### Summary

Things start out well for Harry this year: he only has to put up with the Dursleys for a week before he's whisked off to Malfoy Manor, where Hermione soon arrives. After spending a happy summer with his two best friends, Harry's cheerfully prepared for his fourth year at Hogwarts.
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Or so he thinks. Evil is gathering strength, and the signs are there - but will anyone read them in time?

Notes

Once again, thank you so much to Cynical Turkey. Your help has been invaluable, even if I've had to ignore some of your more eccentric suggestions!
In Which Harry Returns to Malfoy Manor and Visits Sirius

Harry sat down, careful not to sit on the grass snake's tail where it disappeared into the long grass. “Still finding plenty of prey here?”

“Yes, human boy. We've eaten most of the mice, but there are some very stupid birds that have started coming here,” the snake said happily.

Harry frowned. “Don't go eating any white owls, you hear me? I don't think you're big enough to eat Hedwig, but I'll be angry if you try.”

The snake whipped its tail closer to its body. “You ask a lot, human boy.”

Harry laughed. “You know that's not true.”

“Perhaps,” the snake said non-committally.

“Hey, I made you really popular when I told you about this field. The least you could do is not eat my owl.”

“I have enjoyed telling the story of your defeat of the King of the Serpents, this is true,” the snake conceded.

Harry grimaced, not wanting to talk about the basilisk. “I better go, my boyfriend will be here soon. I'll see you next year.”

The snake hissed a farewell as Harry stood up and brushed his shorts down. “Don't get into trouble this year.”

“You can't talk, human boy,” the snake replied.

Harry laughed as he left the field. He headed back to Privet Drive in a good mood. Draco and Narcissa would be there in an hour, and then he wouldn't have to deal with the Dursleys for an entire year.

When he walked through the front door he could see the Dursleys huddled the kitchen table, clearly nervous about the Malfoys' impending visit. Harry couldn't blame them. Their interactions with Narcissa had not turned out well for them so far. He stifled a laugh as he headed upstairs to his room. He was fully packed already, with Hedwig sleeping in her cage, so he decided to finish the Beatrix Potter book Narcissa had given him last Christmas.

He somehow managed to become so wrapped up in the children's stories that the sound of the doorbell startled him. Harry dropped the book on his bed and ran down the stairs, jumping down the last two just as Uncle Vernon stepped out of the kitchen.

“At least they're punctual,” he grunted.

Harry ignored him and opened the front door to reveal a beaming Draco and a composed Narcissa.

“Hello, Harry. Draco, run along and help him with his things. I'd like to leave as soon as possible,” Narcissa said, eyeing Uncle Vernon with icy disdain.

Harry grabbed Draco's hand and pulled him up the stairs, eager to leave. Once in Harry's room, Draco tugged Harry towards him and gave him a kiss.
“I like it when you come and rescue me,” Harry said as they pulled apart.

“Me too, even if Mother has forbidden me from having any fun with your cousin,” replied Draco.

“Fun with Dudley?” Harry stared at him.

“I was going to bring some Dungbombs and leave them in his room, but she refused to let me leave the Manor without emptying my pockets,” Draco complained.

Harry laughed. “You mum knows you too well.”

“Yes. It's rather annoying, isn't it?”

As Harry picked up his book and added it to his trunk, Draco opened Hedwig's cage and gently woke her up. “Go to Malfoy Manor.”

Hedwig gave a chirp as she took off through the open window. Harry slammed his trunk shut and checked under the loose floorboard.

“All set,” he said.

He dragged his trunk down the stairs, with Draco carrying Hedwig's cage and the Firebolt. They found Narcissa standing in the kitchen, looking curiously at the kitchen appliances and completely ignoring the Dursleys, who were clustered at the far end of the table. She turned at their entrance and smiled.

“All set,” he said.

He dragged his trunk down the stairs, with Draco carrying Hedwig's cage and the Firebolt. They found Narcissa standing in the kitchen, looking curiously at the kitchen appliances and completely ignoring the Dursleys, who were clustered at the far end of the table. She turned at their entrance and smiled.

“Allow me,” she said, and shrank down Harry's things. As he put them in his pockets, she turned back to the Dursleys. “I suppose I should thank you for treating Harry in a humane fashion for once. You have managed to exceed my low expectations. I shall probably see you the same time next summer. Do have a good year.”

“Now just wait a minute,” Uncle Vernon said angrily.

Narcissa paused. “Yes? Do you have a problem with me collecting Harry in the first week of holidays again?”

Uncle Vernon shrunk down a bit. “I just don't see why you have to wait a week at all. Can't you lot just keep him?”

Narcissa's eyes flashed angrily. “Believe me, I would take great pleasure in not having to inflict your presence on Harry. But I do believe Dumbledore has explained the concept of familial blood protection to you, or at least to your wife. If you've any problems, you may contact him about them. Good day.”

She whirled around and swept out the door with her skirt billowing behind her in a very Severus-like manner. Draco followed her with a grin. Harry looked at the Dursleys, who were all looking a little stunned.

“See you then, I guess,” he said before he followed the Malfoys outside.

Narcissa was fuming by the time Harry joined them.

“I'm sorry about that, Harry, but I felt it prudent to leave before I hexed the whole sorry lot of them,” she said. “They are some of the most disgusting people I've ever had the misfortune to meet, and I've met more than my fair share of Death Eaters.”
Harry shook his head. “It's fine, really. I'm just glad to be out of there. One week a year is nothing.”

Draco took his hand as they began walking down the footpath. “Are you hungry? Mother was thinking of taking us to Amesbury for lunch.”

“Starving. Dudley's been put on a diet by his school nurse, and Aunt Petunia decided the rest of us had to join in to make him feel better,” Harry said.

Narcissa raked her eyes over him sharply. “They haven't actually been starving you, I hope.”

“They tried. But they didn't know about all the sweets I brought back from Hogwarts with me. I've been living on them all week. Don't tell Hermione.”

“You don't want a lecture on dental hygiene?” Draco asked slyly.

“Not really, no.”

Narcissa led them to the laneway they'd Apparated out of last time they'd picked up Harry. “In light of that, I think we shall take lunch at home. Something very healthy.”

“Mother -”

“I think you can forgo a milkshake in order for Harry to have a proper meal, darling. You may ask the elves for dessert afterwards, if you wish, but right now I think Harry needs some vegetables, don't you? Now, take my hands.”

Narcissa Apparated them to the gates of Malfoy Manor. She released their hands as they walked through. “Lunch will be in an hour, Draco. Why don't you help Harry get settled?”

“Yes, Mother.”

Harry looked around him as Draco pulled him up the drive. The Manor looked the same as it had last time he'd visited.

“I thought your mum redecorated,” he said.

“She did the interior. I think she's planning on doing the gardens this year,” Draco said.

As soon as they stepped into the foyer, Harry could see the changes. Gone was the black wallpaper, replaced with a cream and gold floral pattern that brightened the room and made it appear even larger. Two large vases of flowers stood on either side of the staircase. The hallway upstairs had the same new wallpaper on it, with a cream rug running the length of the floor. The portraits of Malfoy ancestors that had lined the walls had been replaced with Asian prints of flowers and streams, leaving the hallway far cheerier than it had been.

Draco caught Harry staring at the walls. “She had the elves put them all in my father's study. She didn't want to be reminded of him, and neither did I. Now come on.”

Harry smiled in relief as Draco led him into the Green Bedroom. It looked exactly the same as it had the last time he'd stayed here. “I'm glad this room's still the same,” he said.

Draco smiled. “You can change it if you want.”

“What? I couldn't do that,” Harry protested.

Draco shrugged. “It's not like we can't afford it, and it's your room now. No one else is going to stay
in it; Mother and I are agreed on that.”

Harry smiled crookedly. “Thank you.”

“Don't get sappy on me, Potter,” Draco said waringly. “Tilly!”

Tilly popped into the room at once. “How can Tilly be helping Master Draco?”

“Can you unshrink Harry's things and put them away, please?”

“Of course, Master Draco. Tilly is happy to be helping Harry Potter,” she squeaked. She gave a little curtsy and held her hands out.

“Thanks, Tilly. How've you been?” Harry asked as he handed her his things.

“Tilly is good, sir! Tilly is glad that sir is visiting again.”

“I forgot to mention the last time I saw you that I like your new pillowcase,” Harry said. It was true; unlike the old, filthy pillowcases the Malfoy elves had used to wear, this one was clean and pressed. With its light blue checks, it looked more like a dress on the elf.

Tilly beamed. “Thank you, sir. Mistress is giving all elves new pillowcases last year!”

Draco rolled his eyes but smiled all the same. “Mother disagreed rather strongly with how my father used to treat our elves. Everyone in the Manor is happier now that he's locked up. Except possibly the peacocks.”

Harry laughed at the image of the albino peacocks pining after Lucius Malfoy. “Your mum doesn't like them?”

“She just doesn't care about them. He used to look after them himself because he didn't trust the elves. So now that they're left alone, they've gone a bit wild.”

“The peacocks is liking to chase us elves, sir,” Tilly said. “They is not nice birds.”

“They don't hurt you, do they?” Harry asked.

Draco laughed as Tilly shook her head, making her ears flap. “Oh no, sir. Mistress is letting us elves fight the peacocks if they is being mean to us.”

“The elves can more than take care of themselves. I don't think I've ever seen anything funnier than a sulking peacock,” Draco said. “Wait, no. I nearly forgot about putting that spider on Weasley's face last year. But this is a close second.”

They spent the remainder of the hour chatting on Harry's bed as they watched Tilly put away Harry's clothes. Just as they were thinking about heading downstairs, Dobby Apparated into the room.

“Hello, Harry Potter!” he said excitedly.

“Hi, Dobby,” Harry said, trying not to laugh.

The last time he'd seen Dobby, he'd been wearing one of Draco's old suits. Draco had told him that Narcissa had given Dobby permission to choose his own clothes after that, with disastrous results. It still hadn't prepared him for the sight before him.

Dobby was wearing what looked like a pair of child's pyjama shorts with cartoon cars on them and a
red t-shirt, but he'd chosen to accessorise those with a silky silver scarf and a plastic tiara. On his feet he was wearing the sparkly gold jelly sandals that Draco had told Harry about last summer.

Harry smothered a grin. “Nice outfit.”

“Thank you, Harry Potter! Miss Narcissa is giving Dobby the scarf last night!” Dobby smoothed the scarf down proudly.

Draco rolled his eyes. “Was there a reason you're here?”

Dobby let go of the scarf. “Yes, sir. Miss Narcissa is wanting to eat on the balcony today. She is liking the sunshine and is thinking it will be pleasant to be viewing the roses as you is eating.”

Harry smiled in bemusement to hear what must be Narcissa's phrase filtered through Dobby's speech patterns.

“Tell Mother we'll be down in a minute,” Draco said.

“Yes, sir.”

After Dobby Disapparated away, Draco turned to Harry. “Do you have to encourage him with those clothes of his? It's bad enough that Mother does so.”

“What? I like his clothes. You agree with me, don't you, Tilly?”

Tilly looked up, startled. “Tilly is liking her pillowcase, sir,” she said diplomatically.

Draco laughed. “Come on, before you start trying to corrupt Tilly.”

Narcissa was sitting at a small table on the balcony when they joined her. There was a large chicken salad in the centre of the table, and a jug of iced water. She shaded her eyes against the sun and smiled up at them.

“Hurry up while it's still fresh. I expect it will wilt in the sun.”

Harry had to admit it was a relief to have some healthy food after a week surviving on old cakes and sweets from Honeydukes. He had two servings before Dobby appeared to remove the emptied salad bowl. He returned ten seconds later with a platter of fresh fruit.

Narcissa delicately selected a strawberry and straightened up to look at Harry. “I have something of a more serious nature to ask you.”

Harry wasn't surprised. Up until that point they'd been discussing Dobby's clothes. Pretty much anything was a more serious topic than that.

“I've been making inquiries within the Ministry to see if I could secure you a visit with Sirius. Would you like to see him?”

“Sure. I didn't have a chance to talk to him in June,” Harry said eagerly.

Narcissa nodded happily. “People locked in the Ministry's holding cells aren't usually allowed visitors at all, but I've some rather useful contacts within the Ministry who have agreed to let us see him. I think they're looking to minimise the fall out once the whole affair goes public.”

“What's happening with his trial? I still haven't gotten a subscription to the *Daily Prophet*.”
Narcissa dabbed her mouth with a napkin. “I believe it is scheduled to take place shortly after you return to Hogwarts. The Ministry is hoping certain other events will overshadow the trial.”

“What other events?” Draco asked peevishly. “You keep hinting at something.”

“And I shall tell you eventually, darling. Do you want all the facts, or rumour and hearsay?”

“Fine,” Draco muttered sulkily, scooping up a peach.

“Do you think he'll be freed?” asked Harry.

“Yes. The Ministry wouldn't be so worried if they still thought he was guilty. From what I understand, it is Severus' evidence that is the most convincing.”

“Snape? But he hates Uncle Sirius,” Draco said.

“Exactly. And yet his testimony and his memory of the events in the Shrieking Shack both support Sirius' story,” Narcissa explained. “Think of it from the Ministry's perspective. If someone who has that much animosity with Sirius is saying, however grudgingly, that Sirius is innocent, surely there might be some truth to it? Not to mention that Dumbledore is a member of the Wizengamot that will be conducting the trial.”

“Have Draco and I been asked to be witnesses or something?” Harry asked.

“Thankfully not. There isn't anything new that you could say in Sirius' defence, and Dumbledore's word carries a tad more weight than either of yours could,” said Narcissa.

Harry nodded in relief. “So when are we seeing him?”

“Whenver you like, although we need to give two days' notice due to some bureaucratic nonsense I don't care to understand,” said Narcissa.

“Is Saturday okay?”

“Perfectly. I shall contact the Department of Magical Law Enforcement later today,” Narcissa said. 

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On Saturday morning Harry walked down into the foyer a little nervously. Narcissa had told him over breakfast that he should wear his robes to the Ministry, and he'd also tried unsuccessfully to get his hair to lie neatly.

Narcissa was already waiting by the fireplace. She ran her eyes over Harry before nodding approvingly. “Those will be fine for today, although you'll need to buy new ones at some point over the summer. Those are getting a little small for you.”

Harry looked down at his wrists, which were poking out of his sleeves. “I probably need new school robes as well.”

Narcissa nodded. “Draco does too, along with some new dress robes.”

“Not that I'm complaining, but why do I need new dress robes?” Draco asked as he walked down the stairs.

“You'll see, darling,” Narcissa said with a secretive smile.
Draco narrowed his eyes. “Is this to do with those events you keep not telling me about?”

Narcissa’s smile widened. “Perhaps.”

Instead of leading them out the front door like Harry had been expecting, Narcissa reached up to the mantle and picked up a pot of Floo powder. “Draco, you may go first. Watch closely, Harry.”

Draco gathered up some powder, threw it into the fireplace and stepped into the green flames that burst up. “Ministry of Magic.” He spun on the spot, getting faster and faster, before disappearing into the flames.

“Enunciate clearly, and try to keep your arms close to your body,” Narcissa instructed, holding out the pot.

Harry picked up some powder, cast it into the fireplace and stepped into the warm green flames. “Ministry of Magic,” he said. He squeezed his eyes shut tightly in the smoke and shoved his hands into his pockets. He spun around quickly before he began to slow, and then stumbled out of the fireplace. Luckily Draco was there to catch him.

“Coordinated as ever,” he smirked.

“Shut it,” Harry grumbled good-naturedly.

Narcissa stepped out smoothly and brushed down her robes before doing the same to Harry’s. “Stick close to me boys, it will be busy in here with the lead up to the Quidditch World Cup.”

She set off across the vast hall they were in. Harry followed in silence, too busy looking around him to speak. They’d emerged from one of a number of fireplaces that lined the walls, and there were witches and wizards coming and going from them steady streams. Narcissa exchanged greetings with quite a few of them, but didn’t slow down to talk to anyone.

Straight ahead of him was a fountain with golden statues in the centre of it, depicting a witch, a wizard, a house-elf, a centaur and a goblin. Narcissa led Draco around it, but Harry stopped to read the sign.

All proceeds from the Fountain of Magical Brethren will be given to St Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries.

There were a handful of coins glinting up from the base of the pool. Harry threw in a Galleon and made a wish that Sirius would be freed soon before hurrying to catch up with the Malfoys.

They were stopped at a security check point, slightly off the side from the stream of Ministry employees hurrying through a large golden gate. A bored looking security guard was sitting there, and had placed Draco’s wand on a brass plate. As Harry joined them, a strip of parchment slid out of the plate.

“Ten inches, unicorn-hair core. Been used for three years?”

Draco nodded. The witch gave him back his wand, impaled the piece of parchment on a receipt spike, and held her hand out for Harry’s wand to repeat the process.

“Eleven inches, phoenix-feather core. Used for three years?”

He nodded and got his wand back. The security witch waved a long, thin, golden rod in front of Harry and Draco before jerking her head towards the gates. They walked through and came to a row
of old-fashioned lifts behind golden grills. They joined the shortest line, and a few minutes later they were squeezed into the lift.

“Hold onto a rope, boys,” Narcissa said.

Harry looked up to see golden ropes hanging from the ceiling of the lift. He had to almost stand on his tiptoes to grasp his, and just in time. The lift gave a violent lurch as it ascended, making Harry stumble into Draco.

“Level Seven, Department of Magical Games and Sports, incorporating the British and Irish Quidditch League Headquarters, Official Gobstones Club and Ludicrous Patents Office,” announced a smooth female voice.

The lift doors opens onto a very busy corridor. People were rushing past, carrying stacks of paper, dictating to floating quills, having shouted conversations and generally looking harried. A wizard staggered onto the lift, muttering about Bludgers and carrying a crate which kept making thumping sounds. A broomstick went shooting past, making people duck out of its trajectory with startled shouts before Harry heard a dull thud followed by a groan. He shared a nervous giggle with Draco.

A pair of witches got onto the lift. “The merpeople have finally agreed,” the first one said.

“Tried their time,” her friend replied.

“Well the language barrier didn’t help…”

Draco snorted quietly. “Mermish is really easy,” he whispered when Harry looked at him.

One of the witches overheard him. “Know a lot about it, do you, kid?” she asked with a smirk.

Draco raised an eyebrow and made some screeching sounds. There was silence in the lift as everyone turned to stare at him, then the two witches burst out laughing.

“Nice accent,” the first said in surprise.

“What did you say?” Harry asked.

“A common Mermish insult. I'm not repeating it in front of Mother,” grinned Draco.

The second witch glanced at Narcissa. “No, best not to, I think.”

“I sincerely hope you've learned something other than insults in that language, Draco,” she said.

“Of course, Mother.”

They stopped talking after that, as the lift had become crowded with Ministry workers, most of whom were discussing the World Cup. At least the press of bodies prevented Harry from swaying under his rope as the lift jerked upwards.

“Level Two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, including the Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters and Wizengamot Administration Services,” said the cool female voice.

“Come along boys,” Narcissa said.

They squeezed through the crowd and found themselves in a corridor that was slightly less busy than the ones they'd seen so far. They walked through some thick wooden doors into an open plan office. The cluttered cubicles were low enough for the red-robed Aurors to talk to each other over the walls.
An Auror spotted them and came over to greet them. Harry recognised him as one of the Aurors who had arrested Mr Malfoy, the one who had wanted to use sniffer dogs to find Harry in the Chamber of Secrets. A glance at Draco told him that he'd recognised him too.

“Mrs Malfoy, right on time. Welcome to Auror Headquarters,” he said in his slow, deep voice.

“Thank you, Mr Shacklebolt. This is Harry, and my son Draco.”

Shacklebolt acknowledged them with a nod. “Mr Potter, the prisoner is ready to see you. I will have to escort you to his cell. Ministry protocol, I'm afraid.”

“Can Draco and Narcissa come too?” Harry asked.

“If you like. Follow me.”

Shacklebolt led them around the perimeter of the room to a set of heavy barred doors. He traced a pattern in the air with his wand, and they opened at once. As soon as they'd all stepped through, the doors slammed shut behind them.

The corridor ahead of them was lined on both sides with yet more bars. Shacklebolt walked calmly past the cells, but Harry couldn't help peering into them all. They looked similar to the prison cells he'd seen in Muggle movies: a plain bed, a toilet and sink. Most were unoccupied, but the prisoners he did see mostly looked bored. A few were pacing behind their bars, some were reading, and one appeared to be meditating.

Shacklebolt stopped before the last cell. It was the only one with a guard stationed outside it.

“You can take a half hour, Williamson,” Shacklebolt said. He waited until Williamson had walked back through the far doorway, then he turned back to the group. “You'll have to stay outside the cell. The bars are warded, so you're unable to have any physical contact with the prisoner, but you can communicate freely.”

“How have I gone from 'Sirius' to 'prisoner' in a day, Kingsley?”

Shacklebolt grinned into the cell. “Yesterday I was helping you with the Daily Prophet crossword. Today I'm escorting visitors.” He looked at Harry. “Go on,” he said, before stepping back a few paces.

Harry walked forward and stopped a foot away from the bars. Sirius threw his newspaper onto his bed as he got up. He looked better than the last time Harry had seen him. He'd showered and had a haircut, and no longer looked so corpse-like, though he was still very skinny. He stared at Harry before breaking into a wide grin that took years off his face.

“Harry! So good to see you properly.”

“Yeah. You look well,” Harry said a little awkwardly. Not even Narcissa had been able to tell him the proper etiquette for this situation.

“This place is like a luxury hotel after Azkaban. No dementors, proper food, showers... I even get the Prophet each day,” Sirius said cheerfully.

Harry grinned back at him. “You ready for your trial?”

Sirius nodded. “Not long now, and I'll finally be free.”
“Narcissa says the Ministry thinks you're innocent now,” Harry agreed.

“Narcissa?”

Narcissa walked into Sirius' line of sight, guiding Draco along with her. “Hello, Sirius.”

Confusion flitted over Sirius' face. “What are you doing here?”

“I'm staying at Draco's for the summer,” Harry cut in.

Sirius' eyes darted from Narcissa to Draco and back to Harry. “With the Malfoys?”

“Yeah.”

“A lot has happened whilst you were in Azkaban,” Narcissa said mildly.

“Clearly,” Sirius said. “Last I knew, you were married to a Death Eater.”

“Oh, I still am,” Narcissa said blithely. “But he's now in Azkaban, and I've decided it's time that I lived my life as I see fit, not what my family wanted for me.”

Sirius frowned. “I don't understand. You went along with your parents when Andromeda was disinherited for marrying Ted.”

“She wasn't disinherited for marrying Ted.”

“Yes, she was!”

“Rather the opposite, actually. Unlike you – who ran away from home at sixteen – Andromeda waited until she had graduated from Hogwarts and both she and Ted had secured jobs. Then she cut all ties to us. My parents just disinherited her after the fact.” She smiled down at Harry and Draco. “That's the difference between Slytherins and Gryffindors.”

Sirius was still frowning at her. “Even you? She didn't speak to you, either?”

A brief look of pain flashed over Narcissa's face. “I was fifteen at the time, what could I do? Even if I had the courage to defy my parents, there was always Bellatrix.”

“Who you got along with very well,” Sirius continued.

Narcissa rolled her eyes. “Of course I did. Would you let Bellatrix know how much you disliked her if you were sleeping under the same roof as her?”

“No,” Sirius said with a shudder. “So this must be your son?”

“Yes. Draco, meet your uncle.”

“First cousin once removed,” Sirius corrected.

“Hello,” Draco said uncertainly. Harry reached for his hand and gave it a squeeze. Sirius' eyes followed his movement in surprise, but he didn't say anything.

“So, er, have you had any other visitors?” Harry asked.

“Not apart from the Aurors. They didn't even tell me that it was you coming today,” Sirius said.

“They didn't want to allow Harry to see you either, initially,” Narcissa said. Both Harry and Sirius
looked at her. “I have some useful contacts within the Ministry,” was all she said.

“I'm sure Lupin would see you if he could,” Harry said. “He was really happy when he figured out you hadn't killed Pettigrew.”

Sirius smiled. “I know. We got a chance to talk in the Shrieking Shack in the morning, after he transformed and before the Aurors stormed in. He caught me up on a few things, but we didn't have long.”

“So what are you going to do when you're free?” asked Harry.

Sirius considered this. “I'm not sure, really. I'd given up on freedom a long time ago... I think I'll find Remus, if he's not at the trial already. And then... I can't decide if I should take my old motorbike for a fly, or just get drunk.”

Harry laughed. “There's no reason you can't do both. Just, you know, in that order.”

“Sounds good to me,” Sirius said with another grin. “I could take you up on my bike, if you like.”

“That'd be great!” Harry said enthusiastically.

“As long as that contraption has appropriate safety measures,” Narcissa interjected.

“You're not his guardian,” Sirius said.

“No, but he's staying at my home for the summer, and as such, is currently my responsibility,” Narcissa said. “It could be worse for you, he stayed at Severus' home last year.”

“Snape?” Sirius' eyebrows shot up. “What'd you do to get stuck with him?”

“I didn't get stuck with him,” Harry said sharply. “He rescued me after I blew up my aunt.”

“You what?”

Harry told him about his last summer. Sirius laughed heartily at the description of Aunt Marge floating into the sky, but sobered when Harry got up to his time at Severus' farmhouse. He was frowning by the time Harry finished.

“As I said earlier, a lot has changed while you were imprisoned,” Narcissa said.

“I'll say,” Sirius agreed. “I expected you to be a Gryffindor, for a start, Harry.” He eyed Harry's snake cloak pin.

Harry shrugged. “The Sorting Hat did think about it. But I'm much happier in Slytherin. Most of the Gryffindors in my year are idiots, although I do like McGonagall. And my other best friend, Hermione, is a Gryffindor.”

“Crookshanks' owner?”

Harry shared a smile with Draco to hear Hermione described thus. “Yeah.”

“Well, as long as you're happy,” Sirius said doubtfully.

“I am,” Harry said firmly.

Sirius smiled briefly. “You fly really well, you know.”
Harry brightened at the non sequitur. “Thanks.”

“Better than James, in fact. Though you seem more like Lily...” Sirius seemed to look through him.

“Must be why Severus likes me,” Harry said lightly.

“Severus? You call him Severus?” Sirius lost his distant expression.

“Sometimes,” Harry admitted. He didn't think Severus would be very happy if he made it a habit to do so in the company of others, but then again, he didn't think Severus would be very happy with his current company on principle.

When Sirius just frowned at Harry, Narcissa cut in again. “I'm sure Lupin will be able to fill you in on much of what has happened, Sirius.”

“Yeah,” Sirius said, still far away.

Shacklebolt cleared his throat. “Time's up. You've already been here longer than the agreed time.”

“Of course,” Narcissa said at once.

Harry hated the thought of leaving Sirius alone in his empty cell, even if it was miles better than Azkaban. “Can I write to him?”

Shacklebolt shook his head regretfully. “Ministry protocol. But I doubt it will be long before you're free for good, Sirius.”

He nodded. “I'll be seeing you soon, Harry.”

“Yeah. Good luck with your trial.”

Sirius nodded again and watched as they walked away.

Harry was quiet on the way back through the Ministry, keeping a tight grip on Draco's hand. Narcissa looked at him as they entered the lift. “How about some milkshakes?”
In Which Hermione Arrives at Malfoy Manor and Teaches the Boys a Valuable Lesson

Once again ensconced at Malfoy Manor, the next fortnight flew by in a happy whirlwind for Harry. With her husband gone, Narcissa was more carefree, and therefore even more indulgent towards her son than formerly.

Harry and Draco spent most of their time flying around the grounds during the days, or dissecting the results of the Quidditch World Cup matches after listening to them on the wireless in Draco’s room. After hearing Scotland and Wales get defeated, and England absolutely slaughtered, both boys pinned their hopes on Ireland.

They had visits from both Pansy and Blaise, who were accompanied by their mothers. As Narcissa sat in one of the drawing rooms with Mrs Parkinson or Ms Zabini, Harry and Draco heard all the latest gossip from Pansy, and listened to Blaise telling them about his current girlfriend, before telling them in turn about their visit to see Sirius.

Narcissa took Harry and Draco out for dinner at fancy restaurants, both magical and Muggle, a few times a week, but otherwise they stayed at the Manor. Evenings were spent in the lounge, which was now decorated in pale blues. Draco played chess with Narcissa or continued his study of Mermish while Harry drew.

Best of all, in Harry's opinion, were the times he was able to spend kissing Draco in either of their bedrooms. He'd discovered that Draco loved to have his neck sucked on, and Harry was happy to oblige. Draco was equally generous with nibbling on Harry's sensitive earlobes, though rather better about not leaving hickeys than Harry was.

“Sorry,” Harry murmured one afternoon. He'd just pulled away and spotted a purple mark on Draco's neck.

“Again? You're doing that on purpose, I just know it. You enjoy making me wear high-necked shirts in the middle of summer,” pouted Draco.

“Maybe I just need more practise,” Harry smirked, leaning in for another kiss.

“Master Draco?”

Harry rolled off Draco with a groan and they both sat up to see Tilly standing in the middle of the room.

“What?” Draco snapped.

“Mistress is wanting to see Master Draco and Harry Potter in the lounge, sir,” said Tilly.

Draco sighed. “We'll be down in a few minutes.”

Tilly picked at the hem of her pillowcase nervously. “Mistress is saying you is coming now, Master Draco.”

“Alright!” Draco got up. “See? On our way.”

Tilly nodded happily and Disapparated quietly. Draco sighed and went to adjust his shirt collar in the mirror. “Are you part vampire, Potter?”
Harry just laughed. “You love vampires. You'd probably like me even more if I was one.”

Satisfied with his collar, Draco turned around. “I do not love vampires. I'm just interested in them. I'm also interested in Mermish, but I certainly wouldn't want you to be a merman.”

Harry sniggered as he followed Draco out of the room. “Well, of course not, I'd have a tail. Vampires still have, you know, er, all their, er, human bits, at least.”

“Don't say things like that when we're about to see Mother,” Draco hissed.

“Sorry,” Harry said, still grinning.

“No you're not.”

“No, I'm not,” agreed Harry.

“Well, just shut up, alright? Mother has a way of knowing everything,” warned Draco.

“I've noticed that.”

Narcissa had a Devonshire tea set up for them when they entered the lounge, and was patiently sipping her tea as she waited.

“Good afternoon. I wanted to talk to you about Sunday, Harry. Your birthday,” she elaborated when he looked at her blankly.

“I hadn't really thought about it, to be honest. You don't need to make a fuss,” Harry said.

“Yes, we do. Have you ever actually gotten to celebrate your birthday?” demanded Draco as he drowned a scone in jam and cream.

“Er -”

“Exactly.” Draco looked at his mother expectantly.

“Hermione will be arriving the day before, if that will impact your decision,” she said encouragingly.

Harry smiled hopefully. “I've never been to the beach before...”

Narcissa clasped her hands together. “The beach it is. Draco, please write to Hermione and tell her to pack something appropriate to wear.”

********

As it turned out, neither Harry nor Draco had any bathers they could wear to the beach. Harry had never had any before, and Draco said he'd outgrown his, though Harry suspected he just wanted a new pair. This necessitated a quick trip to Ainsley's Emporium in Amesbury, and they both returned to Malfoy Manor with swimming shorts that Mr Ainsley assured them were the latest fashion amongst Muggles, along with many other bulging bags of clothing.

Saturday afternoon Narcissa Disapparated away to pick up Hermione, and Draco wasted no time in seizing the chance to snog Harry for half an hour without house-elves being sent in to interrupt them. The boys made sure they were innocently playing chess in the lounge by the time Hermione arrived. As she hugged them hello, Narcissa followed her into the room. She took one look at Draco and sighed.
“Harry, Hermione, please wait out in the hallway, I need a moment with my son.”

Harry cast a confused look at Draco before leading Hermione back out of the room. “Had a good holiday so far?”

“Yes, it's been great,” Hermione said brightly as she looked up and down the hallway. “I knew Draco's house was big, but I didn't know it was this big.”

“Just wait until you see the grounds,” Harry told her. “Draco has his own Quidditch pitch! Oh, and they've also got a massive library.”

Hermione's eyes lit up. “Where?”

Harry laughed. “Let Draco show you where your room is first, and then we can go find the library.”

Just then Draco walked out in a sulk. “Come on, Mother's put you in the White Bedroom.”

“What's wrong with you?” asked Harry.

Draco glared at him and held up a jar. “Mother just gave me bruise paste. For my neck. Because you're a giant fucking leech, and I can't wear a collared shirt to the beach tomorrow.”

Hermione laughed. “Harry!”

“It's not funny, Hermione,” Draco said peevishly.

Hermione laughed again, reached up and yanked down Draco's collar. Her eyes widened. “My god, Harry, did you kiss him or attack him with a vacuum?”

“He liked it,” Harry grumbled. Draco didn't answer, though his mouth curved slightly.

They took Hermione's things up to her room for the elves to unshrink and put away. It was down the hallway from Draco and Harry's rooms, and had the same basic layout, but had dark wooden furniture that contrasted nicely with the white walls and carpet.

Hermione looked around briefly. “This is lovely, Draco. Now, where's the library?”

They spent the rest of the afternoon in the library. Hermione was predictably fascinated by the rare books, and had countless questions for Draco. Having nothing to add to the conversation, Harry ended up summoning Tilly for some afternoon tea, and then convinced her to sit down in order for him to draw her. He'd never drawn a house-elf before, and it took him a few goes to get the dimensions of her eyes right. He was planning on drawing Dobby and his clothes before the summer was over.

They had a lovely dinner on one of the balconies, enjoying the mild summer evening, and stayed out there well after it had grown dark. Dobby had lit some lanterns placed along the balustrade, and Harry and Hermione patiently taught the Malfoys Muggle card games after dessert.

For the first time in his life, Harry went to bed excited about his birthday.

********

Harry woke with a start and lay there in confusion, wondering what had woken him so early, before he remembered it was his birthday. It was a little odd not to have stayed up until midnight, waiting to wish himself a happy birthday, but he'd wanted to go to bed early enough to be ready for the beach.
There was a present sitting at the foot of his bed. He opened the card to see Hagrid's messy scrawl. He'd obviously sent it in the middle of the night, and one of the house-elves must have dealt with the owl, because Harry had no recollection of one arriving. The present turned out to be a large box of Chocolate Frogs.

He smiled to himself as he got up to have a shower. He sang loudly and happily amidst the steam, if rather off-key, and was still humming when he walked back into his bedroom to find Draco and Hermione grinning at him from his bed.

“Fantastic performance,” smirked Draco.

“Absolutely lovely,” Hermione agreed.

Harry stuck his tongue out at them. “If you don't like my singing you shouldn't have come into my room uninvited.”

“It's tradition,” said Draco.

Harry joined them on the bed and was immediately enveloped in two hugs. “What's a tradition?” he asked once they'd released him.

“Breakfast in bed,” said Draco as he pushed Harry to lean against the pillows. He and Hermione sat on either side of him. “Mother and I have always done it on our birthdays. But presents first.”

Hermione gave him a heavy package which turned out to be a set of Jane Austen novels.

“You said you liked *Pride and Prejudice*, so I thought you might like to read the rest of her novels,” Hermione explained.

Harry smiled at her. Trust Hermione to seize an opportunity to encourage him to read. “Thanks. This will take me ages, though.”

“I know,” she said complacently.

Draco handed him an envelope. Harry opened it curiously to find four tickets to the National Portrait Gallery for the following week. He looked at Draco in surprise. “How'd you get these?”

Draco shrugged. “Mother, of course. I told her I'd like to take you to an art gallery, and since there isn't a magical one in Britain, she came up with this. I hope it's good.”

Hermione laughed in disbelief. “The National Portrait Gallery? Of course it is. I've been there a few times with my parents, you'll love it, Harry.”

“Right, well, since I wasn't sure, I also got you this.”

Harry opened up the present to find a book about deer and burst into laughter. “Really?”

“Hey, it's not my family who are obsessed with deer,” Draco shot back with a smirk.

“Deer, darling?”

Harry looked up to see Narcissa walking into the room. “Er, my Patronus is a deer, and so were my parents.”

“I see,” Narcissa said as she sat at the foot of the bed.
“Mother? What's yours?” Draco asked eagerly.

Narcissa pulled out her wand. “*Expecto patronum.*”

A silvery tiger leapt from her wand, landed silently on the floor and prowled around the room before it faded away.

Draco stared after it with wide eyes. “I hope mine will be the same as yours.”

“Possibly,” was all Narcissa said. “Happy birthday, Harry.”

“Thank you.”

Narcissa nodded and clapped her hands once. Tilly and Dobby Apparated into the room, holding a large birthday cake between them and singing “Happy Birthday”.

“I thought you said I was getting breakfast in bed,” Harry said to Draco over the noise of the high-pitched singing.

“You are,” said Draco.

“Draco has always gotten cake for his birthday breakfasts,” explained Narcissa.

Hermione goggled at Draco. “How exactly do you still have all your teeth?”

“Exemplary dental hygiene,” sniffed Draco.

“And lots of apples,” Narcissa said in a stage whisper.

Hermione didn’t say anything more about it, but Harry caught her staring at Draco's teeth as she ate her piece of cake.

After they’d finished the delicious cake, Narcissa told them to meet her in the foyer in fifteen minutes. Harry set about packing his backpack for the beach. He didn't really have a lot to take, just his Walkman, some pencils and a sketchbook. He briefly wondered if he could take a Beater's bat for a game of beach cricket, but decided against it. Even if he managed to find a suitable ball, he'd still have to explain all the rules to Draco, and he didn't think Hermione had any interest in the game.

He met Hermione and Narcissa in the foyer, and Draco joined them a minute later.

“Come along then. We're Apparating in today,” Narcissa said as she picked up a large basket.

As they set off down the drive, Hermione began questioning Narcissa about Apparition, as she'd never travelled that way before.

“I'll be able to Side-along Apparate you all today, as Milford On Sea isn't too far from here. It is more difficult to Apparate longer distances, even more so if you're carrying other people with you,” Narcissa explained. “Naturally, the Manor is warded against Apparating in or out, apart from the elves of course, so we need to be beyond the gates for me to accomplish anything.”

“Like Hogwarts,” Hermione nodded.

“Precisely,” Narcissa said, then held out her hands. “Hermione, you will need to take my hand and hold on tight until we arrive.”

Harry and Draco grasped Narcissa's other arm, and then Harry once again felt the horrible
constriction of Apparition. They materialised in a small copse of trees next to a grassy field. Narcissa led them along a path worn into the grass, and then Harry came to the top of the slight rise and stopped dead in his tracks.

“It's so big,” he said in awe.

When the Dursleys had gone to the hut on the rock in the sea to escape the Hogwarts letters, it had been too dark to properly take in the expanse of the water. Even the next morning, Harry had been focused on watching Hagrid steer them towards shore with his flowery pink umbrella. Now, Harry could see water stretching to the horizon, sparkling in the sun. As he looked at the far horizon, he suddenly felt very small. He gave himself a shake and took off after the others.

The path they were on wound down a short slope, in between tiny little huts painted in blues and greens and whites. They looked like cubby houses.

“What are those?” Harry asked.

“Bathing boxes,” said Hermione. “They used to have wheels attached, and the Victorians used them to bathe in the sea, back before it was acceptable to be seen in your bathing suit. Now people buy or rent them as shelters for their belongings when they come to the beach.”

Narcissa stared at the closest one. “I wish I'd known about them. Maybe next time.”

She led them along the stone beach until she reached a spot not too close to any Muggles. She slipped her wand out of her dress and discreetly waved it at the ground. “Cushioning Charm,” she said in answer to Hermione's questioning look.

She set down the basket and pulled out a large picnic blanket. It settled smoothly on the ground, and when Harry sat down he couldn't even tell there were pebbles underneath him. Never having been to the beach before, he waited to see what everyone else was doing.

Draco had taken his shirt off and was applying something that Harry guessed was a sun-protection potion. Hermione had taken her dress off to reveal a blue bathing suit, and was busy applying sunscreen. She handed the bottle to Harry when she saw him looking, and he took his shirt off and did the same.

Narcissa pulled a book out, placed a wide-brimmed hat on her head and settled down on a large cushion. “There are fruit and drinks in the basket if you want them,” she said idly as she began to read.

“Race you!” Draco shouted and ran off towards the water.

Harry and Hermione tore after him and splashed into the water. Harry stopped when he was up to his thighs.

“It's freezing!”

“Wuss!” Hermione cried before she dove deeper. She emerged a few metres away and pushed her hair out of her face. “It's much better once you've fully submerged yourself.”

Harry looked at her doubtfully, but Draco dove into a wave before it could crash into him. “Come on, Potter!” he called when he stood up again.

Harry took a deep breath and lunged forward, falling clumsily into an oncoming wave. There was a moment of freezing cold, and he had to jam his glasses back on his face when they tried to float
away before he burst back above the surface.

“Told you,” Hermione said smugly.

She and Draco began swimming further out. Harry stood and watched them, letting the waves rock him to and fro.

“Aren’t you coming?” Draco called when he realised Harry hadn’t moved.

Harry shook his head. “I can’t really swim.”

What followed was the oddest swimming lesson in history, in Harry’s view. Hermione launched into the theory behind it all, talking about different strokes and breathing techniques. She and Draco would demonstrate something for Harry, and when he copied it to their satisfaction, Draco would reward him with a kiss.

After an hour of this, Harry felt a little more confident about not drowning, but he was also exhausted. They decided to take a break and returned to the blanket for a drink. When they got to the blanket Narcissa settled down for a nap to one side. They had to talk quietly so as not to wake her, though she also told them to wake her before they went back into the water so she could keep an eye on them.

When Hermione and Draco got up to return to the water, Harry stayed on the blanket and let Narcissa sleep. He put his headphones in and began to draw the scene in front of him. It was hard to capture the way the sunlight glinted on the water, but he felt he was improving as he went.

He didn’t know how long he’d been drawing when a touch on his arm startled him. He pulled out his headphones and turned around.

“I didn’t mean to alarm you,” Narcissa said apologetically.

“It’s fine,” Harry assured her.

Narcissa moved next to him and looked at his latest drawing. “You’re quite talented at this.”

Harry blushed, pleased. “Thanks.”

“You’re not sitting out just so I could sleep, were you?” Narcissa asked, crinkling her brow.

Harry shook his head emphatically. “No. I can’t really swim and I’d just slow them down. I’m happy here.”

Narcissa flipped through his discarded drawings, which he’d weighted down with the sunscreen bottle so the wind wouldn’t catch them. “You never had swimming lessons? I thought they were something wizards and Muggles had in common.”

“Usually, yeah. Dudley got lessons when we were little.”

Narcissa pursed her lips but didn’t say anything as she gazed out to where Draco and Hermione were playing some kind of game in the waves. The only rule Harry could make out was that it involved a lot of screaming and laughter.

“Narcissa, can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”
Harry shut his sketchbook. “How come everyone's so confident that Sirius will be cleared at his trial? I mean, he got sent to Azkaban at his last trial.”

“He never got a trial,” Narcissa said quietly.

Harry twisted his head to stare at her. “What?”

Narcissa rearranged herself in a more comfortable position. “Sirius was captured just after the fall of the Dark Lord, and the harsh measures that the Ministry had introduced against him and his supporters were still in force. Apart from the Aurors being authorised to use Unforgivables on suspects – including killing rather than capturing them – people suspected of being Death Eaters were often sent to Azkaban without trial. Sirius wasn't the only one, though whether he was the only innocent person to get caught up in that, I don't know.”

Harry stared out to sea. No wonder Sirius thought the Ministry holding cells were a vacation. It wasn't just the lack of dementors, but the prospect of a proper trial that had him so cheerful.

“But they've changed the laws now, haven't they?”

“Oh, yes. People are now given trials before being sent to Azkaban, as Lucius' experience shows.”

“How did -” Harry stopped and ran his hand through his hair.

Narcissa looked at him levelly. “How did Lucius evade Azkaban thirteen years ago?”

“Er, yeah,” Harry said sheepishly.

“He claimed he was forced to follow the Dark Lord. He had a lot of influence at the Ministry, and plenty of money to throw around. It wasn't hard for him to convince the Ministry of his innocence. Until, of course, he was caught attempting to murder Muggle-borns via that blasted diary,” Narcissa said bitterly.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to -”

“It's not your fault, Harry,” Narcissa said firmly. She sighed and continued softly, “I will never regret marrying Lucius, because otherwise I wouldn't have Draco. I've come to terms with that fact. I'm just thankful that Draco is nothing like him.”

“Me, too,” Harry said fervently.

Narcissa smiled. “So I've gathered.”

Harry ducked his head as he remembered the bruise paste.

Narcissa laughed. “I'm sure your technique will improve. You make Draco happy, which is the most important thing in my opinion. Never let someone tell you how you should live your life, Harry. It will only make you resentful.”

“Is that why you freed Dobby?” Harry asked, eager to change the subject.

“Partly. I did think he needed some sort of compensation after the way Lucius treated him,” Narcissa said seriously, then grinned mischievously. “But there's also the fact that I find myself free for the first time in my life. I was never a rebellious teenager, and I find myself currently having a lot of fun doing things that I know would annoy both my husband and my parents, if they were still alive.”

Harry laughed at the idea of Narcissa's late in life teenage rebellion, and began offering suggestions.
She seemed to consider some of his ideas, especially the idea of a television, but when he suggested she dye her hair green and get a tattoo she shooed him back into the water.

Draco spotted him and grinned. “Harry! I've just been telling Hermione about the cute boy over there. He's been looking at her ever since he arrived.”

Harry casually turned his head to where Draco was looking. There was definitely a boy there watching them from the shore.

“He could be looking at you, Draco,” Harry said loyally.

“Exactly!” Hermione said in relief.

“Please, he's been staring at you, Granger,” said Draco. “You should go talk to him.”

“You're just hoping that if I do that, it'll distract your mum enough that she won't notice if you and Harry start snogging,” Hermione said tartly.

“On second thought, he's definitely looking at you, Hermione. Go over right now,” Harry said.

Hermione splashed them both rather than answer, and things quickly devolved into a fierce water fight. Hermione eventually called a truce after she dumped a large piece of seaweed on Harry's head, and suggested they get something to eat.

“What would you like for lunch? I have some Muggle money on me, so we can get something in the village,” Narcissa said as they sat and dripped onto the blanket.

“Fish and chips?” Harry asked hopefully. It had always smelled nice when the Dursleys had ordered it, but they'd never given him any take away food.

“Is that something we'd be able to find in the village?” Narcissa asked.

Harry and Hermione exchanged an amused glance.

“Yes. I'll come with you,” Hermione offered. She stood up and got dressed again.

“Very well then. Boys, one of you will need to stay on the blanket to look after our possessions,” Narcissa said as she left.

Draco poured himself some water and grinned at Harry. “All alone. Whatever will we do with ourselves?”

Harry snorted. “Say hello to our visitor?”

Draco looked up to find Hermione's admirer walking towards them. Up close Harry could see that Draco was right about him being cute. He had dark brown hair, blue eyes and looked friendly enough. “Hi,” he said with a wave.

Harry smiled at him. “Hello.”

The boy stopped a few metres away. “So, uh, your friend... She's not dating one of you, is she?”

Draco sniggered. Harry elbowed him and smiled up at the boy. “No, she's not dating anyone.”

The boy grinned. “Great! Do you think...”
“We'll try to get her on her own for you when she gets back,” Harry promised impulsively.

“Thanks! Any tips?”

“She likes books,” Draco said.

“Books? That's it?” the boy said, his smile slipping a bit.

“No, of course not, but you'll talk about them if you want to get her attention,” Draco said flatly.

“Books, right. Books I can do,” the boy said.

“You better get going before she gets back,” Draco said.

“Good luck!” Harry called after him, then raised an eyebrow at Draco. “Books? Really?”

Draco lay back on the blanket. “What was I supposed to say? That her favourite subject is Arithmancy? That's not going to help anyone. And anyway, she's going to kill us, you know.”

Harry flopped down next to him and watched the seagulls swooping high overhead. “She might like him. And if she doesn't, then she never has to see him again.”

“I suppose,” agreed Draco.

Harry smiled and shut his eyes, enjoying the sunshine. He felt Draco shift beside him, then light kisses tracing his jawline. He opened his eyes. “What was that for?”

“I need a reason to kiss you now?”

“No, but your mum's going to be back soon,” Harry pointed out.

“She's not back yet,” Draco said with a sly grin.

“Good point,” Harry said as he pulled Draco back down.

Harry smiled against Draco's lips as their bare chests met. As he deepened the kiss, he ran his hands down Draco's warm back. Draco arched into his touch and then jerked up as they heard Hermione and Narcissa returning. They hastily sat up and moved apart. Hermione deposited two paper parcels on the blanket and Harry helped her unwrap them as the Malfoys looked on.

“So, we just eat off the paper?” Draco asked doubtfully.

“Yes,” Hermione nodded.

“With your hands,” Harry added.

Draco looked at Narcissa.

“There are some napkins in the basket,” she told him.

Hermione poured some vinegar onto the chips. “Help yourselves. And don't give anything to the seagulls.”

Harry looked around to see a large flock of seagulls had them completely surrounded, all looking at the humans and their food very intently. He watched them warily as he grabbed some chips. Fish and chips turned out to be as good as he'd hoped. Even Draco liked it once he got used to eating with his
hands, though Narcissa still looked unconvinced.

“That was certainly interesting,” she said when they'd eaten their fill.

“Do you think the elves would mind making this?” asked Draco. He burst out laughing at the look Narcissa gave him. “I'm joking, Mother.”

“Go have another swim,” Narcissa said as she picked up her book again.

Hermione decided she wanted to go look for rock pools instead. The boys followed her down the beach, where she found a wide but shallow pool nestled in some large rocks. She climbed up gingerly, as the rocks were rougher than the pebbles covering the rest of the beach, and leaned over excitedly.

“Look, there's a starfish!”

The boys followed her pointed finger and saw a pale red starfish nestled between two rocks.

“Anyone running low on potions ingredients?” Draco asked.

Hermione swung her head around to glare at him. “You can't use this in a potion!”

“Why not?” Draco asked. “We use starfish all the time.” He gave Harry a meaningful look then darted his eyes right for a second.

Harry followed his gaze and saw the brown haired boy walking towards them. “Er, yeah, this one looks like it should be good. And it'd be really fresh.”

Hermione smacked his hand when he began to reach into the pool. “I'm not letting either of you take this. Go away.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Harry said at once.

He and Draco set off back up the beach before they could start laughing and give themselves away. They passed the boy, who nodded his thanks at them, then ducked behind a nearby beach hut to watch. Hermione knelt up on her heels when the boy greeted her, but she didn't stand up.

“She doesn't look very impressed,” Harry said, disappointed.

“I knew this was a bad idea,” said Draco.

“We should go help them,” Harry said.

“And do what, exactly?”

“Er…”

Draco sighed. “Come on, let's go get rid of him.”

Harry stopped him by taking hold of his hands. “I have a better idea.”

He stepped forward and pulled Draco's arms around his waist, then raised his own and slid them around Draco's neck to pull him in for a kiss. He tasted salty, whether from the sea water or the fish and chips, Harry didn't know and didn't care. He licked Draco's lower lip before sliding his tongue into his mouth.
They broke apart a few minutes later, breathless and flushed.

Draco cleared his throat. “Swim?”

Harry nodded, and they left the shadow of the beach hut for the beckoning waves. They looked around to see Hermione walking down the beach with the boy, who waving his hands around as he spoke.

“Where do they think they're going?” Draco asked indignantly.

“Maybe they wanted some privacy?” Harry suggested.

“For what?”

“What do you think?”

“If he -”

Harry grabbed Draco's shoulders. “Draco. While it's really cute that you're being all protective of Hermione, she'll be fine. She wouldn't be happy if we went after them.”

Draco frowned. “But what if he, you know, tries something?”

“Are you suggesting Hermione can't take care of herself? Remember when she punched the Weasel?” prompted Harry.

A dreamy smile spread across Draco's face. “Yes...”

“Good,” Harry said, and kissed him. “Now let's have that swim.”

The water was just as cold as before, though Harry knew to dive in this time. They were paddling around lazily, just past the waves, when Hermione eventually joined them.

“Have fun?” Harry asked.

“Yes...” she said a little shyly. “He kissed me.”

“He what?” yelped Draco.

“He kissed me,” she repeated with a blush.

“Was he any good?” asked Harry.

Hermione shrugged. “I think so. I don't have anyone to compare him to, though.”

“That was your first kiss?” Draco demanded.

“Yes,” she said defensively. “Do you have a problem with that?”

“Just that if I'd known, I would've picked someone cuter than him.”

Hermione bristled. “Picked? Picked?”

Harry splashed frantically to get between Hermione and Draco. “He didn't mean it like that.”

“And how did you mean, Malfoy?”
“Well -”

Harry cut him off with a quick explanation of how the boy had come up to them earlier. Hermione listened with narrowed eyes before huffing.

“I appreciate where you're both coming from, but I'll thank you to keep out of it next time,” Hermione said. “Unless I ask for your opinions, I'm perfectly capable of making up my own mind. And I certainly don't need or want your protection.”

Both boys nodded sheepishly.

“So, er, are you going to see him again?” Harry asked tentatively.

Hermione shook her head. “Alex is a local, not to mention a Muggle, and I go to a magical boarding school in Scotland. I just wanted to get my first kiss out of the way. Better him than Blaise.”

Draco blinked. “You weren't seriously considering him, were you? You know what he's like!”

Hermione laughed. “Of course not, give me some credit. I just wanted to see your face.”

After an hour or so they agreed they'd had enough of the water and returned to the beach blanket. It was starting to cool down, so they packed up and Narcissa Apparated them back to the Manor. Draco and Harry took Hermione for a tour of the grounds as the sun set, though they had to avoid the pond which was surrounded by peacocks.

They had dinner on the balcony again: roasted quail with champagne and treacle tart for dessert. Narcissa said she was grateful to have proper food after the fish and chips, but Harry wasn't fooled. As Draco and Hermione headed off to the lounge for a game of hearts, which both Malfoys had taken a liking to, Harry stayed back with Narcissa.

“Thank you for today. And for organising my favourite dinner,” he said earnestly.

A curious expression flitted over her face before she gathered him in her arms. “It was my pleasure, Harry,” she murmured. She squeezed him tightly before letting him go and smoothing down his hair gently. “We better hurry, we don't want to keep them waiting. Draco can be vicious during games if he's in a bad mood.”
In Which Our Trio Discuss the Ethics of House-Elves and Spy on Narcissa

A few days later they visited the National Portrait Gallery. As they walked around, Narcissa quietly pointed out all the famous Britons who had also been magical. Harry had known that one of Draco's ancestors had tried to court Elizabeth I, but he hadn't known that her mother had been a Squib. He couldn't say anything in the gallery as there were too many Muggles around, but he brought it up with Hermione and Draco after they'd returned to Malfoy Manor and were sitting in Draco's room.

Hermione shook her head. “Honestly, Harry, there's a portrait of Anne Boleyn at Hogwarts!”

“I've never seen it,” he said defensively.

She raised an eyebrow. “One day you're going to read Hogwarts, A History.”

Harry looked at her in mock confusion. “But that's what you're for. Ow! Okay, okay, I take it back!”

Hermione lowered the gallery map she'd been hitting him with and smiled. “So did you find it acceptable, Draco?”

He nodded. “Although now I wish we had a monarchy like the Muggles do. They seem like fun. All those fancy clothes...”

Hermione and Harry looked at each other. “Er...”

Just then Narcissa swept into the room. She'd changed out of the Muggle dress she'd worn to the gallery into a beautiful set of silvery robes.

“There you are. I'm going out for dinner with a friend and expect to be home late, so don't wait up. If you need to contact me, summon Dobby,” she announced as she slipped in some pearl earrings.

“Where are you going?” Draco asked.

“Out to dinner, I’m not sure where,” she said breezily. “Tell Tilly when you're ready for dinner, and don't eat too many sweets.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Yes, Mother.”

Narcissa walked over and kissed him on the cheek. “And be good, darling.” She smiled at Harry and Hermione and walked out of the room.

Draco swiftly followed her to the door and peered out into the corridor. “Come on!”

“Er, what -” began Harry.

“She's got a date, and I want to see who with. Now come on!” Draco whispered impatiently.

They crept along the passageway to the staircase leading into the foyer and peeked down in time to see the front door close and hear a man laughing.

“She's Apparating, then. Lounge,” Draco said.

Harry and Hermione shared another glance, uncomfortable now, but they followed Draco into the lounge and crowded against one of the windows. Looking down, they could see Narcissa walking along the drive with a tall man. All they could make out was that he had long dark hair and olive
skin.

“Damn, I can't tell who it is. Looks like an expensive cloak though... Nice hair...” Draco mused.

“Are you sure she's not just seeing a friend like she said?” asked Hermione.

“If it was a friend she'd say who it was. She did the same with that Italian prince I told you about. At first he was just a 'friend', and then suddenly he became 'Stefano' and Dobby went insane with rose petals.”

“And your mum's roses are in bloom at the moment...” Harry teased.

Draco narrowed his eyes. “Not helping, Potter. You better not encourage Dobby in that. It's bad enough you tell him that you like his clothes.”


“I've been meaning to ask you, why are the rest of your elves in pillowcases?” Hermione piped up.

“Because if you give clothes to a house-elf it frees them,” Draco said.

“You mean Tilly and all the others are your slaves?” Hermione gasped.


Hermione pursed her lips. “Do you pay them?”

“Of course not!” Draco looked shocked.

“Then they're slaves,” Hermione said mutinously.

Draco glared back at her. “But they like it. Usually. Mother freed Dobby and has hired him with pay and days off, but most of them would be upset if we tried to give them clothes.”

“Tilly always seems very happy,” offered Harry.

“She's a slave, Harry,” Hermione said witheringly.

“She's a house-elf. It's different,” Draco countered. “All the rest of our elves think Dobby's a freak for wanting to be paid.”

“Have you asked any of them if they'd like to be free?” Hermione asked archly.

“Of course not, and anyway, it would just upset them,” Draco said angrily. When Hermione looked unconvinced he sighed heavily. “Fine. But this is going to be your fault. Remember that, Granger. Tilly!”

Tilly Apparated in quietly. “Is Master Draco and his guests ready for dinner?”

Draco shot an ugly look at Hermione and shook his head. “Not quite yet. Tilly, would you like some clothes?”

Tilly's face fell as she took a step backwards. “Clothes? But – but Master Draco cannot be giving Tilly clothes, sir. Only Mistress or Master can be doing that!”

“But would you want Mother to give you some?” Draco pressed.
Tilly shook her head violently. “No, sir! Tilly is not wanting clothes!”

Hermione took a step forward. “But you’d be free then.”

“Tilly is not wanting to be free! Tilly is liking serving her Mistress and Master Draco! Tilly is not wanting clothes!” Tilly shouted as she glared up at Hermione.

Tilly’s tiny fists were clenched by her sides, and Harry began to feel concerned for Hermione’s safety. She didn’t seem to notice, however, and forged on relentlessly.

“You can’t actually like being a slave, though,” she said.

“I think it depends on who their owner is,” Harry suggested.

Draco nodded. “Tilly, tell Hermione what you think of my father. I forbid you to hurt yourself because of it.”

Tilly looked at him cautiously. “Tilly is not wanting to say, Master Draco.”

“That was an order, Tilly. Tell the truth.”

Harry had to struggle not to laugh at the look Tilly gave Draco at that. He’d no idea house-elves could look that rebellious towards their owners.

“Tilly is not liking her Master. Master is – is being a bad wizard, miss! Master is not nice to his house-elves. Tilly is being much happier now that Master is gone. All of us elves is being happier with Master being gone,” she said firmly.

“But you’ve seen how happy Dobby is now that he’s free,” Hermione pressed.

“Dobby is being a good friend to Tilly, miss. Tilly is liking Dobby a lot, but Dobby is being Dobby. Freedom is good for Dobby, miss, but it is not something Tilly is wanting! Tilly is being a Malfoy house-elf and Tilly is happy, miss.”

Hermione looked doubtfully at the house-elf, who had crossed her arms as she glared back.

“And what about our other elves, Tilly?” asked Draco.

“The other elves agree with Tilly, Master Draco. We is not wanting clothes!” Tilly said stubbornly.

Draco shot a triumphant look at Hermione. “Thank you. I think that settles it.”

Tilly smiled in relief. “Is Master Draco wanting anything else?”

Draco looked at Harry and Hermione. “Just dinner, please. Pancakes?”

Harry nodded eagerly, and Hermione grudgingly bobbed her head.

“Tilly is serving pancakes on the balcony,” Tilly said happily before she Disapparated.

“Happy, Granger?” Draco muttered.

Hermione bit her lip. “Are all house-elves like that?”

*********
Much to Draco's annoyance, Hermione wouldn't let the matter of the house-elves rest. Finally, after getting sick of tracking Hermione down in the kitchen or laundry, interrogating the elves there, Draco dragged Hermione off to speak to Narcissa. He and Harry flew around the grounds while they waited for Hermione to emerge from Narcissa's study. They found her sitting near the pond a few hours later, watching Crookshanks stalking the peacocks, and flew down to meet her. They sat down next to her on the grass.

“I'm sorry,” she finally said. “For trying to convince your elves to mutiny.”

“Mother explained everything, I take it?”

Hermione nodded. “And she's given me some books to read. But I still think it's abhorrent that house-elves are completely unprotected if they serve someone cruel!”

“Most people are nicer than my father, though,” Draco said.

“No shit,” muttered Harry.

Draco acknowledged him with a grimace. “Yes, well... Let's go inside. The *Evening Prophet* tonight is supposed to be devoted completely to the World Cup. I want to see who Ireland have in their starting line-up.”

********

In the week before the World Cup final, Harry and Draco couldn't talk about anything non-related to Quidditch. Hermione was patient at first, but she soon got sick of it, and began to spend a lot of time with Narcissa, leaving the boys alone. In between talking about Quidditch, Harry had been practising, and was proud to say that he was now capable of not leaving hickeys on Draco's neck every time they got a moment to themselves. Harry went to bed most nights with his mind swirling between Quidditch statistics and strategies, and Draco's kisses.

Most nights.

“*Harry, wake up!*”

Harry's eyes shot open to find Draco kneeling on his bed with a hand on Harry's shoulder. Harry could just make him out in the moonlight coming in through the windows. He pressed a hand to his scar, which was burning with pain.

“What's wrong?”

Draco looked at him incredulously. “*You were having a nightmare. I couldn't wake you up – you wouldn't respond to English.*”

Harry stopped reaching for his glasses as he realised they were speaking Parseltongue. He sat back against the headboard and rubbed his scar as fragments of his dream began coming back to him. “It was Voldemort -” he ignored Draco's flinch “- and Pettigrew – Voldemort was calling him Wormtail. There was an old man. I've never seen him before, but Voldemort killed him. And there was this huge snake...”

“It was just a dream,” Draco said shakily.

“It felt real, though. And my scar's hurting.”
Draco paled. “I'm getting Mother.”

Harry panicked at the thought of disrupting Narcissa this late at night. He knew she wouldn't punish him like the Dursleys would, but he didn't think she'd be happy all the same. “No, don't. You're right: it was just a dream.”

Draco frowned and sat back on his heels, making his face blur in Harry's vision. “A snake would explain the Parseltongue, I suppose, but not your scar. The last time that hurt -”

“- was because Voldemort was around, yeah. But he can't be here,” Harry said with a confidence he didn't feel.

“I still think we should tell Mother.”

“Don't, please. Not until the morning, at least.”

“Fine,” Draco said unhappily.

“Can you stay here for the rest of the night?”

“That I can agree with.”

Draco slid under the covers and cuddled up to Harry. He was soon asleep, but it took a lot longer for Harry to join him.

He hadn't told Draco, but in his dream, Voldemort had also been planning Harry's murder.

********

Draco kept his word until the next morning, when he told Narcissa all about Harry's nightmare.

“Have you had a dream like this before? One that hurt your scar, or made you dream in Parseltongue?” she asked over breakfast.

Harry shook his head. “I've had dreams about Voldemort before, but they never made my scar hurt.”

Narcissa sipped her tea as she frowned in thought.

“Would you have any books on curse scars?” Hermione asked.

Narcissa blinked as she looked at her. “There may be some in the library you can look at. I'll have a look through the volumes in Lucius' study as well.”

“Can I help?” Hermione asked eagerly.

“Absolutely not. There is a reason those books are not in the library. They aren't very pleasant reading, to say the least,” Narcissa said firmly, then looked at Harry. “I don't expect we'll find anything. People don't usually survive the Killing Curse, the best we can hope for is to find another curse that can leave scars.”

Narcissa was right. Though they spent most of the day in the library, they didn't find anything that might explain how a dream could make Harry's scar hurt. After feeling like they'd wasted the day, Harry was happy when Narcissa suggested they go to Diagon Alley the following day to get their school things.
As they walked down the drive Hermione pulled out her book list. “We only have one new book this year.”

Harry looked at his own list. “It says we need dress robes, though.”

“Mother, why -”

“I'll tell you all after the Quidditch World Cup final,” Narcissa promised.

Harry had never seen Diagon Alley so crowded. There were a lot of green decorations on the shop fronts, and Quality Quidditch Supplies had posters of both the Irish and Bulgarian teams in the window, with overflowing tubs of merchandise lined up outside. The shop itself was absolutely packed with people, and Narcissa refused point blank to let the boys go inside.

After stopping off at Gringotts in order for Harry and Narcissa to withdraw some gold and Hermione to exchange her Muggle money, they began their school shopping. They didn't spend long in Flourish and Blotts, as Hermione had a list of some two dozen books from the Malfoys' library that she was working through, but Harry held them all up in the apothecary when he insisted on choosing his own supplies instead of letting a salesperson help him.

“She says I should do this myself,” he said when Draco complained about how long he was taking.

“She's not here to hear you sucking up,” Draco said.

“No, but choosing the best ingredients will let me make better potions,” said Harry as he sorted through lion-fish spines.

“And you're an expert now, is that it?”

Harry raised his head. “He taught me a lot last summer. It wasn't all just *Jurassic Park* and Led Zeppelin, you know.”

Draco looked at him blankly. “I have no idea what any of that sentence means.”

Harry grinned. “Well, your mum seemed keen on the idea of a television. If she gets a video player as well, I can show you *Jurassic Park*. You'll love it.”

Draco looked over to where Narcissa was watching them with amusement. “Is that true?”

“I'm considering it,” she said with a smile. “If you're finished, Harry, we just have your robes left.”

They ended up spending even longer in Madam Malkin's than they'd anticipated. As well as all three of them buying new school robes, Harry also bought a new set of casual robes, which, like his dress robes, were a dark green that Narcissa declared set off his eyes nicely, and Hermione bought a set made of a floaty, periwinkle blue material. Purchases made, the three of them ended up watching as Draco tried to make his mind up between a set of silver and a set of black robes.

“We'll take both,” Narcissa finally said.

They stopped off at Fortescue's for an ice cream before returning home. It was very busy, and they were forced to take a table inside rather than out in the sunshine.

“Andromeda will be coming for lunch on your last day of holidays,” Narcissa commented.

“Is Nym coming, too?” Draco asked.
“Nym?” Harry asked.

Draco rolled his eyes. “My cousin. Aunt Andromeda got annoyed with me calling her Tonks, but she got annoyed with me calling her Nymphadora, so I’ve come up with a compromise that seems to keep everyone happy.”

“I imagine that Nymphadora will join her, if she doesn't have training or study,” Narcissa said, smiling fondly at Draco before turning to Harry and Hermione. “You'll like her, I think.”

“Of course they will,” Draco agreed.

Narcissa nodded. “Hurry up with your ice creams. I'm going out for dinner with Richard again tonight, and I need to get changed.”

“Is that who you went out with last time?” Draco asked.

“Yes, darling,” Narcissa said.

Draco merely nodded at her warning tone, and this time, when Narcissa came to bid them farewell, he didn't suggest they watch her leave.

“We're not following your mum tonight?” Harry asked.

Draco shot him a pitying glance. “No.”

“Good,” said Hermione.

“I've a better idea,” Draco continued. “Come on.”

Harry looked at Hermione and shrugged before following Draco out of his room. He led them down the corridor, past the wide staircase that descended to the foyer, and stopped outside a door Harry had never been to. Draco pushed it open to reveal a gigantic bedroom, easily twice as large as Draco’s. There were pale wooden floorboards, with furniture made from the same wood, and the walls had white wallpaper with subtle silver stripes.

“Having fun, Dobby?” Draco asked with a smirk.

Dobby paused next to the bed where he was in the middle of setting a bottle of champagne on one of the bedside tables. Harry smiled when he saw that the drawing he’d sent Narcissa of her and Draco at King's Cross was sitting in a silver frame on the other table.

“Yes, sir,” Dobby said as he began scattering pink rose petals all over the pale green bedspread.

“What has Mother told you about this Richard?”

Dobby threw his last handful of petals on the bed and checked his work critically. “Miss Narcissa is very fond of him. Dobby hopes that he will make Miss Narcissa happy.”

“And? What does he do? What's he like?” Draco pressed.

“He is working for the Department of International Magical Co-operation. He is not so rich as Miss Narcissa's last romance, but Dobby is hoping that this will one will be lasting longer than the man from Italy.”

Draco nodded thoughtfully. “I think you're done here. We won't have any roses left at the rate you're going.”
Dobby turned around to survey the bed, which was hardly visible under the amount of petals on it. “Sir is right.” He snapped his fingers and a bowl of chocolates appeared next to the champagne.

“I think you've been watching too many movies, Dobby,” Hermione said with a smile.

“Dobby is wanting everything to be perfect for Miss Narcissa, miss.”

“We'll let you finish then,” Draco said. Back in the corridor he looked at Harry and Hermione expectantly. “So, what do you think?”

“A bit clichéd, perhaps, but I think it's sweet. He obviously cares a lot about your mum,” Hermione said.

Draco looked at her in confusion before shaking his head. “No, not Dobby. Richard.”

“We don't exactly have a lot to go on. But Dobby seems to like him,” said Harry.

“Yes, well, Dobby's currently wearing my old suit with those fucking sandals and a straw hat. I'd hardly rely on his judgement,” Draco said

Hermione eyed him suspiciously. “This isn't about you trying to interfere with your mum's love life, is it? Because I don't think she'd like it anymore than I did.”

“I just don't want her wasting her time with some loser, that's all.”

“Yeah, but there's not a lot you can do about it,” said Harry.

Draco hummed thoughtfully.

********

The next evening Harry and Draco were waiting impatiently in the foyer, eager to set off for the Quidditch World Cup, and both wearing green robes to show their support for Ireland. They both looked up quickly when they heard Hermione and Narcissa approaching.

“What took you so long?” Draco demanded.

“I didn't have anything green to wear, so your mum went and found this for me,” Hermione gestured at the green cloak she had on.

“We'll get there in plenty of time, don't worry,” Narcissa assured him.

They set off at a brisk walk, and a few minutes later Narcissa had Apparated them into a clearing in a wood.

“Move it along there, now,” said a harried wizard clutching a roll of parchment. “Just follow the path to the stadium, you can't miss it.”

The path wound through the trees and was lit with lanterns glowing green and red. There was a steady stream of excited witches and wizards walking in front of them, and judging from the sounds echoing through the woods, there were many other trails just as busy. Everyone was talking and laughing loudly, and a few people were singing. There were salespeople waiting along the sides of the path doing steady business with many of them selling Irish and Bulgarian flags that played their respective anthems as they were waved. Narcissa stopped at the closest one and bought four programmes and four pairs of Omnioculars. They looked like brass binoculars, but according to the
salesman, could also replay or slow down anything at the twist of a dial.

After walking nearly half an hour through the woods they emerged on the other side in the shadow of a giant, golden stadium. The witch at the entrance checked the tickets Narcissa handed her and directed the four of them up a flight of purple carpeted stairs. They climbed to the very top and found themselves in a small box filled with people. Looking out into the stadium, Harry saw that the box was situated directly between the goal posts at either end. Across the pitch was a vast scoreboard with advertisements playing on it continuously.

“Narcissa, you made it,” Fudge exclaimed. He extricated himself from a couple of black-robed men and hurried forward to bow to her.

“My son would never have forgiven me if I hadn't,” Narcissa said with a polite smile. “I believe you met Draco at Hogwarts?”

“Ah, yes, I, ah, I did indeed,” Fudge said awkwardly.

Harry could understand his attitude, given that their meeting had occurred just before the Aurors had arrested Mr Malfoy. Draco hadn't exactly been polite at the time.

“And these are Draco's friends, Harry and Hermione,” Narcissa continued smoothly.

Fudge visibly relaxed. “Excellent. Allow me to introduce the Bulgarian Minister for Magic, Mr... Well, I didn't quite catch his name. Can't speak a word of English – I need Barty Crouch to translate, but he hadn't arrived yet.”

The Bulgarian Minister bowed to Narcissa and kissed the hand she held out to him. Narcissa blinked in surprise, but didn't look displeased.

“And this is Harry Potter,” Fudge said loudly and slowly to his Bulgarian counterpart. He pointed at Harry's scar, and the Bulgarian Minister nodded and said something to his aide in rapid Bulgarian. Harry gave him a slightly forced smile and allowed Draco to push him and Hermione down to their seats.

They were in the second of two rows. In the corner next to Hermione was a house-elf who had its face hidden in its hands, with an empty seat on its other side. And in the front row was what must be the entire Weasley family, with Ginny and Scarlett in the seats in front of the house-elf. Scarlett had the Irish flag painted on her face and was holding one of the musical flags.

“Harry!” Scarlett cried and pulled him down in a hug. He had to grab the back of her seat to stop toppling over the edge of the box. When she released him he sat back and shoved his Omnioculars back into his pocket, from which they'd nearly fallen out.

“Hi, guys,” Ginny said, pushing up the brim of her shamrock-covered hat with a grin as Scarlett hugged Draco just as enthusiastically as she had Harry. Draco frowned slightly as he rubbed some face paint off his shoulder.

“You been here long?” Harry asked.

“We got up here a few minutes ago, but we took a Portkey to the camping site before dawn this morning.”

“You're camping?” asked Hermione.

“Yeah, just the one night. It's fantastic!” Scarlett said.
Ginny giggled. “I don't know who's having more fun, her or Dad. We're supposed to do everything the Muggle way, since we're at a Muggle camping ground. It took Dad and Scarlett half an hour just to light the fire.”

“Not their fault matches are ridiculous,” one of the twins said, and held out his hand. “Toffee?”

Draco began to reach for one when Ginny grabbed his wrist. “Knock it off, Fred.”

“Just being friendly,” Fred said.

“Uh huh. Real friendly,” Ginny said with a glare.

“What is it?” Draco asked suspiciously.

“Ton-Tongue Toffee,” George said. “Makes your tongue grow unstoppably until you use a Shrinking Charm on it.”

Draco snatched his hand back as if he'd been scalded.

“One of the first products of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes,” said Fred proudly.

“We're starting up a joke shop -”

“- and we'll be trialling our products at Hogwarts this year.”

“Sure you don't want to try one of our first products?” George asked encouragingly.

“I like my tongue the way it is,” Draco said, looking very discomfited.

“Bet Harry does too, eh?” George waggled his eyebrows.

Ginny smothered a giggle as Harry turned bright red. “So where are you lot camping?”

“Mother doesn't camp,” Draco said, clearly relieved at the change of topic. “We Apparated straight in.”

“Well, you'll have to come visit our tents after the match,” Ginny said. “Just don't eat anything the twins try to give you.”

“Maybe,” Draco said with a glance at Narcissa, who was pointing something out to the Bulgarian Minister for Magic.

“What's wrong with your house-elf?” Scarlett whispered. They all followed her gaze to the house-elf in the corner.

“That's not one of ours,” Draco said.

Hermione reached out and touched the elf gently on the shoulder. “Excuse me, but are you okay?”

The elf lifted its head out of its hands, although it kept them raised as if shielding its eyes from the view. “Winky is not liking heights, miss,” she said in a squeaky voice even higher than Tilly's.

“Why are you up here by yourself, then?” Hermione asked with a frown.

“Master told Winky to save him a seat, miss,” Winky said, gesturing to the empty seat next to her.

“Does he know that you're afraid of heights?” Harry asked.
Winky's eyes widened when she looked at him. “You is Harry Potter, sir!”

“Er, yeah.”

“Winky is hearing about you from Dobby, sir!”

“You're friends with Dobby?” Draco asked.

“Yes, sir. Dobby's old master is knowing Winky's master. He is sometimes bringing Dobby with him to visit Winky's master, before – before Dobby is freed.” Winky's voice dropped to a whisper, as though mentioning something shameful.

“Well, maybe he can come visit you on one of his days off,” Hermione said placatingly.

“House-elves is not having days off, miss! House-elves is doing what their masters tells them! Winky is wanting to be back home, but Winky is staying here for her master!”

With that, she buried her face in her hands again, and refused to let Hermione draw her back into conversation. “How can anyone be so cruel to their house-elf?” she muttered.

“If he knows my father, he's probably an arsehole,” Draco said bitterly. Narcissa rested her hand comfortingly on his arm but didn't say anything.

Just then a man wearing yellow and black striped Quidditch robes rushed into the box. “Ready to start, Minister?”

“Whenever you're ready, Ludo,” Fudge said.

Draco leaned over to whisper to Harry and Hermione. “Ludo Bagman, he played Beater for England.”

Bagman pulled his wand out and aimed it at his own throat. “Sonorus!” he muttered, before speaking in a loud voice that carried over the din of the thousands of spectators. “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the final of the four hundred and twenty-second Quidditch World Cup!”

The crowd screamed and clapped as discordant national anthems were played from thousands of flags all waving wildly. An ad for Bertie Botts' Every Flavour Beans disappeared from the scoreboard, which now read BULGARIA: ZERO, IRELAND: ZERO. Harry grabbed Draco's hand in excitement.

“Put your hands together for the Bulgarian Team Mascots!”

The red-clad crowd to the right of the top box exploded with cheers as a group of impossibly beautiful women came onto the pitch.

“Veela,” Narcissa murmured. Beside her, the Bulgarian Minister was clapping wildly.

Harry watched as the veela began to dance to the music that had started up. Their long blonde hair whipped around their heads as they twirled suggestively on the pitch. They couldn't be human, Harry thought, feeling oddly drawn to them. While they had similar colouring to Narcissa, they glowed with a silvery sort of light, and their hair looked more like spun gold. As they spun faster and faster, Draco nudged Harry and pointed down the front row of seats towards Ron, who looked like he was preparing to dive over the railing. Mr Weasley noticed just in time, and pulled him back down to his seat.
“Shame,” Draco whispered to Harry.

The veela stopped dancing when the music faded away. The crowd yelled angrily; nobody wanted the veela to leave the pitch.

“And now, the Irish National Team Mascots!” Bagman called.

The green-decked supporters went wild as a green and gold comet shot into the stadium before splitting into two smaller comets that hurtled towards the goals at either end. A rainbow soared through the air to connect them. It shimmered in the air then faded away as the lights joined up again to become a giant shamrock. It flew over the stands, dropping gold coins down on the crowd. Harry went to pick some off the floor but Narcissa stopped him.

“Leprechaun gold disappears after a few hours, Harry.”

Harry peered up at the shamrock to see that it was made up of thousands of bearded little men in red vests, each carrying a lantern of green or gold. They dispersed and sat down on one side of the pitch, opposite the veela.

As Bagman began announcing the Bulgarian players, Harry raised his Omnioculars to his eyes to watch them.

“And... KRUM!”

Draco gave Harry's hand an excited and slightly painful squeeze as the Bulgarian Seeker flew into the stadium. “It's him! Viktor Krum!”

Remembering how Draco had raved over Krum, who was in his opinion the best Seeker the world had ever seen, Harry spun a dial on his Omnioculars to slow down the vision. Krum was pale with dark hair and thick eyebrows, and he was frowning as he flew around the pitch. Harry watched him with fascination before realising that Bagman had already introduced half the Irish team, and he quickly returned his Omnioculars back to normal speed in time to see the introduction of their Seeker, Lynch. A minute later the umpire had been announced and the match began.

Ireland quickly took the lead through their exceptional Chasers. Just after Bulgaria scored their first goal, the two Seekers went into a steep dive. Krum pulled out at the last second, but Lynch hit the ground hard. As mediwizards went rushing over to him, Harry disentangled his hand from Draco's grip to replay the dive on his Omnioculars at half-speed. Wronski Feint – dangerous Seeker diversion read purple letters on his lenses. Harry watched Krum's expression of fierce concentration as he plummeted towards the ground before yanking his broom handle up and shooting back into the sky. Harry switched back to normal speed as he watched Krum circling overhead. He was using the time out to search for the Snitch, while Lynch was treated on the ground. Harry couldn't wait to try the move out himself.

The game got bloodier after that. The veela managed to entrance the umpire, resulting in two penalties to Ireland. Beaters from both teams were belting the Bludgers ferociously, and another Bulgarian foul caused the leprechauns to form a giant hand giving the middle finger to the veela. Harry watched in fascination as the veela transformed into dangerous looking bird-like creatures and began throwing fireballs at the leprechauns. As Ministry officials converged on the fighting mascots, Krum was hit in the face with a Bludger. Blood began to flow freely out of his nose but there was no time out called: the umpire's broom had been hit by one of the veela's fireballs and he was understandably distracted.
“Oh, come on, he can't play like that!” Draco groaned.

“Yes, he can, he's seen the Snitch!” Harry cried.

Both Seekers were again diving towards the ground, with Krum catching up to Lynch despite the blood flying off his face. A few seconds later and Lynch hit the ground yet again and Krum was rising triumphantly into the air with the Snitch fluttering in his hand.

“IRELAND WIN! KRUM GETS THE SNITCH – BUT IRELAND HAVE WON BY TEN POINTS!” Bagman called excitedly, barely audible over the cheers of the Irish supporters. Harry, Hermione and Draco were dancing up and down. Below them, Scarlett was jumping so enthusiastically that Ginny had to hold on to the back of her robes to prevent her from falling over the railing.

“Vell, it vos a good match,” the Bulgarian Minister said stoically.

“You speak English! I've been miming everything all day!” Fudge said indignantly.

“And it vos very funny,” the Bulgarian Minister said unapologetically. Narcissa chuckled appreciatively.

Harry blinked as a bright white light was shone into the top box. The Quidditch World Cup was brought in and given to Fudge, and then the Bulgarian team trooped in. They shook hands with both Ministers for Magic, and Krum got a particularly loud cheer from the crowd when he was announced. Up close, he looked even worse than he had through the Omnioculars, with two black eyes developing under the blood covering his face. He looked far less coordinated on the ground than on a broom, and Harry wondered if that was due to the Bludger he'd taken to the face, or if he was always like that.

The Irish team came in last, with Lynch being supported by two of his team mates and looking slightly cross-eyed. When the Irish team returned to their brooms for a lap of honour, he had to sit on the back of one of the Beater's brooms.

“Too bad the match didn't go for longer, we could have missed some school,” Draco said.

“Trust me, darling, you'll be enjoying this school year,” said Narcissa.

“Why?”

“Not now,” Narcissa said, flicking her eyes over to Fudge.

Draco took the hint. “Can we visit Ginny now?”

Narcissa looked down at the expectant group. “I suppose so, if that's all right with Arthur.”

Mr Weasley looked up at his name and nodded when Ginny asked him. “The more the merrier,” he said amiably. Beside him, Ron scowled.
In Which Our Trio Come Under Suspicion and are Less Than Impressed With the Ministry

Chapter Notes

A massive thank you to Frogg, who single-handedly fixed the mess I'd managed to make of the French in this chapter.

The Weasleys turned out to have two tents set up next to a rather busy path. As Mr Weasley and Scarlett began lighting a fire with matches (and a lot of help from Hermione), the older Weasley boys dragged some chairs out of their tents and set them up in a ring around the fire.

“This is Charlie, and that's Bill over there,” Ginny said, pointing out her eldest brothers to Harry and Draco. “They usually work overseas, but they're both staying in England for a while this year.”

“What do you do?” Harry asked Charlie. He already knew that Bill worked for Gringotts in Egypt.

“I work at a dragon reserve,” Charlie said, showing off a few burns on his arms.

“It's so cool!” Scarlett said as she sat down next to Ginny.

Charlie gave her an amused smile. “It has its moments.”

“You work with dragons?” Draco asked curiously.

“Yeah. We've got all sorts at the reserve; a couple of specimens from each of the European species, and some of the Asian ones as well,” Charlie said.

“Where do you keep a bunch of dragons?” Harry asked, picturing some gigantic, fire-filled zoo.

“Countryside in Romania. Warded like crazy, of course, to keep the dragons in and the Muggles out,” Charlie explained.

“Romania? Isn't that where Hagrid's dragon egg got sent?” Harry asked Draco.

“I think that's what Snape said.”

Charlie frowned at them. “How do you know about Sally?”

Draco grinned and told him about how they'd convinced Hagrid to give up his egg.

Charlie shook his head with a grin. “You did Hagrid a massive favour. Sally's a Norwegian Ridgeback, and she's pretty vicious. Gave me this, actually,” he pointed at a long burn on his forearm, “last time I had to give her a physical.”

“Yeah, but think how cool it would've been to have a real dragon at school,” Scarlett said wistfully.

Charlie coughed suddenly. “So, er, great match today, wasn't it?”

They spent a few hours sitting by the fire, thoroughly discussing the match. The Irish were still
singing and laughing, and the people walking past their tents were getting progressively drunker as
the night wore on. Every now and then a leprechaun or two would go flying overhead, still carrying
their lanterns. Bill unearthed a bottle of Firewhisky, which he shared with his dad, Charlie and
Narcissa, before carefully putting it far away from the twins' reach. The younger members of the
group made do with endless cups of hot chocolate, piled high with fluffy marshmallows.

Harry sipped his hot chocolate as he watched Narcissa chatting happily with Mr Weasley and Bill. “I
thought Mr Weasley hated your family.”

“No, just my father, I think. In any case, Mother has, ah, widened her social circle since his
imprisonment, and she seems to be particularly enjoying befriending people my father hated,”
replied Draco.

Narcissa looked over at them. “English, please, boys,” she said sharply. When they nodded
sheepishly her brow relaxed, and she held out her glass to Bill for a refill.

The twins pulled out a bag of fake wands and passed them around the group. Harry waved his,
laughing when it turned into rubber chicken. He was soon challenged to a sword fight by Scarlett – if
you could call getting hit in the back of the head with a rubber chicken a challenge. Harry scrambled
to his feet and took off after her as she ducked around the back of the nearest tent, giggling madly.

Harry heard footsteps behind him and glanced over his shoulder to see Ginny gaining on him,
brandishing her own wand, which had turned into a long, plastic daisy.

“Hey, no fair!” he protested, sprinting around the tent.

Draco looked up at his shout and stretched his leg out just as Scarlett was running through the group
still by the fire. She tripped over his leg, tumbling forward into a somersault and ending up on her
back, laughing breathlessly.

“Cheater!” she yelled at Draco, throwing her chicken at him.

Her Chaser skills were clearly taking the night off, as her throw went wild. The chicken spun end
over end before falling into Narcissa's lap, knocking her glass to the ground.

Scarlett sat up nervously. “Sorry, Mrs Malfoy, I didn't mean to get you.”

“No, just my son,” Narcissa said. When Scarlett gulped, she chuckled. “No harm done, Scarlett. I
think we'll head off soon, anyway. We can't celebrate all night.”

“Why not? They are,” Draco said, pointing across the field of tents.

Harry looked up to see flames flickering on the far side of the field and a loud group of people
walking in the shadows and looking up at something in the sky. They were chanting something,
though Harry couldn't make out the words from here. Whatever it was, it didn't sound like the
cheerful songs and chants he'd been hearing from the revelling Irish.

“I don't think they're celebrating the match,” Bill said slowly.

Mr Weasley stood up. “Surely not... There are Ministry officials all over the place!”

“Who else would wear those clothes?” Narcissa asked in a tense voice.

Mr Weasley gave her a worried frown, then turned to his kids. “Fred, George, take Ron, Ginny and
Scarlett into the woods and stay there till we come get you. Bill, Charlie and Percy, come with me,”
he said, then paused and looked questioningly at Narcissa. She nodded grimly.

“What’s going on?” the twins asked.

Narcissa stood up as well and drew her wand. “Draco, take your friends into the woods, too. And stick together no matter what. I'll come find you soon, I promise.”

“Mother, what’s happening?” Draco asked worriedly.

Just then there was a bang and a large tent caught on fire, causing the far group to laugh. In the light of the extra fire, Harry could see the people on the ground were all wearing masks and black, hooded robes. More people were beginning to join them, but even more were running away screaming. In the sky above them all -

“Are those people up there?” Ginny asked.

“Looks like the camping ground manager,” George said.

Fred nodded. “And they must be his family.”

“Draco, take Hermione and Harry and go,” Narcissa said in a clipped voice Harry had never heard her use. “Don't let Hermione out of your sight.”

Draco nodded and grabbed Harry and Hermione's hands and began pulling them towards the woods. The younger Weasleys and Scarlett followed them.

“What did your mum mean about me?” Hermione asked.

“I think... I think Mother thinks those are Death Eaters,” Draco said as he pulled them along. “You better pull your hood up.”

Hermione paled a little but did as he told her as they entered the dark woods. The red and green lanterns had long since been extinguished, leaving the woods completely dark. Harry couldn't see a thing and kept a firm hold on Draco's hand as they heard people rushing around in a panic, jostling them more than once. Over the sound of crying children and shouting adults, Harry could hear more explosions coming from the campsite.

“Can one of you light your wand?” Draco asked.

Harry used his free hand to reach into his pocket, finding only his Omnioculars. He frowned and reached around for his other pocket.

“Lumos,” Hermione said.

As her wand lit them up, Draco dropped their hands and lit his own wand. Harry was now digging through his pockets with both hands for his wand and getting increasingly frantic.

Draco looked around. “Where did Scarlett and the Weasleys go? Weren't they right behind us?”

“Guys, I can't find my wand,” Harry interrupted.

“What?” they both asked.

“I must have dropped it when I was sitting by the fire,” Harry said, making to turn back.

Draco grabbed his arm. “You're not going back, not now. We need to get Hermione out of here.”
“Am I really in that much more danger than you two?” she asked.

Draco looked at her grimly. “Mother certainly thought so, and that's good enough for me. Now come on.”

Harry followed unhappily, feeling very defenceless without his wand. A little further along they came across a group of teenagers arguing in French. One of them broke off when they got closer.

“Avez-vous vu Madame Maxime? Nous l'avons perdue -”

“Je ne sais pas qui c'est, désolé,” Draco replied.

“Elle est directrice de Beauxbâtons. Elle fait plus de trois mètres de haut,” the girl continued.

Draco's eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Nous ne l'avons pas vue.”

The French girl nodded and turned back to her friends.

“You speak French?” Harry asked.

“Obviously,” said Draco. “Mother taught me when I was young.”

“How come I didn't know that?”

Draco shrugged. “You never asked.”

“Just how many languages do you speak?” Harry asked.

“Apart from English? French and Parseltongue. And I'm learning Mermish. Can we keep moving?”

Hermione uneasily.

They hadn't gone far when Winky appeared out a clump of bushes by the path. She was panting as she fought to move forwards, as though something invisible was holding her back. “There is bad wizards around. People is floating high in the sky. Winky is getting out of the way!” she squeaked at them as she crossed the path with some effort.

“That was odd,” Draco said after a beat.

“I bet her master didn't give her permission to run away,” Hermione said with a glower.

Draco shook his head with a frown. “I don't think that's it... If she was disobeying a direct order she'd probably have to punish herself, but she could probably manage it...”

“You seem to know a lot about it,” Hermione began.

“Because my father used to treat our elves that way. Mother doesn't make them do that anymore. They're actually more obedient, now, funnily enough. Or at least, Dobby is.”

The path was less crowded now. They skirted around a group of goblins gathered around a pile of gold and a group of Veela surrounded by admirers and sat down in a small deserted clearing. Harry was re-checking his pockets for his wand when Bagman walked out of the trees. He stopped when he saw the three of them sitting on the ground.

“What are you doing here? Where are your parents?” he demanded.

“Helping sort out the Death Eater riot,” Draco said pointedly.
“The what?” Bagman gasped.

“At the camping ground. They’ve got a bunch of Muggles levitating in the sky and are burning tents,” said Harry.

Bagman stared at him wordlessly before he Disapparated.

“I hope the rest of the Ministry is more organised than he is,” said Hermione.

“They'd have to be,” snorted Draco.

“Shouldn't there be Aurors all over the place?” Harry asked. “I mean, if it was a football riot the police would be -”

“Shh!” Hermione hissed.

They fell silent as they listened to the sound of footsteps getting closer.

“Who's there?” Harry called.

The footsteps stopped abruptly. Draco held up his still lit wand and peered out into the darkness, but they couldn't see anyone.

“Should we go?” Harry asked uneasily.

Draco had just pursed his lips in thought when a voice bellowed through the darkness.

“MORSMORDRE!”

Green, glittery light exploded from the direction of the voice. Harry looked up to see a giant skull with a snake emerging from the mouth and with a jolt, recognised it as the Dark Mark. It rose higher into the air as green smoke swirled around it. Screams came from the surrounding woods as unseen people began to flee.

Draco shot to his feet and grabbed their hands. “MOVE!”

Harry and Hermione stumbled after him.

“Why would -”

“Just fucking come on Potter!” Draco cried, tugging harder.

They'd only gone a few metres when they heard the sound of a group of people Apparating into the clearing. Harry looked around and saw that every single wizard had their wands aimed at Hermione, Draco and himself.

“Duck!” he shouted, and pushed the other two to the ground.

They landed heavily just before the group of wizards yelled “STUPEFY!”

Harry felt warm wind gust over him, then raised his head slightly in time to see jets of red light shoot off into the night, ricocheting off the trees before disappearing into the darkness.

“STOP!” came a scream.

Harry looked over to see Narcissa rushing forwards looking white as a ghost.
“Draco – Harry – Hermione – are you hurt?” she asked urgently, then began to bend down to Draco.

“Out of the way, Malfoy,” came a hard voice.

It belonged to an older wizard. Unlike a lot of the adults Harry had seen that day, who had tried unsuccessfully to dress in Muggle clothing, this man was dressed in an impeccable suit. Even his moustache looked like it had been shaved with the aid of a ruler.

“Which of you did it?” he snarled at them as he stalked forward with his wand still upraised.

“We didn't do anything!” Harry shouted as he got to his feet with Draco and Hermione.

“Do not lie to me!” the wizard shouted back.

Narcissa straightened up and glared at the man. “Harry is not lying, Crouch. You cannot believe a child could possibly have conjured the Dark Mark!”

Crouch's face reddened with anger. “They were found at the scene of the crime! Which of you did it?”

Mr Weasley stepped forward. “Barty, they couldn't have. Only Death Eaters were ever taught how.”

“And he's the son of a Death Eater!” Crouch pointed his wand at Draco, spittle flying from his mouth as he shouted.

Narcissa whipped her own wand up and aimed it squarely at Crouch's throat. “Lower your wand this instant or I'll lower it for you.”

Crouch's eyes bulged. “You dare -”

“You dare accuse my son? He may be the son of a Death Eater, but we all know that you are the father of one!”

Harry had never seen Narcissa look this angry, not even when she'd been threatening the Dursleys. Her normally smooth hair was escaping its bun and red sparks had begun to shoot out of her wand. Her teeth were bared and Harry half expected her to growl.

“Where did the Mark come from?” asked a kindly looking witch still in her dressing gown.

“Over there.” Hermione pointed with a trembling arm. “We heard someone coming towards us but didn't see anything – and then they shouted the incantation to conjure the Mark.”

Crouch turned towards her. “You seem remarkably knowledgeable about the Dark Mark, young lady.”

“She's knowledgeable about everything,” Draco said through gritted teeth. “And before you start accusing her, she happens to be a Muggle-born.”

Crouch's eyes darted suspiciously between Draco and Hermione, but the rest of adults – with the exception of Narcissa – raised their wands in the direction Hermione had pointed to. As a few of the wizards began to search the woods, Narcissa stepped closer and gathered all three teenagers towards her without lowering her wand, which was still aimed unwaveringly at Crouch.

Triumphant shouts went up and a bearded wizard returned carrying an unconscious Winky in his arms. He lay her at Crouch's feet, and he jerked as if he'd been slapped.
“No! No...” he cried before he headed off to where she'd been found.

“Doesn't look good, does it, his own elf,” the bearded wizard said as he gazed down at Winky.

“Diggory, you don't believe it was the elf, do you?” a witch asked. “She'd need a wand for a start.”

“Yeah, and she had one,” Diggory said. He raised up a wand and waved it slowly for everyone to see.

“That's my wand!” Harry cried out in surprise.

“For your wand?” Diggory asked dangerously.

Harry opened his mouth but was interrupted by Bagman Apparating into the clearing. “What's going on? Why's the Dark Mark in the sky? Barty? Good god, what happened to your elf?”

Everyone looked over to where Crouch had returned.

“She has been Stunned,” he said curtly.

“Mr Crouch, she had a wand,” Diggory reported quietly.

“A wand?” Crouch asked sharply.

“Yeah. Harry Potter's wand, actually.”

Crouch swung his head towards Harry, his nostrils flaring. “You!”

This time, Narcissa did growl. “You pathetic, incompetent fools. You have accused two children – one of whom is a Muggle-born – a house-elf, and now Harry Potter of conjuring the Dark Mark. You may continue your pointless paranoia if you wish, but we're leaving.”

“Narcissa, you know you can't just leave,” Mr Weasley said wearily. “Not just yet.”

“Fine,” Narcissa huffed, the red sparks lessening somewhat. “We shall remain long enough for you to question Crouch's elf.”

Crouch scowled at the reminder that it was his elf at the centre of things. “Rennervate,” he said quietly.

Winky opened her eyes and struggled to sit up as she gazed around at all the hard faces looking back at her. When she caught sight of the Dark Mark still hanging in the sky she burst into tears.

“Elf! I'm a member of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures! We have some questions for you.”

The only sign that Winky had heard Diggory's words was that her crying got louder.

“Elf, you were found beneath the Dark Mark and holding a wizard's wand. Having broken the law about non-human creatures carrying wands, why should we not arrest you for conjuring the Mark?”

Winky took great gulping breaths as she tried to speak through her tears. “I – I is not doing it, sir! I is wanting only to get away from – from the bad wizards! I is not doing anything with the wand!”

“Really,” Diggory said, unconvinced. “We'll see about that. Prior incantato!”
A ghostly Dark Mark erupted from Harry's wand, just as large as the original, but made of grey smoke.

"Deletrius," Diggory said hastily. As the grey smoke disappeared he turned back to Winky. "You have been caught at the scene of the crime with the very wand that cast the spell."

"She didn't do it!" Hermione cried out. She turned pink as everyone stared at her, but ploughed on. "It couldn't have been her, it didn't sound anything like her. The voice we heard was human."

Draco nodded. "It was a man. He probably Disapparated as soon as you all began to arrive."

"Well that seems fairly straight-forward. Someone stole Harry's wand and Disapparated as soon as they'd cast the spell, leaving Winky to get the blame," Narcissa said, then stared around as if daring someone to object.

"You must have seen who it was, then, elf," Diggory tried a new tack.

Winky looked at him through streaming eyes before addressing Crouch. "Winky is seeing no one, sir."

Crouch's lips thinned under his moustache. "Amos, I'll handle my elf if you please. I assure you, she will be suitably punished."

When Diggory nodded somewhat reluctantly, Crouch gave Winky a look that made Harry shiver.

"You have disgraced me," Crouch began. "You disobeyed a direct order to remain in my tent, and had the audacity to hold a wizard's wand."

Winky cried even harder as she knelt at Crouch's feet. "No! Master, please – no!"

Crouch showed no pity as he began to loosen his tie. "This means clothes."

Winky collapsed in a sobbing heap. Crouch removed his tie, bent down, picked up Winky's hand and pressed his tie into it. Winky dropped it as if it had burnt her and tried to grab Crouch's leg but he stepped back out of her reach.

"I apologise for the actions of my former elf," he said, then raised his voice as Winky began to wail. "Amos, I do not think she conjured the Mark, but she did break clause three of the Code of Wand Use. Do with her as you will."

With that he walked back to where she'd been found, and a few seconds later there was a crack as he Disapparated. Everyone stared at where he'd been standing for a second before Hermione rushed forward and tried to grab Crouch's leg but he stepped back out of her reach.

"Give Harry his wand back," Narcissa ordered. When Diggory handed it over with an awkward grimace, Narcissa held out her hands expectantly, clearly impatient to Apparate out of there.

"Please, we can't just leave her here," Hermione said.

"What about Dobby?" Harry asked suddenly. "Winky said she knows him, maybe he could help her get used to being free?"

Narcissa hesitated before nodding once. "Dobby!"

Dobby Apparated into the clearing and sparked a chorus of disbelieving gasps and a few laughs. Apart from his usual jelly sandals, he was wearing a green child's dress – evidently he had been
supporting Ireland today as well. “Yes, Miss Narcissa?”

“Dobby, I understand you are acquainted with Winky. She has been extremely upset tonight. Can you please take her home and try to calm her down?”

Diggory stepped forward. “You can’t just take her home with you!”

Narcissa raised an eyebrow. “Oh? I think we all agree that she isn’t responsible for the Dark Mark.”

“Yes, but...”

“Do not presume to tell Dobby what he can and cannot do,” Narcissa said coolly.

Dobby crossed his arms. “Dobby is a free elf, sir! If Dobby is wanting to take Winky home, then Dobby is doing it!”

Harry saw quite a few people struggle to suppress smiles at that, Mr Weasley among them. Dobby walked over to Winky and gently pulled her to her feet before he Disapparated away with her. Hermione stood up and walked back over to Harry and the Malfoys. She took Narcissa’s hand, leaving the boys to take her other arm.

“Arthur, give our farewells to your family,” Narcissa called across the clearing, then followed Dobby home.

The grounds were dark and the walk up the drive seemed longer than usual to Harry. He stumbled more than once on the gravel as the adrenaline began to wear off and exhaustion set in. Draco tightened his grip on Harry's hand, but didn't say anything.

As they walked through the front doors, Narcissa broke the silence with a sigh. “Bedtime for all of us.”

No one argued with her. At the top of the stairs Narcissa turned left to her own bedroom, leaving the teenagers to head right to their own rooms. They came to a stop outside of Draco's room.

“You guys okay?” Harry asked.

Hermione nodded a little shakily. “I'm fine. Though I'd be very happy if I never go through anything like that again.”


“Well, he's in Azkaban now, so you don't need to worry about him,” Harry said consolingly.

Draco nodded slowly. “Good night.”

Alone in his room, Harry got changed into his pyjamas, removed his glasses and collapsed into bed, but sleep didn't come. He lay there, looking at the fuzzy outline of the moon through his window as he replayed the events of the night in his mind.

He found himself thinking of Draco's words. If Lucius Malfoy hadn't been arrested and sent to Azkaban, would he have been there, with the rest of the Death Eaters? Laughing at the Muggles as they levitated helplessly? Would Narcissa have been with him? Would Draco have been with him?

Harry shivered. This wasn't a train of thought that would help him get to sleep anytime soon. He rolled over and hugged a pillow, wishing he had a stuffed toy to keep him company. He didn't dare sneak into Draco's room, not with Narcissa around. Instead, he pulled the covers up to his chin and
curled into a ball, telling himself he was safe in the Manor.

He heard Narcissa’s quiet footsteps coming down the hall, then the sound of her opening Draco’s door. A minute later she eased Harry’s door open and stuck her head through the crack, before shutting it again and walking down to Hermione's room. Harry suddenly felt a lot safer, knowing that Narcissa was looking after them all. He fell asleep five minutes later with a smile on his face. 

*******
Harry slept like the dead until he was awakened by Tilly at lunchtime the next day, with a message to join Draco on the balcony.

Harry groggily put his glasses on, got changed out of his pyjamas and wandered outside. He found both Hermione and Draco waiting for him at the table.

“Mother’s busy all morning, so we get to choose whatever we want for lunch,” Draco said happily.

Tilly popped up next to the table to take their orders. Ten minutes later she reappeared to serve them their food. Harry and Draco began eating as Hermione asked how Winky was.

Tilly shook her head sadly. “Winky is not good, miss. Winky is missing her master. Dobby is trying to cheer her up, but Winky is not listening to him. Winky is just wanting to go back to her master.”

“But he was horrible to her!” Hermione protested.

“House-elves is not choosing their masters, miss. Winky is not being so lucky as Tilly,” the elf said, smiled at Draco, then Disapparated.

Hermione brightened. “Maybe Winky can work here, then. I'm sure your mum wouldn't mind, Draco.”

Draco eyed her warily over his sundae. “Probably not, but don't go trying to recruit Mother to join your house-elf rights crusade.”

When Hermione took a mouthful of her salad instead of replying, Harry knew that that was exactly what she'd been planning.

So did Draco. “Hermione, can you just drop it, please? Mother's already freed Dobby, and the rest of our elves are happy – even you've admitted that. Besides, there are more important things to worry about after last night.”

“Like what?” asked Hermione.

“Like the fact that a couple of days after Harry has a dream about the Dark Lord and wakes up with his scar hurting, the Dark Mark is conjured during a Death Eater riot.”

“Yeah, about that,” began Harry. “I don’t get it. Why would someone shoot that into the sky? I mean, it's just the tattoo Voldemort gave all the Death Eaters, isn't it? Surely it can't be that scary.”

Draco shook his head. “It wasn't just a tattoo, it was his symbol in general. Death Eaters would set it above any place where they'd killed or tortured someone. Seeing it above one's house would have been a lot of people's worst nightmares back then.”

Harry frowned. “So why was it cast in the woods and not the field where they were levitating the Muggles?”

“Well,” Draco leaned forward, “Mother thinks the Dark Mark had nothing to do with the riot. Because all of those Death Eaters Disapparated as soon as they saw it.”

“Why would they do that?” asked Harry.
“Because the Death Eaters we saw last night are the ones who escaped prison or death. People like my father who claimed to have been forced to join up. If you'd lied about your involvement with the Dark Lord, you'd be worried about him coming back, too.”

“But Mr Weasley said last night that only Death Eaters were ever taught that spell,” Hermione said. Harry took a swig of apple juice. “You don't think it could've been Pettigrew, do you?”

“Pettigrew?” Hermione sounded doubtful.

Harry shrugged. “Trelawney had that prophecy about him in June, and he escaped that night. What if he's managed to find Voldemort? He was there in my dream, after all.”

“The Dark Lord couldn't have been there last night, or your scar would have hurt,” Draco said confidently.

Hermione put her cutlery down. “Draco, would there be any books on prophecies in the library?”

“I'm not sure, I've never wanted to read about them before.”

“I guess I'll find out, then,” she said, then walked off.

“Please tell me you don't want to join her,” Draco said.

Harry grinned. “Nah. I want to try out that Wronski Feint.”

“Excellent.”

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Harry and Draco spent most of the afternoon trying out different manoeuvres on the Quidditch pitch. Draco refused to try the Wronski Feint, saying he wasn't a lunatic with a death wish, but Harry practised it over and over, loving the rush he got from pulling up at the last possible second. Eventually they called it quits and went for a fly around the grounds. They rounded the corner of the house and saw Narcissa walking up the drive.

“Where have you been all day?” Draco called down to her.

Narcissa held up a hand against the sun's glare and looked up at him. “I got caught up at the Ministry. I'll tell you all about it if you'd like to join me in the lounge for tea.”

The boys went and fetched Hermione from the library before they joined Narcissa. They found her seated with her feet propped up on a footstool. Dobby was crouched in front of her, giving her a foot massage.

“It went that badly?” asked Draco.

Narcissa sighed. “The Ministry is in absolute chaos. I wouldn't have gone at all, but I thought it was my best chance of finding out anything about last night.”

“Miss Narcissa should not be getting tired,” Dobby scolded.

“You make it sound like I'm pregnant,” she said with an exasperated smile.

Draco blanched. “You're not, are you?”
Narcissa laughed softly. “No, darling, just exhausted. I did manage to find out some useful information, though. Dobby, that's enough. Please fetch us some tea.”

Dobby returned a minute later with a tea tray and a plate of miniature meringues. He poured them all a cup and then said he was going back to check on Winky.

Narcissa took a sip of tea. “First, you'll be pleased to learn that your friends were unharmed when they were separated from you last night. They simply waited together in a quieter patch of the woods until their older brothers found them.”

Harry, Hermione and Draco all nodded in relief.

“Apart from that, there wasn't much else to discover about last night, apart from the Ministry being incompetent as usual. I did see Rita Skeeter skulking around the Department of Magical Games and Sports, though, so I expect we'll be getting a flood of sensational rumours in the *Daily Prophet* in the coming weeks. She may be overfond of printing gossip as fact, but she is entertaining.”

“That's it?” Draco asked in disappointment.

“No, I'm just getting warmed up. I also learned that this year, your Defence Against the Dark Arts professor will be Alastor Moody,” she said meaningfully.

“I've never heard of him,” Draco said, looking at Harry and Hermione, who both shrugged.

“That's because your father refused to allow his name to be mentioned in this house. He's the Auror – or rather, the ex-Auror, now – who arrested your father thirteen years ago.”

“And he's going to be teaching at Hogwarts?” Draco asked.

“Yes. He had retired, but apparently he's teaching for a year as a favour to Dumbledore. I don't expect you'll enjoy Defence lessons very much this year, Draco.”

“What, you think he might have a grudge against me because Father talked his way out of Azkaban last time? That was ages ago, and he's in there now.”

“From what I understand, Moody isn't entirely sane. He was a good Auror in his day, but he spent too long chasing Dark wizards, and has ended up paranoid and suspicious as a result. I don't want you antagonising him like you did Lockhart,” Narcissa said sternly.

Draco nodded nervously.

“Good. You might also want to warn Theodore, Vincent and Gregory about him.”

“Why them?” asked Harry.

“Their fathers were all suspected of being Death Eaters, too,” Draco said quietly.

“Were they?” Hermione asked.

“I believe so, yes. They were all friendly with Lucius, at any rate,” Narcissa replied. Harry stared at her in shock.

“Relax, Harry. Theo hates his father, you know that, and given how much he enjoys Muggle Studies, I doubt he harbours any Death Eater tendencies. And Greg and Vince are so dumb, even if they did turn out to be evil, they wouldn't be a concern,” Draco said flippantly.
“Don't underestimate someone simply because they're not intelligent,” warned Narcissa.

“Mother, Greg only wears slip on shoes because he still hasn't figured out how laces work,” Draco said dismissively.

Hermione shot a questioning look at Harry, who raised his eyebrows and nodded.

“All the same,” Narcissa continued, though she smiled slightly, “lack of intelligence does not make someone harmless. I told you about Polly's friend going missing in Albania. Poor Bertha was always very dim, but incredibly nosy. Add those two traits together, and she could well have gotten herself – and anyone she may have been with – into trouble.”

Harry frowned as her words sparked a jolt of recognition. “Do you mean Bertha Jorkins?” he asked.

“Yes. Why, do you know her?” Narcissa asked.

“I...” Harry wracked his brain. “I just recognised the name from somewhere...”

“I did speak to Arthur about her after the Quidditch World Cup,” Narcissa offered.

“No, that wasn't it,” Harry said slowly. “I heard about her before that: in the dream I had about Voldemort and Pettigrew.”

“You did?” Narcissa asked sharply.

“Yeah... I didn't take much notice at the time because the name didn't mean anything to me. But I think he murdered her,” Harry said. “After torturing her for information about something.”

Hermione and Draco looked at him, horrified, but Narcissa shook her head firmly. “It was just a dream, Harry, and one you didn't remember very well once you’d woken up. Your memory must be playing tricks on you, and conflating my conversation with Arthur with your dream.”

“I guess so,” he said, wholly unconvinced.

“In any case, Bertha works for the Department of Magical Games and Sports, and her boss, Ludo Bagman, isn't worried about her,” Narcissa continued calmly.

“Yes, but Mother, he's an idiot. He didn't even realise there was a riot going on at the World Cup until we told him about it,” Draco said scornfully.

“No doubt because he's been very busy,” Narcissa said. “Apart from organising the World Cup, he's also been arranging something you have taken a keen interest in.”

Draco looked Harry up and down in confusion, then blushed when Hermione snorted with laughter.

Narcissa chuckled. “I'm talking about the Triwizard Tournament.”

Draco sat bolt upright. “Are you serious?”

“What's the Triwizard Tournament?” Harry asked.

“A competition held between the three largest magical schools in Europe: Hogwarts, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. Each school would choose a champion to represent them in a series of three dangerous tasks meant to test their skills. It was held every five years, moving between each school,” began Narcissa.
“Like the Olympics,” Harry said with a shrug to Hermione.

Narcissa looked a little confused. “Perhaps... In any case, it hasn't been held in over a century, when it was agreed that the death toll had become too high.”

“Death toll?” Hermione repeated.

“Er, so not like the Olympics, then,” Harry muttered.

“But they've decided to set it up again?” Draco asked.

“Yes. And it will be held at Hogwarts this year.”

Draco's eyes widened. “No way,” he breathed.

Narcissa smiled. “Oh, yes. Which is lucky for you, because they're introducing an age limit this year. Champions will have to be of age before they can nominate themselves, so you wouldn't have been able to see it if it had been held at one of the other schools. The Heads of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving at Hogwarts with their prospective champions in October, and then the Champions will be chosen at the Halloween feast.”

“Halloween? This is not going to end well,” Draco moaned.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Halloween isn't cursed, Draco.”

“It is at Hogwarts,” said Draco mulishly.

“Yes, well, whether or not Halloween is cursed,” Narcissa said with amusement, “Christmas certainly isn't, and you will be spending that at Hogwarts this year, Draco. Part of the tradition of the Triwizard Tournament is that the host school will organise a Yule Ball on Christmas Night, open to fourth years and above.”

“A ball?” Harry asked.

“That's why your book lists had dress robes on them,” Narcissa said, then cocked her head. “Harry, Hermione, have either of you ever been taught to waltz?”

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The next day, Harry walked into the ballroom. It was situated on the ground floor of the Manor, with large, ceiling-height doors that opened out into the garden. Harry had never really given it much thought before, but that was before he'd found out he'd be expected to waltz at the Yule Ball. Narcissa was wearing a knee-length Muggle dress, which was unusual for her, while Hermione was sitting on a chair in the corner with a large book open on her lap.

“What are you reading?” Harry asked her.

“A History of the Waltz,” she said, tilting the book so he could see the moving picture of dancing couples. She bit her lip and looked up. “It sounds complicated.”

“Well, if we suck, we just won't dance at the ball, then,” Harry said consolingly.

“Oh, yes you will, Potter,” Draco said from behind him. “I want at least one waltz from you.”

“I hope you remember your manners on the night,” Narcissa admonished him. “Only the champions
and their partners will be required to dance the opening waltz. The rest of the ball should be less formal. Now, I thought we could start with a brief demonstration.”

Draco followed her into the centre of the floor and took her proffered hand. She rested her other one on his shoulder and flicked her wand at an ornate gramophone in the corner, from which a gentle waltz began to play. Harry and Hermione watched as the Malfoys moved gracefully around in time to the music. As the song drew to a close, Draco spun Narcissa around with a flourish. She fell into a deep curtsy as Draco bowed to her, then looked over with a grin.

“See? Easy,” he said with a smirk.

Harry shared a glance with Hermione, who looked as nervous as he did.

Narcissa laughed gently. “It really isn't that difficult. I'll teach you both the steps to follow, and then you can take it in turns dancing with Draco, as I've never led a waltz before.”

Harry and Hermione stood behind Narcissa as she demonstrated a series of slow steps, moving in a square on the floor. Harry suddenly realised why Narcissa was in Muggle clothes; her usual floor-length robes wouldn't have allowed them to see the movement of her feet.

“That's all there is to it,” she said as she turned back to face them. “You will, of course, also turn during the actual dance, but those are the basic steps. Given that you will both be following, you can always blame any mistakes on the poor techniques of your lead.”

“Hey!” called Draco from the edge of the dance floor.

“I stand corrected. Hermione, you will be able to do so. Harry, you'll have no such excuse.”

“That's more like it,” agreed Draco.

“That's not reassuring, Malfoy,” Harry called back.

“Draco, make yourself useful and have a go with Harry,” Narcissa ordered.

He walked over and took Harry's hand, slipping his other hand around Harry's waist. “Put your other hand on my shoulder.”

Harry did so and gave a small smile.

“Just relax, alright? You'll be fine; I've been doing this since I was little,” Draco reassured him.

It was easier than Harry had anticipated. Draco was indeed a good dancer, and led Harry around far more gracefully than he could have managed by himself. All the same, he spent the dance carefully counting out the beat, and was more than a little relieved when it was over. He went and stood next to Narcissa as Hermione took his place.

“You did well,” Narcissa told him while she watched Hermione. “Just try not to make it so obvious that you're counting steps. You should be smiling, not frowning in concentration.”

The rest of the morning was spent with Draco taking it in turns to lead Harry and Hermione around the dance floor as Narcissa called out instructions from the sidelines. When she was finally satisfied with their progress she called a stop.

“Finally, my feet were getting sore,” grumbled Draco.

Narcissa ignored him. “Congratulations you two, you've both mastered a basic waltz. Just don't try to
show off on the night, Draco. Now, how about some refreshments?"

As they were served gelato on the ballroom balcony Draco looked appraisingly at Hermione.

“Do you have anyone you want to go to the ball with?”

“I haven't really thought about that, to be honest. I was more worried about the actual dancing. But we don't need a date, do we? We can go by ourselves?” she asked.

“I'm sure you'll find someone,” Harry said firmly. “And Draco and I will stay out of it this time.”

Draco nodded grudgingly. “But if you want my opinion, you should try for someone from another year, or from Beauxbatons or Durmstrang. The single boys in our year are all idiots. Or Blaise.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” Hermione said drily.

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The last week of the holiday flew past in a blur of sunny days, which Harry and Draco had to spend finishing their holiday homework. Naturally, Hermione had finished hers before she even came to the Manor, but she sat with them out on the lawn, reading through the books she'd borrowed from the Malfoy library and watching Crookshanks attempt to catch the peacocks. Unfortunately for him, the peacocks had a tendency to stick in a group and were more than a match for him. Dobby had to heal minor scratches for him most days, and the elf spent the time muttering about how the peacocks should all be thrown out of the Manor.

On the last day Harry went down to breakfast feeling grumpy. The nice weather had come to an end, and instead of being able to have one last fly around the grounds with Draco, they were stuck inside. He ate his crumpets as he looked sourly at the rain driving against the dining room windows.

“Cheer up, my cousin's coming over today, remember?” Draco said.

“Oh, yeah. I'd forgotten about that,” Harry said, brightening.

“They'll be arriving at lunchtime, so you'll need to get packed when you finish eating breakfast,” said Narcissa, not looking up from the letter she'd just received. “Harry, you can borrow Dobby, and Winky can help you, Hermione.”

“So she's working here now?” Hermione asked.

Narcissa put down her letter reluctantly. “Yes, she belongs to me now. She's not very happy about it, but said she'd prefer that over being a free elf. She's still pining for her old master, unfortunately.”

Harry returned to his room and began sorting through all his possessions. He set aside his old robes since he wouldn't be taking them with him, and had just started digging his socks and underwear out of the dresser when Dobby arrived.

“Dobby is here to help Harry Potter pack, sir!”

Harry smiled in bemusement at the elf's excitement. “Yeah, thanks. Er, could you find anything I've left around the house, please?”

“Of course, Harry Potter!”

Harry had managed to pack his backpack for the train by the time Dobby returned. He was carrying
Harry's Firebolt, his snake encyclopaedia and some loose drawings.

“This is all Dobby could find, sir, except for Harry Potter's owl. She is sleeping and Dobby didn't want to wake her.”

“Thanks, Dobby. I think I can manage the rest.”

Dobby watched as Harry began to stack his schoolbooks in his trunk and shook his head. “Begging your pardon, Harry Potter, but you is not good at packing. Dobby is much better.”

Harry shrugged. “Go for it.”

A few minutes later Dobby had all of Harry's school things packed into the trunk and was in the process of folding all his clothes in as well.

“Not those, they don't fit anymore,” Harry said when Dobby went to fold his old robes. “Actually, would you like to have them?”

Dobby looked at him with wide eyes. “Harry Potter wants Dobby to have his clothes?”

“If you like, yeah,” said Harry.

There was a pause before Dobby's eyes filled with tears and he rushed to hug Harry around his waist. “Harry Potter is too kind, sir! Dobby will take good care of Harry Potter's clothes!”

Harry patted Dobby on the back, then gently prised his arms off him, embarrassed by Dobby's emotional response. “Who else would I give them to? I'd just upset any of the other elves,” he said awkwardly.

Dobby wiped his eyes and nodded. “The others is not wanting clothes, Harry Potter.”

Harry picked up the robes and looked at them critically. “You'll probably have to shrink them down a bit. But they should go well with your sandals.” When Dobby just nodded and looked up at him adoringly, Harry sighed. “Here, I can manage the rest. Thanks for your help.”

“Thank you, Harry Potter!” Dobby said before he Disapparated.

“That was weird,” Harry said after a pause.

“What was?” Hermione asked from the doorway.

“I gave Dobby my old robes and he burst into tears and hugged me,” Harry said, still a little confused.

Draco laughed as he walked in behind Hermione. “Congratulations, you're now officially Dobby's second favourite person after Mother.”

“I am?”

Draco nodded. “He's always liked you, but giving him clothes? He'll love you forever. Now come on, Mother wants us in the lounge.”

When they entered the lounge they found Narcissa conversing with two women next to the fire. Draco was kissed on the cheek by the elder, and the younger one gave him an enthusiastic hug.

“Harry, Hermione, I'd like you to meet my sister, Andromeda, and her daughter Nymphadora,”
Narcissa said. “These are Draco's friends, Harry and Hermione.”

Harry studied them curiously as they all shook hands. Andromeda looked remarkably like her sister, only with brown hair and eyes, but her daughter was something of a shock. Harry had been expecting her to either be as spoiled as Draco was, or to be a tough policewoman sort. He certainly hadn't pictured someone so... punkish. She had a pale, heart-shaped face surrounded by a shock of short, bright blue hair, and was wearing torn leggings, a short black dress, a dragonhide jacket and purple Doc Martens.

“Wotcher,” she said with a grin. “Call me Tonks.”

“Nymphadora,” Andromeda stressed the name, “was just telling Cissy her good news.”

“I've been accepted as a fully qualified Auror!”

“Congratulations!” Draco grinned. Harry and Hermione echoed him.

“Thanks! I nearly failed the Stealth and Tracking exam, but I made up for it with bonus points on Concealment and Disguise,” Tonks said.

“I think this calls for a celebration,” said Narcissa. “Dobby!”

Dobby Apparated in, thankfully no longer teary-eyed. He was already holding a tray with six glasses of champagne on it. He handed them out quickly and Disapparated again.

Narcissa raised her glass. “To Nymphadora, may your career be long and successful.”

“To Nymphadora,” they all echoed.

Tonks gulped down her champagne, set the glass on a coffee table, then looked at Draco. “We should leave them to it before they start gossiping.”

“We can go to my room,” Draco offered, then led the way.

Tonks bounced onto his bed, nearly falling off the far side, and looked around the room. “Every time we come here I always think my mum was mad to give all this up.”

Draco made a face as he sat down next to her. “Yes, but at least you didn't get stuck with all the Death Eater relatives, Nym.”

“True,” Tonks agreed. “And my dad's pretty cool, so I guess Mum made the right choice. I've heard a lot about you guys,” she said brightly, addressing Harry and Hermione, who were sitting on the couch at the foot of the bed.

“You have?” Harry asked.

Tonks winked at him. “Don't look like that, it was all good stuff.”

Draco went pink. “No need to repeat any of it.”

Harry suddenly had a burning curiosity to know what Tonks had heard.

“So, little cousin, I hear you've got Mad-Eye for Defence this year,” Tonks said.

“Moody? Yes.”
“He's great. Completely mental, of course, but not as scary as he looks,” Tonks said. “He mentored me during my Auror training, before he retired.”

Draco shifted uncomfortably. “Mother says he'll probably hate me because of my father.”

Tonks cocked her head. “Nah. Well, he might, but then, he's pretty suspicious of most people, and anyway, I'll put in a good word for you, too. Plus your best friends are a Muggle-born and Harry Potter: any idiot can see you're nothing like your dad,” she said breezily, then turned serious. “Just whatever you do, don't let him catch you putting your wand in your back pocket. It's not worth the lecture.”

There was a slightly confused silence at that, broken by Harry. “What's it like being an Auror?”

“Great! Well, I've only had a couple of days so far. Most of the Department is busy trying to track down anyone involved in the World Cup riot.”

“Any luck?” Harry asked.

“Can't tell you that, can I? Ongoing investigation and all that.” Tonks laughed at their crestfallen faces. “Kidding. I'd tell you if I could, we just haven't found anything. Anyway... Mum says you guys know all about the Triwizard Tournament?”

“Too late now if we didn't,” smirked Draco.

Tonks just laughed. “Well, I'm dead jealous. We never had anything like that when I was at Hogwarts. I hear Crouch will be one of the judges, and he's pretty pissed at your mum. Something about her humiliating him at the World Cup?”

They all grinned.

“Oh, I nearly forgot!” Tonks reached into a pocket and pulled out a small package, enlarged it, and handed it to Draco. “Late birthday present for my favourite cousin.”

“I'm your only cousin, Nym,” he replied, but looked happy all the same. He opened it up to reveal a Weird Sisters t-shirt.

“Got it at the last gig I went to. I'll make a fan out of you yet, Draco,” Tonks said, punching him in the shoulder.

Draco shifted away from her and held the shirt up to his chest, checking the fit. He lowered it with a smile, then pursed his lips at Tonks. “Why does everyone think my taste in music needs improving? Harry's been getting me into Pearl Jam for the last two years.”

Tonks looked at Harry appreciatively. “Have you? I still prefer the Weird Sisters, but they're pretty cool, too. You'll be good for Draco.”

“Cheers,” Harry said with a grin.

“Draco told us you're a Metamorphmagus,” Hermione cut in.

They spent the rest of the afternoon talking idly as Tonks changed her appearance for them. As Harry watched her give herself a pig's snout, he couldn't help wishing he had a cousin who was as fun as she was.

After an elaborate, delicious dinner, the entire group retired to the lounge. Harry was busy drawing
Dobby – who was now wearing Harry's old, shrunken down robes and chattering happily to him about what clothes he wanted to buy next – and half-listening to the conversation around him. Hermione was talking to Tonks about what it was like to work at the Ministry. Draco was playing chess against Narcissa as she and Andromeda discussed Sirius' approaching trial.

“It will be good to see him again,” Andromeda said wistfully. “He was always my favourite cousin.”

“Of course he was, Andy, our only other cousin was Regulus,” Narcissa scoffed.

“What was wrong with him?” Harry asked curiously.

“In this family? Death Eater, what else?” Draco said bitterly.

Andromeda shook her head. “He wasn't always a Death Eater. Growing up, he was just -”

“An idiot?” Narcissa offered.

“No, he was -”

“A prejudiced snob?”

“Well, yes, but -”

“A moron who blindly followed his parents' bigoted beliefs, before he joined the Dark Lord, only to anger him enough to get himself killed?” Narcissa asked archly.

Andromeda looked at her reproachfully. “That may all be true, but he did have his good points. He was always very sweet with his family's house-elves, for one.”

“That's because his only other options for socialising in that house were his insane parents and an older brother who picked on him constantly,” Narcissa said dismissively.

Harry flashed back to the scene in the Shrieking Shack, and Sirius' scornful tone when he mentioned his brother. “What did he do to get killed?”

Both sisters shrugged. “No idea,” Andromeda admitted. “His body was never even found, but back then, if someone disappeared, it was because You-Know-Who or his followers had gotten to them. Who knows, maybe he realised he was in over his head and tried to leave.”

“Please, the Dark Lord most likely had him murdered for general stupidity. Fleeing the Dark Lord would have required Regulus to have an original thought of his own, and that would never have happened. Now, I think it's high time the three of you headed to bed,” Narcissa said.

Draco looked like he wanted to argue, but a raised eyebrow from Narcissa had him nodding his head. He, Harry and Hermione said their farewells to the Tonkses and headed upstairs.

“I wonder what it's like to have a normal family,” Draco said once they were out of earshot.

“Don't ask me,” Harry replied. As far as he was concerned, anyone who tried as hard as the Dursleys to appear normal had serious problems.

Hermione bit her lip and looked between them awkwardly. “It's pretty boring, actually.”

“I'd take boring over Death Eaters any day,” muttered Draco.

Hermione clearly didn't have an answer for once, and slipped into her room with a soft “goodnight”.
Draco looked at Harry. “Come sleep in my room.”

“But your mum -”

“- will be busy reminiscing with my aunt. Trust me.”

Harry looked at Draco's unhappy face and nodded. “I'll be there in a few minutes. But if your mum catches us this is all your fault.”

After brushing his teeth and getting into his pyjamas, Harry stuck his head back out into the hallway and then tiptoed down to Draco's room. He walked in to find Draco sitting up in bed, hugging his knees as he stared out the nearest window at the driving rain.

“You okay?” Harry asked as he got in next to him.

“It's only five years.”

Harry frowned. “What is?”

Draco turned to face him. “My father's sentence. Five years – four, now – and he'll be out, and he'll do his best to drag Mother and I back to how things used to be. Back to how my family used to be.”

Harry shuffled over and wrapped his arms around Draco. “If he tries, he'll fail.”

“How can you be so sure?” Draco's voice was a little muffled by Harry's elbow.

“Your mum. I spoke to her about some of this stuff on my birthday, when you and Hermione were swimming. She doesn't want anything to do with him,” Harry said confidently, then tugged Draco down until he was lying on his back.

“It's true she's been having a few affairs,” Draco mused as he stared up at the ceiling.

Harry rested his head on Draco's shoulder. “Plus she's let the peacocks go wild. How could he ever want her back after that?”

Draco gave a short laugh which made Harry's head bounce slightly. “You're an idiot sometimes, you know that?”

“Huh. I always thought I was a prat,” Harry said teasingly.

“You can be both,” Draco said before he tilted Harry's face up to kiss him.

“Git,” Harry breathed against Draco's lips.

“Mmm. Your git.”
Harry awoke the next morning to find Draco holding him tightly. He smiled lazily before he realised something hard was digging into his back. His cheeks heated up when his sleepy brain figured out what it was, and he gently wriggled out of Draco's grasp to sit on the edge of the bed. He put his glasses on and took a deep, calming breath, only to realise that he had his own morning erection. Not bothering to see if Draco was awake or not, Harry fled back to his own room, praying he wouldn't run into Hermione – or worse, Narcissa – in the hallway.

Luck was on Harry's side and he shut his bedroom door gratefully behind him. He'd just pulled out his Hogwarts uniform and was on his way to the bathroom when the sound of his name made him jump.

"Dobby!" he said in relief after he'd turned around. He quickly held his uniform in front of his groin.

"Good morning, Harry Potter! Miss Narcissa is wanting you to be ready for breakfast in half an hour, sir."

"Right, yeah, er, of course. I'm, er, I'm just getting in the shower, and, er, then I'll be down," Harry stammered.

Dobby nodded happily and Disapparated. Harry let out a relieved huff of air and headed into the shower. He put all thought of Dobby out of his mind as he debated whether or not he had time for a wank. Figuring it'd be quicker than waiting for his erection to subside on its own, he lathered his hand up with soap and set to work. It didn't take long for images of Draco, sweaty and flushed after Quidditch, to push him over the edge.

After they finished breakfast Narcissa led them all into the foyer to use the Floo. Their school trunks were stacked next to the fireplace, along with Crookshanks, who was safely secured in his basket. Dobby and Tilly were standing next to the pile.

Hermione knelt down in front of them. "Goodbye. Thank you for all your help this summer."

"Yeah, thanks," Harry echoed. "Enjoy your clothes, Dobby."

Dobby nodded enthusiastically. "Dobby will, Harry Potter, sir!"

"Goodbye!" Tilly squeaked.

Draco leaned over to whisper something in Dobby's ear.

"Yes, sir. Dobby is doing that for you!" Dobby said solemnly, before standing back with Tilly.

"We'll Floo over to the Leaky Cauldron, and I'll Apparate us to King's Cross from there. I'll send Thoth and Hedwig to Hogwarts once the rain has cleared up," Narcissa informed them.

She shrank down the three school trunks and handed them out, then they stepped through the Floo one by one. The Leaky Cauldron was busier than usual; evidently there were still a lot of overseas visitors left over from the Quidditch World Cup. Narcissa held out her hands to Hermione and the boys, then Apparated them all onto platform 9 ¾, where they quickly headed away from the Apparition point.

The Hogwarts Express was emitting clouds of steam over the crowded platform as its engine
warmed up. There was the usual chaos of 1st September: parents giving last minute warnings to their children; said children paying more attention to trying to find their friends than to listening to a word from their parents; owls hooting and cats yowling from their respective cages. Everything was slightly obscured by the thick clouds of steam beginning to pour out of the engine carriage.

Narcissa resized their trunks and hugged Harry and Hermione. “Be good this year, and enjoy the Tournament,” she said conspiratorially.

“Thanks for having us, Mrs Malfoy,” Hermione said.

“How many times do I have to tell you to call me Narcissa? Now, go find a compartment, I'll send Draco along in a minute.”

They found an empty compartment easily, as they'd arrived quite early. Draco joined them a few minutes later.

“Mother just wanted to know what I'd told Dobby before we left,” he said as he sat down.

“And?” Hermione asked.

“I told her I'd suggested that Dobby take it easy with the rose petals.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “But?”

Draco smirked. “But I told him to keep an eye on who she dates, and get rid of anyone he doesn't like.”

“Draco!” cried Hermione.

“What? I don't want her dating some loser just to piss off my father. She's better than that,” Draco said defensively.

“Who's dating a loser?”

They looked up to see Pansy, Tracey, Millicent and Daphne enter the compartment and sit down.

“No one,” Draco said swiftly.

“Not anymore,” Daphne said darkly as she slumped down in a window seat.

“She dumped Finnigan,” Pansy announced.

“Yes, thank you, I think there are some first years you haven't told yet,” Daphne snapped.

“What happened?” Hermione asked.

Daphne rolled her eyes. “The Quidditch World Cup, that's what. He wouldn't shut up about it all summer. If I'm snogging someone, their attention should be on me, not some twat on a broom!”

Millicent snorted. “He was an idiot anyway.”

“Maybe I just need to date someone older. I mean, boys our age...” Daphne mused.

“What about us?” Draco asked indignantly.

Daphne waved her hand. “Oh, you two aren't that bad, I suppose.”
“Thanks,” drawled Draco.

“Besides, you're gay, so I'm never going to date you anyway.”

“How do you know we're not bisexual?” Harry asked with a wink.

“Hmm,” Daphne cocked her head and looked at him appraisingly.

“Back off,” Draco said as he put a territorial hand on Harry's leg.

Daphne burst into giggles. “You're far too easy sometimes.”

“I think Blaise is the easy one,” Tracey said, also giggling.

Pansy's eyes lit up. “Have you heard who he's with now? Hannah Abbott.”

“He told us in July that he was dating Megan Jones,” said Harry indignantly, losing all interest in tormenting Draco.

“Must be working his way through the dorm then,” said Millicent.

“As long as he stops trying to hit on me, I don't care,” Daphne said moodily as the train pulled out of the station.

“Why does he only crack onto you?” Harry asked, then hastily added, “Not that there's anything wrong with you, Daphne, but what about the rest of you?”

Tracey shrugged. “I'm with Theo, and not even Blaise is enough of a dog to go after his best friend's girlfriend.”

Hermione smirked. “Nice to know he has some standards. He usually spends most of our Arithmancy lessons trying to flirt with me.”

“During class? Has he met you?” asked Draco incredulously.

Harry looked at Millicent and Pansy.

“He knows he doesn't stand a chance with me,” Millicent said flatly.

“Not good enough for you?” Draco asked with a grin.

Millicent shook her head. “Not female enough. He knows I'm a lesbian.”

There was a short silence, broken by Pansy. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Millicent said somewhat warily.

“How? How does he know that? I didn't know that!” Pansy demanded.

Draco gave her a pitying look. “It's Blaise, he always knows that sort of thing. He knew I liked Harry before Harry did.”

Pansy laughed. “I think most people did, Malfoy.”

The other girls all nodded at that.

Draco joined in with Pansy's laughter. “He probably knew Harry liked me before he figured it out,
come to think of it.”

“I got there eventually, didn't I?” Harry asked grumpily.

“Only after I lay on top of you and kissed you,” said Draco smugly.

“You should shut up if you want to ever do that again,” Harry threatened.

Draco immediately stopped smirking and made puppy eyes at Harry. “I'm sorry. You are in no way thick when it comes to this sort of thing and you are the best boyfriend ever and -”

“Shut it, you git,” Harry laughed and leaned over to kiss him.

“Get a room, would you?” Tracey interjected.

Draco broke away from Harry. “Hey, we found this compartment first, why don't you leave?”

“How were your summers?” Hermione quickly asked the other girls.

The rest of the train ride passed by pleasantly as they exchanged stories of their holidays, though Daphne glowered when Harry brought up the Quidditch World Cup. Luckily, Tracey cut in to tell them about how she and Theo had gone to Heathrow to watch the planes take off and land. Harry and Hermione shared an amused look at the excitement in her voice as she described their time at the Muggle airport.

There was a tense minute when Seamus and Dean passed their compartment and glared at Daphne, making her sit back and let Millicent block her from view. She only cheered up with the arrival of the lunch trolley, at which point Draco bought enough sweets for the entire compartment to share.

When they reached Hogsmeade station they all pulled their cloak hoods up before stepping onto the platform, where the rain was now bucketing down. Harry was immediately grateful that Narcissa was sending Hedwig along later, as he watched Hermione and Millicent try to keep Crookshanks and Goliath dry inside their cat carriers. Harry waved to Hagrid further down the platform, then allowed Draco to bundle him inside the nearest horseless carriage.

When they walked into the Entrance Hall they found Peeves floating over the heads of the dripping students, throwing water bombs with malicious glee.

“Fuck off, Peeves!” Millicent shouted when he hit her in the shoulder. She had another thrown at her for that, though she was quick enough to duck this time.

Unfortunately, McGonagall had overheard her yelling. “Five points for language, Miss Bulstrode, and into the Great Hall with you. Peeves, get out of here before I call the Headmaster!”

Peeves threw the rest of his water bombs out over the crowd and flew off backwards whilst sticking both middle fingers up at McGonagall. She pursed her lips and continued chivvying the students into the Great Hall.

It was much warmer inside the Great Hall, though the floor was soon covered in water as the students came in. Harry sat down and pulled off his sneakers to tip the water out of them, then edged closer to Draco to get away from Daphne, who was wringing out her long hair on his other side. He took the time to scan the staff table for Moody, but he didn't see any new faces up there. He caught Severus’ eye and gave a quick wave. Severus nodded in return before he joined in Sinistra and Sprout's conversation.
Conversation slowly quieted down when McGonagall came into the hall leading the line of tiny first years for their Sorting. They were even wetter than than the older students, on account of having travelled to the castle over the lake, and Harry thought it lucky none of them had been drowned in the storm. McGonagall left them grouped in front of the stage and went to fetch the Sorting Hat. Harry sat impatiently through the hat's song and the Sorting, eager to get to the feast, though he applauded each new Slytherin who was announced. The new first years sat huddled at the end of the Slytherin table, next to the Bloody Baron, who gave them his customary lecture about bringing glory to Slytherin house.

When the last student had been Sorted, Dumbledore rose to his feet. “Welcome to Hogwarts. I have a few announcements to make, but first, enjoy the feast!”

As Dumbledore sat down again the dishes on the tables were filled with food, and the hall was soon filled with the noise of hundreds of people talking excitedly over the clink of cutlery and the roar of the storm outside. Harry gradually dried off over dinner, and by the time Dumbledore again stood up to address the school, he was feeling pleasantly warm and full. He listened half-heartedly to Dumbledore's warnings about banned objects, eager to get to his dorm.

“I also regret to announce that this year, we shall not be running the inter-house Quidditch Cup,” Dumbledore said.

Harry sat up straight, now paying full attention. “What?” He looked at Draco, Theo and Millicent, who were all as put out as he was. Further down the table, Scarlett was glaring up at the Headmaster with her cutlery clenched tightly in her fists. There was angry muttering coming from all three other house tables as well.

Dumbledore merely smiled. “This is because this year, Hogwarts will be hosting a far grander event, one which will take up a large amount of the staff’s focus. It will begin in October and run for the rest of the year, but I assure you that you will all find it a highly entertaining diversion from your classes. So, without further ado, allow me the pleasure of announcing -”

He cut off as at that moment, the doors to the Great Hall burst open during a particularly loud crash of thunder. Silhouetted in the doorway was a hooded figure leaning on a staff. He lowered his hood and began to walk slowly up to the staff table, leaning heavily on a thick staff that echoed around the room with every descent.

He reached the dais and was making his way over to Dumbledore when a bright flash of lightning jagged across the ceiling and lit up his face. Daphne gave a little whimper and clutched Harry's arm in a painful grip. He couldn't really blame her. The man – Moody, Harry assumed – was heavily scarred, and was missing a good portion of his nose.

What unsettled Harry the most were Moody's eyes. While one was normal, the other was quite obviously fake. Robin's egg blue, it was about the size of a ping pong ball, and spun unceasingly in its socket – including rolling completely backwards, leaving a blank, white surface staring out of the damaged face. He shook hands with Dumbledore and sat down next to him. As he began to eat, his fake eye never once stopped scanning the sea of students, all of whom were staring back at him in complete silence.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. “Allow me to introduce our latest Defence Against the Dark Arts instructor, Professor Moody.”

He and Hagrid began to clap, but quickly stopped when no one else joined in. Evidently most people were too alarmed by Moody's appearance to do so, even the rest of the staff.
Draco was looking up at him in horror. “Nym has seen his face and still wants to be an Auror?”

“There's nothing wrong with Shacklebolt's face,” Harry pointed out.

“True...”

Dumbledore cleared his throat again. “As I was saying, this year, for the first time in over a century, Hogwarts will be hosting the Triwizard Tournament.”

“YOU'RE KIDDING!” called one of the Weasley twins.

Laughter broke out over the room. Dumbledore waited for it to die down a little before continuing. “Not at all, Mr Weasley. Now, those of you who know about the Tournament, kindly indulge me as I give a short explanation to those who do not.”

Harry immediately turned to Draco. “I don't get why they need to cancel Quidditch for this. There's only three tasks, right? They could easily manage both.”

“Too complicated to organise?” offered Draco.

“That's just stupid. What if the Tournament's boring?”

Draco snorted. “It won't be, trust me. Even if they have changed the rules and made it less dangerous, it'll still be interesting.”

“It better be if they're cancelling Quidditch over it,” Harry muttered.

“It's not that bad. We can still go flying on weekends.”

“I suppose...” Harry said doubtfully, then tuned in to the last of Dumbledore's speech.

There was excited chatter when the students were dismissed, as the entire school discussed the Triwizard Tournament.

“Hey, Harry!” Harry turned around to see Bastien Queensbury, a blonde fifth year, waving to him from further up the table as he pushed through the crowd. “Listen, they've made Nerissa Brody and I Prefects. We've got to get the firsties, but can you let the other fourth years know the password's 'non deperiet’?”

“Sure. Thanks,” Harry found himself talking to Bastien's back, as he was already going off to join Nerissa. She was surrounded by first years and looking rather stressed.

Harry passed the message onto his friends as they made their way to the dungeons.

“I'm so glad Hawthorn's left,” Theo said as he put his arm around Tracey's shoulders.

Daphne scowled. “Did I tell you he actually gave me a lecture on 'protecting my reputation' last year?”

Blaise shrugged. “He gave me one, too. I just told him he was jealous he couldn't get a girlfriend and ignored him.”

“Now why didn't I do that?” Daphne muttered.

“He was just a wanker in general,” Millicent said. “Non deperiet.”
They split into two groups in the common room, with the girls going off to their own dormitory.

“I'll miss Gemma though,” said Harry as he sank gratefully onto his bed. “She would've made a good champion for Hogwarts.”

“She would have,” Draco agreed, “except with Dumbledore picking the champion, you know it'd never be a Slytherin.”

“Good thing Dumbledore isn't picking them, then,” said Theo.

“He isn't?” asked Harry.

“No. Didn't you listen to his announcement?” Theo asked.

“Not really, no,” said Draco. “Mother had already told us about the Tournament over summer.”

Blaise rolled his eyes. “Well, all three champions are getting chosen by some impartial judge.”

Draco shrugged. “It'll still be a Gryffindor champion. Risking their necks is their favourite pastime.”

“Could be a Ravenclaw, they love to show off how much they know,” argued Theo.

“And you'd know all about that,” Blaise laughed. He got a pillow thrown at him for his trouble.

“As long as it's not a Hufflepuff,” Theo said, deftly catching the pillow on its return. “Can you imagine? Hogwarts wouldn't stand a chance.”

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Hedwig and Thoth arrived during breakfast the next morning, carrying a large box of sweets between the two of them. Harry was feeding Hedwig strips of bacon when Severus arrived to hand out their new timetables.

“I think you'll enjoy Monday mornings, Mr Potter,” he said with a smirk.

Harry looked down at his timetable and groaned. “How do we keep getting History of Magic first thing in the morning?”

“Could be worse. It could be Divination,” said Pansy.

“Yes, I guess. At least I can just sleep through this,” Harry agreed, then realised what he'd just said and looked at Severus warily. “Er, I mean, read ahead in my Potions textbook?”

Severus' lips twitched. “You could attempt something novel and pay attention to the class you're actually in.”

“You're right, I could attempt that,” nodded Harry with a cheeky grin.

Severus merely rolled his eyes and moved down the row.

“Wish I could get away with talking to him like that,” Pansy said wistfully.

“Make a decent potion for once and he might let you,” Tracey said as she flipped through an abandoned copy of the Daily Prophet.
“Yeah, right,” Pansy scoffed.

Harry ended up staying awake in History of Magic by drawing goblins on his parchment rather than attempting to pay attention to Binns. He didn't know how the ghost managed to make goblin rebellions so boring; even Theo and Tracey were passing notes to each other, and Vince and Greg were openly snoring at their desks.

It was a relief to get out into the grounds for Care of Magical Creatures. The Gryffindors were already there, gathered around the wooden crates Hagrid had set on the ground near his cabin. The Gryffindors didn't look too pleased by the contents, but Fang was straining against his leash trying to get a closer look at them.

“Hi Hagrid,” said Harry.

“Hullo,” Hagrid said. When Fang caught sight of Draco he forgot about whatever was in the crates and lunged towards him instead. Hagrid held out the leash to Draco. “Yeh best take a hold of him.”

“Sit, Fang,” Draco said firmly, smiling smugly when Fang obediently sat down next to him.

Hagrid blinked down at his dog then shook his head slightly. “Right, then. Got a real treat this mornin’ – blast-ended skrewts!”

The Slytherins peered into the crates and recoiled immediately.

“EW!” Daphne and Pansy cried in unison.

That was a pretty good description of the blast-ended skrewts in Harry's opinion. About half a foot long, they looked like pale lobsters – if they'd had their heads and shells removed and replaced with slime. Given the way they were bumping into the crate walls and each other, Harry thought there was a very good chance that they were, in fact, headless. They stank of rotten fish, but Harry wasn't sure if that was from the slime, or some sort of gas involved in creating the sparks that shot out the end of them at random intervals. He looked up at Hagrid in disgust.

“They've just hatched, and I thought yeh could all raise 'em til they're fully grown,” Hagrid said proudly.

“Just how big will they become?” asked Hermione nervously.

Hagrid shrugged happily. “Don't know, never had 'em before. Don't know what they eat, either, so I've got a few things fer yeh all to try – bits of grass snake, frog livers, bat heads and cockroaches. Go fer yer lives.”

The class shuffled forward very reluctantly and began tentatively throwing bits of food into the crates, making sure to yank their hands back quickly to avoid getting burnt whenever one of the skrewts emitted sparks.

“Eugh! What's that pointy thing?” Lavender shrieked.

Hagrid grinned broadly. “A stinger! The males have those, and the females have suckers – I reckon they're to suck blood.”

Lavender stepped back from the crate looking like she was on the verge of throwing up. Draco dragged Fang away from the crates and refused to go near them for the rest of the lesson, claiming he didn't want Fang getting injured.
“I can't believe you got away with that,” Harry said at the end of the lesson.

“It was the truth,” sniffed Draco.

Hermione joined them as they waited for Hagrid to put the lids back on the crates. “What do you think?” she asked quietly.

“That this is going to end badly,” Draco said at once.

“At least they're small,” Harry offered.

“Yes, they're quite small,” Draco conceded. “Unfortunately, they're also capable of burning, stinging and sucking blood. I wouldn't be surprised if their slime was poisonous as well.”

Hagrid ambled over to them. “What'd yeh think?”

“I think I liked it more when you were trying to raise a dragon,” Draco said bluntly. Harry and Hermione nodded.

Hagrid just chuckled. “Ah, don't be like that. They're not that bad.”

“Where did you get them from?” Draco asked suspiciously.

“Told yeh, I hatched them,” Hagrid said. “No card games at the Hogshead this time, if that's what yer thinkin’.”

Draco narrowed his eyes but didn't say anything until he, Harry and Hermione were halfway back to the castle.

“Hermione, I assume you've read the entirety of *The Monster Book of Monsters*.”

“Of course I have,” she said, sounding faintly offended.

“Are blast-ended skrewts mentioned in there at all?”

“No...”

“Why do you ask?” Harry interrupted.

Draco pursed his lips. “Because I've never heard of them before, and Hagrid didn't seem to know much about them, either.”

“What, you think they're some rare but gross creature he's managed to get his hands on for class?” asked Harry.

“No, I think they're a disgusting hybrid of other animals he's bred himself for some insane reason.”

“But he could get into a lot of trouble for that!” said Hermione.

“No shit,” said Draco, then sighed. “I think I'll do a bit of research during our free this afternoon.”

“It's that bad?” Harry asked.

Draco nodded grimly. “If he's breeding without a licence, yes. And this place will likely be crawling with Ministry officials and reporters and fuck knows who else when the Tournament starts, any one of whom could catch a glimpse of one of those *things* and start asking awkward questions.”
Harry accompanied Draco to the library straight after lunch. Despite spending the entire afternoon there, they didn't find any books that mentioned blast-ended skrewts. They didn't dare ask Pince for help in case she started prying (they even spoke in Parseltongue so that they couldn't be overheard), and Draco in particular was very grumpy by the time they decided to head down to dinner.

“There's got to be some Fire Crab in them,” he said.

“But mixed with what? Some sort of slime lobster that farts sparks?” Harry asked as they stepped into the Entrance Hall and joined the throng heading towards the Great Hall.

Draco gave him the side-eye. “Slime lobster that farts sparks?” he repeated incredulously. “There is absolutely no such – ouch, watch where you're going, Weasel!”

Ron glared back at him. “You walked into me, Malfoy.”

“Why the fuck would I want to do that?” snapped Draco.

“How the hell am I supposed to know?”

“Trust me, Weasley, I wouldn't touch you with my father's cane if I could help it.”

“Don't ask me how a Death Eater thinks,” snarled Ron.

Draco turned pink. “I'm not a Death Eater!”

“Shut your mouth, Weasel,” Harry growled, then held out his hand to Draco. “Let's go.”

“Not until he takes back what he said,” Draco said through gritted teeth, then pulled out his wand.

“What, scared of the truth?” Ron sneered.

Draco's lip curled. “How are you this bloody stupid? Ginny's smart, and the twins. What went wrong with you?”

Seamus and Dean tried to tug Ron away. He ignored them and pulled out his own wand. “You're just like your dad, aren't you? He's King of the Death Eaters, and you're what, the little Prince?”

“TAKE THAT BACK!” Draco shouted.

“NO!” roared Ron.

They acted at the same time.

“Densaugeo!” screamed Draco.

“Calvorio!” yelled Ron.

Their spells flew at each other, hit in a burst of light and rebounded out across the hall. There were screams from the crowd as onlookers dove out of the way. There was a roar of anger from behind Harry and he spun around to see Moody limping down the staircase. He waved his wand twice and two loud bangs echoed throughout the hall. There were gasps from the crowd, and Harry turned back around to look at Draco.
Then he looked down.

Cowering on the floor, exactly where Draco and Ron had been standing, were a white ferret and a gingery weasel.

“Draco?” Harry gasped. He knelt down next to the ferret and slowly reached out a hand.

“Hold it, Potter!” barked Moody. He thumped down the stairs and glared at Harry, then at the terrified animals on the floor.

“Change him back,” Harry ground out.

“Not until they've learned their lesson,” replied Moody. He jerked his wand upwards, and both animals flew into the air. They fell back down and bounced up again as Moody walked through the gathered students, who hastily backed away to let him through. “They need to know that actions have consequences. They're lucky they didn't hurt anyone. Stupid, foolish thing to do, picking a fight with so many people around them.”

Harry winced as the ferret squealed in pain and twisted as it bounced higher and higher. “Stop it!”

“Not just yet, Potter,” Moody said calmly.

“Professor Moody!”

McGonagall was striding down the stairs with a stack of books in her hands.

Harry seized his chance and snatched the ferret out of the air and cradled it against his chest where it tried to wriggle out of his arms. “Shh, it's okay, Draco, I've got you. Just calm down.”

“Evening, Professor McGonagall,” called Moody. The weasel was still bouncing off the stone floor, and Harry could feel the ferret getting tugged out of his hands in time with the weasel's bouncing. He tightened his hold.

McGonagall's eyes darted between the ferret and the weasel. “What on earth is going on?”

“Just a quick lesson on duelling safety,” Moody said.

“A lesson? Are those students?” cried McGonagall.

“Uh huh,” Moody said calmly. He frowned at Harry and raised his wand higher, and Harry realised he was going to lose his grip on the ferret.

“Enough!” yelled McGonagall. She brandished her own wand and with a bang, Draco and Ron reappeared. Ron crashed to the floor with a groan. Draco was luckier, and landed heavily on Harry, knocking him down in an undignified sprawl and winding him.

“We do not use Transfiguration as a punishment at Hogwarts!” snapped McGonagall. “We give out detentions, or you can talk to the student's Head of House!”

“Bet they've learned their lesson, though,” said Moody in satisfaction.

“Then your work here is done,” McGonagall said swiftly.

Moody stared back at her with his normal eye, then nodded curtly. His magical eye was darting between Draco and Ron. “I'll be watching you,” he growled before stomping off.
“Weasley, Malfoy, are you alright?” McGonagall asked in a softer voice.

“I'm fine,” Draco said, pushing himself off Harry before reaching down to pull him up.

Ron nodded and got to his feet.

McGonagall looked from one to the other, pursed her lips, then nodded once. “Get into dinner, then. That goes for all of you!” she said louder. She frowned at the surrounding students until they began to trickle off into the Great Hall. She shook her head and followed the stragglers.

“You okay?” Harry asked.

Draco nodded jerkily and began to smooth his hair down. “I'm fine,” he repeated. “Thanks for grabbing me.”

“Any time,” Harry said. “Let's go to dinner.”

“I'd rather get something from the kitchens,” said Draco. “I really don't want to go into the Great Hall just now.”

“That'll just make it worse later on, though. Go in now and it'll all blow over quicker. Plus Weasley's there as well, so it won't just be you everyone's talking about,” Harry said.

“You're right,” said Draco.

He straightened his back, held his head up and grabbed Harry's hand before walking quickly to the Slytherin table. Heads turned to follow their progress and whispers followed them, though Harry couldn't hear what they were saying. Draco was bright pink by the time they slid onto the bench.

“What happened to you?” Tracey asked.

“I was attacked by a lunatic,” muttered Draco.

“Moody transfigured him and Weasley into a ferret and a weasel for fighting,” Harry explained.

“He what?” gasped Tracey. “He can't do that!”

“He did, though,” said Draco, glaring at Greg and Vince, who were laughing.

“Are you alright?” asked Blaise, failing to completely hide a grin.

“Yes, thank you,” Draco said stiffly.

“Good, then I don't have to feel bad for laughing at you,” Blaise chuckled.

Draco kicked him under the table.

“I thought you made a very cute ferret,” Harry offered, getting a small smile in return.

Pansy rolled her eyes. “Of course you would. You two really are sickeningly sweet, you know.”

“Thank you,” Draco said, deliberately misconstruing her words. He looked grimly at Theo. “I think my mother was right. Defence is not going to be fun for us this year.”
In Herbology the next day all the Ravenclaws wanted to talk about Moody, much to Draco's annoyance. As Harry quizzed Padma and Morag about their first Defence lesson, Draco took out his anger on the bubotuber plant from which they were supposed to be harvesting pus.

“He definitely knows what he's talking about,” said Morag.

Harry looked at Draco out of the corner of his eye. “Is he better than Lupin?”

“I wouldn’t say better,” said Padma thoughtfully, “so much as different. We only did Dark creatures last year, whereas Moody's teaching us about curses and how to protect ourselves from them.”

Morag laughed. “He talks like he expects us all to get attacked at any time. Completely mental if you ask me, but knowledgeable.”

“Oh good, so he knew exactly what he was doing yesterday, then,” grumbled Draco, then squeezed the bubotuber angrily. The pus shot out and Harry had to lunge to collect it with his bottle.

“I doubt he'll do anything like that again,” Padma said. “Dumbledore didn't look too happy with him at dinner that night.”

“Yes, but Dumbledore isn't entirely sane himself,” replied Draco. “He could have been annoyed about something completely unrelated.”

“It won't be that bad. Just be prepared for him to go into some detail of the effects of curses,” said Padma.

“And shout 'constant vigilance' at you a lot,” added Morag.

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Severus was in a foul mood during Potions the next day, so much so that, when Neville melted his latest cauldron, he was assigned detention as well as losing points like usual. It was with some trepidation that Harry hung back with Draco when Severus asked him to.

Once the rest of the class had left Severus shut the door and faced Draco. “I trust you are recovered from Moody's exhibition the other day?”

“Yes, sir,” said Draco.

Severus nodded shortly. “Good. I want you to do your best not to draw Moody's ire towards you this year.”

“Mother's already warned me about him, sir,” Draco said.

“Has she? Very well then. See that you heed her advice,” Severus said.

“Surely he's not going to keep it up all year long?” asked Harry.

Severus scowled. “Moody's good at holding grudges, and he's already watched one Malfoy escape
justice. He won't allow that to happen again.”

“I'm not my father,” Draco said sharply.

Severus' frown softened minutely. “I know that, Draco. But Moody won't. Tread carefully with him.”

They hurried to the Defence classroom after that and managed to catch up to the rest of the class as they were entering. Draco made a beeline for the back row, and he and Harry were soon joined by Theo, Greg and Vince. The girls and Blaise filed into the front rows and the class waited silently for Moody to arrive.

Soon enough they heard Moody's thumping footsteps approaching before the man himself appeared in the doorway. For the first time, Harry noticed that Moody had a wooden leg, and he began to see why Draco was so worried about Tonks becoming an Auror.

“Books away,” Moody growled, then took the roll. As he read each name with his normal eye, his magical one focused on each student as they answered. “Plenty of familiar names in this class,” he said once he was finished. Both eyes swept the back row, making the class shift nervously. “Now, Professor Lupin's told me that you've covered Dark creatures, but you've not yet studied curses. It's my job to teach you how to protect yourselves from anyone who's out to get you. So who can tell me one of the Unforgivable Curses?”

There was a deep silence in the room; no one seemed to want to draw Moody's attention to themselves. He looked around at them impatiently. “Come on, come on, I know you lot will have heard of them.”

Tracey raised her hand tentatively.

“Yes, Miss Davis?”

“The Crucius Curse,” she said quietly.

“Yes, you would know about that one, wouldn't you? Your uncle was a brave man,” Moody said gruffly.

Tracey looked startled. “So I've heard.”

Moody stood up, took a jar filled with spiders out of his desk drawer and placed it on the desk top. He scooped out a spider and set it down. “Needs to be a bit bigger for you all to see clearly. *Engorgio.*” The spider grew to the size of a large crab. It quivered slightly then tried to scuttle off the desk. It didn't make it. “*Crucio,*” Moody muttered.

The spider immediately drew its legs into its body and rolled over onto its back, then began to rock from side to side. Its movements soon became more spasmodic, until it was twitching uncontrollably, clearly in a considerable amount of pain. It grew still again as Moody raised his wand. Harry looked at Tracey in concern. She was absolutely still and paler than usual as she stared at the spider.

“The Crucius Curse. Very popular around the time you were all born – amongst certain groups, that is. If someone wants information out of you, that's what they'll use. You don't need knives when your wand can become a portable torture chamber.”

The class watched silently as Moody shrunk the spider and returned it to the jar. Harry could see it was still twitching erratically.
“Who knows another Unforgivable?” he asked them.

To Harry’s surprise, Draco raised his hand. “The Imperius Curse,” he said.

“Go on.”

Draco clearly hadn’t been expecting to need to elaborate. “Right, well, ah, it sort of enslaves whoever it’s cast on, doesn’t it? You can make them do anything you want them to.” He paused, then added, “A lot of Death Eaters used that as an excuse to stay out of Azkaban, by claiming the Dark Lord had used that curse on them.”

Moody stared at Draco with both eyes, a very unpleasant expression on his scarred face. “Yes, they certainly did. It was a real headache for the Ministry trying to sort it all out, and a lot of people walked free when they shouldn’t have.”

As Moody reached in the jar for another spider, Harry looked at Draco. “What the hell did you say that for?”

“Because I don’t want him thinking I’m anything like my father,” Draco whispered back.

“I think it might’ve backfired,” Harry said.

Draco chewed on his lower lip and didn’t reply.

At the front of the room, Moody raised his wand again. “Imperio.”

The class watched as the spider walked over to the jar and waved at the other spiders with one of its front legs. It then jumped around the edge of the desk doing front flips, before squatting down and lifting its legs individually, like a solo Mexican wave, before Moody picked it up and put it back in the jar.

“I’ll be teaching you how to resist the Imperius Curse. It’s the only one of the Unforgivables that can be fought, if you’re hit with it, but it takes great strength of will – some might say stubbornness – and not everyone can do it. Best to avoid getting hit in the first place. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!”

As the class jumped, Moody picked up one more spider. “So who can tell me what the last Unforgivable is?”


Harry felt a chill go down his spine as Moody nodded. He placed the spider on his desk and aimed his wand again. “Avada Kedavra!” he cried.

With a flash of green light and a strange rushing noise, the spider keeled over dead. Moody brushed it onto the floor and surveyed the room.

“The Killing Curse. There’s no counter-curse, no way to block this one. There’s only been one person ever known to have survived being hit with it, and he’s sitting in this classroom.”

The entire class turned to stare at Harry, with Greg and Vince cottoning on a few seconds after everyone else. Harry swallowed and stared down at his desk. He’d been seeing the green light of the curse in nightmares for as long as he could remember, and had known since the year before that it was from his parents’ murders. But he hadn’t known what it was. He supposed he should be happy that they’d died quickly – if the spider was anything to go by, it didn’t even look painful.
He felt a strange twisting in his gut as he thought about his parents dying so quickly. Shouldn't killing someone take more effort? This curse looked far too easy for such a permanent effect. He blinked and made an effort to listen when he realised Moody was still speaking.

“The Killing Curse needs a fair bit of power behind it. There's no point in any of you aiming your wand at the first Gryffindor who annoys you, because you'd hardly manage to give them a bloody nose. All three Unforgivables also require intent: you need to really mean it for one to work. It takes real hatred and anger to be able to cast the Cruciatus curse on another person. The use of any one of these curses on another human will gain you a lifetime in Azkaban, so let that be a warning to you all.”

They spent the rest of the lesson taking notes as Moody lectured them on the Unforgivables. Harry found it hard to concentrate. Every time he looked down at his parchment, he saw the spider dying in a flash of green light. When the bell rang there was somewhat of a stampede for the door as the class strove to escape the tense atmosphere.

“Grab Hermione and Neville – no one else – and meet me at the lake,” Draco told Harry when they were in the Entrance Hall, before heading off briskly for the kitchens.

Harry rolled his eyes, but walked into the Great Hall and up to the Gryffindor table. “Feel like having lunch by the lake?” he asked.

“Of course,” Hermione said swiftly and picked up her schoolbag.

Neville took one look at Harry's face and got to his feet, too. “Sure. Are you okay?”

“Not here,” Harry muttered, noticing Ron glaring at him.

Neville followed Harry's gaze and frowned, but didn't ask anything else until they'd joined Draco by the lake. “So what's wrong?”

Harry reached for one of Draco's hands, interrupting him setting out the food. “We just had our first Defence class of the year.”

“Fucking Moody,” growled Draco, “just demonstrated all three Unforgivable Curses in class, despite knowing that Harry's parents were killed with one, and – from the sounds of things – that Tracey's uncle was tortured with another.”

“T-tortured?” Neville asked, going pale.

“I think so, yeah,” Harry said.

Neville gulped and looked at Hermione. “We have our first class tomorrow, don't we?”

Hermione nodded. “Will you be alright?”

“Why wouldn't I be?” Neville asked.


“We know about your parents,” Draco said quietly.

“But we haven't told anyone else,” Harry added.

“Who told you?” asked Neville.
Draco fidgeted. “My mother. When I asked her why my aunt was in Azkaban.”

Harry squeezed Draco's hand.

“How come you've never mentioned it before?” Neville pressed.

“Because it's not something I want to talk about, and I assumed you felt the same way. Besides, it's not a topic that comes up easily, is it? 'Oh, nice to meet you Neville. My aunt tortured your parents for so long that they're now stuck in St Mungo's, let's be best friends!'” Draco's voice was shrill by the end of his rant, and his face was pink as he stared at Neville for a few seconds, before he yanked his hand out of Harry's. “Sorry,” he muttered, then took off.

There was a brief silence as they all watched him run back up the lawn to the castle.

Neville shifted guiltily. “I didn't mean -”

Harry shook his head quickly. “It's not your fault. He's pretty touchy about his family at the best of times, and Moody practically accused half the class of being Death Eaters.”

“So why'd he bring it up in the first place?” Neville asked, looking a little relieved.

“I think he wanted to let you know what you guys will be seeing in class,” said Harry slowly. “I mean, we didn't have any warning, and I think he wanted to make sure you did.”

Neville nodded and gave a small smile. “I'll thank him later.”

“Is Tracey alright?” Hermione asked.

Harry frowned in thought. “Dunno. We all pretty much ran out of the classroom as soon as the bell rang, I didn't stop to see if she was okay. I'll ask her after lunch.”

********

As it turned out, Tracey was sitting in Draco’s usual seat when Harry walked into the Transfiguration room. Draco was in the front row next to Theo, heads bent together in what seemed to be an intense conversation.

“Never thought I'd see the day where both you and Theo willingly chose to sit in the back row of a classroom,” Harry said as he sat down.

Tracey snorted. “Never thought I'd see the day where a teacher performed all three Unforgivable curses in front of kids.”

“Good point,” Harry conceded.

“Anyway, I wanted to talk to you,” Tracey began, then fell silent as McGonagall walked in. She waited until McGonagall had described how they'd be transfiguring bullfinches into bullfrogs, then turned back to Harry. “You okay after the last lesson?”

Harry shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. I've had nightmares with the green light of the curse in them, and dementors make me hear my parents dying, but the way he just killed that spider – just, two little words and that's it, it was dead…”

Tracey grimaced sympathetically. “I know what you mean.”
“Your uncle?”

“Yeah,” Tracey nodded. “My dad's brother. He was a pure-blood, but he married a Muggle. You-Know-Who sent Death Eaters after them. My uncle managed to hold them off long enough for his wife's parents to get away, before You-Know-Who himself showed up. My uncle and aunt were tortured before they were murdered, and then he turned my uncle into an Inferius and made him attack my parents as well. Dad had to fight him off until Mum managed to destroy him.”

Harry stared at her, aghast. “My god, that's horrible.”

Tracey smiled bitterly. “Yep.”

“How can you like zombie movies after that?” Harry couldn't help asking.

“I'm not really sure,” Tracey admitted, pushing her glasses up self-consciously just as a shadow fell across their desks.

“Since you're having a cosy little chat, I gather you've both mastered this particular transfiguration,” McGonagall said from in front of them. “You'll therefore have no trouble giving me a demonstration.”

Harry gripped his wand nervously and aimed it at his bullfinch. A few seconds later, Tracey had a bullfrog with wings, and Harry was left with a disgusting partial transfiguration.

“I can't say I've ever seen a bird covered in frog skin before,” McGonagall said, peering through her glasses with curiosity. “It's very unusual for you to not pay attention, Miss Davis. Five points from both of you, and I want an essay detailing where you went wrong.”

“Yes, Professor,” Tracey said. Her mouth twisted unhappily; it was the first time Harry had ever seen her told off by a teacher. “Sorry. It won't happen again.”

“See that it doesn't,” McGonagall answered sharply.

“Please, Professor, it wasn't her fault. We were talking about our Defence class,” Harry broke in.

“I see. And is Professor Moody's class really that fascinating that you cannot concentrate on mine?”

“He showed us the Unforgivable curses,” Harry explained.

McGonagall's lips thinned in displeasure and her eyes flicked between Harry and Tracey. Harry was surprised when her expression suddenly softened. “Do either of you wish to visit the infirmary for a Calming Draught?” she asked quietly.

“No, ma'am,” Harry said.

McGonagall nodded briskly. “Very well. Manage the transfiguration perfectly by the end of class, and you don't have to write the essays.”

She moved away, leaving Harry facing off with his slimy, nightmarish bird. He took his cue from Tracey, and began trying to turn it into a frog as he thought about what McGonagall had just said. He got the feeling that she didn't approve of Moody's teaching methods.

********

The class walked up to the Defence classroom in a tense, silent group the next morning. No one had
enjoyed the previous day's lesson, and the prospect of having Moody use the Imperius curse on them was about as appealing as hugging a blast-ended skrewt.

Harry watched nervously as one by one, the rest of the class was called up to perform a series of strange actions. Millicent pirouetted gracefully around the room, and Greg recited what Harry thought might be a speech from Shakespeare. Draco was made to impersonate a chicken, and Theo performed “I'm a Little Teapot”, complete with actions.

Harry managed to suppress a shudder as Moody aimed his wand at him, then felt a wonderful feeling of calm spread through his entire body. He stood there blankly, relaxing in a soothing, lazy warmth, no longer worried about what he'd be made to do – or about anything, really – then he heard Moody's voice in his head.

*Cartwheel around the room.*

*That sounds fun,* Harry thought, then raised his hands above his head and paused as another thought struck him. *Does it, though? I've never cartwheeled before.*

*Cartwheel around the room,* Moody's voice said, a little more sharply than at first.

*No, I really don't think that's a good idea,* Harry thought.

*Cartwheel!*

“No!” Harry cried out.

A second later a sharp pain ripped through his shoulder, and he jolted back into the world to find himself crumpled on the floor with his right arm pinned underneath him. He'd managed to both attempt a cartwheel, and try to stop himself, which resulted in him slamming awkwardly into the stone floor.

“Very good, Potter,” Moody growled as Harry clambered to his feet. “You nearly threw me off. Did you all see that? Let's do that again, Potter. The rest of you pay attention – especially to his eyes – you can see the fight in them.”

By the end of the lesson Harry had quite a sore shoulder, but had managed to completely resist the Imperius curse, as had Daphne, after she'd spent a fair bit of time dancing an Irish jig.

“At least we'll be prepared for anyone attacking us,” Daphne said smugly to Harry as they walked out of the classroom.

“Yeah, should be any day now, if we listen to Moody,” Harry said as he rubbed his shoulder. “We should probably put that into our Divination homework, Trelawney would love that.”

They had begun studying the planets in Divination, and Trelawney had asked them all to write out predictions based on the planets' positions at their births. Harry had had a lot of fun coming up with increasingly dire fates with Daphne and Pansy. Unfortunately, the rest of their classes weren't as easy. With OWLs coming up in their fifth year, all their teachers were giving them more work to prepare for them.

Even Hagrid was giving them extra homework: the class was expected to come down once a week, out of class hours, to observe the skrewts. This had the added effect of spurring on Draco's research of them, as the skrewts were growing alarmingly quickly and showed no signs of stopping.

“I think we should just kill them,” Draco said in frustration.
Harry looked up in alarm from the book of antidotes he was reading. Severus had been hinting that he’d be poisoning one of the class before the term was out, and Harry was taking his antidote research very seriously. He had a pile of books on the library table, partially shielding Draco and himself from Pince.

“Kill them? Hagrid will be devastated,” he said.

“True, but he’d be even more devastated if one of them hurt Fang,” Draco pointed out.

“I guess. But how? I mean, they’re developing pretty thick shells now, and I don’t really want to get close to them,” Harry said, flipping a page.

Draco’s eyes followed Harry’s movement. “We poison them.”

Harry looked up at him. “That could work... What with?”

Draco shrugged. “Snape’s planning on poisoning one of us, isn’t he? I say we just steal the remainder of whatever poison he’s using. And Hagrid’s admitted he had no idea what they eat, so it’ll be assumed that something he gave us to feed them just didn’t agree with them. Simple.”

Harry stared at him. “It’s slightly concerning how much thought you’ve given this.”

“Don’t be a wuss. If we get rid of the fucking things, Hagrid won’t be in danger of being arrested, Fang will be safe from being eaten, we won’t get bitten, stung or burnt, and we might get to study something interesting in class. What’s not to like?” Draco waited expectantly.

“Nothing, when you put it like that,” Harry conceded.

********

It was a welcome relief from the heavy workload when a notice appeared in the Entrance Hall in the last week of October, announcing the arrival of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang the day before Halloween. The last classes of the day would be cut short by half an hour in order to allow the Hogwarts students time to prepare to meet their guests.

“Dammit, Snape won’t have time to poison us all,” Harry complained.

“You want to get poisoned?” Millicent asked in disbelief.

“Well, yeah, kinda. I think I’ve come up with a good antidote,” Harry said defensively.

Millicent shook her head. “Mental,” she muttered, not at all under her breath.

The next week flew by in a feverish anticipation of the arrival of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang schools. Finally, in the last Potions class of the week, Severus finished his lecture on antidotes and shooed the class out of the room.

Harry made his way back to his dorm quickly, dumped his school things, and then made his way to the Entrance Hall with the other fourth year Slytherins. They gathered with the rest of the Slytherins as Severus prowled up and down, organising them into lines according to year.

“Miss Greengrass, do up your top button at once. You too, Mr Zabini,” he snapped, then moved up to critique the fifth years. As he moved off, he aimed his wand at Greg and Vince, knotting their ties neatly for once.
When the Heads of House were satisfied with their students' appearance, they led them out of the Entrance Hall and down onto the lawn in front of the castle. The students were lined up in their year levels, with first years at the front, and the staff standing behind the seventh years. Low, excited murmurs swept through the crowd as everyone waited for the visitors to arrive.

“Wish they’d hurry up. I'm starving,” Greg muttered. He loosened his tie with a grimace.

“You're always starving,” Blaise said impatiently.

Greg looked at him uncomprehendingly. “So?”

Blaise rolled his eyes and went back to scanning the grounds like everyone else.

“Aha!” Dumbledore exclaimed. “I believe the Beauxbatons delegation has just appeared!”

“Where?” called a few people, looking around eagerly.

“There!” replied Zubeida Khan, a sixth year Prefect. She was pointing into the sky over the Forbidden Forest.

“It's a dragon!” squealed a first year girl.

Scarlett squealed, too, a very different sound. “Is it really?” She jumped up trying to get a better view, ignoring Nerissa's admonishment to behave herself.

It turned out to be an enormous horse-drawn carriage. Painted a soft blue, it was the size of a house, and was pulled by a team of equally large winged horses. It came closer to the assembled students without slowing down and hit the ground with a resounding crash. Neville jumped back, landing on the foot of Vikram Thakur, a fifth year, and earning himself a glare for his trouble.

A boy in blue robes darted out of the carriage door and pulled down a set of golden steps before standing off to one side as the tallest woman Harry had ever seen began to emerge. She was easily as large as Hagrid, and the Hogwarts students gasped as she straightened up. She was dressed entirely in black satin and had jewels winking at her throat and hands. She broke into a smile when Dumbledore led the school into a round of applause, and made her way over to him.

“Madame Maxime, allow me to welcome you to Hogwarts,” he said, then kissed the hand she held out to him.

“Dumbly-dorr,” Maxime said in a warm, deep voice. “It is a pleasure, of course.”

Harry watched as about a dozen teenagers descended the carriage steps and lined up behind their Headmistress. Like the boy who had pulled down the steps, they were all dressed in thin, silky robes that precisely matched the colour of the carriage, and they all immediately began shivering as they looked up at the castle unhappily. A lot of them had scarves wrapped around their heads.

“What a bunch of wets,” Millicent snorted, making the people around her snigger. Three different Prefects shushed them, but Bastien joined in with their laughter.

Dumbledore was still talking to Maxime. “Would you prefer to wait here for Karkaroff or warm up in the castle?”

“We shall warm up, but ze 'orses need tending.”

“Our Care of Magical Creatures professor will be able to tend to them,” Dumbledore reassured her.
“He should be here any moment – he's currently dealing with a situation with some of his other creatures.”

“Fucking skrewts,” Draco muttered darkly.

“Maybe they've all killed each other,” Pansy said brightly.

“Let's hope so,” Harry replied.

The Beauxbatons students followed Maxime up into the castle, and the Hogwarts students were once again left waiting on the lawn. The evening was cooling rapidly now, and Harry began to get cold despite his warm cloak.

“Clearly they don't value punctuality at Durmstrang,” Draco sniffed. “No wonder Mother didn't want to send me there.”

“Is that where your dad wanted you to go?” asked Harry.

“Yes, he knows the Headmaster,” Draco said.

Harry looked at him warily. “Is he...”


Just then there was a commotion to their left where people were pointing at the lake. It had been calm and smooth all evening, but now the surface was roiling, despite there being no wind. Waves began to break upon the shore, and then a deep whirlpool developed in the centre of the lake. Soon a dark sailing ship became visible. Once it had fully reached the surface it sailed forward towards the crowd, bumped gently into the shore, and lowered a gangplank.

Harry stared as a group of people began to file down the gangplank. At first he thought they were all built like rugby players, huge and muscly. It was only when they got closer to the light of the castle that he saw they were rugged up in fur cloaks and hats.

A man dressed in silver furs the same colour as his hair strode to the front of the group and greeted Dumbledore. “Well met, Dumbledore, well met!”

“It's a pleasure to see you, Professor Karkaroff,” Dumbledore replied.

He shook hands with Karkaroff, who enfolded Dumbledore's hand in both of his own. Harry wasn't sure if it was because of what Draco had just told him, but he disliked Karkaroff immediately. He watched as Karkaroff looked up at the castle in satisfaction.

“What a sight,” he said, then beckoned someone forward. “Viktor, come along and warm up. Dumbledore, you'll forgive my presumptuousness, but Viktor has a slight cold, I'm afraid.”

Draco grabbed Harry's hand and squeezed it painfully. “Harry! It's Krum! At Hogwarts!”

“I can see that,” Harry said through gritted teeth. “Can you stop crushing my hand?”

“Sorry,” Draco said distractedly. He loosened his grip as he watched the Quidditch player lead the other Durmstrang students into the Entrance Hall.

Draco dragged Harry eagerly back up the lawn with the other fourth year Slytherins trailing after them. The careful lines they'd been arranged in had quickly fallen into chaos as the Hogwarts students gawked at Krum.
When Harry got into the Great Hall he saw the Beauxbatons pupils were sitting huddled at one end of the Ravenclaw table, many still wrapped in their scarves. The Durmstrang students were milling around in the doorway, apparently trying to decide where to sit as the Hogwarts kids streamed past them to their usual tables. Several doubled back to get a better look at Krum. Harry felt a flash of empathy for him, but couldn't help feeling that it would be nice to not be the only one getting stared at for once.

Eventually the Durmstrang group made up their minds and came over to join the Slytherins. Draco again squeezed Harry's hand too hard underneath the table, but appeared outwardly calm and sat up straight as Krum sat down opposite them.

Draco leaned forward eagerly. “Hi, I'm Draco, and this is Harry. Welcome to Hogwarts.”

“Thank you. I am Viktor,” Krum said somewhat stiffly.

“Your castle is very nice,” said the girl next to him in a lilting accent. Her eyes flicked up to Harry's scar briefly, but she didn't say anything about it. She took off her fur hat and shook out her blonde hair. “I'm Ulla.”

Harry returned her smile. “Glad you like it.”

Ulla nodded happily. “Our castle, it is much smaller. And not so warm.”

Viktor looked at her sideways. “The grounds are good for flying.”

“Yes, in summer is good. Winter gets very cold,” she said. She was clearly used to Viktor's surliness.

“Well, maybe you guys could come flying with us one day,” Draco said. “Harry and I are on the Slytherin Quidditch team, but there won't be any matches this year because of the Tournament.”

“You play Quidditch?” Viktor looked interested in the conversation for the first time.

Draco nodded. “Harry's our Seeker, and I'm a Chaser. We saw you play at the World Cup, in the final, you were really good. Harry spent most of the next day practising Wronski Feints.”

“You?” Viktor asked in surprise.

“Yeah. I'm not as good as you, obviously, but I think I did okay,” Harry said in embarrassment, wishing Draco would shut up.

Draco rolled his eyes. “He's just being modest. He was brilliant.”

Viktor eyed Harry speculatively. “Maybe we go flying, then.”

They stopped talking as the staff walked into the hall. The Beauxbatons contingent stood up as soon as their Headmistress walked in, and only sat down again once Maxime had taken her own seat up at the staff table. The rest of the staff sat down as well, until Dumbledore was the only one standing in the hall.

“Good evening, ladies, gentlemen, ghosts, and most importantly, our honoured guests,” he said genially. “On behalf of Hogwarts, I welcome you to our school. I hope you shall all enjoy your stay, and that our own students make you feel comfortable. The Triwizard Tournament shall officially begin at the end of tonight's feast, so please, help yourselves!”

Some of the visitors at the Slytherin table gasped as the golden dishes magically filled with food,
though the Beauxbatons group still looked unimpressed. Ulla picked up the platter closest to her, which was piled high with some sort of delicate pastry Harry had never seen before.

“What is this?” Ulla asked him curiously.

“I'm not sure,” he admitted. “There's a lot of stuff here that we don't usually get.”


Harry picked up one of the buttery pastries and found that Draco was right. Their group was soon happily trying all the different dishes on the table. Even Viktor became friendlier as he and Harry compared British black pudding to its Bulgarian counterpart.

Once dessert was finished the crowd fell into a tense silence and watched Dumbledore rise to his feet. “The Tournament will begin momentarily, but first, I must, I'm afraid, bore you with a few words. Firstly, allow me to introduce Mr Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Department of International Magical Co-operation, and Mr Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports.”

Bagman beamed from beside Karkaroff as he waved around the hall, but Crouch, seated next to Maxime, merely stared ahead with a stony expression. Harry wondered if the man even knew what a smile was. He looked further down the staff table and saw Severus looking very unhappy. As Harry watched, McGonagall leaned over to whisper in his ear. Severus turned and gave her a disbelieving look.

Harry jumped when Draco elbowed him in the side. “Pay attention!” he hissed.

Dumbledore was still speaking. “- be joining Madame Maxime, Professor Karkaroff and myself as judges for the Tournament. And now that we're all caught up, please bring in the casket, Mr Filch.”

Harry frowned at Draco. “Casket? Like a coffin?”


Harry stuck his tongue out at him before turning his attention back to the stage. Filch was carrying a large, ornately decorated wooden chest up to the staff table. He deposited it in front of Dumbledore and walked to the side of the stage.

“The three tasks that the champions will face have been agreed upon by Mr Bagman and Mr Crouch,” Dumbledore continued, “and will take place over the course of the school year. The champions will be tested on their bravery, resourcefulness, capacity to think on their feet, and their magical skills – all in the face of danger.”

Harry looked across the table at Viktor and Ulla. Like the rest of the potential champions, their eyes were fixed unblinkingly upon Dumbledore.

“Each school will be represented by one champion. The three champions will receive marks for each task they complete – or attempt to complete. After all three tasks are over, the champion with the highest combined score will win the Triwizard Cup, along with the thousand Galleons prize money. The champions will be picked by the impartial Goblet of Fire.”

Dumbledore took out his wand and tapped the casket three times. The lid opened with an echoing creak, and the Headmaster reached in and pulled out a plain wooden cup. It looked downright dull next to the jewel encrusted casket – except for the bluish white flames that were already dancing in it. Dumbledore shut the casket again and placed the goblet on top of the lid.
“The Goblet of Fire will be placed in the Entrance Hall tonight. Anyone who wishes to represent their school and to chase glory for themselves is welcome to enter their name for judgement. Write your name and that of your school on a piece of parchment, and place it in the flames within the next twenty-four hours. At tomorrow's Halloween feast the three champions will be announced.”

Dumbledore paused and gazed out at the silent hall. “The Tournament will only be open to those who are of age. I shall be drawing an Age Line around the Goblet, and no one under the age of seventeen will be able to enter their name for consideration. To those older pupils wishing to enter, I give you this warning: if you are chosen, there will be no backing out. The act of entering your name is construed as initiating a binding magical contract, and if your name is chosen, you will have to see the Tournament through to its completion. I therefore urge you all to think long and hard about whether or not you truly wish to compete. And now, I believe it is well past your bedtimes.”

Excited chatter broke out all over the hall as everyone began getting up to leave. Karkaroff hurried over to the Slytherin table to collect his charges.

“Back to the ship, everyone. Viktor, how are you feeling? Do you want anything from the kitchens?”

Viktor merely shook his head and pulled his furred cloak back around his shoulders. Karkaroff nodded and didn't ask if anyone else needed something. He looked around the table impatiently and froze when he spotted Harry.

Harry stared back at him warily until Karkaroff gave an odd jerk of his shoulders and led his pupils back out into the grounds. Harry shook his head slightly and trotted off to catch up with his friends.
In Which the Goblet of Fire Screws Up the One Job it Had

When Harry and Draco made their way to breakfast the next morning they found Pansy and Scarlett sitting at the base of the marble staircase in the Entrance Hall and watching the Goblet of Fire. There were quite a few other people standing around the hall as well, all clearly curious to see who was entering their names.

“Grab some food and come join us,” Pansy called.

Harry looked at Draco. “Nothing else to do today.”

They fetched some toast and joined the girls on the stairs.

“Been here long?” Harry asked.

“Since six,” Pansy said, swiping a piece of toast from him, “and then Scarlett got here not long after me.”

“We've been laughing at everyone who thought they were being sneaky coming up so early, and then getting upset when they saw us waiting for them,” Scarlett said with a grin.

“Who's entered so far?” asked Draco.

Pansy began ticking off on her fingers. “Most of the early people were Slytherins. Peregrine Derrick, Hayley Quentin and Titus Mitcham from seventh year all came up shortly after I did -”


Pansy giggled. “I know, he doesn't stand a chance, does he?”

“Any other Slytherins?” asked Harry.

“Just Zubeida Khan and Tabitha Bainbridge from sixth year,” Pansy said.

“We think anyone else must've come up here in the middle of the night,” added Scarlett.

“All the Durmstrang kids came in around seven, and the Weasley twins shortly after,” Pansy said, then broke into giggles.

“I don't get it,” said Harry.

Scarlett was also giggling. “They're not old enough! They tried to get over the Age Line, but they both got thrown back over it, and then they grew these really long beards. It was the best!”

“That Hufflepuff sixth year, Summers? He tried the same thing earlier,” said Pansy. “His beard was pathetic though, just a wispy little thing.”

They spent a very enjoyable morning sitting in the Entrance Hall and watching the other contenders enter their names. The Beauxbatons students all filed in together to enter their names under the watchful eyes of Maxime. What seemed like every Gryffindor seventh year and quite a few of the sixth years entered their names.

“Please, no, not a Gryffindor champion,” Draco moaned.
“You’re just jealous because you know it won’t be a Slytherin,” Ginny shot back. She and Luna had come over to join them, though Luna was spending more time gazing off in thought than discussing the entrants.

“I’d settle for a Ravenclaw,” Draco said thoughtfully, “but a Gryffindor champion would be insufferable. Especially if they won.”

“Still pissed off we won the Quidditch Cup last year?” Ginny asked cheekily.

“See what I mean?” Draco appealed to the other Slytherins.

Scarlett put an arm around Ginny and messed up her hair with her free hand. “We’ll get you next year, Weasley.”

Ginny just laughed. “I’ll believe that when I see it, Lympsham.”

“So next year, then,” Scarlett said as she released Ginny and stood up. “This is boring. Let’s go find Archie.”

Ginny looked up at her. “And do what?”

“She wants to see the Abraxans. Supposedly, Hagrid’s said she can help him give them whisky.”

“You want to steal some of it, you mean,” Luna said.

They all looked at her in surprise, as she hadn’t seemed to be paying them any attention. Then Scarlett grinned wickedly.

“Yep. I can make a lot of money selling it. Let's go!”

With the departure of the younger girls, Harry, Draco and Pansy decided to return to the common room. Unsurprisingly, the seventh years were running a betting pool on who the Hogwarts champion would be.

“Fancy a wager?” Titus called out. “I’ve got excellent odds.”

“You really don’t,” Reiko Sibazaki said flatly.

“We’re good, thanks,” Pansy said. They headed towards one of the windows and sat on a free couch. “Just how dumb do they think we are? We have no way of knowing who the Goblet will pick. Hell, I was sitting on those steps for hours and I don't even know all the entrants!”

Harry hummed in agreement and stared out the window. The giant squid’s tentacles kept slapping against the glass every now and then. “What's up with the squid?”

Draco glanced over. “Probably annoyed about the ship yesterday. It did make a rather large whirlpool on its arrival.”

Harry soon got up to get his sketchbook and Walkman. On a whim, he grabbed his photo album as well. As Draco studied his Mermish book and Pansy and Daphne painted their nails in Halloween colours, Harry listened to Pearl Jam and drew some pictures of his parents. It was hard since the photos he was copying were moving, but he much preferred to remember his parents like this instead of getting upset.

When they walked into the Great Hall for dinner they found it decorated with live bats swooping through the air, and hundreds of jack-o-lanterns were arrayed against the walls. No one seemed all
that interested in the food, though, probably because the last feast had only been the night before. Most people spent the meal craning their necks to watch the Goblet of Fire, which was once again positioned in front of Dumbledore.

“Good luck tonight,” Draco said to Viktor and Ulla.

“Thank you,” said Viktor.

“I will need it, I think,” Ulla said.

“Well, if you don't get picked, you can just enjoy a holiday here, can't you?” Harry asked.

“This is true,” Ulla smiled.

Finally, the food disappeared and Dumbledore rose to his feet. The hall fell into a deathly silence as everyone watched him.

“We will soon learn the identities of our three champions. If your name is called, please come up to the stage and go through that door over there,” Dumbledore gestured to the door behind the staff table, “where you will receive your first instructions.”

He waved his wand and extinguished the floating candles, leaving the room lit only by the candles inside the pumpkins, and the Goblet of Fire itself, which glowed brightly in the gloom. There was a heavy silence as everyone in the room held their breath, then suddenly its flames suddenly turned red. Sparks began to fly out of it, and then a long flame shot high into the air. It launched up a charred piece of parchment which was snatched out of the air by Dumbledore. The flames turned blue again as Dumbledore read the parchment in their flickering light.

“The champion for Durmstrang is Viktor Krum.”

Applause swept the hall as people jumped to their feet and watched Viktor. Ulla gave a cry and hugged Viktor as Draco leaned over and shook his hand. Viktor smiled at them before getting up and shuffling up to the door Dumbledore had indicated earlier.

Up at the staff table, Karkaroff was clapping wildly. “Bravo Viktor! I knew it would be you!”

“Is he always like that with Viktor?” Harry asked Ulla.

A look of distaste passed over her face as she watched Viktor. “Yes. It drives Viktor crazy. I think it will only get worse now that Viktor is the champion.”

The hall once again fell silent as everyone watched the Goblet. A few seconds later the flames turned red and another long tongue of fire shot a piece of parchment into the air towards Dumbledore's waiting hand.

“The champion for Beauxbatons is Fleur Delacour.”

Over at the Ravenclaw table a very pretty blonde girl was getting to her feet as all around her, her classmates let their disappointment show. Two girls were actually sobbing on each other's shoulders. Ulla watched them with amusement.

“Well, I may not have been chosen as champion, but at least I didn't burst into tears like a baby,” she said in satisfaction.

The applause died down as Fleur disappeared through the doorway. The air was now thick with
tension as the Hogwarts students leaned forward eagerly when the flames turned red.

“The champion for Hogwarts is Cedric Diggory!”

The Hufflepuff table erupted into cheers as every single Hufflepuff leapt to their feet. Cedric got up with a grin and began making his way up to the stage, getting slaps on the back from everyone he walked past. Up at the staff table, Sprout was clapping proudly.

Dumbledore had to wait a few minutes for the noise to die down. “Congratulations to our three champions! Now, I know that everyone here will do their best to support their school's representative as they face the challenges ahead. By cheering them on...”

Dumbledore fell silent as the Goblet's flames turned red again. He frowned in consternation and caught the parchment that flew towards him. He stared down at it in shock for a long moment then looked out at the crowd.

“Harry Potter.”

Harry was the only person who remained staring up at the stage; everyone else turned to stare at him. Then both Severus and McGonagall got to their feet and went to speak to Dumbledore. Harry tried not to look at the angry expression on Ulla's face and turned to Draco. His eyes were as wide as Harry felt his own must be.

“What?” Harry asked dumbly.

“Harry Potter!” Dumbledore called again. “Up here, thank you.”

Beside him, Severus and McGonagall were both frowning down at the Slytherin table. Harry got up slowly. He shook off the hand Draco had put on his elbow and walked up to the stage. He stared resolutely ahead, not making eye contact with anyone, and did his best to not pay attention to the whispers that followed him up. He couldn't completely block them out, however, without putting his hands over his ears, and heard many people from the other three houses calling him a cheat. He kept close to the Slytherin side of the aisle, since the Ravenclaws and Beauxbatons students at the next table were looking particularly angry with him.

When Harry finally reached the stage he found Severus looking grimmer than he'd ever seen him. A muscle was clenching and unclenching in his jaw but apart from that, he was so still he may as well have been carved from stone. He gave Harry what he supposed might have been an attempt at a smile. Harry looked from him to McGonagall, whose lips were pressed so tightly that her mouth was a thin slash in her face, then Dumbledore.

There were no twinkling eyes at the moment. “Join the other champions,” was all Dumbledore said.

Harry's blood ran cold at the word “other” and he stumbled towards the door automatically. He found Viktor, Cedric and Fleur grouped around a fire in a small room whose walls were lined with portraits. The three of them turned around when they heard Harry enter. He felt shorter, smaller, younger than usual when he looked up at them.

“Vot is it, Harry?” asked Viktor.


He was saved from further attempts at speech by the entrance of Bagman. “Extraordinary!” he cried, rubbing his hands together as he bustled over to the fireplace.”I never expected this! May I present the fourth champion?”
The three champions frowned down at Harry.

Viktor spoke first. “You cannot compete. You are not old enough.”

“I didn’t -” Harry began.

“Slytherin,” Cedric muttered.

“Hufflepuff,” Harry retorted. *Not the best comeback, he thought inanely, but then I am under a bit of stress.*

Bagman was still smiling, oblivious to the glares now passing between Harry and Cedric. “What a to-do! I don’t think this has ever happened before! This certainly puts a new spin on things, doesn’t it?”

Harry was spared any more of Bagman’s enthusiasm by the door opening. In marched Dumbledore, Karkaroff, Maxime and Crouch. Bringing up the rear were Severus and McGonagall, talking tersely to each other. Severus looked calmer than he had a few minutes ago. He came over to stand behind Harry and rested a hand on his shoulder. He didn’t say anything, but the gesture made Harry feel a little better.

Fleur immediately stomped over to her Headmistress. “Madame Maxime! Zey are saying zat zis leettle boy is anuzzer champion!”

Harry bristled at being called a little boy as Maxime turned furious eyes on Dumbledore. “Explain,” she commanded imperiously.

“It appears Hogwarts is delegating itself two champions to our one,” Karkaroff said. He threw Dumbledore a nasty look.

“I can assure you that we have done no such thing,” Dumbledore said.

“Zen it was ze boy!” Maxime cried, turning her furious eyes on Harry.

“I didn't do anything!” Harry protested.

“Yeah, right,” snorted Cedric.

Severus’ hand tightened on Harry’s shoulder. “Mr Diggory, Harry has managed to find himself in danger every year since he arrived at this school through no fault of his own. Are you really foolish enough to believe that he has now begun to deliberately court further danger?”

Cedric fidgeted but continued to scowl at Harry.

Dumbledore looked at Harry. “Did you put your name in the Goblet of Fire?” he asked calmly.

“No, sir.”

“Did you ask an older student to put it in for you?” pressed Dumbledore.

“No! I didn't do anything!”

“He’s lying,” Maxime said swiftly. Karkaroff nodded, throwing a dirty look at Severus for some reason.

“I'm telling the truth, I didn't do anything!” Harry said desperately.
“I agree with Severus, Harry wouldn't have done it,” McGonagall spoke up.

Harry looked at her gratefully, glad that Severus wasn't the only one who believed him. Viktor also looked doubtful, but that may have been wishful thinking on Harry's part.

“Albus, you drew the Age Line yourself, he couldn't have gotten over it,” Severus pointed out.

“Perhaps you made a leetle mistake when you drew ze Age Line,” Maxime said.

“Perhaps,” Dumbledore said courteously.

“Nonsense!” McGonagall snapped.

“Well, I think that settles it then!” Bagman ventured.

“I beg to differ,” Karkaroff said in an unpleasant voice.

Dumbledore looked at Crouch. “Bartemius?”

Crouch smoothed his moustache. “This has never happened before, but the rules are perfectly clear. If an entrant has their name pulled from the Goblet of Fire, then he or she must compete in the Tournament.”

Severus' hand once again tightened on Harry's shoulder as the room erupted with angry shouting.

“I demand that Durmstrang and Beauxbatons be allowed to submit our students again so that we all have two champions!” bellowed Karkaroff.

“Of course he's lying, he's a Slytherin!” Cedric said angrily.

“I will not compete wiz a mere child!” Fleur pouted.

“Beauxbatons will never be competing in this farcical Tournament again!” Maxime cried.

“Silence!” thundered Dumbledore. When all eyes were on him he raised his hands placatingly. “It seems the rules demand that Harry compete with the other champions, no matter how his name may have been entered.”

“Convenient, wouldn't you say?” came a new voice.

Moody stomped into the room and glared around.

“Ow do you mean?” Maxime asked.

Moody stopped and looked up at her with his real eye. “Because whoever entered Potter knew he'd be forced to see this thing through.”

Karkaroff rolled his eyes. “This was all a conspiracy, was it? I see. To what purpose?”

Moody's lip curled as he turned his attention to Karkaroff. “Potter couldn't have crossed the Age Line, let alone fool the Goblet over the number of entrants. It would have taken powerful magic for someone to trick the Goblet into thinking that it should be choosing four champions.”

“What are you saying?” demanded Dumbledore.

“I'm saying someone's trying to kill Potter.”
Incredulous laughter swept the room, but Harry tensed at the words; Severus had once again squeezed Harry's shoulder, which made him think that Severus, at least, might be taking Moody seriously.

“Kill Potter? Who'd want to do that?” Bagman asked in a vain attempt at joviality.

“Ignore Moody, he's so paranoid he probably tries to jinx his own shadow on a daily basis,” Karkaroff said contemptuously.

“It's not paranoia when you're right,” Moody growled at him.

“Yes, well, I don't think there is any cause to be alarmed just now,” Dumbledore said loudly. “As I was saying, we shall have to run the Tournament with four champions. Bartemius, Ludo, please give them their instructions.”

Crouch cleared his throat. “The first task will be held on the twenty-fourth of November. It is designed to test your daring, and therefore you will all be going in completely unaware of what you will be facing. You will be allowed to take only your wands with you. You are not allowed to ask for or receive any help from any of your teachers. Once the first task is over, you will be told what the second task will consist of. You are all exempt from end of year exams, as you will naturally spend most of your time focusing on the Tournament.”

Harry nodded along with the other champions.

Dumbledore clasped his hands together. “Well, I think that's all for now. Nightcap, anyone?”

Bagman nodded eagerly, but he was the only one. Maxime and Karkaroff were escorting Fleur and Viktor out of the room. Viktor gave Harry a sharp, questioning look as he passed.

“Come with me, Harry,” Severus said quietly.

Harry allowed himself to be steered out into the now empty Great Hall, which was eerily lit only by the candles dying in the pumpkins.

“Going to tell me everything will be okay?” he asked half-jokingly.

“Not now,” Severus replied curtly.

Harry had to half jog to keep up with Severus' swift stride. They walked in silence to Severus' office. Harry sat down in a chair in front of the desk as Severus closed the door. He watched nervously as Severus came and paced behind his desk.

“I'm not in trouble, am I?” Harry asked, suddenly unsure. “I thought you believed me.”

Severus stopped, took a deep breath, then sat down. “Of course I believe you.”

“Good. But then, what -”

Severus leaned forward intently. “Harry, have you any idea of who might have entered your name? Did you hear anything? Even someone joking about it?”

“No.”

Severus' mouth twisted unhappily. “Much as I loath to admit it, Moody might be onto something.”

“You think someone's trying to kill me?” Harry asked, wincing inwardly at the squeak in his voice.
“It is a possibility. And I think you know who may want you dead.”

“Voldemort?”

Severus gripped his left forearm. “Precisely. Narcissa wrote to me to inform me of the nightmare you had over summer. It was her belief – and I am inclined to agree with her – that the events in your dream may have actually occurred in reality. We think it may not have been a true dream, but rather a vision of some sort.”

“But she told me it was just a dream!” Harry cried, feeling a stab of outrage that she'd lied to him.

“Because she didn't want to worry you unnecessarily. However, given tonight's events, I felt it time to share with you the possibility that the Dark Lord may be rather more active than we had previously thought,” Severus said grimly.

“Just because of one dream?” Harry asked shakily.

Severus rubbed his left arm. “Not entirely... My Dark Mark has been growing clearer for some time, though it has not yet pained me like it used to before the Dark Lord disappeared. I think there is a high chance that Pettigrew did indeed manage to rejoin the Dark Lord as Trelawney predicted, and is helping him regain his strength somehow.”

“Fuck,” Harry blurted, then covered his mouth with his hand.

Severus merely raised an eyebrow. “Indeed. However, the status of the Dark Lord is not the reason I've pulled you in here. I want you to know that you won't be facing this – any of this – alone.”

“But you're not allowed to help me,” Harry said.

Severus shrugged. “You're not supposed to be in this Tournament in the first place. It's hardly my fault that the organisers of the Tournament were incapable of enforcing their own rules. Besides which, as a teacher and your Head of House, I have a duty of care towards you. I shall be doing everything in my power to get you through this Tournament in one piece.”

Harry gave a crooked smile. “Thank you.”

Severus nodded briskly. “I shall let you know what the first task is going to be as soon as I've found out, and we'll come up with a strategy at that time. For now, try to stay out of trouble on your way back to the common room.”

Harry nodded. “Can I tell Draco and Hermione that you'll be helping me?”

“I believe they have proven themselves circumspect enough to be trusted with the information. See that it remains between the three of you, though.”

“Of course,” Harry said, then stood up. He walked over to the door and looked back. “This isn't so scary, now, knowing that you'll be helping me.”

Severus smiled faintly. “Excellent. You wouldn't want to be upset heading into the party that is no doubt being set up as we speak.”

Harry was glad Severus had mentioned the party, as it had never occurred to him. As soon as he stepped into the Slytherin common room he was met with cheering. Draco latched onto him and hugged him tightly.
“What happened? Are you alright?” he asked urgently.

“I'm fine, really,” Harry said firmly.

Draco looked unconvinced, but stepped aside so that the rest of Harry's friends could congratulate him.

“How'd you do it?” Bastien called out.

“I didn't,” Harry yelled back over the top of Tracey's head.

The crowd laughed; clearly, no one believed him, but at least they didn't seem angry about it.

“We won't have to suffer a Hufflepuff representing us now!” Peregrine shouted, raising a glass of what looked like Firewhisky. “To a Slytherin victory!”

“To Slytherin!” the crowd screamed back.

“But no pressure, Harry,” Blaise said with a grin.

“This will make you feel better,” Scarlett said. She pushed through the crowd and thrust a glass into Harry's hand. “I sold the rest of it at the start of the party, but I saved this especially for you!”

Harry looked down uncertainly at the glass of whisky in his hand, then up at Scarlett's bright, expectant face. “Thanks, Scarlett.”

He swallowed it down in one go and immediately began coughing as his eyes watered. The group around him laughed and Scarlett beamed.

“Better hope the first task isn't a drinking contest!” Adrian called out. The sixth and seventh years burst into renewed laughter.

Harry listened to the crowd try to figure out how he'd managed to get his name in. Apparently, they all saw it as a source of great house pride that one of their own had succeeded in getting past Dumbledore's Age Line, especially when Pansy mentioned that at least three people from other houses had failed to do so.

The theories got wilder and wilder, until Adrian, Hayley and Tabitha were laughingly describing how Harry had managed to bribe Mrs Norris – who they swore was over twenty years old – with mackerel until she carried his parchment over for him.

“You guys are all insane and I'm going to bed,” Harry said once they'd finished. “And any idiot could’ve figured out that I used kippers, not mackerel!”

He ignored the people yelling for him to stay and retreated to his dorm where he collapsed face down on his bed. He heard the door open but kept his eyes shut until he felt someone sit on the side of his bed and begin rubbing slow circles on his back.

“That feels nice,” he mumbled, half into his pillow, as he peered up at Draco.

“Oh, I'm thrilled for you. Now kindly explain how you can make fucking jokes about kippers at a time like this!”

“What?” Harry struggled to roll over so he could face Draco properly.

“You've just been entered in the Triwizard Tournament and you're joking around? Aren't you even a
little bit worried?” Draco demanded.

“I was. Well, still am, but not as much as at first,” said Harry.

Draco frowned. “And that makes sense in which universe, exactly?”

Harry sighed. “Sorry. Severus took me into his office, after everyone had finished yelling. And then -” Harry broke off and checked to make sure no one else had walked into the room, “- he told me he’s going to help me. With all the tasks. So yeah, I'm feeling a little better now.”

Draco’s eyebrows had shot up. “He's cheating so you can win?”

“He didn't mention winning, just making sure I don't get hurt.”

“Well, I'm glad someone is,” huffed Draco.

“You can't tell anyone, obviously. Apart from Hermione.”

“Did you really just accuse me of being dumb enough to go around broadcasting the fact that Snape's going to be helping you cheat?” Draco asked indignantly.

Harry looked up at Draco’s outraged face. “Er...”

Draco grabbed a pillow and whacked Harry in the face with it. “You absolute prat!”

Harry did the only thing he could think of to shut Draco up: he pulled him down on top of himself and began kissing him. Draco kissed him back for a while, then pulled away and glared at him.

“Don't think I've forgotten what you just said, Potter,” he growled. “And you taste like whisky.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Harry licked his lips experimentally.

He was very pleased when Draco's eyes followed his tongue's movement. “It's not awful.”

“Not awful? That's it?”

“I prefer it when you taste like you,” Draco said a little shyly.

Harry smirked even as he felt his cheeks heat up. “Well that's alright, then.”

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Harry woke up with a frown and a vague feeling of unease. It took him a moment before he remembered what had happened the night before, and his unease became crystal clear. He must have shifted when his brain kicked into gear, because Draco tightened his hold on Harry's chest and murmured something indistinct against his neck.

Harry slowly forced himself to relax by telling himself it wouldn't be that bad. Severus would be helping him, and he had the full support of his friends. He wriggled a bit, intending to try to get back to sleep, but froze when he felt Draco's erection once again pressing into his butt.

He felt himself getting hard and quickly began prising one of Draco's arms off him in order to get up, then thought again. It wasn't like Draco was humping him or anything. He could lie here and enjoy being warm and comfortable, right?
“Stop moving,” Draco whispered in a sleepy voice.

His breath brushed past Harry’s ear and made him shiver, making up his mind. “No, I, er, I’m going to go take a shower.”

He pulled Draco’s arms off him, grabbed his glasses, gathered his towel and some clothes and made his way to the empty bathroom. As he stepped into a shower stall he wondered if Draco had realised just why Harry had gotten up. Would he have been mortified, or turned on?

When he returned to the dorm after the longest shower of his life (he still wasn’t fully convinced this wasn’t some disquieting dream) he found the others had begun to stir. He waited for Draco to shower then walked out for breakfast with him.

The other Slytherins had clearly been busy after Harry had gone off to bed. He and Draco stopped in the centre of the common room and took in the new decorations. It looked like someone had stolen the giant Slytherin banner that usually hung in the Great Hall if they won the House Cup. It was stuck to one wall, covering the tapestries and trailing on the floor. Above the fireplace was a very poorly done drawing of the four champions, with the stick figure of Harry (only distinguishable from the dark-haired Viktor by his lightning bolt) holding up a golden trophy. Green snakes had been conjured up to float around under the ceiling. Harry peered closer and saw that they were all wearing silver crowns on their heads. The few people currently in the room all started clapping when they noticed Harry.

“If this is what happens when you get chosen, I wonder what will happen if you win,” Draco mused.

“I doubt we’ll find out,” Harry said as he headed for the exit.

“It could happen,” Draco continued.

The wall opened up to reveal Hermione leaning against the opposite wall holding a stack of toast in a napkin. “Finally! Come on, let’s have breakfast outside.”

Something about Hermione’s tone made Harry pause. “Why?”

“It’ll be more pleasant,” was all she said.

It was cold outside so they decided to walk as they ate, instead of going to their usual spot by the lake.

“You haven’t spoken to anyone from the other houses today, have you?” Hermione asked.

“No, you caught us just as we were heading up to breakfast. Why?” asked Harry.

“Because everyone’s convinced you put your name in,” Hermione said.

“Everyone?” Harry asked.

“Apart from Ginny, Neville and myself, I think so,” Hermione said.

“Brilliant,” Harry said, kicking a stone away angrily. “At least you guys don't think I did it.”

“Of course not. You were completely shocked when your name was called. I could see that from across the room. And Ginny said she spent the morning with you watching the people who were entering their names, and didn't notice you acting oddly. I don't think anyone apart from Neville believed us, though,” Hermione said with a sad smile.
Harry remembered Cedric's reaction the night before. “And no one's going to believe you. Not with me being a Slytherin.”

“Wankers,” muttered Draco.

Hermione bit her lip. “There were a lot of angry people in the common room last night. They all think you snuck your name in to win fame and glory.”

Harry made a noise of disgust and kicked another stone. “Tell them if I get killed I'm coming back to haunt the whole stupid lot of them.”

“See? I told you all that Halloween is cursed,” said Draco. “Not even my own mother believed me, and now look.”

“Well, you can tell her again,” Hermione said, pointing across the grounds.

Harry and Draco turned to see Narcissa stalking up the drive. Dobby was trailing behind her, wearing Harry's old robes. He waved excitedly when he saw them.

“Mother? What are you doing here?” called Draco.

“Not now, darling, I've got a meeting with the Headmaster. I'll come find you when I'm done with him,” Narcissa replied without slowing down.

They watched her disappear into the castle in bemusement.

“I would not want to be in Dumbledore's position right now,” announced Draco. “She's absolutely furious.”

Hermione waved her hand. “Never mind Dumbledore. How are you, Harry?”

“I'm fine. Not happy about it, obviously, but Severus has said he'll be helping me through it, so I'm less convinced I'm going to die,” said Harry.

“He's helping you?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah. Don't tell anyone. But he said that since the organisers couldn't keep anyone from breaking the rule about entering someone underage, he didn't think he needed to obey the rule about not helping me,” Harry said with a grin.

“Be careful,” Hermione said. “You don't want to get into trouble for cheating. Or Snape, for that matter.”

“I'm going to be facing a bunch of stuff that could kill me, I don't think trouble gets any bigger than that,” Harry pointed out.

They spent the next hour or so wandering the grounds discussing the Tournament. When they got close to where the Durmstrang ship was moored they saw Viktor walk out onto a plank in swimwear. Harry gave a tentative wave, which Viktor returned after a moment, before diving into the lake.

“I think he might believe me,” Harry said. The thought cheered him, as he'd liked both Viktor and Ulla, and didn't want either of them to stop talking to him.

“Yes, but he's clearly insane if he's diving into the Black Lake in November,” said Draco.
“Cheers, Malfoy,” drawled Harry. “What happened to Viktor being the best Seeker in the world?”

“Doesn’t mean he's sane,” Draco retorted.

“Yeah, well, I still want to go flying with him,” said Harry. “If he's speaking to me. You should come too, Hermione.”

Hermione tore her eyes away from watching Viktor swim. “I'm not very good on a broom, you know that.”

“Who better to teach you than Viktor Krum, then?” Harry asked.

They were nearing the Quidditch pitch when they heard Narcissa calling out to them. They stopped and went back to meet her. To their surprise, she walked past Draco and pulled Harry into a hug.

“I've heard about the Tournament,” she said as she leaned back to look at him. “I tried to convince Dumbledore to get you out of it, but he maintains that it can't be done.”

“That's what they all said last night,” Harry said.

Narcissa nodded grimly. “How that man is allowed to run a school, I'll never know... In any case, I just saw Severus, and he's assured me that he'll be giving you his full support. But if there's any way in which I can help you, you need only ask. Draco can summon Tilly if you need to speak to me.”

“Dobby will come if Harry Potter calls, too!” Dobby added, raising his chin stubbornly.

“Thanks. Severus said he's going to find out what the first task is and take it from there,” Harry explained.

“Good,” Narcissa said in satisfaction. “Now, I'm afraid I must be off. I'm lunching with the Bulgarian Minister for Magic today and mustn't be late.”

Behind her, Draco gave Dobby a significant look. Dobby nodded back with a smile. Hermione saw their exchange and rolled her eyes.

“Be safe, and good luck with the first task,” Narcissa said.

She kissed Draco goodbye and walked back down to the gates with Dobby hurrying along beside her. Draco watched her gloomily, waving half-heartedly when Dobby waved goodbye.

“If Mother couldn't get you out of it, you're definitely stuck,” he said.

Harry took Draco's hand and linked their fingers together. “I already assumed that. But hey, look at the bright side: Dobby seems to like the Bulgarian bloke.”

Draco raised an eyebrow. “He's not exactly sane, either.”

“How can you say that about someone who clearly adores your mum?” Hermione asked slyly.

Draco opened his mouth, closed it again, then pouted. “Good point.”
In Which Harry Deals With the Press and Severus Aids our Trio Rather Unexpectedly

The next day Harry discovered exactly why Hermione had dragged him and Draco outside on Sunday. When Harry walked into the Great Hall for breakfast people turned to glare at him from the other tables, muttering angrily. The Durmstrang students had also moved to the far end of the Slytherin table in a huddle, instead of sitting mixed in with the Slytherins.

“Do I get a medal for pissing off people from three different schools at once?” Harry muttered sarcastically.

“Forget them and read this,” Tracey said, thrusting the *Daily Prophet* under his nose.

Harry pulled it away to read the headline. *Harry Potter Illegally Enters Triwizard Tournament.* They'd also unearthed one of the photos of Harry with Lockhart at Flourish and Blotts. It had been cropped in two, leaving only Lockhart's arm trying to drag Harry back into frame.

Harry glared over the table at Tracey. “I could've done without seeing that again.”

“Page five,” she said calmly, then returned to her breakfast.

Harry flipped through four pages of breathless speculation about the Tournament before he found a small article in the lower right corner. *Sirius Black's Trial Delayed* ran the headline. Harry felt a frisson of dread crawl down his spine before he read the story.

“It's only been moved back a week,” he said in relief to Draco, who was reading over his shoulder.

“Yes, to the day of the first task. Clearly, the Ministry's hoping that the public will be more interested in reading about you competing in the Tournament than in a criminal trial,” said Draco in disgust.

“It's not bad enough that he's been wrongly imprisoned for twelve sodding years, but now they're using you to divert the public's attention from their own fuck up.”

“Not if you complete the task wearing a 'Free Sirius' t-shirt,” Theo said slyly.

Harry laughed at that, despite his anger at the Ministry. “I'll think about it.”

For the first time in his life, Harry was eager to get to History of Magic. The glares from the other houses continued in the corridors, and more than once he heard someone calling him a cheat. He slumped down at his usual desk, then rested his head on his arms and looked at Draco.

“It's like second year all over again. Except this time no one's scared of me,” he complained.

“Plus, this time you're actually guilty of what they're saying,” Draco pointed out. “Or at least, you will be, once Snape finds out what the first task is.”

“Yeah, well, they don't know that, do they? And you're really not being helpful,” Harry replied.

Draco laughed and laid his head on his own arms. “You want advice? Have a nap. We'll need all our energy to deal with the skrewts in our next class.”

Harry groaned and shut his eyes. He spent the rest of the lesson letting the soothing monotone of Binns' voice lull him into a pleasant doze. He jerked upright when the bell rang, as did most of the class, and they headed down to Hagrid's. They arrived after the Gryffindors, who, apart from
Hermione and Neville, began hissing at Harry as he approached.

“Ignore them,” Hermione said.

“I don't get it,” Greg said.

“They're calling Harry a snake,” Neville said.

“And that's supposed to be insulting how?” demanded Millicent.

“Sounds like a compliment to me,” drawled Blaise, winking at Harry.

Neville shrugged helplessly. “To them, being called a snake is an insult. You know: snake equals Slytherin equals cheater.”

“Oh, for fuck's sake,” Harry muttered, then raised his voice. “You're going to have to try harder than that!”

“And you all sound like Parselmouths with brain damage!” Draco added.

He and Harry snickered, though they quickly stopped laughing when they spotted Hagrid emerging from behind his cabin, carrying a precarious stack of crates. He set them down on the ground and looked around at the class.

“Mornin'. The skrewts have begun killin' each other,” he announced. There were quite a few smiles at that, though they died at his next words. “I reckon it's because they've bin kept in their crates fer too long, so today yeh all get to take 'em for a walk.”

He pulled a group of leashes out of a pocket and held them up with a grin. There was a stunned silence as the class gawked at him.

Draco spoke first. “Walk? You want us to take these things on a walk?”

“Yeah, I do. They'll love it,” said Hagrid.

“And how are we supposed to attach the leashes? It's not like they have discernible necks,” Draco continued.

Hagrid pulled a skrewt from the closest box, held it on the ground and quickly looped a leash around its middle. “Just like that. Yeh might want to wear yer dragonhide gloves, come to think of it. Harry, come help me with this big one.”

Hagrid waited until the class had reluctantly collected their leashes and moved towards the skrewts before he turned to Harry. “So, school champion, eh, Harry?”

“Yeah. Well, one of them, anyway.”

“And yeh don't know who put yer name in?” Hagrid asked.

Harry looked up to see Hagrid looking at him with a worried expression. “No idea. Wait, so you believe I didn't do it?”

“Course I do. Yeh looked right shocked when yer name was called. And everythin' always happens to you, don't it?”

“Yeah...”
Harry looked away, out at the rest of the class. At least he'd managed to get out of walking a skrewt, he thought with a shudder. Several of his classmates were currently lying on their fronts, trying to regain their footing as they were dragged along by their skrewts, which apart from scuttling at a surprisingly fast pace, also lurched forwards at intermittent intervals when they shot flames out of their butts.

Something about the scene didn't look right to Harry, and not just the horrific ugliness of the skrewts. It took him a minute to figure it out.

“Hagrid, where's Fang?”

“Fang? He don't like the skrewts, much,” Hagrid said. He didn't meet Harry's eyes.

“He didn't seem to like the hippogriffs that much, but you still brought him to class last year,” Harry pointed out.

Hagrid sighed heavily. “He got burnt by one of 'em the other day.” When Harry opened his mouth in alarm, Hagrid waved a hand. “He's alrigh', now. Just the tip of 'is tail, and I got a burn salve from Snape that set 'im right. But 'e don't want to be around the skrewts no more.”

That wouldn't be a problem for much longer, Harry thought. Not once Draco found out about this.

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Harry left the Charms classroom the next morning in a bad mood. They'd begun studying Summoning Charms, and he was having more difficulty than usual in mastering the new spell.

“It's just because you're distracted by the Tournament,” Draco said consolingly.

“Great, so I might fail all my classes before dying horribly,” Harry said glumly.

“You won't do either of those things,” Draco said firmly.

Harry's bad mood continued all through Herbology. Sprout was decidedly cool towards Harry. He was confused at first, since Flitwick had been fine during Charms, until he remembered that Sprout was Cedric's Head of House. She didn't say anything about the Ravenclaws hissing at Harry during the lesson, though he was able to ignore that easily enough by talking in Parseltongue with Draco.

After lunch Harry trailed Pansy and Daphne up to Divination. He could only imagine how excited Trelawney must be over him being entered in the Tournament.

Sure enough, the class had hardly sat down before Trelawney turned her bug-like eyes on Harry and declared that he'd be in mortal danger. Greg and Vince gaped at her, but Pansy sat up straight and raised her hand in the air.

“Yes, Miss Parkinson?”

“Professor, did you foresee Harry's name being entered?”

“I did. I alone was unsurprised when he was named as the fourth champion,” Trelawney said.

“You didn't tell anyone?” Pansy pressed.

“And fight the fates? I most certainly did not,” Trelawney pulled her shawls around her, affronted.
“But it wouldn't be fighting fate to tell him what he's facing in the first task, would it?” Pansy asked.

Trelawney stared at her before drawing herself up. “It would be highly unethical to aid one champion like that, Miss Parkinson.”

“But he's only fourteen! He's going to need all the help he can get!” Pansy cried melodramatically. She bit her lip as tears gathered in her eyes. “What if he dies?”

“That's enough. Please pull out your homework,” Trelawney snapped. She moved away to the other table.

Harry grinned over at a now dry-eyed Pansy. “I'd say thanks, but you look like you enjoyed that.”

“Of course I did. I think I'm going to have a lot of fun with her this year,” Pansy said smugly.

“Too bad those two are going to take her seriously,” Harry said, nodding at the other table.

Daphne shrugged. “They're too dumb not to. But at least we can enjoy Pansy winding her up.”

Pansy gave a little bow over the table. “I live to serve.”

********

The next Friday the Slytherins were waiting outside the Potions classroom when the Gryffindors walked up. Apart from Hermione and Neville, each of them were wearing a glowing red badge that read:

Support CEDRIC DIGGORY – the REAL Hogwarts Champion!

“Branching out from hissing at me, are they?” Harry asked Hermione.

She grimaced. “It's the whole school, actually. Some of the Hufflepuff seventh years are handing them out.”

“Just a little reminder, Potter, that the rest of the school's loyalties are with Cedric,” Ron called out.

Harry shrugged. “If the rest of the school contains you, I really don't want their loyalty. But hey, if you feel like wearing an ugly little badge, go right ahead.”

“Although with your complexion, you probably don't want something that red so close to your face,” Draco added. He turned his back on Ron and lowered his voice. “Remember the plan?”

“Duh,” Harry replied.

It wasn't much of a plan, to tell the truth. During their Potions lesson on Wednesday, Severus had shown them a vial of the poison he was going to be giving them. Harry and Draco had carefully watched him put it back on the top shelf in the ingredients cupboard. All Harry had to do was distract Severus long enough for Draco to levitate the vial down. They'd decided not to include Hermione at all. Apart from the fact that she'd likely have moral objections to poisoning the skrewts, they also knew if they were caught, as a Gryffindor, she'd be in far more trouble with Severus than they would.

“I still say we should just use the Invisibility Cloak,” Draco said.

“And I told you, I'm not breaking my promise to Severus,” Harry said, fed up with the argument.
He was spared Draco's retort by the arrival of Severus. “In,” he said curtly.

As the class took their places behind their cauldrons, Severus surveyed the room. “Take those ridiculous badges off and twenty points from Gryffindor.”

“But sir, we're not breaking any rules,” Parvati protested.

“You will wear the correct uniform when in my classroom, Miss Patil. Detention for anyone still wearing one in five seconds,” Severus snapped.

As the Gryffindors hastened to take off their badges, Harry flashed Severus a grateful smile. Severus nodded minutely before he took the roll.

“Antidotes,” he announced. “You have all had adequate time to research and prepare a suitable recipe. You will be brewing them now, and then I shall decide whose I shall test first.”

He looked at Neville unpleasantly, and Harry felt a little disappointed. Apart from the fact that he didn't want to watch Neville get poisoned (because history told him that Neville's antidote would be worse than useless), he'd been looking forward to testing his antidote. He gathered his ingredients quickly and pulled out his recipe to re-read it.

The class had just settled down at their benches again when there was a knock on the door. Harry looked up to see Colin walking into the room. He beamed at Harry, who returned the smile when he saw Colin wasn't wearing a badge.

“What is it, Mr Creevey?” Severus asked.

“Sir, I've been asked to take Harry Potter upstairs,” Colin said nervously.

Draco's head shot up, and he quietly made his way over to the ingredients cupboard.

“Mr Potter is otherwise engaged,” Severus said.

Colin shifted anxiously. “But, sir, all the champions are expected. Mr Bagman said so. I think they want to take photographs of them.”

Harry flushed as he heard the Gryffindors start hissing again.

“Silence!” Severus snapped. “Mr Potter, I expect you back here once you're done.”

“Professor, he's been told to bring all his things with him,” Colin protested weakly.

Harry looked at Draco, who was making frantic gestures at him, then looked at Severus again. “But my antidote...”

“Leave me the recipe and I'll mark that,” Severus said. “I know your brewing is perfect.”

Harry grinned at the praise and retrieved his carefully written recipe. He handed it to Severus as Draco returned to his bench holding a bottle of aloe vera sap and looking smug.

As soon as they were out in the corridor Colin turned excitedly to Harry. “Congratulations, Harry! I want you to know that my brother, Dennis, and I fully support you!”

“Thanks, Colin,” Harry said with a sigh. While he was grateful for any support from the other houses, Colin's hero worship was unsettling. He prattled on excitedly about how great he thought Harry's performance in the Tournament would be as they walked upstairs.
“You'll be fantastic!” Colin finished up. “Much better than Cedric! Anyway, good luck with the photographs!”

They'd stopped outside a small classroom, and Harry entered alone. He found all the desks pushed against the walls and had a fleeting memory of Patronus lessons with Severus. At least he wouldn't be facing a dementor today, he thought more cheerfully.

There was a long, velvet covered table set in front of the blackboard with five chairs behind it. Bagman was sitting in one of them, deep in conversation with a witch in garish magenta robes. Cedric was talking to Fleur, who was clearly flirting with him as the photographer eyed her. Viktor was standing by himself in the corner, and Harry was making his way over to him when Bagman stopped him.

“Excellent, you're here, Harry! The rest of the judges will be in for the Wand Weighing any minute – the expert has just arrived, I understand. This is Rita Skeeter; she's doing a small piece for the Daily Prophet today.”

“Actually, I was hoping to have a little chat with Harry beforehand,” Skeeter said.

Harry didn't like the predatory look she was giving him.

“Of course! You don't mind, do you, Harry?” Bagman said.

“Er-”

“Fabulous,” Skeeter said.

She moved forward quickly and grabbed Harry's arm in a firm grasp. He tried not to wince as her long nails pressed into his flesh as she dragged him from the room. She led him to the closest door.

“This is a broom cupboard,” Harry said weakly.

“So it is,” Skeeter said as she thrust him inside.

Harry stubbornly remained standing as she sat down on an upturned bucket. The door closed and left them in darkness for a brief moment before Skeeter pulled some candles out of her crocodile skin handbag and lit them. As the candles floated up into the air, Harry watched Skeeter pull a bright green quill out of her bag.

“Just a Quick-Quotes Quill, Harry. I can talk to you normally, now,” she explained. Harry raised his eyebrows at her idea of normal. Skeeter ignored him as she placed the quill on a piece of parchment and cleared her throat. “My name is Rita Skeeter, for the Daily Prophet.”

Harry watched the quill write unaided. Attractive blonde Rita Skeeter, forty-three, whose savage quill has punctured many inflated reputations-

“Lovely,” Skeeter said. She ripped off the top of the parchment, screwed it up and shoved it into her handbag as she smiled up at Harry. “So, Harry, tell me why you wanted to enter the Triwizard Tournament.”

“I didn't, actually,” Harry began, then stopped to read what the quill was scribbling.

An ugly scar, reminder of a tragic past and the only blemish on Harry Potter's otherwise charming face, is the first thing that many people notice-
“Ignore the quill, Harry, and tell me your reasons for entering,” Skeeter said firmly.

“I just told you, I didn’t,” Harry said.

Rules are beneath our young hero, who sees them as society's way to prevent him from doing what he wants, when he wants-

“Don’t worry about getting in to trouble, Harry. My readers love a good rebel – and you're the underdog here.”

It was her use of the word “dog” that jarred Harry's brain into action.

“But I didn't enter myself. I've got more important things to worry about,” he said.

Skeeter leaned forward eagerly. “More important than the Triwizard Tournament?”

“Yeah. My godfather, Sirius Black, is going on trial the same day as the first task, you see, and I'm really worried about him,” Harry said with exaggerated earnestness.

“Worried about him? Why, do you think he'll be sent back to Azkaban?”

Harry ignored the quill, which was writing quicker than ever now. “Not if he gets a fair trial, no. He didn't get one last time, you see.”

“Yes, I remember,” Skeeter murmured. “And are you close with Black?”

“Not as close as I'd like to be, since he's been locked up for most of my life,” Harry said, and this time he didn't have to fake the bitterness in his voice.

“And how does that make you feel, Harry?”

“Really mad, actually.”

“Really,” breathed Rita. “And what do you think your parents would say about this? After all, Black isn't the only accused Death Eater you're friendly with, is he? I understand that you're quite close with your Head of House, Professor Snape?”

Harry opened his mouth to angrily ask how she knew that, when he was interrupted by the cupboard door opening. He looked over his shoulder to find Dumbledore looking back at them.

“Dumbledore!” Skeeter cried. There was a flurry of activity as she hastily stuffed the quill and parchment into her handbag. “I hope you saw my story on the International Confederation of Wizards' Conference?”

“I found it deliciously nasty,” Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eye. “Mostly the part where you described me as an obsolete dingbat.”

“I found it deliciously nasty,” Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eye. “Mostly the part where you described me as an obsolete dingbat.”

“Just pointing out that many of your ideas are a little out of date,” Skeeter said.

“While I would be delighted to hear the rationale behind the rudeness, Rita, I'm afraid that Mr Potter is needed next door for the Weighing of the Wands. We cannot start if one of our champions is hidden in a broom cupboard.”

Harry hurried out past Dumbledore and back into the classroom. The other four judges were all sitting behind the table now, with the champions sitting in chairs next to the door. Harry sat down next to Viktor. Skeeter came in and sat down in the corner, once again taking out her quill and
Dumbledore strode in and took the last place behind the table. “To those of you who haven't met him, allow me to introduce Mr Ollivander. He is the leading expert in wands in this country, and will be checking that every champion is suitably equipped for the trials ahead.”

Harry followed Dumbledore's gesture to the corner where Ollivander was standing. Harry shifted uncomfortably; when he'd bought his wand from Ollivander, the elderly wizard had creeped him out. He watched silently as Ollivander called up each champion in turn, until he finally reached Harry. When Harry handed over his wand, Ollivander's eyes gleamed oddly.

“Ah, yes, I remember this wand well, very well indeed...” he murmured.

Harry did, too. He'd never told anyone, but he vividly remembered Ollivander informing him that the phoenix who had provided the tail feather for Harry's wand core had provided only one other – for the wand that Voldemort ended up with. He sincerely hoped Ollivander wasn't about to announce that to the room.

His wish was granted. Though Ollivander spent far longer inspecting Harry's wand than anyone else's, he didn't say anything about Voldemort, and eventually handed it back to Harry after making a jet of wine pour from the end of it.

Dumbledore clapped his hands together. “Thank you all for coming. Dinner will be starting shortly, so if you'd all like to head down to the Great Hall -”

“Photos, Dumbledore, photos!” Bagman interrupted when the photographer cleared his throat rather pointedly. “All the champions and judges together.”

“And then some individual snaps of the champions,” Skeeter butted in, eyeing Harry again.

It took a long time to get all the photos done. Harry kept trying to sidle his way to the back of the group, along with Viktor, whereas Skeeter kept trying to position him front and centre. The photographer was keen to get Fleur in front, and Maxime cast the whole lot of them into shadow. Eventually the photographer got her sit down with everyone clustered around her.

Finally, after each champion was photographed by themselves, they were free to go. Harry hurriedly picked up his bag and fled the room – Skeeter was making her way over to him again – and ran right into Theo.

Theo looked at Harry's flustered face and smirked. “Having fun?”

“Time of my life,” Harry said sarcastically.

“Right, well, Snape wants you in his classroom.”

“Did he say why?”

Theo shrugged. “No, but Draco and Hermione were kept back after class.”

“Okay, thanks,” Harry said.

He made his way back to the Potions classroom in confusion. He couldn't think of why Severus would want to talk to the three of them – unless he'd found out what the first task was. Harry sped up eagerly.
He entered the classroom to find Severus standing behind his desk glaring at Draco and Hermione, who were seated at their benches in the first row. All three of them looked up when Harry entered, with very different expressions. Hermione was worried and confused, Draco sullen, and Severus merely jerked his head impatiently at Harry's desk. Harry sat down slowly. They were definitely in trouble.

“So,” Severus began waspishly. “Now that you're all here, perhaps one of you would be kind enough to tell me why you attempted to steal poison from me.”

“Poison?” Hermione repeated disbelievingly.

“Yes, Miss Granger, poison,” Severus replied. He flicked his wand, and the vial came sailing out of Draco's bag. He caught it and held it up to them. “For whom was this intended?”

Harry shared a look with Draco and slumped down in his seat. “Not whom, what,” he said quietly. “And Hermione had nothing to do with it.”

Severus merely intensified his glare.

“What's going on?” Hermione asked.

Harry sighed. “Draco and I were going to poison all the skrewts.”

There was a beat of silence, then Severus sat down. “Go on.”

“Well, sir,” Draco said nervously, edging slowly away from Hermione, who looked like she wanted to hit someone, “we figured out that Hagrid bred them illegally. If he gets caught he'll be in trouble, not to mention that those things are vicious, and serve no real purpose apart from endangering us all.”

“So you decided to kill them?” Hermione asked hotly. “I mean, I hate them as much as you do, but killing them?”

“Thank you, Miss Granger,” Severus said sharply. His eyes flicked between Draco and Harry. “Why did you decide on this method?”

Harry shrugged helplessly. “Their skin's too thick for spells to get through.”

“So you decided to steal poison from me.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry and Draco said.

Harry watched guiltily as Severus stared at them. Then, to his surprise, Severus smiled. “Next time you require poison, I suggest you ask me instead of attempting to steal it from me.”

“What?” Harry blurted out.

Severus didn't say anything. He picked up the poison from his desk and placed it back on its shelf, then sat down at his desk. He tapped the desktop four times with his wand, reached down to pull out a drawer, then sat back up with another bottle held in his hand.

“This will serve your purpose far better,” he said.

“You're actually letting them go through with this?” Hermione burst out.

“Yes,” Severus said simply.
“Er, not to complain, but why?” asked Harry.

“Because something has to be done about those monsters. The Headmaster is fully aware of their origin and is unconcerned about the consequences for Hagrid, which makes me suspect that they will be used in the Tournament in some fashion,” Severus explained. “Even if they weren’t, it’s far easier for me to hand you this single bottle than to keep making an endless supply of burn paste for Hagrid.”

“Brilliant! Thank you, sir,” Draco said, reaching forward.

Severus pulled his hand back. “One moment, Mr Malfoy. This poison is fatal, incredibly fast acting, and does not need to be swallowed. Two drops in the confinement of each skrewt's crate will be enough for the fumes to kill them. Do not inhale the fumes and do not spill the liquid on your skin. If you do, use a Scouring Charm on the affected area immediately. I also expect the remaining poison returned to me tonight.”

“You want us to do it tonight?” Harry asked.

“Of course. Your classmates are aware that you have all been kept back with me. If you fetch your Invisibility Cloak now and go down to Hagrid's immediately, you can return here before dinner is even finished. You will thus have an unquestionable alibi,” Severus said matter-of-factly.

Harry, Draco and Hermione looked at him in stunned silence. Then Harry nodded. “Yes, sir.”

He left the classroom and walked quickly to the common room. “Open,” he said impatiently. He stuck his head through the opening and stepped through when he saw the coast was clear. He crept down the corridor to his dorm, which was also deserted, pulled his Cloak out of his trunk and threw it over himself in relief. He returned to the Potions classroom far calmer.

He found Draco clutching the vial of poison and tapping his foot impatiently while beside him, Hermione was frowning and biting her lip.

Harry pulled the Cloak off his head. “Ready?”

“Yes,” Draco said.

He darted forward and joined Harry under the Cloak. Hermione hesitated then followed with a sigh.

“Don't dawdle,” Severus said calmly as they left the room.

They walked through the empty dungeon corridors and the Entrance Hall in silence. Draco had to stoop with all three of them under the Cloak and Harry kept scuffing his feet against the back of Hermione's, but they made it out into the grounds undiscovered. Harry lit his wand once they left the pool of light spilling out of the castle windows.

They were halfway to Hagrid's before Hermione said anything. “I can't believe you two!” she began angrily. “How long have you been planning this?”

“Er, a couple of weeks,” Harry admitted, then gasped in pain when Hermione hit him in the leg.

“And you weren't going to tell me?” she went on.

“Maybe once we'd done it,” Harry said.

“We knew you wouldn't agree,” Draco cut in, “and that if we got caught stealing the poison, you'd
be in far more trouble with Snape than either of us.”

“Those are both good points,” she admitted grudgingly.

“Thank you,” said Draco.

“But that doesn't change the fact that you went behind my back like this!”

“Well, technically, Harry and I did most of the planning during our free periods, which is when you have Arithmancy,” said Draco. “We didn't think you'd want to skip class for this.”

“Oh, shut up, Malfoy,” Hermione said, though with far less anger now.

They all fell silent when they reached Hagrid's darkened cabin, in case Fang heard them and began barking. They found the skrewt crates spread out on the lawn next to Hagrid's vegetable patch. After checking that Hagrid wasn't inside his cabin, Harry pulled off the Cloak and stuffed it into his pocket.

“How are we doing this?” he asked.

Draco cocked his head thoughtfully. “You two pull the lids up, and I'll pour in the poison.”

They moved slowly to the closest crate. Draco uncorked the vial as Harry and Hermione grasped the edge of the lid and looked at each other.

“Let's do it,” Harry said.

He and Hermione yanked the lid up on its hinge. Draco poured out two drops of the poison and pulled his hand back quickly so Harry and Hermione could hurriedly shut the lid before either the skrewt or the poisonous fumes could escape. They repeated the process on the rest of the skrewts. They'd just reached the fifth crate when they heard a muffled crash.

“That'd be the first one down,” Draco said. He looked at the vial in his hand. “What is this stuff?”

“You can ask Snape afterwards, let's just get this over with,” Hermione said.

It didn't take long to finish, as there weren't that many skrewts left. Evidently they'd greatly enjoyed killing each other.

“That's the lot, isn't it?” Harry asked.

Draco nodded. “Unless Hagrid has one in his cabin as a pet.”

They all looked at the cabin in trepidation before Harry shook his head. “Not with Fang, he wouldn't. And I don't think even Hagrid would want one of these things in his house.”

“Let's go, then, dinner will be over soon,” Hermione said.

Harry once again covered them all in his Cloak. Their luck held on the way back to the dungeons and they didn't see anyone apart from a couple of ghosts hovering in front of the hourglasses in the Entrance Hall. The ghosts looked around when the door opened, but when they didn't see anyone, went back to discussing the house points.

When Harry, Hermione and Draco returned to the Potions classroom they found Severus nonchalantly marking their class' antidote recipes. He looked up when they emerged from under the Cloak.
“All went well, I take it,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” Draco said as he handed back the poison. “What is this, by the way? It was incredible.”

Severus smiled. “A rare poison that you won't find in any of your textbooks, Mr Malfoy. Now get back to your common rooms. Tell your friends that I kept you all back to discuss your antidotes.”

They left the classroom quietly, each deep in thought. Hermione bid them goodnight and made her way up to Gryffindor tower, leaving the boys to go to their own common room. Neither felt like hanging around the common room, so they made their way to their dorm.

“Hungry?” Draco asked.

Harry looked over to see Draco holding a box of sweets from Narcissa.

“Not really, no,” Harry said quietly.

Draco looked down at the box. “Me neither. I'm going to bed.”

Harry nodded and got changed into his pyjamas. He got out his Charms book to read about Summoning Charms, but gave up after he'd read the same paragraph four times. He lay in bed for hours with his Walkman on, barely even noticing the lights go off when the other boys all came in and went to bed; he was too busy thinking of the night's events. Something was troubling him, and not just the fact that they'd just killed all the skrewts. It was only when he eventually turned off his music and settled down to sleep that it hit him.

The smile that Severus had given when Draco asked about the poison was one Harry had seen a few times before: when Severus was pleased with himself.

He'd created that poison himself.

Harry stared up the canopy of his bed, thinking hard. He didn't want to think about Severus inventing poison, but what other explanation was there? It was probably something he'd done as a Death Eater.

Completely unable to sleep now, Harry put his glasses back on, got up and quietly pulled his Cloak out of his trunk. He swung it over himself and tiptoed out of the room. There were some older students scattered around the common room as he walked through, but he took a chance and opened the entranceway.

Harry wandered around the dungeons aimlessly for a while without thinking about where he was going. He stopped when he found himself outside Severus' office. Definitely not where he wanted to be. He turned around, thinking maybe he'd go outside and get some fresh air when he spotted Ollie's portrait.

He found the snake sunning himself on his rock.

Harry pulled the Cloak off his head. “You awake?”

“Yes, Harry,” Ollie said, opening his eyes lazily. “Is something wrong?”

“You could say that,” Harry said. “My friends and I killed all the skrewts tonight.”

“All of them? Good work,” Ollie said approvingly. “I never liked the sound of them.”

Harry frowned. “How'd you know about them?”
Ollie pulled his tail in closer. “That snake charmer up in the Divination Tower told me.”

“Oh, Wait, what? He's a Parselmouth?” Harry asked.

“Yes.”

Harry’s frown deepened. “I thought you only had Draco and I to talk to. And that cobra painting.”

Ollie hung his head. “I told you that so that you'd both keep coming back to talk to me.”

“We would've done that anyway!”

“I know that now,” Ollie said. “I'm sorry.”

“That's okay.”

“Thank you. Now, you've killed the skrewts. How, may I ask? The stories I've heard of them...”

“Severus gave us poison,” Harry said.

“Ingenious. What's the problem?”

“I... I think he invented the poison himself. And that stuff was scary. Very quick.”

Ollie studied him. “It worries you that he created something so lethal?”

“Yeah.”

“I want you to listen to me carefully, Harry,” Ollie said sternly. “Professor Snape is a good man – and a better Slytherin – and I'm sure he has his reasons for inventing the poison. He may have been forced to make it by You-Know-Who, or he may simply have enjoyed experimenting.”

“But -”

“Listen!” Ollie flicked his tongue irritably. “What are you worried about? He's hardly likely to go around killing people with poison, now, is he?”

“No...”

“So, what, you are worried because you think he may have done so in the past?”

“Well, yeah.”

“He's not a Death Eater anymore, Harry. I was here when he was a student, and I was here when he became a teacher. And I have heard many stories about him, both good and bad. You may find this hard to believe, but he has mellowed quite a bit over the years. Well, a little. Well.. My point is that you shouldn't judge him on what he has done in the past, but what he is doing now.”

Harry stared at him. “When did you get so wise?”

“I'm not wise, Harry, just a good listener. Portraits like to gossip, and that snake charmer tells me everything I ask him, in the hopes that it will aid him in his quest to put me under his thrall.”

Harry grinned. “So what you're saying is that I should still trust him?”

“Yes. If you're still worried about the poison, you could try asking him about it.”
“That wouldn’t be awkward…”

“Well, that’s my advice. Trust him for who he is now, do not fear him for who he used to be.”

“Right. Thanks, Ollie,” Harry said.

“Any time, Harry. I don’t like to see you – quick, someone’s coming!”

Harry yanked the hood of his Cloak back over his head and stood flush against the wall, trying not to breath too loudly. A few seconds later he heard what Ollie had – the distinctive clunking of Moody's footsteps. He watched nervously as Moody came around the corner towards him.

“Evening, Potter,” Moody said, looking straight at him.

“You can see me?” Harry asked stupidly.

“Sure can,” Moody said, pointing at his magical eye. “What are you doing out after curfew?”

“Er, I couldn't sleep, so I came to talk to Ollie here,” Harry said, pointing at the portrait.

“Ah, yes, I've heard you're a Parselmouth,” Moody said. He stared at Harry then jerked his head in the direction of the Slytherin common room. “Get off to bed now, laddie.”

“I'm not in trouble, Professor?” Harry blurted.

Moody laughed shortly. “Not this once, but don't let me catch you out after curfew again.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry said. “Goodnight, Ollie.”

“Harry – this man keeps snooping around Professor Snape!” Ollie said.

Harry tried not to react as he turned back to Moody. “Goodnight, Professor.”

“Same to you, Potter,” Moody said.

Harry quickly made his way back to the dorm before Moody could change his mind. He still wasn't at all sleepy, but Ollie had cheered him up a bit. And he'd definitely given Harry a lot to think about.
“We should go visit Hagrid,” Hermione said by way of greeting the next morning.

Harry grimaced, but nodded. He grabbed another piece of toast and stood up from the Slytherin table. “Come on, Draco.”

“Bollocks, all right,” Draco muttered as he joined them.

They walked slowly down to Hagrid's, due to Draco dragging his feet. Harry took a deep breath before he knocked on the door. There was no answer.

“Hagrid!” Harry called.

There was the sound of distant barking, and then Fang came tearing around the side of the cabin. He jumped up and licked Harry and Hermione before bounding to Draco's side.

Draco immediately scratched him behind an ear. “I gather Hagrid's around the back, then.”

They walked around and found Hagrid had a large bonfire blazing on the grass. The skrewt crates were stacked next to where he stood facing the flames.

“Hi, Hagrid.” Harry hoped his voice didn't betray his guilt.

Hagrid turned around. “Hullo. It's good to see the three o' yeh today.”

“What's wrong?” Draco asked.

“The – the skrewts have all died,” Hagrid said with a quaver in his voice. “Last night.”

“Oh, no, what happened?” Hermione asked. She winced slightly; probably at her wooden tone, Harry thought.

“Dunno. They were fine last time I saw 'em. Must've fed 'em something that didn't agree with 'em,” Hagrid said. “When I checked on them this morning, they were all dead.”

“All of them?” Harry crossed his fingers behind his back.

Hagrid nodded and looked at the crates. “I'd hoped maybe one or two mighta survived, but...”

“So you're burning them now?” asked Draco.

“Easier than burying 'em,” Hagrid said heavily. “I tried that wi' the first ones that died – when they were killin' each other – but I ran outta room for 'em all. And their bodies do somethin' to the soil when they rot.”
Harry tried very hard not to picture what a rotting skrewt would look like.

“Do you want us to help?” Hermione asked, sounding more normal than earlier.

“That'd be good of yeh, Hermione.”

“Wingardium leviosa,” Hermione said.

The top crate floated over to the fire and fell in with a shower of sparks. Harry and Draco quickly pulled their own wands out and helped Hermione levitate the rest in. They stepped back as the heat increased, then further back when the stench of rotting fish came wafting towards them. They watched the fire burn for a few minutes.

“Is that all of them?” Draco coughed when the fire began to die down.

Hagrid nodded with a hanky held over his face. “You lot get goin’, yeh don't need to hang 'round for this.”

“Will you be okay?” Harry asked.

“Yeah. We never really bonded, to tell yeh the truth. I'll wait for this to go out then head over to Hogsmeade for a drink,” Hagrid said.

They escaped gratefully for the castle. Harry felt guilty about leaving Hagrid so quickly, but the stench was making him gag, and Draco was looking green.

“What do you feel like doing now?” Hermione asked, waving a hand in front of her face.

“Flying,” Harry said instantly.

Draco brightened, but Hermione rolled her eyes. “I'm going to the library.”

“Why is that her answer to everything?” Draco asked as soon as Hermione had left them.

“Like you can talk?” Harry laughed. “Your answer to anything is to either ask your mum or eat something sweet.”

“Wrong, Potter,” Draco said. “Sometimes it's both.”

********

A few days later Skeeter's article was published in the Daily Prophet. Harry had walked down to breakfast to find Tracey and Theo bent over a copy and convulsing with laughter.

“Here's the criminal mastermind now,” Theo cried as Harry and Draco sat down.


“Gave a very interesting interview, apparently,” Tracey laughed. “Oh, and I'm happy with Theo, so don't try to recruit me for your harem.”

Theo smirked and put an arm around Tracey's shoulders as Draco stared at them in complete bafflement. Harry leaned over the table and snatched the paper out of her hands. He read the story with Draco and looked up at the end of it, unsure of what, exactly, he was feeling.
Instead of the promised article on all four champions, Skeeter had focused almost exclusively on Harry. The other three champions were only mentioned in the last paragraph, although Viktor and Fleur's names were both misspelled. Skeeter had taken Harry's mention of Sirius and managed to imply that Harry was advocating for the abolition of the justice system altogether.

Most alarmingly, Black isn't Harry's only connection to the criminal underworld. Many of Harry's friends have parents who were accused of being Death Eaters. His closest friend, Draco Malfoy, himself a nephew of Black, has another four family members in Azkaban. His father, Lucius Malfoy, was only imprisoned last year – and sources tell me that Harry had stayed at the Malfoy residence earlier that year.

Around the time that Malfoy was going on trial for attempted murder, Harry was spending the summer with Severus Snape. Potions Professor at Hogwarts, and Harry's Head of House, Snape is said to be closer to Harry than usual for a teacher and student.

“Yeah, Snape's great,” Harry gushes. “He's like a father to me, actually. We've been close ever since I came to Hogwarts, he took me under his wing straight away. I'd do anything for him, anything he asked me to.”

A touching story of an orphan finding a parental figure, or something more sinister? Readers may not remember that Snape was accused of being a Death Eater during the war. Albus Dumbledore gave testimony in his defence at the time, but a look at some of Dumbledore's decisions – both at Hogwarts and in the Wizengamot – may indicate the approach of senility.

Of course, we mustn't judge Harry on the pasts of others, but his own record isn't as innocent as one might hope. His close friend, Colin Creevey (Muggle-born, with no known links to Death Eaters), tells us while Harry is rarely seen without one Hermione Granger, she isn't the only girl Harry's got wrapped around his finger. Posey Parkinson and Daisy Greengrass can usually be found enjoying his company, along with a multitude of younger girls. One can only hope that Harry lets them down gently when – or if – he ever decides which one he wants.

“What the fuck did I just read?” demanded Draco.

“I... I don't know,” Harry said.

“Seems pretty clear to me,” Theo said, his smirk growing larger. “You're the centre of a Death Eater conspiracy, and you're doing your best to create yourself a harem here at Hogwarts.”

“It makes it sound like I'm only friends with any of you because you're all evil,” Harry said bluntly. “And I've never said that about Snape.”

He looked up at the staff table to where Severus was reading the paper and drinking tea. He must have felt Harry's eyes on him, because he looked out at the Slytherin table. When he saw Harry watching him, he jerked his head irritably, got up and swept out of a side door.

Harry sighed. “Gotta go, Snape wants to see me. And he looks pissed.”

Draco winced. “I'll be in the common room when you're done.”

Harry nodded as he got up from the table. Heads swivelled as he walked out of the Great Hall, along with the sound of people hissing. Harry rolled his eyes and sped up.

When he knocked on the door to Severus' office he was surprised when it was yanked open immediately.
“In,” Severus said curtly, shutting the door behind him.

Harry sat down in his usual chair and waited apprehensively as Severus prowled around his desk. He sat down and held up the *Prophet*.

“I can explain,” Harry said quickly.

“Yes?”

“Look, I didn't say any of that, okay? Well, I mentioned Sirius, and his trial, but that's it!”

Severus sighed. “Why did you give an interview to Skeeter in the first place?”

“I didn't want to,” Harry protested. “She dragged me out of the Wand Weighing ceremony and into a broom cupboard. I was only in there for a few minutes before Dumbledore found us.”

“And how does your mutt of a godfather figure into any of this?”

Harry bristled slightly, but decided to leave the jab at Sirius. For now. “Well, I know the Ministry changed the date of his trial to the date of the first task, so that everyone’s distracted by that and don't think about how the Ministry messed up. And I was mad that they were using me for that, so I brought up his trial. We spoke about that for about a minute, then she mentioned you, and then Dumbledore interrupted us before I could say anything else.”

Severus closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Look, I'm sorry, okay?” Harry continued. “I didn't say any of that about you, and I definitely didn't think she'd try to make you out to be some kind of – of -”

“Death Eater?” Severus dropped his hand. “I can hardly blame you for that.”

Harry frowned in confusion. “Then... Why are you mad at me?”

“I'm not,” Severus muttered. “I'm not, Harry. Just... Don't talk to Skeeter in the future, if you can at all help it. She twists people’s words and flat out invents more. This story portrays you very negatively.”

“Yeah, I know. But most people will know it's bullsh – er, not true. I mean, all that stuff about all the girls? I've been dating Draco for nearly a year now!”

“Yes, but outside of Hogwarts, not many people would be aware of that. Famous or not, you're still a schoolboy, and school yard gossip doesn't usually sell many papers.”

“Oh.”

“Don't look so despondent. I do have good news.”

Harry sat up straight. “You've found out what the first task will be?”

Severus grimaced. “Not quite. Bagman was surprisingly circumspect about it, and Crouch wouldn't even speak to me. But,” he held up a hand when Harry opened his mouth, “Bagman did let slip that whatever you'll be facing, it will be arriving here on the weekend.”

“But the task's next Tuesday!”

“I know it doesn't leave much time to prepare. My best advice is to try to pay attention in class. You
never know what may prove helpful in the task, and it will help to keep you from worrying over the Tournament.”

Harry privately thought that there wasn't anything in the world that could stop him from worrying about that. “Okay. Thanks.” He got up to leave, then whirled back around. “I nearly forgot. Ollie told me that Moody's been snooping around you.”

“I know. But thank you for the warning.”

Harry did his best to follow Severus' advice over the next week, but he found it almost impossible when the rest of his classmates were speculating about what the first task might be. On top of that, the Gryffindors and Ravenclaws were still hissing at him in class, despite Severus taking nearly one hundred points off Gryffindor in one lesson alone.

By the time Saturday rolled around, Harry was a tightly wound bundle of nerves. At breakfast he looked up at the staff table, and was disheartened to see Severus shake his head slightly. He looked down at his plate, trying to quash his rising anxiety.


“Yeah,” Harry tried to smile.

“It'll be good to get away from here for a bit,” Draco went on.

Harry perked up by the time they were walking to the village in the sunshine. He was holding hands with Draco and watching Scarlett skipping around in front of them. As a third year, it was her first time going to Hogsmeade, too, along with Ginny, Luna and Archie, though none of them were as excited as Scarlett. She bounded over to the fourth years.

“Is it true that the Shrieking Shack has even more ghosts than Hogwarts?” she asked.

“Oh, yes,” Draco nodded. “They're really violent, too.”

“Cool!” Scarlett cried, running back to the other third years and slinging her arms around Archie and Ginny.

Harry and Draco ambled up the High Street with Hermione and Neville, looking at all the shops. They stocked up on lollies at Honeydukes, then headed to the Three Broomsticks for a Butterbeer. The four of them sat at a table in the corner. Harry zoned out of the conversation and gazed out across the crowded pub. It was mostly full of Hogwarts students, and Cedric badges glowed at Harry from all over the room. He jerked his attention back to his table when Neville waved a hand in front of his face.

“Sorry, what?”

“Did you want another drink?” Neville asked patiently.

“Sure, thanks,” Harry said, handing over some money.

Draco got up to help Neville with the drinks. As they weaved their way through the crowd, Harry spotted Hagrid coming over to him with Moody in tow.
“Alright Harry, Hermione?” Hagrid asked.

“Hi Hagrid,” Harry said warmly, then turned wary. “Professor Moody.”

“Potter,” Moody nodded. “Granger, I wanted to ask you about a point you made in your last essay.”

With Hermione talking to Moody, Hagrid bent down closer to Harry. “Meet me at my cabin at midnight tonight, and wear your Cloak.”

“Okay,” Harry said, too surprised to question him.

Hagrid merely smiled at him furtively, and soon left with Moody just as Draco and Neville returned.

“What was that about?” Draco asked.

“He wants me to go meet him at midnight,” Harry said.

Hermione bit her lip. “You don’t think it’s about the skrewts, do you?”

“What about them?” asked Neville.

Harry froze. “Er...”

“You don’t think he’s got more, do you?” Draco cut in.

They all shuddered.

“He bloody well better not have,” Harry said.

********

At dinner Harry scanned the staff table for Severus. Surely if Hagrid had found out they’d poisoned the skrewts, he would’ve figured out they’d got the poison from Severus. He wasn’t there, however – he was missing along with both McGonagall and Dumbledore – and Hagrid didn’t look angry; rather the opposite, actually. Harry turned back to his dinner in confusion.

At a quarter to midnight Harry slipped out of the dungeons under his Cloak. He took the Marauder’s Map with him, to keep an eye out for Moody, but couldn’t see anyone in the dungeons apart from himself. He wiped the Map clean, stowed it in a pocket and left the castle. The grounds were dark but there was enough light coming from Hagrid's cabin and the Beauxbatons carriage that Harry didn't need to light his wand in order to see. He knocked on Hagrid's door quietly.

Hagrid opened it and glanced around. “That you, Harry?”

“Yeah. What did you want to see me for?” Harry stepped inside and took off his Cloak.

A quick glance around the cabin didn't show any baby skrewts, just Fang sleeping on Hagrid's bed, but they could always be outside. Harry looked at Hagrid expectantly and jolted in surprise.

“What have you done to your hair? And is that a suit?”

“Do you like it?” Hagrid asked, brushing the lapels of a truly hideous brown suit, then patted his hair, which was gathered into two bunches and slicked down with something oily, and straightened a large, ugly flower in his buttonhole. “I brushed it, Harry. Wouldn’t expect you ta know anythin’ 'bout that, though.”
“I brush my hair,” Harry protested, running a hand through it and ignoring the first question.

Hagrid snorted. “Put yer Cloak back on and come with me. Mind yeh keep quiet, now. We'd best keep Fang here, too, he won't like 'em.”

Harry groaned. “You don't have more skrewts, do you?”

“Nah, this is much better,” Hagrid said, and Harry noticed for the first time how excited he was. 

*This is going to end well*, he thought, as he followed Hagrid back into the night. He was frowning by the time they reached the Beauxbatons carriage and Hagrid knocked on the door.

It was opened immediately by Maxime herself. “Bon soir, ’Agrid.”

“Bong-sewer,” Hagrid said.

Harry had to press a fist to his mouth to keep from laughing at Hagrid's terrible accent. Hagrid helped Maxime down the stairs and then led her around the paddock in which the Abraxan horses were being kept. Harry had to jog to keep up with them, trying to figure out why Hagrid had dragged him along on his night-time stroll with Maxime. They were skirting the edge of the Forbidden Forest, though to Harry's relief they didn't seem about to enter it.

Maxime was evidently in the dark too. “What is it that you wanted to show me, ’Agrid?”

“Ah, I don't want to go spoilin' the surprise, now,” Hagrid said happily, then his smile faded. “Yeh'd best not go tellin' no one 'bout this, mind, yer not s'posed ta know about 'em.”

“You 'ave my word,” Maxime said.

Harry felt a chill go down his spine. *If Maxime isn't supposed to know about whatever they were about to see, then it probably has something to do with the Tournament. And if Hagrid is this excited about it...*

Hagrid and Maxime walked around one final copse of trees and stopped to look at the scene in front of them. Harry walked around them to see what it was they were looking at and went cold. Ironic, really, since the first thing that caught his eye was fire.

There were four gigantic and really, really, pissed off dragons in a hastily erected wooden enclosure, rearing up on their hind legs, bellowing, and breathing fire up into the night sky. Harry guessed the tallest one's head was nearly twenty metres off the ground. A voice in Harry's head told him that one of the others was a Welsh Green, like the dragon painted on Draco's bedroom wall. He shook his head numbly. Knowing its name wasn't going to help him defeat it.

There were wizards all over the place, hanging onto chains that connected to thick leather collars on the dragons, trying to get them to calm down. As Harry watched, the black dragon reared up and tossed its head, sending one of the men flying into the fence.

The man stood up and faced the dragon again. “We need to Stun them! On three!”

“*Stupefy!*” the dragon-keepers yelled together.

Red stunning spells went shooting off at the dragons, exploding like fireworks against the dragons' thick scales. The dragons stopped roaring and swayed on their feet, before they fell down in four colossal booms. The dragon-keepers quickly pulled their chains taut and attached them to large metal pegs which were forced into the ground.
“Wanna get a bit closer?” Hagrid asked Maxime.

They moved up to the fence eagerly, with Harry trailing behind them. A man on the other side of the fence turned around at their approach, and Harry recognised Charlie.

“Hi, Hagrid. I was wondering when you’d get here.”

“Soon as I could,” Hagrid replied, not taking his eyes off the dragons. “What breeds d’you have?”

Charlie pointed at the black dragon. “This is a Hungarian Horntail. The small one there is a Common Welsh Green. Next to that’s a Swedish Short-Snout, and then the red at the back is a Chinese Fireball.”

Maxime wandered off around the edge of the enclosure. Charlie frowned after her. “You shouldn’t have brought her, Hagrid. She’ll tell her champion.”

Hagrid waved a hand dismissively. “Just thought she’d wanna see ‘em, is all. So, four dragons... One for each champion?”

“Yes. They're not fighting them, though, just need to get past them, I think. We were told to bring nesting mothers. They were very specific about that.”

Harry had a sudden longing to be back in the cool dungeons, away from the dragons and their blistering, deadly fire. Knowing Hagrid wouldn't miss him with both Maxime and four dragons around, he didn't bother trying to say goodnight. He went back the way he came, glad to put as much distance between himself and the dragons as possible, when the sound of footsteps made him freeze.

He scanned the edge of the Forest warily and saw Karkaroff skulking towards him. Harry tiptoed further away from the Forest and let him pass, thinking quickly. Karkaroff would find the dragons soon, and then Cedric would be the only champion unaware of what the first task consisted of.

Harry mulled that over as he walked back up to the castle, and decided that he’d take the first opportunity he could to warn Cedric.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he re-entered the Slytherin common room and took his Cloak off, then jumped when he heard his name. He looked over at the fireplace to see Draco reading on a couch.

“Finally! Snape wants to see you,” Draco said.

“What, now?”

“Yes, he came by a while ago, and was very insistent that you see him as soon as you returned,” Draco said, then peered closer. “What did Hagrid want?”

Harry ran a hand through his hair. “I’ll tell you when I get back.”

Draco narrowed his eyes but nodded. “Fine.”

Harry put his Cloak back on and set off for Severus' office.

“Enter.”

Harry slipped inside and pulled off the Cloak. “Sorry I’m so late, Hagrid wanted to see me at midnight and – what's wrong with you?”
Severus was looking wan and tired. He had a bottle of what Harry recognised as a headache reliever on his desk in front of him.

“I could ask you the same question.”

“I asked you first,” Harry pointed out as he sat down.

Severus grunted. “I spent the evening at the Ministry giving my final testimony in Black's defence, which I find galling enough on its own. To make matters worse, they originally gave me Veritaserum, but then it occurred to them that I may have built up a tolerance for it.”

Harry nodded; he'd read about that being a possibility, and it didn't surprise him in Severus' case. “So...”

“So they used Legilimency on me as well, to ascertain that I was telling the truth.”

“What's Legilimency?”

“The art of entering someone else's mind to, amongst other things, find out if they're telling the truth or not. Of course, I was able to block them from certain memories using Occlumency, but it is tiring to do so whilst under Veritaserum,” said Severus.

“Why would you do that? Wouldn't they be able to tell?”

Severus scowled. “Because there are numerous memories I have of Black that I don't want anyone to see. In any case, I am rather skilled at Occlumency, so no, they couldn't tell I was keeping anything from them.”

Harry made a mental note to later find out more about the hatred between Severus and Sirius. Perhaps Lupin would tell him a less biased side to it all. “Right. Why'd they get you in today, when the trial's only a few days away?”

“Because I won't be at the trial. I'll be here, watching you compete in the first task,” Severus said simply.

“Oh,” said Harry, pleased.

“Indeed. Now, am I right in assuming that your palpable worry stems from the fact that Hagrid took you to see the dragons?”

“How'd you know about that?”

“The staff were informed this afternoon, but I didn't have time to talk to you before I left for the Ministry.”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, Hagrid took me to see them. I'm dead, Severus. There's no way I can face one of those things.”

“Nonsense.”

Harry goggled at him. “'Nonsense'? Have you ever seen a dragon? They were all chained up, but it still took multiple Stunning spells to subdue them. Stunning spells from trained dragon-keepers. The closest I've come to a dragon is that egg Hagrid had.”

“You faced a basilisk when you were twelve,” Severus said calmly.
“Not by choice. And anyway, you were there,” mumbled Harry.

“Just as I am here now, telling you that you can do this.” Severus said, leaning forward.

“How?” Harry asked plaintively, then had an idea. “They don't speak Parseltongue, do they?”

“Unfortunately, no,” said Severus. “But you have another skill in your armoury.”

“What?”

“Flying.”

“Okay, so I'm more coordinated on a broom than the ground. That still doesn't help me much. Pretty sure dragons can fly, too.”

Severus smiled. “But these ones won't want to leave the ground. The aim of this task is not to defeat a dragon, but to snatch an egg from the dragon's nest.”

“Steal a dragon egg? That sounds like suicide.”

“Not a real dragon egg, though it will be amongst some genuine eggs. It should be easy enough for you.” When Harry stared at him, wide-eyed, Severus pursed his lips. “What do you do as a Seeker, Harry?”

“Catch the Snitch. But -”

“Whilst avoiding getting hit by Bludgers, am I right?”

“You know you are.”

“It is the same principle. You once caught the Snitch whilst Quirrell was attempting to jinx you from your broom, did you not?”

“Yeah, but -”

“And you managed to catch it the following year, when you had a broken arm, yes?”

“Okay, okay, I get it, I'm good on a broom,” Harry said, raising his hands in surrender. “But I'm not allowed to take my broom to the task.”

Severus shook his head. “But you are allowed to Summon it.”

“I haven't been able to cast a Summoning Charm yet,” Harry admitted in a small voice.

Severus blinked. “I was under the impression that you were currently studying them in Charms.”

“Yeah, and I suck at them.”

“Well then, I suggest you practice,” Severus said in his classroom voice.

“Yes, sir,” Harry said automatically.

“You can do this, Harry. I have complete faith in you,” Severus said firmly.

Harry looked at him doubtfully, but there was no answering doubt in Severus' dark eyes, only focused determination.
“Alright,” Harry said, beginning to feel some semblance of calm for the first time since he’d seen the dragons. “Er, one last thing... Maxime and and Karkaroff both know about the dragons...”

“And you wish to tell Diggory,” Severus said, then shrugged. “If you wish.”

“You don't mind?”

“That you're aiding one of your competitors? How can I?” Severus asked softly. “It's what Lily would have done. You really are unmistakably her son.”

Harry smiled crookedly. “Really?”

“Oh, yes. You have quite the large streak of foolish Gryffindor sometimes.”

“Should come in handy when facing a dragon, then,” Harry quipped.

Severus' lips quirked as he waved a hand. “Go to bed, Harry.”

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“A dragon?” Hermione shrieked.

“See, this is why we didn't say anything until we got in here,” Draco said pointedly.

Harry glared at him. While he had a point, Draco couldn't really talk. He'd turned an alarming shade of white when Harry had told him about the dragons last night, and Harry had awoken that morning thinking he was getting choked by his blankets. It had turned out to just be Draco wrapped around him tightly, like his mere presence could protect Harry from the danger to come.

“Why are we here, anyway? I'm talking specifically about all the cushions,” Hermione gestured around them.

Harry had asked the Room of Requirement to give him a place where he could tell Hermione about the dragons, as well as practice Summoning Charms. It had provided a large, unadorned room, that had a large mound of cushions in all colours on the floor.

“It looks like you're setting up that harem Theo keeps mentioning,” Draco sniggered.

Harry ignored him and explained Severus' strategy to Hermione. She was nodding in agreement as he finished.

“It's a good plan. It doesn't explain the cushions.”

“I need to practice Summoning Charms. I've, er, had a bit of difficulty with them,” said Harry.

Hermione pulled out her wand and set her jaw. “Then let's get to work.”

They practised all day, stopping only to go to the toilet and have lunch. Hermione and Draco both demonstrated the charm perfectly for Harry, and just before lunch, he was able to Summon cushions from the other side of the room. They asked the room to provide larger and heavier objects in the afternoon. When Harry nearly dropped a bowling ball on his foot they called it quits for the day.

At breakfast on Monday Harry watched the Hufflepuff table carefully, and shot to his feet when he saw Cedric getting up with his friends.
“See you in class,” he said to Draco, then followed the Hufflepuffs out of the Great Hall.

Cedric was still surrounded by his friends when Harry had nearly caught up to him in the Charms corridor. Not wanting to talk to Cedric in front of them, as they were all wearing Cedric badges, Harry took out his wand and aimed it at Cedric's bag.

“Diffindo,” he murmured.

Cedric's bag split open and all his school things tumbled to the ground.

“You guys keep going, tell Flitwick I'll be there in a minute,” he said in an annoyed tone.

As soon as Cedric was alone, Harry walked up to him. “Hi.”

Cedric looked up and his eyes narrowed. “Potter.”

“I just wanted to let you know, the first task is dragons.”

“Dragons?”

“Yeah.”

“You think I'm going to fall for that?” Cedric asked angrily. “This is low, even for a Slytherin.”

Harry ran his hand through his hair in frustration; he hadn't been expecting this reaction. “Look, you can believe me or not, I really don't care. I'm just trying to do the right thing here. If you don't want to take a friendly warning, then that's your problem.”

Cedric finished gathering his possessions and stood up. “Why are you telling me?”

“Because I've seen them, and I wouldn't let my worst enemy face them unprepared. And Viktor and Fleur will know by now, so this way it's all fair.”

“And Slytherins are renowned for valuing fair play.”

“I do,” Harry said quietly.

“Then how do you know about these so-called dragons?” Cedric asked.

Harry scowled; it was a good question. “Er, it was an accident. I was with a friend near the Forbidden Forest and we heard them, so went to have a look, and... Dragons.”

Not knowing what else to say, he spun around to go to class. He felt Cedric's gaze on his back as he headed off for History of Magic. He'd only gone a couple of metres when Moody stepped out of a classroom in front of him. “Come with me, Potter.”

“I have to get to class, Professor, I'm already late.”

Moody simply jerked his head and set off. With a sigh, Harry followed him. He wondered what animal Moody was about to turn him into. *Probably a deer of some sort, given my family*, he thought gloomily.

“That was decent of you, Potter,” Moody growled once they were in his office.

Harry jerked in surprise. “Er, thank you, sir.”
“Sit down.”

Harry did so reluctantly. He looked around the office as he did so. Moody had an array of odd instruments, none of which Harry recognised. His curiosity must have been evident.

“They're Dark detectors,” Moody said.

“What do they do?” Harry couldn't help asking.

“Not a lot at the moment. Most of them are rendered useless here in Hogwarts,” Moody said sourly. He pointed at a wiggly, golden rod that was humming quietly. “That's a Secrecy Sensor. Vibrates when it senses lying, and it hasn't stopped since I got here. Too many kids lying to their teachers about their homework. That's a Sneakoscope,” he pointed at a glass spinning top on his desk, “they whistle when there's someone untrustworthy around, and I had to disable that completely. The whistling was driving me nuts.”

“And that?” Harry pointed at a mirror-like frame on the wall. Instead of reflecting the office, shadowy figures moved around in it, too blurry to make out who they were.

“Foe-Glass. If I see the whites of someone's eyes on there, I know I'm in trouble. That's when I open the trunk.”

Harry looked at the trunk Moody was pointing to. It had seven locks on it in a row. He was about to ask what was in there – maybe some sort of weapon – when Moody spoke again.

“So you know about the dragons.” It wasn't a question.

“Yeah... Sort of found out by accident,” Harry said, trying not to show his nervousness.

Moody laughed shortly. “Don't worry, people have been cheating in the Triwizard Tournament ever since it was begun.”

“I didn't -”

“I'm not here to lecture you, Potter. Dumbledore may not have told you or Diggory, but you can bet your last Knut that Karkaroff and Maxime would have told their champions.”

“Okay,” Harry said cautiously.

“I was just curious to see if you'd figured out how you were going to get past your dragon. Got a plan yet?”

“Er, yeah, I think so,” Harry said. \textit{What the hell is going on here?}

Moody studied him, then nodded once. “Good to hear. Not that I could've given you any advice, mind you.”

“I'm sorry, but I really do need to get to class, sir,” Harry said.

“Get going then,” Moody said.

Harry walked briskly through the empty halls trying to figure out why Moody had dragged him into his office. It sounded like he'd intended to help Harry come up with a plan, which made no sense. Moody spent their DADA classes making not-so-subtle references to the Death Eater relatives of Harry's friends, but wanted to help him cheat in the Tournament? Suspicion gnawed at Harry's stomach. He did his best to quash it; he'd think about it after he got through the first task.
Harry slipped into the History of Magic classroom, muttered something about the Tournament to Binns – who didn't even break his lecture at Harry's entrance – and sat down in his seat, where he stayed awake in class for once by Summoning small objects over the heads of his drowsing classmates. Draco was very surprised to wake up when the bell rang and find a pile of quills, scrap parchment and Greg’s tie sitting on the desk in front of his face.

“I think you can stop now,” he said drily after he gave the tie back to a very confused Greg.

Harry couldn’t have continued during their next lesson even if he’d wanted to. With the skrewts now dead, Hagrid hadn't had a back-up lesson plan. Luckily, he’d managed to talk Maxime into letting him show the class the Abraxan horses. They'd already had one lesson observing the giant horses as the fumes from the whisky trough gradually made the class light-headed and giggly. Like the rest of the class, Harry was looking forward to this next lesson.

The only downside was that the Abraxans were too fierce to ride. Hagrid was under strict orders from Maxime not to let the class into the paddock with the horses. Harry hadn't realised just how much Hagrid liked Maxime until he actually obeyed; Hagrid didn't usually have the same concept of bodily safety as most people.

“I still say Vince or Greg would probably be okay having a go,” Draco said. “I mean, look at them.”

Harry looked past him, down the line of students leaning against the paddock fence, at Greg and Vince, who were both half a foot taller than any of their classmates, and a lot sturdier. “Probably.”

“Or Millicent,” Draco continued.

Harry looked around at Millicent, who was taller than most of the boys in the class, and nodded as he turned back to watch Hagrid demonstrating the correct way to check the Abraxans' horseshoes.

“Yes, I guess you're – oh, bugger.”

Draco looked at Harry in alarm. “What?”

“Millicent's boggart last year was a dragon, wasn't it?” Harry asked in a low voice.

“I think so... I was a little preoccupied that lesson.”

Harry frowned down at the grass. It was bad enough that he'd had to warn Cedric about the dragons, but now Millicent? He didn't think he was cut out for this whole cheating thing.

At the end of the lesson Harry weaved through the departing class and tapped Millicent on her shoulder. “Can I talk to you?”

Millicent nodded. “What's up?”

“Millicent's boggart last year was a dragon, wasn't it?” Harry asked in a low voice.

“I think so... I was a little preoccupied that lesson.”

Harry frowned down at the grass. It was bad enough that he'd had to warn Cedric about the dragons, but now Millicent? He didn't think he was cut out for this whole cheating thing.

At the end of the lesson Harry weaved through the departing class and tapped Millicent on her shoulder. “Can I talk to you?”

Millicent nodded. “What's up?”

Harry gestured for her to follow him away from everyone else. Unfortunately, Pansy and Daphne decided they were coming too.

“Can you give us a second?” Harry asked them.

“No. You look like you have something juicy,” Pansy said. Daphne nodded beside her.

Harry looked at them, weighed it up in his mind, then shrugged. “Fine. But you can't spread this, especially you, Parkinson.”

Millicent and Daphne frowned in confusion as Pansy deliberated, then nodded. “Okay, I won't tell
anyone. This better be good.”

“You're scared of dragons, right?” Harry asked Millicent.

“Yeah. Why?” she asked.

Harry took a deep breath, hoping he wouldn't regret this. “Because that's what the first task is.”

Millicent swallowed. “You're sure?”

“Yep. We each have to face one. I just thought you might want a heads up.”

“Thanks,” Millicent said.

“How do you know this?” Pansy demanded.

Harry looked at her levelly. “Snape. So don't go spreading it around that I know about them, or you'll have to deal with him.”

Pansy managed to look offended. “I would never!” When they all looked her in disbelief, she shook her head. “Why would I? Yes, I love gossip, but this hardly counts. I thought you'd broken up with Draco or something! Anyway, I want you to win, and I don't have a problem with you cheating.”

“I won't tell anyone either,” Daphne promised.

Harry grinned. “Cheers.”

“So you skipping the first task then, Milly?” Pansy asked.

Millicent glared at her and began walking up to the castle. “I don't know...”

“No hard feelings if you do,” Harry said. “I'll understand.”

“I'll be there,” Millicent said decisively.

Pansy nodded. “Yes, you will. And I'll be right beside you the whole time. I'll even come with you if you can't handle it and need to leave.”

They all stared at her, before Millicent gave a slightly bewildered smile. “Thank you?”

Pansy sighed. “See, this is why I hate being nice to people. It just confuses them.”
Somehow Harry managed to get to sleep on Monday night. He suspected it was due to Draco's comforting warmth in his bed, and felt a fierce rush of affection as they got dressed with the rest of their dorm mates. Harry changed into jeans, the Pearl Jam t-shirt from Hermione and a green hoody – all things he could comfortably fly in, since he'd be going straight to the Tournament from lunch, yet nothing that gave away the fact he knew what he would be facing – while the others simply wore their uniforms, albeit with their Slytherin scarves.

All six of them walked out to breakfast together, but came to a stop when they entered the common room and the rest of the house burst into applause. They were all wearing their Slytherin scarves too, and even though Harry knew that many of them were cheering more out of house pride than any affection for himself, it did help to momentarily quell the rising panic that kept threatening to overwhelm him.

Harry forced a smile and grabbed Draco's hand in his own, not letting go of it until they were seated for breakfast. Harry stared down at the plate his friends pushed in front of him, unable to eat. He'd just managed to psyche himself up to butter a slice of toast when Draco and Pansy were hauling him to his feet.

He felt curiously detached from everyone as they marched him to Charms. He just focused on swallowing his toast without throwing up as he walked. Time was acting funny, rushing forwards relentlessly and suddenly pausing, like someone was fast forwarding a tape. Flitwick had just congratulated Harry on his excellent Summoning Charm and wished him luck for the first task, and then the lesson was over and it was time for Herbology. The lesson sped by quickly, especially since it was finishing early for the Tournament, and then Harry was sitting in the Great Hall again, sipping on a goblet of pumpkin juice. Hermione and Neville came over from the Gryffindor table, but Harry was too nervous to do more than offer them a weak smile. He jumped and spilled his juice onto his empty plate when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“It's time, Harry,” Severus said quietly.

Draco pulled Harry forward into a kiss. “You'll be fine. I know you'll be fine,” he said against Harry's lips.

Harry nodded jerkily and rose to his feet as his friends all wished him luck. Severus had put his hand back on Harry's shoulder as they walked, and Harry focused on that warm, unyielding strength as they walked out into the brittle November sunlight.

“Just remember what you need to do, and stay calm,” Severus said.

“Okay.”

“The dragonologists will be on the sidelines, just in case anything goes wrong. But it won't. You'll Summon your broom, fly as superbly as you always do, and secure your egg unscathed,” Severus continued in that same calm, forceful voice, as if by speaking he could make it true.

Harry merely nodded as they made their way around the Forbidden Forest. When they reached the area the dragons were being kept in, Harry saw a tent had been erected which completely screened the dragon pen from view. They came to a stop a few metres from the entrance. Harry stared hard at the side of the tent. He hardly noticed Severus grasp Harry's other shoulder.
“Harry,” said Severus. He sounded very far away to Harry. “Harry, look at me.”

Harry looked up at Severus. He appeared completely calm, like they'd merely been taking a pleasant stroll around the grounds. It was only from the pressure of Severus’ hands on Harry's shoulders that he could tell just how tense the man was.

“You can do this. You will do this. Do you hear me?”

Harry nodded again and found his voice. “Yes.”

“Bagman will be waiting for you and the other champions in the tent. He’ll run through the final details with you all,” Severus said. “It won’t take long, and then I'll see you afterwards.”

He gave Harry's shoulders one last hard, almost painful squeeze, and then he was gone, heading back up to the castle, and Harry entered the tent alone. The other champions were already waiting inside. Viktor was scowling down at his feet, arms crossed tightly; Cedric was pacing relentlessly; and Fleur was sitting down, pale as curdled milk. Harry had a brief thought that they'd all picked this: they'd chosen to put themselves in this situation, and what could they have been thinking, they must be insane. He blinked back into reality when Bagman clapped his hands together.

“Harry! Come in, sit down, make yourself comfortable!”

Harry just stared at him numbly.

Bagman seemed oblivious to the nerves of all four champions. “Now we're all here I can tell what will be happening! Once the spectators are all seated, I'll invite you all to reach into this bag,” he shook a silky purple bag, “and pull out a small model of the, er, obstacle you will be facing! There are four different types, each equally challenging! Oh, I nearly forgot! Your task today is quite simple: capture the golden egg!”

No one answered him, each too caught up in their thoughts. Bagman didn't seem at all fazed, however, given the way he was bouncing on the balls of his feet. Harry just focused on breathing normally; he felt as though his lungs were taking in too much oxygen, yet somehow, not enough. All too soon he heard the sounds of the rest of the school passing the tent. Bagman opened the bag with a great air of excitement.

Harry watched as one by one, tiny, animated model dragons were pulled out of the bag. He had an irrational flash of anger when Fleur drew out the Welsh Green. He'd had a semi-conscious superstition that he'd have better luck against that dragon, as the dragon painted on Draco's bedroom wall had always seemed friendly to him. Viktor pulled out the Chinese Fireball, then Cedric the Swedish Short-Snout, leaving Harry with the Hungarian Horntail. It had a number four hanging around its neck.

“That's right, you'll be facing dragons today!” Bagman cried. “The numbers around their neck tell you the order in which you'll be competing. I'll be leaving you now so I can go commentate. Good luck, everyone! Mr Diggory, you'll be first, just go out into the arena when you hear the whistle. Harry, could I have a quick word outside?”

“Er, okay,” Harry said.

He followed Bagman out onto the lawn, clutching his dragon, and waited for Bagman to speak.

“So, Harry, how are you? Feeling up to it? Need a pointer or two?”

“No,” Harry said shortly.
“No one has to know,” Bagman continued.

“I have a plan,” Harry said firmly.

He sagged in relief when the whistle came and Bagman sprinted off, before he remembered that the whistle meant he was all the closer to facing a fully grown dragon. He watched Cedric leave the tent and walk around to a gap in the fence of the enclosure. Harry went back into the tent and sat on the bench Fleur had vacated. He stared down at the tiny dragon in his hands and did his best to block out the screams and groans of the crowd. He ran a finger down the spine of his dragon.

“Ow!” he gasped. He pulled his finger back and stuck it in his mouth and peered closer at the dragon. There was a row of spikes running the length of its tail. “That explains your name.”

Presently there was a great cry from the crowd: Cedric must have gotten to his egg. A few minutes later the whistle sounded again, Fleur left the tent, and Harry began focusing on what he had to do.

Summon my Firebolt, don't get burnt, mind the tail, get the egg. Summon my Firebolt, don't get burnt...

All too soon, Viktor had left as well, and then the whistle sounded to call Harry into the enclosure. He set his little dragon on the bench, pulled his wand out, and walked out into the enclosure.

He only dimly noticed the packed stands and the noise of the crowd. The gigantic black dragon at the other end of the pen was too important. The Horntail was crouched over her eggs, watching him intently with her wings half raised. Her spiked tail was whipping around and leaving deep grooves in the dirt.

Mind the tail, get the egg...

“Accio Firebolt!” Harry cried, holding his wand aloft. He lowered it and looked at the dragon, who glared back at him with her snakelike eyes. “You couldn't be an actual snake, could you, then I could've just asked politely for your egg and been done with it.”

Harry shut up when he heard the most beautiful sound in the world, and he spun around to see his Firebolt shooting towards him. It stopped next to him at perfect mounting height. Harry wasted no time in jumping on and leaving the ground with a hard kick.

Harry soared upwards, completely unable to prevent an exultant grin spreading over his face. For the first time in two and a half days, he felt calm, capable, right. He didn't know, now, why he hadn't spent his time flying around Hogwarts; he couldn't possibly have panicked, not if he was flying.

“Focus, you prat,” he muttered.

He levelled out and studied the Horntail far beneath him. There, between her front legs, were half a dozen grey eggs, and one of glimmering gold. The dragon was watching him warily.

“Need to get you either up in the air or looking behind you. Or both. Okay, let's do it.”

Harry plummeted towards the dragon. Her head came up to greet him, her great jaws opened wide—whether to snap at him or breathe fire, Harry didn't know. He banked hard to the right, away from the dragon's head and tail, towards the stands, and felt a blast of heat behind him. He circled back around her, hugging the front of the stands, and her head swung around on her long neck to watch him.

“Okay, so you go for fire over biting. Good to know.”
Harry came back in close to her head. This time, he rocketed into the sky when the great tongue of flame shot towards him. He flew in a tight circle above her, looping around her head once, twice, but though the Horntail roared furiously at him, she made no move to follow him into the sky.

Harry abandoned that tactic and flew back towards the tail. It came up quickly – quicker than he'd anticipated – and he tucked himself into a tight barrel roll to avoid impalement. He straightened back up and spun around to glare at the dragon from a safe – well, safer – distance of fifty metres, right in front of the stands.

Her tail was thrashing around more viciously than ever, and her neck was twisted right around so that she could watch Harry over her shoulder, but between the two lethal weapons was the twenty or so feet of her back. Twenty or so feet of non-lethal back.

“Yeah, sure, Potter, completely safe. This is a brilliant plan,” Harry muttered.

He took a deep breath, flattened himself as much as he could along his broom handle, and shot forward, straight towards the dragon's tail.

“Come on, faster, faster!” Harry urged his broom.

Ten metres away from the tip of the madly twisting tail, Harry swung out in a tight loop, gaining speed all the while, then flew back in again. Straight for the Horntail's back. He leaned even further forward and down along his broom, hoping this would work, because if it didn't, he was in for a lot of pain – and then he was over it, above the back of the beast, and the dragon was bringing in her tail at the same time she was opening her mouth.

Harry kept his eyes glued straight ahead, seeing both deadly weapons coming in towards him, but they were too slow, the dragon was too slow. She hadn't counted on Harry being faster than she was, and the result was that the scorching flame shot out – dangerously, blisteringly hot – and hit her own tail where she was bringing it up to stab Harry.

There was a deafening screech of pain that Harry ignored – had to ignore, because he couldn't concentrate otherwise. He kept flying as quickly as he could, circling around to the back of the dragon again, and, yes, there it was! With a singed tail, the dragon did what was only natural – she took a step towards her injury to assess the damage.

That single step was all the opportunity Harry needed. He kept his course around the dragon, diving closer to the ground, towards the now undefended nest. Both of the front legs were on the far side of the eggs, and Harry took both hands off his Firebolt as he neared, leaned over, and then the golden egg was in his hands and he was soaring back up into the sky in triumph.

All at once the sound of the crowd came back into clarity. Harry winced at the noise, glad he hadn't been able to hear it properly when he was facing the Horntail.

“Would you look at that!” Bagman was screaming, louder than everyone else put together. “Our youngest champion is the quickest to get his egg – and I don't think he even has a scratch on him! I tell you what, if any of the other tasks can be done on a broom, you're looking at the winner right now!”

Harry saw the dragon-keepers hurrying towards the Horntail to soothe her – not a job he envied – and he slowed down at last. He headed back down to the entrance of the enclosure, and saw Severus, Hagrid and McGonagall waving at him. He landed lightly and held the egg under one arm, his Firebolt – his amazing, life-saving Firebolt – in his other hand as the teachers rushed towards him.
Hagrid reached him first and clapped him on the back. Harry nearly dropped the egg but was too elated to care. “Yeh did it, Harry! And against the Horntail – she's a mighty mean beast, that one! But yeh did it!”

“Fantastic, Potter!” McGonagall exclaimed. “I'm almost happy there's no Quidditch Cup this year, not if you'd be flying like that for Slytherin!”

“Thanks!” Harry beamed at them both, still panting a little from exertion and nerves, then looked at Severus.

Harry almost didn't recognise him, so wide was his smile, and his pride was almost tangible. “That was outstanding, Harry. Truly magnificent. Stupendous. Fifty points to Slytherin.”

McGonagall frowned as if about to argue, then shrugged and nodded. “Well deserved. Though to be fair, Hufflepuff should take the same.”

Severus was too busy smiling at Harry to argue with her.

Harry hadn't thought his own grin could get any bigger, but it was verging on painful after seeing Severus. “Thank you.”

Severus nodded once and reached out to squeeze Harry's shoulder before he began to compose himself.

“Harry!”

Harry looked past his teachers to see Draco and Hermione sprinting towards him. A second later he was enveloped in a three-way hug. Draco was peppering kisses over one cheek while Hermione sobbed onto his other shoulder.

She broke the hug first and hit him in his now damp shoulder. “Are you insane? What you just did – you could have been killed!”

“Well, yeah,” Harry laughed breathlessly.

“Oh, you were brilliant, of course, but you're a lunatic when you're in the air,” Hermione said. Harry wasn't entirely sure if he was getting scolded or praised.

“You were amazing,” Draco said. He finally released Harry, only to grab both his wrists. “Bloody hell, Harry, that was completely -”

He stopped abruptly and Harry realised that he'd actually managed to render Draco speechless.

“Come along, now, it's time to receive your scores,” McGonagall said briskly, though she was still smiling.

“If it's anything less than a ten from all judges, this competition is a joke,” Severus said.

“They might mark him down for injuring the dragon,” McGonagall cautioned.

“Come on,” Hermione said, pushing Harry back into the enclosure.

He walked forward with her and Draco, leaving Severus and McGonagall bickering happily behind them. The Horntail was being taken away by the dragon-keepers, who had succeeded in Stunning it and were now levitating it as a group through an open panel in the fence. For the first time Harry saw that all five judges were sitting at the far end of the arena in raised seats. Harry had hovered right in
front of them on his broom and hadn't noticed them. Draco and Hermione held onto his arms as they waited for the scores.

Maxime was first. She raised her wand and shot a silvery thread into the air, which twisted into a large number ten.

“Full points, Harry!” Hermione pointed out excitedly.

Crouch, too, gave Harry a ten. Then Dumbledore – nine.

“Oh, for fu –” Severus began.

“Ah, he's tryin' to seem fair, I 'spect,” Hagrid said loudly.

“Ridiculous,” McGonagall muttered.

Bagman gave Harry a ten as well. And finally Karkaroff. Five.


“Don't worry, Harry, you're in first place!” Hermione said, dancing up and down excitedly.

“I am?”

“Yes, then Viktor, Fleur, and Cedric,” Hermione recited.

Harry was grinning stupidly at her when the sound of his name made him look away. Charlie was hurrying towards him.

“Good work, Harry!” he called out. “Ginny had told me you were good on a broom, but that... Wow! Anyway, they want you back over in the tent, Bagman needs to talk to all the champions.”

“Thanks, Charlie,” Harry replied and turned to his friends. “Hang around for me?”

“Of course,” Draco said.

Harry walked into the empty tent and looked around. His model dragon was still sitting where he’d left it, so he walked over and put it in his pocket. The other three champions all came in together. Cedric had thick orange burn paste on one cheek, but apart from that, they all looked to be in one piece.

“Thanks for your warning, Harry,” Cedric said quietly.

“No problem,” Harry said.

Bagman bustled into the tent. “Congratulations, all of you! Now, you've got quite a break until the next task. It's on the twenty-fourth of February, at nine thirty in the morning. But this time, you'll have a heads up about what you'll be facing! If you look at your eggs, you'll see that they're hinged. Simply open them up, and you'll get a clue about what the next task is! Now off you go – I expect you'll all be celebrating tonight, eh?”

Harry was heading to the exit when a hand on his shoulder stopped him.
“You fly very vell,” Viktor said.

Harry let out a small, disbelieving laugh. “Thanks!” he managed to say, stunned that Viktor Krum was complimenting his flying.

Viktor nodded. “I should have thought of flying... But you and me, ve go flying together sometime, yes?”

Harry nodded eagerly. “Yeah, definitely! Maybe in the Christmas break?”

“I vould like that,” Viktor said as they emerged from the tent.

“HARRY!”

Harry looked up at the squeal in time to see something hurtling towards him before he was nearly knocked over by Scarlett throwing herself at him. She squeezed him tightly around his waist – Harry was surprised by how strong she was – then pulled away and beamed up at him.

“That was so, so good! I can't believe how quickly you got your egg – and you were very good, too,” Scarlett said politely to Viktor, then turned back to Harry. “That barrel roll – and the way you flew over its back! Weren't you scared? But then I suppose you knew what you were doing, right? You really looked like you knew what you were doing! Were you scared? You didn't look scared.”

Viktor was looking slightly alarmed by Scarlett, who had only stopped speaking in order to take a much needed breath. Further up the lawn, Draco and Hermione had been joined by Ginny, Luna and Archie, all of whom were watching in amusement.

Scarlett was now skipping along beside Harry and Viktor. “I can't believe they had real dragons here! I've always wanted to see a dragon, and then you had to steal an egg from one! Just wait until you get back to the common room, we've got such a cool party planned for you, everyone's so excited and -”

“Scar! You wanted to help organise that thing, remember?” Archie reached forward and grabbed Scarlett's arm, smiling apologetically at Harry and Viktor. “She's actually calmed down quite a bit.”

“Oh, yeah!” Scarlett pulled free from Archie and took off up the lawn, shouting over her shoulder. “Sorry you guys can't come, but it's Slytherins only!”

Draco cocked his head in thought. “We could just say you're friends with Harry and drag you inside.”

“I don't think that would work out,” Luna said mildly.

“I must get back to the ship. Karkaroff vill vant to – to see me,” Viktor said awkwardly.

Hermione stepped forward uncertainly. “Do you mind if I walked you there? I wanted to ask you about the spell you used on your dragon, but I wouldn't want to get you in trouble with your Headmaster.”

Viktor looked at her in surprise, but not displeasure. “If you like.”

Hermione cast one last smile at Harry. “See you in Potions tomorrow. Congratulations again, Harry! You really were marvellous.”

“We should get going, people will be getting impatient,” Archie said.
“Good job, Potter, you've made me terrified of playing against Slytherin when Quidditch starts up again next year,” Ginny said, but she was smiling.

“Do you want to go visit the dragons?” Luna asked her. “Daddy says that dragons sing to their eggs. Their songs are supposed to be very enlightening.”

“Sure. I want to see Charlie, anyway. I need to yell at him for not telling me about the bloody dragons,” Ginny said.

They set off, leaving the three Slytherins to return to the castle alone.

“So you've planned a party for me, have you?” Harry asked Archie.

“Yep! Well, it was mostly your year, with some of the Prefects. Although Scar was the one who came up with the idea of asking Theo.” Archie clapped her hand over her mouth.

“Oh god, she's been plotting with Theo?” Harry asked. Surely nothing good could come from Scarlett combining her enthusiasm with Theo's cleverness.

“You'll like it,” Archie reassured him.

“Draco?”

Draco raised his hands innocently. “I actually didn't know about any of this.”

“Course not. You were always with Harry,” Archie said. “But the rest of us decided we were partying, either to celebrate your victory, or commiserate your loss.”

Harry shuddered to think how losing to a dragon could have ended out for him. “Let's not keep them waiting, then.”

When they reached the entranceway to the common room Archie gave Harry a wicked grin, muttered the password and slipped inside. Harry and Draco followed her and were immediately assaulted by an explosion of cheers and whistles. Daphne reached up and draped a large Slytherin banner around Harry's shoulders and Bastien placed a silver crown on his head.

Blaise grabbed Harry's Firebolt and egg off him and then he was hoisted into the air. He looked down to find himself sitting on the shoulders of Greg and Vince. He wobbled a bit until he found his balance and looked around to see the entire house waving their scarves in the air as he was bounced up and down.

“What's in the egg?” Pansy shouted over the din.

People quieted down at that. Blaise held the egg back up to Harry, who grabbed it and looked out at his house mates.

“I haven't opened it yet,” he said into the hushed silence.

He dug his fingernails into the rut running around the egg and yanked it open. A painfully loud screeching sound came out of the egg, which was otherwise empty. Greg and Vince immediately dropped Harry in their haste to clap their hands over their ears. Harry managed to land on his feet and quickly shut the egg again, giving a sigh of relief when the noise stopped.

“What the hell was that?” Zubeida demanded with her hands still pressed over her ears.

“No idea,” Harry said. He looked at the egg in dismay.
“It's Mermish,” Draco said from behind him.

Harry spun around. “What did it say?”

Draco reddened slightly. “I didn't have a chance to hear much, since you shut it so fast. You've got an hour to look for something, I caught that much.”

“Can you translate it all if I keep it open for longer?” Harry asked.

“Maybe. I'm not very fluent yet, though, so it'd be better to listen to it underwater,” Draco said.

“How would that help?” Archie asked.

“Because underwater, Mermish will sound like English, and then Harry won't need me to translate for him,” Draco explained.

“Oh,” Harry said, wondering how he'd do that, since the bathrooms only had showers. Maybe the Room of Requirement?

“You can use the Prefects' bathroom,” Hayley called out. “There's a bath in there.”

Bastien leaned in to whisper in Harry's ear. “Fourth door to the left of the statue of Boris the Bewildered, up on the fifth floor. This year's password is 'pine-fresh'.”

“Thanks, guys, that's great,” Harry said, grinning widely.

“What, didn't fancy sticking your head in the lake at the start of winter?” Blaise asked.

Harry looked out one of the windows at the fish swimming through the dark water. “Not really, no.”

“Whatever. You have more important things to worry about right now, like this magnificent party,” Pansy declared after pushing through the crowd. She took the egg and gave it back to Blaise, who was still holding the Firebolt. “Be a dear and put them away, would you? As for you, Harry, you look like you're in desperate need of some refreshment. Come with me.”

Harry and Draco followed Pansy back through the crowd, most of whom called out congratulations and slapped Harry on the back. Pearl Jam began playing from somewhere, making people shout to be heard over the music.

There was a long table running the length of the wall, groaning under the weight of the food piled on it. Pansy pulled Harry along it, to another table set up with a large punch bowl and bottles of Butterbeer. Peregrine and Hayley were standing behind it, ladling the punch out into glasses. Pansy grabbed one and thrust it into Harry's hand.

“This spiked?” he asked Peregrine.

“Yes, but it's not very strong,” Peregrine said.

Harry took a sip of the sweet, berry flavoured punch that had only a hint of alcohol, and almost spat it back out again when someone punched him in the arm. He turned to see Scarlett glaring up at him.

“You haven't noticed the music!”

“I have,” Harry insisted. “Wait, was that your surprise?”

“Uh huh! I got Theo to get your music thingy and charm it to play louder,” Scarlett said proudly. She
pointed to a corner where Harry saw Theo and Tracey setting his Walkman on a side table.

“Thanks,” Harry said.

“You can thank me by dancing with me,” Scarlett said at once.

Not at all surprised by her demand, Harry gulped down the rest of his punch, set the empty glass down on the table, then followed Scarlett back to the centre of the room, where there was already a small group of people dancing. Draco, Daphne, Theo and Tracey joined them. Dancing with his friends, Harry began to feel that the stress he'd been under ever since his name came out of the Goblet of Fire might have been worth it after all. He was especially pleased when Draco began singing along with him, though no one else knew the words.

Dancing whilst wearing a hoody and a heavy Slytherin banner turned out to be hot work. After half an hour he couldn't take it anymore, so Harry begged off to get another cup of punch. Draco came with him to the drinks table.

Hayley and Peregrine were having a quiet argument. They broke off when they saw the younger boys approaching.

“Another glass for our champion?” Hayley asked.

“Yeah, thanks,” Harry said. He pulled the banner off his shoulders and held it up. “Wanna wear this?”

Hayley took the banner, draped it around her own shoulders and preened. “I think I deserve this for selflessly being on drinks duty.”

Peregrine scowled at her, but refilled Harry and Draco's glasses when they held them out for a top up. “Why's she get that and I get nothing?”

Harry shrugged and handed over his crown.

“Cheers, Potter,” Peregrine said in satisfaction. “Drink up and I'll top you both up again.”

Glasses filled again, Harry turned around and nearly walked into Adrian.

“Harry! Brilliant flying today! Can't wait for Quidditch to start back up again next year! Anyway, I've been told to tell you that we're putting the Weird Sisters on, so you can take this back.”

Harry took the proffered Walkman. Adrian ruffled his hair and walked away, shouting to someone over by the gramophone. “I'm just going to dump this in the dorm,” Harry said to Draco.

It was quiet and cool in the dorm. Harry's Firebolt and the egg were sitting on his bed. He moved them to his trunk, put his Walkman and punch on his bedside table and pulled off his hoody. There was a lump in it and he belatedly remembered that his model dragon was still in there. He pulled it out and set it next to his Walkman. The dragon prowled around the table top and settled down in one corner. Harry smiled tiredly at it, sat down on his bed and shut his eyes as he took a moment to appreciate surviving the first task.

His eyes flew open when he felt hands sliding over his shoulders. He looked up to see Draco slide onto his lap and kiss him. Harry's eyes fluttered shut again and he returned the kiss with fervour. He wrapped his arms around Draco's waist and pulled him in closer. Draco made a noise in the back of his throat and began trailing kisses down Harry's neck, then back up to his ear, where he sucked on the lobe.
“We,” Harry began, then moaned when Draco bit down. He tried again. “We should get back.”

Draco swirled his tongue around the shell of Harry's ear. “Why?”

Harry couldn't answer due to all rational thought having melted from his head. Draco chuckled and pushed Harry onto his back and wriggled his hips as he pressed down onto Harry's lap. Harry felt himself getting hard and pushed Draco off him. He bounced onto his arse on the bed and looked at Harry as they both panted.

“Too far?” Draco asked eventually.

Harry shook his head, half in denial and half to clear it. “No. Just, you know, we really should go back, and, er, you were making that a bit hard.”

Draco snorted at Harry's unintentional innuendo. “Fair enough.”

Harry gave him a relieved smile and reached across for his punch. He took a large swallow and then looked at Draco shyly. “I'll need a minute before I can go out.”

“Me too,” Draco murmured, going pink.

That admission did nothing to lessen the tightness in Harry's pants. He thought desperately of Trelawney and his next Divination lesson. He hadn't had one this week, as it was the afternoon class that had been cancelled for the first task. He thought sourly of what Trelawney would be predicting for him in his next lesson. At least he could always look forward to Pansy taking the piss. The thought of Pansy made him sit up straighter.

“What's wrong?” Draco asked.

“Have you seen Millicent?”

“Not since we went down to the arena, no. I was sitting in the front row, but she dragged Pansy up to the back row.”

Harry stood up with a wobble. “I'm going to find her. I want to make sure she's okay.”

“I'll come with you,” Draco said.

They walked back into the corridor. Just as they reached the door back into the common room, Draco spun Harry back around and pulled him into a fierce hug.

“I'm so glad you're safe,” he whispered in Harry's ear.

Harry pulled away to look up at him. “Me too,” he whispered back. He gave Draco a soft kiss and released him.

They found the party far rowdier than it had been when they'd left. Half the house was dancing to the Weird Sisters in the centre of the room. There were couples snogging on most of the couches, and Hayley and Peregrine had been joined at the drinks table by a group of seventh years, none of whom looked particularly sober.

“Let's get another drink first,” suggested Draco, already dragging Harry over to the drinks table.

“Hey, it's the champion and his boyfriend!” giggled Hayley. “Another drink?”

She nudged Reiko beside her and they both giggled.
“Yes, please,” Harry said.

The girls ladled them out some more punch and then giggled again.

“You've been missing,” Reiko accused them. “Adrian wanted to make a toast to you and we couldn’t find you.”

“We're here now, aren't we?” Draco asked.

“Yeah, yeah you are!” Hayley said. “Oi, Adrian!”

Adrian wandered over from the gramophone. “What?”

“Harry's here for his toast,” Hayley said.

“Cool,” Adrian said.

He clambered up the nearest couch and aimed his wand at the gramophone. The clamour of voices quietened down with the loss of music. People began grumbling, and more than a few voiced concerns that Severus may have arrived to shut down the party, despite it only being the early evening.

“Friends, Slytherins, lend me your ears!” Adrian shouted, throwing his arms out wide.

“Stop butchering Shakespeare then!” called Tabitha.

Adrian joined in laughing at that. “I'll cop that. I'd like to propose a toast to Harry. He might still be refusing to tell anyone how he entered the Tournament, but I think we can all agree that he's made Slytherin damn proud today. To Harry, and a Slytherin victory!”

“To Harry, and a Slytherin victory!” the crowd echoed.

Adrian downed his drink, jumped off the couch, winked at Harry and returned to his friends by the gramophone. The music started up again and the common room was soon back to full volume again. Harry and Draco weaved through the crowd trying to find Millicent. They found no sign of her, so Harry ventured onto the dance floor to talk to Daphne, who was dancing with Blaise.

“Have you seen Millicent?” he asked them.

“She's with Pansy over there,” Daphne answered, waving her hand in the vague direction of the girls' dorms.

“Cheers,” Harry said.

When they got to the door leading to the girls' dorms there was no sign of Millicent.

“What do you think?” he asked Draco.

“I think that unlike the straight boys, we can get down this corridor,” Draco smirked.

He pushed open the door and walked through with Harry behind him. He'd only taken a few steps when the door swung shut behind him with a bang that drove apart the two figures in front of them.

“Pansy? And Millicent?” Draco asked incredulously.

Both girls were blushing as they pushed away from the wall Pansy had been pressing Millicent
“Piss off,” Pansy growled.

“Sorry,” Harry said hastily, elbowing Draco when he made a high-pitched squeak that Harry was sure precipitated some gleeful remark. “I just wanted to see if you were okay, Millicent, what with the dragons today.”

“I’m fine, as you can see,” Millicent said, then softened. “But thanks for checking on me.”

“How long has this been going on for?” Draco butted in, waving his hand between the two girls.

“We only just started before you rudely interrupted us,” said Pansy.

“We’ll just be going then,” Harry said.

He had to pull Draco back out of the corridor. “That was unexpected.”

“I’ll say,” Draco said with feeling, then grinned. “Time for some pay back.”

“Draco, don’t -”

Draco was already making his way into the press of dancers. Harry sighed and followed him. He found him animatedly telling Daphne, Blaise, Tracey and Theo what they'd walked in on.

Daphne’s eyes widened. “No way!”

“Way,” Draco said smugly.

“This I have to see!” With that, Daphne pulled away from Blaise and took off for her dorm.

Blaise glared at Draco. “What did you have to do that for? I was finally making some progress with Daphne.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Draco said dismissively. “Now if you'll excuse me, I have about a hundred people I need to tell.”

Harry took a drink as he resignedly watched Draco move around the room.

“He's acting like he's surprised by this,” Blaise commented.

“You aren't?” Theo asked.

“No. Pansy's been panting after Millicent all year,” Blaise said, then stared around himself. “What, none of you knew?”

“No! How did you? I share a room with both of them, and I had no idea,” Tracey said indignantly.

Blaise shrugged. “It seemed pretty obvious to me.” He looked at their stunned faces, then shook his head pityingly. “I'll leave you to your gossip. I'm off to find someone to snog.”

Tracey tugged on Theo's shoulder and whispered something in his ear. He nodded down at her and smirked at Harry. “See you later.”

Harry watched them leave and decided he'd better track down his errant boyfriend.
On Wednesday morning Harry somehow managed to drag himself to the showers before stumbling up for breakfast with the rest of his dorm. They found the girls already sitting down at the Slytherin table, though Tracey was the only who looked remotely functional. Pansy appeared to be asleep next to her pancakes; Daphne was staring blankly at the food with her hair uncharacteristically unkempt; and Millicent was surrounded by a range of different beverages. As Harry sat down next to her, he narrowly missed getting hit with a water jug as she Summoned it down the table.

“Got enough drinks there?” he asked her.

She glared blearily at him. “I'm thirsty.”

“So I can see,” Blaise said, leaning across the table to snatch up one of her goblets of pumpkin juice and downing it in one.

“Hey! That was Pansy's!” Millicent growled at him.

Blaise glanced at Pansy, who was now audibly snoring. “I don't think she'll miss it.”

Harry poured himself a goblet of water and gulped it down gratefully. He surveyed the food on the table and decided not to risk it. Maybe I could get some hangover cure off Severus, he mused, refilling his goblet. He'd just put the jug back on the table when it was snatched up. He twisted around to see Scarlett scampering off down the table.

“Oi, we needed that!” Millicent shouted after her.

“We're thirsty too!” Scarlett called back, plopping down next to Archie.

“You're too young to get drunk, Lympsham!” Theo called after her.

Scarlett merely stuck her tongue out at him. A second later she tried and failed to hold onto a plate of bacon as Millicent Summoned that up the table.

“Cheers,” Draco, grabbing a few rashers.

“Here, Harry,” Tracey said.

Harry fumbled the *Daily Prophet* she handed him. He eventually got it smoothed out and read the front page eagerly, ignoring the fight over bacon that had broken out around him.

**SIRIUS BLACK FREED AT LAST!**

*After months of speculation, notorious mass-murderer Sirius Black has been found to be entirely innocent of the charges for which he was imprisoned in Azkaban. Never in recent memory has there been a criminal trial so eagerly attended by so many. Security staff had to turn away scores of would-be spectators, but among those lucky to get inside the courtroom were two of Black's cousins, Narcissa Malfoy and Andromeda Tonks. Accompanying them was Remus Lupin, an old schoolmate of Black and a known werewolf.*

*The trial itself was brief, and presided over by the Minister for Magic himself, Cornelius Fudge, who questioned the defendant. The testimonies of three key witnesses – Albus Dumbledore, Minerva*
McGonagall and Severus Snape – were read aloud to the court. Readers who have followed the story in this paper will recall that all three witnesses are remaining at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry due to the Triwizard Tournament currently taking place there.

The testimonies concerned the events of 9th June, when all three witnesses heard Peter Pettigrew - long thought to have been murdered by Black - confess not only to the murder of twelve innocent Muggles, but to spying for You-Know-Who. After the testimonies were read out, Black gave a statement in his defence, afterwards answering a few questions from the Minister.

Fudge declared that the evidence pointed overwhelmingly to the 1981 murders of a group of Muggles having been committed by Peter Pettigrew, still at large. He then went on to say that, although to be cleared of the charges of murder, Black had confessed during his own defence that he was an unregistered Animagus. The crowd erupted angrily at that, as the punishment for failing to register an Animagus form is a stint in Azkaban. Black himself shouted that he'd “already spent twelve [redacted] years in that hell”, and the Minister swiftly changed the subject.

Minutes later the shackles were unlocked from Black's wrists and he was a free man for the first time in over a decade. He appeared unsure at first, looking around uncertainly at the applauding crowd. Then Lupin pushed his way to the front of the crowd and embraced Black. This reporter swears to having seen tears on the cheeks of both men before Black's cousins obscured the view.

Neither Black nor any of his acquaintances would speak to the press. Black and Lupin left the Ministry via Floo in the Atrium, seen off by Malfoy and Tonks. When asked about the men's destination, both women refused to comment, though Malfoy was later seen in the still substantial crowd, laughing in the company of an Auror.

“I am very proud to have been responsible for righting such an injustice. We have made history here today,” the Minister told the gathered press. When this reporter asked if there was to be any investigation into the innocence of other Azkaban inmates who were imprisoned without trial, Fudge looked at his watch and excused himself to take lunch with his wife.

For the full history of Black's legal battle, see page 3.

Harry was grinning when he finished reading the article. He passed it over to Draco and, feeling a lot better all of a sudden, managed to eat a bowl of porridge before the group headed down to their Potions lesson. By the time the Gryffindors arrived a minute or two later, the Slytherins were leaning against the walls, and Pansy had slid down to sit on the cold stone floor.

“Good morning!” Hermione chirped. Far too loudly, Harry thought with a grimace.

“Shh!” Daphne put her finger to her lips.

“What's wrong, celebrate a bit too hard yesterday?” Neville asked, grinning.

“There was a party yesterday, yeah,” Harry yawned. “It ran pretty late.”

“And there wasn't enough bacon at breakfast,” Millicent complained.

“Thanks to some people,” Blaise grumbled, shooting a very sour look at Vince, whose tie was hanging around his neck completely untied.

Hermione tutted. “I do hope we won't be making anything with a strong odour today...”

Draco attempted a glare. “Shut it, Granger. It's not our fault the punch was spiked.”
“Not my fault you drank it,” she shot back.

“It didn’t taste very strong,” Millicent said, “but after a few glasses -”

She snapped her mouth shut when she caught sight of Severus striding towards them.

“Get up, Miss Parkinson,” he said idly.

The class followed him into the classroom and took their seats. Severus glanced around with a slight smirk.

“I had intended for you to begin brewing another antidote today, but given the abysmal efforts you’ve handed me so far, I think a theoretical test is in order.”

The class groaned as Severus flicked his wand and sent a test paper soaring to each bench. Harry grinned down at his test. Tired or not, this would be easy, and far preferable to brewing something given his hangover.

When the bell rang Severus Summoned all the tests and told the class to summarise the next chapter for homework. “Mr Potter, stay behind.”

“I'll tell Moody you'll be there soon,” Draco said on his way out.

When the room was empty Severus shut the door and faced Harry. “Have you begun to work on your clue for the second task, or were you too busy revelling last night to think about it?”

Harry grinned. “Bit of both, actually. We opened the egg at the party, and it wailed the clue in Mermish. I'm going to go to the Prefects' bathroom to listen to it under water.”

Severus nodded. “Very well. Inform me of what it says once you've heard it, though I assume given the Mermish, water will play a prominent part in the task...” he paused, then continued. “I suppose you wish to join me on Boxing Day again?”

Harry hesitated. “Er, yeah, but I've been thinking... I know I have to stay here over the break because of the Yule Ball, but is there any chance I could leave the school grounds for a day?”

“Why?”

Harry bit his lip. “I wanted to visit my parents' graves. Just in case I don't make it through the Tournament.”

“You'll make it through,” Severus said with firm certainty. “But your request is not unreasonable... I shall have to clear it with the Headmaster, as you would normally be required to remain here for the duration of the holiday, but I do not foresee him denying you. Not if you had a staff member escort you there.”

“Would you mind?” Harry asked hopefully. “Taking me, I mean. I could always ask Hagrid if you didn't want to.”

Severus held up a hand. “No, I do not mind. Not in the slightest. I shall let you know what the Headmaster says. Now get going, before Moody comes hunting for you.”

********

At dinner that night Harry was surprised by an owl landing on the table in front of him and holding
out its leg.

“Bit late for the post,” Harry commented as he removed the letter. He gave it a piece of lamb from his plate and it flew off with a contented hoot. Harry forgot his dinner and unrolled the parchment.

Dear Harry,

I'm free and cleared on all charges! I'm at Remus' for the moment while I sort out the legal tangle surrounding my inheritance – he's asked me to say hello to you.

I've kept up to date with the Prophet, so I know all about the Tournament. I hear that you were spectacular against that dragon! Wish I could have seen it! I'm glad you're safe for the moment, but I look forward to hearing the full story from you. Remus and I are going out celebrating both your victory and my acquittal as soon as I finish this letter.

On a more serious note, I don't know if anyone's told you, but your parents named me your legal guardian in their will. My current situation isn't the best, but I should soon be able to move into my own home fairly soon. As soon as I'm able to, I would very much like to fulfil James and Lily's wishes, and have you come to live with me. I know that you're probably attached to Lily's sister and her family, but this is what your parents wanted for you.

I understand if you need to think about it, but I'd like to talk to you about it in person. Perhaps at the next Hogsmeade weekend? Send me the date, and I'll meet you at the Hog's Head at noon.

Love,

Sirius

Harry finished reading the letter and looked at it blankly as his mind raced. There was little he'd like more than to leave the Dursleys' for good, and Sirius seemed like he'd be a lot of fun to live with, but... It was a big decision. He'd never before been asked how he'd like to live, or where, or who with, and the thought of being given a choice was surprisingly daunting.

He's right, said a little voice in his head that sounded like Hermione. This is what your parents would have wanted.

Yes, said another voice that sounded like Draco, your parents wanted you to live with him. They also made Pettigrew their Secret Keeper. Maybe they didn't have the best judgement.

Annoyed to have such a disloyal thought, Harry scowled down at his plate.

He didn't really know Sirius, that was the problem. He'd be more fun than the Dursleys' – a fully grown blast-ended skrewt would be more fun than them – but then again, Harry knew them. He could predict how they'd react to things, and manipulate them with help from Narcissa. Sirius was a complete unknown.

Not entirely unknown, he corrected himself. You know he's reckless, and that that recklessness landed him in Azkaban for most of your life. Living with him would be fun, but would it be safe?

“What's wrong?” asked Draco.

Harry shook his head. “Nothing. I'll tell you later. We better go do that essay Moody set us, if we want to go to the Prefects' bathroom tonight.”

*******
At midnight Harry and Draco snuck out of the common room under the Cloak. Harry had the Marauder's Map open in front of him, and he checked it compulsively for any sign of Moody. Luckily, they made it to the bathroom without seeing anyone but Mrs Norris on the last staircase. They waited until she'd stalked off and hurried down the corridor.

“Pine-fresh,” Harry whispered.

They walked through the open door and stopped in their tracks.

“That's it, I'm becoming a Prefect next year,” Draco said.

Harry bolted the door behind them. “As long as you tell me the passwords to this place.”

There was a massive bath set in the floor in front of them, even bigger than the pool-like one Harry used at Malfoy Manor – this one even came with a diving board. A hundred taps lined its walls, and there were shelves filled with thick, fluffy towels and bottles of toiletries. There was a painting of a mermaid sitting on a rock on one wall. She looked up when the door opened, then returned to combing her hair when she didn't see anyone.

Harry pulled off the Cloak and set it on the floor with the Map. He walked over to the empty bath and looked down. It was deep enough for him to stand with his hands above his head and remain entirely underwater.

“This is going to take ages to fill,” he said.

“That's what magic's for, Potter.”

Draco joined Harry by the side of the bath and began turning on taps. The largest one in the centre began gushing water, but the smaller spouts all produced something different. There was an array of different bubbles, some as thick as fairy floss, some tiny and silver, and others that skated quickly above the surface of the rapidly rising water. Harry had to quickly shut off one tap that emitted whistling bubbles; they didn't want to risk mishearing anything the egg said.

Finally, the giant bath was filled to the brim with twenty different types bubbles, giving off a pleasant fruity scent.

Harry swallowed hard at the thought of bathing alone with Draco, even if they were both in their swimming shorts. “Let's do it.”

They stripped off their uniforms. The mermaid giggled and kicked her tail and watched with interest. Harry looked away in embarrassment and felt himself beginning to blush when he saw that Draco wasn't wearing his shorts.

“Where are your bathers?” he asked.

“At home. Why would I bring them to Hogwarts?” Draco asked. “I've no intention of swimming in the Black Lake.”

“Oh,” said Harry. Of course. Draco didn't have to take all his worldly possessions to school with him each year like Harry did. Which worked out brilliantly for Harry, since it meant that Draco was currently standing in just his pants. His small, tight pants that left nothing to the imagination and Harry found himself suddenly growing very fond of a small piece of blue cotton.

He also found himself growing hard. He hastily took off his glasses, picked up the egg and jumped into the bath, hoping Draco hadn't noticed anything. He sank down to the bottom and then kicked off
back to the surface. He wiped the bubbles off his face to see Draco spluttering at him, covered head to toe in bubbles.

“Sorry,” Harry said with a grin.

“You will be,” Draco promised.

He stepped onto the diving board and dove smoothly into the water, disappearing under the bubbles. Harry spun around in the water trying to see where he'd gone. All of a sudden a hand clamped around his ankle and he was yanked underneath the surface. He opened his eyes to see Draco smirking at him before swimming away. Knowing he'd never catch Draco, Harry simply rose back to the surface and waited for him to reappear.

“You're supposed to be helping me with the egg, not trying to drown me,” Harry said.

Draco pushed his hair out of his eyes and grinned unrepentantly. “Don't be a wuss.”

Harry stuck out his tongue then held up the egg. “Ready?”

When Draco nodded, they both took a deep breath and sank underneath the surface. Harry opened the egg and was relieved to hear that it did indeed translate into English under water.

“Come seek us where our voices sound,
We cannot sing above the ground,
And while you're searching, ponder this:
We've taken what you'll sorely miss,
An hour long you'll have to look,
And to recover what we took,
But past an hour – the prospect's black
Too late, it's gone, it won't come back.”

They listened to the egg’s clue repeatedly until they had it memorised, then swam over to the edge of the bath. Harry carefully set the egg on the marble ledge and rested his arms next to it.

“It's merpeople, obviously,” he began.

Draco rolled over to float on his back. Harry wondered vaguely how he was able to keep his head up like that and not lose his balance. “Yes. And they're taking something of yours, though how they'd manage that, I'm not sure.”

Harry tried very hard not to let his eyes wander down Draco's body. “Right. So, what are they taking? Hedwig? My Firebolt?”

“Invisibility Cloak?” guessed Draco.

Harry scooped up some bubbles and blew them away in frustration. “Let's forget that part for now. How do I fight merpeople? They'd have a huge advantage given that I'd drown pretty quickly.”

“I'm sure Snape will know of some potion or charm that will let you breathe underwater,” Draco said confidently.

Harry nodded, cheered, then paled. “It's going to be the Black Lake, yeah?”

“I would assume so.”
“Draco, there's a giant fucking squid in there!”

Draco flailed in the water as he tried to sit up. He grabbed hold of the edge of the bath and looked at Harry, wide-eyed and pale. “Surely they wouldn't expect you to fight a giant squid. Surely.”

“I just had to face a sodding dragon,” Harry pointed out.

“Yes, but that was different. You could breathe properly, for a start. They wouldn't do this.”

Harry would have very much liked to have been convinced by Draco, but unfortunately he sounded like he was trying to convince himself, too. Harry was silent as he thought about all the times he'd seen the giant squid through the windows of his dorm or the common room. Its eyes, almost cartoonishly large, had given him the creeps when he was a first year. He'd become accustomed to its occasional presence by now, of course, but that was with a barrier of thick castle walls and magically strengthened glass between them. Down in the depths of the Black Lake – alone – was a completely different story.

“Plus it's not that bad. I mean, it lets people tickle its tentacles sometimes,” Draco offered. “I'm sure we would have heard if it had ever killed anyone who went swimming.”

“Yeah, but I think there's a difference between splashing around by the shore and swimming to the bottom of the lake,” Harry said gloomily.

He glared at the egg like it was wholly responsible for his predicament. He jerked with a splash when he felt Draco hugging him from behind. He had to take a firmer grip of the bath edge when Draco stopped paddling his legs to keep afloat, and instead wrapped them around Harry's waist.

“Don't try to distract me, Malfoy.”

“I don't need to. You've been ogling me ever since we took our clothes off,” Draco said smugly.

Harry eyed him over his shoulder. “True, but I think we should be focusing on the clue right now.”

“I think you're wrong.”

Harry let out an impatient sigh. It quickly turned into a moan when Draco nibbled on his ear.

“You're worrying about this too much. We have Potions on Friday and we'll tell Snape about the clue then. You can worry if he can't come up with a plan.” There was a pause as Draco slid under Harry's arm to straddle him from the front. “But right now, we're all alone in here, and I want you to kiss me.”

“There's a mermaid watching us,” Harry protested.

Draco rolled his eyes at Harry and then twisted around to look at the portrait. He screeched at her, raised a very unimpressed eyebrow at whatever she screeched back at him, and then smirked when she dove off her rock and swam further into her painting.

“My hero,” Harry said sarcastically. The kiss he gave Draco was anything but.

“Don't you forget it,” Draco said when he got his mouth free.

“Like you'd let me.”

*******
On Friday Harry hung back after Potions with Hermione and Draco.

“Am I to assume that you have figured out the egg’s clue?” Severus asked them.

“Sort of,” Harry said and recited the clue. “We think that I'll need to fight the merpeople to get back whatever it is that they've stolen.”

“I don't think you'd be fighting them,” Hermione said. “Merpeople are beings, not creatures. It's completely different, ethically, to fighting a dragon.”

“Miss Granger is right,” Severus agreed. “Though I dare say you will likely come into contact with the merpeople, I think it highly unlikely that they themselves would be an obstacle in this task.”

“So I've just got the squid to worry about,” Harry said.

“I think not. The squid is half-domesticated and won't usually attack unless directly provoked, and should be contained in an area of the lake far from where the task will actually take place,” mused Severus.

“Should be,” Harry repeated, still uneasy at the prospect. How the hell did one domesticate a squid?

“You could try a charm to replicate the sound of echolocation,” Hermione suggested.

“What, like a dolphin?” Harry asked.

Hermione shook her head. “A whale. Sperm whales prey on giant squids, and they'd use echolocation when they're hunting. The squid might be driven away by the sound of it.”

Severus looked at her appraisingly. “That might be an idea. I'm unaware of any such charm, but you may be able to find something in the library.”

“That's great, but aren't we forgetting the fact that Harry can't breathe underwater?” Draco asked.

“Or swim very well,” Harry added.

Severus smiled. “Gillyweed will solve both of those problems.”

“Gillyweed?” Harry asked.

“It's a Mediterranean water plant. Ingesting it will allow you to temporarily grow gills and webbed hands and feet. It should also improve your underwater vision to a certain extent and make the water temperature more bearable.” Severus paused in thought before nodding in satisfaction. “I've some gillyweed in my stores. Coupled with an Impervius Charm to waterproof your clothes, and a Sticking Charm to keep your glasses on your face, you should find this task simple enough.”

“But what if I take too long? I've only got an hour before whatever they have of mine is gone. I'd be able to deal with that if it was my Firebolt, but what if it's Hedwig, or something from my parents? Would Hedwig die?”

“Of course not. That part of the clue is telling you that you have an hour in which to complete the task. They'd be opening themselves up to a whole range of potential legal problems if whatever they took was lost or, as in the case of a pet, was injured or died,” Severus said.

“Oh, Cool,” said Harry. It was hard to feel stupid when he was so relieved.
“So all you need to worry about is not getting lost down there,” Draco said with a grin.

Harry nodded. “Thank you for all your help, sir.”

“I keep my promises, Harry. I would not let you face this unprepared.”

“Yeah, I know. But I wouldn't have been, actually. Both Moody and Bagman offered me help,” Harry replied.

Severus frowned at him. “They did?”

“Yeah. Moody asked me if I knew how I was getting past the dragon when he saw me telling Cedric about them, and then Bagman asked me if I needed any tips right before the first task.”

Hermione looked outraged. “Bagman's a judge, he can't be helping you!”

“I know that, Hermione,” Harry said patiently. “But it's Moody who's really confusing me. He spends every lesson making jibes about how we're all going to turn out to be Death Eaters, and he turned Draco into a bloody ferret, and now he wants to help me with this?”

Severus' frown deepened as he stared off in thought. “It is most unusual behaviour, but I cannot think of what his motivation might be.”

“It doesn't fit with his behaviour in class, that's for sure,” Draco grouched.

Severus shook his head and looked at Harry. “For now, practise those charms you will be needing in the second task. Do not worry about Moody for the moment, although I want you to tell me if he offers you anymore advice. And whatever you do, do not antagonise him like you have your previous Defence teachers.”

********

During Care of Magical Creatures on Monday Hagrid was downcast, no doubt due to the departure of the dragons during the week. He led one of the Abraxans over to the fence where the class was gathered and told them about the horses' diet.

“Pretty borin', really, not that much different from a regular horse, 'cept for the whisky, o' course,” he said.

The Abraxan lunged at him, snapping its teeth, and only narrowly missed Hagrid's nose. He jerked his head back and chuckled.

“Bit more lively than a regular horse, though,” he added approvingly.

“What an interesting creature you have there.”

The class turned around to find Skeeter standing behind them, dressed in violently purple robes.

“Who're you?” Hagrid asked.

“Rita Skeeter, reporter for the Daily Prophet,” Skeeter said, with what Harry assumed was supposed to be a winning smile. It reminded him of a crocodile.

“Thought Dumbledore banned you from the school,” Hagrid said suspiciously.
Skeeter waved a hand airily. “Slight misunderstanding. Now, what are these called? I don't think I've ever seen flying horses this large.”

“They're Abraxans. Came with the Beauxbatons lot,” Hagrid said. He patted the horse on its neck and nearly lost a finger.


“That they are. Don't s'pose it hurts that they only drink whisky!” Hagrid laughed.

Skeeter's eyes travelled to the troughs in the field, then to the class, who were once again light-headed from the fumes. She took in Daphne and Pansy giggling together; Greg's more vacant than usual expression; then lingered on Harry for an unreasonably long time. His lip curled as he met her gaze unflinchingly.

“I'll tell you what,” Skeeter said briskly. “I'd love to hear more about them. Would you like to give an interview? I'll submit it to the Prophet's zoological column.”

“They're not my Abraxans, I'm just tending 'em while they're here.”

“Then you can describe the challenge of caring for a new creature,” Skeeter said quickly. “I'm sure my readers would be very interested to learn about the other, ah, lively creatures you've come across.”

Hagrid smiled. Harry's heart sank as Hagrid arranged to meet Skeeter in the Three Broomsticks on Friday night.

“You can't go,” Harry said after class.

Hagrid looked down at him. “Ah, it'll be alright, Harry. She jus' wants ta have a chat 'bout some interestin' creatures.”

“She'll manipulate you and print lies, just like she did with Harry,” Hermione said.

Hagrid snorted. “Bout some flyin' horses? S'not the end o' the world if she does that, but why would she?”

“Just be careful,” Draco said eventually.

“No need,” Hagrid said blithely.

“I've got a bad feeling about this,” Hermione said as they made their way to lunch.

“I reckon she'll try to make out that Hagrid likes to give booze to kids,” Harry agreed. Hopefully Skeeter never finds out about Scarlett's black market whisky, he prayed.

********

With the first task over and the clue sorted out, Harry found himself enjoying the last few weeks of term. The first Charms lesson after the task, Flitwick had allowed the class to talk quietly, under pretence of studying in groups, while he spent the entire lesson talking to Harry about the Summoning Charm he'd used in the the task.

“Your practise certainly paid off, it was very impressive,” Flitwick said.
“Thank you, sir,” Harry grinned back at him. An idea had just occurred to him, and after giving a wary glance at the class, none of whom were paying him any attention, he leaned forward. “You wouldn't be able to give me any pointers on Impervius or Sticking Charms, would you?”

“This wouldn't have anything to do with the next task, would it, Mr Potter?” Flitwick asked shrewdly.

“Er, yeah,” Harry said sheepishly.

Flitwick tsked and shook a finger at Harry. “Mr Potter, you know I can't help you in the Tournament. It's against the rules.”

“I understand, sir,” Harry said. He'd known it was a long shot.

“Yes, completely against the rules,” Flitwick continued before leaning forward and lowering his voice. “I think I can, however, let you know that the library will have spare copies of *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 6* in the Charms section.”

Harry's grin returned, wider than before. “Thank you, Professor.”

Flitwick gave a guilty giggle. “What for, Mr Potter? Mentioning the library's catalogue?”

As for the rest of the school, the other houses weren't hissing at Harry as much as they had been and there were fewer Cedric badges to be seen. Harry supposed that after seeing him confront a dragon, they felt a little sorry for him. Or they figured that, after a dragon, being hissed at in the corridors wasn't going to faze him.

Best of all, in Harry's opinion, had been Pansy's reaction in their first Divination lesson.

“A dragon, Professor?” she cried. “You knew Harry was going up against a dragon and you thought it was unethical to warn him? How ethical would it have been if he'd died?”

“I knew he would survive the first task,” Trelawney said stiffly. “Therefore, I didn't need to break the rules to warn him.”

“But you predicted my death a week before that,” Harry said in feigned confusion.

Trelawney opened her mouth, closed it again, then drew her shawl more tightly around her shoulders. “Carry on with your planetary predictions,” she said tightly.

Harry grinned at Pansy. “Old fraud.”

“But such fun,” Pansy giggled.

At the end of the week Severus called a house meeting. The Slytherins packed themselves into the common room after dinner and speculated as to what he wanted while they waited for him to arrive. He swept into the common room and raked the assembled crowd with his eyes as they all fell silent. His mouth twitched when he caught sight of the gigantic, stolen Slytherin banner which was still stuck to the wall.

“As some of you are no doubt already aware, the Triwizard Tournament is traditionally accompanied by a Yule Ball. This event will be held on Christmas Day at eight o'clock and run until midnight. It will be open to fourth years and above, though younger students may attend as the date of an older student, including members of the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons delegations.”
There was excited murmuring at this, though it quickly died down when Severus held up his hand to continue.

“If you wish to attend, you will need to remain at Hogwarts for the holidays. I hardly need to warn you to behave yourselves at the ball. Dress robes are mandatory. You will not only represent Hogwarts, you will be representing Slytherin. This event is not the time nor the place for spiked punch or lewd behaviour. I am not averse to assigning detentions for Boxing Day.” There was silent nodding at this. “Very well, that is all. Mr Potter, a moment.”

Harry weaved his way over to Severus. “Sir?”

“As part of the Tournament, you will be required to open the ball with a waltz,” Severus said.

“Yeah, I know, Narcissa told us over summer. She even gave Hermione and me a dancing lesson.”

“Very good. I trust that you are then prepared?”

“Yes, sir. Er, but I wanted to ask you, do you know when the next Hogsmeade weekend is?”

“Please tell me that you have not left the purchase of dress robes this late,” Severus said warningly.

“No, I've got them sorted. It's just, er, Sirius wants to see me,” Harry said, trying not to wince.

Severus' lips pursed. “Second weekend of January.”

“Thanks, Professor,” Harry said.

Severus nodded curtly and left the room, leaving Harry to return to his friends. He found them sitting in some of the chairs next to one of the windows. He couldn't help glancing out at the dark lake as he sat down and shivered. In less than three months he'd be swimming in its depths, facing who knows what. He jerked his attention away from the window and took out some parchment to write to Sirius.

“What'd Snape want?” Draco asked him.

Harry looked up from his bag. “Just wanted to let me know I'd have to dance the opening waltz at the ball.”

Millicent scrunched up her face. “Tough luck.”

“He'll be fine. His partner is an excellent dancer,” said Draco.

Millicent rolled her eyes and turned to Daphne. “Who do you want to go with?”

Daphne's eyes lit up. “There's this really cute Beauxbatons boy I've been speaking to...”

********

For the rest of term, the Yule Ball was all anyone could talk about. Harry was inordinately pleased that he already had a date as he watched his friends fret over who to go with. Daphne and Blaise were spending most of their free time walking to and from the Beauxbatons carriage, carrying out what could only be called a concerted campaign of flirtation with two of the French students. It all looked exhausting to Harry, but Daphne and Blaise certainly seemed to be enjoying themselves, and rarely returned to the common room before curfew.

He and Draco had been most surprised one morning when they went to meet Hermione in the
library, where they were due to look for sound replicating spells. They'd just walked past the group of girls who trailed after Viktor like motherless ducklings, when they saw Viktor himself sitting at Hermione's table. They were leaning towards each other and talking quietly, a stack of library books neglected at Hermione's elbow. They broke apart when Harry and Draco sat down.

“We're not interrupting anything, are we?” Draco asked, his tone implying that he very much hoped they were.

Hermione must have caught on, since she narrowed her eyes at him. The effect was somewhat ruined by the blush on her cheeks. “We were just talking.”

Viktor looked like he was about to argue, then stood up abruptly. “I vill speak to you later, Hermy-own.”

He gave a tight smile to the boys and then slouched off past his fan club, who followed him out of the library.

Draco smirked in the sudden silence. “‘Hermy-own’?”

Hermione's glare intensified. “Shut up.”

Harry elbowed Draco, who was now sniggering. “What was that about?”

“Well, he, that is, we, er,” Hermione stammered and went even pinker. “He asked me to go to the ball with him.”

“Really?” Harry smiled. “What did you say?”

“Yes.”

Harry grinned at her. “That's brilliant!”

“And I did it all without you two interfering,” Hermione said archly, but a smile was playing about her lips.

“We introduced you,” Draco replied. “After the first task.”

“You are not taking credit for this, Malfoy. For your information, we've spoken a few times this last week, and all without your input,” said Hermione.

“Yes, well, Mother and I taught you how to waltz,” Draco said mulishly.

Hermione rolled her eyes and pushed the stack of books over towards them. “Shut up and start reading.”

Despite spending most of the day in the library, they couldn't find any spell that might repel the giant squid. Harry and Draco finally gave up late afternoon and retreated to the Slytherin common room, where they joined Pansy and Millicent on a couch.

“Come on, Milly, stop being stupid,” Pansy was saying.

“Don't call me Milly!” Millicent said through gritted teeth.

Pansy pouted at her and then turned to the boys. “Can you tell her to stop being stubborn?”

“What are you on about?” asked Harry.
She won't go to the ball with me!” Pansy said in frustration.

“Why should I?” Millicent demanded.

“You know why,” Pansy said.

“One kiss does not mean I'm obliged to -”

“It was more than one kiss and you know it.”

“Whatever.”

“Have you tried asking nicely?” Harry suggested.

“Yes!” Pansy cried.

“Have not,” Millicent countered.

Pansy huffed and made a visible effort to calm down. “Millicent. Will you please do me the honour of being my date to the Yule Ball?”

Millicent studied her. “I'll think about it,” she said finally.

“Argh!” Pansy threw up her hands and stormed off to her dorm, startling a group of first years.

“How long are you going to make her wait?” Draco asked.

“I'll go in in a few minutes. I want to make her stew for a while,” Millicent smirked. “Just to get her back for all the times she teases me.”

Draco chuckled appreciatively. “Nice.”

“You know, I don't remember you asking me if I was going with you,” Harry couldn't help saying.

“Of course you are,” Draco said.

“See? This is what I'm trying to avoid with Pansy: her just thinking I'll do whatever she says,” Millicent said to Harry.

“They are both pretty bossy, aren't they?” he agreed.

Draco frowned a little uncertainly. “You are coming with me, aren't you?”

Harry couldn't keep teasing him, not when he was making puppy dog eyes like that. “Of course I am, you git.”

Draco punched him in the shoulder. “Fucking prat.”

Harry caught Draco's hand and kissed it. “Sorry.”

“You should be,” Draco said.

Harry tugged Draco closer and kissed his neck. “I'll make it up to you.”

“Ugh, get a room,” Millicent groaned.

Draco tilted his neck to give Harry better access and looked lazily at Millicent. “Don't you have
something you need to be doing, Bulstrode?”

“Yeah, vomiting in disgust at you two getting it on in front of everyone,” Millicent said, laughing to herself as she headed to her dorm.
In Which Draco's Familial Angst is Caused by Narcissa for Once, and Students Mostly Behave at the Yule Ball

Harry woke up on Christmas morning to the sound of laughter and small explosions. For the first time since he'd been at school, all six boys in his dorm had stayed at Hogwarts for the holiday, and Blaise and Theo were busy setting off fireworks that flew around the ceiling, crackling and fizzing with sparks before exploding into different colours. Harry's model Horntail was flying around snapping its teeth at the fireworks, adding its own small flames to the mix.

Draco yawned. “Nothing quite says Happy Christmas like being burned to death in your bed.”

“I love how cheerful you are in the morning,” Blaise said. “It's Christmas!”

“I'm aware of that,” Draco said in a perkier voice.

Harry moved to the foot of his bed and began opening his presents. Hagrid had sent him a big box of assorted sweets from Honeydukes. Hermione had given him a copy of *Quidditch Teams of Britain and Ireland*. Even the Dursleys had out done themselves: they'd sent Harry a bandaid.

“Hey, Theo, you want this?” Harry asked, waving it in the air. “Muggles use them on small wounds.”

“Sure,” Theo said, walking over. He turned the bandaid over curiously in his hands. “What's it do?”

Harry quickly explained how to use it.

“ Weird,” Theo said happily. “I can't wait to show Tracey.”

Harry snuffed a laugh and returned to his presents. Sirius had sent him a penknife that would open any lock or knot, which Harry thought would come in very handy at the Dursleys’. Draco had given him a set of potions knives made of different metals, housed in a box of dark wood and black velvet.

“Thanks, Draco! They're beautiful,” Harry said, running his hand over the handle of a tiny silver knife.

“Same to you, Harry,” Draco replied. He bent down to pull on the dragonhide Quidditch boots Harry had given him. “They fit perfectly.”

Harry smiled as he opened his last present, which was from Narcissa. It was a set of warm winter pyjamas in a black and green check, with a black quilted dressing gown. Harry couldn't tell what material they were made from, but they looked like they'd be very warm and they were very soft. There was a note sitting on top of them.

*Dear Harry,*

*Happy Christmas. I remember how cold the Slytherin dungeon can get, and these will keep you warm.*

*I also wanted to ask you about Rita Skeeter. I've read the piece of filth she wrote about you, and was wondering if you'd like me to do anything about her? I know her somewhat, as she was a few years ahead of me at Hogwarts, and I should be able to convince her to meet with me. I might be able to pre-emptively cut off any future stories she might try to write about you. If that fails, I'm sure I could always dig up some dirt on her. Let me know what you think.*
Love,
Narcissa

Harry laughed in delighted disbelief and went over to Draco's bed. He had to sit on top of the pillows as the rest of the bed was taken up by presents. He handed Draco the letter.

Draco read it quickly and smirked. “Mother's the best.”

“Pretty much,” Harry agreed. “You think we should go for it?”

Draco nodded. “Definitely. I don't know what she could say to Skeeter to make her leave you alone, but I wouldn't be surprised if she finds something with which to blackmail her.”

As Draco set about opening his remaining presents Harry sat back and entertained himself with the thought of Skeeter getting her comeuppance. He was jolted from his thoughts by Draco kissing him softly.

“You're cute when you daydream.”

Harry kissed him back. “Thanks.”

“Stop groping each other and come join us in the common room,” Blaise called over, holding up a brand new poker set.

The common room was louder than usual for a morning. Almost all of the older students had stayed at Hogwarts for the holiday, and everyone was sitting around in their pyjamas talking excitedly with their friends. Blaise led the other boys over to where the fourth year girls were sitting in a circle by the fire, along with Scarlett and Archie.

“Happy Christmas, ladies,” he said as he sat down between Scarlett and Daphne and began shuffling the cards.

“How come you're here?” Draco asked Scarlett and Archie.

“What, sitting with you lot, or at Hogwarts in general?” Archie asked.

“Both, actually.”

“Because the only people from our year still here are the Carrow twins, and they're not that much fun at the best of times. They're extra mean today because they didn't get dates to the ball, so they can't go,” she said.

“But we did, so who cares?” Scarlett added.

“Who are you going with?” Harry asked.

“Greg and Vince are taking us,” Scarlett said, waving at them across the circle. They grunted back at her.

“Really?” Pansy asked a little doubtfully.

Scarlett giggled. “Don't worry, we won't be spending too long with them. One dance and a bottle of whisky, and we're free!”

“Hope it's worth it,” Pansy said. “Try not to let them step on your feet.”
Archie nodded seriously, but Scarlett's attention was already on her hand of cards.

They all spent the rest of the morning in the common room, not bothering to go up to breakfast since they had Christmas lunch waiting for them later in the day.

Lunch was as good as it was every year, but no one really seemed to take much notice. Not with the Yule Ball to look forward to that night. When Scarlett suggested a snow fight afterwards all the fourth year Slytherins joined her, along with Hermione, Neville and Ginny. They organised themselves into two teams and set about stockpiling snowballs.

Harry jumped when he heard the crack of Apparition behind him. He turned around to see Dobby beaming up at him. He was once again wearing Harry's old green robes, with gold tinsel wrapped around his waist.

"Happy Christmas, Harry Potter, sir!" he squeaked.

"Happy Christmas, Dobby. What are you doing here?" Harry asked.

"Dobby is come to talk to Mr Draco, sir."

Draco looked up when he heard his name and strolled over. "Happy Christmas, Dobby."

"Happy Christmas, sir. Dobby is here to make his report on Miss Narcissa's new lover."

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Who is it this time?"

"Mr Shacklebolt, sir."

Draco's eyebrows were now in the vicinity of his hairline. "Shacklebolt? Really?"

"Yes, sir. Miss Narcissa was talking to him at the trial, and then they is going out for dinner afterwards. Now they is going out a few times a week, or – or staying in!" Dobby's eyes widened.

Draco chewed his lower lip as he thought about this. "It's serious, then?" he finally asked.

"Dobby thinks so, sir."

"And is Mother happy?"

Dobby nodded emphatically. "Oh, yes, sir! Miss Narcissa is very happy!"

Pansy ran over. "Could you two please give us some help – oh! Is this your house-elf, Draco?"

He shook his head. "Dobby is a free elf."

He'd spoken at the same time as Dobby. Pansy looked between them curiously. "A free elf?"

"Mother freed him, and now she's paying him," Draco explained. "Two Galleons a week and time off when he wants it."

"Begging your pardon, sir," Dobby began, "but Miss Narcissa is giving Dobby three Galleons a week now."

"You got a raise? Good for you!" Harry said.

Dobby smiled up at him proudly. "Thank you, Harry Potter!"
Pansy looked at Draco with a gleam in her eye. “Can he do me a favour?”

Draco shrugged. “You'll have to ask him.”

Pansy looked a little put out by having to ask a house-elf for a favour, but she recovered and smiled down at Dobby. “Well? I can pay you.”

“What is miss wanting?”

“You can Apparate around Hogwarts, right? Can you get Hermione into my dorm without getting caught?”

Dobby puffed up his chest. “Of course, miss! That is being easy for Dobby!”

“Brilliant! Here,” Pansy said, digging out a Knut and handing it to Dobby, “I'll go get her now.”

As soon as she'd left Draco turned back to Dobby. “Can you keep an eye on Shacklebolt?”

“Yes, sir. But Dobby is not thinking he needs to. Dobby is liking Mr Shacklebolt a lot, sir.”

Draco continued to chew on his lip while Hermione returned with Pansy, greeted Dobby, and Disapparated with him.

“I'm off to get ready for the ball,” Pansy said.

“That's what this was all about?” Harry asked.

Pansy nodded. “We've been trying to figure out how to sneak Hermione in to get ready with us, so that she's not stuck with those two idiots in her dorm. I was going to ask if I could borrow your Invisibility Cloak, actually. But it's all sorted now. See you at the ball!”

Harry smiled in relief as Pansy walked off with Daphne. The thought of Pansy with his Cloak was vaguely terrifying. His smile died when he saw Draco. “You okay?”

“Hmm? Yes,” Draco shook his head and gave a weak smile.

Harry stepped closer and lowered his voice. “Upset about Shacklebolt? Because of, you know...”

“Arresting my father? No,” Draco said firmly. “I hate my father, you know that.”

“Then what is it?”

Draco chewed his lip again, then spoke in a small voice. “It sounds serious. What if they get married?”

Harry pulled him into a hug. “It's only been, what, a month? I doubt they'd be getting married anytime soon.”

“Yes, but -”

“No buts,” Harry said, pulling away to look at him seriously. “Draco, your mum loves you. She's not going to do anything like that if she thinks you have a problem with it.”

Draco's worried eyes met his. “I suppose...”

“Trust me. You're the most important thing in the world to her.”
Harry tried not to show the jealousy he felt whenever he thought of how much Narcissa cared for Draco. It wasn't Draco's fault and besides, Sirius had offered to take him away from the Dursleys for good. If Sirius actually meant it, if he actually went through with it, maybe Harry had a chance to have his own family.

Draco smiled at him. “You're right. Thanks, Harry, you're -”

A snowball hit the side of his head. Harry caught one on his shoulder a second later. They spun around to find Scarlett skipping away from them, already rolling another ball of snow.

“If you're not going to help our team, then you're on the other one as far as I'm concerned!” she called.

All thoughts of Narcissa were forgotten as Harry and Draco took off after her. With the departure of Hermione, Pansy and Daphne, the teams were wildly uneven and the snow fight quickly descended into a free for all. It only ended when dusk began to fall and Harry and Draco had succeeded in levitating a huge pile of snow onto Scarlett. She giggled as they dug her out and the group headed back to the castle.

They had time for a hot shower before getting changed into their dress robes. Harry was struggling with his bow tie in the mirror when Draco came over and held up his robes.

“I can't make up my mind. Black or silver?” he demanded.

“Er, silver?” Harry said. “They'll match your eyes.”

Draco flung the black robe in the direction of his bed and pulled the silver one on. He smoothed down the sleeves and watched with amusement as Harry undid his tie and began again.

“You're hopeless, let me do it,” he said eventually.

“Thanks,” Harry said, handing over the offending tie. “I don't know why I can't just wear my school tie, at least I know how to do that up.”

“You are not wearing your school tie to the Yule Ball!” Draco said, sounding far more scandalised than Harry thought necessary.

Draco slipped the bow tie around Harry's neck, deftly did up the tie and smiled in satisfaction.

“Can you do something about my hair?” Harry asked hopefully.

Draco laughed. “I'm not a miracle worker, Potter.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Malfoy,” Harry drawled.

“It looks fine, Harry,” Draco sighed, then smiled. “You look good.”

Harry grinned. “After all the crap you give me about my hair, it turns out you like it like this?”

Draco wrinkled his nose. “I said no such thing. You'd just confuse people if you had neat hair for once.”

“Mmm hmm,” Harry smirked. “You going to go help Greg and Vince with their ties?”

“No. I don't care what they look like,” Draco said dismissively.
Draco took over the mirror to fix his own hair, leaving Harry to wait for the others to get ready. Predictably, they all ended up waiting for Draco, apart from Blaise.

“I'm off to meet Eleonore at the carriage. See you at the ball,” he said on his way out.

“I'm ready,” Draco finally announced.

“About time,” Theo grumbled.

They all headed out together and met up with the girls in the common room. Tracey was in a deep blue robe that went very well with Theo's dark grey robe, but Pansy's frilly pink robe clashed horribly with Millicent's red one. The girls were arguing about it as the boys joined them.

“Next time, I'm dressing you,” Pansy said, shaking her head.

“Don't count on it,” Millicent replied.

The Entrance Hall was packed when they arrived, with the Hogwarts and Beauxbatons students all waiting for the Great Hall to be opened up at eight o'clock. Scarlett caught sight of Ginny, who'd been invited by Neville, and called them over.

Harry edged away from Scarlett, who was waving her arms around violently as she spoke excitedly to Ginny and Archie, and looked over when the front doors opened to admit the Durmstrang kids. Hermione and Viktor came in right behind Karkaroff and joined the Slytherins.

“Hermione, what did you do to your hair?” Harry asked her. “It looks great.”

Hermione patted her hair self-consciously. It was up in a smooth bun with loose curls framing her face, and two silver rose clips at the back. Harry had never seen her look so pretty.

“A whole lot of Sleekeazy's Hair Potion,” she said. “And these clips from Narcissa are charmed to prevent any of it falling down during the night.”

“See, you could have fixed my hair,” Harry accused Draco.

“Shut up,” he muttered, going pink.

Harry smirked; he'd been right that Draco liked his hair messy, no matter how much he protested otherwise.

“Champions and their partners over here, please!” McGonagall shouted over the din.

Harry, Draco, Hermione and Viktor headed over to where McGonagall was standing beside the doors to the Great Hall and greeted the other champions. Cedric was accompanied by Cho, and Fleur was with Davies, the Ravenclaw Quidditch captain. McGonagall told them they'd be walking in once everyone else had been seated, then left to chivvy the crowd through the opened doors. She returned a few minutes later, had the champions line up behind her, and led them into the Great Hall.

The house tables were gone, replaced with smaller tables that each seated about ten people. There was a lantern on each table, giving the hall a softer glow than the usual hundreds of floating candles. Harry held tightly onto Draco's hand and tried to ignore the stares that were directed at the group as they made their way to the top table, where they'd be sitting with the judges.

Bagman gestured at Harry to sit beside him. Harry smiled apologetically and sat next to Draco, who had Hermione on his other side. Harry wasn't happy to see that it meant he'd have Percy on his other
side, but at least he wouldn't have to make small talk with Bagman. Harry was still unsettled by the man offering to help him with the dragon.

Dinner was ordered by reading aloud from a menu. Harry was quite impressed with this and ordered some goulash: he was quite enjoying all the foreign food being served this year. He grinned over at Draco and Hermione.

Hermione was deep in conversation with Viktor, trying to teach him to pronounce her name correctly. She had a coy smile on her face that Harry had never seen before.

“I think she really likes him,” he whispered to Draco.

Draco watched her out of the corner of his eye for a moment then nodded. “Looks like it.”

Percy cleared his throat. “Excuse me, but is that Parseltongue you're speaking?”

“Yeah,” Harry answered.

Percy's eyes widened. “Really? It's a shame my boss, Mr Crouch, couldn't be here tonight. He knows over a hundred different languages, you know, and I'm sure he'd love to converse with you in Parseltongue.”

Harry smiled politely. “He wouldn't be able to speak it.”

“Why not?” Percy asked, outraged. “If two school boys can speak it, Mr Crouch certainly can!”

Harry leaned back, alarmed at Percy's vehemence. “Because Parselmouths are really rare.”

“I assure you, Mr Crouch would have no trouble -”

“The only two known Parselmouths currently around are Harry and the Dark Lord,” Draco snapped. “And Harry's only taught me how to speak it.”

Percy's mouth dropped open. He stared at the pair of them before muttering something indistinct and turning to Cedric on his other side.

“Didn't think it was possible there was a Weasley more annoying than Ron,” Draco said.

Harry snorted and looked around the table. Karkaroff was watching them with a very unpleasant expression on his face as he fingered his goatee. Harry made a mental note to ask Severus about him when he got the chance, and switched back to English to ask Draco how his dinner was.

When everyone had finished their dinner, Dumbledore got to his feet and asked everyone else to follow suit. He waved his wand and sent all the tables floating through the air to line up neatly along the walls to create a dance floor, then conjured up a small stage along one wall. There was an assortment of instruments on the stage and then the Weird Sisters walked out to wild applause.

Harry had butterflies in his stomach as he took Draco's hand and followed him onto the dance floor along with the other champions and their partners. He mentally went through all the instructions Narcissa had given him over summer, hoping he wouldn't forget anything. He didn't know what would be worse: tripping over in front of the school, or stepping on Draco's feet.

Draco slid his arm around Harry's waist and pulled him in close. “Relax, I won't let you mess up.”

“I know,” Harry said with a nervous breath.
The Weird Sisters began playing a slow waltz. Draco led Harry in a neat circle, and Harry felt his tension drain away as his feet remembered the steps. *Waltzing is quite nice, really,* he thought, though he was grateful that Draco knew what he was doing.

“All right?” Draco asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said honestly. “But I'd hate to be doing this with anyone else. I'd probably look a right berk.”

“Yes, yes, you would. Clearly, you shouldn't waltz with anyone else,” Draco said at once.

Harry laughed softly. “Trying to keep me all to yourself?”

“Of course.”

The waltz ended to more applause, and the band moved onto a faster, upbeat song. The dance floor began to fill up as other couples joined in. The teachers and other adults mostly paired off, dancing in a variety of different styles, but the students formed more of a mosh pit in front of the stage. Harry and Draco were soon joined by most of their friends, and they spent the next few songs dancing in a big group. When Scarlett declared her intention of crashing the stage to dance with the band, Draco grabbed Harry's hand and led him off the dance floor.

“If we're not here we can't be held responsible for not stopping her.”

Harry laughed at the idea of anyone trying to stop Scarlett when she'd made her mind up. “Let's go outside.”

They walked around the edge of the dance floor, through the mostly empty Entrance Hall and into the dark grounds. The lawn in front of the castle had been transformed into a rose garden with winding paths, fountains and statues. It was all lit by real, living fairies who were hovering over the rose bushes. Harry and Draco sat down on a stone bench not far into the garden. Harry had just reached up to pull Draco in for a kiss when they heard voices coming towards them.

“It's no concern of mine, Igor,” Severus was saying.

“What? How can you say that? You're in this just as much as I am!” Karkaroff sounded worried.

Severus sounded supremely disdainful. “I shall remain at Hogwarts. What you choose to do is not my problem. I find it laughable that you would presume to thrust your fears onto me after attempting to sell me out for your own freedom.”

“It – it wasn't like that,” Karkaroff said desperately.

“Spare me,” Severus spat, angry now. “If you are truly this anxious, by all means, flee like the coward you are. But do not try to drag me along with you.”

Harry could see them now. Karkaroff was once again twirling his goatee with his finger. Severus was aiming his wand at the rose bushes they were passing, making them explode in scented showers of debris. More than half of the bushes were being used by couples canoodling, who ran away squealing when their covers were blown apart.

“Ten points from Hufflepuff, Stebbins! And from Ravenclaw, Fawcett!” Severus shouted after a pair who ran past Harry. Severus caught sight of him and Draco and frowned. “You'll excuse me, Igor. I need a moment with my students.”
Karkaroff glared at him and stormed off without a word.

“Do not mention a word of what you have just heard,” Severus warned them.

“Yes, sir,” Draco said.

“What was that about?” Harry couldn't help asking.

“A minor disagreement with an old acquaintance.” Severus said with a twist to his mouth, calming slightly and sheathing his wand. “Now, Harry. The Headmaster has agreed to your request. Come to my office after breakfast tomorrow, and wear Muggle clothing.”

“Really? Thank you,” Harry said feelingly.

Severus nodded. “Do not stay out too late,” he said, then swept off up the path.

“Request?” Draco asked at once.

Harry stood up and pulled Draco further along the path, away from the castle. He stopped by a statue of a reindeer and leaned against it. There was a fountain on the other side of the statue and he could see the unmistakeable shadows of Hagrid and Maxime sitting on the other side of it. He ignored their quiet conversation and looked up at Draco.

“I asked Severus if I could go visit my parents' grave over the holidays.”

Draco’s eyes widened and he leaned against the statue next to Harry, flicking away a beetle that was crawling along the statue's back. “And he's taking you?”

“Yeah. He just had to get Dumbledore to agree to me leaving school grounds for a day.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah.”

Draco ran his thumb over the back Harry's hand. “You've never been to see them, have you?”

Harry laughed bitterly. “The Dursleys have never even mentioned it.”

“Fuck them,” Draco said angrily. “You nervous?”

Harry considered this. “No. Severus will be with me, after all. I just really wanted to go, you know, in case something happens to me in this Tournament.”

“Don't say things like that,” Draco said fiercely, before yanking Harry around to kiss him roughly.

Harry let Draco have his way with him, grateful for a distraction from the subject of his potential demise. Draco ran a hand through Harry's hair and used it to tug Harry's head back so he could reach his ear. Harry bit his lip to keep quiet when he felt teeth on his earlobe, followed by a hot tongue. Heat flared in his stomach and he snaked his arms around Draco's back to pull him closer. He slipped one hand up to cup the back of Draco's neck, and, daringly, slid the other down Draco's back, resting it on the curve of his arse. Harry felt a hardness pressing against his own but for once, didn't jerk away, happy for the reminder that he was still very much alive.

A shriek rent the air and they broke apart gasping.

“'Ow dare you?” Maxime screeched.
Harry ducked down behind the statue with Draco and peered across at the fountain. Maxime was on her feet, looming over Hagrid.

“You may be ‘alf-giant, but not moi! ’Ow dare you insult me like zis? I – I ’ave big bones! Zat is all!”

She stalked off back to the castle, leaving Hagrid alone by the fountain. He watched until she had gone, then got up and slowly left for his cabin.

“Poor Hagrid,” Harry murmured. He put his hand on Draco's shoulder, but he didn't move.

“Did you know that Hagrid was half-giant?” he asked, still staring after Hagrid.

“No, but it makes sense, doesn't it?”

Draco stared at him. “I thought he'd just had too much Skele-Gro as a child. This is bad, Harry.”

“Why?”

“Because giants are vicious. I mean, they're nearly extinct because they keep fighting amongst themselves and killing each other!”

“But Hagrid's not vicious,” Harry objected. “Sure, he has really weird ideas about what animals should be kept as pets, but he's fine. This sounds like that crap people think about werewolves all over again.”

“I agree with you about Hagrid, but then, I know him. If this gets out...” Draco trailed off unhappily.

“Well, it won't. We're not going to tell anyone, and everyone else out here is too busy snogging to pay any attention.”

“Like we were?” Draco asked pointedly.

Harry shook his head stubbornly. “It'll be fine.”

Draco looked at him, unconvinced, then sighed. “Let's get back inside.”

They walked back to the castle. On their way they passed Blaise twined around a dark-haired Beauxbatons girl, and Daphne sitting half on top of a bench, and half on top of a very cute Beauxbatons boy. When she saw Harry and Draco she shooed them away with a glare.

Back in the Great Hall they rejoined their friends on the dance floor where Theo pointed to the stage. Harry looked up, burst into laughter and nudged Draco. Scarlett was on stage dancing in front of the bagpipe player and urging Archie and Ginny to join her. Both girls looked like they were thinking about it, but McGonagall was already on her way over.

“Weasley, Shetty, do not even think about joining her up there! Lympsham, get down this instant!”

McGonagall shouted.

Scarlett high-fived the bagpipe player and jumped off the stage looking very pleased with herself. Her grin didn't fade even as she followed McGonagall off the dance floor to get yelled at. She returned a few minutes later with a week of detention and quite a few less house points and declared it all worth it.

The ball ended at midnight when the Weird Sisters finished their last song. Everyone applauded them one last time and began trickling out of the hall. Harry said goodnight to Hermione in the Entrance Hall and headed to the dungeons with Draco.
“Hey, Harry!”

Harry turned around to see Cedric walking towards him. “What?”

Cedric glanced at Draco, clearly not wanting to speak in front of him.

“I'll join you in a sec,” Harry told him.

Draco eyed Cedric suspiciously, but continued on to the dungeons without protesting.

“Your egg – does it wail when you open it?” Cedric asked.

“Yeah...” Harry said. Surely Cedric didn't think that Harry would help him with his egg just because he’d told him about the dragons?

“Well... Take a bath with it,” Cedric said.

Harry stared at him for a long moment. “I've already got my clue sorted, thanks.”

“Oh, well, that's good,” Cedric smiled.

Harry didn't smile back. “I told you exactly what we were facing with the dragons, and you tell me to take a bath? I thought Hufflepuffs were supposed to value fairness. Not exactly even, is it?”

Cedric went red. “I just thought -”

“You just thought you'd make yourself feel better by telling me the bare minimum.”

“Moody said – er, that is -”

Harry stared at him, hard. “Moody put you up to this? Why?”

“Well, he only told me to open it underwater. I decided it was only fair to tell you the same, since you'd told me about the dragons,” Cedric admitted.

“Huh,” Harry said, thinking furiously. “Okay, fine. We're even. As long as you don't tell Moody that I know he was behind this.”

“Okay,” Cedric said, bemused.

Harry nodded and continued down to the dungeons. He ignored the people sitting around in the common room and headed straight for his dorm, where he made a beeline for Draco's bed. He kicked off his shoes and sat down next to Draco, pulling the curtain shut behind him.

“Something really weird is going on.”
Harry woke earlier than usual on Boxing Day, despite his lack of sleep. He and Draco had stayed up late trying to figure out why Moody was trying to help Harry and Cedric in the Tournament, but hadn't been able to come up with a solid theory. Predictably, Draco's advice had been to ask Narcissa, so Harry pulled on his new dressing gown and began to write a letter.

**Dear Narcissa,**

Thank you for your Christmas present – both the clothes and the offer. I think I'd like to take you up on that. However you want to play it is fine with me. I trust your judgement.

I'm actually writing to you with a different problem. Moody's been trying to help Cedric and me in the Tournament. With the first task, he asked if I had a strategy for my dragon, and now he's helped Cedric with his clue egg for the second task. Cedric came to me last night to tell me about my clue (which I've already got sorted out). I don't know why Moody's trying to help me. He doesn't seem to particularly like me, and he hates Draco and half of my friends. I've no idea what he feels about Cedric. It just doesn't make sense. I'm going to ask Severus about this later, but Draco insisted I ask you too. You know what he's like.

Hope you have a happy Christmas,

Harry

He re-read the letter, got changed into some warm Muggle clothes and set off for the owlery. It was freezing when he got there, with a harsh wind whistling through the open windows, and he rubbed his hands together as he scanned the room for Hedwig. She fluttered down and landed on his shoulder.

“You up for a trip to Wiltshire?” he asked as he made his way to the closest window. Hedwig clicked her beak and held still as he attached the letter to her leg. He stroked her a few times then held his arm up. “Make sure you give this to her alone, okay? It doesn't mention the blackmail, but I really don't want anyone else reading it.”

Hedwig nipped his finger and took off into the overcast sky. Harry watched her for a moment then turned around, only to come face to face with the grinning Weasley twins.

“Blackmail, eh?” one of them asked. He looked at his brother sadly. “What is the youth of today coming to, George?”

“I'm not blackmailing anyone,” Harry said truthfully. “Why are you up here so early?”

“Definitely not blackmailing anyone,” George said.

There was a pause, then all three spoke at once. “Who are you blackmailing?”

Harry sized them up then shrugged. They couldn't know who he was writing to, after all. “Skeeter. To get her to stop making up bullshit about me. You?”

The twins looked at each other. “Bagman. He owes us quite a bit of money.”

“Bagman?” Harry repeated.

Fred nodded. “We had a bet with him on the World Cup.”
“He tried to pay us in leprechaun gold -”
“- and obviously it disappeared after a few hours.”

“Huh. Well, I don’t know if this could help you or not, but he tried to help me with the first task.”

“Really?” George asked. “Why are you telling us?”

Harry shrugged again. “It might help you get your money off him. It’s not much, since I didn’t actually accept any of his help and I’ve been avoiding him ever since, but...”

“I’m sure we’ll be able to work with it,” Fred said.

“Thanks, Harry,” George said.

“Just don’t get me into trouble,” Harry warned.

Both twins looked offended.

“We would never betray a fellow rule breaker!” cried Fred.

“To even suggest such a thing is deeply hurtful, Harry!”

Harry snorted and began walking to the exit. “Right. Have fun with your blackmail.”

“Same to you!” George called after him.

Harry wandered back down to the dungeons until it was time for breakfast. He only managed a slice of toast and some tea, since his stomach was beginning to knot with nerves. When he saw Severus leave the staff table he quickly headed down to his dorm to get his coat, gloves and scarf, then went and knocked on Severus’ office door.

“Enter.”

Severus was wearing Muggle clothing like Harry, though his black coat was so long it may as well have been a robe. He quickly wrapped a scarf around his neck and looked at Harry. “Ready?”

Harry nodded. “Let’s do it.”

Harry followed him silently through the dungeons and out into the grounds. The wind was biting, though not as bad as it had been up in the owlery, and Harry quickly pulled on his gloves. When they’d passed the Beauxbatons carriage Harry looked up at Severus.

“Do you still want to know about Moody offering me help?”

“Has he done so again?” Severus asked sharply.

“Not directly,” Harry said, then explained what Cedric had told him the night before. “I’ve written to Narcissa about this today as well.”

Severus hummed thoughtfully. “It’s most strange. Moody hates Karkaroff, of course...”

“Because he was a Death Eater?” Harry guessed.

“A Death Eater who evaded Azkaban,” Severus corrected him. “It’s possible that that hatred is enough to make Moody want Karkaroff’s champion to lose.”
“Then why’s he helping me? I mean, if he read that article by Skeeter...”

“He may not think I’m helping you, or he perhaps thought that the article was completely fabricated, rather than based on a kernel of truth. Or perhaps he simply hates Karkaroff more than he hates me. I avoided Azkaban because the Headmaster vouched that I had deserted the Dark Lord to spy for him. Karkaroff got out of Azkaban by making a deal and offering up the names of other Death Eaters.”

“So how do we find out?” Harry asked.

“If he’s helping Delacour as well as you and Diggory, his actions are likely aimed at hurting Karkaroff through Krum. That seems fairly straightforward. If he is not helping her, then I don’t know what his purpose could be. I don’t think patriotism or loyalty to Dumbledore would be enough to spur him to cheat like this,” Severus said slowly.

“So I should try to find out if Fleur’s spoken to him?” Harry asked. How the hell was he supposed to do that? They weren’t exactly friends.

“If you can, yes. Though I doubt she would admit to receiving help from him, especially not when we know that Maxime’s been helping her. One accusation of cheating can lead to another.”

“This sounds hopeless,” Harry muttered.

Severus paused in front of the school gates. “The only other options that I can see are to either snoop through Moody’s office for evidence of something, or to perform Legilimency on him. The first is pointless, as he’s not careless enough to leave anything incriminating lying around, and the second is something I’d very much like to avoid.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to do that,” Harry said quickly. No way would Moody react well to that, he thought with a shudder.

Severus didn’t reply, but murmured the spell to open the gates. Harry waited on the other side for Severus to seal them again, and then took his arm when he held it up.

They Apparated to the yard of a small church. The ground was covered in deep snow, through which only the tops of the gravestones were visible. Severus wound his way through the graves, coming to a stop in front of a single white headstone.

“It’s this one,” he said softly, then stepped away.

Harry moved forward slowly. His heart was beating quickly and he felt a choking sense of grief as he stood in front of the grave.

James Potter, born 27 March 1960, died 31 October 1981
Lily Potter, born 30 January 1960, died 31 October 1981

The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.

Harry had to read the words a few times as his eyes had quickly filled with tears. He pressed his lips together to stop from sobbing, but couldn’t stop the tears from running down his cheeks. He knelt by the side of the grave and rested his hand on top of the headstone.

“Hi Mum. Hi Dad,” he whispered, then paused, not knowing what to say. “It’s Christmas time... I wish you were still with me.”

He fell silent again and busied himself brushing snow off the top of the headstone as he tried to quell
the lump in his throat.

“Everyone says how much I look like you, Dad,” he continued. “But I’ve got your eyes, Mum. Although I guess you would have seen those when I was a baby... I also inherited your skill at Quidditch, Dad, along with your shocking eyesight... And I’ve got your Invisibility Cloak and the Marauder’s Map. They’ve come in really handy, believe me. And I got your talent with Potions, Mum. And your old copy of *Pride and Prejudice* off Severus. It’s not bad for a love story.

“He’s my Potions teacher, actually. Severus, I mean. And my favourite teacher. He's told me a lot about you, Mum. And Sirius and Lupin have told me a bit about you, Dad, though I only met them last year. But they've all let me ask about you both. Sometimes I feel like I know you, but I don't, not really. I can't, can I? I have pictures of you and I know what music you used to like and what Quidditch position you played, but I can't remember what it felt like to – to be hugged by you, or what you smelled like, or what your laughs s-sounded like -”

Harry broke off when the tears took over. He knelt there in the cold snow, crying for the parents he'd never know, for the life he could have had, for the lives they should have had.

All of a sudden there was a swirl of black next to him. Severus knelt alongside him in the snow and wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulders, pulling him in tight. He didn't try to tell Harry that everything was alright, for which Harry was grateful, because obviously it wasn't, it couldn't be. But his warmth was comforting to Harry as he stared at the gravestone through his tears. He didn't know how long they stayed there like that. Finally, he took off his glasses to wipe his eyes. He put his glasses back on and re-read the words in front of him through clearer eyes.

“*The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death*,” he read aloud. “That sounds like – like a Death Eater thing.”

“It's from the Bible. It's been a while since I've read it, but I believe that quote refers to the afterlife, not cheating death the way the Dark Lord intended,” Severus explained.

“Oh,” Harry said in a small voice. “Were they religious?”

“Not particularly. Your aunt organised their funeral and burial.”

“Oh,” Harry said again.

He supposed that made sense. Aunt Petunia would have been their only living relative apart from himself. Sirius would have been in custody, if not Azkaban, and Lupin would have been a mess, believing that Sirius had betrayed Lily and James. For the first time in his life, Harry felt a glimmer of affection – or at least sympathy – for his aunt.

Harry sniffed and cleared his throat. “I should have brought flowers. Isn't that – that's what people do, isn't it?”

Severus didn't reply, just drew his wand and conjured up a bouquet of wild flowers. “Lily always hated lilies,” he said, then handed the flowers to Harry.

Harry placed the flowers carefully on top of the snow covering the grave. He stared at it for a long moment before climbing stiffly to his feet. Severus stood up with him and waited silently as Harry finished composing himself.

“I'm ready to go back to Hogwarts,” Harry finally said.

“If you wish,” Severus agreed, “but first, would you like to see the memorials?”
“Memorials?”

Severus nodded. “There are two. One is the cottage that you lived in with your parents, where you – where they died.”

“Okay,” Harry said shakily.

He followed Severus back through the graveyard to the front of the church. A wooden kissing-gate guarded the churchyard, and he squeezed through with Severus to find himself standing on the edge of the village square of Godric's Hollow. Apart from the church, it was bordered by a pub, a post office and several other shops.

In the centre of the square stood a war memorial, a tall obelisk covered in the names of people who had fought and died for their country. Severus headed straight for it with Harry trailing. When they were halfway across the square the memorial shimmered and transformed into a statue of the Potters. James had his arm around Lily, who was holding an infant Harry, unmarked by the scar Voldemort's curse had left him with.

The living Harry stared up at the memorial to his parents wordlessly, trying to commit it all to memory while at the same time hoping it would spark some memory of his early life with his parents. It didn't, no matter how life-like it was. All he could remember were the last moments of his parents' lives, courtesy of the dementors from the previous year.

“Where's the cottage?” he asked Severus.

“On the outskirts of the village,” he replied, gazing up at the memorial. He tore his eyes away to look at Harry. “I should warn you that it has mostly remained in the state in which the Dark Lord left it.”

Harry set his jaw stubbornly. “I want to see it.”

“Very well.”

They walked down a lane leading out of the village proper. At the end the houses on either side opened up onto country fields. Just as they'd reached the last house, another appeared in front of them. Unlike the other houses, which were well-kept and had Christmas decorations up, this one was a ruin. The garden was overgrown and strewn with rubble, and plants were growing up and into the house itself. The right side of the first floor was completely open to the elements, destroyed by an explosion.

“Is that the curse damage?” Harry asked.

“Yes.”

“How come no one's fixed it?”

“Place your hand upon the gate,” Severus replied cryptically.

Harry spared him a curious glance, but did as he was told. At his touch, a wooden sign rose from the ground. It was covered in golden writing:

*On this spot, on the night of 31 October 1981,*

*Lily and James Potter lost their lives.*

*Their son, Harry, remains the only wizard ever to have survived the Killing Curse.*
This house, invisible to Muggles, has been left in its ruined state as a monument to the Potters and as a reminder of the violence that tore apart their family.

Surrounding the golden writing was graffiti left by scores of magical tourists. Some people had carved into the wood, whilst others had written in indelible ink. There were signatures, initials, and even short sentences; Harry supposed that they might be poems or prayers of some sort. He reached out with a finger to trace a message of condolence carved into the wood.

Severus huffed. “Some people have no respect.”

Harry shook his head. “No, I like it. It’s more personal than the official sign. These were real people who felt something, even if they didn’t know my parents.”

Severus pursed his lips but dropped the subject, leaving Harry to scrutinise the house further. It would have been a nice place to grow up, and he said as much.

Severus cleared his throat. “Harry, I am truly sorry for the role I played in this.”

“I didn't mean it like that,” Harry said quietly. “Anyway, Voldemort's the one who killed them, not you. He was the one who decided the prophecy was about me. And you did your best to stop him once you found out.”

“Perhaps,” Severus said, sounding completely unconvinced.

They fell silent at that, both caught up in their own thoughts. Harry tried not to think of what it would have been like to grow up here with two loving parents, rather than lonely and forgotten at the Dursleys’. His thoughts moved to Sirius' offer to take him away from them.

Harry remained facing the cottage as he said, “Sirius wants me to go live with him.”

“What?”

Harry fidgeted. He hadn't told anyone this yet. For some reason, he hadn't been able to bring himself to broach the topic with either Draco or Hermione. He had a feeling they wouldn't quite understand why he was so distrustful of Sirius' promise of a happy home. They'd both had normal childhoods, far removed from Harry's miserable upbringing at the Dursleys'. True, Draco's relationship with his father was now pretty much over, but at least he still had a loving mother. Harry wasn't entirely sure, but he was guessing from what Severus had told him about his father, he might understand, at least a bit, where Harry was coming from.

“He wrote to me, as soon as he was freed, asking if I wanted to go live with him, since he's my legal guardian.”

“I see. Well... Even he cannot be as bad as your relatives,” Severus said, making it sound like uttering those words was physically painful.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed.

“I would have thought you'd be more enthusiastic at the prospect of leaving them for good,” Severus frowned down at Harry.

“I am,” Harry insisted. “Really, I am. And I think he does mean it, that he won't change his mind... It's just... I mean, he's not going to starve me or lock me up like they have, but I don't think he's all
that, I don't know, responsible? Is that the right word?"

Severus snorted. “I don't think you want my true opinion of him.”

“Probably not, no,” Harry agreed.

“You are doubting his efficacy as a guardian,” Severus surmised.

“Pretty much. Is that awful of me?”

“Not at all,” Severus said slowly. “It shows great maturity.”

“Right.”

Severus hesitated before speaking again. “You wouldn't have to live with him if someone else adopted you. An adoption is more binding than a guardianship, and would take legal precedence, despite what your parents may have set down in their will, which was, I think, entirely ignored in the first place. You have, after all, spent the last thirteen years enduring Lily's relatives, whom I doubt she would have nominated to care for you, except as a last resort.”

Harry thought this over. “Yeah, but if Narcissa adopted me, that'd make me Draco's brother, wouldn't it? And just, ew, no thanks.”

“I was referring to myself,” Severus said.

Harry turned to face him fully. “You – what?”

To his surprise, Severus reddened slightly. “I realise it is unorthodox, but I hope the offer is not wholly unwelcome.”

Harry stared at him with wide eyes. “No, not unwelcome, just... Unexpected. Wait, this isn't just to annoy Sirius, is it?”

Severus' nostrils flared. “Do you truly think so little of me?”

“No!” Harry cried. “I just know how much you hate each other and you've never mentioned anything about this before now and I'm not used to adults wanting me around and now I've had two offers of a home in the last month -” He cut himself off when he realised he was babbling and took a deep breath. “You really mean it?”

“Very much so,” Severus said firmly. “I won't deny that I would greatly enjoy foiling any plans Black may have, but I have actually been thinking about this for some time.”

Harry just stared at him. For the first time, he saw the uncertainty Severus was trying to mask behind his usual calm facade. “You're serious? Like, I'd come live with you and everything?”

“That is usually what happens when one adopts a child, yes,” Severus said. Harry saw the barely restrained eye roll and grinned.

“Then yes,” he said unwaveringly.

Severus blinked. “You... Do you not wish to think further on the matter?”

“Why would I? I'd love to get away from the Dursleys, but I'm not sure Sirius would be good at looking after a teenager, since he's basically one himself,” Harry said. He swallowed, then met Severus' gaze steadily. “But you're not. I trust you completely. I mean, I never told her this and I hate
to say she's right about anything, but what Skeeter wrote wasn't that far off from how I feel about you.”

Severus opened his mouth to reply, then shut it and ducked his head so that his hair swung over his face, obscuring it. “Let's go have lunch,” he said in a suspiciously tight voice. “The pub should be open.”

They walked back to the village square in silence and entered the pub. It was fairly full with people celebrating the holidays, but they managed to find a table in a booth along a wall. Harry took off his coat and gloves and sat down as Severus went to order at the bar. Harry waited impatiently, his foot jiggling under the table. After what seemed an eternity, Severus slid onto his bench, removed his own coat, pushed Harry’s glass across the table to him and made a jerky arm movement.

“Privacy charm,” Severus explained to Harry's quizzical look.

“Right,” Harry said, suddenly nervous. He took a gulp of his Coke.

“I can teach you, if you like,” Severus offered.

Harry nodded. “Why now?”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “I assume you're talking about my offer to adopt you and not my offer to teach you the charm.”

“Yeah.”

Severus sipped his beer. “As I said earlier, I have been thinking of this for a while. From what you have mentioned to me of your home life, I have suspected it was not as happy as it could have been. It was only when you stayed at my home, however, that I realised how abusive Petunia and her family have been to you.”

“They haven't…”

“Do not attempt to excuse their treatment of you,” Severus said angrily. He began ticking points off on his fingers. “You were made to sleep in a cupboard until the age of eleven; they withhold food from you as a punishment; they attempted to prevent you from returning to Hogwarts in your second year and actually locked you in your room; you were told nothing but lies about your parents, when all children have a right to -”

“Alright!” Harry held up his hands in defeat. Hearing it all listed like that made it sound worse than he'd ever thought it was.

Severus continued more calmly. “In any case, the events of the last two years have also made me suspect that you are not as safe at your aunt's as you may have been led to believe.”

“What do you mean?”

“Lily's blood protection is supposed to reside in Petunia, yet Black was able to find your neighbourhood when he was on his way to commit murder.”

“Yeah, but he wasn't trying to kill me.”

“Nevertheless. Did it do anything to protect you from your brute of a cousin?”

“No..."
“Exactly. I believe that the Dark Lord is close to being resurrected with Pettigrew's aid. If Black could find you, why not the Dark Lord, or any of his followers?”

Harry paled. “You really think so?”

Severus rubbed his left arm instinctively. “Yes. I don't want to alarm you, but all the signs – Trelawney's prediction, your dream, the strengthening of both Karkaroff's and my own Dark Marks, the Death Eater activity at the Quidditch World Cup... They all point to the same result.”

“So it's for protection,” Harry said bluntly.

“Partly. That is a large part of parenting after all,” Severus nodded. “But I also wish for you to be happy. I know that you wish for a family.”

“Yeah.” Harry smiled crookedly. “What about you?”

Severus shifted in his seat but didn't look away. “Are you asking if adopting you will bring me a measure of happiness?”

“Yeah.”

Severus sipped his beer. “I enjoyed your company for those weeks you spent at my house. When I returned there this past summer I found myself lonely. It is not something I am accustomed to feeling in my own home. So yes, I believe that adopting you will fill a void in my life – a void that was entirely created by you in the first place, I might add.”

“Really?”

Severus nodded and looked down at the table. “I have also grown exceedingly fond of you, perhaps more so than I have been of anyone else before,” he muttered.

Harry grinned. “So how do we do this?”

Severus relaxed, now that they were talking about logistics and not emotions. “It will have to wait until summer, I'm afraid. I will need to lodge some paperwork at the Ministry, and then, of course, we will require Petunia and her husband to sign over all claim to you.”

“That won't be hard.”

“Undoubtedly. There is also the question of witnesses.”

“Witnesses?” Harry frowned.

“Two, to be precise. They will stand as guarantors.” At Harry's blank look, Severus sighed. “Essentially, they will be pledging that they agree that the adoption is beneficial for the both of us and that neither one of us was coerced into it. Usually the adoptive parent or parents would nominate both witnesses, but you may choose one of them, if you like. The only requirement is that it is someone you trust implicitly and are of age.”


“I thought as much,” chuckled Severus. “I myself will ask Minerva. You will need to write to Narcissa, but otherwise keep the matter quiet.”

“Why?” Harry asked instantly. “And does that mean I can't tell -”
“You may tell Mr Malfoy and Miss Granger,” Severus said, rolling his eyes. “And Black needs to be
told as well, I suppose, along with Lupin. I must insist that you impress the importance of secrecy to
them, however. The Headmaster may prove somewhat reluctant to allow this to go ahead.”

Harry frowned. “He can't stop us, can he?”

“Legally, no, he has no say in the matter. But Dumbledore is very good at manipulation. Do not
forget that it was under his orders that you were taken from Black, your legal guardian, and placed
with your aunt.”

“But he thought that was for my own good, didn't he?”

Severus scowled. “Undoubtedly it seemed that way to him, at the time. I do not say this lightly,
Harry, nor to make you dislike him. But placing blind faith in Dumbledore is not a good idea. I shall
tell Dumbledore myself when I deem the time right.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully. He didn't particularly like Dumbledore, per se, but he'd never distrusted
him before now. “You've really thought this all through, haven't you?”

“I told you I have been thinking about it,” Severus said with a shrug.

Harry didn't say anything, as a waitress had arrived with their food. She gave them a dirty look after
she deposited their plates on the table, and Harry realised that Severus' privacy charm prevented her
from hearing his thanks.

They ate in silence for a few minutes before Severus set his cutlery down and looked at Harry
seriously. “You haven't mentioned any reservations about the way I may treat you.”

“What do you mean?” Harry put down his own cutlery and picked up a chip.

“I am aware of the reputation I have amongst the students at Hogwarts,” Severus said.

Harry shrugged. “You've always been nice to me. Maybe not all my friends, though.”

Severus pursed his lips but nodded. “I may be making assumptions here, but I gather you have some
wildly disparate ideas of the way parents or guardians can act. You have known nothing but neglect,
in direct comparison to your cousin, and must be aware that Narcissa spoils Draco rather
excessively.”

“Yeah, but I'm not expecting my own Quidditch pitch,” Harry laughed.

“Good to know,” Severus said drily. “But I wish to make my intentions clear. When I adopt you, I
will care for you as if you were my biological son. That means I will be both rewarding you when
you excel at your school work or extracurricular activities and punishing you when you break rules
or otherwise misbehave.”

“Okay,” Harry said slowly.

“I will not use corporal punishment on you, you have my word. Nor will you be starved or locked
up. But you may be grounded or have your allowance or other privileges docked.”

Harry brightened; grounding wasn't anywhere near as bad as being locked in a cupboard, and going
to the Dursleys' felt like a summer long grounding to begin with. “I'll get an allowance?”

“We'll negotiate that later,” Severus said with a smirk. “I expect you to respect any rules I lay down
for you, though I will explain my reasoning behind them if you require it.”

Harry nodded. It all sounded quite fair so far.

“I will not breach your privacy; I shan’t snoop through your possessions, or pry into your relationship with Draco, for instance. But I will expect you to be honest with me, as I will be with you. I want you to feel comfortable coming to me with any problems you may have.”

“I already do,” Harry said.

Severus smiled slightly. “I will do my best to keep you safe, healthy and happy, and to provide you with what you want, within reason, of course. I want you to know that I care for you. Do not doubt that, though I may at times speak sharply in anger.”

“I think I can deal with some yelling,” Harry said mildly, thinking of all the times he’d been awoken in his cupboard by Aunt Petunia’s screeching or Uncle Vernon's bellowing.

“Very well,” Severus said, then curled his lip slightly. “I will also endeavour to be somewhat fairer in my interactions with Mr Longbottom.”

Harry looked at him in surprise. “Thank you. Is – is all of that because of the prophecy? Because it could have meant him and his parents, instead of me and mine?”

“Partly. There is also the fact that he regularly melts cauldrons or causes other catastrophes in my classroom. But,” Severus held up a hand, “I will attempt to ignore his transgressions more than I have thus far.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, somewhat surprised. Then a thought occurred to him. “Does this mean I'll have to change my name?”

“You do not wish to take mine?”

“No...” Harry said slowly. “Not that I have anything against yours. It's just that I have so little from Mum and Dad. I'd like to keep the same name as them.”

Severus nodded. “That is entirely understandable. You may of course retain your surname.”

Harry nodded happily, and the conversation turned to the Triwizard Tournament. Severus listened to an account of Hermione’s lack of progress in finding a charm that could repel the giant squid, and promised to try to find out if the squid would be imprisoned for the duration of the second task or not. He quizzed Harry about his research on Impervius and Sticking Charms and offered some pointers.

By the time they’d finished lunch, Harry had almost forgotten that he’d just made what was probably the most important decision of his life. He had time to think about it while Severus paid at the bar. He followed him quietly out of the pub and down the adjoining alley.

“Is everything alright?” Severus asked when he’d held up his arm in preparation to Apparition and Harry hadn’t moved.

“Yeah, brilliant,” Harry said earnestly. He hesitated, then ducked under Severus' arm and hugged him. “Just wanted to do this.”

Severus stiffened momentarily before relaxing. Slowly, he lowered his arm to Harry's shoulder, and brought his other one up to meet it.
Harry tightened his hold when he realised that he wasn't going to be pushed away. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome.”
Harry sat back in his armchair and tried very hard not to laugh at the stunned looks on Draco and Hermione's faces. They were sitting in the Room of Requirement, which had taken the form of a cozy lounge room, and Harry had just told them that Severus was adopting him.

“Holy shit,” Draco said eventually.


Harry looked at her apprehensively. “But?”

“Well, aren't you worried about what Sirius will say? I mean, if he is your legal guardian, he could potentially block this.”

Harry hadn't thought about that. “I don't think he will. Not if he wants me to be happy. I'm going to talk to him about it at the next Hogsmeade weekend. I don't think it'll be a fun conversation but I think I can make him come around.”

“I'm sure Mother will be happy to speak to him for you, if you need it,” Draco offered.

“I'll ask her if there's a problem,” Harry said.

“You know, Harry, I'm proud of you for choosing to live with Snape instead of Sirius,” Hermione announced. “That was a really mature decision for you to make. Lots of people would've chosen Sirius, thinking that he'd be more fun to live with.”

Harry shrugged. “That's what Severus said, too.”

“Which implies that neither of them generally think of you as being mature, if this is so note-worthy,” Draco smirked.

“Shut it, you,” Harry shot back.

“Ignore him, Harry,” Hermione said, taking her own advice. “When is the adoption taking place?”

“Summer. Apparently there's a whole bunch of Ministry stuff that Severus needs to do first, and we need my aunt and uncle's signatures so he wanted to wait until then. All I have to do now is find a witness. Do you think your mum would agree?” Harry asked Draco.

“I think she'd be upset if you didn't ask her.”

Harry grinned. “I'll write to her when Hedwig gets back then.”

“Mmm, blackmail to plot and your adoption to witness. Mother's having a very good year,” Draco smiled.

Harry's grin turned sly. “I think you're forgetting about the fit Auror she gets to f -”

“HARRY!”

*******
On the last day of the Christmas break Harry and Draco arranged to go flying with Viktor and Ulla. To Harry's surprise, Hermione joined them.

“You've never come flying with us before!” Draco said, wounded.

“What, and fall to my death because the two of you are too busy flirting with each other to notice when I inevitably lose my grip or something? No thank you,” Hermione said tartly.

“That would never happen,” scoffed Draco.

Viktor walked over and adjusted her grip on the broom handle. “I vill make you a good flier, Hermione.”

“Hey, he can say your name properly now,” Harry said.

“I've been helping him practise,” Hermione explained, smiling at Viktor.

Draco smirked. “Oh, so that's what you two have been getting up to when you disappear, eh? 'Practising’?”

“Among other things,” Harry said, making Draco and Ulla snigger.

Hermione ignored them, choosing instead to pay attention to what Viktor was telling her. Pretty soon all five of them were in the air. While Viktor spent most of his time helping Hermione (who made a slow but visible improvement over the course of the afternoon), Harry and Draco played a game of mid-air tag with Ulla.

By the time the sun was beginning to set Hermione felt confident enough to fly laps around the pitch with Draco and Ulla, leaving Harry to do some Wronski Feints with Viktor in the remaining light.

“You are good. You could go professional, I think,” Viktor commented when they finally landed.

“You really think so?” Harry asked, gobsmacked.

“One day, yes, if you practise,” Viktor said as they others landed nearby. He turned around to talk to Hermione, leaving Harry grinning stupidly behind him.

“Viktor, can you help me put this broom back in the shed? I can't remember where I got it from since they all look the same to me,” Hermione said.

“Subtle,” Draco laughed as Hermione and Viktor walked off to the broom shed, leaving the other three alone on the Quidditch pitch.

“Your friend, she is liking Viktor a lot?” Ulla asked.

Harry nodded. “Yeah, I think so.”

“That's good. Viktor is good boyfriend,” Ulla said.

“How do you know?” asked Draco.

“We dated for a few months, but broke up when Viktor was picked for the Bulgarian Quidditch team. Too much training,” Ulla said. She laughed at the looks they gave her. “Don't worry, I am not liking him like that anymore. We are friends only.”
Harry looked over at the broom shed, where there was still no sign of Hermione or Viktor. “Do you think they'll try a long-distance thing when you all leave after the Tournament?”

Ulla cocked her head. “I think Viktor would like to.”

Draco shuddered. “I couldn't do that.”

Harry smiled fondly at him. “I probably couldn't, either.”

“Probably’?” Draco raised his eyebrows.

Harry shrugged. “I dunno. I'd be able to practise my letter writing skills, wouldn't I?”

“How about you practise dodging, Potter,” Draco growled, and punched him in the arm.

Harry just laughed and ducked around Ulla. A few minutes later Hermione and Viktor finally emerged from the broom shed and rejoined them. They set off back for the castle, with Ulla and Viktor splitting off to return to the ship.

“You certainly look pleased with yourself,” Draco teased Hermione.

“It's not what you think. Well, not entirely,” she said, failing to repress a smirk. “I asked Viktor, and he hasn't been offered help from Moody or Bagman.”

“What, you just asked him that outright?” Draco demanded.

Hermione shot him a withering look. “Please. Anyway, Harry, now you just need to ask Fleur.”

“Thanks, Hermione. But that's easier said than done. We don't talk, and she isn't dating one of my friends,” Harry pointed out.

“We could always ask Blaise to flirt with her,” suggested Draco.

“Draco!” Hermione stared at him.

“You want to pimp out Blaise?” Harry laughed.

Draco shrugged. “It's not like he'd mind. She's quite attractive.”

“True,” Harry agreed.

Hermione still looked doubtful. “It's not very ethical...”

Draco didn't look concerned. “Think about it, at least.”

********

On the first day of term Harry sat down to breakfast only to have the *Prophet* thrust under his nose by Theo.

“You're not going to like this,” he said ominously.

Harry smoothed out the paper and stared down at the front page. There was a photo of himself from the Wand Weighing ceremony looking sullenly at the camera. Next to it was a photo of Hagrid in the Three Broomsticks looking dodgy.
Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, has already come under fire for his less than desirable links to suspected Death Eaters, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent. Chief amongst these is Harry’s Head of House, Severus Snape. Their closeness has baffled outsiders, but this reporter now has the unhappy duty of informing readers that their relationship may be even more sinister than previously thought.

Over the holiday break, Snape escorted Potter to his parents’ graves in Godric’s Hollow. While seemingly an innocent, touching odyssey, this was in fact directly against the wishes of Potter’s guardians. Why, then, would Potter defy them and embark on what must have been a painful journey? Why, too, would Snape assist him in this? Do either of them think they know better than Potter’s guardians what is in his best interest? Or was there some darker purpose behind it?

There have long been tales of Dark magic that can only be performed with the remains of a relative, most notably in the field of Potions, which just so happens to be Snape’s area of expertise. There have been no reports of anything unusual occurring in Godric’s Hollow – but in a village made up mostly of Muggles, would the residents even know what to look out for?

Alarmingly, it seems Potter isn’t content to surround himself with humans with shady pasts. Potter has also been close to Rubeus Hagrid, the game-keeper of Hogwarts, since the day they met. But what most people won’t know is that Hagrid isn’t who – or what – he says he is.

Promoted to the post of Care of Magical Creatures professor at the start of the previous school year, Hagrid has been terrifying his classes with creatures too dangerous to even allow the students to come into contact with. This comes as no surprise when one takes into account that Hagrid isn’t fully human.

His mother is the notorious giantess Fridwulfa, who has not been seen in Britain in decades. Her current whereabouts are unknown, but readers will remember that the giants still living in Britain this century all joined He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named during his rise to power. Before the Aurors managed to kill most of them, the giants were responsible for some of the most devastating massacres of Muggles ever recorded.

Is Potter setting out to recreate You-Know-Who’s reign of terror all over again? With Snape and Hagrid at his side, Potter would certainly –

Harry couldn’t read anymore. “Incendio,” he snarled, pointing his wand at the paper and taking fierce pleasure in watching it go up in flames.

“Aguamenti,” Theo snapped, dousing the fire. He fanned away the smoke and glared at Harry. “I get that you’re angry, but can you give us some warning next time?”

“Sorry,” Harry said shortly. He glanced up at the staff table, where both Hagrid and Severus were absent, and got to his feet abruptly. “I’ll see you in class.”

He stormed out of the hall with his heart pounding. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been this angry – maybe when Severus had told him that he’d been the one to inform Voldemort of the prophecy. Harry was dimly aware that someone was calling his name but ignored it. A few seconds later a hand grabbed his arm and he was wrenched around to come face to face with a furious Draco.

“Setting the table on fire isn’t the best way to convince people you’re not evil,” he snapped.
“I’m going to kill her. I’m going to fucking kill her!”

“Don’t say that!” Draco looked around them warily. “Not in English, anyway.”

“Right, because speaking Parseltongue is nothing the new Dark Lord would do. Do you remember our second year?” Harry replied.

“Better than yelling death threats at the top of your lungs in the fucking Entrance Hall.”

“What do you suggest, then?”

“I suggest you calm down so we can get to History of Magic. Mother will have seen the paper, and she’ll be taking action,” Draco said, calming down himself.

Harry deflated. “She had no right to print any of that. No right! What the hell was that bullshit about my parents?”

“I don’t -”

“And now she’s dragging Hagrid into this? What’d he do to her?” Harry asked indignantly.

“Probably nothing. I think she just mentioned him because it supports her angle that you’re going to turn evil. But that’s not the problem here.”

Harry frowned at him. “It isn’t?”

“No. I want to know how she found out about you and Snape going to Godric’s Hollow. And about Hagrid being half-giant. Did you tell anyone else about Snape taking you?”

“Just you and Hermione, after we got back. And Severus, of course, when I asked him originally.”

“And where did that conversation take place?”

“His classroom.”

Draco nodded in satisfaction. “Which means that she overheard you telling me in the garden during the Yule Ball – at the same time we overheard Hagrid. She definitely would’ve mentioned the adoption if she’d heard you telling us in the Room of Requirement.”

“She could have overheard me asking Severus in the first place,” Harry pointed out.

“Snape was a spy, Harry, do you really think his classroom wouldn’t be warded against eavesdroppers?”

“You’re right,” Harry said ruefully.

“Of course I am. I’ll write to Mother during class; she’ll want to know about this.”

Draco spent the entirety of History of Magic doing just that. Since he was still too angry to attempt a nap, Harry amused himself playing hangman with Blaise. His spirits had lifted slightly by the end of the lesson, but they plummeted again after the morning break.

Hagrid wasn’t waiting for the class outside his cabin. Instead, there was an elderly witch Harry had never seen before, waiting with the Gryffindors.

“I’ll thank you to be punctual next time. The bell rang ten minutes ago,” she said sharply.
“Where's Hagrid?” asked Harry.

“Otherwise engaged. Now, my name is Professor Grubbly-Plank and I'm your temporary Care of Magical Creatures teacher. Follow me.”

She led them around the paddock that contained the Abraxans, who were huddled together against the cold. Harry frowned over at Hagrid's cabin. All the curtains were closed in the windows and there was no smoke rising from the chimney.

“I saw the Prophet,” Hermione said quietly, startling Harry.

He scowled at the reminder. “I really don't want to talk about it right now.”

Hermione pursed her lips but nodded.

“Oooh!” squealed Lavender and Parvati together.

Tied to a tree on the edge of the Forbidden Forest was a pure white unicorn. It was gleaming against the snow, pawing the ground nervously and tossing its head.

“Boys stay back!” Grubbly-Plank said. “Unicorns don't trust boys so much – girls forward, please, nice and slowly.”

Harry watched as the girls crept forward to the unicorn. It skittered a bit as they approached, but allowed them to stroke it. The boys watched enviously while Grubbly-Plank lectured them on unicorns. Harry didn't hear half of what she said, as he kept turning around to look at Hagrid's cabin in case he suddenly appeared.

“Would you stop? That's really distracting,” Draco finally snapped. “We'll go visit him during our free period this afternoon.”

“Okay,” Harry agreed.

They hurried down after lunch and knocked on Hagrid's door. The only response was Fang's wild barking inside. Harry tried peering through the windows but couldn't see any movement through the cracks in the curtains. After a while they gave up and walked dejectedly back up to the castle.

********

There was no sign of Hagrid all week. Harry was getting increasingly worried about him. Short of breaking down his door, however, there was nothing he could do, and he also had his meeting with Sirius to worry about.

Harry was quiet as he walked to Hogsmeade with Draco, Hermione, Pansy and Millicent. He listened half-heartedly to their plans for the day, but most of his attention was focused on trying to plan what he was going to say to Sirius. He said goodbye to the others and walked into the Hog's Head alone.

It wasn't what he'd been expecting. While the Three Broomsticks was warm, welcoming and filled with people, the Hog's Head was none of those things. It was dark and filthy, and the few patrons present didn't look like the sort of people Harry would want to meet in a dark alley. Or a brightly lit one, for that matter. He scanned the room nervously, hovering in front of the door with his hand halfway to his wand.
“Harry!” Sirius' voice boomed out across the quiet room.

He was sitting at the bar, facing the door, and had obviously been in conversation with the grumpy looking bartender. Harry walked over and was immediately pulled into a tight hug.

“So good to see you!” Sirius grinned widely.

Harry couldn't help grinning back at him. “You too. You're looking a lot healthier.”

It was true. Sirius was no longer alarmingly skinny, and his hair was growing out thick and shiny. He was dressed in black dragon-hide pants and a long, red velvet jacket. Harry thought he looked rather like an eighteenth century rock star.

“It's good to be free, let me tell you,” Sirius laughed. He drained his glass and signalled for another. “Want one?”

Harry shook his head, remembering the spiked punch and the resulting hangover. “Just a Butterbeer, thanks.”

When they'd been served their drinks Sirius stood up and led Harry to a table in a corner. “It's a filthy hovel, but I've got a lot of fond memories of this place. You dad and I used to get our Firewhisky here when we were underage. Aberforth's a grumpy bastard when he wants to be, but he was always good for a drink.”

“Just you and Dad? Not Lupin?” asked Harry.

“Remus,” Sirius corrected, then laughed. “And no, not usually. He was a Prefect, wasn't he? Had to set a good example to the younger kids. We did manage to convince him to join us on occasion, but it took some effort.”

“Have you got your house yet?” asked Harry.

Sirius made a face. “To tell you the truth, I'm not sure if I want to keep Grimmauld Place. I didn't have the happiest time there, but on the other hand, my mum would roll in her grave to know I'd inherited it after all... There's no rush to move in, though, and Remus' place suits me fine. Unless... Have you spoken to your relatives about coming to live with me?”

“Not exactly...”

Sirius nodded understandingly. “Waiting to do it in person?”

“No, it's... Well, you see...” Harry sighed then spoke in a rush. “Severus is adopting me.”

Sirius paused with his glass halfway to his lips. “What?”

“He's adopting me,” Harry winced.

“I heard you. I meant how? And when?” Sirius demanded.

“He's got to take some paperwork to the Ministry, and then we'll be signing everything during the summer, since we need the Dursleys' signatures.”


“Please don't take this the wrong way,” Harry began. “It's just that I know him, and I care about him, and I know he cares about me, too. And you seem really great, but I've only met you three times
now. I know you were best friends with Dad, but I trust Severus.”

A hurt expression flitted over Sirius' face. “And you don't trust me, is that it?”

Harry ran a hand through his hair, knowing he had to tread carefully. “I trust you to want what's best for me. But... I'm not sure if I trust your judgement. You handed me over to Hagrid when my parents were killed, just because Dumbledore said to. And then you forgot about me to go chasing after Pettigrew.”

Sirius shook his head. “Harry, I was in shock! I was grieving, I wasn't thinking straight.”

“Yeah, I get that. I really do. But while you've been in Azkaban for most of my life, Severus has been looking out for me ever since I arrived at Hogwarts.”

“When did you decide all of this?” Sirius asked suspiciously.

“Boxing Day.”

“Boxing Day,” Sirius growled. “A month after I ask if you want to come live with me, Snape offers to adopt you, does he?”

“It wasn't like that,” Harry protested unhappily, ignoring the fact that he'd thought something very similar at the time.

“Really?”

“Really. Look, you don't even trust that I'm telling you the truth about this, how do you expect to live with me?”

“I trust you, just not Snape,” Sirius said quickly.

“Well, it's a good thing that he's not adopting you then, isn't it?”

Sirius shuddered. “I'd like to see him try.”

Harry couldn't help it; he burst out laughing. After a few seconds Sirius joined in with his rough bark of a laugh. Harry eventually stopped and took a sip of his drink.

“It's nothing personal. I do like you, but I think it'd be better for me if I live with Severus. And for you.”

Sirius frowned. “What do you mean by that?”

Harry shrugged. “Just that you've only just been freed. Do you really want to get stuck looking after a kid?”

“Yes. What makes you think that Snape would want to?”

“Because he already does,” Harry said simply.

Sirius waved a hand. “At school, yeah, he's a teacher -”

“Last year he came to get me when I told him I'd run away from the Dursleys. He never once complained about me spending half the summer at his house.”

“Trying to spare your feelings, no doubt,” Sirius said dismissively.
Harry looked at him incredulously. “Does that sound like Severus? Being nice for the sake of being nice?”

Sirius’ eyes lit up and he tried a different tactic. “No, and that's another thing. He's a mean, cruel bastard, Harry.”

“What better to protect me from Voldemort?” Harry shot back.

“His old master, you mean,” Sirius said sharply. “Because he was a Death Eater, Harry, or have you forgotten?”

“No, I haven't forgotten,” Harry said quietly.

“Then how -”

Harry put his drink down, fed up. “Sirius, you're not going to be able to make me change my mind. You can either accept that this is happening and be my godfather, or you can keep fighting me on this and ruin any chance we have of ever having a close relationship.”

Sirius went very still and looked at Harry for a long moment. Harry stared back at him determinedly. Sirius sighed, rolled his eyes and finished his drink. “As long as you don't expect me to have a close relationship with Snape.”

Harry snorted. “I'll settle for the two of you being civil to each other. And yeah, I'll be telling him the same thing.”

“You're as stubborn as Lily was.”

Harry grinned, sensing victory. “Yep.”

Sirius looked down at his glass, then back up at Harry with a grimace. “I'm not happy about this. I doubt I'll ever be happy about this. I can only hope that you will be.”

“I will,” Harry said confidently. “And, er, you need to keep quiet about this for now. You can tell Lupin, but Severus is worried about what Dumbledore might do.”

“I wonder why,” Sirius said darkly, then held up his hands in surrender when Harry glared at him. “Okay. Go ahead with your ridiculous plan. I'll even try to be civil to Snape for your sake,” he pledged sulkily. “But the second he mistreats you, you come straight to me, okay?”

“He won't.”

“Harry.”

“Okay. If he mistreats me – which he won't – I'll come to you.”

“Good,” Sirius said, leaning back in satisfaction.

“So, er, how's Lupin?” Harry asked, desperate to change the subject.

“Remus,” Sirius again corrected him. “He's, well... He's overjoyed that I'm out, of course, but he's not doing too well with his time of the month,” Sirius’ voice dropped to a whisper. “He got used to Snape's Wolfsbane last year, and he's having a rough time going back to his old supplier. Not as good, apparently.”

Harry frowned. “Can't you try someone else?”
“Money's not a problem. It's just hard to find someone who can make it properly. It's got poisonous ingredients in it, you know, so if we bought it from someone dodgy it could make him sick, or even kill him,” Sirius said.

“I'll ask Severus if he can recommend anyone,” Harry offered.

“If you think that'll work,” Sirius said, highly doubtful.

“Can't hurt to ask,” said Harry.

“I suppose,” Sirius conceded, then stood up. “Feel like having a fly on my bike?”

Harry shot to his feet. “Is that a trick question?”

“Come on, then,” Sirius said.

He gave Aberforth a few coins when he walked past him. Outside, he led Harry around the side of the bar to a dingy alley. There, propped against the wall of the building, was a large, shiny black motorbike.

“Cool,” breathed Harry.

Sirius laughed, hopped on and patted the seat behind him. “You'll have to hold on tight.”

Harry jumped on and wrapped his arms around Sirius' waist. “Let's do it!”

Sirius kicked the bike into gear. The engine purred loudly as he steered out into High Street. They slowly skirted around students and puddles before reaching an empty stretch of road leading out of Hogsmeade.

“Don't let go!” Sirius yelled, and opened the throttle.

The bike shot forward with a roar. Once they'd picked up enough speed, Sirius pulled up on the handles and the bike rose into the air. They ascended quickly and had soon put the village behind them.

As they soared over the countryside Harry looked down with awe. While he'd flown this high on his broomstick, that had always been on the grounds of Hogwarts or Malfoy Manor. For the first time, he had a spectacular view of the land surrounding Hogwarts. Apart from Hogsmeade, it was devoid of human settlements. There were tall, craggy mountains that gave way grudgingly to flatter terrain on the other side of Hogsmeade, where the train station was situated. The train tracks disappeared down south, running through moors and over a river.

“You up to doing some tricks?” Sirius called over his shoulder.

“Yeah!” Harry shouted back.

Sirius laughed again and pulled the bike into a large, vertical loop. Harry tightened his grip as he looked straight up at the ground far below him. Sirius pulled out of the loop and swung around back to Hogsmeade. He dove down in a tight corkscrew before straightening out to fly low over the rooftops of the village. The students in the streets below pointed up at the bike and Harry grinned down at them until the sound of shouting reached him.

Hermione and Pansy were standing in the middle of High Street facing off against Skeeter. Draco and Millicent appeared to be trying to push Hermione away from the reporter as a photographer
captured the whole thing.

“Can you land right now?” Harry called.

Sirius nodded and eased up on the throttle. The bike slowed down as they descended, and Sirius landed them roughly on the side of the road.

“Never was that great at landing this thing,” he said carelessly.

Harry hopped off and glanced over at his friends. “That was really fun, but I think they need my help over there.”

Sirius looked over Harry's shoulder and smiled dangerously. “Excellent, I've been wanting to have a little chat with Skeeter.”

They marched over and stood behind Draco, who had a hold of Hermione's waist.

“You foul, loathsome little cockroach!” she was shouting at Skeeter, while trying to wriggle free of Draco's grip.

Skeeter's eyebrows twitched slightly. “You don't know what you're talking about, you idiot chit.”

“I know that you enjoy ruining people's lives for your own amusement,” Hermione spat back at her.


“You don't write gossip, you write slander,” Pansy joined in. “And I'm going to make sure that my mum – the editor of *Witch Weekly* – never publishes a single word you write again!”

“Please, I write for the *Daily Prophet* now. I think *Witch Weekly* is beneath me,” Skeeter said contemptuously.

“That's funny, I always thought that gutter trash like you is the lowest anyone can get,” Sirius said.

The group turned to look at him in surprise, having been too caught up in the argument to hear him and Harry approach.

Skeeter found her voice first. “Harry! And Sirius Black! What a pleasant surprise! Fancy a little chat?”


Skeeter turned her attention to Sirius. “How about you? Drinks are on me.”

“Sure,” Sirius growled. “In fact, why don't you come back to my place? It'll be just the two of us, with no one to interrupt. We can have a nice little chat about why you're writing all these lies about my godson.”

Skeeter flinched at Sirius' tone. “Actually, Bozo and I really should be getting back to the office. I'll see you around, I'm sure!”

With that, she Apparated away. The photographer followed her a few seconds later.

“That was fun,” Sirius said brightly.

“Do you really think you should be threatening her like that?” Draco asked. “You don't want her
Sirius shrugged. “I spent twelve years alone with the dementors, she doesn't scare me.”

“She'll be going after Hermione next, anyway,” Pansy said.

Hermione finally pulled free from Draco. “I'm a Muggle-born, she can't possibly try to say that I'm going to become the next Dark Lord!”

“She'll think of something, just you wait,” Pansy predicted darkly. “Milly, let's go back to the Three Broomsticks. I need to spend the next half hour talking to Rosmerta about what just happened. That woman lives for gossip.”

“Sure. Your shout,” Millicent said.

They headed back into the pub. As Harry watched them leave, he thought he saw a gold sparkly sandal slipping around the corner of the building. He narrowed his eyes but didn't say anything about it.

“Why's she going to go after you?” he asked Hermione instead.

Draco laughed. “Because she started yelling at Skeeter in the middle of the Three Broomsticks, and got them both thrown out. Made quite the scene.”

Harry groaned. “Hermione...”

“No, sorry, Harry, but I've had it with her. Come on!” Hermione set off at a brisk walk.

“Where are we going?” Harry called after her.

“Hagrid's!” she replied without breaking stride.

Harry turned back to Sirius. “I better go after her. Sorry.”

“I understand,” Sirius assured him. “Good luck with the next task. Send me an owl if you need any help.”

“Sure,” Harry agreed.

Sirius hugged Harry and clapped Draco on the shoulder. “Go catch up to Hermione.”

“Say hi to Remus for me!” Harry called as he and Draco jogged off after Hermione.

She was walking so fast that she already past the outskirts of Hogsmeade by the time they caught up to her.

“What are we doing at Hagrid's?” Harry panted.

“Dragging him back to society. He can't let that horrid Skeeter woman win. I won't let him!”

She broke into a run, all the way to Hagrid's cabin, with both boys following on her heels. The curtains were all still drawn, but there was smoke issuing from the chimney. Fang started barking at their approach and Hermione banged on the front door.

“Hagrid, open up! We know you're in there! You can't let that hack scare you into hiding! Nobody cares who your mum was! I'll break down this door if you don't -”
Hermione snapped her mouth shut when the door opened to reveal Dumbledore on the threshold.

“Good afternoon,” he said mildly.

“We wanted to speak to Hagrid, sir,” she said nervously.

“So I gathered. Please, come in,” Dumbledore said. His eyes twinkled as he stepped aside.

Fang jumped up to lick Hermione and Harry as soon as they entered, before jumping up on Draco. He sat down heavily in the nearest chair and Fang half climbed into his lap, tail wagging madly. Harry sat next to Draco and looked at Hagrid in concern. His eyes were red and swollen from crying and he was clutching a large mug of tea like a lifeline.

“Hi, Hagrid,” Harry said tentatively.

“Hullo,” Hagrid croaked back.

Dumbledore closed the door and moved over to the table. “Did you happen to hear what Miss Granger was shouting, Hagrid?”

Hermione went pink and Hagrid grunted something indecipherable.

“Hermione, Harry and Draco all still want to know you, if their threats to enter your cabin by force are any indication,” Dumbledore continued.

“Of course we do!” Harry said earnestly. “You don’t think we’d pay any attention to that bitch of a – er, sorry, Professor,” he said to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore rubbed an ear. “I’m sorry, did you say something, Harry? I seem to have rather a build up of ear wax all of a sudden.”

“Right,” Harry said with an anxious laugh. “I meant – Hagrid, why would we care what that article said? We don’t care if you’re half-giant.”

“You see, Hagrid?” Dumbledore asked. “These three students are standing by you. I have shown you the many letters I’ve received from the parents of other students, remembering you from their own days here, telling me that under no circumstances would I get away with sacking -”

“Not all of ’em said that,” Hagrid interrupted.

“Of course not,” Dumbledore said sharply. “You will always have those who dislike you, as everyone does. I myself receive a constant stream of disapproving letters from those unhappy with the way I run Hogwarts. Should I sequester myself in my office any time I get a terse letter informing me of my failings?”

Hagrid shook his head. “’S different. Yer not half-giant.”

“Who cares what your mum was like?” Harry asked angrily. “You know what my relatives are like!”

“And mine,” Draco added.

Dumbledore nodded. “Every family has a black sheep or two, Hagrid – though my brother Aberforth would perhaps be better described as the black goat of my family. He too received some unwanted publicity when he was prosecuted for performing inappropriate charms on a goat, but he didn’t allow it to drive him into hiding.”
“Please, Hagrid, come back to teach. We miss you,” Hermione begged.

Two fat tears ran down Hagrid's cheeks and he took a large gulp of tea.

Dumbledore stood up. “I refuse to allow you to resign over this, Hagrid. You will return to work on Monday, and begin taking meals in the Great Hall as of breakfast tomorrow. Good day to you all.”

He left the cabin quietly. Hagrid covered his face with his hands as he kept crying. Hermione began patting him on the arm until he dropped his hands and looked around at them.

“Great man, Dumbledore, great man,” he said hoarsely.

“Er, yeah,” said Harry.

“He's right, too. I've bin stupid 'bout this whole thing. I haven't copped it as bad as you have, eh, Harry? Me dad would've bin dead unhappy with me... Here, I've got a picture of him...”

He stood up unsteadily and walked over to a chest of drawers from which he pulled a photo. He handed it to Harry who looked at it curiously. Hagrid's dad had been remarkably short. He was depicted sitting on the shoulder of Hagrid, who looked to be around eleven or twelve, but was already well over six feet tall. Despite the size difference, they had the same friendly black eyes and smiles.

“That was taken just after I got inter Hogwarts. Dad'd bin worried I wouldn't get in, cause of me mum, see. I was always a lousy student, o' course, but Dad didn't care 'bout that, just so long as I was happy. Then he died in me second year, before I got expelled. For the best, I 'spect, he would've hated ter see that. Then, o' course, Dumbledore got me the job here... Great man.” Hagrid paused to blow his nose and then smiled at Harry. “Yeh know, yeh reminded me a bit 'o meself when I first met yeh. No parents, worried 'bout fittin' in at Hogwarts. And now yer the school champion! I hope yeh win, Harry, I really do. It'd show 'em all, wouldn't it? How're yeh gettin' on with that egg o' yours?”

“Great, actually,” Harry said, grinning at him. “Draco figured out that the clue was in Mermish, so we got it translated pretty quickly.”

Hagrid patted Draco on his back, nearly pushing him face first into the table. “Good on yeh, Draco.”

“Thank you,” he said, straightening his scarf.

“So what's the clue tell yeh?” Hagrid asked.

Harry quickly recited the clue for him. “So I've got a few spells I need to learn for it, but I should be set, apart from the giant squid.”

“Ah, it won't bother yeh,” Hagrid said breezily.

“Are you sure about that?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, it's a friendly little thing. Haven't yeh ever seen it playin' in the shallows before?”

“Yeah, but this is a bit different,” Harry said.

“Hogswash. Yeh'll be fine, Harry,” Hagrid said confidently.

Harry didn't have the heart to press the matter any further, not when Hagrid was finally cheering up. He hoped Severus was having more luck finding out about the squid's whereabouts during the task.
Having Hagrid claim a giant animal was “friendly” didn't exactly do anything to allay Harry's fears about being eaten. Nonetheless, both he and Draco were in a good mood when they left Hagrid. Only Hermione was still put out.

“I hope your mum figures out something to do about that awful woman, Draco, and soon!” she fumed.

Draco put his arm around her shoulders. “She will, don't worry. She's got Dobby stalking her, for a start.”

“I thought I saw his sandals!” Harry cried.

“There's no mistaking them,” Draco agreed. “In the meantime, has anyone ever told you that you're scary when you're mad, Granger?”

Hermione gave a very unsettling smile. “Thank you.”
When the bell rang at the end of Potions on Wednesday morning Harry stayed back as the rest of the class filed out.

“I'll see you in Defence,” he told Draco when he looked back from the doorway. Draco nodded and walked out.

Severus frowned at Harry. “Did you have a question about the anti-venom? I thought you understood the theory.”

“No, I got that,” Harry said. “I wanted to let you know that I spoke to Sirius in Hogsmeade. About the adoption.”

Severus slowly sat down behind his desk. “I see. So you've decided to take him up on his offer after all, have you?”


“What do you mean?”

“I mean, he's not happy about it and tried to talk me out of it, but I managed to convince him not to fight me on this. I even got him to say he'll try to be civil to you,” Harry said proudly.

Surprise flickered across Severus' face. “Indeed. Forgive me if I'm sceptical about his ability to follow through on that last point.”

“Yeah, well, I think he'll at least try. And...”

“And you wish for me to make a similar promise,” Severus guessed.

“Er, yeah...” Harry smiled nervously.

“Very well. I give you my word that I will do my best on that account.”

“Thanks. Because the thing is, he told me that Remus is having a hard time without your Wolfsbane. His old supplier isn't as good as you are by the sounds of things. I thought maybe you could recommend someone he could buy it from.”

Severus pulled a piece of parchment towards him and scribbled a name on it. “Give him this. She is a competent brewer. She is also disgustingly cheerful.”

“I don't think that'll be a problem for Remus,” Harry said as he accepted the parchment.

“She uses that cheerfulness to mask the fact that she is ruthless at negotiating the best deal for herself,” Severus explained.
“Got it. Thanks. Oh, and I haven't had a chance to try to talk to Fleur, but Viktor told Hermione that he hasn't been offered help by either Moody or Bagman.”

Severus nodded. “I didn't think he would have been. Don't worry about it for the time being. Your energies are better off being put towards preparing for the next task.”

********

The following Saturday, Harry and Draco returned to the dorm after lunch to practise Sticking Charms. They sat down on Draco's bed with a pile of books and pulled the curtains shut, since they hadn't told any of their friends what the second task would consist of. They weren't worried about Theo or Blaise, but didn't trust Greg or Vince not to accidentally blab, and it get back to one of the other champions.

“Make sure you use the Temporary Sticking Charm and not the Permanent Sticking Charm,” Draco warned.

“That was one time, Malfoy,” Harry protested.

“And you're lucky you didn't have your wand in your hand,” Draco retorted.

Harry rolled his eyes and stacked two books in front of him and pointed his wand at them. “Adhaereo temporalis.” He picked up the top book and grinned when the bottom book clung to its back cover. He gave them a shake, and the bottom book dropped to the bed.

“Again,” Draco ordered.

Harry spent the next hour practising the charm. When he was able to stick the whole pile of books together and couldn't shake them apart, Draco declared them done for the day.

“Finite incantatem,” he said, waving his wand over the pile. He pushed all but one of them onto the floor and sat back against his pillows. “You can practise with your glasses tomorrow. Right now, I think I should teach you some Mermish. It might come in handy.”

“Okay,” Harry said slowly.

Draco flipped through the book on his lap, searching for something useful. “No... Too hard... Here we go. This means 'I'm lost'.” He made several screeching sounds then looked at Harry expectantly. “Your turn.”

Harry copied him.

“No, no, no!” Draco cried. “You sound like a dying seagull.”

“I'm no good with languages. Not like you are,” Harry said.

“It should be more of an 'e' sound. Like this,” Draco demonstrated again.

Harry tried to shape his mouth the way Draco had.

Draco winced a bit. “That was better but still atrocious.”

“Could you two keep it down? Or better yet, leave?” came Blaise's peevish voice.

“Sorry, we didn't know anyone else was in here,” Harry said, then stuck his head out of the bed
curtains. His eyes widened. “Sorry!” He yanked the curtain shut and looked at Draco. “There's a boy in Blaise's bed!” he whispered.

Draco raised his eyes upwards. “Merlin, has Crabbe gotten confused about which bed is his again? I thought we'd drummed that into him in second year.”

Harry shook his head. “No, Draco. There's a boy. In Blaise's bed. With. Blaise!”

“What?”

“I think he's from Durmstrang,” Harry mused.

“What?”

“Yeah, that muscly one with the light brown hair. What's his name? Nicholas?”

“Who?”

“Well, it was kinda hard to tell since Blaise was lying on top of him!” Harry said defensively.

Draco blinked at him then lunged for the curtain. He withdrew his head a moment later. “Damn, they've got the curtains shut.”

“We should go,” Harry said.

“What? No! I want to see who it is!” Draco whispered furiously.

“Draco. If we leave them alone now, we can use this to get Blaise to leave us alone when we want some privacy,” Harry said pointedly.

“We should go,” Draco said at once.

“You don't say,” drawled Harry.

They retreated to the common room to start their Charms essays. If Draco was hoping Blaise would emerge with the Durmstrang boy soon, he was sorely disappointed. Dinner was almost over by the time Blaise and his new friend sat down at the end of the Slytherin table together. Draco kept darting glances down the table at them until Harry dragged him back to the dorm. He tried to engage Draco in a game of chess, but he was so distracted that Harry was actually winning when Blaise walked into the room.

“There you are! What was that all about?” Draco stood up abruptly.

“What was what about?” Theo asked, walking in behind Blaise.

“He,” Draco pointed at Blaise, “spent the afternoon in bed with a boy from Durmstrang!”

Theo raised his eyebrows and looked at Blaise.

“So?” Blaise asked.

“So, how come you're having sex with a boy when you've spent the last few years working your way through all the girls here?” demanded Draco.

“We didn't have sex,” Blaise said. “Why would you assume that?”
“Because it's you!” Draco shot back.

“We haven't had sex,” Blaise repeated quietly. When Draco just looked disbelievingly at him, Blaise huffed angrily. “Look, we just kissed a bit, okay? Can we stop talking about this now?”

“What happened to the girl from Beauxbatons?” Harry asked.

Blaise shrugged. “Was never going to last, and then Nikolaj and I started spending some time together and he's hot, so why not?”

“Because you're straight?” Theo suggested.

“Mostly, yeah,” Blaise shrugged again.

Draco narrowed his eyes. “But... If you're into boys, how come you've never had a go at Harry or me?”

Blaise chuckled. “You're not my type, Draco.”

“You have a type?” Harry asked in genuine confusion. As far as he could see, the only thing that the girls Blaise dated had in common was, well, Blaise.

“Yeah, conscious,” Theo muttered, causing them both to snigger.

Draco ignored them both. “What about Harry then?”

Blaise shrugged. “If he didn't have an insanely jealous boyfriend, sure.”

“Really?” Harry asked, flattered.

“Fuck off, Zabini,” Draco said, moving closer to Harry.

Blaise just laughed. “Relax, Draco, I'm not going to try anything. Besides, I don't think I could actually date a boy. I'd miss tits too much.”

The others laughed at that, even Draco.

Theo clapped his hands once. “There, you see, Draco? You don't have to worry about Blaise hitting on Harry, because Harry hasn't got boobs. It's all good.”

“That wasn't -”

“Pretty narrow-minded, Malfoy,” Blaise said, though he was still grinning.

“Sorry,” Draco muttered.

Theo looked around the room warily. “How about a game of poker?”

“Sounds good,” Harry said swiftly, glad to change the subject.

They sat down next to one of the fireplaces and Theo began shuffling the cards. Blaise looked at Harry and Draco curiously.

“So, what do you do when you're snogging and you both get a boner? I mean, they sort of get in each other's way, don't they? What's the etiquette for picking a side?”

Harry let out an embarrassed giggle.
“If you're Harry, freak out and push your boyfriend off you,” muttered Draco.

“That happened once, you git!” Harry cried, going bright red. “And I was kinda drunk at the time!”

“Aw, bit shy are we?” Blaise said, putting an arm around Harry and knuckling his head.

Harry sighed. It was going to be a long game of poker.

********

Later that week Hedwig arrived at breakfast with Narcissa's reply.

Dear Harry,

Sorry it's taken me so long to reply, but I've been extremely busy with my little project. You'll forgive me, as I believe I am about to make some significant progress on that account.

As for your other query, I think the best thing you can do is to allow Severus to investigate this. The last thing you want to do is to antagonise Moody unnecessarily. I have asked Kingsley about him, though I refrained from directly mentioning you or the Tournament. Kingsley found him to be a competent Auror, though his leadership as Head Auror was less than stellar, given Moody's increasing paranoia and unpredictability. He does, however, have a fondness for rules and fair play, so his offers to you and Diggory are most unusual.

In short, Harry, tread carefully. I do not know what game he is playing, but I don't trust it. Good luck with the next task.

Love,

Narcissa

On their way down to Herbology, Harry relayed the contents of the letter to Draco, who nodded. “I thought as much. Hey, Blaise!”

Blaise stopped in front of them. “What?”

“How's it going with that boy, Nikolaj?” Draco asked.

A wary look settled on Blaise's face. “Why?”

“Well...” Draco waited for Tracey and Theo to walk past them, leaving him alone with Blaise and Harry. “If you're sick of him, I was wondering if you'd thought about going for Fleur.”

“Why?” Blaise repeated, completely baffled.

Draco lowered his voice. “Because Moody's offered to help Harry and Cedric with the Tournament, but not Viktor. We want to know if he's offered help to Fleur or not, but we need an in with her.”

Blaise grimaced. “I'd like an in with her too, believe me, but it's not going to happen. Been there, tried that, got rebuffed for that Ravenclaw tosser.”

Harry looked at him in surprise. “She turned you down?”


“Because it's weird. You know what he's like in class to most of us, but he wants to help me cheat?”
“You think he wants to catch you cheating or something?”

“I don't know,” Harry admitted. “Maybe?”

“Well, I'd like to help, but I can't,” Blaise said apologetically. “But hey, you could always dob in Diggory for cheating.”

Harry and Draco looked at each other guiltily.

Blaise caught them and laughed. “Oh, so you've been cheating yourself, have you? I won't tell anyone, I swear.”

“You better not,” Draco said threateningly.

“Why would I? I want Harry to win just as much as you do. Plus, he's up against someone who rejected me! That never happens,” Blaise said sullenly.

“Except for Daphne,” Harry couldn't help pointing out.

“Yeah, well, she's a special case. And I think I can wear her down.”

“What makes you think that?” asked Draco with a laugh.

“Because I'm hot and an incredibly good kisser,” Blaise said smugly.

“And how's she going to know that if she refuses to kiss you?” asked Draco.

“Well... Harry could always tell her how good I am,” Blaise winked at Harry, then laughed when Draco grabbed Harry's hand possessively. “You're far too easy, Draco.”

Harry laughed too. “Luckily for me.”

Draco scowled. “You both suck.”

“Do you, Harry?” Blaise asked. “I haven't, personally, but I'd never say never.”

There was a beat before Harry got his meaning. “Piss off, Zabini.”

Blaise just laughed again. “This whole shy act's pretty cute, you know.”

Draco sped up, pulling Harry along, Blaise's laughter following them all the way to the greenhouse.

*******

The approach of the second task didn't have Harry nearly as worried as the first one had. With the help of both Draco and Hermione he'd practised Sticking and Impervius Charms until he'd mastered both of them. The only thing he was concerned about was the possibility of meeting the giant squid underwater. None of the other champions seemed that bothered. Harry was pretty sure they would have all worked out their clues by now, so he assumed it was just that none of them had ever seen the squid close up like the Slytherins regularly did.

The night before the task McGonagall walked up to the Slytherin table at dinner with Hermione and Cho right behind her.

“Mr Malfoy, I need you to accompany me to my office,” she said gravely.
“Yes, ma'am,” he said, rising to his feet.

“I wonder what that's about,” Harry said after they'd left. Surely they weren't in trouble for helping him with the egg. Cho had nothing to do with that and besides, Severus would've said something to him if that was the case.

“Don't worry about that. You need to make sure you're prepared for tomorrow,” Tracey said firmly.

“I am,” he assured her.

After dinner he sat in the common room with his friends, staring out the window into the lake as they chattered around him. He looked up when he heard his name.

“Snape wants to see you in his office,” Hayley said. “You better hurry, he sounded angry.”

Harry pushed down the apprehension that rose up in him. “Thanks.”

Hayley nodded and turned to the rest of the group. “Who wants a bet on tomorrow's task?”

There was a flurry as they all searched their pockets for money. Harry walked to Severus' office quickly.

“Enter,” Severus said when Harry knocked.

He walked in to find Severus behind his desk with two cups of tea in front of him. Harry sat down with more than a little sense of foreboding. He picked up his cup and sipped it as he waited for Severus to speak.

“Firstly, you won't be encountering the giant squid tomorrow. As we speak, Hagrid is corralling it into an enclosure in an out of the way section of the lake,” Severus began.

“Thank Merlin for that,” Harry said in relief, then frowned when Severus looked at him grimly. “What is it?”

“Keep in mind that what has been taken from you for the task will suffer no harm if you are unable to complete the task,” Severus said.

A chill swept over Harry at Severus' tone. “Hedwig?”

Severus shook his head. “Draco.”

Harry stared at him in horror. “What?”

“The organisers have taken hostages, not possessions,” Severus explained. “The Headmaster is putting them into an enchanted sleep in Minerva’s office tonight. They won't be aware of anything until they resurface from the lake tomorrow.”

“So that's what they – oh, god, Hermione too?” Harry asked.

“She is Krum's hostage,” Severus confirmed.

Harry closed his eyes. First he'd been entered into this Tournament against his will, and now both Draco and Hermione had been dragged in too.

“Harry. They will be in no real danger,” Severus said.
Harry opened his eyes unhappily. “You promise?”

“Yes. If any champion is unable to reach them before the hour is up, they will be retrieved by Dumbledore afterwards,” Severus said. “Now, how confident are you with the necessary charms?”

“Great,” Harry said hollowly.

“Good. Here,” Severus handed over a jar containing a mass of slimy, greenish-grey weeds. “This Gillyweed will last you over an hour. You will know it has come into effect when you can no longer breathe above water. Dive immediately and you will be able to inhale through your mouth and exhale through your gills.”

“Okay,” Harry said, looking at the Gillyweed with distaste.

“You will need to cut Draco free from whatever bonds they use,” Severus continued.

“Sirius gave me a knife that can cut through any rope,” Harry offered.

“That will suffice. The merpeople's village is in the centre of the lake. If you swim in a straight line you should have no difficulty reaching it.”

“Okay.”

“Harry. You will be fine, as will all four hostages.”

Harry met Severus' dark eyes and wished he felt half so calm. He nodded mutely.

“You should get to bed. An early night is all you need now. Oh, and wear a watch tomorrow, to keep track of how long you've been underwater. If you're reaching the end of the hour and haven't found the hostages, rise to the surface immediately.”

Harry nodded again. “Thanks,” he said once he'd found his voice.

“You'll be fine,” Severus repeated.

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After a fitful sleep filled with nightmares of drowning with Draco and Hermione – and worse, of them drowning alone because Harry couldn't reach them in time – Harry got up early and sat on his bed in the quiet dorm. He looked across at Draco's empty bed and grimaced. He'll be okay, he told himself, Severus wouldn't lie to you. They'll both be okay.

To distract himself he got up to pull on his clothes for the task. He didn't fancy swimming in the cold lake in just his bathers, so he pulled on some track pants and a t-shirt, with a hoody over the top. He strapped his watch on tightly, slipped Sirius' knife and the Gillyweed into some pockets, and pulled out his Walkman.

He sat on the floor next to one of the windows, cheek against the cold glass as he watched the fish swim past and waited for his friends to wake up. He had to change tapes when “Black” came on, as it reminded him too much of Draco. Trying not to think of Draco and Hermione tied up at the bottom of the lake, Harry turned up when the volume when Nevermind began to play.

After what felt like an eternity Theo got up. When he'd dressed he came and sat down in front of Harry.
“You ready for today?” he asked.

Harry turned off his Walkman. “Yeah.”

Theo studied him curiously. “You seem a lot calmer this time around.”

“I'm fully prepared this time,” Harry said.

“And you're not facing a dragon this time,” Theo pointed out.

“No,” Harry said with a relieved smile.

“Ha! We knew you knew about that beforehand!” Theo crowed.

Harry winced. “How? And who is 'we’?”

“Tracey and I could tell you were terrified. Seemed pretty obvious once we'd seen the dragons that you must've known what you were up against.” Theo said.

“Great,” Harry moaned.

“We won't tell, don't worry. Far as I see it, you didn't ask to be in this thing, so you can use whatever means necessary to avoid an unpleasant death,” Theo said.

Harry laughed. “Thanks.”

The others began to stir then, and when they were all dressed they headed up to breakfast together. Just like during the first task, everyone was wearing their Slytherin scarves, though as classes were cancelled for the day, they were all in casual clothes.

“Where's Draco?” Pansy asked when the boys sat down to breakfast.

“He's with Hermione. They'll be there for the task.” Harry said. He had a feeling that he probably shouldn't know about the hostages if he hadn't been cheating, and technically, he wasn't lying.

Pansy seemed satisfied with that. “So what do you have to do today?”

“I'm not going to spoil the surprise,” was all Harry said.

He busied himself buttering his toast as Pansy immediately began speculating with Tracey. He'd spent so long practising the charms he needed for today that he felt pretty confident. Apart from a gnawing fear of something happening to Draco or Hermione underwater, he wasn't much more nervous than he usually was before a Quidditch match, and was able to eat a normal breakfast.

At quarter past nine Severus, Sprout, Maxime and Karkaroff all got up from the staff table and headed towards the champions.

“Time to go, Harry,” Severus said.

His friends all wished him luck, as did the rest of Slytherin as he walked between the Slytherin and Ravenclaw tables on his way out of the Great Hall. Once out in the grounds Severus slowed his steps so that he and Harry soon fell behind the rest of the group.

“You are prepared?” he asked quietly.

Harry patted his pockets: the knife and Gillyweed were still there. “All set.”
“Good. Remember, begin your ascent immediately when you've been underwater an hour. The Gillyweed will only last for a few minutes more. Enough time to reach the surface safely, but not if you continue to search for Draco,” Severus continued.

“Got it,” Harry said.

They stopped talking after that and soon caught up to the other champions, who were all likewise silent. Harry suspected that was more to do with the fact that no one wanted to give away that they'd had further help on this task, rather than the oppressive nerves that had heralded the first task.

The stands that had been erected for the first task had been moved to the far of the Black Lake. As they drew nearer Harry could make out that the golden judges' table was sitting on the bank in front of the seats. Dumbledore, Bagman and Percy were already waiting next to it, though Crouch was yet to arrive. Maxime and Karkaroff joined them and Severus returned to the castle with Sprout, leaving the four champions huddled together in the cool morning air.

“Anyone else really not looking forward to swimming in there today?” Cedric asked wryly.

“It's not so bad,” Viktor replied.

“I'm with you,” Harry told Cedric. “The windows in the Slytherin common room look out into the lake and it always looks freezing this time of year.”

“You didn't see any of the preparations for today, did you?”

Harry couldn't tell if Cedric was accusing him of cheating, or just genuinely curious. “Nah, just the usual fish.”

Cedric nodded and the conversation died. The rest of the school were making their way down the lawn to the stands. Harry checked his watch; only ten minutes to go now. The spectators took their seats noisily.

When the last of the stragglers were sitting down, Bagman broke away from the rest of the judges and headed over to the champions. “Time to get into position!”

“Shouldn't we wait for Mr Crouch?” Cedric asked.

“Barty's still unwell, unfortunately, but not to worry, we've got Percy Weasley filling in for him,” Bagman said, not losing any of his enthusiasm. “I'll get you to line up on the bank now, ten feet apart.”

Harry moved to the end of the line next to Viktor, who was stripping down to his bathers. Bagman came over and moved him a little further away. “Got a plan, Harry?”

“Yeah,” Harry said warily. Just what was Bagman's game?

“Good, good,” Bagman beamed at him then returned to the judges' table where the rest of the judges were taking their seats.

“Good luck,” Harry called quietly to Viktor.

“And to you,” he replied.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Bagman's magically amplified voice boomed around the lake. “Our champions are assembled and waiting for my whistle! They have exactly one hour to find and
retrieve from the bottom of this lake something they each hold dear. On three! One... Two... Three!”

At the whistle Harry pulled out the jar of Gillyweed and opened it. It didn't look anymore appealing than the last time he'd looked at it. He screwed up his face and shoved the weed into his mouth. It was cold, slimy and rubbery, and tasted somewhat like limp lettuce. As he chewed he set the jar on the ground, pulled off his shoes and socks and put them next to it.

“**Impervius,**” he said around the Gillyweed in his mouth, running his wand over his clothes. He aimed another Impervius Charm at his watch, then pointed his wand at his glasses. “*Adhaereo temporalis.*”

He jiggled his glasses experimentally. When they didn't move, he put his wand in his pocket and began wading out into the lake. He was up to mid-thigh by the time he swallowed the last of the Gillyweed. There was a pause as he waited for it to come into effect.

All of a sudden he found it difficult to breathe. A split second later he felt a sharp pain on either side of his neck and he dove forward into the water. The first breathe of water felt indescribably alien to him, but he relaxed as he breathed out through his gills. He spared a glance at his webbed hands and feet and began to swim.

He rose back to the surface to get his bearings. A slight twist to the left aimed him at the centre of the lake and he dove back underwater. It was eerily silent underneath the surface, with his own breathing and swimming the only sounds. There was no sign of any of the other champions, but then he was still quite high up in the water.

He descended further. He noticed vaguely that the water was now a lot warmer than before he'd taken the Gillyweed, and he could see through the murky water a lot more easily than from the common room windows. The landscape was different here. Outside the Slytherin windows, the lake bed was muddy with the occasional boulder. Here he was swimming through a patch of dark green, almost black weeds. Once or twice he brushed a slimy tendril, and rose up slightly in the water. He swam through a small school of silver fish, over an empty mud flat, and found himself swimming over a different, lighter green weed.

He'd almost reached the other side of the weed when he felt something grab his ankle. He looked down to see a grindylow grinning at him, almost the exact colour of the weeds. Harry's heart sank. He'd been so focused on the giant squid and the merpeople that he'd forgotten that the small water demons also lived in the Black Lake. He cast his mind back to what Remus had told the class last year.

“Break his grip,” Harry muttered, though it emerged as a stream of bubbles.

He twisted in the grindylow's grip and reached for the floor, where there were rocks scattered amongst the weeds. He grabbed the biggest he could reach, curled up so his knees were near his face, and brought the rock down on the grindylow's fingers – hard.

The grindylow let go of his ankle and Harry quickly kicked hard, shooting up a couple of metres above the weeds. The grindylow glared at him but didn't come after him, too busy massaging its bruised fingers. Just to be on the safe side, Harry got his wand out of his pocket – nearly dropping it with his clumsy, webbed hands – before continuing forwards.

The weeds gradually disappeared, giving way to dark mud. Harry was careful to keep his distance this time. While the Gillyweed helped, it was so murky this far under the surface that his visibility was still very poor, and he didn't want to find out the hard way what might be lurking in the mud.
He kept swimming in what he hoped was a straight line — it was hard to tell now that there were no landmarks — and checked his watch. He still had half an hour left before he needed to surface. It sounded like plenty of time, but the fact that he hadn’t come across the hostages, merpeople or even the other champions was beginning to unnerve him.

Finally, he heard something through the overbearing silence. He put on a burst of speed, and was soon able to make out the eerie song of the merpeople. He followed the sound, and before long the mud began to contain rocks. Small at first, they grew in size as he passed over them. The largest had primitive paintings on them, depicting merpeople fighting the giant squid with spears. Friendly, my arse, he thought. *I'm telling Hagrid about this next time I see him.*

All of a sudden he found himself in a sort of underwater street. There were crude houses on both sides of him. Peering in through the dark windows, he saw merpeople darting about inside. They didn't look anything like the mermaid from the Prefects' bathroom. Grey-skinned, they had long, wild, green hair and yellow eyes the same colour as their jagged teeth. They watched him closely as he swam past, some swimming out of their homes, clutching spears. Harry tightened his grip on his wand as he kept going.

The houses became larger and more elaborate. Some had gardens made of weeds, and one or two even had pet grindylows tied to stakes. Then he saw something that made him come to a dead stop. Propped against the wall of the fanciest house he'd seen yet, was a portrait of Lockhart. It seemed he hadn't managed to retrieve all that Peeves had thrown into the lake at the end of Harry's second year.

Portrait Lockhart didn't look very happy. A swarm of young merpeople were gathered around the frame, poking at Lockhart and giggling. From the way Lockhart ducked away from their hands, Harry could tell he wasn't fond of this sort of attention. Harry laughed, emitting a cloud of bubbles that caught the attention of the children. They forgot the painting and stared unabashedly at Harry, who waved and swum on.

He stopped again when he rounded a corner. He'd come to what seemed to be the village square. There was a choir there, singing the song that had called Harry towards the place. About fifty other merpeople were floating in front of a large, roughly carved statue of a merperson. Tied to the tail of the statue were Draco, Hermione, Cho, and a little girl with silvery-blonde hair who Harry bet was Fleur's sister. All four of them were in a deep sleep, their heads drooping onto each other's shoulders and swaying slightly with the movement of the water.

Harry swam over cautiously, keeping an eye on the armed merpeople surrounding him. They allowed him to reach the hostages unmolested. Harry pocketed his wand, pulled out his knife and fumbled it slightly with his webbed hands, but managed to open up the right attachment. It sliced through the thick rope like it was a blade of grass and then Harry was pulling Draco away from the statue.

Harry looked behind him — there was still no sign of any of the other champions. He looked back at Hermione's unconscious face, which was a corpse-like grey in the water. He could hear Severus telling him the hostages would be in no real danger. Harry looked at the surrounding merpeople, then back at Hermione. He couldn't leave her down here.

Mind made up, Harry let go of Draco, who bobbed gently in the water, and raised the knife to her bonds. Four mermen grabbed his arms and pulled him away from her. They were rough but not malicious; three of them were laughing.

The other frowned at Harry. “*Take your own hostage. Leave the others.*”

“No!” Harry shouted futilely.
“You take your own friend,” the merman continued.

Harry pointed at Hermione. “She’s my friend too!”

The mermen just laughed again at the stream of bubbles leaving his lips and pulled him further away from the hostages. Harry twisted his wrist to look at his watch. Less than twenty minutes left. He was struggling again to free himself when the crowd around him started shouting excitedly and he was let go abruptly. He spun around in the water to see Cedric swimming towards him. His head was encased in a large bubble.

“Go! The others are coming!” he mouthed at Harry. He pulled his own knife out, cut Cho free and quickly began dragging her to the surface.

Harry looked back to where Cedric had come from, but there was still no sign of Viktor or Fleur. He scowled stubbornly and turned back to Hermione.

“Leave her!” the same merman told him.

Harry wracked his brain trying to remember the Mermish Draco had taught him. A stream of bubbles burst out, along with a screech. He tried again. “No!”

The merpeople looked surprised to understand him. Harry tried to recall more of the Mermish he'd learnt.

“Mine,” he said, pointing at Draco, then pointing at Hermione. “And mine!”

“You can only take one. Him,” the merman said, jerking his thumb at Draco.

“No,” Harry snarled, whipping his wand out and aiming it at each merperson in turn.

The merpeople backed off, and he darted over to Hermione. A few seconds later and Harry was guiding her over next to Draco. He grabbed both of them by the collars of their robes, then turned back to look at the little girl.

She looked impossibly young, tied up all alone down here. Harry sighed, releasing another stream of bubbles, and let go of his friends to swim back over to the girl. He’d just raised the knife to her rope when startled screams behind him made him turn around once again.

He nearly had a heart attack when he saw the shark charging straight at him. Then he saw that the shark’s head was attached to a skinny body in bathers: Viktor. He headed towards the statue and stopped when he saw Hermione already free. The fearsome head turned to Harry in what he assumed was surprise. Viktor shrugged, grabbed Hermione around the waist with one hand, then beckoned Harry with his other.

Harry shook his head stubbornly and pointed to the little girl. Viktor hesitated then nodded. Harry quickly cut the girl free and dragged her over to the others. He put his arm around Draco’s waist, Viktor clasped the girl’s other hand, and together, he and Harry began to pull all three hostages towards the surface.

It was difficult swimming without his hands to help. Harry was grateful that Viktor had decided to help him with the little girl’s weight. Most of the merpeople were following them up, now that there was nothing to see in their village square. None of them offered to help, but they were no longer trying to stop him, either.

Harry was beginning to get very tired. At first he assumed it was merely because he'd been
swimming for so long, but then he realised he was finding it harder to breathe. The Gillyweed was
running out. He looked up desperately and was relieved to see it was only twenty metres or so until
the surface. He took his last breathe underwater and kicked as hard as he could.

He broke the surface gasping in the cold, sweet air. Around him, all three hostages had woken up.
The merpeople surfaced as well and smiled at the group, screeching excitedly at each other.

Draco smiled. “You did it!”

“Viktor helped,” Harry said.

“It would have been rude not to,” Viktor said. “He had already untied Hermione. I would not leave
him after that.”

“You are aware that you’re supposed to be competing, not cooperating, aren’t you?” Draco asked.
Then he spotted Fleur's sister. “Why's she here?”

“I couldn’t just leave her there,” Harry said lamely.

“You knew we would be safe,” Draco reminded him. “Snape told you that.”

“It was really creepy down there, okay? I couldn't take you and not Hermione, and then she
would've been left there alone,” Harry explained.

Hermione turned in Viktor's arms to level a stare at him. “Harry...”

Harry sighed. “Can we wait until we're back on land before you tell me how dumb I was? She looks
pretty scared.”

It was true. While they'd been treading water, the girl had been clinging to Harry's arm with wide
eyes.

Draco paddled closer to her. “Je m'appelle Draco et c'est Harry, Viktor et Hermione. Quel est ton
nom?”

She fixed her eyes on Draco. “Je m'appelle Gabrielle.”

Draco nodded. “N'aie pas peur, Gabrielle. Nous t'amènerons à Fleur. Ça va?”

“Ça va,” she said timidly, though she’d brightened at the mention of Fleur.

Together, Harry and Draco pulled her towards the bank. Hermione and Viktor had soon outstripped
them, and had been wrapped in thick blankets and given Pepperup by Pomfrey by the time Harry
staggered ashore. Maxime was struggling to hold back a hysterical Fleur, who was screaming for her
sister. The other judges were watching the approaching group. Dumbledore, Bagman and Percy
were smiling, but Karkaroff was scowling at Viktor, who was talking and laughing quietly with
Hermione.

“Gabrielle!” Fleur sped towards them and wrapped her blanket around her sister, speaking in rapid
French.

“Come here you two,” Pomfrey ordered. Within seconds she’d wrapped Harry and Draco in their
own blankets and poured Pepperup into their mouths. “Keep those blankets on until you can have a
hot shower in the castle.”

Harry nodded meekly and turned to Draco expectantly.
“You're an idiot,” he said at once.

“Don't care,” Harry said with a grin. “You'll never guess what I saw down there!”

“Hmm, what?” Draco asked. He'd been listening in to the conversation Dumbledore was having in Mermish with one of the merpeople at the edge of the lake.

“One of Lockhart's portraits was in the merpeople's village. From the looks of things, their children like poking it,” Harry said.

Draco laughed. “Excellent. Wait, what?” He cocked his head towards the merperson. “You threatened the merpeople?”

“Not that much...”

Dumbledore said something final to the mermaid and stood up from his crouch. “Just a few items to discuss before we award points,” he said to the rest of the judges.

As the judges gathered in a tight circle, Draco rolled his eyes at Harry. “Snape's going to be pissed, you know. He told you not to take the song seriously.”

“Yeah, well, I'd like to see him say the same thing if it was his best friend he had to leave down there,” Harry said. “Come on, let's go see how Hermione's doing.”

They were intercepted on their way over by Fleur and Gabrielle.

“You saved 'er!” Fleur cried. She wriggled free from the blanket and, to their great surprise, proceeded to kiss both of them on each cheek.

Gabrielle shuffled closer to Fleur. She was swamped in the blanket, with only her face peeking out. She pulled Fleur down and whispered in her ear. Fleur shushed her and put a protective arm around her.

“I cannot thank you enough. Ze grindylows attacked me... I thought she was to be lost,” Fleur said.

“Viktor helped us,” Draco supplied.

“Ah!”

When Fleur set off for Viktor, pulling her sister along in her wake, Gabrielle waved a blanket-covered hand at the boys. “Merci beaucoup!” she called, smiling shyly at Draco.

“Someone's got a crush on you,” Harry said in a sing-song voice as they trailed after the Delacours.

“I don't think I'll be dumping you for an eight-year-old girl anytime soon,” Draco drawled.

They'd just reached the group, which now contained Cedric and Cho, when Bagman's voice echoed around the lake.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have made our decision,” Bagman began, then waited for the crowd to hush. “Mer-chieftaness Murcus has informed us of the events at the bottom of the lake, and we will be awarding each champion their points based on this information.

“Miss Fleur Delacour performed a flawless Bubble-Head Charm, but was attacked by grindylows on her way to her hostage, and had to withdraw. We therefore award her twenty-five points.”
“I deserve nuzzing,” Fleur said.

“Mr Cedric Diggory, who likewise performed the Bubble-Head Charm, was the first champion to return with his hostage. However, he arrived one minute past the hour time limit. We therefore award him forty-two points.”

Cedric and Cho smiled at each other as the crowd cheered.

“Mr Viktor Krum performed a partial but effective human Transfiguration on himself. Mr Harry Potter made excellent use of Gillyweed and, we are told, even managed to speak to the merpeople in Mermish. Both champions rescued their own hostages, but returned well outside the time limit.”

The crowd was silent as Bagman paused, and Harry reached out to hold Draco's hand nervously.

“However, Mer-chieftaness Murcus has informed us that Mr Potter was in fact the first champion to reach the hostages and managed to free his own without incident. He was then held up by his determination to rescue all three remaining hostages. After Mr Diggory had left with his own hostage, Mr Potter argued with the assembled merpeople, then proceeded to free both Mr Krum's and Miss Delacour's hostages. Mr Krum, upon arriving at the scene, was convinced by Mr Potter to aide him in bringing Miss Delacour's hostage to the surface, along with their own. Their ascent was slowed considerably by the extra hostage. We feel that this shows great moral fibre from both champions, and therefore award Mr Potter forty-six points, and Mr Krum forty points.”

The crowd erupted into fresh cheers. Harry grinned at Draco. “Moral fibre, Malfoy. Not so dumb now, eh?”

“Prat,” Draco said fondly.

“Thank you all for coming out to support the champions!” Bagman continued. “The next task will take place at dusk on the twenty-fourth of June. The champions will be informed a month beforehand what they will be facing. We look forward to seeing you all again at the thrilling conclusion to the Triwizard Tournament!”

As the crowd began to leave the stands, Pomfrey came over and chivvied the champions and their hostages back towards the castle. “Hot showers and warm clothes immediately, please!”

“We better hurry,” Draco said. “We don't want to miss the start of the party.”

Harry nodded. “Okay, but this time I'm staying away from the punch.”
The day after the second task, both Harry and Draco received mail at breakfast. Harry's was a letter from Sirius and Remus, congratulating him on his performance in the lake. He gave Hedwig some strips of bacon as he wrote out a cheery reply. After he tied it to her leg, she gave him a friendly nip before she flew off.

“You didn't have any plans for Hogsmeade this Saturday, did you?” Draco asked him.

Harry shrugged. “Not really. Why?”

Draco waved his letter. “Mother wants to meet us there, along with Hermione. She's booked a private room at the Three Broomsticks.”

“Sure,” Harry said. “What do you think she wants?”

Draco's eyes glinted. “I think she's come up with something on Skeeter.”

********

On Saturday Harry walked down to Hogsmeade with Draco and Hermione, discussing the previous day's Potions lesson. Karkaroff had walked in halfway through the lesson demanding to talk to Severus, and had refused to leave, choosing instead to wait until class was over.

“Did Snape say anything to you Harry? Your desk is right in front of his,” Hermione said.

“Not apart from telling me I'm an idiot for hanging around too long during the second task, but I'm pretty sure Karkaroff wanted to talk about their Dark Marks. Severus told me a while ago that they're getting stronger,” Harry said.

Draco paled. “Getting stronger?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, then swallowed. “Severus thinks Pettigrew's close to resurrecting Voldemort.”

“And you're just telling us this now?” Draco snapped.

“Well, he told me on Boxing Day, and I was a little distracted by him offering to adopt me,” Harry said defensively. “It's not just their Dark Marks, either. Severus reckons that the dream I had about Voldemort might have actually happened.”

They both frowned at him. “How could that happen? You've never had visions like that before, have you?” asked Hermione.

“Dunno,” Harry said, “but he wasn't joking around.”

“So Karkaroff's been following Snape around because he wants to compare their Marks?” Hermione pressed.

“Maybe. I think Karkaroff wants to run away, and he's trying to get Severus to agree to go with him,” Harry mused.

“That would fit with the conversation we heard between them at the Yule Ball,” Draco said. “This is not good.”
“Yeah...” Harry said, then took a deep breath. “Severus thinks that whoever entered me in the Tournament is trying to kill me, and that they’re likely working for Voldemort.”


“Cheers, guys. Am I really that annoying?” Harry asked.

“It’s the prophecy, Harry,” Hermione said patiently. “You supposedly have the power to vanquish You-Know-Who, remember? Of course he’d want you dead.”

“And even without the prophecy, I’d imagine he’d want revenge for you making him disappear thirteen years ago,” Draco added.

“I would’ve thought you guys would be a little more upset talking about Voldemort wanting to kill me,” Harry said.

Draco’s eyes flashed angrily. “Of course we’re sodding upset you prat!”

Hermione shot him a warning look. “This isn't the first time we've spoken about it, Harry. And he's already tried to kill you twice, through Quirrell and then the diary.”

“Oh,” Harry said, feeling stupid. He hadn't thought about it like that.

Draco slipped his hand into Harry's. “You won't have to face him alone, you know that, right? I mean, Snape's adopting you, Mother basically views both you and Hermione as the extra children she always wanted, and of course there's your godfather -”

“There are a lot of people who want to keep you safe,” Hermione cut in.

Harry smiled crookedly at them. “Thanks.”

“Good. Now, let's go hear Mother's good news,” Draco said in a forcefully bright tone.

When they got to the Three Broomsticks Draco headed straight for the bar. “We're here to see Narcissa Malfoy. She has a private room booked.”

The bartender, Madam Rosmerta, looked them over. “Not going to start a fight in here today?”

“Sorry about that,” Hermione said, not entirely convincingly.

The bartender shrugged. “I won't deny that I enjoyed seeing Skeeter get a public scolding like that, and it ended up being great for business: everyone wanted to talk about it over a few drinks. Follow me.”

She turned around and led them through a doorway next to the bar and up a flight of stairs. At the end of a short corridor she knocked on a closed door. “Your guests, Mrs Malfoy.”

The door opened and Narcissa smiled down at them all. “Thank you, Rosmerta. I'll send my house-elf down with our orders presently.”

Rosmerta nodded and returned downstairs. Harry and Hermione smiled at Narcissa as they walked past her into the room. It was small but handsome, with wood panelling on the walls and windows that looked out over Hogsmeade. There was a round table set in the middle of the room, close enough to the fire to be warm but not over-hot.

“Happy birthday Mother,” Draco said, hugging her and kissing her cheek. He pulled a neatly
wrapped gift out of his pocket. “Don't open this until next week.”

Narcissa took the gift and smiled. “You're going to make your poor old mother wait to open this?”

“You're not old,” Draco said dismissively.

“Forty's getting there,” Narcissa replied lightly.

“Happy birthday,” Harry and Hermione chorused.

“Thank you.”

“What are you doing for your birthday?” asked Draco.

“I'm spending the week in Greece with Kingsley. He's taking time off work and we're renting a villa on a private island,” Narcissa said happily.

“So things are going well with him?” Draco asked carefully.

“Yes, darling,” Narcissa said, her gaze sharpening slightly. “So you can stop asking Dobby to spy on us.”

Harry and Hermione smothered their laughter.

Draco gaped at her. “You knew?”

Narcissa chuckled. “Of course I did. Dobby told me everything the day you asked him to report to you. I let him play along with your little game, but he's been rather busy with something more serious of late.”

The three teenagers went still as they listened.

“While I have been asking around after her, I have been unable to find anything illegal in Skeeter's dealings,” Narcissa began. “However, Dobby has been following her quite closely, and has discovered something that will ensure she stops harassing you, Harry.”

“What is it?” he asked breathlessly.

“I'll let him tell you, I think. Dobby!”

Dobby Apparated into the room and bowed. He was dressed conservatively today, by his standards, in Draco's old suit and a black woollen cap which had holes cut out for his ears – though he was still wearing the sparkly sandals. “Miss Narcissa.”

“Is our guest comfortable?”

“Yes, Miss Narcissa!” Dobby said.

“Very good. Would you like to tell us what you've found out about her?” Narcissa asked.

“Yes, Miss Narcissa!” Dobby quivered excitedly as he turned to the others. “Dobby has been following the Skeeter woman wherever she goes. She is talking to a lot of people, but no one is seeming to like her very much.”

“We knew that already,” Draco pointed out.
“Yes, sir. As Dobby was saying, the Skeeter woman talks to many people about many things, but is most interested in you, Harry Potter. Dobby is being very angry with some of the things she is saying, sir.”

“You're not the only one,” Harry grumbled.

Dobby nodded. “The Skeeter woman is wanting to get into Hogwarts, but the wards is not liking her. Not as a human.”

Harry leaned forward. “What do you mean, 'as a human'?”

Dobby swelled with pride. “Dobby is finding that the Skeeter woman is turning into a beetle, Harry Potter!”

There was a stunned silence.

“She's an Animagus?” Hermione asked.

“Oh, yes,” Narcissa said, “but it seems she's been rather lax about getting herself properly registered.”

“You're sure about that?” Draco asked sharply.

Narcissa smiled wickedly. “Not at first, no. Dobby captured her in her Animagus form and brought her back to the Manor. After locking her in the smallest guest room for the night, he brought her some breakfast the next day, assuring her I would free her after we'd had a chance to catch up.”

“You kidnapped her?” Harry asked delightedly.

“Dobby merely picked up an interesting beetle and brought it home with him,” Narcissa said with fake innocence. “Once we realised the truth, we offered her our hospitality. Unfortunately for her, the tea I gave her was liberally dosed with some Veritaserum that Severus was kind enough to give to me.”

Draco grinned. “You got a full confession?”

“We did. In return for us not turning her in to the Ministry as an unregistered Animagus, Skeeter has agreed not to write any further stories about you, Harry, or anyone you remotely care about. In short, she is restricted to reporting Wizengamot proceedings and international relations. She will also be most accommodating if you ever feel the need to get your own story published.”

Harry didn't think he'd ever want to further court the press' attention, but didn't mention that. “Good work, Dobby.”

“Thank you, Harry Potter!”

Narcissa smiled warmly. “Please ask Rosmerta for her finest sparkling wine and today's special.”

“Yes, Miss Narcissa,” Dobby bowed and Disapparated.

“Do you think she's going to keep her word?” Draco asked.

Narcissa let out a most uncharacteristic cackle. “Most definitely. I may have let it slip that I'm in a relationship with an Auror. Even if she wanted to double-cross me, she knows that at least one Auror would take my testimony of her confession very seriously. We won't be having any more trouble from that woman, believe me.”
Dobby Apparated back into the room with a bottle of wine, four glasses, and four steaming bowls. He set them out on the table and stepped back. “Lunch is being chicken stew and elf-made champagne, Miss Narcissa.”

“Thank you, Dobby,” Narcissa said.

“If Miss Narcissa is not needing anything else, Dobby is wanting to go to Hogwarts to see his friends.”

“Of course. You may take the rest of the day off, in fact,” Narcissa said.

Dobby beamed. “Thank you, Miss Narcissa!”

After he Disapparated, Narcissa held up her glass. “To victory.”

“To victory,” the others repeated, clinking their glasses together.

Draco took a sip, put his glass down and looked at Harry. “There was a beetle there when we were talking in the garden during the Yule Ball.”

“Yeah, there was...” Harry said, sickened by the thought of Skeeter witnessing that moment.

Hermione's glass came down with a clunk, slopping wine onto the table. “Viktor pulled a beetle out of my hair after the second task. She didn't -”

“Skeeter had some notes with her when she transformed back into her human form. I destroyed them all when I realised who she'd been writing about, and she told me under Veritaserum that she hadn't yet written them up into a story to be published,” Narcissa said soothingly.

Hermione slumped back in relief. “Thank god for that.”

Draco looked from her to his mother. “What had she written?”

“She was aiming to hurt Sirius through Remus, through his status as a werewolf,” Narcissa said, her mouth thinning in displeasure.

Harry stomped down on Draco's foot under the table when he turned back to question Hermione. “Do they know?” Harry asked Narcissa over Draco's hiss of pain.

“Yes, I visited them afterwards. Remus and I had to prevent Sirius from going to confront her right then, but we managed to calm him down. He gave me a detailed description of what he'd do to Skeeter if she ever wrote about Remus or you again,” Narcissa smiled at Harry, “and I passed it on to her when I returned home.”

Harry grinned. “He's really enjoying the whole former convict thing, isn't he?”

Narcissa sighed. “Maybe a little too much, but I can't begrudge him that. Not after Azkaban.”

Harry grimaced down into his stew at the thought of Sirius alone at Azkaban for so long. They ate in silence until Draco put down his spoon and nudged Harry a little harder than was necessary, obviously getting him back for stepping on his foot earlier.

“Didn't you need to ask Mother something?”

“What? Oh! Yeah...” Harry took a hasty drink and met Narcissa's eyes. “Severus is adopting me over summer.”
Narcissa's eyebrows shot up before she smiled fondly. “Oh, Harry, that's marvellous. I'm very happy for you. But what does that have to do with me?”

“Well, when we sign everything, we need two witnesses. Severus is asking McGonagall, and he said I could pick someone too, if I wanted, and I was hoping that you'd say yes,” Harry said tentatively.

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the quiet crackling of the fire. Then Narcissa blinked rapidly. “I would be honoured.”

Harry smiled at her in relief, and answered her questions about the adoption. Conversation moved swiftly after that. They regaled Narcissa with their experiences of the second task, and she shared her plans for her birthday trip. Finally, with lunch finished, Narcissa stood up.

“I really must get home, I don't feel comfortable leaving Skeeter there while both Dobby and I are out. It was lovely seeing you all,” she said, hugging Harry and Hermione before turning to Draco. She hugged him tightly then released him, smoothed down his hair and fiddled with his shirt collar. “I'll send you a postcard from Greece. Be good, darling, and I'll see you in June.”

“Have a nice trip,” he said, kissing her on the cheek.

They walked downstairs together and left Narcissa at the bar to settle the bill. Outside they stopped and looked at each other.

“Where to?” Hermione asked.

“I want to buy Dobby something as a thank you,” Harry said at once. “Some clothes.”

“Gladraggs, then?” Draco asked. Harry nodded and they set off.

When they walked into Gladraggs Wizardwear Hermione and Draco looked at Harry expectantly. “What do you think he'd like?” he asked as he looked around the store.

Draco snorted. “He's really not that fussy when it comes to clothes... I think you should buy something gold, at least that way it'll match those bloody sandals of his.”

“Yeah, what's the deal with them?” Harry asked, walking over to the kids' section.

“They're the first things he bought for himself with his own money,” Draco said, examining a gold scarf before putting it back on the rack.

“What about this?” Hermione held up a gold and red striped jumper.

“Urgh, too Gryffindor,” Draco said immediately.

Hermione rolled her eyes but put the jumper back on the shelf.

“Here,” Draco said. “They're not gold, but I think they're thematically appropriate.”

Harry turned to see him holding up a pair of white socks with red ladybugs on them, charmed so their wings fluttered. “Perfect.”

Harry paid for the socks and they left the store and spent the next hour shopping. Hermione scoured the bookshop, Tomes and Scrolls, for some new Arithmancy texts, and Harry and Draco stocked up at Honeydukes. Finally, laden down with their purchases, they headed back to Hogwarts.

As soon as they were out of the village Draco turned to Hermione expectantly. “So? Spill!”
“Spill what?” she asked.

“What did you and Viktor talk about that had you so worried?” he asked.

“Worried? I wasn't worried,” Hermione said, a little too quickly.

“Please, you were obviously worried that Skeeter overheard you and Viktor at the lake. What were you talking about?”

“Nothing,” Hermione said.

“Uh huh, that’s why you’ve turned pink, is it?” Draco pressed. “Just what have you been doing with our second favourite champion?”

“I -”

“Oi, Harry!”

Harry turned around to see the Weasley twins waving at him. He looked over his shoulder to tell Draco and Hermione not to wait for him, but they were too caught up in their argument to notice he’d stopped. He shrugged and waited for the twins to catch up to him. “Hello.”

“Harry! How are you this fine afternoon?” one of them asked.

“Okay,” he said warily.

“Good, good. How’s the blackmail going?” the other asked.

Harry checked there wasn’t anyone close enough to hear them. “All sorted, actually. You?”

The twins shared a look. “Not so good -”

“Shite, is what George is trying to say,” Fred said.

“We’ve hit a snag.”

Harry eyed them warily. “And you need my help?”

George beamed. “You catch on quick!”

“What do you expect me to do?” Harry asked, perplexed.

“Well,” Fred said, putting his arm around Harry’s shoulders. “We wrote to Bagman, telling him that we knew he’d been offering you help -”

“- handy bit of information, that, thank you -”

“- but he told us he’s dead broke from gambling. Owes a lot of money to a lot of people -”

“- and goblins, don’t forget the goblins,” George put in.

Fred nodded. “Right. Anyway, he said he’d love to pay us, but he can’t. Not unless he wins big on his latest bet.”

“Which is where you come in. He’s betting on you to win the Tournament, you see,” George said.

“So that’s why he wanted to help me,” Harry breathed. “Well, I’ll do my best.”
“Make sure you do,” said George.

“Not that we're holding you responsible for this,” Fred said hastily.

“Not at all! It's just that we really need that money. Can't start a joke shop without it,” George finished.

“A joke shop?” asked Harry.

“Want a sample?” Fred asked eagerly, producing a custard cream from somewhere.

Harry narrowed his eyes. “This isn't going to give me a giant tongue, is it?”

“Of course not!” Fred looked scandalised.

“Don't touch that!”

They spun around to see Hermione walking briskly towards them, Draco right behind her.

“No harm done, Hermione,” George said quickly.

Hermione ignored the twins. “Do you want to be turned into a canary, Harry?”

He turned to Fred. “How long does it last?”

“Just a minute or so,” he said swiftly.

Harry shrugged, grinned at Hermione, and stuffed the custard cream into his mouth. He swallowed it and stood there for a few seconds while everyone stared at him. Then his stomach did a funny twist, which turned into an all over shiver, and with a pop, he'd turned into a human-sized canary. Harry looked down at his arms, which were now yellow wings, with some difficulty, as his eyes were on the sides of his head. As he stared at them, his feathers began falling out, and soon he was back to normal, standing amongst a pile of yellow feathers and his dropped shopping.

When he'd regained the ability to speak he grinned at the twins. “That was brilliant! You made that yourselves?”

“Yep,” George said proudly. “Canary Creams, seven sickles each. Just one of the many products we'll be making, if we ever get the start up money.”

“Honestly, Harry, no one in Gryffindor's game to accept anything from these two anymore,” Hermione said.

Fred nodded sadly. “We have to do all our testing on ourselves. If we had the money we'd be able to pay people, but as it is...”

“You could always ask Scarlett, she'd find this hilarious,” suggested Harry.

The twins looked at each other. “Why didn't we think of her?”

“If you're asking her, Luna might help out, too. She's into all kinds of odd things,” Draco added.

Fred grinned. “Sounds like we better go find Ginny. Thanks, guys.”

George nodded. “And don't forget to win the Tournament, Harry!”
The twins walked back to Hogsmeade, heads bent together. Harry knelt down to pick up his shopping bags.

“What was that all about?” Hermione asked.

Harry grinned up at her. “Bagman. Turns out he's got massive gambling debts so he can't pay the twins back unless I win the Tournament. He's got a huge bet on me: that's why he's been trying to offer me help.”

“That makes sense,” Draco said in surprise.

“Yes, but I can't see Moody having a gambling problem like that, can you?” asked Hermione.

Harry stood up and they resumed walking back to Hogwarts. “Not really, no.” There was a brief silence, then he looked slyly at Hermione. “So what did you and Viktor talk about after the second task?”

Hermione heaved a great sigh. “You're a terrible influence on him, Malfoy.”

“I am, aren't I?” Draco agreed smugly.

“Well?”

“He told me that he's never felt this way over anyone before,” Hermione said, beginning to blush, “and he asked if I'd visit him over summer... He may have mentioned that his parents travel a lot for work, so we'd be alone for most of the time.”


Draco shuddered. “Can you imagine? She'd try to make you having sex sound like some virgin sacrifice.”

Hermione was bright pink by this point. “We never actually said explicitly that that's what we'd be doing!”

“It's pretty obvious, Granger,” scoffed Draco.

“Yes, well, she can't write anything about that now,” Hermione said.

“No, she can't,” Harry said happily.

Draco hummed thoughtfully. “You know, we should blackmail people more often. It's quite effective.”

On Monday Hagrid organised one of the most enjoyable lessons Harry had ever attended. He walked down to Hagrid's cabin in trepidation, as there were a number of crates set out on the lawn in front.

“Please tell me he hasn't bred more skrewts,” Draco moaned.

The class gathered in front of the crates, clearly nervous. There was a large patch of freshly dug earth next to the crates.
Hagrid grinned around at the class. “Got a real treat fer yeh all today.”

Given Hagrid’s track record, no one was reassured by these words. Hagrid leaned over one of the crates and pulled out what looked like a small, fluffy black anteater. It had over-sized front paws that were curiously spade-shaped, and a long black snout.

“Nifflers!” Hagrid announced. The niffler licked his face with a long, skinny tongue. “I've got one fer each o' yeh. Thought we could have a little competition. They like shiny things, see, and I've buried a bunch o’ gold coins over there. Person whose niffler returns them the most coins by the end o' the lesson gets a prize. Oh, and ah, make sure yeh're not wearing nothin' shiny, or they'll try to grab it off yeh.”

There was a flurry of activity as people hastily removed watches and jewellery, then everyone stepped forward enthusiastically to collect their nifflers. Presently the entire class was standing around the dirt patch, cheering on the fluffy creatures as they dug for treasure. The nifflers dove into the ground as easily as if it were water, sending clods of dirt into the air before returning with coins.

When the bell rang Ron had the largest pile of gold by his feet. Hagrid handed him a block of chocolate from Honeydukes.

“First and last time he wins anything,” Draco said to Harry as they headed up to lunch.

Harry’s laughter died when they reached the Entrance Hall and he saw Severus frowning at him. “Come with me, Mr Potter,” was all he said.

Harry shared a confused look with Draco before following Severus up the main staircase. “What is it?”

“I have informed the Headmaster of the adoption and he is not best pleased,” Severus said.

Harry's heart sank. “Are we in trouble?”

“Not exactly. He wishes to speak to us, however,” replied Severus.

He led the way to Dumbledore's office. “Acid pops,” he said to the gargoyle. When it moved aside, they walked through the doorway and onto the moving staircase in silence.

Severus raised his hand to the door knocker and looked at Harry. “As I told you earlier, he has no legal standing in this matter. Just answer his questions truthfully,” he said quietly, then let the knocker fall.

Harry nodded and ran his hand though his hair. The door opened and Harry looked up to see McGonagall standing there, lips pressed together unhappily. She nodded minutely at Harry then gave Severus a sharp glance before stepping back to allow them to pass by. Harry's heart sank as he walked into the office; Severus had anticipated Dumbledore's displeasure, but he hadn't seemed to be expecting any from McGonagall.

“Come in, my boys, and take a seat. Lemon drop?” Dumbledore held out a bowl.

“Thank you, sir,” Harry said politely, reaching out before sitting down. He sucked on the lolly and tried not to fidget as he waited for Dumbledore to begin. Severus took the seat next to him, but McGonagall remained on her feet, moving to one of the windows and crossing her arms.

“I trust that Severus has told you why I've called you all here,” Dumbledore said to Harry.
“Yes, sir.”

Dumbledore nodded and leaned forward over his desk. “Harry, I hope you haven’t made this decision lightly. It is something that requires a great deal of thought.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw McGonagall shift restlessly. “I know, sir.”

Dumbledore looked at Severus briefly then back at Harry. “You know that by leaving your aunt's house, you will be weakening the blood protection your mother gave you?”

“But not destroying it, right?” asked Harry. He was still a bit fuzzy on the details, to tell the truth.

“No, not entirely,” Dumbledore said slowly. “Lily gave her life to protect yours, Harry, I hope you realise that.”

Harry felt a hot swoop of anger in his gut at Dumbledore trying to use his mum against him like that, and he once again saw McGonagall move by the window.

“I am perfectly capable of protecting Harry at my home. Besides which, there are serious limitations with that protection, Albus,” Severus said quietly, before either of them could speak. “Black was able to find Harry last year, and then there is the Dursleys' own treatment of Harry to take into account.”

Dumbledore gave Severus a piercing stare. “I think we can let Harry speak for himself, don't you?”

Harry met Dumbledore's eyes unflinchingly. “They lock me up and starve me when they want to punish me. I've never felt safe there.”

McGonagall finally snapped, and strode forward with an impatient huff. Harry watched with trepidation until she opened her mouth. “Albus, I told you what the envelope of Harry's first Hogwarts letter said. The magic used for those letters is always precise. I don't know why you've let Harry remain there for so long.”

Dumbledore bowed his head for a moment before looking at Harry again. “I just want to make sure you're aware of the repercussions of your decisions. In the long history of Hogwarts, there has never been a student adopted by a member of staff. You'll be facing rather a lot of attention and scrutiny, likely from the press as well as your fellow students.”

“More than I'm already getting for being in the Tournament, sir?” Harry asked, barely managing to prevent himself from rolling his eyes at the ridiculousness of that statement.

Some of the twinkle came back into Dumbledore's eyes at that. “Perhaps not... Severus, Minerva, would you both kindly step outside for a moment?”

Both teachers frowned but did as they were asked. When the door shut behind them Dumbledore leaned closer to Harry. “Is this truly what you want, Harry? You have not been, ah, persuaded by Professor Snape?”

“No, sir,” Harry said, unable to stop the scowl spreading across his face. “I was already planning on leaving the Dursleys before Severus even asked.”

Dumbledore seemed amused by this. “Oh? And where were you planning on staying, if I may ask?”

“With Sirius.”
“I was under the impression that he is currently staying at Remus’ house. You have not forgotten his condition?”

“No, sir. But I'd much rather spend a full moon with Remus than with the Dursleys.”

Dumbledore stared hard at him, leaving Harry with the impression he was being X-rayed. Finally, Dumbledore nodded slightly. With a wave of his wand, his office door opened once more and Severus and McGonagall returned.

“Forgive an old man's concern. I merely wished to make sure that you were both prepared for any problems this adoption may throw at you. I wish you well, my boys,” Dumbledore said. He got to his feet and gestured towards the door.

“Thank you, sir,” Harry said in relief.

He quickly headed for the door with Severus and McGonagall on his heels. Once they were on the staircase Harry turned to look up at his professors.

“What's his problem with this anyway? How does it affect him?”

Severus grimaced. “I believe -”

“Severus!” McGonagall said sharply.

“He already knows part of it, Minerva. He deserves to know the rest,” Severus said firmly.

McGonagall pressed her lips together but nodded.

“As I was saying,” Severus continued, “I believe it was the Headmaster's intention that I resume spying on the Dark Lord should he ever return. Obviously, adopting you will render that course of action impossible.”

Harry's mouth dropped open. “But Pettigrew – last year – he must have realised that you switched sides.”

“I know, Harry.”

Panic swept through Harry. “But – but Dumbledore was there! How could he expect you could convince any of them that you'd gone back to them?”

Severus grasped Harry's shoulders and spun him around just as they reached the base of the staircase. They stepped off and through the door, huddling together in the corridor. “I was an excellent spy, I'll have you know,” said Severus.

“But -”

“However,” Severus spoke over the top of him, “I have given you my word that I will adopt you. You don't need to worry about me abandoning you for a renewed career in espionage.”

“Well alright then,” Harry said, though he continued to frown.

“The Headmaster will find another solution, Mr Potter, should the need arise,” McGonagall chimed in. “Whatever you said to him has convinced him that this is not worth fighting.”

Harry grinned. “I told him I'd rather spend a full moon with Remus than the Dursleys.”
McGonagall smiled back. “Aye, that would about do it.”

“Appealing to his sense of guilt was a good move,” Severus agreed.

“All I did was tell the truth, like you told me to,” Harry said, a little confused.

“Exactly,” said McGonagall. “The Headmaster is hardly likely to keep arguing against this course of action when faced with an adolescent informing him that his supposed guardians are less appealing than a rabid werewolf.”

“It is always easier to manipulate someone to your advantage if you have truth on your side,” Severus said.

Harry nodded, thinking of Skeeter's articles. She'd used his real relationships with people as the basis for her lies. “Got it.”

McGonagall shook her head. “Slytherins.”
In Which Harry Prepares for the Third Task, When not Getting Distracted

With the second task over, and months to go until the third one, Harry gave himself a mission for the end of winter term: to get Fleur on her own and ask her about Moody. This proved harder than he'd expected. The Beauxbatons students were still sleeping in the giant blue carriage, coming up to the castle only for meals, which they continued to take at the Ravenclaw table. Harry didn't really want to go up to her while she was sitting there. Students from the other houses may have stopped hissing at him, but he knew most of them still thought of him as a lying cheat.

Eventually, as Harry was walking back up to the castle after Care of Magical Creatures, he saw Fleur walking up the castle steps, surrounded by a group of her friends. Harry grabbed Draco by the hand and pulled him towards the French students.

“Where are we going?” asked Draco.

“You're going to help me ask Fleur about Moody,” Harry explained. “Hey, Fleur!”

Fleur turned with a slight frown, then smiled when she caught sight of them. “Bonjour. ‘Ow may I ‘elp you?” she asked, gesturing to her friends to go on without her.

“Er...” Now that he'd got her alone, Harry couldn't think of a way to broach the subject of Moody.

Draco made a barely perceptible noise of frustration. “We were just wondering how Gabrielle was. She was pretty scared when we rescued her from the lake.”

Fleur's smile deepened, and Harry began to see what all the straight boys saw in her. “She is well, merci beaucoup. I shall tell ‘er that you asked after ‘er.”

“Did you know before the task that she'd be your hostage?” asked Harry.

Fleur shook her head. “Non, I thought it would be an object, or perhaps my cat. Never my sister. My friends who ’elped me wiz my clue ‘ad no idea, either.”

Harry couldn't help laughing at that. “Draco helped me with my clue, and we had no idea we were talking about him.”

“At least I figured out straight away that the clue was in Mermish,” Draco said.

“Zat was ze easy part. My grandmuzzer, she ’as a ‘oliday ‘ouse zat often has merpeople near it, so I recognised ze sound, but I did not theenk to put it under water for a long time. None of my friends knew to do so,” Fleur explained. “It was only when I was getting desperate zat I thought, ze merpeople speak underwater, maybe I should try listening underwater.”

They'd reached the Great Hall, which was rapidly filling up. Fleur looked over Harry's shoulder and waved at someone. “I must go. I will tell Gabrielle zat you asked after her, Draco.”

When she'd walked off, Harry looked at Draco. “What do you think?”

“I think she was telling the truth. I mean, putting the egg underwater because the merpeople live underwater makes sense,” Draco said slowly.

Harry nodded. “I can't really see how she would've been able to talk to Moody in the first place. She doesn't spend much time in the castle, and it would've been a bit suss for Moody to walk down to
meet her in the grounds. I mean, Severus never noticed them talking, and he used to be a spy.”

Draco sighed. “So, we're just as much in the dark about him as we were half an hour ago.”

“Pretty much,” Harry agreed.

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The Easter holidays came and went in a blur of homework. Harry was exceedingly glad that he was excused from exams; he didn't think he would've been able to keep up with studying for them once he began preparing for the final task, not with the amount of work the fourth years were getting. What little free time he did have, he spent with Viktor and Ulla, or his younger friends, who didn't have as much school work as the rest of his friends did.

In the last week of May McGonagall had Harry stay back after Transfiguration and told him to meet Bagman and the other champions at the Quidditch pitch at nine o'clock on Thursday night.

Harry set off at twenty to nine by himself and ran into Cedric in the Entrance Hall.

“Any idea what we're facing?” he asked.

Cedric shook his head. “Fleur thinks there'll be an underground treasure hunt.”

“That could be fun,” Harry said, thinking of the nifflers. “Viktor reckons we'll have a mid-air obstacle course, but I think that's just wishful thinking on his part.”

“We are meeting on the Quidditch pitch,” Cedric said thoughtfully.

They kept guessing as they walked down through the dark grounds, before coming to an abrupt stop when they stepped onto the Quidditch pitch.

“What've they done to it?” Cedric asked, sounding as outraged as Harry felt.

The formally smooth pitch was covered in an intricate lay out of low walls. Harry crouched down and frowned.

“They're hedges,” he said, reaching out to brush his hand over the closest one.

“Over here!”

Harry looked up to see Bagman waving at them from the centre of the pitch. Viktor and Fleur were already standing next to him. Fleur smiled at Harry as they approached, picking their way over the hedges. He smiled back at her and Viktor, who merely nodded.

“So, what d'you think?” Bagman asked, rocking on the balls of his feet. “Not much yet, but they'll be twenty feet high by the time Hagrid's through with them!”

“What?” yelped Harry, glaring at Bagman with Cedric.

Bagman just chuckled at them. “Don't worry, boys, it'll be good as new by the next Quidditch season, trust me. Now, I trust it's fairly obvious what it will grow into?”

“Maze,” said Viktor.

“Exactly!” Bagman cried. “The Triwizard Tournament trophy will be placed in the centre of the
maze, and whoever touches it first will win the Tournament! Mr Potter, as you're in the lead, you will enter first. Mr Diggory and Mr Krum will enter after you together, and then Miss Delacour. But don't go thinking your head start will win you the cup! There will be obstacles placed in the maze that you will have to overcome. Dangerous creatures and enchantments, that sort of thing, but nothing our four champions can't handle, right?"

The four champions looked at each other with varying degrees of doubt and nodded.

“Well, that's all I can tell you, unless anyone has any questions? No? Let's head back inside, then, it's too chilly out here,” Bagman said briskly.

They set off for the edge of the pitch, stepping carefully over the low hedges. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Bagman sidling towards him, so he tapped Viktor on his shoulder.

“Can I have a word in private?”

“Of course,” Viktor replied.

“I'll wait for you, shall I? Walk up to the castle together?” Bagman called.

“It's okay, Mr Bagman, I won't get lost,” Harry said.

Bagman didn't quite manage to conceal a look of unhappiness before smiling back. “As you wish.”

Harry guided Viktor away from the others, belately realising that they were headed straight for the Forbidden Forest. He came to a stop and peered around Viktor at the three retreating figures.

“Vot is it?” Viktor asked.

Harry shook his head. “Sorry, just wanted to avoid Bagman.”

Viktor frowned. “You do not like him?”

“No, he, er, he upset a couple of my friends,” Harry said evasively. “I don't want to talk about it.”

“He seems to like you, though,” Viktor pointed out.

“Yeah... Dunno why, I'm not that great,” Harry quipped.

Viktor gave a short laugh before his eyes fixed on something over Harry's shoulder. “Vot vos that?”

“Vot – sorry – what was what?” Harry asked. He spun around in alarm; this close to the Forest, it could be anything, and he sincerely hoped he wasn't about to be eaten. He had not defeated a dragon just to be eaten by an acromantula.

“Oh there,” Viktor pointed to Harry's left.

Harry followed his finger and saw some rustling bushes. A second later a man stepped out – or rather, staggered out, talking to himself. He was filthy, covered in blood and wearing robes that had clearly seen better days.

“Isn't he a judge? The one that is sick?” Viktor asked suddenly.

Harry peered closer. “Yeah, that's Crouch,” he said. He tamped down the memory of the last time he'd come across Crouch in a forest and took a cautious step forward. “Mr Crouch? Are you okay?”
Crouch ignored Harry in favour of continuing his conversation with thin air. “Weatherby, I need you to send an owl to Dumbledore and tell him that I have secured the agreement of the merpeople. Yes, fully agreed, thankfully. No, no need for that...” Crouch shook his head violently. “And once you've done that, Weatherby, track down Ludo and ask him if he's heard anything from Bertha. She should have returned by now even if she did get lost... She did get lost...”

Crouch gave a huge gasp as he trailed off. His eyes bulged alarmingly and he staggered forward before collapsing to his knees. Harry knelt down beside him with Viktor hovering behind him.

“Mr Crouch, are you okay?” he asked again.

“Dumbledore!” Crouch croaked. He grabbed the collar of Harry’s robe and jerked him forward, staring at a nearby bush. “Must talk... Dumbledore... Terrible...”

“Okay,” Harry said, trying to loosen Crouch’s grip. “Let go of me, and I’ll help you up to the castle.”

“Tell Dumbledore...” Crouch continued in that same desperate tone. “Should never... Mistake... Dumbledore...”

Harry succeeded in freeing himself and quickly stood up out of reach. “Mr Crouch, I can take you to Dumbledore now. You just need to get up.”

Crouch turned his attention away from the bush and looked at Harry unblinkingingly. “Who are you?” he breathed.

“I'm a student here at Hogwarts,” Harry said.

“Are you his?” Crouch asked urgently.

Harry sent Viktor a baffled glance. “Er, no?” he said, hoping he'd picked the right answer.

Apparently he had. “Dumbledore's?” Crouch asked hopefully.

“Yeah, Dumbledore's,” Harry agreed. “He’s my Headmaster. Do you want me to take you to see him?”

“See him,” Crouch nodded.

“Okay, you just need to get up,” Harry urged.

He nodded encouragingly when Crouch snapped upright, but he made no move to stand up again. He simply knelt, straight-backed, and stared intently at the bush again. “Good evening Mr and Mrs Fudge. Yes, we’re quite well, thank you. Have you met my son? Recently graduated from Hogwarts, you know, and hoping to follow in my footsteps and join the Ministry... Weatherby! Have you copied out that letter to the head goblin at Gringotts? What do you mean you can't read Gobbledegook? Why did I hire you, Weatherby? No, the goblins will be far more receptive if we write to them in Gobbledegook. Very well, I'll do it myself...”

As Crouch began to mime writing a letter, Harry looked at Viktor. “Stay here with him. I won't be long.”

“He is completely mad,” Viktor objected.

“Looks like it. Just, I don't know, keep your wand out or something. I'll be back soon,” Harry promised.
“Dumbledore!” Crouch gasped again. “Need to warn... Harry Potter... Shouldn't have... Bertha... He murdered... Dumbledore... Warn him... Harry Potter... Danger... Dark Lord...”

“I'm going to get Dumbledore right now, Mr Crouch,” Harry said loudly. “Viktor, just keep an eye on him, okay?”

Viktor nodded grudgingly as Harry pivoted and took off for the castle. He didn't see anyone on his way – Cedric, Fleur and Bagman were long gone by this point – and was soon standing, panting, in front of the gargoyle guarding the entrance to Dumbledore's office.

“Acid pops,” he gasped. The gargoyle didn't move; Harry supposed it was too much to hope that Dumbledore only rarely changed his passwords. “Er, sugar quills. Lemon drops. Cockroach cluster. Chocolate Frogs. Ice Mice.”

The gargoyle moved aside and Harry darted through the doorway, jogging up the moving staircase. He knocked hurriedly on the door and blinked in surprise when it was opened by Severus within a few seconds.

“What's wrong?” he asked immediately.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Harry said a bit breathlessly. He stepped past Severus and looked at Dumbledore, who was standing behind his desk. “It's Mr Crouch, sir. He's down near the Forbidden Forest and he's acting really weird.”

“In what way?” Dumbledore asked, moving briskly around his desk.

“One moment he was talking like he was at work, bossing around an assistant, and then he just changed. He was struggling to talk, but he definitely asked to see you. He didn't seem to know where he was and he's got blood on him.”

Dumbledore nodded and led the way out of his office. Harry had to jog to keep up the longer strides of Dumbledore and Severus.

When they were out of the castle Dumbledore glanced down at Harry. “Did he say why he wanted to see me?”

“Not really... He did mention me and Voldemort, and a mistake – I don't know who's, though, er... Bertha Jorkins, and something about murder.”

“I see,” was all Dumbledore said as he sped up even more.

“He did not harm you?” Severus asked.

“No. What, do you think he's dangerous? Because I left Viktor with him,” Harry said worriedly.

“Did anyone else see you speaking with him?” Dumbledore asked sharply.

“Not that I know of. Bagman had already left with Cedric and Fleur when we found him,” Harry said.

“Where did you leave them?” Dumbledore asked as they reached the edge of the Forest.

“Over here,” Harry said, slowing down as he led the way through the darkened trees. “Viktor!”

There was no answer, not even the continued ramblings of Crouch.
“Lumos,” Dumbledore murmured, lighting his wand.

Harry and Severus followed suit and the three of them swung their beams of light around themselves slowly. There was the sound of something small skittering off into the depths of the Forest, and then Dumbledore's beam fell upon a pair of feet lying still on the ground.

“Viktor!” Harry cried, rushing forwards.

He knelt down next to Viktor's unconscious body and grabbed his wrist, trying to feel for a pulse. Dumbledore knelt on the other side of him, delicately pulled up an eyelid and lowered it again.

“He's unhurt, Harry, just Stunned,” he said quietly.

“Are you sure?” Harry asked, now trying to see if Viktor was breathing. He breathed his own sigh of relief when he saw Viktor's chest rise slowly.

“Rennervate,” Dumbledore said, pointing his wand at Viktor.

His eyes opened immediately and he blinked in confusion as he looked up at Harry and Dumbledore looming over him.

“Crouch attacked me!” he said indignantly. He rubbed the side of his head and frowned. “Harry, I kept my wand out like you said. But when I tried to see if you were coming back, I looked away from him. He attacked me from behind!”

Harry put his arm around Viktor's shoulders and helped him sit up slowly. “I'm sorry for leaving you with him.”

Dumbledore looked up at Severus, who had remained standing, and was scanning the area with his wand up. “Severus, please go and inform Igor that his student has been attacked. Once he is on his way, I want you to go and find Alastor and bring him -”

“No need, Dumbledore, I saw your wand light on my way down to Hagrid's,” Moody grumbled as he stomped into view.

“What a coincidence,” Severus murmured.

“Igor, please, Severus,” Dumbledore said pointedly.

Severus spun on his heel and stalked off towards the Durmstrang ship.

Dumbledore looked at Moody grimly. “Barty Crouch was seen in the Forest this evening. He has since disappeared and it is vital that we find him.”

“No problem,” Moody said.

He turned and stomped off into the trees. No one spoke; Dumbledore was waiting expectantly for Severus to return with Karkaroff, and Harry was still kneeling next to Viktor, using an arm to support him, as he was still quite woozy.

Harry saw Karkaroff returning first, his silver furs standing out more than Severus' black robe in the dark Forest. He came to an abrupt stop when he saw Viktor sitting on the ground rubbing his temple.

“What's going on? What did you do?” he demanded.

Harry looked around, unsure of whom, exactly, Karkaroff was accusing.
“I vos attacked. Mr Crouch -”

Karkaroff's eyes bulged in anger. “Crouch attacked you? Crouch? The Tournament judge?”

“Igor,” Dumbledore said, holding up a hand.

Karkaroff ignored it. “I knew it! This Tournament is a farce! You -” he pointed at Dumbledore “- have enticed me here under false pretences, you and your Ministry of Magic. You said you wanted greater ties between our nations, to foster international cooperation and friendships, but that was all a lie! You set this all up just to make Hogwarts appear greater than Durmstrang or Beauxbatons. I should have left the moment Potter's name came out of the Goblet! And now one of your judges has attacked my champion!”

There was silence as everyone stared at Karkaroff, who had been spitting copiously by the end of his rant.

“It vos not like that, Headmaster,” Viktor said tentatively. “I do not think he vos sane ven he vos talking to Harry and me.”

“You're a Quidditch player, no one expects you to think,” Karkaroff snapped. “And I told you I didn't want you going anywhere near Potter!”

“Really, Igor, you take paranoia to new heights,” sneered Severus.

“Thank you, Severus,” Dumbledore said warningly. “Kindly escort Harry back to his common room.”

Harry looked at Viktor apologetically. “I didn't mean to get you into trouble,” he whispered.

“It's alright,” Viktor muttered, putting an arm on the ground when he lost Harry's support. “I vos ignoring him anyvay.”

Harry flashed him a grateful smile before getting to his feet and joining Severus. They walked in silence for a few minutes as they put distance between themselves and the scene in the Forest.

“So what do you think?” Harry asked eventually.

Severus frowned. “Crouch’s behaviour as you described it could be caused by any number of reasons: mental illness; a curse; poison; an adverse reaction between different potions or medications... It will be difficult to discern the cause if he is not found, and soon.”

“Brilliant,” muttered Harry.

Severus stopped and faced him. “I want you to promise me that you’ll be careful until this Tournament is over. I have no doubt that there is someone trying to kill you, and they could have succeeded tonight.”

“But Crouch waited until I’d left before they attacked Viktor,” Harry pointed out.

“There is no concrete proof that Crouch was behind this,” Severus said. “Circumstantial evidence, yes, and he definitely appears to be guilty, but it could have been someone else.”

Harry chewed on his bottom lip. “I didn't think about that. Who could it be though, if it wasn't him?”

“It's difficult to say, since we have no motive. I find it strange that they Stunned Krum... If they wanted him out of the way, choosing such a temporary spell is an odd choice...”
“What, you think Viktor had something to do with it?” Harry asked, frowning.

“Given his relationships with you and Miss Granger, I doubt it. But I did notice that when he happened upon Krum sitting on the ground, obviously harmed in some way, Karkaroff became angry at the Headmaster. He did not at any point show any concern for Krum himself,” said Severus.

“Why would Karkaroff attack his own champion?” asked Harry.

“We do not know what happened in the Forest after you left. Krum could have been Stunned immediately after your departure; what if you were the intended target, and the attacker simply had poor aim?”

“I didn't think of that,” Harry admitted.

Severus nodded. “You know what Karkaroff used to be. He bought his freedom from Azkaban by betraying his former comrades. His own well-being will always be his paramount consideration, no matter what – or who – stands in his way.”

“Okay.”

“I want you to avoid leaving the castle except for your Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures classes. And make sure you walk to and from those lessons with at least one other student. Absolutely no flying around the grounds when the rest of your classmates are studying for their exams. If you visit Hagrid, have him collect you from the castle and walk you back up afterwards.”

“Okay,” Harry said again, trying to keep the sullenness from his voice.

Severus began walking again. “You learned this evening what the third task will consist of, did you not?”

“Yeah, it's a maze on the Quidditch pitch. They'll be putting the Tournament trophy in the centre of it, and the first one to touch it wins. We have to fight our way through a bunch of different creatures and spells.”

Severus hummed thoughtfully. “Very well. I shall begin instructing you in the necessary spells.”

Harry jerked his head up in surprise. “You'll be training me yourself?”

“Not entirely. That would take too much time and people might begin to suspect my involvement... I believe the best course of action is for you to practice with Mr Malfoy and Miss Granger. I'll ask you to stay back after Potions classes to demonstrate what you've mastered, and to set you your next goals.”

“Sounds good. What do you want me to practice first?”

Severus pursed his lips and looked at Harry speculatively. “For tonight, I want you to practice Disarming, just to make sure you're still competent with that spell. Read the chapter on Stunning Charms in your Defence textbook if you haven't already covered it in class, and borrow a fifth year's text to read about Shield Charms. I'll speak to you after Potions tomorrow afternoon and gauge your progress.”

“Got it.”

Severus smirked. “I believe you should count yourself lucky that you and your friends exterminated the skrewts when you did.”
“God, yeah,” Harry said fervently, shuddering at the thought of meeting a fully grown skrewt in the maze.

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Naturally, Harry had told Draco everything as soon as Severus had left him at the entrance to the Slytherin common room. Together, they both told Hermione at lunch on Friday, in an empty classroom on the second floor. She sat silently on the window sill, listening intently. When they'd finished the story she'd wrapped her arms around her knees and frowned out of the window. Harry leaned back against a desk and waited for her to speak.

“It's incredibly odd how quickly he was able to move,” she finally said.

Draco frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, Viktor already had his wand out, didn't he? If Crouch was as injured or sick as it sounds like he was, I can't see how he could have managed to Stun Viktor without him at least trying to defend himself,” said Hermione.

“Yeah, but he said he turned around to see where I was,” Harry reminded her.

“All the same... Then there's also how easily he disappeared.”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe he Disapparated.”

“You can't Apparate or Disapparate within Hogwarts,” Hermione snapped. “How many times do I have to tell you that?”

“You can if you're a house-elf,” countered Draco.

Hermione's mouth dropped open. “That's it!”

“What's it?” asked Draco.

Hermione was staring out over the grounds again, obviously thinking furiously.

“She thinks Winky helped him,” Harry guessed.

“What? But she belongs to Mother now,” said Draco.

“And the last we heard of her, she was still pining for Crouch, despite the fact that your mum is much kinder to her,” said Hermione.

“I could write to Mother,” Draco said reluctantly, “but it's a waste of time. Mother wouldn't let her elves run around all over the countryside.”

“Have you forgotten about Dobby?” Harry asked incredulously.

Draco waved a hand dismissively. “Dobby's a special case and always has been.”

“It's not like it's anything taxing. You write to your mum every week,” Hermione said.

“Fine,” said Draco.

“Thank you,” Hermione said calmly. “Harry, you should write to Sirius.”
“Why?”

“To see if he knows of any secret passages in the Forbidden Forest. One that didn’t get put on the Map for some reason.”

“Good idea,” Harry said.

Hermione nodded briskly. “Not to mention that he and Narcissa will want to know what happened last night.”

“Yeah, and he'd want to know what the next task is, too,” Harry said, now digging through his schoolbag for some parchment.

Draco pulled out a bottle of ink and set it on the desk in between him and Harry. “What are you going to do while we're both writing letters?”

Hermione grinned and pulled out her Defence book from her schoolbag. “I thought I might look for some more spells for Harry.”

When the bell rang for class they headed down to the Potions classroom with two completed letters and a list of spells Hermione had told Harry to ask Severus about. For the first time, Harry spent Potions wishing the class would hurry up and end. It seemed to take longer than usual for the bell to ring.

“No, Miss Parkinson, I will not be telling you what will be on the exam. You should be studying the entire year's syllabus,” Severus snapped over the sound of the bell ringing.

Pansy pouted and began gathering her belongings with the rest of the class, and soon Harry was left alone with Severus.

“Well?”

Harry grinned. “I Disarmed Draco, Blaise and Theo loads of times last night.”

“Did they just stand there and allow you to do so, or were they trying to Disarm you at the same time?”

Harry's grin widened. “We blew out all the lamps in the dorm and were running around trying to Disarm each other in the firelight. It was a lot of fun, actually.”

Severus blinked. “That sounds surprisingly effective.”

“I also did the reading you told me to do, and I'm going to practice both charms on the weekend with Hermione and Draco.”

“Very good.”

“Oh, and Hermione went through her Defence book and came up with this list of spells for me to try,” said Harry, handing over the piece of parchment.

Severus read the list quickly. “Inform Miss Granger that this is an excellent list of basic spells, but relies too much on defensive spells.”

Harry winced. “Can't you tell her that?” Informing Hermione that her research had been sub-par sounded like a dangerous activity to Harry.
Severus snorted. “No. If it helps, try suggesting she look up offensive spells not found in your textbook. The library has an extensive range of books on jinxes and hexes.”

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Harry and Draco both received prompt replies from Sirius and Narcissa. Unfortunately, neither were able to help shed any light on the matter of Crouch. Sirius swore he knew the Forbidden Forest inside out from his jaunts out during the full moon and that it contained no secret passages save the one under the Whomping Willow. Narcissa assured Draco that Winky was in no condition to be Apparating around Hogwarts; she was still miserable over being freed by Crouch, and seemed to have developed somewhat of a drinking problem.

As Harry had expected, Hermione had taken Severus’ criticism personally. While Draco spent the weekend helping Harry practice Stunning and Shield Charms in the Room of Requirement, Hermione had retreated to the library to look up some more offensive spells for him to use.

“I doubt she's even working,” Draco grumbled. Harry had just Stunned and Revived him yet again, and he was pouting up at Harry from the middle of the large padded mat he'd fallen onto.

“Who, Hermione?” Harry asked in amusement.

“Yes! I bet she’s snogging Viktor in some dusty corner, hidden in the stacks.”

“Really?”

“Yes! Or maybe they’ve left the library,” Draco said, warming to his theme. “They've probably gone to the kitchens to get some chocolate and are currently flying around the grounds and snogging.”

Harry burst into laughter. “Don't you think you might be getting them confused with us?”

A trapped look came into Draco's eyes, but his jaw jutted stubbornly. “I do not.”

“Really? Because I'm pretty sure Hermione would find a library to be very, er, stimulating,” Harry said, slowly moving towards Draco.

“You're right, they’re probably pawing each other in the Defence section,” Draco nodded.

“Whereas you and I,” Harry said, straddling Draco, “are the ones who would enjoy eating chocolate and flying around the grounds and snogging in mid-air.”

Draco slipped his hands around Harry's waist. “We've never kissed in mid-air.”

“We'll try it next time we go flying,” Harry promised.

He cupped Draco's face and pulled him forward to close the last few centimetres between them. Harry could feel Draco smiling as he kissed him. He stifled his own smile, gave Draco's lower lip a gentle bite and then moved his mouth to his neck.

“No hickeys,” Draco warned breathlessly.

“I'm much better than I used to be, you git,” Harry said, biting down gently to prove his point.

“Mmm,” was Draco's only response.

After a few minutes Harry gave one final lick and pulled away. “Come on, back to work.”
Draco gaped up at him, flushed and incredulous. “You expect me to let you Stun me after that?”

“Yeah, I do,” Harry said. He stood up, held out his hand, and pulled up a very reluctant Draco. “Because I've just discovered a brilliant way to make sure I Revive you properly.”

Draco raised an eyebrow. “You'll have to check me out thoroughly.”

Harry kissed him lightly. “Trust me, I'll pay very close attention.”

After Care of Magical Creatures on Monday, Hermione handed Harry a comprehensive list of hexes and jinxes to try out. Each spell had its incantation and effects neatly written down, followed by the book in which Hermione found it.

Harry grinned at her. “Thanks, Hermione. See, Malfoy? She wasn't snogging Viktor in the library.”

Hermione looked at Draco in disbelief. “You thought I was with Viktor when I was looking up spells for Harry to use in the Tournament? You do remember that he's competing against Harry, don't you? Just how stupid do you think I am?”

When Draco mumbled something under his breath, Harry snorted. “He's just annoyed that he was the one I was practising Stunning on.”

“Too bad,” Hermione said, smirking. She rummaged in her bag and pulled out a thick, well-thumbed book. “Here, this one was the most useful, you should start here.”

“Okay. Thanks again,” Harry said, taking the heavy book and slipping it into his own school bag.

After lunch he headed down to the nearly empty common room with Draco and Pansy for their free period. They joined Daphne and Millicent at a couch near the windows, and while the others began their exam studies, Harry pulled out the book and list from Hermione. He sat on the floor, leaning against Draco's legs, and began reading about the Knockback Jinx, which sounded quite useful.

Unfortunately, the language in the book was about as exciting as one of Binns' lectures, and Harry was soon struggling to stay awake.

He found himself looking down on the back of an eagle owl as it soared through the bright sky. At first he thought it was Thoth, but this owl was too small and didn't feel at all familiar. Neither did the building they were flying towards. Sitting at the top of a hill amidst a large garden, the sprawling house was covered in ivy and had a distinctly neglected feel about it. Harry shivered (though as he couldn't see his body, he was unsure how he managed this) and the owl dipped down, heading towards a window on the top floor that was helpfully broken.

They flew through the shattered remains of the glass, through a dusty room and into a dark hallway. There was something very foreboding about the hallway, something that sparked a memory, but Harry couldn't think what... In only a few seconds they'd reached the end of the hallway and had entered an equally dark room. Weak beams of sunlight streamed in through gaps in the boarded up windows, but most of the room was in ominous shadow.

Harry's dream-self (he didn't know what else to call it, but he still saw no body) had left the owl now. He watched silently as the owl slowed its flight and disappeared over the back of a dilapidated armchair.

Harry wasn't the only one watching the owl. As it fluttered into the room, two large shadows on the
floor had stirred. Darker than the rest of the shadows in the room, Harry was able to make out a small man and a large snake. Both of them were looking at the armchair, the seat of which Harry couldn't see. The snake was calm and still, but the man was sobbing with laboured breath as he cowered on the floor.

“I will spare you, Wormtail,” said a cold, high-pitched voice. Harry could tell it was coming from the chair, but couldn't see who was sitting in it. “Though you do not deserve it, fate has smiled on you. Your mistake has been mitigated. He is dead.”

Relief washed across the man's face. “My Lord, I am thankful. Such mercy... I am so grateful. I will never disappoint you again... I am so sorry...”

“Nagini, you'll have to find your own dinner. I won't be feeding Wormtail to you after all. Not today, at any rate. But there is always Harry Potter,” the voice said.

“Yes, Master,” the snake replied.

The voice switched back to English to address the man. “Now, Wormtail, I think a little refresher is needed, don't you? To make sure that you do not disappoint me like this again.”

Wormtail looked at the chair in terror. “No, please, my Lord... Don't, please... I cannot... Please...”

A wand appeared over the arm of the chair, pointing unwaveringly at Wormtail. “Crucio.”

Wormtail writhed on the floor, screaming in pain. As his limbs jerked, Harry screamed too, despite knowing that Voldemort would hear him – the burning in his scar was not letting up and it felt like his head would surely split open.

“Harry!”

“Harry, wake up!”

“Harry!”

Harry opened his eyes and found himself slumped sideways, sprawled over onto Millicent's feet with his hands pressed to his scar. Draco and Daphne were kneeling over him looking worried, and Pansy was standing behind them.

“I'll go get Pomfrey,” she said.

“No,” Harry said, sitting up with the help of Draco and Daphne. “Snape's closer.”

“But...”

“I can get a headache cure off him,” Harry said, willing his eyes to stop watering.

“I'll take him,” Draco said to Pansy. He and Daphne helped Harry stand up.

Pansy was still frowning at him in concern. “You sure?”

“Yes,” Harry said firmly.

He grabbed Draco's hand and headed for the exit. The other students in the common room looked at him curiously as he passed, and he knew the story would spread around the school by the end of the day.
Out in the corridor Draco stopped to face Harry. "What was that?"

Harry grimaced. "Another dream about Voldemort."

Draco paled but nodded. "I thought so. Come on, the bell should be ringing soon, we won't have to wait long."

Harry allowed Draco to pull him through the corridors to the Potions classroom and knock on the door.

"Enter."

They walked in on a class full of first year Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors, all of whom stared at Harry over their cauldrons as he followed Draco to Severus' desk.

Severus took one look at Harry's face and pointed to his own chair. "Sit," he told Harry, then glared at the class. "If a single cauldron boils over because you were too busy gawking at a couple of fourth years, the entire class will have detention."

Harry couldn't help smiling as the class jumped and bent back over their cauldrons. Severus frowned at them for a few seconds more then turned to Harry. "What's wrong?"

"I had another dream about Voldemort," Harry said quietly, gingerly lowering his hand from his scar, which was still burning with pain.

Severus watched his hand's trajectory with concern. "Your scar is paining you?"

"Not as much as when I woke up."

"He woke up screaming in the middle of the common room," Draco put in.

Severus shot a look at him before returning his gaze to Harry, who nodded miserably. Severus pursed his lips and turned back around to the class. "Your time is up. Bottle what you've managed to brew and clean up."

As the class scurried around Severus crouched down behind his desk and pulled out a drawer. He selected a small blue vial and handed it to Harry. "All of it."

Harry knocked back the potion and pulled a face at the taste. After a few seconds he had to admit that having a mouth that tasted like he'd been chewing stale grass was worth it when his headache went away completely. He and Draco watched in silence as Severus prowled up and down the desks while the first years finished packing up. After they'd all placed their bottles on Severus' desk (shooting curious looks at Harry while they did so) they were told to read a few chapters and dismissed. When the last of them had departed Severus flicked his wand at the door to close it and then came back to Harry.

"Can you remember your dream?"

"Mostly, I think," said Harry.

Severus nodded and conjured up chairs for himself and Draco. "Harry, I would like your permission to perform Legilimency on you. I will be as gentle as possible."

Harry tightened his grip on Draco's hand. "Okay. What do I have to do?"

"Maintain eye contact with me and think about the dream, but do not try to control the narrative. I'll
do the rest,” Severus said, shifting forward on his seat and pointing his wand at Harry.

Harry met Severus' eyes and swallowed nervously. “Okay.”

“Legilimens,” murmured Severus.

The black of Severus' eyes faded away to the shadowy dark of the house as Harry was plunged back into his dream. It played out exactly the same as it had when he was asleep, only without the pain. The fear was still there, though, and it didn't leave when he returned to the Potions classroom and found himself staring at a very worried Severus.

“Draco, go up to dinner and do what you can to prevent this story from spreading. I doubt you will be able to contain it, but try to make sure no one suspects it had anything to do with Harry's scar,” Severus ordered.

Draco nodded shakily. “Yes, sir.”

He squeezed Harry's hand and left. Harry stared at Severus, who was even paler than usual. “What is it?”

Severus' mouth was set in a grim line. “That was no dream, Harry,” he said slowly.

“You mean it was real?”

Severus nodded and stood up. “We need to speak to Dumbledore. We'll take the Floo. I don't want anyone seeing you walking up to his office immediately after the scene in the common room. It's going to be hard enough as it is keeping this quiet.”

There was no fireplace in the classroom, so Harry followed Severus out into the corridor. Since it was dinner time, it was thankfully deserted. Severus led the way to his office, crossed immediately to his fireplace and threw in some Floo powder.

“Headmaster, I need to speak to you urgently.”

“Come through,” Dumbledore replied.

Severus beckoned Harry forward and they stepped through together. They found Dumbledore pacing in front of Fawkes' stand. “Bad news?”

“Harry's had a vision of the Dark Lord,” Severus said.

“A vision?” Dumbledore asked sharply.

“I thought it was a dream, but...” Harry trailed off uncertainly.

“I used Legilimency on him. It was real, Albus. I did not see the Dark Lord, but I recognised his presence,” Severus said.

Dumbledore sat down behind his desk and gestured for them to take a seat. “What did you see?”

Harry looked at Severus, who nodded. “Er, he's holed up in some run down mansion somewhere. The room felt familiar but I don't know why. He got an owl from someone with good news. Pettigrew was there – he made a mistake, but it's fixed now, because someone's died. That's what was in the owl. He had a huge snake that he'd been planning on feeding Pettigrew to, but he changed his mind. He told the snake – he called it Nagini – that he'd feed me to it instead.” Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Severus shift suddenly, and realised that he hadn't understood the Parseltongue
in the vision. “He was still angry at Pettigrew though, so he used the Cruciatus curse on him. It made my scar hurt so much that I woke up.”

Dumbledore clasped his hands together. “Is this the only vision you’ve had since your nightmare during the summer?”

“Yes, sir. Wait, you know about that?”

“I told him, Harry,” Severus said quietly. “Immediately after Narcissa shared her concerns with me. I am now exceedingly glad I did so, as it seems you have some sort of a connection with the Dark Lord.”

“Connection? You mean my scar?”

Dumbledore looked at him gravely. “Whether or not the scar is the cause of the connection, it is most definitely involved somehow,” he said slowly. “Tell me, has it hurt at any other time this year?”

Harry shook his head. “Just when I had the dreams. What does that mean, sir?”

Dumbledore was silent for a moment. “I believe – and this is just a theory, Harry – that your scar pains you both when Voldemort experiences a particularly strong feeling of hatred, and when he is in close proximity to you.”

“So I'm like a satellite dish for Voldemort?” Harry asked, feeling sick.

“Of a sort,” Severus said. “Muggle device,” he explained to Dumbledore, who'd looked confused.

“Ah. Yes, well, I am afraid that there is a strong likelihood that you will be experiencing more pain in the future.”

“Because he's getting stronger?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore shot an exasperated look at Severus before nodding slowly. “As Severus has no doubt informed you, we have cause to believe that Voldemort is indeed growing in power. The beginning of Voldemort's first rise to power was marked by a string of disappearances, and there have been several over the last year. Barty Crouch has just disappeared from this very school. You are aware from your first dream that Bertha Jorkins has disappeared. And there is a third disappearance, that of Frank Bryce, of which you are likely ignorant, as he was a Muggle, and he was not mentioned in the Daily Prophet.”

“What makes you think that he had anything to do with Voldemort?” asked Harry.

“He lived in the village where Voldemort's father grew up. The Ministry believes this is all just a matter of coincidence, but I think that all three disappearances are linked.”

“So what do we do?” Harry asked, looking between Severus and Dumbledore.

“Well -” began Severus.

Dumbledore stopped him with a raised hand. “You do nothing, Harry, for there is nothing you can do about this. Now,” he raised his voice, as both Harry and Severus had opened their mouths to object, “you really should be getting to dinner before it's all eaten.”

Reluctantly, Harry got to his feet and walked to the fireplace with Severus.

“Oh, and Harry, good luck with the third task,” Dumbledore said.
“Thank you, sir,” Harry replied, before following Severus through the Floo. He stumbled slightly but caught himself. “Severus -”

“He’s right,” Severus interrupted. “Go up to dinner.” When Harry just stared at him unhappily, Severus sighed. “My priority right now is getting you through the final task safely. Once you’ve done that, I’ll begin teaching you how to protect yourself from any further visions, all right?”

“You can do that?” Harry asked eagerly.

Severus smirked. “Of course I can. However, it is not an easy skill to learn, and you need to devote your current energy to learning the spells that will get you through this task. Once the Tournament is over, Dumbledore will be better able to work towards slowing or preventing the Dark Lord’s resurgence, and I’ll have plenty of time to help you block the visions once the adoption is complete.”

“Oh okay,” Harry said before heading for the door, unable to prevent a smile from spreading across his face at the mention of the adoption.

He didn’t really feel like the noise of the Great Hall right now, so he walked back to the dorm instead. He stole a muffin from the latest package Narcissa had sent Draco and settled down on his bed, where someone, presumably one of the girls, had kindly deposited the spell list and book he’d left in the common room. He ate the muffin as he began reading about the Impediment Jinx, getting up for another when he polished it off. He was just wondering if he could get some of Tilly’s cooking sent to him over the summer holidays when Draco walked into the room.

“There you are! Feeling better?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said, shifting over so Draco could sit down next to him.

“Good,” Draco said, snuggling up and leaning his head on Harry’s shoulder. “If anyone asks, you get crippling stress headaches.”

“They bought that?” Harry asked.

Draco chuckled. “Yes, they bought it. Turns out both Tracey and Theo get them around exam time. So, ah, don’t mention them around either of those two. They’re quite passionate on the subject, especially Tracey.”

Harry kissed his forehead. “I’ll keep that in mind.”
In Which Sirius Visits Hogwarts Without Terrifying Everyone, and Harry Enters the Labyrinth

The last weeks of term were spent in a flurry of revision. All of Harry's friends were studying for their exams, from which he was exempt as a Triwizard champion. He had his own study to occupy him, however.

Severus had wholeheartedly approved of Hermione's new list of spells, and after each Potions lesson, Harry stayed back to demonstrate his newest hexes and jinxes. He was also receiving daily owls from Sirius, more often than not with notes from Remus inserted into them. Harry was amused to see that all four of them were giving him the same sort of suggestions. On one memorable occasion, Harry had witnessed Severus giving Hermione a sincere compliment on her research, but he thought it would be pushing things to point out that Severus was also in perfect agreement with both Sirius and Remus.

Harry had one day off from practising when Draco flat out refused to be hexed, jinxed, or otherwise maimed on his birthday. Instead, Hagrid collected both them and Hermione from the castle and took them down to his cabin for lunch, which included a delicious chocolate cake. After Hagrid had escorted them all back up to the castle, Harry and Draco took their brooms to the Room of Requirement and spent a few hours flying around a slightly smaller than average Quidditch pitch, where, as promised, Harry kissed Draco in mid-air. Repeatedly.

After his last Potions lesson before the task, Harry cast his latest spells for Severus, the Reductor Curse and the Impediment Jinx. Severus had nodded approvingly.

"You'll be fine. One last piece of advice: to find the centre of the maze and thus the trophy, simply stick to one wall. Right or left, it makes no matter. So long as you are consistently keeping to the same side, you will eventually get there without getting lost."

"What about dead ends?" Harry had asked.

Severus shook his head. "Don't worry about them. If you follow this rule, if you do come across a dead end, you'll shortly emerge on the other side of it and continue on your way. All you need to do is remain consistent."

All in all, Harry was going into the final task feeling very confident about his ability to – if not win the Tournament outright – come through the maze unscathed. He was therefore quite rattled when, during breakfast on the day of the task, Severus walked up to him with a bizarre announcement.

"Mr Potter, champions are to make their way to the chamber behind the staff table to meet their families before this evening's task," he said.

"The Dursleys are here?" Harry blurted in disbelief.

"Just go," Severus said impatiently before he stalked out of the hall.

Harry turned to Draco, who looked just as baffled as he did. "Guess I'm off, then. Good luck with your exam, guys."

He kissed Draco on the cheek before getting up from the table. He waved at Hermione and Neville and made his way to the side chamber. He'd only taken a couple of steps inside when the cause of Severus' bad mood made itself apparent.
“Harry!”

“Hi, Sirius,” Harry gasped weakly from the bear hug he was trapped in.

“Sorry,” Sirius said, letting him go and ruffling his hair. “Come on.”

Harry looked around himself as he followed Sirius across the room, skirting around Cedric and his parents. Viktor was talking to his parents in Bulgarian, and Fleur was speaking to her mother in French. Gabrielle was holding onto her mother's hand, and gave Harry a wave when she spotted him. He smiled and waved back at her.

Standing in front of the unlit fireplace were Narcissa and Remus, both beaming at him.

“Hello, Harry,” Narcissa said, pulling him into a hug that was thankfully less constricting than her cousin's had been.

“Hi Narcissa, Remus.”

“Hello, Harry,” Remus said, shaking his hand.

“Surprised?” Narcissa asked mischievously.

Harry grinned. “Yeah. When Severus said my family was here I thought he'd gone mad and was talking about the Dursleys.”

“Your real family, Harry,” Sirius said. “Dumbledore invited me, and I decided to drag Remus and Narcissa along with me.”

“I'm glad you did. The Dursleys would never have come,” said Harry.

Sirius frowned. “James met them a couple of times. He complained about them for weeks every time.”

“I guarantee they're worse than whatever he told you,” Narcissa said darkly.

Remus cleared his throat. “So, Harry, are you prepared?”

“Yeah,” Harry nodded, then looked around the room. “Let's get out of here.”

They walked towards the door. Sirius slowed down and winked at a portrait nearby. “Vi. Looking as well as ever.”

The portrait gave him a startled look before slipping out of her frame.

Remus chuckled. “I'd forgotten about your flirtation with her.”

Sirius sighed heavily. “I don't think she'll forgive me for what I did to the Fat Lady last year. She did recover, didn't she? I felt awful about that.”

“It really wasn't your smartest move,” Remus said reprovingly.

Sirius slumped a bit. “In my defence, I was on a quest for bloody vengeance and got a bit carried away.”

Harry snorted. “I'll say. But yeah, they restored her. She's back guarding the Gryffindor entrance, unfortunately. Her replacement was a lot better about letting Draco and I into their common room.”
“You got into another house's common room?” Sirius asked enviously.

Harry laughed. “Yeah, it's easy enough with the Invisibility Cloak. Though we haven't managed to get into Hufflepuff.”

“James and I never got into any of them,” Sirius said dejectedly.

“Not for lack of trying,” Remus said with a grin.

“Care to show us the Slytherin common room?” Sirius asked.

“Er...” Harry glanced at Narcissa, who nodded slightly. “Sure. If it's empty.”

“It will be good to see it again,” Narcissa said, as they descended the stairs into the dungeons. “I do miss looking out into the lake sometimes.”

“Open,” Harry said to the entrance. He stuck his head in and stepped aside when he saw the room was deserted.

As Sirius bounded into the room, Remus looked at Harry questioningly. “It opens to Parseltongue?”

Harry nodded. “It's dead handy. I don't have to worry if I forget the password, and it's good for times like this when I'm letting in a non-Slytherin. Though I've only ever invited Hermione inside. I think even Severus would get mad at me if I brought in anyone else.”

Remus shook his head. “I can't believe you only had detention once last year. Sirius and James were in daily at one point.”

“That was only for a few months, Moony!” Sirius called from the other side of the room, where he was peering out into the lake.

“Guess Slytherins are better about not getting caught than Gryffindors are,” Harry said loudly.

Narcissa smirked. “We are. So we should get these two out of here before someone else wanders in.”

Sirius grumbled at that, as he'd been about to walk down into the dorms. Remus had to drag him outside.

“Nervous about tonight?” Remus asked.

“Not yet,” Harry said honestly. “Thanks to you two, and Hermione and Severus, I know a whole bunch of useful spells. Draco helped too,” he assured Narcissa, “with actually learning the spells they told us about. He knows a lot of new jinxes and hexes now.”

“Just what every mother longs to hear,” she said drawled. “Why am I not surprised to learn you've been a bad influence on my son, Sirius?”

Sirius just grinned. “Sounds to me like he's pretty good at getting into trouble without my help.”

“I'm so glad I'm not a teacher anymore,” Remus remarked.

They spent the rest of the morning wandering the castle. Harry was greatly entertained by the adults' tales of their school days, though he noticed that Sirius was careful to avoid all mention of Severus. When it was close to lunch time they returned to the Great Hall and sat down at the Slytherin table. More than one Slytherin did a nervous double take when they saw an ex-professor sitting at their table.
“Mother!” Draco exclaimed happily as he squeezed in between her and Harry.

Narcissa smiled when he kissed her cheek. “Hello, darling. Did your exams go well?”

“Quite well. I just have History of Magic after lunch and then I'm finished. What are you doing here?”

“We came to watch Harry tonight,” she replied.

“Excuse me, Professor Lupin,” Tracey said politely. She and Theo sat down next to him. “Do you mind if we ask you about our Defence exam? I know you’re no longer our teacher, but we don’t want to ask our current one.”


As she and Theo launched into a series of detailed questions about the counter-curses, Harry shared a wry grin with Draco.

“Are you Sirius Black?”

Harry looked up to see Scarlett staring at Sirius. He twisted around to see her and smiled. “Yes. And you are...?”

Scarlett bounced on the balls of her feet. “Scarlett. But you can call me Scar if you like. Are you really an Animagus like it said in the *Prophet*?”

Sirius' smile widened. “Let me guess, you want a demonstration?”

“Yes please!”

Sirius stood up, winked at Scarlett, then transformed into a giant, black shaggy dog.

Scarlett's eyes widened with glee. “That is so cool! Do you play fetch?”

Sirius barked and wagged his tail. Scarlett grabbed a spoon, transfigured it into a silvery stick, then ran out of the hall with Sirius at her heels.

Draco laughed as he watched them. “That's your godfather, Harry. Your godfather is going off to play fetch.”

“Yeah, but he's your uncle, you git,” Harry replied.

Draco blinked at him. “First cousin once removed, thank you very much.”

“Whatever. You're still related by blood.”

Draco turned to appeal to his mother, but Narcissa was busy chatting to Pansy, Millicent, Blaise and Daphne.

Everyone rushed off to their exam after lunch, leaving Harry alone with Narcissa and Remus.

“If you've no objections, I'd like to take a walk around the grounds,” Narcissa announced. “I didn't get a good look last time I was here.”

Remus shrugged. “I spent most of last year here, wherever you want is fine with me.”
“Shouldn't we wait for Sirius?” Harry asked, getting up after them.

“He'll find us when he's done. He always does,” Remus replied.

“He's done this before?” asked Harry.

“Don't ever go to a park with him,” was all Remus said.

They were walking along the side of the Abraxans' paddock talking about Crouch's disappearance when Sirius, still in dog form, pelted up to them. He circled them once then transformed back into his usual self and slung his arm over Remus' shoulders.

“That girl is exhausting,” he panted.

“I could've told you that,” Harry said.

“I'll know for next time. So what are you talking about that has you all looking so serious?”

Narcissa raised an eyebrow when Sirius began laughing at his own pun. “Crouch's disappearance.”

That sobered him. “Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy,” he growled.

“Yes, well, as I was telling Harry, his replacement as judge for tonight is none other than Cornelius Fudge,” Narcissa said.

“Wanker,” Remus muttered.

Harry looked at him in surprise. “What do you have against Fudge?”

“He was Minister for Magic when the Ministry passed some legislation that makes it virtually impossible for werewolves to find work,” Remus explained sourly.

“I keep telling him not to worry about it. I have enough money for both of us,” said Sirius.

“Some of us prefer to earn our own money,” said Remus.

Narcissa sighed, clearly used to this particular disagreement, and sped up her pace. Harry joined her when Remus asked Sirius why, if Sirius was so keen to make use of his inheritance, they were still living at Remus' tiny flat, and not the huge townhouse that had been part of said inheritance.

They returned to the Great Hall for dinner. Sitting between Draco and Sirius, Harry didn't talk much, too busy beginning to feel nervous. To distract himself, he spent the meal going over all his new spells in his head, pleased he could remember them all.

All too soon, Dumbledore stood up from the staff table and the hall went silent. “Ladies and gentlemen, in five minutes I will ask you to walk down to the Quidditch pitch to take your seats for the third and final task in this year's Triwizard Tournament. But now, will the four champions please make their way down with Mr Bagman.”

Harry stood up to applause from the Slytherin table. Draco pulled him down for a kiss.

“I'll see you when you've got that trophy,” he said.

Sirius ruffled his hair as he straightened up again. “Knock 'em dead, Harry.”

“I'll do my best,” Harry assured them, then waited for Viktor to walk up from the other end of the
Nearly over,” Harry said with a nervous smile.

Viktor nodded. “Yes, though I will be sad to leave here.”

They both looked over at the Gryffindor table, where Hermione gave them a cheery wave and mouthed “good luck”.

“She’ll miss you too,” Harry said quietly.

Viktor tore his gaze away from Hermione and gave Harry a small smile. “Even after I beat you tonight?”

“You mean when you get second place, don’t you?” Harry replied.

Viktor merely shook his head, and then they were joined by Cedric, Fleur and Bagman.

“All set, Harry?” Bagman asked him.

“Yeah,” Harry said shortly. He was silent for the rest of the walk down to the Quidditch pitch.

If the usual stands hadn’t still been ringed around it, Harry doubted he would have recognised the pitch. There was a twenty foot high hedge running around it, broken by a single entrance. The path beyond it was dark and foreboding.

“They better be able to fix this before the next Quidditch season,” Harry muttered to Cedric.

“You’re telling me,” he agreed, frowning at the hedge in consternation.

A few minutes later came the sound of the crowd heading towards the stands. There was a festive feel in the gathering twilight, though the champions remained tense. Hagrid, McGonagall, Flitwick and Moody all came into the stadium and stood before the champions.

McGonagall addressed them. “We will be patrolling the perimeter of the maze. If for any reason you are unable to continue in the task, send up a shower of red sparks and one of us will come and get you. Understood?”

All four champions nodded silently.

“Better get into position,” Bagman said jovially.

“Good luck, Harry,” Hagrid whispered as he walked past.

Bagman pointed his wand at his throat. “Sonorus,” he said quietly, then addressed the crowd in a much louder voice. “Welcome to the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament! Our fearless champions are ready and rearing to enter the maze, but first, let me give you a run down of the scores! In first place, on ninety points, Mr Harry Potter of Hogwarts School!” Bagman paused for the cheering of the crowd to die down before continuing. “Tied for second place, on eighty points, are Mr Cedric Diggory, also of Hogwarts School, and Mr Viktor Krum, of Durmstrang Institute!” Again Bagman paused until there was silence. “And finally, in last place but most definitely still in the running, on sixty-four points, Miss Fleur Delacour of Beauxbatons Academy!”

Harry scanned the noisy stands and waved when he saw his friends sitting in what was usually the Slytherin stand, along with Sirius, Remus and Narcissa. They waved back, yelling something Harry couldn’t make out.
Bagman beamed at Harry. “On my whistle! Three... Two... One...”

As soon as he blew his whistle Harry set off at a steady jog. It was dark in the maze, as if the fading dusk light couldn't penetrate below the tops of the hedges. It was silent too, the only sound that of Harry's own footsteps and breathing.

“Lumos,” he muttered, then held his lit wand in front of him.

After about fifty metres he came to a fork in the path and he remembered Severus' last piece of advice. Both paths looked equally empty from where he stood. He looked between, weighed his options, and took the right one. A few seconds later he heard the whistle blow again, and he started running, knowing that Viktor and Cedric were now in the maze. He had to get to another corner and out of sight of whichever one of them took the same path he had. He didn't want either of them following him.

He snuck a glance over his shoulder and didn't see anyone, but didn't slow his pace until he came to another fork. He had the strongest feeling that he was being watched. He ducked down the right path and slowed slightly. Apart from a shiny, grey, almost perfectly spherical rock, there weren't any obstacles on this path, either. He dodged around the rock and continued on his way.

As he jogged along, Harry started to feel unnerved. Surely he should have come across something by now. He heard the whistle blow for one final time and reflexively looked behind him again. There was no sign of any of the other champions. Apart from the shiny rock, the path behind him was perfectly empty.

Harry frowned. He thought he'd travelled further past the rock than that. He shook his head and continued forwards; obviously the eerie atmosphere of the maze was getting to him. Another right turn had him walking down the longest straight stretch he'd come across yet. He couldn't make out anything in front of him, but he slowed his pace warily.

A few seconds later he heard a strange whirring sound coming from the hedges on both sides. He slowed down further and peered at the hedges suspiciously. There was a tense moment when nothing happened, and then the hedges exploded.

Harry stumbled backwards and was able to make out the shapes of over a dozen small, furry black fairy-type creatures as they came pouring out of the hedges. When he saw that they had four arms and four legs he recognised them from Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them as doxys. He took some more steps backwards when he remembered that they had highly venomous bites.

“Immobulus,” he cried, grinning when three of the doxys froze in mid-air. He quickly cast the Freezing Charm over and over until the entire swarm was left suspended in the centre of the path. He ducked down under them and hurried away before the charm could wear off.

He took the next right turn and found himself in a dead end. He walked to the end of it, just to make sure there were no hidden openings in the maze, then turned around and came to a stop. There was no way that he would have missed that rock being at the entrance to the dead end.

“What the hell are you?” Harry asked, walking forward curiously.

The rock didn't move, even when he crouched down in front of it. Harry poked it with his wand, but apart from rocking slightly from the force of the poke, the rock didn't move. Harry narrowed his eyes as he studied the rock. It didn't move, and eventually he rose back to his feet and walked on.

After a few metres Harry whirled around and looked down at the rock. While it had moved forward
slightly, it still showed no evidence it was anything other than a rock. Harry ran a hand through his hair in frustration. He didn't want to let this rock thing follow him for the entire task, but he had no idea what it was, let alone how dangerous it might be. He had a vague memory of Remus having mentioned a creature like this in passing one lesson. He'd said kicking it worked, but that surely wasn't right.

On a hunch, he pointed his wand at the rock. "Stupefy."

A shudder ran through the rock and it tipped over, revealing a short, hairy body underneath its rock-like head.

“A pogrebin, right,” Harry breathed in relief. That explained the feeling that he was being watched. A demon from Russia, if left alone, the pogrebin would’ve followed him for hours, slowly lowering his spirits much like a dementor would have. When he finally collapsed under the weight of his own despair, it would have devoured him.

Harry hurried away from the Stunned Pogrebin, not wanting it to regain consciousness and begin following him again. He took two more right turns without coming across any other creatures, and began to get increasingly wary. Surely he should have come across something more dangerous than doxys by now?

“Why'd you have to think that?” he muttered. He'd just rounded another corner and caught sight of a fire crab crawling slowly at the end of the path, blocking his next turn.

Harry walked forward slowly, wand up, as he tried to remember what he knew about fire crabs. He'd read about them with Draco when they were trying to figure out what the blast-ended skrewts were bred from, but had gotten rather distracted by Draco being turned into a ferret shortly afterwards. They couldn't be as bad a skrewt, though, surely.

Harry studied the fire crab through narrowed eyes. It looked harmless to him; quite pretty, really, like a giant tortoise with a bejewelled shell. And tortoises weren't dangerous, were they? Maybe he could just squeeze past it. There was no way any spell would be able to penetrate its thick shell. His only other choice would be to turn back the way he'd come, but then he'd be lost.

“Protego,” Harry said on instinct.

A transparent but strong Shield Charm sprung up in front of him, making him feel instantly safer. He edged forward, pressing himself against the hedge as he neared the fire crab. It paused briefly when he was a couple of metres away, but resumed its steady pace when he made no sudden movements.

Harry was right behind the fire crab when he heard the sound of something very large moving in a nearby path. He tried to ignore it, but jumped when he heard Viktor yelling in panicked Bulgarian. The unexpected movement evidently startled the fire crab, for it began shooting flames out of its backside.

Harry flinched, but his Shield Charm held. The flames bounced off it, singeing the hedges around them. He gave up any further attempts at stealthiness and pushed past the fire crab, careful to keep the Shield Charm between it and himself. He checked that the hedges weren't on fire then turned in the direction he'd heard Viktor, cancelling his Shield Charm now that he was out of range of the fire crab.

There were red sparks hanging in the air about ten metres above him. They looked like they were a few rows over. Harry could still hear the large something crashing around, though Viktor was no longer yelling in Bulgarian. Harry was just debating whether or not he should call out to him and risk
giving away his position, when he heard the deep rumble of Hagrid's voice.

Knowing that Viktor would be safe with Hagrid, Harry pressed on. While he was sad for Viktor, he couldn't help being glad that there was one less competitor in the race to the trophy. He sincerely hoped his path to the Triwizard Cup didn't take him past whatever it was Viktor had just been bested by.

It was getting properly dark now, and Harry was having trouble seeing very far past the light of his wand tip. He had no idea where the trophy was, but he hoped he was close. He was getting tired, and something in the maze smelled really bad. He held his free hand over his nose as he kept walking and tried to ignore the feeling that he was once again being watched. The stench was getting stronger and seemed familiar somehow...

He rounded another corner and all of a sudden felt like an eleven year old again as he stared at the troll lumbering towards him. This one was thankfully a little smaller than the ones he'd encountered in first year, though it had made up for its smaller size by choosing a larger club.

The troll gave a roar when it spotted him and swung its club at Harry's head. He quickly jumped backwards and felt a fierce sting of wind as the club narrowly missed taking his head clean off.

"Stupefy!" Harry shouted, aiming at the troll's face. The spell shot off the troll and ricocheted back to Harry, forcing him to duck. "Impedimenta!"

That spell also had no effect on the troll, which slammed its club down at Harry. He quickly jumped backwards and felt a fierce sting of wind as the club narrowly missed taking his head clean off.

"Expelliarmus!" he shouted. He watched through watering eyes as the troll's club shot out of its hand. "Wingardium leviosa."

He levitated the club over the head of the troll and brought it down as quickly as he could. There was a dull thunk as the club connected with the troll's head. The troll's face went slack and it teetered on its feet before slowly keeling over. Harry scooted backwards again to avoid getting crushed by the unconscious troll.

Harry sat there breathing hard before planting his right foot down and pulling himself upright with the use of the hedge. Gritting his teeth, he put his left foot down and hissed with pain when it made contact with the ground. There was likely something broken, or at least fractured. He swayed slightly as he put all his weight on his other foot. He tried to take a step forward and groaned with the fresh pain.

At the same moment, Harry became aware of a vicious stinging near his right ear. He reached up tentatively and winced when his hand came into contact with a cut on his scalp. Obviously the troll had managed to knick him with its first attack, but he hadn't been able to feel it when he'd been full of adrenaline. He pulled his hand away and found it slick with blood. He wiped his hand hastily on his hoody and resisted the urge to feel the wound again. His hands were filthy from scrabbling on the ground and he didn't want to get any more dirt in the wound.

Harry looked around himself. He needed something to make a splint out of, or he wouldn't be able to walk properly. With some difficulty he managed to pull a couple of branches of the closest hedge and lengthen them. He tested their strength before sitting down again. He pulled off his hoody and used Severing Charms to tear one of the sleeves into four strips. He tied the two splints on either side of his leg as best he could, then used a Sticking Charm to make sure they wouldn't fall off. He'd never had never first aid training, but he thought he'd managed pretty well.
Looking around himself, Harry saw the troll's club and transfigured it into a crude crutch. He picked it up and awkwardly got to his feet again. He could just stand the pain in his leg with the crutch to lean on. He hobbled past the troll, hoping desperately that he was close to the trophy. While part of him wanted nothing more than to shoot up red sparks and get taken immediately to Pomfrey, the larger part of him was stubbornly insisting on finishing the maze.

He could only move slowly now he was injured, and it took him a minute to get into a rhythm with the crutch. He made his way down the path, taking two more right turns before he ran into anything else.

Pacing to and fro across the path in front of him was a sphinx. She had the head of a woman, but her body was that of a very large lion. Her tail was flicking back and forth like an annoyed cat, but she didn't make any attempt to attack him when she saw him. He raised his wand warily and leaned on his crutch as he waited for her to speak.

“You are very close to what you seek,” she began in a surprisingly deep voice. “The quickest way is past me.”

“So, could you let me past, please?” Harry asked, not very hopefully.

“No,” she said, unsurprisingly, giving a small smile. “Not unless you can answer my riddle. Answer correctly, and I shall let you pass unharmed. Answer incorrectly and I shall attack. If you do not answer, I shall let you return the way you came.”

Harry nodded in resignation. He wasn't very good at riddles, that was Hermione, but perhaps the time he and Draco had spent in reconnaissance outside the Ravenclaw common room might come in handy. His mouth twisted unhappily. If he heard the riddle and couldn't answer it, he could just go back the way he came – but that would throw out his entire tactic of following the one wall.

“Alright.”

The sphinx inclined her head and sat down in the centre of the path.

“First think of the person who lives in disguise,
Who deals in secrets and tells naught but lies.
Next, tell me what's always the last thing to mend,
The middle of middle and end of the end?
And finally give me the sound often heard
During the search for a hard-to-find word.
Now string them together, and answer me this,
Which creature would you be unwilling to kiss?”

Harry stared at her. That was far more complicated than the riddles that the Ravenclaw door came up with. “Er, could you repeat that, please? A bit slower?”

The sphinx gave him that same mysterious smile and repeated the riddle.

“So all three clues add up to something I don't want to kiss?” Harry confirmed.

The sphinx merely blinked at him and continued to smile. Figuring that was a “yes”, Harry ran his hand through his hair, narrowly avoiding the wound from which he could feel blood dripping down the side of his face. Obviously, the first thing that came to mind that he wouldn't want to kiss was a dementor, but he couldn't see how that fit into the rest of the riddle.
“Well, a person in disguise who has to lie would obviously be a spy,” Harry said aloud, thinking of Severus. “Could you please give me the next two lines again?”

The sphinx did so, watching calmly when Harry swore under his breath. These lines were one of those abstract riddles that he'd struggled with at Ravenclaw. Draco had guessed most of those, but it took Harry longer to get into the right frame of mind to understand them.

“Okay, so something that's the last to mend... Is it because it's so badly broken, or because it's the least important?” A tail twitch was his only answer. “Okay... Er, okay... Middle of the middle... End of the end... End of what? The broken thing? Is it dead? No... Think, Potter! Last to mend... Middle of the middle... End of the end... Mend, middle, end... But it's all one thing – so what do they have in common? They sort of rhyme – oh! It's a 'd', isn't it?”

The sphinx blinked again but said nothing.

“Well, a person in disguise who has to lie would obviously be a spy,” Harry said aloud, thinking of Severus. “Could you please give me the next two lines again?”

The sphinx did so, watching calmly when Harry swore under his breath. These lines were one of those abstract riddles that he'd struggled with at Ravenclaw. Draco had guessed most of those, but it took Harry longer to get into the right frame of mind to understand them.

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The sphinx blinked again but said nothing.

“Okay, could I have the next two lines please?” Harry asked excitedly. He was pretty sure he now knew the answer, but he wanted to make sure. The sphinx had very long, very sharp claws and he didn't want them anywhere near himself.

Again, the sphinx fed him a single rhyming couplet.

Harry nodded. “It's 'er'. So it all strings together to make a spider!” He grinned at her, but tightened his grip on his wand, ready to cast another Shield Charm if necessary.

It wasn't. The sphinx merely gave him a genuine smile, got to all fours again and moved to one side of the path.

Harry beamed at her. “Thanks!” He hurried past as fast as he was able, happily picturing the look on Hermione's face when he told her he'd solved the riddle.

He took a right turn after a few hundred metres and found himself in view of the Triwizard Cup. Less than a hundred metres away was a small clearing. In the centre of it was a stone pedestal, on which the Cup was sitting, serenely glowing in the darkness. Harry could see a pathway leading to it from the other side and sped up as best as he could. He came to a stop in front of the Cup and grinned at it in disbelief.

“No!”

Harry jerked around to see both Cedric and Fleur racing up a path towards him. They were both covered in dirt and scratches, but seemed otherwise unharmed. They looked at him with weary resignation as he tucked his crutch under his arm and stretched out his hand to the closest handle of the Cup.

The moment his hand touched the handle he felt a sharp tug from his belly and he jerked forward. The world dissolved in a swirl of colour and sound, and his hand seemed glued to the Cup. The last thing he saw were Cedric's and Fleur's shocked faces before he disappeared.
In Which Harry Realises Just How Much Voldemort Loves the Sound of His Own Voice

Harry slammed feet first into the ground. His injured leg immediately collapsed underneath him and he sprawled forwards, finally letting go of the Cup. He took a deep breath and raised his head, trying not to think of the dirt he'd just gotten into his head wound. He rolled over and sat up to inspect his leg. It was burning with pain but both splints seemed to be in one piece. He could only hope the bone was as lucky.

Harry struggled to his feet, swaying slightly on his right foot now that he'd lost his crutch back in the maze. He looked around himself apprehensively. He definitely wasn't anywhere near the maze – or Hogwarts, for that matter. He'd somehow travelled a long distance. The mountains that surrounded Hogwarts were no longer visible, and he fancied that the sky was a little lighter, too. South, then.

He was standing in the middle of a graveyard that had clearly seen better days. While there were some fancy tombs and even a couple of large mausoleums, they were all overgrown with grass and weeds, and some of the smaller tombstones had begun to crumble. There was a tiny church to one side, and a hill dominated by the silhouette of a large house. The only thing Harry knew for sure about this place was that he'd never been here before.

Harry tightened his hold on his wand and slowly turned on the spot. He once again felt that he was being watched, the feeling far stronger than it had been when he was in the maze. Somehow, he didn't think it'd turn out to be a pogrebin again. This couldn't be part of the Tournament. None of the other tasks had come close to leaving the grounds of Hogwarts, and most importantly, Severus would definitely have warned him about this.

Harry looked down at the Triwizard Cup and bit his lip. For some reason, touching it had transported him to a creepy, deserted graveyard. Would touching it again take him back to Hogwarts? Or would it just take him somewhere even worse?

A shuffling noise made Harry look up again, and he saw a short, hooded figure making its way towards him. The hood covered their face, but Harry could see that they were carrying something in their arms, something that looked like a baby, to judge from the way they were holding it. It was wrapped up in too many robes to make it out properly.

The figure stopped next to a tall marble tombstone a few metres away from Harry, who raised his wand defensively. For a few tense seconds Harry and the figure stared at each other, and then Harry's scar burst with pain. It was worse than anything he'd felt before, worse than the dreams he'd had of Voldemort, and he forgot all about his injuries. He dropped his wand as he pressed both hands to his forehead and collapsed to his knees.

Harry had no idea how long he huddled on the ground. Eventually the pain faded slightly and he was able to open his eyes in time to see the figure place the baby on the ground and light a wand. They walked over to Harry and roughly pulled him to his feet. He was dragged forwards to the marble tombstone. Harry just had time to register the name on it – Tom Riddle – before he was spun around and pushed against it.

Thin ropes were quickly conjured and began to bind Harry to the tombstone. He began to struggle and was backhanded for his efforts – by a hand with only three fingers. His eyes widened when he realised who his captor was.

“Pettigrew!” he gasped. “Sirius will kill you for this!”
Pettigrew flinched but otherwise ignored his outburst. After satisfying himself that Harry was bound tightly – neck to toe, he couldn't move, though it did take some of the weight off his injured leg – Pettigrew pulled some black material out of his pocket and jammed it into Harry's mouth with a shaking hand. Having finished gagging Harry, Pettigrew scurried off to the side and out of Harry's line of sight.

Harry took the chance to take stock of the situation. He was tied to the grave of someone with the same name as Voldemort. His scar was hurting worse than it ever had before. He had a cut on his scalp that was still bleeding and an injured, possibly broken leg. Fleur and Cedric had seen him disappear, but they had no way of knowing where he'd been taken so he couldn't count on help coming any time soon. His wand was lying on the ground a few metres away, and the only other person here was Pettigrew, who seemed to be terrified of something.

Or someone, Harry thought, and swivelled his eyes to the wrapped up baby lying on the ground. As he watched, it wriggled slightly, and his scar burned with a fresh jolt of pain.

All in all, Harry didn't think things could get any worse.

He groaned behind his gag when a slithering sound made him look down. There was a huge snake circling the tombstone he was tied to, and he recognised it as the snake Voldemort had promised Harry to as a meal, Nagini. There was no way he could even attempt to speak to it when he was gagged like this, not that he thought it would be easily persuaded anyway.

Pettigrew came back into view, pushing a large stone cauldron across the ground. Harry could hear liquid of some sort splashing inside it, and Pettigrew was panting heavily with the effort of moving it all. Harry wondered fleetingly why he didn't just levitate the whole thing. Perhaps the potion he was brewing was particularly sensitive? Harry tried to remember if Severus had ever told him about the sorts of potions one might brew in a stone cauldron and came up blank.

The baby – or whatever it was – on the ground began to move more forcefully with the arrival of the cauldron. Pettigrew finally got it into position at the foot of the grave Harry was tied to. He bent down behind the cauldron and a few seconds later had a fire lit underneath it. The snake slithered away from the flames. The potion began to bubble, then throw up fiery sparks. Thick steam billowed out of the cauldron, obscuring Pettigrew from view.

Then came the high, cold voice that Harry heard in his nightmares. “Hurry, you fool!”

Harry tried to ignore his rising panic, doing his best to focus on the potion. If he died, he decided, which seemed pretty bloody likely, he was coming back as a ghost to tell Severus as much about this potion as he could. Unfortunately, he had no idea what was in it, though he thought the stone might be granite.

“It is ready, master,” Pettigrew said.

“Now.”

The entire surface of the potion was sparking now, so brightly that it hurt Harry to look at it directly. He instead watched as Pettigrew made his way over to the bundled up baby. He couldn't help giving a muffled shout of horror when Pettigrew peeled back the robes. What Harry had thought was a baby looked more like a nightmarish miscarriage. Its head was far larger than its body, which had spindly, weak-looking limbs. Its skin was a dark reddish black, like it had been scalded, and it looked scaly. Harry half expected to see a tail. But it was the face that scared him the most. It was inhumanly flat, like that of a snake, and had red eyes that seemed to almost glow in the dark.
The thing raised its arms and wrapped them around Pettigrew's neck, who had an expression of utter disgust. He carefully carried the thing over to the cauldron and dropped it in. There was a hiss as it entered the potion, then it sunk below the surface and fell to the bottom of the cauldron with a quiet thunk.

Harry couldn't tear his eyes away from the cauldron. *Please drown*, he prayed, *please drown, please drown*... With some effort he focused on Pettigrew, who was now speaking in a quavery voice.

“Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!”

The grave below Harry's feet split open with a jagged crack. A small cloud of fine powder rose up and floated over to the cauldron. There was another hiss as it fell into the potion, which sent out a stronger shower of sparks and turned a bright, sickly blue.

Pettigrew was nearly hyperventilating now. He pulled a silver dagger out of his pocket and looked at the cauldron as he began to cry. “Flesh of the s-s-servant, willingly g-given, you w-will revive your master!”

He held out his right hand, the one missing a finger, over the cauldron. Harry realised what he was about to do and screwed his eyes shut as Pettigrew swung the silver dagger upwards. He had no way to block out Pettigrew's scream of pain, nor the sickening sound of the hand thudding to the ground. A second later there was a splash as the hand was thrown into the cauldron. Harry opened his eyes again to see the potion had turned the same red as the baby's eyes.

Pettigrew was moaning with pain and had tears running down his face, but he stumbled towards Harry. “B-blood of the enemy, forcibly t-taken, you will resurrect your foe!”

As Pettigrew grabbed Harry's arm, Harry tried to nod. *Take it, take it, please take it*, he thought desperately. *I'm giving it willingly*...

Pettigrew pressed the dagger to the crook of Harry's right elbow. Blood began to run from a small cut that Harry didn't even feel through the constant pain in his scar. Pettigrew pulled out a small glass vial and held it to the cut until it had filled with blood, then returned to the cauldron and poured it inside.

The potion turned white, shining so brightly that Harry had to squint. Pettigrew's job was now evidently over, and he collapsed to the ground, where he sobbed and held his bleeding stump to his body. The light from the potion suddenly extinguished as a huge cloud of thick white steam poured out of the cauldron. For a fleeting second, Harry thought that maybe, just maybe, his thoughts had worked, that his blood hadn't been forcibly taken and he'd managed to sabotage the potion.

Then the steam began to dissipate and his breath hitched in pure fear. Rising up from the depths of the cauldron was a tall, skeletally thin man.

“Robe me,” he ordered in that same frigid voice.

Pettigrew, still sobbing, crawled over to the abandoned robes on the ground. He picked them up one handed, his right arm still held against his chest, and staggered to the cauldron where he threw the robes over the man's head before falling to the side again.

The man stepped smoothly out of the cauldron and ignored Pettigrew. Instead, he turned to face Harry, who stared back in horror at the face that had haunted his nightmares ever since he'd first seen it, in a chamber far below Hogwarts. White as a bleached skull, with mere slits for nostrils and crimson eyes with snake-like pupils...
Lord Voldemort was back.

Voldemort turned away from Harry dismissively, choosing to inspect his own body. He ran his hands up his arms and chest, then over his face. His eyes gleamed with satisfaction; clearly a lack of nose didn’t bother him. He held his hands up, twisting his wrists back and forth and flexing the long, cadaverous fingers. He ignored both Pettigrew, who was still whimpering on the ground, and Nagini, who had returned to circle the grave and congratulate Voldemort on his resurrection.

Voldemort ran his hands down himself one last time then plunged one into a pocket, withdrawing a wand. This too received a tactile examination, before he aimed it at Pettigrew. A flick of his wrist had Pettigrew raised into the air and slammed against the tombstone Harry was tied to. Pettigrew fell to the bottom of it and lay on top of the damaged grave. Voldemort turned his attention back to Harry and laughed, a cold, humourless laugh, clearly enjoying the moment.

Pettigrew raised himself to look up at Voldemort. His robes were now more blood-stained than Harry’s t-shirt and he was beginning to look pale. “Please, my Lord... Please... You promised, my Lord... Please...”

“Give me your arm.”

“Oh, thank you, my Lord... Thank you...” Pettigrew gasped, holding up the bloody stump.

Voldemort laughed again. “Your other arm, fool.”

Pettigrew choked on a sob. “Please, master, please... My Lord...”

Patience clearly up, Voldemort bent down and yanked up Pettigrew’s left arm. He pushed his sleeve back and turned the arm over to inspect the underside. Harry caught a glimpse of Pettigrew’s Dark Mark. It wasn’t a faded black like Severus’ had been whenever Harry had seen it, but an angry, vivid red, the colour of fresh blood. Voldemort peered closely at it, waving his hand almost gently above it.

“Does it hurt, Wormtail?” he asked idly. “They will all have noticed it by now... Let’s see, shall we... Let’s see how many shall return to me.”

Voldemort pressed his forefinger to the Dark Mark, smiling when Pettigrew gave a high-pitched wail of pain. At the moment Voldemort had touched the Mark, Harry’s scar had burned fiercer again, making his eyes water. When his vision cleared he saw the Mark was now completely black.

Voldemort let go of Pettigrew contemptuously and cast his gaze around the graveyard. “And now we wait. But not for long, oh no... Those who are loyal enough will be here soon. I wonder how many are too cowardly to answer my summons...”

He paced in front of Harry and scanned their surroundings for a minute before stopping in front of the grave and smiling coldly at Harry. “Beneath your feet, Harry Potter, are the remains of my filthy Muggle father. Like your Mudblood mother, he was a fool... But again like your mother, he has proved himself useful... I killed him decades ago, never dreaming how one day, he would prove himself this instrumental in my resurrection... And your mother died to save you as an infant. What a pity she didn’t know she was only buying you a few meagre years... Do you think she would have bothered, had she known?”

Harry felt rage sweep over him, burning momentarily fiercer than the pain in his scar.

“We are somewhat alike, you know,” Voldemort continued. “Not you, Wormtail,” he said when Pettigrew looked up in surprise. “No, Potter, we do have a few surprising similarities... Both of us
half-bloods... Abandoned as babies, left to grow up amongst the Muggles... And from what Wormtail tells me, you can understand every word I'm saying... Tell me, have you ever thought how much easier your life would be if you would join me?"

Harry's eyes widened in surprise. Was that a sincere offer? Perhaps... If he could somehow convince Voldemort that he wanted to join him, he'd be untied and could escape?

Voldemort laughed suddenly. “You think you could fool me, Potter? Your mind is pathetically open to me. But enough of this diversion. I see my true followers are here.”

All around them were the sounds of Apparition. Hooded and masked figures made their way forward slowly, one by one, clearly not quite trusting that the scene in front of them was real. Voldemort stood completely still as they advanced.

One of the Death Eaters suddenly dropped to his knees. “Master...” he whispered, edging forward to kiss the hem of Voldemort's robes. Behind him, the others did the same. Harry counted over twenty Death Eaters, only one of whom was a woman, though he wouldn't have been able to tell if she hadn't spoken. They all backed away and stood up, forming a circle around Harry, Voldemort and Pettigrew. They arranged themselves silently, leaving gaps here and there as if expecting yet more Death Eaters to arrive.

Voldemort seemed to know that no one else would be joining them. “Welcome, Death Eaters. Thirteen years... Thirteen long years since I last beheld you, and yet here you are, prompt and obedient. Why, it is like we were never parted. Such loyalty is touching.”

Nobody moved as Voldemort surveyed the group and gave a long sniff. “And yet I smell guilt. It rolls off each and every one of you. And why should it not? Thirteen long years it has been, and not a one of you tried to find me. How could this be? My loyal Death Eaters would never let their master wither away alone, not while they retained full use of their bodies. But I see no cripples here tonight, save Wormtail of course.”

Hooded faces turned to Pettigrew, who was still crying on the ground, but again, nobody spoke.

“Your swift arrivals tonight tell me that you all retain your magic, and so I must ask, why was I abandoned for so long in exile?” Voldemort lowered his voice. “Why, it must be that you thought I was dead and gone. And so you fled, telling your lies to the Ministry... If I had used the Imperius curse as often as you all claimed, I would have had little time to accomplish anything else. And I have accomplished much, as you well know. No wizard in history has come closer to immortality than I have! No wizard has experimented with the very essence of magic, of power, of life as I have! How could any of you doubt the extent of my power? Unless, of course,” and Voldemort's voice became even softer, “you believe another is more powerful than I. Someone with the power to vanquish me. Tell me, who amongst you has pledged their loyalty to that Muggle-lover, Albus Dumbledore?”

There was angry muttering at that, and a few Death Eaters shook their heads.

Voldemort remained unmoved. “Such a disappointment, my faithless Death Eaters...”

One of the Death Eaters broke then, and prostrated himself at Voldemort's feet, shaking violently. “Please, master, I beg you to forgive me!”

Voldemort merely laughed and aimed his wand at the man. “Crucio.”

The man screamed in agony and flailed on the ground. Harry thought the sound must surely carry to
the village. He didn't know what would be worse: if someone called the police to investigate, and they were murdered along with Harry, or if no one came, and Harry died alone.

Voldemort ended the curse, leaving the Death Eater twitching on the ground. “Get up, Avery,” Voldemort said. “I do not forget. You abandoned me for thirteen years... I will have thirteen years repaid before I think about forgiving you. Wormtail here has already begun paying his debt to me, haven't you?” Voldemort switched his attention to Pettigrew. “Though you didn't return out of loyalty, but because you had no where else to go. Your former friends want you dead, and the rest of the world does too... The pain you are in is nothing more than you deserve.”

“Yes, master,” Pettigrew agreed.

“Still, you did aid me in my efforts to return to my body,” Voldemort continued. “As useless as you often are, you somehow managed to complete my instructions. Time for your reward.”

Voldemort twirled his wand, leaving a silver streak in the air. It hovered in mid-air before it assumed the shape of a human hand. It descended and attached itself to Pettigrew's bloody stump. Pettigrew immediately stopped crying and looking at his hand in wonder. He flexed the silver fingers, much like Voldemort himself had done with his own hands after getting out of the cauldron. He lowered his hand to the grave beneath him, broke off a cracked piece of stone and crushed it to a powder.

“Oh, thank you, my Lord, thank you!” Pettigrew gasped. He scrambled forward to kiss Voldemort's hem.

“Make sure that I do not doubt your loyalty again,” Voldemort said.

“No, master, never,” Pettigrew vowed, then stood up and took his place in the circle.

Voldemort turned slightly from Pettigrew to the large empty space to his right. “Malfoy and the Lestranges should be here... The Lestranges went to Azkaban rather than deny me. They will be rewarded when we take Azkaban from the Ministry. And Malfoy, too, is in Azkaban, though not for any loyalty to myself, but reckless revenge... It was all in the aim of killing Mudbloods, however, so I will welcome him back, despite his unfortunate wife... But then, we cannot always control our relatives, can we?”

Voldemort moved across the circle to stand before two massive figures and one bent over with age. “Nott, Goyle and Crabbe... All three of you have sons who are friends with our guest here, do you not? Tell me, will they be upset when I kill him? Will they cry when they see his corpse? Will they wail about life's unfairness, or swear their futile revenge?”

Harry choked back a sob when he realised who he was looking at. He was immensely thankful that Lucius Malfoy was in Azkaban; he suspected he would have broken down completely if Draco's father had been here as well.

“No, my Lord,” Nott said swiftly. “I have been lax in punishing my son for his transgressions. He will soon see the error of his ways, I swear.” Crabbe and Goyle echoed him; by the sounds of things, they were as bright as their sons were.

Voldemort looked at all three of them coldly. “They will if they know what's good for them. And for you.”

Harry decided that his second mission as a ghost would be to warn Theo. Greg and Vince he was fairly certain would fall in with their fathers' wishes, but Theo hated his father and would never agree to anything he wanted.
Voldemort moved on, coming to the largest gap in the circle. “And here are six missing Death Eaters. Three died in my service rather than renounce me... One too cowardly to return, he will be killed... One who has left me forever, in favour of our guest – I will kill him particularly slowly... And finally, my most loyal servant, one who willingly rejoined my service... He will be rewarded for his service... He is at Hogwarts for the moment, and it is due to his tireless endeavours that our delightful young guest is with us tonight.”

“Yes, Harry Potter is gracing us with his presence tonight,” Voldemort said, sending Harry a malicious grin. The Death Eaters all looked at Harry, but none of them said anything. “But I'm getting ahead of myself. How can any of you appreciate Potter's joining us here tonight if you remain ignorant of how much he has affected my life... You all know that he has been hailed as my vanquisher... The Boy-Who-Lived-To-Defeat-You-Know-Who – though not through any particular power of his own. On the night I lost my physical self, I had attempted to kill Potter. His mother sacrificed herself to save him, giving him a powerful protection that I admit I did not anticipate. I could not even touch the boy the last time we met.”

Voldemort swept closer to Harry and held one spidery hand mere centimetres from his face. “His mother's sacrifice imbued him with a deep, old blood protection. In my haste to kill him, I did not consider this... But that is all in the past. I can touch him now.”

He pressed a single fingertip to Harry's forehead. Harry screamed behind his gag, feeling as if his forehead was splitting in two.

Voldemort ran his finger down Harry's temple and laughed as he withdrew it. “The Mudblood's sacrifice made my curse rebound off the boy and onto me. I cannot describe the pain... I was pulled, ripped out of my body... I was left formless, less substantial than a ghost... But I was alive. What I was, even I do not know – I, who have gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality. You know I have long desired to conquer death... And so I did that night... One or more of my safeguards withstood the test... I should have been killed, but instead I was left alive. Weak and formless, yes, but I still lived... I drifted, unable to help myself, for I could not hold a wand. I was sure, however, that one of my faithful followers would find me. I did not then know what a futile belief that would be...”

A palpable sense of dread spread around the circle of Death Eaters. Voldemort allowed his gaze to travel slowly around the circle, building the atmosphere of fear, before he picked up his tale.

“I had only one ability left to me: the power to possess the bodies of others. I shunned humans, for I knew the Aurors would yet be searching for me. I left the country altogether, and settled in a far away forest where I possessed small animals that crossed my path. It was not an easy life... Spending time in the bodies of snakes and vermin is dull, and my presence wore out their lives in quick order...

“But then my salvation arrived, in the form of a young wizard. I could not believe my good fortune, for he was a teacher at Dumbledore's school. He was weak, and I quickly made him into my puppet. He brought me back to Britain, and eventually I possessed him too, in order to better supervise him as he did my bidding. But it was no use. Despite my careful planning, I did not manage to secure the Philosopher's Stone. I was foiled once more by little Harry Potter.”

Harry felt a surge of defiant pride at Voldemort's words. He might be about to die, but at least he had delayed the bastard by a few years. And thanks to Moody, he could take comfort (weak though it may be) in knowing that the Killing Curse was instantaneous.

“I left my servant to die and returned to my far away forest. I spent many months there, alone and friendless, giving up hope that any of my Death Eaters would come for me,” Voldemort said, ignoring the Death Eaters who fidgeted at his words. “But finally, less than a year ago, I was saved.
by a most unlikely source. Wormtail here, who had faked his own death years ago, had recently had his continued existence discovered by none other than Dumbledore. Fearing the Aurors who would no doubt begin searching for him, he decided to seek me out at last. He was aided by the rodents he met along the way – you have a strong affinity with rodents, don't you, Wormtail.

“Guided in my direction by his rodent friends, Wormtail had nearly succeeded in finding me when he ran into someone who could have ruined something. Curiously bad luck, running into a Ministry witch so far from home. But Wormtail somehow rose to the occasion, and overpowered Bertha Jorkins. It was all too easy for me to... *persuade* her to talk to me... She told me that the Triwizard Tournament was being revived – at Hogwarts, no less – and that she knew of a faithful Death Eater who had escaped from Azkaban. With a little more persuasion, she soon told me my loyal servant's location, and a plan began to form.

“Unfortunately, when overcoming the Memory Charm she had been inflicted with, I destroyed what remained of her mind. She was unsuitable for possession, so I disposed of her. Wormtail, too, was unsuitable, given that he'd recently exposed himself as a living Death Eater. But he did manage to follow the instructions I gave him, together with my dear Nagini,” Voldemort looked almost fondly upon the snake that was still slithering through the graves. “A few spells of my own invention... A potion brewed from unicorn blood and Nagini's venom... It was enough to return me to a crude body. I was once again strong enough to hold a wand – and to travel.

“There was now no hope of gaining immortality through the Philosopher's Stone – Dumbledore would have seen to it that it was destroyed. And so I set my sights lower, for the time being, and chose to return to my old body and powers. I knew a potion that would allow me to do just that... An old piece of Dark Magic, but simple enough that even Wormtail could successfully complete it. The hardest part would be getting the three vital ingredients... One of them – flesh of a servant – was at hand. My father's bone, too, was easily procured, and simply meant relocating to his old house. But the blood of a foe... Therein lay the difficulty. Wormtail thought any wizard who hated me – as many do, even now – would do. But I knew none could make me stronger than Harry Potter. With the boy's blood in my veins, I would have his mother's protection for myself.

“To my consternation, I found the boy better protected than I had expected. Dumbledore may be a fool, but he too has knowledge of old magic, and had used it to ensure the boy's safety whilst he remained under his relatives' care. He was, of course, untouchable at Hogwarts... I had hoped that perhaps the Quidditch World Cup would give me the opportunity I craved... But there were too many Ministry officials in attendance, and even there he was kept safe, under the watchful eye of the blood traitor, Narcissa Malfoy. Before I knew it, he would be safe again behind the walls of Hogwarts.

“Safe from all but my faithful servant, that is. Using Bertha Jorkins' information, I devised a cunning plan... My loyal Death Eater would travel to Hogwarts. There, he would enter the boy's name into the Goblet of Fire... He would ensure that the boy won the Triwizard Tournament – that he would be the first to touch the Triwizard Cup. My servant would turn the Cup into a Portkey, charmed to bring the boy here, where I awaited him, far from Dumbledore's meddling. And so there you have it,” Voldemort spread his hands and turned slowly. “Here stands the boy so many believed had the power to destroy me...”

Voldemort stepped closer to Harry and raised his wand almost lazily. “*Crucio.*”

It was agony – pure, unadulterated agony. Every cell in Harry's body was screaming with pain. It was burning, it was freezing, it was sharp, it was blunt force – the Cruciatus Curse covered every type of pain indiscriminately. He could no longer discern the ongoing burning of his scar from the rest of his body – he could no longer sense anything at all, bar the blinding pain. It would surely kill
him... And oh, how sweet that would be right now...

All at once it ended. Harry was left slumped on the grave, held up only by the ropes with which Pettigrew had bound him. His legs, even if they'd both been uninjured, would not have been able to support him as they shook with the after effects of the curse. He slowly raised his head to look into Voldemort's glowing red eyes, the sound of the Death Eaters' laughter ringing in his ears. He tried very hard not to think about the fact that he was friends with the sons of three of the laughing Death Eaters.

“What a fearsome display from my supposed adversary,” Voldemort said, eliciting a fresh wave of laughter from the Death Eaters. “But I grow weary of these games. I will now prove to you all that Harry Potter is nothing compared to me, by killing him in front of you all. There is no Mudblood here to die for him this time. But I will give him a chance. We will fight, face to face. And when I kill him, you will be left in no doubt which of us is the more powerful. Soon, Nagini. You will eat well tonight,” Voldemort hissed to the snake, though he kept his eyes trained on Harry. He switched back to English. “Untie him, Wormtail. Give him his wand.”

Pettigrew hastened to obey. He used his new prosthetic hand to wrench the gag out of Harry's mouth, then slashed his hand through the ropes, dissolving them all instantly. Harry's leg shook when his weight landed on it, and he realised that he had no chance of even trying to run away. In any case, the surrounding Death Eaters had tightened up their circle, eliminating the gaps where the missing members would normally stand.

Pettigrew scurried over to where Harry's wand still lay in the grass. He thrust it back into Harry's hand without making eye contact, then hurried back to take his place in the circle of Death Eaters.

“Do you know how to duel, Harry Potter?” asked Voldemort.

Harry had a brief memory of the Duelling Club from his second year. Severus had taught him how to conjure a snake – not particularly helpful against a Parselmouth like Voldemort, who currently had his own human-eating snake prowling the graveyard – and Disarm people. Well, Harry was good at Disarming, but what good would that do, when there were nearly thirty Death Eaters who could give Voldemort their own wands should he lose his own?

And Harry knew what was coming: the unblockable Killing Curse. Harry had only survived that once through his mother's sacrifice, he wouldn't be able to do it again. It'll be quick, he told himself. And then I can come back as a ghost to warn everyone. Harry had no idea how one came back as a ghost, but if stubbornness had anything to do with it, he'd be fine.

“We bow to each other, Harry Potter,” Voldemort said. He gave a shallow bow, never once taking his eyes off Harry. “And now you do the same. Surely Dumbledore would want you to observe the proper etiquette. Bow to your death, Harry Potter.”

The Death Eaters were laughing again. Harry didn't move a muscle, apart from his leg, which was still shaking uncontrollably. He refused to give Voldemort the satisfaction, and right now he couldn't care less what the hell Dumbledore wanted.

“I told you to bow,” Voldemort said, and his voice became even colder than it had already been before. He raised his wand and Harry felt an invisible pressure upon his back, forcing him to bend over in a bow.

“There you are,” Voldemort said before he lowered his wand. The pressure disappeared from Harry's back and he was able to stand up straight again. “And now, Harry Potter, you will face me like a man – face me like your father did, before I killed him – and we duel.”
Before Harry even raised his wand, Voldemort had aimed his own at him. “Crucio.”

Without the benefit of being tied to a tombstone, Harry collapsed under the pain. As before, there wasn't a single part of him that wasn't in agony. It seemed to last an eternity before stopping abruptly. Harry's last scream died in his throat – he hadn't even been aware that he'd been screaming – and he opened his eyes to find himself lying on the ground. He pushed his glasses back up his nose and got clumsily to his feet, doing his best to stop the tremors racing though his body.

Voldemort was waiting for him, smiling while the Death Eaters all laughed. “A little break, now, I think, so that you may recover.”

Harry just stared back, stony-faced. They all knew that they'd only stopped because Voldemort wanted to draw this out for as long as he could.

“That hurt, didn't it? You don't want to suffer through that again, do you, Harry Potter?” Voldemort asked in a dangerous voice.

Harry said nothing. Of course it fucking well hurt, he thought furiously. A gleam in Voldemort's eyes told him that he'd read Harry's mind, but he didn't care. He wasn't going to give Voldemort the satisfaction of begging aloud. He just wanted this over already, quickly and painlessly. Being a ghost might not even be that bad. He could haunt Hogwarts and play pranks with Peeves, as long as he avoided Moaning Myrtle.

Voldemort glared. “I asked you a question. Do you want me to torture you again? Answer me when I speak to you! Imperio!”

A blissful calm swept through Harry, wiping away the terror and pain that had been consuming him. Just say “no”... Just say “no”...

I don't think so, Harry thought.

Just say “no”...

I definitely don't think so, actually, so just fuck off...

Just say “no”...

Fuck off...

Just say “no”!

“FUCK OFF!” Harry shouted.

He was jolted back into the present, with all its fear and pain, his words echoing around the graveyard. The Death Eaters were frozen in place, staring fearfully at Voldemort, who looked shocked.

Then his face twisted in fury. “Such language,” he spat. “You see what comes from growing up with Muggles? I see it falls to me to teach you manners and respect... One last lesson before you die...”

This time, Harry knew what was coming. He dodged to the left, rolling into a tight ball and taking shelter behind the grave of Voldemort's father. Fresh pain shot up his left leg but it was nothing compared to what the Cruciatas Curse would have done. Instead, Voldemort's curse hit the tombstone and cracked it, sending a shower of debris down upon Harry's head.
“Come out and face me, Harry Potter,” Voldemort called, his voice getting nearer. “I am not here to play school yard games with you. We were duelling, in case you’ve forgotten. Or am I to take this as a sign that you've grown bored? Your manners really are deplorable... Still, I can deliver you from your boredom. Come out and face me, and I will end it for you.”

Harry tried to control his panicked breathing and rose to a crouch. It was all well and good to decide to remain behind as a ghost, but he really didn't want to die... Not yet... Even his parents had made it to twenty-one before they were murdered...

The thought of his parents spurred Harry into action. They hadn't died crouching in fear – they'd died standing up for themselves, for their loved ones. Well, Harry was all alone here, but he could make his death mean something, could even help his friends if he could get back to them as a ghost... And he was going to go out with one last show of defiance... He could hear both Severus and Sirius telling him how stubborn he was, and he saw no reason why he should give that up now.

Harry pushed himself up with his right leg and aimed his wand at Voldemort. He was clearly ready for Harry, for he uttered his own incantation at the same time as Harry did.

“Avada Kedavra!”

“Expelliarmus!”

Harry’s beam of red light shot out of his wand directly for Voldemort, where it met his green spell light in mid-air. Harry had a thought he should duck, expecting the spells to ricochet like Draco’s and Ron’s had so many months ago.

To his surprise, the two streams of light merged into one, turning a deep, lustrous gold colour and connecting the two wands to each other. Harry’s wand was vibrating like a jack-hammer in his hand, but he couldn’t let go, even if he’d wanted to – it felt welded to the wood, much like his left hand had earlier, with the Triwizard Cup. He ran his eyes along the beam of golden light, and saw that Voldemort’s wand was vibrating just as hard where it was clenched in his spidery fingers.

Harry hadn’t thought he could feel more astonished, but that was before both he and Voldemort rose into the air together. Held together by the golden thread of magic, they were moving smoothly away from the circle of Death Eaters, over the tops of graves, towards a clearing on the edge of the graveyard. The Death Eaters were running after them, shouting panicked questions at Voldemort, asking for instructions. When Harry and Voldemort returned to earth the Death Eaters closed around them again, brandishing their wands, but took no action. It seemed they were too scared to intervene and risk harming their master.

The golden beam suddenly began to break off into smaller tangents, which arced up, out and down. They quickly formed a bright cage of magic around Harry and Voldemort, who were still connected by the main beam of light. The Death Eaters’ voices were muffled now, and none dared to touch the golden cage.

“Do nothing until I order you to!” Voldemort screamed at them.

Wide-eyed, Voldemort began trying to pull his wand away from the light, fighting to break the connection. Harry didn't know if Voldemort knew what was happening – judging from the look on his face, Harry would wager he was as lost as Harry himself was. Figuring if Voldemort wanted to pursue that course action, he should do the polar opposite, Harry gripped his wand with his left hand as well, hanging on with all his strength.

The beam of light showed no sign of breaking, however. Presently an eerie but beautiful song began...
to issue out of the web of light. For some reason, it gave Harry a small measure of calm, of hope. The song was inside him, speaking in an unearthly but friendly voice, telling him not to break the connection.

*I know, I won't*, Harry thought, *I won't*...

As soon as he'd had the thought, though, the task became harder. His wand was vibrating worse than before, and now the beam of light was changing. Beads of light were gliding up and down the connection. They began to head inexorably toward Harry's wand, which shuddered and became even more difficult to hold onto.

The nearest bead was closing the distance between itself and Harry's wand, which began to heat up and vibrate with such vigour that Harry was scared it would explode. Knowing that such an occurrence would surely sign his death warrant, Harry focused his entire being on forcing the beads away from his own wand and back towards Voldemort's.

The beads slowed and shook, before stopping completely. One heartbeat – two, three – and they changed direction, moving the other way. They began to pick up speed as they went, and now it was Voldemort's turn to feel his wand shake angrily in his hand. Harry narrowed his eyes as he focused on the lead bead, urging it on. Two feet... One foot... Mere inches away now, the bead was quivering as it closed in.

Then it connected with the tip of Voldemort's wand. Screams filled the air. Harry initially thought it was the Death Eaters, who were prowling ineffectively around the cage, then realised they were issuing from Voldemort's wand. They fell silent, then a smoky hand poured out of it, hovered in the air, and disappeared... A shadow of the hand Voldemort had made for Pettigrew. More screams, then another shadow, larger than the hand.

A head, comprised of the same dense smoke as the hand had been, grew out the wand tip. Neck, shoulders and chest all followed before a full body tumbled out onto the ground. An old man straightened up with the aid of his walking stick. Harry recognised him as the old man he'd seen die in his summer nightmare.

"*He was a real wizard, was he?*" the old man asked, looking at Voldemort with loathing. "*He killed me, you know. You fight him, lad, hard as you can.*"

Another smoky head was pushing out of Voldemort's wand. It was a woman this time, and Harry was fairly certain she must be Bertha Jorkins. Like the old man, she fell soundlessly to the ground before getting to her feet.

"*Hang on, Harry,*" she encouraged him. "*Don't give up!*"

Along with the old man, she started to walk around the interior circumference of the golden cage. Outside, Harry could make out the shadowy forms of the Death Eaters looking in, scared and confused. Bertha and the old man gave Harry words of encouragement when they passed him, and spoke in low, hateful voices to Voldemort when they neared him. Harry couldn't hear what they said to him, but he was looking increasingly unhappy about the situation.

And then another head began to emerge from Voldemort's wand. Harry had been expecting her since Voldemort's wand had begun reliving its past spells, but even so, he nearly dropped his wand when his mother's shade walked over to him, pushing her long hair out of her face.

"*Stay strong, my darling boy,*" she said, and Harry thrilled to hear her voice, not crying out in terror, but warm and soothing. "*James is on his way, just hold on a little longer... We heard you, that day in*
Harry nodded, throat tight, and then he saw a familiar shock of messy hair appearing. Moments later he was looking up at his father's shadowy face.

“You've done brilliantly, Harry,” he said softly. “Not much left to do... You just need to get to the Portkey – the trophy – it'll take you back to Hogwarts... We'll distract him, but we won't be able to stay long once the connection's broken, do you understand? You need to be as quick as you can be...”

“I understand,” Harry said.

“Get ready, Harry,” Lily said. “Get ready to run... Now!”

With a cry, Harry wrenched his wand, up and away from the golden beam, as hard as he could. The connection fell away, the golden cage disappeared and the beautiful music faded away, but the shades of Voldemort's victims remained. True to their word, they descended upon Voldemort, blocking Harry from his view.

Harry turned and ran back towards the graves as best he could, pushing past a couple of startled Death Eaters before they had time to aim their wands at him. His injured leg was protesting this rude use, and he was more limping in an odd sort of skip than running. At this rate, he'd never reach the Cup...

“Stun him!” he heard Voldemort shouting behind him.

“Accio Cup!” Harry cried, diving forwards.

He landed painfully on his shoulders and rolled. The red light of four Stunning spells shot over his head, but that didn't matter – he could see the Cup sailing towards him. He reached up with his free hand and snagged it out of the air. The sickening jolt came from his stomach as soon as he made contact, but he didn't care – he was going home, to Hogwarts, to safety.
In Which the Exposition is Grimmer Than Usual

Harry slammed face down into grass. The breath was knocked out of him, and he lay there just trying to begin breathing again. His scar was burning steadily, but it was nothing to the pain radiating from his lower leg. Whatever that troll had done to it, Harry had made it worse in that final, frantic flight from Voldemort, and it was catching up to him now that the adrenaline was wearing off. There was no way he'd be able to put any weight on it at all by now.

There was panicked conversations around him. He heard what must be Fleur speaking in rapid French to someone; Cedric kept repeating “it was a Portkey!”; and what seemed like fifty other people shouting into his ears, their voices overlapping into frantic gibberish.

Harry let go of the Triwizard Cup when he felt someone grasp his shoulders and flip him over. With some effort, he opened his eyes.

It was Dumbledore. “Harry! What happened?”

Harry ignored the crowd around them and focused on Dumbledore. “Voldemort…”

There the sound of a scuffle, and then Fudge pushed through the crowd and looked over Dumbledore's shoulder. “Good god, you're covered in blood!”

People in the crowd gasped, and some began calling Harry's name.

Harry ignored them all and kept his eyes trained on Dumbledore's face. “He's back.”

Dumbledore set his mouth in a grim line. “Voldemort is fully risen once more?”

“Yes.”

Fudge gasped. “What are you talking about? You-Know-Who can't be back, he's dead! Where did you go? The other champions said you just disappeared -”

“Cornelius, you need to contact the Aurors. Voldemort has risen again,” Dumbledore commanded.

The crowd around them gasped, and people began crying out. “You-Know-Who's back from the dead!”

“I'll take him to the infirmary, Dumbledore,” said a gruff voice, louder than the others.

“No, he needs to stay here,” Dumbledore said sharply over his shoulder, then looked at Fudge again. “Cornelius, the Aurors, if you wouldn't mind.”

“But he can't be… Potter's hit his head, he's probably concussed,” Fudge protested.

“I've got you, Potter, come on.”

The sound of the crowd was increasing as people repeated Harry's news to each other. He shut his eyes again, completely exhausted, then felt himself hauled up to his feet. He swayed, light-headed, and his left leg began to crumple beneath his weight. Before he could fall over again, the hands moved from his armpits, one grabbing him by the waist while the other slung his right arm around a pair of shoulders.

“Come on,” said that same gruff voice.
Harry was dragged up to the castle, his left leg trailing uselessly on the ground. He would have tried to argue, to say that Dumbledore had told him to stay there, but if he opened his mouth he would have either cried out or vomited in pain every time his injured leg was jolted over a bump in the ground. He screwed his eyes shut against the pain and said nothing. The sounds of the crowd faded behind them, and then he heard oddly asymmetrical footsteps as they ascended the stone steps of the castle; the clunking told him it was Moody who was now carrying him through the Entrance Hall.

“What happened?”

Harry took a deep breath; at least now that they were on even ground, his leg wasn't getting jostled as badly. “Cup was a Portkey – took me to a graveyard... Voldemort was waiting...”

“You saw the Dark Lord? What then?”

Harry said nothing as they started up a staircase, his leg protesting with every step it was scraped over. He thought they were going up too far, that they were passing the first floor where the infirmary was located, but then figured he was probably just disoriented. When they were in a corridor he spoke again. “Pettigrew made a potion... Voldemort's back.”

“He has returned to his full powers once more?” Moody asked sharply.

“Yeah... Then he... He called all the Death Eaters to him...”

“And did they obey?”

“Yeah...” Harry gasped.

His leg was steadily increasing in pain, and he was longing to see Pomfrey's calm face and the strongest pain relieving potion she possessed, preferably one brewed by Severus. He was only dimly aware of them pausing, a door opening, then he was pushed roughly into a chair and a goblet was pressed into his hands.

“Drink up.”

“What is...” Harry couldn't finish his question.

There was a muttered oath, then the goblet was pulled out of his unresisting hands and held to his lips. Harry had no choice but to drink it all or choke as it was poured down his throat. He recognised the taste of Pepperup and relaxed minutely. The pain of his leg dissipated slightly, as did the burning in his scar, and he was finally able to open his eyes again.

He was in Moody's office, not the infirmary. Moody leaned over him, empty goblet in hand, staring unblinkingly at Harry.

“I need to know what happened,” he prompted.

“Er,” Harry said, trying to get his brain to focus through the muted throbbing of his leg. “The Death Eaters came...”

“How did he do it? How did the Dark Lord return?”

“Potion. I don't... I didn't recognise it. He took his dad's bone, Pettigrew's hand and my blood. And then... He was back.”

“And his Death Eaters all returned?” Moody asked urgently.
“Yeah... No – some were missing... Er... Some died... Some were in Azkaban... One's missing... And obviously Severus was here...” Harry's eyes widened as a memory pierced through the pain induced haze in his brain. “There's a Death Eater here, at Hogwarts. Not Severus – someone loyal.”

“I know,” Moody said calmly.

Harry blinked at him. “Karkaroff? Because I thought he was planning on running away...”

Moody laughed; it was an ugly sound to Harry. “No, Karkaroff is not the loyal Death Eater. He indeed ran away, this very night, when his Dark Mark began to burn once again. He turned in too many Death Eaters to the Ministry to be safe once the Dark Lord arose again. But never fear, he won't get far. The Dark Lord will track him down.”

“Then who is it?” Harry asked impatiently.

“Me,” Moody said simply.

Harry just stared at him, assuming he'd misheard. Moody had been an Auror – he'd tracked down Death Eaters – and was Dumbledore's friend. How could he be a Death Eater?

“Don't look so gormless, Potter, it doesn't suit you,” Moody said.

“But... How?” Harry asked, perplexed. “You hate all my friends whose dads are Death Eaters.”

Moody's magical eye fixed itself upon the closed door to the office, but he aimed his wand directly at Harry's heart. “Yeah, I hate them... Scum, they are... Like their fathers – the Death Eaters who escaped Azkaban by rejecting the Dark Lord. Couldn't muster the courage to go to Azkaban for him. Oh, they were perfectly happy to mess around with those Muggles at the Quidditch World Cup, but ran away like a pack of rats when I set the Dark Mark into the sky.”

“That was you?” Harry asked. Was he dreaming? Maybe he'd passed out on the Quidditch pitch from the pain.

“Yes, it was me,” Moody said impatiently. “Now what happened tonight? What happened, when those traitorous scum answered the Dark Lord's summons? Did he mention me? Did he tell them that I alone have remained faithful? Did he torture them? Tell me he made them pay. Tell me he made them scream.”

“But – but you were an Auror!”

Moody laughed. “Got the wrong person, boy. Haven't you figured it out yet? You didn't seem this stupid in Defence classes this year.”

“So... It's been you, all year? You put my name in the Goblet?”

“Yeah, it was me. I've been helping you in the Tournament all year, surely you've realised that by now? Although that faithless turncoat Snape did help me with that... His cheating made my job a lot easier, believe me.”

“You didn't help me -”

“Who do you think told Hagrid to tell you about the dragons?” Moody – or whoever he was – asked fiercely. “I thought I'd have to walk you through the whole thing, but then I discovered Snape helping you – this eye's come in very handy this year,” Moody said, pointing at the magical eye.
Harry looked over Moody's shoulder as he tried to process this. On the wall, the Foe-Glass had foggy shapes moving across it. “Why...”

“Why? To resurrect my master, of course. I had a bit of difficulty tonight, when you took the long route through the maze. Krum nearly beat you to the Cup, but I was able to set an Acromantula on him and sorted him out.”

Harry kept watching the Foe-Glass, wherein the foggy shapes were becoming more distinct. He could make out three distinct figures now. What had Moody told him about that earlier that year? He only needed to worry when he saw their eyes? Harry shut his own eyes as he tried to remember properly.

Moody kept talking. “I didn't expect you to come back from the graveyard. I thought the Dark Lord would have killed you. Well, lucky I'm here to do it for him, isn't it? Think how favoured I will be... I will be his right-hand man... Delivering you to him for the potion, and finally killing you... I will be so honoured.”

Harry opened his eyes, certain it was the eyes he needed to look out for. He could see the three figures in the Foe-Glass getting closer and closer, the whites of their eyes gleaming through the grey gloom, and knew he only had to stall for a little while... “I don't understand -”

“Luckily for me, you don't have to. All you need to do, Potter, is die – and then I'll be the greatest Death Eater -”

There was a deafening crash as the door to Moody's office blasted inwards in a shower of splinters.

“Stupefy!”

The figures in the Foe-Glass had sharpened into the furious faces of Dumbledore, Severus and McGonagall. Harry twisted around to see Dumbledore in the doorway, wand still pointed at the now Stunned Moody and looking more intimidating than Harry had ever seen him. Gone was the benign twinkle, replaced with a powerful rage as he stared down at Moody. Behind him were Severus and McGonagall, also holding their wands up.

Severus brushed past Dumbledore and knelt down in front of Harry. “It's alright, Harry, you're safe now. I'll take you to Poppy. Can you stand?”

“He'll stay here, Severus,” Dumbledore said sharply.

Severus looked up mutinously. “Albus, he needs medical attention. He's covered in blood, he's probably in the early stages of shock.”

McGonagall made a noise of assent, but Dumbledore shook his head. “He will stay so that he may learn why he has gone through what he has. Only through understanding can he accept, and without acceptance there can be no recovery.”

Severus' nostrils flared but he didn't argue.

“He's not Moody,” Harry said

“No,” Dumbledore agreed, “that is not Alastor Moody. That is a very convincing impostor, but they showed themselves tonight when they removed you from my sight. I knew straight away, and followed immediately.”

Dumbledore crouched down over Moody, rummaged in his robes and removed from a pocket
Moody's flask and a ring of keys. He handed the flask to Severus who opened it and sniffed it.

“Polyjuice.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Severus, please fetch me the strongest Truth Potion you have in your stores.”

Harry grabbed hold of Severus' hand, which was resting on the arm of his chair. “Don't... Please.”

Severus didn't move from the floor in front of Harry. “I'm not leaving you, Harry. Minerva?”

“Of course,” she said at once.

“There's a bottle of Veritaserum in the cupboard in my office. Top shelf, far left. Small green bottle with a golden lid. There is also a pain reliever in a blue bottle on the shelf beneath it.”

“I'll be right back,” McGonagall said, then strode quickly from the room.

Dumbledore took the ring of keys and began opening the trunk with seven locks. Severus spared him half a glance then stood up to inspect Harry's head wound.

“This needs cleaning,” he warned.

Harry gritted his teeth and nodded. There was a tingle of magic and a sharp but brief sting as Severus cast a cleaning spell. He conjured up a length of cloth and pressed it tightly to the wound.

“I'm not comfortable treating head wounds, but this should hold until we can get you to Poppy,” he said. “What happened to your leg?”

Harry looked down at his leg, where his improvised splint was now held on by only two bandages.

“Troll clubbed me – hit my leg and grazed my head. It was alright in the maze – well, bad, but bearable – but it got worse in the graveyard. I can't put any weight on it anymore.”

Severus nodded and pressed one of Harry's hands against the cloth. It already felt damp.

“Keep the pressure on that,” Severus told him, then bent down and untied the remaining bandages on Harry's leg, Banishing them and the splints. “Probably broken,” he murmured. “*Ferula.*”

Fresh bandages wrapped a new splint to Harry's leg, far more tightly than his had been.

“Thanks, that's loads better,” Harry said.

Severus smiled tightly. “Yours was rather impressive, given the circumstances. I'll teach you some basic first aid over the summer.”

“Severus, throw down the impostor's cloak,” said Dumbledore, sounding strangely distant.

“Stay seated,” Severus told Harry, then turned and swept the cloak off the unconscious man. He leaned over the trunk and dropped the cloak into it. A few seconds later he reached down and pulled Dumbledore out of the trunk.

“The real Alastor is alive,” Dumbledore said at Harry's confused expression. “Very weak – he's been Stunned and controlled by the Imperius curse all year – but alive. He will need to see Madam Pomfrey, but he is stable. His hair has been cut off for use in the Polyjuice Potion.”

“I should have known,” Severus said bitterly. “Boomslang skin has gone missing from my stores this year. I assumed it was a student – I occasionally catch the older Ravenclaws brewing outside of
“You are not to blame, Severus,” Dumbledore said heavily. “It was ingenious, really, Alastor is infamous for only drinking from his flask. But I think there is a chance that with tonight's events, the impostor may have forgotten to take his hourly dose. Only time will tell...”

Dumbledore sat down at the desk, staring at the unconscious Moody.

“Hourly dose?” Harry asked Severus.

Severus conjured another length of cloth, and gently pulled Harry's hand away from his head to add it on top of the blood-soaked cloth. He held it there firmly then guided Harry's hand back before replying, keeping a hand resting reassuringly on Harry's shoulder. “Imbibing Polyjuice will give one the appearance of someone else, providing the potion contains a part of the victim – often hair, or nail trimmings – but the effects wear off after an hour.”

As they all watched Moody, Severus answered Harry's questions about Polyjuice. Harry realised he was trying to keep Harry's mind off what he'd just gone through, and he was more than happy to play along.

Harry didn't know how long they waited before there was any change in Moody's appearance. He watched interestedly as Moody's face began to change. The skin smoothed out, losing scars and wrinkles. The nose grew back, as did his eye, sending the fake one skidding across the floor. There was a thud as the wooden leg fell to the floor, replaced by one of flesh and bone.

Harry stared at the stranger before him. Sandy haired and freckled, he looked like he was about thirty.

“Barty Crouch!” Severus cried.

“You know him?” Harry asked.

Severus' nostrils flared. “I did. He was two years below me at Hogwarts. He was in Ravenclaw, though, so I didn't really speak to him until he joined the Death Eaters. He was one of the four Death Eaters who tortured the Longbottoms. He was sent to Azkaban by his own father – you've met him, I'm sure you can imagine him capable of that.”

Dumbledore looked like he was about to say something, but he was interrupted by the door opening. McGonagall had returned with the requested potions – and Sirius and Narcissa.

“I ran into them outside your office, Severus, and they insisted on.” McGonagall cut herself off when she saw Crouch lying on the floor. “Doesn't anyone stay dead anymore?”

“Apparently not,” Narcissa said, her voice dripping with loathing as she glared down at Crouch.

Sirius ignored them all and flung himself down next to Harry, on the opposite side from Severus. He gripped the chair arm so tightly his knuckles turned white. “You alright?”

“Mostly,” Harry said, attempting a smile which Sirius didn't return.

“Do you have the potion?” Dumbledore asked McGonagall.

She nodded and gave him a small green bottle, before giving a larger blue one to Severus. He uncorked it and handed it to Harry who drank it down gratefully. It was the same potion Severus had given him after his last dream of Voldemort, and it worked just as well as it had then. For the first
time in hours, Harry was free from pain. Narcissa walked behind him and stroked his hair comfortingy.

There was silence as everyone watched Dumbledore manoeuvre Crouch so that he was sitting slumped against the wall. Above him, the reflections in the Foe-Glass now also contained Narcissa and Sirius’ angry countenances. Dumbledore prised open Crouch’s mouth and poured three drops of Veritaserum into it. He handed the vial to Severus who pocketed it, then Revived Crouch.

Crouch opened his eyes and stared blankly ahead. His face was creepily expressionless; not like he was hiding his emotions, but like he didn’t have any to show.

“Can you hear me?” asked Dumbledore.

“Yes,” he said flatly.

“First of all, I would like to know how you got here. How did you escape from Azkaban?”

Crouch took a deep breath, then began talking, again in that flat voice. “My mother saved me. She was dying. She persuaded my father to save me for her. He agreed. He loved her, though he never loved me. They came to visit me together. They had Polyjuice Potion. I drank some containing one of my mother’s hairs. She drank some containing one of my hairs. We took each other’s appearance.

"The dementors didn't know. They're blind. They could sense one healthy and one dying person enter Azkaban. They could sense one healthy and one dying person leave Azkaban. My father took me out, under my mother's appearance. My mother died soon after. She kept taking the Polyjuice until the end. When she died, she stayed in my body. She was buried under my name. No one knew I was still alive, except for my father and our house-elf Winky.”

“What happened next?” Dumbledore asked.

Another breath, and Crouch continued. “My father took me home. I was controlled by the Imperius curse. He hid me under an Invisibility Cloak. My father staged my mother’s death. He gave her a private funeral. And Winky nursed me back to health. My father had to use more spells to control me after that. All I thought of was finding my master. The house-elf was with me constantly. She was my jailer, but she felt sorry for me. She talked my father into giving me occasional rewards for good behaviour.”

Narcissa's fingers stilled momentarily at the mention of Winky’s service, but she said nothing and soon resumed her stroking.

“Apart from your father and the house-elf, did anyone else know you were alive?” asked Dumbledore.

“Yes,” Crouch said, and his eyelids flickered once. “A witch who worked for my father. Bertha Jorkins. She came to the house with some paperwork. My father was out. Winky let her in to wait for my father. Then she returned to me in the kitchen. I was hidden under the Invisibility Cloak, but Winky spoke to me. Bertha followed her and heard her. She realised who Winky was speaking to. She confronted my father when he returned. He put a Memory Charm on her so she couldn't tell anyone. But he overdid it. He said he destroyed her memory for good.”

“What happened at the Quidditch World Cup?”

“Winky persuaded my father to let me go. As a treat. I always liked Quidditch. It was the first time I left the house in years. He spent months planning it. He took Winky and me to the Top Box early in the morning. I was under the Invisibility Cloak. Winky was ordered to tell people she was saving my
father a seat. We were to leave after the match, after everyone else had left.

“But my father didn't know I was growing stronger. I was beginning to fight the Imperius curse. There were times when I could think clearly. It happened again at the match. A boy was pulled into the row in front of me. His wand nearly fell out of his pocket. I hadn't been allowed a wand since Azkaban. I stole it. Winky didn't see. She's scared of heights. She kept her eyes covered in the Top Box.”

Harry fidgeted, ashamed he'd made it so easy for his wand to be taken. Severus squeezed his shoulder and he settled down.

“What did you do with the wand?” Dumbledore asked.

“I kept it hidden from Winky. We returned to my father's tent. And then we heard them. The Death Eaters. The ones who abandoned my master. They were tormenting some Muggles. The sounds woke us. My father went to help the Muggles. He ordered Winky to stay in the tent with me. But I was thinking properly. I was so angry at the Death Eaters. I wanted to make them hurt. Winky was scared of me. She bound me to her with elf magic. She dragged me away from the Death Eaters, into the forest. I fought back. I cast the Dark Mark.”

“Then what happened?”

“Ministry officials arrived. They shot Stunning Spells. One of the spells broke the connection between Winky and me. We were both Stunned. Winky was discovered, but I was still underneath the Invisibility Cloak. My father gave Winky clothes. After everyone else left he found me and took me back home. I was put under stronger spells. I thought I would never escape.”

For the first time, Crouch showed some emotion. An insane, blissful grin spread across his face, and his voice was less wooden. “But then he found me. My master came for me. Wormtail brought him to our house one night. My master had found Bertha Jorkins in Albania. She'd told him about me. He knew I was still loyal. She told him about the Triwizard Tournament. She told him about Moody coming to teach at Hogwarts. And so my master came up with a plan.

“He needed me. My master needed me for his plan to work. He came to our door at midnight. My father answered. And my master put him under the Imperius curse. It was my father's turn to be a prisoner. He was made to go to work like everything was normal. I was freed by my master. I was awake. I was with my master.”

Crouch was still grinning. Everyone else was looking at him with varying degrees of disgust.

“And what did Voldemort order you to do?” asked Dumbledore.

“He told me he had a job for me. Only I could do it. Only I was loyal enough. He told me he needed me at Hogwarts. He needed me to enter Harry Potter's name in the Goblet of Fire. He needed me to make sure that Harry Potter touched the Triwizard Cup first. He told me to turn the Cup into a Portkey that would take the first person to touch it straight to my master. And to do all of this, he needed -”

“Alastor Moody,” Dumbledore said coldly.

“Wormtail and I did it together. We brewed Polyjuice Potion. We went to Moody's house. He fought back, causing a disturbance. We bested him just before the Ministry came to investigate. We forced him into his trunk. I took some of his hair for the Polyjuice first. I drank it. I took his eye and his leg. I jinxed the dustbins in the yard to explode. When Arthur Weasley came I told him an intruder had
set them off. After they all left I packed up Moody's clothes and Dark detectors. I put them in his
trunk and went to Hogwarts.

"I kept him alive under the Imperius curse for the year. I asked him questions about his life, so that I
could better impersonate him. I needed his hair for more Polyjuice. The other ingredients I stole off
Snape. He caught me once. I told him I was ordered to search his office. He believed me."

Severus moved as if to speak, but stilled again at Dumbledore's look.

“What did Pettigrew do? What happened to your father?”

“Wormtail went back to serve my master. My father was kept under the Imperius curse. Like me, he
began to fight it. My master didn't trust him to leave the house. My master decided to make him say
that he was ill. He made Wormtail send letters to my father's assistant. He was made to say he was
unwell. But Wormtail was lax. He let my father escape. My master guessed he was coming to
Hogwarts to see Dumbledore.

“My master warned me my father was on his way. I spent a week waiting for a sign of him. I spent
hours walking the grounds under my Invisibility Cloak. Eventually, I got lucky. I saw him speaking
to Potter and Krum. I waited for Potter to leave. My master needed him unhurt. When he ran off I
Stunned Krum. I killed my father.”

“What did you do with the body?”

“I transfigured it into a bone. I hid it under a pile of leaves. Then I waited for Potter to return. He
came back with Dumbledore and Snape. I doubled back around them. I took off the Invisibility
Cloak and met them. I told them I'd seen them on my way to visit Hagrid. Dumbledore told me to
look for my father. I pretended to look. Dumbledore joined me after a while. When he found nothing
he went back to his office to contact the Minister for Magic. I put the Invisibility Cloak back on and
went back for the bone. I buried it in some freshly dug earth in front of Hagrid's cabin.”

“And what did you do tonight?”

Crouch's grin was wider than ever. “I took the Triwizard Cup into the maze. I turned it into a
Portkey. I helped Potter reach it first. And my master's plan succeeded. He is returned. He will be
stronger than ever. And I will be at his side.”

There was a short silence in the office before Sirius spoke up from the floor. “Why'd you wait all
year? Why not just give Harry a Portkey any old time?”

“My master said it had to be tonight. After Potter died, he and all the Death Eaters were to take the
Portkey back here themselves. The Minister of Magic is here. The traitor is here. The deserter is here.
Dumbledore is here. We would have surprised them all.”

“It would have been a slaughter,” breathed Narcissa.

Harry shivered as the truth of her words hit him. Most of the staff would have fought, he thought, but
they would have been outnumbered by Death Eaters with the advantage of surprise. Add to that the
students they would have tried to protect... Harry swallowed harshly as images of his friends, dead
and bloodied, swum through his mind.

Dumbledore stood up. He looked at Crouch with revulsion, then conjured ropes which bound him
tightly.

He turned to McGonagall. “Minerva, please stand guard over him whilst I take Harry next door.”
McGonagall nodded grimly and aimed her wand at Crouch.

Dumbledore turned to Narcissa. “Narcissa, may I ask you to fetch Madam Pomfrey? She will need to tend to Alastor.”

Narcissa didn't move. “What about Harry?”

“I need to speak to him privately, though I imagine Severus and Sirius will be joining us,” Dumbledore said. “I will bring him to the hospital wing when I'm done. Once you have spoken to Madam Pomfrey, please find Cornelius Fudge out in the grounds and bring him up to this office. No doubt he will want to interrogate Crouch himself. Tell him I will meet him in the hospital wing once he's done.”

Narcissa nodded curtly and gave Harry's hair one last stroke before she spun around and walked out of the office.

Severus held out a hand to Harry. “Keep off your leg entirely.” Harry allowed himself to be pulled up. Severus ducked down and draped Harry's arm around his shoulders. “Take his other side, Black.”

Sirius scowled up at him but did so, leaving Harry suspended between them, his feet dangling a foot above the floor. Together, they manoeuvred Harry out of the office, leaving McGonagall alone with Crouch, and carried him to an empty classroom down the corridor. They carefully set him down in a chair, then sat down on either side of him. Dumbledore shut the door behind them and cast a privacy charm for good measure.

“This better not take long,” Sirius growled.

“I'll make it as brief as possible,” Dumbledore assured him, leaning against a desk in the next row, “but I need Harry to tell me what happened after he left the maze tonight.”

Haltingly, Harry began his tale, the memories coming back vividly. He went into as much detail with the potion as he could. Severus was frowning at him intently, clearly trying to work out exactly what potion had been used.

“I don't know what was in the cauldron to begin with,” Harry said apologetically. “I think it was granite, though, if that helps, and the surface was all sparkly.”

Severus shook his head. “There's no way you could know what that potion was. In fact, I'd be very concerned if you did.”

Harry sagged in relief. “Right. Well, Pettigrew put in a bone from Voldemort's dad, saying it was unknowingly taken... He cut off his own right hand – flesh of the servant, willingly given... And then he – he took my blood. Blood of a foe, forcibly taken. I tried... I kept thinking I wanted him to take it – it couldn't be forcibly taken if I wanted him to, could it? I thought maybe that would mess up the potion, but it didn't.”

“You were tied to a gravestone, Harry, you could not give true consent,” Severus said.

“Okay. Well, he said that my blood would make him stronger than anyone else's would. Because now the blood protection Mum gave me is in him, too,” Harry said, looking at Dumbledore now. “And it's worked. He can touch me now. Without hurting himself.”

He thought he saw a glimmer of satisfaction in Dumbledore's eyes, but he blinked and it was gone. Probably just the blood loss making him see things, for Dumbledore merely nodded.
“So he has found a solution to that problem. Please, continue.”

Harry nodded. “He touched Pettigrew’s Dark Mark. Then he spoke about his family a bit, while he waited for the Death Eaters to arrive.” Sirius grabbed his shoulder at this. “He... He welcomed them at first. But he was angry that none of them had tried to look for him. He tortured Avery. Then he walked around the circle, talking to some of them. He said Lucius Malfoy was foolish for giving Ginny that diary, but he forgave him since it was to kill Muggle-borns. He called Narcissa a blood traitor, and said something about not being able to choose your family. Then he... Then he spoke to Nott, Crabbe and Goyle about their sons. He's not happy they're friends with me. Theo's dad said he'd make Theo change his mind – I was going to come back to warn him about that...”

“What do you mean, 'going to come back’?” Severus asked sharply.

“I decided I was going to come back as a ghost,” Harry explained, “after Voldemort killed me. To warn Theo about his dad, and to tell you as much as I could about the potion.”

“You what?” yelped Sirius, looking appalled.

“Well, I didn't,” Harry said tentatively, startled by Sirius' unexpected reaction.

“We'll be discussing this later, Harry,” Severus said sternly.

Sirius swung his head around to glare at Severus. “I'm sure he just didn't realise -”

“That's not the point,” Severus snapped.

Dumbledore raised a hand. “Gentlemen. This is not the time. Harry, please continue.”

Harry looked between Severus and Sirius, who were glaring at each other. “Er, he kept going round the circle... He said you've left him for good, and he'll be killing you extra slowly.”

Severus inclined his head. “I expected no less.”

Harry blinked at the calm tone, but continued the tale of how Voldemort made him duel. “He was too quick. He hit me with the Cruciatus curse -” he ignored the indrawn breaths “- before I could do anything. He only stopped to taunt me – he asked if I wanted some more. When I refused to answer, he tried to used the Imperius curse to make me, but I threw it off.”

“You threw off Voldemort's Imperius?” Sirius sounded impressed.

“Yeah. Moody – I mean, Crouch – taught us how to in class this year. Well, only Daphne and I actually managed it. Anyway, I, er, I told him to fuck off instead.”

There was a deep silence. Then Sirius let out a bark of laughter. “You told Voldemort to fuck off? Oh, I wish I could've seen that!”

Harry grinned. “He didn't like that. I dodged another Cruciatus, then he tried the Killing curse. I tried to Disarm him at the same time, and our spells met and our wands connected.”

Severus frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Priori Incantatem,” murmured Dumbledore.

Both Sirius and Severus gasped. “The reverse spell effect?”

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes. Harry's wand shares a wand core with Voldemort's – phoenix tail
feathers from the same bird. From Fawkes, as a matter of fact. Mr Ollivander wrote to me to inform me as soon as you'd bought your wand, Harry.”

“What does that mean for Harry?” asked Severus.

“Wands that share a core will not work properly against each other in battle. If, however, their owners force them to do so, an exceedingly rare effect will take place. One of the wands will force the other to relive its previous spells, in reverse order. Which means...”

Harry nodded heavily. “Voldemort's wand started screaming. Then there was a smoky sort of copy of the hand he made Pettigrew – more screaming... Then the old man I saw in my nightmare over summer. He was like a more solid ghost... Then Bertha Jorkins... Then – then my parents.”

At this, a spasm went through Sirius' hand, which was still on Harry's shoulder, and Severus' breath hitched.

“His most recent murders,” Dumbledore said softly. “There would have been more, had you maintained the connection any longer. And so what did these echoes do, Harry?”

“Bertha and the old man walked around inside the cage. They were taunting Voldemort, I think. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but he looked pretty scared... Mum came out of the wand first. She told me Dad was coming, to hang on until he got there. She told me they heard me when I spoke to them in Godric's Hollow,” he looked at Severus, whose black eyes were glittering, and who had gone remarkably pale. “Then Dad came. He told me I'd done a good job. Then he told me that the Cup was a Portkey, and would take me back to Hogwarts. Then they distracted Voldemort when I broke the wand connection. I ran for it, but didn't get far because of my leg. I dove under some curses and Summoned the Cup.”

Harry stopped talking and looked around. Severus was blinking rapidly and staring out a window. Sirius had buried his face in his hands. Only Dumbledore met Harry's gaze.

“Harry, you have shown extraordinary courage tonight. You have faced an ordeal the likes of which few people will ever endure in their lives, and lived to tell the tale, which even fewer people have managed. The resilience and determination you have displayed would be a credit to a fully qualified wizard, let alone someone so young. I will ask no more of you tonight. I will take you to the hospital wing. I do not want you returning to your dormitory. Severus, Sirius, I trust you will stay with him?”

Both men nodded, and presently Harry was again being carried on their shoulders as Dumbledore led the way downstairs. He pushed open the door to reveal a rather crowded infirmary. Draco was pacing the length of the room, muttering agitatedly to himself. Remus was talking in a low, soothing voice to him, holding out a bottle which Draco was steadfastly ignoring. Viktor was lying unconscious on a bed. The table next to him held an alarmingly large number of bottles, and Pomfrey was in the process of pouring another down his throat. Viktor's parents were huddled next to his bed watching closely. Hermione was standing at the foot of the bed, alternating between watching Pomfrey tend to Viktor, and watching Draco wear a path in the stone floor. The real Moody was sleeping in a bed in the corner, his magical eye and wooden leg lying on the table next to him.

Hermione spotted the new arrivals first. “Harry!” she cried, hurrying over and snagging Draco on the way.

Dumbledore stepped forward swiftly. “A moment, if you please. Harry has lived through a terrible trial tonight. What he needs now is peace and quiet so that he may sleep. You may stay with him if he wishes your company, but I do not want you pestering him about tonight's events until he is ready to tell you. I regret that he has been in need of medical intervention for some time now, and that must
take precedence. Poppy, if you would. Harry, I will be back to see you once I have spoken with Fudge.”

Harry was lowered onto the bed next to Viktor's. Pomfrey pulled the curtains around it and Severus and Sirius stepped out after she deposited some pyjamas on the bed for him. Harry could hear Severus telling Pomfrey about Harry's injuries he'd treated in the Defence office. Harry changed into the pyjama top, but left his jeans on; he didn't want to touch the splint.

“I'm decent,” he called, pressing the cloth back to his head.

Pomfrey was back in a trice, handing him two goblets. “Skele-Gro and Dreamless Sleep, I want you to drink all of them.”

Harry looked at Severus over her shoulder. “Are they okay to drink after the pain reliever?”

Severus nodded calmly, and Harry gulped them both down. He could feel the effects of the Dreamless Sleep instantaneously, with the room becoming blurry as a deep lassitude came over him. The last thing he was aware of was Severus taking off his glasses and Pomfrey peeling the bloody cloth off his head.

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Harry awoke unwillingly. He was warm in his bed, he could feel Draco's hand linked with his, and he wanted nothing more than to go back to sleep. Maybe he could pull Draco into bed with him first...

“That's Mother,” Draco said in a hushed voice.

“And Minerva and Fudge,” came Severus' whisper.

Draco's grip tightened. “I've never heard her shout like this.”

Harry opened his eyes and looked to either side. The room was only dimly lit and coupled with his lack of glasses, he was only able to see blurry outlines around his bed. Draco was sitting to his left, one arm stretched out over Harry's bed. Judging from the brown smudge next to him, Hermione was sleeping with her head on his shoulder. The black shape looming behind them must be Severus. To Harry's right were two more seated shapes who he guessed must be Sirius and Remus.

The next voice confirmed that. “I haven't heard Narcissa yell like this since she was ten and Bellatrix tried to kill her kitten.”

In the somewhat stunned silence that followed Sirius' announcement, Harry was able to make out the echoing shouting coming from outside the infirmary. Curious, he sat up, dislodging Draco.

“You're awake!”

“Yeah. Glasses?”

“Here,” Draco handed them over and shook Hermione awake.

“What?” she asked fuzzily.

“Shh!” Draco whispered.

“It is regrettable but unavoidable,” Fudge was saying.
“Unavoidable? If you weren't such a coward you could have had a full confession from him by now!” Narcissa shouted back.

“You never should have brought it with you, you know Dumbledore's stance on them!” McGonagall added.

“I am the Minister for Magic, if I wish to ensure my own safety -”

The doors to the hospital wing burst open. Severus yanked the curtains back to reveal a red-faced Fudge striding towards them. At his heels were Narcissa and McGonagall, both looking angrier than Harry had ever seen them. McGonagall was also red with anger, and Narcissa was looking like she was seconds away from cursing Fudge.

“You! Where's Dumbledore?” Fudge snapped, walking up with Severus.

“Not here, evidently,” Severus said frigidly.

Remus stood up. “Minister, there are patients sleeping.”

“Hang the patients!” Fudge retorted.

The doors to the infirmary opened again, emitting an aggravated Dumbledore. “What is going on in here? Minerva, why aren't you guarding Crouch?”

“Because there's no need to anymore, thanks to Fudge!” McGonagall shrieked.

“I fetched Fudge like you asked me to,” Narcissa spat, shooting a scornful look at Fudge. “He refused to accompany me without first securing the company of a dementor. He was apparently so threatened by a man bound head to toe that he -”

McGonagall cut in again. “I tried to warn him, Dumbledore! I told him your policy on dementors at Hogwarts, but he refused to listen to reason!”

“As Minister for Magic, I have the right to secure my own safety however I deem appropriate when interviewing a dangerous suspect!”

“He had no wand and was tied up! What possible threat could he have posed?” Narcissa demanded.

“What happened?” Dumbledore asked in a dangerously calm voice.

“Exactly what you think!” cried McGonagall. “This craven little man brought a dementor into a room containing an Azkaban escapee, and it – it -”

“IT administered the Kiss before either of us could produce a Patronus,” Narcissa hissed, “leaving us with a useless shell of a man instead of a valuable witness!”

“What for what?” Fudge asked. “His own insanity? You told me he thought he was obeying orders from You-Know-Who! Frankly, I don't see why you're all so upset by this. What's wrong with one less murderer in the world?”

“Did you just ask what's wrong with removing a man's soul without trial?” growled Sirius.

Dumbledore looked at Fudge coldly. “The problem, Cornelius, is that Crouch was acting under Voldemort's instructions. The murder victims were casualties of the plot to restore Voldemort to his full strength once more. A plot that succeeded tonight. Voldemort has returned.”
For a long moment, Fudge just gaped uncomprehendingly at Dumbledore. He opened his mouth and
shut it again, then shook his head. “No. He can't have done. I've only just finished calming down the
crowd outside after they heard Potter's claims. He's dead. He has to be.”

“You just saw a man we all thought to be dead turn out to be alive and well!” Narcissa snapped. “Or
should I say, he was well until you happened upon him!”

Fudge shook his head again. “You-Know-Who can't be back. I don't believe you.”

“Surely Minerva and Narcissa told you of Crouch's confession?” Dumbledore asked. “A confession
given under the influence of Veritaserum and in front of five witnesses. He told us of his escape from
Azkaban and reunion with Voldemort. And he told us about the plan to restore Voldemort. The plan
has worked.”

“I see no evidence of that,” Fudge said stubbornly.

“Harry was taken from this school by Portkey and taken straight to Voldemort. He returned bloodied
and injured!” cried Sirius.

“He was injured in the Tournament!” Fudge shouted. “You cannot possibly expect me to believe the
word of a boy like him!”

“A boy like what?” Sirius asked dangerously.

Fudge took half a step backwards. “Well, I mean -”

“He means a boy who's going to become the next Dark Lord,” Severus said venomously. “Fudge is
apparently idiotic enough to swallow the filth Rita Skeeter likes to call journalism.”

“And she was right, wasn't she?” Fudge shouted, gaining back his confidence. “Just look at the
company he keeps! Death Eaters and murderers! How do I know you weren't in league with Crouch
yourself?”

Dumbledore stopped forwards, looking increasingly angry. “Really, Cornelius, you're a bit behind
the times. Severus defected from Voldemort over a decade ago, and you yourself presided over
Sirius' trial six months ago. You cannot possibly be trying to use either of their relationships with
Harry as the basis for your stubborn refusal to accept the truth!”

“Surely you don't think the deaths of Barty Crouch and Bertha Jorkins are the random work of a
lunatic?” McGonagall asked.

“I see nothing in their deaths that backs up anything you're saying!”

“Question the Death Eaters then,” Harry said suddenly. “Go ask them where they were tonight. Nott,
Crabbe, and Goyle. They were laughing at me getting tortured in a graveyard!”

Draco's grip on his hand tightened painfully, and Hermione covered her mouth with her hand.

Fudge remained unmoved. “All I see here is a lot of gullible people taking the word of a dubious
young boy.”

“Then look at this,” Severus seethed. He unbuttoned his left sleeve and rolled it to his elbow,
displaying the Dark Mark in all its ugly glory. “The Dark Lord burnt this Mark into the arms of every
Death Eater. It was a means through which we could recognise and acknowledge each other. It was
also the method the Dark Lord used to summon us to him. When he touched the Mark of any Death
Eater, we had to immediately Disapparate, and Apparate to his presence. This Mark had faded after
the Dark Lord disappeared, but it has been steadily growing more distinct all year. Karkaroff's too.
He fled tonight because he felt the Mark burn, just as I did. We both knew he had returned.”

Fudge stumbled back, looking repulsed. He stared at the Mark for a long time before he looked back
up at Dumbledore. “I've heard enough. I do not know why you all persist in this – this – this
delusion, but I want no part of it. Nor do I want you contacting the Aurors, or any other Ministry
employees over the matter,” Fudge said, mainly addressing Narcissa on this last point. “And
Dumbledore, you can expect me to get in contact with you over the way you run this school. Now, if
you'll excuse me, I must go in to the Ministry and attempt some damage control.” He put his hat on
his head, then dug a hand into his pocket. He pulled out a bag of gold and handed it ungraciously to
Harry. “Your winnings. There was supposed to be an awards ceremony, but I decided against it
when your return panicked the crowd.”

He left the infirmary with an air of decided ill grace. Dumbledore watched him leave then turned to
the group.

“We must act quickly. Minerva, please send Hagrid up to my office – I'll meet him there as soon as
I'm done here – and Madam Maxime, if she is agreeable.”

McGonagall nodded once and left silently.

Dumbledore turned to Pomfrey. “Poppy, do what you can to hasten Alastor's recovery. I would like
to inform him of tonight's events as soon as I can.”

“Of course,” Pomfrey said, and walked over to the bed Moody was still sleeping on.

Dumbledore eyed Narcissa speculatively. “Am I able to count on your support?”

Narcissa lifted her chin. “To fight the Dark Lord? Yes. I'd rather thought I'd immediately cease all
further donations to any charity even remotely affiliated with the Ministry.”

“An excellent beginning,” Dumbledore said, his moustache twitching. “I understand that you are
rather close to two Aurors?”

“My niece and my partner,” Narcissa confirmed. “I'll speak with them immediately. I also have some
useful contacts in other areas of the Ministry, I'll begin sounding them out...”

Narcissa moved over to kiss Harry and Hermione. She hugged Draco tightly, whispering something
in his ear, before she straightened up, murmured something to Severus who nodded, and swept out
of the room. Harry gave Draco's hand a reassuring squeeze when he caught him looking after his
mother forlornly.

Dumbledore turned to the other side of the room. “Sirius, Remus, I need you to leave immediately.
Round up the old crew – you know who I mean. Tell them what's happened – I'll be in touch with
them soon myself, but they should be put on alert in the meantime.”

Remus nodded. So did Sirius, before he looked across the bed at Severus. “Look after him, Snape.”

Severus jerked his head irritably.

Sirius made a face but didn't say anything further to Severus. “Harry, I'll see you soon, okay?”

When Harry nodded, Sirius ruffled his hair and followed Remus out of the room.
“Harry, take the rest of your potion. Severus, I leave him in your care,” Dumbledore said, before leaving himself.

“Can you stand?” Severus asked.

“Yes,” Harry said, “but didn't Dumbledore want me to stay here for the night?”

“He only said he didn't want you returning to the dormitory.” Severus answered, picking up the bottle of Dreamless Sleep. “I thought I'd take you to my quarters, where you will not be disturbed by any other idiots from the Ministry.”

“Sounds good,” Harry said.

“I'm not leaving him,” Draco said, “not tonight.”

Severus met his gaze then nodded in resignation. “Fine. You may come too – you and Miss Granger,” he added, when Hermione's jaw began to jut out stubbornly. “Help Harry get up whilst I inform Poppy.”

Draco and Hermione held onto Harry as he eased himself out of bed. His leg felt as good as new when he put it on the ground. Draco kept a firm hold on his hand, though Hermione let him go to pick up his sack of Galleons from the foot of the bed.

“I don't want them,” Harry said dully.

“Harry, it's a thousand Galleons,” she said.

“You can have them, if you want,” Harry said.

Hermione pursed her lips but didn't say anything as Severus returned. They followed him out of the hospital wing and down into the dungeons, past the Slytherin common room and his own office. He turned down one of the secret passages Harry had found in his first year at Hogwarts, the one hidden behind a tapestry of Merlin talking to a herd of centaurs.

“I didn't know this led anywhere,” Harry said in surprise.

“That's because my quarters are hidden by more than a tapestry,” Severus replied.

A few seconds later Harry realised what he meant. Severus touched his palm to a stone in the wall, which shimmered to reveal a wooden door. Severus opened it and ushered them all inside. Harry had a quick view of a dark stone chamber before he was guided into a bedroom. He got into the bed and took the goblet of Dreamless Sleep that Severus handed him. He swallowed it gratefully and collapsed into sleep seconds later.
Harry awoke disoriented, unable to tell where he was without his glasses.

“Table to your right,” came Severus' voice as he sat up.

Harry groped around beside himself, his hand shaking slightly as memories came flooding back. He pushed his glasses up his nose and looked around himself. He was sitting in a large, very comfortable double bed with entirely black bed clothes. The bedside table his glasses had been on held only another potion bottle, but the table on the other side of the bed was wholly covered by piles of books. There was a large wardrobe directly in front of the bed. To the right of that was a closed door, and to the left was a black wingback chair currently occupied by Severus. There was an empty fireplace to Harry's left; the room was lit by four tall candle stands, one in each corner.

Severus shut the book he'd been reading and stood up. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine. I'm not sick, you know,” Harry said,

“Harry, you were hit with the Cruciatus curse whilst already injured,” Severus said, stretching with a grimace. “Get used to people asking after your health.”

“Okay,” Harry said, swinging his legs over the side of the bed.

Severus moved forward swiftly and picked up the bottle from the table. “Here. Poppy said you're to drink this before you do anything.”

Harry did so obediently, pulling a face at the strong taste of metal. “What was that?”

“Blood-Replenishing Potion. I had strict orders not to let you out of bed without taking it, but you're free to get up now. Breakfast?”

“That'd be great,” Harry said enthusiastically. He didn't know how long he'd slept for, but his stomach had started growling at the mention of food.

They left the bedroom and walked back into the room Harry had been hurried through earlier. It was lit by a large fireplace, with currently empty sconces lining the walls. On either side of the fireplace were large windows showing a peaceful forest glade; they were obviously enchanted, as Harry knew all of the dungeons were underground. There was a dark green couch in front of the fire, continuing the forest theme, with a matching armchair and a low coffee table. Straight ahead of Harry was a small kitchen with a dining nook, and there was a door to his left that must lead to a bathroom. The rest of the walls were obscured by bookshelves, which didn't surprise Harry at all.

Hermione was reading on the couch, and twisted around at their entrance. “Harry! How are you feeling?” she whispered.

“Fine. Why are we whispering?”

“Draco's sleeping,” Hermione replied, pointing down at the couch.

Harry walked around to find Draco stretched out with his head in Hermione's lap, dead to the world.
“Sit down,” Severus said softly. “What do you feel like for breakfast? I can order something directly from the elves.”

Harry lifted up Draco's feet gently and sat down, resting them across his legs. He was still hungry, but couldn't think of a single thing that was appealing. “Do you have that tea? The one with the cardamom?”

Severus nodded. “Miss Granger?”

“Tea's fine with me too, sir.”

“Better get a cup for Draco, too,” Harry added, as Draco began to stir. Severus nodded again and walked into the kitchen, and Harry leaned across Draco to look at Hermione's book. “What are you reading?”

“Eating Death,” she said with distaste. “It's about You-Know-Who's first rise to power.”

“That title is awful,” Harry said.

“It doesn't get any better,” Hermione said with a sigh, “but Professor Snape suggested I read it, in order to see how the general public thought You-Know-Who operated back then.”

“If Fudge is set on denying the resurrection of the Dark Lord, then it may be beneficial for Miss Granger to have a better understanding of just what nonsense people are willing to believe,” Severus said, coming back into the lounge with a tea tray. “I highly doubt the author's claim to have interviewed several Death Eaters. At least ninety per cent of that book is macabre fantasy.”

“Oh, good,” Hermione breathed emphatically, making Harry wonder what exactly she'd been reading about.

Harry sipped his tea in silence, staring blankly at the coffee table whilst both Hermione and Severus resumed reading. He jumped a few minutes later when Hermione closed her book and dropped his winnings on the table.

“Any idea what you want to do with them?” Hermione asked.

“I told you, I don't want them,” Harry said.

“Well, I'm not taking them off you,” Hermione said.

“Severus can take them, then. For adopting me.”

“Absolutely not,” Severus hissed.

Harry looked at him in alarm, not having expected such an emphatic reaction. “What?”

“You are not bribing me for adopting you,” Severus said.

“It's not a bribe,” Harry protested.

“Really,” Severus said. “So why don't you want them?”

Harry nudged the sack with his foot and took his time replying. “The only reason I have this is because of Voldemort's scheming. It'd just remind me of – of everything.”

Severus nodded. “I thought as much. If you don't want it, donate it to charity. I'm not taking it.”
“Not very Slytherin of you,” Harry muttered.

“I disagree. I think it is entirely Slytherin to not accept a thousand Galleon bribe from someone I am shortly adopting. I've no intention of letting you hold this over my head any time I tell you to clean your room or do your homework,” Severus countered.

Harry smiled faintly. “Good point.”

He sat there thinking of who he could donate the Galleons to. He didn't know of any wizarding charities, and resolved to ask Narcissa.

Draco awoke a few minutes later and dumped an obscene amount of sugar into his own tea. Harry fell asleep again shortly afterwards, lulled by the soothing tea and the soft crackling of the fire. He woke up some time later to Draco shaking him.

“Dumbledore says we have to go up to dinner,” he explained.

“Can't we just get something from the kitchens?” Harry asked hopefully.

Severus raised an eyebrow. “After the Headmaster specifically instructed you to go to dinner? No.”

“It won't be that bad,” Hermione said earnestly. “Dumbledore said that he spoke to everyone at breakfast and told them not to bother you.”

Harry tried not to drag his feet as they headed towards the Great Hall. He really wasn't looking forward to huge crowds of people gawking at him.

“Anyone who wants to hassle you has to come through me,” Draco said as they crossed the Entrance Hall. “And I know a lot of new jinxes now.”

Severus left them at the doors after giving Harry's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. Harry tried not to listen to the whispers that broke out while he followed Draco to the Slytherin table. Draco secured them seats at the end closest to the doors, glaring at some first years until they scooted up the benches. Hermione sat down with them and spoke quietly with Draco while Harry picked at his food. He fled back to his dormitory as soon as dinner was over, getting into his bed and pulling the curtains shut tight before any of the other boys walked in.

He lay there trying to get to sleep, but kept seeing glowing red eyes whenever he shut his eyes. Then a new voice made him prick up his ears and his heart beat faster.

“I just want to talk to him,” Theo said, sounding thoroughly miserable.

“Not now,” Draco said, quietly fierce. “Give him a few days, alright?”

Theo must have nodded, because Harry couldn't hear anything further. He knew he'd have to talk to Theo soon – and probably Greg and Vince, for what little good that would do – but he didn't want to see anyone right now, not except for -

Draco cleared his throat from beside Harry's bed. “Mind if I join you?”

Harry opened the curtain and pulled Draco into bed with him. Neither one said anything more. Even with Draco's arms wrapped around him, it still took Harry quite some time to fall asleep.

*******
For nearly a week, the only people Harry spoke to were Draco, Hermione and Severus. He'd never before seen the school obey a rule as completely as they did Dumbledore's order to leave Harry alone. Apart from the first night, when he'd overheard Theo arguing with Draco, no one tried to talk to Harry, much to his relief. Even his teachers didn't call on him in class, although that may have been because classes were in the usual post-exam slump. Apart from students like Hermione or Tracey, who pestered the teachers about their exams, everyone else spent their lessons mucking around with their friends.

There were two teachers who continued to teach as normal: Severus and McGonagall. Well, probably three, but as Harry and Draco had slept in on Monday morning after Harry had woken them both up with nightmares, they couldn't say for certain what Binns did during class.

On Wednesday morning, however, Severus announced they would be brewing Dreamless Sleep in their last two remaining lessons. Harry shot an accusatory look at Draco.

Draco met his gaze unapologetically. "Someone had to tell him you're having nightmares every night, and you obviously weren't going to."

"Tattle-tale," Harry responded, though without any real heat. He knew Draco was right.

"Ensure that you have stabilised the colour at a deep, opaque purple before setting your cauldrons aside," Severus called out ten minutes before the end of class. "If you have not done so, your potion will be useless – unless you wish to spend a night sleepwalking."

Harry looked at his potion and smiled in satisfaction before he started to pack his things up. He was just returning from putting his cauldron in the cupboard where everyone's labelled cauldrons would mature until the next lesson, when he saw Severus peering into Neville's cauldron.

"This needs to be stirred anti-clockwise for a minute," Severus began, making Neville gulp, "then it should be acceptable."

Neville dropped his stirring rod as he watched Severus move off down the benches. Hermione was staring after him, open-mouthed. Harry couldn't really blame either of them. While Severus had stopped picking on Neville after he'd said he would, this had mostly meant he'd ignored him, something both parties seemed to find satisfactory.

"Mr Potter, stay after class," Severus said, seconds before the bell rang.

"I'll save you a seat in the common room," Draco promised, ambling out after the other Slytherins, who all had a free period on account of Defence being cancelled.

"Come along," Severus said, walking towards the door.

Harry followed, confused when they turned away from the corridor that led to Severus' office. Instead, Severus took him to his quarters. Harry sat down on the couch while Severus made tea.

"How bad are the nightmares?" Severus asked when he sat down.

Harry kicked off his shoes and drew his feet up onto the couch. He hugged his knees as he met Severus' gaze. "Pretty bad, I guess. I wake up tired most mornings, and I wake Draco up a few times a night."

"Not the other boys?" Severus asked, handing Harry a cup of tea.

"Well, apparently I don't scream so much as thrash around a lot and speak in Parseltongue. Since
none of the others speak it, it wouldn't really get their attention like it does Draco's,” Harry said. “I mean, it'd just sound like, I dunno, wind or something to them, I guess, but Draco hears my side of a conversation.”

Severus nodded slowly. “Do you remember your nightmares?”

Harry shrugged. “Just the graveyard. What happened, what could have happened... Voldemort, Death Eaters, Nagini...”

Severus frowned and stood up to pace in front of the empty fireplace. “Do they feel like your earlier nightmares? The ones we believe actually took place?”

Harry shook his head. “No, they feel like normal nightmares.”

Severus merely nodded and continued to pace. Harry drank his tea and watched him. Abruptly, Severus walked over to a bookcase and selected a worn, battered book and gave it to Harry. *An Introduction to Mind Magic*, read Harry.

“You should be able to get through that in the next week. Pay close attention to the chapters on Occlumency, making note of anything you wish to question me about,” Severus said.

“Okay,” Harry agreed. “What's happening in a week?”

“I'm adopting you Monday week. You'll need to make sure that the Dursleys are home on the day, incidentally,” Severus warned.

“Oh. Sure,” Harry said, grinning.

“I'll begin teaching you Occlumency once we're home, but for now, I want you to take Dreamless Sleep. It can be harmful to take it for too long, but a week and a half is fine. Get some off Poppy for the next two nights; what you're brewing in class will suffice for the rest of the time.”

“Okay,” Harry said again.


Harry thought back over the last week. “No.”

“Good,” Severus said in relief.

Harry frowned. “Shouldn't Pomfrey be asking me about this?”

“While she is a competent mediwitch, Poppy works at a school. She is used to healing injuries from fights and Quidditch accidents, not torture. I'd be very surprised if she'd ever had a patient who'd been hit with the Cruciatus curse, and I highly doubt she would know what to look for.”

“But you do.”

Severus looked at him for a long moment, making Harry wonder if he'd gone too far. “Yes,” he said finally.

Harry hesitated, unsure of whether or not he wanted to ask his next question.

Severus decided for him. “From both ends of the wand. Though I only had to perform it once.”
Harry looked at him in horror. “You used an Unforgivable?”

Severus sat down heavily and gulped down half his tea before he spoke, so quietly that Harry had to strain to hear. “On one occasion, yes. It is not something I ever wish to repeat. It was an initiation ritual, to use it on a Muggle.”

“You had to torture a Muggle to join the Death Eaters?” Harry was feeling sick.

“Not necessarily. We had our choice of the three curses,” Severus was whispering at this point.

“And you chose that one?” Harry tried desperately not to think of Severus, only a few years older than Harry was now, having to choose which Unforgivable to use on a stranger.

Severus was now glaring down at his left forearm, as if to burn off the Mark through his sleeve. “I didn’t want to kill some random Muggle. I’d seen what happened to the new recruits unlucky enough to get stuck with a Muggle capable of fighting the Imperius curse, and had no intention of allowing that to happen to me.”

“Mood – er, Crouch told us that you need a lot of hatred and anger to be able to use an Unforgivable on another human,” Harry said haltingly.

“And at that point in my life, I had both of those in abundance,” Severus said.

“You only did it once?” Harry asked.

Severus shuddered slightly. “Once was one time too many. I may have been filled with hatred, but I was not prepared for the actuality of torturing another human being. I cast the curse and was accepted into the ranks of the Dark Lord’s followers, and immediately resolved to avoid using any more Unforgivables if at all possible. As it turned out, the Dark Lord was more interested in my brewing capabilities, so I was not called upon to perform any of them again. He had other Death Eaters for that, people who took pleasure in using them. They were far more effective than I’d been.”

Harry refilled Severus’ tea cup, then laid a hesitant hand on Severus’ shoulder, unsure of his reception. “Crouch also told us that using an Unforgivable on another person would land you in Azkaban for life,” he said slowly.

Severus didn’t pull away, though he didn’t meet Harry’s eye. “If you’re caught, yes.”

“So did Dumbledore know? When he stopped you going to Azkaban?”

Severus finally raised his head again to look meaningfully at Harry. “He knew. I had to tell him everything to gain his trust. Luckily for me, I was far more useful to him as a spy than as a prisoner.”

Hearing the bitterness in Severus’ voice, Harry decided to change the subject slightly. “I didn’t know Muggles could fight the Imperius curse.”

Severus half-shrugged. “It doesn’t require any magic to do so, just stubbornness.”

“Right.”

“Speaking of stubbornness,” Severus said, twisting to face Harry fully, “I brought you in here primarily to talk about the decision you made in the graveyard.”

“The ghost thing?” Harry asked, dropping his hand and trying not to wince. He’d been hoping Severus would forget.
“Precisely. Harry, from what you’ve told me about your state of mind at the time, had you been killed you would indeed have stayed behind as a ghost,” Severus said.

“Really?”

“Yes,” Severus said. “I want you to promise me you'll never think that way again.”

“Why? I mean, if I’d died, which, can I point out, I very much thought was going to happen, I wouldn't have been able to tell you guys anything otherwise,” Harry said defensively.

“And what then? Once you'd told us what you needed to, what did you intend to do for the rest of your existence?” Severus asked hotly.

“I thought I might play pranks with Peeves,” Harry said in a small voice.

Severus didn't move, except for his nostrils flaring angrily. Harry shifted uncomfortably as he waited for the storm to hit.

All of a sudden Severus deflated. “Harry, I don't care what the circumstances are. Nothing is worth becoming a ghost, do you understand? You would have been stuck for eternity, unable to move on to any sort of afterlife. You would have watched all your friends grow up, live their lives, get old and die. Perhaps you would have gotten to know their children, only to have the cycle repeat itself.”

Harry felt a chill go down his spine. “Don't... Don't ghosts sort of fade away after a while? Like after they've done whatever unfinished business they had?”

“Muggle nonsense,” Severus said. “You need look no further than the Bloody Baron. He was born in the tenth century and taught by Salazar Slytherin himself. Now he is trapped haunting teenagers at the end of the twentieth century.”

“No wonder he's unfriendly,” Harry muttered, thinking enviously of the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor ghosts.

Severus snorted. “Indeed. I trust that you now understand why your decision was so worrying to me.”

Harry nodded. “Sorry.”

Severus leaned his head against the back of the couch. “Just don't ever do it again.”

Harry ended up having lunch with Severus in his quarters, before getting kicked out to go to Transfiguration. He sat at the back and didn't hear a word McGonagall said. He was too busy thinking about his conversation with Severus and watching Theo in the front row. While he'd normally be busy taking notes like Tracey was beside him, Theo was sitting motionless, staring down at his desk.

When the bell finally rang, Harry wove his way through the departing class and tapped Theo on the shoulder. “Can we talk?”

A look of relief washed over Theo's face as he nodded. Harry allowed the rest of the class to pull ahead on the way back to the common room, then ducked into a nearby empty classroom with Theo at his heels. He shut the door behind him and then froze when he looked at Theo. How exactly was
he supposed to tell him about his dad?

Unsurprisingly, Theo had the answer. “He was there, wasn't he. My father. He was there when you faced the Dark Lord.”

Harry nodded slowly. “I thought Fudge told you all that -”

“Fudge is an idiot,” Theo broke in, “as is anyone who believed him. It was perfectly obvious that something awful had happened to you, and everyone was saying you said the Dark Lord was back. So what happened?”

“The Cup was a Portkey,” Harry began, summarising as briefly as he could, “and it took me to a graveyard. Pettigrew used a potion to resurrect Voldemort. He called all the Death Eaters, and then tortured me for their amusement... And then we duelled, before I was able to get away...”

Theo's mouth twisted unhappily. “I'm so sorry.”

“It's not your fault,” Harry said fairly. “And it wasn't just your dad. Greg and Vince's were there too.”

“That doesn't make it any better,” Theo said.

“No, it doesn't,” Harry agreed. “Anyway, I wanted to tell you that Voldemort spoke about you. With your dad.”

Theo flinched. “What did the Dark Lord have to say about me?”

“He's not happy that any of you are friends with me. Your dad said he's going to make you stop. So did their dads, actually, but I figured they're more likely to go along with what their dads want. Whereas you -”

“Am not going to do a thing that bastard wants me to,” Theo declared, leaning against a desk.

“He said he'd punish you,” Harry warned him.

Theo shrugged. “That's nothing new. He's been punishing me my entire life.”

Harry frowned. “What do you mean?”

“He blames me for my mother dying,” Theo said matter-of-factly.

“What does he do?” Harry asked, aghast.

“He acts like I don't exist, usually.”

Harry stared at him, feeling guilty. He'd had no idea that Theo's childhood had been in any way similar to his own.

“Don't look at me like that,” Theo said. “It's not like he locked me away or anything, he just made it clear that he didn't want me around. The house-elves looked after me. He'd wheel me out when we had company, so I was able to see Draco sometimes. Greg and Vince too, though they're rather unstimulating conversationalists. And I had a tutor. I wasn't a total recluse.”

“Theo -”

“Seriously, forget I said anything,” Theo said a little irritably, pushing off from the desk he was
leaning against. “Honestly, I hate him, having him avoid me has been great. Plus I had full access to our library. If he had any brains he would've locked me out of there to punish me.”

Harry bit his lip before nodding reluctantly. “Okay, but he's got Voldemort after him on this.”

“This isn't totally unexpected, you know. I rather thought he'd react this way when I heard that the Dark Lord was back.”

“I'm sorry,” Harry said miserably.

Theo slung his arm around Harry's shoulders and led him towards the door. “Hey, Muggle Studies is one of my favourite subjects, and my girlfriend's family fought the Dark Lord. Things were bound to come to a head sooner or later. I've got a few contingency plans worked out.”

“Let me know if you need help, yeah?”

“Count on it.”

*******

After talking to Theo, Harry felt ready to begin talking to other people. The next day, he and Draco skipped History of Magic to visit Hagrid, along with Hermione, whose Defence class was cancelled. It was a lovely summer's day, the kind that made it hard to believe that Voldemort could possibly be back.

They found Fang sunning himself next to Hagrid's front door. He got to his feet with a lazy bark when he heard them approach. After giving Hermione and Harry a few cursory licks, Fang attached himself to Draco's side, tail wagging furiously.

“Who is it, Fang?” Hagrid called from inside the cabin. He appeared in the doorway a few seconds later and a broad smile split his beard when he saw them. “Harry!”

He hurried forward and pulled Harry into a crushing hug. “Good ter see yeh, mate. Bloody good.”

“Thanks,” Harry gasped when he was released.

“Come in, sit down,” Hagrid said, leading the way inside. “Just bin havin' a cuppa with Olympe,” he added, gesturing to the pair of mugs on the table.

“Who?” Harry asked.

“Madam Maxime ter you,” Hagrid said. He pulled out some more mugs and set them on the table before sitting down himself. “How yeh holdin' up, Harry?”

“I'm fine,” Harry said automatically, then shook his head. “Well, no, but I will be.”

“You'll get there,” Hagrid said, nodding sympathetically. “Dumbledore told me what yeh did that night. 'S'not many people who could've done what yeh did. Yeh're as brave as yer parents were, Harry.”

Harry smiled but changed the subject, not wanting to talk about that night again. “What were you and Maxime talking about?”

“It's to do with the Dark Lord, isn't it?” Draco chimed in. “Dumbledore got McGonagall to fetch the two of you after – after everything.”
“Top secret mission, that is. Reckon I might've convinced Olympe to join me. Can't tell yeh no more, I'm afraid,” Hagrid said.

“We've heard that before,” Draco drawled.

Hagrid chuckled. “True, but I really can't tell yeh 'bout this.”

“Is it about You-Know-Who?” asked Hermione.

“Can't say,” Hagrid said, “but wish me luck.”

“Will you tell us what it is once you've completed your mission?” Draco asked.

“Don't see why I can't.”

“Then good luck.”

********

For the first time ever, Harry was happy to be packing his trunk to leave Hogwarts. True, he'd have to get through the Leaving Feast, and all the stares he'd receive in the crowded Great Hall, but it meant he was one day closer to being adopted. Severus had told him to expect himself, Narcissa and McGonagall at the Dursleys at six o'clock Monday evening. If Harry had been any good at maths, he'd have been counting down the hours by now.

The crowd in the Great Hall was more subdued than it normally would be during the Leaving Feast. Instead of talking loudly and excitedly about their summers, many people were talking quietly in little groups, staring at Harry. He slumped down between Draco and Pansy and tried to ignore all the attention he was getting.

Millicent looked up at the blue and bronze banners decorating the hall in surprise. “Wasn't expecting that. I thought Snape spent half the year taking points off the other three houses anytime anyone gave Harry a hard time about the Tournament.”

“Yes, but only from people who were stupid enough to do it in front of him,” Theo point out.

“Don't forget the two parties that left most of Slytherin hungover the next day,” Tracey said, smiling and giving Theo a nudge. He smirked back at her.

“Or the people who got caught sneaking down to the Beauxbatons carriage after curfew,” Daphne said, giving Blaise a sly grin.

“Hey, I got better at not getting caught doing that,” Blaise said with a laugh.

Harry smiled as he listened to his friends' conversation and looked around the Great Hall. At the other end of the Slytherin table, Viktor had rejoined Ulla and the other Durmstrang students. He'd been in the hospital wing for days as Pomfrey worked to get the Acromantula venom out of his body. Hermione had visited him most days, and was planning on asking her parents if she could visit Bulgaria over the summer holidays.

Up at the staff table, the real Moody had been deemed healthy enough to attend the feast. Sandwiched between Flitwick and Pomfrey, he jumped anytime either of them spoke to him. Already paranoid and suspicious, being locked in his own trunk for almost an entire year had only made him worse.
There was an empty seat where Karkaroff should have been. Next to it, Maxime was deep in conversation with Hagrid. They looked serious, and as he watched them, Harry wished he knew how to lip read. Maybe he could ask Severus if he knew how to; it would certainly be a useful skill for a spy to have known... Harry was just trying to come up with a convincing argument as to why Severus should teach him, when Dumbledore stood up and the hall went quiet.

“The end of another year,” he said heavily, “and the end of our world’s long period of peace.”

There were rumbles across the crowd at these words, and a few younger students looked around as if expecting to be attacked right there.

“The Ministry of Magic has forbidden me from saying what I am about to,” Dumbledore continued. “I have no doubt that some of your parents will agree with them, whether because they disagree with me, or because they think that you are too young to hear this. But I do not believe there is a single child in this room who is too young to hear the truth. I believe each of you has the right to know... Lord Voldemort has returned.”

Harry grasped Draco's hand as frightened whispering broke out all over the hall. People were looking at Dumbledore in horrified disbelief, except for Hermione and the fourth year Slytherins, who had believed Harry's story in the first place. Pale and frightened, they waited for Dumbledore to resume.

“We owe our knowledge of Lord Voldemort's return to one person. Without him, we would remain ignorant. Harry Potter -” Dumbledore stopped for a moment, as everyone turned to look at Harry “- Harry Potter faced Lord Voldemort and his followers last week. He showed great courage in the ensuing battle and managed to return to Hogwarts to inform us of the terrible events that took place. I honour him for his bravery, a bravery that few people have ever shown when faced with Lord Voldemort in his wrath.”

Dumbledore raised his goblet in Harry's direction, and the rest of the crowd followed suit, getting to their feet and murmuring Harry's name. Harry was reminded of the last time he'd been toasted, by a drunken, laughing Adrian in the Slytherin common room. It seemed to have happened to another boy. Looking down the Slytherin table, Harry caught sight of a few older students who hadn't joined in and were instead muttering to each other in twos and threes. Harry eyed them warily then returned his attention to Dumbledore as everyone else sat down again.

“The aim of this year's Tournament was to foster greater and stronger ties of friendship between our respective countries. In the wake of Lord Voldemort's resurrection, these ties are even more important.” He paused and looked from Maxime and Hagrid, to the Beauxbatons students at the Ravenclaw table, then to the Durmstrang kids. “Tonight, in this hall, we have witches and wizards from nearly every nation in Europe. Every one of our foreign guests is welcome back to our school at any time they may wish to return. It is my hope that we may continue to cooperate in the coming times, as many of you have during this past year.

“Our greatest weapon against Lord Voldemort, and those who follow him and his beliefs, is to set aside our differences and stand together in the darkness that is poised to swallow us. Through whispers and lies, Lord Voldemort will seek to divide us, to set us fighting amongst ourselves. We must stand together against his evil.

“Many of us in this hall have already suffered because of Lord Voldemort. Good people have sacrificed their lives fighting him. Families have been torn apart through his violence. We have had friends lost to his hatred. If we allow Lord Voldemort to divide us, even more of us will lose loved ones. Perhaps some of us will lose our lives. Remember that, if ever you are given a choice. Lord Voldemort deals in hatred and death. Only through standing together in love and friendship will we
defeat him.”

Harry wasn’t sure if he should applaud or not as Dumbledore sat down. No one else seemed to know, either, to judge from the mismatched, sporadic bursts of clapping that swept across the room. Most people began immediately talking to their friends, though some here and there simply stared up at Dumbledore, who was now leaning across Karkaroff’s empty seat to talk to Hagrid and Maxime.

“Well, then,” Draco said, breaking the silence in their group.

“Not exactly inspiring,” Daphne said.

Tracey shook her head. “Wasn't meant to be.”

“What do you mean?” Daphne asked.

“It was a warning,” Tracey said. “To stick together.”

“To not let the Dark Lord come between us,” Theo elaborated, looking at Harry.

Everyone turned to look at Greg and Vince, who’d both started serving themselves as soon as the food had appeared, completely oblivious to the tense mood all around them. Harry hadn't spoken to either one about what Voldemort had told their fathers; Draco, Theo and Blaise were all of the opinion that Greg and Vince’s history of following simple orders would extend to obeying their fathers' wishes in this. Harry had never been particularly close to either one of them, but it still rankled.

“Some things are easier said than done, I think,” Pansy said glumly.

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The last day of school was bright and warm, promising a long summer ahead. Along with the rest of their year, Harry, Draco, Theo, Tracey and Blaise were waiting in the packed Entrance Hall for the horseless carriages that would take them to Hogsmeade station. Hermione had left Crookshanks and her trunk in their possession and disappeared to find Viktor.

“‘Arry!”

Harry turned around to find Fleur walking swiftly through the crowd. Behind her, out in the grounds, he could see Hagrid helping Maxime ready the Abraxans for flight.

“I must leave soon, but I could not go wizout telling you goodbye,” Fleur said. “But I ’ope to see you again. I am ’oping I will come back to England to work.”

“Good luck,” Harry said sincerely. “Say hi to Gabrielle from us.”

Fleur smiled. “I will,” she said, glancing at Draco. “She will be pleased to hear from ’er two rescuers, non? One more than the other, perhaps.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Tell her... Vous ne voulez pas un vieil homme comme moi. Vous voulez quelqu'un d’assez jeune pour apprécier votre beauté.”

Harry had no idea what Draco had just said, but Fleur certainly seemed to like it. She beamed at Draco and kissed him on both cheeks, before doing the same to Harry. “Au revoir!” she said, then headed back outside to the carriage.
Blaise watched her leave and sighed. Theo put his arm around his shoulders consolingly, even as he shared an amused smile with Tracey.

Hermione didn’t return until the horseless carriages were halfway up the driveway. She was holding hands with Viktor, with Ulla a few paces behind them.

“It has been nice meeting you all,” Ulla said, smiling around at the group.

“You too,” Harry said.

Ulla shook hands with the group, then moved off to say goodbye to some sixth years. Blaise, Tracey and Theo dragged their trunks off to a carriage, promising to save the others a compartment.

“Have a good summer,” Viktor said gruffly, shaking hands with Harry and Draco.

“Same to you,” Draco said.

Viktor nodded and looked at Hermione. “You vill let me know if you change your mind?”

“It's up to my parents, but yes,” she said.

“Good,” Viktor said, then lowered his voice. “I vill miss you.”

He leaned forward to kiss her. Harry picked up his trunk and Hedwig’s cage and looked at Draco pointedly. “Let's get a carriage.”

“Oh, but -”

“She doesn't gawk at us, you git,” Harry said.

“Fine,” Draco huffed.

They started dragging their things down to the remaining carriages. Hermione caught up to them a minute later, slightly out of breath. Draco pressed his lips together and somehow refrained from saying anything about it.

True to their word, the other three had saved them seats in a compartment, though Blaise had already disappeared off somewhere.

“He back onto the Hufflepuffs?” asked Draco.

“Moved on to Ravenclaws by the looks of things,” Theo replied.

“What? No, that was Parvati he was with, not Padma,” Tracey argued.

“How can you tell? It's not like we could see her face,” Theo said.

“No, but I could see that hideous butterfly hair clip of hers,” Tracey said, screwing up her face.

Hermione laughed. “It really is ugly, isn’t it?”

Tracey nodded fervently. “Whenever she wears it in Potions I spend half the lesson fantasising about melting it in a cauldron…”

“Must be bad, if it can distract you from class,” Harry teased.

“It is,” both girls replied at once.
“I'll take your word for it,” Harry said, unable to remember any such hair clip. “Anyone up for poker?”

“What, those thousand Galleons from the Tournament not enough, now you want to clean out your friends?” Theo asked.

“I'm giving them to charity,” Harry said quietly.

“What?” asked everyone except Hermione.

Harry shifted uncomfortably. “They remind me of Voldemort.”

There was a shudder around the group at the name.

“Fair enough,” Tracey declared.

Just then, Blaise slid in through the door. “Excellent, are we playing poker?”

“We are,” Draco said. “You, on the other hand, seem to be making the moves on one of the Patil twins.”

Blaise smirked. “Who said it was only one of them?”

“Both of them?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah,” Blaise said, his smirk growing wider. “I've had sisters before, but not twins. This'll be fun.”

“Aiming for the Weasley twins next?” Theo asked.

Blaise just shrugged. “Haven't thought that far ahead, to be honest.”

Harry shot to his feet and began rummaging through his trunk.

“I think the Weasley twins are a two-for-one kind of deal,” Theo said.

“Yeah, better learn how to multi-task,” Tracey said. She and Theo began sniggering together.

Blaise looked at them calmly. “I have no problem with any of that.”

Tracey stopped laughing. “Yes, but -”

Harry pulled out his Triwizard winnings, stuffed them in a pocket and left the compartment, shutting the door on a conversation he wasn't sure he wanted to hear. He glanced up and down the corridor. There were a few people ducking in and out of doors, but no sign of the Weasley twins. With a sigh, he resigned himself to searching the entire train for them.

He found them in an compartment in the next carriage. Together with their friend Jordan, they were huddled together over a piece of parchment when he walked in.

“Harry!” one of the twins looked up.

“Sit down, sit down!” the other said. “Fred, do we have any Butterbeer left to give him?”

“Somewhere,” Fred waved vaguely at a trunk.

“Not anymore, you don't,” Jordan said guiltily.
“Lee!”

“It’s alright,” Harry laughed.

“No, it’s not,” Fred said crossly.

“If we’re going into business together you can’t keep drinking the last Butterbeer like that!” George said.

“Business?” Harry asked.

“Joke shop’s back on!” Fred said happily.

“Bagman came through on what he owed us -”

“- not least thanks to you -”

“- so we can start buying materials in bulk now!” George finished up.

Harry grinned. “That's great! Does that mean you won't want this, then?”

The three older boys all stared at the sack of Galleons he was holding up.

“Is that what I think it is?” Fred asked weakly.

“If you're thinking a thousand Galleons, then yeah,” Harry said.

“And you want to give it to us?” Fred confirmed.

“Yeah.”

“Why?” George asked.

Harry shrugged. “I don't want it. I don't need it. I was planning on giving it to some charity, but then I thought of you guys.”

“Really?” Jordan asked.

Harry nodded. “Really. Look, from what I've seen and heard, you know what you're doing. I didn't know Bagman had paid up, but you can always use the extra money, right?”

The twins both just stared at him.

“Course we can,” Jordan said, looking at the twins like they were crazy. “What's the catch?”

“Two conditions,” Harry said. “First, keep me up to date with your latest products.”

“Free samples,” Fred blurted.

“Soon as they're ready for production,” Jordan added.

“Brilliant!” Harry grinned. “Second, don't give Draco anything to eat or drink without telling him exactly what it'll do to him, alright? Especially if it's something sweet, he can never say no.”


“Well, then, I think we have a deal,” Harry said.
He handed the sack of Galleons over to Fred and shook hands with all three of them.

“Thank you,” George said hoarsely. Beside him, Fred and Jordan nodded emphatically.

“Have fun,” Harry said, then rose and left the compartment.

He returned to his own to find Blaise smirking while everyone else looked rather discomfited. Deciding he’d rather not know, Harry picked up the abandoned deck of cards and began dealing out the hands for poker.

In what seemed like no time at all (but during which time many fortunes had been won and lost at poker) the Hogwarts Express was pulling into King’s Cross Station. Harry’s compartment waited until the corridor outside was nearly empty before they disembarked, in order to miss the chaotic crowd.

“You going to be okay with your dad?” Harry asked Theo quietly as they brought up the rear of the group.

“I’ve got it all sorted, thanks,” Theo said.

When Harry walked through the barrier, he immediately saw Uncle Vernon waiting for him. Harry ignored him for the moment, and walked over to Narcissa, who was talking to Draco and Hermione. Shacklebolt was standing next to her, somehow looking as if he’d done this a thousand times.

“I’ll see you next Monday, Harry,” Narcissa said, then bent down to kiss him on the cheek.

“Looking forward to it,” Harry told her, then hugged Hermione and kissed Draco. “I'll see you both soon, yeah?”

When they both agreed, Harry nodded at Shacklebolt and headed for Uncle Vernon. Unlike the past three years, he didn't feel as if he was marching to his own execution. Then, he'd been dreading the return to the Dursleys', even if only for a week. This year, while he had just over a week to spend with them, it would be for the last time. He didn't see any reason why, after next Monday, he would ever need to see them again. Despite the horror that he'd been through recently, that thought made him almost light-headed with joy.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, thank you so much to everyone who's read this series, especially those of you who have left kudos or taken the time to comment. I always enjoy hearing your feedback, even the people who point out typos and mistakes!

I'm planning on beginning to post Fifth Year at the start of April, but that will depend on whether or not I've actually finished writing it by that stage. Sorry for the longer than usual wait, but it's turning out to be longer than I'd anticipated. Fingers crossed!

Works inspired by this one

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