The Secret of Slytherin

by Kirinin

Summary

Before Harry's sixth year, he never thought a great deal about how wizards Sort others: by blood, by allegiance, and by House. When those strictures begin to crumble, Harry must find his own way without relying on prejudice or presumption, aided by Severus Snape, Remus Lupin, and an increasingly enigmatic Draco Malfoy.

This story is now COMPLETE! <3 Thanks so much to everyone who read and reviewed!

Join me in the sequel starting in December, Geas of Gryffindor. For those of you new to the story, yes, this part does come to a distinct end. ;)

-K

Notes

I will be posting a chapter a day, as life permits. :)
Harry leveraged himself slowly up into a seated position, glaring blearily at his flashing alarm clock. It was already hot in Dudley’s spare room, he noted. That didn’t look good for the gardening later today. Maybe, he reflected, if he got started early, he could finish before the real heat of the day.

Harry swung his legs over the edge of his bed and rubbed his eyes, considering his options. After a moment, he decided to owl Hermione and Ron, first. With letters to look forward to, it would be a lot easier to get through the day’s work. Grabbing a Bic pen (his quills, despite being entirely non-magical, had been confiscated immediately upon arrival) Harry found a piece of lined notebook paper in one of his desk drawers amongst old, broken toys of Dudley’s, and began a note to Ron. Five minutes later, he addressed one to Hermione, a much more careful and thoughtful letter that assured the bushy-haired girl that he had already completed every assignment for school – a record, as tomorrow was his birthday – and that he was doing rather well, thanks. The Dursleys were being downright civil this summer, which Harry personally attributed to Mad-Eye Moody’s threatening Uncle Vernon with torture or worse.

He clucked to Hedwig, then explained to the snowy owl that he figured Hermione and Ron to both be at the Burrow by this point. The owl dipped her head in acknowledgement, but he could swear that she turned her beak up at the crumpled notebook paper secured with twine. He fed her an owl treat to placate her, then sent her on her way.

This early, there wasn’t much in the way of activity at Number Four, Privet Drive, Harry noted as he slipped down the stairs and into the kitchen. Petunia was already starting breakfast, but she was yawning and not yet fully dressed. Harry looked blankly at the low-fat yogurt she was spooning into little dishes and sighed. When Harry’d complained that the family-inclusive diet continued, Hermione had told him that it was no use. *I’ve read all about it; Dudley would be far better off eating decent meals in decent quantities than in starving himself completely. He won’t lose any weight at that rate.* Harry, in this vein, occasionally snuck his cousin some eggs on wheat toast, when Aunt Petunia gave him lunch. He was silently debating whether he had forgiven his cousin to the point that he would share his birthday cake with the other boy.

He had no doubts that Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon were eating any time they were outside the house, and hated them more rather than less for doing the same to Dudley as they were to him.

“There’s the weeding to do today,” Aunt Petunia reminded him, as if he would forget. “Since Dudders has been losing so much weight, some of the shirts Aunt Marge sent him are a tad too husky; you’re welcome to them,” she continued, sounding as though he was anything but welcome.

Harry refrained from snorting; sure, Dudley had lost some weight, but that only brought him down to the size they still allowed on theme park rides. Anything that was too big for Dudley was bound to make him look a right idiot. “Yes, thank you,” he said politely. After all, she hadn’t yet insulted him. He could almost imagine he was having a normal conversation with a normal person.

“Well? Shoo!”

Harry didn’t need to be told twice. He loped over to the tool shed and withdrew the fussy flowered gloves that Aunt Petunia favored, along with a hand-fork to loosen tough soil; then he dropped to his knees in front of the first bed of flowers.

Harry had gotten his OWLs back and was startled to note that he’d somehow managed an
Outstanding on his Potions OWL. It meant that he had to endure another full year with his least-favorite professor, but it meant more than that. It meant that it wasn’t his imagination that Professor Snape not only treated him unfairly in class, but also graded him unfairly. It meant that he’d have another class without Ron, who had been unforgivably gleeful about his own Acceptable. It actually meant, as Hermione had informed him via OWL just last week, that he’d be joining the other five members of the class who’d managed such a grade. Hermione was one, of course, and Hermione knew – somehow, Harry couldn’t begin to imagine – that Draco Malfoy was another.

He was looking forward to that class like he was his next battle with Voldemort. He could just imagine Snape’s look of shock and surprise, slowly altering to the familiar dislike he so often wore when he looked at Harry. He could hear the Potion Master’s voice now: Mister Potter, in my Advanced Potions class? When he was in Remedial Potions a mere six months ago? There must be some sort of error, Potter, wouldn’t you agree? He was wondering if Professor Snape could continue to grade him so harshly, even when an unbiased observer had deemed his potion-making skills remarkable.

Harry winced, tossing the weeds into a small pile to his right.

Not all of the plants employed in potion-making were exclusive to the Wizarding World; in fact, the bulk of them could be found easily in field and meadow – and in certain gardens. Harry found himself absently using Aunt Petunia’s to study. It gave his brain something to focus on while he worked, distancing his thoughts from the glare of the sun and the sting of sore muscles. After the first couple of times, he realized that he was idly considering his choice of topic for the difficult paper he’d heard Snape assigned all of his sixth-years, and a plan slowly began to form in his mind.

It had started last Wednesday as he was weeding, staring at the lobelia and attempting to recall what its uses were in Potion-making. It was a sedative, he remembered that much, although in which potions he couldn’t recall. On the heels of that was the realization that it was also used in a universal antidote, one which healed the effects of a wide variety of harmful substances. When he reached the morning glories growing trained around both fence posts on either side of the front yard, he’s searched his memory until he recalled that the seeds were for finding lost objects and in a potion for fearlessness, known as Cour de Leon.

On a hunch, he’d gone to the local library and searched out the plants in Muggle books. Sure enough, their uses only differed in interpretation, sparking Harry’s interest. Were the uses of the plants passed down from wizard to Muggle – from Muggle to wizard, even? He was willing to acknowledge that their uses might have been discovered independently by both groups, but if so, then he could argue Potions as a mere subset of Plant Chemistry, writing a brilliant paper that would, not incidentally, absolutely infuriate Professor Snape. It would be a paper that would turn the Wizarding World on its head, implying that the ‘subtle art that was potion-making’ was really quite thoroughly Muggle in origin.

He hadn’t informed Hermione of the ambition, but he was planning on working very hard in Potions this year. He’d come to the slow realization over the summer that the Professor’s attitude might not be as much of an obstacle as it seemed. Harry forced himself to admit that he came to class unprepared and made no secret of how much he disliked the Professor. While the latter wasn’t likely to alter, he could certainly do something about the former. Snape typically asked him questions, and when he didn’t know the answer, derided him. Harry was determined that, this year, Snape would have to find a new tack. He was going to become an Auror, and nothing Severus Snape could say or do would stop him, even if he had to work twice as hard as anyone else just to make it through a lesson.
Dudley loped out into the bright sunlight, squinting against the glare. “Mum says it’s time for breakfast, Harry.”

Harry stood, tossed the gloves atop the growing pile of weeds, and moved inside.

Aunt Petunia barred the door. “You! Don’t you set foot in this kitchen! You’re filthy! What possessed you to go out before breakfast?”

He frowned, agitated that he still had to look up to look her in the eye. He was wondering when he was going to grow, as Ron already had. “You told me—” he began, before sighing and slumping in defeat. He was helpless, in a way. He could not do magic, and he could not hurt her physically — it wasn’t in him, though he’d thought about it dozens of times, even to the point of detail — what weapon he’d use, how he’d wait until Uncle Vernon left for work — but it was no use. And most of him was very happy for that, blindingly grateful to find himself incapable of such a thing.

That decent part of him was hiding, now, though. He wanted nothing more than to bash her duplicitous skull in, and it was only his control that kept him from doing so.

“You can eat when you’re through out here,” Aunt Petunia continued, as though conceding a point. She slammed the door in his face.

Harry growled inarticulately, his wand hand itching, before whirling back to the flowers. His stomach rumbled, and he had the absurd and simultaneous urges to burst into tears and tear every flower out of the soil that housed it. He rapidly submerged both impulses, but the effort left him breathless, feeling empty as a clapperless bell, a familiar feeling that sped his heartbeat.

Harry gazed around, wondering what sort of magic he’d done, and unable to detect anything out of the ordinary. He frowned, leaning once again over the flower bed, the motion now mechanical rather than determined. His mind felt achingly blank.

After nearly an hour, the back door opened again. Harry realized that Dudley had brought his food out so that he could finish eating outside, in front of Harry, but Harry couldn’t bring himself to care very much.

It was only when Dudley placed the plate next to Harry that he realized what the other boy was really doing. “Thanks,” Harry mumbled, still unsure what to do about these sudden surges of kindness that seemed to occasionally grip his cousin.

Dudley nodded, also looking awkward, then retreated to one of the lawn chairs, perching at the edge. It was an odd sight, Harry reflected as he snatched suddenly at the food and shoved it in his mouth. There was no telling when Aunt Petunia might pop back out, after all. Dudley waited until he was finished before speaking, a courtesy Harry wouldn’t have thought him capable of. “I got the books you wanted,” he finally interjected.

Harry flushed. “I didn’t know you’d actually get me any,” he replied rapidly, before he could think to censor his words. “The — the Muggle ones... what was I talking about?”

“I guess you don’t really need them after all, then?” Dudley inquired, sounding even more put-out. “So you were just whinging on about nothing? Fine.” He stood angrily and stalked back into the
Harry stared after him, trying to will the conversation to come back to him. It was surprisingly
difficult. He still felt slow and almost dazed. Maybe he’d been in the sun too long.

When he’d finished, and rinsed himself off, he entered his bedroom to find that a small stack of
library books had been dumped on his bed. They were all Botany volumes, except for one, which
was Plant Chemistry.

Dudley was definitely getting half of his cake.

By the time evening rolled around, Harry was happy to be lying down and awaiting his birthday
presents. Every muscle ached. He busied himself by flipping through the book on Botanical
Medicine, correlating it with his first-year Potions text that he’d managed to save from Uncle
Vernon. He was amazed at how many different plants had similar uses in an ostensibly magical
potion as they did in a Muggle preparation. He was just wondering how he’d go about proving who
had discovered what, when a tap sounded at the window. He leapt up to allow Hedwig, Errol, and
Pig into the bedroom. Hedwig and Errol were both carrying a cake so heavy that Harry wondered
that they’d made it at all, and undiscovered; Pig had a small package tied to one leg, but was
whizzing about so happily that it took Harry ten full minutes before he managed to snag the pint-
sized owl.

Harry untied the string from Pig’s leg and released the tiny bird. Peering in the half-light of the
streetlamp outside his window, Harry examined the package in his hands.

It was small, with silver-and-gold shimmering paper that had obviously been bought in a Wizarding
shop. Tearing the paper carefully revealed a beautiful gold sphere that reminded Harry of a
shimmering snitch. It glimmered and pulsed in his hands.

It took a moment before Harry realized that Hedwig was standing patiently on his dressing-table,
offering her leg. Untying the parchment revealed both Ron and Hermione’s writing.

Dear Harry,

Hope all is going well with your family. I’m ever so glad to hear that they’re treating
you better. It’s about time!

I’m amazed you’ve completed all of your assignments. Well, I’d better tell you, or Ron
will do it for me; I haven’t completed all of mine. Are you certain you truly understood
the reading Professor Snape gave us on the uses of anemone tincture in calming
potions? The fifth and seventh questions are bothering me, honestly, although the rest
is rather simple. I’m sure you’ve noted, as I have, that we’ve more Potions
assignments than in all of the other classes put together. I’d heard Snape expects a lot
from his sixth-year students, but I hadn’t imagined it would be this challenging!

Anyway, we’re hoping you can come visit before we have to go to Diagon Alley, but if
you can’t, I’ll understand. As much as I’d love to see you, the three of us don’t tend to
get much work done when we’re together, and the last thing you need is to get on
Harry felt his throat go dry with sudden anxiety, and grabbed his pen to scribble a rapid note to Hermione:

What anemone? Never got any papers. Send that along with copies of ALL supplemental materials, and retie it to Pigwidgeon. After feeding Pig an owl treat, he tossed the bird out the window and stared blankly ahead, too wired to sleep. He felt terrified, and oddly betrayed. Why hadn’t he received the Potions materials? Was Professor Snape in such disbelief about his grade that it had been contested? Was he not in Advanced Potions?

He retrieved his Hogwarts letter and smoothed it out, scanning it again just to be certain. There it was, on official stationary, his placement in Advanced Potions, Advanced Herbology, Advanced Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Advanced Charms, along with a list of the required texts. Nowhere had he ever received a note discussing any summer work from Snape. He groaned, realizing he should have known better than to imagine, even for a moment, that the sadistic Potions professor would do something so kind as refrain from assigning homework during a vacation.

No; the only possible reason he hadn’t received anything from Snape was that Snape hadn’t sent it. Not to him.

Harry bristled, his fists clenching. The crinkle of paper alerted him to the fact that he was still holding Ron’s letter. Unfurling it carefully, he examined it in the dim light.

Harry,

Hermione’s actually fussing over homework already! And I can see that she didn’t even bother to say why we wanted you to come early. The long and short of it is that Bill’s gotten engaged, and the entire family – and I mean the entire family – is here to meet her. Mum says we’d love to have you here too.

The ball is a Dark detector from me and Hermione. It’s Hermione’s work, mostly. It’ll light up green when you’re around a witch or wizard who’s up to no good. It also glows red when the person means you well, and other colors fill in the sort of everyday in-between intentions. Hermione held it all day, and it was a sort of purplish color most of the time, which we reckon means something in the middle.

Happy Birthday!

-Ron

P.S. – Don’t let the Muggles get you down!
Harry then examined the cake, which looked to be a rich double-chocolate layer treat. He breathed in the scent, allowing it to calm him, to remind him he was cared-for. He sliced a piece off, slapped it unceremoniously into his hand and proceeded to eat it, trying not to think of Potions, or Hogwarts even, or anything but the sweetness of a birthday, and friends who unfailingly remembered him each and every year.

Once he’d eaten all he could hold, he was back to pondering his fate. He had a week until classes started, and although Hermione was the only person he knew who could possibly understand an emergency request for assignments, he doubted that they would come in time. Moreover, he doubted that the Dursleys would let him stay holed up in here in order to complete the work that he needed to.

His plan to show up to Potions brilliant and over-prepared was falling to dust around him. It seemed he was up to Plan B – copying off of Hermione.

*No, Harry suddenly decided. No, I got into that class because of my score, which means I can do this. Today I decided nothing Snape does is going to phase me, and that includes this... I’ll be fine. I’ll just do a couple of hours’ work before I go to sleep each night. I can manage that much...*

Feeling a bit better, Harry stowed his cake under a loose floorboard, then placed the yellow bauble into his desk drawer. It shone a soothing gold that winked out the moment his hands left it. He yawned widely and collapsed into bed, arranging himself comfortably while Errol and Hedwig did the same. The sounds that the owls made were comforting, the ruffle of feathers and soft keening noises reminding him of Hogwarts.

Before he knew it, Harry was asleep.

Chapter End Notes:

Onward! (But first... review!)

Look familiar? Don't worry, it's not stolen. Just on a new archive. ;)


Just as Harry had suspected, Snape’s assignments arrived early the next morning. He was just releasing Errol, who’d had a good night’s rest, when Pig came zooming through the open window panting, devoid of his zooming energy, for once. Harry took the small package from the owl as well as the missive attached to his leg. The package, Harry noted, had the dimensions of a paperback novel. Frowning, he opened the letter.

Harry,

*Here are all of the assignments Professor Snape gave us over the summer*. Mrs. Weasley was nice enough to shrink them to half-size so that Pig could carry them all, but you can blow them up without magic. Go to the library and use the copier to make them bigger. The writing should be a bit fuzzy, but legible.

*I’ve done it before, when I forgot some things I needed at home*. Mr. Weasley, of course, finds this all incredibly fascinating.

*Love from, Hermione*

*P.S. – He won’t get away with this.*

Harry’s eyebrows lifted. Hermione wasn’t one for breaking school rules or defying teachers, but when she *did* do, she always managed something spectacular. He felt a brief surge of vindicated glee just wondering what the girl planned on doing to Professor Snape.

Harry straightened as he heard a sudden rap on his bedroom door.

“Breakfast!” Dudley announced.

“Wait!” Harry called out, suddenly remembering his cousin’s kindness the day before. “Come in a minute.”

Dudley peered around the half-open door, looking like he expected something magical to leap out. Given the boy’s previous experiences with magic - Dementors and piggy tails and ton-tongue toffee – Harry couldn’t exactly blame him.

“All the way,” Harry snapped. He’d long since learned that Dudley didn’t respond to any other sort of tone.

Dudley managed to slip through the door, a true feat for one of his girth. With an expression of stubborn defiance, he closed it all the way behind him. “What?” he demanded, eyeing the sleepy Hedwig with disgust. Then, his eyes lit on Pigwidgeon, and the expression fell off his features. Harry knew Dudley would never admit it, but he strongly suspected the other boy thought that the tiny owl was sweet.
“Got some cake,” Harry replied simply, nudging the loose floorboard away.

Dudley snickered, looking unsurprised at the hiding-place.

“I use it to hide sweets,” Harry admitted. “Well, I also use it to hide magical objects and books and things,” he added mercilessly, feeling a rush of satisfaction when Dudley flinched. He drew out the cake and opened the top, dismayed when he saw how little was left. His cheeks flushed – he couldn’t really have eaten half of a cake that size at one go, could he? He supposed he had. He cut a generous slice off of what remained, and handed it to his cousin.

Dudley blinked, then surveyed it critically. “It isn’t magic, is it?” he inquired.

Harry shook his head. He supposed it wasn’t an odd question, given the toffee. “Here,” he said. He cut himself a far smaller slice and took a bite.

Dudley grinned at him and began doing the same.

“Dudley!”

Both Dudley and Harry straightened suddenly and guiltily, staring wide-eyed at the closed door. Harry waited for his heartbeat to slow, reminding himself to take deep breaths.

“Dudders, darling, where are you?”

Dudley reverently placed his unfinished cake back into the box, closing the lid and replacing it. “Later, okay?”

Harry nodded. “I need another favor,” he said quickly. “Look, can you take these to the library and make them big enough to read? I’ll give you money.”

Dudley examined the small package and shrugged. “I guess.” He snorted. “Mum and Dad are going to wonder what has me interested in the library all of a sudden. Dad’s already called me a ponce for going the once, especially when he saw the books I’d gotten.” The older boy stood, brushed his hands free of crumbs and moved to the door.

Harry sighed. “Well, tell them you’re going to a friend’s house, or something. The way you do when you don’t want to be bothered.”

Dudley was already outside the door, thumping down the stairs for breakfast, and didn’t reply.

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The sun was setting before Harry realized his shoulders were sunburned and his muscles ached. He had taken to work like it was a harsh meditation, spending the entire day in a daze, half-aware of sound and sensation. It felt almost good, really. When he came back into the house, splattered with paint and feeling disgustingly sweaty, there was a large stack of papers sitting on his bed.

Harry picked them up and flipped through them, groaning. There was easily enough there for a summer’s worth of reading, and more. He rubbed his forehead in circles, realizing he should have known when Hermione of all people had admitted she wasn’t yet done.

He showered, then returned to his room. He was staring at the infamous anemone article when a small tap sounded at the door. He was so absorbed that it didn’t quite register for a moment. Finally, the door opened, and Dudley slipped in.

Dudley didn’t bother asking for interpretation. He loosened the floorboard and drew out his half-eaten slice of cake. After a moment of inaction, he stared up at Harry, who was sprawled out on his bed. “Being a wizard... you can’t, er, catch that, can you?”

Harry eyed him contemptuously. “Being a Muggle... you can’t, er, catch that, can you?” he echoed in a lumbering, Goyle-like voice.

Dudley snorted. “Just asking.” But he ate the cake, with much in the way of happy exclamations. It stopped bothering Harry after the first minute or so. “What is all of that, anyway?” Dudley wondered.

Harry resigned himself to distraction. “Stuff for school.”

“Oh, that’s revealing. Glad you cleared it up.”

Harry sat up suddenly, glaring at his cousin. “You don’t want to know about my school.”

Dudley shrugged. “I read some of your stuff, and–”

“You read some of it?” Harry squeaked.

“It was just photocopies, it’s not magic all by itself,” Dudley said in a superior tone, as though pleased to have figured that out on his own. “Besides, it reads like chemistry to me.”

Harry felt flummoxed. “Y-yeah,” he mumbled, feeling like he’d woken on a different planet that morning. Or was dreaming. Yeah, dreaming, he decided.

“So you take Chemistry?”

“Well – they call it Potions,” Harry replied, the feeling of dreamy unreality persisting. “But yeah, from what I know of chemistry, it’s similar to a practical chemistry course. Put a bunch of stuff together, hope it doesn’t explode. That sort of thing.”

Dudley snorted again, and Harry realized that this was his cousin’s attempt not to laugh. Harry couldn’t help but feel that he and Dudley might make it through the summer if they worked together, so he continued.

“My teacher is a bit of a bastard,” he added lightly. “He didn’t send me my summer work until now.”

“I’d think I’d like that sort of teacher,” Dudley replied.

“No, he’ll still want it all at the start of term,” Harry clarified. “He’s trying to make certain I’m at a disadvantage, that’s all.”

Dudley didn’t say anything for a moment, just stared thoughtfully at the remainder of the cake in his hand. “I’ve been curious about – your school – for a while. I was imagining all sorts of things. But you have classes just like me, don’t you?”

Harry pondered this. “Well, I suppose. I mean, some of them are purely magic, like Charms and Transfiguration. But then there’s Herbology and Potions–”

“Like Biology and Chemistry?”
“And Care of Magical Creatures.”

Dudley perked up slightly. “Okay, then. Botany, Chemistry, and Zoology.”

They shared a grin, but Harry was feeling slightly ill. His brain was scrambling to continue the conversation with his cousin, to keep things light and hopefully a bit funny, to cultivate the goodwill that they now shared. He cast about for something else to say, and found it.

“Want to see my birthday present?” he inquired. He opened the desk drawer and fished out the golden bauble. When his hands closed around it, it glowed crimson. Harry blinked, and looked up at Dudley in surprise.

“What does it do?” Dudley wanted to know. His face looked pale and chalky.

“It’s a Dark Detector,” Harry said. “Look, it glows different colors depending on the people around you.”

Dudley frowned, still looking a bit distrustful of the sphere.

“Do you want to hold it? It won’t hurt you.”

Dudley seemed to be taking the last bit as some sort of challenge. His features hardened, and he thrust out his hand. Harry grinned and dropped the golden ball into his cousin’s grasp.

The small light thinned, then flickered before winking out entirely. Dudley’s expression drooped.

“Why won’t it light?”

“I expect it’ll only light for a wizard or witch,” Harry explained.

Just as Harry was finishing, the light returned.

“Or not?”

Harry peered into the darkness of the sphere. At the very center was a cool, dim blue-violet glow.

“Dudley...?”

Dudley stared at the sphere in consternation. “It shouldn’t be doing that. Right?”


“Make it go–!” But it already was. The cool light expanded to twice its size before it flared brightly for an instant. Then, it faded to black.

Harry reclaimed the bauble with shaking fingers, where it lit crimson in his palm. “Oh. How... how interesting.”

“What does that mean, interesting?!?”

“It means... oh, I don’t know what it means. I expect I’ll have to ask Hermione.” Harry frowned, suddenly resenting his first reaction. “Or we can find out ourselves. Here.” He placed the bauble back into Dudley’s hands. “Give it to one of your friends, and see if it lights for them.”

Dudley flushed a dull pink. “And what if I don’t want to?”

“Don’t want to? Don’t you want to know?”
For a moment his cousin was silent, the expression on his face resentful. “Maybe not,” he answered flatly, slapping the item back into Harry’s palm. “For all I know, you’re lying, or it doesn’t work the way you thought, or you’re the one making it glow in the first place.”

In Harry’s hands, the bauble began to shift from red to orange to gold, bathing Harry’s bedroom in a spectrum of warm colors. “Come on, Dudley, it won’t take much doing. Just hand it off to Piers or somebody and—”

“No,” Dudley snapped, standing abruptly. “Thanks for the cake, Harry, and good luck with that... stuff,” he added, nodding towards the huge stack of papers in front of the other boy.

Then, he fled.

Harry didn’t see Dudley for three whole days after that. His cousin managed to avoid him except at meals, which he could hardly skip given how Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia were feeding the both of them. At that point, Dudley didn’t speak to him, even to ask for ketchup or salt. Uncle Vernon in particular seemed to approve of this. “Best thing all around, Petunia,” he said one evening as the four of them sat around the dinner table. “Best thing all around, that Dudley here has figured the right sort from the wrong sort, if you know what I mean.”

This sounded so like what Draco Malfoy had said on the Hogwarts Express back in first year that Harry couldn’t help but issue a little snort of his own.

“You think that’s funny, boy?” Vernon roared, thumping his meaty fist against the table; even Aunt Petunia jumped a bit. “You think your kind is a little joke to people like me and mine?”

He and his, Harry thought, his eyes going automatically to his cousin. If Dudley was a wizard, or anything like one, he was in some serious trouble. Up until that moment, Harry had been thinking about vengeance against his relatives. What delicious irony it would be if Petunia’s Diddums turned out to be a wizard, himself. Now, watching Dudley’s white face and trembling hand he found himself suddenly hoping that there was no magic whatever about his cousin. For the first time he realized that too much concern might be just as terrible as too little; Dudley, after all, couldn’t even go to the library without having his reading choices examined.

“Well?” Vernon barked.

“Not funny,” Harry agreed, and didn’t say anything else for the rest of the meal.

Meanwhile, Harry continued to work through his Potions assignments, although he’d long since realized there was no chance of his finishing up before he arrived at Hogwarts. The best he could manage would be to do what looked easiest, first, and hope to remain one step ahead of the Potions Master.

One night, three days before the Hogsmeade trip, Dudley let himself into Harry’s room again. He tossed something through the air to land on the bed in front of Harry.

It was the bauble.

“What – when did you-!”

“Nicked it this morning,” Dudley replied.
Harry mastered his anger. “And?”

“And... I gave it to Mum and Dad–”

“– if they’d even guessed it was magical –!”

“Well, they didn’t. Thought it was a Christmas ornament. Blown glass,” he continued.

Harry sat up, frowning at his cousin, suddenly concerned at the clipped sentences and the odd, helpless cast of Dudley’s shoulders. “Not a thing, eh?”

“Not a thing,” Dudley echoed. “Not one little spark. Not one.”

Harry didn’t know what to say, so he remained silent.

“I haven’t been able to eat since this morning.”

In Dudley, this was an admission of terrible distress. “Do you want some cake?”

Dudley shook his head slowly. “I’m... I’m like you, aren’t I?”

Harry pondered over how to answer this. “Don’t think so, Dudders,” he replied, trying for levity. “It lights up all the way for me, you know. Barely a spark for you. I doubt you’re contaminated in any way.” He couldn’t help the bitterness in his voice.

“I am,” Dudley protested, nodding, his eyes faraway. “Yes, I am.” His eyes shot up, suddenly fierce in his chubby face. “Well? Where is it? Give it to me. I have to know.”

“Give you... what? Where’s what?”

“Your... your wand, you prat,” Dudley whispered, as though ‘wand’ was a filthy word.

Now Harry knew he’d heard it all. “Vernon’s got my wand, Dudley. Don’t know where he’s tossed it.”

Dudley’s lips firmed, and he glanced at all of the papers littering Harry’s bed. “I’ll bet all of that would go faster if you had your books,” he commented, a seeming non sequitur.

“Well... yeah, of course it would...”

“Well, I’m going to get them for you, along with your other... things. And in return, I’m going to use your wand.” Dudley stood and marched out the door.

Five minutes later Dudley had returned, surprisingly quiet for someone of his girth. Harry hadn’t known the other boy could move silently, but apparently he could, given the proper motivation. Dudley dumped a huge pile of belongings on Harry’s bed, then waited while Harry sorted through the pile and withdrew his wand. Holly, phoenix feather, eleven inches. At first, he was reluctant to hand it over, at least as reluctant as he’d been to give it to Vernon Dursley. Then he caught the terrible stubbornness in his cousin’s eyes, and the terror beneath the surface. “All right, Dudley,” he said quietly, and placed the wand in his cousin’s hands.

Dudley nodded, determined. Then he looked blankly at the shaft of wood, turning it over in his hands. “It’s... almost pretty,” he managed. His blue eyes lifted again to Harry’s green ones. “Now what?”

Harry blinked. “Well... uh, lift your arm out... yes, like that.” He moved a piece of parchment in
front of Dudley. “Now, say *Wingardium Leviosa*, and move the wand like *this* – yeah, just like that.”

Harry watched with something like incredulity while Dudley pointed the wand and repeated his words. Dudley’s eye had been sharp: the motion was proper, but the paper didn’t move.

“Sometimes it takes a few tries...”

Dudley repeated the exercise twelve times. When it was rather obvious that nothing was about to happen, he handed the wand carefully to Harry. “Thank God,” he breathed, shoulders slumping. He laughed a little, then, as though he couldn’t quite help himself.

Harry smirked.

“I’m all right with it being you, Harry,” Dudley hastily assured him. “I mean, really, now. But me...”

“The bauble probably’s very sensitive,” Harry guessed. “But if you don’t have enough magic to do *Wingardium Leviosa*, you’re no wizard.”

Dudley grinned, relieved.

Chapter End Notes

Editing this is weird. It's not the 'voice' I write in any longer at all, so I'm fixing little errors while attempting to retain the tone of the piece. Like it's someone else's, pretty much. :)

-K
Harry couldn’t help but be a bit satisfied with himself. He had nearly finished all of his Potions work, and had gone through every supplemental reading. The only things missing were the article on the use of magical creatures in potions, which he figured he could talk to Hagrid about, and the three one-page articles from *Alchemy Today* which each talked about different Potions used for magical maladies. A vicious satisfaction was building in him as he pictured the look on Snape’s face when he handed everything in on the first day of class. He’d sent a thank-you to Hermione for her notes, but hadn’t had to ask her the answer to a single question.

The day he was to meet Hermione and Ron in Diagon Alley dawned bright and cool for early September. Although it wasn’t the fashion, he’d brought a Muggle schoolbag with him, because the list of books this year was somewhat exhaustive. He was certain Hermione wouldn’t consider the same thing; she’d blushingly informed him last year that there was something in touching the books she enjoyed. He’d called her mental.

“Harry!”

Hermione ran up to embrace him, then drew back to look him over, while he did the same to her.

Hermione had grown, Harry noted with a small grimace; she was now tall as he was, or nearly. She’d done something to her hair, which had lightened to a golden brown and was less frizzy than he remembered. Her cheeks were flushed with the excitement of shopping for school supplies, and she was carrying four books in her arms already. For some reason, she looked a whole lot older than he recalled.

Hermione finished her appraisal and grinned at him. “Harry James Potter,” she announced. “What’s happened to you?”

“Look who’s talking,” he shot back, flushing at her blatant admiration.

“I’ll have to tell Ginny,” Hermione added, “so she can prepare herself.”

“Enough of that,” Harry protested. “How are you? Where’s Ron?”

“I’m well, thanks, and Ron is in a certain new joke shop. As if you couldn’t guess.” She eyed his bag. “What have you got there?”

Harry began describing the Muggle Botany and Chemistry books he’d gotten and was just getting around to explaining why he had them when Ron burst out of a nearby doorway, laden with packages. “Harry!”

They settled down in the Leaky Cauldron and chattered away for awhile. “Mum’s with Ginny, getting some new robes and things,” Ron explained. “Dad – you know how he is – he wants to see
“Photocopies,” Hermione supplied with a small, amused smile. “I expect he’ll go on about them for some time. Back to what we were saying…” she prompted, nudging Harry. “Why have you brought Muggle books?”

Harry grinned. “I’m thinking of my Potions essay–”

“Potions essay? But you’ve done all of them, you only just finished saying –”

“No, no, the one that’s the year-long project.”

Hermione looked horrified. “There’s a what? Why didn’t you tell me? I’ve been idling about all summer, I could have –”

“Idling about, she says,” Ron laughed amicably. “When she spent most of it with her nose in Potions and Charms texts.”

“Don’t worry, Hermione, you’ve got the whole year left,” Harry soothed, exchanging an amused glance with Ron.

Hermione eyed him. “And you’ve started on it?”

“Well, no,” Harry admitted. “Not yet. Just thinking of topics, is all…”

Hermione relaxed. “Well, I suppose I’ll forgive you for not mentioning it, then.”

“Can’t we talk about something less incredibly dull?” Ron moaned.

“Now you know how I feel when you and Harry talk Quidditch,” Hermione irritably replied, but she subsided directly thereafter, even when Ron began to do just that. For the next hour or so, they moved between inconsequentials, from Quidditch to Ron’s joke shop items, to their final purchases before they boarded the train. Harry found himself telling tales of his summer, but avoiding almost any mention of his cousin. He didn’t find the fact that a Muggle had a spark of magic to be all that big a deal, and he didn’t want them to make a big deal out of it, either.

Besides, considering the summer he’d had, the last thing he needed was a closer examination of his home-life. He hoped Dudley finished off the cake he’d left.

“Harry!”

Harry turned to view Ginny and Mr and Mrs Weasley standing in the door. Ginny, as Hermione had predicted, looked him over and flushed slightly. Ginny, Harry noted, had also grown up a great deal, especially in height; she was every bit as tall as Hermione, though still recognizably younger. Hermione exclaimed politely over Ginny’s new robes; Mr Weasley descended into a long, drawn-out discussion concerning photocopiers, but since Harry neither knew how they worked nor had even made the copies himself, the conversation ended more abruptly than it might have.

Harry’s thoughts were still on Potions, and he found himself desperately wanting to ask Hermione for her opinion on which direction he should take his paper, but he didn’t want to be rude to Ginny or Ron. His mind also kept traveling back to his cousin, but he didn’t really want to talk about that either. Neither Hermione nor Ron had mentioned Sirius at all, for which he was glad… now what
was left to talk about?

Luckily for him, Ginny was filling up the empty space with bright chatter, telling Hermione and Ron a funny story from her Charms class, how one of the more talented students had levitated Professor Flitwick himself, rather than the feather. Harry laughed loudly, grateful for the reprieve.

Once safely on the train to Hogwarts, Harry could no longer help himself. He withdrew his work and began again. When Ron raised his eyebrows, Harry shrugged. “It’s all I’ve been doing for the past week, waking and sleeping,” he replied. “I can’t help it if my mind keeps going back to it. Besides, I’m not quite finished. I just sort of told Hermione I was.”

Ron laughed. “Anyone’d do the same.” After a moment or two of silence – Hermione was still with the prefects – Ron cleared his throat. “Er… what’s it about?”

Harry lifted his head. “Oh, well… it’s about the use of certain potions in medicine,” Harry said, shifting the papers in his hands. “The author seems to be concerned that the magical flux of each plant, depending on, you know, when it’s picked and how it’s dried and processed, is going to affect the efficacy of the potion—” Harry blinked, looking at Ron’s gobsmacked expression. “What?”

“Nothing, mate. You just sounded like Hermione for a second.”

Hermione slipped into the car, handing Harry a tea and Ron a pumpkin juice. Harry felt oddly embarrassed, and didn’t say anything more until Neville, Ginny and Luna entered en masse. Luckily, he still didn’t have to say much, other than the round of greetings along with a retelling of some funny stories from his summer, stories safe enough to tell in broad company. The last thing he needed was Malfoy, or, for that matter, Snape, finding out about his stellar homelife and using that to taunt him as well.

“…so Daddy was wondering,” Luna was saying in her least-dreamy voice, “if you’d be willing to give him another interview sometime. A sort of follow-up. What do you think, Harry?”

Harry nodded. “Sure, no problem.”

“And, about the D.A.,” Luna went on. “We’d certainly love it, if you’d be willing.”

“Certainly love. . . what?” Harry inquired, not certain he was following her.

“Well, you do intend to carry it on,” Ginny said in a tone that brooked no argument.

Harry didn’t know what to say. His actions last term had nearly gotten them all killed. He’d been surprised and warmed to see that they didn’t seem to hold any grudge, neither Ron nor Ginny nor Luna and Neville, but he certainly didn’t expect them to put him in any sort of position of leadership again. “I’ll… I’ll have to think about it,” he said, feeling a bit lost.

Ron and Ginny exchanged a knowing glance, which Harry allowed to sail past him, burying himself once more in his work. He had been waiting so long to get back to school; but oddly, now that he was on the train, he found himself fervently wishing he were alone again. Some of his irritation must’ve carried through his words, because soon the others were talking over and around him, seemingly without rancour. The tension in Harry’s chest eased, and he found himself warmed by the company even while he didn’t participate in the conversation.
“Time to put on school robes,” Ron said gloomily, reaching into the bag he’d stuffed his inside. Hermione nodded smartly and began to rummage through her trunk.

As the train came to a halt, Luna peered outside at the thestrals awaiting them. “They are pretty,” she noted absently, “in a macabre sort of way.”

Harry, looking at their skeletal bodies shimmering in the moonlight, couldn’t help but agree.

Ron elbowed Harry. “I swear, they get tinier every year.” A group of first-years, smaller in number than any Harry remembered, filed in. Each child looked small, lost, and frighteningly young. Harry had to wonder if his robes had hung off of him like that, making him look like he was drowning, back when he was eleven…

One boy in particular caught his eye. This child had a cap of shiny black hair that waved around his face in a riot of curls, and sharp, attentive blue eyes. Other than being singularly pretty for a boy, he was unremarkable, except that he reminded Harry of someone. He couldn’t place who.

The Sorting Hat was placed reverentially upon the low stool, and, after a moment, a long rip resolved into a mouth and it began its song:

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I am for a purpose, as are every one of you:
I Sort and place each child here,
To one dream, one goal, one truth.
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At this, the Hat paused, and there was a small silence, followed quickly by a low murmur. The Hat had neither explained the Houses, nor voiced an objection to them, as it had the year before…

Just as suddenly as it had faltered, the hat took up its song again:

```
It may be you are clever,
You are worthy of renown.
In that case, it is Slytherin
That will become your home.

It may be you have bravery,
And more than a bit of pride.
Of course, then it is Gryffindor
In which you must abide.

It may be you are true at heart,
Beyond all other qualities –
```
In that case, you are Hufflepuff,
And strongest in your loyalties.

It may be that you are possessed
Of a talented intellect, an inquiring mind;
In that case, it is Ravenclaw,
To which you are assigned.

Another pause, this one slightly longer than the last. Harry noted each table in turn preening slightly as it was mentioned, especially the Slytherin and Ravenclaw tables, but then their descriptions had probably been the most flattering. “What’s the matter?” he wondered, but Hermione silently shook her head, waiting until the Hat finished.

And it makes sense at first, it seems,
To rely upon my intuition;
A convenient way to classify -
If nothing else, it is tradition.

And yet, can any wizard place
More value on, say loyalty,
Than maneuvering with clever grace,
Or intelligence, or bravery?

All of these are crucial tools
For living, and, when lacking one
A wizard suffers. It is cruel,
This Sorting, and must not be done.

Thus I tip my Hat to you
And disappear forever.
But before I do, I tell you true
One more of my endeavors:

I have sorted no less
Than one of five in alternative station
Than that which I did first suggest,
A sort of House-contamination.

There are Slytherins in Gryffindor,
And Gryffindors in Slytherin,
And Hufflepuffs in Ravenclaw,
And on and on again.

It was their choice, not mine or yours,
To go to one House or to another,
So I let them go, but first
I told them the House they should be under.

There! The Houses, they are mixed,
And so shall I take my leave.
And if you wish the Houses fixed
I beg of you a kind reprieve,

For I, not you, have watched each year
From the unique perch of this stool
The hatred that comes from the fear
Of the first-years in this school.

Now the time has come, dear children all,
When I must meet my fate.
I must adjure you: join the Houses!
Tomorrow may be too late.

And with a burst of flame like a phoenix dying, the Sorting Hat was gone. For a moment, there was complete and utter silence in the Great Hall; then, as the smoke cleared and it became apparent that there was no longer any such object seated at the stool...

The entire Great Hall erupted in a roar.
The Unsorted House

Chapter Summary

Hermione has a revelation.

Chapter Notes

Here's today's chapter, folks! Hope you enjoy it. :) 

-K

Many of the first-years still standing in line up at the front of the Great Hall seemed even more terrified than before, but Harry noted that the boy with the curly black hair looked incredibly relieved. He turned to a small girl with two long, blonde plaits down her back and exchanged a high-five, laughing. Harry couldn’t help but grin bemusedly, reaching back in his mind. Had he really wanted to be sorted?

No, he answered himself. Not at all.

Harry was all too conscious that he was one of the students that the Hat had willfully mis-Sorted, and felt the shame of being placed into Slytherin overwhelm him all over again. He hadn’t wanted to be Slytherin – didn’t that count for something?

Hermione remained quiet, but she was the only one.

“What does that mean?” Ron’s face was white, his eyes wide. “There’s never been no Sorting Hat! Not in all of Hogwarts’ history!”

Hermione straightened briefly, as if she were about to mention the exception to this rule that she’d read in *Hogwarts: A History*, but then subsided, looking slightly gloomy.

“I expect they’ll enchant another,” she finally said darkly.

“But you wouldn’t want them to,” Harry deduced.

Hermione frowned in thought. “No.”

“Well, I don’t see what’s all that wrong about the Houses,” Ron said.

“It’s why I hate Millicent,” Hermione announced. “She’s in Slytherin. There’s no other reason.” She was blinking, as though waking from a dream. “Who would have thought that placing people according to their strongest personality trait would ever help people get along?” she continued. “I mean, look at the three of us. It’s obvious the reason we all get on is because we’re so different, not because we’re the same.”

Ron snorted. “We all got placed in Gryffindor, didn’t we?”

“Didn’t you hear the Hat?” Hermione shot back. “One of five! There’s a twenty percent chance
that you weren’t placed in Gryffindor first! Well – were you?”

Harry watched the color climb on Ron’s face. “Yes, I was, thanks.”

“Well, I wasn’t.”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up. “Hermione?”

“I was placed in Ravenclaw, of course,” she said.

“You’re having me on,” Ron protested.

“No, I don’t think she is.”

“Hermione?” Ron said in a small voice.

“Oh, blast them,” Hermione said, her own voice distant as she gazed up to the front of the Hall where the first-years were still milling, confused. “Even Dumbledore looks thrown. I’m going to go up to see if I can help. Come along, Ron.” She stood, tugging absently at his robes.

When Ron didn’t move, she turned the full force of her glare on him. “Come on, Ron, we’re prefects!” She tsked. “I shouldn’t have to remind you of that every other moment, you know!”

Harry blinked across the way, where Neville was sitting, looking shell-shocked. “All right, Harry?”

Harry laughed, then turned his attention up to the front of the Great Hall. Hermione, apparently, wasn’t the only one of the prefects who’d seen the need. A Ravenclaw and a Slytherin had also joined Professor McGonagall and Hagrid, who were attempting to soothe some of the more frightened first-years.

Neville was now looking worried. “Where will they go? Where will they sleep?” he wondered.

Harry shook his head in bemusement.

“I expect they’ll be placed somewhere meantime,” Seamus put in.

“Meantime?”

“Until they can enchant a new Sorting Hat, of course.”

“But will they?” Neville wondered. “The Hat was pretty definite, wasn’t it?”

Dean turned an anxious glance on Neville. “Were you put in Gryffindor first, mate?”

Neville pinked. “Yes, actually.” He turned his attention away from the other boys, though, playing with the Gryffindor crest on his robes.

“Ahem.”

Harry, Neville, Dean and Seamus all jerked at the sound of Dumbledore’s voice echoing across the Great Hall with the use of Sonorus. The Hall quieted rather abruptly.

“As something truly historically momentous has occurred,” he said expansively, “there can be no question as to what to do: talk about it, in a long and boring fashion. However, I have found that the mind does not do well on an empty stomach. In that spirit – tuck in!”
Food then appeared at every spot of the table; the tables seemed to be groaning with it. Harry, however hungry he was, kept his eyes trained on the first-years still standing up front.

With a wave of Dumbledore’s wand, another small table appeared, likewise laden with food. The blonde girl and black-haired boy exchanged another series of comments before setting-to with a will. Most of the other children looked ill at ease; Harry noted a girl he would have labeled as a Weasley had he not known better – she didn’t even pick up a fork, staring instead at the food as though she supposed it might leap down her throat of its own accord.

After a moment, Hermione sat by the small redhead and began chatting her up; the blonde Slytherin prefect did the same to Harry’s black-haired boy. Harry couldn’t help but feel a strange, instinctive anger. He didn’t even know the small boy’s name, but he did not want any Slytherin bothering him. The fact that everyone at the table appeared to be having a decent time of it bothered him more, if anything.

Ron slid into the seat across from him again, looking ill-at-ease. “Ravenclaw,” he said immediately. “Did you know?”

Harry shook his head. “No clue.”

“Well, it makes sense, doesn’t it? And the way she rolls her eyes whenever anyone says she should have been Sorted there?”

“I’d roll my eyes if people kept saying the same thing to me over and over,” Harry offered neutrally. “For instance: ‘Harry Potter! Is that you? Oh, what a pleasure it is to be meeting you, Mister Potter!’” he intoned in his best Colin-Creevey sycophantic voice.

Ron snorted into his potatoes.

“Anyway, it’s not like it matters,” Harry went on, feeling as though he were defending himself instead of Hermione. “She’s been in Gryffindor for years now. No way she can be anything else.”

There were nods around the table.

“One in five, though,” Seamus said darkly. “That’s a lot. I wonder who else...?”

Harry reddened, hiding his blush with a cough.

“The Hat said *Slytherins in Gryffindor*,” Neville added.

“Yeah, and Gryffindors in Slytherin,” Ron joked. “Don’t know which is harder to believe.”

“Did anyone see the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?” Harry inquired, peering up at the empty spot at the staff table. There was plenty to talk about besides the Houses at Hogwarts, after all.

Neville shook his head. “No... it’s been empty since the beginning.”

“Maybe they’re giving up,” Ron said.

There was a general laugh at this, but Harry had to wonder. The school had such terrible luck with Defense teachers that it was no wonder if no one wanted to apply any longer. If that were the case... if the others wanted to continue with the D.A., he supposed he would. He was no teacher, but any Defense instruction was better than none.
The meal disappeared suddenly, causing Harry to realize he’d only eaten three or four bites of his food. Sighing, he placed his fork on the empty table, where it immediately disappeared.

Dumbledore rose from his chair to survey all of the students of the Great Hall. “First,” he intoned, “some general announcements. As always, the Forbidden Forest is just that. Second, Argus Filch has added some two-hundred new items that shall be confiscated if they are found on school grounds, most of which can be bought from a shop known as Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes, and, as always, magic is not permitted in the corridors between classes.” He broke off to gaze down at the first-years, a kind smile on his face. “As for the Unsorted House, they will be delivered to the Northwest Tower. Even now, Professor Flitwick, along with certain helpful prefects, is providing beds and rooms for each and every one of them. As to prefects, they will be chosen from other houses to serve until these students are Sorted.”

Harry realized that Hermione was gone, along with the blonde Slytherin prefect and the dark-haired Ravenclaw boy.

“Needless to say,” Dumbledore went on, with a twinkle in his eye, “such a thing has never before occurred in the history of the school. There have always been Houses at Hogwarts, and, to my thinking, it should always be thus.” He cleared his throat. “However, the Sorting Hat has sacrificed itself to impress upon us the importance of its message. Thus, I shall be required to reconsider this notion, as should all of you,” he concluded, eyeing them over his spectacles with sudden gravity.

“One final notice: your new – or shall I say, your old – Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Remus Lupin, will be arriving tomorrow, due to... certain circumstances which cannot be helped. On the days which Professor Lupin is indisposed, your Assistant Professor, Harry James Potter, will serve – if he agrees. That is all.”

Harry gaped soundlessly, his eyes automatically going up to the staff table. He met Professor Snape’s eyes – the Professor looked horrified rather than furious, which was somehow even worse. Professors McGonagall and Sprout, along with Hagrid, looked fondly pleased. Dumbledore himself wore one of his most somber expressions, as though he wished to convey the seriousness with which he viewed this matter. When Harry turned back to view his housemates, they each wore an expression that Harry supposed must mirror his own.

Neville was the first to break into a grin. “Wow, Harry!” he exclaimed. “That’s incredible – you’ll be brilliant!”

“Well, of course he will,” Ron said, as though to contest the dubious-sounding whispers that seemed to be rippling through the Great Hall.

“I haven’t accepted yet, you know,” Harry retorted, still processing the shock mixed with derision on Professor Snape’s face.

“It’s better than going three days of the month without lessons,” Neville protested. “We need Defense, Harry.”

Ron nodded. “Your lessons last time were pretty good, Harry,” he acknowledged. His eyes went faraway. “I reckon it’ll be tough, planning lessons for more than one group and all, but you could ask Professor Lupin to help you.”

“And Hermione,” Dean added. “She is a Ravenclaw, after all. Bound to be brilliant.”

“Hermione’s a Gryffindor,” Ron growled. “Come on, Harry.”
Ron and Harry waited in the Gryffindor Common Room for Hermione, who stumbled in after most everyone had already gone up to bed. She looked harried, and bits of dust and cobweb were clinging to her hair. When she settled down on one of the sofas with a huff of breath, Ron sat close to her, carefully picking the bits of detritus away from her hair and robes.

“Awful,” she breathed, when she had the breath at all. “Awful! Rooms not used in years – vermin – dust – and Dumbledore, calling them the Unsorted House! Missed the point, hasn’t he?”

Harry couldn’t help but agree, but he knew better than to interrupt Hermione when she was on one of her rants.

“I was thinking about it the whole time, recalling what the Hat said, and I really think it had a point,” she continued, frowning. “I mean, where has Sorting ever really gotten us? Enmity, that’s what. I recognize that, these days, it’s a way to Sort potential Death Eaters…”

“Of course,” said Harry, who’d never once thought of it that way.

“…but I think it actually causes more problems rather than fewer,” she went on as though he hadn’t spoken. “Picture this: Draco Malfoy is placed in this part of Hogwarts, and he rooms with you, Harry, and maybe Ron and Neville. What happens?”

“We tear him apart?” Ron suggested hopefully.

“No,” Hermione retorted. “He probably makes nice with the lot of you. He’s a Slytherin, isn’t he, which means—” She paused, took a deep breath. “– that is, if he wasn’t mis-Sorted – he looks for advantage. And it would be awfully stupid to make enemies of his roommates; no advantage in that. So he doesn’t. And eventually advantage turns to actual friendship, somewhere along the line. He has doubts. He never becomes a Death Eater…”

Ron was staring at Hermione like she’d lost her mind. “You don’t really think –” he began.

“Oh, but I do,” Hermione said, the same spark shining in her eyes that Harry recognized from any discussion of S.P.E.W. “And there’s not much use in being nice to sixth-year potential Death Eaters, is there, when they’ve already decided what they’re going to do with their lives? It’s probably far too late for Draco.”

“Draco?” Ron squeaked.

“He’s a human being, Ron,” Hermione said, and this time her voice had slipped from matter-of-fact to cold. “Besides, this isn’t about him, or only him, anyway. It’s about the way this school is run.”

Harry frowned. He’d never heard Hermione refer to Hogwarts in that tone before, as though she was somehow dissociating herself from the very name.

“I helped those children get settled, and it occurred to me that some of them would have
undoubtedly been placed in Slytherin,” she went on, her voice lilting faintly as her thoughts turned from the school. “But I couldn’t tell who. They’re all the same right now, all innocents. Sending a child to Slytherin is like telling them they *have* to be deceptive.” She frowned. “For that matter, sending a child to Gryffindor is like telling them they must be brave, even stupidly; sending one to Hufflepuff says that they must put others before themselves.”

*It’s also, Harry thought, like informing them they’re clever, or brave, or loyal. Those are good things.* But at the mutinous look on Ron’s face, he decided to refrain from calling Slytherins clever. Ron was a bright red.

“Maybe you don’t understand the importance of the Houses because you weren’t brought up in the Wizarding World,” Ron offered, with a condescension that made Harry wince.

The spark in Hermione’s eyes died. “Oh,” she said. “I see. Well then, I’ll just go up to the girls’ dorm and be Muggle where they don’t mind it.” She stood, rigid, and stomped her way up the stairs.

“Mental, she is,” Ron said vaguely, but he looked a bit guilty. After a moment, he gazed at Harry. “You know what I mean, don’t you, Harry? I mean, you were Muggle-raised, and I don’t have a problem with that, it’s just...” He paused, obviously trying to convey his thoughts in a way that wouldn’t insult Harry. “You grow up with it all your life – from when you’re a little kid – and you begin to sort of... Sort people unconsciously. It’s background, I’m not even aware I’m doing it.”

Harry thought about that. In a way, the Dursleys did that themselves, Uncle Vernon in particular: by car, or house, or clothing, or the attractiveness of the wife hanging on another man’s arm. “I don’t think that’s limited to the Wizarding World,” he replied.

*It is important.* How do you tell whether you can trust someone unless you know their House? Any of those kids could be a Slytherin.” Rather than finding this thought warming, as Hermione had, Ron looked disgusted, a small sneer decorating his face. It looked odd there.

Harry stood. “Uh, I’m going to go on up to bed. I have Potions first thing,” he managed, faking a yawn. Ron nodded, stating he was going to stay by the fire for a bit, while Harry went up the stairs.

When he got to his bed, Harry lay silent and wide-eyed, staring up at the slats of the bed above his. It had been one thing when Vernon echoed Draco Malfoy – they went together, in his mind.

It was another thing entirely when Ronald Weasley did.
Harry didn’t much feel like speaking to Ron or Hermione so he set his alarm early, casting a charm around his bed so that the noise would wake only him; and when it did, he dressed silently. He wasn’t particularly hungry, so he grabbed his broom and headed for the Quidditch pitch. Outside, the air was still soft and mist-laden, damp from the rain of the night before. Harry grinned, relishing the feeling of being alone and free for the first time in what now seemed ages; kicking off of the ground, he soared through the air as fast as he dared, swooping through and around goal hoops, grinning with the sheer joy of speed and power.

After fifteen minutes, he sensed eyes watching him, so he descended out of the now-parting mists and landed.

It was three of the Unsorted House.

The black-haired boy was staring at him with open admiration. “Hello,” he said with a smile. “What’s all that, then?”

Harry looked behind him. “Er... the Quidditch pitch?”

The blonde girl with the long plaits grinned up at him. “It looks like fun. Is it a game?”

Harry stared at her in incredulity. Is it a game? his thoughts echoed blankly. “Yes,” he managed.

“Sure it is. And it is a lot of fun...” He frowned, wondering if any of these children could ever play for any Quidditch team. “I’m sure you’ll see it soon enough.”

The black-haired boy nodded decisively. “I’m Ewan Jones, and this is Lilac Johansen,” he announced imperiously, nodding to the blonde girl, who giggled. “And this is Rae Thomas.”

Harry peered behind the two to find the girl with the Weasley hair. “Any relation to Dean Thomas?”

She shook her head mutely.

“We won’t be any relation to anyone you know, I expect,” Ewan filled in quietly. “It took us awhile to find one another, but it appears we’re the only Muggle-borns in this year.” He eyed Harry. “That is how you say it? Muggle-born?”


The blonde’s eyes lit. “You’re Harry Potter!” she exclaimed.

“No, Harry Potter,” Lilac finished excitedly. “He’s a teacher!”

It was all Harry could do to keep a straight face. Harry Potter, the Boy Who Taught. “Assistant Teacher,” he mumbled, “and I haven’t accepted yet.” He looked at each of the three before him, wondering if they’d approached any Slytherins this way. He decided to try and warn them. “Look, if you ever see... well, if anyone tries to get you to...”
Ewan snorted. “Trying to warn us off of Slytherin, I expect.”

“Really?” Lilac’s eyes were wide.

“Well, he’s Gryffindor, isn’t he?”

Harry blinked, surveying his clothing. He’d left his robes inside; he found they interfered with his flying, dark cloth whipping into his eyes at importune moments. “Do I have ‘Gryffindor’ stamped across my forehead?”

“I saw you,” Ewan went on, his face carefully neutral, “at the Gryffindor table last night.” He turned to his companions. “The one with all the red and gold? He was holding court, the same way that the tall blonde boy was at Slytherin, and the long-haired black girl at Ravenclaw.”

Harry sputtered. “Holding court?” At the same time, he found that he had automatically Sorted Ewan himself: Slytherin.

“Yeah, they were all listening to you,” Ewan supplied, his eyes peering off into the distance, “nodding whenever you spoke, and laughing – even the ones farthest away, who couldn’t possibly have heard every word you’d said...”

Harry blinked. “That so?”

“That’s so,” Rae contributed unexpectedly. “But it was a bit more... obvious... where there was all that green.”

Ewan turned to face her, his expression unreadable. “Yeah, guess so. At least Gryffindor seems to find you genuinely funny, Harry.”

“So do I,” Lilac added. “What happened to your head?”

Harry was saved from answering that question by a small ringing on the watch at his wrist. “Uh, it’s time for breakfast,” he answered instead, herding them ahead of him.

When they entered the Great Hall, it was already full of people; the small table that had sat up near the Staff Table was now gone.

“Where will we sit?” Lilac wondered, her pale braids swishing as she examined each House Table in turn.

Ewan looked up at Harry. “What do you suggest?”

“Well... I suppose you lot ought to come with me, for now.”

“I want to sit with Hermione,” Rae said in the small, quiet voice Harry was beginning to realize was the only one she possessed.

“All right,” Harry agreed. “I’m sure she won’t mind.”

“She’s in Gryffindor, too,” Ewan noted.

“I like her,” Lilac said simply. “She’s nice. She made my bed smell like my name.”

“It was a cool trick,” Ewan added. “Wonder if she’ll teach me?”

Harry couldn’t help but find the three’s blatant admiration for Hermione somewhat warming. It
showed good judgment on their part, for one thing. He began to reassess his immediate Sorting of Ewan as the trio settled at the Gryffindor table.

“Where’d you find this lot, Harry?” Ron inquired, while Hermione grinned at the two girls, sharing a private smile with each.

“Found them hanging about the Quidditch pitch,” Harry said. “Ron, this is Ewan, Rae, and Lilac. You three, this is Ron Weasley.” The conversation with the trio had warmed him considerably, and he no longer felt angry with Ron.

“Is he Muggle-born as well?” Ewan wondered.

When Harry shook his head, Ewan’s small nose drifted upwards a notch. “Delighted, I’m sure,” he said, in such an echo of Draco Malfoy’s parody of manners that Ron blinked in surprise before a familiar dislike crept over his features.

“Nice to meet you,” Lilac said pleasantly. Rae merely looked a tad more terrified than before.

Ron smiled awkwardly, and continued eating.

“What class do you have first?” Hermione inquired, and a happy fifteen minutes passed while Hermione gave them all advice on each Professor. “As far as our temporary Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher goes,” she tacked on mischievously, “I highly recommend you not be late to his class. He hates that. And don’t let your mind wander for a moment, either,” she continued in tones of grave concern. “He’ll notice immediately and take you to task.”

Lilac giggled behind her hand, but Ewan appeared to be taking her seriously behind his pleased grin. Rae continued to look terrified until Hermione mussed her hair slightly.

“In all seriousness, I expect Harry will be one of our better Professors this year,” Hermione said. “Of course, he might have told me a bit about it before I had to find out from Parvati...”

Harry flinched. “Whoops?”

“I realize there were other things on your mind,” Hermione added graciously. She half-turned at her seat so she was facing Harry more directly. “Do you think you’re ready for Potions, this morning?”

Harry nodded resolutely. “Quiz me, if you like.”

Ron groaned and covered his ears while Hermione did just that. While Ewan and Lilac chattered for awhile in the background, Harry swept the Gryffindor table with his eyes, noting that most of the people seated there flickered their attention towards he, Ron and Hermione every two or three minutes, as though to make certain that there was not anything interesting or exciting going on. A couple of second- and third-years looked anxiously at Colin Creevey and Neville, who were both seated near to him. Harry stiffened, wondering if the right to sit near him was some sort of ...

“Are you listening, Harry?” Hermione demanded. “I just asked you to name five issues of quality in herbal potions ingredients.” She tsked. “If you’re not serious about this, I won’t waste my time.”

“Thank Merlin!” Ron announced, unplugging his ears.

“I am serious, Hermione, I’m just a bit distracted.” More than anything, he wanted to ask Hermione if sitting near him was a mark of power within Gryffindor, but, eyeing Ewan’s sharp
gaze, he decided that a question like that could wait.

Once breakfast was finished, Hermione stood, the three Unsorted following her example. “Now, do you remember where the Transfiguration classroom is?”

When they all nodded, she sent them off.

“Dear Merlin,” she said. “That we were ever that age.”

Harry was surprised to find himself shaking slightly by the time he and Hermione entered the Potions classroom. Draco Malfoy was already there, looking oddly out-of-place without his cronies. The blonde Slytherin prefect entered the classroom a moment or two after Harry and Hermione. He noted that the blonde locked gazes with both Hermione, then Draco; she sighed, and picked a seat almost directly in between them. “Who’s that?” Harry inquired.

“Yolande Zabini,” Hermione supplied. “We’re, er, acquaintances. Sort of, anyway.”

When the dark-haired Ravenclaw prefect entered the classroom, Harry frowned, wondering just how many of Snape’s Advanced Potions students were, in fact, prefects. “And that?”

“Regalius Exclasia,” Hermione said, sounding far harder this time. “He’s a...” Hermione frowned. “Prat,” she decided, although it sounded like Hermione wished for a better, more descriptive term.

Ernie Macmillan of Hufflepuff followed on Regalius’s heels. He smiled at Harry and Hermione before taking a seat in the second row, the closest anyone dared sit to Professor Snape.

Harry was seated beside him.

Professor Snape swept into the Potions classroom with his usual aplomb, writing on the board as usual before deigning to turn and face his students. With a flick of his wand, the following words appeared:

*Advanced Potions:*

*Syllabus*

*Week 1 – Review of previous years*

*Week 2 – Chapters 1-4 of Advanced Potion-Making*

*Week 3 – Chapters 5-6 of Advanced Potion-Making*

*Week 4 – Practical Exam; Paper Proposals Due*

*Week 5 – Chapters 7&8 of Advanced Potion-Making*

*Week 6 – Chapters 8-11 of Advanced Potion-Making....*
Harry had barely written the sixth line when Snape whirled to survey them all. “As you are no

doubt aware–” His voice hitched when his eye lit on Harry. “Mister Potter.”

Harry jumped. There was absolutely nothing he could have possibly done at this juncture. He was the
picture of innocence, he’d made certain of it, all he was doing was sitting and taking notes.

“Sir?”

“What in Merlin’s name are you doing here?”

Harry’s anger blazed. “Taking notes, sir.” Had Snape actually thought that not sending his assignments would keep him from attending the classes he needed to become an Auror?

“I am well aware of that fact,” Snape replied, moving to stand by his desk. “However, the question remains. I have not placed you in my Advanced Potions class, Potter. So, I repeat: what are you doing here?”

Harry flushed in combined anger and embarrassment that only increased when he heard Draco Malfoy chuckle somewhere behind him and to his right. “Professor McGonagall said you took those who received an Outstanding on their OWL, Professor,” Harry replied stiffly.

“So I do,” Professor Snape replied. “In which case, that leaves you unqualified, as you received an Exceeds Expectations.”

Harry could almost feel Hermione straighten behind him in dismayed surprise. His face, he knew, was now a bright crimson, and his mind was reeling in confusion. Would Snape really go so far to ensure that he had a Harry Potter-free year? “No, sir, I received an Outstanding,” he insisted, wincing at the sharpness in his own voice. “I know I did. I have–”

“Here, then, Potter, if you must see.” Professor Snape was beginning to look angry, now, and it didn’t help Harry that he knew it had been the alteration in his own tone of voice that had done it. Snape slapped a sheet of parchment down in front of Harry, who scanned it. He was certain that it was a breach of protocol of the most serious degree for Snape to hand him the grades of every single student of his year, but that was precisely what the professor had done.

Sure enough, right by his name was a calligraphy letter ‘E’, written in an unrecognizable, lacy script.

The page seemed to blur under Harry’s eye. “But...” he murmured helplessly. He knew he hadn’t brought his own grade-sheet with him, so he could not show it to Snape. Could he have wanted that grade so badly he’d hallucinated it somehow?

Harry shook his head, pushing all of that aside and pressing on. “But Professor, I’ve done all of your summer assignments,” he protested, drawing forth a tightly wrapped scroll that felt heavy in his hands.

Professor Snape accepted the scroll thoughtfully, unrolling it and peering at its contents for a moment before scanning Harry’s face, his determined eyes. “Very meticulously done, Mister Potter,” he acknowledged. He eyed the paper once more. “Incendio,” he said ruthlessly.

Harry watched with horror as the toil of his last week of summer went up in flames. Suddenly, he could see Snape taunting him back in his very first year, asking questions no Muggle-raised child could possibly know, humiliating him... Snape, saying you’re not trying hard enough! when he had to know Harry would do anything he could to force him from his mind... Snape, taunting
The rage built in him until it seemed it must have release, until it seemed bigger than the whole room, bigger than the whole world.

And just as suddenly, it was gone, leaving a yawning gap of nothing. Harry looked up half-fearfully at Professor Snape, but once again the accidental magic didn’t seem to have had any effect. As before, he felt mentally and physically exhausted.

The Professor was looking at him oddly, but all he said was, “Well, Potter? Remove yourself from this room, or I will!” When Harry began to pick up his books and stuff them back in his bag, Professor Snape stood in front of him tapping his foot, herding him to the door, and even shoving him slightly in the small of the back on the way out. “And Mister Potter?”

Harry turned, searching in his emotional range for dread, or anger, or sadness, and coming up empty. Professor Snape stood in the doorway, that odd look still on his face.

“You might consider taking yourself to the Hospital Wing,” he added, sotto voce, then slammed the door.

The Hospital Wing. Well, all right, Harry thought. It was as good a place to go as any, now he had a free period, although Snape’s words didn’t make much sense to him. He hadn’t been hurt, at least not physically. Madam Pomfrey busied herself about him, gave him a Pepper-Up Potion and in general looked vaguely worried. She gazed into his eyes, then quizzed him carefully about something called Fretandulus draught, which Harry assured her he had never taken nor even heard of. He still couldn’t manage to care much about any of it, but after awhile, her worry gave him cause for concern in and of itself. She was displeased that the Pepper-Up Potion hadn’t seemed to do him much good, and told him to lie still for the rest of the class.

Harry couldn’t really find a reason worth arguing, so he quietly complied, staring up at the ceiling, wondering what had gone wrong with his Potions O.W.L.

He supposed it logical of Snape to not really want him in Potions anymore. Harry himself never would have attended the class if not for wanting to be an Auror, and he could understand how Snape wouldn’t much like to see him either. Still, changing his grade seemed above and beyond natural Snape vindictiveness. Therefore somewhere along the line, there had been some kind of mistake. He doubted that it could be any sort of typo, not when the grades were probably double- and triple-checked; and, for that matter, he doubted Snape could change it if he wanted to. It was probably charmed to resist that sort of thing, or students would be altering their O.W.L. grades all the time.

Harry pondered his next move. He could go to Professor McGonagall, or Dumbledore. Frowning, he decided his Head of House was his best choice, especially given the scene he’d made in Dumbledore’s office at the end of last term. Frowning, he couldn’t really place why he’d been so upset at the time.

About forty-five minutes after Madam Pomfrey’s first order to have a lie-down, Professor Snape came sweeping into the infirmary. He exchanged a couple of words with the woman before
standing beside Harry’s bed and glaring at him with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Been experimenting, I see?” he finally said in his most sinister voice, leaning over Harry and examining him much as Pomfrey had, tugging his eyelids up and peering at his pupils, holding his wrist with cold fingers to take Harry’s pulse. “Death Eaters and the Dark Lord and Quidditch and half the known Wizarding World out to kill him cannot possibly be enough excitement for our little celebrity...”

“Don’t know what you’re on about,” Harry said, his voice still sounding strangely flat. “I haven’t been...” He lost interest in the sentence halfway through, realizing that it would not matter what he said: Snape would continue to examine him in precisely the same manner, whether he talked or no.

“No,” Snape confirmed, sounding disquieted, “you haven’t.” He seated himself abruptly in one of the small wooden folding-chairs that Madam Pomfrey kept stacked in a corner of the Wing and leaned back, his arms once more crossed forbiddingly. “Well? Talk.”

Harry didn’t quite know what Snape wanted him to talk about, but he took a wild stab at it. “I did get an Outstanding,” he said, a faint indignation filling him from somewhere far, far away. “Or, at least, my paper said so.” He frowned. “Oh. Maybe they mixed me up with someone else? Maybe all my grades are wrong? But I failed History of Magic and Divination just like I knew I would...”

The Professor appeared neither pleased nor displeased with this babble, but Harry continued, unable to think of a reason to stop. Snape’s comfort or discomfort seemed worlds away, in any case.

“I tried really hard this time,” he rambled. “I even got questions five and seven from the anemone article. Even got Dudley to help me.”

Snape’s brows raised. “The boy with the dog?”

It took a long moment to put that into context. “Oh, yes, but he’s matured. And I had the topic of my paper already, or I think I did – and I just wanted...” Harry paused, wondering what it was that he had wanted. He’d wanted to see Snape not frown at him, but even in his befuddled state he knew he couldn’t say that, or anything like it. Wanted you to be pleased, he thought absently, wanted you to think I’m worth more than a name and a scar. The thought pained him, and he squirmed slightly. Was there anyone, even Ron and Hermione, who didn’t think of him that way? Sirius hadn’t, he realized, but Sirius was gone.

Wasn’t he? Everything felt so muddled.

“We shall see about your grade, Mister Potter,” Snape replied. “As to your current state, I can only imagine one of my cleverer Slytherins has slipped you something. What did you eat this morning for breakfast?”


“And to drink?”

Harry frowned. “Oh, nothing to drink. Just some eggs. Was upset at Ron – not hungry.”

“The night before, then. At dinner?”

Harry stretched his thoughts back. All of the business with the Sorting Hat suddenly seemed laughable, the way everyone had gotten so worked up. “Not much,” he said. “Three or four bites of something, not sure what. Was distracted.”
Snape was frowning, now. “And before that?”

“Lunch?” Harry mused. “Well, Hermione handed me some tea on the train.” He blinked. “D’you think Hermione poisoned me, Professor?”

Snape snorted. “I think I have the answer, you fool.” He stood, moved to talk to Madam Pomfrey.

Five minutes later, Harry had a tall glass of pumpkin juice, a buttered roll, a heaping plate of still-steaming vegetables, cooked in olive oil and basil, and three or four pieces of ham.

“Don’t let him leave until it disappears,” Snape ordered. He whirled on Harry. “Next time you come to class,” he said flatly, “*eat* first.”

“Sir?”

“Potter?” Snape barked, a parody of Harry’s earnest query.

“Next time I come to class, sir?”

Snape glowered. “I am certain this matter with your grade will be soon resolved. Now, *eat.*”

Harry nodded, and set to.

Chapter End Notes

Since no one ever commented on it, I wonder how many people who read this the first time around cottoned on to the fact that both Pomfrey and Snape assume Harry has taken some kind of 'recreational' Potion in this scene. Severus assumes he was 'slipped' something, and then assumes he's weak from hunger. Hmm...

Read it? Review it! :)
After Harry had eaten, he had to admit that he felt a little bit better. Going over his conversation with Snape, he flushed, but at least he hadn’t whined that he’d wanted the man to be pleased with him. He wondered where on earth that had come from; Snape was easily the teacher he was least close to. He liked Professor Flitwick more than Snape – even Trelawney. But, he realized slowly, he had no desire to impress either of those Professors; Snape and Dumbledore and possibly McGonagall held that enviable spot in his heart. Harry couldn’t help but laugh at himself in his choice of patrons: the evil git, the beneficent grandfather of the Wizarding World and the straightlaced Head of House didn’t really seem to go together.

Still slightly embarrassed of all he’d said, Harry was heartened by the fact that Snape assumed Harry would be back in his class once he’d gotten his grades squared away, and was startled that the other man had cottoned to his physical predicament so rapidly.

He met up with Ron and Hermione in Charms. Hermione was horrified.

“I can’t believe it!” she whispered, her voice clipped and furious. “He can’t just do that, Harry! He burned your assignments!” This desecration more than anything else seemed to have appalled Hermione. “He won’t get away with this,” she said in a dark voice, the repetition giving Harry goosebumps. “He won’t.”

Ron and Harry eyed her worriedly.

“Don’t, er, kill him or anything, Hermione,” Harry urged her.

She blinked. “Kill him? No, no, would never imagine it. No, he’s due far worse...”

Ron gulped. “Did he really toss you out, Harry?”

“Yeah, but he met up with me later and told me I’d probably be back in the class soon,” he said loudly, hoping Hermione would overhear.

Hermione had partnered with Neville, and was stubbornly avoiding the conversation.

“That’s downright pleasant, for Snape,” Ron remarked clearly. He lowered his voice, turning to Harry. “You don’t suppose she really means it, do you? What do you think she’ll do?”

Harry grinned. “Try ‘Crucio’. Nothing less for murdered assignments...”

“That’s not funny,” Ron said, the seriousness of the statement somewhat overshadowed by the fact that he was laughing.

“You know Hermione finds schoolwork sacred,” Harry filled in. “This is rather obviously a capital crime, in her books.”

Ron sniggered.

“It’s a capital crime in my books, too,” Harry tacked on. “I mean, I worked so hard... stayed up all hours...”
“You were down to the wire, too,” Ron remarked sympathetically.

“But I got it all done! And now…”

“…gone,” Ron finished. “I see, mate, really I do. Care to try this charm anytime soon?”

“Oh.” Harry frowned at the list before him. Like Snape, Professor Flitwick had decided to start off with a review of the charms they were already supposed to know. Harry squinted down at the list, grinning at Ron. “It’s safe to say we know this one, but…”

Together, they pointed at their quills. “Wingardium Leviosa!”

Charms, Harry decided, had gone wonderfully. He, Ron and Hermione had spent so much time on charms in the past that it was impossible to imagine any of them forgetting even one. Neville, on the other hand, had a bit of trouble with a handful of the charms, which meant it was just as well that Hermione had partnered him. If he hadn’t been so hopeful that Hermione and Ron would stop arguing one day, Harry mused, he might see hope for she and Neville; the bushy-haired girl had developed an instinct for when Neville needed help, and precisely how much. In return, Neville treated Hermione with an unfailing courtesy that bordered on awe.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was next, and although Harry hadn’t seen Professor Lupin at breakfast, he knew that meant nothing. In all likelihood, the Professor was sleeping off the effects of the full moon, and had been exempt from the usual staff breakfast.

Sure enough, when Harry entered, Professor Lupin was standing there in one of his old-fashioned suits, looking particularly pleased with himself. Harry remembered the Professor as wan and pale near the full moon, but now Lupin seemed bright and eager to begin class, the dark circles beneath his eyes the only hint that he’d been a wolf the night before.

Harry grinned when he surveyed the class, which was made primarily up of members of the old D.A.: Neville, Hermione, Ron, Dean, Lavender, both Patil sisters, Zacharias Smith, Ernie Macmillan, Hannah Abbot, and Justin Finch-Fletchley were amongst the fifteen students packed into the rather small classroom. Draco Malfoy, he noted, was as well. He was beginning to wonder irritatedly how many of his classes he still shared with the Slytherin boy.

“Well, well,” Professor Lupin said, surveying them. “An unusually large crop of Advanced Defense Against the Dark Arts students, isn’t it? The largest in eight years, I’m told. Would I be remiss to assume that this is due to the instruction you received last year from Harry?”

Draco sneered, but the sneer faltered. Scanning the desks again, Harry realized that Draco was the only Slytherin in the room. Perhaps Hermione was right; Draco’s sneer only worked in the proper company.

“Now, I could certainly do with a quick summary of all you covered last year.”

Hermione raised her hand.

“Yes, Hermione?”
“We covered Expelliarmus, Impedimenta, Stupefy, Protego, Petrificus Totalis, Diffindo, Expecto Patronum...”

“And the tickling curse,” Neville tacked on.
Hermione rewarded him with a grin. “Yes, and that as well.”


Harry shook his head. “It was only a practicum, sir,” he replied with a shrug. “I couldn’t very well procure a vampire and trap it for my –” Here he was going to say ‘students’, and faltered. “Friends.”

“Fair enough,” Lupin conceded, with a small nod. “Next lesson we will start on analysis of Dark creatures, then. For now, follow me.” He moved to the door, leading the sixth-years down to the side of the Quidditch pitch. A cool wind was blowing across the open field, making Harry shiver. He recalled very clearly Lupin’s very first lesson on boggarts; it made even more sense now, the first lesson for Defense being the ability to laugh at your fears. Two years ago, they had been laughing and exclaiming over Lupin’s lesson – Dark Arts had still seemed an impossibility to most of them, with just enough danger to seem exciting. Now, they moved out into the open wind like soldiers, quiet and stern-faced, even the normally giggly Lavender Brown, and lined up silently before Professor Lupin.

“I will partner you with another student,” Lupin said in his soothing, even voice, “and you will duel. By duel, I mean by the most stringent of rules: your partner casts a hex, you repel and/or counter. You cast a hex, your partner repels and/or counters. Nothing in between. There will be plenty of time for more realistic dueling later in the term. If I see so much as a Lumos out of turn, you will be removed from this class, never to return. Am I understood?”

There were faint nods and murmurs.


Hermione immediately cast Impedimenta, but Harry was ready for her, and deflected the curse easily. “Stupefy,” he announced, rather languidly. He had no desire to get the better of Hermione. Even though he knew he was quicker than she was, she would be insufferable for days if he dispatched her too easily.

Hermione deflected the curse and scowled, thinking. “Protego,” she snapped.

Harry frowned. He hadn’t yet cast anything...

“Expelliarmus!” Hermione tacked on, and Harry’s wand nearly slipped from his hand –

“Protego!” He managed to catch it with the tips of his fingers.

They eyed one another more warily, Hermione’s lips twitching up into a pleased grin. “Your turn,” she said.

Harry paused in thought. Hermione was going to be tricky about this, he knew it. He was wondering what he could do to fool her, and decided to try something new. “Nox,” he incanted.
To his surprise, a small pocket of darkness grew around the two of them, until they appeared to be standing in their very own little patch of night. Hermione was blinking, still trying to get her night-vision.

A loud bang sounded right by Harry’s ear, or so it seemed; when he turned, Lupin was smiling grimly at them all. “Good, very good. You’ve all improved tremendously. Switch, now, with the party to your right.”

Harry turned to find Justin Finch-Fletchley leading Hermione off to the side, making her laugh. Which meant...

Draco Malfoy.

When Harry moved to face Draco, he saw that the other boy looked grim and fey, and did his best to match the expression. “You first,” Harry said graciously.

Draco snorted, but didn’t refuse. He was Slytherin, after all.

“Begin!”

“Serpensortia!” Draco cast a huge snake at Harry.

“Lumos!” The snake fled from the bright light and disappeared into the brush.

“Corpuscas Incarnata!” A dementor flew out of Draco’s wand, or seemed to. Even though Harry knew it was an illusion... “Expecto Patronum!” A bright, silvery stag leapt across the field, chasing the false dementor away.

“Reducto!”

“Protego!” Harry said quickly. Draco had been pointing his wand at Harry himself with that Reducto... Harry wondered if he really would have survived that, had it hit. His lips thinned.

“Petrificus –”

“Protego! Diffindo!” Draco shot back, pointing his wand at Harry’s.

The wand did not break, but gained a hairline crack running up one side. “Reparo!” Harry intoned, not happy that this spell did absolutely nothing to his opponent.

“Morsmordre!” Draco snapped, taking the time to analyze Harry’s reaction.

Harry knew his eyes were filled with hatred and disgust as a miniature form of the Dark Mark appeared between them. “Deletrius.” He was on the defensive now; Draco was only doing charms that required very specific banishments; a mere Protego would no longer do, and would no longer afford him an extra turn.

“Cruci –”

“Protego!” Harry glared at Draco. “You idiot,” he tacked on quietly, his focus narrowing suddenly. He could no longer hear anything outside of his own breathing, could no longer see anything but Draco Malfoy. “Furnunculus!”

“Protego! Try Imperius, Potter, why don’t you?”

“Imperio, then!” Harry shot back obligingly.
A deadly silence filled the air around him as Harry realized that the curse had worked. He was in Draco, now, or a tiny bit of him was. It was a mess in there, Harry realized, but it wasn’t all that difficult to sort through after the dizzying images and sounds of Occlumency. Harry wanted nothing more than for Draco to shut up for once, and so that was what he demanded: Shut. Up!

And Draco did.

That was when Harry realized that the deadly quiet was not just in himself, but all around him. He slowly turned to Professor Lupin.

Lupin was looking at him with mingled shock and horror. “Harry,” he whispered hoarsely, and to avoid hearing that word in that voice from that man, Harry would have endured Crucio from Draco a thousand times. The Defense Professor turned to face Malfoy. “Sweet Merlin, he’s still under. Let him go, Harry!”

“L-let him go?” Harry stammered, Draco’s thoughts still swimming around, quite within reaching distance of his. The urge to dive into them was nearly overwhelming. “How?”

Lupin seemed to deflate slightly. “At least I can be certain this is your first time, Mister Potter.”

Harry felt smaller than he ever had at the Dursleys. The way Lupin said ‘Mister Potter’...

“Here. Hold your wand – so. Releaseo.”

Harry held his wand hand parallel to his waist, and tried to concentrate on Draco’s thoughts slipping free of him and away. “Releaseo!”

“Well, aren’t you going... to...?” Draco trailed off, catching sight of Professor Lupin standing behind Harry.

“Mister Potter, Mister Malfoy. Up to Dumbledore.”

“Professor Lupin –” Harry began desperately.

“Now, Mister Potter.”

Harry was tromping up the stairs, Draco Malfoy in his wake. The blonde boy kept silent until they were about halfway up. “Confundus?” he finally offered, in an odd voice Harry almost didn’t recognize.

“No,” he replied shortly.

Draco frowned in thought, still continuing to walk up the stairs. “The expression on that rangy mutt’s face...” He stared at Harry, his eyes narrowing. “An Unforgivable...”

Harry didn’t reply; he rather thought the expression on Professor Lupin’s face had been self-explanatory.

Draco burst into wild, half-hysterical laughter. “Did you Obliviate me as well? ‘I cannot have that
foul Slytherin tarnishing my good name...’ but what about everyone else out there? Did you cast a giant Obliviate out over the entire Quidditch pitch? You might well have done it with that wand, I hear it’s the twin of the Dark Lord’s –”

“I didn’t cast Obliviate,” Harry broke in. “It was Imperius – sometimes people don’t remember, afterward.”

There was a small, shocked silence. “What did I do?” Draco said. “Potter – what did you make me do?”

“Lemon drop,” Harry said. When the doorway to Dumbledore’s office didn’t open, he tried again. “Every-Flavour Beans?”

The staircase began flowing up, carrying Harry and Draco up to the front door. When Harry knocked, the door opened, admitting them into the Headmaster’s Office.

Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath, like a man about to dive under water – and slipped through the door to seat himself before Albus Dumbledore.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sure that most of you have recognized by now that this is a re-post. Despite that, this is the first time I've noticed that Harry teases Ron about Hermione doing an Unforgivable directly before performing one, himself. Man, Harry's impulsivity here, too. I kinda want to shake him.

Much as I love kudos, I do prefer comments. :)

About comments...

I was wandering around AO3 when I came across a very clever story written by someone clearly new to posting fic online. When another poster suggested they get a beta for their spelling and grammar errors (which were plentiful) the beta they already had (ouch!) posted an infuriated diatribe, followed by the AUTHOR'S furious diatribe about how awesome their writing was and what a terrible creature the poster was for insulting her beta. Then she claimed her mistakes were part of her 'style'. Ugh.

There seems to be a higher prevalence of the Thumper rule on AO3 than on other archives where I've posted fic. However, the OP was polite, even going so far as to suggest that perhaps the author had betas for plot or characterization, instead. If you do not want constructive criticism, for heaven's sake, say so.

It may sound bad, but "I only want positive feedback" is better than igniting a flame war on your review page.
Chapter Summary

Harry faces the combined wrath of Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape, and confronts his own darkness.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once Harry had told the entire story, both for the benefit of Dumbledore and Draco, he sat quietly awaiting the verdict. Dumbledore looked quietly disconcerted. Draco was more open with his amazement, eyeing Harry the way Ron eyed the latest of Hagrid’s creatures. “I believe I will call both your Heads of House,” Dumbledore said finally. “It is best, perhaps, that they decide your punishment between them.”

Harry paled. Professor Snape. Deciding his punishment. Oh, god.

“And, Harry, it hardly needs to be said that I am incredibly disappointed in you, and more than a bit startled you would let yourself be goaded into the use of an Unforgivable.”

Goaded, Harry thought, seizing on the concept. Yeah, Malfoy goaded me. Right? I mean, he started using the Cruciatus Curse...

Atop the first voice, a second was speaking: you know you’re faster than him, you’ve always been faster at wandwork, he never would’ve gotten that Crucio through, he knew it and you knew it, and he even knew you knew it, and he was only doing it to play child-Death Eater, to make sure everyone knows how bad he is... Besides, you have to mean it, can he even cast it? He eyed Draco, whose skin looked the color of snow. But it was easy, it shouldn’t be that easy, I can throw it off, shouldn’t he? I must’ve taken him off guard, yeah, but that’s still no excuse, if he can’t throw off the Imperius Curse, even for a moment, he’s easy prey for –

Well, said the first voice, what did you expect? He likes crawling for Voldemort, most likely...

Two or three minutes later, Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall were both staring quietly at the pair of them.

“I am afraid,” Professor Dumbledore intoned sadly, “that these boys have become a bit overenthusiastic in their Defense Against the Dark Arts duel today–”

“Relashio?” Snape inquired of Draco, sternly, but not without a trace, Harry noted, of fond amusement. “Serpensortia?”

“Cruciatus,” Dumbledore replied quietly.

Snape went quiet and cold. “On Mister Potter?”

Draco shook his head. “No,” he replied truthfully.

“No,” Harry took up. “It never hit. He knew it wouldn’t hit. It’s my fault.”
“It’s your fault Mister Malfoy cast the Cruciatius Curse?”

“No,” Harry replied, biting his lower lip. “It’s my fault I countered with the Imperius.”

There was a moment of ringing silence, followed by Snape’s voice, as cold and deliberate and full of darkness as Harry’d ever heard it. “Harry. James. Potter,” he hissed.

Harry shivered, knowing he was quailing under the blackness of Snape’s gaze, but he didn’t care. “I’m sorry!” he whispered. “I’m sorry,” he said to Draco, who didn’t bother to reply.

“No idea what it is you have done?!” Snape roared, all dangerous quiet ripped from him in his rage.


“Very luckily,” said Professor McGonagall in a shaky voice, “you are underage for such a sentence. Merlin knows what should become of the wizarding world were you to...” She trailed off, looking lost.


“This is no time for flippancy!” Snape shot back.

“I’m not being flippant,” he said, trying to convey honesty through his eyes. “Abyss. Gazing. Battling with monsters.” He rubbed his temples. “Ugh.”

“Aftereffects,” Snape was saying coldly, “of your first time truly casting an Unforgivable.”

“My head,” Harry moaned, then clamped down on his complaints at Snape’s disgusted glare. His scar felt as though it were going to burst open from the pressure, and he felt simultaneous urges to vomit and scream. The power was building in and running through him, now, suffusing every nerve ending, every heartbeat. Snape was still lecturing him, he could hear him, but it was all so far away... he remained oddly aware of Draco, seated three feet to his right, but he supposed that could have been due to their recent mental contact... everything else was falling apart around him, the power was...

“Stop it!” Draco suddenly shouted, standing and whirling to face Harry. “Don’t do that, whatever it is you’re... ugh, it feels like you’re filled with... with worms and maggots and dead things trying to claw their way out!”

The energy fell from Harry – no, he realized, not in the fashion that was becoming usual, with its explosion of power and subsequent emotional blankness. Instead, it seemed like Draco himself had done something, although Harry could not begin to guess what. His breathing was shaky and heavy, so he took a moment to gather himself before glancing up.

Professor McGonagall was staring at him with the blank, expectant expression of one awaiting explanation. Professor Dumbledore looked suddenly ancient as he stroked his beard, looking from Draco to Harry with sad blue eyes.

Snape looked livid, but beyond that... frightened. Terrified, behind it all, in some fundamental way. Draco looked the same, only his terror was inward, self-directed. Draco was horrified, either at what he had seen in Harry, or what he had done to dispatch what he had seen.
“Sorry,” Harry repeated numbly, rubbing his forehead again, absently this time. “I... sorry, Malfoy, I didn’t mean...” He wasn’t even certain, by this point, what he hadn’t meant. “That’s been happening a lot lately... accidental magic...”

“Accidental magic, Potter?” Snape said blackly. “That,” he added, “is a blatant falsehood. Do you see any physical manifestations of your power? Any wounds on my person? For it is most certainly what you attempted earlier today in my class.”

Harry shook his head slowly. “N-no.”

“Nothing external,” Snape said, his voice brittle behind the calm. “What, then, is it?”

“O-Occlumency?” Harry said in a small voice.

“Very good, Potter. Excellent. Gold star,” Snape ranted, still in that frighteningly quiet voice. “What have you been doing to yourself?”

“Doing to myself?”

“Magic not expended externally is expended internally! And so I must repeat: what have you been doing to yourself?”

“I – don’t know,” Harry admitted.

“Severus, it’s obvious the child isn’t the slightest bit aware,” McGonagall supplied in a would-be calm voice. “Right now, the best thing is to get the both of them into the Hospital Wing so they can be observed.”

“Me?” Draco inquired.

“He’s still in a bit of shock from the curse,” she tacked on, as though Draco had not spoken. “As for Harry...”

When the two professors turned assessing gazes on him, Harry shrunk slightly back into his seat.


Draco fell into bed protesting all the way, but the moment his head hit the pillow he began to snore. Harry couldn’t help but grin weakly at the other boy, the presence of Draco going farther and farther away from his sense of self. Imperius finally seemed to be falling away completely.

“He is not yours,” Snape said.

Harry blinked. “No! No, I mean, of course he isn’t.”

The Professor glared at him with eyes as dark as coal, searching Harry’s own eyes for almost a full minute. Harry figured he was using Legilimency, but didn’t care: I’m sorry, he thought, I didn’t mean to, I was rash. I want Draco to go, I don’t want to command him, I’m not that sort, what Voldemort does to other people is terrible, I’m just a kid who screwed up –

“All right, Mister Potter, that’s enough,” Snape announced.
Harry ceased the mental chatter abruptly with an audible sigh. “Will he be all right?”

“I believe so,” Snape said, gazing back at Draco’s sleeping form. “As for you…”

Harry met Snape’s glare, unflinching. “Lost cause,” Harry said suddenly.

Snape flinched. “Very good. But I was only wondering it. I have been since I heard you tried to cast the Cruciatus Curse on Bellatrix Lestrange.”

A cold anger built in Harry’s chest, but it seemed very faraway. “She killed Sirius,” he replied in a soft, dangerous voice.

Snape nodded. “Well-spotted, you idiot. So she did. And?”

“And so she deserved to pay!”

“And you were going to be the one to make her.”

“Yes!” Harry shot back. “Yes, I am! She’s a murderer…”

“So am I. Do you decide whether I ought to be tortured? Killed? And do you decide it is by your hand that these things occur?”

Harry stared at him blankly.

Snape sighed. “Mister Potter. Dumbledore is, in a way, very lucky you are still such an innocent—and, in a way, very unlucky. You cannot have the wisdom to understand the Unforgivables, not really.”

“I’m not an idiot and I’m not naive,” Harry snapped.

“You’re both,” Snape countered, “if you don’t understand the simple truth behind them. Do you suppose the Dark Lord started off using Cruciatus and the Killing Curse on his friends?”

Harry blinked. “N-no.”

“No,” Snape repeated, nodding as though praising a reluctant child. “They were his enemies, as Bellatrix and Draco are yours.”

“Draco’s not my enemy,” Harry said abruptly.


Harry frowned. “No,” he agreed, but now he felt a bit less certain of his answer.

“In any case, the Dark Lord moved onto his allies, in time,” Snape pointed out. “The same will happen to you.”

“No, I –”

“Yes,” the Professor snapped angrily. “Yes, you will. Unless you stop – now.” His eyes suddenly met Harry’s. “Will you?”

Harry thought it all over, thought of getting into a situation like the one with Bellatrix, where he almost had her in his grasp—“I won’t until I see her again,” he vowed.
“Not good enough, Potter. There will always be one more. One Death Eater important enough, one situation dire enough. And before you know, it is second nature.” Snape’s eyes bored into his own. “Swear. Promise me.”

Harry thought he saw flits of memory behind his Professor’s eyes, realized that he was reminding Snape of his own first slow steps into the Dark Arts. “Y-yeah, I promise,” Harry replied, suddenly gaining a vision of himself ten years down the line, altered nearly beyond all recognition from what he had done to defeat Voldemort.

Sweet Merlin, he could almost picture that.

“Yes, I definitely promise,” Harry repeated, more vehemently. “Never.”

Something relaxed in the lines of Snape’s face. “Good, Potter. Very good. Now – let us see what it is you have done to yourself, Mister Malfoy aside.” Snape perched on the edge of the hospital bed and reached a hand towards Harry, who flinched away.

“Hold still, Potter, it’s just easier this way,” the Professor sniped irritably, his fingers shifting around at Harry’s temple, seeming like they were looking for something. Harry closed his eyes tightly, trying not to focus on the fact that his Professor’s cool fingers felt very good on his gathering headache. Then, Snape stopped, apparently having found what he was looking for, and –

Harry gasped aloud as he felt the Professor’s presence in his thoughts, pawing through a wealth of information at once, faster than Harry could have dreamed of doing, sifting and sorting with incredible ease. The motion through his own thoughts was far too quick for Harry himself, who floundered, attempting to grab hold of each thought as it whizzed by, which only served to make him dizzier.

A warm wash of reassurance flowed through him, and he heard Let go.

Oh. Harry stopped attempting to grasp for the memories, and the process began to move even faster, fast enough so that he was no longer tempted to make a grab for the now-blurring images and stray thoughts. He felt as though he were floating on some kind of sea, and remembered that Draco’s thoughts had been like a cool ocean, an ocean with incredible monsters in its darkest depths.

How many commands did you give him?

It took a moment for Harry to realize that the thought was not his own, but less than a tenth of a second to call up the memory and offer it quietly.

Just the one, the voice said in something like relief, and then the presence was withdrawing, then gone.

Harry sighed, his eyes fluttering open. “That was sort of nice,” he admitted in a hushed voice. “Weird, but nice. What was it?”

“Occlumency, Potter.”

“The same as before? It can’t be. It used to feel awful.”

“Perhaps. You were attempting to resist me, then, were you not?”

Harry nodded, leveraging himself up so that his back was pressed flat against the headboard of the infirmary bed.
“As to what you have been doing...” Here Snape frowned, looking more perplexed than before. “It is incredibly advanced. Given your skills in Occlumency, or lack thereof, I would have supposed you incapable of it.”

“Incapable of what?” Harry murmured, raising his hands to rub again at each temple. It didn’t feel as good as it had when Snape was doing it, but at least it was something.

Rather than reply, Snape continued to stare at Harry thoughtfully. “Do you remember discussion of a technique called Obscura?”

“No,” Harry replied. “We definitely didn’t get as far as particular techniques.”

“You have figured it out on your own then,” Snape continued, looking puzzled but unabashed. “It is a technique that contains and reigns in strong emotion. I myself have used it many times...” His eyes went faraway for a brief moment, focusing on a spot beyond Harry, but his attention abruptly returned. “It is a very uncommon discipline, and considerably dangerous.”

“Dangerous how?”

Snape paused in thought. “Most directly, you hold all that is dark within you until it can no longer be contained. At that point, you go mad.”

Harry stared.

“In a more general manner, it is unhealthy to have no mode of release when you are angry or upset.”

“Why would anyone want to use a technique like that?” Harry demanded, picturing all of that darkness festering somewhere inside him.

“Surely you can imagine situations in which it would be advantageous to stifle aggressive emotion,” Snape replied sharply. “A skilled practitioner of Obscura releases the darkness slowly over time, when it is once more safe to do so.”

Harry considered this. “So I should do that.”

“Considering your ineptitude and your all-or-nothing nature, I am not certain you are capable of doing that,” Snape corrected, his expression sour.

“So I go mad then,” Harry confirmed. “Go corrupt. Lose my mind. Become my own Dark Lord.”

“Flippancy again, Potter.”

“If your body and soul were in mortal peril every moment of every day, you’d learn to laugh,” Harry replied.

“It is, and I do not suppose I have.”

Harry blinked. “We’re bound to have different reactions to the same things, Professor.”

“I should hope so,” Snape replied neutrally. “I was not suggesting you succumb to madness, Mister Potter, although it appears you are already halfway there. I merely meant you will likely require... aid.” The curl of his lips indicated distaste, now, Harry noted.

“From you.”
“Mmm.”

“And we know just how well that all went the last time.”

“Better than we had thought,” Snape replied coolly, “as you appear to have revived a long-dead branch of the discipline.”

Harry didn’t know quite what to say to that, so he remained silent.

“In any case, I am less concerned with your mastery of Obscura than your abandonment of it,” Snape continued. “It is Dark Arts and more than Dark Arts; it is a submersion of the self. I do not recommend you pursue it – even though it is, on some occasions, useful,” he added grudgingly. Snape surveyed him, then, as though weighing Harry’s worth with his eyes. “You will meet me every Saturday evening for the next two months, at least,” he finally said. “After that, we shall take note of your progress and decide on our next best course of action.”

Harry wasn’t sure he wanted to agree, but then, he wasn’t sure his agreement would matter to the black-haired Potions Professor.

“As for your punishment, I believe I have just the thing,” Snape tacked on.

Harry stiffened. He’d actually almost forgotten.

“For the next week, starting tomorrow, you will be under the control of Draco Malfoy.”

“Sir, I resist Imperio,” Harry countered. “I can’t help it, it’s just something I do, like the Obscura –”

Snape turned the full force of his glare on Harry. “You are a naive fool if you would believe for a moment’s time that I would suggest you put your will in the hands of the son of a Death Eater,” he hissed, gripping the edge of the hospital bed with whitened fingertips.

“But you just said–”

“You will be under his control. You must – willingly – do all he tells you to,” Snape clarified, his face still white, the two spots of brilliant color on each cheek the only indication of his fury.

“Oh.” Harry considered this. “I won’t hurt any of my friends or put myself in more mortal danger than usual.”

“Considering the mortal danger you blithely wander into on a daily basis,” Snape replied coldly, “you will indubitably leap off a cliff if Draco Malfoy tells you that is his wish.”

Harry almost wanted to laugh, but he clamped viciously down on the urge. “Sir, you know what I mean.”

Snape sighed, the fury leaving him. “Here.” He placed a small stack of paper at the edge of Harry’s bed.

Harry looked down. It was his summer assignments. “...Professor?”

“Reconstitutio,” Snape said absently. “For your information, number seven on your anemone paper is quite incorrect. Although your analysis of medipotion ingredients was...” He cleared his throat. “Insightful.”

Harry stared.
“Your grade is an ‘Outstanding’, Mister Potter.”

“What?” Harry was certain he couldn’t have heard properly. “I mean, what happened?”

Snape shifted slightly in his seat. “The grade was altered, but after I had already received my list, and before you had received yours.” A pause. “When they heard you wanted to be an Auror, one would presume.”

Harry felt the color drain from his face.

“Perhaps I was incorrect,” Snape continued silkily. “Perhaps fame is, in fact, everything...”

Harry’s gaze couldn’t help but travel to the summer work he’d spent so long on. His fingers grazed the low-quality parchment, enjoying, in some small measure, the texture. So much time, patience, and energy... he’d been so absurdly proud of that completed stack. He’d been reveling in the fact that the Professor had been wrong all these years, that he was ace at Potions so long as Snape wasn’t in the room, with his greasy hair and hook nose and condescending smirk... but the truth was, the test proctors had merely been as interested as the rest of the Wizarding World in the fact that he was Harry Potter, whose desires could not be thwarted, heavens forefend we deny our little celebrity any dream he may have left, poor dear...

Professor Snape placed one finger atop Harry’s unconsciously stroking hand, effectively halting the motion. Harry’s eyes jolted upwards in surprise.

“You are still in my class, Mister Potter,” he added. “Your most recent grade is, in fact, an Outstanding, and I take those few students who receive such a coveted mark. It is only my assumption that your grade has been altered because of who you are; I can easily imagine a half-dozen other possible reasons.”

Harry took in a shaky breath. “O-oh.” He looked down at the papers again, the sick feeling still drowning him, but mere moments later, his native stubbornness rose again. “You won’t be sorry, Professor.”

“That, Mister Potter, remains to be seen.”

Chapter End Notes

Liked it? Review! Didn't like it? Review anyway! Selling something? We don't want any!

There is the obvious moral objection to what occurs in this chapter: that Draco is being rewarded for his particular brand of foolishness, while Harry is punished for his.

Hold on to that thought.
When Harry went down for dinner and sat at the Gryffindor table, a dozen hushed whispers halted in his wake. Between the Triwizard Tournament, the Heir of Slytherin business, and Cedric Diggory’s death, he found this almost comforting in its familiarity. It was better than wondering how many points a student garnered for sitting three seats away from famous Harry Potter.

“All right, Harry?” Ron said loudly.

Harry grinned. “Yeah. You?”

“You sure caused a stir today,” Neville said. “Professor Lupin stared after you for a minute, then re-paired everyone... but he looked…”

“Sick, Harry,” Hermione interjected. “He looked sick.”

Ron rolled his eyes and leaned noncommittally over his food, as though determined to weather out the coming storm.

“As am I,” Hermione continued angrily. “How dare you do something so… wrong?”

“It was only Malfoy,” Ron offered.

“Oh, I see, so that makes it all right, then?” Hermione shot back, whirling on Ron. “Ronald Weasley, you don’t understand anything!”

“Well, I guess I’m not so clever as a Ravenclaw,” Ron mused thoughtfully. “But then, we can’t all be, can we?”

Hermione had gone red in the face. “Maybe I ought to have been in Ravenclaw after all,” she managed, her voice clipped in her fury. “That way, I wouldn’t have to deal with two little boys who always insist on doing whatever pops to mind!” She stood, looking down at them with supreme disdain, and stormed away.

“Mental,” Ron repeated, staring after her. Then he turned his attention back to the table. “What really happened down there, Harry?” he asked in a small voice.

“Malfoy tried to cast the Crucius Curse on me,” Harry said.

“That makes sense,” Ron replied, some of the concern fading from his features. “Cruciatus, yeah... and so you had to—”

“No, I didn’t,” Harry replied. “Hermione’s right. I just didn’t think.”
Ron peered at him anxiously. “Don’t listen to her, mate, she just doesn’t understand that Malfoy’s not like her friend... Yolande-what’s-her-name. He’s going to become a Death Eater, he is. And one day he’ll try to murder you, or me, or the both of us.”

Harry blinked at this calm admission. “Yeah... s’pose so,” he returned, disquieted.

“What was it like, casting the Imperius?” Neville inquired softly. He was seated just to Ron’s right, Harry realized, and couldn’t help having heard some, if not all, of the conversation.

Harry frowned, noting that the area around him had grown subtly quieter. “Well... er... not very pleasant,” he lied. “Really uncomfortable.”

Neville nodded, looking satisfied with the answer, but Ron kicked him lightly under the table. Harry wondered just how transparent he was when he was lying; he’d fooled Neville, but not Ron... then, it probably didn’t take much to fool Neville... Harry decided he’d have to ask an impartial observer, like Snape, to tell him how well he lied. If he could trust Snape not to lie to him.

“Honestly, Harry,” Neville said. “I thought we might not see you again.”

“I thought I’d be sent to Azkaban,” Harry confirmed.

“Azkaban?” Ron looked horrified, then incredulous. “Naw, mate, we thought you might be expelled, though.”

“Then they’d have to expel Malfoy, too,” Harry mused, “for casting Cruciatus. And they want him here. For that matter, they want me here as well.”

Neville considered this, then kept his peace.

“So what’s your punishment, then?” Ron wondered.

Harry sighed. He wasn’t certain how much he wanted to tell them, but then, they’d all know by tomorrow in any case. “I’m to obey Malfoy,” he mumbled.

“You’re to what?”

“Obey Malfoy,” Harry hissed between his teeth, suddenly all too aware of the sheer numbers listening in on his conversation.

“OBEY Malfoy?!” Ron shrieked, gaining everyone’s attention and making all of Harry’s efforts moot. “Are they mad?”

“I said I won’t hurt myself or my friends or... well, you get the idea. Said I wouldn’t let him goad me into anything too dangerous, either.”

Ron looked horrified.

“Snape came up with it,” Harry added with a small smile.

Ron shrugged and set to, but when it came time to meander their way up to the Gryffindor Common Room, he pulled Harry aside and made for the Room of Requirement.

Ron obviously wanted peace and quiet, so Harry allowed him to focus rather than demanding answers as they strode once, twice, and three times past the blank wall that sometimes led to the D.A. practice room. On the third try, the door appeared. Harry glanced up and down the hall to be certain that no one was approaching, then opened the door and slipped inside.
He drew up short when he realized where the door now led: it was the Burrow.

A cheerful and homely scrubbed-wood table sat in the middle of the kitchen, the Weasley’s purple-and-gold braided hearth rug sitting by the fire. A kettle that was sitting on the stove was just beginning to whistle, and Crookshanks meandered up to Ron, who scooped the cat up in wonder.

“I think this is the best the room’s ever worked,” he said, patting the cat absently. “Who thought it could bring a real, live cat?”

“Probably it’s the real Crookshanks from the girls’ dorm,” Harry reminded him. Looking more closely at the furnishings revealed that one of the wooden tables lacked the large gouge that had been incurred when some of the Weasley boys made them duel in Harry’s fourth year at Hogwarts: it was not the same table, merely one that looked remarkably similar. The same went for the rug, Harry realized, the design of which was not quite the same as that of the one belonging to Mrs. Weasley. The entire scene had rather obviously been painstakingly re-created, but for all of that, it was not real.

Ron, however, was quite at home, already moving to the kettle and removing two cups from the cupboard.

“Am I in trouble?”

Ron eyed him, looking like he wanted to laugh, but instead his features grew hard. “That all depends. Are you all right?” he demanded, almost belligerently.

Harry wasn’t sure what that meant. “All right? I mean – yeah, sure, when am I not –?”

“Because, besides your sudden fondness for Unforgivables, you haven’t so much as mentioned Sirius.”

“ Mentioned him? What should we be talking about?”

Ron looked taken aback rather violently for a moment, but then he continued his bustling through the facsimile kitchen, pouring the hot water into both cups. “Because he’s dead? Because he died in front of you?”

Harry considered this. “Well... yeah, that’s true. But it’s not like talking would bring him back.”

Ron set a cup of steaming liquid in front of him and sat across from Harry. Ron’s dark blue eyes examined him closely. “How practical,” he finally replied, moving to the kitchen cabinet to remove tea bags.

“Look, screaming and crying about it isn’t really going to help anything, is it? It won’t change the fact that he’s dead and gone. Come to think of it, I never really had him in the first place,” Harry mused. “He was in Azkaban; then he was in hiding; now he’s dead. We’ve had maybe ten conversations, me and Sirius. I’m unhappy he’s gone –” and here Harry paused, because ‘unhappy’ didn’t seem quite the right word, somehow; “ – but we weren’t close or anything.”

Ron, Harry noted, now looked genuinely disturbed. “All right,” he said quietly. “Moving past Sirius, for now. All this focus on your work.”

“What?”

“Hermione seems to think you’re growing up, as does Mum –”
“You talked to them about this?”

“- but it’s not like you to obsess over essays and grades,” Ron completed as though Harry had not spoken. “I invited you to stay at the Burrow, and normally you’d jump at the chance –”

“I was busy!”

“With work,” Ron confirmed. “Bill missed you, by the way, asked how you were.”

Harry flushed, ashamed to admit he’d forgotten about Bill and his new wife entirely.

Ron took a sip of tea, looking supremely unconcerned, but Harry could tell Ron knew he’d scored a hit, and was waiting patiently for Harry to recover his equilibrium.

“I’m sorry I missed it. Really,” Harry said genuinely. “Work seemed... seemed important, at the time...”

“And your relatives,” Ron went on. “What about the Dursleys? Every summer I get reams of complaints, and Hermione too, about boredom, and anxiousness concerning Him, and What-Is-The-Order-Up-To, and that you’re ready to murder your aunt and uncle in their beds. This summer? Nothing.”

Harry frowned. “I couldn’t have said nothing about the Dursleys.”

“Oh, well, ‘I’ve finished painting the shed, today’, and ‘Did some more gardening this morning’ are not pressing issues. It sounds like you just soldiered through all they told you to.”

Harry supposed he had, at that. “Didn’t seem worth the trouble of an argument.”

Ron looked paradoxically more worried and more angry all at once. More importantly, he looked at a loss. “So you spent every day doing manual labor: gardening or setting up a new fence or repainting a room – and every night writing out essays and studying, until you dropped off?”

Harry thought that sounded about right, but didn’t reply.

“And this never struck you as a bit out of the ordinary?”

“I doubt that Voldemort is trying to strike at me through paint fumes or Potions essays,” Harry retorted sharply.

“Who said anything about that evil git?” Ron crossed his arms over his chest. “You’re right, it’s most likely nothing to do with him. Have some tea.”

Harry ignored the tea, which would probably be growing cold, soon. “Well – what, then? D’you think I’m cracking up, or something?”

Ron’s expression made it clear that was exactly what he thought. For a full minute, Harry stared, analyzing the fear and anguish in his best friend’s expression. Ron refused to look away, his features set in their most determined lines, his gaze challenging.

“You really believe that, don’t you?” Harry finally murmured.

“No one’d fault you,” Ron replied in what Harry supposed he must think was an understanding tone of voice. “Your parents, then Cedric, then your godfather... you’ve seen a lot. Not to mention what-all happens here every year, the stupid Tournament... look, that all seemed like a way to get you more glory at the time, but someone was only trying to kill you, like always. I don’t know I’d
do so well if it was me,” he finished, sincere-sounding but his logic somewhat meandering. “All that Occlumency last term, and your scar killing you all the time... and you, Harry, you’re really very...”

“Very. What,” Harry said, keeping the two words separate so that he could keep them level.

Ron looked afraid, but kept going. “You don’t speak to anyone anymore, not even Dumbledore. You could be on the verge of – of something terrible, but you’d never say. In fact,” he added in an even smaller voice, “you’d probably keep on sending me and Hermione letters telling us that it was all fine, only without any details: ‘the Dursleys are beating me, and have locked me up in a hole. Oh, wait. I mean – summer’s going great, I’ve finished all my assignments already. Incidentally, it’s because I’ve been locked up in a hole...’

Harry declined to be amused.

“I didn’t know what to do about it. Hermione has this skill, doesn’t she, for dropping these little truths when it’s time to hear them. But I’m not her, so I figured I’d just say it all straight out, and hope for the best,” Ron said. “Look, you were doing great last year, you really were, with the D.A. and getting over Cho and coaching Quidditch and that toad Umbridge. I wasn’t ever more pleased I was your friend,” Ron went on, each sentence more hurried than the last. “I mean, you did great with Umbridge on your own – don’t glare like that Harry, really you did – but you just kept letting her hurt you over and over, didn’t you, and you didn’t say a word to anyone. And Occlumency – you never told me how bad that got –”

“What? If I never told you how bad it got, how would you know?”

“Well, it only got worse, the thing with your scar, and you’d wake me all times of night, screaming. Not to mention this one time you came out of the Potions lab and Professor Snape right behind you, and you looked awful and he looked livid, but then he calmed down when he saw me and said, Mister Weasley, keep an eye on Mister Potter this evening... and if he was worried, of course I was as well.”

“You never told me that,” Harry said suspiciously.

“Well of course I didn’t say Snape wanted me to keep an eye on you! You were twitchy enough as it was –”

“So I’m twitchy now?”

“Yes, you’re considerably twitchy!” Ron shot back. “And I’m trying to be helpful, here, trying to get you to open up a bit and tell me what’s bothering you, and it doesn’t help that I’m horrible at this sort of thing!”

“Nothing’s bothering me,” Harry returned, “except for you.”

“Fine. Great,” Ron replied. “I’ll be at Gryffindor Tower if you’re interested in chatting.”

“I like to chat with those who consider me stable, thanks,” Harry returned coldly.


Harry didn’t follow. Instead, he sat at the table, turning to face the fireplace, amusing himself by imagining that Mrs. Weasley was about to bustle in any moment, or Ginny pound down the stairs, or even that Ron might come in from de-gnoming the garden. Crookshanks curled up on his lap
and butted his hand for pats. Harry took off his glasses and lay his head down on the table, smoothing the ginger cat’s fur with one hand as he stared, unblinking, into the flames.

Harry dreamed that Sirius’s head was sitting in the fireplace. “Oh, hello,” Harry said amicably, pulling himself into a seated position while Crookshanks purred. “You watched him die,” Ron commented beside him.

“Oh, yeah,” Harry realized. “He can’t be here.” Sure enough, when Harry turned to face the flames, his godfather was gone.

“And it doesn’t bother you one bit,” Ron confirmed.

Harry shook his head, then shrugged his shoulders. “It should?”

“Watch yourself, Harry,” Ron warned sadly. “Numb yourself completely and you become just like –”

“- the Dark Lord,” Snape was saying at the front of the otherwise empty Potions classroom, “is a wily foe. He will try to gain mastery of you, try to control what you see and even how you view it.” Sunshine was illuminating the normally-dank dungeons, and Snape strode through it, sunlight casting shifting ribbons over his dark, oily hair.

“He can change how I view things?” Harry asked. “If he can do that, he should already be ruling the world.”

Snape smiled, a bare quirk of the lips. “Ah, the same way you viewed Occlumency as ‘mind reading’, you view the Dark Lord’s measure of control as a complete alteration of your perceptions. You must, Mister Potter, move yourself beyond this all-or-nothing mindset…”

“Yes sir,” Harry said impatiently, “but then what can he con–”

“-trol,” Snape was suddenly intoning, and now he was facing Harry at the front of the room. “Legilimens!”

“Protego!”

“Not good enough, Potter!” Snape growled. “Must I take you everywhere, lead you by the nose to every conclusion? You cannot handle this on your own, do you understand me, you foolish brat? Wake up!”

Harry jerked upright, then groaned, straightening his neck. It took him a full minute to gaze about, wonder why he was at the Weasley’s, realize he was not at the Weasley’s and place why he should have fallen asleep in the Room of Requirement.

Harry stood, running a hand through his hair, and cast about, still gathering his wits. After a moment he snatched his glasses from the wooden table and placed them on his nose.

Harry had walked down three hallways before he was fully awake. The inside of his mouth felt like cotton, and he couldn’t help but wonder how late it was. Still, he decided he ought to go to the Great Hall in case there was still time for breakfast.
It was all coming back to him from the evening before: his cursing Draco with *Imperio*; getting immediately caught and sent to Dumbledore; Snape’s punishment... Harry groaned.

Starting now, he was to obey Draco Malfoy’s every whim.

Chapter End Notes

So, in my mind, the Ron of Geas of Gryffindor (SoS’s sequel) has changed so much and become so much more mature, the way he and [spoilers!] risk their lives to stop Harry from interfering with the spell that will [spoilers!], and then he ends up saving the life of [spoilers!], more than once.

Contrary to my doubts, the Ron in this chapter DOES make sense in the light of where he is headed and who he will become. Ron is the sort who looks after his friends, when he isn't so jealous or angry that he isn't thinking straight. And he's a strategic thinker: show me the idiot who can beat McGonagall at chess.

Reading the series, I often felt like Rowling wasted Ron's potential. It was like she couldn't have two bright characters in the trio, or like she decided there is only one way to be bright, and it's Hermione's way. Or maybe it's that Ron as a character devalues and denies his own intelligence; maybe he admires Hermione so much because she's brave enough to put it right out there, hand raised and waving, everything she knows on display.

What do you think?

-K
Harry wasn’t all that surprised to see Unsorted children hanging about the entrance to the Great Hall. “Harry!” Lilac squeaked.

“I told her we oughtn’t to sit with the Gryffindor table every day,” Ewan began, “but she seems quite taken with you.”

Harry peered about for the third of their trio, but she was nowhere to be found. “Where’s Rae?”

Lilac frowned, and Ewan looked unhappy. “She’s... we don’t know,” he finally managed. “She’s upset. We can’t figure why.”

Surrounded by the children, Harry almost forgot about Draco Malfoy and all things Imperius. He could almost imagine that this was going to be like any other day.

That beautiful dream was swept from his mind when he saw the blond-haired Slytherin rise from the table and make his way towards him. Harry froze, feeling the color drain from his face, as an unfamiliar, tantalizing summons gripped him. With surprise, he realized that he was experiencing the urge to perform the Imperius again. His wand hand twitched.


“Good morning, Potter,” Draco said with bright, false cheer.

“G-G’morning,” Harry stammered.

“Beautiful day, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Stunning.”

“I hear your punishment is incredibly apropos.” A wide grin was forming on Draco’s features.

“Apropos?”

“Appropriate,” Ewan supplied.

Draco blinked, looking down. The menace he seemed to carry about him like a dark cloud lifted slightly as he peered at the pair of first years. “It’s a sorry thing, Potter, when an eleven-year-old has a sharper vocabulary than you.”
Ewan snorted. “You’re Draco Malfoy,” he announced.

“And the cleverness keeps coming!” Draco said, but he seemed genuinely pleased.

“I’m Ewan Jones, and this is Lilac Johansen.”

“Are you two friends with Potter, here?”

Harry opened his mouth to say something, but he could hardly protest. He wasn’t even sure what it was he was upset about Draco doing. The blonde boy’s expression was friendly, and he seemed to be teasing more than terrorizing the first-years.

“I’m his friend,” Lilac said to Draco with a grin.

“Friend?” Ewan queried, considering. “Well...” He eyed Harry. “We’re acquaintances. We met at the Quidditch pitch the other day, and he’s incredible on a broom, isn’t he?”

“Oh, yes,” Draco agreed affably, sneaking Harry an amused glance.

“Harry seems afraid of you,” Lilac commented bluntly, eyeing him. “You’re Slytherin, aren’t you?”

Draco bowed slightly.

“The King of the Slytherins, or something like,” Ewan tacked on contemptuously.

“And you,” Draco replied, “would have undoubtedly been my successor if the blasted Hat hadn’t destroyed itself.”

Ewan looked shocked by this news.

“I thought it was brilliant, what the Hat did,” Lilac nearly growled, stepping in front of Ewan. “The Houses are stupid, no mistake. Hermione says so.”

“And you would be Gryffindor,” Draco mused.

Lilac looked startled. “Really?”

“In any case, I invite you both to be the guest of the King of the Slytherins,” Draco said, “at breakfast today.”

Lilac, won over again already, managed a giggle.

“I don’t think –” Harry began.

“You too, slave.”

Harry winced, but followed Draco, nodding at Ewan reassuringly when he looked like he might stay behind. Together, he and Draco and the two Unsorted made their way to the Slytherin table.

There was a flurry of murmurs as Harry sat by Draco, but once again, Harry couldn’t bring himself to care.
Ewan, apparently, was far more interested. “Lose a bet, Harry?”

“Sort of,” Harry murmured, picking at his food. He chanced a look up, where Crabbe and Goyle were staring at both he and Draco like they’d lost their minds. Then, he glared back down at the plate.

“Let me see,” Draco intoned. “As you are now my slave, I think I’d like to set down some ground rules before we go any further.”

Harry had expected something of this nature, but that didn’t make it any easier to bear. He flicked his eyes up to Snape, who seemed to think this entire business hilarious. It was the happiest he’d ever seen the man.

“Well, first of all, I think I’d like you to call me ‘Master’ for the duration,” Draco began.

Harry choked on his food; Lilac thumped him helpfully on the back.

“Let’s have a go now, shall we? Say it for me: ‘Master’.”

Harry sensed he was chalk-white, but he certainly had said he would obey Malfoy, and this wouldn’t hurt anything but his pride. He gulped the remaining food in his mouth and tried it out: “m...M...”

Ewan snorted. “He literally can’t.”

Draco nodded, looking down at the younger boy. “You may be right. We’ll start off with a bit less humiliation and work our way up, how does that sound?”

Ewan nodded. “Reasonable,” he replied.

Harry restrained the urge to growl at the younger boy, who winked at him. He straightened as he realized that Ewan was purposely charming Draco into making Harry’s punishment less harsh.

“How about this: he must call me ‘Master’ in private?”

“I think that should do,” Ewan replied with a giggle and a winning smile.

“Done, then,” Draco said. He turned to Harry. “Very lucky, aren’t you, that your young friend is doing the negotiating.”

Lilac, Harry noted, was paying very close attention to her broccoli sprouts, completely ignoring the proceedings.

“Anything else, Ma...” Harry coughed. He’s right, I’m actually physically incapable! “Malfoy?”

Draco looked pleased at the effort, anyway. “You’ll in general be my secretary during classes. I won’t bother taking notes when you could simply do that for me.”

Harry blinked. He hadn’t imagined Draco would want to use him to cheat in class, but really, he should have, he realized. “Okay,” he replied, trying to keep hold of his temper.
“Excellent. Oh – and don’t speak until you’re spoken to, of course, that’s simple servant etiquette, though I wouldn’t expect you to know, Muggle-raised as you were...”

Ewan’s pleased grin died, and he shifted slightly away from Draco.

Draco didn’t seem to notice. “...and you’ll take your meals with me from now on, so that you’ll be nearby in case I need anything.”

Harry groaned.

“What was that?”

“You didn’t say no groaning,” Harry protested. “You said, ‘don’t speak until you’re spoken to.’”

“No groaning, Potter.”

Harry scowled and finished eating. Staring at his plate, he realized he’d only managed about half this time. He placed the fork down with a small clatter.

“Well? Finish. I don’t care if you’re hungry or not.”

Lilac looked considerably less entertained, and Ewan’s flush betrayed his discomfort at the casual way Draco ordered Harry. “I’m...” Lilac’s blonde pigtails waved to and fro as she shook her head. “’Bye, Harry.” She gave a sharp hand-motion to Ewan, who stood as well.

“Thank you for your kind invitation, Draco,” Ewan said with a nod. “See you, Harry.”

Harry could only feel relief when the Unsorteds were absorbed by the Gryffindor table. He slowly picked at his food until it was completely gone, but he felt sick to his stomach. Harry resolved in the future to put a bit less food on his plate.

“Come, Harry,” Draco ordered, and with a sweep of his robes, they were headed off to Potions class.

It was the first Harry had seen of Hermione since last night’s dinner; but Draco urged him to begin setting up for class and taking out their books, so he could only manage a small nod to her before he began. It was just as well, as she didn’t appear to be speaking to him. When Yolande entered the room, she made a beeline for Hermione’s hunched shoulders and began leaning in, talking quietly to her.

“What’s that all about?” Harry wondered to himself, eyeing the pair of them, the Slytherin’s sheet of pale gold hair brushing Hermione’s riot of dark curls as Yolande leaned close.

Draco made a small noise in the back of his throat; whether he’d meant it as a laugh or some more derisive sound, Harry couldn’t be certain. “A charity case, nothing more,” he replied. “The Zabinis are an celebrated, pureblooded family, but Zabini women are well-known for their contributions to charitable causes... undoubtedly it is this impulse that moves her now.”
Harry frowned.

“Sit here, Potter.”

Harry took the seat directly beside Draco, then edged his chair slightly to the left, scooting as far away as he could without sitting at another two-person table. Draco rolled his eyes, but made no more of this before Snape swept in. They were still doing review, but Snape was moving so quickly through magical theory and general use of Potions ingredients that Harry found his head spinning after the first ten minutes.

Draco leaned close to Harry, observing his paper. “No – he said that loosestrife’s leaves are used, not its roots – ah, I see, you’ve mixed it with the damiana.” Draco’s pen moved to Harry’s paper and began filling in little notes in the margins. “Idiot. One would suppose you never saw magic before you came to Hogwarts. But that would be correct, wouldn’t it? These are to be my notes, Potter. Do pay attention.”

Harry held his tongue. Nothing he was likely to say was bound to be of any use to him or to Draco.

“Mister Malfoy,” Snape cut in. “Anything you’d like to share?”

Draco straightened and issued his most charming, smarmy smile. “Just noting Harry’s deplorable lack of concentration, sir,” Draco said.

“Very well. Five points to Slytherin.”

Harry was still wondering how Snape could justify that, even in his own mind, when he realized that, however nastily Draco had put it, he was still helping Harry correct a mistake.

The class ended with a half an hour of actual Potion-making. Harry fetched Draco’s Potion ingredients, and did menial work like light the fire under Draco’s cauldron and mince Draco’s false unicorn root. Just when he was getting started on his own Potion in earnest, Draco called him over.

“It seems I’ve added too much sulfur,” Draco said ruefully, and indeed, his cauldron was emitting clouds of yellow smoke. “Would you mind terribly getting me the ingredients over?”

Harry didn’t mind when Draco put it that way, and he was beginning to wonder if obeying Draco was going to be that bad after all. He fetched the ingredients, prepared them, then anxiously moved back to his own potion, which was starting to burn.

“Oh, Potter?” Draco wanted to know.

“Malfoy?”

“It looks like I somehow managed to halve the amount we need. Do you suppose you could get me some water and a bit more of the guar so I can fluff this up?”

Harry shook his head and moved quickly to the supply cabinet, but by the time he’d apportioned the respective ingredients, his own potion was beyond repair and he was obliged to start again.

“Potter?”
Harry paused in chopping his false unicorn root. “Sir,” he said, surprised at how easily this word came to his lips when ‘master’ had so categorically refused to surface.

Draco gave him a delighted smile that transformed his whole face. Harry couldn’t help but feel, somehow, that he’d delivered the other boy an unexpected treat, and his lips quirked a bit ruefully in return.

“Never mind,” Draco said, turning back to the potion that was simmering on his desk. “I’ll get it myself.”

The class ended without incident. After all was said and done, Harry and Draco both had serviceable potions, although Snape called them ‘barely acceptable’ before sweeping on to terrorize Hermione, whose potion was not even the proper colour. He headed off to Charms, feeling a burgeoning joy that Draco would not be there to order him into doing something stupid. He was wondering why Draco wasn’t taking far worse advantage of the situation than he yet had, although he could see why, from a Slytherin point of view, it might make better sense to start slow as Draco had. Moreover, Potions was a small class, especially with Justin out with a cold; Draco seemed to enjoy an audience. Harry strongly suspected that the worst would come in his Defense classes, in front of his former students.

Harry’s hunch turned out to be most unfortunately correct. They were still dueling in Professor Lupin’s class. With much reservation, Lupin had positioned himself quite close to Malfoy and refused to pair them; perhaps he was hoping Malfoy would make a move so that he would be expelled.

Harry wondered if Malfoy’s parents had taught him that wide-eyed innocent expression, or if it was a skill he had to acquire in order to facilitate his usual gittishness. When they were facing their partners side-by-side, Harry’s wand hand trembling slightly, Draco gave him an evil grin.

“Lose,” he said.

Harry glowered in return, but if Draco thought that this was going to break him, he was mistaken. It wasn’t as though Harry never lost in anything before. Besides having a seeming talent for losing people, he lost regularly to Ron in Wizarding chess, to Hermione in grades, and he certainly felt like he’d lost something every time he left Snape’s dungeons.

“Come to think of it,” Draco said, ”lose believably.”

Well, that dashed Harry’s hopes of collapsing immediately onto the ground to avoid the humiliation.

By the end of Defense, Harry had been Bat-Bogey Hexed, turned pink with green spots and set on fire.

“That was pathetic,” Draco hissed when Harry incanted a stream of water out of the end of his wand. “Do you think anyone bought that for a moment? You’re the worst liar I’ve ever seen!”
“I wasn’t speaking, so I wasn’t lying,” Harry countered angrily. “Besides, that wide-eyed innocence of yours doesn’t exactly make your case, either.”

“It got us back into class, didn’t it?” Draco demanded.

“And I lost – believably!” Harry shot back, barely noticing as students began to break up and move inside; the class was over. “Trust me, they all believe it! Why they believe I lost, now, that may well be another question...” he trailed off suggestively.

Draco stared. “You...” Then he laughed.

Harry couldn’t help but stare in surprise. It was the first time he’d heard Draco Malfoy laugh in a way that wasn’t rather obviously put-on. The sound was warm and almost infectious, the same way Draco’s one, genuine smile had been.

It was incredibly off-putting.

“A bit more Slytherin than you let on, aren’t you?” Draco said.

Harry wondered what Ron and Hermione would have to say about that. Indubitably, he’d just tricked Draco, but certainly for a worthy cause.

Suddenly, he wondered if Hermione would consider salving his pride a worthy cause... Or if Lupin would... or Professor Snape...

“Sorry,” Harry mumbled.

“Come again?”

“Sorry.” Harry’s glare blazed at Malfoy, just to make certain that the blond-haired boy would be definite concerning how he felt. “This is my punishment, and I deserve it. I shouldn’t be trying to get around it.” Harry swallowed. “When I put you under the Imperius, I could have told you to murder your own mother, and you would’ve done it for me. Next time, I’ll do as you say.”

Draco’s silver-grey eyes assessed him, coldly and quietly. For a moment, he looked almost precisely like Lucius Malfoy. “I wouldn’t have done it for you,” he finally replied, tossing his pale hair back. “But you’re right. I would’ve done anything.” He took a deep, unsettled breath. “A proviso to your initial set of commands, then, Potter: you shall do not just as I say, but as you believe I mean. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry replied meekly. He paused. “Can I... can I say something, though?”

Draco looked startled and gratified at the tone of Harry’s voice, but he nodded readily.

“It’d be – erm, better – if you didn’t ask me to do things that injure my pride like that.”

Draco snorted.

“I mean it. It’s – it’s my weak point. Things’ll go – easier – on both of us! – if you give me orders I can actually obey.”

“Well-reasoned, I suppose.”
Harry jerked his head up to stare at the Slytherin boy, who was frowning in thought. Harry had to admit that he’d thought Draco would toss this away out of hand.

“We can work towards enhancing your servile tendencies; we do have all week.” Draco eyed him. “Although I must say, you’re doing startlingly well.”

“Thank you,” Harry said. His features crumpled in confusion. “I think.”

“One would almost imagine you’ve had experience,” Draco murmured.

Harry’s head jerked up as he thought of Number Four, Privet Drive, but Draco’s words were a throwaway comment, not meant to poke fun at him. *Then again,* he supposed, *Malfoy’s got no reason to belittle me now. He could tell me to do the hokey-pokey and turn myself around – that’s far more humiliating than jibes on my parentage.* Harry chuckled quietly to himself.

“What?”

“Oh – I was just thinking – if I were in your position, I’d have thought up a couple of things by now.”

“Oh, really? Such as?”

Harry laughed again. “I’m not telling –”

“Oh, but it’s an order, Potter.”

Harry froze, feeling his face heat. “Er... I was thinking of... a Muggle dance,” he replied, miserably. “An embarrassing one.”

“You tell me not to injure your pride; then you intimate that doing so would be the best revenge. You’re rather paradoxical, do you know that?”

Harry sighed.

“Don’t you suppose,” Malfoy continued, in an infuriatingly reasonable tone, “getting over this excessive pride thing might be of benefit to you in the long run?”

“And what about you?” Harry returned, stung. “What about your pride, you hair-gel infested twit? You, who can’t walk out of a room with an entourage –”

“Look who’s talking, Potter. Up until third-year, Goyle was convinced you and Weasley and Granger were actually one person. One really fat, redheaded, bucktoothed person. Besides all that, I can muzzle my pride if and when I have to. The fact that you can’t – physically cannot – call me ‘Master’, even for a punishment that you genuinely believe to be justified, is pathetic.”

Harry bit his lip, feeling cornered. “It reminds me of Voldemort, that word!”

“Oh, of course,” Draco murmured. “And we certainly want to distance ourselves from Dark wizards. Well, then, I suppose ‘sir’ will have to do in public.” He glanced around the empty Quidditch field. “We are in private, now. Try the other.”
Harry closed his eyes tightly, his fingers curling into fists. A vague tremble had taken hold of him, very faint. “M...aster,” he managed, then took a huge gulp of air.

Draco was observing him with what looked like startled concern, but the expression was gone so rapidly that Harry couldn’t quite have been certain it was there. “Don’t tear yourself apart, now,” the Slytherin mumbled, and now Harry was certain. There was fear someplace in the back of Malfoy’s voice, behind the sarcasm, faint but unmistakable.

“It’s fine... Master,” Harry said clearly, tilting his chin slightly up. It was only a word. The word didn’t have to mean anything to him if he refused to let it.

Draco frowned, and then he shivered, a full-body shiver much like Harry’s. “Good,” he breathed. “You’ll get the hang of this, Potter. In no time.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh gosh. Draco freaks me out a little in this chapter, and I'm the one who wrote him! Hang on; needless to say, things are going to get worse before they get better.

In the initial version of this, Draco orders Harry to win in a duel against him. Uh - unless Lupin has had a recent concussion, I doubt he'd actually pair them again, at least not the very lesson after their recent disaster. (I think tiny!me was veering towards drama and away from credibility. ;)

-K
Harry wasn’t a good singer, and he really didn’t enjoy public attention, despite what Draco had intimated about his exhibitionist tendencies. Harry was an even worse dancer than he was a singer, so this probably went down right next to seeing Snape’s worst memory as his most embarrassing moment ever. “You put your right foot in – you put your right foot out – you put your right foot in, and you shake it all about; you do the Hokey-Pokey and you turn yourself around. That’s what it’s all about!”

Harry kept his eyes on Draco the entire time. As Malfoy was the only student not laughing, this was somewhat helpful. His face felt like it was on fire, and he felt any moment his muscles might collapse in sheer rebellion. When the song was finally, finally over, he collapsed back into his seat at Gryffindor and pillowed his head on his hands.

The entire Great Hall erupted in applause, most notably from the Slytherin and Gryffindor tables. The Hufflepuffs looked too confused and the Ravenclaws too disdainful to do much more than murmur amongst themselves. Draco came up behind Harry and patted him absently on the head.

“That’s a Muggle song, Harry?” he demanded, amusement lacing his tone. “I’ve always said that our culture is superior, but now I know it for a fact... anyway, see me after supper, I’ve got a couple more things for you do to before you head off for Gryffindor. Oh, and eat it all.” He walked back to the Slytherin table to more applause.

Ron looked after Draco in disgust. “He calls you Harry now?”

Harry blinked up at Ron blearily. “Am I still alive?”

“Aren’t you...?”

“Because I think, if it’s possible to die of embarrassment...”

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione said.

Well, one good thing had come of this – Hermione was speaking to him again.

“That’s awful, what he made you do. I’m so sorry!”

“That’s all right, Hermione, it could be worse,” Harry replied. “Besides – it was my idea.”
“Yours!”

Harry nodded. “I was idiot enough to laugh in a space of silence. Malfoy asked me why I was laughing, and I said, ‘well, if I were in your place, I’d...’”

Hermione blinked, looking as though she, too, found this inexcusably dull-witted, but at least she didn’t say anything.

“Hermione,” Harry said, catching sight of her robes, “what’s that?”

Hermione flushed, and Ron rolled his eyes. “She’s been wearing that crest for the past two days,” he said. “I was wondering if you’d ever notice. It’s Hermione’s latest cause.”

Hermione didn’t seem very put-by Ron’s attitude, which was worrying. Her smile barely dimmed as she drew slightly forward to show Harry her new crest. “Look,” she said with faint pride, “see, it’s all the symbols, intertwined. The snake and griffin are facing one another, and—”

“You have a Slytherin crest?” Harry murmured.

“It’s not Slytherin, or not only Slytherin, anyway,” Hermione protested. “It’s all of them, all the Houses. Together.”

Harry’s gaze snuck up to Ron’s. The Weasley boy was awaiting just such a signal, for he immediately rolled his eyes.

Harry wasn’t so certain this particular gesture could be so easily dismissed. Of all Hermione’s causes, this seemed the most sensible, and had the most chance of success. There was already one year of Unsorted children – why not another, and another, and another? He didn’t want to have another fight with either Ron or Hermione, so he decided to say nothing of value.

“It looks good,” he said. “Did you do the sewing? You’ve improved.”

“Oh!” Hermione suddenly pinked. “Well, no, it’s not me – er, it was Yolande—”

“Yolande!” Ron exclaimed. “That Slytherin?”

“Well...” Hermione temporized. “We’re, ah, not identifying ourselves with any House right now, not either of us.” She turned even redder. “The two of us have been chosen to be the prefects for the Unsorted House.”

“I thought you didn’t like that name,” Harry said.

She shrugged. “It is what it is. I could list each child by name, but that would take quite awhile.”

“So you’re not in Gryffindor anymore?” Ron inquired, in a very small voice.

Harry snorted, then paled while Hermione dithered.

“Er, it... it isn’t like we’re not friends, Ron,” she finally said. “I-is it?”

Ron had turned white. “Well... I mean...”

“If I’d been Sorted into Ravenclaw, or not Sorted at all, wouldn’t you still like me?”

“Well, look, Hermione, you were Sorted into Gryffindor. So how can I answer that? I don’t know how things might’ve gone.”
Hermione frowned, but luckily she recognized the logic in this and merely stabbed at a potato wedge on her plate with unnecessary vehemence. “In any case, of course I’m rooting for Gryffindor at Quidditch and all.”

“Of course,” Ron said.

“But that’s mostly because my two best friends are flying for Gryffindor,” Hermione tacked on unrepentantly. “I don’t have House pride, really.” She pierced Ron and Harry with a searching glare. “You don’t have any difficulties in that I’m counting on you, do you?”

Harry thought that Hermione had turned the conversation around in a very Slytherin-like manner, as both he and Ron had to now say that they didn’t mind that the only reason Hermione was interested in Quidditch at all was because of the two of them.

“Good,” she said firmly. “And I’m sitting here at Gryffindor table because I enjoy the company of the both of you. It only makes sense I’m to sit with my best friends.”

Once again, it was appallingly hard to disagree.

“Well, then,” Hermione said. “All settled.”

And she ate her peas.

Harry wandered over to the Slytherin table after he’d eaten. Everything he’d put on his plate, too, although Malfoy’s insistence on that topic was somewhat odd. It was probably bad manners in the Wizarding World not to leave a clean plate, Harry decided. Something to do with insulting the cook, maybe? The closer he drew to the Slytherin table, the more audible the talk became.

“...and when he spun in a circle, sweet Merlin, I thought I was going to die!” Pansy Parkinson simpered, leaning on Draco’s arm. “However did you think of it? That was divine!”

Harry couldn’t see Draco’s face, but he could tell by the set of the other boy’s shoulders that he wasn’t really enjoying Pansy’s attentions – and she was overdoing it, he had to admit.

“C’mon, Yolande,” Harry heard Goyle say as he elbowed the golden-haired prefect. “Why not?”

“Because, I’ve no wish to accompany you anywhere,” she said coldly, grey eyes flashing. “In any case, I’m already going with someone. And before you ask – it’s none of your business.”

“Er, hey,” Harry said quietly.

Yolande grinned wryly at him, and Harry couldn’t help but note that his episode of complete and utter humiliation seemed to have endeared him to some of the Slytherins – probably those who’d thought him a complete stuck-up prat, before. Even Crabbe couldn’t hide a small smile of rueful amusement.

Malfoy turned, or turned as well as he could with a girl surgically attached to his arm. “Potter. There you are. Did you eat?”

Harry stiffened. “Y-yeah.”
“I hear they don’t feed you at home,” Malfoy added casually.

Harry froze in shock; then, on the heels of that shock, he realized what Malfoy was doing. Slytherins respected strength and they respected power, and they apparently could be amused.

They did not respect victims. Even Yolande, whom Harry was beginning to believe halfway decent, eyed him with new suspicion. A couple of people giggled.

“Well then,” Harry said politely, “I suppose I must thank you for looking after my well-being so tirelessly.”

Draco colored. “It’s not because of you, it’s because the Professor asked me to –”

“Well Draco,” Harry said with a faint smile. “You actually like me, don’t you?” He faked a gasp, eyeing the Slytherin table with delight. They were staring at Draco, now. “You really, really like me?” he inquired, a puckish gleam to his eyes and a grin on his lips. “You care? Why – all my life, I’ve been awaiting someone who would...”

“All right, Potter, shut up.”

Harry did, with an abruptness that was apparently entertaining – the entire Slytherin table chuckled again, although some of it was obviously nervous laughter. Harry shrugged to them, as if to say he regretted not being able to continue for their viewing pleasure. The gesture was so expressive that several people laughed again.

Draco eyed the table with amused benevolence, as if to say that there was no accounting for Gryffindors, and then Harry was dragged away.

Harry wasn’t certain when he should begin talking again, so he remained silent until Draco led him up to the Astronomy Tower. There, they found at least three couples in various nooks and bends, and whirled back around.

“Where can we go to be alone? I need to talk to you.”

Harry frowned. He knew the perfect place – but...

“All right. Follow me.” Harry led the way, frowning in consternation. He knew the perfect spot, he did – but his mind scurried about, attempting to come up with a place – any other place half so good. When he was unable, he found himself striding past the Room of Requirement, thinking of a good place to talk with Draco.

At the third pass, a door appeared, and Harry entered.

Oh, Merlin, Harry thought.

The Room had delved deeper into his thoughts than he would’ve imagined. It had arrayed itself as a War room, a council chamber. Harry found a moment of amusement comparing how it had been when he needed to talk to Ron, as opposed to now.

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Draco paused to consider. “Well.” He adopted a stern expression. “I didn’t know you were an aspiring comedian, Potter.”

Harry averted his gaze. “I told you not to play on my pride. It’s my –”

“Greatest weakness,” Malfoy said, nodding. “And what did I tell you?”

“You said that I should try working on my greatest weakness,” Harry parroted emotionlessly.

“And instead, you...?”

“Tried to gain back my power by taking the mickey out of you.”

“Good, Potter, very astute.” Draco ran a hand through his white-blonde hair. “And why do you suppose I mentioned food?”

Harry’s eyes blazed. “I don’t know,” he said, hating him.

“You really don’t? I think you do. Let’s go over the possibilities. First: I’m genuinely interested you not starve yourself.”

“Vetoed,” Harry said.

“Acknowledged. Second: I have a diabolical plan in which you become flabby and unattractive –”

“Oh, fine, you wanted to get the power back from me, I understood, Slytherins don’t respect victims, and the stupid dance made me brave, but the thing about food makes me a victim...”

Draco leaned back in his chair with a small, twisted smile. “Very good, Potter. Going one layer deeper, why didn’t you want me to know you understood? Is it easier to hate me that way? Because you do hate me... you should see yourself, it’s really quite amusing...”

“It’s always easy to hate you,” Harry replied. “It’s just that what you did was so...”

“Slytherin,” Draco finished. “I see. Once again, disavowing yourself from anything beyond the pure and the good. Any indication you understood a machination of mine would mean... what? That you yourself were too Slytherin?”

Harry was unsure which he was most upset about: that he was so transparent, or that Draco made it all sound so idiotic.

The pale-haired boy gazed at him for a moment, frowning in thought, before moving his chair so that he was sitting beside Harry rather than across from him. “Listen, Harry, because I will only say it once. You oughtn’t feel bad about that; the Hat was right. We are all Slytherin... in a way.”

Harry jerked in his chair, gazing at Malfoy in startled confusion.

“We all want what’s best for ourselves,” Malfoy said, warming to the topic. “We all use subterfuge in order to gain higher ground. You did it today, and if you aren’t the picture of Godric fucking Gryffindor, I don’t know who is.”

Harry flushed silently, praying Draco wouldn’t notice.

Luckily, Draco was on a roll. “Some of the things you and your little friends have done, Potter... well, if you were a Slytherin, I would have tipped my hat to you. And jostling for position isn’t just Slytherin, it’s natural. Subterfuge is sometimes the best way, even your precious Dumbledore
knows that.”

“And yet murder and torture don’t seem to come as naturally to the rest of us,” Harry said. “I’m not like you.”

“But there’s where you’re wrong, Harry,” Draco reminded him coolly. “Murder and torture are also all too natural. They’re outgrowths of those urges to be on top, to be the one in control, the one in charge. A murder is taking control of another person in the most final and absolute way.”

Harry looked at the other boy, into his grey eyes, where there lurked a fanatical spark, and realized that he was hearing the truth as Malfoy saw it – a dark, twisted vision of the world with just enough reality to feel real to the Slytherin. He realized he was sitting with a future murderer, and his guts sank so fast it felt like he was falling away from the room, from the painful truth in Malfoy. And on the heels of that, there was a sharp, raw twinge in his chest, because someone who saw the world that way could not be anything but miserable. “Malfoy,” he breathed, and it was the sorrow that came out in his voice.

“It’s ‘Master’,” Draco reminded him, “when we’re alone. I think I’d like to hear you try it now, Harry.”

“Master,” Harry said dully. There was no struggle this time. It was a more horrible word than Harry had ever realized, but it was still just a word.

“Excellent,” Draco praised. “Now. As for what I’d like you to do... there are several things...”

Harry, though, was scarcely listening. Hermione was right: it was far too late for Draco to change his course. He hadn’t, he realized now, truly believed that.

Now he did, seeing the depth to Malfoy he’d never guessed. Beneath all the posturing and behind the vile smirk, he truly believed in what he was saying, believed in it the way Harry believed in destroying Voldemort for good.

Draco Malfoy would soon be a Death Eater, if he was not already.

Chapter End Notes

Pausing here for reviews! Sound off if you're enjoying the story, please and thank you.

:D

-K
Harry woke late, feeling stupid and lethargic, realizing that he really hadn’t gotten that much sleep. Although Draco’s words, and, more importantly the meaning behind them, made him sick to his stomach, he couldn’t help that they seemed to be replaying in his mind. By the time he dragged himself out of bed, he’d missed breakfast entirely and was already five minutes late for Potions. Snape’s rule for his sixth-years was simple: for every minute late to class, ten minutes of detention and ten points from their House; if a student was so foolish as to be more than ten minutes late for class, the Professor simply locked the door.

Harry was the first to be late that year. Not exactly a mark of distinction, he decided, sitting on his own and pretending he hadn’t noticed Draco’s frantic motions or Hermione rolling her eyes.

“Mister Potter,” Snape greeted. “How kind of you to join us. As we are slightly ahead of ourselves in our lessons, I was giving a pop quiz. What excellent luck that you have not – quite – missed it.”

Harry didn’t think it was excellent luck. He thought Snape was getting a head start on revenging himself for the slight of not showing up on time by making him look stupid.

“What are the uses of wormwood in the three following potions: Wolfsbane, Calming Draught, and Web of Darkness?”

Harry flushed. This was a seventh-year question, and Snape knew it. The reasoning behind the ingredient’s inclusion into each of those potions was utterly beyond him –

Wait, he thought, wait, I do know this...

“Today, Mister Potter. Unless you do not know? Draco –”

“No, I do,” Harry said. “In the Calming Draught, anyway, it’s a bitter principle, so it’s going to interact with the skullcap and end up settling the stomach. In the Web of Darkness, it is one of the blinding agents, and it stings the eye as well. In the Wolfsbane...” He paused, searching his memory. “It’d still be working on the stomach... so... it helps to curb the bloodlust that werewolves feel during the full moon?” he tacked on, completely guessing by this point.

Snape was staring at him as if he’d never seen him before.

Harry himself felt a little odd. He didn’t recall reading about any potion called the Web of Darkness. Frowning, he began wondering if Occlumency was somehow giving him the ability to read his teacher’s mind, but he didn’t feel the tell-tale touch of another’s thoughts on his.

Harry re-traced his mental steps. How had he known? Something Hermione said...? Something written as a footnote in their text?
‘The Web of Darkness...’ Harry saw the words written in lacy handwriting in his mind’s eye. ‘...is a blinding powder, made up of powdered wormwood leaf, sand, and—’

“Good one, Harry!” Hermione said, elbowing him as Snape turned to write on the board. “I’d read all about the Wolfsbane, you know, but I wasn’t sure about the others.” She beamed at him happily.

Harry heard Ron’s voice: Hermione reckons you’re just growing up...

No, Harry thought, she feels she’s finally found a kindred intellectual. It must be lonely for Hermione, he suddenly realized, to be the only one really interested in this stuff... He smiled at her tentatively, feeling as though he were meeting her for the first time.

Hermione seemed to sense his hesitancy and touched him gently on the arm before turning back to face the board, an unromantic but unmistakably intimate gesture, serving to remind Harry that Hermione was who she’d always been; he was only seeing her differently, lately.

After class, Draco stormed up to his desk and glared. “Just what do you think you were doing? You were supposed to be at breakfast; you were supposed to set up my books for me! You’re supposed to be doing as I say!”

Harry looked up at Draco in surprise. After yesterday, it seemed incredible that Draco could be such a spoiled-brat child. Hermione and Yolande stopped chatting to eye the both of them — sympathetically, Harry thought — before exiting the classroom, leaving it empty but for he, Draco, and Snape.

“I can’t obey you in matters I can’t help,” Harry replied calmly. “I overslept, plain and simple. It happens to the best of us.”

Draco glowered and crossed his arms over his chest. He looked away briefly, then shrugged. “What would you like me to do, sir?” Harry inquired mildly. “I can set my alarm earlier, if you’d like.” Harry thought he saw Snape’s lips curl faintly at the ‘sir’.

“No. No, that’s useless. Goodness, Potter, I thought you’d be able to follow simple orders like ‘set out my books’. Maybe you consider these things beneath you, not worth your time?”

Harry looked up in alarm, his disinterest falling away. “No, sir,” he said, his voice ringing with quiet urgency.

“Perhaps that is the case. Professor Snape calls you ‘our little celebrity’. Maybe he’s right. Maybe you’ve been in the spotlight so long that the little things have long since faded to insignificance, hmm?”

Harry could’ve told him that it was only the little things that mattered anymore when you were in the spotlight, but somehow he didn’t think Draco would understand, or even listen.

“Well. We’re going to start in on some of the big things, today, Potter.” Draco glanced up at the front of the room, where Snape was innocently marking papers. He lowered his voice and crouched so low that his breath stirred the hairs on the back of Harry’s neck.

“Your invisibility cloak,” he said. “I want it.”

Harry paled and looked up into Draco’s features, scanning them for signs of... of what, he wasn’t certain. Mercy? He wasn’t the least bit interested in how Draco’d found out, although he realized
he should be. He was more concerned with... “Why?”

“Why isn’t any of your business, is it?”

Harry worried his lower lip. “It is,” he protested. “I said I wouldn’t help you put me in more
danger than I already am...”

“You said it yourself: you could’ve told me to murder my own mother under Imperio and I
would’ve complied. And now you won’t give me an item, a stupid piece of clothing, albeit a
useful one? So much for Gryffindor honor,” Draco spat.

“Heavy-handed with the manipulation, Mister Malfoy,” Snape said, still managing to look
unconcerned as he scribbled something vehement in bright green ink on some poor first-year’s
paper. “He would’ve given it to you without the mention of his House.”

Draco sniffed haughtily, but raised one pale eyebrow at Harry.

“Yeah,” Harry said with a sigh. “Reckon I would’ve.” If Malfoy planned on sneaking someone
into the castle underneath an Invisibility Cloak, surely he didn't need Harry's. No, this was
personal.

Snape made a vague get-on-with-it motion with one hand, still not looking up.

“Will you give it back?” Harry inquired.

“I’m going to hazard that all depends on you, and how well you perform during the rest of the
week,” Draco said, his tone measured and firm. “If you please me, I’ll return it to you.”

Harry gazed at him dubiously. “That’s a lie, isn’t it?”

“Maybe,” Draco replied easily. He grinned. “Only one way to find out, isn’t there? Besides all
this, I shouldn’t have to haggle with my slave. Hand it over.”

Harry sighed again, feeling cornered. “When?”

“Whenever, so long as it’s before lights out tonight,” Draco replied. “Perhaps during Defense?”

“Okay,” Harry said through clenched teeth. There was nothing else to do.

Charms passed by in a haze for Harry. He noted Ron looked worried, and felt amused that
Hermione could manage to listen to Professor Flitwick, do her own work, watch Neville, and read
some sort of esoteric text behind the pages of her Charms book without difficulty. Neville
commiserated with him briefly about Malfoy before Hermione gently redirected him towards his
work.

When class ended, Harry ran miserably back to Gryffindor Tower and withdrew the invisibility
cloak from the bottom of his trunk. He held it lovingly to his face, breathing in the scent – that of
himself, Hermione, and Ron, of course, but also an older scent, unrecognizable to Harry but
nonetheless bringing him a feeling of home, security, peace. It was his father’s smell.

Oh, Merlin, no. He hadn’t known what this would mean to him until he was holding the cloak.
He could not give it to Malfoy. He watched the fabric ripple, watched it drape over his hands until it appeared there was nothing beneath.

“Potter.” Malfoy was framed in the doorway.

Harry whirled around. “What are you doing here?!”

“Don’t act as though your universe’s been breached,” the blond boy drawled, leaning indolently against the doorframe. “I followed you; I heard the password. Nothing to it.” He grinned at the cloak. “Is that it?”

Harry didn’t trust himself to speak, so he nodded.

“Give it to me, Harry.”

Harry looked down at the cloak, then up at Malfoy. Slowly, his hands lifted into the air, without conscious control.

When Malfoy took the fabric from his arms, the gesture was almost reverent. “They don’t have one of these at Malfoy Manor, even,” he breathed. “They’re so rare. Do you know why?”

Harry shook his head mutely, still unable to speak past the despair lodged in his throat.

“They take fifty years to weave,” Draco replied, perching on the edge of Harry’s bed as though he belonged in the Gryffindor’s room. “The thread can only be made of a flax which grows on the north face of mountains where snow nymphs live... and the spells, they have to then be placed on, layer by layer, thread by thread...” He stroked the cloth with a motion that Harry, in his abstraction, noted was uncharacteristically gentle. Those long, tapered, pale fingers were touching something that was so personal, though, so very much his, that the gesture almost seemed obscene.

“Come, Harry,” Draco ordered, standing. “I still need to drop this off before Defense. And you’re coming with me.”

When Harry rose slowly, Draco took him by the sleeve and nearly dragged him from the room.

It was two or three minutes before Harry noticed where they were headed. They were descending to the dungeons, or thereabouts: to the Slytherin dormitories. When they reached a large gargoyle, Draco whispered the password: Imperio. He seemed to think this funny, but Harry didn’t. Snape indubitably thought the entire business hilarious still, and was attempting to carry the joke for all it was worth.

“Oh. Wait a moment. I think I hear someone coming.” Draco beckoned to Harry, and tossed the invisibility cloak over the both of them, then pressed against the wall.

“...don’t know why you’re –”

“For the last time, it’s my own business!” Yolande Zabini was in a fury. Her golden hair was in a static-ridden halo around her head; her cheeks were crimson and her eyes flashed. She whirled on her companion and stood, hands on hips. “Let me tell you one thing, Blaise Zabini,” she intoned, advancing on her prey. “You breathe one word of this to anyone, and I’ll tell mother all about that party at the end of last summer.”

Blaise raised his hands in the air. “Steady on, dear girl. Never you mind that party, I was drunk.”

“Ha!” she barked. “Please. I saw you looking at Iya long before that, didn’t I?”
Blaise went suddenly quiet, running a hand through his short-cropped, dark hair anxiously.

“You know I wouldn’t tell – under normal circumstances,” Yolande said, and the sharpness had faded from her voice, somewhat. “But, you know how it goes: you keep my secrets and I’ll keep yours.”

“How it goes in Slytherin, you mean,” Blaise said. “What about that new badge you’re carting around, is it just for show?”

“I’m still a Slytherin first and foremost, but I believe in inter-House cooperation,” she said, her chin hitching up slightly.

“I’ll bet you do,” Blaise hissed. “You and your pretty new girlfriend.”

Yolande went bright red. “She’s not my girlfriend!”

“But you wish, don’t you, darling,” Blaise echoed. “Goodness, you’re transparent. One wonders how you made it into Slytherin at all!”

The pair moved out of view and their voices muted to nothing. When Harry moved to tear the cloak away, though, Draco gripped his wrist, shaking his head silently. Together, they began to move forward, in the same direction as the two Zabinis, presumably towards the dorms. Draco had to rattle off three more passwords before they actually reached his bedroom, where the cloak came off.

Harry took a deep breath of Draco-free air. Draco’s scent, a faintly nervous smell behind too much expensive aftershave, had been getting to him – especially, mingling as it was with the scents of the people he loved best. He sank into a seated position on the floor, suppressing the urge to cough and double over. It was the aftershave; that had to be it.

Draco carefully folded up the cloak and tucked it under one arm. “Well? Close your eyes, Potter. I won’t show you where I’ll be keeping it.”

Harry obeyed – instinct, by now, he no longer even paused to question, he realized – and it was just as well. He couldn’t stand crying in front of Draco Malfoy, and if he had to watch his father’s invisibility cloak secreted among the other boy’s things, he might have done just that. At the feel of Draco’s hand atop his head, his eyes fluttered open and he gazed almost straight up.

“You gave me a treasured possession today,” Draco said formally, twining his fingers almost painfully in Harry’s hair, “and you did it willingly. I saw how much it hurt you.”

Harry willed his eyes not to fill with tears, clamped down on the words it was my father’s, stomped on the desire to beat Malfoy to a bloody pulp.

“Good,” Draco said, and his grip altered suddenly to a pat. “You’re getting better, aren’t you, Harry? Come along, now, or we’ll be late.”

Defense passed by in a blur; Harry couldn’t have said, even, what the lesson was about. All he knew was that Professor Lupin wanted to meet with him to discuss future lesson plans. Harry had agreed; it seemed like it would take more energy to disagree. Lupin had called him ‘Mister Potter’
the entire time, and they’d set up a meeting for some time during the next week. They still had three weeks to plan, but part of Harry knew that Lupin was also interested in making sure that Harry was... well, that Harry hadn’t...

Become his own Dark Lord, maybe?

Something like that. Maybe it was as Ron said – Lupin figured he’d snapped, or was snapping, under the weight of his responsibilities.

Maybe, Harry thought, indenturing me to Malfoy wasn’t the best of plans, then. It certainly doesn’t seem to be improving my state of mind.

Ron was acting just the same as ever, except that, instead of ‘good night’, he always said, “feel like talking?” When Harry said no, Ron nodded and extinguished his light. Harry had seen this quiet determination on his friend’s part before, and realized that Ron would probably be asking him this question for some time to come.

Hermione, for her part, was more cheerful than ever. Although it was hard to tell whether she were ignoring his distress or simply unaware of it, Harry had to believe the latter, given what he knew of Hermione’s tendency to involve herself wholeheartedly wherever she supposed it should do the most good. The bushy-haired girl was doing swimmingly in her classes, and seemed quite pleased with the progress she was making on a personal Charms project of which she would say very little. Every now and then, she would pat Harry bracingly on the arm and tell him that the business with Draco would let up very soon.

It did seem to be letting up, with or without his servitude ending. After the Cloak, Draco did not seem to want anything particularly taxing for a few days. Harry made it to the weekend before even realizing that he had an Occlumency session with Snape that was fortunately disguised as a detention due to his lateness to Potions.

Knowing Snape, though, it would be every bit as difficult as a detention.

When Harry arrived Saturday evening, the Professor was in the Potions lab. He beckoned Harry forward without looking up, then gestured for him to close the door – again, without bothering to look up or otherwise acknowledge Harry’s existence. After Harry had stood awkwardly in the doorway for a full three minutes, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, he moved to a desk and settled himself down.

“Potter.” Snape’s voice drifted in from the adjoining room, muffled by space and potion smoke. “Write the following fifty times, using no magic: No matter how I am tortured by Draco Malfoy, I shall not be late for Potions class.”

Harry jerked slightly in his chair. “Professor...? But... Occlumency...?”

Snape stuck his head out of the door and peered at Harry, sneering. “You honestly thought you would be missing this detention because both it and your Occlumency lesson happened to be on the same evening?” Snape’s eyebrow twitched, as though he saw some black humor in the very thought.

Harry glared at him half-heartedly, withdrawing a quill, an inkpot, and a small roll of parchment.
He wrote: *No matter how I am tortured by Draco Malfoy, I shall not be late for Potions class.*

By the time he’d written it the tenth time, he was beginning to be truly angry with Snape.

By the time he’d written it the twentieth time, the words were beginning to lose meaning.

By the time he’d written it the fiftieth time, the words had taken on *new* meaning. He laughed aloud, setting the quill down.

Snape emerged from the Potions lab, wiping a glittery blue substance off of his hands with a dark cloth. “You find something amusing, Mister Potter?”

“Myself,” Harry said with a shrug, handing Snape the parchment. “Are you through in there? Do you need help straightening up?”

“Your detention is over, Potter, and your lesson has begun,” Snape said by way of an answer. He set himself behind the teacher’s desk. “Tell me,” he said, “what you recall of our Occlumency sessions last year.”

Harry glared. “*Sessions,* you call them,” he said. “Mostly, I remember things like *try harder,* and *you are handing me weapons!* and the *Dark Lord will not go so easy...*” He couldn’t help but slightly imitate the Professor’s trademark sneer with these words. “Oh, but the first time you told me I’d done well, actually,” he suddenly recalled.

“No what I said, you fool, *technique, ideas...*”

“Not much. Er... clear my mind. Empty it of all emotion. Before sleeping, but sometimes during waking hours, too. Control, precision... things like that.”

“Things like that,” Snape said, rubbing his own forehead with every sign of intense exasperation. “So you do not recall anything concerning the *Obscura* technique?”

“No,” Harry replied. “You just kept throwing *Legilimens* until I collapsed.”

“And you, Mister Potter, did not clear your mind before sleeping so much as one measly time!” Snape’s expression slowly began to shift under Harry’s relentless accusatory glare. After a moment, the Professor broke the staring contest and massaged his temples.

It also looked, to Harry’s disbelieving eye, that the Professor was counting to ten under his breath.

“I’ll do better this time,” Harry said stiffly.

Snape shook his head absently, lowering his hands. “I know you will.” The words emerged with surprising conviction.

“Good,” Harry said, wondering how the Professor was so certain. “So... shall I clear my mind?”

“If you can, with all that buzzing,” Snape said, raising his hands to his temple again.

“Buzzing, sir?”

Snape looked up at him sharply. “You don’t hear any buzzing.” When Harry shook his head, the man shrugged his shoulders. “Well – one of the added benefits of being a Potions Master –” His gaze slipped significantly back to the lab, where copious amounts of smoke were still emerging. “Interesting side-effects. You should have seen; the other day, I was mixing three separate cauldrons in the same room, and I –” He paused, suddenly. “I’m rambling.”
Harry nodded. “What were you brewing in there?” he inquired.

“Calming Draught, Draught of the Living Death, and...”

“Veritaserum?” Harry completed. “Sir...”

Snape laughed suddenly, a sound so startling that Harry jumped. “Well,” he said, when Harry continued to stare, “don’t you find this funny?”

“I find it interesting... sir,” Harry replied cautiously. “My guess is that you inhaled some combination of the Calming Draught and Veritaserum.”

“You may be excellent at saving the world,” Snape interrupted, “but you’re terrible at Potions. That shouldn’t cause symptoms of lightheadedness...”

“No, no,” Harry said, “see, if they’re in combination, inhaling them might have this effect... because of the...” He frowned, suddenly losing the thread of what he was saying.

Snape was eyeing him with sudden suspicion. “Continue.”

“I, uh... I don’t remember what I was going to say.”

The Professor blinked, then snorted, rolling his eyes. “Close the damned door, you idiot,” he said. The odd thing was that he appeared to be talking to himself, because before Harry could rise, Snape had suited word to action and slammed the door to the Potions lab. Snape withdrew his wand and pointed it at the door. “Impervio,” he said, and smoke ceased curling from the crack in the door and the keyhole. “Much better. You were saying?”

Harry struggled to regain the thread of the conversation. “Erm... oh, yeah. The Calming Draught has that anemone tincture, and if you added it before it was cool, it would leave some of the good stuff behind, but all the volatiles would have evaporated, and if that combined with some of the volatiles from the Veritaserum, that would go straight to your hindbrain, sir, if you know what I mean, some of that stuff is pretty potent, and... and now I’m rambling.”

“Accurate.”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“No, you’re rambling, but you’re also quite accurate,” Snape said. “What happened to you over the summer?”

Harry stared at him. “I think you got the worse of those Potions, Professor.”

“Highly likely. Now answer the question.”

“Not much, really,” Harry replied. “Dudley was okay, this summer. Mostly, I did yard work and homework and that was really all.”

“But you’re...” Snape gestured vaguely with one hand.

“What am I?” Harry demanded.

“Markedly different,” the Professor said with a shrug. “Quiet. Detached. Rather brilliant at Potions all of a sudden. Better hold on your temper. Nearly deranged respect for me. If I didn’t know you were you, I’d swear you weren’t.”
Harry thought about this for a moment, then grinned. “Right back at you, sir. Although you’ve probably always been brilliant at Potions.”

“Don’t change the subject,” Snape said, his eyes narrowing.

As sloshed as he was, the effect was rather more humorous than he intended. Harry broke into a fit of giggles.

Snape rubbed at his temples again. “Ugh, the buzzing’s back...”

“Oughtn’t we look for an antidote?”

“While the potions are still smoking, Harry? I know you have a brain; kindly use it.”

That sounded a bit more like the Snape Harry knew. “Certainly, sir. How and where would you like me to use it?”

“Figure out how to get in there and douse the flames under the cauldrons,” Snape replied promptly.

“Well... you could Apparate in there and douse them, then Apparate out,” Harry suggested.

“Apparate? No, I’d be too alarmed at the thought of leaving an eyeball or an arm behind me, in this state...” He shook his head. "And you can't Apparate at Hogwarts, you dolt."

“Oh, I have a thought,” Harry said suddenly. “Oooh, I have a good thought.” He frowned. “Let’s see...” He stuck his wand under the gap between the door and the flagstones. “Accio oxygen!” he said.

Harry immediately felt far more dizzy in the rush of air coming under the door, but he stood to peer inside the room anyway. “Hey, it worked! No more fire!”

Snape’s hand gripped him by the shoulder and practically tossed him back, slamming the door and whirling on him.

“What?”

“Do you hear yourself, Potter? ‘No more fire!’? What’s the matter with you, do you always feel the need to place yourself in harm’s way, is it some sort of obsession with you?”

“You told me to get in there and douse the flames!” Harry protested.

“I told you to figure out how to get in there and douse the flames!” Snape corrected, roaring now. “It’s not your responsibility to fix everything, do you hear me?”

“I’m sorry.”

Snape held himself rigid for another moment; then, he seemed to deflate. “So am I. First, you stood directly in the path of those fumes. Then, you called every oxygen molecule in the room over to you. Do you know how flammable oxygen is – and you, standing next to the torches? Strike that, I imagine you do, or you wouldn’t have called it away from the fire. Did you know an excess of oxygen also makes you lightheaded?”

“I... I do now,” Harry replied. “You, er... seem to be feeling better.”

The Professor sighed. “Yes. And you?”
Harry tilted his head to one side, running a systems diagnostic. “Okay, I guess. I still feel a bit odd.”

Snape ran a hand through his lank hair, a nervous, aberrant gesture that told Harry the Professor was still not quite himself. He sank suddenly into the chair behind his desk, his pitch-black eyes sliding up to Harry, then back again. “Well, sit, Harry, for Merlin’s sake.”

Harry moved cautiously to one of the chairs most directly across from the desk and slid into it, keeping an eye on his Professor the entire time. “Have – have I really changed so much?” he managed.

Professor Snape glared, and Harry couldn’t help but entertain the disturbing notion that the greasy-haired man was gazing through him instead of at him. “Perhaps you are merely growing up,” he finally said. “Or perhaps you were simply never the boy I thought you were.”

Harry frowned, not certain he liked that. “Detachment and the hold on my temper... do you think it’s Obscura?”

“Perhaps,” the Professor conceded, steepling his fingers. “General side-effects of the technique have never been studied, owing to its extremely limited number of master practitioners.”

“You said everyone who masters it goes insane.”

“Ah, yes.” Snape leaned slightly forward in his chair. “Allow me to rephrase then: that is one of the only things generally known about Obscura.” He frowned, and worried his lower lip, again a gesture so expressive that a pinprick of worry formed at the back of Harry’s mind. “A practitioner of Obscura – the sort of man who buries his emotions – is not likely to discuss side-effects with anyone else; nor is he the sort of man in whom anyone would note an alteration. The entire idea of the thing, Harry, is to hide oneself, to display a surface so consistent that there is never any impression created other than that of control.” He cleared his throat. “Often, the fact that the wizard in question was practicing Obscura goes completely unnoticed until the final month or so of limited sanity before...” He shrugged.

Harry swallowed with difficulty. “Oh. Er... well, you and Ron have been noticing, anyway.” He frowned. “And Draco, I think.”

“Your best friend and your worst enemy,” Snape mused. “They, more than anyone else, are in a position to appreciate an alteration in your behaviour. Besides, your initial behaviour–”

“I have an all-or-nothing personality, I know,” Harry filled in. “I wish you’d stop saying that. It sounds like I don’t have a brain.”

Snape laughed, but at least it was a low, scornful laugh and not the laugh full of feeling he’d heard earlier. “If I could trust you with such an advanced technique, I might teach you to control Obscura rather than abolishing it,” Snape mused. “You could certainly use a better hold on your temper. What worries me is that you appear to be doing this unconsciously, avoiding a meltdown at all costs.”

“Well of course I am,” Harry said, eyeing Snape. “You aren’t still hammered, are you, sir?”

“Maybe a little, but that isn’t the point, Mister Potter.”

They were back to ‘Mister Potter’. Harry sighed in relief. “What is the point?”

“That there are times in life when we must break down. When the walls around us hem us in rather...”
than keep our demons at bay. If we do not allow our pain expression once in a great while, we risk allowing it to overcome us in all things.”

Harry shut his open mouth with difficulty. “Y-yes sir,” he managed, hoping that Snape would only remember the gist of what he’d said in the morning. Almost against his will, he added, “what about you?”

“What about me?”

“You use this Obscura thing too, don’t you?”

Snape glared. “In my services for the Dark Lord, yes.”

“But do you let it out gradually?”

“Yes, Potter, why is it you think I have such a temper?!” Snape shot back, proving his point with the shout and glower. “I’m letting it out in a trickle most of the time; I have to!”

Harry fell silent after a small sigh. Then, “couldn’t you let it out all at once?”

“That would be... inadvisable.”

“But maybe in larger chunks? So not... all the time?”

“Potter, it’s late, I’m exhausted,” Snape said suddenly, passing a hand over his eyes.

Harry stood. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize...” He checked the watch at his wrist. “We’ve been here hours already, sir.”

“We didn’t even progress to anything practical,” Snape murmured, rubbing at his forehead. When Harry started forward, the Potions Master made a dismissive gesture. “Just an ordinary headache,” he said.

“We talked about it, and that is practical. It’d be great if we could start off every lesson with some talk,” Harry managed. “Like, what we’re going to do, before we do it? Uhm, that would help me. A lot.”

“Very well, now go,” Snape dismissed.

Harry stood gathering his things. He was almost to the door before a worry suddenly gripped him. “Professor? Do you need help getting downstairs?”

“My private rooms are not far,” Snape replied. “I’ll be fine, Mister Potter. Thank you for your concern.”

Harry nodded somewhat formally and moved into the corridor with the startled realization that he felt oddly cheerful – more cheerful, in fact, than when he’d come.
First: I added "If Malfoy planned on sneaking someone into the castle underneath an Invisibility Cloak, surely he didn't need Harry's. No, this was personal." because I couldn't resist the irony of "if Malfoy planned on sneaking someone into the castle", given the events of HBP/DH. That line is not in either of the other versions.

Remember, guys, no actual Horcruxes and no Deathly Hallows in this story, which was written in 2005 or thereabouts. But the idea of Harry *handing over* a Deathly Hallow to Draco Malfoy to test his own sense of honor and decency... WOW that context would have raised the stakes considerably.

Initially, Yolande Zabini was a Pansy Parkinson cut-out, and later she developed more of a personality. I retconned her lines to sound more like I view her now.

A few people have pointed out Obscura's connection to real mental illness, and notably a reviewer asked me if Obscura is 'real' and can be performed by real people. Look up 'suppression' (psychology) and 'repression' (psychology) for the answer to that question. 'Expressive suppression' can also be enlightening, even if it's about physical manifestations of an emotional response.

Reviews feed the beast! You can only hit 'kudos' once, but you can review as often as you like!

-K
Harry was beginning to become used to slipping outside before anyone else was awake; it was his summer, he supposed, still dictating his schedule. He made for his broom; then, on second thought, he took two Potions texts instead, figuring that he would double-check his assumptions about what had happened the night before.

Still, instinct had him heading towards the Quidditch pitch. There was enough light to read by, and the stands would allow him to have some peace and quiet in the precious moments before the rest of the school stirred from sleep.

Harry’s coveted moment of solitude was, however, not to be. A small figure was hunched behind the stands with its arms thrown about its knees. Harry was about to turn around when a stray ray of sunlight illuminated bright red hair, and he realized that, whoever it was, it was probably a friend of his.

Rae Thomas sniffled up at him, displaying a tear-stained face and bleary green eyes. “Harry!” she whispered urgently. Then her features scrunched up, more tears welling, and she doubled over again to bawl into her robes.

“Oh, Rae,” Harry said stupidly, sitting next to her. He’d never had a little sister, so he wasn’t sure what to do. Ron would probably know whether he ought to tease her or hug her. Luckily, Rae took the matter out of his hands by leaning against him and gaining a handful of his dark robes; Harry awkwardly raised his arm and she ducked under it, curling her smaller body around his; she was radiating the heat only a child crying could manage, and Harry almost immediately felt uncomfortably sweaty.

For a good five more minutes, she sobbed, but then she began to slow down, the tears breaking into occasional hiccoughs. Finally, she looked up at him. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“All right?” he inquired, smoothing her damp bangs out of her eyes.

She nodded resolutely and sat up. “M sorry, you’re all wet, now,” she observed.

Harry looked down at the two large circles on his robes that were indubitably from each of Rae’s eyes, and smiled. “What’s the matter?”

“Is... is it true about... the scar?”

Harry hadn’t thought Rae was crying over his childhood, so this seemed a bit of an odd question. “Er... yeah.”

“Voldemort – he killed your parents, and almost killed you?”

Harry nodded solemnly. “That’s right.”

“Mine too,” Rae said.
Harry froze. “Rae...?”

“And my little sister Maggie, and even the dog,” she said. “I've never understood that. It's not like a dog can be Muggleborn or pureblood.” She played absently with the grass, allowing it to run between her fingers.

“Why?” Harry said.

She looked up at him, dry-eyed, now. “Well, no one knows, really. He doesn’t like Muggles. Professor McGonagall said... maybe... for ‘sport’.”

“I'll kill her,” Harry said, and at the moment, he meant it.

“Oh, no, it was a relief,” she said, wide-eyed with the effort to convince him. “Really, it was. He wasn’t after me, not like he’s after you. It’s how I found my magic,” she added in a small voice. “I saw... and ran... and before I knew it, I was far away, far, far away, where he couldn’t reach me.”

“You Apparated?”

Rae nodded. “Yes, but I’m not sure I could do it again. It was an emergency,” she tacked on needlessly, scrubbing at her cheeks. “I’m sorry for crying all over you.”

Harry shook his head, remembering what Professor Snape had said. “It’s fine to cry, especially over something like that. I’m lucky; I don’t really recall my parents.” This had never struck him as lucky before. “Let’s go inside and get you cleaned up, okay?”

She nodded desolately, and they stood, Harry pulling her to her feet. “I hear you and Lilac and Ewan had a fight...”

Rae nodded. “Sort of. They wanted to start a Muggle-born club, and I didn’t want to join.”

“A club?” Harry laughed, picturing Ewan as the head of such an organization. “I suppose I can see that.”

“It’s stupid, though. I’m not – I’m not all that good at convincing people of things. But I knew it’s stupid all the same.” She frowned in anxiety. “Didn’t they listen to what the Hat said? And Hermione?”

Harry didn’t quite follow, but he opened the door, allowing Rae to slide in ahead of him. “The Hat and Hermione were talking about Houses,” he said.

“No, about... oh...!” Rae was distracted by a group of approaching first-years. “No, I can’t go to the ladies’ here,” she said. “Everyone’ll know...”

Harry grinned. “I know just the place,” he said.

“Oi!” Harry said as he peered through the door. “Myrtle?”

When he didn’t hear anything, he ushered Rae in ahead of him, then slipped inside himself, and closed the door.
“Who’s Myrtle?” Rae demanded. “Why are you coming in the girls’ room?”

Harry grinned. “Myrtle’s one of the ghosts in the castle, and this bathroom’s been abandoned because she lives here.”

“She isn’t... dangerous, is she?”

“Er... no. Annoying, sometimes, maybe...”

Harry supposed Rae wasn’t a Parseltongue, so she could never open the passageway that ran through Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom; he certainly seemed to be the only one of his generation. Besides, he doubted that the third-floor girls’ room really led to anything dastardly, these days. Just yet another secret passage, now partially caved in... Although Harry had to wonder what it had been before Tom Riddle came along. He doubted that any sixth-year, no matter how extraordinary, could manage to hollow out an entire catacomb of caverns below Hogwarts undetected. It had to have been for something, at one time... an escape route, perhaps?

The real entrance, in that case, was probably not in the girls’ toilets, Harry realized with a small smirk. Besides, it was obvious that Riddle had fashioned the entrance, himself, as it only responded to Parseltongue. Perhaps he could discover the original entrance using the Marauder’s Map? Of course, now that he no longer had the Cloak...

Rae finished splashing her face and turned to gaze up at him. “All right?” she inquired, lifting her chin for inspection.

“They’ll never know,” he assured her. Rae nodded resolutely and moved to the door, but Harry stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. “Look, if you’d ever like to talk about it some more, that’s fine by me. Don’t cry alone, though, it’s never any good.”

Rae eyed him anxiously before jerking a small nod. “Okay, Harry.”

When Harry entered the Great Hall, he moved automatically to Slytherin, despite the fact that Draco wasn’t awake yet. He settled himself in and began eating, heedless of the motions of those around him until Yolande set herself down at his right.

“Hey, Harry,” she greeted with a smile. “All right? Listen, I hear Draco’s taken something of yours,” she said without preamble. “Something important.”

Harry stiffened. “Yeah. And?”

“And I can get it back for you,” she replied with a smile that had so many layers, Harry couldn’t begin to sort them.

“That’s no use. He’ll figure I’ve gotten it back, and ask for it again; and then he’ll order me to never again remove anything from his room, or something.”

Yolande smiled. “I’ll get it back for you once your punishment is over, deliver it into your hands. I know where he’s hidden it.”

Harry blinked. “And? Where’s the catch?”
“No catch, Harry, just a deal. One: you let me make you a multi-House badge, and you wear it. Two: you put in a good word for me. That’s simple, isn’t it?”

“Put in a good word for you?”

“Oi, don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about,” she said impatiently. “Well?”

Harry paused, considering. He knew Hermione liked Ron; it certainly couldn’t hurt to say something kind about the blonde-haired girl, since it would do nothing. However, it went a bit against his grain to plot anything concerning Hermione. Besides all that, he could get a huge amount of flak from his House over the badge. “Let me think about it.”

She shrugged, giving all signs of being unconcerned, and turned to pick once more at her eggs.

Harry finished his, clearing the plate automatically before glancing around. “Where’s Malfoy?” he wondered aloud.

Yolande shrugged, standing and gathering her books. “Haven’t seen him. Best ask those two.”

Harry gazed across the table at Crabbe and Goyle, who were glaring at him. Or, rather, Goyle was glaring; Crabbe was looking slightly amused. “Hey; er, d’you know where Malfoy is?” he inquired.

Goyle opened his mouth, but Crabbe elbowed him. Both shook their heads.

Harry shrugged, then stood, brushing a bit of food off of the front of his robes, before striding off to Potions.

Harry was early, so he set up his and Draco’s cauldrons side-by-side long before any of the other students had arrived. Oddly, Professor Snape was early as well, for all he normally strode in dramatically once everyone was seated. When Snape entered his classroom to find Harry already there, he paused, as though taken aback.

Harry was surprised to realize that the man’s cheeks had tinged a pale pink. *Uh oh,* he thought, *he’s really embarrassed... this does not bode well...*

He kept especially quiet, his actions measured, not even daring to make any sudden moves; when Hermione came in, Yolande trailing behind, Harry couldn’t help but grin at them both in sudden relief.

Hermione waved, her gaze flicking over to the already-present professor and back. “All right, Harry? We missed you at breakfast. Ron kept muttering that Malfoy wasn’t there, so he had no right to make you sit at Slytherin.”

Harry shrugged. “I had Yolande there, anyway,” Harry replied, “so it wasn’t all bad.” He shrugged at the blonde-haired girl apologetically.

“I just don’t get why so many Slytherins follow him around – sorry, Yolande,” Hermione tacked on, calming slightly.

“Oi, everyone knows Malfoy’s a useless prat,” Yolande admitted, keeping her voice low because
of the professor’s presence. “But there are so few of us in Slytherin willing to admit it. His father’s got so much money and power right now that most of us are prepared to lick his boots, though Malfoy’ll soon be little more than a name, anymore. It already doesn’t open the doors it used to.”

Harry frowned. “What do you mean?”

Yolande half-turned to face him in her chair. “Well, his family did the right thing, claiming to be bewitched just after -” She paused, sighing. “Er, You-Know-Who died. They lost very little credibility on the surface.” At Harry’s blank look, she elaborated. “You know, the Malfoys moved so quickly that people could at least fool themselves into imagining that the family really had been enchanted – especially those who accepted bribes in order to ease their passage through all of those irritating legalities. It’s... how do you call it...? A ‘polite fiction’.”

Harry seated himself, facing the other girl. “Well, yeah. Everyone knows about Lucius Malfoy.”

“But nobody says,” Hermione added. “That lends a veneer of credibility to the Malfoy name.”

“But now,” Yolande went on, “Lucius Malfoy has made the mistake of siding with Him again. This time, the claim of bewitchment shall be a bit harder to swallow.” Her chin lifted slightly. “Quite impossible to swallow, actually. All of the money in the world won’t help them now. The Malfoys are living on borrowed time.”

“What I don’t understand is why he would do it, then,” Hermione said helplessly, furrowing her brow. “It really doesn’t make any sense, does it? Why do such a foolish thing? I may not like the Malfoys, but I don’t consider any of them stupid.”

Yolande turned to smile at Hermione rather fondly. “That’s only because you’re so good, Hermione. What’s the only reason anyone would embark on such a foolhardy venture?”

Harry answered her, seeing Draco’s grey eyes light with fanatical enthusiasm. “They really believe in it, don’t they?”

Yolande nodded. “Honest-to-goodness zealotry,” she confirmed. “Muggle-hating, money-and-power-hungry zealotry. Can’t see they’re the last of a dying breed; it’s literally unthinkable for them. All of them: Nott, and Crabbe and Goyle and maybe even my stupid cousin’s mum and dad.”

Harry nodded, leaning back in his seat with something like shock. Sure, he had known that not all Slytherins were Death Eaters, but this actual evidence was off-putting nonetheless. Of course, there were nearly a hundred students in Slytherin; they couldn’t have all been Death Eaters, or even sympathizers. And he hadn’t really supposed anyone could like Hermione who was a Muggle-hater... but it all seemed so odd.

But he didn’t have time enough to think of much more than that, because the lesson was beginning; Snape made a few more scratches on a notepad in front of him and stood, addressing the class.

“Mister Potter, where is Mister Malfoy?”

Harry shrugged, thinking that the blond-haired Slytherin had probably gone to find somewhere even more secret to hide the invisibility cloak. “Sorry, sir. Don’t know.”

Snape frowned. “All right. Let’s begin, then.”

What followed was probably the most pleasant Potions lesson Harry had ever had. Without
Draco’s work to do, he found himself staying alongside his professor’s instructions without any great difficulty, and held his hand up to answer questions nearly as often as Hermione. He’d read Chapter Two of Advanced Potion-Making twice, making small notes in the margins the first time, although it had all seemed rather familiar already.

As Harry was gathering his things to head to Charms, Snape looked up at him with an odd expression. “I wonder, Potter, if you’ve ever found out what would happen if you added asphodel to an infusion of wormwood.”

Harry couldn’t help it – he laughed, startled into amusement. “You said it was a sleeping potion – I haven’t forgotten, or anything.”

Snape nodded, and went back to collecting his own materials.

Harry was nearly out the door when he paused, and turned. “Hey, though, they’d sure make an excellent drink, wouldn’t they? Absinthe from the wormwood, if you used an alcoholic extraction instead of an infusion, and from Arabian asphodel, that liqueur...” He shook his head. “Don’t remember what it’s called, but I read about it in some Muggle book or other.”

“It’s called Komante,” Snape replied, folding his arms across his chest. “Tell me, Mister Potter; have you decided on a topic for your term paper, as of yet?”

Harry grinned, nodding. “Yeah, I decided before I even arrived; listen, it’s going to be great. Now, don’t interrupt ‘til I’m done, because the thesis is a little... well, it’s unconventional.”

Snape gestured expansively with one arm, as if to say that Harry had the floor.

“I’m going to take a bunch of Muggle Botany books and a bunch of Potions texts, and compare the plants in them and make a project of how often their uses coincide. I’ve already talked to Hermione; she says she can help me a bit with the Arithmancy to decide whether the results are significant. And if they are... well, that’s where the real difficulty starts. Did Muggles discover the answers independently, because if they did, aren’t they using magic somehow? And if they didn’t discover it using magic, then Potions isn’t really magic, see, it’s Chemistry...” He paused at the thunderous expression on Snape’s face. “Heh,” he laughed nervously, “I knew you wouldn’t like it much, but even you called Potions a science, didn’t you, the very first day...”

Professor Snape gazed in that way he had, as though he were examining Harry’s very bones, before breaking off with a small shudder.

“Professor?”

Snape was examining him minutely, as though viewing him for the very first time. “Get to class, Harry.”

“There isn’t anything wrong with that thesis?” Harry inquired, not liking the expression on his professor’s face.

“We shall see. For now – do as I say, and go.”
Whelp, there it is, folks! Sorry for the delay; I'm visiting my sister right now, so I'm not entirely certain how regular updates are going to be over the next week. :( 

It's really interesting to go back over the story so much later. This chapter probably had the greatest number of line-by-line edits so far: like, nothing big, just a tweak here and a changed phrase there, but in almost every paragraph. Also, in the original version, I had an error re: what asphodel + wormwood actually does in the HP universe. Oops...

Absinthe is a real thing, but there is not a commonly imbibed liqueur made of asphodel. (Although it does exist, it has no such common name.)

Thanks so much for the reviews! :)

-K
Harry entertained the brief but heady fantasy that his paper idea had rocked his professor’s world
to its foundations, but he found himself unable to support that. Surely Snape, a Potions Master, had
at least considered the idea that Muggle sciences and his discipline were related in some fashion.
In that case, he was quite unable to guess why the idea had so unsettled Snape.

Today was Harry’s meeting with Professor Lupin, after supper; the Professor reminded him of it
after their lesson on vampires and ghouls. Harry was not looking forward to it; ever since Harry
had cast the Imperius, the Defense Professor had been oddly stiff and formal. He was beginning to
wonder if Remus Lupin would ever forgive him.

All throughout the day, Draco persisted in his absence. At one point, Harry got curious enough to
check the Hospital Wing, but Madam Pomfrey made it clear that Draco had not been there since
the initial casting of the curse. Draco was skipping out, probably to do some sort of underhanded
thing using his father’s cloak...

Harry found that time moved rather quickly when he was awaiting something miserable, and the
day certainly flew past as he awaited the interview with Lupin. Not having Draco around to fill his
moments up with inane demands and dark looks made the day seem uneventful, which merely gave
him more time to dread the meeting.

After dinner (at which Malfoy was, once again, not present) Harry wended his way up to Lupin’s
office, and knocked. When Lupin answered, Harry slipped inside.

Remus’s office was unlike it had been in third-year; the professor had made good use of all of the
items left behind by his predecessors: Moody’s Dark Detectors, several odd implements that Harry
recognized as having been Quirrell’s, and...

“You didn’t keep those!” Harry sputtered, catching sight of a complete collection of Professor
Lockhart’s books.

The Professor followed Harry’s eye to the books. “And why not? They’re entertaining, aren’t
they?”

Harry rolled his eyes.

“They also contain very excellent anecdotes. If you read through all the flourish, you’ll realize
they contain good advice on dealing with Dark creatures; they were taken from credible sources,
you know, before Lockhart stole and embellished on them.”

As ice-breakers went, Harry decided, that had been a good way to go. Lupin, leaning back in his
chair with his waistcoat unbuttoned, looked more relaxed than Harry had seen him all term. “Have
a seat, Harry,” he said, gesturing to a swivel chair tucked into a desk across the room. Harry
turned the chair around and perched in it, unable to escape the feeling that he was three years
younger, talking to Lupin about his parents.

The nostalgia seemed to be affecting Lupin, too, who smiled at him warmly. “Now, Potter, shall
we discuss your first series of lessons?”
Harry nodded. “What’s your schedule for the twenty-ninth?”

Lupin scooted slightly closer and offered Harry his planbook. “I was thinking that we’ll probably be up to grindylows with the third-years; and with your class? We’ll probably have moved to our first real duels.”

Harry looked up to note that the professor’s expression had shifted to somber. “I’m sorry, Professor. I really am.”

“I have no doubt you are,” Lupin said, passing a hand over his eyes. He examined Harry, much as Snape had earlier in the day. “I never would have given you such responsibility, Harry,” he said suddenly. “You’re not ready for it.”

“Professor...!”

“No, Harry; and I am not seeing you as the third-year student I once had. You’re different now; I could spot it right away, and I don’t mean how you’ve shot up in height. But you’re still a child.” He frowned. “No one but me seems to realize that. Even Severus —”

Lupin broke off, then, shaking his head. “But it’s no use. You’re really the best we have, our best option. There is no one else who could fill the position as admirably. You will miss classes, but you’re clever enough to make them up, especially with Hermione’s help...”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, sir,” Harry said dryly, raising an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Lupin said, sounding like he meant it. “Really. I just think you’ve got people expecting enough of you without being a teacher, too.”

“I’m coping fine, thanks,” Harry said, his voice dripping with venom, before he realized that this wasn’t probably what Lupin had meant at all.

“Ah. Yes, well,” Remus replied, catching on to Harry’s defensiveness quickly and backing off. “First-years will still be learning to handle their wands, so I’ll probably be on book-work with them. Same for the second-years. Fourth-years will be learning the protective and defensive charms. Fifth years will be just starting more aggressive magic. Seventh-years... well, we can hardly expect you to teach above your year, Harry.”

“I did at the D.A.,” Harry replied. “I’ll manage.”

Lupin nodded. “I don’t suppose that there’s much more to go over. I’m told your lessons for your D.A. were superb. But I did want to talk to you about some other issues.”

*Here it comes,* Harry thought.

“You haven’t noted any... side-effects... after doing the Imperius curse on Draco Malfoy?”

This was the last thing Harry expected to hear. “Am I supposed to be noting any?”

The Professor moved a hand through his sandy hair and shrugged. “Many wizards experience them, but not all. There must be a certain... compatibility between the caster and his victim, for any sort of connection to persist.”

Harry winced slightly at the word ‘victim’. “What are the side-effects?”

“Well – have you, for instance, been experiencing an urge to cast the curse again?”
“Once, the day after,” Harry suddenly recalled, “but not since.”

“An added closeness to Mister Malfoy?”

Harry winced more visibly. “Come again?”

“I suppose not,” Lupin said with a teasing smile. “What about any alterations in personality, in your need to command others? A certain detachment from everyday life?”

“No,” Harry lied smoothly. He wondered if all Dark Arts had similar effect on the caster, and, after a moment, voiced the question.

“Similar, yes, but it is specific to the spell cast,” Lupin elaborated. “Casting the Cruciatus Curse, for example, is also addictive, and increases the need to command others. However, it also increases the caster’s penchant for causing pain, both emotional and physical. It causes a far more marked feeling of distance from the rest of humanity.”

Harry shivered, wondering what might have happened to him if he’d managed to cast the Cruciatus on Bellatrix. “What if you were to cast a Dark Arts spell on yourself?” he inquired. He was pretty certain that Snape hadn’t casually informed any of the other staff about Obscura, and he didn’t want Lupin to know – but he needed to know more about it.

“On yourself?” Lupin echoed, staring at Harry in distaste. “You have changed, Harry.”

“I’m growing up,” Harry said flatly, “or perhaps I never was the child you thought I was.”

There was a moment of silence in which Remus Lupin examined him carefully, this time with a far more thoughtful eye than before. He seemed to know Harry was quoting someone, and attempting to discern whom; Harry’s estimation of the Professor went up a notch. “Well – I’m not sure,” Remus replied, rather carefully. “You might end up with the worst of both sides of the curse; the side-effects of the caster along with the effects upon the victim.”

“Let’s say you cast Imperio on yourself,” Harry meditated, “ordering yourself to do something. Would that work?”

Lupin frowned at him. “Perhaps...”

“What would happen to you?”

The Professor tapped a finger against his lips as he contemplated this. “No, I’m relatively certain that wouldn’t work, Harry. A person under the Imperius Curse is nearly useless – they would be unable to order themselves to do anything. It would be a waste of time.” He eyed Harry again. “But it’s a very interesting thought, Mister Potter.”

Back to the ‘Mister Potter’ business again. Hmm, better back off somewhat...

“Er... what about the side-effects to the Imperius? The one who it’s cast on, I mean,” Harry tacked on. “I want to be able to make sure Draco’s okay, too, and I doubt he’ll come and talk to you.”

Lupin nodded. “Well, let’s see. Has he demonstrated increased respect for you?”

Harry laughed aloud. “Definitely not.”

“Has he asked you to cast the Imperius Curse on him again?”

Harry froze. “Would... would someone do that?”
“Have you ever been under *Imperio* before, Harry?”

Harry nodded.

“Then you *must* recall the feeling...” Lupin sighed. “*Imperius* would be more addictive to someone with a great deal of troubles. With so much falling away, it’s far easier to note the lightness...” He shook his head. “In any case, the idea of no longer being responsible for one’s actions is a rather tantalizing one to the thoughtful wizard. No guilt, no self-recrimination, no second-guessing... everything’s decided for you before you even wake up in the morning.”

Harry shuddered.

“Yes, that’s it exactly, but when you’re a bit older, Harry, you’ll begin to see the appeal. Teenaged witches and wizards, incidentally, have less trouble concerning addiction to the curse.”

“That’s a relief, then,” Harry said. He frowned. “Come to think of it, Malfoy *was* a lot nicer to me than I expected, the first day I was under his control. At first, I thought it was just because he didn’t know what to do with me yet, and he said it was because it would be easier to start off simple... but maybe it was aftereffects of the *Imperius*. He was almost decent.”

Lupin frowned, concerned.

“No need to worry, Professor, after a day he was right as rain. Trust me.” When the Professor continued to look anxious, he added, “I’ll keep an eye on him and tell you immediately if he shows any additional symptoms.”

“Thank you, Harry. That’s a great relief.”

Harry shrugged. “Just fixing my mess, Professor.”

When Harry reached the Common Room, Ron was scribbling Charms homework with Hermione. “Want to talk?” he inquired, without looking up.

“No, Ron,” Harry said. “For the last time.”

Ron put down his quill and raised his eyes. “It isn’t the last time, because I’ll keep asking until you give me a different answer.”

“I’ve got nothing to talk about,” Harry replied icily.

Hermione was now frowning at them both. “What’s this all about, then?”

“Ron thinks I’ve gone ‘round the bend.”

“No, I don’t,” Ron retorted, talking to Hermione rather than Harry. “I think we need to talk about Sirius, that’s all.”

“Ron,” Hermione said gently, “grief is a very private thing. People deal with it in different ways, you know.”

“Complete and utter denial isn’t a way of dealing with –” Ron paused. “How come whenever you
argue with Harry, and whenever I argue with Harry, we always end up arguing with each other?”

Harry snorted, and whirled around to brood in the chair by the fireplace, leaving the other two to their conversation, or argument – whichever it was. He took out his own homework and sped through it, telling himself that he would check his answers at the Quidditch pitch tomorrow – alone.

Harry was up before dawn again, grabbing his books and finding an isolated bench by the pitch to study. This meant he had a good hour before the Unsorted House descended.

Ewan, Lilac, and Rae were together again; this time they’d brought a handful of others. Harry recognized a Gryffindor second-year, and a Hufflepuff third-year along with two more of the Unsorted House.

“All right, Harry?” Ewan called, while Rae waved to him shyly.

“Great,” Harry said, closing his books up and waving in return. “How are you all? What do you think of classes?”

They discussed Transfiguration (“Easily our hardest class,” Ewan said), Potions (“Not too terrible if you read the text and ignore the giant bat up front”), Charms (“Bloody brilliant!”), and Care of Magical Creatures. “The flobberworms are sweet,” Lilac said, but everyone else shuddered.

“We hear you did a small class last year,” Ewan said, “of selected members. Are you doing it again?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “Would you be interested?”

“All of us are,” he replied, and heads bobbed throughout the group.

“We’ve heard all kinds of stories,” Lilac supplied. “If even half of them are true, it would be marvelous to have you for a tutor!”

“Probably that’s about how many of them are true,” Harry supplied ruefully, “and likely not the ones you believe.”

She and Rae exchanged a glance and giggled.

“All the same,” he tacked on, “I’m not an... Expert? he thought. He knew, without pride, that he was. “...er, a full-grown wizard, and I’m sure there’s a lot about Defense that I don’t know – but these tutoring sessions were really just to ground people in the basics, that’s all... I suppose you’re welcome to come, then, if I set it up.”

Lilac jumped up and down, bouncing on the balls of her feet with barely-restrained glee.

“We thought we might be too young,” Rae admitted, glancing at the other girl.

“You’re never too young to learn how to defend yourself,” Harry said sadly.

Rae nodded solemnly, her small face set in determined lines.
“I will have your classes at the end of the month,” he mused. “Professor Lupin wanted you doing bookwork, and wanted you doing grindylows,” he said, glancing at the third-year, “but... well, perhaps he’s underestimated you. We’ll see, won’t we? After that, I’ll be in a better position to see if you’re too young to be in the D.A.”

Ewan straightened self-importantly.

“Don’t worry, I promise we’ll work on simple things,” Harry said. “All right?”

Nods and murmurs moved through the group.

“And if I do set up the D.A. again, you’ll be the first to know.”

Draco had mysteriously reappeared, and was seated at the nearly-empty Slytherin table when Harry meandered into the Great Hall, a half-dozen children of assorted houses trailing in his wake. Several of them insisted on sitting near Harry, Yolande, or Hermione, but Harry couldn’t fault them. He couldn’t help but recall that Ewan, Lilac, and Rae had sought him out before they ever knew anything about the famous Harry Potter, his scar, or how he received it.

“Harry’s going to teach us Defense!” Ewan chirped, sliding in between Harry and Draco.

“Wonderful,” Draco said flatly.

Ewan didn’t seem to note the sarcasm. “There are rumors he can do all sorts of things most wizards can’t, but he won’t say anything about himself. Can you tell me if they’re true?”

Draco made some small, noncommittal noise.

“Can he talk to snakes?”

Draco eyed Harry, then nodded grudgingly.

“Can he scare away a dementor?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Draco replied, slumping so that he pillowed his head in his arms. His voice emerged, slightly muffled by the black cloth of his robes.

“Was the Defense Association last year a secret organization, with magic coins that said the date of the next meeting?”

“Yes,” Draco repeated dully.

“Oh, wow,” Ewan murmured, looking up at Harry with awe. “Okay, last thing, Draco. Did he get that thing on his head from Voldemort, who tried to –”

Draco jumped at the mention of the name. “No more questions, Ewan.”

“But is it true? Is that why he has the scar?”

The blond Slytherin shifted once more into a proper seated position, glaring first at Ewan, then at Harry. “Let me tell you something about Harry Potter,” he said, venom dripping from every word.
“He’s been in trouble since he was your age. He rushes where the angels dare not tread, and all of that. It’s gotten him nearly killed with regularity, gotten his friends nearly killed with regularity, and got one of his closest friends killed just several months ago. His penchant for tossing himself into danger – his hero complex, if you will – is nothing more than a desperate desire to be recognized, by an adopted child whose aunt and uncle never so much as –”

Harry pushed Draco so hard that he tumbled over backward out of his seat and onto the floor of the Great Hall. Several people laughed, but Harry was not in a laughing mood. He grabbed hold of Draco’s robes and hauled him to his feet, and then out the door, and then outside to the thankfully still-deserted Quidditch pitch, where he let go abruptly enough to send the blond-haired boy sprawling.

“You idiot, Potter, what d’y you think you’re doing?!” Draco yelled, drawing his wand.

“What do you think you were doing back there?” Harry demanded. “Not everyone grows up with a silver spoon in his mouth!” His hands began to tremble, and he curled them into fists, hoping to hide the motion. “Besides... besides, it’s not my say whether my friends follow me in whatever I do, okay? It’s like you said, isn’t it, everyone wants power? So they’ll follow me, because that’s what I am to them! You think I like that? You think that makes me feel like I’m... bloody –”

“What, the Dark Lord?” Draco scathed. “Please...” He paused, his grey eyes narrowing. “Call them followers, then, and not friends, if you dare. I’m certain Weasley and Granger would appreciate your honesty.”

Harry went cold, his next breath leaving him in a small shudder.

“This isn’t about family, is it? It’s about friends. Or your lack thereof.” Draco examined him closely, pocketing his wand. “You think they like you because of your fame. And so? What’s wrong with that?”

“What’s wrong with it is that they’ll leave once Voldemort is conquered!”

“Once Voldemort is conquered. Goodness, you do have an ego. Don’t worry, Potter. If he is vanquished, you’ll always be the bloody Chosen One, the Boy Who Lived to Feel Sorry for Himself, you know. Even if it’s in your past, it’ll still have meaning to the teeming masses.”

“And what if I don’t want to be liked for that?”

“You don’t have a choice, you naive little snot,” Draco shot back. “Your name will always have power.” The Slytherin’s voice had gone slightly chillier at this statement, Harry noted.

“And yours...” he murmured.

“Right, won’t,” Draco tacked on. He sighed. “You’re worried that your name and history is the only thing that brings people to you? I know that’s true in my case; my name only ever really had prestige. And now... with my father in Azkaban... well, Potter, let’s just say that things aren’t looking very good for me.”

Harry stared. “I... I didn’t think–”

“Well, that’s your way, isn’t it?” Draco demanded. “To whinge and moan without consideration for those around you?”

Harry took in a shaky breath, trying to remember where he’d heard about the bottom dropping out of the Malfoy name before... “Hey... you were in class yesterday! In the cloak!”
“Give the boy a prize,” Draco intoned.

“Were you in every class?”

“I followed you, actually,” Draco supplied, “including into Professor Lupin’s office. Casting the Imperius on yourself? What an intriguing idea. I simply must use it at Mother’s next cocktail party. Merlin knows I need to control my temper during, and that I’d really rather forget, after.”

Harry twitched a grin. “I don’t think that’s wise. Besides, I already have something for things that get beyond my temper, it’s just... not wise, either.”

“No quick fix is ever really wise, is it?” Draco inquired, moving to sit at the lowest seat on the Slytherin side of the pitch. Harry sat on the grass, pulling his knees up, and for a minute they were silent, Harry trying to process all that the other boy had said to him. It took a moment for him to realize that Draco had heard the entire conversation with Yolande and Hermione; he’d also heard Harry call him ‘almost decent’, along with the side effects of Imperio from Professor Lupin.

“You haven’t... er, had any of those side effects the Professor mentioned, have you?”

Draco shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “No...”

When Harry glared up at him, the blonde boy shrugged.

“The first day, like you said,” he replied, his gaze going faraway. “It was... odd. I knew I wasn’t seeing you the same way, but I couldn’t really put my finger on what was different.” He frowned. “What was different?”

Now Draco glared down at him, and Harry grinned innocently. “I’m curious,” he said.

“That expression may work on your precious little fans, Potter...”

Harry laughed in spite of himself, and pulled a face. “Fine. This better?”

Draco shoved him roughly aside, unamused. “I’m surprised you’d waste your time even speaking to a zealot,” he said coldly, standing from his perch.

It was impossible to tell behind Draco’s still features whether he were commenting absently, angry, or even hurt underneath the words. Harry opted to stay amused. “Well, aren’t you speaking to the Boy Who Lived To...?”

“...Feel Sorry for Himself,” Draco completed.

“Whatever,” Harry said coolly, standing as well. He looked up to see that Hermione was making her way towards the two of them across the pitch, her brown hair flying back behind her.

“Oh, thank goodness!” she exclaimed, catching sight of them standing, Harry with his hands in his pockets, Draco rolling his eyes and looking annoyed. “When you dragged him outside, Harry, I really thought you’d come here to fight... you did it so quickly, none of the teachers noticed...”

“Seems like you did, Granger,” Draco commented with a grin, striding up to Hermione and moving into her personal space. “Keeping an eye on your boyfriend, are you?”

Hermione leaned slightly away, but refused to give ground. “Stay out of it, Malfoy,” she said clearly. “I only wanted to make certain that the two of you hadn’t hexed one another to pieces, that’s all.”
“We’re fine, thanks,” Harry said. He turned to glare at Draco. “Aren’t we?”

“Oh, perfectly,” the Slytherin drawled, turning from Hermione to shove Harry ahead of him. “Come along, then, or we’ll be late for Potions. Coming, Granger? One would suppose you’d faint dead away at the mere thought of being late to a class...”

And together, the trio moved off of the pitch and into Hogwarts.

Chapter End Notes

One of my favorite aspects of this story is the theme of connection vs disconnection and the connected idea of empathy versus control: that being willing to connect with others leads to empathy for and understanding of others, while willful disconnection stems from fear, and leads to the need to control others.

Or, more concisely: fear leads to anger; anger leads to hate; hate leads to suffering (and the Dark Side). :) 

-K
Potions passed rather uneventfully, save for the fact that Snape was still examining Harry like some as-of-yet undiscovered form of Magical Creature. When the lesson ended, however, Draco grabbed him by the wrist and yanked him back down into his seat before he could depart for Charms.

“What?” Harry demanded.

Draco smiled, and it was not his spontaneous, warm smile – it was the one Harry recognized, full of dark intent. “I have two requests. They will be very difficult for you.”

Harry paled, thinking that nothing could have been worse than handing over his most prized possession in all the world.

Draco moved Harry’s wrist above their worktable and pressed a sheet of parchment, rolled, into the dark-haired boy’s open palm. “Read it carefully,” he said, his tone measured. “Memorize it. Burn it. Then do as it says.”

“I’m not all that good at –”

“Oh, trust me, this’ll stick in your mind.”

Harry unfurled the parchment and scanned it, feeling the color drain from his face. He looked up, as he had before, he realized, out of some sort of misplaced conviction he might see mercy engraved on the marble of Draco’s pale features. The Slytherin was more than willing to stare him down, his grey eyes cold and unreachable.

When mute pleas failed, Harry tried for cheek. “You aren’t serious,” he said, crumpling the paper and tossing it towards the trash bin.

Draco caught it effortlessly, dropped it back on the desk. “I am. It’s an order.”

“I can’t even say some of these words.”

“If you can call me Master, you can say them,” Draco returned.

“I won’t.”

“Then you’ll be breaking the terms of your punishment!” Draco snapped, standing and towering over Harry. His lips twisted into a sneer. “Though I’ve heard Azkaban is perfectly lovely this time of year. Father’s become ever so fond…” He seemed, then, to choke on his own words. Flushing, he spun and strode for the Potions classroom door. “Do it, Harry. Or else.”

When Harry looked down at the crumpled sheet of parchment, he heard someone clearing his throat.

Professor Snape was staring at him, one eyebrow raised. “Unless you’d like to join the seventh-year Potions students, Potter…”

Harry took a gulp of air and stood, feeling that now-all-too-familiar sensation of suppressed
emotion; he couldn’t let it overcome him, but he didn’t want to somehow end up muffling it with Obscura, either. But he didn’t even know how he accomplished the technique, so it was hard for him to prevent himself from using it...

Try not thinking about it, he advised himself harshly, and he placed himself mentally on the Quidditch pitch, not doing Potions homework or talking to the first-years, but soaring, soaring high above it on a broom, alone on a foggy morning...

It seemed to work. The feeling of helpless rage was falling away, now. He opened his eyes and stood, gathering his things. “Sorry for staying so long,” he mumbled, and escaped out of the classroom, the parchment crumpled to a ball, rough in one hand.

Ron partnered him in Charms, but Harry paid so little attention to the casting that he was very nearly useless. He was beginning to fail Charms, he realized, because it was after he partnered with Draco in Potions, and his mind was usually too occupied to keep it together, afterwards. Ron was encouraging in vague terms, telling Harry that it would soon be over; whether he meant the class or Draco’s orders was unclear. Hermione, however, eyed him worriedly.

“Harry,” she said, only paying a modicum of attention to her feather as she turned it green, then blue, then violet, “what’s the matter? You look positively grey.”

“I know,” Ron said, “it’s that Quidditch tryouts are tomorrow, isn’t it?”

“Quidditch?” Harry inquired absently, setting his feather on fire. Just as absentl, he drew a spare from a coffee tin at the head of the classroom, then returned. “Tryouts are this week?”

Hermione and Ron exchanged a glance, and now Harry knew that Ron had voiced his concerns about Harry to Hermione in more detail after the argument of the evening before. “Yeah, you know, Quidditch,” Ron elaborated gamely. “That thing where you go flying through the air on brooms? There are three sorts of –”

“Yes, thank you,” Harry snapped irritably. “I was just wondering if Draco was going to make me do something stupid, that’s all.”

At least Ron didn’t snort, ‘so he’s Draco now?’ for which Harry was immensely grateful. Instead, the redhead merely looked more worried.

“Like what?” he inquired. “I mean, what can he do? You’re a shoe-in.”

“Well,” Harry said, “damn you for even making me think about it, because he’ll know to ask, but he could tell me to do my very worst out on the pitch. He could tell me to ignore the Snitch, or to pretend I was at a tea party. He could tell me to show in a ladies’ bonnet with pink bows, or, most simply, to ignore tryouts altogether.”

Hermione stared at him. “I don’t suppose he’s as creative as all of that, Harry.”

“No, he’s not creative at all,” Harry mused, thinking on it. “His thinking is... er, straightforward, I guess. But he’s very clever, really,” he went on, “and somehow he really does know me. He doesn’t seem as intent on humiliating me in front of witnesses as hurting me.”

“Hurting you?” Hermione whispered furiously. “If he’s laid a hand–”

“I’m not talking that sort of pain,” Harry said warily. “I didn’t want to tell you, but somehow he found out about the cloak...”
Ron gaped.

“It’s gone,” Harry confirmed. “He’s hidden it, now, for good.”

Ron sputtered briefly, and in his loss of attention, his feather sprouted miniature wings and began soaring around the classroom ceiling, making soft cooing noises as it went. Several people pointed, as this was a rather out-of-the-ordinary error, but Ron didn’t appear to notice he’d done a brilliant bit of Transfiguration by mistake. Hermione, for that matter, didn’t notice either. She’d gone a bit grey herself, and was frowning.

“It... it is dead useful,” Ron managed after a moment. “I can see how he’d want it. But you think he did it to... to injure you?”

“I know it,” Harry replied, feeling miserable. “Actually having the cloak seemed to be a sort of bonus to him, icing on the cake. It... it hurt me to give up something of my dad’s... and he was... drinking it up.”

“Ugh,” Hermione said with feeling. “At least it’s nearly over, Harry, maybe we can steal it back then, you’ve got just two and a half days to go, he can’t do that much in two and a half days...”

Harry’s shoulders slumped as he thought of the paper now crumpled into the front pocket of his schoolbag, his mind still scrambling desperately to find a way around it... “Yeah,” he said. “Sure.”

The day sped by again, even through Harry’s first Transfiguration lesson of the year; McGonagall had some sort of family emergency and had to travel to Devon. Now, they were far behind, and spent most of the period playing catch-up. Harry’s mind, against his will, went back to the contents of the parchment, analyzing each and every sentence, every word, and thought how well it had been put together and how much time Draco had to have spent, and how nothing would ever be the same again after he spoke those words.

Believably, Draco had specified.

God.

Throughout Defense, Draco watched him, as though savoring every moment of his distress. Professor Lupin gazed at the pair of them worriedly, but Harry could tell he’d adopted the same policy as he had in his own school days: leave well enough alone. Draco wasn’t attacking or verbally abusing Harry, and so long as it stayed that way, it seemed Lupin would stay out of it.

When classes let out, Harry went straight back to Gryffindor Tower, refusing dinner; Ron and Hermione, as Harry had predicted, followed. This was just as well, since Harry didn’t want an audience.

“What’s this about, mate?” Ron wanted to know. “Are you all right?”

Harry clenched his fists and closed his eyes. When he opened them, he did his best to look angry. “It’s nothing you’d understand,” he spat.

“Well, obviously not,” Ron said, taken aback, but more than equal to an argument. “You won’t
talk to me at all, anymore. What, don’t trust me?"

“Trust you?” Harry laughed, low and derisive, borrowing the sound from Snape. “Why should I? You and Hermione kept all sorts of things from me about what was really going on, last year. I don’t care who ordered you – you should’ve told me.” This was his own invention, not Draco’s, but Harry couldn’t just start screaming what Draco had written and make it believable. He had to have some sort of lead-in, or they’d merely think he was possessed, or Imperio’d at the very least.

“There wasn’t much we could do!” Hermione shouted back, her own fists clenched. “Our letters were watched, you know –”

“You could’ve found a way,” Harry returned. “Don’t tell me ‘the cleverest witch of our year’ can’t figure something out.”

Hermione flushed in combined embarrassment and anger.

“Don’t talk to her like that!” Ron interjected, one hand rising to grip Hermione’s upper arm protectively, stepping ahead of her as if to put himself between she and Harry. “What’s gotten into you?”

“What’s gotten into me? Let me remind you. Voldemort did,” Harry enunciated clearly, his voice going lazily dangerous as Draco’s, perhaps because Harry still heard the words in the Slytherin’s voice, the voice of the boy who’d written them. “Nothing Dumbledore or Snape or anyone could do stopped him for even a moment. But hey, I’m still alive, aren’t I, still able to keep plotting his murder? That’s all anybody really cares about, isn’t it?”

Ron and Hermione blinked in tandem, utterly flummoxed.

Harry fought the absurd urge to laugh. “All anyone cares for is whether I’m going to manage to kill the Dark Lord,” he added casually, trying not to wince. Couldn’t Draco keep it in his head that I don’t call him that? “They’re not interested in me, are they?” he continued, angrier, because in a way, this was nothing but the unvarnished truth. “All they care about is the Boy Hero – all you care about is that I’ll defeat Voldemort.”

Tears began to gather in Hermione’s eyes. “Harry... you can’t believe that...”

“The very first day on the train,” Harry reminded Ron, “you asked to see my scar. Do you remember? And Hermione, you said I was in several of the history books you’d read. That’s what you were both interested in, from the beginning. Don’t deny it.”

“H-Harry, we won’t,” Hermione interrupted. “Or I won’t. I mean, sure, that’s why I spoke to you at first. But we’re friends, now, I don’t care for all of that...”

“Oh, really?” Harry shot back. “That surprises me, it really does. Do you honestly think that you would be my friend at all if I didn’t have this?” He gestured viciously at his scar. “Would you have bothered to ask the Hat to put you in Gryffindor if it weren’t for me?”

Hermione pinked, and Harry realized that his hunch had been correct – Hermione had chosen Gryffindor because she’d guessed that was where he’d end up, rather than because she felt it would be best for her. Maybe that’s why she really didn’t believe in the House system, Harry thought irrelevantly.

“I can’t believe, after...” Ron gesticulated wildly. “...after everything, you’d say that.”

After everything, Harry thought, bitter amusement decorating his features. After the Mountain
Troll, and Quirrell; after Lockhart, and Riddle; after Sirius and Remus and Snape; after Dementors and Time-Turners and the Department of Mysteries... “I understand, of course,” Harry went on, hating himself, hating Draco even more, “why you’d do it. The both of you need every scrap of advantage you can get.”

He didn’t even sound like himself – wasn’t it incredibly obvious to them that these weren’t, couldn’t be his words?

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ron inquired almost softly. His face had gone red, and his fists were clenching and unclenching, but he was the quietest and angriest that Harry had ever seen him. He knew what he was to say, but he couldn’t help but wonder, with some small corner of his mind, if he were about to be clocked. It certainly seemed like it.

“Well, your family’s so poor, you know,” Harry continued. “And Hermione – the lack of a single witch or wizard in the family other than yourself... maybe it was the only way you could make a name for yourself, right, Mudblood that you are? Hitch your wagon to a star, right?”

Yes, Harry realized, that had done it. Ron punched him flat.

“After all my family’s done for you, you ungrateful little –!” he screamed. “After all Hermione’s done for you...!”

“Ron!” Hermione shouted, moving to hold him back.

Harry lurched again to his feet and nodded once to Hermione, once to Ron, then scrambled out of Gryffindor Tower via the Fat Lady’s portrait and into the hall. He’d done the only thing he could think of to let them know he hadn’t meant it, but that did not mean he was foolish enough to sit in Ron’s view while the redhead regained his temper, while he and Hermione worked out between them what had really happened. If they would even bother.

He was sitting on the steps of one of the moving staircases, staring blankly ahead, when it actually hit him, what he’d just done. What he’d just called Hermione. What he’d just implied about Ron, and Hermione, and how they felt about him.

The fact that he’d really meant quite a bit of it, someplace deep in his darkest self.

Harry read and re-read the last instructions on the crumpled sheet of parchment. And you’re not to talk to either one of them again, it said. That’s an order, Harry.

Harry swallowed heavily, leaning his head against his knees. Of course the order wouldn’t hold in two more days, but that currently seemed an eternity. Now he could attempt some sort of damage control, even without speaking to either one of them, but he felt sick and drained of energy. There was no way he could go back to the Tower, not now. He hated Draco Malfoy, and how he seemed to be able to strike at the heart of him without really knowing him at all; but now, more with each passing moment, he wondered at the elation in his heart after he’d said those terrible things... It had been brief, but the immediate lightening of his burdens had been almost overwhelming for a minute... he’d longed, however briefly, to say every other terrible thing that had ever entered his mind, but he’d swiftly caged the impulse...

How could part of him enjoy what he’d wrought, while another part cringed in horror at Ron’s clenched jaw, that look in his eyes that was normally reserved for followers of Voldemort, and at Hermione’s shock and tears?

The horror built and built in him until it seemed to swathe the corridors and staircase itself with a
darkness thick as tar, swirling, rising to choke him – and then it was gone, all gone, tucked away in some secret part of himself, and Harry, for the first time, recognized that he had just performed *Obscura*.

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Chapter End Notes

Raise your hand if you hate me with the passion of a thousand suns. Raise your other hand if you hate Draco even more. ;)

The title 'the Tower' refers not only to Gryffindor Tower, but to a card in the Tarot deck. The card reflects the unfortunate truism that you can smash something valuable to pieces in one moment - even if it took you ages to build. On a more emotional level, it is when your paradigm is yanked out from under you and you have to start from scratch. The picture in my deck is that of Poseidon, watching a beautiful tower crumble into the sea.

Many of you will see Harry as OOC here, and I will not disagree with you. Obscura is having an effect on his mind, and that changes his character: he is more likely to both rage and despair.

Reviews are much appreciated. :(
Revealeo

Chapter Notes

You guys waited so patiently that you get two chapters today. This is also because I'll be at the doctor's pretty much all day tomorrow. I hope that this doesn't cause you all to skip a chapter! Uh, if Draco hasn't yet given Harry a more frightening order than handing over the Cloak, then GO BACK and read 'the Tower' first.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The light-headedness didn’t come at all, this time. Rather, everything became abundantly and perfectly clear.

He no longer cared much for how Ron and Hermione felt about his outburst; but that didn’t really matter. He realized he wanted to care, had cared mere moments ago, and somehow, that was nearly the same thing. Harry began making connections he couldn’t help but think he should’ve made long ago. This swell of emotion and immediate muffling directly thereafter was Obscura... and he’d done it at least once over the summer; once in Snape’s classroom; once in Dumbledore’s office; and just now.

Only Merlin knew how many times before that, but at least one for Sirius Black, as well. His godfather – whom he probably loved as much as he did Ron and Hermione.

Somewhere, buried deep, anyway.

There was only one person to whom he could go who knew anything about the technique, so Harry wasted no time. When the Potions classroom proved empty, Harry began wandering down the dungeons, hoping to catch sight of Severus Snape, but having little luck in locating much of anyone. Soon, Harry was lost in a part of Hogwarts he'd never visited before, and was wishing he’d brought the Marauder’s Map – but he knew there was no returning to Gryffindor Tower, at least not tonight. Despite his Obscura, he knew that this would be bad politics, to say the least.

Harry ended by a corridor that looked somewhat familiar, Lit torches lined the walls, and a faint perspiration on some of the stones showed that he was very deep in the earth indeed; he hadn’t seen windows for several staircases, and was beginning to think that Hogwarts truly descended into the bowels of the earth. Then again, the third-floor bathroom led to a cave, so he supposed that could be true.

Moving by instinct and little else, Harry took a right fork at the next bend, and found a room with light emerging from beneath the door. Feeling incredulity break part-way through his sense of dreamlike calm, he knocked politely on the door.

Severus Snape opened it and blinked at Harry in abject surprise.

Somehow, Harry found he was not as startled. He’d known his professor to be here, somehow. Even in his Obscura-induced state, this was more than slightly out of the ordinary, but he filed it away for further consideration.

“Harry!”
“Professor,” Harry greeted. “Can I come in?”

Snape glared at him. “It’s eleven-thirty in the evening.”

“Yes,” Harry replied.

Snape continued to assess him in the flickering torchlight. “How did you find–” He broke off. “Albus sent you,” he answered himself. “Fine, fine, come in, then. I suppose it’s something that couldn’t possibly have waited until morning?”

Harry slipped past Snape’s beckoning hand and entered the Professor’s private chambers.

He didn’t know what he’d expected. Maybe bats clinging to stalactites, black curtains with moth-holes, cauldrons bubbling over the fire and cooling on the mantle.

Instead, Professor Snape’s quarters resembled that of anyone else, Harry observed. The furnishings were simple and matched, as if Snape had purchased them all at once as part of a set; they were, without variation, dark blue or forest green in upholstery of a simple fabric, and where they showed wooden legs, or where there were tables, the wood was a dark walnut. A couch was nearly shoved up against the wall directly facing the door, and before it set a small, low table; chairs seemed scattered about the room in a manner which, at first glance, appeared random – at second glance, anything but. A fire blazed in the hearth to his left, and a long, expensive-looking, but well-worn rug of intricate design lay before it. Rooms led from the sitting room to the left and right; Harry imagined that one of them was a Potions lab and the other a bedroom, though he could not see them from where he stood. A rather extensive mess of shelving units lined the entire back wall, and were lined with books, without space for a single other. In fact, Harry noted two or three stacks of unshelved books piled haphazardly near the couch, as though there was no other possible place to put them.

Harry shifted his attention to his Professor, who was standing in a black robe looking annoyed. “Er...” he managed.

“Come in all the way or not at all,” Snape warned.

Harry came in all the way. “Thanks,” he said, wondering if he was the first Gryffindor to ever see the inside of Snape’s rooms. The Potion Master’s reputation would be shot to hell if anyone saw how normal – even homey – they really were.

“What is it that brings you here in the middle of the night?” Snape inquired, seating himself on his couch and looking incongruously – well – at home.

Harry had to scramble to come up with something vaguely articulate. “I did Obscura again tonight,” he managed, hoping that his directness would evenly match Snape’s. “Just about a half an hour or so ago.”

Snape stiffened in his chair and frowned. “Under what circumstances?”

Harry briefly explained about Draco’s orders and his subsequent behaviour towards Ron and Hermione.

“You performed an Obscura over this?!” the Professor snapped. “For Merlin’s sake, Harry, it’s meant to be used sparingly! In times of true trial, and need – not when someone yells at you, or when you’ve been arguing with your little friends!”

“I can’t control it!” Harry snapped back, with equal fire. “If I could, d’you think I’d be bothering
Snape opened his mouth as if to say something, then closed it slowly. Harry had the distinct impression he was counting to ten again. “What’s the effect, then, Potter? What did you Obscure?”

Harry sighed. “I don’t care about what I said to them.”

“You?”

“Then why are you here?”

“Because I performed an Obscura!” Harry said feelingly. “Because I know I shouldn’t’ve! Because I know it was over something... not small... but something I could’ve probably handled on my own a couple of months ago without resorting to anything like this.”

“What happened a couple of months ago, then?” Snape wanted to know. He relaxed again, leaning slightly back into the couch; Harry realized that his Professor was settling in for a long conversation.

“Black,” Harry replied. “Black went through the Veil a couple of months ago. D’you think that’s it?”

A shadow passed over Snape’s face. “Perhaps. Why don’t you explain how you feel about Black?”

“I can’t,” Harry replied. “I’ve Obscured it.”

“You Obscured Black’s death.” Snape’s brows lifted. “Then you’ll have no problem with my saying that it was entirely his own fault that he was killed. He was an impulsive fool with no concept that subtlety is the most important tactic in the arsenal of any true soldier.”

“I don’t think that’s really fair,” he said, “but you’re entitled to your opinion, I suppose.”

Snape barked a laugh, but then an odd expression, almost worried, seemed to overtake him. “Talk a bit about your father then – about James.”

Harry thought this was the strangest request he’d ever heard from the man, but he obliged him gamely, talking about his father, how it had bothered him when he’d seen – seen that his father wasn’t all he’d cracked up to be, but how it didn’t really bother him so much anymore.

Snape was nodding. “Thank you. Now, your relatives, back home?”

Harry talked briefly about them – very briefly. He didn’t care much for them, but they were barely blips on the radar of his life.

“Potter. You do realize you’ve Obscured anyone you ever cared about.” Snape’s eyes dimmed. “Anyone you ever hated, as well. You’re speaking easily with me. With Draco Malfoy. I suspect, if the Dark Lord appeared this very moment and were willing to be reasonable, you’d sit him down to tea.”

Harry’s throat felt dry, and he began to tremble slightly as this slowly took hold in his mind, a chill running over his skin and raising the hair on his arms. He attempted to swallow past the lump in his throat, but ended up nearly choking because of the lack of moisture on his tongue.

“You’ve dimmed yourself completely, like wrapping a thick blanket around your soul. How comforting that must be, not to care for anything.”
“You’re one to talk! You do it too!” Harry shot back, anger stinging him into motion.

“Oh, yes, Potter, by all means, become just like me!” Snape replied, flushing. “That sounds a brilliant plan, doesn’t it?”

“It’s just the pot calling the kettle black, that’s all I mean,” Harry said in a would-be reasonable tone of voice. “Besides, I’m here because I thought you could help me. Get – get rid of it, or something.”

“Potter – if I were to get rid of all that was holed up inside of you right now, you would go promptly and irrevocably mad.”

Harry glared at Snape, his eyes softening when he saw the truth reflected in the depths of Snape’s face, voice, expression. “Oh, Merlin,” he said. “Then how?”

“I don’t think we’ll be able to seep it out of you on a gradual basis, not at the rate you seem to be casting...”

Harry hung his head. “I’m sorry, I’ll try to be more aware of when I’m upset, sometimes it’s just hard to tell until I’ve screamed or broken something.”

Snape laughed harshly. “Yes, I know the feeling. But there is a way. You spoke of letting it out in ‘chunks’; I have found that this is possible. An Obscura can be countercharmed by Revealeo.”

“Why didn’t you say so?” Harry demanded. “That isn’t so bad.”

“It’s... painful,” Snape replied with a small wince. “I am not certain you can bear it. Perhaps even more importantly, I am not certain you can do it. If you are not consciously casting Obscura, will a conscious casting of Revealeo aid you?”

“Well, I think it will,” Harry mused. “When I used to do accidental magic – and this is accidental magic – people used to come and clean up my messes, right? Like with Aunt Marge?”

Snape nodded, confirming Harry’s long-standing suspicion that all of the teachers knew about his escapades outside of school.

“So they would’ve had to have used generic countercharms in order to make it work...”

“They wouldn’t necessarily have countercharmed your aunt,” Snape corrected. “An Accio would have brought her to earth; that would have nothing to do with the charms you unconsciously used. An Obliviate was used to modify her memory, and a Finite to bring her back to her proper size.”

The Potions Professor was referring to one of Harry’s funniest memories with a perfectly straight face. Harry forced himself to analyze the words rather than picture his aunt, floating over Privet Drive.

“Only one way to find out,” Harry told him. “I’d like to try it with you around, though, in case things go awry...”

Harry watched Snape’s motion with the wand – it was an odd, rather complicated maneuver, a tight loop followed by a twitch away, as though Harry were lassoing the pocket of emotion and tugging it free.

“Okay,” Harry said, and took a deep breath. “Revealeo,” he incanted.

Immediately he felt a pain in his head, centering around his scar, and oh sweet Merlin it was awful,
this was like *Crucius*, only not around his physical body, it was centered on that indefinable rest of him... he gasped at the almost satisfying pain of something black being torn away from his subconscious and moved back into his conscious mind...

Harry looked up from the floor, surprised to note that he had fallen, looked around at the dungeon. Snape was seated next to him, one hand resting under Harry’s head. Harry realized with a cold chill, that he’d been thrashing enough that Snape was worried enough to touch him, to prevent him from smashing his head open or breaking his neck. There was something very frightening in that.

He scrambled into a seated position. “Oh, yes,” he said distantly. “Oh, yes, that really hurt.”

“I warned you,” Snape replied.

Harry scrabbled back until he was leaning against the edge of the couch. The Professor stood. “You won’t be in good enough condition to climb the stairs for another hour or two,” he said.

“Now you tell me.”

Snape nodded. “That’s right. As you have been casting *Obscura* left and right these days, I certainly didn’t want to give you any excuse to renege.” He paused to consider. “I do have some reading material you may find interesting, though, while you wait.” he continued.

Harry blinked. “Reading material?”

The Professor nodded, some private amusement twisting his lip. He fumbled through the pile of books by the edge of the couch and withdrew a large, thin volume. He handed it to Harry, then moved to the room to the left of the sitting room, which Harry now realized was an efficiency kitchen, or what passed for one in the Wizarding World. Oddly enough, it looked like Snape was mixing up some tea.

Harry turned to gaze down at the book, then realized it was not a book, but a report of some kind. Emblazoned on the cover in even, black lettering were the following words:

*Potions and Muggle Preparations: the Disturbing Connection*

*a cross-linked study between the Potions Today Records and the Herbpharm Database*

*by Severus Snape*

*May 5th, 1977*

Harry stared blankly at the sheet of paper, reading it over and over again until it somehow managed to register in his beleaguered mind that he was looking at his own paper topic. He flipped feverishly to the first page, scanning for the thesis. There it was, in black-and-white:

...thus, one needs must imagine that there was, at least at some point in history, some exchange of information. Otherwise, the conclusion that is reached must be one of the following: either Muggles possess some small measure of magic, and always have; or Wizards have been employing science and calling it magic. Of these three postulations, which has the most promise?

There are far too many correlations between the two journals. (See Figures 1-4). It is statistically impossible that these associations can have been the result of one mere exchange; the data is both too scattered chronologically and too varied geographically. Neither remaining option is palatable to the Wizarding community at...
Professor Snape came in from the kitchen, holding a steaming mug. He handed it to Harry. “For the pain,” he said. When Harry didn’t reach his hand out to grip the cup, Snape sighed, and placed it on the parchment, carefully balancing it before letting go.

...and yet, it must be accepted, that in fact – both are true.

Harry gasped and nearly jolted the hot tea in his lap. He recalled all over again that Snape had put it there, and cradled it in one hand. “You wrote this,” he said. “You – you wrote this for your Advanced Potions class.”

Snape was sitting in one of the chairs, and had scooted it slightly so that it faced Harry. “That’s right,” he said, watching Harry carefully.

“It must’ve made some splash,” Harry continued.

Snape didn’t say much of anything; he examined the tea in his cup. It suddenly occurred to Harry that this looked very, very bad.

“I didn’t ever see this!” he suddenly exclaimed. “I’ve never read it before in my life!”

“I know, Potter.”

“You – you know?” This wasn’t the answer Harry was expecting.

“You can’t’ve.”

“But... you published it... and now –”

“I never published that paper. I never even handed it in,” Snape corrected. “I was obscenely proud of it. Showed it to Lily Evans, even, but she’s the only other person who’s ever had her hands on it.”

Harry gazed at the papers with new reverence.

“Haven’t Obscured your mother? That’s reassuring.”

Harry glared at him, then peered at the paper again. “Why didn’t you hand it in? It... I mean, I know I’m no expert... but it reads really well. It looks good – and the idea... and you had proof!”

“That’s just it, isn’t it?” Snape inquired, his black eyes glinting. “You’re right. Despite my many years of respectable articles, I’ve never written anything half so innovative, since. A bit of magic in everything, in everyone, a bit of science always operating in the magical world – there’s something inherently correct in it, something symmetrical. That’s the beauty of a true theory: when you read it, even if you’ve never heard of it before, it seems you should’ve known all along.”

“That’s just what I thought!” Harry cut in excitedly, hearing the concrete articulation of what he had only felt. “But... you never even... no one else knows about this...?”

“And why do you suppose that is, Potter?”

Harry frowned at the suddenly cold note in the Professor’s voice. “I don’t know, sir.”

When Snape only continued to glare as though the answer were perfectly obvious, it slowly dawned on Harry.
“I suppose a final paper on Muggles wouldn’t’ve gone unnoticed, especially one like this, if you wanted to join the Death Eaters.”

Snape smiled grimly and nodded, as though pleased at Harry’s deduction.

“But... you wrote this back then. You knew it was true!”

“There’s your naiveté again, Potter,” Snape said, but his voice was weary rather than biting. “Yes, I knew it was true. I abandoned it for what I felt to be a greater cause at the time.”

Harry gazed at the paper, and back up at his Professor. Voldemort, more important than something that would rock the foundations of the entire magical world...? “But...” He frowned, resolve gripping him. “Look, all right, I know I’m naive and inexperienced... but this is the important stuff. I mean, it’s why I’m studying so hard now. Ron doesn’t understand, but there has to be something after Voldemort. If you fight so hard it’s all you have, what are you supposed to do when the fighting’s done?” He shook his head. “Even that’s not really it. This stuff... uhm...” He blushed, fought his embarrassment, and finished in a small voice. “...it transcends anything he can do.”

Snape eyed him critically. “Do not be embarrassed of passion, Mister Potter. It is rare enough without those few who happen to possess it being ashamed.”

Harry blushed even redder, but before he could manage something self-effacing, Snape was continuing.

“I do regret abandoning that work – more than you know, I wish I had published that paper... for so many reasons. It would have denied me entrance to the Death Eaters, for one... but there is no use wishing for what might have been. Of course, I may be lucky enough that some promising young student might follow my work...”

Harry felt his entire body begin to tingle with some mixture of shock and pleasure. He didn’t know what to say, or do, so he swallowed his tea in one, scalding gulp.

“That should take effect, soon,” Snape continued, without missing more than a beat. “And you ought to finish reading that,” he tacked on, with a nod to the paper. He stood, moving to the kitchen to dispense with his own empty cup; but then he paused, on the threshold, and spoke without turning.

“Tell me what you think,” he said, before continuing into the darkness of the dimly lit kitchen.

It took a moment for Harry to gather himself before he could turn his attention again to the yellowed parchment in his lap.

Chapter End Notes

Hmm, a lot of little seeds planted in this chapter. Tell me what you think! :)  

-K
A strange smell was really what woke Harry. It was an odd mixture of herbal and more stringently chemical, along with a familiar scent that brought to mind a dark, creeping dread. He sat bolt upright and gazed around. *Sweet Merlin*. He’d passed out in Professor Snape’s quarters. On his couch. He gazed around for any sign of his Potions Professor, figuring he could slip quietly away before the other man awoke. Snape was cranky enough without facing him first thing in the morning, and Harry had no idea what he’d make of his least-favorite student accidentally spending the night.

Harry scrambled for his trainers, and Professor Snape’s paper slipped off his lap and onto the rough flagstones of the floor.

This effectively halted Harry’s motions, because he’d read a great deal of it before drifting off. His mind went back to the points Snape had made, examining the logic in them – and more arrestingly, beholding the beauty of the idea... the idea that the Muggle world and the Magical one were, if not the same, then inextricably intertwined... it appealed to him on a very basic level. Snape had still been speaking in specifics – monkshood and valerian and powdered sulfur – but Harry had no doubt that his professor was going to widen his scope as the paper progressed.

Harry didn’t realize he’d frozen with the laces of one shoe in his hands until Professor Snape emerged from the room off to the right, which Harry had supposed was a bed and bath.

Harry gaped, not only because he hadn’t meant to be caught, but because Professor Snape’s hair was now a startling, bubblegum pink. He turned bright red, trying not to laugh. “Trying out... a new look, sir?” he managed.

“What in the blazes are you muttering about?” Snape growled. “So they’re new robes – odd of you to notice.”

Harry began to realize that the hair was a mistake, and that he would be blamed for it somehow and froze like a deer in the headlights. Still, he *had* to let his Professor know about the hair before he exited the chambers. “Er... sir...” He pointed a shaking finger at the Professor’s head.


Harry shivered helplessly. “Nothing, I swear! Legilimize me, I didn’t Charm your hair!”

“You know it’s a Charm, though, Potter, and not a Potion? How astute of you, for someone who knows nothing about it...” Snape was advancing, like a snake preparing to strike at its prey.

“I’m serious! Honest! Go on, Professor, look at me, I had nothing to do with it!”

Snape seemed to lose his menace rather abruptly; and, without Legilimizing Harry, he turned to the mirror. “*Merlin’s teeth,*” he swore.
Now that Harry was out of the path of danger, he felt it safe to laugh. He laughed until his sides hurt as one by one, each of Snape’s countercharms failed. “Oi, someone’s really out to get you, sir.”

“I’m afraid that doesn’t narrow my list of suspects, now, does it?” Snape demanded.

“Oh, yes it does,” Harry said, managing to muffle his laughter as Snape turned to glare at him. “How many people are clever enough to have done it so thoroughly? How many are likely to consider this a just punishment, even?”

Snape considered these facts. “Well then, Mister Potter, that leaves three.”

“Three...?”

“You, Draco Malfoy – and Hermione Granger.”

Harry winced. "Pink hair doesn’t strike me as particularly Slytherin...”

“And as you haven’t done it, and as you are correct in your assumption that this is not particularly Draco’s style – no, something painful or humiliating is more that boy’s speed – then that leaves us one person.”

Harry groaned aloud. “Two hundred points from Gryffindor,” he murmured.

“Any particular reason Miss Granger would...?” Snape paused. “Ahhh, I see,” he murmured almost appreciatively. “Very interesting. Your Miss Granger has apparently deduced the source of your argument last night as Draco Malfoy. And, instead of punishing him –”

“She’s decided to blame you, for setting the punishment in the first place,” Harry completed miserably. Then he grinned. “That, or Draco’s sporting a very interesting look, himself, sir.”

“This is all about that ridiculous fight?” Snape scathed, still examining his hair in the mirror.

“Well... and the fact you didn’t give me my assignments over the summer, and booted me out of class.” Harry frowned. “Perhaps it is a Potion,” he mused. “Maybe it’s something she put in your shampoo.”

Snape blinked in surprise, then shook his head. “I assure you, this room is carefully warded... and rather obscure in location.”

Harry’s lips thinned as he thought about the Marauder’s Map. “Hermione’s smarter than you think,” he said, speaking more frankly than he ever had to Snape before. “I know at least one way she could find this room, and she’s awfully clever with countercharms.” He eyed the stormclouds gathering in his professor’s eyes with no small amount of trepidation. “Come on, sir – if it were McGonagall, you’d be howling.”

A strangled sound issued from the older man, and Harry realized that Snape had probably pictured just that.

“Try washing it again, maybe, just with soap?” Harry offered, keeping his voice faint but neutral. He paused. “Or – Muggle dyes aren’t magic. They’re not a countercharm of any kind – so they might work to cover it up.”

Snape didn’t say much of anything, but disappeared back into the bathroom. Sounds of running water emerged; Harry viewed this as a good sign, but wondered what it would do to the man’s
mood if nothing altered. He checked his watch and shrugged; still twenty-some-odd minutes until
breakfast. Harry flopped back on the couch, trainers abandoned, to read the rest of the paper.

Snape emerged fifteen minutes later, hair dripping onto his robes, looking as though he’d bitten
into a lemon. The hair was a mere two or three shades darker.

“Well, that’s all right, then,” Harry said cheerfully. “That means it’ll come out, eventually.”

“Five points from Gryffindor for enjoying this altogether too much,” Snape said sourly.

“Now that’s not even fair!” Harry protested. “Try the Muggle dye.”

“Or a hat,” Snape grumped.

“Or a turban,” Harry said with a smirk. “It looked so smashing on Professor Quirrell.”

Snape glared, then moved to his Potions ingredients.

“I wouldn’t try a magical –”

“Thank you, Mister Potter,” Snape intoned acerbically, “I am quite familiar with both Potions and
Magical Theory. I have, in fact, taught both of those classes. I am about to attempt something
rather less than magical.”

Harry placed the paper down on the table by the couch and followed Snape curiously as the
Professor began removing herbs from his shelves. “What is it?”

“It,” Snape said, “is walnut shell, bramble, and powdered blackroot. All potent dyes.” He lit a
small fire under a standard-size pewter cauldron and began adding water and copious amounts of
each plant. He removed a final jar from the shelf and sprinkled a faintly glittering dust into the
mixture. “Iron,” he said, before Harry could ask. “That will set the dye.”

Harry nodded, then watched as the Professor applied the tea to his fluorescent hair.

“How long should it set, then?” Harry asked. “I don’t suppose you’ll make it to breakfast.”

“No, I don’t suppose I will,” Snape said.

Harry thought of saying, now you’ll be cranky, then thought better of it. He liked his head attached
to his shoulders, thanks. “I’ll smuggle you some toast or something,” he said, instead.

For a minute, Snape eyed him in surprise. “Do you always do this?” he inquired after a space of
silence.

“Do what?”

Harry was treated to the rare sight of his Professor looking uncomfortable and awkward. It had the
odd effect of making him look years younger, as Remus did whenever he broke into a genuine
smile. “I don’t need your aid, you realize,” he said. He eyed Harry with new suspicion. “What
are you still doing here?”

Harry blinked, taking a small step back. “I... I fell asleep,” he said simply.

“And before that...?”

“You know about Obscura,” Harry said. “I thought of you. You were the one who told me about
the technique.” Harry’s words seemed relax the other man marginally.

Snape ran a hand through his hair, then grimaced. “Evanesco,” he said with evident self-disgust, pointing his wand at his fingertips. The dye, which was already beginning to turn dark, disappeared from under his nails.

“Well, er, I’m off to breakfast then,” Harry announced uselessly, his cheeks flushing for a reason he could not name. He moved back to the couch to examine the paper. “Uhm, I want to finish this,” he called, placing it back on the table. “Sometime. Okay?”

There was a brief pause. “After your next Occlumency lesson, then, Potter.”

“Oh, yeah, okay,” Harry replied, feeling more awkward with every passing moment. He finally drew on his trainers a bit reluctantly, fiddling with the laces.

A knock sounded at the door. “You’ve got a visitor, sir.”

Snape froze from inside the Potions lab, turning to view Harry with an unreadable expression. The knock sounded again, more insistently, this time. “Severus?”

“Professor Lupin!” Harry exclaimed, standing and rising to open the door. He wondered if this was a wizard custom he didn’t know about. Maybe the youngest wizard in the room was supposed to do things like open doors for people? He couldn’t find another reason why Snape would still be standing in the doorway of his lab, continuing to stare at him. Harry opened the door at looked up at Lupin with a grin.

“Severus, I –” Lupin paused at the threshold, obviously suddenly catching on to the fact that he was staring at empty space. His gaze flitted down. “Harry,” he said in surprise.

“Hi, Professor – he’s back by the lab,” Harry said.

“All – all right,” Lupin replied, stepping inside.

Harry turned at the door. “I am getting you toast,” he said stubbornly. “Unless you’d like something else better.”

When nobody replied, Harry rolled his eyes at Lupin and slipped out the door.

By the time Harry had reached the Great Hall, his good cheer had evaporated. Upon entering, he caught sight immediately of Ron and Hermione. Ron had his hand surreptitiously next to Hermione’s on the table – he wasn’t holding her hand, just placing it close enough to hers so that they were touching. Hermione’s eyes were red-rimmed, and Ron looked pale and grim.

Harry tried to escape their notice, making immediately for the Slytherin table and Draco Malfoy.

Draco didn’t say anything at first, merely nodded at Harry. After a couple of minutes of silence, he eyed the Gryffindor Table from across the hall. His grey eyes found Harry’s green ones, examining him. Draco gave a small frown and went back to eating.

Harry couldn’t decipher Draco’s meaningful glances, and was too tired to extend himself to do so.
He slumped in his seat, messing about with the food on his plate. After a moment, he placed his fork down. Draco raised a pointed eyebrow, and this time the unspoken message was quite clear.

Harry speared an asparagus and contemplated it, then used it to point to Draco. “You know, I can’t figure you.”

“I’m an enigma, Potter.”

“You used to seem very straightforward,” Harry told him.

Draco regarded him shrewdly. “So did you.”

The blonde boy turned back to his own plate; Harry snuck half of his food under the table while Draco was distracted, flushing but feeling oddly triumphant. Draco hadn’t voiced his concerns as a command, so Harry wasn’t disobeying him, strictly speaking.

Harry smuggled several pieces of toast off of the table and wrapped them in a napkin, sticking them in his cloak. It was, in a way, his own fault that Professor Snape was missing breakfast – if Hermione hadn’t been upset on his account, she never would have done the charm. He felt he had to at least attempt to make up for this, despite his professor’s dislike of ‘aid’, as he termed it.

Draco eventually struck up a conversation about Potions and their work for the next week or so, comparing mental notes and discussing possible questions for the first exam. His voice was free of its usual ring of entitlement, and was slightly quieter than usual – just as it had been after he’d taken the cloak, Harry realized.

“Speaking of Professor Snape,” Draco said, “I wonder where he is?”

“Oh, Hermione hexed him,” Harry said, figuring Draco would extract the information out of him eventually – better to do it now, and on his own terms.

As he’d suspected, Draco was too flabbergasted by this information to take charge of the conversation.

“She charmed his hair a bubblegum pink,” Harry added, and, again as suspected, this just-as-shocking bit of information stalled the other boy again. “He’s using a dye with plain old physical and chemical properties to fix it, but it’s going to take awhile to set.”

“How do you know that?” Draco demanded.

“I was the one saw it first,” Harry said. “He hadn’t looked into a mirror before leaving...” Before leaving the bathroom, although Harry didn’t take great pains to point that out. “You can bet he rushed right back in once I mentioned it to him.”

Draco snorted. “So he used a Muggle dye? Ridiculous. Just cast the same charm on Granger and see how she gets rid of it.”

“Well, obviously, if he knew which one it was, he’d know how to get rid of it already. Snape’s not stupid, you know.”

“You don’t have to cast the proper charm,” Draco insisted, rolling his eyes. “Cast any charm that turns the girl’s hair pink, and she’d immediately assume that Snape figured her out and hexed her back: the first words out of her mouth would be the proper countercharm.”

Harry quirked a smile; this was an incredibly elegant solution, and very Slytherin. He never
would’ve come up with it, himself, he was reluctant to admit.

“What – you didn’t think of that?” Draco demanded, but his voice was teasing. He already knew the answer.

Harry shoved him negligently with one hand, and Draco snickered under his breath, rubbing at the side of his arm and looking wounded. “Just because you’re stupid doesn’t mean you have to resort to violence,” Draco said with mock-fussiness.

Harry knew better than to question the other boy’s moods – instead, he took advantage of the unexpected kindness, was kind in return. Harry was slowly realizing that it was his way – he tended to mirror his behaviour towards others after how they behaved towards him. He always hung back and observed people when he could, and modeled his actions accordingly. Dudley was a prime example.

So was Snape.

Harry looked up at the staff table, where Dumbledore’s smile twinkled at him. Professor McGonagall still had a foreboding, thunderous expression when her eyes lit on him – if he read her right, it would all change to smiles once Quidditch began. But Professors Snape and Lupin were still missing.

Harry shrugged. It had to be something important for Professor Lupin to show up first thing in the morning, before breakfast, even – apparently it had required a real chat.

It didn’t mean anything was really wrong... still, a nagging feeling clouded his thoughts and dogged his footsteps all the way to the dungeons.

Chapter End Notes

Draco’s motivations are complicated here, and I don’t think he fully understands them himself.

Thoughts on the story? Thoughts on the hair colour? Heh. I’m sure Snape looks smashing in pink.

Keep reading, keep writing everyone!

-K
Severus Snape blinked at Remus Lupin, feeling his cheeks heat against his will. He wanted the safety of *Obscura*, wanted to drown this rising tide of embarrassment, but his own words about darkness and madness and an obfuscation of self rang in his ears, sounding especially pedantic and self-righteous and so he did nothing, which was probably all for the best, because it was important he not start spouting denials before Lupin had so much as said a word.

When Lupin did speak, it was one word, clipped and concise and as heavy with sarcasm as Snape had ever heard the other man’s voice. “*Well,*” he said, crossing his arms and glancing about the room. “I like the decor. It’s really quite lovely.”

Snape’s eyes narrowed. A student – a male student – *Harry Potter* – had stumbled out of his room first thing in the morning in rumpled robes obviously from the evening before – and Lupin was admiring his taste? There was something particularly twisted in that; Snape decided he was impressed. “Thank you,” he said dryly.

For a minute, Lupin looked to be mastering himself – he turned pink, then white, then finally a faint tinge of green. Finally, he was himself again, the normally placid flatness of his brown eyes replaced by a cold hatred that Severus had never quite seen replicated but once or twice in a mirror.

*You won’t do anything, though, will you, Lupin?* he thought. *No, I could be having my way with your little friend in here every day of the week, and you’d stand there just like that, wouldn’t you?* “You haven’t changed a bit,” he said coldly.

Lupin’s lips thinned, and nearly trembled with suppressed anger. “You have. I thought you hated Harry.”

“I don’t hate young Mister Potter. When all is said and done, he is an... interesting young man. Very talented.”

Lupin’s eyes widened, his breath hissed out like steam from a kettle, his muscles bunched, all in the space of moments. It was only when Snape felt himself crash against the flagstones of his rooms that he realized the other man had actually punched him, hard.

“Oh, Merlin,” Lupin said directly after, for all the world sounding as though it was someone else had struck Snape – he sounded, Severus reflected, the way he did after one of Black and Potter’s more dastardly deeds – horrified and dreadfully disapproving.

Snape struggled to his feet and grinned darkly at the other man, the comparison amusing him. Something about the entire business struck him as immensely funny, and he barked a laugh.

Lupin stared at him, regret rapidly overtaken by raw hatred in his eyes. “You... you *vicious, coldhearted bastard...*”

Snape stopped laughing, realizing it was not helping his case. He rubbed at his cheek. “You hit me,” he said, feeling oddly more relaxed around Lupin. This was patently ridiculous, as the man had just attacked him, but Snape couldn’t shake a sudden feeling of kinship. “Harry came by last night because he’s been performing an ancient and rather dangerous technique called *Obscura*, an
Occlumency discipline. He thought, correctly, that I would be the best person to help him deal with the spell. Unfortunately, the countercharm is rather weakening, and he fell asleep.” Snape jerked his head roughly towards the couch. “I thought it better to let him sleep than to wake him and inhibit his already somewhat shaky recovery.”

Lupin’s mouth slowly closed, his eyes narrowed. “You let me think...”

“And what was I supposed to say, unless you spoke first, you reticent twit?” Snape returned darkly. “As you step in the door: ‘no, I have not been shagging Mister Potter, although I realize it may very well seem that way.’”

“I punched you,” Lupin echoed irrelevantly, wrapping his arms around his shoulders.

Snape rolled his eyes, although the reminder had him rising to his feet, and rummaging through his potions stores for some bruise salve. The last thing he needed was to turn up for classes with pink hair and a black eye.

“That was incredibly impulsive of me, Severus,” Lupin said in a small, penitent voice.

Snape frowned. “Stop whinging. If I discovered Mister Potter in your rooms first thing in the morning, I might have done the same.”

Lupin blinked. “Would you?”

“Well – no,” Snape amended, pondering this. “No, I would’ve congratulated you on your conquest and merely poisoned you the next morning at breakfast.”

“I’m sure Harry would be pleased to hear you say that,” Lupin said, his voice sounding strangled.

“What, that if you were sleeping with him, I should have to kill you?” Snape inquired peevishly. “He might be startled to hear it; that’s certainly not something one hears every day.”

“That you care for him, I mean,” Lupin said.

Snape glared at him. “I don’t particularly care for Harry – I’d do the same to any teacher who was messing about with a student.”

“Mmm,” Lupin said in that perfectly neutral way that he had that always made Severus want to strangle him.

“Why are you here?” Snape demanded.

“Eh?”

“You must’ve come here for some reason,” Snape continued.

“Er... I – I came to talk about Harry.”

Snape sighed, resigned, and slumped down into the softness of his couch. “What about him?”

“If you’ve taken him under your wing, I think I don’t really have that many more questions. It’s suddenly quite obvious to me that some of the changes he’s been going through are due to your influence.”

“Mine?”
“Yes... er, something of his, ah, attitude... somehow brings you to mind,” Lupin said nervously, obviously still feeling wrong-footed. “He asked me all about Dark Arts the other day...”

“I’d love to hear this,” Snape said flatly.

“Oh – the oddest question was about the Imperius Curse – he was talking about casting Dark spells on himself.”

Snape nodded. “A roundabout way of asking you about Obscura,” he explained. “It is Occlumency, so it is a self-directed Dark spell.”

Lupin nodded, more slowly than Severus had as he was obviously recalling Harry’s questions and placing them in a more appropriate context. “Yes, well... it’s not just that.” Lupin coughed into his hand. “Unless I’m mistaken, he’s picked up some of your mannerisms as well.”

Snape stiffened. “The blame cannot be laid at my feet for any impertinence that enters that boy’s head –”

“I’m not trying to blame you for Harry’s odd behaviour of late, Severus.”

“Then what are you trying to do? Why inform me of any of this at all?”

“Because it’s obvious Harry’s taken it into his head to worship the ground you stalk on, old friend,” Lupin said quietly.

Severus stared at the other man. “I am not your friend new or old, and I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“He’s imitating you, consciously or unconsciously, Severus. He’s got a sudden interest in schoolwork in general, Potions in particular. He spends hours off by himself, and when he’s not alone, he’s with the Unsorted children, or Draco Malfoy, or Yolande Zabini.” Professor Lupin smiled gently, almost apologetically, adding, “And he raises one eyebrow and runs his left hand through his hair, and even sometimes imitates your inflection.”

“Haven’t you made a study,” Severus replied faintly, but he was adding things. *He practices Obscura and keeps his temper altogether too well and for Merlin’s sake, was about to write the same paper as I did –*

Snape was proud of the project, particularly because he had written it at seventeen years of age, but he knew that most sixteen-year-old boys would not have bothered to read the first paragraph, much less attempt understanding. *It was* odd, wasn’t it, that Harry, of all people, wanted to finish it?

That Harry wanted to come back at all?

Severus suddenly felt strangely bewildered.

His consternation must have showed, because Lupin pulled a chair close to the couch to face him, his brown eyes going soft and understanding. “Now that I look at it all together, it makes a lot more sense, especially after losing S-Sirius,” he stammered, then flushed at his loss of control. “He wants another, er, father-figure, and, well, you’re certainly a constant in his life...”

“I am nobody’s ‘father-figure’,” Snape spat, a wave of what he recognized as terror coursing through him – inexplicable, but there it was. “He has a father: James Potter...”

“Dumbledore told me that you helped Harry out last year with Occlumency,” Lupin tacked on,
ignoring the denial altogether. “He said that the information you passed on was invaluable.”

“What?!” Snape growled under his breath. “Invaluable... yes, what I taught Mister Potter was to never, ever trust me under any circumstances. That I was his enemy in all things. That, even when Albus Dumbledore gives me a direct order, I cannot tolerate his presence, even at half-hour intervals.” Severus looked up to find Lupin frowning in confusion. “I’ll own that the boy may have somehow formed an attachment of some sort,” he said, “but I cannot fathom how – or why.”

“What happened?” Lupin inquired softly. “Dumbledore called the sessions successful – they must have been, in some way...”

Snape shook his head. “The boy was unwilling, and I was – I was... useless. I couldn’t.” Severus recalled getting angrier and angrier with Harry to the point of blind fury, recalled even the familiar Obscura falling through his fingers. “It was a catastrophe.” Snape paused, finally allowing himself to voice the niggling doubt that had been lingering in the back of his mind ever since the start of the summer. “It is because of my own inability to instruct him that he nearly got himself killed at the Department of Mysteries,” he said. “And, really, in the end –” He paused, then looked at Lupin again, pulling up memories of torture and torment to harden his expression. “In the end, I killed Black, as if I did it with my own hands.” Snape felt the pull of a faint sneer tugging at his lip, and marshaled his contempt and indifference like the soldiers of an army. “Of course, I would have preferred to do it with my own hands, and not through lowering the defenses in the mind of a child...”

“Severus,” Lupin said calmly, and something in the way he said it brought Snape up short, as though the faint rebuke in it really had any merit. “Obviously the sessions did Harry some good. He respects you.” Lupin smiled widely, looking very young suddenly. “And there’s nothing odd about a bit of hero-worship in a boy his age. Very likely, there are few wizards someone like Harry could view as any sort of hero. You uniquely qualify.”

Severus frowned at him with a jaundiced eye; doubly so, as the skin was turning a bright yellow as it healed under the salve. “This is all ridiculous,” he murmured.

“Nonetheless true,” Lupin replied. “Like it or not, you have an admirer, Severus. I want you to be careful with him. He’s a lot more fragile than he looks.”

“Do not entrust him to my care, then,” Snape returned. “I cannot be careful, even if I wished to be. Do you understand?” This was nothing but the unvarnished truth. He was used to making others feel his presence with a glare or a well-placed barb; he didn’t know any other way.

He hadn’t ever had cause to learn any other way.

“You’re rather brilliant, Severus,” Lupin said softly. “You’ll figure it out. And now I have one more question.”

Snape frowned at his unwelcome guest. “If I answer, shall you go away?”

Lupin grinned. “Yes.”

“Then by all means.”

“What on earth have you done to your hair?”
Needless to say, Severus Snape was not in a good mood when he reached the Potions classroom. His hair, while greatly improved from bubblegum pink, was now dark brown with flashes of auburn – apparently the balance between pink and blue-black. It might have been a perfectly attractive color in someone else, but Snape’s coal-black eyes and brows made it look, in his estimation, perfectly ridiculous.

On the bright side, his hair looked thicker and cleaner than he’d ever personally seen it, and the paler color of his hair made his skin look less like a dead fish rotting in the sun. He considered adding the dark colorant to his current shampoo for good for its apparent cleansing properties. He’d certainly add it now, until he had his original color back.

Storming into Potions just as the bell rang was almost worth it just to see the expressions of shock and wonder. Potter actually smiled at him in obvious approval, elbowing Draco, to whom the professor quickly deduced he’d told about the entire business. Odd, that. The Zabini girl and Granger were both gaping at him. After a moment, they put their heads together and began to giggle. The reactions of the rest of the class were of little concern to him, especially when he noted that there was a small napkin full of toast on his desk.

Chapter End Notes

Ooooh, I love the thoughtful comment I got on the last chapter. Thanks! :)

This is the first time that the chapter is not from Harry's POV. I needed Severus here, though, and from now on, you'll begin to see a bit of a wider viewpoint than solely Harry's.

Whenever I put Remus and Severus in a room they completely develop a life of their own. I never knew that Lupin was going to hit Severus until the moment before he did so. I love that unpredictability!

I think that when they're together, Severus acts a little bit more like Remus, and Remus a little bit more like Severus. When they're together, that makes them seem just barely within the constraints of their characterization (and not OOC, I hope).

Let me know what you think!

-K
When class ended, Hermione moved to the table where Harry and Draco were sitting. Harry averted his eyes, but Draco leaned back in his chair to observe, like a man watching a vaguely interesting show.

“Harry," Hermione said softly.

Harry didn’t look up. He flushed dully, not wanting to look her in the eye without being able to so much as answer his name with hers.

“Harry, please,” she said.

Harry had never heard Hermione use that tone of voice before: a low, husky tone full of the effort not to sob, tremoring at the end. He gripped the edges of the desk and stared at the bits of Potion stain and a scrawling that said *I hate that great greasy git* in Ron’s handwriting. He knew if he looked up he’d start to cry, himself – in front of Draco Malfoy and Professor Snape. His mind was scrambling for *Obscura*, he could feel it. He closed his eyes and recalled the flying feeling again, soaring high, away from Hermione and Draco and the whole world.

“Draco Malfoy," Hermione said, turning to address the blond Slytherin, who was eyeing her with that same, vague interest. “I’ll never, ever forgive you for this.”

It was, perhaps, the matter-of-fact way she said it that made Harry take especial notice. It did not seem a threat, more like a promise – Harry’s eyes finally climbed up to hers, and he saw that her expression was full of a coldness he’d never seen in her before. She spun on her heel and moved to stalk out, but was halted by Professor Snape, who began berating her in cold, low tones of his own. Hermione said something obviously very tart in return and flounced out of the room, but Harry could see her shoulders slump once she believed herself out of view. Yolande wrapped an arm around her and the two moved out of sight.

Harry’s shoulders began to shake, but he stood, stuffing his books in his bag; his hands were trembling so badly that his Potions text slipped from his grasp.

Draco Malfoy picked it up, dusted it off absently, and finished packing up both of their things.

Going to Charms was out of the question, Harry realized. He could partner with Ron as soon as turn himself inside out. Besides, any use of his wand might very well result in some sort of explosion. Malfoy walked him halfway to class; then, they went their separate ways, Draco shooting him an odd parting glance that Harry knew was meant to be full of meaning.

Once again, he didn’t really care what that meaning happened to be. He headed off in a completely new direction, not really caring where his steps took him; then, he realized what it was he would do. He slipped back to the Gryffindor dorms, and withdrew the Marauder’s Map, examining the small figures that strode from one end of the halls to the other; the classrooms, filled with little names, none moving; scanning, he found Filch and Mrs. Norris – far from his current location. Feeling slightly better already, Harry pocketed the map and his wand and began climbing the stairs to the second floor ladies’ bathroom.

Moaning Myrtle, Harry noted, was here today.
“Harry!” she exclaimed gleefully, sounding, for just a moment, as though she were pleased. “Goodness, I get so few visitors – but why should anyone want to visit me, I wonder, I’m just Moaning Myrtle, the ghost of the loo!” She gazed at him again, brows raising. “How long has it been, Harry? You’ve grown!”

Harry found himself smiling at her, realizing she sounded like some kind of maiden aunt at a reunion. “Dunno, Myrtle, awhile. How’re you?”

Myrtle sighed. “Terrible,” she said, “just terrible. Awful. Miserable, really. Honestly, I get so bored, but none of the other ghosts ever want a chat. I mean, I’ve only been a ghost for about fifty years or so – and most of them from the Middle Ages, or something, I suppose it’s true we have very little to talk about... no, they’re too clever to bother with the likes of me, too ancient, too proud.”

Harry thought Myrtle sounded genuinely depressed rather than just complaining for the sake of hearing her own voice. “Well, depending on how things go today, we may be seeing a lot of one another,” he said, hoping this would cheer her.

It did seem to. The ghost looked startled, then grinned. “Really? Do tell!”

“How could I forget?” Myrtle demanded. “It opens up and you and your friend and the sweet little blonde man go down there; and then I hear all sorts of things about snakes and demons later on. But is Myrtle asked to go on the adventure? Noooo... despite the fact that she’d be dead useful, especially since nasty little snakes can’t hurt her – but you didn’t even think of me once, did you?”

Harry had to admit that he hadn’t, and this brought on another fit of whinging, which did not abate until Harry told Myrtle that she could come along with him on the condition that she keep very, very quiet.

Harry moved towards the water spout. Frowning, he wondered if something other than the command to open would open the passageway, so long as it was in Parseltongue, or if he’d just guessed it right on the first try. Staring at the snake and pretending for all he was worth that it was real, Harry murmured, *Ghost*.

He frowned when nothing happened. *Open*, he said this time.

Harry slumped, realizing that it would be very unlikely that the staff wouldn’t re-seal the Chamber of Secrets...

Myrtle watched him anxiously before lowering to hover at Harry’s left. “I suppose we can’t go down after all,” she moaned sadly. “The Headmaster came in here once and poked at it for a bit; he must’ve fixed it for good.”

“Dumbledore did?” Harry inquired, a sudden suspicion taking hold of him. He stared at the snake. *Confection*, he said, which was apparently the snake-translation for anything sweet.

To his consternation, the passageway opened.

For a moment, Harry seriously considered letting Dumbledore know that it wasn’t wise to use the same sort of password over and over. Then again, perhaps that was just what the Headmaster intended – for anyone who truly needed to reach him to have the ability to do so. And perhaps,
Harry further reasoned, Dumbledore knew he would come to explore these caverns later on, or guessed.

“Ooooh, clever boy!” Myrtle exclaimed, zooming down the passageway and gazing about.

Harry followed her down, not even needing to produce a Lumos because of the gentle light Myrtle emitted as she examined every crevice. Once his feet were on solid ground, Harry took out the Marauder’s Map and examined it.

“What is that?” Myrtle demanded, hovering just above and behind Harry.

“It shows where people are; it’s a map,” Harry explained.

“The passageway isn’t on it,” Myrtle said petulantly, then gasped. Slowly, lines were being inked that indicated a myriad of passageways. The rest of Hogwarts disappeared, and writing began taking its place.

Mr. Moony congratulates Mister Potter on finding a new area of Hogwarts Castle and grounds.

“What’s it doing, what’s it doing?” Myrtle squeaked.

Mr. Prongs would like to add his congratulations as well, except for the fact that he is too shocked by the sight of the unhinged Myrtle Thompson, and may need several weeks at St. Mungo’s to recover his sanity.

Mr. Padfoot wonders how Mr. Potter ever became involved with such a deranged whinger.

Myrtle wailed and hid her face in her hands.

“Hey,” Harry said to the map. “That’s enough!”

Mr. Wormtail adds his own congratulations to the redoubtable Mister Potter the Second.

And Mister Mooney apologizes to Miss Thompson for the stupidity of his friends.

At that, the map was finally and thankfully silent.

“Who made this thing?” Myrtle demanded, too shocked to be properly mortified.

“My father and his friends, back when they were at school,” Harry said, looking as apologetic as he could. “I’m afraid they could be right prats when they wanted to be,” he added, thinking of Snape.

“Well, I didn’t come here to be insulted,” Myrtle replied snottily, floating up through the ceiling. “See if I help you now!”

“Myrtle!” Harry waited a moment, then shrugged, deciding that the ghost’s feelings were good and hurt. He smoothed the map. “Thanks a bunch,” he told it flatly.

As always, Mssrs. Mooney, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs are at Mister Potter’s service.

“Like fun you are,” Harry said, then examined the map of the Chamber of Secrets more carefully.

The Chamber, he decided immediately, had been poorly named. It was more like a small but complex-looking series of catacombs that resembled a nautilus shell – or perhaps, a coiled snake – from above. It wasn’t hard to figure out where in the shell he’d landed, because there was a small, unmoving dot labeled Harry Potter written in elegant but compressed script on the outermost coil.
It didn’t take long for Harry to deduce that the part of the Chamber that had been caved in was somewhere off to the east; he was facing north, and he distinctly recalled moving off to his right with Ron and Professor Lockhart in second-year.

There was really only one other way to go, so Harry headed west, watching as his small dot moved along the outermost edges of the parchment. After a moment, he trusted that the path would not divide or meander, so he pocketed the map and used his wand to illuminate the way.

The stones were old and crumbling, Harry noted, and everything was blanketed in a thick layer of dust; despite its muffling, he should have heard noises from the castle above, or from rats or owls or the other animals that nest down in the dark. There was nothing – not one small noise, save his footfalls. He abruptly regretted not folding up the map the moment it began to insult Myrtle...

The entire business reminded Harry inescapably of a mine shaft, with its cramped walls, wooden support-beams and feeling of muffled isolation. He began to hum as he moved, desperate to hear something more cheerful than one set of footsteps, echoing enough so that they sounded like two sets, if Harry listened hard enough.

It took a surprisingly long time to reach the end of the coil, nearly a half an hour by Harry’s reckoning. The path ended very abruptly, blocked by a stout, oaken door bound with strips of iron. Harry glared at the door warily, then pointed his wand at it. “Alohamora,” he said.

Nothing so much as clicked or stirred; either the charm had not worked – or the door was actually open? Harry paused, considering it. He supposed there was no point in locking a door that sat beneath the ladies’ room at the end of an already-secret passage guarded by a tongue only two could speak. He heard the shuttle click as he put his hand to the knob, and the door swung readily open; Harry stepped inside and shut it behind him.

“Lumos,” he said, and the light at his wand grew bright enough to fully illuminate the area.

Harry was within a circular room of generous dimensions, cold with disuse but obviously the beneficiary of a massive preservation spell. There was no dust, as there had been outside the door; the stones were far from crumbling. In fact, they fairly gleamed.

Harry had thought that Professor Snape’s personal library was extensive, but the sheer number volumes within this room dwarfed those within his; four shelves ran around the entire circular room, and were completely packed with large tomes, small treatises, and piles of scrolls. A futon of some sort rested back against the wall just behind a rather large armchair, a pair of glasses perched on its left arm, an open book overturned to keep its page on the right. A circular hearth sat, oddly, in the centre of the room; as Harry watched, the fireplace burst into flame, obviously merely awaiting the return of some secret master – for as Harry stood there, he realized that someone must be looking after these rooms, must belong here. The open book and glasses, more than anything else, told him that he was an intruder on someone’s secret space – perhaps, he thought, examining the glasses, Dumbledore.

Even as Harry thought this, he decided it was wrong. Dumbledore, always so relaxed and comfortable with himself and others – he would not need a secret room like this. He would not need to be alone, as Harry did so often of late. Professor Snape might, though, Harry realized, gazing about. But then he thought of the Professor’s private rooms – already so deep in the bowels of the castle – and decided that Snape already had a room like this. Why another? And the glasses...

“Nox.” Harry pocketed his wand, then picked them up, turning them over in his hands. They were
more-or-less oval-shaped bifocals. He replaced them, carefully lifting the book, which proved to be a slender collection of poetry. Frowning, he placed it back down. No real hints, there – no one he knew liked poetry, with the exception, perhaps, of Ginny Weasley, whose grasp of rhythm and rhyme had been demonstrated very publicly to him at one point.

Harry examined some of the other books, but they were of little use – they were far too varied to be of any help in indicating their owner. Many of them he recognized as copies of volumes he had seen before: he spotted *Hogwarts: A History*, simply by shape, colour and size, from how often he’d seen Hermione carting it around. Harry felt a pang, which he summarily ignored. *Advanced Potion-Making* was on the shelf, too, although the cover looked slightly different than that of the one he owned.

*Maybe I can convince Ron and Hermione to come over here after the whole business with Draco is fixed up,* he decided. *Hermione’ll know what to do with all these books, for one thing.* Harry grinned, picturing the bushy-haired girl’s face when she caught sight of the secret room...

...secret room... Harry frowned at the stuffed armchair with something like suspicion. The caverns certainly hadn’t seemed worthy of the word ‘Chamber’... was this, in fact, the Chamber of Secrets? Harry gazed about with new eyes, stalking the area. There was not enough time to explore, now; if he wanted to get back to Defense Against the Dark Arts in time, he was going to have to turn about immediately. Harry opened the door, poised to take his first step out into the winding hall, and froze.

There was nothing there to place his questing foot on – no walkway, no hallway – *nothing*, except a vague swath of grey in the near-distance. Gazing downward revealed an inky blackness and an unguessable depth. Wildly, Harry withdrew the map, gazing on it, silently imploring it to tell him a different story – that the drop was an illusion, or even hysteria – the first signs of going mad due to his continued use of *Obscura*.

As Harry watched with disbelieving eyes, the ink on the map shifted and writhed like a live thing, corridors changing and melding, disappearing and reforming, and the bleeding ink was coupled with the sound of stone sliding fitfully against stone, audible through the now-open doorway. The patterns settled, suddenly – only to reveal a maze, one which *still* did not connect to the Chamber...

Harry had wondered, at one point, if the halls and Chamber were part of some sort of escape route. They were not.

They were a trap.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for all the comments last chapter! You guys are awesome. :D

I always wondered why it was called the Chamber of Secrets, per se, since a chamber is usually just an old-fashioned name for 'room'... I kind of got the picture of catacombs and caves while reading the second book, didn't you?

One of the things I'm noticing in this story as I revisit it in detail is that it seems I took every trope I liked and used it. I can see younger me kind of going "playground of ideas... WHEEEEE!!!" throughout SoS. ;) In contrast, the sequel seems a lot more linear - not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing - probably some people will like
the first one more because it has more surprises, and others will like the sequel because it's more complex. (One hopes they both have their charms...)

Keep reading, keep writing, everyone!

-K
Hermione Granger was Worried.

This was actually a rather normal state for her to be in. She was friends with Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley, two boys who, if not for the presence of Fred and George Weasley, would have vied for the top spots of Greatest Losers of Gryffindor Points. She obsessed frequently over grades, often fretting herself into a loss of temper and/or sanity. She was a Muggleborn witch living in the age of Voldemort.

A far more immediate cause for anxiety, however, was the fact that Harry was Missing.

Harry’d been missing since Charms, although Hermione wasn’t really to know that he was Missing missing and not moping missing. Despite all he’d said to her, the way he’d spat out that horrible word – Mudblood – with such noteworthy aplomb, and perhaps really because of all of that, she was beside herself by the end of Defense.

Lupin looked none too pleased either, she noted as she conferred with Ron.

Ron was still incredibly angry with Harry. “I reckon he’s off brooding somewhere,” Ron said, and although Ron was basically right, that did not, in this case, place Harry in any less danger than before, which Hermione was quick to point out to him.

“No matter what Harry’s said to us, he’s still our friend,” Hermione reminded him sharply. “Besides, Ron, you know Draco Malfoy told him to say all of those things; we’ve discussed this.”

Ron grumbled something inaudibly, but the words Harry and git were definitely in there someplace.

“Seriously, Ron. We must spend some time after Defense looking for him. What if he’s in the Hospital Wing? How would you feel then?”

“I’d feel a bit better, I reckon,” Ron said stubbornly. When Hermione sighed, looking drained, he placed a comforting hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “Look, Hermione, I don’t think there’s any reason to worry... he’s probably avoiding Malfoy. After that scene last night, wouldn’t you? Let him be.”

But Hermione couldn’t let Harry be – so, after Defense, she checked the Hospital Wing, where Madam Pomfrey was cheerfully treating one of the Creevey brothers; Hermione didn’t check which. Then she checked the Astronomy Tower, which was out of the way and rather brood-worthy, but she had no luck there, either, beyond disturbing a new amorous couples and seeing things that Could Not Be Unseen. She even went to check with Hagrid, although she was careful not to so much as mention that Harry was missing, so as not to worry him. She asked if he’d seen a lot of Harry this year, and Hagrid admitted Harry hadn’t been to see him yet.

By then it was time for supper, so Hermione wandered down to the Great Hall, half-expecting to see Harry’s riot of dark wavy hair close beside Draco’s straighter silver – but Draco was alone. Hermione accidentally caught his grey eyes and realized that he was scanning the Gryffindor table as she’d been scanning Slytherin.
He doesn’t know either? Hermione’s anxiety skipped up a notch. She conferred rapidly with Ron. Together, they decided that the time for worry had arrived, but they quickly worked out a handful of other places to check before they informed a teacher.

Hermione and Ron chased away a handful of the Unsorted House, and escaped the Hall. Together, they checked the library, every nook, including the three secret study lounges scattered in various spots behind paintings and under rugs throughout the library proper. They checked the Hospital Wing, again, just in case. And finally, they moved to check the Room of Requirement.

“What do you suppose we should be looking for?” Hermione wondered, one finger tapping meditatively on her lower lip. “What would Harry look for?”

Ron shook his head. “No telling. Although he once told me he was never more comfortable anywhere than in the Gryffindor dorms...”

“All right, you picture them, then,” Hermione said, knowing Ron was more familiar with the inside of his room than she was. “I’ll wait here.”

Ron pictured the dorms with varying degrees of concentration, but the door refused to appear, even on the third and fourth pass.

When it did on the sixth, it was with an odd feeling of magical reluctance – or that was how Ron would describe it if pressed. Frowning, he opened the door.

There was already someone inside, and, for a moment, Ron believed with all his heart that it was Harry. A figure was slumped in one of the chairs of the room that Ron, Harry, Seamus, and Dean shared, his elbows resting on his knees, his head in his hands.

Then a flash of torchlight from the hall caught on hair pale enough that it could only be Draco Malfoy’s.

Hermione, standing beside Ron, took a step back – she recognized the stance of someone who Wished To Be Alone, and automatically respected it.

Ron, however, had no such compunctions. “You!” he said, pointing with a certain drama. “What are you doing here?”

Malfoy stiffened, straightened, and turned to glare at them. Hermione couldn’t help but note that he looked drained and exhausted. “What the deuce...?” he murmured, looking at them. Then he turned his attention to the room as a whole. “Well, now,” he added, startled. “When did that happen?”

“Have you seen Harry?” Hermione inquired politely. After all, that was what they’d come for, and she had no intention of allowing the boys to become sidetracked by an argument.

“No, he’s not here,” Draco said rather redundantly. “One would hope that even your brain could grasp the fact.”

“I asked you if you’d seen him, not if you were looking at him just now,” Hermione replied, forgetting immediately her plan not to antagonize the Slytherin.

“But since Potions,” he said.

The reply was so straightforward that Hermione stared. “Er... okay, thanks,” Hermione said, tugging Ron away with little yanks of his robe.
“You haven’t seen him?” Draco continued.

Hermione shook her head. “Not – not since Potions...”

“Why?” Ron interjected. “Wanted him to do something even worse than before?”

“I wanted him to do something, yes. He’s not in the Hospital Wing, or the Astronomy Tower, or with you...” Draco was frowning and standing up, some of the tiredness falling from him. “I suppose it’s time to see a professor.”

Hermione didn’t really enjoy hearing her thoughts echoed by the other boy, but she nodded. “Yes, well – we’re off to do just that.”

Draco shrugged. “Certainly, Granger. Feel free. But I’m going to inform one as well.” He slipped past them and into the hallway.

“But – who are you going to inform?” Hermione called after him.

Draco half-turned, eyeing her as if debating whether to respond. “My Head of House.”

Ron snorted. “Some help he’ll be. He’ll probably throw a party, that one.”

“Who will you tell, Granger?”

Hermione bit her lower lip. “Professor Lupin. Harry’s most likely to be in trouble with some sort of Dark Arts thing...” or already dead, the most cold and logical part of her announced, and she felt herself pale. Grabbing Ron’s sleeve again, she made off for Professor Lupin’s quarters, while Draco headed in the opposite direction.

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Why’d he have to go and do that? It’s not like Granger and the Weasel are even really upset with him, Draco thought, staring after the pair for a moment before striding swiftly along the corridor in the opposite direction. Harry’s such a ponce, such a baby.

Draco was one of the few students who knew the location of his Head of House’s private quarters; at one point two years ago, Snape had revealed its location, with a strict command not to abuse the privilege. He’d talked about darkness, and crises, and knowing of a refuge one could turn to. At the time, Draco had been certain Snape was talking about the Dark Lord as a refuge, but now he was beginning to think that the black-haired man was offering his rooms as a refuge in case Draco ever got in trouble with the Dark Lord, somehow, or at home. Over the years, his view of Snape had altered, subtly at first, but it scarcely mattered. Professor Severus Snape would always take his side and would always shield him from both the worst that the Light had to offer – and the worst of the Dark.

When he knocked on the door, Professor Snape answered, still in his school robes. The Professor’s features fell visibly when Draco grinned at him and sauntered in.

“What, sir, awaiting a lover at your age?” Draco teased, then immediately regretted it as Snape’s features hardened with anger.

“What do you want, Draco?” he bit off.
Draco paused, thrown by this odd miscalculation on his part. “Uhm, I thought you should know that Potter is missing.”

“Potter is missing?”

Draco nodded. “I mean, he’s probably off whinging to the wind somewhere high and remote, but I can’t find him.” He frowned. “Neither can Weasley and Granger, and that’s worrying.”

“When did you see him last?”

Draco sighed, wondering why everyone always wanted to know this. How did it help? “Potions, this morning. And before you ask, that is where they saw him last, too. He never came to Charms.”

Snape paled. “Have you alerted the Headmaster? Why did you wait so long?”

“No – I came to you, first. And I waited because it’s his tendency to go off on his own when things go wrong. I just wait for him to show again, and he does. His friends must be used to the same.”

Professor Snape tossed some powder into the fire and stuck his head in, obviously having a quick conversation with Professor Dumbledore. When he emerged once more, he turned to Draco. “Mister Malfoy, what are the side effects of a properly performed Imperius Curse?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Hardly time for a lesson just now, is it?”

“Do not be obtuse,” Snape replied.

For a moment, they stood there, both glaring – Draco feeling small and pale silvery-gold – and Snape looking the personification of night. They might have continued like that for quite some time, but for the fact that a knock on the door interrupted them.

Snape moved to open it, then blinked in surprise as Remus Lupin nodded to him and entered, followed by Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger. Draco saw Snape rub at his temples and frown.

“Good evening, Severus,” Lupin said pleasantly. “Eye... healing nicely, I see?”

Professor Snape offered up a glare that shifted to a wary tolerance a moment later. “Quite,” he replied. “Any news of Mister Potter?”

“I was hoping you might know of some of his haunts. Have knowledge that the rest of us aren’t privy to?”

“Do I detect a hint of jealousy, Lupin?” Snape sneered, stepping a bit closer, eyeing Lupin with distaste. “No, Mister Potter does not pour his heart out so very regularly – he is a singularly solitary person...”

“...who’s missing!” Granger squeaked.

Draco turned to glare at her, but really, he was grateful for the interruption; something in the dynamic between the two professors had shifted, but it was rapidly apparent to him that the two could continue in this vein for hours.

“Yes, thank you, Miss Granger,” Snape said acerbically, but Draco caught a hint of genuine
gratitude in his Professor’s voice.

Briefly, they conferred on where they had already looked; Draco had checked some of the same places they had, but he had also thought to scan the Quidditch pitch and stands. Nobody they’d asked had even seen Harry, except some terrorized-looking first-year, who’d informed Draco that she’d seen Harry on the end of the second-floor corridor.

Hermione perked up. “Oh, no,” she said.

“What is it, Hermione?” Lupin inquired gently.

“The second floor,” she repeated.

“Spit it out, Miss Granger!”

“It’s okay,” said Ron, “she gets like this – but she’ll say what’s what if you’re patient.”

Draco watched as the girl regained hold of herself.

“He’s gone where we can’t follow. Oh, this is awful! Don’t you see, Ron? He’s gone down to the Chamber!”

“Oh, don’t be silly, you foolish girl,” Snape said. “No one can reach the Chamber of Secrets anymore. I know for a fact that the Headmaster changed the password.”

“What, to lemon drop?” Ron asked.

Snape and Lupin both flushed.

“He couldn’t quite get it to shift off of Parseltongue,” Lupin said, frowning, “or so McGonagall tells me.”

“So it’s lemon drop in Parseltongue,” Hermione confirmed. “You think Harry won’t figure that? There’s nothing else of interest on the second floor,” she continued, “unless he went to see the Headmaster, which I doubt - and Professor Lupin is already here. Harry might’ve gone up to the third floor to the statue of the witch, but the secret passage is caved-in.”

Draco perked up. “There’s a secret passage?”

“And so’s the Chamber of Secrets,” Ron reminded her. “Why should Harry go down there, when it’s blocked?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Ron,” Hermione said with feeling, “maybe because it’s dark and cold and lonesome and no one will find him there? After what that fool made him do, he won’t want to see us, will he?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “I did it to prove a point – not as though I’d expect either one of you to understand.”

“So – what, he’s sitting down there feeling sorry for himself?” Ron shot back at Hermione, crossing his arms over his chest. “I’ll admit he’s been different, lately, but one would imagine he’d come back for supper.”

“But that’s just it, Ron, he can’t,” Hermione went on, gesticulating feelingly. “Remember how we got out? Fawkes! You can’t climb back up. Now that it’s closed in, there’s no way out!”
“You mean you can’t just speak the word in Parseltongue from the other side? Isn’t that rather a foolish way to go about building a secret passage?” Draco wondered.

“He’s stuck in there!” Ron said, as though the idea had just suddenly hit him.

“Excuse me!” Draco shouted, moving to stand directly in between Ron and Hermione. “Are you idiots even aware there’s anyone in the room but the two of you?”

Ron blinked and stepped slightly away; Hermione did the same thing.

“Thank you, Mister Malfoy,” Snape said. “Excellent deductions, Miss Granger, but you do not need to reveal all in the manner of a dime-store-novel detective. Despite all evidence to the contrary, there are those who have the ability to keep up with your intellect. Mister Weasley, kindly refrain from ignoring those around you; it’s rude, no matter how involved you are with your girlfriend at the time. Lupin – suggestions?”

Draco watched as the werewolf started slightly, looking quite taken aback by the query.

“I suppose we should go up to the second floor and see if we cannot locate another entrance to this Chamber.”

Snape considered this, then nodded, and strode out the door without waiting to see if anyone else would follow.

The odd procession made their way up to the second floor, with a lot of mutters concerning ill-treatment from Draco, who was beginning to find the stairs tiresome after the fifth flight. The others didn’t say much of anything, even Professor Lupin, who was beginning to look a bit grey after the third.

Too close to the full moon, I suppose, Draco thought, eyeing the older man with ill-concealed revulsion. I doubt he’ll be much use by the time we reach the entrance to the Chamber...

When they emerged onto the second floor, Draco started thinking about the Chamber, about how very much he’d wanted to be the Heir of Slytherin... but Potter had somehow stolen even that from him, everyone assuming it was him – Potter, who heard voices and talked to snakes and who, at twelve, already looked far more dangerous than Draco could hope to appear at sixteen.

“Here we are,” Hermione said, and without any more preamble, led the way into the girls’ toilets.

“Oh, you have got to be kidding me,” Draco said, his chin hitching up a notch, although the place smelled mineral, like water, rather than anything more objectionable. Hermione eyed him with a fastidious distaste, as though she found his squeamishness disappointing but not entirely unexpected, and moved to a particular water fixture. Ron stood beside her, and they nodded in tandem.

“That’s it all right,” Ron said. “Now what?”

Draco watched as Professor Lupin nodded at Snape and moved to stand beside the fixture. Starting with a simple Alohamora charm, he ran through a rather impressive gamut of unlocking and revealing incantations. When he’d exhausted his ingenuity, Snape stepped in with a few that the other Professor had omitted. When all was said and done, nothing had altered.

Except, perhaps, that Draco could swear the little snake was now grinning cheekily up at them.

For his part, Draco waited until they’d exhausted their ideas before stating the obvious. “You
know, even if we do get in, we’ll only be stuck as well. Even assuming you did find Harry, we’d just be a bunch of jolly corpses...”

Hermione blinked at him and Snape looked taken aback. He could tell that they were both mentally cursing themselves, and that was somewhat satisfying.

“Couldn’t Snape or Lupin Apparate –” Ron began.

“Can’t Apparate at Hogwarts,” Hermione and Draco said in chorus, Hermione tired and Draco smug.

“Oi, that was scary,” Ron said. “Sorry I asked.”

“Oooh, more guests! I don’t remember when I’ve had this much fun!” Myrtle exclaimed, melting through the ceiling and moving to hover before the five wizards.

“Myrtle, have you seen Harry?!” Hermione exclaimed.

“Seen him? Oh yes, I’ve seen him,” she replied coyly. “But his parchment was incredibly mean, d’you know? I’m sure he charmed it just to insult me; it said all sorts of terrible things. But I suppose that’s what I’ve come to expect, really,” she added with a vague stab at being prosaic.

“No one cares for moping, moaning Myrtle!”

“Too right we don’t,” Draco replied. “So – where’s Harry now?”

Myrtle blinked back tears. “I know you. You don’t care for anyone but yourself, you don’t!” she cried. “See if I help you!”

Hermione shot a warning look around at all of the wizards, especially at Draco, Ron, and, daringly, at Snape. “Oh, Myrtle, you know how boys are!” she exclaimed. “Come back on down and let’s have a chat, shall we? I know you like Harry, you’re only upset because of that stupid parchment.”

Myrtle paused, looking dejected. “He charmed it to insult me,” she said petulantly.

“Oh, no, it’s a joke shop item,” Snape said suddenly. “Insults anyone who looks at it.”

Lupin started, and turned to stare, but Myrtle was looking slightly more cheered.

“Really? He said his father and his father’s friends had made it... that makes more sense, though, I suppose. Harry’s always been nice to me. One of the few who has, really.”

Draco recognized Myrtle’s lapsing back into her horrid mood and opened his mouth, but Hermione had apparently spotted it, too.

“Yes, he’s a perfectly lovely boy, isn’t he?” she said desperately. “Only, he’s trapped down there, and he really needs your help!”

“Trapped? Is he?” she inquired, looking interested. “Oh, bother.” A crafty gleam entered her eyes. “Perhaps I’ll have company, soon, shall I?”

“If you think for one minute Harry’d hang around with you, you’re bonkers!” Ron snapped, his face pink.

Draco wondered how the Granger girl would smooth this over, but she did – without so much as a hitch.
“He’s right, I’m afraid, Myrtle,” she said solemnly. “Harry wouldn’t appreciate it if you let him starve down there, or come to some other, horrid end. I doubt he’d hang around you if he knew you were almost directly responsible for the fact that he died. Be reasonable, now,” she chided, sounding as though Myrtle had said something foolish rather than abhorrent.

“Oh, well, I suppose you’re right,” Myrtle conceded begrudgingly. “Let me go down and see if I can find him.” And she disappeared.

For several minutes they waited on tenterhooks. Draco gazed about and wondered how he’d ended up in this situation. It was going to be very difficult to explain any of this to his father in his weekly report... he could see it now, writing in his own, elegant script:

Spent most of the day searching for Harry Potter. Checked: library, bathrooms, Quidditch pitch, Medical Wing, War Room. Which hadn’t been a war room when he’d opened his eyes, but he wasn’t about to ask Weasley or Granger how that worked, or if he’d simply been hallucinating. He’d been feeling so tired lately that he didn’t rule that out out of hand. Then, met with Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger and discussed Potter’s absence; went to Professor Snape’s private rooms to discuss disappearance. Met with Remus Lupin (werewolf), Weasley and Granger and convened with Professor Snape in second-floor ladies’ room – waited twenty-five minutes.

No one said anything. The silence spiraled horribly.

Finally, Myrtle came floating up through the floor. “Found him!” she announced. “It’s terrible,” she tacked on with what seemed like glee.

Draco wanted to strangle her.

“He gave me messages,” she went on. “Now, let me see...” She turned to Professors Lupin and Snape. “He says that he’s in a room physically at the center of the labyrinth, but you cannot reach it from any angle, save directly above.”

“Labyrinth?” Ron echoed. “But – there was a cave, and all of that.”

“I don’t know about any cave,” Myrtle replied, lowering so that her feet rested on the ground and she could gaze at Ron without craning her neck. “I saw the map – it was like a cinnamon cake down there, the path all spiraling. But Harry showed the map to me –” She flushed dark silver. “And after it insulted me some more, I saw that it’s like a maze, now. It changed.”

Draco frowned, catching Hermione and Ron exchanging a dismayed glance out of the corner of his eye.

“Anyway,” Myrtle continued blithely, “it’s odd down there. There are all these pretty books, and a nice chair and a fire at the centre. Nearly out, now, though. Then he’ll be alone in the dark.”

“That doesn’t sound like a prison,” Lupin commented.

“That’s just what Harry said,” Myrtle replied, “but it’s a prison nonetheless. Harry said...” She paused, seeming to strain to recall Harry’s words. “Harry said that it was obvious it wasn’t a prison... maybe an escape route.” She frowned. “He says he’s too stupid to figure how to escape, though.”

Snape snorted, looking disbelieving, but Lupin looked more worried. “We need a direct connection with him. It took Myrtle far too long to locate Harry and return.”

Draco felt Snape’s eyes on him, and shook his head minutely. Unfortunately, the know-it-all
caught sight of the motion, noted it, as she did everything.

“What?” she demanded. “Draco, is there something you can do?”

Draco shook his head again. “Really Severus,” he drawled in his most insolent tone, “I told you no to begin with.”

“You did not, Mister Malfoy,” Snape replied. “Rather, you glared.”

“Same thing,” he said.

“What’s this?” Lupin inquired.

Snape examined the company they were in, as though determining whether he could speak freely – when he opened his mouth and continued, Draco nearly died of the shock. Trusting Weasley, Granger, and the werewolf? Hell, apparently, had frozen over.

“Imperius can create a bond that never quite dies, especially in people of similar background or circumstance,” Snape replied. “I believe Draco has that bond with Harry.”

Draco shuddered. “No, I don’t,” he snapped. “Thank Merlin and all the patron saints of House Malfoy.”

“You have the best chance of communicating with Mister Potter,” Snape countered. “Whether you have experienced any connection by accident is not the issue. The question remains as to whether you can contact him on purpose.”

“I won’t,” Draco said.

“Well, there’s a surprise.” Ron glared at him. “I’ve been wondering why you’re still hanging around. Toddle off and terrorize some first-years, why don’t you?”

“Ron,” Hermione stressed.

“Listen to the Mudblood, Weasel,” Draco spat. “She’s far more sensible than you’ll ever manage.”

“Now is not the time for petty rivalries,” Lupin interjected. “Please, Draco, if you would try...? I am certain that if we could contact Harry directly, we could solve this between us.”

Now the werewolf was pleading with him – and more importantly, he probably had a point. Fabulous. He turned to Professor Snape, who gave him an odd, curt nod of encouragement. Draco didn’t want to admit that he felt sick to his stomach at the very thought of attempting contact with Harry. But if he didn’t, they could spend the rest of the night sending Myrtle back and forth – if the ghost would even agree to shuttle between them.

If the ghost could even be useful enough to provide information that would lead to Harry’s escape at all.

Damn it, why was he here? Yes, he really wanted that final favor from Harry before the other boy’s servitude was up, but wasn’t it better, really, if he just...

Say it, he thought harshly. Say what you mean: died.

A picture swept, unbidden to his mind – Harry seated on the grass, knees tucked under his chin, looking up at him with that incredibly relaxed smile. The memory was little more than an image, a
flash like a Muggle photograph, but he recalled his sudden uneasiness at the expression, the need to suppress that smile that had immediately arisen within him. He’d said that the smile only worked on Harry’s admirers and followers, but that wasn’t true.

It had worked on him.

He didn’t want to become closer to Harry. Whenever Harry was around, he trailed chaos behind him, and that chaos was beginning to encroach onto Draco’s rather carefully ordered life... Harry made things so very confusing.

One touch with Harry’s mind had completely reordered Draco’s. It had taken a week to admit, but he was admitting it now, even if only to himself. What would a second touch do?

“I can’t,” he said suddenly, becoming slowly aware that the talk had gone on without him, that he was interrupting. He didn’t care. The very thought of interacting with Harry in that way had him feeling ill.

“You will try,” Snape ordered in a voice that brooked no argument.

Draco wanted Harry out of there. He wanted his last command to be answered. He wasn’t sure if one reason really led so directly to the other, not anymore, but that scarcely mattered, now. Eventually, they’d get Harry out, he was certain of this – the boy’s life wasn’t in any real danger – but if he were partially responsible for Harry’s escape... well, all sorts of possibilities could open up.

“I suppose I’ll give it a go,” he replied, enjoying Hermione and Ron’s expressions of horror. “Nothing to lose, eh?”

He sat abruptly down on the bathroom floor and cleared his mind of distractions. Hermione made a sound as if to ask something, but Snape shushed her. Then there was silence, and cool, and calm... Draco wondered if Professor Snape knew of his training, then decided that he did, that Lucius told his Head of House absolutely everything about him...

It was terrifying how rapidly he found Harry, his consciousness shifting to Harry’s like a magnet to lodestone.

Chapter End Notes

First Draco/Hermione/Ron interaction that doesn't involve fists or name-calling! :)

I love writing Hermione's and Draco's point of view, too. Hermione and her Important Things Capitalization! Wait until you see things from her POV in the sequel. Hermione's thinking is very... regimented. And Draco is a chronically unreliable narrator.

Thanks as always for your comments, guys! I really appreciate them. :D

-K
Harry couldn’t tell how much time had passed; the fire was slowly running out of fuel, though. Despite having a magical trigger, it seemed to have a mundane power source – wood – which was currently being consumed.

Harry read the entire book of poetry before carefully replacing it open face-down on the arm of the chair. He had been hoping that the catacombs would re-arrange themselves again if he waited, this time connecting to the room, but they did not move. Harry was beginning to wonder, a bit shakily, if they hadn’t been designed that way.

That thought pulled others along behind it. What had the Chamber been built for? Surely a prison could have been a little bit less well-appointed. Why the books, the fire, if this was really meant to be some sort of trap that he had sprung? It looked like someone could stay here comfortably for quite some time – there was even a cozy chair to sit in. No, this wasn’t a prison at all, it was a place to sit and pass the time...

Harry frowned as the pieces of the puzzle began filling in. This is a place to run to, he realized, nodding to himself. The fire and all of that, or maybe the door closing sets it all off so that the moment you are shut in tight, the entire path here is destroyed, and you can’t be reached! Even the shape of the corridors, which had seemed uselessly curving and coiling had been more than mere aesthetics, Harry realized. They were designed for someone – or a group of someones – to handily escape a common enemy out of the path of wandfire. It was hard to shoot curses at someone who was obscured by every turn of the corridor!

This all meant that there was a way out. A safehouse wasn’t safe if you starved there, and Harry did not see any food or drink stored in the room, just lots and lots of books. He sat sulkily in the overstuffed chair and attempted to think, staring at the dying flames before him.

He opened the map and tapped it with his wand. “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,” he said.

The Marauder’s Map inked itself perfectly – sure enough, the corridors hadn’t rearranged – they were still in their second pattern, that of a maze. As far as Harry could see, the new path led absolutely nowhere – not to the room nor to any other spot. The maze was the trap, for an enemy: Harry was in the safehouse. Quite the trap, too, if the basilisk had still been alive.

“Got any bright ideas?” he demanded. To his surprise, words began forming on the Map.

*Mr. Padfoot congratulates Mister Potter on finding the lost Chamber of Secrets, and kindly suggests he not land himself in any more trouble than he can escape on his own.*

“All right, you know what to do,” Harry replied, stung. “Other people wouldn’t help in this case, thanks very much, even if they were Animagi.” He paused. “Unless one was a hawk or an owl or something.” He couldn’t imagine what Professor Snape and the others could do to aid him...

All of a sudden, Harry felt a familiar presence, and turned rapidly to the door, an exclamation on his lips...

*No, I’m still up there,* a voice drawled, aristocratic and more than a bit condescending.
Harry blinked. *Draco?*

*None other. Don’t look so startled, this is rather confusing to me without your confusion adding on to it.*

That seemed rather convoluted to Harry, who was only really ‘hearing’ Draco. There didn’t seem to be much to Draco’s presence but the words and an overwhelming sense of Draco being in the room – Harry could almost smell Draco’s smell, like fear, and too-expensive aftershave. Then there was the sense of Draco’s thoughts, like flowing water, familiar but almost forgotten.

*Merlin,* Draco breathed, or seemed to. After a moment, his voice sounded again. *Look around. I want to see what’s here* –

Harry obliged, feeling very odd. Then, he ‘heard’ Draco talking aloud, but obviously thinking the words as well, describing the room to Snape, Lupin, Ron and Hermione. He didn’t hear their replies, which probably meant Draco was deliberately ignoring them.

*It’s... it’s a bit of a strain keeping contact,* Draco conveyed, *as well as keeping track of them. I’ve told them to be quiet unless they have something useful to contribute...*

Through Draco, Harry realized that Snape was speaking.

*Look at the book,* Draco advised.

*I did look at the book,* Harry replied. *It’s a volume of poetry.*

*Let me see.*

Harry turned to the stuffed chair and book, feeling put upon, and picked it up to read the first poem written there:

> And so I grew lost in the mazes of your soul,  
> and could find neither window nor door –  
> crawling near death on dampened stone,  
> until, bewildered, I knew no more...  
> Then standing, swaying, I shaded my eyes,  
> beheld the way with growing wonder –  
> Through passion's flame and journey's strife  
> I did rip the walls asunder.

Harry shook his head, wondering why he was bothering to do such a useless thing... It wasn’t like the book was of any significance...

...left open to that particular page in such an obvious place...
Harry frowned, considering. The poem was talking about escape, albeit from a personal situation rather than a prison. If it was a clue, though, how exactly was he meant to ‘rip the walls asunder’? He didn’t have that kind of strength, magically or otherwise.

Try leaning against the walls, Draco’s thoughts announced, though absent of their usual surety. Perhaps they’re not real, just an illusion? Like Platform 9 ¾…

Harry ran his hands all the way around the wall, past the door and back to his initial position. “Sorry, no. It was a good idea, though.” He picked the poem up, and read it again. “The first thing the person does to escape is… stand, and – and shade his eyes.”

Shade his eyes… the glasses, Draco said. Harry, put on the glasses!

Harry moved to the armchair and took the glasses into his hands. They certainly didn’t seem special in any way, but… he adjusted them on his face in place of his own. Slowly, he brought up the book once more. The words swam, making him feel dizzy, and Harry almost tore the glasses off – before he realized that the writing on the page had bled and changed...

Pride and Prejudice, it now read.

What?! Draco didn’t seem too happy with this latest development, Harry noted.

What now? Harry wondered desolately. That doesn’t help. Have you ever read it?

Read what?

Harry abruptly realized that, to Draco, those words conveyed nothing more than two attributes – the book was Muggle in origin. Ten pounds says Hermione’s read it. Ask her what she thinks it means.

There was a small pause.

Granger says to try and find the book on the shelves.

“Find the book on the...?” Harry echoed aloud, scanning the room in the dying light. “Lumos,” he incanted, frowning. The fire was almost out, now.

There! Harry and Draco both announced at once. Harry hefted the book in his hands.

Odd, he thought. It’s far too heavy and way too thick... Harry opened the cover of the book, which immediately transfigured into a small box. “Floo powder! I... I think.”

It looks old, Potter. Careful.

Harry walked over to the dying flames, realizing with horror that he had almost been too late. Gasping, he sprinkled the powder very, very carefully over the flames, which turned white-hot before slowly fading to green.

Where?

To Lupin’s rooms – I think we’re closest to those.

“Professor Lupin’s Private Quarters, Hogwarts Castle,” Harry said, enunciating as clearly as he possibly could. Glancing around, he darted back to the chair to grab the book and the glasses; then, he leapt into the green flames.
When Harry tumbled out into the familiar gold and brown of Professor Lupin’s rooms, he breathed a huge sigh of relief, remaining flat on his stomach for a moment, just breathing in a scent without the heavy, oppressive dampness of his prison. *Draco*...? he inquired with a light, probing touch, but the other boy was gone.

Harry levered himself up into a seated position, then stood, brushing ashes from his robes and feeling in general as though he had moved the space of several universes instead of several floors; the heavy, silent oppression had made the Chamber seem as though it did not belong to the rest of the world.

Mere moments later, Professors Snape and Lupin, and Ron, Hermione, and Draco trailed into the rooms.

Harry grinned tiredly at them, surprising Ron, Hermione, and himself with an embrace. Ron patted him on the back awkwardly, and Hermione wept into his shoulder, telling him she’d worried he’d been hurt or killed. He felt awful, realizing that he very well could have become trapped there, if Ron and Hermione had left him alone, never noticed him gone... and his last words to both of them would have been the worst Draco Malfoy could come up with.

*Draco*... The blond-haired Slytherin was hanging back and looking—well, looking oddly self-satisfied, as well as white as a sheet.

“Draco,” he said aloud, moving beyond Ron and Hermione. He wasn’t sure what he should do. He couldn’t hug Draco Malfoy—out of the question. And yet, he needed to show, somehow, that he had been impressed with the other boy’s intelligence and startled by the fact that the Slytherin, too, had come looking for him. He awkwardly stuck out a hand, which Draco ignored.

Harry looked up to find Snape staring at him. He flushed self-consciously. “Why don’t I save you the trouble?” he muttered. “Stupid Potter, probably not enough excitement for you nearly getting killed by Voldemort all the time, now you have to seek trouble on your own? We all put ourselves in great danger today to help you, but you still could’ve died and where would the Wizarding World be, then, because of your carelessness? Twenty points from Gryffindor.”

Ron choked, and Hermione raised her eyebrows. Lupin merely smiled serenely.

“Right on the first and second counts,” Snape said, “although you omitted the most important factor— that Mister Malfoy was forced to connect to you once more in order to extricate you from this mess... and I would have omitted the ‘entire Wizarding World’ as you so aptly put it. Twenty-five points from Gryffindor. Twenty for endangering yourself and others. Five for pure cheek.”

Harry, to his surprise, and apparently to everyone else’s, barked a small laugh. “Sorry,” he said, when Snape shot him a glare with extra venom. “Really. It’s the shock.”

“Ten points to Slytherin on Mister Malfoy’s behalf,” Snape added. “And five, I suppose, to Miss Granger, for quick thinking.”

Hermione looked startled, then smiled tentatively. “Come on, Harry, let’s get some food into you. You must be starving—when did you last eat?”

Draco gazed at the trio; Harry caught the other boy looking out of the corner of his eye.

“Uhm, Draco, are you okay?” Harry wanted to know. “You don’t look right. Let’s go grab something to eat...” He attempted a grin before remembering that it didn’t seem to have the same
effect on Draco as on other people. “After all, if you’re not there, I may end up leaving half of it on the plate.”

For a minute, Draco stared at him, stretching the gaze until the moment became slightly uncomfortable for Harry. Then, the blond boy shrugged, looking wearier than ever. “No, you go on, Harry. I’ll be fine.” Draco nodded curtly at the assemblage, meandered out into the hallways and disappeared.

Somehow, it didn’t matter that Harry couldn’t talk to Hermione or Ron. Suddenly, nothing much seemed to matter at all, except that they were with him, and feeding him, and kept touching him unnecessarily, as if to make certain he was real. It wasn’t readily apparent, but Ron would place a hand on his shoulder to gain his attention, or Hermione would lean up against him briefly while they sat side-by-side on one of the Gryffindor couches, but Harry knew what it meant, and felt safe, and beloved, and disgustingly unworthy.

While he smiled, nodded, and laughed, Ron and Hermione chatted about school, and teachers, and Quidditch. Harry abruptly realized he had missed tryouts.

“I already talked to Katie,” Ron said. “They’ll be making an exception, seeing as it’s you and all.”

Harry was about to growl that he didn’t want an exception, but Draco Malfoy’s voice interrupted his thoughts, saying, you don’t have a choice, you naive little snot, and he was forced to remind himself that not only did he not have a choice, but he would’ve gone begging for a second chance if Katie hadn’t outright offered it to him.

It was only when Hermione disappeared quietly into his rooms and Ron started talking about the Quidditch tryouts Harry had missed in more detail, that Harry recognized how much he’d missed them – missed company – and wondered what it had been that made him want to isolate himself as he had.

When Hermione emerged with Harry’s birthday bauble in her hands, Ron’s speech faltered. The girl sat solemnly beside Harry and Ron – and the sphere glowed a brilliant, almost blinding red. She passed it silently to Ron, who looked up, and said, “Hermione, you don’t have to –” in a sort of vaguely disapproving way.

“Yes I do, Ronald Weasley,” she said sternly. “I absolutely do.”

Ron rolled his eyes, exasperated. When Hermione and Harry merely looked at him, he passed the bright red sphere to Harry.

It shone like the sun, blinding Harry for a moment, a red so dark and pure that the room for a moment looked drenched in blood. Harry stared into it, the brilliant colour burning into him, feeling as though he couldn’t look away… with a tingle of shock, he realized he was waiting for the colour to shift, or flicker, even as the knowledge slowly entered him that it was not going to change.

Ever.

“It’s late,” Hermione said, standing. “And tomorrow’s your last day with Malfoy. You’ve got to be ready for it.” When she reached the spot directly behind Harry, she leaned over the back of the
couch to rest her fingers atop his shoulders; then, she bent to kiss him gently on the cheek before fleeing to her rooms.

For a moment, Ron stared at him, and Harry realized with a blush that the redhead was wishing he could somehow convey the same sentiment. Ron settled for wrapping his arms loosely about Harry’s neck from behind the couch and leaning over to enfold him in a rough embrace that nearly choked him.

When Ron had disappeared, too, Harry was left staring silently at the flames of the Common Room’s fire. He sniffled once, then buried his face in the side of the couch and began to cry in earnest, in a way he hadn’t since – hadn’t, since –

Ever – at least, not over something like this. Harry didn’t cry over anything less than a death his fault.

Harry gasped with sudden pain - or - or, the release of pain - and, realizing he was ready, pointed his wand at himself. “Revealeo,” he said, and the universe crashed down about his ears.

Chapter End Notes

...how did this story get the same number of reviews as kudos? YOU GUYS ARE AWESOME, THAT’S HOW. :D

I really liked this scene, and I hope you are beginning to wonder a little bit more about Draco Malfoy. The reconciliation scene was fun to go through again, too, but there are so many bits of this story that I CANNOT WAIT TO SHARE that are COMING PRETTY SOON so I am stoked.

As you can see.

Hey, twenty chapters in a month isn't bad! It's about 2/3 of a chapter a day, which is good. ....right?

<3

Keep reading, keep writing, everyone!

-K
Harry woke sprawled across the couch of the Common Room. Everything seemed tinged with grey this early in the morning, but at the back of his mind there was a bright spark of defiant triumph. He had managed a *Revealeo* by himself. Admittedly, what he had released was apparently being absolutely *furious* with Snape for burning his entire summer’s work, but it was still a triumph – and, lost points or no lost points, last night had been a sort of triumph all around.

Sod the guilt – sod to everything to do with darkness and sorrow and self-recrimination. Toss the bit about Ron and Hermione following him – they did, yes, but they did it because they loved him. Hermione had known it was wrong – known! – and she’d still followed him into the Department of Mysteries. Come to think of it, everyone had been aware he was wrong, with varying degrees of certainty, and they’d followed him.

So he wouldn’t get himself killed.

And maybe, just maybe, getting all huffy because they admired his saving-people thing when it wasn’t getting them nearly killed themselves, was like trying to be bothered about people who enjoyed his wry sense of humor or respected his determination. Maybe growing up doing the saving-people thing had made it a part of him, and if they liked and admired him, well, they had to like and admire that, even though it must drive them up the wall, sometimes... the way Harry had to admit that he truly admired Hermione’s dedication to scholarship, even though he wished she’d poke her nose from a book once in awhile and stop sounding like she’d swallowed the dictionary.

Grinning stupidly to himself with happiness, Harry rummaged through his things for clean robes, ending by carefully placing the bauble in his trunk, nestling it lovingly between several layers of robes.

Sod the Invisibility Cloak, too – *it* was now his most prized possession.

---

Harry was doing his Transfiguration homework when Ron emerged from their room, looking sleepy-eyed with his hair sticking every which-way. Ron’s brows raised when he saw Harry, but he didn’t say much of anything at first, merely headed straight for the bathroom to brush his hair and teeth. Hermione toddled out of the girls’ dorms directly afterwards, flashed him a brilliant smile, nearly threw herself into his arms before doing the same. Their reactions made Harry realize it was the first time he’d waited for them to go down to breakfast all term.

*I, Harry realized slowly, *am an idiot*. He did not share this brilliant deduction with Crookshanks, who popped up to sit beside him on the couch, purring but shooting him a look that was considerably reproachful. He took the cat on his lap and began scratching him behind the ears, hoping to make up for lost time. Harry set the work aside and removed his glasses, setting them on Crookshanks's head. The cat tried to look up at them, then shook his head irritably and jumped down.

When Hermione popped out of the bathroom, looking cheerful and freshly polished, she scooped...
the cat up in her own arms and looked over Harry’s homework. “Oh, I think this definition of transconflagurate isn’t quite right, Harry,” she said timidly, looking up at his face for reaction.

When Harry merely blinked at her neutrally, she continued.

“See, er, the way you’ve used it here, it seems like you think it’s that other word, you know, transconglomerate...”

Harry looked down at the paper, saw she was right, and waved his wand at the parchment so that the proper word was now being employed. He didn’t want to think how awful he’d been to Hermione for her to sound so apprehensive – bossy, straightforward Hermione, wondering if it would be all right to correct him! He nodded at Hermione encouragingly, and set to finish his work.

Moments later, Ron emerged, and the three of them descended to the Great Hall. Harry parted ways with them with a smile and a hesitant and subtle brush of each of his hands on theirs, and then he was gone, off to the Slytherin table.

It was odd, Harry reflected as he withdrew the cutting board from the back shelf of the Potions closet, being friends with Hermione and Ron and being almost-friends with Draco at the same time.

He and Draco read directions and talked theory and chopped bits of frog liver, but every now and then Hermione would glance back at him from her position at the front of the room, a glowing little smile on her face.

Draco, for his part, acted as though Hermione did not even exist on the same planet as he did. “I’ve begun to think about my end-of-term paper; have you?” he inquired, shifting pale hair out of the way as he bent over their cauldron to toss in the marigold petals.

“Er, yeah,” Harry said, thinking of Snape’s paper. It was a troubling realization that, despite Snape’s suggestion that Harry could ‘follow his work’, he wouldn’t be satisfied with himself until he came up with something completely different – or at least a new angle from which to approach the initial idea.

“It’s a bit daunting, but I’m certain you’ll be fine,” Draco said, eyeing his look of frustrated reluctance.

Harry thought of Draco’s reasoning abilities and grinned. “Maybe you’ll look at it before I hand it in?” He handed Draco the liver, which followed the marigold. The mixture began to emit clouds of khaki-green steam. “Is it supposed to do that?”

Draco consulted the book. “Scrap it, Potter.”

Harry sighed, and Evanesco’d the fledgling potion.

“Switch,” Draco commanded, and Harry took up the spot by the cauldron while Draco began to prepare fresh ingredients. “Honestly, you have no focus, has anyone ever told you that?”

“Snape says it constantly,” Harry replied, flushing. “I know it. It doesn’t help when you talk to
“Would you rather I go all silent, then?”

“No,” Harry said quickly, eyeing the cauldron ahead of them, where Yolande and Hermione were practicing silence themselves. Both girls looked so focused, he was certain a tap on the shoulder would make either one scream – and for one, wicked moment, he was tempted to do just that. Then, Draco handed him a scoop of newt eyes.

“Stir twice counterclockwise,” he ordered.

Once Harry’d done so, Draco nodded at him with approval.

Harry pinked as a spark of pleasure died under a rising tide of embarrassment. He knew he was horrible at Potions, but surely Draco didn’t have to make sure he stirred.

He has to make sure you eat, a small, mutinous voice chimed at the back of Harry’s head.

“I have to talk to you tonight,” Draco said as he tore the marigold petals free of the flower-heads.

Harry stiffened, then sighed. “Yes, sir,” he said. “When and where?”

“Nine-thirty, War Ro... wait a moment. What was that room that we were in last time? It – it changes.”

Harry nodded. “It’s called the Room of Requirement... it changes according to what you need. Why were you there?”

“Looking for you,” Draco replied. “Toss these in, and stir five times counterclockwise. I won’t say anything ’til you’re done.”

Harry glared at him, then dumped in the petals, watching as they began to dissolve in the juice from the eyeballs. Eugh... Once he’d stirred, he looked up at Draco again. “What is it that happened last night?”

“You mean they didn’t tell you?”

“They did, but I meant what happened with you? Where’d you learn to communicate that way? That was brilliant!”

The pale Slytherin eyed him oddly, then frowned, leaning over the cutting board and slicing the liquorice-root. “They didn’t mention that, did they?”

Harry shook his head no.

“I have very good concentration, Potter, which you do not.”

“Don’t tell me anyone with good concentration can do that. That was... what, Legilimency, or Occlumency, or something like them.”

“Something like them,” Draco replied. “Here – four slivers in, timed four seconds apart.”

Harry dropped one in, then counted under his breath. Draco was obligingly silent until each slice had disappeared beneath the surface.

“Now stir thirteen times, clockwise.” Draco consulted their Potions text. “Should be green-gold.”
Harry peered in as a cool, pale mist began to evaporate off of the surface; the potion inside was a burnished gold with a tinge of green. Draco frowned, dropped in another newt’s eyeball and smiled as he watched the color darken slightly.

“Well, whatever it was, thanks,” Harry said. “It was cool, anyway, to –”

Draco didn’t stop shredding the quassia bark with his hands, or even look up. “To what?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Harry said carelessly. “I’d almost forgotten what it was like, I guess.”

“What was like?” Draco sounded a bit strangled.

Harry turned to look at him, really look, and it seemed to him that Draco was several shades paler than usual, if that was possible, and that his motions were meticulously mechanical enough that Harry knew he was containing some large emotion. “Sorry, you did look sort of worn, I guess,” Harry murmured, feeling like an idiot. “I didn’t realize it was so painful, though, talking to me, or I would’ve tried to move faster…”

Draco handed him the quassia. “Sprinkle over the surface of the brew in a spiral pattern,” he ordered.

Harry took a deep breath, and did so; the potion began to swirl of its own volition, sucking the shreds of inner bark beneath its surface. “Or – maybe it’s just me? Maybe it wouldn’t bother you if it were someone else –”

Draco sighed, then turned flat grey eyes on him. “Harry. Someday you will realize that not everything is about you. And on that day you will become a real boy.” He read the book. “Let sit for ten minutes.”

Harry sat and turned to him, flushing with embarrassment. “Okay, so I don’t get it. But I don’t get it because you won’t explain.”

“And something else you need to understand – I don’t have to explain.”

When Harry snorted, Draco sighed again and shook his head.

“Look, Harry, this isn’t aristocracy or bloody-mindedness or any of the other half-dozen things you’ll label it. I don’t have to tell you what’s going on with me; it’s not your business.”

Harry couldn’t help but realize that this was, more or less, what Professor Snape had told him. I don’t require aid, you know... It was a way of both of them saying they didn’t like his saving-people thing. “Asking if I can help is my way of showing concern,” Harry said. “It’s rather a common way, come to think of it. You ought to try it sometime.”

Draco shot him a dirty glare.

“I mean it, I’m just being...”

“Being what?”

A friend? “Me. It’s me, that’s what I do. Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived to Save People,” he added in sudden inspiration. “All Gryffindorian you know. Or do you Slytherins still call it Gryffindorkian?”

Draco did an odd thing and laughed aloud – seemingly against his will, for when he removed his
knuckles from his mouth, he shot Harry another look, even more venomous than before.

“And do you hate to laugh, or something? Because every time I make you laugh or even smile, you look like you want to hit me.”

“I don’t want you to make me laugh. Time’s up and heart-to-heart’s over. Stir clockwise thrice and counterclockwise ten times. Then add the pinch of powdered moonstone and we’re through.”

Harry glared at him, wondering if Draco’s timing was even correct, the way he’d managed it, but did as he was told.

After all, as odd as it seemed lately, he was still obeying Draco Malfoy.

That night, he made his way to the Room of Requirement, opening the door to find a rather different scene from the initial War Room. There was a small table with a chess board and two chairs, and a set-up that looked vaguely like a pool table, but wasn’t – some sort of Wizarding gaming table, Harry supposed. If he wasn’t mistaken, the table shoved up against the wall at the far left had the small pieces and many-sided dice of a role-playing game scattered atop it. There was a couch with fluffy pillows shoved up against the back wall, looking like it’d been removed directly from Severus Snape’s private quarters. Perhaps, Harry thought with a stab of alarm, it had – the Room of Requirement seemed to take what was required from wherever it could find it throughout the castle... and Draco Malfoy was asleep on the couch.

It looked like he’d meant to sit there and wait for Harry; he was in a seated position. His head was resting against a curve of the furniture so that he was barely slumped to the side at all, and his mouth was hanging slightly open.

Harry closed the door silently behind him and moved to one of the chessboards, amusing himself for awhile by moving the pieces first on one side, then the other. It turned out to be a harder game than he had anticipated, trying not to use his self-knowledge to aid one side more strongly than the other. He had to blank his mind before gazing at either side of the board, looking with a fresh perspective each time, or he subconsciously cheated...

Hmm, this is actually excellent practice for Occlumency, Harry decided, gazing at the board with new eyes. Then he defeated himself, white trumping black in a move that surprised even Harry – odd, how that could happen sometimes, your next move coming to you in a flash of insight and you were suddenly the winner. And the loser, Harry realized with a wry smile.

“You didn’t wake me,” Draco said.

Harry started, turning to view Draco and wondering how long the other boy had been watching him. Not long, judging from the sleep-encrusted grey eyes, still slightly unfocussed.

“You wanted midnight to come and go,” Draco deduced.

Harry shook his head no, even while wondering whether that had been his plan, subconsciously. “I just figured I should let you sleep.”

Draco moved to seat himself across from Harry at the chessboard. He waved his wand and the pieces re-set themselves. “White goes first,” he said without preamble.
Harry moved a pawn forward.

“I’ve decided what I want from you is nothing less than your deepest secret,” Draco said, moving his knight free of the encircling pieces.

Harry frowned in concentration. “Hmph. I don’t even know what that is.”

“Well, think, and tell me once the game is over.”

Harry played with his bishop, twirling his fingers around the piece before he remembered – Ron had taken him out no less than three times with this series of moves before it had been hammered into him that, as with so many things, the obvious way out was a trap. He moved another pawn on the exact opposite end of the board from his first.

“I suppose it is somewhat limited, what you can actually say,” Draco conceded. “Nothing important about the Order of the Phoenix – oh, don’t look so flummoxed, Harry, of course I know about the Order...” He moved a pawn, the one in front of his king, and Harry’s eyes widened before glaring up at Malfoy. It was obviously a trap, but it looked so much like checkmate. The Slytherin was never moving the bishop that protected Draco’s king.

“Right, so nothing about the Order,” Harry said faintly, moving another pawn.

“Are you ever going to do anything of importance?” Draco sneered, looking at the board. “Are you a Gryffindor or a Hufflepuff?”

Harry caught his breath, suddenly knowing what he would tell Malfoy. His worst secret – the worst, that was, that wouldn’t harm anybody but himself. And maybe, come to think of it, Malfoy. When Draco castled, Harry moved his knight out from behind his remaining pawns, smiling innocently at Draco.

“I know that look,” Draco said, capturing one of Harry’s pawns with the bishop. “You’re plotting.” His eyes narrowed as he examined Harry. “You’ve found a secret that will damage me more than it will you.”

Harry grinned at him. “It won’t damage you.” He moved his other knight, menacing Draco’s bishop. “It’ll surprise you.”

Draco examined the board for a minute, scanning the pieces already there. “And I won’t like it,” he said, and moved his rook forward.

“No,” Harry replied, “you won’t.” He moved his queen two spaces to the right.

Draco glared at the board, obviously seeing the checkmate Harry had in mind, anywhere from five to thirteen moves away, give or take. He acted decisively and sacrificed his queen to take Harry’s.

Harry glowered at the changed board and moved his rook. “For the final day of my imprisonment, I thought you’d be doing something more diabolical than playing chess,” he said.

Draco lifted an eyebrow. “Don’t tempt me.” He moved his remaining bishop in a protective position before his king.

“Merlin forbid,” Harry said dryly. He paused, looking at the arrangement of the board, trying to look at it with a fresh perspective as he had while playing himself, blanking his mind. He blinked as the board came into new focus, and castled with his remaining rook.
“In the beginning, there were other questions I wanted to ask you, but after awhile, I figured out the answers on my own. And what I don’t yet know I don’t want to know, for the most part,” Draco replied. “Or you can’t tell me.” His fingers wandered over half the board before he scooted a pawn forward.

Harry immediately moved his knight out of the way and captured Draco’s bishop. Draco took his knight with a pawn before saying anything more. An exchange, Harry thought, but an unequal one.

“For instance: what is it with you and those two?”

Harry blinked. “Ron and Hermione?”

“Yes.”

Harry looked up from the board. “What do you mean? Be more specific.” He moved his bishop. “Check.”

“Which one are you dating?” Draco queried casually, moving a pawn to block.

Harry took it. “Check, and neither, you pervert.”

“I know that now,” Draco said with a smirk. He captured the attacking piece with his king.

“You can’t do that,” Harry reminded him. “That places you in check again.”

“What? Where?”

“The knight.”

Draco squinted at the board. “Damn. Is it mate?”

Harry shook his head, and after a moment, Draco moved his king out of the way.

“I was going to ask you a bit about Sirius Black, really, too,” Draco said.

Harry moved his rook. “Check again.”

“I can see that, Harry.”

“What about Sirius?”

“Who was he to you?”

“My mum and dad’s best friend, and my godfather. Check and mate.”

Draco tsked disgustedly. “I can’t understand how you can be good at this game when you can’t even concentrate for three bloody seconds.”

“Oh, three I can do,” Harry said, “and that’s all I need.” At Draco’s glare, he relented. “You should see Ron, he’s twice as good as me... and he still wants me to play all the time,” he said, smoothing his hair with one hand. “If I didn’t ever get any better, it’d be torture.” He paused. “But it keeps getting harder, you know.”

“The Weasel is better than you?” Draco inquired with a nasty laugh. “Goodness, at least he’s good at something.”
“Ron’s good at plenty,” Harry said defensively.

“Ah, yes: loyalty and goodness and passion and honesty,” Draco said, making each word sound an insult – even if, Harry admitted silently, those were Ron’s best qualities. “None of those are exactly life-skills.”

“They are,” Harry said staunchly. “They’ve got him this far, and in one piece.”

“Yes, I’d imagine being friends with you tends to be a bit dicey.”

Harry paused, feeling damaged and working hard at not showing it, before replying. “Yeah, having one of the world’s strongest Dark Wizards out for your life tends to make things turn out that way,” he said.

“Bollocks – you’d be this way, anyway, wouldn’t you?”

“I’d still be a Gryffindor, yeah, but that means I’d be setting off dungbombs in the corridors and doing Quidditch and playing in the pond with the Giant Squid, not trying to avoid getting killed,” Harry protested.

An awkward silence fell, while Harry couldn’t help but wonder if the skin of Draco’s forearm was as of yet, unblemished. Do you want me to die, Draco? he thought, but he couldn’t ask, the same way he couldn’t really ask if they were friends, or reveal the accompanying fear – that they were friends because of Imperio, if they were friends at all.

“Maybe,” Draco said softly, and it took a moment for Harry to realize that the other boy was not responding to his thoughts, but to his assertions concerning normal Gryffindor activities. “So, Harry Potter – what is your greatest secret?”

Harry offered up a faltering smile. It had seemed a neat thing to tell Malfoy, at first, but now he was feeling oddly anxious. “You recall the Hat’s Song this year?”

Draco laughed aloud. “How could I forget? It was marvelous!”

“Well – I’m one of those ‘Slytherins in Gryffindor’.”

For a moment, Draco stared at him with a nearly wild incredulity.

Then, he began to laugh. “Oh, very funny. Try again!”

Harry remained stone-faced. “That’s it, Malfoy. The Hat wanted me in Slytherin. It only put me in Gryffindor when I begged.”

Draco’s smile was breaking apart on his face, disappearing, then an echo of it reappearing, finally revealing an expression Harry couldn’t quite interpret. “Really?”

Harry nodded. “You can see why I wasn’t anxious to reveal this to the world,” he said.

Draco eyed him speculatively. “People will pay for this information...”

“But they won’t believe you, will they?” Harry inquired. “I’m Harry Potter! The Boy Who Defeated Voldemort, and all of that! No one’s going to take you seriously,” he tacked on.

Draco smiled slowly at him, his wicked smile, although this time, he was sharing his wickedness with Harry rather than inflicting it upon him. “You are Slytherin, aren’t you? A Slytherin in Gryffindor clothing.”
“Every inch,” Harry said, and grinned his own best, wicked grin right back.

Chapter End Notes

...and it was this scene that gave me an idea for a story about Ron Weasley and the ghost of Draco Malfoy in a post-apocalyptic world in which Voldemort has won. It's called 'A Game of Chess' and has been in production for basically always. I hope its issues work themselves out, because I really like that iteration of Ronald Weasley.

I enjoyed writing this chapter because it was fun to make the game parallel the conversation. I have my father to thank for teaching me the rudiments of chess. The trick is to try to anticipate a few moves ahead, which is the trick to a lot of things. ;)

Thanks again for all your comments, guys! You rock!

-K
When Harry awoke, it was still dark. He rose silently, gathered his books and his broom. He felt like a bit of night flying before study.

Harry made his way out to the pitch by memory and by feel, dumping his books on a bench before taking to the skies. He rose high above the Quidditch field so that he would avoid the goal posts and the stands, and proceeded to test that claimed, charm-induced speed limit of the Firebolt line.

When dawn broke fifteen minutes later, Harry was right alongside the sun that reddened the sky. He felt light and free and above himself, as though he were a part of the dawn he was witnessing, as elemental and beautiful as it was. It was an odd, shivery feeling Harry only got when he was the first person awake, as though the universe was waiting on him, only for him, and he loved its quiet and its promise.

Ewan was sitting at the stands, gazing up at him, when Harry landed.

“I want to be able to play that game, someday,” the first-year said, looking up at the hoops and smiling. “I saw the tryouts, you know. You weren’t there.”

“I was indisposed,” Harry said, then laughed. “To tell you the truth, I was stuck somewhere so fast it took two Professors, two Gryffindors and a Slytherin to pull me out.”

Ewan eyed him as though attempting to determine whether Harry was joking or not.

“Nice seal,” Harry said, realizing that Ewan’s robes were now emblazoned with Hermione and Yolande’s multi-house badge.

“It took awhile for our prefects to make enough,” Ewan said, pulling his shoulders back proudly.

“What’s that in Latin underneath?” Harry inquired.

“It means: our pride is in our differences,” Ewan chanted quietly. “I think that my being clever sort of complements Lilac’s bravery and Rae’s...” Ewan frowned. “I think Rae is wise, in a sort of quiet way, don’t you?” He looked up at Harry inquisitively.

Harry nodded. “Rae is most definitely wise.” He smiled. “All you need is someone incredibly good and loyal and you’ll have a complete set.”

“There are plenty of other worthy attributes,” Ewan said haughtily. “And we’re plenty loyal, thanks. It’s not like you’re one or the other.”

Harry shrugged. “I suppose I’ve gotten used to thinking of it that way.”

“Well – it isn’t that way.”

“I know,” Harry replied. “I think Ron and Hermione and me got put into Gryffindor because bravery is our primary attribute.” Secondary, in two cases, actually, he thought ruefully. “Ron’s also really loyal, and Hermione’s truly clever. And I... well, I can be a bit sneaky, sometimes.”

“Hmm...”
Harry took out his homework and added a couple of finishing touches before heading in to the Great Hall and making his way to Draco. He sat down beside the other boy and began eating before realizing that Draco was staring at him and further realizing that there was no longer any real need for him to sit there.

“Whoops,” Harry said.

Draco rolled his eyes, but said nothing. Harry didn’t bother to move.

Professor McGonagall descended from the dais and strode over to the Slytherin table. “Mister Potter,” she said kindly, “you may go back to the Gryffindor table, now.”

“It’s fine, really, Professor,” Harry said. “I’ve kind of gotten used to it.” His eyes slid over to Draco for the Slytherin’s reaction, but Draco wassteadfastly ignoring the conversation in favor of his porridge. Yolande, seated across from them, seemed to perk up slightly, as did Crabbe.

Minerva McGonagall eyed Harry and Draco from behind her severe spectacles. “Harry is a Gryffindor, Mister Malfoy, and therefore belongs at the Gryffindor table.”

Harry stiffened. Professor McGonagall was talking to Draco like Harry wasn’t even there, as though Draco was still responsible for Harry’s actions! His eyes narrowed. “I’ve been thinking of joining the Unsorted House, actually,” Harry said casually, watching Draco twitch. “That’ll mean I can sit where I like, won’t it?”

Professor McGonagall’s eyes widened and her lips pursed. “That would take you off of Gryffindor Quidditch, Mister Potter,” she said.

Harry clenched his fists. “Yeah, suppose it will,” he said conversationally. “But, you know, if enough people join up, I suppose I can put together another team, maybe.”

The Professor stared. “Mister Potter, Mister Malfoy – you are to see the Headmaster first thing this morning – the moment you finish your breakfasts. Hurry along, or you’ll be late for your first class.”

Harry shovelled in his porridge, and stood.

“What in Merlin’s name made you spout all that?” Draco demanded, standing a beat behind him.

“I didn’t like her attitude,” Harry said.

“Cor,” Draco murmured under his breath, but Harry was certain he’d misheard. ‘Cor’ was not a Draco Malfoy word.

“Why d’you suppose the Headmaster wants to see us?” Harry wondered.

“He wants to officially end your punishment, of course,” Draco said airily, buffing his nails on his robes. “Tell you that you no longer need to hang around the nasty Slytherin.”

“I didn’t know you were hard of hearing, Draco. I’m Unsorted now.”

“You didn’t honestly mean that,” Draco replied.

“Yes, I did.”

“You won’t quit Quidditch.”
“Watch me.”

Draco opened his mouth to retort, but he was interrupted by their arrival. “Oh, bloody hell – Fizzing Whizzbie!”

The door to the Headmaster’s office appeared on their very first try.

It felt oddly like Harry’s attempt at *Imperio*. He and Draco were sitting side-by-side, while Minerva McGonagall and Severus Snape eyed them balefully. There was a Talk, as Harry had dreaded, about never giving in to such destructive impulses again, from Minerva McGonagall. Professor Snape merely glared, as if that were more than enough – and, really, Harry decided, it more than was. Draco looked incredibly bored by the entire proceedings, except when Dumbledore kindly asked him if Harry had been obeying him as he ought.

“Oh, yes,” Draco gushed, his eyes flicking to Harry and back, “he has. *Far* exceeding my expectations.”

Snape raised his eyebrows at this, and McGonagall looked faintly sympathetic, and, Harry realized, the conversation had wound down.

“Well, I must be off,” Snape said. “At least four sixth-years are downstairs awaiting my entrance with – how shall I say – *bated breath*.”

“One moment, Severus,” Professor McGonagall said, placing a firm hand on the Potions Professor’s upper arm. “There is one matter which has not been resolved to my satisfaction.”

“Oh?”

“Mister Malfoy’s punishment.”

Harry stiffened and turned to look at Draco, who was staring fixedly at Harry’s Head of House.

“Pardon?” Snape inquired icily.

“Harry, isn’t it true that Mister Malfoy attempted *Crucio* on you?”

Harry blinked, turning to look at Draco again.

“Harry!” the professor exclaimed, causing him to look over at her. “I asked you a question, not Mister Malfoy!”

Harry worried at his lower lip. “Yes, but–”

“But nothing,” McGonagall replied. “Mister Malfoy has not yet been punished for this misdeed. I say that there ought to be a punishment befitting the crime.”

Draco shivered suddenly; Harry caught the motion out of the corner of his eye. “Professor, I really don’t mind, I mean – the curse never hit me. Strictly speaking, Draco didn’t do a *Crucio* on me at all.”

McGonagall looked like he’d been speaking in tongues, and said something that sounded oddly
like ‘Stockholm Syndrome’, although Harry hadn’t the slightest clue what that was. She was nodding to herself, however, a satisfied smile forming on her face. “Yes, yes, that’ll be just the thing, in that case,” she finished aloud, turning to face them. “Mister Malfoy, a reversal of fortune is in order. You will obey Mister Potter for the space of one week.”

Professor Snape swirled a spell in the air so rapid that Harry couldn’t even make it out. Then, he started ranting at Professor McGonagall.

Only Harry had no idea what he was exactly saying, because he could not hear a word. He turned to Draco. “What was that?”

Draco shook his head, staring at the trio.

“You’re lip-reading!” Harry accused.

“Shut up, I’m concentrating!”

Harry’s jaw slid shut with a snap, and he did his best to read Professor Snape’s lips. It didn’t take all that much imagination or concentration to realize that the man was upset by Draco’s punishment, but he was speaking so rapidly that it was hard to discern anything concrete. McGonagall said very little, just weathered the storm, her collected expression never abandoning her for a moment. A couple of times, she shook her head in negation. Dumbledore, for his part, looked as though he were watching a rather engaging game of tennis.

Snape turned to the Headmaster at one point, as if appealing, and then the conversation was over. The Potions Professor flicked his wand swiftly, and the two Professors turned to Harry and Draco once more.

“You will obey Mister Potter, starting first thing tomorrow morning,” McGonagall said to Draco, “or risk losing House points. All of them, Mister Malfoy, so do not begin thinking for even one moment that it will be a good trade. Am I understood?”

Draco bobbed his head once, looking a bit lost. Snape shot Dumbledore a filthy look, then stormed from the room.

Harry stood, Draco a beat behind him, and they followed Snape out of the Headmaster’s office.

“Uhm... Professor, what’s the matter?” Harry hazarded after they’d traveled past several classroom doors.

Snape paused in his tracks, then turned to face the two boys. “This is a... unique situation,” he said coldly. “I would endeavour to caution you, Mister Potter, to have a care in what you order Mister Malfoy to do. Recall that in one week this shall all be over. Or do you have that much forethought?”

Harry bristled, the newly-Revealed memory of Snape yelling at him and setting his papers afire bringing heat to his cheeks. “Thanks for believing in me, sir, as always.”

“Two points from Gryffindor for being a self-righteous brat,” Snape intoned, almost absently. At least, Harry reflected, he wasn’t yet counting to ten.

“I won’t make Draco do anything that either of us will regret, Professor,” he said. “You have my word as a Gryffindor.”

Snape eyed him, then shifted his gaze to Draco. “Mister Malfoy, will you truly obey him?”
“I have some modicum of self-control,” Draco intoned, sniffing in disdain. “I dare say I’ll do far better than he did.”

Snape coughed in what seemed like surprise, then turned on one heel. “Follow me, then, children. I do not doubt that your fellow classmates are in a froth at the thought of all three of us missing at the same moment.”

Harry knew that he should probably feel utterly elated that Draco Malfoy was under his power for one week. Instead, he felt lost and – even a bit guilty, he realized with surprise. Draco’s curse hadn’t even landed, after all.

When Draco didn’t say a word, not even to ask Harry to hand him ingredients, a tinge of anxiety was added to the guilt and confusion. Surely Draco wasn’t about to blame Harry for this? Snape was uncharacteristically quiet as well, leaving off of berating his other students in favor of watching them both.

After traveling back to the Great Hall, Harry explained the reversal to Ron and Hermione.

Ron blinked, possibly shocked at hearing the sound of Harry’s voice for the first time in two days, but then grinned. “All right!” he exclaimed, claiming the attention of Ginny, and, indeed, half of the other people at the table.

“Hush, Ron, not everyone and his brother needs to be aware of this, you know!” Hermione scolded, and Harry couldn’t keep back a grin. The two of them were so warm and familiar, even when fighting – well, he admitted, especially while fighting, given all they’ve argued over lately.

Ron ducked his head and turned to grin at Harry in return. “So, what’ve you thought up so far? I want to hear all about it!”

Harry flushed self-consciously, and Ron stared.

“Cor, Harry,” he said under his breath – and it sounded far more natural coming from him – “you haven’t thought of anything?”

Hermione’s eyebrows shot up. “You haven’t?” she whispered.

Harry shook his head. “There isn’t anything I want from him, really,” he said, shrugging uncomfortably.

“Make him do a stupid dance in front of everyone, for starters!” Ron encouraged, but Harry shook his head again.

“I don’t want to humiliate him,” Harry said. “Besides all that, it isn’t wise.”

Hermione was now completely ignoring the book in her lap in favor of Harry. “Why not?” she inquired.

Harry frowned. “It’s something Professor Snape said. Antagonizing Draco isn’t such a brilliant idea. After a week, he’ll be free to hex me any way he likes. Snape said it in his perennially nasty way, of course...”

“So you’re saying you want to go easy on Malfoy because you know he’ll be pissed at you after the week’s out?” Ron demanded, once they had exited the Great Hall and started on their way back to the Gryffindor Common Room.
Harry sighed. “I don’t know.” He frowned in confusion, then shrugged helplessly. “I don’t want to tell Draco Malfoy what to do.”

Hermione paused, considering. “Well, Harry, there certainly are some things that you could tell him to do that wouldn’t really hurt either of you in the long-term.” Her voice was soft and filled with a gentle approval he’d seldom heard there before.

“Like what?” Harry wondered.

“Well... I don’t know, things that would seem annoying at first, or even foolish, but that would, in general, benefit Draco in the long run.”

Harry turned to look at Hermione and reply, only to note that she was looking anywhere but at him, as if she didn’t quite want to meet his eyes. “O-oh,” he stammered, taken aback by her studied innocence. Just what was Hermione getting at?

“You two are speaking a foreign language,” Ron said firmly. “Humiliate him, Harry. Rub his face in the dirt.”

Someone bumped into Ron, hard, almost sending him sprawling. Harry turned to face Draco Malfoy, who was smiling with a calculated calm. “Sorry, Weasel, didn’t see you there.”

“’Lo, Draco,” Harry choked out. Hermione smiled gently at the pair of them, then grabbed on Ron’s sleeve and began to slowly tug the redhead away from Harry and Draco.

“Hey!” Harry heard Ron saying as the pair turned down the final corridor to the Defense classroom. “Hey, Hermione, this is the first I’ve spoken to him in days, and –”

“They’re dating,” Draco suddenly drawled, and began walking.

As usual, Harry turned and began to walk with him, startled into motion, into catching up. He felt like nothing had changed since yesterday. “They’re not dating,” Harry corrected. “I only wish they would.”

“Thought anything up?” Draco intoned.

Harry shook his head. “No. This whole punishment thing took me just as much by surprise as it did you. I don’t want anything from you, but if I do, I’ll let you know.”

“As you wish.”

Harry felt his shoulders hunch in at Draco’s quiet subservience, but he was not about to order Draco to be less obedient anytime soon. Come to think of it, maybe Draco was hoping to make him do just that. If he ordered Draco to be less obedient, any subsequent orders would be moot.

Harry had to appreciate the way the blond Slytherin’s mind worked, sometimes.

Later that evening, Harry sat in a corner of the Gryffindor Common Room, refusing to isolate himself – no matter how much he wanted to be alone, he was beginning to think, somehow, that it was not particularly good for him – and examined the book he had stolen from the Chamber of Secrets.
The glasses had shattered in his pocket when he fell forward into Professor Lupin’s quarters, but one frame remained intact; and, with Hermione’s help, he had transfigured the remaining slip of glass into a monocle on a long, slender chain. Now he withdrew it from underneath his robes and flipped the slender volume to the very first page, wondering if the words transformed there, too.

“All right, Harry?”

Harry winced, realizing all over again that he wanted privacy and was currently denying himself. “’Lo, Ginny,” he said, looking up at the fifth-year.

Ginny knelt in front of him, tucking the Muggle fashion magazine she’d been reading under one arm. “What have you got there?”

“Something interesting,” Harry replied, and told the redhead about the Chamber and the book of poetry that had held the secret to escape. By the end of the story, Ginny had gone somewhat pale.

“Be careful, Harry,” she said quietly. “I know it doesn’t have a brain like – like the other book – but be careful in any case. It comes from the same place, you know? And it seems like a similar charm. Did it ever occur to you that Tom might’ve actually enchanted it?”

Harry flushed, because that hadn’t occurred to him, not once. “The – the poetry in it is Muggle,” he protested feebly.

“And wasn’t he half-Muggle?” Ginny replied reasonably. “Who else would’ve thought up something like that maze but someone with a lot of power and a certain... sneakiness? The shape of the corridors, the Floo powder hidden so that only someone clever enough could ever escape... that sounds an awful lot like his style. Doesn’t it?” She eyed him, her expression probing.

Harry noted – oddly – that Ginny had taken to wearing dark eyeliner, although not much other makeup. “What, have you gone Goth, then?” he inquired.

“Don’t change the subject, Harry,” she said, swatting him lightly on the arm with the magazine. “I really think you ought to take that straight to Dumbledore. Or another teacher.”

“You’re channeling Hermione,” he told her.

She frowned at him sternly. “Harry James Potter, that won’t work! Nor will teasing me or flirting! You're insufferable - does everyone just give in to you when you smile and bat your eyes?”

Harry blinked at her, completely taken aback. She shot him a parting glare before stomping off to the girls’ dorms, slamming the door behind her and gaining the stares of everyone else in the Common Room.

Oh, yes. Now Harry remembered why he liked to be alone... everyone staring at him in the Gryffindor Common Room was familiar, but rather trying after awhile...

Besides all that, honestly. He hadn’t been batting his eyes, or anything like. He’d just been... well... trying to distract Ginny from asking annoying questions...

Glowering down at the book in his hands, Harry swept from the Gryffindor Common Room, and, before he realized quite where he was going, found himself at Severus Snape’s door.

Chapter End Notes
Haha! The eyeliner! I think I was actually thinking of GatewayGirl's 'Blood Magic' when I wrote that...

Well, I'm sure there were a lot of you who were waiting for Draco's punishment to come along, but Harry's ambivalence is what I find more interesting. I think he sees the tendency in him to wish to control others, and he's beginning to learn he shouldn't give in to it.

Seriously, I get more excited with every chapter... because with every chapter we get closer and closer to my most favorite bits. <3

Thanks for reading and reviewing!

-K
“It’s nothing,” Harry said again, forcefully. “It’s only what Ginny said, and Ginny doesn’t really know Dark Arts – but I figured you did, so...”

Professor Severus Snape frowned at Harry. “How many magical items must you pilfer before you’re satisfied?”

Harry bit his lower lip, recalling the Invisibility Cloak, bauble, Marauder’s Map, Godric Gryffindor’s sword, the Time-Turner, Tom Riddle’s diary, the mirror of Black’s, and now the book and monocle... odd, how many magical items he had, or had once possessed. He wondered if other Wizarding children were the same, or if their magical items were merely toys that eventually outlived their usefulness.

Snape took the book from Harry irritably and flipped through it. “And so we must say goodbye,” he read an almost reverent voice, “And go, as lovers go, for ever; tonight remains, to pack and fix on labels and make an end of lying down together.” He frowned. “I’ve never read that one before.”

Harry felt slightly embarrassed, hearing his professor’s voice go soft and husky like that with emotion – emotions other than fury or disdain being a thing he hadn’t credited Snape as even having, a month ago. Now he knew better, but it still seemed odd. “Neither have I. All the poems changed again, once I left the room.”

“Did they now? Hmm, My Last Duchess,” Snape mused, flipping through the volume, “and the Second Coming.”

“I didn’t know you read Muggle poetry, sir.”

“In any art, there are very few who have an apt hand, an agile mind... there are even fewer prodigies and geniuses. A simple analysis of population will show the thoughtful wizard that Muggle poetry, literature, and music is going to be...”

“...better?” Harry breathed. “Really – you think so?”

Snape eyed him with no little amusement. “Would I say so if I didn’t? Much of the education of a forward-thinking Wizarding family includes Muggle art, or it would include very little art at all. And then there are still a few families – very few – who follow the truly old ways, and include it as well. It is only the pureblood purists, whose way of thinking arose rather recently, who insist on teaching Wizarding work only.” Snape actually smiled then, a quiet smile that soothed the lines on his face and changed something in his eyes. “Their only blessing,” he added, “is that they have no idea whatsoever what it is that they are missing.”

Harry, eyeing his professor, resolved to bring Snape and poetry together more often, as it had a considerably salutary effect. He handed his professor the monocle, and Snape peered through it at the words written on the first page. He blinked in amazement at the obvious change, then moved to his couch to seat himself there, slowly turning the pages.

Harry sat on the other side of the couch, and, after a moment, retrieved Snape’s paper from the large, leaning pile to his left. They read companionably for awhile, both occasionally making some small exclamation under their breath.
Harry was right in thinking that Professor Snape would expand the thesis of his paper in its latter half; it discussed the Muggle and Wizarding worlds as being one and the same, or hinted at it. Harry was wishing, however, that Snape would pick one of these points he was making in passing and run with it, but he also recognized that was not in the scope of a Potions paper, but a paper on theory or even anthropology. (Was there such a thing as Wizarding anthropology, even?) He set the paper down on the table and Snape met his glance with another one of those uncharacteristic smiles.

“It’s a fairy tale,” Snape said without preamble, and handed both book and monocle to Harry.

Harry moved the monocle in front of his eyes and watched as the lettering altered to highly-stylized calligraphy:

Once upon a time, in a kingdom much like this one and in a day much like today, there lived two handsome enchanters. One was like the morning, with hair the color of wheat, and golden skin, and the other as midnight, hair black as pitch and eyes the color of coal. The two men lived in harmony because they were brothers, and no two were so close as they.

One night, the Evening Brother came out of the wood, the light of the crescent moon catching in his hair. “Brother,” he said. “Brother, I have a secret.”

The Morn Brother merely smiled, because, after all, even the brightest noontime keeps its own secrets. He smiled at his brother and sharpened his knife, because he was the older and the wiser and knew that, in time, every secret becomes common knowledge – or else fades to dust.

The next night, Evening Brother emerged from the woods, a wild look of victory on his face. “Brother!” he sang, more exultant than before. “Brother, I have the most marvelous secret!” But Morn Brother paid him no heed, and went night-hunting instead.

The next morning, however, Morn Brother could not keep his mind from discovering Evening Brother’s secret. It was all he could think of, while chasing deer, while sipping water from the flowing stream, while teaching the children their letters. Finally, Evening Brother appeared at his doorway, a wreath of leaves on his head and fire in his eyes. “Brother!” he cried – and Morn Brother could tell, by looking into Evening Brother’s coal-black eyes, that this secret was so big that Evening Brother could no longer contain it.

“Tell me,” Morn Brother said. “Tell me this secret of yours.”

First, Evening Brother gazed about. Catching sight of Morn Brother’s golden-haired woman and four children, and his own dark wife, he shook his head. “These are enchanter’s children,” he said, “my nieces and nephews. First banish them far, far from here, so far that even they cannot spy us, and I will tell you my secret.”

So Morn Brother did, amidst much weeping and wailing, send his woman and children away, and Evening Brother’s woman, too.

Evening Brother examined their surroundings again. “The birds,” he said, “and the forest creatures. You must send them away as well, for if they hear me, I am undone.”

Morn Brother moved into the forest and moved against every living thing with bow
and axe and flame. When the wood was empty, he returned to his house to find Evening Brother awaiting him there. “Now,” he said, “surely now you will tell me your secret.”

Evening Brother gazed down and saw a line of ants running from the outside to the pantry, and shook his head. “No,” he said, “I will never tell you my secret, because it ought never to be discovered.” So Morn Brother led him from his house and set it aflame, and the last obstacle was set firmly aside.

Evening Brother gazed at the empty wood and the remains of the house and finally, finally, in a language only the two of them understood of all the men living, he told his brother his secret.

Morn Brother drew back from Evening Brother and gazed on him for the last time. Then he withdrew his knife and cut his brother into many pieces, knowing that a powerful enchanter such as he could arise from a memory. The secret, you see, was too powerful for any man to have.

Then Morn Brother wept, for he had loved his brother as much as himself. And he gazed at the wood and the remains of his home, and cast about for his love and his children, and tossed himself to the ground with bitterness, wondering that a secret could engulf a man until he found no ease. He wept until a lake had risen up around him, until he drowned himself five times over, but he was still alone.

He rebuilt his house slowly, brick by brick and stone by stone, and secret by secret, until the walls were high and the magic deep. And then he called the children back, along with the women, and bade them enter.

And the secret – both secrets – were kept ‘til the end of his days.

“Ugh,” Harry said once he’d finished reading, turning the last page. The rest of the book was blank, save the one page towards the end that still read ‘Pride and Prejudice’.

“Rather chilling, isn’t it?” Snape said. “One wonders what such a secret could be.”

Harry eyed him anxiously. “What do you think it is?”

“These two enchanter characters seem almost godlike,” Snape mused, leaning back in the couch and looking thoughtful. “I would imagine that Evening Brother learned something that could entirely alter the world in which they lived, and Morn Brother did not take too kindly to the idea.”

“So Morn Brother destroyed the world and rebuilt it again rather than have the world be different from the way he wanted it,” Harry deduced. “There’s something very creepy in it, Professor, no matter how you look at it.”

“It’s a very interesting little tale,” Snape admitted begrudgingly.

“Is it a common Wizarding one?”

“I’ve never seen it before,” the professor said with a grimace. “The theme about not peering into other people’s business – one which I am certain would benefit you, Harry – is rather common. The idea of a secret far too dangerous to be told is not.”
Harry slipped the monocle back around his neck, then slid it under his robes, where the metal cooled his sternum. “It means something, I think, and not just a moral.”

“What does it mean then?” Snape inquired, sounding only slightly curious.

“I don’t know,” Harry replied, “but no one would bother hiding it unless, somehow, it were a real story, a true one.”

Snape smiled grimly at him. “Another secret from the Chamber, I suppose, Potter.”

Harry grinned at him.

Snape glared in response. “Promise me you won’t go haring down there without any idea of how to escape?”

Harry felt a hot flush of shame. “Course not, sir. I know you think I’m an idiot, sometimes, but I really wouldn’t do that.”

“I think you’re an idiot most of the time, but if you can figure out when that Chamber was built – using books – using the books in our library, here at Hogwarts – I should say you’d be well on your way to discovering your story’s origins.” Professor Snape stretched his hand out, and Harry offered him the volume with a slight hesitation. “Do not worry, Potter – I don’t plan on separating you long from your toy.” Snape muttered incantations over it, waving his wand with precise and measured motions. When he was done, he handed it back to Harry. “Nothing untoward about it,” he pronounced, “although you might want to hand it to Professor Lupin and see what he thinks,” he tacked on reluctantly.

“You and he seem to be getting on,” Harry hazarded, accepting the book and pocketing it.

“Getting on? The man hit me,” Snape retorted.

Harry’s jaw dropped. “Professor Lupin HIT you?” He shook his head in amazement. “This is Professor Lupin we’re talking about, isn’t it? The one who teaches Defense?”

Snape sighed heavily and moved into the kitchen to prepare tea. “Yes, the very same,” he intoned in a voice full of mock-injury. “I didn’t think he was capable of it. If I did, I certainly would have ducked.”

“Why did he hit you?” Harry wondered, suspicion gripping him.

“Some foolish misunderstanding or other,” Snape muttered from the adjoining kitchen.

“Hmm,” Harry said neutrally, and Snape emerged with tea, glaring at him, setting the teacups down on the table by the couch with perhaps more force than was strictly necessary. “I suppose I’ll have to ask him, then.”

“You do that,” Snape said faintly, sipping at his still-steaming cup. “Did you finish the paper?”

Harry nodded eagerly. “Oh, yeah. It was brilliant.”

Snape smiled behind his cup.

“Only, half of the conclusions towards the end weren’t really followed up, were they?”

“What do you mean, Potter? I was seventeen, my paper-writing skills weren’t exactly up to par...”
“Listen, I said it was brilliant, all right? I said brilliant, I meant brilliant. It’s just... the end had so much promise, but it was like there wasn’t enough room to follow up on every lead.”

“It is a paper, not a novel. Although I do seem to recall feeling frustrated that there was not enough time to explore every idea that I wished to; that, even then, I felt as though I was leaving work unfinished.”

Harry reached for a cup and blew across the surface of his tea. “I liked the stuff about Kepler,” he volunteered. “And the comparisons you drew between the two databases were... exhaustive.”

Snape shrugged. “It was the only way to make the point, as I am certain you are well aware. I needed a number that made it patently, transparently apparent that there was a correlation. And yet, it had to be enough to be absorbed in a glance. I toyed with doing a hundred, you know.”

“But then it might seem overwhelming, too technical,” Harry deduced. “Fifty fits on one table on one page.”

“Exactly. Even Potions Masters can be intimidated by enormous piles of data, Harry.”

“No,” Harry said in mock-surprise.

“Yes,” Snape countered. He grimaced. “Especially Slughorn. He was an old fraud if ever there was one.” He paused. “No, no, not a fraud, I suppose. How to describe the man?” He frowned in concentration. “He had favorites. But it was more than that. He picked and chose the best of the bunch and elevated them further, while treading the others into the mud.”

Harry blinked, attempting to picture Snape in his own position – as a student, constantly attempting to make headway with his Professor. It was considerably odd to hear Professor Snape talk about that attitude with such an expression on his face, when it was the attitude he evinced towards his class as well. Harry held no illusions that part of the reason that he was conversing with Professor Snape at this very moment was because he had somehow managed to become considerably better in Snape’s subject. Draco, whom Harry had always supposed was being favored because of his parentage was really one of the best students of the year. Hermione was probably the exception to the rule – and probably only because of her association with Harry.

Snape’s eyes had gone faraway, far enough away that Harry wondered if Snape still knew he was even in the room. “Your mother,” he said, suddenly looking at Harry, who flinched. “He liked your mother very much.”

Harry watched Snape’s eyes travel from his own to the paper in Harry’s hands... the paper, Harry suddenly recalled, that Lily Evans had read – and she’d been the only one to read it, before Harry.

Feeling suddenly awkward, Harry placed the paper on the table out of the way of his tea, smoothing it carefully. He wondered if he ought to try and probe a bit deeper – he was sick for any stories about either one of his parents, even if they were stupid bully-stories about James...

Luckily, though, Snape didn’t seem to need any encouragement for once. The Potions Professor’s dark eyes were still locked on the paper, and he seemed worlds away. “Slughorn paired people,” Snape commented far too lightly. “James Potter and Lily Evans – perfect for one another, of course, both exceptionally talented, both... high-spirited. Even during Potions, he would switch us around until he found pairs that got things done, that worked well together.”

Harry examined the tight lines of his professor’s face and decided with reservation to interject. If Snape wanted to tell him this, he would continue – if it had slipped his mind just who was truly
present, it would serve to remind him. “Sir – who were you paired with?”

Snape jerked upright, and for a moment, Harry didn’t think he would respond. Finally, he did, in a low, almost surly tone of voice: “Lily and then Remus.”

Harry didn’t trust himself to say a word, so he kept silent.

“Oh, spare me the shock and dismay, Potter, I have not had a romantic relationship with your mother or your precious werewolf.” He frowned for a moment in confusion. “Rather, Lily and Lupin were... probably the only two who could tolerate me, at that point. Recall, this was right before I joined the Death Eaters – I was not a pleasant boy.”

Harry tried to look neutral, but something must have revealed him, because Snape barked an odd, humourless laugh.

“I was like a bear with a sore tooth,” he said dryly. “If you think I am hateful now, you have no idea just how unpleasant I can be.”

“It’s always smart people who are,” Harry replied, thinking of Draco, of how he had known exactly how to hurt him, where to strike. It took a sort of cunning, he decided, to figure people out. It took a sort of cruelty to then use that to strike out at them.

“It would have been smarter to befriend them both,” Snape countered.

“My mum read your paper.”

“Lily pitied me, I think,” Snape went on dispassionately, seeming more puzzled than upset. “She was clever, of course, but your mother had an odd way of looking right through me. And James. And everyone,” he muttered, running a hand through his lank hair distractedly. “I think she honestly knew what I was to become, and was sorry.”

“If she was sorry, she could’ve done more to stop it.”

“What, Harry, do you think the love of a good woman would have saved me?”

Harry felt himself turn bright pink and ducked his head, but not before he got up the courage to ask. “Did you love her? Lily, I mean.”

“Did I love her...” Snape paused, as if asking himself the question for the very first time. “I’m not certain. Did I love Lupin – or your father – or even Black? We followed each other’s every motion, every decision, from robes to classes to alliances... we were obsessed, they no more or less than I. Lupin, coward that he was, tried to distance himself as he does from everything, but to no avail. The five of us – myself, and the Marauders – were far more inextricably intertwined than any lovers. I won’t feel at peace until they’re all dead, I suppose – every last one.”

Harry heard the echo of Draco again: in the hatred, in the exhaustion inherent in sustaining that hatred when it was long since impracticable. Harry searched about for something, anything to say, and caught on to one of Snape’s more positive statements with near-desperation. “You said it would have been smarter to befriend them both.”

Snape eyed him with a small measure of his normal wariness, still looking unnaturally fatigued.

“Why not now?” Harry demanded.

Snape laughed again, with that same, humourless sarcasm.
“I’m serious. I’m sure Professor Lupin would try to be kind to you, if you were to him.”

“Lupin is always trying to be kind to me,” Snape said to Harry, his voice almost gentle. “It is one of the werewolf’s hallmarks that he at least attempts kindness; it is a weakness of his, if you will.”

“And?”

“And what, Harry? He uses that kindness to deflect, it isn’t any different from my being derisive, or your being brash, or your Miss Granger being supercilious.”

“And that was why you smiled talking about him hitting you,” Harry realized suddenly.

“It’s the first genuine emotion I’ve seen in the man,” Snape admitted. “The first in a long, long time. I think I was honestly delighted to see it.”

Harry shook his head dazedly as his entire perception of Remus Lupin lurched about in his brain, unseated from its usual position. He decided the conversation had long since lapsed into the uncomfortable and sought to move it back to himself, and therefore to more familiar ground. “I suppose it’s a good thing me and Draco are sort of starting to get along, then,” Harry said.

Snape stiffened, and turned to look at him. “Harry – remember what I have said. Enemies can have more power over us than friends could ever hope to do. I can say with certainty that Draco Malfoy has been more on your mind of late than Hermione Granger or Ronald Weasley.”

Harry frowned, feeling suddenly unsettled.

“Whatever you do, Mister Potter, do not stop associating with either of those two children. And do not – repeat, not – waste your hatred on Draco Malfoy... either befriend him, if you think it is in your power, or leave him to his fate.”

And when Harry left Snape’s rooms, stroking the spine of the poetry book beneath his thumb as he clasped it to his chest, he had to wonder if either option was, in fact, within his power, or had ever been.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry in advance for the long A/N... thanks for putting up with them! :)

So here's where we find out how Severus feels about Lily and the Marauders in general.

For those of you thinking of the latter books, remember that this was written in the Golden Summer of Harry Potter fanfiction (I am serious, that's what it's called) between books 5 and 6; there was no epic Severus Snape/Lily Evans unrequited love at that point, although the scene in Snape's Worst Memory pointed at it.

I suspected we were supposed to believe Severus loved Lily when I wrote this, but I kind of refused, because the trope felt too familiar and didn't interest me. So I went with 'yes... and also, no', and then had Severus apply the same kind of logic to the obsessive, creepy relationship he had with the Marauders as a whole.

Still, it should be clear by now that I have no issues with slash or het (even if this story
is gen). If the idea of characters discussing such relationships bothers you, get thee hence. Or place your thumbs in your ears and hum loudly.

The story of Morning Brother and Evening Brother sprang fully formed the evening I first wrote this chapter; very little has changed from its inception to now, two versions later. I warped the rest of the story around it to fit. I think that, after this chapter, I never had to delete large amounts of text again, because I became more and more certain of where the story was going and how to get there.

Although Draco was a mystery until the very end, even to me...

What do you think of Severus's advice re: Draco? Befriend him or excise him completely from Harry's life...

Keep reading, keep writing, everyone!

-K
When Harry dreamed, he no longer dreamed of darkness, and endless corridors, and eyes like glowing coals, and snakes and torture. Now he dreamed of Draco, or he knew it was Draco, only the one he faced looked nothing like the other boy. His hair was dark, and fell to his shoulders – he looked almost like Snape as a young man, really, only a whole lot healthier, more vital. Harry cut him into little pieces and buried him in various spots around Hogwarts, with the help of Hagrid the gamekeeper. The dream held an anxiety, the anxiety of being discovered rather than that of committing such a terrible crime – and when Dumbledore saw Harry, he knew that the old man understood what it was that he had done, and was terribly disappointed in him.

Draco was behind Harry, reproaching him solemnly: *you won’t be rid of me that way, it’s not so easy,* and then Harry was awake and upset and vowing never ever to eat pumpkin pasties before bedtime, no matter that Ron had given them in way of a peace offering after asking again if there was anything Harry wanted to talk about.

*What would I say?* Harry wondered. The secrets he was keeping from his two best friends had layered on one another so that even if he did decide to reveal all, the words and concepts would be an indecipherable hodgepodge of events and feelings. It hardly made sense to him anymore, especially his shifting relationship with Snape and with Draco. He was certain that Ron would overreact, would not even try to understand, and that Hermione would be hopelessly logical about it all.

Shrugging into clean robes, Harry moved down to the Great Hall with the small red book in his hands and the monocle around his neck. He wanted to examine the story one more time, no matter how it had unsettled him. Harry set himself down at the Gryffindor table, this time – Seamus grinned at Harry as he entered the Great Hall and sat across from him. “What’ve you got there, Harry?”


This was ambiguous enough to stop any conversation, unless the boy one was conversing with happened to be Seamus Finnegan. “Let’s have a look; maybe I can tell which one it is,” Seamus cheekily replied.

Harry was saved from answering by the entrance of Neville, who smiled warmly at Harry and Seamus. “I’m so glad your punishment’s over, Harry,” Neville said in that quiet, solemn way he had. “It was awful, you having to do whatever Draco Malfoy told you to.”

“Could’ve been worse,” Harry admitted. “To tell you the truth, I was expecting it to be. Either Malfoy’s a better person than I ever imagined, or he had a hunch that McGonagall would punish him the same way.”

“Same way?” Seamus inquired.

Harry shook his head, feeling his dark hair shift around at the vehement motion. “I can’t believe Ron didn’t tell you. Malfoy’s to obey me, now. For trying that Cruciatus Curse.”

“Whoa, Harry, that’s brilliant!” Seamus exclaimed, clapping him on the shoulder. “Well, what’ll
it be first? Oh, *man*, you ought to write to the twins! Bet they’d have some ideas, they would.”

This hadn’t occurred to Harry, who ducked his head and examined his book. It was a lot harder saying that he didn’t want to order Draco than it had been yesterday. He supposed it had something to do with sitting at the Gryffindor table again, Neville and Seamus staring at him excitedly, waiting for the great Harry Potter to make his next pronouncement from on high...

Harry snorted, deciding it was trouble when his internal voice gained an aristocratic drawl. “I won’t ask them,” Harry said firmly. “It’s bad enough.”

Seamus gaped, but Neville looked rather relieved. “That’s good, Harry,” the round-faced boy said appreciatively. “Malfoy’s done a lot of nasty things, but the last thing you need to do is sink to his level.”

Seamus transferred his gaze from Harry to Neville and back. “What the bloody hell are you lot talking about?”

Hermione slid into the seat next to Harry. “All right, Harry? Seamus – Neville.”

They all made polite murmurs.

“Did the monocle work?” she inquired, dimpling.

“Yeah. You really ought to see this,” Harry said, lifting the chain from his neck and settling it around Hermione’s. Then he passed the book over to the bushy-haired girl. Hermione read the tale once, rapidly, then again with greater concentration under Seamus's suspicious eye. As she worked her way through it, students began to filter into the Great Hall with more regularity, until about half of Hogwarts had gathered there; Lilac sat on Hermione’s left and ducked under the older girl’s arm. Hermione made room for the smaller girl almost absently, running her fingers through Lilac’s loose hair as she finished reading.

Harry grinned, then perked up as a low murmur began to rise around the Gryffindor table. He looked up from Hermione’s furrowed brow and solemn features to realize that Draco Malfoy was sitting to his right.

“Draco,” he said, stupidly. He noticed that Neville was blinking at the pale-haired Slytherin in the same way he did at Snape, although to a lesser degree. Come to think of it, the same could be said for Seamus, who was eyeing Draco with what looked like disgust.


“Draco Malfoy,” Hermione said, eyeing him in return. “Stop being such a git.”

Draco blinked at her innocently. “A git? I’m merely doing my best to serve my master, meet his needs *properly*. Am I meeting your needs, Harry?”

Ron slid in next to Seamus, directly across from Harry. “Ugh, what a sight first thing in the morning,” he muttered, gazing at Draco, then Harry. “All right, Harry?”

“Er...” Harry replied, because it was a bit too much stimulus for him first-thing.

“You could at least let me do *something* about the hair. It sticks up in the back like nobody’s business. Do you sleep on your back, Master?”
Harry flushed. “S’ none of your business how I sleep, Malfoy, and for god’s sake stop calling me that.”

“Certainly. I shall never call you ‘that’ again. Not that I ever did, Master.”

“Draco – obey what you think I mean and not what I say,” Harry immediately ordered. “And don’t call me Master, you know I hate that –”

“I know you hate using the word,” Draco corrected.

“And I told you it reminds me of Voldemort!” Harry retorted sharply, noting several Gryffindors startle out of the corner of his eye. “Can you see, then, why I might not want to be called that, either?”

“Yeah – well – sorry,” Draco said, not sounding sorry at all. He muttered a charm under his breath.

Ron, Hermione, Seamus, and Neville’s jaws dropped and they stared at Harry.

“What was that?” Harry inquired in a tone of voice that sounded far calmer than he felt.

“Just your hair,” Draco replied coolly.

“I didn’t ask you to do that!”

“You didn’t tell me I couldn’t!” Draco retorted. “Honestly, Harry, if I’m going to be seen as your whipping-boy for the next week, I cannot have you degrading me by your very appearance. Oh, and it would be nice if you could wash before you come down next time. Goodness, one supposes you might have figured all of that out by this time, you know.”

“Harry washes every day!” Ron retorted hotly.

Harry buried his head in his hands, knowing just how Draco would reply, and the blond boy did not disappoint.

“Really, Weasel? Is that so? How are you so certain, I wonder? Highly interested in Harry’s comings and goings, are you? Or just his comings?”

Hermione and Ron both looked puzzled, but Seamus and oddly, Neville, were both turning bright red. Harry felt scarlet enough to make up for the lack of blushing in his two best friends. “Draco,” he warned.

“Yes, Ma...er, Harry? Potter?”

“Harry’s fine,” Harry said tiredly. “You’re going to make this hard on me, aren’t you?”

“Oh yes, very,” Draco replied. “It’s what you should’ve done to me in the first place, you unimaginative dullard.” Looking at Harry’s forbidding expression, Draco’s smirk softened, if only slightly. “Oh, come now, Harry. Weasley didn’t even get it. He’s as thick as a stump, that one.”

Ron began to redden now, too, although from anger rather than embarrassment.

“I was planning on being nice to you,” Harry said from between clenched teeth. “Why d’you have to be so difficult all the time?”

Draco frowned, but didn’t reply.
“Answer me, Draco.”

“Sod off.”

“I ordered you to answer me!”

“I just did.”

“I want a real answer, and you know it! I already ordered you to do as you believe I mean. Do I have to repeat myself?”

“No, it’s just—” He gazed around the table. “I would rather answer that later.”

Harry gazed about, realizing they had a captive audience hanging on every word. Ron’s mouth was hanging slightly open. Odd – he’d almost forgotten anyone else was even there. Being angry with Draco seemed to have that effect on him. “Whisper it, then.”

Draco bit his lower lip in anxiety before giving in. He leaned towards Harry and cupped a hand around Harry’s ear. “Why I Have to be Difficult, by Draco Malfoy,” he whispered, as though reciting a grade-school paper about the Prime Minister or his summer abroad. “There are several popular theories. One: I was abused terribly as a child. Two: I am so insecure that I only gain a modicum of power by taunting others. Three: I enjoy seeing you squirm...”

Harry pushed him away with a laugh.

“All right, all right, so it’s mostly the third one,” Draco admitted.

Hermione was eyeing the two of them thoughtfully. “Well, sorry for the cliché, Draco, but it appears that the shoe is on the other foot.”

When Harry nodded wisely, Draco frowned. “What in Merlin’s name does that mean?”

“Unimportant,” Hermione said, then opened her mouth to continue – but Draco interrupted. “You said it, which should’ve given that away,” he replied.

Harry was becoming Less Amused.

“What is important,” Hermione went on, unperturbed, “is that I have an excellent command for Mister Malfoy.” She leaned over and whispered in Harry’s other ear.

Harry felt a slow grin overtake his features. “Excellent, Hermione. Draco: be good.”

“No, Harry, tell him be nice,” Hermione corrected. “I think he is good, in his own startingly twisted little way. Nice is something else altogether.”

“You think I’m good?” Draco managed, sounding beyond insulted.

Hermione leaned forward on her elbows, looking around Harry to catch Draco’s eye. “You did some good things for Harry last week. You know it and I know it. Harry may not know it, but that’s part of what makes them good deeds. Go on, Harry. Tell him to be nice.”

“B-be nice, okay, Draco?” Harry asked.
“Oh, Potter, you couldn’t command if your life depended on it. That was a question.”

“Be nice, then, you twisted bastard.” Harry replied.

Draco looked at him, then looked at Hermione, then looked in general defeated. “Give me a moment. This’ll take some doing.”

Ron snorted in disbelief. “The floor suddenly seems awfully cold. I suppose that must be because Hell froze over…”

Harry kicked Ron under the table, remembering how Draco had gone so easy on him at first, although it hadn’t seemed like it at the time. He placed a hand over Draco’s wrist and smiled encouragingly. “I understand this’ll probably be hard for you,” he said. “We can try it like the whole Master thing… try for politeness in public, and niceness in private. How’s that?”

“Better than most relationships,” Nearly Headless Nick commended as he floated by, and breakfast began.

Harry tried very hard not to be upset and confused by what Draco Malfoy considered ‘polite’. In Potions, he held out Hermione’s chair for her, and waited until she sat before scooting in, smiling blandly all the while. Then, he did the same for Yolande, who appeared to find the entire business rather amusing. She issued a low comment to the blond-haired boy, who laughed appreciatively. Throughout Snape’s lesson, he sat quietly attentive, raising his hand rigidly and politely in a fair imitation of Hermione when he had a question – and when he asked it, he was just as careful as she was in her speech. Hermione did not note that Draco was doing a sort of impression of her, but the rest of the class did, and looked torn between amusement and disapproval.

“Why’d you do that?” Harry demanded once they had started their potion. “Imitating Hermione is not polite, not one bit!”

“Ah, forgive me. I wasn’t meaning to imitate Miss Granger, it’s just that she does have the most perfect way of asking a question in class. She blends just the right bit of deference with polite inquiry. In order to do it properly, I was thinking of her. I had no intention of poking fun at her.”

Harry shook his head in consternation, attention moving back to their cauldron. He was beginning to realize that Draco could be just as nasty being polite as being his usual, snarky self. In fact, he was beginning to think it was something of a Malfoy art, incorporating a sneer or even a blank look of innocence into a comment, thereby changing its meaning entirely. Hermione was right – being nice was going to be a lot harder for Draco than this exaggerated, barbed civility.

Draco held the door open for Hermione and Yolande as they exited, and this time both girls tittered a bit before easing out the door.

Draco packed Harry’s books into his bag and picked it up.

“What are you doing?”

“Carrying your things,” Draco replied. There was a well, of course, you idiot, inherent in the tone.
“You don’t have to do that. You have your own stuff. How’re you gonna carry it all?”

“I can –”

“That was rhetorical.”

Draco’s jaw slid shut. “Well – what do you want me to do, then? Sir? Harry?”

Harry sighed, slumping, feeling suddenly exhausted. “Come on, then,” he said tiredly, and herded Draco out of the door.

Once they were in the hall, away from Snape, Draco’s attitude altered subtly, and Harry realized that he was going to get Draco’s version of nice. “I’m sorry for trying to cast Crucio on you at all, you know,” he said without preamble.

“You have to really mean it for it to work,” Harry replied carefully. “I’m not sure you could’ve managed.”

“Oh, no, Father has had me practice on rabbits and mice and things,” Draco added casually.

“It never hit,” Harry said, thoroughly uncomfortable by now.

“And you got in trouble for trying to defend yourself.”

Harry turned to him, stopping their progress. “Is that how you really think of it?”

Draco eyed him oddly. “Well – yes, of course. You could’ve countered with Crucio... and instead, you just wanted me to – to stop. Besides... what should you have done after a Crucio?”

“Gotten Lupin,” Harry immediately replied. “Tried a Petrificus again...”

“No and no. My curse would’ve hit you in the back if you’d gone to get a professor. And I would’ve dodged the Petrificus and tried Crucio again. You did the only thing you could have done.”

“I was angry! I wasn’t thinking strategy, I wasn’t thinking right or wrong, I was just thinking I hate Draco Malfoy, I hate Draco Malfoy – that’s all there was room for.”

“You don’t hate me,” Draco said dismissively. “At least not most of the time.”

Harry began walking again, trying to find an answer suitable to such a statement, and coming up blank. “Er – no,” he finally replied.

Draco smiled at him, that genuinely pleased smile of his, and shrugged.

“Do you – d’you hate me?” Harry inquired. “Still,” he tacked on.

Draco eyed him thoughtfully. “What do you think?”

“I’m not sure, that’s why I asked,” Harry snapped. He sighed. “I’m sorry, I’m – I mean, I’m sure a lot of people are going to think I’m delighted you’ll do whatever I say, but –” He shrugged helplessly. “And I know you think I’m some sort of bloody choirboy, Malfoy, but even I sort of thought I’d enjoy this... more than I am.”

“You’re babbling, you know,” Draco commented lightly.
“Yeah, I know. I’m trying to say I wish you didn’t have this punishment.”

“Then say, ‘I order you to not follow my orders after this order.’”

Harry choked.

“Seriously.”

“Somehow I doubt McGonagall would be satisfied with that,” Harry demurred. “Besides – I want my cloak back.”

“Your cloak?” Draco looked startled. “No can do, Potter; I burned it.”

“B-burned it?!” Harry hissed as though he’d been punched in the gut, and before he knew what he was doing, he had shoved Draco up against the rough walls of the hallway, attracting the attention of several of the students who were passing by. “How... DARE... you...” Harry spat, scarcely aware of anything that was going on around him, except Draco’s pale features before him, Draco’s shoulders under his hands. “You bastard!” he shouted. “You selfish, shagging bastard! You held that thing lovingly, you talked like it was the most precious thing you’d ever seen, and you burned it just so I wouldn’t have it? That was my father’s, my father’s cloak, the last thing of his I’ve...”

A voice was speaking, low and calming, and it took a moment for Harry to realize it was Draco’s.

“Harry,” the voice was saying, “Harry, breathe. Breathe. I never did burn it. I was baiting you; you know, like I usually do? Come on, Harry...”

The words were just beginning to slip from Harry’s hindbrain into his cognitive centers when Draco gave up.

“Oh, bloody hell,” Draco whispered.

Then Harry felt that pull on his emotions, as though his anger had suddenly been denied him, and he dropped like a stone. Draco dropped with him, and for a moment they sat there, both gasping.

Then Ron was at Harry’s side, pulling Harry to his feet, demanding to know if Harry was okay. “What did you do to him?!” Ron growled, making ineffective shooing motions at the students who had gathered to watch the altercation.

“Ron...” Harry attempted, “Ron, s’all right...”

Draco, meanwhile, was babbling. “It’s my fault, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t’ve said –”

“Bloody right it’s your fault!” Ron shouted. “I don’t care if you’re supposed to be obeying Harry, if you know what’s good for you you’ll get out of here, now.”

“I’ll only leave if Harry says,” Draco replied with a childish stubbornness.

“Just – go,” Harry gasped, leaning heavily on Ron.

Draco’s chatter stopped abruptly and he gazed at Harry for a moment, his expression unreadable. Then, “all right,” he said levelly, and disappeared off down the hall.
Of course Draco was going to make things rougher on Harry than Harry did on him - he's Draco Malfoy, after all - but I don't think even he intended these consequences.

I'd say that this is where both Draco and Harry are most confused about how they feel about one another. A gentle reminder that there are no ships in this story, per se, although there is a lot of random maybe-this and maybe-that floating around, and there may be ships in the sequel. If I had to describe the relationship between Harry and Draco in this story, I would probably say that they have a VERY intense friendship - of sorts.

Thanks so much for all the comments! As the author zamwessell(greencarnation) says, 'something for me, something for you'. ;)

-K
Once in Charms, Harry slid into his seat with a numb sort of fatigue that was becoming routine. He wasn’t certain whether this was a good sign or bad, but he was getting more used to rebounding rapidly from emotional distress. Harry couldn’t help wonder if Professor Snape had ever been having a sort-of perfectly normal conversation with someone and found himself shoving said person up against the wall and screaming at them. Maybe this all was due to the effects of Obscura somehow.

No, no – Snape, anyway, had far too much control to do something so thoroughly stupid. Especially not after a declaration of – well, maybe not friendship, but certainly something like. Certainly some sort of mutual understanding.

Gone, now, Harry realized with a sick sort of dread.

As when Malfoy had been attempting to talk him down, it took Harry awhile to realize that Ron was speaking to him, and in the same gentle, probing tone.

“Harry – what’d he say to you? All right, there?” Ron demanded.

“He said he’d burned the Invisibility Cloak,” Harry replied numbly, pillowing his head in his hands.

“He what?” Ron squeaked – luckily, because Harry had a feeling if Ron were any less shocked and dismayed, he would’ve shouted.

“He didn’t actually do it, I don’t think,” Harry replied, running a hand through his hair absently.

“He told you that to rile you up? He deserves what he gets!”

Harry felt a spark of anger. “Malfoy deserves far better than what he’s getting from me,” he hissed quietly. “I know you like me, Ron, and I know you hate him, but think about this clearly. He said something insulting, mostly as a spiteful joke. I just had a fit at him in the corridor and screamed my head off. I think we were just admitting we were really getting on better – and then he said one nasty thing and I snapped. You’re right, Ron. I’m... losing my mind.”

“No, Harry, it’s always Malfoy that gets the sharp end of your temper – and why not, since he’s such a lousy bastard?” Ron inquired, looking just as solemn and worried as he had back in the facsimile Burrow. “It’s no wonder he sparks something in you, he’s –”

“He wasn’t doing anything wrong, Ron,” Harry said, “and I... I think I was about to hurt him.”

“But you stopped.”

“He stopped me.”

“You stopped yourself, Harry. Malfoy was too scared to move.”

“Malfoy was trying to talk me down,” Harry said firmly. “And... and I can’t explain how, but he stopped me.” Harry shivered reflexively, the surreality of the situation engulfing him like water
closing over his head. “You’re okay with this because I’m the good guy, aren’t you, Ron?”

Ron eyed him warily. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, Draco’s just the son of some Death Eater arsehole, right? So it’s okay if the Boy Who Lived kicks him around a bit.” Harry couldn’t help seeing his father, seeing James, in his mind’s eye, lighting up with malevolent joy as Snape walked past, rather innocently engrossed in his end-of-term exams... as innocently as Snape did anything, anyway. *God help me I become like James*, he prayed fervently.

Ron’s brow furrowed as he stared at Harry. “You’ve got it backwards,” he said cryptically. “It’s far worse when it’s the Boy Who Lived who’s kicking people around.” He turned, affecting a manner that was almost Hermione-like, to the front of the room. “We’ll talk about this later.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” Harry grumbled, but he, too, turned his attention once more to the lesson. He turned it *completely* to the lesson, in fact, since he was practically flunking Charms – Draco had been unsettling him so badly in Potions every morning that he had been unfailingly distracted and morose in his next period. Today he took notes like Hermione, putting little comments in the margins of the teacher’s words and underlining anything Flitwick mentioned more than once.

Over and over again, he felt himself slam Draco up against the wall, the reverberations traveling up his arm, saw the fear glint in Draco’s eyes, felt the anger leave him abruptly, leading him to that moment of horrified realization when he knew what it was he’d been about to do. The sequence of events ended only to begin again, cycling through his mind any time Harry stopped writing, so he tried not to stop. He wrote what he remembered of the fairy tale, he wrote what Padma Patil and Lavender Brown were whispering about Justin Finch-Fletchley, he sketched Ron sitting at his desk and looking incredibly bored.

He needed to talk to Draco. He needed to make sure Draco was all right – physically, of course, but he also had to look in the other boy’s eyes, make sure that he could still see himself reflected in them, *him*, Harry, not a monster like Voldemort. He needed to look at Draco and make sure that Draco wasn’t furious with him. Or afraid.

The moment Charms let out, Harry practically ran for Defense Against the Dark Arts. The lesson began, but Draco’s seat remained empty. Harry didn’t exactly blame Draco if he was opting out of the lesson by choice, but maybe he’d actually hurt the other boy; after a moment he raised his hand to go to the loo, but went to the Hospital Wing instead. There, Madam Pomfrey assured him that Draco was not there nor had he been since the Imperius incident over a week ago.

Harry was out of ideas; he wouldn’t have much of a chance of finding Draco through guessing randomly, and he’d miss the entire DADA lesson if he chanced fetching the Marauder’s Map from his trunk in the Gryffindor Tower.

At dinner, Draco was back, seating himself next to Harry with a determined silence that forcibly reminded Harry of – well, of himself at his most stubborn.

“All right, Malfoy?” Ron inquired.

Draco blinked at him in abject surprise, and he was not the only one. Luckily, he remembered his ‘manners’ and straightened, looking Ron in the eye. “Yes, Weasley. And you?”
“All right,” Ron replied, returning to his meal.

Okay, so the two of them looked like they were having some sort of staring contest rather than exchanging pleasantries, but it was a start, Harry decided, never one to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Hermione’s gaze was flitting back and forth between Harry, Draco, and Ron. After a moment she flushed self-consciously. “Uhm, Draco?”

Draco looked, if anything, more startled than before.

“I’m sorry what I said the other day about never forgiving you. I ought to know better than to say never. Anyway, it was a foolish thing for me to say and a childish way for me to behave.” She darted a glance at Ron.

Well, Harry thought, *this is certainly a weird way for them to compete*. Gazing at Hermione’s dark pink blush, he reassessed his initial conclusion. *No... I think Ron’s being civil has actually shamed her into apologizing!*

Draco gaped quietly at Hermione, and then turned his grey eyes on Harry. Harry shook his head in consternation. He had no idea what had brought all this on, and was still having trouble meeting the Slytherin’s eye in the first place.

“That’s quite all right,” Draco said stiffly, inclining his head as though he were a king acknowledging some dame or duchess, but Harry supposed that was Draco’s version of polite, again. “We all say things we don’t mean once in awhile.” He glared significantly at Harry.

Harry took his cue. “I’m really sorry. I didn’t bruise you or anything?”

Draco surreptitiously shifted his right shoulder, then halted abruptly when he noted Harry looking. “Well, it’s –” he muttered, but Harry was already frowning at him.

“Why didn’t you go to the Hospital Wing?”

The pale-haired boy’s eyes narrowed. “And how d’you know I didn’t?”

“Because I went there, you berk, when you didn’t show at Defense!”

Draco blinked. “Why?”

“Because I thought I might’ve hurt you!” Harry returned hotly. “I mean, honestly! I was just – I just have some trouble keeping hold of my temper lately, it’s nothing to do with you. It’s just a stupid old cloak anyway –”

“Which reminds me,” Draco said, placing a small package wrapped in parchment paper and tied with a green bow on the table.

“That isn’t –” Hermione said.

“It is,” Draco countered, “so don’t open it here.”

Harry ripped a small tear in the parchment and peered through – sure enough, the rich velvety paisley of the Invisibility Cloak lay within. His breath hitched in a half-sob as he pulled the small package to his chest and hugged it to himself, the paper crinkling under the pressure. He looked up to grin at the other boy, relief burgeoning in his chest.
Draco returned his smile with interest, the slow, real smile that he had shown Harry only a handful of times. With surprise, Harry realized that Draco had been wondering if Harry would forgive him, and now had his answer.

Harry ducked his head in confusion and a faint embarrassment. He’d been the one who slammed Draco up against the wall, after all – he should be the one waiting on Draco’s say-so...

Ron saved Harry the trouble of stammering something he’d probably muddle by bringing up the day’s lesson in Defense Against the Dark Arts, the one class the four of them had in common. Harry shot him a blatantly grateful glance and together the trio launched into a discussion as to whether this-or-that technique was useful or not, a discussion into which Draco was inescapably drawn. Draco and Hermione began to argue heatedly about the efficacy of the Spiritus negrum hex, which probably would have been an Unforgivable were it not so obscure.

“Oh, come now,” Hermione was saying, tossing her hair, “how the curse works isn’t really the issue, is it? It’s the moral ambiguity of the thing.”

Draco snorted. “The ‘moral ambiguity’. Why don’t you just say you suppose it’s evil?”

“All right, then,” Hermione agreed readily. “I suppose it’s evil.”

“No magic is evil,” Draco shot back. “That’s something you Gryffindors never seem to understand. Magic isn’t evil, it’s either used for evil ends or it isn’t.”

“Er,” Harry interjected, as he had a number of times.

“So it’s a case of the ends justifying the means, then,” Hermione said flatly. “And I’m Unsorted, now, Draco, thanks much.”

“Uhm, Hermione,” Ron attempted.

“D’you suppose the whole ends-justifying-means thing is some kind of magical phrase, like Wingardium Leviosa?” Draco wondered caustically. “It doesn’t prove your point. The ends often do justify the means. And your change of heart does not alter the fact that you were Sorted into a house of reckless dunderheads, does it?”

Harry and Ron shared an odd moment when they simultaneously gave in, green eyes meeting dark blue in resigned but tolerant amusement. Harry’s lips twitched and he shrugged, turning back to his dessert.

“It wouldn’t change the fact,” Hermione bit off, “except for: a, Gryffindor is not full of dunderheads, thanks much again – and b, I wasn’t Sorted Gryffindor in the first place.”

Draco paused only a heartbeat before replying, “so you don’t deny the reckless bit, though.”

Hermione startled them all by laughing, Draco most of all. The blonde boy literally flinched and shuddered, as though he’d been dumped in the lake. “Yes, well,” she replied with a grin, “I’d really have to be a dunderhead to deny that – don’t you think?”

Draco’s lips twitched uncertainly, and he poked listlessly at his apple tart.

Hermione sighed and stretched her arms above her head; Harry heard some joints pop back into place. “Ahh,” she said. “Well, I’ve assignments to complete, so I’ll see you all later. ‘Night.” She was halted in her departure by Neville, who was showing her a piece of scrap parchment with a rather desperate look on his face – most likely one of the aforementioned assignments.
“So she was Sorted into Slytherin, then,” Draco finally managed, attacking his dessert with more vicious stabs than before. “She certainly knows how to maneuver, having the last word like that – and on a matter completely unrelated to the heart of the argument.”

Ron’s face twisted in disgust. “Slytherin?” he barked. “No way Hermione was Sorted with your type, Malfoy.”

“There’s nothing the matter with being clever,” Harry said quietly.

Ron blinked at him in surprise, his eyes narrowing when they lit on Malfoy. “No, but Slytherins aren’t just clever, Harry, they’re sneaky and manipulative.”

Harry, whose left arm was touching Malfoy’s right, felt Draco stiffen. The temperature of the room seemed to drop several degrees. “It’s another case of the end perhaps justifying the means,” Draco replied in cool, measured tones. “Manipulation can be to the good, you know.” Under Malfoy’s cultured voice, Harry could hear no trace of anger or any other sort of distress, but he could tell from the other boy’s rigid presence that he was anything but calm. The discrepancy was rather unsettling.

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,” Ron replied darkly.

“And here I thought your lot truly respected Professor Dumbledore,” Draco returned quietly, placing his fork down as though he had just noticed what he’d been doing with it.

Ron gaped. “That’s not the same.”

“Why not?” Draco inquired, still cool, still polite. Harry had to admire that, as he’d be yelling by now.

“Because it just isn’t!” Ron returned. “He’s doing it because he wants things to turn out right, because he cares about everyone here!”

“So his intentions are different than, say, the average Slytherin’s?”

Ron nodded earnestly. “Exactly.”

“So the techniques he uses are all right because it’s he who uses them?”

Harry saw the trap, and noted the exact moment that Ron did as well. The redhead paused.

“If Miss Granger were here,” Draco continued, “she would undoubtedly note that it is the technique itself – that of manipulation of others against their will – that is, in fact, evil. Which would lead us to conclude –”

“That Dumbledore is evil,” Ron finished.

“Which is not true, even by my own admission,” Draco continued.

“Which means – that the ends do justify the means,” Ron finished. He stared at Draco. “Where on earth did you learn to do that?”

Harry felt Draco relax slightly under Ron’s admiring gaze, breath leaving the other boy in a whoosh. “Harry tells me you play chess,” he said. “It’s like that.”

“I don’t think so,” Ron demurred.
“Anyway, I would’ve thought, with Harry and all, you could’ve learned to be a bit more tolerant of Slytherin qualities.”

Ron frowned at the seeming non-sequitur, and Draco paused, blinking in brief surprise that shifted with a twist of his lip.

“I mean, he’s relatively sneaky, isn’t he?” Draco finished, turning to stare at Harry.

Harry tried to convey later with his eyes, desperation gripping him. If Ron learned now, and from Draco...

Ron looked like he wasn’t certain how to take Draco’s comment about Harry. “I guess,” he finally hazarded.

Draco shrugged. “And you like him well enough.”

“Yeah,” Ron conceded with a grin in Harry’s direction. He stood. “Look, I’m getting off to the Tower before he convinces me that up is down and the Cannons have a chance at the Cup, all right?” He nodded at Draco, a wary goodbye but a goodbye nonetheless, and disappeared the way of Hermione.

Draco looked thoughtful, his grey eyes stormy. “You didn’t tell them,” he said once Ron was out of hearing range. “They don’t know.”

“Of course they don’t,” Harry said. “I told you it was my greatest secret, not my greatest fun-fact. No one knows but you – well, and Dumbledore.”

Draco considered this. “Much as I enjoy the possibility of stopping your heart with well-dropped hints for awhile, I really suppose you ought to let them know. Granger was mis-Sorted; I think she’ll understand. And Weasley is – is good at chess,” he tacked on with a small smile. “He’ll work it through if you give him enough time, I should think.”

“You can stop being polite now, you know,” Harry said, “and start being nice.”

“Nice is too difficult. I can’t seem to manage it quite yet.” Draco frowned. “Last time I attempted ‘nice’, I told you I had burned your most prized possession.”

“There is that,” Harry replied. “Thanks, though.”

“For not hexing you when you so violently attacked me?”

“For talking to Ron and Hermione, for being polite,” he said.

“Polite? I mean, I certainly did try, but I think there’s something about the both of them that pushes me... in rather the wrong direction. Polite?” he repeated incredulously. “We spent the entire time arguing!”

Harry shrugged with a smile. “Yeah. It was brilliant. Although you were a lot nicer than you were polite, come to think of it.”

“You and your friends are a strange lot, Potter,” Draco said with a puzzled frown. “A strange, strange lot.”

“Yes,” said Harry, eyeing Draco speculatively. “And getting stranger.”
First of all, thanks for sticking with this so far!

I've been reading the past few chapters with Ron's perspective in mind, which is very interesting. And Ron's admiration of Draco's ability to talk himself out of any situation foreshadows Book 2 in all the ways, though I assure you that was subconscious on my part (there were years between Secret of Slytherin and Geas of Gryffindor.)

I know it's my own stuff, guys, but I still have favorite bits and can't wait to get there... It's getting tough for me to read and edit one chapter and stop. But I'm trying to finish Geas of Gryffindor, too - I'm still writing the end of that arc, although it's close - and that means I have to have one chapter per day or it won't be finished in time to start posting it as well.

Thanks again for all the comments and discussions w/in the comments. That, too, has helped me keep to my schedule. <3

-K
Remus Lupin Versus the Establishment

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Remus Lupin was having one of those mornings. To be perfectly honest, he was having one of those weeks, months, and year – but he tried to take things day by day. As a werewolf, he absolutely had to, in order to stay what passed for sane at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry; although Hogwarts, headed as it was by Dumbledore, and staffed as it was by Snape and Trelawney and himself, admittedly had a very unique definition of sane.

His first week of teaching at Hogwarts three years ago had been idyllic. He had been hired for a real job for the first time in his adult life, and at Britain’s primary – well, only, but therefore primary – magical school, no less. And for Defense! Yes, it was rather well-known that Dumbledore had a great deal of trouble finding Defense Professors and an even harder time keeping them, but the truth was that a job teaching Defense had seemed like a sort of dream come true, especially because it would give him the opportunity to get to know James and Lily’s only son. His classes had gone unbelievably smoothly – so unexpected, no matter how many hours he’d spent in preparation – and he was truly beginning to believe that he could build a life for himself at Hogwarts when all the business with Sirius and Snape melted it all away.

He hadn’t been all that upset because, to be honest, it had been far too perfect to last.

When Dumbledore approached Lupin to re-hire him for the position, he had demurred, stating in no uncertain terms that no parent should want a Dark creature for the Defense Against the Dark Arts position. Dumbledore, subtle old wizard that he was, had replied by dumping a full three-dozen letters on his desk from parents demanding to know why Remus had been dismissed, and begging for his return. Little Suzie has learned so much in your class, she goes on and on about you, and she adores you so! they gushed, and Lupin was swayed. He’d never admit it to anyone, but he kept them all, tied together with a little ribbon in his bottom desk drawer, in a small box marked ‘receipts’.

His first week of teaching this year had been another thing altogether. On the very first day Harry had done the unthinkable and cast the Imperius Curse on a classmate, as if to say to Lupin, d’you see how much you’ve missed? A thrill of guilt had run through Remus, despite having nothing to do with Harry’s actions; he should have been keeping a better eye on the boy. Sirius would have been disappointed with him. Then Harry persisted in being a rather creepy version of himself during the discussion about Unforgivables in Lupin’s office. Shortly thereafter, Remus punched someone for the very first time. It had been strange, and satisfying, and, scarily enough, he believed it had earned him a friend. If he’d known the way to befriend Severus Snape was to hit him, he might have done it quite some time ago, perhaps when they were in school. As well as it had turned out in the end, the entire business had been incredibly humiliating for him.

Then Harry had become lost in the Chamber of Secrets, and who but the boy whom he cast the Unforgivable upon to drag Harry out of that mess? Remus wasn’t certain which was the more astonishing truth: that he and Snape were beginning to see eye-to-eye occasionally, or at least catch one another’s eye without Snape’s trademark sneer making an appearance – or that Harry and Draco Malfoy were playing with a tentative friendship. Last evening, he’d actually seen Draco, Harry, Hermione and Ron all engaged in conversation and caught himself goggling. Snape did sneer at that, but Remus noted that Minerva McGonagall had her eye on the quartet as well.
Now Remus was sitting at breakfast and staring at the Ministry seal on the envelope in his hands. Surely – surely this month could not go any farther downhill? Out of the corner of his eye, he saw an owl swoop down to Snape as well, and used the distraction to open his own letter and begin to read:

(Mr./Mrs.) Remus J. Lupin:

It has come to the Ministry’s attention that you are in the employ of Headmaster Albus Dumbledore at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in the capacity of a(n) Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor.

In accordance with Section I, Paragraph II of the Werewolf Act of 1993, no werewolf may be employed in a position of government or education in other than a temporary, advisory capacity, excepting in a state of emergency.

You may choose to visit Room 401 within the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures on September the 10th, 1997 at 10 a.m. to discuss your options with the Department. It is recommended that you bring with you your birth certificate, your certificate of transformation or another official document containing your identification number, a letter from your current employer, and no more than one character witness.

Best Wishes,

Dolores Umbridge, Chief Inquisitor of the Department of Magical Education, etc. etc.

Remus re-read the letter with increasing desperation, then crumpled it in his fist. Stupid, stupid, stupid to think for even a handful of days that he would be allowed to stay here. He was dangerous three days of the month, but more importantly, he had replaced the unctuous Dolores from what she considered to be her rightful place at Hogwarts. He supposed it was time to pack his bags – again.

Then his eyes lit on Harry. The teenager felt the weight of Remus’s gaze and looked up, offering Lupin a hesitant and slightly apologetic smile, along with a half-wave. He returned Harry’s smile and waved back; he could not leave Harry now, not when Harry had just lost Sirius, was most likely still reeling from the pain of it. He smoothed the letter flat, his expression going rigid with determination.

His birth certificate. Well, yes, of course he had that. His werewolf papers? He sneered unconsciously. They’d been handed out the day that the infamous werewolf decree was passed, and any Ministry official or Auror could demand to see them at any time, and could arrest him if he happened to have left them at home. They were in the pocket of his robes right now, and always were. A letter from the Headmaster – just as easy, and no doubt Dumbledore would go above and beyond the simple requirement that he state he wanted Remus for the job.

The character witness.
Remus frowned in concentration. Perhaps Dumbledore would consent to accompany him? He had heard many rumors about Dolores Umbridge, however, and suspected that Dumbledore’s or even McGonagall’s presence would make things worse rather than better. The woman had clashed with both of them rather spectacularly, and had been defeated – certainly, from what Remus knew of her, she was not likely to be gracious in defeat.

In fact, perhaps this was her attempt to say that, in fact, no suitable replacement had been found for the Defense Against the Dark Arts, and that she was, Therefore, going to resume her position?

Oh, dear.

No, he needed someone who harbored no real animosity towards the woman, but could be just as intimidating as the aforementioned Professors when roused. Or when vaguely irritated in fact. His gaze swept unconsciously to the man he was considering, then fled back down to the letter in his hands.

Oh, yes. The madness of Hogwarts was definitely rubbing off on him.

Still, Snape’s reputation was such that if the man did manage to say something nice about him, no one would contest his Sainthood, much less his ability to teach. Not even Dolores would be able to dispute that Snape had no reason whatsoever to support him – it would be apparent, in fact, that Snape had every reason to dispute him, given that Snape wanted the Defense job for himself…

Right. He has no reason to. So what makes you think he will? Remus snuck another glance along the staff table. It couldn’t hurt to ask.

Given how he reacted the last time you said something ridiculous, perhaps someone could get hurt, he conceded, and finished his eggs through force of habit rather than actual hunger.

When Snape stood, Remus did as well, bolting the last of his chamomile tea. He followed the Potions Master out into the hallways, trailing ten or twenty feet behind, his brow furrowed; he wasn’t certain how to broach the subject.

It took a moment for Remus, therefore, to realize that Severus had stopped walking, and he nearly banged into him from behind.

“Well?” Snape spat. “You were staring at me all throughout breakfast. Unless I have some bit of egg on my face, you have something to discuss with me. Put more succinctly, what has Harry done now?”

Remus swallowed, opening his mouth to explain, but felt in a rush how many ways he could say the wrong thing, not be convincing enough. After a moment’s consideration, where Snape stared at him rather patiently – for Snape – he merely handed the Ministry’s letter to the other man.

Lupin relaxed as Snape took it in his hands and began to read it, thinking with a pang that if he’d shown the letter to Sirius, the Animagus would have tossed his black hair back with his trademark bark of a laugh – that perfect cow, he would’ve commented, and then offered to get Remus spectacularly drunk…

Lupin jolted out of his reverie when Snape thrust the letter at him, actually thumping his chest with the outstretched hand. He snatched at the piece of paper and trailed Snape as he continued to stomp down the hallway.

No comment? No comment whatsoever? He would have supposed – something – even something inescapably, unforgivably cruel. “Er, Severus?”
“What is it that you expect me to do about it?” Snape bit off. “Or perhaps this is merely your way of informing me that you are leaving us. Again.”

Remus perked up. “No, no, it’s not that. I was just wondering if you’d consent to – to be my character witness.”

Snape actually laughed at this, a sound Remus had never heard before, merry and absolutely non-Severus Snape. Several of the portraits swiveled around and made exclamations of startlement.

Although the sound was somewhat warming and altogether human, Remus couldn’t help the fact that his cheeks were heating – Snape was laughing at him, after all.

“What possessed you to ask me?” the man finally wondered once his mirth had subsided. “Perhaps your latest brush with demonhood has finally unhinged you?”

Remus growled. “No – it’s just that...” He paused, feeling a heady rush of anger towards the other man. “I don’t know what possessed me. Never mind. I’ll ask... Nearly-Headless-Nick.” He turned to head back to the Great Hall.

“Why is it that Dumbledore cannot accompany you?” Snape demanded.

Remus paused, turned. “Dumbledore and McGonagall would do anything to get a more permanent Defense professor, and the whole Wizarding World knows it,” he replied. “In light of that, I doubt that even Dumbledore’s rather significant influence would sway the Ministry to suppose them unbiased.” He coughed. “Besides all that, it’s Umbridge,” he tacked on. “She has a particular dislike for them both.”

“Flitwick, then. I do not have time to participate in yet another one of the Ministry’s paltry segregation attempts.”

“Flitwick is clever and a very kind man,” Remus replied, “but is he intimidating? Can he stand up to Umbridge?”

Snape looked a bit lost for a moment. “Trelawney?”

“Now honestly, Severus, do you really suppose that would help or hurt my chances?”

Snape paused. “Well.”

“Then you’ll come,” Remus said.

“No, I shall not.”

“Then it will be your fault when I am sent packing to the farthest reaches of Outer Slabovia,” Remus replied lightly.

“Joy,” Snape replied, and continued stalking off to the Potions dungeons.

Remus, desperate, pulled his trump card. “Harry,” he breathed anxiously, “I want to be there for Harry!”

Now it was Snape who paused, turned, masked interest. “Pardon?”

“He’s just lost Sirius, is it fair that he lose me, too? I know I have not been there to take care of him – and I should have been, Severus, I should have been! I need to be a presence in his life, I owe it to James –”
Snape’s features had been softening, but the mention of his old enemy hardened them to stone. “Heavens forefend I stand in the way of James Potter –”

“James isn’t here!” Lupin said desperately. “When are you going to figure out that they’re not here, not James or Sirius or Peter – that I’m the only one left!”

Remus paused, hysterical energy draining from him at the words. He hadn’t meant to say all that. More importantly, Snape didn’t owe him anything. If anything, he owed Snape – for making the Wolfsbane Potion over and over again, despite the man’s personal dislike of him. Snape always did what was right, even when he didn’t like doing it, and that was so incredibly admirable. Now here he was, not only asking for another favor but expecting to receive it, indignant at being denied, as though Severus’s aid was his due.

It was insane – all of this. He was only humiliating himself, and, he suspected, Snape as well. “Sorry,” he muttered, but Snape stopped him, gripping his upper arm and jerking him back.

“I see what you’re saying,” the Potions Master muttered. “We are the only ones left.”

Remus gaped – he and Snape were the only ones...? What did that mean? He swallowed past the lump in his throat that was part fear and part thwarted hope, then held his breath as Snape scanned his features, the Potion Master’s sneer fading as the moment stretched.

“Yes. I’ll go,” Snape said suddenly, and released him. “The tenth. That is the day after tomorrow, is it not? Saturday?”

Lupin nodded dumbly.

“I will be waiting in the Great Hall after breakfast, at nine A.M. Do not be late or I will consider it a further waste of my time. And you’ll owe me, Remus,” he said darkly.

Remus Lupin nodded, letting his breath out in a whoosh as Snape turned on one heel and continued to billow off dramatically towards the Potions classrooms.

He went next to obtain his letter from Albus Dumbledore, who seemed startled but quite pleased that he had chosen Severus Snape for his advocate. And all throughout his classes that day, he found his speech temporarily arrested by an almost overwhelming sense of relief – an almost treacherous well-being that left him feeling weak, shaky, and rather filled with gratitude.

Chapter End Notes

Poor, dear Remus! Severus will soon face off against Umbridge... HAHAAHAHAAHem, oh. Excuse me, was that maniacal laughter aloud? Yes? MWAHAHAHA-oh, again? It just keeps slipping out. ;)

Gosh, it's so weird reading this while finishing up the sequel. Of course, I'm writing one with the other in mind (otherwise it wouldn't be a sequel, Y/Y?) but it's really cool contrasting what Severus was barely willing to do for Remus in Secret of Slytherin and what he's doing for him now in Geas of Gryffindor. Once Severus takes someone under his wing IT IS FOR REAL.

On an unrelated note, Umbridge's signature is from a wiki and I believe its use here
constitutes 'fair use'. If someone else knows better, please inform me immediately and I will replace it with plain script.

As always, thanks so much for your kudos and comments! They really keep me going. :D

-K
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ravenclaw Versus Slytherin

The first Quidditch match of the season was Slytherin versus Ravenclaw, and Harry found himself looking forward to it with anxiety-tinged enthusiasm. He brought one of his research texts to the pitch, out-Hermioneing Hermione as it were, and the bushy-haired girl didn’t appear to appreciate it. She urged Harry to put his work away for once, earning an amused glance from both he and Ron.

Harry shrugged. He was certain that once the game began he’d be too caught up in it to pay attention to anything else, but while everyone milled about for seats it gave him something to do. He had also begun to realize something Hermione had no doubt long since been aware of: that when he was reading or researching, people tended to forget his presence, which was a welcome respite for the Boy Who Lived. Besides all of that, he often overheard useful bits of information when he was purportedly paying attention to some obscure text or other; and he was beginning to develop an instinctive, subconscious sense of when he needed to tear his attention away from the words in front of him and focus quietly on the events surrounding him.

Perhaps Hermione did not know these things; sometimes he and Ron would joke that a Howler could go off and Hermione would still have her nose in a book. She was remarkably difficult to disturb once involved.

Harry’s attention slowly turned outwards at the murmur that arose in the Gryffindor stands; Draco Malfoy was making his way over to them, already in full Quidditch regalia. He paused before Harry and knelt, rather obviously trying to avoid the eyes that were now focused on the two of them.

“Problem?” Harry asked, noting Hermione and Ron eyeing Draco with every evidence of great dislike. He supposed it was hard to forget certain facts about the other boy when Draco was dressed in flowing robes of silver and green.

“No particularly,” Draco replied, glancing up from underneath silver lashes. “Just wanted to know if you’ve got any last-second orders for me. Sir.”

“Someone on your team piss you off, Malfoy?”

Draco’s grey eyes widened in surprise, and then he chuckled grimly. “You could say that.”

“D’you want Slytherin to lose, then?”

“No,” Draco replied sullenly and rather automatically.

“Do your best, then. That’s an order, I suppose.”

Draco’s lips curved wryly. “Yes, well,” he murmured, attempting to stand and not quite finding the leverage, as close as they were in the stands. Harry took Draco’s elbow and hauled up, while Draco rested his other hand on Harry’s knee. One half-stumble later and Draco was back on his feet, nodding to Hermione and Ron. “Weasley. Miss Granger.”

“Good luck, Draco!” Harry called, causing several of the other Gryffindors to turn and stare. “Well,” Harry muttered when he realized that one of those staring was Ron, “it’ll be better for
Ron rolled his eyes. “Uh huh.”

Madam Hooch released the Snitch, and, moments later, released the quaffle. Harry watched, closing his *Botany of Desire* book with one finger betwixt the pages to keep his place... Ernie MacMillian was commentating, his officious voice perfect for the job.

“And yes, the Ravenclaws have an excellent team this year,” he murmured appreciatively into the megaphone. “Oh dear me, quite a near-miss with that Bludger just past Cho Chang...”

“Ah yes,” Harry interjected from where he was sitting, “And the Quaffle is passed from Rawley to Higgins – Higgins to MacPherson – and the Ravenclaws score! Excellent teamwork from Jennifer, Agatha and Colin of Ravenclaw!”

Harry scanned the area above the real action, where Draco and Cho appeared to be conversing none-too-civilly, judging by the set of Cho’s shoulders and the sneer on Draco’s face, visible even from where Harry was sitting.

— and the Slytherins have the quaffle – and –” Ernie broke off to gasp as one of the burlier Slytherin beaters hit a Bludger with unfailing accuracy – at Draco Malfoy.

“Draco!” Harry shouted, finding himself on his feet... Ron was dragging him back into a seated position, but Harry had warned Draco in time, the blond Slytherin shot up into the air, the Bludger scraping the side of his broom. For a heart-stopping moment, he spun out of control... Harry was on his feet again, shaking Ron off, his wand out. If Draco fell, he would conjure something, he would figure something out –

But Draco was slowly correcting the course of his broom, glaring at Cho as she giggled.

Harry took a deep breath and began to sink back down when he saw Severus Snape standing in a rather similar position directly across the Quidditch pitch. Their eyes locked for a moment, and Harry grinned and shrugged bemusedly, seating himself.

“Could you be a bit more obvious?” Ron demanded. “Try flashing lights that say ‘I love Draco Malfoy’ and charm them to follow you, maybe?”

“What?” Harry demanded, the aftereffects of adrenaline flooding him, making it hard to feel particularly embarrassed at his reaction, He was still focused on slowing his heartbeat, on telling himself that Draco was all right. As his mind latched on to the words and parsed them, he turned to Ron. “What?” he repeated, more emphatically.

Ron shrugged, looking uncomfortable; Hermione watched the pair curiously.

“You don’t really think –” Harry began. “I mean, he almost fell!”

Hermione tilted her head to one side, considering. “It just seems rather sudden. Last year the two of you hated one another and now two weeks into term – oh, excellent save!” she enthused, as the Ravenclaw Keeper swung nearly off of his broom to catch the Quaffle with his outstretched fingers.


“Snape said I ought to befriend Draco or give up on associating with him altogether,” Harry replied defensively. “I’m just trying to do that.”

Harry shook his head, trying to keep his eyes off of Draco and Cho for the sake of appearances, but
frankly the rest of the game wasn’t as interesting to him. He was a Seeker, and was most interested in the tactics of other Seekers – and besides that, both Cho and Draco were poetry in motion in the air. And his friends, both of them, or close enough. He forced himself not to feel guilty for keeping his attention above the rest of the game.

“It’s only natural, Harry,” Hermione said absently, twirling a bit of hair around one finger. “There’s no television at Hogwarts, and Parvati and Lavender have to entertain themselves somehow. Just yesterday they had me half-convinced that Professors Snape and Sinistra are conducting some sort of torrid romantic rendezvous every Tuesday evening at the top of the Astronomy Tower.”

Ron gagged. “Thanks for the mental image! Why would those two want to obsess about Snape and Sinistra anyhow?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Hermione trailed off, tossing a wicked glance in Harry’s direction. “Professor Snape’s hair looks awfully nice since I... er, since someone charmed it that auburn colour.”

“Someone charmed it bubblegum pink and we both know it was you,” Harry returned. “He was none too pleased, you know.”


Harry gasped: he’d caught sight of the Snitch out of the corner of his eye. *Come on, Draco, it’s right there*, he thought forcefully, staring at the wink of gold. *Right there, look, to your left...*

Draco suddenly caught sight of the Snitch and began to wind lazily down, looking as though he were merely gaining a new vantage point from which to await the Snitch’s appearance...

One of Draco’s teammates hit another Bludger in his direction, but it didn’t matter... Draco had shot forward like a firecracker, and the Bludger missed him by a mile... The blond Slytherin leaned forward on his broom, fingers outstretched, lips moving. Harry deduced that he was almost certainly urging his broom to even greater speeds...

Another Bludger headed Draco’s way, this one finally from the opposing team; the other Bludger followed it closely, a half-second later... Harry blinked, wondering just how many people on both sides were against Draco Malfoy in this game.

It scarcely mattered. Draco wove amongst the projectiles with grace if not ease, flipping up-side-down to avoid one Bludger in a move so fluid that a quiet, admiring murmur rose from the Hufflepuff, Gryffindor and Ravenclaw stands. The Slytherins, of course, were on their feet, roaring. Harry had the absurd urge to join them, held in check only by Ron and Hermione’s presence at his side.

Draco’s fingers closed around the Snitch in the best bit of flying Harry had seen since the Quidditch World Cup. The blond-haired boy waved the Snitch in the air as he banked out of his dive.

“And Slytherin wins after a rather daring capture of the Snitch by Draco Malfoy, two-hundred fifty to one-hundred eighty points!”

Harry whooped enthusiastically, grinning as Draco did a victory lap around the stands. Most of the Gryffindors around Harry were booing at this rather ostentatious display of both Draco and the captive Snitch, but Harry noted that Ron and Hermione were both quiet if not enthusiastic. When
Draco reached them, he quirked an eyebrow at Harry and broke into a grin, releasing the Snitch for a split second only to grab it again.

Draco caught up with Harry and Hermione just inside the doors that led from the Quidditch pitch to the Great Hall. “Did you see that?” he demanded, cheeks flushed with excitement and the chilling weather. “Did you see?”

Harry returned the other boy’s grin somewhat shakily, suddenly not knowing how to respond – especially not to a Draco who was filled with delight and seemed rather keen on sharing it.

“We all saw,” Hermione informed him rather dryly, but her expression was tinged with amusement.

Draco glared at her briefly, than shook his head as if to clear it of all irritation, as if even Hermione’s presence could not spoil the moment. “It was incredible!” the Slytherin enthused. “I mean, you told me to do my best and I just did it, somehow, like it was just any old order! Go on – go on, order me to... to kiss Pansy Parkinson!”

Harry laughed. “See, Hermione?”

Hermione shrugged. “Well – it’s Ron that said it, bring it up with him,” she suggested. “Frankly, though, I think he’s just a bit jealous...”

“Jealous?” Harry said, noting out of the corner of his eye that Draco’s own eyes were narrowing.

“Well, yes,” Hermione temporized. “Don’t be upset, Harry, but you’ve been spending more of your time with Draco than with us, lately.” She blinked as though startled by her own words. “Not that I mind! I honestly, honestly don’t,” she repeated, catching Harry’s odd gaze. “I think it’s natural that whenever one makes a new friend, he or she spends a great deal of time with that friend at first.”

Draco blinked. “New friend?”

“Well – yes,” Hermione said. “I mean, right?”

“I guess so,” Harry conceded, eyeing Draco, who wore an expression of perplexity – the way, Harry realized, he often did when dealing with Harry. Harry considered himself a relatively uncomplicated person, so he had to wonder what it was about him that the other boy found so difficult to understand.

“Frankly,” Hermione said in a low voice, “it’s the same with Yolande and myself... so Ron’s feeling – well, maybe just a bit left out. Can we try to include him, maybe? Uhm, a get-together or something?”

Draco paled and actually took a step back, but Harry snatched at his upper arm and held on for dear life. “Of course,” Harry replied coolly, tossing the other boy a sharp glance. “Maybe this Hogsmeade weekend?”

Hermione nodded enthusiastically. “Yes! That’ll be perfect.” She turned her gaze on Draco suddenly, and went slightly stiff, although her voice was warm. “That was some excellent flying,
Draco. I may not have seen much Quidditch, being a Muggleborn and all, but out of what I have seen I must say you were spectacular.”

Draco looked even more confused than before, staring at the bushy-haired Gryffindor. His gaze flicked from hers to Harry’s, rather obviously at a loss. “Uhm, thank you,” he mumbled, flushing.

“I won’t pretend this will be particularly easy.” Hermione tacked on once she finally received her response. “But, well, you’ll have another Slytherin to talk to, and hopefully Harry and Yolande can help bridge the gap between you, myself and Ron. Uhm, I’ve probably said too much already, but I find it’s best to be open with people when you want to get along.”

Harry and Draco blinked at her in tandem.

“Excellent. Well, I’m off,” she announced when it became apparent that no answer was forthcoming from either of the two boys, and swept ahead of them and out of the Great Hall.

Draco still looked pale and still strained slightly against Harry’s grip, his former joy forgotten. “I think I’ve just been steamrolled by Granger.”

Harry laughed.

“This means I have to endure her company – not to mention Weasley’s – for hours. And yours,” he tacked on.

“You didn’t seem to have a problem with our company the other night at supper,” Harry protested, crossing his arms over his chest.

“A mistake. A fluke. Temporary insanity.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Honestly. It won’t hurt, you know.”

“So say you,” Draco replied, shaking off Harry’s grip. “Did you notice that crack she threw in about her Muggle nature – as if I weren’t perfectly aware? She’s trying to rub my nose in the fact that I don’t want to associate with her – but I still have to, because of you! And all that rubbish about friends;” he sneered angrily. “What is she trying to prove?”

Harry paused. “Hermione’s very up-front about what she wants,” he replied quietly. “I think that she honestly does want us all to be mates. Not everybody’s a Slytherin, you know.”

Draco snorted indelicately, and rolled his eyes for good measure. “Hermione Granger,” he repeated, “wants to be friends. With me. Son of the imprisoned Death Eater. Who’s called her Mudblood and worse since she was eleven. Me. The zealot.”

The repetition of that word bothered Harry more than he was willing to let on, but he covered by speaking rapidly, and on a new tack. “Of course she does. It’s probably one of her fondest wishes.”

Draco gaped at her. “The Mudblood has a thing for me? Ugh!”

Harry took Draco by the shoulders and shook him. “Hermione doesn’t like you, you prat, she’s had a crush on Ron for as long as I’ve known her, or near. What I mean is... well, it’s something you ought to know about Hermione that she’s got a lot of faith in lost causes.”

“Is that what I am?” Draco demanded, an expression on his face that Harry could not quite interpret.
“If Hermione could ever get along with you, I think it would confirm her belief that what she sees as wrong with the world can be changed,” he continued, speaking slowly since it was the first time he had ever verbalized these thoughts about the Muggle-born girl. “I may have a saving-people thing, but Hermione has a helping-people thing. Even when they’d rather not be helped, really…”

“So she’d like to reform me, is what you’re saying.”

Harry frowned. “Well – not quite. I don’t think she would like you to perform a disappearing act and leave a new, improved Draco Malfoy in your place. I think she’d like to see whether you can be civil with her, whether she can be civil with you. A simple, straightforward experiment, with observable results.”

“Sounds just like Granger,” Draco muttered.

“Yes. What do you think? Will the experiment be a success or a failure?”

Draco’s eyes went faraway. “Doomed to failure,” he replied.

“Well, I order you to try in any case. Or maybe I should order you to succeed, if what I saw out on the pitch is any indication...”

The smile made an encore performance, creeping over Draco’s face until the Slytherin looked nearly as happy as before, and together they rehashed every moment of the game until Harry knew Draco had mostly forgotten about Hermione altogether.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, Hermione and her endless faith in her ability to Make Things Right.

Although it ‘shows up' as rude objection, very time Ron acts as an obstacle in Harry's life, he's actually trying to help Harry by way of trying to understand him better. So now he's trying to figure out if the reason Harry wants to hang around Draco is because he's interested in him as a boyfriend, and he remains baffled when the answer is 'no'. In a way, everything Ron says about Draco is, "but what good is he?" which I'm finding interesting in retrospect.

Remember, you can only hit 'Kudos' once, but you can review as often as there are chapters! ;)

-K
Remus Lupin was sitting, stiff-backed, at the staff table, although everyone had gone and the tables were clear; he was awaiting Severus Snape. With every moment that passed, he felt smaller and a hair more doomed. He was not certain whether pressing the Potions Master into his service was the smartest or most foolish thing he had ever done – Sirius, undoubtedly, would be rolling in his ethereal grave. But then, Sirius would be getting a lot of exercise in the hereafter if he had seen some of the things Harry had done this term...

Severus swept into the Great Hall at eight-fifty-nine, and nodded regally to Remus. Remus eyed the other man, who was wearing not black for once, but a blue so dark it might as well have been. The cut was also slightly different than the austere lines Snape typically favored. The effect, while not dramatic, was salutary; Snape almost looked as though his hair was the proper color.

“Thank you very much for doing this, Severus,” Remus said immediately.

“Come along, then,” the other man replied. “The last thing we need is to be late for that toad of a woman; she’ll consider it an insult.”

Remus rose from his seat and followed after the other man.

“Do you have everything? The birth certificate, the –” and here Snape sneered – “– identification?”

“I’m not a child,” Remus replied.

“I am merely implying you have a great deal on your mind,” Snape replied. “Stop being so bloody defensive.”

Remus’s eyebrows climbed. This was the first time he could remember the other man cursing since their school days. “Who has a great deal on his mind?” he wondered.

Snape paused in the hallway, turning to face Lupin. “Pardon?”

“You seem unsettled.”

The Potions Master harrumphed, then took off once more down the hallway. “It is none of your concern, Lupin. Keep your mind on the task at hand. Umbridge is a meddling, bureaucratic nuisance on her pleasantest days and a sadistic powermongering toad when her back is up,” Snape continued as they found a flight of stairs and descended; light from torches threw odd shadows across the black-haired man’s features, bringing them into sharp relief, making him look gaunt and almost otherworldly. “Whatever transpires, you must allow me to present your case,” Snape continued. “Speaking can only worsen your chances, so remain silent unless spoken to.”

Then, Snape himself was silent until they had reached his rooms and slipped inside. “I cannot believe you wore that,” he muttered under his breath as he stoked the fire and tossed another log on. “Don’t you realize you are attempting to impress the Ministry? And not with the fact that you truly need a place of employment before you lapse into abject poverty?”

Remus growled at him. “These are my best robes, Snape, don’t start berating me about clothing of
“For Merlin’s sake!” the other man snapped. “If you’re going to go off to the Ministry with this sort of attitude, I shouldn’t be surprised if they toss us both out on our ears! Do you even want to stay at Hogwarts?”

Remus felt his cheeks heat. “Of course! I just don’t think it will happen...”

“Ah,” Snape replied, opening his closet and withdrawing one of the dark robes that he typically wore. “Put this on.”

“I don’t want to look like I’m preparing for a funeral —”

“You will be if you do not put this on immediately,” Snape replied.

“It won’t fit —”

“Fine then, an overcoat,” Snape growled, digging through the closet again and producing a long charcoal grey coat and tossing it to Lupin, who slung it around his shoulders.

“Piccary Street!” Snape said, tossing the Floo powder into the fireplace; together, the two men ducked in, popping out in a side alley with a raging fireplace built inside it, masked from the outside to look like a normal brick wall. They emerged into the bright autumn sunlight, and Remus smiled. He had lived in the Muggle world for many years, and he held a particular fondness for it, for the stoplights and trashcans and normal everyday people who wouldn’t even believe him if he shouted from the rooftops that he were a werewolf. It gave Remus a feeling of comfortable invisibility that he realized he had truly missed when a palpable weight dropped off of him at the very sight of the Muggle world he remembered. He took a deep breath and smelled gasoline, and crushed leaves, and street vendors’ food, and the wool of his coat, and Severus Snape.

Oh, yes. Severus. He was jolted out of his reverie as he recalled rather suddenly why he was on Piccary Street; the weight returned abruptly, and he sagged briefly beneath it.

Still, he squared his shoulders and led the way up the street to the official headquarters of the Ministry of Magic, or, rather, the entrance thereof: a red telephone booth behind a hopelessly graffiti’d brick wall. Remus stepped inside, then waited while Severus followed with a grunt of half-amusement, half-distress. It was a very tight fit.

The dark-haired man picked up the phone. “Ministry of Magic, now!” he spat.

“Welcome to the Ministry of Magic,” a pleasant female voice stated from what sounded like a foot away. “Please state your business with the Ministry.”

Snape spoke irritatedly into the receiver. “Professor Severus Snape, here to be the character witness for Remus Lupin.”

“Thank you. Please take your badge and attach it to the front of your robes.”

Severus reached out to take a small silver badge from the coin return slot, then pinned Remus’s on him as well, since the other man could not move his hands. Remus noted Snape’s said ‘Werewolf Character Witness’; he could only imagine what his said.

“Visitor to the Ministry,” the woman’s voice intoned, sounding slightly stern, now, “you are required to submit to a search and present your wand at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium. Thank you; and have a nice day!” Slowly, the telephone booth began to
sink down; eventually, it halted and opened out onto a very large room with a vividly blue ceiling marked with gold; witches and wizards were hopping out of Floos to the left, and waiting to step into them to the right. Remus suspected that the other man hadn’t wanted to use these because he did not want to have to wait.

The dark-haired wizard advanced silently to the Security desk, half-snarling at the men who scanned his robes. “Wand,” the man announced.

Severus reached into his robes and handed the other man the wand; Remus could not help but notice that the professor’s hand trembled slightly as he released it.

“How can I not?” Ernie muttered. “That’s Professor Snape, I had him for Potions ten years ago...” Snape eyed the young man. “And as I recall, I told you if you did not shape up in my class, you would end up serving food at some Muggle establishment. It appears I was not too far off the mark.”

“Briar, dragon heartstring, thirteen inches,” the man announced, handing Snape his wand once more. “Hey, can’t forget a wand like that. You here again?” He turned to the other security guard, who was looking rather supremely bored. “Hey, Ernie, you remember this guy?”

“Beech, Unicorn hair, ten and a quarter inches,” the man read aloud, handing Remus his wand. “That’s all we need from you.” He eyed the pair. “Mister Lupin, I’m related to the Boneses, and Susan’s told us about your predicament. We do wish you the best of luck.”

“Thank you very much,” Lupin replied with a startled nod.

Remus shut his mouth, through a combination of pique and the sneaking suspicion that the other man was right. He slowly drew calm over him like a cloak, taking deep, measured breaths and using a trigger word he had learned a long, long time ago. He felt the man’s eyes on him and opened his own.

“What is that?” the Potions Master demanded.

“Me being calm,” Remus replied, noting the lack of testiness in his own voice. “Throughout my life, I’ve needed to develop techniques to keep my temper on an even keel, or...” He shrugged. “Being bitten by a werewolf has a handful of more obscure disadvantages, one of which is a problem reigning in extreme emotion...” Snape raised an eyebrow. “You don’t have a temper. Or emotions, for that matter.”

“Exactly,” Remus replied with a small smile. “It works, then, doesn’t it?” He paused, then,
needing to know: “Severus, does my pin say ‘werewolf’?”

Several of the other wizards in the elevator with them stiffened.

“It says ‘petitioner’,” Snape replied quietly.

“Fourth floor, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, incorporating the Beast, Being and Spirit Divisions, Goblin Liaison Office and Pest Advisory Bureau,” the elevator-voice chirped, and not a moment too soon. Several of the wizards around Remus and Severus had taken as large a step back as they could without literally pressing against the walls. One witch held her ground, but her nose was high in the air and her gaze was filled with disgust, as though Severus had brought a mangy animal into the Ministry and was allowing it to drool all over her robes.

Together, the two wizards began to stride along the wing of the Ministry that dealt with magical creatures, but they did not have to go far; room four-oh-one was ten paces beyond the elevator. As they reached the door, Remus found himself losing his calm, and he paused, knowing it was better to collect himself before entering. Snape paused, waiting with him, not saying a word.

After a minute or two, Snape eyed him searchingly. “Hand me your papers.”

When Lupin did, he continued: “You are ready. Best get it over with.”

My career? Remus wondered, but followed the other man inside.

A plump, rather unattractive secretary was seated at a large desk in a room with the worst decor the werewolf had ever seen. Everything was horribly, miserably pink, the sort of pink that reminded him of Pepto-Bismol, and subsequently of upset stomachs; it was as though the decorators had gone wild with the stuff, drenching the room. Posters of kittens and puppies lined the walls, clashing horribly with the lavender carpet, and one, white poster outlined a list of Ministry-approved teaching techniques in sober, black lettering - although it was apparent that Umbridge, her secretary, or both had attempted to sweeten that as well, in the form of winding, stylized designs around the border in pink, day-glo marker.

“Remus Lupin?”

Remus tore his eyes away from the soul-injuring spectacle and forced his attention onto the woman before him. “Er, yes?”

“You’re expected. Please have a seat.”

Lupin wandered to one of the stiff-backed wooden chairs, thanking Merlin they were neither plastic nor pink. With surprise, he realized that Snape must have somewhat anticipated the color scheme – with this much pink surrounding the man, both his hair and his clothing looked nothing less than pitch black.

Ten minutes passed, then twenty, then a half an hour. Remus began to feel terribly anxious, but noted that Snape merely examined his nails and hummed a bit, tunelessly.

After an hour-long wait, Umbridge flounced from her office, wearing a pink cardigan and over-robos of a darker rose; she also wore a very wide, very apologetic smile. “Well, Mister Lupin, and Professor Snape, isn’t it?” she greeted with every appearance of enthusiasm. “I’m ever so sorry, but we’re so very busy here in the Department today...!”

Remus blinked. The secretary’s floo had not shown callers so much as once for the entire hour that
he and Severus Snape had been present.

“You understand I’m sure,” she simpered, and let them inside her office proper. “Have a seat, have a seat. Would you like some tea?”

Snape sat with a grimace, and Lupin perched beside him, noting that these chairs were even harder than those outside, making the werewolf wonder if they had been transfigured from solid rock. “Certainly,” Snape replied. “What sort do you have?”

“I know better than to serve the everyday sort to a Potions Master,” Umbridge said with a sly little look. “I have Czechoslovakian Carava Blend, or perhaps some damask rose? That is my very favorite,” she confessed in a high-pitched, schoolgirlish voice. “It’s all terribly expensive, you know, and on a Ministry salary...” She sighed dramatically. “Although I suppose you know how it is, Severus dear, being on a teacher’s is rather the same, isn’t it?”

“Czechoslovakian Carava Blend, thank you,” Snape replied cordially, causing Remus to blink in surprise. He would not have thought that the other man would have accepted anything from Dolores Umbridge, and he also would have supposed that Snape would have cut off the Inquisitor’s blather long before she was through.

“Er, aren’t there supposed to be others here?” Remus inquired tentatively. “Judges, that sort of thing?”

Dolores tittered behind one hand. “Oh, goodness yes, but this is so much more cozy, don’t you think? A bit more personable, really...”

Remus could not help but note that she spoke to Severus rather than to him.

“So you have been roped into this business by Dumbledore, have you?” Umbridge continued as she fussed about with the tea.

“Quite,” Snape replied coldly.

“Then we needn’t keep to the formalities,” the woman went on in that same, private little voice. “You have no wish to speak on behalf of this half-breed, do you, dear?”

Snape sighed. “No,” he admitted, his voice an odd mirror-image of the Inquisitor’s, dry and wryly condescending while still containing a hint of empathy. “He is an incredibly treacherous animal that, in my opinion, ought to have been put down long ago.”

Umbridge nodded wisely, but Remus scarcely noted the motion. He was feeling truly ill, now. What had possessed him to choose Severus Snape for his advocate? He must have been mad...

“Severus?” he inquired weakly.

“Oh, honestly, Lupin, don’t give me such a look.” Snape turned to Umbridge. “He’s a danger to the students, as he is perfectly aware. He merely wishes to continue for the sake of his pride, perhaps; or perhaps he gains some obscure satisfaction from his pretenses at normal wizardry. I have not asked. Regardless, he is unfit for the position at Hogwarts, or at any educational institution, for that matter.”

Remus looked up at the other man blankly; Snape wore a sneer he remembered from before he had begun growing friendly with the man, one so empty of anything save condescension that Remus felt a rising urge to knock it off his face. Still, that could scarcely help his chances for employment, so he closed his eyes and reminded himself to breathe again, telling himself firmly
that Dumbledore might still be able to salvage the situation; if he was so determined to have Remus for the Defense Against the Dark Arts position, then he should not have any problem fighting to keep him... And telling himself that he had never really depended on Severus anyway, that the other man’s words weren’t painful...

The worst of it all was that Umbridge was eating it up, an eager gleam in her protuberant eyes and a self-satisfied smirk on her lips.

“Ma’am,” Remus managed. “Ma’am, please. I have my identification papers, and my birth certificate, and the letter from my employer –”

“That scarcely matters without a character witness,” Umbridge replied peremptorily.

Snape raised a brow. “I am his character witness.”

Umbridge tittered. “You are a truly interesting man, Professor Severus Snape,” she said coyly. “A character witness indeed! You have attested to the very darkness of his character admirably, it is true.”

“Yes indeed,” Snape replied quietly. “He is a monster three days of the month.”

“And hiding a monster the other twenty-seven,” Umbridge reminded him.

“Quite. And yet...” Snape paused, looking thoughtful. “We are in truly dangerous times, Dolores.”

The Inquisitor looked taken aback at this change of tack. “Certainly true, certainly true,” she replied, handing Snape his tea.

“A state of emergency, really.” Severus took a slow sip and proclaimed it excellent, before continuing in a slightly more dangerous drawl. “It would be a shame if your decision had... unwanted repercussions.”

Umbridge was so used, now, to agreeing with the other man, that her head bobbed for a moment before she processed his words. “Repercussions?”

“A woman such as yourself, Dolores, tends to land on her feet, but still, from one professional to another, I must admit I see a difficulty ahead of us, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named having returned.”

“There is still some doubt –”

“Is there?” Snape wondered, taking a long, slow sip of his tea. “I was of the understanding that Cornelius Fudge had declared him Returned.”

“Well – yes,” Umbridge replied, rearranging robes that did not need to be rearranged, and fussing with the stationary before her: parchment lined with interweaving pink and violet ribbons.

“That certainly qualifies as an emergency,” Snape prodded. “Are we agreed?”

Some of the breathiness left Umbridge’s voice as she murmured assent. “Of course, of course. So true.”

“And any move a Ministry official makes at such an important time is bound to be scrutinized,” Snape continued sympathetically. “I imagine it must be very taxing.”
“Oh, yes, quite,” Dolores replied, and for a moment her voice reflected nothing but sincerity.

“It would be a shame if one decision at an important juncture lost us the war,” Snape murmured idly.

Umbridge spilled her tea.

“There are rumors that the werewolves are undecided in their allegiances,” Snape continued, as if he had not noted the other woman’s distress, and the tone of his voice seemed to reveal he hadn’t; those dark eyes were certainly downcast, introspective – viewing his tea as though he were planning on divining based on the pattern of the dregs. “One thing about half-breeds is how very vocal they are, Miss Umbridge... if Remus Lupin were to leave here complaining of unfair treatment, no matter how unfounded the accusation... I can only imagine how things would go for you.” Snape placed Lupin’s birth certificate and his certificate of identification on Umbridge’s desk along with Dumbledore’s letter.

The stout woman’s lips thinned stubbornly. “Certainly one werewolf one way or the other won’t make all that much of a difference,” she muttered, almost petulant.

“Oh you would be quite startled how vehemently the lunatic fringe support one another,” Snape replied darkly.

“The Werewolf Act of Nineteen Ninety Three, Paragraph four Section eight states quite clearly that a werewolf cannot hold any governmental or educational position,” Umbridge added weakly.

“Excepting in a state of emergency,” Lupin said coldly. “Which you have both agreed we are currently facing.”

Snape’s lips thinned and he scowled darkly at Remus. “I am afraid we have failed, Dolores,” he said, his voice heavy. “In a way, it is just as well, however, given the... situation, as it were.”

Umbridge frowned in concentration, her pudgy hands forming fists.

Then Remus watched as Snape stood, bending slightly over Dolores’s desk, his body language sympathetic and unthreatening. “I understand, Miss Umbridge, but there is nothing we can do... at this time. I assure you, he will not have an easy time of it.” He shot a venomed glance back at Remus. “And once the Ministry resolves this situation with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, as I am quite certain they shall do very soon, your... path... will be far more clear.”

Umbridge nodded reluctantly, rising to shake Snape’s hand. “You are the sort of professor, Severus, that Hogwarts so desperately needs,” she said, a wide smile on her face, her eyes glittering with restrained malice.

“You flatter me, madam.”

“Certainly not,” she demurred. “Now, if you would excuse me, I have a great deal of work to catch up on. My position at the Ministry is rather taxing, but one makes the necessary sacrifices...”

“Oh – yes, of course, the tedious paperwork,” Snape said, as if Umbridge’s words had caused him to recall.

Remus watched the self-satisfied expression slide off of Umbridge’s features.

“Yes, Professor Dumbledore insisted on putting together a document... if you would just sign here, Miss Umbridge...”
Dolores smiled at him sweetly, but Remus could swear that the woman was a hairsbreadth from strangling him with her pudgy fingers. “Of course,” she murmured. “Of course I shall.”

Remus took his first clear breath when the Umbridge stormed past them and out into the hallway, looking like she was in a right state. “Hold all my calls, Theodora!” she announced, before marching away.

Professor Umbridge’s secretary smiled shyly once her superior had disappeared, and Lupin’s opinion of her shifted – she seemed a perfectly nice woman, all of a sudden. Then again, the decor suddenly seemed perfectly nice as well, so it was rather more likely that his mood had dramatically improved.

“Professor Lupin,” Theodora said, her smile going warm. “Oh, from the expression on the old toad’s face, I’d suppose you two got the best of her – congratulations!”

When Lupin frowned in puzzlement, Theodora stood and pumped his hand enthusiastically. “You had my Lavinia – got her past her NEWT, you did! We’d been worrying...”

Lavinia re-formed in Lupin’s mind, a sweet but rather bumbling Hufflepuff seventh-year with a round face and dark, disordered curls. “She only needed a bit of confidence,” Lupin murmured warmly. “It was my privilege to teach her. How is Lavinia?”

“Working here at the Ministry, more’s the pity,” she replied with a scowl. “Honestly, if Fudge’d keep his nose out of Hogwarts, things would run a lot more smoothly around here.” She turned to Professor Snape. “Nice to see you back again, sir, although I hadn’t expected so soon. How is dear Harry, anyhow?”

Snape frowned in puzzlement.

“Oh, what a question, he’s Harry blimey Potter, isn’t he?” she rattled on, misinterpreting Snape’s look of confusion for one of disbelief. “I’m sure the poor boy has enough to deal with, doesn’t he, without the Ministry poking into his grades?”

Remus watched as the other man froze over from the inside out. It was a rather singular thing to witness because it was difficult to pinpoint what about the Potions Master had changed. Something in his eyes, something in his affect? Remus wasn’t certain, but after knowing the other man for over twenty years, he could spot it. If Severus had a wolf form, Remus would have said the man was sniffing the air.

When Snape spoke, however, it was with a simple, “quite.” He paused. “I did, however, want to make certain that everything was squared away regarding Mister Potter’s new Potions grade.”

“Of course, of course,” Theodora murmured. “I understand perfectly with things being... er, as they are. Let me just hunt about for the paperwork, it’ll only take me a moment...” She opened a great file drawer attached to her desk, the nature of which was rather obviously magical, as it opened to an enormous length behind her and cracked the plaster on the opposite wall. “Oh, dear,” she murmured. “Does that every time. Just a moment,” she repeated, seeming flustered, now. “When was it, then? Sometime in June? Or was it May?”

Severus stilled even further, but Theodora was already talking over him.
“May, it must’ve been,” she said. “Mid-May, I should think, because Mister Potter’s first exam had not yet been graded...” She flipped through a group of manila file folders (pink) seemingly at random, then made a grab for one. “Here it is, Professor.” She tapped the cabinet with her wand and it flew back to rejoin the rest of the desk with an audible whooshing noise.

Remus peered over Snape’s shoulder as the Potions Master flipped through the documents contained therein. Severus went more still yet, his fingers lingering over one sheet of parchment in particular.

“I didn’t know you changed Harry’s Potions grade,” Remus commented lightly. “And, in any case, I would have supposed you’d have changed it from an Outstanding to an Exceeds Expectations.”

Theodora smiled. “It wasn’t a question of caprice, Professor. Mister Potter re-took the OWL; Professor Snape merely made certain that the paperwork was in order.” She shook her head in wonderment. “That boy is something else; isn’t he, Professor?”

“Oh, yes,” Severus replied coolly. “Do you mind if I make a copy of some of these documents, for my own records?”

The plump woman frowned. “Why, I can’t say I mind, but didn’t you make some the last time? There’s nothing new in that stack...”

“Silly me,” he replied. “I’ve gone and lost them.” He pointed at the papers with his wand. “Duplicario,” he murmured, and pocketed the papers that magically appeared atop the originals. “Thank you very much, madam.”

“Oh, certainly!” Theodora chirped brightly. “Anytime – and let Harry know that I wish him the best of luck, will you? And same to you, Professor Lupin.”

“Thank you very much,” Lupin echoed, and the pair exited the office.

“That was... uncomfortable,” Lupin murmured once they were on the elevator – alone, this time.

Snape nodded mutely, his dark eyes faraway.

“I suppose it would be a waste of time to ask you if you really believed any of those things you spouted at Umbridge?”

“Yes,” he murmured, paused to await effect. “It would be a waste of time.”

Lupin snorted, but he already felt half-himself again. “Ought I to ask you why you changed Harry’s grade?”

“I did not,” Snape replied.

“That’s your signature.”

“It is.”

“But you didn’t change the grade.”
“Certainly I didn’t.”

Lupin attempted to parse this in a way that made any sort of sense. “Who did, then?”

“That is what I intend to find out.”

Remus frowned, rubbing his brow. “Someone would have to Polyjuice you,” he murmured, “and perfect your signature. And Polyjuice Harry, too, by the sound of it. Unless Harry really did re-take his OWL, and thought he was with you?”

“Harry did not re-take his Potions OWL,” Severus denied sharply. “The boy was as startled as I was to note that the grade had been altered, and while he can hide things, he is a notoriously poor dissembler.”

“So someone Polyjuiced you, and Harry, and signed your name... why?”

“That is also what I intend to find out.”

“All right,” Remus said inflectionlessly.

“You think it impossible.”

“Think about it. I’ll bet that Umbridge or Miss Klempf runs a battery of tests on anyone who wants to alter a grade, an extremely thorough magical examination. Otherwise, anyone could Polyjuice their way in, and, believe me, some of the parents are every bit that desperate, never mind the children themselves.”

“What do you suggest, then?”

Remus sighed, wondering what it was about Severus that made the dark-haired man feel such a constant need to impress. “I suggest that you admit you let Harry have a second chance, Severus. It’s not the end of the world if to admit you are capable of empathy, you know.”

Snape gaped a moment, then growled, “I did not –”

“Honestly. You’ve been watching over Harry so admirably, and now me, really – your words say one thing, but your actions say something completely different. Always been true, now I think on it...” Remus offered him a warm, engaging smile. “Don’t worry, Severus – your secret’s safe with me. If you like, I’ll tell everyone how much you infuriated me in Umbridge’s office.”

“Mobilus interruptus,” Snape hissed, and the elevator screeched to a stop. Then, he took hold of Remus’s shoulders and slammed him against the back of the elevator. “Listen to me, you fool Gryffindor,” he scathed, his face inches from Remus’s, his eyes furious black holes. “Someone at the Ministry is mucking about with Harry. I am not attempting to protect my reputation as a foul bastard, I am continuing to do my best to ensure that the little brat avoids being skewered and featured as an appetizer at the Dark Lord’s next lawn party. Do we understand one another?”

Remus worried his lower lip between his teeth. “I’m sorry, Severus,” he said earnestly, “it just doesn’t seem like a very logical part of a grand scheme of any sort. Why change Harry’s grade? Why go to all that trouble?”

Severus paused, his expression freezing, blanking, then finally moving to slightly guilty. He retreated, leaning heavily against the closed elevator doors. “It seems... wildly unlikely,” he admitted, running a hand through his hair, then stopping halfway through the gesture.
“I know you’re nervous already, feel free,” Remus said dryly, readjusting the wool overcoat where Severus had pulled at it.

Snape sighed, withdrawing the copies and gazing at them again; Remus moved close to the other wizard to read over his shoulder. One sheet of paper was a letter on what appeared to be Severus’s own personal letterhead stating that Harry’s testing conditions had been inappropriate and demanding he have the opportunity to re-sit the exam in June – footed by Snape’s signature. The next was an answering letter from the Ministry, a note of permission for Harry James Potter to re-take the exam on June the eleventh. Snape closed the folder when he reached the paperwork that shifted Harry’s grade from an Exceeds Expectations to an Outstanding.

“Mobilus,” Snape incanted absently, his eyes still on the paper, now staring sightlessly.

“Severus?”

Snape blinked, as if abruptly recalling Lupin’s presence.

“You’re thinking it really did happen,” Remus realized. “Just as that woman said.”

“I once told you that Harry was practicing Obscura,” Snape said quietly. “I happen to employ the technique as well... a side-effect is sometimes a fuzzy blankness of memory, a suppression in the truest sense of the word, if the memory is sufficiently painful – although what could be so traumatic in changing Harry Potter’s grade only Merlin knows,” he finished wryly. “Perhaps – perhaps I have forgotten?”

Lupin frowned in anxious concern, reaching out instinctively to grip Severus’s shoulder. “Maybe it’s Polyjuice after all...”

Snape shook his head grudgingly. “You are right,” he said, “in supposing that changing Harry’s grade is no great, diabolical plot of the Dark Lord’s. But I think it may be a small detail that presages something far larger.”

Remus opened his mouth to say something he hoped would be encouraging, but then the doors opened and they were back amongst witches and wizards rushing to wait in line for the fireplaces built into the walls, and his hand fell to his side and the words died on his lips.

He tried, unsuccessfully, to suppress the feeling that everyone he cared for was in mortal peril, that or already dead.

Chapter End Notes

On Wands, feel free to skip:

It has since been revealed that Remus’s wand is cypress and not beech. “The great medieval wandmaker, Geraint Ollivander, wrote that he was always honoured to match a cypress wand, for he knew he was meeting a witch or wizard who would die a heroic death.”

...so Remus knew at age eleven to start looking for a cause he was willing to die for? I fear if I start to poke at that, this A/N will be twelve pages long, much of it ranty, so we shan’t.
The far less dramatic beech-wood is associated with a love of learning, since writing tablets were often made of beech. It is a wood for those who are introspective, philosophical, seeking, studious, wise, and distinctly non-aggressive.

Luckily, JKR never mentioned Severus's wand wood. Briar is described as being for a sharp, brilliant, quick-tongued and prickly person, who "has a great deal of knowledge and expects you to appreciate that fact." A person with this wood is additionally described as "resourceful, cunning, smart, defensive, strong, confident and harsh, but an extraordinary teacher."

For the symbolism, I depended on McFarland's the Complete Book of Magical Names, which rocks when you're thinking up character names or attempting to find symbolism for natural objects like trees, stones, or flowers.

What else can I say other than that the plot thickens? Any theories as to what actually happened here?

-K
Harry was in the best mood he’d been all week, and not even the promise of another session of Occlumency with Snape tomorrow could dim it.

Professor Dumbledore had granted fifth through seventh years the august privilege of a Diagon Alley weekend, and Harry reveled in being able to explore the old Wizarding section of London without hunting for school supplies. He was seated on a long, low wall that ran alongside the better part of Diagon Alley, swinging his legs back and forth, a new text entitled *Potions des Hierbas* on his lap, another entitled *Practical Defense for the Practical Wizard* atop it; the sun was bright and warming, the fall wind was cool, and Diagon Alley was bustling with witches and wizards about on their business, calling out to one another and selling their wares on streetcorners. Every now and then, some small noise would emerge from Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes off to their right, or the windows would flash with some sudden light; whenever this occurred, students invariably exited the shop mere moments later with bags chock full of joke items, departing in twos and threes, chattering excitedly at what they had seen. Ron was chatting up his brothers in the joke shop while Hermione lingered in Flourish and Blotts; Draco was getting new robes down at Madam Malkin’s, and Ginny was off with a group of friends, window shopping. Yolande was perched beside him, thumbing idly through a book with no title and a dark leather cover, content to be quiet with Harry while they awaited the rest of their party.

No matter that Harry had grown up in the Muggle world, he felt most at home in the magical, and probably had before he was properly conscious there was one; the sounds of explosions and flashes of light made him smile quietly, while he knew that his Aunt Petunia probably would have had an hysterical fit with each and every one. Thinking back on his irritation at the beginning of the school year, Harry could not help but feel he had learned a new skill: that of shutting out what needed ignoring, and paying attention to what demanded it. The bustle around him warmed him, but he was quite capable of reading the back cover of his new Defense book without feeling bothered.

Hermione finally emerged from Flourish and Blotts to their left, carrying, predictably, an inordinate number of books, half of which Yolande claimed from her just as they threatened to topple from her hands.

“Ack! Thanks much,” she muttered, setting the stack gingerly on the worn stones by Harry.

“There’s just so much that’s new, I haven’t been all summer... just had to pick up the new History text by Carlisle... and there’s a brilliant treatise on how Muggle technology has arisen because of a foolish mistake Arglewylde made on a summoning spell during the Industrial Revolution I simply had to have.”

“Not to mention a few romance novels,” Yolande observed, precariously balancing her own stack beside the first.

“Never you mind,” Hermione advised, snatching the top three volumes and secreting them in some unknown space on her person.

Harry laughed and placed his own book down atop his first again. “Where’s Ron? He swore he’d be out in minutes.”
“Well, if there’s any interest more avid than Granger and her books, it’ll be Weasley and his toys,” a new voice sounded.

Harry looked up to note that Draco had arrived, his nose hitched into the air a fraction higher than usual, although if Harry were to be honest, the emotion reflected in Draco’s eyes was more like distress. “What’s the matter?” he inquired, making room for Draco to seat himself between he and Yolande.


“From getting fitted?” Hermione inquired cheekily.

Draco opened his mouth angrily, as if to retort, then closed it with a snap; Hermione’s response was to color and frown in confusion.

“What say we drag Ronald out of there?” Yolande said, breaking the staring contest between the trio.

Hermione turned to Yolande gratefully. “Er... yes, I’ll go. Ron’ll want to play some sort of trick on me in any case, and if I sneak in – and possibly bribe the twins – I might be able to turn the tables on him. Pardon.” She nodded at Draco somewhat hesitantly, then disappeared off into the joke shop.

“Well, this is going swimmingly,” Draco muttered.

“It’s the first five minutes,” Harry snapped. He frowned, passing a hand over his eyes. “Sorry. But can you try to be more patient?”

“And polite – sorry – nice. And less Muggle-hating. Oh, and perhaps, Malfoy, if you could turn yourself inside out? That’d be great,” Draco recited in an over-earnest voice that Harry feared sounded much like his.

Yolande snickered, subsiding with raised hands in the universal gesture of disavowal when Harry shot her an irritated glare.

“I don’t want you to –” Harry began. “I mean–”


“I think that what Harry means,” Yolande ventured with one dark blonde brow raised, “is that those things come naturally for most people. Sorry,” she added thoughtfully, “most Gryffindors I should say.”

Draco laughed, tossing his hair back. “I am neither most people nor most Gryffindors,” he replied with a smirk, and Harry realized with slow-dawning surprise that Draco was casting his charm on the blonde girl, and not in a precisely magical way. He wondered if he ought to mention that she was a lost cause.

“That’s for certain,” Yolande agreed – with Draco, although it took Harry a moment to realize that.

Harry perked up when he saw a mass of red hair working its way through the crowd in front of the joke shop – it meant someone normal to talk to. Or, well, sort of. “Ginny!” he called. “Ginny!”

“That your girlfriend?” Yolande asked as Ginny’s head perked up, searching for the owner of the voice that had been calling her.
“No, she’s – she’s Ron’s sister,” Harry explained hastily, not wanting to have to explain Ginny’s odd relationship with him, which, he suspected, was halfway between brother and betrothed. It was something like being engaged in the seventeenth century: he and Ginny had known one another since they were very small, but, although they hung around one another occasionally, it was always with a chaperone. Harry couldn’t remember a time he’d just sat and been with Ginny, as he did with Ron and Hermione. It was as though that tiny bit of tension just wriggled under their skin – and moments after Ginny had settled into a chair in the common room, Harry felt himself getting up, stretching, calling it a night; he’d seen her do the same, looking puzzled at her own actions. He didn’t dislike Ginny, but he didn’t like her either, at least not in that way – and given what was unconsciously expected of them both, that tended to make things a bit awkward in private. Ron in particular continued to make none-too-subtle hints that the two were simply destined for one another...

In company, though, Ginny was one of Harry’s best friends, smart and funny with a wicked streak a lot like that of the twins, and he would’ve given his right arm to have caught her attention – Draco and Yolande’s humor, he was finding, was the same, but it wasn’t his. Someone had to lighten these two up.

These three, he suddenly decided, lumping himself in with the two blondes after all. Slytherins have rot for humor.

Unfortunately, Ginny must’ve thought that Ron or Hermione had called her, because her face lit up with recognition and she disappeared into the shop.

“Her brother will drag her out,” Draco said when he saw Harry’s face.

Harry shrugged.

“You sure she’s not your girl?” Draco inquired dryly.

“Quite.”

Draco shrugged suddenly, as though his doubt had been wiped away. “You shouldn’t have a problem, then, if I flirt with her?”

Harry coughed.

“He does have a problem, Draco, be nice,” Yolande ordered with a smirk.

“I really don’t have a problem,” Harry admitted. “I was just picturing Ron’s face is all.” Harry wasn’t certain whether he had a problem or not, but this would be as good a way as any to find out. “Be careful, though,” he warned. “Ginny’s... Ginny’s not...”

Yolande cleared her throat.

Ginny Weasley was standing behind him on the other side of the low wall – she had to have gone through the shop and out the other end just to take him by surprise. “Harry James Potter,” she intoned, warning in her voice. “Just what am I not?”

“A pushover,” he replied immediately.

She swung over the fence and perched beside him. “Oh. Well, that’s all right, then.” She eyed the two Slytherins. “What are you doing with this lot? Captive?”

Draco’s features blanked, and Yolande sighed.
“Oh, wait – you’re Hermione’s friend, aren’t you?” Ginny exclaimed, bouncing off of the wall and pumping Yolande’s hand. “Unsorted – I’m sorry, but I thought you were... well, nevermind. I’m Ginny.”


Ginny blushed brightly and stammered another apology, then turned a scathing glance Draco’s way, sliding a step back. “Ugh,” she said, “now this is a Slytherin.”

Draco oozed over into her personal space with a wry, heartbreaking smile. “Now that’s not very nice, is it?” Harry suspected he was the only one of the three that heard Draco accent the word ‘nice’. “How should you like it if every time I saw you I shouted, ‘ugh! A Gryffindor!’ and ran away?”

“I should like it very well, I think,” she replied, perfectly straightfaced, “if it would mean I wouldn’t have to see your ugly mug again.”

Harry shot Draco a smug told-you-so look, but decided to rescue the Slytherin before he was further trampled into the mud. “Draco’s stuck here because he’s obeying me,” Harry said, and clued Ginny in on the details of the Imperio incident.

“Oh, I knew that – I would have just thought you’d have ordered him to go to the farthest reaches of the dungeons and lock him there until the week was over.”

Harry and Draco exchanged a befuddled glance.

“Well, then, you know, you shouldn’t have to deal with one another,” Ginny continued in the tilting sort of tone people used for stating the obvious.

“We’re dealing just fine, I should think,” Draco grated.

Ginny eyed them and smiled, a slow secret smile that Harry supposed most boys would find attractive, but he found very, very frightening through familiarity. The redhead turned the smile on Draco who obviously didn’t know the danger; he twitched a grin back in return.

“I still haven’t paid you back for the diary,” she said conversationally.

The smile fell off of Draco’s features. “Pardon?”

“The diary,” she repeated. “You know. The one you gave me.”

Draco looked from Ginny to Harry and back again, comprehension dawning in his eyes. “That was my father,” he protested in an admirably even tone of voice.

“But you knew about it,” Ginny confirmed. "Didn't you?"

“D’you think I would’ve gone about claiming I was the Heir of Slytherin if I’d known who really –” Draco stammered into silence, flushing brightly. “I didn’t know, all right? At least, not until it was mostly over.”

“Still,” Ginny replied thoughtfully, although Harry could tell that the danger was moving past, now, and he unconsciously relaxed the muscles in his shoulders. Hurricane Ginny would not decimate anyone – today. The redhead was pausing, and when she paused, she usually ran out of steam. “Oh, well,” she murmured, brightening predictably. “I can make your father pay through you in any case.”
Draco paled. “Just what are you–?”

“Harry,” Ginny wheedled, “just let me borrow him, for a little bit?”

“Borrow!” Draco muttered under his breath, just as Harry said, “what is it you want him for?”

Ginny considered. “I want to go shopping, and I think I’d like a busboy. You know, to carry my things, comment on which robe looks pretty...”

Harry thought that this sounded like rather appropriate punishment for Draco Malfoy, and far more kind than Ginny could be. “Well...” he temporized.

Draco grabbed him by the arm and moved him several feet away from the two girls. “You aren’t thinking of doing this,” he hissed.

“Look, you do owe Ginny,” Harry replied. “It’s because of your dad that she nearly died in the Department of –” He paused, puzzled. “I mean, in the Chamber of Secrets.”

“Well, she had you to save her from that, didn’t she?” Draco replied.

Harry shook his head. “It was a near thing,” he said in a low voice. “And I had help. If I hadn’t, Ginny wouldn’t be around for you to insult –”

“Who’s insulting whom, here?” Draco demanded, eyes narrowing. “If you expect me to obey the word of that redheaded chit –”

“I do,” Harry said, the words deciding him.

Draco went cold, his grey eyes going blank. Harry was beginning to realize that Draco’s blank face meant he was hurt or confused, both emotions that never presented as such. Maybe now he was both.

“Look, you remember when you said maybe my pride is something I ought to get over instead of work around?”

“You’re going to tell me that passing me off like a thing that you own will be good for me?”

Harry frowned. “No, not that in and of itself. But your thing with Muggles –”

“Ginevra Weasley is not a Muggle!”

“Fine, then, the thing where you set yourself above everyone else,” Harry said flatly. “You don’t like the Weasleys because they’re poor, or Hermione because she’s a Muggle, or me because I’m a Gryffindor, or...”

“I don’t like the three of you because you’re all insufferable.”

“No,” Harry repeated firmly, “it’s because we don’t belong to your club. Because as long as there’s an outside, there’s an inside, isn’t there? And you feel you’re in it.”

Draco eyed him for a long moment, his gaze going deep enough to unsettle the other boy. Harry refused to look away, though, willing the truth to enter Draco, as though he could somehow pass it from himself to the Slytherin.

“Really,” Harry went on, keeping his gaze level, “it’s an awfully un-Slytherin thing to do. Not so good for advantage or sneakiness. I think it’s your aristocratic roots showing.”
“It’s excellent for both, actually,” Draco finally responded.

“If you were friendly with Hermione, the two of you could trade notes and things. You’d be far better off, although what her advantage would be I can’t possibly relate.”

Draco blinked at him and Harry realized he had somehow channeled the other boy – but maybe it was instinctive. If he wanted to get through to Draco, he had to speak Draco’s language.

“The Weasleys might not be wealthy, but they’re well-connected,” he went on dispassionately. “A friendship with Ron is probably impossible at this point, or near; but a friendship with the younger Miss Weasley would also be an advantage to you. You move in different, but equally important circles.”

“And you?” Draco prompted gravely.

Harry faltered. It was no good to be his friend, or even associated with him; he knew that. It took him a moment to scramble to find something, and when he did, he spoke with a sickness lodged in the back of his throat. “When I die,” he said, proud of the consistent timbre of his voice, “there will be a gap, a hole to fill. Probably a scramble for power. If I’ve defeated Voldemort in the process of dying, those who were my close friends will probably be best positioned for government in the Wizarding World.”

“We aren’t having this discussion about Ron and Hermione again, are we?” Draco responded acerbically. “I thought we’d proven unequivocally that they weren’t all that interested in fame or power.”

Harry blinked. “‘We’ proved?”

“In your staged argument. Come now, Potter,” Draco drawled with shades of his former haughtiness, “surely you noted that I had you calling Hermione a Mudblood and that I wrote in Vol- Voldemort as ‘the Dark Lord’? Certainly she caught on to all of that.”

“Yes, of course she did, and Ron too,” Harry replied. “So?”

“So I did it on purpose, you fool!” Draco barked impatiently. “That way you’d be able to say what was on your mind – which needed saying, by the way – but you wouldn’t get the blame. They hated me already...”

Harry twitched a smile. “I... see. I think. Er, thank you.”

Draco shrugged. “You were bothering me. More upset about them than about obeying me... sounding like Moaning Myrtle... besides,” he continued, an odd look stealing over his features. “I... I couldn’t see you throw it away.”

“Boys?” Ginny called. “A decision, please.”

Harry glanced over to note that Ron and Hermione had joined Ginny and Yolande; all four were chatting, glancing occasionally at the two of them.

“Look,” Harry said. “It’s a simple enough question. D’you trust me?”

“I’d have to be insane,” Draco scoffed.

“Yes,” Harry replied, “which doesn’t answer the question.”
“Trust you to do what?” the blond muttered, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “To water my plants while I’m away? To be around? To give your life for mine? Those are different sorts of trust, you know.”


“Yes,” Draco croaked, as though the word had been forced past his vocal chords with a punch to the gut. “Merlin help me, but I do.”

Harry gripped his shoulder. “Good. I trust Ginny. Therefore, you trust Ginny. Come on.” He began to drag the Slytherin back to the rest of their party.

“Wait!” Draco exclaimed. “No! That doesn’t follow...”

“He’s all yours, Gin,” Harry said with an evil glare in Draco’s direction. “Draco, I order you to obey Ginny Weasley for the next...” He paused, eyeing the redhead. “...two hours. Except things you consider unreasonable –”

“Awwww!” Ginny exclaimed.

“And by that I mean things that endanger you or her or others,” Harry finished.

“Fair enough,” Ginny said. She turned to Hermione. “You might want to come along for the ride,” she advised tightly.

When Hermione nodded, looking grim, Harry wondered just what it was he had done. He caught Ginny by the shoulder as she turned away, Yolande, Hermione and Draco already ahead of her.

“You aren’t... you’re not really...” he began.

Her brown eyes softened. “Honestly, Harry, half the fun is making him think the worst. But you know you’ve got nothing to worry about from me. We’re going shopping. Shopping. We’ll meet you in the Leaky Cauldron at six for supper. All right?”

He nodded slowly in return.

Draco shot him a glare that started off filled with loathing as bad as it had ever been last year, but the glance altered somewhere along the way to pleading.

“Excellent,” Ron said feelingly. “Not only is he about to have a miserable time, we’re well shot of him.”

Chapter End Notes

In the initial posting, the chapter that’s coming up - and the idea of giving Draco away to someone else for a few hours, like a possession - freaked people out more than anything but the incident with the Cloak.

I have my suspicions as to why, but we will discuss them at the end of the next chapter, where they belong. ;}

;}
BTW, started posting a second HP story to the archive: Meant to Say, in which the Accident-in-Potions trope takes a turn for the weird. Check out the tags for more.

Keep reading, keep writing, everyone!

-K
Draco wasn’t happy.

For one, he’d just admitted – yes, under duress, but still – that he trusted Harry Potter. Worse, it was true. And the very worst of it all was that he’d known Harry was trustworthy since the first day he’d met him on the train to Hogwarts, and had trusted him to do the right thing ever since. Even when he hated him – especially when he had. Harry’s friendship felt more treacherous than his enmity. And he certainly couldn’t let anyone know that. It barely made sense, even to him.

He examined his companions in the bright light of the late afternoon sun: Hermione Granger, the smartest girl in school – Ginevra Weasley, the most vivacious – Yolande Zabini, the prettiest. Each one with the heart of a Slytherin, no matter where they’d been placed.

He was doomed.

Oddly, for the first ten or fifteen minutes, they simply walked, ignoring him. Every now and then, Ginny would intone “come... slave!” and break into helpless giggles while Hermione sighed and rolled her eyes and, in general, made every attempt to avoid joining in.

“Just what are you plotting?” Hermione finally said as they reached the Leaky Cauldron at the end of Diagon Alley. “You told Harry we were going to take Draco shopping. There aren’t any clothing stores back here, much less witch dress shops. We passed Madam Malkin’s ages ago.”

“Did I say all that?” Ginny inquired innocently, pushing open the door to the inn and restaurant. “Well, I certainly didn’t say where I’d be going shopping. Nor that I’d be doing it at Wizarding shops.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped, and for once, Draco was right with her. “What?” the bushy-haired girl demanded.

Yolande looked pale, he noticed. “You aren’t proposing we go into Muggle London,” she said, her tone low but definite.

“I’m not proposing it, I’m telling you,” Ginny replied with a spark of fire, walking determinedly to the back of the Cauldron. “You can come along or not as you choose.”

Yolande blanched. "Well I, for one, am not going into Muggle London. It's ridiculous."

Hermione's gaze darted from Ginny to Draco and back to Yolande again. "I'll meet up with you in a couple of hours," she told the blonde Slytherin firmly.

The girl paled. "You'll get into trouble."

Hermione smirked. "No I won't. I've done far more ridiculous things a number of times, and I'm rarely caught."

The blonde witch rolled her eyes but smiled, as if against her will.

Ginny, meanwhile, took Draco by the shoulders and moved him directly behind her. "Stand right
there, and if anyone comes this way, distract them 'til I'm through." She reached out to the back brick wall of the inn's common room, and, confident that the cluster of Hermione, Yolande and Draco were hiding her actions, tapped it in a rapid sequence with her wand; after a moment and two or three tries, the wall opened brick-by-brick, revealing...

Draco took an unconscious step back at the sheer volume of noise that filtered in through that opening, experiencing an odd moment of raw panic. Then Ginny was ordering him through, and... and he was through. The wall closed behind Granger, who was watching him worriedly.

“All right, Draco?” she whispered.

Draco shook his head quietly, more in wonder than in negation, gazing around. Muggle London was loud and claustrophobic, and simply packed with people... cars raced back and forth along a road that seemed to wind behind him and to his left... although some buildings looked rather familiar in design, others were boxy, huge, and reached up into the clouds. A massive metal vehicle swept in front of him, making an enormous noise, and Draco flinched, then flinched again as he felt something pinch his arm.

It was Hermione, who was gazing off rather innocently to the right.

“Merlin,” he breathed, adrenaline flooding his system.

“Merlin!” Ginny breathed, in an entirely different tone of voice, gazing about. “Where’s the fashion district, then, I know I read somewhere...?”

Ginny was still gazing around like a child presented with a lifetime supply of Gobstones, so Hermione murmured a question quietly.

“It’s your first time in London?”

He opened his mouth for a scathing retort, then paused, catching Hermione’s expression. When she looked at him with only worry painted in her dark brown eyes, swiping an errant curl out of her face, Draco felt an unexpected stab of guilt. He still couldn’t understand Granger – wasn’t sure he ever would. But it was obvious that she was, in her own way, as trustworthy as Harry. Maybe more.

“I’ll keep an eye on you, then,” she said, divining his thoughts.

“You’re loving this, eh, Granger?”

“Oh, it’s a laugh riot,” she replied. “Ginny, come now, this is your show.”


Only to be grabbed by Hermione from behind. “Ginny! Red means stop – green means go!”

“Course!” Ginny replied. “Everyone knows that! It’s green, so we go!”

“No,” Hermione countered patiently, “it’s green so the cars go.”

“Why do they get to go?” Ginny demanded. “Bollocks!”

“We have to wait our turn,” Hermione said.

Draco wondered if Hermione was petitioning for sainthood.
They finally crossed (still against the light – Ginny was impatient) and began such a long walk that by the time they reached their destination, Draco had long since forgotten the cars and horns and incredible press of people and had taken up complaining instead.

“How far is it?” he asked, and “how far is it now?” mere moments later. He thought he might actually be breaking Granger, who started twitching slightly whenever he spoke. He opened his mouth to complain, paused, without speaking – and Granger twitched anyway.

“Got you,” he said.

Hermione did what was natural and whapped him upside the head.

“Ow!”

“Children, children,” Ginny said, which Draco thought was rich. “We’re here.”

‘Here’ was, apparently, the fashion district of Muggle London. Very well-dressed women – five for every one immaculately attired or artistically disheveled man – meandered in and out of a long row of shops – clothing that was on sale draped the tables outside. Everywhere Draco looked there were flashes of color and motion, except where the shops deemed themselves even too expensive for that – then it was all black, white, khaki and brown, in harsh, severe lines...

“Ginny,” Hermione said in a low, anxious voice. “Are you certain you can afford this?”

“No,” Ginny said confidentially. “But he can.”

Hermione turned to stare at Draco, who immediately scoffed. “If you think I’m going to pay for you to receive a new wardrobe, you’re sadly mistaken,” he muttered as yet another Muggle brushed past him. It was like they didn’t even know who he was!

Oh, right. They didn’t.

Hermione spoke up timidly. “Hate to say it, Ginny, but he’s right. Harry said anything that didn’t get us killed, but that’s because he didn’t suppose you’d try theft. The boy may owe you a skirt—” she tacked on, glaring at him, “—but it probably isn’t right to make him take you on a shopping spree.”

Ginny’s nose, slightly turned up already, climbed a notch higher. “Hermione Granger,” she said with a hint of effrontery, “you cannot possibly imagine that I would demand such a thing.”

“Oh – well, good,” Hermione said, her shoulders relaxing a bit.

“I’m far more diabolical than that. He’ll get to keep them.”

“What should I want with a bunch of Muggle girls’ clothes?” Draco demanded.

“Oh, they won’t be girls’ clothes,” Ginny replied, examining her nails. Then she locked her brown eyes with his. “They’ll be boys’. And they’ll be in your size...”

Hermione snorted. “Oh dear.”

Draco tried to remember to breathe through his nose and out his mouth. He seemed to recall that was how one stopped from passing out. “Muggle clothes?”

“Muggle clothes,” Ginny replied firmly.
“Granger,” Draco pleaded quietly. Slytherins had pride, but only when it suited them. He turned big puppy-eyes on her.

She turned her nose up at him.

Odd. That always seemed to work on Harry.

“Granger, please,” he repeated. What did she want him to do, get down on bended knee?

“Oh, Malfoy, really,” Hermione muttered crossly, folding her arms across her chest in indignation. “This won’t endanger your life, and, given the way you natter on about money, it certainly won’t injure your pocketbook. It might even be fun.”

Fun. The Mudblood was killing him.


They had no idea, he decided. They really didn’t. “All right,” he muttered.

“Yes!” Ginny squealed. “All right, here we go!” She grabbed on to Hermione with her other hand and proceeded to drag them into the first store with men’s clothing she could find.

“Ginny,” Hermione whispered as they entered the store – the store, one of the white-black-and-khaki ones, seemed to demand it – “what have you done for money?”

“Simple,” Ginny said in a bright voice. “I had my money changed over from galleons into pounds this afternoon. All of it. Malfoy will just have to pay me back.”

Hermione looked horrified. “Ginny Weasley! Your parents will notice!”

“Not if he puts it back right away – this evening,” Ginny countered defensively. “And he will when Harry orders him to.”

“How much money can it possibly be?” Draco sneered. “With how many brothers and sisters you have –”

“I don’t have any sisters,” Ginny said angrily.

“Brothers, then,” he countered. “And your parents are poor already, aren’t they? You can’t have had much of a –”

“Two thousand two-hundred and eighty pounds,” Ginny announced proudly. “And I want to spend it all.”

“What?” Hermione hissed, clapping a hand over the redhead’s mouth.

It was too late. The salespeople descended like vultures.

“Would madam like to try on one of our party dresses? Is madam shopping for a special occasion?”

“Madam is shopping for him, today,” Ginny demurred.

The two women and one man literally fought for the chance to stand next to Draco. He had to admit to finding it all rather amusing, actually. But when it came to actually trying on the winter sweater, with its high neck and long sleeves which would undoubtedly hit him at the knuckles, he
felt a wave of – something – overcome him.

He surprised himself by wishing Harry were here. Harry would be just as out-of-place here, no matter that he’d grown up with Muggles, and Harry would know what to say to – to make him feel –

Was he actually scared?

Of a sweater.

Draco snatched the offending item away from the woman’s offering hands and stalked into a changing room with a door so small he could still see Hermione and Ginny giggling like madwomen over top of it. Ginny actually winked at him, and he turned almost frantically away.

So now what? He was trapped in Muggle London with this pair of scheming harpies, and... and which side went in the back?

“Don’t you have anything in blue?” Ginny was inquiring in her best, most charming voice. “No? Ah well, that’s too bad. If that sweater were the palest blue, it might really be perfect.”

“Perhaps one of the other shops might have something similar in blue,” Hermione commented idly.

Draco listened as the shop owner quoted a slightly lower price, working his way through the sweater. He wasn’t at all certain that was how it went, and the fact that the mirror wasn’t commenting even though he pressed it for answers was a bit disconcerting.

“Well...” Ginny murmured. “I did have my heart set on blue. But let’s see how it looks, shall we?” Draco saw her turn to face him in an edge of the mirror. “Well, Draco, dear?” she inquired cheerfully. “Let’s see!”

Draco could hardly go out in his underwear and a sweater. Please don’t let her order me to, he prayed fervently.

Ever-clever Granger was tossing something dark over the top of the door, and, things being as they were, couldn’t help but get a good look. Draco felt himself turn pink against all reason and expectation, but was truly pleased when he realized that the dark things were trousers of some kind. The button part was simple, but then there was a little tag made of metal just beneath. Eyeing it distrustfully, he pulled the little tag, which made an odd noise and unbuttoned the pants completely.

He eased into them, then buttoned and pulled the tag... it got inextricably caught in his pants.


Hermione and Ginny eyed him critically.

“Jeans too big,” Ginny finally said. “White is sort of his color, I think. Do you have off-white? Something just a hair darker? And the jeans one – no, two sizes smaller. Hermione, what were you thinking? He’s not a thirty-three.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I’m far from being the expert on men’s trousers,” she said mutinously.

“That’s not surprising, given that you can’t have gotten into Weasley’s pants just yet,” he shot back.
Everyone, from the shopkeeper and salespeople to Ginny herself, was glaring. Harry was right, he needed people like Granger to be on his side, she was smart and nice and really good, she wasn’t even snapping back at him and she obviously wanted to...

Right. She was trying the get-along thing. And here he was raining all over her little Quidditch match. He tried to salvage the situation. “Er... and he obviously hasn’t gotten into yours. More fool Weasley, if you ask me.”

There. All fixed.

Come to think of it, Hermione was now staring at him oddly. He supposed he was exhibiting multiple personalities, but honestly, Harry did that on a rather consistent basis...

He shrugged off the first shirt and pulled his arms through the second, tugging on the ‘jeans’ with more alacrity this time around. Then he emerged.

Ginny eyed him critically. “I suppose the color’s all right,” she said. “The jeans are, too.” She looked up at the nearest saleslady. “We’ll take them – price we agreed on for the sweater.”

Draco began to peel off the clothes.

“Oh, no,” Ginny said, tugging him back out of the changing room. “You’re keeping those on.”

Hermione snickered as his face fell, and Draco took everything back about Weasley being stupid about Granger. If Weasley was smart, he had run in the other direction the moment they were out of sight of Diagon Alley.

“What do I do about my robes?” he said.

“Quit moaning, Malfoy,” Ginny said, and he glared at her – he did not moan, the same way he didn’t whine or mope. At least, unless it was on purpose. “Give them to me.”

Draco handed her his robes in a neat, folded square; he didn’t want to be carting them around, anyway.

“Excellent,” she said, then passed them off to the salesman, still hovering hopefully at her arm. “Will you get rid of those for us, please? Thanks.”

Draco lunged for her, but Hermione held him back, and proceeded to drag him outside while Ginny paid.

“You ass, were you going to attack a girl? A girl younger than you?” Hermione demanded.

“Did you see – did you see, she took my robes –”

“Aren’t they special to you?” Hermione said, looking worried for a moment.

“What - special? No, it’s not like my dearly departed great-aunt bought them or anything.”

“Then why on earth does it matter?” Hermione returned.

“But – no, those are custom-ordered, Madam Malkin made them herself, by wand, and –”

“And I think Ginny knows that quite well,” Hermione replied primly. “So you’ll be in Muggle clothing for awhile. What’s the trouble?” She eyed him reprovingly, and he was reminded very strongly of Professor McGonagall.
“Muggle clothing for awhile. No trouble at all. Are you mad?”

“You can always buy generic robes when we get back to Diagon Alley,” Hermione suggested. “Which, d’you suppose, would cause more talk?”

Draco was hard-pressed to find the answer to that particular question.

Luckily, Ginny came sauntering out and they were on to the next store, and the next...

By the end of the two hours, he was holding four bags worth of admittedly well-made but nonetheless Muggle clothing, and was wearing the first pair of jeans and a new, pale blue sweater that he felt was slightly too big for him. Ginny, however, insisted that it made him look ‘awfully cute’. He did not want to look cute; he’d rather look awful, but Ginny merely ignored him while Hermione snickered. The Muggleborn girl’s expression appeared to have become frozen in some sort of combination of happiness, disbelief, and incredulous humor. That was, until he turned the tables on the poor girl and shoved her in to get a haircut after Ginny had literally wrestled him into a chair.

Hermione’s hair was now gone. Draco, for one, thought it an improvement. It didn’t look nearly so big, now, or rather, it looked big on purpose when it was cut around her shoulders. She had looked down at the twelve inches of wavy hair piled on the haircuttery floor and tears began to well in her eyes.

Making Granger cry should have been satisfying, but all he could do was wonder why she’d lopped it off in the first place if it’d meant so much to her. It was only a little hair, after all.

Of course, he’d screamed like a banshee getting his own cut, but that was different.

Ginny still looked at Hermione out of the corner of her eye every now and then, as if to make certain she wasn’t about to burst into tears, but the Granger girl had sobbed passionately for five minutes and then rather abruptly sniffled and wiped at her eyes. Draco supposed if a girl had to cry, that was probably the best way to go about it.

Ginny offered the occasional bracing comment, like, “I always thought your hair would look best short anyway, Hermione,” and “it really brings out your long neck like that, I could scarcely see it before, the boys’ll be wild...” When Ginny began to list actresses and famous women who’d kept their hair short, Hermione’s tolerance finally bled into irritation.

“All right already, it’s only my hair!” she snapped.

Draco was glad she had. He’d been beginning to feel like he wasn’t the one having a bad time of it.

By then they had reached the magical barrier which separated Diagon Alley from London Square. Draco and Hermione shielded Ginny while she withdrew her wand and tapped the bricks in sequence. After the first five times, it became apparent that she had forgotten the proper order, and Draco had the odd and dizzying notion that they might be trapped there forever... he wondered how much it cost to rent a flat in London.

“So now you know how it feels,” Hermione said suddenly, watching the people as they passed. A man across the street catcalled something to her, and she flushed bright pink; behind them, Ginny cursed increasingly creatively at the brick wall.

“How what feels?” Draco growled. “To be played with like a dress-up doll?”
“To be tossed into a world you don’t recognize,” she replied in a you-really-ought-to-have-known-that voice. It was Draco’s least favorite voice in the world. “I was so anxious over everything, I just kept nattering on... it’s no wonder Ron and Harry thought I was perfectly intolerable at first.”

The other questions buzzing in Draco’s head drained away with her last sentence. “Trouble in paradise? Between the Holy Trinity? Good gracious, no.”

She conveniently ignored his sarcastic tone; Draco was beginning to believe that when Hermione Granger had something to say, she’d say it, and never mind what anyone else thought of it. *Must be a Gryffindor thing*, he decided.

“I couldn’t involve myself in people’s conversations,” she went on. “I didn’t know what Quidditch or Gobstones or Exploding Snap was, I didn’t know who the Weird Sisters were besides the three witches from Shakespeare... I was so lost. The only thing I had was textbooks – they were the only ones I could trust to tell me what to do.”

“Which explains a lot,” Draco intoned, examining his nails.

She whipped around to view him. “How should you like it if we left you here?” she snapped. “Left you here with an address for a new home, to fend for yourself?”

Draco felt himself turn white. “You – you wouldn’t.”

“And for the first time, Draco did understand. He looked at her with new eyes, feeling the unlikely stab of combined pity and respect.

For Granger.

“I always said we shouldn’t let the Muggleborn into Hogwarts,” he said.

She sighed, tried to tuck her hair behind her ear and failed because it was now too short. “I fear I’ve gone and proved the wrong point,” she said.

“Oh! Oh, bollocks, it’s reversed, of course! We’re on the other side!” Ginny exclaimed suddenly, and the bricks slid away to reveal...

Draco found it odd that he could be startled all over again. Somehow, he had gotten used to the sheer, dizzying noise and bustle and...

Merlin, what an odd thing it was to think that Diagon Alley was too quiet.

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Chapter End Notes

So, next to the Invisibility Cloak chapter, this was the one that freaked people out the most. Weird, huh? You wouldn't think a treasured family heirloom being stolen (and then supposedly destroyed) would have the same impact as playing dress-up with Draco, or destroying his robes... but somehow it did.
Why do you think that is?

-K
Harry and Ron had spent an excellent and companionable afternoon and early evening meandering about the shops in Diagon Alley with Yolande Zabini, whose quiet company Harry was finding he truly enjoyed. Yolande was a bit like a cross between Hermione and Draco – clever and book-smart, with a dry, often biting wit - coupled with a warm and fuzzy side that she seemed fond of denying. When he caught her cooing at one of the owls through the pet shop window, though, her soft side was rather prominently on display.

It had made Harry anxious to learn that Hermione, Draco and Ginny had gone on to Muggle London, but he knew better, at this point, than to go all hero and demand they return. For one, he had no idea where they were headed or how to find them; for another, he knew that none of the three would appreciate being ‘rescued’ by him when they were not in any precise sort of trouble. Especially not for mischief he certainly would have been involved in if he’d thought it up first.

When Yolande’s expression had fallen, it became apparent to Harry that she’d been hoping he’d do something stupidly heroic and save Hermione from a life of detentions and cauldron-scrubbing. Now the blonde shifted uncomfortably as they waited for the trio to return from Muggle London, and her eyes darted to the magical doorway of the Leaky Cauldron every two minutes, as though Harry, who was seated facing the entrance, could have possibly missed the arrival of the three they were waiting on. Ron was telling a very funny story about Madam Rosmerta and the last time she’d caught his elder brothers trying to sneak some mead, but Harry was listening with only half an ear.

He realized he was still anxious when he caught sight of a blond teen in the doorway and jolted slightly in his chair – but it was some guy in Muggle clothing, with a girl hanging on each arm. Merlin, Harry reflected, have some decency towards those of us who don’t have one.

Then he realized that the man and two girls were approaching them.

Then he realized the man was Malfoy.

“Oh my God,” he said aloud, standing.

Draco was attempting to glare at him, but every now and then he would break into a small helplessly sheepish smile. He was flushing slightly.

“Oh God,” Harry repeated.

Draco Malfoy looked amazing. Literally every eye in the room was on him, and for once he didn’t seem to notice, or maybe just didn’t appreciate it the way he usually did. He slid into the chair across from Ron, who goggled silently.

Yolande wolf-whistled.

The inside of Harry’s mouth felt dry for some reason. “What...?” he murmured.

“You gave me to two girls, that’s what,” Draco moaned, putting his head in his hands, and suddenly he was just Draco Malfoy, no matter what it was that he was wearing.
“I didn’t imagine Ginny’d –” Harry began.

“Hermione!” Ron choked out.

Yolande and Ron were staring at the girl who’d been by Draco’s arm, and now Harry realized that girl with the sophisticated hair was Hermione... it was like seeing her at the Yule Ball all over again. She looked so much older, and he could see the hollow of her throat and the curve of her neck...

Harry’s mouth felt parched. He took a long sip of butterbeer.

Worst of all was Ginny, who’d dressed to kill. She hadn’t done anything to her bright red hair, but she was wearing a clingy shirt and a skirt short enough to make her brother choke.

Harry wondered if they were trying to kill him. It was as though his hormones, long dormant, had suddenly realized they were living in a sixteen-year-old boy.

“I feel surprisingly like I ought to’ve dressed up,” Yolande said dryly.

“Now aren’t you sorry you didn’t come?” Hermione demanded. She turned to Ron. “Well? Say something, even if it’s, ‘where did it all go’?!”

Ron coughed on air. “B-bloody brilliant!” he managed, before burying himself in his beer.

“Oh. Well, good,” she replied.

Yolande went a step farther by scooting back her seat and moving behind Hermione. “You need two clips... like this,” she murmured, drawing Hermione’s hair slightly out of her eyes on each side.

The effect was dramatic. Harry caught Draco nodding enthusiastically out of the corner of his eye. Meanwhile, Yolande had her hands in Hermione’s hair, which Ron didn’t even seem to be noting as a bad thing... perhaps he hadn’t guessed about the blonde girl, yet.

“Well, yes, it’s excellent to be able to see,” Hermione commented, her tone wry. “Until we left London I hadn’t realized that I wouldn’t be able to tuck it behind one ear anymore, or not for long; it slips out. It’s going to have to be kept out of the way somehow.”

“Kept out of the way,” Draco scoffed. “Listen to you. One would almost think you weren’t even a girl, the way you go on.”

“And one would almost think you were, the way that you go on,” Hermione replied.

Draco laughed, and Harry realized abruptly that he had finally learned when Hermione was serious and when she was not.

This, apparently, was a code red from Ron’s point of view. “I think it’d look great with clips,” he volunteered. “Maybe some red-and-gold ones.”

“I rather like purple,” Hermione said neutrally, which quieted Ron and reminded him rather subtly about her position as a member of the Unsorted House.

“We’ll get you purple, then,” Draco said, and now Harry was certain he was just saying so to bother Ron.

Hermione didn’t seem as definite, however. She eyed Draco uneasily, then motioned for Madam
Rosmerta while Ron seethed. “Could we get some butterbeers and some menus? Thanks.”

“I had no idea you were off to Muggle London, Ginny,” Harry said, trying not to flush as he looked at her. “I wouldn’t’ve... lent you Draco, if I knew you were.”

“Oh, it was good for him,” Ginny said dismissively. “And he got excellent things, didn’t you, Draco?”

“Oh, no,” Draco said flatly. “I’m not listening to you anymore. Your two hours are up. She threw away my robes, Harry.”

“Tattle,” Ginny said amicably.

“Did you really throw away his things?” Harry demanded.

Ginny shrugged. “I wanted him to wear Muggle clothes for a couple of hours, Harry. So, yes, I tossed his robes. Don’t let him fool you. I’m sure he’s got five just like them in his wardrobes back at Slytherin; he can change the moment he gets back.”

“All I have to endure is this rather public humiliation, then,” Draco muttered under his breath.


“Angora,” Ginny said before Draco had a chance to reply. “Or mostly. Angora cotton mix, really hard to find. And really soft.”

Harry took part of Draco’s sleeve and rubbed it between his fingers. “Hunh.” His eyes met Draco’s, and he saw that the other boy was fatigued, more fatigued than he ought to have been just from a day of walking around – but then he remembered Draco had been tired before. “All right?” he inquired, when Hermione, Ginny and Yolande were all absorbed in a gigglefest over the amount of hair she’d shed and Ron’s features were buried behind his menu.

Draco looked up and quirked a small smile. “I feel practically naked. I know I’m covered, technically, but – are all Muggles perverts or something? These trousers are tight, but they sort of move around me so that they’re never too tight. They feel odd. And I’m hot in this sweater. It’s so close in here.”

“You’re obviously not all right,” Harry countered at the other boy’s anxious tones. “Anyway, it looks – it’s...” He paused. “I didn’t recognize you.”

“Oh.” Draco leaned back into his chair and away from Harry, shoulders slumping in disappointment.


Harry caught Draco in one of his rare, slow smiles, and smiled himself when he realized that it was time to stop calling them rare. “Can I give you some of these clothes?” Draco wondered quietly, shooting a careful glance towards Ginny Weasley. “We’re nearly the same size, and I don’t need – I mean, I don’t really want –”

“Yeah, all right,” Harry agreed. “Thanks. So, let’s see what you got.”

They spent the next fifteen or twenty minutes, even Ron, examining the purchases, and Harry
watched Draco look a little bit more lighthearted with each nod and approving smile; and once the bags had been emptied and painstakingly re-packed – by Draco – Harry wondered if he were going to get a single shirt or pair of trousers after all.

They were late getting back to Hogwarts Castle, Hermione and Ginny slumping with exhaustion, Draco even more so. Harry felt a stab of worry as the blond boy stumbled over his own feet, catching himself on a cobblestone – and he certainly didn’t thank Harry for stopping his fall, although he dropped back and stuck very close to him from then on.

Hermione looked like she was content to fall asleep with her face buried in Ron’s shoulder, and the fact that she was walking didn’t appear to hinder her journey to slumber one iota.

“We should just Apparate to the edge of the grounds,” Draco slurred tiredly, and Harry shot him another anxious glance. “Save us all this walking.”

“Oh, perfect,” Yolande said. “Except where it’s illegal and you’re asleep.”

They were a bit late slipping back into the castle than they actually ought to have been, but that hardly prevented Draco from being as loud as he felt like, imitating Hermione’s struggles at the hairdresser’s, flinging his arms about and incidentally knocking Ron in the face with one of his clothes bags.

“Well, that’s a fine by-your-leave,” Hermione said, “considering I did it because of you.”

“Because of him?” Ron squeaked, and Hermione eyed him with a long-suffering patience.

“I just thought people ought to be staring at something besides the great Draco Malfoy in Muggle clothes.”

“You did not, Granger, that’s patently ridiculous,” Draco returned. “I practically forced you into it, anyway.”

“Believe what you like,” she said. A small pause. “It’s called empathy,” she added, “if you’d like to look it up.”

“Looking things up is your department,” Draco replied crossly, but Harry noted that he was staring at Hermione the way he often stared at Harry – as if he didn’t quite know whether to take her actions at face value or not.

“Well, anyway,” she said, “I’m off to bed, I’m dead tired.” She kissed Ginny and Yolande on the cheek and hugged Harry and Ron. Then she looked at Draco in slight confusion.

“I wouldn’t think about it –” Draco began.

Hermione was already sticking her hand out to shake.

“Oh,” he said. He put down his bags and examined her hand.

Harry didn’t say anything; he was afraid to. It was one thing to be forced to spend time with Hermione and be civil to her. It was another to make physical contact. Harry felt poised on the moment, and did not want to order Malfoy to touch Hermione.
He didn’t want to have to.

Draco shot a look back to Harry, as though divining Harry’s thoughts and wishing Harry would just take the decision out of his hands, but Harry shrugged.

“Oh, fine, then,” Hermione said tightly, lowering her hand away from his grasp; Ron wrapped his arm about her shoulders again, leveling a Death Glare at Malfoy.

Hermione twitched a strained smile. “How’s a ‘see you tomorrow’?”

“See you tomorrow,” Draco parroted, and Ron, Hermione and Ginny turned to head towards the Gryffindor dorms.

“What was that, you idiot?” Yolande stormed the moment Hermione was out of sight, pushing Draco up against the wall with an open-handed shove. “What’s your problem?”

“I have a club,” Draco replied, haughty. “Apparently. And Granger doesn’t belong.”

Harry sighed, pushing his glasses up with one finger, wanting to reprimand Draco but noting that the blond boy looked as though he was doing the job rather thoroughly on his own. His newly-styled hair was in disarray as he ran his fingers through it; his features were flushed and he was frowning in some combination of anger and dismay.

Yolande didn’t share Harry’s reservations. “I know all about your sodding club,” she spat. “Yours and your father’s. Hermione would never be a part of that club, and it has nothing to do with her being a Muggleborn or a Gryffindor... she cut off all of her hair just to make you feel better, you twisted little prat – and you won’t so much as shake her hand. D’you know what that means?”

Draco turned half-away from her, his eyes trailing down and to his left.

“It means she’s on a different level from you,” Yolande spat. “Always has been, always will be.” She dropped Draco’s new fluffy sweater and stormed in the opposite direction as the Gryffindors, presumably off to the Slytherin dorms.

Draco gave a brittle little laugh and stormed off after her, only to turn around and begin stalking in the opposite direction. After a moment he slid into a seated position directly in the centre of the hallway.

Harry watched him for a moment, waited for him to settle, then sat across from him.

“Potter,” Draco said.

“Draco,” Harry replied, unwilling to call him Malfoy, despite everything.

“Why haven’t you chased after Weasley and Granger?” he muttered.

“Hermione seemed quite all right,” Harry replied. “You, rather less so.”

Draco stared at him blankly before his features twisted with rage. “What is the matter with you people?!” he demanded wildly, shoving Harry down.

Harry blinked; his head had smacked slightly against the floor, not hard enough to make him feel dizzy but certainly hard enough to smart.

Draco had risen again to his feet. “My father’s the Death Eater, Potter, and you expect me to shake hands with that girl, that Muggleborn, as if it’s normal! I can’t! I’m not made that way!”
Harry remained seated, backing up until he was against one of the walls so that he could better view Draco. Otherwise, it was hard to keep track of the blond, who was a dynamo of repressed energy, stalking and whirling a ten-foot by ten-foot space of corridor and barking demands at him.

“You have to be able to see by now! I’m not – I’m not – I can’t–”

“Finish sentences?” Harry asked.

“This. Is. Not. Funny, Potter!”

“I beg to differ,” Harry said, although his voice was serious. “Has it ever occurred to you that if you were the raging bastard you seem to think you are, this wouldn’t be bothering you at all? You’re tearing yourself apart because you couldn’t shake Hermione’s hand, you know.”

“I’m tearing myself apart because you expect me to shake Hermione Granger’s hand!”

“And?” Harry asked, although he suspected he knew the answer.

“And? And?!” Draco shouted at him. “And I’m meant to obey you!”

“I never ordered you to like Hermione.”

“You told me I’d benefit from befriending her, didn’t you?”

“That’s advice.”

“Well – well it was good advice,” Draco said.

Harry glared at him.

“Well, what am I supposed to do, Harry?” The Slytherin’s angry expression dissolved completely into confusion. “Just tell me what to do and I’ll do it.” He slumped down next to Harry, leaning until the back of his head touched the rough-hewn stone of the corridor wall.

“I can’t,” Harry said.

“That’s your current job description,” Draco informed him, “in case you forgot.”

“Think about why you care so much and maybe then -”

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake!” Draco swore, suddenly angry again. “I care about her because I care about you! Obviously!”

Harry’s lips parted in surprise.

“Well – I mean, of course you knew that,” Draco mumbled, pulling his knees close to his chest and wrapping his arms around them tightly. “I mean – even Granger said we were friends, didn’t she?”

Harry tried to gather his wits together to form a reply. “Uhm... well, I’m sitting on this freezing-cold floor with you after hours, when we could easily be caught by Filch, so yes, I should hope so.”

“Yes, you’re sitting here,” Draco said. “With the sarcastic, bigoted asshole, instead of with your sweet, forward-thinking fellow Gryffindors. Great choice in company, Potter.”

“I’m an idiot,” Harry replied, grinning and ducking his head slightly.
“I’m a worse idiot. I’ll shake her hand tomorrow. In front of the entire school – wearing Muggle clothes, if you like. Wearing an Unsorted badge. In Muggle underwear. In only Muggle underwear.”

Harry laughed. “Are Muggle underwear different from Wizarding underwear?” he demanded.

“Yes, Harry, of course they are. Which kind do you wear? And don’t say Muggle.”

“Well – now I’m not sure. You may have to describe both sorts,” Harry replied.

Draco began to giggle helplessly; he buried his head in the fabric of his jeans. “Oh, now I’ve heard it all,” he whispered. “Late at night, in the deserted hallways... Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter meet in secret... to discuss...”

“Underpants,” Harry supplied in a would-be serious tone of voice.

Draco promptly lost it again. “Oh, Merlin!” he said.

“Harry! Draco!”

Harry jolted upright from his position on the floor. Hermione was regarding them both, looking pale and bothered, Ron next to her. His inner alarms began screaming – he knew that look on both their faces and suppressed the sudden urge to shout, ‘who’s dead?’ or ‘point me towards Voldemort!’

Draco, unfortunately, was not so well-acquainted with Ron and Hermione’s strained expressions, and probably was equating them with offense. He bounded to his feet and eyed Hermione frankly.

“Look, I was just telling Harry here I’m an idiot, I’m sure you’re a lovely girl, and it honestly doesn’t matter whether you were raised in a pigpen or whatever, because you certainly are still a witch, and Muggle-ness certainly isn’t catching, and basically what I’m trying to say here is that I’m actually sorry for not shaking your hand –”

Hermione was nodding impatiently. “That’s really wonderful, Malfoy, but –”

“You don’t believe me?” he demanded. “Here.” He grabbed both her hands and shook them while Harry and Ron gaped.

“Malfoy!” she squeaked. “Your mother!”

“This is hardly the time for insults,” Draco stated flatly. “I said I was sorry.”

Hermione choked. “No, your mother –”

“My mother what?”

“Is standing over there,” Ron completed dryly, and he pointed off to their right.

Sure enough, Narcissa Malfoy was standing a mere ten feet away from the four of them, blinking at Draco in shock. Draco looked at Harry, looked down at himself, looked at Hermione and abruptly let go.

“Mother,” he said, his tone arid as the Sahara. “What a surprise.”
Oh, dear, Draco!

Whelp, we're about halfway through the story as far as wordcount is concerned (as later chapters are slightly longer than beginning chapters.) One of the loveliest aspects of ao3 is that you can turn this fic into a pdf or an ebook with the click of a button; I definitely plan on doing so once it's all up here. :)

One of the Britishisms that I hadn't fixed in the previous version was the "pants" vs "underpants" vs "trousers" issue. I pretty much changed all of that until I got to the exchange between Harry and Draco about wearing "only" underwear - I was worried if I used 'pants', I'd confuse my American readers, so it is as it stands. ;)

After this lighthearted chapter things are gonna take a bit of a swoop towards the angst...

-K
The note pinned to Professor Snape’s door the next evening said the following:

Mister Potter:

I regret that I cannot continue to give you your lesson in Meditation Techniques this evening, due to circumstances beyond my control. Professor Remus Lupin has promised to stand in for me this evening. We shall meet tomorrow evening at the same time.

-Professor Severus Snape

Harry read the note twice through before folding it up and sticking it in his pocket. Well, at least ‘Meditation Techniques’ was better than ‘Remedial Potions’… but why Professor Lupin? He paused, slightly taken aback by his own reaction. There was nothing wrong with Professor Lupin; in point of fact, Professor Lupin was one of the best teachers, if not the best that Harry had ever had. Still, he reasoned, it was not plausible to imagine the werewolf as someone who practiced Occlumency, much less Obscura.

As Harry began to move down the corridor to the stairs, the very act of going to see Professor Lupin sent a shot of unexpected sourness to his stomach; and he realized that he wasn’t sure how his father’s old friend would receive him. Would Lupin’s conversation be laced with ‘Mister Potter’s and thoughtful pauses, or would he finally be easier with Harry again? Harry was beginning to wonder if the man would ever forgive him his mistake.

Worst of all, Harry had the unfortunate maturity to realize that he would behave in the same way, in the Professor’s place. If he saw a student cast an Unforgivable, especially one so insidious and perfidious as the Imperius Curse, he wouldn’t be so quick to trust them again, either.

The feeling grew worse as Harry climbed the stairs, the knot of uneasiness growing. He found himself choosing and discarding modes of behaviour. Would he be aloof and quite Slytherin, the way he had been last time? Would he be the young Gryffindor? Would he be quiet but kind, reflecting Lupin’s behaviour? Lupin was one of the only people he knew from his father’s generation, and one of the most emphatically good people he knew; which, Harry realized, was indubitably part of the reason the Professor was now so uncomfortable around him. And the reason Harry was determined to change Remus Lupin’s mind about him.

Making the rather Gryffindorian decision to wing it, he rapped smartly on the door to Professor Lupin’s classroom. “Just a moment!” sounded from behind the thickness of the closed oaken door. When it opened, it revealed a tousle-haired, sleepy-looking professor.

“Mister Potter?”

Harry nodded politely but cautiously and moved past him into the classroom. “Hello, Professor. How are you?”

Lupin eyed him. “Well, thank you.”

There was a small, awkward pause.
“Er… what can I do for you tonight?” the man enquired.

Harry blinked. “He didn’t tell you.”

Professor Lupin was, by now, looking quite confused. “Who didn’t tell me what?”

Harry handed him the scrap of parchment by way of an explanation, and the other man’s eyes lit up with recognition as he scanned Snape’s note. “He must’ve forgotten to inform me. Why don’t you have a seat?”

Harry did, sliding into the seat with more grace than he might have been able to manage only a year ago. He wasn’t certain if he’d finally stopped growing (please Merlin no!) or whether his actions were more carefully deliberate than usual. As he watched Lupin begin to gather up his unfinished work at the front of the room and scan the note several more times, he came to an abrupt decision.

“It’s more likely he just didn’t want to give you the opportunity to say no,” Harry cut in, his tone matter-of-fact.

Professor Lupin looked up, genuinely startled. “Harry?”

Harry wanted to smile at the sound of his name, unadorned and familiar, but he had to finish what he’d started. “Because you’re still afraid. You’re afraid I’m going to become like him.”

For one, agonizing moment, the only expression that showed on his teacher’s face was shock. Then it broke into pain, which was worse. “Harry.” The word was infused with that pain. “I worry over you. Of course I do. But never – I don’t want you to ever believe, for even a breath, a moment –” He paused, gathering his thoughts, and in doing so, moved to seat himself at one of the student’s desks by Harry. “This is awkward for me,” he began again, more coherently.

Harry snorted. “Trust me, it’s awkward for all involved.”

“What is difficult for me,” he went on, unperturbed, “is that I’m not your mother or your father; but at the same time, I’m more than your teacher.” He frowned, for a moment, staring at the surface of the desk, looking frustrated and puzzled, before raising his gaze to meet Harry’s own again. “It’s hard to see exactly where my responsibilities lie.”

“Draco hadn’t been at the brunch or supper that was served on Sundays at Hogwarts, making Harry wonder just what sort of talking-to the other boy had received. “Yeah,” he murmured absently. “Draco’s all right, really.” But I’m beginning to wonder about myself. Now that Professor Lupin had voiced his support, Harry paradoxically was more concerned with his own recent actions.
He’d lost his temper pretty badly at Draco – twice. He couldn’t lose it like that anymore – he just couldn’t.

Determination filled him. “Professor, do you really know any meditation techniques, or was Professor Snape just hoping we’d have this conversation?”

Remus Lupin laughed. “No, Harry, I really do, and I really mentioned them to him the other day. So, why don’t we get started? Can you start by summarizing everything Professor Snape has taught you?”

Harry nodded, and the lesson began.

Harry was still holding the note the next morning at breakfast on Monday; it sat tucked in a pocket within his robes as he shoveled porridge in.

“Where’s Malfoy?” Ron wondered, gazing at the empty spot at Slytherin. “I hope he didn’t get into too much trouble.”

This, from Ron, was like a declaration of eternal brotherhood, so Harry spared a moment between bites to grin at his best friend.

“Missus Malfoy looked none too pleased,” Hermione tacked on, poking at her own porridge with her spoon, creating rather artistic swirls and patterns of lump-on-lump. “Imagine, her only son in Muggle clothing and consorting with Harry Potter, of all people! It must’ve been very distressing.”

“Why are you worried about that ponce anyway?” Ron demanded.

Hermione blinked. “You just said more or less the same thing, Ron.”

“It’s different when it’s me!”

“Oh, now this is rich,” Hermione intoned dramatically. “How is it different when it’s you?”

“Because I’m a guy! Guys are allowed to worry about other guys.”

Harry shook his head and tried to hide his face. If he didn’t make eye contact, there was a possibility he would not become involved. And his friends wondered that he’d taken to hiding out on the Quidditch pitch before breakfast.

“How’d it go with Snape last night?” Hermione wondered sympathetically, ostensibly (and effectively) steering the conversation away from Malfoy.

“Oh, yeah,” Ron murmured, snagging a roll and biting into it. “I forgot that you and Snape had Occlumency.”

Harry sighed. “He was apparently otherwise occupied. I had Lupin instead.” He snorted.

“What’s the matter with Lupin, I’d like to know,” Ron countered.

“Nothing,” he said. “Lupin’s great.” Harry’s eyes traveled slowly up to the staff table, where Lupin was apparently sneaking enormous piles of toast onto Snape’s plate, magicking more
whenever the sour Potions Professor managed to get rid of them all. Harry knew he’d hear about this later. “Er... it’s just that he doesn’t know much about... about what I need, is all. Snape’s very clear on that.”

“Professor Snape is quite clear on what everyone needs,” Hermione responded with uncharacteristic asperity.

“Shouting, pop quizzes and lots of homework,” Ron tacked on. “Oh, and shouting.”

“He’s rather brilliant, actually.”

“No one said he wasn’t,” Hermione replied. “I’ve seen some of his work and it really is superbly clever. It’s just a pity that so often the smart ones have little to no social skill.”

Ron eyed her silently, but thankfully he did not take that rather obvious bait. Harry counted his blessings and finished his breakfast in a hurry. He’d seen Hermione in a mood like this a handful of times before, and she would keep on making digging little comments at he and Ron until one of them gave her a good argument.

“If Professor Lupin knows so little about Occlumency, what did you talk about for three hours?” Hermione wanted to know.

Harry paused, trapped. “Well... some meditation techniques, really. Some of them might come in handy for that whole blanking-my-mind bit. Professor Lupin sounded exasperated when he heard that Snape called it that, actually. He called it ‘making the mind receptive and ready’. It isn’t blankness at all, it’s steadiness, and I can pick an image or feeling and focus on it instead of thinking of absolutely nothing.”

“It certainly sounds like you got a lot done,” Hermione replied.

Harry agreed with her. “Yes, certainly, Lupin’s excellent. Anyway, I’m off to Potions.”

Hermione, cheated of her confrontation, pouted, then turned to Ron. “What is it about you and Draco Malfoy anyway?” she demanded.

“What is it about me and Draco Malfoy?” Ron sputtered, turning pink. “Let’s see, his father’s a Death Eater –” Ron’s voice dissipated with distance as Harry exited the Great Hall, making his way towards the Potions classrooms. He half-expected Draco to be seated there already, one eyebrow raised and a ready smirk decorating his lips, but the Slytherin boy was not in his accustomed seat. Harry was the first one to arrive.

As the class slowly filled but Draco’s seat remained empty, Harry began to feel worry creep up on him. Where was Draco?

“Mister Potter, kindly join Miss Zabini and Miss Granger,” Snape ordered as he made his characteristic, dramatic entrance.

Harry’s eyes snapped to his professor’s. “Sir?”

“Do not make me repeat myself, Potter. And do not sulk, it is only until Mister Malfoy’s return. Am I to gather you have become so very attached that one Potions class without him is too much to bear? I did not think so,” he added as Harry scurried to join the two girls. “Today we will be discussing theory...”

Harry phased out, glancing every now and then at the empty space left at Draco’s chair.
Harry shook his head, unable to believe he hadn’t thought of this. It wasn’t like any action of his went unobserved; befriending Draco Malfoy had to be rather noticeable. They had been enemies, and now they were mostly getting along. Draco trusted and maybe even liked him, and he certainly liked Draco, although he wouldn’t trust the other boy any further than he could throw him.

Someone had noticed. Someone had reported.

And Draco’s mother had taken him out of school.

All right, so it was a temporary thing, Harry realized, given Snape’s comment. Draco would be back at least in time to take his mid-year exams... but it made him anxious. He realized that the room was oddly silent and decided it was because of the lack of Draco’s constant stream of commentary, which he had long since taken for granted. Even when taking notes, Draco mouthed the words he was copying down, sometimes elevating from silence to a whisper around the syllables. It had driven Harry practically barmy the first several days of his servitude, but by the end of that week he had gotten used to it.

Somewhere along the line he had gotten to like it – or at least miss it now it was gone. Hermione and Yolande’s quills scratched against their parchment nearly inaudibly; the spaces in Professor Snape’s droning voice, where Draco would have inserted a wry or thoughtful comment, now rang out as nearly painful silences.

When the class was over, Harry was worried enough to approach Professor Snape.

“Draco Malfoy’s business is his and his alone, Harry,” Snape replied, not unkindly – for him. “I noted that you did not so much as pick up your quill once throughout the entire lesson. Perhaps you feel yourself beyond this theory?”

“Not by choice, Professor. I was distracted,” Harry replied.

“Mister Potter, if I share anything with you besides a rather foolish penchant for helping those in need,” – here Harry’s eyebrows raised and Snape himself snorted in self-derision – “let it be this: there will always be a Dark Wizard.”

“There will always be a Dark Wizard, sir?”

“Yes, you fool, metaphorically. And literally, really. In my childhood, I heard horror stories of Grindlewald from my parents. You understand.”

Harry thought he might.

“There will also always be homework, and rooms to Evanesco, and normal, everyday relationships that need to be maintained.”

Harry felt himself chastened; he nodded slowly, making eye contact with Snape to show he understood. “I’ll pay more attention, sir. And, uhm, thanks.”

Snape straightened. “For?”

“For not patting me on the head and saying, ‘there, there’.”

“Would you ever suspect me of such a thing?” Snape demanded. His expression said that he
would be utterly disgusted if Harry did not vehemently deny it.

“No,” Harry said. “Thank Merlin.” As Harry turned to go, a tall pile of toast appeared with a slight pop on Snape’s desk.

Snape jumped, then stared at the leaning tower with something approaching resignation.

“I – I guess you’ve done something nice for Professor Lupin, then?” Harry hazarded.

The Potions Professor ran a hand through his hair and nodded absently. “He seems determined I regret it,” he added in a hard voice.

“But why – why toast?”

“Haven’t you guessed? When I would not tell you what I wanted, this is what you did,” Snape spat, as though the entire toast debacle was officially Harry’s fault. “Lupin asked what I wanted in return for the favor I did him, and I must have given him a similar response.”

Harry considered. “Make something up.”

“Pardon?”

“Even if you don’t want something from him, you’d better make something up,” Harry repeated, eyeing the toast warily, almost expecting more to appear.

He was not disappointed. Snape backed slowly away from his desk as it suddenly exploded with toast – toast made of pumpernickel bread, bread infused with currants or raisins, wheat bread, seven-grain bread, Italian bread, even toasted slabs of muffin. The ones Harry could see had marmalade smiley-faces on them.

“He’s trying to kill you with kindness, sir,” Harry said, making a noteworthy attempt not to laugh. He thought he did rather well with it coming across as a hacking cough.

“Fine!” Snape shouted as his desk creaked ominously. “Find out who signed the damned papers, then!”

The toast came to a quiet but dignified halt.

Snape’s dignity was rather harder to gather, but he managed somehow. “Tonight, Mister Potter. *Revealeo*. Do not forget.”

What Harry did not think he would ever forget was the expression on Snape’s face as he *Evanesco’d* the last of the toast crumbs off of his desk.

That night, when Harry arrived for his Occlumency session – or what he was calling his Occlumency session to Hermione and Ron – he found himself rather inexplicably anxious. The last time he was supposed to get a lesson from Snape, he ended up being instructed in the combined power of Calming Draught and *Veritaserum* fumes, the fact that his professor used *Obscura* himself, and the combustibility of free oxygen. Harry couldn’t say that his last session hadn’t been... educational... but it was hardly comfortable, and hardly what he would have expected. If anything, it was *more* unsettling than his lessons last year, when Snape had merely
yelled at him and called up horrible memories... at least then, he had known what to anticipate...

Gingerly, he pushed open the door and slipped inside.

“Harry,” Severus said, looking up from the book on his desk. “Please write the following fifty times, using no magic: No matter how I am tortured by Draco Malfoy, I shall not be inattentive in Potions class.”

“Are you serious?” Harry said.

Snape raised an eyebrow, glaring at him through beetle-black eyes. “Do I jest?”

“No sir, and forgive me for ever implying you might,” Harry murmured resentfully. He took parchment from his bags and scribbled the words over and over until his mind was a hazy blur of repetitive exhaustion. It was odd, but Harry thought this was probably one of the better states of mind for Occlumency. He felt — surprisingly regimented, the same words standing in his mind over and over, cocooning him. It scarcely mattered whether they were true or not, they protected him, because they made up the forefront of his mind. After a moment, he explained this thought to Snape.

“Ah, I see that Lupin’s lesson was not completely useless, then,” was his reply. He marked his book by turning it up-side-down onto his desk. “Yes — it is called a mantra, and it helps. Though I suggest you not have the words ‘Draco’ or ‘Malfoy’ in yours.”

Harry smirked, shaking his head.

“Before we begin with actual instruction, there is a matter that we must discuss.”

The Gryffindor paused, the confident smile falling off of his features.

“It is indeed serious,” Snape said. “But no one has died. Yet.” His features set in their most familiar lines, those of dislike, even hatred. “There is a force that is toying with the both of us.”

Harry pulled a chair next to his Potions Professor’s desk. “You and me?” he wondered. “Why?”

“Perhaps before you descend into wild speculation, you will allow me several questions,” Snape replied.

It was not a request, but Harry nodded anyway.

“First: do you remember anything out-of-the-ordinary about your Potions O.W.L.?”

Harry flushed, because the first thing he remembered that was out of the ordinary was how much easier it had been without Snape around. “Uhm — not really, sir.”

“Think back, Potter. Anything that struck you as strange at the time may end up being important.”

Harry searched his memories more assiduously, combing them for signs of things that were odd or out of place. “I’m afraid it was a perfectly normal exam,” he said. “I found some of the questions difficult, but most of them were all right. I anticipated getting an Exceeds Expectations when I left.”

“And so you were surprised when you got the Outstanding, eh, Potter?”

He nodded again, more slowly. “This isn’t about my OWL, is it? You aren’t changing it back?”
Professor Snape eyed him coldly, waiting a cruel moment before replying. “No, Potter. You have the second-highest grade in the class, you know, as it stands.”

Harry hadn’t, but tried not to show that. He also tried to suppress an instinctive desire to know whether it was Draco or Hermione who was first.

“Any idea as to how you have soared into the upper echelons of academic prowess?”

Harry had to admit that he had none.

“When was the last time you were in the Ministry of Magic?”

“That’s cruel, Professor,” Harry returned.

“Nonetheless.”

Harry sighed. “During the rescue attempt for Sirius Black, where I nearly got myself, my friends and several Order members killed. And Black disappeared behind the Veil.” That still felt so odd, the feeling-but-not-feeling that was a hollowness left by Obscura. It was like a pulled tooth that he could not help but keep tonguing, only to recall all over again that there was no longer anything there.

Snape echoed Harry’s sigh. “You’re certain.”

“Well – yeah. That’s the sort of thing that’s hard to forget.”

“You didn’t go on a far more minor matter?”

Something sparked at the back of Harry’s memory, there then gone. “No,” he replied, more hesitantly. “At least – I don’t think so.”

“I spoke with a witch named Theodora the other day who insists she saw you,” Snape replied.

“What,” Harry said, “like Elvis? Am I being sighted now?”

“I know you are not completely without intellect,” Snape drawled, “despite all evidence to the contrary. Kindly put all the mysteries together for me and see if you can come up with some kind of conclusion.”

“The mysteries?” Harry echoed, although he was already listing them in his mind.

Snape vocalized them anyway. “Obscura. Your Potions grade. Your Potions knowledge, for that matter. Your slight alteration in personality, or perhaps temperament is the better term. Finally, the crowning glory: your Potions paper topic.”

Harry cast about for a connection.

“You,” he finally said.

“Brilliant,” Snape said. “Bravo. Five points to Gryffindor for stating the patently obvious.”

“And, so – what?” Harry demanded. “So when you were...” He coughed. “Teaching me Occlumency... you bled in, somehow?”

Snape froze.
“And me into you? You have been different lately... I think last year you would have cursed Professor Lupin for all he was doing, and terrorized Hermione for the thing with your hair, but you really... I mean, even when you were cleaning up from Lupin, you looked like you might – might laugh, any minute.”

Snape frowned in thought. “I must admit I hadn’t thought of that, but I am afraid that your supposition – besides being horrifying beyond belief – is also altogether besides the point.”

“Well? Doesn’t it fit?” Harry demanded.

“No,” Snape bluntly replied. “There are a handful of other things. Subtleties. Your magical ability to be in two places at once, according to the Ministry, caused me to write your home and inquire as to your whereabouts on that particular day.”

“And they told you I was mending the fence or painting something or weeding the garden,” Harry said, turning bright red at the thought of Professor Snape even getting an inkling of how his mother’s family treated him.

“On the contrary,” Snape said. He took a deep breath. “They informed me that Hogwarts had agreed to keep you over the summer, and that you were only with them the last few weeks of vacation.”

Harry swallowed past the lump in his throat. “T-they’re lying,” he said.

“We shall see,” the Potions Master replied grimly. “There is one more question I would like you to answer, Harry, and then we will see what can be done in the way of action. You resist the Imperius Curse, do you not?”

“Y-yeah,” Harry stammered, now thoroughly taken aback.

“Which means that, in order to be put under Imperio, you would have to agree. Do you know anyone for whom you would submit, if asked?”

Harry gaped, shaking his head. “No one. Well... I mean... maybe one person.”

“Am I right in guessing that person would be Albus Dumbledore?” Professor Snape did not wait for an answer. “Exactly,” he replied. “And since the same is true of me, I should think that our mystery is at least partially solved.

“Now,” he added, gesturing to the book and turning it to face Harry. “If you would read pages one-hundred and ten to one-hundred and sixteen, then we will get on with our lesson.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the hiatus, guys! I have been a bit under the weather.

If I ever say that I can't do X because of some crisis, my mother starts the "...there will always be a Dark Wizard, Harry..." speech and won't let up until she's got through "...and everyday relationships that need to be maintained.” At least I got to say it to her the other day. ;)


(Uh, not posting because I was sick is the perfect example. This chapter is a self-demonstrating chapter.)

Reviews? I enjoy them. :D

-K
Harry was furious to learn that the Potions-Master was perfectly serious. After dumping all of that in Harry’s lap, he actually expected his student to begin faithfully examining the passage. It became immediately plain that he was not planning on revealing anything more until Harry had done so.

The passage discussed Occlumency as a whole, but then delved into the deeper matter of Obscura, otherwise known as the Double-Edged Sword because of its ability to keep the caster sane in an emergency, all the while eroding slowly at the same self-possession it artificially induced. The mix, altogether, of power and of price was an uneven one, Harry decided, even more firmly than before. He had to stop Obscura, no matter what it took.

When he finished, he looked up at his professor, who he found to be studying him as he studied the text. It was disconcerting to find Professor Snape eyeing him thoughtfully, even slightly warily. Harry had never felt a stronger sense of caution from the man; it was radiating from him like heat.

“Sir?” he inquired, the physical voice smaller and younger than it had sounded in his head.

Professor Snape seemed to shake himself free of whatever had briefly ensnared him. “Before we go any farther, let us have a Revealeo, Potter.”

Harry nodded, then stood, closing his eyes to picture the proper motion. “Revealeo!” he incanted, then frowned, his body tense, awaiting the pain.

“Try again,” Snape demanded when Harry neither cried out nor collapsed.

Harry frowned, repeating the spell, his wand slicing through the stale air of the empty Potions classroom. “Revealeo!” he said, more firmly this time.

Professor Snape stood suddenly from behind his desk. “Potter...”

Harry braced himself again, this time for a verbal assault.

“Your motion is perfect. It ought to have worked; unless... your previous Revealeo removed your last Obscura?”

“I still feel nothing about the whole Black debacle,” Harry said, one eyebrow raised. “Unless I’ve suddenly become completely soulless – and I’d prefer not, thanks – we’ve still got at least one to go. I must be doing something wrong.”

“Well, then, Harry, one more try,” Snape advised, folding his arms across his chest. “Keep the motion tight and contained, except for the last flick.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry replied. Frowning in concentration, he completed the path of his wand, slicing it through the air with an unaccustomed brutality. “Revealeo!”

Harry dropped to his knees, the pain coursing through his body as though a bolt of lightning had grounded itself within him... the energy shot through him, burrowing itself into his soul and surrounding its target...
Harry was standing outside in the garden, dripping with sweat and filth as his Aunt Petunia, her horsey teeth gleaming, denied him entrance...

...telling him he could not get inside, that he could never get inside, that he never had one moment belonged there with she and his Uncle Vernon and his cousin, never had belonged with decent people...

...he was a FREAK, a mistake, just like his father and his mother had been, and he –

Harry wrenched himself back into the here-and-now, gasping and clinging tightly to –

Oh, Merlin. To Professor Snape’s arm.

Harry jerked away, bright pink, stammering apologies too rapid to follow. He realized his cheeks were wet and suffered a moment of humiliation so exquisite it actually hurt his physical body, feeling nearly like a minor heart attack.

Snape watched him for a moment, not quite the way he had before, in wariness of Harry, but almost wariness for Harry. Harry, not liking the scrutiny, straightened under that gaze, wiping his cheeks determinedly.

For another moment, Snape said nothing. Harry floundered; the moment was so horrifying he was afraid he would do Obscura again just to swamp it... he closed his eyes and felt the lurch of his broom underneath him, the sweetness of the speed and the air rushing past his face...

...which suddenly felt all too real. He opened his eyes to find that he had somehow summoned a light breeze into the Potions classroom. Snape was looking at him again, and Harry wasn’t certain this time what his professor’s eyes meant, because he was still just edging out of terrified...

Snape reached out and placed his hand on Harry’s shoulder, a warm, steadying grip.

Harry choked, air going in the wrong way in his surprise, and found himself on the edge of yanking his arm away... but Snape wasn’t Aunt Petunia to keep shutting him out... Snape wasn’t his family at all... Snape could be counted on to –

To what? his acerbic inner voice demanded. To be dodgy and sarcastic and hopeless?

Yes, he answered it steadily, yes, and also... Immediately memories shifted to the forefront of his mind: Snape saving him as he fell from his broom in first-year... Snape trying to find out if Sirius were all right in fifth-year while still maintaining a good face for Draco and Umbridge... Snape allowing him to stay on in his Potions class, even though his grade had probably been altered by some third party... Snape, stepping forward to banish the snake that Draco had cast in second-year...

Harry’s scar twinged as he looked up at his Professor in surprise, realizing for the first time that while Snape could say some truly horrid things to him, his actions utterly contradicted him.

Harry slowly relaxed, practicing some of the breathing exercises that Lupin had taught him, guided by the firm, almost painful pressure on his shoulder. He found himself nodding, saying, “I’m all right” until Snape nodded in return and released him.

“And now, Mister Potter, I suppose we ought to continue this conversation with the Headmaster. Don’t you agree?”

Harry was already on his feet, blinking as the room spun slightly. He found himself gripping
Snape’s sleeve.

“Oh – is this where I ought to be saying, ‘there, there’?”

Harry snorted at him, but also leaned on him slightly as they made their way to the Headmaster’s Office.

Professor Dumbledore was seated behind his desk when they arrived. He smiled at them in that calm, welcoming way of his, as though there was nobody he would rather see in the world than Severus Snape looking ready to spit nails, a wan Harry Potter clutching at his arm.

“Oh, Severus, Harry,” Dumbledore greeted, rising with a twinkling smile. “Do come in and have a seat.”

Harry’s gaze traveled inquiringly to the small dish of sweets that always rested upon the Headmaster’s desk; it was a rare moment when he was called into the office without being offered any sort of candy.

Dumbledore, sharp as always, offered him a slightly wider smile. “By all means, take one, Harry, if you’d like. But I was under the impression you and Severus were here on a rather serious matter; am I correct?”

Harry took a lemon drop with an almost rebellious air, then flopped down next to the seat that Snape was already occupying, arms crossed over his chest. He didn’t precisely know what was going on, and he hated the feeling with a passion.

Snape himself seemed oddly wary, and Harry noted that his professor’s left hand kept twitching ominously.

“His wand hand,” Harry realized in slight shock. His eyes flew to the Headmaster’s, which were also trained on Snape, but he did not look upset or afraid. If anything, the look in his eye was one of commiseration, of understanding.

“Just how many times have you cast Imperius on myself and Harry?” Snape shot out, his voice jangling and harsh from nerves.

Harry rounded on his professor, turning to stare. “You didn’t tell me this was what you meant! I wouldn’t’ve come! Dumbledore would never—”

“Once,” Dumbledore interjected quietly, “and solely on you, Severus. Although you won’t recall, you agreed, albeit reluctantly, that it was necessary. It was the Occlumency, you see, that required it.”

Snape sputtered, leaving all pretense at calm as he sprung to his feet. “The Occlumency required it?! For Merlin’s sake! I would’ve taught him – I would have done anything you asked!”

Harry had never seen the man so emotional, and he prided himself on having now seen Severus Snape in every possible mood. He almost sounded as though he were begging to be wrong, somehow – proven incorrect.
Dumbledore’s voice was low, soothing and persuasive. “Of course, dear Severus, in a heartbeat. I know.” Strong emotion suffused the Headmaster’s face, too, before he continued. “The Imperius... it was your suggestion.”

Snape paused, thrown, then moved forward with all the impetus and violence of a physical blow. “So you say,” he murmured, and Harry flinched in recognition of this voice, the one that was authority and venom and brilliance, dangerous as broken glass, the voice that cut to the heart of the matter and dashed its listener to pieces. “But you could say anything, couldn’t you? Sir,” he tacked on, as Harry had himself less than an hour before. “It’s rather convenient with my memory of the event completely wiped away.”

“But mine was not,” Dumbledore replied, seeming unfazed. “Would you like to see it? Harry?”

Harry, who had hoped he could remain unnoticed, flinched at the mention of his name.

“For Merlin’s sake, what a time for that vaunted Gryffindor courage to desert you!” Snape exclaimed, and somehow that made Harry rise rather defiantly and stand beside him.

Dumbledore drew open a small cabinet, one that contained a medium-sized Pensieve, and, closing his eyes in gentle concentration, reached his wand to his brow and withdrew two silver threads of memory. Shaking himself slightly, he gestured to Snape and Harry to draw forward.

Snape, Dumbledore, and Harry were standing directly in the middle of Dumbledore’s office; another, recent Dumbledore sat quietly reading something on his desk; it looked like a missive from the Minister of Magic – no, it was from the High Inquisitor at Hogwarts. Harry jumped slightly at a noise behind him, then whirled to view Snape entering the Headmaster’s office. This Snape looked far filthier than the one at his side, for some reason – and, unless Harry missed his guess, unhappier as well. There was something in the slant of his shoulders and the pallidity of his skin that caused Harry an unexpected and confusing pang of – of worry.

Harry slowly began to wonder if Revealeo made him feel more... exposed, raw, in the short-term. He found himself sidling back towards the real-time Snape and Dumbledore, halted only when his professor surreptitiously tugged his sleeve.

“Ah, Severus. I’m glad you could make it. Lemon drop?”

“I must say I wonder why you insist on offering me those infernal drops,” Snape said in disgust, his lip curling, making him look even more cold and harrowed than before. “You know I hate sweet things.”

“It’s a wonder you have to ask,” Dumbledore said, with a conspiratorial wink and a wry smile. “It discomfits people, Severus. Surely you know a tactic when you see one.”

“And surely you have no need of tactics with me,” Snape replied, relaxing marginally.

“Well – and how are Harry and Sirius?”

“Black is chafing. You had best find him something to do, before he resorts to invention.”

Dumbledore frowned. “I cannot risk him yet in open combat. He is a powerful man, and the
“The Order needs his *house*, you mean,” Snape snorted, folding thin arms across his chest. “Find another space and leave the man be. I believe the strain of being around the Order and yet able to do nothing has driven him mad.” He paused. “Or perhaps it’s just Azkaban.”

“Flippancy doesn’t look well on you, Severus,” Dumbledore replied, shifting up his half-moon spectacles with one finger. “One would almost think you are enjoying the man’s distress.”

The Snape seated in the chair paused, suddenly, as though discomfited; then, he re-crossed his legs. “It... it felt *good* to argue with him.”

Harry blinked as the real Snape’s grip on his sleeve suddenly tightened.

Dumbledore tilted his head to one side in an attitude of earnest listening. “Why do you think that is?”

Snape suddenly moved his hands over Harry’s ears and pressed, hard.

“Hey!” Harry exclaimed. “Hey, come *on*, that’s not fair!”

“Neither is your listening to my personal ramblings!” Snape growled.

Harry subsided. It was not like he would really enjoy Snape sitting through a private conversation with Ron or Hermione, either. He slumped, waiting it out.

Eventually, Snape lifted his hands from Harry’s ears, and Harry heard the seated Potions Master’s slow, sarcastic drawl.

“...teaching him *Occlumency* of all things.”

Dumbledore sighed. “I do *not* want you to teach him Occlumency, Severus. At least not initially.”


“He will have to make the first step on his own,” Dumbledore replied.

“Why?” Snape snapped angrily. “Is this some part of the boy’s sacred Hero Training Programme that I have missed? That he must stumble upon extremely difficult mental techniques completely independent of anyone’s aid? Perhaps it’s written next to the bit where he battles ancient serpents with the aid of a hat and a firefowl?”

Dumbledore was smiling quietly, and though it obviously infuriated both Snapes, Harry thought he saw why. Snape had just stood up for him, in however roundabout a manner.

“*It is not any part of any prophecy,*” Dumbledore replied gravely, just as though Snape’s concern had been a perfectly valid one. “*It is because of Voldemort. I am afraid that we cannot risk you, Severus. If Tom were to gaze into Harry’s mind and see you painted there as a helpful wizard training Harry to defeat him... well, all your careful work would be for naught.*”

“So what am I to do, then, in this hour or two of not-teaching Harry Potter?” Snape demanded, his voice acerbic and almost painful to listen to, repressed darkness lacing through it.

Dumbledore eyed him. “What you must.”
“Look the part, in other words,” Snape replied. “Well, then. I see perfectly, I suppose. Why the farce, Dumbledore? The boy knows well enough already that I dislike him.”

“I need a good Legilimens,” Dumbledore said, his voice measured and matter-of-fact. “We must see to what degree Voldemort has a hold on Harry – and, if the boy begins to catch hold of Occlumency even a bit on his own, you may subtly guide him into proficiency.”

“So I’m spying, then.” Snape gave an unhealthy little laugh. “I forget. Am I a double or triple agent by this point? Voldemort thinks I’m spying on you, you know I am spying on him – and now I am appointed to spy on the thoughts of the Boy Who Lived.” He stood, bowed. “Very well; I am nothing if not useful.”

By now, Harry was not certain whether Snape was holding on to his arm to steady him, or if it was the other way around. The Snape beside him looked pale, cold, his features etched with disbelief.

The scene bled, light streaming through the windows a different color, a different angle, and Snape was there again. Harry immediately noted another change for the worse, and wondered that he hadn’t noted it last year – but then, Snape had been Snape, just another adult no matter how odious, background for him by that point, not a new object to be examined or understood.

“...it is not that,” Snape was saying, filled with tension again even though he sat perfectly, incredibly still. “I have seen horrors that I may flatter myself you have never witnessed. It is only – it is...”

“He is not what you expected,” Dumbledore offered.

“Why?” Snape hissed, and more venom was invested in the word than Harry thought possible.

“Harry had to remain with his relatives,” Dumbledore replied. “It is a greater protection than anything I could devise.”

“You could have thought of something,” Snape countered, with the stubborn insistence of a child who firmly believes in the omniscience of his elders. “I could have thought of something. Surely, Hogwarts –”

“Hogwarts is no place for an infant. Where would we have placed Harry, Severus? With you?”

Snape blinked in confusion. “Certainly not, Headmaster.”

“Should he have grown up in the Wizarding World, then? Revered wherever he went? I am certain that there would have been a list of hundreds of Wizarding families who would have taken in such a highly celebrated child... although they could easily have done far more damage to Harry, in their way.”

“So you were interested in molding a young hero,” Snape sneered. “Well, in that you have succeeded. I have looked into Harry Potter and found one, tailor-made to suit. But basically and most fundamentally he is still a child locked under the stairs, placed there – and kept there – by the one who should have been his most vehement protector. What, then, do you intend to do?” The Potions Master’s voice was barely accusatory; mostly it was cold, saturated with contempt.

“Severus,” Dumbledore said, and his voice was kind and soft. “Oh, Severus. I intend to win. I intend to save the Wizarding World, and I intend on doing whatever it takes. But you knew that.” He paused. "This has unsettled you.”

Snape looked more than merely unsettled. He looked odd, off – and Harry slowly recognized the
picture of a man for whom the foundations have been rocked, leaving him off-balance. He’d felt that way after Cedric had died, as though the world had changed overnight and everyone ought to have known that the universe was not the same today as it had been yesterday.

Part of Harry could scarcely accept what he was seeing, not least because he remembered this period as when Snape had been his most cruel, his most vindictive. It was so very hard to believe that, at that very moment, the man had been suffering a crisis of conscience.

Harry watched his Potions Professor wrestle with Dumbledore’s pronouncement, then shake his head slowly.

“I don’t know,” Snape said, just as slowly. “Maybe I’m no good to you anymore. I came to you when I was angry, but the anger is going. More and more, I just feel...” He shrugged, helplessly, looking lost. “Tired.”

Harry looked up to the real Professor Snape, but his eyes were trained on his slightly younger self, an expression of horrified shock written on his features; he was obviously in no condition to judge whether Harry ought to be hearing all of this or not. “Sir,” he chanced quietly.

Snape’s black gaze shot to Harry, his expression firming as he saw the inquiry in his student’s eyes. “No,” he said. “We need to stay.”

“Tired, Severus? Are you getting enough sleep?”

“Not that sort of tired!” Snape snapped at the Headmaster. “I feel... very soon, I will make a mistake. The sort of mistake impossible to redeem, except with my life.”

“No,” Harry said, unaware he was going to speak until he had already spoken. Although he knew it was useless, he strode up to the Professor Snape of the past and shook his head; he turned to face the real Professor, his body rigid with determination. “I won’t let it happen.”

“The way you didn’t let Black?” Snape inquired dully.

“Severus!” the Headmaster exclaimed, but Harry waved him away, unwilling to explain about the Obscura. The conversation was going on without them.

“...to continue doing what you want me to,” Severus whispered. “I can certainly manage enough vituperation to fool Harry, but not enough to convince the Dark Lord if he looks through Harry’s eyes. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named knows me; he will know my attitude has shifted, no matter how slight the shift may be. Moreover, the Dark Lord is inventing a new form of Legilimency, stronger...”

“What do you suggest?”

The Snape seated at the other side of Dumbledore’s desk nodded smartly, his upright posture and attentive manner betrayed by a slight tremor in his hands and the purple half-moons under his eyes. “Imperius,” he suggested immediately. “Order me to behave as I always have – worse – and I shall. I won’t have a choice.”

Dumbledore’s eyes saddened behind their slender spectacles. “Severus. Are you certain?”

“As I am of anything,” the slender man replied. He paused, then, a small expression of doubt entering his eye. “Unless – unless it is time to stop spying for the Order?”

“Soon,” Dumbledore said heavily. “Very, very soon, my dear Severus.”
“Very well.” The certainty in regards to his imminent decision seemed to bolster the younger man. “Ready whenever you are, Headmaster.”

Dumbledore raised his wand.

Chapter End Notes

I see both Severus and Harry as somewhat teenaged in their emotional responses, and this includes in regards to Dumbledore; here is my entry on House Pride concerning my opinion on Dumbledore and his actions:

"As for Dumbledore, I see him as incredibly wily, creative, and far-thinking. While I believe that he takes advantage of those around him, I don’t necessarily believe that this makes him a horrible, evil person. It is quite teenaged – and therefore quite appropriate – for Harry to accuse Dumbledore of ruining his life at the end of book five; but Dumbledore is doing what he believes will save the lives of those around him. He is willing to sacrifice and let others be sacrificed for the greater good. I don’t think this pleases him, but it seems that he feels he is doing what is necessary. For doing what is necessary, even when it pains him terribly, he earns my respect as a character.

"It is a pretty childish assumption that father-figures and adults in positions of power are always right; and when children find out, as Harry does in book five, that their deity-like authority figures are not always right, they feel betrayed and then furious. In short, I don’t dislike his character for not managing perfection, and was frustrated with Harry for being angry for that reason."

My favorite bit is how Harry's always yelling at people for not telling him anything. Pot, meet kettle... Harry's easily the most secretive person in the books, and that counts Dumbledore and Snape. You can't count on one hand the times he's kept an important fact from someone and it's become important/dangerous. (I'm just waiting for the debate to rise off of these comments like smoke from a flame, folks. Bring it on, it's okay.)

Oh, and did anyone notice that this memory, while throwing Severus and Harry for a loop, doesn't answer their question at all? The man's a Slytherin, I'm convinced.

Next time in Secret of Slytherin: the Missing Hour. See you soon!
Harry looked up at Professor Snape in startlement. Somehow, they were both standing outside the
Headmaster’s door.

He was certain this was real life, not the Pensieve.

He was... relatively certain.

He looked up to find his own confusion mirrored in Snape’s eyes. For a moment, they stared
incredulously at one another.

“Bloody hell!” Severus suddenly swore angrily. “Again!” He gazed with utmost loathing at the
closed door.


Snape’s lips thinned, however, and he immediately took off down the hallway, Harry in tow.

“Sir,” Harry managed diffidently. When Snape didn’t reply, his tone hardened. “Snape.”

“Not now, Potter, wait until we’ve got some wards, haven’t you any discretion?”

Snape marched down the hall and up a flight of stairs, then turned a left, moving towards the
western wing of the castle. Harry was wondering where they were headed and beginning to make
guesses, all of which were shattered when Professor Lupin opened his door sleepily. Harry peered
in behind the man and recognized the fireplace he had fallen through to escape the Chamber of
Secrets.

“Mmmgh?” Lupin murmured inquiringly.

Snape barged past him, Harry a step behind, shooting an apologetic glance at his tired Professor.

“Snape?” Lupin muttered peevishly, running a hand through disheveled hair. “Snape, it’s past ten
in the evening. It’s past ten in the evening three days before the full moon, Snape.” He suddenly
noted Harry, and blinked in surprise, looking slightly more awake and alert. “Uh oh,” he managed
succinctly.

“Silencio Perispherico,” Snape spat in reply, waving his wand in a circle around the room.
“Sophia Terminalis!” he added.

“What...?” Harry wondered. Meanwhile, he was wondering where the time had gone. How can it
be ten o’ clock? Didn’t my detention start at seven?

us if and when anyone steps close enough to breach and subsequently break the wards. Even a
small, bastard Animagus,” he tacked on darkly. “Severus, what is it?”

Snape went into a cold, measured recitation of all that had gone on so far. “I believe that, with the
Headmaster’s aid, I discovered the truth. Unfortunately, both Harry and myself were subsequently
Obliviated.”
“What?” Remus murmured, looking startled, eyes childishly wide beneath a mess of disheveled hair. “Oh – oh my.” He stood, distractedly, and moved to his small kitchen, retrieving a plate of chocolate biscuits and three cups of tea.

For a moment, Severus stared at him silently. Then, “this is your idea of aid?”

Remus offered him a dazzling smile. “Yes.”

Harry took a biscuit. “Thanks, Professor.”

Remus turned the smile onto Harry, then took a biscuit himself, munching on it thoughtfully, his brow furrowed. “Well, hasn’t it occurred to you that perhaps the Headmaster knows best?” Remus supplied, once they had eaten at least one biscuit and several sips of tea each. “You even apparently think so, Severus, or at least Harry does. Harry resists Imperio and Obliviate as well, so he must have agreed to it.”

“How d’you know that?” Harry wondered. His eyes narrowed. “You haven’t ever tried to Obliviate me, have you?”

Lupin blinked at him in surprise. “Well – no. It’s just that the two curses are quite related. Your father could resist both, and your mother resisted Obliviate so well that it was literally useless against her. I imagine you’re much the same.”

Snape looked like he was choking on his biscuit – probably remembering something nasty about his father, his mother, or both, Harry decided, and declined to comment.

“How ever, it seems that the Headmaster has decided it is best for neither of you to remember, and you agreed,” Remus emphasized. “Don’t the both of you trust him? More importantly, don’t you trust yourselves?”

Snape’s shoulders slumped under the question, his dark eyes scanning the brown carpet of Remus’s private rooms. After a moment, he sighed. “I trust Albus more than any other man living,” he conceded. “But...” He smiled at Remus, a smile Harry had never seen before on his professor’s face: it looked almost self-deprecating. “…well, I don’t really trust anyone, I suppose,” he finished with a shrug. He frowned. “Besides, I would certainly like to come to my own conclusion, without the Headmaster’s... interference. If, after that, I decide that I do not wish to recall, or that it is unwise to do so, then I shall remove that memory. Not before.”

Harry realized that he felt the same way, and nodded silently. Dumbledore was such an excellent manipulator that he could probably convince Harry of anything; and the man had said himself that he would do absolutely anything in order to win the war. Harry had to know if he would have agreed on his own. There was even the terrifying possibility that Dumbledore had developed a stronger Obliviate the same way that Voldemort had apparently improved on Legilimens, although that thought was so horrifying that Harry’s mind skittered rapidly away.

He found himself torn between Draco and Hermione’s ideas: either the ends justified the means – or not. If Draco was right and they did, he ought to simply trust in Dumbledore’s authority and wisdom, qualities Harry knew for certain he possessed. If Hermione was right, then Dumbledore’s very methods made him incorrect, and he was bound to extricate the memories kept from him no matter the consequence.

Harry realized he was frightened, that he was longing for Draco and Hermione and Ron as well, wishing they could argue it out so that he could listen and decide after hearing it from all angles.
I ought to write to Draco, he decided suddenly, nodding to himself while Remus and Snape argued on.

“Very well,” Remus finally agreed. “If you are set on discovering this, I will help you.”

Snape frowned at him. “Even though it would probably mean your job?”

“I don’t have a job, Severus, how many times must I explain it to you? For someone so blatantly hard-headed, you certainly seem to have difficulty with this particular concept. People hate me for what I am. They fear me. I won’t remain long at this post, although,” – and here his face transformed – “although I like it here very much. I like teaching, and Hogwarts, and even you. But that certainly won’t change the fact that I’ll leave at the end of the year. You’ll see. I’m not risking myself very much at all by helping you. In fact, if it is this debacle that forces my hand, I’ll be somewhat grateful. It will mean I have left doing something worthwhile instead of because of an idiotic mistake... like last time,” he finished, golden brown eyes stealing over to Harry with an apologetic twist to his lips.

“Don’t play martyr on my account,” Snape dissuaded him flatly.

“I don’t play it for you, it’s my natural state,” Remus quipped blandly. “In any case, your next step ought to be finding out exactly where Harry was for the missing time period. Once you do that, it ought to be easy to solve the rest.”

“Harry’s family says that he was not with them,” Snape muttered.

“But they could very well be lying,” Harry interjected. “It’s something of a hobby for them, at least where I’m involved.”

Snape eyed him, but said nothing.

“Could you check?” Lupin inquired. “Check more carefully – perhaps contact a friend you typically see over the summer?”

A friend, Harry thought, his heart sinking. Right. A friend from Privet Drive.

“Surely there is someone–” Snape began, examining his blank look.

Harry felt a depression grip him. Sure, he’d spent most of his teen years at Hogwarts, but it was still incredibly miserable that he hadn’t made a single connection to anyone... not in fifteen years at Privet Drive... there wasn’t a single person who –

“Oh,” Harry said aloud. “Oh, uhm... I think there might be one person who’d tell me the truth.” He realized he was about to write two letters instead of one.

That evening, Harry sat down to write, frowning in concentration because both letters had to be careful and concise.

Dear Draco,

he began, then tossed that out. Draco wasn’t his ‘dear’ anything, and the Slytherin would probably howl with laughter if he realized Harry had written that at all. He began again.
Draco,

I’m sorry about what happened in the corridor with your mother, and we all hope you’re not in too much trouble. (Believe it or not, that includes Ron.) Just tell her that the really old wizarding families always associated with Muggles

Harry paused, crumpled the parchment up in his hands and tossed it in the wastebasket again. This was turning out to be harder than he’d thought.

Draco,

I’m sorry to bother you at home

Now he sounded like a solicitor.

Ever wondered if you were being manipulated? Lately I’ve had cause to think I have been, for a long time now. I guess it’s a question of trust in the end. Someone I’ve trusted for ages looks like they might be taking advantage of me. I thought of you and H right away and your argument about the ends and the means. Do you really think that if I believe in what someone wants to accomplish, I ought to let that person do anything in order to get there?

Feeling v. confused right now, and sort of wishing you were still around to bully me into sensibility.

Another thing I have been meaning to ask you about was the contents of this book I found. Maybe you’ve read it before; it’s a Wizarding story and no one I know recognizes it. I’ll include a copy.

Let me know you’re doing all right.

-H

Harry examined it with surprise, realizing it sounded just about right; it also sounded vague enough so that he could be certain that no one who intercepted the letter would automatically understand its contents. Since he never referred to his name or Draco’s, there was a good chance that no one would know who it was to, or from. Smiling, he bent down to a new sheet of parchment and began his second missive, which was quite a bit easier to pin down.

Dudley,

Sorry to send this the usual way, but there isn’t exactly a post service here besides Hedwig.

I have a very strange question for you. Do you recall how long I was there over the summer? No, I haven’t gone completely off – or not any more, in any case – but there’s something odd going on and I intend on finding out what it is.

Please reply by tying your note onto Hedwig’s foot. Feed her a scrap of something if you can. (Are you still on that diet? Don’t know how well she’d take to a wilted bit of lettuce.)

Thanks again for all your help over the summer. I managed to finish all my assignments and everything. Hope things are well with you.
Harry went up to the Owlery, where Hedwig moved to light on his shoulder, nipping his finger in loving concern. He had not been to visit her in awhile, and so he spent the next few minutes stroking her warm head and clucking affectionately to her under his breath, reminding her quietly that she was the most lovely thing he had ever seen.

She preened under his attention, and Harry had a feeling that if owls could smile, she would be grinning.

“Here we are, Hed,” he told her, wrapping Dudley’s letter around her leg with a bit of white ribbon he had transfigured from a spare scrap of parchment. “To Dudley, all right?”

And if owls could start in scandalized amazement, Hedwig would have done that, too.

“Come now,” he told her. “He’s been nicer, lately, and we need his help. Although, feel free to bite him, hard, if he gives you any trouble.”

Settling her feathers with dignity, she jumped onto the sill and took off, winging her way elegantly south.

Harry selected another owl, a school owl, for Draco’s missive; he could not be certain that his bird would not be recognized, and he was quite sure that if she were, Draco would be in even worse trouble than before. He drew another bit of transfigured white ribbon from his pocket and tied this second letter, along with a painstakingly copied version of the Morn Brother/Evening Brother tale, to the nameless owl’s leg and told it Malfoy Manor in his firmest voice.

The owl offered him a dubious glance before leaping onto the sill and launching itself into the cold, late-September air.

And Harry set himself to wait, rather impatiently, for replies.

Chapter End Notes

Harry's attempts to write a letter to Draco were my attempts. I erased nothing, just keeping them exactly as they were, then made my own reasons for rejecting them, Harry's reasons. That was fun!

Next time in Secret of Slytherin, Harry receives responses to his letters in Chapter Thirty-Four: Question and Answer.
The next morning found Harry, Ron and Hermione in a small knot, discussing Harry’s latest findings in low, excited voices.

Ron looked startled when he learned about Harry’s supposed absence, but then he began nodding, slowly at first and then with greater certainty. "Wow, I feel a right idiot," he said feelingly. "Those stupid letters – I should’ve known."

"Huh?" Harry muttered.

"Well, they were all about mowing the lawn and painting the shed and rubbish like that," Ron replied. "You know, it made me really worry about you. Why write about stuff like that at all? But if you were somewhere else, trying to convince me you were at the Dursleys’... well, that’s exactly what you’d write."

"Are you saying I was lying to you?" Harry demanded.

"It’s not like it hasn’t happened before, mate," Ron informed him, playing with his bangers and mash. "We had to do much the same thing summer before last, didn’t we, me and Hermione?"

Hermione nodded. "That’s right. You probably thought it would be easier to just avoid mentioning where you were at all. Chances are, it was Order business."

Harry digested this along with his breakfast.

He was halfway through his biscuit when Hedwig swept in and landed on the table, upsetting his pumpkin juice. She wore a bit of lined notebook paper and a harried expression.

Placating Hedwig with bits of crispy bacon, he untied the note and read it; then, he showed it to Ron and Hermione.

Dear Harry,

Very nice and flippant for someone who can’t remember their summer. Always knew there was a down-side to being a wizard – you’ve been enchanted or something, I expect. That or you’ve finally gone nutters from all this Lord V stuff. Or maybe it was that Chemistry professor you told me about, the one who hates you. Finally drive you round the bend?

Anyway, no, you weren’t here over the summer almost at all. In May we got a letter from your school saying that you were going to be staying there for awhile yet. Don’t know if it was real or not, but it certainly looked official, and it was on the same type of paper as all of those ruddy letters you got way back when. The seal looked the
same as well. Needless to say, mum and dad were ecstatic. Me, less so. When you’re around they go a lot easier on me. I was right glad to see you when you finally got back in August. August tenth it was, or something like. Hope that helps.

From,

D.D.

P.S. – In Dad’s words, "No more ruddy owls!" He threw a bloody fit.

Harry couldn’t hold back a spark of amusement at the fact that Dudley had stuck to the proper form of a letter, from the right salutation to the right indentation as he closed; he also found himself picturing the look on his Uncle Vernon’s face when he realized that, not only had his son received a letter from ‘his sort’, but Dudley actually planned to reply.

At the same time, his stomach was sinking, even as Ron nodded as though they had already figured on this. Maybe Ron had, but Harry was finding the fact that he had a big chunk of memory missing to be more than a little off-putting. When he focused on his memories of the summer, he realized that he should have figured long ago how false they were. They were like Muggle photographs, without any depth or detail, a lot like his letters had been to Ron.

In contrast, he recalled weeding in his Aunt’s garden, chatting with Dudley, and studying with a fervor with incredible clarity. Why hadn’t he noticed that the rest of the summer was so muzzy in comparison?

"So, you’ve been, what, Obliviated?" Ron wondered.

"I expect so," Harry replied carefully.

"That’s not the only option, Ron," Hermione reminded him. "I’m certain that there are dozens of other ways to explain this."

"Dozens?" Ron repeated dubiously.

"Yes, quite," she said, her tone sharp. "For one, you could be ordered not to recall if you were under the Imperius Curse."

"Dumbledore said he hadn’t Imperio’d me," Harry said morosely.

"Dumbledore?" Hermione screeched, and Harry realized he’d somehow managed to leave that out. Once he finished explaining, the two glanced at one another, then at him.

"Snape," Ron said. "It has to be."

"If you’d seen how absolutely furious he was, you wouldn’t even be able to suggest that," Harry said. "He said he really trusted Dumbledore, and I think maybe now he doesn’t trust anybody."

Hermione’s eyes slid up to the staff table, then back to Harry. "That would be... unfortunate," she said.

"You’ve got a gift for understatement, has anyone ever told you that?" Ron wondered.

"He’s so very necessary," she said, and then her voice lowered. "To the war effort, I mean. If he were to decide that he was being treated unfairly by both sides... I wonder what would happen?"
Harry considered this. "It’s no good, Hermione. He’s stuck, either way. It’s not like he can disappear. One or both sides would catch up to him eventually, and either way things would be unpleasant for him. Even our side would eviscerate him for turning turncoat twice. So he’s got to choose the lesser of two evils, and Dumbledore is certainly that, in any case."

Hermione examined him with wide eyes.

"You’ve been hanging ’round Draco Malfoy too much," Ron muttered.

"I’m still right, though, aren’t I?" Harry replied.

"Hell," Ron swore, eyes trailing up to the staff table as well.

Harry wished suddenly that the two of them had a bit more Slytherin in them. It was, by now, blatantly obvious that they were discussing one of the staff. Anyone with half a brain would know, and anyone clever would have narrowed it down to Snape, Lupin, McGonagall, or Dumbledore already.

"If we can’t trust Dumbledore, who can we trust?" Ron demanded softly.

"I still do trust him," Harry said slowly. "Sort of. He wants the same thing I want – a safe Wizarding World. I really do believe that about him." He paused. "The trouble is, that’s probably what Voldemort wants as well."

Hermione gasped and Ron stared at him. "What?!" they demanded in unison, then turned to stare at one another.

"From his point of view, I mean," Harry continued. "He probably thinks he’s killing off Muggles to ensure the safety of wizards. I’m sure he’s got a utopian picture someplace in the back of his twisted mind."

"Ugh, I like to avoid looking at things from V-Volde- you know, from his point of view," Ron supplied.

"But if Dumbledore and Voldemort have the same basic intention," Harry realized, "then it’s their means you have to examine." He sighed, slumping. "I don’t like their methods in either case, but Dumbledore at least doesn’t go off killing randomly. He only manipulates, at least most of the time, which isn’t as bad."

"I feel very old suddenly," Hermione said in a small voice. "All the same, we can’t expect Dumbledore to be perfect. He could very well be – be making a mistake," she said, dawning realization in her voice.

Harry wondered if it was the first time Hermione had ever thought this about a professor. Then he recalled Gilderoy Lockhart.

"So in other words," Ron cut in, "we’re back where we started. Finding out where you were, what you were doing, with who, and why."

"Ah, square one," Harry said.

"It’s as good a place to start as any," Hermione replied. She frowned. "I hope you haven’t been neglecting your lesson plans, though, Harry," she tacked on. "I know that you’ve a great deal on your plate right now - " The bushy-haired girl glared at him when Harry’s gaze inadvertently flickered down to his food. "The full moon is in a matter of days, however, and -"
"I know," Harry said, his stomach doing a strange flip. "Two days to be exact. I’ve got it under control, Hermione. Don’t worry so much, okay?" He glared angrily at his black-eyed peas in butter.

Truth be told, he was doing enough worrying for both of them. Harry was beginning to get a case of nerves that rivaled what he’d experienced right before his very first Quidditch game. Back when he’d been in charge of the D.A., when it came time to talk, he gave Hermione free rein; and when it came time to instruct in more than theory, she graciously stepped back. Harry and Hermione together were one excellent teacher. Harry wouldn’t lay a knut on either one of their classroom skills alone. Plus, Hermione was right... he wasn’t finished with those lesson plans - not by a long shot.

During Potions, he managed to keep his focus, handing Hermione the newt’s eyes and slicing the burdock root just so for Yolande. But in Charms, he found himself subconsciously planning his first lesson for the first-years, which he was finding by far the most difficult to structure. He began to see Wingardium leviosa and Accio charms behind his closed lids as he lay down to sleep.

That night, Harry dreamed he looked out the window to view the full moon. If the moon was full, that meant his classes had started today! Why hadn’t anybody told him? He rushed down to see - he wasn’t certain whether he was looking for Dumbledore or Snape or McGonagall - but he needed to apologize to someone, and fast. Hogwarts was empty, however, save a wink of green light that sped in front of Harry, illuminating his steps. There was no other sound, save the faint thuds of his footfalls against stone...

...no... Harry could hear a noise. Somewhere, faint from distance, he could hear one whispered word. Harry sped forward, following the speck of green, but it was too fast for him to follow... the sound grew sharper, then fell out of focus like a radio station going in and out of tune. The sound whispered and the whisper rose into a wind that circled around Harry, tossing his cloak and lifting his hair, the sound was in his clothes and rushing past his ears, and finally he could discern it:

Harry, it said.

He woke with a strangled gasp, sweat clinging to his face and breathing heavy as if he’d just had a dream of Voldemort. But he hadn’t.

He realized he hadn’t all term.

Draco’s letter arrived the next morning at breakfast, the school owl literally dropping it into Harry’s meal and, screeching, taking off for the Owtery. Harry was left with the distinct impression that it had gone to a great deal of trouble to deliver his letter and was none too pleased about it.

Potter,

It’s incredible that you haven’t learned the simple charm that makes a document visible only to whom you wish; although, given your background, I suppose it is understandable. The charm is Hitomi Veritas, and I’m certain that Flitwick would be all too happy to show you the motion; or, barring that, Professor Snape. I have disguised this missive so that anyone else will see something perfectly innocuous.
So, you’ve stopped hopping when Dumbledore says ‘toad’. Congratulations on finding a spark of independent individuality buried beneath all of that Gryffindor righteousness. It may be arriving a bit late, but savor the touch of teenage rebellion that seems to have infected you. Merlin knows how long it shall last.

As for ends and means, I must admit that I was playing Devil’s Advocate, as I so often do, with Miss Granger. You will find my real answer wholly Slytherin. It all depends – on both the ends and the means. There are some depths to which one ought never to sink, no matter how glorious the cause. There are some causes which are so very imperative that they swamp such insignificant things as inconvenient mores and moralities.

Yes, I am quite fully aware that these are the rationales which have fueled – dare I say it? – zealots – for centuries. I am also aware, as perhaps you are not, that perfectly normal witches and wizards also apply shifting morality in everyday life. It’s quite all right to take a knut you find sitting in the street – but morally corrupt to take a giant bag of galleons without inquiring as to whom has lost the small fortune. The only difference is obviously a matter of degree. So you see, it is not only Slytherin sons of Death Eaters who hold this seemingly unique set of shifting principles.

Your sweet little story is most interesting. It is about being betrayed, at least on the surface; and so at first I thought it was written by you, about the two of us, a rather unsubtle hint that you thought me abominable. Then I read more carefully. The story is also about a secret so large it cannot be shared. And if and when it is shared – the end of the world. That hardly fits your being Slytherin, no matter how melodramatic or self-important you may be feeling at the time.

Although I am now aware of the fact that you did not write the tale, it puzzles me, in a way, that you didn’t. After all, the ends and the means is the central question to this story. No matter what the secret was, could it have ever been something terrible enough to justify Morn Brother’s response?

The story has the feel of an allegory describing an actual event, and, if so, was probably written by someone far more melodramatic than you; because the writer is likely either Morn Brother – or Evening Brother himself.

If the latter, then Evening Brother’s death is a symbolic one. Being a wizard, he was, perhaps, cast from the Wizarding World, his supporters flung from him – or his powers were destroyed. There are quiet, unsettling rumors of a spell which does this to a wizard, and perhaps this was done to Evening Brother.

Before learning of Evening Brother’s secret, and subsequently dispatching him, Morn Brother sends away the children. **His** children, so the story says – but they could easily be ‘his’ in some way other than by blood. The author mentions that Morn Brother is teaching them their letters, and so he is likely a teacher or a scholar rather than a father. A place where Wizarding children are taught... Morn Brother and Evening Brother had a school.

Finally, there are **four children** when the usual, archetypical number is three or sometimes seven. The story is most likely about Hogwarts.

Leaving the rest to Granger,

Draco Malfoy
"Well?" Hermione inquired, frowning. "Did he come up with anything interesting?"

"It’s not much," Harry said. "Only just about the most brilliant thing I’ve ever seen."

Hermione stared at him blankly, along with Ron, until he began to read the letter’s contents aloud, in quiet, excited tones, skipping over certain truths, such as his place in Slytherin and the fact that Draco had named his father as a Death Eater on paper.

When it was over, Hermione had gone rigid; her lips were parted and her eyes gazed far, far away.

"Oh... my," she breathed, standing suddenly. "Listen, uhm, can you cover for me in Potions? I need – library – now."

Harry and Ron knew there was no stopping Hermione when she got like this, but they both stared at her in amazement.

"Sorry," Ron said, leaning forward in his seat. "For some reason I thought I heard you say you were considering skiving off Potions."

"Oh, I’ll go now and take some books out and bring them with me, I suppose..." she replied distractedly.

"Good," Ron said. He turned to Harry as Hermione dashed off. "For a minute I thought someone had Polyjuiced her."

Chapter End Notes

SO MANY THINGS.

First of all, interesting debate on the nature of Dumbledore in the comments section. :D

Second: teacher dreams. I hadn't yet been a teacher, so I can only imagine I'd heard stories. You know those dreams where you don't know where you're supposed to be and you can't find your way and you're late and everyone's waiting for you? Teachers have those dreams as the school year approaches. Every year.

I canNOT believe I've never mentioned this in the author's notes, but Draco's story about a knut vs a bag of galleons relating to shifting morality has a much funnier historical story behind it. The exchange is attributed to various famous and infamous persons:

He: Would you ever sleep with a man you didn't know?
She: Tee hee, no!
He: What if he were to give you a million dollars?
She: (coy) Well, now, I don't know!
He: What if he gave you a dollar?
She: Sir! What on earth do you take me for?
He: Ma'am, we've already established what you are; now we're just haggling over the price.

She has a sliding morality scale; he does not.

-K
Hermione didn’t dare do research in Professor Snape’s class, but during Charms she kept *Hogwarts: A History* open on her desk the entire lesson. She still maintained enough attention to snatch Trevor as he passed her on the desk, handing him back to Neville with admirable patience.

She cornered Harry and Ron after class, on the way to Defense. “I don’t know why I didn’t see it before,” she murmured as she strode along, full of characteristic nervous energy. “I’ve read the book at least a dozen times. The fairy tale is about Salazar Slytherin and Godric Gryffindor.”

“But which one’s which?” Harry inquired.

“Obviously the creepy one is Slytherin!” Ron exclaimed.

“I don’t think so, Ron.” Hermione looked bothered, attempting to slide her hair behind one ear and failing miserably. “Slytherin is *Evening Brother.*” She opened *Hogwarts: A History*, and Harry crowded her on one side, Ron on the other. “Look,” she continued, opening to a page very near the beginning. “Slytherin is the one who left. Disappeared, really.”

“...old Slytherin departed, and though the fighting then died out, he left us quite downhearted,” Harry recited slowly. “Or something like that. It was in the Sorting Hat’s song last year that Slytherin was the one who – left. Or was killed,” he realized, thinking on the nature of the story.

“No, Draco’s right, he wasn’t killed,” Hermione countered excitedly. “He had to write the story.”

Ron was unconvinced. "Couldn't Gryffindor have written it?"

Hermione scolded. "Honestly, Ron. Why in the world would anyone leave clues about a murder they had committed?"

“Guilt?” Ron suggested.

Hermione turned exasperated eyes on him. “No, Slytherin wrote the book. It’s his. So is the room and so are the traps. We honestly should have known a Slytherin did it. It’s all remarkably clever.”

“So why not a Ravenclaw?"

“It’s also remarkably sneaky,” Harry interjected. “Those corridors, shaped so you couldn’t see ahead or behind. The room, and the weird Floo powder.”

“Not just clever,” Hermione proclaimed. “A little bit paranoid, if you ask me.”

“Well, he was right to be concerned,” Harry pointed out. “He got kicked out of Hogwarts! Maybe his powers were removed.”


“It’s only the books that say he was brave,” Harry said, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. “Books have a way of telling the story of the person who won.”
Hermione paled, looking down at Hogwarts: A History, as though it had personally betrayed her. Perhaps she felt it had. “The book never says what the Founders argued about, only that it had something to do with – with allowing Muggles into the school. I always assumed that Gryffindor wanted them in, and Slytherin wanted them out. We can’t take anything for granted, though. Regardless, it’s obvious Slytherin had a secret and he trusted Gryffindor with it.”

Harry’s eyes flashed. “Yes, and he probably tried to explain many times, but Gryffindor didn’t believe him or wasn’t ready to listen. In the story, he was too busy to pay any attention.”

“And when he finally did manage to convince Gryffindor, Gryffindor removed everyone from the school.” Hermione pointed down at the History in her hands. “The book says so right here: Gryffindor told everyone to leave, because he feared they’d be harmed by the battle between he and Slytherin. But it could really have been because he was afraid others would hear Slytherin’s secret and believe him. He sent Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff away as well.”

“The two women in the story,” Harry said, “who took the children away.”

“Exactly. So they started to duel.”

“Gryffindor won,” Harry said. “And then...”

“...Slytherin disappeared, and the secret with him,” Hermione breathed.

Ron was watching the two of them with a slightly dumbfounded expression on his face. “You don’t really think – Gryffindor did all that?”

“Gryffindor was in charge of the history books, but Slytherin wrote Harry’s poetry book,” Hermione mused. “The truth is probably somewhere in the middle.”

Ron sighed heavily. “Well, all right, I suppose we have to find out what this secret is, then, same as Harry’s.”

Hermione turned to stare. “Ron – what if it is the same secret?”

“A secret so big that no one could know it,” Harry mused. “Well – it would explain why Dumbledore is making certain that neither Snape nor I know about it. You’d think, though, of all people, he’d trust us with it.”

Ron frowned. “I reckon it’s not you he’s worried about.”

“Honestly Ron,” Hermione sniped, “will you leave off of Snape?”

“No,” he said, “I won’t. Don’t look at me like that, Hermione, I don’t think he’s a Death Eater for real, I don’t think he’s about to run off and change sides or anything. But, well, the thing he and Harry have in common is that they’re both connected to You-Know-Who, aren’t they? I mean, mentally. It’s probably him Dumbledore doesn’t want knowing. The Headmaster can’t chance it that he could find out from Snape or Harry what’s going on... Dumbledore’s probably the only one now who knows for sure, because he’s the only one who can really stand up to You-Know-Who.”

There was a small, shocked pause.

“Ronald Weasley, I could kiss you,” Hermione proclaimed.

Ron turned bright red and muttered something incoherent, but Hermione pecked him on the cheek anyway. “Bless you, Ron, and your good sense,” she murmured, bobbing back to her previous
position, clutching the history text to her chest.

The next several days were spent in a flurry of research, on Slytherin, Gryffindor, and the castle itself. Hermione was in her element, and Harry, at least, found a tidbit of information to interest him once in awhile, but Ron was miserable. Books were not his province; he was much more comfortable in discussion, reasoning out the bits and pieces of information that Hermione and sometimes Harry had painstakingly collected. After his third interruption to talk Quidditch in so many minutes, he was summarily banished from the library by a harassed Hermione.

“See if you can’t find out if Harry was really here over the summer,” she suggested in a tone that made it quite clear that she was not suggesting.

“I’ll just ask the bloody portraits,” Ron said, irritated.

Hermione blinked, then meandered over to kiss him on the cheek again.

Meanwhile, Harry was distracted for his own reasons, reasons that did not involve Quidditch. Draco had now been gone for three days. Although he hadn’t noticed it in the excitement, it had later occurred to him that Draco’s letter had been completely devoid of personal details.

So had his, really, but he’d expected Draco to say something like: despite my sudden capture by my mother, I am doing rather well. I intend on staying here until this punishment nonsense is over, Potter, so you oughtn’t to expect me until four days have passed.

Or something.

Instead, Draco had answered his questions, carefully and thoughtfully – and that was really all.

He was getting worried enough to consider composing another letter, one that read: where the hell are you? Are you all right? Do you need help? When are you coming home to Hogwarts?!

Hermione grabbed his wrist. “Harry,” she said, “Draco isn’t a pixie. No matter how many times you clap that quill against the table, he’s not coming back.”

Harry laughed, taken aback by her ability to read his mind. “Sorry, Hermione. Maybe I’m being distracting, too?” He was hoping against hope to be banished from the library. As self-destructive as he now quite well knew it was, he wanted a place to be alone and mope.

“Listen, Harry, the first Gryffindor-Slytherin game of the season is two days from now. He can’t stay away for that,” she replied solemnly. “He simply lives for that game, the same way you do.”

Harry offered her an apologetic smile, because he knew that Hermione did not understand what it was that made people live for any game, even Quidditch. “You’re right, Hermione.”

“Yes,” she replied airily, and he rewarded her with another smile, wider this time.

“So,” she said in a firmer, more businesslike voice. “How are your lesson plans coming?”

Harry took a shuddering breath. “I think I’ll be able to manage with the first through third-years, no problem. And even fourth- and fifth-year is all right. It’s the sixth- and seventh-years I’m worried over, now. I’m going to have to teach Slytherins, you know. Slytherins older than me.”
“Yes, Harry,” she said. “Just think of them as people, all right? Not as Slytherins. They need Defense just as much as anybody. Maybe more than most.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully, and bent back over his parchment.

The next morning, Harry woke even earlier than usual and meandered down to the Quidditch pitch to make last-second changes to his lesson plans. He was cold, tired and feeling more than a bit pessimistic about his chances. He’d spent hours huddled over the sheets of paper in his hands, and yet he was afraid they would not be enough. He had slept only fitfully, staring wide-eyed at the red bed sheets hanging off of Ron’s bed above his, adrenaline racing through his system, making him feel stupid and slightly sick, suppressing another sudden urge to communicate with Draco.

Merlin, it was just plain stupid, he thought, kicking at a small bit of dislodged turf. He’d gotten along fine for years without Draco Malfoy’s assistance; he should not need it now. Harry supposed it had something to do with the fact that they had been in rather constant company for so long that had created this definite sense that Draco was gone. It was as though he could literally feel that Draco was nowhere near; but that was ridiculous.

*Yes, really stupid,* Harry told himself quietly, *although you were reading his mind just a week or so ago.* Cautiously, he felt for that absence, that feeling of Draco-is-not-here, examining it at a distance.

He had a vague feeling of Draco’s being-alive, of his existence, somewhere... somewhere to the west. His eyes fluttered closed, searching for detail.

“Harry!”

Harry flinched at the sound, blinking at Rae Thomas. The small redhead was gazing up at him frankly. “You okay?” she inquired.

“I’m fine. How’re you, Rae?”

She smiled shyly. “Okay, Harry. You’re teaching us today!”

“I am,” he replied, his voice measured and solemn.

Rae threw her arms around his neck and pecked him on the cheek. “I’m glad.” Then she ran for the doors that led to the Great Hall, her robes flapping jerkily behind her.

Harry couldn’t keep back a smile. She looked a lot happier than the girl who’d arrived at the start of September, silent and shy. Ewan and Lilac seemed like they had been good for her. Grinning and ruffling his hair anxiously, he followed the redhead into the Great Hall and then to the Gryffindor table, where Hermione was yawning over *Hogwarts: A History.*

“Really, professor,” Ron was saying earnestly to Professor McGonagall, “you’ll have it by the end of the week.”

“Ah, Mister Potter,” she greeted crisply. “All ready for today?”

Harry nodded, placing his bag under the table.
You’re to sit at the dais this morning,” she tacked on casually, “at Professor Lupin’s usual spot.”

Harry’s eyebrows climbed. “Are you sure?”

“Quite,” she said. “Come along then.”

Harry trailed after McGonagall, half-turning to show his incredulity to Ron and Hermione, the latter of whom had her mouth open wide in a silent scream of incredulous joy. Ron pounded his fists against the table, an excited drumroll.

Harry took the seat of the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher with trepidation. “Are you sure it isn’t the chair itself that’s cursed?” he inquired nervously, getting a laugh out of Professors Dumbledore and Flitwick, along with an indulgent smile from McGonagall. He felt slightly better. Harry nudged his bookbag farther under the table, anxious to hide evidence of his youth, although he was relatively certain that his inexperience was written on his face, then turned to gaze out across the Great Hall.

The Great Hall looked quite different from this perspective, Harry realized. The elevated dais gave an excellent view of the entire room; from here, a professor could see any disagreement that broke out before it became a cause for concern; a professor could also note the overall mood of the students, he realized when they stiffened slightly as Professor Snape swept dramatically into the room. Harry could see Ron’s brilliantly red hair beside Ginny’s, and Hermione’s bushy, short curls. Lilac slid in next to Hermione while Ewan made for the Slytherin table and sat with Yolande. Rae looked for him, found him, and made an incredibly enthusiastic thumbs-up.

Harry felt his heart climb into his throat as Professor Snape shifted past him and sat to his left. He was suddenly aware that the large gold chair seemed too big for him, and he did not know where to put his hands.

“Potter,” Snape greeted him.

“Professor,” he replied cautiously.

“Come now, Potter,” Snape countered. “Surely, now we are colleagues, you need not stand on formality.”

Harry goggled at him before realizing slowly that the man had surprisingly adopted Lupin’s favorite ‘kill them with kindness’ routine; he offered his professor a slow, slightly ill smile.

Flitwick was apparently too good-natured to catch on to this little bit of sarcasm. “Why, Professor Snape!” he exclaimed delightedly. “How kind of you to make Harry feel so welcome. Or perhaps I ought to call him Professor Potter, now?” He grinned.

“Oh, please don’t,” Harry muttered under his breath.

Snape caught the whisper and tossed Harry a cat-that-ate-the-canary grin. “Certainly, Professor Potter,” he replied, his voice saturated with false admiration. “By all means, let us show our new professor every bit of the respect he has earned.”

Harry thought this was going a bit too far. “I suppose the other Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers were far more qualified,” he replied, as if conceding a point. Of course, one was possessed by Voldemort, one was a pretty-boy fraud, one was a Death Eater, and one was a Ministry flunkey, he silently added.

Snape seemed to hear what he did not say, and take offense at Harry’s silence. “Their fitness for
the job is not in question,” he said sharply.

Meaning they were unquestionably lacking, Harry decided with a snort. Their banter – yes, banter, Harry suddenly realized – was interrupted by Dumbledore standing up from his chair at the centre of the dais and clearing his throat. Harry and Snape turned identical expressions of slit-eyed wariness on the Headmaster.

Slowly, the breakfasting students paused, one gaining the attention of another until the entire Hall was silent.

“Before we get to the business of the day,” Dumbledore intoned with a small twinkle down at the food on his plate, “there are several necessary announcements.

“Indubitably you have noted young Mister Potter up at the dais this morning. That is because Professor Remus Lupin is currently indisposed. Mister Potter will serve as your professor until such time as Mister Lupin can resume his post, and I expect you shall show him all the respect of a full-time Professor at Hogwarts.”

The Slytherins booed rather loudly, and Harry’s cheeks heated in embarrassment. “Oh, this’ll be fun,” he intoned.

He wasn’t certain which was worse, the boos from the Slytherin table – and some from Hufflepuff – or the cheers from Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, trying to drown them out. Snape shot him an amused glance that nonetheless contained a great deal of self-satisfaction. When Harry muttered something derogatory under his breath, the older man leaned towards him and intoned, “now, now, Potter, that’s hardly the sort of language a professor employs...”

Harry wanted to hit him.

Then, Dumbledore raised his hands in the air for silence, and the noise diminished, then disappeared.

“Will all of the Unsorted House please stand?”

Harry frowned at Dumbledore, wondering what the Headmaster had planned, then turned to face the rest of the Great Hall. Hermione was on her feet, as was Yolande, but Harry watched in surprise as a handful of others at the Slytherin table stood as well – Crabbe rose and glared at his seated peers while Yolande patted his arm absentely. A handful of third- and fourth-years stood as well at Slytherin, followed immediately by a knot of Hufflepuffs, including Justin Finch-Fletchley, looking frightened but defiant. A shout arose from the Ravenclaw table before Cho Chang pulled herself away from a group of girls obviously attempting to cajole her into remaining seated; she was followed by a respectable handful of younger girls. Then, of course, there was all of the original Unsorted House: Ewan with Slytherin, and Rae and Lilac with Gryffindor, along with a smattering of other small heads popping up at various places. Hermione remained the only Gryffindor standing.

They all wore Yolande and Hermione’s hand-stitched Inter-House badges. Harry scanned them rapidly and was startled to find that, if the Unsorted House were actually a house, it would have been a respectable size, just a bit less than half the size of Gryffindor.

The professors looked startled; Snape said “well well well,” under his breath, and McGonagall looked wrong-footed.

Dumbledore, of course, smiled serenely at them all. “Thank you. Now, will everyone who is not a
first-year, please be seated?"

Harry, who had been wondering whether he ought to get to his feet just to support Hermione, was relieved at this command. Slowly, the other students began to rearrange their robes as they sat, turning alert eyes back to the Head Table once they were done.

“First-years,” McGonagall said, and the children rose and moved to the dais, where she placed a familiar-looking stool.

“We have accomplished the very difficult if not impossible,” Dumbledore went on, “and re-made the Sorting Hat.”

The reaction to this news was mixed. The Gryffindors hooted and slapped hands; the Hufflepuffs relaxed in their chairs. The Ravenclaws frowned disapprovingly, and Harry would swear that the Slytherins looked—well, disappointed. Put-out. Ewan was glaring up defiantly at McGonagall, his dark hair in anxious disarray, his eyes flashing; Lilac looked angry, Rae uncertain.

“Amos, Jessica,” McGonagall read.

A small girl with white-blond hair rose from the Hufflepuff table and tottered over, with much encouragement from the elder Hufflepuffs. A new, freshly starched witches’ hat was placed upon her head. There was a moment of silence, where everyone leaned forward in their chairs, even the teachers, anxious to see whether the new Hat would work.

“Enough time dawdling with Hufflepuffs!” it exclaimed. “RAVENCLAW!”

Jessica Amos lifted the hat up and placed it back on the small chair with exaggerated care. She took two steps before she burst into passionate tears.

Justin Finch-Fletchley popped up from the Hufflepuff table, shot a poisonous glare at the professors, and swept the younger girl away from the dais, obviously muttering sympathies; Harry watched the small girl gaze at the upperclassman earnestly and nod, once, before traveling slowly to Ravenclaw, where she was accepted with lukewarm sympathies at best. Most likely, the Ravenclaws had never seen a child burst into tears at the prospect of being placed into their House, which had an excellent reputation. The blonde looked miserable, shoulders hunched as she squeezed in between two third-years.

“Avery, William,” McGonagall rapped out, sounding slightly discomfited.

William Avery, a small, dark-haired boy, rose from the Ravenclaw table. Harry saw him squeeze Jessica’s hand before dashing up to the front.

“Ah,” the Hat said, “another RAVENCLAW!”

And so it went. Some of the Unsorted House were disappointed, some relieved. Very few children were placed where they had hoped or expected—that much became apparent after the third child had been sent away in tears.

“Jones, Ewan,” the Deputy Headmistress intoned.

Ewan rose from Yolande’s side and nodded smartly at them both before climbing the dais to scramble onto the stool.

The Sorting Hat was placed upon his head; the moment it touched his brow, “SLYHERIN!” it rapped out.
Ewan shook his head no.

“I assure you, young man,” Snape intoned, warning inherent in his voice, "that there is nothing the matter with my House.”

Ewan tugged the Hat away and placed it on the stool, turning to face the professor. “I know that,” he said. “But I’m plenty *besides* sneaky, and I don’t want to be judged on that alone.”

“I know, Ewan, and I’m sorry,” Harry said.

“If you’d have stood up, Harry,” Ewan said, “and if Draco were here to do it, too, I think this might not have happened.” His voice was low and solemn; Harry could not tell whether Ewan were accusing him of being a coward, or merely stating a fact. Before Harry could reply, the black-haired boy had wandered off to the Slytherin table, where Crabbe ruffled his hair and Yolande tickled him.

Harry watched with an oddly helpless feeling as McGonagall called for “Johansen, Lilac.”

Lilac looked as though she were about to explode in a million different directions at once as she snatched the Hat off of its stool and placed it over her twin braids. For a whole minute she sat there, her eyes squeezed shut, bunching her freckles together.

“HUFFLEPUFF!” the Hat finally exclaimed. Lilac took the Hat off very slowly, placing it on the stool behind her and meandering in the direction of the Hufflepuff table; but in order to do so, she had to walk by Gryffindor. When she reached Hermione, she launched herself into the older girl’s arms, sobbing loudly.

“Erm... Klempf, Adrian,” McGonagall continued, flushing and looking upset. Harry understood why; the woman had to be feeling like a villain just now, already having made a handful of eleven-year-olds burst into tears.

When she finally came to Rae Thomas, the redhead looked up at Harry with terror in her wide eyes. She grabbed the Hat and slammed it down over her ears, holding on to each side for dear life.

“SLYtherIN!” it exclaimed almost immediately.

Harry gaped as the redhead moved to Slytherin in a daze, gripping on to Ewan Jones in utter desperation.

“You’ve got a faulty Hat,” he said darkly, once Dumbledore had sat down.

“You think so?” the Headmaster inquired.

“What’s the trouble, Potter?” Snape demanded. “Not enough of a crop for Gryffindor this year?”

Harry blinked, looking at the Gryffindor table, where six new faces were arrayed. He hadn’t realized it, but both Slytherin and Hufflepuff seemed to have made out with the lion’s share – so to speak. “It’s not that. It’s... it’s Rae Thomas. She’s no Slytherin. They’ll tear her to pieces.”

“And yet you seem to have no sympathy for the young man who pleaded not to be placed there,” Snape said.

“It’s Ewan, Professor, and he *is* a Slytherin. I mean, he’s sneaky and clever and very manipulative...”
“In other words, you do not like him, but you are fond of this Rae girl—”

“I’m quite fond of them both!” Harry snapped. “What I’m saying is that Ewan would do best in Slytherin, it’ll allow him to hone those skills, become even more clever and strategic, but Rae? Rae is—emotional, and shy, and— and recovering from a tragedy! She’s not ready for Slytherin, she’s not strong enough!”

Snape seemed taken aback by this left-handed compliment.

“Look, I’ll prove the bloody thing’s faulty,” Harry said. “Watch!” He leapt down from the dais and slammed the Hat on his head.

This time around, the Hat didn’t bother with saying a single word other than “SLYTHERIN!” both loudly and immediately, gaining the attention of nearly everyone in the Great Hall.

“Look, if this stupid thing had its way,” Harry said, placing the Hat back down on its stool, “I’d have been in his House instead of Gryffindor.” Harry jerked a nod towards Snape. “Can’t we just leave the Unsorted House as it is? They’re all miserable, look at them!”

Dumbledore’s brows raised as he regarded Harry. “Mister Potter,” he said softly, “perhaps you’ve forgotten what you told me at the end of your second year?”

Harry groaned. Of course Dumbledore already knew about what House he was meant to be in...

Oh, Merlin—everyone heard that, didn’t they? And now I can’t say it was the Hat making a mistake, because Dumbledore will contradict me... Briefly, Harry argued with himself, wondering whether he ought to deny it anyway, see who they believed... but he still trusted Dumbledore, still liked Dumbledore...

“Aw, hell,” Harry muttered, slumping back into his seat and crossing his arms over his chest.

“Mister Potter!” McGonagall gasped.

“I suppose you have become a true Slytherin, Harry,” Dumbledore said wryly. “At least, every bit as much as you are a Gryffindor. That was quite clever, as well as underhanded. And despite your... oversight,” he added with a smile, “you’ve convinced me to reconsider. I will discuss the matter with the staff in a week and decide on whether the Houses ought to be dissolved.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry said, flushing. He wondered if he ought to apologize to the Headmaster for attempting to fool him; but, as the man had just complimented him on his efforts—and, as the man had just pulled one over on Harry himself, not too long ago—he bit his tongue.

“And,” Dumbledore said, with a truly mischievous twinkle, “until then, you, Harry, are a Slytherin. You have been Re-Sorted, after all.”

Harry was beginning to realize that, while Snape’s punishments were cruel and vindictive, Dumbledore made a habit of hoisting him on his own petard.

Chapter End Notes
Well, this marks the beginning of a dramatic arc for Harry's character. The next few chapters are amongst my favorite in the story, and I can't wait to get to them! (Hence how early I've posted this one.) <3

As always, I've love to hear your thoughts! Remember: the kudos button can only be hit once, but you can comment as many times as you like. ;)

Oh, and Meant to Say is now complete, if you'd like a tiny capsule of a fic. It's nine chapters long and can probably be read in an hour or so.

-K
To say that Harry was the topic of conversation at breakfast that morning would have been an understatement. Once Harry slunk back into his chair, Flitwick began chuckling, low and startled-sounding, Trelawney revealed she had known about Harry’s true House all along, and McGonagall desperately tried to catch Harry’s eye around Dumbledore’s attempts at pleasant conversation. Hagrid, who did manage to catch Harry’s eye, smiled encouragingly; Harry supposed that the half-giant had seen enough censure in his time to be unwilling to show Harry any. Harry smiled tentatively in return.

Professor Snape remained almost eerily silent, toying with the crepe on his plate and rather obviously not seeing it. Harry had the urge to break the other man’s silence, but had a feeling that, if he gave in to that impulse, Snape’s response would either be more silence or perhaps enough rage to warrant an Obscura – from Harry, the Professor, or both. He decided that he had been foolish enough for one day, and that he would leave the other man alone until he looked a bit more himself.

The moment that Harry rose, he watched Ron nudge Hermione and rise as well. Several of the Gryffindors noted this and followed suit, including Neville, Ginny, Seamus and Dean. From his vantage point, Harry could see that Pansy Parkinson, Vincent Crabbe, Yolande Zabini and half the Unsorted House looked like they planned on following him as well.

Harry could swear that Dumbledore looked ready to start laughing, but he blocked that out of his mind, scrambling for a way to avoid being swamped by curious students without looking like he was trying to avoid his two best friends.

“Oh, Potter?” Snape finally said, watching the goings-on with his old malevolence.

Harry turned to face his Potions Professor. “Erm, sir?”

“We can’t have you going about like that, now, can we?” Snape intoned, and flicked his wand, a whispered word on his breath.

Harry didn’t note a surfeit of hideous boils on his nose, so he glanced around himself –

“Oh,” Harry said.

Harry was now clothed in Slytherin robes, complete with snake seal; even the scarf he had tossed over the back of his chair in light of the early cold weather had shifted from red-and-gold to green-and-silver. The tassels were in the shape of little snakes.

Damn the man and his potions-induced attention to detail.

Harry grabbed the scarf from his chair and wrapped it around his neck, tossing a challenging glare back at his professor before escaping only a step or two ahead of his pursuers, fleeing the Great Hall. It wasn’t a very Gryffindor thing to do, but then, he wasn’t a Gryffindor. Not anymore.
The first lesson went better than he had thought it would; the second-years were so very in awe of him, the Harry Potter, that they sat with slack jaws and sparkling eyes, quills racing feverishly across their parchment.

The first-years were another thing altogether. They trailed in morosely, finding their seats and stacking parchment wearing a quiet despair along with their new colors; Jessica Amos, the girl with the white-blonde hair, still hiccoughed periodically. Rae and Ewan were part of a huddled group that sat at the very centre of the room, as though fearing the touch of the walls.

“Good morning,” Harry said, once they were settled.

“Don’t see what’s so great about it,” Ewan muttered.

There was a general murmur of dispirited assent.

“Maybe that wasn’t the best choice of words,” Harry conceded.

“Where’s Professor Lupin?” Jessica demanded. “Where’s Lilac and Josie and Emily?”

“Don’t you get it?” William Avery said despairingly. “We’re sorted by House now. This is the Slytherin/Ravenclaw class.” He paused. “Just as well, I guess, that we won’t have Hufflepuffs slowing us down.”

Ewan stood and whirled, facing the other dark-haired boy. “You shut up about Lilac!”

“Oooooh,” the class murmured, as one.

“What, Jones, you like her?” Will replied nastily.

“I just don’t see what being Hufflepuff has to do with being smart!” Ewan returned.

“That’s because you’re a Slytherin,” Will replied, “and so you’ve already forgotten that being Ravenclaw means you’re smart.” He fingered his blue badge importantly.

“All right,” Harry interjected. “Ewan, have a seat. Will, same to you. I think that this issue’s a bit more important right now than Defense, don’t you?”

Rae sniffled quietly.

“Let’s talk about the Houses, then,” Harry said, seating himself on the front of Professor Lupin’s desk. “Can everyone move the desks so that we’re in a circle? No, Will, not using your wand, thank you...” He took a deep breath, observing the small faces around him, their eyes trained hopefully on his.

“First, for those of you who don’t know, Professor Lupin has a condition that means he’s ill three days for every month, so you’ll be seeing me around Halloween as well.”

Will snorted. “He’s a werewolf, you mean.”

“Yeah,” Harry said challengingly. “And?”

There was a slightly disturbed silence; after a moment, a small brunette piped up. “My mum says they’re vicious beasts,” she said. “She says they’re dangerous.”
“Name?” Harry inquired.

“Bettie Harmond, Slytherin.”

“I didn’t ask for your House, thanks,” Harry said, a bit taken aback. But he remembered, now, how quickly he himself had taken to being a Gryffindor - how fast he’d begun to eye Slytherin distrustfully. “Professor Lupin isn’t dangerous right now because of a special Potion he takes. Can anyone tell me the name of a potion like that?”

Jessica raised her arm slowly. “Is it – is it the Wolfsbane Potion, Professor?”

Now that definitely sounded strange to Harry’s ears, but she was certainly right. “Excellent, take five points to –” He paused. “Five points for you, Jessica.”

The small blonde beamed.

“So he’s not dangerous right now, and he’s certainly not dangerous the rest of the month.”

“Professor Lupin’s very kind,” Rae opined in a soft, barely-heard voice.

Harry quirked a smile. “Very true,” he replied. “In any case, due to the Professor’s difficulty, I’ll be here three days out of the month.” He paused, then sighed. “Is there anything you’d like to know about me before we get started?”

A boy with ginger hair raised his hand confidently. “Adrian,” he said, “Adrian Klempf. And is it really true that you were Sorted into Gryffindor accidentally?”

“Not quite accidentally,” Harry responded. “I told the Sorting Hat that I’d rather be in Gryffindor, and it agreed.”

Ewan raised his hand.

“Ewan?”

“Why didn’t you want to be in Slytherin?” he asked.

“It’s like you said,” Harry replied thoughtfully. “If I wanted to be judged on one quality, I’d rather it was my bravery than my ability to fool people.”

Ewan nodded. “Me, too.”

Rae shivered. “I don’t want to be a Slytherin. Voldemort was a Slytherin.”

The Wizard-born children in the class gasped and shuddered; Jessica looked near to a faint, and the room was full of shocked whispers. Harry waited for them to die down before speaking again.

“The man responsible for the murder of my parents,” he said firmly, “was a Gryffindor. You can be a good person in Slytherin, Rae. You can be a good person anyplace you like. All Slytherin is is a bunch of people wearing green-and-black dresses and silver scarves.” He tossed his over his shoulder, and Rae giggled.

“If that’s the case, why put us in Houses at all?” Will demanded.

Harry shrugged. “It’s history, I guess,” he said. “You heard the Hat: there were four founders, so there are four Houses.”
Ewan looked skeptical, but didn’t say anything to gainsay him.

“Regardless,” he went on, eyeing them, “I don’t think it’s such a great idea to judge people based on their Houses. My friend Hermione Granger has the best grades in my year, although she was mis-Sorted into Gryffindor; and I was Sorted to Slytherin even though I’ve been fighting Voldemort since I was your age.” He shrugged. “It’s better to get to know someone,” he decided, thinking of Draco and Yolande.

“But how?” Ewan demanded. “This entire place is set up so that you sort of have to act like the kids in the other Houses are the enemy. Everything’s done by House – sports, points, down to classes.”

“That’s certainly true,” Adrian piped up unexpectedly. “I don’t want to stop talking to the friends I made when we were all Unsorted.”

Harry worried his lower lip between his teeth. “Let’s all make an effort then, if we’re agreed. We won’t mention Houses or anything to do with them in this class. If you do, you’ll get a mark by your name; and if you get three marks, you’ll have a detention.”

Will groaned, but Rae interrupted him.

“I think that’s the right idea,” she said in her small voice, sounding surer this time. “Ewan’s right, it’s in the way the school’s set up... if we don’t make the punishment bad enough, we’ll keep on doing it.”

Harry nodded. “Let’s break the habit now. And while you’re at it, if you catch me doing it, I’ll get a mark by my name.”

Several of the first-years tittered nervously.

“...and if I get three in a lesson, I’ll have detention with Professor Snape.”

Gasps accompanied this startling pronunciation. Jessica looked pale as her hair, and wavered on the spot.

“I mean it,” Harry told them. He came to a sudden decision, perched there at the end of the desk. “And you’ll certainly have to know how to deal with other Houses – if you want to join the Defense Association, that is.”

Rae squealed with something like the delight she’d shown early that morning, and bounced in her seat. Harry smiled warmly at the Unsorted House, feeling a certain kinship with all of them. There were only two in the room – Will for Ravenclaw, and Ewan for Slytherin – who had correctly anticipated their Houses. The rest were, like Harry himself, suspended between two.

“Now as fascinating as all of that is,” he continued, turning to the board and pulling his wand from his pocket, “we do have some work to do.” With a flick of his wrist, the date appeared on the board in his angular, cramped handwriting, along with the words: Defense Against the Dark Arts: Curse Avoidance. “Today we’re going to practice a charm called ‘Expelliarmus’...”

Harry’s only joy was that the sixth-year mixed DADA class was not on his first day of teaching,
although he knew he would have to face them tomorrow.

It became rapidly apparent that the detentions weren’t going to work when the fourth-year class piled in; not only did the fourth-years not really understand the point of avoiding the discussion of Houses, they seemed to be rather eager to land a detention with him, especially a knot of tittering girls who sat at the front and flushed a brilliant scarlet every time his eyes lit on them. It was almost impossible to get through a lesson, so impossible that he almost let up on his determination not to take points.

The worst, though, was the Gryffindor-Slytherin fifth-years. Neither group knew how to treat Harry, nor how to take an admonition not to discuss their House; both came to the bewildering conclusion that they were being slighted, and were insufferable. Ginny in particular looked as though she were ready to scream.

Harry himself was ready to scream by the time the day was over. Lunch had been taken up with fevered corrections to the afternoon’s lesson plans and those for the day after. He was starving, exhausted both mentally and physically, and in severe pain from a headache that had begun first period and continued to pile on throughout the day. He considered going to Madam Pomfrey, then decided to go straight to the source, instead.

Professor Snape handed Harry the headache cure, looking coldly unsympathetic as Harry gulped it down.

“Ugh,” he said. “Couldn’t you make that taste better?”

“That’s what Lupin said last night,” Snape replied, examining the papers in front of him.

Harry sighed as the headache slipped peaceably away. “And what’d you say?”

“Yes,” Snape replied. “Of course I could.”

Harry snorted. “Uhm, actually I was wondering if you would do me a favor.”

“Another one?” Snape eyed the phial in Harry’s hand with a raised brow.

“Another one?” Snape eyed the phial in Harry’s hand with a raised brow.

Harry laughed nervously. “Yeah. Er... what are you doing tonight?”

“Marking papers, what else,” Snape replied dryly.

Harry had always thought Snape gave so many assignments because he was sadistic but now, from the perspective of a teacher, Harry had to wonder if Snape was masochistic.

“I was wondering if you could accept a couple of detentions,” Harry replied.

“Disciplining your students is your look-out, Professor Potter.”

“Yes, sir, of course. Except that I got the feeling that they were angling for a detention.”

“Angling for one?”

“Yeah... er...”

Snape placed his quill down with exaggerated care, giving Harry his full attention. “Why would they want a detention, may I ask?”

“They were all girls, sir.”
“Girls? I don’t follow, Potter. I have never before found that girls desired detentions. Nor that they cause more trouble. In fact, over many years of teaching, I’ve noticed that, in general, it tends to go the other way around.”

“Sir, they were all twelve, thirteen, and fourteen-year-old girls.”

Snape merely stared.

“Who wanted detention. With me.”

“Oh!”

“Yeah.”

Snape considered this. Slowly, an evil smile spread across his features.

Harry took an unconscious, sliding step backward.

“You’ll have to convince them,” Snape said.

“Convince them of what?”

“Convince them that detention is – not a desirable place to be,” he continued darkly.

“Huh,” Harry replied thoughtfully. “I follow, but... I don’t really have any ideas.”

“Come now, Potter, surely you can think of something.” Snape picked up his quill and licked it absently, gazing down at the paper before him. “Mix up aconite and calamus? Why do I bother?”

Harry thought about that for a moment. Maybe, if he swept in wearing a black robe like Snape’s and refused to wash his hair, perhaps they would scatter.

Then again, they might just like the tragic villain bit.

“You sure you won’t...?”

“Potter, if you have to dole out punishments via myself or another member of the staff, they will never take you seriously.”

Harry opened his mouth to say that it wasn’t like he was a real teacher anyway, that he didn’t need to keep and hold their respect, but something stopped him. He realized he did want their respect. He didn’t want to disappoint Professor Lupin – or Ewan, Rae, or Lilac. So instead, he closed his mouth and nodded, placing the empty phial on the Professor’s desk.

“Don’t you have anything else to say to me?” Harry muttered anxiously, thrusting his hands in his pockets.

Snape slashed the paper beneath his hand with a particularly furious twitch, his usually cramped but neat writing looking almost sloppy. “What, Potter, could that possibly be?”

Harry winced, and fingered his scarf.

“Before you wriggle completely out of those robes, Mister Potter, let me assure you that I spoke with the Headmaster at lunch considering your little... incident. He is examining the new Sorting Hat as we speak.”
“Examining it – but why?” Harry wondered.

“Obviously it is faulty,” Snape replied, shifting the potions paper underneath the stack as he finished with it. “You. In my House? It’s perfectly ridiculous.”

“Then why won’t you look at me?” Harry inquired in a low, solemn voice. “And why do you keep calling me by my surname?”

Professor Snape paused, arrested mid-mark. Black eyes slowly lifted to meet green.

Something in Harry quietly unwound, and he felt his shoulders slump in relief. “Thank you,” he muttered, then paused, briefly. “I mean, I’m going to get enough flak from my friends, I thought you of all people would – well, would like that I was Slytherin...”

Snape frowned, writing rapidly on the next set of papers, not looking up at him anymore. “P... Harry... you are not Slytherin just because the Hat said so. Professor McGonagall said it best in the Headmaster’s office – it is beyond belief that you be anything but a Gryffindor.” His lip curled slightly around the hated word. “I do not know what Dumbledore seeks to prove...”

Harry pulled a chair close to Professor Snape’s desk and slumped into it; after a moment, when he realized that his professor was babbling slightly, he did as Snape had done for him back in the Hospital Wing, and placed one finger carefully atop the other man’s hand to stop its motion.

When Snape’s gaze jerked up again to his, he smiled apologetically.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before now.”

Snape sighed, rubbing his temples.

Harry realized that the man was counting to ten again, although he was being a bit less obvious about it; his lips were barely moving. He waited until his professor was through before speaking again.

“Does this mean I need to sleep in the Slytherin dorms?” Harry inquired. “I’d really like to stay where I am.”

“No one has shifted House in their sixth year at Hogwarts before. Besides that, your friend Miss Granger has remained in Gryffindor, has she not?”

Harry gaped. “How did you know about that?”

Snape smiled at him, then barked a laugh. “It is the strange assumption of the young that teachers exist inside a classroom and cease to exist once classes let out. Miss Granger has made rather a production of her not belonging to any one House. Anyone with eyes and ears would take note.” He eyed Harry. “You might do well to point out Miss Granger’s position if it is suggested that you relocate.”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Uhm, listen, my cousin confirms the thing the Dursleys told you. I wasn’t there over the summer. They got a letter – supposedly from Hogwarts – saying I’d remain here until the end of summer. Apparently I was there sometime in August, but that was it. Ron checked with the paintings to find out if I was really here, and they said I was – but they could easily have been tampered with...”

Snape tapped one ink-stained finger against the stack of papers before him. “I think it is safe to assume that you were here,” he said finally.
“It – it is?” Harry wondered. “Why?”

The Potions Master snarled, rising menacingly to his feet. “For Merlin’s sake, Potter, will you trust my knowledge for once? You were here!”

Harry swallowed past a sudden lump of fear. “Do – do you remember, Professor?”

“Of course not!” he replied, slamming his chair back under his writing desk with a furious motion. “But I know. How else would you have become so very skilled at Potions? So very adept at Occlumency, and, more specifically, Obscura, an unusual discipline, to say the least? How – unless I were tutoring you? You’ve managed to pick up my habits for Merlin’s sake!”

Harry gaped. “But – but what was I doing here?”

“Quite possibly picking up all you had failed to absorb the year before,” Snape shot back. “I should have realized it,” he continued, mockingly. “How could Dumbledore allow his prize pupil to be unsafe over the summer? There are only two places you could have possibly been: home – or Hogwarts.”

Harry, who hadn’t thought of it that way, slumped in defeat. “Yeah – that’s kind of obvious, isn’t it?” He paused. “But – if that’s the secret – what’s the big deal?”

“How much of the conversation with Dumbledore do you recall, Harry?”


Snape waved the apology away with one hand. “Never mind that. You heard me tell the Headmaster, then, that the Dark Lord had developed a new sort of Legilimens, one which I could not yet manage to counter?”


“That, then, would be his reasoning,” Snape said, frowning. “If I do not know I was teaching you a lesson or two, it is as good as if I never did; the Dark Lord would have no way of finding out. The same goes for you. At the beginning of last summer, he had nearly taken you over on a handful of occasions. He would have no trouble sifting through your thoughts at his leisure if you still recalled what had occurred; and then he would have discovered the fact that I was aiding you rather than impeding your progress.”

“That reminds me, though,” Harry broke in. “Look, if you managed to teach me Occlumency – I mean – well, how didn’t he find out then, you know, as it was happening? We’d have to remember what we’d done day-to-day or I never would’ve learned anything.”

Snape paused. “Hmm. Yes.”

“So maybe I wasn’t with you at all.”

“Don’t place your galleons on it,” Snape returned. “You have merely unearthed a new dimension to the problem.”

“So... we spent the whole summer together?” Harry finally managed, feeling as though he’d been caught off-guard.

Snape gave a small pause. “Your bookmarks are in half of my novels,” he said, finally re-seating
himself – an excuse, Harry decided, to avoid meeting Harry’s eyes again.

“Pardon?”

“That thing you do,” Snape replied, moving his papers slightly closer and straightening them, “where you transfigure something into a bit of white ribbon. There are three white ribbons in my books that, so far as my memory tells me, were not there last month. *Hamlet, Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart*, and *the Black Cauldron*.”

“More Potions books?”

“No, Potter, none of those are Potions books. They are a play, a book of poetry, and a work of fiction, respectively. My guess is that you were bored out of your skull.”

“I – I must’ve read your paper,” Harry realized.

“Indubitably.”

Harry’s shoulders sank slowly. “O-oh,” he stammered, flushing. “I’m sorry. I guess I really did steal the idea –”

Snape arched an eyebrow at him, the way he did when he was growing impatient with a student’s stupidity.

“I’ll – I’ll just have to come up with something even better,” he said, before he could stop himself.

To his surprise, the older man’s lips curved slightly behind the curtain of hair that was now an auburn so dark it was nearly black. Snape ducked his head a bit under the guise of examining the paper before him more carefully, but Harry had caught the – what? – approval? – amusement? He knew the professor wasn’t angry, anyway.

“You do that, Potter,” he said.

“Harry,” Harry told him.

“Yes – Harry. Come up with something even more brilliant. If you do, I’ll award fifty points to... Slytherin.”

“And people say you’re evil, sir,” Harry replied flatly. “Anyway – uhm, thanks for the headache cure.”

“Not a problem.”

“And, uh, thanks for taking so much time over the summer?”

Snape twitched upwards to stare at Harry, a slow, crooked smile spreading across his features. “Certainly, Harry. Any time.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, a bit of the mystery has been revealed, yes? Or at least summarized efficiently
by our Potions Master. I know a lot of people were waiting to see Harry's first lessons, and I hope that those people were not disappointed with the result.

I remember sincerely enjoying the writing of this chapter; it was a lot of fun to deal with people's reactions to Harry's Slytherin nature, although we haven't seen all of them, yet. For instance, the scene where Harry talks to his fellow Gryffindors is coming up next. I re-wrote that scene nearly ten times, but this chapter flowed relatively smoothly; not much was altered from one version to another.

You guys make the most awesome comments. Thanks so much for all of your thoughtful discussion!

-K
Unity in Adversity

Harry stood outside the Potions classroom for a full five minutes, arranging his thoughts before moving on; he hoped to be able to visit Gryffindor before his detentions began. That would give him time to state his case while allowing him to escape before things got ugly, citing the disappointed fourth-year girls that would be awaiting his arrival.

Unfortunately, it was not to be. Within moments of his arrival on the ground floor, a second-year ran into him, literally.

"Sorry, Professor!" the boy exclaimed. "Professor McGonagall wants to see you, though! Glad I found you, she told all of us to let you know if we saw you..."

Harry found this was all too true as he was stopped by not one, not two, but five second-years, all flushed with the importance of carrying the Transfiguration Professor’s message, so puffed up with the responsibility that he didn’t have the heart to stop any of them halfway through. Instead, he nodded gravely every time, and continued heading for the Deputy Headmistress’s office.

Professor McGonagall looked up as he entered, starting as she caught sight of the Slytherin scarf that he was still wearing. Harry smiled awkwardly and sat across from her.

"Well, Potter?" she inquired. "Anything you’d like to tell me?"

Harry fidgeted nervously, wondering why she had called him into her office to ask him if he had anything to discuss.

"I was up in the Headmaster’s office debating the finer points of House law for two hours," she said with some asperity. "The least you can do is tell me if I was wasting my time."

Harry slumped. "I don’t imagine any time with Professor Dumbledore is wasted..."

"A very Slytherin answer," she replied sharply, shifting her glasses up on her nose with one, rigid finger.

"Yes, well," Harry replied. "The Hat told me I’d be great in Slytherin," he tacked on, feeling slightly rebellious.

"But?"

"But I’d just heard that only Dark wizards were in Slytherin," Harry supplied. "Gryffindor was the Hat’s second choice."

Minerva McGonagall sighed, the rigidity of her shoulders the only other sign of her distress. "Severus is probably chuckling to himself as we speak. Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived: a Slytherin."

"First of all," Harry said, feeling more than a bit put out, "Severus is every bit as discomfited by this as you are, if not more. Second, I prefer to be referred to as ‘Harry’, or maybe ‘Mister Potter’, or even ‘Potter’, if you’re in a hurry. I get enough Harry-Potter-the-Boy-Who-Lived from the Prophet, thanks."
McGonagall eyed him, looking not the least bit disturbed by his outburst; but then, she’d dealt with them before, along with the various indignities brought on by the presence of one Dolores Umbridge, and seemed none the worse for wear.

Under her steadfast gaze and bland expression, Harry wilted.

"Your outbursts – Potter – on the other hand... now, they are quite Gryffindor. You had best learn how to control them," she tacked on firmly, "if you want to be an Assistant Professor for very long."

Harry hadn’t considered that his newfound position might be at risk because of what he had done at breakfast, and after a moment he said so. At least, he silently reflected, the outburst hadn’t been an Obscura-level difficulty.

"Even you are not completely immune to decorum and to school regulations," McGonagall replied. "A certain degree of professionalism is upheld by the staff. Tomorrow, you might want to show up in robes a bit cleaner than those you wear today, Professor Potter."

Harry gaped.

"And smarten up your hair a bit, if that’s at all possible," she tacked on, a twist to her lips much like Mrs. Weasley wore when Ron had tracked mud all over her clean kitchen. McGonagall’s eyes roamed over his hair and his robes, as if to catalogue his flaws, as though she was planning on making check-marks as he overcame them. "Don’t you know the charm?" she demanded sharply.

"Erm..." He winced. "Draco Malfoy used to do it."

"Come again, Potter?" Minerva sat up in her chair even more rigidly than before, and her eyes narrowed.

When Harry opened his mouth to explain, she cut him off with a brusque gesture.

"Never mind it, Potter, you’ll have to learn to do it yourself now. Repeat after me: Sortis!"

Harry pointed to his hair and flicked his wand. "Sortis!"

"There you are, Potter, much better." She frowned. "You may have to do it rather frequently."

He eyed her sardonically and pocketed his wand. "So, am I graduating a Slytherin?" he inquired.

She pursed her lips. "Not if I have anything to say about it," she replied. "You do realize, however, that this means you cannot play Quidditch for Gryffindor tomorrow."

"But what about Hermione? Hermione still enjoys all of the privileges of Gryffindor – she eats at our table and sleeps in our dorms – even though she’s said she was initially Sorted into Ravenclaw."

"Yes, Potter, but there’s a small difference. Miss Granger did not set the new Sorting Hat on her head. It did not proclaim her a Ravenclaw. And, due to that prudence on her part – and, if I may say so, imprudence on yours – she is still technically a Gryffindor. You are technically a Slytherin, because the Hat has proclaimed you so."

"What if I proclaim myself Unsorted?" Harry inquired.

"That could get you back onto the Gryffindor Quidditch team." McGonagall eyed him. "Very
"I'll take that as a compliment," he replied. "Uhm – actually, I'm sort of glad I ran into you. I had – erm... a teaching problem today."

The woman's eyes flashed, and she leaned slightly forward. "Yes? Do tell."

"I don't think detentions are going to work out," he said, flushing. "Professor Snape said he won't take my detentions, and after he explained why, I think I understand. But detentions probably won't be a good punishment for my – uhm –"

"Feel free to say 'students', Potter. It is not a presumption. You are teaching them."

"Er... yeah. Anyway, I don't want to be taking off House points, either. I don't like what it does to them, how it makes them think." He took a deep breath. "I told my – my students that they can't say anything nasty about anyone else's house, and if they did they'd eventually get a detention. But then –"

"Let me guess. A score of young things practically volunteered for the job."

Harry laughed. "So to speak. I think I have ideas about what detention will be like tonight, but I need some sort of punishment that is not House points or detentions, for tomorrow and the next day."

Minerva McGonagall smiled shrewdly. "A long time ago, when I was working at an office as a secretary, we had a curse jar. One of the other secretaries thought it lowered the class of the place to have verbal sewage polluting the air." She arched a pencil-thin eyebrow and shared a smile with Harry. "Of course, there were some who believed in the less subtle sort of cursing: the bat-bogey hex, Furnunculus and so on... schoolboy pranks, you understand. The idea was, if you cursed, you had to place a knut into the jar. At the end of every month, the money was used to hold an office party. After awhile, no one wanted to curse anymore because they had lost quite enough pocket change." Her smile grew. "Once the jar was too empty to throw a party – five knuts, I think it was – our boss took us all out to dinner. Those were hard times, so it was quite an extravagance."

Harry nodded slowly, some ideas coming to him. "Hmm... thanks, Professor."

"You're welcome, Professor Potter."

Harry examined her to gauge whether the older woman was kidding or not, but couldn't read the sharpness of her features.

"Make certain you're heard declaring your utter lack of House loyalty before tomorrow," she said with a nod. "And abandon that bloody Slytherin scarf wherever you found it."

"That's one knut, Professor," Harry deadpanned.

She rolled her eyes, but she also smiled her old, warm smile for him; and for a just a moment, Harry felt like a Gryffindor again.

Then he stood, and, nodding at the older woman, made his way back to the DADA classroom to hold his detentions.
Harry didn’t spend so much time as make a production of the entire affair. He swept inside the classroom and offered his most menacing, disdainful glare to the nine girls and two boys who had managed to insult another House three times before the end of an hour. Harry suspected that Phil MacDermot, Slytherin, was the only one who had actually made the mistake; the others were there merely to catch a glimpse of him.

"Welcome," he drawled in a surprisingly passable imitation of his Potions Master. One of the little girls up front looked ready to swoon, so he backed off on that one, literally and figuratively, scooting an unconscious step away from her. "Follow me, please."

The girls got up with excited titters, which Harry cut off with a slicing motion.

"In silence," he said. "This is detention, not Hogsmeade weekend."

There was quiet, now, behind him, except for the shuffling of feet and the occasional panicked-sounding whisper. Harry led the students to the Great Hall and flung open the doors, not looking back once to see if they were all still following him.

A slip of a girl with dark brown hair and heavily lashed hazel eyes raised her hand.

"Name?"

"Er – Corrie Lawson, Harr – er, sir. Uhm, what are we doing here?"

Harry smiled evilly. "Well, Corrie, I’ve been wondering whether the House Elves were really doing such a great job keeping up the Hall. I could swear I noticed a thin layer of dust at the foot of the teachers’ table this morning."

Corrie gulped as Harry conjured buckets, sponges, and a great deal of water.

"You’re kidding," Phil said, backing away from the cleaning implements distastefully. "I’ll get all wrinkledy!"

"What’s all that for, anyway?" a blonde girl demanded. "We can just use an *Evanesco*!"

"That reminds me," Harry said, offering his hand, palm up. "Wands, please."

"W-what?" one girl demanded.

"You can’t *do* that!" Phil exclaimed at the same time.

"I can. Hand them over, now." He raised one eyebrow in cool demand and prayed it would work.

Slowly, a veritable plethora of wands were laid across his open palm: cherry, walnut, oak, yew, willow, and a handful of woods Harry could not place a name to. "Thank you," Harry said quietly, stowing them carefully away. "You’ll get them back once you’re through."

"The whole place?!" one tiny girl screeched, patting hair that she had obviously carefully styled for the occasion. "It’ll be morning before we’re through!"

Harry eyed the room. He’d been cleaning for his Aunt Petunia since he’d been old enough to hold a sponge, so, after a quick bit of mental arithmetic, he knew perfectly well how long the Great Hall would take with eleven people working together.
"It’ll be midnight before you’re through, I expect," he said, "so I’ve taken the liberty of writing out a handful of special passes that will get you back to your dorm rooms with your points and your head intact." When hands reached out imperiously, he shook his head with a snort of disbelief. "Not until you’re through." He strode to the door, ready to go out and make those passes, because he had done no such thing.

"P-Professor! Where are you going?"

Harry whirled to face them, noting that his cloak billowed rather dramatically with the abrupt turn. "I will be back to check on you in two hours, then in four," he replied. He eyed them. "You had best get started, Miss Edgecombe, or you will be here all night."

Harry departed, but hung back just out of sight, watching his students bitch and moan for a good five minutes before resolutely picking up sponges. After the first fifteen minutes, a leader had emerged, and she was directing the rest of her brethren: ‘no, we ought to start on basically the same side of the room and work our way back, or no one will know if anything’s been cleaned already’ – and Harry felt ready to go and face his housemates.

Or, well, knew he had to. It was that or find somewhere else to sleep.

Harry slipped into the Gryffindor Common Room, which was far from deserted at this early hour – Ginny was curled in one of the chairs reading what looked like a novel, for pleasure – Hermione was in the opposite chair, reading what looked like a text, probably for pleasure as well. Ron was seated at his chessboard, Neville on the other side looking horribly confused. Yet none of the students of other years were present. It was as though they had arranged to have the Common Room to themselves. Harry swallowed past the sudden lump in his throat.

"Harry!" Ron exclaimed, standing and nearly upsetting the board. Hermione extricated herself from her book – Harry could swear he heard a tearing noise – and Neville turned around to face him. Ginny blinked in surprise. "Hello," the redheaded girl tacked on. "Where have you been?"

"Detention," Harry said.

"What happened, mate?" Ron inquired. "Did Snape decide you were at fault this morning?"

"Er, no," Harry clarified. "I, erm, gave detention. How were classes?"

Predictably, Hermione was already handing him a small stack of parchment. "We didn’t take many notes today, it was mostly practical work," she murmured.

Since Harry didn’t take fourteen pages of notes on a day when all they did was book work, he exchanged a smile with Ron.

"I saw that, you know," Hermione said disapprovingly, but her lips twitched into a smile, too. Harry retreated to the stuffed chairs by the fire, seating himself at the foot of one and resting his back against it as Hermione folded herself back into it, tucking her feet under her. Neville arranged himself similarly by Ginny, and Ron leaned against the back of Ginny’s chair.

"You, ah, weren’t all waiting on me, were you?" Harry inquired nervously.
"I heard you were a Slytherin," Neville replied in a deceptively calm sort of voice. "I heard that the Sorting Hat was right."

Harry swallowed. "Uhm – Neville... it, er..."

"You don’t have to bother about that, Harry," Ron protested. "I mean, come on! Slytherin? You? Just because some people," – and here he glared significantly at Neville – "...some people’ll believe anything a bit of canvas says..."

"Come on," Ginny said, frowning, directing her comment to Harry. "Detentions couldn’t have taken all that long. What else were you up to?"

"Well, no," Harry temporized, eyes sweeping the Common Room, suddenly realizing he was still wearing the Slytherin scarf. "There were some, uh, other things..."

"Did you get chewed out by Dumbledore?"

"No... Snape," Harry replied. "Sort of."

Ginny and Ron groaned in tandem. "Oh, no," the fifth-year moaned. "How many points did we lose?"

"I think he was too busy being shocked to deduct points," Harry muttered. He turned on Neville, who still looked vaguely upset. "Well, Neville? Isn’t there something you wanted to say? I thought this was your especial kind of courage."

Neville frowned for a moment, looking puzzled, an expression that rendered him rather childlike. Then he looked up and shrugged. "If you already know what I’m going to say," he told Harry thoughtfully, "there’s no reason to put my foot in it, is there?"

Harry laughed, his anger dissipating. "Guess not," he replied, liking the way that Neville had told him in no uncertain terms he was being a fool without really harming his pride. He wondered when he’d started to require that ability in his friends.

"Was there something you wanted to tell us, Harry?" Hermione prompted gently, closing her book. Harry eyed his four housemates thoughtfully. Neville was bumbling but could occasionally utter profound truths, the same way that Ron could occasionally be quite clever, putting things together that no one else saw. Ginny’s mind was sharp, and he knew that saving her life gave him a special connection to her. He took a deep breath and nodded, casting the strongest wards he knew around the five of them.

Hermione frowned in concentration, eyeing the area around him as though she could actually see the magic there. "What was that?"

"It’s a combination Silencio Perispherico and Sophia Terminalis," Harry said. "I saw Snape do them once."

When Hermione nodded and Ginny tilted her head to one side in an expression of curiosity, Harry began.

"Hermione," he began, licking his lips nervously, "could you ask Yolande about making another one of those Unsorted House badges?"

Ron crowed triumphantly. "That’s perfect!" he announced. "Malfoy’ll be in a right state when you..."
give him *that* to wear, never mind Muggle clothes..."

"Malfoy?" Harry pondered. "I didn’t mean Malfoy, but that’s a good idea. Yeah, make it two then."

Ron gaped in horror, but Hermione was pinking with pleasure. "Really, Harry? Really, you’ll wear one? Oh my – there’ll be a wave of orders in, I know there will! Harry, you may not know it, but you have such an effect on the rest of the student body -"

"I am well aware," Harry replied dryly.

"...and I just know that if *you* wear one, *loads* of people will!"

"We’ll see, Hermione," Harry said, not wanting to promise anything. "It’s true I have an effect, but sometimes it’s positive, and sometimes it’s not. You may get a flood of people – on the other hand, you may have people turning in the badges you’ve given out."

"Oh, Harry, don’t be ridiculous!" Hermione said, laughing and throwing her arms around his neck. "But what made you change your mind?"

Harry carefully extricated himself from Hermione’s embrace under Ron’s watchful eye. "Look, it’s like Hermione says, I love you both, but, uhm, I didn’t really want to tell *anyone* this. Ever. But, well..." Harry addressed himself to the bushy-haired girl. "Uhm, the truth is that I was mis-Sorted too."

Hermione clapped her hands to her mouth and Ron leaned suddenly and heavily on the chair back.

"One in five?" Hermione crowed. "I don’t believe *that* anymore! All right, Ron, fess up – where were *you* Sorted?"

"Gryffindor!" Ron grumbled. "I mean, of *course* Gryffindor..."

"I think you’re more loyal than anything else," Hermione said. "Are you *sure* it was Gryffindor?"

"Yes, it *was*, thanks!"

"There’s nothing the matter with loyalty," Neville offered quietly.

"Ugh, Harry, can you imagine having been Sorted into Hufflepuff?"

Harry winced. "Well, it wasn’t Hufflepuff in my case," he said.

"Harry, you *can’t* mean you were really –" Hermione began, then trailed off at the expression on Harry’s face.

Ron was staring at him, slack-jawed. The expression on Ginny’s face was so similar to Ron’s that it was almost comical.

Harry knew he should be allowing them some time to absorb the fact of his being a Slytherin – but it was as though he couldn’t help himself. "The Hat said I had good qualities for all of the Houses, it was really nice, but... but then it said I ought to be in Slytherin, that I could be really great there, that it was all in my head to... to be sneaky, I guess," he finished miserably. He chanced a glance up at the group to note that Neville looked slightly ill - more miserable than surprised.

"How’d you get Sorted to Gryffindor, then?" Hermione wasn’t looking at him, she was playing with a thread that was coming undone off of her pyjamas.
"Well, I’d just met you and Ron on the train, recall," Harry said, thinking back, "and Ron had said that all the witches and wizards who were Sorted into Slytherin were evil—"

"I said that all the evil witches and wizards were Sorted into Slytherin!" Ron countered, and he rather obviously was willing to look at Harry; his gaze was hard and challenging.

"Same thing," Harry said.

"No it’s not. Think about it for a minute."

Harry did. "All right, but that’s what I thought you meant, anyway. So when I put the Hat on, I said not Slytherin, not Slytherin, anything but Slytherin, and the Hat said that it had better send me on to Gryffindor, then." He shrugged sheepishly.

"You’re not having us on?" Ron inquired.

"No, sorry."

Hermione shrugged in return. "I suppose I can see it, Harry. I mean, you’re not exactly forthcoming lately – not that you ever have been. You keep your secrets, and other people’s, pretty well. And all the sneaking about we’ve ever done, you’ve planned, haven’t you?"

Harry smiled awkwardly. "Guess so."

"Just when were you planning on telling us?" Ron demanded, flushing.

"I wanted to," Harry replied fervently. "Especially second-year, when everyone thought I was the Heir of Slytherin... I wanted to tell you and Hermione so much, but I wasn’t certain of you back then."

"Like you still aren’t now?"

Harry frowned. "If I’m certain of anything, it’s you and Hermione, and Neville and Ginny and all of the other Gryffindors. I’ve just been a bit – under the weather lately, that’s all. It’s not a Slytherin plot, on my honor," he joked, raising his hand in the air, avowing innocence.

"Good," Hermione said in her most businesslike tone of voice. "Yolande and I are going to be busy tomorrow, stitching badges, but I expect the members of the Unsorted House will be happy for some more upperclassmen they can rely on."

"That’s kind of the plan," Harry replied. "Listen, I’ll bet you’re all exhausted. I have stuff left to do tonight, so..."

Neville took the hint, rolling to his feet with unaccustomed grace; Harry wondered if Neville had finally stopped growing. He must be six feet, or nearly, he realized jealously. Ginny went up the stairs as well, but Hermione and Ron both lingered.

"Well," Ron said with a cheerfulness that was just a hair too bright, ''I’d ask you if you wanted to talk, but I think you have talked, haven’t you?"

"No, I’d still like to talk," Harry replied. "There’s more I need to say." He frowned. "But maybe tomorrow night. I’m beyond knackered."

When Ron eyed him skeptically, Harry rose and moved to sit on the edge of Hermione’s chair so that he could look Ron full in the face. "I mean it, Ron, I’ll talk. You’ve been awfully patient with
me the past year or so. You too, Hermione. I know I wouldn’t be alive if it weren’t for you two, but that’s almost besides the point.” He felt himself turning red, unaccustomed to such blatant words of affection. "You’re both more to me than that.” He saw that both Hermione and Ron were pink, too, similarly unaccustomed – both to voicing their feelings and listening to him voice his.

"That’s all right,” Ron finally stammered. "I mean, we feel the same way, don’t we, Hermione?"

Hermione bobbed her head almost frantically, obviously happy she didn’t have to form a coherent sentence.

"It – it really doesn’t matter I’m Slytherin?” Harry said in a small voice. He hadn’t realized how scared out of his mind he had been until just now.

Ron moved around to face he and Hermione, his dark blue eyes earnestly searching Harry’s features. "You’re Harry," he said simply. "Well – I mean, ‘Harry’ and ‘Slytherin’ don’t really fit, as concepts go...” His expression shifted under Harry’s desperate gaze, first to pain, then to reassurance. "Blimey, Harry, you could’ve turned purple for all I care."

Harry made a small, strangled noise and threw his arms around Ron, practically knocking him to the floor and ending in a half-wrestle that had Hermione looking pleased and anxious by turns.

When Harry released Ron, he grinned at them both. "Thanks – I mean, I know neither of you really like Slytherins, but I’m glad you still like me..."

"Honestly, Harry," Hermione tsked. "Was there ever any doubt?"

"I’ll just have to change my definitions a bit, reckon," Ron replied, scratching the back of his head. He frowned at Harry. "What made you ever think we’d stop being friends?"

Harry grumped a bit before responding. "Well, I don’t know, Ron. Maybe my first clue was when you said that if there weren’t Houses, you’d never know who to associate with."

"What? I never!” Ron exclaimed.

"You did so, Ronald Weasley,” Hermione exclaimed. "We had a fight about it!"

"Did we?” Ron scratched his head. "Well, if you both say we did, I guess we did... but, I mean, Malfoy isn’t that bad, is he?"

Harry shivered suddenly. "Wow," he said. "Did you feel that, Hermione?"

Hermione nodded. "Wow," he said. "Did you feel that, Hermione?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, it feels as though the temperature of the room just dropped several degrees,” she mused.

"My feet," Harry said, "seem to be especially cold."

They both turned to raise one eyebrow at Ron.

"Yeah, yeah," Ron grumbled. "I got it. It’s a cold day in hell, I know." He shivered, himself.

"And don’t do that identical-expression thing. That’s spooky, that is."

Hermione grinned at Harry, then at Ron. "Well, it is late..."

"Yeah," Harry said. "I’ve just got to check up on my detentions, I’ll be up in a bit.” He said his goodnights and exited the picture frame, yawnning widely.
When Harry reached the Great Hall, his students were finishing up, exhausted and grimy from their work; even House Elves could not polish every surface every moment, and the Great Hall sparkled like never before.

He wanted to find some way of thanking the students for listening to him and respecting him enough to complete their punishments, but there was hardly a way of rewarding them without implying that their actions had been acceptable. He wanted to grin at them or at least pat them on the back, but he could do neither.

Still, Harry noted an odd change in atmosphere. Phillip MacDermott was chatting amicably to Corrie, whom Harry was certain was a Ravenclaw. The giggling group of girls, all Gryffindors, had obviously not remained cohesive in the face of such shared trauma as cleaning the entire Hall: somewhere along the way they all had become one group, one group fighting against him, and it was a wonderful thing to behold. Harry was certain that they would spend fifteen minutes or so happily abusing his character before heading off to their respective dorms.

This being-the-bad-guy thing wasn’t so bad, if you kept an eye on what you were doing.

Harry then called them up one by one to hand them their wands along with the special passes he had promised. For a moment, they milled uncertainly, and Harry realized that they were waiting to be dismissed.

"I trust that, in the future, you will learn to pay more attention to what you say," Harry told them.

There was a smattering of muttered, "Yes, Professor Potter"s that Harry found a bit off-putting. But then, he didn’t really know what else to say. He was so new at this that he could scarcely believe none of the students had yet pointed at him and shouted ‘fraud!’ at the top of their lungs.

"Goodnight, then," he added awkwardly.

Now it was a genuine chorus: "Goodnight, Professor Potter."

Slowly, the students dispersed, in clumps of threes and fours, and no longer by House.

Chapter End Notes

Several of my favorite Ron-lines in this chapter. <3

Next time in Secret of Slytherin: Chapter Thirty-Eight: Gryffindor Versus Slytherin. The return of Quidditch and... Draco Malfoy!

You're going to hate me. You're really, really going to hate me.

-K
The next morning, Harry woke early as usual, but used his time to flatten his hair with repeated charms and don his special bottle-green robes. Hermione did not yet have an Unsorted House badge for him, so he merely wore no badges. Come to think of it, the teachers did not wear them, so he supposed he was in his rights, at least for the next two days.

Harry checked himself self-consciously in the bathroom mirror – ‘Goodness, young Mister Potter, what have you done to yourself?’ – and headed down to the Great Hall, where he found that, other than Minerva and Severus, he was the only other professor up so very early. (‘Other’ professor - it still felt odd!) Harry sat next to Professor Snape with an apologetic half-grin at McGonagall, who eyed him and raised her eyebrow, smiling her approval of his clothing. Against all reason, Harry blushed, trying to decide whether he was pleased by her tacit sanction or offended by her audacity in attempting to dictate his wardrobe.

Snape was absorbed in some Potions journal, and did not bother to emerge to greet Harry; Harry didn’t mind, though. He took out his own work and busied himself with it, coming up with a handful of new ideas for his revised system of punishments. He also added one idea to the small list of new paper proposals he was collecting for when he resumed his life as a student.

When Dumbledore strode in, sharp and full of energy as usual, Snape stiffened as though the other man’s very presence had alerted him. He jumped when he noted Harry seated next to him. Harry tried very hard not to laugh. “A bit involved?” he inquired.

“Attempting to move myself beyond the events of this morning,” Snape replied, “when a young student in my house by the name of Phillip MacDermott insisted I check his wand for hexes and curses. When I questioned him, he insisted all queries be redirected to you.”

Harry snorted casually. Or at least, he tried to. It sounded more like he had choked. “I doubt you stood for that,” he replied, hoping his hunch was correct.

It was. Snape gave him an appreciative smile. “Quite,” he replied. “Still, Potter. Cleaning the entire Great Hall, without the use of magic? Trying to visit your blighted Muggle childhood on the entire student body, are we?”

Harry winced, stung. “I made it tough, just like you said,” he replied coldly. “Perhaps next time I ought to make them write lines: No matter how I am goaded, I shall not insult another wizard’s House.”

Snape sneered at Harry’s tone and buried himself once more behind his journal, while Harry busied himself similarly with his class notes, feeling oddly hurt. By way of distraction from the cantankerous Potions Master, Harry decided to search out Ewan and Rae, sitting hunched together at the Slytherin table. They were deeply involved in conversation, and, after a minute, Lilac came and sat on Rae’s other side. The three heads nearly knocked, they were so close together, and Harry felt a small jolt of nostalgia. Gazing around the Hall revealed that several other first-years were not at their assigned tables; Harry couldn’t help but issue a small smirk as he bent over his lesson plans.
Just then, Harry caught a flash of white-blonde hair and felt the stab of dark grey eyes on his own: Draco Malfoy had entered the Great Hall, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle. Harry jerked inadvertently in his seat, and he realized that something in him wanted to depart the dais and chat Draco up as if they were old friends – but a sense of caution enveloped him at the glint of Draco’s hard eyes and loping gait. Beyond that, there was a sense Harry got just looking at the Slytherin boy, as if he really ought to stay back. He wasn’t certain where the feeling came from, but it pinned him to his seat.

Draco Malfoy left a haze of confusion in his wake as he sat at the Slytherin table by Ewan and Rae, rather obviously welcoming them to the House, perhaps expressing his chagrin that he had not been present at the Hat’s Sorting. Harry could almost hear the words although Draco was now considerably far away; moreover, he had the odd impression that if he just narrowed his attention carefully enough, the words would come into focus, like the letters at his eye exams.

“Do not forget that your time is up, Mister Potter,” Snape warned him, jolting Harry out of the half-trance he had not quite realized was overtaking him.

“Huh?” Harry managed.

“He is no longer to obey you,” Snape informed him. “Both your and Mister Malfoy’s punishments are over. Remember what I told you: it is one or the other, Potter, or you are doing worse than merely wasting your time.”

*One or the other – befriend him, or ignore him entirely.* Harry had been certain mere moments ago that he had succeeded in the former, but now he wasn’t so sure. He busied himself with a chat to Professor Flitwick; in order to make his little punishments, he needed a fairly sophisticated charm, and he wanted consult the diminutive professor to double-check his work. By the time the professional conversation was over, so was breakfast, and Draco Malfoy was long gone.

The day ran rather smoothly for Harry until the sixth-year DADA students arrived, filing in with a great deal of jokes and laughter. Ron grinned at him unabashedly, but Hermione sat down and removed a fresh quill from her case, setting down a hefty stack of parchment before her.

Harry couldn’t help himself; his professional demeanour cracked, and he offered the bushy-haired girl a wide, appreciative smile as a thank-you.

“Hi, everyone,” he said awkwardly as Draco slipped in just before the start of the lesson. It was one thing to be teacher to the first-years; it was another to be that to his mates.

“Hey, Harry!” Seamus whooped enthusiastically, and everyone grinned.

“First of all, some announcements,” Harry said with a smile. “The Defense Association will be starting up again, on the first and third Thursdays of every month –”

There was a widespread cheer at this news; after all, most of the students in Lupin’s sixth-year Defense class had once been Harry’s.

“The second piece of news is that I am officially declaring myself a member of the Unsorted House as of today.”
Many of those in the room looked discomfited; Harry caught Lavender wriggling in her seat as he expressed his desire to distance himself from Gryffindor, and a rash of whispers broke out amidst the small group.

“Look, you all might as well know I’m doing it partially to be able to play Quidditch later on today,” Harry informed them, and he watched them relax. “But, well, that’s not the only reason.”

“Maybe it’s because the Hat proclaimed you a Slytherin in front of everyone,” Zacharias Smith said with a grimace.

“I’m sure that’s what the majority of people will think,” Harry said ruefully – and quickly, because he noted Ron turning red on his behalf. “But the truth is, I’ve been considering joining the Unsorted House for awhile now. This just tipped the scales.”

“I’ve seen you talking to some of the first-years,” Parvati volunteered, looking for confirmation at her friend, Lavender, who nodded.

Harry nodded too, leaning against the teacher’s desk. “Yes, but mostly I’ve been thinking about prejudice,” he said simply. “I think that us fighting amongst ourselves is exactly what Voldemort wants. Besides, Voldemort is terrified and disgusted by people who aren’t like him. Does anyone in this room really want to be imitating him?” He scoured the classroom with his gaze, and most of his fellow sixth-years looked away.

Not Draco Malfoy, of course, but Harry couldn’t tell whether that was because the blond boy disagreed, or from sheer principle. He wasn’t about to stop class to ask him, either.

“In that spirit,” Harry went on, rummaging behind Lupin’s desk, “there is this.”

Another low murmur filled the room as Harry placed a wooden box with a circular hole cut in its top.

“What’s that?” Padma squeaked.

“Every time anyone in this classroom insults another wizard’s house, they have to reach in here,” Harry said in a deceptively neutral voice, “and take a scrap of parchment. Then, they have to do whatever that paper says.” He smiled. “I’ve charmed them all like Howlers... so if you refuse to do them, they will eventually scream, explode, and likely scorch you. And shout the task you refused to perform, along with some verbal abuse.”

Hermione and Ron blinked in tandem and exchanged a startled glance.

“I think you’ll all agree that the tasks – which, I assure you, are relatively simple – are better than an entire evening in which you and I stare at one another. Right? Right,” he answered himself. “So far, in all of our myriad and somewhat dubious instruction in Defense, I don’t think anyone has covered defense against Charmed Objects. Please take out a fresh bit of parchment – this is a bit tedious, so it may take awhile.”

While the instruction on different sorts of charmed objects went rather well – Harry had secreted different bespelled items both from his own sources, and from random spots throughout the Castle, and the physical examples enlivened the lesson – the moments directly after were what worried Harry.

Zacharias left chatting up Justin, saying, “well, I don’t know who he thinks he is, but if he tells me to take a parchment, I won’t. It’s ridiculous how he was going on like he’s a teacher, he isn’t any older than you or I, is he?”
Harry noted that the blond boy didn’t make much of an effort to modulate his voice, despite the fact that he was standing just outside the classroom doors.

Hermione’s words were even less encouraging, coming as they did from a friend. “You’re somewhat... authoritarian,” she mused, leaning casually against Lupin’s desk, the better to confide in him. “You might want to give more pause after you ask questions, you know, instead of just rapping out the answers yourself when not everyone automatically understands what you mean. We aren’t all as brilliant in Defense as you are.” Seeing Harry’s hurt expression, she stammered, “Harry, that’s a compliment, you know!”

Worst of all, though, was Draco Malfoy, who left the classroom without giving him a second glance.

Once classes let out, Harry made for the dorms rather than the Quidditch pitch, abruptly realizing that his green robes would indubitably be taken for a support of Slytherin. He rooted around in his trunk for his rattiest black, determined not to mess up his dress robes, in any case. He caught a glance of himself in the full-length mirror half-covered by discarded robes, books, and joke shop items – there wasn’t much call for one in the room that he, Ron, Dean and Seamus shared, to be perfectly honest – and blinked in surprise at his reflection.

Sure, he’d spent some time primping in the morning, but over the course of the day, he had managed to forget how he looked. His hair, despite all expectation, remained sort-of neat, or neater than was usual, anyway. His green eyes burned brightly under the influence of his dress robes, and his skin looked far less peaky than usual without the black for contrast. More importantly, he was standing in a posture to which he was unused, shoulders tossed back, expression cool and almost arrogant.

He realized he was seeing his ‘teacher face’ and practically tore out of his nice things. He’d had no idea that he looked – like that. He did the catch for his off-black robes and straightened.

“Well,” the mirror wheezed, hoarse from ages of disuse. “It was a sight, Harry, dear, but I suppose all good things must come to an end.”

Harry, grimacing, ruffled his hair for good measure before heading off for the pitch.

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The weather was chill as Harry snuck into the Gryffindor changing rooms, beholding the team for the first time. Katie was there, of course, and, oddly, so was Ginny, who hadn’t said a thing about her placement on the team or lack thereof. When Harry inquired as to her position, she smiled at him and let him know that she had been appointed Chaser. He recognized none of the others, although it could not be denied that Katie had put together a very young team this season.

“Now, Harry,” she warned him darkly. “I’ve been willing to take you on despite the fact that you didn’t do me the courtesy of showing for tryouts...”

“I was trapped in the Chamber of Secrets,” he said lamely.

“...but I also realize you haven’t gotten used to any of our tactics or plays,” she went on. “So – stay out of our way and keep your eye out for the Snitch. Savvy?”

“Savvy,” Harry replied miserably.
“Good. Team? We’re going to lop off the head of Slytherin and serve it to them on a platter!”

“Ewwww...” Ginny moaned.

“Yes, well,” Katie replied anxiously. “All right, so I don’t have the pep talks down like Oliver did.”

Harry laughed, but he was the only one who did. With a pang, he realized he was the only other one in the locker room who remembered Oliver Wood’s coaching.

“But that doesn’t matter,” she said firmly. “None of it matters, because each one of you is bloody amazing in his or her own right, and as a team we’re nothing short of brilliant. So go out there and play hard, and play good. We’ll win the day without breaking a sweat,” she added, confidence glowing in her skin, in her voice.

“I like your pep talks better,” Harry muttered.

Katie knocked him playfully in the shoulder and then they were off, to the sounds of Ernie MacMillian announcing their names.

It was still quite unseasonably cold for the end of September, and Harry felt like it ought to be cold enough to see his breath – but only when he breathed out slow and deep did it crystallize in the air, misting and slightly obscuring his vision.

Draco, he slowly realized, was hovering as far from him as humanly possible, all the way at the other end of the pitch. For the first time, Harry felt a stab of irritation at the Slytherin’s aloof demeanour. What is he playing at? he wondered, grimacing.

And then the game was on:

“And Chaser Ginny Weasley, a new addition to the team, seems to be settling in well,” Ernie was saying admiringly. “Look at that girl go!”

Harry did, briefly, still scanning the pitch for a flash of gold. Ginny appeared to be running the length of the pitch on her broom; after a moment, she tossed the Quaffle at one of the Slytherin goals.

Harry heard the ring which signified her success, but he had no attention to pay the rest of the game; he had caught a wink of metallic brightness, and, fast as thought, he was diving for it.

Malfoy, however, had seen him, and strived to overtake Harry, approaching the dark-haired boy at a near-right-angle trajectory, heading for where he expected Harry to be, rather than for where he was... Harry realized that they would crash, but it wasn’t in him to give ground – or air – before the other boy... his days of obeying the Slytherin were over.

At the last moment, Draco swerved dramatically, pulling up on his broom, but it was too late – the two brooms tangled, Harry’s head knocked into Draco’s, and the flight path of both boys was disrupted drastically.

And the Snitch was gone.

“What a move by Draco Malfoy!” Ernie crooned. “The Slytherin Seeker seems more intent on keeping Harry Potter from the elusive Snitch than in capturing it himself!”

Harry, who thought it was rather typical of Malfoy to ram his broom off-course, took it in good
He shrugged at the Slytherin and eased his broom higher to see the pitch with more clarity in case the capricious Snitch made a reappearance, rubbing his forehead all the while.

“I couldn’t help but notice that your teammates have stopped attacking you,” Harry said casually, then realized it was the first words he’d spoken to Draco Malfoy in days, after weeks of constant company; the words felt strange in his mouth.

“They were concerned,” Draco replied, “over my loyalties.”

“And now they’re not,” Harry filled in, still feeling as though there were something strange about the discussion.

For an answer, Draco dove and Harry instinctively followed, leaning close along his broom, scanning for the flash of gold –

There was none, he realized: a feint. He pulled out immediately, followed Draco at a more sedate speed.

“Just trying to avoid a conversation, aren’t you, Malfoy?” he shot out – and it was a shot in the dark, but his words seemed to find the mark anyway. Draco flushed under his gaze, then growled, “leave it alone, Potter,” under his breath.

“Don’t think I will,” Harry replied cockily. “So, what’s made your schoolmates change their collective mind? You kneel in front of Voldemort and pledge your eternal obedience?”

Harry had been hoping to provoke a reaction, something along the lines of you wish, Potter, you can’t be rid of me so easily, and so he was startled by Draco’s visibly different reaction.

Draco’s broom jerked – he paled. Harry watched him swallow.

After that, there didn’t seem to be very much to say. Harry had forgotten the game below them, and he thought it was pretty safe to say that Malfoy had forgotten it as well. The pale-haired boy blinked at him unassumingly, his expression surprisingly blank, open, as though he were awaiting judgment. Harry, for his part, scanned the other boy’s expression, searching for the tell-tale sign of a lie.

He could not find one, but that didn’t change his opinion on the matter.

“I don’t believe you,” Harry said, and it was a statement of fact rather than an accusation.

Draco’s features twisted, his glare turning ugly. “Believe it, Potter,” he said.

“Let me see it, then.”

“See what?” he demanded, too quickly.

Harry edged his broom closer to the Slytherin’s, until the tail of his broom brushed against the tail of Draco’s. “You know what. I want to see your arm.”

“No.” Draco jerked both physically and magically away, flinching and unconsciously easing his broom away from Harry’s.

“Yes,” Harry countered. “I have to see it. I have to see it now.” He edged his broom forward again.

With a snarl, Draco was off, speeding across the sky, and with less than a moment’s pause, Harry
was following him, urging his broom to greater and still greater speeds, the way he had done that misty morning alone on the Quidditch pitch, testing how fast his model could truly go... Draco looped tightly through the air, but Harry followed... Draco feinted, speeding towards the ground, but Harry dropped directly through the air, letting gravity do the work for him, knowing he would be going faster than Draco by the time he was ten feet from the ground... Draco sped dangerously close to the onlooking witches and wizards, Harry a mere foot behind him, now...

“Slow the hell *down!*” Harry ordered.

“I don’t listen to you anymore, Potter!” Draco shouted back – then had to dip instantly to avoid the Bludger which had been heading for them. Harry was less than a heartbeat behind, but he still felt the heavy ball graze his hair.

Now he was alongside Malfoy, who rammed him from the side. His leg smarted, but he ignored it, twining his right leg around Draco’s left, so that it was not only impossible for the Slytherin to ram him, but also impossible to escape him. He rose in the air and Draco was bound to follow, however little he liked it.

Draco flipped to Harry’s own broom so that he was seated facing the black-haired boy; he knocked Harry in the teeth, and leapt back to his own broom now hovering below.

Draco’s diversionary tactic had not bought him much time. Instants later, Harry had his hands wrapped around the double length of Draco’s broomstick and his own, binding them together and making it impossible for Draco to escape. Harry fumbled anxiously for Draco’s sleeve, tearing it in the process.

The blond boy had been struggling like a man possessed, but once his arm was exposed, he froze, going suddenly limp in Harry’s arms.

Harry, for his part, had never really believed it. He’d thought, somehow, that Draco’s arm had been injured, or that Draco had merely wanted to maintain some of his Slytherin mystique – but there it was, in throbbing black, dark as pitch and twice as odious: a skull with a poisonous snake slithering up from its depths, set in and surrounded by skin pink with recent abuse...

Harry released Draco with a cry, but the fight seemed to have left the boy, who merely glared at Harry in silent, offended fury from underneath his fringe of pale hair.

Harry swallowed, then swallowed again; he couldn’t seem to take his eyes off of the Dark Mark; he stared so long and so hard that the image seemed to blur in his eyes, the snake emerging from the skull, flicking its tongue at him.

“You go the hell away!” Harry hissed angrily. “*You leave him alone!*”

It was then that he realized dimly that he was: a)incoherent – b) speaking in Parseltongue to an inanimate object –c) yelling at a mess of ink and magic for attacking his friend – and d) defending someone who was rather obviously not a friend in the first place.

It came upon Harry suddenly that he had been very, very stupid. Because while Draco had said he trusted Harry, he had never told Harry that he *liked* him. Draco could trust Harry because he was honorable. Because Harry was a Gryffindor.

Because Harry was oh-so-stupid...

The pain was so acute that Harry doubled over and thought he might vomit. Somewhere in the back of his mind, the thought rambled, and won’t that be a pleasant surprise to the spectators
God it hurthurt, and Harry slowly came to realize that he was about to perform an Obscura, and that he didn’t really care because this was the sort of thing that Obscura was really for, and the darkness was building in him, rising like a wave does over your head at high tide, and he was noticing all sorts of things he hadn’t before, because something in him was still subconsciously fighting it off, despite the fact that not caring a whit for Draco Malfoy was looking better and better –

He was cold, so cold he began to shiver, and the sensation of drowning persisted and persisted, no matter that he cracked an eye open to view the air around him, hoping to dispel the impression. His stomach felt even sicker, and in his brain was a scrambling, rapid-fire jumble of thoughts that often either made little sense or had nothing to do with the situation at hand. Paradoxically, the encroaching Obscura allowed him a certain cool indifference that enabled him to examine each thought as it flitted from his subconscious to his conscious mind and back again, attempting to form connections in the connectionless sea of combined terror, hopelessness, and grief that was seeing the Dark Mark on Draco Malfoy’s pale arm.

And suddenly it reached the point of becoming unbearable, and Harry, with a familiar feeling of resignation, decided to give in...

...when Draco made an odd noise in the back of his throat, and the Obscura collapsed, the backwash beating against Harry.

Harry choked, the pent-up energy still singing in him, although he no longer felt the faintest urge to do an Obscura. In fact, he felt strangely sleepy...

The pitch spun.

“Uh oh,” Harry said, aloud. His hands suddenly seemed weak and uncoordinated as they grasped for his broom handle; he only managed to avoid falling off by leaning heavily forward, and hanging on to his Firebolt for dear life.

Then he realized that Draco was already sliding limply off of his broom and into the void one-hundred meters above the pitch, eyes fluttering closed as he lost consciousness.

Chapter End Notes

Mwahahah.

That is all.

-K
Harry gasped at the vision of Draco falling, noting the entire scene as though it were a Muggle snapshot: Draco’s near-white hair, whipping in the wind along with his torn sleeve; Draco’s lashes, still on his cheek; the way he would land, head-first.

Oh, God, why didn’t I listen to Hermione? She had gone on in detail, once, about the spells that were and were not allowed on the pitch. It was why a cushioning charm had been used on Harry when he had fallen off of his broom so many years ago, rather than a simple levitation...

Cushioning would not do, he saw immediately. Cushioning would still break Draco’s neck.

The thoughts rushed through his head and back out like waters from a raging stream. Less than two seconds had passed since Draco had pitched out into nothingness.

Harry saw one recourse, and dove.

It was not the smartest of moves. Harry was weak, dizzy, scarcely hanging onto the broom himself, and with every passing millisecond, he was more and more certain that he himself would fall.

None of that mattered as he drew his broom into a nosedive, and then, when it became apparent that Malfoy was not drawing any closer, attempted to urge his broom to speeds greater yet.

To his dismay, he found himself decelerating. Of course, he realized, releasing his broom into free-fall again... the moment he engaged the broom, its inherent speed-limiting charms slowed him down... Draco was going to die, and there was nothing he could do about it...

In a spontaneous burst of raw, wild magic, Harry tore through the safety charms, ripping the carefully constructed spells asunder and speeding towards his target.

And then, ever-so-suddenly, he was on a level with Malfoy. Harry reached for him, reached for the other boy as though it were any other game, and he were a Snitch...

Harry saw the problem right away. They were still falling. Stopping at this speed would break his arms and probably Malfoy’s back. He had to find a way to correct their course...

...and, more urgent: he could not breathe past the rushing air, and he was dangerously close to passing out.

Pressing the other boy to his chest, Harry felt for that unnameable energy that allowed him to correct his course in any Quidditch game and swung himself around its axis, shooting up into the sky with a centrifugal force that nearly slid him off the back of his broom.

Harry let go of his control completely, allowing gravity to slow and then stop them nearly where they had started, one hundred meters above the pitch. Draco stirred and murmured in his arms, nearly causing Harry to drop him.

The entire affair had taken less than fifteen seconds.
Black spots were gathering at the edges of Harry’s vision, but he could still see someone with a banner of red hair approaching him... he had never been happier to see Ginny Weasley in his life...

As she came up alongside him, Harry gratefully relinquished consciousness, feeling her arms close around him as he slumped off the side of his broom.

When Harry woke to the familiar sights and smells of the Hospital Wing, it was with some degree of confusion, and for a full minute, he cast about for why he should be there. It occurred to his beleaguered mind that he had been at a Quidditch game, and had probably been injured, there. Most likely by a Bludger, as he didn’t really recall anything.

Then he saw Draco Malfoy, passed out on the bed beside his and it all came flooding back so painfully that Harry had to tamp down on Obscura all over again.

Obscura. What would have happened if he had managed that Obscura while out on the Quidditch pitch? He would have let Draco fall, he was certain of it. He certainly wouldn’t have tried so hard.

He really was such a sucker, for caring so damned much.

“Mister Potter!” Madam Pomfrey bustled in. “So glad you’re awake! Are you feeling all right?”

Harry nodded, wondering how long it would take before he really felt all right again.

“Are you sure, dear? You look a bit queasy.”

“I’m fine,” Harry said; and he was. The dizziness was gone, although his vision was still a bit blurry.

Oh. My glasses. He fumbled for them along the nightstand beside the hospital cot.


Harry didn’t snort, but it was a near thing. “He’s fine, isn’t he? He’s just passed out.”

Pomfrey glowered at him unexpectedly. “He’s in a right state, actually, malnourished and sleep-deprived,” she said sharply, “and then there is the matter of his father's passing.”

Harry froze. I will not feel bad for Malfoy, I will not feel bad for Malfoy...!

"I only wish the Prophet knew better than to meddle in other people's private business,” she commented, frowning. “Sometimes I do wonder why we insist on putting the pressure of such high expectations on our young people. Mister Malfoy is expected to live up to his name every bit as much as you are, Mister Potter.”

Harry nodded, knowing this was true. It did not make him feel any better.

At that moment, the door opened, and Hermione and Ron rushed through.

“Ohmigosh, Harry!” Hermione exclaimed. “That – that you’re even in one piece...!”

Ron shook his head in amazement. “That was brilliant, mate,” he said with a grin, but Harry noted
that he looked shaky and pale as Hermione. “Just – just don’t do it again anytime soon, yeah?”

“You have my word,” Harry growled, already wondering why he’d saved Draco Malfoy in the first place. He guessed it was habit.

“What happened up there, Harry?” Hermione demanded.

“Calmly, if you would, children,” Madam Pomfrey urged them, nodding in the direction of Draco Malfoy, who had turned over on his side and muttered something incoherent at the sound of their agitated voices.

“Sorry,” she whispered, then turned back to Harry. “We couldn’t see anything!” she exclaimed. “Only Draco falling – oh God! – and you catching him... and Ginny going for the both of you—” Without warning, she burst into tears. “Now that you know I’m Ravenclaw,” she sobbed, while Ron rested one arm gingerly across her shoulders, “I might as well say it! This heroics stuff kills me! It’s not so bad when I’m doing it, but oh, Harry! When you or Ron are...!”

Harry wrapped his arms around her, exchanging a worried glance with Ron. “There, there, Hermione; I’m fine, now.”

“Oh, I know,” she said, obviously impatient with her own outburst. She pulled away from Harry and wiped at her eyes, smiling at him. “You just really scared me, that’s all.”

“Sorry,” he told her earnestly. “Malfoy passed out on his broom.”

Ron frowned, turning to view Draco over his shoulder. “Yeah, we saw that much. What happened, though? Did he get hit? Did somebody say something to him about his father?” he added, eyes narrowed in defensive anger.

“Say something to him?” Harry laughed. “It’s what he said to me.”

“Things I say don’t knock me unconscious,” Ron said sensibly.

“I saw his Dark Mark, actually,” Harry told them.

There was a moment of silence. Then Hermione said, “you’re joking, right?” Then, “no, of course you’re not joking,” without missing a beat.

“Aw, hell,” Ron muttered, raking an anxious hand through his red hair. “Aw, bloody hell...”

“Yeah,” Harry tightly replied. “And then I started feeling really miserable, and then he passed out, and...”

“You felt miserable, so Draco passed out?” Ron wondered. “That’s strange.”

“Well, I reckon he was feeling pretty miserable, too... he probably wanted to keep the Mark a secret...”

“Keep it a secret?” Ron puzzled, turning again to gaze at Draco. “D’you really think he would?”

Hermione and Harry stared at him like he’d lost his mind.

“Well, Ron,” Hermione said in her most patient voice, “of course he’d want to keep his status as a Death Eater a secret. Considering Hogwarts is practically the stronghold of the Light.”

Ron’s eyes had gone wide. “You think he wanted the Mark,” he said blankly.
And suddenly Harry was filled with a rising tide of exasperation at Ron's inability to see what sat right in front of him and, “God, Ron, you are so thick,” popped out of his mouth before he could censor himself.

“Harry!” Hermione exclaimed, scandalized.

“Not like that’s a bad thing!” Harry hastened to add. “I mean, most of the time, it’s one of the things I like best about you, that things are so... simple for you. But Malf... Malfoy’s been raised for this, trained for it. He told me once that a murder is just taking control of someone in a final sort of way, like it was nothing. I knew he’d be a Death Eater then, a murderer. I should’ve listened to my instincts.”

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione whispered. “We all could have guessed it, but we didn’t want to believe it of him...”

Ron still seemed baffled. “You two sure do turn on a knut, don’t you?”

Harry blinked, exchanging a startled glance with Hermione. “Come again?”

“See, here I thought you’d actually made friends with him,” Ron returned, cheeks flushing. “Guess not, though. Just a Slytherin alliance is all.”

Harry, who really had wanted to be Draco’s friend, saw red. “What did you say?”

“You heard me. You haven’t even asked him what happened to him while he was gone. He might have been blackmailed, he might have been bullied, he might have been forced! I’m not even Draco’s mate, but I can see any of those things happening, and clearer than him going on with that smirk of his and deciding to become a Death Eater the moment he’d befriended you. I mean – I mean – it makes no sense!” Ron stood, and crossed his arms over his chest, as if forbidding Harry or Hermione to say anything more.

Harry felt cold from the inside out. He could not believe Ron was defending Draco Malfoy, and to him. “You don’t understand how Voldemort works,” Harry protested. “It doesn’t always make sense, not at first. Hindsight’s twenty-twenty – once someone has died...”

“Ron, Harry,” Hermione said in a would-be calm voice, her gaze swinging to Madam Pomfrey’s nearby office, “let’s settle down, now. There’s no reason to fight over it until we know more...”

The redhead was pink all the way to the tips of his ears; his fists were clenched, rage and pleading alternating on his features, gazing from Hermione to Harry himself. “I guess I just can’t turn it on and off the way you two do,” Ron said slowly. “I like someone or I don’t; I trust them or I don’t. I can’t flip from Draco’s-an-all-right-sort-of-guy to Malfoy’s-a-cold-blooded-murderer. It’s – it’s so stupid... don’t you see, this is exactly what they did to Sirius?”

“Ron!” Hermione looked shocked. “It isn’t the same – we’re not friends with Draco Malfoy –”

“Fine!” he exclaimed, storming away from them. “You two have no bloody loyalty!” He slammed the Hospital Wing door behind him.

After less than a second, he flung it open again. “FINE!” he tacked on even louder. “So I’m loyal! So it was Hufflepuff, all right?!” and slammed it again.

Madam Pomfrey came bustling out of her little room. “Just what has been going on in here, if I may ask?” she demanded. “I told you three not to raise your voices above a whisper!” She paused, catching sight of Harry and Hermione’s gobsmacked expressions, and frowned, turning slightly to
face Draco Malfoy. “Well, I suppose since he’s still asleep...” she muttered, turning and heading back into her more private domain.

For a long while, Harry and Hermione sat rather silently, thinking of all Ron had said.

You could have heard a pin drop in the Hospital Wing.

Chapter End Notes

Favorite chapter in this fic, complete. ;)

So this actually went through more changes in this, the third major draft, than most of the other chapters, and here's why.

Ron has a point. (Poor Ron, he so seldom gets to have one!) The thing is, Harry also has a point. And Hermione's wait-and-see also makes sense.

I think that in previous versions, I made it a bit too obvious who I wanted the audience to agree with. I think it's better storytelling, though, to let you guys decide for yourselves who's right; so I toned things down a notch so that their arguments (hopefully!) seemed more equally reasoned.

I think that paradoxically, Ron admitting that he was initially Sorted to Hufflepuff is his bravest moment. Ron's friends and family are everything to him, and to side with Draco Malfoy over his best beloveds must feel like a knife to the guts; but Ron knows he absolutely must do what he believes to be right, even if both Harry and Hermione think it's wrong.

Thinking on it, that's probably because friends and family are everything to Ron. Draco has lost his father, been forced into taking Voldemort's Mark (Ron believes)... and now, if Harry has his way, he'll lose his fledgling friendships as well. Draco can't lose everyone at once: Ron won't let it happen.

-K
When Draco woke, sunlight streaming across his face, he thought for a moment that he was still at the Manor.

He was rapidly disabused of that notion by Madam Pomfrey, who bustled in, pressed the back of her hand against his forehead and smiled cheerfully at him. “There you are, Mister Malfoy. I was beginning to wonder whether you were going to join us again.”

Draco sat up abruptly, groping for his left arm, where he felt the cotton of a soft bandage secured around the Dark Mark. He gazed at her wordlessly for a moment, taking in her warm smile, the strain at the edges of her eyes. “How long?” he inquired, and his voice croaked. The sound drew his hand up after it, pressing against the hollow of his throat.

“You’ve been here nearly a full day,” she said, gently.

He nodded, slowly; began to rise.

“Oh, no you don’t, dear,” she replied, pressing gently against the flat of his chest. “Not just now. Let’s get some food into you, first.”

“Not hungry,” he replied, and made to move again, only to find that his struggles were ineffectual. The matronly woman was stronger than she looked.

Just then, his stomach growled, and he flushed bright pink.

“Not hungry?” she inquired brightly. “Hang on, I’ll get Severus and you can chat while you eat. I’m certain he’ll want to see you, and it’s near dinnertime, anyway.” The mediwitch Floo’d his Head of House and came to seat herself at the edge of his bed. “Well now, let’s have a look,” she said, removing her wand.

Draco closed his eyes as she murmured a simple diagnostic spell above him.

“You’re a bit anemic, did you know?”

“Since I was a baby,” Draco replied, without interest. “I don’t pass out or anything, so I never really paid it much attention.”

“What’s your sleeping schedule been like?”

“My sleeping doesn’t have a schedule.”

The quip didn’t appear to amuse her. “Mister Malfoy...” she intoned warningly.

“I mean it,” he said. “Sometimes I go up to the Astronomy Tower and draw, or listen to music. Sometimes I play cards. Sometimes I walk the grounds until I get bored.”

“Does sleep ever enter into this equation?” she inquired tartly.

He paused, unsure of what he ought to say. “I don’t like the dreams I have,” he muttered, finally.
Madam Pomfrey blinked at him in surprise. “We have a potion for that, you know. You could ask your Head of House for it.”

“It prevents dreams? All kinds?”

“All kinds,” she reassured him. “Now, before you have any food, I’m going to give you a bit of Nutritive Draught,” she informed him, bustling into and out of her little office. “Here you go, dear.”

Draco took the steaming cup, glanced into it dubiously and back up to her retreating figure. He drew his wand. “Aurelius inimicus,” he whispered. “Aurelius toxicum.”

Nothing. He gave the steaming cup one more dubious glance, then swallowed its contents.

Professor Snape then strode through the Hospital’s double doors and saw Draco sitting up and awake. Some strain lifted from his face and he gave the boy an awkward smile.

“Professor!” Draco tried hard not to show how relieved he was at the very sight of the Potions Master, but knew he was only partially successful. The knot coming undone at his middle made him realize how tightly he had been wound. The worst part of it all was that tears were pricking his eyes.

Snape perched on the edge of his bed and looked down at Draco, moving to grip Draco’s shoulder. The Slytherin flinched away from the touch, but regretted his initial reaction when Snape’s eyes seemed to shutter and darken, and Snape’s hand moved away.

Draco felt worn as an old rag, worn and wrung out. “Sorry,” he muttered.

Snape shot him a brief glare, as if to demand to know what such an apology could possibly be for, but his expression softened when it caught on to Draco’s. “Talk,” he said, without preamble, and Draco smirked briefly as he realized that Snape was no good at extracting information. It was not among his talents...

“What should we talk about?” Draco wondered, an odd dreaminess lacing through his tone. He realized suddenly that there had been Calming Draught in the potion he had swallowed, and that it was beginning to take effect. For all his perspicacity, he had not thought to check for potions slipped in ‘for his own good’...

“Do not be obtuse, Mister Malfoy,” Snape ordered. He reached out for Draco’s arm and plucked at the gauze.

Draco began to jerk away. “Hey – hey, don’t do that! It hurts!”

He was lying, but Snape looked him in the eye and used his other hand to pin Draco’s arm down at the wrist while his fingers continued to unwrap the gauze far more gently.

The other man’s expression of horror and hiss of inhaled breath practically undid Draco. If a fellow Death Eater responded that way, what would the rest of the world think? What would they see when they looked at him?

“Draco,” Snape said quietly, his voice full of anger and disappointment, and Draco had the sudden urge, more than ever before, to make it all not true. To Draco’s surprise, Snape rested his hand over Draco’s Mark. The warmth of the contact felt surprisingly good. He blinked up at the Potions Master in surprise.
“Madam Pomfrey tells me you are not injured in any way, except for a significant lack of food and sleep. Why is that, Draco?”

Draco flinched at his tone, but at the same time, the palm of his professor’s hand stayed resting gently over the Mark. The juxtaposition of his words and actions confused the Slytherin.

“After having a long talk about Harry’s similar propensities at the beginning of term,” Snape went on with strained patience, “about how he avoids food and sleep when he is upset, after we talked about this and you actually managed to correct him of it – then you pick up these selfsame habits. I am at a loss.”

Draco blinked. “Y-you’re here to talk about my sleeping habits?” he whispered.

“Among other things,” Snape sniffed. “Well?”

The words to describe the – the other things were on his lips. What did Snape hope to gain by delaying the inevitable?

“Uhm... I just... I’ve been finding I need less sleep of late –”

“I have several potions brewing several levels almost directly below us,” the Potions Master commented almost idly. “One of them is Veritaserum. You can tell me this – or perhaps we shall wait a day or two. And on that day, I will ask you everything from your sexual preference to at what age you stopped wetting the bed.”

“Professor!” Draco exclaimed, flushing. “Fine, fine!”

Snape smiled at him, genuinely, now. “Ah, in that at least you are still a young man. Threatened with embarrassment, a teenager will do anything.”

Draco would have wanted to wipe that smug expression off of his teacher’s face except for the fact that Snape’s hand was still resting gently on his forearm, almost like the other man had forgotten it was there.

More like he was hoping not to forget, Draco realized with a sinking heart. The Professor couldn’t help but feel the lines etched into his skin – each curve of the skull was an angry weal that had only ever gentled under Snape’s touch. Perhaps the other man wanted to hear everything Draco had to tell him, everything – with the Dark magic and evil shape of the Mark as a tactile backdrop for every word.

Then he would just have to convince the other man that the bloody thing meant nothing to him – or, more accurately, that it was the ruination of his life on angry red skin.

“It’s the dreams,” he said bluntly. “Potter’s.”

“Potter’s dreams have been keeping you awake.”

“Yes.” Draco glared at him, daring his Professor to dispute the truth he knew. “They’re his,” he said firmly. “They’re from his perspective – the Dark Lord’s. And then there are his ordinary nightmares.”

“You stopped sleeping. Not a particularly clever solution.”

Draco sighed. “Yes, all right,” he said.
“Yes, all right?” Snape echoed. “Do not be ridiculous, Mister Malfoy. How long has your awareness of Mister Potter been in effect? To what extent are you aware of Mister Potter, his thoughts, his feelings, his dreams? Why didn’t you say anything when I requested the information the first time?”

Draco stiffened again, feeling himself press his bulk slightly into the hospital cot, as though he could push his way through somehow, emerge on the other side, but he kept his expression blank, icy. “Now who’s being obtuse?” he returned. “I know the side effects of the Imperius Curse as well as you.” He shifted up, so that his back was resting slightly against the bedframe, and ticked points off on his fingers with a casual idleness that belied his anxiety. “One: an increased respect and affection for the caster. Two: an increased awareness of the caster’s needs and desires. Three: the desire to be once more under the curse – from the same caster, especially. Put it together and you’ve essentially got a nasty case of dependence, especially if the caster and victim are compatible. But what’s going on with me isn’t only Imperius.”

“Explain.”

“It started in Dumbledore’s office,” Draco replied. “After the Imperius I was – I was aware of – I mean, Harry was there, yes, but it's not like I was focussed on him. I was so upset and confused, myself – what was a bit more upset and confusion, even if it was someone else’s? But then... I got this impression of a big, dark something rising in him.” Draco paused, then, looking up at Snape, who now looked slightly skeptical, as though what had been in Harry couldn’t’ve been all that destructive... Draco felt a crushing need to make him understand. “It was – it was –” For the first time he could remember, words were failing him. “Black, and thick, like tar, all congealing and rotten and rising to swallow him whole and from him to the rest of us –”

His Potions professor placed a hand over his wrist. “I am aiding Mister Potter in removing his Obscura,” he said quietly. “You do not need to place your soul on the line to help him in this matter.”

The Slytherin shook his head. “The... the Obscura. It rises up to cover him, and – and I can’t help it. I pull it back. I don’t have a choice, how could I let it have him? How could I let it have anyone? And every time, after, he’s... closer. After I connected to him in the Chamber of Secrets, I started having his nightmares.”

“I wish you’d said,” Snape muttered, running a hand through his hair irritably. “I would have dug through the tunnels to the Chamber by hand rather than let you, if I had known of any lingering connection. You keep too much to yourself, Draco...”

“Stones and glass houses, Professor,” Draco said sleepily. “And I tried to tell you.”

“Take your behaviour in context,” Snape advised, a wry note entering his voice. “You did not say anything until that moment, in the – er, ladies room – and then you pitched an adolescent fit. I supposed, first of all, that you would have told me about anything untoward when it was happening. More fool, me. I also supposed that you were merely trying to avoid involving yourself further with Harry by refusing to connect to him. Finally, I believed you would not give in at all, if you knew that it would do you damage.”

“Sound reasoning.”

“Sound and perfectly flawed,” Snape filled in, “apparently.” He peered at Draco. “It certainly looks as though the Calming Draught has taken complete effect.”

Draco straightened in surprise. “Eh? That was you?”
“Of course; I asked Madam Pomfrey to add it to your Nutritive Draught. I knew we would have to talk, Draco, and I would have to tell you some things that would undoubtedly make you... agitated. And you would have to tell me some upsetting things as well, I am certain.”

Draco nodded. “Uhm... I – I’m not sure you know why I went home –”

“Lucius had been scheduled for the Kiss,” Snape said, “in Azkaban.” His hand briefly squeezed Draco’s arm.

“At first I did not understand why Mother wanted me to see that... but she said we ought to – to say goodbye.”

Snape did not say anything, just patiently waited for him to continue.

Draco felt overly warm, even under the influence of the Calming Draught, and tugged helplessly at his collar. “Father and I talked for hours, though I can’t remember much of it, now. Mum had really come to leave him Granddad’s old wand so he could die like a Pureblood, very discreet, and we sort of slipped away.” A small attempt at a sneer briefly decorated Draco’s features. “A day before he got up the courage to use it, though,” he said, “and – and mean it, right? You have to mean it for the Killing Curse to work.”

“Yes,” Snape said. “You have to mean it.”

“Then Mother and I were on the trip back, and – and I was sort of thinking about what must be going on back at Azkaban... and the hue and cry they would raise, wondering how he’d gotten a wand, and, well, Mum having just been there, would they put her in Azkaban, too? And that’s why I didn’t notice. I think that’s why.”

“Didn’t notice what, Draco?”

Draco started at the sound of his own name. He had almost forgotten Snape was in the room. “All the people,” he recited, as though Snape should have known the answer. “The Death Eaters. At the Manor, I mean.”

“The Death Eaters were at Malfoy Manor,” Snape said slowly.

“Yes. They were there waiting for us there. They kept talking and talking at the two of us – me and Mother – and Mother said she wouldn’t let them have me or something equally foolish – and I told her not to be stupid, that I’d been looking forward to it all my life, Father’s stories and all, and on and on about how much I hated the Boy Who Lived...” Draco heard his voice going strange, rapid and breathy, but he kept going. If he was ever to finish he had to do it at one go.

“Then I started thinking what I should do, because he was there himself; you know, him, and he was talking about mantles and responsibility and I thought I would cave right there and end up screaming, and I thought it would be easier if I were more Gryffindor, you know, because a Gryffindor would’ve thought up some way to save his mother, even if it meant he would die, and all I could do was just stand there and take it...”

“You mean more like Harry,” Snape provided in a somber voice.

Draco was startled his monologue had been interrupted. It was so very difficult to stop, returning to the present, only to have to submerge himself again the moment he regained his equilibrium. Didn’t the other man understand that?

“It isn’t every Gryffindor who saves the day, Mister Malfoy,” Snape filled in, almost gently.
“That’s exactly it,” Draco said. “I thought – well, I contacted Potter once, I’ll contact him again, right? So – so I called for him. Again and again. He didn’t answer, and I tried harder. Again and again. Right up until taking the Mark, when – when all I could think of...” He paused, unable to shake the image from his mind even now, the one that arose as the Mark twisted itself into him. “G-Granger,” he stammered anxiously.

Snape’s features twisted in some unnameable expression. “Miss Granger?”

Draco shook his head. “It’s nothing to do with... with whatever it is you’re thinking. It’s just – well, she’s a Muggleborn. And I’d just seen her hair lopped off and shaken her hand. And there I was, kneeling in front of him. And I thought, if Granger could see me now, wouldn’t that put her knickers into a twist? And it all seemed – sort of funny, somehow. I wanted to laugh.”

“You were most likely skirting hysteria,” Snape informed him dryly.

Draco nodded slowly; he was desperate for any explanation of that particular impulse, the way horror and humor had twisted together in his gut.

“Just as well you held in your mirth. He might have thought you were taking the Mark lightly. May I judge by the disgust in your voice that if you were given the choice, you would not ally yourself with the Dark Lord?”

Draco looked up into the face of his Head of House, doubt writ on his features. “Will you kill me?” he wondered, although he knew what he had to say. The words buzzed in his mind, but he closed his lips around them.

“You idiot boy!” Snape spat. “Of course not! Whatever your answer, I shall try to sway you to my views.”

“And if you can’t?” Draco returned, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Only you would be so resistant under the effects of a Calming Draught,” Snape hissed at him.

After a moment of silence on Draco’s part, Snape broke and sighed. “If I cannot, I am afraid I will have to use an Obliviate to ensure that you cannot report me to the proper authorities.”

“Which would be...?” Draco inquired.

“You first,” Snape deadpanned.

Draco fumbled in his pockets for his wand, gripping it tightly before answering, just in case. “I don’t want to kill anyone,” he said slowly, feeling the words out in his head before allowing them to escape on his tongue. He closed his eyes to get a better handle on his emotions. “I certainly wouldn’t want to kill anyone for... for fun. And I sort of like Hermione Granger, although at first I rather thought she was the exception to the rule. And Dean Thomas, I partnered him once in Potions, and he was all right, except for the fact that he didn’t seem to want to talk much.” Draco opened one eye cautiously, pointing his wand at Snape through his robes.

Snape was looking at him oddly. “A child’s answer – from a child,” he finally said.

“Hey!”

The Potions Master tilted his head to one side, viewing Draco as though he were a particularly finicky potion. “There is nothing wrong with it,” he said at length; “the fact that you are a child, or
the answer itself. Sometimes I forget you and Harry are children at all; your decisions are too important for children. It is a lucky thing for all of us that childlike choices are so often the right ones in the end."

Draco puzzled this out and nodded, once. “You think avoiding – him – is the right choice?”

Snape straightened, eyeing Draco from beneath a sweep of near-black hair. “I think fighting him is,” he said coolly. “Of course, you are welcome to avoid that route as well; it holds dangers which most cannot imagine. I had hoped, however, that you might become a spy for the Light.”

Draco sensed that his jaw had long since dropped, and he shut it with a click. “Oh, Professor, you don’t want me!” he blurted. “I’m a coward!” He clapped his hands over his mouth.

“Hmm,” Snape said. “Calming Draught still in full effect. When was the last time you ate?”

Draco paused, counting back twenty-four hours first, based on Madam Pomfrey’s estimate. “Solid food?” he inquired.

Snape rolled his eyes expressively, and stood. “I will get some food Floo’d in from the kitchen. Then we will eat and we will talk.”

As Draco ate, slowly, listening to Severus Snape begin to spin the story of how he had become a Death Eater and how he had eventually (and secretly) changed sides, it came to him in sparks and flashes of hope that had been missing lately, as though the Mark had branded it out of him:

Maybe he had a future after all.

Chapter End Notes

The next several chapters are going to be pretty emotional for all involved. We're on the last leg of our journey with this story, as there are fifty chapters plus prologue and epilogue at this point - so just eleven more. :)

As always, I have to thank everyone for their comments and their interest in the story! Thanks for sticking with the me (and the characters!) through it all. <3

-K
Ron Weasley did not understand Harry Potter.

Well, this was not news. He had been not-understanding Harry Potter off and on since the day he had met him back on the Hogwarts Express. At first he had not-understood him as a hero, and then as a boy. Now he was trying to understand him as a teenager and it was tougher than the other two put together.

For one thing, Harry was still arguing with Ron. He was also arguing with Hermione, but less so. Harry was angry, Hermione angry and guilty by turns.

It would have been a bit easier to deal with without Harry brooding and sneering about the Common Room, showing increased resemblance to Ron’s hated Potions Professor with every passing day; he also hid from Ron when he wasn’t looming. The same basic principle went for Hermione, who slumped from corner to corner with book after book, each one heavier and duller than the last.

What was most incredible was that they were arguing over Draco Malfoy, of all people. Although, as his father liked to say, it was really the principle of the thing. Ron had started not liking the idea of House Unity at all, but it had grown on him over time, especially as he’d gotten to know Yolande Zabini and Draco Malfoy. His loyalty had shifted, so subtly that even he had not noticed, from Gryffindor to a very select group of individuals, of varying age, background, and House.

Honestly. Why prate on about House Unity if you didn’t really mean it?

When Hermione took out *Fleas on Fleas: the Microorganisms that live on Fungi*, and *All About Strangely-Shaped Rocks*, Ron decided that something had to be done. He stood, brushed invisible lint off of the casual clothes he wore on weekends, and went to visit Draco Malfoy in the Hospital Wing.

Somewhat luckily for Ron, he was saved from awkwardness by the fact that Yolande was already in the room. At the noise he made entering, both she and Draco looked up in an abrupt, startlingly similar motion, white-blond hair flashing in the sunlight streaming in through the windows, grey eyes sparking.

“You two are related,” he said, then immediately felt stupid. It was like there was no barrier between his brain and his tongue, sometimes.

“Yes, Weasley,” Draco sniped. “All pureblooded families are. Although I shouldn’t expect you to know, given how you were raised.” This was delivered with all of the Slytherin’s old vitriol, complete with patented sneer.

“Well then,” Ron said. “Glad to see you’re feeling better.” He hadn’t heard that tone from Draco Malfoy in weeks, and was genuinely startled to hear it, but he wouldn’t say so. Although he
expected it was obvious. Hermione was telling him he was an open book all the time.

Yolande stood. “Don’t be rude, Draco, or you’ll have no visitors at all,” she chided coolly. “We are rather closely related, Ronald,” she said with a small smile. “Draco and I are second cousins.”

Ron grinned at her, grateful for a way to ease into the conversation. “I can’t believe I didn’t notice it before. You two are the only ones in the whole school that have hair that color.”

Her smile widened. “Legend has it there is a Veela somewhere in the Black line,” she teased. “What do you think, Draco?”

Draco’s shoulders were hunched in an attitude of discomfort, his eyes flicking from Ron to Yolande. Ron noticed that he did that a lot, but kept the thought to himself. He’d learned a long time ago from his brothers’ taunts – especially the twins – that most people found it creepy, the details he cottoned on to. He reckoned that the Slytherin either didn’t have much social experience outside posturing and ordering people about, or had been finding himself in situations with increasingly unpredictable outcomes all term.

“I – I suppose it might account for *some* of our natural charm,” Draco allowed.

“Would you prefer it to be completely due to skill?” she teased gently. “I heard a whole *contingent* of third-year Slytherin and Hufflepuff girls swooning over you only this morning.”

“Slytherin and *Hufflepuff*?!” Draco exclaimed before Ron had a chance to.

“Professor Potter seems to be on a mission of peace,” Yolande commented dryly. “The younger years are particularly susceptible.”

“Speaking of *Professor Potter*,” Draco sneered, “why are you here, Weasley? As it’s obvious that the Wonder-Boy-Who-Lived can’t be bothered to meet me face-to-face... sending his bloody lackey...”

“I am *NOT* Harry Potter’s sodding lackey!” Ron exclaimed.

He froze. Bloody hell, there went his mouth again, off and running without any consultation from his brain. Under incredulous, blank gazes on the part of the two Slytherins, he backpedaled for all he was worth.

“Look, Malfoy, you may have *lackeys*, but Harry has *friends*. And that’s what him and me and Hermione are. And we argue once in awhile. Which is what we’re doing now. But we’ll make it up. It’s just...” And he slumped down next to Yolande, feeling the power of anger dwindle into uncertainty.

“Then – then why are you here?” the boy finally managed.

Ron glared at him. “Look, Harry and I *do* function independently.” He wiggled his fingers under Draco’s nose. “Look! Didn’t even need to ask permission.”

Draco’s eyes uncrossed and lifted up to Ron’s, meeting him glare for glare. “I repeat. Why are you here?”

Yolande stood, smoothing her robes. “So sorry, the testosterone’s positively choking me,” she murmured coolly. “Catch you later, Ron. I’ll visit again, Draco. ‘Night.” She moved to the door.

“Now look what you’ve gone and done!” Draco snapped. “Robbed me of the only company I’ve
had in—” His words cut off, his jaw dropped, and pink tinged his cheeks. He moaned and turned so that his face was buried in his pillow.

“Sorry,” Ron muttered awkwardly, scratching the back of his head.

Draco half-turned to face him, viewing him with one, gimlet eye. “You still haven’t said why you’re here.” He squirmed until he was half-supported by the bedframe. “Uhm. I mean, not that you have to go, or anything.”

Ron filed this away for further consideration, along with everything else. Draco could actually be sort-of charming, when he wanted to be. He had heard it was true, but he’d never had it directed at him before.

“I’m checking up on you,” Ron said, matter-of-factly. “You’ve been in here for days. Bit much for a fall, especially one where you were caught before you hit the ground.”

Draco eyed him in surprise, then finally frowned. “Look, er, Weasley.” And then he stopped, glaring incomprehensibly at some middle distance between them.

“Yes?” Ron prompted.

It became more and more apparent that the blond boy was lost for words. “Look,” he repeated finally, “I don’t know what obligation you feel you have, but it certainly won’t be expunged through awkward chatter or anything so inane. Besides which, due to circumstances rather beyond my control, I shall be a very dangerous person to know in the near future...”

Ron’s eyes trailed to the other boy’s arm. “Well, first of all, if anything, you have an obligation to me.”

Draco started satisfyingly. “What?”

“You owe my little sister a Wizard’s Debt.” Ron’s smile twisted. “Sorry if it offends you to have a connection to such a lowly family,” he sneered. He could sneer when he wanted to, although his friends nearly never saw it.

Draco blinked. “Your sister? A Wizard’s Debt?”

“You mean no one’s told you?”

The blond shook his head slowly.

“You’ve been here all this time and no one told you what happened?”

“Only that I fell.”

“You’re joking!” Ron swore loudly. “I’d want to know everything if it was me. Don’t you want to know?”

Draco trembled slightly with the force of wanting to know, but didn’t say anything. With surprise, Ron realized that he was not going to ask.

So Ron told Draco the story without being asked, noting with some surprise that Draco felt no discomfort at the thought of being rescued by Harry, but seemed genuinely upset by the fact that Ginny had then arrived and saved them both.

“That’s why it hurts so much,” Draco said at the end, sitting up and rubbing at one of his shoulders.
insistently. “It must have jarred when Harry caught me.”

“Is that why you’re still here?”

Draco nodded. “Both shoulders and just under my knees. I must have been falling too fast,” he added absently. “Why hasn’t he come?”

Ron started slightly. “Er... because of me. I – uhm, I said something stupid.”

“What do you have to do with it?” the Slytherin demanded bluntly.

Ron tried to find some sort of way to be kind about it. “Harry’s Slytherin and you’re Slytherin, so I reckon you’ll understand,” he said slowly. “You know he saw the Mark –”

Draco’s hiss of intake breath did not surprise Ron, and he talked blithely over it.

“ – and of course that upset him, yeah? The way I figure it, he would’ve just gotten over it after awhile. He knows you, and he knows you, uhm, probably don’t want that on your arm.”

Ron likewise ignored the gobsmacked expression now adorning Draco’s features. It was good, sometimes, to have a reputation for being a bit unwitting.

“But then I sort of interrupted his moping and told him he was being stupid in a very, uhm, loud way, and now it’s made him stubborn,” Ron finished.

“Made him stubborn,” Draco echoed.

Ron nodded firmly. “Yeah.”

“Weasley,” the Slytherin said, leaning forward and narrowing his grey eyes until they seemed nearly black. “D’you see this?” He thrust his arm forward, undoing the bandage. “Do you see?”

Ron stared unwillingly at the Dark Mark, wincing when he saw how red the skin was. It looked – he didn’t know how to describe it other than ‘infectious’ – as though some poison had been inserted just under Draco’s skin. The area around the Mark was inflamed, pink, and looked like it would be hot to the touch.

It was one thing to be told that Draco Malfoy had the Dark Mark; it was another to see it branded into the skin of his forearm.

“Do you know what this means?” Draco continued, his voice rasping. “He marked me himself. Him. He stood there, a million times more powerful than I was and he took me. That’s why Harry hasn’t come to see me. He knows the truth – what I am now. And that’s His.”

Ron wasn’t buying it, but he didn’t know how to convey his mixture of sadness, pity, and exasperation. He never knew what to do with Harry when he got like this, either. So he sat, and waited.

Eventually, Draco deflated, staring at him oddly.

Ron quirked a smile at him. “You talk too much,” he said. “I know all that. Except the bit where you’re his. You take up too much space to be anybody’s.”

Draco’s breathing hitched and his expression almost looked pained.

“I live in the same room as Harry Potter,” Ron went on. “Drama washes on over me. Besides, you
aren’t any Death Eater.”

The Slytherin made the strange mistake of glancing down at his own arm, as if to verify the presence of the Dark Mark. Ron couldn’t help but grin.

Draco’s gaze slid, then, to stare at the thin wool blanket covering his bed, shoulders slumped, eyes unseeing.

“Malfoy?” Ron chanced.

The blond jerked slightly in recognition of his name. “Sorry,” he muttered, scrubbing at his eyes.

Ron tactfully looked out the window until the Slytherin spoke again.

“Why should he come? Why should anyone, if they know?” Draco bit off. “With this on my arm I’m worthless to anyone sane.” He glared at Ron. “Why are you here again?”

Ron decided to be straightforward. “I’m sorry you got the Mark. It was probably really tough, and it can’t be easy to have it there now, like a little voice telling everyone you’re untrustworthy. I’m sorry about your Dad. I’m sorry you fell off your broom. I’m sorry your House is full of berks. And I’m sorry that Harry’s not here instead of me.”

“So you’re here because you’re sorry for me.”

“Got it in one,” Ron grinned.

“So long as we’re clear,” Draco snorted.

“Harry told me that you play chess,” Ron said. “Fancy a game?”

Draco blinked at him. “Er...”

“Good,” Ron said. He fumbled around in his pocket and withdrew his own chess set in miniature. “Engorgio,” he said, and they sprung back to their normal size.

“That’s the most beat-up chess set I’ve ever seen,” Draco said unthinkingly.

“Shut up Malfoy! I’m trying to be nice, here.”

Draco pinked, looking strangely humble. “You should know,” he said stumblyingly, “that sometimes my mouth and my brain are on the same Floo. I don’t mean anything by it. Most of the time.”

Ron shook this off. “Yeah, I know that. White or black?”

“White,” Draco said. “Are you very good?”

“Incredibly,” Ron replied. “You?”

“I’m getting better, I think.”

After that, there was only the hollow sound of wood on wood.
Ron went back every evening after that, and while it was partially because he felt bad for Malfoy, it was also because he’d found the only student at Hogwarts still willing to play him. Draco was sneaky, moving the pieces while Ron wasn’t looking, and distracting the redhead with elaborate stories that often ended with the characters in tight spots.

While the Slytherin was good company sometimes, of a sort, Ron realized that his initial assessment of the blond was right: Draco didn’t have much social experience where he didn’t order people around, and the result was a boy who said what he thought without first considering the consequences. There was at least one flash of temper on both sides every time Ron visited. He couldn’t help it, the same way Draco couldn’t help saying something stupid once in awhile.

By the time October was well under way, Ron figured that Harry ought to have cooled down. After all, the Slytherin-cum-Gryffindor was wearing his Unsorted House badge these days, along with Hermione (and Ron, really, though he’d gotten his from Yolande). He and Harry and Hermione were just beginning to be civil to one another again, when he said, “I really think you ought to apologize.”

“You're right, Ron. I’m sorry for calling you simple,” Harry said.

Harry had a way of being obtuse on purpose that drove both Ron and Hermione absolutely batty.

“I mean to Draco.”

“For taking the Dark Mark? For being a prat?” Harry wanted to know.

He was still doing that clueless thing. Maybe it wasn’t an act. “I’ve been by to see him –”

Hermione jerked in her chair, upsetting her ink bottle. “You what? Ronald Weasley!”

“– and he’s actually quite upset you haven’t been by,” Ron continued placidly. “He didn’t want the Mark; you know he didn’t.”

Harry’s green eyes flashed, always a sign he was about to be almost painfully grim. “You haven’t heard him say what I’ve heard him say, Ron. Or seen him do what I’ve seen him do.”

Ron straightened, giving Harry a glare of his own. “I’ve heard him laugh with you,” he said simply. “Tell you he trusts you. That’s enough.”

Harry and Hermione were both staring at him now, so he left the Common Room and went to loiter around the Hospital Wing.

Draco could still laugh, luckily, although afterwards he always looked startled, even mutinous, as though he hadn’t meant to and he certainly hadn’t meant to in front of Ron. Ron didn’t mind; he actually thought it was sort of funny the way Draco attempted to suppress every little thing about himself, from his hair to his allegiances to his wicked sense of humor. It was incredible how he’d never really noticed that before, but then, he hadn’t really been looking. Draco made such a production of himself that it required a certain degree of sheer stubbornness to peer past the shiny, well-cultivated surface. Luckily, Ron had that in spades.

At the start of the week, Ron showed Draco loyalty because no one else would, because of duty, or pity, or ‘the principle of the thing’. But now – now it was because of Draco, who was sarcastic and bitter, clever and narrow-minded, petulant and hilarious, guarded and rubbed raw. Ron knew Draco; and soon that was reason enough to come, and to keep coming.

He only wished Harry would see it the same way.
Ron was one of the characters who kept surprising me in dramatic ways in this story. When I began this, I had no idea that Ron would be on Draco's side, EVER, and OH GOSH THE SEQUEL, JUST YOU WAIT, GUYS. <3

-K
“You might want to consider apologizing,” Snape said.

Harry jerked slightly in his chair, where he was reading a book entitled, *Creative Visualization: Uses in Anger Management.* “Sorry?”

“Just like that,” the Potions Master quipped. “Point it in the direction of the Hospital Wing, however, if you please.”

Harry placed the book down on the desk and folded his arms. “Ron said the same thing,” he admitted. “But I don’t know what I’ve got to apologize for. I saved his life. If anything, he should be thanking me.”

The older man sighed, running a hand through his dark hair. “Harry,” he muttered, “you do trust me, do you not?”

Harry blinked. “Well – yeah, of course. You’ve only saved my life a half-dozen times. Not to mention you’re the only one who can help me out with this stuff.” He hefted the book.

“If you do trust me, then you will accept my judgment on this matter, and apologize. Very interesting, however, how you rate your loyalty to me based on my skills,” Snape mused thoughtfully. “Very Slytherin.”

Harry gaped. “I didn’t mean it like that! I just meant – I meant, how can I not trust you? That’s all.”

“That, Mister Potter, was a joke. I suggest you learn to recognize them.”

“I guess I ought to be used to them coming from you by now,” Harry admitted ruefully.

“You’re not the only one who has commented on my sense of humor of late,” Snape replied. “Yesterday, Lupin asked if I had begun dabbling in Muggle medications.”

Harry choked on air.

“Yes, I admit to a similar reaction. After that, I laughed, somewhat against my will,” he mused. “Then the man had the audacity to ask me if I was feeling all right.”

“Are you?” Harry inquired, leaning forward onto the open book.

“You’ll ruin the binding,” the Potions Master snapped. “Lean back, Mister Potter, if you value those arms.”

“Sorry.” Harry transfigured his quill into a white ribbon, placed it thoughtfully between the pages of the book, then closed it. “The question still stands, though. If you’re going to be able to ask me about my feelings and stuff, I get to ask you.”

“That doesn’t necessarily follow, but the answer is not personal and actually rather simple. Absurdly so. I am down to my last ten Obscura.”
“I’ve taken to removing them in the manner you are,” Snape replied. “Ridding myself of the Obscura is admittedly far more painful this way, but it is also significantly more rapid. They seem to be ordered based on level of severity in my case rather than chronologically, however. It makes for some... unpleasant surprises. I will admit to some dread concerning the last few.”

“I’d been wondering,” Harry said, leaning back. “I’m glad it’s nothing serious.”

“Speaking of which,” Snape said, “it occurs to me that, given your Obscura, you may be the only one I can talk to regarding a new project I am working on.”

“My Obscura makes me uniquely qualified?”

Snape smirked at him. “Given it is in regards to Sirius Black, I consider you to be the only one in the entire castle whom I can trust to be perfectly impartial.” He handed a small stack of papers to Harry. “Peruse these in private, Mister Potter, and let me know what you think after class tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, shuffling the papers around in his hands.

“Ready?” Snape inquired, putting away his remaining papers.

“Are you sure? What if this one is the one about Sirius Black?”

“I highly doubt, given your frequency of Obscuras, that you did not perform a single one between May and August.”

Harry nodded doubtfully. “All right.” He closed his eyes tightly. “Revealeo!”

When Harry arrived at the Hospital Wing, it was a quarter to nine, fifteen minutes until curfew. He knew he wouldn’t make it back in time, and risked being caught by Filch, but he was still carrying the Cloak in his pocket, and he knew that if he did not force himself inside now, he never would. Still he dallied, standing before the closed door, immobile. After all, a Death Eater was on the other side. Admittedly, Draco was a Death Eater he had grown to appreciate, even to like, but that was part of the problem, really. There was a small, insistent, Slytherin voice at the back of Harry’s mind, informing him in no uncertain terms that he was a naïve fool; that the moment he accepted, say, a handshake from Draco Malfoy, they would be sucked away via Portkey, straight to Voldemort. There was another, significantly more Gryffindor voice that ashamedly told him he’d been an ass, and the fact that he’d needed both his best friend and one of his former worst enemies to tell him so before he’d managed to catch on was not encouraging. He was not sure which instinct to heed.

In which case, he probably ought to trust Ron and Snape…

Shaking his head, Harry pushed the door open and slipped in, alerting Madam Pomfrey to his presence with a wave. The mediwitch was in her office, well within earshot; Harry figured she would be able to stop them if he and Draco came to blows.

And they might, Harry realized. They really might. Draco had been his enemy last year, and
they’d been in more verbal fights than ten other boys put together. Minerva McGonagall had once said to Harry that if he weren’t so peaceable and Malfoy weren’t so cunning, they might’ve torn one another apart a long time ago. The older witch had sounded almost rueful, as though if either boy had started a more physical altercation, that might have ended up resolving something between them. Harry wasn’t so sure. Their battles had started with words, and they had, lately, ended with them. Their last encounter, however, had been as much physical as verbal, and now Harry did not know what to expect.

He caught sight of Draco in the uneven light of the dimmed lamps about the Hospital Wing and the moon coming in through the large, many-paned windows that stood taller than Harry himself. The other boy was facing the window, his back to Harry, seated at the edge of one of the beds.

Harry paused, wondering what he ought to say – or, rather, the best way to say it – when Draco spoke.

“Well?” he demanded dryly, not turning.

The hair on Harry’s forearms and the back of his neck lifted slightly at the uncanniness of it.

“How did you know I was here? I mean, that it was me?”

“Simple deduction,” Draco replied, still examining the grounds bathed in moonlight outside.

“Who else but you would bother? Ron’s already been, today.”

Harry found that a little unnerving as well, and swallowed noisily. “Uhm, I’m sorry,” he said.

“For bothering?”

Harry frowned, not liking the fact that he could not see Draco’s face. It made it ever-so-difficult to gauge the other boy’s emotions, and Draco’s perpetual flatness of tone didn’t help. He moved around Draco to sit on the bed directly next to him, and tried to hide his surprise when his eyes finally did light on the Slytherin.

Draco looked awful. He’d been looking tired and somewhat worn over the past month, and he still did – but there was a defeated look to his grey eyes and a blankness to his features that Harry had never seen before. The moonlight coming through the window made his pale skin paler and turned his flaxen hair ghostly white.

It suddenly occurred to Harry that he might not be able to fix this, that there were some things – like curse scars and Dark Marks – that could not be overcome. He couldn’t conquer the Mark on Malfoy’s arm. He couldn’t rescue the blond boy, not when Draco’s enemy might well be himself.

But maybe, he realized slowly, doing what was right wasn’t always in the rescuing. Maybe it was in where you stood, and in who you stood with: as much in your day-to-day as in the Chamber of Secrets, or deserted graveyard, or Shrieking Shack. He was, Harry admitted silently to himself, much better at the latter sort of heroism than the former. People like Ron and Neville practiced the everyday sort like breathing, but for him it would have to be an acquired skill.

Harry sat gingerly on the bed across from Malfoy’s, eyeing the other boy and wondering where he should begin. He sat there for so long that his own eyes were eventually drawn to the pale moon outside of the window, waning, but still nearly full. He thought about how strange it was that his Professor’s worst fear could be something so beautiful and yet so mundane. To have what terrified you not only be omnipresent, but actually be a part of you – that was even more difficult. Harry knew that from personal experience.
“You’re still here,” Draco commented.

“Yeah,” Harry said, and his voice cracked from disuse. He wondered how long they’d been sitting there like that, both completely silent. Snores emitting from Madam Pomfrey’s office caught both boys’ attention, and Harry shared an almost unwilling grin with Draco, who blinked back at him uncertainly.

“I couldn’t stop them,” the Slytherin said abruptly, in a voice that sounded like a shout in the darkened, hushed Hospital Wing. “I couldn’t even try.”

Harry knew Draco well enough by now to know the sickness in his eyes – boasting was the furthest thing from the other boy’s mind. “You didn’t try?” he prompted.

Draco shook his head almost violently, his eyes staring out the window, but up close Harry could see that the Slytherin was not really looking. Instead, his grey eyes were flat, faraway, and widened with remembered panic.

Under the force of the very real anguish and fear in Draco, Harry’s heart twisted in his chest, and he called himself ten kinds of idiot. “I’m sorry,” he said, meaning it this time. He put all he was behind it, and hoped that the other boy could hear the force in the words.

Draco shook his head again, his eyes finding Harry’s for the first time. “Not your fault. Not your problem.”

“It is!” Harry shouted; then, when Madam Pomfrey’s snores hitched and paused, causing both boys to whip around, he repeated his words in a whisper: “it is… it’s my fault for not noticing, for not knowing there was something wrong when you came back – for not knowing there was something wrong before, with your mum showing up like that –”

A ghost of Draco’s old sneer made its appearance. “Potter,” he said chidingly. “You have the strangest ideas about what is your province and what is the province of others. Obscura, for example.”

Harry froze, then leaned slightly closer. “How do you know about that?”

Draco eyed him disdainfully. “Tell me you haven’t caught on yet? I’ve been stopping you from performing them – when I can. That’s what happened out on the pitch, you know.” He shuddered. “You were so horrified. Terrified. I thought you were going to pass out.”

“I almost did,” Harry whispered.

“I know.” Draco paused. “I owe you a Wizard’s Debt.” He raised his wand hand and Harry slowly, jerkily raised his in return. The Slytherin’s strong, slender fingers interwove with his, gripping Harry’s hand almost tightly enough to hurt. His eyes, no longer deadened, blazed into Harry’s. “Will you accept it?”

Harry frowned, flexing his fingers within Draco’s. “I didn’t know you had to accept a Wizard’s Debt –” he awkwardly began.

Draco’s animated features began to shut down again, like a slamming door that closed Harry out, and he began to withdraw.

Harry gripped the other boy’s fingers more tightly. “I – I want to, though,” he stammered quickly, when he saw that Draco still looked doubtful. “If you do, I mean.”
“It’s true that you don’t have to,” Draco said, and it was as though all of the arrogance and awkwara
ness had been stripped away from him, leaving him at his most essential self. Harry, noting that Drac
’s wand was nowhere to be found, found himself gripped with the certainty that this magic was more ancient than wands. “It – formalizes the debt, however,” Draco finished quietly.

Harry nodded firmly, a motion which was echoed by the blond Slytherin a half-beat later. Then, Draco began to chant:

“In waking or sleeping, in silence or speech; in pain and in pleasure and hope out of reach; in
defeat and in triumph, in peace and in strife; I give you this hand in return for my life.”

Harry gasped as his scar flared to life, attempting to pull away from Draco’s grasp, but that pale
hand held firm. After a moment, he came to himself, and realized that Draco had his free hand clasped firmly over his forearm, hissing with pain. “Take your hand off!” Harry gasped, slowly removing his own free hand from his scar.

Draco lifted his shaking hand away. The Dark Mark was writhing, hissing. “No bindings can be
made,” it said in Parseltongue, “save with the one who made me.”

“Fuck off,” Harry said, surprised when that translated quite admirably into Parseltongue. That odd
instinct on the pitch, the one that told him to protect Draco from the Mark, was rearing like a snake
itself, rearing to strike. “I’m stronger than the one who made you.” It was Gryffindor, running full-tilt
on sheer instinct and not thinking what lay ahead; but the snake within the skull paused, hissed uncertainly, black tongue tasting the air.

“This one has a connection to me already,” Harry said, knowing it was true, “and I am stronger
than the one who made you. You will go to sleep, and wait for him.”

The snake eyed him balefully, but when Harry hissed a challenge, it darted back into the skull, peering at him through the Mark’s empty eye sockets. Abruptly, Harry felt a tugging like that which preceded the use of a Portkey, just behind his navel, and gasped. His first thought was that somehow the snake had managed to defy he and Draco, and was taking them directly to Voldemort.

Instead, a brilliant filament shot from Draco to himself and back again. Each thwarted Obscura
became a thin, spindly, shimmering line, shining with the color of the moon; Draco rescuing Harry
from the Chamber was a dense and coolly glowing cord as thick as Harry’s thumb, traveling from
Draco’s head to Harry’s heart. There was their first encounter on the Hogwarts Express, the half-
dozen times Draco had called Hermione 'Mudblood' to her face, the Remembrall incident… The
Inquisitorial Squad was a dark, pulsing rope the size of Harry’s rescue from the Chamber. Every
ephemeral connection between he and Draco had become visible, concrete, the bindings of fate and
choice made physical.

Harry’s Imperio, their conversation on the Quidditch pitch about Harry’s friends, their entire
history up until this moment was in the whipping strands of light, and there was as much darkness
and prejudice and rage as there was kindness and casual acceptance, and tentative understanding.
Harry saw his own confusion reflected in Draco’s eyes, and smiled what he hoped was a
comforting smile.

Draco’s breath caught for a moment before he licked his lips and nodded jerkily in return. The
entire mass of cords wrapped around their still-clasped hands, shining in a way that reminded Harry
of Wormtail’s glove. He shook his head to rid it of the memory, swallowing past his fear.

The cords sank into their hands and the light died, leaving Harry blinking in the sudden, moonlit
“Wow,” he said.

Draco flexed his fingers and tugged, but their hands remained welded together.

“Uhm,” Harry continued, feeling less than articulate.

“It should be fine in a moment.” Draco flexed his fingers again, then laced them back through Harry’s. “What did you say to the Mark?”

Harry shrugged. “I told it I had more hold on you than Vol – than the Dark – than Him.”

“Call my Master whatever you like.”

“I thought only I got that title,” Harry joked weakly. “Anyway, I basically told it that our connection was stronger.”

Draco snorted, but his eyes were downcast and his shoulders slumped. “I thought so, too.”

Harry eyed Draco with concern. “Listen, I’ve been a real prat, you know? Ron’s so brilliant, I should just do as he says –”

“I think we’ve both had enough of obeying people for a lifetime, wouldn’t you agree?” Draco tonelessly returned.

Harry frowned. “You remember those – those lines. I was – I was still thinking of you with the dark half. I thought you’d be happy to have it, the Mark, but I’m – look, you can hit me, okay? I might feel better if you hit me.”

Draco scanned him up and down, as if considering such a thing, then shrugged and turned to look out the window again.

Harry tugged on Draco’s arm, suddenly thankful for the still-working spell. He tugged Draco’s hand into his lap, wrapping his other hand around it as well. The added contact caused the other boy to turn to look at him, really look at him instead of just stare through him, and Harry was grateful.

“Look,” he said, “I’ve been a jerk, I know it. Just – can’t you forgive me? Maybe? Someday?”

Draco’s expression shifted slowly from blank to hurt. “I…”

Harry waited anxiously, eyes wide and trained on Draco’s features.

“I just turned into one of your worst nightmares. I should have known you’d react like you did. I guess I did know,” he added disjointedly, eyes trained on Harry’s hands enveloping his own. “I’m not angry at you for that,” he finally said in a small voice. “I think I’m angry for an irrational reason.”

“An irrational reason? You?” Harry joked, but his voice was as quiet as the other boy’s.

Draco nodded miserably. “When I was getting the Mark, I – I called for you.”

“You – what?”

“I called,” Draco repeated, shivering, not meeting Harry’s eyes.
Harry scooted a bit closer and draped Draco’s blanket around him.

The blond boy didn’t even seem to notice Harry had done anything, and after a brief moment, the disregarded blanket slid down the small of Draco’s back and pooled there. “He was there, he was coming, and all I could think of was that—” He swallowed before continuing. “That maybe I could call you, like I did when you were in the Chamber, and—”

“Oh,” Harry said, his throat tight. “Oh, no.” Guilt twisted inside his gut, even as he realized that he never knew, that he could not have known, he thought of Draco calling for him, waiting for him, waiting for someone who would never come, who would never save him.

“I told you, it’s not your fault,” Draco choked out. “It’s totally irrational, like I said—”

Harry shook his head. “It’s—yeah, but I’m still so sorry—”

“Stop apologizing, Potter, it’s not necessary—”

“It doesn’t matter!” Harry exclaimed. “I’m still—Draco—I’m so sorry I wasn’t there—”

“Will you stop that?” Draco shouted.

Harry felt tears prick the back of his eyes. “S-sorry…”

Draco’s free hand was gripping the edge of Harry’s sleeve so tightly that his fingers were showing even whiter at the knuckles. His breathing was harsh and quick, and his eyes were hidden by his fringe as he hung his head. “I… order you… to stop… apologizing.”

Harry shook his head. “Not until you accept my apology,” he said, but very quietly. “Now, look at me.” He moved his hands, found he could separate them, now, from Draco’s, although a thin silver line stretched between them, connected at the center of their palms. He set those hands against Draco’s shoulders and shifted the other boy so that they were face-to-face. He thrust all of his earnest nature into and behind his words, gripping Draco’s shoulders hard enough to bruise.

Draco’s face lifted slowly, his features set in hard lines, and his eyes glinting.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said.

“Stop it,” Draco whispered, but his eyes were glinting with more than ire, and the fight had gone out of his voice.

“I’m sorry, Draco. I can’t imagine what that was like.”

The other boy’s lower lip began to tremble and he tore away from Harry’s grasp. Draco laughed wildly, tears in his voice. “Are you happy, now, Potter? You’ve seen Draco Malfoy have an hysterical fit. All right? Satisfied?”

Harry gaped. “No!” He gulped, wondering if he were going to regret this, but already not caring. He shifted his grip on Draco’s shoulders and drew him in.

Draco stiffened into his arms, going cold and silent as a statue, stunned out of his tears. The moment passed beyond what Harry allowed the other boy for shock, but Draco neither relaxed nor withdrew. It was as though the Slytherin were completely ignorant of the gesture.

Harry thought it might help if he added a soothing motion, so he ran his hand across one of Malfoy’s shoulders, rubbing gently. After another moment and an uncertain twitch, the tension
went out of Draco in a rush of expelled air, and his breathing became irregular again. Slowly, he
began to return the pressure of Harry’s embrace, but that pressure quickly became uncomfortable;
Draco began to grip his shoulders so hard that Harry feared he would have fingerprint-shaped
bruises in the morning.

He ignored that, mumbled the inanities that seemed to help Hermione when she was like this,
while shudders shook the Slytherin boy’s frame, a trembling so violent Harry could only hang on
tight. He wasn’t even certain Malfoy was crying – he seemed in a sort of despair-induced seizure -
but then tears became apparent in the wet slowly seeping through Harry’s robes, and Draco’s
fingers relaxed their hold ever-so-slightly. The other boy’s breathing slowed and, with a
shuddering gasp, he drew away from Harry, his grey eyes wide and his face bright pink. “Merlin,”
he swore quietly, looking frightened of his own outburst. His eyes caught briefly on to Harry’s,
then slid away to that infernal middle-distance again. “Merlin.”

Harry clamped down on the usual and infinitely stupid question ‘are you okay?’ and attempted to
ground Draco with the force of his will alone.

Draco shook him off almost absently. “That was – I haven’t ever –”

“You haven’t ever what?”

“I mean, I haven’t – I haven’t broke down.”

Harry sighed. “We all do it sometime.”

“Malfoys don’t cry,” he continued wonderingly. “We stomp and scream and throw temper
tantrums. Occasionally we set things on fire. But we do not cry.” He took a deep breath and
whooshed it out experimentally, looking far more alert and alive than he had all evening.

“Which may be why Malfoys are often rich, and powerful, and occasionally deranged,” Harry
tacked on, somewhat thrown, himself.

Draco turned to his bed only to find the blanket that had fallen from his shoulders; he seemed
surprised to find it there. After a moment’s rearrangement, he slid beneath the covers, Harry rising
briefly to accommodate him.

Harry gave in to the inevitable question. “You all right, then?” He frowned. “Are we all right?”

“There would have been nothing you could have done, anyway,” Draco replied slowly, as though
realizing this himself, for the first time. His cheeks and eyes were still bright with tears, and his
fair hair stuck to his forehead with sweat. “You just would’ve gotten killed. I think that would’ve
made me even more miserable than this.”

“Sortis,” Harry murmured, and the Slytherin’s hair shifted off his brow and arranged itself neatly.

For a moment Draco blinked up at him sleepily, an unreadable expression on his features, his grey
eyes wide and uncharacteristically solemn. A burst of confusion, loneliness and wariness exploded
from within him, then emanated from him like heat.

“I have to go back to Gryffindor sometime, Draco. You know, to sleep.” Harry was halfway
through his statement before he realized that Draco hadn’t said anything to him – no… he was
feeling the other boy. He closed his eyes briefly, focusing on the dark waters that were Draco’s
consciousness, brought himself close enough to stir the surface.

What he felt for Draco was still a jumble. Each emotion crowded his thoughts until he felt nearly
overwhelmed by them; then he relinquished them to Draco’s mind as a child sets small paper boats out onto the sea: first, his anger, the way something lit under him every time Draco Malfoy entered the room. Then, the wary respect he had felt as Draco’s slave, the tentative friendliness that had worked in them both. He thought of the way he would feel whenever he managed to coax a smile from the taciturn Slytherin, thought about how Draco’s tendency to repress amusement made Harry feel even more triumphant when he managed to make the other boy smile, or, once in a while, laugh in startled delight.

Harry tried to keep his thoughts simple and ordered, but he found that after mere moments he could no longer let each thought set sail and drift towards Draco – everything came at once, a veritable flood of information: his confusion, his horror over the Mark (which he had not meant to convey at all), his growing affection for Draco despite – because of? – his many foibles, and above all else a guilty twinge about his own recent actions and a protective streak surprising in its ferocity.

Harry cut the flow of information abruptly, gasping with the effort and with the suddenness of the sensation.

“Oh,” Draco said aloud, his voice sounding faraway. His eyes were closed, and Harry was no longer so sure that he was completely awake anymore. “Oh. Good.”

“I’ll see you in the morning, then?” Harry said, feeling a bit out of his depth.

“Mmmgh,” Draco replied into his pillow.

If it had been a whisper, Harry could have pretended that he hadn’t heard, but it was not a whisper that carried across the Hospital Wing to the door where Harry stood.

Thank you...

As exhausted as Draco was, Harry was unsure whether Draco had meant to convey that last, or not. Good night, he replied, firmly thinking the words.

Harry was careful not to click the door too hard against the frame on his way out.

Chapter End Notes

I always love the Ron comments I get from the previous few chapters. Ron is so relegated to the background as canon progresses that we often forget that when we first read Book 1, we were really fond of him as Harry's first friend. HP&tSS shows him to be strategic, brave, and able to admit his mistakes re: Hermione, someone it's clear he's derisive towards at the start of the book. But he doesn't seem to grow or change at all until some slapdash maturity gained towards the very end of the series, which is sad. :( I always wanted to see more become of him.

I think that I feel some echo of what my characters feel, and Draco's horror/exhaustion is so prevalent in this chapter. Now that I'm finished editing it (again), I feel a little bit like someone who's been swimming underwater - out of breath, my lungs burning a bit, taking deep breathfuls of fresh air, and somewhat surprised to find the world around me as bright and present as ever. I hope I didn't go too far with Draco's
emotions, but I think breakdown was imminent. And necessary for his growing character. There are other reasons he's upset, but for now, I'm keeping them to myself.

Happy NaNoWriMo, folks! Expect updates to be a little sporadic. Sorry, but the fiction, she is needing to be written, not just edited! <3

-K
Severus Snape was not much of a conversationalist. He did not make small talk. He said what he said – and often what others would rather he did not say – and then he made his escape. One of the greatest and most secret truths of his life was that people, both Wizarding and otherwise, made him nervous.

“Severus, are you all right?”

Snape started, and turned to stare at Remus Lupin, seated across from him on the other side of the werewolf’s antique oak table, which looked as though it had taken nearly as many slings and arrows as its owner. He and Severus had taken to marking papers together, sometimes late into the night; and if Lupin noted that their sessions tended to coincide with Harry’s little Defense meetings, he did not remark on it. “Pardon?”

“You seem disturbed,” Remus commented in the low, soothing tone in which he uttered most everything, including Expelliarmus. He toyed with his quill, twirling it between ink-stained fingers, gazing up through his lashes solemnly.

“I am sorry if I am disrupting your concentration,” the Potions Master replied with a sneer.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Severus, that wasn’t what I meant and you know it,” Remus said, frowning. “I’m trying to help.”

“Are you planning on putting a mark at the top of that essay any day soon?”

“You know me – I can be rather indecisive, sometimes...”

Snape sighed, standing from the table and beginning to pace. “Have you taken your potion?”

“Yes-of-bloody-course I’ve taken it.” He smiled, to take the sting off his words. “Now, you’re making me dizzy. Do sit down.”

“I am anxious.”

“I can see that. About what? Shall I echo you and ask, ‘what has Harry done now?’”

Snape whipped around to glare at Lupin, only to find that the other man had already risen to meet him.

“Honestly, Severus,” he said quietly. “Whatever it is, it’s all right. Stop storming about like a great raven and sit down.” He placed a hand atop the other professor’s shoulder and squeezed.

“I may know how to bring Black back from behind the Veil,” the Potions Master snapped. There was a small pause. “Come again?” Lupin whispered.

“I was looking at a Potions journal, and something I read sparked a thought. Draught-of-Living-Death amended with a handful of other ingredients coupled with a strong Protection charm supposedly enables one to walk briefly in the Land of the Dead, and return. The author of the article I was reading claimed that this legendary Potion could be made and used, and postulated an
ingredients list as well as some Arithmancical theory that fits well behind it. I believe it possible.”

Lupin stumbled slightly back, groping for his chair. For a moment, he stared straight ahead. Then, after a moment, his eyes found Snape’s, and the hope in them was painful to see. “A-are you sure?” he stammered.

“No. Of course I am not,” Snape returned darkly, his usual demeanour regained in the face of Lupin’s query. “I debated whether even to tell you before attempting it.”

“Why?” Lupin demanded. “This is the best news – the best news I’ve had since I found that he wasn’t a murderer!”

“He was anyway,” Snape replied coolly. “He nearly murdered me, with you as his unwitting accomplice – or had you forgotten?”

“You remind me nearly every day. How could I forget?” Lupin demanded bitterly.

For a moment, both wizards were silent.

“I did not wish to inform you because I fear it may not work,” Snape said. “Where would that leave you?”

“Back where I’d started,” Remus said. “And I’m finding... really... it’s not such a bad place to be,” he said, looking directly at Snape.

The Potions Master blinked in surprise. “Well,” he said.

“That’s a first,” Remus said, smiling his quiet smile. “Severus Snape, Potions Master, at a loss for words!”

Snape felt himself flush. “I most certainly am not –”

“You are!” Remus exclaimed. “If only –” He paused, looking thrown.

The delight drained out of Severus rather suddenly, and he crossed his arms across his chest with a snap of his dark robes. “Oh, please do finish the sentence. If only James could see it. Or Sirius. Or – Peter?”

Remus flushed, too, with anger instead of embarrassment, rising to meet Severus. “How dare you repeat that rat’s name to me...?”

“Peter,” Snape bit off viciously. “Peter, Peter, Peter.”

“James,” Lupin countered, his nose mere inches away from his opponent’s. “James-bloody-will-always-be-better-than-you-Potter...”

There was a small pause where the Potions Master took this in, the sneer on his face wavering. He suddenly snorted. Then, he began to laugh. What would his students say if they could see him arguing with another grown wizard as though they were scarcely out of second year?

“I hate you, you know,” Lupin said. “And d’you know why?”

“I could hazard a guess or two,” Snape replied, smothering his uncharacteristic laughter in the sleeve of his robe.

“But you’d be wrong,” Lupin replied. “It’s because you bring out the absolute worst in me. The
things I’ve said to you... sweet Merlin, I haven’t said anything half so cruel to anyone else...”

Snape’s laughter finally stilled. “It’s a quality unique to me that I bring out the worst in everybody,” he informed the startled werewolf. “You are in no way special.”

“You call transforming into a werewolf every full moon run-of-the-mill?” Lupin inquired.

“I deal with Dark Creatures every day,” Snape replied. “They are called first-years,” he added, and almost began to laugh again; then he gulped in a large breath and held it, containing his mirth, which it fell from his features slowly. He realized that he was babbling, and let the breath out in a long, low whoosh. “Draco Malfoy has taken the Mark,” he said darkly. After a moment’s time, his eyes fled to Remus’s. “And you are not to repeat that to anyone!”

Remus shook his head slowly, his eyes softening with sympathy. “I am so sorry,” he replied.

“He isn’t dead,” Snape snapped.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Remus soothed. “I just – well, he’s on the other side now...”

“When you have been a spy as long as I have,” Snape returned, “you come to the discomfiting realization that there is no my-side-your-side.” He looked up at Lupin. “Instead, the people I know fit into three categories: those I love, those I hate, and those to whom I am indifferent. All three sorts of people exist on both sides,” he added. He laughed again, his harsh bark of a laugh, this time. “I suppose I serve an ideal, then, in the truest sense of the word, in that I have picked a side at all.”

Remus frowned, puzzling that out. “I don’t know that there’s anyone I love on the side of the Dark...”

“But there was,” Snape said mercilessly. “You loved Pettigrew. You loved Black. At different times in your life, you believed them both murderers. Did you stop loving either one?”

At this, Lupin fell silent, hanging his head. After a moment, he shook it. “I suppose that means I am a bit mad.”

“It only means that your loyalties are to people rather than causes,” Snape said. “As are mine, most fundamentally.”

“A commonality!” Remus exclaimed in faux wonderment. He paused on catching the expression on Snape’s face. “I’m sorry, Severus. What did you say to Draco Malfoy?”

“Not very much as of yet,” Snape revealed. “Madam Pomfrey has deemed him malnourished and sleep-deprived, and would not allow me to wake him for the longest time. It was just as well, as I did not know what to say at first... Albus wants him for a spy, however. I am obviously outliving my usefulness.”

Lupin tilted his head to one side. “I don’t think so,” he said seriously. “You’re a fixture here, Severus.”

“Oh, and what is the glue that fixes me in place?” Snape sneered. “I am nothing more than another professor, wiping up after sniveling brats and containing the pretensions of my House –”

“Nothing could contain the pretensions of your House,” Lupin protested. “But that’s besides the point.” He eyed the other man curiously. “I see you won’t be convinced by anything but time. You’ll see – after the War is long since over, you’ll be here, reducing first-years into quivering
puddles of mush. In your dotage,” he tacked on, his expression now suspiciously smooth.

“Oh, but by that time,” Snape mused, “Granger or Potter or both will be teaching here as well. I am not certain I could stand to have either one of them for a colleague. No, I shall live out the remainder of my years in – hmm...”

“A cave,” Lupin suggested mildly.

“A deserted one,” Snape added.

“With bats.”

During school, Snape had often wondered what made Potter and Black hang around quiet, bookish Remus Lupin; and after the infamous trip to the Shrieking Shack in his fourth year, he had supposed that it was the lure of being aware you were friends with a werewolf. He had never thought that the shyest boy of their year, always half-hidden behind some text or other, should have such a dry, witty sense of humor.

His school days reminded him of the last Obscura he had Revealed, one of the greatest humiliations of his life. He had been upside-down and hanging from the branches of a tree, and then he had blacked out.

Or so he had thought, all these years.

Instead, what he had actually done was unwittingly perform his first Obscura, which, until now, had made the rest of the memory fuzzy.

Last night he had seen it in full: Remus tossed his book down in the dirt and shoved James, whose concentration then broke; Lily clambered up the tree during the distraction; and it was Peter of all people who had helped her ease him down. Snape recalled Lily’s voice, high with tension, overwrought and furious to the point of murder. He had never before nor ever since heard that tone from Lily Evans.

If he hadn’t buried that memory, he might’ve been friends with Lily beyond the necessity of completed Potions assignments. He might have had Peter and Remus for friends, if he’d bothered to try; and while perhaps Peter Pettigrew had not turned out to be the most loyal of friends, he certainly found the werewolf’s company... tolerable.

It was as though in ridding himself of the horror of the memory, he had also submerged any good that could have come of it, burying the only redeeming part of the whole debacle.

Snape felt the urge to apologize for his behaviour to Remus after the boy had risked the friends that meant so much to him – he’d been abominable to him and to Lily, afterwards, treated them as terribly as he had the others – but he wasn’t certain how.

Maybe Lupin didn’t even recall the humiliation, which was, after all, Severus's. It was years ago, now.

Severus would do well to remember that.

When Snape looked up, Remus had returned to grading papers, marking and circling an ‘E’ at the top right corner in red ink. “I’m not normally bothered by these silences of yours,” he commented when he caught Snape looking at him again, “but they are growing in frequency. I understand you have a lot on your mind, but I don’t believe it’s healthy for you of all people to be quiet that long. Sometimes I think that when you’re silent, it only means you have one of your diatribes blasting
away internally.”

Severus flinched.

“Do you?” Remus demanded in surprise. “Do you really?” He paused, obviously taken aback by the expression on Severus’s face. “Never mind. Papers are safer,” Remus muttered with affected gravity, turning once more to his stack.

“I’ll take my leave of you, then. There is... something I have yet to do.”


“To think that Albus foresaw your talents where I did not,” the Potions Master sneered. “You can mark second-years and tell time.”

“You’re funnier every moment.” Lupin commented dryly. After a moment’s quiet, while Severus shrugged and moved for the door, the werewolf slammed his quill down. “Why did you have to tell me about Sirius now?” he demanded. “I won’t be able to sleep, you know.”

“Then once the three days are over you should be very exhausted, indeed. That is how long I expect to wait for the last of the Potions ingredients to come in. I suggest you sleep now, and obsess later. Preferably while I am not present?” He twitched a derisive eyebrow in Remus’s general direction before departing in a dramatic swirl of robes.

Snape moved from his showers, dripping and shivering, and lay himself quietly down underneath the bedclothes. He found it was best to perform Revealeo once one was completely prepared for sleep. The first two times he had told himself that he could handle the pain and energy deficiency with a thought, or, perhaps, a well-made potion.

Both times, he had blacked out and woken in his school robes in the morning, stiff in a thousand unnamed places. Now he knew better, and prepared. Still, it seemed to him like he was a man preparing himself for a nightmare – complete with pyjamas, just to add to the sense of the surreal.

Last night, it had been the torture of a Muggle child, and her subsequent rape playing across his consciousness. For all that had gone on before, it was the pain and uncomprehending raw terror in her face when she caught and held his eye that had finally sent him into the bushes to vomit. He had been nineteen.

Nine to go. He could feel them, crowding for his attention like confused first-years tugging at his sleeve in the classroom. He placed the necessary glass of water upon his nightstand: near enough so that he could not knock it away if his arm flailed out, close enough so that all he would have to do would be sit up and lean over if he needed it. Sometimes, especially lately, the dreams left him parched beyond all comprehension, and he had to gulp an entire glass of water before he began to once more feel human.

His breathing was already quickening, and he cursed himself for weakness.

“Revealeo!”

The pain came, stabbing sharp, the kind that ignored the fact that certain nerve endings and
helpless ways of thinking had long been burned out of him; it sank into his mind, a scalpel cutting the cancers away from him.

He gasped as the darkness lifted free of him, and he identified the *Obscura*:

He was afraid that Potter would die.

*When? He’s nearly died so very many times...*

Snape, panting, sweat-covered, examined the memory.

Potter was hurt, in pain. It was very bad. Severus could almost hear the screaming. No – no, he’d never heard Harry scream like that, he would have remembered, surely.

Sweet Merlin, it was just the way the little girl had screamed: not in hope of rescue, but to express and release her pain, like a wounded animal.

Snape stiffened in his bed, eyes narrowing. *From the summer – it has to be,* drifted through his thoughts, but he shoved that impatiently aside. The tissue around tumors were made to protect the rest of the body from the harm they contained... Could it be that an *Obscura* had actually served to protect this memory from tampering, to keep it safe?

He closed his eyes, forced himself to listen closely to the sound, the sound of Harry’s terrified screams...

...and in mere moments he was transported to the voice, colors bleeding together to make a picture, rough wool covering his arms as he –

As he carried Harry Potter, who was screaming loudly enough to wake the dead. He was transferring him from one cot to another, and perhaps time was of the essence, or he would have used *Mobilicorpus*?

His intent drifted back to him through time, sluggish as old molasses but definite and reliable: he was trying to keep Harry from hurting himself, and *Mobilicorpus* wouldn’t do the job. As Snape watched, nearly an outside observer to himself, he saw his own form place Harry down on – where? Was that in his own chambers? There was someone else in the room...

Albus. Of course.

Snape caught Harry’s arms and held them. “*Petrificus –*”

“We cannot risk it!” Albus exclaimed. “Harry must be able to fight him!”

Snape blinked in his bed as he felt the rush of remembered fury that had gripped him.

“He is not fighting! He is dying! I don’t see how keeping him from –” – a breathless moment, where one of Harry’s hands slipped free and raked at his pale skin, drawing blood, gave him pause. “He cannot do this! He is a child, and a hopeless failure at Occlumency besides!” he shouted, as Albus remained sad but impassive. “*The Dark Lord will tear him to pieces and there will be nothing left. What will become of your golden child then, Albus?*” He was bruising Potter’s wrists, and didn’t care. It had occurred to him in a stunning and almost painful rush to wonder if anyone cared for Harry Potter very much at all. Here the boy was, dying, and all Albus could do was shake his head in sorrow, as if he were some sort of blasted phoenix pushing its chick out of the nest?
The unfamiliar feeling of solidarity with Potter caused him to growl and glare at the Headmaster. “If you are unwilling to help, you may as well depart.”

There was precious little time to begin with, and now he had spent it arguing. He could have used the help of a student, or some sympathetic faculty, but he and Albus were the only ones who had elected to stay over the summer holidays, and the Headmaster was rather obviously useless.

Snape stared briefly at Harry, still screaming through a ravaged throat, before shaking himself into action. He transfigured a throw pillow into rope and bound the teenager there so that he could visit his Potions stores, secure in the knowledge that the boy could not do himself any more damage.

He moved to the Potions cabinet, forcing himself into calm. A mistake now could be deadly. He claimed a double-dose of Calming Draught and, on second thought, downed the last of the bottle himself before arriving once more at Harry’s side.

He immediately regretted his selfishness when an abrupt motion of Harry’s knocked the glass from his hand with a crash. The phial could be repaired, but there was no gathering the spilled potion.

“Damn it, Potter!” he shouted, fear beginning to eat away at his composure. “If you’ve ever listened to me, listen now! Blank your mind, Potter! Occlude!” Snape knew that he could do it, could slam a powerful barrier between the Dark Lord and the boy... but the Serpent-eyed bastard would know it, would recognize him, his mental signature, and then the Order would no longer have its spy...

While he puzzled, the boy’s screams continued unabated, although the rattle as Harry gasped for breath signaled that he would not be screaming for very much longer.

“Potter!” he shouted, but it was no good; Harry jolted, as though moved by the sound of a cry from a faraway room, but he was too absorbed, too ensconced in his own private pain to be very aware of his surroundings.

“Potter!” he said, shaking the boy for emphasis. “Harry! Do you know where you are? Do you know who I am?”

“Professor?” Harry managed, lids flickering to reveal a slit of feverish green eyes.

“Good,” Snape praised. “Can you hear me? Can you try to listen?”

Harry moaned, then screamed afresh, screamed unabated until he actually began to frighten Severus. The boy turned on his side and coughed, falling onto his back the moment he could get air.

He’d left the pillow damp with blood.

At that moment he was certain Harry Potter would die. In that moment, he was certain he had chosen the wrong side after all. It was the moment he knew for a fact that the fairy-tale nonsense of the Boy Hero who would save the Wizarding World was just that: a fairy tale.

It all rushed upon him, the hopelessness, the foolishness, all striking him like a Confundus Charm, and he rapidly performed an Obscura because he could not afford such a wasteful imprudence as a panic attack.

“None of this foolishness, boy! You will listen!”

It seemed to work. Harry nodded jerkily, bit back the beginnings of a scream, only allowing it to
escape him when the pain caused him to lose control utterly. Snape pressed his hands into the boy’s shoulders, hoping the real pain would bring Harry to the here and now.

“Empty your mind of all emotion! Fear, anger – none of it matters! There is only pain and absence of pain. Do you understand?”

When Harry didn’t respond, Snape increased the pressure on Harry’s shoulders, digging his nails in until the boy cried out.

“How do you understand?!”

Harry nodded again, and the Potions Master watched him wrestle for the calm necessary for Occlumency, watched his features empty of all fear.


Harry gasped, and Snape realized the boy was in no state to understand his words, to appreciate their meaning.

“How can your Patronus!?” he cried through clenched teeth as Harry let out another blood-curdling scream, bringing his hands up to claw at his scar; the ropes... the ropes had disappeared, transfigured back into a dark blue throw pillow and tossed across the room, courtesy Harry’s thrashing...

Snape caught at his wrists. “Your Patronus, Potter! NOW!”

Harry let out one, final scream, and then a beam of light blasted out of his mouth, as though it was the scream itself that had brought it into being...

A corporeal Patronus. Wandless. Wordless. It was perhaps the most impressive bit of magic Snape had ever seen – but then, it had been called into being during what was undoubtedly one of the most traumatic experiences of Harry’s life...

The magnificent stag could barely turn about in Snape’s spare room; it ducked its head and turned to face Harry, then pawed the nonexistent earth with its hoof, like a bull preparing to charge... Snape gasped as he realized where the animal was headed and interposed his body between it and Harry Potter, raising his wand...

The apparition gave pause, eyeing him with a hint of incredulous sarcasm that he could swear looked familiar.

Directed, focussed menace now emanated from the Patronus as it bared its teeth at him, its expression informing Severus in no uncertain terms just what would happen to him if he did not rather quickly move out of the way.

The stag reared, sounding a trumpet-like note of challenge, then charged Harry, leaping past Severus, over the boy’s sickbed and passing through his head – no, his scar, disappearing into its depths. With a flash of light and a noise like a clap of thunder, it was gone. The room echoed with dazzling afterimages.

Severus realized, in the ringing silence that followed, that Harry had stopped screaming. In the quiet, Severus observed that Harry had slipped quietly into shock, that his work was far from done, that Voldemort had been unceremoniously shoved from the boy’s mind.

That Harry Potter had finally learned Occlumency.
Completely, thank Merlin, on his own.

Chapter End Notes

(Takes deeeep breath)... I left this chapter feeling the same way as Harry in the Hospital Wing: shaky and out of breath. I wonder if other people get into the spirit of their stories as emphatically as I do in mine...?

I really love to hear what people think as they get each chapter under their belt. I think I posted 'echo in the echoing wood' too rapidly, because I get comments like "I really kept wondering if it was Stiles or the Nogitsune, I kept changing my mind", posted to the last chapter. While that's totally awesome (because it's the point of the story!) I'm always more interested in *when* they were sure it was Stiles and when they were leaning towards 'nope, not at all'. That tells me which parts of the story worked out they way they were 'supposed' to, and which parts of the story yielded an unexpected audience reaction. That helps me become a better author.

Every other time I've posted a story, I've also posted recs. This is the first time I haven't, probably because I'm posting so fast, but today I have one. It's 'Chaos Theory' on this archive. HOLY CRAP IT'S GOOD. In tone, theme, quality, and main characters, it reminds me of nothing so much as Year Like None Other. Especially interesting is that chapters are very short, and there's a song attached to each one; and usually, the song will play as you read the chapter, about once through. The soundtrack is eclectic and well-chosen, and each song adds to the atmosphere of the story. The story features genius!Draco, and here you may say "oh, but Kirinin, I KNOW that sort of ridiculous trope and have no interest in -"

Stop. Stop there. It is good. I promise.

Here there be slash, and here there be Dark Themes. READ THE WARNINGS ABOUT THE DARK THEMES. But it is definitely worth losing a weekend. <3

-K
Marauders Redux

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry woke late – for him, anyway. The sun had already completely broken from the earth when he rolled out of bed, feeling languorous but happy. It was the deepest he had slept in some time. The air around his bed was cool, and he had been subconsciously reluctant to emerge. For the first time, he saw the lacy hand of frost on the glass of the dorm windows, bits of it already melting away in the rising sun. He would have to tell Ron; winter was Ron’s favorite time of year, by far. There was just something about Ron that screamed ‘snowfights!’ and ‘Christmas!’.

He debated awakening the redhead just to see it, then paused to consider just how important he would find frost if awoken from a deep sleep to witness it. He might just ruin Ron’s love of winter forever.

Laughing to himself, he padded down to the dormitory bathrooms. The tiles were cold beneath his feet, making him rush over to the shower and mutter the charm that got the hot water going. As he stood under the stream, he thought up ways to make his behaviour up to Draco.

He could offer to obey him again, but something told Harry that this would only discomfit the blond. It also made a great deal out of – well, certainly not nothing – but it was a bigger gesture than he wanted. He needed something casual, something that carried his message plainly without embarrassing Draco or himself.

He probably needed to ask Hermione. But what would she say? Would she tell him to stop associating with Death Eaters? Would she clasp his hands warmly and say, ‘about time’? Either way, she would know the right answer, and the right answer was what Harry needed.

He would risk her displeasure and ask.

He was still up earlier than any of the other boys, so he toweled himself off and moved into the sitting room.

After which he blushed immediately: Hermione was, as always, the second person up; she was seated on one of the overstuffed armchairs, legs folded elegantly under her as she examined the passage of a book entitled, oddly enough, All About Strangely-Shaped Rocks. “Harry!” she exclaimed when she looked up, startled by some small noise.

Oh sweet Merlin. Harry stood there in his towel and nodded completely against his will. He should have been freezing, but his embarrassment was keeping him warm.

Hermione wasn’t one to beat around the bush. “D’you really think Draco Malfoy took the Mark out of choice?” Her entire body was in one, rigid line, her eyes wide with anxiety. She looked as though her very sanity hedged on the answer.

Since Hermione thought it was so important, Harry decided not to dissemble or even hedge. “No,” he said.
She relaxed, breath leaving her in a whoosh. “Oh! Thank Merlin. Uhm – well, me neither, obviously. I thought maybe, when I was getting to like him, that it was sort of wishful thinking... Like – well, maybe I didn’t want to believe anyone could really be like that, hate like that, and so I, uhm, projected that goodness on to him. It’s called transference, have you heard of it?”

Harry had to admit that he had not.

“And now...” She bit her lip. “We can’t be friends with Malfoy.”

“Can’t we?”

“Don’t you see?” Her eyes glinted worriedly. “V-Voldemort is a Legilimens. He’ll see us being friendly to Draco, and that could very well get him killed.”

Harry paled. He hadn’t even thought about that, which was truly remiss of him – considering that he and Snape had supposed that Dumbledore had blocked their summer memories for the very same reason.

“Exactly,” she said, replying to his mere expression. “At first, I was horrified at the Mark, but I’ve continued to keep my distance for a reason. The horrible part is that we can’t even let Draco know we still like him, or...” She trailed off miserably.

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Draco wanted to be friends with me on the train to Hogwarts,” he said.

Hermione nodded. “I suppose. That must mean that their plans changed. Or perhaps he was truly working under his own power?”

“I doubt it. It was one of the first things he did – he wasn’t even a Hogwarts student yet! His father probably ordered him to befriend me. I’ll have to ask.”

“You mean for him to pretend to be carrying out the original plan,” she filled in, harrumphing thoughtfully.

“Precisely,” Harry said with a mischievous grin. “Hey, befriend Harry Potter, and when he trusts you enough, slip some poison into his soup or push him off a cliff. To a Death Eater, that probably sounds like an excellent business opportunity. I’ll bet we could even ask Snape to drop something at a Death Eater meeting, like he suggested to Draco it would be a good idea.”

“Slytherin,” Hermione accused, but without heat.

Harry’s grin grew an inch. “Thanks. Uhm, I was thinking maybe I – maybe we – could make this up to Draco somehow. He’s been through a lot. But extravagant gestures embarrass him.”

“Extravagant...? Embarrass Draco? Are you certain we’re talking about the same wizard?”

“You should see how he blushes,” Harry replied.

“I have. He’s doomed to show his emotion on his face at all times, he’s that pale.” She twirled one brown curl around her finger as she thought. “Ask me again this afternoon. I’ll think on it, all right?” She closed the book on her lap. “Now – about you and Ron –”

Ron stumbled out through the room that he and Harry shared, reaching the bottom of the steps before noting that Harry was barely half-clothed. He blinked, turning from Harry to Hermione.

Harry gaped, and opened his mouth, but Hermione beat him to the punch.
“Oh, there you are, Ron,” she said in a breezy sort of voice, as though Harry spent a great deal of his time parading about in a towel. “I was just saying that Harry owes you an apology.”

“Huh?” Ron stammered, rubbing at his eyes. “For what?”

“For not listening to you about Draco Malfoy,” Hermione filled in, again, before Harry could speak.

“You should be apologizing to him,” Ron bit out.

“I did.”

Ron paused in scrubbing the dust from his eyes. “You what?”

“Apologized to Draco. At length, last night,” Harry said. “You were right. I was a prat.”

“What did he say?”

Harry frowned. “He was – uh, upset. But I had more to apologize for than I realized, so…”

“But you have made it up?” Ron demanded.

“Yeah, I think so.”

The smile on Ron’s face kept breaking up, and he turned to stare at Hermione. “Now I know how you feel when me and Harry fight. I don’t know whether to hug him or slug him that it took so long!”

Hermione smiled smugly, hiding the expression behind a forest of hair.

After a moment’s contemplation, Ron hugged Harry; of course, the towel dropped in the unexpected motion, and while Ron immediately leapt back, he also thoughtfully shielded his best friend from Hermione’s view.

“Jesus Christ!” Hermione swore, Muggle in her distress, hiding her eyes. “Harry James Potter, cover up! Why have you been standing around like that for so long anyway, you’ll catch your death!”

Harry grinned as he scampered up the stairs and began readying himself for the day.

It didn’t take long for Hermione to cotton on to an idea for Draco; she was a startlingly intelligent witch, after all.

After very little consultation with either of her two best friends, she busied herself with obscure preparations for hours, first with books and then with actual items. By eleven, she was ready, a small, covered basket in hand, and standing at the portrait hole, tapping her foot. “Come on, you two, or it’ll be too late!”

“For what?” Ron muttered to Harry as they followed her down to the Hospital Wing. An expressive shrug was Harry’s only reply.
When they arrived, Draco Malfoy was seated up in bed, a steaming plate of food before him.

“None of that!” Hermione announced. “We’re going on a picnic!”

Draco stared at her as though she’d lost whatever mind she’d had. For that matter, he was not alone.

“A picnic, Hermione?” Ron demanded. “But it’s bloody freezing out!”

Harry had to agree. Although the temperature had heated slightly with the rising sun, it was still far from comfortable out-of-doors.

“Just trust me, will you lot? Draco, can you stand all right?”

“Well –” Draco shot a confused glance at Harry. “Well sure I can stand…”

“Excellent. Come along, then. I stole you some of Harry’s clothes, and so…” She laid out a butter-soft, long-sleeved white shirt and a pair of faded blue jeans, withdrawing them from the basket resting in the crook of her arm.

Madam Pomfrey moved to Draco’s bedside, shaking her head. “I am so sorry, children, that does sound like a…” She gave the large windows that lined the Wing a dubious glance. “…a wonderful idea… but Mister Malfoy has to stay here for now.”

Hermione tsked. “He must be healed from what happened on the pitch. And I’m no Mediwitch, but even I know that malnutrition and sleep deprivation only take a handful of days to overcome, when it’s minor. What’s the matter with him that he has to stay?”

Harry felt like he was at a Quidditch match, watching first Madam Pomfrey, then Hermione. He didn’t want to open his mouth for fear he’d mess up whatever plan Hermione had in mind, and noted that both Draco and Ron were similarly close-lipped.

Madam Pomfrey, meanwhile, was dithering, a slight flush to her cheeks. “Mister Malfoy has… has another injury.”

Hermione nodded as though these words had confirmed something for her, although Harry was still a step or two behind the bushy-haired girl. “I hardly think,” she said acerbically, “that Lord Voldemort is likely to call Mister Malfoy to tea. And,” she tacked on, “if he did do, the four of us together would rather have more of a chance of stopping him than any one witch.”

Madam Pomfrey, who had started when Hermione had named the Dark Lord, began to redden.

Draco headed her off at the pass. “I’m ever so sorry,” he interjected smoothly. “Miss Granger has always had a bit of a… problem reigning in her temper, haven’t you, Hermione? I seem to recall a powerful slap not so very long ago.” He grinned winningly at Hermione, who flushed. “However, she also has this rather annoying habit of being right. There is only so long you can keep me here, in good conscience. Everything has healed but for that which will not be healed.”

“Come on, Madam Pomfrey,” Harry pleaded earnestly, looking as wide-eyed and as innocent as he was capable.

“You’ve got to let him outside sometime. Otherwise he’ll be white as paper,” Ron interjected. “Besides, my mum says that sick people need plenty of sunshine and fresh air.”

“Oh – oh, very well, you charmers,” Madam Pomfrey said, but she did not look particularly upset.
On the contrary, she looked absurdly pleased. “Make certain you have him back by two!” she demanded.

“Yes, ma’am,” Hermione said. “I’ll make certain.”

“Good girl,” Madam Pomfrey praised. She disappeared into her office with a parting grin.

“You three are amazing,” the bushy-haired girl intoned, someplace between disapproving and admiring.

Harry exchanged an impish grin with Draco and Ron, then recreated his best innocent look. Ron burst into laughter, Draco a slightly more reserved step behind.

“In any case, let’s scoot over here a bit so he can change,” Hermione ordered, tugging on Harry and Ron’s sleeves. Draco sat motionlessly for about a half a minute, staring at the three of them, before springing into action, jumping up and swinging the curtain around his cot completely. Sounds of rustling bedclothes and dropping shoes could be heard from behind its green enclosure.

“You weren’t serious about going outside, were you?” Ron whispered.

Hermione grinned her own, wicked grin in response.

“Hmm,” Harry said, exchanging a wary glance with Ron.

“Here, take this,” she said, digging once more into the basket and withdrawing two small phials, each stopped with a cork surrounded by wax.

“What is it?” Ron wanted to know.

“It’s good for you, now take your medicine.”

Ron sighed dramatically before wedging the cork free and downing it.

“What does it do?” Harry wondered.

“Now is not the time to get all Slytherin, Harry. It’s a surprise, obviously. Now, drink up.”

Harry obeyed her as well. “Oh! The taste isn’t bad at all.”

Ron shook his head, shrugging.

Hermione withdrew a third phial from her basket and popped the cork. “Bottoms up,” she announced, sipping hers slowly. “I actually somewhat enjoy the taste. Like – cinnamon and smoke, don’t you think?”

Draco emerged from behind the bedcurtains and gave an odd, awkward nod to Hermione, who smiled warmly at him, digging around in her basket. “Here you are, Draco.” She passed a fourth phial off to him.

Draco took it from her hand with a surprisingly delicate grip, examining it in the crisp light shining in through the window. Harry, who had not taken the time, examined the potion.

The Slytherin took it from her hand with a surprisingly delicate grip, examining it in the crisp light shining in through the window. Harry, who had not taken the time, examined the potion.

It was a deep, clear, vibrant green with touches of olive. It seemed to sparkle – or spark? – in the morning light as he twisted it about in his hands. He uncorked it and peered over the top at Hermione, then at Harry and Ron.
Hermione blinked, withdrew her wand, and, before anyone could so much as react, incanted, “Aurelius toxicum.”

Draco, Harry noticed, was groping at his own hip in vain; looking, indubitably, for the wand that was not there. As Hermione lowered her own wand in concern, the Slytherin boy calmed and viewed the potion again.

“What was that meant to do?” Ron demanded. “The potion looks the same.”

“It shows if it’s got a poison in it,” Draco replied, his voice dull.

“Draco!” Ron chided. “We all just drank the same thing, me and Harry and Hermione!”

“Out of different bottles,” Harry said slowly.

“Damn it!” Draco swore. “Of course you wouldn’t – Hermione – I know... I just... oh, shit.” He glared at the concoction as though it had been entirely at fault, and downed it. After an interminable moment, he swallowed, then offered the bushy-haired girl a feeble grin.

“Come on, then,” Hermione said, tugging at his arm. “We’ve got to be outside soon, or we shall be very sorry.”

“Shall we?” Draco echoed, looking alarmed as they exited the Wing.

“Oh yes,” she replied. “Draco – did you know that the word ‘poison’ and the word ‘potion’ have the same root?”

“What?” Ron whispered to Harry as the pair walked arm-in-arm ahead of them down towards the Great Hall. “What on earth is she babbling about?”

“I think,” Harry said, “that you made up with Draco and I made up with Draco and now Hermione is, in her own way, making up with Draco.”

“By talking Latin at him?” Ron sputtered. “She’ll bore him to tears! She’ll make him think she’s doing her best to torture him!”

“That’s you, Ron,” Harry quipped. His expression turned serious, and he frowned. “For all you or I know, Draco finds Latin fascinating. We don’t know him very well.”

“No, he’s made sure of that,” Ron replied, offhand.

That was good enough to chew on for quite awhile, really.

“Don’t you think it’s sweltering?” Ron suddenly announced. “They’ve muddled the heating spells for the castle again.”

Harry nodded; it was genuinely, uncomfortably warm. Hermione was actually fanning herself with her hand. “What did they do, set the castle to char-broil?” he demanded.

“It’s – it’s actually kind of cold,” Draco replied hesitantly, obviously not wanting to start an argument over something as uncontroversial as the climate. He frowned in puzzlement. “Oh – well, it does seem to be getting a bit warmer all of a sudden.”

“Oi!” Ron exclaimed as they moved outside into the cool air, which felt like a soothing benediction in the wake of the heat they had left behind. “That’s better!” Ron exclaimed.
“Quite,” Hermione replied with a grin. “The potion is working in you all, isn’t it? I’m almost uncomfortably hot, myself.” She unwound her scarf and tied it around her waist with a smile.

“Thermos Theros?” Draco inquired politely.

“In one, Mister Malfoy,” Hermione replied solemnly. “Five points to Slytherin.”

“Hey!” Ron exclaimed. “You can’t do that!”

“She’s a prefect, she can, and she just did,” Draco said with a smirk.

Ron rolled his eyes and in general looked put-out. It was amazing, Harry reflected, how fast that smirk of Draco’s flickered into uncertainty these days. He wished with an odd pang that he would see the Slytherin regain some of his old confidence. Being branded had taken a lot out of him, and more than physically.

Harry didn’t have to wait long. A spark shone in Draco’s grey eyes as he straightened, his chin jutting out, hands clasped behind his back as they walked. “Well then, Miss Granger,” he said in his best Severus-Snape tones, “will you favor us with the dangers of Thermos Theros?”

“Certainly,” Hermione replied airily. “An imbalance of the feverfew can cause a stomachache – not to mention that it ought not to be used in particularly cold climes. It would not do to be unaware of your frostbite until you had inconveniently shed a limb.”

“Cheekily answered, but five points to Gryffindor nonetheless. Unless they’re awarding points to the Unsorted House?”

Hermione shook her head, flushing. “No. I was by to talk to Dumbledore yesterday about the House, but he’s convinced that the Houses are the best way to keep watch on potential Death Eaters and potential allies alike.” She snorted. “Not that he said as much, you understand.”

Ron growled. “It’s no use, half the school’s Unsorted these days, or at least they pretend they are. It’s gotten all fashionable.” He eyed Harry. “Predictably.”

“That’s not my fault. People just know a good idea when they see one,” Harry protested.

Hermione shook her head sadly. “I’m afraid it is your celebrity, Harry. Nobody joined S.P.E.W., now, did they?”

Ron turned red from the effort of keeping silent, and Harry coughed into his scarf.

“S.P.E.W.?” Draco echoed politely. “What’s that?”

Ron groaned.

“Why, I can’t believe you didn’t catch wind of it!” Hermione exclaimed brightly. “I was certain I’d discussed it with anyone I could get my hands on, so honestly, I figured it would’ve reached you by now. It’s the Society for the Promotion of Elvish Welfare, I formed it in my third year or thereabouts.”

“Elvish Welfare? You mean, you would like House Elves’ masters to treat them more fairly?”

“Yes, as in, with wages, for starters. I know what you’re going to say: any elf would rather die than accept them, but that’s only because they’ve been taught to believe that servitude is the only way that they can exist –”
“Because it is,” Draco interjected.

Hermione frowned. “Excuse me?”

“I mean it in a literal sense. You are Muggleborn, but surely you know...?”

“Enlighten the Muggle,” Hermione replied acerbically.

He flushed, equal parts anger and embarrassment. “The House Elf is a breed of elf –”

“Race,” Hermione corrected.

“Very well, a particular race of elf, bred – er, created,” he added, without prompting, “by wizards nearly a millennia ago.” A smirk crossed Draco’s features. “Their creators were singularly diabolical. No House-Elf can survive without a master of some kind. It’s a fact.”

“But Dobby did,” Harry said. “Once he left your household, there was a period of time where he belonged to no one, before Dumbledore took him on.”

“The agreement doesn’t have to be stated, it may be implicit. Indubitably, you were his master, however briefly.”

Harry shivered, wrapping his arms tightly around his frame. He still hated that word.

“From Dobby’s point of view, there wasn’t a time he didn’t have a master. The House Elf gives his eternal loyalty to the family that employs him, and the family gives that Elf his very life in return. To be given clothes and sent out into the world is practically a death sentence, because a House Elf can seldom find a new master before he perishes; no one wants to take on an Elf that has been banished from house and home.”

“But – but that’s awful!” Hermione exclaimed as Harry and Ron moved towards a giant oak and sprawled out on the earth.

“Yes, perhaps,” Draco replied indifferently. “But I am afraid it is – in this case, quite literally – the nature of the beast. There are actually a dazzling array of rules and regulations to govern the behaviour of a House Elf.”

“And it’s all down in their DNA?” Hermione exclaimed, horrified.

“In their – their what?”

“Their genes?”

“They aren’t given clothes, Granger, didn’t I just explain?”

“Hermione means to ask you if that’s all in their nature,” Harry translated.

“Yes, every last bit; it’s magically engraved there.”

Hermione deflated. “Oh. Well, bollocks.”

“That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t campaign for their better treatment if you think it’s important,” Draco said.

Ron hit him in the shoulder.
“Ow! Back to enemies so soon, Weasel?”

“Call me that again and I’ll give you something to shout about,” Ron warned. “Or do you answer to ‘Ferret’?”

“Food, anyone?” Hermione inquired sweetly, opening her basket. “I brought tons of sandwiches. Made by aforementioned House Elves. Although they’re always quite sulky with me. Now I think I know why. It must seem like I’ve been offering to murder them for a favor.”

“*Aurelius toxicum*,” Draco said, waving his hand over the basket.

“Ha ha,” Hermione deadpanned. “Do you prefer tuna, ham and cheese, or roast beef?”

“Ham and cheese,” Ron said, and “roast beef,” said Harry. Draco took the tuna, while Hermione rummaged and eventually came up with another ham-and-cheese.

“Just how big is that basket?” Harry wondered as Hermione dug into it and withdrew a picnic blanket.

“It’s Charmed, of course,” she replied. She dug out a book – *not* the one on rocks, Harry was grateful to note – and propped herself up against the trunk of the oak, letting the closed volume rest in her lap. For a minute or two they all ate quietly, each one very hungry. When Ron reached for his second sandwich, rummaging inside Hermione’s picnic basket, the bushy-haired girl spoke again.

“Are you all right, then?” she inquired of Draco. “We’ve been worried.”

“Could have fooled me,” Draco snapped.

Hermione’s eyes grew wide with the effort to convince her audience. “I knew you got the Mark and I wasn’t sure how good a liar you are, Slytherin or no. If you cried in my arms over it, don’t you think Voldemort would figure that out? He *is* a Legilimens.”

Draco’s eyes darted frantically to Harry’s, before alighting once more on Hermione. “I – I don’t believe you.”

“Then why are you here eating my sandwiches?”

Draco paused, looking thrown, gazing down at the half-eaten tuna sandwich in his hand as though it had done him a personal wrong. He swallowed stiffly, and a small bit of tuna salad plopped unceremoniously from the edge of the sandwich and onto the grass. “Because you Shanghaied me.”

“You don’t go anywhere you don’t want to.”

“I did just a couple of days ago. And I got a pretty little skull on my arm for my trouble.”

“Draco Malfoy!” she exclaimed. “Why are you being so difficult?!”

“Difficult!” he exploded. “I’m being difficult am I? *Well,* then, turn your whole bloody life upside-down and see how you damn well like it...” He paused in his rant, eyeing Hermione with a grimace. “All right, very well, we’ve *had* this discussion, but your being introduced to the Wizarding World was the nice sort of surprise, I imagine...” He slumped. “Imagine waking up one morning and knowing for certain that the better part of your life has been a lie, and your father served a madman who turned on him like a rabid dog, that you will be expected to cave in to this...
madman or he’ll murder your mother – not because he doesn’t like her, but because he supposes it’d break you and besides, it’d be fun.” Draco’s breathing had gone funny, and his pupils were constricted with impotent adrenaline.

Hermione’s brown eyes softened, and she scooted slightly closer to Draco, resting her hand quietly over his. He jerked wildly in response, glaring at her.

“Granger!” he nearly shouted. “Don’t be getting any ideas.” The old sneer was back.

Ron opened his mouth to say something – most likely angrily – but Harry shook his head, and the redhead’s mouth slid shut. Hermione, for her part, looked torn between pity, confusion, and anger. Draco, under the weight of her gaze, blinked away his haughtiness, replacing it with his own confusion. It was obvious he had become aware of his mistake, and the heat decorating his cheeks said he had no idea what to do to rectify it.

“You’re... reactive today,” Harry said quietly once both Hermione and Draco had reached their own conclusions.

“All three of you make me feel like I’m wearing my guts on the outside!” Draco exploded.

“You should know that Gryffindors like to touch people,” Ron offered hesitantly. “A lot. You should be more afraid if a Gryffindor goes out of her way not to touch you. Then she likes you for sure.”

“What? But that makes no sense!”

“From a Gryffindor point of view, it does,” Harry said, thinking of the way Ginny used to literally hide from him.

Hermione cautiously placed her hand over Draco’s again, keeping eye contact. Harry watched her hand squeeze his, then let go. “All right?” she inquired.

“All right,” he replied, after a moment. He frowned, looking puzzled. “Sorry, I guess.”

She smiled warmly. “Sure. I guess I should’ve been a little bit more sensitive, anyway, just bringing up the Mark like that. It’s awful, and I shouldn’t want to talk about it, if I were you.”

Draco’s smile grew wider with what looked like relief, and he nodded, reaching for another sandwich. “Whatever we talk about or don’t, I’m glad you got me out of there,” he finally said. “I was practically dying of boredom. Class notes just don’t make for decent reading material, and while Madam Pomfrey’s lovely and all, even her company grows wearying after several days of saturation.”

“Oi!” Ron exclaimed. “That reminds me.” He dug in the pockets of his robes. “I was meaning to give it to you yesterday... might have some entertainment value, anyway...”

Draco looked up at Harry, who shrugged. He had no idea what Ron was on about.

After a moment, Ron stopped searching, holding his hands cupped around a small object. The others gathered around, peering closely as Ron slowly removed his right hand to reveal...

...a Snitch, which darted quickly away before Draco snatched it out of the air.

“Where in bloody hell did you get this?!” Draco demanded.
“Well... I kind of stole it,” Ron admitted.

“Ron!” Hermione exclaimed.

“What?” Ron demanded, hurt lacing his tones. “I’ll give it back. It’s only a practice one anyway, Hermione, it’s not the one they use in matches. I was cleaning out the broom shed and it was tucked away in a corner, covered in dust... no one’ll miss it...”

“What were you doing cleaning out the broom shed?” Harry wondered.

Ron launched into a rueful but perfectly hilarious story involving Professors McGonagall, Sprout, and the Venomous Tentacula, which ended, of course, in detention. Harry privately suspected that the snitch, while intended as a present for Draco from the get-go, had probably also been Ron’s little revenge for what he viewed as an unfair punishment.

“Stealing is still quite wrong, Ronald,” Hermione chided him. She looked over at Draco, who was pouting. “But since our Slytherin-in-residence is so terribly bored... and imprisoned...”

“Your Slytherin?” Draco demanded, plucking up a handful of grass from the turf underfoot. “And here I thought I took up too much space to belong to anybody.”

Ron began to laugh. “You do, mate. You do.”

Harry turned to share the laugh with Draco; but the other boy was absorbed in the action of ripping the handful of grass to tiny pieces.

With an odd, threadbare smile, Draco let the wind claim them.

Chapter End Notes

Why is the chapter called Marauders Redux? Think of the picture the quartet presents, and you’ll get the idea.

I have to add that it's almost weird to read this chapter again, because it's very much the start of the next book. As this chapter is to Harry, Draco, Hermione and Ron, the last chapter was to the Snape/Lupin dynamic.

Today's rec is JiM1's 'Apparently', on ff-dot-net. It's a quick, quiet little piece about Snape and a grown-up Harry; and if it doesn't move you, you are immovable. Just hie thee hence and read. <3

-K
Severus Snape awoke with the distinct impression that it was far later in the day than he had meant to arise. He threw off his coverlet, ran his hands through his limp hair and rose blearily, slouching off to the bathroom. He was halfway through his morning ablutions before the awareness ripped through him.

The *Obscura*.

Harry!

His analytical mind sifted through the events, even as his face paled, his breathing quickened, and his eyes unfocused with remembered strain. It was amazing Harry had been able speak at all, the way he’d been screaming.

Merlin – it was amazing Harry was *alive*, the way he’d been carrying on. At the time, he'd briefly entertained the idea that Potter was *not* being subjected to torture of that painful intensity, not when the Dark Lord had not even bothered to show his face before striking. Potter simply *had* to be playing up the hero role, the way he always had.

Now Severus knew better. Even then, he had known, at least in some buried part of him, that Harry’s pain was very real...

Despite deriding the celebrity with which Harry had been graced, Snape had managed to swallow the picture the Prophet painted; the only difference between he and the rest of the Wizarding World was the jaundiced eye with which he viewed the heroic figure. He saw James as someone who had been afforded all the pleasures in life with none of their inherent responsibilities, and saw Harry as continuing his father’s legacy, but on the world stage rather than the Quidditch Pitch. Harry could crash a Charmed Muggle vehicle into an ever-present feature of the Hogwarts landscape; Harry could decide to take on a mountain troll at age eleven. The rules did not apply to the Boy Who Lived.

So Harry hadn’t been a boy to Snape, he had been a concept; not a person, but the foundation of a corrupt mythos. In shame, he realized that the *Obscura* was not the moment he had known that a young boy would die; rather, it was the moment he became *aware* of Harry as a boy, a mortal, a mere Muggle-raised wizard-child, rather than the golden boy of Daily Prophet fame.

That night - because of his pain, his terror, and, Snape realized, drawing a tired hand over his features, largely because Dumbledore had refused him aid – Harry had become in Snape’s eyes what he had obviously always been: a child.

Dumbledore, who Snape had seen as the Potter boy’s patron, had tossed him to the wolves because it was necessary. While Albus Dumbledore was essentially good, he was far too old and far too wily to let one child’s suffering stand in the way of the war. Snape chuckled with barely-restrained cynicism, shrugging his body into house-robes. He was of no mind to go out into the world today...

...but didn’t he owe it to Potter? He had seen a hint of their shared past – should it not become shared once more? He silently debated. There was nothing in that memory that had been deeply
secret, save that the boy’s Patronus could protect him from Voldemort – and shouldn’t Harry know that?

Slowly, Snape nodded to himself. His uncertain expression steadied, firmmed. He stood from his bed and began to move rapidly, efficiently about his bedroom, selecting dark robes made of smooth, heavy wool, based on his examination of the small weathervane in miniature sitting on his desk. He moved into his labs, wondering whether he ought to start a new batch of Nutritive Draught for Madam Pomfrey before he left; the potion took two good hours at a moderate boil before it was ready. He should not be discussing the matter with Potter any longer than that...

He turned reflexively to the cabinet from his dream, and paused.

There was no cabinet there.

That was ridiculous, of course. There had always been a cabinet there. It had been his great-grandfather’s potion cabinet; the man had built it himself, in Muggle fashion. Something about the dimensions had first amused Severus, then drawn him; it was a unique piece. It was as though, with every nail and tack, every arc and well-placed curve of the wood, the man had been lamenting that he straddled the Muggle and Wizarding worlds, without fully belonging to either.

It was an apothecary chest, and Tiberius Snape had been a compounding apothecary. Severus would have thrown the piece away as soon as his mortar and pestle; and yet he found he had a foolishly vague memory of deciding that the thing had gone decrepit and tossing it out.

Blinking owlishly, Severus languidly raised his wand. “Finite incantatem?” he inquired.

The cabinet shimmered back into existence.

“Alohomora,” he added.

The lock sprang open.

Up until that point, Severus had held an illusion or two that perhaps, while Harry had been staying with him, recovering from his injuries, he had wanted to keep the boy out of his Potions stores. After all, he recalled a certain escapade involving the ingredients to Polyjuice Potion, and another with gillyweed.

Now he realized that, if anything, the spells had been chosen for their simplicity, perhaps so that Harry could use the cabinet if he wanted to. Finite and Alohomora were taught in first-year, after all. Why bother placing such flimsy protections, unless what had been hidden was meant to be found? The chest was like an unlocked door behind a curtain; anyone could open it, provided they knew where to look.

The Potions Master reached out to the small, brass knob, and it gave easily in his hands.

Snape couldn’t help but swallow at the sight of the wide-brimmed cauldrons which sat on its shelves, pewter no. 5’s, relatively small and fat... dozens of them, the drawers having been magically crowded away from the centre to accommodate their bulk.

Pensieves.

A handful of Pensieves were labeled, indubitably falsely; ‘the time when Sirius sicced his dog on you’ and ‘taking the Mark’ were a handful of the lovely memories the cauldrons promised.

Of course, he didn’t believe a word. Never mind that the words were in his own, lacy
handwriting. If anything, that made them more suspect.

_Hmm. The ones labeled ‘Disgustingly Awful Childhood Memories’ must be Harry’s... he must be the disgustingly awful child to which they belong..._ He snorted, appreciating the sense of humor inherent in the thing, but of course, that was his _own_ sense of humor; he was bound to find it appealing.

For the space of a moment, he stood undecided, wondering if he ought to reclaim the memories. Remus’s words floated across the surface of his consciousness, the assertion that Dumbledore surely would have had a good reason for doing as he did...

Snape found he did not want to hear the reasons. Chances were, Dumbledore’s words would sound reasonable and be wise, but he was no longer certain that they would be _right_... a distinction that was as new to Severus as it was subtle. Lips thinning in determination, Snape drew his wand—(briar, dragon heartstring, thirteen inches)—and lay it gently against the swirl of memories in the nearest cauldron. Slowly, he raised his arm, dragging a fresh memory from the pile, and placed it against his brow, allowing it to slither, wormlike, into his flesh.

“Severus!”

Snape jumped embarrassingly high into the air before whirling impressively to glare at—

Oh. It was only Lupin.

“There you are, I’ve been looking all over!” Remus gave Snape the grin that the Potions Master had long since discerned was meant to be charming.

“What do you need now?”

Remus blinked, then sighed. “Honestly, Severus, must you always think the worst of me?”

“Once again, Lupin,” Snape replied, “it’s nothing to _do_ with you. I think the worst of everybody. Besides, oughtn’t you be used to it by now? You didn’t suppose some of your impertinent buoyancy would _rub off_, did you?”

Lupin leaned slightly away from the other man, scanning his features. “What’s the matter?”

Snape opened his mouth to begin a tirade, or an evasion, or anything but what spilled out. “I am not certain what to do.”

Remus looked every bit as taken aback as Severus felt; the Potions Master watched the werewolf’s eyes widen in startlement, then slowly soften. Snape realized that the other man would see this admission as some sort of plea for help, and would follow that thought to its natural conclusion, given Lupin’s skewed logic: that now was the time to repay Severus for his earlier… kindnesses.

True to form, Lupin’s smile gentled, his eyes remaining grave. Indubitably part of the reason Harry had chosen him for a confidante. “What is it, Severus?” he inquired. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“I highly doubt it,” Snape replied tightly, his hauteur regained. He began his progress down the
hall again, heading more decisively for Gryffindor Tower. He was pleased to note that, for once, the werewolf was not trailing after him. He chanced a glance over his shoulder to note that Remus was doing a credible impression of a teakettle about to boil over.

Snape watched the other man submerge his anger, his chin rising in a cold civility that reminded him strongly of… well, himself, really.

“You doubt it, do you?” Remus inquired, voice chill. “After the opening salvo of ‘I don’t know what to do’? You don’t know what to do – but you don’t need help.” When Severus opened his mouth to retort, Remus ploughed on over him. "At least, not from some mangy werewolf. Of course.”

“How many times must I tell you, you egocentric fool, that my moods are nothing to do with you…?”

“But it is! It is to do with me!” Remus gestured angrily to himself. “It’s to do with me and James and Sirius and – and Peter! Eighteen years and you still can’t let it go! I’ve done everything possible –”

Severus felt a rising tide of anger lashing against his insides. “You?” he demanded with his trademark sneer. “You’ve done everything. I must have missed your tireless efforts to befriend me. Who helped you obtain your papers so that you could continue teaching here? Who researched how to bring your best friend – whom I hate, by the way – back from beyond a Veil he wasn’t meant to cross in the first place…?”

“You,” Remus said firmly, “and that’s what I mean. You won’t let me do anything for you, no matter how I try. You won’t let me repay you. And despite it all, I have been your friend, you know. Sirius isn’t my best friend anymore. He was, but he – he’s gone.”

Snape stared at the other man’s unwavering golden eyes and flinched. “Now you’re overtly manipulating me.”

“To what purpose?” Remus demanded, flustered.

The Potions Master couldn’t help but examine the other man’s face for the lie he wanted, needed to see there, but there was nothing save that Gryffindor earnestness and more than a hint of fond exasperation. Something jumped uncomfortably in his stomach, and he found himself teetering on the edge of Obscura.

“Severus?”

There was, he found, very little to say when someone had told you to your face that they were your friend even if you were not theirs. It was the sort of statement that had no ready reply.

“Severus, when someone proclaiming their friendship makes you get the vapors, that’s trouble, you know.”

He’s trying to cheer me up. Merlin preserve us. “Only Victorian witches get ‘the vapors’, Lupin,” he retorted weakly.

Remus shrugged. “Will you tell me what the trouble is, now we’ve had our requisite argument?”

It is almost as though he does not take me seriously at all, Snape realized with an unexpected stab of self-directed amusement. “Did Harry ever give you a book to look at? A storybook?”
Lupin looked mildly puzzled at the seeming non-sequitur. “I don’t believe so.”

“The story is about the battle between Gryffindor and Slytherin,” Snape replied, shaking off his dizziness and continuing down the hallway once again. “How they battled. But the reason that they fought is rather different from the explanation provided by the history books.”

“The story, as I remember it, is relatively vague,” Lupin supplied. “All I remember is that the battle became so dangerous that everyone from Hogwarts was sent away until it was finished. The fight was over something to do with the magical versus the mundane worlds.”

“They fought over whether they would remain connected to the Muggle world,” Snape supplied. “Gryffindor won, and with the aid of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, made Hogwarts Unplottable, and so on and so forth. Slytherin, who campaigned to keep the worlds aligned, disappeared. The Potions Master covertly examined Lupin, awaiting his reaction.

After a small moment, Lupin nodded, slowly. “I see. But why? Slytherin was famous for his disapproval of the Muggle world.”

“He discovered something, then,” Snape replied. “Something so important that he was willing to put his views aside. Something so dangerous that Gryffindor was willing to do anything to be rid of him. Harry and I discovered this secret on our own, through unrelated events, over the summer. The only difficulty is –”

“Voldemort,” Lupin supplied. “He knows what Harry knows, or he did until lately; and that is why Dumbledore was so insistent that the both of you forget the entire business.”

“Yes; precisely.”

Remus sighed, rubbing at his temples. “And – and now you know the truth.”

“Yes.”

“And you are about to tell Harry the truth.”

“Yes.”

“Which you purposely hid from yourself and Harry purposely hid from himself.”

“He deserves to know.”

“Why?”

“Because he is more than old enough to be capable of making his own decisions.”

“He chose to keep this information from himself,” Remus reminded him. “He has already made his decision.”

Snape shook his head. “He was under both my and Dumbledore’s influence at the time…”

“And what are you doing now but placing him under your influence alone, Severus?” Remus’s smile was wry. “If you want him to make his own decision, then let him make it – alone. Do not force knowledge upon him that he does not want. Harry has more than enough of that sort of knowledge already.”

Severus fell silent, considering the other man’s words. “Perhaps you are right.”
Remus smiled at him. “I know that I am.”

“I will allow him to make his own decision in this matter.”

“What will you do if he accepts the information?” Remus demanded.

“Harry can keep Him out, now. He has the ability to perform Occlumency in his sleep, literally, if he so desires. As for myself – I suppose that my career as a spy for – for Voldemort – is over.” A strange rushing sound accompanied the words in Severus’s head, and he shook away the sudden, treacherous feeling of freedom that threatened to drown him.

“And Draco Malfoy’s is beginning,” Lupin said softly.

“Yes. I will teach him everything I know. Everything that may help him survive this, as I have.”

Remus’s features twisted in sympathy. “I think I heard that Harry went out on – on a picnic of all things. Would you like me to go with you?”

Severus wanted to shake the man for not revealing this information sooner, wanted to snap out some sort of bitter retort, but the words died in him. “No, thank you,” he muttered, feeling thrown – then, “I’m certain I’ll manage,” with a hint of his old asperity.

“I’m certain you will,” Remus said gravely, then smiled his best, most charming smile with, Snape couldn’t help but notice, a certain tinge of relief.

When Severus reached the large oak, the Granger girl was seated, her back propped up against the stoutness of an oak, absorbed in a book; Draco was playing with a snitch, releasing it only to snatch it out of the air mere seconds later; Harry was watching Draco, sneaking in a lunge of his own every now and again. Ron was staring at the two of them in something approaching wonder.

“Mother of Merlin!” Snape heard him intone as Harry and Draco began to shove one another in their quest for the snitch.

A particularly hard shove, and Draco tumbled inelegantly to smack his head against the roughness of the oak; Snape was by his side instantly, although he knew for a fact that one could not Apparate at Hogwarts.

Somewhat luckily for all involved, Harry got there first.

“Ow! Sorry, that looks like it hurt.”

“Bloody hell, Potter, let me up, will you? You’re crowding me.” Then, to Ron, “you’re right. I’ve been interpreting it as rudeness, but Gryffindors just *invade your personal space*, don’t they?” He noted Snape’s presence and blinked wide, grey eyes at him. “Oh, hello there, sir. Didn’t see you.”

Ron snorted in tandem with Hermione, and after a moment, Snape realized that they were implying that he was incredibly difficult to miss.


Draco cringed slightly against the back of the tree. “Picnicking?”
“Picnicking, Mister Malfoy?” Snape tore at Draco’s sleeve. “You cannot have it both ways. The Dark Lord will see this event in your mind, and –”

“– and assume – when you tell him so, anyhow – that Draco’s just playing a long game. Like you were,” Harry interjected, green eyes blazing.

Hermione jerked Draco free of Snape’s grasp and tugged at the other boy’s sleeve until the Dark Mark was concealed once more. “We haven’t forgotten or anything, sir. That would be difficult to do.” She offered Snape a wry smile, which faded with her next words. “But we can’t – we can’t leave him alone to fight this out. I couldn’t leave anyone to fight him alone like that, and Draco’s – he’s… it isn’t even his fight, is it? It’s Harry’s – and ours.”

“And yours,” Ron offered grudgingly.

“Indeed,” Snape replied. “It is my fight. And as it is mine, I understand it. It is not a child’s game.”

“I’m not a child,” Draco contributed unexpectedly. His grey eyes flashed with fear, but they met Snape’s, unwavering. “And I’m not playing games. I can do this.” He eyed the others. “But – but, uhm, not alone. I’d go mad.” His gaze found Harry’s, and a small, vulnerable smile lingered briefly on his lips before he turned to Snape again. “Harry’s been through it, hasn’t he? The –” His attention flickered briefly to Ron. “The way you have. Sir. And I think I might just survive with his help and with yours. Maybe.” His shoulders hunched in and for a moment he tightly closed his eyes, as if in some silent prayer. “With luck. A lot of luck.”

Snape eyed the four teenagers gazing up at him, Harry warily but with hope dancing at the heart of his eyes; Draco’s face open as he’d seen it; Ron distrustful; Hermione patient and calculating. For the first time he recognized them as a force to be reckoned with.

“Children,” he began, then paused. “You are children, Harry, don’t glare. You are children faced with adult decisions. And I must say that I am… surprised… and pleased… at those you are making. Draco – you are perfectly correct in your reasoning that you will need those whom you can trust in the coming years. Your choice – your most hated enemy – is both ridiculous and completely Slytherin. No one should ever expect your intentions to be honorable, and thus it is a worthy deception.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry replied.

“Your deception, Potter?”

“Mine.”

“Hmm. Ten points to Slytherin, then.”

Ron and Hermione exchanged a significant glance.

“Finally, Mister Potter, I believe I have uncovered the truth concerning your whereabouts and why your memories were removed.”

“Memories - removed?” Draco echoed. “You’re kidding, Potter, right?”

Harry shook his head.

“However, Professor Lupin and I… discussed the matter, and we both feel you should be able to
make this decision free of our influence. It should be your decision and yours alone, to make. If
you desire this knowledge, come and see me first thing tomorrow, before classes begin.
Otherwise, I will see you in Potions. Yes, you as well, Mister Malfoy. Madam Pomfrey can only
keep you ensconced for so long. You’ve missed quite a bit as it is. I suspect, however, that Miss
Granger will see her way to providing you with a summary of what you have missed?”

“Oh!” Hermione pinked, and Draco muttered something unintelligible.

“What was that?” Snape inquired dryly. “I prefer those with whom I converse to speak the
Queen’s English, Mister Malfoy.”

“I was only saying,” Draco hissed, “that Ron and Yolande have been giving me my notes every
day, and so I’m all caught up, thank you.”

Snape eyed Ron, who stiffened, returning Snape’s look glare for glare; that is, until Draco kicked
him.

Ron stammered something that sounded like, “hope that’s fine by you, sir,” but by then Snape was
too far into shock to care very much.

“Well, then,” he said. “Carry on, I suppose.”

“Yes, sir,” they chorused, looking very much like the Marauders at their most deceptively
innocent. How odd that the thought didn’t really bother him.

Severus moved into the castle, already beginning to frame the events together, sort them in his
mind. Every now and again, he found himself arranging the facts humorously, almost as though
they were a story.

And there was only one person he would tell.

Chapter End Notes

One of Severus's most important arcs in this story is beginning to understand Remus
Lupin - understand what it is that he needs - and deciding, despite everything, to be the
one who gives it to him. Allowing Remus to provide the same courtesy to Severus...
that's even harder for him, I think.

I've started re-reading the sequel and oh my goodness, but it needs more work than
this one. It's still on its first iteration. This story is on its fourth!

-K
What do you suppose he means?” Hermione wondered as she watched Snape stride off towards the castle. “It doesn't sound much like Professor Snape to give you a choice.”

“That must’ve been some talk he and Professor Lupin had,” Ron commented under his breath.


Hermione tilted her head to one side. “Yes,” she drawled slowly, obviously thinking this through. “The Professor wanted us to advise you, Harry. Hinted at it, really.” Her eyes slipped up again to the dark-haired man’s retreating figure. “He’s so different lately – isn’t he?”

Ron shrugged. “Not really.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but didn’t press the issue.

“You think he wants me to talk to you about it? The memories?”

“I’m still a bit behind, here,” Draco alerted them.

“Oh.” Ron frowned. “Well, Harry doesn’t really remember his summer, not properly. We got all sorts of vague letters from him and he was saying very odd things about what happened just before the summer.”

Harry’s cheeks flushed with guilt as he realized he still had not explained to Ron fully about Sirius Black and the Obscura.

“Eventually, we figured out he’d been here at Hogwarts, and probably studying something or other with Snape.”

“Dumbledore seemed to be keeping it from the both of us,” Harry growled. “Me and Snape, I mean.”


“There has to be something there, some secret – a secret that Dumbledore doesn’t want Harry and Snape in particular to know,” Hermione filled in. “A secret so dangerous that no witch or wizard ought to know it.”

“Or just me and Snape in particular,” Harry mused, “because Voldemort –” the other three winced – “has a direct connection to the both of us, or did just a few months ago.”

“A secret no one ought to know – like the story you gave me,” Draco filled in. His grey eyes stirred and flashed like stormclouds in a high wind. “It’s the same secret, isn’t it? The same thing?”

Hermione eyed him warily. “The thought did cross our minds.”

“But what could be so powerful?” Draco wondered, eyes now thoughtful, narrow.

“No need for speculation,” Hermione replied dismissively. “All we want to know right now is whether Harry accepts the offer of information or not.”
“Then we need to speculate what that information may be!” Draco returned. “How can he know what he wants if he doesn’t know what he’s accepting? We need to at least have a handful of guesses as to what this great secret really is.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Well, fine, I suppose; for the sake of argument we’ll continue. I always assumed Slytherin and Gryffindor fought over Muggles, or Muggle rights.”

“What makes you say so?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Hermione dithered. “Just some context clues from a dozen or more sources - nothing concrete. I assumed that Slytherin wanted Muggles out of Hogwarts.”

“Of course he did,” Draco sniffed. “Pureblood tradition is practically the motto of our House.”

“Yes,” Hermione said sadly, and Draco blinked as if rediscovering his audience.

“Well, Draco’s right, though,” Harry mused. “It makes sense that he wanted Muggles out, right? Because wizards… wizards of mixed blood are still allowed in today. If Slytherin had been the one for Muggles, then Gryffindor would have shut out non-purebloods and his is the House that would have Draco’s motto.”

Draco scowled. “Not my motto.”

Hermione nodded certainly, but Ron looked confused.

“What is it, Ron?” Harry asked, noting the redhead’s furrowed brow.

“Well… maybe I’m just being daft, but didn’t they always let non-purebloods into Hogwarts? From the beginning?”

Hermione nodded. “Yes, Ronald, what’s your point?”

Draco, however, was sharing a grin with Ron. “Absolutely. Always.”

“Then what changed?”

Harry, beginning to catch on to Ron’s train of thought, felt his jaw drop slightly.

“I mean, if wizards of mixed blood were always allowed into Hogwarts, what changed after Slytherin left? Something had to’ve.”

Hermione shook her head. “Not necessarily. Slytherin might have disagreed with their policies all along –”

“Why would he have formed an alliance with Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw to create a school if they disagreed so fundamentally, from the start?” Harry returned. “Ron’s right. We need to find out what altered just after the battle. It would have to be something big – something noticeable. You’ve memorized Hogwarts: A History cover to cover,” he prodded. “So what happened right after Slytherin left?”

Hermione shook her head slowly, then paused, caught on the cusp of an idea.

An apparently overwhelming idea. Her eyes glazed over for a moment in sheer shock; then she recovered her internal equilibrium. “If you’re right – and I’m not saying you are – this is bigger than we ever thought. Right after Slytherin left – that was when – when Helga Hufflepuff drafted the Muggle Declaration.”

“There was no Statute of Secrecy, yet,” Hermione explained. “The Declaration was the first in a long line of edicts that slowly separated the Wizarding World from the Muggle. The Muggle Declaration,” she filled in, turning to Harry, “says that no magical person may inform a non-magical person of their status as such.”

“In other words, you can’t blab to Muggles,” Ron translated.

Harry still wasn’t quite wrapping his mind around it. “So Slytherin wanted us to be able to talk to Muggles about magic?”

Draco cut in then, his tone cold and his body stiff. “What she is implying, Potter, is that Slytherin never wanted to separate from the Muggle world in the first place.” He shuddered distastefully. “We had been drifting away from the Muggle world for centuries by that point, slowly but surely,” he continued, as Hermione nodded to confirm his words. “What the Muggles called fairy stories and legends were the last vestiges of our influence on their realm; any wizard worth his salt would know that any fairy story holds at least a grain of truth; and that they are usually about wizards. That’s why Slytherin told his story as a fairy tale.”

Ron went quiet for a moment, then nodded. “D’you think that’s it? He wanted us to stay within the Muggle world?”

“If Gryffindor was so against Muggles, why am I in his House?” Hermione wondered. She flushed. “I mean – I wasn’t – but… it was my second choice… oh, you know what I mean!” she exclaimed, cheeks flushing.

“He wasn’t,” Ron said staunchly. “Gryffindor liked Muggles. Thought they were funny.”

“Funny?” Harry’s eyes narrowed.

“Well, maybe funny so long as they were quite far away,” Draco commented, examining his nails and buffing them quietly against the shirt Harry had lent him.

“You could separate yourself from the Muggle world a lot easier than kill off all the Muggles,” Ron added.

Harry coughed.

“All right, so He doesn’t see it that way, but that’s because he’s completely mad. Maybe Gryffindor thought – well, can’t beat and don’t want to join them – maybe a strategic retreat is in order?”

“Now,” Draco intoned flatly, “we have the pureblood-loving one embracing Muggles everywhere, and the brave one running away.”

Harry snickered.

“Perhaps next,” Draco commented, “we shall discover that Ravenclaw was so dull that she thought the sun was a shiny Galleon cast into the sky and that Hufflepuff…”

“…was so brilliant that she wrote Hogwarts: a History,” Ron finished, and though they knew that last, at least, was chronologically impossible, they all laughed.
“So,” Hermione said, “although Slytherin did not like Muggles very well, he wanted to remain with them, as a part of their world. I wonder why?”

They were all silent. Harry watched as Hermione ran her fingers along the spine of her book, Ron thumbed his fingertips against the cold grass, and Draco held stiff, perfectly still – exactly, Harry decided, like some statue, except for his white-gold hair, which stirred gently in the wind.

“He had some advantage to gain,” Draco finally said, his lips the only moving part of him.
“Muggles were – were giving him something. Something important.” His eyes flashed again, brighter now. “Something vital.”

“He found out something about Muggles that makes them vital to Wizardkind,” Hermione pieced together.

Harry stiffened, his cousin’s features flashing through his mind. “I think I have an idea what it is.” He stood almost reflexively. “And I need to know the rest…” Harry looked down at the three of them – his friends – and felt the tug of a warm smile. “Thanks,” he said. “I’ll tell you the whole thing as soon as I know all of it.”

Draco bounded to his feet. “You’re not going to wait until tomorrow?”

Harry, already jogging away, turned to face him. “Are you kidding? Wait that long?”

Hermione laughed and waved, and then Harry was taking off like a streak, heading for Snape’s private chambers.

When Harry saw the Pensives he nearly choked. “Are you serious?”

Severus Snape eyed him balefully. “I assure you that I am.”

“But that’s impossible,” Harry replied, one hand reaching tentatively to brush the small, squat pewter cauldrons. “It can’t have been Pensives. Dumbledore always remembers what he’s put there. And you –” He choked on his words, clenching his fists in his dark pant-knees.

Snape smiled at him, a relatively rare occurrence, one that was becoming more frequent. His dark eyes flashed. “Very good, Harry. Why do you suppose that is?”

Harry frowned. “Well – I’ve never thought about it before.”

“Relatively incurious for someone who manages to land in trouble as often as you do,” Snape replied caustically.

Ouch – that stung. “Well, I typically had other things on my mind at the time.”

When no ready answers were forthcoming, Harry pondered. “I guess – well, you are removing the memory… Dumbledore implied that, anyway, the first time I talked to him about Pensives… so I guess… you must remember removing it?”

Snape nodded. “Precisely. Five points to Slytherin. You recall removing the memory, which means you do not recall the event itself – rather, you recall an echo of it.”
“You – you remember remembering it,” Harry supplied. “I think I understand. So why don’t we, then?”

“Answer your own question, Potter. I do not approve of lazy minds.”

This, Harry decided, was not news. He did his best, but nothing he could come up with made any sense. Someone would have to remove the echo of the memory, too, and then that memory’s echo, and so on until the echo faded into silence. It was definitely tedious, perhaps impossible. Maybe no memory faded to that little significance. Wasn’t there always something left?

Maybe there had been something left, he decided. Snape had been different lately and so had he, presumably from their time together – but maybe habits were like the emotional equivalent of muscle memory, so that didn’t necessarily explain it.

“Can someone else use a Pensieve for you?” Harry wondered.

Snape nodded. “Very good. Once you had removed the bulk of your memories, someone would have to incapacitate you and finally remove the memory in which you utilized the Pensieve.”

Harry nodded. “So you did it for me, probably, and then Professor Dumbledore did it for you.”

“Very plausible, Potter. In fact, correct.”

Harry grinned. “It had to be him; no one else knows, do they?”

“So – do you want them?”

Harry looked at the half-dozen Pensieves. “Yes,” he said.

“That is what I thought you would say,” Snape murmured, but Harry thought he caught some warm emotion behind the typically stilted dialogue. He got the sneaking suspicion that Snape was actually proud of him. It made him even more certain of his decision.

And also a bit sentimental. “Sir… uhm, thanks for all you’ve done, this year.”

Snape stiffened. “I should hope you won’t begin going on about what you may do to repay me, as Lupin has.”

Harry bit back a startled laugh, and, after an instant’s search for some meaningful reply, opted to ignore the statement altogether. “Before I take them, I have a guess.”

“A guess?”

“About Slytherin’s secret,” Harry said. “I think I know what it is.”


Harry parroted back the combined reasoning skills of Hermione, Draco, Ron and himself. “…so basically it has to be something that Slytherin discovered about Muggles that he considered vital and that Gryffindor considered dangerous or undesirable… and my cousin… he did a bit of magic this summer…”

“He – your cousin? That…” Words seemed to fail Snape, but his face twisted into familiar lines of contempt.

“He was loads better this summer – really he was, Professor!”
“And why didn’t you tell anyone about this sudden discovery of yours?” Snape demanded.

“It was really only a little bit of magic – insignificant, really… Dudley made my bauble light, just a little bit. I think – I think maybe Muggles have a magic of their own. Maybe their magic – responds to ours, somehow. Maybe it even makes us stronger. Slytherin would have thought he was clever enough to handle that, to maneuver it. But maybe Gryffindor thought that would threaten his strength.” Harry paused. “Strong people, you know, they’re always afraid that someone stronger will come along and make them less important, less strong.” He eyed Snape. “Clever people are – are always clever,” he stammered. “They don’t become stupid when a smarter man walks in the room.”

Now the expression on Snape’s face was unmistakable. He was… proud of Harry. The dark-haired man ran his finger along the rim of one of Harry’s cauldrons. “You are correct,” he finally replied. “Of course, I believe it is so very much more than that. We had only stirred the surface of the truth between us, you and I.” He paused, both in his speech and in the motion of his stroking finger; his hand fell to his side, rasping against the edge of his dark wool robes. His black eyes scanned Harry. “Voldemort would use that knowledge against us, but more importantly, he would see Muggles as sources of power that he could tap at will. It is unlikely that Wizards' connection to Muggles could be manipulated in such a fashion, but it is not in Voldemort’s nature to grasp certain concepts; and those involved in Sympathetic Magics are amongst those that are beyond his reach. He would alter his tactics to exploit and enslave Muggles rather than merely murder them.” Snape’s eyes grew fierce. “More importantly, he would gain another, very powerful way to convince Wizardkind that Muggles are dangerous and must be disposed of. He would not even have to lie.”

Harry swallowed past the sudden lump in his throat. All he had been thinking about was how incredibly exciting it all was, how everything he had learned and seen and heard that school year was sliding together, piece by piece, forming a paper in his mind, a paper with the inescapable conclusion: the Muggle and Wizarding Worlds must be Joined.

A paper he would never publish. A paper like Snape’s.

Harry hung his head and hissed a sharp release of breath.

Snape placed his hand on Harry’s shoulder. “I ought to tell you, Mister Potter, that I know very few wizards who could have pieced all of that together.”

“It wasn’t me,” Harry averred. “I mean, yes, I pieced it all together in the end, but Hermione and Draco and Ron practically led me to it.” He grinned quietly to himself. “And if it hadn’t been for Dudley…” The fact that Dudley had held the missing piece to the puzzle delighted Harry to no end, and he was planning on explaining that in detail to the other boy in his next letter – as much as he could explain.

Snape tsked under his breath. “This is no time for false modesty, Mister Potter. I am complimenting you. It is an incredibly rare occurrence, as I am certain you are aware. Your response is to deny responsibility for the triumph? Not very Slytherin.”

Harry smiled. “Yes, but it wouldn’t be very fair not to tell you that my friends really helped, because they did. And… thanks. For the compliment. Uhm…” Harry flushed, not really certain exactly what he wanted to say. He had already thanked Severus for all he had done, but it didn’t seem quite right, or perhaps it wasn’t specific enough. “…and for… looking out for me.”

“Keeping an eye on you over the summer was hardly the onerous task I first imagined. You were less off-putting than a new piece of furniture,” Snape added, his lip twisting slightly in a half-
smile. “You were so quiet I scarcely noted you. After the screaming,” he tacked on, rubbing distractedly at his arm.

_The screaming_. These memories proved to hold some interest beyond their mere origins, after all. Still, that was besides the point. “I didn’t mean over the summer,” Harry said, awkwardly, and then, before Snape could do more than frown in slight puzzlement, he set to work replacing the first memory back into his conscious mind.
Harry’s explanation to the others was brief and nearly devoid of detail. He explained about Slytherin and Gryffindor, about their argument and its conclusion, and that he had been finally learning Occlumency with Professor Snape; he also finally explained in full about Obscura, with Draco occasionally commenting or clarifying. After tears from Hermione, a clap on the back from Ron and Draco’s usual enigmatic half-smile, he meandered up to his rooms and, closing the curtains on his bed, proceeded to lay wide-awake, staring at the ceiling.

He hadn’t told them what was important – not the half of it. The way Snape sat silently at his bed after a bad nightmare about Sirius, not saying anything perhaps from the fear of saying something wrong, just waiting until Harry had dropped off to sleep again. The strain giving way to long, comfortable silences, where Harry read yet another Potions text or one of Snape’s novels. The dinner arguments, where cautious civility fell away to reveal brutal contests of logic, which his professor almost always won. The self-directed smirk on Snape’s face when Harry finally succeeded in out-maneuvering him. Snape finally admitting he had known Lily Potter and admired her, at least as much as Snape would admit to possessing a beating heart; Snape digging around in a worn wand box until he found an old, faded photograph, where a small redheaded girl, a dark-haired boy, and a handful of others mugged for the camera.

Having just received the memory, it was definite as Avada in his mind. Snape had an odd expression on his face. Is that Remus Lupin? he had wondered aloud, as an almost pathetically small boy with dark gold hair grinned up at Lily.

It was. And before Harry was really aware what they were doing, Snape was pointing out Sirius at the photo’s edge, trying to shove his way to the center, and a small, mousy Peter Pettigrew. And Alice Kemper… Something in the bright, pale eyes caught Harry’s attention, and he realized that Alice had to be Neville’s mother. There had been a curious look on Snape’s face, then, and Harry had found himself wondering whether Snape had a hand in her torture, or capture, or felt his hands had been tied… or if he simply had not realized Voldemort’s plans in time to save either Neville’s mother or father and still felt the sting…

The memory was a golden one, though, one of Harry’s best. It would produce a corporeal Patronus, he was certain. It had been while he was still mostly ill, and the kindness from Snape, such as it was, had been unexpected enough to seem nearly suspicious. Healing and helping Harry might have been explained away as necessary, but no amount of duty would justify showing him that picture, nor telling him he could keep it.

And where was it now? Probably back in Snape’s musty wand box, as though the scene had never happened… perhaps Snape wouldn’t be offended if he reclaimed it? It was his favorite picture of his mother and Remus, and seeing them in a picture with Snape obscurely pleased him.

Well, there was no help for it; he wasn’t anywhere near sleep. His mind was still awhirl with the fresh new memories, still attempting to assimilate far too much information; and perhaps his sleeplessness also had to do with the fact that Snape had rubbed at his left arm while Harry accepted his memories.

Harry drifted off to sleep. Strange laughter chased him through his dreams, when he heard it's time, Potter, lacing through the laughter. Don't you tire of it? I know I do. Find me, Harry. Let us
Harry blinked awake with a gasp. It took him longer than it should have to realize the cool green light reflected on the floor by the window and raised voices from beyond the Tower out on the grounds were real... Sleep left Harry very suddenly, leaving him wide-eyed and adrenaline-charged. He didn't bother rushing to the window. Instead, he reached to the bunk above his head and shook the shape he found there, huddled under the covers. "Ron. Ron!"

Ron sat up blearily. The expression of dazed disgruntlement dropped off his features when he saw Harry. "He's here, isn't he? What do you need me to do?"

"Fetch Hermione and Yolande and start waking the other DA members. I'm going to go find Dumbledore." Harry locked eyes with Ron until he saw the slow fire of realization overtake Ron’s dark blue eyes. Harry dashed to retrieve the Marauder’s Map.

Then, he ran.

The wind howled down the cliffs behind the Death Eaters, the waves crashing a loud counterpoint, tossing spray into the air. Not for the first time, Severus wondered what attraction the Dark Lord had to remote and unpleasant places. Draco stood several feet to his right, hooded and Masked, shaking with the cold, breath misting before him.

“My loyal friends,” Voldemort hissed; and only he was unhooded, undisguised. Severus wondered at that, as a young man. Surely, of all the circle, it was the Dark Lord who ought to have been disguised, hidden. Now he understood better the thrill of shock it had given him, long ago, to look on the man and the monster that the man had become. There was the sense that he could brave things that others could not, and, therefore, that his rewards would be all the greater. He saw those childish sentiments reflected around their dark and cowled circle – grown men preening under the press of their own importance, importance lent them by Voldemort’s regard.

“My Death Eaters,” he murmured, and something in the monster’s tone froze Severus, pricked his ears. He noted several others – those clever enough to hear the sinister note and comprehend its meaning – doing the same. Voldemort’s eyes shone red, then dimmed to dark embers. “So many, to offer me such devotion,” he added softly, striding the circle. “So many to give one man the whole of their hearts. Would you not say so, Draco?”

Draco’s cowled figure started at being addressed by name, but his startled hesitation did not linger long. “When one man has a vision so very worthy of following, my Lord, it is not surprising when those around him take notice. What is more startling is that the entire Wizarding World has not yet done so.”

Severus made an approving noise, noting as several others around him did the same. At the same time, he could not help noting the childish incomprehension coloring Draco’s naturally aristocratic, unctuous tones, or wondering whether the attitude was feigned.

“You find that startling, do you?” Voldemort inquired. “How very naïve. Power is the meat and drink of the world, my friends. And starving dogs will kill to be fed.”

Ah, Severus thought with an internal sigh. Fortune-cookie philosophy.
“No,” Voldemort repeated. “There are those who disagree rather strongly.”

“Fools and incompetents,” Draco dismissed.

Severus saw the Crucius coming before it hit, saw the pain forming behind the Dark Lord’s eyes. Draco should have long since learned, he reflected, that the flippant answer was never the proper one, either in class or at home.

“Those who you call fools,” Voldemort intoned, not bothering to raise his voice above the blond’s screams, “have bested me at every turn.” His eyes smoldered fire-red. “And do you know why?”

Silence. Even the most foolhardy among them recognized that this question had no proper answer.

“Finite,” the Dark Lord said dismissively. Draco fled back to his position, Severus yanking him up by the scruff of his robes. If the boy stayed down, he would only bring himself the reward of an additional Crucio until he stood under his own power, or lost consciousness.

“No,” Voldemort mused. “No, I suppose you would not. Severus, have you a speculation?”

The Dark Lord had not yet peered into his mind – he had mental failsafes to alert him. The defenses which then followed were practically automatic in Severus. Voldemort’s words were a guess then, and nothing more.

“Speculation?” Snape echoed, without taking so much as a calming breath. The pause would have been taken as an admission of guilt, and the word gave him precious seconds to think. He decided to answer honestly. “While Potter,” he said, lip twisting, “is merely a boy, he has the power of the Headmaster behind him. It is not only that mere boy whom we fight. Rather, he is both the figurehead and the sharpest, most powerful tool in the old man’s arsenal.”

Severus could not help but note that the Death Eaters had gone silent and still at his words, near-sacrilege for their circle of liars and murderers; Draco made a small, odd noise at the back of his throat. Voldemort’s eyes, however, glinted with some dark pleasure.

“Albus Dumbledore,” he hissed, “is not the only Professor at Hogwarts who stands behind Harry Potter.”

Severus remained silent. Anything he said could easily be twisted to further incriminate him. He knew Voldemort, knew his labyrinthine, dark and twisted thoughts to their rotted core. The man was waiting for the Potions Master to destroy himself; and that he would not do.

Voldemort laughed then, cold and high and terrible. “Clever,” he crooned. “Clever Severus. But not quite clever enough, for quite long enough. And to think, you were mere moments from retirement…”

The Death Eaters scattered, leaving Snape standing alone, as though treason were a communicable disease. Severus, however, only had room for one thought: that there had been a limited number of wizards who had known his status as a spy, and fewer still who understood that Draco Malfoy was shortly to replace him; that among those were Professors Dumbledore and Lupin, the Holy Trinity, and Draco Malfoy himself.

His dark eyes found Draco’s; the boy’s own eyes were wide, and frightened.

Oh, Draco, he thought. Oh, no. There was no room in him for anger. Now that his death was certain, peace settled on his shoulders, crept into his limbs. Thinking of Draco only brought him a real yet slowly fading pain. He had seen the good in the boy the way that Albus had once seen his
own potential. Eventually, Draco would no longer be able to live as a Death Eater; and when that
day came, he would defect, die, go mad. Perhaps all three in the logical order. Severus wished,
briefly, that he could spare Draco, but his usefulness as a wizard, a spy, and a force on the earth
was over, and he knew it. For a moment, he saw his and Draco’s dance as a cycle, an angry young
man growing up with a heritage of hatred and suffering, learning to visit that hatred and suffering
on others – watching the next angry young man make such familiar, naïve mistakes.

“Tonight,” Voldemort continued, oblivious to Severus’s silent insight, “we strike – at Hogwarts.”

A low murmur ran along and through the Death Eaters there assembled, an eager buzz.
“Tonight?” one man exclaimed. “But, my Lord… the preparations… the plans…”

“You misunderstand me,” Voldemort murmured with a small smile. “Hogwarts is shining with
Dark Magic as we speak, Morsmordre standing above its walls…”

“But… who…?” the man stammered.

Voldemort’s smile grew and darkened. “Surely you do not believe that you are my only loyal
friends?” he inquired dangerously. “We will join in the festivities soon enough. Meanwhile, we
have important matters to discuss…” His eyes trailed to the Potions Master. “Isn’t that right,
Severus?”

The Dark Mark shone over the rooftops, casting an eerie green light over the castle and grounds as
Ron and Hermione herded a group of younger wizards up to the third floor, Hermione silently
imploring the staircases to remain immobile, predictable. Unfortunately, the Castle was not of a
mind to listen; its very walls had been thrown into chaos, as though it sensed the intruders and
aimed at muddling them. Rae and Lilac gave startled squeals as their hurrying feet met empty air,
and Hermione found herself lunging forward and catching the scruff of Rae’s robes, but was not in
time to reach the blonde girl. Her eyes landed gratefully on Ron, who scooped the frightened first-
year up and into his arms, the first-year who was nonetheless protesting that she could fight. Even
considering the danger they were in, Hermione could not help but feel a surge of affection for
Ron’s steadiness, willingness, and strength of will. At the same time, Hermione’s agile mind was
scurrying about as she determined the quickest way to reach Gryffindor Tower now that their way
was blocked.

At the moment that the staircase finally reached its new destination, another group of students
spilled from a nearby doorway and began clambering down it, with much panicked cries and harsh
whispers. Hermione’s eyes lit on a fall of gold hair and she felt her features relax in automatic
relief. “Yolande!”

The pale-haired Slytherin whirled to face Hermione, her group of young charges milling wide-eyed
around her as they met on the landing. “Hermione!” Yolande exclaimed, throwing her arms around
the other girl.

Ron’s eyes traveled swiftly from the recalcitrant staircase and back to Yolande. “Come on, you
lot!” he ordered. And the newly swollen group took off down the stairs again.

“What’s happened?” Yolande demanded, keeping pace with the harried Hermione. “All I heard
was the commotion.”
“Death Eaters,” Hermione tersely explained, “fired off Morsmordre in the courtyard. We were separated from Harry in the scuffle, and now the Castle won’t let us back into Gryffindor Tower.”

“You’re welcome in Slytherin,” Yolande said with a lopsided grin that acknowledged the irony of the situation. If, hours ago, Hermione had been told that Gryffindors should be welcome in Slytherin, she would have imagined that her efforts and Yolande’s had finally yielded fruit. As it was, her triumph tasted bitter.

Ron grinned at Yolande, the tightness around his eyes the only betrayal of his tension. Hermione could not help but note that, for every corner they turned, their small group gained a handful of frightened children; that, soon, they would be too large a congregation to avoid attracting notice. With every turn towards Slytherin, the hallways became less familiar, until even Yolande appeared confused.

“The Castle’s keeping our attackers at bay,” Hermione reasoned. “But to do that, she’s moving things about.” She turned to view her charges, now perhaps forty strong, eyeing them thoughtfully. Ron had placed Lilac down to walk under her own power, and now she and Rae clung tenaciously to one another. In Hermione’s eyes, they briefly ceased being Slytherin or Gryffindor, Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff – they were frightened children, and they were her responsibility. To think if, perhaps, Slytherin and Gryffindor had never argued… if Gryffindor had been willing to see the truth…

Hermione stiffened, an idea invading her thoughts. Behind her closed lids she saw cool tile, heard the sound of Draco Malfoy’s voice, smelled and tasted the metallic tang of standing water…

Yes. Yes, she knew where to go. The only problem was getting in – oh, and getting out again. She took off at a rapid, ground-eating stride, Ron and Yolande close behind her.

Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall exchanged a wary glance before going in opposite directions. Harry realized that, if the two were in the same party, the school could very well end up bereft of leadership.

Dumbledore at his side was a comforting presence, but Harry was too used to depending on his own skills to pay him any more heed than that. He strode along the hallways by the older man’s side, wand drawn, eyes darting for signs of motion, noting Ewan at his side do the same. The hours since Harry had rolled back out of bed and down into the Gryffindor Common Room, felt as much as seen the green light bathing the Castle, and been separated from Hermione and Ron all bled together to a confusing jumble of impressions. Now all that had fled him; all he knew was the darkened corridors, the thump of his heart and the rasp of his breathing.

A sharp hiss filled the air around them. Nagini, Harry thought, placing his back against the stone of the walls, but the hiss was not approaching or receding; it was all around them.

“Potter,” a sibilant voice whispered. “Do you hear the screams? The ones who die merely because you exist?” A small pause, in which Dumbledore cast a small seeking charm, a bright, red-gold orb which hung before them uncertainly before dividing into three and moving swiftly in different directions down the corridor.

“Perhaps you are too far removed to care,” the voice mused. “Or perhaps it is that you are simply
A high-pitched scream shattered the air, and Harry winced, the muscles in his jaw twitching before his expression hardened. He and Dumbledore moved down the abandoned corridors like ghosts, silent and grim, nodding and parting when the searching spells separated; Ewan left his side to follow the third orb.

“Come, Potter,” the voice taunted. “Surely you know I have no difficulty casting *Avada Kedavra*. Of course, there are other ways of destroying a person. They require far more attention and time, and yet they are infinitely more pleasurable.”

The orb darted around a corner, Harry in pursuit. It paused hesitantly at the door to the Great Hall.

Inside was a scene literally out of one of Harry's nightmares. Death Eaters ringed the Hall, dozens of them, more than he ever knew existed; and at their centre, huddled in a small, whimpering group, were a knot of Hogwarts students.

And then at the dais, seated at Dumbledore’s traditional place, his booted feet resting upon the long, low staff’s table, was Voldemort.

“Forgive me for failing to rise,” he said with an ironic flourish, “but as you can see, it’s been an incredibly long night.”

Harry scanned faces and bodies, looking for hurt and injury. All of the students in the center of the circle were unharmed, Harry realized swiftly. Ginny Weasley, seated at the Dark Lord’s feet, had a small rivulet of blood running down her cheek from a head wound, and a murderous expression on her face. Apparently, the man had recognized her.

He had to then wonder what Voldemort's game was.

“It is quite simple,” Voldemort said, not reading his mind so much as anticipating him. “Even traditional. Your life for theirs.”

Harry shook his head. “No,” he said.

“Then they will die. Starting with this one,” he said, gesturing with a casual wave towards Ginny.

Harry realized suddenly that what he had taken for mud dropping from the man’s boots was, in fact, half-congealed blood. A glob fell from his boot, landing obscenely in Ginny’s red hair.

“You'll kill them in any case,” Harry said, bringing his wand to bear.

“Now, Harry,” Voldemort said, in a voice that might have been sympathetic in anyone else. “Be realistic, won’t you? You may have been able to best me before because I insisted on your death at the end of my wand. I won’t be so foolish again, you know. I won’t mind who hexes you, Harry, so long as you manage to die permanently.”

Harry couldn’t help but allow his eyes to flicker anxiously towards the circle of Death Eaters, doing a mental tally. His jaw firmed as his eyes narrowed. The best he could hope for was to create a distraction or mass confusion, and engineer the escape of as many students as he could, perhaps separate Voldemort from the group in the chaos. Severus Snape aside, the Death Eaters were not exactly known for their brilliance, and they were likely helpless without him.

“What? No heroics, Harry?” Voldemort wondered, eyes flashing red with the growing temper he was attempting to hide. “You’ll disappoint me. Here I was counting on you to provide myself and
“Why haven’t you killed me already?” Harry wondered. “Why offer me a deal? If you’re so powerful, why not kill me now?”

Voldemort chuckled, low and rich. “I hear they praise Gryffindor for bravery, but you ought to be using your Slytherin mind,” he advised in a hideous parody of a professor’s cadence. “If you make the deal, you will die, and all of your friends will see you helpless. If you fight, you will die, and they will all finally understand that resistance is hopeless. Either way, Harry, I win. A single curse just won’t do, however.” He smiled. “Well, what shall it be? Will you fight? Or will you negotiate?”

“Negotiate,” Harry said.

Voldemort’s smile grew. “Excellent.”

“I want them all to walk away,” Harry returned slowly. “I want to see them leave, and then I want a half an hour after that before anyone else leaves this room.”

Voldemort chuckled, high and sibilant, and the Death Eaters joined him, a timed laugh-track. “I have a better idea,” he whispered, and Harry had to strain to hear the words. “For every minute that passes, one student will pass through the doors.” He smiled, revealed very white teeth that briefly reminded Harry of Tom, of the boy the monster once had been. “When all the students have gone, that is when you will die. In return, you will not resist me.”

Harry didn’t see any choices, except to stall and hope for aid. “How do I know you’ll keep your word?” he demanded.

Voldemort’s lips slipped once more into grim lines. “If I wish to rule the world, Harry – and I do – I cannot murder the future soldiers of my armies. What I want is you, your friends, your Headmaster. Nothing else will satisfy me; and nothing more is necessary. I have no interest in keeping or killing them, boy. What should I do with a bunch of sniveling brats to look after?”

Harry nodded, slowly. “Ginny first.”

Voldemort tsked under his breath, but after a moment he waved Ginny forward. The young witch stood, resolute yet wary, striding woodenly towards Harry without looking back. “Who shall I look for?” she whispered softly.

He wrapped his arms around her, slipping her the Marauder’s Map. “No one,” he said. “I want you to wait outside the doors, Ginny, and tell the others where to go. Best place is the secret entrance through the Whomping Willow; the map will tell you what to do, and besides, Ron’s told you the story enough. Tell them to go to the Shrieking Shack and wait there for you. When the last wizard’s through, take them and run, Ginny. Run as fast as you can, because they’ll be looking for you and the others, no matter what lies he tells me. Count on it.”

Ginny eyed him, her red hair flyaway and her face white.

“Ginny…?” He put stress, feeling into the syllables, willing her to get the others to safety. It was more important they stay safe – far more important than any one wizard, even the Boy Who Lived.

She nodded, tears filling her eyes. “I will, Harry. I’ll get them safe, I promise I will.”

Then she was going, shoulders stiff, awaiting the curse that ought to hit her in the back, but Voldemort was good as his word. Harry had a strange thought, that the man was that fond of the
drama he had created; heroine exits stage right, and the climax of the story begins.

Death Eaters, nameless, faceless, grabbed on to Harry and hurled him at Voldemort’s feet. It was almost obscene, that thing in Dumbledore’s chair, and Harry swallowed, his mind whirring with desperation, with half-formed plans which grew then dissolved around him. Then one plan brightened in his mind, one he rapidly buried beneath a barrage of inconsequentials, the barrage necessary to prevent the man from glimpsing it through Legilimency.

Several Death Eaters circled Harry hungrily, stepping away from the group, which immediately contracted to cover their absence. Harry stood quietly in the center, searching for some way to steel himself; but he never had been able to. There was no way he had, no technique to prepare, really…

…or…

Harry pulled on Obscura, swathing himself in the absence of feeling like a cloak. Just then, the Crucio hit him, and every nerve jangled and racked, and someone was screaming, and it was him…

But there was no panic, no desperate thrashing of the mind to escape the pain or the truth of his situation. While his body thrashed, while his throat grew raw and sore, his mind was still functioning with more logic and order than he naturally possessed.

“Finite,” Voldemort hissed. “I wonder,” he drawled while Harry caught his breath, “if you can manage to call me ‘Master’ before we are through. Wagers, anyone?”

The inner circle of Death Eaters laughed again, and Harry could make out Macnair’s voice easily, could effortlessly separate it from the others; and, unless he missed his guess, Bellatrix Lestrange was the woman to his left.

It was she who replied. “I will wager you the newest recruit,” she said with her mad laugh.

“Ah, Bella,” Voldemort crooned. “What should you do with such a prize, were you to win it?”

Lestrange licked her lips, then threw her head back to laugh, wild, mad.

Voldemort smiled an indulgent smile. “Crucio!”

Harry screamed wordlessly, but he managed to deduce they were discussing Draco. Draco… he was to be passed around from Voldemort to Lestrange? Harry was not certain at whose hands Draco would fare worst. When he had the breath, he hissed.


“Two… minutes,” Harry wheezed.

Voldemort waved a hand, bored, and two small students scampered for the doors.

Then, it began in earnest. Harry counted silently to himself, shouted out when another minute had passed; he gained true satisfaction watching another terrified student dash through the door, knowing they would reach Hogsmeade in ten minutes at most. When half of the students had escaped, Voldemort paused in his ministrations.

“Do you know, Harry,” Voldemort wondered, “perhaps this is not the right sort of torture for you.”
Harry frowned, sweat-streaked face turning to the sound of the man’s voice.

“No, you’re entirely too sane for so long under the Cruciatus Curse… Longbottom’s parents lasted nearly an hour, but they were both older and wiser than you… perhaps we’re going about this entirely the wrong way.”

Bella smiled wickedly, stooping to take Harry’s face in her hands. “Give him to me,” she implored, scanning his features with her dark eyes. “I want him. Give him here.”

Voldemort kicked her casually out of the way, but to Harry’s surprise, the raven-haired woman laughed wildly, licking blood away from her split lip. She growled, then barked at the Dark Lord, but her barking quickly slipped away to laughter again.

Harry understood the implication that Voldemort was treating her like some mad dog, but he also understood fully just how far from sane the woman truly was. He found himself wondering if he ought to call Voldemort ‘Master’ just to lose her the bet.

“There are other ways of breaking minds, Harry,” Voldemort went on, as though he had never been interrupted in the first place. “Pain is only one facet of the art, isn’t that right, Bella? Pleasure often works equally well, if not better. They say you catch more flies with honey.”

“T-twenty t-two,” Harry panted.

Voldemort scowled, but his anger broke soon enough into a dark smile as he pointed his wand at Harry. “Vivicus gaudium.”

Harry was seated at his writing desk in the room that faced westward, frowning irritatedly as the sun’s ruddy light crept slowly away from his page. Soon he would have to rise and turn the lights on, but for now he was content to write in the encroaching darkness; he was working particularly hard on this one passage, and he had no desire to rise, to interrupt the flow of thought.

“What are you doing sitting in the dark?”

Harry turned to grin ruefully at his mother as she flipped the switch on his wall, wincing at the sudden change in light.

“You’ll burn out your eyes one of these days, young man,” she scolded, her own green eyes, just like his, flashing with merriment.

“Yes, mum,” Harry sighed, with the exasperated tone he’d so often heard from Ron. He was so very happy to see her, though he couldn’t imagine why; he’d seen her an hour or so ago at supper. Deciding that his work was muddling his mind, he stood, stretching, his mother automatically stepping into his arms for an embrace. “Don’t you work so hard tonight you won’t be able to get up for Quidditch tomorrow,” she warned. “And your sister made the cookies with the chocolate centers because she knows your exams are close. If you don’t go down and sample at least one, you’ll be blacklisted.”

Harry grinned ruefully; no one wanted to be on the receiving end of one of his sister’s tempers. He moved down the stairs, his mother’s hand resting familiarly on the small of his back, and –

…A strange man was glaring at him, turning his insides to mush, adrenaline flooding back through his system as he blinked away the memory.

No… not a memory. Not anything that had ever happened at all. His heart twisted. Mum…
“Vivicus gaudium,” the man said, and Harry was –

…standing at the front of the classroom, anxious because he was about to give his report to the whole school. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia were in the audience, beaming up at him, and that gave him the courage to begin. He looked down at the notecards in his hands before realizing that he didn’t need them; he had long since memorized his speech, and it would be the best fourth-grade project ever.

When he finished speaking fifteen minutes later, the audience leapt to their feet, clapping – clapping for him. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia told everyone that he was their boy, and even though they were not his parents, he knew what they meant and he glowed with pride.

It was too bad Dudley couldn’t come; he was locked up in his cupboard again, locked up for doing what his Aunt and Uncle wouldn’t call magic...

Harry reeled, shuddering from reaction. He had no idea how much time had passed, but he noted only five students left.

“Vivicus gaudium.”

Harry was standing atop the Astronomy Tower, kissing Cho...

Harry was kneeling in the garden, weeding the bed at Number Four Privet Drive, where his godfathers Sirius and Remus lived...

“Thirty-one,” Harry hissed, and the last student scrambled for the door. After a desperate glance behind her, the frightened first year dashed away.

“Are you certain you don’t wish to continue, Harry?” Voldemort inquired, thumbing away the tears Harry hadn’t been aware were on his cheeks. “Although I shall kill you now, if you desire.”

Harry rose into a seated position. “I’d prefer it if you didn’t – Master.”

Voldemort blinked at him; it was the first time Harry had ever seen the man at a loss. Then he barked a laugh, loud and rich and almost human-sounding. “Beautiful, Harry. Perfect. And why shouldn’t I?”

Harry kept his eyes lowered, both as a show of respect and to prevent Legilimency. “Because I can be useful to you,” he whispered, his voice catching. “Because the Wizarding World will fall at your feet if I help you. Those truly devoted to me, to the idea of me, would despair. And the undecided might actually change their minds.”

“Perhaps,” Voldemort replied. “However, I would be sparing you to kill you now. Amongst my Death Eaters, my most dear, loyal friends, there is much affront on my behalf; so you would not last the night in any case. And now, Harry,” he said, feigning sorrow, “good-bye.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay. Here's where the announcer screams "Mortal Combatttttttttt!!" and you all rush me, right?

You'll get to hear Draco's side of things soon - but yes, he really did give Severus
away; it's not a trick or a misunderstanding. He's how Voldemort knew Harry's issue with the word 'master'. Besides, cop-outs like that are crappy writing.

*Vivicus gaudium* isn't canon, but a spell of my own invention. Like the Mirror of Erised, it shows people their heart's desire, but it shows only that which can never be achieved; it eventually drives the victim mad.

As far as recs, I would like to FOREVER rec The Shoebox Project. If you call yourself a Harry Potter fan and haven't read it yet, for shame: it's a classic in the fandom, but less and less known because it was written what must be ten years ago, now. (What?! Yes, wow, that's probably about right...) I am NOT a fan of Marauder-era fic, but I've read it over and over again because of its awesomeness. Hie thee hence and read it now!

But wait! First, review... because you guys have gone worryingly silent.

-K
Ginny watched as the large number of witches and wizards, led by Hermione, Yolande and her brother, attempted to descend the fifth-floor staircase. The map had coloured the three names in gold lettering, clearly marking them as the generals of the group. She noted that her name had a silver colour and shrugged. She didn’t mind being second, now of all times.

“All right,” she said, furling the map and turning to face her people – thirty or so witches and wizards of varying age, the bulk of whom were quite young and very terrified. “Follow me.” Ginny smiled grimly as she noted Hogwarts aiding her purpose – coralling the other group until she could reach them.

When they got close, Ginny raised her wand and pitched her voice low. “They’re expecting Death Eaters,” she said calmly, not looking back to see if they were listening; she knew that they were. “Raise your best shield charm and hold until I say to drop it.”

Ginny cast her own, silently thanking Harry, and turned the corner that would bring her face-to-face with the others.

Sure enough, a hex hit her raised shield before she could blink, but the barrier held. “Ron!” she exclaimed, knowing her brother would hear her voice most clearly.

“…Ginny?” Ron’s voice echoed oddly in the sudden silence.

Ginny found herself with an armful of panicked brother. “Glad to see you too,” she murmured, her voice muffled in his robes. “Where are you all headed?”

Hermione stood with Ron on one side and Yolande on the other, her lips pressed together and her expression grim, holding the hand of a small redheaded girl whose expression mirrored her own. "We can lead everyone out through the Chamber of Secrets,” she said, voice low. "It's designed to be an escape route..."

“You’re certain there’s enough Floo for all of us?” Yolande pressed, eyeing Ginny’s people.

“We’ve found enough,” Hermione said.

Ginny grinned viciously. “I think I might have a better idea,” she said, and couldn’t help but be a bit startled when everyone leaned in to listen. She supposed she was still a bit too used to being the littlest sister, the one whom everyone did their best to protect. “If worst comes to worst, we’ll rescue the stragglers after we’re through,” Ginny finished, her tone even, even as her eyes promised an ugly death to anyone who tried to hurt Harry or anybody in her charge.

Hogwarts, as though it had finally sensed their purpose, led them unerringly to the girls’ third-floor bathroom.
It hurt. He hadn’t expected it to, but it did, like being burned by *Incendio* from the inside out, at least at first. What followed was tingling, half-dazed numbness that made it hard to concentrate.

Hell, who was he fooling – it made it hard to stay upright. Concepts, images and ideas that didn’t really belong there kept invading his thoughts. *I wonder what Quidditch will be like without him? He always was a challenge. I wonder what Quidditch will be like without him?*  

What followed was tingling, half-dazed numbness that made it hard to concentrate. *I wonder if I’ll have a new broom this year. Why is it so bright? I thought Voldemort liked the darkness. The color scheme in the Great Hall is atrocious.* A flash of memory – his mother’s rose garden in the summer. *I’d like to have one, a garden. They’re soothing.* Another flash – sitting in Snape’s class over a particularly temperamental potion, adding the red rose petals one by one – *His mind jerked viciously away from the image, but it was too late. Visions of blood and the sound of screaming assaulted him, blending with Potter’s.*

When they finally stopped using the Cruciatus curse, it was as though he had awoken from a dream, been shoved back into reality. He felt as though he’d been drenched in ice-cold water.

But it wasn’t over. Voldemort cast a new sort of curse he’d never heard before tonight, which was followed by a long, ominous silence on Potter’s part. Again. And again. And once more. The light from the Great Hall’s gigantic fireplace shone redly, illuminating the sweat on the features of the Boy Who Wouldn’t Live Much Longer.

*Murder and torture are all too natural. They’re mere outgrowths of those urges to be on top, to be the one in control, the one in charge.*

A lie. A particularly venomous one, engineered more to unsettle Potter than because it was anything he truly believed. He’d known just how to say it, too, imitating his father’s expression and intonation. It had been too easy.

Lying hadn’t been so simple after that, but it was both startling and confusing how little he’d had to. Being with Harry had all come so naturally, naturally enough that, moments after Harry had made him laugh, or smile, he would remember himself, and reel. Finding Potter amusing in his own right wasn’t in his plans, nor was desiring the other boy’s company.

He had almost fooled himself into thinking he would switch sides, when his father was killed and he’d been initiated. Then he’d called for Harry with all that he was, and Harry hadn’t come.

 Couldn’t come.

As he’d been telling Harry all along, he was just an ordinary wizard who’d had some luck avoiding Dark curses. How had either of them been fooled into thinking any differently? Harry couldn’t save him, or his mother. Harry couldn’t even save himself, it seemed.

And then Voldemort said it: the word ‘goodbye’.

“Wait,” Harry rasped. “Don’t you want to know the secret?”

Voldemort smiled slowly. “Slytherin’s, you mean? I know it already. Why do you think I attacked? I have no more use for you now.”

His ember-coloured eyes tracked to Draco’s. “Malfoy.”

Draco’s awareness crashed once more to earth. He could have sworn someone had said his name. His fellow Death Eaters were muttering to themselves, as if at an upset of some kind. Perhaps that hadn’t been his imagination after all…?
He stepped uncertainly towards the dais.

Voldemort smiled at him. “As this is your first meeting, and as I was so very fond of your father,” he said, “I would like you to be able to claim the great Harry Potter as your first kill.”

The silence in the room was absolute.

*What?* Draco wondered, wildly. *What?!* His Slytherin mind was moving on ahead of him. This was not about a gift, it was not about admiring Lucius. The bastard had left him in Azkaban to rot, after all. This was about cementing his ties to Voldemort. This was about destroying Draco as much as it was about destroying Harry, about making him unfit for the side of the Light.

Voldemort must have understood his ambivalence to the cause; murdering the figurehead of the Light would leave him with no possibility of defection.

He could almost admire the man if he didn’t harbor the vicious desire to kill him.

Harry did not look angry, or resigned, or broken, or the half-dozen other predictable emotions Draco had subconsciously expected to see. Instead, Harry looked – stubborn. His jaw was fixed, his eyes were steely behind his cracked lenses, and his hands were clenched into fists. The look held no accusation nor hope nor fear. It was Harry at his most elemental.

Draco raised his wand, his arm moving almost of its own accord. *We are all Slytherin, in a way,* he heard himself saying; it seemed incredibly long ago, at such an impenetrable distance. *We all want what’s best for ourselves. We all use subterfuge to gain the higher ground... jostling for position isn’t just Slytherin, it’s natural. Subterfuge is sometimes the best way...*

Harry quirked an odd smile, an oh-well-then sort of grin, the determined spark never leaving his eyes. *Well I suppose I’d rather it be you than him. Not much of a choice, is there?*

He definitely wasn’t meant to be hearing that. He *hadn’t.* It was just that he was going mad, that was all.

*We are all Slytherin, in a way.*

Draco’s wand hand tremored. He had forgotten about his father, about Voldemort, about the Death Eaters. There was the wand and himself and Potter and oh sweet Merlin he wasn’t certain he could do this.

No. No, he *knew* he could not.

He’d never thought that he would ever feel so grateful for his own cowardice. Relief swam through his veins, made him dizzy. His wand quivered, a small, barely noticeable twitch, before rising to point at Voldemort. “No,” he said, his voice quavering a bit towards the end.

Voldemort’s lips quirked almost as Harry’s had, in that I-suppose-I-can’t-stop-you-then, rueful sort of way. “I feared as much,” he admitted. “Better to find out sooner rather than later, however.”

“There’s always a choice,” Draco muttered, wearied, responding to Harry. “The other choice was die, but that’s all right. I’ll take it.”

Harry sighed. “Ass.”

Voldemort raised his wand in turn.

“I would not do that, Tom, if I were you.” Dumbledore stood unassumingly in the doorway, his
body relaxed, his features mild.

Draco let out a choked sob. He’d never been happier to see the old man in his life. Then, reality reasserted itself as he took in the numerous Death Eaters populating the room.

This most definitely meant that three wizards would be dying today.

“Ah, just the wizard I was waiting for,” Voldemort murmured, his interest in Harry and Draco momentarily lost. “I have been expecting you for some time, as a matter of fact. I rather expected you to have arrived far earlier, perhaps early enough to attempt some foolhardy rescue attempt before your prize pupil was subjected to torture.”

“I had some pressing matters to attend to,” Albus informed him, characteristic twinkle quite absent, now.

Draco was doing his best to avoid breakdown, but it was taking all of his energy. His mind was surprisingly blank of plans, terror comprising all he was. Focussing on the Headmaster’s words was the only thing keeping him in the here-and-now. He wanted to view Potter’s injuries, felt the almost pathological desire to do so, but refrained. That would not help, now. No way to break for it, so why bother?

“It makes me think,” Harry said quietly, “of the Triwizard Tournament.”

Draco could understand why. Cedric Diggory had died; Harry had faced Voldemort. If this was an allusion as to his own future prospects for survival, he didn’t really appreciate it.

“You remember those dragons? Everyone kept telling me to try a simple spell, you know, and to play to my strengths, but I really couldn’t understand it until the last minute,” Harry said. He sighed.

Bellatrix kicked at him, and Harry shut up, but Draco swallowed past the lump in his throat. They hadn’t taken his wand; of course they hadn’t. They’d wanted him to kill Harry mere moments ago; and now they were too lazy, too certain in their own power, too contemptuous of his. Harry was trying to tell him something. Something important.

Triwizard Tournament. Dragons. What had Harry done? He hadn’t been there for that task. Couldn’t Harry just tell him what to do? In his thoughts…?

Maybe Harry was getting weak, and couldn’t maintain the connection. Maybe Harry didn’t know how he’d projected the thought in the first place; typically it was Draco who initiated that sort of interaction, the few times it had occurred.

He’d heard things about the Task, of course, from the gushing student body, but it hadn’t been important at the time, just another one of Potter’s exploits. Dragons. A simple thing. Harry’s strengths were…?

It came to Draco rapidly. Sweet Merlin, the gushing Hufflepuff in question had been lauding Harry’s flying skills. A simple spell…


If they couldn’t kill Voldemort, perhaps they could at least escape, as the rest of the students had…

Voldemort had advanced until he was facing Dumbledore, his wand drawn. “No statues now,
“Dumbledore,” he informed the older wizard with a red gleam in his eye. “No phoenixes, nor hats, nor even your Harry Potter to save you.”

“You have always seen dependence on others as a weakness, Tom,” Dumbledore replied, sending out a single, wordless curse, which Voldemort repelled. “It may be; but it also can be a great strength.”

Voldemort sneered. “It puzzles me, this insistence on tutoring during a battle. Perhaps you suppose you shall say the right phrase, make the proper gesture, and I shall be converted back to the boy you knew. I don’t see a Time-Turner in your possession, old man.”

Harry and Draco exchanged a wary glance. It was more than Draco had ever heard the man say, and indubitably more revealing than he intended it to be.

Dumbledore saw it, too, as he dodged the other man’s furious barrage of curses. “You are the boy I knew, Tom. You have a touch more power, but other than that I am afraid I fail to see very much in the way of a difference.”

Voldemort’s reply was not verbal so much as it was a growl, low and deep in his throat. “Stupid. Old. Man!” he finally returned. “I have gained and lost more than you ever could have dreamed! I have risen from the very dust and reached the greatest heights, greater than any could have imagined! I have -!”

“No man is born to dust,” Dumbledore chided, almost gently, as he sent a leg-locker – the first spell Draco had recognized in the entire business – at Voldemort. “You were born to a magical heritage; you were born with a sharp, strategic mind. You could have been so very much, Tom. If I engage you in conversation, it is not so much for Voldemort as for Tom Riddle. For the clever, resourceful boy, whose mind was twisted to madness.”

Voldemort’s curses were now going awry, slamming home into the walls behind Dumbledore, into the enchanted ceiling, into the grate of the fireplaces.

That drew Draco’s attention to the fireplace, where someone was… was standing. But that was impossible, wasn’t it? He rubbed at his eyes, because it certainly looked like… Granger.

His eyes darted to the other fireplaces, where innumerable people were standing, jostling one another.

Sweet Merlin. And here he’d thought she was Ravenclaw.

“…was born to nothing! But you… you and others like you… could never comprehend…”

Dumbledore now looked rueful, and shook his head. “I am sorry, Tom. I am sorry for how you have lived. But, most of all, I am sorry for the spark of self-pity which grew to swallow you. You could have been born on the rack, or in the gutter, and none of it would justify what you have become.”

The spell hit Voldemort full in the chest, and he stumbled, unable to breathe.

That seemed to be the signal the students were waiting for. With battle cries, they spilled out into the Great Hall. Draco had pictured a handful of students, and only Gryffindors, but they were of all Houses, and he stopped counting at one-hundred. They fanned out rapidly to enclose the Death Eaters, their wand hands extended, many trembling with fear and adrenaline.

Bellatrix and the others immediately hustled Draco and Harry to the centre, unwilling to give up
their hostages, but there were many more students than Death Eaters; he thought he saw Ginny give Harry a reluctant grin, the blood on her forehead trailing into her hair. She looked pale but determined. Draco tore off his mask and robes; he didn’t want the Slytherins’ loyalty to be clouded unnecessarily. He saw Hermione through the press of Death Eaters, and Ron, who smiled grimly and cracked his knuckles. Neville was there, and though he trembled head to foot, his features were the most determined. Draco caught sight of Yolande, and Ewan, and Rae, who stood with hate flashing in her features – a face too young for such an expression, but Draco was not about to deny her the revenge she wanted. All of this was expected, in some corner of Draco’s mind…

…but there was also Morag MacDougall, who’d gone on to Draco at length about how the Death Eaters surely had the right idea, and Blaise Zabini, who was an inch away from his Mark, as far as Draco had been aware.

And, of course, he himself was here, finally feeling safe enough to check on Harry Potter, because everyone’s attention was now quite firmly elsewhere. And that was something he hadn’t been daring to hope for.

Draco barely had time for a once-over before their brooms finally appeared, crashing down through the enchanted ceiling. He leapt astride his, watching Harry awkwardly mount, then rose high above the Death Eaters. He reached the ceiling’s limit before pausing, looking down.

It was havoc. Curses were flying across the Great Hall, striking pillars and the staff table and Death Eaters and students. It was a melee, although every now and again, Granger or Weasley or Yolande would shout something, some sort of phrase which caused unhurt students to flock to them. Oddly, the small camps seemed not to have very much to do with House; when Yolande called, a flurry of red and green and gold and blue surrounded her.

Draco realized he had a great advantage in that he had his broom and his wand, and he could probably get to his rooms, pack some essentials and flee the castle.

*We are all Slytherin, in a way.*

*I guess we’re all Gryffindor, too,* he decided, shaking his head in amazement at the chaos below. Then he dove.

It did not take long before fellow Quidditch players caught on to Draco’s idea; soon, Quidditch members were dive-bombing Death Eaters, making short work of them.

Voldemort himself scarcely seemed dismayed at how badly it had all gone; he was far too wrapped up in his battle with Dumbledore to be perfectly aware of his surroundings, snarling at the older man as he attempted to pin the Headmaster to the ground. Voldemort slammed the white head into the marble tile of the floor, and Dumbledore was still.

Luckily, Hermione had caught wind of what was going on, and led her small band to swarm the Dark Lord, whose expression of panic actually made Draco laugh for a moment. It looked like Hermione had this well in hand –

*No.*

The man was holding Hermione by her short hair, tugging until she toppled backwards. Rae cast a Leg-locker on him, but he broke it with what seemed to be very little thought.

Draco swept down and cast a tripping jinx, hoping to slow the man down, but Voldemort merely
halted as though he sensed the magic waiting to pounce. He raised his wand. “Avada—”

“Avada Kedavra!” Draco shouted, his wand pointed at Voldemort’s back.

The man made an odd noise and crumpled, pinning Hermione beneath him. She rapidly skittered away, looking up at Draco and giving him a grateful smile that nonetheless revealed her horror. Draco darted away, but the Death Eaters were breaking, running to the flames with Floo powder, dashing for the doors. A cry of victory rose among the students.

Draco watched Harry slump on his broom and moved to his side to support the other boy, to slowly sink down by Hermione.

His Wizard’s Debt had been repaid.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, you will hear more about Draco and his own reasoning for his actions. No, that reasoning won't make you completely forgive him, though murdering Voldemort is a good start.

Rather obviously, I am pretending the real sixth book doesn't exist. There is no such thing as a Horcrux. Alternate universe! Thank you.

Here come the fic recs! Today's fic rec is By Any Other Name, by the redoubtable Didodikali. You must - repeat, must - read the story with the pictures rather than on fanfic-dot-net. (The name of her site is 'Lemonade Party').

To read only the text part of the story would be a waste, because Didodikali's fics are brilliant mostly because of the pictures, which are sweet, emotive, and often heartrending. Don't be surprised if you're reminded of a great children's book, but her plot here is anything but childlike. By Any Other Name follows the relationship between Lily Evans and Severus Snape. Reasons why this fic is amazing? Well, let's see. I believe I've mentioned the pictures. Another reason is the very cool way Didodikali switches perspective - by changing the colour of the frame around the text. Subtle and lovely.

Then there's the treatment of the characters - Quidditchjock!Lily is absolutely marvelous, and so is the slightly awkward (but quite prettily drawn) teenaged Severus. The Marauders, rather than being represented as Satan's Minions, are quite likable as Lily's best guy friends who are doing their best to protect her from Slytherin influence. And Lucius... heh. I'll let you meet him for yourself. Even the quick peek we get at the Harry-at-Hogwarts-Era characters is charming and perfect - Modern-day-Severus's thoughts concerning Draco Malfoy are laugh-out-loud funny. Didodikali views those who populate Rowling's world with empathy and kindness. What you end up with is characterizations that are believable within the context of canon, but you like Didodikali's folks better and root for them more insistently.

While the story has a great deal of humour, the end of the tale is, of course, bittersweet. Lily is dead - this is no alternate universe - and Severus is not a
particularly happy guy. This balance is what makes the story great instead of merely good. For all the sweet drawings and gentle characterization, the plot doesn't flinch away from the facts - which it could have, by producing a vignette instead of the whole tale.

Didodikali's other work is fantastic as well, and I highly recommend each and every story, but that one is rated PG and so is most ready for mass consumption.

Review, if you're reading, for heaven's sake. ;)

-K
“…but they wouldn’t really let me go until I’d demonstrated something, y’know,” a familiar voice said, but there was something unfamiliar about it, too. Something that didn’t belong? After a moment, Harry realized that it was a voice that did not usually hold any hint of humor in it; but it did, now. “Seems you end every year in Hospital, Harry,” the voice continued, bemused, “even if it’s only November. That’s why they tell me not to worry. But the truth is…” There was a small pause, and the voice dipped to a whisper. “…if you weren’t here, I think I might’ve thought I was going spare.”

Harry stubbornly tried to place the voice and could not. The scents were familiar: the crispness of the cloth around him, along with the smell of almond castile soap told him he was in the Hospital Wing. The voice didn’t go with that, either…

Harry’s lids flickered, and lit on an unfamiliar boy seated on a wooden chair at his bedside. He still didn’t have his glasses on, but in all honesty the person before him did not look like anyone he knew: the hair was too dark to be Draco’s, and besides, he was far heavier than –

Suddenly Harry knew why this voice had seemed so very out-of-place. “Dudley?!”

Dudley grinned, and Harry groped for the glasses at his bedside, slamming them on to his face to make certain that this wasn’t some sort of freakish nightmare. Surely enough, Dudley remained, if it could even be called Dudley; the boy was half the bulk Harry remembered.

Far from whalelike or fit for amusement park rides, he was now merely hefty. There was a look to him as well, one Harry had never seen before. After a moment, Harry classified it as relief mingled with excitement. “Ma’am!” he bellowed, calling to Madam Pomfrey. “Ma’am, he’s awake!”

The motherly witch bustled out of her small office and exclaimed in delight over Harry. “Oh, sweet Merlin, thank goodness you’re of a piece!” she exclaimed. “We weren’t quite certain when you’d awaken, were we, dear?”

Dudley shook his head. “Not a bit of it! That old guy…”

“Professor Dumbledore, dear,” Pomfrey prompted.

Dudley rolled his eyes. “He said he wasn’t sure you’d be all there when you woke up.”

“Mr. Dursley!” Madam Pomfrey exclaimed.

“Well, maybe it’s not what he said, but that is what he meant, wasn’t it?” Dudley demanded, unapologetic. “But I could tell the moment you opened your eyes that you were going to be all right.” Dudley paused, frowning at him. “Although now I think on it, you do look a bit like you’ve swallowed a golf ball.”

“W-what are you doing here?” Harry managed.

“Harry Potter!” Madam Pomfrey exclaimed, scandalized. “What a way to talk to your cousin after he’s traveled all this way!”
Dudley grinned wickedly. “Yes, Harry,” he said. “What a way to talk to me! I’m of a mind not to say a thing.”

Harry ignored his cousin in favor of Madam Pomfrey. “How long have I been here?”

She smiled. “A bit longer than your habitual end-of-year stay, Mister Potter. Four days.”

Harry gaped at her. “Oh… uhm, but you can usually heal scrapes and things so quickly…”

“Yes, dear.” Madam Pomfrey’s shoulders slumped slightly. “However, if there is a great deal of damage, especially internally, care must be taken. Rapid healing may sometimes have deleterious effects–”

“Internally?” Harry wasn’t sure why he was in the Hospital Wing, come to think of it. “What happened?”

Madam Pomfrey frowned. “What’s the last thing you remember, Harry?”

Harry strained, thinking carefully back. “I was… outside, picnicking with Hermione and Draco and Ron,” he replied.

Pomfrey clucked to herself. “That’s most likely just as well. I know the Headmaster will want to see you, Harry, and your friends as well, and… well, there is quite the waiting list, if you must know. I’ve kept out the gossipmongers; it’s only been staff and family.”

Harry gave the older woman a relieved grin. The last thing he needed was some new headline gracing the front of the Daily Prophet: ‘Harry Potter Gravely Ill! What Does This Mean for the Wizarding World?’

“Do you know what happened?” Harry managed, once Madam Pomfrey had bustled off to find Dumbledore.

Dudley shrugged. “I can’t really make it out. I think there was some kind of attack, here, and you were hurt. For the first day or two I was here, everyone was quiet and sometimes angry; there was one man, a teacher I think, who was here every day, looking like his dog’d died – but then they had a big celebration.” He puffed up. “I was invited. It was pretty incredible.”

“So we must’ve won.” Harry’s expression cleared. “That means I killed him.” He grinned. “That means I did it!”

“That means you killed someone?” Dudley demanded, taken aback.

“I think so,” Harry replied; then, “the guy who murdered my parents, Dudders, no one you’d miss.” He found himself biting off those last few words, harsh, defensive. Harry didn’t like the idea he was a murderer, but he liked the idea of a world with Voldemort even less, so… Harry leveraged himself up in bed, muscles twingeing throughout his body. He hissed under his breath, the pain taking him by surprise. “Why are you really here? It’s not to congratulate me, that’s for certain.” Harry glanced around the Hospital Wing, and found more of the beds occupied than was usual. There had been some sort of battle, and no mistake.

At that moment, the Hospital Wing doors opened, and Ron, Ginny, Hermione, Draco, McGonagall and Dumbledore spilled in, followed closely by Poppy Pomfrey, who was – quite ineffectually – reminding them not to excite Harry overmuch.

Hermione was the first to reach him. She threw her arms around Harry, nearly choking him,
dampening his shirt with her tears. “I told you, Harry, I told you I don’t like it when you’re in danger, it’s no longer allowed!” she sobbed, drawing back briefly to stroke his face with the side of her hand. “Oh, Merlin, Harry…”

Ron wrapped him in an awkward, round-the-shoulder hug. “I’m glad you’re all right, mate,” he said simply, but the look in his eyes was worth a million more dramatic greetings. His face said what Hermione had done in words: don’t you dare ever do that again, you nearly killed me.

Ginny was comforting Hermione, looking up at him with an odd, wry grin that the bushy-haired girl was more in need of assistance than Harry at the moment.

“Good morning, Harry,” Dumbledore said, trademark twinkle in his eye. “Glad to see you’re with us.”

“Glad to be here,” Harry replied, genuinely.

Minerva McGonagall didn’t say much except for something that sounded suspiciously like ‘five hundred points’, after which she became immediately misty-eyed.

Harry looked for the two people he found he most wanted to speak with and found one of them absent and one of them silent.

“You did not notice,” Dumbledore said, slowly, his features falling. “He is there, Harry.”

Harry turned to view the form of none other than Professor Severus Snape, lying silent in a hospital bed four or five from Harry’s own. Harry swung his legs out to touch cool tile before he knew what he was doing. Ginny ducked under his arm and helped him hobble over.

“What happened?” Harry demanded. “He was fine!”

“Cruciatus,” said a cold, raspy voice. “Tortured to death.”

Harry turned to Draco. “To death? But he’s – I mean, he’s there, lying there!”

Madam Pomfrey moved to the other side of the Professor’s bed. “Four spells proclaim him deceased. One says he is still alive, if only by a hairsbreadth. There is little chance he will recover.”

Harry shook his head, almost absently. It was always like this. He found an adult who liked him, who was willing to look after him, and then they died – through association with him. First it had been his parents, then Sirius, and now Severus. He moved back to his own cot, seating himself and tucking his feet under the covers, feeling cold and numb.

“In the end, there were few casualties,” McGonagall told him. “Two students died, although many spent several days here. Poppy had her hands full. You all just took them by far too much surprise.” A wicked grin adorned her features, briefly.

“It was the brooms,” Ron said with a grin of his own, much broader and more free with his happiness. “The brooms really did it. You and Draco… brilliant!”

Harry noted that Draco looked pale and drawn, and that he wasn’t saying much. The Slytherin had his normally expressive eyes trained on his feet. Harry instinctively wanted to talk to him alone the moment it was possible, not least because he still had no real idea what had gone on.

“What about you, Ron?” Hermione inquired, having regained her equilibrium. “You were like
some sort of general!"

Ron flushed, and for awhile the group reminisced about the battle and their heroic roles in it; Minerva quietly excused herself, but not before ruffling Harry’s hair. Dumbledore left and took Dudley with him, startling Harry with the summary claiming of his cousin. Soon, it was just the four of them, Ron seated on Harry’s bed, his wrist lightly sitting against Harry’s, a quiet and private reminder of his presence – or perhaps Ron was doing it to remind himself that Harry was warm, alive, and intact. Hermione regaled Harry with stories of the feast, and stories of Dudley’s introduction to Hogwarts.

"Dumbledore thought it was important that he be here, although he's keeping his cards close to his chest as to why," Hermione stated, arching one, dark brow. “But to start with, I thought Muggles couldn't see Hogwarts."

“Me, too,” Ron said. “But when you think about it, he’s not entirely Muggle, is he? He’s Harry’s first cousin, you know. His mum and Harry’s were sisters. So maybe he’s part-Wizard or something.”

Harry fully expected Draco to start nattering on about bloodlines, and purity, but the other boy was silent. He didn’t seem to be completely cognizant of his surroundings. When Draco walked over to examine a vase of flowers shining in the windowsill, Ron tugged at Harry’s wrist.

“He’s been like that since the battle,” he said, sotto voce. “I think he feels like – he’s responsible, or something. Now you’ve woken, I was expecting he’d be more cheerful, but…” Ron’s somber eyes flickered over to Draco, who, standing in the sunshine, looked like some angel lit to earth. And yet, the slope of the shoulders, the jerky way Draco moved, the way he stood with his head tilted to one side, as though he could not hope to find anything more fascinating or engaging than the rectangle of world revealed through the tall Hospital-Wing windows, all screamed ‘wrong!’ to Harry. “He couldn’t’ve done more,” Ron muttered, more to himself, now, than to Harry. “He just couldn’t’ve. I mean, he killed Voldemort and everything. But maybe that could be the problem?”

Harry choked on air.

“Yeah, I know, mate; you’d think anyone’d be happy as a niffler in a goldmine to be the one who did us that particular favor.”

Hermione had caught wind of the conversation and was now shaking her head in dismay. “He didn’t even notice my hair.”

Harry hadn’t, either, but when he looked up he saw that her hair was pulled back on either side with small, jeweled purple clips.

“He is a bloke, you know,” Ron offered.

Hermione sniffed. “Draco? Not notice something to do with hair? You obviously don’t know him as well as you think you do, Ron.”

Ron had to laugh at that.

Harry frowned. “Let me have a chat with him, will you?”

Ron and Hermione exchanged a glance.

“Good luck,” Hermione said dismally. She and Ron trailed back out into the hallway, closing the door gently behind them.
It took Draco awhile to even notice they were gone; and, when he did, he made for the door himself, halting almost guiltily when Harry called his name.

“What’s the matter?” Harry inquired when Draco finally perched at the edge of his bed.

The Slytherin shifted uncomfortably. “Nothing,” he said.

Harry laughed. “I can try to read your mind, if you’d like.”

“No!” Draco’s cheeks were pink, now. “No – don’t.”

The dark-haired boy shifted up into a seated position to get a better look at Draco’s features. “All right – I was only joking, anyway. That’d be like the Imperius Curse all over again if I didn’t ask.”

Draco shook his head. “I want to tell you.”

“Draco, whatever it is, I –”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” the other boy snarled suddenly.

Harry was beyond frustration and sliding into worry and fear. “All right,” he repeated slowly. “No promises, except that I’ll listen. How’s that?”

“Good,” Draco said, his expression calming. “That’s good.” He paused again, though, running a hand through his hair.

Harry couldn’t help but note that, for the first time in a long time, Draco’s hair was not slicked back or styled. In fact, if he didn’t know better, he would’ve sworn that the other boy hadn’t even bothered brushing it that morning. As Draco would probably take time to style his hair while standing at wandpoint, this more than anything betokened his unsettled state of mind.

“I’ve done something,” Draco said.

To Harry’s surprise, the other boy slid into his thoughts, after all.

Irredeemable.

Harry realized that Draco was shaking, and squeezed the Slytherin’s hand, hard. Draco jerked away from him and shook his head, vehemently.

“You won’t want to touch me,” he rasped. “I’m not your friend. Listen, I – at first it was like some kind of game, a war game, and I... I felt important. Succeeding where even my father had failed... you can’t know what that was like.” Draco sent the feeling, anyway – elation, and triumph, supported on a very old bitterness. “I got you to trust me, and you started letting things slip – little things, at first, and that was helped along by the fact that you were obeying me...”

The words were dropping into Harry’s mind like pebbles going over a chasm, making great booming echoes wherever they touched. He slumped back against the headboard, his lips parted slightly in surprise. He should have seen this – he should have. He had, briefly – but Ron had shamed him out of it.

“...but he wanted something bigger, something huge, some old secret of Slytherin’s that could change the Wizarding World forever, and he was certain you knew it, only he couldn’t break into your mind anymore... so he asked me to.”

“Imperio,” Harry murmured.
“Yes. He wanted me to do it to you, or, failing that, for me to goad you into doing it to me. He already knew there was enough similar between us to form that connection.” Draco shuddered. “Kindred, he called us.”

Some of Draco’s terror slipped between the link, and Harry saw a picture in his mind’s eye: Draco standing in front of Voldemort, the man Legilimizing him, prizing into all of his most secret places. The man had known that Imperius would form this sort of lasting connection because he had learned the dark corridors of Harry’s mind in fifth year; he had been able to compare, to note similarity.

“I couldn’t find out, though, because you didn’t know, not really. So I was meant to break you if I could, befriend you if I couldn’t. I did all that and I did it without a second thought about you.”

Harry’s eyes slid up to Draco’s to confirm the statement, because he was still having trouble believing. The Slytherin’s grey eyes were hard and dark; they absorbed everything, including Harry’s will. He slumped. “All right,” he said quietly. “I understand.” A depth of shame welled in him, threatening to overwhelm him; he already felt tears prick his eyes, but he knew they wouldn’t drop. He had learned a long time ago when not to cry. Slytherins didn’t respect the weak, anyway.

Before he knew it, the shame exploded into cold anger. All that time – all that time he’d been laughing with Draco, and trying to convince Hermione and Ron to get along with him, all the secrets he’d shared or let slip – it was all a lie. All of it. He wanted to scream.

“But then you disappeared, went down into the Chamber of Secrets, and...” I was scared.

Harry blinked in surprise as Draco gave an odd, half-strangled laugh. “At first I told myself it was because it was my responsibility to keep track of you, but then I searched myself into exhaustion, until I couldn’t help but know that what I was searching for was you, and that I was –” He shook his head. “You weren’t what I thought you were. You were a puzzle and I wanted to solve you. When I thought of what things would be like after you were gone...” Draco shook his head in absent wonder, words failing him.

“You were my friend,” Harry said. “You are. You and I began to trust one another at the same time. That’s when I really knew you were all right.” When Draco smiled weakly, Harry went on. “Why bring all this up, now? Voldemort’s dead; you killed him. As odd as that sounds.”

Draco winced. “Yes...” His eyes trailed to Snape’s bed. “You know Voldemort was holding my Mum.”

“Yeah,” Harry said in a low, sympathetic voice.

“He told me that he knew that there was a spy,” Draco said, “and to find out who it was. Or...”

Harry’s eyes followed Draco’s. “No...”

“I told him,” Draco whispered. “It... it was... no... no, I thought it was... the only way, and... oh Merlin, Harry...” He put his head in his hands, and his shoulders began to shake.

“Are you being Slytherin?” Harry demanded quietly.

Draco lifted a tear-stained face. “No, I am not being SLYTHERIN! If anything I’m being a bloody Hufflepuff, Harry. I’ve... I’ve killed him, haven’t I? I’m a murderer. Wouldn’t Father be proud?”

Harry frowned, searching for the right thing to say, to do. It was hard for him to imagine what he
might’ve done if his mother had been captured by Voldemort; he’d never known his. The best he could manage would be if Voldemort had been holding Dumbledore, or Hermione, or... or Draco himself? How would he have behaved? What would he have done?

“You’re not a murderer,” he managed. “At least, not yet. He’s not dead, you know.”

“He might as well be!” Draco shouted. “And do you know what else? While you were asleep the Aurors found the Dark Lord’s hideaway, on some street in Muggle London of all places. My mum wasn’t there. Either he’s killed her, she’s escaped — or she was never there in the first place! If he had her, he was never planning on giving her up. He would’ve kept on until she died of natural causes, and by then I wouldn’t have needed an excuse to do the things he told me to!” Draco blinked away more tears. “I knew,” he said with wide eyes. “I knew it, then. I did think he had her, but I knew that he’d keep using her name to get me to do what he wanted, I knew that he’d never stop. But I had to keep on, because if I didn’t...”

Behind the words were the feelings that had engendered them, and Harry could feel the suffocating pressure of the last several months, the way it had started simple for Draco: Voldemort as a tool for his own ambition. Slowly, though, he became aware of what he was giving and what he was gaining, and panic closed over his head.

Harry’s Gryffindor side wanted to rail at Draco. Couldn’t the other boy have told someone? Anyone? It didn’t have to be him, Harry. Dumbledore would’ve done. Snape. Hermione, or Ron. Yolande, his cousin. He could’ve trusted any of those people to stand by him, to protect him. But no, he’d been so certain he could handle it on his own — so certain what Voldemort had been planning and certain he was the only one who could deal with it...

*Now,* Harry’s Slytherin side interjected, *who does that remind you of?*

Harry looked at Draco’s trembling shoulders and let out a long, low whoosh of breath. “Someone said to me once that Voldemort had hoodwinked older and wiser wizards than me,” he said softly. “I guess I ought to pass that on, then.”

Draco’s tear-stained face jerked up in surprise. “W-what?”

“Well, he manipulated you, didn’t he? He knew you loved your mum, and he used that against you.

“Once he tricked me into thinking he had my godfather. I didn’t tell anybody what was going on. Ron and Hermione found out of course, because that’s what they do. But then Neville and Luna found out as well, and then Ginny and of course they all wanted to follow me — to save my sorry hide. They nearly all ended up dead because of me.” Harry paused. “My godfather did die, or pass beyond the Veil, anyway. It was my fault.” He paused again, with a small frown of realization on his features. “In a way, I didn’t stand a chance, though. Voldemort saw that I had too much pride, that I thought I could always handle things myself, without help. He counted on it. It’s ironic in a way, because now that’s exactly what I have to do: handle things without help. My godfather’s gone, likely irretrievably, and I loved him very much.”

Harry felt an odd lightness fill his lungs as he took a breath deeper than he had in a long time; a subtle tightness left his frame. It was almost as if an *Obscura* had lifted without any conscious effort on his part.

“I loved mine, too,” Draco said dully. The Slytherin’s gaze lit on Professor Snape.

Harry tried to swallow past the lump in his throat. "You can't mean that Snape's -"
Draco’s grey eyes conveyed a dismal agreement without words. "Everything, Harry," he finished softly. "I've lost everything."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so... *whew!*

If I were to point to one thing that has changed between this version and the last, it's chronology. For some reason (training/brainwashing) I had initially decided that everything important had to happen to Harry at year's end - a half-joke that Dudley refers to at the beginning of the chapter. OTOH, the timeline really doesn't work to mystically become summer. So, it's November. I'm sure this could still be picked apart by others if they wanted to, but it's close enough for government work.

Kindred Powers, also the title of the series overall, is from The House of Life by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. The poem refers to the 'kindred powers': Truth, 'with awed lips', Hope, 'with eyes upcast', Fame, 'whose loud wings fan the ashen Past' and Youth... who still has so much to learn. I couldn't help but think of these four Aspects as parallels to our four main characters. Plus, Draco and Harry's connection due to their kindred powers, and Dudley - Harry's actual kin - being an important aspect of Slytherin's secret, as well as Draco's kindred - his mother - as the impetus for his actions.

Harry sacrificed his godfather to his own pride - Draco sacrificed his godfather to his own fear - the great Gryffindor weakness versus the great Slytherin one. We still sympathize far better with Harry (myself included); yet, the end result is the same, and I wonder how my readers would feel if the series had originally been titled Draco Malfoy and the... Could we forgive Draco for his brand of stupid the way we forgive Harry for his?

Continuing my trend of recommending older but marvelous stuff, I'm going to do what I rarely do and rec something that is not a fic at all. Rather, it is McTabby's 'Summary Executions'... a gathering of the worst, most grammatically-challenged, inadvertently-hysterical fic summaries, here: http://mctabby.livejournal.com/327291.html.

Go and laugh your arses off. You'll need it after this chapter. ;)

-K
Chocolate

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For every ill under the sun,
there is a remedy... or there is none.
If there be one? well then, you find it!
(If there be none: then never mind it.)

When Harry woke an interminable time later, it was dark outside, and Draco Malfoy was slumped against his shoulder, breaths deep and even. As Harry came fully awake, he realized what had started him from sleep: there was a warm, friendly glow in the room that had not been there before. Peering past Draco’s head, he made out a fire-warm luminescence, surrounding a vaguely birdlike shape.

Harry nudged Draco in the side with his elbow until the Slytherin twitched and began stammering that he didn’t remember falling asleep and all sorts of other useless things until Harry hushed him. “Look!” he exclaimed. “Fawkes!”

It was indeed the phoenix, perched on Snape’s headboard and peering down at the older man. In Fawkes’s light, Snape looked different; in the orange glow, Snape’s cheeks took on the semblance of health. Harry could swear that, while in the reach of Fawkes’s light, the man breathed deeper and easier than before.

Draco’s gasp caught and rattled in his throat, and he gripped Harry’s arm tightly enough to hurt. “What’s it doing?” he demanded. “What is it doing to him?”

“Shh!” Harry exclaimed. “Watch...”

Fawkes gazed at the Professor in kindly compassion, as though the bird saw all of the man’s deepest sorrows. One pearly tear trembled at the tip of his beak before dropping to land directly in the middle of Professor Snape’s forehead. It rested there, shimmering in the gold light, and Harry watched Snape’s breathing grow deeper still. “Professor!” he exclaimed, hoping to wake Snape.

“The bloody bird is drooling all over him!” Draco exclaimed.

“Professor!” Harry called again.

Snape did not move; he did not so much as twitch.

Harry frowned. “But... I was so sure...”

Fawkes himself seemed startled and more saddened yet. He flew to Harry and made an odd, vibrant cooing sound, as close to a query as Harry supposed a bird could get.

“Sorry,” Harry whispered to him with a sigh. “I thought for sure you’d have it, too.” In the light of Fawkes’s glow, Harry could feel the memories of the attack slowly returning to him. Perhaps they had returned to him in his dreams, but Harry didn’t think so.
Fawkes cocked his head at Draco, who was staring at the huge bird in awe. The bird waddled from Harry to Draco, who flinched back slightly before holding ground.

“It’s... it’s...” Draco muttered, eyes wide. “...uhm, really something, isn’t it?”

“His name is Fawkes,” Harry offered.

Draco’s eyes slid up to Harry’s, then back down to the phoenix. “Hello, Fawkes,” he said.

The phoenix cooed at him.

Draco laughed, the genuine, slightly started laugh that Harry liked. “He answered!” He reached out a tentative hand to stroke the top of Fawkes’s head.

Harry watched the Slytherin grow calmer in petting the bird. Fawkes, for his part, was staring up at Draco with a wise, increasingly sorrowful expression.

A small tear-drop landed on Draco’s other hand, which he snatched back, rubbing furiously. “What...?!”

Fawkes waddled to the edge of the mattress, leapt from there to the bedpost, launched himself into the air, and disappeared.

“Maybe he was hoping to get luckier on the second try,” Harry said gloomily.

Draco snorted. In the absence of the gold light, he seemed much more his usual sarcastic self. “I don’t get it. I thought phoenix tears were supposed to cure anything and everything.”

Harry sighed. “They are.”

“I guess Cruciatius was too much for him,” Draco agreed. He shuddered.

Harry pondered this statement, which seemed intrinsically wrong to him. Fawkes had saved him from the brink of death from a basilisk wound. If the phoenix could do that, what was it about the Cruciatius Curse that was so much more difficult to cure? “Do phoenix tears only work on external injuries?” Harry wondered aloud.

“No,” Draco muttered, already beginning to sound sleepy again. He sat up more fully, obviously with the intent of avoiding another impromptu nap. “No, it’s supposed to help with anything.” He frowned. “Why?”

Harry wet his lips nervously. “Well – look. If Fawkes could heal me, he should be able to heal Professor Snape.”

“Shouldn’t ‘is’, you know.”

“I guess... but if it can’t be fixed, even by a phoenix... then maybe nothing’s broken?”

“Of course it is!” Draco snapped. “He’s barely breathing, all of those diagnostic spells say he’s already dead!”

Harry shook his head. “No... one says he’s alive. Think about it.”

Draco opened his mouth to retort, then paused. “You... you mean a potion, don’t you?”

Harry’s eyes connected with Draco’s, the idea sparking between them. “If I were Snape, I
would’ve figured a way to play dead the minute I joined up with Voldemort, or at least the minute I turned against him. Wouldn’t you?”

“Four diagnostic spells say he is dead, but the fifth doesn’t,” Draco mused with growing hope. “There are potions designed to fool tests like that.”

“Like Draught of the Living Death,” Harry said.

The Slytherin nodded eagerly. “He could’ve had some on him and drank it before Cruciatius. It takes at least fifteen minutes before the potion really kicks in, but he could have found some way to extend that, to make passing out look like it was a result of the t-torture. So Draught of the Living Death... but modified by him...”

“...which could make it hard to counter. But he wouldn’t want to make it tough. He’d know someone would have to wake him, right? Maybe it’s simple.”

“Like Accio Firebolt,” Draco contributed wryly. “Probably. So he’d need a potions cure-all.”

They grinned at one another. Harry could see Professor Snape’s own writing in his mind, written in the margins of one of the man’s old Potions texts: Shove a beozar down their throats.

“Do you think it’d work?” Draco breathed.

“Only one way to find out,” Harry replied, a gleam of mischievousness entering his eyes. He scanned the Wing. “D’you see Madam Pomfrey anywhere?”

Draco shook his head. “Obviously she went to sleep a long time ago, like we would if we were sensible –”

Harry hushed him. “Look, we can test our theory pretty easily. There’s Madam Pomfrey’s office... all we have to do is steal one beozar and give it to Professor Snape. It isn’t poisonous in and of itself, so we can’t do any harm...”

“Since when are you such an expert on Potions ingredients?” Draco groused, but Harry wasn’t listening. He was already creeping towards Madam Pomfrey’s office door, using a simple Alohamora to gain admittance. “Potter!” Draco hissed, looking at the several other patients dotting the otherwise empty beds in the Hospital Wing. “You’ll wake everyone!” Draco swore under his breath, then crept after Harry.

And crashed into him from behind. “Why have you...?!”

“Look!” Harry exclaimed. Draco swore again, then did.

There were hundreds of jars all along the wall: jars made of aluminum, faceted jars made of blue glass, ball jars with screw-top lids, earthenware jars that looked like they belonged in an Egyptian museum.

None of them had labels.

“Have you forgotten you’re a bloody wizard?” Draco sneered. “Accio beozar jar!”

A small, earthenware jar flew to his hand with enough surprising force that he stumbled into Harry, who tripped, who knocked over a small shelf lined with delicate bottles made of blown glass and trailing with filigree. Each one crashed to the ground with an almost physically painful noise. The two boys froze, eyeing each other in the quiet, awaiting the scolding voice which was sure to
come, but the room echoed in its silence.

Draco’s shoulders drooped and he breathed a huge sigh of relief.

“Come on!” Harry exclaimed. He and Draco moved to Snape’s bedside and exchanged an anxious glance. They heard footsteps approaching, and froze.

“We may have tripped an alarm,” Draco realized. “Fuck!”

“Do it! Now, while we still have a chance!” Harry ordered.

Draco fumbled with the stopper, obeying for once without pausing for the sake of his pride. He dropped the jar in his nervousness, which shattered, scattering bezoars all over the floor. Harry caught one as it skittered towards him, tossing it to Draco, who snagged it from the air with all the reflexes of a Seeker.

“H-How?” he stammered.

“Just shove it in his mouth!” Harry exclaimed, just as the door to the Hospital Wing flew open, admitting Madam Pomfrey and a sleepy-looking Professor Lupin.

“Harry! Draco!” the mediwitch exclaimed. “What are you...?”

“Now, Draco!” Harry exclaimed.

Draco nodded and, making a face, stuck his hand halfway into the Professor’s mouth, dropping the beozar at the back of his throat.

“You’ll suffocate him!” the witch exclaimed, running to Professor Snape’s side and attempting to hook the offending item away with her pinkie finger. She sighed in relief when the Potions Master swallowed without choking. When she turned to Harry and Draco, however, her face was red and flushed, and her eyes were filled with tears. “Boys! Just what did you think you were doing?!”

Professor Lupin moved completely into the Wing, still looking confused and mostly asleep.

“What are you doing with Severus?”

Harry blinked, startled at the use of his Professor’s first name. “Uhm... just trying a beozar, sir.”

“A... poison antidote?” Lupin inquired, looking slightly more alert.

Draco coughed, looking surprised. Harry tried not to hold it against him; Professor Lupin was so scruffy-looking that it was hard for Harry to remember, sometimes, just how competent he was in his field.

“A beozar?” Madam Pomfrey echoed. “Well... it won’t do any harm, at least. But what were you thinking, breaking into my private office like that? Twenty points from Slytherin, and twenty from Gryffindor!”

Harry sighed. “Don’t take the points from Slytherin,” he said. “I was the one who broke in. Draco told me not to.”

Madam Pomfrey sighed. “Very well. Fifteen points to Slytherin – and five to Gryffindor for being so honest, Harry. But still...”

“When is it supposed to work?” Draco inquired, just as Professor Snape sat up in bed, rubbing the back of his neck as though he had a crick in it.
Harry grinned. “Right about now,” he breathed.

Draco grinned back at him, but the expression broke quickly. Harry watched as the blond went from elated, to startled, to panic-stricken. Harry’s attention was distracted, however, by the odd sight of Lupin throwing his arms around Snape and squeezing.

Snape tolerated it with better grace than Harry might’ve thought; while he remained silent and unyielding, he did not immediately shove Lupin onto the floor, which, Harry decided, showed great forbearance on his part. Lupin detached of his own volition, wearing the grin that Harry was certain decorated his own features.

Then Snape said the most human thing Harry had ever heard from his lips. “Why are you all staring at me?” A pause, a reassertion of his usual tone. “...and grinning like madmen?”

Of course, that only made everybody grin more widely, except for Draco, who was trembling, looking like he might drop to the floor on the spot.

Snape’s gaze hardened when it lit on him. “Draco...?” he muttered, the inquiry sounding wary, laced with doubt. The Potion Master’s black eyes swung up to Professor Lupin, then, and he frowned. “Madam Pomfrey, if you would excuse us? There is no reason to further disturb your sleep.”

Madam Pomfrey eyed him with a professional air for a moment before nodding. Harry watched the witch and knew that she was well aware of the tension lacing the room; it was in the tightness of her features and her darting eyes. She left, however, which meant she trusted Snape, or Lupin, or both, not to do anything foolish.

“What is it, Professor?” Harry inquired.

“Come stand over here, Harry,” Snape ordered, his eyes on the other two.

Harry did as ordered, not realizing what the look on the man’s face really meant until Snape nicked the wand from Harry’s left pocket and pointed it at some middle-distance directly between Draco and Professor Lupin.

“Oh,” Harry said, stupidly.

Lupin froze – rather intelligently, Harry thought – but Draco made the mistake of attempting to draw closer. Soon Harry’s wand and the will behind it were focussed solely on the Slytherin. Harry twitched but Snape’s free arm shot out to grip his wrist tightly, preventing him from moving.

“Severus,” Lupin said quietly but firmly, “none of us are here to hurt you...”

From the tone of his voice and his non-threatening stance, it was obvious that Professor Lupin believed Snape’s actions were due to some sort of post-Cruciatus psychosis; Harry wasn’t so sure.

Snape snorted eloquently. “One of you betrayed us. I was certain it was Draco, but now he is here and Harry is alive... which leads me to re-include you, Lupin, in my list of suspects... You have been acting very odd, lately...”

Harry watched as the Professor’s concern for Snape fled his features and he began to consider the issue at hand. “Why would I befriend you in order to betray you? We’ve had this conversation, Severus. Over the course of our acquaintance, you haven’t told me anything about the Order I didn’t know already. First of all, I’ve known you were a spy for the Order for years. Why would I need to befriend you to betray that particular confidence? Second, since I am in the Order myself, I
am certain you possess very few secrets that are not already mine.” Lupin tsks under his breath. “Put that bloody thing away, will you? I’m getting tired of standing at the end of your wand.”

Snape frowned, looking confused; it was obviously a lot to deal with right after having been in the Living Death for five days. “You, though,” he muttered, his wand twitching to Draco. “You found out I was a spy so recently...”

Draco jerked a nod, and Harry found himself instinctively stepping towards the blond boy, utterly forgetting the grip closed over his wrist – which was quite an oversight, given that the fingers on his left hand were going tingly.

“You told him...” Snape said. It was not a question.

Draco moved to the man’s other side, heedless of the wand that drew nearer and nearer to him until it rested against the hollow of his throat, which jerked as he swallowed. “It was me,” he said.

Snape’s eyes crinkled in a profound sorrow for an instant before hardening again.

Draco knelt down next to Snape’s cot, his face white and his entire body still trembling.

Harry jerked his hand free of his professor’s grip, then moved to stand beside the other boy. “Professor!” he exclaimed, because it was necessary in order to get Snape to take his eyes off of Draco at all. “I know it must’ve been terrible, but you’re alive... and maybe what Draco did was the only way he could save both you and his mum!”

Snape raised his eyebrows at Harry’s impassioned defense. “As admirable as your loyalty is, Mister Potter, it is misplaced; and, as cheerful as your statement is, the ends do not justify the means. It could have turned out considerably worse...”

Harry choked back a laugh, but Draco was far too on edge to reign in the emotion; the blond boy giggled nervously, swallowing the sound under Snape’s black glare.

“There is something funny, here, Mister Malfoy? Something amusing in all of this? Please do share it with the rest of the class,” he said icily. “I certainly could use a good laugh.”

“It all depends on the ends and the means,” Draco replied. Then, with slightly less composure, “...I couldn’t think of another way. Whatever I did, he had the upper hand. I’m not worthy of House Slytherin, I know it. I couldn’t think of anything to do, and I couldn’t escape without leaving her...”

Remus smiled gently at the harried tones of Draco’s voice. “I think he’s sincere, Severus. And it would be awfully hypocritical of you to condemn him, don’t you agree?”

Snape looked up with a sneer on his lips, but something in the other man’s expression stilled him. He drew in a deep breath, then exhaled it slowly. He drew Draco up to stare at him; Harry watched as Draco allowed himself to be Legilimized, but with the viewing came a certain amount of vertigo, as though he were being examined a split-second after Draco was. It was the psychic equivalent of a double-image and it was making him dizzy.

“You are genuine,” Snape finally said, releasing Draco’s shoulder and half-shoving him away. “I do not understand. You were genuinely for the Dark Lord mere months ago.”

“I hate him,” Draco said simply.

The pale man sneered. “Hate won’t be enough. When you took this,” he began, pulling Draco’s
“sleeve up, “you swore to–”

Harry watched Snape’s face drain of color. He hadn’t thought such a thing possible, given how gaunt and pale the man already was. Harry leaned forward to find –

Draco’s unblemished forearm.

Snape flipped it over.

Nothing.

“What...?!” Snape hissed, looking up at Draco as though the boy had betrayed him personally in his sudden ability to rid himself of the Mark. When Snape thought to examine his own forearm, the Mark was still there.

“Fawkes,” Harry breathed. “He must’ve healed it.”

Lupin and Snape turned to stare at Harry. “Fawkes was here?” Lupin inquired, a tightness in his voice that Harry didn’t recognize.

“Yeah,” Harry confirmed, nodding. “He went to Professor Snape and cried, but it didn’t do any good. That was how me and Draco figured out that he wasn’t sick, he was under the influence of a potion.” He paused to smile at Draco, who attempted a sickly one in return. “Then he came over to Draco and cried on him. Draco rubbed the tear up his arm; it must’ve found the Mark and got rid of it.”


Professor Lupin smiled sweetly. “He can’t maintain the Mark anymore. Due to his demise.”

Snape frowned for a moment as though the words themselves puzzled him. Then his eyes found Harry’s.

Harry grinned. “It wasn’t me, although I appreciate the implied confidence in my abilities,” he said, quirking an eyebrow. “Not Dumbledore, either. I’m beginning to think prophesies are complete and utter nonsense. Especially considering it’s Trelawney of all people that said it...”

Draco flushed. “Uhm...” he said in a small voice. When the others looked up, he continued. “But I think it makes perfect sense.”

Draco’s words were swallowed by Snape’s. “Are you sure? Perfectly certain?”


“Poor Hermione practically got crushed under it,” Harry added. “He came to Hogwarts, I’m not sure you knew.”

“And where were you when this was all happening?” Snape demanded, glaring at Draco.

Draco winced. “On my broom.”

“Casting Avada Kedavra and getting it right the first time,” Harry said with a grin.

“Wasn’t my first,” Draco demurred.

Harry decided he didn’t want to know.
“He did it, Severus,” Lupin added. “Draco’s the one who killed him – He-Who-”

“-damn-well-ought-to-be-named,” Harry broke in. “Voldemort. His name has no power anymore, if it ever did. He’s dead, you know.” He said it again, because it sounded so good. “He’s dead.”

There was a moment of quiet while Snape absorbed this information. “Draco?”

Draco drew slightly closer, his adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed again past his fear. “Yes, sir?”

Snape looked him over. “Congratulations on being the first wizard to ever incur and fulfill a wizard’s debt within the space of a moment.”

Draco blinked.

“Huh?” Harry muttered.

“You doomed me, then saved my life in the same breath,” the dark-haired man added. “Considering that fact, and my own... dubious past,” he tacked on, black eyes flicking up briefly to Lupin, then back again, “it would be difficult for me to pass judgement on you. Especially considering that your actions have possibly saved the entire Wizarding World.” Severus snorted. “Consider yourself lucky that you have caught me in perhaps the best mood of my life.”

Draco shivered, poleaxed, then dropped to the floor in abject startlement, his knees going out from under him.

“Draco!” Harry moved to the blond boy’s side. “Draco, this is good news!”

Lupin looked down at Draco kindly. “I think this may have been a difficult time for Mister Malfoy,” he said mildly. He dug around in his pockets, presenting a small object to Draco. “Chocolate?” he inquired.

Snape rolled his eyes, running his left hand through his hair. “You think chocolate is the answer to everything, don’t you?”

Lupin affected surprise. “Isn’t it?”

Indeed, Draco, making his way through the small bar of dark chocolate, seemed to be slowly coming back to himself. “Thank you,” he said to Lupin. He turned to his other professor. “Uh... thank you,” he repeated.

“I will think of some other ways for you to make it up to me,” Professor Snape said, an odd glint in his eye. “You can be sure of that. Besides, I believe I shall be keeping my eye on you. Just to be certain you do not undergo another... change of heart.”

“Oh,” Draco said, going pale all over again. He stood, nodding formally to both Professors, then turned to Harry. “Good night,” he said, and the change in stance and tone warmed Harry to the tips of his fingers.

“Night,” Harry said. He didn’t think he would ever forget that, when Draco had to choose between life and Voldemort, or death and Harry, he’d chosen the latter – no matter how it had turned out.

Draco gave his usual half-smile and a wave, and was gone from the Hospital Wing.
“He really did it,” Snape said, somewhere between question and statement of fact.

“It was brilliant,” Harry confirmed.

“Draco Malfoy is the last student of mine I would have expected to develop a case of heroics,” the dark-haired man added doubtfully. “Much less fall apart once it was all over.”

“Our students often surprise us,” Lupin commented dryly. He glanced at Harry, who grinned.

“Everyone’s Gryffindor in the right circumstances,” Harry added, shifting his glasses up with one finger.

“And Slytherin in the wrong ones?” Snape demanded.

“No, I think you’re born Slytherin,” Harry replied. “Or not. What do you think, Professor?”

Lupin paused to consider. “Yes, you need something special for that,” he replied. “Severus?”

“I think that the pair of you are perfectly ridiculous,” Snape replied, but he was too obviously suppressing a smile to be taken very seriously, himself. A pause. “He’s really dead?”

“Yes, Severus,” Lupin replied, with fond exasperation. The sandy-haired man reached out to squeeze Snape’s shoulder. “Forever and ever, if the Order has anything to say about it. You’re done with being a spy.”

“Merciful Merlin,” Snape breathed.

“Yes, it’s a shock,” Lupin replied sympathetically. He rooted around in the pockets of his voluminous robes. “Chocolate?”

Snape glared.

Chapter End Notes

Mmm, chocolate; I could go for some right now...

The summary this week is actually from an old Mother Goose rhyme. It always struck me because it is such good, simple advice; how often do we worry about that which has no remedy? Many of us spend a lot of time worrying about that which we cannot change. Also, of course, something that isn’t a sickness has no remedy, so it was also in reference to Snape and his not-illness.

Five readers just wrote in saying DON’T KILL SNAPE, which, <3. You all are extraordinarily awesome.

This is not the last bit! Just as this story had a prologue, it will have an epilogue.

I am working on something new, too, a story that is slowly but completely absorbing my attention. It is pure Severitus challenge, and somewhat difficult - first, because I am rewriting the fifth book - which, in my opinion is pretty much perfect as it is, so
that's trouble. Second, I am writing another story with Harry, Severus, Remus and Ron as main characters while trying to stay far, far away from their characterisations here. I am mostly succeeding, I think - Harry is already far more foolish, Remus harder. Many Weasleys are main characters, which is also new ground. Pre-Fudge!Percy, Mrs. Weasley and Charlie play significant roles in the story's beginning. I think I like them, even Percy, and hope you will too. (Funnily enough, this exact A/N was in my previous posting of this story. I abandoned that fic and have just picked it up again. SO IT'S TRUE AGAIN.)

Next time on SoS: we learn about Dudley, the prophesy, and have the sort of celebration that should end any good year.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“I still can’t quite wrap my mind around it,” Dean said. “Draco Malfoy – Saviour of the Wizarding World.”

Harry shrugged uncomfortably, perched at the edge of the Gryffindor Table, waiting for supper to begin. “Neither can I,” he said.

“It must be strange,” Hermione said, sympathy shining in her brown eyes as she leaned forward to get a better look at Harry. “You were the Boy Who Lived.”

“Yeah, everybody just knew it was going to be you, Harry,” Seamus commented in his familiar brogue. “Including you, I reckon.”

Neville shrugged, looking almost as uncomfortable as Harry. “Look, Seamus, didn’t we all save the world? A little, I mean.”

“Hear, hear,” Ron declared, thumping his fork against the wood of the table. “So long as Voldemort’s pushing up the daisies, what d’you care?”

There was a moment of shocked silence after the dreaded name, then a spate of self-deprecating laughter as it sank in that it couldn’t matter anymore.

Harry, for his part, found his eyes swinging up to where Draco Malfoy sat, nearly directly across from him at the Slytherin table. The blond boy was animatedly explaining his role in the final battle – most likely greatly exaggerated – to a bevy of admiring girls and younger boys. Dean couldn’t wrap his mind around it...? And what did Hermione mean, ‘you were the Boy Who Lived’?

Harry heard Draco’s voice in his mind: your name will always have power. He doubted it. He hadn’t managed to kill Voldemort: Draco had. Harry felt he must seem like an enormous let-down to witches and wizards everywhere. People were probably wondering why they’d ever made such a big fuss over him.

Draco, on the other hand... Draco would go down in history as the Boy Who Killed Voldemort. The Slytherin had been wrong all along – their positions were reversed. It was the Malfoy name which would have power. Harry suspected that the Prophet would paint Draco as the struggling rebel of his family, always cast out and misunderstood by family and classmates...

Much the way they painted you, he realized. Some of his humour abruptly returned. He wouldn’t mind leaving a great deal of it behind: the threat of death hanging about his head, the way people sensationalized his every move, the adoration of people he’d never met. Let Draco deal with that, along with the rest; Harry could do without it, both the good and the bad.

He just didn’t know how.

He’d had two lives, now: one where he lived at the Dursleys', hated and feared – another as part of the Wizarding World, revered as the Boy Who Lived. Now a third life was beginning, and that was frightening.
Harry re-focussed when Draco’s own eyes sought him out. Green met grey; Harry gave a sarcastic half-wave as he scanned Draco’s many admirers. Draco gave a weak grin and a shrug that replied without answering.

Dudley wandered in and sat across from Harry, temporarily blocking his view to Draco.

“Hey,” Harry said. It was still weird to see Dudley at Hogwarts, like a blast-ended Skrewt at a fancy dress ball.

“Hi,” Dudley replied. He fiddled with his hands, briefly, then worried his lower lip between his teeth, as though he wanted to say something. “Uhm... look. I’m sorry for teasing you about – this. Once mum and dad found out about my – uhm... well, they chucked me out pretty quick. Mum didn’t want to at first. She thought it might be catching and it might be curable. But Dad was firm. ‘Let him go and be with his own kind, Petunia,’ he said.”


Dudley flushed bright pink. "Little things, like used to happen to you," he said. "At first, I could take them for coincidence. Things nearby when I wanted them; mum knowing just what I wanted for brekkie. But then one day a chocolate cake appeared in the kitchen, and no one knew how it'd gotten there. And when dad tossed it in the trash... you know how suspicious he gets of anything funny... it was just there again, the next day. Like nothing’d happened.”

Harry gaped.

“Well, you know how mum and dad were with the diet,” Dudley said to Harry, eyeing Ron and Hermione a bit anxiously before continuing. “We’d had a bit of a row about it, because the school nurse said I was dropping weight too quick. Mum and Dad wouldn’t believe me when they said I had to add some things back in, that I was getting sick.” He coughed nervously, still that ruddy colour. "So I was super-hungry, and kind of... almost... hallucinating cake. Or I thought I was. But it sort of... became real cake. I think. I couldn't eat it, not knowing where it came from..."

"Wise," Ron muttered.

"But Dad did exactly what he did with the letters, you know? He destroyed that cake every way he could, even blasted it off the countertop that once."

Harry’s jaw dropped further.

“Oh! Well... he wasn’t hurt,” Dudley reassured him. “The cake... sort of – cushioned...” Seeing the stricken expression on Harry’s face, he paused. “What?”

Harry and Ron burst into helpless laughter, and Hermione had one hand clapped to her mouth as though she really wanted to, but was simply too well-bred.

“Oh, Sweet Merlin!” exclaimed Ron. “Mr Dursley... covered in cake... bellowing...”

Harry remembered that Ron had met Uncle Vernon, and shared a grin with him.

Dudley barked a startled laugh as though he were recalling the embarrassing memory in an entirely different light. “Yeah, well. I guess it was pretty funny. But dad didn’t think so... sent me here to get me 'sorted out'.”

"Or to get Sorted," Ron muttered into his food.
“I’m sure he wasn’t well pleased,” Harry solemnly replied. “Now – d’you understand that the thing about the snake was a mistake?”

Dudley frowned. “I guess. But you must’ve been pretty brassed off to do it.”

“What’s this about a snake?” Hermione inquired.

Harry flushed. “Er... nothing.”

Somewhat luckily for Harry, Dumbledore walked through the doors and took his place at the head of the Staff Table. He cleared his throat and immediately dozens of voices hushed and moving children stilled.

“Hello,” Dumbledore said pleasantly, looking out over them all, his features benevolent. “I hope you are all well on this most splendid of days.”

There was a murmur of assent, far more cheerful than usual. Ever since it had become clear that Voldemort was dead and was most certainly not coming back, a pervasive joy had settled over Hogwarts, students and staff alike.

“Since all are present and accounted for for the first time since the battle, I have decided that it is time to award points. Ahem.”

Hundreds of students leaned forward in their chairs.

“First of all, to Hermione Granger, Ronald Weasley, and Yolande Zabini, a hundred points apiece to their respective Houses – for their intellect and leadership in difficult times.”

Hermione and Yolande beamed at one another from across the House lines.

“Second, to Draco Malfoy – five hundred and twenty-five points, not only for ridding the world of an evil menace, but for having the courage to die for a friend.”

Draco, rather than preen as Harry thought he would, flushed a brilliant scarlet. He obviously hadn’t been expecting the second half of Dumbledore’s praise.

“Third, to Mister Harry Potter – on whom all of our hopes have rested these many years...” he said while Harry felt his own face heat. “...for his negotiations with Tom Riddle, for enduring torture so that others might escape, for commanding the respect and securing the loyalty of his fellow students, and finally, for understanding the folly of pride, for knowing when it is time to obey an order to save a life... five hundred points.”

Harry’s fists clenched under the table. His memories had gradually returned, and he now recalled quite clearly calling Voldemort ‘Master’. But he had done it to save Draco from becoming a toy of Bellatrix LeStrange’s... he hadn’t known how things would end, then. He had let go of that pride because he’d had to, and it was still harder than it should have been. It wasn’t anything to win points for.

“To Ginny Weasley, for knowing when to ignore an order... two-hundred points. Without her swift mind and rapid organization, the day would not have been won.”

Ginny practically glowed; Harry was certain it was the highest number of points any Weasley had gleaned at one go.

Poppy Pomfrey leaned over and whispered into Dumbledore’s ear.
“And for curing Severus Snape of his afflictions,” Dumbledore continued, with a hint of humour, “twenty points apiece for Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter.”

Snape tsked and rolled his eyes.

“To all who participated in the battle, ten points apiece; that took a great deal of courage.” Dumbledore paused, then cleared his throat, looking out over the Great Hall; his eyes were shining, and when he continued it was in a very different voice from his usual cheerful obliviousness. “Not to mention loyalty, intellect and strategy,” he added while the rubies of various Houses practically whirred behind him. “You have all – all of you – made us proud to call Hogwarts our home.” His eyes twinkled.

“You may be interested to know that, starting next term, the Houses will be combined. There comes a time when we must eat our words – or our Sorting Hat. I have seen, this year, what the Houses, working together, can accomplish, and I intend to make certain that each class and dormitory has an even sprinkling of all the Houses whenever possible.”

Hermione whooped enthusiastically; she was joined by the rest of the Unsorted House, including Harry and Yolande. Dudley looked confused, and he wasn’t alone; two-thirds of the school appeared to be rather startled by this decision, and seemed unsure what to think about it.

“Well, that’ll be... interesting,” Dean said.

“Interesting?” Seamus demanded. “We could end up with a bunch of Slytherins, you know!”

Neville eeped.

“Or Ravenclaws,” Dean countered his friend. “Maybe some Ravenclaw girls will end up in the Gryffindor dormitories...”

“Ravenclaw girls are awfully cute,” Ron contributed unexpectedly, shoveling potatoes onto his plate. “Especially the ones who don’t know they are.”

Hermione pinked.

“Hufflepuff girls are sweet, don’t you think?” Neville inquired.

Seamus nodded. “Yeah, they sure can be.” His eyes trailed to the Hufflepuff table. “And willing, if you know what I mean.”

“Seamus!” Hermione exclaimed, swatting him. “That’s rude!”

“Rude but true, Hermione,” Ron interjected.

She huffed. “If I knew that improving inter-House relations would just make you all want to jump each other, well, I wouldn’t’ve bothered, now, would I?”

Harry smiled, and only grinned wider when Hermione glared at him.

The witch softened under his warm expression, a smile widening her own features. “I’m going to go chat up Yolande; maybe we can arrange to have the same room next year!”

Harry’s eyes widened and he opened his mouth to stop or warn her, but he wasn’t exactly certain what he would say, or even if he ought to say anything. Before he could so much as decide, she was gone.
Ron, Dean, and Seamus were now arguing the merits of the girls from all four Houses, with Neville occasionally tossing in a comment or two. They were deciding that Gryffindor girls were best – probably out of loyalty as much as anything else – when Harry interjected.

“I don’t know,” he said. “There’s something about Slytherin girls…”

The four other boys turned on Harry immediately, protesting, but Harry grinned. Maybe it was all right being ‘just Harry’ after all.

There was no question that Slytherin would be winning the House Cup at year’s end, and, considering Draco’s recent contributions to the Wizarding World, for once no one seemed to begrudge them the honor. House Slytherin responded to its new, heroic reputation by inviting the school as a whole to an enormous celebration just before the Christmas hols, both rowdier and with a darker atmosphere than most Gryffindor parties Harry had attended. Some idiot had the temerity to dress as a Death Eater; Professor Snape scooted the offending Slytherin out immediately, with a whap to the back of the head for his trouble.

The party was in and around the Slytherin dormitories, where it had started before spilling out. Eerie, throbbing music hung in the air from some unknown source; it didn’t appear to become softer or louder no matter where Harry stood. If he strained, he could make out words, but it was obviously meant to be background. The decorations around the dungeons were silver and green: silver candles flickered against the stone walls on the lower floors of the castle, and there were sprigs of evergreen artfully arranged at various spots throughout the party.

There was food and drink of course, both of high quality and in copious quantity. Harry was pretty certain that the green punch was spiked to the nines, so he took a couple of sips for show before tossing the rest into one of the vases of evergreens; the decorative sprigs hissed and withered, and briefly Harry entertained the notion that the party was merely the Slytherin’s rather overblown and creative way of ridding themselves of the rest of the Houses once and for all.

“Enjoying yourself, Potter?”

Harry turned to find Draco in some elaborate costume he could not immediately identify, making his way through the press of giggling and chatting students. “Who are you supposed to be?”

Draco shrugged. “Morning Brother, of course. Although I’ve been telling everybody else that I’m Apollo.” He lifted the edge of his pale cloak and swung it around. “An excuse for dressing up, really. I have no idea who I’m supposed to be.” He reached out to offer Harry a glass. “Punch?”

“Er... no, thanks, I’ve just finished mine,” Harry lied smoothly. “So, how does it feel to be the Saviour of the Wizarding World?”

“I’m beginning to understand why you developed paranoid tendencies,” Draco replied stiffly. “Everyone wants to talk at me and no one will talk to me. Except –” He paused, his eyes swinging to Hermione, who had dressed as an archetypical witch, from the tip of her black hat down to her spiderwebby stockings and black buckle-shoes. The bushy-haired girl was chatting amicably with Ron, in Muggle garb. “And my cousin, of course.”

Harry sighed. “Yes, well. It has its ups and downs.”
“I mostly came here to give you the sorrowful news that we’re losing two of our best professors,” Draco replied, “including my head of House.”

“What?!”

“That is a good summary of the general Slytherin reaction,” Draco went on, patting his hair into place with exaggerated care.

*Not like it needs it, Harry thought with a pang of jealousy. “Why?”*

“Put two and two together, Potter,” Draco snapped. “The war is over, and even if it weren’t, he’s been ousted. What use is he now?”

Harry gaped, then nodded. Draco wasn’t stating his opinion, he was describing the situation from Snape’s point of view. “And the other professor – Lupin?”

Draco sighed eloquently. “They’re exuding identical airs of martyrdom. I figured, if anyone could change their minds, it would be you. You *are* the expert on martyrdom, aren’t you?”

Harry snorted. “Along with all my other titles, I think that one’s yours too.” At Draco’s gobsmacked expression, he smirked. “After all, who’s the one who said –”

Draco immediately leaned in to slap his hand over Harry’s mouth, muffling the rest of the dark-haired boy’s sentence. “You don’t have permission to quote me,” he asserted haughtily, his voice wrought with agitation and repressed humour. His eyes scanned Harry’s; after assessing the other boy for a moment as if to make certain he wouldn’t finish speaking, he leaned back and removed his hand, wiping it on his cloak. “Eww,” he dramatically intoned. “Harry germs.

“Listen,” he said. “I don’t want to think he might be leaving because of me, but he might. Tell him I’m not a threat. Tell him you believe in me – something.”

“All right,” Harry said. He grinned. “This party’s a total bore, anyway.”

Ignoring Draco’s very real shocked offense, Harry slipped out the door and made his way to Snape’s quarters.

The older man was standing in the middle of his sitting room, taking books from shelves – and from the toppling piles throughout the room and on the floor – and moving them towards an open case that seemed to have no bottom.

“Professor!” Harry exclaimed. He’d had no idea that the other man was leaving before term even ended; but, he supposed, if it hadn’t been urgent, Draco wouldn’t have told him in the middle of the party.

“Mister Potter,” Snape greeted, his tones measured and aloof.

“You’re going?” Harry inquired, stepping inside, despite the fact that he had not been invited. He sat down on Snape’s couch, flushed at the memory of having fallen asleep there.

Snape eyed his new position and tsked. “As it should be obvious to anybody with eyes, *yes*, I am going.” His eyebrow raised. “Still in full regalia, are we? You obviously knew I was departing, or
you would not have bothered to make a short visit during the Slytherin party.” He paused. “Come to gloat?”

Harry reared back at the implied insult. “Very nice. Gloating was exactly what I had in mind,” he murmured sarcastically.

“Well, you’ve only wanted me out of Hogwarts since you were but so high,” Snape returned, tone every bit as acid as Harry’s and more. “Now I’m out. Care to throw another party? I’m certain the Gryffindors would all agree one is in order. Now begone. I am busy.” And he returned to coaxing his enormous library off the shelves and into the floating suitcase.

Harry paused. He didn’t want to give the impression that once he was finished speaking, he was going to leave, so he propped his feet up on the long, low table that sat before the couch.

“Get your feet off, you impertinent child!” Snape ordered.

“Hmm?” Harry looked up as if he was startled to hear Snape’s words. “But it’s not your table anymore, right?”

Snape muttered something incomprehensible, then slammed one of his elder volumes into the suitcase with a bit more force than was strictly necessary.

“Why are you leaving, anyway?” Harry wanted to know.

Snape blinked at him as though he’d demanded to know why the sky was blue or the grass was green; the books halted in mid-air, as though confused or startled, themselves. “I should think that would be obvious,” he snarled, and the items swung back into motion.

“Well, I’m a Gryffindor, you know,” Harry replied, because Draco had taught him to use the stereotype of his House to good advantage. “We’re dumb as posts, as a whole. Have to be led to everything.” He kept his expression bland.

“There is no reason for me to remain,” Snape said, impatience lacing every word. The volumes around him fluttered gently down and came to rest at various spots on Snape’s rug, which Harry noted was woven into a complicated design of phoenixes and blooming weeds – most likely obscure potions ingredients, he decided.

“No reason?”

“Yes, Potter, for Merlin’s sake. Professor Lupin said it himself: my job as a spy is done. Voldemort is dead, thanks to Mister Malfoy, yourself – and a seemingly unlimited number of foolish do-gooders, including a passel of those from my own House,” he tacked on with a sneer. “Do you honestly think,” he added, “that my skills as a professor are required?”

“Yes,” Harry replied, honestly and automatically.

“Well then, you are more of a fool than I ever credited,” Snape bit off. The volumes scattered across the floor twitched, then were quiescent.

Harry considered this to be a good sign. “What will Dumbledore do?” he wondered aloud. “Two Professors gone in the middle of the year... he can scarcely find a warm body to fill that Defense position; you know that. There aren’t enough witches and wizards in the country to make for a good pool of teachers to pick and choose from. You really ought to stay.”

“And deprive you of your own chance?” Snape snorted. “Whatever fools the Headmaster dredges
up won’t last long. You and Miss Granger are top candidates for the two positions Lupin and I will be vacating, and you both only have a year of school remaining.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Well.” The volumes lifted and swung towards Snape’s suitcase.

“Still,” Harry said, panicking, “I’m sure Miss Granger and I would rather have you.”

“Ha!”

Harry had never heard a more derisive sound in his life, so he tacked on, in utter desperation, “you’re the best teacher I’ve ever had!”

The books halted short of their destination and crashed to the floor.

Harry’s feet moved automatically to the ground, and he half-stood, watching Snape’s shoulders shake. He was wondering if the other man was having some sort of fit, when he heard a sound that made his heart leap.

“Oh, Sweet Merlin!” Snape laughed.

Harry hadn’t been certain Snape could laugh like that, with his head thrown back, and now he saw it, it was sort of... frightening.

“Poor Harry,” Snape added, regaining mastery of himself; when he looked up at the Gryffindor, his face had relaxed into the now-familiar lines of a subtle, wry humor. “If I am the yardstick to which you measure your educational experiences, I do pity you,” he tacked on. “Still. What a ridiculous thing for you to say. So incredibly *Gryffindor*. And yet a lie so large it’s worthy only of Slytherin. Now I think I finally understand why the Hat had such a difficult time.” Snape sobered, coming out the other side of humor looking somber indeed. “Still,” he added again, apropos of nothing. The remaining books slid into his suitcase, upon which he closed and locked it.

“It’s not a lie,” Harry said, jaw jutting out in his stubbornness. “Professor Lupin is a better teacher than you are – but you taught me more.”

“You contradict yourself.”

“Without you, I’d be dead, or mad,” Harry said. “A dozen times over on both counts, I should think.”

“How many times ought I to tell you, Mister Potter, that I am no longer *needed* here. I’m certain we didn’t root out all the Death Eaters in England. If Lupin and I -”

“Needed?” Harry shouted. “I think that maybe you have a being-needed thing, has anyone ever told you that? You’re so focussed on what other people need, that I think you’ve failed to notice that you need other people!”

Professor Snape drew himself up to his full height, and glared. “First of all, that sentence was so garbled that I am not even certain it makes sense. And second, I am not certain where you came by the impression that I would tolerate such barefaced impudence. Twenty points from Gryffindor for mouthing off to a professor!”

Snape deflated, shoulders slumping at the same time Harry’s did.

“Sorry,” Harry muttered. “I didn’t mean it to all come out that way. But it’s true. I don’t want you to go, and I’m sure part of the reason Professor Lupin is leaving is because you are. And you shouldn’t just leave because you don’t have a double-life anymore... after all, there’s plenty to do in this one.” He offered the older man a wry grin. “As someone once told me, ‘there will always be a Dark Wizard. There will also always be homework, and rooms to Evanesco, and normal, everyday relationships that need to be maintained.’ Life goes on, you know, in between catastrophes.”

“Are you certain?” Snape inquired, running a hand through his dark hair and quirking a smile.

“Maybe you ought to stick around and see,” Harry told him.

Snape stared at Harry, examining him as though Harry’s arguments were written in his features, as if the answers could be discerned by close scrutiny. The older man barked a sudden laugh then shook his head, staring at Harry almost suspiciously.

Harry glared right back.

Professor Snape then moved to his suitcase, flipped open the latch, and stared at the volumes within; after a moment, he withdrew his own sixth-year Potions text and regarded it pensively, turning it over in his hands, sliding one pale finger against the battered spine. Then he moved to the shelves that lined the back wall of his quarters and purposefully slid the volume back onto the highest shelf, where it dislodged a scant, ancient layer of dust. The motes danced and lit around the Potions Master as he glided back to his suitcase and gripped the edges, his dark eyes swallowing the dim illumination of the room.

A hefty, cloth-bound volume caught Harry’s eye. “What’s that one?” Harry inquired, rising off of the couch to take it from the confines of the case, turning it over to view the title. “I don’t think I’ve seen it before.”

Snape straightened, eyeing him with a familiar exasperation. “You fool, that’s Most Potente Potions. You’ve only paged through it a dozen times.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Harry agreed, liking the rough weave of the cover under his fingertips. He strode over to the empty bookshelf and slid it carefully into its proper place, dead center, second shelf from the bottom. “Here?”

Harry stayed until every book had been moved to its correct spot on the shelves, until he was absolutely certain they, and their owner, would remain. The man was Slytherin, after all.

When Harry reached the Common Room, Hermione, Ginny, Neville and Ron were still awake, chatting. Hermione sprang to her feet from her stuffed chair immediately. “You won’t guess what!” she proclaimed.

“Me, Ginny and Hermione convinced Professor Lupin to stay,” Ron filled in.

“Ron!” Hermione exclaimed, deflating. “Whose story is it, mine or yours?”
“Ours, I should think,” Ginny broke in. “It was brilliant, anyway, Harry.”

“That’s good news. I’ve got more. I convinced Professor Snape to stay, too.”

Neville gaped, and Ron’s features fell. “Really? Why?”

Hermione swatted him.

“I might not like him, but he does know his stuff,” Ginny said slowly. “Imagine getting someone as helpless at Potions as most of the new Defense teachers are at Defense!”

“Explosions everywhere,” Neville offered, looking startled.

Ron scratched his head. “Yeah, you do have a point, there, Gin.”

“Besides, Harry likes him, don’t you, Harry?” Neville inquired.

Harry made a small, inarticulate noise. “Er... yeah, sort of.”

“Well, of course you do; you wouldn’t let me kill him at the beginning of term, when he burned your assignments,” Hermione filled in.

“You’re very scary sometimes,” Ron interjected solemnly.

“Don’t you wish some of the other teachers would want to leave, other than the brilliant ones?” Ginny inquired idly, swinging one, freckled leg that was hooked around the arm of her favorite overstuffed chair.

“Yeah, like Trelawney,” Harry said. “‘Neither can live while the other survives’. Right.”

Hermione’s brows climbed into her hair. “But that was right, Harry. She made that prophesy? Really?”

“Just because one of us died –” Harry began.

“No, it had to be one or the other,” Ron said. “Because Draco had to pick one of you, didn’t he?”

Harry blinked. “What?”

“He’s right, Harry,” Hermione confirmed. “If Draco had picked Voldemort, he would’ve murdered you there in the Great Hall, at Voldemort’s order. But since he chose you, he ended up murdering Voldemort instead. Only one of you could have survived in that scenario.”

“O-oh,” Harry stammered.

“Cheer up, mate,” Ron said, slapping him on the back with a thump. “He’s still dead because of you, isn’t he?”

“I guess he is,” Harry said. Without knowing quite why, he felt immeasurably better. “Maybe I was feeling a bit of an idiot because I bought into all that prophesy stuff about myself, and it seems like I should’ve known better.”

“What matters is that he’s gone,” Hermione said wisely.

“And that we’re here!” Ginny exclaimed with glee. “D’you know where Draco’s gone and hidden those Muggle clothes, Harry? Because I have it on good authority that certain Gryffindor girls
would pay gold to see a fashion show, and we’re not talking leprechaun gold, either...”

Harry laughed, trying to stave her off, knowing it wouldn’t do any good. Maybe he’d join in; there was no reason to be so serious, he realized with a slight tingle of shock. Not much to be serious about. Maybe he’d try out being a real Gryffindor, setting off dungbombs in the corridors and doing Quidditch and playing in the pond with the Giant Squid.

The future, for the first time, was a blank – an exciting, terrifying, blessed blank, with no fighting or protecting or hiding or saving-people imminent.

Grinning, Harry leaned back and began to plan the ambush of Draco Malfoy.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so here is your final rec. It's for the Bunny Massacres by wevvles, a highly disturbing one-shot with Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger as the main characters. Pairing? No, not even if you squint, but it's a fascinating study of both characters. Not much more can be said about it without giving it away, but rest assured that you will have the chills afterwards.

Thanks for sticking with this story. Thank you for your marvelous reviews and conversations and debates in the comments section, and for enjoying (dissecting?) Rowling's characters with me. If you liked this story, bookmark and discuss! It's time to weigh in, you lurkers! ;)

Oh - and join me starting in December as I post the Darker and Edgier sequel, Geas of Gryffindor.

You guys are awesome - thank you so much for your support of the story.

Sincerely,

Kirinin

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!