Cunning And Ambition - Book Five

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Summary

The Dark Lord has risen, and Harry's problems have only just begun to increase. During his fifth year, the enemies won't just be outside the school - they'll be on the inside, in more ways than one.

A Slytherin AU.

((This book is completed, but Book 6 was abandoned))
Summer Days

It was getting dark.

“Just where are these people?” Uncle Vernon asked Harry at the dinner table. Harry did not have a plate. “If I had to give them one thing, it was that they were usually nice and prompt about getting you out of our hair.” His lip twitched, and it made his thick mustache jump from side to side. “Finally got sick of you, eh, boy?”

Turning his head away towards the window, Harry shrugged. “They’ll be here.”

Vernon snorted and turned back to his plate, while Aunt Petunia asked Dudley about his day. The huge boy spouted out some lovely sounding lie or another, probably involving going out for tea or something, and Harry tried his best to tune them all out.

There was no way his Uncle was right. Even if he was the reason that they had to leave their home... and was why Voldemort was now personally after him...

But the Malfoy’s loved him. Well, at least cared a lot. And Narcissa and Draco did, anyway. Harry was fairly sure Lucius mostly just put up with him.

Either way, there was no way they’d just abandon him. Not a chance. Harry believed that. Really, he did.

But the sun finished setting, and the dinner table was cleared (by Harry of course) and the Dursleys were sitting around for some nice quality telly time, and Harry was still there.

So when the doorbell rang, Harry was bounding for the door before the rest of this relatives could do more than register the noise. Grabbing the handle, Harry practically threw himself out the door. He opened is mouth to greet the Malfoys, but then froze.

“Severus?”

The potions professor was standing on the Dursley’s doorstep in all black Muggle clothing. Well, mostly black. The shirt he was wearing had a faded logo on it that might have been for some band or another.

Harry had to blink at the odd sight. It simply did not compute for a long moment.

When the normal sounds of the controlled chaos of a Malfoy arrival didn’t ensue, Aunt Petunia made her way behind Harry, asking just who was at the door. She peeked out and let out a little scream when she saw the dark figure. “You!”

Something equal parts nasty and amused glimmered behind Snape’s eyes, and he arched an eyebrow at her. “You still recognize me after all these years? I’m flattered, Petunia.”

Glancing between his aunt and his professor, Harry felt like he’d entered some sort of alternate universe. It was one thing for the Malfoys to interact with the Dursleys - neither set really understood or knew each other. They just sort of glanced off each other once a year.

But this? This was weird. This had history.

Where Snape’s eyes glimmered with malice, Petunia's had pure hatred behind him. It was possible
the man was the only person she hated more than Harry. “Got your claws into him as well? Needed the full set, then, I suppose. Perhaps you’d like to lead my son to his death as well as Lily’s.”

Harry stared at her with wide eyes. He’d long known Petunia to have a sharp tongue, but this was that talent at it’s most pure, rather than used for petty gossip. He opened his mouth to respond to that (how, Harry didn’t know, but he had to say something), when a hand landed on his shoulder. “Grab your things. It would be best if we got you our of here as soon as possible.

Nodding, Harry made his way up the stairs, glancing back once he was at the top. Petunia hissed something low and vaguely suggestive, and the look on Snape’s face made Harry decide that maybe his room was indeed the best place to be at the moment.

It took only a few minutes for Harry to gather everything. As usual he’d packed up the night before, and he just had to grab the Divination Essay he’d been working on, as well as a few odds and ends he’d forgotten. As he packed up, he could hear Snape and Aunt Petunia’s voices. The words were indistinct, but the tone was unmistakable. It was a hatred years in the making, felt passionately on both sides.

Not for the first time, Harry wondered just what had happened between Snape and his mother when they were children. But, this time he tried to add a young Petunia. No matter what way he looked at it, that puzzle piece just didn’t fit.

Maybe that had been the problem from the beginning.

Finally Harry made his way back down. Petunia and Snape were staring at each other, the air tense, but neither said anything. Harry caught sight of Dudley watching the confrontation through a crack in the door to the living room.

He made his way over to his professor, who nodded at him. “Do you have everything?” Harry nodded back. “Good. Now, let’s be off.”

Snape ushered him out the front door, but a hiss from Petunia made him look back. “It’s only fair to tell you, boy, that he’s the Grim Reaper. He leads people, good people, first to that terrible world, and then to their deaths.”

His grip on his trunk and Hedwig’s cage tightening, Harry frowned at her. “And even so, he’s been far better to me than you and your family. Just what does that say?”

Before he could say more than that, something (a football?) was pressed into his hands, and there was the sensation of a hook behind his navel, and Number Four Privet Drive was gone.

Harry wobbled when he slipped back into reality before his hands released their hold on his things and, ignoring the clatter as his things fell to the floor, he quietly pressed his back against the closest wall and slid down it. He could tell, blearily, that they had appeared in the Manor garden.

“Harry?”

Harry held up a hand to hold off Snape’s voice as he calmly pulled his knees against his chest and tucked his chin against them. He heard Snape move towards him and saw the other sit down out of the corner of his eye, but he said nothing. He took a few long, shaking breaths, and then looked to Snape.

“Some forewarning would have been nice. I don’t like portkeys so much anymore.”

Snape’s lips pinched together and he nodded slowly. “I apologize.”
They sat in silence for a few minutes longer before Harry uncurled himself and slowly relaxed. He pushed his glasses up his nose and looked around the garden in the setting sun. “Why didn’t we Apparate?”

“We would have been forcibly splinched. There are too many protective wards around the Manor at the moment.”

“Oh.”

“It’s also under a temporary unplottable charm. It ends tomorrow night, but we’ll be off tonight.”

Harry finally managed to stand and gathered his things. “Where are we staying?”

“More on that later.” Snape waved his wand and watched as Harry released his things and they floated towards the door. “I thought perhaps you’d like to say hello?”

Harry shot him a look before opening the door with some timidity. The Manor looked different. One of the first things Harry noticed were the walls were bare and the comfortable furniture was gone. He heard quiet talking a room over and headed towards it, knowing Snape would follow. He paused briefly in the doorway, watching the elder Malfoys squabble over a series of open trunks. Several were packed already, tucked away in the corner, and one looked particularly heavy and nasty.

Lucius gestured with an arm before catching sight of Harry and stopped before he straightened and smiled in the faintest way. “It seems our portkey arrived.”

Narcissa looked over before rounding the series of things and placed her hands on his shoulders before sliding him into a hug. Harry unashamedly hugged her back.

“You’ll want to see Draco, hm? He’s in his room. Tell him we have an hour.”

Harry broke from her with a rushed nod. He was halfway up the stairs before the fighting resumed, this time with Severus’ low voice quietly pitching in. Harry paused outside of Draco’s door for a moment and looked down at himself. He flattened his hair and hurriedly tucked in his shirt before knocking.

The door threw itself open and Draco gave a grin before Harry was yanked into the room by his arm. He heard the door close and then felt Draco’s arms close around his shoulders in a tight hold as they kissed. It was odd, how quickly the tension seeped from him at the feeling, and he pulled back slowly and rubbed his cheek against Draco’s lightly.

“Hullo.”

“About time you got here.”

“S’not my fault.”

Draco gave a long-suffering sigh and stepped back. Harry examined the rooms. Most of the posters were still on the walls. He figured they had been done up with a permanent sticking charm. Three trunks were laid out. One was closed and two were open and Harry flung himself down on the bed as he watched Draco pack his things with a lazy interest.

“So, where are we going, anyway?”

“Dunno. Mother and Father seem to have some idea, but they’re not telling me. They say it’s in my best interest.”
“I was told to remind you we have an hour.”

Draco made an annoyed noise and quickened his pace. Harry wondered why he wasn’t using magic and asked him.

“The Ministry have cracked down on Pureblood families. Or rather, I should say Pureblood families with a history.”

“I thought the Ministry thought this was all rubbish.”

“They do, which is the frustrating thing, but Fudge is so paranoid...” Draco made a waving motion with his hand before dropping some things in a trunk and latched it. “I have my school things, the important things I want to take with me... Now I just need to figure out the clothes I want...”

Harry rolled off the bed. “I’ll help, otherwise we’ll be stuck here forever.”

He dodged the balled out towel Draco sent his way before lifting the empty trunk as they moved to Draco’s closet. They stepped inside and Harry’s brows lifted. It was no wonder Draco took so long in packing his things. His closet looked like a clothing store, sorted no doubt by brand (if they were Muggle) and colour. Draco was already making his way up a ladder and Harry watched him for a moment, completely amused. Honestly, only Draco Malfoy would have a closet so big it needed a ladder.

Well... Maybe he and Pansy.

“Extra robes are to your left. I’ll need dress robes and extra functional ones.”

Harry nodded and put the trunk down before moving towards the robes. He selected the robes Draco had worn for the Yule Ball with an odd fluttering feeling in his stomach along with a few others in various shades of green, black, grey and one in muted, dark reds he had never seen but rather liked. Draping them over the top of the trunk for approval, he moved to find shirts.

Working together it took them just under forty minutes to pack - with some pauses in between to look at certain things and laugh. They had added the last thing to the trunk when Draco got up and pulled out some things from a small drawer in the closet, Harry watched him. One seemed to be a onesie, the other a pair of faded robes that were well worn, and the last was something in a box. He tucked them all away before closing the trunk with a snap and they headed to the stairs and back down.

The trunks in the sitting room had been shrunk and Narcissa had tucked the last into her bag before she waved her wand and Draco’s trunks appeared beside her. She shrunk them and added them to her bag.

“I think that’s everything then...”

Harry mused. “You’ve taken care of the house-elves as well?”

Lucius looked at him, before he frowned a moment. Clearly he had forgotten. With a crack four Elves appeared and with a wave of his wand, Lucius presented each of them with an article of clothing. A sock for one, a glove for another, an old hat for the third, and for the last one what looked to be a scarf. The elves stared up at him with wide, bulging eyes before he waved them off and they all disappeared with a crack.

“Have you gotten everything?” Severus asked, he was in one of the chairs, thumbing through the Prophet.
“Oh!” Narcissa rushed off down the hall and then came back looking all the same. “Yes. Everything’s here.”

“What about Hedwig? And Ananta? And my things?”

“We’ve packed your things.” Narcissa assured. “And while you were upstairs Hedwig arrived. She’s in her cage. Your snake however…”

“I’ll get him.” Harry rushed up the stairs to his room. He found Ananta curled up by the fireplace and with a bit of prodding managed to get him coiled about him. He bounded back down the stairs. “Ready!”

Severus nodded and stood. He pulled something out of his pocket and waved his wand over it. An old, battered giant stuffed elephant landed on the floor.

He looked wordlessly to Harry and Harry nodded back at him.

They gathered around it, taking hold of it. Harry grabbed on and took hold of Draco’s hand for reassurance. Draco squeezed.

For the second time that evening the world went upside down and he was gone.

Since this time he’d had more warning, Harry managed to keep himself together when they arrived in a small part in what looked like London. Instead he took a few gulping breaths, and felt Draco take his hand again. He squeezed it hard. Draco grimaced but didn’t pull away.

“Where are we?” The blonde asked, looking around them. At this time of day the park was thankfully abandoned, but it was still an odd place to appear.

Rooting through her bag, Narcissa replied, “London.” She made a soft noise of triumph and pulled a piece of paper out. “Here we are. You boys need to memorize this, understand? We’ll explain in a bit.”

The bit of parchment was passed first to Draco and then to Harry. It read ‘The headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London.’ The handwriting was somehow familiar. Harry recited the address in his head a couple of time before he handed it back to Narcissa, who promptly set it on fire.

Before either boy could question that bit of seeming overreaction, the three adults set off down the street, and they were forced to follow. The area seemed distinctly… Muggle. Cars passed through, and the houses had none of the usual strange additions of Wizarding homes. It seemed like an odd choice for a place to hide from Voldemort. But they, maybe this was a place they thought he wouldn’t want to look?

A few minutes worth of walking later, they were turning onto a street labeled Grimmauld Place. The houses here seemed older, if well kept, and Harry strained ahead, reading the house numbers. Number eleven… number thirteen… number fourteen…

Where was number twelve?

“Concentrate on the address,” Snape told them, eyes focused like he could see something ahead of them, but Harry couldn’t pinpoint what. He closed his eyes and thought hard on that piece of paper, and the writing on it.

When he opened his eyes, the houses around him seemed to be stretching away from the point
between number eleven and number thirteen. From that space, something like a townhouse came into being. This abode was not nearly so well taken care of, and had an aura of something Dark.

The boys were hurried up the creaky steps to the door, and after a short knock with his wand Snape opened the door for them. The extended Malfoys made their way in, and Harry noticed Narcissa neatly sidestep a particularly ugly looking umbrella stand without looking down. It was like she’d known it’d be there...

Once they were inside a series of gaslights sputtered weakly to life. They did next to nothing to fight the gloom that seemed to cling to the walls like a living thing. The place was ratty looking, with it’s aged wallpaper and tattered carpet. Above them, just barely visible, a dusty, rusted looking chandelier swayed, like it was just waiting for the right moment to fall on top of them.

Harry took a step towards the wall. Just in case.

There were low voices coming from down the hall, and Snape made his way towards them. Feeling vaguely unsettled, Harry followed close behind him, grabbing Draco’s hand and linking their fingers together. Some little part of him wanted to keep Draco behind him in case there was a threat ahead, but Harry pushed it away. The other boy wouldn’t thank him for that sort of Gryffindor behavior.

They eventually came to a much cleaner and brighter looking kitchen. Inside were a several familiar people, all sitting in around the table. Molly Weasley looked up and noticed them, and gave a startled, ‘Oh!’. She stood, looking half like she wanted to greet them and half like she’d rather they be anywhere else. Her reaction gained the notice of everyone else in the room.

Amongst the faces was the grizzled face of Mad-Eye Moody, and Harry’s wand was out and pointed towards him almost before he’d known what he was doing. Everyone looked at him in shock except for the ex-auror himself, who nodded in approval. “Nice reflexes, lad. Though you shoulda had the wand out before you came in. Constant Vigilance!” The last was snapped out, but not shouted as the impostor version had. Harry wondered if it was due to the atmosphere, or if it was just something Crouch had gotten wrong.

“You can put down the wand, Harry. He has been verified by the Headmaster.” Snape told him, arching an eyebrow. Slowly, Harry nodded and lowered his arm. He thought it might be best not to point out that Dumbledore had been the one to verify the impostor as well. He was surrounded by the man’s supporters, after all.

Mrs. Weasley frowned a bit, looking disapproving of his reaction, but said nothing. “I’m afraid the meeting is for adults only, boys. The rest are upstairs, if you’d like to join them.”

Before Draco could protest, Narcissa nodded and ushered the boys out towards the stairways. “Do keep quiet, boys, if you can. Don’t want to wake anything up.”

Rather than explain that remark, she disappeared back into the kitchen, and the distinct lack of noise from a silence charm cut them off from the adults. Draco and Harry exchanged looks before they made their way up the stairs. Shrunken house-elf heads. Interesting decorative choice.

Voices were coming from behind one door, and so Harry knocked on it. He shifted uncomfortably, unnerved by the feel of the house. Draco looked cool and collected, but the way his fingers tightened in Harry’s proved he was no more at ease.

After a few seconds of noise, the door opened to reveal Ron and Hermione, who blinked at them for a moment, before breaking into slightly strained smiles. “Hello, Harry!” Hermione said, pulling him, and by extension Draco, in the room. “Hello to you too, Draco.”
The Malfoy heir gave a muttered greeting, still firmly in brat mode, and Harry subtly rolled his eyes at him before grinning. “’Lo, you two. Interesting housing choice.” He exchanged a quick hug with Hermione, and a very manly handshake with Ron.

Sighing, Hermione glared down the hall before shutting the door. “Oh, it’s horrible, isn’t it? I mean, the house itself isn’t quite so awful. Well, it is, but anything is better than those awful heads!” She shuddered. “Too old to work anymore, so let’s kill them! It’s barbaric.”

“Most families don’t do that anymore.” Draco told her as his gaze racked the room.

A huff came from Hermione. “I suppose your family still uses house-elves?” Her voice was highly disapproving and sharp.

Grey eyes met brown. “Not anymore.”

An awkward silence fell.

Clearing his throat, Harry pulled Draco to sit down next to him on one of the beds and leaned against the taller boy, trying to be comforting. It was the least he could do, considering that he was at the heart of these changes. “So what is this place.” Ron and Hermione shared a weary glance, like they weren’t supposed to talk about it, and Harry snorted. “It’s not like I don’t already know about it. Might as well know where we are, right?”

Ron snorted a bit. “Yeah, fair enough. This is the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix.” He pronounced the name like it was something very grand. Harry and Draco blinked at him. “They’re a group that used to fight You-Know-Who, back in the day. Dumbledore is their leader. He founded it, I think. We dunno everyone whose in it, but it’s folks like my parents, and the real Moody, some aurors, that sort of thing.” He paused, eyes wide. “Sirius Black is even in it! And he’s not guilty, can you believe it?”

When neither Draco nor Harry reacted, Hermione narrowed their eyes at them. “You knew?”

Shifting awkwardly, Harry shrugged. “Found out in Third Year. He’s my Godfather. We ended up with him and Professor Lupin and found out.” The explanation about Scabbers was on the tip of Harry’s tongue, but he bit it back. If Ron didn’t know, than Harry did not want to be the one to have to tell him.

Looking put out, Ron asked, “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“It isn’t exactly the sort of thing you bring up in the Great Hall, is it?” Harry pointed out, and he reluctantly nodded. Draco shifted next to him, and Harry got the distinct feeling he didn’t like their secrets getting revealed to them. He pressed their fingers more tightly together in apology.

Resting his head against Harry’s, Draco asked, “Just what has this Order been up to, then?”

Shrugging, Ron cast a frustrated look down towards the kitchens. “We dunno yet. They won’t tell us anything, ’cause we’re ‘too young’.” The redhead scoffed. “Fred and George are working on something that’ll get passed the Silencing Charms, but for now we’re stuck.”

There was a loud crack near the door, and all four students jumped and stared. The twins were suddenly standing there, smirking wildly.

“Did someone say our names?”

“I do believe they did, brother dear.”
Behind them, the door opened, and in came an exasperated Ginny Weasley. “Honestly, can’t you two just walk anywhere?”

The twins looked at each other, and then at her. “Of course not!” They chorused. She groaned and rolled her eyes, and they just grinned.

“So... Where are we supposed to sleep?” Harry finally asked, wondering how things had been divided.

“Ginny and I have this room,” Hermione informed. “You, Draco and Ron have the room across the hall, and the twins sleep above this room across from the bathroom. The floor above that is Sirius’ room and his brother’s old room, which is empty. And then various people from the Order stay around the house, like Draco’s parents and Ron’s parents.”

Harry managed to hide a groan. He didn’t want to share a room with Ron. He figured the choice had been deliberate, instead of letting Draco and he spend too much time alone, but it didn’t seem fair. He looked at the boy. “I keep my snake out of his cage. So you need to keep the door closed otherwise he’ll roam about the house.”

“You have a snake?” Ginny asked, flopping next to Hermione on the bed. “What kind?”

“An Oroboros,” Harry informed her proudly. He poked at the lump under his shirt and after a bit Ananta’s head poked out of the hem before he slithered interestedly out onto the bed.

“You just let him do that?” Ron squeaked at the same time Ginny said, “Can I touch it?”

Harry nodded in response to both questions and Ginny moved off the bed and onto the floor. She settled on the floor by the bed and held out both of her hands so Ananta could smell her. She giggled and stroked down his long body. Then her eyes lit up and she pulled over a bag on the floor and rooted through it, after a long moment she pulled out a tin and opened it. She pulled out one of the ice mice and laid it on the bed.

“Oh, he’s gonna love you,” Harry murmured as Ananta pushed at the treat with his beak. “Spoiled thing.”

“I keep them for the delivery owls, but he’s more than welcome.”

“Ruddy great snake sleeping in my room...” Ron muttered, crossing his arms. “I don’t like it.”

“He doesn’t bite people. I’ve told him not to. And he tends to sleep with me or Draco, and he doesn’t move much. You’ll only have to worry if he finds a warm spot near your bed.”

Hermione’s face was amused. “Ron’s bed is beside the radiator.”

Draco let out a laugh. “You’re buggered.”

Before Ron could answer the door opened and Sirius was standing there. Harry barely managed a quick greeting before he was pulled into a bear hug without much warning. His arms were trapped and he was rather rigid, but Sirius seemed pleased. After a long minute or more he was released, and he smoothed his hands down his shirt.

“So good to see you! So glad you came!”

Harry wanted to say he didn’t have much choice in the matter, but he nodded his head. The man was his Godfather, after all, and he seemed kind enough. “Good to see you too. You’re looking better.” It
was an honest compliment. His eyes looked brighter and he looked less worn and thin. He looked like a man with hope.

“And you!” Sirius paused a moment in looking at Harry. “Seems you’ve gotten your mother’s height as well, however. Still! You look good, my boy.” His eyes wandered the room and he took note of Draco who was watching them with a bemused look. “Hello, Draco. I’m afraid we weren’t properly introduced last time we met.”

“Indeed not.” Draco sat up and watched the older man for a long moment before extending his hand. They shook and Harry felt somewhat more settled at the idea that they were at least acting amiable, even if it was just for his benefit.

“Sirius!” A voice called from down stairs. “If you’re done scaring the children, dinner’s ready.”

“Professor Lupin’s here?” Harry asked at the realization of whom the voice belonged to.

“Why wouldn’t he be?” Sirius asked, looking to Harry. “Well, you heard him, dinner.” With that Sirius headed out, with the twins quickly behind him. Harry stared after them a moment, wondering if there was something he had missed.

“C’mon, mate. Dinner.”

When the kids made their way downstairs, it was like stepping into a refrigerator. The Malfoys were sitting at the opposite side of the table as the members of the Order, and the silence was somehow louder than the kids chattering had been.

Several times throughout the meal, Harry, Hermione or one of the twins would try to strike up conversation, but no matter the topic, one set of adults would find a way to disagree with what the other said, and the talking would lull into more awkward silence.

It didn’t help that Harry was in the middle of the line of sight of Mr. Weasley and Mr. Malfoy, who spent the entire time exchanging glares.

In short, it was the most awkward dinner Harry had ever been part of. Which was saying a lot, given his history.

Finally they were released, and the kids made their excuses as quickly as possible, escaping to the upstairs. Once Draco, Ron, and Harry were in their room, they exchanged nervous glances.

This was not looking up to be the best summer ever.

But when Ron specifically moved his stuff away from the radiator, leaving that bed open for Harry, he couldn’t help grinning a bit.

It wasn’t going to be the worst summer, either.
Ticking Time Bomb

The adult’s feud only got worse from there. In the end, the Malfoy parents claimed the room as far away from the rest of the house as they could. Harry and Draco were asked to join them, but the boys declined as gently as they could, claiming that they were already settled and didn’t want to have to move their stuff. Besides, Ananta loved the radiator.

Narcissa looked rather put out with them, but they didn’t press the issue.

“Are they going to be alright in that room?” Harry asked Sirius at one point, while he and Draco helped the Weasley kids and Hermione clear out the living room. “No one’s gotten around to cleaning that bit, right?”

Shrugging, Sirius spun an ancient and fragile looking cup in his hand. “Narcissa’ll be fine here. Better than the rest of us, anyway.”

A sneeze came from Draco, and he glared at the dusty shelf he was reluctantly clearing. In truth, the only reason he was helping at all was because Harry refused to leave the others to do it by themselves. And he knew he’d get a reward from Harry for doing it. “And why is that?”

The cup dropped from Sirius’ hand and cracked on the carpeted floor. The man shrugged and tossed it into the rubbish bag, where it audibly broke to pieces. “She was one of the last people here, I reckon. The three of them - that’d be her and her sisters - were here all the time as kids.”

Draco looked up at him. “Really? Other than some of the heirlooms Mother has, I’ve not much background from her side of the family.”

Snorting, Sirius grabbed the next bit of china and tossed that too. “I’m not surprised. It wasn’t a lot of fun here. Bellatrix was a little terror as a kid, if nothing else. Not to mention my Mum.” Sirius shuddered. “Probably didn’t want to expose you to much of it. Though that didn’t turn out well, obviously.”

Now Draco was eyeing the broken pieces in the rubbish bag with something akin to horror, and Harry patted his hand gently. Over the blonde’s shoulder, the twins were trying to see how far they could throw the bits they’d collected and still make it in the bag. Grimacing a bit, Harry directed Draco towards the shelf where his back would be turned to that show.

Of course, that sort of commotion just had to lead to more chaos, and soon enough one of the twins missed, sending a squat looking bit of china crashing loudly into the floor.

And of course that set off the portrait.

The screaming started almost immediately. “Filth! Scum! Freaks, mudbloods, blood traitors, begone! How dare you defile this place!”

A collective sigh came from the children. This happened far too often for anyone’s taste, especially when there were more people around.

From a distance, just barely audible over the screeching, Harry could hear Narcissa’s voice. “Oh, that is quite enough!” There was the sound of footsteps, and then the screaming abruptly cut off. The kids and Sirius exchanged glances, and then peered out the door down the hallway.

“Narcissa, dear! It’s lovely to see you!” The portrait said. The woman in it leaned forward, like she
was pressing herself against a window. “You grew up well, if I do say so. You married the Malfoy boy, correct? How did that work out?”

Giving a slight sniff, Narcissa nodded. “Well, Aunt Walburga. In fact, we have a son- Draco, come here a moment, would you?”

Looking extremely reluctant, Draco slunk out towards his mother. Once he was in the line of the sight of the portrait, however, he straightened up and looked every inch the heir to a impressive family. “Ah, look at that. Takes after his father, then. A pity, but you could do far worse than a Malfoy. Far worse indeed.”

To the others it probably looked like Draco hadn’t heard the comment at all, but Harry could see the flash of temper in Draco’s eye, and the way his shoulder’s tightened. He wanted to go over and grab his hand, but knew his presence would be the opposite of helpful now. “Nice to meet you.” Draco said, and if his voice had been just a tad too dry to be truthful, then Walburga didn’t seem to notice.

“Aunt, are you sure you wish to stay here? There is a blank wall near the room my husband and I have taken that faces a window. Surely you would prefer that?”

The portrait’s eyebrows rose. “There’s such a place? Yes, a window sounds lovely. You have my permission then, Cissy Dear.”

There was something like a release in the air, and Harry blinked at the portrait, confused. Could paint and canvas do magic? Narcissa didn’t act like this was odd at all, and nodded. “Thank you. Let’s get you moved.” And with that she picked the portrait up in a show of surprising strength (or perhaps very good lightening charms), and proceeded to carry it upstairs.

Silence followed in her wake.

Predictably, Sirius was the one to break it. “She could have done that the whole time?” He asked, eyes wide.

Making his way back to Harry, Draco shrugged. “Well, she needed permission first, clearly.”

Waving an arm at the now empty expanse of wall, Sirius continued. “And she just picked it up! We tried everything on that damn thing, and nothing got it off. I thought she’d done a permanent sticking charm on it...” He looked a mix of frustrated and put out, and shook his head like a wet dog. “Never mind, I’ll talk to her later. Let’s finish up the family room for now, before Kreacher gets his grimy little hands on any more of it.”

He stalked back into the room, followed by the Weasley kids and Hermione, who looked disapproving at the way Sirius spoke about the house-elf. Draco glanced back after his mother, and Harry grabbed his hand and squeezed. Draco pressed back, and they went back into the living room to finish their task.

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“I just don’t understand how she could do it!” Arthur groused as he peeled potatoes in the kitchen.

“Obviously it was some sort of Dark magic.” Molly was tenderizing the steaks with a fiery passion.

Harry was trying to ignore their comments as he, Draco, Hermione and Ginny helped with dinner. Hermione and Ginny were making pie crust and Draco and Harry had set about the task of coring and peeling apples. Draco was having a harder time of it as he jabbed his knife into the apple with anger.
“Clearly. I mean you know the Blacks, with the exception of Sirius, of course...” Arthur’s voice was quiet but firm and Harry took a glance at him. His back was to them, but it was rather obvious he had forgotten they were there.

“ Asking permission, ha! I bet it was some sort of blood-hating bond. And now it’s up by their room conspiring to —”

Harry’s attention drew away from them when Draco let out a curse. Harry’s head snapped to Draco and saw him shaking a hand and he sucked his index and middle fingers into his mouth.

“Let me see.”

“It’s just a nick, I’ll be fine.”

“Let me —” With a gentle tug Harry managed to pull Draco’s hand from his mouth and looked at his fingers. They were bleeding rather freely and the cuts had gone deep. Harry grabbed a handful of napkins off the table and pressed them against Draco’s hand and held them there. “Come on, Professor Lupin’s in the living room.”

Hermione flashed him a weak smile as they stood and headed out of the room. Harry paused at the door to look at the two adults in the room. Arthur was still peeling potatoes, but with hunched shoulders now. Molly had turned and was looking at them with a strange expression on her face. Harry wrapped his arm around Draco and ushered him out of the room.

They managed to get Draco healed up without a problem and as usual whenever something was wrong and it came to Lupin, he was treated with a wave of the wand and presented with a square of extra-dark chocolate. Draco was still chewing on it sulkily as he and Harry headed back to the kitchen. When they opened the door they were greeted to the sight of Hermione and Ginny now quietly sitting in the corner at the table making the filling without the apples and rather skillfully ignoring the screaming match happening between Molly and Narcissa.

“--not Dark magic! She’s a Black. One of the most noble, pompous families in the Wizarding world. She wants someone to side with her. I was acting the part!” Harry had never heard Narcissa’s voice so loud, or so furious before. It was equal parts amusing and terrifying.

“How do I know that!? How can I be sure you’re not lying! You’ve taken it up to that awful hallway of yours!”

“Give me veritaserum!”

“You know there are ways around it!”

“And if you would take a moment to open your eyes you and actually visit the hallway you would realize I stuffed that forsaken portrait in a box and silenced it once and for all!”

The squabbling continued as Draco crossed to the table and took a seat next to Hermione.

“Did Professor Lupin manage to help?”

“Yes.” Draco was quiet for a moment as he resumed cutting up the apples. Then he looked to Hermione. “Have you managed to translate that document Professor Vector assigned for Ancient Runes?”

“No! And it’s so frustrating!”
“I’ve thought about consulting some of the runic books my father brought with us, but one of them is in German and I can’t read it.”

“Oh, I know an excellent translating spell.”

“Then why haven’t you used it on your homework?”

Hermione sent Draco a dry look before her face broke out in a small smile. “That would be cheating.”

Finally, the argument tampered off with noises of frustration from both Mrs Weasley and Narcissa. They whirled away from each other and noticed the return of Harry and Draco almost immediately. Both looked sheepish, but Narcissa recovered faster, her nose in the air at once. “Come now, Draco. We should go upstairs. You too, Harry.” With that she stormed up the stairs.

The boys exchanged glances, unsure of how to react. Finally, Draco gave the slightest of shrugs before he nodded to Mrs. Weasley and followed, tugging Harry along by the hand. Mrs. Weasley gave a small wave back before turning back to dinner, a frown tugging at her lips.

After that there was a sort of unspoken rule at the Headquarters. The Malfoys stayed in the upstairs area and the Order members stayed in the downstairs ones. Harry thought it was so either side could complain about the other in relative privacy. (“How can they not trust us? We have lost everything!” and “How are we supposed to believe they’re on our side? It could be a trick!” respectively). The only times of interaction were at meals, which were either silent, sullen affairs, or filled with arguing.

The adults obeyed it like it was the law, but the kids had mostly decided to ignore it. They refused to pick a side, and spent their time wherever they damn well pleased. Still, the stress was starting to get to them. The relationship between Ron and Draco, shaky at the best of times, was starting to turn even further, especially as Draco and Hermione bonded over being the only two working on Ancient Runes.

Harry was doing his best to be there for Draco, as they were often around when some member of another ranted about his parents, but it was starting to rub him raw as well. He couldn’t help but wonder how his parents would have reacting to his relationship to Draco, and every time the Weasleys, who were very similar to them politically, made a comment, he had to resist a wince. The shades, or echoes, or whatever they were hadn’t said anything about that, after all, though they’d taken the time to mention his house and Severus.

It didn’t help that Harry was preventing both Ron and Draco from getting a good night’s sleep as well. At least twice a week he woke them with his nightmares, and Draco point blank refused to let him put up Silencing Charms around his bed. They were good-natured about it, other than a bit of teasing (It was Draco. It came with the territory), but bags were starting to become noticeable under the other two’s eyes. Harry was relatively sure he had them as well, but he’d taken to avoiding mirrors. He didn’t want to know.

In short, the house was a powder keg.

And tonight was an Order meeting.

Molly had again enlisted the children’s help in preparing the meals. After the first time, she was careful to keep to neutral topics when she was aware Draco was around, and so the actual cooking went relatively well. Which really should have been some sort of sign.

A bit before dinner, various members of the Order started to show up. Moody was first, and Harry
carefully kept his eye on him as much as possible. The ex-auror noticed and looked approving, which was beyond strange. After that were a couple of current aurors by the names of Kingsley and Tonks. By this point, the elder Malfoys had made their way down, possibly to be as big of pests as they could manage, and Narcissa commented on how like her father Tonks looked, but how she had her mother’s chin. Tonks looked like she didn’t know if she was supposed to be insulted or not, and changed her hair to a bubblegum pink, but said nothing.

A few more members arrived, most of whom Harry was unfamiliar with. (“That’s Emmeline Vance. Scary lady, her. Real intense.”) Last to show up was Professor Snape, who patted Harry fondly on the shoulder and went over to talk to Mr. Malfoy. He looked relatively relaxed, for him, but his eyes darted between the Order and the Malfoys, clearly picking up on the tension. This was the first time he’d been in Grimmauld Place since bringing Harry there. It was not going to be a fun night for him.

Finally, the group of them sat down at the enlarged table and dug in. At first there was an awkward, tense silence. It felt somehow like they were at the edge of a cliff.

In the end, it didn’t take much to push them over.

Dinner was relatively somber, as was usual. Snape kept glancing about, as if wondering why no one was talking and more than half the people weren’t looking at each other. Every so often there would be a break in the silence when someone from the other end of the table asked for something to be passed down to them. Usually it would be done with little fuss, but there were moments when Arthur asked for the peas and they were nearly shoved into him by Lucius, or when a roll was nearly pelted at Sirius’ head by Narcissa.

All in all, it was a decent dinner. It was dessert that turned out to be the bigger problem. Because with dessert came the idea of conversation.

In the end, Harry blamed Emmeline Vance.

“I’m so glad to have finally met you, Harry.” They were sitting rather close together. She was sitting beside George, who was right across from Harry.

Harry couldn’t help the “oh?” that left him..

“I was in the same year as your parents, you know. Except I was in Ravenclaw. I was the reason your mother joined the Order, you know? Well, me and I suppose James. You’re very like him. In appearance, anyway.” She had paused to take a bite of her cake. “We lived close together, James and I. We grew up in Godric’s Hollow. Do you know where that is?”

Harry mutely shook his head and pushed his fork around his plate. It was actually quite nice to hear information about his parents that wasn’t from Severus or Sirius.

“Oh, you should visit there one day. It’s quite nice. Very beautiful. I’m sure you would have loved growing up there, there was a big pond just by --”

“Emmeline!” Arthur snapped, banging his coffee down on the table. “You needn’t trouble Harry with ghosts.”

Harry opened his mouth to reply but was cut off by Lucius. “I’m sure he’s enjoying her story, Arthur. No need to be so dramatic.”

Arthur’s nostrils flared and his hand on the mug tightened. He looked as if he was desperately trying to control his temper, but it looked also like a loosing battle. Harry looked between the two men with a growing sense of dread. Emmeline’s mouth hung open like she wanted to reprimand both of them.
but she wasn’t quite sure what to say.

Finally a choked word escaped Arthur’s throat. “Dramatic?” He echoed it again, this time much louder. “Dramatic?! It’s your fault we’re in this situation in the first place!”

“My fault?”

“Yes your fault! You and the rest of your lot parading around doing who knows what with who knows who! Poking your noses into dirty, Dark things!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Maybe not now, oh but I have my doubts, yes I do! But before!”

“Arthur—”

“You joined with him! You were with You-Know-Who doing all those things. You were part of the Muggle Attack in Brighton in 1980 and don’t even think about lying and saying you weren’t! You were part of his inner sanctum. Who’s to say that you didn’t know about the attack on the Potters well before hand?!”

“ARTHUR!”

Arthur’s words died in his mouth at Molly’s cry and slowly he looked around the table. He hadn’t even realized he had stood up or knocked over his coffee mid-tirade, but he slowly lowered himself back into his chair as he realized everyone was looking at him.

Everyone but one person.

The sound of the chair toppling over was more ominous and damning than all of Arthur’s words. And not seconds later, another chair followed as Draco bolted out of the room after Harry.

“Well...” Severus started slowly, pushing himself back and up from the table. “I hope you’re quite pleased with yourself, Arthur Weasley.” He paused a moment and looked at Molly. “The meal was excellent. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to find my student.”

No one stopped Snape as he took long, quick strides out of the room. Not long after him Narcissa followed. Everyone else sat at the table awkwardly before Hermione left the table, quickly followed by Ron, Ginny and the twins. They clambered up the stairs and there was a sound of three doors slamming shut. Molly looked to her husband before standing up and rounding the table and joined in the search, followed behind by Sirius and Remus.

Everyone else sat around the table with rapidly cooling tea and looking everywhere but at each other.

A little over two hours later and Molly and Narcissa were frantic. Everyone who wasn’t required was sent off with the promise of a new meeting soon. Arthur had retired to his bed and Lucius had joined in the search. They had checked as far and wide as they could. Outside, down the street, in the park, bus shelters, in the dank basement, in Regulus’ room, in abandoned rooms, but they had turned up nothing.

“Draco must be with him...” Narcissa muttered quietly. “Since he hasn’t been spotted either. It must be a place that Draco knows Harry would hide.”

“Have you tried a locating spell?” Molly asked, turning in place.

“He’s not my child, only direct blood can do that. Besides, with all of these wards, I don’t even think
I could find Draco.”

Snape held up a hand when Lucius went to speak, his brows pinched together. “Do you hear that?”

The group of adults fell quiet and Lupin nodded first, followed by Sirius, then the Malfoys and Molly. It sounded like quiet humming. They moved towards the kitchen where the sound grew louder. Molly’s brows were furrowed as she tried to locate it. Narcissa’s eyes widened with realization and her heart clenched as she strode towards a row of cupboards under the counter and pressed her hands against them before she shifted to the farthest one in from the stove and grasped hold of the knob and pulled it open.

In the soft lighting, Draco’s fair hair was the first noticeable thing. His arms were wrapped around a fetal positioned Harry, chin tucked over Harry’s head as he rocked them back and forth, humming quietly. Draco’s eyes turned toward his mother but he didn’t say anything, she nodded at him and he nodded back and ducked his head to quietly murmur to Harry.

Harry slowly, almost imperceptibly, lifted his head. His glasses were askew and his nose red where the bridge had dug in. His face was wet but he gave no crying noises. Quietly he pulled himself back from Draco and with a bit of twisting pulled himself out. Draco followed behind him and closed the door of the cupboard and watched as his mother gently wiped Harry’s face with her hands and wrapped her arms around him.

“How did you know where to look?” It was Molly’s voice, and it was so low, that if he hadn’t been looking for it, he would have missed it.

Draco’s answering smile was bitter, but he didn’t respond. Instead he opened the refrigerator and poured a glass of orange juice and crouched back in front of Harry. Harry moved slowly, like a frightened child and wrapped both hands around the glass and drank in quiet gulps before he nodded thankfully.

“How did you know where to look?” It was Molly’s voice, and it was so low, that if he hadn’t been looking for it, he would have missed it.

“Not r’ly.” Harry responded but pulled away from her all the same. “They gone?”

“Mostly. Come on. Let’s get you off the floor and into the living room.” She stood and took Harry with her, brushing him down. “There’s a boy, come on.”

They managed to relocate quietly to the living room where Harry took an easy chair and curled up once more, looking at the people watching him before looking down at his knees.

Molly, with the keen instincts or a parent, ushered the newly emerged Weasley children out, ignoring their protests with practiced ease. She eyed Draco, but Narcissa shook her head, expression conveying that it would be pointless to kick the boy out.

Kneeling down next to the armchair, Molly reached out to pat Harry’s hand, but then thought better and withdrew it. “Sweetheart, why were you in that little cupboard?”

For a long moment, Harry was silent, and then he shrugged. Molly did not look convinced, and shifted her weight until she was more comfortable. Clearly, she was not moving until she got her answer. Finally, he frowned and picked at a loose thread on the chair. “I like small places, I guess. My...” He trailed off a bit, eyes tracking to the fire. “Until I was ten, my bedroom was a cupboard. My Uncle and, after a couple of years, my cousin were both too big to fit in there. It was... safe.”

Draco moved to sit on the arm of the chair and petted Harry’s hair. The smaller boy practically fell
into the embrace, leaning heavily onto Draco. The blonde eyed Mrs. Weasley, who was staring at Harry, frozen.

“But... Professor Dumbledore was the one to...” She trailed off, brown eyes going distant as she sorted this new information in her mind.

Smiling bitterly, Lucius nodded. “Dumbledore is also the reason that Harry has to return to the Dursleys every summer. He wanted him to stay for longer, but we insisted on no more than a week.”

Looking over at the elder Malfoys, Molly frowned. “Why?”

With a sigh, Narcissa settled herself down on the couch. “He said that Lily Potter cast some sort of protection on him before she died, and that it was keeping him safe from The Dark Lord’s forces. I, personally, have never seen any manifestation of this protection...”

“I have.” Spoke up Severus. He was standing behind Harry’s chair like a sentinel. “During the boys’ First Year, while Quirrell was acting as a vessel for The Dark Lord, he tried to touch Harry. Where ever his skin made contact with Harry, his skin burned to the point of becoming ashes.” Below him, Harry crinkled his nose like the memory was slightly unpleasant.

Shrugging, Harry burrowed himself deeper into Draco. Suddenly, he stiffened, as a thought came to him. “But he can touch me now.” He pointed out slowly. “Does the protection still work?”

There was silence. No one had an answer to that, save Dumbledore.

After a minute or so, Molly stood up, wincing a bit as the tightness in her back. “I apologize for my husband, dear. He means well, but he can be rather stubborn on certain subjects.” She patted his hand lightly. “I’ll be talking to him tonight, believe me. And I think Professor Dumbledore has a few things to explain as well.” Her frown was severe. Clearly, by putting a child in danger, the man had committed a huge crime in her eyes. Harry had little doubt that Dumbledore would have an explanation that satisfied her. But for now, it was nice to have someone who wasn’t a Slytherin and therefore quick to distrust authority figures on his side.

Molly made her leave, muttering something about rescheduling and putting the food away for another day. From the corner of his eye, Harry caught Draco scrunching his nose at the idea of leftovers, and pressed his head against the other boy’s neck, a snort making it’s way out of him almost reluctantly.

Soon after that the two made their way up to the room they shared with Ron. At the door, Harry paused, wary of having to explain himself again. Draco pressed a quick kiss to the corner of his mouth and quirked his lips into a half smile. Giving something that would have been a smile any other night back, Harry opened the door to let them in.

Ron was lounging on his bed, frowning severely down at his chest, where Ananta was curled comfortably. He looked up at them quickly, and smiled a bit in awkward greeting, before turning his gaze back to the snake. Ananta picked up his head a bit, swaying back and forth as he met the redhead’s gaze. It looked for all the like they were having a staring contest.

“Help?” Ron managed, and stiffened as Ananta shifted a bit. The Oroboros looked very comfortable indeed, and placed his head right below where Ron’s neck met his chest. The redhead visibly shuddered. “No, really, help.”

The scene was just so far from the emotionally charged conversation Harry had just had that he
couldn’t help first snickering, and then slipping into full blown laughter. If his chuckles had just the barest hint of hysteria, then no one was rude enough to mention it.

Blue eyes widened, looking dramatic and injured, but there was a slight hint of playfulness behind it. “Oi!”

“Sorry, Ron.” Harry answered, then concentrated on Ananta. “What are you doing?”

Ananta picked his head up to look at Harry. “The heated metal went cool. This one is warm and large. I like him.”

Another set of snickers escaped Harry, and Ron grumbled something about the ruddy snake having a sense of humor making it worse. “I’m afriad he’s not so fond of you. And I’m here’s now. Surely you don’t like him better than me?”

The snake eyed him for a moment before travelling off Ron, who sighed in relief, and up Harry. “I am rubbing off on you, child.”

“Actually, I think that one was Draco.” Harry replied, and Ananta wrapped himself his waist.

After getting ready for bed, Harry curled up with the snake, rubbing his finger’s over Ananta’s now impressively thick body. The snake was now longer than him when fully extended, and wider than his fist in places.

From the dark, Harry heard Ron give a quiet murmur. “You alright, mate?”

Glancing at where he knew Ron and Draco were, even if he couldn’t see it, Harry smiled. “Yeah, I think I am.”

“Good. I’d hate to have to break in a new Slytherin. Loads of work, you lot are.”

Draco snorted. “Shut up, Weasley. Some of us are trying to sleep. You could do with some beauty sleep, I think.” There was the sound of a pillow hitting someone, and a muffled curse. Harry feel asleep, still smiling at their antics.
Fifteen Candles

After the blow out at dinner the house settled back into a normal state. The Malfoys moved back into their previous bedroom and it became easy to breathe again. Things were still a little tense between Lucius and Arthur, as well as Harry being somewhat unsure around Arthur, but it was quick and fleeting. Before anyone knew it, Harry’s birthday had come along and the whole house smelled like chocolate.

Harry was lounging in the living room, absently sketching the room from his view as Hermione and Draco laid books out on the floor, bent over them to work on Runes. He had found that returning to his art had helped with his headaches and temper and also put a damper on his bad dreams. A pile of presents stacked high in the corner and one of them was rather large, flat and rectangular. Harry spent a long time staring at it and wondering what it was.

Dinner was in an hour and with it would come Snape, more than likely Tonks (Harry had found she liked to spend time with them and he was growing to like her), and possibly Kingsley. Other people had been invited but either turned down out of quiet but polite disinterest, or out of a busy schedule.

In a few days Ron’s brother Bill would be arriving. He was going to be staying with them for the rest of the summer until things settled down. He had been in Egypt, but had moved back after a fight had broken out between Percy and his parents. Harry hadn’t really caught the details, but was interested in meeting the only member of Ron’s family that had eluded him.

Ginny walked into the room, a book in her hand, and flopped onto the couch next to Harry. Harry paused in his drawing and looked over at her. She smiled back at him absently before opening her book and beginning to read. Harry watched her for a moment, thinking. She seemed so different now than she had been the previous year. Harry wondered if it was because she had gotten over her infatuation with him, or because she had simply grown older.

“Have you two broken the code yet?”

Hermione didn’t look up from her writing. “No.”

Ginny made a face at Hermione. “This is why no one takes Ancient Runes.”

Draco turned a few pages in his book and scratched something down on his parchment. “Ancient Runes is fascinating. How else do you expect us to learn Wizarding history? Or be able to invent and cast new spells? Runic usage is actually more common than you’d think.”

Ginny huffed a bit and made another face before turning to look back at her book. Harry silently sketched, working on the negative space around the furthest chair with a calm determination.

After a bit Hermione sat up, her eyes wide. “I’ve got it!”

Draco stopped what he was doing and looked over at her, they examined the page and Draco nodded in approval. “So you have. Excellent job.”

Hermione flushed under the praise and with that the two of them finally went about completing their summer homework with a passion. Harry watched the two of them work for a long moment with a fond smile before his attention was torn away at the loud clatter of the umbrella stand in the hallway being knocked over.

Tonks had arrived.
She appeared in the living room wearing a set of jeans and a t-shirt. Her hair was lime green that day and she had a squashed looking package in her hand she added to the stack. “Wotcher, Harry.”

“’Lo, Tonks. Everyone’s in the kitchen, I think.”

She nodded and turned back out and moved to find the others. Less than a minute later Snape strode in and Harry offered him a smile. The Potions Master nodded back curtly and wished him a “happy birthday” before leaving behind a gift and then headed off down the hall. No doubt there would be an impromptu meeting. Harry eyed Snape’s gift and wanted to rush over and open it.

He’d just have to wait. Impatiently.

The hour wait was excruciating. When the twins showed up twenty minutes into the wait, and rather than due something helpful, like say, distract Harry, they first tried their extendable ears (which didn’t work do to a charm on the door), and then spent the rest of the time loudly speculating as to what each present was. No amount of scowling in their direction seemed to help.

“Don’t worry, Harry.” Ginny told him ten minutes into the torture. “They do this to everyone. I’m pretty sure it means they like you or something. You get used to it pretty fast.”

Not fast enough, clearly. He grumbled as much to the girl, who laughed and went back to her own book.

Finally he turned back to his sketch, and managed to ignore their chattering for long enough to get back into the little world of charcoal and paper.

After that it was a surprise when there was suddenly snapping in his ear. He jumped to see Draco looked down at him, amused. “You awake yet?”

“Prat.” Harry returned, covering his ear with a hand. From the now open door Harry could see tiny points of light coming towards them. As they reached the room, Harry could tell it was a chocolate birthday cake, decked out with no doubt fifteen candles.

“Cake first, then presents.” She declared, and set the treat down on the table. Tonks came from behind her, carrying a stack of plates. She started to fall forward, but Snape caught her by the back of her shirt, keeping her from dropping them.

It was several minutes of chaos before they were served. The cake was the best one Harry had ever had. He’d known Molly was an amazing cook, but his eyes still went wide as he took the first bite. He gazed at her in amazement, and she coloured and looked very pleased.

And then it was finally time for presents. Harry eagerly picked up that strange package and carefully unwrapped it. It was two canvases pressed together. Attached to that was a supply of good quality paint. He glanced up in surprise at the elder Malfoys, who smiled at him. “We figured you’d like to try something more permanent.” Narcissa told him.

After thank them, Harry dove into the rest. From Ron he got the customary chocolates (“Who doesn’t love chocolate?”), and from Ginny and the twins he got a set of the items the twins had so far developed. The pair of them gave him a dramatic wink, and he grinned back. Hermione’s gift was a biography on Salazar Slytherin, which he had to force himself to put aside rather than crack it open immediately. The present from Tonks turned out to be a wand holster, and he grinned at her in
“Moody has been complaining about how you kids keep them in your pockets.” Tonks told him dryly. “This helps me have to listen to less of his complaining, so you really don’t have to thank me.”

Next was his gift from Snape. Inside were two books. One was the novel *Catch-22*, which Harry tilted his head at curiously. He wondered if Snape had gotten his message from the last novel, and how this one replied. The other was a book on tutoring. “I was rather hoping that I could send some of the first years who need help to you.” Snape told him. “You don’t particularly need the extra credit, but the offer is there if you’d like.” Harry nodded in consideration, and leaned back a bit from Hermione, who looked rather jealous.

From Sirius and Remus Harry got a book on defensive spells. Before he could open his mouth to thank them, Sirius had made his way to sit next to his Godson. “Open it!” He demanded. When he flipped through the pages, pictures fell out.

Most were of his father. Several of them showed him in his Quidditch uniform, or around various spots around Hogwarts. A few of them showed his mother, or a older couple he assumed to be his paternal grandparents. One in particular caught his eye. It was of his parents wedding, and James moved to feed Lily cake, only to smear it along her nose. She scowled at him, but it quickly transformed into laughter.

Looking up at Sirius and Remus with slightly shiny eyes, Harry murmured a heartfelt thanks. He spotted Snape looking anywhere but at the three of them, and shoved the photos back into the book, determined to look at them later.

He realized there were no more presents on the table, and turned to Draco, who smirked. “It’s still in our room.” The blonde informed him, smirk curling his lips. “You’ll have to come with me to get it. Privately.” He held out his hand for Harry, who took it and followed, waving to the gathered guests and thanking them again. He ignored the twins’ cat calls.

Once at their rooms, Draco thrust his present into Harry’s hands. Inside was a scrapbook, filled with pictures. There were photos from their time at Hogwarts, and from France, and a couple of picture of them dancing at the Yule Ball that Harry couldn’t figure out how he’d gotten.

“Thank you,” Harry breathed, flipping through. Then he paused. “Why did you need to give me this in private?”

Smirking growing larger, Draco leaned in close enough to Harry that their breath intermingled. “Not that. This.” With that he pressed their lips together firmly, pushing against Harry’s shoulder until the smaller boy flattened out on the bed. After a few seconds, Harry felt Draco’s tongue swipe at his lips. He opened them, more on instinct than anything, and then moan at the feeling or Draco’s tongue on his.

Harry had no idea how long the snog went on for, but at some point later there was a knock on the door, and then Ron barged in. “Mum wants to know if we should start- Oh, Merlin! Sorry!” The two broke off to see him staring at them, his face as bright red as his hair. “I’ll just... tell Mum to start then...” He turned on his heel and fled.

There was a brief moment of silence after his escape. And then Draco burst out into laughter, and Harry rolled over to bury his head in his pillow, face burning.

“Hate you,” Harry muttered, kicking at Draco’s leg blindly before he felt the other boy slide down beside him on the pillow.
“Really?”

Harry lifted his head and rested it on Draco’s chest. “Absolutely.” He nodded his head slightly, the movement making his chin dig into Draco’s sternum. “Loathe you with my whole being.”

“Shame. I quite like you.” Draco’s fingers sifted through Harry’s hair and he smiled happily at the way Harry’s eyes closed lightly.

“People need to learn how to knock. Especially on my birthday.”

Draco huffed out a laugh and pressed his mouth chastely against Harry’s before pulling back. “Happy Birthday.”

Harry shifted a bit and propped himself up on his elbow. He watched Draco for a long moment before leaning forward to kiss him again. They exchanged a few lazy kisses before Harry’s eyes started to droop tiredly and he felt Draco nuzzle into his neck. He sighed happily and hooked an arm around Draco’s waist.

“Stay.”

“Wasn’t planning to leave.”

Harry curled further against Draco happily before drifting off. Draco read quietly before he too, fell asleep.

~*~

“I’m bored.” Harry groused, kicking at a cushion on the couch. “I want to go outside.”

“You can’t, it’s too --”

“Dangerous, I know.” Harry was irritable and snapped at Ron. He had been cooped up in Grimmauld Place since arriving and there wasn’t much to do aside from clean, read (which he enjoyed, but there was only so much), and help around the house. He couldn’t even practise magic because it earned him looks.

Still...

Midway through August and no fresh air was starting to make him a little stir-crazy. He shifted on the couch again and looked at the cards Hermione and Ron were playing. He watched as Snape entered the room, signifying the most recent meeting was over.

“Agitated, Mr. Potter?”

“Bored is more like it. I wish I could go outside or have something new to do. Something to keep me busy.”

Snape levelled a gaze at him but said nothing. “It’s been decided that Tonks will gather your books as well as Draco’s when the letters arrive. Mrs. Weasley will gather things needed for her children and Miss. Granger.”

Harry let out a frustrated sigh. He had been looking forward to going to Diagon Alley and at least getting his own things. “Can you at least make her a detailed ingredients list so she doesn’t bungle things up? I’m sure she’s right good at what she does, but...”

Snape had something akin to pride on his face but it vanished quickly in light of Hermione and Ron.
“I will see what I can do, but I make no promises of her abilities.”

Harry nodded and watched as Snape strode out. He felt like strangling himself to at least change the atmosphere. After about twenty minutes Snape strode back into the room, a bunch of things in his arms.

“Perhaps this will alleviate some boredom.”

Harry sat up slowly as Snape put everything down. It looked like a projector and movies. “But the magic...”

“Can be bypassed.”

Harry practically dove at the new distraction and fiddled with it and with a bit of Hermione’s help they managed to set up everything. Draco and Ginny had come down due to the commotion and watched with the same curious fascination as Ron. They selected *The Lion King* before sitting down and watching with glee as the movie started.

Harry’s smile said more thanks to Snape than words ever could.

~*~

Chaotic sounds from the first floor woke Harry. At first he didn’t react, lulled by the warmth of his bed and the clinging remains of sleep. But then words started to penetrate his haze. Dementor. Attack. Muggles. Dursleys.

The thud in his chest as that registered work Harry up faster than any amount of Pepper-up, and he was bolt upright and untangling himself from Ananta from one second to the next.

From the far end of the room he could hear Ron give a low grumble, complaining about the noise at such an hour. Harry ignored him and cast a glance at Draco, who seemed to still be asleep. Figuring there was no sense in waking him, Harry slipped as quietly as he could out the door.

For a long moment, Harry stood at the top of the stairs, simply watching. Order members darted back and forth, either whispering furiously at one another or foregoing that and simply barking across the room. As he watched, Vance and a small man Harry didn’t recognize grabbed a handful of Floo powder each and called out “Number 8, Privet Drive!” before disappearing.

Number 8? That was the address of Ms. Figg, who, aside from an excessive fondness for cats, had never struck Harry as anything but a Muggle. Maybe they had just gotten the address wrong?

He started down the stairs, trying to remain as quiet and unobtrusive as he could for as long as possible. Not only did he not want to interrupt the Order business, but as long as they didn’t know he was there, they wouldn’t censor what they said.

Of course, that plan went straight to hell when the Floo flared green and out came Ms. Arabella Figg herself, escorted by Snape, who looked more ill tempered then usual. Judging by the snarling looks he kept sending towards the fireplace, he would much rather be back at Privet Drive.

Harry couldn’t help the gasp that escaped him at the sight of his old neighbor, and the sound caught her and Snape’s attention. “Harry? My, you’ve grown up, haven’t you! Wizarding world did you good, just like I knew it would.” She nodded sagely and then turned to Snape. “They’ll be careful of my cats, right? Poor dears are probably frightened out of their minds after all this.”
Before Snape could comment back, no doubt on how very low on the list of importance her cats were, Harry sputtered out, “You’re a witch?”

“No, no, of course not.” Ms. Figg responded, flapping a hand at him as she settled into a chair. “Wouldn’t be in a Muggle neighborhood if that was the case, would I? No, I’m a squib. When you were placed with the Dursleys, Dumbledore asked me to keep an eye on you.” She sighed and gazed at the fire. “Never was terribly happy with it, I have to say. When ever you came over you were such a small little thing, and almost scared. I told Dumbledore, ‘The lad’s not happy there’, but he insisted it was best.” She sighed and shrugged. “You look much better now, dear. Happy. I’m glad.”

Her words bounced around in Harry’s head, and he blinked a few times to try and process them. No luck. Instead he pushed this new knowledge, along with the awareness that Snape was watching him with an intense expression, to the back of his mind. “What happened? Did something happen to the Dursleys?”

Leaning forward like she was relaying a particularly juicy bit of gossip - which to her might have been the case - Ms. Figg whispered, “There were dementors in Little Whinging! Spotted them myself. Well, not spotted, exactly. But I felt them, and then ran right off to Dumbledore. I believe it’s all taken care of by now, right?” She glanced back at Snape, who nodded. “Yes, it was right around the playground where Dudley and his little friends like to play around. You know the one, right?” Oh, yes. Harry was very familiar with that particular big area of land. He nodded. “It was strange - almost like it was waiting around for someone. I’ve never heard of one doing that before.” She shuddered. “Awful things, just dreadful.”

Before she could continue to feed Harry information, Moody came through the Floo, grumbling darkly to himself. “You had the right idea, Snape.” The man growled, which was probably the only time he’d ever said that to the former spy. He nodded to Figg and informed her that she could go home in a few minutes, once the other order members returned, gave Harry a narrow stare but said nothing, and then slipped out of the room.

A glance at Snape showed that the man had a dark look on his face, and Harry had a bad feeling he knew why the man was here rather than with the Dursley’s. Turning to him, Harry asked, “They are alright, aren’t they?”

With an expression that showed how much he wished otherwise, Snape gave a jerky nod. “While I believe your Uncle may have ended up close enough to one to feel the chill, they were unharmed and mostly unaware of the threat. I imagine the Order will likely keep it that way.”

As Harry processed that, the Floo flared one more time, and Vance’s voice invited Figg to come back home. The older woman agreed, patted Harry on the shoulder and wished him well, and then disappeared into the flames. Snape glanced at Harry like he wanted to say something, but Harry jerked back a bit, and then gave a violent one-shouldered shrug. “I’m going back to bed.”

Without waiting for a response, Harry dashed up the stairs and into his room. He sat down on his bed, trying to control his breathing. The room was silent and dark, and so it was a surprise when a voice sounded from the bed next to him.

“What’s going on, then?” Draco whispered, and what little ambient light there was reflected off his eyes, revealing that they were focused on Harry.

Flopping back on his bed, Harry whispered back, “Dementor at the Dursleys.”

There was a moment of silence. “Are they alright?”
“Yeah.”

Another moment, and then Draco rolled over so Harry couldn’t see his eyes anymore. “Pity.”

The worst part was that a very large part of Harry agreed. And he hated himself a little bit for it. What kind of person was he becoming? The kind that could abandon his friends for the sake of a tournament, or who could wish a fate worse than death on his relatives? Someone like Voldemort?

Harry started to shiver despite the radiator. He didn’t get anymore sleep that night.

A few days after the commotion there was talk amongst the Order members about the elder Malfoys and what to do with them. There was a bit of a scuffle before it was agreed upon that Narcissa and Lucius would join the Order. As tentative members at first and if things went along smoothly and nobody protested, they would become a permanent fixture. Harry was happy for them, and glad that by bringing them in, it would put a stop to all the in fighting they had going on through the house, which had tapered off but still had moments where it flared.

All in all, it seemed to be a settled environment.

About a week later, letters arrived. Hermione’s envelope was thick and she opened it curiously. She let out a shriek of delight when she realized that she had become one of the Gryffindor prefects. Harry looked almost expectantly to Ron, but the other boy’s face fell when he did not receive the badge. Harry offered him a look of understanding. Neither he nor Draco had shared in Hermione’s good fortune. Still, they were happy for her.

By dinner, Tonks had arrived with Harry and Draco’s new books and a case full of potions ingredients for Harry, grumbling all the while about the smell and how he didn’t understand why he had to use certain ingredients. Harry just tucked his things away with a grin. Mrs. Weasley arrived not long after with the things for the Weasley brood as well as Hermione. They had a surprisingly pleasant dinner and conversation about the upcoming year’s anticipation flowed.

Harry listened to Ron talk about his want to try out for Gryffindor’s Keeper position. Before bed, owls arrived. Neville was bursting with excitement and told them he was the other prefect. Ginny’s eyes shone with happiness and pride. Harry and Draco got an owl from Millicent, who informed them that she had gotten one of the two Slytherin prefect badges and that rumor had it Nott had the second. Harry sent off his congratulations without regret or hard feelings and fell asleep in Draco’s bed while waiting for the other to come back from his shower.

The next morning was filled with furious packing as last minute things were shoved into trunks and essays were snatched up. Missing things suddenly turned up and things they needed desperately went missing. Mrs. Weasley loaded them all up with turkey sandwiches and Narcissa fussed far too much. Lucius, a potion altered and glamoured Sirius, Tonks, and Moody were waiting for them to gather the last of their things so they could go to King’s Cross.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you, dear?”

“We’re going to be around lots of Muggle things and likely taking the bus.”

Harry laughed as Narcissa’s mouth twitched and curled in distaste, speaking more than enough for her. She heaved a sigh and pulled him close. “Be careful, will you? Stick close to Draco and Blaise and Pansy. Don’t let anyone you don’t trust near. There are going to be prying eyes.”

Harry nodded his head. “I promise. And we have Draco’s mirror if anything happens. And Professor
Snape will be around.”

Narcissa nodded her head sharply and wrapped her arms around him, sifting her fingers through his hair before she pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Alright, I’d better let you go.”

Harry nodded and moved off towards the others as Narcissa moved to fuss over her son. Harry shifted a bit uncomfortably as Sirius’ hand rested on his shoulder and squeezed in a likely comforting gesture before he relaxed when he felt Lucius lay a hand on his arm. He was in good hands.

Draco breezed over, looking calm and cool and they exited Number Twelve Grimmauld Place without further pause. They argued about whether or not to take the bus before they finally settled on walking. It wasn’t too far and they were actually ahead of schedule so it wasn’t that much of a problem. As they walked the twins rambled about various ideas for products and Ginny and Ron talked about Quidditch. Harry, Hermione and Draco ended up in a rather passionate discussion about defensive magic.

When they arrived at King’s Cross, Harry dawdled on the platform. He thought that perhaps he was being odd, but the air felt strange to him. He tried to brush it off. Bidding Draco’s father farewell and watched as Tonks boarded the train - she would be staying in Hogsmeade, he lingered a long moment and Sirius approached. He looked strange with his altered appearance but Harry did his best not to stare.

“Don’t let anyone intimidate you. You may not be the safest in your House, what with all the offspring of former supporters all around you.”

“Thanks, that makes me feel so safe,” Harry muttered sarcastically.

“I just mean… watch who you trust, alright? A storm’s coming, Harry….”

Harry fought not to roll his eyes and instead nodded. “I’ll be sure to pack an umbrella.”

Sirius got a look on his face akin to shock but wiped it away and nodded his head again. He ruffled Harry’s hair and squeezed his shoulders. “Off you go.”

Harry moved to leave, before he paused and wrapped his arms around Sirius. It felt a little awkward at first, mostly because Harry wasn’t exactly affectionate with anyone who wasn’t Draco or Pansy, but it was nice. Sirius hugged back and when he pulled away, Harry saw happiness in his eyes and knew he had made the right decision.

Harry slipped into the crowd and boarded the train. It took a bit of searching before he found Blaise and Pansy, rumpled and blissful, and rolled his eyes at them. “Where’s Draco?”

“Looking for a seat. Come on.” Pansy grabbed his arm and pulled him down the aisles.

They worked through two carriages before Harry caught sight of Draco’s corn-silk blond hair. He was talking to someone Harry didn’t recognize but who seemed rather odd. It was a girl with hair as fair as Draco’s, and a willowy, swishy build. Her wand was stuck behind her ear and she had a faintly vacant expression. Harry made his way over to them.

When Draco spotted him, he shot Harry a mildly freaked out glance, eyes darting between him and the girl. She didn’t seem to notice and kept talking in a quiet, wistful sort of voice about a trip with her father for some creature Harry didn’t recognize the name of. “Hello,” He greeted, blinking at her. Draco glared at him like that was the wrong response.

Stopping mid-sentence, the girl stared at him with her head cocked to the side. “Hello.” She replied,
and Harry had the vague impression she was looking through him. “You’re Harry Potter.”

“That’s what they keep telling me.” Harry replied, shoulder’s tightening with tension. Was she going to be one of those people?

However, the girl gave no indication she knew he was famous at all, and rather that she just knew him from around school or something. “I’m Luna.” She greeted quietly, staring past him and focusing on an empty owl cage to his right. “I don’t know you two.” She continued, apparently referring to Blaise and Pansy, though she didn’t move her gaze away from the cage.

Pansy wrinkled her nose like she’d rather Luna never know her, but Blaise gave that charming I’m-A-Gentleman-And-Rather-Dreamy smile (and yes, that was the name. Blaise had told him), and gave a nod that looked like a bow. “I’m Blaise, and this is Pansy.” The smile didn’t falter when Pansy stamped on his foot.

Blinking at the cage as though surprised by their names, Luna nodded vaguely. For a moment no one spoke, and then she nodded again and murmured something that might have been a good-bye. Turning on her heel she made her way towards the back of train, pulling a paper (The Quibbler, according to the front page) out and started reading it. After a few steps she flipped it upside down and continued to weave through the crowd.

Groaning like she had a headache, Pansy puffed up like an angry bird. “I don’t understand how that girl functions. She earned her nickname, fair and square.”

“What nickname?”

Corner of her lip twitching, Pansy replied, “Loony Lovegood.”

Mean as it was, Harry couldn’t deny it seemed to suit her. “She seemed nice enough.”

“For the nut house, maybe.” Draco said, shivering slightly. “C’mon, let’s get seats already, before they’re all taken.”

The four of them made their way deeper into the train. They passed a compartment with Ginny, Luna and Ron, the latter of whom was staring at the blond girl like he expected her to grow a second head. Harry made to enter, but was corralled away before he could do more than reach for the door.

Eventually they found an empty compartment, and after some time they were joined by Millicent, prefect badge pinned prominently on her robes. The five of them shared stories about their summer. Harry and Draco stayed as quiet as they could without arousing suspicion, and when they had to, lied with all the skill of a nearly five years in Slytherin.

The train ride went quickly, and soon enough they were seated in the Great Hall, waiting for the sorting to begin. The hat had just finished singing, though not it’s usual song.

“What was that about?” Harry asked quietly, as the hall gave somewhat scattered surprise. Everyone was staring at the fabric in confusion.

Shaking his head, Draco glared at the Sorting Hat like that would make it reveal it’s secrets. “I have no idea.”

A few older students turned to the Baron, murmuring questions about the hat and if it had ever done such a thing before, and the House Ghost nodded but did not explain. The Slytherins cast nervous glances around, but the sorting began and they were quickly distracted by clapping for new housemates.
When that finally ended, Dumbledore stood, welcomed the new students, made a joke, and then started the feast. Harry narrowed his eyes at the man, and anger stirred in his stomach. The feeling settled almost as suddenly as it had sprung up, and Harry blinked at his plate. He knew he wasn’t fond of the Headmaster at the moment - he wasn’t fond of playing pawn, and it seemed that the older man agreed - but he hadn’t thought it’d gotten that far...

But the smell of food made it nearly impossible to worry very deeply, and so Harry tucked in with gusto, putting his musings to the back of his mind for now. He chatted and joked with his groups, and did his best to ignore some of the stares and malice coming from some of the other students. Nott was especially prominent amongst them, his badge pinned so that it was pointing at Harry, just to rub his power in his face.

Once the students were finished, the plates cleared and Dumbledore again stood. This time Harry didn’t look directly at the man, uncomfortable with his feelings, and instead focused on the pink blob a few seats down from the Headmaster. Who was she? The new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, obviously, but she wasn’t the most qualified looking Harry had ever seen.

Dumbledore introduced first Grubbly-Plank as the Care of Magical Creatures professor for the meantime, which made Harry start and realize that Hagrid was missing. How he hadn’t noticed the lack of the half-giant’s huge presence by now baffled him. Then he told the students that the pink blob was known as Professor Umbridge.

He tried to continue, but the blob gave cleared her throat (hem, hem) and stood, apparently set on giving a speech. The hall started to murmur at the action. It was unheard of to interrupt like that.

“Thank you, Headmaster.” Her voice was overly sweet, like she was trying to placate someone simple minded. Beside Dumbledore, McGonagall visibly bristled. “I always appreciate such kind words of welcome. It’s lovely to be back here at this wonderful school!” She made a wide gesture to indicate Hogwarts. Did she think they wouldn’t be sure which school she referred to? “But not as wonderful as seeing all your happy little faces smiling up at me.” A quick glance around the room showed that none of the faces looked particularly happy, nor were there any smiles. “I look forward to getting to know each and every one of you, and I think we’ll all be very good friends!”

A sneer formed on Pansy’s face. “Not in that outfit.” She grumbled, pressing her hand to her brow like she was shielding her eyes from the bright outfit.

With another throat clearing, which made Harry wonder if she practiced the sound to be as annoying and condescending as possible, her smile turned a bit more brisk and business-like. “The Ministry feels that standards here are not quite up to what is promised to the students and their parents, which is of vital concern to all of us. Each of you has gifts that need to be carefully cultivated, with strong guidance, lest they be lost to not only all of you but the community at large. The noble profession of teaching is designed to polish and guard the treasures of our world, in both the knowledge it passes on and the way it molds the students into the best they can be.”

Here she paused, nodding at all of them like she’d said... anything, really. The words seemed designed to slip straight from the mind, and Harry tilted his head at her and concentrated on her more closely.

Taking a deep breath, she continued. “As each generation comes through these hallowed halls, they are influenced by the guiding hand of those protecting their education. Chief among these are the Headmasters and Headmistresses of Hogwarts, each of whom brings a unique experience and ideal into this amazing institution. It is a weighty task, as well as a vital one, for without these new voices the knowledge and ways amassed here would fade and stagnate. This job is not one that can be left to one man, and so the Ministry must occasionally step in to lend a hand, and to help balance
between progresses and tradition in a way only a grouping of many, united under a leader, can.”

Narrowing his eyes, Harry mentally reviewed that, tossing out as many of the fluff words as he could. The Ministry didn’t feel Dumbledore was up to par, and so there were standing in. Okay, in theory that was alright. But didn’t Fudge not believe in Voldemort’s return...?

A quick glance around told Harry that most of the student’s attention was flowing away. Many students and started to chat with their neighbors, or picked up personal distractions (He spotted Luna at the Ravenclaw table with her upside-down paper). Few people were really staring at her with any sort of true attention. Most of the ones who were still even looking at her had glassy, far away expressions. The only focused eyes he could see were the brown orbs of Hermione, who was staring at Umbridge with an expression that was slowly going mulish. Good for her.

The pink blob didn’t seem to notice the lack of attention, which seemed rather unlikely, especially as the noise levels rose as more and more students talked. Harry thought that maybe that’s what she wanted.

“The influences around you can be positive as well as negative, and so the Ministry wishes to make sure your minds are kept clear of misinformation and misunderstandings as much as possible. To clear the grass of the pests of lies and accidents of information. Because of this some changes may have to be made, but such things are for the betterment of not only this but all generations that will pass through these stone corridors. Where things have stagnated must be refreshed, and while much will remain, many old habits must be cleared to make Hogwarts as successful as it can possibly be. We shall preserve that which should be preserved and bring new life to what needs it, cutting off only the excess, and pulling out the weeds and scaring off the hidden predators which seek to make your minds prey.”

Finally, she sat, looking pleased with herself. Dumbledore was the first to start clapping, and soon the staff and then the students joined him. Harry did not partake in the applause, instead staring down at the table, feeling vaguely queasy.

They were going to clear ‘the grass’ of ‘pests and predators’. And ‘cut out bad influences’ to ‘protect young minds’ and ‘mold them’.

That was basically a threat to Dumbledore, wasn’t it?

And Harry had been the messenger to that particular bit of news.

Oh shit.

Around him, his friends chatted about the windbag and the ability of those in politics to say absolutely nothing. Harry managed a weak smile, but gave Draco a serious look, which the boy returned.

They were going to have to talk. Soon.
The first morning of classes was busy as usual. Harry was lucky that he had Potions and then Defence and then Divination. He may have thought Trelawney was barking mad, which she was, but he actually liked Divination. It was fun. Harry and Draco were trying to push through the gaggle of students and frightened First Years to get down the stairs to the dungeon.

“Make way! Make way!”

Harry turned at the familiar, booming voice of Ernie MacMillian. He was shouting and jostling people aside as Cedric, holding lightly to his shoulder, walked through. The first thing Harry noticed was that Cedric looked healthy, or at least healthier than he had at the end of last year. He was tanned, his hair had gotten longer and slightly shaggy and looked rested. His crutches had been abandoned for an ornate, redwood cane, which he held in his left hand. He still hobbled and limped, but his gait was much more even and though he swayed a little when he put too much weight on his left side, all things considered he looked excellent.

“I think I’m beginning to see what you saw in him.”

Harry’s eyes turned to Draco to see the blonde tracking Cedric as he walked to Professor McGonagall for his schedule and took it with a smile. Then he watched as Cedric, damned and determined, made his way up the stairs, prodding MacMillian with his cane every time his friend drew too close to try and help.

“Oh, really?”

“Well, now that he isn’t my rival I can see the appeal.”

“I have half a mind to box your ears.”

Draco grinned lazily before they finally made their way down the stairs towards the Potions classroom. He spotted Neville and Hermione sitting on the Gryffindor side near Ron, both of them proudly wearing their pins. Millicent and Nott, however, were on opposite ends of the Slytherin side. Harry had always known the two never really got along. He wondered if it was due to the fact Nott had opened the Chamber and had very nearly killed her first real friend outside of Slytherin.

Snape strode into the classroom and silence fell quickly. He examined them all with his dark, sharp eyes and nodded to himself. “As most of you know in June of this year you will be taking your OWLs. I expect all of you to at least manage an Acceptable in my class, as difficult as this may seem, or you will do a great dishonour not only upon my reputation, but the reputation of this school. However, baring that in mind, I am aware that some of you...” His eyes roamed the classroom. “Will not be returning to my class after June and will instead elect out of the skillful art of Potions for a more frivolous pursuit of nonsensical work. Please bare in mind that those of you who wish to place in my favour next year must gain an O in order to be admitted.”

Harry noticed a few people shift uncomfortably. He had to admit, as much as he adored Potions, he wasn’t the type to test well or perform under pressure, and instead tended to be carried by his own sheer dumb luck.. He could only hope to do Snape proud.

“Today we will practice with the Draught of Peace.” Instructions and ingredients appeared on the board and the classroom store cupboard swung open. As several students filed up to the front of the class others gathered their bought ingredients and lined them up on their tables.
Harry got to work immediately.

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“I hate this.” Harry mumbled quietly to Draco as the blonde sat next to him behind Pansy and Blaise in the Defense classroom. “I can feel them staring at me.”

Draco’s hand settled on his back and rubbed gently. “Just ignore it. They’re just trying to wind you up.”

The previous night had been the worst. Nott had loudly, very loudly, as they were getting ready for bed, asked Crabbe how his father was doing after his “splinching accident” while shooting Harry a pointed look. Harry had ignored the barb and instead glared at his book. It had just made his poor mood worse.

After everyone had found their seats, Umbridge stood from her place behind her desk and smiled at the class. The look did not suit her. “Good morning, class.”

In response she got a mixture of off-centre greetings, a bunch of people ignoring her, and half garbled responses. She frowned deeply. “That simply will not do! I would like you all to greet with “Good Morning, Professor Umbridge”. Now, good morning, class!”

“Good Morning, Professor Umbridge!”

She smiled her smile again. “Wonderful! Now if you will please put your wands away and take out your parchment and quills we will begin.” Words appeared on the blackboard. “This year your curriculum will be much more structured than the hodgepodge of previous years, oh yes. You will be studying in a Ministry approved manner, with Ministry approved guidelines. This means it will be a theory based course without the need for direct confrontation.”

Murmurs ran through the classroom and Millicent opened her mouth before raising her hand. Umbridge, who looked ready to spout off ridiculous wisdom, paused and nodded to her.

“Yes? Miss....?”

Millicent stood. “Bulstrode.”

“Miss Bulstrode, how may I help you?”

“Are you telling me, then, that we aren’t going to study magic?”

“Of course you will be studying magic, dear! Just because you aren’t running around after grindylows or banishing doxies does not mean you aren’t studying magic. Instead, the theory based, Ministry approved regimen will assure maximum retention of basic knowledge to help you complete your OWLs.”

Millicent didn’t look impressed, but sat down nevertheless. Umbridge looked satisfied and waved her wand at a stack of books that started handing themselves out to the class. Harry looked down at his copy of *Defensive Magical Theory*, it looked like a children’s guide. Rather hokey and cartoony. She couldn’t be serious.

“Has everyone got a copy of Mr. Slinkhard’s book?”

She was responded to with mostly grunts or nods and twitched in place. “Well! It seems manners in this school are lacking to say the least! In my classroom when I ask you a question I expect either a
“Yes, Professor Umbridge” or a “No, Professor Umbridge”. Is that clear?”

No response.

“I said, is that clear!?”

“Yes, Professor Umbridge.” The class chorused and Harry had to hide his snicker behind his book when Pansy threw in a sarcastic ‘sir’ at the end of hers. It earned her a glare but Pansy simply stared back wide-eyed and apologetic.

“Excellent. You will now begin to read Chapter One on page five. There will be no need to talk.”

Everyone slowly began to read. Millicent instead stared defiantly at the Professor, refusing to so much as touch her book. After several minutes Umbridge, irked by the behaviour, finally stood from behind her desk.

“Were my instructions unclear, Miss Bulstrode?”

Millicent stared at the squat woman, her face impassive. “No, Professor Umbridge.”

“May I then inquire as to why you are wasting valuable class time by staring at me?”

“I have a question, Professor Umbridge.”

“About the reading?”

“Yes, Professor Umbridge.”

“What is it?”

“There is nothing in this book about using defensive spells, Professor Umbridge.”

“You haven’t a clue what’s in the book, Miss Bulstrode, you have yet to open it.”

“I have a copy at home, Professor Umbridge. I read it when I was seven, Professor Umbridge, it did not contain any defensive magic.”

People were starting to look over at the two of them. At Millicent’s blank, uncaring face and almost monotonous voice, and at Umbridge wearing her blinding shades of pink, and slowly looking like she was about to dwindle into madness.

“As I said to you before, Miss Bulstrode, this is a theory based, Ministry-approved course. There will be no need to defensive spells.”

Millicent blinked twice. “Then you lied, Professor Umbridge, when you told me we would be using magic in this class.”

Umbridge twitched violently. “Are you a Ministry approved teacher, Miss Bulstrode?”

“No, Professor Umbridge.”

“Then why do you think it necessary to not only criticize my methods - which are the Minister’s methods - but to also assume that being attacked in this classroom is the only way of learning.”

Millicent opened her mouth to respond when Harry, finally tired of this, snapped.
“Because if we’re attacked using theory won’t help us, Professor Umbridge.”

“Students will raise their hands in my class!”

Harry’s hand shot up and he curled his lip in a way he was sure would make any Slytherin proud when she turned from him. He sat there patiently but she ignored him. Blaise slowly rose his hand. Followed by Pansy and two girls Harry didn’t know the name of. Umbridge looked displeased but chose Blaise’s hand.

“Harry’s right, Professor Umbridge. If we’re ever attacked in real life, be it by Dark creature or Wizard of ill-respite, we won’t have the safety, risk-free environments of a classroom.”

“Mr Potter is being a sensationalist, Mr --”

“Zabini, Professor Umbridge, and I don’t think he is.”

“Sit down, Mr. Zabini. I am going to make things very clear.” She advanced slowly down the aisles, walking past Blaise, and past Harry, whose hand was still raised defiantly even if it ached, and rounded back to the front of the classroom. “The nonsensical news and reports of a certain Dark Wizard’s return are a lie!”

Anger boiled up inside Harry and his hand finally dropped and banged loudly on his desk. “It’s not a lie!”

“Hand! Mr. Po--”

“Fudge trying to cover the whole thing up is nonsense! You stunting our education is nonsense! His return happened and --”

“Fifteen points from Slytherin, Mr. Potter!”

Harry’s mouth snapped shut and he stared at her wide-eyed. Even in all of his years, aside from the blip he liked to ignore concerning Norbert, he had hardly ever lost House points. Especially in a classroom. He pinched his mouth shut and took in a few hard, deep breaths through his nose before snatching up his book and standing.

“If you walk out of this classroom, Mr. Potter, you will get a write-up!”

Harry paused a moment. He considered giving her the two finger salute before he pushed the thought away, turned on his heel, and marched out of class.

Later, Harry found himself in Snape’s office, shifting uncomfortably under the man’s dark gaze. A cup of tea had been placed in front of him - Earl Grey this time. The fact that it wasn’t Chai helped ease his mind a bit. Not by much though.

Finally, the professor gave a long sigh and took a sip of his tea. “I confess to not being pleased with you at the moment.” He began. Harry glared down at his cup, feeling irrationally betrayed by the flavour. “I understand that Umbridge is something of an odious figure, but it is necessary that you avoid her attentions as much as possible.”

Harry found that rather unfair. “Easy for you to say.” He grumbled, pushing the tea away from him in a small show of temper. The liquid inside wobbled but did not spill. “She’s the one whose focused on me, isn’t she?”

“Did she do anything unreasonable towards you before you spoke up?”
Letting out a low sigh, Harry slouched back in his chair. “She was ignoring me.” There was really no way to say that without sounding childish, and no words to convey the sheer delight she’d taken in doing so. Instead he shrugged. “You weren’t there, okay?” Finally, he met the Professor’s eyes. The man still had his tea cup up, but Harry got the distinct impression that he was smirking behind it. Irritation welled up in Harry. Found it funny, did he? Wouldn’t be such a laugh if he was the one facing the bitch while she had the authority.

After a moment, Harry looked away, letting the quiet rage he was feeling settle. “I’m afraid ignoring you isn’t a punishable offense.” Oh, he was definitely amused. At least he wasn’t accusing him of being arrogant or something like that again. Gritting his teeth, Harry pushed back at his temper, fighting the urge to explode. Some part of him recognized that he was overreacting, but couldn’t really be bothered to care.

“Regardless of her attitude and actions - or lack of, as the case may be - you need to control yourself in her class, Harry.” The last word was snapped out like an order, and Harry’s eyes rose to meet his almost by instinct. The anger he’d managed to control came roaring back, and he couldn’t help the glare that developed. “Whatever you do, do not get a detention with her.”

“That’s not fair!” Harry responded, mouth falling open. “She has it out for me. She’s going to give them to me for no reason!”

A frown crossed Snape’s face. “I doubt that, if only to protect herself from accusations of misconduct.” When Harry opened his mouth to protest again, Snape glared. “This is of the utmost importance, Harry, if only because I do not want you alone with her. Do you understand me?”

“But-”

“Do you understand?”

Something like a growl fought to escape him, and Harry stood up, glaring down at the table. “I’ll do my very best, sir.” He didn’t look up, but the atmosphere around his professor seem to shift a bit.

A sigh came from across the desk. “This is war, Mr. Potter.” Harry was surprised by how much that title hurt. But he wasn’t the one being unreasonable! It was Severus! “I imagine that you cannot enjoy being treated like a child after the things you have seen. Therefore, think of this as an order and a test.” Harry’s eyes shifted up to trace the man’s face.

“What do I get by passing?”

What might have been amusement flashed behind Snape’s eyes. “Spoken like a true Slytherin.” He drawled. Harry rolled his eyes. Obviously. He’d only been in the house for five years now. “As a member of the Order, I am privy to information that you are not.”

Eyes widening, Harry considered this. “I thought Dumbledore ordered you guys not to tell us.”

Giving a casual half-shrug, Snape took another sip. “I admit to disagreeing to that idea. Not to mention that I believe Molly Weasley might have a hand in it as well. Besides, it would be rather simple to let a fragment of information slip once in a while during our private lessons. And if you just happened to pick up on them, it would be a testament to your information gathering skills.”

A smirk curled at the corner of Harry’s mouth. “Would your reputation be able to take it?”

Snorting, Severus gave him a bland stare. “I don’t imagine that anyone would have to know.”

“If you disagree with it, why don’t you just tell me now.”
“Because you are young and untested. Do not give me that look, I am aware that you don’t agree. Teenagers rarely do. However, you have never been given the chance to prove that you can be trusted with secrets, especially ones that require you to put yourself deliberately in a position of weakness in order to hide them. Think of this as your opportunity.”

Harry’s answering smile had the edge of a smirk to it. “Spoken like true Slytherin.”

A noise almost like a chuckle escaped Snape. “Go on, now. I’ll see you this weekend.”

Giving a half-sarcastic little salute, Harry made his way toward the door. As he raised his hand to open it, he paused. “Sorry, Severus.” He managed.

Although he didn’t turn around, Harry could feel Snape’s eye roll. “You are fifteen. I don’t expect you to keep your temper constantly. I certainly did worse when I was your age.” He paused here, like the words pained him, and Harry wondered if they’d wandered into painful territory. “I do expect some respect from you, however.”

“Right.” With that, Harry slipped out the door and down the hall towards the Common Room. He desperately wanted one of his sketchpads. Other than Quidditch, there was no better way to calm himself after today’s emotions.

The dorm was empty when Harry arrived so he flopped down on his bed and sketched a rough work of Ananta. He was trying to keep himself calm and instead he was getting more and more agitated. Annoyed he ripped the sheet out of the book and tore it apart before flinging the book aside in a huff.

“Woah, mate, what’s got you in such a wad?” Blaise’s voice sounded from the door.

Harry crossed his arms with a grunt. “Just not having a great day.”

“Is this because of Um-bitch?”

“Yeah.”

Blaise sighed and picked up Harry’s sketchpad and set it on his bed. “While I appreciate what you did in class and the faces and rants she made afterwards, it wasn’t the brightest move. She’s slimier than a flobberworm. Draco’s in the Common Room, want me to get him?”

Harry shot a smile at Blaise and the taller boy stood before exiting the dorm. Harry picked up the sketchpad again and tapped his pencil against it before looking up when he felt a familiar weight settle on the edge of the bed. Draco rubbed soothing, off kilter circles in his calf and Harry smiled faintly as some of the tension left his body.

“What’re you drawing, then?”

“Dunno.”

“You could draw me…”

Harry looked at Draco over the edge of his pad. “You do know it would be a realistic likeness and not ignorant to your flaws, right?”

Draco rose his shoulders in a graceful shrug before making himself comfortable draped over a pillow. Harry settled down and turned his pad before sketching loosely. After about twenty minutes of work he had an outline he was comfortable with and Draco’s breathing had evened out into sleep. Harry let him doze as he worked on the delicate, fine features of Draco’s face.
He took in things he never realized before. The small mole below Draco’s left ear. The way Draco’s hair curled at the roots no matter how slickly styled. The adorable way his chin jutted out in a way that was almost sharp. The slope of his nose curving slightly right. Harry sketched and stared and smiled.

It took him longer than usual, mostly because he kept simply looking at Draco, utterly infatuated.

He was admiring the lightness of Draco’s lashes, almost invisible against his pale face when Crabbe bustled into the room, all noise and annoyance and Draco stirred. Harry closed the sketchpad with a flush and set it aside before stretching his arms up and shivering when his shoulders popped in a deliciously painful way.

“How’s your first week going so far?”

S’alright so far. Yours?”

“Alright.”

Cedric paused when he reached the top of the stairs and pressed his right side against the wall to take a few even breaths. He looked between the two of them and offered up a lazy, slightly tired smile.

“Not pitying me are you?”

Draco snorted. “Don’t be daft, Diggory. I’m sizing up my Quidditch competition.”

Cedric laughed airily and brushed some of his unruly hair back from his face. “Luckily enough I can fly just as well. Heard you got a new Keeper. What’s his name... Nott?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, Gryffindor’s trying people out too, I hear.”

Cedric nodded his head a little. “Heard Ron Weasley is trying out.”

Draco’s brows shot up a bit. “Weasley? That’d put four of them on one team, right? The littlest one got a Chaser position last I heard.”

Cedric opened his mouth to reply but was cut off by a soft “hem hem”. The three of them turned to look towards the doorway to the Greay Hall, which was open, flooding light into the hallway. Umbridge was standing in a wide beam of light, her thin lips pulled into an altogether too-happy smile.

“Mustn’t dawdle. Dinner is being served. It’d do you well to hear the newest announcements. And growing boys must eat.”
Harry matched her smile with a large amount of force. “I’m sorry Professor Umbridge. We were just keeping Cedric company while he gathered himself.”

Umbridge’s eyes pushed their focus past Harry towards Cedric, who had righted himself. He was no longer flushed, but still looked a little peaky and was leaning slightly too hard on his cane. Harry wondered briefly if the pain flared and how hard it had to be for Cedric to move around the castle.

“Yes... well...” She touched her thin, lizard-like mouth with her stubby fingers as her mouth curled unpleasantly. “One mustn’t hinder oneself with burdens, Mr. Potter. Casting off shackles and breaking free of dead weight, while hard, is necessary to excel in life.”

She turned and marched her way into the Hall. Harry’s hands curled into fists and his nostrils flared with anger. He felt the rage boil up inside of him. All he wanted to do was keep sending furious, painful hexes at her or keep beating her with his fists.

“She really is rather nasty, isn’t she?” Cedric’s quiet, polite voice said. It broke the fog of anger in Harry’s mind.

Harry unfurled his hands and tried to take in a few deep, calming breaths as he looked back at Cedric. “I’m sorry for her. Are you alright?”

“Fine. I’m a big boy, I can handle a barb or two. Come on, let’s get some supper.”
Classes quickly settled into a routine. OWL year was quickly proving to be more difficult by far than their previous years. Already, Harry had a two foot paper for Transfiguration, a foot for Charms, and two and a half for Potions. And that wasn’t counting the continuing annoyance of classes like Divination.

Despite all that, the fact that they didn’t have homework - or at least not real homework - for Defense Against the Dark Arts was infuriating. Harry was become sure that their textbook had been specifically created to be as dull as possible.

The parchment in front of him had about two lines of notes, which then managed to transform themselves into sprawling, loosely connected doodles. There was one of the Whomping Willow, which Harry could vaguely see through the window, several of toads that became more ugly and pained looking further down the paper, and images of kittens, like those on the walls, that became snarling beasts.

A productive period, then.

For the most part, Umbridge - and he refused to call her Professor, preferring to make vague humming noises instead of the word when they were forced as a class to answer her - sat in the front of the class, watching them or scribbling away at her desk. Her beady eyes were the only thing that kept the class from turning into the next History of Magic.

Towards the end of today’s class, however, she had taken to stalking the aisles, simpering at students like Nott, who preened outrageously under the attention, or berating people like Millicent for poor posture or handwriting. So far she’d ignored Harry, and he’d begun to think that maybe Operation: Appease Severus had a chance of working.

But of course it couldn’t hold.

“Mr. Potter,” the high voice twittered over his shoulder. He resisted the urge to shudder. “What are you doing?”

Turning to meet her eyes, Harry gave her his best blank expression. “Taking notes.”

She unleashed one of her little throat clearings, and Harry had the abrupt desire to throw the ink well at her. Maybe it’d cover up some of that pink. “I don’t believe there are any pictures in your book, Mr. Potter.”

Something twisted in Harry’s stomach, and he glanced down at the sketch of a kitten with snake eyes and a long, slimy tongue he’d been working on. A few smart remarks jumped to mind, but he swallowed them back. “I didn’t feel the book had reached any new material.”

One thin, sharp eyebrow raised. “Really? Not in the entire class period?”

“I’m a slow reader.”

Her eyes gained just a bit more venom at the words, but he kept his expression as innocent as possible.

“That does make sense, considering how difficult you can be on coming to terms with facts.” She returned, voice lighter than before. Somewhere behind her bulk, Nott snickered. “Perhaps if this
book mentioned you more you might be more interested in it, since you do seem so preoccupied with your public image.”

Green eyes glazed a bit as Harry fought back against the frustration rising in him. He couldn’t fight everything, however, and couldn’t help but speak. “That might help. I hear Rise of a Dark Lord has some good detail on the previous war, especially on how society wasn’t nearly prepared enough for Voldemort’s reign.” His tone was dry enough to create a desert.

Umbridge, like most of the class, flinched at his name. When she returned her focus to him, something cold and burning was visible in her gaze. “I’m sure your opinion is extremely important to you, Mr. Potter, but I assure you that witches and wizards far smarter and more experienced than you have decided that this book is the best for our purposes.”

Nodding, Harry said nothing, but was sure his gaze showed exactly how he felt about that fact.

A sniff came from Umbridge, the sound slightly put out, like she was disappointed at his lack of response. “Now, no matter how far over your head the material goes, I still expect you to follow my instructions. Would you mind reading what’s on the board, Mr. Potter?”

“Why, do you have trouble seeing it from here?” This time the snicker behind her sounded like it was Pansy, and the sound settled in his chest like a reinforcement.

Umbridge’s face twisted slightly. “I was wondering if perhaps you couldn’t, considering your obvious failings.” She motioned towards his glasses with something just shy of a sneer. “I know I can’t expect you to remember how we discussed it at the beginning of class. Now, read from the board, please.”

With a sigh, Harry turned back to look at the board. “‘Read chapter 5 from your book and take notes.’” He read, voice blank.

“Was any of that unclear to you, Mr. Potter?”

His stomach dropping, Harry shook his head.

“Have they changed at all from the start of the class?”

Another head shake.

“And do you agree with me that two lines does not count as proper note taking for an entire chapter?”

He didn’t move.

Something like a grin of pleasure crawled along her face. “Answer me.”

“In most cases, it would not.”

Smile growing, she leaned forward a bit. “Do you believe this to be an exception?”

Unable to hold his tongue anymore, Harry snapped, “Yes, I do.”

“Well, I’m afraid that your opinion does not matter in the least. Detention for disobeying my clear orders. For a week. Meet me in my office tonight after dinner. Now, class dismissed!”

At first Harry just stared at her, unable to believe he’d gotten a week of detention for something so stupid, but Draco grabbed his arm and tugged gently. Slowly, Harry stood, grabbed his bags and left.
The whole time, he could feel Umbridge’s gleeful gaze on his back.

Snape was going to be furious.

~*~

Someone like Ron might have called it stalling, but Harry chose to call it ‘strategic timing’. It wasn’t a good idea to go to Snape, who he knew was going to be furious, while his temper was still so frazzled. The anticipation, however, was killing any chance he had of doing something productive with his time.

With a sigh he set down his book and stood. Harry opened his mouth to inform his friends he where he was going, but he was interrupted by a snicker. “Looks like Potter’s off to his special lessons.” Nott drawled, just loud enough to carry across the room. Harry glared over at him, only to meet Crabbe’s dark gaze. He flinched away a bit, the anger there like a blade. “What does he teach him that requires he be there so often?” Nott’s tone dropped into something more suggestive. “Something that means they have to be all alone for hours.”

Appreciative chuckles came from Goyle, while Crabbe nodded darkly, like he agreed with the sentiment. Harry’s mouth dropped open at the accusation, and he reached into his pocket to grip his wand in a death grip. But Nott looked up and met his furious gaze with a sly look of his own, and Harry grit his teeth to hold back his temper. He was not going to give him the satisfaction. Instead he whirled around and stalked out the passageway and into Snape’s office.

Harry dropped into the chair inside Snape’s personal chambers with an angry huff. Now he was even worse off. So much for that time he’d wasted. He angrily kicked the leg of the chair to try and vent some of his frustration.

“Now, now. I don’t think my chairs deserve such punishment. They were not the ones who gave you detention. Though from what I gather it was a rather necessary action.”

“I didn’t do anything! Merlin, she makes me so mad! She doesn’t even teach anything, so what, I was drawing a little in my notes, it was far more productive than anything she could muster.”

Snape’s brow rose as he sat down in his chair and took a sip of his drink. “I understand you’re frustrated, Harry. I was your age once, and I remember quite clearly the feeling of the world being against me.”

“You don’t know what this is like! She’s a harpy, Severus! All she does is leech the life out of me and mock me at every turn. She says I’m a liar. I’m the one who saw him! I’m the one who fought him! No one here believes me.”

“Mr. Potter, if you would just take a deep breath and calm down you would remember that quite a few people here believe you. Your friends do. I do. Headmaster Dumbledore does. The Order of the Phoenix does. Just because one woman from the Ministry spouting dribble disagrees with you does not mean the whole world is against you.”

Harry glared towards his teacher before taking in a few slow, deep breaths. It did nothing to calm him. He pressed his mouth together. “But the people who matter - the Ministry, the Prophet, they’re setting everyone up to be slaughtered! How on earth are we supposed to fight against an enemy no one even thinks exists! It’s like the Ministry is being ignorant on purpose. Like they want people to get picked off one by one.”

“Do not say things like that. The Ministry, while foolish, will strike when they realize the action
necessary. Do you honestly think Fudge a man ready to sacrifice his people? He is stupid but he is not cruel.”

“He’s an idiot! An idiot whose going to get us all killed! And because of him people like Umbridge get to roam the halls of this school and pull the wool over the eyes of the unprepared. Well I won’t stand for it. I want to be ready to fight when Voldemort strikes and if that means I have to take a thousand detentions with her than I will!”

“Harry, I think you need to calm down. What you’re saying is dangerous and --”

“I don’t need to calm down! I’m thinking perfectly clearly. If you all want to lay down while he bowls right over you then that’s fine with me but I’m going down fighting like my mother. I’m not going to let him win because the rest of you are too scared to act and --”

“Be. Quiet. You dare use your mothers death in a vein such as this? You think that none of us tried to help her? That she was left alone and helpless against the Dark Lord? Foolish boy, you have no idea of what you speak.”

“Neither do you.” Harry shoved out from his seat. “I fought him. He nearly killed me and I fought him. I saw them that night. Saw the people he killed for fun. He took my blood, its on my head that he’s back. He’s back because of me. Thanks to me. All because he wants to kill me. How could you know what I’m feeling?”

“Do not think you are the only one who lost something precious that Hallowe’en. This isn’t about your mother or the Dark Lord, this is about Professor Umbridge and the fact you acted out of turn in her classroom. I warned you to stay quiet and not to draw her attention and you disobeyed me.”

“She was looking for a fight!” Harry’s hands were in fists and his breathing was shallow. He rocked on his heels before grabbing his bag. “Sit here and praise the toad all you want I’m not standing for her nonsense.”

Harry stormed out slamming the door forcefully behind him. The door closed so hard it shook the walls and one of the pictures of Lily fell from Snape’s mantle. He stood and picked it up. He stared down at her smiling face before putting the frame back into place. He could remember being fifteen and filled with rage but it had been nothing to match Harry.

He stroked his fingers down the glass of the picture frame. He only hoped he was doing the right thing.

Dinner was a sullen affair for Harry. A few people tried to bring him into the conversation and cheer him up, but being rebuffed every time, they eventually let him be.

His plate remained mostly untouched, unless the way he pushed his food around counted. The mix of rage and apprehension made his stomach rebel at even the smell of his meal. Even worse was the way Umbridge’s eyes tracked him like a particularly juicy fly that she couldn’t wait to snap up.

Maybe he shouldn’t be thinking about her tongue.

Worse, Harry felt guilt creeping into his stomach as he put distance between him and Snape. He couldn’t figure out why he’d been so mad at the man. Sure, he wasn’t pleased with the way he reacted to Harry’s detention, or how utterly unfair it was how he refused to acknowledge Umbridge’s capability in the whole thing.

Still, Harry had never meant to bring his mum into it like that, especially not to Snape. Not to mention the way he’d acted like some sort of sullen, moody teenager and stormed out.
Finally he pushed his plate away and stared down at his hands, feeling the absurd urge to scream until he went hoarse.

When did his life get so much harder?

Oh, yeah. Third task. Voldemort. That’d do it.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Umbridge slip out of her seat and out of the Great Hall, clearly going to set up for his detention. He groaned and slumped forward, pressing his forehead against the edge of the table.

He felt a hand settle on his shoulder and glanced up, frowning sullenly. Draco had stopped eating as well and was watching him with worried eyes. Something that felt like pity seemed to jump at Harry, and he shoved the hand off and looked away.

Despite not being able to see his face anymore, Harry could feel Draco’s slight hurt and irritation at the action. The older boy went back to his conversation and ignored Harry, which suited him just fine.

Really.

He waited for another ten minutes or so, before deciding that the sooner he went, the sooner he would be able to leave. With a grumbled good-bye to his friends, which was coolly ignored by Draco, Harry made his way towards Umbridge’s office. The sound of every footfall sounded like the ring of a funeral bell, and he started to wonder if the violent churning of his stomach was apprehension or if he was actually coming down with something.

When he reached the door, he waited a full minute before finally reaching up and knocking. “Come in!” Umbridge’s voice rang, jolly in a way most people’s were about an approaching holiday.

He made his way inside, and settled down at the desk Umbridge motioned towards. In front of him was a stack of blank parchment and a quill that was a strange red colour. Something about the shade was vaguely familiar, but Harry couldn’t really place it. “You’ll be writing lines for me tonight, Mr. Potter.”

That hadn’t been what he’d expected. “Lines?” It seemed so... simple. Plain. Not at all scary.

Clearly Umbridge thought differently, because her eyes glittered with dark pleasure. “Are you having hearing problems?” He managed not to roll his eyes. “Yes, lines. You are to write until I tell you to stop.”

“What am I supposed to be writing?”

The look in her eyes growing brighter, she practically twittered out, “‘I do not matter.’”

Harry sucked in a harsh breath, meeting her gaze. She returned it with interest, something like conviction in the set of her shoulders.

This woman was honestly trying to make him believe this. That he did not matter. That it was a fact that should be written over and over until it was burned into his brain.

‘I do not matter.’

Feeling even sicker, Harry cleared his throat and grabbed the quill. “I...” It came out slightly breathless, and he coughed before trying again. “I don’t have an ink well.”
She tilted her head at him, like he was a dumb dog that wasn’t understanding the trick she was trying to teach him. “You won’t need one.”

So he was supposed to write until the ink ran out? That could work. It might not even take that long. He placed the quill to the parchment and scratched out the letter ‘I’.

A slash appeared on his hand, and Harry hissed at the sharp pain. At first the gash showed up bright red, like someone had carved onto his hand with a knife, but it quickly healed up. He stared first at his hand, and then and the bright red ‘I’ on the paper, some part of him refusing to believe what he’d just seen and felt.

“Is there a problem, Mr. Potter?” Umbridge asked, voice like honey as she watched him with eagle eyes, taking in the tension of his shoulder and the slightly shocked look on his face like they were works of art.

Oh, no.

He was not going to give her the satisfaction.

“No problem.” He replied, voice filled with as much cheer as he could manage. She narrowed her eyes at him before returning to the papers on her desk.

Pressing the tip back to the paper, Harry started on the ‘do’. Just like the first letter, the message was scratched onto his hand before healing up, and on the paper it glittered in that red ink.

Oh, it wasn’t ink, was it? And that explained why the quill’s shade seemed so familiar. It was the exact same colour as the blood on the parchment.

Clearing her throat loudly, Umbridge didn’t even look up as she called out, “I don’t hear writing!”

Gritting his teeth together, Harry started to write his lines.

_I do not matter._

_I do not matter._

_I do not matter._

He quickly discovered that it was best to write them quickly - while it meant he wrote more, at least it was a quick, sharp sting. When he’d tried to slowly, the gash had taken longer to form, and had started to bleed freely before it closed.

There was no way this was legal. Harry glanced at Umbridge for a second before going back to his writing. This was torture, simple as that. Of course it was illegal to use on anyone, especially a minor.

But no matter when he glanced at her, Umbridge never looked shifty or worried, like she was doing something she knew was wrong. Instead she just looked pleased, if disappointed at the way he didn’t react.

This went on for hours, and Harry filled parchment after parchment with the phrase. Finally, the kitten clock on the other side of the wall gave twelve simpering little meows, and Umbridge stood up and made her way to him. “Hand.” She demanded, and Harry gave it to her without a fuss, staring down at the lines and lines of _I do not matter_. After a moment she gave a tutting sound. “Seems like it hasn’t quite sunk in, has it? I’ll be seeing you tomorrow after dinner, then.”
Harry didn’t speak, but nodded and slipped out the door. He remained silent as he slipped down to the dungeons and into the Common Room.

There, Pansy and Draco were waiting for him, currently in the middle of a game of cards. “Harry!” Pansy greeted, eyes wide. Draco glanced up at him and then turned back down, still clearly peeved at him. The reaction echoed in the empty place that seemed to have developed in his chest. “Was it terribly awful? What did that horrible hag make you do?”

“Lines.” Harry croaked out. For a moment, the desire to tell his friends roared to the front, but something old and dusty and fueled by punishment after mocking after punishment killed it. Instead he hid his hand behind his back as subtly as he could behind his leg and shrugged. “Not what I was expecting.”

Snorting in an extremely un-lady-like manner, Pansy nodded. “No kidding. I thought for sure you’d be... I don’t know, strung from the rafters or something.” She paused and tilted her head at him. “You okay? You don’t look well.” Across from her, Draco gave a twitch like he wanted to turn, but didn’t.

Jerking in a way that was close to a shrug, Harry sighed. “Just tired. Long detention with that... with Umbridge. I’m just going to go to bed.”

Pansy nodded. “That’s a good idea. Though if you still look like this in the morning it’s straight to the infirmary with you.”

“Yes, General Parkinson.” Harry drawled, and she smirked at him. He glanced at Draco and sighed a bit. He wanted to apologize for hurting his feelings, but the closed off posture made him want to retreat instead.

Following the instinct, Harry slipped upstairs with a murmured good night, and got ready for bed in record time, before settling down. After a quick glance around to make sure no one was awake, Harry used the low light from his wand to inspect his hand.

Apparently there was only so much the quill could heal, because there were stripes of paler skin, like old scars, that marred the back of his hand. Had he not known the message, he wouldn’t be able to tell what it said.

Feeling even sicker, Harry canceled the spell and slipped under the covers, shoving his left hand under the pillow. If it still looked like that in the morning, he’d do something to heal it. For now he just wanted to sleep.

It didn’t take long for him to slip off, but that night his slumber was far from peaceful.

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The long, dark corridor seemed to stretch on forever. Harry was sure he had been wandering through the halls for hours. He didn’t know what he was looking for. But he kept getting the nagging sense he was missing something; or had forgotten something. He pushed through doors leading into rooms filled mirrors, before backing into the hallway again that seemed to twist and change. Some rooms were filled with people. Some were filled with things. Some made the world go upside down when he walked into them.

One of the rooms looked like Draco’s bedroom. Harry had thought about waiting for Draco inside. He sat on the bed but soon felt the urge to leave again. He wondered if Draco was in the long
stretch of halls like he was. If maybe they were supposed to be looking for each other.

Harry broke into a run down a long, narrow stretch of walls. The torches lining the hall flickered and cast strange shadows. Harry rounded a sharp left turn and skidded to a stop at a set of stairs leading down. He leaned over the railing and peered down, seeing how far it went. The blend of the carpet on the steps seemed to writhe and come to life the longer he stared at it and he pulled his gaze away.

With a deep breath Harry took hold of the banister and made his way down.

And down.

And down.

There were no ways off the stairs once he started to descend. Harry wondered how far they went and where he was headed.

His legs were aching and he was tired when he stepped off the last step. The floor was no longer carpet and were instead dark, polished tile. A wide, looming door sat at the end of the hallway and was beginning to close.

Harry broke into an exhausted run.

He was so close!

The door slammed shut and he ran right into it. Harry collapsed to the ground, tired and in pain.

Harry groaned as he sat up in bed. His mind was reeling and his heart was pounding in his chest. What on earth had that been? He carded his fingers through his hair before dragging his left hand out from under the pillows. It throbbed weakly and he put on his glasses before casting a weak ‘lumos’.

He could still see the faint marks. And his hand looked slightly swollen. He frowned at it before cancelling his spell and opening his curtains. He was greeted with silence and tossed a look out the window. The lake was still murky and dark, but filled with faint shafts of light. It was probably early morning. Harry moved to his trunk and opened it quietly. He looked through some of the jars before he wrapped his free hand around the one labelled ‘murtlap’.

Making his way down the hall toward the bathroom Harry slipped inside. He turned on the taps on and ran his hands under the cool water before drying them and worked some of the liquid murtlap essence onto the back of his left hand. At first it stung before it cooled and went numb. Harry stared at his hand expectantly and waited for the swelling and faint scars to disappear.

After a few long minutes the swelling went away but the scars remained. Harry frowned. He picked up the small bottle and scowled at it, like it was the murtlap’s fault. Angry, Harry made his way out of the bathroom and into the dorm again. He put his things away and flopped on his bed, curtains closed, to wait until everyone else woke.

It took a few hours but finally people started waking. Harry listened as they made their way about. He heard Crabbe turn on his Wireless and listen to the news as he got ready for breakfast. Not long after came Goyle, and then Blaise. All three of them headed for the showers. When Nott had left the room, spelling it quiet, Draco finally emerged from his bed.

Harry listened to him get ready and change before he listened to him leave. Draco lingered at the door, no doubt wondering if he should wake Harry. After a long pause Harry heard him leave. Finally alone again, Harry jammed on his robes and his shoes. If he really hurried he would be able
to catch Snape before breakfast. Maybe the Potions Master had something stronger to heal him.

If Snape even looked at him, of course.

Harry made is wall to the Great Hall quickly and sat down next to Draco, who glanced at him quickly but didn’t speak. Giving a sigh, Harry leaned forward and pecked his boyfriend on the cheek in apology. “Sorry I was a prat yesterday. I was just off the wall, and so I lashed out.”

Grey eyes met his, and for a moment Draco seemed to be unsure if we was going to let Harry off the hook that easily. Then he smirked. “You call that a make-up kiss?” He drawled.

Matching the smirk, Harry pressed his lips to Draco’s. Mindful of the very public forum, he didn’t make it deep, but there was no way it couldn’t be counted as ‘proper’.

A gagging sound from a little down the table made them brake away, and both turned to see Nott watching them with a disgusted expression. “Do you two have no shame? Honestly.” He turned away, nose in the air.

“Like you have any room to talk.” Blaise pointed out from his spot next to Pansy. “You spend more time eating your girlfriend’s mouth than your food.”

Nott send him a deadpan look. “It’s not the kissing I object to as much as it is having to look at such shames to society. It’s nauseating.”

Picking at her carrots, Pansy snorted. “That was worthy of a Gryffindor. Must you ruin the meal with your blather?” When Nott didn’t even bother to reply, she rolled her eyes. “It’s a shame what we have to put up with these days.”

Conversation faded away as they continued eating, and under the table Harry’s hand throbbed. He gave thought to telling them about it, but it seemed like a stupidly public place to do so. Not to mention it seemed awkward to bring it up.

‘Speaking of meat, my hand got sliced up by Umbridge last night’. Not exactly his best opening.

Appetite suitably killed, Harry glanced up at the staff table with some trepidation. Professor Snape was studiously avoiding looking at their group. Shame and irritation both welled up in him. It was best not to go to him. He’d probably just tell me it was my own fault for getting the detention in the first place. Ignoring the childish tone of the thought, Harry pushed his plate away and prepared to leave when a hand landed on his shoulder.

Jumping, Harry spun to see Ron looking quite angry, a letter crumbled in his hand. “Hello?” Harry greeted, rather hoping he wasn’t about to be punched in the face.

“We need to talk. Can we go somewhere?” The redhead replied. Pausing, he removed his hand and took a step back.

Eyeing him cautiously, Harry asked, “Is this place going to have witnesses?”

A somewhat vicious smile spread across Ron’s face. “That was the idea, actually.”

Harry stared at him for a moment, before shaking his head. “I’m confused. Are you angry at me for something? Because I know this is the standard Slytherin response but I swear I didn’t do it.”

For a moment Ron blinked at him before he shook his head. “Oh, sorry, musta looked scary there for a bit. No, not at you anyway. But can we go someplace... well, less public, but still with people. Like the library?”
“That’s a new one from you.” Harry noted dryly, and Ron grinned, unrepent. “Yeah, sure, I guess. I’ve got time before classes.”

Ron nodded again, and his fist closed tighter around the paper. “Right. Great. Those two coming with you?” He nodded at Draco and Pansy, who sent him dry, unimpressed looks.

Glancing at them, Harry raised an eyebrow. “Doubt I’d be able to shake them off, so I suppose.” This time he got the glares.

“Great.” Harry send him a curious look. While Ron didn’t tend to fight with Draco and Pansy (much. Lately), he still had never really warmed up to them.

After waiting a few minutes for Draco and Pansy to finish eating (and for Pansy to kiss Blaise goodbye until lunch) and collecting Nevile and Hermione, they made their way to the library. At this time, it was mostly deserted, but a few students, mostly Ravenclaws, were milling about.

Once they sat down, Ron thrust the crumbled paper he’d been holding into Harry’s hands. “Got this last night from my brother Percy - you remember him. Prefect, glasses, utter prat? Yeah, him. He got a job at the Ministry after he graduated, and recently he’s been under Fudge. Junior Undersomething or whatever it was. Anyway, that prat had the nerve to send me this. Talking about how I should ‘limit to associations to better influences’, and how ‘certain people could be harmful to any future plans I might be having’. He’s all coy about it until the end, there, where he finally breaks and starts going on about how you’re obviously some terrible sneaky Slytherin and blah blah blah.” He flapped his hand dryly. “You know, the same sort of stuff that people use when they’re trying to talk bad about one of you guys without having anything real to say.”

When Ron stopped to catch his breath after his rant, Hermione leaned forward, eyes sharp. “He mentioned something about you having control over the papers, and that any attempts to ‘inform the public about the truth of your character’ have been blocked. Do you have any idea what he’s talking about?”

Harry started to shake his head, but Pansy’s expression became rather suddenly smug. “I didn’t think I did.” He said dryly, arching an eyebrow at her.

Making a noncommittal little noise, Pansy shrugged. “I may have mentioned to Mother that some of the articles Skeeter had been writing could attract legal trouble, and that the way they caused chaos made it rather hard to keep my grades up.” She smirked widely. “She thought those were very sensible points, and has strove to keep the Prophet more informative and less scandalous. After all, if they publish anything false and inflammatory, it might hurt their value in the long run.”

Making exaggerated little bowing movements, Harry chuckled. “All hail Pansy, Queen of Information.”

“And don’t you forget it.” Pansy returned, kicking lightly at his shin.

Hermione looked like she didn’t know if she approved of blocking articles like that, but Ron and Neville just looked impressed. The redhead grinned. “Wicked. Right, anyway, I was kind of hoping we could meet up a bit more in public places to spite the prat. You mind?” Harry grinned and shook his head. “Brilliant.”

“Speaking of, we were thinking of starting a defense group, since Umbridge is absolutely useless and all.” Neville added. “Maybe you’d guys like to join? Better than nothing, after all.”

Draco eyed them consideringly. “Depends on who is in it.”
Something bright and passionate was entering Hermione’s eyes. “Well, it was going to be just us, but…” She paused, thinking about it. “What if we invited other people in our year that wanted to learn? Or other years, it does matter. Start a club or some sort and help teach everyone to defend themselves, whether they think You-Know-Who is back or not. If Harry leads it, I bet we could get loads of people-”

“Wait, hold on there.” Harry blinked at her. “How did this go from us joining you guys to me leading a club?”

Hermione blinked at him. “Well, it’d obviously have to be you, wouldn’t it? You’ve…” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “You’ve faced him. Seen him. And gotten away. Harry, you’ve survived against You-Know-Who three times!”

“Four times.” Draco drawled. The Gryffindors stared at him. “There was once in First Year. It’s why we had so many more points on that last day.” He shrugged in an overly casual manner. “Just thought you’d like to be correct.”

Nodding, Hermione continued on. “Right. Four times. And you fought a Basilisk, and saved Ginny, and talked to a dragon, and-”

Holding up his hands, Harry’s gaze racked over all of them, starting to look panicked. “It’s not what you’re thinking, really. I mean, yeah, I did that stuff, but I always had help, and…” He trailed off, flailing his arms slightly as he tried to convey just how wrong they were. “And besides, just because I can do stuff doesn’t mean I can teach. Or that people will want to learn from me - Sneaky Slytherin, remember?”

“You’d probably have more people than you think.” Neville told him, voice quiet but confident. “I think you could do it.”

Hermione leaned forward, eyes still that bright, passionate shade. “At least consider it, won’t you? Anything you could do would be better than leaving everyone to Umbridge.”

“I…but…” Harry shook his head. “I’ll think about it, but no guarantees, okay? I really don’t think I’m the right bloke for the job.”

Ron slapped him jovially on the back. “Better you than me, mate.” Harry scowled at him. “Now I think we’d better get going - we have McGonagall next, and you know how she gets about being late.”

They made their good-byes and headed to their classes. All the while, Harry’s head spun. Him, teach defense? Snape had asked him for help with tutoring potions, but that was just simple stuff like proper stirring or basic reactions. This was something else entirely. What, was he supposed to teach how to huddle, terrified, behind a gravestone? As far as he could tell, his track record for actually defending, rather than scurrying around for cover was rather low. And this was the sort of stuff that could determine if a person lived or died. Could Harry even begin to cover that?

“You should do it.” Draco told him matter-of-factly, not even bothering to look at him.

Blinking at him, Harry asked, “Why?”

“Because you’re the only one who can.”

Beside Draco, Pansy nodded sternly, mouth pressed into a thin line.

Huh.
Meeting Places

The day had gone surprisingly well. Harry only had two classes that day - Divination and Herbology. He had spent the remaining time between completing his Herbology work and dinner tutoring a few First Year Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff students for potions. He had been shocked to find the request for his help delivered by owl during lunch. The loopy handwriting definitely hadn’t been Snape’s, but the small note mentioned that “Professor Snape said we could ask if we needed help”. He had been slightly shocked. When had Snape recommended him to the class? On the first day or recently? Had it happened before or after his blow up about Umbridge?

Harry supervised the small group as they went over making a basic brew that would later be used in the course as the base for the Boil Cure. One of the Ravenclaw girls was being most annoying. Harry had instructed her, as he was sure she had been told countless times, to bind back her hair while working on her potions. He really didn’t fancy having to put out her hair after it caught flame due to her oversight. Still she had yet to do so and was leaning heavily over her cauldron, peering inside of it. Harry’s mouth pinched and he did a quick flourish with his wand and cast a spell he swore he never would have known if not for Millicent and Pansy and lowered his hand in satisfaction as her hair snapped up in a tightly coiled braid.

“Hey!”

“He did warn you, Patricia. No free long hair.”

One of the Hufflepuff boys was glancing between his textbook and his potion with increasing frustration and a frown. Harry moved to his side and watched as the boy crushed some aloe pods before adding in seven drops to his potion. It sent out a great plume of smoke and the boy sat back, face fallen, looking defeated.

“I’m never going to get this.”

Harry cleared his cauldron with a wave of his wand and extinguished the flame. “Do you know what you did wrong, Easu?”

“No! I followed the instructions.”

“You did, that’s true. However, your flame was to high. You boiled it over.”

“Oh.” The boy nodded his head and looked at the book once again and then made a note with his quill. Harry smiled a little at the action.

A sudden bolt of pain shot up his back and settled into his spine and he wavered on his feet before pressing a hand to his forehead. What on Earth? What had that been?

“Not-Profesor Potter,” one of the Hufflepuff girls, Harry was sure her name was Ingrid, ventured softly, “are you okay?”

“Fine. I’m just tired.” Harry forced a smile and rubbed at his lightly aching scar and sat down on a stool. “Okay, I think you’ve all got this down. We’ll meet Saturday afternoon and go over this again.”

The younger group nodded and Harry watched as they cleared their stations and trooped from the empty classroom. Harry cleaned the remaining space before he left the classroom and headed back to the Common Room. His head was aching and he thought about taking a nap before dinner. He made
his way to his dormitory and he flopped down on his bed.

“The runts wear you out?”

Harry’s mouth tugged up at Draco’s voice and he opened his eyes slightly. “Headache. When did you get out of Ancient Runes?”

“About ten minutes ago.” Draco laid next to Harry and plucked Harry’s glasses from his nose. “I know just what you need. Close your eyes.”

Harry’s eyes slid closed unhesitatingly and he felt Draco’s slim, cool fingers slide over his temples in lazy circles. Harry let out a sigh of content and relaxed into the bed, not even tensing when he felt Draco shift and felt a weight settle over either side of his hips. A mouth pressed against his own and Harry kissed back lazily, tilting his head back when he needed air.

“How do you do that?”

“What?”

“Make everything better.”

Harry could hear the smile in Draco’s voice as he leaned down and kissed his temple. “Magic.”

Harry laughed but it was cut short when Draco’s mouth pressed against his throat and he gave a sigh. “Kiss me.”

Draco’s mouth pressed against Harry’s and Harry rose an arm to cup at the back of Draco’s head as he pulled him into a deeper kiss. Draco made a pleased noise and shifted, his knees moving to hug Harry’s ribs as he opened his mouth against Harry’s and pushed his body against Harry’s. Harry groaned and pulled his mouth back, breathing heavily and moved to bite softly at Draco’s neck. Draco cursed under his breath and shuddered against Harry’s body before he slid his hands down Harry’s side, pulling impatiently at his shirt. He fused their mouths back together before he freed Harry’s shirt and moved to push it up. Harry jerked back and grabbed hold of Draco’s hands, he placed them firmly on his shoulders before he laid back down and dragged Draco to kiss him.

In response, Draco hesitated a moment, opening his mouth to question Harry on his actions, but lost his train of thought when Harry’s teeth scraped over his bottom lip.

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It started with an article in the Prophet.

MINISTRY SEEKS EDUCATIONAL REFORM: DOLORES UMBRIDGE APPOINTED FIRST-EVER “HIGH INQUISITOR”

“This cannot end well.” Blaise dryly noted, as he snatched Pansy’s paper from her hands. She gave a squeal of protest and slapped at his shoulder, which he ignored with practiced ease. “I don’t care where you are, or who it is. Giving the government this much power over education is just asking for trouble.”

Draco snorted. “Wise words from the ancient and wise Blaise.” Said ancient and wise Slytherin ran the paper over Draco’s hair, making a few white-blonde strands stand up. The boy yelped and frantically smoothed at his hair as the article was passed to Harry.
“Educational Decree Number Twenty-two? That just sounds bad.” Harry practically growled at print, eyes narrowed to green slits. “And what’s this about being an ‘immediate success’? Utter rubbish.” He was silent for a moment as he read on. “All this to pull one over Dumbledore, then? Seems like a bit much.”

Shaking her head, Pansy snatched the article back. “More than that, I think. Dumbledore’s powerful, you know. And he’s saying stuff that Fudge doesn’t want to hear at all. I’m sure his brain - or what serves as one, anyway - has jumped right to the worst possible scenario.”

“Like what?” Blaise asked. “Starting a student-run revolution?”

Shrugging, Pansy flattened the Prophet out so that Umbridge’s picture smiled demurely up at the ceiling of the Great Hall. “Maybe. That would explain why he’s making sure we don’t learn any real defense.”

Fury bubbled up in Harry again, and he felt as though he could light the paper on fire with the intensity of it. “That-” The rest of it was little more than a growl. His table-mates gave him odd looks, but when he glanced over across the hall at the Gryffindors, he saw Hermione giving him a grave stare. He nodded jerkily at her, and she returned the gesture, something savage and bright behind her eyes.

Draco gave him an odd glance, but didn’t comment. “I’m just looking forward to her ‘evaluations’.” He drawled, eyeing the staff table. Many of the teacher’s expressions were rather pinched looking as they busied themselves with their breakfasts. In fact, the only ones immune seemed to be Dumbledore and Umbridge herself, who was giving a wide, smug smile to the hall. “Can you imagine what Professor McGonagall is going to do to her? Or, better yet, Snape.”

Despite his irritation at the man, (source still mostly unknown, especially since he wasn’t near so sore over the task anymore) Harry had to grin. The thought of the hideous pink toad under the professor’s best Death Glare - hopefully the one usually reserved for poor Neville, though he had improved lately - was deeply satisfying.

With that thought in mind, they finished up and made their way back down into the dungeons for Potions.

Unfortunately for them, Umbridge was not in attendance during the class, nor in any others for the rest of the week. Perhaps it was because he was disappointed at the lack of fireworks, but Harry couldn’t help the clawing mass of something almost like betrayal in his stomach during class.

For his part, Snape seemed to be content to leave Harry to his own devices. Most of the potions were simple for Harry - a few of him he’d done as early as last year, in fact - and so he didn’t really need supervision anyway. But they way he avoided him made Harry feel rather like a ticking time bomb. The comparison was not a comfortable one.

And when he realised he had Defense Against the Dark Arts next, the feeling got worse.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was filled with boring, repetitive note taking. Harry actually did the work. And didn’t even look up when Umbridge loomed over his shoulder. He had detention with her that night and for the next two nights. He didn’t feel like making it worse. The tension in the room was palpable as the only noises were scribbling quills and pages turning.

Harry felt like setting fire to something, just for something new to happen.

He paused in his writing momentarily as he heard Umbridge’s chair move. He glanced around the
classroom. Millicent was hunched over her desk, her rambunctiously curly hair was shielding her actions from view. Harry wondered if Millicent had started to wear her hair unbound for that very reason. He had a sneaking suspicion she wasn’t even doing work. Something about that made him angry.

He started writing again. Wondering how on earth the idea of “envisioning a safe, neutral state of mind” during combat was possible. He wrote it down anyway and underlined it. Umbridge was up and walking around the class again. She answered a few questions of her favourite students. Harry noticed a bunch of Death Eater children were among the group.

A sick feeling settled into his stomach. He wondered if under Umbridge’s pink layers the macabre Dark Mark was branded into his skin. He dismissed the thought with a silent snort. Even Voldemort wasn’t that stupid. He hunkered down over his notes and listened to Umbridge snap at Millicent and listened to the sound of Crabbe pushing back from his desk to go to the bathroom.

The full class felt longer than an hour and a half. Harry stood when the bell rang and he folded up his spare parchment and tucked his things away, following after Draco to go to Divination.

“Mr. Potter!”

Harry stopped and turned at her voice. “Yes, Professor Umbridge?”

“Don’t forget, detention tonight at seven o’clock. We need to make sure your punishment really sticks, don’t we?”

Harry managed a convincingly cheerful smile and sent it her way. “Absolutely, Professor.”

The look of irritation on her face over her inability to get a rise from him made Harry pleased. He slipped out of the classroom and broke from Draco and Pansy as they made their way to Arithmancy (Draco had taken it up after leaving Divination). He and Blaise headed up the stairs toward Divination. As they headed up the ladder Harry spotted the strange, whimsical girl from the train wandering the hallway. He wondered if she took the course, as it would no doubt suit her.

Harry threw himself down on a cushion and sighed as he pulled out his book. He couldn’t even remember what they had been studying. Some sort of thing involving dreams. Harry tended to make his up. He didn’t think anyone needed to be privy to his obscene subconscious. Millicent was talking softly to Nott as she walked into the class, but stopped when she sent a glare in Harry’s direction and sat down at his table, alone. Harry offered her a feeble smile. She looked nonplussed as she took a dimly lit seat near the back.

Five minutes into the class Harry zoned out.

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“Today we talked about the number three hundred and thirty-three. It was utterly fascinating.” Pansy nattered on as she took a bite of her casserole. “Did you know it’s common for people linked with magical properties and knowledge of foresight to wake up at 3:33 AM? We discussed it. I made a point of telling Professor Vector that according to Muggle religion there was power in the number 666 and we discussed the correlation between the two. Earned us twenty points.”

“You know...” Harry ventured as he pushed his salad around his plate and looked to Draco. “I never understood why you left Divination and then took Arithmancy. Aren’t they the same thing?”

“Not at all. Arithmancy is based in numerical value. While it can be used to predict the future in certain cases of certain numbers, it is a logical magic. Divination is blind guessing unless one is a
true, gifted Seer. With Arithmancy the knowledge is there, you just need to crack it.”

“Like a code?”

“Sort of. It’s more complicated than that. But that is the basic idea. It’s one of the reasons Arithmancy and Ancient Runes go hand in hand.”

Harry gave a faint nod and took a bite of his food. He had already forced down a full plate but his dish had refilled itself. He felt like if he ate anymore his stomach would explode but he was likely going to spend several long hours with Umbridge. He sighed and pushed the plate away.

“I should go for detention.”

The others nodded and Harry kissed Draco on the cheek before excusing himself and made his way toward Umbridge’s office. She was already there, sipping her tea and marking a stack of parchments when he walked in. She studied her clock.

“You’re fifteen minutes early, Mr. Potter. No matter.” She stood up as he sat down and set a stack of parchment and the Blood Quill in front of him. “Best start now.”

Harry resisted the urge to pick up the quill and jab it into her eye. Instead he picked it up, twirled it once between his fingers and began to write. He ignored the first flash of hot, white pain across the back of his tightly clenched hand and wrote.

I do not matter. I do not matter. I do not matter.

Blood, much more than before, slicked the back of his hand. It felt as if the quill was a knife and it was digging deeper into his skin. He felt the wounds on his hand with the pad of his thumb. The first day they seemed to heal quickly. Barely reddened at all. Now they were tacky with blood and deeper. They swelled at the edges and itched and stung.

There was definitely going to be a scar.

As he wrote line after line as quickly as he could and filled up sheet after sheet he tried to think of something else. He would start to lose the feeling of pain before a sharp jab of it would bring the aching throb back. Out the window he could see people zooming about the Quidditch pitch. It took a few glances but in the dimly setting sun Harry could make out the yellow and black. Hufflepuff. He scanned the sky when he could, looking for Cedric. Again it took a few tries but he finally found the Seeker doing lazy loops and spins. It seemed he hadn’t been lying when he said he could still fly. It made Harry joyful to know that Cedric had not lost that. Harry had no idea what he would do if he lost flying.

He wrote and snuck peeks until the sun disappeared and he lost his distraction. He kept writing. By that point his wrist was covered in slick and drying blood and it had soaked into his uniform shirt. Still, he kept writing. Tomorrow night would be the final detention with her. Then he would be free of this.

By the time Harry heard her clock mewl out midnight he had ruined a piece of parchment to keep his blood from the desk. It was amazing how much blood came after hours of writing. So little at first but it built up. She made her way to him and held out her hand for his. He showed her. She prodded at the marks on his hand and he clenched his teeth to keep from making pained noises.
“Very good. I think by the end our last night tomorrow it will have sunk in completely. You may go.”

Harry left. His hand felt five times too big and was pulsing with pain. When he got to the Common Room he saw Blaise playing chess with a third year.

“Heya. Lines again?”

“Yeah. Where’s Draco?”

“Up in the girl’s room with Pansy and Millicent. They’re working on Runes.”

“Thanks.” Harry headed up the girl’s section and stopped at the second landing from the top before poking his head in the room. The three of them were on Millicent’s bed, which had been doubled in size. Several curtains were closed as people slept. Harry made a face as he stepped over some girl’s under things.

“You’re finally back,” Pansy observed from her place flopped back on a pillow.

“I’m back.”

“What’s wrong?” Draco asked, looking up from his work. “You sound off.”

“S’nothing.”

“Well, come on and sit down. Tell mummy Pansy all about your mean old teacher.”

Harry levelled a gaze at the girl. “Call yourself that again and I won’t be responsible for my actions.” He made his way to the bed and sat down, his left hand shoved deep in his pocket.

“What’s with the hand, Potter?” Millicent asked, shifting her body so he had more space.

“Nothing. I’m just — Hey!” Harry fought with Pansy as she grabbed hold of his elbow and yanked his hand free.

“Harry!” Her face was pallid as she looked at his bloodied, scratched up hand. The cuts had already started to scab. “Who did this to you?”

Harry jerked his hand back. “No one, okay?”

Draco’s slim fingers wrapped about his hand and it throbbed strongly in response. “She’s using a Blood Quill, isn’t she?”

Pansy gasped. “You can’t use those on a student! That’s illegal! They banned it in ages ago.”

“Do you really think that cow gives a damn?” Millicent asked with an eye roll. “She’ll say its ‘Ministry approved’ and we’ll all get tossed out on our ear.” She took Harry’s arm and waved her wand with a quiet mutter doing away with the blood on his skin and clothes. “What a bitch. How dare she come up with such a message?”

Harry’s brows lifted at Millicent’s use of language. “It doesn’t matter, it’ll heal.”

“No it won’t, Harry. Blood Quill’s are cursed to leave residual magic in the skin. The scar never completely fades. It’s one of the reasons it was banned and branded as a Dark object.” Pansy’s face was grim and she stood.
“Well that explains why dittany and murtlap aren’t helping.” He watched as she crossed to her bed and knelt beside the chill chest she had given him for his thirteenth birthday and opened it. “What are you doing?”

Pansy pulled out a bottle of pumpkin juice before she moved back to Millicent’s bed and pressed it against the swollen skin of his hand. “There. You should tell Professor Snape, Harry.”

“And do what? Get him sacked? No thank you. You can’t tell anyone.”

Pansy looked like she was going to protest but nodded her head. She cast a concealment charm over the wounds so no one would notice them in the morning. “Fine. But if she does this to another student she’s going to get told on. And I won’t be quiet then.”

Harry gave a faint nod, knowing it was the best he was going to get. “Thanks, Pans. This goes for the other two of you as well.” He got two nods in return and nodded his head.

Not long after he and Draco headed to bed.

The next morning, Harry rose bright and early. The rest of the dorm was still dark and quiet, and so for a long moment he stared up at the canopy of his bed, gently tracing the still sore lines on his hand, ignoring the pain.

I do not matter.

Something about the words rang through him, vibrating some old, rusted part of him. It was like a skill he’d forgotten he could preform, but his muscles still remembered.

He shivered. Next to him, Ananta twitched at the movement and curled away from him, burrowing half under the blankets and half into the pillow.

The slight shift of the cloth surrounding him made the shadows cross and sway, and the effect made him somehow uncomfortable. Giving up on falling back asleep, Harry quietly slipped out of bed and gazed around the room. Only the sound of the heavy breaths of the dreaming broke the eerie silence, and Harry shrugged his shoulders, trying to shake off the surreal feeling that clung to him.

Finally he padded out the door and made his way into the Common Room. It too was empty and silent, other than the vague watery sounds from the windows to the lake. Harry was suddenly struck with a memory of the night he’d snuck out and ran into the Mirror of Erised. He’d had the same soft of eerie phantom shivers then.

Unlike then, Harry flopped down onto one of the ancient couches, staring at the embroidered snakes running along the surface. For some reason he’d felt like he could escape the dark atmosphere he’d been feeling by moving here, but instead it seemed to have followed him. Or rather, like it was attached to him, like a cloak, twisting around him and smothering-

His morbid musings were interrupted by a low creak, and Harry sat up, startled. Draco was making his way down the stairs, watching him with tired grey eyes. The blonde made his way over until he was pressed up against Harry’s left side. He grabbed the scarred hand and stared at it, studying the marks like he did a textbook.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Draco’s voice was equal parts cool disappointment and dull hurt.

Swallowing, Harry twisted his hand until it turned over in Draco’s hand, so that the palm faced up instead. “I couldn’t.”
“Oh?” Now his tone was sharp, and Harry was reminded of Narcissa.

After a moment, he shrugged. “It... I’m not...” He let out a low gust of breath as he tried to word it. The grey eyes watching him with laser focus didn’t help. “What were you going to do, anyway? No sense in going to you until there was a point to it.”

Those eyes narrowed at him. “Oh, so you only come to me when I have something you want?”

“That’s not what I said!” Harry snapped back in a fierce whisper, jerking away in a motion that was half flinch.

Draco held tight to his hand. “That’s what it sounded like to me. Since when have you hid things from me?”

Eyeing him with mixed guilt and irritation, Harry frowned. “Since always.” Draco frowned back, looking disbelieving. “Do you really think you know everything about the Dursleys? That I spilled out everything there was to say in a couple of hours back in our first year?” The frown took on and edge of thoughtfulness, and Draco opened his mouth, but Harry was riding on momentum of words he didn’t know he’d held back. “These aren’t the first scars I’ve gotten by the hands of someone who was supposed to be looking after me. Ever wonder about the burn on my back? Or the slice on my shoulder?”

A weak nod came from Draco, and that should have been enough. He’d made his point. But it wasn’t. “Or, hell, not even something as important as that. You didn’t know that I’d seen that mirror before getting to the Stone. Or what I saw- and probably still see - in it. You don’t know all that I hear when the dementors come near. You don’t know what I saw in that graveyard. So, tell me, since when?”

Draco said nothing for a long moment, staring down at the hand he was now gripping far too tightly. Harry barely felt the pain, too caught up in throwing these truths out into the air, letting the dark fester of them come into the light. Finally, the older boy threw the hand back into Harry’s lap, and ran his hands through his pale locks, letting out a slow burst of air. The breath he replaced it with was sharp and shaky, and Harry felt abruptly ashamed of himself.

Reaching his arm around, he gently pulled Draco towards him. At first the other boy didn’t move, resisting the touch, but finally he gave in and listed sideways until his head rested on Harry’s shoulder. He still made no noise, but as time passed the tension melted out of him until he was held up by the brunette beside him.

The cut hand ran through Draco’s hair, the motion of it soothing. Harry could feel the pain of it pulling the slices, but refused to halt the motion. Right now it felt like a penance.

Harry didn’t apologize. Draco didn’t ask. Instead they stayed like that until faint noises began to drift down to them from the dorms. Finally, the blonde slipped away, and other than some faint tension around his eyes, looked perfectly composed. “Hogsmede today.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed, standing up. For a moment he just stood there, biting his lip, before he shrugged his shoulders up and looked away. “Draco... it really doesn’t matter, okay? It’s stupid.”

Draco made a face like he disagreed with that, but instead just shrugged. “If you say so.” His voice was light and airy, and Harry hoped this would be the end of it. But he doubted it. “Now let’s get ready before Blaise and Nott monopolize the bathroom.”

Nodding vaguely, Harry helped Draco up and followed him up the stairs, idly tracing the lines on his
Harry huffed as he walked through the chilly, slightly damp streets of Hogsmeade. Draco was drifting about ahead, talking to Blaise about something. Harry wondered if Draco was upset about what had happened that morning. He tried to brush it off as he walked through the street, glancing in store windows as he passed them by. He kicked at a stone and watched as it bounced a few feet ahead of him.

Maybe he should have just stayed in bed.

“Harry!”

Harry blinked at a low whisper of his name and looked around for the source of it. “Hermione?”

“By the bushes!”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Hermione, I don’t know what you -- ack!” Harry’s thoughts were interrupted when a hand grabbed his arm and yanked him behind the clump of bushes.

He heard the footfalls of his friends as they rushed off, no doubt following his shocked cry. Before long they had all squeezed into the narrow gap between the gate leading toward the Post Office and the bushes.

“What did you do?” Draco asked, his voice low and bored. He examined his nails. “I’m not about to become accessories to a crime unless it’s well worth my time.”

“What?” Hermione’s brows met and she shook her head wildly. “No.” She lowered her voice. “This is about that group we were talking about.”

“Oh.” Harry absently picked at a scab on the back of his hand that was concealed with a decent charm. “Then what’s with the dramatics?”

“We may have... gotten a few people to meet us.”

Harry groaned and pressed a hand to his forehead. “Where?”

“That dive off near the Shrieking Shack.” Ron’s voice was softly proud. “No one ever goes there.”

“And you thought a group of kids going into a ne’er-do-well pub that no one frequents wouldn’t be suspicious?” Blaise scoffed and shook his head. “Brilliant.”

“How many people?” Harry asked, cutting into the chance of a fight between Ron and Blaise.

Hermione’s figure shrugged in the dim light. “A few.”

Harry was resisting the strong urge to strangulate himself with his scarf. “Alright. We’ll go. In small groups. Okay? Go ahead and tell them we’re coming. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

Hermione nodded and shuffled out from the bushes followed quickly by Ron and Neville. The four Slytherins remained slumped in the half-darkness.

“This is that Defense idea that Pans was telling me about, yeah?” Blaise asked, voice barely a whisper.
“Yeah. I hadn’t really decided one way or another…” Harry rubbed his hands over his face. “I guess with this High Inquisitor business Hermione doesn’t think we can afford to wait. I rather agree with that. Things are going downhill, and fast.”

“So you’re going to teach people Defense?” Pansy asked.

“Not sure. I’ll go to this gathering and see what happens. I mean it’ll probably be five people. I doubt many people care, and talking can’t hurt.”

“Right.” Blaise nodded. “Well Pansy and I will head over. See you there.”

Blaise and Pansy slipped out, leaving Harry and Draco in the silence. Neither of them said anything for a long moment.

“You should pull up your robe hood,” Draco finally said, breaking the tension, “that way people won’t know it’s you.”

Harry shuffled in place before pulling the hood over his head, making sure to pull it low enough to cover his scar. “What about you?”

“A Malfoy acting suspicious is pretty normal behaviour.”

Harry felt himself grin and he nodded a bit. “Alright, off with you, Mr. Moral Ambiguity.”

Draco slipped off and Harry boredly picked at the scabs on the back of his hand. It ached and itched but pulling at the scabs made him feel better. He headed out a few minutes after Draco toward their meeting place. Luckily no one paid him any mind and he slipped inside. He lowered his hood and walked past the bar, where the bartender looked at him for a long moment before turning away to wipe at a countertop. He had heard rumor of the place being a haven for more shady characters, but thankfully this early in the day it was empty.

Harry walked toward the room where he heard Hermione speaking softly and stopped short in the doorway.

There had to be at least twenty people.

He recognized some of them, almost of out reflexive habit his eyes settled on Cedric before sweeping away quickly. He spotted Ron’s sister and the twins as well as Seamus and Dean. There was a group of Hufflepuffs he didn’t know, a few younger year Gryffindors and a gaggle of Ravenclaw girls. He cleared his throat as he walked into the room and closed the door. He noticed some of the students nursing drinks and he thought that maybe Fire Whiskey was going to be needed to get through this whole ordeal before he pushed the thought aside.

He looked to Hermione for a moment, she nodded to him as she sat down on a bench and made a motion for him to speak. Harry shifted uncomfortably before he moved closer to the centre of the room.

“Hullo... Uhm...” He chewed on his lower lip a moment. “I don’t know what you’ve heard but this gathering is not a guarantee of anything, alright? I’m just here to talk.” A shift went through the room and he got a few nods from people before he kept going. “So... We’ve all been made painfully aware of the situation when it comes to Defense Against the Dark Arts, this year. So, Hermione brought up the idea of a group where we can practice real Defensive magic. She offered the teaching position to me, I’m highly skeptical I could do a decent job --”

“Stop it, Harry! You’re plenty talented. You competed in the Triwizard Tournament and I’ve heard
rumor you can cast a patronus and --"

Harry cut off Hermione’s ranting. “As I was saying.” He started up a bit louder when Hermione sent a glare his way. “But I’d be more than willing to give it a try. We could attempt something. However, I don’t want slackers and I can be rather brisk and seen as rude. If I don’t like your progress I will tell you so. And --”

“What makes you think you know what you’re doing? That you have any right to teach us anything?” A Hufflepuff near the back spat out.

“Because he fought You-Know-Who, you git. Now sit down and let him speak!” Ron’s voice was surprisingly hostile before he sat back down.

“No one else was there to confirm anything, and the Ministry says there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Because the Ministry is always so accurate,” Pansy snarked back, flipping her hair. “If you want to be a stupid sheep than by all means believe Fudge.”

“What did you just say to --”

“HEY!” Harry’s hands slowly unfurled when people looked toward him. “You.” He pointed to the Hufflepuff. “You’re skeptical. That’s good. But I didn’t come here to talk about that. I came here to see if there was interest in this idea of Hermione’s. So... If you don’t want to be here because of whatever reason, if you only came here to gossip or to leer at me, then you can leave right now. I’m not going to gloat or give into rumors or any of that filth. I’ve got things to do and if you waste my time I won’t be happy.” There was a grumble that went through the crowd but no one got up to leave. “So... We’re going to take a vote...” He shifted impatiently on his feet. “All those who wish to learn more about Defense or actually practice spells, raise your hand.”

Slowly people raised their hands, some shot their hands up quickly. Harry was actually a little shocked when before any of the Gryffindors or the Slytherins that Cedric’s hand thrust itself into the air. It hung alone for a few seconds before Hermione’s, then Ron’s and Neville’s joined it. Quickly followed by his Slytherin friends. The mouthy blonde Hufflepuff raised his hand and then a few Ravenclaw girls. Harry noticed the last of them to lift their hand was Cho Chang. Finally he nodded his head.

“Right then. We’ll need to come up with a schedule that doesn’t interrupt OWL training and Quidditch.” Someone in the group gave a ‘hear-hear’. “Maybe once a week?”

“Wednesday nights are good for us.” A Hufflepuff girl spoke up.

“Wednesday is bad for us.” A Ravenclaw boy said.

“What about Sundays?” Asked Hermione.

“Sundays is when we practice for Quidditch, Hermione,” Ron whispered loudly.

“Ron I think that defending our lives is a little more important than--”

“Mondays?” Pansy offered up.

There was a pause as people chatted between one another before Harry received several nods and nodded himself. “Right, Mondays, unless... We could move it around if needed.” Harry nodded again. “Right. Good. What about where to practice?”
Silence fell over the mixed group. A few ideas were tossed around but one after another they were shot down. They agreed to meet when they could and get a message out about a meeting place. Harry looked a little uneasy about word passing around but didn’t say anything.

“Well, I think the last thing is...” Hermione started, then paused before pulling a parchment and a pencil from her bag. “I think we should write down our names so we can message each other if needed...”

Millicent eyed Hermione for a long moment. “May I have the parchment?”

“Of course.”

Harry watched, amused at the looks the friendly action between the two got. Millicent inspected the parchment and waved her wand over it before she handed it back to Hermione. Hermione’s brows rose but she didn’t say anything more and stood to put the pencil and parchment on a table in the corner.

“Right, so... if you would please write your names down...”

No one moved for a long moment, looking hesitant before once more Cedric was the first to move. Ignoring the way Cho clutched at his sleeve before letting go. Harry watched the way people’s eyes tracked Cedric as he took his time to move across the room and picked up the pencil. He hunched over the table before standing and setting the pencil down. After he returned to his seat a more steady stream of people filled in the list.

After their names were down many people left. Harry watched Cho leave with her friends while Cedric lingered behind. Soon it was down to Harry, Draco, Blaise, Pansy, Millicent, Hermione, Ron, Neville and Cedric.

Harry took a seat and smiled when Millicent pressed a bottle of pumpkin juice into his hand. He took a long sip of it. “What’d you curse the parchment with?”

Millicent smirked a little and toyed with a curl of hair. “Something I invented. It’ll inflict pain on anyone who tries to reveal information to anyone’s name not on the list. Not to mention tie their tongue into knots for an hour after.”

“That was clever of you!” Hermione grinned down at the Slytherin before looking away as Neville said something.

Harry wanted to say something about the way Millicent preened under the praise but he also valued all of his teeth. He looked over to Cedric and stood. He crossed to where the Hufflepuff was rubbing his hand over his sore leg. Harry shot him a sympathetic look. Cedric made no complaint and stopped when Harry sat down across from him.

“I really don’t think you need my help.”

“Nonsense, Harry. We never stop learning. Besides, you’re my friend.”

Harry smiled a little and looked away. “Cho didn’t seem too happy at your enthusiasm.”

Cedric’s face pulled down. “We broke up.” He looked away from Harry. “Something about her parents being displeased about her dating someone with my so-called rebellious attitude and new outlook on life. It was the source of a lot of fighting over the summer. We broke up a few days before coming back. We’re still friends, though.” He scratched at the back of his neck. “I suppose I can’t complain too much; I’ve still got my health and my friends and I’m walking around. And I’m
thinking about asking Susan Bones out. She’s in your year.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen her around. She was here, right? With a blonde girl who was talking to Ginny.”

“That would be Hannah Abbot. She’s been tutoring students in Charms.” Cedric pulled himself up. “Well, I’d better get back. If I’m lucky when I get back I can use the Prefects bathroom.”

Harry laughed a little. “You aren’t a Prefect.”

“Head Boy. Means I get perks.”

Harry offered his arm as Cedric pulled himself up and balanced himself using Harry’s shoulder before he headed out of the room. Harry returned to his friends. In his absence Ron, Pansy and Blaise had left.

“We’d better head off.”

Hermione nodded. “Right. Neville and I should head off too, Prefect duty.”

Harry looked to Millicent a moment, wondering if she had to do the same. She offered him back a blank face. Harry shrugged at her.

Draco looked at him for a moment and Harry blinked at him. Draco rose a brow. “Want to go for a walk?”

Harry nodded his head. A walk sounded nice and uncomplicated. “I’d like that.”

They headed out of the Hogs Head after bidding farewell to the three remaining students.
Once out of the pub, Draco linked his arm through Harry’s and started at a brisk pace towards the Shrieking Shack. Apparently the Third Years had already had their fill of the ‘haunted’ house, and the area was deserted. Harry had a bad feeling about this.

“Feel like explaining yourself?” Draco asked, voice bland and dry. There was just a tinge of frustration below the surface of it, and Harry teased.

Rather than answer, he used their linked arms to drag Draco over so they were both leaning against the rickety fence, he blew out a cloud of steamy air and shrugged. “I dunno what you’re on about.”

Draco’s eyes were the colour of steel as they regarded him. “Maybe why you’ve been in such a mood lately?” The paused and then snorted. “Lately might be a tad off. Try this past year.”

Grinding his teeth in irritation, Harry purposefully avoided looking at him, instead focusing on the Shack. “You need to ask?”

“Obviously, or I wouldn’t be asking.” That was the drawl Draco normally saved for people he thought were idiots, and Harry bristled.

His head snapped back to Draco, frown slicing across his face. “In case you haven’t heard, there’s a psychopathic teacher who wants my head on a platter, the Ministry is trying to launch a smear campaign against me, and oh yeah, there’s a mass murderer who’d like to make an example out of my gruesome end. The year’s been peachy.”

A strange expression - half frustration, half sympathy - crossed over Draco’s features. “I know that. You think I’ve forgotten? It’s just...” He sighed and looked down at his shoes for a moment, before his gaze locked back onto Harry’s face. “You seem so much more... vicious; lately. Quicker to anger.”

Something about that made Harry’s stomach twist into uncomfortable knots, and he pushed the thought away before it could sink in. “Maybe I’m just not as inclined to bother pushing it back anymore.” He drawled. “Maybe I’m sick of holding back my temper and taking it all the time.”

Draco’s face twisted slightly, like he was biting the inside of his cheek. “I suppose. But it just feels like the things you’re reacting to are the ones that don’t matter, like Umbridge.”

In his pocket, Harry’s left hand spasmed slightly, before he clenched it into a tight fist. He felt like he could feel the outline of the words from the way the skin pulled. “Those things are the only ones I can react to. What am I supposed to do, give Voldemort a ring?” A small spark of heat came from Harry’s scar at the name, and he suppressed a shudder and ignored it. “Or maybe I’ll pop over to the Ministry and waltz into Fudge’s office. I’m sure that’d help.”

With a small tilt of his head, Draco acknowledged the point. “Fair enough. But it’s discomforting to see you so on edge. Once in awhile you come off more like a caged animal than a wizard.”

Snorting, Harry shrugged. “Yeah, well, sometimes I feel that way. Stuck in Hogwarts with Umbridge, while the world outside carries on without us and Voldemort doing Merlin knows what?”

Rather than reply verbally, Draco slid closer, lacing their fingers together. After a full minute of just staying pressed together, he murmured, “You get... frightening, when you act that way.”
Murmuring something soft and vaguely apologetic, Harry pressed a kiss to his temple. Draco twisted to meet his lips with his own, and soon pale fingers were running through Harry’s locks, and Harry’s arms were wrapped around Draco’s waist.

“Ugh!” A young voice interrupted. The two broke apart to see two boys staring at them. Both looked to be in their third year, and had Gryffindor scarves wrapped tightly around their throats. “Trust Slytherins to do something like this.”

Narrowing his eyes dangerously, Harry took a step forward. He felt Draco tense up warily behind him, but ignored him in favour of the rapidly growing heat in his chest. “Doing what, precisely?”

The boy who had spoken gave him a scornful look, apparently immune to the dangerous emotions coming off Harry. His friend, however, swallowed and took half a step back. “Queer stuff like that. S’not natural, you know? My Da’ says so, and he’s a priest.” The boy took a step forward, oblivious to the pained glance his friend shot him.

Bending over so he was at eye-level with the kid, Harry allowed a slow, vicious smile to spread across his face. The boy’s smirk started to fade, replaced with something nervous and twitchy, like a hunted rabbit. “I seem to remember some lines about witchcraft in the Bible.” While the Dursleys weren’t precisely religious, Vernon had certainly delighted in pointing out that fact when he could get away with it. Voice low and dark, he drawled, “Something about how they all deserve to die. If you’re that serious about it, perhaps you should ask your father to rectify that for you. Or, maybe you’d like me to do it.”

Eyes going wide, the boy took a step back, almost running into his friend. “You wouldn’t.” He said, but his voice quavered just a bit. Rather than reply, Harry slowly raised one eyebrow, expression not changing from it’s grin. Finally, the boy spun on his heel and grabbed the shoulder of his friend, dragging them both back down the path. The friend shot them one last glance, a mix of fright and apology, before they both disappeared around a bend.

Once he was sure they weren’t coming back, Harry straightened up and turned to face Draco, who was giving him a blank look. “What?”

“As strange as it is for me to say this, don’t you think that as a bit much?”

“Not really.” Harry replied, setting his shoulders stubbornly. “If he’s going to go around casting judgements like that, then he should be prepared to face the consequences.”

Draco let out a low sigh. “You just threatened the kid’s life over one comment.” He pointed out dryly. Something like guilt twinged in Harry’s guilt, but it was quickly drowned out. The dark haired boy shrugged, and Draco shook his head. “Fine.” The word was snapped out and he leaned back against the fence, frowning at the treeline.

Taking a step forward, Harry laced their hands together again. Draco didn’t fight it, but he didn’t seem terribly interested either. The smaller boy gave thought to going back to snogging, but the debacle had killed the mood. Instead he tugged lightly on the hand. “Want to go back now?”

“Alright.” Draco agreed, voice slightly distant, but he hooked his arm with Harry’s like normal.

They were silent the whole way back.

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Harry was pleasantly surprised when his detention was cut short by a summons via floo from Professor Snape. Professor Umbridge had tried to work around it but as Harry’s Head of House the
potion teacher still had sway. She sent Harry off with a bloody hand and a cheery smile.

Harry headed for the dungeons as quickly as possible. He wrapped his hand in cloth before shoving his hands into gloves. It was late October, wearing gloves in the potions room wouldn’t be seen as odd. He crossed into the room to find Snape standing by a desk over a cauldron, stirring slowly. Harry moved closer and peered into the copper cauldron curiously. He observed the smoke and watched Snape work.

“Calming Draught?”

Snape’s eyes levelled at him. “I thought having some around considering our previous encounter might have been a necessary precaution.”

Harry opened his mouth to reply. “About that, sir, I--”

“I think it best if we just move on, don’t you?”

Harry’s mouth snapped shut and he closed his mouth. “Why did you want to see me? And if it was because you wish to serve me tea, I’m leaving right now. After four years I think I know when to stop.”

Severus eyed Harry for a long moment. “Is there something else you’d prefer to drink?”

Harry’s mouth twisted into something that may have been a smile but gave up halfway through. “I’d just get a dry look if I asked for anything alcoholic so I think I’d be fine with pumpkin juice if you have any.”

“I never could get the taste of it...” Snape pointed his wand at another desk which, with a soft pop changed into a table and two chairs with drinks on them. “Strange as that may seem.”

“Not strange. I don’t like fizzy drinks.” Harry took a sip and watched Snape add sugar to his tea. It smelled like mint. “So, aside from assessing my mental state of being, is there another reason why I’m here?”

Snape pursed his lips before taking a sip of his tea. “I heard you were tutoring some students. Easu Isenberg’s work has risen considerably since he began studying with you. I wished to commend you on your work. And also to ask if you’ve given thought to your future occupation once you leave. It is necessary to think about such things when studying for OWLs.”

“I hadn’t given it any thought to be quite honest. My mind has been in a million different directions. Right now I’d like to focus on making it to my potential future occupation.”

Snape scoffed and shifted in his seat, his eyes drew down to Harry’s hands. “You’re wearing gloves but your sleeves are rolled up. That seems rather contradictory.”

“My hands get cold.”

“You’ve never complained of such before.”

Harry ground out a sigh. “Well, they are. So if we could move on in this topic of conversation that would be --”

“Take them off.”

“I... What? No,”
“If your hands are truly cold they you may return them back once I inspect them.”

Harry glowered at Snape but made no move to remove the gloves.

“I also find it interesting that the left glove is stained with what I can only assume to be blood while the right is not. So I can either assume you’ve been doing some very strange things in your pass time or someone has cursed you. Either way as your teacher it is my duty to examine such details and if you do not remove the gloves I will be forced to remove them for you.”

Harry thought about snarling and storming out but instead removed the gloves and flashed his hands quickly to Snape. He watched as Snape’s hand wrapped around his left wrist and tugged on his arm before inspecting his hand.

“Care of Delores Umbridge, I assume.”

“And her handy Blood Quill.”

“And you didn’t inform me of this for what reason?”

“She would have gotten you sacked. Besides, you made it quite clear that if I angered Umbridge I was to deal with the consequences.” Harry tugged his hand back. “So I will thank you kindly to leave it alone.”

“She had you carve untruthful, hurtful things into your own flesh. That is not something I can easily overlook.”

“It’s nothing I haven’t dealt with before.”

Snape’s mouth twisted unpleasantly and he opened his mouth to say something before heaving out a sigh. “I thought you trusted me more than this.”

“I didn’t tell you about my detentions and now you think I’m hiding things. This is because of you, did you know that? You’re the one who made it clear to me that I was over the line because she treated me like an other. You’re the one who insisted I go to detention with her. So thanks a bunch, Professor. I now have a daily, close reminder of how little this world thinks of me.”

“Harry, I did not expect you to --”

“You aren’t my parent! I can’t run to you every time there’s a problem. Nott and Crabbe and Goyle make it quite clear about their feelings that I have specialty lessons with you. That I’m the only one. People think I’m favoured. You should hear some of the things people say! The rumors!”

“Since when do you care what people think?”

“Since half of those people’s parents were in that graveyard last year and want me dead!” Harry slammed his good hand down on the table and sent his drink to the ground. The glass shattered hard on the stone. “Since three of them live in my dormitory and one of them... Well one of them I kind of blew off his father’s leg and I’m pretty sure he’d like to return the favour. Not to mention the rabble about the reason I’m here with you is because we’re in some kind of sordid relationship and that’s why I’m getting top marks in your class!”

Harry shoved back from his seat and pulled up his book bag. He looked at Snape who was watching him with the well placed cool, expressionless Slytherin mask. Harry stared at Snape hard for a long moment.
“I’ve shown you mine...” Harry’s eyes looked to Snape’s left arm. “It should only be fair you show me yours.”

Snape looked down at his left arm before he removed it from the table and pressed his hand against his forearm before curling his arm under the table. Harry snorted angrily before pulling away from the table.

“Figures.”

Harry stalked out of the room and made his way to the Common Room. He pushed past a few younger year students before throwing himself down on his bed and closing the curtains to the rest of the world.

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The rest of the weekend did nothing to improve Harry’s mood. However, mindful of the comments Draco had made, he did his best to push his temper back. From the odd glances his friends kept shooting him, Harry figured he hadn’t been terribly successful. Either that or he was being obvious about it, which amounted to the same thing in Slytherin.

As was becoming usual, the world found a way to make it worse.

The notice board in the Common Room was now half taken up by one large poster. The words By Order Of The High Inquisitor Of Hogwarts were visible from across the room. Giving a low groan, Draco buried his head in Harry’s shoulder. “Oh, Merlin. Unless that’s a suicide note, there’s no way this can end well.”

“Anyone ever tell you that you have a morbid sense of humor.” Blaise asked, tone conversational.

Draco shrugged but didn’t remove his head. “It may have come up one or twice.”

Pushing past them, Pansy snorted. “Come on, let’s see what the toad has to say.”

It was tricky to maneuver Draco down the stairs when he refused to look up, but they managed. “I dunno,” Harry responded once they reached the floor. “I was kind of hoping that if we ignored it it’ll just go away.”

A snort was his only answer as Pansy elbowed her way through the growing crowd, nearly smacking a Second Year in the head. “Out of the way, cretin. I’m a head taller than you. I win. Now scram.” Once she was in prime position, she looked up and read. And then let out a low hiss.

Groaning, Draco shook his head. “Tell me when it’s over.”

When Pansy turned around, her face was grave. “What is it?” Blaise asked, voice serious. At the new tone, Draco picked his head up.

Instead of answering, Pansy shook her head and ushered them back up the stairs into the girls’ dorm, where Millicent grunted at them in pseudo-greeting. She sat up quickly when she noticed their serious demeanor.

“Umbridge knows.” Pansy told them, voice dull, as she closed the door and set up a silencing charm.

Frowning, Millicent tilted her head. It made her look like an angry bear. “About Hermione’s defense group thing?”
With a sigh, Pansy flopped onto her bed. “Yeah. The notice banned all associations and the like from now on. If you want to have one, you have to get it cleared by our dear High Inquisitor.”

Draco sat down next to her, groaning. “Oh, brilliant. The Hog’s Head was a stupid idea. Now she’s going to be watching.”

“So what?” Harry snapped, arms crossed. “We knew it wasn’t going to be an official thing anyway.”

“Before she wouldn’t be able to punish us if she caught us.” Blaise pointed out darkly. “Now she might even be able to expel us, if it so pleases her.”

Giving a dry shrug, Harry responded, “Then we don’t get caught.”

That earned him a bland look from Draco. “I thought we’d finally gotten rid of those pesky Gryffindor traits.”

Snorting, Harry rolled his eyes. “Stuff it, love. She’d give us detentions and what not anyway. Now we just have added incentive to be subtle. Hopefully no one can turn on us, what with that lovely little spell of Millicent’s.” The girl gave an exaggerated bow at that, but she didn’t look near so pleased as when Hermione had complimented it. “There are tons of abandoned rooms in this castle. So long as we aren’t predictable, and smart about how people show up, I think we can manage to avoid getting caught.”

“Sure thing, Not-Professor Potter.” Pansy chuckled. Harry stole a pillow off of Greengrass’ bed and threw it at her. It missed. “Maybe you should go over Disillusionment and Notice-Me-Not Charms first. Just to be safe.”

The reminder that he was expected to have a plan made Harry jolt a bit, and he ducked his head. “Don’t you already do that for the Firsties?” Blaise pointed out.

Shaking his head, Harry shrugged. “No, I just go over what they’re going to do in Potions next. This is...” He shrugged. “Different, I guess.”

“Give the man a prize.” Millicent deadpanned. “Now if you’re finished being covert and dramatic, I’d like for you to please get the hell out.”

Saluting sarcastically, Draco got off the bed. “Yes, ma’am.” He sneered, and she just smirked back. Suddenly, Draco spun to look at Pansy. “Wait... you said ‘Associations and the like’. What does the ‘like’ entail, exactly?”

There pause a short pause as Pansy thought about it. “Uh...clubs, associations, groups, teams~”

Harry felt his stomach drop out. “You don’t think...?”

“You’d put it past her?” Draco snarled, eyes narrowed.

A low noise like a growl came from Millicent, and Harry looked up to see her gripping a pillow like she wanted to rip it in half. “You two better not be thinking Quidditch.” Her fingers sunk deeper into the fabric. “Potter. You had better hold your damn tongue in class next, you hear me?”

Narrowing his eyes, Harry bristled. Before he could respond, Blaise shook his head. “Nott’s on the team too, and he’s her little favourite. The teams probably fine, if only because she won’t want to piss him off.”
The logic of that relaxed them, and Harry flopped forward. “Best not to chance it, though. Don’t worry, I have no intention of setting her off, if that’s possible.” He glanced up, mouth twisted dryly. “Though I’m not the only one on the team she objects to.”

Millicent looked down her nose at him for a moment, eyebrows high, before rolling her eyes. “Whatever. Now will you please get the hell out?”

~*~

Breakfast was rather somber. Not many conversations were buzzing through the Great Hall. Harry pushed his food around his plate and listened to the few whispered conversations. He perked his ears up at the sound of Nott’s pretentious, slightly nasal voice.

“I managed to talk her into reinstating the Quidditch team. She said she wanted to observe us to make sure we were appropriate and gave us permission to practice today.”

Blaise leaned over the table, brows raised. “That was quick of you.”

“I was here last night when she posted the Decree while most people were at Hogsmeade, I visited her immediately.”

Millicent lowered her tea and turned to look at Nott. “Theodore, did you tell Savage? He is Captain.”

Nott made a dismissive wave with his hand but a few people down from him Savage nodded his head. Millicent looked pleased and returned to her omelet while Harry ducked down his head and took a quick bite of his bagel to keep himself from making a comment that would likely cost them the team. Draco offered up a wan smile but it slipped quickly.

“So what time are we practicing?”

“The pitch is booked for ten. Slytherins only with the exception of Inquisitor Umbridge.” With that Nott looked pointedly at Harry who stared back at him with widely innocent eyes as he took a long swallow of his orange juice. Nott’s eyes narrowed but he gave a sharp nod and turned back to his own breakfast.

The rest of breakfast passed without further conversation.

~*~

Harry laced up the his riding boots tightly, wrapping the laces about his booted calf and tugging them before tucking the excess away. He felt calmer than he had in weeks at the chance to fly. Something about being up in the air made him forget all his troubles. It grounded him. He flexed his hands and curled and uncurled them. He hadn’t had a chance to properly break in his new gear since getting it in third year.

Millicent was roaming through the wide selection of Beater’s bats for practice. She had five of her own but tended to keep them separate - one for each house and one for specialty games. She was checking the balance of each one before pulling one out and gave it a few lazy swings while Savage did the same with his choice.

Draco, Blaise and Adrian were lightly tossing a Quaffle around. They were checking to see how quick they could pass and how well they could react.

The six of them were waiting around for Nott.
After about fifteen minutes of killing time Nott strode into the room, fully dressed and with his Nimbus 2001 over his shoulder. He had a wide smile on his face. “Ready to play?”

Millicent hauled the ball trunk under one arm and grabbed her broom with the other. “I’m ready to crack some Bludgers.”

They made their way onto the pitch where Umbridge sat at a neatly conjured table just outside of the boundaries. On the pink tablecloth covered table sat a clipboard and quill, a pot of tea and some biscuits. They filed past her and her beady eyes tracked them while giving them a wide smile. Millicent dropped the trunk and opened it while everyone else took flight. With a look of glee she kicked at the trunk and released the Bludgers and the Snitch. Taking up the Quaffle she launched it up before kicking off the ground.

Draco dove for the Quaffle and grabbed it before Reverse Passing it to Blaise who snatched it and rose in altitude before diving quickly as a Bludger rocketed toward him. Millicent swerved around him and walloped the Bludger behind her toward Savage. Harry watched while doing a few lazy circles, eyes scanning for light off of the Snitch. Blaise shot towards the goal hoops and threw the Quaffle with all he had. Nott spun and kicked at the ball, catching it with the side of his foot and launching it back into play.

They went on like that for a good while. A few times Harry caught and released the Snitch. Once grabbing it mid Sloth Roll. Blaise and Draco had scored a few goals on Nott, but their newest choice for Keeper was good. Very good.

After about two hours Harry noticed Pansy had made her way into the stands along with Daphne Greengrass and Crabbe and Goyle. Umbridge had stopped writing and instead was watching them. Harry didn’t know if it was out of genuine interest or because she was looking for flaws, but he tried to push the thought out of his mind.

Just over an hour later Harry caught the Snitch and was about to release it when Savage called for them to touch down. Harry ached pleasantly, he was cold from the wind and his heart was pounding but he felt amazing. He stretched his arms over his head and sidled up close to Draco, touching at his boyfriend’s fingers with his own. Draco shot him a look before pressing back softly with his own fingers.

They trooped past Umbridge for the locker room as Pansy made cow eyes at Blaise and he tried his best to pretend she didn’t exist. They entered the locker room and locked up their brooms before stripping down, tossing their sweaty robes down for the House Elves before they went to the showers. Savage talked strategy while Adrian praised Draco on a particularly difficult goal. Harry let the hot water seep in and closed his eyes. Somehow it felt like normal.

Harry had just gotten his pants and undershirt on when Umbridge walked into the locker room. Something about her presence made him want to screech like a girl and cover himself up but he was quickly sidetracked when Draco walked by. His trousers low slung on his hips, still unbuckled and shirtless. He tracked the blonde for a long moment before pulling his uniform shirt over his head.

“You’re not allowed in here,” Savage drawled. He was sitting down the bench from Harry lacing up his trainers.

“I have permission to observe the team for flaws and indecency. It is my duty to uphold the moral fibre of this school.”

Blaise’s brow winged up but he shrugged as he tugged on his socks and boots. “Alright, if it’ll make you feel at ease.”
“Thank you, Mr. Zabini.” Umbridge offered him a small smile and consulted her clipboard. “Well so far everything seems to be in order. No underage players, playing by Ministry approved rules and guidelines, well upheld uniforms... Your changing area seems to be in well maintained condition...” She took a few steps about. “All appropriate health and safety features are maintained and--”

Umbridge’s observations were cut off as Millicent strode out of the shower room. Her hair was slicked back from her face, still slightly dripping over her bare shoulders from it’s high ponytail. She had dressed partially in the adjoining room and put on her skirt and under tights but was topless. She was whistling jauntily as she towelled off her shoulders and arms and made her way toward her cubicle where she pulled out her deodorant and applied it to her underarms before pausing when she caught Umbridge staring.

“May I help you, Professor Umbridge?”

Umbridge sputtered as Millicent calmly finished applying her deodorant and pulled on her bra, camisole and blouse. “Don’t... Shouldn’t you be in the women’s changing room?”

Millicent offered up a shrug as she dried her hair with a flick of her wand and pinned it back smoothly. “Slytherin doesn’t have one.” She carefully knotted her tie. “I’m the first girl on the team in nearly a century. Besides do you really think I care what they think of me?” Millicent waved her hand toward the boys. Harry, Draco and Blaise were all trying hard not to grin. “Blaise is completely into Pansy, Potter and Draco are poufs, Nott would rather join the Hufflepuffs than look at me sideways, doesn’t matter he’s missing out, and Savage tried once, punched him in the nose and that was the end of that. I think Adrian is too intimidated to try anything, that or I’m not his type. Doesn’t matter he’s too skinny for me anyway.” She paused in her tirade to slip on her socks and shoes. “Respectfully, Professor, it would be unwise to have a secondary locker room for only one person. The boys respect my privacy, they don’t stare and they don’t leer at me.” She shrugged on her robes. “Now if you’ll excuse me I have a History of Magic essay to finish.”

Umbridge’s eyebrows pinched together and she had an unpleasant look on her face. Like she had eaten something disgusting. “Before you leave, Ms. Bulstrode may ask you a few questions?”

Millicent nodded her head and paused near the door. “Of course, Professor Umbridge.”

“Very good. How long have you been on the team?”

“Three years, Professor Umbridge.”

“And for these three years the staff at this school found it within respectability for a young woman such as yourself to reveal her body to young men?”

“In a bathing and changing capacity, yes. It was purely done out of space and time saving reasons. If more than one girl joined the team I’m sure Professor Snape and Headmaster Dumbledore would see fit to reopen the female locker room. However, as I was asked before I was added to the roster if joining an all male team and sharing private space with them would be an issue and I of my own free volition said no, I see no problem with it. Furthermore I’ve been approached several times about being asked if I wish for my own space and I have refused. So I see no problem with us sharing the space as all good intention has been done and taken to make me feel comfortable and at ease.”

Umbridge made a strange throaty noise but nodded her head. She turned away from Millicent who slipped out of the locker room without another word. Harry had finished dressing while Umbridge had talked with Millicent and he and Draco were getting ready to leave. Her sharp eyes made Harry lower himself back down on the bench.

“Well...” She threw her shoulders back. “I think I’d like to talk to Mr. Savage and Mr. Nott alone,
the three of you may leave.”

They beat a hasty track out of the locker room and back to their Common Room. Harry flopped down on one of the couches. He was glad that he hadn’t been called on but felt sorry for Millicent. Draco sat down next to him and curled in on him. Harry was bothered for a moment and debated pushing him off before he pulled Draco closer in spite of himself.

His good mood had turned sour.

~*~

Harry had almost made it out of the Great Hall after lunch when a shadow fell over him, and an arm was suddenly wrapped around his shoulders. He jumped what felt like a mile and took a step closer to Draco, who was scowling at whoever was clinging to him.

With a bit of twisting, Harry was able to see red hair and a wide, wooden smile. “‘Lo, Ron.” Harry greeted dryly, ignoring the way his skin prickled uncomfortably where the other boy touched him. He wasn’t used to a lot of physical contact outside of Draco and Pansy.

“Harry! Old buddy. Old pal. It’s been awhile since we’ve talked. Want to talk with us? Great! They can come too. Let’s go.” Without waiting for his response, he used his bulk to push Harry out the main doors and down the hall. Harry couldn’t see his friends, but he could hear Hermione groaning at the display and Draco’s snickering. He blindly flicked off his boyfriend, whose snickers only increased.

He let Ron drag him for a little while before twisting out of the larger boy’s grasp, rubbing his neck like it was sore. Ron just rolled his eyes - he was no doubt used to such bullshitting from his brothers.

“Oh, what’s going on? I’m guessing it something to do with the defense club, given how utterly subtle you’re being.”

Hermione gave a huff. “I believe the discussion can wait until we’re somewhere more private?” Giving a shrug, Harry let her pass to lead the way, trying not to snicker at the way Pansy made a show of looking around the empty hall.

Two floors later, they found themselves in an unused classroom. It took a few charms before the room was habitable and to set up the chairs and stools abandoned there to talk. Neville pulled out a familiar piece of paper, which was immediately snatched up by Hermione, her brown eyes practically glowing with enthusiasm. The small boy gave a little eye-roll at the rude action, but smiled fondly after.

“Okay,” Hermione said, eyes darting over the paper. “We ended up with quite a few people, didn’t we? Which is wonderful - the more people we can teach, the more people will be safe once they leave Hogwarts. But it does raise of few questions - a group this size will certainly draw attention.”

Shrugging, Draco leaned back into his chair and clasped his hands together.

“Communication will also be an issue. Talking about times and meeting places will be difficult with other houses. Or even without houses, in some cases.”

A snort came from Blaise. “Too right. Little rodents like Nott would be all too pleased to turn us all in to dear Professor Umbridge.”

Looking some strange mixture of proud and irritated, Ron motioned to Hermione. “She’s got something she’s working on for that one. Bulstrode’s been helping her with it, actually.”

Smiling a bit, Hermione nodded. “She’s been a wonderful help. I’d still be searching for an answer if
not for her.” The Slytherins traded a glance. Millicent? *Helpful?* “That will probably be ready by the first time we meet. I don’t want to say anything until I’m sure it’ll work, though.” She got a round of shrugs for that, and nodded like she was mentally checking off a list of things to discuss.

Waving a hand at their surroundings, Harry raised an eyebrow. “What about rooms like this? Hogwarts probably has dozens of rooms it doesn’t use for one reason or another. We can just keep switching, like we are with the schedule.”

“It’d be harder for anyone to track us that way.” Draco agreed. “Since whoever would be watching us couldn’t stake out a room and wait.”

Hermione made a face. “That complicates things a bit. The method I was thinking of wouldn’t be ideal for that. Anyone have another idea?”

There was a chorus of shrugs and ‘no’s, and she nodded like she’d expected as much. “Alright. Unless we find some place more suited, I suppose we don’t really have a choice, do we? Millicent and I can work it out.” She paused. “Anything else?”

“What are we going to call our group?” Pansy asked. “If we need to talk to each other about it, it’d be suicide to call it ‘that defense group thing’ or some rot like that.”

Silence ruled as they mused over that. “Well, something that stands for something else’d be nice. Like S.P.E.W.” Ron gave Hermione a dry look. She turned her nose up in return. “But something that sounds better.”

Neville raised his hand a bit, like he was in class, before dropping it with a bit of a blush. “Well, I don’t know if it’s really a wise idea, but…” He paused, and then shrugged. “I mean, a lot of this is about getting back at Umbridge, right? About being more active in learning defense. So, something aggressive? Like, I don’t know, BLAST.”

“Not a bad place to start.” Blaise said, looking like he couldn’t believe he was agreeing with a Gryffindor. “How about... W.A.N.D? Wizarding... Attack And Defense?”

Hermione opened her mouth, but was beat to the punch by Pansy, who pushed his shoulder so hard he nearly fell off his stool. “We are *not* using ‘n’ for and. Ever. That’s awful.”

Rubbing his arm, Blaise scowled. “It was just an idea. No need to be violent about it.”

“Using a weapon might be a good idea. Since if we’re asked, we can say we’re talking about the actual object. How about... S.W.O.R.D. Society for Wizarding... Offensive Rebellion and Defense?”

Draco suggested.

Pansy crinkled her nose. “Offensive? It sounds like our rebellion centers around insulting people. Which I would be all for, mind, but that’s not really the point.”

There was another moment of silence before Harry tilted his head. “How about... Society for Wizarding Opposition Revolution and Defense. Basically the same thing.”

“I. Kinda like that.” Ron said. “Especially the revolution part.” His grin went a tad vicious. There was a series of agreements from around the room. Hermione grabbed the paper and wrote ‘SWORD’ at the top with a flourish.

“Wonderful. I suppose we’ll have everyone meet here on Monday, and then start looking for another room we can use. Agreed?” Another chorus, and she gave the paper to Neville to put away. “We’ll see you then.”
And they all made their way towards their respective classes, Harry realized with a jolt that he felt better than he had in a while.

This was going to be *fun*. 
A little over a week later they managed to cram everyone in three hours before curfew during free time, lock the doors and silence them. Harry had been extra careful and had brought his cloak and the Marauder's Map with him just in case. Furthermore, for his own aid, Harry had brought Ananta with him.

He had thought of a few basic lesson plans and thought that perhaps the best place to start would be with basic stunning and disarming spells. He knew that some people already knew them, most notably his friends but he couldn’t speak for everyone.

He was going over the basic refinement of ‘stupefy’ when a soft voice spoke from near the back of the classroom. “Can you really cast a patronus charm?”

Harry’s mouth snapped shut and he looked for the voice. The dreamy eyed blonde girl from the train was looking toward him with a lazy sort of smile. He blinked at her. “I... Yes. I can. I don’t think people are quite ready for that charm yet.”

Cedric grinned brightly. “That’s brilliant, Harry! I didn’t know you could do that. Can we see?”

Harry shifted in place. He didn’t like being put on the spot. He stroked down the side of his wand with his thumb. “I dunno... I mean... I’ve only done it a few times and....”

“Then you can’t do it then.” The blonde boy with the mouth, whom Harry learned was called Zacharias Smith said.

Harry bristled and his hand tightened around his wand. “I can. I didn’t call you all here to show off. I called you hear to refine your techniques.”

Hermione nodded her head vehemently. “That’s right. And when we get to the patronus charm I’m sure Harry will provide adequate evidence of his patronus. There’s no need to put him on the spot.” She looked back at him. “Now go on.”

“C’mon, Potter. Prove it!”

“Zacharias, stop being such a prat.”

“Cedric, he’s just boasting.”

“Look, if I cast the damn patronus will you shut your gob?” Harry asked, looking to the Hufflepuff. He received a nod. “Well... Fine...”

Harry forced out a breath and closed his eyes. He took in a few deep, slow breaths as he focused his mind. He thought about he and Draco in their room on his birthday. He felt his body relax and flourished his wand. “Expecto Patronum.”

Silence fell over the group as the silvery mist shot from his wand and worked itself into the shape of a hyena and trotted about the room. She made her way up and down the ranks of people before walking over to Draco and sitting down an staring him expectantly. He stared back at it for a long moment before she pressed her misty head against his leg. He gawked for a moment before ‘petting’
the hyena.

“Blimey and it’s full bodied,” Harry heard possibly-Fred say and he grinned a little.

He let the hyena hang about for a moment before slowly letting the thought and grasp on the spell fade from him. He felt slightly detached for a long moment before gathering himself.

Harry nodded once. “Right. The spell we’re going to try is called ‘stupefy’. It will knock your opponent unconscious. Are there any volunteers to try it?” Hermione’s hand shot up and Harry rolled his eyes. “Anyone other than Hermione?”

A boy in Gryffindor robes rose his hand. Harry faintly recognized him as the boy obsessed with his camera. “Yes, you?”

“Colin Creevy, uh... Sir.”

“Right, Colin, and for Merlin’s sake call me Harry, you’re going to throw a stun at me. I promise not to block it. Okay?”

Colin nodded his head and swallowed thickly. “Okay.”

Harry nodded and rose his wand. “Alright, when you’re ready.”

Colin nodded again and took a few deep breaths. He looked very nervous and sweaty. He gripped his wand tightly and waved it at Harry. “Stupefy!”

A weak red jet of light shot from Colin’s wand but fizzled out before reaching Harry. Harry gave a small smile. “Good try. Next?”

Zacharias stepped into Colin’s place and rose his wand. Harry nodded at him. “Stupefy!”

Harry wavered on his feet hard when he was hit but didn’t go down completely. He nodded his head in approval. The Hufflepuff boy looked pleased. Harry watched as Millicent slid into his place and rolled his eyes.

“I know you can do this spell.”

“But they don’t. Now shut up and let me stun you.”

Harry snorted and nodded in her direction. “Give me your best shot.”

Millicent drew herself up and closed her eyes before taking a single step forward and slashing her wand down, as if throwing the spell out of the tip of it. “Stupefy!”

Harry went down with a hard thud. Millicent smiled smugly.

Hermione fell to her knees beside Harry and jabbed him in the chest with her wand. “Ennervate.”

Harry sat up groggily and righted his glasses. He stood up slowly when Draco offered a hand. “Right. Excellent. Now, I’d like you all to pick a partner and practice on each other.”

After about an hour, Harry called an end to their practicing. Some people had caught on right off the bat and some were still struggling but overall he was pleased. They had little under an hour left before curfew and he didn’t want to push it.

“Right, one final demonstration and then we’ll go.”
Blaise bounced up and down in place. “Can I get stunned?”

Harry peered at him, bemused, for a long moment. “If you’d like.”

Blaise grinned widely and the students parted toward the far wall to avoid getting hit. Harry licked his lips and looked at Blaise who smirked at him and took on a defensive stance. Harry shook his head in amusement before raising his wand.

“Stupefy!”

Blaise didn’t even react, he made a dismissive motion with his wand and blocked the spell before firing one back. Harry grinned wider and blocked the stun. With a quiet mutter he sent ‘impedamenta’ towards Blaise who dodged it and fired back. Harry had forgotten how much he loved duelling and ramped up his game before firing off another spell.

Blaise ducked and shot back up. “Flipendo!”

Harry shot up a quick shield charm before pivoting in place. “Expelliarmus!” He fired off the spell and watched as Blaise’s wand flew from his hand and landed a few feet away from him on the floor. Panting with a wide smile, Harry nodded in satisfaction to Blaise. “Good job.”

“Harry...”

Harry turned his attention to Ron and cocked his head to the side. “Yeah?”

“Since when do you cast in Parseltongue?”

Harry rubbed at the back of his head sheepishly. “It just happens sometimes. Ananta definitely helps with that.”

“Ana-what now?” Smith asked, looking genuinely curious.

“Ananta,” Harry repeated. “My snake.” Curious by the mentions of his name the Oroboros poked his head out from the opening to the bag Snape had given him and coiled his onto the floor.

A few members flinched at the sight, but Zacharias grinned. “Cool.” He crouched down as the snake slithered interestedly toward the movement. “Oroboros, right?”

“Yeah. He’s a bit too big to fit round my arm now.” Harry laughed a little. The snake was just under eight feet. “But if I need him he coils about my stomach and chest and my wand arm.”

“Have you ever taken him hunting?”

Harry shook his head. “Spoiled thing.”

“My uncle raises snakes, you know? For potions and stuff. All kinds of animals. You should let him into the Forest one day. I bet he’d love it.”

Harry hummed under his breath and nodded his head. With a sharp command the snake swivelled around and coiled lazily about his feet before making his way back into the heated compartment of his bag.

“I think that’s it for tonight. Be on the look out for the next meeting.”

Slowly people made their way out of the classroom in House sorted groups and short bursts. Harry watched and waved as Hermione, Ron and Neville exited after the last group of Hufflepuffs. Pansy
was hanging off Blaise’s arm nattering away as he practically dragged her from the room. Millicent trailed after them disinterestedly, heading in the opposite direction.

Harry turned to gather his things and paused at the sight of Draco perched on one of the desks. He rose a brow. “Yes?”

Draco smiled slowly as he slid off the desk and walked toward Harry and draped his arms on either shoulder. “Well, well, Professor Potter, finally alone, I see.”

Harry’s hands reflexively settled on Draco’s hips. “Not really a--” Harry’s words were cut short when Draco’s mouth pressed against his and his hands tightened their grip. He drew back after a long moment. “Mm... Fifteen points to Slytherin.”

Draco laughed weakly before threading his fingers into Harry’s hair and pulled him up for a second kiss. When he pulled away he nipped at Harry’s lower lip before licking at it in apology. “Maybe we should move back to Common Room.”

“Sitting would be beneficial.”

Draco smirked a little pressing a chaste kiss to the side of Harry’s mouth before gathering their things and threaded his fingers with Harry’s. “Come on.”

~*~

The corridor was silent.

He was walking down it. Other than a few, pale, flickering lights, it was dark.

It seemed to go on forever, coming together to a point in the distance. But... no...

A door.

Solid and dark and foreboding. Would it...?

It swung open on it’s own. Inviting. He went through it.


This one is right.

His heart beats harder in his chest, the feel of it pumping through him.

This was important. This was the most important.

He moves forward, and it too opens to welcome him.

Lights. Thousands, shimmering, white.

It’s here.

It has to be here.

But not these.

The room is large, but it doesn’t matter. He knows exactly where to go. Number ninety-seven. He moved ahead, watching the numbers rise.
Almost...

Almost...

There was a sudden jerk, and Harry was flung into the waking world. He groaned, feeling vaguely ill and off balance. When he finally picked his head up, the blurry form of Draco was sitting comfortably on the end of the bed, where he’d landed hard enough to send Harry into the air for a moment. Judging by the slash of pink on the pale shade that was his face, the blonde was smirking.

The mild grunt he gave when Harry kicked him was incredibly satisfying.

“Prat,” He grumbled, glaring fiercely. Irritation rose up in him, sudden and strong, and he snatched up his glasses with more force than was strictly necessary. He’d been so close. To what, he had no idea, but the longing was giving way to anger. “You couldn’t have woken me up like a decent human being?”

From the other side of the room, he could hear Blaise chuckle. “Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed.”

“Correction,” He grumbled, sitting up and rubbing at his even messier than normal hair. “I woke up in the air.” Blaise just snorted, and Harry rolled his eyes. He though he heard Nott murmur something like ‘Drama Queen’, but couldn’t see where he was through the jungle of bed curtains, and thus couldn’t figure out where to throw his pillow.

Shrugging and not looking contrite in the least. “Well, sorry. It’s not like you’ve never done it to me before.”

There was truth in that, but Harry couldn’t be bothered to explore it. Instead he pushed Draco with his foot until the boy got off his bed. “Fine. Sure.”

Grey eyes regarded him coolly. “You’re just going to be a ray of sunshine today, aren’t you.”

Scowling slightly, Harry shrugged. “That depends. What day is it?”

“Thursday.”

With a groan, Harry flopped back onto his pillow. Thursday was Defense Against the Dark Arts and Care of Magical Creatures. “Oh yeah. I’ll be just brilliant today.”

He got a dry look and a shrug. “When you feel like being pleasant, I’ll be in the Great Hall.”

Draco disappeared from his line of vision and out the door, shortly followed by Nott and his entourage. After a couple of seconds, Blaise popped his head into Harry’s bed. “What’s got you so worked up?”

Letting out a low sigh, Harry shrugged. “I... it’s stupid. I was just dreaming, but...” He trailed off, making a vague motion with his hand that was supposed to encompass how much it had meant at the time.

Apparently it hadn’t come across, but Blaise waggled his eyebrows and gave him a wry grin. “Oh, dreaming, eh?”

A pillow to the face felt like a good response to that. If nothing else, Blaise’s face once it bounced off cheered him up a bit.
“Shall I leave you alone then?”

“That’d be a good idea, yeah. Tell Draco I’m sorry?” He really didn’t feel sorry, but Draco would be pissed all day if he didn’t at least say it.

Blaise shrugged. “Sure. But he’ll want to hear it from you too.”

“Yeah, but at least he’ll be a little more open to it if you do it first.”

The dark-haired boy laughed and tossed Harry’s pillow back. “We did make a proper Slytherin out of you, didn’t we?”

Snorting, Harry flipped the covers over, careful not to disturb Ananta. “Oh, shove it.”

Still chuckling, Blaise slipped out, leaving Harry alone to deal with his emotions.

~*~

Harry was grateful that Thursday had passed into Friday with little trouble. He had kept to his best, most Gryffindor-like behaviour while in Defense. Which he thought may have pained him deep down inside. Still, it kept them off the radar for the upcoming Quidditch match against Gryffindor, kept him out of detention and kept the lumpy toad smiling.

Harry picked disinterestedly at his lunch, chewing on a few pieces of salad with boredom. Things lately seemed so monotonous. He knew he was angry all the time, but he figured it was normal, and unlike his fellow Slytherins he just couldn’t mask it as well. He frowned down at his plate as if it had offended him and stabbed at a radish with brute force.

He was also nurturing the idea of writing Sirius. He wasn’t sure why, exactly, but the idea of writing the letter made him feel better. He had no idea what he would say, but he thought that an exchange between the two of them might perk them both up. Maybe knowing something about Voldemort’s movements would put him more at ease and calm his restless nerves.

He watched people through the Hall before noticing Umbridge was gone from her usual spot. And so was Dumbledore. Harry’s brows drew together and he nudged Draco before nodding toward the Head Table. Draco’s expression mimicked Harry’s for a long moment before he gave a shrug.

“Want to go for a walk after lunch?” Harry wanted out of the castle for a while.

“Sure. I’m done with my Potions essay.”

Harry gave a weak, thin smile before resuming his sparse eating.

As they slipped out of the castle Harry sucked in the cool November air. The grounds smelled like dead leaves and chill. It was strangely comforting. He and Draco walked for a while in silence, either unsure of what to say or actually too comfortable to break the silence. Harry mused on the idea of telling Draco about his dream before he dismissed the thought as quickly as it had come into his head. He wasn’t twelve any longer. He didn’t need to cuddle with Draco to rid himself of nightmares.

“Is that smoke coming from Hagrid’s?” Draco’s voice finally said into the chill.

Harry looked toward Hagrid’s. Smoke was indeed rising from his chimney. Harry’s brows shot up in
surprise before he took off down the hill, followed quickly by Draco. They stumbled toward the hut and paused at the sight of Hermione, Ron and Neville crouched by a window, listening intently. Harry and Draco made their way over to them.

Inside the hut Harry could hear Umbridge talking to Hagrid. Her voice was shrill but he didn’t want to focus in on her words. Instead he gestured to the three Gryffindors and the four of them had a quick, silent, motion-filled conversation to fill in the gaps. Hagrid had returned not long before. Umbridge was questioning him about where he had been. Dumbledore hadn’t been seen all day.

The five of them stiffened when they heard Umbridge’s footfalls on the floor of Hagrid’s hut and the door swung open. They huddled behind the wooden house as quickly as they could. Hermione cautiously peered around the corner before stepping out.

“She’s gone, come on.”

They knocked on the door and Hagrid answered. Harry grimaced. He looked awful. A slab of meat was slapped over his right eye and cheek and his clothes looked frayed. He opened his mouth but shut it as they were all ushered inside. Once they had sat down all the questions burst out of them in a jumbled, noisy mess.

Hagrid silenced them all with a wave of his great hands and shifted in his seat, discomforted. “I was on a special mission for Professor Dumbledore,” he informed them in a low voice.”

“Doing what, exactly?” Hermione asked tartly, her mouth pinched together. She looked incredibly displeased.

“Gather information, get out the message. See if anyone was up to join the cause.”

Ron’s brows moved rather acrobatically as he processed the information. “And?”

“And I wasn’t the only one recruiting.”

Harry scowled. “Death Eaters.”

Hagrid nodded grimly.

“They did this to you?” Hermione asked, her mouth hanging open.

“No. They luckily never saw me. I was with the giants. Managed to get the message through but... well... I came home with more than a few souvenirs.”

Draco gave a rollicking snort. “No joke. What did Umbridge want?”

“To find out why I’d been gone. She didn’t get anything from me. What’s she up to, anyway?”

They filled Hagrid in on all he had missed. When they’d finished, he gave a low grunt, eyes glimmering darkly. “Knew she was bad news, but this isn’t going to end well.” The kids murmured their agreement as Hagrid moved to put the kettle on his stove. The half-giant glanced at the clock. “Don’ you lot have class?”

Hermione craned her neck to check the time and gave a little hiss. “Oh, no. We need to go now or we’ll be late to Potions.”

Pansy shrugged. “Not that I want to get on Professor Snape’s bad side, I don’t think it’s quite worth that expression.”
“To you, maybe.” Neville murmured darkly. “He’s still rotten to us Gryffindors.” Before any of the Slytherins could respond, Hermione was ushering them out the door and giving their goodbyes to Hagrid.

“Is she always like this?” Draco asked sotto voce, watching her bustle about the group.

“Nah,” Responded Ron. “Normally she’s worse.”

~*~

The morning next came with the promise of the Slytherin versus Gryffindor Quidditch match. It was bright and sunny, if a bit chilly. Harry had successfully buried his angry, confusing emotions down and locked them up. Today was about freedom and flying. Today Harry would have no worries at all. Nothing to think about except catching the snitch and celebrating with a butterbeer.

Harry ate well and took his time in showering before joining the rest of the team in the locker room. Blaise, Savage and Adrian Pucey were already in their robes and Millicent was milling about in the pants that came with her robes and her undershirt doing stretches. Draco was lounging about while still in his normal robes. Nott was dressing when Harry walked in.

Harry crossed to his cubicle and pulled off his long sleeved shirt and robes while he toed off his shoes. He shimmied out of his pants while leaving on his boxers and an A-shirt. He pulled on his under robes and his pants and fastened them all on while Draco finally started to change. Pulling on the green over robes Harry fastened them happily before pulling down the rest of his gear and slipping it on.

While they warmed up and finished getting ready Savage ran through some plays and did a quick pep talk. Harry listened, all the while feeling strangely nostalgic for Flint’s out-for-blood attitude. While Flint didn’t encourage fouls, he tended to be rather open ended with his suggestions. Savage, on the other hand, seemed to have no issue with boredly reminding them that blurring is against the rules in a tone of voice that sounded like a mixture of Millicent and Hermione.

They usually didn’t listen anyway.

Quidditch was boring without fouls. Who didn’t love a good cobbing every now and then, anyway?

With Savage’s tirade over they hydrated themselves and gathered their brooms. Harry snapped on his goggles and waited for his eyes to adjust before they headed out onto the pitch. The crowd was roaring and a mess of gold-and-scarlet and green-and-silver. Somewhere in the din Harry heard Lee Jordan calling out over the screams. As they kicked off the ground Harry circled around the pitch once, looking at the people, he took in the first full sight of Ron in his Keeper robes. He noticed a student in a great, slithering green and silver serpent hat. He paused in flight to stare down at it. A small speck amidst Gryffindor colours and neutral Ravenclaw colours. It was the strange Luna Lovegood girl.

Harry finished his lap when Madame Hooch stepped onto the field. Both captains of the team shook hands before kicking off the ground and the Bludgers zoomed into the air. Millicent’s eyes tracked on for a long moment with a sinister smile and then the Snitch glinted into the sky before the Quaffle was released.

It only took a second for the Snitch to disappear into the sky, and Harry began to circle the pitch in search. After a couple of laps he was joined by the Gryffindor Seeker, Ginny Weasley.

“How many Weasleys can you guys fit on one team!” He called to her, his grin showing just a bit of
teeth. She rolled her eyes and made a rude gesture, but she was grinning too. “You kidding? We could make our own team if we wanted to. And if we were willing to put up with Percy.” She made a shrugging motion to say ‘sorry about him’, and Harry shrugged in return. Percy Weasley’s opinion didn’t bother him in the least.

Suddenly there cheers erupted from the Slytherin side, and Harry and Ginny both whirled to see Ron retrieving the Quaffle, expression twisted with a mix of frustration and nausea. “Oh, hell.” The girl murmured as she began to scan the field anew.

Harry drifted closer to the Gryffindor hoops, being careful to avoid getting in the way of the Chasers. After a few moments he caught Ron’s eye and sent him what he hoped was an encouraging grin and thumbs up. In response, the redhead hunched up his shoulders and shook his head, looking even more ill.

Feeling strangely guilty, Harry dropped his hand and swirled back around just in time to catch Savage glaring at him and yelling something. He couldn’t catch the words from here, but what he could get didn’t sound polite in the least. Harry nodded even as he rolled his eyes, going a bit higher in hopes of catching sight of the familiar glint. There was nothing.

Time passed, and the Slytherins were beginning to scream themselves hoarse from excitement. Every time a goal slipped past Ron, he got more nervous and frustrated, which Slytherin was taking shameless advantage of. It had gotten to the point where the Chasers, Draco among them, were showing off a bit and taking time to mock him as they passed. It was a dangerous move, since the Gryffindor Chasers were getting more desperate by the minute, but was working to effectively neutralize any blocks.

Harry felt bad about it for about five minutes, before the adrenaline and competitive spirit blew it away. He could be a good friend later. Right now he wanted to win.

When the score was 80-10 to Slytherin, he finally caught sight of the metallic glimmer. Tracking it with his eyes, he turned slowly, casually, until he saw Ginny. She was closer to the Snitch, but looking the wrong way and on a far inferior broom.

Good enough for him.

In a flash he was dashing after the Snitch at full speed, ducking past the twins, who let out a stream of garbled curses as he passed. The roar of the crowd made Ginny turn and give pursuit, but it was far too late.

The little ball zoomed about, doing it’s best to shake Harry off, and one swerve nearly made him fly right into a Bludger, but his fingers managed to snag on.

Mixed cheers and boos, as well as the angry tirade of Lee Jordan, were his reward, and before he could make it to the ground, Draco was at his side, sliding an arm around his waist. They touched down together, and the blonde grabbed Harry’s face and planted a kiss on his lips. Several cat-calls rang out from the stands, and Draco managed to glare without removing his lips from Harry’s.

“Honestly, Malfoy. I know you’ve fallen from grace, but debasing yourself with the half-breed tart for the masses? It’s downright vulgar.” Nott drawled, sounding a artificially nauseous.

Suddenly, all that elation and leftover adrenaline soured, swinging right back around to fury. He pulled away from Draco, whose expression was slowly morphing into something dark. “Don’t talk about him that way.” His voice was nearly unrecognizable, twisted into a growl.
Nott frowned for a moment, before returning his hateful expression with interest. “Why? Did I hurt his pwecious fewings? I know I can’t have hurt yours - animals don’t have feelings, after all, and I figure a half-animal wouldn’t either.” His posture went suddenly casual. “If Malfoy wants to put on bestiality shows, that’s fine, but I ask he not do it in front of civilized company.”

With a wordless snarl, Harry twisted away from Draco and tackled Nott to the ground. He didn’t get the chance to do more than recover from the impact before Draco grabbed him around the waist and tugged him away, hissing furiously in his ear. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Before Harry could respond, there was a loud *hem, hem*. His stomach dropped.

Making her way over to them was Professor Umbridge, in all her pink, round horror. “Mr. Potter,” She began, eyes glimmering darkly and the corners of her mouth turned up smugly. “I cannot believe the conduct I am seeing. Clearly you feel you can do whatever you please on this field. And you, Mr. Malfoy - I am very disappointed in you, getting involved like that.” She heaved a great sigh, like her actions pained her. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to ban the both of you from Quidditch.” She paused to let them exclaim in horror. “Permanently. Oh, and Mr. Potter, seeing as you started this, I must insist you serve detention with me for two weeks. Clearly nothing I have tried to teach you has sunk in.” With one last smug smirk, she turned around and made her way towards the castle, leaving a stunned silence in her wake.

For a long moment, Harry remained froze, not daring to chance a look at Draco. When he heard a sharp intake of breath behind him, he did the Slytherin thing.

He bolted.

Harry was sitting in the old, disused classroom they had used the previous year for their dance lessons. It was cool and he was sitting next to the window, throwing pieces of broken rocks across the room. He didn’t feel like emerging from the room ever.

Soft footfalls echoed from the doorway and he looked up toward them. Pansy was standing in the door, her hand clutched around the Marauder’s Map, he sighed at the sight of her. He wished he had never taught her the incantation to activate the Map. He looked away from her and out the window toward the lake. He frowned and blindly threw another rock. He heard it hit off a desk.

“Go away.”

“Harry --”

“I said go away.”

Silence fell in the room and Harry listened to the wind rattle the windows. It was blustery and grey out. Threatening a heavy rain that would accommodate his mood. He heard quiet walking on the stone and the sound of Pansy settling on one of the desks in the room.

“You should talk to him, Harry.”

“And he sent you here to say that?”

“No I’m saying it as your friend. His friend too. He’s upset. He blames himself. If he hadn’t kissed you --”

“Exactly. If he hadn’t kissed me we’d both still be on the team.”

“Harry your reaction was a little over-dramatic.” Pansy barrelled on past the snort Harry gave. “You
know that Nott is a vicious prat on the best of days. He knows how to get under your skin, Harry. He does it on purpose.”

“...You can leave now.”

“But I--”

“Get out, Parkinson.” Harry threw a piece of rubble hard at the wall and it exploded into tiny pieces. “I don’t need your rabble. If I wanted mindless chattered I’d go to Gryffindor Tower.”

Pansy gave a soft gasp. “Harry, I know you don’t mean that. You’re just --”

“I said leave.”

Pansy made a breathy noise but Harry heard her footfalls rush out of the room. He slumped down deeper in the window sill, satisfied with the silence. He picked up a jagged shard of rock and lobbed it at a glass jar, smiling bitterly when it broke over the floor.

Harry spent the next hour repairing and re-destroying the jar. Something about the sound of it crumbling apart made him feel better.

Any progress he’d made with his mood was ruined when the door burst open, revealing Blaise. The boy’s brows were drawn together and his mouth was twisted in a mixture of frustration and anger.

Some small part of Harry wondered if that was what he’d looked like these past few months.

“What the hell is your problem?” Blaise growled, moving so he was standing over him. Harry didn’t move from his spot on the floor, choosing to shrug and look away instead. “Oh no. You don’t get to sulk about this. What did you say to Pansy?”

Finally meeting the other boy’s eye, Harry glared back. “Nothing,” He snapped. “Don’t give me that crap.” Blaise returned, voice just as sharp. “You did something utterly and completely stupid, and then you made Pansy cry when she tried to help. Now tell me what you said to her.”

Making a show of leaning back casually, Harry shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. She shouldn’t have been sticking her nose in it anyway.”

Harry was utterly unprepared for a pair of hands to grab the front of his robe, and even less so for them to yank him up until he was standing. It was funny how it’d never really registered how much taller Blaise was than him. Right now, as he used his superior height and bulk to tower over Harry, his physical disadvantage sunk in.

With one big step, Blaise slammed Harry against the wall. The smaller boy squirmed and twisted, trying to get away, but Blaise used his forearms to pin him until he couldn’t shift anymore.

“Want to rethink that answer?”

After a few more moments of struggling, Harry looked away and gave another sullen shrug. “It just doesn’t matter, okay? What was she thinking, anyway, trying to come and scold me after all that shite?”

A low, deep noise, like a growl, escaped Blaise, and he leaned forward until his bulk blocked the light of the lamps. “I don’t know what your problem has been this year, Potter, but you need to get
“over yourself because there is only so much I can take from you.”

Managing a sneer, Harry snorted. “Right. Sure. I’ll get right on that, just for you.”

Blaise gave him a dark look. “Fine. Act like a fucking brat. When you’re willing to either tell us what’s wrong or get the fuck over it, then we’ll talk. Until then, stay the hell away from us.”

With that, Blaise let Harry drop, and the smaller boy slid down the stone wall until he hit the ground with a muted thud. For one long moment, Blaise stared down at him, eyes a mix of anger, irritation and confusion, before he stalked out the door and left Harry alone.

Once the other boy was out of earshot, Harry let out a low, shaky breath and wrapped his arms and his knees, ducking his head down to his chest. Dudley had done that to him plenty of times, but this was the first time he’d had to face it at Hogwarts.

He stayed like that for a long moment, Blaise’s words and Harry’s own actions replaying in his head like an echoed recording. Maybe... maybe there was something wrong with him. Maybe this wasn’t normal.

The very idea that something in him might be broken and he hadn’t known for so long made Harry feel ill, and he spent a few moments breathing deeply.

He was being ridiculous, right? There was no way. He’d... he’d try harder to hold it back. To mask his emotions like everyone else seemed able to. That’s all he needed. Really.

There was no need to waste more time or resources or thought on it.

This wasn’t worth it.

And maybe he wasn’t worth it either.

~*~

Time slid on and Harry spent most of it alone. He had made a cursory, but rather unfelt apology to Pansy, which seemed to please her in some way, but she spent more time away from him. She and Blaise were “on break”, and Harry wondered if part of the reason was due to him. Blaise certainly seemed to think so, judging from the looks he’d shoot Harry every so often. Harry just ignored him.

His detentions weren’t helping any either. Spending night after night carving I do not matter into his arm was starting to anger him more and more. Some nights Draco would wait up in bed with a warm cloth and bandage, and Harry would let him take care of things. Other nights Draco would be asleep, things held in his hands but waiting had faded into exhaustion. It didn’t really matter to Harry either way.

Currently he was sitting on a desk in the unused classroom that S.W.O.R.D. had procured. Blaise was near the back, making conversation with a Ravenclaw. Draco, Pansy and Millicent were talking with a few Hufflepuffs. Hermione was standing beside him, watching people filter in but her eyes kept tracking back to Neville who was sitting on one side of the room before moving to Ron on the other.

“What’s going on with them, then?” Harry asked, picking at his nails.

“They’re not talking to each other right now. Ginny finished with Neville but Ron thinks Neville finished with Ginny. He thinks Neville broke his sister’s heart even though they’re still good friends. I think Ginny likes someone else.”
Harry nodded wordlessly before closing the door with a motion from his wand when the last person walked into the room. He quickly charmed it before nodding to everyone in greeting. He got a few nods in return. Blaise rolled his eyes and looked away.

“Right, first off, Hermione’s got an announcement.”

Hermione nodded her head. “Right. Well...” She pulled a pouch from her bag and delved into it. She pulled out a shining gold coin. “This is our new system. I’ve placed a charm on these fake Galleons with Millicent’s help. It’s a protean charm, so when a new meeting comes up the little serial code here on the coin will change to the date and time when the meeting is set. Also, it was Millicent’s idea to make the coin warm up so you’ll know a change has been made.”

As she passed them out Harry felt amazed at her idea. They could hide their method of communication in plain sight. It was brilliant.

“Will it say they room we’re meeting in too?” Colin Creevy asked as he examined his coin.

Millicent shook her head in response. “We tried but we couldn’t fit it all in. So starting tonight we’re going to look for a permanent place we can practice. When we find one we’ll charm the coins so you can meet us where we held our last meeting and we’ll make an announcement.”

Colin nodded his head in satisfaction of the answer and pocketed the coin. Hermione returned to the front of the room and handed Harry his. He examined it. It looked perfectly normal to him. He’d just have to remember to keep it separate from his money. He slipped it into his trouser pockets.

“Today we’re going to be practicing ‘reducto’. It’s a small but powerful blasting curse. I used it several times last year during the Tournament and it really came in handy.”

“I’ve heard of it. It only works on inanimate things, right?” Ginny asked from where she was sitting next to Neville and leaning on him in a friendly manner.

“I s’pose.” Harry shrugged and lied through his teeth. “Never fancied trying it on someone.”

“I bet it’s wicked disgusting,” Seamus said, grinning. “I bet there are bloody pieces everywhere!”

“Seamus, love, no one wants to hear you talking right now,” Dean chided playfully, ducking his head at the weak blow.

Harry cleared his throat to get back people’s attention and stood up from the desk. “It’s performed like so,” he rose his wand and gestured with it, “reducto.” The desk splintered in several places and fell to pieces before Harry repaired it. He turned back to the class. “Now you’re all going to practice on the desk, alright?”

Harry stepped aside as Marietta Edgecombe strode up and pointed with her wand. He rubbed a hand over his itching scar absently as he watched. Hopefully they would have one last meeting before Christmas.

As they wrapped and began to shuffle everyone out in groups of two or three, Harry felt a small hand poke an his shoulder. He whirled to see Luna Lovegood watching him with wide, distant eyes. He stood there, waiting for her to speak. After a few seconds of the impromptu staring contest, he finally said, “Can I help you?”

“If you’d like, but that’s not why I want to talk to you.”

He gave another beat before making a ‘go on’ hand gesture. She smiled. “You said we need a place
to stay. Well, to be fair, Millicent did. But you seem much nicer to talk to.”

“Depends on who you ask.” He responded dryly, before the words sunk in. “Wait, do you have a place?”

“No.” She replied plainly. Harry stared at her for a long moment, and this time she continued on her own. “But I think I know someone who does. Several someones, anyway.”

Leaning forward just a tad, Harry felt a small smile tug at his lips. The less he had on his mind, the better. “Who?”

Giving a little hum, Luna shrugged. “Helena probably would. Maybe the others as well.”

Harry racked his brain for someone of that name, but came up empty. “Who is Helena?”

The girl blinked at him, like not recognizing the name made him a strange new species. After a second of that, she apparently accepted this as a part of him, because the expression smoothed out into her normal slightly-vacant expression. It was rather eerie to watch. “She’s the Ravenclaw house ghost. Helena Ravenclaw. She’s been here since the beginning.” She tilted her head, clearly thinking. “Though I’m not sure she’d like to talk about it. She’s very shy.”

The hope that had bloomed in him began to sink. “Are you... Wait, you said others. You meant the other ghosts?”

“Oh, yes.” She responded pleasantly. “I don’t think they’d all be very helpful. In fact, I think Peeves might send us to the wrong place all together.” She looked perturbed the the idea, which made her eyes look even larger. “But the Baron might help. He’s been around for just as long.”

A slow grin made it’s way across Harry’s face. “That’s brilliant. Luna, you are brilliant. I’ll talk to him. Thank you!”

Luna blinked at him. “Why are you thanking me? I don’t know where the room is.” With that she slipped away. Harry watched her go, confused, but the smile didn’t slip at all.

“There’s a sight for sore eyes.” Draco drawled. He seemed perfectly normal, despite the fact that neither had spoken of the ban. Only a slight tension at his eyes betrayed the underlying emotion in their interaction.

Not exactly sure what he was referring to, Harry shrugged. “Everyone’s gone, right? We can leave?”

Looking slightly apprehensive, Draco nodded. “Yes, it’s just us and the Gryffindors. And Millicent, but she’s spent enough time with Granger that she practically counts. Why?”

“Great, let’s go down to the dungeons.” His boyfriend gave him a dry look, but followed him as he made his way out. “I’ll explain on the way, but I’d like to get back to the Common Room before we get caught.” They both ignored the way his left hand clenched slightly at the thought.

After making their goodbyes, Harry and Draco slipped out and made their way down the stairs. “You remember Luna Lovegood?” He ignored the way Draco murmured ‘unfortunately’. “Well, she pointed out that the ghosts probably know plenty of good places for S.W.O.R.D.”

Giving a little gasp, Draco rolled his eyes. “We are idiots. The Bloody Baron!”

Grinning at him, Harry nodded. “Exactly.”
They made their way down into the dungeons, and took a few lesser-used halls. Here the temperature dropped several degrees, and the shadows never seemed to settle. It was popular Slytherin legend that the Baron resided in these part, thought neither boy had been here to verify.

Eventually they hit an area where it seemed there was more shadow than light and stopped. It seemed as good a place as any.

“Hello? Baron?” Was there a better way to address him? What was his name, anyway? “A-are you there?”

There was a burst of cool air, but the form of the ghost didn’t appear.

Shifting slightly, Draco grumbled, “We might have been better with The Grey Lady.”

“Do not call her that.” A voice calmly demanded from behind. Harry and Draco both spun wildly, hearts hammering. The Bloody Baron looked a strange mix of calm and irritated. “She does not like that name.”

Swallowing audibly, Draco nodded. “Sorry, didn’t know that. Won’t do it again.” His voice reached a pitch Harry hadn’t heard since they were in Second Year.

One translucent brow rose. “See that you don’t.”

There was a pause as the Baron watched them, before Harry cleared his throat. “We, uh, actually had a question for you.”

Something dark entered the Baron’s gaze, and he frowned suddenly. “If it’s about that artifact-”

“What?” Harry interrupted, confusion overriding his fear. “No, nothing about that. We had a question about the rooms in the castle.”

The ghost’s dark eyes stayed narrow, but the room seemed to warm a tad. “Oh?”

Harry glanced back at Draco, who gave him a frantic, wide-eyed stare. “This was your crazy idea’, he mouthed, and Harry bit his lip to keep from arguing back. “Yeah. We, uh... you know about Umbridge, right?”

“Indeed.” The Baron replied darkly, and the way his eyes settled on Harry felt far too knowing.

Shifting uncomfortably, he nodded. “Yeah, well, then you know she’s teaching us nothing at all in defense. And so we need a place to teach ourselves, but where she couldn’t find us. Would you happen to know a place like that?”

For a long moment, the dark, translucent eyes gazed intently at Harry’s face. He resisted the urge to duck away, and felt Draco press comfortably against his side. Slowly, something like a smile crossed his face. It was terrifying. “I suppose I do have a place for you. It’s always nice to see a touch of true rebellion against authority. Does my heart good.” Harry thought he felt Draco give a slightly hysterical chuckle at that, but it was so quiet and quick he couldn’t be sure. “Try the seventh floor, across from that horrid tapestry. Pass by it three times, thinking about a place to train.” He inclined his head. “Do try not to do anything terribly stupid. If I have to share my space with another ghost, I will be very displeased.” Without waiting for a response, the ghost faded away.

For a long moment, the boys stood there, staring at the now empty space. “Did he remind you a little of Severus?” Harry asked.
“No. And I wouldn’t tell him that if I were you.”

“Obviously.”

~*~

The scents were amazing.

He felt wonderful. Better than he had in a long time. His movements were smooth and elegant as he made his way down the hall.

Some part of him noticed that the hallways were familiar. Another pointed out that view was wrong. Down. At the floor.

No, this was right. This was good.

Anticipation was rising in him, like he’d swallowed a bird whole. It fluttered in his stomach like it was trying to get out. Futile. Nothing escaped him.

It was dark, but it did not matter. He did not need sight. He had scent.

Empty. Empty like always. Was he wrong? He could not be wrong. There was-

There!

A man. Near Harry, near the ground. Slumped over. The form was strange, more outline the real. But scent did not lie. He was there.

And he was asleep.

Harry could not help it. He let out a low, joyous hiss. This was it!

The hiss woke the man, and he sat up suddenly. The strange outline wavered by stayed.

Too late, man.

Harry opened his mouth wide and struck.

Blood, screams, success.

Approval that was not Harry’s.

More screams.

No longer an outline, but a face.

Mr. Weasley!

Harry woke up with a choked off gasp, feeling like he was suffocating. He flailed, trying to get free of whatever had him trapped. “Harry! Harry, calm down!”

Finally, he was able to push off the weight. There was a thump as he sat up, panting heavily. On the floor he could see Draco getting back up, eyes wide and frightened. “Harry! What in Merlin’s name is wrong with you?”

He flinched back slightly from the phrasing. It struck too close to home. “I...” He managed to croak out before he coughed hard. “S-Se-”
“He needs to go to the Hospital Wing, Draco.” Blaise’s voice rang out, sounding scared. “I think he’s feverish.”

Harry shook his head frantically. “N-no, not sick. Severus. It was Mr.-” He cut himself off, aware of that they no doubt had an audience. “I need to see Severus.”

Studying him intently, Draco frowned. They both ignored the dark, suggestive comment Nott murmured from his bed. “Harry-”

“Draco, please.” Harry wasn’t sure he’d ever used that tone before. If he had, the Dursleys had made sure he never did again. It was the voice of someone much younger than 15.

Apparently it’d been the right thing, because Draco nodded. “Fine. Okay. He’ll have potions for you anyway. Can you walk?”

Probably not, but it didn’t matter. Harry slipped out of the bed, as some detached part of his brain noticed that his hands were shaking, and that Ananta had picked up his head and was watching the scene with keen interest. He wondered if he’d been speaking in Parseltongue in his sleep and shuddered.

As it turned out, Harry really wasn’t able to walk, but he was able to balance himself well enough for Draco to basically drag him out the room. From the corner of his eye, Harry saw Blaise move like he wanted to help, but he never joined them.

Once he was moving and out of the dark, heated dorm, Harry began to feel slightly better. At least he was able to breathe without feeling like he was hyperventilating, and able to take some of the weight off of Draco.

They made it to Snape’s office in record time, and Draco pounded on the door to his private chambers with only a moment of hesitation.

It took a minute for the door to swing open. At first Snape glared, looking furious and a bit rumpled, but once he noticed Harry, he helped Draco maneuver him to one of the seats. Once there Harry let his eyes drift shut, trying to fight off the phantom sensations of the dream. “What in Merlin’s name happened? Was he attacked?”

“He was asleep, but he started screaming and wouldn’t wake up and then he started on about needing to see you.” Draco responded. His voice was going slightly frantic, and Harry reached up blindly until he was able to thread his fingers with Draco’s. “I think he’s sick, but-”

Shaking his head, Harry sighed. “‘M not sick. It was... like a vision. Really weird. I was...” He swallowed hard, but made himself continue. “I was like a snake, and I was in the weird hallway. At first it seemed empty, but I could smell someone. And I bit them, and it was Mr. Weasley, and...” He swallowed hard.

Severus was giving him a look like the thought Harry was about to jump off the deep end. “Harry, I think Mr. Malfoy is probably right-”

Groaning in frustration, Harry opened his eyes. “No! I know it wasn’t a dream, alright? Sometimes I have these weird vision things. I told you about that one before Fourth Year, remember? This was like that. And I bit... the snake bit... Oh, Merlin, I think it was Nagini. She bit Mr. Weasley and he could be dying right now and he might really die if someone doesn’t do something!”

His professor’s eyes had started to widen a bit, and Harry thought he might be convincing him. “Was Mr. Weasley on a Order mission tonight?” He asked. When Severus’ expression didn’t change, he
nodded. “Exactly. And, look, if I’m really just sick then you can give me potions in ten minutes, but Mr. Weasley doesn’t have that time to waste and will you please contact Dumbledore or someone?”

There was a pause as Severus thought on this, before he nodded once and closed his eyes. With a murmur or ‘expecto patronum’, the slender silver shape of a doe bounded off. Once it was gone, Severus reached out and placed a palm on Harry’s forehead. His scar ached from the contact, and he hissed and shoved it off so he could rub at the inflamed bolt.

A moment after that, there was a vaguely bird-shaped silver shape. It settled on the couch above Harry, and he could see that it was in fact a phoenix. It opened it’s beak, and the voice of Professor Dumbledore drifted out. “Take the children to the Place.” Once it’s message was delivered, it dissolved into a puff of silver smoke.

Wide, dark eyes focused on Harry, looking shocked, before he nodded and grabbed a container of Floo Powder of the mantle. “Go to the Headquarters.” He ordered, shoving the pot into Draco’s hand. “I’ll be right behind you.”

A minute later and a swirl of green flames later, Harry, Draco and Severus were in the living room of Grimmauld Place. A moment later they were joined by Ron, Ginny and the twins. “What in Merlin’s name is going on?” Ron asked, frowning at the room.

For the space of a heartbeat, Harry gazed him in the eye, and then looked away.

How was he supposed to explain this?

He’d attacked their father.

“I’m sorry.” He whispered.

Chapter End Notes

Unfortunately updates will be postponed until April 5th due to Mina fighting an eviction.

Thank you for your kindness and understanding and patience.
The kitchen was silent. Ron was staring blankly into his tea. Harry was staring at his hands. The twins were sitting with their mother. Ginny was fraying her napkin to bits.

The floo roared up with brilliant green flames and Severus strode out of the flames and immediately to Harry. Dumbledore followed quickly and before he was out of the grate the words “he’s fine” were out of his mouth. Mrs. Weasley burst into messy sobs and leaned her head against George’s shoulder.

“Thanks to young Harry, Arthur was found just in time. They’ve taken him to St. Mungo’s and he’ll be ready for visitors, they assure me, tomorrow afternoon. What’s more is they managed not to obtain it.”

Mrs. Weasley seemed to relax at the words, as did Sirius and Professor Lupin, who had crossed in from the kitchen at Dumbledore’s voice. Severus, however, did not look impressed at the news.

“I think there is more to be concerned about, Headmaster.”

“I just informed everyone that Arthur was in good hands.”

“I was talking about Mr. Potter.”

Harry glanced bleakly at Snape’s face. His words had been dry but the apparent, implied message of Dumbledore’s lack of caring seemed obvious to him. He tried to for a smile, it felt painful and twisted. “I’m alright, Professor.”

Severus’ eyes darted down to Harry and he examined him for a long moment. “Apparently. Would you like something to help with sleep?”

Harry shook his own head. He had been taking sleep potions all week to try and battle with his restlessness. “I’m fine. I could use some fresh air.”

Sirius’ head perked a bit at that. “There’s a porch out back if you’d like to sit.”

Harry nodded his head and pushed himself up. He realized as he stood that at some point a knitted blanket had been draped over him. It was bright and sunny with it’s Gryffindor colours. He stared at it a moment before picking it up and wrapping it around his shoulders.

“Would you like some company?” Draco asked.

Harry considered him for a moment before slowly nodding his head. He had thought maybe Draco would have stayed with his parents but in the eyes of Weasleys it seemed the Malfoys had no emotions. Harry made his way out.

A cold frost and snow had settled on the ground and Harry sat on the step. A moment later Draco sat beside him. He rolled his sleeves over his hands and Harry inched closer to him before sharing the blanket. Draco stared for a moment and made a comment about “a Malfoy in Gryffindor colours” but it fell flat.
“D’you think we’ll go back to school tomorrow?”

Draco nodded a little. “I’m sure of it. At least it’s a Sunday and we won’t be missing class. It won’t be long until we’re back here, though.” Draco was quiet again. “Your detentions are done again. Are you alright?”

Harry shrugged. “I guess. I can’t believe they replaced me with that third year shrimp. We’re never going to win the House Cup again.”

Draco didn’t reply and Harry was partly glad for it. After a while Draco bid goodnight and shuffled off into the house. Harry stood from his spot, slightly chilled, and moved inside. Severus was sitting at the kitchen table, his hands wrapped around something. Harry moved toward him slowly before sitting himself down into a seat. His body practically deflated.

“Don’t suppose they’ve got any honey lemon in this house.”

Snape shook his head. “Chamomile or Earl Grey?”

“I’ll take Chamomile.”

Harry watched the pot pour him some tea and he stared into the cup before taking a long swallow. He set the cup down and settled his uneasy hands on the table. Severus stared at them. They were shaking slightly, but Harry couldn’t feel it. Severus’ eyes drifted to his left hand which was curled slightly. The latest round of detentions still had their mark on his skin in the form of scabbed words. Harry slid the hand under the table and took another sip of tea.

Halfway through the cup Harry realized Severus had dosed him with sleeping potion. Before he could reprimand the man his eyes closed into a strangely comforting blackness.

Harry’s last coherent thought was git.

~*~

The next few days were like moving underwater. Slow and muffled. They had managed to find the room the Bloody Baron had told them about and introduced everyone to it. Hermione’s enthusiasm and praise was shining and bright and and slightly painful. Harry suggested a final meeting before everyone went off on holiday. People concurred.

Their last meeting before Christmas came on the Friday and they went over all the spells they had learned in the room that Hogwarts had given them. The room Hermione called the Room of Requirement.

The Weasley children seemed especially keen on getting to perfect their magic. Harry was proud of them in a strangely detached way. He was proud for them. He gave the members of S.W.O.R.D. an assignment to work on over the break; to learn a trip jinx. Hermione stared at him in her way of you’re not serious about us doing magic outside of school, are you? A few who remaining behind at Hogwarts nodded and so did the few who were over age.

Harry strangely felt good about doing good. It felt like a foreign feeling. And all things considered given the past few days he felt rather guilty about feeling good. He tried to relish in the positivity and watched as Neville talked to a few Ravenclaws, some of whom eyed him and left, leaving him with Luna, while Cedric chatted with a Gryffindor girl. Harry was sure he knew her. It took a minute before he placed her. Katie Bell; one of the Quidditch players.

Harry waved when a few people exited the room before he sat down on a plush chair the room
provided for him. He sunk into the depths of it and closed his eyes. He heard a movement to his left and leaned against Draco’s hip when he felt fingers in his hair. Or at least he hoped it was Draco’s hip.

“We leave tomorrow. It’ll be a good two weeks away from here.”

Harry nodded against Draco’s knee. “Yeah. I think I need some space to breathe.”

“Which you will completely be able to do in a house full of Weasleys and Grangers and family members and former and current professors.”

Harry groaned weakly. “Can I get a house at the bottom of the ocean?”

Draco was quiet for a moment. “I suppose it would be cool to have sharks in our back yard.”

Harry traced nonsense designs on Draco’s leg and smiled faintly. Draco had said our. He huffed out a breath before sitting up straight. “Alright, we’d better leave, we have that Astronomy homework to finish.”

Draco offered his hand and Harry took it to stand. When Harry stood Draco didn’t release his hold. He squeezed Harry’s fingers lightly. “Come on, for every right answer you give you get a kiss.”

Harry grinned weakly. “And they said I’m a good teacher.”

~*~

The next day dawned cold and clear, and Harry and Draco were summoned early to Professor Snape’s office. Grabbing their bags, they said good-byes to Blaise (albeit rather awkwardly), as well as made him promise to relay the same message to Pansy and Millicent.

Once at Snape’s quarters, they were quickly ushered back to Grimmauld Place. Now that they weren’t there because of Mr. Weasley’s possible death, Harry was rather amazed at the difference from the summer. It wasn’t charming or anything, but most of the first floor was downright livable, and all those creepy House-elf heads had been removed, replaced by a fresh coat of pale paint.

Harry barely managed to get a look around before he was grabbed from behind and lifted in a spin. He gave a startled yelp and tried to squirm away, but he was trapped in a bear hug. There was a series of bark-like laugh next to his ear, and Harry paused in his flailing, only to start up two-fold once he recognized the voice.

“Put me down, Sirius!”

“You asked for it.” Sirius replied, voice mischievous, before he let go, sending Harry falling for a split second before he hit the couch with a grunt. After taking a second to collect himself, Harry opened his eyes and tilted his head the way he’d come, catching sight of Sirius in a Santa hat with dog ears attached.

He couldn’t help it. He started to laugh. “What are you wearing?” He snickered, sitting up and ignoring the way his hair was probably sticking up in all directions.

Sirius beamed at him with pride, one hand reaching up to make sure the hat was quirked at a proper jaunty angle. “It was a gift from Moony.” He reported happily, before reaching down and ruffling Harry’s already shaken up hair. “How’s my favorite Godson?”

Giving him a dry look, Harry arched an eyebrow. “You, since I’m your only Godson, that makes me your least favourite as well.”
“Semànrics.” Sirius waved the thought away, before turning to look at the other two arrivals. “Hello, Draco. You’re looking good.” And his demeanor suddenly went dark as he took in the professor. “Snape.”

Face blank, with something almost smug below the surface, Snape nodded back. “Black.”

Immediately, Sirius started to bristle, and Harry got off the couch and led Draco out the door. “Let’s take cover while we still can.” He joked, grinning slightly.

Half-way up the stairs, he noticed Draco giving him a strange look. “What? Is it the hair? Because blame Sirius for that.”

Shrugging a bit, Draco traced his eyes over Harry. “You’re acting strange. Happier.”

Expression going dry, Harry snorted. “Happy is strange? Okay.” Draco frowned slightly, but it quickly smoothed away. “Fair enough. We probably have a while before Weasley showed up - I doubt he packed last night like someone with sense. Want to set something up before he gets here?”

With a snort, Harry continued his way up. “Let’s not prank the guy whose father is in the hospital.”

Draco gave a huff. “Oh, fine. Can we at least be snogging when he shows up? Last time he didn’t talk for five minutes after.”

“I like that one.” Harry replied, ignoring his own blush. As they made their way to their room, Harry pondered his own feelings. He was feeling happier. Like a weight had been taken off his shoulders, if only for the moment. Maybe it was because of the holidays? The O.W.L. courses were taking their toll, as well as a break from Umbridge.

Either way, he was feeling much better than he had. And he was going to enjoy it while he could.

And snogging his boyfriend sounded like a great place to start.

~*~

As it turned out, Ron did walk in on their snogging. This time, however, he just threw his jumper at them and told them to knock it off while he was there with him - apparently both the other Gryffindor boys had gotten quite used to walking in at Dean and Seamus in various states of snogging and dress.

For once, Ron’s timing had been superb - Draco’s hands had snuck under Harry’s shirt, and the smaller boy had just been about to move them. It wasn’t that Harry didn’t want to go further - he really, really did. And he knew Draco would be good before, during and after. But the idea of being that... vulnerable... bared.... The idea made Harry slightly queasy.

Draco never pushed, exactly, but when they were in the middle of snogging, he didn’t exactly hold back either. Harry was starting to become afraid of irritating his boyfriend with the slow pace, especially compared with their peers - Nott and Daphene had definitely been together that way (at least if Nott’s stories to Crabbe and Goyle could be believed), and Blaise and Pansy and long since gotten past that point.

Really, Harry was a bit thankful to Ron. At least this time he had an excuse.

The next few days passed in a blur of green and red, as they helped Mrs. Weasley decorate the
headquarters for Christmas. Garland was just about everywhere, now, and the kitchen constantly smelled of some treat or another. Once or twice, Harry caught Narcissa staring at the tree with something mourning. He had no doubt she missed their ornaments and traditions. And so had maybe taken to talking to her a bit more often, and bugging Draco into doing the same, if only to keep her somewhat distracted from it.

T'was the season, after all.

Three days into the holidays, the Weasleys were finally allowed to visit Mr. Weasley at St. Mungo’s, and so the group of them (including Draco and Harry. Mrs. Weasley was bursting with good cheer over the visit, and so she didn’t seem to notice she was dragging along two extras. Harry decided to be flattered by it - she seemed to think of them as her own, at least on some level) were ushered through the Floo and to the hospital.

Harry and Draco hung back awkwardly with polite greetings as the Weasley brood flew to their father. Harry hid his hands in the pockets of his jeans and tried not to think about how all hospitals smelled the same. As Ron regaled his father with the latest news about being Keeper, Harry shifted from foot to foot. He looked around the room, taking in the sight of Molly holding tight to Arthur’s hand and the twins joking back and forth.

He felt stifled.

Seeming to sense it, Draco smoothed a hand down Harry’s arm. “Erm, we’re going to get some air.”

Ginny looked over at them and offered up a wan smile and a nod. “Tea Room’s on the fifth floor.”

Harry smiled at her. “Thanks, Gin.”

They made their way out of the room and Harry felt himself almost instant relax. He scratched the back of his head before looking around for the lift. It took he and Draco a while but eventually they found it, and were surprised to see not only Cedric waiting by the lift but Neville as well, with an elderly woman. Cedric seemed perky when he spotted them and straightened from his lean.

“Heya.”

Harry nodded his head. “Visiting?”

“Not so lucky. I have a follow up about my leg.”

Harry nodded again and turned to look at Neville. The Gryffindor boy gave a weak smile at him and nodded his head. Harry nodded back, feeling slightly confused.

Neville’s mouth twisted a little. “You here with Ron?”

Harry nodded again. “Yeah. You going to pop in?”

“Maybe later. I’m here to visit.”

Harry gave a weak grin. He remembered something Moody had said over the summer, as well as from the memory of Dumbledore’s he had viewed about Neville’s parents. He swallowed when he boarded. “Want some company?”

Neville looked to the woman holding onto his right shoulder. Her eyes were sharp in her face and she scanned over Harry and Draco before giving a rapt nod. Neville looked back at Harry and nodded.
They travelled in silence up to the fourth floor.

After exiting the lift Cedric was swept off with a Healer and shot them all a distracted wave. Harry held Draco’s hand as they followed after Neville and his grandmother. They walked through a set of doors - Janus Thickley Ward - and Draco gave an almost silent noise in his throat but said nothing. The area was filled with kindly looking Healers and one bustled over to Neville with a wide smile.

“Good to see you again, Neville. And you Augusta. Oh you’ve brought friends!”

“Oh, yes... This is Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy.”

Harry was glad the Healer didn’t make a fuss but noticed the way Augusta Longbottom’s hand twitched on Neville’s shoulder and the way her hawk-like eyes darted to Draco. He tried to offer the woman a smile, she simply gave a curt nod.

“Come along, Neville.”

They walked a little bit of the ways down the hall and then ducked into a room. The room was sunny and bright, filled with cheery plants and paintings. Harry thought it looked almost homey. There were two occupants in the room on two separate beds, dressed warmly. As Harry’s eyes drifted over them he realized his suspicions had been correct. They were Neville’s parents.

The woman - Neville’s mother - whom he quickly introduced as Alice, gave them a wide, distracted sort of smile. The man, Frank, was in a gloomy sort of mood. Harry politely greeted them both, and was pleased when Draco did the same. It seemed to make Neville happy. The fact that they weren’t making a big deal out of it.

Neville told them about how his classes had been going and how his friends were. It was sweet in an utterly heartbreaking way and Harry wondered how on earth Neville could stand it. He kept his mouth closed and smiled faintly, his hand clasped tightly to Draco’s.

“Come now, we’ll get a tea before going home.”

Neville nodded limply and let her steer him out of the room, Harry and Draco followed close behind.

The tea room was overly pleasant and Harry and Draco sat across from Neville as his grandmother decided what she wanted to eat. Neville pulled out the wrapper and studied it. He looked at Harry.

“I get one for every visit. She doesn’t remember me, but she remembers the gum. And I bring it to her... so...” He stared back at the wrapper before putting it in his pocket. Augusta looked displeased but patted his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” Draco finally breathed. He looked from his drink to look at Neville. “I’m sorry she did this to you.”

Neville’s brows creased a moment before he gave a jerky nod and rubbed his hands over his face. “As shocking as it may seem, Malfoy, you aren’t anything like her. Even if you are her nephew. Besides, she’s gone away now. Can’t hurt me anymore.”

Harry looked at Draco quizzically for a moment. Draco offered up a smile. “My Auntie Bella... um...
“Bellatrix LeStrange. She...”

“Right.” Harry nodded his head, catching on. “Neville’s right though. She’s in Azkaban. She can’t hurt him, or you, and the fact you’re here now, says something.”

Draco smiled and rested against Harry. “I missed this you. Thoughtful, empathic Harry Potter. Where’s he been?”

“Locked up in a jar, I reckon.”

Harry looked up as a shadow fell over the table, smiling when it turned out to be Ginny. She beamed widely at them all and wrapped an arm around Neville in a hug. Harry was glad they were so close even if they weren’t dating. It made him feel good about people. He stood up, rolling his eyes when he saw Ron glowering in Neville’s direction. Over protective brother as he was, it was also a pleasant sight.

“Well, we’d best be off.”

“Right.” Neville nodded his head. “See you after Holiday. Happy Christmas.”

Harry returned the sentiment with a gentle murmur before letting himself get tugged away toward the gaggle of Weasleys.

Chapter End Notes

Mina would like to thank everyone for their patience and kindness in understanding the delay in updates. She won her eviction hearing and gets to keep her apartment. Hooray!
Christmas cheer was really settling in, and Sirius seemed to be really getting into it. He had taken to roaming the halls, singing ‘God Rest Ye, Merry Hippogriffs’ at the top of his lungs until someone, usually Remus, plied him with eggnog. He had also made a habit of sitting next to Harry whenever possible - ‘Making up for lost time’, in his own words.

Sometimes it did get on Harry’s nerves, especially when he was trying to snuggle with his boyfriend, thank you very much, the sheer enthusiasm and love he had for Harry made it impossible to get mad. In fact, he was utterly weak to that kind of devotion.

Sirius and Remus were the only adults left that Harry could talk to about the short year he’d had with his parents. He tried, mostly successfully, to avoid stories about their Hogwarts days, instead focusing on times like his birthday, or how he’d played with Padfoot in his playpen. He wasn’t especially fond of what he’d learned about the school-age version of his father, but he thought he could be proud of the man that had raised him, if only for a very short amount of time.

He felt a bit guilty about feeling so warmly about Sirius and Remus, when he owed so much to Narcissa and Mr. Malfoy. He did like them a lot - they’d been the closest thing to real parents he could remember. But he was very aware that if he had never become friends with Draco, they wouldn’t care about him in the least, if not dislike him for his part in Voldemort’s first fall. It wasn’t him that mattered to them so much as his role in Draco’s life.

While Sirius and Remus did have an outside reason for liking him, he was still necessary to them for that connection. They couldn’t see what was left of his parents anywhere else. And they ‘d known him for so long and in such a warm way that they couldn’t help but love him.

He’d never felt that sort of unconditional love before. And he’d take it wherever he could get it.

And if that meant sitting through the Black family tree, he’d do that a hundred times just to see Sirius grin at him like that.

“And here’s my brother, Regulus. Little brat, he was. Never had a chance with our parents.” He gave a snort that was supposed to sound derisive, but Harry caught the regret under it. Shifting a little closer he bumped into Sirius’ shoulder in a way that could have been an accident, and Sirius sent him a warm little look in return. “He’s dead now, obviously. I heard he tried to defect, but wasn’t able to get away. Poor, stupid kid.”

Clearing his throat a bit, Sirius pointed to another bit of the tapestry. “Look, there’s Narcissa. My mother died before she could add on her marriage, I guess.” The grin he gave was slightly maniac. “She must be rolling in her grave right now. Of the five cousins, one’s dead, one’s in Azkaban and three have switched sides.”

“Never did particularly like your mother.” Came from behind them, and Harry and Sirius both turned to see Narcissa entering the room. “Particularly unpleasant woman.”

Giving a little snort, Sirius gave a shrug. “No one liked her. Not even my dad. I’m amazed they lasted as long as they did without someone offing them.”

Narcissa bent down next to them, managing to fold herself in a way that looked lady-like instead of a tangle of limbs like Sirius. She glanced between Harry and the tapestry, eyebrow arched knowingly. He gave his best blank face in return, which only seemed to amuse her more. When she finally gave
the family tree her full attention, the other eyebrow jumped up to join the first. “Oh, goodness. I’d forgotten about that connection to the Prewetts. Didn’t they come over here a few times?”

“Wait, Prewetts? Like Mrs. Weasley and her brothers?”

Giving a little choked noise, Sirius bit back snickers. “Only twice. It was expected for purebloods to stay in contact, after all. Though that had started to fall apart by the time we were kids. But, yeah, Molly and the twins. They were utter rascals, and she was such a little tag-a-log. Wanted to be considered one of the big kids, you know? She was the youngest at home, so when she was here she tried to boss us around.”

Something mischievous danced behind Narcissa’s eyes. “Terrible decision, that. No one tried to mess with a Black. Except another Black, obviously.” She paused. “Didn’t Bellatrix once hide a dead doxie under Regulus’ pillow?”

“Oh, yeah! He keep showing up in my room for a week after that, asking if he could sleep in my bed.” Sirius’ eyes went distant. “I always gave in, when everything was said. He was good at getting people to do what he wanted.”

There was an awkward silence, before he shrugged. “Doesn’t matter now, I suppose.” He stood up and stretched, back cracking. “A lot of things stop mattering in war.” The last was muttered, and Harry wasn’t sure he even meant to say it. His left hand itched. “Right. I’m going to go get some cookies before Molly’s horde manages to eat them all. Night!” He sauntered off, and Narcissa send a dry look after him before patting Harry on the shoulder, giving her own good-night wish.

After watching them go, Harry rubbed at the back of his hand, trying to ignore the scarring. He stood up and made his way up the stairs, pondering what things stopped being important.

~*~

The days leading up to Christmas Eve were filled with bustling excitement. People coming to and fro and packages arriving daily. Harry helped out with Molly. He tended to find the familiar aspects of cooking and helping in the kitchen soothing. It was an even keel. He didn’t have to walk on eggshells. He knew where everything was and he could get them without being asked.

He could be helpful without being noticed.

“Harry, have you seen the nutmeg for the spice cake?”

Harry looked over from the dishes he was putting away, he carefully tucked the stack of plates under his arm and pulled the nutmeg from over the fridge and held it out while putting the plates away. When he felt the shaker leave his hand without taking his eyes away from the cupboard where he was stacking plates he rummaged through a drawer and held out the wooden spoon Molly needed before she even asked.

“Thank you, Harry, dear.” He felt her squeeze his arm. “You’re so good at this. So very attentive. I wish mine were more like you. Everyone could find use in a kitchen.”

Harry offered her a thin smile before returning to the sink to start washing a new stack of dishes. He was halfway through the stack when the door to the kitchen swung open.

“There you are!” Draco bounded over to him. “The twins need your help with a potion.”

“Okay, I’ll be there when I’m done with the dishes.”
“Bah, the dishes don’t matter!”

Harry frowned deeply. “But, I--”

“Honestly, I’m sure Sirius’ Elf will take care of this.”

Harry looked back to the soapy dishes and then looked to Draco. “Just let me finish them, okay?”

“Honestly! It’s just a pile of dirty dishes. There are spells for that and everything. I don’t know why you’re doing them by hand.”

“Because I want to.” Harry looked into the soapy water again. “I’ll be up in a few minutes, okay?”

Draco huffed out a breath. “Fine, enjoy your menial tasks.”

Harry watched as Draco left before sighing. Molly smiled as she added eggs to her batter. “Don’t mind him, there’s no shame in doing an honest day’s work.”

Harry scrubbed at a particularly offensive pot with a frown. He was doing good work. He just had to remember that.

~*~

Harry stared at the ceiling. Ron was snoring loudly two beds over. Harry shifted and rolled onto his stomach. Then he shifted again onto his side. Helping out in the house made him feel useful. He kept hearing Draco’s words in his head. He scowled and sat up. He mattered! He could do lots of things. Even if Draco found most of them useless.

Shoving out of bed, Harry made his way down the stairs. He flicked on the kitchen light and made his way over to the fridge. He opened it and poured himself a drink. He studied the kitchen as he drank slowly. The dishes were neatly put away, the counters were clear, but something was bothering him. Harry rinsed out his glass and put it back, walking around the kitchen.

After a few laps Harry realized what was bothering him. The floor was filthy. He frowned down at it and wondered why it had taken him so long to realize. His Aunt Petunia would never have stood for a floor in the state this one was in. He would have been soundly cuffed on the ear if he let Privet Drive get to such a state!

Rolling up his sleeves Harry found a mop bucket and some cleansing potions under the sink. He filled the bucket with soap, mild scented water and went on a hunt for a brush. He found one after a bit of searching and then went to the bathroom. He grabbed a towel and knelt on it.

Scrubbing kitchen floors he could do. It was practically what he was raised for.

As he scrubbed at the grimy tile Harry felt his mind wash over into blankness. He focused solely on the task at hand. Knowing he could pride himself in a well washed floor. He paused and wiped his arm across his brow, surveying his work.

“Couldn’t sleep, hm?”

Harry turned to look back and blinked at the sight of Molly in the doorway. He offered her a weak grin. “Something like that.”

“Ah, I used to do that when I was younger. Clean to get myself tired. Had a purpose, you know? I can’t do it so much anymore, my back gets tired. But look at what you’ve done. Ron would gladly
Harry laughed softly. “Yeah. Can I get you anything?”

“Oh, I just came for a cup of tea. I haven’t been sleeping well without Arthur.”

Harry stood and put on the kettle. He watched Mrs. Weasley as she walked on the floor carefully before easing herself into a chair. He poured her a tea and fixed it the way she liked before handing it to her and going back to finishing the floor.

“I’ll say something, Harry, you’ll make young Draco very happy one day. Your place is in the home. I can see that.”

“Draco doesn’t think stuff like this matters.”

“That’s because Draco has his mind on other important things. But a home needs to be tended. Yes indeed.” She took a long sip of her tea. “Oh, you missed a spot by the door, dear.”

Harry doubled back with a murmur of thanks before standing when he finished the floor. He emptied out the bucket and rinsed his hands clean. With his mind quieter he was sure he could get some sleep.

“Well, I think that did the trick.” Harry stretched his arms over his head and smiled at the Weasley matriarch. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Right you will. If you ever have trouble sleeping again, dear, the front hall and the dining room need washing.”

Harry nodded his head and rubbed at the back of his left hand. “Well, good night.”

Over the next two days the hall and dining room were spotless.

~*~

Christmas was a blur of food, presents, chaos, and more food. The twins alone managed to throw every plan and set-up for the day, and the full house only confounded the problem. There had been one quiet time when the Weasleys went to visit Arthur (who was set to get out in a few more days, but the venom was still dissolving his stitches, so the Healers wanted to keep an eye on him), but other than that it had been noise and mess and confusion.

But when evening fell, most of the inhabitants had finally crashed to some degree. The only ones who seemed to still have much energy were Harry and Mrs. Weasley, who had teamed up for the Christmas Dinner Preparations/Pre-Meeting Meal. Between them they had managed to get everything ready in record time, and the army’s worth of food was now waiting under a heating charm for the rest of the Order to arrive. Harry had been kicked out of the kitchen for hovering, and was now snuggled against Draco in the living room.

Actually, snuggling might have been generous.

“Will you relax?” Draco grumbled, frowning at him. “It’s like leaning against wood.”

Shrugging slightly, Harry bit his lip. “Sorry.”

A little groan came from Draco as he sat up from where he’d been flopped against Harry. “What’s gotten into you now? You were so much better at the beginning of break, and now you’ve gone all
Harry started to give another shrug, but aborted the movement half-way through. “I don’t really like doing nothing, I guess. Seems like a waste.”

That earned him a half-frustrated look, and Harry glanced away just in time to catch the fireplace flare green. After a moment, Snape stepped through, brushing off a bit of soot that clung to his sleeves. “Hello, Severus.” Harry greeted pleasantly, glad for the interruption. The professor shot him a slightly startled look, most likely at the tone. When their eyes met, Harry felt a flash of irritation, and looked away quickly. “Thanks for the book - it looks good. And probably pretty useful.”

“I’m glad. The Art of War focuses more on army tactics than case-by-case strategy, but it will probably be helpful all the same.” Snape replied with a nod. “However, my main purpose was that you might enjoy it, rather than as an instruction manual.” Harry played with the edge of his shirt, feeling slightly uncomfortable for some reason, but nodded.

He was spared having to say something in response when Mrs. Weasley bustled in, probably summoned by the noise and light of the Floo. “Oh, Severus, hello! Time must have slipped my mind - I should go set the table, then.”

Snape opened his mouth for some pleasantry or another, but was interrupted by Harry, who started to get up. “I can help with that.”

“Oh, no, dear.” Mrs. Weasley shook her head fondly. “You’ve done plenty already - this week, in fact. It’s just a quick charm.” She smiled at him. “Thank you again for all your hard work - this house has never looked better.”

Feeling two intense stares at his back, Harry sat back down and slumped forward a bit, avoiding looking at Snape and Draco. “What exactly has Harry been doing?” The professor asked, voice light, but with something sharp behind it.

Blinking slightly at his tone, Mrs. Weasley frowned. “He’s been doing some cleaning at night when he can’t sleep, the poor dear. I know the feeling. In times like these it’s nice to do something productive-”

“Harry,” Draco cut in, voice flat. “You’ve not been sleeping?”

Something like guilt churned in Harry’s stomach, and he bit his lip, refusing to answer. Instead, Mrs. Weasley gave a huff. “Now, I know you might not put much stock in it, but doing small tasks like chores can be helpful against stress.”

Snape took a step closer to Harry, his form blocking the light of the fireplace. Feeling slightly claustrophobic, Harry leaned back against the couch and away from the man. “If it is indeed simply a coping mechanism, that’s fine. But if it’s a reinforcement of a behavior learned from the Dursleys…” Harry would have bet money that Snape learned that phrase from a muggle psychology book. The knowledge didn’t make him feel any better.

A hiss escaped Mrs. Weasley, and Harry could practically hear her going over their past conversations with a new eye. His muscles tensed as he prepared to make his escape, but Draco must have felt the movement, because he slipped his fingers between Harry’s and clanged them tightly.

Damn.

Letting out a low sigh, Harry gazed down at his feet. “‘S what I’m good at.” He mumbled, not sure if the words were for them or for him. “I can do that sort of thing. It’s useful.”
“You realize you don’t have to prove your worth.” Draco drawled. Harry could hear shuffling over his head, like the adults were glaring at the Malfoy heir, but he was grateful for the tone. It felt more normal, and less like he was being surrounded in some sort of therapy session. He squeezed the hand surrounding his in something like thanks, and Draco shifted a bit closer in response.

Glancing at him for a moment, Harry shrugged. “I guess. But it was just... something that mattered, you know? Something that made a difference, if only in this house.” His left hand twitched slightly, and he clenched it to hide the movement. When a larger hand closed over it, he knew he’d failed.

Snape’s voice came from close enough that he could practically feel the vibrations of it. “Please do not tell me that you are buying into that cow’s words.” Harry shrugged and shook his head, but the movement was weak, even to him. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Mrs. Weasley disappear towards the kitchen. The sigh that came from Snape was strong enough to ruffle his hair. “This,” He moved his hand off Harry’s and tapped one long finger against the word ‘matter’. “Serves the same purpose as the Dark Mark. It acts as a constant reminder of a negative message. In this case, it wants to undermine your self-confidence. While we cannot make the scars themselves go away, we can change the message.” He paused, and the atmosphere felt slightly charged in the wait. “How about ‘Umbridge is a bitch’?”

Hearing the normally proper voice curse made Harry snort, and the ghost of a smile crossed his lips. “I don’t think I need the scars for that.”

“Perhaps not.” Snape replied, and Harry heard the shift of cloth that meant he’d shrugged. “But it’s certainly more true than the idea that you do not matter.” He spat out the last words like they left a bad taste in his mouth as he stood. With one last light pat on the head, barely more physical than the air from his sigh, Snape made his exit.

For a long moment after he left, there was silence. Then Draco pushed at Harry with his shoulder until the smaller boy was laying flat on the couch, and then moved so he was over him. Then he smirked. “You know, you can’t be useless. It’s impossible.”

Arching one eyebrow, Harry send him a dry look. “And why is that?”

“Because you’re too good a kisser. I could keep you just for that.” With that, Draco swooped down to press a kiss to the side of Harry’s mouth. Chuckling, Harry tangled his legs with Draco’s and reached up to move the blonde’s head until their lips met.

Harry was sure he’d had some retort to that, but he couldn’t remember it at the moment.

~*~

The next morning was rather subdued. They ate breakfast and talked about things for school and in life. It was so relaxed that Harry easily let stress roll off of him, out of him, and enjoyed his pancakes and sausage without much of a production. He planned on helping Fred and George with their potions later, and maybe sneaking out back to play with the snow, but he had no large plans. He knew that Mr. Weasley would be arriving back the next day and that work had to be done, but most of it was advanced magic.

Harry was loitering on the thought that he could do pretty much nothing all day.

He showered and changed into fresh clothes and was lounging on his bed, letting Ananta coil about his body and squeeze in lazy pulses as he waited for Fred and George to get up. He turned the page in Art of War before looking up at a knock to his door frame. He sat up slightly at the sight of Severus standing in the frame.
“Professor, er... Severus. Can I help you with anything?”

“I was going to work on some of former Professor Lupin’s Wolfsbane potion, I thought you might like to assist me.”

Harry gave a lazy, lopsided grin. “Sure, I mean, yeah. Yes. Yes I would.”

Severus eyed him for a long moment. “Very well, please meet me in the kitchen in ten minutes and put on something less loose.” He gestured to Harry’s hanging sleeves and Harry gave a quick nod.

With that Snape exited and Harry sat up more, before pulling off his loose shirt and pulling on another. He peered down at his lazy snake before ordering him to follow before heading down the stairs and into the kitchen after a few minutes of waiting. He smiled when he entered the kitchen and watched the familiar sight of Severus setting up. The Potions Master looked down when Ananta gave him a nudge with his beak and peered over at Harry. Harry shrugged.

“He’s getting lazy.”

“Very well. Get him onto the table.”

Harry guided Ananta up as Snape charmed the fire under the cauldron. The snake let out a happy noise before curling round the silver cauldron Harry had gifted Snape with in his second year. Snape started to add the base ingredients as Harry sat and observed. He knew this part was the trickiest and out of respect for Professor Lupin he didn’t want to get in the way and screw things up.

“You seem to be in a much lighter mood, as of late.”

“Yeah. I think I needed a break from everything, you know? A bit of space to breathe.”

Snape gave a absent nod and threw a few leaves of hellebore into the cauldron. He let the potion stew for a few minutes, his eyes not focused on it, but drifting back to it every so often. “I have some questions for you. Headmaster Dumbledore suggested something to me which I find quite preposterous, but I am curious nevertheless, would you indulge in answering them?”

“Of course.” Harry shifted a bit and Severus added something to the cauldron before charming it.

“Now, when you visited me the night Mr. Weasley was attacked you mentioned something about a snake?”

“Yeah, uh... Nagini. It’s his snake. It was in the graveyard last year. She’s big like Ananta, but her colouring was completely different.”

Severus nodded but didn’t say anything for a moment. “So, when you were observing --”

“I wasn’t observing, sir. I was participating. I was Nagini.” Harry shifted a bit, feeling uncomfortable. “She was looking for something but Mr. Weasley was there and...”

Snape gave a solemn nod of understanding. “Then perhaps Professor Dumbledore is right and some Occulmency lessons would be wise.”

“Some what?”

“It is a type of magic used to prevent persons of ill intent from invading your mind.”

“Professor Dumbledore thinks...” Harry’s brows creased. “Thinks I’ve been too open?”
“Indeed. I gather he thinks there may be a connection between you and the Dark Lord, but he will not divulge his evidence or his theories to me.” Snape looked displeased for a moment before standing and moving to brew some tea. “However, I can assist you in helping to control your emotions and shield your mind.”

“Severus you’re already doing so much for me, I couldn’t ask -”

“I’m offering. And it will help you in the battle against the Dark Lord. It is for the betterment of your magic.” Severus took a long sip of his steeping tea before turning the cup in his fingers and frowning at the watery taste. He focused back on Harry. “We can attempt to do some tomorrow night and when we return to Hogwarts - you will do one week of potions and one week of Occlumency in rotations so we do not take up more days than necessary.”

“I...” Harry nodded and then looked to the potion. “It’s ready for the quicksilver.”

Severus’ eyes drifted to the cauldron. “So it is. You may add it. Nine drops.”

Harry dutifully added the next ingredient, feeling nervous and light at the same time.

~*~

“Absolutely not!” Sirius barked, frowning over Harry's head at Snape.

Bristling, Harry took a step back so he was in Sirius' line of sight. “Why not?” He demanded in turn, voice rough with frustration. He could hear his professor shift behind him, and hoped the man wasn't doing anything to anger Sirius more.

The low growl that came from his Godfather dashed those hopes. “You spend more than enough time with that man for my tastes.” Harry had thought it was only Slytherins who could make a simple word like 'man' sound like some sort of terrible disease. Apparently not. “Who knows what he's doing to you!”

“Teaching. That's what he's doing.” Harry responded dryly, but he was ignored as Sirius took a threatening step forward. “This is ridiculous! Occlumency is something I need, if these visions are going to keep up.”

Bright blue eyes still trained on the professor, Sirius made a little jerking motion with his shoulders. “Seems to me like they've been pretty useful. And if Professor Dumbledore wanted you to learn it, why didn't he come and say it?”

And they were off. Again. Shoving his hands in his pocket, Harry frowned down at the floor as Snape snapped back that Dumbledore was a very busy man, you imbecile. His Godfather's words had hit a little too close to home – some part of Harry did want to keep getting these visions. They'd saved Mr. Weasley's life, after all, and they were his only source of information. But, his self-preservation instincts were screaming at him that they fleeting, terrifying shows weren't worth Voldemort being able to get inside his head. Not to mention that he'd not been so desperate for information over the past couple of weeks – maybe it was being back at Grimmauld Place, but the need he'd had to know wasn't as all-consuming.

“-but I'm sure you aren't capable of understanding that, Black.”

“Oh, like you're one to talk, you over grown bat-”

What was quickly consuming him was his irritation at the Order. Most of the time they seemed pretty functional, if limited in scope – they only had about twenty members or so, that he could tell, and the
fact that Voldemort was being very underground about his dealings to avoid detection by the Ministry kept them fairly caged it.

“-haven't changed at all from your Hogwarts days, have you?”

“Says the mutt who still thinks he's twenty-two and the light of life-”

But at the same time, they limited themselves in ways they didn't need to. Just the way conversation would cut of the second they thought any of the 'children' were around was annoying. Even if they wanted to 'save them for the dirty truths of life' or whatever their reasoning was, it happened way too often for Harry's taste. All it meant was they were losing time and probably forgetting topics because they were terrified that the children's precious, precious ears might be tainted. Hell, even if the students were allowed to hear the real facts, didn't mean that they didn't have brains to lend – for example, Hermione and Draco had voiced confusion as to why, if they couldn't get anyone to believe in Voldemort's return, the Order didn't try to capitalize on increased public Death Eater activity, like at the Quidditch Cup, to get people to prepare themselves. Just leaving out Voldemort would increase their ability to spread the word by a good margin. But every time they'd attempted to bring it up, someone – usually Mrs. Weasley – would shush them and tell them not to worry.

As if that was going to happen.

“-just a scared, scrawny little boy, aren't you, Snivellus. Still afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?”

“Tell me, just how hard did you lobby to set up Pettigrew as the Secret Keeper without telling a soul? Anyone with brains could have pointed out the flaws in that brilliant plan.”

Something in Harry snapped. “SHUT UP!”

Both Snape and Sirius froze, turning to stare at Harry. He could feel his face heat with slight anger, and his eyes burned with frustration and the desire to throw things at them both. “Aren't you two supposed to be ADULTS? Yet you waste time arguing about the most stupid, inconsequential things, like a pair of sodding CHILDREN! What sort of example do you think you're setting? Oh, look at the shining examples of Order members we have here! Can't even get over a RIDICULOUS school-boy grudge! This is war! Get the hell over yourselves, would you?”

It was like the words were being torn out of him. Harry hadn't even realized he'd been thinking these things, but something about them was raw and aching. “You!” He pointed at Sirius, who jerked in shock. “I'm have Occlumency lessons, since your apparent reasoning for not is that you can't see three feet past your own damn nose. If you have some real concerns, you can bring them up to Dumbledore, because I really don't have the patience to deal with them.” Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the corner of Snape's mouth turn up, and whirled on him. “And you! Cut the smug bullshit act, would you? It doesn't make you seem like the superior person. It makes you seem like an arsehole who would rather hold onto bloody grudge that's older that I am than to do anything worthwhile! And until either of you can fucking deal, I don't want to see either of you!”

Harry stalked out of the kitchen before he could give into the desire to throw the salt and pepper shakers at the pair of them and made his way up the stairs, not really surprised to see several sets of eyes watching him, some with shock and others with dry amusement.

The twins were among the latter, though their faces twisted into masks of terror as he passed, pressing their hands to their hearts and foreheads as they swooned as though overcome with fear. Also despite himself, Harry cracked a tiny smile at their theatrics, even as he rolled his eyes.

A hand grabbed onto the back of his robes, and Harry was dragged back a step until he met Draco's
chest. His boyfriend wrapped an arm around his waist and rested his chin on Harry's shoulder. “That was an unusual bout of temper.” He drawled, and out of his peripheral vision, Harry could just barely see the pale eyebrows rise in curiosity.

Tilting his head to the side, Harry frowned a bit. “Was it? It's not like I've never lost it before.” There was a snort next to his ear.

“Well, normally you go all hissy and quiet when you're really ticked off.” Ron supplied, mouth twisted ruefully. Harry wondered if he was thinking of Second Year.

There was a chuckle at his other side, and Ginny punched his arm playfully. “Didn't know you had it in you, Potter.” She dodged out of the way of his swatting arm, amusement not dented in the least. “We might make a proper Weasley out of you.”

“Merlin forbid.” Draco drawled, ignoring the four glares he got in response. “You might have to dye your hair red. It'd go terrible with my complexion. I'd have to dump you on the spot.”

Twisting around, Harry leaned up so his lips were an inch from Draco's. “I don't suppose I could convince you otherwise?” He smirked.

Behind him, Ron groaned. “Oh, get a room, would you?” He paused, and then added, “And not my room, either.”
Harry woke the morning of New Year's Day in a good mood, for all that had transpired. The longer his time from Hogwarts the better his mood improved and the more the scars on his hand improved. He also owed some of it to Snape and a particularly powerful balm he had made; the scars would never fade completely, but for the moment, unless someone really focused, the scars were barely noticeable, which would make classes and his S.W.O.R.D meetings far less stressful.

He would have his first Occlumency session after lunch in an empty room just off the kitchen Harry suspected had once been a drawing room. Sirius still wasn't happy about it, but due to Harry's adamant behaviour and some soft words from Lupin, Sirius has stopped verbally whinging. He would still glare, and his nostrils would flare, but he had stopped being overtly obvious. Harry was pleased for it, he knew it was hard for all those involved, but the sooner they put the past behind them, the faster they could move on.

Harry hopped off the last step of the creaky stairs, ignoring the way Kreacher grumbled in his direction and shoved his hands in the sides of his jogging trousers. He hadn't felt like getting properly dressed as soon as he woke up, and while sometimes Narcissa would glare at him for wearing the clothes around the house, she never said anything. It was among the few times that Harry felt completely normal, like a normal teenager, with a normal boyfriend, who just so happened to be able to do magic.

He liked those moments.

He slid on his socks over the polished wood floors, through the door into the kitchen after gathering a running start. The somber mood in the air immediately trampled over his sunny one and his shining smile drooped before falling all together.

“What happened?”

Sirius' shoulders were raised in defense and nervousness, Narcissa was sitting across from him, looking prim, but her face was stony, and her eyes were distant. She was holding her tea in both hands, risen halfway between the table and her mouth and frozen in place, elbows gently resting on the tabletop. Molly Weasley turned in her seat to look at him, she tracked her eyes over his face for a long moment, she looked ashen and old and weary.

Harry felt utterly horrible.

He crossed to the table and took his usual seat, no one moved to greet him, they were all oddly frozen in time and space. The *Prophet* was in the middle of the table, sitting there innocently, still closed. The picture on the front page was moving violently and Harry slid the paper toward himself, turning it round so he could read it.

MASS BREAKOUT FROM AZKABAN (see page two for details)

Harry thumbed through the paper, opening it to the appointed page. *Mayhem at High Security Prison: Black To Blame*. He scowled at the subtitle and skimmed the article. Ten escaped prisoners, most of them Death Eaters; Dolohov, Mulciber, Rookwood, Travers, Rastaban LeStrange, Rudolphus LeStrange, Bellatrix LeStrange (cousin of fellow escapee Sirius Black)... Harry lowered the paper feeling numb. Bellatrix LeStrange... The one who had done those unspeakable things to Neville's parents. Draco's aunt. Narcissa's sister...
“I know the LeStranges are in Azkaban... They will be rewarded... Yes, yes... Rewarded...” Harry squeezed his eyes tight so hard it was painful as the memory of Voldemort’s voice collided into his brain, filling him up. He curled his hands tightly around the edges of the paper, feeling his nails tear it.

This was bad.

This was beyond bad.

He folded up the paper calmly and laid it down on the table before pushing back from his chair and stood from the table. He walked back to his room where he shut the door, locked it and jammed a chair under it for good measure. He climbed back into bed, pulled the covers over his head, curled up in a ball, and ignored the world.

Was it possible to quit being the “Saviour of the Wizarding World”?

~*~

Harry was still feeling off balance when he slipped into the drawling room. Severus was already waiting for him, seated in one of the carved wooden seats, eyes tracing over the pattern of decay and yellowing of the wallpaper. When he noticed the boy entered, he nodded and stood. “Are you ready to begin?”

“Yeah,” Harry replied with a nod, resisting the urge to bite at his bottom lip. “So... how is this going to go, exactly?”

Letting out a low gust of air, Severus tilted his head slightly. “There is a spell - *Legilimens* which allows me access into your mind. I will go through your memories and experiences, and it will be your job to expel me.”

Unease raced through Harry, and he swallowed. “You can read my mind?”

Severus shot him an impatient look. “Of course I can’t – this merely gives me visual and auditory impressions. Like a memory in a pensive, if you require the analogy. It's possible for me to also feel some of your emotions, but that is the limit of the spell. There is no way for me to cast a spell and tell you what number between one and one hundred you're thinking of.” He rolled his eyes like the idea was ridiculous, and Harry couldn't help bristling a bit. Normally he could brush off Severus' somewhat condescending tone, but he was already on edge from the earlier news.

With a jolt, Harry realized that was probably the reason behind Severus' slightly surely attitude as well. The knowledge helped to push away some of his irritation. “Alright. How am I supposed to expel you, exactly?”

The professor paused, looking like he was considering several options. “When we return to Hogwarts, you should search through the library for any texts they have on the subject. They should give you other methods that may suit you better. For now, we will try having you clear your mind.”

“‘Clear my mind’? What, think of a brick wall or something?”

That earned him a dry look. “Of course not. If it was that simple, any dunderhead could preform this kind of magic. Focus on a location of some sort, real or imaginary. Whatever it is, the place will have to be highly detailed. Now, take a minute to come up with your setting, and we will begin.”

For a long moment, Harry's mind whirled, slightly panicked. What place could he possibly choose? But then he remembered a summer night over two years ago, where Draco had calmed him in a
much similar manner. He'd used the Slytherin dorms then, hadn't he? Although he hadn't focused on it since, the Common Room was still something he could remember almost down to the last detail – he'd certainly drawn it enough times by this point for that.

Giving his professor a nod, Harry closed his eyes and concentrated on that mental image, remembering the details of the carvings on the fire-place, and the exact colour of the wood of the chairs... “Ready,” He murmured, feeling almost as though any sound would melt the picture away like fog in the morning sun.

There was a short, slightly tense pause, before Severus spoke. “I warn you now; I will not be kind in the memories I choose. The purpose is to motivate you further – the more you want me out, the easier it will be to expel me. Understand?” Harry just nodded, and Severus took a deep breath. “Legilimens!”

One long moment passed, and Harry was able to keep the Common Room at the forefront of his mind. Across from where he was 'standing', he could see something like a ghostly impression of Severus. The shape was too blurry to see his expression, but the way the part of him that was the head moved from side to side gave Harry the distinct feeling he was examining the location.

And then there was a load, all too familiar roar, and the Slytherin dorms seemed to become consumed by flame. Then Harry was standing in the field they'd used for the First Task, breathing heavily, a much smaller Ananta constricting around his chest, and throat sore from hissed screams. The dragon was staring him down, looking angry and defensive and like it was about to ignore what he was saying and just fry him...

'Concentrate!' Harry suddenly heard, and he snapped his eyes closed, ignoring what his senses were telling him and focusing on the Common Room.

All his instincts were telling him to be on alert, and so his eyes opened almost of their own accord. The world around him had gotten slightly darker, and everything seemed lit by the odd green lighting that was commonly used in the dungeons. But it wasn't enough, he needed-

And suddenly the First Task was gone, replaced by the long, disgusting hallway leading towards the Chamber of Secrets. Pansy and Draco were slightly behind him, as was Lockhart, who had Pansy's wand as was shouting out that horrible spell and then there were rocks falling and were they okay?

Panic tried to set into Harry, but he pushed it away, instead focusing it onto his anger, letting it fuel him. His mind began to settle into something sharper, but not towards his mental location. Instead he sensed out for the ghost of Severus, and felt a disturbance further down the tunnel.

Without stopping to think about what exactly he thought he was doing, Harry lashed out mentally at the figure, heat thrumming through his veins. “Out!” The word felt dragged from his lips, burning almost like acid as it wrenched it's way out of him.

Then, suddenly, he realized he'd shouted it physically as well, as his senses re-oriented themselves to show that he was in fact in the drawing room, wand in hand and panting heavily. Severus was not in front of him now, instead a couple of steps to the left. Where he had been, there was a scorch mark on the wall.

“What exactly was that?” Severus snapped at him, dark eyes crackling with irritation. “Congratulations on doing the exact wrong thing. Well done.”

Trying to calm his breathing, Harry lowered his wand, but kept his white-knuckled grip on it. “Worked, didn't it?”
Snorting, Severus looked down his nose at Harry. “No, it did not. Not in a way that would be useful. Using your emotions like that is a weakness. It will give the Dark Lord a straight path to the areas we want to keep him away from.”

Cutting off what wanted to be a growl, Harry shook his head like an angry dog. “What do you want me to do, then? The location thing wasn't working.”

“On the contrary – it was in fact quite successful for a first attempt.” He paused here, a thought clearly occurring to him. “How was it that you were able to come up with such a detailed version in such a short time.”

The change in topic was helping, and Harry let out a low gust of breath, trying to expel his remaining anger with it. “Draco had me do this meditation thing once, back in Third Year. I choose the Common Room then, and since I've drawn it about a hundred times. So, I guess I know it pretty well.”

Severus eyed him and then nodded. “Indeed.” He looked like he wanted to inquire further, but didn't. Harry was thankful – it was a moment he would like to keep between him and Draco, if he could help it.

Judging by the success of the last session, he probably couldn't.

Giving him a critical look, Severus frowned. “Do not assume you will see immediate progress on this venture – Occlumency is a very precise art, that normally takes years to perfect. To believe you can get it down in the first day is pure arrogance.”

There was an awkward silence after that. Accusations of arrogance fell into that awkward grey area they both liked to avoid talking about. Something like nervous energy thrummed through Harry when ever they brought it up, and he always moved the conversation on as quickly as possible. He didn't want to give Severus too much time to think about those things.

They tried the spell a few more times that night, each less successful than the last.

That night, Harry went to bed frustrated and nursing a headache. The corridor visited him again in his dreams, and he was thankful for it. Better than the nightmares he had been expecting.

~*~

The next morning Harry woke up feeling nauseous. A letter from Neville was sitting on the table addressed to Ginny. Her face was dark as she read it, slowly eating her toast. She penned off a letter in reply and sent it off. Harry was glad she and Neville were still so close even though they weren't dating anymore. He was sure Neville needed all the friends he could get. Especially now.

The rest of the day was filled with a strange, melancholy air. They would be back at Hogwarts the next day. Harry was dreading it. His hand ached and he shoved it under the table as he ate his breakfast, despite the sickness in his stomach. He packed his things and spent half of the afternoon finishing his essays.

After finishing his work Harry wandered around the house, cleaning bits and bobs as he went, or talking to various people milling about the house. Sirius was in a somber mood, sitting in the living room with Remus who sat next to him, reading quietly, his feet up on the coffee table. Every now and then Harry would notice Sirius shift slightly and Lupin would look over at him, brush a hand over his arm or leg, and Sirius would still.
Harry wondered if they were together or if they had a friendship. He just couldn't decode.

Perhaps it was both.

He helped make dinner, but only after Molly fussed for about an hour, making him swear he wasn't doing it because “those awful Muggles had rammed the thoughts into his head.” He assured her he wasn't and that he just wanted to help. It took his mind away from the strange clutter inside of his head. It was hard to explain, and he was sure if he tried he would surely get stares, but it was almost as if there was too much stuff for one person inside of his brain. Like someone else had used part of it to dump their luggage.

He set the table in automatic motions and helped plate everything out. He sat at the table when everyone arrived and pushed his food around his plate. He ate the roast chicken everyone said was lovely, but barely tasted a thing. He still spouted off praises of Molly's cooking and in a surprise to himself, swallowed down a second plate even though he wasn't hungry. The food kept him busy; kept his mouth unable to talk.

Harry laid in bed for hours before finally falling asleep with less than two hours before they were meant to wake.

~*~

Getting back to Hogwarts was a blur of panic as the Order tried to get them back through the Floo with minimum problems. Sirius tried to go with them, but he was soundly vetoed by just about every adult. Instead he pulled Harry aside, shoved a strangely shaped package into his hands and told in “In case you need it.” Then he gave him a big hug and Harry was sent off with the rest of them to school.

Hogwarts was cold compared to the warmth of Number Twelve. Harry spent the Sunday with his gaudy Weasley jumper on and thick, hand knit socks on his feet. People trickled into the House slowly, some tossed greetings at him as they walked in, covered in various regalia. Harry nodded at them from his place by the fire. He ate some chocolates, read a while, and tried to keep himself entertained.

After about two hours freezing cold hands grabbed hold of his neck and he jolted hard in the chair and held back a scream. Pansy beamed at him, proud of herself and the revenge she had enacted upon him. She seemed in a better mood. Water under the bridge to her. She sat on the arm of his chair and he watched her for a long moment.

“I have news,” she finally announced in a dramatic low voice.

“Oh? Good news.”

“Well, I figured out why Longbottom and the Weasley girl aren't dating anymore.”

Harry's brow rose as he turned his eyes back to his book. “Did you?”

“She's dating her Charms tutor. Hannah Abbot.”

Harry looked up from his book at her. He hadn't seen any evidence while at Grimmauld Place, then again, he hadn't been looking for any. He looked at Pansy for a moment before nodding his head in an automatic motion. “That's nice. How are you and Blaise?”

“Oh, we're dating again. He sent me these lovely dragon skin boots with rabbits fur. They're so lovely and warm.” Pansy sighed and sifted her now warm fingers through Harry's hair. “What about
“Holiday was good. Draco and I are good, better than good, even. I feel better, Pans, I was a right arse. I just needed to get away.”

Pansy smiled and pressed a light kiss to his temple. “This year is hard on everyone, and you're just in the middle of the maelstrom. It'll get better.” She shook him lightly, making him smile. “If not I'll pummel everyone who bothers you.”

“Wouldn't that hurt?”

“Not if I use a spell!”

Harry snorted at her and she brandished her wand, tracing it in lazy circles. “I've been practicing at home.”

“Hopefully now you'll be better in Charms,” Harry teased. She glowered at him and elbowed him in the shoulder. “Ow! Okay, you're pretty alright.”

Pansy nodded and opened her mouth to say something before flying off the couch with a cry of “boyfriend” towards Blaise.

It really wasn't surprising when Blaise was less forgiving than Pansy. Still, he gave Harry a nod that was at least mostly cordial, and Harry did his best to smile back as warmly as he could. It was, he tried to remind himself, a good thing that Blaise was being so open with his irritation. Had he been really serious about cutting Harry out, he'd be perfectly polite and ice cold towards him.

At least, he hoped so.

The way he was being brushed off just made Harry feel awful, though, which in turn fed his slowly dwindling mood, which just made him be slightly short at his would-be friend. It was a kind of irritation spiral, and Harry wished he could break it, but he couldn't see a way out.

Instead he just stuck close to the fire and put the finishing touches on his Charms essay.

As the week continued on, Harry found his mood plummeting yet again. It wasn't yet near the point of pre-Winter Hols, but it was sliding down with dangerous speed. Everything just seemed to be conspiring to bring him down -- the dread of continuing of the Occlumency lessons, the expectant stares of the members of SWORD, the way Umbridge had seen his hand's improvement as was now watching him closer than ever, looking for a way to 'reeducate' him...

Instead of lashing out, this time Harry did his best to swallow his growing frustrations. He'd already lost one friend over being an irritable arse – no need to make it worse. So far he'd been only slightly successful. If he wasn't paying attention, or didn't think about what he was saying, then he'd make a rude comment or snap.

If anyone noticed that he'd started taking a bit longer to answer, or if he came off seeming slightly flat, no one had said anything. And that was good enough for now.

Harry noticed he was at his worst with Severus. That had been true during the previous term as well, but it seemed almost more focused, now, rather than the vague irritation of before. Most of it stemmed from how much he was beginning to hate Occlumency. With a burning passion. He'd tried a few other techniques, but due to the level of detail he was able to produce with the Common Room one, Severus had insisted they stick to that one.
This particular session, Severus had dragged him through his memories of the Second Task and a detention with Umbridge. After that one, the professor had told him to rest, and to practice keeping up the mental image before he slept.

Harry had zero faith that this was doing anything but giving him headaches and making him resent Severus. But, hey, if Dumbledore said it would work. Honestly, he normally had nothing against the man. However, the more anyone insisted that the man new best, that Harry had to take Occlumency, that the kids couldn't be told anything about the war, that they were to just keep their heads down...

It was worse around the Gryffindors. Hermione seemed to take his word as gospel, and none of the Weasleys had anything but good things to say about the man. But it was like things seemed different across the hall. There were things about Hogwarts that were really starting to bother Harry and that no one seemed interested in fixing – the prejudice against Slytherin being the top of the list. He was really sick of being booed by the majority of the school whenever he went onto the pitch.

Not that he could go on the pitch anymore.

This train of thought was really not helping him right now.

With a huff, he gave the password ('dragon scales') and made his way into the Common Room. It was an odd feeling, being sick of looking at a place he hadn't been since this morning. A quick glance around showed that none of his friends were here. They were probably in the boys' dorm then.

Harry took his sweet time on the way up, taking deep breaths to try and calm himself. He was not going to fuck up any more than he had already.

The door to his dorm was closed, but Harry could just barely make out the voices through the door.

“He's getting that way again. I just... I don't know what's wrong.” Draco was saying.

Harry froze.

“The castle isn't exactly pleasant for anyone right now. But he has been better.” That was Pansy, and from the soft noises it sounded like she was patting him on the back or shoulder.

There was a snort. “Yeah, but for how long.”

“Shut up, Blaise.”

“You know it's true. Look, Harry's my friend. But whatever it is that's going on doesn't mean he can take it out on us.”

A sigh came from Pansy. “You really need to get over that, hun. He snapped at me, I snapped back, it got out of hand, all of that. But he apologized and I accepted it. Can we please all move on?”

There was a grumble from Blaise, and a sound that might have been one of the other two kicking at him. “If he starts acting like a reasonable human being again, I'm fine with that.”

“I just wish I knew what was going on in his head.” That was Draco again, who sounded so hurt that Harry felt his heart breaking. He felt like a monster for making his boyfriend feel that way. “He just seemed so much better during the holidays, and now something is happening and we're just stuck here.”

After that there was just silence. Harry look a long moment to collect himself.
He had to get better control of himself. There were consequences to his actions, and if that meant hurting those people in that room than that was just unacceptable.

No matter what it would take, he'd do better.

After waiting another moment so the timing wouldn't be so suspicious, Harry made his way into the room, forcing himself to smile and joke about Occlumency and be as good a friend as he could. At first they seemed somewhat wary of him, their conversation no doubt still fresh in their minds, but they quickly warmed up to his pleasant attitude.

This had to work. Because Harry couldn't live with it otherwise.

~*~

Harry quickly fell into a pattern of fake smiles that no one saw behind and jokes. He forced it when he woke up. He cracked smiles and jokes and was overly pleasant. He slid the mask the Dursleys had taught him so well firmly into place. He was a good little boy who took orders well and listened and never caused trouble. Slowly Blaise came back around and they were close once more, Harry spent time between classes with Draco, sitting with him, holding him close, he’d kiss him on the cheek, on the temple, chastely on the mouth. He’d watch the way Draco would relax and smile, the ease at which he could feel good about himself... Harry would stap down the jealous feelings he had about the ease with which they dragged out joy while he floundered.

He threw himself into his work. He focused on Occulemcy until he thought his head would split open. He would shove his emotions down as Severus tried to bring them up. He tried to put locks on the trunks and pretty up things to distract. He added familiar features, lit fires in the fire place.

Then instead of going down the familiar path of the Tasks and diving into the Third one as Harry suspected he would, Severus took a sharp turn and attacked the memories of the Dursleys. He had tried to bury them as deep as he could but they were pulled up and out of him like fresh wounds and he was dragged through them like cut glass and hot coals. In his agitation to stop it, Harry lashed out and destroyed half of the glass in the classroom.

When he came back into himself, shaking, on the floor of the empty classroom Severus refused to meet his eyes. Harry left without a word or dismissal and spent the night in bed, curled under his sheets, trying to suppress the urges to cry and vomit. It was a long, sleepless night.

The next day came with the announcement of a SWORD meeting. They gathered in the Room of Requirement and went over their spells. Harry praised the students who had clearly worked hard on their techniques. Harry smiled at their progress, feeling pleased. He walked around the room, eyes sharp, before taking his place at the front once more.

“I think it’s time for you to learn the Patronus Charm.” Excited murmurs ran through the room, and Harry quelled them. “It's a hard, hard charm. I don't expect any of you to get it on the first try. Or even the tenth try. Still... The way to do it is to take your wand and you hold tight to it and think of the happiest, greatest memory you've got. You focus on it, you let it fill you up. You hold on to it until there's nothing left and it has to burst out of you and then you incant *expecto patronum*. Now, I don't expect them to be full bodied, but a shield patronus is just as good.”

“Can you show us again, Harry?” Blaise asked, grinning toward him.

Harry returned the grin and nodded his head. “Sure, of course.”
Taking a deep breath, Harry closed his eyes. He focused hard, on curling in bed with Draco, feeling him close, the fingers sifting through his hair. He took in a few deep breaths and cast. He opened his eyes and watched the familiar silver smoke curl into the shape of his hyena before it flickered and disappeared. He frowned deeply and then looked at his wand. He inspected the implement closely before looking at the group and giving a light shrug.

“I must have too much on my mind.”

Hermione nodded gravely. “You mustn’t let your mind wander, Harry. No matter, we’ve seen it before, I think we can go from that. Who wants to start?”

“I’ll give it a try, Harry Potter.”

Eyes turned to Luna Lovegood as she stepped out of the line and smiled dazedly. Her wild, blonde hair seemed flyaway as she pulled her wand from behind her ear. She cleared her throat and closed her eyes. She was still for a moment before flourishing her wand with a quiet ‘expecto patronum’. Silvery mist spouted from the tip of her wand before curling about in the shape of a hare that hopped about aimlessly.

Hermione gaped. “But...”

Luna smiled at it, her eyes darting about the room as it hopped. “Oh, how lovely.”

After a few moments the rabbit stopped hopping and disappeared and Luna returned to her place in line. Harry watched her for a moment, jealous she was so carefree that she could cast the charm without a thought. He was curious, wondering if perhaps she had cast the charm before. He scolded himself and pushed the thought aside.

“Alright, good job Luna, now, everyone give it a try.”

Harry leaned against the wall, frowning internally at his inability to cast while he watched everyone work.

~*~

Umbridge had gone mad. Over the past few weeks, directives from the High Inquisitor were almost as common as breakfast, and her class examinations had reached a whole new level of awkward.

She had been in three of Harry’s classes - Potions, Care of Magical Creatures, and Divination. All three had been a disaster. Umbridge obviously despised Hagrid from the get go, and his lesson on Thestrals (which Harry now knew were the creatures that drew the school carriages, and which could only be seen by those who had viewed death. Harry decided not to announce that he was capable of seeing them, in all their creepy skeletal glory. It seemed like a pretty personal thing) had resulted in the half-giant becoming a stuttering nervous wreck. And from the way she’d commented and wrote everything he did down with disapproving little noises, Harry really couldn’t blame him. He didn’t think Hagrid had any other place to go, after all.

Potions had been nerve-wracking for a different reason. Severus obviously didn’t give a damn about Umbridge’s opinion, and he spent the entire class sending subtle jabs her way. The High Inquisitor attempted to do the same disapproval routine she used on the other teachers, but Harry figured it would probably be hard to replace Severus - not many people had a mastery in their subject, and fewer still would be willing to spend 9 months surrounded by teenagers.

Still, it worried Harry to see her examine his classes like that, especially since he’d made no secret of being his mentor. It wouldn’t surprise him if that woman would fire him just to get at him.
But by far the worst was Trelawney. Harry wasn’t really sure what Umbridge’s problem with her was. She seemed to really dislike the mysticism and the drama that the Divination professor wrapped herself in, but that really wasn’t enough for the utter distaste she showed.

And so it really wasn’t much of a surprise when Umbridge decided to get her fired.

It was actually Trelawney’s screams that caught Harry, Draco, Pansy and Blaise’s attention on the way to the Great Hall. She was openly sobbing, half-collapsed onto the stairs that led out of the castle. Umbridge was standing not too far away, arms crossed under her bright pink shawl. She wasn’t truly smiling, but her expression had a kind of twist to it that showed exactly how much she was enjoying this.

“You can’t do this!” The Divination Professor sounded broken, and Harry felt pity choke him. He had never been fond of the woman, but this was just sad. “Hogwarts has been my home for sixteen years! I’ve no where else to go!”

Giving a little sniff, Umbridge looked down at Trelawney, who had finally sunk all the way down to her knees. “Hogwarts was your home.” That earned her a whimpering choke, which Umbridge seemed to almost relish. “But the Minister has co-signed the order for your immediate dismissal. Now, if you would kindly take your bags and go already. You are embarrassing this establishment.”

Rage suddenly boiled up in Harry. Some part of him was demanding that he tell Umbridge just who was the embarrassment here. It took quite a lot of will power to hold him self back, and in he end he had to dig his fingernails into his left hand instead, and hope he wouldn’t leave any marks for his friends to see later. He glanced around at anything but the bitch, spotting Hermione’s dorm mates clinging to each other, eyes wide and wet. From behind them, McGonagall emerged, pushing her way through the students to Trelawney, who was clutching one of her two large suitcases to her chest as she continued to sob.

Despite the well known animosity between the two professors, McGonagall wasted no time in comforting her, pressing a hanky into Trelawney’s shaking hands and patting her back calmly. “Don’t worry, Sibyll, calm yourself. Go on, blow now, and take a deep breath. That’s it. You don’t have to leave Hogwarts.”

“Oh, really, now?” Umbridge interrupted, voice sharp and dark. “And exactly what authority do you make that statement under?”

There was the sound of a clearing throat, before Dumbledore spoke up. “Mine, as it would happen.”

The sight of the Headmaster making his way over drove Harry’s rage to new heights, and he had to close his eyes for a long moment to keep from doing... something. Something bad. When he was back in control of himself, he found Umbridge and Dumbledore in the middle of a mildly worded but heated argument about Trelawney’s status. Apparently the Headmaster could still control who could and who could not stay at Hogwarts, regardless of whether they were teaching. Good for him some part of Harry snarled, and he pushed it back as hard as he could. It was good. Much as he didn’t like the Divination Professor, he had never wanted to see her pushed down to this state. Not to mention it was a real kick in the teeth for Umbridge.

And then there was a scuffle over the appointment of a new professor, and Dumbledore revealed that he already had one lined up, which turned out to be a centaur that looked vaguely familiar. That would make for interesting class. “So how long did he know this was going to happen for?” Harry almost didn’t recognize his voice, since it came out slightly low and gravely from fighting back emotions.
“Umbitch probably had to show it to him before sending it ot the Minister.” Pansy whispered back with a shrug.

On her other side, Blaise arched an eyebrow. “Besides, she’s not exactly been subtle about hatred of her, has she? It was kind of between Trelawney and Hagrid.”

Part of him rioted against the explanations, determined to find things wrong with Dumbledore. He gave a shrug instead, not wanting to have to agree, but knowing it would seem strange for him to to reply. “I guess.”

The four made their way into the Great Hall as the crowd began to fall apart, and Harry cast one last look at Umbridge’s flabbergasted expression. It should have been funny, but all Harry could think of was that she was going to want revenge. And that didn’t bode well for him.

~*~

Harry spent the next day hiding curled up under his bed while everyone else went to Hogsmeade, sure that it was next to be chopped by Umbridge. Harry thought in the dark confining space, and decided that he had to do something. There was talk of a Inquisitorial Squad taking over to police the areas Umbridge couldn’t get to.

A hour before everyone was set to return Harry crawled out from under his bed and wrote a note telling Draco he was in the library. He headed off down the halls, killing time until people returned from Hogsmeade, and Severus, who was begrudgingly chaperoning the trip would also return. And this week was an Occulmency week.

Tomorrow was Quidditch, Ravenclaw versus Gryffindor.

Harry turned down the hall, feeling grumpy. He bypassed the Library and instead kept wandering. He had no real destination, he just felt restless. The headaches and bad moods had returned in full force, and while no one was any the wiser, Harry felt lonelier because of it, because he had hidden it so well no one was concerned.

Harry walked and walked through the long, winding halls, up and down staircases until he stopped because his legs were aching. He leaned against the wall, looking out the window over the frosty lake and felt the oddest sense of deja vu. He straightened and turned to his left and walked a few feet. He tried the classroom door and opened it. The door swung easily and he stepped inside of the empty class room, covered in a layer of dust and slightly chilled.

He closed the door behind him. He walked the length of the class room, eyes searching curiously. It was light outside, but the view from the window was the same. This was the classroom he had found the mirror to see his parents in first year. It was gone now, and Harry found himself saddened by the reality of the fact, but he sat down on the floor and then laid down on it. He stretched out, no doubt smudging up his robes with dust. The floor was hard and cold, but somehow comforting. He stared up at the high, vaulted ceiling and its cobwebs and closed his eyes.

He never went to Occulmency.

~*~

The next day fell on them quickly. Harry avoided the chance of running into Snape before Quidditch. The prospect of watching the sport comforted Harry. He ate breakfast with his back to the Head Table, ignoring most of the excited chatter and bets that were flying around the table and simply kept his head down and ate his food. He lounged in his bed for the better part of an hour
before going to the game, and he was swept into his group of friends, his loner attitude from the previous day forgotten.

It was cold out. They were all bundled in thick material, and Millicent even had warm looking ear muffs clamped over her ears as she booed Gryffindor. She was friends with Hermione, true, but when it came to Quidditch, since it wasn’t Slytherin playing Millicent rooted for the Ravenclaw team. Most of the time if it was a Hufflepuff-Gryffindor match she wouldn’t even show.

Harry watched one of the chasers on the Ravenclaw team weave to avoid a Bludger and snagged the Quaffle that Katie Bell had tossed for Ginny Weasley and lobbed it hard. Ron hadn’t even seen the ball coming and it soared through the wide open ring. He was distracted and Harry couldn’t help but be curious why. He followed Ron’s gaze toward the further end of the Slytherin stand. A banner had been enchanted to float over the heads of students and every so often the words changed. Harry tried to make out the message. After a bit of staring it seemed obvious it was a jeering song.

As the game wore on more and more Slytherins stared to sing along with the crude lyrics on the banner. He was actually shocked when Millicent, who was standing beside him, belted out the lyrics as loudly as she could.

Weasley cannot save a thing,  
He cannot block a single ring,  
That’s why Slytherins all sing:  
Weasley is our King.

Weasley was born in a bin  
He always lets the Quaffle in  
That’s why Slytherins all sing:  
Weasley is our King.

Weasley is our King,  
Weasley is our King,  
Weasley will make sure we win  
Weasley is our King.

The chant was obviously doing its job since Ron was stuttering and hesitating on his broom. His face was beet red and he fumbled with balls or missed them all together. It lead to a crippling defeat of 240 to 60 for Ravenclaw. Harry felt dreadful for Ron as he watched as his fellow Slytherins shuffled down the stands. He remained, watching as Hermione ran toward the downtrodden Weasley and flung her arms around him. Millicent made a noise behind him and he tossed a quick glance over his shoulder, watching the way her lip curled. She shoved past him hard and rude, and made a circling motion with her wand. The banner, which was now blank, furled up tightly and she snatched it in her fist and stomped down the stairs.

Harry merged into the flow of people, confused as hell.

He had almost managed to make it to the Common Room when he felt a set of long, slender fingers curl around his upper arm and yank him out of line. He knew better than to resist as he was led down the hall and into the Potions classroom. When his arm was released he rubbed it once, gingerly. and turned his gaze toward Snape, who was watching him with a dispassionate, unimpressed look.

“Why were you absent from yesterday’s lesson?”
“I was feeling ill, Professor.”

“Yet you seem to have made a miraculous recovery to attend the Quidditch match today.”

“I went to bed early.”

Snape’s thin lips turned down in a frown. He shifted, his exterior robes thick, with a large scarf about his neck, and he studied Harry. “I will assume that you practiced on your own.”

“Of course, Professor.”

“Have the headaches or unpleasant dreams returned?”

Harry hesitated and hated himself for it. Snape’s eyes turned steely and he nodded once, sharply to himself.

“I see. Tonight after dinner we will make up for the time lost yesterday. Do not be late.”

Harry watched him leave and returned to the Common Room feeling anxious and pained.

~*~

SWORD really was the highlight of Harry’s day. Even when he was tired and achy from Occlumency, and jittery from his continued suppression of his emotions, watching the students learn how to protect themselves and the knowledge that he was the one helping them put a glowing bit of warmth in his chest that took days to wear off.

Honestly, it might be the reason he wasn’t crazy already.

Today they were doing their last session on Patroni. From what Severus and Remus had said, Harry had assumed that only a few of them would be able to produce a decent shield, much less a full-fledged corporeal animal.

But by this point over the half the group had managed to manifest some creature or another. Currently, Draco was sitting on one of the bean bag chairs, his swan preening over his shoulder, sending odd glances towards where Blaise’s eerie looking Black Widow was dodging between the vaguely solid looking shield Pansy had managed. On the other side of the room, Hermione’s otter swam through the air, above where Ginny’s horse was bucking restlessly over Ron’s dog (some sort of terrier?). A short distance away from them, Millicent’s bear switched between glaring at Cedric’s sleeping lynx and Cho’s swan, and staring over at Hermione.

By this point, the room was fairly crowded, and Harry’s hyena was sticking close to him, panting like it was out of breath. He swore it was slightly darker in colour than normal, which was seriously starting to worry him. Rather than think on that too hard, he continued to coach a nervous Neville through it. Honestly, his real problem was that he thought it was so hard that it was impossible for him. If he’d just relax-

Suddenly, the various chatter around the room gave way to a blaring alarm. Most of the students, Harry included, slapped their hands over their ears in pain. Hermione and Millicent shared a wild-eyed stare, and Harry felt his stomach drop. Both girls turned towards him, as Hermione waved her wand and the siren shut itself off. Neither said a word, but their expressions told Harry all he needed to know.

“Everybody, go! Leave now!” The students blinked at him, even as the girls began to try and usher them out. “What are you waiting for? Run!”
Finally his words sunk in, and there was pandemonium as spells were canceled and everyone scrambled to grab their bags and get out as quickly as possible.

Harry made sure nearly everyone was out before scampering out of the room and nearly running into Draco, who grabbed his sleeve in a white-knuckled grip. Millicent and Hermione were only a few feet ahead, and so he hissed out to them. “What was the alarm set to?”

“If Umbridge was within a hundred feet, and coming towards the room with intent.” Hermione answered, not slowing down as they made their way down the hallway as fast as they dared. It wouldn’t do to look suspicious, after all. “We ran the risk of getting set off on accident, but it seemed better than getting caught.”

Before anyone could respond to that there was a sudden, shouted spell, and Harry felt his limbs snap together, captured by conjured rope. He fell over into Pansy, sending them both tumbling painfully onto the floor. Draco, Blaise and Hermione stopped for them, which made Millicent pause as well, though she looked like she wanted to dart away while she could.

Harry wondered what exactly was stopping her, but a drawling voice from behind interrupted the thought. “Look what we have here.”

Of course it was Nott.

It took a good bit of wriggling for Harry to get off of Pansy and turn around to look at his dorm mate, and he could feel a slight trickle of blood from where he head had hit the floor. Brilliant. Nott sneered down at him, looking very pleased with himself indeed. He was standing in a darkened little alcove, where he had neatly hidden away from them before attacking.

A portion of Harry’s brain congratulated the boy on that. It was a good plan. The rest of him told that bit to shut the hell up.

“Well done, Mr. Nott!” Said a new voice, and Nott preened even as Harry suppressed a groan. Perfect.

He had never seen Umbridge look more pleased, even when she was kicking out Trelawney. “Look what we have here! My, I wonder what the Headmaster will think of this.” Harry heard Hermione take a deep breath in, and Umbridge held up a hand to stop her. “Ah-ah-ah! Not a peep out of you. I think we’ll wait to hear what you have to say.” She made a motion with her hands, and Harry suddenly felt himself be grabbed and heaved up roughly. He twisted his head and caught sight of Crabbe holding the collar of his robes, glowering darkly at him.

More students began to appear around them. Goyle was there too, as well as a number of older Slytherins Harry didn’t know by name. There were a few Ravenclaws mixed in as well. None of them looked particularly pleasant at the moment, and so Harry clamped his mouth shut around his frustration and forced his mind into high gear. He had to think of an explanation, and fast.

The six of them were marched to the Headmaster’s office (Only Umbridge could make ‘Fizzing Whizbee’ sound equal parts sing-song and diabolical), and Harry wished they’d stuck to the dungeons for SWORD. At least then he’d have more time to work on a story.

Harry hadn’t realized so many people could fit in Dumbledore’s office. Along with the Headmaster himself, the room contained McGonagall, Fudge, Percy Weasley, Kingsly Shaklebolt, another Wizard who was probably an Auror as well, given the uniform, and their sizable group.

The look on Fudge’s face as he took in Harry was like a cat with a mouse. He vaguely remembered
Pansy mentioning that her mother had been blocking articles from the Ministry about him, but hadn’t thought it could be so bad.

Apparently it could.

“Caught him running away from the scene of the crime.” Umbridge informed the group, voice prim with just a pinch of glee. “Mr. Nott here caught him with a very nice bit of spellwork.” Percy started scrawling on a piece of parchment at an almost impressive speed, and Harry had to resist the urge to snarl at him. That wouldn’t help their case.

Making a noise that might have been a chuckle some other time, Fudge sighed dramatically. “I assume you know why you’re here, Mr. Potter.”

Yeah, right. Did they expect him to agree? They had the wrong house. “No, sir.” Harry returned, making his eyes go wide and wounded. Fudge looked shocked by his denial, and it was a fight not to roll his eyes.

“We were attacked, completely unprovoked, I might add, by Nott, and now you’re accusing us of wrong doing?” Draco put in, voice sharp and aristocratic, and Harry wanted to cheer. Fudge’s eyes snapped to the blonde like he just noticed he was there. At first his face softened a tad, but then they became sharper than before. He was probably remembering how the funding he usually gotten from the Malfoys had suddenly dried up this past year.

Umbridge cleared her throat. “We caught you running away-”

This time it was Blaise who interrupted, voice just as high-class as Draco’s had been. “I understand running in the halls is against the rules, Ma’am, but I think spell work is far beyond appropriate retaliation.”

Face going red, Fudge frowned. “You are in serious breech of a Ministry decree!”

“What?” Pansy asked, sounded utterly shocked. All that rumor-mongering paid off, apparently. “I don’t know what you mean, Minister.”

Making a frustrated choking sound, Umbridge motioned for someone to come forward. “Never mind their lies - I have proof!”

It was Cho Chang’s friend, Marietta Edgecombe, who came forward, head ducked down and refusing to look at anyone. “Informants are such valuable sources of information, don’t you think?” Fudge asked Dumbledore, voice jolly.

“When they are correct, very much so.” Dumbledore replied, voice just as cheerful. The part of Harry that really disliked the man stirred at the tone, but Harry told it to bugger off. This wasn’t the time.

Placing a thick hand on the girl’s shoulder, Umbridge’s tone dropped into something sickly sweet. “Tell them what you told me, Ms. Edgecombe.” She turned to Fudge and rattled off something about the Ravenclaw’s mother, which seemed to inch up the Minister’s mood. Edgecombe gave a whimper and shook her head, finally peering up at everyone around here. There were bright marks on her face, like she had been stung by a horde of bees, and Harry realized that must be the security Millicent and Hermione had put in. Pity it didn’t stop her before she spilled to Umbridge. The High Inquisitor gave her a disgusted look and shook her head. “Fine, I’ll tell them then.” She grabbed a frighteningly familiar scroll from Nott and shoved it at Fudge. “This is a list of all the members of a secret defense club, lead by Mr. Potter here. And, as Educational Decree Twenty-Four clearly states,
‘All Student Organisations, Societies, Teams, Groups, and Clubs are henceforth disbanded. An Organisation, Society, Team, Group, or Club is hereby defined as a regular meeting of three or more students. Permission to re-form may be sought from the High Inquisitor. No Student Organisation, Society, Team, Group, or Club may exist without the knowledge and approval of the High Inquisitor. Any student found to have formed, or to belong to, an Organisation, Society, Team, Group, or Club that has not been approved by the High Inquisitor will be expelled.’ Clearly this SWORD of theirs is in utter violation of this.” At the words ‘regular meeting’, Harry heard Hermione give a little gasp and felt her shift a bit.

What was it about tha-

Oh. Oh!

Fudge was nodding sagely, and looked like he was about to say something, but Harry spoke before he could. “Oh, I understand now! Clearly there’s been a big misunderstanding. We’ve been having SWORD, yes, but it’s not in violation of the decree.” He paused here, just to watch Umbridge and Fudge’s faces fall. “You see, SWORD isn’t a regularly meeting group - we’re just a group of friends who happen to practice spells together, to help prepare for exams. There is no meeting schedule, no patterns to what we do - whenever everyone has some free time, we just come together as a group to study.” He shrugged, and then turned to Edgecombe, who was watching him with wide eyes. “I’m sure Marietta here just misunderstood what we were doing.”

For the first time in weeks, Harry let the shutters behind his eyes fall, showing the crackling rage beneath. Edgecombe went very, very still, looking like her heart had stopped.

She’d get was coming to her, no doubt.

“But... it’s called ‘SWORD’.” Fudge finally managed. “If it has a name, surely it’s a group!”

Millicent sighed. “SWORD, as in ‘Society for Wizarding Opposition, Revolution and Defense’ is from a novel series, Minister. It was just a joke.”

Fudge stared at her for a long moment, before slowly shaking his head. “I... see...” He cleared his throat. “Be that as it may, I cannot believe that none of you thought that this might be in violation of the decree.” He nodded in agreement with his own words. “Yes, it simply cannot be. However, you are young. Mistakes can be made. And so, I’ll do this. You are all free to go - Except for Mr. Potter.”

There had been relieved shifting behind Harry, but it stilled all at once. “Sir?” Harry managed, feeling his heart stop.

“As the person in charge, the responsibility for this group falls on Mr. Potter. As such, it will be he who faces punishment for it.” Fudge puffed out his chest, like he was being wise and generous.

Next to the Minister, Dumbledore cleared his throat. “Actually, Minister,” Harry could actually see the light go out of Fudge’s eyes. It was a grand sight. “I was the one who signed off on this.”

Fudge slowly turned to look at the Headmaster, who was looking very grave and serious and had his eyes glued to a spot a couple of feet to Harry’s left. “Mr. Potter did have misgivings, and asked me for clarification. I told him it would not be any trouble.”

What did he think he was doing?

“Y-you...” Fudge had to pause to collect himself. “You went against the High Inquisitor?”

“It would seem so.”
“And you were aware of what you were doing?”

“I usually am.”

Now Fudge looked like Christmas had come early. “Weasley, are you writing this down? Good, good! Then I must ask you to come with me, Headmaster.”

The look Dumbledore sent him was dry as parchment. “I’m afraid not. I have a war to see to, after all.”

Once again, the light left Fudge’s eyes. “I’m sorry?”

The Aurors were quicker on the draw than the Minister, and both drew out their wands, pointing them towards the Headmaster. He gave them dry looks, managing to look Grandfatherly and patronizing at the same time. To the Aurors credit (though less to Shakebolt’s, admittedly), their wands didn’t waver.

“What are you waiting for! Arrest him!” Fudge shouted, and suddenly there was noise and light and smoke.

It cleared relatively quickly, and Harry found himself and the rest of the students shielded by McGonagall. Dumbledore was now standing over the stunned forms of the Ministry officials, lightly petting Fawkes. “I hope you will attend to your duties well.” He told the Deputy Headmistress, but there was something about the way he was turned that made it seem like he was indicating Harry. McGonagall gave a sharp nod, and Harry tilted his head slightly in acknowledgement.

And then Fawkes gave a cry, and Headmaster Dumbledore was gone in a burst of flame.

“He’s absolutely barmy.” Millicent muttered, and Harry had to agree, though he at least admitted the man knew how to put on a show..

~*~

Umbridge took over in Dumbledore's absence. Professor McGonnagall tried to fight it as hard as she could as Dumbledore's Deputy Headmistress, but waving Ministry decrees in her face, Umbridge haughtily took the position. In punishment the members of SWORD had to serve detention due to their names being on the list. It may not have been in opposition of Educational Decree Number Twenty-Four, but Umbridge still found it insubordinate and assigned most of them menial labour. She took far too much glee in assigning one Draco Malfoy to scrubbing down the trophy room with Filch for a week.

However, for Harry, she assigned him to writing lines for a month with a shining, devious gleam in her eye. Harry smiled back at her with a forced, sunny smile and wide, innocent eyes. He wrote down the lines with flourish, doing his best to annoy her, sure that he was scratching I do not matter deep into the bones of his hand.

Severus watched him closer, all of his teachers had gotten notice of the SWORD group due to Umbridge's large, unpleasant mouth. Most of them paid it no heed, buying the study group excuse, but Snape watched him, curious as to his motives. He seemed to be able to see through the fog and lies and right down to the truth of the reason the group was formed. Harry did his best to throw up shields around Snape, and while it may not have been completely effective, he did notice a deeper frown on Snape's face. Whether out of annoyance and frustration at his lack of trust, or due to his inability to get through as easily, Harry wasn’t sure.

He pushed on in his classes, studying hard for the approaching O.W.Ls, he didn't want his grades to
falter because of Umbridge or because of the fact he had been holding SWORD meetings more and more often after Christmas to distract him from his bad mood. Now he didn't have the group to fall back on, they had been forced to disband out of safety for themselves and Harry's bad moods increased but he stomped them down and threw himself into studying.

He heard that other members of the group were rebelling in their own ways. He heard that Hermione's S.P.E.W action had powered through further and since it was only her, it wasn't a group and much to Umbridge's dismay, she couldn't do anything about it. Ron and Neville had started Exploding Snap and Chocolate Frog trading groups and though harmless they put up loud, colourful posters all over the castle. Seamus and Dean threw themselves into their betting once more, taking lots for pretty much anything that happened on campus – pools for romantic engagements (Pansy ended up winning twenty Galleons for calling a date between two seventh years) – or bets for Quidditch, thoughts on who was going to win the House Cup, everything that wasn't against the rules went into the pool queue.

Perhaps best of all and most annoying to Umbridge and most satisfying to the student population at large, were Fred and George's tactics. They had spent a large portion of the term before Christmas perfecting their prank objects. Their testing of their wares had gone underground and the trading had gone even further below ground (literally, it happened in the secret passages they had memorized from the Marauder's Map) when Educational Decree Number Twenty-Four had passed.

Now Fred and George and a few students under their guidance and protection, would release prank items at random, but perfectly timed intervals. During meal times, or just before lights out, Quidditch matches, once during a speech "Headmistress" Umbridge was giving... Most of the Prefects turned a blind eye to the activities, the two exceptions were Nott and one Prefect from Ravenclaw that Harry hadn't bothered to learn the name of. Even Hermione and Millicent, two of the most uptight people, learned to look the other way when a "Weasley Wizard Wheeze" beta testing object was released into the Hogwarts population at large. (It was a mutual decision between Hermione and Millicent even if they weren't talking to each other in light of Millicent's prank of the Weasley is our King song, which she had pulled for reasons she refused to explain).

The entire cacophony of events was driving Umbridge utterly batty.

It made Harry smile between fleeting moments of utter rage and despair and blindingly painful headaches that he was sure could kill a man.

He carried on.

~*~

"I'm telling you, mate, the Canons are going to win this year."

Draco snorted from his spot hunched down in a chair in the library. It was mostly empty this late on a week day, but they still had over an hour until light's out. Harry was pouring over a book on Occlumency, figuring if maybe he knew theory it would help him better. Hermione was reading something on Ancient Runes, and Neville was doing some Charms homework. Draco and Ron were talking Quidditch. It was honestly the only thing they could talk about without getting into a fist fight. Okay maybe there had been punches thrown. Once. Twice...

"The Holyhead Harpies are winning. Sorry to burst your insanely stupid bubble."

"It isn't a stupid bubble! You're living in a stupid bubble!"

A loud hushing noise came from Ms. Pince's direction when Ron's voice went a little shrill and he
ducked his head in apology. He pinched his mouth shut and glared at Draco.

“You're wrong, the Canons are going to win.”

Harry folded his hands over his book and turned to glare at the two. “Can we talk about anything except Quidditch?” It came out practically in a snarl. He slammed his book shut and placed it on a passing cart and stood. It hadn't been helpful at all.

They had started the whole conversation to talk about Ron's nerves but hadn't even touched the subject.

Draco blinked before nodding. Clearly not understanding why Harry was so upset when he too had been banned from Quidditch. “Sorry, love.”

Harry forced out a slow breath and nodded. “Sorry, I'm just on edge. You can talk about Quidditch if you want, Ron needs help with his nerves after all.”

Ron went scarlet and nodded his head. “Yeah, I need to learn what the bloody hell to do. I can block just fine when we're practicing but I can't do it when we play. I just lose my confidence.”

“And Millicent is so wonderful with helping,” Hermione murmured quietly, not looking up from her writing.

“She apologized,” Harry tried to soothe.

“She shouldn't have done it in the first place.” Hermione snapped.

“Look, Weasley, what you have to do is learn to push the fact you're watching a game out of your mind. I think that's your biggest problem. As a spectator you don't have to participate. But you're in the game now.”

“Right.” Ron nodded his head. “Gotta stay centered and focused.”

Draco nodded his head again. “Precisely. It's like with anything. Confidence and focus is key. I'd be willing to bet if you learned a focusing trick it'd help with your spell casting too.”

“Oi!”

~*~

Harry entered Severus’ office, hand still throbbing from his latest detention with Umbridge. He had taken to soaking and bandaging it up before coming to these lessons, if only to avoid awkward questions.

The professor didn’t look up when he came in, instead giving a welcoming motion with his hand as he finished grading. He murmured something that sounded suspiciously like ‘dunderheads’ under his breath, scribbling away at the paper in front of him. “Have you been practicing?” He asked.

*He could have at least said hello first,* Harry groused, but gave a jerky nod. “Yes, sir.”

Severus gave him an add look for the ‘sir’, but didn’t say anything. “Has it helped any?”

No. “Yes,” He replied, studying the stack of already graded papers rather than meet the professor’s eye. There was a sigh that hold him his lie had not fooled the man at all, and Severus finally stood and pulled up his wand.
“Let’s test that, then.”

One quick casting later and Harry found himself in the Slytherin Common Room. These days, the green light seemed to do much less to illuminate the dorms, and dark shapes darted past the windows.

He caught sight of a blur of black, but before he could react the floor jerked from under him, and suddenly he was in the Forbidden Forest, watching the dark shape of Voldemort jerk away from the dead Unicorn, coming towards Harry...

The lights flickered green, but before he could come up with a proper block, the scene switched again. They were still on Hogwarts grounds, this time near the lake, and the Dementors floated by in droves, and the cold was driving into his lungs, and there was that awful screaming-

Suddenly the scene seemed to freeze, and then almost zoom in on that noise. Harry saw Severus again, holding very still as he listened. He reached out and pulled, like he was tugging at a line of robe.

Memories flashed by, almost too fast to keep track of. There was getting that photograph at the end of third year, having the clasp made for the Boxing Day party, the photo album from Hagrid, asking Aunt Petunia if he’d ever had a Mummy, and then it stopped.

Harry was standing beside a crib, in which a toddler was sitting up, gripping at the bars. His mother (Mum) was kneeling beside it, whispering soft calming words. He couldn’t make any of them out. He must have been too young to understand.

Shouts rang out from downstairs, and there was the sound of something large and solid hitting the ground. A high-pitched, dreadfully familiar hissing laugh rang out, sounding pleased and triumphant.

No.

His mother stood up suddenly, wand in head, blocking baby Harry from sight of the door. There were footsteps coming up the stairs, loud and ominous and then Voldemort was there, hissing to Lily, who shook her head as tears fell from here eyes.

Nonono.

More words, and Harry began frantically thinking of the Common Room. But every time he tried, some desperate force threw it back away forcing him to stay here, to watch. He looked around, trying to spot Severus, to stop him, to not have to see this, but the man was no where to be found.

And then Voldemort raised his wand and cast the Killing Curse with a casual flick, and Lily Evans crumbled to the floor in a lifeless heap.

No!

The scene shifted to the Slytherin Common Room with the force of a sledgehammer, and then he was back in the real world. Harry fell to his knees, eyes wide and unseeing but dry. His brain was replaying the sight of his mother, dead on the floor, over and over.

“Harry...” Severus sounded honestly ashamed, eyes wide and expression more open than Harry had ever seen it.

Suddenly, holding in his rage and frustration and sadness didn’t seem worth it anymore.
“How dare you!” Harry hissed, eyes burning and muscles so tense he was afraid something would snap. “How DARE you!” Severus started to say something, but a wand pointed at his chest stopped him. Harry was shaking, breath coming out in hot pants, unable to begin to articulate how betrayed and angry he was. The one part of him that wasn’t burning with rage was the portion that had been angry with Severus all year. It was gleeful, encouraging him from the back of his mind.

Slowly shaking his head, Harry took a step back. “I-” He cut himself off with a shake of his head. “Stay away from me.”

“I can’t do that.” Severus replied, voice low and set to soothe. But Harry was in no room to be calmed. Instead he dropped his wand and grabbed the seat placed in front of Severus’ desk, picking it up and throwing it as hard as he could.

Something that large and heavy was almost impossible to throw with accuracy, so it missed the professor and smashed into the wall instead, breaking apart into satisfyingly small pieces. Severus whirled to see the damage, before slowly turning back towards Harry, eyes wide and stunned.

The sensible part of his brain pointed out that his reactions were getting dangerous, and so Harry snarled and snatched his wand back up. “I never want to see you again.” He snapped, voice flat, before he span on his heel and fled.

Despite how his heart twisted in his chest, tears never came.

Harry was still fuming when he got back to the Common Room and stormed his way toward his dorm. Blaise was lounging on his bed, reading and eating some candies when he burst into the room, angrily pulling off his robes, feeling choked and stifled. He couldn't stop seeing her on the floor or hearing that awful screaming.

Merlin, it was so hard to breathe.

“What's wrong, Harry? You look like you're having a fit.”

“Don't wanna talk, Blaise.” Harry managed to get the robes off, leaving him in his shirt, trousers and tie, which he was rapidly loosening.

“Bad Occlumency session?”

“Said I don't want to talk.”

Blaise was quiet for a moment and Harry watched as he returned to reading and eating his snacks. Harry's lip curled unpleasantly, he gulped in air and sat on the edge of his bed, unwrapping the cloth from his hand and examining the scabs. He took to picking at them almost instantly, relishing in the feel of them breaking and bleeding. He wanted to rip off his flesh and bleed out, raw and broken on the floor.

He stopped when two hands took his, and he looked at the dark contrast of Blaise's hands against his and jerked his hand back. His hand and wrist was covered in sticky-warm blood. "Just leave me alone.”

“What happened? I haven't seen you like this in a long while.”

Harry looked up at Blaise's face, the genuine concern in his eyes. “Severus pushed himself in too far. We aren't talking.”

“Did he make you see... um... He-Who-Must --”
“No. Worse.”

“What's worse than --”

“My mother dying.”

Blaise hissed through his teeth and flinched back from Harry. “Sorry, mate. I know how that is.”

“No, you don't. Your mother's alive.”

“But I was there when my father caught ill and died.”

“S'not the same.”

“Fuck you, it isn't. I was seven. I had no idea what was happening.”

“At least you knew your parents!” Harry shoved Blaise off and snatched up his wand and stalked out of the dorm, sliding his wand easily into the holster Tonks had given him he fastened about his thigh. He had taken to carrying it around recently, it made him feel secure from the monsters in his head.

He left the Common Room.

He made his way through the winding corridors up toward the Room of Requirement. He was thinking about just hiding away in the Room of Hidden Things as Draco sometimes called it, and let himself be forgotten. To forget about the war. To live on what the castle provided.

He was walking down the long corridor when he heard someone round behind him and he turned, hand drawing his wand from the holster and pointing it in the direction of the noise. His chest was rising and falling quickly in an anxious, agitated manner.

“Whose there?”

“Well, fancy meeting you here, Potter.”

Harry's hand closed around his wand tighter at the rarely heard sound of Crabbe's voice. “What are you doing up here, Vincent?”

“Could ask you the same, Harry. Sneaking off to your little club again?” Crabbe stepped out of the shadows, his Inquisitorial Squad badge gleaming on his chest.

“Just wandering. Didn't even realize where I was.”

Crabbe sneered. “Sure you were. Came up here to play with your friends. Teach them bad spells that can lop off legs.”

Harry stepped back, managing to give a cool expression and a haughty stance. “I see your dad remembers me, then.”

Crabbe snarled but didn't do anything. “You attacked him completely unprovoked!”

“Right because being a Death Eater is such an innocent pastime. Because following Voldemort --”

“You aren't worthy to say his name!” Crabbe launched forward and shoved at Harry hard, Harry stumbled back and hit the wall, Crabbe's weight pinning him in place. “You aren't worthy of anything, Potter. Not worthy of magic, not worthy of this school, not worthy of the friends you have, and especially not worthy of Slytherin. That's our house. The winning team's house.”
Harry felt bile rise in his throat, felt saliva pool in his mouth, he bared his teeth and spat. Crabbe growled as he started back in disgust and swung at Harry. He caught him in the ribs. Harry staggered, winded, but grinned. He lashed out, quick on his feet, and slammed his fist into Crabbe’s jaw.

Crabbe barely reacted at the blow, but instead grabbed Harry by the shoulders and bent him forward, slamming his knee hard into Harry's stomach and throwing him aside. Harry hit the stone floor winded and in pain, rolling on it as Crabbe charged. Harry pushed up, catching him at the knees and taking him down. They bounced on impact and rolled, Harry ended up on the underside of Crabbe, with a fist to the nose, easily breaking it.

Blood puddled down his face but he felt exhilarated. He was actually smiling as he returned the blows with a fierce voracity. Finally pleased he had the chance to vent the rage that been simmering inside of him for so long. He laughed maniacally as he kicked out with a foot, catching Crabbe like he had caught Dudley many a time on the back of the knee and sending him toppling to the side as he jutted out with his elbow. He caught Crabbe in the mouth and saw him roll onto his hands and knees and spit blood onto the stone.

Harry scrambled up and ran. Crabbe was fast for his size and charged for him like a rhino. Harry skidded down the stairs and spun, kicking when he reached a landing only to be shoved down a few steps. He caught himself before he slid on his back but felt his glasses break in two as a fist connected with his face, giving him what he was sure was going to be an impressive black eye.

With his blurred vision he saw another hit coming and pounced, biting hard into Crabbe's shoulder. He heard shouting in the distance, excited students were running down the halls and watching. Harry was jerked to the side and pummeled in the chest and the face, he was pouring blood and finding it hard to catch his breath but he smiled with his bloodied teeth and split lip.

He wasn't going down.

He kicked with his left leg and slammed Crabbe in the groin, watching in satisfaction as he went down heavily. Standing over him, winded, dazed and wounded, Harry spat again. He straightened, feeling victorious, when a hand grabbed his ankle and yanked. He toppled forward off the last two steps and fell face forward into the landing as he heard Professor McGonagall's shrill Scottish accent trying to fight it's way through the chants of “Fight! Fight! Fight!”. He rolled onto his back, aching, but pleased. When the blobish figure of the Deputy Headmistress invaded his cloudy vision, he let himself be hauled up and dragged toward Hospital feeling victorious.
This was not Harry’s most shining moment.

Between the 150 points Slytherin had lost (75 for both him and Crabbe), the way he was fighting with Blaise again, and his own stand-offish attitude lately, he had not been exactly popular over the last week. He was just done. Done dealing with everyone, done smiling and acting like nothing was wrong, and done holding back the bile that continued to build in him.

Draco and Pansy seemed to have taken up a ‘give him some space’ policy, but they were wasting their time and breath. Blaise had been happy to point that out to them. Of all the things he’d said and done in the past couple of weeks, those words were the only things he regretted. Everyone knew that Blaise’s parents were a very sore subject, and no one was usually stupid enough to bring it up.

But, whatever. It didn’t matter. In fact, Harry was having trouble thinking of anything that mattered.

He had taken to spending all of his free time in the library, studying for the OWLs. It was quiet and distracting and no one bothered him there. The only downside was that once in a while he would come across a spell and think it would be great for SWORD, and then remember exactly how that had ended.

Several of the members of SWORD had approached him, asking if they were going to start it back up, citing that they’d be more careful and isn’t this too important to let go? But Harry had turned them all down. He knew they were right, but it just didn’t seem worth the effort anymore.

The only upside recently was that Severus had taken Harry’s words to heart. He only saw the man during class and meals, and he never even did so much as call on him to answer questions. Which was for the best, because Harry didn’t think he could look at the man and speak coherently. He had actually messed up a potions so badly it was unusable for the first time in years this past class, because he spent the entire time thinking about how much he wanted to throw the cauldron or put the knife to better use, rather than ingredient order.

Of course, that couldn’t hold out for long. Today was Career Advice day.

Harry gave a lot of thought to just not going. After all, it wasn’t like Harry really had a future to worry about - Voldemort was still out there, and he wasn’t going to let Harry Potter live if he could help it. What good could career advice do for him?

But some part of Harry - small and fragile, but still a part - kept up some ridiculous hope that he would live to see his second decade. And that, mixed with the knowledge that he would probably just be tracked down on another day, was why he found himself knocking on Severus’ office and walking into a room with the two people he hated most at the moment, one of whom was sitting behind his desk, and the other in the corner of the room with her damned clipboard.

Those dark eyes roaming over him once as he entered, no doubt taking in the sunk eyes, pale skin, and the bandaged hand. But Harry refused to meet his gaze, and so Severus looked back down at the papers in his lap - no doubt Harry’s record. “Mr. Potter,” He greeted, tone formal. The name sounded wrong, but Harry didn’t comment. “Take a seat, would you?” He gestured to the seat across from the desk, which was one he’d never seen before. He hadn’t just repaired the one Harry threw? “As you’re aware, this meeting is to talk about any careers you might be thinking of after Hogwarts. Have you had any thoughts?”
“Not really,” Harry responded, the sound of his own voice surprising him. It was almost dead. “Didn’t see any point in focusing on it.”

The look on Severus’ face meant he understood the implications, as Umbridge gave a tiny, disapproving cough. They both ignored her.

Flipping through the papers, Severus gave a tiny nod. “I...see. Well, you do have a number of options. You are aware of your prowess in Potions, and you could easily make a living in that field. However, do to your experience, I would suggest other paths for you.”

“Oh?” Harry asked, voice flat. He couldn’t decide if he cared or not. Probably not.

“The reviews for your tutoring sessions were very good, until Educations Decree Twenty-Four required it to disband. The young students found you engaging and helpful. Because of this, I would suggest you consider teaching.”

Umbridge gave that cough again. “I’m not sure I agree with that, Professor.” When neither of them reacted to her words, she continued. “Mr. Potter here as proved himself short tempered and attention-seeking. Personally, I’m beginning to wonder if he isn’t unhinged. Is that really a good person to teach children?” The last line was delivered like she thought she was in a press conference. Both of them continued pretending she wasn’t there.

Setting aside the papers, Severus seemed to be staring directly at Harry’s ear. “With your grades and aptitudes, I would suggest either Potions or Defense Against the Dark Arts. Either of those would require you to go into NEWT levels of that course. While the standards for Defense Against the Dark Arts tend to change each year, for obvious reasons, Potions has always required an O on the OWLs. I’m confident you can get that, however.”

“I think you’ll find, Professor, that according to the memo I sent you, Mr. Potter does not have the grades needed to get into the NEWT levels of my class-”

“When the OWLs focus on ‘diffusion of negative situations via communication’, then I could agree with you. Until then, I will form my own opinion on the matter.”

Umbridge made an affronted little noise. “I am a valued professor here at Hogwarts-”

“You are no such thing.”

“Did you get recommended for teaching?” That stopped both professors, and they turned to look at Harry, who was staring at Severus with a bland gaze. “During your Career Advice session. Did you think about teaching?”

Severus blinked at him for a moment. “No, I did not. I was looking at the Potioneer path.”

Tilting his head slightly, Harry met his eyes for the first time since that disastrous evening. “Why did you take up the position, then?”

“Because Headmaster Dumbledore offered to to me.” Severus replied simply.

With a short nod, Harry stood. “I ask because, going by the examples in this room, teaching is about taking a group of students and telling and doing whatever you please to them, regardless of fact, reasons or morals.” He gave his driest smile. “Frankly, I’m feeling rather insulted at the moment. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” And he left before either could react.

A few days later found Harry studying in an old converted classroom that had been made into a
student study space. Well... Perhaps converted was too polite a term. It was more like the fifth years had co-opted the room into their own haven, transfigured things about how they liked it, and made it their own. Harry was currently sitting by a window pouring over his Charms textbook. There was soft talking at the other end of the room, where people were studying in groups. Harry tended not to bother these days. More often than not he was given a wide berth. He rather liked being left alone.

He looked up at familiar voices and watched as Hermione, Ron, Neville, and Luna filtered in. The three Gryffindors didn't even notice him sitting, hunched in on himself, in the corner of the room. Luna, however, did. She stopped her chatter with Neville and broke away, skipping toward him with a content but distant gaze.

“Hello, Harry Potter.”

Harry looked up from his work toward her and nodded his head. “Luna.”

“That's quite an impressive black eye, was that from the fight the other day?”

“Er... yeah.”

She nodded her head and rocked back and forth on her feet. “They say that Lemitop Oil is good for bruises.”

“I've never heard of that before.”

“They're a rare Asian creature, you see. They live under rocks in Shinto temples.” She nodded her head and tapped on her chin. “Would you like to study with us?”

Harry leaned to the side in his chair and looked to Ron, Hermione and Neville, who all shot him pleasant, fake, weary smiles. He looked back to Luna's impassive face. She was staring up at the ceiling now. “I don't think I'd be very welcome. And I'm almost done here anyway.”

“Okay then.” She turned on her heel and headed back to the Gryffindors, sliding easily into the group as they four of them made their way toward the fireplace. Harry watched them go, feeling an odd pang in his chest.

Several Hufflepuffs were making pineapples dance along the floor, Harry watched it with a bitter smile. So many of the people in the room had belonged to SWORD, he wondered if they still practiced in their spare time like he did. He would sneak off and work on jinxes in the middle of the night, in a silenced room, huddled under his invisibility cloak.

Harry twirled his quill in his fingers before shifting in his seat and closing his Charms book. He flicked his hand through the pile of books beside him before pulling out Umbridge's stupid Defense book. He made a face at it, but pulled it open. He had paid next to no attention in her class due to his severe lack of caring, but with O.W.Ls coming up it was imperative that he studied. He couldn't let his grades tank because of the Ministry's stupid toad faced representative.

After about ten minutes of intense study Harry found his mind wandering. He was staring distractedly out the window toward the Black Lake. It was a hard grey and dotted with whitecaps, he knew earlier that day that Fred and George had been working nearby with Filch, doing disgusting work in the swamp. Harry frowned at the thought, the idea of the manual labour brought his mind back to Draco and he really didn't need, nor want to be thinking of his boyfriend. Or possibly former boyfriend.

After what had happened with Crabbe the two of them weren't talking to one another. Harry wasn't really talking to anyone, at all, come to think of it. The only person in their house who could get a
rise from him, and that was only due to her large stature and inability to give in, it was Millicent. He usually just nodded curtly in her direction and grunted. She would glower back and make an odd, sort of grunt back, but it was more feminine, and less aggressive.

He overheard Nott the other day saying they sounded like a pair of mating Trolls. Millicent had broken a plate over his head in retaliation.

Harry shook his head, settling his wandering mind while trying to clear it. He turned his eyes back to the book in front of him and opened it. He was reading about the basics of “focusing and pointing” when a loud bang sounded from down the hall, quickly followed by a second. Harry’s brow furrowed and he stood, watching as a few others did as well, slowly people made their way into the hall.

Thick orange smoke made it hard to see toward the stairs at the front of the hall. Through the thick of it two bouncing balls made their way over the tile before bouncing hard and exploding into a frenzy of sparkles that zipped in various outlandish shapes down the hall.

Bursting down the other end of the hall, screeching, came Umbridge. She was tailed by Filch and the Inquisitorial Squad, and Harry carefully ducked when she drew near to avoid being seen. She stalked toward the encroaching orange smoke before jumping back when two figures burst from it on brooms. Umbridge fell back against the wall, eyes wide and angry as Fred and George Weasley zoomed up and down the corridor, pulling off tricks on their brooms and releasing more and more of their joke items.

Students in the small study room poured out, cheering and egging the twins on. They followed as Fred and George made their way toward the Great Hall, doing loops and whirls around the ghosts. Tossing up firecrackers and noisemakers whenever they wished. As they reached the Entrance Hall, Fred and George focused on breaking down all the frivolous Educational Decrees that Umbridge had put up, alighting them or sending them tumbling down to the hard floor.

Harry couldn’t help but feel his heart jump with delight as Umbridge and her tyranny was knocked down a few pegs. As her regime was symbolically shattered to pieces. With a loud whoop and a grand finale of explosive, sweet smelling smoke, sparkles, chattering toys and acrobatic tricks the twins were out the door, followed by a rush of students and faculty alike.

Harry watched them go, watched their joy, before he returned to the study center, gathered his things, and returned to his dorm quietly.

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By the time OWLs came around, Harry was wondering how wise it would be to dose himself in Calming Potions. He still was basically not talking to anyone, including Draco, but that had been driven from his mind by the frantic atmosphere. In fact, other than occasionally answering questions in class, Harry wasn’t sure he’d spoken at all for the past few days.

At least his own strange behavior was hidden by the way the other students were reacting. Quite a few of them seemed to be having nervous breakdowns, and those who weren’t were having one of two competitions: The ‘how many hours have you studied today, or the ‘I am the most screwed’.

The professors weren’t helping at all, as they ruthlessly reviewed the past five years worth of information during their classes. It was clear that they were also affected by the maniac tone of the past few weeks, and were pushing harder than they had all year.

When the examiners finally arrived, Harry was surprised that some students hadn’t fainted dead
away. They were a tiny group, and all were elderly witches and witches who had the air of someone highly distinguished, and were led by the oldest and most intimidating of all, a witch by the name of Marshbanks. Apparently she had been the examiner for Dumbledore. It said a lot about the Fifth Years’ stress levels that not one of them cracked a joke about that.

The night between that dinner and the first OWL exam was one of the longest Harry had ever experienced. He spent it studying. It wasn’t like he was sleeping decently anyway.

On the first day was Charms, which wasn’t too terrible. Before lunch was the written exam, which proved to be something of a problem when Harry realized he wasn’t nearly so solid on the spelling of the Latin, rather than how to say it. One or twice he found himself having to try and write it out phonetically, which meant he was sure to have bungered it up.

The practical portion didn’t turn out to be a pain like Harry had half suspected it would. After a quick comment on his name (“The Harry Potter?”), the examiner didn’t treat him any differently than the other students. Considering how long most of them had been doing it, they had probably seen plenty of celebrities come and go. If nothing else, Nott wasn’t going to be able to claim his grades were because of his name.

Once the exams were over, no one relaxed. There wasn’t time. Transfiguration was the next day, followed by Defense Against the Dark Arts. Instead, dinner and the evening were a mess of quizzing and reviewing notes. Harry got two hours of sleep that night, but only because he fell asleep in his book sometime around five.

After that, the exams were something of a blur. Transfiguration went a good deal worse than Charms (several questions he’d ended up leaving completely blank, and on the practical portion he’d managed to turn his kettle into a bobcat rather than a kitten, which had promptly began attacking the other transfigured animals and took 10 minutes to capture).

Once that exam ended, he was startled to end up between Millicent and Hermione at the Slytherin table. Apparently she’d forgotten about being angry in the chaos of the OWLs. Both of them had taken to rehashing the entire exam, comparing answers in low hiss. Several times they managed to drag him into the conversation, mostly when it seemed that he’d flubbed up a question royally. Across the table, Draco sent him a betrayed look, and so Harry had ducked his head and not spoken for the rest of dinner.

Harry barely remembered Herbology once he was finished. He was fairly certain he’d done okay, though he was far more secure of his knowledge of plants used in potions. There may have been Devil’s Snare at some point, but it was also possible that he’d made it up.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was almost a break compared to the last few days. A large number of the written questions were on various Dark creatures, and Harry spend the exam thanking Remus in his head. The practical wasn’t nearly as bad as he’d thought - most of Harry’s experience in that particular field came from being in some sort of peril, whether mortal or simply being caught by Umbridge. Having the chance to do it in such a low pressure environment was almost relaxing in comparison.

When he’d been about to go, the examiner called him back, mentioning that she’d heard he could make a Patronus, and offered him extra credit to prove it. He wasn’t sure he exactly liked the idea that somehow that bit of information had been unleashed into the world, but bit back his reaction to snap and instead cast, focusing on the memory of the Yule Ball. It seemed so far away now...

The first time all he got was wisp. The examiner seemed impressed by this, but Harry frowned and tried again, this time his hyena appeared, panting and looking rather sleepy, but fully formed. Eyes
all over the hall tracked to him, and he saw quite a few members of SWORD turn and speak with
their own examiners. Harry left before he could see them cast.

Friday was examless for Harry, and he spent it curled up in bed with the curtains drawn. He spent
half the day studying for Monday, dreading Potions. It was the exam he was least looking
forward to this year. In the beginning of the year, he'd been terrified of disappointing Severus. Now,
he wasn't sure he could so much as look at a cauldron without wanting to scream. The only time he
during the entire weekend was for meals, which were miserable affairs. Hermione kept switching
between the Gryffindors and Millicent, since the way she was going on about every mistake was
getting on everyone's nervous. Millicent was just as bad, in the opposite way - now that there wasn't
an exam to take apart, she growled at anyone who so much as mentioned the word 'owls', whether
they were referring to the exams or not. Pansy and Draco tried to get Harry into a conversation a few
times, while Blaise avoided all eye contact with him. He ignored all of them, growing increasingly
annoyed at the attempts. Every time his temper started to calm, he'd get a headache and suddenly he
wanted to punch something.

Frankly, it was easier to be alone.

On Monday he managed to keep it together, though he was fairly certain he'd frightened his
examiner a bit. The written portion was fine, even though he wanted to hit himself for not getting a
better description of Polyjuice from the Gryffindors. The practical went about as well, since Severus
wasn't allowed in the room when the exam was going on. Had he been there, Harry was half afraid
he would have thrown the cauldron, potion and all, at him. The color of it had been slightly on the
red-ish side of purple, which he spent the rest of the day obsessing about. Had he added to many
porcupine quills...?

Tuesday had been a bit of a problem, since it was Care of Magical Creatures. The various animals
(nothing more dangerous than knarls) seemed to be made nervous by him. The examiner had assured
him that this was fairly normal during OWLs - the high stress environment tended to get them antsy -
but he still felt like he'd completely buggered it up. He managed a quick wave at Hagrid, who was
watching with clear anxiety from his cabin, before scampering.

Astronomy was split somewhat awkwardly, with the written before lunch and the practical late.
Harry was fairly certain he'd managed to mix up Aquarius and Sagittarius, and was mentally berating
himself on the way to Divination.

The wait for that exam was a new kind of awkward, since the elective had far fewer people, and
Harry ended up rather near Blaise. His friend - should he even still be calling him that? - keep
shooting him looks, emotions switching so fast in his eyes that Harry couldn't keep track. The taller
boy was in constant, if subtle, movement, hands moving from his pockets to behind to back to by his
sides. It was starting to wear down on Harry's already shredded nerves, and he moved over towards
Millicent if only to block out the distraction motions.

The look he earned for that was very clearly anger.

Divination was a disaster, plain and simple. Without Trelawney's morbid streak to fall back on,
Harry knew he didn't stand a chance. As it was, he only remembered the deathly or unfortunate
symbols, and his tendency to find them got him a strange look from the examiner, and some
disapproving scratches to her parchment. On the way out he looked towards Blaise to share a
grimace of distaste, more out of habit than anything, but the other boy was studiously not looking at
him.

Well, at least he never had to take that class again.
It turned out to be a fantastic night for the exam, to the point Harry wondered if there were spells they used to keep clouds away. (Or they just scheduled it on a night predicted to be clear. Either worked).

At first it went fairly smoothly, even though the dark, quiet tower, mixed with the high stress of the past few days, was making him feel tired. He started to go a bit cross-eyed staring through the telescope, making it doubly hard to accurately place the stars on the map.

But after a few hours, there was a commotion that blew all thoughts of sleep from his mind.

The castle doors below them opened with a bang, which startled several students (and made a couple of them nearly knock over their telescopes). At first it seemed like nothing, but then Umbridge (who was mostly just a squat-ish silhouette, but distinctive enough that it wasn't difficult to identify her) came striding out, accompanied by a squad of other, taller shapes.

There was the sound of a barking dog, which quickly proved to be Fang, as the figures made their way closer to his hut. Harry was seated close enough to the house that he couldn't be mistaken for cheating, and so leaned forward a bit, squinting to try and figure out what was going on. It was so dark out, and that far from the castle there were no lights-

Another bang rang out, this time much louder than before. Suddenly, light was streaming from Hagrid's open door, and was immediately struck by six separate stunners. Everyone around Harry gave up focusing on their own tests, turning to watch, and he grabbed his telescope and peered through.

Hagrid was currently surrounded by all six of the figures (Aurors, maybe?), shouting at them as they attempted to take him. It seemed Fang was in on the action for the first time in Harry's memory, growling loudly and jumping at any of the figures who turned their backs on him. The examiners (Tofty and Marchbanks) were trying to get the exam under control, but no one was paying them any attention at all.

The Entrance Hall doors banged open yet again, this time allowing Professor McGonagall out onto the grounds. She began shouting at the group, her accent the thickest he'd ever heard. The Aurors whirled on her, and at least four stunners hit her dead on. Around Harry, many students let out frightened shrieks, and even the examiners seemed to have forgotten all about Astronomy. Hagrid was bellowing even louder now, his deep voice like a huge drum. He swung wildly at anyone stupid enough to get close, and the Aurors looked very reluctant to attack him, no matter how much Umbridge howled at them.

Before the Aurors could regroup and start casting at him, Hagrid whirled and darted off faster than a man his size should have been able to move, Fang on his heels. Umbridge cursed and shot her own stunner after him, but it went wild as Hagrid disappeared into the dark.

While the people on the ground collected themselves, the students remained absolutely silent, stunned by what they had witnessed. Tafty weakly told them the time, but no one even looked back at their exams.

When they were released five minutes later, everyone burst into conversation, trying to figure out what the hell was going on. Harry ducked away as soon as possible, ignoring the way Draco, Pansy and Blaise all huddled up. He made his way down to the dungeons, the exhaustion from before returning.

He fell asleep almost at once that night, but it wasn't restful. He kept having the same dream of hallways and doors and dazzling lights, and never managed to stay down for longer than an hour.
History of Magic was never going to be a fun exam, but when he finally sat it, the words were swimming in front of Harry's eyes. He started answering the shortest questions he could find, if only because they required the least amount of trying to read, and let his eyes drift slowly over the room. Hermione and Blaise were scribbling away fast, the latter because he actually liked the subject when not taught by Binns. Draco also seemed to be holding his own, and Neville's hand was moving at a good clip, even if the light was dying from his eyes. Ron was staring at his paper like it was in Russian, and Pansy looked like she was writing, but judging by the movements of her quill she was probably just drawing on the margins.

Harry returned his attention back to his own paper, worrying at his bottom lip in an attempt to stay awake. The First Goblin Revolts had ended in 1562? Or was that the Giants? And something about France blocking trade with the colonies? Was that too early for that?

The paper wavered in front of his face like it was made of water, and Harry found himself in that room with the lights and the orbs from his dreams. There was a shape on the floor that was moving slightly, like it was in great amounts of pain, and Harry felt like laughing in triumph. That would teach him, wouldn't it? "Take it down, you can do it. You just need to grasp it..." He said. The figure didn't move, and so Harry cast Crucio, feeling irritated.

Slowly, the figure raised itself up and turned to look at him. "You'll have to kill me." Sirius said.

"Patience, patience. First, bring it to me. Do not tempt me to make you scream."

And there was a loud scraping noise and then Harry wasn't in that room anymore, but back in the Great Hall. His chair was pushed back a full foot from the table, and balancing on it's back two legs. A scream was caught in his throat, and he flailed and choked, sending the chair finally falling, landing on the stone floor with a startlingly large crash.

He couldn't breath past the lump in his throat, and he scrambled to get up, coughing violently. Sirius— he had to get to Sirius! A hand grabbed his shoulder and lugged him up, and Harry turned to see the examiner at his side, leading him out. The old man gave him a sympathetic smile. "Do you need to go to the Hospital Wing, lad?"


He got a warm pat on the back. “The stress got to you, then? Happens to the best of us. Do you want to go back in?" Harry shook his head. There wasn’t any point to it anyway. “Alright, I’ll turn it in for you. Go get some rest, yeah?"

Harry gave him a nod, and one the man went back in, he ran up the stairs at full speed, heading for the Hospital Wing. He had to get the McGonagall - she could contact the Order, and they could go save him.

But when he got there, she was gone, having been taken away to St. Mungo’s. Harry let Pomfrey rant about it while he tried to figure out what the hell he was going to do. McGonagall was gone, Hagrid was gone, Dumbledore was gone...

Severus was here. He gave some serious thought to going to him, but decided against it. The professor hated Sirius - he’d might just let him die. After that Occlumency session, Harry wasn’t sure what he would do. There had to be another way...

There was the rumbling of students leaving the Great Hall, and Harry sprinted back down. He spotted Draco, Pansy and Blaise right off - they were currently talking to Ron, Hermione and Neville. Or, perhaps it was more accurate to say they were being interrogated. All six heads snapped
to look at him, and Harry ran up to meet them, panting heavily.

“Harry, are you alrig-” Pansy started, but Harry waved his hand at her, cutting her off.

“He’s got Si-Padfoot!” He managed to get out. They all stared at him.

Draco took a slow step towards him, looking like he wasn’t sure whether to be afraid for or of Harry. “What are you talking about?”

Shaking his head in a violent, almost feral jerk, Harry groaned. “Voldemort has Padfoot. Right now! In the Department of Mysteries. I have to go get him-”

“He’s lost it. Harry, you have lost it.” Blaise said, shaking his head. “We should get him to the Hospital Wing.”

Suppressing a growl of frustration, Harry glared. “No! It’s like Mr. Weasley, with the snake.” Ron paled, but Harry couldn’t find it in him to feel bad. “Just like that - I have to go and get him, there’s no one else to tell.”

Hermione gave him a strange look. “What about Professor Sna-” She cut herself off as Harry turned his glare to her, and the rest of the Slytherins shook their heads.

Shifting lightly, Draco looked very reluctant to speak. “Harry... don’t freak out...” Harry tensed. There were very few ways that could end well. “But the Occlumency was because we didn’t know what the Dark Lord could do with it. Are you sure it’s...” He trailed off, sounding helpless.

Frustration welled up in Harry. How could he make them understand? “It... these feel different, remember? I was a wreck after that first one, because they’re... they’re visions, not dreams. I can tell, and Sirius doesn’t have a lot of time and I need to go but I don’t know how to get there and please help.” His voice broke on the last word.

Slowly, Blaise shook his head. “This doesn’t makes any sense, though! How would the Dark Lord even have Padfoot, much less get into the Ministry without knowing. Besides, if someone wanted to manipulate you, this is exactly how to do it! This Hero Complex of yours.”

Ron tilted his head. “I dunno, Padfoot was getting kind of twitch there, wasn’t it? He might have snuck out. And it is You-Know-Who - if anyone could sneak into the Ministry, it would probably be him.”

Letting out a hiss that was just a step above Parseltongue, Harry shook his head like a dog. “Exactly! I can’t chance it! This is S-Padfoot. He’s the only-” He cut himself off, suddenly straightening. “I can’t. I have to.”

Pansy raised her hand like she wanted to try and calm him down, but thought better of it. “Is there some way we can check, rather than running all the way out to the Ministry?”

Raising his hands in a wild shrug, Harry snorted. “If you’ve got an idea, I’d love to hear it.”

Nevile raised his hand like he was in class and wasn’t sure his answer was right. “What about Flooing?”

“Umbridge has it all monitored. My mother told me that.” Pansy answered, and Harry wondered when that had happened.

Perking up a bit, Ron shook his head. “Not all of it - I heard the twins talking about it before they
left. They said she probably wouldn’t let hers be monitored.”

Turning on his heel, Harry made his way toward her office, the rest following behind him, some faster than others. “Can you guys make a distraction?”

“Are you sure about this?” Draco asked, catching up to his side. Harry just nodded. “Then, yeah, I think we can do that. We’ll stand guard, redirect people somehow. Make it quick.”

Harry paused long enough wrap him in a quick, rough hug. “Thank you,” He murmured, voice rough, and let him go before Draco could get passed the shock. And then he made his way down the hall at a faster pace.

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He only took a couple of charms to get the lock open, and Harry made his way in cautiously. The kittens on the plates were all asleep, and there didn’t seem to be any way of monitoring for intruders.

Idiot.

Taking a handful of powder from a jug on the mantle, Harry whispered out the address and stuck his head through. The living room of Grimmauld Place was empty, and Harry hissed out Sirius’ name. No one came.

And then Kreacher was there, cackling. “Where has Sirius gone, Kreacher!” Harry growled, forgetting to be quiet. “Where is he?”

“No one here! No one but Mistress.” The elf told him with glee. “Kreacher is not told where Master is going. Kreacher is stuck here with the Mudbloods and the Blood Traitors, but now it’s just Mistress and Kreacher! Master won’t be coming back!” And the mad elf started cackling again, as Harry snarled out a curse, stomach twisting into knots.

And then Harry felt something grip his hair and yank, and he found himself back in Umbridge’s office, staring up at the woman herself.

This might not have been Harry’s best plan.

“What were you doing with your head in my fire?” Umbridge’s hand clamped painfully onto the back of Harry's head as she yanked his head back, peering down into his open eyes. Pain radiated through his body but he didn't let it show.

“Nothing, Professor Umbridge.”

“Lies! You were contacting Dumbledore, weren't you?”

The idea was so absurd to Harry that he couldn't stop the snort of mixed disbelief and amusement from leaving him. She hissed through her sharp looking teeth and glared down at him and opened her mouth to say something the door banged open. Several members of the Inquisitorial Squad marched inside haughtily, each one of them hauling someone with them. Pansy, Draco, Blaise, Neville, and Hermione had all gotten captured. It seemed Ron had managed to slip free. Each one of the captors had a gag in their mouth and was vehemently fighting to try and get free.

“These five were all keeping watch,” Nott informed gleefully, his hand weaved deep into Draco's hair, yanking his head to the side in a way that burned fire in Harry's belly.

“We thought there would be others, but these five were stupid enough to stay exposed,” a
Ravenclaw boy piped up with a nasty looking smile. He looked down at Pansy, who was kicking back at him as best she could.

Harry felt awful. All of this was his fault.

“So, Potter...” Umbridge twisted her hand in his hair, forcing him to look up at her face. He resisted the very strong urge to spit in it. “You had lookouts, clearly you were doing something. Something very naughty indeed. Who were you trying to contact, hm? Was it Dumbledore? Was it that oafish lump Hagrid? Or maybe it was that useless supposed Headmistress, hm?” She shook him hard, practically tearing the hair free from his scalp. “Now tell me! Who was it!”

“It doesn't matter does it? No matter what I say you'll just say it was me trying to go against the Ministry anyway, won't you, Professor.”

Umbridge hissed at him through her teeth, her eyes dark and face going tight. Her other hand clamped down on his shoulder. “Ah yes, I forgot. I'm dealing with Harry Potter. The most self important person ever to set foot in this castle.”

Harry smiled up at her coolly even as rage curled inside of his body. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Nott lean against Draco's face to whisper something low and suggestive in his ear. Draco made a muffled noise, actually seeming angry and shocked at whatever words Nott had spoken and thrashed hard in his arms. The others were fighting back just as much. Neville was slowly turning an odd colour as he flailed about, and Harry wondered if he was losing air. Harry wondered if the six of them were going to die in this room. He was sure Umbridge could come up with a honey-sweet lie as to what had happened and how they were all in the wrong and she, and the Ministry, were in the right.

The rage broiled even deeper inside of Harry. So much he was sure he was shaking.

“Clearly, Professor. Such a pity that you could forget a prize student such as myself. It sickens the heart.” Harry wasn't even sure what he was saying or why. He knew he didn't have time for this. He knew that Sirius was with Voldemort and that every second was precious. Why on Earth was he stalling? What was wrong with him?

“Very well then...” Umbridge sighed, seeming almost sad. She released her tight grips on Harry and took a step back from him. “You leave me with no choice...”

Harry stood there, stunned. For a moment he thought of the desperate act of running. He knew he wouldn't get far. He looked around the room, his eyes desperate. Crabbe had loosened his hold on Neville slightly, and the Gryffindor boy shuddered hard and desperately gulped in air. His discolouration weakened slightly.

“What?” Goyle barked, shaking Blaise hard. “You're just going to let him go?!”

“Of course not, Gregory!” Umbridge snapped, she was pacing slightly, shifting from foot to foot. As if the idea in her head was causing her great distress. “Surely... Surely the Ministry will understand that I had no choice... You've been lying and deceitful. I have to force the truth from you one way or another...”

Nott's eyes tracked Umbridge as she paced. Harry's heart thudded against his chest.

“The Cruciatus Curse should do just the trick.”

The students held back by their captors began to argue muffled disagreements. Jerking hard to try and get free. Harry looked at her, his eyes hard and cold.
“You can't - it's illegal. Especially to perform it on a student.”

“This is a moment of great need, Mr. Potter!” Umbridge shrieked, her hand clutched tight to her wand. She was eyeing him with fury. She took a deep breath. “You give me no choice.”

Harry watched her in disbelief. She slashed with her wand. Everything in the world tilted sideways as Nott jeered and Draco struggled all the harder.

“Crucio!”

The spell hit him square in the chest. Harry's shoulder hit the corner of Umbridge's desk when he went down, screaming uncontrollably. He had undergone the curse last year with Voldemort, but he had been running on pure adrenaline, now he felt the curse for how wicked it truly was. He could understand why, in this clear, shining moment of pain, how someone could be driven mad by it. Why Cedric's leg had been permanently damaged by it.

The door to the room banged open. Umbridge looked up in shock. Her concentration broken the spell lifted. Harry moaned in pain. His face was wet with involuntarily shed tears. Draco had gone limp and gray in Nott's arms. Neville's eyes were screwed shut and he was heaving and retching.

“What on Earth do you think you're doing?”

Harry's whole body shuddered at the sound of Severus' voice. He looked up at him, he was upside down from Harry's angle. Out in the corridor Harry saw a flash of red hair disappear around the corner. Ron.

“Interrogating a suspect.”

“With an Unforgivable?” Somehow the rage in Severus' quiet voice made it seem like he had roared the question. “You could have used Veritaserum. Merlin knows you've taken all of my stores.”

Slowly, his whole body feeling like lead, Harry sat himself up. He swayed dangerously as he tried to gain composure.

“The potion has been depleted.”

Harry sucked in a breath and tried to focus in on Severus' mind, hoping that he could break through his defenses. Voldemort has Sirius. Voldemort has Sirius.

“If I had known that was the case I would have made you more.”

“Excellent, make me some now!”

“Impossible. It takes a full month to brew.”

“You are being purposefully unhelpful, Professor Snape. You are attempting to aid a student in overthrowing the Ministry of Magic. I caught him with his head in my Floo! You are on probation! Return to your quarters immediately!”

Harry's heart sunk in his chest. He watched as Severus' mouth curled unpleasantly.

“Of course, Headmistress.”

Snape turned and opened the door.

“He's got Padfoot!” Harry's voice burst from him. “He's got Padfoot and the place where it's
Severus turned and looked at Harry for a long moment, then looked to Umbridge, his face passive. “You've boggled the boy's mind with the curse. I do hope that was the desired result.”

With that Severus was out of the room, the door closing ominously behind him.

Harry lay on the floor, feeling betrayed. He stared up at the ceiling. Umbridge rolled her wand between her fingers.

“Perhaps a second dose will do you well.” She raised her wand. “Cru--”

“I know what Harry was doing.”

Umbridge whirled and looked at Hermione, who had worked her gag down and was staring at Umbridge.

“What?”

“It was a pact between Professor Dumbledore, Harry, and myself. None of the others are involved. I confounded them.” Hermione swallowed thickly as everyone stared at her. “P-Professor Dumbledore was making something --”

“A weapon? He was making a weapon, wasn't he? To use against the Ministry!”

“Only he d-didn't finish. H-h-he... He asked me to finish it. And tell Harry when it was complete. Only Harry can activate it, you see. I don't know why, but Professor Dumbledore was adamant on that point. He was attempting to get into contact with Professor Dumbledore for further orders.”

Umbridge's face split into a wide, manic grin and she laughed, but it was hollow and insane. “You see! I was right! Where is he?” She whirled on Harry, who was looking at her with wide eyes.

“I dunno.” Harry managed, picking up on Hermione's long winded lie. “I was trying the places he told us to. I haven't had any luck.”

Umbridge made a noise in her throat and looked to Hermione. “Can you take me to it? This weapon? I wish to document it for evidence.”

Hermione nodded once, sharply. Umbridge made a motion at the seventh year Slytherin girl that was holding her. The girl let go. Hermione stumbled forward and Harry made a noise as he was yanked off the floor by Umbridge. Her eyes were gleaming wildly.

“You stay here and guard the others,” she ordered to the Squad members.

“But, wouldn't you like some help?” Nott asked.

“Nonsense, it's two wandless students. I can handle myself, Theodore.”

Nott opened his mouth to reply but yelped went Draco stamped hard on his foot and flung himself at Harry. Harry stumbled back in shock at the sudden weight on his body but remained still when he felt Draco's arms slide under his outer robes and slide a wand into his pockets. He pressed his forehead against Draco's shoulder and nuzzled there briefly, feeling strangely comforted.

“Eugh.”

Harry watched as Nott yanked Draco back. Shoving him down into a chair and pointing his wand at
him. He looked desperately at the others, Pansy gave a strange jerky half-nod. It was the last thing Harry saw before Umbridge hauled him out of the door.

~*~

Harry was surprised as they walked out of the castle and onto the grounds, how sneakily Hermione had lied. He felt a strange swell of pride in his chest toward her and knew that had Millicent been raided (though he had his doubts that any one of those students could hold her) she would have been proud of her friend's cunning. Perhaps Millicent was right and Hermione did belong in Ravenclaw. He kept his face masked and stoic as he walked behind Hermione, trying not to seem as if he was being led and knew exactly where he was going.

Behind him he could hear Umbridge's heavy breathing as she struggled to keep up. He was struck with the urge to use Draco's borrowed wand and whirl on her and curse her down. But that would, he was sure, be counter productive to Hermione's plans. They bypassed Hagrid's hut, and slipped into the Forbidden Forest.

Harry tripped on a root near the entrance as his scar throbbed angrily. He managed to catch himself from cursing or falling over and bungling the whole thing up. His head ached, and he realized, with some strange twisted sense of relief, that it was a low, warning of an ache. He could recall from the previous year, and from Christmas, the searing ache of a kill. And it had not yet happened.

Maybe the could save Sirius in time.

He only hoped Severus had understood his message.

“It's quite deep in!” Hermione called as they weaved through the underbrush. “So no other students could find it!”

Harry swallowed thickly. He felt a pang of nerves enter him at how loudly Hermione was speaking. He knew she didn't have a wand. It wouldn't do well if they were killed before serving Umbridge a piece of their minds. Still, he smartly kept his mouth shut.

Umbridge tripped over a sapling and Harry took the opportunity to jolt closer to Hermione.

“We're going to be heard.”

Hermione nodded slightly. “Good.”

Harry opened his mouth to reply but Umbridge had recovered herself.

“Almost there, Professor!”

They entered into a clearing and Harry became suddenly aware of the forest floor vibrating underfoot and a volley of arrows launched overhead, missing them, thankfully, by a safe margin. Umbridge screeched wildly and grabbed hold of him, using him as a shield. Harry felt strangely calm as the movement of the ground grew wilder and he could hear hoof beats.

Centaurs.

He pulled himself free of her and kept his face calm as he neared Hermione, who was smiling, but also kept a passive face. Thanks to Hagrid's classes both of them knew if they came off calm and non-threatening the Centaurs wouldn't attack. Umbridge, panicked, cast a lumos, and screamed at the sight of them surrounded by fifty or more Centaurs.
“What is your name!” Came a voice from the left.

Harry turned his head, inclining it politely toward the advancing Centaur. The Centaur returned the nod and turned his eyes towards Umbridge.

“I asked you your name, human.”

Harry’s eyes tracked to Umbridge, who was holding her wand in her hand, outstretched as far as it would go. She mewedled in terror. “Delores Umbridge!” She finally called, putting as much power into her voice as she could. She cleared her throat and straightened. “I am Delores Umbridge. I am Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic, High Inquisitor and Headmistress of Hogwarts. And I demand your name!”

In the circle, Harry watched as a few of the Centaurs shifted in agitation, hands clenching tight to their bows.

“I am Morrigan, human. You are with the Ministry of Magic, you said?”

“That’s right!” Umbridge put bravado into her voice. “So by the laws put forth by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures an attack by a half-breed –”

Harry hissed through his teeth as Hermione flinched next to him and took hold of his arm.

“What did you call us?”

In the surrounding circle Harry could hear bowstring being pulled and angry mutters.

“The law clearly states that as Creatures of Near-Human intelligence –”

“Near human!” Another Centaur bellowed, Harry recognized him as Bane. “Near human! She insults us, Morrigan!”

“I will ask you, human, what you are doing in our Forest.”

Umbridge laughed haughtily. “Your Forest?! You only remain here because the Ministry allows you half-breeds to stay--”

Umbridge’s rant was cut short as an arrow flew through the air, missing her head, but being too close for comfort. The woman screeched.

“What is your forest?” A Centaur demanded, as others jeered and pawed at the ground in delight.

Something inside of Umbridge seemed to have snapped. She pointed her wand at the Centaurs. “Filthy half-breeds! Disgusting!” She sent out a spell with her wand and ropes lashed out, wrapping around Morrigan’s torso and arms. He snarled and rose up on his hind legs as he tried to free himself.

A Centaur grabbed hold of Umbridge as the others charged. Harry withdrew Draco’s wand and slashed at Morrigan, cutting the ropes about his body. Hermione grabbed him and pulled him to the ground. They lay there, hands covering their heads as the Centaurs stampeded and Umbridge wailed.

Before long the trampling of hooves drew further and further away and Harry felt himself be pulled up. He stood on unsteady feet as Morrigan and another Centaur studied he and Hermione with indecision.

“What do we do with these?” The unnamed Centaur asked. His face was hard and angry.
“I’ve known this one,” Morrigan replied, pointing to Harry. “He is a friend of Hagrid’s. He knows Bane. He released me. You know that we do not harm foals.”

The other Centaur seemed angered but nodded his head, he couldn't argue with the fact Harry had freed Morrigan. “Very well, lucky humans. You will leave our Forest immediately and not disturb it.”

Hermione and Harry nodded rapidly and were released as the Centaurs galloped away into the Forest. The two exchanged a relieved look before running back toward the Castle.

“Where did you get a wand?” Hermione asked as they broke into a run.

“Draco! When he hugged me!”

“Brilliant. Okay! One thing down. Now, how are we going to get to London?”

“Excellent question.”

Harry was so shocked at the new voice he actually tripped over the same damnable root he had caught on when he entered the forest and turned. He laughed, actually laughed, out of pure relief. Draco was leaning against a tree sporting a long gash on his cheek. Near him were Ron, Ginny, Blaise, Pansy, Neville, Luna and Cedric.

“How'd you get free?”

“Nott's a damn fool,” Draco said, offering his hand. There was a pause as he and Harry traded wands. “Umbridge left your wand lying on the desk without guard. I managed to grab it and all hell broke loose. Ron managed to grab Luna, Ginny and Cedric after getting Professor Snape. They came in and helped out.”

Harry gave a breathless grin. “Excellent. Okay, so...”

“Well... it's obvious isn't it, we're going to fly.”

Harry stared at Luna. “What do you mean “we”?”

Neville actually snorted, sounding very like Ron. “You're not going alone, mate. I will honestly give you a beat down if you think I'm not going to help you. We all joined S.W.O.R.D. for a reason.”

Harry's mouth screwed up. He wanted to argue but he didn't have the time. “Alright, fine. But some people need to stay here to make sure Snape knew my message and to help with the Squad.”

“I will.” Pansy said, raising her hand.

Harry paused, turning his head to look at Blaise, who was suspiciously quiet. Harry tilted his head at him, blinking. “Are you coming too?”

Blaise snorted and shook his head, hands raising up in an almost defensive position. “No offense, Harry, but you’re barking. This is insanity. You’ve been nutters all year and this whole thing takes the pasty. I’m going to stay here because I’m not getting dragged all the way to London on a whim.”

“Fine. I don’t... I can understand. I’m a little hurt that you think I’m being crazy, but whatever, stay behind.”

Blaise made a face before nodding his head and crossed his arms before looking around at everyone before turning on his heel and marching off. Harry watched him go before switching gears and
looking back at his group.

“Okay good. So, I can take my broom, so can Draco, Ron, Ginny and...” Harry looked at Cedric, frowning. “Cedric, I'm not sure if you coming is a good idea.”

“I know spells you don't, Harry. My dad works for the Ministry, I know how to get in, probably in ways Ron doesn't, since I've actually been inside.”

That was a good feature. “Fine. Alright. But what about Hermione and Luna and Neville?”

A keen sounded off to Harry's left and he looked away from Blaise trudging up to the Castle. Harry looked and saw Thestrals. Luna walked toward one.

“Lovely, they seem to want to help. Come, on Neville, we can take one and Hermione can take the other. Oh look, a whole herd is coming, no need for brooms.”

Harry moved, ignoring the questioning stares as he and Luna guided Neville onto one and Hermione onto a second. Not long after they had managed to guide everyone onto a Thestral. With one short, Harry realized he and Draco had to share. He helped Draco on and climbed on behind him ignoring the way Ron snickered.

“To the Ministry.”
Strife or Abscond

Chapter Summary

Warning: Some scenes of graphic violence.

The Thestrals, it turned out, moved gloriously fast.

Before long they were all sneaking into the Ministry with Cedric's help. Harry paused once they were inside, unable to help his awe at the smooth, dark stone and the efficient way everything was laid out. Before long they managed to cram themselves into a lift. They were all quiet and Harry closed his eyes, concentrating, remembering his dream.

“Level Nine.”

The lift jolted before moving backwards and hurtling down.

“Level Nine: Department of Mysteries.” The lift chimed and they poured out into the hallway of smooth, black stone.

Behind them the grille of the lift clanged shut and the lift sped off. They walked down the hall, wands outstretched, with determination. Harry opened the door at the end of the hall and walked through it, heart pounding. Slowly they filed into a circular room. Harry nodded to himself, this was the room. The door was the one directly opposite.

The door they had walked through shut. The room was dark, save for the dim, blue candles. Harry took a step forward and then froze. The wall was rotating. It spun for a long moment before it came to a sudden, booming stop. Harry groaned and looked around, each door was the same. He scrubbed a hand over his face. Of course it couldn't be so easy.

“Figures the room is enchanted,” Draco muttered. “So should we just pick a door?”

Harry shrugged momentarily before purposefully striding toward a room. He tried the knob, it was smooth and cool. He turned it to open it and the door swung open easily. It was the door leading back to the lift. He shook his head.

“This one isn't it.”

They backed out slowly but before Ron closed the door Hermione scoured it with a 'flagrante' in a bright X. They returned to the middle of the room as the walls spun once more. To his left when the spinning stopped Harry could see the door marking the room they had just entered.

He strode toward another door and tried it. He frowned. “It's locked.” He withdrew his wand. “Alohamora.” He tried again before sighing and marking the door.

“How d'you know it's not that room?” Neville asked.

“I could open every door in my dreams. One that's locked doesn't make sense.”

The room stopped spinning and Draco strode towards a door, throwing it open with a flourish. Harry
rolled his eyes. Only Draco could make a rescue mission into a production. He peered past Draco. The room was so bright he had to shield his eyes. He smiled and clapped a hand on Draco's shoulder. “Well done, you found it.”

“Of course I did. And on my first try too.”

Cedric scoffed. “Now isn't the time to boast, Malfoy. Go on, Harry.”

Harry nodded to himself and walked through the room, ignoring the time pieces. Harry stopped after a few paces, looking around before staring up again. They stopped by a giant crystal bell jar that Luna and Ginny peered into curiously before Harry opened a door.

“Come on.”

They crossed into the next room. It was dim and high and long, filled with nothing but rows and rows of shelves.

“We're looking for number ninety-seven.”

In the dim light of the room they fanned out, looking for labels.

“This one is fifty five.” Ron called, three rows down from him Ginny's voice declared the row as fifty eight. They headed that way.

Harry moved at a brisk pace. He tried to ignore the throb in his head and the nagging voice in the back of his mind that said that Sirius could already be dead. He stopped when he reached number ninety-seven and looked around, frowning at no sign of Sirius before starting down the aisle. Maybe he was on the other side...

“He's not here...” Harry sounded distressed. Maybe they were too late?

“Harry...” Cedric's voice sounded from the middle of the aisle. “Harry you should see this.”

Harry jogged back toward the others and stopped where they were all looking. One of the glass balls... Below it was a yellowing label that read:

S.P.T. To A.P.W.B.D. Dark Lord and (?) Harry Potter.

Numbness spread through Harry and he stared at it. “It has my name on it.”

“Why...” Hermione started slowly, her eyes big and round. “Why would it have your name on it, Harry?”

Curious, Harry reached up and inched his hand toward it as the other made quiet noises both of warning and of encouragement. Harry touched it with his index finger and winced out of reflex before smoothing his hand over the ball. It was surprisingly warm. He pushed up on his toes and curled his hand around the ball fully before pulling it down.

The others huddled in closer and Harry stared down at it expectantly. Maybe it would tell him something. Maybe it would glow or sing or anything....

Nothing.

Harry rose his other hand, clutching his wand between his middle and ring finger to brush the dust off of the orb.
“Wonderful work, Mr. Potter. Now turn around and hand me the orb.”

Harry stiffened at the slow, quiet voice. He knew that voice. He curled his hand possessively around the orb as his hand curled around his wand. “Hello, Mr. Yaxley.”

“Ah, you remember me, good... Good...”

Harry turned slowly, eyes sharply surveying his surroundings. Yaxley watched him move, looking over the others as well.

“Quite the arsenal you have, Mr. Potter. Three Gryffindors, a Hufflepuff, a Ravenclaw and... Lucius' boy.”

Beside Harry, Draco stiffened and clutched his wand tighter. He didn't say anything but his eyes were cold.

“Now, Mr. Potter, hand that to me.”

Harry's eyes moved around the room, they were outnumbered. Easily outnumbered two to one. “Where’s Sirius?”

Yaxley barked out a laugh and a woman Death Eater near him cackled.

“Awww, baby Potter had a nightmare...” She swirled her wand lazily, the lighted tip glowing bright. “He thought it was true. Well guess what, ickle baby - the Dark Lord is in your head.”

Draco hissed lowly and jerked his wand arm to point toward the woman who spoke. With icy dread, Harry realized who it was. It was Draco's aunt, Bellatrix LeStrange. Harry was realizing just how doomed they were, how he had failed his friends, leading them deep into this trap.

“Wait for it...” He murmured slowly, shifting on his feet.

Bellatrix let out a loud laugh. “Do you hear him! Giving orders to children!”

“Yes... Well... You weren't there last year, Bellatrix. Mr. Potter has quite the eye for dramatic heroics. The Dark Lord is well aware...” Yaxley's head tilted slightly, placating. “Give me the prophecy, Potter. Or we start using wands.”

Harry snorted with laughter. “Right. You expect me to believe that I hand this off and we can just jauntily skip home, no hard feelings. I'm a Slytherin, remember! I know how you think!”

Bellatrix snarled. “Accio--”

Harry smirked and clung hard to the orb. “Protego!”

Bellatrix made a keening, kittenish noise. “Bitty baby Potter knows how to play!”

“Bellatrix, I said no! Don't smash it!”

Harry watched them, watched as one of them grabbed Ginny and pointed his wand at her temple. “Let her go or I smash it! He clearly needs this! I'll do it!” Harry swung his arm up and turned his hand round, ready to fling the damned piece of glass down.

“NO!” Yaxley roared. None of the Death Eaters moved. “We need that prophecy!”

“Tell me why Voldemort needs it!”
“You dare!” Bellatrix howled. “You dare speak his name you filthy half-blood!”

Harry snarled back at her, more annoyed than intimidated. “He's a half-blood too!”

“Stupefy!”

Before Harry could react Yaxley had deflected the spell and six orbs behind him were sent tumbling to the floor. “Tell me or I drop it!”

“Have you never wondered why?” Yaxley said smoothly. “Why the Dark Lord came to you when you were an infant?”

Harry’s shoulders slackened slightly, he turned his eyes to the orb. “So you needed me to get it then? Some stupid prophecy about me?”

“It isn't foolish, child. It carries the reason why you were the foil to him...”

“So I needed to get it...” Harry murmured, hunching in on himself, turning the prophecy. The others murmured, wondering what he was doing. “Of course he couldn't get it. Not when the stupid Ministry is making me out to be a liar. So he sent others... But they couldn't do it, could they? But he knew I'd come for Sirius...”

“Very good, Potter... You are so very smart... the Dark Lord knows of your promise and will rewa--”

“NOW!”

Spells fired from the others towards the Death Eaters and the prophecies. They took off running.

Harry watched, amazed, as Cedric flung his cane toward advancing Death Eather and bolted his body toward a door. The six others darted after Cedric, who took lead, firing advance spells to deter their enemies. They flung themselves out of a door and tumbled down into the light.

The room span around them, and Harry hoped that would slow them down for a few minutes. But almost as soon as the door closed, there were shouts behind it, and the crackling of spells impacting something solid. The wood gave a might crack, but managed to hold. The group of them shared a panicked moment, before they scattered, each jumping for the closest door.

Harry ended up with Cedric and Neville, and the older boy moved one of the cabinets in the room in front of the passageway before sliding down to sit, rubbing at his knee.

“You okay?” Neville asked, sinking to the floor next to him. The Hufflepuff gave a nod and a wane smile, before looking around.

“Where are we?”

The room was mostly dark, but there were a huge number of glinting gold objects around, as well as large quantities of what looked almost like sand filling containers. There was also a strange sort-of jar with more of that sand. As he watched, it slowly rotated, the sand shifting form one side to another.

Clearing his throat, Neville stared at the gold things. “Those are Time Turners.” He said, voice a little shaky. He sounded very sure, and Harry blinked at him in surprise before accepting it and putting a finger to his lips. Mouthing 'hey might hear us', he made his way back towards the door, trying to hear something.

That was then there was an deafening crack, and the cabinet went flying past Harry and over Cedric and Neville's heads, crashing into the Time Turners. They shattered at once, spilling more of that
eerie sand onto the floor, before the sand began to trickle back up, repairing itself. It continued to replay the moment of destruction over and over.

There was no time to hide, and so Harry raised his wand, vaguely aware of the other two doing the same, and shouted ‘Stupefy’ just as one of their pursuers fired off his own curse.

Two Disarming Charms streaked from behind, joining his. The Death Eater just coming through managed to dodge the stunner, and instead got hit by both charms. He fell over like he'd been kicked in the chest, his wand following the path of the cabinet toward Neville and Cedric. Unfortunately, they were busy scrambling out of the man’s curse, and the wand hit the floor with a dull crack before rolling over to rest near the jar.

The next person to enter the room Harry recognized – it was Dolohov. He stepped over his crumpled companion with a sneer of disdain, ignoring his attempts to stand, and whirled on Harry. “Where’s the prophecy?” He snarled, voice low and almost quiet despite the tone. Harry just sneered back and arched an eyebrow, and the Death Eater narrowed his eyes before jerking his arm to cast.

Before he could complete the action, he was slammed from the side by Neville, who had forgone spells altogether, and instead just tackled the Death Eater. As they hit the ground, there was a noise like snapping wood, and Harry hoped that had been Dolohov's wand, and not the Gryffindor’s.

He pointed his wand at the tussling pair, trying to find a clear shot, when there was a growl from the door. The other man had managed to regain his footing, and was now making his way towards Cedric, who was trying to stand back up, but seemed to be having trouble gaining his footing for some reason.

Harry moved to curse him, but Cedric beat him to it, sticking out his leg in front of the man's ankles. The Death Eater's footing flew out from under him, and now Harry could tell that all the sand on the floor was making that area dangerously slippery.

Still flailing, the Death Eater's head made contact with that jar. Instead of shattering, his forehead up seemed to go straight through it, like it was made of water instead of glass. Once in, the man didn't seem to be able to get out, and the top of his skull seemed to change, the skin smoothing out and the hair getting shorter. Then it began to physically shrink.

Once the part of the skull that was inside no longer connected with that on the outside, the man fell forward the rest of the way, fluid and some chunks Harry was trying not to think about falling out of the gaping top. What was left inside the jar now looked like it belong to an infant.

Harry jerked his gaze away, looking back on Dolohov in time for him to finally push Neville – whose wand was in two pieces around him and bleeding heavily from the nose – off of him and point his own wand directly at Harry's face. “Diffindo!”

Then everything became hot, white fire.

Agony raced through Harry, and he only felt himself make contact with the floor because it send a new bolt of pain up his spine. Through it all, the little part of his mind that had kept him going despite how much pain he was in noticed that the Crucius Curse felt nothing like this. That pain was all in his head – terrible and horrible, but there was nothing physically wrong with his body. This, while not quite so refined, was deeper somehow, like the way he could feel Dudley's bass system in his chest.

When he finally became aware of the world again, he was on his back, Neville and Cedric both hovering over him. He could see Neville's mouth moving, and thought maybe he was apologizing
for being too slow or not good enough or something equally ridiculous, judging by his expression, but he couldn't hear anything but the roaring in his ears. From the corner of his eye he could see the unconscious form of Dolohov. Instead he held up a hand to stop him, and shook his head, ignoring the fire that originated from the left side of his face.

Almost on it's own, the hand he'd raised came up touch gently at his cheek, ignoring the way his friend's faces twisted and the way their mouths formed the words 'no'. There was pain, but not the kind that came from touching a wound. But his fingers came across the warm slickness of blood, as well as something else. It was thick and clumpy, almost like jelly, and Harry couldn't figure out what it was supposed to be.

And then he realized that the world had never fully come back. Not only was it blurry, since his glasses were no where to be found, but it was less than normal. A good portion of what was to his left was now out of his range.

*Oh, shit.*

Harry's stomach twisted, and he had to fight the urge to vomit.

Sound was now slowly returning, and he heard Cedric murmur a quick apology before grabbing his wrist and jerking the hand away, before snapping out a quick spell. Conjured bandages wrapped themselves around his head, over his left eye. Harry hissed out with pain, and he could vaguely feel the bandages grow damp and heavier, but they held. “Can you stand?” The Hufflepuff asked, voice tight with worry.

“Yeah,” Harry responded, but it was more croak than voice. Another lick of fire raced through his skull, and he concentrated on moving his lips and jaw as little as possible. “We have to go get the others and get out of here. This was so stupid.” He trailed off and sat up the rest of the way, trying to jar his head as little as possible. Cedric and Neville grabbed an arm each before hauling him up. Once he had his footing, he starting walking, ignoring the way they looked like they wanted to help him. Cedric needed both his hands for wand and to brace himself, and Neville had enough problems with his nose, which looked badly broken.

They cautiously made their way out, and the room did it's customary spin. None of the crosses were left, and Harry frowned, trying to figure out how to find everyone. “Let's all open a door.” Neville suggested quietly, and Harry gave a nod in response.

“Good idea.” They each went to a knob and twisted it. Neville had gotten that locked one, while Cedric ended up looking back at the room with the prophecies, reminding Harry of the delicate ball still in his front pocket. His door, however, struck gold, as he could see Draco and Luna sprinting towards the door. They seemed alright, although smoke was wafting off of them. Both sets of light eyes lit up and they slid through the door, slamming it shut behind them.

Coughing a bit at the smoke and ignoring the pain that caused, Harry stared at them. “Did you set a fire or something?”

Draco shook his head, eyes locked on the bandages. “No, I cast a smokescreen just as Lovegood here did a wind charm. It backfired a bit, but those goons are probably still choking, so that's fine. And what happened.”

Giving an elaborately casual shrug, Harry looked back at the now spinning doors. “I got hit. But now's not the time, Draco.”

The Malfoy Heir looked very rebellious at that, but couldn't deny the truth of it. “Where's everybody
“else?” He asked.

Before Harry could even give another shrug, one of the other doors burst open, and Ginny emerged, dragging Ron through by his shirt and levitating an unconscious Hermione behind her. None of them looked unscathed – Hermione was bleeding from the side of her head, there was what looked like burns scaling up from Ginny’s neck to the base of her hair, where several of the long red strands were burnt. Ron at first glance seemed fine, but his eyes refused to focus on anything, and he was giggling softly under his breath.

Ginny gave them a grimace. “We got chased by Yaxley. He got Hermione with something – I didn’t recognize it, and it was non-verbal. And these weird things got Ron, after he’d been hit by a Confundus Charm. He’s not been right since- ow! Ron, stop it!” She yanked her head away from Ron, who had started playing with her hair and had brushed against the burns.

Pouting, Ron turned away from his sister and caught sight of Neville. He grinned and greeted the boy like they’d not seen each other in months, before clinging to him and giggling about how his nose looked silly.

Guilt tore at Harry, but he pushed it away. First they needed to get out. Now. “We should try to find the right do-”

The door Harry had been motioning towards burst open, and Bellatrix Lestrange burst through, cackling madly. “I found you!” She shrieked in the childish voice, like they’d been playing a game all along. A group of Stunning Charms burst out from behind them, and they all dove towards the nearest door, which lead to a strangely stone room. There was stadium seating, and down at the bottom there was an archway of some sort, and in the moment of silence between them ending and the door exploding open, Harry could swear he heard it whispering.

In that same moment he felt arms slide around him and a mouth press against his own. He tasted blood and clutched desperately at Draco’s hair before pulling back. He noticed a series of large gashes ran along Draco’s cheek, forehead and neck. His face was slightly tacky with blood and his hair was matted to his head but he looked okay.

But then the Death Eaters were piling in, casting spells, and a stunner hit Luna on the side of the head, sending her tumbling down the stairs, her dead weight dragging Cedric down as well, and they landed in an unmoving pile in against one of the rows of seats.

Harry wanted to run and check on them, but their pursuers were right behind them, so instead he bolted down the stairs, nearly tripping over himself in his haste to get down. He slowed down for a couple of steps and whispered furiously to Ginny, who was still leading Hermione and Ron. “You try to wrap around or find somewhere safe. I need you to keep those two safe, no matter what.” The redhead looked like she wanted to argue, but then nodded. When she hit the bottom step she sprinted to the right as fast as she could while still dragging Ron along. Harry took that cue and sped left, followed by Neville and Draco. They tried to make it around the veil, but as they passed they saw that Yaxley had weaved around the other side, and was waiting for them.

“This was fun, but we are busy, I’m afraid.” He drawled in a manner Harry thought he might have copied from Mr. Malfoy. “The prophecy, if you would.”

Growling, Harry a step back, nearly running into Draco. “And if I wouldn’t?” Yaxley just raised his wand, and Bellatrix sprung from behind, placing her wand at the base of Draco’s skull. Another Death Eater physically grabbed Neville, pinning his arms and letting him kick uselessly at the air.

With a soft cackle, Bellatrix leaned in close to Draco. “Aww, if it isn't my widdle nephew! Mommy
and Daddy didn't do a good job with you, did they? Auntie Bella will have to be the one to punish you today!” She sounded entirely too happy at the prospect. “Crucio!”

Draco's scream was almost worst than a Cutting Curse to the eye. Instead of his face being on fire, it was his heart, and Harry jerked towards Draco, only for Yaxley's grip on his wand to tighten. Bellatrix lifted the spell and resumed her gleeful laughter. “Do you feel better after your spanking, Widdle Nephew?”

Resisting the urge to dive to Draco's side, Harry grabbed the prophecy out of his pocket and held it aloft. Every Death Eater's eyes locked onto it. “Leave them alone,” Harry panted, fury and guilt and adrenaline mixing to make his hands shake lightly. “Don't touch any of them again, and I'll give it to you.”

Grinning viciously, Yaxley gave a mocking little bow, but didn't drop eye-contact. “As you wish.” He took a step forward, hand out for the orb, and Harry extended his own hand -

And then the doors around the burst open, and in came Mr. Malfoy, Sirius, Moody, Remus, Tonks, Kingsley and Severus. Harry's breath caught at the last person, something heavy falling away from his chest, as Draco whispered 'Father!' is such tones of relief that Harry almost believed everything would be just fine now. The Death Eaters whirled to face them, the one holding Neville dropping him as he went for his wand.

Common sense reasserted itself, and Harry grabbed Neville and dragged him down, just as a flurry of spells shot up behind them.

A hand slapped the back of Harry's head, and he hissed as the jolt made his face throb. “You idiot! You were going to just give it up!” Draco snarled, even as he winced from the remnants of the Cruciatatus Curse made him twitch.

Glaring, Harry gripped the orb closer and motioned for them to follow as he scrambled away from the brewing battle. “Of course not! I was going to throw it once he got close enough.”

Neville made a noise like he approved of that plan, but it was hard to tell, since his nose made everything sound nasally. He wasn't looking at them, though, gaze locked on Bellatrix. He looked like he wanted to just go and tackle Lestrange, damn age and experience, and Harry was suddenly reminded that the boy was a Gryffindor, and therefore might be just reckless enough to try it.

Before he could react to that thought, Yaxley was suddenly upon them. “The prophecy!” He roared, the thin veneer of politeness completely gone from his voice. “Give it to me!”

The three of them tried to scramble away, but he gave them a grin that was all teeth and cast a spell that made Neville fly into the air, dangling from is ankle. Then he flicked his wand at Draco, and the Malfoy Heir went skidding away, unharmed but now in the middle of the battle.

Glaring at him, Harry's fingers drummed against the surface of the orb. “Such a good dog for your master, aren't you?” Yaxley sneered and held out his hand, wand now leveled at Harry's head. “You want to play? Fine. Fetch!” With that he lobbed the orb as hard as he could behind him, immediately moving under Neville.

Yaxley's face twisted with horror, and his grip on his wand loosened, as did the spell on Neville. The Gryffindor collapsed onto Harry, and they managed to untangle themselves and make a dash for it, making their way towards Draco. Harry never heard the sound of it shattering in the din of battle, but he turned in time to see a tiny, silvery figure emerge, looking like it was speaking, but the words were indistinguishable from the noise around them.
As he turned his head to watch where he was going, Harry just barely heard Yaxley give a hiss of rage. He ignored that and searched for Draco, even as he dodged for cover, and lost Neville in the chaos. That shade of blonde had to be visible, even here.

There!

Lucius had managed to fight his way to his son, and they were standing with their backs to the seating, casting as a team and creating a little bubble of relatively safety around them. The desire to join them or to find Severus struck Harry, but then Sirius caught his eye. His Godfather's eyes were very blue and very wide, the most serious he'd ever seen, and he motioned for Harry to come to him-

And then a burst of green hit him square in the chest, and he was pushed back, arching, feet off the ground, falling into the veil.

He never emerged. There was a scream of horror, and it took Harry a long moment to realize it was coming from him. A few feet away from the veil, Bellatrix had stopped to celebrate, cackling in glee and throwing her arms in the air. “Bye-bye, Sirius!” She laughed, grin wide and maniac and taunting, and Harry was going to kill her make her suffer for Sirius Sirius Sirius no.

His attempt to run to her, make her pay, was thwarted by an arm wrapping around his stomach, and a voice in his ear. “Harry! Harry, calm down!”

The fact that the voice was someone, or the danger of what he was doing didn't enter his mind. Instead Harry struggled as hard as he could, planting his feet and pushing in an effort to get free. As he watched, there was a snarl of fury, and Bellatrix's expression drooped as she turned and saw Remus, eyes burning a furious amber. A spell streaked towards her and she dodged, no longer laughing, making her way through the battle, around the spells, up the stairs.

“NO!” The word was dragged out of Harry from somewhere in his stomach, and with one final wrench he pushed away the voice – judging by the arms it was Severus, but that thought was gone before it fully stuck – and Harry bolted after her, taking the stairs two at a time. The fury and adrenaline made the trek effortless and quickly, like his desire for blood and payment gave him wings.

He managed to catch the door Bellatrix went though before the room began to spin, and followed the flapping of her robes past the elevator, up the stairs, into the Atrium.

Finally, he lasted out with a spell - it had started as a stunner, but when it hit that hideous fountain, chunks of marble were sent flying - but Bellatrix ducked behind a pillar. He ran towards it, but when he get there she was gone. She gave that maniac cackle again, but it echoed oddly in the huge, empty room, giving the impression that 10 Bellatrixs were amused by his antics. Nerves beginning to override his fury, and he ducked behind the fountain, panting heavily.

“Widdle baby Potter.” Bellatrix laughed. “Are you angry with me? Are you going to avenge my poor cousin?”

Harry wanted to scream, to jump out and affirm that avenging was exactly what he was going to do, and his payment was a pound of her flesh. But instead he held his breath, concentrating. Where was her voice coming from? Slightly more to the left, maybe...

Humming a little tune under her breath, Harry heard footsteps. Defiantly to the left, then. “Come out, come out! Are you playing a game with Bella? Because you should know that I always win!”

That’s it!
With a roar, Harry jumped out of his spot, casting the only spell that came to mind at the moment. “Crucio!”

The curse hit Bellatrix hard enough to send her backwards, and she hit the ground screaming. Heat seemed to travel up Harry’s arm. It was almost comforting, in a way-

And then the spell gave out, and Bellatrix got to her feet, panting. Her playful demeanor had dropped, leaving something predatory and very dangerous behind. “Not bad, Potter. Never used one before, have you? You didn’t have enough hatred behind it. Not like me.” Her mouth twisted into a grimace disguised as a smirk. “Crucio!” Harry dodged the spell, nearly falling into the stagnate water of the pool part of the fountain in his haste to get out of the way.

Once he regained his balance, Harry shot out a desperate stunner. Bellatrix blocked it with ease. Slowly, with nothing but confidence in her step, she made her way towards him. He kept his wand pointed at her heart, but it was useless. They both knew it. “Just give me the prophecy, Potter.” Bellatrix offered, voice still flat and serious and all the more intimidating for it. “Do it and I might let you go, to hunt another day.”

A bubble of vicious pleasure rose in Harry, before it was popped but a sudden burst of pain from his scar. “Sorry, Auntie Bella. Your little toy was broken by the mean old steps. So sad.”

For the first time, Bellatrix didn’t look deadly. Instead, terror was written all over her face. “You lie!”

Resisting the urge to cackle right back at her, Harry gave her a grin that was all teeth. His scar throbbed harder. “Nope! Gee, I wonder how Voldemort is gunna take that. I hope he doesn’t get mad at you.”

The point of Bellatrix’s wand wavered. “No, NO! You’re LYING! Accio prophecy!” Harry held out his hands mockingly, ignoring the way his eyes - no, eye was starting to water from the pain. At least he couldn’t feel the throbbing from his left eye anymore... “No!” Now she sounded close to sobbing. “Master, Master! Please, don’t punish me, Please! I tried, I did!”

A cruel chuckle made its way out of Harry. “Master isn’t here right now, Auntie Bella! He can’t hear your pathetic little pleas!”

Then a high, cold voice rang out. “Oh, but I can.”

Harry’s heart stopped.

Bellatrix continued to sob, and Harry spun in time to see Voldemort give her a disdainful look. “Quit your sniveling. He is not lying, as you have already proven, and as I can tell.” He met Harry’s eye, the contact driving another bolt of agony down Harry’s spine. “So you smashed it. That’s one problem you have caused me too many.” He leveled his wand at his heart, and Harry took a step back but it was far too late. “Avada Kedavra!”

But the bolt of green did not hit Harry. Instead it connected with the statue of a man from that fountain. A breath of relieved air escaped him, even as the ‘man’ lead him back, away from Voldemort. “Dumbledore!” He hissed, and Harry craned his head around to see that Dumbledore was indeed there, posed dramatically under the golden gates of the entrance.

...Why was he just standing there? Was he waiting for a picture or something?

The statue directed him behind the fountain, and though he couldn’t see the battle, he went willingly. He heard spells that he’d never so much as read about be cast, and the sounds of metal on stone, marble shattering, and their voices.
“You should not have come tonight, Tom. The Ministry will be here soon.”

“I have no intentions of being here once they show up!” For a while there were only spells and damage. “You aren’t fighting to kill, Dumbledore! Is the Light above such dirtiness?”

“There are worse things than Death, Tom.”

“No, there are not.”

And then Harry finally gave into his curiosity and peeked over the statue, just in time to see a streak of green, and he gasped in horror, but Fawkes swooped down from what seemed like nowhere and swallowed the spell, bursting into flames and crashing into the ground.

Voldemort cast a spell that made something like molten glass in the shape of a snake fly though the air towards Dumbledore, but the Headmaster banished it with a flick of his wand, before returning with a spell that was like living shadow-

And then the Dark Lord vanished, and Harry took a step away from the fountain, looking around. He was gone? Just like that? But the Headmaster shouted for him to stay put.

Harry’s scar seemed to split open, and there was only pain.

Harry staggered in place, groaning as he fell do his knees and collapsed. He opened his mouth to scream but felt himself choke on air, instead words that weren’t his words fought there way from his mouth. “Kill... Dumbledore... Kill usss.”

Harry’s still working eye wrenched itself shut as he writhed on the floor and he tried to fight against the intruder to his body. Pain pulsed deep within him, shaking is core and suddenly he wasn’t in the Ministry anymore. He was in his birth house, looking over the mayhem. Looking down at his mother’s lifeless corpse, her vivid green eyes flat and lifeless. Then it was like a tape rewinding and he could see Voldemort threatening her. See his infant self huddled in his cradle.

She was screaming.

He was screaming.

He rolled on the ground as his body tried to twist and crawl at the same time. He felt like snakes were trying to force their way up and out of him. Like he was vomiting up invisible coils of them. His eye rolled back and he found himself in the Slytherin Common Room. It was dark and filled with shadows darting in the corners. He focused and concentrated, flooding the room with light from the fireplace, warming the cold with the soft, warm green glow of the lanterns.

He looked at the couches where he and Draco and Pansy had spent so much time sprawled out, curled up and piled together. If he listened hard enough he swore he could hear Draco laughing at a nonsense story Pansy was telling. He looked to the tables were he, Millicent and Blaise would joke about Divination; making houses out of their tarot decks.

The shadows flickered away as light filtered more into the room. Harry focused on the lessons with Severus...

Happy schools of fish darted past the windows.

Harry gasped in a great bubble of air and found himself staring up at the arching, wide ceiling of the Ministry of Magic. Numbness faded for reality and pain slammed into him, sudden and sharp. Warmth spread through his limbs and it was like all of the sound in the world was suddenly turned
on. And at high volume.

Blue eyes, darkened with concern were watching him. Harry sat up quickly, ignoring the spikes of pain the action did and shook Dumbledore’s hand from his arm. A strange almost emptiness trickled inside of him and he looked around with his blurred vision, making out teams of people surrounding him.

“W-wha?”

People were starting to speak, to scream. The words made no sense to Harry at first, but slowly his brain began functioning.

“Here was here!”

“I saw him!”

“That was You-Know-Who!”

“What in Merlin’s name is going on here!” That one was the grating tones of Fudge, and Harry lazily tilted his head to see the man gripping his bowler cap, still clad in his nightgown. “You - Dumbledore, I -” He shook his head. “Seize him!”

Harry rather thought that he should be worried about that phrase, but it didn’t seem to matter at the moment. His head was still filled with cotton. Instead he watched Dumbledore, who drew himself up to his full height, looking quite regal, except for the barely visible stars on the white fabric. “Cornelius, stop this foolishness. You have seen Lord Voldemort for yourself. You know that I have been telling the truth for the past year. If you must, I can take on all of your men and win. Do not make that mistake.”

For a moment, Fudge just sputtered, but then shook his head violently and gestured out of Harry’s field of vision. “Dawlish! Savage! Heck, the Department of Mysteries, please, find out what all this is about.” He sighed. “We need to talk, Dumbledore...”

“Of course,” the Headmaster responded. “Right after I have settled Mr. Potter.” With that he offered Harry his hand which he took and allowed himself to be dragged onto his feet. He head his name being whispered around the room, like an echo, but ignored that as Dumbledore grabbed a piece of marble and cast ‘portus’.

Behind them, Fudge made noises about unauthroized portkeys, but Dumbledore just gave him a look, before handing Harry the slab. “I also have somethings to talk about with you, Cornelius, about Dolores Umbridge and my Care of Magical Creatures professor.” Fudge swallowed loudly, like a guilty schoolboy. “I’ll see you shortly, Harry. 3... 2... 1...”

With a sickening jerk at the navel, the Ministry of Magic melted away.
For a long moment, Harry just stood there, processing his environment. His brain was mostly functional again, and once it caught up he threw the marble away with a cry of disgust.

After the chaos at the Ministry, Dumbledore’s office was disgustingly calm. Even the shattered objects and damage from the man’s dramatic flee from Hogwarts was cleaned up and in pristine condition. He wished he’d been sent to Order Headquarters - at least it wouldn’t be this clean - Sirius.

Harry collapsed into the chair on his side of the desk, curling up and hiding his face against his legs. He was such an idiot. Truly. He’d gone on this entire, ridiculous crusade, just to kill the person he was trying to save. His Godfather. He’d killed his Godfather.

All that time and he’d never stopped to think. Never bothered to ponder through all the facts, or tried hard enough with Occlumency, or realized that anything was wrong. But he’d just been so angry, and then when he’d seen that vision it had all turned instantly to panic.

Well guess what, ickle baby - the Dark Lord is in your head.

Did that mean...? All this time, all that anger, all that energy...

Voldemort had been in him. Controlling him. Inside of him.

Abruptly, Harry felt very, very ill. Bile rose in his throat, and he swallowed back against it. He’d been Voldemort’s little puppet, all this time, doing his bidding, putting everyone in danger.

His breath was coming in panicked little bursts, and spots were starting to appear behind Harry’s eyes. He was going to pass out-

“Oh, do calm yourself.” A voice snapped, and Harry looked up to see a portrait he vaguely recognized glaring down at him. “You’re going to hurt yourself, idiot boy.” He paused to shift a bit, shoulders setting like he had an unpleasant task a head. “I assume you wish to speak with my worthless great-great-grandson.”

It took a moment for recognition to flare. This was Phineas Nigellus, which meant that the relation in question was Sirius. Harry’s breath stilled in pain, and he shook his head frantically, fighting back tears and ignoring the pain from what he assumed was still his eye.

“What happened to your face?” One portrait asked bluntly, blinking at him. Harry turned away. “You should get that looked at soon, my boy. Especially if it’s the eye- those are tricky.” Harry gave a shrug, and the portrait pantomimed a sigh, though it made no such noise. “Does that mean that Headmaster Dumbledore will be back?” Harry shrugged again. “I do hope so. It’s been a bore without anyone around, and Albus is quite entertaining.” The man eyed him. “You are as well, I admit. Albus didn’t know what to do with you at all, at first. But he seems to think well of you now.”
He nodded like he’d settled a great matter, before settling back in the painted chair, sipping ink tea.

Not sure what to make of this information, Harry just stared at the fireplace, wishing for Dumbledore to show up so he could go and just sleep and maybe if he was lucky not wake up.

Before his brain could go too far down that road, the fireplace flared and Dumbledore came through. The portraits burst into applause, and for a brief, bright moment, Harry resented every last one of them. What was there to celebrate?

Dumbledore thanked the portraits and dug an infant bird that looked quite a lot like Fawkes from his pocket, setting it down on his perch. Then he made his way to the desk and sat across from Harry, looking very serious. “I am pleased to inform you that, so far, there have been no injuries that should cause permanent damage.” He thought he saw the Headmaster’s gaze jump to his eye, but it was so quick he couldn’t be sure. “Mr. Weasley will probably have quite the headache when he wakes up, the elder Mr. Malfoy might require a little extra time to fully recover his hand.” Harry jerked at this, stomach churning. Mr. Malfoy’s hand had been hurt? Which one? “And Nymphadora Tonks might spend a night or two at St. Mungos. But it could have been far worse.”

Ducking his head, Harry gave a feeble nod at that. It could have been, though Harry wasn’t sure he could feel worse. Not to mention that Dumbledore was failing to mention one person who was quite definitely permanently undone.

There was a long silence, charged by the curious onlooking portraits. Harry wished they could all burst into flame, so he wouldn’t have to feel their eyes. “Harry, my boy, I understand.”

“Do you?” Harry asked, voice low and edged with razors. “Tell me, how exactly am I feeling?” His blood began to boil, and he welcomed it. It was familiar and it was his, not Voldemort’s, and it was better than the gnawing ache Sirius had left.

Nigellus muttered something about respect and self-pity and in his day, and Harry whirled his head around to glare at him, putting every inch of anger he could gather into it. The portrait blinked at him, looking unimpressed, but did at least shut up. Dumbledore added his own quiet but sharp rebuke to the mix, and Harry looked away, staring at one of the strange devices of Dumbledore’s. It let out a puff every few seconds, a tiny mechanism on the side whirling away. It looked fragile. Harry wanted to break it.

“Do not be afraid of what you are feeling, Harry.” The Headmaster said, his tone meant to be soft and comforting, which just made Harry feel like riled animal to be soothed. He grit his teeth. “It is, in fact, your strength.”

The noise that came from Harry might have been a laugh, but it was too cold, too raw. “Really? Because I feel so strong at the moment.” In fact, Harry felt rather like he was just a collection of fracturing cracks, like a pane of glass held together by nothing more than its fame, and all it would take was one little tap in the right direction, and he would fall apart so thoroughly that they’d never put him together again.

Nodding, Dumbledore attempted to meet his eyes, but Harry refused to at his face. “This pain proves you still have a heart - that you are a good person.”

Suddenly sitting seemed far too still a task, and Harry jumped up, placing his hands flat against the desk. “Then I don’t want a heart.” He snarled, voice venomous. Behind him, the portrait he’d been talking to before made an affronted noise, and Harry grabbed that gloriously breakable little object and lobbed it at the painted man, enjoying the way he flinched and dove into the frame next to him.
Whirling back around, Harry grabbed what looked rather like a telescope off the table next to where the puff-machine had been and threw it at the wall behind Dumbledore. It too shattered terrifically, but the Headmaster just stared at him, looking almost detached. “I don’t care anymore.” Harry told him, voice flat and calm, like a pond with an alligator right below the surface. ”I don’t.”

“You do.” He disagreed easily, unflinching in the face of Harry’s rage. “You care too much, because you have lost so much, and you think you’ll die from it all. Because you are in pain, because you have to destroy my possessions, you care.”

Harry wondered if the man wanted to be punched. Instead, he snorted like a bull and made his way over to the door, feeling suddenly like the room was too hot and too cold and too small, and tugging on the handle. It didn’t budge.

“Open it.”

“No.”

“Now.”

“I shall not until you have listened to me.”

Staring at him incredulously, Harry shook his head. “No.”

“Then the door remains closed.”

A wounded noise escaped Harry, and he tugged one more time at the handle, feeling somehow betrayed when it did not open. Finally he went back to the desk, this time choosing to stand over the chair and stare down at Dumbledore. “So? Spit it out, then.” He snapped.

“I only wish to convey to you my own culpability in Sirius’ death. Had I done what I should have when you can to Hogwarts, you would have known this was coming long before it did, and therefore would not have fallen into Voldemort’s trap.” Dumbledore gave him a solemn look, but Harry barely noticed it. What exactly was that supposed to mean?

Behind him, Nigellus denied the possibility of the last of the Blacks being deceased. When Dumbledore contradicted him, he stormed off. Harry hardly noticed.

Finally, the Headmaster turned back to him. “Let me explain, Harry. You see, fifteen years ago, once I saw the scar upon your forehead, I knew a connection between you and Voldemort had been formed. It was soon discovered, to your pain, I’m afraid, that because of this you were able to feel his emotions, his proximity, and it allowed an influence between both of you. Since he regained his body a year ago, I have worried that he will notice and abuse that connection. Alas, from what I have heard, he may have noticed it almost immediately, and began to push your emotions in ways most beneficial to him.”

The nausea returned, and Harry ducked his head. “Would you get down to it?” He asked sharply. “I know this already.”

With a weary nod, Dumbledore continued. “Alright, I shall do my best to shorten this. When we knew for certain the bond worked as I had feared, Professor Snape began offering you Occlumency. However, there had been another candidate - myself. However, I asked him to give the lessons because I was afraid my presence would draw his notice even sooner. However, due to the way I distanced myself from you, I missed that this had already happened, and for that I’m sorry.”

“What does this have to do with Sirius?” Harry growled. “Get. On. With. It.”


Dumbledore gazed at him over his half-moon glasses, but continued. “Voldemort’s aim in possessing you, I believe, was in order to find out the truth of the prophecy that he wished for you to retrieve. You see, he only knew the first part of it, and believes the second part would hold the secret to his rise to power or to his destruction. Yes, I am aware that it shattered.” He added, when Harry opened his mouth. “But he did not know that I had kept this information from you, despite your own place in it. This is also why he needed you there - only those who are part of a prophecy may touch it without being driven mad.”

Something choked Harry. He should have mastered Occlumency. If he had this all wouldn’t have happened. “B-but I checked. I talked to Kreacher-”

“Kreacher has been working for Bellatrix Black, as the last ‘worthy’ heir of the name, for several months now. He lied. In fact, he used a loophole in a rash command from Sirius, and used that to contact the woman he saw as his true Mistress.”

Harry blinked at him. “How do you know this?”

Something slightly cold entered Dumbledore’s eyes. “He told me. Once Professor Snape got your message, he contacted both myself and Sirius. The Order has methods of communicating, you see. Then, once they realized that you had disappeared, they realized what must have happened and rallied the troops, so to speak.”

For what had to be the hundreth time that night, Harry’s stomach twisted itself into painful knots. Severus hadn’t betrayed him. He had, in fact, done his best to save Harry’s sorry arse. Even the memory of that disastrous Occlumency lesson now seemed to be more his fault than Severus’ - had he mastered the art like he’d been supposed to...

Dumbledore continued on. “Perhaps if Kreacher had been treated better, this might not have been the case. However, Sirius had no love lost for that elf.”

“He deserved it then, did he?” Harry snarled, suddenly outwardly angry again. “Got what was coming to him?”

Blue eyes gazed calmly at him. “Of course not. I realize that leaving Sirius in that house and with Kreacher would be a reminder of his past life. However, it was for his safety-”

“You always do that!” Harry snarled, another, older hurt lighting up inside him. “You keep making decisions for everyone, and we’re supposed to trust that they’re the best thing for us. Like the Dursleys! They’re supposed to be so safe, but I’d broken more bones in between turning seven and eight than I have my entire time here at Hogwarts! And I’m supposed to be safe there? What, because you said so? Because you’re the fucking all knowing Albus Dumbledore! You said it, so it must be true!”

Backing away from the chair, Harry kept eye contact with him. “That’s not to say the Wizarding World is perfect. For all the Order’s talk about being kind to the Muggles, they know jack shit about them! Mr. Weasley actually gives a rat’s arse about them, but he seems to think that they’re all just animals in a zoo, here to do clever little tricks for them. Look! They can make a fake duck! Isn’t that just fucking precious!”

The words just kept pouring out. Harry hadn’t even been aware he was thinking this stuff, but it rung a bell somewhere deep in him. “I suppose that’s not their fault, though. No, it’s Hogwarts’ fault! Has anyone who isn’t a Pureblood even read that textbook? It’s criminally incorrect! How the hell are students supposed to learn how to blend into Muggle Society, or to so much as respect them when the bloody textbooks can’t even be bothered to get it right! That’s not even the only class that’s
useless - how about History of Magic? Even leaving how utterly abysmal a teacher Binns is, the curriculum is useless! The only thing we’ve been taught in the past five years are the Goblin and Giant wars. That’s it! No current events, no actually history of magical society, and no civics! How are students who aren’t raised to take part in the Ministry supposed to learn about their rights as citizens, or about the government works? You realize what that does, right? It means that the power will always remain with the Purebloods, because they’re the only ones who have actually been taught what they need to run this shitty, corrupt government.”

“Actually, no. I’m going back. Let’s talk about Binns. In fact, let’s add Umbridge to that, and the fake Moody, and Lockhart, and Quirrell. Let’s talk about how all of them were here for a year before anyone realized that they were fakes, or scam artists, or psychos, or they had bloody Voldemort under their hat! Hell, how well do you know Moody? You’re supposed to be old friends, yet you didn’t realize that someone was impersonating him or months at a time? That’s not even bringing up the sort of favouritism that’s freely allowed in these hallowed halls. Severus is awful towards Gryffindors, but at least someone doesn’t automatically hate us. How is it we live in an institution that for some reason a fourth of the students are deemed automatically evil? Where Hagrid can tell an eleven year old with a straight face that every bad wizard came from one house? Where I nearly lost a very good friend because of how I was sorted? How when I play Quidditch, three fourths of the school can boo me and no one thinks that odd?”

Finally, Harry’s breath gave out, and he found himself panting heavily as he stared at Dumbledore, who had continued to stare calmly at him the whole time. “For someone who continues to make decisions for everyone, you sure are shit at it.”

Dumbledore inclined his head. “If you’re finished, I have another item to your list.” Still staring at him with furious eyes, Harry sat down in the chair. “You see, I have something I should have told you years ago. I have had many opportunities to do so, such as when you were in the Hospital in your First Year. Do you remember, how I told you I had something I wished to tell you when you were older? This is what I was referring to. I could have told you in my office in your Second Year, or in your Third Year after you proved your Godfather’s innocence. Once Voldemort regained his body, I had run out of excuses. However, I still did not tell you. Every time, I couldn’t. ‘He’s far too young,’ I said. ‘There is time’. And because of that Sirius is dead. I am so sorry Harry.”

For a long moment Harry just stared at him. “What exactly is it that you wanted to tell me?”

Dumbledore stood and walked to his cabinet, pulling out the pensive Harry had fallen into last year. He felt no guilt as he looked at it. Now he just wished he’d found the right memory, and that maybe then Sirius wouldn’t have died. Placing the pensive on the desk, Dumbledore placed his wand to his temple and dumped a memory into the mass of silver in the basin. He then tapped his wand to the edge.

A silver figure rose up, wearing shawls and too much jewelry and a pair of thick, round glasses. Professor Trelawney. The tiny figure spoke, but it was in the sharp tone Harry had heard only once before.

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches. … Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies … and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not … and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives. … The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies…”

The little figure sank back down, but Harry didn’t stop staring, his mind whirling. “Does that mean...?” He voice cracked.
“It means that only one person can truly destroy Lord Voldemort. It means that someone born at the end of July would be that person. It means that Voldemort would attack that one person, and he would mark them.” For the first time, Dumbledore’s tone wasn’t polite disappointment. It was utterly regretful, from the bottom of his heart.

“It means me.” Harry’s voice was flat, unaffected.

“Yes.”

Swallowing, Harry’s tone didn’t change. “And it means either he’s got to die, or I?” Dumbledore nodded.

There was no way he could kill Voldemort. He hadn’t a chance.

_Harry was going to die._

The knowledge was like a hammer to the fractured pieces inside of Harry. Something seemed to fall apart inside of him, leaving him in scattered, with an empty frame.

Slowly, he stood. “Thank you for telling me. Can I go now?”

The Headmaster looked surprised at first, and then slowly nodded. “Yes, you may. Please head straight for the Hospital Wing to get that eye looked at.” The lock clicked open, and Harry slipped out without acknowledging the request. Then he made his way to the nearest bathroom and was promptly sick.

Once he was finished, it felt like he’d vomited up everything in him. His stomach, his lungs, his heart all felt like they were missing, and all that was left was a hollow feeling. Harry decided it was far better than the anger or the heartache.

Then he made his way to the Hospital Wing.

~*~

In the end, Harry ended up spending the rest of the night in St. Mungo’s. The Healer he saw gave a low hiss when he saw his face, which he probably should have taken as a bad sign. Instead, he just felt numb as he was poked and prodded and spelled.

Finally, it his eye was declared as healed as possible by magic, and they removed his bandages. Immediately, Harry had to duck and protect it. The light _burned_ and the one glance he’d gotten out of it had seemed strange - the colors seemed almost inverted, which made his eyes ache.

Words like ’photosensitive’ and ‘colour deficiency’ were thrown around, and Harry was given an eyepatch and told to get regular check-ups for the next few months, to see how healing would progress. Then he was ushered back to Hogwarts with a set of instructions for cleaning the patch and the area beneath it.

At once, he was swarmed by Draco. “You said it was nothing!” He hissed, even as he carded his hands through Harry’s hair and carefully inspected him. Behind him, he could see Ron, Ginny, Neville and Hermione separate from the huddle they’d been in and turn to look at him, a mix of greeting and sympathy on their faces. Cedric was propped up on a hospital bed, and waved a new cane in greeting, asking how he felt, nothing but friendliness in his voice. From a bed where the covers had been flung back, he saw Pansy with her hand over her mouth, and Blaise’s eyes were wide and shocked.
None of it made any impression on him.

“It’s not a big deal.” Harry responded, blinking slowly at them all.

That earned him a frown from Pansy. “Can you see from it?”

“Not really. It has vision, but it’s all messed up.”

Blaise made a choked little noise.

Sitting up a bit more, Cedric frowned. “Is it gunna get better?” Harry just shrugged. Ron opened his mouth to say something, but Hermione and Ginny both elbowed him and he closed it so fast Harry could hear the click.

Ah. They probably thought his strange attitude was about Sirius.

The name brought up an echo of pain, and Harry pushed it away. This numb state was kind of nice. He wasn’t hurting anymore, or angry, or filled with twitching energy that had no outlet. He just... was.

“I should probably get some sleep.” He said. Draco nodded and dragged him over to the bed he’d vacated, pulling him down until Harry was lying against him. It seemed too much effort to fight it, so he went along and closed his eyes.

Conversation swirled around him, but Harry paid it no attention. Instead he let himself drift away into darkness.

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