius and the Grangers to the floo antechamber. “What’s he doing at a werewolf gala?”
“Gabrielle’s a werewolf,” Hermione whispered. Harry nodded, but he knew that wasn’t the real reason they were waiting on a floo call from him, and Sirius knew it, too. Philippe Delacour was a French Oureur at their Ministry of Defence, and if he was floo calling on Yule, then it was certainly to do with the werewolves’ roles in the Dementor feeding event. Harry pursed his lips, and tried not to think of all the danger little Gabrielle would be in; hopefully Fleur knew nothing about it.

They got their shopping done quickly in Eweforic Alley, and took lunch at a slightly more age-appropriate restaurant than Merlin’s Magic Mushroom. Sirius convinced the Grangers to try the braised cockatrice, which they, thankfully, liked. Suddenly put off by several foods she normally enjoyed and drawn to some she typically ignored, Hermione opted for a minced meat pie with goat cheese on top, and a gingerbeer to drink.

“You never eat meat pies,” Mr Granger said, chuckling. “Are you feeling all right, sweetheart?”

“Fine, Dad,” Hermione said. The remainder of lunch continued without a hitch, and they returned to River House just in time to greet the Weasleys, who flooed in as a swarm of red hair and happy voices. Mr Weasley and Mrs Weasley had, thankfully, been forewarned to expect the Notts and Malfoys, as well, who would be family guests, and thus any existing blood feuds were temporarily on hold. They accepted this with about as much grace as they were capable, which was more than Harry expected, truth be told.

“I don’t recall why we have a blood feud with the Malfoys to begin with,” Arthur was saying, scratching his head. “Certainly they’ve never been the type of people I’d think to offer an alliance to end it.” He shrugged. “Molly and I can certainly be polite for a day, of course, can’t we, my dear?”

“Absolutely,” she said. “That poor child of theirs, though. He always looks half-starved when they show his picture in the paper.”

“I’m sure he’s fine, Mrs Weasley,” Harry said.

Ron laughed. “Harry would know—he’s seeing him! Can you believe it, Mum?”

“Ronald!” she said. “Harry’s private life is none of your concern to be spouting off.” She levelled a blue-eyed gaze on Harry, and said, “I suppose this means I can’t expect you and Ginny to work things out, can I?”

Harry’s face was beet-red. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. Fortunately, Fred and George took that moment to come up and sling an arm each around his shoulders. “We caught Ginny kissing Luna Lovegood this morning, anyway,” said Fred.

“Thought you knew, Mum,” said George.

“Ginevra Molly Weasley!” Mrs Weasley said.

They steered him, thankfully, away. “Good to see you, Mrs Weasley!” Harry called over his shoulder. She didn’t hear him; she was too busy yelling at Ginny about being too young for kissing.

“That was mean of you,” Harry said, but he couldn’t help being thankful.

The twins smirked back at him. “You looked like you needed rescuing,” one said. Ron joined them, eyes wide.

“I do not want to be around Mum right now,” he said. “Or Ginny, for that matter. She’s going to be furious with you two, you know that.”
“I am sixteen!” Ginny said. “Luna’s sixteen, too! We’re plenty old enough!” Fred and George winced. The boys edged closer to the door.

“Best find somewhere else to be,” Harry said, and they took that advice very quickly, ending up in Hermione’s room, where she was finishing up the wrapping on the present she got her parents.

“You four look guilty,” she noted.

“We aren’t,” said George.

“Not us, never,” said Fred.

“They are,” said Ron. “And I’d stay away from Mum and Ginny for a while if I were you.”
Hermione lifted an eyebrow in the twins’ direction, and they looked back innocently.

“What do you think of Ronnikins’ beard, Hermione? Isn’t he dashing? We’re thinking of growing moustaches ourselves—well, we’re thinking of each growing half of one, so when we stand next to each other, we’ll have a full one. A great long one, that reaches down to our navels, at least, and curls at the end.”

“Leave off,” Ron said. “Lavender likes it well enough.”

“Sounds very handsome,” Hermione said dryly. “I’m sure Katie and Angelina will both have hearts aflutter at your half-moustaches.”

This seemed to bring the twins pause. “Perhaps we should keep the full bit, then...” said Fred.

“I wouldn’t want Katie to think I was only half a man,” George agreed.

The wards sounded in Harry’s head, and he felt three apparitions to the front garden. “Sounds like the Notts or the Malfoys are here,” he said. Three more apparitions sounded. “Ah, now the others’ are here. I better go change into something more presentable or my dad will be sure to make it especially embarrassing for me.”

“I’ll come with you, mate,” said Ron. “Mum’s making me wear dress robes, too.”

“Not those manky ones from fourth year,” Harry said, hoping.

“You can thank us,” said Fred.

“When you see what we got Ronnikins,” said George. He and Fred were already in lime green trousers with black coats, cut in a Victorian style. They had conjured top hats with green ribbons around them at some point. They winked at him, jingled some galleons in their pockets, and even though Ron didn’t know it, Harry knew that the money to buy them had come from his Tri-Wizard Tournament winnings, just as he’d asked.

“They’re smashing,” Fred said.

And indeed, they were a right step up from the ones before. They did show evidence of the twins’ fashion sense, but Fred and George obviously didn’t want to embarrass Ron, so they were still respectable—dark grey with plated-silver buttons, and red embroidery in an understated design up the sleeves and along the hem. Harry was fortunate to get away without dress robes, and was wearing his navy and black striped frockcoat with his nice trousers and boots Sirius bought him over the summer. Hermione met them at the stairs in a red dress and black flats.
“Those robes do look very nice on you,” Hermione said to Ron. She had her hair back with a red Alice band and it made her brown eyes look very pretty. “With your hair tied back and the beard, you look very grown-up.”

“Ah, thanks,” said Ron.

“Did you manage to send an owl off to Lavender?” Harry asked. “Is she coming.”

“Sent an owl,” Ron said, “but she isn’t sure she’ll make it. They always do a vigil for her dad on Yule, she said. He was an Auror, killed in the first war.”

Harry would have said more, but there, at the bottom of the stairs was Draco. He was busy talking to Ginny, who looked lovely in the same yellow dress she wore to the Yule Ball three years ago. But Harry wasn’t concerned with Gin—Draco was wearing black dress robes, but they were quite posh. Harry wasn’t much concerned with what Draco was wearing, though. His heart started hammering in his chest, and the underlying ache for Draco that he’d been feeling since leaving the hospital wing wasn’t going to go away until he touched him. He knew that now.

Chapter End Notes

1. Maddock being Aladair Maddock of the Montrose Magpies, Sirius’ and Regulus’ favourite team.
2. Ravenshall Wood is a real place, and the plants and trees mentioned do all grow there. I did a lot of research to find the right forest to place West Elfshire near, and this one seemed to just yell ‘Magical!’ so I liked it. Just random trivia. :)

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Diplomacy II

Chapter by faire_weather

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Diplomacy** (n): 1. skill in managing negotiations, handling people, etc., so that there is little or no ill will; tact. 2. the conduct of the relations of one state with another by peaceful means; tact skill or cunning in dealing with people

“**You’re here,**” Harry said.

Draco looked up from his conversation with the Weasley girl. “**Well spotted,**” he said. He gave her a pointed smile and she took the hint, and wandered off to speak to Granger. Draco turned to him fully, noticed the tailored navy-on-black striped coat, and the way his hair never sat properly, and barely resisted the urge to touch him. What was coming over him? Draco always had more restraint than this.

He felt strange tingles run up his arm and a great, warm wave of—what? Relief?—washed over him, and looked down in shock. Harry’s fingers were ghosting over his knuckles. He looked back up; their eyes met, and held. “**I couldn’t not touch you any longer,**” Harry said. “**It’s been torture, not even two full days away from you. I can’t sit still, it’s like there’s an ache in me where you’re supposed to be.**”

Draco swallowed. “**You missed me, Potter,**” he said, and wanted to hit himself for it. Harry’s eyes were so bright and serious; of course he missed him, but it had been more than that. Draco felt it, too. He had tried to keep this whole thing light and frivolous, but recently it had taken a turn that he couldn’t back away from. He closed his hand around Harry’s, pausing the feathery strokes of his fingers. “**I felt it, too,**” he said.

The look of relief that washed over Harry’s face was enough to make him want to kiss him right there, Merlin help him.

“**Good evening, Mr Black. Hello, Draco,**”

Draco disentangled their hands immediately, but it was no use. His father’s eyes lingered on the space where they’d been, then slid his eyes upwards, gave Draco the slightest of looks. He straightened his shoulders further, habit taking over.

“**Hello, Father,**” he said. “**I was just thanking Mr Black for opening their elegant home to us on Yule. Mother’s side of the family does have impeccable taste, do they not?**”

“**Were you,**” said Father.

“If you’ll excuse me,” said Draco, never one to hang around a tense situation when there was an alternative, “I believe I’ll see if Mother could use any help bringing in gifts.” He gave his father a nod, and turned to do the same to Harry, but Harry was already staring at him—was still staring at him, unconcerned with Lucius Malfoy’s presence at his side. Draco’s heart hammered in his chest, and he backed away unable to pull his eyes from Harry’s, until at last, Father stepped between them and cut off their line of sight.
“Mr Black.” Lucius Malfoy now stood where Draco had, seconds before, pointedly ending their conversation. “I trust you are recovering well from the unfortunate magical accident you and Draco suffered at the school?”

Harry inhaled deeply, trying to steady himself. It was as if the further away Draco was from him, the harder it was for Harry to focus on anything else. His shoulders ached; his head ached. Everything ached now. “Well enough,” Harry said. After a moment, because it was Christmas, he added, “Sir.”

Malfoy’s smile was tight. “Remarkable that you and Draco have become such fast friends,” he said.

Harry was half a head shorter than Lucius Malfoy, but he still looked up at the elder Malfoy without the briefest feeling of shame, much less fear. “It was overdue,” he said. Then, “I take it from your presence here that you don’t approve of it and you’d like me to leave your son alone so that he can fulfil a loveless betrothal to one of the Flint girls?”

“Mm,” said Malfoy. He looked quite amused. Hardly perceptible, he twitched his wand and a Notice-Me-Not spell rose up around them. “On the contrary, I find myself pleased that your dalliance has aligned my family’s name with yours, if you will forgive me for being so direct. I care not at all what kind of friendship you have with my son, so long as he produces an heir in the long run.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “So you do want him married off to some pureblood girl. And it doesn’t matter to you if he has a little slap and tickle on the side with another man, so long as the Malfoy blood line stays pure.”

“My, you are the conspiracy theorist, aren’t you?” said Lucius. “My son is free to make his own suitable match, female or male,” he said, “as long as a Malfoy blood heir is in the offing. You are a wizard, are you not, Mr Black? There is more than one way to produce those.”

Harry’s lips parted; this was something he had not expected to hear. “Oh,” he said.

“I do know what you are up to, Mr Black,” said Lucius. He smiled a little, a sinister-looking thing. “With the Dark Lord. You are playing a dangerous game, but if I have learned anything since first meeting you, it’s that you will luck out in the end, and I intend for the Malfoys to be associated with you when you do.”

“You do realise,” said Harry, heart hammering, “that what you’re saying sounds an awful lot like what the Dark Lord would call treason?”

Malfoy’s eyebrows lifted. “Come now, Mr Black. Surely you see what’s going on here.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean, Mr Malfoy,” said Harry.

“I see,” said Lucius. He smirked. “Very well, let me just say that it is an honour to be in your illustrious presence, and I look forward to serving you in any way I am able, in the future.”

“Er, right,” said Harry. “Wish I could say it’s mutual, but it isn’t.”

“That is of no matter to me, I assure you,” said Malfoy, and his voice was much more serious now. “It turns my stomach to think of my son touching a half-blood, but I am not stupid. Diplomacy is all that I seek from you, and so long as you remain on the winning side, you can expect the Malfoys to remain with you. I believe I have a blood feud with the Weasleys to attempt to end now, as it is evident that where you go, Weasleys follow. A merry Yule to you, Black,” he said.
He dipped his head in a nod, and walked away before Harry could gather his thoughts to reply.

“Hello?”

The portrait was empty, but they had to be around here somewhere. There were only so many portraits in the house.

“Hello?” she called again, just a little louder. Ginny glanced over her shoulder nervously. All the other guests were still occupied with each other, and no one had seen her leave, she was sure. Still, it didn’t hurt to be careful.

A woman peered around the edge of the frame. She had a thin face and large green eyes. “Yes, dear? Were you calling for us?”

“Yes,” said Ginny. “I was told I could come to you for help.”

Mrs Evans’s forehead furrowed. “Help?” she said. “Of course, dear. What did you need?”

“Both you and Mr Evans,” said Ginny. The woman nodded and stepped back out of the frame. She returned a moment later with a tall man with a large salt-and-pepper moustache. They slid into the frame and sat down on a bench. Mrs Evans clasped her hands in her lap.

“What can we help you with?”

That nauseated feeling of vertigo that she got every time it happened rushed through Ginny again, and then she knew she was once again just a guest in her own body. She relinquished control of herself easily these days. For a long time, she fought, but the other woman was stronger, better trained, a master of Legilimency, as if she even needed that to get into Ginny’s head and take over.

Ginny let her do it nowadays. There was no sense in fighting it; she just tired herself out when she did, and she needed to reserve her strength because supporting two lives wasn’t easy. And this parasitic relationship would be continuing for a while—no, not parasitic, really; she was getting something out of letting Lily Potter invade her—she didn’t dream about him, about You-Know-Who, anymore. And sometimes, she even woke up to her homework already done, thanks to her bored and restless ghost.

Ginny felt her hands and feet going numb as the other woman took over. Her legs and arms followed, and then all control was gone from her, leaving her with only those horrible phantom tingles, like when she sat on her foot and it went to sleep.

“Mum,” she said—or rather, it came from Ginny’s own mouth, but it wasn’t her voice, it wasn’t what she was thinking. Though they shared a body, Ginny couldn’t hear Lily Potter’s thoughts, but even though she didn’t think Lily actively listened in on Ginny’s thoughts, she was sure she heard them sometimes—when Ginny’s emotions ran high and ‘broadcasted’, as Lily said. But they could talk to each other. Lily could communicate with her when Ginny was in control, and Ginny could do the same.

But she did get scared sometimes. Lily had already died once, and she had nothing to lose; Ginny did. Ginny wanted to finish school and play for the Harpies and fall in love with some wonderful man or woman who would see her as more than Ron’s little sister or a poor pureblood with nothing to offer. She wanted to live, and to do that, she had to first live through yet another possession that she didn’t have the inherent power to shake. She wasn’t stupid, but she wasn’t Harry, either, and she was forced to co-exist with his definitely-not-Gryffindor mum in her as long as it took—for what, she
didn’t know, but she suspected necromancy might be involved before the end of it. She just hoped it wasn’t her soul they used for it.

_I told you_, came Lily’s voice in their shared head, _I’m not going to let you die. I’m not a murderer, and ending one child’s life just to be with my son is a price even I won’t pay._

Ginny believed her—most of the time—but she was still scared sometimes, and she was still tired. She hardened her resolve. Lily had said she was sure they would be able to part ways by the spring. She just had to hold out a little longer. She focused on what was going on around them to calm herself.

The people in the portrait were staring at her with confusion. They were Lily Potter’s parents, Ginny knew, through images pushed into her mind through her possessor before this mission had been requested of her.

“I’m sorry, dear,” said Mr Evans slowly, “but I don’t believe we have met.”

A wave of dizziness flooded her and Ginny knew that her face was changing—not like polyjuice did, but like a glamour, where it was merely an illusion and her bones and skin stayed the same underneath. She’d watched Lily do this in the mirror right after it happened, before she’d gone and made Professor Snape aware of them.

The Evanses’ faces changed comically slowly from polite confusion to recognition. As one, they jumped from their oil-painted bench and rushed the front of the frame, where they pressed their hands against the canvas as if they could get out and touch her if only they pushed hard enough. Their palms were painted as if an after-thought, and they probably had been—their life lines were painted in hurriedly, and there were no other creases. The back of Mr Evans’ wedding ring wasn’t even painted.

“Lily,” Mrs Evans breathed the name out like she had never expected to ever speak it again.

“No,” said Mr Evans, shaking his head. “Lily, no.”

“What have you done?” said Mrs Evans. Tears were beginning to leak from her eyes and she blinked them away. They clung to her lashes in shimmery oil painted brush strokes.

“To possess a little girl?” said Mr Evans. “Lily-mouse, you cannot; you could kill her.”

“Harry needs me,” said Lily firmly. “James moved on; I have been trapped in the in-between all these years, with my business unfinished.”

The portraits’ hands fell back to their sides, and they looked out at them in stunned horror.

Mrs Evans blinked furiously again and the brush-stroke tears ran down her cheeks. “No,” she said, and Ginny almost felt the poor woman’s grief as she was forced to think about her child suffering in emptiness for nearly twenty years.

Lily nodded their shared head. “It was worth it, if only to see Harry. I touched him once, I—” Tears welled in Ginny’s eyes, her veins throbbed achingly with Mrs Potter’s sadness. “Just the other day,” she said. “I helped heal him.” Mr Evans’ eyes were getting shiny now, too. He clung to his wife’s hand, looking lost. Lily forcibly composed herself. “I need your help,” she said at last. “Harry’s in danger, and I can’t rest in peace until he’s safe.”

“All these years...” said Mrs Evans. Her eyes were still wide with shock. “At least with Petunia, we won’t have to worry—” she stopped herself suddenly, looked away. Mr Evans pulled her down onto the bench and wrapped and arm around her.
“Petunia is fine, if still disagreeable,” said Lily. “Please, Mum, help me. It has to do with a prophecy.”

The Evanses sat straighter on their bench. “A prophecy?” said Mr Evans.

Lily nodded. It was so strange for Ginny to feel her body performing all of Lily’s strange quirks—the way her lips pursed was nothing like Ginny’s, the way she popped her hip out to their left side when she was standing—Ginny did it on the other side.

“Two, actually. The first is against Harry and the Dark Lord—James and I went into hiding with Harry when we first learned it, but the first part has come to pass, and now with the way Harry’s collaborating with him, I believe the prophecy will react to it, and exact a penalty.”

“What’s the prophecy?” asked Mrs Evans. Lily must have felt Ginny’s confusion because images of a younger Mrs Evans were pushed to her in rapid succession, and she understood that, while alive, Mrs Evans had been a hobbyist interpreter for tricky prophecies.

Lily said, "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches. Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies, and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not, and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies."

“Good Merlin,” said Mr Evans, “You got up to all that after we died? Thrice defying? Lily-mouse, you ought to have been in Gryffindor.”

His wife slapped his thigh. “Hush,” she said. “Do you know what the power is? That the Dark Lord knows not?”

“No,” said Lily. “It seems Headmaster Dumbledore thinks it’s love, but that can’t be right. The Dark Lord has known love.”

“Hm,” said Mrs Evans. “It may not present itself until the moment of truth, so to speak.”

“But the line, and either must die at the hand of the other is what worries me,” said Lily. “I had faith that Harry could defeat him, but now Harry has decided not to kill him—yet the prophecy is clear here: either must die. What will happen when the prophecy realizes that they are actively not trying to kill each other?”

“Perhaps the Dark Lord truly is trying to kill him still,” said Mrs Evans. Her brow was furrowed with worry.

“No,” said Lily, shaking her—Ginny’s—head. “He isn’t, and even worse, I believe he’s giving up. What will happen if the Dark Lord dies by his own means and not Harry’s? Mother, do you think there will be backlash?”

“Oh, darling, I truly—"

The door opened behind them, and Ginny jumped, startled. It took her a moment to realize that she once again had control of her own body. Professor Snape strode into the room looking surly as ever. His eyes met hers.

“I thought I might find you here.”

“I’m not her,” said Ginny. It was almost as if a light left his eyes when she said it. His
disappointment was palpable.

“Is she—?”

Ginny shook her head. “No, she isn’t gone.” She tapped her head. “She’s still here. She can hear you.”

He glanced at the portrait behind her and stilled. “Mr Evans, Mrs Evans,” he said. They nodded back in greeting. He looked back to Ginny, catching on rather quickly. “Have you ordered her to evacuate Ms Weasley’s body?”

“As much as I would like to,” said Mr Evans, “I am but a portrait, and she does bring a good point. That is—Ms Weasley, how do you feel about the situation?”

Ginny blinked, surprised anyone was asking her opinion on the matter. Certainly Professor Snape didn’t much care. “I—well, it’s rather exhausting,” she said. “But, Harry’s my friend, and Lily is helping me in return. I had these dreams, you see, and she stops them.”

Lily was struggling to take over again, and with an internal sigh, Ginny allowed it. Snape noticed her face changing and Ginny thought he might be on the verge of smiling. “I am being as hospitable a guest as possible,” Ginny heard herself saying.

“I’m sure,” said Snape. “I wanted to speak to you again about how to keep you here.”

Lily turned back to the portrait. “I won’t do what the Dark Lord did, Sev,” she said. “You might stay, though. I was asking my parents about how the prophecy will react to Harry and Voldemort refusing to kill one another.”

“Lily...” he said. “Please consider—”

“No,” she said. “Mum, you were saying before?”

Mrs Evans smiled hesitantly, confused at Snape’s interchange with Lily. “Darling,” she said, “It is quite likely that the prophecy will still come to pass exactly as it is written. Yes, there will be some kind of backlash if they completely avoid it, but that will be near impossible to do. Somehow, some way one will die by the hand of the other. If what you say is true, then I’m quite sure Harry will kill the Lord Voldemort, whether he likes it or not.”

Ginny felt her shoulders slump with Lily’s defeat. “Then—why am I here?” she said. “Why could I not move on if Harry doesn’t need me?”

“I have watched over him all these years, just as you asked, Lily,” said Professor Snape quietly. “Have you thought, perhaps, that he isn’t your unfinished business?”

Lily looked over to him, and Ginny saw the professor staring at her with a foreign, broken look, but he wasn’t seeing Ginny. One day, she thought, she wouldn’t be possessed anymore, and someone would look at her like that, like she’d once hoped Harry would look at her.

“Lily...” he said again, and Ginny felt her heartbeat quickening at whatever emotion Lily was feeling. “Let me save you for once.”

“Oh!” said Mrs Evans. Lily looked up at the portrait, and then followed her mother’s line of sight to the door where Harry was standing, mouth slightly parted as he stared at their little group in confusion. “Hello, Harry dear,” she said, but her calm voice sounded forced.
Ginny’s body tensed; she felt Lily’s fear—so strong she stood there shocked instead of relinquishing control back to Ginny.

“Hi, Grandmum,” Harry said. He stepped into the room and shut the door behind him carefully. Glancing between Snape and Ginny, he said, “I think this is a conversation I want to hear.”


“Honestly, Black,” said Snape roughly. “Just like your father, barging in wherever you please with no consideration for—”

“Shut it, Snape,” said Harry. He sounded angry—angrier than Ginny had ever seen him, and she felt herself trembling, though she didn’t know if it was her or Mrs Potter causing it. “Why did you call Ginny by my mu—why did you call her that?” he asked. He swallowed roughly, and Ginny tried to ignore the way his voice had caught when he spoke.

He turned to her, and she watched his eyes flicker over her face, saw the subtle differences. He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head as if to clear it. “Ginny...” he said. “Are you wearing a glamour?”

He was grasping at straws, she knew. She wanted to tell him no, she wanted to tell him she was all right and not to look like he was so close to a magic breakdown, but Lily Potter had yet to recover her shock and give Ginny back control, so Ginny said nothing.

“You must tell him,” said Mr Evans. His voice was hard and direct, like the politician Ginny knew he had been, thanks to memories once pushed to her by Lily.

“Do not tell him,” Snape said angrily. “He will overreact as usual and we simply do not have time for his histrionics.”

“Tell me what?” said Harry. He was once again met with silence. “Please...” he said, looking again at her. “I thought...I thought I heard Snape call you by another name.”

“I...” said Ginny, but the voice wasn’t hers, and Harry recognized it. He came forward quickly and stared at her face, and deep inside her own body, Ginny knew he could tell.

“I know your voice,” said Harry, swallowing. “I’ve heard it in my dreams all my life. You watched over me when I was at the Dursleys.”

“Black, honestly,” said Snape, but he was ignored.

Harry blinked furiously, eyes bright. “I have missed you my whole life, and you’ve been right here, and you never told me.”

“Harry...” said Lily, swallowing.

“Mum,” he said. His face was crumbling. Ginny’d never seen anyone look quite so sad. He’d certainly never looked at her like that before. “How are you here?”

“I...don’t know,” she said. “I never moved on. I just ended up here one day.”

“Are you hurting Ginny?” he asked, barely audible. She could see he was afraid of the answer.

“No,” said Lily, shaking her head slowly. “Ginny’s fine. We’re just...we’re just sharing for a little
“And then what will happen?” he asked.

Ginny’s shoulders were shrugged. “I will move on, I guess,” she said.

“No,” said Harry and Snape at the same time, in the same broken voice.

“I can save you,” Snape whispered. “Please.”

Harry looked over to Snape. “How?”

“The same way the Dark Lord lived,” he said.

“Will she have to do the blood ritual that Voldemort did with me after the Tri-Wizard Tournament?” Harry asked.

“If the spells were performed properly at the time of burial, I might be able to use her body, but even if not—”

“Does no one listen to me?” Lily said. “I will not use the Dark Lord’s foul magic! I am not above dark magic, Severus, but I will not have my soul split in half. There must be another way, and if not, then I will freely leave Ginny’s body on a specific date, which I have previously arranged with her.”

“How long?” asked Snape.

“The end of April,” she said. “I won’t risk possessing her for more than six months.”

“You’ve been here since...” Harry stopped to think. “It was Halloween, wasn’t it?” he said, comprehension dawning. “Voldemort warned me that it was an unsafe day, and it was the day you died, so it would’ve been even easier for you to possess her. You’ve been here all this time, and you never told me?”

“Harry,” said Lily. “I didn’t want to upset you...”

He shook his head. “I would have given anything to see you,” he said. “Who else knows?”

“Headmaster Dumbledore has figured it out, I believe, and your friend, Narcissa’s son,” she said. Then, “And the Dark Lord.”


Her hand flew to her mouth, and Snape groaned in dismay.

“It’s true then,” he said. “What Sirius said. You really did become a Death Eater.”

“Lily Lovage Evans!” said Mrs Evans. “Am I to understand that your father and I raised you to be a fool? It is one thing to embrace your inherent dark cadence magic; it is quite another indeed to let some maniac control you for it!”

“I was infiltrating his ranks for information!” Lily said angrily. “Now, would you like to hear the second prophecy or not?”

Harry inhaled sharply. “There’s another prophecy about me?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” said Lily. “I believe it is about the Dark Lord only, and his soul fragment magic, but
it’s possible it could affect you tangentially.”

“Recite it,” said Mr Evans, and she did.

“Two become one before one becomes three; the dark lord’s mate finds peace when the beasts of dark days sleep, and one becomes two or one becomes three; the choice lies with the end of the beast of dark days.”

“The Dark Lord’s mate,” said Harry, visibly pulling himself together. “I thought she might have been reborn as Ginny.”

“She is,” Snape agreed. “But Ms Weasley is her own person, as well. She presumably has none of the former Calixta Yaxley’s memories, just a recycled soul.”

“And she has dreams,” said Harry. “About...him.”

“Those will end when the beast of dark days dies—the Dementors, obviously.”

“Are you quite sure, darling?” said Mrs Evans. “Don’t be too hasty to make an assumption when it comes to prophecies.”

“What else could be the beasts of dark days?” asked Lily.

“It must be the Dementors,” Snape said. “It says when the beasts sleep, not when they die. I believe that Dementors do go into a deep sleep after feeding, before they breed.”

“So, when we deal with Dementors, Ginny will be able to break the bond she has from her past life?” asked Harry.

“I...” said Lily, thinking. “I don’t know. I didn’t consider that it would cancel the bond. I thought it would simply give her peace for the rest of this lifetime. “

“I believe Mr Black may have come to the correct conclusion...for once,” said Snape. Lily shot him a dark look and he relented immediately. “The question is how Ms Weasley will be able to break the bond, and when she does, what, if anything, will happen to you?”

“I will figure something out,” said Lily.

There was a sharp knock at the door and it opened before anyone had the chance to spell it locked or say a word. Draco Malfoy came in, poncy and imperial as ever, and smirked at all of them when he realized what was going on.

“Just in time, Evans,” said Malfoy. “You only had a few days before I was going to tell him myself.”

“You are certainly Narcissa’s son,” Lily said flatly.

“You were going to tell me?” said Harry, and remarkably he didn’t seem angry that the stupid Slytherin hadn’t told him—instead he looked surprised and grateful that he’d planned to tell him at all, eventually.

“Of course,” Malfoy said with a scoff. Then, as if he’d been invited, he said, “What are we discussing now?”

“We,” Lily said, “were discussing how to interpret a prophecy that is completely unrelated to you.”

“Oh, lovely,” said Malfoy. “Let me get Mother then. Since you two were such good friends in
school, I’m sure she would be delighted to help.”

“No!” said Snape and Lily, but Malfoy was already to the door, leaning out, and calling, “Mother, a moment, please?”

“You are determined to destroy me, aren’t you?” said Lily. “What have I done to you?”

“Nothing,” said Malfoy casually, leaning back inside the room. “It’s what you’ve done to Harry that’s made me dislike you so.”

Draco’s mum stepped in and shut the door behind her with a polite, curious smile. “Merry Yule,” she greeted them all. “Draco, was I needed for something?”

Draco relaxed on the couch and Harry went to join him. He didn’t know what to think about seeing his mother in Ginny’s body, and he needed the comfort of someone he could trust, which was a completely ridiculous thing to think of Draco Malfoy—yet, it was true. Draco wouldn’t lie to him ‘in his best interests’, and his body nearly ached to be near him, so he went and sat down next to him.

“Mother, we were having a discussion on prophecies, and I thought you might be of some help.”

Mrs Malfoy smiled again at the collected group. “Yes? How may I help? I do keep a small collection of prophecy records in our library at home if you would like me to retrieve them?”

“That won’t be necessary, Narcissa,” said Snape, through his teeth.

“Well?” said Draco. “Why don’t you tell my mother?”

“Draco,” she admonished. “That’s no way to speak to Ms Weasley. We are all guests here.”

“Your son,” Lily said, “is certainly not a Rosier. Entirely too ruthless, and as much as I would like to never see him again, I see that he will be a constant fixture.”

Mrs Malfoy was getting annoyed. Draco was enjoying it far too much, it was almost as if Harry could feel Draco’s sadistic elation through his skin. But Mrs Malfoy didn’t deserve to be teased to a revelation, like Harry had been.

He said, “That’s my mother.”

Mrs Malfoy looked sharply at him, then back to Ginny. At once, Ginny’s features faded away, and her hair changed, and she looked taller, though it was hard to say, as the process was subtle, strange—as if she weren’t really changing at all, only their perception of her. Harry’s breath caught in his throat. He’d seen little flashes of Mum but they were like hallucinations. Now, Ginny was gone completely, and before him stood the woman he’d seen that night in the graveyard. His breath hitched, and he turned his face away from her, pressed it against Draco’s neck. He couldn’t look at her knowing he couldn’t keep her, knowing she was just invading his best friend’s little sister’s body.

“Lily,” said Mrs Malfoy. She didn’t sound nearly as surprised as Harry had been. “I thought you might come back as a ghost, but it appears that you had higher ambitions.”

“It was by chance,” said his mum. “I was not able to move on.”

Draco rested his head on Harry’s, his way of showing support, Harry knew. Taking a deep breath, he turned back to the scene before them. They stared at each other for several long moments before
Narcissa rushed forward and they wrapped their arms around each other.

“I have missed you,” said Mrs Malfoy.

“I missed you, too.”

“I want you to stay,” Harry said, breaking up their little meeting. He didn’t yet feel comfortable seeing his mother hug anyone, especially since she’d yet to hug him.

His mum turned to him at once, and for the first time, he saw her eyes—just like his—focus solely on him, and not on other Marauders in pictures he had in his album. “I don’t know how, Harry,” she said, and it looked like it was killing her to say it.

“There must be a way,” said Harry.

“Is it out of the question to simply take full control of the Weasley girl?” asked Mrs Malfoy.

Harry saw where Draco got his ruthlessness from. He was saved from saying that of course it was out of the question, by his granddad. “I won’t stand for my daughter taking a child’s life to save her own,” he said. “The world is full of magic, and if she wants to stay in the living world, then she will just have to find the right magic.”

Mrs Malfoy looked contemplative. “Well, what about taking over an empty body?” she said. “We could perform a binding spell to make it your own.”

“I considered the same thing,” said Snape, “but alas, it is difficult to acquire empty bodies without drawing Ministry attention.”

Mrs Malfoy gave him an incredulous look. “Surely, you are not serious,” she said. “There will soon be five hundred empty bodies to choose from, and with the right binding spell, it would adapt to Lily’s own soul to look more like she once looked. The Ministry would never notice, as it would be a combination of Lily’s features and whatever unlucky inmate she adopted as her own.”

Harry wanted to laugh at the shocked look on Snape’s face, but he couldn’t. He hadn’t thought of that, either, and it was so obvious.

Mrs Malfoy scoffed. “Do tell me you haven’t been torturing yourself with this for some extended period of time, Severus.”

He looked away, face angry.

“Oh, you have,” she said, with a little laugh. “Good Merlin. Well, shall I look through the list of names and find an appropriate body to reserve for you, Lily?”

His mum nodded without a word. “Thank you, Narcissa,” she said softly. Mrs Malfoy’s face changed again, ever so slightly, and he saw how much this was actually affecting her, seeing her dearest friend alive after sixteen years. She hid it well with her self-satisfied blasé attitude, all a front to hide her pain.

“I will speak to the Dark Lord,” she said, and turned to leave the room. Harry didn’t miss the way she furiously blinked her eyes as she opened the door and left. A wave of guilt rushed through him; it took him a moment to realize it wasn’t his. He looked curiously at Draco, who was looking at the door his mother had just exited with furrowed brows. Harry inhaled sharply; he was feeling what Draco was feeling.
“I must speak to Lucius,” said Snape, and he, too, left the room without a backward glance.

Harry was left alone with his mother and Draco, and his grandparents’ portrait; they looked down on the scene with sadness. “Can you...can you let Ginny back, please?” said Harry. “It’s not right to make her miss Christmas.”

“Oh,” said his mum. “Oh, right. Of course.” A moment passed, and then Ginny was standing there, looking at him with a solemn expression he wasn’t used to seeing on Weasleys.

“Are you okay?” he asked. She nodded.

“I’m fine,” she said in her own voice.

“Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

“The dreams,” she said. “I don’t have them when she’s here. It makes me feel like I could be my own person, not bound by something I can’t control, as stupid as that sounds.”

“It doesn’t sound stupid,” said Draco. “It sounds ironic.”

She grinned. “It is.”

The door opened and Sirius stuck his head around the door, looking far too merry this early in the evening. “There you are!” he said. “You’re missing the festivities. Regulus invited Snape for some reason, and they’re teasing Lucius for ending a blood feud with the Weasleys.”

“You’re having me on,” said Draco.

“I’m afraid not,” said Sirius, but he sounded entirely too pleased about it. “Come on then, don’t be hermits; it’s Yule!”

Harry forced a grin on his face. “All right, we’re coming.” Sirius grinned and left again. Harry stood, looking over to Ginny, who seemed lost. “Can, er...can she hear us when you’re in control?” he asked. Ginny nodded. “Oh. Well, do you want to come with?”

“I think I’ll sit with my family,” she said, and said no more.

They found Hermione and Nott with her parents and his grandparents sitting near the Yule tree, all laughing quite heartily. “Harry!” said Hermione, seeing them approach. “Draco.”

Her father stood and shook his and Draco’s hands merrily, a goblet of warm mead in his other hand. “Sit down, sit down,” he said. “Would you believe our shock at meeting Hermione’s boyfriend,” he said to them. “My Alice recognized him right away.”

“They were the ones who put the brackets on my teeth before Hogwarts,” Theo said, smirking at Draco for some reason Harry couldn’t fathom.

“Brackets?” said Draco, attempting politeness.

“Yes, Draco,” said Nott. “They’re muggle contraptions that make your teeth straight.” He grinned at him, but it had a distinct air of satisfaction about it.
“You...” said Draco. Harry felt the shock run through him, and this new thing between them needed answers, and soon. “You made me think it was good breeding.”

To Harry’s surprised, the Notts burst into laughter—all three of them, even Nott’s severe-looking grandfather. “Well done, Theodore!” the old man said, chuckling.

Nott took a small, overly dramatic bow.

“What’s the joke?” said Hermione’s mum, smiling.

“Merely a schoolboy prank, Mrs Granger,” Nott said. He was being absurdly charming, and a glance at Hermione confirmed that she knew it, too, but found it endearing. Harry gave her a smile when she looked his way; the both of them, completely undone by two evil Slytherins. What was the world coming to?

“There is no magic to change bone structure, you see, and so wizards with crooked teeth end up keeping crooked teeth their whole lives—that is, until my father found your practice and had me fitted for brackets. I convinced Draco and my other house mates that my teeth were just naturally that straight, and of course they were jealous.”

“Oh dear,” said Mrs Granger, laughing. She turned to Draco and smiled, saying, “Are yours crooked then, Draco?”

“Unfortunately, madam,” he said. He grinned at her to show off his canines that sat slightly forward of the rest.

“Well we could fix that up for you in twelve to eighteen months,” said Mrs Granger, winking.

“Thank you for the kind offer,” said Draco. Harry felt his disdain and stomped on his foot as inconspicuously as possible. He gave Harry a confused look and Harry just lifted his eyebrows.

“We’ll let you get back to your conversation,” said Harry, standing. Draco followed him, not needing a reason to leave a pair of muggles behind. “I just wanted to say hello.”

He needed to talk to Draco about this weirdness, and soon. He tilted his head to the kitchen, and Draco followed without comment. His father, his Uncle Regulus, Remus, Lucius, Severus, and Narcissa were seated all around the fire, talking—surprisingly jovially—with Mr and Mrs Weasley. Merlin only knew where Ginny, Ron and the Twins had got to. Harry got by their group easily, so wrapped up in conversation were they, and led Draco through the kitchen and up the servants’ stairs.

When they got to his room, he locked and warded the door several times before he was satisfied. Turning, he was caught by surprise by Draco’s knowing look. “ Couldn’t wait?” he asked, lips quirking.

“It wasn’t that,” Harry started to say, but he couldn’t finish it. It had only been a couple of days since he’d last seen Draco, but it felt like years. He wanted to touch him so much it was almost like a physical pain when he didn’t. “No,” he said instead. “I couldn’t.”

To his relief, Draco’s face softened, and he took a step forward, then another, and then they were holding each other in a way they’d never done before. “Me either,” he said.

Harry pulled back and stared at him, shakily exhaling a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “It felt like years,” he said. Draco looked back at him, grey eyes lined in white-blond lashes. Sometimes, Draco spelled his black like Narcissa did, but they were natural now, and it made him look vulnerable.
Draco reached up and pulled Harry’s face to his. Had they kissed before? Harry wondered. Once, he thought they had, early on, but it hadn’t happened again, if it ever did at all. They were both so guarded—they fooled around sometimes, but it was like a dance, and neither of them risked getting too close. What about now? Harry wondered. Would they be able to go back to that if they satisfied themselves tonight?

He never could, he knew. His heart clenched at the thought. Draco pulled back, looked at him curiously. “Are you okay?” he asked. His voice was rough, unrefined; this was something the rest of the world didn’t get to hear.

“Yes,” said Harry, and he moved back in, pressed his lips against Draco’s roughly. Draco moved his hands to Harry’s waist and walked backwards, pulling him to the bed. They fell on it in a way that was not at all sexy in Harry’s mind, but he didn’t care at all. His skin felt like fire where Draco touched it, and he didn’t care what they looked like so long as it didn’t stop.

He leaned up to unbutton Draco’s dress robes, and their hands got tangled as he attempted to do the same with Harry’s coat. Their eyes met, and Harry quirked a wry grin. He shrugged the coat off, tossed it on the floor. He pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it vaguely in the direction of the door. “Why do you wear these poncy robes?” he asked, working the buttons from the holes again.

“You know I look good in these,” Draco said, ever confident. Harry couldn’t deny it, so he just finished the last of the buttons and Draco sat up to help get it off. Harry pulled his linen shirt over his head and suddenly felt himself flipped over.

Draco stood looking down at him, pleased with himself. His Quidditch-toned arms flexed as he unlaced Harry’s boots and pulled them off, followed by his trouser laces. Harry sat up on his elbows, watching through hooded eyes. He stopped and looked up before pulling them down, unlaced his own boots with a spell and stepped out of them before crawling back onto the bed. He leaned over Harry, hands braced on either side of his shoulders, and for a moment, their eyes held, and a strange sensation flowed through Harry.

“Your mother’s right you know,” said Draco, and his voice was softer than normal, unreserved. It took the sting out of hearing his mum being brought up. He had so been trying to avoid thinking of her.

“About what?” he asked.

“That I’m going to be around awhile.”

Harry’s heart skipped a beat. Draco never said things like that to him. He licked his lips, mouth suddenly dry. “Are you?”

Draco nodded. His blond hair fell into his face and caught the light from the candle sconces on Harry’s bedroom wall. Merlin, he was turning into such a sap. “I didn’t realize it at first, but it was obvious once I started thinking about it.”

Harry tilted his head, comprehending. “What’s obvious? That I like you?” Even though he was sure Draco had rather well figured that out considerably earlier, saying it aloud was still frightening, and he couldn’t help blushing as the words left his mouth.

The corner of Draco’s mouth tilted up in a facsimile of that cocky, amused smile he often wore. “You do,” he said, and there was a note of wonder in his voice, as if he’d thought it, but hadn’t believed his own thoughts. “We’re bonding, Harry.”
“We’ve been mates for a while,” said Harry. “Haven’t we already bonded?”

Draco’s eyebrows shot up with his apparent surprise. “Black,” he said, as if he were about to laugh. “You’re having me on.”

Harry sat up, forcing Draco to sit back, legs tucked beneath him. “What are you talking about?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Well when two peoples have very compatible magic, and they spend a lot of time around each other, sometimes magic bonds form. We’ve been getting closer for a while now, and you’ve noticed that things feel a little differently right?”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “I feel like I want to be around you a lot.”

“Right,” said Draco. “It’s fairly common, really. We’re just developing a magical bond.”

“What exactly does a magical bond entail?” asked Harry.

“It varies, really. They’re common among siblings and close friends, sometimes couples. Generally, we’ll just be able to perform stronger magic together and feel closer.” He shrugged. “Not really a big deal. Pansy and I have had a bond since we were children; you might even have one with Granger and Weasley. They’re really pretty common, and people tend to gravitate towards other people with compatible magic because the bonds make them comfortable around each other.”

Harry grinned. “So at least our magic’s compatible, even if we weren’t for six years.”

Draco grinned back at him. “Figures. There was bound to be something between us with as strongly as we felt about each other—even if that feeling was absolute hatred.”

“So now that we’re bonded, I can make you help me when there’s something really magically draining to be done?”

“Not likely,” Draco said, scoffing. “That’s house elf work.”

“If it’s no big deal, then why are you bringing it up now?” Harry asked. He looked pointedly back and forth between their bodies, both in states of undress. “We could be doing something more interesting.”

“That’s why I’m telling you,” Draco said. He shrugged, looking uncomfortable for the briefest of moments before his usual control was back in place. “Bonds between friends are unpredictable. There’s a chance that if we...continue what we were about to do, then it might alter the bond...make it stronger.”

“Oh,” said Harry. He couldn’t help thinking of Voldemort’s insanity, in large part connected to the death of his once lover. That was definitely not something he wanted any part of. “So our choices are to never be, er, sexual with each other, or go insane like Voldemort if one of us dies?” He flopped back on the bed. Of course. It was just like his life to give him something great and wonderful like a potential relationship with Draco, and then take it away. His heart clenched painfully.

“Insane?” said Draco. “What are you talking about?”

“Is it going to turn into one of those romantic bonds that link our souls together for all of eternity or some such rot? Because Voldemort had one of those once, and she died, and now he’s completely batty.”

“What? No, you idiot. Those have to be created with spells. This is a natural bond; it just develops
when people are compatible. Are you always this melodramatic or is it Weasley’s renewed presence in your life?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “You are such a git. So, it’s fine for us to continue where we left off then?”

Now Draco looked uncomfortable. “Well, yes, but it might be uncomfortable for a few weeks while our magic settles together.”

“Are you okay with that happening?”

He wasn’t sure he wanted to hear the answer. Even being friends—sometimes with benefits—for this long, he knew Draco could crush him if he wanted to. Slytherins could walk away like that, and never look back. Harry couldn’t.

“Yeah,” said Draco. He grinned at him.

Harry grinned back, pulled him down on top of him. “Okay,” he said. He reached up and carded his fingers through Draco’s hair, then pulled him in, and kissed him again, feeling his heart rate once again increasing. “I want you,” he said.

Draco smirked at him, slid down his body until he was at the foot of the bed and began tugging off his trousers. A moment later, Draco’s hot mouth was wrapped around his prick, and he gasped, pushing his hips up. It was almost too much, and it still wasn’t enough.

“Gods, come here,” he said. Draco crawled up his body. He leaned down, pressed his slick lips roughly against Harry’s and kissed him. His hand slid back down between them and stroked Harry’s cock, and Harry moaned into the kiss.

He moved his hand to Draco’s trousers and began unlacing them. Draco’s hips moved seductively as he slid out of them, and kicked them off onto the floor. Harry grabbed his cock and ghosted his fingertips up the shaft. Draco threw his head back, panting.

“Why don’t we do this more often?” he asked.

“Thought you just wanted to be friends,” he said. “You’re so hard to read.”

“Mm, I know,” Draco said, grinning down at him. His cheeks were flushed and he was panting, and he looked amazing.


Draco lifted an eyebrow, smirking. “Golden Boy wants to fuck me, does he?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. Then, “Shut up. You talk too much.” He rolled Draco over and straddled his legs, staring down at his flushed, heaving chest and his erection, and the blond hair that trailed up to his navel. Unable to help himself, leaned down and enveloped Draco’s cock with his mouth, running his tongue along the underside, swirling it around the head, delighting in the heady salty taste of his skin.

“What was that spell Pomfrey told us about in fifth year? When we all had to go for that awful magi-sexual health lecture?” Harry asked, lifting up from Draco’s cock.

“Which?” Draco said, apparently in no mind to think.

“The one so you can fuck me, you git,” Harry said.
“Lubricus,” Draco panted. He pushed himself up on his elbows and looked down at Harry through lowered lashes. “Don’t remember it from fucking Finnigan?” he asked. There was a strange note to his voice.

“We used Dean’s lubricating potion instead,” he said. He whispered the spell and slick liquid flowed from his wand onto his fingertips. Harry reached behind himself and slid a finger inside, followed quickly by a second.

“You’ve had a lot of practice at this,” Draco said, smirking.

Harry slipped a third finger inside, ignoring him. Things with Seamus had always been quick and hot, and Harry got used to preparing either one of them with haste. He felt himself stretching open, and knew he could take Draco in right now, but Draco’s cock looked so delicious, and he wanted to make him wait a little longer...after all, Draco had made him wait this long, going from hot to lukewarm as he led Harry on with his stupid Slytherin machinations.

He braced his free hand next to Draco’s hip and leaned forward, taking him back in his mouth again as he continued to work himself open. He took all of Draco’s cock in his mouth and sucked, running his tongue all over it as he slowly pulled up, then took him again—again and again until Draco’s legs were trembling and his breathing was coming in short, sharp gasps.

“Merlin, Black,” he said.

“Ready?” said Harry, smirking. Draco nodded, and Harry crawled up his body and positioned himself over Draco’s cock. He sank down slowly, but steadily, with all the Gryffindor bravado he normally showed. It’d been a while since he did this, and even though he’d stretched himself well, there was still a twinge of discomfort. Not enough to stop—Merlin, no, now that he was finally with Draco, he couldn’t stop for anything.

Draco’s hands came up to his hips, thumbs pressing hard against Harry’s hipbones, as he struggled to slow his breathing. “Gods,” he said. “Why haven’t we done this before?”

Harry lifted himself up and slowly slid back down. “Shut up, Draco,” he said. “You talk too much.” And then he went about making sure that Draco did shut up by leaning forward and kissing him. His cock was trapped between their bodies, sliding against Draco’s skin every time Draco’s hands on his hips pulled him up and then pushed him back down, pleasure surged through Harry.

Draco broke away from the kiss, panting. His face was slick with perspiration. Harry braced himself on his hands, and moved. His hips undulating slowly, pulling both of them closer and closer. Draco moved one hand to his cock, whispered lubricus against his lips, and stroked Harry slowly, the warm slickness of the lubricating spell nearly sending him over the edge.

He threw his head back, moaning. “God, faster,” he said, and Draco complied.

“Gods, so fucking close,” Draco panted. His hand sped up on Harry’s cock, and Harry fucked him faster, sweat running down his face and chest, until Draco cried out, and his fingers squeezed his hip painfully tight. The sight of Draco coming inside him was too fucking much, and Harry covered Draco’s hand with his own, jerking his cock, and slammed his hips down a final time, coming hard all over Draco’s stomach.

Panting, he leaned over, braced himself on trembling arms, and kissed Draco thoroughly. Draco kissed him back, eyes closed, and his hands slid from Harry’s hips, up his side, then around his back, and pulled him down to him. They lay there for several long moments, coming down.
Neither noticed that Draco had forgotten to use his wand when he cast the spell.

Harry jerked, startling Draco from his light doze. Draco yawned and lifted his head. “What is it?”

He cornered her on the veranda, protected from the abnormal magical winter with a Black family heirloom spell. He stepped outside and watched her staring down the rough cliff edging the Firth of Forth. The Dementors’ magic was stronger here, and waves that normally weren’t seen this far inland crashed against the walls of the cliff. Across from them, invisible to the muggles, what would one day be the Quidditch pitch of the Firth College for Young Witches and Wizards was overwhelmed by the ghastly construction where the Dementor feeding would take place. Already, it drew the Dementors to it, and their magic swarmed around it, evil and soulless, as they watched, and waited, for food to appear.

“Which are you?” he asked quietly, hoping not to startle her.

She glanced back at him and he fought his disappointment. Weasley then. Her face was drawn and tired, and he almost regretted asking, but he’d never been able to control himself where Lily was concerned.

“If you want her,” said Weasley, “I’ll let her come.” She looked tired enough not to care. Not quite hating himself for not feeling enough empathy for Weasley, he nodded. Weasley closed her eyes, and a moment later, they opened green.

“Sev,” she said. He would not tolerate that name from anyone else. “What is it?”

He couldn’t think of what to say. There were so many things he needed to ask her, so many things that were actually important, but what he ended up saying was none of those.

“Are you going to go back to him?” he asked instead.

She looked away. “I don’t know,” she said.

“You loved him,” said Severus.

She nodded. “I did. Once.”

“Do you still?” he asked, unable to help himself.

“Being dead feels like eternity. I hardly remember what it felt like to love Sirius,” she said. Then she glanced back up at him, and even in Weasley’s petite body, with Weasley’s freckled face, he could see her eyes, and it made his chest ache. “But he’s Harry’s father...”

“Being alive felt like eternity,” said Severus. “Yet I never forgot what it felt like.”

She said nothing.

What had he been thinking? He was stupid to come looking for her. She’d turned him down once; why would she not turn him down again. He was not attractive or humorous like Sirius Black. Face blank, he nodded goodnight to her, and left without another word. As he walked to the edge of the wards to apparate, past the protective barrier around the property, snow slamming into him from every direction, he did not see her eyes following his every step, a look of desolation on her face.
Harry cocked his head to the side, listening for something. “The wards...” he said. “But not someone coming in. Something new...it’s a strange feeling.” He furrowed his brow, thinking, then said, “It’s like the wards are thinking...”

“Emotional stress in the house?” he asked.

“I think so,” said Harry. “It’s never felt like this before.”

“Oh,” said Draco, lying back down. “Probably Granger and Nott telling their families about their impending bundle of half-blood joy.”

“Oh, Merlin,” said Harry. “I should go see if she needs support or something.”

Draco groaned, but followed him from the bed. They somehow managed to locate all of their clothes, though Harry’s legs were still a little shaky, and he nearly fell trying to get his trousers back on.

The scene they were met with downstairs was something altogether unexpected, though. For one, Draco’s father was shaking hands with a Weasley, of all things. He and Mr Weasley were actually smiling at each other as if they were sharing a grand joke. So much for that blood feud, he thought—it’d had a good run.

“I thought you said the wards were going off like something was wrong,” Draco said to Harry. Nothing seemed amiss here...well, unless you count his father actually touching a Weasley.

“I did,” said Harry and he walked off to pester Sirius about it all.

Draco spotted Granger, off to the side, chewing her lip. He sidled over, but she barely noticed. “Why are you looking so dour, Granger?” he asked.

She glanced at him, distracted. “My parents and Theo’s grandparents are talking...” she said. She nodded over to the drawing room where the portrait of Harry’s grandparents hung. They were politely absent from the frame. The door stood open, but there was a strong muffling charm on the room, and he couldn’t hear any of what was being said.

Draco grimaced. “I gather you told them of your...delicate condition,” he said, with great distaste.

“I’d planned to do it some other time when so many people weren’t around, but Theo’s gran pulled me aside and said she saw it in my aura, and that we better tell them what in Dagda’s name was going on if we knew what was good for us.” She peered around Draco to the gathered group of Weasleys, Blacks, and his parents. “Thank Merlin Sirius is keeping everyone else occupied.”

Draco watched all three Notts in deep conversation with the Grangers, but their muffled voices didn’t sound agitated at all. “It looks like things are going well, at least. What did your parents say?”

She shrugged. “They’re disappointed of course, but I think they’re a little more scared than anything.”

“What on earth is there to be scared about?”

Granger sighed, held her palm up to his face so he could get a good look at it. There, in the navy and black colours of the House of Nott, was Theodore’s family crest, emblazoned on a mudblood’s hand—the magical signature of a betrothal courtship.

“Oh you have got to be kidding me,” Draco said. The way Nott ran around like a love-sick crup was
nauseating; Granger wasn’t wearing a ring, though, which meant she’d not accepted any marriage proposals. “You turned him down?

“Of course,” said Granger, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Draco arched an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me you don’t want to, after all this? Not excited about what a fantastic learning experience it’ll be to marry into a decent pureblood family? Be glad it wasn’t Weasley who asked you, if you want my opinion. You won’t get a better offer,” he said.

She gave him a sour look. “I didn’t want your opinion, thank you.”

Draco sighed. “Fine, I’ll bite. Why aren’t you happy?”

“I’m barely eighteen. I had plans for my life, and they didn’t include marriage before I was thirty.” She looked down at her stomach, a vague frown on her face. “Theo did it so suddenly after we told them that I think he felt like he had to—and I didn’t know what to say, but I couldn’t say yes—not yet, not now.”

She shrugged. “Theo’s gran suggested a courtship, and after discussing it with my parents, I agreed to that, at least.” She huffed out a breath. “I’m just not ready to make such a big decision about my life yet.”

Draco gave her stomach a pointed look. “Bit too late for that, Granger.”

She waved her hand dismissively in his direction. “Yes, but that doesn’t mean I need to make two big decisions right now. This, I can deal with. A permanent magically-binding marriage? Not just yet, thanks.”

“You do know that if it’s a male, Nott’s family’s going to push you to marry anyway. He’s the last of the line—no uncles or male cousins to take his place as heir.”

“I know,” she said, “but at least this gives me some time to get used to thinking about it.”

After a moment, Draco said, “Nott—he’s okay, right?”

She looked up at him, face open and conflicted—so very unlike all of his Slytherin friends. He could tell what she was thinking just by looking at her, and it was a strange thing. “I’ll talk to him after...” she said, swallowing heavily. “He just didn’t give me any warning and we hadn’t even discussed how we would tell our families, much less him asking me to...well.”

Not okay then, Draco gathered. He glanced back at the drawing room, where Nott sat with his grandparents, speaking to the Grangers. He looked calm enough, but there was a tenseness to his shoulders that said differently.

“And I thought we Slytherins were heartless,” he said, smirking. “You Gryffindors really know how to break a man, don’t you?”

She looked up at him, and he knew he’d gone too far. Even for a mudblood, she was a good match for Theo, and the Notts could certainly benefit from her affiliation with Harry. He shouldn’t have said it, but he wasn’t about to take it back. That just wasn’t done.

The Grangers and Nott’s family stepped out of the drawing room and Kathryn Nott cleared her throat for attention. “We’d like to make an announcement,” she said. “Our grandson, Theodore, has tonight entered into a betrothal courtship with Hermione Granger, and we look forward to an engagement to follow.”
There was clapping all around, even his parents being polite enough to do so.

“And we have one more announcement,” said Nott’s grandfather. He clapped Mr Granger on the shoulder, and said, “It brings us great pleasure to also announce that we will be expecting a great-grandchild in July of next year.”

A stunned silence followed, during which Draco said to Hermione, voice low, “That’s a nice way of putting it. Avoid the embarrassment to the family by pretending you’re happy about it.”

She sneered at him, then pasted a smile on her face and moved over to stand next to Theo. They looked every bit the happy couple, but her rejection stung Nott—Draco could still see it in the stilted way they smiled at each other.

“Well,” said Sirius, speaking up into the silence. “Yule is a time for celebrating a fertile season. I think Hermione’s got the right idea!” He clapped, and everyone else then followed, even, he noticed, Ron Weasley, looking rather traditional with his new beard. Maybe there was hope for that family yet.

The pace has slowed down a little for everyone to enjoy their holiday, but they won't get peace for long. The Dementors might be unpredictable, but they won't wait forever. Hope you enjoy the chapter, and as always, comments and kudos are appreciated :D
Friendly Fire

Chapter by faire_weather

Chapter Summary

In which Hermione finds a locket, Voldemort makes a confusing decision, Ron finds out...and the Dementors feed.

Chapter Notes

Please be aware that this chapter has some extra warnings. Hit the link for End of Chapter notes if you want to see them before reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Friendly Fire (n):** 1. An attack by one’s own side which results in the injuring or death of one’s own forces or an ally.

“We need to stop by Grimmauld Place and get you keyed into the wards before you head back to school, kiddo,” said Sirius, sitting down to the breakfast table. He accepted a plate from Fred with a smile, and very obviously elbowed his younger brother out of the way. “Today okay?”

“Today’s fine,” Harry said with some difficulty, as he was struggling to stop yawning. He was making a concerted effort to keep from slumping over his breakfast from exhaustion. The Smiths had come wassailing around midnight, as was custom, and stayed to see in the Yule with all the other guests. Harry hadn’t gotten to bed until near on five in the morning, when the Weasleys, Smiths, Notts, and Malfoys left for home.

On either side of him, Hermione and Ron struggled equally to keep their eyes open. The Grangers, unused to being around so much magic, had been especially worn out and were still sleeping in their room. Only his father, his uncle, and Remus were at all bright eyed—though not bushy tailed for another two weeks in Remus’s and Regulus’s cases.

“I’ll go with,” said Regulus. “I need to check up on Kreacher.”

“Why you bother, one could never guess,” said Remus.

“He’s useful,” said Regulus. “Besides, I like the batty old elf.”

“He certainly likes you,” Sirius said sourly.

“And he might’ve liked you, too, if you’d had any sense at all, Sirius. Too busy going off on wild tangents to make a friend at home where you could.” They glared at each other for a few seconds before Sirius turned back to Harry, seemingly chipper again, as he generally was.
“What about you two?” he said. No response was forthcoming. A moment later, Ron’s hair turned an unfortunate shade of green, though only Remus and his father appeared to notice. Even Hermione was barely operating at an Inferi-level of awareness.

“You’re out of practise,” Sirius said to Regulus. “That wasn’t nearly as sly or sneaky as your usual work. For one, no one else would have used green; for another, you were the only one eating at the moment, so you immediately look guilty because you’re the only one not looking guilty. Honestly, Reg, learn to prank.”

Ron’s hair faded back to red, though it was slightly more vibrant than usual. Harry shook Ron’s shoulder. “Mate,” he said. “Wake up. Breakfast.”

“Breakfast,” Ron said, startled. There was syrup in his beard. Harry spelled it away for him, because that’s what mates were for.

“We’re going to Grimmauld Place,” said Harry. “Coming?”

“Coming,” Ron said decisively.

On his other side, Hermione was attempting to cast an invigorating spell on herself, with little success. Unusual for her, but Mrs Nott had told her and her parents that magical pregnancies could be extremely draining, and combined with how late they’d all stayed up, she’d probably be more tired than usual. Unable to watch any longer, Remus retrieved three Pepper-Up potions for them. Harry didn’t even have the energy to notice how awkward the steam coming out of his ears felt.

“Much better,” said Hermione. “Thank you, Professor—er, Remus.”

“You’re very welcome, Hermione.”

“Did you say you’re going to Grimmauld Place, Harry?” she asked him. “Do you think I could visit the library? Last time we were there I saw a book on courtships that I want to read.”


“I must say I’m astonished by this, ah, development,” said Remus delicately. “I wouldn’t have thought you the type to settle down early.”

Hermione frowned. “I am, too, really. I only accepted even this much after Mrs Nott said I could dissolve the courtship after a year and a day if I choose. It’s really a lot to decide on such short notice, isn’t it?”

“But you love him, don’t you?” said Ron. His voice had a quality to it rarely heard from Weasleys—sombre and delicate, but dignified, like he was attempting to hide it.

Neither Hermione nor Harry missed it, but she had the grace to pretend she had. “I do,” she said, obviously uncomfortable. “But that doesn’t mean I want to get married right now or jump into a magical contract without knowing everything it entails.”

Regulus pulled his pocket watch out and stood. “We ought to floo over—I’ve got to see a goblin about my vault in an hour.”

Ron shovelled a few more bites of food into his mouth before standing, and then they were off. Grimmauld Place was only slightly less miserable than usual; Regulus’s reappearance had instilled a new will to live—and clean—in Kreacher. Hermione headed straight for the library and after one look at the curtain hiding Mrs Black’s portrait, Ron followed. Regulus stuck his head behind the
curtain and said, “Hello, Mum.” A muffled, ‘Hello, darling,’ floated out, and Regulus pulled his face out, smirking at Sirius.

“Dare you,” he said.

“Not on your questionably-existing life,” Sirius growled.

“Is that Sirius I hear out there?” came Mrs Black’s portrait.

“Bugger,” Sirius muttered.

“I do,” Regulus said with a smirk, and he sauntered off down the hallway, calling, “Kreacher!” as he went.

“Sirius? Sirius Seth Black! You shameful blood-traitor, you come here and speak to your mother!” she screeched. Wincing, Sirius cast a silencing spell over her portrait.

“Well,” Sirius said. “Let’s get you keyed to these wards, and then what’s say we have lunch in Diagon Alley while my good-for-nothing brother speaks to the Goblins at Gringotts?”

“Sounds good to me,” Harry said, although, given Mrs Black’s outburst, he wasn’t sure there was much ‘sound’ to be had. His ears were still ringing—had that woman really been his grandmother? The thought made him gag.

Sirius keyed him to the wards in short order, and Harry went off to find Hermione and Ron while Sirius headed to the drawing room to retrieve Regulus. Hermione already had several books selected and hovering behind her as she browsed the library shelves. Ron was leant against the wall, talking to her about his and the twins’ Transfigurations tutor, which she appeared to be in favour of. Knowing Hermione, she probably wished she’d got one herself during summer hols.

“Find what you needed?” Harry asked.

“Yeah,” Hermione said distractedly. She paused and stretched up on her toes, reaching for a book on the highest shelf. “I do wish your family hadn’t put anti-summoning charms on these books, though,” she said. Ron came up behind her and, being right at a foot taller, reached the book with ease. He handed it to her with a smug look. “Thank you,” she said primly.

“We’re having lunch in Diagon Alley if you both want to come,” Harry said. Ron immediately agreed, never one to turn down a free lunch. To Hermione, Harry added, “If your parents are awake now, you could floo them and see if they wanted to come,” he added.

Hermione appeared to consider this. “That might be a good idea,” she said. “Seeing a fully wizarding town for the first time is distracting enough that they might not bring up the disaster that was last night.” She flicked her wand at the huge stack of books and they followed behind as she exited the library. “We’ll meet you there, shall we? Leaky Cauldron?”

“All right,” Harry said. She stepped into the floo, and he and Ron met his dad and uncle at the entrance hall to apparate out. The three of them caught a table at the Leaky Cauldron while Regulus went into the Alley proper to visit Gringotts. Sirius picked up five butterbeers at the bar and returned with them just as the Grangers stepped through the floo, eyes wide. It wasn’t their first trip by floo now, but Harry vividly remembered how disorienting it was the first few times. Hermione followed them through without a frizzed hair out of place, and he rolled his eyes. Of course Hermione was the better flooer of the two of them.

She slid into the booth next to him, and her parents followed, though with slightly less enthusiasm
than they’d showed for other magical encounters—Harry couldn’t blame them; Hermione’s revelation would have come as a shock even if it hadn’t been blurted out by Nott’s gran without so much as a by-your-leave.

“I found something in the library,” Hermione whispered to him, surreptitiously erecting a *Muffliato* over the two of them. Sirius took up all of the Grangers’ attention with cheery greetings and ‘How did you sleep’s, and Ron, though now awake, was staring a little sleepily at his butterbeer. Glancing around to make sure everyone else was duly occupied, she carefully pulled something from her winter-cloak pocket and passed it to Harry beneath the table. It was cold and heavy in his hand, and had a distinctly sinister feeling about it. He opened his hand and glanced down. It was just a necklace, a locket really—gold with brass inlays in delicate, ornate patterns. He flipped it over, and felt his heart flip in his chest with it. Engraved on the front was an S in the elaborate calligraphy of Old English manuscripts.

He knew whose locket this was. He clenched his fingers around it, felt the heinousness of the magic in it push at his skin as if it were trying to get inside him—like it were trying to join with him. He shuddered, thinking of the second piece of this very magic that was already in him. One look at Hermione confirmed that she knew, too. She tapped her lips and he understood; she felt Voldemort’s presence in it, through her Mark.

“Where’d you find this?”

“It was behind a book in the library, so heavily warded that I couldn’t help but notice it. It only took me a few minutes to disable them, and Ron was too busy putting himself to sleep talking about his Transfiguration lessons to notice.” Harry gave her a funny look, and she added, “It’s a side effect of pregnancy, according to *Magical Babes and How to Brew Them*; I’ll have an increased sensitivity to environmental and warding magic for several months after—what?”

Harry was looking at her quite strangely indeed. “How to ‘brew’ them?” he asked dubiously.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Honestly, I didn’t write the book, Harry. And you know as well as I that you can’t account for taste in the wizarding world.”

Harry glanced down at the locket again, turning it over in his hand. “What should we do with it?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” said Hermione. “Do you know what it is?”

Harry nodded, still staring at the necklace. “Yeah, it’s part of the Dark Lord’s soul,” he said. “There are more.”

Hermione’s eyebrows shot up. “You’re having me on,” she said, leaning in and snapping her wand under the table to reinforce the muffling charm. Harry added a Notice-Me-Not to hers for extra measure. “How’d his soul get in there? There’s more? How is he still alive if he isn’t all in one body? Is that why he’s immortal? Does he know—”

“He put it there,” said Harry, cutting her off before she could truly get started. “There are more, but some have been destroyed.”

“The diary,” said Hermione suddenly. “That was one, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, and the ring, too.”

“You’re kidding!” she said. Then, “And you and Malfoy destroyed it, didn’t you?” Harry nodded, forehead furrowed in thought as he twisted the gold chain between his fingers. He didn’t want to
“Dumbledore would want me to destroy it,” said Harry.

Hermione opened her mouth, but paused. He could see her absently tonguing the roof of her mouth through her parted lips as she thought. “You can’t take it with you to Hogwarts,” she said. “Dumbledore would feel it, I think. If I could feel it through all those wards at Grimmauld Place, surely a wizard as powerful as he is could feel it unwarded. He’d recognize Vol—the Dark Lord’s magical signature right away.” Harry noticed her slip, but didn’t react outwardly to it. Now that she was Marked, she was rewarded with a sharp stab of pain anytime she said the name, and Harry knew how much it galled her to call him the same thing that other real Death Eaters called him, and she was too much a Gryffindor to call him You-Know-Who.

“I don’t want to leave it at home, though,” he said.

Hermione was nodding. “No, you shouldn’t,” she said. “Now that I’ve removed the wards on it, there’d be no way to hide it from anyone who came to your house. The wards were rather intricately designed especially for the locket, and there’s no way I could recreate them.” She glanced at her parents, and then looked back to him, suddenly quite serious. “I think you should destroy it, Harry.”


“You said he’s got more,” she reminded him, ever the pragmatist. “He’s doing fine with two missing, and you really can’t afford to be found with anything so connected to the Dark Lord, Harry. The political atmosphere is just too highly charged right now, and one wrong step could very easily swing public approval out of your favour, which would mean that you’d have even more people watching your every move.”

“Who are you not killing?” said Ron. Harry stilled, and both he and Hermione turned to look at their friend with suspicious slowness. He was leaning into their spelled privacy charms and sipping the froth off the top of his butterbeer as if they were at the Three Broomsticks, talking Quidditch.

“Erm,” said Harry.

Then the false cheeriness slid from Ron’s face, and his eyes flicked to Hermione. “And why did you just call You-Know-Who ‘the Dark Lord’?”

“Ron,” Hermione said, but she faltered.

Ron prodded the muffling and Notice-Me-Not charms with his wand and they obligingly widened to enclose the rest of him so that he wouldn’t have to lean over. He set his butterbeer on the table very carefully, and crossed his arms over his chest. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” said Harry. “Hermione just found something that belongs to Voldemort.” He held the locket up just a little for Ron to see, but pulled his hand back when his friend started to reach for it. “You don’t want to touch it, mate, trust me,” he said by way of explanation, though it rang false even to his own ears.

“You’re touching it,” Ron said.

Harry exchanged a glance with Hermione quickly. There was no way they would get out of this conversation without losing their friend for good, unless they told him something close to the truth—but it was Ron and Ron never took anything well, even things that weren’t so traitorously heinous
that Harry felt burning shame just thinking of them.

“I can touch it because I’m connected to Voldemort,” said Harry. “It doesn’t want to hurt me.”

“How are you going to destroy it?” he asked. “I can feel evil leaking out of it even from here. You better get rid of it quick, but I’d bet my last galleon it’s going to take something more than a well-placed _Reducto._”

“I, erm—Ron,” Harry said, suddenly serious. “I’m not going to.”

“Harry!” Hermione said, but she was ignored by both of them.

“Why?” said Ron.

“I can’t,” Harry said, and was struck by a brilliant thought. If he’d learned anything from associating with so many Slytherins—Snape, Draco, and his Uncle Regulus among them—it was that the best lies were the truth. So he told Ron the truth, or at least part of it. “It’s part of Voldemort’s soul; he stored it in here for safe-keeping a long time ago.”

Ron shuddered. “More the better to get rid of it right away.”

“You don’t understand,” Harry said. “There are more of these. Voldemort’s hidden them in all sorts of places—like me.”

Both Ron and Hermione’s mouths dropped open, and Harry caught the look in her eye that she’d realised just how much of it was truth.

“What—but the prophecy...” said Ron. “How are you supposed to defeat him if—merciful Merlin,” he broke off, realisation dawning. The blood drained from his face, leaving his freckles and bright auburn beard standing out in stark contrast against his white skin. “Dumbledore knew,” he said, seemingly to himself.

Harry paused. All this time and yet—he had not come to that conclusion. He had not considered the ramifications of his actually attempting to kill the Dark Lord. Would it have killed him, too? Or would he have had to let himself be killed so that he could bring Voldemort down with him? His stomach dropped, and he felt like he wanted to sick up. Had Dumbledore known—? No...but surely not...surely Dumbledore would not have let him live in ignorance of something like this...right? He chanced a look at Hermione and saw that her face was just as pale as Ron’s.

“Harry,” she said again, her voice oddly strangled. She didn’t seem able to say much of anything else.

He swallowed heavily, feeling a lump in his throat that just wouldn’t go away. He was going to choke, to suffocate. He’d been raised for slaughter.

“So you’re safe from it since you’ve got a connection to You-Know-Who,” Ron said, staring down at the locket. It looked so innocuous. “And Hermione touched it. It doesn’t seem to want to do her much harm, either.” He gave her a hard look, and retreated from the privacy spells, which snapped back to their original size without him there. The movement caught Sirius’ and the Grangers’ attention, and Harry let the wards drop, and smiled and nodded at their conversation, but Hermione grabbed his hand beneath the table, and he couldn’t bring himself to let go.
beside him. He glanced up when Harry appeared before him, a look of vague annoyance on his eerily human face. It would have been so much easier, so much less creepy, if Voldemort had not looked human—if he’d looked like some monstrosity with no humanity about him at all. How could anyone have expected him to kill another human—another person? How could Dumbledore have expected him to lay down his own life with no choice, no warning?

“It is good that Ms Granger delayed her planned attempt,” Voldemort said. “It likely would have destroyed her magical core.”

Harry fancied he felt his heart shudder to a stop in his chest, back in his bed at home. “What?” he said. “Really?”

“Really,” Voldemort sneered. He rolled his eyes—was it Harry’s imagination or were his irises no longer red? It looked as though they might be brown now, or perhaps black, or—Voldemort interrupted his thoughts, adding, “But I must give her credit where it’s due. Her proposal is remarkably close to...possible.” He looked up at Harry seriously, and slid the parchment to the side of his desk. Harry sat down opposite him, intrigued.

“Tell her,” said Voldemort, “that if she cross-reverses the variables in her initial Arithmancy, that there is a respectable chance her spell could transfer enough energy to fill a squib’s magical core with magic enough to grow and replenish itself without outside aid.”

Harry slumped. “But her parents are muggles, not squibs. That won’t help her at all.”

The Dark Lord’s head tilted to the side, considering. “Tell her, then,” he said, “that if she incorporates the emotional requirements of an Old Magic spell into it, that she may be able to successfully transfer the magical core of a wizard into muggle.”

Harry grimaced. “She’s going to be so disappointed.”

“A great act often requires a great sacrifice, Harry. The sacrifice doesn’t necessarily have to come from the caster, however.”

Bile rose in Harry’s throat, threatening to make him sick up. “Hermione would never steal someone else’s magic to give to her parents. That—that sounds like something you would do.”

Voldemort smirked. “I would,” he agreed, but Harry got the feeling there was something else in those words, some unsaid message that he was failing to understand. He wanted to ask, but that would never do. The Dark Lord likely wouldn’t tell him even if he did.

“This is dangerous magic, Harry,” Voldemort said then. “You must tell her to destroy it once she accomplishes her goal. Our world would never be safe from muggles if it were known we could give them our magic.”

“She’s not going to do it,” Harry said, rolling his eyes. “Hermione isn’t like that.”

“Tell her anyway,” said Voldemort.

“I’m not your owl; why can’t you tell her yourself?”

Voldemort merely lifted an eyebrow, and turned back to his papers, pulling a set of parchments from beneath Rowena Ravenclaw’s grizzly journal. He ignored Harry’s question, and said instead, “Why have you come to me tonight?”

In response, Harry pulled the locket from his pocket and dangled it from his fingers between them.
“Because of this,” he said. Though Voldemort showed no reaction, Harry knew that the sight of it stunned him—the careful neutrality of the Dark Lord’s face all but confirmed it.

“It’s Slytherin’s Locket, isn’t it?” said Harry. “The locket you told me about...Hermione and I could both feel you in it.”

“Where did you find that?” asked the Dark Lord.

Harry opened his mouth to say, but found that the words would not come. Still under a Fidelis then. “My dad’s childhood home,” he said instead. “You did say my uncle attempted to destroy it once, didn’t you? He must have hidden it there.”

“Ahh,” Voldemort said. “I had wondered. It is unfortunate that Regulus removed the memory from his mind. No amount of Legilimency was able to retrieve its location for me.” He steepled his fingers together on the desk in front of him, observing Harry carefully.

“What do you intend to do with it?” he asked.

Harry pursed his lips. “I told you I don’t want to destroy you,” he said, anger seeping into his voice. “I’m not going to go looking for basilisk venom or anything to get rid of it.”

“And so you will what? Keep it with you at Hogwarts?” he said, laughing. “Dumbledore will sense it within the week, I assure you. It’s not safe for you to keep it there.”

Harry looked at him angrily. “What would you have me do with it then? Owl it to you?”

“Certainly not,” said Voldemort. “The Ministry would be alerted to magic of that magnitude travelling over owl post.” He leaned back in his chair, regarding Harry. “You must destroy it as soon as you return to school.”

“No!” said Harry. “I’m not a murderer. I’m not going to...to kill part of your soul.”

“I’m sure I’ll manage without it,” said Voldemort.

“Why can’t I just leave it here? No one’s going to come looking for it at River House. Or better yet, you could come pick it up. I’m sure you remember where I live,” he added wryly.

“I’m afraid I’m rather busy at the moment,” said the Dark Lord. “Secretly moving prisoners around the country, you know.” He shook his head. “No, it must be this way. The longer you have it in your presence, the more likely Dumbledore will realise. You simply must destroy it, for both our safety. Take it to Dumbledore upon returning to the school and tell him you felt evil within it like you felt within the ring. Then tell him you think it’s like my diary—that it can be destroyed with basilisk venom. I assure you, he will be delighted that you have come to such conclusions and will be less likely to suspect anything should it become obvious that you are disregarding the prophecy.”

“Dumbledore knows?” asked Harry. “About your soul pieces?” He had not wanted to believe it, but the evidence was overwhelming. It made his heart hurt—Dumbledore had always played his hand close to his chest, but this—this was so, so much bigger than the prophecy.

“Horcruxes,” Voldemort corrected absently. “But yes. Do please remember not to be an idiot and let on that you know more than you should.”

“If I do this,” Harry said, “then you’ll only be half a person. Half of your soul will be gone. You do realise this?”
“Of course I realise it, you idiot!” said Voldemort, slamming his hand on his desk. “And half is more than nothing. Sometimes you must sacrifice one thing to gain another.”

Harry looked at him curiously. “What are you gaining by killing part of yourself?” he asked.

Voldemort looked at him through narrowed eyes. “You will know soon enough,” he said.

Harry huffed angrily. “Fine,” he said.

They glared at one another for several long moments, and then Voldemort said, “I understand from Severus that you’ve found out about your mother.”

Harry closed his eyes, taking a moment to breathe through the utter desolation that reminder brought to him. His mother—his mum—one he’d thought to be whole and good and a soldier for the Light, someone he’d held as a talisman, a reminder of his destiny and the fight he must fight, when it became difficult to keep trying—she wasn’t what he’d thought at all. He wanted so badly for her to be alive, for her to be there for him and to know her, but how could he feel that way when she was stealing his friend’s body? When he could see how exhausted Ginny was? His heart ached painfully. It was doing that a lot lately.

“Yes,” he said.

“I gather you also understand that the ‘three’ in the second prophecy refers to my late wife, Ms Weasley, and her?” Harry nodded. “She is wrong about the rest of it.”

“What do you mean?” said Harry.

Voldemort’s lips parted, but suddenly he stiffened, eyes losing focus, and Harry was nearly getting worried when the Dark Lord shuddered and looked straight at him, as deadly serious as he’d looked at Harry that night in the graveyard. Harry’s heart skipped several beats in fear. “It’s happening,” said the Dark Lord. “The Dementors have come to feed.”

In his room, Harry’s eyes flew open, panic surging through his body. There was a commotion going on outside, and he ran to the window to see that Professor Snape had apparated to their lawn and was arguing with his father. Across the firth was nothing but darkness. Were those forests truly swarming with all the Dementors of Britain? Without a second thought, he threw on his shirt and trousers, shoved his feet in his boots, and grabbed his winter cloak.

He ran from his room and banged on Hermione’s door, and she opened it immediately, already dressed. “I know,” she said. “I have to go. I’m being summoned.” She looked incredibly nervous, more frightened than he’d ever seen her, but there was something else, there, too—some underlying determination that stood in for bravery.

“I’m coming, too,” he said.

“Harry, it’s not safe—”

“I’m going,” he said, and she nodded her head, shutting the door quietly behind her. She had her blue winter cloak on over her robes, and Harry charmed them black as they ran down the stairs. It would not do for her to be recognised. “Have you got a...you know?”

“Yes,” she said tightly. “I’ll put it on before I apparate.”
Sirius and Snape were still arguing when they exited through the veranda and ran down to the lawn. “There you are, Black,” said Snape. He ignored Sirius’s sputtering and said, “The location has been made unplotable since your last visit. Come, I will apparate you to the Dark Lord. Ms Granger, I take it you were given visual directions to the apparation point?”

“Yes,” she said.

Sirius turned to her, mouth agog. “Hermione, are you out of your fucking—”

“That is enough, Black,” said Snape. “Come on, Potter.” It was a testament to how worked up he was that he slipped and called him by his old name. Harry reached out for the Professor’s arm, but Sirius slapped it away. Hermione, fidgeting from the pain of an unanswered summons, gave him an apologetic look, and apparated away without him. In his rage, Sirius didn’t even notice.

“He’s not going,” he said. “There are Dementors there.”

“No fucking shit, Black,” said Snape. “And yet, I am required to bring him anyway, as I have been ordered, and the longer we sit here, the longer the Dark Mark pulses agony into my arm. Frankly, I don’t care that you spent a decade in Azkaban and now piss your trousers at the mere mention of a Dementor; you don’t have to come, but your son does. Let’s go.”

Harry grabbed his professor’s arm, sending his dad the most apologetic look he could muster under circumstances of extreme panic and fear. Snape sneered at his dad, but at the last moment, Sirius reached out and grabbed Snape’s other arm, and Snape turned, and they were gone.

 Snape shook them off as soon as they landed. “It’s just like you to catch a free side-along without even bothering to ask first, Black,” he snarled at Sirius, and then turned and pointedly ignored him. He retrieved his mask from within his cloak and pressed it to his face, then stood looking at Harry expectantly. “Well?” said Snape.

“Well, what?”

“Do you mean to waltz into this with your face showing? Not everyone here will be Marked; you aren’t safe here.”

“I’m not a Death Eater, sir. I don’t have a mask.”

“Oh, for Circe’s sake,” Snape said. “Put up your hood.” He waved his wand harshly in front of Harry’s face, and then did the same to Sirius without even bothering to look at him first. A blackness settled in front of Sirius’s face, making his hood look like it was...empty. No matter how hard Harry looked, he couldn’t see his father’s face within. “It will cancel when your hood is removed, so do try not to stupidly lower it. Come!”

They were surrounded by forest—thick and unnaturally dark. Harry’s skin began to crawl immediately, fear enveloping them like a slow, liquid swarm. It was almost palpable in the air. He could hear his father breathing erratically, and reached over to squeeze his arm reassuringly. “Patronus,” Harry said lowly—both a reminder and a reassurance. This wasn’t Azkaban.

Sirius nodded and pulled out his wand. “*Expecto Patronum,*” he said, voice wavering. Nothing came from his wand but a sluggish mist that hovered in the air for a few moments before drifting downwards like sludge running down a wall.

“*Expecto Patronum!*” Snape said, considerably more confidently, and a silvery doe burst forth from
his wand and paused, waiting. Harry gave him a baffled look and called forth his own stag, finding
the likeness of their patronuses odd and unsettling. Some of the suffocating fear from the nearby
Dementors subsided, and Sirius tried again, and this time the huge, silvery mastiff leapt from his
wand and slunk over to their deer. Sirius’ shaky sigh of relief went unremarked upon, thankfully.

The patronuses led them through the trees and up a sloping hill towards the school’s grounds. As
they crested the top, Harry’s stomach dropped. There was a silver circle of wards separating the
Death Eaters, who lined up silently against its barrier, with the Dementors—hundreds and hundreds
of them. Inside the wards, it was nothing but blackness, so thick were the Dementors—and in the
middle, another large, gold-glowing dome containing the feeding arena. The Dementors pushed up
against it, oddly quiet. Hermione stood ahead, seemingly as shocked as they—her red shoes the only
thing that differentiated her from the many black-robed Death Eaters, werewolves, and sympathizers
lining the crest of the hill on either side of them. All stood still, some with patronuses stalking
restlessly in front of them, some shuddering so violently, he could see it even in this eerie darkness.

Harry went to her, the other two following him without a word. “My god,” he said quietly, by way
of greeting. She turned to him, the sinister white mask on her face—on Hermione’s face, of all
people—almost as disturbing as the Dementors themselves. There were hundreds of Death Eaters
and unmasked sympathizers lined up around the huge silver-domed wards, each of them unnaturally
still and quiet. Harry’s chest was heavy with fear, and for the first time, he realised exactly what it felt
like to be in the eye of a storm. The hush of this war was surreal; soon, this quiet would pass and
there would be slaughter. And how long before it truly ended? This peace could not last forever.

“Look at them. So many it’s like one massive, undulating blur. Even the air feels sinister just to
breathe it.”

She nodded, and it was at that moment that Harry realized that he knew the Death Eater standing on
Hermione’s other side. Pansy Parkinson stood in front of what could only have been her father and
older brother, both gripping one of her shoulders as if they could protect her with just that. She
leaned around Hermione, and her long, dark hair slipped from her cowl, and her blue eyes flashed
fiercely behind her mask.

She said, “I knew this was coming, but it’s taking every last ounce of my Occlumency to keep
myself from fainting.” Her patronus, a King Charles Spaniel, stalked agitatedly back and forth,
growling lowly at both the Dementors and the crane patronus next to it, held steady by Blaise
Zabini’s ebony wand. Harry would never forget those long, delicate fingers after watching Blaise
play everything from piano to a didgeridoo with the same confident ease.

And then the Malfoys were walking up behind them, Draco’s mother the only one with a patronus
out, and Harry remembered the strange spell Draco had used to banish the Dementors that last night
at school. It brought to mind the strange oneness he’d felt to Draco that night, and he shuddered,
letting his eyes drift closed for only a moment as he relived the amazing feeling.

“What are you doing here?” Harry asked Draco quietly. He was using the same darkness spell over
his hood that Harry was using, but he’d recognize Lucius’ cane without needing to see his face, and
there was something about this friendship bond that told him when Draco was near. Draco turned
towards him, the emptiness of his cloak hood so utterly frightening to look at that Harry almost
looked away. “You aren’t Marked,” he added.

“No,” Draco agreed. He turned back to stare down at the swarm and shuddered. Then, suddenly, his
hand was in Harry’s and Harry squeezed it tightly, trying to convey both his utter dread and what
little reassurance he could offer—but there was little; they all knew why they were here, and this
would only get worse tonight. “I can’t cast a patronus,” he said, and then barked out a short, strained
laugh. “One of the only Old Magics that the Ministry allows, and I’ve never been able to do it.” He was babbling; he never talked this openly. Harry squeezed his hand again, and pushed another surge of magic into his own stag. It turned and carefully butted its nose against Draco’s hand, and when he squeezed Harry’s hand, it glowed brighter.

“Look,” said Hermione quietly. Above the feeding arena, a hovering platform came into view as its wards were lowered. Voldemort stood atop it, staring down at the sea of blackness as if he wasn’t even aware all of his Death Eaters were standing just outside the outer wards. But that wasn’t what Hermione was pointing at. Harry followed her hand and inhaled sharply. There were wizards inside the outer wards—flying slowly around on brooms, wands out. “It’s the werewolves,” she said, and Harry saw the long, silvery blonde hair of one of the smallest werewolves fly past. Gabrielle Delacour.

“Moony,” Sirius whispered. His hand came up and clenched Harry’s shoulder, his only means of protection, just like Pansy’s family. “Regulus...”

“My loyal Death Eaters,” Voldemort said then, voice magically amplified. Every hooded figure turned its head up and stared at the Dark Lord, waiting in disturbing silence for him to keep speaking. No one here was evil right now—even the most depraved of the Death Eaters was still, frightened, waiting for direction. “We have known this day was coming. There is little for me to say. Some of you have family participating tonight. There are, of course, happiness charms over the inner arena, but you are welcome, and indeed encouraged, to cast your own spells of choice at your friends and family as they enter the arena. There is honour in the sacrifice they will make tonight, and there is no shame in easing their agony.

“The Azkaban inmates selected from the lottery will be port-keyed to the arena in order of their selection. I will not disclose names, but you will have received a letter with the number of any relative selected, and I will call that number out. If you are able to spare your magic, you may consider casting charms for even those you don’t know.

“We will begin now,” he said, voice echoing frighteningly, only the hellish sounds of the Dementors to be heard. He slashed his wand viciously, and ten Dementors finally pushed through the golden wards. “One!” he said, and a body popped into the middle of the arena, clothed in the filthy grey standard-issue Azkaban robes, arms and legs bound, a black cloth bag covering its head. A demonic, hellish screeching rose up from the ten Dementors, a cacophony of sinister noise that did nothing to mask the terrified scream from the person inside. The Dementors swarmed, but the screaming went on and on and on—its voice cracked and it still screamed.

“Dagda grant peace,” Pansy whispered, and her fingers drew a strange knotted cross in front of her that left a trail of glowing spellwork. The screaming stopped, and she gave the glowing knotted cross a push and flashed towards the first victim.

“Avada Kedavra!” said one of the werewolves hovering nearby. The body jerked and lay still, and the Dementors moved away from it, roving restlessly around the inner ring—unable to get out, and the others still unable to get in. There were only nine Dementors now—whichever one had been successful had now disappeared into whatever hellish plane Dementors came from, to rest and sleep before it bred.

“Two!” said the Dark Lord.

“Dagda grant peace,” said Pansy, already casting her strange blessing. This time, the prayer was murmured by all three Malfoys, Sirius, and the Zabinis, too. Mrs Malfoy’s cross-work spell twisted more elaborately than Pansy’s, and Sirius’ was quite simple and golden, but they all wove them carefully, and this time, they pushed the magic forward before the faceless inmate was Kissed, and it
quieted his screams to whimpers.

Again, the screaming stopped suddenly, and there were eight Dementors left, and a second werewolf slashed his wand, striking the soulless body with vivid green light. When “Three!” port-keyed in, Harry joined in the plea for peace, having no idea who he was praying to, but unable to do nothing for these people, no matter how depraved they’d been outside Azkaban. He knew not their crimes—not all of them had been Death Eaters, or even murderers. Some of them, surely, had only lied on their taxes, or...he couldn’t bear to think of it. It was horrible; bound and bagged bodies were dropped into the feeding arena in quick succession, and every time the last Dementor would disappear, Voldemort would weave his wand in a complicated fashion, lowering the inner wards just enough for ten to enter. But it was taking too long—the Dementors were getting restless and some noticed the Death Eaters standing just outside their enclosure. They began to push against it as well, and when the twenty-ninth anonymous inmate slumped dead from the Killing Curse, Voldemort let in twenty Dementors instead.

“Thirty one!” Voldemort said, and behind him, Harry heard Mrs Malfoy’s breath hitch. Her voice was an octave higher, wavering as she said the prayer, and then said it again and again and again as she knotted together her spell and pushed it forward. The screaming coming from the feeding arena was surreal—high pitched and broken and touched by madness. Harry knew that voice—had spent nights remembering it and hating it and the person attached to it. Bellatrix Lestrange.

The screaming stopped, finally, and Mrs Malfoy made a startled, broken sound. Draco leaned back against her and Lucius murmured to her in a voice Harry had never expected from him. A werewolf swooped down to put the former Bellatrix out of its soulless misery, but Voldemort called for him to stop, and with a flick of his wand he shielded Bellatrix from the remaining Dementors and floated her limp body up to his platform. He pressed something to her chest, and she disappeared with a pop, landing, inexplicably, behind Harry.

Glancing at his mother, who stood staring at the bound and bagged form of her sister, Draco vanished the hood from Bellatrix’s face. Formerly Bellatrix stared up at Harry as if she were in there, as if she could see him—but there was no one left there, just an empty shell. Blood and drool slid down her chin, and she breathed raggedly—a body physically exhausted, unable to do anything other than the most basic of human reflexes. Mrs Malfoy dropped to her knees, slumped over the body of her sister, shoulders shaking, but making no sounds. Her manicured fingernails dug into Bellatrix’s arms, but Bellatrix made no reaction—she was no longer Bellatrix at all.

Snape stepped forward and helped Lucius lift his wife, then hoisted Bellatrix up, her tall form slumping against him, head lolling back. She blinked, and the humanness of that one, reflexive action was all Harry could take. He barely turned away from the Malfoys in time to retch all over the snow-covered grass in front of him. It splattered against the patronus-silver wards of the feeding arena, and he sank to his knees, head bowed. Hermione vanished the sick from the ground, and resumed chanting—he hadn’t even noticed she was before, but the loss of it as she cleaned up his sick was more noticeable than the steady murmur of her voice as she, along with several dozen other Death Eaters, continuously fed the outer ward with the magic of their patronuses to keep the Dementors from escaping.

“I will take her home,” Lucius was saying to Snape. “Will you bring my son home—after? We need all the wands here we can get.”

“I will,” said Snape, and he moved to stand behind Draco as Mr Malfoy levitated his former sister-in-law, and took hold of both her and his wife, apparating them away.

“Why on earth...” said Sirius. “Why not let her die?”
“None of your concern,” Snape said, sneering, but suddenly, Harry knew. He remembered Mrs Malfroy’s declaration at Yuletide, and with another sick feeling in his stomach, he knew that Bellatrix Lestrange was going to become his mother. The blood drained from his face, and this time, it was Draco who grabbed his hand. He retched again, but there was nothing left inside him, and so he scraped his throat raw dry-heaving over the snow, unable to banish the sight of Bellatrix Lestrange’s vacant, blinking eyes from his mind. He thought of Alsace, and blinked hard, but his eyes still burned for want of crying. 

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It was well after noon the following day when Harry side-alonged Hermione back to River House. She’d already risked one apparition last night, and she couldn’t afford another, especially as magically drained as she was. Sirius, Remus, and Regulus popped in seconds behind them, all equally exhausted—and a little shaken in the case of Remus and Regulus. One of the werewolves, probably overcome with exhaustion, had taken a sharp turn and fallen from his broom above the pit of Dementors. Hermione could only hope that he’d broken his neck upon impact—the alternative was too gruesome to consider. She glanced across the river and could barely make out the dark shapes of the thestrals circling, hungry. She could see them now.

But for all of the death and destruction of the previous evening, there had been one turn of fate that left her feeling as though the world would indeed continue on. Only five-hundred and seventeen Dementors had come to feed, and one had been sated by the unfortunate, nameless werewolf—and there was something important about Number Five-Hundred and Seventeen; it was Rodolphus Lestrange, Alsace and Lorraine’s father. With only a margin of error of one, Rodolphus Lestrange, who had two daughters who’d barely met him, had been spared, and though the Ministry didn’t know it yet, by tomorrow’s Prophet, wizarding Britain would find that the Dark Lord Voldemort, with full approval of the Continental European Magical Union, also known as CEMU, had arranged a pardon for every Azkaban inmate who escaped the Dementors Kiss last evening, and they would be offered sanctuary anywhere in the union, which was twenty-seven countries strong. They were being port-keyed out of the island even now.

Her parents were waiting for her on the veranda, cups of steaming tea before them as Fred and Ginger bustled around in some attempt to make up for every last one of their hosts leaving in the middle of the night with their daughter and without warning. Crookshanks was dozing in her Mum’s lap. Ron, hopefully, was still sleeping.

“Mum, Dad,” she murmured, giving them a tired smile. There was no easy way out of explaining where the five of them had been all night, so she would have to wait and see how they reacted before knowing how to proceed.

Sirius and Regulus made excruciatingly polite and apologetic excuses for leaving them unattended at such short notice, and chastised themselves thoroughly for their rude manners, but in the end, they took Professor Lupin and went inside, leaving her to explain the details as she saw fit. Harry, however, gave her hand a quick squeeze and let it drop, making no attempts to leave whatsoever.

“Hello, sweetheart,” her dad said. “Ginger said you all had an urgent engagement to attend to.”

Hermione and Harry closed the distance between them and her parents and sat down at the table, shucking their winter cloaks off in the fake heat of the old warming wards placed around the veranda. “How did you sleep?” she asked them.

“Oh, fine,” Mum said, almost back to her usual free-spirited hippie self again. “Your father really loves that tobacco-scented faucet; we may have to pick up some scented candles when we get home.”
“About that,” said Hermione. She shared a quick glance with Harry, and at his encouraging smile, took a deep breath and continued. “There is a war on, you know?”

Her parents shared an uneasy glance between them, and Dad cleared his throat. “Vaguely,” he admitted. “We know what you’ve told us—a mad wizard you said? Hellfire and brimstone? Is he anything like Margaret Thatcher?”

Hermione fought a smile. “No,” she said, and then proceeded to finally come clean to her parents. It was long overdue. She told them of the Dark Lord—and their being muggle meant they didn’t know to be wary of a witch who referred to him in such a manner—and when she came to the part about the prophecy, Harry recited it to them without comment.

Through it all, her parents’ eyes stayed wide with shock and fear, and yet she still told them of how she was hated for her muggle blood, and that there were some wizards here who would persecute her simply because of her genetics. She told them of the Order, and the name of the group called Death Eaters and how they fought to prevent muggleborns like herself from learning magic, simply because they were afraid of people like her parents, of muggles, finding out they existed. She told them about how electrified the political and social climate was, and how easily the suspicious, superstitious wizarding world could decide to rally for the Death Eaters’ campaign, and for completely closing off their world from the muggle world.

And then, finally, she told them that she’d joined this vigilante group—that she’d sworn a magical, binding oath that could very well kill her if she betrayed it willingly—and that she was fighting alongside the very people who wanted to keep people like her out of the wizarding world. After the revelations of this holiday, Hermione wondered if her parents would ever speak to her again; the silence was heavy and her enhanced senses made her aware of their fear and apprehension in startling clarity. She could smell it on them. But it wasn’t yet ten minutes later when they spoke. Her mother, who surely would have been a Gryffindor, was the first.

“Hermione—why?” she said, shaking her head slowly. “You would willingly give your talents to people who hate you for something you had no control over?”

“Mrs Granger,” Harry said quietly, breaking his silence for the first time in the forty-five minutes she’d been talking to her parents. “If I may—I don’t want to presume that I know how you’re feeling, but I would like to say that Hermione is the most brilliant witch in recent history, and she never does anything without checking the facts. She had a good reason, even if it took me a while to realise it myself.”

“But didn’t you say there was a prophecy between you and this group, Harry?” her dad asked. “How is it that you’re okay with Hermione opposing you in a war?”

“There is a prophecy, yes,” Harry said quietly, “but prophecies are notoriously tricky, and we have chosen to interpret it in a different manner.” He paused, and then added, voice very even, “Hermione and I are not on opposing sides.”

“You’re on the same side as someone who tried to kill you, Harry?” her mum asked, voice an octave higher than usual.

“I’m a pacifist,” he said. “I’m on the side that does the least damage while preventing all-out war.”

Her mum leaned back in her chair heavily, and Harry continued, “I appreciate the viewpoints of both factions in this war, and approve of neither. Strictly speaking, I am aligned with the Order, but I also have a strategic alliance with Vol—the Dark Lord. His methods are often reprehensible, but there are times when they’re necessary.” He turned to Hermione, and added, “And that, I think, is where Hermione was going with this. Last night, we were required to take part in something we would
normally—and did—find repulsive, but the alternative was...unspeakable.”

She took a deep, shuddering breath. “Yes,” she said.

“What did you have to do?” Dad asked. “Surely not...Hermione, you don’t go around killing people, do you?”

“No!” she said. “No...never that, never me—but...”

“People did die,” Harry finished for her, voice low.

“What?” Mum whispered. “Hermione—how could—” she broke off suddenly, looking away, and Hermione’s heart wrenched. How had she come to disappoint her parents so many times in so few hours?

Hermione closed her eyes tightly, willing back tears. “Neither choice was good, Mum. There was no good choice in this situation. There’s a magical phenomenon that happens, and when it happens, people will die, no matter what happens.”

At her parents’ blank looks, Harry said, “Dementors,” and they shuddered, remember her many letters about them when they were at the school in third year. “They breed about every five-hundred years, depending on some Astronomical and Arithmantic factors, and when they do, they require the soul of a human to complete the process. There is no way to subvert this, and to destroy a Dementor would take the combined efforts of a hundred wizards and witches. The only two options we ever have when it happens is to either let the Dementors choose their victims—often unsuspecting muggles with no way to defend themselves—”

“Or choose for them,” said her dad quietly. Crookshanks butted against his hand, and he petted the half-kneazle absently, face pale. “Who?”

“Prisoners,” said Harry. And even though she knew it was a lie, she was grateful when he added, “Prisoners who were condemned to life in Azkaban for violent crimes. It’s such a magically miserable place that it’s quite possible this opportunity for escape came as a relief to them, in the end.”

“My goodness,” Dad whispered. He moved to grab her mum’s hand on top of the table, and gripped it tightly. “And this—this happened last night?”

“Yes,” she said. “The last known Dementor in Britain and Continental Europe fed, and has disappeared. They remove to another plane for a period before they breed.”

“There will be more?”

“No, the birth of one Dementor requires both the death of a human and another Dementor. The fed Dementor will die and release all the souls it has previously eaten, and a new Dementor will be created from the spirit of the old one.”

“The other side—the Order,” her Mum corrected. “What did they plan to do?”

Hermione shook her head. “The Order could not ethically condone the death of anyone, even prisoners. They attempted to force the Dementors into submission until their urge to feed passed.”

“It didn’t work,” said her dad.

“No,” she said. “Given last night, it didn’t work.” Then, “But it was a noble try, just the same.”
“In the end,” said Harry, “there is no right or wrong side. ‘One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter’. Both the Order and the Death Eaters struggle for what they believe is right, and both sides make choices that cost lives, either directly in the case of the Death Eaters, or indirectly in the case of the Order. My hope is to be the link between them, so that we can finally end this civil war.”

They were all quiet for several moments, her parents digesting the information, and she reflecting on the horrors of the night before. Her eyes were heavy and scratchy from lack of sleep, and she wanted nothing so much as her bed, but she would not leave this table until everything was resolved with her parents.

Harry sighed quietly, and she could see by the tense, distant look on his face that he, too, was remembering. Her heart clench; Harry was so empathetic, and she knew how much his own heart hurt at the necessary deaths of so many people. He was probably destroying himself with guilt. She reached under the table and grabbed his hand, and he threaded his fingers through hers immediately, rubbing her knuckles with the warm pads of his fingers.

Finally, her father spoke. “What I don’t understand,” he said lowly, thoughtfully, “is why you, Hermione, chose to actively support the side that seems to have the least regard for you.”

“I was offered something priceless in exchange for my research capabilities,” she said, and felt Harry squeeze her hand at the admission.

“You’ve never been the type to be swayed by riches,” her mother chastised.

“I’m still not,” she said.

“Then what? What could possibly be worth all of this?”

Hermione glanced up. “The possibility to give you both magic, so that if—when—this tentative peace breaks, and we are cut off from the muggles for however long it takes to re-establish peace, that I won’t be separated from you...so that when I’ve had this baby, you’ll be around to meet it.”

The shocked hush that followed was charged, and she cringed at how she’d just manipulated her parents without a second thought. A wave of nausea rushed through her, but she tamped it down. There were twenty soulless people laying in beds in some Death Eater’s home now, being tended to by their house-elves, blinking, breathing, but not alive, not really. And through her fetch-key, she’d received the information from the Dark Lord that those people were for her. They had no use for their magical cores any longer, his note had said, she could have them for her research.

And Harry had told her the Dark Lord’s discovery about her research. If she wanted to give her parents magic, she’d need to first give them a core to hold it in—and all those soulless people were practically dead already, weren’t they? What was the ethical decision to be made here?

Was there one?

She wanted to retch.

Then she saw the shimmer of Ron’s Disillusionment charm as stood watching from the door, knew he’d heard everything, everything, and she did retch. The house-elves swarmed her cleaning it up and fetching compresses and tea, and her parents jumped up and rubbed her back, assuming it was morning sickness, and not the overwhelming disgust she felt from what she’d participated in the night before, and that Ron had heard all about it.
WARNINGS THIS CHAPTER: Dementor Kissing, character death (not main characters), strong language, vomiting

1. “One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.” – Gerald Seymour, from the book, Harry’s Game

Comments, concrit, and kudos greatly appreciated!
Collusion

Chapter by faire_weather

Chapter Summary

In which Ron and Harry have a talk, the kids head back to Hogwarts, Dumbledore reveals important information, and we visit the Chamber of Secrets. NC-17 for sex.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Collusion (n): 1. Secret or illegal cooperation or conspiracy, esp. in order to cheat or deceive others; 2. Such cooperation or conspiracy, esp. between ostensible opponents in a lawsuit.

Ron wasn’t handling it well—or rather, Harry didn’t think he was. It was hard to tell with this new, suddenly-mature Ron. He didn’t want to talk about it, and he didn’t want to yell about it, and that was worrisome.

“Mate...” Harry said pleadingly. They were shut up in Harry’s bed room, facing one another from opposite sides of the room. It might as well have been opposite sides of a battlefield, and when it came down to it, wasn’t it? Wasn’t that what it would seem like to Ron, anyway?

Ron looked away, tight-lipped. “Are we?” he asked.

“Always,” Harry said desperately. “Ron, you were my first friend—my only friend, for a while, before Hermione.”

“And now she’s your best mate, and I’m only second.”

“No!” Harry said. “That isn’t it at all, Ron. You just weren’t there to tell, and you weren’t answering my owls—how was I supposed to tell you?”

“But Hermione...” Ron said. “How could she?”

Harry sighed, and slumped down on his bed. “It’s complicated,” he said.

Ron laughed bitterly. “Of course it is. My best mate’s a muggle-born Death Eater, and my other best mate is The Boy Who Defected. Harry—he kills people. He kills muggles and muggle-borns and he doesn’t care about anyone. He nearly killed Ginny—”

“I don’t think you’ve got anything to worry about with Ginny, Ron.”

He finally met Harry’s eyes. “What do you mean? Not her, too...”

“It’s not my place to say, Ron,” Harry said, begging him with his eyes to accept this. How could he tell Ron about the connexion Ginny shared with the Dark Lord? “Just—please, hear me out. We haven’t gone dark, or—or evil.”
“Haven’t you?” Ron asked harshly. “Hermione’s got the goddamned Dark Mark!” He stopped suddenly, mouth parted in surprise. “Harry, you’re not doing this because you’re...well, it’s okay if you’re scared to fight him, but you could win, Harry. You know you could! And I’d be there with you. You don’t have to be afraid to do it alone, because I wouldn’t let you—”

“It’s not that,” Harry said.

“Then what?” Ron asked plaintively. “What could possibly make you do something like this?”

“I just don’t want there to be a war,” Harry said. “Haven’t you noticed? You can’t say you haven’t noticed Ron—there’ve been absolutely no attacks in the last two years.”

“The Dementors attacked the seventh years at Stonehenge not even a fortnight ago!”

“Those are Dementors, Ron, not Death Eaters. They didn’t have anything to do with it. Voldemort had no more idea where they Dementors were than Dumbledore or the Ministry did. They’ve been acting weird, you can’t deny.”

Ron frowned. “What about the orphans? That was him, though, wasn’t it?”

“And who did that hurt?” Harry asked.

“The muggle-borns and their parents!” Ron said.

“Most of them came from bad homes anyway, Ron.”

“How exactly does that excuse kidnapping children and Obliviating their existence from their parents’ memories?”

Harry looked away. “It doesn’t,” he said. He sighed. “Look—I can’t say that I agree with everything the Dark Lord does—”


“But he made an agreement to a ceasefire if I would even just tangentially align with him, and how could I say no to that, knowing that not only do I have no way of blocking the Order’s secrets from him with our scar connecting us, but also that if I declined, he would go on some sort of murderous rampage in retaliation? He would have enjoyed taunting me with every death I could have prevented just by agreeing to do what I’m doing—practically nothing, except putting up with his company.”

Ron was silent for a long moment, staring desolately out of the window. He came over to the bed, an air of weariness about him, and sat down. “But what does he want from you, Harry? He has to want something.”

“Yeah,” Harry said softly. “I wish I knew.” He looked over to Ron and found him looking back. He looked so different now with his longer hair and his beard, like a grown wizard—mature and able to make mature decisions. Harry willed his rushing pulse to slow, and hoped, prayed—to Merlin, Circe, Dadga, all of them—that he was different enough to accept Harry like this.

Like a traitor.

Hermione and the Grangers returned to London the morning after the Dementor feeding, needing time together as a family to deal with the multitude of revelations that had been dumped on them
during their stay. Harry didn’t blame them for wanting to take Hermione home, but he couldn’t help feeling anxious at being abandoned; how was he supposed to deal with Ron on his own?

Ron was distant, but he didn’t seem as though he was about to send an owl of to the Ministry—or worse: Dumbledore. Things were tense, but there were moments where it felt like old times, and he wanted so badly for Ron to be back at Hogwarts with them full-time, but twice a week was better than nothing. Harry tried to make things as normal as possible; he would let Ron decide what he was going to do on his own time—fear that if he rushed him, Ron would explode at him kept him quiet, but he wanted so badly to know things were good again.

The rest of the holiday was spent finishing homework, as even Ron’s tutor had set him some, and watching Quidditch games on floo disk. The Prophet had indeed broken the news of the Dementors disappearing, and an anonymous owl had brought them a letter bearing the names of every Kissed prisoner, and a second parchment listing the names of every pardoned prisoner, signed and notarised by the Secretary of International Affairs, CEMU. As predicted, magical Britain was in an uproar. The remaining week of Yule holidays saw the papers filled with editorials and opinion pieces on the method used to sate the Dementors; there was certainly revulsion and disgust from the people, but beneath it all, there appeared to be an overwhelming sense of relief that they’d been spared. The holidays passed in a blur of political and social uproar, and before long, Harry was on the train back to Hogwarts.

Contrary to what Draco told him, he hadn’t felt at all weird as since their encounter on Yule—he’d expected intensification of the feelings he’d felt before, of needing to touch Draco and be near him. He’d half anticipated, regardless of Draco’s denials, that it would end up like one of those awful situations found in the wizarding romance novels Hermione pretended she didn’t read. If this friendship bond had somehow let Draco read his mind or titillate him from afar, Harry would not have been best pleased. A man needed some privacy now and again.

That didn’t mean he didn’t miss him, though. On the contrary, he had, and they’d written to each other several times, and even met at Diagon Alley for some post-holiday shopping, with Ron tagging along to meet up with Lavender at the Tea Leaf tea house—Harry had politely failed to react with alarm to the vividness of her new French cloak, and if Lavender noticed the distance between them, she didn’t comment on it, either.

Now he was sitting in a compartment across from Ginny, waiting for Draco, Hermione, and Nott to finish rounds. He’d not spoken to her since Yuletide, and was even now making a valiant attempt not to look at her, but she was radiating loneliness, and it wasn’t long before guilt overcame his reluctance. He glanced up at her through lowered lashes. She had a copy of Witch Weekly open in her lap, but she wasn’t reading it.

“All right?” he said at last.

Ginny’s eyes flicked to him, and she blinked. “All right,” she said. They stared at each other for several minutes, and she suddenly cleared her throat. “Lil—your mum has owled him, and he says that he’ll have another host ready for her within the month.”

Harry inhaled sharply. He’d forgotten all about that, but now, unbidden, Bellatrix’s slack face and unseeing eyes flashed before him again, and he pressed his lips together firmly, forcing his nausea away. What would have to be done to her to make it habitable for a new person? He shuddered at the thought of a mass of dark, necromantic magics no doubt being used to prepare her.

“You’ll be free,” he said.

She looked away again. “Yes.”
Harry thought back to the second prophecy, and said, “I’m sure he’ll be glad it’s done with, too.”

“He hates your mother,” Ginny confirmed.

“There aren’t many people he doesn’t hate.”

Ginny smiled wryly, the first flash of good humour he’d seen on her since that fateful encounter in his drawing room. “He holds your mum in a special level of hatred,” she said. “She’s manipulative, and she isn’t scared of him, and he doesn’t take it well at all.”

“I never would have imagined my mum was manipulative,” Harry said. Even knowing she could hear him through Ginny’s ears, he couldn’t stop himself from continuing, and perhaps he wanted his mum to hear. “I always thought she was a Gryffindor with a heart of gold.”

“She’s a true Ravenclaw,” said Ginny. “Good at distancing herself from emotions when she needs to, and...” she paused, and Harry glanced up, seeing her looking at him intensely. “And she does have a heart of gold, but only for you...and maybe one other.”

His dad, he reckoned. “I don’t know how to feel about all of this,” he said. “How have I gone from being an orphan to having not one, but two parents? But I still barely know either of them.”

“She does love you...I can feel it, in here,” Ginny said, touching her chest. “When she sees you in the corridors, and that night she healed you and Draco, and...at Yule. When she’s in control and you’re around, my chest feels fit to bursting with all her love for you.”

Raised voices suddenly came from the corridor. Ginny stood to open the venetian blinds on the window, but the door slammed open, and Hermione yelled, “Morrigen take you, Theodore Nott!”

Hermione flung the door closed behind her before Nott could follow her in, and spelled it locked with a furious slash of her wand. She flung herself down on the bench next to Ginny, ignoring his an. “Damn him!” she said to no one in particular. “I am not property!”

“What happened?” asked Harry.

Hermione huffed. “He’s angry that I put a glamour over my hand. He seems to think that it’s perfectly fine for me to go around advertising that I’ve been branded by a man. Well, I’m sorry to disappoint him, but I didn’t even want to commit to a courtship, and I absolutely will not walk around flaunting that I’ve been effectively pissed on like a tree in werewolf territory!”

Ginny giggled. “A lot of pureblood boys are like that.”

Hermione pressed her lips together and, defiantly, recast the glamour over her palm to strengthen the spell. “Well, he can be angry all he wants, but I’ve got enough brands already, thank you.”

A hesitant knocking came at the compartment door. “If that’s you, Theodore Nott, you can just go back to your Slytherin friends. I’ve nothing to say to you right now,” said Hermione stiffly.

“It’s not Theo, Granger. For Merlin’s sake, let me in.”

Hermione dropped the locking spell and Draco stepped in, sliding into the seat next to Harry with a look on his face that said he was trying very hard to fight a smile. “Enjoy your break, Granger?” he asked, amused.

Hermione positively growled. “I’m going to do rounds,” she said.
“I’ll come with you,” said Ginny, following her from the compartment.

When they were gone, Draco turned to him, looking pleased with himself. “Hello again,” he said lasciviously. “We seem to have the compartment to ourselves.”

“We do,” Harry agreed, and grabbed Draco’s tie to draw him nearer. Draco came willingly, straddling his lap and leaning down to crash their lips together. Harry slid his arms around Draco’s waist and pulled him closer. Kissing Draco was like, well, magic, and he could not seem to get enough of it. Every time they did it now, Harry’s felt like he would explode, and when Draco gave him a sultry smirk and slid from his lap to kneel in front of him, he nearly did.

“Merlin, you look hot,” Harry said, watching Draco slide his tongue over the tops of his thighs teasingly—and when, exactly had he lost his trousers? Draco brought one hand up to wrap around his prick, and looked up at him seductively. Harry moaned. “I wanked to something like this in the shower last week,” he admitted.

“Oh?” said Draco, running his tongue up Harry’s shaft. “Was I on my knees pulling myself off while I sucked you?”

“Yes,” said Harry, head thrown back. “Exactly that. How’d you know?”

Draco pulled his mouth away and Harry looked back down. Draco was looking at him strangely. “What?” he said. He was aching hard, and if Draco didn’t want to do anything about it, he was going to have to step to the loo and do it himself.

“Nothing,” Draco said after a moment, and then bent his head back down, taking all of Harry in his mouth. Harry groaned, reached up, and fisted one of his hands in Draco’s hair. For several long moments, all he knew was the absolute ecstasy of having Draco’s mouth around his cock. His whole body was tense with desire and when his climax finally hit him, his whole body shuddered with it. He barely took a moment to catch his breath before pouncing on Draco, pushing him down to the floor of the compartment, and returning the favour.

They were recovering, fully clothed, a while later when angry voices were again heard from the corridor. Nott had found Hermione and they were arguing again. Harry sighed, leaning his head against Draco’s shoulder.

“What is it?” Draco asked.

“I feel awful for Hermione.”

Draco scoffed. “They’ll make up,” he said, as if the very idea of that was disgusting.

“It’s just that, this thing between you and me is the only thing that’s ever felt right or been easy for me,” Harry said, ignoring the strange, intense look Draco gave him at the words. “I’ve got something that makes me truly happy for the first time in years, and everything in Hermione’s life is going to shit all around her. How can I be so happy when her life is falling apart?”

Draco might’ve answered, Harry didn’t know, but he never got the chance to regardless. Hermione stormed back into the compartment, throwing up even stronger locking spells and wards over the door than before. The remainder of the ride was made in tense silence, and even the welcome back feast at the school did nothing to lift the dull sadness from Hermione’s eyes.

 Snape wasn’t happy about having Ron back in his classes on Tuesdays, but he made no more a
mockery of it than he made of Harry on normal days, and for his part, Ron was quiet and attentive. Everyone else was pleased to have Ron back, even if it was only for one day a week, and Ron, for all that he despised potions, and despised Snape even more, seemed to be pleased, too.

The first night back Harry spent with Hermione, doing their homework together in her Head Girl room. Draco had detention after classes the first night, but he joined them the next day in the Heads’ common room, since Nott was with Snape that night, serving detention for ‘inadequate application of a contraception charm’, and would be each Tuesday for the rest of term. Hermione didn’t seem to be concerned at all, as they still weren’t speaking. She’d locked the door that separated her side of the quarters from Nott’s, and Harry didn’t think he’d be too pleased when he realised it meant he couldn’t get to their shared loo and would have to shower in the Prefects’ Bathroom until Hermione removed her—exceptionally powerful—wards. Even Ron joined them for a few minutes that night before he had to floo back home, and Harry was pleased Draco’s effort to be civil, and even more pleased that Ron had agreed to come at all.

They got their Transfiguration homework done and relaxed in front of the fire. Hermione’s depressed state had eased, and she’d was back to being royally angry with Nott, but she still occasionally lapsed into these moments of distant staring. The knob connecting Nott’s bedroom to the common area jiggled as he, apparently returned from his detention, attempted to enter. It held fast.

“Hermione?” he said from the other side. Her eyes re-focused, and she glanced at the door before looking away again. “Come on, Hermione” Nott said. Harry looked to Draco and found him already looking back at him—neither of them had missed the dejected tenor of Nott’s voice. Hermione didn’t answer, and they could hear Nott trying a series of progressively stronger unlocking and unwarding spells, to no avail. “Please?” he said, after a long moment of silence. Hermione flicked her wand at the door and erected a silencing charm. The doorknob stopped jiggling.

“So,” she said brightly, turning to them. “Have you arranged to meet with Dumbledore about the locket yet?”


“You know it’s the safest move,” Draco said, ever the Slytherin.

“I know,” said Harry. “And the Dark Lord agrees…I just don’t know why he agrees.”

“I’m sure he’s got his reasons,” said Hermione.

“Of course he does,” said Draco. “He’s a Slytherin.”

“I know,” Harry said, “and that’s what makes me so worried about doing this. I’ve got this feeling that something bad’s going to happen.” Neither Draco or Hermione had anything to say to that, and eventually he and the Slytherin returned to their respective dorms for the night. Harry slept fitfully, and all too soon, it was morning. He roused himself and threw on yesterday’s robes before trotting down to the entrance to Dumbledore’s office, which the castle had put on the second storey again this year.

“Jelly slugs,” he said, and the gargoyle obligingly leapt aside. Dumbledore bade him enter as soon as he reached the top of the stairs, and he went in. The Headmaster was standing before his desk, lost in thought as he stared at a shelf of whizzing gagdets. “Hello, sir,” Harry said.

Dumbledore turned to him, looking wearier than Harry had ever seen him. “Hello, Harry,” he said. “I hope you enjoyed your break.” He remained standing there for a moment before he seemed to come to himself, and returned to his desk, calling for tea from the elves as he went. “Please, sit.”
Harry did, fidgeting. There was something about the Headmaster that no matter how often Harry spoke with him, he always ended up feeling like a failure. The *Daily Prophet* was opened on Dumbledore’s desk, showing an old picture of an Azkaban Dementor, before they all disappeared. Dumbledore was over 150 years old, and still strong, and Harry wasn’t sure he’d ever be able to handle stress like Dumbledore did, no matter how old and wise he got.

“What can I do for you, Harry?” asked Dumbledore.

Harry retrieved the locket from his robes and set it levitating between them with an unconscious spell, so focused on gathering his thoughts that he completely missed Dumbledore’s momentarily shocked expression as he did so. “I found this at Grimmauld Place,” he said, deciding to leave Hermione out of it completely. “It was hidden in the library, heavily warded, but it felt…strange…to me.”

Dumbledore did not reach for it, though whether from a general sense of caution or from knowing exactly what the locket was, Harry wasn’t sure. Instead, his blue eyes stared hard at it as it floated between them. “Strange, you say,” he said.

“Yes,” said Harry, swallowing. He didn’t even have to fake his disquiet. “It felt like…like Voldemort.”

Dumbledore’s eyes flicked to him. “Do you have any idea what this is, Harry?”

Never so grateful for his father’s more successful methods of teaching Occlumency, Harry let his eyes meet Dumbledore’s, and said, “No.”

Their eyes remained steady for another moment, and Harry knew that Dumbledore was using Legilimency on him, knew he was seeing a mishmash of teenage-boy-thoughts involving Quidditch and lessons, and even a few of snogging Draco, but none at all that hinted at his deeper thoughts, at the locket’s origins. Finally, Dumbledore looked back to the floating necklace and said, “I believe, Harry, that you have found another horcrux.”

“A what, sir?” Harry asked, feeling guilt roil through him.

“A horcrux, Harry,” said Dumbledore. He cast a containment spell over the locket and finally reached for it, plucking it easily from the air. He studied it for a moment, turning it this way and that, then added, “They are created from a great and terrible magic—magic that’s made with the murder of another person.”

Harry gulped. “That’s awful. What are they?”

“Quite so,” said Dumbledore, setting it aside. “They are fragments of Voldemort’s soul, transferred from his body to another object. In ancient times, they were used by the head of a family to ensure that the bloodline didn’t die out—you see, a person can always be brought back to life if just part of his soul is still in the living world, though it will never be a true life. Of course, a true life isn’t needed for, ah, procreation—just enough of one to get the job done, so to speak.”

Harry’s eyes were drawn to the necklace, as if against his will. Dumbledore didn’t miss the movement. “It would appear that you feel a certain affinity for this one.”

Harry nodded. “Yes,” he said.

“I expected as much,” said the Headmaster. “You see, I have been looking for this necklace for quite some time. I had theorised that Voldemort would make a number of them, and that they would be made of objects once owned by the founders, or other items of significance to Tom.” He turned his
blue gaze to Harry. “I believe that Voldemort made seven of them, in fact.”

“What does that mean, exactly?” asked Harry.

Dumbledore stood again, and began pacing behind his desk. He paused to trail his fingers over Fawkes’ feathers, a thoughtful, solemn expression on his face. “I had hoped to spare you this burden a little longer,” he said. “But it appears that even I cannot control Fate...As is no doubt evidenced by the Order’s failed efforts to contain the Dementor population.”

He sighed. “What’s done is done...To create even one horcrux, Harry, is to rend the soul in two. What was once a full human life becomes false, perverted...To create seven is...an aberration.” He turned back to Harry and looked at him steadily.

“It means that in order for Voldemort to truly die, each of these objects must be found and destroyed before we can even attempt to go after Voldemort. If we fail to do so, then part of him will always live, and we will never truly be safe from him being resurrected again.”

Harry shuddered. “Are you sure there’re seven? How do we know what they are? Or how to find them?”

Dumbledore was silent for a long moment. Finally, he said, “I am positive that there are more than one, and Tom Riddle was always a wizard who appreciated the inherent strength in magical symbolism. Seven is a powerful arithmantic number, and the most powerful of the numbers zero through nine. If he made more than one, which he did, then it only makes sense that he made six horcruxes, leaving himself as the seventh piece. He is arrogant enough to think he has the magical strength to not only live with, but grow stronger from, a seven-part soul.

“As to how I knew there was more than one—I have come across two before. You will recall the diary from your second year; that was one. As was the ring that you and Mr Malfoy devised destruction for...I am quite proud of you for your ingenuity with that, Harry—I myself had been unable to discern a way to destroy it, and I believed that figuring it out for yourself would be valuable in the war to come. We will have more to find, after all.

“This locket, however, has eluded me. Through a review of my own memories and those of others, I guessed that it, too, would be a horcrux, but I had been thus far unable to locate it.”

“This is three then,” said Harry. “How do we find out what the other three are?”

“I have an idea as to the last three,” said Dumbledore. “Tom would have wanted a full set of horcruxes from the founders. This is Slytherin’s locket, and there are three other known items from the founders in existence, though their location is uncertain. The famous Cup of Hufflepuff was stolen from an elderly witch at the same time as this locket, so I believe it is another horcrux. Though I have been unable to find anyone with any information on it, there is said to be a lost diadem of Ravenclaw, and if he found that in his wanderings, it would be another. From Gryffindor, there is his Sword, which you will recall from your second year, but it has been in my possession for many years and I am certain that it is not a horcrux, which means that Tom would have been unable to complete his set. The power of having a seventh soul fragment would have been more important to him than the narcissism of having a piece from all four founders, which leads me to believe that he put the last piece in his snake, Nagini.”

Harry’s eyebrows rose. “In his snake?” he said. “You can put your soul into something that’s alive?” But he already knew the answer to this question—after all; he was a horcrux as well. Did Dumbledore truly not know it? Did Dumbledore really not know that if they had stayed the course, that Harry would have been required to sacrifice his own life to the Greater Good?
“You can,” said Dumbledore, “although it will never be stable. It is my guess that Tom chose Nagini in an effort to surprise us, should we ever discover he had horcruxes to begin with—he would not have expected me to believe he would sacrifice power for subterfuge.”

Harry leaned back in his chair, brow furrowed. How well these two wizards knew each other. How was it that they, so very different, could understand the other’s thought processes so well, when they each thought so differently? And what did that say about them?

“Now the question is,” Dumbledore spoke up a moment later, “what to do with this particular horcrux now that we haven’t got a Dementor to hand.”

“I think I know,” said Harry.

“Oh?”

“The Chamber of Secrets,” Harry said. “If the basilisk is still down there, then I could use one of its fangs, like I did with the diary.” He looked up to see Dumbledore twinkling at him over his half-moon glasses.

“Very clever,” said the Headmaster. “I believe that will work splendidly.”

The papers continued to report endlessly on the Dementor situation. All of the known Dementors in Britain and Western Europe had fed and were now in some other plane, sleeping, before they would undertake their suicidal breeding. It was a time for great rejoicing one reporter said—after all, all the poor souls lost to Dementor Kisses since the last breeding would be free again, and perhaps, if Fate was in their favour, they would get another chance to live again (but hopefully as muggles since they were likely all criminals and didn’t deserve to be magical again, she said). Another reporter praised the ‘anonymous’ wizards who so thoughtfully saved the rest of the wizarding world—the good people of the wizarding world—from being Kissed. While no one explicitly mentioned Voldemort’s or the Death Eaters’ involvement, Harry wondered how anyone could be dense enough to miss it. Yet, given the complete wilful ignorance displayed by the public when what was obviously—to Harry’s mind anyway—a Death Eater plot to steal muggle-born babies and give them to wizard families, he wasn’t as surprised as he might be.

Wizarding Britain was willing to overlook many heinous things, so long as they didn’t have to face it.

It was the Quibbler who finally released the full list of names of wizards and witches granted sanctuary and promises of anti-extradition by CEMU. That issue came out only a week after the students returned to school, and Harry was in the Great Hall when he heard Alsace Lestrange’s gasp. He wasn’t sure if Snape just hadn’t told her, or if she and Lorraine had not believed him until they saw it in the paper, but her whispered ‘Rodolphus Lestrange’ as her finger trailed over the page made his heart ache at the surprised hope on her face. The sisters weren’t in classes that afternoon, nor in their common rooms that night, and Harry could only assume that they’d arranged for a port-key to take them to their grandparents in France to visit with their father.

“It was Yaxley,” Hermione whispered to him that afternoon. “The werewolf who fell from his broom.” The werewolf who’d saved Rodolphus Lestrange’s life.

Harry shuddered. “Edward Yaxley?” he whispered back.

She nodded. “Yes.”
Was there any wonder Voldemort had been so silent lately then, Harry wondered. Edward Yaxley, his dead wife’s brother—his first Death Eater, his only friend—was Kissed and dead. The Dark Lord didn’t have too many emotions—Harry wasn’t sure he had any, really—but Voldemort had been fond of Yaxley.

‘Number Five-Seventeen’, as they were calling him in the papers, was something of a hero, if you listened to the reporters at the Prophet. Rodolphus Lestrange, who’d done terrible, awful things—who’d helped torture Neville’s mum and dad until they went mad—was a free man, and hailed for his ‘bravery’ and his ‘courage’ to face death for the good of Wizarding Britain. That evening, Harry sent for a package of sweets from Honeydukes, and left it on Neville’s bed, with the Drooble’s Best Blowing Gum on top. He didn’t know how else to be comforting, and Neville wore himself out with extra Prefect rounds for the remainder of the week.

What was usually the game of the year—Gryffindor versus Slytherin—was a dreary thing, and Harry was so pre-occupied that at one point, he forgot to keep looking for the snitch, and by the time he shook himself out of it, Draco was already zooming towards it. Harry gave it all he had, but Draco had just been too far ahead of him, and it was almost a relief when his boyfriend caught the snitch. And Draco was well pleased about it. It was, after all, the first time he’d ever beat Harry in Quidditch. He felt bad for letting his team down, but after the first couple of games, Gryffindor didn’t have a chance at the Cup anyway. What a way to go out, Harry thought—his only year as Captain, and he’d blown it.

Harry tried to put on his best martyred face for the good of the common room that evening, but he was pleased for Draco, and the best he could do was an oft-repeated, “I’m sure Slytherin cheated.”

As for the locket, he put it off and put it off until he couldn’t put it off any longer. Dumbledore sent him a note at dinner that weekend and made a pointed suggestion about doing it soon—lest something terrible happen to his soul or magic, or possibly both. It was all very enigmatic, but the underlying point was the same: Harry wasn’t doing his hero duty quick enough and Dumbledore was getting worried he might not have it in him.

He didn’t, but that was beside the point—there was more than one way to be a hero, he thought. It didn’t always have to require killing the villain.

Did it?

The trip to the Chamber of Secrets was finally scheduled for a week later, during the weekend of Imbolg, since it was also a Hogsmeade weekend, and the students would have an extra day out from class on Friday. Harry was unsurprised that Headmaster Dumbledore didn’t, in the end, think it necessary to accompany a bunch of school kids down into the chamber, but sent Snape instead.

Snape didn’t seem at all thrilled with the prospect, and he made it known rather vehemently. And in fact, he managed to extort a price on his presence there in the form of free labour harvesting disgusting things—something that would take the better part of the afternoon, and thus one full day away from Hogsmeade—and sole rights to any and all potions ingredients they found within the chamber. Harry agreed to this readily just to get on with it, but he didn’t think there was likely to be any potions ingredients left. Wouldn’t they have all rotted?

“Oh course not, you moron,” Draco said when Harry told him the deal. “It’s a magically sealed, freezing chamber beneath the lake. If Slytherin was worth his magic at all, he would’ve covered the place in preserving charms, anyway.”

Harry felt rather silly after that, but Snape had agreed to come—As if he had a choice with Dumbledore calling the shots, Harry thought bitterly—and what did he need with potions
ingredients? It wasn’t as if he’d use them.

“Basilisk parts fetch a high price on the black market,” Draco added. “I’m surprised no one’s been down to harvest it before now.”

“Couldn’t get in, could they?” Harry said, feeling rather bitter about the whole ordeal. “No one speaks Parseltongue but me and Voldemort.” He crossed his arms over his chest and huffed angrily. He really, really didn’t want to do this.

“Who put their broom up your arse?” Draco asked.

“Oh, bugger off,” Harry said, and stormed off to Transfigurations alone. He didn’t even want to bring Draco with him to that dank old place—didn’t want Draco to see him vulnerable like that—but Draco was insistent now that he knew about this grand adventure that even Snape was invited to. Next thing he knew, Hermione would be demanding to come, as well.

It wasn’t that he didn’t want to destroy the locket, it was just that—well, yes, it was exactly that he didn’t want to destroy the locket. Voldemort was quite evil but Harry was afraid of how he’d feel afterwards if he had any part in the Dark Lord’s downfall. He didn’t particularly like Voldemort, but he knew him now—it had changed from an abstract ‘vanquish an evil monster’ to ‘murder someone you’ve had tea with’.

What kind of person would he be if he was able to do that without feeling remorse?

During Arithmancy the next day, Hermione did indeed demand to come. “Draco told me,” she said when he sat down. “You’re not going without me, you know.”

“Can’t you go back to sitting with Nott?” Harry asked. He glared across the room at Nott, as if this whole thing were his fault. It probably was—if Nott hadn’t been such a possessive arse over Hermione, she might’ve been too preoccupied to notice Harry’s assignment-to-murder in the first place.

“No,” she said flatly, and unlike Harry, she didn’t even bother to glance in his direction. The strength of her glamour charm was rolling off her hand in waves of compacted magical energy, and Harry wondered if she might permanently glamour her hand if she added enough layers to the spell. She was quite determined not to let anyone see how she’d been acquired as property.

Draco, relegated to sitting with Nott now that Harry wasn’t speaking to him—mostly because of Draco’s insistence to come and watch Harry commit murder—caught his eye and lifted his eyebrow. It was a very amused and sardonic look and it made Harry all the more annoyed. No one even took his tantrums seriously. He sighed. “Fine—we’re going Friday after next, while everyone’s in Hogsmeade.”

Hermione gave him a very satisfied smile, and then set about correcting his backwards Arithmancy equations.

When Imbolg finally came on the first of February, all the snow had mostly melted, and the entire castle was ready for a break. It was their first Hogsmeade Weekend since coming back to school, and the first few days of free time that wasn’t plagued by an underlying fear of the Dementors in a long while. As a result, the students flocked from the castle in loud, boisterous, care-free hordes. Of the Gryffindor students old enough to leave, only Harry and Hermione remained at the castle that Friday morning. Harry would rather be anywhere than where he was about to be, but he would especially
like to be at Hogsmeade.

Yet, here he was, stuck with Snape inside a girl’s loo.

“You are telling me that the entrance is located in the plumbing of a loo,” Snape said. His arms were crossed over his chest, and he looked extremely displeased.

“Open,” Harry hissed. He wouldn’t give the git the benefit of an answer. It wasn’t as if Harry designed the sodding Chamber of Secrets. If Snape had an issue with its accessibility, then he could jolly well take it up with his house founder. The sink slid back, and Snape craned his neck to peer downwards.

“How do you mean to get us back up?” he asked. Harry looked at him blankly.

“I brought brooms,” Hermione said, and Harry was annoyed to see her pull his beloved Firebolt out of her bag, only four inches long. He snatched it from her when she enlarged it, and looked it over for any signs of distress. Only Hermione would so disregard the sanctity of a broom by shrinking it. However, Harry had to admit, if only to himself, that Hermione’s idea was much better than Harry’s plan to just slide down and worry about getting back up when it came time for that.

“You’re lucky I like you,” Harry said as Hermione slid on behind him on his broom. “I might’ve made you ride with Snape after that stunt with my broom.”

Snape glared at him from his own school broom, looking altogether too comfortable on it for Harry’s good. “After you, Black,” he said.

Harry took off straight down the tunnel, Hermione shrieking in his ear behind him. Her fingers were digging painfully into his sides, and he knew he was scaring her, that she hated flying, but he was just so angry with everyone about everything that he couldn’t bring himself to slow down. Finally, they reached the bottom, and Harry helped her off the hovering broom. She was trembling all over, and the guilt finally set in.

“I’m really not happy about this,” Harry said, by way of distracting himself.

“As if any of us are happy about spending a Friday in a dark chamber with you,” Snape sneered.

“I’m not opposed to it,” Draco said, and Harry felt a rush of guilty warmth flow through him. He’d been such an arse to Draco these past few weeks, and Draco was still here with him. Still wanted to be in a dark chamber with him—he put up with Harry’s tantrum, and didn’t leave him.

“Oh, do shut up, Malfoy,” said Hermione, fully recovered. “No one cares about your libido.” Draco gave her a pointed look and she fluffed her robes around her with a huff. She still wasn’t showing and wouldn’t for a few months yet, but she was still careful with the fall of her robes since they returned to school. Harry took a deep breath. His wasn’t the worst situation in the world; he could grow up and do this task—because he had to, whether he liked it or not.

“It’s through here,” Harry said when they reached the cave-in. “Wingardium Leviosa! Help me move these rocks out of the way.”

“Oh, honestly,” said Snape, with his most long-suffering voice. “Pulverisium!”

The rocks disintegrated and floated to the mouldy ground in powdery clouds. The coldness of the chamber flowed through the opening and Harry’s skin rose in goose pimples. It was absolutely bloody freezing down here. Snape gave him a smug look and stepped through, calling over his shoulder as he went,
Harry rolled his eyes, but followed, lighting his wand as he went. They trudged through the slimy, murky sludge covering the stone floor until they reached the chamber proper. It still had that strange, eerie green glow to it, though Harry could see no light sources. Like the Slytherin common room, it was probably somewhere beneath the lake, and the green tinted light no doubt came from some underwater window, but he could not find it, and that made it all the more unnerving. Perhaps a glamour had been cast over the window. He told himself that to keep the chills at bay, though the near-zero temperature of the room didn’t help.

“Sweet Circe,” Draco said. He stopped at the entrance to the chamber, eyes fixed on the heavy, dark mass in the centre of the room. “It’s a basilisk.”

“Well spotted,” said Harry.

“Your powers of observation,” added Snape, “are inspiring.”

“Oh, honestly,” said Hermione, who was already at the basilisk’s mouth and bent over, studying one large fang. “You might be family with the way both your tongues are so quick to mock.”

Harry and Snape glared at one another. The very thought was nauseating.

“This one looks like it has some dried venom on the tip,” said Hermione. She removed a pair of dragonhide gloves from her bag and pulled them on, casted a handful of powerful protection charms over them, and gingerly reached out for the fang. “It’s loose, thank Merlin,” she said. “I wouldn’t trust a summoning spell for something like this.”

“At least someone’s sensible,” Snape muttered. He pulled out his own set of dragon-hide gloves and joined her, with a pointed look at Draco. “You’re here to harvest, Mr Malfoy, not gape...That is, if you still intend to apply for an apprenticeship after Hogwarts?”

Harry pursed his lips, watching the three of them at the basilisk—Hermione removing the fang, Snape and Draco busy scaling the carcass and banishing them to hovering specimen jars—and ran his fingers restlessly over the necklace in his pocket. The chain slid through his fingers like water, cold and smooth, and yet, somehow, comforting. He still didn’t want to do this. It didn’t feel right.

“Coming, Potter?” said Draco, that playful sneer in his voice that he used lately. It usually made Harry’s stomach flip to hear it, but now he couldn’t stop thinking about how much he didn’t want to destroy this stupid necklace long enough to appreciate it. *Get it together, mate,* he thought. *It’s not like it’ll kill him.* It wouldn’t kill him...would it? He *did* have more, he said.

But more importantly—why did he care?

“Coming,” he said.

Hermione handed him a pair of gloves and cast a multitude of protection spells over his skin and glasses. Finally, she handed him the fang. It all felt very anti-climatic. The look she gave him said more than he was capable of reading at the moment, but then she smiled at him a little, and he couldn’t put it off any longer. He laid the locket on the stone floor and crouched over it. He took a deep breath. Snape and Draco weren’t even watching. Anti-climatic. They had no idea what was even going on—no idea that this was a part of Tom Riddle and it was about to die.

Well, maybe they did. Maybe Snape had some idea. Maybe Draco had reckoned some of it. Maybe he was just giving him space or some rot. Maybe Snape was just too busy harvesting scales that would bring in five hundred galleons a piece. He brought the basilisk fang down on the locket.

An inhuman shriek rang out, and *that* got their attention, finally. Snape had his wand trained on it, as
if now, of all times, it was suddenly dangerous. There was a keen look about his eyes, though, andHarry knew that Snape had figured it out, at least. Hermione was pretending very hard as if she didn’t hear it, and was busy removing an eye, with what looked like an iron welder’s mask over her face.

“Harry?” said Draco, when the shrieking stopped. He came over hesitantly, covered up to his elbows in slimy dragonhide, nose pink from the cold. “Was that another—?”

“Yeah,” said Harry. He looked down at it. Anti-climatic, still. He felt strangely undone. “Yeah, it was.”

He cocked his head to the side. That arrogant look he had was natural, Harry decided. “Do you want to help harvest the spleens and livers? There’s two left…”

“We would like for the ingredients to be usable when we’re done,” said Snape.

“Harry’s fingers are quite delicate,” said Draco. “He may be an idiot, but he has good coordination.”

“I’m sure,” said Snape.

“Come on then,” said Draco, and Harry followed him over there, just like he knew he would. This was going to become a habit, following Draco. Harry could tell. “Granger’s got about a dozen more pairs of dragonhide gloves in that bag of hers.”

Being elbow deep in cold, slimy basilisk, preserved all these years from the freezing cold, wet atmosphere, wasn’t as bad as it might’ve been. It was kind of fun, in a disgusting sort of way. He dug through the intestines in search of the last spleen for several minutes with no luck, but did find the last stomach, and pulled it out, tossing it on the floor behind him. It didn’t make a squelching sound like he expected it to, though—there was a distinct echo from something hard and solid impacting with the ground. Confused, he looked down at the stomach sac. It looked normal. He prodded it with his foot. Felt normal. He reached down to pick it up, and there it was—there was something in there, something oddly shaped and quite heavy.

“Diffindo,” he said. The stomach sac fell open around his hands, and he felt it before he saw it—Hermione’s head turned so fast her hair whipped out behind her, and when he glanced over, Snape was staring at him with those hard, knowing eyes. “Bugger me sideways,” he said.

“What is it?” said Draco, the only one of them without a connexion to the Dark Lord. “What is that ghastly thing?”

Harry cleaned the bile off it and vanished the stomach with a mumbled charm, and then all that was left was a heavy Chess bishop, intricately carved from white marble. Harry swallowed. “It’s another one.”

“Well, you’ve got to destroy it, too,” Granger said. Her voice echoed unnaturally through that ghastly blacksmithing mask, and she looked altogether unconcerned about it. Altogether unconcerned about everything, truth be told. Draco wasn’t sure he agreed with Harry about her being so broken up over Theo—or else she was that good of an actress. He studied her, considering. Perhaps she was.

“No,” Harry said. “I’ve already killed two parts of a person; I’m not going to kill three—that’s nearly half.”
“Harry, you can’t go around with a piece of the Dark Lord in your pocket!” she hissed.
“Dumbledore will know.”

“I’ll leave it down here.”

“Absolutely not,” Draco said. “Do you know how dangerous it would be if some enterprising dark-lord-aspirant got hold of it?”

Harry flung his arms out. “Who’s going to come down here?” he asked. “No one can come down here but me...and, well, Voldemort, too, and I’d be rather relieved if he’d reattach this manky old piece of himself instead of me having to kill it!”

Granger gave Harry a strange, pitying look that Draco couldn’t decipher the meaning of. “Oh, Harry,” she said, removing the mask. “I’ll do it.”

Professor Snape was watching her silently, eyes flicking between her face and Harry, still clutching the marble chessman. He sent the scales he was removing to the glass jars, and quietly adjusted his hold on his wand to a battle grip. What was he wary of?

“Hermione...” Harry said, as if he was exhausted and this was all a silly game. “Come on.”

She pried it from his fingers with surprising gentleness, so incongruent to the usual no-nonsense approach she used with everyone else. Harry didn’t argue with her any further; the fight had left him, and Granger managed to extract the marble chessman. She set it on the stone floor of the Chamber and studied it.

“I wonder if stabbing it will work,” she said. “It might not break the marble.”

“Could we submerge it in a solution of venom?” Draco asked.

“Diluting the venom at all will neutralize the magic that allows it to destroy anything,” Professor Snape said. “It will have to be penetrated if you mean to succeed.”

“Obviously she means to succeed,” Harry muttered, but no one paid him much attention.

“Perhaps if you cast a softening spell on it first,” Snape suggested.

“Oh right,” she said, and did just that. “Here we go, then.” She picked up the old fang and lifted it above her head, but just as she took aim, her arm jerked and she made as if to stab herself. Granger screamed, and before Draco could even react, Harry was there, pulling her back to him and batting the fang away without even bothering to make sure none of venom got on him.

“What was that, what was that?” Harry said frantically. He was checking Hermione over for injuries with absolutely no regard to propriety. “Are you okay? Did it touch you at all?”

“No, but you are,” Granger said pointedly. She glanced down at his hand, resting just beneath her breast, and back up at him with a quirked eyebrow. Harry removed his hand hastily, but Draco couldn’t help but feel a twinge of jealousy at how protective Harry was of Granger, of how much she meant to him. Would Draco ever mean that much to him? Would Harry ever be unable to live without Draco, if Draco didn’t particularly like someone who obviously meant so much to him? It wasn’t that he disliked Granger, per se—it was just that she could be annoying. Of course, Pansy could be annoying, too, and Draco liked her quite a bit. Loved her, really, in his own way.

“Sorry,” Harry said. “Sorry.” He ran his hand through his hair, agitated. “I was just really worried—what happened?”
“It knew I was about to destroy it, and it wouldn’t let me. I could feel it through the, ah—the Mark,” she said. “It was about to kill me for treason.”

Harry grimaced. “Because you’re connected to it,” he said. He eyed the unassuming chess piece with disdain. “I’ll have to do it after all, then,” he said at last.

Draco’s heart sank. Harry really didn’t want to do it, for whatever reason. It was almost as if he didn’t want the Dark Lord to die, which was ridiculous, no matter how well they were getting on. He couldn’t let Harry carry that by himself, whatever it was. “No, I’ll do it,” he said. “I’m not Marked... and besides, if this piece is protected differently from the last one, we don’t know if it’ll react to the connection you have through your scar.”

A strange look passed over Harry’s face for the briefest of moments, but it was gone before Draco could decipher it. He went over to Granger—Hermione, he decided; she would be Hermione from now on—and picked up the fang from the floor. He knelt down, and closed his eyes to feel for any malevolent magic swirling around him or the soul fragment, but there was none. With his off hand, he cast a softening spell on the chess bishop, and lifted the fang up. With one smooth motion, he slammed it into the marble figure.

Magic exploded from it, knocking all of them backwards. It rushed over his skin in a hot wave of excited energy... and then it was gone. Professor Snape was the first to pick himself up, dusting off his robes as if he hadn’t just been knocked aground by unknown magic. Carefully, he picked it up. There was a long crack running down the back of the piece, and even the marble itself looked dead and dry.

“It’s dead,” Snape said.

Beside him, Harry let out an explosive breath. “Less than half,” he muttered, but Draco didn’t understand the reference. He turned then to Draco, and Draco was overwhelmed by the unguarded affection and worry on Harry’s face. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” Draco said.

Harry nodded. “Good... good.”

“Are we quite finished?” Snape asked, as if the entire ordeal had been mundane and boring.

“I’m finished,” he said. “If you lot want to stay down here collecting parts from a dead basilisk, then you’re quite welcome to do so.” He picked up his Firebolt, and Draco tried not to notice how shaky his hands were. He called his broom to hover and helped Hermione to get on before sliding on in front of her.

Professor Snape didn’t deign to reply, but he mounted his broom, too, and without a word, they flew back up the tunnel and out of the Chamber of Secrets for the last time.

“I’ve done what you asked,” Harry said angrily. “I did it even though it felt like murder. I’m sure you’ll have some other evil task for me next, though.”

Voldemort was leant over a hospital bed in some Death Eater’s cellar, examining the quiet, staring body of one of the Kissed inmates. This one hadn’t been a Death Eater, just some middle-aged bureaucrat who’d had the misfortune to be enticed by an under-the-table investment in a brothel in Eweforic Alley. He was of no particular importance to anyone, unfortunately, especially not now—except to the Dark Lord, who’d not allowed him an easy death by the Killing Curse, but who had
saved him for his inherent—and altogether unused—magical strength prior to being Kissed. Harry
didn’t know his name, and didn’t want to, but he did know that he’d been very strong—was *still*
very strong, if only there was someone inside who could wield the power.

“I do hope you aren’t looking to me for absolution,” Voldemort said, not bothering to look up. He
ran some diagnostics with his wand hand and the auras that rose up were blood red and vibrant, and
they pulsed slowly.

“No,” said Harry. He stuck his hands in his pockets, for lack of anything better to do with them.

Finally, Voldemort stood up, and turned to face him. “You will forgive me if I find it hard to believe
that you are opposed to preventing my immortality.”

Harry looked away. “I never wanted to be the one to *do* it,” he said. “I don’t like war. I don’t like
death.”

Voldemort laughed harshly. “I am afraid you are in the wrong species for that, Harry. There will
always be war among humans, and everyone dies.”

“Not you,” said Harry. “Dumbledore said you can’t die while you’ve still got horcruxes.”

“No,” Voldemort agreed.

Harry exhaled loudly, frustrated. “Why are you doing this? I know this is all part of some evil
Slytherin plan, but I can’t figure out what you gain by making yourself vulnerable.”

Voldemort grinned at him, all white, glistening teeth and tightly-stretched lips. “I have my own
personal agenda, yes,” he agreed.

“But what is it?”

“Tsk, tsk, Harry,” said the Dark Lord. “It’s not polite to ask people such personal questions.”

“Well I never had anyone to teach me manners,” Harry muttered.

“Ah, but you do now,” said Voldemort. “Your mother always was a nuisance—she would have
been a great Death Eater if she’d joined for the right reasons.”

“As if there are right reasons to be a Death Eater,” said Harry.

Voldemort looked at him for a long moment, eyes flickering over his face. “You would be
surprised,” he said softly. “This war was never just dark magic against light magic, Harry. There’s
always been more to it than that.”

“Blood purity is a load of rot. It’s not worth all the people who’ve died.”

Voldemort gave him a flat, fake smile. Harry shivered. “Perhaps one day you will see,” he said, “that
there are no absolute rules of conduct, either in peace or war. Everything depends on circumstances.”
He turned back to the man lying on the bed and added, “In fact, I should think you will see it rather
soon.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Harry asked.

Voldemort moved on to the next soulless patient. Hermione’s patients, he thought with a shudder.
People being kept alive for magical research. It was disgusting. He wondered if she’d seen them at
all since that night—if she’d *studied* them.
“I do tire of your inability to think for yourself sometimes, Harry,” said the Dark Lord. “There are times when I know quite certainly that you were the right person for this job, and other times when I begin to believe that I have made a grave error in judgement indeed.”

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but Voldemort cut him off. “Was there a particular reason you came to me today?” he asked.

Harry sighed. “Yeah, this,” he said, holding out the chessman. “I found it in the Chamber of Secrets when we went down to destroy the locket. It was in the basilisk’s stomach.”

Voldemort studied the cracked marble chess bishop with a disinterested eye. “I see you took the liberty of doing away with this one as well,” he said.

“Draco did it,” said Harry. “Hermione tried to, but the Dark Mark wouldn’t let her. She nearly stabbed herself with the fang when it took over her movement.”

“You didn’t expect me to leave myself vulnerable from direct attacks within, did you?”

“No,” said Harry, “and I thought that would be the end of it, since I refused to do another, but Hermione was insistent that we couldn’t just leave it lying around, and even Snape was giving me a determined look.”

“I did tell you Severus was on your side...” Voldemort said, voice extremely mocking. “And apparently quite a bit more observant than you are.”

“For the love of Merlin, what do all these riddles mean?” Harry yelled. “Everyone from you to bloody Lucius Malfoy seems to know more about my life than I do!”

“Give it time,” said Voldemort. “As much as you flounder about, you aren’t as stupid as you look. I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

“What I’ll figure out,” Harry growled, “is what the bloody hell is in the water that makes you and Dumbledore act so alike.”

“Quite,” said Voldemort, smirking.

“Oh, bugger you!” Harry yelled. He took the broken marble chessman and stabbed it into his palm, and when he woke in his bed from the pain, his hand wasn’t bleeding.

Chapter End Notes

1. Voldemort’s line, “There are no absolute rules of conduct, either in peace or war. Everything depends on circumstances,” is by Leon Trotsky.
Chapter Summary

In which the students visit Hogsmeade, but the day doesn't turn out as happy as they expected.

Chapter Notes

**Special Warnings:** This chapter has EXTRA WARNINGS. Please click the link to skip to the end of the chapter to read them before continuing if you may be triggered by certain things. (Posted at the end for those who prefer not to be spoiled).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Martial Law (n):** 1. the law administered by military forces that is invoked by a government in an emergency when civilian law enforcement agencies are unable to maintain public order and safety; 2. the law temporarily imposed upon an area by state or national military forces when civil authority has broken down or during wartime military operations.

Harry wanted to sleep in the next day, but Hermione had other plans. It was barely half-ten when she walked right into his dorm as if she belonged there. He glared at her from beneath his pillow, trying in vain to keep the sunlight from his eyes. “Go away.”

“Sorry, Harry, but I’m Head Girl, and I have to put in an appearance at Hogsmeade,” she said. She was leaning over his bed with her hands on her hips.

“I don’t see what this has to do with me,” Harry said. He made an attempt to roll over, but she prodded him in the back with her wand, and he growled in frustration.

“I need someone to come with me or Theodore’s bound to corner me and try to sneak back into my good graces.”

“So let him,” Harry said. Hermione prodded him again, and this time, a little spark shot out and tickled his back. He glared at her again over his shoulder.

“Not likely,” said Hermione. “Besides, Draco’s outside the common room looking for you. He told me to ask if you wanted to look at the new broom shipment at the Quidditch shop.” That got Harry’s attention. He rolled over to face her.

“Really?” he said, trying not to sound suspicious, surprised, or any of the other strange emotions he was definitely feeling. Draco had come all the way up to Gryffindor to see if he wanted to go to Hogsmeade with him? That was unexpected.
“Yes, really,” said Hermione, rolling her eyes. “Now, are you coming or what?”

There was an angry huff from the other side of the dorm. “I can’t, can I, with you in the room!” Seamus yelled from behind his bed curtains. “What with all your feminine voice and such. Let a man wank in peace, Hermione, Merlin.”

“Seamus Finnigan!” Hermione said. “If you are conducting improper business behind your bed curtains while I’m in the room, you will not see the end of my rage.”

“I jus’ said, didn’t I?” Seamus said. “You’re too distractin’ fer me to.”

Hermione turned back to Harry, nonplussed. “Well, come on. Get dressed so that Seamus can finish his morning constitutional.”

“Fine,” Harry said. He rolled out of bed and pulled on someone’s trousers—probably Dean’s—a Gryffindor jumper—maybe Neville’s—his boots and coat. He attempted a neatening spell on his hair more out of habit than any real expectation of a positive result. Yawning, he grabbed his wand and cleaned his teeth. Hermione gave him a disgusted look, but it was Saturday and he’d had an awful day yesterday—he just wanted a lie in, and if she wasn’t going to let him have it, then she could just deal with spell-cleaned teeth for the day.

“Neville on duty in Hogsmeade?” Harry asked as he rummaged around for some gloves—anyone’s gloves, really; he wasn’t choosy. It looked like he and Seamus were the only ones left in the dorm, but Dean was likely at Madam Puddifoot’s with Romilda—as if they needed a special place to snog.

“Yes, with Hannah,” said Hermione, “which is why I couldn’t have him do rounds with me.”

“Well done, Neville,” Harry said.

Draco was indeed waiting for them outside the portrait hole—as was, to Harry’s dismay, Ginny. It wasn’t right to ostracise Ginny for something she couldn’t help, especially as she was the victim in the situation, but he was just so uncomfortable around her, knowing his Mum was in there, and that she could hear everything he said. It was creepy, truth be told. Not to mention how morally questionable it was to possess another person, much less a minor. Harry found it hard to reconcile with his conscience.

“It’s all right if I come to Hogsmeade with you, right?” Ginny asked. “It’s just that Demelza and Romilda had dates—and Malfoy said it was fine, but I wanted to make sure, Harry—”

“Oh of course it’s fine,” Hermione said. “Why wouldn’t it be fine?” Both Harry and Ginny pretended not to have heard. “Shall we go?”

Draco and Harry fell into step back a few paces from the girls as they descended the many staircases leading down to the Entrance Hall. “I’ve no idea how Longbottom went up and down these stairs every day,” Draco said, a small smile on his face. “All this open air and the seven storey drop is enough to give even me vertigo.”

“Don’t make fun of Neville,” Harry said, but he was grinning, too. God, what was it about Draco that made all his emotions so extreme? “I’ve always wanted to fly down to the Great Hall from the dorm. How amazing would it be to dive through moving staircases on a professional grade broom?”

Draco shook his head, smirking. “You have a death wish, you know?”

“Nah,” Harry said. “I just like life more exciting.”
“It’s definitely that when you’re around.”

Harry grinned at him, his heart fluttering a little bit. They reached the huge doors of the Entrance Hall and pushed outside, the early February air cold and dry—but thankfully not snowy. Harry tried not to get flustered over the way Draco tucked his chin into his Slytherin scarf, or the way his white-blonde hair flew out behind him. It was getting long now, nearly to his shoulders, and it looked incredibly fine and soft. He felt his cheeks flushing, and not altogether from the cold.

Draco’s eyes flicked towards him and he smiled again—that quirky, amused little smirk that he used when he was feeling happy and playful—and then his hand slipped into Harry’s, their gloved fingers intertwining, and Harry’s heart skipped a beat. He squeezed Draco’s hand, and though he tried, he wasn’t able to completely remove the stupid grin from his face.

Hermione glanced back from her conversation with Ginny as they neared the town, and looked pointedly at their hands, though thankfully, she said nothing about it. “Do you need anything from Scrivenshaft’s, Harry? Ginny and I are going to stop in.”

“Yeah, will you get me a new spell-check quill?” He made quite a spectacle trying to figure out how to retrieve the coins from his pocket with one hand, but in the end, he didn’t want to let go of Draco’s hand, no matter how ridiculous he looked—who knew when Draco might hold his hand again, after all? “You know, we’ll just come in with you. We can stop at the Quidditch shop after.”

Draco smirked at him, and Harry made a very good show of pretending not to notice. They passed the seventh year boys huddled outside Madam Puddifoot’s talking—though Zach Smith and Finch-Fletchley were arguing, as usual. Smith noticed them passing and paused his argument with Justin long enough to smirk and say, “All right, Harry, Malfoy? You look like you’re having about as much fun as Hannah. Wish I could say the same.”

Inside the teashop, sitting at the table by the window, Hannah Abbott was indeed happily sharing a pot of tea and a single scone with Neville. In an obvious effort to appear more grown up, she was wearing her hair in only one tail instead of two. As Harry watched, Neville barely avoided upsetting the teapot, and when Hannah attempted to help, she actually did upset it. They were, Harry decided, made for each other.

“Fuck off, Smith,” Draco said pleasantly.

And because Harry was in such a fantastic mood, he grinned at Smith and gave him a very friendly two-finger salute. “Maybe if you weren’t such a wanker,” Harry offered, smiling. Smith smirked at him and went back to his argument with Justin.

They stepped into Scrivenshaft’s, and Harry could no longer keep holding Draco’s hand without looking ridiculous. It was thankfully much warmer inside, and he really had to get his scarf and gloves off before he melted. He picked up his new spell-check quill and paid for it all within the space of about three minutes, but Hermione and Ginny were still browsing, so they took up a spot inside by the window to wait for the girls. It was much too cold outside to wait around when the shop was so toasty warm.

“How long before Smith gabs to the Prophet about us?” Draco asked. He didn’t seem very concerned.

Harry shrugged. “Dunno, why?” Dean came in with Romilda and Harry spared him a wave as they passed.

Draco smirked. “Father will have kneazles if he finds out I’ve let myself be seen holding hands in
Harry laughed. “Figures—Lucius Malfoy can deal with a son who shags men—me, in particular—and goes to Hogsmeade with both a muggleborn and a Weasley, and it’s the handholding that will send him over the edge.”

Draco smirked at him again. “His gentle heart can only take so much, you know.”

“Gentle my arse,” Harry said. Hermione and Ginny finally made their purchases and joined them by the window, looking pleased with themselves. Of course, Hermione always looked pleased when she was buying new quills and fancy parchment. “Ready?” he asked.

Ginny nodded, nearly dancing with excitement. “Dean just told me they’ve got one of the new Falcon 5000s in stock at the Quidditch shop! That’s the same broom Gwenog Jones flew in that match against Wimbourne last week!”

“Was it? The Harpies crushed them on Saturday. It was shameful,” Draco said.

“Gwenog flew like a dragon,” Ginny said, sighing happily. “It was beautiful.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I’ll just stop at the book shop while you three no doubt spend the next hour slobbering over a conglomeration of wood and straw.”

Harry, frankly, was disgusted by this blasphemy. “Be gone then, woman!” he said, shooing her off. “No Quidditch haters allowed.” She rolled her eyes again and left without another word, so they trudged off in the opposite direction to Flights of Fancy. There were several new brooms in today, but one in particular was the favourite. There was already a crowd gathered around the display glass showcasing the new Falcon 5000. It was a beautiful piece of craftsmanship, though painted an alarmingly bright orange with gold accents. Garish, yes, but Harry didn’t pick his brooms for fashion. Ginny slid forward between them, and pressed her hands to the glass, starting at it with wide eyes.

“Three-tiered braking system,” she read off from the spec sheet. “Can you imagine all the feints you could do with a three-tiered braking system? You could stop on a knut.”

“I wonder if it comes in any colour besides Weasley,” Draco said.

Ginny giggled. “It’s rather ironic, isn’t it? The most expensive broom on the market and it’s Weasley orange. I wonder if they planned it that way.”

Draco rolled his eyes, and turned to push back through the crowd of students admiring the new broom. “Don’t be absurd, Weaslette. There are plenty of poor pureblood families—the Weasleys don’t have a monopoly on being strapped.”

“I think we have a monopoly on being ginger and strapped, though,” she said, grinning. She turned back to the case, wistful. “It’s a lovely broom, isn’t it?”

Draco was apparently in a git mood. He said, “If you want the broom, don’t sulk about it; buy it.”

Ginny pursed her lips and followed him away from the display case. “And how would you suggest I do that?” she asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Draco said. “Get a job, perhaps. Even Malfoys earned their money once.”
“Draco, don’t be a prick,” Harry said. “Ginny’s had a rough time lately. You know that.”

Draco ignored him. The bell over the door jingled as he pushed through. “Weaslette, you know you could easily make professional reserve if you trained well, if not starting—” The rest of his sentence was cut off as Draco stopped dead in his tracks. Suddenly, screams rang out up and down High Street, and an unnatural, slimy coldness settled over Harry. There was a ringing in his ears that grew louder and louder until he realised it wasn’t a ringing at all—it was the sound of his mother screaming as she died.

There were Dementors in Hogsmeade.

Hermione looked back and forth between the two books in her hands, forehead creased in thought. She had enough galleons to get both, but it really just wasn’t smart to be spending money frivolously—especially now that she had to think about taking care of another person soon. Would her money be better spent on a NEWT review guide or on an in-depth study of the magical cores of witches and wizards? She pressed her lips together, thinking.

They both had their merits, really. She needed the NEWT review guide because her future depended on the marks she received. If she didn’t get a NEWT in all of her subjects then she could forget a full scholarship to Oxford. The other book, of course, she needed for her parents. If she wanted to make sure she always had access to them, then she’d need to research every avenue available, and this particular book was well-reviewed but not available through the Hogwarts library...

Both it was, she decided. She paid at the counter and had the package sent back to Hogwarts by owl. She stepped out into the cold, readjusting her scarf around her hair so it wouldn’t fly in her face with the wind that had just picked up.

The streets were full of students and locals alike as she made her way to the Quidditch shop. It was really one of the only nice days they’d had all winter, what with the awful Dementor business. The street was so packed that she had to push through all the groups of people just to get from one end of High Street to the other. At least the shops were getting good business, she thought. Hermione was nearing the post office when she felt a hand land on her shoulder. She jumped, and spun to face the person, wand already out.

She narrowed her eyes when she saw who it was. “I’m done with you, Theodore Nott,” she said, but her heart ached even as she said the words. She missed him, really, so very much, but she just couldn’t let herself be attached to someone who thought of her as property.

His eyes were bright with some great emotion, and she fancied that it might have been sadness, but she didn’t want disappoint herself, so she ignored it. If he really loved her, he would have trusted her to love him back without putting some disgusting mark on her like some failed dark lord. “Please, Hermione,” he said. “I’ve been trying to talk to you for weeks. Please, can’t we just go sit down for a few minutes and talk? I’ll buy you a cup of tea.”

“I’m not a piece of property, and I won’t talk to someone who thinks I am,” she said angrily, and made to turn away. A gaggle of fourth year Ravenclaws impeded her dramatic exit. She was forced to wait for them to pass before she stormed off in the opposite direction she intended to go. She didn’t care—she just wanted to get away from him before her resolve wilted.

Theo followed her. “Please,” he said quietly. “I miss you. And we’ve got the—” he paused and his eyes flicked up to all the students pouring out of Madam Puddifoot’s and crowding the street. He gestured subtly to her abdomen. “We’re in this together,” he said instead.
Hermione pulled away. “We most certainly are not,” she said. “Just because we were stupid doesn’t mean we’re bound together for life, and in just under a year, I won’t be chained at all, because I’m dissolving this wretched contract. I won’t be traded like livestock.”

“No!” Theo said. “Don’t, gods, Hermione—please. I want to be chained to you for life—with or without the, ah, extra bit.”

“I’m afraid it’s too late for that,” she said. “You made yourself quite clear that I was something to be owned, and I won’t lower myself to that kind of life just because of a...of a baby,” she whispered.

“You’ll be ostracised,” Theo said.

“Oh, fuck off!” Hermione said, unable and uncaring, at that particular moment, to think of a more polite way of putting it. “I don’t need you to swoop in and save me from trouble you helped to get me into in the first place!”

She pulled away again, but again, he grabbed her arm. “Hermione, please just let me—”

Screams rang out—first one, then more, until the whole street around them was full of students and adults alike, running in fear. Hermione was knocked down by a burly fifth year and would’ve been trampled if Theo hadn’t grabbed her under the arms and pulled her into the doorway of Gladrag’s.

“Dementors!” he said. “Hermione, get inside!” He tried to push her into Gladrag’s, but she struggled because damn it, she was not property!

McGonagall ran up to her then, and said breathlessly, “Oh, thank heavens, Ms Granger—it’s chaos. Sonorus. Students, get inside the nearest shop if you can! Don’t try to run back to the school—it’s too far. Get your Patronus out if you have one—Prefects, headcounts, please!” She turned to them, cancelling the spell, and said, “Where are your Prefects? Are they in the town?”

“I saw Neville and Hannah in the tea shop—I haven’t seen Ernie, Anthony or Padma.”

“Pansy’s in the Three Broomsticks,” Theo added. “I saw Draco in the Quidditch shop with Black a half hour ago.”

“Dear me,” said McGonagall. “Mr Nott—have you a Patronus and another method to defend against Dementors? Perhaps one your family taught you?”

“Both, Professor,” said Theo. He called forth a silvery rabbit, and said, “How can I help?” The Dementors were spreading, breaking up the clumps of students as they all ran in different directions. Patronuses were flying in all directions, but there was too much chaos for them to be doing any good.

“Send that rabbit to the Headmaster and tell him to come immediately,” said McGonagall. “You know the spell for messages?”

“Yes,” said Theo, and did as she asked. McGongall nodded and ran off towards a group of third years cornered in a side alley, her cat Patronus hissing and scratching at a Dementor closing in until it fled.

“Stay in a shop, Hermione—I’ll get the Prefects.”

“No!” she said. “I’ve got to find Harry.”

“He can take care of himself,” Theo said, but Hermione wouldn’t hear of it. She pulled away from
him and pushed through the stampeding crowd, feeling the sharp, sinister coldness of Dementors bearing down on her from every direction.

“How is this happening?” she muttered to herself. “They were supposed to be sleeping.”

“I don’t know,” Theo answered, and she realised that he was beside her, and that he was even holding her hand to keep from losing her in the crowd. “I thought they were supposed to sleep for months. And weren’t they supposed to not be hungry?”

“They feel hungry to me,” Hermione said. She ran past Professor Flitwick, Lavender and Parvati, but there was no sign of Harry. Blood-chilling screams rang out near the Three Broomsticks and Hermione did not want to think of what was happening there. She pushed further on, uncaring that Theo was still following her, towards the coldness and misery of the Dementors. The crowd parted as a group of Hufflepuffs ran back towards the school, and she saw them—there must’ve been three dozen at least.

It took her a moment to realise that she’d stopped and her mouth was hanging open—there were so many. A second later, she collected herself. She was Head Girl, and she had to protect the students. “Expecto Patronum!”

Hermione directed her otter to help where it could and scanned the crowd—she had to find Harry and make sure he was okay, but she now was vulnerable without her Patronus. “What other method was McGonagall talking about?”

“It’s dark magic,” said Theo. “A dark version of the Patronus, really.”


“I can’t get it out; it has to be called as it’s needed. And it’ll make me—oh, fuck it. Let’s go. I’ll do it when we need it.”

Hermione nodded. “I have to find Harry. He’s with Draco and Ginny, can you see them?” Theo stood on his toes and craned his neck over the crowd, looking for them.

“No,” he said. “Let’s check the Quidditch shop.”

Hermione nodded and took off in that direction. “Harry!” she yelled. She pushed through a family of elves and a terrified shopkeeper who were all trying to get to the apparation point, unconcerned with whether or not they saved themselves. “Harry! Ginny!”

There was Ginny and Draco stepping out of the Quidditch shop, thank Merlin. She ran towards them, Theo fast behind her. “Malfoy!” she yelled. He turned to her, his face a mixture of shock and fear, and then she heard it—the sound of Harry screaming that awful, terrified scream. She hadn’t heard it since third year, but it set her blood to freezing just the same. Draco’s head turned back so fast his hair flew out behind him, and he rushed to grab Harry as he slumped to the ground. Hermione reached them in record time and fell to the ground next to him just as Harry’s screaming stopped and his eyes rolled back in his head.

“What’s happening, what’s happening?” Draco asked frantically. He was shaking Harry, but Harry didn’t wake.

“There’re too many Dementors around,” Hermione said. “He faints sometimes.”

“Ennervate,” said Hermione, but Harry didn’t wake.
Draco was well and truly panicking by now. “Why won’t he wake up? Oh, gods, what’s wrong with him?”

“They saw him! They’re coming over here!” Ginny said. “*Expecto Patronum!*”

Hermione looked up to see five Dementors approaching, their bottomless black eyes fixed on Harry’s fallen, vulnerable form. Where was her otter? It should’ve been back by then. “*Expecto Patronum!*” she yelled, and the extra magic from re-summoning an active Patronus sent her reeling with light-headedness. The otter that appeared was weak and wispy, but at least it was there. “Draco, hurry, cast a Patronus!”

“I can’t!” he said. “I can’t do it! Wake him up!” There was another rush of terrified, blood-curdling screaming further down the alley, and Hermione prayed to God that it wasn’t a student being Kissed.

“*Ennervate!*” Hermione said again. Nothing.

“Draco, you try it,” Theo suggested anxiously. “Hurry—we need to get him inside. Weasley’s Patronus can’t keep them off much longer.” Ginny’s silvery horse was out and trotting back and forth around them, but it was doing little to relieve the frightening effects the Dementors caused, and it was indeed weakening as time went on. It snorted angrily at the approaching Dementors, and they paused, but made no move to retreat. Harry was too tempting a target, and they could wait out these two Patronuses.

“*Ennervate!*” Draco said, and Harry’s eyes finally fluttered open, his pupils already wide with fear. He jumped up and scurried back against the wall, eyes fixed on the Dementors being held at bay by Hermione’s and Ginny’s Patronuses.

“*Expecto Patronum!*” Harry yelled. His stag jumped out and charged the nearest Dementor, sending it reeling, but there were more left.

“We have to get inside,” Hermione said. She turned back to the Quidditch shop, but the door was locked and the shutters were closed up tight. The shop owners had barricaded themselves inside, and now Hermione and the rest of them were stuck outside with the Dementors. “Try the post office next door,” she said, and they took off towards it, but it too was locked tight. Hermione tried half a dozen unlocking spells on each door they passed, but none opened. At the other end of the street, Professors McGonagall and Flitwick were guarding the rest of the Hogwarts students on a run for the castle. The Dementors were tiring them out quickly, though, and they wouldn’t be able to hold them off much longer. There were just too many, even spread out as they were.

Headmaster Dumbledore and Professor Snape apparated in mere feet from them and were immediately set upon by the evil beasts, but they had their Patronuses out and charging within seconds. “Ms Granger, is everyone accounted for?” the Headmaster yelled to her.

“I don’t know!” she said. There were still so many people stuck in the street, unable to get into shops or waiting for space inside the apparation point radius. She couldn’t tell who was safe and who wasn’t. How was this happening? She didn’t think she’d seen anything so horrible in all her years at Hogwarts.

Then, High Street echoed with the sounds of Death Eaters apparating in, their dark robes and white masks a disturbing facsimile of the Dementors themselves. Some had Patronuses, some did not, but their arrival caused enough chaos to break up the huge group of Dementors into individual creatures of terror.

A high-pitched laugh resounded and the Death Eaters parted, letting one tall, thin figure through. “A
beautiful day, is it not, Dumbledore?” Voldemort said.

“Tom,” Dumbledore said, even as he erected shields around Hermione’s group. “I suspected you were behind this.”

“Oh, but I wasn’t,” Voldemort said, cackling. “I was invited.”

“By whom?” asked Dumbledore.

“I think,” said Voldemort, “that it matters not. Perhaps we are both here to resolve this situation.”

“Get back to the castle immediately!” said the Headmaster to them. “Professor Snape and I will guard your back. Go—run!”

Hermione did. A fifth year Slytherin couple burst out of the crowd from the direction of Madam Puddifoot’s, running for McGonagall with all they were worth. She saw them and erected a shield around them, a desperate look on her face as she struggled to maintain it and her Patronus both.

Then a frightened shopper turned and saw a Dementor near him. He screamed, shot a blasting curse at it, but his aim was wide, and it struck the shield over the Slytherin students. The shield exploded in a flash of blinding light, but the spell had drawn the attention of another Dementor. It turned from Flitwick and surged to the shopper, who shot off another blasting curse, and again missed. It ricocheted off the outside of Gladrag’s and the Slytherin boy dove on top of the girl just as they made it to McGonagall. The blasting curse slammed into his side and threw him into the wall.

“Mr Pritchard!” McGonagall cried. She ran to him faster than Hermione had ever seen her move, but when she got there, there was blood pooling on the ground beneath him, and the girl he’d jumped on was screaming and screaming and screaming.

“Oh, gods,” Theo gasped. “Graham...”

Hermione kept running. They sprinted past the professors and towards McGonagall’s group. Hermione was the shortest of the lot of them, and the slowest runner, but Theo was matching his pace to hers, and that little part of her that was terrified of losing him along with her life was grateful for it. Harry and Draco were in the lead, sprinting far and ahead away from them—both of them shooting immobilising spells at every Dementor they saw, hitting the Dementors like punches that sent them stumbling back.

They were nearly to McGonagall and Flitwick when a Dementor turned from its fight with McGonagall’s cat to face Harry, whose stag was still busy with the last four Dementors. He skidded to a halt and yelled for his Patronus, but he was nearly face to face with the Dementor, and his stag was too slow. Draco sent a slowing spell at it, but he was tired, and magically drained, and the spell was weak. The Dementor barely noticed.

It glided towards Harry, emitting a horrific keening noise—some sort of awful, hellish laugh. Its approached even as Harry and Draco scrambled backwards from it. Another turned its attention on them and then another and Harry screamed again, mouth wide open and inviting.

“Stay with me, Potter!” Draco yelled, frantically shaking Harry. The Dementors came nearer, almost on top of them now, and Draco turned towards them, and tried to cast his spell again. It failed altogether, and the Dementor keened again. It sounded amused, and Hermione knew she was going to be sick when it finally reached them and leaned down to Harry, who stood frozen in frightening memories.

“No!” Ginny yelled. She pushed Draco aside and grabbed the Dementor, jerking it towards her
“Ginny!” Hermione screamed. “Ginny, stop!”

“Weasley, no!” said Theo and he slashed his wand angrily in front of them. A burst of angry silver light shot from his wand towards the Dementors, but it missed the first one entirely, though it sent the others reeling backwards. Theo doubled over, vomiting from the strength of the magic, but Hermione could see nothing but the horrific scene before her.

Ginny closed the gap between herself and the Dementor…and Kissed it. She fell to the ground, amid screams of fear from students and Professor McGonagall’s terrified yell.

“No!” Snape yelled somewhere behind her, a strange agony in his voice that Hermione could not attribute to the life of a Weasley. She turned around, saw his doe Patronus dissipate as he screamed. He fell to his knees as if they couldn’t hold him any longer, and stared at Ginny’s crumpled body, eyes wide.

The Dark Lord let out a howl of rage, so loud and fierce that all stopped at looked to him in fear. “You will suffer forever for this,” he snarled, and sent a lash of hot, silvery magic at the Dementor. It wrapped around it, and the unearthly screeches of the Dementor sounded out. The magic constricted around it like ghostly chains, searing its undead flesh, and the Dementor screamed in agony, bound.

“Up, man!” said Dumbledore to Snape, his voice more unsettled than Hermione had ever heard it. “Severus, you cannot falter now!” His phoenix Patronus was swooping and diving at the Dementors, but he was just one man, and there were thirty Dementors after him. “Severus!”

The Potions Master pulled himself to his feet with great effort, but when he tried to re-summon his Patronus, nothing came—not even the fine mist that Flitwick was fighting with.

The Dark Lord was distracted, and Dumbledore fired off the first curse. The street exploded in spellfire—horrible spells in every colour imaginable flying in all directions. Hermione erected a shield around herself and Theo, who was still shaking from whatever spell he’d cast.

“Come on, come on! Snap out of it, Harry! We’ve got to get back to the castle!” Hermione said. She slapped him hard across the face, and he blinked rapidly.

“Levicorpus,” Draco said and Ginny’s body floated up, legs dangling awkwardly. He was too shaken and drained to maintain the spell, and she slumped back on the cobblestones with a horrid crack when her nose hit the ground.

They couldn’t just leave her there. Hermione would just have to do it—while she maintained the shield spell around them. “Levicorpus!” she said. The shield was weakened, but it held, and as a group, they ran, pulling the body of her good friend behind them. She would not cry now. She had to get back to the castle first.

The Dark Lord screamed out a terrible spell, and Hermione heard windows shattering up and down the street. Glass flew out at them, striking their shield and sending red sparks flying from it in all directions.

Hermione turned to look over her shoulder and tripped, falling into Theodore. Her spells faltered, and Ginny’s body hit the ground again just as Hermione’s weakened shield spell finally fell, too. A stray spell slammed into her, and she screamed as every injury she’d ever had reasserted itself all at once. Theo tried to put a new spell up, but he was still sick, and it was shaky at best. A second spell got through and hit Ginny’s body; it set her hair afire. Hermione screamed and shot water at her from roughly.
her wand, but the flames licked against Ginny’s pale neck, and—

Ginny screamed.

“She’s alive!” Theo said. “She’s still in there! Aguamenti! Aguamenti!” His scream drew the Dark Lord’s attention, and Hermione shivered at the cold, enraged look on his face.

It also drew the attention of the Dementors and they swarmed again. Draco screamed and used that same awful spell that made Theo so sick, but it didn’t make Draco sick—he looked energized afterwards and when more Dementors came to take the first’s place, he was able to keep casting and erect a new shield around them, too.

“Tom!” Dumbledore’s voice rang out. “You should not have come here.”

The Dark Lord turned to the Headmaster in rage. “I have no master,” he said, and the force of his words carried like magic itself. Death Eaters, shopkeepers and shoppers alike froze in anticipatory fear, watching the Dark Lord face off with Dumbledore.

Neither Harry nor Ginny had awoken, and Hermione fell over her body, sobbing. The Dark Lord glanced in their direction for the briefest of moments, and Hermione swore his eyes flashed red, and his teeth looked so fearsome when he snarled, as if they were long and pointed like a predator. He looked back to the Headmaster, sinisterly calm, and whispered, “Avada Kedavra.”

Dumbledore called up the rubble around him to block it, but he was caught off guard. The green light hit his hand, and he dropped to the ground. The Dark Lord stared at the still body for a long, silent moment; it felt like years—a look of almost surprise on his face, a quiet satisfaction. And then he gestured harshly with his hand; the bound Dementor, heretofore forgotten by all, was jerked roughly to him, and he apparated them both away.

An eerie silence settled over the gathered people, and then Hermione felt as if she’d been hit with an entrails expelling curse, though there was no spellfire. She doubled over, agony tearing through her. And then the screaming really started—her own.

“He’s dead,” said Harry, when she woke. “He’s dead...he’s dead...he’s dead.”

“Dumbledore,” Hermione said quietly.

Harry’s eyes were red-rimmed and his face was blotchy, but he pressed his lips together tightly and looked away. “Yes.”

Hermione sat up, feeling very tired. “Ginny?” she asked.

Harry tilted his head over to the other bed. “She’s going to be fine,” he said. “Just a broken nose and some second degree burns. She’s sleeping it off. Pomfrey had to cut her hair really short to even it out from being burnt. The Weasleys are talking to McGonagall in the—in the Headmaster’s office.”

“Then the Dementor, I saw—” said Hermione.

Harry looked away again. “My mother, I assume...she protected me again.”

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione said. She reached out for his hand, and he gave it to her willingly. “Are you okay?”
He rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes. “I should be asking you the same thing,” he said. “You took some awful curses...”

“I feel fine,” said Hermione. Then, hesitantly, she asked, “How’s Theodore?”

“He’s—he’s okay, too,” he said. “There were some...complications with him using that spell, but Draco’s taken him out to the Forbidden Forest to get it fixed.”

“Old magic,” Hermione guessed.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Draco was pretty messed up afterwards, too. There was nothing Madam Pomfrey could do—they just have to get it out of their systems.” There was a long, pregnant silence. Harry stared at his hands and his breathing was shallow and fragmented with the after-effects of crying.

“Anyone else?” Hermione asked carefully. That Slytherin boy—had he lived?

“Justin Finch-Fletchley was Kissed,” Harry said, swallowing heavily. “Madam Rosmerta, too...And a Slytherin fifth year—Graham Pritchard. He was hit with a blasting curse meant for a Dementor—broke his neck when he hit the wall. And a third year Gryffindor—I don’t remember her name, isn’t that awful? She lived in the same house as us for nearly three years, for Merlin’s sake.”

Madam Pomfrey emerged from her office carrying a tray of potions. Her face was heavy with exhaustion and grief, but she attempted her usual stern look. “Good, you’re awake.” She gave Harry a pointed look and he made to leave.

“Can’t Harry stay, Madam Pomfrey?” asked Hermione. “I’d really like to not be alone right now.”

“I need to discuss the state of your health with you Ms Granger,” said Madam Pomfrey. “Whatever it is, I’d tell Harry after anyway,” said Hermione. “Please?”

The mediwitch pursed her lips. “Very well. He already knows anyway,” she said, setting the tray on the table between Hermione and Ginny’s beds. She pulled out her wand and ran a series of diagnostics over Hermione’s head as she spoke. “You were hit with an Old Wounds curse, followed quickly by a Panicking Curse and a Pain Magnification curse.”

“Yes,” said Hermione. She remembered all this. “Was there any internal injury?”

“Not as such,” said Madam Pomfrey. She gave Hermione a very serious look. “Ms Granger, I will be frank with you since that is what you seem to prefer—the spell trauma caused you to miscarry. You are no longer pregnant.”

Hermione blinked several times in confusion. She was struck by how she couldn’t think of a single intelligent thing to say, save, “I’m not?”

“No,” Harry said, taking her hand again. “It happened when we were carrying you back to the castle.”

Hermione looked down her body as if there would still be blood there. It was so strange—she felt absolutely fine, absolutely normal. What did this mean? How did she feel now? She thought hard on it for several long seconds, but she still wasn’t sure.

“Does Theodore know?” she asked at last.
Harry pressed his lips together very tightly. It was Madam Pomfrey who answered. “Mr Nott surmised it, yes. It was he who carried you in, and—there was some amount of bleeding through.”

Hermione flushed, unaccountably embarrassed, though it was absolutely ridiculous to be embarrassed over bleeding. She cleared her throat. “Harry—I’m sorry, I’m feeling suddenly tired. Would you mind?”

“No at all,” he said, standing. Hermione gave him a smile to show that everything was all right, but it wasn’t, and she didn’t know what that meant. She needed to think.

Theo felt sick. Hermione’s blood was long since vanished from his robes, but just knowing it had been there once—just knowing that if he hadn’t distracted her, she might’ve got safe before she was hurt at all—was enough to make him nauseous. His hair and robes were pasted to his skin with drying sweat and, probably, blood. His, Hermione’s—he didn’t know.

“All right, Nott?” Draco asked him. He looked awful—high strung and dirty and terrified all at once. Theo barely noticed a tree branch before him in time to duck it. They moved through the underbrush with quiet, nervous steps. It wasn’t acromantulas they were afraid of, no; they were both so bursting with magic right now that Theo was certain they could take on a dozen Aurors between them. No—it was themselves they were afraid of...of the people they could so easily become if they didn’t burn off this energy before it overtook them. He felt sick from the weight of it inside him.

“No,” Theo said. There was nothing to be gained by lying about it, after all.

Draco let out an explosive breath. “Me, neither,” he said. They ducked another half-fallen tree, and he added, “I’ve never used so much all at once. I thought it was going to rip me in half by the end.”

Theo nodded. They reached the clearing where the thestrals gathered and stopped just inside the trees, watching the unnatural, black creatures grazing over the carcass of some animal, their sharp teeth tearing at its meat just like a unicorn tore at grass. A young one looked up, met their gazes, and whickered in a strange, echoing voice. The rest of the herd lifted their heads, and Theo stepped into the clearing slowly.

“Graham Pritchard,” Theo said. “I saw him die today.” He’d been Theo’s first—and now, in exchange for Graham’s death, Theo could see thestrals. It was not a fair bargain.

“He was dating Daphne’s younger sister, Astoria,” Draco said. “They were just at Madam Puddifoot’s today.”

Theo wanted to retch. “You saw, too,” he guessed. Draco only nodded. How could he have missed seeing it, after all? Then, “What do we do? I’ve never had to do this before.”

Draco shrugged. “We just need to get rid of all the extra energy. Run, fight, destroy things...I don’t know. I’ve never felt it this much before.”

There was sudden movement behind them, and they spun around, wands out and magic crackling off their skin—but it was only Black. He dismounted his broom slowly, hands out in front of him as he stepped over the hovering broomstick.

“Hermione knows,” he said lowly. “She asked me to leave and I—I really needed to work it off, too. I know I didn’t use any Old Magic, but I feel like I did. I feel like I cast just as many spells as Draco did. I think I may vomit if I don’t get rid of this...this residue.”
Theo looked closer and—yes, there it was; Black’s hair was standing on end as if affected by magic electricity. He and Draco stared at one another for a long minute, an unusually unreadable expression on Black’s face. Draco looked uneasy and shocked and still that same tense wariness that they’d both been wearing for the past several hours, ever since they’d made it back from Hogsmeade and Madam Pomfrey released them from hospital.

Theo looked up at the sky. Dusk was beginning to fall. It was freezing cold and getting colder, but he barely felt it. “Let’s get on with it, then,” he said.

Draco turned to him, and nodded once. “Hide and seek?” he suggested.

“How will that help us?” asked Black.

“I run,” said Draco, “and you both try to take me down—but only with New Magic. We’ve got to get this Old Magic out.”

“I can’t,” said Black, his face crumpling. “I don’t have the willpower to attack you right now. I just can’t.”

“I’ll run,” said Theo. “I’m the fastest anyway.”

They turned to him, and Draco nodded again. They were all fast—but Theo’s legs were the longest, and his body was the lankiest. Theo took a deep breath, feeling suddenly fatalistic. The look in Draco’s eyes said he wouldn’t be pulling his punches—and he shouldn’t; it was paramount that they get rid of the dregs of this Old Magic before they became addicted. Black drew his wand, face determined.

“Go,” he said. His voice was unnaturally flat.

Theo turned and ran for all he was worth, but it wasn’t a game this time, and neither Draco nor Black counted to ten before chasing after him. He took off through the forest, ducking trees and crashing through underbrush where he could, and jumping what he could not. A furious Reductor curse came so near his head that he felt the heat of the magic against his cheek. He might’ve been beheaded just then. He kept running.

His heart pounded loud in his ears, and he was hit in the back with a stinging hex that sent him crashing to the ground, coughing mud from his lungs. He rolled and shot off two supersensory charms in quick succession, and Draco cried out in pain when he ran through the nettle shrubs between them. “Stupefy!” Theo yelled, but he missed Black by a Quidditch pitch, so he picked himself up and vaulted over a fallen tree. Black’s slug-vomiting curse hit him in the back and he choked, gasping for air as his body fought to both bring up the disgusting things and swallow them back down. He fell again, freezing cold mud splattered in his eyes and nose and he hacked up the last of the slugs onto the wet ground.

“Gelatio!” Theo cried as he stumbled up. The mud beneath him froze over. Black slipped and there was a horrible, frightening cracking sound as he hit the ground. Theo didn’t want to look, but he couldn’t help himself—he’d seen one death already today...would Black’s be just another? But Black picked himself back up right away, and Theo saw copious amounts of blood running from his nostrils—only his nose then. He and Draco jumped the frozen patch easily, and Theo knew his best chance was to make a solid run for it.

He sprinted off as fast as he could, taking the straightest path possible, using his heightened senses to feel when he should duck or jump or dive out of the way. The hair on the back of his neck rose and he knew that Draco was casting a blasting curse, even though he didn’t speak the incantation. Theo
dived forwards and rolled through the soggy leaves just as the blue light of the spell missed him by inches. Graham Pritchard, he thought, as it whooshed over his head. That spell had killed Graham Pritchard today. He ran on.

Black was just as quick and agile as Draco, and he fired off curses, hexes, and jinxes with alarming rapidity. A cutting curse hit his hip and sliced it open, the cold air pressing into it so sharp and painfully that if Theo wasn’t so worked up from the Old Magic earlier, he’d have stumbled. As it was, it only served to make him angry, and he spun around, shot a powerful slamming spell into Black’s stomach, and the stupid Gryffindor doubled over, stumbling and vomiting on the ground. It was just him and Draco now.

There was a creek up ahead and he thought he might be able to put some distance between them with the freezing charm again. He leapt from the bank, intending to jump it in three quick strides, but Draco was close behind him, and he used Theo’s own offense against him. “Gelatio!” he cried, just as Theo was coming down.

There was nothing he could do—his feet hit the ice awkwardly and he heard his ankle snap before the pain registered in his brain. He stumbled forward on his one good leg, scrambling for the other bank, but Draco was a Malfoy, and he was ruthless. “Accio Nott’s boots!” he yelled and Theo screamed, agony surging through him as his boots pulled the rest of him with them.

Theo landed back on Draco’s side of the creek, fairly hyperventilating from pain. Draco pressed his foot onto Theo’s chest. “Say you surrender,” he said, his voice rough and primal. “Say it, Nott, or I’ll snap your wrists to go with that ankle.”

“Wouldn’t dare,” Nott huffed, teeth gritted. He’d run for a solid twenty minutes. He was tired, but he wouldn’t surrender to Draco fucking Malfoy.

“Wouldn’t I?” said Draco. “Kitchen magic is New Magic, after all.”

Theo barked out a laugh. “Pea snapping spell? How Weasley of you, Draco.” Draco pressed his wand against Theo’s wrist, digging it sharply into his freezing skin. He could play this game. “I surrender,” Theo said.

Draco stepped back and reached his hand down to pull him up. He wobbled a little on his good leg, after a moment, decided to cast a pain suppression spell on it. Draco looked at him, and for a moment, it was like they were two different people. “You okay now?” Draco asked.

He was breathing heavy and everything hurt, pain suppression spell or not, but he did feel better. Not all-the-way better, but good enough to make it through the day. Still, on second thought, he still had a little energy left in him. He pulled his arm back, fingers curled in, and punched Draco in the jaw. Fuck if it didn’t hurt, but seeing the wanker’s head jerk to the side so roughly was more than enough to make up for it.

“I’m okay,” Theo confirmed.

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It was dinnertime when the three of them limped into the castle. There was talk of going to see Madam Pomfrey to get patched up, but in truth, they were all three of them tired and sore and defeated; they just wanted to eat dinner and go to bed. Theo’s ankle would hold until the morning. Harry probably wasn’t bleeding internally, and Draco came out of the ordeal rather better than the rest of them, truth be told.
In the end, they tidied themselves up the best they could with scouring spells and freshening charms. Draco put a weightless spell on Theo to keep as much pressure off his foot as possible as he walked, but he knew that, just like their own injuries, the ache of it was still there beneath it all, and it wouldn’t let any of them forget how terrible this day had been.

The Great Hall was eerily quiet when they entered. Few heads turned when they walked in. Beside him, Harry made a strangled noise and Draco followed his gaze. There was a great empty place at the staff table where the Headmaster usually sat. It was surreal; Draco knew logically that Dumbledore was dead, but—it just didn’t seem real. On either side of the empty chair, Professors McGonagall and Snape ate mechanically, and the students seemed to be doing the same. The entire school was in mourning.

Draco moved towards the Slytherin table as if under *Imperius*. Pansy watched him approach with a sort of desperate, disbelieving look, and Draco nearly choked when he saw who was sitting next to her—Granger, watching Theo approach with a similar expression. She’d been waiting for Theo. As if by unspoken invitation, Harry followed them both to the table and when Draco sat across from Pansy, he sat on his other side.


Draco reached across the table and grabbed Pansy’s hand. She latched onto him like a crup after a galleon. “You’re alive,” she said. “Mandy Brocklehurst said she saw you in the middle of a half-dozen Dementors. I know they would’ve said, but I thought—”

“I’m fine,” Draco said, before she could finish that terrible sentence. “How many?” he asked instead.

“Enough,” said Pansy. Her voice caught on the word and she swallowed. “Graham Pritchard didn’t make it.” Her eyes cut down the table to the Greengrass sisters and Draco watched Astoria lean against her sister as she tried very hard not to fall apart in front of the entire school. The only thing getting her through, Draco knew, was her Slytherin upbringing.

Draco’s fought to keep his face straight. He’d known—and yet, now that the magical residue from his spell casting had worn off, it felt so much more raw and painful. Graham was only a fifth year, but one of the most promising potioneers of the generation. He could’ve created amazing potions that saved lives or made them better, but he was dead now, and he would never do any of that.

“I know,” he said. Pansy’s eyes watered, and she turned her face away, hiding it behind her dark hair, as she tried to collect herself.

There were others, too. McGonagall stood shortly after they arrived, and addressed the school, her Scottish brogue thick with grief as she read off the names of dozens of dead Hogsmeade residents, including beautiful Madam Rosmerta and the owner of Gladrag’s. When she got to the students, only three names were read off: Graham Pritchard, a third-year Gryffindor of moderate family, and Justin Finch-Fletchley, a Hufflepuff.

“And there is one other we mourn tonight,” said McGonagall, her voice somehow both carrying and quiet at the same time, “Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, who gave his life today fighting He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, protecting the lives of students with his own, to the very end.” Silence followed her speech.

Harry’s fingers curled around the edge of the table, so hard his skin turned white. Draco pried them off and twined his with them. He thought of saying something comforting, but that wasn’t the Slytherin way, and he didn’t know how anyway.
“Finch-Fletchley was a muggle-born,” Pansy whispered when McGonagall sat down.

“What does that matter?” Hermione asked, but her heart wasn’t in it. She was pushing food around her plate and sneaking glances at Theo whenever she thought he wasn’t looking. They’d said hello to one another when he sat down, but there the awkward attempts at conversation had ended. “He was still a person...a classmate.”

“What are they going to tell his parents, I meant,” said Pansy quietly. “They won’t be allowed to know about the wizarding world if they have no family in it...”

“Justin was their family. Just because he’s...he’s...”

“Been Kissed,” Harry interjected roughly.

“I don’t make the laws, Granger,” Pansy said.

Hermione slumped down, and Draco watched from the corner of his eyes as Theo worried the hem of his sleeve beneath the table, apparently trying to decide whether or not to try speaking to his erstwhile girlfriend. Draco pressed his knee against Theo’s and when the other boy looked up, Draco lifted an eyebrow. Frowning, Theo nodded, though he was distracted. Finally, he reached his hand out and tentatively laid it over Hermione’s. Her fork clattered to her plate, but she didn’t look up.

Theo made to remove his hand, but finally—she looked up, wrapped her fingers around his wrist. Draco studied the look in her eyes unashamedly. He’d never seen Granger look so intense—not even that time she’d punched him. He squeezed Harry’s hand beneath the table.

To Draco’s immeasurable surprise, it was not the Hufflepuffs who broke down first. It was the Slytherins. The Hufflepuff table sat in stoic, tragic silence, staring at their plates but not eating at all. Astoria Greengrass started sniffling soon after McGonagall resumed her seat, and within minutes she was crying. It echoed through the silent Great Hall and was met with the awkward forced ignorance of hundreds of people who weren’t ready to face reality. At the Head Table, McGonagall suddenly excused herself and left quickly through the staff door. Snape held his cutlery in a death grip and stared determinedly at his plate.

Then, Susan Bones stood shakily from the Hufflepuff table and walked quickly from the hall. Ernie Macmillan followed and then the rest of the Hufflepuff upper years. Their footsteps echoed loudly, but not a single Hufflepuff broke down in the Great Hall, and that, Draco decided, had to be worth something. He didn’t know what, though.

Chapter End Notes

**Special Warnings:** character death, disturbing themes/descriptions, blood, vomiting, injury, miscarriage.
Chapter Summary

In which there are memorials and funerals and Hufflepuffs being awesome.

Martial Law (n): 1. the law administered by military forces that is invoked by a government in an emergency when civilian law enforcement agencies are unable to maintain public order and safety; 2. the law temporarily imposed upon an area by state or national military forces when civil authority has broken down or during wartime military operations.

Sirius Black sat with his head in his hands, a cup of Earl Grey cooling on the table next to him. Minerva, de facto Headmistress until that damned Board made a decision, sat in a chair in front of the big ornate desk—because she was too uneasy to sit behind it. The emergency meeting that the Board of Governors was holding to officially install her as Headmistress before the wards of the school were compromised was rare indeed. Unusual for a Headmaster to die in office—the ward transference was such a vulnerable time that most had the good grace to step down before their times came.

Albus Dumbledore probably wouldn’t have had that good grace—he was always too spry for his own good—but he’d been taken before his time, and Minerva would never know what he would have done. She watched Sirius in lieu of thinking about her three missing students or staring at the clock and waiting; though she’d been Deputy Head for forty years, there was no telling what the Board of Governors would decide, or if they would decided at all, and without a Head to stabilise them, the school was prime for attack. She glanced nervously out the window, as if Voldemort might be standing at the gates already.

“Who will be Deputy Head?” asked Remus. He’d been a good teacher—good with the children and good with the subject. It was a shame he’d decided to leave.

“Filius has seniority,” said Minerva, “but he’s refused again. I expect the Board will nominate Pomona—especially since I sent them a letter doing the same.”

“Not Severus?” asked Regulus Black—and wasn’t that one for the books, she thought. All these years, everyone had thought him dead, and he’d just been wandering France, thinking he was someone else. He’d been a good lad—surly and bigoted, but...well, come to think of it, Regulus Black had been a spiteful little brat. Good at Transfiguration, though. That’s why she’d liked him.

“As Head of Slytherin, he is the next most suitable choice if Pomona also demurs.” A brisk knock
came at the door and Severus entered Albus’—no, her office, followed by Filius and Pomona. She bade them sit down, and they did, except for Severus who generally preferred to loom. He was looking peakier than he normally did, she noticed. Had Albus’ death hit him harder than he let on? She knew he cared for his Slytherins, but she’d not expected even poor Mr Pritchard’s death to affect him quite this much. The Aurory was being appallingly slow about bringing anyone in for questioning on that front. They were too preoccupied and stretched thin enforcing the new curfews, the bloody idiots.

“We were waiting for Madam Smith; she scheduled a meeting with the young men and myself, though I would ask the three of you to stay as well,” said Minerva, at the professors’ curious looks. “Has the Board come to a decision yet?”

“Yes, the Secretary has given me this to deliver to you, Minerva,” said Severus when they had all settled. He passed her a scroll, sealed with the stamped gold wax of the Secretary of the Board of Governors. She unrolled it with a sigh and skimmed it perfunctorily.

“They’ve acknowledged me,” she said. “The ceremony will be this weekend, but fortunately, I’ll be able to take control of the wards as soon as I accept.” She glanced up, staring into the middle distance and waited.

“Which I do, Castle,” she said after a moment. “Give me the damned wards so we can try to get on with our lives.” There was a brief surge of magic and Minerva jumped, startled, as it all flowed into her. It was over rather quicker than she might’ve expected, and to her dismay, it left her tight bun feeling rather frazzled. She patted her hair back into place as best she could and glared at the men present before they could develop any ideas about mentioning it. “Hogwarts is more of a nuisance than Peeves,” she said. “Always having to make a spectacle of itself. Never an ounce of decorum in anything it does.”

The energy in the room rose dramatically in protest and she knew she’d got her point across. If the castle wanted to play games with her, she would jolly well show it who was in charge. Albus might have stood for sassy castles, but she would not.

She turned back to the assembled group. “And who’ve they nominated for Deputy Head?”

“Well, they did ask me, like you said, Minerva,” said Pomona. “I thought Severus would do a better job of it, but he insisted I take it, so I have done.” She smiled a little, though it was tinged with sadness. Minerva knew that feeling intimately. Only Filius had not felt a direct loss to his Ravenclaws, but Minerva loved all her students, as, she knew, did the other professors. Graham Pritchard’s untimely death was hurting her and Pomona as much as it did Severus. Not even to mention how utterly defeated Minerva felt at the loss of Ms Fraser—barely thirteen years old, and such a little thing she’d been. She felt her eyes starting to sting and roughly brought herself back to the present.

“Good,” said Minerva. “You’ll do fine.” She gave Severus a little smile, and added, “Severus is too young to be chained to this old pile of stone anyway. Let him enjoy his life a bit longer before he signs it over to Hogwarts.”

“What life,” Severus muttered bitterly. Minerva didn’t have the energy to admonish him for it; they were all feeling low today. She glanced at Dumbledore’s portrait, now sitting in pride of place behind the Head’s desk. It still hadn’t woken up, and probably wouldn’t for another month or so. Death was tiring on a soul, and it would need rest before it could spare part of itself for a portrait.

There was another knock on the door and her final guest arrived. “Thank you for coming, Madam Smith,” she said, standing. She offered the blonde woman her vacated chair and retired to the one
behind the desk at last. It was unnerving to sit here. “I trust you’ve spoken to your son on the way in?”

“Yes,” said Yasmin. “Zacharias met me at the gates and walked in with me. I’m afraid he was very shaken up by the loss of one of his den-mates in such a tragic manner.”

“Justin Finch-Fletchley was a good student,” said Minerva. “Very true-hearted and sturdy. He will be missed by all.”

“Yes,” agreed Remus. “As was Graham; he was only a first year when I taught him, but very promising indeed.” They shared a quiet moment, thinking of the three lost students and the one huge hole in this office where Albus should have been.

“There will be time enough for mourning,” Minerva said, sighing. “We have work yet to do. Madam Smith—I understand you’re here about the new school.”

“I am, Headmistress,” she said. It was strange to hear herself being referred to as the Headmistress, but no stranger than anything else had been these past few days. Had it really been three days since that attack? It felt like time stood still, and she was left treading water in some icy lake.

“At least, indirectly,” Madam Smith continued. “You see, I’ve become privy to a piece of unsettling information.”

“That’s never a good thing where the Ministry’s concerned,” said Sirius. He would forever be distrustful of that particular institution—with good reason, Minerva thought. The Ministry had certainly not done well by him.

“No,” Madam Smith agreed.

The morning’s Daily Prophet was still lying on her desk, though she couldn’t say why she hadn’t burnt it yet. She flicked it aside with a disgusted look. “That numpty old Scrimgeour’s been waiting for just this opportunity—martial law, indeed! It’s Dementors we’re fighting, not wizards!”

“Makes me wonder why wizarding Britain was never put under martial law during the First War,” said Sirius.

“Or this one,” Regulus muttered.

“Fudge didn’t have the bollocks for it,” Minerva muttered. “Scrimgeour’s not got that problem.”

“Do you think he’ll try to install another Ministry underling in the school?” Remus asked.

Minerva sighed. “I just don’t know.”

“The Minister’s seizure of control is indeed worrisome, but it is not the reason, specifically, that I am here. There is something further to be concerned over. Shall I get straight to the point?” said Madam Smith.

“Please do,” said Minerva.

“Scrimgeour’s playing hard and fast with the Wizengamot. In the interest of public safety, he’s pushing a bill through that will restrict any wizarding person from revealing magic to any muggle.”

“How’s that different from the secrecy laws already in place?” Sirius asked.

Smith gave him a cool look. “Any muggle,” she said. “We will be unable to send representatives to
the families of muggle-borns or deliver Hogwarts letters to them. They will effectively be cut off from learning magic, and if left untrained, a young wizard or witch can be very dangerous.”

“Good heavens,” said Pomona. “They can’t do that!”

“Martial law,” Madam Smith reminded her grimly. “He can do whatever he wants so long as it’s in effect—and it likely will be for quite some time. Now that he’s declared it, nothing short of the defeat of You-Know-Who will be strong enough cause to override it.”

“But surely the people will protest,” said Remus. “It’s absurd. Especially after all of those children were deposited at the orphanage and the nunnery—no one could be stupid enough to think those were not muggle-born children, taken from muggle families.”

“You overestimate the morality of people, Lupin,” said Severus. “They are scared right now. None of us know why the Dementors have re-emerged hungry, and none of us know when or if they will be manageable again. Muggles finding out about us might be an unrelated fear, but the people will latch on to anything that makes their lives the least little bit less frightening right now. Mark my words—this bill will pass.”

“But it cannot last forever,” said Minerva. “It’ll cause chaos—perhaps not right away, but if left in place for even a decade...”

“Exactly so,” said Yasmin. “I believe this move will prove to be the ruination of the Minister, but it won’t happen right away. In the meantime, we need to inform as many muggle-born families as possible, so that they can be grandfathered into the secrecy laws. That is why I have come today, Headmistress; I need access to your Book of Magical Names in order to send letters to every magical child age four and older.”

“Of course,” Minerva said without hesitation. “In future years, we will perhaps need to work out a duplication spell for the book, but I will be happy to help you draft all of the letters this year.”

“Thank you. I must admit that this move by Scrimgeour only helps my campaign. I think that bringing the muggle-born students in for a summer primer session before the full fall term starts will ease some of the animosity between muggle-born students and wizard-born students. I’ve drafted a summer orientation program for them that includes basic wizard maths, wand- and quill-handling, foundations of potions, some broad wizarding history, writing composition, magical transportation, and wizarding etiquette. A magical crash-course, if you will.”

“That’s quite the curriculum,” said Pomona.

“Yes,” said Smith. “It won’t be anything all-encompassing, just little things that wizard-born children grow up knowing without a second thought. We’ll arrange weekly day-trips with the children and their parents to get them acquainted with shopping districts, set up floo connections, provide port-keys for the students to take to and from school, and arrange getting-to-know-you partnerships between wizard-born and muggle-born students. I believe that if they meet each other early enough in life, that the children will not go to Hogwarts with as many prejudices.”

“A very interesting theory,” Regulus said. “I’d be interested to see this in action.”

“So glad you said so, Mr Black,” said Madam Smith, looking indeed quite as Slytherin as Minerva suspected she would have been, had she attended Hogwarts. “You see, your brother indicated that you might find some time to spare over the summer to help with the school. I understand your potion-making skills are almost as impressive as our good friend, Mr Snape’s.”
“Hardly,” Severus said, but there was no feeling behind it. He looked as desolate as he had when he walked in the room.

“Well,” said Madam Smith, smirking, “I daresay Mr Snape will be looking forward to his summer holiday, so I thought not to bother him. Perhaps you would be interested in teaching the younger years how to choose cauldrons and proper crushing, dissecting, and slicing techniques?”

“I suppose I could spare a summer,” said Regulus. “I am a man of leisure, after all.”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “That’s one way of putting it.”

“And Mr Lupin,” said Yasmin. “Sirius tells me you are a man of endless patience—I’d thought you might be willing to spare some of your valuable time instructing the muggle-borns on quill- and wand-handling, and magical maths this summer.”

“I’d be delighted,” Remus said at once.

“Of course you’d only be obligated to teach this summer’s orientation, but we will be conducting interviews for the full-time teaching positions in April, so if, after some consideration, that sounds like something you would find fulfilling, please do apply for any of the positions you are qualified for.”

She turned to Minerva and added, “And if you or any of your Heads know of any promising seventh-years interested in teaching, please have them floo me for an interview.”

“Of course,” said Minerva.

“I have taken up enough of your time now, and I really must be getting back to the school now, Headmistress,” said Madam Smith. “With this new bill, we have to push our schedules up drastically. I know that this is a difficult week for you, but will it be possible to have those names by the weekend?”

“I will copy the letters out for you, Madam Smith,” said Minerva, smiling. “I’ll have them ready by Friday afternoon. It will give me something to focus on instead of the terrible events that have just recently occurred. Do you have a template for the Firth School letter?”

Smith smiled gratefully and conjured a sheet of parchment. “It includes a list of supplies and the required uniform as well—we’d planned to send representatives to the families over the course of a month, but I’m afraid we have to push that up, too. The Minister’s bill could go through as early as two weeks from today, so we need every family informed by then. That does remind me—do you think you could spare any of your professors for a few hours at a time during the week? Or perhaps even some of your seventh years with free periods? I’m pulling in friends and family to get this done, but we still won’t inform them all in time at this rate.”

“I will help,” Severus said suddenly. “I have no classes Monday or Wednesday afternoons, and I will be free over the weekend.”

Every head in the room turned to him in surprise. “We don’t need you scaring the poor buggers off before they even get here, Sev,” Regulus said, grinning.

Severus sneered at him. “I can be polite,” he said.

“I’d like to see it,” Sirius muttered.

“You never will, you mangy mutt,” Severus said.
“I’m quite sure Severus is more than capable of being charming,” Remus said, the only voice of reason among those boys that Minerva ever saw. “I’d like to volunteer as well. I’m free the full two weeks, of course.”

Yasmin smiled at him. “That would be so very helpful, Mr Lupin, thank you. We’ll have several hundred families to visit over the course of the two weeks—I’m hoping that if we can get just forty volunteers that we can cover all of them, assuming that we all visit six families a week.”

“I’m sure that my seventh year Prefects will be more than willing to help out,” said Minerva. “Perhaps some of the others with lighter schedules. I will make an announcement.”

“I’d rather keep it as low key as possible,” said Yasmin. “If you would only ask those you trust...”

“Of course,” said Minerva.

“Very well—then, I thank you for your time. I know you are dealing with quite a lot at the moment, and I appreciate your granting me an audience. I was no particular friend of Albus Dumbledore, but he was a wise man and a good educator. He will be missed.”

“He will,” said Minerva. “Thank you.”

Yasmin turned to leave. “Oh, Headmistress—I will also be hiring your Defence instructor from you at the end of the year. I’m offering her a higher salary and a more tolerable climate. You will need to find a replacement for Professor Sinclair.” Smirking, she showed herself out.

“That woman,” Pomona huffed, thought she was hiding a sad laugh. “Zacharias does get his pomp from her, no doubt.” She stood. “I’ll feel out Hannah and Ernie about volunteering for this; I’m sure they will jump at the opportunity...as would have Justin,” she added quietly. “I know we aren’t supposed to have favourite...but he was one of mine—so steadfast and upstanding. A good lad, he was.”

“Yes,” said Filius. “He was very impressive—just as much drive to prove himself as Ms Granger, though—slightly—less vocal on the matter.” They shared a quiet, sad chuckle.

“I will make the Deputy announcement at dinner,” said Minerva. “Please do tell your Hufflepuffs first. It will give them something positive to focus on for a change.”

“I will, Minerva, thank you.”

She and Filius left and their group was suddenly so much tenser. Sirius, Remus, Regulus—and Severus. “No doubt Draco will balk at it, but I believe it will be good for him, and Ms Parkinson as well, so I will be instructing them to prepare for a visit to a muggle family each.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” Remus asked.

Severus turned to him with mocking eyes. “And just who are you afraid they will tell?”


“Of course,” said Severus. “I will take my leave, Minerva. I have much to do before dinner.”

As he stepped through the door, Minerva was sure there was something she was missing, but it wasn’t important right now—not with Albus’ funeral in an hour and the memorial service after that—then there was apparently the ad to put out for a new Defence teacher.
Harry saw Zach Smith as he was trudging back inside, but by then it was too late to turn around and go the other way—too obvious. And he’d spent enough time outside already anyway, watching the funeral wizards preparing the memorial site at the far end of Hogwarts grounds. “’Lo, Smith,” he said wearily.

Smith looked up from where he was sitting on the steps, chin propped on one hand. “Black,” he said. “All right?”

Harry sighed. “No—I expect you’re not, either.”

Smith laughed, though it was fake and cynical. “You’d think I was, wouldn’t you, with as much as I hated Justin. Never wanted the prick to die though—especially such a nasty way. He’s not even really dead, yet. They have to wait seventy-two hours at St Mungo’s before they can let someone who’s been Kissed die.”

“Then what’ll happen to him?” Harry asked. After a moment’s hesitation, he sat down next to Smith.

“They’ll send his body back to his parents,” Smith said. There was the briefest of pauses, and then he added, “Mum thinks they’ll Obliviate them afterwards.”

Harry shuddered. “They’d really do that?” he asked. He wanted to feel some outrage over it, but the truth was, there wasn’t much the Ministry could do these days that surprised him. All he could feel was a weary sadness—over Dumbledore, over Justin, over Geilis Fraser, the third year Gryffindor he’d never even known, even for Graham Pritchard, a Slytherin.

“Yeah,” Smith said. “It’s the standard procedure, but I’ve never heard of it happening to the family of a muggle-born who was still in school.” He exhaled heavily, and glanced at Harry from the corner of his eye. The look he gave him was wry. “Poor bugger...died and gone to muggle Hell.”

“You really are a prick, Smith,” Harry said, but there was no feeling behind it.

“I know,” he said. “I’m a lonely prick, though. Justin was the only lad in Hufflepuff who ever wanted to talk to me—even if it was just to argue.”

This caught Harry by surprise. He looked over to Smith, but Smith was staring at the funeral wizards working out on the grounds, preparing it for Dumbledore’s funeral, followed by the memorial service for all the dead. He thought of denying what Smith said—offering comfort in some way, but...it was probably true. He never saw Smith hanging around with anyone other than Justin, even if they were always arguing. Instead, Harry put his hand on Smith’s shoulder, squeezed it reassuringly. “You can talk to me,” Harry said. “I could always use another friend—if you can stand me.”

Smith snorted. “Harry Potter hasn’t got many friends?” he said. “That’s likely...everyone fawns over you.”

“Fawns over, maybe,” Harry agreed, “but only three true friends, so I know the value of friendship. I could always do with another friend if you can stand me.”

Smith’s back began shaking, and Harry moved his hand down from the other boy’s shoulder to his back, and rubbed it slowly. Smith’s face was red, and his eyes were closed, and he was making a determined, Hufflepuffian effort not to cry. Harry said nothing, giving Smith a moment to compose himself with dignity while he stared off into the morning sky. Finally, Smith pressed his palms against his eyes, and took a shuddering breath. He exhaled slowly. When he removed his hands, his eyes were dry, and his face was solemn. “I could stand you,” he finally said.
Harry reached across their bodies with his right hand and held it out for the Hufflepuff. “Good,” he said. “My name’s Harry.”

Smith took his hand with a wry, shaky smile. “Zacharias Smith,” he said. “But Justin called me Zach.”

Harry smiled at him, taking the offering for what it was—Smith’s one true friend had been the only one to call him Zach, and Harry would never be able to replace Finch-Fletchley, but he could be a good friend, just the same.

“Zach it is,” he said.

The great doors to the Entrance Hall behind them creaked open and they looked up to see Smith’s mum coming out. Zach jumped up as if nothing was wrong and went to her, offering her an arm, even as he said, “Leaving already, Mum?”

“I’m afraid so,” she said. “Hello, Harry.”

“Mrs Smith.”

She turned back to her son. “Walk me to the apparation point, darling?”

“Of course, Mum—see you, Black...Harry,” he amended hesitantly. Harry grinned at him.

“See you, Zach.”

With a sigh, Harry turned and headed back up the steps and into the castle. He felt like it would be a good day to just go back to bed and maybe even cry, but he couldn’t drag up the energy for even that. He supposed he ought to at least go back up to the tower and change into his good robes for the funeral and memorial this afternoon.

His father was waiting for him outside the portrait hole, head bowed in thought. He looked up when Harry rounded the corner, smiling faintly.

“Hey, kiddo,” he said. “How you holding up?”

Harry shrugged, and said the password—“Chocolate Frogs”—to the portrait. “All right, I guess. Not much choice in the matter, you know? You coming in?”

“Yeah,” said Sirius, and ducked to step through. It was a strange sight to see his Dad, nearing on forty years old, bending to fit through the portrait hole. Harry followed him, pulling it shut behind him. “Did you see the Prophet this morning?”

Harry grunted a surly affirmative, and took the stairs up to the dorm two at a time, Sirius following him with slightly less ease. Neville was in the dorm changing when he got in, but he scampered off when he saw Sirius enter behind Harry.

“Hermione said the Ministry hasn’t enacted martial law since the Clover Wars in 1475.”

“They nearly did during the Goblin Rebellions of 1612,” Sirius said, “but they were able to work something out before it came to that.”

Harry flung off his day robes and tossed them in the corner for the house-elves, summoning his dress robes from his trunk. “How is Scrimgeour getting away with this?” Harry asked. “The Ministry needs to be focusing on bringing down the Death Eaters now, not policing its own people—without
Dumbledore, there’s no telling what Voldemort will do.”

Sirius looked up at him from his lowered head, his eyes tracking Harry’s movements as he buttoned up his good robes for the memorial service. “Woudn’t you know?” he asked quietly.

Harry slumped down on the bed and apathetically summoned his boots. They skipped across the floor lethargically and landed by his feet with a desolate flop. “I don’t know,” he said. “I really don’t. I haven’t heard from him in weeks—I saw him in Hogsmeade, of course, but he came for something else, and hasn’t spoken to me since then either.”

“What did he come for?” Sirius asked.

Harry laughed bitterly. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” he said. With a sigh, he started putting on his shoes.

There was a long, awkward silence during which Sirius studied the wood grain of Neville’s bed posts, and Harry struggled with a bootlace that had a mind of its own—literally, as it had been charmed by Seamus some weeks ago, and Harry hadn’t bothered to remove it. Finally, Sirius said, “Will you be sitting with the family during the service, or with...?”

“The family...” Harry repeated. What an unusual, wonderful phrase—something he’d never, ever considered might be linked to him. Did he really have one now? He had Sirius, and his uncle Regulus, and Remus Lupin who, for all intents and purposes, might as well be an uncle, too—given his relationship with Regulus at the very least. And then there was his mother, in Ginny’s—no. No, she was gone now. She was subsisting inside some Dementor now, for the next five-hundred years or so, until they fed again, and her soul was released—

He couldn’t bear to think of it. He’d only just got her, and she was gone again. Conveniently, he forgot about her questionable existence inside the little sister of one of his best friends, because she was his Mum, and she was dead, and he’d never got the chance to get to know her, either time.

“You don’t have to,” said Sirius, when Harry failed to respond right away. “Really, it’s fine—I’m sure you wanted to sit with Hermione, and—”

“No,” said Harry. “Hermione can sit with us. I’m sitting with family.”

Sirius grinned hesitantly. “Good,” he said. “Good.”

“It’s a time for family,” Harry added. “I wouldn’t sit elsewhere.”

“I know I’m not the greatest father,” Sirius suddenly said, but Harry cut him off before he could get started.

“You’re my father,” said Harry. “That makes you great to me. And you’ve not even had a year to get used to it, and I’ve been away at Hogwarts for more than half of that, so no one could have expected anything different from you. You’re trying, and that counts to me.”

Sirius smiled at him. “I just wish I could’ve been there for you growing up. My one chance to do something well, and I blew it, by being a reckless Gryffindor—Promise me, Harry...promise me that if you’re ever in a situation where lives are on the line, that you won’t act like a reckless Gryffindor, like I did. It’s okay to be a calculating Slytherin sometimes. I wish I’d known that before, but I do know it now, and I want you to know it before you end up making a decision that leaves you dead—or worse...in Azkaban.”

“I promise,” Harry said, and knew that it was true. The Sorting Hat had been right about him—he
would’ve done well in Slytherin, but he was still thankful that he hadn’t chosen it. He had enough Slytherin in him to get by, and he didn’t want to think of the kind of person he might’ve become if he’d been forced to keep masking his emotions like he did at the Dursleys. Detached, he thought. He would have definitely been detached. Cold, maybe.

“And you know,” he added. “It doesn’t have to be your one chance. You’re not even forty.”

“I couldn’t,” said his father. “It wouldn’t be fair to you.”

“Don’t be a berk,” Harry said. “I want you to be happy, and I like the idea of family, so the more there is, the better. If you find some poor witch willing to take you on, then I’m happy for you. Besides—you do realise that there’s every chance I’ll be letting my own flat eventually, right? Then where will you be? Stuck in that big, old house with no one but three batty house-elves and two cuddling-werewolves.”

Sirius shuddered. “Perish the thought.”

“I thought so,” Harry said. He turned to grab his coat and glanced through the window down to the grounds. His smile slid from his face. “I suppose we better head down there,” he said. “I told Hermione I’d meet her at the portrait hole to walk down.”

This time, Ginny wasn’t waiting for them when he got down there; she had probably gone ahead to meet the Weasleys on the grounds. She’d been even more subdued since returning from the Infirmary, and Harry didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. He both wanted to talk to her and see how she was doing, and avoid her. It was a confusing feeling.

Hermione was wrapped up in her dark brown woollen cloak and matching cap, looking equally sombre. The three days since the attack on Hogsmeade had been easy for no one. Even Professor Snape looked sad, though Harry suspected he might have also lost another person that day in Harry’s mum. It was strange to think of himself and surly Professor Snape mourning the same person, though unable to speak of it to each other because of their pasts.

Draco and Nott were both taking fifth-year Pritchard’s death harder than Harry expected. The Malfoys were close to the Greengrasses, and as the younger Greengrass had been engaged to Pritchard, Draco had taken an afternoon off, along with several other students, to attend the young man’s private funeral. He and Nott returned from it glassy-eyed and blank-faced—typical Slytherin mask; one that was used for difficult emotional situations.

And Harry hadn’t seen much of Draco since then. He’d avoided meals and even the note Harry sent him through Hedwig, so he and Hermione had trudged through Sunday and Monday as best they could, with no way to occupy themselves save for redundant revision, since all classes had been cancelled for the week. Hermione, too, had been trying to get in touch with Nott after that day, but it seemed that the roles were reversed now, and he was the one avoiding her.

They pushed outside and into the first evidence of the Minster’s martial law in effect—they approached the Aurors checking wands for entrance to the memorial service, and Hermione handed hers over with a scowl. Harry, too, was not comfortable with the procedure, but he didn’t have the drive in him to fight it at the moment. It felt like some creepy dystopian novel coming to life.

Regulus called out to them as they neared the area where the funeral was being held. The ground was marked by rows of black wooden chairs, and Uncle Regulus was sitting next to Remus, saving five seats for them. Before them was a stone dais, and on top of it lay the muslin-wrapped body of Albus Dumbledore.
Somewhere in the background, an unfortunately macabre dirge began to play, and the crowd began to rustle. An old druidess in white and gold robes ascended the dais and lifted her hands for quiet. She had a golden torc around her neck that caught the sunlight as she moved, and white hair braided down her back.

“Welcome, friends,” she said, and her voice carried over the assembled mourners with ease, though it lacked the harshness of a *Sonorous*; it was likely part of clergy magic that Harry was unfamiliar with. “Today we gather to celebrate the life of a great wizard and a true champion of Hogwarts. Let us pray.”

Harry bowed his head along with the others in attendance, though he did not recognise the requiem, and could not even guess at the words, as they were in Gaelic, not Latin. Beside him, Hermione was also quiet, but his father, uncle, and Remus, along with most of the other mourners, were quietly reciting the words. When it ended, they all raised their heads, but Harry’s heart was beginning to ache furiously. He barely heard a word the Arch Druidess said as she talked of Dumbledore’s life and how he looked to death as the next great adventure.

It seemed to go on forever, and Harry started to worry that this would never end, that he would be stuck in this funeral service for the rest of his life, that he would die here, that—

“Are you okay?” Hermione whispered.

Harry nodded, but he wasn’t. His heart was beating so fast he thought it might burst. He was panicking, and he didn’t know why. Everyone around him stood abruptly, and he followed suit, though he hadn’t heard anything in the last fifteen minutes. What was going on now? Was there another attack?

The Arch Druidess was speaking. “Now, we send the mortal body of Albus Dumbledore to the next world, where he may again choose his path.” She threw her hands upwards, and with them fire burst from within the cloth-wrapped body and soared into the air.

When the flames disappeared, Dumbledore was gone with them.

Harry could not sleep. He was sad and angry, and felt very alone indeed. From the moment he watched the Headmaster’s body go up in flames, and the reality of everything finally sank in, his anger at The Dark Lord for breaking his promise not to kill anyone consumed him. How could he? He’d trusted Tom Riddle.

And how stupid was that? He deserved this. It was his fault. He should have never trusted someone so heartless and cruel—but there had been that little part of him that wanted so very badly for their world to be at peace, and hadn’t it been worth it, mostly? Hadn’t countless lives been spared just because Harry agreed to Voldemort’s bargain?

He began to wonder if he hadn’t been duped, if maybe Voldemort had planned to lie low the whole time, and had no intention of killing off random muggles and muggle-borns. Had this all been for naught?

He was the worst kind of idiot. And the apex to the last two years of this idiocy was how very sad it made him to realise he had been wrong, to realise that Voldemort was evil and didn’t care about anyone at all. He had thought that—

No. Better not to think of it. He needed to sleep. He needed to get his life back on track and start...
training because he was going to have to kill Voldemort after all. But—Hermione. How was he going to stay friends with Hermione? Her Mark wouldn’t allow her to actively oppose Voldemort, and therefore she could never help him...or even let him plan her master’s death. He felt bile rise in his throat at the thought of fighting against her, of her Mark forcing her to meet him in battle.

He would just not tell her. And in the meantime, he’d use whatever knowledge he’d gained to finish this once and for all. Voldemort told him so many things, things he could use to bring him down...and Dumbledore had been right, all along. He would need this newfound knowledge of how to destroy horcruxes if he wanted to succeed.

He would first find Nagini, and destroy her, though the thought of killing anything turned his stomach. After she was dead, he would find and kill Voldemort, and it would be over. Everything would be peaceful, and there would be no more war, and no more death, and he and everyone else could get on with their lives.

And then he remembered.

He was the last horcrux.

Friday morning, they pushed through the doors of the Great Hall and into uproar. McGonagall was arguing fiercely with the Head of the Aurory, her face red with anger. “This is heinous, Auror Robards. You can’t keep a grieving family from their own son’s memorial service.”

“I take my orders from the Minister, madam,” the red-robed Auror snarled. “Not an old school marm. Orders were absolutely no muggles, so no muggles there’ll be. You’ll just have to send them away.”

“They are here in my office!” McGonagall said. “I can’t send them away!”

“Sorry, ma’am,” said Robards. He didn’t sound sorry at all.

“What’s going on?” Hermione said.

McGonagall turned to her, face more furious than Harry had ever seen it. “The Ministry, in its infinite wisdom, has decided that a memorial service is an opportune time for muggles to attack us—”

“It is,” Robards interrupted.

“—And won’t allow Mr Finch-Fletchley’s parents to attend.”

Hermione pressed her lips together angrily, but didn’t, surprisingly, go into a social-rights screaming match. Instead, she turned to the pompous Auror, and said, “You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Auror. I’ve met Death Eaters kinder. Come on, Harry.”

Robards’ mouth dropped open in anger, and he looked to McGonagall to reprimand Hermione, but Hermione was already halfway down the steps, and the only thing McGonagall offered the Auror was tight-lipped glare before turning and very pointedly walking back inside. Harry and Sirius hurried to catch up with Hermione, and when he got to her, he saw that her eyes were red and her chin was shaking from trying not to try.

“How could they?” she whispered.

“Maybe they didn’t know,” said Sirius.
She snorted. “Ignorance is not excuse, especially when presented with evidence to the contrary. How do people like that live with themselves when they turn parents away from their own child’s memorial?”

“The Ministry is corrupt,” Harry said. “We knew this.”

“Yes,” said Hermione. “I did know this. He warned me, and I knew it. It won’t be long before they try to cut us off completely. I might never see my own parents again.”

“Don’t say that,” Harry said. “You’ll figure it out.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Hermione said.

They settled into the hard, white chairs, faces grim. There were several hundred people in attendance for Dumbledore’s funeral on Tuesday, but today, Hogwarts grounds were packed with mourners. The memorial service was being held for all four of the dead, and even though not everyone here had known them, the deaths of three students during a Hogsmeade weekend was enough motivation to get well over a thousand people to Hogwarts on their lunch hours.

“Narcissa’s kid, coming?” asked Regulus. “Or your Nott, Hermione?”

“I don’t think so,” Harry said, and tried not to show how sad he was about it. “Draco’s probably sitting with the Greengrasses...Nott, too, I suppose.”

“Yes,” Hermione said, and Harry heard the conviction in her voice that claimed it was more of a reassurance to herself than any real belief. “He is. Oh, and there’s Ron with the Weasleys over there, Harry. Merlin, Lavender looks sad—Mandy Brocklehurst told me she was Geilis’ Divinations tutor.”

There was a commotion to their right, and Harry looked up to see the red-robed Auror from before manhandling the Headmistress and two people with her. They were wearing a pair of old school robes transfigured to fit, with Hufflepuff badges on the front. Even as they struggled, their eyes never left the front of the Great Hall, where a moving photograph, courtesy of Colin Creevey, endlessly replayed a picture of Justin Finch-Fletchley.

“Please,” the man said. “He’s our son. Please!”

“I’ve got orders, man,” one of the Aurors said, struggling with him. “No wand, no entry!!”

“But we haven’t got magic,” the woman cried, “How would we have wands?”

“Auror Dawlish!” McGonagall said, “This is unbecoming of the Ministry. Surely they will let the grieving muggle parents of one of our three fallen students attend their son’s memorial?”

“No, ma’am,” said Dawlish. “It’s dangerous—without a wand, we can’t identify ’em, and if we can’t identify ’em, they aren’t coming in.”

By now, the commotion had drawn the attention of all the attendees near the doors and word was travelling up the rows of chairs like a wave. Reporters off to the sides of the Great Hall turned their heads towards the tumult and then flashes were going off as their photographers started taking picture after picture.

The Aurors placed near the front of the Great Hall were running towards it now, wands out, yelling at the crowd for order. “Remove these people!” Auror Robards said. “Who dares disturb the Minister’s peace on such a sombre occasion?”
“The parents of one of the fallen, you bloomin’ idiot!” McGonagall said. “Let them in, for Circe’s sake!”

Mrs Finch-Fletchley saw an opening and took it, running forward in an attempt to get lost in the crowd. “Stop her!” Robards yelled. The red-robed Aurors tried to push through behind her, but the crowd was on her side, and they closed off before the Auror could get through. It wasn’t enough to stop an Auror, though—seeing a gap in the crowd, he thrust his wand through and yelled, “Obliviate!”

Mrs Finch-Fletchley immediately lapsed into a stupor, staring confusedly at all the people crowded protectively around her. The crowd silenced.

“Vivian!” Mr Finch-Fletchley cried. “Vivian! What’s wrong with her?”

“Good heavens,” McGonagall whispered. Her eyes were wide and stunned. Slowly, she turned to the Auror who cast the spell, still struggling to break through the crowd and grab Mrs Finch-Fletchley. “Auror Dawlish,” she said, “Have you just erased that woman’s entire recollection of her son?”

“No!” Mr Finch-Fletchley cried.

“What son?” his wife asked, with a confused little smile. “Howard—what are they talking about?”

Behind them, the Great Hall doors opened and Minister Scrimgeour entered with his Undersecretary in tow. Seeing the tense, silent atmosphere of the attendees, he stopped short, a bemused look on his face. “Robards?” he said. “What’s going on here?”

“They didn’t have wands, sir,” said Robards. “We tried to keep them out, but the Headmistress thought to sneak them in wearing robes.”

“Why don’t you have your wand?” Scrimgeour asked Mr Finch-Fletchley.

“Why would I have a wand if I also don’t have magic?” he said angrily.

“A muggle!” Scrimgeour said. He turned to his Undersecretary and said, “Why are muggles here?”

“Have you no shame, Minister?” McGonagall exclaimed. “They are Mr Finch-Fletchley’s parents! How could you be so poorly informed that you could not even bother to ascertain the genealogy of one of the children you are here today to mourn?”

Scrimgeour’s eyes went wide, and then immediately narrowed into slits. “Why didn’t you just let them in? You know we can’t afford this—”

“Howard!” Mrs Finch-Fletchley yelled. “Howard, please—why are we wearing these clothes? Who are these people?”

Scrimgeour stopped short. “Do you mean to tell me that we’ve Obliviated the parent of a muggle-born?” he hissed.

There was a short silence. “Yes, Minister,” said Robards.

Scrimgeour’s face went red with anger. “Get them out of here,” he growled to his Head Auror. It was so low that Harry wasn’t even sure he heard it, but he was one of the few close enough to see the Minister’s lips moving. The Aurors sprang into action; Dawlish finally managed to get through the crowd to Justin’s mum, and now that she was unrelenting, grabbed her arms and apparated her
“Please,” Mr Finch-Fletchley whispered, but the Aurors ignored him. Another took hold of his arm, and disapparated with an angry crack.

McGonagall stood rooted to the spot, eyes wide and unseeing, her mouth parted in shock. She turned to the Minister, but only stared at him, unbelieving of what she’d seen. And then, all of the sudden, the crowd surged into motion. Voices carried loudly until the noise grew so loud that it became a throbbing roar in his ears. Cameras flashed from all directions, so rapid that it became a blur of bright lights.

“Silence!” Scrimgeour yelled, voice amplified to an ear-piercing level. The people quieted. “This is a day for mourning, and we will not disrespect the memories of our four fallen friends by behaving in this manner. Find your seats, and we will begin the service.”

He turned to McGonagall and whispered roughly, “We will talk about this later, Minerva.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I look forward to it, Rufus,” she said, and stalked off to her seat without a backward glance. Stunned, Harry and Hermione returned to their seats with his family.

“I knew it,” she whispered. “I knew it would happen.”

“We can’t trust anyone,” Harry said lowly. “Without Dumbledore, the Ministry can do what it wants.”

“For now,” Hermione said.

Harry glanced at her, unsure of her meaning, but then the music started, and as the dirge played at Dumbledore’s funeral was unfortunately depressing, the music chosen for the memorial service was awkwardly happy. ‘A celebration of their lives,’ the programs read, ‘with a welcoming by Minister Rufus Scrimgeour.’ The music was meant to let them remember the happy times. As the unfortunately selected music continued to play, the audience became unnaturally silent. Finally, it tapered off, and Minister Scrimgeour took the podium.

“Friends,” he said. “Today we gather to celebrate the lives and accomplishments of four very different people.”

Behind him, the four enlarged moving photographs continued to replay the tiny snapshot of their lives—on the far left, Headmaster Dumbledore smiled and twinkled at them from what looked to be the same photograph used on his Chocolate Frog card; it was several decades out of date. Next, Justin Finch-Fletchley smiled at the camera, an origami broom flew into his hair, and he laughed. Graham Pritchard, unusually handsome, smiled pleasantly from his Slytherin Quidditch team photograph, his light brown hair forever catching in some old breeze. On the far right, youngest of them all, little Geilis Fraser, grinned at them from her choir photograph. Harry swallowed, trying to keep down the bile in his throat.

Scrimgeour’s smile was forced; his face was still a little red from before, but he carried on as if everything were fine. “Albus Wulfric Percival Brian Dumbledore, Justin Howard Finch-Fletchley, Graham William Pritchard, and Geilis Cara Fraser—four lives taken from us much too soon, yet who left us with so many cherished memories.

“While we will forever be grateful for the many accomplishments of Albus Dumbledore and their unending enrichment of our world, we will also mourn the many he might have given us in time, and those of the three young students, taken from us before they had the same chance.”
“Rubbish,” Hermione whispered. “He talks as though they hadn’t done a single thing of merit in their whole lives—Graham was a Prefect for Merlin’s sake, and Geilis was a soprano one in the Hogwarts Girls’ Choir for three years. And Justin—” her voice caught on his name, and she swallowed. “Justin was a good friend and a good student. We studied together in the library all the time and he always had something kind to say when I was feeling overwhelmed.”

Harry felt unaccountably ashamed of himself. He’d always taken Justin to be a self-important berk, and he’d never once bothered to see for himself, to find out what Justin Finch-Fletchley was really like. He thought, suddenly, of Dean, Neville, and Seamus, and how he’d lived in the same dorm as them for near on seven years, and barely knew anything about them, when it came down to it. He never spent time with them, or joked around with them like he had with Ron—and even with Ron gone from Hogwarts, he still didn’t find time for them. Neville had been Prefect for months now, and Harry had barely congratulated him. He’d slept with Seamus, for Merlin’s sake, and Dean had come from a muggle family, just like Harry—they could’ve spent hours talking football—but he’d never bothered.

What if it had been one of them who died, instead of Justin? What if it had been Ron or Hermione, or Merlin help him, Draco?

Forcefully ignoring the stony silence of all the witches and wizards listening to his speech, Scrimgeour continued on. “—And as the years the years pass by, we will continue on, but we will never forget the places our friends occupied in our hearts...Arch Druid Adair Greengrass will now lead us in prayer.”

“That was rather uninspired,” Sirius, sitting next to him, whispered. Harry could only nod. This entire thing was a sham, and that was incredibly sad.

A wizard in the white and gold robes of Druid clergy, this one much younger than the old woman who’d led Dumbledore’s funeral, stepped up to the dais. His face was tight and his eyes were hard, and Harry wondered if he was perhaps Daphne and Astoria Greengrass’s father, and just as upset over Pritchard’s death as they were. “Let us pray,” he said. His voice was very deep and sombre.

Harry bowed his head though like the prayers said during Dumbledore’s funeral, this one was also in Gaelic, and he understood not a word of it. It went on for several long minutes, and every word of it seemed to bring the reality of it all more firmly into focus, until by the end of it, he could feel his eyes prickling, and when Hermione grabbed his hand, he squeezed it so tight he worried he might hurt her. She didn’t protest.

After the praying came the speakers, each of whom had something to say about the dead. There were many for Dumbledore—professors, people he’d heard of in history books, and people he wasn’t even sure had ever met the man, but they all spoke anyway. People came and spoke for Graham Pritchard, including Astoria Greengrass and, to Harry’s great surprise, Professor Snape, whose remembrance of the young Slytherin was terse, but very real. Geilis Fraser’s parents spoke about her, and Professor Flitwick talked about what a delight she had been to have in his classes and the choir, then two of her friends came up together and made an impassioned dual-speech about how the three of them had planned to be best friends forever, and they still would be, even though Geilis was gone. There were a lot of people crying after that.

Then Arch Druid Greengrass called for the speakers for Justin to take the stage, and Hannah Abbott was the only one to do so. The Arch Druid looked down at his notes and back up at the assembled crowd. “Mr Howard Finch-Fletchley, if you would...”

The Minister’s eyes went wide, along with the collection of Aurors standing behind him on the dais. He strode quickly over to the Arch Druid and bent to speak in his ear. An expression of distaste rose
on Greengrass’s face, but he nodded and stepped back, waving Hannah forward.

She took the podium shakily, her face red from nervousness, but she was a Hufflepuff, and her determination won out. Hands trembling, she spread her notes out on the podium in front of her, opened her mouth, and squeaked. Her face flamed in embarrassment, and a few embarrassed tears gathered at the corners of her eyes, but she blinked them away hastily, and cleared her throat.

“Justin w-was my friend,” she began. “Whenever I was nervous about something, he always had something kind to say to me, to make me realise that I could do it. I was really nervous about speaking today, but I knew that if he’d been here, Justin would have told me I was the best speaker in the world—that I could stand before you today and talk without being afraid, and when I was done, I’d get a standing ovation. I don’t expect that to really happen, but I knew that even if I got laughed off the stage, I had to do it anyway, because Justin would have done it f-for m-me.”

She paused, staring out at the sea of face, and when no one laughed her off the stage, looked back down at her parchment of notes, and continued reading. Hannah talked about all the years she’d known Justin, relaying dozens of things about him that Harry had never known, and now, never would get to know personally. After a few moments, she seemed to forget that she was on stage at all, and her voice grew stronger and stronger, until it carried quite clearly all across the Great Hall.

*His parents should have seen this,* Harry thought. They should have been here to see the impact Justin’s life had made on at least this one person, because Hannah spoke so openly about how much she admired Justin, that there was no doubt how she’d felt about him. Finally, her voice ended, and she looked up from her parchment, tears streaming down her face. “That is how I remember Justin,” she said. “Thank you.”

There was a moment of brief silence, and then all the people around Harry stood, hands clapping. Hannah’s eyes went wide, and it surprised her so much she squeaked again, before running off the dais and down to her seat between Susan Bones and Megan Jones, face red.

The Arch Druid took the podium again. “Are there any others who will speak for Mr Finch Fletchley?”

“I will,” Zach Smith said. He stood up slowly, and wound his way through the chairs to the dais at the front. When he reached the stage, he looked angry and Harry thought for a moment that Smith was going to get up there and lambast Justin in death, like he had in life, but he was quickly proved wrong. Zach Smith was angry, but he had something else in mind.

“I didn’t prepare a speech,” he said, “because I didn’t plan to speak. So I will just talk until I’m removed from the stage—it shouldn’t take long. Justin was a prat,” he said. The crowd gasped. “Or, at least I always thought so. He was also my only real friend, and my perception of him was skewed by my distaste for how he could—and did—talk to anyone, about anything, endlessly. Justin was charming, and I...am not.

“He was confident—maybe sometimes too confident, but at the end of the day, he was one of the few students in my year who would voluntarily enter a conversation with me that wasn’t related to the Hufflepuff Quidditch team or whether or not I’d finished my Herbology homework yet. He was also muggle-born; the only muggle-born who died Friday afternoon. The only person with a photograph up here, who doesn’t have any family in the audience. Justin didn’t deserve that. His mum and dad are nice people, and they gave up his spot at Eton just so he could come to Hogwarts...because that’s what he wanted, and they loved him enough to let him do that—to go where they could not follow.

“Today, I saw the truth of that, and I know that Justin would not have stood for the injustice that
happened today.” The red-robed Aurors started moving forward with purpose, but Smith only
looked at them disinterestedly. To them, he said, “Justin would not have sat idly by while his own
mother was Obliviated of her memories of him—”

“Young man!” Scrimgeour exclaimed, amid gasps from the attendees.

The Aurors grabbed Smith’s shoulders, and he said over the uproar, “Will you really silence me?
Will the Ministry continue to do injustice by a muggle-born member of our society?”

“No!” Scrimgeour whispered furiously, but he was close enough to the Arch Druid, who
still had a Sonorous spell on, that it carried through the Great Hall anyway.

Hannah Abbott stood up from her chair. “How could you?” she yelled. Ernie Macmillan followed
right away, glaring, and then all of Hufflepuff House was standing up, silently protesting the Aurors’
treatment of Zach Smith. His blue eyes turned to his housemates and widened in surprise. Seeing
their support, he struggled more fiercely, and then his mother made it to the stage, her face pinched in
outrage.

“Unhand my son,” she said. “He is protected under the law for freedom of speech, Auror.”

Scrimgeour stalked over to her angrily. “He is disrupting a solemn event, Madam Smith, and—”

“This solemn event has already been disrupted beyond repair by your own Aurory. I suggest you not
put your foot further in it. My son is grieving, as were Mr and Mrs Finch-Fletchley. You will allow
him his rights under the law.”

“Need I remind you, Madam Smith, that Britain is under martial law, and—”

“Need I remind you, Minister,” she hissed, “That martial law as is currently defined by the
Wizengamot Code, does not extend to speech.”

Scrimgeour growled. “Let him speak,” he said, his voice a forced calm.

“I’ve nothing left to say,” Zach said, and stepped down from the stage without a backward glance.
Every Hufflepuff in the Great Hall stood protectively over him as he made his way back to his seat,
and only when he’d sat and there was no indication that the Aurors were coming after him, did the
Hufflepuffs resume their seats.
Chapter Summary

In which Hermione has a breakthrough, Voldemort asks of her a special task, Harry's life is filled with worrying, Draco shows some common sense, Theodore finally gets a chance to speak his mind, and formerly-Bellatrix makes another appearance. Or does she?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Conspiracy (n): 1. an evil, unlawful, treacherous, or surreptitious plan formulated in secret by two or more persons; plot. 2. an agreement by two or more persons to commit a crime, fraud, or other wrongful act.

“What I want to know,” Hermione said the following Tuesday, slapping her newspaper down, “is why the Dementors came back. It wasn’t even a fortnight—they were supposed to sleep for a few months, at least, and no one seems to have any idea at all what went wrong.”

“Did something go wrong?” Ron asked. “I mean, we didn’t really have any eye-witnesses from the last time to tell us what would happen. Maybe this is normal.”

“Maybe,” Hermione said, but she was doubtful. “I really don’t think so, though, Ron. The Arithmancy was over seventy percent reliable; I think something affected them and it changed their habits.”

“Like what?” asked Harry.

“I don’t know,” she said, worrying her lip. “I’ve got to go, though. I need to do some reading in the library before class.” She tossed the Prophet to the table for them to read through because she was too disgusted to look at it any further.

The newspapers were still in an uproar, and the story on Justin’s family had run all weekend, so letters were pouring in all across the isle in outrage over the shunning of the Finch-Fletchleys, who were distant relatives of the Howards on one side, and the House of Cavendish on the other—Pansy Parkinson was seen scouring the wizarding genealogy section in the library the afternoon after that information came out, though Hermione didn’t care to know why.

Hermione couldn’t figure out why the Minister was digging his heels in after his approval ratings started plummeting. It turned out that instead of trying to fix the memory charm on Justin’s mum, he’d decided to make a clean job of it. On Sunday morning, the news came out—leaked by some angry Auror—that both the Finch-Fletchleys had been Obliviated, and didn’t even know they’d ever had a son named Justin, much less that he’d been a wizard. It was horrific. Scrimgeour had issued no less than a dozen public statements since the memorial service on Friday, and none of them had been
an apology.

He wasn’t backing down over this muggle separating business, and for the magic of her, Hermione could not figure out *why*. She’d known it would happen, of course, but now that it was, she didn’t understand the motives. Why was the Minister focusing so much on anti-muggle policy when there were Dementors out there doing Merlin knew what? She shuddered as she reached to open the library door—if only they could find them, trap them somewhere where they couldn’t...

Trap them.

She stopped so suddenly that the Ravenclaw behind her barrelled into her, and her books went flying.

“Dagda, Granger, can’t you stop thinking for a minute and start walking instead?” he snarled, and pushed around her into the library.

She gathered her books without even bothering to acknowledge the Ravenclaw, and ran to the Restricted Section, a providential perk of being Head Girl. The section on magical creatures was full to bursting with books on demiguises, basilisks, and other dangerous creatures, but there was only one book on Dementors, probably indicative how much wizards actually knew about them, which was woefully little. She tossed her satchel to the floor and flipped open to the contents, scanning for what she was looking for—there. She turned to the appropriate page and skimmed through, looking for the confirmation she knew was there. When she found it, her heart skipped a beat and the blood ran from her face.

With shaky fingers she dug through her bag for her fetch-key, and after determining that no one was around, grabbed her bag and the book, and whispered, “Port”.

When she stopped spinning, Hermione found herself in the same creepy old manor house she took her Dark Mark in. The curtains were open in the parlour she landed in, but the windows let in very little light just the same, leaving the room in a constant dead-looking state. A house-elf popped in almost immediately and stared aggressively at her.

“Why are you here?” it asked.

“I need to see the Dark Lord,” she said. “It’s urgent.”

“He isn’t expecting you,” the elf said.

“No,” Hermione agreed, “but he’ll want to hear what I have to say.”

“Follow me,” said the house-elf. He led her from the parlour and down a similarly dark corridor, then up a flight of stairs to the first storey. At the second door on the left, the house-elf stopped, and knocked. Without waiting for an answer, he opened the door and announced her, surprising Hermione with his knowledge of her identity: “Miss Hermione Granger.”

This room was not as dark as the parlour. Some of the morning sunlight was able to filter through the dirty windows, and streamed onto the beds. Hermione could see dust motes floating in the beams, and she wondered how long it had been since this place had really been lived in. There were four single beds in the room, and standing over the last one, shadowed in the dark corner of the room, was Voldemort.

Hermione dropped into a curtsey, once drilled into her by her grandmother. “My lord,” she said.

“Ms Granger,” he said. Then, to the elf, “Horvitz, leave us.” The house-elf bowed and slipped out of
the room, shutting the door behind him, and trapping Hermione in the room with the Dark Lord. She wondered that she was still not afraid of him, even after the attack on Hogsmeade.

“To what do I owe the unexpected pleasure?”

“I think I know why the Dementors didn’t act according to plan,” she said.

She saw the surprise on his face before he masked it, and beckoned her forward. “I cannot leave this task just now, so we must converse here...that is, I take it you can only stay for a short time? You have a class this morning, do you not?”

“Potions,” she said. “Professor Snape will undoubtedly give me a detention, but at least he won’t report me if I tell him where I was.” She stopped before the bed and glanced down at the person in it. She didn’t recognise the face, but she knew what he was doing here just the same—this was one of the twenty soulless bodies he’d promised her for her research.

“Tell me what you have found,” he said, passing his wand slowly back and forth over the man’s body. It left a sickly green trail in its wake, like a slithering slug of magic.

She pulled the book from her bag and flipped open to the reference in question. “I thought of it today, and I don’t know how we missed it before. It’s so obvious now—”

“Ms Granger,” he said.

“Right—I thought today that something must have happened to change their behaviour, but I couldn’t think of what it was, and then I remembered that the Ministry didn’t start using Dementors at Azkaban until the Pax Britannica in 1815. The only records we have of the Dementor breedings occurred before the Ministry bound them to serve Azkaban; before that, they roamed free.

“But now,” she continued, “they’ve spent almost two-hundred years trapped in magical bindings and it’s skewed their perception of time and space. And I think perhaps that the Order might have succeeded in corralling some of them for a while, confusing them further, though I can’t be sure just yet. My lord—I don’t think the Dementors can sleep right now. I think they’re too confused. Like when you’ve been in a coma for a long time, and you can’t sleep during the night for a long time because your pattern’s been thrown off.”

The Dark Lord’s eyebrows were lifted in surprise, and he said nothing for several long moments—just staring down at the soulless man lying on the bed, lost in thought. Finally, he cleared his throat. “That is a very troubling conclusion,” he said at last.

“Yes,” Hermione agreed. She swallowed. “It is.”

A blue light started emanating from the man in the bed, the result of some diagnostic spell, and Voldemort cancelled it with an impatient slash of his wand, causing the soulless body to jerk and cough. When it was done, it continued staring at the ceiling, blinking occasionally.

“I thought you might turn on me as I feel Harry doing,” said the Dark Lord at last.

Hermione looked at him in confusion, both at the change of subject and at what he’d changed it to. “We had a bargain,” she said slowly. “I’m bound to you until it’s fulfilled.”

“So very pragmatic,” said the Dark Lord. “Why you were not in Ravenclaw, one could never guess.”

“My lord,” she said. “With all due respect, I really think this is import—”
“It is,” he agreed. “I do not know what to do about it at present, however.”

Hermione slumped, feeling the fight leave her. With Dumbledore dead, if the Dark Lord didn’t know what to do about it, then no one would. And now with Scrimgeour running the Ministry even further into the ground, it felt like her life was straight out of a George Orwell novel. “After that night—I thought everything was going to be fine again, but it’s only got worse.”

“For you, perhaps,” said the Dark Lord.

“And not for you?” asked Hermione waspishly, then she immediately slapped her hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry, my lord—I’m just shaken up.”

He sneered at her. “You are lucky that my bargain with Harry prevents me from punishing you for all but the most major of transgressions.” They stared at each other for a moment, and then Voldemort looked away, hissing through his teeth in frustration. “I will have to think on what you’ve told me. There’s nothing I can do about it at the moment...however, there is something you can do for me, since you are already missing Severus’s class as it is.”

“Of course, my lord,” Hermione said, not eager to anger him a second time. She scrambled to follow him down the stairs and into the entry chamber, which wasn’t warded against apparation.

“We will apparate to Malfoy Manor; it is unplottable. Look at me.” She met his eyes and felt him pressing the images of the Malfoy estate into her mind until she had detailed faux-memory of it. Are you ready? she heard him ask in her mind. She nodded, and he disapparated. Taking a deep breath, Hermione followed.

A house-elf met them at the gates and bowed low as it swept its arm wide, magicking the gate open. “Sir Dark Lord,” the house-elf greeted solemnly. “Miss. How may Miffy direct Sir?”

“I am calling upon Lady Narcissa,” said the Dark Lord. “Take me to her.”

“As you say, Sir Dark Lord,” the house-elf said, and held out a long-fingered hand to each of them. Voldemort placed his hand on top of the elf’s, and Hermione followed. Her first experience being apparated by a house-elf left her with no doubt about how inferior wizard magic was to elf-magic. Unlike when she normally apparated, she felt no discomfort being apparated by Miffy, and there was no harsh crack! of disapparation to leave her ears ringing.

They landed in a lady’s receiving room and the elf directed them to seats, which Hermione took, and the Dark Lord did not. They waited for only a moment before the door opened and Narcissa Malfoy entered, cool and collected as ever. She glided forward in a smart set of tailored trousers and heeled boots, her lightweight blue cloak left open. She dipped into a brief curtsey. “My lord,” she said. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“I’m sure,” said Voldemort. He nodded at Hermione. “My...most recent acquisition. Hermione Granger.”

One elegant eyebrow lifted on Narcissa’s face, but she remained otherwise unmoved. “I’d not heard,” she said.

“No,” said Voldemort. “I hadn’t supposed you had. Regardless, she is mine, and will be assisting me. I will be removing Bellatrix from your care today.”

Mrs Malfoy’s eyes widened, as did Hermione’s. What need did they have of Bellatrix’s body? Lily was truly gone now, stuck inside that Dementor until—until the Dementor died. Was there a way to get her out?
Mrs Malfoy regained her composure quickly. “Of course, my lord. If you’ll follow me, she’s in the east wing guest suite.”

Hermione followed them through the huge manor house, her face white with shock. When they reached the door leading to the room Bellatrix was in, Hermione paused at the door, not wanting to go in and see that familiar, blank, staring face again. Voldemort wasn’t sensitive to her desires though and stared angrily at her until she moved into the room.

“What do you need me to do, milord?” she asked.

“I need you to rid me of a particular nuisance,” he said.

“My lord...?” Mrs Malfoy said. “Surely, you can’t mean? I was told that she took a Dementor’s Kiss for Harry Black at Hogsmeade.”

“She did,” Voldemort said, peering down at Bellatrix. He held one eyelid open with a long, thin finger and held his lit wand to it, checking her pupils for reaction. “And I have that Dementor in my dungeons. We will kill the Dementor, extract her from it, bind her to my faithful Bellatrix, and she will be forced to serve me again as punishment for being so utterly infuriating.”

“That’s quite dastardly of you, my lord,” Mrs Malfoy said, smirking.

He quirked an eyebrow at her. “Indeed.” He turned to Hermione. “Granger—you will bring formerly-Bellatrix to my estate via your fetch-key as soon as I leave. The Malfoy wards prevent apparation by any except myself and the family, so I cannot take either of you with me.”

Hermione nodded, and satisfied with her, Voldemort apparated away, straight from the Malfoys’ guest suite. Hermione looked back to the bed. Bellatrix’s dark, hooded eyes looked so relaxed and non-evil. It was hard to see her this way, without personality. She swallowed heavily.

“Ms Granger, is it?” said Mrs Malfoy.

Hermione nodded.

“Well, Ms Granger, I do not need to tell you that if there is so much as a bruise on my sister’s body, I do not care if you are under the protection of the House of Nott, I will remove your fingers one by one.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Hermione. “But—you do know what he’s going to do with—”

“Yes, I know,” she hissed, eyes narrowed. “Of course I know you stupid girl.” She looked away, mouth pressed tightly together. “I do know,” she said again. “Either way, someone I love is in this body—be careful with it.”

“I will,” said Hermione. Hesitantly, she reached down and took formerly-Bellatrix’s hand. She half expected the woman to turn to her, sneering and mocking her in that awful baby voice...but she didn’t. Hermione took her fetch-key in her other hand, and ported away, back to the Dark Lord; back to this surreal life she was now living, where she was a Death Eater, willingly touching another one.

This time, the Dark Lord was waiting for her in the parlour when she arrived, levitating Bellatrix beside her.

“We’ll take her down to the dungeons. Come.”

Hermione followed, being as careful as she could to not bump the floating body into any walls, but it
wasn’t easy navigating through the cramped servant corridors of an old manor house, and there was a heart-stopping moment where she banged Bellatrix’s head against a door jamb. The dungeons were really a large, damp, one-roomed cellar with stone walls and stone floors. Some sort of sphagnum looking remarkably like a very expensive potions ingredient grew in the crevices, but she didn’t have time to check on it just now.

Voldemort conjured a long table; it had leather straps places approximately where hands and feet would be, and Hermione looked at him in fear when she saw this. “Put her here,” said Voldemort. He snapped the leather bindings over the woman’s wrists and ankles with a flick of his hand and removed an inky black ward from the other side of the room with the other.

Fear overwhelmed Hermione, even though there was a second patronus-silver ward between them and the Dementor. She felt the anxiety hit her like slime covering her body—a sickly, sinister fear that felt nothing like anything, save a Dementor.

“The process shouldn’t take but a few moments,” said Voldemort, “but I expect it will be very draining on me, and I won’t be able to restrain her as it happens.” His lips parted in an evil smile. “I can’t imagine that it will be very pleasant for Evans, but as the muggles say—no pain, no gain.”

“It’ll hurt her?” asked Hermione. She was starting to tremble from fear of the Dementor, but she struggled to keep her voice steady.

“Very much so,” Voldemort said. He was still smiling that eerie smile.

“Are you sure it will work?” asked Hermione.

“No,” said the Dark Lord. “I’ve adapted a technique proposed by Lady Ravenclaw in the journal you leant me.” He gazed dispassionately at Bellatrix’s restrained body, apparently unconcerned by the presence of the Dementor, or the waves of fear it sent out. Perhaps Voldemort had no fears. That was a chilling thought. “If it doesn’t work, I expect that it will do one of two things—permanently destroy Evans’s soul, or send her irrevocably to the Beyond. Either way, I am satisfied.”

“Right,” Hermione said, because she couldn’t argue with the Dark Lord. Not anymore, and not without good reason. Lily Potter was already dead. She was most likely unaware of her own consciousness, and so she would either be resurrected, or continue to stay unaware...and dead. But there was just one thing she couldn’t help asking, before she did this. “What will you do with her, if it does work? You won’t...torture her...will you?”

The Dark Lord laughed. “I think not,” he said. “No—a far better punishment for Lily will be to live her life out knowing she owes it to me. If she is unable to reconcile with her son, then so much the better. Of course, I will require her loyalty, as both she and Bellatrix were Marked, but I won’t ask anything more of her than I ever did—which is to say, hardly anything. Like you, she was useless to me for raids; only her mind was valuable.”

“Thank you, I think.” She nodded once, decisively, and focused on pushing out all thoughts of fear and Dementors. One of these days, she would learn to Occlude, but until then, mind over matter worked in a pinch. “What do I need to do?”

“Monitor the body’s vital signs and keep it alive. It will try to fight the invasion, by self-destructing if necessary. Do not let it, or you will answer me why. It will greatly weaken me to destroy this Dementor, and even further to locate her soul through our connection through the Mark. There is a possibility that I will need to draw on both your and Bellatrix’s latent magic. This will be done through the Mark, and if you feel it, do not resist me. I prefer my servants able and magically strong, so you have no need to worry I will steal your magic; it will regenerate. Once I’ve found the soul,
you will cast a patronus, as a new Dementor will begin forming immediately. Continue to monitor
the body as I permanently bind Evans’s soul to Bellatrix’s body.”

Hermione swallowed uneasily. “So, that simple,” she said.

“We shall be done in time for you to attend the last half of Severus’s class.” He turned to the
Dementor, and released the second ward. She expected it to surge forward, but it was also chained to
the wall with magical cords so black, it looked as though they were made of emptiness. This was
truly dark magic, if she ever saw it.

Hermione set up her diagnostic spells to hover above the body, counting heart beats and monitoring
blood pressure and brain activity, along with spells to keep watch on all the internal organs.
Voldemort began to chant in dead languages—a little Latin, but mostly ones she couldn’t decipher;
perhaps something Nordic. The energy levels of the dungeon room rose steadily, but quickly.
Bellatrix’s heart began beating faster in sympathy to the energy, but her body showed no other signs
of stress, so Hermione only watched. The Dementor was screeching now—a horrible, ghastly sound
straight from the pits of Hell. It struggled against its bonds and this seemed to bring the Dark Lord
great pleasure, for his lips were stretched wide in a ghastly imitation of a smile, even as he continued
to chant.

The Dementor’s shrieking was so loud now that Hermione had to put a muffling charm around
herself and then a second. It still broke through, but at least her ears weren’t ringing. Then suddenly,
the Dementor exploded, and the Dark Lord staggered back against the table, his smile morphing into
a manic grin even as he pushed himself back up and threw his arms wide, pulling in magic from the
very air around him to stabilise himself. Hermione felt the drain on her own magic, as if it leaked
from the Mark itself and into his hands, but it was okay because there was no fear any longer.
Everything was good in the world, everything was fine. Bellatrix’s heartbeat slowed with her own
magic being drawn away, her body refocused resources.

Hermione could see them. At first, she’d thought it was sparks of magic, but then she looked closer
and saw that they were people’s souls. Voldemort was sifting through them with his fingers, pulling
and pushing them through the air as he searched for the one he wanted. At last, he focused on a
single spark, and drew it to him. Hermione barely had time to notice it—to see what Harry’s mum’s
soul looked like, before she felt fear coalescing once again inside the dungeon. It was as if the
Dementor was made of fear itself, solidified into a hideous, evil thing. It formed slowly—long,
skeletal limbs and a cloak created from the very atmosphere itself; every last fear of the souls in this
room—dead and alive—were copied and collected until they became solid things, solid fabric.

“Expecto Patronum!” Her otter burst forth, but she felt the drain of the spell like she never had
before, and then she, too, was staggering back against the table. The alarms went off over Bellatrix’s
body and she turned to them, frantic. She had to keep her alive. Voldemort was focusing intently on
the spark of soul floating above Bellatrix’s chest. Now Bellatrix was struggling mindlessly, tongue
lolling, eyes rolled back in her head. She began to seize, and not knowing what else to do, Hermione
put a body bind over her.

The Dark Lord chanted on, eyes closed. A vein on his forehead bulged under the stress of his teeth
gritting and the magic flowing through him. He was pulling in magic from all over; it flowed into
him in waves. Hermione had never seen anything like it. Had Merlin been able to do this? Had
Dumbledore? Voldemort, she realised, was truly, remarkably powerful. Harry wouldn’t have a
chance if the Dark Lord decided to come after him.

It was tiring Voldemort out, but what wizard could say he’d destroyed a Dementor on his own—and
then transferred a soul into a new body? Well, that was assuming that he managed to do it, but—
Hermione would be surprised if he failed. The sheer power at his disposal at the moment was unbelievable. She’d never felt so much in her life—just being in the room with it all was enough to make her dangerously lightheaded. With her last vestiges of strength, she pushed more magic into her patronus to stabilise it. The Dementor drew back, screeching horribly. It was young, and its parent had died hungry. It would be hungry, too.

Voldemort’s chanting was loud and strained, even as Bellatrix’s body trembled and shuddered, despite the body bind over it. Voldemort slammed his hands down in a violent stroke, and a wave of energy crashed downwards, knocking Hermione flat and leaving her dazed. She lost control of her patronus and the new Dementor rushed her.

A wave of heavy, silver magic slammed into it and knocked it back into its cell. Hermione pulled herself up slowly, eyes wide as she stared at her master. He’d saved her—even after he’d magically exhausted himself.

And he was exhausted. She could see the sweat dripping down his clammy face, the heavy lids of his eyes drooping slightly. He was breathing heavily in sharp, ragged breaths. He looked entirely pleased with himself.

Hermione turned her eyes to the table, and looked on at Bellatrix’s body. But it didn’t look like Bellatrix anymore—not exactly. The hair was still black, and the face was still angular, but there was something about the set the mouth wasn’t right—wasn’t the same mocking smirk that Hermione remembered being permanently etched into that woman’s face.

“Did it work?” she asked. She cast a quick Finite to release the body bind, but there was no movement. She wasn’t awake...or alive.

“Yes,” he said. Then, sneering, he said, “Ennervate!”

The woman on the table gasped; her arms flailed wildly, looking for purchase, eyes wide and frightened. Finally, she caught sight of the Dark Lord, and stilled. She pushed herself up slowly with her arms, eyes locked on his.

She tried to speak, but coughed instead. Hermione conjured a glass of water and handed it to her, and she finally noticed Hermione there, too. Hermione met her eyes, and gasped. They weren’t the grey eyes of Bellatrix Lestrange, but the same green eyes she saw on her best friend. It really was Lily Potter.

She drank, and passed the glass back to Hermione. “So you’ve done it,” she said to Voldemort. “I suppose you mean to punish me with life.”

“That was my general idea,” said Voldemort, waving a hand as if to dismiss the importance of the thought. “I did warn you not to endanger the girl.”

Lily laughed, and it was a horrible sound—Bellatrix’s vocal cords had not yet healed from being screamed raw. “I’m sure she’s a hero now—taking a Dementor’s Kiss for the Boy Who Lived.”

“She might’ve been, if the papers hadn’t been so full of talk of the Ministry declaring martial law.”

“You’re having me on,” Lily said.

“No,” said Voldemort. “Things are looking rather grim, wouldn’t you say?” He had a strange, self-satisfied smile on his face as he looked down at Lily.

“So I’m to continue serving you because there is no other option now, is that it? You do realise that
Dumbledore will give me sanctuary if I ask it.”

Voldemort’s creepy smile widened further. “He’s dead, Evans. You’re mine.”

“Ms Granger,” Snape drawled. “I trust you have an exemplary excuse for arriving an hour and a half late to my class.”

“Feminine problems, Sir,” Hermione said, face flaming. Theo looked back at her, and she flushed, not knowing what to do. Should she sit with him? She glanced at her old table, where Ron was now sitting with Harry and Draco. No room available for her; she sighed and moved towards the table she’d shared with Theo before the holidays.

“Hermione,” he said softly.

She gave him a fragile smile. Merlin, she missed him, but what did they have between them now save a forced engagement and a miscarriage? The remainder of the class passed in strained silence. Hermione was hopelessly behind, and by the time Professor Snape called for them to put stasis charms over their cauldrons, she’d just barely mixed her Arithmantic base for the potion. She huffed, running through all the things she had to do in her head. She would have to work on this potion tonight before bed if she had any hope of catching up to the class this week, and when was she ever going to find time to continue her research on giving her parents magic? She was so close, but she couldn’t stomach experimenting on people—even if they weren’t really alive, per se, any longer. She would have to be sure before she could extract one of their magical cores.

Hermione stacked her cauldron and packed up her utensils, intent on getting out before she had to talk to Theo. “Ms Granger,” Snape said, as she was pulling her bag straps over her shoulders. “Detention, tonight. Seven p.m.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, and ducked out before Theo could stop her.

Hermione rushed out of class before Harry could find out why she’d been over an hour late to Potions, but he had a pretty good idea; there was not much that would keep Hermione from attending class, and being summoned by Voldemort was one of those. How could she still go to him, knowing what he’d done? She’d seen Dumbledore fall from Voldemort’s curse just as he had.

He didn’t know how to act around her, knowing she would not refuse Voldemort’s call, and so he didn’t seek her out. He gathered up his things, intending to stop by the library for a brief moment before lunch to finish up his Herbology essay. The Hufflepuffs were still travelling in protective groups, as if they could prevent the loss of another of their number just acting out ‘safety in numbers’. He met a group of them as he was entering the library, and was surprised to see Zach Smith with them. Smith gave him a rare smile, and Harry nodded back. It was sad that it had taken Finch-Fletchley’s death to remove the pariah label from Zach, but Harry was glad that he’d found some sort of acceptance within Hufflepuff. How awful would it have been if Harry had lived every year at Hogwarts like the months after he was selected for the Triwizard Tournament? He would have gone mad.

Harry selected his reference books from the stack and returned to his table to find it occupied. Draco was sat across from Harry’s things, worrying one of the straps on his book satchel. Harry suppressed a smile—he’d almost convinced himself that this tragedy would be the knife that finally severed their strange, fragile relationship, and yet—here Draco was. He’d taken the time he needed to mourn
“Hi,” he said, sitting.

“Harry,” Draco said. He looked up then, and Harry saw the unease in his eyes. His heart sunk—he was wrong; Draco wasn’t coming back to him at all—he was going to leave him. Harry swallowed, tried to brace himself—but how could he brace himself for something like this? He’d known it would come eventually; he’d known that Draco wouldn’t want him forever—but he hadn’t thought it would be so soon. He hadn’t thought that it would come right after he’d finally let himself feel the things he felt for Draco...right after Yule, when they’d...

He looked away. He couldn’t look at Draco and see him leaving. “Already?” he asked. “I thought it might’ve taken a little longer.”

“Yeah,” Draco said, sighing. “Already. I didn’t think it would be this soon, or this definite—”

“Definite?” Harry asked. “Is it?”

“I know you don’t like it, Harry,” Draco said, “but I can’t help it.”

Harry scoffed. “Don’t like it, you say. “Of course I don’t like it. I don’t want you to leave me.”

Draco scrunched his eyebrows up. “I’m not leaving you, you pillock,” he said. “What are you talking about?”

“You aren’t breaking up with me?”

“Don’t be melodramatic, Harry,” said Draco, rolling his eyes. “It’s so common. I’m talking about the bond.”

Harry frowned. “What about it? You said it was natural for friends and such.”

Draco looked uneasy again. “I did—it is. But it seems that your propensity for the impossible has extended to our relationship; I started realising it when I figured out we were having the same fantasies...I checked with Mum to be sure, and...it seems like we’ve developed some form of marriage bond...without actually getting married.

Harry’s mouth dropped open. “Like Voldemort?” he whispered.

Draco secured their table with some high-level privacy spells. “Nothing so drastic,” he said, “but...yes, along those lines.”

“Will one of us go mad if the other dies?”

“I should hope not,” Draco said. “I want to say that of course it wouldn’t, because we’d have to actually perform the Last Marriage rites to commit ourselves that fully, but I’m afraid that if I do, your impossible luck will jinx us, and we’ll be miserable souls bound together in tragedy for the rest of eternity.”

“Now who’s being melodramatic?” Harry muttered.

Draco sighed. “Barring that, then no. There’re other types of marriage bonds—my parents have one; the Weasleys undoubtedly have one. Lots of old families still perform them, but the one the Dark Lord used went out of fashion in the 1200s. The bonds today are less restricting.”
“But?” Harry said. There was always a but.

“But you were worried that we might start being able to read each other’s thoughts...”

“Don’t tell me you heard all the things I was thinking during Potions...”

Draco smirked. “Only some of your more, ah, vivid thoughts...and they were intriguing. I’d no idea you wanted to do some of those things with my cock.” Harry blushed furiously, and Draco sobered. “Actually, it’s the thoughts you had on your way up to the library that stood out. Harry—have you been thinking all this since the attacks?”

“All what?” Harry asked.

“All this about betraying the Dark Lord.”

“Betraying him?” Harry asked, aghast. “To do that, I’d have to have been on his side before.”

“Weren’t you?” asked Draco.

“Of course not!”

“Then—whose side were you on? Because you weren’t helping the Headmaster.”

Harry looked away. “That doesn’t mean I was on Voldemort’s side.”

Draco looked doubtful. “Harry—he’s the Dark Lord. You can’t expect him to sit idly by while someone prevents him from getting to the person he’s bonded to.”

That stopped Harry short. “But Ginny’s fine.”

“Did he know that then? He’d just watched your mum—as Weasley—take a Dementor’s Kiss for you. I don’t think the Last Marriage bond would’ve given him the clarity of mind to simply say, ‘Sorry Headmaster, but I simply must ascertain the relative health of this blood traitor’.”

Harry pursed his lips. “That doesn’t excuse murder.”

“Don’t you think the Headmaster would have taken out the Dark Lord if he thought he could’ve?”

“Dumbledore was a good man!” Harry said. “He doesn’t murder people just because they’re in the way!”

“Yeah, he was,” Draco said. “But this was a war to him, and he would’ve been relieved if he’d been able to take the Dark Lord out. You know he would’ve.”

Harry looked away. “I don’t want Dumbledore to have died in vain. I want his death to have meant something—otherwise, it was just a waste, and he was a good man who did good things.”

“Not every hero gets a heroic death, Harry,” Draco said. “Sometimes even they lose to luck. But you can’t let the Headmaster’s death send you on an offensive rampage, because then it will have been in vain...because then the wizarding world will truly be at war with itself, and we’ll not have the resources to fight the true enemy.”

“The Ministry,” Harry said.

Draco nodded, his face very serious. “It’s war, Harry. People die—even good people. But you can’t let Scrimgeour take you by surprise, and you can’t bring him down on your own.”
“Which ‘him’?” Harry asked.

Draco shrugged. “Either of them.”

Harry sighed, dejected. “I don’t know what to do.”

“First, you ought to strengthen your Occlumency walls, so I don’t get a running dialog of every strong thought you have.”

“Is that why I can’t hear you?” Harry asked. “I think I did feel what you were feeling over Yule—when you felt bad about telling your mum about my mum.”

Draco smiled bitterly. “Felt wretched,” he agreed. “Yeah—I always have my Occlumency up; most Slytherins do, really. I usually can’t hear you—it only started after the attack on Hogsmeade, when you were probably occupied with other things, and didn’t think about protecting your mind.”

“Probably.”

“And I can’t hear you all the time,” Draco added. “Only when you’re thinking really strong thoughts. I wasn’t even sure if I was hearing you at first. It’s very faint and easy to ignore until it keeps going on and on.”

Harry nodded, mentally pulling up the brick walls around his mind just like Sirius taught him, and letting the little insignificant thoughts filter through as distraction for uninvited guests. When they were back in place, Draco indicated that he couldn’t hear them anymore.

“We’ll probably always be able to feel hints of what emotions each other is feeling, though,” he warned. “But at least if you keep your shields up, I won’t be invading your privacy.”

“What else could happen from this bond?”

Draco smirked again. “We could have really good sex,” he said.

“Prat,” said Harry. “Seriously.”

“That was serious—it does enhance our empathy of each other, so we can know what each other likes more easily. But these bonds really aren’t anything dramatic like the romance novels would have you believe. We can’t apparate to one another without knowing where the other is first; we won’t die if we’re far apart; we won’t grow wings or be super powerful. We won’t even be ‘mated’ for life. For as long as we are together, we’ll just be more in tune with each other.”

So he could still leave Harry. The whole ‘I’ll love you forever’ bit was the only good thing about this bond in Harry’s opinion, and it turned out that it was just made-up tripe from Hermione’s guilty-pleasure reading. “Right,” said Harry. He tried not to sound too dejected about it.

Draco grinned at him. “Now that that’s settled, what are you going to do about the Dark Lord? My father’s got a lot of influence at the Ministry—they were only too happy to find a reason to say the charges against him were unfounded when my mother pulled out her coin purse—and you’ve got Smith’s mum to help, too. We need to decide what’s to be done about the Minister declaring martial law in peace time.”

“You think it’s really necessary?” Harry asked.

“Harry—honestly. There’s no faster way to expose us to those half-brained muggles than to set up muggle-born kids on a path of self-destruction. Without training, they’ll have loads of accidental
“magic, and it won’t take long for even muggles to put two and two together.”

“We can’t keep on stealing the muggle-borns before they start exhibiting magic,” said Harry. “It’s just not done.”

“It’ll have to be, for a while. The laws need to be changed—but not like this. There are better ways to keep us safe from muggles than closing off communication altogether. We can worry about that when the time comes; for now, we need to do damage control.”

“You sound awfully excited by the prospect of throwing over the Ministry,” Harry said. “This isn’t something I’ve come to expect from Slytherins.”

“Don’t be daft,” said Draco. “Slytherins love a good political intrigue and masterminding coups is something we’re particularly adept at. You need to kiss and make up with the Dark Lord soon, Harry, because my father’s got galleons to spend, and he’s likely itching to spend them. If you wait until he’s outlined a plan for himself, you’ll be looking at Minister Lucius Malfoy within the year.”

Harry shuddered. “There’s a scary thought. Your dad is a huge prick.”

“Perhaps,” said Draco. “But he’s a good man to have on your side.”

Hermione arrived at detention right on time, because knowing Professor Snape, he’d dock points if she was late or early. She knocked briskly at the door, and stepped through when he called for her to enter. Professor Snape was at his desk marking essays, and he barely spared her a glance before directing her to a student bench to chop ingredients. She nodded and turned towards the desks, and stopped short.

Theo was there. She could’ve hit herself—it was Tuesday, after all, and he had detention every Tuesday until the end of term. If only she’d had a moment to prepare for this meeting, or—no; it would have been difficult no matter what, she realised. She wanted to make up with him—but how?

The ingredients to be prepared were already at the desk, and the extra set of knives already out, so she really had no choice but to join her erstwhile lover at the same table. She nodded politely to him as she approached, for lack of anything better to do.

“Hello,” she said.

He swallowed. “Hi.”

She’d done so well avoiding him all of January, and though she’d looked desperately for him before dinner the night of the attack, they’d been unable to communicate with one another, and had both gone to bed without saying more than a handful of words. As the rest of that week had passed by, the habit of avoiding Theo had stabilised Hermione—grounded her, and it had been so easy to just continue as they were.

But now, here she was, sitting next to him for the second time today, and she couldn’t help but wonder if perhaps Snape had engineered this meeting; of course that was absurd. As if Snape cared one iota what his students’ relationship statuses were. Ignoring him was so hard, but she managed it, for about three hours. It was nearing ten o’clock, and Snape barked at them to clean up and get out, without taking his eyes away from his marking.

Hermione gathered up her things and sanitised the tools, then packaged up the prepared ingredients to put in the storeroom. Theo followed her in, and she could’ve hit herself for letting herself be
cornered like that.

“Hermione,” he said. She didn’t look up at him, just kept floating her jars of ingredients up to their shelves. “We need to talk.”

“Do we?” she said.

He sighed. “You know we do. Please, we had something special...don’t throw it away.” He paused. “Don’t throw me away.”

“Granger, Nott!” Snape yelled from the other room. “It should not take two people that long to put things away.”

Hermione pushed past him and out of the potions classroom. He followed her. “Come on, Hermione. If you’re going to leave me, at least let me have the closure of knowing I did everything I could to keep you. Can we please talk?”

Hermione sighed. “Fine,” she said. His relief was so strong she could actually see it wash over him, in the relaxation of his face, shoulders, everything. They walked together back to their suite, and through their separate entrances. Not entirely convinced she was making the right decision, Hermione nevertheless removed the locking and warding spells from the door that lead from Theo’s bedroom to their shared common room. A few moments later, he turned the knob and stepped through, for the first time since they’d returned to school over a month ago.

“I wasn’t sure you’d really let me in,” he said. “I thought you might’ve just said you’d talk to me and then leave me locked out.”

Hermione pursed her lips. “Please say what you need to say.”

He slumped down onto the couch, face in his hands. When he looked back up to her, he looked exhausted and defeated. “I thought things were going to be better after...the Friday before last. You sat at the Slytherin table, and you let me hold your hand.”

“I was distraught,” Hermione said. “But you hadn’t indicated you wanted to talk then, so I left it as it was.”

“I didn’t know what to say,” he said. “You’d been avoiding me all month, and a lot of people had just died—including someone I was friends with, and someone else I had Potions with, and yet another person who told me I was a handsome lad every time I ordered a butterbeer from her at Hogsmeade—even though we all know I’m not. Then, I’d just come in from nearly killing myself, Draco, and Black just trying to get the magic off us before it took over our minds, and you’d...you’d been bleeding and I’d thought you were dying for Merlin’s sake.” He looked at her desperately.

“Hermione—I was so fucking scared carrying you back to the school. We ran the whole way, and I just knew that you were going to die before we got you to Pomfrey. Please—I just didn’t know what to say to you. I just wanted to hold you and make sure you were never hurt again, but we were barely speaking, and I didn’t know what to do.”

“But you branded me,” she said, clenching her fist. She could feel the heavy magic of the House of Nott coat-of-arms on her palm, through all of the layers of glamours she had over it. “I can’t commit to someone who doesn’t think of me as his equal.”

“I do think of you as my equal,” he said. “Merlin—if anything, you’re my superior. I didn’t know you’d be opposed to doing things traditionally, and I didn’t even think of how it might’ve been perceived as dominating. Believe me, if my grandparents hadn’t demanded it, I would have never
done it. I wanted to propose to you properly, when you were ready. I knew you weren’t ready then—but with...with the baby...they weren’t likely to allow us to keep seeing each other without making it somewhat official, and I didn’t want to lose you.”

“So take it off,” said Hermione, holding out her hand. “End the courtship and let me decide whether I want to be in this relationship without being forced.”

The blood drained from Theo’s face. “I can’t,” he said. “It can’t be removed; it has to remain for the duration, or until we marry, whichever comes first.”

“Then I think we’re done here.”

“No!” he said. “Wait—please, Circe, Hermione. Don’t leave me. We were great together...we could still be great together. I know I bollixed this up, but let me try to show you that I value you...that I can’t even live without you, for Merlin’s sake.”

“How are you going to do that?” she said. “You can’t end this imprisonment you’ve put me in.”

“Brand me,” he said. “I’ll gladly wear your family’s heraldry on my hand.”

Hermione paused. Her study of courtship traditions had confirmed the inherent and rampant sexism in the wizarding world. Men never wore the symbols of their intended’s house. It just wasn’t done. No doubt, if she agreed to let Theo do this, he would suffer no end to the jeering from the other lads. Was she okay with that? If she did it, would it be making them more equal, or would it just be spiteful?

“And for doing this, you’d want me to not use a glamour over mine, right?”

He looked away. “I want people to know you chose me, but if it’s against your ideology, then I won’t insist on it.”

“Fine,” Hermione said. Her decision was made. If he still thought it was okay to piss on her like a tree, then she’d let him dig his own grave. “I’ll do it, but you know everyone’s going to rag you for it, so you can cover it with a glamour all you like.”

“Whatever you want,” he said, and practically thrust his hand in her face, so eager was he to make amends.

“The Grangers don’t actually have a blazon,” she said. “But I recall my mum’s family’s, if you’ll accept that.”

“Of course,” he said. “Or you could take the blazon of the magical Grangers. They died out years ago, and there hasn’t been another Granger to claim it.”

“That wouldn’t be right,” Hermione said.

Theo shrugged. “You’re probably related to them in some way, anyway. And it’s not unheard of.”

It was a tempting thought—after all, if the Grangers had a magical heraldic crest, then, that could help them in the long run, if she was ever able to give them magic. It might throw off some suspicion...maybe. It would at least give her time to research a better way to hide them. And right now, she needed all the time she could get.

“All right,” she said. “What does it look like?”
Theo waved his wand and an image materialised in the air between them, along with the family’s motto: ‘quod potui perfeci’. That sounded about right.

He held out his hand solemnly, and she took it. It was warm and solid, and felt exactly how she’d remembered his hand feeling in hers. She rubbed her thumb over the fleshy pads of his palm and felt him tense. Would this even work? The spell was meant to be cast by a male.

There was only one way to find out. She drew her wand across his palm, reciting the words that had once bound her to him for an entire year. Now, he’d be bound the same. Whether they worked this out or not, she’d at least know that he now knew what it felt like to be branded, though not unwillingly, as she’d been. At least the Dark Lord had given her the choice.

Theo pulled his hand back carefully, studying the red and green crest on his palm. Slowly, he smiled. His eyes met hers, and she was surprised by how relieved he looked. “Thank you,” he said, and she felt her eyebrows rise.

When he sat back down, it was next to her, on her couch. “Do you want to talk about...?” He paused.

“The miscarriage?” Hermione said flatly. “Do you?”

He pressed his lips together, considering. “You didn’t want a baby,” he said.

“No,” she agreed. “I didn’t.”

“But you were just starting to get used to the idea, and then it was...gone.”

Hermione looked down. That was exactly it, damn him. How did he manage to know her so well, even after a month apart? “I’d started adjusting my plans to include a child,” she said. “Thinking about how I’d manage to afford a nanny during the day while I was at university, reading all the pregnancy books, telling my parents and...it just feels so anti-climatic.”

“But now you won’t have to worry about that,” he said.

“I thought that without the pregnancy forcing us into a rushed marriage, that we could...” she trailed off.

“Take things at our own pace,” he said.

She nodded. “I know, logically, that many pregnancies miscarry in the early stages, sometimes even before the woman knows she’s pregnant, but I did know about it, and I can’t help feeling like I’ve failed in some way—first with forgetting the bloody contraceptive charm, and then with...with.”

She paused. “I’m not sad about it, Theo,” she said plaintively. “That’s the problem. I was a rubbish mother before I even had a child.”

“That’s ridiculous,” said Theo. “You weren’t ready for it, and frankly, neither was I. Even so, you were changing your life for a baby, and you would’ve loved it when it got here. Just because you don’t want to be a mother now, doesn’t mean you aren’t ever going to want to.”

She looked away. “I don’t think I will,” she said. “Ever want to.”

He shrugged. “That’s fine. What, did you think that just because I’m the last Nott that I’d require you to, what, produce an heir?”
“Won’t you?” she said.

Theo rolled his eyes, but he was grinning. “No, you silly witch; I’m not a Malfoy. I just want you. If we happen to fuck up a contraceptive charm again sometime...far...in the future, then we can deal with that then, but if we never do...then I’d be happy. Give me a year and a day; I’ll prove it to you.”

Slowly, Hermione smiled.

Harry was pulled roughly from his dreams into Voldemort’s presence.

“Good, you’re here,” said Voldemort. “I do realise that you’ve been suffering from an existential crisis over whether or not to wage war against me—an extremely stupid idea, as I’m sure you’ve surmised—but I find that I require your assistance most urgently.”

Harry rolled his eyes. Of course Voldemort wouldn’t take him seriously as a threat. No one did, apparently. “What do you want? I’m afraid we’re out of Headmasters to kill, if that’s it.”

“No,” said Voldemort, unconcerned. “I need you to come to me.”

“Fuck no,” said Harry, eyebrows nearly to his hairline in surprise at the request. “You want to kill me next, is that it? I thought you didn’t want a war...”

“You do have quite the talent for melodrama, did you know, Harry? I have no intentions of killing you tonight, so please make haste. You may borrow Granger’s fetch-key; I’ll send word to her to find you and give it to you.”

“Absolutely not,” Harry said. “It’s nearly midnight, I’ve got Defence in the morning, and regardless of whatever rumours you’ve heard, I don’t have a death wish.”

“You will come,” said Voldemort, “or I will take your father instead.”

Harry stilled. “You tried that once before,” he said. “I believed you then, and it nearly got someone killed. I won’t believe you again.”

“Won’t you?” Voldemort said. “I’m not far away; your family’s wards would be nothing to unravel...”

Harry clenched his fists. “You won’t hurt me?”

“Not physically, no,” said Voldemort. “You know I’m quite fond of you, Harry.” He grinned, and Harry shuddered.

“Fine.”

Pulling his mind roughly back to his own body, Harry woke. He muffled his footsteps as he dressed, trying not to wake any of the other boys. He pulled his on his frockcoat and scarf, and slipped quietly from the boys’ dormitory. Hermione was waiting at the bottom of the stairs in her dressing gown, her hair a fright.

“What are you doing?” she whispered, handing over the mirrored fetch-key. “Do you know what he wants?”

Harry shook his head. “If I’m not back for Defence, tell McGonagall.”
Hermione nodded. “I’m sure he’s just being creepy, as usual.”

“Do you know something I don’t?”

“Probably,” she said. “Just go. I’m sure it’s fine...or as fine as anything ever is with him.”

Harry nodded. “Port,” he whispered, and felt that familiar tug behind his navel. When he landed, he was in a dreary sitting room in Voldemort’s old manor house, Ard-Mhéara, in Ireland.

“Come,” said Voldemort from behind him. Harry tensed, startled, but did his best not to show it.

“What, no tea?” he asked.

Voldemort smirked. “Would you like some?”

“No,” said Harry. Voldemort turned and left the room without another word, and Harry followed.

They walked down a dark hallway and up two flights of stairs. At the top, Voldemort took the left corridor and pressed his hand up against the first door. After a moment, it clicked open. He stepped inside, and Harry followed. The room was well-lit and well-appointed, but Harry was still surprised to see that they were not alone in it.

A tall, thin woman was sat on the chair by the window, browsing the latest issue of Ars Alchema. She looked up when they entered, and her eyes widened for the briefest of moments. She set the magazine aside, standing.

“Have I offended you that badly?” she asked of Voldemort. Harry knew that voice. He stopped short, feeling the blood rush from his face. “Now you bring him to me to mock me? To show me what I failed to do? Was I not a good servant to you for all those years?”

“You were,” said Voldemort. “And now your son is a good servant to me. See, he has come when I asked it of him.”

It was his mum. She was alive.

He could see it now—she wasn’t the woman he knew from his scrapbook photos, or even the brief glimpse he saw in Ginny over Yule, nor was she Bellatrix Lestrange, who she now inhabited. Whatever heinous magic Voldemort had used to pull her from that Dementor and resurrect her into this body was strong, and it had overtaken Bellatrix so very much that parts of Lily Evans were showing through. Her eyes were the same green as his own, and she was just as tall and athletically thin as she’d looked in all her photos, but that was where the similarities ended. Bellatrix’s hair had been too dark for the magic to change, and so it was now some dark auburn; her skin was pale and her features were sharp, like his, and the rest of the Blacks—not classically beautiful, but attractive in their strangeness. Still, no one would say she looked like Bellatrix...only that she looked like a Black.

But her voice—that was the same. It was low and melodic as he remembered from his dreams as a child, and hearing her in Ginny’s body over Yule.

“You took a Dementor’s Kiss for me,” Harry said, and saw the strangeness of not-Bellatrix’s face crumpling.

“Of course, darling,” she said.

“All very touching,” said Voldemort, “but I resurrected your mother for three reasons only: to ensure your loyalty to me, to have another researcher in my debt, and to fulfil an agreement to one of my Inner Circle.”
His mum cut her eyes to Voldemort, surprised. “I told him not to ask,” she said.

“As I’m sure you’ve found, he heeds the advice of no one.”

“Who?” said Harry. His question was met with silence.

After a moment, Voldemort continued, “However, Evans, I find your constant presence tiresome, and it has not even been a full day. I am releasing you into the care of my second—”

“Your second?” Harry said. “I’m not a Death Eater.”

Both Voldemort and his mum gave him strange looks, as if there was something going on that he should have been aware of, but had just proved too stupid for. A moment passed, and then Voldemort turned back to his mum.

“I’ve arranged for documentation to be planted in the Ministry. You will now be Capella Black, Harry’s aunt from a disgraced branch of the Black family.”

“Wonderful,” she said. She didn’t sound excited at all.

He narrowed his eyes. “You should be quite grateful I’ve given you an easy excuse to be around him,” he said. “What you do with his father is entirely up to you. He’s thus far unaware of your continued existence at all. Narcissa has indicated that her floo is open to you at anytime, should you wish to see her. Harry will relinquish control of all assets in your Evans vault at Gringotts, to be re-established under your new name. You will take up residence wherever you like, and support yourself. You will acquire a new wand in your new name from Ollivander in the morning. You will come when I summon you. You will cause me no further trouble. Are we clear, Black?”

She grimaced. “Quite, my lord.”

“Very good,” said Voldemort. He turned to Harry. “Get her out of here.”

Harry nodded mutely, and for the first time in his entire life, Harry took his mum’s hand. They apparated away.

Chapter End Notes

1. The magical Granger family motto (no relation to any muggle Granger mottos) translates to “I have done what I could”.

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Conspiracy (n): 1. an evil, unlawful, treacherous, or surreptitious plan formulated in secret by two or more persons; plot. 2. an agreement by two or more persons to commit a crime, fraud, or other wrongful act.

The only place he could think to go was Diagon Alley.

It was mostly dark and deserted at this time of night, but there were lights on in the Leaky Cauldron, so he headed there, for lack of any better place to go. It wasn’t as if he could bring his mum to River House—another shock was the last thing his father needed right now. He let a room from Tom and followed her up the stairs, watching her from the doorway as she examined the room.

“It’s been years since I’ve stayed at the Leaky,” she said quietly. “You weren’t even born yet.” She laughed, suddenly, turning back to him. “You might’ve been conceived here, actually.”

Harry grimaced—she didn’t look like Bellatrix, but if he looked at her from the corner of his eyes, he could see the woman she’d been before. “Are you going to tell Dad?” he asked.

“Do you want me to?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “Will it hurt him? Will you go back to him?”

“I’ve been dead almost twenty years, Harry,” she said. “He spent over a decade in Azkaban. Time changes us in irreparable ways.”

“So, no,” Harry said.

She shrugged a sharp shoulder. “I don’t think it would work. He’s had long enough to fall out of love with me, and being dead feels like forever. You were my only focus for so long that I don’t even remember feeling love for anyone but you.”

Harry bit his lip, unaccountably sad. They stared at each other for several long seconds, awkwardly. There was no more than five feet between them, but the chasm was huge—Harry wasn’t sure they could ever bridge it. He had the strongest urge to run up and hug her and never let her go—never let her leave him again. He needed her.

Instead, he just reached into his trousers and pulled out fifty galleons. “I already paid Tom for the week,” he said, “but you’ll need a wand and clothes.”

“Harry, keep your money.”

“It’s your money,” he said. “It came from either the Potter vault or your vault. Take it.”

She did.

“I’ll be back this week as soon as I can. Do you know what you’re going to do for work? Where you’re going to live? I think there’s an empty Black property in Wales—and there’s Godric’s Hollow, though I’ve never seen it, so I don’t know the state it’s in.”
“A right mess,” she said. “I’m sure.”

Harry nodded. “We’ll figure something out. I—I won’t leave you to struggle, Mum. I’ll make sure life is worth living, now that you’ve got it.”

She blinked several times, eyes suddenly bright. Her lips curved into a brittle smile. “Better start calling me Auntie Capella,” she said.

Harry felt his own eyes burning. He shook his head. “You’ll always be my mum, even if we never do quite figure things out between us.” She looked away, pressing her fingers to her eyes. “Is there anything you need? Anything I can do or get to help?”

She nodded jerkily. “Yes,” she said. “Tell Severus where I am.”

Harry nodded. Their eyes met again, and he couldn’t help himself anymore—he ran forward and wrapped his arms around her, pressing his nose against her hair and inhaling, trying to memorise the way she smelled and felt as he hugged her, just in case—in case his luck ran out, and she disappeared for good. He just needed to know, just this once, what it was like to hug one’s mum. Her arms came around him immediately, and squeezed him tightly. He heard her breath hitch and felt it in her chest, pressed against his. She started trembling beneath his hands, and he realised that she was crying. He tried to be stoic, but when he felt hot tears starting to run down his own face, he didn’t even consider taking his arms from her to wipe them away.

So this was what it felt like to hug your mum.

³³³

“As Headmistress, I can no longer act as your Head of House,” Professor McGonagall said to the assembled common room. She was met with a sea of surprised, distressed faces. She’d admit it to no one, but it was a heart-warming to see that she was appreciated and her Gryffindors would miss her direct interaction with them. She would mourn the loss of being Head of Gryffindor, but Hogwarts needed a Headmistress for all the students more than Gryffindor house needed a Head for only its students. Replacing her position had not been easy, but at least a temporary solution had been reached.

“As the only other professor currently on staff who sorted Gryffindor, Madam Hooch has been asked, and has agreed, to assume this duty until the end of term. By next year, we will hopefully have a more permanent solution, but for this year, please give Madam Hooch your respect and see her for any problems you may have.”

There were no questions from her Gryffindors. She nodded briskly. “Ms Weasley, Ms Patil, Ms Brown, Ms Granger, Mr Longbottom, Mr Thomas, Mr Black. Come with me.”

Outside the portrait hole, she led them back down the corridor and stairs to her old office on the fifth storey. “In you go, find a seat,” she said, locking the door behind them and setting no less than three privacy wards over it. She settled behind the desk and regarded them seriously. She was taking a big chance pulling Longbottom in, too, but she had a good feeling about the lad—he’d done so well as Prefect this year, and she thought the experience would be good for him.

“As you know, Zacharias Smith’s mother works for the Department of Education, and is currently spearheading the development and construction of the new Firth College for magical children ages five to ten. She met with me last week to discuss something very serious, and after great—great—consideration,” she emphasised, eying them sternly. “I have chosen the seven of you to represent Gryffindor House this week for a very important task.”
Longbottom swallowed nervously, the poor boy—always thought he was in for the worst. “Don’t fret, Mr Longbottom. It isn’t dangerous.” Well, not particularly dangerous, anyway. It wasn’t as if he couldn’t defend himself against muggles, but there was always a danger to Longbottom’s mental health, no matter what was concerned. She had a mind to have a word with Augusta about it, although Merlin knew the woman had done the best she could...Minerva pressed her lips together, stopping that line of thought.

“To be frank, I will need your wizard oaths that what I am about to tell you will not leave this office. Do I have it?” She received seven sober nods in return. “Good—because this is quite serious, and it needs to be taken as such. I’m sure you’ve all noticed that the tone of even the papers has changed in the weeks since the Minister declared martial law. The rumour is that he’s keeping the Prophet under a tight reign, and that isn’t all. Madam Smith has received evidence that after Mr Finch-Fletchley’s death, Minister Scrimgeour developed a plan to fast-track a new bill through the Wizengamot that will completely cut the wizarding world off from the muggle world.”

Granger gasped, and Minerva nodded soberly; she’d come directly to the right conclusion. “Yes, completely. This will also prevent Hogwarts—or Firth—representatives from visiting with muggle parents to deliver school letters to muggle-borns. They will, therefore, be unable to come at all. It’s of the utmost importance that we inform every known muggle family of their child’s magical ability before this law goes into effect. We’ve got about a week left to do this—Professors Flitwick, Sprout, Snape, Sinistra, and I have already been helping out since last week. As the deadline approaches, we find that we are desperately behind. Therefore, we are bringing in trusted seventh years and of-age sixth years to help.

“Your task would be to perform the role usually done by Hogwarts professors and visit these muggle families, deliver letters to Firth College, and explain to the parents the nature of their child’s gift. You would also act as a temporary liaison to the family in the coming weeks, as they acclimate themselves to the wizarding world and collected requirements for study. I would ask that you perform this during your breaks, as many families as we can do. Does this appeal to you?”

“Definitely, Professor,” Granger said firmly. Patil and Brown were nodding, too, thank goodness. “Would I have to tell my Gran?” Longbottom asked.

“You are an adult, Mr Longbottom,” Minerva said. “I cannot control what you do or do not tell Madam Longbottom.”

He nodded. “Then I’ll do it; will you be training us what to say?”

“I’m afraid we don’t have the time for all of that,” said Minerva. “The best I can do is give you a copy of the Firth College brochure to study tonight, and answer any questions in the morning.” She turned to the three remaining students.

“Ms Weasley, Mr Black, Mr Thomas?”

They nodded. “Are my parents doing it, too, Professor?” Weasley asked.

“Yes, and Ronald, Fred and George, as well.” She looked them over one last time to check for indecision—none, good. “Very well—I see from your timetables that you all have at least one free period tomorrow. Please see me after breakfast in the Headmistress office to receive the letters and apparition coordinates for the families you will be visiting this week, and to answer any last minute questions. You may return to your common room now.”

“Goodnight, Professor,” they said, and Minerva gave them a rare smile as they filed out.
“Goodnight—Oh, Mr Thomas?” she said.

“Yes, Professor?”

“I do not need to remind you that even though Mr Finnigan is your bosom friend, that his mother also works for the Ministry, and that under no circumstances can you intimate anything of what I’ve told you to him.”

Thomas looked torn, but he nodded. “Yes, Professor. I promise.”

Minerva nodded. “Good. I’ll expect you right after breakfast tomorrow.”

-Tho arrived at the Headmistress’s office at exactly half-eight. The door at the top of the swirling stairs was already open, and the office was full of people. The Headmistress was there, along with Professors Snape, Sprout, Flitwick, and Sinistra. Smith and his mum were there, along with Hannah Abbott and Wayne Hopkins of Hufflepuff, standing near Professor Sprout. Padma Pati, Su Li, Morag McDougal, Terry Boot, Stephen Cornfoot, and Luna Lovegood came from Ravenclaw House.

He, Draco, Daphne, Pansy, and Blaise were the only ones Snape had asked to attend. Why Snape had asked any of them other than Theo was beyond him. Draco, probably, was okay—he was loyal to Harry Black, after all, and Harry would have approved of this—but the others...Theo wasn’t sure. Snape was betting a lot on their being intrigued enough by the prospect not to show their arses to the muggles. Pansy, especially, looked uncomfortably underdressed in her muggle trousers and blouse. Without her fashionable, voluminous bespoke cloaks, she was much more delicate than Theo ever imagined. Her long hair was pulled into a unicorn-tail and she was standing nervously between Professor Snape and Daphne. Daphne didn’t look much better, but at least she had a few squib relatives who lived in the muggle world, and she looked somewhat more comfortable in her muggle pant-suit. All of the students, Theo was glad to see, had at least been properly instructed on transfiguring their robes into current muggle styles, although Wayne Hopkins’ denim trousers were a very pale white-washed colour that Theo was pretty sure stopped being fashionable about ten years ago.

Hermione and the other chosen Gryffindors entered and Theo smiled at her when she met his eyes. They would be okay, he thought. It would take a lot of work on his part, but he was more than willing to put it in. He raised his hand and waved to Black when he nodded to Theo, and several pairs of eyes zeroed in on Theo’s hand.

“Mr Nott,” Professor Snape hissed. “What in Circe’s name is that on your hand?”

“Betrothal contract, Professor,” Theo said. Every eye that wasn’t already on him turned to him at that point. The Slytherins, especially, were scandalised, but the Hufflepuffs looked vaguely impressed, and the Ravenclaws—well, they always looked intrigued. Hermione’s eyes were wide. She closed her fingers into a loose fist, rubbing them along her palm. She’d left hers glamoured, but Theo didn’t care—he was more than willing to wear their intentions alone. Hermione was a good match, and while his family might’ve been able to find a better bred wife for him, they would have almost certainly been unable to find someone well-bred and even half as smart or pretty as Hermione.

The Headmistress blinked several times, mouth parted. She cleared her throat. “I think we’re all here,” she said at last. She waved her wand and the stack of envelopes on her desk rose and floated towards all the people in the room, sorting themselves as they went. Theo received two envelopes, as did all the other seventh years. The handful of sixth years in the room took one each, and the teachers all got five. He looked down at the sparkling green-inked address on his first envelope.
He wouldn’t be able to visit his second family until at least tomorrow, but his envelope for Crispin Peabody, in London, fortunately also contained apparation coordinates.

“Each of the families I’ve handed out school letters for today are expected to be at home, so you should have no trouble locating them. You will be flooing to Hogsmeade, Eweforic Alley, Fairyfield, or Diagon Alley, from where you will apparate to your destinations; your return trip will be via floo or apparatation to Hogsmeade, and then taking a carriage to the school. You will politely introduce yourselves to the muggle families and you will not do anything to frighten them. It is perfectly acceptable to explain that you are a student volunteer, and you must of course answer any questions they have honestly, but I advise you to not bring up the political climate today—that is better left to a professor or Madam Smith once the family has already been informed of their child’s magical ability. If there are no questions, please line up at the floo, and do not dawdle. I will only excuse lateness of a few minutes to any subsequent classes you have today.”

Theo queued up behind Hermione. She quirked a grin at him, but said nothing, and this time, it was okay, because she wasn’t avoiding him—they were just comfortable enough not to have to talk all the time. “Fairyfield,” she said, stepping into the flames. When she was gone, Theo followed, and stepped out at the Leaky Cauldron moments later. He straightened his navy and grey striped jumper and checked that he didn’t have any soot on him in the mirror posted by the muggle-side door, right next to the ‘Are you muggle appropriate? Check before you go!’ poster that reminded him,

- **Hats:** Muggles don’t wear pointed hats! Take yours off or transfigure it to look like one of the options below.
- **Cloaks:** Under no circumstances should cloaks be worn in the muggle world. See our handy transfiguration guide below for appropriate alternatives when the weather is inclement.
- **Shoes:** Wizards are advised to remove the heel on shoes; witches may leave heeled shoes intact, but may choose to alter the style, as shown below.
- **Colours:** Normal muggles only wear one side of the colour wheel at a time. (Green and red is only appropriate during December for muggles.) Common combinations displayed in the guide below.
- **Accessories:** Wizards are advised to transfigure galleon purses into one of the foldable options displayed; witches may choose to add a shoulder strap to theirs.
- **Wands:** Please remember to keep wands concealed at all times.

He should be okay, he thought. Hermione’d checked his outfit out last night and okayed it after a few tweaks. He pulled out his wand and apparated to his coordinates, finding himself behind a chip shop only a few hundred feet from his muggle-born’s street. He made his way there, ducking through the muggles walking up and down the street, and trying not to show how marvelled he was with the seamless paving on their roads—not cobblestone at all, but some sort of created material. How had muggles found one rock that long?

Bradwell Lane was lined with townhouses, each differentiated by different design themes—one was brick-faced, and it merged into another with shingles, and another painted blue. Number Eighteen was red brick with a freshly-painted red door. Theo stepped up to the door and knocked hesitantly; his hands were shaking just a little bit from nervousness, and he moved them awkwardly from his hair to his pockets to his face while he waited for the door to be answered, unsure what to do with
them. When the door opened, it was his muggle-born standing on the other side. The boy was about seven, perhaps, and he looked up at Theo with unimpressed brown eyes.

“Who are you?” he said.

Theo offered a smile. “My name’s Theodore Nott; are your Mum and Dad home?”

“Mum is,” said the boy. “Wait here.” He shut the door again, and Theo listened to the running footsteps inside as he went to get his mum and bring her back with him. A moment later, the door opened again, and a woman smiled at him questioningly. She was nearly as tall as Theo himself.

“Hello?” she said. “Can I help you?”

Theo put on his best smile. “Mrs Caper?” She nodded. “Yes, my name’s Theodore Nott, and I’m a student volunteer representing a special school that’s taken an interest in your son, Elliot.”

She looked vaguely alarmed; her eyes flicked down to the brown-eyed boy, and back to Theo. “Elliot?” she said. “Is this regarding his rugby?”

“Not exactly,” Theo said. “May I come in?”

Hesitantly, after looking him over rather more thoroughly to assure herself he wasn’t carrying any weapons, she stepped back and opened the door wide enough for him to step through. The inside of the house was tidy and well-appointed, and he took a seat on the leather chair when Mrs Caper invited him to do so. “I’ll get tea,” she said, and disappeared into the kitchen with Elliot, returning a few moments later with the tray.

When they were settled, Theo opened his mouth, and found that nothing would come out. How, exactly, was he supposed to broach this subject? He chuckled, and Mrs Caper’s eyes widened in alarm. “Sorry,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s just that this is my first time doing this, and I’m a little tongue-tied.”

“What school did you say you were from?” asked Mrs Caper. Elliot curled up next to her on the couch and she wrapped an arm around him.

Deciding that it might be better to let the brochure do the talking for him, Theo retrieved it from his pocket and passed it to the woman. “I’m a seventh year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in Scotland, and I’m representing our new primer school, opening this summer, the Firth College for Young Witches and Wizards.”

There was a heavy pause. “What?” she finally said. “I think I misheard you—”

“You did not,” Theo said, smiling slightly. He nodded to the brochure. “Take a look.” As she flipped it open and started scanning the words, he said, “Elliot is one of the rare children born to non-magical parents who has the gift of magic.”

“Magic!” Elliot said, excitedly. “I can do magic?”

“You can,” Theo said, grinning at him. “You’ll learn how at Firth and, when you turn eleven, Hogwarts.”

“This is nonsense,” said Mrs Caper. “What kind of prank is this? Do you know how heartbroken Elliot will be when he realises that this is all just a big joke? You can tell your mates that the joke is over.”
“It’s not a joke,” Theo said quickly. “I promise—may I demonstrate?”

Mrs Caper rolled her eyes, mouth pressed into a thin line. No answer at all was better than saying ‘no’ specifically, Theo figured; so, carefully—so as not to scare them—he pulled his wand from his sleeve and showed it to them. “My wand,” he explained. “As a wizard, Elliot will also have one. If it’s all right with you, I can show you a simple spell.”

“I wanna see!” Elliot said excitedly.

“Avis!” Theo said. Four small canaries sprung from his wand and fluttered around the room in confusion. Elliot squealed in delight, and jumped up on the couch, reaching for them, though they avoided his grasp skilfully.

Mrs Caper’s mouth had dropped open, and her eyes were fixed on the canaries. One alighted on top of what appeared to be an antique china plate collection, so Theo dismissed them with a Finite before there could be any accidents. “Does that help?” he asked.

She looked back to him. “Any stage magician can do that. You’ve come prepared with a set of tricks, and if we watched them enough times, we’d figure out how you did it.”

“I’m afraid not,” Theo said, smiling. “Magic is very real. Why don’t you suggest something for me to do, so that I won’t be able to use any tricks I’ve come prepared with.”

Elliot looked at his mum with big eyes. “I wanna fly,” he said. “Tell him to make me fly.”

“Elliot, darling, you can’t really fly,” she said.

“Not without a broom, no,” Theo agreed. “But I can make him float.”

He could see the warring emotions on her face—she was likely thinking that magic was of course not real, and tempted to let him try it just to prove she was right, but then her eyes flicked back to where the canary had landed, and he knew she was thinking what if? Guessing her hesitation, Theo added, “Not too high, of course. Nothing dangerous.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Mrs Caper nodded, and Elliot made a noise that sounded like he might’ve exploded inside from excitement. Theo stifled a laugh as the boy pulled his legs in to sit cross-legged, and sat up straight in preparation. He moved his wand slowly to show them, and spoke clearly, “Wingardium Leviosa”. Elliot rose a few inches from the couch, and Theo guided him higher up with his wand.

“I’m floating!”

Mrs Caper jumped off the couch and grabbed his waist with her hand. “He’s floating!” she said. “Good heavens! He’s floating! Don’t let him fall!”

“He won’t fall,” Theo said, but he guided Elliot back to the couch to save her blood pressure. As soon as his bum touched the couch, Elliot bounced started bouncing in excitement. Merlin, he was a vibrant little fellow. “Well?”

Mrs Caper picked the brochure back up. “It’s really real?” she asked.

“It’s really real,” said Theo. “The brochure explains the cost of attendance for the Firth College, which is our new day school for wizards and witches ages five to ten. At age eleven, Elliot will receive a letter for Hogwarts, which is a boarding school, where he will attend until the age of seventeen.”
“You say all this like it’s a done deal,” Mrs Caper said.

“I’ll be very frank with you, Mrs Caper—an untrained wizard child can be very dangerous if he never learns to control his magic. I don’t want to pressure you, but as muggles—that’s non-magical people—you and your husband don’t have the means to help him with this.”

“I don’t have a husband,” Mrs Caper said. She laughed suddenly. “I always said that Elliot was my magic baby—I used a donor, you see.”

Theo did not see—not exactly, anyway—but he smiled and nodded just the same. A donor? She couldn’t mean—his eyes widened slightly. She did mean that. Muggles! They had their own brand of magic, didn’t they? It was really Miss Caper, then.

“I see,” he said. “Well, with training, Elliot will be able to harness his magic and use it safely. If you choose to send him to the Firth College, he’ll get an introduction to it and learn the basics of witchcraft and wizardry before he’s fully immersed in our culture via Hogwarts. He’ll meet other children like himself and learn the basics of many of our crafts.”

“Like what?” asked Elliot.

“Ah—well, like making potions,” said Theo. “And of course how to use a wand, and ride a broom. Things like that.”

“How will Elliot get a job when he leaves school?” asked Ms Caper. “What about University?”

“We do have our own society, Ms Caper,” said Theo. “He will leave Hogwarts a fully-trained wizard, and be able to choose from among any number of magical career paths. We do have our own universities—Oxford has a magical division, in fact, where my fiancée intends to go—and there’s also vocational academies like the Auror Academy—our version of your police, I believe. They stop criminals and such. However, if Elliot eventually chose to work in a muggle profession, the Ministry of Magic maintains connections with the muggle Ministry, which would allow him to have his records adjusted appropriately.”

“I see here that the cost of attendance at this day school is six-hundred-fifty galleons per term. Surely this doesn’t mean pirate galleons? Is this a form of currency?”

“I thought you might ask that,” Theo said, pulling out another scrap of parchment. “I did some conversions before I came. It comes out to about three-thousand, two-hundred-fifty pounds. There are need-based scholarships available, of course, and Hogwarts does offer tuition stipends for athletes to the Quidditch team—you said Elliot plays rugby?”

“He does,” she said, scruffing his hair and smiling. “Quite good.”

“Quidditch is our main sport—a bit like rugby, but played on brooms. That’s something Elliot could look forward to.” His pocket watch chirped and he stood, regretfully. “Unfortunately, I’m only a student volunteer representative, and I have class in ten minutes. Would it be all right for myself or another school representative—perhaps one of the professors—to visit you again this week to discuss this in more detail?”

“That would be fine,” she said. “But—how will you get to class in ten minutes? You said it was in Scotland.”

Theo smiled. “Another bit of magic: apparation—I think you call it teleporting? In the meantime, let me point out that a representative can be reached through muggle post at this address here,” he said, pointing to the contact information at the back of the brochure. “Oh! And here’s the most important
bit of all—I can’t believe I almost forgot to give it to you.”

He handed Elliot his Firth College letter. “This letter has all of your supplies and uniform information, plus your acceptance letter, more information about the school, and a brief discussion of all the classes that will be offered. Did you have any questions?”

“No joke, I promise,” said Theo. “Myself or another volunteer will visit and answer all the questions you’ve thought up. It will likely be one of the actual school professors, however, as they’ll be able to answer better than myself.” He shook her hand and then bent down to shake Elliot’s, too. “See you soon, Elliot. Ms Caper—would you mind if I disapparated from your parlour?” She shook her head mutely, and with a step and a turn, Theo apparated away.

Severus came straight from his meeting with the muggle family and apparated to the Leaky Cauldron. Room six, Black had said. That’s where she was staying. He nodded absently to Tom as he strode past and took the stairs two at a time, barely noticing it with his long legs. When he reached the third storey landing, he knocked briskly at the door marked ‘SIX’. A moment later, it swung open, and though she looked nothing like Lily, he’d know those eyes anywhere.

“It’s really you,” he said. She stepped back to let him in and he did so without hesitation. The room was barren and lifeless like all the rooms at the Leaky Cauldron; the last time he’d been in one of these had been the night he took the Dark Mark. He’d been too coward to go home and face his mother. He sunk down on the edge of the bed and drank in the sight of her—her hair was much darker, but the bright redness of her own hair was trying to shine through, and he could see it in the light from the windows. She was still tall—taller than she had been, in fact, and still slender, though not athletically so as she’d once been. Her fingers were longer. Her hips were thinner. Her cheekbones were higher, and her mouth was thinner, but Circe, did Severus think she was still breathtaking. It was the eyes—it had always been the eyes.

“He said Dumbledore was dead.”

Severus nodded. “Yes—two weeks ago.”

Lily nodded distractedly. She looked out the window, blinked several times in rapid succession, and then swiped at her eyes. After a moment, she sank down on the bed next to him. “This is my punishment,” she said.

“How in Merlin’s name could this be a punishment? You’re alive. You’re unharmed.”

“Because,” she said, “I’ve handled this poorly, and Harry will spurn me. All this work, and my son won’t ever want to see me.”

Severus felt his eyebrows furrow in a combination of confusion and disgust. As if the stupid boy would ever give up a chance to know his mother. The very thought was ridiculous. “You underestimate him,” he said, which was where the disgust came in. “And you are blind if you think this is really punishment.”

“How could it not be?”

“Do you really think the Dark Lord would have put an act of humanity on display for his Death
Eaters to see? He gave you life as a token of appreciation for Harry, not for you, nor for me.”

Lily gave him a dour look. “And what, exactly, should I do with this precious life, then? I’ve been dead sixteen years—I don’t even recognise half of Diagon Alley.”

Severus shrugged. “That is inconsequential,” he said. “You will get a wand, a job, and a life, and I will help you. We’ll start with the wand. Get up.”

“She gave me fifty galleons,” she said ruefully. “The situation’s rather ironic, isn’t it? My seventeen-year-old son giving me spending money...I should have been the one giving him pocket money, but instead, he handles all his own finances from a trust fund provided by two dead parents and one live one.”

“You aren’t dead, Lily,” said Severus, rolling his eyes. “You’d better get used to it. Now get up—best friend or not, I won’t spend the afternoon listening to you being petulant; we’ve got years to do that, but today, we need to get you settled in.”

She smiled at him. “You’d better start calling me Capella, then. I’m not a Lily any longer.”

Severus paused on his way to the door, studying her. No, she wasn’t a Lily any more—she wasn’t the ethereal beauty that she’d been in her first life, but that didn’t matter really. Not to Severus—after all, he would win no beauty contests himself. But that was his best—and only—friend in there, and after all these years, in this new body, with sixteen years of being dead to alter her outlook on life, she was a new kind of beauty: a strange, grave kind of beauty—dark and slender with heavy-lidded green eyes and a sad mouth; a long, straight nose and slender potion-making fingers; bony shoulders and heavy dark hair all around them—neither black nor red, but a sullen auburn that flickered like dark fire when the light from the window caught it. She was right—she could not be called a Lily any longer; she was much too dark.

“Capella, then,” said Severus. “It suits you. Or would you prefer Ella?”

She scrunched her nose up, so reminiscent of the Lily she’d been, and unusual on her sharp new face. “No,” she said. “I’m much too old to be an Ella. Perhaps Elle.”

“Too dark for an Elle,” said Severus.

She walked to the mirror and peered into it for several long, quiet moments. He watched her eyes as they studied her new body the way he’d just done. She sighed, but it was not a sad sigh, merely tired and jaded. “Capella,” she said at last. “That is all I can ever be now—a Capella Black.”

Severus grinned, his lips parting slowly with the strange movement. “A capella,” he said. “That suits you even more. Can you still...?”

“Spell sing?” she asked. “Yes. I did it last night to lock the door of this room.”

Severus nodded. “Good. I still use that counter-spell you taught me for healing cuts, but yours were so much stronger than mine ever will be. I should be grateful that any at all of my mother’s ability passed on to me.”

“You do have a lovely voice, for spell singing or not,” she said.

He turned away, feeling his face flush uncomfortably. He cleared his throat. “Let us go,” he said. “Capella Black needs a new wand.”

She smiled at him slowly, scooped up her coin purse from the nightstand, and met him at the door.
“You know,” she said. “You were my first friend, too, Sev.” It was unnerving having her nearly looking him in the eye now—as Lily, she’d been a half foot or so shorter than him, and as Weasley, she’d barely reached his chest; but Bellatrix had stood at nearly six foot, and Capella Black did, too. She still looked up to meet his eyes, but distance was much shorter.

Not knowing what to say to that, Severus opened the door and led her out. He locked it for her, as she still didn’t have a registered wand, and followed her down the stairs and into the back courtyard of Diagon Alley. He tapped the bricks and tried very hard not to let his heart run away with him. He’d never had a chance with Lily, but Capella was a new person, and with her came the chance for Severus to try again.

And hopefully win this time.

No one in Diagon Alley paid them any mind, but then, no one ever paid Severus any mind, and it went a long way towards easing his mind that indeed no one else would recognise her as formerly Bellatrix Black Lestrange. A distant cousin surely, but not the fearsome Death Eater herself, and therefore, safe from notice. After all, the Blacks were a long respected family with many offshoots and another one wouldn’t even be worth noting.

They pushed into Ollivander’s shop shortly before elevenses. She looked around carefully, as if trying to both remember and memorise the shop front. “I should have been the one to bring Harry here,” she whispered to him. “Do you know who did?”

“Hagrid, I believe,” said Severus, and wondered, not for the first time, why it had been Hagrid who Dumbledore had chosen to collect the boy. Severus had offered to go, more out of duty to the life debt he owed James Potter and a masochistic desire to see if Harry Potter had grown to look like the woman he’d still grieved over, but the Headmaster had not allowed it. Perhaps it had been for the best, given what Severus now knew about him; he would have terrified the child.

Lily—no, Capella; she was Capella Black now—nodded. “Hagrid was always very kind to me.”

“I’m sure,” said Severus.

“Still, I would’ve liked to have brought him myself. It’s not every day that a child gets their first wand, after all.”

The backroom door creaked open and Ollivander stepped out, his pale blue eyes as unnerving now as Severus remembered them being in 1971. Aurelius Ollivander looked like a man trapped in a single point in time—nothing about his face or body, or indeed even his shop, ever seemed to change. The old wizard looked them over with interest.

“Severus Snape,” he said. “Acacia with dragon heartstring; twelve inches precisely; brittle. That wand suited you very well twenty-seven years ago—tell me, does it still?”

“I am still fastidious, precise, and brittle, if that is what you mean, Master Ollivander,” he said.

Ollivander gave one of his strange half-smiles. “So I see,” he said. He turned to her. “I served you once, in another life. Tell me what wand chose you then.”

“Willow, unicorn hair, ten and one quarter inches,” she said.

Ollivander’s bushy white eyebrows rose curiously. “Swishy?” he asked. She nodded. “Ahh, I do remember you, Lily Evans. But I can see right away that you are not the same person even inside any longer; perhaps you are a little brittle, too.”
“Perhaps,” she agreed. “Death does that to one. It is Capella Black nowadays, Master Ollivander.”

He nodded, as if this were quite the normal conversation. “Yes, I quite agree. And you will need a new wand to match. Let me see here.” He flicked his wand and a half-dozen dusty wand boxes flew down from the shelves and lined themselves up on the counter. He opened one, seemingly at random, and thrust it in her hand. “Try this one—apple wood and unicorn hair, an unusual combination.”

She swished it, but the sparks it emitted were decidedly desolate.

“No, no, not at all,” said Ollivander, already opening a new box. “Apple is all wrong for you, all wrong indeed. Try this—you sorted Ravenclaw, did you not? Walnut and unicorn hair, seven and three-quarter inches.”

More sparks came out this time, but they were a bit vicious and one caught Severus’s hand, and gave him quite the nasty shock.

“Goodness Merlin, what am I thinking? Unicorn is not right for you at all anymore.” His hand hovered over two boxes, finally selecting the one on the right. He handed her this wand, saying, “Redwood, dragon heartstring.”

She swished once, and the sparks that came out this time were decidedly less violent, but still Ollivander was shaking his head. “This one is very close—redwood is often the wandwood of wizards who overcome great odds and turn catastrophes into blessings, but I think, perhaps…” He took the redwood wand back and handed her the wand from the second box, this one a dark brown, nearly a foot long. “Fir wood, dragon heartstring, eleven and seven-eighths inches—quite resilient.”

She swished it once and a shower of navy and bronze stars billowed out and drifted downwards, sparkling. She turned to Severus and grinned, the same happy, childish grin he remembered from when they’d come together for their wands in 1971, and his heart lurched at the similarity of this situation. They had come full circle.

“This is the one,” she said—the exact same thing she’d said the time before.

Ollivander nodded. “Yes, I think so—you have some darkness in you now that you never had before, and the dragon heartstring will adapt to that; the fir, I think, has been in your destiny for some time; I do believe, Madam Black, that had you ever needed a replacement for your willow wand, that you would have found a fir to replace it—the wood is particularly suited for those of a focused, strong mind, and not unwilling to use whatever means are at their disposals for succeeding in their quests. You’ll find it’s also quite good for Transfigurations.”

She met his eyes. “Yes, that’s me.”

“Well then…seven galleons, please.”

When she’d paid and they’d left the wand shop, Severus decided that there would not be a better time to broach the topic he’d been sitting on, ever since learning that it might be possible to keep her here—alive and on this plane of existence.

“Lunch?” he said. “There is a café—”

“The Tea Leaf?” she asked. “We haven’t been there in ages.”

“Of course,” he said. “It’s still off Main Street, just passed the owl shop.” As they walked, he mulled over the best way to bring it up, and found that there likely wasn’t one better than his usual approach,
which was quite direct. But he could at least wait until they were seated and ordered. The lunch
crowd had not yet filled the place up, and as if by some omen, she was able to secure for them the
table facing the street that they used to sit in every year when they would come shopping for their
school supplies—well, before he’d said that terrible thing and run her off for good. He’d known how
she hated that word; had just used it to spite her and her muggle-born Gryffindor friend that she’d
been sitting with. They each ordered a cup of Earl Grey with lemon—no milk, no sugar—and a
sandwich, and Severus marveled at how wonderful it was to have this with her again, their strange
minutia similarities.

He cast a *Muffliato* spell over their table to mask their conversation. She smiled widely—her teeth
white and somehow sharper-looking than Lily Evans’s little square ones. “I remember that spell!” she
said. “You made it in fifth year…you’re still using it?”

He smiled wryly. “I’ve noticed some of the students using it, as well. It seems I’ve become
anonymously immortal.”

“But how would they’ve learned it?”

Severus shrugged. “My old potions book has been in the storage cabinet since I started teaching.
Students use it on occasion, when they’ve forgotten their own.”

She laughed. “It’s fascinating; to think that you will live on in your teenage spells.”

“It’s quite a good spell,” he said. “Extremely useful.”

“Yes,” she agreed, still smiling. Her green eyes sparkled just like he remembered. Was this real? Was
she really here? Alive? For good? They could start over, and he could hold on to her this time; he
would hold on to her this time. “You were always so ingenious. Why you didn’t sort into Ravenclaw
with me, I’ll never know.”

He smirked. “Too clever for Ravenclaw.”

She smacked his hand, and he caught himself smiling again—a full-fledged grin. It was now or
never, he decided. “Ollivander said the fir wand would be good for Transfigurations.”

Just like she had when they were eleven, she pulled out her fir and dragon heartstring wand and laid
it on the table, studying the fine grain of the wood and the intricately carved detail along the handle
with great care. She ran her finger along the length of it, long nails scraping. Bellatrix had always
worn hers so very long. Frowning, she must have noticed the length for the first time, for she picked
up her new wand and cast her first spell with it.

He laughed. “Your first spell, and you chose a nail clipping charm.”

“Long nails are unsuitable for potions,” she said. “But yes—he did say the wand would be good for
Transfigurations, which McGonagall would’ve been glad for, as I was never top in that class.”

“You were never bottom,” said Severus.

She smirked. “No—I was usually second or third, but you beating me was always so maddening.”

“Still, better than most, and by a large margin, as I recall.”

“Perhaps,” she said. “Why?”

He shrugged. “It is only that with the Headmaster…with Dumbledore dead, Minerva has been raised
to Headmistress, and she can no longer teach Transfigurations as well.”

Lily—Capella—tilted her head sideways, thoughtful. “What are you suggesting?”

“It would give you a place to work, a place to live…you would have four months in close proximity to your son, to try to build a relationship with him…you would be close to him.” You would be close to me, he thought.

“I never thought of teaching,” she said. “Is it difficult?”

“Extremely,” he said.

She laughed. “I can’t say the thought of having a friend nearby doesn’t appeal…do you really think she’d hire me? I’ve no credentials.”

“Minerva is not the type to hire a Gilderoy Lockhart, but regardless of how fit and spry she is, she’s quite desperate to find a replacement for her classes…they are beginning to take a toll on her.”

“Goodness—Gilderoy Lockhart? The one who won Most Charming Smile in ’81?”

“And several years after that,” Severus confirmed. “Dumbledore hired him to teach DADA the ’92-’93 school year. Suffice it to say, he was not as charming in person.”

“I imagine not,” she said. “The man looked as if he hadn’t two brain cells to rub together.”

“At least he had his smile,” Severus said dryly.

She pressed her lips together, suppressing a laugh. “The Dark Lord said my records are on file in the Ministry, but I really have no idea what they say about me. I do hope he didn’t say I was from France; my French is ghastly, and if McGonagall were to check up on that, I doubt I’d be able to provide a convincing display.”

Severus shook his head. “No, I checked before I came to fetch you. You’re American, I’m sorry to say.”

“Well, that’s fine,” she said. “I was American to begin with. I’m sure I could affect an accent for long enough for me to adapt to a British one. Do I have any skills or work experience?”

“None at all,” said Severus. “You are a Black, after all.”

“Then what am I allegedly doing over here?”

He shrugged. “I’m sure you could claim a falling out with your family for wearing muggle trousers, and now you’re here to start over with a more tolerable side of your family.”

The smile dropped from her face. “Sirius,” she said.

Severus felt his own mood fall as well. Of course—Sirius Black. How could he have let his happiness over her being alive cause him to forget such an, unfortunately important, detail? Sirius Black was head of the Black line in Great Britain, and of course he would be aware of any cousins coming to stay. The small spark of hopefulness that had been growing within Severus died a painful, bitter death.

“You’ll have to tell him,” he said quietly. “He’ll know you aren’t a real Black—and if nothing else, Regulus will find out, if not through his own research, then via the Dark Lord.”
She looked down at her hands, frowning. The waitress came and set their sandwiches in front of them, and retreated without a word, recognizing a privacy spell when she entered it. Capella picked at her food, but didn’t make a move to eat it. After several long minutes, she looked back up at him, and her eyes were determined.

“I don’t know how to feel,” she said.

“It is fine that you still love him; I’m sure that he will jump at the chance to be with you once again —”

“No,” she said. “That’s just it. I don’t remember feeling romantic love for either him or James. Death somehow…muted that. I don’t think I could love him that way again, but he is Harry’s father, and he deserves to know.”

“Of course,” said Severus. He tried to stamp down the spark of hope before it began rebuilding, but he was doing a poor job of it. “Not to mention that you are now, for all intents and purposes, his first cousin.”

She shuddered. “The Blacks, unfortunately, never seemed to have a problem with first cousins.” She swirled her finger above her tea and watched the liquid in the cup following her movements. “I’ll tell him, but I’ll put in an owl to McGonagall today anyway. Could we somehow work in a prior acquaintance between the two of us if she asks for a reference? I can’t imagine how I’ll get one otherwise…unless she accepts reference letters from the Dark Lord. Merlin knows I’ve done enough work for him.”

“I will tell her to expect your owl,” said Severus. He finished his sandwich and caught the waitress’s eye for their cheque. “I’m afraid I can’t stay any longer—I’ve got muggle families to visit to deliver school letters.”

“Already?” she asked. “Don’t the professors usually wait until summer holidays to deliver letters to the muggle-borns?”

“This is for the new pre-Hogwarts day school,” he said. “There’s a full press release in today’s paper that will tell you more about it. Suffice it to say that it is of the utmost importance that we get these done within the week. I’ve done two already this morning, and I’ve another scheduled before I have first year Potions to teach this afternoon.”

He paid their cheque and they stood. “I’ll pick up a copy of the *Prophet*, then,” she said. “I may stop by the tailor’s and the cobbler’s and pick up some essentials.”

“I’m sure that Narcissa would send you Bellatrix’s wardrobe,” said Severus. “No doubt she wants the reminders away.”

“Yes,” she said. “I’ll have to alter those as well—Bellatrix’s style was much too severe for me—but in the mean time, I’d give Narcissa another week to grieve before she’s put face to face with me.”

“Perhaps wise,” said Severus. They exited the café, and Severus was about to say goodbye, when she stopped him and wrapped her arms around him, pressing her cheek against his shoulder. “You’re the reason I’m alive,” she said. “I do thank you for it. You were always the best friend I could’ve had.”

He felt himself hugging her back so tightly he marvelled he hadn’t broken her. “You were mine,” he said. “It was worth any risk.”

She stepped back and looked into his face. “Do you always pull your hair back these days?”
He shook his head. "No, I only did it for the muggles and when I’m brewing. It seems more in line
with muggle fashion these days. Muggle men aren’t wearing their hair long anymore like they were
in the seventies and eighties."

“It suits you,” she said. “Makes you look so much more human…approachable.”

He couldn’t help smiling. “Not looking approachable is good for teaching.”

She laughed. “I would’ve thought that teachers were meant to be there for students’ needs.”

“Needs, yes…whims, no.”

She nodded. “Well, regardless, I do like it. Now, be on your way, Severus Snape.”

Nodding, Severus apparated away, the image of almost-not-quite Lily still visible behind his eyelids.

The owl that landed on the post-box next to the Harpers’ front door was of the non-descript barn owl
type typically employed by the Diagon Alley post office. The Harpers themselves—Mrs, Mr, and
their muggle-born daughter, Haley—were startled enough by its landing to gasp, and in Haley’s
case, to squeak. Harry favoured her with a conspiratorial smile. “Have you seen an owl up close
before, Haley?”

“They’ve got some at the zoo,” she said. “Has that one got a letter for you, like you said, Harry?”

He nodded, and pointed to the owl’s leg. It held it up obligingly, displaying the folded parchment,
secured with a red ribbon—and likely a couple spells, as well. “See here—he carries the letter on his
leg.” He fished out an owl treat from his pocket, making a mental note to order some more for
Hedwig, as he was running low, and retrieved his letter. The handwriting was unfamiliar. “And
you’ve got to give them a treat when they deliver for you, or else they might get feisty.”

Haley giggled. “Will owls deliver our mail from now on?”

“Nope—just letters to magical people. When you go off to Hogwarts, you can send your mum and
dad letters by owl, but until then, you’ll be able to write to all the friends you’re going to make at
Firth College and send it to them by owl.”

She grinned. “I can’t wait!”

The owl, paid and provided with a snack, flew off, and Harry turned to the Harpers. “Haley’s a
smart girl—she’s going to do really well at Firth, I’m sure.”

“Are you sure that they’ll have need-based funding available?” Mr Harper asked, voice low, for
probably the tenth time since Harry explained his daughter’s magical ability to him and her need of a
school that could help her harness it.

“Like I said, we’re a relatively small community, and there are a lot of old families with more money
than they know what to do with—helping kids who really need it is one way they use it. I wouldn’t
be surprised if there was more funding available than there were students who needed it. Haley’s
muggle school marks are good, you’ve said, and that’ll also go a long way to ensuring that her
tuition’s fully covered. One of the school representatives will be better able to settle all of that with
you.”

“And what about books and supplies?” he asked.
“I’m sure that there won’t be any problems there, either, Mr Harper,” Harry said. After a moment’s hesitation, he added, “Look—the truth is, I come from two of those families, and I’ll make sure that Haley’s tuition and supplies are covered, regardless of what the school says. As long as you allow it and Haley wants it, she’ll go to Firth College and then Hogwarts; I’ll make sure of it.”

He nodded reluctantly—not the type of man to accept charity, but one who realized that he might have to if he wanted to do right by his only daughter. Harry opened his letter and flipped the envelope over to write his name and floo address on the back. He handed it to Mrs Harper. “After the representatives come to connect your fireplace to the Floo Network, you’ll be able to contact me at this address. They’ll show you how.”

He stepped back, smiling at them. “I do need to get to class, though. My next one is in five minutes.”

“Oh, no, you’ll be late!” Mrs Harper said. “We kept you too long. I’m so sorry, Harry.”

“Not at all,” he said. “In fact, I won’t be late at all.” He winked down at Haley, and said, “We have instant travel—Haley will be able to learn this when she’s seventeen. Goodbye!” Curiously, they waved him goodbye, and Harry turned on the spot, and disappeared with a crack.

When he reappeared at the Hogwarts apparition point just outside the gates, he immediately unfolded the letter the owl had brought him. When he’d pulled it out of its parchment envelope, one word had caught his eye: Capella.

*Mr Harry Black,*

*Hello from the United States! We have not met, but my name is Capella Black, and I am a distant aunt on your father’s side of the family, second cousin, once removed. I am writing to you because I am relocating to Great Britain, and would like to get to know your side of my family. I understand that your father, Sirius Black, is currently Head of the Black family in the UK, but I have been unable to reach him so far. I take it your residence is under an Unplottable. I would be grateful for your assistance in arranging to meet your father, Cousin Sirius, at both of your conveniences.*

*Respectfully yours,*

*Toujours pur,*

*Capella Black*

*New York City, New York*

*United States*

She was going to tell his father. Harry didn’t know if it would be a kindness or a curse. ărăș

“It’s a conspiracy,” Sirius muttered, throwing the evening special edition paper aside in disgust. “I’ve never seen a Minister act with such abandon...well, unless you count Millicent Bagnold, tossing me in Azkaban without a by-your-leave, or Fudge, doing whatever he normally did...or really, well, we’ve not had a good run of Ministers lately, have we?”

Regulus favoured him with an amused look. “There was our great, great, et cetera grandfather, Castor Black in 1614.”

“Him I liked,” Sirius agreed. The floo roared to life and Harry stepped through, dusting himself off. Sirius jumped up, excited, to hug his son and ply him with scones and tea. “You’re early,” he said. “We weren’t expecting you until after classes today.”

“The Headmistress gave me leave to come once I was done with History of Magic,” he said. “The
Slytherin-Ravenclaw Quidditch game was cancelled for the weekend, in light of one of the teams being short a Chaser, and, well."

He ended with a shrug that said all that needed to be said about how the students—and the wizarding world, really—were faring after the attack at the first of the month. Valentine’s Day had passed without fanfare earlier in the week, and the rest of February looked to be as dour as the beginning had been, judging by the papers. Sirius patted his shoulder awkwardly. He was just glad to have Harry home for the weekend; glad for this special privilege that seventh-years could exercise once a term, and that Harry had chosen to spend his free weekend here, with family.

“There’s a reason that I had to come this weekend, though,” he said, and Sirius was immediately on his guard. That sort of talk never boded well.

“What? Why?”

As if in answer, the floo flared to life again, and when the green flames died down, there was a woman stepping out of his kitchen hearth. She looked remarkably familiar, and altogether unknown at the same time.

Harry turned towards her, lips pressed together in a determined line that Sirius knew all too well from his own face. He gestured to the woman awkwardly, arm sort of slack and heavy. “Dad, Uncle Regulus, may I introduce Capella Black.”

Regulus stood, confusion etched into his brow. “Capella?” said Regulus. “I don’t recall a Capella...” He moved forward warily, and stretched his hand out to her. She took it and they shook, and then her eyes moved to Sirius, and he gasped; he’d seen eyes that colour only once before Harry, but that was impossible.

“You wouldn’t have,” said the woman, looking directly at Sirius. “I’m not a real Black.”

“Then who...?” said Regulus in confusion.

“Bellatrix,” Sirius said, brows furrowed. “You look remarkably like our cousin, Bellatrix.”

“But she’s dead,” Regulus said.

“She is,” Capella agreed. “As once was I.” She looked back to Regulus and favoured him with a half-smile that brought a series of half-remembered memories to Sirius’s mind. He couldn’t quite place where he’d seen it before, but he could neither shake the sense of *déjà vu*. “It’s good to see you alive and well, Regulus. You caused me a great deal of trouble trying to keep up with you many years ago.”

“Pardon?” he said.

“Look,” Harry interrupted. “I know that it’s better to ease into things like this, but I’ve a mind to get this over with as soon as possible, because I can barely believe it myself, and I’ve known since Yule.”

“Known what?” asked Sirius.

“She’s my mother,” said Harry, arms folded across his chest, and looking remarkably like a small child trying to hide behind his hands.

“Lily!” Sirius said, feeling all the blood drain from his face.
“But how?” asked Regulus, stepping back in alarm. “You can’t raise the dead.” He’d gone white as a sheet, and Sirius suspected that his little brother knew a thing or two about what happened when the dead were raised.

“Apparently, you can,” said Lily. She looked pointedly at the kitchen table, scattered with newspapers. “May I sit?”

Stunned and silent, except for Harry who was just sullen and silent, they moved to the table, and Sirius ordered tea from little Morty, who was growing quite fast indeed. When they were served, she spoke. “On All Hallows’ Eve of this past year, I found myself connected to a living body. Having spent near on two decades—though it felt like much longer—mouldering in the in-between, neither able to live nor move on, for some reason, I clung to it desperately. A moment later, I found myself waking in the Hogwarts hospital wing. It happens that I’d unwittingly possessed the body of a girl unfortunately critically injured on that day where the Veil is thinnest. Ginny Weasley,” she clarified.

Sirius stiffened. The little Weasley girl! How—how had this happened? How had no one noticed? The girl could have been gravely injured during even the briefest of possessions, and yet she maintained it for three months, apparently no worse the wear.

“Miss Weasley allowed me to share her body while I, with this newfound opportunity to protect my son, attempted to find a way to live separately from her. This did not please the Dark Lord, who had reasons for wanting me out of her body. Through a volley of blackmails and counter-blackmails, it happened that I would continue to inhabit Miss Weasley’s body out of defiance, unless he found a way to give me my own.

“It was Severus and Narcissa who finally came up with the idea to move my soul from Miss Weasley’s body to an empty one left after the Dementor feeding, but then the attack came on Diagon Alley, and I took a Dementor Kiss for Harry, giving Miss Weasley her life back. I was unaware, however, that the Dark Lord witnessed this, and that seeing Miss Weasley Kissing the Dementor instilled in him a particular rage...in punishment, he gave me life within Bellatrix Black.”

“How’s that a punishment?” asked Regulus.

“I find that now that I am alive, I don’t know how to protect Harry as I did when I was dead...and I don’t know how to be alive anymore.” She shrugged. “Severus tells me it is no punishment after all, that it was a gift for Harry, to have his mother.” Here she turned to their son and gave him a small, fragile smile. “And yet,” she said, “that is not my place to decide.”

Sirius stared at her, unblinking, and unable to look away as his world, once again, crashed down all around him.
Infiltration

Chapter by faire_weather

Chapter Summary

In which things start coming together.

Infiltration (n): 1. a method of attack in which small bodies of soldiers or individual soldiers penetrate the enemy's line at weak or unguarded points in order to assemble behind the enemy position and attack it from the rear, harass enemy rear-area installations, etc.

Minerva glanced through the reference letter again. Miss Black had applied with only two, most notably one from Severus Snape, which went a long way in her favour, as Severus rarely had a word of praise for anyone. There was also one from Sirius Black, her third cousin, who claimed that, though he'd only met her recently, found her entirely charming and an asset to the family Black. It was unusual for a lady of good breeding to come with so few reference letters, but Minerva trusted the instincts of these two men, and she was utterly desperate for a replacement to her post.

She flicked her eyes back up to the woman seated across from her. Yes, very definitely a member of the Black family. And the Blacks were known for their unusual and often upsetting manners of treating their own family; it was not difficult to believe that this young woman—for she could not be a day over forty, if that—had chosen to pack up her life and port-key half-way across the world to start again. She was circumspect about her family's status, and Minerva took that to mean that she wasn’t on speaking terms with them any longer. That, she could believe. Easily. Young Sirius Black’s teenage plight came to mind, in fact.

“You’ve just arrived in England, you said?” she asked again, hoping for some small morsel of new information. Her emigration records at the Ministry checked out, but that still didn’t tell Minerva much about her.

Ms Black nodded, and when she spoke, there was a vague hint of American accent, though it sounded as if she were trying very hard to minimise it. “Yes, Headmistress,” she said. “Just last week, in fact. I looked up my cousin Sirius and met his family, and got in touch with an old friend—he’s employed here, too. They indicated that there might be a position open in the Transfigurations department, and I was always a dab hand at the subject so I thought I’d apply.”

Minerva frowned. “I’m afraid that it isn’t a Transfigurations department; there is but one professor per subject at Hogwarts. Could you handle teaching all the students of every year level?”

“Oh, I’m sure I could,” she said. “I admit I’ve never taught before, strictly speaking, but there is little for a woman of my standing to do but read and practise spells I’ll never use, I’m sorry to say. I would welcome the opportunity to do something meaningful with my life.”

“And if you were brought on, how long would you intend to stay?”

“I couldn’t say that I would ever look to leave,” said Ms Black. “Other than my cousin Sirius and his
brother and son, I’ve no family at all here in the UK, and I’d assume not broadcast where I am to my own family, if it were up to me. I left no spouse or child there, nor any career, unless you count taking up donations for the Witch’s Civic Club. I brought no baggage with me; if I’m to remain a spinster for the rest of my years, which it looks like I will, then I’d like to at least do it in the good company of fellow academics and children.”

Goodness, Minerva thought. She wasn’t sure whether this woman was overly optimistic or overly pessimistic. She was a strange one, that was for sure. And truth be told, she didn’t seem overly excited about the prospect of teaching at all, but perhaps that was for the best—perhaps Ms Black was coming into this with a realistic mind, and Minerva always did appreciate pragmatism over the silly infatuations of youth.

And she really, really needed someone to take over teaching Transfigurations. She was only 72 years old, and much too young to be as tired as she was these past weeks. Well, Minerva thought, she couldn’t be any worse than Gilderoy Lockhart, could she?

She set the reference letters aside. “When could you start?”

“I have no obligations,” said Ms Black, “save to settle up at the Leaky Cauldron. I am available at your pleasure.”

Minerva nodded briskly. “I admit I am in great need of a Transfigurations professor as soon as possible, and applications have been few. I would like to bring you on beginning Monday, for a probationary period. The lesson plan is already in place for the year; you would only need follow it. At the end of the school year, we would evaluate your performance and if we are both in accordance, negotiate a contract for subsequent years at such time. For the probationary period, I am prepared to offer you the standard adjunct salary of 6400 galleons per year, plus room and board. Would you find that acceptable?”

Ms Black’s eyes had gone wide, as if she had not really expected to be offered the position. She probably hadn’t—the old families had a habit of never holding jobs. She cleared her throat after a moment of silence. “More than acceptable,” she said. “Thank you.”

Minerva smiled, and hoped that she hadn’t just jinxed herself with another Lockhart.

It says here,” Voldemort said, eyes roving over the printed words, “that two suspected members of the Order of the Phoenix have been apprehended and brought in for questioning.” He looked to Harry for confirmation, and Harry looked back at him steadily.

“I read that, too.”

“One wonders what the Ministry thinks to gain by arresting members of the Order of the Phoenix.”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know. Dumbledore’s dead,” he said pointedly. “Who’s around to tell me anything?”

Voldemort looked back at his paper, disinterested. “I was given to understand that even he told you little.”

“Story of my life,” Harry muttered.

“Hmm,” said Voldemort. “And how would you like a different life?”

“How do you mean?”
“It occurs to me that our lives could be very different indeed. For instance, had I ignored the prophecy altogether, likely nothing would have ever come of it...and surely nothing with you. Your father—Sirius Black, that is—defied me only twice before I cast the Killing Curse on you. It was not until last year, when I came to your home at River House that he defied me for the third time. Prophecies are tricky things, you remember...by believing in them, we have made them true.”

Harry was silent for a moment. “I never would have been the Boy Who Lived?”

“The other boy—Longbottom, was it?” said Voldemort. “Yes, it would’ve been him. Eventually, it would have come to pass that I marked him as equal in some way, but by putting our hands in fate, the world has adapted the prophecy to mean only you. Prophecies are complicated, but they always come true, one way or another.”

“Why are you telling me this?” asked Harry. He felt a surge of anger...and with it, a surge of...relief? Relief that it had been him, after all? What would his life had been like if he wasn’t the Boy Who Lived? He didn’t know how not to be him.

“Because you will need the knowledge one day, I’m sure.”

Harry began to pace, useless as it was not being corporeal, but his mind had been flying at a whirlwind speed for months now, and he would do anything to calm it even a little. “What else does the Prophet say?” he asked.

Voldemort flipped it back to the front page, and Harry could see the large wizarding photograph of the Minister, Rufus Scrimgeour, scowling from it. He wasn’t sure he even wanted to know what kind of article had caused the Dark Lord to rouse him from sleep, at not even seven in the morning.

“There’s been a new law passed,” said Voldemort, and Harry’s stomach dropped. It couldn’t be...it was too soon. “The Muggle Protection Act, they’re calling it.”

Harry’s distrust of Voldemort was still there, but underneath it all was the constantly-growing feeling that there was more than one evil in the world right now, and if he wanted to do the right thing, he was going to have to take Draco’s—and Hermione’s—advice, and pick the lesser of them. It was frightening to think of Voldemort being that lesser of any evils, but the Ministry under Scrimgeour was the worst kind of evil: the kind that did atrocious things in the name of protecting the people...but from what? Muggles? Muggles didn’t even know they existed, and they had enough magical resources to counter all but the most disastrous of scenarios where muggles found out about them.

“Hermione knew this was going to happen,” Harry said, looking Voldemort steadily in the eye. “She never got the chance to make any attempts on magical core transfer, did she? She was researching like mad all month, and all for nought.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Voldemort said. “Never say never, you know.”

“We’ve got to do something about this. We’ve got to stop it.”

“We?” Voldemort repeated. He stood and walked around to the front of his desk, lightly trailing a long, thin finger over Nagini’s body, curled up on the chair next to him, as he did so. “Is there a ‘we’ now?”

“Hasn’t there always been, between you and me?” Harry said. “I can’t escape you, no matter what I do. You’ve always been with me, in some way. Regardless of whomever the prophecy might’ve truly meant, you chose me, and now we’ve got to work with that...it’s always going to be just you
Voldemort’s black eyes studied him. “Come to me,” he said at last, and Harry, for all of his conflicting hatred and annoyance and respect for the Dark Lord, did not question the command or balk at the order; he just nodded, and pulled himself from sleep.

He dressed, and went down the stairs to the common room as quickly as he could without attracting the attention of those getting ready for breakfast. Hermione had already come in from her Head Girl suite, and was waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs, her face solemn. She handed him the fetch-key before he could even ask.

“Again?” she said. He nodded, and she exhaled heavily. He could see her stress in the tightness of her face. “I suppose this means that the Wizengamot finally pushed it through?”

“They did,” Harry said. He took her hand and squeezed it, but it did little to give her comfort. She would be forbidden to contact her parents now, but then—she’d read all about it in just a few minutes when she went down to the Great Hall for breakfast and took her copy of the Prophet. “I have to go. I’m going to go back to my dorm and put a locking spell on my bed curtains. Can you tell McGonagall I’m sick?”

“You know she’ll send someone up to check on you,” Hermione said. “And you’ll get detention if she finds out you didn’t see Pomfrey.”

“Yeah—but this is too important.”

“It is,” Hermione agreed. “It’s Monday, you know. Ron will know that you aren’t really sick, when he comes for Potions.”

Harry felt a momentary pang of regret. Ron still hadn’t given them an answer on how he was going to handle the situation. This wouldn’t help their cause with their friend at all. “I have to go,” he said. “If there’s any hope at all for overturning this...”


Harry bounded back up the stairs, fetch-key in hand, and sat on his bed, pulling his curtains closed and locking them with a spell Sirius taught him. He took a deep breath, steadying himself. “Port,” he said.

This time, when he landed from the port-key, he was standing before a heavy iron gate blocking a gravel path that led up to an impressive manor house. Voldemort stood beside him with Nagini curled at his feet, chillingly close—dangerously close—but Harry wasn’t afraid of him anymore; not even a little bit. The Dark Lord had had numerous opportunities to kill him, and he hadn’t, and they were on the same side now, finally.

“I wondered that you would come,” said Voldemort quietly. Harry was close enough to hear the wizard’s slow, even breathing, and he didn’t shudder. “After all this time, I thought perhaps that we would always stay on one another’s periphery, never quite utilising each other for our full potentials. I do hate waste.”

“Have never had a common cause to fight against,” Harry said back. He did not look at the Dark Lord as he spoke, but stared straight ahead, to the house beyond the huge iron gates. He knew where they were—a potential viper’s pit, but he wasn’t nervous, only determined.

“Not even the Dementors?”
“The Dementors don’t think; they aren’t evil or even good or bad, they just are. I could only be against Dementors like I would be against a rabid dog. The Ministry thinks. It’s a true enemy.”

Voldemort nodded. He hissed, *Open*, and the iron gates swung out. They walked through.

“Parseltongue?” Harry said. “I would have thought the Malfoys protected against that in their warding.”

“It is a remnant of many generations ago, when the occasional Malfoy was still born with the talent. It’s been many years since they had a Parselmouth, but the key is still in place.” Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy were waiting for them at the door, seemingly unsurprised to see Harry coming up the path with the Dark Lord.

“Welcome, My Lord,” said Lucius, bowing deeply. Narcissa dipped her head, and said nothing. “Mr Black,” he said to Harry, quite respectfully.

“Thank you, Lucius, Narcissa,” said Voldemort. He stepped through the door and when a house-elf appeared he removed his hood and cloak and gave it to her to hang. Harry had never seen him without his outer cloak, he realised. It was discomfiting; he was *human*. Truly human, not just vaguely so, as Harry had begun to view him. He had black hair and black eyes, a high brow and a thin nose—when had he re-grown a nose? His skin was pale, but flesh-coloured, not grey, not white. His body was tall and thin as his teenage form had been, but not skeletal. He was real, and that made him somehow more *surreal*. How had this *person* become a heartless killer? What had made him this way? Surely, it hadn’t all been insanity from a broken marriage bond.

“I’ve directed the house-elves to prepare the board room for business,” said Lucius. “Narcissa will be joining us, at your pleasure.”

“That is quite all right,” said Voldemort. “Harry, come.”

He followed them through to the drawing room, where there was a large table positioned near the windows, and more comfortable seating nearer the fireplace. The Malfoys invited them to the table, and Harry sat next to the Dark Lord without hesitation when he was directed to do so.

A house-elf popped in and quietly delivered tea and biscuits. Narcissa served the tea, and the biscuits were ignored. Nagini rested her head in the Dark Lord’s lap and he stroked her slowly—her eyes focused on Harry and did not leave him. She didn’t blink.

Voldemort lifted his hand and spread his fingers, and the *Daily Prophet* materialised beneath them; Harry had never seen magic like the Dark Lord used sometimes. He didn’t seem to even need a wand for most things, and Harry wasn’t even sure he was using real spells, or just *willing* things to happen. He spread the paper out on the table for all to see.

“This is dangerous,” he said. “Harry and I have finally come to an accord, and now that we have, we must discuss this new bill, the Muggle Protection Act.

“Mudbloods will rebel,” Lucius said, mouth set in a grim line. “And the muggle-borns will expose us with accidental magic.” He dipped his head in his wife’s direction. “Narcissa still has a collection of muggle-borns in the nursery that we’ve not been able to rid ourselves of for two months. The Auror won’t remove the men they have staking out all the delivery points, and I won’t risk her trying again after what happened last time.”

“No,” Voldemort agreed, “It’s too risky. I’m afraid you must keep them for a while longer, Narcissa.”
“As you command, my lord,” she said. Her eyes met Harry’s for the briefest of moments.

“I have been reluctant to initiate this kind of change,” said the Dark Lord, “but I fear that we cannot let our world continue down this path, and now that Harry has finally committed to me, I feel that now is the time. We will never be stronger than we are together, and so the time is now.”

Harry was surprised, but tried not to let it show on his face. He wanted to help correct the evils in the world, and he needed help to do it...if that help had to come from the Malfoys and Voldemort, then he’d work for their respect, if he could. That meant playing their social games.

“What is the plan, Lord?” asked Narcissa.

“Two-fold,” Voldemort answered. “Our first will be to introduce all of the Death Eaters to my second in command, Harry. The point of this, as I’m sure you’ve surmised, is to have someone in the public eye that Death Eaters can take commands from, as I do not have the luxury of being in public...though I daresay I could pass more easily now than before, especially with Dumbledore dead.”

“A wise plan,” said Lucius. “If we’re to stage a coup, then we will need a figurehead, even if not all of our brothers know his identity just yet.”

“Are you saying you’re going to tell your Death Eaters who I am?” asked Harry, heart hammering in his chest. “Is that necessary?”

“The political climate is extremely volatile right now, Mr Black,” said Narcissa. “The Death Eaters will need someone to take their cues from, someone with good public standing, because not all of them have immediate access to the Dark Lord, and therefore do not always know what is going on.”

“The newspapers hate me every second week, and the Death Eaters themselves will have no cause to take any public comments I make as a command,” Harry protested. In truth, he was terrified of his identity being revealed. What if there was a traitor? What if there was a spy?

“The only spy in my ranks is Severus Snape,” said the Dark Lord, reading his thoughts, as was his wont. “I assure you, Harry. You will have nothing to fear from the Death Eaters once they know you...in fact, I should say it will make you safer.”

He swallowed heavily. “But...what about Ron and Hermione? Won’t they come under suspicion by the people who know I’m friends with them? What if they’re targeted by other Death Eaters?”

“Hermione, of course, is under my protection,” said Voldemort. “She’s useful to me.”

“But Ron...” said Harry. “Ron’s a Weasley. His family’s all in the Order.”

“Not...something I would claim, at present,” said Lucius, nodding to the papers. In the side margin was a picture of Tonks, head bowed as two other Aurors led her to a Ministry interrogation room.

“It’s quite inspired,” Narcissa said to him, diverting his attention. “By putting you more firmly in the public eye, and having you give well-worded comments to the papers, the Death Eaters will be able to come to see eye-to-eye with you without being forced to do so by our Lord. As much as he inspires loyalty among all his servants, faithfulness is better earned than demanded.”

“Oh,” said Harry. He took a deep breath. “Right. I hate dealing with reporters, but I...you’re right, I guess.”

“Good,” said Voldemort. “Then we will discuss the second item. The Minister will need to be
replaced, of course.”

“I thought as much,” said Harry, more comfortable with this topic. “There’s no way we could get Scrimgeour to back down, not after this. He’s too committed.”

“Exactly so,” said Lucius. “Elections are not until August, but we will need to select a candidate immediately to begin campaigning.”

“Who did you have in mind?” asked Harry, dreading the answer. Of course it would be Lucius bloody Malfoy. Harry wasn’t sure what it said about him that he thought the man would be a better choice than Scrimgeour, but that still didn’t mean he wanted him in office. Lucius Malfoy was too selfish for such a high office—Harry wouldn’t say that he would be corruptible, but that still didn’t mean he was a good man or would have all of the public’s interests at heart.

Voldemort turned to him, head cocked to the side. “I’ve considered three potential choices,” he said. “Your father is one.”

Harry considered this. “He would get the sympathy vote for sure,” he said. “After the Azkaban scandal.”

“He’s intelligent and comes from a good family—a well-known one with a long history of men in politics,” Narcissa added.

Lucius said nothing. Harry shook his head. “No,” he said at last. “I don’t think he’s quite the right choice. He’s been hit with a lot of revelations over the year, and he’s still not fully recovered from Azkaban. I hate to say it, but he might crack under pressure...we need someone who can withstand public scrutiny, and my dad needs...and wants...a quiet life.”

Voldemort nodded. “A wise decision, Harry. I’m glad that you were able to see that.” He turned back to the Malfoys. “I also considered Elliot Parkinson.”

“He’s already an advisor to the Minister, though I can’t see where Scrimgeour’s taken any of his advice lately,” said Lucius. “He would be a solid choice—firmly on our side and not above setting a few scruples aside.”

“Yes, I quite agree,” said Voldemort, “but I wonder that we might leave him in his current position and replace the Minister with someone new, so as to have as many on our side in high positions as possible.”

“Then who is your third choice, my lord?” asked Narcissa.

He smirked at her. “You, my dear.”

Her eyebrows lifted dramatically. “Me, my lord?” she said. “I’ve no political experience at all.”

“Yes, and that’s what makes you perfect for it. A beautiful woman from the noble House of Black, married into the prestigious House of Malfoy; wife to Lucius who the papers are even still regarding as a hero wrongly imprisoned just like Sirius Black...your son a Prefect and in the top five per cent of his class, friends and possibly more with the Boy Who Lived.”

“That isn’t public,” said Harry, eying Lucius warily, but the man’s expression did not change from the thoughtful one he adapted when his wife’s name was put forth. “We’ve kept it relatively quiet.”

“That can be changed,” said Voldemort, “and I’d suggest you do so. It could only help our cause to link the Malfoys to you. They do need the good publicity with the middle class, and you need the
good publicity with the noble families.”

“Narcissa is also active in a dozen high-profile charities,” said Lucius. “And quite intelligent, if I may say so.” He gave his wife a half-smile and she quirked her lips in return. “Very many people like her, so the likelihood that she could move our agenda forward is very great.”

“A little politeness goes a long way, darling,” she said.

“I believe this makes the decision much easier. Harry, what do you think?”

“I was worried you were going to suggest Lucius Malfoy. No offense intended, Mr Malfoy,” he added. Lucius smirked at him. “I don’t know Elliot Parkinson, other than that he’s Pansy’s father. I couldn’t say whether I’d support him or not.” He shrugged, and looked to Narcissa. “I suppose, the only question I have is, would you be a good Minister, Mrs Malfoy, and act in the best interest of all the people, whenever you could?”

She was quiet for a long moment, collecting her thoughts. When she finally spoke, all she said was, “I can promise that I will always act in good faith, and that I will not hold the wants of the few over the needs of the many...but I will support the prosperity of the magical community as a whole, and my beliefs on how to do that are likely to differ somewhat from your own.”

Harry bit his lip. “I can’t dictate your beliefs, or anyone else’s, and I wouldn’t want to. As long as any policy changes were legally put to vote to the people before they were set in law, then I support you.”

“Then...this is our plan forward?” said Narcissa. “Am I now chosen to run against the Minister in August?”

“If you agree to it, Narcissa,” said Voldemort, looking first to Harry and then to Lucius. “I believe we are in agreement, Harry, Lucius?” They agreed. They looked to Narcissa.

She nodded once, decisive. “It will be an engaging challenge,” she said. “Can I expect Harry to speak in my favour, or will he publically oppose me?”

“I think that it best if he slowly comes to agree with you,” said Lucius. “You can announce your candidacy this evening, and speak in March at the first debate. I don’t believe another candidate has come forward to oppose Scrimgeour this election...?”

“No,” said Voldemort. “None yet. With any luck, it will be just Narcissa against the incumbent Minister, but we will deal with it if another challenger emerges.”

“And what do we hope will happen once we’ve done these two things?” asked Harry. “I don’t see how that will magically change the world, forgive the pun.”

“It won’t,” said Voldemort, “but it will give us the opportunity to change the Ministry from within. It doesn’t have to be corrupt. The wizarding world can adapt and change, but it needs strong leadership —both officially and unofficially—to truly grow.”

“And I’m the unofficial leadership,” Harry guessed. “As I’m already a figurehead to the ‘Light’ and you want to make me one to the Death Eaters as well.”

“Precisely,” said Voldemort.

“This won’t be easy,” said Lucius, but he was smirking.
“You will thoroughly enjoy it,” said Narcissa.

“I will,” he agreed.

There was more talk of details and specific tactics and strategies, but it all came down to chance and good planning in the end. The election would have to be won in actuality, and Narcissa would need to garner early support. The house-elves came to refill the tea twice, and it was after nine when Lucius said, “It seems the only thing left to do is actually do it. Shall we present Mr Black to the Death Eaters now, milord?”

“Not just yet. Let us wait until tonight,” Voldemort said, standing. “We will summon them to the manor, if you are agreeable.”

“Quite,” Lucius said. “Milord—I should ask, how would you like Mr Black and I to interact publically? If he is to make it known that he’s seeing my son, and Narcissa is running for Minister, I imagine we will be at a number of the same events.”

“Warily, at first, I should think,” said Voldemort. “But I expect you to be on a first-name basis before the year is out. It’s good publicity.”

Lucius nodded. “At your command, my lord,” he said. “If there is nothing else, I should begin expanding the ballroom for this evening. The manor has become rather irritable in its old age, and lately it takes longer and longer to get it to change.”

“Yes, you’re dismissed. I would speak with Harry for a moment, though, if you don’t mind,” said Voldemort. The Malfoys nodded and saw themselves out, closing the door quietly behind themselves. Harry turned to Voldemort, tense with anticipation and a strange sense of excitement. They were going to stage a coup for Merlin’s sake. This was straight out of a novel.

“It feels an awful lot like you’re making me your replacement,” he said to the Dark Lord. “Like you’re stepping down.”

“You’re to be my second in command; you are my replacement, Harry,” said Voldemort quietly. “What do you think I’ve been training you for?”

“Training?” Harry said stupidly. “How’ve you trained me?”

“I’ve taught you to think for yourself,” said Voldemort. “That is what a true leader of the wizarding world needs to do. You’ve taken your inherent hate for me and turned it into something else by thinking for yourself, and with your inherent magical strength and charisma, that makes you strong enough to lead the magical world into a new era. You can be the one to succeed where I failed.”

“And what will you do?” asked Harry.

Voldemort turned and walked to the window, looking down on the manicured green lawns of the Malfoy estate. “I will free my wife of an eternal struggle to reunite with me in each successive life.”

“How?” asked Harry.

“Madam Ravenclaw inspired me,” said Voldemort. “By modifying the necromantic spell she attempted on Salazar Slytherin, I can permanently sever the connexion I had with Calixa Yaxley, and therefore Ginevra Weasley and whomever she becomes in her next life.”

“Won’t that hurt you?” asked Harry.
Voldemort turned back to him, smirking slightly. “There are worse things.”

Harry nodded, feeling not at all comforted by this answer. “But...you’ll be okay, right? After it’s over?”

“I imagine that I’ll be more ‘okay’ than I’ve been in a long while, Harry,” he said.

“Oh...good. Good.” He bit his lip. “What’ll I have to do as your replacement?”

“Lead the people, Harry. My Death Eaters want to fight to better our world, and they will listen to my second-in-command. You can cause a great deal of change in our world.”

“Good change,” Harry said, if only to clarify.

Voldemort nodded. “Any kind of change you want, Harry,” he said. “It is up to you do decide whether it is good or bad.”

“What if I’m corrupted?”

Voldemort looked at him askance. “You can’t be corrupted. You can only corrupt yourself. That you are worried about it at all gives me hope.”

“I don’t want to end up like you,” Harry said at last, his voice heavy with the strength of conviction.

Voldemort laughed, though it was a bitter sound. “Then don’t ever forget what it is you’re fighting for.”

Harry nodded. “I won’t,” he said. “I should get back to Hogwarts before anyone notices I’m not really sick in my bed.”

“Tonight,” said Voldemort, nodding. “We will do it tonight. Will you be prepared?”

“As much as I can be.”

“That is all I can ask.”

Harry pulled the fetch-key from his pocket, and whispered, “Port Hogwarts”.

Harry made it back to Hogwarts, and so he was only a half-hour late to Transfigurations after all. Hopefully, McGonagall would let him slide with only a few points lost for Gryffindor, especially since Hermione would have told her he was sick. He slipped into the room and wound his way to the empty seat at Hermione’s desk, and pulled out his note parchments and self-inking quill. But when he looked to the front of the classroom, it wasn’t the Headmistress looking back at him.

It was his mum.

“They announced it at breakfast,” Hermione said. Then, “How did things go? Is there anything to be done?”

“You’ll find out tonight,” Harry whispered back. She nodded.

“Mr Black,” his mother said. She gave him a smile, and his heart lurched because he remembered that smile from the pictures in the photo album Hagrid had given him first year. “Ms Granger explained that you were ill this morning. I’m glad you could make it to class after all. I’m Professor
Capella Black—we met a few weeks ago when I introduced myself to your father; I’ll be covering Headmistress McGonagall’s Transfiguration classes for the duration of the year.”

“Welcome,” he said, for lack of anything better. She smiled at him again, but this time, it was forced.

“Please turn to page six-forty-one. We’ll be covering wood to metal transfigurations today.” The tense feeling in his stomach never left him throughout the class, but as a professor, his mother wasn’t bad. She seemed nervous and unsure of herself...out of practise, and there was a part of him that still recognised the woman who’d protected him as a baby, who’d sung to him in his dreams when he was alone in his cupboard at the Dursleys, and who wanted very badly to go to her and make her feel better for a change, but he didn’t know how to bridge that chasm.

He’d already dealt with two people coming ‘back from the dead’ this past year; was he ready to deal with another? He was afraid that allowing himself to accept it would make him careless, would lead him to believe that anyone could be brought back from the dead.

And that was a dangerous thought. Because it wasn’t true. Because Sirius and Regulus hadn’t been dead after all. Neither of them had ever crossed over to the world of the dead.

He still didn’t know the particulars of the spell Voldemort had used to bring his mother to life, but he did know it was necromancy, and he did know that it was something he’d learned from Rowena Ravenclaw’s diary. It would not be a spell just any wizard could re-create. Perhaps no one but Voldemort could. After all, the Dark Lord did magic that Harry could barely fathom.

She did not seek him out during class, but seemed to be keeping her distance, though Harry did occasionally feel her eyes on him as he worked quietly with Hermione. His piece of wood was stubbornly refusing to change to iron, but it was hard to concentrate, and alchemical transfigurations were extremely advanced anyway.

Class was over before Harry even noticed the time, and he and Hermione rushed off to Potions before his mum could corner him. Ron was waiting for them outside the classroom, cauldron dangling from his elbow. He pushed away from the wall when they approached and met them near the door.

“Did you read the paper this morning?” he asked right away. He was looking at Hermione.

“Of course,” she said. “It’s horrid.”

“Dad says the wording’s so broad that you won’t even be able to write to your parents when it goes into effect,” Ron said.

Hermione looked away. “I thought the same thing. I warned them this might happen, but it still feels so surreal.”

“Dumbledore never would’ve let this happen,” he said fiercely. “The Ministry’s been running down the Order, too...Dad says they brought in Tonks and Dedalus for questioning on charges of ‘involvement with a suspicious organisation’...she might get sacked.”

Once, Harry might’ve said, ‘They can’t do that!’ but now he knew better. They could, and they very well might. “I know,” he said instead.

Ron looked at him expectantly. “Well, what are you going to do?”

“Me?” Harry asked, eyebrows raised.
Ron pressed his lips together, frustrated, and moved in closer. He flicked his wand to put up the muffling charm, but it didn’t work the first time, and he had to try again before it took. “Yeah, you. You and Hermione. You’re both active in this war...what are you going to do?”

“I’ve been trying to avoid war,” Harry said.

“There’s all sorts of kinds of wars,” said Ron. “Professor Sinclair told us that, remember? Something that brings great change to our society...that’s what you and Hermione are doing, isn’t it?”

He and she looked at one another. “It’s being addressed,” Harry said carefully.

Ron gestured angrily. “No. No, that’s hippogriff shit, Harry, and you know it. The Ministry is letting laws through that are worse even than some of the shit Death Eaters spout. I know you two. You won’t sit back and let it happen, so I know you’ve got a plan.” He looked at them searchingly. “I want to help you. Like old times, remember? When we were a team? I won’t let them do this to muggle-borns like Hermione.”

Harry felt his eyes widen. “You do?” he said. Did this mean what he thought it meant?

Ron nodded. “Let me make my own decision, Harry. Let me do something right for a change.”

The other students in the Advanced Potions class started lining up to wait for Professor Snape to unlock the classroom door, and Harry hesitated. It would be disastrous to make the wrong decision here, but...this was Ron. He knew Ron, and he could trust Ron. At least he hoped he could.

And Ron was wrong; he did make the right decision most of the time, it was just that when he didn’t, the results were truly awful. He looked to Hermione for help, and she shrugged her shoulders, just as torn as he was. The decision, of course, was his, like many in the future would be. “All right,” he said. “It’s tonight. Can you leave your house?”

“I’ll tell Mum I’m picking up a shift at the twins’ shop,” he said. “What time?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. He shrugged. “We come when called. Probably around six, but leave earlier just in case. Meet me at River House. You can floo there—Sirius won’t question it.”

Ron nodded, and dropped the muffling charm. Professor Snape strode up to the door and paused. His eyes met Harry’s for the briefest of moments, and Harry saw something new in his expression, something he’d never seen directed at him before. He thought, perhaps, it might’ve been approval. But then it was gone.

“Get in!” he snarled at them, per usual. They filed into the classroom. Draco, Pansy and Theo made it just before Professor Snape shut the door, and Draco took up his usual seat next to Harry and Ron.

“I heard you were with my parents this morning,” he said quietly as they settled their cauldrons. Then he noticed Ron and immediately quieted. It was too late, though; Ron was looking at the both of them, and Harry could see the thoughts turning over on his freckled face. He gave him a reassuring smile. “It’s fine, Ron,” he said. “Tonight.”

“What do you mean, tonight?” Draco hissed at him. “Weasley? You can’t be serious.”

“This is war,” Harry said to him.

Draco pursed his lips, but after a moment, he nodded. “As you say,” he said, and Harry’s stomach
dropped, reminded of the way Draco’s parents had spoken similarly to the Dark Lord. He gave Ron a long look, and Ron returned it evenly, then he turned back to Harry and said, “My mother owled me before class. We should be caught kissing before lunch, to get the rumours started. With any luck, the Prophet will have a special report on the Boy Who Lived’s love life by tomorrow morning.”

Harry blushed, and Ron choked, started coughing. Snape sent them a quelling glare, and Ron sputtered out an apology, face red, as he struggled to stop coughing. “Probably a good idea,” Harry whispered, face hot.

“Retrieve your Arithmantic potions from the storage shelves,” said Professor Snape. “We’ll be beginning the fourth and final stage of the brewing process today.” Harry did as he was told...just like he always did these days.

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Tea was a quiet affair with just him, Regulus and Remus, but Sirius was antsy. Something was coming. He’d known it ever since he read the special evening edition of the Prophet a few days ago that documented the special bill Minister Scrimgeour was pushing through the Wizengamot. The paper reported on it positively, but he knew that the people of magical Britain would see it for what it was soon, and when they did...

Well. Something was coming. Regulus and Moony looked tense, too. They sat at the kitchen table and picked at their biscuits, having never been the type of fellows to put on airs for themselves and have tea in the drawing room when there wasn’t company.

Regulus’s sudden reappearance in Britain—alive—was being passed off as a botched potion accident that left him wandering France for nearly two decades, thinking he was a down-on-his-luck artist. It was a bit embarrassing in the upper echelons of society, but the Blacks were nothing if not resilient, and incompetence was much easier to play off than dead Death Eater. He was staring into space, and the concerned looks Moony kept sending his brother made Sirius feel unaccountably lonely and sad.

He thought of Lily. Why hadn’t she trusted him to reveal herself to when she was possessing Ginny Weasley? He could have helped...he would’ve done anything to help, and yet, she’d trusted Snivellus and not him. It was a crushing blow.

After all these years, was he still not good enough for her? But perhaps he was trying to rush things. It had been many years, after all...and she’d been dead, to boot. And he’d been in Azkaban. Yes, they would have a lot to work out between them, but they’d loved each other before, and he loved her to this day. She was a different person, but so was he, and they had Harry to bring them together. He nodded to himself. Yes, things would work out. He just had to give it time, and remind her how it had been between them.

And perhaps...in a few years, they might get married proper, and then maybe Harry could have a little brother or sister. He smiled to himself, thinking of how great it would be to be a father from start to finish for once. And Harry did say he had always wanted a big, happy family. Sirius wouldn’t be opposed to it, either.

Lily was alive, he thought again, barely able to believe it. He hoped that she was settling in to teaching well enough. Perhaps he’d write her and ask how her first day of classes had gone.

At five, the floo roared to life, and Ron Weasley stepped out, hesitant. He brushed soot off his well-worn travelling cloak, and said, “Erm, hi.”

“Hello, Ron,” said Moony. “This is an unexpected surprise. Would you like some tea?”
“UH, Harry said to meet him here.” He sat at the table when Moony gestured to a chair, and Ginger popped in with another cup and filled it for him, somehow knowing, with whatever house-elf magic she used, that Ron took an atrocious amount of sugar in his. “Thanks.”

“Harry’s coming?” asked Regulus, instantly alert. “Why?”

Ron was distinctly discomfited. It was quite obvious. “Um...”

Moony was better at this sort of thing, apparently. He said, “It’s okay, Ron. Is something happening tonight?”

“A meeting or something,” he said, nodding. He took three lemon-cream biscuits and ate them methodically one after the other. Sirius noticed that his hands were trembling faintly, and knew that he was nervous.

“A...Death Eater meeting?” Sirius asked.

Ron looked at him, stunned. He coughed. “I...I don’t know,” he said. “I think so, maybe.”

Sirius exchanged a worried glance with Regulus and Moony. Something was coming, all right. Something big if Ron was in on it. Moony stood abruptly. “I’ll get our cloaks,” he said, and disappeared from the kitchen.

“So Harry told you,” Regulus said, eyes appraising. “Forgive me for being surprised.”

Ron took another couple of biscuits. “Only because I overheard,” he admitted, snapping pieces from the lemon cream biscuit and pressing them into his mouth. He looked up from his hands, and said fiercely, “But I won’t let him down, now that I know. He never would’ve told me, no matter what he says...but I know now, and I won’t let him down.”

Sirius smiled faintly. “I’m glad to hear it, Ron. He’s going to need all the support he can get.”

“I’m just surprised,” Regulus continued, unimpressed with Ron’s declaration, “that you’ve come to that decision. Forgive me, but the Weasleys are not known for their clear-headedness and critical thinking.”

Ron flushed hotly. His fingers curled tightly into a fist on top of the table. “I probably wouldn’t have,” he said, “but I knew if I didn’t. I’d be giving up Harry forever, and he’s my best mate. He’s worth the effort of thinking for myself. I don’t have to agree with everything he does to support him as a friend.”

“Is that what you’re doing now?” asked Regulus.

“Leave the boy alone,” Sirius said, sighing.

Regulus gave him a hard look. “The Weasleys are known for their indiscretion, and that’s the last thing we need where Harry’s safety’s concerned.” He turned back to Ron. “The question stands.”

Ron swallowed. “I’d never betray Harry,” he said. “I know I’ve not got the best record when it comes to being there for him when he needs me, but betraying him is a far sight worse than not talking to him during the Tri-Wizard Tournament.”

Regulus gave him an unconvinced look, his grey eyes slitted in doubt. “Some would call those the same thing.”
He didn’t get a chance to continue his interrogation, for the floo flared to life again, and Harry and Hermione stepped through, arms linked. The flames roared again, and Draco Malfoy followed, and right behind him, surprisingly, was Zacharias Smith. They were all wearing their black travelling cloaks and sombre expressions.

“Ron,” Harry said, relief evident in his voice. “I thought you might not come.” I thought you might betray me, remained unspoken, but Sirius knew it was there, underneath, and a look at his brother confirmed he knew it, too.

“I’m here,” Ron said.

Moony returned with three black cloaks and two white masks, and Sirius watched Ron’s eyes widen when he saw them, and widen further when he realised that one of them was for Moony, for ‘Professor Lupin’, one of the kindest people Sirius knew.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked, seeing Sirius take his own cloak from Moony. “Are you coming, too?”

“You’d better believe it,” Sirius said. “I may not be Marked, but I’m with you ‘til the end, kiddo. You’re my son.”

Harry smiled, all surprise and white teeth. “Oh,” he said.

“Hello, Zacharias,” Sirius added. “I was just speaking to your mum this morning at the school.”

“Mr Black,” he said. The boy’s expression was altogether more nervous than the one he usually wore. Zach wasn’t marked, Sirius knew—just his parents. He wondered, briefly, if Harry’s letters had not exaggerated in that the two of them were becoming friends. It was hard to imagine that after having sniped at each other all summer, they could learn to get along now, but stranger things did happen.

“It hasn’t started yet,” Hermione said, seating herself at the table and accepting a cup of tea from Fred. She wiggled uncomfortably on the chair and reached into her pocket, removed a mask just like Regulus’s and Moony’s and put it on the table in front of her. Ron’s eyes widened again, but he seemed to get over his surprise rather quickly with her, for he said nothing, only ate another lemon cream biscuit. “We sneaked out during dinner, while everyone was preoccupied.”

“Do you know what the meeting’s going to be about, Harry?” asked Regulus.

Harry nodded. “You won’t believe it even if I told you.”

“I suspect we’ll start believing it here soon enough,” Moony said. He was grimacing, as were Regulus and Hermione. “We’re being Summoned.”

Harry nodded absently, feeling quite anxious again. “Are you sure this is a good idea?” he asked one more time.
“I’ve been preparing you for this since I first proposed a ceasefire with you,” said Voldemort. “Now come, conceal your face; our Death Eaters are arriving even now and I don’t want to startle them before it’s time.” Harry nodded, and cast the spell over his face that Professor Snape had used on him for the Dementor feeding. Our Death Eaters, Voldemort had said. He shivered.

“Ron Weasley is coming, too,” Harry said.

Voldemort gave him a long look. “Are you sure that is a good idea?” he asked.

Harry shrugged. “I hope so,” he said.

Voldemort turned without a word. They exited the drawing room and crossed the hall to the grand ballroom, already filling with Death Eaters who’d apparated to the front gates and were being escorted in by house-elves. They gathered around the room, masked and hooded with their black Death Eater cloaks thrown over their everyday robes. Every now and then, another wizard or witch entered without a Death Eater mask, using the same face-vanishing spell Harry wore. These were their sympathisers...their unmarked supporters.

There was a raised dais at the far end of the room, and Harry followed the Dark Lord up onto it, feeling a strange sense of déjà vu; he’d done this before, once, hadn’t he, over the summer, when the Dark Lord had made him use Polyjuice potion to impersonate him. Voldemort hadn’t looked quite human then; how was it that he became more and more human nearly every time Harry saw him?

He and the Dark Lord stood there silently, watching wizard after wizard file into the Malfoys’ ballroom until it was full to bursting. There were more Death Eaters and sympathisers than Harry had ever seen or ever imagined. There must have been close to a thousand. This was a special meeting, Harry realised...all were invited.

Harry stood looking out at them, his face hidden by Snape’s creepy spell, and saw a sea of white masked faces looking back at him. He found Hermione near the front, identifiable only by her red leather shoes. She and the others had got there quicker than most Death Eaters, having advance warning, and therefore took a position near the front. There were others, such as Professor Snape and Lucius Malfoy who took positions of privilege on the dais with them, off to the side, and separate from the others by the silver embellishments on their masks that identified them as part of the Inner Circle.

And there, sliding into the room in the back, just as the doors were closing, was his mother with Professor Sinclair, their teaching robes peaking from beneath their black travelling cloaks, and giving them away to those who knew what to look for. His heart clenched. He’d known she’d been a Death Eater in her previous life, but he hadn’t thought of what it would feel like for her to see him up here, cavorting with the wizard who killed her once. He felt, briefly, ashamed. But then he thought of the Ministry and martial law, and straightened his spine, knowing he’d made the right decision, finally.

The doors to the ballroom shut with an ominous echo, or perhaps it was just ominous to Harry, who knew his identity was about to be exposed, and that once it was, there was no going back. He would not only be a defector, he’d be a well-known one.

Voldemort was not one to mince words. He said, “It has been several months since I called all of you here together at once. I would not have done it save for this most important of announcements.” He looked back at Harry arm outstretched, and, face still hidden by the spell, Harry stepped forward, next to the Dark Lord. Voldemort smiled at him, and it looked human.

“I have chosen my second in command...an heir, if you will.”
He could see the Death Eaters processing this information in the way their breathing seemed to pause and they shifted on their feet uncomfortably, unsure where to look or how to react. There were no gasps of surprise or cries of outrage, just...waiting. They were waiting for more information, expecting it to come. Harry wondered at this, at how long it had taken the Dark Lord to teach his followers that he wouldn’t leave them hanging on forever.

“I can see that this is not something you ever suspected, and until two years ago, neither had I. I did not believe anyone could finish the work I started until then. It has taken me that long to bring this person to the level I require, but I believe, when he is revealed, that you, my Death Eaters, will see the value of this choice.”

He faced Harry and gestured at his hood. “If you will?”

Slowly, hands trembling, Harry reached up with both hands, grasped the sides of his cloak cowl, and lowered it from his face. He felt it when the vanishing spell cancelled, and he saw it in the assembled Death Eaters, as they recognised him. The room went silent.

“Harry Potter!” someone yelled, aghast. Gasps did echo through the room this time.

Harry cleared his throat nervously. “Harry Black, actually,” he said. He wasn’t prepared for the *Sonorous* spell the Dark Lord had cast on him, or the way his voice subsequently carried through the room.

“But he knows nothing of our struggles,” said another. “He was Dumbledore’s boy.”

“No,” said Voldemort. “He has been mine for two years now, though he’s only recently realised it.”

“He switched sides?” asked the Death Eater.

“Nothing so drastic,” said Voldemort, favouring Harry with an amused look. “He merely realised we both wanted the same thing, but had been using different methods to achieve that. Now...we are aligned. He has my full support.”

“He’ll sell us to the muggle lovers, Lord!” said a new Death Eater. “We’ll all go to Azkaban!”

Harry shook his head. “I won’t hold anything you’ve done in your pasts against you. I don’t approve of torture, but I do see that war is violent, and that violence is sometimes necessary. Please don’t kill people just to kill them, though.”

“But, my lord,” said one Death Eater, “Why do you need an heir? You are immortal.”

“I have within the past year begun extensive magical research that is taking up more and more of my time. My second will have the authority to approve all tasks and will give you someone in the public eye to take commands from. As you might’ve guessed, I do not have the same ability to walk unencumbered through Diagon Alley.”

Low laughter filtered through the crowd.

“Then we’ve won,” said the first Death Eater. “Dumbledore is dead, Harry Potter is ours, and the Ministry is controlling the Order of the Phoenix. We’ve won.”

“Not quite, I’m afraid,” said Voldemort, and the crowd hushed again. “A new enemy has emerged in Minister Scrimgeour. I’ve left the Ministry alone too long, and now it is beyond hope. The Minister must be replaced, and the Ministry itself reworked from the bottom-up. It is true that we’ve won against the so-called Light Side, but we haven’t finished the task we set out to do. Our world still
isn’t safe, and our laws still aren’t efficient and effective. We can change that, and with Scrimgeour making himself more and more unpopular every day, now is the time.”

“How can you use us, Lord?” asked Lucius Malfoy, standing off to the side with Snape and other members of the Inner Circle.

“To truly win, we must do what the rest of wizarding Britain has failed to do: unite. Wizarding France and Belgium...South Africa, Japan, India, and Canada have all done this, and we’ve seen the success of their work. Wizarding Britain can join that group; we can make our population, our family lines, and our magic safer. We can grow our numbers, as they have. But the change will have to begin in the Ministry, and among our own numbers. Instead of fear, we will now fight with debate and logic and reason...

“We will elect one of our own as Minister.”

“How can it be done?” asked a Death Eater. “The background checks are extensive...the election committee will check for a Dark Mark.”

“It can and it will.” He looked down to the front of the assembled Death Eaters, and said, “Come up, my dear.”

Narcissa Malfoy was wearing the same darkness spell over her face as Harry had been, but she was identifiable by her elegant gait and the sparkiling jewellery she wore on her hand. She mounted the dais, and stood on the other side of Voldemort. Narcissa lowered her hood, smiling a soft, pleased smile, and Harry immediately saw where Draco got his many expressions from. Lucius Malfoy was nowhere near as expressive. “Our new Minister is unmarked, you see.”

“Mum!” Harry heard Draco whisper, shocked. Her smile turned into a smirk. Well, she obviously hadn’t told her son everything in that letter.

“Even now, Lady Malfoy’s letter of intent is on its way to the Ministry election committee, stating her decision to challenge Scrimgeour this August. No doubt it will be in the papers in the morning. We have changed our path tonight, but as any true leader...and Slytherin...knows, change is but an opportunity to adapt before our enemies do. Change is not a challenge, but an opportunity. Our path has changed tonight, but not our goal. For the first time, triumph is in sight. The wizarding world will be safe from muggles, our fortunes will be safe from thieves, our families will be safe to practise any magic they so choose, and with luck, our children will be safe from squibdom. Our numbers will grow again, not decline.”

“Why?” Harry asked afterwards. “Why are you now more human than you ever were before?”

Voldemort was silent for a long moment. Harry had begun to think he wouldn’t answer at all. Finally, he said, “My horcruxes. Every one you destroy brings me closer and closer to death, and it’s that closeness to death that makes me human...that mortality. For while I was immortal, I could not be truly human.”

“And you’ve given up immortality?” said Harry. “That was your goal, all this time? To be human?”

Voldemort gave him a sly smirk. “Perhaps.”
In which Hermione makes demands of the Dark Lord, Ron makes a great leap forward, and Harry makes a lot of people angry.

“...I’ve done what you asked, every time you asked,” said Granger. “Please—I know you said we’d figure it out by the end of my five years, but I’ve run out of time. Help me.”

The Dark Lord stood by the window, silently observing the crowd of wizards and witches walking over the Malfoy grounds on their way to the edge of the wards to disapparate. There was a lightness in his Death Eaters’ gaits that he hadn’t seen in many years. This was the right decision, he knew. Potter was always going to be the right decision. He only wished that Yaxley might’ve been here to see it.

He turned from his watch and faced his newest Death Eater. She was a prize indeed; her research had been invaluable to him in discovering the mysteries of Ravenclaw’s diary...and that diary had led him to discovering a path to...well. That was a thought for another day.

“You promised to serve me for five years,” he reminded her.

“I will!” she said.

“You will continue to research our little Dementor problem. We must find a way to reset their internal clocks.”

She rolled her eyes, frustrated. “Did you really think I’d stop caring about that just because I’ve solved this?”

The Dark Lord lifted his eyebrow, vaguely amused in that part of him that felt amusement. He did owe her. He had promised. The question was whether or not he was inclined to uphold that promise. He eyed her thoughtfully, considering. She’d earned her reward, he decided.

“I gave you 20 soulless wizards to experiment on,” he said.

She pressed her lips together tightly, but he didn’t fail to miss how the colour drained from her face at the mention. He smirked at her. “I...” she paused, cleared her throat. “But I’m supposed to be testing the transference of a magical core from a magical person into a non-magical person. How am I supposed to do that?”
He gave her a pointed look. The solution was quite obvious to him.

“I can’t do that!” she said. Granger rubbed furiously at her face, and when she pulled her hands away, it was red, both from the rubbing and her frustration. “I’m not like you. I can’t just hurt people just because they’re muggles.”

“What makes you think it will hurt them?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t know that it will, really, but...” she trailed off. The What if? was obvious, if unspoken.

“And so what would you like me to do about it, Granger?” he said. “I’m not your mercenary nor your secretary; I won’t do your work for you, much as I might enjoy the amusement. This is your pet project. Like any scientist, you must make hard decisions if you want to do something great.”

She exhaled heavily, exhausted. He didn’t blame her; it was going on midnight, and she looked like she hadn’t slept well in several days. “Do you think...that it’s safe?”

He gave her a sardonic look. “Of course not,” he said.

She looked away. “Do you think it will work?” she asked instead. He was beginning to wonder if she feared him at all anymore. She certainly didn’t seem to, and he wasn’t sure if that pleased him or not.

“I would say it has as much chance working as it does not,” he replied.

“Then what do you think would happen if...” She swallowed. “If it didn’t work?”

He turned back to the window, watching the last of his Death Eaters reach the gates and pop out of sight, one by one.

“I suspect the muggle might die,” he said blandly. She did not respond, and indeed all was quiet for several long, heavy moments. He heard her stand and move behind him. She reached the window and stood next to him, looking up at him without fear for what he could do to her, for how easily he could end her life—only desperation and frustration.

“I think it will work,” she said. “Ravenclaw’s supposition was sound, and our Arithmancy points to a great chance of success.”

“Arithmancy is notoriously fickle,” said Voldemort. “As I recalled, Ravenclaw’s own diary suggests that she was killed by her own faulty equations.” He paused, studying her ashen face, and added, “The field has come a long way since the founding of Hogwarts, though.”

Granger considered this. She glanced up at him, her expression inexplicably trusting. “What should I do?”

He lifted an eyebrow. “You have three options, Granger,” he said. “You can test the spell on another subject first, you can not test it and apply it directly to your parents, or you can continue on as you have and pretend to ignore the problem, naively hoping it will go away without your having to do anything you find discomfiting.”

He could see the effects of his reply on her face as she mulled over the pros and cons of each option. She bit her lip, and he reigned in a disgusted sigh, knowing that he would need her again one day, and overlooking the occasional Gryffindor waffling, while annoying, was necessary. She would need to get over this if she intended to ever do magic like this in the future—Old Magic always
exacted a price, and usually more than one.

“You didn’t say a human test subject...” she said.

“I never took you for a witch who approved of experimenting on animals.”

“I’m not!” she said, and immediately looked horrified at herself for suggesting it. “No, I can’t do that, either,” she conceded with a sigh.

He rolled his eyes. “Granger,” he said tiredly. “Have you not considered first attempting to even remove the core and transferring it to an object?”

“Like making a horcrux?” she asked shrewdly.

“Ah, so you do know about that,” he said, and moved to sit himself behind Lucius’ desk. “No, it isn’t the same at all. Objects that receive prolonged direct exposure from magic often absorb it and form their own versions of magical cores, much like Hogwarts has done. Theoretically, therefore, I would imagine that it is possible to transfer a magical core directly to an inanimate object. Perhaps you should attempt that first, if your stomach cannot...yet...handle the other.”

She chewed on her lip, thinking. “But that won’t tell us if it could still be harmful to do on humans.”

“No,” he said, “but perhaps it would tell us if it is possible at all, or if we have been living a fool’s dream in attempting such impossible magic.”

“Okay,” she said. “Can we try it now?”

“Oh, by all means, Granger,” he said, sneering. “I live to serve.”

She nodded and preceded him out of the room without another word, so caught up in her academic conjectures that she failed to notice the dangerous tone his voice had taken. Voldemort sneered at her retreating back, and clenched his fists in suppressed rage. Who was this mudblood to feel so entitled to his assistance and time?

Oh yes, he remembered bitterly, the very same mudblood who was going to release him from this horrific marriage bond to a dead woman...whether she yet knew it or not.

The Dark Lord prepared himself for another long, exhausting night.

Ron sat across from him and they stared at one another as if the divide between them was leagues long, and not a mere kitchen table. Harry nursed a cup of Earl Grey, feeling his eyelids droop with exhaustion, but unwilling to leave and go back to Hogwarts just yet.

“Harry...” Ron said finally. His voice was strangely quiet. “I’m really trying, mate, but this is really your big plan?”

Harry clenched his fists, bracing himself against the inevitable rejection. “What do you mean?”

“You and Hermione and your plan to fight the evils of the Ministry by joining up with Voldemort.”

“That...isn’t exactly how it happened.”

“How long has it been going on then?” asked Ron.

Harry shrugged. “Remember when he possessed me at the Department of Mysteries?” Ron nodded.
“It did something to strengthen our connection, and I started being astral projected to him nearly every time I went to sleep.”

Ron shuddered. “Really? So all during sixth year...?”

“Yeah,” said Harry. He looked down at his hands, inexplicably ashamed.

“What about Hermione?” asked Ron, after a moment.

“She knew it was coming,” said Harry. “The separation between magic and muggle. For some reason he wanted her even though she’s muggleborn. He made her a bargain, and she took it.”

“What does the new Ministry law have to do with anything about Hermione and You-Know-Who, Harry?” asked Ron, looking utterly bewildered.

Harry’s mouth parted fractionally; several things came to mind, but he didn’t know how to say any of them. Ron had been gone only a few months, but he was so very out of the loop. It was like he’d been gone for years.

“Ron,” he said finally. “D’you remember that nasty old journal I found that turned out to be Rowena Ravenclaw’s? It was her notes on necromancy mostly, but it had little bits and pieces of other experiments and theories she had.”

“Wicked!” said Ron, intrigued despite his aversion to gruesome things.

“The Dark Lord thought so, too,” said Harry. “But that’s not the important bit. See, there was a section in the journal that theorized about what makes muggles different from wizards, and Hermione and the Dark Lord thought that it might be possible to rewire—”

“Rewire?” asked Ron.

“To change the way muggles work to make them work like wizards,” Harry said instead. “She thought it might be possible to give muggles magic.”

Ron’s eyes went huge. “She’s barmy,” he said, but there wasn’t any feeling behind it.

Harry bit his lip. “The thing is, the Dark Lord thought it might be possible, too...and so that’s her bargain. She’s got to serve him as his research assistant with that journal and anything else he wants for five years, and he’s promised to help her try to give her parents magic.”

Ron pushed away from the table, brow furrowed. He paced back and forth several times and came to a stop where he started, facing Harry. “You think it’ll work?” he asked.

Harry hesitated. “I thought it might work on squibs,” he said.

“But what about on Hermione’s parents?” Ron asked. His voice was serious, taut with apprehension.

“I don’t think so,” Harry said. Then, “I think she’s so desperate for it to work that she’s overlooked how improbable it is.”

Ron took hold of the back of his chair and leaned over it, his head hung low and his long hair obscuring his face from Harry. Despite the low, slow crackle of the kitchen fireplace beside them, he could hear the slow steadiness of Ron’s breathing as he thought. Finally, he looked back up, and met Harry’s eyes with his own. “It could kill them,” he said.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Yeah, it could.”
“Hermione’d be devastated,” he said.

“Yeah.”

Ron was quiet for a long, heavy moment. He shook his head, as if to clear it, and said, “We’ve gotta help her. We’ve got to make sure it works.”

Harry felt his mouth stretch into a grin. “Are you with us then?” he asked.

Ron rolled his eyes. “Of course I’m with you, don’t be daft.”

“Even after tonight?”

“Especially after tonight, you berk,” said Ron. “You’re going to be the king of this game, and it’s my job as pawn to follow your orders.”

“You aren’t ever just a pawn,” Harry said seriously.

Ron rolled his eyes. “Even the pawns are important in chess, Harry. So, what about Hermione’s parents?”

“Well, last we talked about it, she needs to find a way to transfer an unused magical core into them. They can’t hold magic without one.”

“Where’s she going to get an unused magical core?” asked Ron.

“...Dementors,” Harry said, and he didn’t need to say anymore.

Ron’s mouth fell open into a little O of surprise. “You mean...You-Know-Who saved...?” Harry nodded. Ron turned a faint shade of green, but swallowed heavily, and attempted to compose himself—he’d realized that Hermione’s happiness depended on this. “And then what?”

Harry faltered. He wasn’t too sure on the theory, to be honest. “Remember your dad talking about electricity that muggles use? Well, Ravenclaw thought muggles might run on it, like wizards run on magic. Even if Hermione puts a magical core in them, she’s going to have to change that electricity to magic so their bodies don’t reject it. Electricity is what makes muggles’ hearts and brains work, and to switch them over to being run on magic, you’ve got to get rid of the electricity first...I don’t think it can coexist with magic in one body. That’s why I think it can only work for squibs.”

“Oh, is that all?” said Ron. He was aiming for jovial, but the very real worry he was feeling showed through anyway.

“Yes,” said Harry. “I don’t think she’s realised it yet, but she’s going to have to kill them and then revive them right away.”

Silence hung heavily between them. The fire in the hearth continued to spark and crackle and Harry wondered for a moment where his dad and uncle were. Probably over at the Smiths’...Sirius seemed to be really close to them these days.

Ron moved back around to his chair and said back down again. He didn’t look up to talking about Hermione anymore, and said, “You really think it’s a good idea to back him publically like this? What are you going to do when it’s your turn to take over and you’ve got Death Eaters asking you what to do?”

“That won’t happen,” Harry said. “Remember the locket? He’s got more of those. He’s immortal
Ron looked doubtful. “If you say so.” The clock chimed, and an awkward silence overcame once again.

“I need to get back to Hogwarts before McGonagall notices I’m gone,” said Harry.

Ron nodded, “Yeah, Mum’ll be worried if I’m gone much longer anyway. Harry...”

“Yeah?”

“Just...be careful, mate.”

Harry exhaled heavily. “Do my best,” he said.

It was well after one in the morning, but Harry knew Hermione wasn’t back yet, and he’d been waiting for her. He pulled her aside as soon as she slipped into the deserted common room, although if she’d intended on sneaking into her Head Girl room unnoticed, she ought to have used the secondary entrance.

“Where’ve you been?” he asked her. “The meeting was over hours ago. You’re lucky McGonagall didn’t notice you were gone.”

“I was doing some research,” she said.

“We?”

“I talked to Ron afterwards, at River House,” he said.

Hermione’s mouth parted in surprise. “Oh?” she said. She cast a non-verbal cushioning charm on the phials and slipped them in her robe pockets, then shifted her weight, moving her books from one arm to the other anxiously. “How’d that go?”

Harry exhaled. “He’s with us.”

She nearly dropped her books. “Really?”

“Yeah, think so,” Harry said. He couldn’t help the happy grin that overtook his face. “He’s our best mate, after all.”

“And he wants to help...with this?” she asked.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Just tell me what you need us to do.”
She smiled slowly at him. He saw the relief wash over her face, and felt it in him, too. Hermione needed a break more than any of them, and if he could help her, he damn well would.

“Do you think Ron can find out from his dad if there are any more anti-muggle laws in the works? And can you look for any studies that’ve been done on squibs before? Any that looked for differences between them and magical people?”

He nodded. She dropped her books then, but this time on purpose, and launched herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck. “Oh, thank you, Harry!”

“Course, Hermione,” he said. “You’re my best mate, after all.”

Narcissa Malfoy’s photo on the front page of the Daily Prophet took up nearly half of the top fold. She looked cool and elegant, quick and keen—exactly the type of witch to make Scrimgeour sweat. And sweating he was, if the bottom fold of the paper was anything to go by. At breakfast, Harry attempted to read it upside down as he sat across from Hermione, who was reading the top half. She passed it to him wordlessly when she finished, and he pushed aside his kippers and eggs to read the story.

Beloved Philanthropist Narcissa Malfoy to Run for Minister of Magic!

[LONDON] Narcissa Malfoy, née Black, wife of fifteen-year Hogwarts Board of Governor Lucius Malfoy who was acquitted last year on charges of breaking and entering the Ministry and participating in an illicit group, announced late last evening that she would be challenging current Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour for his office this August. Madam Malfoy is the first contender to announce her candidacy for this year’s general election.

“I am announcing my candidacy for Minister of Magic tonight,” Madam Malfoy said in her initial owl of intent. We at the Daily Prophet stopped by last evening for a comment, and she offered, “I have great respect for any witch or wizard who attempts to better our world, but I believe that wizarding Britain is in dire need of new direction. We are being attacked by Dementors that should be under Ministry control, and there’s been no word of any move made against You-Know-Who. It is time this changed.”

Madam Malfoy graduated top 5% of her Hogwarts class in 1978, where she was a Ravenclaw, an active member of the Spelling Club, and an initiated member of the Sorceress Society. Her achievements include finishing second place in the 1977 Young Ladies’ Competition of Excellence for spell-crafting and chairing the Magical Mums Association for three consecutive years.

Madam Malfoy has one son, Draco Malfoy—a Slytherin Prefect—who is sitting Potions, Transfiguration, Charms, and Herbology for his final year of Hogwarts. Our sources tell us that young Mr Malfoy is currently in a romantic relationship with none other than The Boy Who Lived himself, and when we asked Madam Malfoy and her husband about this development, they shared a smile before she replied, “I only want Draco to be happy. If Mr Black makes him happy, then Mr Black makes me happy.”

Draco himself was unavailable for comment on that score, but he did reply to our owl
with the following thoughts on his mother’s announcement: “I’m very pleased. Mum’s terribly smart. She’s got a huge heart, and I know she had the best interests of all of wizarding Britain in mind when she made this decision.”

We at the Daily Prophet look forward to the upcoming spring and summer campaigning months. This is sure to be an election for the books.

“Tonks and Dedalus were released after questioning,” Harry said, when he set the paper aside. He gestured to the article beneath Mrs Malfoy’s announcement. “But you know Scrimgeour’s not going to let up.”

“Maybe Mrs Malfoy’s announcement will redirect his focus.”

“Doubtful,” said a new voice. Draco sat down next to Harry and gave him a very obvious and ostentatious kiss on the cheek, much to the delighted pleasure of the girls at the Hufflepuff table. They were playing this public relationship to the max, and it’d only been two days. She rolled her eyes.

“Don’t be such a bore, Hermione,” said Draco. She narrowed her eyes at him; he’d recently started using her first name, and she suspected she knew what his agenda was. It was working, too, judging by the pleased look on Harry’s face.

“It’s just a spot of fun,” Harry added. “Plus, I get to show Draco off and his mum gets good publicity. You do want his mum to have good publicity, don’t you, Hermione?” he added with the fakest crup-puppy eyes she’d ever seen.

Mrs Malfoy was not exactly kind to her, but she mostly trusted Harry’s judgement in this, and at least she knew that this was one of the Dark Lord’s schemes—as frightening as that should be to her, she was somewhat comforted by it; he was helping her with her parents, after all.

“How do you think Scrimgeour’s going to respond?” she asked instead. If he had any more laws up his sleeve, they were all in trouble.

Draco smirked at her, looking quite pleased with himself, his mum, and the world in general. Oh, to be a Slytherin, she thought with some amusement. They discussed it more for several minutes until it was time for classes, which passed in a blur of thoughts—none of which she spent on class itself, but all on the spell variations she planned to attempt on the magical cores this evening. By the time dinner rolled around, she was so lost to the variations in Runes, Arithmancy, and potentially even Potions that she could use on the spells, that she was startled when the owls flew in with a special edition evening issue of the Prophet.

The headline, printed in heavy, black Copperplate text, startled her even more.

Muggleborns Attacked in Newport; Three Dead

[CARDIFF] A muggleborn family and their son were killed this afternoon in what Aurors are calling a triple parricide. The family was discovered by neighbours who called the muggle authorities when they heard a 'gun shot' (see page 3, “Muggle Weaponry” for more information). Aurors arrived on the scene after receiving an anonymous tip, and found that the family of three, which included a muggleborn mother and father and their son, aged four, were killed by an attack to the chest with the muggle gun weapon.
The attack was allegedly perpetrated by one of the parents’ fathers, who was taken into custody by the Aurory after the muggle authorities were dispatched. When asked for a statement, Head Auror Gawain Robards said, “We have taken the muggle into custody, but he maintains innocence, despite evidence to the contrary. The Aurory will be working with the Muggle-Injuries Ward of St Mungo’s to determine whether or not it is safe to administer Veritaserum, though at this point, we do not believe it will be possible. That is all I can say at this juncture.”

Next to the text was a moving image of an elderly muggle being magically bound and port-keyed away, presumably to a Department of Magical Law Enforcement holding cell. Hermione pushed her plate away, no longer hungry. No matter what really happened, Scrimgeour would spin this right where he wanted it. She felt sick to her stomach, and the nausea did not leave her at all that night.

Harry was the first down to breakfast, which was unusual and unsettling. Anytime Hermione was late for breakfast, he worried. Had she not been able to sleep the night before? He couldn’t blame her if that were the case. Hedwig arrived with her copy of the morning *Prophet* and he fed her bacon, staring warily at the rolled up newspaper. He wasn’t sure he wanted to find out what sort of awful new law Scrimgeour could come up with overnight.

Nott walked into the Great Hall and, after a brief glance at the Slytherin table, turned and made his way to Gryffindor’s. He slid onto the bench across from Harry where Hermione normally sat, and flicked his eyes, too, to the paper.

“What do you reckon?” Harry asked.

Nott looked very much like he wanted to bite his lip, and only his inherent Slytherin-ness was preventing him. “I don’t know if I want to venture a guess,” he said. “Whatever it is, it’s probably going to make it that much harder for Hermione to see her parents.”

As if coordinated, they both glanced at the doors to the Great Hall, but there still was no sign of Hermione. Harry worried his lip. Finally, with a sigh, he unrolled the paper and laid it out between them. This headline was, perhaps, worse than even they expected.

**Vicious Muggle Attack on Wizard Family Spurs New Wizard Protection Act, Minister Says**

[LONDON] The vicious attack perpetrated on the family of three yesterday afternoon has sent terror through the wizarding world. The family, now known to be Thomas and Helena Wilkins, and four-year-old-son Patrick, were found murdered in the home of Thomas Wilkins’ muggle father. Geoffrey Wilkins, muggle, is believed to be the murderer. He was found stupefied in the same room where the Wilkins family died of heart failure from a muggle weapon attack to the torso, apparently having been stunned after attacking Mr or Mrs Wilkins.

When owled for a quote, Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour said, “We are obviously living in a very dangerous time, but I cannot remember a time when muggles have not been a danger to our society. It is utterly terrifying that a father, a grandfather, would murder his son and daughter-in-law, and their small child, simply because he was afraid of their magical ability.” When asked if it were apparent that the motive for the murders was indeed fear, the Minister replied, “We can find no other motive. It appears quite obvious to the Aurory.”
Thomas Wilkins' father, Geoffrey Wilkins, was arrested in Newport yesterday afternoon after the British Auroy was alerted to the crimes. He is being held in custody and indictment is expected by the end of the week.

"I am duty-bound to protect the people of wizarding Britain," Minister Scrimgeour said. "I can assure you that the Ministry is fast at work drafting a bill that will prevent muggles from harming us ever again. Wizarding Britain can rest easy knowing it will be in effect within the month, after a vote from the Wizengamot." The announcement of the Wizard Protection Act comes right after the much-lauded Muggle Protection Act was announced in February.

"At least we got all those younger kids informed already," Harry said, thinking of Haley Harper and her letter to attend Firth College.

Nott gave him a dubious look. "I don't know. I wouldn't be surprised if Scrimgeour finds a way around that," he said. "Although, I'm hoping for the best, so maybe it will work out."

"Where's Hermione?" asked Nott, after a moment of awkward silence. It was still hard to keep up a conversation with any of the Slytherins who weren't Draco, though Harry was finding it a lot easier to talk to Nott than he used to.

He shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe she's having a lie in."

Nott didn't look convinced. "I knocked on her door this morning and she didn't answer. I thought she'd already come down."

Harry shrugged. "I'm sure she's just off at the library." He hoisted his bag over his shoulder and nodded to Nott. "Gotta go to Transfigurations. See you." Nott nodded absently, but his thoughts were obviously not on Harry.

Something told him to take the secondary route to Transfigurations today—the one they usually only took when the third floor stairs were acting wonky. He heard her voice as he reached the door. It was slightly ajar, and there was a silencing spell over the doorway, but she'd missed the hinges in her apparent haste—more proof than Harry needed of her heightened stress levels. The day that Hermione Granger was too absent-minded to properly cast a silencing spell was a worrisome day indeed.

Harry glanced through the crack in the doorway, trying not to startle her. She was standing in the middle of the empty classroom, facing the far wall, staring down at the floor where one of her glass phials of magical core sat. She loomed it, making agitated passes with her wand between it and a wooden doll. A trail of translucent green light followed her wand movements, and when she stopped, it dissipated. Hermione sighed.

He rapped his knuckles against the door and she spun around, wand pointed straight at him. "Harry!" she said, gasping. "You scared me." She turned back to her core phials and sighed. "I was just trying a new variation on these. He got them out for me, but we weren't able to attach them to an object then."

He stepped fully into the unused classroom, taking in the desks pushed to the walls and the scorch marks on the floor nearby. Hermione’s eyes were red and surrounded by dark circles, and her hair was a wild mess that looked like she’d knotted it in a bun on top of her head the night before and
then slept in it. A surge of pity ran through him. She hadn’t even seen the morning paper yet, but he wasn’t dull enough to think she didn’t know what was in it anyway.

“We need to get to Transfigurations before McGonagall has a fit,” he said softly. “Come on, you can practise more after dinner while I’m researching squibs and wizards.”

She gave him a brief, tired smile and then nodded, turning to gather up her things. They exited the classroom and Harry made sure to lock it behind them so no one would find her spot. A group of Slytherins coming from their de facto dormitory in the Theology wing passed them, eyeing Harry with blatant curiosity; they weren’t afraid of being blunt with their knowledge around him anymore; he was a known entity now, thanks to Voldemort, and he was known to be on their side. Almost as one, as if they were some assimilated hive of Slytherins, their eyes slid from him to Hermione, and he was surprised to find that he could read the expression they gave then, too: She wasn’t to be trusted because she wasn’t a known entity like he was, but they knew enough of his and her personalities to retain judgement until more information came out.

They slipped into the Transfigurations classroom right on time, and Hermione split off to sit with Nott, who looked remarkably relieved to see her. Harry slid into his seat next to Draco and smiled at him. He was truly enjoying the freedom to love Draco publically—it was so much better than worrying about what the wizarding world would think of it. “Morning,” he said. “You missed breakfast.”


“Speaking of sleeping in,” said Harry, “why are all the Slytherins still in the Theology wing? I thought you were going to move back after the Dementors let up.” It was early March, and still cold, but nowhere near the freezing below-zero temperatures brought on by the Dementor surges.

Draco shrugged. “It’s much warmer than the dungeons. Dumbledore was going to move us back last month, but then...well. So Pansy went to see McGonagall about staying up there for the rest of the year, and she was much too busy taking on Headmistress duties to be bothered one way or the other, so she let us stay.”

“Nice of her,” said Harry.

Draco’s lips twitched. “I’m not sure that being too busy to care constitutes ‘nice’, Harry.” Harry didn’t have much to say on that, because McGonagall could have just as easily directed the house-elves to move all the Slytherins back down to the dungeons.

“Mr Malfoy, Mr Black,” came a voice from the front. “Eyes to the front, please.” Harry nodded, blushing at being chastised by her.

“We’ll be working on animated transfigurations today,” she said after. “Everyone, please come to the front and collect one box turtle each; then turn to page seven-forty-one in your texts and read the indicated section. We will start with the box turtle to turtle dove transfiguration, and when you’ve mastered animate to animate, we will move to the box turtle to jewellery box transfiguration.”

Harry stood and made his way to the front, collecting two box turtles and returning to their workbench with them. Draco had his book set out between them, with a highlighting charm over the relevant paragraphs. They worked in silence as they practised the movements and listened to Professor Black go over the steps of the transfiguration in detail.

“This class is so hard to sit through now,” Harry said, once they’d started making attempts on the box turtles. He didn’t have to say why.
“Mum thought she might’ve flooed by now,” Draco said quietly. He was focused on his turtle very intently, moving his arm and wrist quite regally as he pushed his magic into the transfiguration. He got his turtle to change into a bird, but it was still an olive green colour wholly unnatural on doves.

Harry shrugged. “I think she probably wanted to give your mum time—you know, because of your aunt.”

Draco scrunched his nose. “Aunt Bella was mad and I never liked her. She’ll get over it.”

“Draco, mate,” Harry said, aghast. “She was your mum’s sister. Don’t be a prick.”

A wave of guilt settled over him, and he pushed at his Occlumency shields, annoyed. He had enough emotions to feel on his own without Draco adding his own guilt on top of them. “Draco,” he said pointedly. Draco gave him a sheepish smile and Harry could sense him rebuilding his Occlumency, bit by bit, until the feeling of guilt left altogether.

“Please start controlling that better,” he said under his breath.

Draco turned to him suddenly, mouth parted in surprise. “I—fine,” he said.

“Mr Black, Mr Malfoy,” came Professor Black’s sharp voice.

Harry looked up guiltily—his mum was giving him a pointed look, and he felt about five years old again, getting caught stealing food by his Aunt Petunia. That wasn’t right at all, though—his mum would’ve never starved him, would’ve never hurt him at all...

But she hadn’t thought twice about maybe hurting Ginny. Ginny wasn’t her child. And he hadn’t been Aunt’ Petunia’s child. How much, exactly, were the two sisters alike? He looked back down at his desk, and let his mum’s voice wash over him as she chastised him and Draco for talking during class.

“How many times must I tell you?” she said. “Concentrate on your own work...and see me after class.”

They nodded tersely, and this time Harry did return to his work. He was frustrated with this class and his mum and Voldemort and Draco’s emotions, and pretty much everything at the moment. An hour later, class ended, and while both he and Draco had successfully transfigured their box turtles into turtle doves, only Draco had got his to an elegant jewellery box with antiqued gold-filigree detailing. Harry’s was a box, yes, but it still had legs and a head, and the turtle stared at him balefully as he cancelled the spell and turned him back into a turtle.

They lingered as everyone else filed out, packing their bags slowly. The last student slipped out, but before the door shut, Snape snapped it back open and walked briskly in, not even noticing them until he was nearly upon them. He paused at their workbench.

“Do you not have other places to be, Mr Black, Mr Malfoy?” he asked silkily. “Detention, perhaps?”

“Not yet,” said Draco. “We’re waiting for her to assign it.”

“I see,” said Snape, who looked quite pleased at this. “Perhaps I shall save Professor Black the trouble and assign it to you myself.”

“That won’t be necessary, Sev,” said his mum, but she had an amused quirk to her lips that she hadn’t shown him yet. “Just a moment.” She slipped through the door to her office and returned a moment later with a couple books and a stack of parchments, which she sat on her desk.
“I’ve got some information for Ms Granger’s special research,” she said, indicating the stack, and looking remarkably like Hermione after a study binge. “I thought you might give it to her for me.”

“Okay,” said Harry. He shifted from foot to foot. Surely that hadn’t been the reason she kept them after? She could’ve just given it straight to Hermione after class.

“And I wondered if you might pass a note on to your mother, Mr Malfoy.”

“All right—I think she expected you to floo call last week, anyway.”

“Did she?” asked his mum. “I thought to give her time...”

Draco shrugged. “Mum’s resilient, I’m sure you know.”

“She is,” Professor Black agreed, smiling slightly.

“So no detention?” asked Harry.

She shook her head. “Not this time. I do wish you two wouldn’t disrupt my class,” she said, giving them a stern look.

“Sorry, Mum,” Harry said automatically. He realised what he’d said even as it was coming out of his mouth, and his eyes widened, stunned at himself. The three of them were staring at him in similar states of shock. Snape, unexpectedly, was the first to recover.

“Sorry, Professor Black,” he corrected snidely. “Do I need remind you that you are at an institution of learning, Mr Black, and not at your home? You will give Professor Black the respect due—”

“It’s okay,” his mum said quietly. “Severus—stop, it’s fine.”

He stopped, and stared at her blankly. “Harry,” she said, and then paused. “Would you like...would you perhaps like to spend tomorrow evening with me in Diagon Alley? We could have dinner and catch up, perhaps, or—”

“Taking students off school grounds is strictly forbidden,” Snape began again.

Harry sneered at him. “With all due respect, Sir, shove off. It’s a special case, and you know it—”

“You’re always a special case, aren’t you Potter? Just like your father—”

“Which father do you mean?” Harry asked in feigned interest. “Because I’m a Black, as you will recall, though the way you’re hovering about my mum anyone would think you preferred me to be a Snape—”

“Harry!” Draco hissed. Harry stopped, all too aware of what he’d just said. Snape’s face was red with anger; he looked altogether murderous. Harry flicked his eyes over to his mum, who stared at him equally silent, equally stunned, but she looked agonised, not angry, and Harry’s stomach dropped.

“Was there anything else, Professor Black?” Draco asked. She shook her head mutely, and Draco grabbed his arm and pulled him forcibly from the room. The door slammed shut behind them, but right before the silencing spells slammed into place, Harry heard Snape say, “Lily, don’t...”

“Now who’s being a prick to his mum?” Draco asked, pushing him down the corridor.

“Me, a prick?” Harry asked, amazed. “You can’t be serious. Snape was out of line, and the way he
looms about my mum is sickening. I can’t even imagine how she puts up with him always sitting next to her in the Great Hall and talking to her every time she steps into a corridor, and here he is showing up in her classroom and trying to give us detention for her.”

Draco stopped abruptly. Confused, Harry did, too. “Harry,” Draco said slowly. “You aren’t really that daft, are you?”

“What are you on about, Draco?”

“They were friends, you pillock.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yeah, right,” he said. He started walking again, intent on getting to lunch before the house-elves removed it. “As if anyone would be Snape’s friend.”

“Harry, you take that back,” Draco said angrily. “Professor Snape’s my Head of House and he’s been friends with my dad for a long time. He’s a good man—”

“It’s Snape, Draco,” Harry said. “And he wants to shag my mum. It’s disgusting.”

“Who in Merlin’s sagging sac gives a fuck?” Draco asked.

“Me, for starters,” said Harry.

Draco grabbed his arm and made him stop again. “Harry, you can’t seriously be doing this. You’ve known about your mum for three months now, and you haven’t wanted anything to do with her until now—and you’re going to make her choose between her one friend and her only son? You’re a bigger git than I thought, if that’s true.”

“A git, too?” Harry asked angrily. “Have you got any other names you want to call me, or shall I start in on some for you? Like what an arsehole you are to Smith every time he comes to say hello? Or what an absolute condescending cock you are to Hermione whenever she opens her mouth? Or how much of a cunt you are for pushing your mum and my mum together when you know she’s still upset—Merlin knows why—about your bat-shit fucking insane aunt?”

There it was again, that wave of nauseating guilt that Draco never could keep to himself. And of course, he wouldn’t feel it at all until Harry mentioned precious Narcissa Malfoy, who Draco treated like shit until someone pointed it out to him. Because Draco didn’t feel guilt for anyone except his mum.

“For Circe’s fucking sake, Draco!” Harry said. “You told me this wouldn’t happen! You said I wouldn’t always feel every fucking thing you felt.”

“You never can tell what’s going to happen when you’re involved,” Draco sneered. “I can’t fucking control this bond.”

“I’m sick of it! I don’t care when you’re feeling bad about being a prick to your mum, so rein it in!”

“I can’t!” Draco said. “I don’t know how!”

“Well, figure it out,” Harry sneered. “Because I hate this stupid bond and I want it gone.”

“What?” Draco said, deadly quiet. “Did you just say our bond is stupid?”

“You heard me.”

Draco took a step forward, his grey eyes narrowed into furious slits. “Say it again,” he said.
Harry clenched his fists. “I—hate—this—bond.”

Without a word, Draco stepped back, and then he turned and walked back the way they’d come. There was one good thing about making Draco so angry—he’d finally got his Occlumency shields up properly, and Harry couldn’t feel a thing from him. Angrily, he spat on the ground where Draco had been, but Draco didn’t sense that, either. He kept walking.

Without a word, Draco stepped back, and then he turned and walked back the way they’d come. There was one good thing about making Draco so angry—he’d finally got his Occlumency shields up properly, and Harry couldn’t feel a thing from him. Angrily, he spat on the ground where Draco had been, but Draco didn’t sense that, either. He kept walking.

Lily, don’t be upset,” Severus said. “I did warn you about him. The boy’s lucky he can function in society at all after the way your sister raised him. He’s socially inept and a cocky brat at the best of times; you can’t take heart to anything he—”

“Capella, remember?” she said grimly. He turned to her. Her eyes were closed and he knew she was reciting all the Ministers of Magic in reverse-chronological order in her head to calm herself down. He waited, as he always did. Finally, after several long minutes, she opened her eyes again.

“How far did you get?” he asked.

Her lips twisted bitterly. “I stopped at Castor Black of 1614,” she said. “Sirius wanted Harry named after him, you know.”

Severus’s heart skipped a beat. Dagda, he needed to get himself together—letting that homicidal Gryffindor’s useless son rile him was unacceptable...that the stupid boy had apparently been observant enough to see Severus’s desires was also unacceptable.

She sighed. “Sev, what Harry said—”

“I do not wish to hear your apologies,” he said roughly. “It is enough for me that you are still my friend.” It wasn’t, though. He knew it, and she knew it, but she let it slide, and with a small, forced smile, she gestured him through to her office. He went at once, but she didn’t stop at her desk, and instead pressed her hand against the far door that led to her private chambers. Briefly, he wondered what her rooms would look like—no doubt as meticulously arranged as her and Narcissa’s Hogwarts dorm room had been and likely wallpapered in photographs of her son.

But it was neither of those things, he saw, as she led him through. It was much like his own rooms, but with mismatched furniture, likely chosen from storage at random by house-elves. The couch was blue and covered in chintz. She’d always hated frilly things like that. There was only one picture of Potter in evidence—a pathetic newspaper clipping circa the Tri-Wizard Tournament, with the boy staring sullenly off to the side. It was three years old, and the movement charms were wearing out; Potter blinked choppy. The clipping was framed, and placed in the centre of the mantle above the hearth.

“Tea?” she asked. He nodded. She poured his for him without needing to be reminded of how he took it.

“Life is much harder than I recall it being,” she said after a moment.

“The boy doesn’t make it easier, I’m sure,” he said sourly.

“No,” she agreed. “It was much easier when he thought I was a figment of his imagination.”

He looked up at her through his lank hair. “What are you going to do about it?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know,” she said. “I suppose that dinner in Diagon Alley is off, so I guess I’ll just go back to trying to keep him alive until he’s ready.”
“And if he never is?” asked Severus.

She looked away, to the pitiful newspaper photograph on the mantle. “Then I will keep trying,” she said. “If one method doesn’t work, then I will find another that does.”

“Very Ravenclaw of you,” he observed. “To experiment on your son.”

She cracked a smile at that. “I don’t know how to do it any other way. I feel simultaneously as if I’m still twenty-one and as if I’m a hundred and twenty-one. How old am I, really?” She paused to think, and Severus let her, even though he knew that Lily Evans turned thirty-eight this past January, just twenty-one days after he did. It was impossible to forget—even if he hadn’t spent his whole life in love with her.

“Thirty-eight,” she said at last. He nodded once. They were silent again. Severus set his tea down, just to do something with his hands. She flicked her wand over her shoulder and summoned another stack of papers. “Since you’re here,” she said. “Perhaps you would give me your opinion.”

“When have you known me not to?” he asked.

She grinned. “Very rarely, it’s true.” The papers landed on the table between them and she indicated the one on top. “You’ve heard the second prophecy?” she guessed. “I think there’s more to it than anyone’s giving credit for.”

“You don’t believe in Divination,” he said.

She waved that thought away. “The Dark Lord does, and if he does, then I have to. I want to make sure we understand this one exactly. You know how he is with prophecies, and I haven’t had much luck with them myself.”

Severus frowned bitterly. And whose fault is that? he asked himself. His own, always his own. Why had he listened in on that prophecy? Why had he reported it to the Dark Lord? Why hadn’t he known it could have meant her? His hair fell forward and he hid behind it gratefully.

She seemed to read his thoughts, just like she always had, even though he knew for a fact that she was no Legilimens. “Don’t,” she said quietly.

“I can’t,” he replied. He swallowed. Even his voice sounded anguished. He was losing it. All these years, and now he was losing it.

“I’m alive,” she said. “It means nothing.”

Finally, he looked up. “It means everything,” he said. You mean everything, he added, and he knew she could read that in him, too. He looked away first, and his eyes landed on the summoned parchments.

“What about the prophecy?” he asked, scanning the parchment. It was a copy of the verse, written out in her precise hand: ‘Two become one before one becomes three; the dark lord’s mate finds peace when the beasts of dark days sleep, and one becomes two or one becomes three; the choice lies with the end of the beast of dark days’.

“The first part is obviously about Yaxley, Weasley, and me,” she said. “I possessed Weasley and we became one, then I left her, but she’s still ‘two’ and not ‘one’. How does she split from Yaxley?”

Severus shrugged. “Perhaps it won’t happen until the second part comes to pass,” he said.
“Yes, the Dementors,” she said. “Yaxley will be at peace when the Dementors sleep...”

“Are you sure?” he asked. “What if it isn’t the Dementors?”

“What else could it be? What other beasts are there?” she asked.

He had no answer for that. “I suppose the question is how to make them sleep then.”

“But what happens if the third part happens, and the ‘one’ only becomes ‘two’? That’s what worries me. It could affect Harry...everything always seems to affect Harry,” she added.

“I won’t let it,” he said. “I’ve kept him alive for you this long, haven’t I?”

She paused, glanced up at him with those awful green eyes. Why could he never keep his pulse steady when she looked at him like that? “I know,” she said. “I watched you, too.”

“I thought you said it was for my special research,” Hermione said, flipping through the first book. There wasn’t anything at all about squibs or electricity or magical cores in this... “Oh,” she said, and didn’t manage to keep the disappointment from her voice.

“Oh what?” asked Harry, leaning over her shoulder to read. He was sprawled out across her common room couch being quite sullen indeed if Hermione said so herself, which she did. She leaned back against the front of the couch so he could read over her shoulder if he was so inclined, but she was pretty sure he wouldn’t be able to decipher Old English lettering or spelling anyway, so it was probably unnecessary.

“It’s not for my parents,” she said. “It’s about the Dementors.”

“Oh,” Harry said, and she could hear his own disappointment on her behalf in his voice.

“This book confirms what I already confirmed,” she said, setting it aside. She picked up the second book, and then changed her mind and reached for Professor Black’s notes instead.

“Which is what?” asked Harry.

She turned to look up at him. “I was going to tell you later,” she said, sighing. “I’ve been so busy, and as awful as it is, the Dementors really were the last thing on my mind. The Dementors aren’t going to go away, Harry. They’ve been magically binded to Azkaban, and it’s messed up their instincts. They don’t know when to feed or breed or die, and so they’re going to keep doing it over and over again until they’ve died so many times that the taint of their Azkaban binding—or bindings, in some cases—are filtered out.”

“So they’re going to be back? And they’re going to start Kissing people again?”

She nodded, looking back down at the handwritten notes.

“So all those people who died in December...that was all for nothing?”

“Maybe,” she said. “I don’t know. It certainly helped filter out some of the Azkaban binding. It won’t be as strong on them now as it was before.”

She felt Harry sit up suddenly. His legs swung over the side and he levered himself down on the floor next to her. “What are we going to do?” he said. “We can’t let them go around Kissing everyone indefinitely.”
“No,” she agreed, but, guiltily, her mind was already sliding back to the phial in her robes. She was close—so close—to figuring this out. Just this evening she’d moved one of the cores into a plush unicorn, and even now it was warm from the magic inside it.

She realised he was waiting for a response for her, and said, “We’ll just have to...I don’t know, round them up again and kill them all over and over until it’s out of their systems.”

“That’s impossible,” he said. “It would take two dozen of us to take down one between us, and there are over five hundred of them in Britain alone.”

“That’s not entirely true,” said Hermione.

He looked immediately alert, and Hermione suspected there was something he wasn’t telling her on that front. She didn’t have time to inquire about it right now, though. And he could always go talk to Draco about it if he needed a chat. “What do you mean?”

“There is one person who can destroy a Dementor alone.”

“Voldemort,” Harry guessed. The Dark Mark in Hermione’s mouth throbbed painfully at the mention, and Harry gave her a contrite look. It didn’t make it stop hurting, though.

“Yeah,” she said.

“Well, there we go then,” said Harry. “If there’s anyone who can do it, he can.”

“It’s not that easy,” said Hermione. “It nearly killed him when he did that one to bring your mum back.”

“But he’s immortal,” Harry said.

“Not for long,” Hermione muttered under her breath.

Harry stilled. “What are you talking about?”

“Well why do you think he’s made you his second in command?” she said. “The wizarding world needs to move on, and they can’t with him around.”

“But with Mrs Malfoy’s campaign, we’ll be able to show everyone that he’s not really as bad as all that—”

“As bad as all that?” Hermione repeated, giggling despite herself. “Harry—it’s You-Know-Who. Of course he’s as bad as all that.”

“He isn’t, though. Not really. You know that.”

She rolled his eyes. “Whatever I know, the wizarding world will never accept the Dark Lord, Harry. “We will always be at war, so long as he’s alive, even if it’s just in the frightened minds of the wizarding people.”

“But, he’s still immortal, and all we have to do is—”

She looked over at him, exasperated. “Oh, come on, Harry,” she said. “Surely you aren’t as daft as all that?”

He stood abruptly. “Daft, am I?” he repeated angrily. “I must be, since you’re the second person today to call me so.”
“Harry!” she said, jumping up. “Harry, wait. What’s wrong with you tonight?”

“Everything, apparently,” he snarled, and before she knew it, he was out the door and it was slamming behind him.

For a brief moment she considered running after him, but then her Dark Mark flared, and her fetch-key got hot in her pocket, and when she read the message on it, Harry’s temper tantrum became the furthest thing from her mind. *Come at once* it said. *I have a test receptacle for a magical core.* A muggle. Bile rose in Hermione’s throat at the thought of it, but it didn’t stop her from activating the fetch-key and porting to the Dark Lord.

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**Chapter End Notes**

We're getting really close to the end. As it stands, I'm estimating that it'll be wrapped up at chapter 39. Chapter 34 is already written and is off to the beta, so you can expect it posted as soon as I get it back.

Thanks so much for reading! Feedback greatly appreciated!
Coup d’État

Chapter by faire_weather

Chapter Summary

In which Hermione does something amazing, there are eleven wars, Harry gets several dressings down, there’s something unusual about Snape and Lily, and Draco decides it’s time to take all this into his own hands.

Chapter Notes

Welp, the story is completely written now. There will be 4 more chapters, including the epilogue. I should have the final chapters posted by the end of this weekend, so stay tuned for the conclusion. :)

Skip to the end notes if you want warnings for this chapter.

Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Coup d’État (n): 1. a sudden decisive exercise of force in politics; especially : the violent overthrow or alteration of an existing government by a small group.

The muggle was dying anyway.

The way Voldemort saw it, they could kill him and possibly revive him as a magical being—or they could just kill him. It suited him either way, but he did gather that Hermione’s stomach was altogether weaker. Still, though—still...she did have a certain practicality about her that Voldemort appreciated. She could have been one of his Inner Circle, had things been different...but they weren’t, and she was still a mudblood, and he wouldn’t be the one to insult Lucius that way.

Harry, though—yes, he could see Harry not giving a niffler’s golden arse about insulting Lucius. The thought was amusing.

Hermione studied the dying man with a pained look about her face. She was rather green. Beneath his stasis spell, the muggle’s blood was stilled in its course out of his body. He was stupefied, but they both knew he’d not last another two minutes without the stasis over him. She wouldn’t have to do anything at all to stop the electrical beats of his heart and the waves in his brain—his body would do it for her. All she had to do was move a core into him when it did.

“Head wounds do bleed so,” he mused, head tilted slightly as he took in the picture. There was another deep stab wound in the top right of his abdomen. Voldemort summoned Horvitz and had him check their stores for a hepatitis-healing potion—that and a general healing spell were the best he’d be able to do on short notice.
Hermione gulped. He could actually hear it. He rolled his eyes behind her back. *Ah, to be young and with delicate sensibilities,* he thought.

“I wonder, Hermione,” he said, and knew that she did not miss the use of her first name. She would question what it meant for days to come. “In your experience, are all muggles so violent as to attack one another in dark alleys?” He nodded to the muggle on the bed, though he knew she couldn’t see the movement. “This one was attacked by another who took his money and left in the alley.”

He did not add that he’d used the Imperious on the attacking muggle first—he rather thought she’d assume it anyway. For him to happen across a wounded muggle just moments from death was entirely too coincidental for even Sybil Trelawney to believe. But he also rather thought that she would ignore that for a while because—he predicted that—she was good at compartmentalising evils into acceptable, necessary, and heinous. This would be an acceptable evil if the muggle lived, a necessary evil if it worked, and a heinous one when she started thinking about it later.

She still hadn’t spoken. Annoyed, he cancelled the stasis spell. Blood spurted from a stab wound in his neck, but it wasn’t as rapid as it had been when Voldemort first paused his death. “He will die,” he told her bluntly. “It’s your choice whether to try to revive him with magic after he dies or let him rot. It matters not to me, and Nagini hasn’t eaten in several days. Be on with it, Ms Granger, no time for indecision.”

He wasn’t above helping her make her decisions, after all.

She snapped out of it at once, and ran to the dying muggle. The blood coming from his neck was only a slow gurgle now, but she pressed her hands against it and tried in vain to stop it. “With magic, if you please, or have you forgotten that you are a witch?”

She jumped back, hands covered in blood, and pulled her wand. Non-verbal healing charms flew from it in rapid succession, and within moments, she had all the wounds closed. The muggle was deathly white and his breathing was so shallow as to almost not exist. He still wouldn’t live. Voldemort judged him to have another thirty seconds at most. Hermione took the time to spell away all the lost blood and when Voldemort passed the liver potion to her, she tipped it into his mouth, again without a word.

“Are you quite all right?” he asked, feigning polite interest.

She looked back at him, and her face was nearly as white as the muggle’s. It looked entirely more fetching on her than him. “Not really, no, my lord,” she said.

He shrugged. “Greatness does require the occasional sacrifice,” he wisely told her. “Let us just hope it continues to be other people’s sacrifices.”

An alert spell rang, signalling the muggle’s lack of pulse. “Ah,” said Voldemort. “Shall I call time of death or will you be transferring a magical core into the muggle? Quickly now, time is of the essence.”

She hesitated for only a fraction of a second before she jumped into action, first retrieving the second bottled magical core from her robes—hands shaking so badly she nearly dropped it—and setting it on the table beside the bed. He took amused pity on her and spelled the sealed cork out of it when her hands proved too unsteady to do it herself.

It took only a matter of moments for her to bind the core to the muggle, but judging by the sweat on her brow, it hadn’t been as easy as it was quick. The spell had been one of her own devising, and he admitted, if only to himself, that he was impressed with her theory. She stabilised the core, and
stopped, obviously uncertain.

“Now what will you do?” he asked.

“I—I don’t know,” she said, her voice high with stress. “He didn’t wake up.”

“Of course he didn’t wake up. He’s dead, not asleep. How will you attempt to revive him now that the core’s in place?”

“I don’t know!” she said.

Was he really going to have to walk her through this systematically? Muggleborns were entirely too timid for his taste. “Would you agree that the muggle has no more—or at least not many, given how enigmatic the brain is—electrical pulses coursing through him anymore?”

“Yes,” she said quietly.

“And would you also agree that you successfully installed the magical core?”

She pointed to his torso, just under his rib cage. “It’s there,” she said. “I felt it take.”

“Very good,” he said, as if to a small child. “And so, if the muggle has no electricity, and now has a core, what will be required to restart his vital organs, now that they’ve been reset by death?”

“Magic,” she whispered.

He waved her forward. “Well, do take your time. It isn’t as if I care if the muggle is brain damaged from going too long without oxygen.”

That, finally, got her moving again. She reached down and pressed the palms of her hands against the muggle’s torso. Her eyes closed. She moved her lips but verbalised nothing, seemingly walking herself through the steps she’d devised for this very procedure. The air around them began to warm from her magic, and her hair and cloak began to slowly flutter around her, caught in the magical currents she was willing into existence. Despite himself, Voldemort watched, and became more impressed by the moment. He’d never expected to see this ridiculous theory come to pass in actuality; it had been merely a hobby, something to amuse himself with when the stress of being a homicidal megalomaniac became wearying.

The muggle coughed. Blood splattered across his face and Hermione’s hair. She kept her eyes closed, moving from organ to organ—from heart to brain to liver and every other part—and pushing magic into them. She still didn’t stop, and he had to send a stinging hex at her to break her away.

“Enough,” he said. “The muggle’s alive, and he doesn’t deserve your magic, so don’t give him any more, or you won’t have enough left to regenerate what you’ve lost.”

“It really worked?” she said wonderingly.

“Yes, but...”

“But what?”

“Is he a wizard? ...Or a squib?”

“I recommend empirical data for finding out,” he said. “Ennervate.”
The muggle’s eyes flew open, and they were just as wild as they had been when Voldemort stupefied him hours ago. “Hello, my good muggle,” he said, leaning over the man. “My young assistant has risen you from the dead. What have you to say about it?”

The muggle backed up hastily on the bed. A variety of sounds came from him, but none of them, unfortunately, were words. “I do believe you forgot to repair his vocal cords,” Voldemort said.

“Oh, right,” Hermione said. She waved her waved and the noises the man was making suddenly turned into words.

“—are you? Who are you?” he was saying desperately, and in an unfortunate Essex accent. Ah, now that was more like the muggles Voldemort was acquainted with.

“Sorry, sir,” said Hermione, ever annoyingly polite, even in the face of muggles she’d just watched die. “My name’s Hermione. What’s yours? How are you feeling?”

“He isn’t a child, Hermione,” Voldemort sneered. “And I do not particularly care what his name is.”

She gave him a hard look and then turned back to the muggle. He was still jabbering some rubbish about being attacked and were they devils and other such nonsense. He saw the determined look when it fell over her features, and smirked. Decisively, she hit him with a rather strong calming spell.

“Hello,” Hermione said again. “Would you hold this for me, please?”

The muggle took her wand without protest, and even gave her a flirtatious smile to go with it. She smiled at him and said, “Now what’s your favourite flower?”

“Roses,” said the muggle. Voldemort wanted to gag.

“That’s lovely,” said Hermione. “Now what I want you to do is think about the most beautiful roses you’ve ever seen, and move this stick like this when you do.” She demonstrated the wand movement for him, and he watched rapturously. When she finished, he tried it once and nothing happened.

“Think really hard about the roses,” she reminded him. He nodded. This time, when he moved the wand through the motions of the Florus charm, a single, pathetic red rose sprouted from the tip and fell gently to his lap. He held it out to her.

“Thank you,” she said. She took her wand back from him and turned to Voldemort.

“A wizard,” she said. She shook her head, as if she couldn’t believe it. Truth be told, he couldn’t, either. “It’s possible.”

“I suggest you go back to Hogwarts and sleep. You need to regenerate your magic as soon as possible, and you can’t do that while you’re awake.”

“What are you going to do with him?” she asked.

He shrugged dismissively. “I’m sure I’ll think of something.” Or rather, Nagini would think of something.

“You won’t kill him,” she said sternly, and he wanted to laugh at her bravado.

“Why ever not? He’s a muggle with an unfortunate case of magic. He has no idea how to survive in the wizarding world.”

Her lips pressed firmly together in anger. “No,” she said. “I just spent a lot of magic bringing him
back to life, and we should be watching him for side effects anyway... besides,” she added, more quietly. “Besides... he’s young. Look at him. He can’t be more than twenty.”

Voldemort did not much care for twenty-year-old muggles, but he did agree with watching him for side effects. “Fine,” he said, waving her off. “I’ll put him in a guest room and have Horvitz keep him dosed with calming draught.”

“What about my parents?” she asked.

“Tomorrow,” he said. She nodded, and then yawned, driving his point home. She pulled out her fetch-key, and on a whim, he added, “Goodnight, Granger.”

She nodded back to him, face still utterly pale as she ported away.

“History in the making,” Professor Sinclair said, arms spread expansively. “Tell me, shall we finally have ourselves an eleventh war, Mr Thomas?”

“I think so, Professor,” he said. “I think it qualifies.”

“And who else agrees with Mr Thomas?” the professor asked. About half of the students in the class raised their hands, including Harry, who was back to sitting with Hermione now that he and Draco were on the outs, or at least, he thought they were on the outs. He didn’t have enough experience to know for sure, but he’d been a right berk and he hadn’t bothered to apologise, so it was likely.

“Well, you’re right,” she said at last. “I believe this will become our eleventh war, now that the Minister’s declared martial law... and how are you all liking martial law, by the way? Bit of a nuisance, isn’t it?”

“Why are we even under it, Professor?” asked Hannah Abbott. “You-Know-Who was back even before... before Justin.”

“And Geilis,” Lavender added pointedly.

“And Graham,” Harry added, when no one else seemed inclined to. “And Professor Dumbledore.” He was so irritable lately and he couldn’t think of why, only that Draco hadn’t spoken to him in several days, and the longer it went on, the more snappish he became. The students shifted in their seats, many of them staring at their desks, mouths closed tightly in remembrance.

“One does wonder, Ms Abbott,” the professor agreed. “The truth is, I don’t know, and I don’t think anyone else does, either, but I imagine that the new Muggle Protection Act and Wizard Protection Act can serve to enlighten us somewhat, if we but think about it.”

Uneasy silence descended as the students processed her words. “Now, who can tell me how to protect ourselves from the Dark Arts of the Ministry?”

“The Ministry, Professor?” asked Parvati. “What do they have to do with the Dark Arts?”

“Oh, well I think the term Dark Arts might be rather relative, don’t you, Ms Patil?” She turned to the class and said, “Tell me, who of you thinks that there isn’t anything suspicious about the WPA and the MPA bills?” Harry craned his neck around to see behind him—only two hands went up: Susan Bones’ and Seamus’s. Harry frowned. Surely Seamus wasn’t still listening to his mum’s rhetoric—not after they’d been together. As if that really mattered, he reminded himself.

“As I thought, most of you see that there is some danger in these bills,” said the professor. “How
many muggleborns do we have?” Only Hermione and Dean raised their hands. The Hufflepuffs all looked wretched; there was a hand missing from their side of the room at that question. “And have either of you considered what will happen when the Muggle Protection Act goes into place and requires that you receive Ministry approval before contacting any muggle? That does include your family, Mr Thomas...

“And how about half-bloods?” Seamus and Megan Jones raised their hands this time. “What will your parents do when they aren’t allowed to speak to one another without Ministry approval?”

“Professor, the Ministry can’t do that,” Ernie said. “Surely it doesn’t say it can do that.”

“No, you’re right, Mr Macmillan—it doesn’t say it can do that...but you know what else it doesn’t say? It doesn’t say that it can’t. There are no provisions in the current iteration of the bill that makes allowances for muggle family members...and I do remind you, students, that this bill—the Muggle Protection Act—has already been passed, as it stands, by the Wizengamot. It goes into effect on the Ides.”

She looked around the room, and Harry knew she was seeing the wide-eyed, stunned faces of the seventh year Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs. “Yes, I thought the Prophet might’ve overlooked that. Now that I have your attention—what defences do we have against the dark arts of the Ministry?”

Smith was the first to raise his hand. Professor Sinclair nodded at him. “Politics,” he offered.

The professor gave him an appraising look. “Very wise, Mr Smith. Magic is usually not the only option. So then—which of you is ready to run for office this summer?” No one raised a hand. “Or do you not think that opposing the MPA and WPA bills is worthwhile?”

“It’s worthwhile...” Neville said.

“But?” Professor Sinclair prompted? Harry craned his neck around in time to see Neville shrugging awkwardly.

“I’m only a student,” he said. “I can’t do anything.”

“Hmm,” said Professor Sinclair, with some amount of disbelief. “Incorrect, I’m afraid. For one thing, you can vote in the elections this summer, and—”

There was a knock at the door and Professor Black stuck her head in. “Mercy,” she said, “I do hate to interrupt, but one of my fourth years has banished all the hair from her body and Madam Pomfrey says you have experience correcting that.”

Professor Sinclair smirked amid the class’s laughter. “Alright then, students,” she said. “Dismissed early today—but do remember your essays are due next week.”

Harry slid from his seat quickly, eager to get away from his classmates and go brood somewhere, or perhaps find Draco—no. If he left it alone, this stupid bond might fade away, and then he’d have a chance at a normal relationship with a normal person, and not mad-as-a-pointed-hatter-Malfoy.

Though the thought of a normal person instead of Draco was, frankly, distressing. It must be the bond making him feel so wretched about all this, he thought.

Hermione grabbed his arm on the way by, and he threw his head back, exhaling in frustration. She pulled him along without a word, and he followed, because he’d long since realised that when Hermione had that determined look on her face, there was no sense in arguing. When she shut the door to the Head common room behind them, he finally met her gaze.
“Still sulking, I see,” she said.

He shrugged.

“Draco did tell me what an utter berk you’ve been,” she said, eyebrow lifted.

“Me, a berk?” he exclaimed. “Draco sodding Malfoy knew all along that these stupid friendship bonds,” he mocked, “can turn into deeper ones, and he let it go on, knowing that I wanted no part of anything that further likened me to Voldemort.” Hermione flinched at the name, and he saw her facial muscles tense as she tongued the sore spot in the roof of her mouth; he felt guilty for saying the name, for causing the taboo to hurt her, but not enough to acknowledge it.

“Harry, grow up,” she said fiercely. “You’re about to become the leader of a rebel organisation and you need to start acting like one, and not like a bitter, lovelorn adolescent. It’s just a silly bond, for heaven’s sake. It won’t let you do outrageous things like apparate to one another when in danger; it doesn’t make you love each other, it doesn’t even make you like each other. It just creates empathy; that’s really it. You boys can be so melodramatic.”

“He can read my mind,” Harry protested.

“So can Professor Snape,” said Hermione. “It’s the wizarding world, Harry, honestly. This is not unusual. If you want more privacy, then keep your Occlumency shields up—or better yet, learn some advanced techniques and block it completely.”

Harry looked away, scowling fiercely. Through his teeth, he gritted out, “Was there something you wanted, Hermione? Or was it just to give me a dressing down?”

“Not that you don’t deserve the dressing down,” she said, “but as it happens, there was a specific reason.”

Reluctantly, he looked back to her, and found that her face was set in determination. Even more so than usual. “You did it,” he said, and it wasn’t a question. “You figured it out.”

“Yes,” she said. “And it has been...scientifically tested.”

Harry shuddered. “Any lasting damage?”

Hermione shrugged. “No way to tell just yet—he was dying anyway. The Dark Lord killed him...I just gave him magic to bring him back.”

“And it took?” asked Harry, just to be sure.

“It took,” she confirmed.

“So then—your parents. When?”

“Tonight,” she said. “That’s why I had to talk to you now, Harry. That data on the Dementors that I got from your mum and the library—well, like with everything regarding those beasts, it’s impossible to tell, but I think it’ll be soon.”

“Another attack?” Harry asked, tensing. They couldn’t just keep fighting the Dementors over and over. They had to stop them.

Hermione seemed to have been reading his thoughts—much like everyone was these days, he thought bitterly. She said, “I think we can end it, next time they come. I think I know how.”
“Do tell,” he said, falling bonelessly into the chair next to her fireplace. He felt so exhausted and irritable lately, and he just wanted a lie-in sometime this week, but it wasn’t looking likely.

“They need to be reset,” she said. “And if we line it up to a day of significance, then all the better.”


She looked distraught. “Tomorrow’s the vernal equinox, and I think they’ll resurface. All you’ve got to do is get them all together and destroy them at the same time; the backlash should reset their internal clocks for another five-hundred years...so long as we don’t bind them to Azkaban again,” she added.

“Is that all?” Harry asked, eyebrow lifted. “If I’d know all we had to do was restrain and simultaneously explode four-hundred and fifty demons from hell, I’d have done it ages ago.”

“Don’t be glib, Harry,” said Hermione. “I’m serious.” She worried her lip, and behind her, the common room door opened and Nott came in, saw Harry’s irritated face, and wisely retreated to his own room with only a kiss to Hermione’s cheek first. “What other options do we have? Just let them keep dying and regenerating over and over, needlessly killing people every time?”

“Of course not,” Harry said, “but how is this an option, either? It’s a great idea, sure, but I can’t think of any way to actually do it. And forgive me if I’m being naive, but the doing it part seems like the most important right now...especially if this might happen tomorrow.”

“I don’t even think that’s going to be the worst of it,” said Hermione. “Aurors will be on high-alert, what with martial law. If it happens after curfew...I don’t know what you’ll do.”

“Where will you be?” he asked.

“With you, if I can,” she said. “You know that. But—I’ve got to do...the other thing tonight, and I don’t know how long it will take or if my magic will have regenerated to a helpful level in time. I have to do this before the MPA goes into effect, or else I could be arrested for contacting them at all.” And I have to do this while Voldemort is still able to help me, he could see her thinking, but he didn’t believe it, and he wouldn’t voice it.

Harry sighed, leaning his head back against the chair and closing his eyes. “Fuck everything,” he said tiredly. “What I wouldn’t give to only have NEWTs to worry about.”

“Even I’m not studying for those yet,” Hermione said with a small grin.

Harry looked back up at her, and felt a small rush of energy go through him at the sight of it. If Hermione could do this, then so could he. He stood, stretching, a million thoughts running through his head, and none of them sounding like a good plan.

“Okay, I’ll figure something out,” he said. “I always do.”

“I know,” she said. “I’ve got to go—but Harry?”

“Hmm?”

“Stop being awful to Draco. He’s really trying, even I can see that—and you aren’t Voldemort. You won’t ever be like him just because you both happen to have a bond with someone you love. Mr and Mrs Weasley have one, too, you know.”

“I know,” he said, looking away.
“Tell him you’re sorry,” she said gently.

Sighing, Harry nodded. He supposed he should. Satisfied, Hermione gave him a quick hug and had barely dipped her head into Nott’s room to let him know she was leaving before she was gone.

Mercy did not care for martial law at all. A curfew severely limited her nighttime activities—even the entirely reputable ones. She could see Hogsmeade from her office window, but it was nine in the evening, and already the lights were flickering off in the pubs and restaurants. She might’ve taken a stroll down with Severus or Minerva or perhaps even Capella Black for a firewhiskey, but with a ten o’clock curfew, it wasn’t worth the effort. She exhaled heavily, frustrated with her seconds who couldn’t grasp the difference between a banishing curse and a vanishing charm and desperately wishing she could wash this day away with a strong drink.

Alas—thwarted by Scrimgeour and his idiocy yet again. Perhaps at least with him out of office come August her husband could finally be granted entrance to Britain, and then they wouldn’t have to be separated half the year. Honestly, a little dark magic never hurt anyone—well, except for her husband. But his having received his NEWTs from Durmstrang wasn’t any reason to keep denying his citizenship applications.

There was a knock at her office door, and she lifted her head, feeling the muscles in her neck twist in protest. She rolled her shoulders, but it was no use. “Come in,” she called.

Malfoy stuck his head in, eyes immediately scanning the room for others. She liked this one. He was intelligent and brusque and entirely too cocksure, but entertaining nonetheless. He reminded her a bit of her husband—if only Vlad had actually had a knack for dark magic.

“Mr Malfoy,” she greeted. “How can I help you?”

“I wondered if you might talk to me about Dementors and prophecies,” he said—and rather direct for a Slytherin, too, in her experience. Another reason she liked him.

“Of course,” she said. “Although, to what degree I will be able to help you with the second topic is questionable.”

“They’re related,” he said. He pulled out a folded parchment from his robe and handed it to her. “It’s a prophecy, and everyone thinks it’s about Dementors—but I’m not convinced.”

“Hmm,” she said, reading it over. It took her a few passes, as the lettering was rather archaic—a direct copy spell, apparently. She looked back up at him. “If not Dementors, then what beasts do you think the prophecy refers to?”

“I don’t,” he said. He leaned over her desk and touched his finger to the second instance of the word ‘beasts’. “It isn’t an S,” he said. “I tested the ink; it was added on later, probably by some moronic illuminator who assumed that if the first mentioning was plural then the second should be as well. The ‘beasts of dark days’ are not the same as the ‘beast of dark days’,“ he said lowly.

Mercy’s mouth parted in surprise. “It’s the Dark Lord,” she said.

“I know,” said Malfoy. When she looked up at him, his face was grim. She, like his other professors in the staff room, had not given this particular Slytherin the credit he deserved.

Zacharias stood beneath the risers, staring out over the damp grass of the Quidditch pitch. It was cold, and wet, and the last time he’d done this, Justin had stood at his side muttering annoyedly about
how watching Ravenclaw practise drills wasn’t on, especially for Hufflepuffs. Zacharias had ignored him then like he was ignoring the memory of him now. Quidditch was cancelled for the year, anyway, and no one was practising.

“Smith.”

Zacharias turned, and saw Malfoy behind him, slices of his white-blond hair and pale face illuminated by the little bit of waxing moonlight that filtered between the risers. He wasn’t startled, but damn if he wanted to know how Malfoy could sneak up so quietly. Zacharias had even been listening for him.

“Malfoy,” he said. They had a tentative truce these days. Not that they were ever overtly hostile to one another before, but more like they’d taken one look at each other as eleven-year-olds, sized the other up (correctly) and decided that they both had better things to do than bother.

“Did you do it?” asked Malfoy.

Zacharias rolled his eyes. For as quiet as Malfoy could be sneaking up, he was alarmingly unsubtle for a Slytherin. “Of course I did,” he said, with no small amount of disdain. “My mum’s calling in a few favours at the DMLE—she should be meeting with your mum to settle things now.”

“Good,” said Malfoy, and Zacharias could actually see some of Malfoy’s tension drain away from him. “Good. It’s going to be tomorrow,” he added. “Harry doesn’t know yet.”

Zacharias lifted an eyebrow. “I doubt that,” he said. “He’s got Granger working for him, after all.”

“They’re friends,” Malfoy said uncomfortably.

Zach smirked. “To you or I, maybe,” he conceded. “I don’t think the typical Gryffindor idea of having a friend is letting someone keep you from being killed, having them do your research for you, and then getting in a whiny strop when you’re angry about something else but they’re nearby.”

“Oh, he got angry at me, too,” Malfoy muttered. “He always gets angry at me.”

“You like that,” said Zacharias, smirking. “Angry sex—how’s that?”

“Oh, piss off, Smith,” Malfoy said. “Look—are you in or not? Because Harry’s still being a twat, and we might not get another chance like this for a while. I’m ready to be done with these fucking creatures.”

“I’m in,” said Zach, grinning. “You know us Hufflepuffs; we do love our hard work and our loyalty.”

“And your revenge,” Malfoy added lowly.

Zacharias grinned, knowing his teeth looked sharp and sinister in the shafts of starlight. “Yes,” he said. “There’s that.”

The lights were still on in the parlour of the Granger house, though it was going on midnight. She knocked on the door, not wanting to startle her parents with an unlocking spell, but by the look on her dad’s face when he answered the door, it hadn’t worked.

“Good Lord, Hermione!” he said, opening the door wide and ushering her inside. He was still dressed for the day, wearing his old Arsenal t-shirt, and he looked so normal and safe that Hermione
felt her throat constrict for want of crying. This had to work. It had to. “What are you doing away from school? And at this time of night?”

“Where’s Mum?” she asked. She heard the telly on in the parlour and a laugh track from whichever show they were watching.

“Hermione?” her mother called from the other room. “Is that you?” The next thing Hermione knew, her mum was rushing into the foyer in her ostentatious Chelsea FC shirt and jeans. They must have been to a game earlier.

“Darling, is everything okay? Should you be out in this weather after...?” Her father left the question hanging, and she fought not to wince. She’d written to them about the miscarriage, but hadn’t had the guts to follow up with a floo call about it yet.

“It’s been weeks,” she said. “I’m perfectly fine...and relieved,” she added.

Her parents both gave her uncertain smiles. “Then what are you doing home from school?” asked her mum. “Not that we aren’t delighted to see you, but we hadn’t expected you until Easter.”

“I need you to come with me,” she said. “That law I was worried about has been passed; I think I have figured out how to give you magic, though, and if we don’t do it now, I may never get the chance. It goes into effect tomorrow, and then communication among magical and non-magical people will be monitored.”

“Will we be able to come back?” asked her mum.

“I don’t know, I think so,” she said. “But...I need to try to give you magic now, before they start tracking me.”

“I’ll get our coats,” her mum said.

“Cloaks!” Hermione called after her. “Get the ones Harry’s dad gave you.”

Her dad looked at her steadily. “Is it dangerous?” he asked. “This experiment?”

Hermione hesitated. “Yes,” she said. “If it goes poorly then it could be...fatal. We can talk about it more when we get there, though. I think I can do this, but I won’t put you in danger unless I’m at least 99% sure.”

Her mum returned with two bugbear fur cloaks and they slipped them on and stepped out onto the front steps with her. Hermione locked the door behind them, and they each took one of her hands. She took a deep breath, steadying herself—she had only been apparating for a year now, and never had she side-alonged two people before. Destination, determination, deliberation, she reminded herself, and turned.

They arrived just outside the wards of Voldemort’s house in Ireland, and Hermione quickly checked to make sure they’d all arrived in one piece. They had. She felt some of her tension drain away—step one down; now all she had to do was get them to agree to be test subjects and transfer magical cores into them...without killing them. Her heart raced faster than it ever had in her chest, but she schooled her features so as not to frighten them, and started towards the house. “This way,” she said.

They followed her through the wards and up the short path to the door, where the Dark Lord’s house-elf Horvitz was already waiting. “This way, if you please, miss.” He led them upstairs to one of the rooms adjacent to those that held the soulless wizards. If they disillusioned the bodies beforehand, perhaps her parents would never have to know...
Horvitz knocked on a door and opened it, gesturing them inside. Voldemort was sat at his desk, all of his many certifications, awards and diplomas displayed ironically on the wall beside him. He rose as they entered, and though Hermione could see the exhaustion and inherent cruelty of his personality on his face, he was making an effort to appear charming to her parents. She appreciated that.

“Mr and Mrs Granger, I presume,” he said, once they all had seats and tea from Horvitz. “I am, as you may have surmised, the Dark Lord Voldemort.”

Hermione’s parents recoiled in their chairs, and a vague wash of guilt rolled over her, but it didn’t stay long. She had too many other things on her mind. Instead, she just said, “It’s okay. He owes me.”

They glanced at her, eyes wide but silent, and then looked back to Voldemort, still wordless. He offered them a sardonic smirk. “Yes, I’m afraid so. However, your daughter is right, and I can say that I have no intention of intentionally harming either of you—whether I do so unintentionally...that remains to be seen.”

“This is untested magic,” Hermione said before either of her parents could start firing off questions. “I’ve been working on it all year, and we both believe that the theory is sound, but there is simply no precedence. I don’t know how long this law will be in place—we may find a way to overturn it, but we may not. I’m giving you the choice because I would want you to give it to me—you can decide whether you want to risk it or not. The spell has a good chance of working—if it does, then it will give you a magical core and some amount of magic. I don’t know how much, but enough to qualify you as magical for the purposes of the law, and enough for basic spells. It also has a good chance of failing, though. If it does, it may do nothing at all...but it could also backfire spectacularly, and that could be fatal. I can’t make this decision for you, and as terrified as I am of losing either of you, I would still be losing you if I didn’t give you the chance. Because if you choose not to do this, then I won’t be able to contact you again while this law is in place...not without risking prison sentences for all of us.”

“There’s no question,” said her father. “We raised you to be rational and logical, Hermione. If you truly believe this will work, then I trust you.”

Her mother nodded, as if denial had not even been a consideration. “We tried for years to have you Hermione—we couldn’t think of giving you up forever.”

Hermione nodded, biting her lip. She’d known they would agree, but now that they had, it felt so much more real. She turned to Voldemort and found him looking back at her steadily. He blinked slowly and redirected his gaze to her parents.

“Are you aware of the procedure?” he asked.

“No,” said her father.

“It is quite straight-forward,” said Voldemort. “In order to give you magic, you first need some place to store it; we call this a magical core. The core is the source of magic. Much like your heart pumps blood, a magical core disperses magic when a spell is cast, but unlike the heart, the core also regenerates the magic it expends, which is why there is not a finite limit on magic. This is almost all we, as wizards, know of magical cores. Much research has been done, but little else has been discovered. That, in part is why this is so risky.

“We do not know how to create a magical core, if it is indeed even possible, but we do believe that we can transfer an unused magical core to you and bind it to you—”
“Unused?” asked her mum.

Voldemort said, “The wizards who once owned them are quite beyond the veil, so to speak.”

“They’re dead?” she asked.

Voldemort was not one to mince words. He said, “No, their bodies continue to live, but their souls have been removed. The heart still beats, but there is no one to benefit from it.”

“Brain-dead,” her father muttered.

“Sort of,” said Hermione.

I have kept the bodies alive and healthy for this purpose only. We will remove the magical core, bind it to you, and that will be the end of it.”

Her parents nodded, mouths set in firm, determined lines. Hermione wish she felt as brave as they did.

Narcissa twirled her finger above her tea, stirring it. She smiled blandly, reservedly, at Madam Smith. Madam Smith returned an equally vacuous smile. “And how is your son?” asked Narcissa. “What a horrible loss to bear at so young an age.”

“Zacharias holds up well,” said Madam Smith. “As well as can be expected.”

“Mm,” Narcissa agreed, and sipped her tea. Madam Smith glanced at her wristwatch—delicate yellow gold filigree detailing and a mother-of-pearl face. Antique. Narcissa absently appraised it at between thirteen- and fifteen-thousand galleons and wondered if Madam Smith had inherited it from French ancestors or if it had actually been purchased for that sum.

On the mantle, an actually-inherited antique clock chimed the seven o’clock hour. Narcissa and Madam Smith smiled blandly at one another again. Narcissa set her tea aside; Madam Smith followed suit. “Shall we, Madam Malfoy?” asked Madam Smith. Narcissa smiled graciously.

“I’ll just fetch my cloak,” she said, but they both knew she had no intention whatsoever of doing so, and as soon as she stood, a house-elf popped in beside her, bowing low, and offering said cloak. She took it without a word, draping it across her arm, even as a second elf came with Madam Smith’s cloak.

As if synchronised, their polite peerage-smiles slid off their faces, replaced by shrewder ones, self-satisfied and condescending, as looks of determination were hardly appropriate for ladies of their standing.

Narcissa led them through the front door and down the drive, their heels clicking over the cobbledstones in a quiet, defined rhythm. At the gates, they apparated, and reappeared in a back courtyard belonging to one of Lucius’s London clubs—of which discretion was the most valuable asset. Hoods raised, they entered inside where gentlemen in heavy, tailored cloaks and women with dangerous faces laughed and socialized. The scent of opium hung in the air, a heavy smoke hanging about the ceiling like clouds. The music was vibrant and not at all to Narcissa’s tastes, but they only had to be here for but a few moments, and she could tolerate jazz for that long.

She found Lucius leaning against a wall, an untouched glass of champagne dangling from his fingers. The man next to him stood similarly relaxed, with a drink similarly untouched, but Narcissa was a student of observation, especially of her husband, and she recognised the tenseness of the
tendons in his hands, and the overly relaxed set to his mouth, which spoke over overcompensation.

“Darling,” Narcissa greeted as they approached. “Lord Smith. What is left to be done?”

Lucius made a show of sipping his champagne without actually taking any of it in his mouth. They all needed to be completely in control of their faculties tonight, or else this could all go very, very poorly. “The elves have them in Dublin,” said Lucius. “We’ll enact it there.”

“And Draco?” she asked.

Lucius nodded. “I received his owl an hour ago. He’s coming.”

“Good,” she said. They looked at each other for a brief moment, and she added, barely audible over the din, “Be careful.”

Lucius’s lips split into a rakish grin. “Aren’t I always, my dear?” He bent to press his lips to the side of her mouth, and then turned back to the Smiths with a decisive nod. Narcissa watched them slip from the club, feeling a warring sense of both excitement and dread. When they were gone, she slipped into the ladies’ room, removing her outer cloak and shrinking it into her handbag. She stepped back out, head high, walking with purpose. She had somewhere to be tonight—several somewheres, in fact, and she needed to be noticed at all of them.

Zach was acting a bit odd—odd than usual, even. Harry regarded him suspiciously. “What aren’t you telling me?” he said. Zach looked back at him steadily, completely unconcerned, the posh wanker.

“There are plenty of conspiracies around, and you want to focus on the possibility that your estranged boyfriend is trying it on with me?” Zach said, rolling his eyes. “Please. Spare me.”

“I know he was out on the Quidditch pitch,” Harry said, “and it looks like you just came from there. What am I supposed to think?”

“Thinking at all would be a good start,” said Zach, but he sounded more amused than annoyed. Harry wasn’t sure if that made him feel better or worse. Better, probably—he couldn’t feel much worse than he already was feeling this week. Being so separated from Draco had felt like an unscratchable itch...like being tickled forever. It didn’t hurt, but it was so very uncomfortable and distracting.

Harry huffed, annoyed. “I just need to talk to him,” he said. “Have you seen him or not?”

“I saw him,” Zach affirmed. “I even talked to him. Someone had to get this quaffle flying since you’ve been sulking all month.”

“I wasn’t sulking,” Harry bit out.

Zach shrugged, looking amused again. “If you say so, Harry.”

“What quaffle are you talking about?” he asked.

“Are you really serious, Harry? Because lately I’ve been wondering if I threw my lot in with the wrong person. Sometimes it seems like you’re on top of things, and others I wonder if you’re even operating on the same astral plane as the rest of us.”

“Zach...” Harry bit out. “What is your point?”
“Only that Granger and others have been working on the Dementor problem for weeks if not months and you’re still faffing around waiting for someone to tell you what to do. Get it together, Harry. You can do this—you can be a good leader; I saw you do it with the DA...but you aren’t doing it now and now is when we need you. So pull your head out of your own arse and start paying attention. Your inability to maintain social relationships will still be here when this is all over, but with any luck, the Dementors won’t be.”

And with that, Zach gave another roll of his eyes and slid back inside the castle, disappearing into the half-light of the Entrance Hall in evening.

Harry stared at the spot where he’d stood, hands clenching and unclenching in some tension he couldn’t quite identify. Was he allowed to punch Zach now that they were friends? Was it a bad sign that he wanted to punch his friend?

Or was it a bad sign that he felt a wave of guilt hit him with every successive word that Zach had spoken? Out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement, and turned quickly—there, walking towards the gates: Draco’s pale hair was so easy to spot in the moonlight. Without another thought, Harry took off after him, trying to reach him before he got to the gate. He had no idea where Draco was going, but he needed to fix things before he went.

“Draco!” he called, when he was far enough from the castle to be safe. He didn’t know if Draco heard him or not, but he didn’t stop, so Harry kept running. Draco made it to the gate, and slipped through it, and Harry called, “Draco!” once more. This time, Draco did hear him—he turned, met his eyes...and then, with a decisive turn, disappeared into nothingness.

Harry skidded to a halt—had Draco really just...?

Yes—yes, he had. His breath was coming in short gasps from the running, but he didn’t think that was the cause of the sharp pain in his chest when Draco’s eyes had met his...shuttered, and looked away.

It hit him like a bludger to the gut. Zach was right. Hermione was right. They were all right. What was wrong with him? He pushed everyone away and then acted like a child about it. And why? Was he really so scarred from the Dursleys or was he just selfish? He wasn’t even sure anymore.

Merlin—if Snape was right about him—

He paused his self-pity abruptly. There was a sound coming from the forest, a familiar, haunting sound. He moved carefully over the wet, crinkling grass, towards the edge of the Forbidden Forest. He could see wand light in there now, about thirty metres in, and that familiar sound was—

“Mum,” he whispered. Not Capella Black or Ginny-possessed, but his mum from his dreams as a child. He remembered this song. It was a Catholic hymn, maybe—‘What blasphemous pagan rubbish,’ Uncle Vernon had always said, ‘Any decency at all and they’d sing C of E hymns instead’—but he didn’t know what it was called. He took another step towards the singing and stopped in his tracks when another voice joined in, this one hesitant and obviously male—a deep, steady voice that sounded both determined and unsure. Snape. Harry recoiled. What was his mother doing in the Forbidden Forest with Snape?

He moved carefully past the edge of the forest, towards the wand light; it flickered slowly in and out as if stuck behind some greenery caught in a breeze. When he was nearly upon it, the singing was so strong and steady that he wondered at how in sync they were—surely this level of synchronicity must have required years of—his mouth parted in surprised realization: Had his mum really been friends with Snape when they were at school? It was so hard to fathom, but this seemed evidence in
favour of it as surely as anything else.

He stopped some feet away and peered around a tree, his heart hammering in his chest from the rush of emotion at hearing this voice again or perhaps something else—he wasn’t exactly sure. But there, crouched low over a rare patch of Nightblooming Fairy Ivy, was his mother and Professor Snape, singing to the flowers and as they in turn bloomed in response of the melody, snipping their blossoms and depositing them into mokeskin gathering bags.

He watched for several long moments, and when the final flower was snipped off, Snape was the first to stop singing. His mother moved into a different song altogether, and drew her hand across the patch of ivy, healing the severed stems as she did so.

“Sometimes I do wonder why you ever bothered with a wand, Lily,” Snape said quietly.

“Capella, Sev,” she said, and it sounded as if she’d said it many, many times, and expected to have to keep saying it for the foreseeable future. “A wand helps me focus, as you well know.”

“Mm,” said Snape, distractedly. He was peering into his pouch, frowning. Absently, Harry’s mum passed her mokeskin pouch to Snape, and Harry’s jaw might’ve hit the ground for as shocked as he was by what happened next: Snape slipping his fingers inside without a second thought and actually pulling the flowers out to add to his own. Snape had been able to pull something out of Harry’s mum’s mokeskin pouch—it was...it was impossible. No one could get anything from a mokeskin bag that wasn’t their own. Not unless—

Oh. She loved him. And by the easy way they were together, had done for some time.

And neither of them seemed to realise it.

He stumbled backward, snapping a twig in his shock. Their heads snapped up and they saw him immediately. Snape wasted no time morphing from surprised to angry, but his mother—Merlin, his mother stared at him like a deer at wandpoint, and he felt suddenly, heavily, wearily ashamed of himself for pushing her away, for pushing Draco away, for pushing Hermione and Sirius and even Remus, Regulus, Ron, Zacharias, Seamus, everyone away. But her most of all. His mum most of all because all his life he’d just wanted a family. And he had one now, but he was throwing it away, and he didn’t know why he couldn’t just handle it like an adult. Couldn’t at least face it at all. And now his mother stared at him with big, doe eyes like she was both afraid of him and afraid of scaring him off at the same time. He saw the ache in her and knew that he’d caused it, and had to look away. He looked at Snape instead.

“Mr Black,” Snape said, gathering himself together. “Not that I expect to actually be able to do anything about it,” he sneered, “but I gather you do not have special dispensation to be in the Forbidden Forest at this time, or in fact, any time at all?”

Harry swallowed. “I heard singing, sir,” he said.

Snape rolled his eyes. “Obviously,” he said. “If you’d paid attention at all during third year Potions you might’ve remembered that certain herbs and plants are rendered more potent by the application of spell-song during harvest.”

“Oh, Harry, tell me you do pay attention in Potions,” his mum said, sounding as though she didn’t even realise she was saying it. Snape gave her a look that Harry often saw on Hermione when he’d just said something incredibly stupid.

“What do you need Nightblooming Fairy Ivy for?” he asked instead.
“Doesn’t even pay attention in Herbology,” Snape muttered, but he turned away and began gathering up their supplies instead of continuing his part of the conversation, as if Harry wasn’t even worth his consideration.

His mum scrunched her nose a little, bemused. “For the potion,” she said, as if it were obvious. Harry’s face heated, and this was _so much worse_ than when Snape embarrassed him in Potions class because it was his mum this time and she actually thought he knew this...that this was something that should’ve been obvious to him. Was everyone doing his job _for him...without_ him?

His face was burning with shame, but he forced himself to ask because it seemed important. “Sorry—what potion?”

Snape rolled his eyes and started stalking off towards the castle, both mokeskin pouches dangling from his hand, but a hissed, “Severus, wait!” from his mum had Snape stopping with unusual speed.

He quirked a sardonic brow at her over his shoulder and said, “Lil—Capella, he has not even bothered to read the research you sent Granger. I guarantee you that Granger has, and further, I guarantee you that Draco has, as well. He’s _your_ son; you deal with his apathy yourself; I’ve spent six years doing it already.” And with that, he continued his march towards the castle, shoulders stiff and back straight. Harry turned to his mum. She was looking after the professor with a furrowed brow and worried mouth.

After a long, long moment, she turned to him. Very seriously, she said, “Harry, this isn’t a game. You don’t really mess around instead of paying attention in class, do you?”

“I pay attention,” he said, uncomfortable. He could tell by the way her expression didn’t change at all that she didn’t believe him. His face burned, and he added, “Mostly, anyway—Snape’s a bloody bastard, though, and he’s had it out for me since day one; I don’t even know why—”

“Of course you do,” she said.

“Because he thinks Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon spoiled me,” he said, and noticed her mouth shift into an angry snarl at the mention of those names.

“Of course not,” she said. “You’re the reminder of what could’ve been his,” she said quietly.

Harry’s heart lurched. “So—it was true then?” he asked. “You dated Snape?”

His mum hesitated. “Not—only for a couple of weeks,” she said slowly. “We had a falling out, and I went back to Sirius.”

“His worst memory,” Harry said with sudden realisation. “He called you a mudblood.”

She pursed her lips. “Don’t say that word, Harry. It’s ignorant.”

“I wasn’t using it in a mean way—”

“You used it at all,” she said firmly. “Don’t let yourself become desensitised to it; you might start forgetting why it’s wrong.”

Harry shuddered, thinking of the Dark Lord. He shook his head, exhausted and overwhelmed. “Really—what’s the potion for?” he asked.

She didn’t answer right away, but instead put her hand against the small of his back and started leading him back towards the castle. “There’s a legend,” she said at last, “that the Panacea Potion can
protect against a Dementor’s Kiss, but no one knows for sure because—well, there rather weren’t many volunteers to experiment with it.”

Why did that potion sound familiar to him? He was sure he’d heard of it before, but it didn’t sound like one Snape had taught them, so then where...? “So you’re going to make it to protect yourself in case of an attack?” he asked.

She looked at him like he’d been speaking Mermish. “No, to protect you. If we’re right and the next Dementor attack happens on the equinox then we have only hours to—”

“You know about that, too?” he asked.

“I found the data,” she said, now looking both bemused and irritated with him. “And then I worked the Arithmancy and extrapolated the likely dates, and then I handed it to you in a stack to give to Ms Granger, and then she performed further calculations and found that the equinox was statistically the most likely. Harry, did you truly read none of that? Did you truly not discuss it with Ms Granger or Mr Malfoy at all?”

“Hermione told me about it tonight,” he said shrugged uncomfortably. “I’ve just been really busy.”

“Too busy to deal with Dementors? With a prophecy that will very likely affect you a great deal?”

Now that she put it that way, it sounded absurd beyond words. He was momentarily speechless at his own stupidity. He risked a glance to his right and found her staring back at him angrily. His stomach plummeted and he felt the urge to be sick right there in the grass in front of the Quidditch Pitch.

“Harry—are you quite all right?” she asked slowly. “You seem rather distracted lately.”

And how strange was that, that she apparently knew his disposition, even though she’d been dead most of his life. It was such a startling question, that it gave him pause. “I—I’m fine,” he said.

She frowned, and they ducked behind the Quidditch pitch risers to stay hidden from the castle as they walked back. “You started this school year quite sure of yourself,” she said. “Or, at least it seemed that way to me, given my limited access to you.”

Harry thought back. “I think I was,” he said slowly. Remembering it, he’d felt so confident and on-top-of things at the start of the year—and what had changed? Not much, really. He’d known about the Dementors since the night he pretended to be the Dark Lord, and that had even been before school started back. He’d known about Sirius. He’d begun being friends with Draco and started sleeping with Seamus...he’d even been mostly fine after Ron’s expulsion. Coping, at least—he’d been coping with it, because after all, Ron hadn’t been dead, only away.

So—was he acting differently? The answer seemed, unquestionably, to be ‘yes’.

“What happened?” she asked. It was exactly what he was wondering himself.

“Draco and I have a friendship bond,” he said.

“Oh,” said his mum, but she was still frowning. “I had one of those with Severus when we were at school, though, Harry. I don’t recall any negative effects from it.”

“It’s turned into...something else,” he said.

She furrowed her brow, thoughtful. “But, you didn’t use any ritual or spell to enhance it?” He shook his head, and she shrugged. “Then—I suppose it’s possible that it could be stressful for you, but I can’t see how it could alter your disposition at all. They don’t do that. Even marriage bonds only
have a limited effect in that regard.”

“The Dark Lord would beg to differ,” Harry muttered, and his mother’s eyebrows lifted in understanding.

“I see,” she said, as they were nearing the greenhouses. “Well, you shouldn’t worry about your bond turning into his. The link he has to his dead wife is through extremely old, extremely complicated, magic. There’s no way you could have accidentally enacted it with Malfoy.”

“He’s always in my head,” Harry said. “Everything he feels, I feel. I hate it.”

She shrugged. “That’s what Occlumency’s for.”

“So I’ve heard,” he said bitterly.

Her lips pressed into a thin line. “Well,” she said, after a moment. “Regardless of how it annoys you, I don’t think that a bond with that boy could be distressing you quite this much, Harry. Whatever it is seems to be completely overriding your other thoughts.”

“Thanks,” he muttered.

“Harry,” she sighed. “I—really don’t know how to do this. Ravenclaw, you know. Pragmatic above all else, et cetera et cetera.” He gave her a small, cautious smile, and she smiled back. “But I am trying, you know. I really am. I only got to be a mum for a year and a half—you were barely babbling, much less needing motherly comforting. I didn’t have time to learn how, but I’m trying now.”

“I know,” he said, and he did. He breathed in deeply, taking in the fresh, cool air of early spring in Scotland. He exhaled, and tried to breathe out all of his anxiety and stress, unsure where, exactly, it came from, but knowing that he wanted it gone.

Unfortunately, it didn’t work. He still felt just as antsy as he had before. But now—now, he had a new understanding of what that anxiousness represented: dread.

The question was, what was it, exactly, that he was dreading?

…”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Warnings: Graphic depictions of blood and minor character death.

If you enjoyed this chapter, I’d love to know about it! All feedback, both positive and critical, is greatly appreciated. :)
Total War I

Chapter by faire_weather

Chapter Summary

In which the Dementors attack.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Total War (n):** 1. military conflict in which the contenders are willing to make any sacrifice in lives and other resources to obtain a complete victory.

“War is for fools who cannot end things quickly.” Narcissa turned from the window and offered Draco a wan smile. “We have been fools,” she said.

Draco prodded at his braised lamb, uninterested in food, but not for lack of hunger—he was hungry all right, hadn’t eaten all day in fact, it was just that he and Harry hadn’t spoke in almost a week, and it was getting harder and harder to stay focused. It felt like ants crawling on his skin and bees buzzing in his ears and various other unpleasant things. He nodded at his mother, because he’d gone too long without responding. “Yes,” he said at last.

He looked up to find her studying him with narrowed eyes. “You did it, didn’t you?” she asked.

“It was just a bloody friend bond,” he said.

“Mmm,” said his mum, and she sounded neither pleased nor upset—merely disbelieving that he’d assumed any bond with Harry would stay a mere friend bond. “And I take it the rumour I heard from Eloise Parkinson was true as well?”

He didn’t even have to ask what rumour that was—Pansy knew all about Draco’s fight with Harry, had even petted his head a bit while he sulked over it in the de facto Slytherin common room—and nodded again. “I don’t know why he’s in such a foul mood all the time recently. At the start of the school year, I was the one feeling a bit manic, and it was his steadiness that drew me to him to begin with. I knew he was up to something with him, but I didn’t know what it was, and it surprised me that he was so calm about it all, so calm about approaching me to begin with, as if I were no longer on the wrong side to him.”

“Has he exhibited any other strange behaviour?” Narcissa asked.

“Mood swings,” Draco said, shrugging. “Sometimes we get on fine, and then I’ll do something or say something wrong, and it’s like a Nox spell goes off. It’s been getting steadily worse, and whatever Harry says,” he added bitterly, “I don’t think it’s from our stupid bond.”

Narcissa inhaled—not sharply, as that would be undignified, but a quiet, brief breath that occurred slightly more quickly and deeply than her usual breathing. “Draco,” she said, drawing out his name in stunned disbelief.
Draco’s mouth twisted, shame and anger warring for dominance. He’d been putting up with Harry’s hippogriff shit and he’d not said much of anything about it. And now he’d just told his mother about it, and she would know all of his secrets—all of his weakness for letting a mere love interest shatter him so. “I would end it if I could,” he said. “He obviously doesn’t want to be in it...but I don’t know how.”

“You do know,” said his mum. “There’s no end to bonds. If you truly want away from him, we could take part of the summer in Italy again. The distance would help to erode its strength. It’s the best you can do.”

“Maybe,” said Draco, looking back down at his food. Then he shook his head. “No, you have your campaign. You need to be in Britain for the summer.”

Narcissa tutted, dismissing this with a delicate wave of her hand. “I can pop back a few times for press conferences. No one even has to know. And we can bring Pansy, of course. Eloise and I have been discussing a trip to Montenegro, and it’s just across the Adriatic.” She paused as the waiter entered their privacy spell, silent and detached as serving staff ought to be, to refill their wine glasses.

Draco just sighed, and Narcissa returned to the previous topic, unwilling to let it go just yet. “That really doesn’t indicate a bond complication, however.”

“I know,” he said, “but I can’t think of what else it might be.”

“Mm,” said Narcissa again. She sipped her wine, thinking. “Perhaps—no.”

“Perhaps what?” Draco asked, suddenly vaguely more interested in this conversation than he had been. It wasn’t often that his mother spoke without thinking.

Her eyes flicked back to him and she set her glass aside with disinterest. “Lily Evans studied the effects of magic on behaviour when we were in sixth year, but I think this is a question you will be more likely to get an answer for from the Dark Lord. They have their own bond, as you will recall.”

“I see,” said Draco. He pulled out his pocket watch, no longer interested in discussing anything having to do with Harry or his bloody mother. “Do you think they’ve begun yet?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m quite sure they must have,” said Narcissa. “Your father is rather efficient when he wishes to be, and the Smiths do seem competent.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Rather too competent for my liking,” he said, thinking of Zacharias Smith. The way Harry had been carrying on with the wanker lately, it almost made him wonder...no. No, Zacharias Smith would be even less inclined to put up with Harry in a strop than Draco was. There was nothing going on there.

She smirked at him, but said only, “I imagine we’ll be rather grateful for their perceived competence if this scheme of your father’s plays out favourably. Madam Smith has elected to come herself.”

Sometime later, when the waiter had brought the bill and they’d made sure to construct a dramatic— and highly visible—exit, his mum slipped her hand through his arm and said, “Shall we be seen taking in a play before curfew? Your father renewed our box seats at the theatre, Circe knows why—he never goes.”

“What’s showing?” asked Draco.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Narcissa. “It’s likely rubbish whatever it is.”
Draco snorted. “All right,” he said. “We should probably be visible until curfew anyway.” The turned towards the square where the apparation point was, the silence stretching amicably between them. He enjoyed his mother’s company, he truly did, and he loved her a great deal, too. She had always been the one to teach him the subtle things he needed to know to get by in Slytherin, as unlikely as that seemed, and whatever he found himself saying when he was feeling distressed, he would never intentionally hurt her. And his guilt when he did so unintentionally, was always extreme.

It was hard to block so much behind Occlumency shields, but—no. He was done thinking about Harry for the evening. He would go and see a truly poor performance by the Pandora Players in London, and do his part to help further the Dark Lord’s plan by being seen out and about with his mother on this night...because someone had to move this stalemate along, and Harry damn sure wasn’t bothering. A bit of political sport was always enjoyable—orphans delivered, a bit of Auror chase, perhaps a spot of Dementor Kissing; if they showed, he could end this tonight. If they didn’t, at least his parents would have those bloody screaming muggleborns out of the Manor.

The first scream took him by surprise, so wrapped up in his own thoughts was he, but the second one sent his blood freezing in his veins. He saw the dark shadows coalescing in the streets ahead of them, and he did not think twice about Ministry fines before he pulled his mum to him and apparated them both away.

Or tried to, anyway. He fell to the ground, vomiting up his braised lamb and wine and perhaps even a little blood, from the impact with the magical barrier. It was only now that he remembered the Ministry had put up anti-apparation wards during martial law—and now he and his mother were trapped here with Dementors swarming in from every direction. He took stock of their surroundings and spared only the briefest second to wish they’d bothered learning how to cast a Patronus.

Damn the campaign—they had no other way to protect themselves but with the Old magic spells their lineage was so adept at and that the Ministry shunned. Several of the beasts saw them and glided towards them, backing them into the alleyway they’d only just passed. Fear curled up in his belly, stagnating and nauseating and he was quickly losing every sense of himself he had. There was no other option.

He pulled his hood up over his distinctive blond hair and saw his mother do the same, and then, with a deep breath, he let himself feel his fear and anger, and for the second time this year, Draco allowed himself be overwhelmed by Old Magic to keep someone he loved alive.

Mudbloods. Bloody mudbloods everywhere.

At least they were about to be rid of them. It was the only thing that consoled Lucius at all. He was not of the belief that mudbloods were less magically adept than purebloods—but he was firmly of the belief that mudbloods were less socially adept. The ones raised by muggles, anyway. No class at all. There was hope for these brats yet, he supposed. They would be raised by wizards, at least.

Xavier Smith set the last mudblood to hovering in its little basket, and turned back to Lucius, face gleaming from the magical exhaustion. Lucius would be happy to have the manor free of children again. His house-elves had better things to be doing than bottle-feeding muggles’ offspring, after all.

“What time will the Aurors come?” asked Yasmin Smith. Her voice came to him as if from underwater, masked as it was by the emptiness-spell they each had over their faces—Death Eater masks being entirely inappropriate, given the small chance the Aurors might actually apprehend one of them.
“Fifteen minutes,” Lucius said, consulting his pocket watch. “I suggest we all take those Pepper-Up Potions now,” and they did, suffering the indignity of steam billowing from their ears because they were likely to need all the energy they could muster here in a moment. They would have to lead the Aurors on one hell of a griffon chase if they wanted to keep their attention away from the more pressing matter of a potential Dementor resurgence—tonight was probably the night, the Dark Lord had told Lucius that morning. And if it were that night, the Dark Lord would need to deal with the Dementors without Auror interference.

The best way to get Aurors out of the way? Distract them with something completely unimportant, Lucius thought with a sneer. Of course the Ministry would be more concerned about apprehending the wicked muggleborn deliverer than stationing Aurors at magical hotspots where Dementors might crossover from the plane of the underworld.

With ten minutes to go, they moved the muggleborns into position at the door of the Dublin Magical Orphanage, and remembering the unfortunate incident resulting from the last time Narcissa had dropped a batch off, Lucius spared a bit of magic to place a protective spell over them. He consulted his pocket watch again—three minutes. Severus would be putting in the anonymous tip now.

Right on time, the Aurors showed, popping in one by one, with no consideration for good cover or surprise attacks—they appeared not fifteen feet from Lucius and the Smiths, and they allowed the Aurors only enough time to erect a rudimentary anti-apparation ward before they commenced their chase, hopping on brooms and jumping off into the night.

Now, if only they could keep the Aurors busy long enough and themselves out of holding cells.

If this potion didn’t work, Severus thought, he would be the only one who didn’t give a damn.

No—no, that wasn’t entirely true, because Lily was only now coming back to herself and realising that she was alive. And if this potion didn’t work—if it came to pass that it was needed and it didn’t work—she would undoubtedly go back to be not alive, even if the body she was in continued to breathe.

Honestly, when had he become so maudlin? This was not like him at all. Seventeen years, he reminded himself. He’d gone seventeen long years without shattering; he could keep going.

It was fortunate he already had a classroom full of passably-brewed arithmantic potion bases, because he certainly didn’t have the time to prepare any himself. He scanned the storage shelf full of cauldrons and finally selected Draco’s and Pansy’s brews. After a moment’s hesitation, he retrieved Granger’s as well. Returning with them to his laboratory table, he set to work crushing the Nightblooming Fairy Ivy, mouth set in a grim, bitter line.

The door opened and he continued with his preparations, no need to look up since only Lily had access to his private brewing lab—well, Dumbledore had, but it was better not to think on that. Severus still felt a small, strange, unwelcome surge of grief at the thought of there being space that Dumbledore no longer filled.

“How long?” she asked. Her voice was quiet, steady—she’d never interrupted his brewing, even while talking. He was too in harmony with her for it to disturb his method.

“Forty minutes,” he said, and moved to slice the Twilight Heather. He didn’t need to consult the recipe, though he did anyway, as it was one he’d never actually brewed before. It was one no one ever actually brewed before, to be fair—or at least not anyone in living memory. The recipe was said to come from Slytherin himself, though whether that was true or not, Severus couldn’t say.
“You do realise,” he said as he slipped the heather into the cauldron, “that there is no guarantee it will even work, should the boy need it.”

“I can take care of myself.”

Severus’s head jerked up of its own volition, and he sneered at the boy before he could reign himself in. “What,” he ground out, “is he doing in my private lab?”

“He’s my son, Severus,” she said quietly.

Severus pressed his lips together angrily, and returned to his brewing, determined to ignore them both until the boy was gone. Once the potion reached the point where he could let it simmer with only supervision, he attended to his other matter of the evening—sending off an anonymous owl with a tip that the ‘muggleborn snatchers’ would be making a delivery in Dublin tonight. If he’d timed it correctly—and if the wind direction hadn’t changed in the past hour—the owl would arrive at precisely ten minutes ‘til curfew.

“Keep your hands to yourself then,” Severus muttered, since that was really all that was left to him. If he kicked the brat out, Lily would follow, and he hadn’t worked half as well during the years she was gone as he did before and after. On second thought—“No, fetch me the powdered lacewing flies from the storage room.” He didn’t even need them yet, but it got the boy out of his lab for a few minutes at least while he relearned his alphabet and tried to find ‘lacewing’ between ‘knotgrass’ and ‘lemongrass’ before he realised that Severus stored them under ‘flies: lacewing’ between ‘flies: horse’ and ‘flies: maggots’.

The brat rolled his eyes, but did as he was told, which Severus was rather grateful for, because Merlin was he getting tired of the stupid child showing him up in front of Lily. She gave him a frustrated look and slid onto a stool across the table from him. “Are you always going to hate him?” she asked quietly.

Severus’s hand paused for the merest fraction of a second in his stirring before it resumed its steady figure-eight pattern—twelve rotations per minute, an incredibly slow and frustrating pace. “I don’t know,” he said, as honestly as he was able.

She sighed. “Severus, he’s my son.”

“And Black’s,” Severus added because, really, that was important. “And before that he was Potter’s.” Never mine, he added to himself, and was grateful that Lily never bothered to learn more than basic Legilimency. Then, he considered this and ammended, Thank fucking everyone.

“I can’t change his parentage,” she said.

“No,” Severus agreed, and continued to stir his potion for the seventeen-year-old brat that belonged to either his first or second worst enemy and his best friend. Ungrateful, ignorant, childish brat.

“Then what do you want me to do about it?” she asked angrily.

“I should expect nothing at all,” he said. “After all, he will be gone by June, and I’ve no doubts that whatever Minerva offers you to stay on, if he’s further than Hogsmeade, you’ll follow.” He forced himself to arch an eyebrow at her, and tried to make it nonchalant. There was no telling whether she bought it or not—she’d always been incredibly clever in social situations. “I must suffer him for only two more months, and, equally, you must suffer me only that long as well.”

“So you haven’t even been trying?” she asked.
Fortunately, Severus was done with stirring and the potion only needed to rest for another twenty minutes, because he surely would have dropped his stirring stick if he’d still had it in his hand. “Why on earth would I have been trying?” he asked, genuinely confused.

It was at that moment that Harry—Severus even sneered the name in his mind—returned with the lacewing flies, even having succeeded in retrieving the powdered ones and not the minced ones. “Have I been more irritating than usual?” he asked, and Severus looked up sharply.

He felt his breath catch in his throat, too angry to even form words. Was he actually being mocked in his own lab? In front of her? He wanted to tell the brat to leave and never enter his lab again, but—Lily. He hesitated. “What?” he bit out instead.

“In your opinion,” Harry clarified, and was it Severus’s imagination or did he look a bit nervous? Not mocking then, so...what? He considered the question.

“Yes,” he said, after a heavy pause. “You were nearly tolerable in September. Once again, you are not.”

He turned back to his work, checking the consistency of the potion against the old hand-written instructions, and attempted to ignore the both of them forevermore. Of course, Harry never knew when to leave well-enough alone.

“I feel...unstable,” he said then, sitting himself—uninvited—on the stool next to Lily. Severus glanced up at him to find two pairs of vivid green eyes staring back him. It was unnerving. “I haven’t considered it before now, but...something doesn’t feel right. I know your first thought is to blame it on me being spoilt, but I thought maybe you might be detached enough from me to provide a different perspective. Could anything be doing this to me? Magic, I mean?”

Severus clenched his fists together so tightly the skin broke beneath his fingernails and little beads of blood slipped out. He swore under his breath and cast a wandless healing charm—there was no telling what an addition of blood might do to an already unstudied ancient potion.

“If you’re trying to find a way out of apologising to Mr Malfoy for your behaviour—” Severus began.

“No!” Harry interrupted. “No—I, no. I will apologise to him. I—miss him. But. When I’m around him, I’m...angry. I don’t know why. It happens when I’m around anyone I have strong emotions for,” he added, glancing sideways. Severus did not miss the way her mouth parted hopefully at the words, and his heart clenched for her, just a bit. She was trying so bloody hard for this stupid boy.

“I don’t know,” he said at last. “But I imagine, that if anyone were to know, it would be the Dark Lord.”

Harry exhaled heavily, stared down at his hands. “That’s what I was afraid of,” he muttered. “I’ve been starting to wonder...”

“Wonder what?” said Lily.

The boy shrugged. “I didn’t connect it until you brought it up tonight,” he said to her. Then, “But I think it is from a bond...just not the bond I have with Draco.”

He looked up again and Snape inhaled sharply at the look on his face—there it was: that determined, ready-to-war look he’d seen on Potter at the start of term. The look that had given him the briefest glimmer of hope that this whole mess might soon end, and he could go back to being alive without any masters having claim over that status.
Harry tapped his forehead with one gnawed fingernail. “I’ve been expectant lately, dreading something that I can’t figure out, and it’s made me panicky. Before that, I was agitated, angry, and apathetic. And at the beginning of the school year, I was excited, hopeful, even determined. My emotional range has remained constrained, though it’s evolved over the year, but it hasn’t been my emotional range. It’s been his, hasn’t it?”

Severus was momentarily speechless. A bond that strong—it wouldn’t just happen from a rebounded curses, not even one augmented by Lily’s sacrifice. If this were truly the explanation, and Severus bitterly admitted to himself that he rather thought it was now that it was presented, then that meant...

“You’re a horcrux,” he said hoarsely, and for the first time, he felt the same fear for Harry that Lily had been feeling all year. He met her eyes, and knew that his must be as wide and frightened as hers now were, his mouth just as slack and stunned.

“What...no,” she breathed, and her voice sounded so broken that Severus nearly slumped in anguish.

“I am,” Harry confirmed, but of the three of them, he was composed. His mouth remained set and resolute, his eyes focused. “He told me over Yule...I’m right, aren’t I? That’s what’s happening, isn’t it? I’ve become a conduit for his feelings.”

And there, everything about Severus’ life turned one-hundred-and-eighty degrees and then flipped upside down. He stared at Lily, knowing what he would next say would tear her apart, and unable to do a single thing about it. “It’s more than that,” he said at last, and watched the stubborn look on the boy’s face turn hesitant.

“If you’re a horcrux, then you are him. Everything he feels, you will feel, to some degree. You are not a separate person. You do not have separate bonds. You are also part of his bond to the late Yaxley woman. Your dalliance with Draco is adultery to the magic that bonds you to her, and it will make you push him away to make you stop. But more importantly, where he suffers her loss, you will, too, sooner or later. Without Miss Weasley around, you will go just as mad as he has—and when he dies, if you’re not already completely deranged, you will be then. You can’t live while he survives, and neither of you can live with both of you alive.”

Harry’s face was bloodless, and he swallowed several times. “The first prophecy,” he said. “I hadn’t realised...”

“Yes,” said Severus, and hated himself for having to confirm it. “While you have his soul within you, you will never be free.”

“I’ve been defeated then,” Harry said lowly, bitterly. Then, “But I never did have a power the Dark Lord knew not, did I? That bit was rubbish.”

“I don’t know,” said Severus. “I have never understood how prophecies work. It is possible that you have already defeated him by showing him another way to create change, but that it cannot alter the part where neither can live.”

The boy started suddenly, his face going even whiter as he stood up, kicking his stool over in the process.

“What are you doing?” Severus said angrily. If Potter was going to have a breakdown in his lab, he was going to get Stunned. Death sentence or not, there were potion ingredients in here from dragons and creatures that were extinct before Hogwarts was even built. He wasn’t risking that for a teenage connipation.
“I have to go,” the boy said, but there was no emotion behind his words—he was somewhere inside his own head, seeing something neither of them could see. “Draco needs...there’s Dementors. I can at least save someone I love, if not myself.” And before either Severus or Lily could react, Potter was haring out of his potions lab and sprinting through the corridors, with Lily right on his heels.

“Fuck,” Severus yelled to his empty lab.

But that didn’t stop him from snatching up the potion and running after them. He hated Lily for having this hold over him, but he loved her enough to allow it, and keeping Harry alive, for as long as he could, was his end of the bargain.

“I’ll go first,” said Hermione’s mother.

“Alice, I will,” her father said anxiously. “In case something goes wrong.”

“Clarence, it’s fine,” she said. “Let me, please.” After a moment, he nodded—a short, hesitant gesture.

“I think it will be fine,” Hermione said, more to convince herself than them, though that she’d even said ‘I think’ instead of ‘It will’ spoke volumes to just how unsure she really was. “You—you don’t have to do this if you don’t want to. If we get the current Minister out of office this summer, then we could have those bills overturned within three or four years...”

“No,” said her father. “Never. We’re family, and family stays together. We’ll do it.” Hermione was afraid he’d say that—and at the same time, so very, very relieved.

“Okay,” said Hermione. “Mum, just lie here, and Dad—maybe you should wait in the other room. It’s not going to be easy to watch.”

“No,” he said again, and Hermione didn’t bother to argue with him. “If muggles can do this, then certainly a talented witch like you can, too. It’ll be fine.”

Hermione giggled hysterically. She was about to kill her parents. She was going to—to...oh God. Her hands started shaking and she couldn’t seem to catch her breath and her pulse was racing and her heart might just explode and—

A wave of calmness came over her like water dumped from a bucket.

“Plenty of time for emotional breakdowns afterwards, Granger,” said the Dark Lord, returning his wand to his sleeve. “Please do focus. My time is not at your disposal, I do not need to remind you.”

The calming spell was doing wonders for her. Why she hadn’t thought to cast it herself, she had no idea. “I’m fine,” she said and turned to give her parents a smile. Her mother was already lying on the bed in Voldemort’s guest suite, and her father sat on the other side, holding her hand. By their own calm, complacent expressions, she rather guessed that the Dark Lord had subtly calmed them as well.

“It won’t hurt,” she said to her mother. Or, at least she didn’t think it would. She’d never died herself, to be fair, but Harry’s mum had been rather willing to talk about it when Hermione approached her. She stepped back, and the Dark Lord stepped forward, having agreed to do this part of the event without much begging, much to Hermione’s surprise.

It wasn’t very climatic. There was a moment when her mother was looking back at her—steady and brave, and every bit of Gryffindor Hermione had inherited—and then the Dark Lord pressed his palm to her chest, just left of her centre, and her eyes dulled and she stopped breathing. Magically-
induced cardiac arrest. He moved aside and Hermione jumped to action; even the calming spell couldn’t slow down her absolute need to bring her mother back to life, and she worked with steady hands and fingers, racing against the *Tempus* charm that was now hovering above her mother’s body, counting the seconds that passed with no oxygen to her brain.

Hermione was practised at this now, and she felt sure of herself. She extracted the unused magical core from her vial and set it hovering above her mother’s solar plexus. She began the spell, all thoughts of her father sitting on the other side of the bed evicted from her mind as she single-mindedly pushed everything she had into attaching the magical core to her mum’s body. One minute and twelve seconds. She was pushing it.

“Ready,” she said at last, and the Dark Lord stepped forward again. He put his hand over her arm and she could feel his magic seeping into her—and it did seep. It was a slimy, oily magic that flowed like sludge until it had a purpose, and then it struck, lightning fast, no—viper fast. His magic was like a basilisk.

The calming spell was wearing off. Judging by the increasingly terrified look on her father’s face, his was wearing off even quicker. Her mother still lay lifelessly on the bed, and Hermione steeled herself—it would work. Taking a deep breath, she refocused herself and drew on the Dark Lord’s magic, pushing both hers and his into her mum’s new, delicate magical core. She fed the magic through slowly, steadily, making sure not to overwhelm the core and cause it to shatter.

After entirely too long, she felt it begin to hum as it assimilated all of the new magic into itself and began pumping it through its new host body, ghosting over the nerve endings and dendrites that used to run on electrical pulses. Her mother’s body had accepted the core, and the core had accepted her. Hermione breathed out a sigh of relief and glanced at the *Tempus* charm again. Two minutes and forty-seven seconds. She had roughly thirteen seconds to revive her mother before brain damage was probable.

The Dark Lord removed his hand and she pressed her fingertips to her mother’s chest, finding the edges of her heart by magical sense, and with another steadying breath, she pushed her magic down and in as she had with the muggle boy, and shocked her mother’s heart back into beating.

It worked.

Her mum’s eyes fluttered open, still, strangely, under the calming spell. “Alice,” her father choked out, and both turned to him. His face was a caricature of fear, almost comically so. She would’ve laughed if she weren’t so exhausted.

And scared herself. It was then that she noticed the violent trembling of her hands and legs; then bizarrely, she was laughing. Still giggling, Hermione collapsed to the floor, physically and emotionally exhausted. Her vision went black as she fainted.

Harry wasn’t sure where he was going, but somehow, he knew he’d get there.

He tore through the deserted corridors of the castle and out the front doors in record time—even for him, who had to run sprints every week for Quidditch—and down the path towards the gates. Behind him, he could hear other running feet slamming into the stone steps and Professor Snape’s voice calling out, ‘*Accio!* *Accio!* *Accio!*’ and then he was down the gravel path and through the front gates. His feet hadn’t even hit the ground on the other side before he was twisting his shoulders around, the rest of his body following, and disappearing into nothingness.

When the blackness faded, he was overcome with a burst of nausea so strong that he bent double,
arms wrapped tight about his middle, as he sicked up all over the ground in front of him.

“Merlin,” someone breathed behind him. Despite the terrifying feeding-howls of swarming Dementors and the screams of people flooding the background, Harry heard this one softly-said word as if there was nothing else around. Draco. He pulled himself upright, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and turned to face him, his heart hammering wildly. Suddenly, nothing else mattered.

“Draco,” he said breathlessly. Draco was shaking his head, as if trying to clear it. His face was covered in sweat and Harry didn’t need two guesses to know it was from keeping the Dementors off him and his mother, who was pressed against the wall behind him, maintaining an unfamiliar, but faltering, shield spell. They were pressed into the mouth of an alley, with no escape behind them and Dementors pressing towards them from the front. Harry swore and called his patronus to help, but compared to the magic Draco was using, it was like casting a Lumos spell at noon.

“Anti-apparation wards,” Draco said through gritted teeth. He had his arms out as if holding the Dementors off through sheer force of will. And he probably was. Harry could tell that he’d released enough Old Magic in the last few minutes that his magic was now coursing strongly enough through him to make wandless magic possible—so much of it that Draco almost was his magic in that moment. He really was holding the Dementors off with sheer force of will. “How’d you get through anti-apparation wards?”

“I don’t know,” Harry lied, directing his patronus to ram an encroaching Dementor. “I just came. I knew—it was the bond, and then I knew.” Perhaps it wasn’t a lie if it really was the bond...just not the bond Draco was thinking of—and honestly, Harry hadn’t known there were anti-apparation wards, truly didn’t know if that was how he’d got through them, or if it was merely his desperation. An unearthly howling roared up from just outside the alley mouth, and Harry turned in time to see a Dementor break Narcissa’s shield and surge towards him. He redirected his patronus and backed up next to Draco to better defend their position.

“Our stupid bond doesn’t give you the ability to apparate to me when I’m in danger—that’s trashy romance novel nonsense,” Draco growled. His forearms were tensed and his arms were trembling, but he showed no other signs of exhaustion, and in that very moment, Harry was impressed. This, he thought, was the draw of Old Magic—this easy power over everything...and the only payment was violence or sanity—take your pick.

“Well, apparently it does,” Harry said. “What did you expect? Everything’s different with me. They should call it Harry’s Law instead of Murphy’s.” Draco didn’t respond, and for one hysterical moment, Harry’s train of thought derailed enough to consider that Draco didn’t know about that adage, as that Murphy bloke had likely been a muggle. Perhaps it was his own sanity he should worry about if he was thinking such things when a half-dozen Dementors were looming at them with their mouths wide open and hungry. Soon, it would be his sanity he had to worry about.

And then suddenly they were gone—rushing away from the mouth of the alley with their festering, fetid, waifish bodies fluttering behind them. There was a haunting sound rising up from the opposite direction, and in response, the Dementors’ howls rose to an unbearable polyphonic cacophony as they fled.

A moment later, Narcissa and Draco recalled their magic, but Harry was reluctant to dismiss his patronus, so he called it to stand next to him instead.

“Mr Black,” said Narcissa, rather more calmly than she had any right to be, though she was breathing heavily. “Have you an exit strategy?”
“Not a one,” Harry admitted. “You know Gryffindors—we feel our love’s in danger and we don’t think twice about apparating into a nest of Dementors.”

“I see,” she said, and gave Draco an odd look. Then, “Perhaps you might allow me to engineer one for us, then. Let us first see if we can make it to the apparation point, since not all of us are able to circumvent the wards.”

“By all means, Mother,” said Draco. He extended one of his trembling hands long enough to make a sweeping gesture that said plainly, ‘After you’, then dropped it heavily to his side.

“Thank you, darling,” she said, and stepped around him. She was nearly to the end of the alley when two figures burst into view, and Harry shot his patronus at them reflexively, but it dissipated when it reached them.

“I’m not a Dementor, Potter,” Snape growled as he dismounted his broom, and Harry didn’t even bother to correct him. It was almost like a pet-name these days. And that meant the other cloaked figure was his mother. He was inordinately pleased to see they’d come after him, though he spared a thought to wonder how as neither of them had a wayward bond to follow.

“Ah, Severus,” said Narcissa. “Exceptional timing. Capella,” she added, nodding to Harry’s mum. “We were just looking to see if escape might be possible.”

“Were you,” said Snape, and it was too amused to be a question.

Narcissa glanced around the end of the alleyway. “The apparation point’s still swarmed and the Ministry’s put up anti-apparation wards.”

“We noticed,” said Harry’s mum, and by the green look of her face, he knew that she’d tried to follow him directly to the alleyway, and hadn’t been able to.

“So let’s just run for it,” said Harry, which, he thought, seemed like a rather decent idea, all things told. Diagon Alley was maybe a tenth the size of London, and given how quick Snape and his mum had followed him, they had to be close to a barrier. They could slip through that and apparate away—to River House, probably. Anywhere would be fine, he thought.

“In Pagan Louboutins?” Narcissa said archly, looking pointedly at her posh shoes. “I think not.” She glanced around the corner of the alleyway again, where a fresh wave of guttural screaming was starting up again, but this time, it wasn’t the Dementors making that hellish sound—it was people. “We shall, however, move quickly in another direction. Where did you apparate?” she asked Snape.

“Two streets over, there’s a side entrance to muggle Islington. We apparated there and came through.”

“Good enough,” said Narcissa.

“What about the other people?” Harry asked. “They haven’t got away.”

“No,” said Snape, Narcissa, his mum, and Draco at the same time. Harry gaped at them, frankly rather creeped out.

“No,” said his mother again. “I came here to see you safely out; it’s nearly curfew—they’ll be mostly adults, and they’ve had as much defensive training as anyone else. They can take care of themselves.”

“I was just wondering,” Harry growled. “I came here for Draco anyway. No one else matters.”
“Harry...” Draco said, looking at him strangely. Harry bit his lip, a million emotions rising up in him, and so many of them were hatred and anger. But there was also desperation and desire...and love. Which of them were his own? His heart ached, and he knew that this was truly a much crueller fate than any simple death would have been. But Draco was his, at least for a while, and he would protect him as long as he could.

Suddenly, three Dementors materialised behind Draco, swooping in for a Kiss, and Draco turned, startled, to face them. His arms rose instinctively and the magic at his call lifted, but it would not be quick enough.

That was okay. Draco didn’t have to be quick enough. Harry would be quick enough for him. That was the only thought that ran through his head as he let his borrowed rage overtake him. He screamed, felt a strange new magic well up within him, and rushed the Dementors.

Too soon, Hermione thought. It was entirely too soon. She hadn’t even fully recovered from giving magic to her mum, much less her started on her dad, but the Dark Lord was suddenly agitated, and she knew enough from watching Harry to know what that meant: Harry was agitated. Harry was in danger, or perhaps Draco was. The Dementors had come, and Harry was fighting them.

Now the Dark Lord would leave, and she was unable to do this without him to stabilize her magic. She simply did not have enough of it, or even enough focus. Without him, she’d be unable to steady a magical core transfer and without a magical core—

After, she told herself, and after, she told her parents, but even as she slid on her heavy wool travelling cloak and mask, she knew that there wouldn’t be an after. She didn’t know what the Dark Lord was planning, but she knew he was planning something and her intuition was telling her it’s now it’s now it’s now.

Hermione set Horvitz up looking after her mum, and kissed her parents goodbye. “I’ll be back,” she said, and she absolutely did not say we’ll be back—because she wasn’t entirely sure that they would be.

Hermione followed the Dark Lord out of the house, and for the first time since her Marking, he willingly touched her. His hand pressed against the small of her back, and she was side-alonged away—to where, she didn’t know, but she made sure to have her wand out and ready before they disappeared.

Dementors everywhere.

Which was the more certain death? The Dementors or the Aurors? Lucius considered this carefully, quickly, before angling his broom north towards the writhing black mass of beasts below them. He had expected Dementors tonight—he had not expected so many. There must have been at least three dozen, and how had they known where to find them? What about this place had drawn the Dementors to it just as Lucius and the Smiths were leading the Aurors on this wild chase?

No matter—he would have plenty of time to think on that once they were clear of these bloody stupid Aurors. A glance to his right show that the Smiths were having no trouble keeping up with his change of plans, and he gave them a brief nod.

They wouldn’t get a second chance to do this right, but it wasn’t so melodramatic as all of that—Lucius had no doubts about his ability to conjure Old Magic when it suited him; he just had doubts about being able to pop back home long enough to refocus before the inevitable shit hit the
metaphorical *Reducto* curse. Ah, well—needs must. Drawing all of his available focus together, Lucius centred himself, pulled his magic in from extraneous sources like his grooming spells and all the veiling charms over his Dark Mark and—a rush of magic enveloped him. He focused on his need to protect his family, on his anger at the Ministry for daring to attack Narcissa or attempt to apprehend him, at the Dark Lord for going spare and leaving them all ungrounded for a decade, at Potter for maybe being the one to bring it all back together again, much as Lucius distrusted him and considered him wholly unequal to the task.

His magic filled him and he became only a conductor, only a body where his magic was the real entity. He was nothing but the conductor and he needed to conduct, or else his magic would take away that privilege as well. He felt his fury overtake him, and he let it happen, encouraged it to happen. And there, beside him, the answering furies of Xavier and Yasmin’s magic welling up, preparing for a fight—Lucius looked back over his shoulder, unconcerned that the emptiness spell over his face had been cancelled to feed his magic; these Aurors might recognise him, but they wouldn’t be going anywhere to put that knowledge to use. Six of them were on their tails, flying close and fast.

Lucius pulled his magic in as tightly as he could, wearing it like armour around himself to keep the fear out, and then, as if choreographed, the three of them pushed their brooms down, straight into the writhing mass of hungry mouths below them. The Aurors were too focused on their marks to register this suicidal change in direction until they’d already copied the manoeuvre. And then Lucius felt the icy cold fingers of dozens of Dementors wrap around his cloak, his broom, his arms—he rolled on his broom, twisted around, and apparated out. The startled screams of the Aurors cut off sharply in his ears as he disappeared, leaving only the ringing of silence behind. He smirked.

“*What the bloody hell is going on here?*” Sirius yelled, even as he was running down the drive to unward the gate for them all. Not that Harry couldn’t do it himself, but something was wrong and Sirius needed to make sure that Harry was okay, that—Merlin, Sirius, he thought. Get yourself together.

“I got it!” Harry yelled back, but his voice was off, anxious, and as Sirius drew close, he could see his son’s hands shaking as he moved his wand through the movements to unlock the gate for unkeyed visitors. The gate clicked open, and there was a collective sigh of relief as Harry led in his boyfriend, Narcissa, Lily, and—Merlin help him, Snape. Sirius bit his tongue, but only because he was more concerned about finding out what was going on.

“Inside, inside!” Sirius said, rewarding the gate. Remus and Regulus were jogging out now, but they skidded to a halt as the group made its way back to River House.

“What’s going on?” Remus asked.

“Dementors,” Snape said shortly, but Sirius saw him give Harry an odd look as he did so.

Sirius inhaled sharply, cast a few extra locks over the wards and herded them all into the kitchen, where Ginger was already laying out tea and Hob-Goblins biscuits. They’d not even sat down when the wards started shrieking in his head again—and by default, also in Regulus’s and Harry’s. But Harry shook his head after a moment, and moved his wand to disable them again. “It’s him,” he said, tapping his temple.

Sirius slumped down in his chair next to Regulus and waited. A moment later, Fred was leading the Dark Lord—and Hermione of all people—into his kitchen and summoning extra chairs for them all. There may’ve been an expansion charm on the table as well, but Sirius wasn’t paying much attention, and house-elf magic was sneaky anyway. He took a long drink of his tea and slid his eyes
over the assembled party, absently watching Regulus reset the wards. It was like an Order meeting with Voldemort reigning at the head of the table, he thought. Perhaps an Order of the Death Eaters one.

Narcissa was the first to speak. “Have you heard from my husband, milord?”

“He’s alive,” was all Voldemort said. “Other than that...” he trailed off, shrugging. It appeared to be good enough for Narcissa, however, for she nodded and finally took her first sip of tea.

“You were in danger,” the Dark Lord said next, addressing Harry. “Why?”

Harry cleared his throat awkwardly. “Draco,” he said, as if that made any sort of sense at all. Sirius looked to the Malfoy boy in time to see him roll his eyes. He looked both angry and confused, maybe a bit awed—having a row, Sirius suspected. James had always looked like that after the wedding when he and Lily—no, best not think of that.

Lily looked just as comfortable in Bellatrix’s body as she had in her own, and just as shrewd. She sat stiffly next to Snape and the pair of them watched the goings-on with equally narrowed, quick eyes. Back to being best mates, it seemed, Sirius thought with disgust. If this ended up being like first through fifth years all over again, with Lily and Snape latched onto each other like two old pieces of Drooble’s Best—well, Sirius would be spending a lot of time sickness up at the sight of it, most likely.

“It seems he’s overcome another aspect of magic, sir,” said Draco, when it became clear that Harry had no intention to continue. “He used our bond—our friendship bond, I might add—to track me when he felt I was in danger.” He shook his head, disbelief of his own words written clearly across his face. “I’ve no idea how he does it, but I’ve lost the ability to be surprised by it.”

“Mm,” said the Dark Lord, flicking his eyes back to Harry. He looked vaguely surprised himself, though it was hard to tell on such a cold face. Harry, for his part, was looking determinedly at the wood grain of the table. A heavy pause. Their facial expressions changed minutely, as if they were having an internal conversation. “Were you planning to alert me to this development, Harry?” he asked at last.

“It’s not important,” Harry muttered. “It’s just a bloody bond, and it’s not like yours,” he said, stressing the word. There was definitely something else going on here. Sirius politely did not acknowledge the sudden crack that formed in Draco’s teacup at that proclamation, or his quiet, wandless and wordless repair charm to it before the tea started seeping out.

“No,” the Dark Lord agreed. “Not at all like mine. I assure you, to create a bond like mine, you would have needed to spend six hours in magically exhaustive ritual.” He flicked his eyes to Draco contemplatively, then back to Harry. “Yet, one does wonder how you’ve managed to access certain advantages of my particular bond without having one yourself.” The blood drained from Harry’s face.

Hermione, suddenly, gasped, and all eyes turned to her. She clapped her hand over her mouth and shook her head quickly. Neither the Dark Lord nor Harry was having much of that, though. “Save the prevarication, if you please,” said Voldemort. “We do have other things to concern ourselves with, so if we might solve at least this one question...?”

“Horcrux,” she said at last. Apparently, that made a world of sense to the Draco, Harry, and the Dark Lord, for they showed varying degrees of surprise. Harry was the least adept at hiding his, but even the Dark Lord’s eyes widened fractionally—whether he was truly surprised or not remained to be seen. However—Sirius turned to his brother and saw that he looked equally surprised, and even Snape and Lily seemed to understand what that meant...and not one of them looked like this was a
good thing. He suddenly felt very, very out of the loop.

“Of course,” Draco said softly. This appeared to answer a long-asked question for him. He looked at Harry with wide, unguarded eyes.

Harry’s fingers clenched, and though he said, “Of course,” too, it sounded significantly more bitter coming from his mouth. His lips twisted angrily and he glared at the Dark Lord as if it were all his fault.

Voldemort waved this off as if it were merely a nuisance, and perhaps it was, Sirius thought bitterly. After all, he had no idea what was going on. “That will soon no longer be an issue. I have devised a solution.”

“What kind of solution?” Harry asked apprehensively, and his voice faltered as he said it. Fear, thought Sirius. Harry was afraid. Why? Hermione looked entirely too knowing for Sirius’s liking.

Voldemort flicked his hand dismissively again. “Irrelevant. No harm to you or yours et cetera et cetera, now—the Dementors. Hermione’s theory that the Dementors are reacting inappropriately due being magically enslaved to Azkaban has proven true arithmantically, and it has led to further consideration as to what is or can draw them out while they are entrapped within this chaotic loop of feeding.”

“The Ministry,” said Lily suddenly, and the Dark Lord gave her a sardonic smile.

“Yes,” he said. “This will work out quite nicely for us, as it happens, since the Aurors are in full force attempting to maintain curfew.”

Hermione made a pained sound. “You can’t just—they’re people,” she said angrily.

“Feel free to reiterate your irrelevant point when you have an alternative to offer,” he said.

“What are you saying?” asked Harry. “I don’t understand whatever leap of logic just happened.”

Snape snorted. “The Dementors were magically tied to the prison,” he said slowly. “The Aurors are magically bound to serve the Aurory. The Ministry controls both, and so both are connected to the Ministry. The Dementors will be drawn out whenever there’s a large gathering of Auror forces in one place.”

“Oh, I see,” said Harry.

“I should hope so, after I spelled it out for you,” Snape muttered. Lily’s mouth twisted and Snape grimaced. Sirius smirked. Lily still wasn’t afraid to stomp old Snivelly’s foot under the table when he was being an arsehole. He smirked at her from across the table, and when she smirked back—even if it looked strangely sad—he felt his heart jump a little bit. It had been so long since she’d shared a joke with him—but no, he couldn’t afford to go down that road just now.

“Then my husband will have encountered them tonight as well,” said Narcissa.

“He’s fine, Mum,” said Draco. “He can—well.” Sirius looked at him sharply. He could at least read between the lines there, and he knew exactly what wasn’t being said. But now that he looked more closely at Narcissa and her son, he saw the tell-tale traces of Old Magic trying to overtake them even now. Regulus caught his eye and gave him a pointed look. If the Malfoys had used Old Magic to get out alive, then Draco and Narcissa’s brush with death must have come a lot closer than any of them bothered to say.
But then...Harry looked a little off, too. Sirius stared at him and there, he could see it—his son had used Old Magic. He’d succumbed to it once, and would he be able to resist doing it again? Sirius’s heart hammered wildly in his chest as he considered every possible outcome from this night...and very few of them were good.

“You’ll need to expurgate that energy,” the Dark Lord said to them, picking up on the same thought. He smiled suddenly, all gruesome white teeth and ghastly dark eyes. “I’ve just the solution.”

Dangerous,” Draco murmured, and Harry gave him a pained look. They hadn’t made up exactly, but—well, that is to say, Harry hadn’t properly apologised to Draco yet, but he needed to do it at the right time. After they finished with the Dementors and he could take Draco somewhere private and tell him everything and how much he really meant to him—

But what if there wasn’t an after?

“I’m sorry,” he blurted out.

Draco looked at him sharply. “Really, Harry,” he began.

“No, wait,” said Harry. “I’m truly sorry. Our bond isn’t stupid, it’s amazing. I...was scared. And there’s a bit more to it, but you’re everything to me. I looked into a mirror once that showed my heart’s desire, and I saw my parents in it, my family. But even now, knowing what I’d be missing if I lost them both, I would do it in a heartbeat if I could still have you, or at least know that you were happy. You’re my heart’s desire. I might not get another chance to say it, so I love you, and I’m sorry.”

Draco was worriedly silent. “Harry,” he said at least, his voice unsteady. He forced a laugh. “Don’t be melodramatic.”

Harry shook his head, and couldn’t say any more.

“It’s fine,” said Draco, after another long moment. Harry offered him a tentative smile, though he wasn’t positive that it didn’t come off as a grimace. “Everything will be fine. Hor-horcrux or not,” he added uncertainly.

Harry nodded. “I’ve known,” he said. “But it’s fine. If—as long as I’m not the only one, then the Dark Lord can’t die, and things...things will be fine. We can figure out a way to deal with the rest of it.”

“Of course,” said Draco, nodding.

“Not scared, are you, Malfoy?” Harry asked, but it was a poor excuse for a joke.

“Not for myself,” Draco said. Instead, he stared out at ancient stone plinths of Stonehenge, almost invisible in the rural darkness. They were alone out here, but not for long. Soon, the empty landscape would fill with a different kind of darkness. Harry shuddered.

“Tsk tsk, Harry,” said the Dark Lord, gliding in silently from behind. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten your warming charm again.” Nagini slithered up with him, chuckling in her soft, sibilant voice.

“No,” Harry said. “Been rather a long day. You’ll forgive me if my nerves are a bit frayed.”

“You’ll need to get over that rather soon,” said Voldemort, surveying the plains before them. “Dark Lords cannot afford frayed nerves.”
Harry wondered when, exactly, there would be time for that between fighting Dementors, expending colossal amounts of magic, avoiding arrest, and going mad from being part of a dark lord. He pressed his lips together tightly before deciding to ignore him completely. He had the strangest urge to take Draco and apparate them far away from all of this, to Bulgaria maybe, though he knew, now, that he would be very unlikely to survive such a distance from Voldemort with his mind intact.

“So we activate the extra defences built into the ward, the Aurors come to arrest us for being out after curfew, the Dementors are drawn to them, and then we...what?” Harry recited the plan dully. The part after the Dementors showed up was still a little fuzzy. “I don’t like this plan at all.” Which said that there was even a plan to begin with, which Harry frankly doubted. This wasn’t a plan; it was suicide.

“I imagine,” the Dark Lord said contemplatively, “that the Aurors shall like it even less.”

“Mm,” Draco said, neither perturbed nor impressed by this. “If they come.”

“They will,” said Voldemort.

“How do you know?” Harry asked angrily. “They don’t know we’re even here.”

“Yet,” said the Dark Lord. He held his arm out and Nagini slithered up it obligingly, wrapping herself around his shoulders. “Severus!” he called. Snape approached them unerringly, easily manoeuvring the uneven ground in the dark.

“Milord,” he said.

“You arm.”

Voldemort pressed his hand to Snape’s revealed Dark Mark, and though he gritted his teeth, Snape didn’t make a single sound of discomfort. “It begins,” he said lowly.

“Take the blasted potion now, Potter,” Snape said afterward. “I cannot bear your mother screeching at me about your safety any longer.” Unspoken between them was the conclusion of their earlier conversation, and though Snape met his eyes, he refused to bring it up and Harry...appreciated that. He shoved the Panacea potion into Harry’s hand and glared at him until he swallowed it all down. What was more dangerous, he wondered. Taking an untested potion that hadn’t been produced in a millennia and may or may not protect against the Dementor’s Kiss, or not taking one at all? At least it’d been brewed by Snape, who, while a complete bastard, was at least a certified Master of Potions.

Death Eaters began apparating in immediately, the darkness of their cloaks somehow both blending seamlessly with the empty background and standing out at the same time. Of the first to arrive was Lucius—Harry could tell immediately from the self-assured gate and the silver mask identifying him of the Inner Circle. He approached at once, dropping to his knee briefly.

“We were successful, despite complications, milord,” he said, voice deep and alive. The almost-electric energy jumping around his own, Draco’s and Narcissa’s skin was echoed on Lucius’s and Harry knew that when the man said ‘complications’ he meant ‘escaped by the skin of his teeth and an excessive amount of Old Magic’.

“Dementors, I presume,” said the Dark Lord. Lucius nodded. “Yes, we shall be eliminating that nuisance tonight.” Lucius bowed again and stepped back into place. Nearly all of the Death Eaters must’ve been here by now, but Voldemort didn’t yet start the proceedings until seven more apparated in. At that, he nodded, evidently able to sense when one was missing, and lifted off the ground, to be better seen and heard. Nagini wrapped her tail around his right arm, completely at ease.
Harry’s jaw dropped. He’d heard—well, there were always whispers that the Dark Lord could fly without a broom, but he hadn’t seen it for himself. How could anyone ever expect to replace this man? His power seemed infinite at times. But the Death Eaters didn’t gasp or seem otherwise shocked by the display, and Harry was forced to assume that this was a talent he’d long held.

“We will not waste time with trivialities tonight,” Voldemort said. “We are pressed for time. Since our attempt to satiate the Dementors, new information has come to light that indicates the beasts’ internal arithmantic clocks have been disrupted, due to being chained to Azkaban. In order to return them to a semi-millennial schedule, they must be destroyed in such a way as to utterly sever their bonds to the prison, and therefore the Ministry.” He paused, scanned the crowd. After a moment, he said carefully, “I will take care of their destruction.”

And here, finally, the Death Eaters showed surprise. Their gasps echoed over the silent, empty Wiltshire downs. Voldemort did not give them time to even absorb this astounding revelation before he was moving on, outlining the evening’s itinerary with precise, military formality. “We will divide into two teams. I want the best flyers and those strongest in evasive magic to come with me to lure the Auror forces back here. The second team will stay here to renew and activate the Hecatomb Ward recently placed around the monument. It is of utmost importance that this ward be active and ready by the time we return.”

“I’ll get my broom,” Harry said immediately after.

“No,” said Voldemort. “You will stay here.”

“What? No. I’m a bloody good flyer—”

“And also my second-in-command,” Voldemort reminded him. “We must never take the same risks, to ensure that one of us is always capable of leading.”

“But...” Harry said, thinking of the horcruxes and the Dark Lord’s insane amount of magical power, anyway. But he paused, realised this wasn’t a fight he would win. Reluctantly, he nodded.

“Draco will come with me,” the Dark Lord said then.

“No!” Harry hissed. Then, “Please.”

“Do keep your emotions out of your work, Harry,” Voldemort said softly, cruelly. And Harry realised that this was set up this way to prove a point, maybe to punish him for being heretofore unable to separate himself from this. But it wasn’t entirely his fault, was it, he thought, and looking into Voldemort’s dark, abyssal eyes, he saw that he knew, too.

He had to keep this separate from his personal life, and he’d been doing exactly the opposite for months now; every important decision he’d made, every important thing that’d happened—he’d tainted all of it with his own feelings. Swallowing, he nodded again, and seeing this, Voldemort narrowed his dark eyes, studied his face for the briefest of moments, and then turned and walked away. Draco followed him without a backward glance, and they were soon met up with by Lucius, Snape, Regulus and others. Harry watched his boyfriend’s back for a moment, but soon he was just another black cloak in the darkness, and soon after that, they’d reached the apparation boundaries, and were popping out of existence.

“Harry.”

He turned and found his mum looking at him, and right behind her, Sirius. He swallowed—how strange it was to see both his parents alive and in one place and be more concerned about the boy
who’d tormented him for six years of his life. He spared a half-second to wish that they wanted to be together and that he’d have a real family—but then guiltily, he recognised that they were already a real family, together or not. He shook himself; he needed to separate his emotions—he needed to detach himself from this entirely.

“I don’t know what to do,” he admitted, and just saying it aloud made everything so very much worse.

A/N:
Not sure if this needs to be said but just in case, Murphy’s Law: “Anything that can go wrong will go wrong.”

Feedback and concrit appreciated. :)

Chapter End Notes
Total War II

Chapter by faire_weather

Chapter Summary

In which there is war.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Total War (n): 1. military conflict in which the contenders are willing to make any sacrifice in lives and other resources to obtain a complete victory.

³³³

His mum lifted an eyebrow. “You made the decision to do this very thing two years ago, when you allowed the Dark Lord unhindered access to your head. During that time, he’s taught you everything you need to know. You can do this.”

“What if it goes wrong?”

“C’mon, kiddo,” said Sirius. “You’re a Black. Even if you bollocks it up, you’ll still get it right in the end.”

“Comforting,” his mother said dryly, but she was smiling a little. It seemed that she, too, had chosen to believe that there was something to be done instead of worrying about it any more tonight; for all he knew, she already had something in mind. “There’s no precedent for a situation like this. You need to be strong tonight because there will be death, but the Dementors must be eliminated. That’s what you need to focus on; let everyone else worry about themselves.”

He nodded. “All right. Hecatomb Ward, then. I missed the school trip when they did this.”

She smiled. “Lucky for you your Defence teacher’s here to offer a hand. Mercy?”

“Here,” said a low voice from his other side. He’d not even noticed her walk up, and she’d nearly blended in with the darkness all around them. “We’ll need a hundred again. How many have we got here?”

“At least that,” said Harry, scanning the crowd. Voldemort took many of his Death Eaters with him to rouse the Aurors, but nearly a third remained.

“Good, good,” she said. “The reactivation of the ward should be straightforward—the Dark Lord chose Stonehenge for its innate magic and position on a major ley line. With the new Hecatomb ward, that should be enough to contain them short-term...long enough to do this, at least.”

“Do you know what ‘this’ is?” Harry asked.

She gave him a tight smile. “It is not my job to ask questions of my master. I was only given orders two hours ago myself.”
“Right,” said Harry. Hermione was making her way over with Theodore, Pansy and Blaise flanking her on either side. “Ward up, Dementors in,” he clarified. Then, swallowing, “I need to give that order, don’t I?”

“Afraid so,” said Sinclair.

Hermione cleared her throat. “We should summon Zacharias,” she said. “The ward will be more easily coaxed into higher activation with one of the original casters for each of the five elements.”

Harry nodded brusquely, already pulling out his galleon. “All right,” he said, sending the message off to Zach’s coin. He put his wand to his throat and amplified his voice, saying, “Those of you with experience warding—get in place around the outer ditch and leave a spot empty at each elemental direction. The rest of you, watch their backs. We don’t know when the Aurors might show.”

Zacharias still hadn’t shown when the Death Eaters were in place. Frowning, he sent off another quick message, Coming or not? Professor Sinclair walked round counting to make sure there were exactly one hundred, less the five previous casters who’d be taking places of the elements, and frowned when she came back around to Harry.

“All right,” she said to him. “We need to get started. If the other group is at all efficient, we’re already cutting it close.”

“Zach’s still not here,” he said worriedly. “We’ve only got four of the original casters.”

Sinclair’s mouth was a thin line. He could see her deliberating what the best course of action would be. She glanced at her watch distractedly. “You’ll need to step in,” she said. “At least it’ll be good for morale if they see you cooperating.”

Harry nodded and slipped in place between her and Pansy Parkinson’s mum, with his mum and dad taking up defensive positions a few yards behind him. Just then, Zach apparated in, already looking around for Harry. When he saw him, he took off at a run towards his side of the circle.

“Longbottom caught me in the corridor and knew it wasn’t my night to patrol. He knew something was going on. Did you send him a message, too?”

“No,” said Harry. “Just you.”

Zach gave him a searching look. “All right,” he said. “If you’re sure.” Then, “Where do you need me?”

“Earth position,” Harry said, stepping out of the circle for him. Zach stepped in and joined hands with Mrs Parkinson and Professor Sinclair.

Sinclair turned to him one last time. “Ms Granger’s worked out an appropriate rune sequence for us. I can’t attest to its accuracy, but it looked sound, and it’ll be the best we can do in fifteen minutes, in any case. You just need to get everyone connected to the wizards beside them, and she’ll lead the sequence.”

“Got it,” Harry said. He took a deep breath, thought over the complicated instructions he’d had to learn for the school trip he never actually got to go on. Then, “Sonorus! Wands out—take the wand-wrist of the wizard to your left. Everyone’s right-wanded tonight, I’m afraid.”

The assembled group got into position with focused efficiency, and on cue, Hermione’s amplified voice rang out from the other side of the monument, steady and confident. “Please repeat this cycle of runes with your wands. Once we’ve established the pattern, we will invoke the incantation.”
“For need...ours to protect our world, the Dementors’ to be free—Nauthiz. For the sacrifices we have made to the Dementors and the sacrifice they make in order to procreate, for re-establishing nature’s balance—Gebo. For purging, to aid us in removing the bonds that hold the Dementors to Azkaban, and thus to this plane—Thurisaz. For strength and protection, to shield us from the Dementors—Eihwaz. And for us, those who cooperate and share our magic to see this will be done—Mannaz.”

Even standing outside the circle, Harry could feel the magic thrumming through him. He watched as Zach’s hand on Professor Sinclair’s wand-wrist followed her repetition of the runes in the air before her, and he was almost sure he actually saw Zach’s magic seeping into hers. Mrs Parkinson’s fingers were tight around his wrist, but even from this distance, Harry could feel that her magic was warm, humid, comforting. The ritual picked up, and watched as her magic flowed through her finders and up Zach’s too. He saw the circuit of magic close as every wizard in the ritual shared and was shared with.

It was extremely strange—both heady and disconcerting. Death Eaters sharing magic and creating something extremely large and vibrant from it—and it was vibrant: the air around them was taking on a strange marshy-glow that lit up their cloaked-faces and the stones, too.

He could see Hermione through the gap between the outer circle of stones; somehow, she’d ended up directly opposite him, as it seemed she’d always meant to be. Their eyes locked and then he could suddenly feel her magic, too—could make it out amongst the whorl of mixing magics flowing through all of them, and knew that the circle was complete. At once, he desperately wished that he could have been within the circle, and felt this connection to other wizards and witches firsthand.

The pattern was steady now. All of them were in accord and connected, their combined magic making up for their unfamiliarity with one another. Across from him, Hermione opened her mouth, and said, “Centum animus renovare!” and as if choreographed, the other ninety-nine of them repeated it, low and steady and sure of themselves and their magic.

Light shot up from the places where they joined, straight into the sky in a column of vibrancy that lit up the entire valley. Harry’s whole body was on fire with the excess energy and excitement, and he’d never felt more alive in his life. He caught Hermione’s eye again and smiled at her, all teeth and happiness—it had been so long since he’d felt this amazing, and she smiled back at him; even from this distance he could see the pink of her cheeks and the way her hair had come undone from her braid.

And then, behind her, fifty cloaked Death Eaters apparated in.

And behind them, twice as many Aurors.

When they started firing, Hermione was the first one hit. She crashed face first into the dirt in front of her, surprise and shock colouring her face. All of the happiness Harry had just felt boiled into rage in the span of half a second.

Harry screamed, his blood fairly boiling with anger. Of all the people, how dare they attack Hermione? Even as he thought it, the fledgling ward was starting to fail. Not quite settled when Hermione’s magic was torn from it, it was now struggling to stay active, and the other ninety-nine wizards were faltering under the added stress. The Death Eaters having just arrived engaged the Aurors at once, but they were outnumbered, and already, two were restraining Hermione’s already limp body.

“Mum,” he yelled over his shoulder. “Take her place.”

“No,” she said. “Not with Aurors here. I’m coming with you. Sirius, get in there.”
“No,” Harry yelled. “You need to keep the ward up. You can use your spell singing to make up for Hermione’s lost magic, and I am in charge. I will not see everyone here arrested or Kissed because you can’t get your priorities in order.”

“You’re my priority,” she said. “That’s the order.”

“Then adjust it,” he snarled, and quite without realising even what he was doing, he focused all of his anger on her keeping him from getting to Hermione, and felt a connection to her come to life and throb with fury. The Dark Mark, he realised—he’d somehow activated hers and summoned her to him. Still glaring at her over his shoulder, he saw it register on her face, saw her flinch; and then she was walking towards him, mouth pressed in a furious thin line, but she came all the same.

When she got to him, she wrapped her hand around Zach’s where it joined with Professor Sinclair’s wrist, and they stepped aside to allow room for her to get between. The connection faltered for only the briefest of seconds, but then the light flared up again, twisting and weaving together as it reactivated in preparation for the Dementors.

Harry pulled away and ran straight through the stones to where an Auror was already wrapping Hermione in magic ropes. “Move away from her,” he said. All around them, fighting was picking up with alarming speed. Many of the Aurors were only casting to incapacitate, but the Death Eaters were casting to end the threat, and many of the Aurors were already starting to respond in kind.

“Harry Potter!” said the Auror, looking up. “What are you doing here? Hurry! Come with me, I’ll get you to safety.”

“I am safe,” he said, levelling his wand at the Auror. “But you won’t be if you put that port-key anywhere near her.” Around them, Aurors were pressing crisis port-keys to Stunned or otherwise insensible Death Eaters, and Harry knew that this was not how it was supposed to go—even with so many Death Eaters, their numbers were quickly dwindling, and they needed everyone they could get tonight. But he would not, absolutely would not, let Hermione be one of that number. Not after all she’d done to help bring this nightmare to an end for him.

The Auror’s eyes widened and he looked from Harry to Hermione and back again. “She’s a Death Eater,” he said, gesturing to her robes. “She’ll kill you.”

“She won’t,” Harry said, and took another step forward, unconcerned about the battle raging around them. “Step back.”

“I really don’t think—” the Auror began to say, and was cut off when a blast knocked them both sideways. Hermione’s stunned body was flung awkwardly over the ground, but she remained unconscious. He hurried to pick himself up again and get to her before the Auror with the port-key did, but someone beat him to her, running fast past him with no concern for whom he stepped on, including the fallen Auror, who took a boot to his hip.

“Nott,” Harry breathed, as he met him there. “Where’ve you been?”

Nott was too busy running his wand over Hermione’s abdomen, checking her delicate vital organs for damage, to give more than a few words in response. “Finishing the bloody ward,” he said, and the next breath shot off a series of mid-grade healing spells to her kidneys, then an Episkey to her nose, which had smashed into the ground when she fell. “I was in the circle, didn’t you see?”

“No,” Harry said, surprised. He looked back over his shoulder and saw that the light was gone, and in its place, a steely-looking dome anchored into the circular ditch that surrounded Stonehenge. It was almost invisible, save for the slight haze as from rising heat, and probably completely invisible to
muggles.

Nott had stayed in the circle to finish their work. Nott, who was so head over heels for Hermione that it was frankly disgusting, had put his emotions aside and done what he had to do before seeing to Hermione. Harry swallowed, suddenly feeling a little nauseous, and not from all the magic he’d been exposed to. This was it, this was his chance to prove himself, and he had to do it. If Nott could separate himself when he needed to, so could he.

“Innervate!” Theo finally said, and Hermione blinked several times before scrambling to her feet, wand already out and stance already defensive. “Bruised kidney, broken nose,” he listed off. “How do they feel?”

“So, but fine,” she said quickly.

He nodded. “See Pomfrey afterward,” he said. She squeezed his hand briefly and then rounded on an approaching pair of Aurors, firing off two bright orange spells.

More Aurors were apparating in now, and the fight was moving from pub brawl to battle, and this had to stop because they all needed to be on guard if—when—the Dementors came. And where was Draco? His father? His mother? He scanned the mob for them, but could see none of them.

Two sharp cracks sounded behind him, and he spun, wand already raised offensively. A stunning spell was halfway out of his mouth before he registered the faces staring back at him—Neville and Ron. Neville’s eyes were wide as tea saucers, and he moved his wand constantly, unsure of who to target in the dark.

“What’s going on?” Neville asked him anxiously.

Harry was too startled to process it himself. He wanted to laugh at the absurdity of the situation, and how it all appeared to be going from ‘dreadful’ to ‘unsalvageable’. “Shouldn’t you’ve known that before coming?” he asked instead.

“We all got a message. No one else thought it was important, but it sounded important to me, so I contacted Ron, and he reckoned you might be here.”

Harry looked at Ron, stunned. How he’d managed to infer where they’d be, he had no idea. Ron shrugged, but his eyes were elsewhere, focused on the fight and watching for any approaching threats. “If it were me making the strategy, I’d’ve picked here to get rid of the Dementors.”

“Dementors?” Neville asked suddenly. “Wait, are those...are those Death Eaters?”

“Looks like it.”

“Shut up!” Harry said. “You need to leave. Both of you. It’s dangerous.”

Ron set his mouth. “Not a chance.”

He heard his name being called, and sighed, releasing a tension he hadn’t realised was there. Draco was here, though, and alive—he could feel him even though he couldn’t see him among the crowd, and for the briefest of moments, he was grateful for their strange bond. He closed his eyes for only a second, let the magic in the air and through their connection speak to him, and when he opened his eyes again, he knew where to go. Ron and Neville were still standing in front of him. If they stayed, Neville was about to get a hell of a shock. Merlin, he did not have time for this.

He gave Ron one last raw, pleading look, but both were refusing to be anything but Gryffindor.
“Fine—just...be careful. Tonight is not going to end well...for any of us,” he said, indicating the 
Aurors, Death Eaters, and himself. “Whatever happens, Neville, just watch your back and don’t let 
anyone—anyone—mess with the ward when the spell starts.”

And with that, he ran back through the central aisle of the monument, bolted around the altar stone 
and through the trilithons behind back to where he’d stood with his mother.

Draco was there with her, and his mum, too, all of them looking urgently around them, wands 
drawn. Sirius was in battle with two Aurors at once, and was holding his own, though his mum was 
keeping a keen eye on it, even as she scanned for him. “Harry!” she said as he slid between the two 
stones on the outer circle. “Thank God.”

“We’re outnumbered two to one,” Narcissa said absently. She was still scanning the fighting wizards 
on this side of the circle even as she asked him. “Nearly every Auror in Britain must have been 
called in. Have you seen Lucius?”

“No,” Harry said. “Draco—”

“I’m fine,” Draco said. “What do you need me to do?”

To do? Harry thought blankly. He blinked rapidly. Right—they needed to stop the Aurors from 
incapacitating the Death Eaters, and they needed to get Neville back to Hogwarts before Dementors 
showed. And he still had no idea what Voldemort planned to do to get rid of the Dementors once 
they came, only that it was going to be big.

As if summoned by that thought, a sharp crack of apparation resounded through the air, already 
heavy with spell fire, and heads turned towards it as if by magnetism. The Dark Lord stood in the 
centre of Stonehenge, surveying the area with a cold eye. His cowl was back and his face was 
illuminated by the ghostly after-effects of all the spell fire, flickering from red to green and bright 
white. It overemphasised the sharp contrast of his pale skin and dark, dark hair and brows, and his 
eyes, which had recently started looking more and more human, where so black as to be bottomless, 
evil. Nagini curled around his shoulders, black scales and eyes reflecting ghastly spell-fire lights.

A collective gasp rose from the Aurors, and the Death Eaters alike, for the Dark Lord was fairly 
vibrating with the after-effects of Old Magic. It crackled around his skin like electricity, and Harry 
was sure if he touched him, that it’d run right through him, shock him senseless maybe.

“Harry,” the Dark Lord said, and though he did not seem to raise his voice, it somehow carried 
through the valley. Aurors who’d not yet noticed his attendance whipped their heads around 
frantically, trying to locate him. “Come here.”

Harry turned to Draco. “Don’t fight them,” he said, and couldn’t help that it came out more as a plea.

“I have to,” Draco said. “I’m a good duellist, and we need to keep them distracted before the 
Dementors come.”

“Please,” Harry said.

Draco shook his head. “Distance yourself, Harry. You need a clear head.”

Reluctantly, Harry nodded. He moved into the ward and winded his way through the circles of outer 
stones, to Voldemort, who stood before the centre altar stone, facing the heel stones to the northeast.

He stopped next to Voldemort, feeling even the air around them sparking, on the verge of being set 
to fire with all of the magic pulsing through it. The Aurors stopped firing what felt like ages ago, and
they stood interspersed with Death Eaters, watching.

“Harry, no!” said Neville. Ron and he remained defensively back-to-back on the opposite side of the monument, perfectly able to apparate away, and yet, neither of them had, not yet. They watched: Neville slightly closer to panic, but Ron looked apprehensive, too. Harry could feel their eyes on his back, his shoulders; the hair at the nape of his neck stood up from the feeling of it. It was eerily quiet.

“I am afraid, Aurors,” the Dark Lord said softly, voice once again carrying with ease, “that you’ve been led here under false pretences. You are not here to arrest my Death Eaters, though I notice that you’ve managed to do so regardless with a few of them. No matter, that shall be fixed. Shan’t it, Harry?”

Mutely, Harry nodded. He wouldn’t let those people go to Azkaban, not for this—not for, perhaps, the only good thing they’d done under the guise of Death Eater. The Aurors shifted uneasily; they could make out his face now, though his hood was still up. He met none of their eyes, choosing to look for those he trusted instead, but he could feel them raking their own over his face, his forehead, his own eyes.

Finally, he slid his eyes back to the one person who was keeping him upright tonight, whether he knew it or not. Like the Aurors, Draco tried to meet his eyes, and Harry allowed it this time. How could he not? Their relationship had begun with Harry being the one to keep Draco calm, focused—to teach him what it meant to grow up. Now their roles were reversed, and had been since Yule.

Harry did not feel altogether right in the world, and he couldn’t place the reason why, but Nott could do it, and his father could do it, and even Voldemort could do it: Harry, then, would also do it. He would also learn to make hard decisions, and to not make easy ones hard. He would be good for Draco because he didn’t want to be wrong for him. He would try very hard, at least, for as long as he could.

“If the Hogwarts students would please step into the ward,” the Dark Lord continued. He didn’t bother to look behind him when he addressed them, and Harry was not surprised to feel none of them stepping inside, not even Ron. The air was tense with anxiety, and a great deal came from behind him. “I assure you, you will rather be in here than out there in a moment. Or—if you prefer, you may apparate away. I’ve put no anti-apparation wards up.”

Even as it was said, Harry knew that wasn’t entirely the truth. He could feel the oppressive push of anti-apparation magic all around. The Dark Lord and Death Eaters may not have put it up, but it was there just the same.

Behind them, the disorienting punch of a failed apparation echoed. “Oh, dear,” Voldemort said. “It seems, however, that the Ministry’s elected to do so. I’m sure they’d let you go, though. You are only students, after all. No threat at all, are they?” he said, turning back to the Aurors. “I daresay that their parents would prefer that you allow the children to return unharmed to Hogwarts. Who will be the Auror to dismantle the anti-apparation wards?”

No one moved or said a word. “I see,” said the Dark Lord, after a long, expectant pause. He turned once again to the students. “Perhaps you’d prefer to be inside the wards now. I suspect we will be overrun with Dementors momentarily.”

Harry turned and saw when the realisation that he was in on this finally sank in for Neville, and a sharp wave of regret coursed through him. It was entirely possible that he wouldn’t ever have a chance to explain. Ron’s hand was clenched tightly around his wand, even now watching out for Harry, looking for threats from all directions. Even behind his red beard, Harry could see his mouth pressed together so tightly his lips were bloodless; he could see his and Neville’s bright eyes flicking
from him up to the Dark Lord, tall and impressive for all that he was utterly frightening. Neville’s throat bobbed as he swallowed, and when he looked back to Harry, he met his eyes.

“It’s okay,” he said softly, having no idea if Neville would even be able to make out the words. “I never turned on you.”

He swallowed again, and then, as if making a terrifying decision, stepped hesitantly into the ward.

“A good leader,” the Dark Lord murmured to him. He’d finally turned and was watching impassively as Ron followed him inside. Outside the ward, Pansy, Blaise, Hermione, Theo, Draco, and Zach refused to give themselves up as students; they kept their hoods raised and made themselves as inconspicuous as possible. Hermione’s red shoes were regrettably noticeable.

“Not really,” Harry said.

“You’ve only just begun,” said Voldemort. “Even tonight, you’ve improved. You will keep doing so.”

It sounded like an order, so Harry nodded. He would certainly try. “You meant for me to teach Draco how to be a good revolutionist,” he said. “But I wasn’t any better than he was.” Unsaid was the thought, But how long will we have for me to get better?

“No, I think,” the Dark Lord said, voice low, “entirely your fault.”

Harry looked up at him. “How long until I go mad just like you?” he asked.

“I expect we will figure it out soon enough,” said Voldemort. “In any case, it will only get worse before it gets better, but it will get better tonight, and things will be apparent then.”

“I don’t understand,” said Harry.

“There is a price to necromancy, Harry. The ritual we use tonight will exact that price from me. If Madam Ravenclaw was correct on at least this point, a side effect of the ritual will sever every bond I have in the living world.”

“You mean your Death Eaters?” Harry said quietly.

“Yes,” the Dark Lord agreed. “At the end, it will unbind them.”

But surely they could retake their Marks, he thought...and then another thought occurred to him. “And unbind you from Calixta.”

“With any luck,” Voldemort said, but before he could elaborate, the valley, already dark, was overcome with Dementors, so ghastly and otherworldly that they sucked what little light there was straight from the air. They materialised all around Stonehenge, wailing and howling in hunger. “Do not leave the wards,” said the Dark Lord. “You are the only one compatible enough to ground me.”

Harry was suddenly finding it very hard to breath. He hadn’t been this close to so many Dementors since third year; even over Yule, when the first feeding took place, he was separated from them by the calming charm and extensive warding. The Hecatomb was strong, but it didn’t keep the psychological horror out.

“Oh, okay,” he said, but he could barely hear the words because in his head, he was hearing his mother screaming and screaming and screaming, and was that really still his worst memory? Even now that he had her back? But what if he lost her again? What if he lost her and he’d disregarded her all this
time when all he’d ever wanted was a family and—

“Harry!” Voldemort said sharply. His fingers dug into Harry’s shoulder, hard enough to make him want to crumple on the ground, just to get away from it. “Focus.” Harry nodded mutely, attempted to pull himself up straight, shoulders back and determined. “If it doesn’t work,” Voldemort said when he had Harry’s attention again, “the chaos of the magic may nullify the Hecatomb ward; if it does work, it may still nullify it. If the ward falls, apparate out immediately.”

“Anti-apparation wards,” Harry reminded him.

“I will get you through them if it comes to that,” he said. “Just keep in contact with me.”

Outside the dome of the ward, the Dementors were ravaging any Auror they could get to. Aurors and Death Eaters were back to back, sharing protective shields and Patronuses, but the Dementors weren’t interested in the Death Eaters tonight. As if pulled by gravity, they were acutely aware of those who had Ministry ties and set upon them with horrifying speed and ferocity. There was screaming and exclamations of pain, but inside, it was starkly quiet. Abstractly, Harry was aware that the DA was still behind them, but his own agitation from the Dementors’ nearness was making it difficult for him to focus on anything else.

Voldemort’s hand slipped into his, and the world slid suddenly into vivid clarity. He gasped from the overwhelming contrast. At once, for the first time in months, he felt calm and safe and strong; he felt like he could do this, that he was meant to do this.

“It really was you,” he breathed, hardly understanding what was happening. “I’ve felt everything you’ve felt, thought I was feeling it myself. But why now? And not before?”

“You’re my last horcrux,” said Voldemort quietly. It was a moment before Harry realised that he’d spoken in Parseltongue.

He shook his head. “Nagini,” he hissed back, and the snake looked back at him steadily from Voldemort’s shoulder, but said nothing. Her dark eyes fixed on him, unblinking, and a shiver ran down his spine for a reason he could not yet discern.

“No,” said Voldemort. “Always a price.” Then, “Nagini, it’s time.” Without a word, she swirled down his arm to the ground before them where she rearranged her long body into a dignified coil before the altar stone; she lifted her head and regarded the Dark Lord calmly.

“A good master,” she hissed then, and to Harry, it sounded like an absolution. He felt Voldemort’s fingers tighten briefly around his and at once, he knew.

“No!” he said. But neither Voldemort nor Nagini turned their attention to him. Their black eyes were locked on each other. Next to him, Voldemort inhaled once, exhaled deeply—then threw their joined hands up in the air and began chanting. It was not a language Harry recognised—sibilant and monstrous though no serpentine dialect. It cut harsh consonants and low, guttural vowels, rising and falling in a steady, preternatural cadence.

The Dementors stopped.

They stopped shrieking; they stopped Kissing; they stopped moving. They turned their grisly faces towards Harry and Voldemort, empty eyes wide and alert. To Harry’s horror, they began to respond in the same demonic language, eerily in harmony and hive-like.

Voldemort lifted his wand and held it steadily before them, Harry felt the magic of the place pull up as if the stones themselves were alive with it, felt the Dark Lord draw upon it as if it were his own,
and then—

“Avada Kedavra!”

Nagini slumped, and an agonising pain sliced through him, like a knife in his delicate abdomen. He screamed, heard screaming, and could not tell if it was all coming from him, or if the Dark Lord were screaming, too. His body was on fire, being torn apart and pieced together again and he had truly never felt anything quite so excruciating.

And suddenly, it was gone. He became aware of himself half-crumpled against the Dark Lord, sweating and trembling. Slowly, he pulled himself together enough to look to his master’s face. Voldemort stared impassively at the limp body on the ground, and then he felt it. It was a hundred-thousand times stronger than whatever magic Voldemort had borrowed to cast the Killing Curse—the inherent magic of the monument and the land all around it, the magic of the living world and whatever dead world the Dementors came from, was rising up, being drawn into the pair of them. It flowed freely between their joined hands; Harry’s awareness zeroed in on the two of them and the places where the Old Magic in the monument flowed into his fingers and feet, through the Dark Lord, and coursed back out again. He flexed his fingers, feeling it flare and spark in his veins and tendons.

His senses were magnified; he heard and saw everything and nothing—was able to focus in on a single sound and block everything else out. The Dementors whined discordantly and briefly, as the Dark Lord’s magic flowed in and out of him, he collected snatches of understanding; they spoke, and he understood it, but recognised it as no actual words—only vocalised needs and wants. And what they said, was hunger and need, need and anger. They pressed themselves against the Hecatomb ward, skeletal fingers clawing and grasping at the translucent wall, though it burnt them when they touched it.

Voldemort was chanting again, and with each repetition, the Dementors writhed and howled, and the magic flowing through Harry intensified until he became dizzy with it. Aurors and Death Eaters and students looked on in awe. He felt drugged—incredibly aware, but only of what the Dark Lord was doing. He felt Voldemort’s magic like it was his own. It was comfortable and recognisable. It felt safe.

But he could feel everything—the Dark Lord’s voice was steady and deep, but he was tiring. Harry felt his exhaustion like it was his own; it flowed into him and he pushed energy from the stones around them back through the conduit. The stalemate of the magic suddenly broke, and he staggered under the weight of it. Distantly, he felt the anti-apparation wards fall in the chaos, unable to remain with all of the wild, Old magic swirling around.

And then he felt Nagini. He couldn’t say how he knew it was her, but he felt her soul, and the bit of Voldemort’s soul that had been within her, coalesce from the broken magic at their feet and rise up through his fingertips, his arm, across his chest through his other hand into the Dark Lord. Voldemort’s wand lit up, flaring like a quiet explosion that rushed the feverish Dementors and crashed into their gaping mouths.

They stilled, vainly and silently struggling against the hold the magic put over them as it tore pieces from their insides and picked at their Ministry bonds; the resultant quiet was eerily so. Harry still gripped the Dark Lord’s hand, but at this point he wasn’t sure if it was to let the remaining wild magic settle through them or to keep him standing. Voldemort was still and upright, but Harry could still feel that enhanced connection to him—even more enhanced than it normally was—and he knew that Voldemort was only a moderately strong wind from crumpling in exhaustion.

“Go!” Harry said to Ron and Neville behind him. The anti-apparation magic still hadn’t recovered,
and they’d done their part, admirably so. He wanted them safe at Hogwarts before the Aurors recovered enough to reactivate it. They hesitated, and Harry wanted to scream in frustration. He couldn’t afford to spend time watching out for them right now. “Hurry, please,” he said to them. Then, “There’s nothing you can do. Patronuses won’t do anything.”

At that, the two finally left, but he could see, even as they apparated out, that they wanted to stay—that Ron, especially wanted to stay. Harry knew that feeling. He saw Zach running, leading two Aurors on a chase through the stones, firing spells with surprising agility. He wished he could tell Zach, Hermione, Blaise, Pansy, Draco, and even Nott to go back, too, but he knew they wouldn’t. All but Hermione’s parents were here somewhere, after all, and they wouldn’t likely leave without them. He turned back to the people before him and hoped that they were not part of the mass of soulless on the ground.

Outside the bounds of the ward, the Aurors were finally reacting. Still stunned by the display, the Death Eaters were slower to respond, and in the chaos, another half-dozen were hit with port-keys, likely leading to Ministry holding cells. Only a few metres from him, Professor Sinclair took a strange, yellow curse to her face that made her crumple to the ground, and she did not get up again.

“We aren’t done,” said the Dark Lord. “Do not let go. Once the magic eats through their bonds, they’ll still need to be resynchronised into their original unit and destroyed together.”

Harry nodded even as he scanned for a glimpse of Draco, his mother or father, or even Snape. Where were they? There were so many black robes interspersed with the maroon of the Aurory, and the area was so dark, that he couldn’t tell one from the other.

To their right, the harsh crack of apparition rang out again, and Harry’s stomach sank when he saw the new arrivals—Minister Scrimgeour looking battle-ready, and next to him, Kingsley. Their eyes met and Harry fought to feel shame at his actions, being as he was literally holding hands with a murderous megalomaniac, but he could not. He met Kingley’s eyes steadily, and focused on keeping all the wild magic around them from overtaking either himself or Voldemort. They were both hyped on Old Magic, and Harry had never realised just what Nott and Draco went through that day until now. He felt simultaneously like he could leap out of his skin in fear and conquer the world.

Kingsley took a decisive step towards him, wand drawn, but at that moment, the Dark Lord inhaled sharply, a broken, pained sound. He said, “Be ready.”

Then the earth moved and shuddered and the magic released them; the ghostly figures surged, coalescing back into oily black shapes that grew larger and larger until they were twice as large as before—at their usual strength without the Ministry binding.

They were ravenous. Their mouths gaped open, and that eerie howling sound echoed from them as they turned towards the nearest human, searching for sustenance. At once, Voldemort began chanting again, new words, but in the same old, broken Dementor language. Instead of hanging on to every word he said, like they had done the first time, they raged at him, clawing at the ward in ravenous fury—and this time, Harry thought, they just might get through.

Voldemort ignored them; he kept chanting and with each repetition, the magic flowing into Harry grew heavier and heavier until he could barely breathe from it. He was aware on some level—strangely both conscious and subconscious—of every living Death Eater. Though he couldn’t hope to know who all of them were, he still knew which ones were fighting, which ones were unconscious or in a holding cell—or worse: which ones were ‘missing’. Not dead, he knew at once; their bodies lived, but the wizard was not there—Kissed.

This was what it felt like to be Voldemort, to control the lives of five hundred people. The effects
that the Dark Lord was receiving from using Old Magic were transferring to him and layering over the jittery feeling he already had from saving Draco. But he could feel him weakening; even with the tremendous amount of magic coming up from the earth to aid him, the Dark Lord was being quickly drained. Harry did his best to stabilise the conduit, but the amount of magic being expended was too much to keep up.

His eyes were closed to help himself focus, but the atmosphere around them was changing, tensing, and he could sense it. As if he could pick up on the emotions of all of the Death Eaters, he saw, without looking, that something was not right. Teeth gritted, he forced his eyes back open, saw that the Minister and his lead Aurors were approaching them now. Death Eaters engaged Kingsley and Dawlish, but Robarbs was like a vicious terrier, and he, like Scrimgeour, had eyes only for Harry and the Dark Lord. They approached the ward cautiously, and Harry could do nothing but watch—could not move to protect himself or the Dark Lord or the ritual without destroying their conduit, and there was no telling what kind of effect that would have.

“Harry!” Scrimgeour called out to him, as if Harry had ever given him leave to use his first name. “We’re coming, don’t be scared!” And why in Merlin’s name did everyone assume that he was being held against his will? But no—he blinked the sweat from his eyes and saw the calculating glint in the Minister’s gaze; he knew exactly what was going on.

“Stop,” Harry told him through gritted teeth. He held his wand out threateningly, but they both knew he couldn’t spare even a *Lumos*-worth of magic right now. It was an empty threat. Voldemort watched them approach with cold, narrowed eyes, but he did not falter in his chanting. His hand squeezed Harry’s once, though, and Harry struggled through the strain of all the magic to know what that meant, if anything.

Finally, the Minister got brave enough to test the ward. He held out a hand to it and when it didn’t repel him or otherwise harm him, his mouth curved up into a smug grin. “Not much of a ward, Harry,” he said. Obviously not much of a warder if he didn’t recognise the Hecatomb for what it was. His wand was still raised as he and Robarbs slid forward, body angled to make as small a target as possible.

Harry watched him approach, unable to do anything to protect himself but glare. The Dark Lord’s gaze never faltered, though his eyes got harder and more murderous with each step forward.

“Y’r brave,” Harry bit out, even as his hands and arms were going numb from the overexposure to magic. “Not many would.”

Scrimgeour chuckled, but Robards was starting to look decidedly less brave. His rush of adrenalin must’ve run out; walking up to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was looking less and less like a good idea. “Can’t stop me right now, can you?” He jerked his head in Voldemort’s direction, recklessly insulting, and added, “Even dark lords can’t cast curses when they’re channelling this sort of magic. Can they?”

Voldemort’s glare intensified, but he didn’t change his steady, purposeful rhythm; he remained completely unconcerned with the Minister’s presence, and that, at least, seemed to have some sort of affect. Scrimgeour waited for Voldemort to acknowledge him for a beat too long; no response came, just the steady repetition of the archaic incantation. Scrimgeour’s throat bobbed as he swallowed. He tensed his arm, jabbed his wand into Harry’s chest.

The cold, bony fingers wrapped around Harry’s tightened enough that he winced, even though his hands had lost much of their feeling minutes ago. Harry stared down at the tip of the wand pressed into his solar plexus—maple, unbowing: so strong, it doesn’t know when to bend until it’s too late and it breaks instead. Harry looked back up at him, the edge of his mouth curling up just a bit.
“Not brave,” he amended. “Too stupid to know better. Gryffindor; I know that type.”

“What’s all this, then?” Scrimgeour asked roughly. “Consorting? Aiding, abetting, conspiracy, collusion, high treason, terrorist organisations, et cetera, et cetera. I knew there was something fishy about you, Potter. What shall we charge you with once we’ve disposed of this rubbish? I shall enjoy sitting your trial.”

“Black,” Harry said through gritted teeth.

“Fitting,” Scrimgeour agreed. He slid his wand tip up Harry’s chest into his throat. “The lot of you, all black-magicking, unfeeling, evil things.”

A heavy, rushing surge of wild magic pitched up at that moment and Harry nearly lost his balance trying to keep himself and the Dark Lord from being overtaken. He was weakening; Voldemort was, too. This had to end soon. This had to be over or they’d both burn out their cores. His heart was hammering so wildly in his chest that he knew he would’ve had heart failure by now if the magic itself weren’t keeping him from it. He could barely breathe; he gasped and gasped and air barely filled his lungs but he was both starving for air and completely satiated. Such a strange, unearthly feeling.

He licked his lips, flicked his eyes down to Nagini’s slumped body, and was able to hiss, “Hurry. I can’t. Not for long.”

“What’s that, boy?” Scrimgeour growled, jabbing his wand so hard into Harry’s throat that he doubled over choking. Voldemort’s grip on his hand jerked him back upright, and then his mind was flooded with a series of images: the journal pages fluttering rapidly until they stopped on a certain page; the steps needed to complete the Last Rite marriage bond; Hermione’s parents and a muggle he’d never seen before; Voldemort himself unwarding a hidden box; a rapid flash of faces—all of them members of the Wizengamot as far as Harry could tell; Pansy’s parents; Zach’s parents; Draco’s parents; and finally—finally: the Dementors breaking through the ward, pouring onto the Minister and Head Auror, devouring them like piranhas on a wounded animal before engulfing the two of them and—blackness.

Harry began to shake violently, truly and utterly terrified.

“Well?” Scrimgeour barked at him. His wand was back to being pressed into his solar plexus. “Ahhhh, bit scared now, are we? Thought about what a nice long holiday in the high-security ward of Azkaban will do to that lovely complexion, have you? A shame, that. The Malfoy lad looks to put a lot of value on appearances.”

“Minister, shouldn’t we just eliminate the threat and—”

“Shut it, Robarbs,” Scrimgeour said. “This bloody child has been conspiring against me for months. He thinks he’s clever. He’s not.”

“Sir,” Robarbs tried again. “The Dementors look to be making progress, sir. I need to get my men out before we lose any more.”

“They’re Aurors,” said Scrimgeour. His eyes were locked on Harry’s, glittering with barely suppressed rage and satisfaction. “We spend enough galleons training them for this; let them prove themselves a bit.”

“Potter,” Scrimgeour purred, leaning in. His breath was hot and damp against Harry’s mouth and cheek as he slid his bearded face closer. “I’ve been waiting a long time to bring down the Dark 
Lord...and now I get to bring down two.” He lowered his voice to a whisper, and said, “Incarcerous.”

Ropes shot from his wand wrapped around him, tight, too tight. He choked, struggling to breathe, his feeling absolutely nothing as his arms were snapped to his sides, and yet somehow—somehow, he hadn’t let go. Or perhaps, Voldemort hadn’t let go. He could see their fingers still entwined, could feel the magic still circulating between them, though he couldn’t feel the Dark Lord’s grip on his hand. Then, the air exploded with sound—so many discordant yells and noises that he hadn’t even realised how muted they’d been before.

Then the wailing started up—louder, stronger, more demonic than he’d ever heard it before, and he’d become quite intimately familiar with the dying sounds of Dementors in recent months. The sound undulated like an oily black wave of jarring noise. His ears rang, and the Dementor howling grew so loud and unencumbered that the sounds became indistinguishable. Peripherally, he could see the huge dome of the Hecatomb ward dimming out of existence; could see the Aurors and the Death Eaters who still remained stopping even in the middle of spell-casting, everything else forgotten as they watched in stunned silence.

He heard his name being called. He felt the magic in his veins throbbing steadily. He felt a brief rush of love or something very like it, and couldn’t find its origin. Vaguely, he registered that Voldemort had stopped incanting. But his eyes saw nothing but the approaching Dementors, gliding in on all sides.

Scrimgeour and Robarbs turned, backed up into them with startled cries and here it was—the Dementors falling on the pair of them like piranhas. Voldemort had anticipated this, had maybe prophesied it. Harry’s trembling grew wild and violent enough to make him nauseous, but he was too frightened to take his wide eyes off the scene before him. The Dementors fighting over two souls, and then would come the next round, where they fought over him and Voldemort, and then the blackness—

There was nowhere to run to, and no way to do it even if there were.

“The prophecy was wrong,” Voldemort said to him, his words sibilant, intimate—for no one but Harry. “The choice lies with the end of the beasts of dark days.” Mis-transcribed. Beast, singular. You are the end, Harry. I am the beast who reigned over dark days. It’s your choice.”

“What,” Harry said, but it came out broken and hoarse. The Minister’s screams were louder, just as ragged-sounding. This couldn’t be it—it couldn’t come down to him making one impossible decision.

“Prove to me that you can be the leader I thought you were,” said Voldemort. “Do what needs to be done.” Harry looked up, their eyes met for the briefest of moments, and then he felt it—just as the Dementors finished picking over their remains and noticed them instead, a backlash of Old Magic surging into him. Everything went black.

Zacharias fought fiercely, carefully defensively. He wanted no part of a murder trial or even a manslaughter trial. He was here for one purpose and one purpose only, and everyone else could go hang. He’d suspected it wouldn’t take long, and indeed it hadn’t: he knew it the moment Scrimgeour arrived.

He shot off a Stunner at the Auror he was fighting and slipped through others duelling until he was close enough to anticipate the Minister’s trajectory. Ah—and there it was. He shot off two more quick Stunners, clearing a wide, easy path from Scrimgeour to Harry and the Dark Lord. The
Minister saw them immediately, took the bait.

Gryffindors.

One of his Aurors broke off when the red spell flew past the Minister and engaged Zach in duel, but that was all right—the Minister would take care of the rest himself; he needed only sit back and wait for the right time to ensure it. His lips curled up, though the Auror would never know it, or even Zach himself. His spellwork was more than adequate to disguise himself indefinitely.

He lost himself to the duel, to the dance of back and forth, side to side, ducking and dodging and applying just enough pressure to make himself seem a threat, but not too big of one. And all too soon, it happened: just like his mother had hinted the Dark Lord would, he dropped the Hecatomb ward and let the Dementors swarm in.

Zach disapparated away from the Auror he was duelling to the other side of the ward, and with a lazy flick of his wand, cast *Petrificus Totalis* over Scrimgeour. The Minister froze, unable to even attempt to cast a Patronus, as if it would’ve done him any good. That made no difference to Zach—he just wanted Scrimgeour to be still so he could *enjoy* his Kiss.

Like Justin had.

He could feel it. All evening, it had been like a slow burn on his skin. He scratched at it over and over, but nothing helped. *Danger*, it said. And *Harry*. All evening, Harry’s fate had been on the edge; undecided. Draco had felt it, recognised it, and been unable to do anything about it. Had known that it wasn’t the right time.

But then the burning stopped, melted down into a maddening itch, and Draco’s heart dropped to his stomach. *He’s still alive*, he thought, even as he slashed madly with his wand, and cut a wide, wet stripe across some Auror’s chest. He had no time to care about the slowing, erratic heartbeat of another wizard or the gushes of blood spraying his robes or the wide-eyed look of disbelief—didn’t even notice it, in fact.

Draco had room for one thought in his head at that moment, and that thought was Harry.

Without another thought for the dying Auror, Draco turned on the spot, having no idea where he’d land, but knowing it would be by Harry. What he saw when he arrived was a hundred times more frightening than he’d expected. Three hundred Dementors or more, all of them with hungry, gaping mouths, and all of them with eyes only for Harry. The Dark Lord, next to him, held little appeal. Not enough soul, not enough to bother with—but Harry; Harry was appealing, had his own and part of another. An especially rare and mouth-watering delicacy.

He sprinted forward before they noticed him, but was thrown back by a wave of magic stronger than any he’d ever seen or felt. The Dark Lord slumped heavily to the ground, dragging Harry down with him by their joined hands, and Draco scrambled up and rushed to him. He was magically exhausted already, but he didn’t spare a thought for gathering up the last of his reserves and *throwing* it at the onslaught of beasts. They fell back, and Draco nearly fell forward, but righted himself just in time.

He caught Harry’s other hand just before he hit the ground.

“Dementors, Harry!” Draco said frantically. The Auror’s screams were faded to nothing now. They had little time—they had *no* time, actually. There was no chance, no chance at all. And yet, Draco couldn’t sit by and let Harry be Kissed without at least *trying*.
Harry’s eyes fluttered drowsily and then snapped open, wide and frightened. He met Draco’s gaze, but his eyes were wild, unfocused. “Magic, Draco” he said. “All of it.”

“Get up!” said Draco and jerked him back to standing. Harry wobbled awkwardly, held half-down by the hand he still kept tightly joined with the Dark Lord’s. “Let go of him, let’s go!”

“No,” Harry said. “It’s not finished.” He tried to pull his hand away. “Let go, I have to finish it.”

Draco wasn’t having any of that. He moved in front of him, inhaled deeply to ground himself, and gathered his magic. The Dementors were regrouping already. “Just run,” he said lowly. “Apparate when you can.”

“No,” Harry said again, steadily this time. He pulled Draco back behind him with his free hand, and then turned to his other side, hissing incomprehensibly. Astonishingly, the Dark Lord hissed back; he wasn’t dead after all. Slowly, he pulled himself to his feet, and took his place next to Harry again. His black eyes fixed on Draco for the briefest of moments, studied him, and it seemed to Draco that in that short time, he received approval, though for what, he couldn’t say.

He took Harry’s free hand, unwilling to leave, and as the Dementors closed in on them, he didn’t even think twice about staying.

It took only seconds, but it felt like hours. Magic rushed him; it felt like a bludger to the chest. He was winded and exhausted, but he felt electrified and wide-awake. Where Draco’s fingers touched his, he felt; there were no deadened, numbed nerves where Draco’s skin brushed his—everything was intensified; everything was unbearably intimate.

There were so many hundred hungry mouths coming at him, fetid and mouldering. His stomach lurched from the stink of it. But he wouldn’t fail; he couldn’t—he needed to finish this, and he would.

He knew now. Somehow, without being told or even shown, he knew what needed to be done. He could see it, as if every memory the Dark Lord had was his own for the taking, if only he’d look—and he did look, and saw firsthand all of those images that Voldemort had pushed into his mind only moments ago. It happened so very quickly, but it felt like eons—one second the last Dementor was rising from Robarb’s lifeless body, and the next, the entirety of the group was upon the three of them, boxing them in like one huge, writhing, howling blanket. He was buried alive.

They slithered over his skin and their fingers curled into his mouth, searching, searching, but they didn’t, or couldn’t, attack him—and they wanted only him. Neither the Dark Lord nor Draco held any appeal, though Draco’s shaking was nearing violent now. Harry screamed, hearing his mother scream, then, superimposed atop it, he saw Draco’s startled face in the alleyway, and knew then that Hermione had been right about the bond: it couldn’t make him love anyone; especially when he already did.

He knew and felt the archaic Middle Magic that Voldemort was using to keep the Dementors’ touches only skin-deep, and knew within seconds how long until it failed. Unbidden, the incantation came to him, in a language that was too old and too broken for his lips and tongue and teeth to recreate, but he let it come anyway. The words came out sharp and grotesque, and as he repeated them each in turn, he felt the restless Old Magic in the air churning expectantly all around, waiting for command. He only need gather it, and the incantation would do the rest.

At once, it happened. It hit him from every direction at once and he was staggered under the overwhelming force of it. He was flung backwards, and stayed upright only by Draco’s quick
reflexes and the utter strength of even the remnants of Voldemort’s magic. The Dementors howled agonizingly. The sound pierced his ears, and he felt tears squeeze from his eyes at the pain. The beasts pushed back and away, but Draco’s shield held them steady for the moment. He pulled in every spare bit of magic he could get, uncaring of his increasing dizziness or the blackened, nebulous edges at the corners of his vision. *Almost,* he thought. They were almost there.

“*Help me,*” he hissed, watching them thrash over them. “*I can finish this if I can just get stabilised.*” Voldemort, already close to swaying on his feet, gave a dry, bitter laugh before pulling himself up to his full height. If he relied overly much on Harry keeping him upright, well—Harry would allow him that last dignity of saying nothing of it. He could give him that much. He *would* give him that much, because the truth was that he had earned it.

“Can you?” he rasped, but his voice was weak. Already, Harry felt him grounding himself and redirecting what surplus magic he could, setting it to circuit between them so it would be there when Harry needed it.

Harry nodded. “Keep them in, not out, Draco,” he said, and for the second time, he knew what it was like to call on Old Magic.

He was drowning in fear; so afraid that he couldn’t even remember what it felt like not to be. Sensing, too, that Draco’s impromptu ward was nearing its end and that they would not have another opportunity, Harry *pushed,* screaming out the broken, ghastly incantation as he released all the agitated Old Magic churning in and around him. It slammed into them, sending four-hundred-plus Dementors reeling. Their moves were almost synchronized—fluid and hive-like.

It wasn’t enough, even with all of this, it wasn’t going to be enough. He’d never seen the destruction of four-hundred Dementors, but he knew it was going to take more than this.

*I know,* he heard Voldemort say. Then, *Do come prepared any day now.*

Harry choked, caught between laughing and crying, but then the Dementors were rising again, and there was nothing else for it. Harry swallowed. Aloud, he said, “You planned this the whole time.” Draco looked at him, his fingers clamped tight around Harry’s own, and Harry saw his confusion and his comprehension, both warring on his face.

“I expected,” the Dark Lord rasped, a moment later, “for you to have figured it out long ago.”

Harry didn’t respond. *I knew,* he thought. *I just didn’t want to see. How many people warned me this was how it would end?*

*Many,* he heard in his mind, and his eyes met Voldemort’s, locking on them desperately. He turned, his eyes searching frantically for Voldemort’s own in the dark, but the Dark Lord looked only ahead, eyes fixed on the monsters before them. His hand within Harry’s trembled, from what, Harry didn’t know. He turned back, watched the magic he was unleashing focus on the Dementors, slowly pushing them together. Closer and closer, they went until they finally, finally, began to merge.

“Dear Dagda,” Draco breathed. “Not even Morgaine...”

The creature that resulted from it was no larger, couldn’t possibly be any more frightening than four-hundred and fifty Dementors had been, but it still seemed it. It was somehow a deeper black, more abyssal and empty. The sound it made when it opened its unnaturally wide, gaping mouth was deafeningly loud, horrifyingly aberrant.

It swooped down on him with unnatural speed, long, white hands reaching out for him. Its fingers
were icy cold and skeletal; the tips pressed into his cheeks and he felt skin break. It screamed at him, and Harry went utterly still, too afraid to move even if it hadn’t been his plan to let this happen. Where the Dementor creature’s eyes should have been were only darkness, but he could feel it looking at him just the same. It was like being studied by Death itself, and then abruptly, it crashed its mouth into his.

Harry gagged, unable to stop the bile that rose in his throat at the smell of decaying flesh, the feel of it pressed to his mouth. The creature’s long tongue slid between his lips, searching and he felt a part of himself dislodge...was aware of it distantly, felt the pain of its loss distantly, but all he could see was the empty abyss of the Dementor’s eyes, and feel the actual, physical agony of his horcrux’s destruction as it passed from his mouth into the creature’s. He felt his own hang on stubbornly, and spared a moment’s hysterical thanks for Snape’s fucking genius with potions.

The creature collapsed into ash.

Mortal once again, he heard. It’s been a long time.

Harry braced himself. If he thought about this any longer, he would be unable to do it.

Almost finished. Remember what it takes to be a good leader, said Voldemort, and don’t forget what it is you’re leading.

“No,” Harry choked out. This couldn’t be happening. It couldn’t end like this—not when everything had started falling into place, not when he finally—

“I have made my choice,” the Dark Lord hissed. “Make yours.” Then, Take it.

Screaming in rage and despair, Harry did. Everything around him became hazy. He pulled and pulled and felt Voldemort feeding him every last bit of magic he could spare, until he could spare no more, and he kept giving it anyway. Everything he’d absorbed until now—all of the free magic in the stones and the earth and the ward Voldemort had dismantled—was nothing compared to what the Dark Lord gave him. All of this magic—where had it come from? But before he’d even fully asked himself the question, he knew the answer, because with Voldemort’s magic, came the rest of his memories; came his knowledge and—Merlin, god, his bonds; finally, here at the end, they were unravelling.

Harry felt them searing into his skin one by one over and over, hundreds and hundreds of times until the searing torture became a slow, steady, thrum of agony. The awareness he’d felt when he first connected with the Dark Lord intensified and cemented in his mind. Everything, he thought, and then, Oh god, I’m becoming him.

You won’t, he heard then, but the voice was already weak, the connection even weaker. And then there was one, final surge, one final agonized scream ripped from him, and the magic slammed into the infant Dementors, even now rising into being. It destroyed every bond they had, every bond the Dark Lord had. Including the one that bound him to the living world.

Even Draco’s steady hold couldn’t keep him upright. Harry collapsed wearily next to the Dark Lord, as limp and boneless as he.

The difference, however, was that Harry was still breathing.

“He killed You-Know-Who,” an Auror said. The comment was picked up and repeated, passed back and over until it became a discordant chant. He killed You-Know-Who, he killed You-Know-Who, he
Harry looked out at the Aurors, gaping at him with undisguised surprise and, deeper, adoration or distrust, and felt sick to his stomach. He looked down, at his feet, where the body of the Dark Lord lay.

*Hero,* they said.

He barely had time to turn away before he sicked up all over the ground. A moment later, Draco was wrapping his arms around him and apparating them away. Harry leaned back into it, completely undone.

Chapter End Notes

2. Centum animus renovare – This is the renewal spell for the Hecatomb Ward. I’m afraid I had to use Google Translate here. It may or may not say something to the effect of “renew the hundred lives”. Corrections welcome here.

Comments, concrit, and kudos appreciated! ♥
In which there is aftermath, and love, and the end.

White Flag

Chapter by faire_weather

Chapter Summary

In which there is aftermath, and love, and the end.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**White Flag (n):** 1. an internationally recognized protective sign of truce or ceasefire, and request for negotiation. 2. used to symbolize surrender.

Everything hurt. Everything. His body ached with exhaustion and exertion, and his heart ached with a loss he wasn’t sure how to define. “He’s dead,” he said hollowly.

“Yes,” said Draco. They were in a luxuriously decorated bedroom suite, dark except for the starlight filtering in through leaded-glass windows. Draco’s bedroom, Harry knew at once. He could feel it.

“It was our bond,” Harry said. “It wasn’t stupid at all. It saved us, didn’t it?”

Draco stepped away from him and walked to the window, but when he looked out of it, his eyes were unfocused. He didn’t answer.

Harry pulled himself up from a chair he didn’t remember sitting in, and walked over to him. “I was the only one compatible enough with Voldemort to start the ritual, and when he was too weak to continue, you were the only one compatible enough with me.”

Draco shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said.

“I do,” Harry said firmly. Tentatively, he reached out and pressed his fingertips against Draco’s back, let them run softly down it. “Please,” he said. “I’m sorry, I—” He shook his head slowly, unsure of what he wanted to say. Draco turned to him, hair faintly illuminated by the light outside. It must be going on four in the morning by now. The sun would be coming up shortly—and then he would have an entirely new horror to face: the rest of the wizarding world.

“I didn’t think he would die,” he finally said.

“Didn’t you?” said Draco, but the question was hollow.

Harry responded anyway, if only to keep him talking. “Maybe I just didn’t want him to die. I...he was becoming a good person, wasn’t he?”

“No,” said Draco, and his voice was so low and steady, so earnest, that Harry knew right away that Draco was trying to brace him for a hard fall. “He wasn’t, Harry. He cared for no one except you, and I am still not sure if it was legitimate concern for your wellbeing or recognising that you could be the tool to realise his objectives.”
Harry looked away this time. “I think you’re wrong,” he said after a moment. “He was becoming more human all the time. Didn’t you notice? He’d even started to look human again.”

Draco shrugged. “Being human at all doesn’t mean you’re a good one. It was only a side effect of losing his horcruxes. In the moment you took his bonds, he—”

“What?” Harry interrupted.

Draco gave him a funny look. “Don’t you even know what the incantation you were repeating meant?” Harry shook his head, and Draco’s eyebrows went skyward. “I’ve never seen that ritual before,” he said slowly, “but my ancestors were necromancers and I’ve heard some of those words in other rituals. You were using the bonds of a willing servant to destroy the bonds of an enemy. He sacrificed them so that you could use them to greater purpose. He made himself your servant.”

Harry felt lightheaded. This was all too much. Twenty minutes ago, Voldemort had been alive, and now Draco was telling him—

Abruptly he ripped off his cloak and shoved his sleeve up, looking for a Dark Mark that would signal his fear was a reality. His skin was as plain and unmarked as before.

“It won’t be there,” Draco said softly. Harry glanced up at him, and Draco’s fingers reached out and touched his chest above his heart. “It’ll be here. A master carries his servant’s needs on his heart.”


Draco’s mouth lifted at the edge, almost shyly. “Our stupid bond saved you again,” he said. “A wizard can only have one bond based on love. You already had mine. The other was destroyed, reduced to its magical energy and expended with the destruction of the Dementor bonds.”

Overwhelmed, Harry moved away, walked blindly towards the mammoth, uncanopied bed between the two large windows. He slumped gracelessly onto it, rubbing his hands over his face. “I,” he began, and paused. “I have been so stupid,” he finally said, and looked up through his fingers at Draco, who was looking back down at him with the strangest mix of disquiet and compassion he’d ever seen.

“You didn’t know,” said Draco. You never do, Harry could almost hear it said.

“But I need to know,” Harry said. “He’s—not here anymore, and I have to, I have to finish what he started. How am I going to do something as impossible as keeping magic from dying out if I don’t even know how magic works?”

Draco hesitated, mouth parted as if to speak, but saying nothing. A moment later, he moved from the window to the bed and sat down beside Harry. “You are not—as studious, perhaps, as the Dark Lord, but even he had help.”

“Calixta,” Harry murmured.

Draco nodded, “And after her, Edward Yaxley. The last of a very long, very pure line. He would have had a trove of knowledge and understanding of minutia that the Dark Lord could have used.”

And I have you, Harry knew, though it was unsaid. “I’m sorry,” he said again, reaching out to seize Draco’s robes. He clutched at him desperately, suddenly aware of just how miserable he’d been to him over the past months. He felt none of that anger, that annoyance he’d felt before. It was gone, like the Dark Lord—and suddenly, he realised the full extent Voldemort’s emotions had had on him:
he saw Draco now and he felt only relief, desire...love. Desperation and regret for his actions, but no anger—no irritation.

“I know,” Draco said, before he could start trying to explain himself. He tapped his head. “I know,” he said again. “I could feel it.”

“When Nagini...” Harry started, and then shook his head as if to clear it. Even remembering it made him ache in phantom pain. It had been so very agonising. “Everything was so much clearer afterwards. She was gone, and the only thing left was what was in me, and I could think again because he could think again.” With every successful horcrux destroyed, Harry had felt more and more ill-at-ease until the unbearable loss of Nagini and then...nothing. Normality.

But unsaid was the ache where he had been. Harry felt its loss like a bad tooth; he’d grown so accustomed to it being there that he didn’t know any different until it was suddenly gone and the empty space it left was as wide as a chasm, and just as echoing. How did other people fill that space?

“With things they love,” Draco said, quietly, but Harry knew he’d not projected that thought. He looked up, amazed at how Draco had learned to read into his emotions, see past the vagaries that the bond sent out and determine the thoughts that caused them. “Or people, perhaps.”

“I am utterly overwhelmed by the fact that you are still here,” Harry said. “Anyone else would have left me months ago.”

“Anyone else wouldn’t have known you were worth the wait,” Draco said smugly. He pressed his hand against Harry’s chest until he fell back against the bed and then slid in beside him. “Come on, sleep now. The battle starts over again in the morning, and you must be ready.”

The morning of the Vernal Equinox dawned slowly. For the first time in months, Harry woke up and didn’t feel crushed by dread or some other nameless desperate feeling. He stretched, waking slowly. Draco’s bed was both unfamiliar and oddly familiar, in that he could smell Draco in it, could feel his body heat pressing against his side. He blinked his eyes open, and was immediately presented with a view of Blodwynn Bludd leering back at him from his poster on the opposite wall.

Harry glared at Blodwynn until, with an amused lift of his eyebrow, he sauntered out of the poster and apparently into a portrait in the hallway, where Harry could hear him serenading a Malfoy ancestress, who was attempting not to be charmed. Draco stirred against him, his pointy chin digging into Harry’s shoulder in a way that, logically, should be painful, but that Harry found he enjoyed very much. “Wanted to be a vampire since I first read mum’s Sherclot Grumes detective books,” he mumbled into Harry’s clavicle. “Tried bribing one into turning me when I was ten, but fortunately, I didn’t have the requisite referrals or Ministry paperwork and the vampire said no. Can you imagine being stuck at ten for your entire immortal life?”

Harry could not. At ten, he was still at the Dursleys’. At ten, there was no magic. Ten was a miserable age to be. “So that’s what all the blood-flavoured lollies are about,” he said instead.

Draco hummed in acknowledgement. “I’ve come to actually like them,” he said. “It’s an acquired taste.”

“I should hope so,” Harry said.

Draco lifted himself up and leaned over Harry, his blond hair falling around his face in a very fetching manner, in Harry’s opinion. “Pansy’s mum’s our solicitor. Father and she will have been working through the night to prepare our position. She’ll have statements ready for you.”
“Everyone seems to be doing my jobs for me,” Harry said.

Draco shrugged, an awkward movement in his position. “You can’t be an expert in everything, and Aunt Eloise is frighteningly good. Believe me, after the PR nightmare that last night was, you’ll want her on your side. Did I imagine Longbottom there?”

Harry groaned. “No,” he said. “God, Merlin. There’s no way I can pretend ignorance now. They saw me helping Voldemort.”

“But he’s dead now,” Draco reminded him, and Harry winced. Inside, it still hurt, and he suspected it was going to start hurting a lot more once the shock wore off and the reality of it settled in. “And it was by your hand. We can work with that.”

Harry supposed that was true. He sighed, they might as well get it over with...or at least get started. He pushed himself up on his elbows, but Draco didn’t move away. Harry lifted his eyebrow questioningly.

“It’s been a long time,” Draco said, voice soft. Their noses were almost touching. It would be so easy to lift his chin up and press their mouths together, for Draco to dip his head down and run his tongue over Harry’s lips. “I missed touching you.”

Harry did then, no longer able to hold himself back, and somewhat astonished, he wondered how he’d done so for the better part of two months. Even before he’d made that truly awful remark about their bond, things had been—tense, disquieted, between them. Draco’s lips were just as soft and delicate as he remembered them. He moved his weight to his left arm and trailed the fingers of his other hand over Harry’s robes—and had he really been so tired that he fell asleep without taking them off?

He pulled back to find that the bronze buttons of his coat were undone and Draco’s tapered fingers were ghosting over the thin fabric of his shirt. Harry stopped him to drag the tip of his tongue against Draco’s jaw line, let his teeth scrap lightly against his chin, and move back to his mouth, already red and wet from kissing.

He ran his hands up Draco’s chest to his shoulders, slid his fingers beneath the opening of Draco’s robes and pushed them down until Draco was forced to adjust his position to slip out of them. They landed somewhere against the far wall, but Harry paid no mind; it had been such a very long time, and he hadn’t realised how much he missed the feel of Draco’s body against his until he was confronted with it once again. He surged upwards, his hands steadying Draco’s waist as he sat them up. Draco’s skin was hot and smooth beneath his fingers, his ribs too prominent, his hipbones and elbows sharp like the rest of him. Draco’s legs wrapped around his waist and he settled against Harry, dipping his head to kiss him again even as his fingers worked their way through his dark hair.

Harry moaned at the feeling, head tilted back of its own accord, and Draco moved in to the hollow space left behind to kiss his way down his jaw and neck. When Draco touched him, it was almost like that feeling of wild magic that had been so overwhelming last night, almost too much to bear. His skin was hypersensitive then, and more so now—heavier now, freer, without that ever-present dread.

Before he realised what was happening, Draco had slid down his body to stand at the foot of the bed, unbuttoned Harry’s trousers. His fingers hooked into the hem, and he pulled Harry’s trousers and pants down in one go. Harry’s knees fell open and he stared unashamedly as Draco undid the clasps of his own trousers and let them fall to the floor.

Then Draco crawled back on the bed, hands and knees sliding over the bed sheets. He bent over
Harry’s cock, already half-hard, and ran his tongue up from root to tip. Harry fell back on his elbows, head hanging back as he clenched his fingers against the sheets. How had he gone without this? Had he even thought about it? No—seldom. That was the effect of his connection to Voldemort. It had nearly destroyed everything, nearly—

“On me,” Draco said softly. His grey eyes were staring up at Harry, watching his face. “Focus on me,” he said. “You gave him long enough.” His mouth dipped down again, swollen red lips parting to wrap around his cock and slide down the length of it.

“Yes,” Harry agreed breathlessly. “Just you, oh god.” Draco’s mouth was better than he remembered it. How was it even possible to feel this good? It wasn’t enough, though; he needed more, needed to feel even closer to Draco, to make sure he was really there...that Harry was really there. After last night, he wasn’t sure of anything. “Draco, please,” he said.

Draco’s mouth slid back up his cock one last time and came off with an obscene smacking sound. He crawled his way up Harry’s body, and Harry shuddered at the sight. When Draco crushed their mouths together, he could taste himself on his tongue and lips and it made him groan, arch his back to press their bodies closer.

Draco’s knee slid between Harry’s thighs and he let them fall open, shamelessly rutting against Draco’s thigh. He pulled away from Harry’s mouth enough to breathe out a charm, and then he was rebalancing on his right forearm, as his left hand reached between them. The spell made his fingers warm and slick and when they grazed along the head of Harry’s cock, he jumped in startlement. His fingers barely paused there before sliding lower, and then Harry felt him circling his entrance.

“Yes, yes,” he panted. “Do it.”

“I will,” Draco smirked, and then his finger dipped in and Harry gasped. His head fell back against the pillow and he breathed heavily, trying to relax enough for Draco’s second finger to push in. Draco worked him open slowly, scissoring his fingers open and closed until Harry felt open himself.

“Now,” Harry said. “I’m ready.”

Draco’s fingers slid out of him, brushing tantalisingly over his prostate as they did. Harry felt his cock pressing against his entrance, the blunt head of it hot and hard, and then he was sliding in, slowly—too slowly. Harry arched upwards, seeking more, even through the burn of being stretched so much. Above, him, Draco’s face was intense; his eyes were closed, pale lashes brushing against equally pale cheeks, and his pink mouth was parted, breath filtering steadily in and out as he adjusted to the sensation of being inside Harry again after so long.

Slowly, he began to move. Draco’s belly was slick with perspiration, and when Draco leaned down to kiss Harry again, it slid along the slick shaft of Harry’s prick, sending sparks of pleasure throughout Harry’s entire body.

“Thought about this every day,” Draco said against his mouth. “Thought about you doing it to me.”

Harry gasped, fingers clutching desperately at Draco’s slender sides, one running down to grab his arse and pull him in deeper. His knees slid up and he wrapped a leg around Draco’s back, determined to hold him there, in him, for as long as he could. “I’m sorry,” he said again, barely able to speak through heaving breaths. “I won’t...not again. I won’t. I promise.”

“I know,” Draco said. He adjusted his angle and *Merlin, there.* Harry moaned, unable to hold himself back and uncaring if the entire house heard them. “Fuck, *Harry,*” he panted.
At some point, he lost the ability to form coherent words, and he was left stuck in his own mind, which, for the first time since last night, was not focused on loss, but now had room only for Draco, only for the flush of his cheeks and the quiet, rhythmic sound of his breathing. It drowned out everything else. Harry saw him, felt the slick slide of sweaty skin along the inside of his thigh as it wrapped around Draco’s back, the hot, heavy heat of his cock sliding in and out of him, brushing against his prostate with every thrust. His vision narrowed to the fall of Draco’s hair, how it stuck against his face; his grey eyes, blown wide and black with arousal—

All too soon, the steady climb of pleasure became too much. His skin was charged, every nerve ending firing and the barest touch of Draco’s stomach against the head of his cock was an overload of sensation.

“Close?” Draco asked him. Harry nodded, unable to speak. He threw his head back, eyes shut tight and fingers clutching at Draco’s shoulders. “Good,” Draco said, and at once, increased his pace, sliding in and out in quick, hard thrusts until Harry didn’t think he’d last another second, but then his fingers wrapped around the base of Harry’s cock and tightened. The urgent sensation faded, but barely. “Not yet,” Draco said, fingers still wrapped around him. “I’ve put you first all year. Now you’ll put me first.”

“Oh, god.” Harry panted. Draco was driving into him relentlessly, over and over and god, it felt so good, but Draco’s fingers denied him release. “Please, please, please,” Harry said through his teeth. He was going to die if Draco didn’t let him come.

“Already begging?” Draco said between panted breaths.

“Yes,” Harry said, uncaring of how desperate he sounded. “God, please come.” *So I can, too.*

Draco made a strangled sound in the back of his throat, and his rhythm faltered. He recovered quickly, and his hand loosened, began to pump Harry in time with his quick thrusts. “God, oh god, Draco, yes,” Harry cried. He was *right there,* and then Draco made a particularly amazing movement, and Harry arched, coming violently into the tight space between their bellies, feeling Draco still inside him shuddering and trembling as he came.

They stayed like that for long moments, struggling to regain their breathing and let their heartbeats settle. Draco flopped over onto the bed next to him, eyes fluttering closed. “Morning,” he said.

Harry laughed, and uncaring of the mess, rolled on top of Draco and kissed him, lips sliding easily together, tongues familiar and lovely against one another. Draco’s arms came around him and held him there with his hot, slick fingers and the desperation of his mouth. Harry knew the feeling even without their bond. He’d almost lost this, he thought. Almost—but not quite. He did his best to pour everything he had into this one kiss, and knew that it was both enough and not nearly enough, but it was all he could offer right now, and so he gave it just the same. They kissed slowly for many, many minutes, until the house-elf came to remind them of breakfast, and when they parted, Harry felt his Occlumency walls sliding lower until he knew that Draco could read his every emotion, and—he didn’t care.

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Lucius Malfoy reigned from the head of the table with a cup of tea, a plate of toast and jam, and reading glasses perched upon his nose. The *Daily Prophet* was spread before him, and Harry could see even from this distance that the frantically moving text and photos on the front page were proclaiming the events of the night before. He glanced over the top of his glasses as they entered, and pushed his tea aside to watch their slow approach to that end of the table.

Draco slid easily into a chair across from his mother, an action born of years and years of ease and
weekend-habit, already ordering a full English from the house-elf that appeared. Harry sat next to him more hesitantly.

“Good morning,” Narcissa said. She nursed a steaming cup of tea, her eyes tired but alive.

“Hi,” Harry said and when the house-elf also brought him a full breakfast as well, he gratefully tucked in.

“A PR nightmare,” Lucius said, his voice somehow more intimate and gravelly in its early-morning timbre. “Your Gryffindors were seen there. ‘Students will be making no statements, Headmistress Minerva McGonagall said via floo’,” he quoted.

“I think it’ll be fine if I can talk to them first.”

Lucius pulled his reading glasses off and set them aside. “And will you be able to?” he asked, not unkindly, but his ever-present shrewdness was evidenced in his voice. “Do you think it safe to return to Hogwarts after being recognised?”

Harry sipped his tea while he considered it. It was, indeed, a very good question. “I don’t know if it’s safe,” he said finally, “but I know that it’s necessary.”

Lucius leant back in his chair, studying him intently. His eyes slid to Draco. “And you, Draco?”

“Wherever Harry goes is still likely the safest place to be,” he said. “What about Mum’s campaign?”

“What campaign?” she asked innocently. “The post is currently uncontested. Both the Minister and the Head of Aurors were lost last night; during such eventualities, the Wizengamot assumes control until a vote can be taken on successor. And who would want such a dangerous job?”

“Amelia Bones,” Draco offered.

“Did anyone see you last night, though?” asked Harry. “Or Mr Malfoy?”

“All three of us were suitably disguised, and Draco and I were seen in London last night. Lucius was prominently present at his club for at least part of the evening, until around curfew when he returned home like a good, law-abiding citizen.”

“But then there’s me,” said Harry. “And I was definitely recognised.” He still felt panic at being so outed. There was no turning back now. “And I’ve been linked to Draco for months.”

“Good of you to concern yourself, but I believe it will, ultimately, be unnecessary,” said Narcissa.

Lucius added, “Our solicitor, Eloise Parkinson, believes that this will actually play to our advantage, and I’m inclined to agree. The Dark Lord did die last night, and by all accounts, it looked as though you had at least some part in it. We will use that to our advantage, intimating that you subverted his ranks on Dumbledore’s orders, with the help of Severus Snape, and led him to believe you were switching sides, only to betray him for the good of the wizarding world, at the very last minute.”

Harry grimaced at that but said nothing. Logically, realistically, it was probably the best shot he had at fixing this. “And it doesn’t hurt that I sent the Dementors down with him,” he muttered.

“Not at all,” Lucius said, and he was smirking now. “I would say, Mr Black,” he said, “that you are actually in a very good position indeed, if we play this right.”

“How do you mean?” said Harry.
In answer, Lucius rolled up his sleeve and displayed his arm. Staring back at Harry was not the Dark Mark, but something altogether different—he leaned in for a closer look. It was vibrant gold and red and it seemed to flicker in and out, both similar to and different from the serpentine writhing of the Dark Mark.

“A phoenix,” he said. So that’s what the mark on his chest would look like...he hadn’t even thought to look earlier because—well.

“Indeed,” said Lucius. “Well known to be the familiar of Albus Dumbledore. Our Dark Marks were replaced when you severed the Dark Lord’s bond with each of us. Not...a pleasant experience. Surely you felt it?”

“I...” Harry said hesitantly. “Perhaps so. The entire ordeal was...painful. I’m not sure I would have been able to differentiate one agony from another,” he said wryly.

“Mm,” Lucius said. He leaned back again, fixing his sleeve with detached elegance. “I need not tell you that I am troubled by the detail of recently becoming your vassal. You will forgive me for saying so, but you are young and untried, and you have been forced into this position with, shall I say, at best, erratic education.”

Harry’s lifted brows said all he needed to about his opinion on whether or not he’d forgive him for saying so, so he refrained from verbal comment on that matter. Instead, he focused on the true matter, and replied, “Referring to Voldemort’s little lessons for me, you mean.”

“Yes,” Lucius agreed. “I should like to make you a proposition.”

“Really, Father,” Draco said, rolling his eyes over his teacup. “Must you be so dramatic?”

“One does wonder,” Narcissa said, “how you manage to restrain yourself at all, given your lineage, Draco.”

“Mother...” Draco said, a bit dramatically in Harry’s opinion. His lips quirked.

Nevertheless, Lucius relented with the pretension. “As you wish, son. Harry—may I call you Harry?” Harry nodded; there was no point in saying no, after all. Lucius would likely do it anyway, just to annoy him. “I will be frank with you: I did not agree to serve you, and I have quite had my fill of having a master at all. I will cut off my own arm before I respond to a summons from a seventeen-year-old boy. Let me tell you what I intend to do, beginning this weekend: I will be exhausting every resource available to me in a quest to sever the magic that now binds me to you. It is quite possible, even likely, that whatever recourse I find will ultimately create a great deal of magical backlash, and could, in theory, destroy not only your magical core, but those of others with the Mark. I’m sure you would rather avoid that.”

“Yes,” Harry said immediately, even as his fingers clenched angrily around his silverware. “I would.”

“I thought as much,” said Lucius. He took a leisurely sip of his tea and Draco rolled his eyes again, but neither he nor Narcissa bothered to interfere. Indeed, they seemed amused. “Therefore, we return to my proposition.”

“Please enlighten me,” Harry said, with a face as straight as possible. “I tremble in anticipation.”

Draco snorted.

“As you should,” Lucius murmured. “Very well—here are my terms: I will agree to aid—not serve—you for the duration of one year and one day, while you establish yourself as leader in the
continuing war to bring stability, new blood, peace, et cetera to the wizarding world. I will provide you with pureblood etiquette instruction, advanced magic instruction—both Old and New, guide you through your first year of political manoeuvring—beginning today, and provide you with a reasonable amount of funding for the duration of the year.”

“And in exchange?” Harry asked.

“One year,” said Lucius. “At the end of that year, you will personally remove my Mark and I will owe you nothing further. In addition, you will never Mark, or attempt to Mark, my wife or my son.”

Harry leaned back. “That’s it?” he asked.

Lucius pursed his lips, seemingly at a loss for words. He nodded. At this, Narcissa’s smirk turned into a quiet chuckle, and Draco grinned unashamedly at his father. “Really, Father,” Draco said again. He was shaking his head, lips trembling as he attempted to hold back from laughing.

“I have to agree with Draco,” Harry said. “Really, Lucius—may I call you Lucius?” he asked, smirking. Lucius glared at him, but did not say no. “I would have taken it off today, had you only asked,” Harry said. “But since you’re offering, I believe I’ll accept the help, especially the political guidance. I’m rubbish at that sort of thing.”

“Black,” Lucius growled. “Remove it.”

Harry smiled at him. “Will you still help me politically?”

Lucius waved his hand angrily about, as if dismissing the thought as unimportant. “I foresee that it will be in my best interest to do so anyway,” he said, “given your relationship with my heir.”

“Son,” Draco corrected. “I’m your son.”

“Yes, well,” said Lucius. He held his arm out. “Remove it.”

Harry shook his head. “I want it in writing. You’ll help me with the politics and public relations for one year anyway, even if I remove it today.” Narcissa snapped her fingers and a house-elf appeared with a scroll atop a silver platter. She handed it to Lucius without even lifting her eyes from the society pages.

“I had a separate contract drawn up in anticipation of this very event,” she said. He plucked it from her and, settling his reading glasses back on his nose, minutely scanned the entirety of it. When he was done, he signed it with a flourish and passed it to Harry, who scanned it, then handed it to Draco to double-check before he was willing to sign himself.

“It’s fine,” Draco declared, handing it back. “No hidden clauses.”

Harry signed it and tucked it away in his robes. Imperiously, Lucius held his arm out once again. The red-gold phoenix flickered like flames on his forearm, strangely beautiful, but wholly out-of-place on Lucius’s pale skin. Harry held the man’s arm between his hands, studying the way the tattoo moved, a little awed by it. It was so much more vibrant than the Dark Mark—where the Dark Mark had looked like death, this looked like life. He did not fail to recognise the symbolism.

He’d never seen a Dark Mark being branded into someone’s skin, nor had he seen one removed, but somehow—he knew. The knowledge wasn’t conspicuous; it settled in the back of his mind and, vaguely, he’d been aware of its presence since the night before, but it hadn’t come forward until he actually needed it. Another strange piece of magic that Voldemort had committed just before dying, and Harry had no idea how—no...that wasn’t right. As soon as he thought it, he did know—saw the
smudged antique pages of Ravenclaw’s diary, saw the Dark Lord meticulously translating archaic script, felt Voldemort’s smugness and astonishment when he realised how perfect this solution would be, an end to his wretched bond and a guarantee of his life’s work continuing, all in one great act. The knowledge of it came as if from a pensieve, strangely devoid of emotion though Harry felt it in himself—horror, mostly, at how detached the Dark Lord was, even in regards to the value of his own life. It was so strange, given the great lengths Voldemort had once gone through to ensure his immortality.

But then there had been the great lengths he’d gone through to ensure his complete and permanent death. It was insane.

Harry took a moment to steady himself, suddenly overwhelmed by a crushing sense of wonder at the power and madness required of Voldemort to go to the great, incredible lengths he went to in just a few short weeks’ worth of preparation.

"Might hurt a bit," he warned him. Lucius only raised his eyebrows. The message was clear: no amount of pain was unbearable if it meant re-establishing his own agency.

Closing his eyes, Harry reached for that peculiar new knowledge lurking just beyond recognition. It came to him easily now, and he saw the steps—not only saw them, but understood them. He touched his fingers to the wavering warmth of Lucius's skin and let it connect with his own. It was unusual; feeling both familiar and unknown all at once. It was his magic binding Lucius...but then, it wasn't. There was some of the Dark Lord in there, too, and it created a singularly puzzling fusion of the two—deathly and lively at once.

Just that small hint of Voldemort made his chest constrict guiltily. He should not be mourning that hateful, cruel man. He should not care at all, but he did—and the feel of Voldemort's magic once again was an unholy comfort. He grasped it, and began to pull. Threads held fast, rooted deep in every part of Lucius, flowing throughout his body like a second vascular system. He tugged and tugged, and one by one, the binding veins of the Mark's magic loosed.

Distantly, he heard the shocked, bitten-off cry of pain Lucius was obstinately trying not to make. It filtered into the outer edges of his brain, a vague register of notice, but he spared it no real attention. He was overwhelmed by the dichotomy of the magic, how it was at once hideous and exquisite. The bright threads of magic unravelled slowly, and even more slowly, they retracted, until there was no reach left in the Mark; it sat restlessly atop Lucius's skin.

He pulled back for a moment, surprised to find his breath quick and unsteady. Lucius' face had broken out in a fine sheen; his cheeks were flushed, and his bottom lip looked as if it had recently been bitten hard. Draco had pushed his chair back from the table to give them more space as they leaned across, and even he looked discomfited.

"Almost done," said Harry. "Do you need a break?"

Lucius shook his head, tense. Nodding, Harry bent back to his task, letting his eyes slip closed once more. He slid his thumbs over the tattoo, feeling the definition of the edges in his mind, though there was no raised area or other physical distinction on his arm.

Here, he knew, there was choice: the magic sat boundless in the Mark, belonging to neither Harry nor Lucius, though it held imprints of both of them and Voldemort in it. He could destroy the magic, release it back into the atmosphere and let the earth do with it what it willed—perhaps to become the magical core of some new child, or maybe not, just a potential that might never be realised. Or, he could take it back. He had the knowledge to do that.
But did he need the magic? Last night, he'd already absorbed some of Voldemort's during the ritual; the backlash had surged through their conduit and stopped within him, unable to leave again once the connection was destroyed. Because of their affinity, it had stayed, settled, learned to mix with Harry’s own magic like Type-O blood. And that magic had brought with it the almost muscle-memory of knowledge that Voldemort owned, a ghostly half-remembered memory of everything he’d ever learned to do.

He was strong before that, though nothing special, not like Voldemort himself or Albus Dumbledore. The surge had given him more, overfilled him with it, and he was still tired from his body trying to learn to accept the overflow. This was just a small bit compared to last night, but it was more power just the same. So—did he need it?

No, he decided. He didn’t. But—but failing to absorb it would send the signal to Lucius that he was too noble to be an effective leader; would tell Lucius that Harry was vulnerable, could be usurped. The last thing he needed was Lucius bloody Malfoy fighting for dominance with him...because given the chance, Lucius would. Of that, Harry had no doubt.

In the end, he decided to split it. He gathered up all of the magic in the Mark and divided it into thirds, taking two for himself, and pushing one-third back into Lucius, free and clear of obligation. At last, he willed the destruction of the tattoo itself, and sat back, surveying the clear skin of Lucius' forearm. It had not seen the light of day for at least twenty-five years. Perhaps longer.

"You did not keep all of it," Lucius said at once.

"No," Harry agreed.

And there it was: understanding, finally. They had it; Lucius recognised the gift he'd been given, but also he recognised the statement that had come with it: 'I'm still stronger,' it said. 'I'm not as naive as you think. Do not try to fight me.'

Lucius nodded once, and a thousand words passed between them in that one gesture. "As you wish," said Lucius.

The receiving room floo chimed and they all turned at the appearance of the house-elf, announcing Eloise Parkinson. Harry pushed his breakfast plate away, no longer hungry. The Dementors might be gone, but it wasn’t over yet.

Seeing Pansy’s mum out of Death Eater robes was strange. Where Pansy was petite and light-eyed, she was as tall and slender as Narcissa Malfoy, with dark, cunning eyes. But she had the same straight dark hair, and small nose, and everything about her exhibited shrewdness. She carried a cognac-coloured leather attaché that matched her no doubt outrageously expensive cognac-coloured leather pumps, and had a gold quill tucked behind her ear. Harry was not sure if it was decorative or practical.

“I’ve scheduled a press conference for one hour from now,” she said without preamble, laying out stacks of papers and files upon the Malfoys’ breakfast table without so much as a by-your-leave. “Mr Black, we will be emphasising the fact that you killed the Dark Lord—please refer to him as You-Know-Who during the conference—and blithely ignoring the fact that it was not intentional. The purpose of today is damage control.

“The situation is tenuous—the majority of the wizarding world did not know of the Dark Lord’s destruction until they opened their Prophets this morning, and so they’ve not yet had time to recognise what it might’ve meant that you were there with him. We will head this off at the pass, so
to speak. Do you follow?"

Harry nodded.

“Good,” she said. “We foresee a number of obstacles—four of them Hogwarts students, or should I say three and one-half Hogwarts students? Then there’s the Minister and the Head of Aurors; you don’t do anything by halves, do you? Not to mention a dozen dead Aurors—seven Kissed, but five dead by our hand, which is trickier, but workable. And then there’s you; what an interesting angle you present, Mr Black. By my own account, you did destroy the Dark Lord, didn’t you? And I see that you knew that would be the price of that ritual, but perhaps you did not realise it until the very end?”

“No,” Harry admitted. “I didn’t. I had to make a choice.”

“So you did,” she said, “and I daresay you made it well. The hardest choice is often the right one. Well, then—we will run with the angle Lucius and I prepared last night: I’m given to understand that the late Albus Dumbledore tasked you with something that would bring down the Dark Lord?”

“Horcruxes,” Harry admitted, quickly becoming overwhelmed by the whirlwind that was Mrs Parkinson. “He wanted me to find them and destroy them.”

“Mm,” she said. “And did he say that he suspected any might be in the Dark Lord’s possession?”

“Nagini,” Harry said.

“Ah, there we go!” She turned to the elder Malfoys, smiling widely. “It all falls so easily into place. It was like our Master planned it himself.”

“Increasingly likely,” Harry muttered, and received several perceptive looks in return.

“Albus Dumbledore wanted you to do everything you had to do to destroy the Dark Lord, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” said Harry, without hesitation. “Except lose myself. It’s our choices that make us who we are, he said. He wanted me to make the choice to destroy Voldemort—” She and Lucius flinched, but it seemed more muscle memory than any real pain, especially in Lucius’s case, caused by the taboo—“but not to lose myself along the way.”


Parkinson waved that away. “Still workable,” she said. “Perhaps even more so. Dumbledore knew that you would need to make hard choices, and also that you would need to get close to Nagini. There was really only one safe way to do that.” She shrugged. “Severus Snape was in a position to bring you aboard, though it was a delicate, painful process for all involved. It cemented his role as spy for the Order and it lulled the Dark Lord into a false sense of security, which is why attacks over the past year dropped off considerably. With you already in his clutches, the Dark Lord began focusing on something even more sinister and evil: breeding more and more new Dementors, until there was no safe place left for anyone to run. That was your moment of action; instead of letting him complete the ritual, you, with your friend Granger’s help, devised a counter-spell that would cause the ritual to backlash, killing the Dark Lord. Simple!”

“Right,” Harry said slowly. He felt unaccountably guilty for even considering this story. That hadn’t been the Dark Lord at all—he hadn’t been sinister or evil or...

But he had, Harry had to remind himself. He’d been all of those things and more. Do not mourn him,
Harry told himself firmly. *The world’s better off without him.*

He cleared his throat. “Got it,” he said, but desperately hoped they’d have time to run through it a couple times anyway.

“Fantastic,” she said. “Now go floo your parents and let them know you’re still alive and that they can meet you in Diagon Alley at eleven. Lucius spoke to your mother by floo shortly after you and Draco came here, but I’m sure a night to think about it all hasn’t made her any less frantic. We’ll do a mock run when you come back.”

Harry shut himself in the Malfoys’ receiving room and grabbed a pinch of powder from a floo powder dish that was probably as old as the Malfoy line itself. He tossed it in the grate and the smouldering flames burst high in the hearth. “River House, Edinburgh,” he said, and watched as the network connected them, bypassing the house wards with only the presence of his blood.

It was answered immediately. “Harry,” his mother said. Even through the flames, he could see the heavy, purple circles beneath her eyes. “Thank God. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” he said. “Did you stay there last night?”

“Yes, of course,” she said. She was pushed to the side and his father’s face joined hers in the floo.

“Are you all right?” he said.

“He’s fine,” said his mother.

“I’m fine,” he agreed. “Are you? Is everyone?” They shared a look.

“Remus was hit with something, we don’t know what,” said Sirius. “Regulus took him to an underground Healer...couldn’t risk St Mungo’s right now.”

“Is he okay?” Harry asked. Sirius shrugged, but the worried look on his face said everything that needed to be said. “I’m sure he will be,” said Harry after a moment. Sirius nodded.

“Your Defence teacher was killed,” his mother continued. Harry’s eyes slid closed. Professor Sinclair. He’d *liked* her. She’d been a good Defence teacher. Was the curse still on the post or had she just been unlucky? “Xavier Smith’s ribs were all snapped from some Auror spell, and he’s got a fractured lung—will probably be okay. George Goyle and Walden McNair were Kissed. Bastien Zabini killed by Auror fire. There were others, but I didn’t know them. Regulus is—fine. As fine as can be expected, given Remus. Severus is...” she trailed off.

“How is he?” Harry asked, knowing her hesitation. She assumed he wouldn’t care.

“Fine,” she said after a pause. “He was port-keyed to a holding cell, but Sirius has retained the Black’s solicitor for him, and we’re hopeful that the spy story will hold up a second time around.”

“It will,” Harry said. “My story depends on him being one. If...if it goes to plan, then he’ll be out.”

She gave him a small smile.

“Hermione is here,” Sirius added. “Her Nott, too. They were both hit with several Stunners, at once, but through the Hecatomb Ward, so they were diluted. They should wake up this evening.”

“What about her parents?” asked Harry.

“What do you mean?” said Sirius.
“She was going to try giving them magical cores last night, before...well. They were at Voldemort’s.”

Lily and Sirius looked at each other again. It was unnerving. Had they done this when they were in school together?

“Regulus said the place is locked up tighter than a nun’s knickers,” Sirius said. “He and several others tried to get in early this morning, looking for special healing potions. It must have closed up when You-Know-Who died.”

“They can’t be trapped in there,” Harry said frantically. “Fuck. How are we going to get them out?’”

Sirius shrugged, but his mother looked thoughtful. “Did he not make you his heir?” she said. “It may only open for you.”

As soon as she said it, Harry knew it was true. A ghost-memory fluttered just out of reach, and he knew that this, too, had been planned. “All right,” he said finally. “I’ll check, but it’ll have to be later. Mrs Parkinson’s scheduled a press conference for eleven, in Diagon Alley. Damage control, she said.”

“Good idea,” said Sirius. He reached behind him and then tossed a bag through the flames. “Here—your mum packed up a change of robes for you. I expect she saw this coming.” His mother shrugged, pointedly not denying anything.

“Thanks,” said Harry. “I have to go. See you there.” He pulled back from the gate, letting the flames die back down with the closure of the connections. He stood, leaning his forehead against the tall mantle above the hearth. In his head, he ran over everything he must do today. It would start with the press conference, but it wouldn’t end there. He could do this. He would get through this day. Resolved, he straightened, and headed back into the Malfoys’ breakfast room to finalise their battle plan.

Legs shaking, Harry descended the steps of the platform, and back into the safety of the hired wizard-guards who stood between him and the crowd. He was not sure how the conference had gone—it was hard to tell. There was one thing for sure, though: his actions had not escaped the Ministry’s notice, and he was required at the Aurory for questioning no later than seventy-two hours hence. He thought of the shackles and the uncomfortable chair of Courtroom 10 and his stomach dropped. There was no Albus Dumbledore to protect him this time. There wasn’t even a Voldemort to break him out if it all went pear-shaped.

He was truly on his own now, in that regard.

The reporters’ questions had been hard-hitting, unapologetic. How many people did you kill while you were a Death Eater, Mr Black? one asked. Tell us about your initiation into the Death Eaters, another said. Have you a Dark Mark? they all wanted to know, and that, at least he could answer easily. He’d rolled up both his sleeves and turned his arms every which way so there could be no mistake at all.

“I never took the Dark Mark,” he’d told them firmly. Then, as an afterthought, added, “Fortunately, You-Know-Who thought it would be too dangerous for me to be Marked. He didn’t want me as a Death Eater, he just wanted me under his thumb...just wanted to show that he had me.”

“And did he have you?” they asked.
"No, he never did," Harry had said, and his stomach had churned and churned from the lie of it. Because it was true that Voldemort had never made Harry into a Death Eater, and it was true that Harry had never truly been his subordinate, but it wasn’t true that the Dark Lord had never had him because, in a way, he still did. And god, what Harry would do for his advice right now. He felt so exposed and vulnerable with just Lucius and Mrs Parkinson to guide him. It felt incomplete, dangerous.

“Mr Black! Mr Black!” a reporter yelled, doing his very best to climb through the ropes and guards separating Harry from him. “Will you be going to Azkaban, Mr Black?”

That stopped Harry in his tracks. He turned, faced the reporter from between the shoulders of two big guards. The reporter was young, inexperienced, maybe only five or six years Harry’s senior. Had he still been at Hogwarts when Harry came? What House had he been in? A hundred irrelevant questions came to mind because the one question he’d been asked seemed far too frightening to consider—but, eventually, he did.

“I don’t know,” he said. He thought back to the Aurors that had approached him—had they been there last night? Probably. What had they seen? No way to tell, really. “Maybe. But if I do...at least I took down the Dementors first.”

He walked away then, and did his level best not to think on Azkaban again. If he did have to go, then there were a dozen things he needed to do first. He supposed he should start with Hermione’s parents. But she was still sleeping off those Stunners. Maybe he would take a nap first, then.

Finally a moment to himself, the first since then. Harry locked himself in his room and slid down the door, letting his head fall exhaustedly back against it. He searched inside himself for that forgotten place he’d never even noticed until it was ripped away from him. He prodded at the space where it should have been like a deep bruise, pressing and pressing to remind himself of it, though it ached terribly each time he did so.

He closed his eyes, and thought of the Dark Lord’s office. When he opened them, he was still in his bedroom. Once more, he closed his eyes, and thought of Voldemort, of the snake-like face that had slowly, over two whole years, merged into something entirely human. His eyes had been red, once. How long ago was it that they became black? And then there was the moment that the ritual stole the horcrux inside him, and Harry met the Dark Lord’s eyes for the last time—he would swear that, in that moment, they’d been brown. He opened his eyes again, and again he was still within the confines of his bedroom at River House.

Sighing, Harry rolled his neck forward until his head fell into his hands. He inhaled deeply, tried counting one to ten to calm himself, but quickly gave that up as a useless endeavour. He was fine. Life would go on, though certainly not Voldemort’s—

Everything was fine.

He took another deep breath but found that this one was startlingly uneven. It shuddered in his lungs, in and out, and he tried another to steady himself, but this breath, too, was shaky. The next breath he took was a broken gasp and then there was no pretending that it wasn’t happening—tears slid hotly down his cheeks and chin and soaking his fingers. There was a desperate, broken sob and he was startled to realise that it must’ve come from him, and that made him cry all the more.

God, it hurt. How could it hurt like this? How could he be so utterly undone by the death of such a terrible wizard? He hated himself for the guilty feeling in his heart over the Dark Lord’s death, and hated himself even more that he didn’t feel that same guilt for any of the Aurors who’d lost their lives
at the same time.

There was a strange ache in his wrists and chest and cheeks, an abnormal contraction of muscles or perhaps a rush of blood through constricted veins; he didn’t know what caused it, only that he’d felt it only once before, when he thought Draco had been lost to him forever. It was a feeling of regret, irreplaceable loss—and it didn’t go away very easily.

He cried for what seemed like hours, letting himself feel everything that he’d ignored or pushed aside and desperate for the release it might give him. Finally, a long time later, when his eyes were raw and his lips were chapped and cracked, the sobs stopped wracking his body and the tears stopped running down his face. He sat there for a long time, dehydrated and exhausted and utterly sad.

But then he got up again, and he knew that this would be the only time he let himself cry for Voldemort, and even just that little resolution gave him the strength to get up, leave his room, and deal with it all.

Hermione sat waiting for him at the top of the main staircase, elbows on her knees as she studied the stitching of her red leather boots. She gave him a weary smile when he opened his bedroom door and stepped out. “Harry,” she said, and it sounded like a greeting and a comfort and an apology all at once.

"Are you all right?"

"Everyone's been asking me that," he said. "But I'm not one of the ones who died."

"Of course," she said. That 'of course' said entirely too many things for two little words to say. Everything from 'But we love you,' to 'That's precisely the point,' and everything in between was in that 'of course'. She stood, a little slower than she might normally have done.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked, reaching out to steady her.

"Fine," she said. "Tired." Then, "Theo's still sleeping. Would you like to get this over with? I'm sure it won't be easy being there, but..." she trailed off, abruptly switching directions. "I am going to take my parents back to the muggle world. I never got the chance to put the core in my father, and I don't think I can stand to try it myself, not without...well. And with the Wizengamot assuming control, and still being under martial law, and all of us being seen by Aurors, it'll be safer there anyway, won't it?"

She sighed, looking utterly worn out and as if she'd just failed the biggest test of her life.

"Probably a good idea," said Harry, allowing her the dignity of not commenting on the rest. "I might be in Azkaban before the weekend."

She bit her lip, but didn't deny it right away. She was still thinking it over as they descended the steps and even as they exited the house and walked down the gravel drive to the gates, beyond which they could apparate. She took his hand when they stepped through, and though he'd only been there once before, almost a year ago, and even that by port-key, Harry knew exactly where to apparate. The knowledge of Ard-Mhéara’s location was etched in his mind as if he'd lived there for twenty years.

The house was not overly large for a manor house, but it exhibited a depressing feeling that covered the entire area around it. It was just nearing sunset now, and Harry caught a flash of red out of the corner of his eye. Startled, he turned to it, and there were those blood-red rocks, jutting up from the water, looking as if only moments before, a hundred sailors had lost their lives upon them. What a fitting place for a Dark Lord to live.
To have lived, he corrected.

With Hermione's hand clasped in his own, Harry navigated the wards as if they were not even there. The house recognised him; its protective magic swam over his skin, welcoming.

"I heard that the house wouldn't let any of the Death Eaters in," Hermione said quietly, her leather-soled boots barely making a sound against the old gravel of the drive.

"There aren't any Death Eaters," Harry replied. "Did you feel it? When it happened?"

He could see her mouth distending as she pressed her tongue to the roof of it, checking, feeling. "No," she said. "I was already Stunned."

"Be grateful," said Harry, who remembered all too well the unceasing agony of the last few minutes of that ritual. Nagini's death had come to him endlessly during that time, or at least it had felt that way. Perhaps that had been the severance of his own horcrux from his body, to be replaced with the ownership of five-hundred Dark Marks.

"But then again," he added, "maybe you shouldn't be grateful after all. There are no more Dark Marks and no more Death Eaters, but there are still Marks...mine. You're bound to me now."

She looked at him sharply. "Did it really?" she said. The intellectual curiosity momentarily pushed out the sadness she felt for her parents' situation. "Does it look different?"

"A phoenix," said Harry. "It may be the only thing that saves us. Makes the story that Dumbledore put me up to this seem more believable."

"Fawkes," Hermione breathed. "Phoenixes are pure, though morally neutral. I'm not sure why wizards seem to think they represent righteousness...certainly good for us right now that they do...Harry, where is Fawkes? Has anyone seen him since Dumbledore died?"

"I haven't," Harry said. He pushed open the front door, unsurprised to find that where dozens of Death Eaters had failed, it opened without so much as a protest to him. He had Voldemort's magic in him now, after all.

"Well," she said a moment later. "The only thing we can do until we've heard from the Aurory is ensure that our case is as tight as it can be. Without lying, if possible. They may not even charge you if we present it well enough..."

Harry gave her a smile, but they both knew how likely that was. He'd colluded with a known terrorist, after all.

"Mum? Dad?" Hermione called. Then, "Horvitz?"

The house-elf was the one to appear. He gave her a dour look and Harry a tolerant one. "Master deigns to attend to his domestic affairs," the elf said, annoyance lacing his voice. "He is a kind, generous master. He has only left Horvitz to look after three muggles for one evening. One long evening."

"Three?" said Harry. His throat tightened at the word 'master', but he knew it was true now. There was no point fighting it.

"Oh!" Hermione gasped. "The first muggle. What was his name?"

"Horvitz does not know," said the elf. "Horvitz keeps him dosed on calming draught, as he was
 ordered."

"That can't be healthy," Harry said. "Stop giving it to him. We'll figure something out...I hope, anyway. Horvitz, where are Hermione's parents?"

"Horvitz locked them in the south breakfast room, as it has the fewest breakables. The witch was experiencing accidental magic."

"Mum!" said Hermione, and took off in that direction.

Harry followed after her, but not before bending down to Horvitz, and saying, "Did he give you orders before he died? What to do if neither of us are around?"

Horvitz rolled his eyes. "My master left nothing to chance," he said. "Not even you, Master."

Harry stood, and followed after Hermione. She was already in the middle of a series of unlocking spells, none of them having any affect. He stopped next to her and pressed his hand to the door. It clicked open. She burst through it.

Her parents were draped over the breakfast table, plates of hot food untouched, and tea only sipped. They looked up when she came in, and Harry could see at once that they'd not slept a minute the night before.

"Oh, God, Hermione," her father said, jumping up. "We've been so worried."

"I'm fine, I'm fine," she babbled, even as she wrapped herself around both of them at once. "Mum are you okay? Accidental magic?"

"Little bursts, it's nothing," said her mother, too busy running her hands over Hermione's face and arms, checking for injuries. "A bit of fire once, but nothing we couldn't stomp out."

"I'm going to take you home," she said. "It's not safe. We were seen. We might get...we're going to be watched."

"Arrested," said her father frantically. "You were going to say arrested."

"Really nothing to worry about," Hermione replied, but it was no use. Her parents stepped back, surveying her. "Really," she tried again. "It'll be safer for you in the muggle world, and Dad, I can't...I don't think I can do it by myself." She looked at him with such abject sadness that Harry couldn't help but feel it, too.

He shook his head. He was physically and mentally exhausted and he would likely be spending the foreseeable future in questioning, possibly Ministry holding cells, possibly even Azkaban, but Hermione would probably get off with a slap on the wrist, especially since she would have no visible mark, either Dark Mark or phoenix. She was in the DA, and a muggleborn; the illogical Wizengamot might not even bother with her, thinking she was there under duress. He could give her this, and if he did, maybe she'd have the energy and willpower to fight the Wizengamot when he couldn't.

"I can help," he said to her. "I...know how. I know all of it." He even knew what it had been like, just moments before the Dark Lord apparated the both of them to River House. There was a pensieve in his head now, where a horcrux had once been. He was no longer connected to another person, but he'd absorbed their memory...every ghostly imprint Voldemort might've left, now lived inside him.

"Harry," she breathed. "You need to save your strength."
"I will," he said. "Right after this. I would have never done it without you. Even he would never have done it without you."

"Are...are you sure that you can?" she asked, as delicately as possible. He understood her hesitation. It was her father's life, after all.

"Yes," said Harry. "He gave me everything." Already the extra magic was beginning to settle and assimilate. It felt more and more like his own with each passing hour. He was becoming comfortable with it, comfortable with it being within him.

Hermione looked at her watch. "All right," she said. "That is, Dad, if you still...?"

"Anything, of course," he said. He shook his head, adding, "I won't leave you here unprotected."

The next few minutes passed without comment. Hermione's mother refused to leave the room and refused a calming draught as well. Hermione didn't give her father the chance to do the same, popping him with a sedation spell without bothering to ask. He reclined back on the chaise and watched the three of them with drowsy, drugged eyes.

"Love you, girls," he said to the pair of them. Hermione beamed at him, and took up position on one side of the lounge, Harry moving to the other. He'd never purposefully killed anyone before, never even been the direct cause of a death, though at least a dozen Aurors and several hundred Death Eaters had died indirectly by his action or inaction. But he still knew it had to be him; Hermione could never, and Voldemort had done her the kindness of taking on this burden for her—Harry could, too.

He laid his hand upon Mr Granger's chest, and felt the fragile, steady beat of his heart beneath. It was only the matter of willing it to happen and thinking an ancient incantation that he didn't even understand, and then Mr Granger's heart slowed, struggled out one last, desperate beat, and subsided.

Harry looked up, met Hermione's eyes. She set to work immediately. Though he had the vague memories of her doing this the night before, seeing it actually happen was...amazing. She ordered her magic to do what she wanted with ruthless efficiency; her hands never made an unnecessary movement, nor her magic an unnecessary push. She had a number of bottled magical cores in her pockets—which surely must have a bottomless charm on them—and she selected one without error, upending it above her father's chest and tying it to him as if she'd been doing this for years.

At the rate Hermione learned, doing it twice before was probably just as good.

He saw it the moment the core was accepted; she was already sweating and sluggish from the exertion, and she was about to give him part of her magic—part that she needed herself while her own magic healed from so many Stuns, and what she'd used up before them. Gently, he moved her hand away when she placed it over Mr Granger's solar plexus.

"I've got it," he said. That she didn't put up more than a token protest was proof enough of how tired she was. Harry again placed his hand over Mr Granger's heart and pushed some of that extra magic into him. It fought him, unwilling to go to this strange, unworthy vessel, but Harry stubbornly forced it into the nascent core and commanded it to stay. At last, it did, though under protest. This magical transfer would not be easy like Voldemort's had been to him. He and Mr Granger had no affinity, and Harry's magic didn't want to leave. But it was done, and it would settle eventually and become Granger's own. Without wasting a second, he silently incanted the spell to restart his heart, and stepped back. He was surprised to find his hands trembling from the magical expenditure. Granger's eyes opened, still drowsy from the calming spell.
"Thank you," Hermione said to him. Harry nodded. "Can I—I'd like to stay here and take care of them, and the muggle. Get them settled at least. They'll need to learn to focus it and we may only have a few days, but—"

"It's fine," Harry said, interrupting her. "You need the rest yourself. I'll add you to the wards." She hugged him, hard, and for a long minute, he hugged her back, and then regretfully, he stepped away. He still had more to do.

Voldemort's study looked just as it had every time Harry visited him in it through their connection. Dark panelled walls, heavy wood desk, framed diplomas and Ministry certifications covering an entire wall. He could see the red glint of the red rocks from the window.

At once his eyes alighted on the box. Something he'd never noticed before, yet now that his connection to the Dark Lord had been severed—now that he'd become all that was left of the Dark Lord—he could see nothing else. It sat on an old, disrepaired credenza against the wall behind the chair Harry had always taken. The edges of the box were worn and sad-looking. Once, they'd been brass, but were now tarnished and uncared-for.

The password, he knew, was in Parseltongue. He opened his mouth and said, "the beast of—" he said, but the words sounded harsh and somehow slippery. He didn't understand them as English as he usually did, but like a language he'd learned in primary school, perhaps: the sounds made sense, formed words in his mind, but it wasn't the natural understanding he'd had before. Had he lost his ability to speak Parseltongue with the destruction of his internal horcrux?

Curiously, he tried a few more words, and each one sounded stilted and badly accented to his ears. He searched his mind for translations and found that most were still there, but it was like speaking French from a phrasebook. Grimacing, he tried again, enunciating as best he could, "The beast of dark days."

The box clicked open.

On top was Ravenclaw's journal. He pulled it out carefully. This eerie book had been both a blessing and a curse. It had provided a solution to the Dementors, helped give Hermione's parents magic...and in exchange, it had taken a life. One that Harry wished was still here.

He was not sure if he wished he'd never found it in the first place, or if he was grateful it had been available to them in such a dire situation as the Dementors presented. He set it aside. Beneath it was a wand, perhaps pine, though it was hard to tell. His fingers brushed it and he was flooded with a sense of loss...Calixta’s then. Sentiment—it jarred with Harry’s recollection of Voldemort. Perhaps, instead, a reminder of revenge. There was a delicate blue-glass phial with a thick potion inside it. Protective magic radiated from it. He pushed that aside.

Finally, at the very bottom, were a pensieve memory and a tiny pensieve. These he retrieved, excited and nervous. Settling them on the wooden desk, he tipped the memory into the bowl and swirled it with his wand. He fell in, momentarily disoriented with vertigo, but he righted himself soon enough and found himself in the very same room.

The Dark Lord stood before him, close enough to touch, but Harry’s hand would have gone right through him if he had. It was oddly familiar, almost like when he’d come through their connection. Almost like he could still be alive.

“You would stand there,” Voldemort murmured, seemingly to himself. He was facing Harry’s chair, and Harry moved to it, unable not to. From here, it was as if the Dark Lord were talking directly to
“You are entirely too sentimental for your own good if you are within this memory,” said Voldemort. “Though it does make things easier.” He paced slowly back and forth, but his gaze always returned to the spot where Harry now stood, eyes focused so intently that Harry caught himself entertaining frankly ridiculous notions of him maybe still being—but no.

“The wand will go to the Weasley girl. It was constructed in the days of Hogwarts founders; I should like for it to not remain in disuse. I believe she will find an affinity for it. The journal, of course, belongs to the Black family and you may do with it as you see fit. A word of caution, however: the theories in Ravenclaw’s diary are largely untested. Even that which I intend to use for the Dementors sometime in the coming hours—I admit that I do not know it will be successful. The potion is for you,” he said.

Harry said nothing; no one would hear him if he did.

“But first,” Voldemort continued, “I suspect I have your undivided attention, and in such a rare event, perhaps I should make use of it. Things will either go right and the following will happen: the Dementors will be destroyed utterly, and will sleep for five-hundred and twelve years, at which point they will return and...I should hope, no longer be your problem. This may require a substantial sacrifice, or it may require my death. The wording was archaic; I will not know until it happens. Either is fine, I dare say. Either accomplishes one goal or another. All of my earthly bonds will be severed—that is the minimum sacrifice. How is that a sacrifice, I can almost hear your Gryffindor mind wondering. Freeing my soldiers, destroying the naive bond I created with Calixta Yaxley... perhaps, but also you. My last horcrux, my most substantial bond. I wonder if you will retain the abilities and power you have through me. I will endeavour to ensure it, if it comes to that.

“Perhaps things will not go according to my plan,” he said after a long, quiet moment. “If they do not, then instead of freeing you, I will be binding you further. To my Death Eaters...to Calixta. I do hope it doesn’t come to that. It is certainly misery to at once hate and love. Such vile emotions. Unnecessary...I will try to give you the knowledge of how to sever a Death Eater bond if it comes to that. I expect I should feel it before it happens...I expect I should be able to transfer some imprints to you before the ritual destroys my horcrux and we become separate entities.

“If such does happen, I warn you that you will have to earn their loyalty. It will not be freely given. Do not disappoint.” He stopped then and leaned back against his desk, looking intently out of the window beside him. It was late afternoon here, the sun not quite low enough to cause the rocks to glow red yet. Voldemort’s black eyes blinked slowly, thoughtfully. His arms crossed over his chest. Harry had never seen him more human. At once, he turned back, his ghostly gaze focusing immediately on the air in front of Harry’s own eyes.

“I am—sorry, for what I am about to do to you. If this magic requires more of me than I anticipate, you will be alone to fight the Ministry when they come after you. They will come after you. I will need a collection of Aurors tonight and it will be impossible for you not to be seen...even if you spelled your face hidden, the magic would dissolve during the ritual...”

“Therefore, we return once again to the potion. I have given you everything you need to argue your case. Everything, perhaps, except truth. If you are questioned under Veritaserum, what shall you do then? You’ve never built a resistance to it like Severus or Lucius... it has taken them swallowing near-daily doses for twenty years to do so, and even that isn’t guaranteed. How much time you will have, I admit do not know. A week, perhaps. Maybe none at all.”

The Dark Lord tipped his head towards the box the memory had come from. “The potion will give you truth,” he said. “If Parkinson is your solicitor, your version of truth will be flawless, except,
perhaps, for how you yourself don’t believe it. I can make you believe it. Take that potion and rehearse that truth, and it will become your truth...but be warned, your memories will rearrange to accommodate it. The truth of me will be gone from you forever...I care not about this. I shall be dead if it comes to it. You, however, are not dead...and if you—the Boy Who Lived—can convince yourself, you can convince the Ministry. And then you will truly be the End of Dark Days, won’t you? A great warrior, just like Dumbledore.”

He smiled bitterly, and Harry felt it, as if it had been directed straight at him. The Dark Lord looked down at his crossed arms. “A great warrior,” Voldemort said again, softer this time. His eyes rose again, and he added, “But can you be a great leader?”

 Abruptly, he straightened from his propped position and began to pace once again. “And will you need to be? I have prepared you for a role, prepared you to replace me so that the work could be finished, but—at times I forget what it is I meant to do. Even now...what did I mean to happen? I have vague recollections of notions of protection against muggles, of solving the problem of squibs—” here he grinned smugly. “But then came revenge. I am only recently beginning to remember at all. Madness, for so long.

“Do not dishonour me by trying to think me altruistic or misunderstood. You are smarter than that. I am everything I am rumoured to be. I am cruel and murderous. I have enjoyed the slow death of many an enemy. I have gutted men, women, children and watched them bleed out with no concern save keeping the stink of it off my robes. I value no human life anymore, not even my own. Perhaps yours in some way, though you are mistaken if you think I would mourn you long.” He turned away again, and Harry felt as if the Dark Lord were giving him a moment to take that in. But he didn’t have to, he’d known it all along, but seeing it now, seeing the way even Voldemort needed a moment to take it in—Harry didn’t think it was quite true.

“It matters not,” Voldemort finally said. “If you can figure out what it is we were fighting for, then try to rally my Death Eaters and do it. If not, then let them have the peace they have earned.”

He turned his back to Harry and circled his desk to sit down. “You are on your own now,” he said. The memory ended.

³³³

Chapter End Notes

Feedback appreciated! ♥
Epilogue: Peace

Chapter by faire_weather

Chapter Summary

In which there is life after.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Peace (n):** 1. A state of tranquillity or quiet: as a freedom from civil disturbance; 2. Freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions, 3. A pact or agreement to end hostilities between those who have been at war or in a state of enmity;

4. *That ineffable state of being after a long war, when you do not yet realise that the war was only a battle.*

It was June now.

He thought so, anyway. Time was beginning to run together. In the mornings, every other day, Eloise Parkinson came to ask him the same set of questions over and over: 'Were you a Death Eater?' (No) and 'Did you kill anyone?' (Yes, I killed Lord Voldemort) and 'Did Dumbledore want you to pretend to join You-Know-Who?' (Yes, he wanted me to win). And every day, Harry gave the same answers. Then Parkinson would leave and with her would go Harry's unchanged statement, back to the Department of Justice and the team of prosecution wizards who were determined to see Harry in Azkaban indefinitely.

Or perhaps they specifically didn't want it to happen, but they were told by the Wizengamot to mount an offense, and so they did. Harry wasn't sure—on Fridays (he thought), they would come and ask him other questions, harder questions, and once, they fed him Veritaserum, but Parkinson had been there at the time, raging about his rights being violated, and they'd only got three questions in before the order came down (from where, Harry didn't know) to administer the antidote. Those three questions had been: What's your name? and How old are you? and Did you willingly collude with You-Know-Who? Those questions had been asked with a strange, awed look on each of their faces.

And his answer, to the last one, had been, *No.*

But before Parkinson left every time, she would say, “Draco is well. Hermione is well. Your trial is 5 June.” Which was Draco’s birthday, Harry thought.

But instead of that, Harry would say, “Hermione's going to kill me for missing NEWTs.”

Once, there she'd said something different; she'd said, “Draco has been in questioning for three days,” and she'd said, “Hermione was brought in for questioning six days ago. The Ministry can't locate her muggle relatives.”

Then, Harry had beat his fury into the walls of his holding cell for three days straight, until Parkinson had come back and said, “The Ministry was unable to bring charges against Draco,” and, “The
Ministry was unable to bring charges against Hermione. They didn’t find a Phoenix Mark on either of them.”

“So Severus Snape goes on trial today,” Parkinson said this morning. Harry looked at her dourly. Once, weeks ago, he remembered caring. Today, he could not imagine how he ever did. “We are not hopeful.”

“Am I advised by my legal team to care?” Harry asked. Then, “How are my par—how is my family?” He had not seen them since the morning he turned himself in for questioning. They were not allowed to see him until his trial. No one but his lead solicitor and his barrister was.

“Yes,” said Parkinson to his first question. Then, more hesitantly, “There have been difficulties. It is not expected that your uncle’s partner will pull-through. The healer has been unable to determine the spell used and the Aurory denies all knowledge of any use of spells unrelated to port-keying or retention. Ms Capella Black is extensively distraught over the incarceration of both her nephew and her friend, Mr Snape. I understand she has taken to only leaving the Hogwarts library to teach her classes. Your father has been alone in his home for over two months. He does not answer floo calls or open the gates to visitors. My sources have told me that spells indicate there are four living beings in the house, three of which I assume are elves. He has been seen in his animagus form twice—once outside, and once through a window. We do not think he ever comes out of it.”

Harry then slumped back on his cot against the cold, lead-painted walls of his holding cell. “But Hermione and Draco are okay now? They won’t have trials?” he asked, just to be sure. “Because they didn’t do anything.”

“Hermione is...very intelligent,” said Parkinson. “She was helping me with your case even while she was in her own holding cell.”

“But is she okay?” Harry asked.

“Yes, fine,” said Parkinson. “As a muggleborn, she wasn’t really expected to have been involved, but the continued absence of her parents made them wary. No formal charges were brought against either her or Draco, so Veritaserum was never used.”

“Any others?” Harry asked pointedly.

“A number of suspected Death Eaters were arrested, including those who were port-keyed to holding cells. The Phoenix Mark was found at that point. Those Death Eaters are currently awaiting their own trials, though the prosecution is confused about how to proceed when there are no Dark Marks left.”

“Does everyone think I’m a new dark lord, then?” Harry asked, not bothering to open his eyes.

“It has been proposed,” Parkinson admitted.

Harry sighed. “I’m not evil,” he said. “I’m nothing like he was.”

“No, but you would be surprised at how many people think so.” Parkinson said. She stood and banged on the cell door to alert the guards she was ready to be escorted out. “However, you would also be surprised at how many people have come forward to testify on your behalf.”

“Who?” Harry asked. He felt the cell-bound petrifying spell come over him, holding him in place as the door slid open for Parkinson to leave. His muscles started cramping immediately.

“Today is 4 June,” she said. “You will find out tomorrow. I will be back in the morning.” The iron
door slammed shut behind her, and the petrifying spell released him. He slumped again.

Courtroom 10, again. Years of nightmares had solidified the appearance of this room in his mind. He could, without opening his eyes, point unerringly at the seat where the Minister's Aide would sit; he could navigate to the chained chair without stumbling.

It didn't echo with the emptiness of no support, as it had in fifth year. Today, it vibrated with the shameless curiosity of hundreds of witches and wizards. Wizengamot in the front, reporters to the sides, and behind him: a crowd of undulating opinions and a slow burn of whispered voices. His skin crawled.

As new Head of Aurors, Amelia Bones sat in the Minister's seat. Harry forced himself to sit in the chair, fingers clenching as the chains tightened around him, and met his gaze.

She lifted his hand and the courtroom quieted. Parkinson's clicking heels as she wound her way down the aisle and through the gates echoed foreboding. The sound stopped just behind him. She took her place with his legal team.

“Court is now in session. Harry Black, also called Harry Potter, also called the Boy Who Lived: you have been charged with violating curfew under martial law, conspiring against the Ministry, colluding with a known terrorist, involvement in an illicit organisation, manslaughter, and high treason against the Ministry. How do you plead?”

Harry tried to speak, but his voice faltered. He swallowed. “Not guilty,” he finally said.

He did not recognise any of the wizards in the prosecution. He recognised only Parkinson from his own team. The Wizengamot looked down at him from their shadow alcove and listened without comment as first the prosecution and then his own team came to give opening statements.

“The simple fact of the matter,” said his barrister to the Wizengamot, an anonymous-looking man with deep-set, cunning eyes and a dark, sharp moustache; it looked wholly incongruous with the powdered white wig and attached black, pointed hat he wore. “Is that my client defeated both You-Know-Who, also called Tom Riddle, also called Lord Voldemort, also called the Dark Lord, and four-hundred-some-odd Dementors. We haven't had a peep from them in over two months' time, and Arithmantists do agree that all signs indicate the Dementors have indeed retreated to the underworld until their next breeding cycle. We should be thanking him, not putting him on trial.”

“I should like to remind the Wizengamot,” said one of the prosecution, “that the law of the wizarding world is not based on any romanticised notions of the ends justifying the means. Mr Black did collude with an illicit organisation and a known terrorist. And unlike Mr Snape, he did not pass information back to either the Ministry or the organisation known as the Order of the Phoenix.”

The prosecution called witnesses. Aurors that had seen him amid the ritual with the Dark Lord gave testimony to the fact. No Death Eaters came to his aid, and he could not blame them: if they’d so far managed to escape notice of the Aurory, then they'd do best to not bring any upon themselves. For her part, Harry wondered at the sheer guts of Eloise Parkinson standing as his solicitor, but perhaps she'd never had a Mark herself. He admitted he wasn't entirely sure, but—no; even as he considered the question, awareness of all the Death Eaters came to him, and he could pick each one out individually. She had a Phoenix Mark, but it was muffled, heavily covered by some very ancient, very dark Old Magic. The Aurory would not find it without a great deal of trouble. There were a few others hidden with this same magic—he could feel Pansy and Blaise very far away (Italy, his mind supplied) and his mother (behind him, seven metres) with it.
By late afternoon, it was looking as though the prosecution had built a solid case against him. He was placed at the scene holding Voldemort’s hand, by a number of high-ranking Aurors. More than that, he still had people who hated him: Cornelius Fudge testified that he’d been at the Department of Mysteries two years ago and that he’d seen him speaking to Voldemort—being (apparently) \textit{willingly controlled} by Voldemort. There were others—people he didn’t even remember ever meeting, and yet, somehow he’d wronged them, or at least given them the impression that he had.

“Heard him in the Hog’s Head two years ago, talking about organising a group to overthrow the Ministry,” said one hag.

“Objection!” his barrister, Mr Crucible, called.

“Ms O’Vile,” said Bones, “Are you quite sure that’s what was said?”

“Let me just think…,” she muttered. Then, “S’pose he might’ve just said they wanted to start up a kiddies defence club, now I think on it.”

But the damage had been done. The eyes of the Wizangamot glittered angrily at him from their protective nooks, anonymous and dangerous. They held his freedom—his life—in their hands, and they had already decided against him. He was too much \textit{trouble}, he realized. It wasn’t, necessarily, that he might be an emergent dark lord, it was that he might threaten their fragile hold over the rest of the population.

He knew at once that he only had one chance. He couldn’t turn around to see Parkinson or the rest of his team, but if he focused very hard, he could almost \textit{tell} her, through the bond, that their plan needed to change \textit{now}. She felt it, and asked for a recess.

“It is getting on anyway,” said Bones, looking at a golden pocket watch. “We shall adjourn until tomorrow morning at half-nine.”

Back in his holding cell, he was met by Parkinson, and for the first time: the rest of his legal team. Five of them in all, they included the barrister, Mr Crucible, Parkinson, two other solicitors—Nagina Spirit-Spektor and Llewellyn York—and an aide, Liz.

“It’s still a toss-up,” said Parkinson. “But the prosecution is not reacting how I expected them to. We need to know now...Harry, how are you going to testify?”

“Truthfully,” said Harry.

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. “What, exactly, is your version of the truth?” asked Llewellyn.

Harry smiled wryly. “Shouldn’t you know that already?”

“Truth is relative,” he said, and Harry knew right away that he’d been a Slytherin however many years ago.

“I want to take Veritaserum,” said Harry. “It’s the only way they’ll believe me over the hag and those other character witnesses, isn’t it? They already think I want to overthrow the Ministry. Nothing’s going to change that unless I swear that I won’t.”

“I must advise against this,” said Mr Crucible. “If you take Veritaserum, Mr Black, you won’t be able to prevent yourself from answering if the prosecution asks you something we would prefer you...didn’t answer.”
“I won’t need to. I have nothing to hide.”

“Nothing?” asked Crucible. Harry shrugged.

Parkinson’s lips went firmly together. She hesitated, then: “Perhaps if I could have a moment alone with our client,” she said. Duly, the legal team filed out, and Harry was left with his original solicitor.

“Harry,” she said. “It is not possible to circumvent Veritaserum. I’m told that Severus may have some degree of control over it, but even he was never confident enough to try it with an Auror, and the man’s been dosing himself with it for years to build a tolerance. Did…did the Dark Lord tell you it was possible? I’m afraid he’s misled you.”

“There was a potion,” said Harry. “If I took it, it would erase what really happened and replace my memories with ones that match our case.”

She slid into the seat opposite him, studying his face. “I’ve heard of such a potion,” she said at last. “Is that what you want to do? There’s no going back. You will forget your motives for everything, all the conversations you had with him, everything you learned.”

“I’ve already taken it,” he said.

Her eyes widened fearfully. He saw them flick to her left arm and knew what she was thinking even without feeling the doubt that surged from her mark to him. The irony of his situation overwhelmed him—he’d gone from hating one bond to having over five-hundred, and yet: these were so much easier to deal with now. The practice he was getting tuning out all of the old Death Eaters was helping him to stabilize his own thoughts—and it gave him insight into the outside world while he was confined to the Ministry.

“It didn’t work?” she ventured, before he could begin to ease her mind.

“It did,” he said, and the frightened look returned to her eyes. “Wait—wait. It worked, but I do remember.” He hesitated for a moment, and then added, “Trust me.”

“Yes, my lord,” she said, right away. They were both surprised by it.

“Don’t—” he began to say, but she interrupted:

“No, I need to. We need to. You need our support now. If we get you out of this, will you do the same for those who were also arrested with the Mark?”

“I’ll do whatever I can,” he said, and meant it.

“If you’re asked to divulge Death Eater names, will you be able to withhold?”

He shook his head. “Not if I know who they are.” She bit her lip, thinking, but there was nothing that could be done for that, no matter what.

“All right,” she said, standing. “We will request Veritaserum. And hope for the best.” He followed her out and let the Auror guards bind his wrists and ankles, stumbling all the way back to his holding cell. Another night on a hard, grey cot—hopefully the trend wouldn’t continue.

His defence, he realised with a sinking feeling, was lying under Oath of Merlin. They did not have to testify under Veritaserum, but they also weren’t fighting for their own freedom, and the thought of his friends and family getting caught out in a lie made him break out into a sweat that even the cold
chains of his chair couldn’t fend off. Hermione mounted the stand and Harry stared at her desperately, begging her not to endanger herself. If she were caught, if any of them were caught, they would face Azkaban along with him. She stared back at him resolutely.

“Hermione Jean Granger,” she said in response to his barrister’s question.

“And how long have you known Harry Black?”

“Seven years,” she said. “We've been best friends since first year.”

“At Hogwarts,” the barrister clarified. She nodded. “And how well do you know Harry?”

She was quiet for a moment, thinking. “I believe, now, that I know him better than anyone.” Unsaid: both of them had lost the strength of their bonds to Ron since his expulsion, and Harry no longer shared his head with another wizard. He nodded, but only she was paying attention to him enough to see it.

“Now?” asked the barrister.

“Our friend Ronald Weasley was home-schooled this year. We lost touch.”

“So in your opinion, would Harry Black defect to the side of You-Know-Who?”

“Never,” said Hermione.

“Then how would you explain the testimonies of these Aurors who claim to have seen him willingly engaged in a dark ritual in early morning on the vernal equinox, 21 March?”

“Albus Dumbledore told him to save the world,” she said. “So Harry saved the world.” There was laughter somewhere in the back, surprised and unsure.

“By destroying the Dementors, you mean?” said the barrister.

“Yes. And Lord Voldemort.” Both ignored the startled gasps.

“Do you know how Harry did that?”

“Not exactly.”

“But you have an idea.”

“Yes,” she said.

“Because you saw it.”

“Yes. I was there.”

“What exactly were you doing there, if you weren't a Death Eater and you weren't an Auror?”

“Albus Dumbledore told me to help Harry. I did. I researched Dementors and binding rituals and found that the reason they kept coming back was because the Ministry had bound them to Azkaban prison. It skewed their internal clocks and altered their habits. To reset them, the bond had to be severed.”

“How would that be done?”
“They had to be killed,” she said, eyebrows up as if to say, *Obviously*. “Twice in succession—once together, and once as a hive, which they are.”

“Good Merlin,” said the barrister, showing surprise, though as barrister, he surely knew what her testimony would have been. “Kill four-hundred-and some-odd Dementors? *Twice*? Impossible.”

“Which is why it was crucial that Harry appear to be on Lord Voldemort's side, at least to him. We needed his magical strength.”

“Was You-Know-Who really as powerful as all that?”

“Yes,” Hermione said. The silence that reigned after that reply was different, tenser and laden with the speculative fears of *What if?* It was a quiet that made every wizard in the room, even those nestled in their shadowy seats above him, momentarily grateful that it had not been them prophecy chose to defeat a monster. And then the longer, softer glow of thankfulness they felt whenever they suddenly remembered that You-Know-Who was finally, *finally* gone. It was such a strange thought; they often forgot.

The barrister gave both the crowd and the Wizengamot a significant look.

“What do you think Harry did that destroyed the Dementors and the Dark Lord? Take your time.”

“He was a conduit,” she said. “When Harry first agreed to try to convince Voldemort that he'd switched sides, he came with a list of requirements. Headmaster Dumbledore thought this would make it look more legitimate. One of Harry's demands was that Voldemort fix the problem of the Dementors. Lord Voldemort had a connection with him, through Harry's scar. It allowed Harry to ground him. Voldemort was powerful enough to manipulate the wild magic in Stonehenge, but even he wasn't strong enough to kill almost five-hundred Dementors by himself. He needed to be grounded so he could wield the wild magic. Harry did that, at great personal risk.”

“Oh? What kind of personal risk?”

“Aside from being within spitting distance of Lord Voldemort?” Hermione said. “I did some research afterwards and I believe the magic used was a variation on a very old type of bond magic. If it had gone awry, any number of terrible things could have happened.”

“Such as?”

“Harry's magical core could have been burnt out. He would have been a squib.”

He heard the click of Parkinson's heels as she stood to distribute copies of Hermione's notes and citations to the prosecution. Another hundred floated past him and up to the risers where the Wizengamot sat.

“The Defence enters into evidence Ms Hermione Granger's notes, verified for accuracy and signed by Head Researcher at the College of Archaic Magic at Cambridge, Dr Rowan Hemlock,” Parkinson said.

“Thankfully, that didn't happen,” the barrister continued afterwards. “But there were other risks, too, weren't there, Ms Granger? Something he wasn't quite so lucky about.”

“Yes,” she said. “Interruptions to that sort of ritual can have unforeseen results, specifically, a backlash, or reversal. Harry could have ended up bonded to all of the Dementors, in Azkaban's place...or to the Death Eaters, in Voldemort's place.”
“What a frightful thought, to be forcefully tied to not one, but all Death Eaters,” murmured the barrister. “And even more frightful since that is indeed what happened, isn’t it?”

“Given the new Marks found on arrested Death Eaters, that is thought to be the case.”

“Do you think Harry knew this was a possibility when he agreed to do it?”

“No,” she said. “Harry wasn’t the researcher. No one knew when the Dementors would return. This was a last-minute plan that ultimately succeeded in destroying the Dementors and giving Harry the opportunity to take down Voldemort at the same time. He saw an opportunity to destroy Voldemort’s magic while he was weak, and he took it, but it had consequences, and Harry will have to suffer them the rest of his life, so that the rest of us could live out from under the shadow of a murderous tyrant.”

“Do you think Harry would have participated, if he had known the risks?”

Hermione did not hesitate. “Yes. Harry loves the wizarding world. Its safety, the safety of his friends and loved ones, would outweigh the agony of losing his own magic or being bonded to people who hate him.”

The barrister stepped away. “No further questions.”

Hermione was cross-examined ruthlessly, but her story, even the fabricated parts, was woven so carefully that it even sounded legitimate to Harry. More witnesses followed. Headmistress McGonagall gave testimony of his character, and of Dumbledore’s character, and said the whole mess sounded precisely like something he would have schemed up. All the while she gave Harry these exasperated, broken looks and Harry felt for her—and hated himself even more for the deception she didn’t even realise she was part of.

More evidence was brought forward, letters to Ron and Sirius that Harry couldn’t find the significance of but which apparently showed his state of mind to have been normal, if stressed. Zacharias Smith was brought in to say that Harry had shown him kindness and friendship and was an all-around nice bloke. A few Order members followed, including Kingsley, who said he saw Harry there that night, and knew of no Ministry dispensation for him to have been—but when pressed by Crucible, he admitted that Harry had always seemed dedicated to the Light Side, whatever that was.

“But what on his demeanour?” asked Mr Whitecauldron, the prosecuting barrister, during the cross-examination. “Would you say that Mr Black often displayed episodes of anxiety or other mental instability?”

“Leading,” York called angrily.

Bones gave Whitecauldron a dour look and he rephrased, “Mr Shacklebolt, how would you describe Mr Black’s demeanour?”

Kingsley shrugged, looking uncomfortable. “I reckon that I would be anxious, too, if Voldemort had a price on my head.”

“So he was unstable, then?”

“I didn’t say that, but—”

“What would you say then?”
“I—he had outbursts, sometimes. But all teenagers do.”

Harry’s fingers were long since numbed from the manacles, and he ached to move around, restore some blood flow to his extremities, but Kingsley was grilled for another twenty minutes before Whitecauldron had no further questions.

“The defence,” said Parkinson, once Kingsley was quit the witness box, “would now like to call Mr Harry Black.” The Auror guards approached his chair and petrified him before removing his chains. His face burned with humiliation as he was levitated to the witness box and re-manacled. He barely kept himself from tipping over when the spell was removed.

“My client,” said Mr Crucible, “has consented to the administration of Veritaserum during questioning, provided that de facto Head Amelia Bones administer any questions provided by the prosecution to ensure that nothing unrelated to the matter at hand is asked, as is his right under article fourteen-dash-three-seven-one-four of Wizengamotary law.”

"Quite reasonable," said Bones. "Mr Whitecauldron, is this acceptable to the prosecution?"

"I should think so," said the man. "If Madam Bones and the Wizengamot would allow us a short recess to transcribe our questions?"

"Granted," said Bones. "We will take a one hour recess."

He caught a glimpse of his parents when his Auror guards pivoted him to lead him back to a holding cell. His mother's furious face was overlain with a deep worry, and his father—god, his father looked nearly as haggard and deathly as he had that night in the Shrieking Shack. His Uncle Regulus sat next to him, eyes deadened; there was no sign of Lupin. Behind them, the three Malfoys watched with calm faces, but he felt that at least one of them was not as calm as he appeared; Draco’s worry was like white noise—constant and buzzing in the back of Harry’s mind.

He tried to give them all a reassuring smile, but he didn’t need to see their reactions to know it had come out more of a grimace.

This time, Harry was allowed visitors. His parents met him in the conference room, and they looked just as miserable as he felt. He was immediately enveloped in a crushing hug by his mother, and then, more sedately, Sirius embraced him, too. Harry studied his face as they pulled apart, noting the deep-set dark smudges beneath his grey eyes and the drawn look of his mouth.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked.

"I," Sirius began, and then cleared his throat. "I should be asking you that," he said, his voice hoarse from disuse.

"Were you Padfoot all this time?" asked Harry. Sirius's ensuing silence was all the answer he needed. "Dad..."

Sirius looked away, grim and beaten.

“Dad...how’s Remus, is he—?”


"Harry, are you sure this is a good idea?" asked his mother quickly.

"Yes," Harry said, swallowing over the lump in his throat. "I did nothing wrong."
"But Veritaserum?" she asked. "They could ask you anything."

"And I'm prepared to answer anything," Harry said. "I was forced to act as I did by Albus Dumbledore, for the greater good."

They looked at each other again. Behind them, the door open, and Harry's legal team stepped in, arms laden with overstuffed parchment folders.

"The questions won't be easy," said Nagina. "Are you quite sure that you are prepared for any question?"

“What choice do I have?” asked Harry grimly. “Even I can see the Wizengamot is against me. They’re all terrified I’ll take over the Ministry.”

“But can you say that you won’t under Veritaserum?” asked Llewellyn.

Harry gave him a steady look. “If I can’t, wouldn’t you rather know that now than later?” No one was able to give him a response to that.

Testifying with a legal team wasn’t nearly as frightening as being on his own in fifth year—even as drugged with Veritaserum as he was. He was both alert and drowsy under its effects, as if it was trying to soften his mind, but didn’t really want to. The questions from the prosecution were staging, building their argument up over a long procession. He was asked about everything from flying the Weasleys’ Ford Anglia to Hogwarts to the origin of the DA.

They spent a gruelling amount of time on his trial in fifth year, picking it apart and emphasising Headmaster Dumbledore’s role, making him out to be a dangerous pet that was given special privileges and ended up abusing them. By the time they got to present day and the things he was actually being charged with, he was weary from trying not to blurt out the first thing that came to him after every question, while still satisfying the truth-requirements of Veritaserum. The potion from Voldemort didn’t give him the ability to disregard Veritaserum’s effects; it was only meant to make him believe the truth he needed to believe. That he’d found a way around that was his own secret.

“Tell me about when you decided to join You-Know-Who,” said Whitecauldron.

“Leading!” Spirit-Spektor growled from their table.

Bones gave the prosecutor a dour glare. “Mr Whitecauldron; a clean questioning if you please.”

“How did it come about that you earned the trust of You-Know-Who?” Whitecauldron said instead.

Harry swallowed, closed his eyes slowly to focus himself, and when he opened them again, he recollected the abject fear he’d felt when Dumbledore told him he must go out and earn Voldemort’s trust at whatever cost, that he would die at the end of this no matter what, but he had to save the world first, that there was a prophecy and it had said he had a power the Dark Lord knew not: the ability to fake it long enough to kill Voldemort’s horcrux, Nagini. And more importantly, he believed it.

“Professor Snape took word to him that I was tired of being Dumbledore’s pet and wanted to make my own decision—to change sides.”

“So you did defect?”

“No,” said Harry, and this part was true at least. “It was a ruse. I needed to get close to him.”
“Why?”

“You-Know-Who kept part of his soul in his snake, Nagini. While she lived, he was immortal. I needed to get close to her, and that was impossible without also getting close to him.”

“Why couldn’t Mr Snape have done this task for you? We learned yesterday that he spent a great deal of time with You-Know-Who.”

“Wizards with Dark Marks couldn’t hurt You-Know-Who or by default, Nagini. There was a protection built into their bonds. Only I could do it.”

“So why didn’t you kill Nagini right away and be done with it?”

“I found out about the Dementors. You-Know-Who was going to breed more of them, but Hermione told me that if we waited, we might be able to take all of them down with him.” He shrugged. “It seemed like a good plan.”

The questioning went on and on and on. He was questioned far longer than any of the other witnesses, but he supposed that was to be expected. He nearly slipped a few times, but managed to think his answer through just in time. By the time his questioning ended and the prosecution stood for closing remarks, he had no idea whether or not it had worked. Mr Crucible made another impassioned speech in closing; it lasted nearly fifteen minutes and covered in great detail all of the personal dangers Harry had undertaken for all of their safety. Many witches and wizards looked rather ashamed, but it was the Wizengamot’s opinions that mattered, and Harry couldn’t get a read on them.

They went into recess again while the Wizengamot deliberated, and it was three hours before he and his team were called back in, and he was strapped back into his chair in the middle.

Amelia Bones stood to read the verdict. “On the charge of colluding with a known terrorist, the Wizengamot finds the defendant not guilty.” Harry exhaled heavily—but she continued.

“On the charge of involvement in an illicit organisation, the Wizengamot finds the defendant not guilty. On the charge of violating curfew under martial law, the Wizengamot finds the defendant guilty. On the charge of manslaughter, the Wizengamot finds the defendant not guilty. On the charge of high treason against the Ministry...” she trailed off, and Harry’s stomach dropped. Silence reigned in courtroom; he could feel the breathless anticipation of Mrs Parkinson and the gut-wrenching terror of his mother through their Marks. He felt it himself. Amelia Bones’ throat bobbed uncomfortably.

“With a vote of 49 to 49, the Wizengamot is hung. As de facto Head of Aurors and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, it is my right and burden to cast the deciding vote. Over the past two days, I have heard both the prosecution and the defence plead their cases, and see evidence to support both sides. The question we were forced to ask ourselves was, ‘What actually constitutes treason? If Mr Black was acting against the Ministry in order to help the people of Britain, is that really treason? Even if it required many highly illegal acts? I have deliberated and have made my decision. On the charge of high treason against the Ministry, the Wizengamot finds the defendant, Mr Harry Black...not guilty.’

His mum actually screamed in happiness. Then the reporters took up the cheer, and he felt Eloise Parkinson’s extreme elation bombard him through the Phoenix Mark. He felt as if his heart might’ve stopped. Damn Amelia Bones’ overdramatic presentation, he thought, even as he beamed up at her.

The chains fell away from his wrists, and he stood.
For the first time, he felt completely free.

In August, martial law was lifted.

With it came the election of the new Minister—Narcissa Malfoy elected by popular vote even without any underhanded tactics, thanks in large part to a huge turnout among voters fresh from Hogwarts—and the opening of Firth College.

Harry attended the ribbon-cutting ceremony with Draco, his first public appearance since the trial. There were sixty-four muggleborns who would make up the Early Start acclimation class before the magical-born students joined the in September. Somewhere out there in Britain, there were hundreds more muggleborns that Yasmin Smith and her volunteers had been unable to get to before the non-communication laws went in place. It was unlikely that they would ever receive magical schooling, but they'd reached sixty-four, and that was sixty-four more than they would have if they'd done nothing.

Regulus did not come to the ceremony, despite all the work he'd put in helping to get it built. Regulus did not do much of anything, in fact. His father was there, but Harry hadn't been sure he would be until he showed up. River House was dark and gloomy and Harry hated coming home to it. His father and his uncle were achingly depressed, constantly, both failing to deal with the aftermath of that night. Sirius had some good days, but, predominantly, they were bad. He did not know how to help him, and neither Sirius nor Regulus knew how to be helped--there was a predisposition to depression among Blacks, always aggravated by use of or exposure to Old Magic, followed by withdrawal. They'd both suffered that more than adequately.

Yasmin Smith spoke long about the generosity of the Black family in donating the land, and Sirius duly bowed and smiled, but it wasn't real, and it fooled no one, so far as Harry could tell. With her speech over, the youngest muggleborn enrolled in the school, five-year-old Marco Moore, stepped forward with muggle safety-scissors and sliced through the red ribbon.

The crowd cheered and one by one, the muggleborns filed through the front door of the Firth College to begin their first day of magical immersion classes, to prepare them for school with magical-born children in September. Harry posed for a few photos with Sirius and another with Minister Malfoy and Draco, and finally, a half-dozen with Yasmin Smith.

When the reporters were mostly cleared out and the volunteers were banishing the confetti to bins, she pulled him aside, discreetly erecting the muffling spell he'd taught her. “Zacharias sends his love,” she said as they walked.

“And to him,” Harry replied. Zacharias was away at Puddlemere training camp until November, after which he'd be a reserve Chaser for the team when professional Quidditch season started.

“Have you thought more about what we talked about?” asked Yasmin.

“Yes,” said Harry. “But I told you it would be difficult for me to do. I have to take an oath.”

Yasmin rolled her eyes. “As if that would be a difficulty for you, and we both know...well.”

“I know,” Harry agreed, but still. It wasn't something to enter into lightly. “Do you think they would be willing? After all this?” He gestured vaguely, indicating himself, the trial, their trials, the battle that was long overdue for a resolution.

“I know they would be,” she said. “I know they are.”
“But why?” Harry wanted to know. “The rest of the wizarding world is ready and willing to sit back and accept things as they are now that the Dark Lord's dead. It's not perfect, but when have wizards been anything but complacent?”

“Death Eaters are different,” she said. “Or should I say, Knights of Walpurgis?”

Harry lifted his eyebrows, curious. “They've restyled themselves?”

She shrugged. “With a new Mark—a new leader—comes a new direction...a new strategy. A new opportunity. Bonfire night represents rebirth to many devotees; the Phoenix is appropriate.”

“What would you have me do?” he asked.

“What Narcissa cannot,” she said. “We are not yet out of the woods. We may never be. You are the linchpin of three-hundred willing men and women, ready to devote their time to a different kind of solution.”

“Different, but just as dangerous,” said Harry.

“And yet, to us, the alternative is worse.”

Harry nodded. “I'll give you an answer in two weeks,” he said. She tilted her head, watchful, but said nothing. After a moment, she nodded, and turned to follow the muggleborns inside.

Draco's eyes followed him as he wound his way back to him. “Have you made a decision yet?”

“I told her I'd let her know in two weeks.”

“But?” said Draco.

Harry glanced at him, their hands sliding together by habit now. “I made up my mind last week. You know that.” You can feel it, he added, and knew Draco felt that, too.

He shrugged. “But not what your decision was going to be. You've blocked me.”

Harry smiled wryly. “Yes, sorry about that. I needed to focus.”

“Hermione knows,” Draco said, not without some amount of bitterness.

“Hermione's my best friend,” he said. Draco's jealousy flooded them both, and Harry added, softly, affectionately, “And we're connected in a way that you and I can never be. Your father made me promise, remember?”

“I would never want to be subservient to you, anyway.”

“And I would never want you to be,” Harry said. “Nor, really, do I want Hermione to be, but she was already, and she has requested to fulfil her original promise of five years.” He shrugged. “She's connected to this as you aren't.”

“I want to be, though,” said Draco. “I want to be involved.”

“You are,” said Harry. Just not like this, he added silently. Not yet. At that, Draco looked at him sharply, and Harry offered him a conciliatory smile. “Later,” he promised him. “I need to talk to Hermione now. Will you be by in the morning?” Which, really, was as much answer as Draco would need.
“Yes,” he said, after a moment. He gave Draco’s hand a squeeze, and then apparated.

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“Are you sure,” said Zacharias, “that this is what you want? Continuing the muggleborn operation is...” He trailed off, leaving unsaid all of the adjectives that could’ve fit, like ‘dangerous’, or ‘time-consuming’, or ‘morally questionable’, or ‘utterly stupid’.

Harry looked away, lips pressed firmly together as he studied the hanging framed picture of a Dementor, falsely tinged pink with watercolour paint. His fingertip circled the rim of his glass. “What I want is so far from reality that I’ve stopped considering it. Is this the right thing to do, is the better question.”

Hermione shared a look with Ron. “You’ve been hiding a long time,” she said. “This could last years...this could last the rest of your life.”

“What else would I do with it?” Harry asked bitterly. “The life of not-an- Unspeakable is hardly conducive to maintaining meaningful romantic relationships.”

“I still can’t believe they recruited you,” said Ron. “After all that.”

He shrugged. “The Department of Mysteries has its own agenda. I’m not even on the official payroll.”

“And speaking of agendas,” Pansy said angrily, “if yours has anything at all to do with hurting Draco—”

“God, you know I—” Harry began harshly, then, more softly: “I don’t want to. But either way, how can I be sure?”

“He’s going to be jealous,” Blaise said. “All of us, and not him? Fuck, mate, you’ve even got a Hufflepuff here,” he said, gesturing to Zacharias. “And Weasley.”

“Piss off,” Ron said.

Harry sighed, lowering his head to his hands. “What am I supposed to do about that?” he asked, angrily. “Either I’m not-an- Unspeakable and I can’t tell him what I do, or I’m not-an- Unspeakable and a revolutionist lord and I still can’t tell him what I do.”

“Mark him,” said Luna, as if it were obvious. To her, it seemed to be.

“Contract,” Harry muttered. “Besides, I don’t want to control him.”

“You control us,” said Hermione.

“I don’t like this,” Harry said, and then quieted. He rubbed his face furiously. “Okay, okay—I’m dealing with it. Dark lord, et cetera et cetera. We need to make a plan because I need to call the Death Eaters—”

“Knights of Walpurgis,” said Pansy. “Though I prefer just the ‘Knights’, for simplicity’s sake.”

“Pansy,” Harry said, “we can be whatever you want if you just shut up long enough to make a plan.”

“Not likely,” said Pansy, rolling her eyes. “I didn’t return from an impromptu holiday in the Mediterranean to take a vow of silence. You’ll take me as I am or I’ll exercise my right to have my Mark removed.”
“Sometimes, I wish you would,” he said dourly, but there was no feeling behind it. Pansy, and her mother, were indispensable, both because she was Draco’s very best friend in the world, and because she was surprisingly intelligent and observant. He needed—wanted—her on his side, with him. Whatever: “As I was saying, I told Zach’s mum I’d call the Knights in two weeks. I need a firm strategy. I refuse to run amok, wreaking havoc randomly like our erstwhile dark lord.”

“So make one,” Ron said. “Select your advisors, call the meeting, and enact it.”

“It would be truly wonderful,” Zacharias said flatly, “if the inane things you said came with annotated notes that we could reference in order to get real meaning out of the stupid shit that you say sometimes, Weasley.”

“Advisors, then,” Harry said, latching onto something concrete before Zach and Ron—or Zach and anyone, really—could get into it. “Like an Inner Circle? All right, good. Voldemort had one of those. Should it be you lot?”

“Busy,” Luna said, nose a half-inch from her wine as she stared intently into it. “Sorry, Harry. School—and then I’ve secured an internship at the Prophet afterwards.” Harry looked at her askance, but stopped himself before asking why she was interning at her father’s rival paper.

“Busy,” Pansy said, staring at her nails. “With life, in general. And by that, I mean I’ve been accepted to Cambridge, for Alchemy.”

“Congratulations!” Hermione gushed. “I’m reading Alchemy, too! But with a minor in Runes.” Pansy looked stricken. “Another four years with you, Granger?”

“Afraid so,” Hermione said. Then, “Shall we room?”

“Yes, of course,” Pansy said right away, then immediately looked as if she hated herself for capitulating so quickly.

“And here we are,” Ron said scratching his whiskered chin, “continuing to have no plan whatsoever. If we’re going to keep fucking around, then I’m going to go home to Lavender’s lavender tarts and Quidditch on the floo.”

“Still need advisors,” Harry said. “Hermione?”

“Of course, Harry,” she said. “Always.”

“Ron?”

“Sure, mate, but with the bakery...part-time okay?”

“Fine,” said Harry. He looked to Zacharias. “I assume that you’re busy, as well.”

“Travelling with the team,” Zach said.

“Fine, good,” said Harry. “I expected as much—I was really hoping that Blaise would, actually.”

“Might as well,” said Blaise. “It was important enough to me to take the Dark Mark in the first place; I should finish what I started.”

Unsaid went all the hypotheticals wherein they never finished. “This is different, though,” said Harry. “We do this right or not at all.”
“No murder,” Hermione said pointedly.

“Self-defence?” asked Pansy.

Harry hesitated. “Use judgement...are we getting ahead of ourselves?”

“No,” said Zach. “This sort of thing’s important.”

“How will we identify one another? We need to be a cohesive unit,” said Ron.

“Mm, black robes are still fine,” Harry said. “But no masks. Our intention will be to remain *anonymous*, not inspire fear. And it can’t look like I have anything to do with this. Pansy—teach Ron and Zach the emptiness spell for hoods before you leave today.”

“Of course,” she said.

“If we’re caught,” Hermione said lowly, “what do we do? To keep from implicating everyone else?”

Harry smiled wryly. “Tell the truth,” he said. The group shared a look. Hermione licked her lips, considering her words.

“How did you do it?” she asked. “I saw you swallow Veritaserum in the courtroom.”

Harry pulled a small phial from his pocket. It was half-full, but what remained of the liquid was thick and dark. “He gave me this. It was left for me after he died. If I took it, he said, I could change my version of truth to whatever case my legal team constructed for me. It would save me from *Veritaserum*—and it did—but it would also make me forget the real truth. My choice—and Dumbledore did always say that it was our choices that made us who we are. I didn’t have long to consider my options—hours, really—but I did know that forgetting everything that happened, everything I learned about him and myself, would have not helped anything. We would have ended this one ‘war’, but only in name. The death of the Dark Lord meant only an end to the fear of him, not the problems he caused or causes he sought solutions for.”

“So you took half of it?” Ron guessed.

“But that wouldn’t work,” Pansy said, before Harry could answer. “Potions don’t work like that, Weasley.”

“No, they don’t,” Hermione agreed quietly. “But that’s not all there was to it, was it?”

“No,” Harry agreed. He touched his chest, right over where the phoenix mark was burned into his skin—but unlike the vibrant flames on those of the former Death Eaters, his was black and writhing. “There is something left of him,” he said quietly. “Not a horcrux or a ghost, or anything so substantial, but there’s his...magic, maybe. What I took during the ritual has merged with my own, but it’s not quite mine, and I don’t think it ever will be. It’s too independent, too strong.” He shook his head, indicating his confusion. “Whatever it is, I knew it was still a connection to him, and I thought that if I just focused on the connection while I took the potion and let it reform my memories, that I could separate them.”


Harry shrugged. “Is it?”

They all looked at each other, words failing them. Blaise was the first to speak: “The Dark Lord didn’t know about this.”
“No,” Harry agreed. “I’m not sure which choice he expected me to make, but this one was not on the table. He had no idea.”

“You made it up,” Ron said. Harry shrugged. Hermione and Pansy shared another significant look. Even Luna was looking on with less-vague eyes.

“But more importantly,” said Harry, “I can show you how to do it.”

Draco was wearing what Harry was beginning to call his PR robes, and they looked exceptionally good on him. He slid through the French doors that led onto River House’s veranda, and took the chair opposite Harry at the table. Ginger popped in with a cup of tea and a plate of peeled orange slices for him.

“It’s depressing just speaking to your family now,” he said quietly. “Uncle Regulus looks about two good cries from dying of heartbreak and Uncle Sirius is increasingly unstable.”

“Tell me about it,” Harry sighed. “I want to get away and get my own place, but I’m afraid to leave the two of them alone.”

“They need something to occupy their minds,” suggested Draco.

“Like what?”

Draco shrugged, even as he stuffed an orange wedge in his mouth. “A girlfriend for Uncle Sirius, I’d say. As for Uncle Regulus…I really don’t know. A hobby. Something difficult and time-consuming. Another werewolf to spend the full moon with.”

Harry’s heart clenched. The moons had not been kind to Regulus. He spent them out on the grounds with Sirius, but they both came in the next morning looking more depressed than the day before. Too many memories tied up in full moons for both of them.

“I don’t know any other werewolves,” Harry admitted.

“I’ll ask my father,” Draco said. Harry gave him a grateful smile.

“Has your mum been able to make any progress on overturning the WPA or the MPA?”

“It’s slow-going,” said Draco. “I don’t think it’ll be up before the year’s out. The Wizengamot’s still nervous.”

“I suppose it’s good Hermione decided to set her parents up in magical Australia anyway, then. They’re finally getting accustomed to port-key travel, apparently.”

“What about your mum?” asked Draco cautiously.

Harry pressed his lips together angrily. “I couldn’t get Snape’s sentenced reduced.”

Draco looked stricken. “Really? Mum thought that we were sure to get six months or so taken off. Merlin—Snape, of all the Death Eaters. Why he got such a long sentence I have no idea.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Harry.

“What?” Draco said. “It’s Professor Snape, Harry. He helped you…your mum loves him.”

“It doesn’t matter because he’s not going to serve it,” Harry clarified. “We have a way to get him out.
Blaise’s oldest brother has an apothecary in Italy and has agreed to hire them in his research department; I’m sending them both there. I owe her this much.”

“We,” Draco said slowly. Harry felt his jealously and his sadness through the bond. Once again, he felt left out.

“I—yes,” said Harry. “This weekend, in fact.”

“I suppose I should make myself scarce so I won’t be in the way,” Draco muttered.

“You’re never in the way,” Harry said. “I...Draco, I want desperately for you to be part of this.”

“Then let me,” said Draco.

“I can’t Mark you,” said Harry. “I promised your dad. And the Knights of Walpurgis—”

“The Knights of Walpurgis?” Draco asked archly.

Harry shrugged, grinning. “I am a benevolent leader. If they want to rename themselves something pretentious then I shall allow it. But the point is that they won’t feel comfortable if I’ve let someone among them who could betray them.”

“Then just Mark me anyway,” Draco said. “We can figure out a way around the contract.”

“I already have,” said Harry. “But it won’t require me Marking you.”

“What then?”

Harry grinned at him. “Marry me,” he said.

Draco blinked several times, his mouth parting but making no sound. He picked up another slice of orange and ate it, eyes never leaving Harry’s face. He chewed, swallowed, and took a sip of his tea. Harry bit his lip, stifling his smile. He might’ve started to feel worried by now if it weren’t for their stupid bond, but he couldn’t feel any revulsion or disgust coming off of Draco...just the stunned mind silence of being completely and utterly surprised.

“All right,” Draco said at last.

“All right?” Harry repeated.

Draco rolled his eyes. “Did you expect me to faint?”

“For a minute there, yeah,” said Harry.

Draco grinned at him. “Come here,” he said. Harry didn’t need to be told twice. He jumped from his chair and came around the table to slide into Draco’s lap. Draco’s hands went immediately to his hips and Harry leaned down to press their lips together softly.

“I’ll tell you everything,” he said, pulling back. “I won’t leave you out. I promise.”

“I know,” said Draco, pulling him back in. Harry went willingly. It was during times like this that he completely forgot the things he’d lost, the people he’d lost—both the dead and those like his father and uncle who were practically the living dead. He could kiss Draco, or slide into bed with him, their bodies warm and slick with desire and perspiration, and he could forget that he was in charge now, and that it was because the Dark Lord was dead. He could forget that he missed him, and how stupid it was that he did. He could forget that he was about to start up a revolution to save muggleborns.
from a life of no magic, and that it might never end—that the war that was over had really only been a single battle—that there was no peace, not really.

“I really, really, really love you,” said Harry, pulling away again because it was important, at that moment, that Draco know.

“Stop being daft,” Draco said, “and kiss me again.”

“All right,” Harry said, and did just that.

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About a year has passed. I've returned to the place of the battle, to its birds that have learned their unfolding of wings from a subtle lift of a surprised eyebrow, or perhaps from a razor blade - wings, now the shade of early twilight, now of state bad blood.

Now the place is abuzz with trading in your ankles' remnants, bronzes of sunburnt breastplates, dying laughter, bruises, rumours of fresh reserves, memories of high treason, laundered banners with imprints of the many who since have risen.

All's overgrown with people. A ruin's a rather stubborn architectural style. And the heart's distinction from a pitch-black cavern isn't that great; not great enough to fear that we may collide again like blind eggs somewhere.

At sunrise, when nobody stares at one's face, I often, set out on foot to a monument cast in molten lengthy bad dreams. And it says on the plinth "commander in chief." But it reads "in grief," or "in brief," or "in going under."

—Joseph Brodsky

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End.

Chapter End Notes

This has been a long time coming, but it's finally complete. I am so excited. I would like to thank laureen/giesha_kitten @ livejournal who has been my most wonderful beta for this story (and my original fiction) for the past six years. She is truly wonderful, and if you leave feedback (which is greatly appreciated!) she deserves some, too.
FOLLOW ME ON TUMBLR for snippets, what I'm working on next, and to ask me anything :) lol-zeitgeistic on Tumblr

DO NOT REPOST OR ARCHIVE THIS FIC ANYWHERE. (I can't believe I am having to put this notice up again. What happened to fandom etiquette?) ty

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!