**Summary**

Five years after Voldemort's defeat, Harry returns to England to help re-open Hogwarts.

**Notes**

Published in 2003, just before Order of the Phoenix came out. Therefore deeply, deeply AU by now.

See the end of the work for more notes

**1. Homing**

The fifth stall in the men's washroom at King's Cross station had had a "Closed For Repairs" sign on the door since 1973.

The stall was large enough to admit a wheelchair; in fact, it was large enough to admit a small car. Occasionally a man using one of the other stalls would report odd sounds from behind its pale-green door. This happened frequently enough that station personnel noticed the pattern, but infrequently enough that references to "the haunted toilet" were mostly in jest -- though the more credulous night employees tended to answer nature's call in pairs.

On this late-summer morning, anyone who had been in the men's room would certainly have been
able to report strange sounds -- a muted pop, a series of faint thuds, a man's weary sigh, and even something that sounded like the squawk of a bird.

But no one was in the toilet to hear it. And when a young man, his green eyes weary behind wire glasses, emerged from the toilet, no one thought to wonder how -- or why -- he had gotten such a quantity of boxes and suitcases into the stall, or what sort of animal he carried in that blanket-covered cage, or how he had come to have that lightning-shaped scar on his forehead.

Several station employees noticed him dragging his burdens across Platform 9, but all of them looked away before they could make eye contact and thus be obligated to help.

No one could remember seeing him board a train. It wasn't long before no one remembered him at all.

Harry laid his head against the seat back and sighed. Transatlantic travel was faster by portkey than by airplane, but it couldn't be said to be more pleasant, and maintaining the Inconspicuous spell that kept the Muggle world from noticing him required more attention than he had expected. His lower back ached a little, and the first hints of a headache lurked behind his eyebrows. Getting a compartment to himself on the Hogwarts Express was the first thing that had gone right all day.

Beside him, Hedwig climbed through the open door of her cage, hopped onto the back of the seat, and began to smooth her travel-ruffled feathers. Harry smiled at her and she gave a lock of his hair an affectionate tug. "Not the easiest trip in the world," he said, "but we're coming home at last."

It had been restful, Florida. The death of Voldemort, the occupation of Hogwarts, the Dementor Rebellion, the Ministry purges, the Death Eater trials -- in Florida they'd been stories played out in the pages of the International Herald-Divinator. His own name had been less familiar to some of his new colleagues than Viktor Krum's. He remembered gathering up the courage to scrub back his hair and show the scar to Sunday Coneskey, who had given him a blank look and then touched it carelessly with one long finger ...

It had been a relief.

But it hadn't been home. And now Hogwarts was reopening, and Harry was going back to teach, and everything was going to be better.

"It will be different," he warned Hedwig, but he found he couldn't believe it. In his mind stood Hogwarts as he'd first seen it, untouched by war and time.

Well, that was a dream. But he'd do everything he could to make it a reality again.

The students would already have arrived on the Express, and this train was empty except for a few Hogsmeade residents returning from errands in the Muggle world, so Harry could relax a bit. He opened his smallest suitcase and pulled out his everyday robe, neglected for five years while he padded around Florida in shorts and sandals. As he shook the wrinkles out of it, he knocked a sheet of paper from the suitcase to the floor of the compartment.

Harry pulled the robe over his head without bothering to unbutton it, then picked up the paper, unfolding the heavy page to show the Hogwarts crest and Minerva McGonagall's rather spiky blue-black script. After the usual greetings and well-wishes came the part that had set Harry on his homeward journey.

"Obeah Bokor tells me that you have done far more than regain your strength over the five years you've spent on the staff at the Coven of the Americas -- that you have in fact developed your power
and discipline far beyond what we saw during your time at Hogwarts. I was pleased to hear this from him, though not surprised.

"Many changes have occurred here during your time in Florida. With the departure of Cornelius Fudge and the reorganization of the Ministry, we at last have a Minister of Magic who will not refuse to acknowledge a threat, nor resist change -- which means that we will be working with the Ministry rather than against it. A better leader than Circe Stormlaw cannot be imagined, and of course I have the utmost confidence in her deputy, Neville Longbottom."

Harry smiled. Neville's unprecedented rise through the Ministry of Magic, placing him in the second position at the unheard-of age of twenty-three, had shocked even those who had known him as a youthful war hero. Harry wished, with some malice, that Professor Snape had lived to see it.

"With the support of this new leadership, we at last feel that it is safe to reopen Hogwarts, and we are calling back a number of our former students to teach. To that end, I am pleased to offer you the position of Professor of Transfiguration."

Harry skimmed the rest of the letter -- room and board, salary commensurate, sabbatical allowance, reply earliest, yours most sincerely. Sunday and Tyndall and the rest of his American friends had been stunned that he would accept a position without a firm salary, until Kat Bonifay had examined his face and said to the others, "Y'all don't get it. He's not climbing, folks. He's homing."

And as the train approached the familiar vista of Hogsmeade Station, Harry felt a great lifting of his spirits. He was coming home to rebuild Hogwarts.

If he was lucky, he'd be busy enough to forget about being the Boy Who Lived when so many others hadn't.

At the foot of the wide stone steps, Harry dropped his boxes, panting. His knees ached -- when had he got so out of shape? and what had possessed him to bring so much baggage? He was looking at the pile in dismay when a familiar voice growled, "Abou' time yeh came back where yeh belong!"

"Hagrid! Are you teaching too?" The last words were smothered in Hagrid's coat as Hagrid folded him into a cheese-scented embrace.

"My! Got some height on yeh in Americer, eh? Don' have that Seeker's build no more." Hagrid held Harry out at arm's length, beaming. "Nah, jus' came back for one las' feast before I go. I'm not fit ter look after the animals in this state, Harry. Can't even help yeh wi' yer bags."

He released Harry's shoulders and held out his hands, and Harry was shocked to see that they were shaking. "Oh, Hagrid --"

"Jus' me war wound," Hagrid said carelessly. "Wasting curse, like as not, only o' course it couldn' kill me on account o' me bein' what I am." Now Harry noticed the deep hollows around Hagrid's eyes, the lines etched on either side of his mouth, and he felt his stomach contracting in horror. But Hagrid sounded as unconcerned as though he were talking about catching cold. "Wizard healers can't do anythin' fer me, but they've got a spot fer me in the giants' sanatorium at Greater Wrenching. I'll be righ' as rain come summer, jus' wait an' see."

"Ah, Harry. And Hagrid -- excellent." Harry turned to see McGonagall coming down the stairs. "If we hurry, we can all get to hall without delaying the Sorting. Let's get this lot to your rooms."

Harry lifted his largest suitcase. "No, no," she said, "leave it to me." She tapped the suitcase with her wand, and with a few short words transfigured its handle into a pair of feet. She did the same to the
rest of the suitcases and the owl cage.

"Follow Hedwig, do you understand?" McGonagall said to the luggage. The cage nodded its perch importantly.

"Ground floor, Hedwig," she said. "Blue rooms, first door past the staff common room. Avoid the staircases and heed the spell barriers." Hedwig set off slowly, landing every now and then to let the jostling pack of luggage catch up.

"I may," Harry said dubiously, watching his bags hurry away, "need some refresher work."

When McGonagall clicked off for the Great Hall, Harry lagged behind with Hagrid, trying not to notice his halting movements and occasional grimaces.

"Y'look better, Harry," Hagrid said, already a little out of breath. "Terrible worried abou' yeh I was, las' time I saw yeh, lookin' like yeh couldn' hardly stand up -- but yeh got yer color back now."

Harry looked away, then made himself look back. "I'm fine now."

"Always said yeh would be," Hagrid said stoutly. "Jus' needed a bi' o' time, yeh did, 's wha' I told 'em all. Awful clever to think o' goin' to Florida, though. Bi' o' sunshine's jus' what you wanted."

"It was Dumbledore's idea," Harry said. "After -- after. Dr. Bokor was an old friend of his -- something about an international folk-dancing festival, I didn't quite catch it -- and he said I should look him up and help him with this new project of his."

"Great man, Dumbledore," Hagrid snuffled, fishing a magenta handkerchief out of his pocket.

They had arrived on the staff platform in the Great Hall, which was already buzzing with a dozen conversations, and Hagrid was already shouting, "Charlie! Forgot to tell yeh -- the young gryffalcons, they'll be needin' --"

Harry nearly ran headlong into a small, neat figure walking behind the table with an open book.

"'Scuse me," they said in unison, and then: "Hermione!" Harry caught her up in a hug that lifted her feet off the floor.

"My! Harry! Weren't we the same height before you went to Florida?" Hermione stuffed her book into a huge shoulder bag as soon as Harry set her down.

"Maybe I grow in sunshine, like a plant."

"You look good, though, Harry," she said seriously. "Are you completely recovered? Because it was really --"

"I'm fine," he interrupted, then added, "You look great." It was true, too; she'd done something different with her hair, and the pinkish color of her robe suited her better than the drab shades she'd chosen when they were at school.

"Thanks," she said. "I've been longing to talk to you -- you're awful about answering letters, you know."

"I was busy," he protested guiltily.

"Right. Busy sunbathing naked with some girl named after a day of the week." She stared him down
"I was busy," he said a little more firmly. She gave him a sharp look.

"You're going to have to talk about it sooner or later, Harry," she said. "I know it's hard for you, but --"

"Hermione --" He looked over her shoulder, searching for something that would distract her.

He succeeded a little better than he would have liked. First he caught a flash of pale hair in the shadows behind the top table. Then the shape came clear. An expensively tailored robe, an expensively bejewelled hand, an expensively barbered head, an expensively curled lip --

Was he never going to be free of Draco Malfoy?

Hermione followed Harry's eyes, and then she straightened up suddenly, crying, "Draco!" and ran to clasp Malfoy. Harry stared dumbly after her. "Mother sent a book for you, and some biscuits, they're in here somewhere --"

"Never mind that," Malfoy said, hugging her roughly. Harry felt a pang of fury. Since when was Hermione so cozy with Malfoy?

"What I want to know is, did Mrs. Spenser ever find Bratleigh's tooth?"

"Oh, yes, it turned out to be in his little brother's forearm -- but how are you getting on without mechanical pencils?"

"Musgrove's Magic Pencils are nearly as good, though not quite so satisfying to click ..." Harry watched their two heads bent together, the dark and the fair. They were exactly the same height, like a matched set of figurines. Something extremely strange must have happened while he was in Florida.

Malfoy was still affecting the look of a wizard-bard from a storybook, Harry thought scornfully: pale hair falling to his shoulders, deep-plum robe heavily embroidered in the same color around the collar, narrow hands heavy with silver rings. Harry hadn't remembered his mouth being quite so red.

He looked up and caught Harry looking, and something crossed his face that wasn't quite the expected sneer. Hermione was tugging him over by the arm. "Harry just got in today from America, Draco, he didn't tell anybody he was coming, I think he forgot how to write a letter --"

"He's forgotten a lot of things, I imagine," Malfoy drawled, but he offered a hand. "Potter. Welcome back."

Damn it, even his languid, lingering handshake felt as though there was an insult behind it.

McGonagall stood up, and Harry suddenly noticed that the hall was full of children milling about. Everyone sat down in a great hurry, and by the time Harry noticed that Malfoy had got into the seat between him and Hermione, it was too late to change, because McGonagall was speaking.

"After five long years, we see the Great Hall filled with students once again." Her voice was rougher than Harry had ever heard it. He turned quickly to look at her and caught what could have been tears
in her eyes. "I think I speak for all of us at the top table when I say that your faces are one of the loveliest sights I have ever seen." She paused a moment, getting hold of herself, and when she spoke again, she sounded more normal.

"We have a long Sorting ahead of us, and I'm sure everyone is eager to get on with the feast. But first, I'd like to introduce the staff, as many of us will be strangers to you."

She began with the four teachers who sat on either side of her in the center of the U-shaped table. "Michelle Verte, Herbology professor and head of Hufflepuff House. Remus Lupin, Defense Against the Dark Arts professor and head of Gryffindor House. Madeleine Aerie, Deputy Headmistress, Potions professor, and head of Slytherin House. And Cypherus Summs, who has kindly agreed to emerge from retirement to teach Arithmancy and look after Ravenclaw House."

Now she introduced the opposite leg of the table: "Oliver Wood, Quidditch coach and Apparation instructor." A great cheer went up from the older students. "Penelope Clearwater, librarian. Daisy MacMillan, Divination profes-- yes, Daisy?"

"Phoenix Skye, please, Headmistress." The new Divination professor was younger than Harry, with a cloud of curly copper hair and a robe decorated in a rather loud paisley of orange and pink. There was a flower tucked behind her ear.

"Very well." McGonagall's voice betrayed her opinion of name changes. "Ursa Polaris, Astronomy professor. And Pedantius Binns, History of Magic professor." Harry wondered how many Sorting feasts it would take before Professor Binns noticed he couldn't eat.

"On my other side: Charlie Weasley, Care of Magical Creatures professor. Sofia Andriescu-Weasley, our medic, whom I hope you won't be meeting too soon." Harry looked up, startled, at the name. One of those notes from Ron must have been about Charlie getting married. "Harry Potter, Transfiguration professor." There was a muted murmur when Harry's name was spoken, and he tensed as he saw some students craning their necks for a closer look.

McGonagall spoke a little louder over the buzz. "Draco Malfoy, professor of Muggle Studies."

Harry was so busy choking on his pumpkin juice that he could barely hear McGonagall introducing Hermione as the new Charms professor.

"Now," McGonagall said over the noise, "we'll need to move briskly through the Sorting, as there are five years' worth of students to be assigned to their houses, so let's begin."

The Sorting Hat, seeming to understand the need for haste, cut its introductory poem to half the usual length, and then McGonagall began calling up the students. The handful of sixth- and seventh-years who were already seated looked up from their conversations. "Banks-Martin, Jonathan?"

"So, Potter," Malfoy said quietly as a boy with a rather superior expression was sorted into Ravenclaw. "Did you enjoy your time doing wizardry for the surfing set?"

Harry, with difficulty, prevented himself from answering back as if he were fourteen again as McGonagall called, "Bates, Niamh?"

"Harry was helping start up the first school of wizardry America has had since Salem, Draco!" Hermione said enthusiastically from the other side. "When we wanted to write to him, our owls had to relay their letters to transatlantic message geese, because an owl could never make it all the way to Disney World --"

Malfoy laughed out loud. "Disney World?" McGonagall aimed a glare in his direction, and he
lowered his voice. "Should we prepare for an onslaught of magical mice?"

"You have to admit, it's a perfect camouflage," Hermione said. "I've read they set off hours of fireworks every night and have parades every day. So no matter what people saw, they'd never suspect anything."

"The Magic Kingdom," Harry offered gamely. Beauchamp, Simon, stopped taking notes long enough to get sorted to Hufflepuff. Malfoy smirked. His robe was turned up at the cuffs, leaving his pale wrists bare. And on his left arm Harry caught a glimpse of the Dark Mark, its grinning mouth like something out of a nightmare.

Malfoy caught Harry looking and turned his arm over. "What, you thought it was just a rumor, Potter?"

It still made Harry's skin crawl after all these years. "I would think that even you would be ashamed to show such a thing," he said icily. Cabot, Jasmine, took off for the Slytherin table at a run, robe trailing behind her.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Shame has nothing to do with it, Potter," he said. "Everything important leaves a mark somewhere. Or hadn't you guessed that yet?" He looked pointedly at Harry's forehead.

Before he could say anything, though, he caught another sharp look from McGonagall. "Dozier, Mignonette?" she said rather more loudly than necessary. Harry had to content himself with glaring at Malfoy and then turning to watch the Sorting.

It seemed to take hours before Young, Lydia, took her seat at the end of the Hufflepuff table, still nervously tugging on one caramel-colored braid. And then the students, who had begun to jostle and whisper among themselves, suddenly fell silent except for the occasional gasp or shriek as the ghosts floated in.

Nearly Headless Nick and the Fat Friar, the Gray Lady and the Bloody Baron ... all the familiar ghosts of the four houses sailed across the air ... and last of all, ghostly eyes a-twinkle, came Albus Dumbledore.

Harry's hands felt heavy and tingly at the sight. Dumbledore made a tour of the student tables, then came up to greet the staff. He wasn't gaunt and bruised and shaky as he'd been at the end, but looked just as he had at Harry's first Sorting Feast, from the spectacles on the end of his nose to the high-heeled boots -- only silvery, translucent as smoke.

Like the rest of the ghosts, he seemed to carry a breath of cold and damp with him, like a portable fog. The hair stood up on the back of Harry's neck.

He felt a sudden sharp pain in his ribs, and started -- Hermione had reached around Malfoy to poke him. He took a breath, almost a gasp. Another, and another, until he was no longer in danger of collapse. He looked up again, still breathing hard.

Dumbledore's ghost looked at him with that same warming, annoying combination of clairvoyance and cheerfulness that he'd always had in life, and winked. "Welcome back, my boy," he said, and blew away like a cloud.

Malfoy was looking at Harry without expression -- taking note of his weakness, no doubt. When Harry gathered his wits, with difficulty, and looked back at him, he raised an eyebrow. "Why, Potter," he said, pushing a glass of pumpkin juice over to him. "You look as though you've seen a ghost."
Harry looked away from Malfoy's considering face and Hermione's sympathetic one and noticed that his plate was full of food. He took a blind bite of a sausage, and at once felt a burst of warmth. Food! Food that tasted like home! Food that wasn't pizza! The whiplashing of his emotions was exhausting him, and quite consciously he closed off part of his mind and sank into the relief of feeling nothing, for the moment, but hunger.

The students, too, were eating as though they'd been starved for months. Harry vaguely remembered a few of them -- Hannah Abbott's youngest sister was passing food to the new Hufflepuffs, and the tall graceful girl at the head of Gryffindor must be Macy Prewitt, who'd had an embarrassing crush on him seventh year when she was twelve and spotty.

There were lots of empty seats at all the tables, but still a good selection of students to choose from. Filling out a Quidditch team -- that was a safe topic to think about.

They'd all be beginners, of course, even the older ones, but that was a handicap that all the houses would share. There were several promising possibilities in Gryffindor. Jack Talos, tall and muscular and at least fifteen, with "champion Beater" written all over him ... Aoife Murphy, a comprehensively freckled girl, with the alert look of a Chaser about her ... and if Taliesin Jones was as fast as he was small, he'd have the makings of a marvelous Seeker.

He looked past Malfoy to Hermione. "Gryffindor kids look good," he said.

"Yes," Malfoy said before she could respond, "nearly all of them look sensible enough not to jump off a roof on a dare."

Harry felt his mouth tighten. He really wished Malfoy would give it a rest; he was worn out from travel and his control of his own temper was uncertain.

Hermione, though, picked it up as though it was a continuation of an earlier conversation. "Oh, Draco," she said. "The Slytherins will be all right. They're young, that's all."

"Young," he said contemptuously. "Look at them. Sneaks, paranoiacs, and Type A high achievers."

Harry followed his gaze to the Slytherin table. Most of them really did look as though they had something to hide, but what was new in that?

"There was a time," Malfoy went on, "when Slytherin attracted serpents -- not jackals."

"Not when you were there," Harry said before he could stop himself.

"Harry!"

But Malfoy didn't even pause. "It's not just the Slytherins, either. Look at Ravenclaw. Nothing but precocious smart-alecks. And Hufflepuff -- they're about to expire from sheer earnestness." Harry could hear Hermione trying to stifle a giggle.

Now McGonagall was giving the students the usual cautions -- no going into the Forbidden Forest, no venturing out after curfew. Rather more than the usual cautions, in fact. "You'll see barriers in places which are still considered unsafe. In particular, the old Potions wing is off limits to all students and staff as well. I cannot stress strongly enough how important it is to heed any barriers you see. Any student caught trying to cross a barrier will be expelled immediately." Harry looked around, hoping the barriers would be easy to spot; he hadn't seen any yet.

"The Gryffindors are all right -- as all right as Gryffindors ever get, anyway," Malfoy went on,
nodding at Lupin, "because Fenris understands the history of the place." Harry set his teeth at the cruel nickname. "But the rest of the houses -- look at them. I told you so, 'Mione. They're parodies of themselves."

Hermione shot Harry a fondly impatient look over Malfoy's head. "Draco believes the Sorting Hat is somehow reacting to the wishes of the Heads of House," she said. "And he's not happy with the Headmistress's choices for Heads."

There was no need to wonder who Malfoy thought was a better candidate for Slytherin head, Harry thought as the table was cleared for dessert -- no, wait, pudding.

A Malfoy was out for himself, first, last, and always. It was strangely reassuring to know some things hadn't changed.

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2. Ruins

Fortunately for Harry's flagging sense of direction, the teachers left the feast en masse and headed for the staff common room. It looked very much like the student common rooms except that it was larger and decorated in purple and gray rather than in house colors.

Many of the staff were already heading to bed -- it was nearly midnight now, and Harry wasn't the only one who'd had a long journey -- but others seemed to be settling down to stay in the common room for a while. Charlie and Sofia had already set up a chess table in the corner by the larger fireplace, and were playing a fierce, fast game full of shouts of triumph and outrage.

Harry could hear Hagrid making his farewells, and he lingered by the hallway door, wanting to speak to him. To Harry's surprise, Hagrid had a long, low-voiced conversation with Malfoy, leaving him with a laugh and an odd forearm clasp.

"Ah, I never can forget wha' a wonder it was we got Draco back in one piece," he told Harry, nodding at Malfoy, who was now engaged in a friendly-sounding exchange with Professor Lupin. Harry wished Malfoy would get out of earshot so he could ask Hagrid if they'd all lost their minds.

"Harry," Hagrid said fondly. "The old place'll feel like home again, now yeh've come back. Almos' wish I could stay. But I've got ter trust that Charlie'll take good care o' th' creatures, an' yeh'll take good care o' yerself." He gripped Harry's forearm with one huge, shaking hand, as he had done with Malfoy. "It's the way me people greet a true comrade," he said proudly. "Look after yerself, Harry, an' if all goes well I'll see yeh come summer."

Harry sadly watched as Hagrid finished his farewells and left, then looked around for Hermione, but she was drawing Malfoy over to a couch under a tremendous bas-relief map of northern England, still arguing as they both sat down. "Then maybe it's time to abolish the House system altogether," she said, and Harry felt his mouth drop open.

Eager as Malfoy was to change everything that made Hogwarts Hogwarts, Harry was surprised to hear him disagree. "You say no houses, 'Mione, but in practice that would mean the whole school was one big house, teaching nothing but Ravenclaw magic or nothing but Gryffindor magic."

"You always think --" she began, but Malfoy interrupted her: "Or nothing but Slytherin, it doesn't matter. The point is there are different kinds of wizards and they need different things. And the House system --"
Obviously Harry wasn't going to get a chance to talk to Hermione as long as Malfoy was here. Funny how he'd been too good for her at school, and now he couldn't get enough of her.

He probably ought to go to bed, but his internal clock had decided that it was early afternoon. So after a moment's indecision, he poured himself a cup of tea from the self-replenishing pot on the sideboard and went off to sit down on another couch. After a moment, Professor Lupin dropped down beside him.

"You look good, Harry," he said.

Harry stirred his tea with more than necessary force. He was getting really tired of that comment. "You too, Professor," he said. "Sorry I didn't write to you more often." He winced inwardly, remembering all the times he'd turned the delivery goose away without even unfolding the message it had brought, unwilling to have his fragile peace disturbed by a message from home.

"Remus, please. And it's quite all right, I understand," he answered mildly, and took a sip of his own tea. Harry was afraid he understood all too well, and he looked away from Lupin's -- Remus' -- sharp eyes.

Behind the couch were several layers of purple and gray curtains, but they framed nothing but seamless stone. "Is this the normal way of decorating in the teachers' quarters? Curtains on a stone wall?"

Remus smiled rather sadly. "It used to be a window," he said. "All the windows have been filled in, didn't you notice?"

Harry hadn't. "Whatever for?"

"To stop the curses, of course." Remus looked at him curiously. "But I suppose you were out of commission that first autumn, and by the time we'd retaken the school and removed the Death Eaters, you were in America." He rose and resettled on the couch. Must be a long story, Harry thought.

"It all began with a first-year who --"

"Even in St. Mungo's we heard about Lark Brown." His voice was sharper than he intended, and he grimaced in apology, but Remus only nodded.

"Yes, when a curse kills a little girl on her way to the Sorting feast, I suppose the word gets about. And her aunt was a classmate of yours, if I remember correctly."

Harry had wanted to send Lavender a letter of sympathy, but even if he had known what to say, owls were frowned upon in St. Mungo's. As were quills, for that matter.

"Then you heard about the other attacks?"

Harry blinked, then shook his head.

"Well, the Brown girl's death was blamed on Death Eaters who had escaped justice, and Medusa Macallan eventually confessed. The Ministry ... well, no one could say they weren't very zealous in making certain all suspected Death Eaters were accounted for."

Harry glanced over at Malfoy, who was leaning toward Hermione, gesturing wildly, cheeks pink, not looking at all accounted for. If it was ever possible to account for Malfoy, which he doubted.

"But," Remus went on, "even after the school was closed, the workers cleaning up the war damage
were harried by attacks. It didn't matter how many Death Eaters were captured -- the next day there'd be injuries, explosions, fires.

"The best theory anyone could offer was that someone was still on the grounds somewhere, casting curses from some hidden stronghold. First the Ministry tried adding more and more security on the grounds themselves. When that didn't solve the problem, we filled in the windows in the hopes of protecting the interior.

"We worked all night in teams, closing up every window we could find," Remus said. "This was in November, just after the last of the Dementors were put down, and we still thought we'd be able to open the school late and finish out the year. And in the morning we came back, and ... "

Remus took a breath, then placed his cup and saucer on the table with careful precision. "Sirius was the first to arrive, as usual, you know, and he used his cane to push open the door --"

"Oh, no." Harry closed his eyes. When he opened them, Remus was staring down at his own clasped hands. "His wounds weren't that serious," Harry said softly. "Everyone was so sure he would recover, and then the next thing I heard --"

"Minerva turned the cane to stone and put it over the door, did you see it? It's the newest of the new memorials." Remus looked up with an off-center smile. "He always used to say he was going to use it to do something unspeakable to Cornelius Fudge."

There was a long silence then. Harry could faintly hear Hermione and Malfoy still arguing over something, McGonagall calling down goodnights as she tripped up one of the curving staircases, Sofia saying "Checkmate" in a rather smug tone.

Kat, Harry thought, would be rolling her eyes. "Unbend and give the guy a hug already, Har. You could both use one." He leaned his shoulder against Remus', and Remus leaned back briefly and sighed.

"Who did it turn out to be?" Harry said at last. Remus shrugged. "They didn't catch anyone?"

"They caught a great many people. Entirely too many, some say. But no one was ever able to explain the Hogwarts attacks."

"Are you certain it's safe to reopen?" The back of Harry's neck felt cold. He had thought he was done with this, this damned impotent worry ...

"No," Remus said flatly. "But with Durmstrang permanently shut down, and Beauxbatons crammed so tightly they don't even have seats for all the students, and all sorts of unscrupulous wizards setting themselves up as private instructors ... well, Minerva felt there was more risk in remaining closed than in reopening."

Hogwarts was still said to be the safest place in the world.

After a long moment Harry said brightly, "Well. I've been home nearly six hours and nothing's gone wrong yet."

There was no immediate explosion. He decided to take that as a good omen.

The door to Harry's rooms was guarded by a painting of a very pretty young milkmaid, who blushed and stammered when Harry introduced himself. To his surprise, she was there again on a painting hung inside the door, where at a word from him she could open the door to visitors.
"Your doorkeeper is lovely," Remus said, setting the girl to trembling and blushing again. "Mine's an Irish setter, which suggests that Albus Dumbledore's sense of humor is not altogether absent from Hogwarts." He flicked his wand to light some candles in the sitting room. "Minerva asked me to apologize for the rooms -- the ones on the upper storeys are more interesting, but none of the vacant ones are in good repair at the moment."

"Oh, no," Harry said. The sitting room was spacious and comfortable, with a fire crackling in the hearth and a wide, squishy couch. Under the filled-in windows was a study corner, with an enormous desk and a wall of bookshelves. Beyond, through an open door, Harry could glimpse a bed with bright blue curtains. "It's wonderful. But how will Hedwig --"

Before he could finish the question, there was a clicking noise, and Harry saw that a decorative panel above the outer door was actually a smaller door, just the right size for an owl to use. Hedwig greeted Remus with a friendly hair-tug, then settled down on her perch and tucked her head under her wing.

"Owls are meant to be nocturnal," Remus said curiously. "Are they subject to portlag?"

"Dunno," Harry said, and then yawned widely. "Humans are, though." He closed his eyes. It took him several seconds to open them again.

Remus smiled. "I'll let myself out."

As soon as he saw the place when he was wide awake, Harry understood why McGonagall was anxious to get on with training the next generation of wizards. Hogwarts was rather a mess.

His own rooms were normal except for the filled-in windows. Just on the other side of his door, though -- he couldn't think how he had missed it the night before -- a passageway was closed off with protections both magical and mundane, black ribbon laced through the faint shimmer of a spell barrier. And beyond that he could see that a staircase was simply missing, with nothing left but a bit of the old banister ascending into empty air.

Coven students and teachers had occasionally been called upon to treat victims of vengeful cursing or to lift the mal de ojo from an infant, but Harry had spent most of the last five years on more benign forms of magic. He'd almost forgotten the unpleasantly slippery feeling that the nastier curses left in the air until he felt it now. He turned his back on it quickly, ignoring the tension in the back of his neck.

Rubbing his forehead to smooth away the headache that still clung to him, he walked through the deserted staff common room. On the other side of the door, he paused, trying to remember the way to the Great Hall. Left at the first hallway, then right at the third -- or was it left at the third and then right at the first? Or was he turned round altogether?

"Straight ahead to the portrait of Usher the Untidy, Mr. Potter," came a very familiar sneer. "After that, right, right, left -- do pay attention, Mr. Potter; I had hoped perhaps even you might have made some progress in mastering that elementary skill --"

"Professor Snape?" Harry whirled, nearly stumbling over his robe, and winced as he heard his voice squeak.

The door to the staff common room had been held open the night before. Now that it was closed, Harry could see the statue that guarded it: the late Potions master in gray stone, nine feet tall and captured in full sneer.
"Your grasp of the obvious remains unparalleled, I see." The statue held a cauldron in one hand, and a lock of stone hair fell forward over its left eye. Like Dumbledore's ghost, Snape's statue was less ravaged by war than the man had been when Harry last saw him alive, though no less imperious. One robe sleeve was drawn back to reveal a shallow etching of the Dark Mark. It was possible, Harry thought with distaste bordering on disgust, to take realism too far.

"R-right, all right," he stammered. "Usher the Untidy, right, right, left --"

"Talking to inanimate objects again, Potter?" Malfoy swept through the door in a swirl of ice-blue robes, looking as if he'd slept for twelve hours rather than four. Harry scrubbed at his unruly hair. Malfoy inclined his head to Snape's statue, a sort of minimal bow, and went on down the corridor.

The statue's lips twitched, but it made no further comment. After a moment, Harry stifled an absurd urge to say, "Can I go now, Professor?" and walked off toward the dining hall.

It was still quite early, and the student tables were empty except for three Hufflepuffs who obviously thought there was no such thing as too much of an early start. At the staff table, Remus and Michelle Verte were sitting side by side, glancing at each other occasionally as though they wanted to have a conversation but couldn't decide how to get started.

Harry headed for the other end of the table, where he'd spotted Hermione eating bacon with one hand and turning the pages of the first-year Charms textbook with the other.

"You're up early," she said as he sat down beside her and helped himself to the first kippers he'd seen in five years.

"My brain thinks it's yesterday afternoon," he said. "And my head hurts. Maybe I should go ask Sofia for a portlag cure."

"Oh, no, Harry," Hermione said, closing her book. "Portlag's one of the Incurables, like hangovers, don't you remember? She'll just give you a sleep draught and a lecture. Not that you couldn't use one. A sleep draught, I mean -- if a lecture would help you'd have been better ages ago."

"Hush," he said, smiling, and on that one word his accent sounded just like Kat's. He'd catch himself saying "y'all" next if he wasn't careful.

Now that the special feast linens had been removed, he could see that the edge of the table in front of him was scraped and splintered. He looked around the dining hall and felt his chest tighten as he saw the marks of damage everywhere.

Most of the tables were scraped or chipped, and a few had been broken in half and mended. There were great gouges in the wall behind the staff table, as though something heavy had been flung against it at high speed, and marks in the floor that looked as though they had been made by claws.

He wondered what it had looked like before the staff spent the summer cleaning it.

Here, too, the air was soapy with the residue of Dark magic, so strong that Harry wondered whether it was entirely the result of old curses. He looked over his shoulder.

"Expecting to see an old enemy, Potter? Your luck is in," Malfoy said, brushing past him to sit down on Hermione's other side. Harry didn't leap out of his chair, but only through force of will.

Have a little pride, Potter, he told himself. The guy's still an arrogant weasel, but that's no reason to be so jumpy. "Listen, Malfoy," he said. "Hermione may trust you, but I'm reserving judgment."
Malfy just raised one eyebrow. "Not jumping to a conclusion yet, Potter? Now there's a first," he said. "If you're too full of homecoming spirit to eat, I'll take that baked apple off your hands."

"Stop mooching, Draco." Hermione smacked his hand as it passed in front of her. "Harry needs all the food he can get. Didn't you eat at all in America? You're gaunt."

"I'm fine," Harry said for what seemed like the hundredth time.

The noise level in the room was rising as more students arrived. Harry hated to see them sitting at the damaged tables. Teaching was going to be a challenge, but he vowed he'd spend as much time as he could working to get Hogwarts back to normal.

"Are your rooms nice, Harry?" Hermione said. "I'm on the fourth floor -- Penelope's going to help me find the charm they used on the ceiling in here, because if I can enchant the walls I'll have a view of the lake --"

Suddenly there was a shriek from the student tables. Harry looked up in time to see one of the young Slytherins collapsing backward, chair and all, with a strange, broken wail.

McGonagall was the first to get to her, with Malfoy close behind. "I don't want to hear any more of this superstitious nonsense," McGonagall was saying severely as Harry arrived.

"But, Professor, the Crabbe chair --" "Nobody ever sits --"

Malfoy was kneeling by the girl, whose heels were drumming on the floor. "Petrificus Totalus," he said, and she fell still. He looked up at McGonagall. "Kitty, get these bloodthirsty little boggarts out of the way, will you, while I --"

McGonagall herded the students back as Malfoy began to murmur in a soft, slurred voice. Harry tensed, but then recognized the words as transfiguration spells -- Malfoy was turning the chair into a stretcher. He still pronounced his spells like a native speaker, all elisions and dropped endings. Harry's spells were perfectly functional, but compared to Malfoy, he had always felt as though he were reading the words out of a phrasebook.

The girl's eyes were still open, moving wildly, and in her arms and hands and jaw Harry could see muscles clenching against the restraint of the spell. His eyes fell on someone's boiled egg, shell still unbroken. He snatched it and knelt on the girl's other side, running it over her face and murmuring, feeling a faint tingle under his fingers. Tyndall de Soto, the Coven's specialist in Latin American magic, had taught him to pull enchantment into an egg, and apparently the spell worked even when the egg was breakfast.

He was dimly aware of Malfoy on the other side of the girl, still tapping the chair with his wand and murmuring. The stretcher began to sprout wheels, then bands to hold the girl's arms and legs. She stopped tensing just as Malfoy's last words transfigured her rather gaudy necklace into a pillow to cradle her head.

Harry put the egg in Malfoy's hand. "Tell Sofia it was boiled. She may still be able to interpret the yolk. If she hasn't done it before, I can help when we're done with crowd control."

"Well," wheezed Cypherus Summs as a prefect hurried up to help Malfoy wheel the stretcher away. "That's what I call teamwork."

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McGonagall declared the Slytherin common room to be the safest place for the students. The room was underground and draped all over with protective spells, but Harry was still uneasy about their
safety.

"I haf removed the Petrificus and placed upon her a Consopium -- a magical coma," Sofia told Harry in her soft accent when he came to the infirmary later. "I could not otherwise stop the confusions, and I feared she would damage herself. But, 'Arry, I do not know what you wanted me to do with this egg."

The rest of the staff gathered round to watch as Harry broke the egg into a glass of water, but apparently this part of Tyndall's curanderismo only worked with a raw egg; he couldn't make anything at all of the shape of the yolk, no matter how he squinted at it.

"Harry, are you singing?"

He shut his mouth, embarrassed, and poured the mess of water and soft-boiled egg into the infirmary sink. Hermione was still looking at him expectantly. "Cherokee chant," he told her. "Supposed to call your manito to you -- your power, your magic, whatever. Sunday got everybody in the bad habit of humming it when we worked on something. A Potions lesson at the Coven is really something to hear."

"You always work without a wand?" Charlie said, and Harry realized his wand was still in his sleeve.

"Two weeks after I arrived in Florida, I helped Dr. Bokor lift a curse with a spatula. After that I understood what wands were for."

McGonagall was bending over the girl's bed. "I am very much afraid that this is the same curse that hit Argus Filch when he attempted to re-open the Potions wing," she said.

Filch had survived the war, but the state of the school made it quite obvious that he wasn't working as a caretaker any longer. Harry had assumed he'd simply retired. "What happened to him?"

"Poppy had a small amount of Nervalitum, a powerful nerve regrowth potion of Severus' invention," McGonagall said. "As long as she was able to administer this to Argus, his seizures were held in abeyance and his body was able to work on healing itself. When it ran out ..."

"You couldn't make more?"

"It requires powdered narwhal tusk," said Madeleine Aerie. "Which is impossible to find, now that the Ministry's reclassified it. We couldn't get at Professor Snape's supplies, and none of us has his shady contacts, more's the pity."

"Ironically," McGonagall added, "the reason Argus was in the Potions wing to begin with was to search Severus' quarters for books, notes, and ingredients that we couldn't get elsewhere." She sighed. "Poppy kept Argus alive for ten months using Animaserum, which is a more general systemic strengthener, but his convulsions continued, and his body wasted itself away."

"Where is Madam Pomfrey, anyhow?" Harry said.

"Dead," McGonagall said shortly.

She stared at the spot where the window should have been, rubbing the back of her neck with one hand and looking entirely exhausted.

Finally Harry asked her, "What was that about the chair?"
"That was Victor Crabbe's chair, and the sillier students believe it's cursed," she said.

She had already undone Malfoy's transfiguration on the chair. It stood in the corner, looking like a perfectly ordinary chair.

"We've questioned everyone," Charlie said, "and there's no sign of anything unusual. She sat down, she screamed, that's all we know."

McGonagall stared at the chair. "Something," she said, "is badly wrong."

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3. Sacrifice

"I'm afraid," McGonagall announced in the staff common room, "we may have to shut down again and send the students home." Her voice was shaking.

"You can't," Harry said without thinking.

There was a roar of comment. The headmistress raised her voice. "If our current security measures are inadequate to the task of protecting students from these curses, or even finding out who's casting them --"

"But that's exactly why --"

"Potter's right," Malfoy said suddenly. Harry's mouth dropped open. "Kitty, if this is a new threat, we need trained wizards. And if the Death Eaters are recruiting -- well, don't look so shocked, you know you were all thinking it -- if they're recruiting, we need to be doing the same."

"Lark Brown," Wood said pointedly, and McGonagall said, "Precisely. To expose children to these sorts of risks ..."

Malfoy smacked a stone-filled window with the palm of his hand -- a disgustingly theatrical gesture, Harry thought, though he had to admit that it captured everyone's attention.

"I thought Gryffindors understood sacrifice," he said, turning back to face the roomful of silent teachers. "Hogwarts or no Hogwarts, wizard children are going to learn something from someone. Right now they're out there untrained, unchanneled, with no positive influence. Children are going to be risked regardless. But if we're open, we can make the risk good for something."

McGonagall looked as though her throat hurt. After a moment, she said, "You make a good point, Draco. I believe I need to consult with Albus on this -- Friar, could you fetch him? We'll discuss it further tonight. Perhaps Miss Rolfe will regain consciousness by then and have more to tell us."

In the roar of discussion that followed, it was almost impossible to make out any conversation. Phoenix Skye was trying to get Summs and Malfoy to join her in a meditation for positive vibrations. Charlie and Sofia were whispering very quickly, finishing each other's sentences. A head in the fireplace -- no one Harry recognized -- was bellowing potion ingredients to Madeleine Aerie.

Only Hermione was silent in her armchair. Harry sat on a nearby footstool and looked at her, but she kept on staring blindly at the wall for several minutes. Then she looked right past Harry.

"Draco," she called, "who was the last person to sit in the Crabbe chair?"
"Crabbe himself, I should think," he said, leaving Phoenix behind with a sigh of relief. "All those little geese believe it was cursed. The older ones whispered it down to the newcomers at the Sorting feast."

He perched on the arm of Hermione's chair, and she looked up at him. "But he didn't really curse it, surely?"

"Do you know any way to put a seizure curse on a chair?" He looked from Hermione to Harry, and then to Remus, who had come up to stand beside Harry's footstool. When they were all silent, he nodded. "Thought not. And if you don't know, then you can be sure Vincent didn't know. He could scarcely spell his own name without help."

"You've always known how to choose your friends, Malfoy," Harry said tightly, ignoring Hermione's noise of protest. "What are Crabbe and Goyle doing now? Standing outside the walls casting curses on unsuspecting children?"

"Oh, I don't imagine Vincent would have that sort of courage," Malfoy said carelessly. "He'll be hiding in some safe place with what's left of the Death Eaters, I suppose, unless he's dead." He shifted back against the back of the chair and crossed one knee over the other. "As for Gregory," he added blandly, "I killed him."

Harry went cold with shock and anger. Was Malfoy not just annoying but dangerous? Could he be casting curses on students?

Beside him Remus made an impatient gesture. "Draco, that isn't funny," he said. "Harry's been gone a long time, and he hasn't had a chance to catch up yet."

Malfoy shrugged. "He ought to be able to handle unpleasant truths like a good Gryffindor."

"I already know all the unpleasant truths I care to know about you, thanks," Harry said through gritted teeth.

The Animaserum quieted Charlotte Rolfe enough that Sofia was able to release her from the Consopium, but as the afternoon wore on, her seizures started again, and Sofia once again spelled her into unconsciousness.

The staff huddled in the common room, talking in hushed voices. McGonagall and Dumbledore's ghost sat murmuring in a secluded corner, heads so close together that their foreheads appeared to intersect. Remus and Michelle Verte went off to take a turn watching over the students, and Penelope and Oliver came back staggering under the weight of several dozen library books with unsettling titles.

Harry wished there were windows to look out of while he was thinking. Lacking that, he stood for a long time gazing into a painting, watching a ship toss on a stormy sea, trying to imagine who had cast that curse, and how, and what could be done to stop someone from doing it again.

He could feel the old feeling bearing down on him, the one he'd shed with so much difficulty in America -- because he didn't know what to do and they were all counting on him, their lives depended on him, and he was going to fail them all again, let them all down, let them all die, just like --

He felt movement beside him and started violently, but it was only Hermione. "Stop brooding, Harry," she said impatiently. "Here," she added, tugging him toward one of the sideboards, "they've brought up some cold chicken for supper. Eat, and then come and tell me what you know about
casting a curse through a solid stone wall."

"Did you ever think," Harry said, as quietly as he could manage, "of the other possibilities? Honestly, Hermione, why are you looking outside the walls when there was a Dark wizard right there in the room?"

She sighed impatiently. "Harry, look over there." She nodded over at where Malfoy stood, talking very seriously with a group of teachers. Charlie was standing beside him, and McGonagall and Dumbledore's ghost were both listening and nodding as Malfoy waved one long-fingered hand toward the closed-up windows, the spell-guarded doors. "Would Minerva trust someone who was dangerous? Would Dumbledore?"

Harry looked from Malfoy back to Hermione. She had never been gullible, but ... "He's a Death Eater, Hermione," he said.

"He was a Death Eater," she said. "And then he was a spy, and then he was in the Wizard Protection Program, and now he's --"

"-- very probably a traitor, and definitely a sneaky, lying, superior --"

Hermione looked at him sternly. "We don't have time for this, Harry," she said, sounding frighteningly like McGonagall. "Something is threatening the students, and us, too. And it is not Draco Malfoy. I know him, Harry. I was here."

Oh, that stung. It must have shown on his face, because to his shock, she leaned forward and took both his hands. "Oh, Harry." Her fingers were very warm. "We'll tell you everything, I promise -- as soon as there's time we'll tell you the whole story. But in the meantime -- well, I understand if you can't trust Draco just yet, but you're going to have to trust the rest of us."

Four-thirty in the morning, and Harry was wishing he'd just nodded off in the common room like Cypherus Summs, who'd been snoring away in a wing chair when Harry'd gone off to bed.

After so many nights in the converted motel that housed the Coven, he was finding it hard to breathe in a room with no windows. It was so dark that he could hardly tell the walls from the furniture, and so quiet, with Hedwig out for the night, that he could hear his own breathing echoing back off the half-closed bedcurtains.

He turned over, punching his pillow and wishing that he'd gone to Sofia for that sleep draught after all. If there were a window, he'd be facing it, and perhaps he could see the moon, or at least a bit of the grounds. Or a robed, masked Death Eater, wand in hand, prowling around, looking for a gap big enough to cast a curse through --

He turned over again, so quickly that he shook the bed. Breathed in, breathed out, closed his eyes and tried to picture ocean waves, the way Kat had taught him. Breathe in, breathe out, let it go, Har, let it go.


The air was filled with an icy fog, though, not like Florida where it was warm even in winter, but cold as a Dementor's breath. And that roar wasn't the ocean at all but his own panting breath.

Or perhaps it was the fire, because Dumbledore had set Voldemort's body on fire, and the flames threw warmth on his face. Ron and Sirius were warm, too, where they held him up, and Snape's Animaserum was warm inside him, and Dumbledore's hand on his arm ought to have been warm too
but it wasn't, somehow, and he was saying urgently, "You must go now, my boy. You have done your part and the task that remains is not for you," but how could they know Voldemort was dead, how could they be sure, it was absolutely vital for them to be sure ... 

Harry sat up with a start, his own whimper waking him from the dream. He ran clammy hands over his face. "Lumos." His voice was shaky.

When his heart stopped racing, he got out of bed and lit every lamp and candle in the room.

When Harry returned to the common room, Summs was gone and McGonagall was sitting on a couch surrounded by books and empty teacups. If she hadn't had on a different robe, Harry would have been sure she'd spent the night there. "Morning," she said indistinctly as she rubbed her face."
The girl --"

"No change."

Breakfast was already laid out on the sideboards -- coffee as well as tea, Harry was relieved to note. As he was buttering a scone, the common room door opened and Hermione and Malfoy came in.

Hermione was already talking rapidly. "No, but it's odd, isn't it, that they'd choose a Slytherin? If it really is Death Eaters, you'd think --"

Malfoy was wearing dark green today, but Hermione was still in yesterday's robe. Harry didn't care for the implications of that; now was not the time for dalliances, even if it had been someone other than Malfoy. "What, they'd spare the old fellow's house out of some sort of old school loyalty?" he was saying to Hermione. "Or perhaps -- oh, raspberries." He descended upon the fruit, looking almost human.

Harry pushed aside some books to sit next to McGonagall. Hermione sat in a nearby armchair and stared at both of them. "Neither of you got a wink of sleep last night, did you?" She herself was looking rather weary.

"Maddie and I combed over every inch of the Great Hall," McGonagall said. "And then Albus and the ghosts combed it again. There is no gap in the walls or ceiling large enough to admit the slightest breath of air." She rubbed her eyes again.

Hermione was frowning, deep in thought. "How does a curse travel?"

"In a direct line, like a beam of light," Harry answered promptly. It was almost word-for-word from the sixth-year Defense Against the Dark Arts text. "It can bounce like light, or reflect like light --"

" -- but it can't disappear one place and appear another, and it can't cross a large body of water, and it can't curve," Hermione finished the quote. "And it can't pass through a solid stone wall," she added as Malfoy arrived with a plate piled high with raspberries. "I'm surprised you didn't just bring the serving bowl, Draco."

"House elves fastened it to the table somehow," he said, mouth full, and once again perched on the arm of her chair.

"They're wise to you." She held out her hand and he dropped three berries into it. Harry looked at McGonagall to see if she found the display as sickening as he did, but she was already turning the pages of a book again, rubbing her temple with her fingers.
Hermione spat raspberry seeds delicately into a napkin. "I still say we should at least consider the possibility that there might be an element of truth in the superstition about the Crabbe chair. That there might be something unusual about the chair itself."

"We did examine it very closely," McGonagall said.

"But not until after," Hermione said.

"Fine," Malfoy said. "I'll say it again, 'Mione -- do you know of any way to put a curse on a chair?" When she was silent, Malfoy looked around her. "Potter? Did your Yank mongrel magicians have some method for doing that?"

"Shut up, Malfoy," Harry said.

"Harry!" Hermione glared at him.

"Well, the answer is no," Harry said. "I could turn a chair into something else, or turn something else into a chair. Or ... make it fall apart when someone sat in it ..."

"Put one of those blasted Weasley cushions on it to make a rude noise when someone sat down ..." Malfoy said.

"Make there appear to be a chair where there really wasn't one ..." Hermione mused.

Harry blinked suddenly. "Well, I don't know how to do this myself, but there's a Dark method for putting something of yourself into an object." He swallowed. "Like Tom Riddle's diary."

There was a moment of silence. "We don't really believe that ... that Voldemort did this, do we?" Hermione said hesitantly.

"Voldemort is dead," Harry said flatly. "Believe me, I have it on very good authority that he's gone for good." He stopped himself from touching his scar. "Though I'm not convinced that he doesn't still have active supporters," he added.

Hermione ignored that. "This would have to be like enchanting an object to set off a spell when it was touched." She seemed to be thinking out loud. "Like a land mine."

"A land what?" McGonagall said, but Harry saw what Hermione was getting at and interrupted her.

"Headmistress -- tell me what happened to Lark Brown. Tell me exactly."

"I was waiting on the shore when Hagrid brought in the boat with the first-years," McGonagall said. "And she hardly even waited until the boat arrived on shore -- I remember thinking we'd all have our work cut out for us, keeping up with this one --" She blinked rapidly. "And before I could offer her a hand, she'd boosted herself over the edge of the boat and put her foot on the ground ..." She trailed off. "She put her foot on the ground and screamed --"

"As if the curse came from the ground itself," Hermione said.

Harry straightened up suddenly. "Remus told me that Sirius wasn't killed until he touched the entry doors with his cane."

"Yes," McGonagall murmured, almost to herself. "And Irma Pince was hit with a Lockjoint Curse at the moment when she first touched the door to the library."

"Professor Aerie couldn't stop vomiting for two days after she first tried to get into the old Potions
classroom," Hermione pointed out.

"She isn't the only one," McGonagall said. "No one has been able to set foot in that wing since we re-took the castle. It seemed as though everyone was cursed, everyone who ventured down there after -- after Severus --" Her eyes flicked to Malfoy.

"After Professor Snape and my father killed one another there," Malfoy said flatly, and McGonagall's face tightened, but she nodded.

"Sofia has already knitted four broken bones," Hermione said after a moment.

Malfoy finished her thought: "-- which probably occurred the first time a student opened a dormitory door, didn't they." McGonagall nodded.

They all looked at each other.

"Someone has mined Hogwarts," Hermione said slowly. "That's why we can't keep the curses out -- because they're not coming from outside. Someone could have done this months ago, and the curses would just sit there quietly, waiting for someone to touch the wrong thing ..."

McGonagall cast a nervous glance around the common room. Harry could see her point. All the furniture, the doors, the floor, suddenly looked threatening.

But Malfoy sounded relieved. "Then it really is over," he said very softly. Harry looked up quickly and saw him looking, not at the furniture, but at the filled-in windows.

"All but the cleanup." Hermione was looking thoughtful. "Neville says they've had a rash of strange occurrences at the Ministry, too." She sat up. "And if that's mined ..." She didn't even have to finish her thought. "We've got to do something."

"Well, by all means, if you know a way to lift a curse when you don't know either the curse or the victim ..."

"Wait," Harry said. "I used to know a gris-gris against hidden enchantments." At their confused looks, he clarified: "A spell, a potion. I'll send a goose to Dr. Bokor and get the details."

"Better get 'Mione to do a Transauditum for you," Malfoy said. "It may be the middle of the night out in the wild colonies, but we haven't any time to waste."

"Rosemary," Harry said. He had roused the headmaster from a sound sleep to ask for the recipe for the gris-gris while McGonagall went to explain the situation to the other teachers. Then Harry, Hermione, and Malfoy had headed for the new Potions classroom, a former storeroom hastily fitted with sinks and cutting tables and the rather inadequate supplies that the staff had been able to buy to replace Snape's inaccessible store.

"Got it," said Hermione, handing the branch to Harry. He added it to the cauldron of boiling water.

"Pennyroyal."

"Got it."

"Ammonia."

"Phew -- really? Well, all right."
"Gunpowder."

"Got it."

"Now what?" Malfoy said.

"Now we let it cool," Harry said, looking at his notes, "and then we wash our hands and feet in it and let them lead us to the secret enchantments."

"Oh?" Malfoy inquired with exaggerated interest. "And when do we say bibbiti-bobbiti-boo?"

"Shut up, Malfoy." Harry clenched his teeth.

To make matters worse, Hermione was giggling. "Harry," she said. "Now, admit it. If someone like Ron had said something like that, you would have laughed."

"Yes, well, I like Ron," Harry muttered.

"The question is," Hermione said, "when we find these enchantments, what do we do about them? I'm almost sure Stheno's De Rerum has a way of identifying an unknown curse -- or maybe it was Opinicus ..." She dug through her shoulder bag and began flipping through books. "Wait -- here it is. 'When thy Wande upon ye source of Enchantement be well trained, then do thou pronounce Patefaco abstrusi, and verily, by thine own eyen shalt thou enlightened be.'"

"Well," Harry said after a moment, "it's worth a try." And he kicked off his shoes.

"What have you got there?" Malfoy was staring at his ankle.

"Oh." Harry touched the braided leather thong. "My ... Sunday made it for me. It's a speedwell. Sort of a folk charm."

"How fascinatingly primitive," Malfoy drawled. Harry glared at him, but he was still looking at Harry's ankle.


"Not really magic," Harry said hastily to head her off from another digression. "Just a pretty superstition, Sunday said. And this stuff is probably cool now."

"Phew," Malfoy said when they'd all bathed their hands and feet. "We smell like Weasley's kitchen. Now what?"

"If our theory is correct, it would make sense to go somewhere that's been deserted since Before," Hermione said.

Malfoy took a step, then stepped back, frowning. "I feel --"

Harry was walking toward the back corner, still piled high with items that had been stored in the room. "An impulse," he said, and reached for the handle of a cabinet.

"Wait!" Hermione stopped him, pointed her wand at the cabinet, and said, "Patefaco abstrusi."

There was a light so bright Harry shut his eyes. After a moment he opened them, still squinting. The cabinet was lit with a tracery of what looked like yellow neon. A squiggle of it hung from the latch.
"Wow," Harry said.

"That's some very advanced calligromancy," Malfoy said.

"You're sure you're not just thinking that because of Harry's speedwell?" Hermione said.

Malfoy glared at her. "My father had a special interest in the subject."

Hermione had a notebook. "All right, then, I can start with Bodoni's Calligromancy," she said happily. "And we need a way to disarm them without hurting anyone. And then we need a way to expand the spell so it works without having to find the enchantment first, and ..." She looked up. "Go get Minerva and the rest. Meet me in the library after dinner."

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4. Synergy

By the time they arrived at the library, they could barely see Hermione's head over the pile of books. She looked up, beaming, from a translation of a German work on magical law enforcement.

"It's amazing! There are spells you can use to create a sigil -- a calligromancy character -- without using paper. With the right spell, you can just -- " She waved her wand as though it were a quill -- "write it on the air. What we saw on the cabinet was a simple explosion, but on the other side of the room I found one that was more subtle -- it causes a slow swelling of the joints, so after a week or two the victim begins to experience something similar to arthritis."

She paused, blinking. "Which they've been having an epidemic of at the Ministry." She began to scabble for another book, mumbling to herself.

"Iubo, 'Mione," Malfoy said.

Harry stared at him, shocked -- it was the spell you used to bring a dog to heel -- but Hermione laughed and said, "All right, you're right. I'm getting off on a tangent."

"Shockingly, yes."

McGonagall read the scroll over Hermione's shoulder. "This is very well done, Hermione."

She beamed. "The problem," she said, "is that we still can't make a sigil visible unless we already know it's there. I suppose we could just walk around doing an abstrusi at random objects until we -- "

Harry frowned. "Hermione, there's another gris-gris I once learned to avenge a murder, and the Orisha use it even when they don't know who the murderer is."

She was right there with him. "So elements of that sort of magic might let us act on any enchantments in an area ..." She flipped open Endor's Metamagics, and in an instant she had forgotten they were there.

It took her all the next day to break down the potion and identify which ingredients were critical (ginger and cornmeal, as it happened), and most of another day, in close collaboration with Professor Aerie, to figure out exactly what the potion did and then develop a way to do the same thing with a spell.

"It's the same process we used for Remus' monthly Contraluna spell," McGonagall told Harry as
they watched the two of them at work, "because no one but Severus could make a reliable Wolfsbane potion."

"I told you Hogwarts could be restored to its former glory as a research institution, Kitty," Malfoy said.

"Don't call me Kitty, wretched boy," she said fondly.

The students were still having an enormous slumber party in the Slytherin common room. Having been informed of the new developments, they were very careful not to touch anything, but the teachers who took it in turns to chaperone them reported that on the whole they seemed to see the unmining of Hogwarts as a holiday.

At last, after dinner on the second night, Hermione called them all together in the staff common room to test the new spell. "I'm not yet sure of the spell radius," she said. "It might cover the whole room or only a few feet around me." Then she dripped a few drops of sour-smelling oil on a candle -- "Harry's contribution," she said, "and it turns out you can't dispense with it" -- and pronounced a few words in what sounded like a mixture of Latin and French. Harry closed his eyes.

When he opened them, he thought at first that the candle had gone out. Then he saw that it was only that the room was so bright with enchantments.

There were fine lines around all the doors and windows. "Hogwarts security spells," McGonagall murmured. And there was a delicate tracery over McGonagall's tartan hat, for which she offered no explanation.

In the hall they could see faint glows from some of the sealed-off areas. When they went to the outer door, they could see light as far as the Whomping Willow.

"I'm surprised every student in the castle isn't running to us for explanation," McGonagall said.

"It's the scent of the candle that allows us to see these," Hermione said. "When it goes out, they'll fade away."

"What's that one?" Harry pointed to a knot of enchantment on the door of one of the unused suites. Hermione's eyes widened.

"Ooh, Harry. That's a pain spell. It's a complicated one, too. See the knots? Each of those is a separate spell, and the spikes are 'If' clauses ... I can take it apart, but it will probably take five or six iterations of the Exstinguo spell, each with the appropriate noun, you know. I mean, it's not as though you can take on the entire conglomeration of knots in a single spell ..."

Malfoy raised his wand. Harry, feeling suddenly competitive, lifted the quill he was holding.

"Nodum exstinguo."

"Nodu'stinguo."

The entire tracery winked out.

After a moment's pause, Hermione said, "How long have you two been spelling synergistically?"

At their blank looks, she rolled her eyes: "You know. Where a spell you do together is more than twice as powerful as if you'd done it separately. Honestly! You'd think neither of you had read a book since you left school."
Malfoy looked nervously at Harry. "Probably purely accidental."

"A fluke, yeah --"

"Try it now," Hermione suggested.

Malfoy sighed and picked up his wand with the air of one humoring a silly whim. "Very well, then -- Potter, shall we summon a glass of water?"

Harry shrugged and readied his wand.

"Accio water."

"Acci'aqua."

"Bloody hell!"

After a moment, Hermione looked up, wiping water off her face. The entire tabletop was drenched, and there was a sizable puddle on the floor.

"Not a fluke, then," Malfoy said blandly.

"But don't you see!" Hermione was twitching with excitement. "If you two have spell synergy, you can clean up these enchantments in a fraction of the time."

Harry glanced at Malfoy, who looked as if he was feeling dismayed too.

"The faster the cleanup, the fewer students will get hurt," McGonagall said. "Do you two know everything you need to know about the spell? Hermione, how quickly can you train them to interpret the sigils? And we'll need to set up tests to see if anyone else on the staff can spell synergistically."

"I'll start tonight," she said, beaming.

Harry shrugged at Malfoy. "I suppose we're the cleanup crew now."

"Oh, good," Malfoy said. "My CV needed some high-level management experience."

"Nodum exstinguo."

"Nodum exstinguo."

"Weasley and Weasley, five," Malfoy said.

"Which is better than either of you did with anyone else," Hermione said, making a note. "All right, you two are a team."

It seemed as though they'd been testing for hours, two by two, trying to identify pairs who could spell synergistically, with long gaps while Hermione looked up each sigil in her book and made sure they didn't take on anything they couldn't identify. Nearly every pair did better together than separately, but the improvement was usually small -- three or four knots with a single spell, perhaps. Only Harry and Malfoy seemed to be able to unravel an entire set of curses at once.

Charlie and Sofia went over to where McGonagall had set up a map of the school on one of the library walls, and Harry could hear them debating the relative urgency of the west and south wings of classrooms. Little by little the map was filling with color as each pair was assigned an area to
unmine.

All but Harry and Malfoy, whose skills were to be put to work immediately unspelling the areas that posed the most danger to students. Except that "immediately" apparently meant "after wasting hours in the most boring way possible," because Malfoy seemed to feel that Hermione couldn't possibly manage the testing without his help. So while team after team went out to do something useful, Harry was stuck here in the common room, watching Remus Lupin pair up with all the remaining teachers to unspell an unused storage closet.

"Nodum exstinguo." Remus' hoarse voice.

"Nodum exstinguo." Michelle Verte's nearly inaudible murmur.

"Beauty and the Beast, four," Malfoy said, and Hermione wrote it down.

"We'll start with the Slytherin dormitory," Malfoy said. The testing was finished at last, and no one remained in the library but Malfoy, Harry, and McGonagall.

Naturally. Whatever was best for Slytherin. "I think the dining hall is more critical," Harry said stiffly.

"Oh, certainly, let's ignore the fact that the entire student population is now sleeping in Slytherin."

"Come now," McGonagall said impatiently. "A dozen of these curses could have been triggered while you two stood here bickering like schoolboys. Why not start where you are?"

So, rather sullenly, Harry dressed the candle and lighted it, and Malfoy murmured the revealing spell.

It was easy to recognize the Hogwarts security spells and the ones that kept the younger students out of the restricted section. Harry noted with curiosity that a number of books had their own protective spells, including several of the ones Hermione had piled on the table.

"There," Malfoy said, and Harry looked and saw a row of small knots around the edge of one of the little-used tables. He flipped through Hermione's pages.

"Pain -- no, wait, paralysis."

"Looks like an explosion to me."

"Did you even look at the picture? Explosions have that vertical line that runs into the --"

"Let me see the scroll, you stupid --"

"It's right here, a perfect likeness for anyone who isn't too --"

There was a hiss, and the tracery disappeared. Harry turned and saw that the candle had burned out.

"Lovely," he said. "A whole candle wasted because you're so stubborn." He thumped the second candle down on the table and shook entirely too much oil over it.

"Fine, you --" Malfoy broke off to sneeze. The smell of the oil was making Harry's eyes water, too. "You can have it your way, if you're so bloody certain."

But they turned out to be explosion spells after all.
"Wait." Malfoy pushed Harry's hand down so that his wand pointed at the floor rather than at the knot.

"What?" Malfoy's fingers were cold. Harry irritably shook his hand free. "What is the matter with you?"

"Are you insane? You can't unspell a spell you can't read."

"Sure I can. Watch me."

"Potter." Malfoy shoved Harry's wand hand down again. "Don't you see the 'if' clause? Are you blind?"

"Yeah, I see it. So what?"

"So for all we know, it says 'If knot unspelled' like that one in the library. Commit suicide on your own time, please, and leave me out of it."

"If we unspell it, it might go off. If one of the kids trips it, it will go off," Harry said. "But trust a Slytherin to save his own skin and risk somebody else's."

"Trust a Gryffindor to risk everybody's skin rather than take the time to think about what he's doing for a change," Malfoy said. "Look, we'll just do this --" A mutter and a showy little wand flourish, and he put up a spell barrier around the mine. "There. Now the poor little Hufflepuffs can use their common room again. And we can leave that one alone until we understand it. Unless that concept is too difficult for you to understand."

Harry pointed his wand at the next set of knots. "All right. Can we do this, or are you afraid of this one, too?"

Malfoy consulted Hermione's scroll. "That one's a paranoia spell. We've done those before. Ready?"

"Nodum exstinguo."

"Nodu'stinguo -- oh, hells." Malfoy hit the floor, rolling, just as a large chunk of plaster fell with a loud crunch on the spot where he had been standing.

Harry looked up at the hole in the ceiling. "I, uh, think we may have overlooked an 'if' clause."

"As the poets of your adopted country would have it: No shit."

Harry flung himself into a couch in the staff common room. Every muscle in his body ached.

Across from him, Malfoy laid his head against the back of the chair and groaned. There was still plaster dust in his eyebrows. His skin was faintly shiny with sweat, and his long hair was limp and bedraggled. He'd probably be mortified if he knew how filthy he was, but Harry didn't even have the energy to mock him for it.

More than anything, Harry wanted to fly -- fast and aimless, just turning loops in the air until he could stop thinking for a while and just be. But all he could see in the future was more sigils, more Malfoy, more falling plaster. More little failures.

He was almost nodding off when Hermione arrived. "There you are!" she said. "You've missed lunch." She sat down next to Harry and brushed something out of his hair. "How much did you get done?"
"Two bedrooms and the common room in Hufflepuff," Harry said.

"That's all?"

"Hey, it's hard work," Harry said, stung. "You try it for a while."

Hermione patted him. "I don't mean -- but why? You two can take out a whole mine with one spell."

"If we can figure out what it is," Malfoy said faintly. "And if it doesn't set off a cascade of new spells as soon as we touch it. And if it allows itself to be touched and doesn't disappear as soon as a wand is pointed at it. And if it doesn't knock a chunk of the ceiling down on our heads."

Without raising his head from the back of the chair, he turned it to look at Hermione. "Don't worry. We left a lot of the trickier ones for you."

"Oh, dear," Hermione said. "It sounds as though this is going to be more difficult than we expected."

"You've always had such a talent for understatement," Malfoy said.

"Well, if you can't do any more spell work today, why don't you come to the Ministry with me, Harry? I'm about to floo over to train some unspelling teams." She knocked Malfoy's hand away from her plate of apple slices. "Neville'd be thrilled to see you. He asks about you all the time."

_Dear Harry_, Neville's first letter had begun. _After the big state funerals, the women from Gran's wyvern-breeding group sent me scrolls and scrolls of their memories of Gran and my mum and dad. Made me cry my head off, of course, but it really helped. So I thought that since Dumbledore --_

Harry had dropped the letter and left it where it fell. "I don't think so," he said to Hermione. "Tell him I said hello, though."

She drew a breath, undoubtedly to tell him that she saw right through him, and Malfoy put a hand on her arm, diverting her attention back to himself, as usual. Harry clenched his teeth.

"Well, all right, if you're sure. Here, Draco, you finish these." She handed the plate of apples to Malfoy, then dipped a pinch of floo powder out of an urn decorated with skeletons dancing at a masquerade, and Harry heard her saying, "Ministry of Magic," as she stepped into the fireplace.

"Never still, is she?" Malfoy said lazily. The fondness in his tone made Harry's lip curl. "Care for some?" He pushed the plate toward Harry.

"You should have gone with her," Harry said. "Two of you might enjoy a nice little date away from school."

Malfoy looked at him blankly, and then smiled. "A date?"

Harry frowned, puzzled. "What?" He was a little insulted on Hermione's behalf. "She's not good enough for you?"

"Far too good for me, actually, if goodness were the issue," Malfoy said, still smiling. As Harry went on frowning, Malfoy's smile faded a bit. "You mean to tell me that all this time you've been thinking I was straight? My goodness, Potter," he went on in an exaggerated version of his usual drawl, "which stereotype did I miss?"

Harry could feel that he was staring, but he couldn't quite stop.

"Sorry," Malfoy said, not sounding especially sorry. "Didn't mean to shock your delicate
"No, it's ... it's no big deal," Harry said a bit numbly. "I just wish you'd told me."

"What?" Malfoy looked like he couldn't decide whether to be angry or amused. "When I was twelve and I had that dream about Oliver Wood? Perhaps I should have ducked out of the Wizard Protection Program long enough to drop you a little update on my love life. Or at that first banquet, when you were glaring at me as though I had a Dementor under my cloak."

He put Hermione's plate down on the chair and stood up. "Don't worry, Potter," he said over his shoulder. "I certainly have no designs on your virtue."

"I wasn't worried," Harry said stiffly as Malfoy swept out of the room.

Harry watched the door swing shut behind him, too tired even to be properly angry. If he were in Florida, he could go lie in the sun, and maybe Kat would come out and tell him stupid jokes until he laughed, and maybe Sunday would come out and just sit silently beside him and make him calm without even trying. And maybe the ocean would come and wash him away.

And that ... was just about enough self-indulgence. He stood up and headed for his rooms for a nap.

5. Lessons

Among the hoots of the morning owls, Harry heard a definite honk.

"Spielberg! Over here!" Before Harry could clear a space on the table, a gray goose landed with a disgruntled squawk in his oatmeal. "It's the Coven's transatlantic delivery goose," he explained to Hermione while he cleaned Spielberg off with a napkin, and the goose nipped his fingers happily and then loudly greeted Hedwig.

Harry untied a parcel from one web foot and undid the waterproofing charm on it.

_Har, you doofus, Kat's note said, did you really think we'd let you get away with leaving all your letters behind? You want to neglect your friends, fine, but leave us out of it. And if you're not going to read these, for goddess' sake put them someplace safe till you come to your senses. Miss you -- say tally ho to them all for me and owl us if you find out you can't live without Twinkies._

But he couldn't quite bring himself to burn them, and given the way Hermione was trying to look over his shoulder, someone would surely snoop if he threw them away.

Eventually he took them back to his room and put them in the very back of the spare wardrobe, behind his trunk and his suitcases.

He really didn't have time to look at them.

"For the second time," McGonagall announced wryly, "I'd like to welcome you all to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry." There was a small patter of applause from the student tables.
"I trust," she went on, "that you've made yourself as comfortable as you can manage in the rather tight quarters available in the dormitories. As the staff continue to remove spells, more space will become available. And finally, I'd like to announce that tomorrow we will finally begin classes --" a groan from some of the students -- "and Quidditch practice." At that, the groan changed to a cheer, which went on for several minutes and then broke off abruptly when the food appeared.

Harry sighed in contentment. Hot food, for the first time in days -- and the house elves had outdone themselves with things that couldn't be eaten off the sideboard in the common room. The table was laden with roast beef and vegetable soup and mashed potatoes.

Harry dug in, ignoring Malfoy's lazy drawl from the other side of Hermione. Now things could start going back to normal.

"Got room for another?"

He looked up -- and then up again. "Ron? Ron!" He dropped his spoon into his soup with a great splash and stood up to fling his arms around Ron's shoulders as far as they would go -- surely he hadn't been this broad the last time they'd met. "What on earth are you doing here? The last time you owled me you were in Bulgaria!"

Ron squeezed him back. "Ran into a mate of Wood's in Morocco. Said they'd had a bit of trouble back here, so I thought I'd see if you could use a hand. Got a bit of a knack for fixing things, I have, and it looks like there's a bundle here that needs fixing." He tugged the lock of hair behind Harry's ear -- the same one Hedwig liked to nibble, with much the same meaning. "Y'look rough, Harry -- what, no barbers in America? Or were you too busy taking midnight swims with Tuesday or whatever her name was --"

"You look fantastic," Harry said hastily. He did, too. He was even taller than he'd been the last time they'd met, and he'd filled out considerably, too. He'd finally managed a tan under his freckles, and the sun had lightened his hair to the color of a freshly polished American penny. A battered dragonhide backpack hung over one shoulder with the hilt of a large knife emerging from the top. "Wait till Hermione sees you."

"Wait till I see wha -- " Hermione came to a full stop in mid-word. "Ron?" Her eyes got wide.

Ron grinned shyly. "H'lo, Hermione," he said.

"But -- last time you owled me you were in New Zealand! And -- but I -- " At last she got up and gave him an awkward hug, still looking very flustered. Ron was blushing. Harry hid a smile.

"Ron," Hermione said rather pointedly when they separated, "you remember Draco, of course."

Harry went very still, watching them. If Malfoy said one word out of line, he would --

Malfoy stood up slowly. "Weasley," he said in a slow, musical, completely unfamiliar voice, and Harry could see his eyes going down to Ron's sunbleached blue sweatshirt and back up to his sunbleached hair. "Good to see you back." He offered his hand.

"Malfoy," Ron said cautiously, and let go of his hand a little too soon for real politeness. He looked from Malfoy to Hermione and his eyes narrowed a little. But by now Charlie had come over to greet his brother, followed by nearly everyone at the staff table, so Harry only had time to give Ron a silent "Tell me about it" look and be glad that it all looked as strange to Ron as it did to him.

"Like a land what?" Ron frowned from the couch in the staff common room.
"It's a Muggle weapon," Harry said. "An explosive, and they bury it, and it can sit there for years until someone happens to step on it and set it off and get killed by the explosion. Or in this case, get hit by a spell and sent into magical convulsions or something."

Ron nodded. "A spell that could do the same thing -- that'd be a hell of a weapon." He frowned again. "But if you could do that, why settle for this small stuff? Convulsions, fires, explosions, pain -- why not just plant one that'd blow up the whole place and be done with it?" He scooped another spoonful of sugar into his tea.

Harry glanced at Hermione, who was watching Ron's hand on his spoon. Malfoy, in his usual perch on the arm of Hermione's chair, grinned slyly and poked her. "Got an answer to that conundrum?"

"Hm? Oh -- right -- actually I was thinking about that, because of something Phoenix and Ursa found. Let me show you." She summoned a scratch parchment and drew a somewhat familiar knot. "Now, you recognize this, right, Harry?" Harry looked at her blankly; all the knots still looked alike to him. She sighed. "Draco?"

"It's one of those swelling-in-the-joints spells, isn't it?" The show-off.

She nodded, beaming, and then drew a long curve hanging from the knot, ending in another knot. "What would you make of this?"

"It's an If clause of some sort ... no, wait, it isn't, is it. It functions as a direct object, but I can't tell what it says."

"What it says," Hermione said grimly, "is, 'Minister of Magic.'"

They all stared at her.

"That," Malfoy said, "is astonishing." He took the parchment out of Hermione's hand. "A trigger in the halls of Hogwarts to get to people who are miles away, even years after the spell was cast -- the caster could be dead, even -- seven hells, that's elegant." He traced Hermione's drawing with a long finger. "An enduring legacy of chaos and ruin. Whoever made this spell was definitely a Slytherin."

Harry looked at him, sickened. Malfoy gave him a challenging stare. "Well, Potter?" he said. "Wouldn't you rather have that sort of mind on your side?"

At midnight Malfoy, with more swirling of robes than could strictly be explained by physics, swept off up the wide staircase to his rooms. For a moment or two after he left, the common room was silent, and then Ron turned to Hermione and said, "If you were that hard up for friends, you could've owled me. I'd have dropped by for a visit." Harry snickered.

"Ron," she said.

"Fine, then, explain it to me, Hermione," Ron said irritably. "How'd you go from --" he stumbled slightly over the word -- "'Mudblood' to 'Mione' in such a short time?"

"It wasn't that short a time," she said. "We've been working together since not long after we left Hogwarts, when Draco contacted Professor Dumbledore from the Death Eater camp and offered his services as a spy. I had just worked out how to set up a Transauditum link, and since it doesn't require the person on the other end to do any magic, it was perfect for staying in touch with him without putting him at too much risk."

"Because heaven forbid Malfoy put himself at any risk," Harry said.
Hermione gave him a look of pure disgust, but didn't respond. "He fed us information for about a year -- he's the one who overheard the discussion about the Fratrium spell, Harry, the bit that got me started doing research on how to lock your wand up with Voldemort's."

Harry had known his duel with Voldemort was a group victory -- research from Hermione, the potion from Snape to keep him going despite his body's exhaustion, Ron and Sirius and Dumbledore all but holding him up at the end while everyone else held off the Dementors and the Death Eaters -- but it irked him that Malfoy had had a part in it. "I thought you came up with that on your own."

She shook her head. "Anyway, eventually he was discovered, and it wasn't safe for him to stay with them any more. This would have been shortly before your duel, Harry. So Minerva got him out of the camp somehow, and I got him at the other end and sent him right into the Wizard Protection Program."

Ron laughed out loud. "You didn't!" he said. "No wonder he's stopped all that 'Mudblood' nonsense!"

Hermione smiled. "Yes. Now he says we're --" she mimicked Malfoy's lazy drawl -- "'no worse, on the whole, than most wizards. Though that's not saying much.'"

"What is the Wizard Protection Program?" Harry asked.

"You've never heard of it?" Ron said. "No, I suppose you haven't -- it isn't as though you grew up listening to 'Aloysius Grimble, the Scrying Eye.' Always reckoned it was just stories, though."

"No, it's real," Hermione said, "though it's a lot more difficult than it sounds in the wizard detective stories."

"What exactly is it?" Harry said again.

"Well, we made him into a Muggle temporarily." Harry nearly spilled his tea. "You what?"

"It was the only way to protect him," she said earnestly. "Of course you knew that magic draws power, right, Harry? And the Dark Mark draws its power from the person who wears it, everyone knows that. So as long as Draco had magic, Voldemort could trace him magically everywhere he went. But if we used an Emagium curse to separate him from his magic, it was nothing but an ugly tattoo. He could hide out for as long as he needed to, until the Dementors were gone and we were fairly sure that the Death Eaters who were still around weren't a threat to him."

"But what did he do?" Harry tried to imagine Malfoy working in one of Uncle Vernon's drill factories or trimming Aunt Petunia's hedges.

Hermione grinned. "He was the worst office assistant my parents ever had." She shook her head. "You'd think any intelligent person could put paper in a file, wouldn't you? Just last week Father found Anson Durham filed under L, and when he posted to Draco to ask him why, Draco said, 'Isn't that where you put the loud ones?'"

"Are they all right?" Harry said. "Was he just awful to them?"

She frowned at him. "Surely after all this you're not still thinking he's evil, are you, Harry?"

"Maybe not, but he's still obnoxious." Harry liked the Grangers very much. "Hate to think of him ordering them about and calling them 'Mudblood.'"
"He calls Mother Prudence, actually," Hermione said, smiling. "Some joke between the two of them. They've never explained it to me."

"What does he call your father?"

"Papa," she said.

"Reckon that's what happens when you travel," Ron said later as he spread out a blanket on Harry's couch. "You lose track of your friends, and then they get involved with weirdos." Harry snickered and handed him a pillow. "Guess if I have to, I can be civil, even to Malfoy. But if he hurts her, I'm going to rip out his spinal column and strangle him with it."

Harry sat down beside him. "Er, I don't think you have to worry about that."

"I dunno. He may not be a traitor any more, but he's still a smug, selfish, good-for-nothing ferret."

"Of course he is," Harry said, "but he's -- I mean, they're just friends. I mean, he's a. He's not interested in girls." He was irritated to realize he was blushing.

"Oh. Oh. One of those Malfoys." Ron didn't look as surprised as Harry expected. "Should've guessed, only he made such a production of always having a girlfriend at school. Well, all right, then, I'll rip out his spine if he hurts you." After watching Harry sputter for a moment, Ron nudged him. "Harry. Joke."

"Right," Harry said, glaring at Ron, "really funny."

Ron grinned at him. "Brain's slowing down, Harry. Better get some sleep or your first class will transfigure you into a blotter by mistake."

Harry looked out over his Gryffindor first-years with something close to despair. Hogwarts had been closed so long that a first-year could be anywhere from ten to sixteen. Some of them had been receiving private tutoring, some of them had been left to their own devices, and the Muggle-born ones had never seen a wand until Ollivander put one in their hands a month ago.

And they were Gryffindors. Bold and chivalrous and -- well, stupid. No more basic common-sense caution than the overfed squirrels at Disney World.

There was Steele, repeating the first word of the spell without waiting to hear the second one. There was Jones, who had mis-heard the spell, but would rather make up an approximation than ask for clarification. There was Osborne, who already knew the spell and was transfiguring random objects with a bored expression.

A few matchsticks turned into needles, while others burst into flames or melted into puddles or began to attack other matchsticks. Harry groaned; he hadn't had enough sleep to deal with this. Five silver needles rose up in formation and flew toward Harry. There wasn't enough sleep in the world to deal with this.

"Wait," Harry said, holding up a hand, and the needles all dove for his palm. "Ow! Wait! Commutati rescendeo! Mr. Osborne, put that down -- Miss Rainbird, stop that at once -- finite incantatem -- will y'all just sit down and shut up!"

The classroom fell silent as the students stared at him, and Harry realized that in scrambling for an
authoritative inner voice, he'd ended up channeling Kat Bonifay.

He sighed. They were lucky he hadn't completed the sentence with "'fore I jerk a knot in each and every one of you."

Harry met Ron on the way to the Great Hall for lunch. Ron wasn't limping, exactly, but he was walking very gingerly.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"New feet," Ron said. Harry looked down. Ron's feet were bare, and as pink and soft as a baby's.

"'Stromkarls,' Charlie says. 'Musical spirits,' he says. 'C'mon and watch, it'll be a nice safe first lesson.' But they're Ravenclaws, and they can't bear it if there's anything they aren't allowed to know."

"What happened?"

"Banks-Martin asked the stromkarls to play the Forbidden Measure."

Harry frowned. "Forbidden what?"

"Seemed like hours we spent casting an Auremclaudium over and over before we could break the enchantment so the students could stop dancing." Ron sighed. "Sofia thinks she'll be able to re-grow all their feet in time for classes tomorrow."

Hermione was already at the table. There were faint traces of blue ink all over her face and hands. "What a disaster. Quills flying everywhere. It took me an hour to uncharm them." She laid her head on the table. "Slytherins," she said. "If they can't use a skill right then and there to get what they want, they can't be bothered to learn it at all."

"Malfoy must've had Hufflepuffs for Muggle Studies," Ron said. "Wonder how he made out?"

The hall door opened and Malfoy walked in. There was a Styrofoam cup stuck firmly to the middle of his forehead.

"About as expected, then," Ron said.

By dinner Harry's other hand was bandaged, too, and two quills pierced the sleeve of Hermione's robe, still quivering and attempting to get free.

"Are they unusually terrible students, d'you think?" Ron asked.

"Worse than Fred and George?" Harry said.

"Point."

"Maybe we're unusually terrible teachers," Hermione sighed.

Malfoy dropped down beside Ron. He'd broken off most of the Styrofoam cup, but Harry was maliciously glad to see the base still stuck to his forehead.

Malfoy glared at Hermione, who'd been unable to stifle a giggle. "Not one word, do you hear me?"
"What are we doing wrong?" Hermione moaned.

"It's the mix," Harry said. "You just can't mix up the ages like that without trouble."

To his surprise, Malfoy agreed with him. "Not to mention the different ability levels. I have students in my class who’ve lived with Muggles all their life, and students who’ve never heard of an automobile. How can I teach them all at once?"

Hermione nodded. "Osborne has had a private tutor since he was six, and he wants to teach all his advanced charms to Jones, only Jones has never spoken Latin before and keeps slipping into French ... and ‘noster’ and ‘notre’ mean the same thing, but in a spell the effect is entirely different ..."

"We're going to have to split up the houses," Malfoy said. "What we need to do is test them out and then place them in classes based on ability instead of on house." He rubbed irritably at the bits of Styrofoam on his forehead.

"Want a hand with that?" Ron said.

"I already tried the unsticking spell," Malfoy said. Ron, ignoring him, picked up something with his left hand, gripped Malfoy's face with his right, and began murmuring the spell for taking things apart. "I mean, by all means, you wouldn't be the first bloke who couldn't keep his hands off me, but ..."

The pieces of the cup fell to the table in front of him. He stared at Ron.

"Sometimes you need an unsticking spell and a butter knife," Ron said.

The students began arriving at their tables just as most of the teachers finished eating. "Well," Malfoy said, "Potter, I suppose it's time you and I went and started unspelling dormitories." The first day of teaching had been so eventful Harry had almost forgotten that there were more magical mines to disarm. "Otherwise -- well, the whole of the student body is crammed into two rooms per house -- I shudder to think. Don't know which would be worse, the rivalries or the romances."

Harry nodded stiffly. "We'll start with more bedrooms in Gryffindor."

"I hardly think --" Malfoy began, but Hermione glared at them and handed Malfoy a pyramid-shaped coin. "Very well," Malfoy said, giving Harry a suspicious look. "Weasley, you toss."

The coin fell on its red face, and Harry couldn't resist a grin. Another small victory for Gryffindor.

The occupying Death Eaters had destroyed a good bit of the furniture, and what was left looked rather smaller and dingier than Harry remembered.

They disarmed a few small curses there and in the two rooms where the students were currently sleeping, then broke the black ribbon on the first of the closed-off rooms. It was strange to see the room so empty; it had belonged to Angelina, Alicia, and the rest of their year, and last time he'd been inside, he hadn’t even been able to see the walls.

When they lit the candle, they found the room bright with hidden spells. After the first four times Malfoy beat him to identifying them, Harry grudgingly admitted that Malfoy was better at that part than he was, and began letting him handle it.

"Explosion, pain, pain, and mumps -- a rare one, that." Malfoy's long hair divided at the back of his neck as he bent over Hermione's scroll, but he was too vain to tie it back. "Ready? Nodu'stinguо."
Harry had to admit it was satisfying to remove the row of spells in perfect rhythm, especially after the chaos of the day. Malfoy wasn't too bad to work with as long as he didn't say anything that wasn't Latin.

They unspelled the girls' room from Ginny's year without episode, and after a bit of a rest back in the common room -- which very nearly turned into a nap -- Harry could no longer avoid his own room.

It looked the same and yet different -- no football posters behind Dean's bed, no Remembrall glowing red on Neville's nightstand, no Firebolt leaned against the wall. Just wallpaper torn down in strips and a great gouge taken out of the floor. Harry dressed the candle with a lump in his throat.

His old bed was so heavily mined that the light made him squint. "Your popularity doesn't seem to be waning with the years, Potter." Malfoy's usually silky voice was rough.

Harry sighed, pushed up his glasses to rub his eyes, and sat heavily on one of the beds. "If anyone had slept in that bed, it'd be a wonder if he survived the term." One of the curses was sleepwalking, and another was aggressive impulses. "And didn't kill all his friends."

"And I'm certain," Malfoy said with deceptive mildness, "that this would be the first time anyone ever suffered because of being associated with Harry Potter." He peered more closely at the spells. "We're going to have to ward this one and come back to it later."

"Found something else you're scared to take on?" Harry glared at him. "And what's that remark supposed to mean?"

"Aren't you used to it yet, Potter? Didn't you get two of the Weasley litter in trouble before they even had a chance to finish puberty? Not to mention Dig--"

"Even you couldn't be enough of a jerk to suggest I'm putting my friends in danger on purpose, Malfoy."

"I'm suggesting nothing of the sort." Malfoy looked surprised. "It's the price of power, Potter. Those who are close to the powerful person will be targets of his enemies, everybody knows that. I'm sure even the Weasleys figured that out eventually. If they wanted to warm themselves in the light reflecting off the great Harry Potter, they'd no one to blame but themselves."

Malfoy must have managed to convince McGonagall that the age mix was a problem, because she canceled classes again for two weeks so the students could be sorted by ability. Oliver Wood put together a sort of tournament, with students matched against one another in trials of skill created by each teacher. So instead of the tense and nervous feeling of exams, Hogwarts had the slightly chaotic high spirits of an extended holiday.

After the fourth piece of furniture was pulverized by a misdirected spell, though, McGonagall suggested that they carry out the testing outdoors as long as the good weather held out. And as there were still parts of the grounds that even the birds wouldn't fly over, this meant that Harry and Malfoy had to spend several days together squinting to disarm mines that barely showed up in the sunlight, with the oil-dressed candle spelled to float nearby.

Hermione followed close behind them, levitating half a library's worth of books, ready to look up any spell they couldn't recognize. "That one's in Chinese, hang on, I've got it right here," she'd say, or, "You'll have to ward that one -- look, there's a bit of it that's charmed to be unreadable except when the moon is new."

Harry couldn't escape from Malfoy when they weren't working, either, because Ron made excuses to
be where Hermione was, and Hermione was never far from Malfoy. Harry watched him out of the corner of his eye as he stole food from Hermione's plate and made terrible jokes and generally behaved like a small, spoiled child at a family party who knows that everyone in the room thinks he's adorable. It made Harry sick.

Since the episode with the Styrofoam cup, Malfoy seemed to have decided that Ron was his personal servant, too. He was forever tugging Ron aside to ask him if there was a way to re-weave the couches in the Slytherin common room or rebuild some of the staircases destroyed during the Death Eater occupation or silence the squeaky hinges on the Great Hall door or tighten a shaky banister.

"Tightening spell's good as far as it goes, but nothing beats a tightening spell combined with some wood glue and a couple of matchsticks," Ron said, digging them out of his dragonhide backpack, and Malfoy beamed at him as though he'd just uttered a line of poetry.

"Think Malfoy's got a crush on you," Harry told Ron as they parted at the door of Ron's new rooms.

"Course he has. Toffs always have," Ron said. "I don't mind. He mostly keeps his hands to himself."

Harry dreamed of a sheet of paper, folded three ways, lying on a table. The paper was thick, and the top fold was lifting, as though the paper were on the verge of unfolding by itself.

He woke up panting with terror. "What is the matter with you?" he said to himself. "What on earth is so scary about a sheet of paper?" But his hands continued to shake.

Hermione dropped her spoon when he came into the dining hall. "Good lord, Harry, what happened? You look terrible."

"Oh, thanks, Hermione, that's good to hear." He shook her hand off his arm and pushed his chair in, wincing as he bumped the edge of the table and made all the glassware rattle. "I'm fine. Just had trouble sleeping, that's all."

He pushed a plate of sausages further away -- he could still smell them, but at least he couldn't hear them popping and sizzling. Nothing on the table looked even remotely edible.

"Rough night, Harry?" Ron sat down beside him and gave him a quick pat on the shoulder. Harry nodded morosely and began peeling an orange. The back of his neck still felt clammy and cold.

He was forcing down his third orange segment when Malfoy sat down across the table. He braced himself for a sneering comment, but Malfoy only gave him a long, narrow-eyed look. Then he pointed his wand at Harry.

"Hey!" Harry said, going tense all over. "What --"

"Finit'incantatem," Malfoy said. "No, no, too obvious. All right, how about this: Noloconturbo."

Harry was suddenly warm all over. It felt like eating chocolate after a brush with a Dementor. He stared at Malfoy, who shrugged.

"Someone tripped a paranoia mine with you as the direct object, obviously," Malfoy said, putting a disgustingly large blob of marmalade on his toast. "You were jumpy as a cat yesterday."

"Ooh, Draco, I can't believe I didn't think of that!" Hermione said. "I'm sorry, Harry."
Harry felt off-balance. "You don't just throw a Finite at somebody like that," he mumbled. "You knocked the anti-smear charm off my glasses."

One corner of Malfoy's mouth quirked. "How careless of me." He reached across the table, took Harry's glasses off his face, and polished them with a cream-colored handkerchief. "There you are."

Harry took the glasses, feeling much less exposed when they were back on his face. "Uh, thanks." He made himself look Malfoy in the eye. "I mean -- thanks."

Malfoy took the rest of his orange off his plate. "You're quite welcome."

"Good morning. Wands on the table, please." Harry had a mix of three houses in his first Level 1 Transfiguration class. All the Slytherins had tested into Level 3 or better, and Malfoy's gloating was almost intolerable.

"On the table, not in your hand, Mr. Chun." Chun, Chun ... Ravenclaw? Or perhaps Gryffindor? Harry couldn't remember, but he sighed with relief when the boy finally stopped pointing his wand at books, quills, and classmates, and dropped it to the table.

Harry didn't allow them to pick up their wands until they proved they had memorized the words properly, and then he let them loose on the matches-to-needles transformation. Osborne had sorted into Level 5 in Transfiguration, and Jones turned out to be quite a good learner when taken out of the bigger boy's shadow. And he really would make a good Seeker. Harry hoped he wouldn't be one of those boys who went home for summer holidays and came back a foot taller.

"How did everything go?" Hermione asked at lunch.

"Better. You?"

"Much better," she said. "Draco? How about yours?"

There was nothing stuck to Malfoy's forehead, but he looked a bit frazzled. "I'm going to have to split Level 1 into two classes, I think," he said. "I've got all the new Slytherins, every single one of them, and the little fools are proud of how ignorant they are about Muggles."

Hermione's hand came down on Harry's arm, hard. "What?" he said. "I wasn't going to say anything."

"Right," she said.

6. The Ripple Effect

On the first Hogsmeade weekend of the term, Harry stepped into Willow and Wombly's and bought an inexpensive camera. It was difficult to look at it without thinking of poor Colin, a war correspondent at seventeen, still snapping action shots for the Prophet right up until the moment a curse brought him down.

Harry shook off the uncomfortable memories and caught up to Hermione and Penelope in the Three Broomsticks. "Smile," he said.

He photographed Oliver and Charlie flying a one-on-one match on the Quidditch pitch, Remus and
Michelle playing Hounds and Jackals at the staff table, McGonagall gazing sadly at the closed-off windows in the staff common room. His sixth-level students proudly holding up quills they'd transfigured into daisies. Ron looking up from a half-rebuilt wall with a prybar in his hand and his wand tucked behind his ear. Malfoy stealing grapes off Hermione's plate.

_Hullo, Kat_, he wrote. _Here's Hogwarts, only a little smaller than I remember, and with a bit more rubble. Things here are --_

He rubbed out "fine" and chewed his quill for a moment before continuing.

-- _rather more complicated than I had expected, to tell the truth._

Even as he explained the situation -- the mines, the hapless half-educated students, the bloody handprint outside the prefects' bath that no amount of scrubbing would remove -- he knew that none of his words would sound quite real when Kat read them out loud by the swimming pool in the bright morning sun. Either that life was a dream or this one was. He sighed.

_Anyhow, I'm sending pictures -- you do the same. Say hi to everyone and give the cats a pat. Tell Sunday --_

But he and Sunday had pretty much said everything that there was to say when he'd left Florida, so perhaps the best strategy was dignified silence, or at least refraining from putting his foot in his mouth again. He rubbed it out and wrote, _I miss all of you, but I suppose it was time to come home._

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After dinner, Harry spent long minutes in the Ravenclaw common room waiting for Malfoy, too tired to go looking for him -- too tired even to generate much annoyance that he wasn't where he was supposed to be.

Eventually he gave up and stumbled blearily out of the Ravenclaw wing, thinking vaguely of taking a nap and letting Malfoy find him when he was ready to work.

The door of the staff common room was shut. The Snape statue's head was slightly inclined, and Malfoy sat on the base, eyes half-closed.

"And for two of them we couldn't identify the direct object, so we figured we'd better leave them alone," he was murmuring. "And then there were the ones where the whole knot would come undone and change its shape, as though it could tell you were looking at it, can you believe that? Or they'd look one way when we first saw them, and then when we came to unspell them they'd look like something different." He leaned his head against a stone knee and let his eyes fall all the way shut. "Some of them are in _Arabic._"

Harry felt oddly reluctant to interrupt him, but after a moment Malfoy seemed to sense that he was there. "Ah, Potter," he said. "Back to the salt mines, is it?" He stood up, staggering a bit, and caught himself on Snape's outstretched hand. He looked as tired as Harry felt. "Well, let's toddle on, then." He brushed past Harry toward Ravenclaw wing.

Harry looked at the Snape statue. It raised its eyebrow at him, but made no comment.

After a moment he raised an eyebrow back, then went after Malfoy.

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"Oh, my. Look at this."

"What?" Harry put his glasses back on and looked over at Malfoy, who was looking at a bookcase in
one of the Ravenclaw boys' rooms.

"Pain on the person who triggers it."

"You're joking. You mean it's one that we can do something about?"

Malfoy nodded. They spelled it out swiftly, then went on to the next one.

Harry leaned against the wall while Malfoy went through the parchment. He kept his eyes open -- he was so tired that he would begin dreaming the moment he shut them -- but he lost track of time. After a while he noticed that Malfoy was awfully quiet. "What is it?"

Malfoy pointed without speaking. Harry looked at the spell. "Heart stops, right? We've seen that before."

"Follow the first curve upward -- that's the direct object."

Harry found the curve and followed it, but couldn't make heads or tails of it. He raised his eyebrows at Malfoy.

"The first thing you learn, when you take Introduction to Calligromancy, is how to write your own name." Malfoy traced his wand through the air, a tight, complex knot of loops and spikes. "Malfoy ... Draco." It was identical to the knot that topped the direct-object curve.

Harry stared, appalled. "If we'd let Malik and Banks-Martin and the rest loose in this room, they'd have killed you the first time they did homework."

Malfoy nodded. "Pity it wasn't Gryffindor," he said. "I wouldn't have been in any danger then." He rolled up the parchment crisply. "Would you like a few more minutes to admire it, or shall we move on?"

Kat's reply arrived one morning after breakfast while Harry, Hermione, Malfoy, and Ron were lingering in the staff common room.

Har! The way you used to ignore all the owls from home, I figured we wouldn't hear from you until you were ready for us to find you a room at the Charmed Acres Wizarding Retirement Center.

You settling in OK? Sounds like y'all have your work cut out for you with the mines and all. Wish we could help, but nobody here has ever heard of calligromancy. Dr. Bokor says you're using some of his gris-gris, though, so at least we know a thing or two that you Brits don't.

I'll ask Mama and Daddy if they know any more of the old magic that might help, but don't hold your breath. Near as I can tell, the only spells that survived from the Huguenot side are ones designed to make your kids' lives a living hell, and the only ones that survived from the Seminole side are ones that make stuff you can sell at a souvenir shop. But you've heard that tune from me before.

Harry smiled. Kat was an historian, among other things, and had gone into ecstasies of jealousy over the unbroken centuries of European magical teaching.

Had a cold snap last week -- it got down into the sixties, and a couple of the houseplants lost some leaves. And somebody claims to have seen a Plat-Eye in the woods, but Dr. Bokor says it was probably a stray dog. Anyway we're all carrying packets of gunpowder and sulfur, just in case.
Tyndall says Marisol can hardly get up out of her chair even though the baby's not due till January, and they're still trying to explain to Atzi why they don't want to name it Jasmine Ariel Belle. Tituba finally had her kittens -- two of them look like Mischief and two of them look like Jefferson and the fifth one is unique unto himself. My cat gets around more than I do.

Thanks for the pix. Next time put some notes on the back to tell me who everybody is. I recognize Hermione from the picture on your wall when you were here -- tell her hey, she sounds like a kindred spirit -- but who is the pocket Apollo on the arm of her chair? and is he available for export?

Harry folded the letter quickly before Malfoy could look over his shoulder and get his ego puffed up even more than it already was. He picked up the pictures instead, and Hermione and Ron leaned around to look over his shoulder.

There was Tyndall playing guitar while his little daughter Atzi danced in her frilly dress. Dr. Bokor stretched out in his usual chaise at poolside, wearing only a pair of cargo shorts and a red flannel bag on a thong around his neck. Kat and Purity brewing a potion at the continental breakfast station in the hotel lobby. The junior/senior class, all sixteen of them, ankle-deep in the Atlantic.

"Oh, my." They all turned to look at Malfoy, who had picked up the next picture on the stack. "Oh, my, my. I've been unjust to America if it can produce the likes of him." He passed the photo to Hermione.

"He is stunning," she said. "That hair."

Until that moment, Harry had been hoping that it was another shot of Tyndall, or Purity's boyfriend down from Boston, or some random undergraduate who'd caught Kat's eye, but when Hermione said "hair," his heart sank.

"So," Ron said, looking over her shoulder. "Who's he?"

Nothing for it. "Sunday Coneskey," he said.

"Harry!" Hermione glared. "You lied to us!"

"Not exactly," Harry said, and it was true. Being very careful with pronouns wasn't the same as lying.

Ron was giving him a look that said he saw right through that argument and found it rather amusing. And Malfoy --

"Evidently your candor leaves something to be desired, Potter," he said, "but I certainly admire your taste." He laid the photo on the table and Harry got to see it for the first time. "Though he's not a very friendly fellow, your Sunday." Where the other photos had waved and grinned, Sunday just stood there with his rather impressive arms crossed over his rather impressive chest, glossy black hair falling almost to his waist, and gave a nod and a half-smile.

"See, that's the other thing," Harry said to Hermione. "It wasn't -- it was only a --" He started over. "His grandfather is Let-Us-Stop Coneskey, the top wizard for the whole Eastern Band Cherokee, so it's not as though he was going to settle down with some random English wizard. He wanted a more advantageous match." He felt a little deja vu; he'd had exactly this conversation with Sunday himself before he'd left Florida.

"Ah, dynastic marriage," Malfoy said. "I suppose I should be grateful to the war for sparing me that."

Harry blinked at him. "But you're ... they would have expected you to get married?"
Malfoy smirked. "You are middle-class through and through, aren't you, Potter? Invert though I may be, I had a duty to carry on the Malfoy line."

Harry fiddled with the packet of photos, and something else fell out of the bundle: a little pine-needle basket, about the size of his thumb. Sunday used to weave them carelessly, without even looking. Harry pushed it back under the photographs. "So ... who?" he said to Malfoy. "Pansy Parkinson?"

"Nasty common family like that? Her great-grandfather was a clerk." He faked his father's voice pretty well. "No, if the wizard world hadn't been split in two the way it was, my father probably would have encouraged an alliance with Susan Bones. Or Macy Prewitt might have been an option, I suppose."

"Your student?" Hermione sounded scandalized.

"Stop thinking like a Muggle, 'Mione. When she's a hundred, I'll only be a hundred and six." Malfoy's smirk was even more pronounced. "But as it was, my choices would have been limited to the Death Eater side -- Marguerite Rosier, perhaps, or my cousin Amaryllis, horse-faced child that she is. Or one of the Snape girls." At Harry's look of surprise, he smiled. "His second cousins, three of them. Unfortunately, the younger ones got their brains from the DeLapin side. I was actually rather fond of Fausta, though. And of course her bloodline is excellent. Powerful all the way back, the Snapes."

"What a shame for her," Harry said, "that your father isn't around to see to it that you give her her fair share of Malfoy DNA."

Ron snickered, but Malfoy just smiled. "Yes, I'm sure she's very disappointed, especially as I'm now head of the family and hence a doubly good catch." He pushed back his hair with the thumb and forefinger of one long-fingered hand, looking every inch the young wizard scion -- funny how the gestures and the lazy confidence stayed the same, whatever the culture.

Harry looked away. Trying not to want the smug bastard was more trouble than it was worth.

"As we've both got the afternoon free, we'd better examine the pitch for mines," Malfoy said one day at lunch.

"Good idea, Draco," Hermione said. "I know Oliver has been anxious to start playing real matches now that things have settled down."

"I don't see the purpose," Harry complained. His wrists and ankles hurt, and everything anybody did got on his nerves. "There was nothing at all out there when we looked the first time. It will just be a whole afternoon of flying back and forth."


Oh. "Well, if it will make you happy," Harry said.

"Delirious," Malfoy said.

There were, of course, no mines. They had to fly slowly so as not to put the candles out. Harry's broomsmanship was embarrassingly rusty, but Malfoy kept to the far end of the pitch, too far away to make any snide comments. Malfoy still flew just as Harry remembered -- with perfect comfort, as though the air were a cushion and the broom were another limb. Harry turned his eyes away quickly before Malfoy caught him watching.
That night at dinner, there was another empty space at the staff table. "Ursa Polaris was hit with another seizure mine this afternoon," Penelope said.

"We've got to work faster, then," Harry said. Malfoy's mouth tightened, but he nodded.

"Pain, pain, fire, nightmares," Malfoy said, pointing to each glowing knot. "Tooth loss, more pain. Ooh, new one here -- paranoia and hallucinations, direct-object clause on the Chief of Aurors -- hang on, I'll need to draw that one for 'Mione's records before we put it out."

Harry still found it disgusting the way Malfoy seemed to admire the more creative mines, but he spelled out the candle so as not to waste it while Malfoy recorded the new mine.

Sarah McDuff and Medea Martin, older students who had a free-study period most mornings, watched them curiously from a safe position in the hallway as Harry lit the candle again and the two of them unspelled the room and went on to the next. Hufflepuff dormitory was nearly deserted as they worked their way through the bedrooms, but Harry couldn't shake an uneasy sensation, as though he were being watched. He rubbed the back of his neck.

"Stiff, Potter? Perhaps you should join Phoenix's yoga classes."

"I'll just rush right out and sign up." It was cold in here, too, and damp. Harry turned up the collar of his robe. He would be glad when they were finished with the dormitory and he could go change into something warmer.

Malfoy was looking at him with his usual expression of supercilious amusement. "Looking a little pale, there, too. Perhaps a Dementor walked over your grave?"

"Shut up, Malfoy." Harry rubbed his forearms. "Let's just get on with it."

"That's a nice start, Mr. Chun." Harry levitated Chun's turtle high enough for the class to see his progress in turning it into a change purse. "You notice how the legs are beginning to withdraw into the body, and the head is turning silvery? The first step in a successful transformation--"

He felt a damp chill on the back of his neck and shuddered. After a moment, he realized the class was waiting for him to continue.

"Right. As I was saying, the first step is to look carefully for similarities between what you have and what you want. Can anyone tell me why? Mr. Jones?" Harry let the turtle float back down to Chun's desk.


"Very good. Everyone return to zero and start again." He rubbed the back of his neck.

"Professor? Professor, you've got to --" The whole class turned at the voice from the fireplace -- Aoife Murphy, one of the Gryffindors, freckles standing out on her pale, frightened face. "Come back with me quick, Professor, we can't--"

Harry glanced around the room quickly. Nathaniel Hobbs was the eldest in the class, and a Hufflepuff; he'd do. "Mr. Hobbs? You're in charge of the class until I return. Tonight's assignment is in my book." He just had time to see Hobbs giving him a nod of almost comical earnestness before he followed Murphy through the floo.
"We didn't do anything, I swear, it just blew up, we were just sitting there --" The two of them tumbled out of the fireplace in the first-year girls' bedroom in Gryffindor Tower. There was a strong smell of smoke and a slippery sensation in the air.

In the corner, green flames were emerging from an open cabinet. Rose Duncan lay on the floor, her skinny arms and legs shaken with convulsions. Tears had left pink tracks through the ash on her cheeks. Harry petrified her quickly before she could choke on her tongue, then turned to the flames.

Harry tried to raise his wand, and found that it would point anywhere but at the cabinet, which deflected it like a magnet. "Never mind," he said. "Get behind me, Miss Murphy."

Holding one of the bedposts, he grounded his attention in it and spoke a quelling charm. The fire went out.

Aoife started talking so fast Harry could hardly understand one word in three, and other students began to come to the door, drawn by the noise. "Hush," Harry told them. "Miss Murphy, I need you to get Miss Duncan to the infirmary, all right? Sofia can help her. And if you see Professor Granger or the Headmistress, ask them to meet me here, if you would."

It was only a moment before Hermione arrived, bringing not only McGonagall but also Ron and Malfoy. At least he'd only have to tell the story once. Ron went immediately to the cabinet and began murmuring repair spells. The other three crowded around Harry as he explained.

"The Murphy girl was babbling something about wands?" Malfoy said.

"There was some sort of deflecting effect." Harry waved his wand at the trunk; he had no difficulty with it now. "Seems to have been temporary."

"How were you able to put out the fire without it?" McGonagall asked.

"I, er, used the bedpost." Harry wasn't sure whether that was frowned upon or not.

McGonagall shook her head ruefully. "Severus always said we relied too heavily upon wands, but Albus felt they were a useful tool for beginners. I suppose this proves Severus right after all." She looked at the smoke emerging from the trunk. "I thought you and Draco had already unspelled Gryffindor Tower."

"Of course we did," Malfoy said. "Though I suppose it's possible Potter might have missed one."

"Shut up, Malfoy," Harry said. "Hang on -- I think I've got a candle in one of my pockets."

When they lit the candle, the room went bright yellow.

"I don't understand this at all!" wailed Hermione. "How are we supposed to make any headway against them when they just come back?"

Malfoy was shaking his head. "I don't think they're coming back," he said. "Potter, was this desk mined when we unspelled this room?"

"I don't recall any of the desks being mined," he said.

"Neither do I," Malfoy said. "And look over here -- this is one of those direct-object clauses. I know there weren't any of those in Gryffindor, because I'd never seen one until 'Mione drew one that day."

Hermione sat down suddenly on one of the beds. "Wait," she said. "Wait, wait," and she pulled a
sheaf of parchment out of her bag and began paging through it. "I know it was here -- just a moment -- ah." She spread one sheet out on the bed, and the other three gathered around to look at it.

It was another complicated knot. "This is one that Oliver and Penelope found," she said. "Draco, how would you interpret that?"

"Pain," he said, dropping down beside her. "Vomiting. Fire, direct-object Headmistress's Office -- oh, that's a wicked one. And ..." He looked up at Hermione, frowning. "There's a direct object here, too, for the gamekeeper's cottage, but I can't read the knot itself."

"Textum disiungo," Hermione said, tapping the parchment with her wand. The knots seemed to unravel a little, becoming larger and spreading apart. "You two might want to remember that charm - - it works on the mines themselves as well."

Malfoy's head bent over the parchment again, and he pushed his hair behind one ear while the other hand traced one of the knots on the parchment. "That's an explosion spell." It was one of a dozen knots, each of which appeared to be hanging from the main knotwork by three long threads woven together in a complex way.

Malfoy traced the three threads upward to the first place they crossed. "That's -- oh, it's been years since I studied calligromancy -- that's -- Oh." He sat up suddenly. "Oh. Oh, that is diabolical," he said in an admiring tone.

"What?" McGonagall said. She sounded as impatient as Harry felt.

"That means 'hide,' " Malfoy told her. At her blank look, he began tracing out each knot with quick, impatient movements. "Explosion spell -- direct object, gamekeeper's cottage -- modifier, front door - - verb, hide. Vomiting spell -- direct object, gamekeeper's cottage -- modifier, bed -- verb, hide. Fire spell --"

Harry blinked as it suddenly came clear. "This spell sets up new mines in other locations?" he said.

"Exactly!" Hermione beamed.

"Well, Potter," Malfoy said. "It appears that ours will be a long-lasting partnership."

"Great," Harry said, scrubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands.

"Of course, this makes it even more urgent to remove as many mines as possible, especially ones that might trigger other mines," McGonagall said.

Malfoy nodded. "We'd better get the Level 7 Charms students helping."

Harry stared. "Are you mad? We can't involve children in this. Bad enough they have to see it in the first place. Don't they deserve not to have to worry all the time?"

But Ron surprised him by looking up from the broken cabinet and shaking his head. "I reckon what they need is to know what the trouble is and how to fix it," he said. "Sorry, Harry, but you should know you can't keep things from kids."

"The truth is always less worrying than whatever they imagine," Hermione agreed, beaming at Ron.

Rose Duncan was lying in a Consopium right next to Charlotte Rolfe when Harry arrived in the infirmary. Aoife Murphy was sitting up on the other side of the room as Sofia dabbed something
green on her face. Most of her burns were minor, but a bit of some superheated liquid had hit her just above her left eyebrow, leaving a painful, blistered wound.

"All I have iss the commercial treatment," Sofia said, turning a tub of salve so that Harry could read the label: Salamandros's Finest Kitchen Quencher, For Household Burns. "Madeleine hass tried to make an Extingument potion, but it requiress seawrack leafss, and she hass been unable to find a supplier."

"Professor Snape had a whole big wooden crate of dried seawrack leaves," Hermione said.

Ron grimaced. "Don't remind me." Seawrack had been a prime ingredient in an ill-fated lesson in invisibility potions that had left Ron unable to see his right leg for a week in sixth year.

"That box is probably still in the second storage closet right where it was when we used it," Harry said.

"Along with dozens of other rare ingredients, and all of Severus' books and notes," McGonagall sighed. "And they might as well be in Iceland for all the good they can do us."

"Maybe," Harry said, "if Malfoy and I --"

"Don't you dare," Hermione said. "Do you know how dangerous it is down there? Nobody's been able to get near the place since the school was retaken."

"Well, I remember you saying that Professor Aerie had a vomiting curse," Harry said. "I don't know about Malfoy, but I'm willing to --"

"Harry." McGonagall was looking very grim. "That vomiting curse left Maddie in treatment for dehydration for almost the entire spring. And the next person to venture down into the dungeons was Argus Filch. I know you want to help, but until we know more, we simply cannot risk it."

No matter how he rearranged the covers, he couldn't seem to get warm enough to sleep. There must be a draft. Harry sat up and pulled his bedcurtains closer together in the middle, but this made a gap at the corners. When he pulled the corners together, the gap in the middle came back. Sighing, he got up and put on his Weeki Wachee sweatshirt over his pajamas. After lying down shivering for a few more minutes, he sat up again, feeling exceedingly foolish, and pulled the hood over his head.

That was better. That would do just fine. Now all he had to do was lie still and not move no matter what, and eventually his feet would get warm and his muscles would stop twitching and he'd be able to sleep.

He had examined every inch of the room. There was absolutely nothing watching him.

He breathed carefully, slowly, in and out. In. Out. Easy, Har, take it easy.

And it would be easy, he knew exactly how to do it, but for some reason his wand wasn't working. It was locked in place, and he couldn't move it, and force was traveling through it, making it vibrate slightly, until the muscles in his hand and forearm ached with the strain.

But it would be so easy. He could kill Voldemort with four syllables, Hermione said so, she was saying it into his ear right now, if only he could move his wand he'd do it and it would all be over and they could all rest.

And his right hand still wouldn't move, but there was a bedpost in his left hand. Fine, that was fine,
he could use that, he could focus his force through that -- and then he was doing it, and he heard his own voice saying "Exadigo," and he felt the force of the curse go out from him and hit its target cleanly. A body tumbled to the ground at his feet, and suddenly his wand went still and he could lower his right hand.

He knelt and turned the body over.

Albus Dumbledore's glassy-eyed face smiled up at him.

Harry looked glumly at the breakfast spread before him, but everything made him slightly queasy. He pinched the base of his skull, as though he could pinch off the headache at its source. Nothing to look forward to today but redoing the work they'd already done on Gryffindor Tower, and probably when they were finished there they'd discover that the other dormitories had been re-mined as well.

Hours of exhausting, dispiriting work, taken on after a short night of very restless sleep, with a strange ache in his knees and wrists and a headache that promised to settle in for the day -- it would have been bad enough in good company. But to make his day complete, he had to do all this with Malfoy.

Grimacing, he gulped a few more swallows of coffee, shoved two oranges into the pocket of his robe, and set off down the hall, limping slightly.

Malfoy was crouched at the base of the Snape statue. "Get up," Harry said. The statue glared at him, but he ignored it. "We've got work to do."

Malfoy stood and stretched backwards, hands on his lower back, somehow looking graceful even though Harry could hear his vertebrae cracking. Dark circles showed up vividly in his pale face. "All right," he said, coming back upright. "No rest for the wicked."

This time Harry's old room made him feel less nostalgia and more paranoia. It was like some kind of nightmare where he was going to have to come back here and do the same tasks over and over into eternity.

He overdid the spell on the first candle and melted it into a puddle of wax. "Shit."

Malfoy sneered at him and lit the second candle with showy delicacy.

The first four spells they found were unfamiliar enough that they had to ward them and leave them. In the light of the candle, the wards looked like pinkish-yellow bubbles. Harry closed his eyes and saw an image of the entire castle under a bubble, spelled into stasis until somebody came along who knew something. Maybe King Arthur would come back and take care of it.

"Potter. Potter."

Harry opened his eyes. "'m not asleep," he mumbled. "What've you got?"

"Thought you might like to see what your name looks like in calligromancy." Malfoy pointed out a knot that dangled above a familiar-looking spell. "If Osborne and Jones had got this far, your heart would have stopped."

"Pretty," Harry said. "Can we undo this one, or is your courage failing you again? Or maybe you'd like to leave it." His voice didn't have the power
it should have. Getting really angry seemed like too much effort.

"If I wanted to get rid of you, I'd've done it by now and not had to keep putting up with your whingeing," Malfoy grumbled.

"Oh, and you're being such a beacon of maturity here," Harry said. "Especially considering that whoever set these spells probably went back to headquarters for a nice drink with you afterwards."

"Hah. By the time the school was occupied, I was already moldering away in Appletreeham, going home every day stinking of tooth-cleaning paste. But I'm not surprised you weren't too eager to keep up with the news after you fled the country and left the rest of us to clean up the mess."

Harry felt his lips pull back from his teeth. "Shut up, Malfoy," he gritted out, "and get to work." He pointed his wand at the glowing star that was his name, waiting a bare second for Malfoy to catch up to him before muttering the unraveling spell.

There was a sudden bright flash of light as new knots sprang into existence all over the room. Harry was ringed by new spells, clustering so tightly around him that he could hardly move. He heard a sizzle and looked down; a knot had formed behind him, and his involuntary step backwards had triggered it. There was a bang from the direction of the kitchens.

"Hells!" Malfoy was all but standing on tiptoe. Yellow neon swirled on every side of him. "Bloody writhing hydoras, Potter, what the fuck did you do?" His elbow touched one of the knots, and he crumpled to the floor, triggering three or four others. A sheet of flame sprang up across the doorway, blocking their exit, but Malfoy didn't even look up, just knelt, breathing in shallow whining pants.

Harry threw a quick protection spell over the candle. Then he took a step toward Malfoy, but was hit by pain so sharp and sudden it took his breath away. It felt dirty, like something inside him was being eaten away by noxious acid. "Oh, shit," he whispered.

"Not ... Crucio," Malfoy said in a thready voice.

"I know," Harry grated. "Hurts like ... holy hell ... jus' th' same." The floor around his feet was completely covered with spells. He bent his knees slightly and focused what little strength he had on staying upright.

"Pot'r," Malfoy panted, "got to ...

It obviously hurt him to talk. " ... yeah ..." Harry whispered, to spare him the effort of continuing. "Dunno ... where t' start ..." The flames in the doorway had started out magical, but by now the curtains had caught and the room was hot with perfectly ordinary fire, which would kill them in a perfectly ordinary way if they didn't get moving soon. He breathed in and out very slowly and tried to think. Making a little noise on the outbreath seemed to help a bit, so he did it.

"What're ... singing?" Even with his voice mostly gone, Malfoy could muster a good expression of outraged dignity.

"Not ... singing ..." But he was -- he was humming Sunday's manito chant under his breath. And as Harry noticed this, he noticed that the pain was easing slightly.

Malfoy raised himself up to his knees. "Spells're dimming," he said, and they were -- the light was fainter.

"What should we --" As Harry stopped chanting to speak, the pain came back.
"Keep singing!" Malfoy said. "Don't stop. Moment t' think." Harry picked up the chant again, singing more strongly, concentrating -- and for the first time, it felt as though the chant really had magic in it. He could feel a tiny thread of power trickling into him, and the pain was growing more distant. And all around him the lights were dimming.

Malfoy had shut his eyes, an expression of fierce concentration on his tear-streaked face. "If the chant works, maybe -- Accingo," he said, and the spells dimmed further. "Potter -- with me this time."

"Accingo."

"Accingo."

A few of the knots went out altogether, and the others were dimmer, though Malfoy was still hemmed in. The air was heavy with smoke.

"Disentangle us now ..." Malfoy's words trailed off in a coughing fit. "Dis -- you first," he wheezed, and pointed his wand at the few knots remaining around Harry. They could hardly make the spells heard over the crackle of fire, but the last sigil winked out and Harry stepped free with a sigh of relief.

"Now get down ... put ... fire out," Malfoy gritted.

"Get you loose first," Harry said. "May need to run for it." He had a vague feeling that he wasn't thinking clearly, but he was still quite certain that unspelling the knots around Malfoy ought to be the first priority.

"Down, damn you. Cooler. More oxygen." Malfoy didn't sound as if he was thinking too clearly either. The air tasted like salt and ash.

"Damn it! Would it kill you to trust me?"

"I wouldn't be the first it killed," Malfoy said quite distinctly.

Harry had tackled Malfoy before he was aware he was moving, knocking him from his knees to his back, fist connecting with whatever flesh he could find. "You -- fuck -- how dare -- " he grunted incoherently, flailing at Malfoy's jaw, knocking his head back. The blow pushed Malfoy into a mine, and whatever it was made his face crumple with pain, but he pushed up with surprising strength, rolling them both over.

There was a faint sizzle as Harry set off a mine, and his face was immediately engulfed by a blinding headache, but he was so busy trying to get a knee up into Malfoy's groin that he hardly noticed the additional pain. Malfoy evaded Harry's knee, which came up harmlessly against his hip, and pinned his hands.

Harry pulled his left hand free and swung, but they were too close together for the punch to have any power behind it. He grabbed a fistful of Malfoy's hair instead and pulled his head back. Malfoy made a squeaking noise and several strands of hair came loose in Harry's hand.

Harry got his other hand free, got hold of both Malfoy's shoulders, and rolled them again, knocking Malfoy's head against the floor. "Kill you," he gritted, hauling Malfoy up by the shoulders and banging his head against the floor again, and again, knocking him into more mines, but it didn't matter, Harry didn't care if the whole place blew up as long as it took Malfoy with it --

And then there was a roar and everything went black.
7. All Souls

Harry opened his eyes and saw nothing but white. He was in a warm place, lying on something soft, and he was suffused with a sense of well-being stronger than any Cheering Charm. He gave a deep, contented sigh --

Well, he intended to sigh, but when he tried to exhale, nothing happened.

He tried again. Nothing.

With difficulty, he raised a hand and laid it on his chest. It wasn't moving. He held his hand in front of his mouth and nose. Nope. He really wasn't breathing.

Somehow this struck him as amusing. He wasn't breathing! Maybe he was in a coma. Maybe he was hallucinating. Maybe -- a grin spread across his face -- maybe he was dead. Wouldn't that be funny? He tried to laugh, but of course it was impossible to laugh without breathing, and that was even funnier ...

"He's awake, Sofia," said Hermione's wry voice. "And the oxygenation spell is obviously kicking in."

Suddenly there was a blur of black on one side of him and a blur of brown on the other. He squinted, and Hermione's and Sofia's faces came into slightly misty focus. He thought he ought to have a lot of questions, but of course if he couldn't breathe he couldn't talk. And anyway, it seemed easier to lie here and grin at their pretty faces.

"Can you understand me, 'Arry?" Sofia said. Harry nodded, smiling. Her voice was so nice. "I am adding oxygen directly to your blood, which iss why you are feeling such euphoria," she said. "It will take another hour or so before the Breathe-E-Z potion repairss the smoke damage to your lungss. If you need to speak, 'Ermione can perform for you a charm."

Harry nodded at Hermione, who waved her wand at him, murmuring some guttural words that definitely didn't sound like Latin. "There. Say something, Harry."

"Thanks," he said, and he could hear his voice, but he couldn't feel the usual vibration in his throat. The crazy urge to giggle was wearing off, but he still had a warm sense of well-being that made this only a matter of curiosity. "How --"

"Mermagic," she said, beaming. "Charlie's been trading secrets with the merfolk, and this charm is one of the results. Rather than using your vocal cords to push sound waves through the air, you're producing sound directly in our ears by magical means."

"Your vocal cordss are swollen, so you will be quite hoarse when you get your physical voice back," Sofia warned. "And shortness of breath may persist for some dayss. You are lucky to be alife, 'Arry."

That reminded him of something. "Malfoy?"

Hermione nodded toward what he assumed was another bed. "He hasn't woken up yet," she said. "He was in even worse shape than you were. Harry ... did Draco make a mistake? Or ... were you two ... were you trying to hurt one another?"
"Er ... Just bit off more than we could chew, is all." All his problems seemed so minor now. He supposed that was the oxygen. "One spell triggered more spells ..." He yawned. "And there was a fire ..." His eyes wanted to fall shut. He struggled to open them again.

"You need rest, 'Arry," Sofia said. "May I perform for you a mild Consopium spell?"

He nodded his consent. Halfway through listening to her murmur the spell, he drifted back to sleep.

Next time he woke up, he was breathing again. Or he would have been, if he could have stopped coughing long enough.

He bolted upright in the hospital bed, hacking so hard his ribs ached. It seemed to go on forever as he struggled to catch a breath between wracking spasms.

A hand held a white handkerchief under his mouth, and he spat gray mucus into it, coughed again, spat some more, wiped his watering eyes. At last the coughing fit eased and Sofia returned with a clean handkerchief, which he used to blow his nose. He could hear his own wheezing breath.

"Thanks." His voice was so hoarse he could hardly get the word out. His head ached and his throat felt agonizingly sore. Obviously he was no longer giddy with oxygen. "Hurts."

"I cannot prevent the coughing," Sofia said. "It is needed to remove the impurities in your lungs. But I can help with the pain in your throat."

"Headache too," he croaked. She took care of both with a flick of her wand, and he sighed with relief, then regretted it immediately when the sigh triggered another coughing fit.

Someone else was coughing, too. He squinted. Hermione was sitting in a chair, and on the other side was a bed with someone sitting up on it. Yellow hair -- obviously Malfoy, but he couldn't see him clearly enough to guess how well he was recovering.

"Glasses?" he wheezed to Sofia, who handed them to him. The lenses were hazed from the smoke. He rubbed them with a corner of the sheet.

In one corner were five beds with the curtains closed. Charlotte would be in one, and Ursa and Rose .... Harry hated to think who might be in the fourth and fifth ones. How many mines had they set off?

"Potter?" Malfoy sounded a hundred years old.

"'m here." He absolutely was not going to be the first one to apologize. After a moment he added, "You OK?"

"By a very loose ... definition of the word," Malfoy said, interrupted with a coughing fit. "I was happier when I thought I was a ghost."

"Did we burn down Gryffindor Tower?"

"Oliver and Penelope put out the fire," Hermione said, "and Minerva warded the whole tower. The Gryffindors are in Hufflepuff Courtyard now."

Harry buried his face in his hands. "Hermione, what are we going to do? We put out one spell and it triggered a dozen others and set the room on fire. We were nearly killed, and I can't think of anything else we could have done ..."

"Lovely," Malfoy croaked. "My life depends on Gryffindors thinking. Look," he went on as Harry
"What would a Slytherin do, then?" Harry sneered. "Find someone and torture them until the spells go away?"

"Look for the source! Those mines are getting power from somewhere, did you ever think of that? Magic doesn't maintain itself."

Hermione's mouth dropped open. "I can't believe I didn't think of that!" she said.

"Well, I did," Malfoy said. "I figured it out last night while Potter was regaling me with some lovely American music. They're drawing their power from us."

"From whom?" McGonagall was the one who asked the question, but it was obvious that everyone in the staff common room was waiting for the answer.

"From all of us. Just like Crucio, just like the Dark Mark, they're drawing power from the very people they're attacking. It's ingenious."

Malfoy sounded admiring. Harry rubbed his temples, where the headache had come back, and tried not to roll his eyes.

"So when Harry sang the chant, or when you cast the Accinctum, it weakened them?" Remus asked.

"Only a bit," Malfoy said. "I'm guessing they pull a little magic from everyone on the grounds. The important thing about the chant and the Accinctum wasn't that it weakened the spells, but that it prevented the spells from weakening us."

"I had noticed," Penelope said, "that undoing the spells seemed to take a lot out of me. And that in general I'm more tired than I should be." Several of the others nodded. Looking from face to face, Harry saw the hollow eyes, the dark circles.

"So what we have to do," Malfoy said, "is stop trying to tackle the spells themselves, and focus our attention on figuring out a way to pull the plug."

"Pull the what?" McGonagall frowned.

"Do you think they'll just disappear if we shut down their power source?" Ron asked.

"No," Malfoy said. "The inventors will have thought of that and set up a backup source. They're Slytherins, after all." He was smirking. "But think about this. In order to cast the curses we learned at school, we need to identify a target. Most of the time we need to be able to see the target. Now, these mines --"

He began counting off facts on his long fingers. "They draw power from all the witches and wizards nearby, without naming them or directly targeting them -- how? They place curses on targets which might be close or far -- how? Some of their targets are selected by proximity, some by name, and some by title -- how?" He sat back, looking extraordinarily pleased with himself. "That's what we need to figure out."

There was an excited murmur around the room. "Now," Malfoy went on, raising his smoke-roughened voice a little. "We're going to need to continue using the candles to find spells and place
appropriate wards on them. In the meantime, though ... My father left behind an extensive library, and he had a particular interest in calligromancy. I'll have the appropriate books brought here, and we might find something in his diary as well -- Oh, all right," he said, noticing the eager look on Penelope's face, "I'll have the whole library brought in, how about that? Only you'll have to keep the students out of it, Penelope, because my father's books have a tendency to ... take on a life of their own."

It shouldn't have surprised Harry that he dreamed about Tom Riddle's diary that night, about Ginny Weasley's pale and crumpled body, her screams echoing off stone walls.

He sat up in bed, shivering. "Don't be stupid," he said out loud. "Ginny's fine. Her band was on the cover of Witch Weekly a month ago." But his hands continued to shake.

Malfoy was already planning his next move at the breakfast table. "I expect there's a great deal of ugliness in Dumbledore's office," he said. "That's probably the place we should look if we want to find mines that can teach us something."

McGonagall was still using the office she'd used as deputy headmistress, so Harry hadn't seen Dumbledore's office since he was a student. It was probably all still there, the astrolabe and the paintings and Fawkes' empty perch ... he didn't think he could bear to see it just yet. It made his chest feel tight just to think about it.

"Nobody ever goes in there," he said, "so it's not as though there's any urgency in getting to it." Hermione frowned at him; hoping against hope that he wouldn't have to explain why he didn't want to look at Dumbledore's office without Dumbledore in it, he added hastily, "You can do research on your own time, but when we have to be working together, I want it to be on things that pose a danger to students."

Malfoy and Hermione exchanged a glance in that irritating way they had.

"All right," Malfoy said. "Then what about the east corridor and staircase?"

"Amateurs did this one," Malfoy said, pointing to the mine on the banister. "See how sloppy the handwriting is?"

"They have handwriting?" Well, of course they did -- magical writing was still writing. Malfoy gave him a pitying look and didn't bother to answer.

They were still warding two mines for every one they undid, and even after using the Accinctum spell, it was still some of the most exhausting work Harry had ever done. By the time they'd reached the top of the stairs, his head was pounding.

Malfoy, of course, was fresh as a daisy. He surely had more on his conscience than Harry did -- assuming he had a conscience -- but somehow he seemed to be getting a good night's sleep every night while Harry lay awake and shivered.

"What are you waiting for, Potter?" Malfoy smirked, holding open a door. "I thought you were quite at home in girls' toilets."

The room wasn't dirty, but Harry wrinkled his nose at the unpleasant stale-water smell. Simple mines laced the faucet handles and hung about the mirrors at face level, and he and Malfoy put them out one by one.
Malfoy in the mirror looked subtly different, like his own brother or his own ghost. Harry studied the swing of his hair, the silver hoops in his earlobes, until Malfoy caught him looking and winked at him. Harry turned away, blushing and furious. "Don't flatter yourself."

"Malfoys never flatter ourselves," he said. "We have fawning sycophants to do that for us."

Lung damage in the first stall, something that looked like Japanese in the second. "Oh, but I'm forgetting," Malfoy went on, "after your little American romance, you know all about the ways of the aristocracy." He placed a ward bubble with a flourish. "Was it a thrill for him to play around outside his class, do you think? Or was it one of those tragedies where the prince falls in love with the commoner?"

Harry snorted at the idea of Sunday putting on airs like a prince. If anything, he'd been a little too careless about his responsibilities to the Eastern Band. Not that they'd quarreled about it. It was nearly impossible to quarrel with Sunday about anything.

"Your insults used to be much more on target, Malfoy," he said. "Losing your touch?" There was a mine in the third stall with several unreadable If clauses; Harry threw a ward over it and moved on to the fourth.

"There," he said. "There's something back against the inside of the door," and Malfoy crowded into the stall behind him.

It looked like an ordinary pain spell, but strangely spread out, so that it was impossible to see the whole thing at once. He backed up further into the stall.

"Hey, watch --"

But Malfoy's warning came too late, and Harry blundered right into the second mine.

They both braced themselves for fire or explosions or pain. Nothing happened. "I suppose eventually we'll find out what that one did -- oh. Oh, cold hells."

"What?" Malfoy was hammering away at what looked like empty air. "What are you doing?"

He'd dropped to his knees on the tile floor and was pushing at the space under the walls. "Oh, Mordred's mother-in-law. It's put up some sort of barrier."

Harry reached for the door, jumping a little in spite of himself when his hand touched a wall his eyes couldn't see. The mine that had been on the inside of the door had disappeared.

Malfoy was clambering onto the toilet, one foot on either side of the seat. "It goes as far up as I can reach. You're taller; you try." He stepped down awkwardly in one corner, and Harry climbed up.

Standing on his toes, he could reach within a couple of inches of the ceiling. "I can't feel any gap."

It was awfully close quarters, and Malfoy's face at the level of his belly made him nervous. He climbed off the seat quickly.

"Alohomora. Adaperio." Malfoy was pointing his wand at the open doorway and working his way through an extensive collection of unlocking spells. Harry contributed a few of his own, but none of them made the slightest difference.

"Hells," Malfoy said at last. "Nothing to do but wait till someone comes looking for us. If we're not at dinner, 'Mione will figure it out and come rescue us." They were so close together that Harry
could feel the air currents stirred by Malfoy's gestures.

"Great." Harry banged the back of his head gently against the stall wall he was leaning on. "No offense, Malfoy, but of all the people to be trapped in a toilet with, you are at the absolute bottom of the list."

"Hm." Malfoy was smirking. "I can't say I've ever given any thought to making a list of people with whom I'd like to be trapped in a toilet."

He was standing awfully close, and something about the word "whom" made Harry's lip curl. "Oh, I'm sure it's never once crossed your mind."

"But it does give me a chance to satisfy my curiosity about why your Cherokee prince gave you your walking papers," Malfoy went on.

"Right. I'm really going to discuss my love life with you."

Malfoy ignored that. "Did you snore?" he asked in a tone of great concern and compassion. "Eat crisps in bed? Not likely he was ashamed to be seen with you -- you're passable enough to look at, in an ill-groomed sort of way, and grooming's not a big concern with Americans." He was lounging against the far cubicle wall, looking much too pleased with himself. "And people who like you seem to be able to tolerate your Gryffindor uncouthness without too much difficulty. Perhaps he just felt that a regional shaman's consort should be someone with a bit more intelligence. Couldn't blame him there."

Harry gritted his teeth. "What makes you think he broke it off?"

Only when Malfoy's mouth thinned into a predatory grin did he realize his mistake. "Two lies on one topic, Potter? The Sorting Hat will want to reconsider." He pushed his hair back with one ringed hand. "Going abroad must be frightfully difficult for Gryffindors, though. Can't have meaningless sex -- heavens forfend -- but settling down overseas would be such a terrible betrayal of your loyalty to the auld sod ..."

Harry clenched his fists. "Will you shut up about things you know nothing about?"

"What, meaningless sex? Betrayal? Lying?" Malfoy looked amused, and he was much too close. "Back off." He gave Malfoy a push in the middle of his chest.

Malfoy took half a step back and stopped; Harry pressed forward and then realized that that was all the space there was. Malfoy had his back to the cubicle wall.

Malfoy with his back to the wall. It had such a nice ring to it. Malfoy with his sneer and his rapidly moving eyelashes, Malfoy with his spoiled rich-boy attitude and his utter, infuriating ease --

Harry pressed forward and felt Malfoy's chest against his, felt it rise as he inhaled suddenly. Not so sure of yourself here, are you, he thought. Another fractional movement brought his knee up against the wall with Malfoy's thighs on either side of it.

Malfoy was breathing rather fast, but he met Harry's eyes with a little smirk, just as if Harry couldn't have made him puke his guts out with one little upward thrust of his knee. Malfoy didn't even seem to have noticed that they were fighting.

"Hm," Malfoy said, and got one hand up between them. And Harry registered that he was hard about half a second before he registered that he was grinding frantically at the heel of Malfoy's hand.
After that everything seemed to happen in flashes, like buildings seen from a runaway train. The cold
of the cubicle wall against his forehead, Malfoy murmuring, "All right, let me, hang on," Hermione's
voice in the corridor calling, "Harry? Draco?" -- and Harry, in a perfectly excruciating rush of heat
and humiliation, coming in his pants.

That noise echoing off the tiled walls was his own panting breath.

He staggered backwards as far as he could, face hot with sex and frozen with horror.

"It doesn't show," Malfoy said, and after a moment Harry realized Malfoy was looking at the front of
his robe.

"Jeans," he said stupidly, through a mouth that felt as though it belonged to somebody else.

"Draco?" Hermione called a little more urgently, and Harry heard her running footsteps.

"In here, 'Mione," Malfoy said, never taking his eyes off Harry.

Alone in his rooms at the end of the day, Harry flopped down on the couch and forced himself to
face facts.

He had *humiliated* himself. And if Malfoy hadn't mentioned it to Hermione, it was only because he
was waiting for the time when the story would create the maximum of embarrassment.

Unless Malfoy wasn't telling because he was trying to protect *himself*. After all, he hadn't exactly
been uninvolved. It had been his sneering voice that had made Harry angry enough to get within
touching distance. And it had been his hand --

His hand --

Harry snatched his own hand away from his trousers savagely. Christ. His brain was absolutely not a
safe place to be tonight.

He grabbed his cloak and his Firebolt and all but ran to the nearest exit.

The night was cloudy, damp and chill. With all the windows sealed up, the castle was unnervingly
dark from the outside, making Harry think of fortresses, prisons, dungeons. He made a turn around
the castle, gathering speed as he went, and when that wasn't enough to outrun his thoughts, he began
to climb.

Up and up, until he was level with the observatory at the top of the Astronomy tower. Up still higher,
until the low clouds were a chill fog all around him. From up here, Hogwarts looked like a toy, like
the fake castle at Disney World that looked so real until you got close enough to touch and realized
that it was watertight fiberglass and not damp, mossy stones and splintering slates reinforced with
waterproofing charms.

Up still further, until the fog closed around him and he couldn't see anything at all.

Back in his room, he tossed the photos on the floor and climbed in his unmade bed, too tired for
tossing and turning. As he was on the edge of sleep, his hand closed over a small object tangled in
the sheets, and without opening his eyes he recognized it as the pine-needle basket Sunday had sent.

He dreamed of Sunday's big skillful hands working on a basket. The weaving had patterns that
looked like calligromancy sigils, but he couldn't see them clearly, however hard he tried.

"What's going in there?" he asked.

"You are," Sunday said agreeably. His deep, accented voice was soothing.

"I can't," Harry said. "I have work to do. People who need me, back home." The basket looked a little like a cradle. It was about the size of Harry's hand, but in his dream it seemed perfectly plausible that he could lie down in it and just rest. How he longed to rest.

"Just for a little bit," Sunday said.

When he opened the common room door next morning and found Malfoy there alone, he took a step backwards, quite prepared to hide in his rooms until the common room was no longer tainted by Malfoy's presence. But a sudden memory of Malfoy's voice sneering "when you fled the country" was enough to stiffen his spine and send him forward instead.

"Pleasant dreams, Potter?" Malfoy said blandly, and Harry felt his lips drawing back from his teeth.

"Right," he snarled. "Maybe a -- maybe being in a bathroom stall is a sweet dream for people like you --"

"Oh, please," Malfoy said wearily. "You are people like me, in case you hadn't noticed."

"I am nothing like you," Harry said through clenched teeth. "I despise you."

"You despise someone, that much is obvious," Malfoy said.

"You children," Hermione said, her voice full of disgust. Ron was right behind her. Harry hadn't even heard them come in. "Harry, this is really getting old. I don't understand how anybody can hold a grudge for twelve years, but you two are going to have to get over it and focus on what's really important."

Ron's eyes went from Harry to Malfoy and back again. If he hadn't already guessed it, he'd figure it out soon.

"And you -- oh, no." Hermione was looking closely at Malfoy. "Harry, please tell me you're not the one who split Draco's lip."

He looked at the floor like a guilty preschooler. Malfoy was refusing to look at her, too. The other teachers were returning to the common room, and really, a public scolding was about the only way this day could possibly get any worse.

"Well, you're going to come right over here and mend it for him," she said. "Honestly. If I could ground you two for a week and take away your allowance, I'd do it. Go on, now."

Harry touched his wand to the split place in Malfoy's upper lip, and Malfoy jerked his head back. Harry put a hand on his chin to hold him still, very carefully not looking up at his eyes. "Integro," he said.

With Rose Duncan unconscious, Aoife Murphy still recovering from her burns, and Macy Prewitt staggering around on newly regrown thigh bones after triggering a brittle-bone mine, the Gryffindor Quidditch team was struggling. On Halloween, when they were flattened by Ravenclaw in the first
major match of the season, Wood left the pitch looking as though he had just come from a funeral.

He was still looking downcast at the feast, despite Penelope's increasingly desperate efforts to cheer him up, and Ron said to Harry, "C'mon, moral support time."

About halfway through a conversation on training schedules and physical fitness regimens and the possibility of waiving the first-year rule for Tally Jones, Malfoy sat down next to Ron and said, "Wood, I could provide Chinook 357s for all four teams, if you like."

"You what?" Wood said. He looked rather as though he'd been hit in the head with a Bludger.

"Are there even twenty-eight 357s in existence yet?" Penelope said.

"Thirty, if we want to outfit the officials," Malfoy said. "Weasley probably has a contact with the manufacturer." Ron nodded. "Though it might cost extra."

Wood was staring into space. "Chinook 357s," he said dreamily.

"You think he's going to favor Slytherin now, don't you," Harry said.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "I think," he said, "that there's not much point in Quidditch if every match is determined by which team has the fastest brooms." He smiled rather wickedly. "Besides, it would be an amusing way to spend some of Father's money."

Harry frowned at Malfoy. "Excuse me," he said. "Did that just come from the mouth of the person whose father bought him a spot on the Quidditch team?"

"Yes, well," Malfoy said, still smiling. "My father always used to say, 'My boy, there are things that money can't buy,' but you'd be surprised how old I was before I saw any evidence of that."

Next morning there was a deep chill in the air. Harry bundled his winter cloak closer as he walked along the verge of the Forbidden Forest.

In Florida he would have had an armful of big, gaudy hibiscus blossoms in five minutes, but here most of the greenery had already died off. He found flexible grapevines, though, and a bit of ivy. Leaving his wand in his belt, he bent them into two awkward, messy wreaths using his hands.

There were dozens of new memorials scattered about the school, of course. A frieze in the library showed Bill Weasley at the head of his army of goblins -- Bill tended to wink at Harry as he went by. Outside the greenhouse, merry-bells and song-lilies serenaded passersby in honor of Professor Sprout, and half the books in the library seemed to bear the frowning face of Madam Pince.

But out at the edge of the grounds were the two shrines to the less eminent dead: the reflecting pool and the Muggles Memorial.

The reflecting pool was small and perfectly round and always still, even on the windiest day. Harry knelt nervously in the damp grass beside it. Hermione had said you never knew who you would see. He leaned forward.

At first he saw only his own reflection. Then, after a few moments, a silvery disturbance passed over the surface, and he was looking into the clear eyes of Cedric Diggory.

Harry flinched back from the edge of the pool, heart pounding. He took a deep breath and leaned forward again.
Cedric looked back patiently. Harry frowned, wondering why the pool was showing him Cedric as a child. Then he realized that he was seeing the boy exactly as he'd last seen him alive -- only Harry had got older, and Cedric hadn't.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know. I didn't know enough." The wreath crackled in his clenching fist.

"Look," Cedric said urgently. And his face shifted and became the face of Colin Creevey, camera in hand.

"I wanted to be there," Colin said. "I wouldn't have been anywhere else."

"No," Harry said. No, it was wrong. There shouldn't have been a there for him to be at. Harry was supposed to have got rid of Voldemort himself. It was supposed to have been a nice clean single combat like in all the fairy tales. Not a messy, bloody, confusing war that spread out until it involved everybody Harry had ever known ...

"You're not looking," the voice said, and it wasn't Colin any more, but Mad-Eye Moody, gaunt and fierce as though everything had been starved out of him except his single-minded determination to root out the Death Eaters.

And shifted again: Nicolas Flamel, the picture he'd seen next to the death notice in the Prophet, smiling genially and waving. "It wasn't, in the end, that difficult a choice, my lad," he said. "Another opportunity to make my life mean something."

If this went on, one of the faces would surely be Sirius. Or Dumbledore. Or even his father ...

Harry flung the wreath into the water. When the ripples stilled, he was looking at his own reflection. He knelt there for a few moments, until his hands stopped shaking, before standing up.

A few steps from the reflecting pool stood the Muggles Memorial, a bronze statue of a family in Muggle clothing. The man was carrying a cell phone, the woman was wearing miniature radio headphones, and the child was dangling a yo-yo. Harry placed the other wreath at their feet.

"That thing gives me the creeps," said a voice beside him. He turned and saw Malfoy looking up at the man's face. "Look at it. You move and the eyes don't follow you. It's unnerving."

He shuddered theatrically.

"Didn't expect you to be observing All Souls, Malfoy." Somehow Harry couldn't quite muster the sneering tone of voice he wanted there.

"Oh, Malfoys are all for tradition," he said. "In its place." Only now did Harry notice that he was wearing Muggle clothes -- tan trousers and a heavy gray wool sweater over his shirt and Slytherin stripe tie.

Harry looked back at the statue. "Bridget Bishop was the first Muggle woman hanged for witchcraft in America," Harry said. "And Giles Corey was pressed to death." At Malfoy's raised eyebrow, he explained, "At the Coven, our Muggles Memorial was a statue of them. Purity Webster had it brought down from Salem. But the only place to put it was by the swimming pool, so it always looked rather out of place."

There was a long silence, and then Malfoy said, "The Death Eater camp was at Outer Lowering." After a moment he added, "Burning thatch has a very distinctive smell."

He stood there for a while, obviously working up his nerve, and then he tossed something at the base
of the statue, nodded to Harry, and walked away.

Harry looked more closely at the object he had thrown. It was a mechanical pencil.

Malfoy was still in his sweater and trousers when Harry arrived in the Hufflepuff dormitory with a candle and a flask of oil.

He should have looked foolish in Muggle clothes, with his long hair and his jewelry, Harry thought as they worked their way through the dormitory -- but he didn't. He looked like an illustration from one of Dudley's fairy tale books, a young prince from some Nordic country putting in his time as ambassador until the time came for him to assume the throne. Harry could easily picture him wrapped in furs, riding in a sleigh drawn by white tigers ...

"Potter?" Malfoy waved a hand in front of his face.

He blinked. "Sorry."

"Lost in thought," Malfoy said. "Not thinking of assaulting me again, were you?"

Harry gritted his teeth. It was very strange that he could have a vivid mental picture of Malfoy spread out on a white fur throw wearing nothing but his silver jewelry, and another, equally vivid mental picture of himself breaking the bastard's nose.

"Because I could live without the split lips." Malfoy's voice was warm and unexpectedly close, and his breath stirred Harry's hair. "But when it comes to the other, my philosophy is, what's a little assault between friends?"

Harry's eyes flew open. "We're not --" he said, and then fell silent as Malfoy carefully took his glasses off his face.

"I'm told that even Gryffindors can come to enjoy meaningless sex if they try," Malfoy said softly, laying the glasses on the table. He wasn't smiling any more.

"Malfoy --"

"Mm?" His face was very close, and his hands came up and hovered for a moment before touching Harry's cheeks.

Harry closed his eyes and lunged forward, catching Malfoy's mouth with his own, pushing his tongue past Malfoy's lips, hardly noticing when his hands came up to clutch handfuls of Malfoy's sweater.

Malfoy tolerated this clumsiness for a moment, and then his fingers shaped brackets on either side of Harry's mouth and he eased their faces apart until their lips barely met, a ticklish touch of skin to skin. His tongue slipped in to paint a warm stripe over Harry's lower lip, and Harry couldn't help gasping.

"You can stop mauling my jumper, Potter," Malfoy said against his mouth. "I've said yes."

"Uh -- OK," Harry said stupidly as Malfoy's lips delicately explored his jaw.

Once he'd disentangled his hands from Malfoy's sweater, he didn't quite know what to do with them. He smoothed them down Malfoy's back, and Malfoy hummed and moved closer, and Harry suddenly realized that he was standing in the Hufflepuff boys' dormitory wing with both arms around
Draco Malfoy.

It didn't feel as odd as it should have.

Malfoy's fingertips left his face and traced a light line down the side of his neck, and he couldn't help lifting his chin to offer better access. Against his mouth, he felt Malfoy's lips curve, and then Malfoy's mouth was following his fingers down Harry's jaw to his neck, and Harry heard himself make a little noise.

Malfoy heard it, too, and heard permission in it, and Harry felt his tongue, warm and soft. His knees weakened and he staggered back a step to lean on something.

"Mm," Malfoy said, "your turn against the wall." Harry tightened his arms and brought Malfoy up against his body, and without giving himself time to think, he pulled Malfoy's shirt out of his trousers and pushed his hands underneath it.

"Ah," Malfoy said. "Good." Harry's own shirt was already half untucked from his trousers; Malfoy hauled it loose. His fingers were cool in the small of Harry's back.

Malfoy was looking at him, head on one side, considering -- and then he ran his hand around Harry's waistband and tucked a finger behind the trouser button. Harry gasped, only partly because it tickled. When Malfoy moved no further, Harry opened his eyes and met an expectant gaze.

Damn. It would have been easier to do this with his eyes closed, and he felt a little angry with Malfoy for not allowing him that. But though Malfoy's expression was one of mild inquiry, his face was delicately flushed, and he was breathing fast. Harry nodded, and felt the brief press of a knuckle against his belly as Malfoy undid the button.

The trousers loosened as Malfoy drew down the zip, and Harry didn't think he could bear to have Malfoy looking at his face while he -- did this. He turned his head away, and Malfoy made a little amused noise.

"A kiss is the socially acceptable way of avoiding scrutiny during a hand job," he murmured, and while his right hand made its way under Harry's pants, his left came up to tilt Harry's face down until their lips met.

Sunday's hands had been as big and strong as the rest of him, and Alicia's and Zoe's had been soft and hesitant. Malfoy's were narrow and sure, and the rings were odd points of coolness against his cock until they picked up his body heat enough that he couldn't feel them at all. Malfoy handled him with neither haste nor hesitation. For once Harry was grateful for that damned Malfoy certainty.

After a moment he took his hands out from under Malfoy's shirt and got one into that fall of web-fine hair. He wrapped the other around Malfoy's forearm. Malfoy pulled back from the kiss for a moment, then dove back in when he figured out that Harry wasn't trying to stop him, and Harry held on gently, enjoying the feel of the muscles flexing in his arm.

The pressure was building now, and Harry shook free of Malfoy's mouth to gasp for air. When he leaned his head back against the wall, he felt Malfoy's tongue on his throat, and then his teeth. Harry pushed up his hips again and again, gritting his teeth against the noises that wanted to come out.

Malfoy tightened his grip minutely and hissed, "Yes," right against his ear, and Harry let go, rocking frantically into his hand as he came.

For a moment all he could do was lean on the wall and haul in one breath and then another and then another. Malfoy was very still against him, face buried in his neck, and when Harry worked a hand
up between them, the gasp he got back sounded like as much surprise as pleasure.

Malfoy's trousers were soft flannel. Underneath, his pants were made of something loose and soft that caught and clung to Harry's fingertips and conducted body heat so well that it was like touching bare skin -- or so he thought until he got underneath to actual skin, hot and smooth, like nothing else in the world.

Malfoy let out a little whine at the first touch of Harry's hand on his cock, and his hips moved fast, pushing in and out of the circle of Harry's fist. His eyes were tightly shut, his face flushed; it looked almost like pain. Harry licked his cheekbone and he shuddered, and before Harry had time to think of doing anything but follow the rhythm of Malfoy's hips, he was coming wetly into Harry's hand.

Somehow they had worked their way apart so that their only points of contact were Malfoy's forehead on Harry's shoulder and Harry's hand in Malfoy's trousers. Malfoy's arms were braced against the wall, and Harry's left hand hung uselessly at his side. Even with his hand still cupping Malfoy's cock, he couldn't quite bridge the gap enough to wrap his other arm around Malfoy's shoulders.

In the end he gave up on finding just the right gesture and Accio'd his glasses instead.

Malfoy was fishing for his wand in his shirtsleeve, and then he murmured a spell and got them both clean. He gave Harry a long look. "All right," he said. "I think we're done here." And he put his hand on the door.

"Just a minute." Harry put his fingertip on Malfoy's red mouth. Malfoy inhaled quickly.

"Nolotumesco."

It was almost disappointing to see Malfoy's lips lose their just-kissed flush, but there was nothing for it.

He did the same charm on himself. Malfoy was giving him a confused look. "I would have thought that'd be a spell you'd get a lot of use out of, Malfoy," Harry said. "You don't want everyone to take one look at you and know."

"Ah," Malfoy said.

8. Greetings

The Malfoy family library arrived by owl in the form of a little book smaller than a pack of cards. Malfoy looked at the showy M embossed in the wine-colored leather cover and shook his head, smirking. "Apparently Hurdy still remembers her orientation to the life of a Malfoy house elf," he said, and then lifted his chin and mimicked his father's pompous tones: "If it is worth doing at all, then it is worth doing exquisitely."

Hermione was smiling. "Do you think she'd want another of those lacy vests the next time she comes to visit Dobby and the rest?"

"Honestly," Malfoy said, "I think she'd rather have one of the curtain cords. Her fashion sense is even stranger than it used to be." He laid the book on the sturdiest table in the library and opened the leather cover.
With a sound like a whip snapping repeatedly, the book unfolded into several hundred volumes of various colors and sizes, stirring up enough dust to make Harry's nose itch. Hermione sneezed.

"Mm, all right," Malfoy said, sorting the books into rough piles. "This is the introductory work, Potter, so you can start here ... I'll go through these three ... might be something in the Oxford Magic Dictionary, you can check that one, 'Mione ... oh, dear, this one's supposed to be kept in a lead box buried at least three feet deep ... Ah. Here's Father's diary."

He opened it and frowned at the blank pages. "Adiperio," he said, tapping it with his wand. "No ... Nolocompingo. 'Mione, can you think of any other spells to undo a privacy spell?" There was a lock of hair that persisted in falling forward over his eyes, however often he brushed it back. It looked soft, but Harry remembered it feeling even softer. He turned his eyes quickly away.

It wasn't pleasant to think of himself as the sort of person who wanted to have meaningless sex with his worst enemy.

But Malfoy was Malfoy, selfish, spoilt, and Slytherin; sex hadn't magically changed him into someone Harry could like. And meaningless sex was meaningless sex, so Harry's pulse continued to kick up whenever Malfoy entered the room in a way that not even Harry could mistake for anger most of the time.

At least Malfoy had been at war before, and he'd understand the way things like this happened. He was unlikely to mistake this -- whatever it was -- for some sort of romance, he thought as he stroked the soft leather cover of the book Malfoy had just shoved at him. That was one comfort.

Harry read two chapters of "Introduction to Calligromancy" and then shut the book with a bang. "It's impossible," he said.

Hermione and Malfoy looked up from their books -- Hermione with a frown, Malfoy with that look of exaggerated concern that made Harry want to smack him.

"The mines can't be taking their power from everyone here," Harry said. "It's impossible."

"Potter, you felt it."

"I felt something, yes, and I can't explain it," Harry said. "But look. Calligromancy can work a little by proximity, like a normal spell, but at heart it's all about names, right?"

"But you said when the chant --" Hermione began, but Malfoy interrupted her.

"Or titles."

"Or titles, sure, but most of us don't have titles. So how can it tap us? How can it even find us?"

Malfoy and Hermione exchanged a glance, and then both of them shut the books they were looking at. "Zapf's Comprehensive?" she said.

"Over there. Green cloth cover," he said. "If it's anywhere, it'll be there."

A powder of snow in early December reminded Harry that it was time to venture out for his annual errand to the Muggle world.

"Is there any safe place to get a non-magical Christmas card and post it?" he asked Remus, trying to
ignore how close together he and Michelle Verte were sitting on the common-room couch. "I don't think my aunt's and uncle's hearts could take it if I sent one by owl."

"I believe the portmap has a vacant flat near the train station in Middle Twombly," Remus said, pointing to the relief map on the wall. Then his face lit up. "You could take the older Muggle Studies students on a field trip!"

Which was how Harry found himself walking through the village streets trailed by seventeen first-level Muggle Studies students, some of them very oddly dressed indeed, and Malfoy, looking surprisingly comfortable in pale-washed jeans, a white sweater, and a pair of tan hiking boots.

"How will you recognize this ... Village News?" asked Sarah McDuff, who had managed to put together a fairly inconspicuous Muggle costume except for the pink bunny slippers.

"Because it will be new, obviously," said Fortunatus Grant, a Slytherin prefect on the Percy Weasley mold. Grant had refused to leave his wand at Hogwarts, insisting instead on keeping the whole group waiting in the classroom while he transfigured it into an enormous walking stick with a handle shaped like a bronze owl's head. "Compensating for something, Mr. Grant?" Malfoy had drawled, and Harry had turned his head away so the students wouldn't see him smiling.

In Village News, the children looked around curiously, tilting their heads to listen to the recorded carols, poking the tinsel gingerly as though they expected it to move on its own, while Harry looked for a Christmas card that didn't have any sentiment he couldn't agree with. At last he settled on "Wishing you a Happy Christmas," which was true as far as it went.

"Professor? What does it do?" Medea Martin asked him.

"Well, the postman will deliver it to my aunt and uncle in Little Whinging. They'll tear open the envelope, they'll look at the picture" -- in this case an old-fashioned family in a sleigh, singing -- "and then they'll open it and read it." And after that they'll probably throw it on the fire, Harry added privately.

"You could make the picture really sing. It's a simple spell. A fourth-year could do it."

"Yes, but my aunt and uncle ... They're a little bit ... different." Harry knew that Uncle Vernon opened each year's Christmas card with fear and suspicion, waiting for something to jump out at him. Imagining this was the main pleasure he got out of the seasonal ritual. "They're not ... comfortable with magic."

"Kind of you to spare them," Malfoy said at his ear.

Harry smiled. "I figure every year the suspense gets worse."

The students clustered round him as he approached the counter to pay for the card and buy a stamp.

Jack Talos snatched it from his hand. "This is what forces the postman to go to their house? It's a sort of Imperius transfigured into a little square of stickum?"

Harry looked up from writing, your nephew, Harry, on the card. "They're from the County Philanthropic School for the Insane," he murmured to the clerk.

"Poor lambs," she said.

"For Monday I'll want eighteen inches on the Royal Mail," Malfoy said as soon as they'd all
portkeyed back to the Great Hall. "You'll find all the background information in 'Busy People, Busy Places.'"

The students scattered to their dormitories and Harry and Malfoy made their way toward the staff wing. "'Busy People, Busy Places'?" Harry asked.

"The Muggle Studies texts on the governors' curriculum are appalling," Malfoy said. "The 2000 edition of Calendula Hawkshaw's 'Understanding Muggles' has an entire chapter on caring for your crossbow. So 'Mione got some books from her cousin, the kindergarten teacher. Hello, Professor," he added, nodding to the Snape statue.

"Good day, Mr. Malfoy. Mr. Potter, your buttons are askew."

Harry looked down. "Shit! Sorry, Professor -- Malfoy, why didn't you tell me?" He rushed for his rooms.

"Relax. You had a jacket on," Malfoy smirked, and followed him right into his rooms. He made an elaborate bow to the milkmaid. "Draco Malfoy, at your service. Potter, you didn't introduce me to your doorkeeper."

"That's because I don't want you here, Malfoy," Harry said, turning his back on him to undo the misfastened buttons.

"Mm. Where do you want me?" Harry jumped a little as Malfoy's hand slid over his belly.

"How's Australia sound?" But the sight of Malfoy's pale, ring-adorned fingers on his skin made it impossible not to lean back against him.

"Damned hot this time of year, Australia," Malfoy said, mouth moving over the nape of his neck.

"You could do with a bit of sun. You're paler than Peeves." Harry finished undoing buttons and began refastening them from the top. Malfoy brushed his hand away and slowly tugged the sides of his shirt open.

"All tanned and leathery like some field hand?" His fingers caught and plucked both Harry's nipples at once, and Harry couldn't hold back a noise. "It's all very well for you and Weasley. You haven't got even a pretense of class."

"Then you're --" Harry stopped with a gasp as one of Malfoy's hands smoothed over the front of his trousers. "Um. Slumming?"

"It's one of the traditional perks of the aristocracy, dallying with the help."

"Never been a ... perk before." He was talking nonsense, but Malfoy had undone his trousers, so it wasn't surprising. He reached behind him to grip Malfoy's hips, and Malfoy steered him a couple of steps sideways and tipped them both over on the couch.

Sitting down equalized their heights, so that instead of talking to the back of his neck, Malfoy was mouthing his ear, sending little shivers of goosebumps down his neck. Then Malfoy rubbed his face around into Harry's hair and took a deep breath -- was he smelling him? He shouldn't be doing that. Harry leaned into Malfoy's left arm where it lay along the back of the couch and turned round a bit to get a kiss instead.

Malfoy's jeans were well worn and soft. Harry stroked his thigh, as far back as he could reach, and Malfoy mm'd into his mouth.
This was all going too slow, and it was making him nervous. Too much time between kisses for murmuring and sighing, as if they were some sort of lovebirds or something, and he had to keep stopping himself from saying things like, "Your hair is so soft," and, "Yes, touch me there, you feel so good" -- and that was for romance, for the kind of relationship that people who weren't heroes got to have in times that weren't wartime. Not for burning off tension with a quick grope on the couch with someone who couldn't even be civil to him in public.

"Look," Malfoy whispered, nudging his head, and Harry looked down the length of his own body to see Malfoy's glittering hand spreading open his fly and drawing his cock out of his pants. "Watch," Malfoy insisted, looking down over his shoulder too as he touched him delicately, just enough to tease, not enough to satisfy --

"God," Harry gasped, and he wrapped his own hand around Malfoy's, closing his eyes at last as he forced Malfoy into the tighter-faster-rougher that his body had been begging for, over and over. And Malfoy gave in with a sigh and kissed him until he spilled over both their hands.

He lay for a moment panting into Malfoy's mouth, and then he felt Malfoy's lips move as he murmured a cleaning spell. He opened his eyes, expecting some snide comment about his stamina, and surprised a look of pure hunger on Malfoy's face, though Malfoy wiped it off as soon as he saw Harry's eyes were open.

"What sort of host am I?" Harry said, and he pushed Malfoy down to lie on the couch and crawled on top of him.

Malfoy kissed him wildly, hands on either side of his face, pushing up against Harry's knee between his legs, until it seemed as though he'd be content to do nothing else until he came. When Harry drew back, Malfoy tightened his hands. "Sh," Harry said, unbuttoning his jeans one-handed, and Malfoy's hands in his hair followed him down as he took Malfoy's cock in his mouth.

There was something intoxicating about having this kind of power over Draco Malfoy, and Harry gave him a little tooth just to remind him that he could. Malfoy shuddered, and one hand left Harry's hair, and the sudden muffling of his whimpers told Harry that Malfoy had put it over his own mouth.

Even so, he was making a noise, that same little whine Harry remembered from last time. Draco Malfoy, pleading! The victory made him feel generous, and he gave Malfoy more of everything -- more depth, more suction, more speed -- until with a great gasp Malfoy came in his mouth.

He was tugging Harry up instantly, hauling him into a kiss, even while his cock was still pulsing in Harry's hand. It took a moment before his breathing began to slow and his hands on Harry's head loosened enough for Harry to draw back.

He found he couldn't resist smiling at Malfoy, pink-cheeked and mussed and heavy-eyed, and Malfoy's responding smile was sweet and sleepy for a moment before it recovered its customary edge.

"Some people get gifts in their shoes on St. Nicholas' Day," he said lazily. "I've never heard of anyone getting them in their trousers."

Harry snickered. "You're the one who's all for innovation." He disentangled himself with some difficulty and sat up, pulling his shirt together. "Reminds me, though, I'd better get to Hogsmeade this week. Still got some of the Weasleys left to buy Christmas presents for before --" He looked at Malfoy, who was still lying on the couch. "You're going to be by yourself at Christmas, aren't you?"

Malfoy shrugged, sat up, and started fastening his jeans. "Haven't made any plans yet."
"You could -- Molly probably wouldn't mind if I took you to the Burrow with me. I guess. If you want to,"

Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "Much as it pains me to refuse such a very gracious invitation, I shall certainly be acquiring some other plans any day now."

"Excuse me for trying to help you out," Harry said, stung. "It's not my house, you know. I can't just bring anybody I meet on the street."

"Don't put yourself out on my account." Malfoy stood up, tugged a wrinkle out of his sweater, and swept out the door. By the time Harry had fastened his shirt and trousers and followed, he was out of sight.

On Christmas Eve, Harry, Ron, Charlie, and Sofia took the portmap to Hogsmeade and then Apparated together to the doorstep of the Burrow.

There was an ear-splitting noise coming from one of the long-empty henhouses; after a moment, Harry got accustomed enough to the din to make out a voice singing: "I'll raise a terrible army, and through tremendous danger go. In spite of all of the universe, I'll conquer the bonny bunch of roses-o ..."

"Lovely! Ginny's brought her band!" Ron said.

The kitchen was stifling and full of mouthwatering smells. Through drifts of steam, Harry could see Molly with a wand in each hand, directing five or six different cooking and cleanup tasks. When she spotted them, though, she dropped everything to smother them with embraces, and she was still exclaiming over Harry's height when the door opened behind him and in walked Percy. Arthur followed, leaning heavily on a crutch.

"Why, what's happened to you?" Harry asked Arthur as Percy gave Charlie and Ron a stiff handshake. Percy's Ministry ID badge was very shiny.

"One of your mysterious magic mines, I'm told," Arthur said. "I'm on the list for a healing spell, but of course the Ministry healers have so many ahead of me to see to. But tell me about America! Did you see any of those Muggle thinking machines -- what were they -- confuters?"

There was a strange noise from the living room. Ron glanced at his mother. "Did you let Fred and George do the decorating again? Haven't you learned anything? Last year," he said to Harry, "they were testing a new kind of enchanted mistletoe to see if they could sell it at Weasley & Weasley Novelties in Hogsmeade, and Mother spent the whole of Christmas eve kissing --"

"Everyone who's not out of the kitchen in five minutes had better start casting washing-up spells," Molly said loudly.

Suddenly there was a loud honk through the open door, and something gray barreled into Harry's chest. "Spielberg!" he grinned, catching hold of the goose, whose feet weren't well suited to sitting on his shoulder as Hedwig would have done. "Oh, brilliant, he's brought me a package!" He opened it and pulled out a large, lumpy object.

"Not alive, is it?" Arthur said nervously.

"It's a pinata, but I don't know what it's meant to be," Harry said. Then he turned it around and looked at its toothy face. "Oh, for ... " He turned it to show Ron. "It's a warthog. They meant well."
"Wait, there's something else." Ron took a sheet of paper off Spielberg's leg. "A card, and --" He handed Harry a little wreath woven of pine needles. Harry stuck it in his pocket hastily.

"Blessed Yule and Io Saturnalia," Ron read off the card. "From your friends at Coven of the Americas."

"That's American for Happy Christmas," Percy explained to Arthur, and Arthur took the pinata inside to wait for Christmas morning.

The noise in the henhouse ceased, and in a moment Ginny emerged, followed by two witches and a wizard. They were all dressed in what looked like American baseball uniforms under robes that barely cleared their knees. "Fashion," Percy sniffed. "I'll have to leave early tomorrow, of course, Mum. They're opening the office on Boxing Day for a big meeting with some Inspectors of the Auror squad. They won't tell us what they want to discuss, but it will have to do with Death Eater extradition, mark my word."

"There are still Death Eaters known to be at large?" Harry asked.

"Well, I understand the Malfoy boy is at Hogwarts. He's Marked," Percy said.

"Malfoy's a snot, not a Death Eater," Harry said. "I'm sure you've got bigger things to worry about than him."

Spielberg was sent out to the henhouse to rest up, with strict instructions not to sleep in any of the instruments -- "though how he'll be able to tell Martha's autoharmonium from Father's broken-down lawnmower I have no idea," Fred murmured to Harry. "Unless he starts them both up and sleeps in the one that sounds better."

Dinner was vegetable soup, served from a cauldron that never seemed to empty -- as much of a miracle as the whole crowd of them fitting around a table that looked about the size of Harry's nightstand.

As they finished eating, there was a faint pop outside. "Come on in," George called through the door. "The more the wearier." The door opened, and Hermione came in. And close on her heels was Malfoy.

"Sorry we're late," Hermione said, hugging Molly warmly. "No, no, don't get up, we've eaten already and we can sit on the sideboard. Now, who here hasn't met Draco?"

Percy's introduction was cold, but he couldn't make a fuss because Ginny and her band had already flocked around. "Draco Malfoy? Aren't you the one who was a Muggle for a whole year?"

"A Muggle? Really?" Arthur pushed his way into the crowd of young musicians. "Perhaps you can explain to me this business of the Facts Machines. Are they used in research?"

Ron squeezed out of the fray and plumped down between Fred and George, who obviously had a great deal of catching up to do, and Percy cornered Charlie and Sofia with a longwinded question about "the state of things on the Continent." Harry was surprised to catch himself yawning.

"Goodness, look at the time." Molly turned to Ron. "I'm putting Harry and Draco and Evander in your room, Ron. Try not to trip over them when you go up."

The only boy in Ginny's band -- Evander, apparently -- said "Grim," with obvious approval, and they all trooped up the stairs.
Ron's room was, if possible, even more heavily decorated with Cannons memorabilia than it had been the last time Harry visited. Evander flopped into Ron's chair, put his feet on Ron's desk, and immediately began to snore. Harry dug two orange blankets out of the chest at the foot of the bed, handed one to Malfoy, and wrapped up on the floor in the other. Malfoy did the same on the other side of the doorway, then murmured, "Nox." The light went out, leaving only starlight coming in through the tiny window.

Down the hall Harry could hear Hermione's voice joining in with the other girls' -- "There was a drake went out to rake, Christ-i-mas day, Christ-i-mas day --" and then a muffled shout from Percy: "Could we have some quiet, please?"

"When I invited you, you said you were making other plans," Harry said to Malfoy, quietly so as not to wake Evander.

"Yes," Malfoy said. "I planned to spend Christmas with a friend." And he turned his back on Harry.

Harry was awakened by a crash and a shout of "Fred!" The first thing he saw when he came downstairs were stockings, so many of them that the fireplace was entirely hidden behind them. Hermione was already drinking hot cocoa with Ginny and the other musicians.

George crawled out from behind a pile of stockings, muttering something and twisting his wand. "Oh, hullo, Harry," he said. "Haven't seen some holly floating about, have you?"

"Literally floating about?" Harry looked around nervously.

"Wait, I see it!" Fred called from the front door. George ran out after him, calling, "No, it was heading for the shed!"

In the kitchen, Malfoy was over in the corner in a flowered apron, hair pulled back with one of Ginny's blue hair ribbons, a wand in one hand and a wooden spoon in the other. "Low heat, that's the secret," he said to Molly.

"Imagine! And they can do all that without even using a thickening spell! Oh, good morning, Harry. Chocolate's on the stove, and you can eat whatever you can rummage up -- just give the bread box a tap, it sometimes empties out if you don't renew the Pastrium spell --"

Taking his breakfast into the living room, Harry sat down with Charlie, Hermione, and one of the girls from Ginny's band, who were watching Sofia murmur healing charms over Arthur. After a moment, Malfoy emerged from the kitchen, wiping his hands on his apron, and perched on the arm of Hermione's chair.

"Excellent! I doubt our healers could do half so well," Arthur beamed, stretching slightly. "But that's Hogwarts for you. You lot are always two steps ahead of the Ministry, I'm afraid. Makes us look right idiots, outpaced over and over by a crowd that are practically undergraduates." Arthur sounded more proud than competitive.

"Percy!" he called out toward the fireplace. "Come tell Harry about your new job! Percy's a junior undersecretary with the Diplomatic Corps."

"Really?" Hermione leaned forward. "There are a lot of fascinating diplomatic problems facing the wizarding community just now."

"There certainly are," Percy said. "The war left international ties in a disgraceful state. Not to mention alliances with other nonhuman magical communities within England."
"I hope," Malfoy drawled, "that the Dementor affair taught the Ministry to be more selective in its choice of allies." He looked at Percy with that polite expression that he always took when he felt sure of winning an argument.

Percy's mouth thinned. "I don't deny that the former Minister made an error in judgment. If he had been aware of information that later came to light --"

"Information?" Malfoy stretched the word out. "Just what were the gaps in the Minister's briefing? That the Dementors violated a wizard's will and dignity? That they could sap his mind and his magic without his consent? That they acknowledged no authority but greed? This was news to him?"

Harry had never heard Malfoy speak as quickly as a normal person before, nor sit up so straight out of his usual sprawl. Percy's lips got tighter and tighter, and his eyes got narrower and narrower. The rest of the party were watching them uneasily.

"The Dementors were nobody's weapon," Malfoy sneered, "and they were the natural allies of the Dark."

"I imagine that you would be an expert on that point," Percy said.

Harry felt Hermione stiffen beside him, but Malfoy said, "Exactly," and sat back, satisfied, as though Percy had just conceded defeat. "Perhaps I ought to be a consultant to the Ministry," he went on after a moment. "I could head up the Takes One To Know One department."

The girl musician giggled.

"It's a sorry day," Percy said irritably, "when I find myself defending Dementors. The former Minister's decisions put me in a very awkward position."

At midmorning an owl arrived with a letter. "It's from Keket!" Molly cried, opening it. "Bill's daughter, you know," she explained to Harry. "We haven't seen her since Halloween." She unfolded a couple of pages heavily covered with junior-school script:

Happy Christmas, everyone! Thank you for all the presents. The jumper fits perfectly again this year, and the cakes were delicious. Mum says Uncle Fred and Uncle George outdid themselves in their box of surprises. And oh! Uncle Charlie, the aerolizard is perfect! I've named her Anat, and she looks just like a baby dragon, and she rides on my shoulder and sleeps in my bed! A little animated picture showed a tiny dragonlike creature flapping its wings.

And thanks to Aunt Ginny for the ocarina -- Mum says it's awfully shrill, so I mostly keep a Tacitum spell on it, but Tolkach-Rychag says it's perfect for Kobalín folk songs, and she's already taught me to play the Mica Dance. And tell Uncle Percy thanks for the book -- though the bit about the "Goblin Rebellion" sounds a little biased. It's all quite different in the book Tolkach-Rychag wrote.

"Her goblin godmother," Ron explained, looking over Harry's shoulder. "She's looked after Keket since she was a little baby."

"Goblin history is Keket's passion," Molly went on, "just like Charlie's dragons and Ron's Quidditch and Ginny's music ..."

"And the twins' mayhem," Ron supplied.

"I wish she could be here," Molly sighed. "Kiya does her best, but Egypt to England is such a hideous distance that Apparating leaves you half-dead for days."
"Muggles have the advantage of us, with their phonotels," Arthur said.

"Why not get 'Mione to do a Transauditum for you?" Malfoy said.

It worked perfectly, and soon the room was filled with the voice of Bill's daughter. "Happy Christmas, everyone!" she said. "Aunt Ginny, Aunt Ginny, let me play you a song! Uncle Charlie, do you hear Anat whistling?"

"And how are Kiya and Pushlever?" Arthur called over the noise.

"Tolkach-Rychag," Keket said sternly. "You ought to use her proper name, Grandpa -- after all, she doesn't call you Strong-as-a-Bear! Uncle Charlie, can I bring Anat to Hogwarts when I come next year? Tolkach-Rychag says they'll be teaching about Daddy in the History of Magic class and everyone will know I'm a hero's daughter!"

It seemed like only moments between the end of the phone call and the time Molly's spell-amplified voice called them back to dinner.

When everyone was stuffed, Fred and George convinced everyone to try out a new, experimental cracker they were working on for Weasley & Weasley. Then, while the twins rebuilt the dining room wall -- "third time this year, and I say nothing of the back porch," Molly muttered -- they all started working on Harry's American pinata. The shortest of Ginny's friends broke it open and was promptly buried under a shower of candy.

"Snickers! Brilliant!" Harry grabbed for one.

Arthur frowned at him. "But they don't snicker at all."

"Save room for Draco's bread pudding," Molly said, setting a steaming dish on the coffee table.

"Can we --" Fred began.

"Not until that wall is finished!"

A comfortable quiet descended on the living room.

"Well," Malfoy said after a moment. "Not quite as well-organized as a Death Eater Christmas, but I must admit that the food is better."

Harry felt Hermione freeze beside him. Molly's mouth fell open. And then there was a suppressed snicker from George, and before he knew it the entire room was laughing. Even Percy gave an indulgent smile.


"To Keket," Molly said when they'd all drunk the first toast. "And Kiya, and Push -- er -- Keket's godmother. And -- Bill's memory." And they all drank again.

Harry had never developed a taste for mead, and would have given a great deal for an ordinary beer, or even a Pepsi, but he gamely toasted the season, family, Hogwarts, "absent friends," Ginny's band, and the coming year, until he felt a warmth in his chest and a vague urge to giggle.

Then George raised his glass. "To Neville Longbottom," he said, with a wink at Percy. "And to Severus Snape, may he rest in whatever he prefers instead of peace."
There were several appreciative laughs, and everyone raised their glasses eagerly. Harry frowned at Hermione.

"You didn't know?" she said. "They're the heroes of the Dementor Rebellion. Neville hybridized a very potent version of Night-Blooming Heartsease, and Professor Snape used it to create a variant of a vaporizing potion. When the Dementors breathed the steam, they melted. Gray goo. Very messy."

"And they say the air smelt of drains as far south as Dover," Ron said.

Harry suddenly remembered his bag of gifts, and he was going up the narrow staircase when he met Malfoy coming down with a small wrapped parcel. "Forgot my offering to the hostess," Malfoy said, "and I couldn't accio it without saying what it was and spoiling the surprise."

"What is it?"

"Kitchen timer," Malfoy said. "I added a few improvements, of course."

There was barely room for two to pass on the stair, and on a whim Harry put an arm around Malfoy's shoulders as they maneuvered. Malfoy gave him a lazy smile and then shocked him by brushing a soft kiss over his mouth.

Malfoy smelled of mead and cinnamon, and his lips felt nice. Harry leaned into him, closing his eyes. Malfoy's robe was made of something heavy and smooth, with little slubs of thread in the weave, and Harry caught at the sleeve and bunched it in his hand and opened Malfoy's mouth with his tongue, warmed by the way Malfoy sighed and leaned against him.

A door shut upstairs with a loud click, and Harry stiffened, feeling his face heat.

Malfoy looked at him with narrowed eyes. "You know, Potter," he said in a conversational tone, "being seen with me can hardly make your reputation any worse."

"Good of you to think of me."

"Well, you need all the help you can get." Malfoy brushed past him and down the stairs. Harry felt the fabric pull out of his grasping hand.

9. Modern History

"How come I always have to be the Dementor? Let Laurel be the Dementor this time."

"There weren't any girl Dementors, stupid."

"Then you do it. I want to be Hagrid."

"You can't be Hagrid because you've got red hair, and I can't be a Dementor because I'm shorter than you."

"Let me be Bill Weasley, then. Come on, Rhys, it's no fun to stagger about and point. It's dull."

Probably even first-years wouldn't have been playing this game if they'd known Harry could hear them, but students tended not to think about how sound carried in the Great Hall. It gave Harry a pang to watch them. He might still dream about the war nearly every night, but to these children, Dementors were no more real than the cowboys and Indians that Dudley and his friends used to play.
"You think that's odd?" Remus said, sitting down beside him. Michelle was with him, as usual; Harry gave her a cool sort of smile. "A few weeks ago I came upon Malik and Robinson pretending to be me and Sirius. They'd got Robinson's broomstick and enchanted it to sound like a motorbike ..." He gave Harry a sidelong grin. "It's only fear of getting caught that stops them playing Harry Potter where you can see them."

Harry buried his face in his hands. "I feel so old."

Michelle looked up from her flower press and laughed. "Take it up with Cypherus. He was a hundred and twenty on Tuesday."

Harry peered at Remus' stack of parchments, which were unusually sloppy and covered with blotches. "First-year compositions?" Remus nodded.

Harry looked at the top one. *The Dark Arts*, it said, in splotchy handwriting, *include the spells used by Lord Voldemort and his supporters. Examples of these spells include ...*

He raised his eyebrows. "So basically it's Dark if the bad guys use it."

Remus smiled. "That's about the standard level of sophistication, yes."

"The Beauchamp boy seems to have read Levi's 'Defining Darkness,'" Michelle put in. "So perhaps there's hope."

"It's not so easy a question as you'd think," Harry said. "Everyone here is suspicious of blood magic, but Dr. Bokor taught us to use it to lift curses and to protect babies against mal de ojo. But then, if the darkness is in the intention and not in the tool, then why are some curses Unforgivable?"

Remus gave him a long, unreadable look. "You don't have to answer this if you don't want to," he said. "But I've always wondered why you chose not to use Avada Kedavra against Voldemort."

"It wasn't scruples, really," Harry said. "We just didn't think it would work. It's rough to kill somebody who's so far from a normal definition of 'alive.'"

"You realize that scholars all over Europe are still debating how you managed to kill the Dark Lord with a spell that's meant for exorcising ghosts."

"Is that what we used? I don't remember the words. It was all Hermione's idea. I was just there to point the wand." Harry put the parchment back on the pile. "I remember that she told us all, Dumbledore and Sirius and Ron and everyone, to hold on with all our power to the idea that we belonged here and he didn't. That he'd stolen it all -- his body, his power, his life. That none of that was rightfully his, but all of it had been taken from others against their will."

"And what you did --"

"Was to trust them." Harry's smile didn't feel quite genuine. "That seems to be my only talent, really. To fall in with good people and trust them."

Remus lifted his hand as though to put it on Harry's shoulder. If he tried to comfort him now, when Dumbledore and Sirius and so many others were dead --

As though he could read what Harry was thinking, Remus dropped his hand.

After a moment Remus looked down at the stack of parchments. "You made a mistake when it came to Severus," he said. "As many of us did." He rubbed a finger over a deep gouge in the table. "It's
the most difficult thing," he said, "seeing the difference between what's evil and what's merely unpleasant."

Down at the student table, Dunning appeared to have won his case and been permitted to play Bill Weasley: He'd used an adhesive charm to hang a fork from one ear, and Billsborough and Lamb had thrown napkins over their heads to impersonate Death Eaters. Now the three of them were loudly clashing together beams of light that emerged from their wands.

"Somebody needs to remind them that light sabers were only in the movies," Harry said. "What on earth is Binns teaching them about the war?"

"Nothing at all, of course. He teaches as though history were something that stopped happening in 1946," said a familiar sneer, and Harry turned and saw Malfoy and Hermione arriving at the table.

"Nothing around here is good enough for you, is it, Malfoy?" Harry said.

"Doesn't have to be good enough for me," Malfoy said, reaching across him to get a dish of French toast. "Only has to be good enough for Dunning and Lamb and the other little Jedi."

"I'm afraid Draco's right about History of Magic classes," Michelle said. "Pedantius is still taking his students through the founding of the 1912 League of Wizards."

"That's bad."

Remus nodded. "I'm trying to make up the deficit as best I can in my classes." He frowned suddenly. "In fact," he said, "you three would make excellent guest lecturers."

Which was how Harry found himself at the head of Remus' Level 7 class listening to Mary Logan, a rather hotheaded Ravenclaw, making an impassioned plea for the restitution of the Dueling Club.

"You make a good case for your plan, Miss Logan," Remus said, looking amused. "You might consider a future as a prosecutor. However, the staff have decided that it's necessary to spend this year making certain that all the students have a good grounding in the basics. Otherwise, student duels would provide a great deal of practice for Madam Andriescu-Weasley, but very little genuine improvement for students."

The girl lifted her chin stubbornly. "You're treating us like children," she said, and there was a murmur of agreement among the students. "I'm only two years younger than Professor Potter was when he had his duel. And don't forget that our side won because it had the better duelist."

Harry shook his head at the thought that he'd been an adult when he faced down Voldemort. He hardly felt like one now. "Our side won," he said, "because it had the better researcher."

"And ironically, this is the very subject on which I've asked Professor Potter to lecture today," Remus said. "If the rest of you would take your seats, please."

Harry waited until the scuffling had stopped -- surely when he'd been a student he'd been able to keep his feet still? -- and then began.

"I'm sure you all know that the battle hinged on an odd accident of fate: that my wand happened to be the twin of the one used by Voldemort." He ignored their nervous squirming at the name. "By now it's well known that when two wands are brothers, there's a spell that can make it impossible for one to act against the bearer of the other. But at the time, the existence of such a spell was only a rumor. Discovering whether it was true or not fell to Hermione Granger."
"The Charms teacher with the fuzzy hair?" Jack Talos asked with ill-concealed scorn.

"Hermione Granger took eleven N.E.W.T.s," a familiar voice drawled. Harry looked up and saw Malfoy leaning against the chalkboard lazily, as though he belonged there. "That's the most ever recorded in the history of Hogwarts. Perhaps, Mr. Talos, you will do as well -- if you pay as much attention to your studies as you do to your hair."

The class chuckled. Jack's devotion to his hair was legendary; he'd even summoned a mirror and comb all the way from his parents' house in Preston when the ones his mother had packed for him didn't meet his standards. That took some skill, of course -- Jack would probably be a powerful wizard one day, if his hair loss began early enough.

"At any rate," Harry went on as Jack glared, "Hermione spent nearly a year researching everything she could find out about wands that were brothers. She got information on the Fratrium spell from --" Harry carefully kept his eyes away from Malfoy. "From a spy among Voldemort's supporters. But then there was the problem of testing it -- Ollivander wasn't going to lose customers by declaring sides, so she wasn't able to get a pair of wands to practice with. She and Ron Weasley ended up becoming wand-making experts in a matter of months so that they could create a pair themselves.

"Then," he went on, "we were up all night dueling over and over, practicing until she was certain I had the spell learned. She developed the Transauditum charm so that she could coach me from a distance when the time came. And then came my thirty minutes of drama."

Harry shook his head. "I got more fame than anyone could possibly want, and she got a permanent table at the reading room of the Wizard Museum. Even though all I did was to -- I suppose I was the occasion for other people to perform great feats of heroism."

"Harry Potter, mascot of the wizarding world," Malfoy drawled from the blackboard.

"Are you so certain that it would be a bad idea to restart the Dueling Club?" Malfoy said to Remus as they left the classroom.

"Are you mad?" Harry asked him before Remus could answer. "Have you forgotten what happened when you and I had our duel?"

The corners of Malfoy's mouth quirked. "Never for a moment," he said.

"I'm afraid that for the current students, a duel would be even worse," Remus said. "Very few of them are as well matched as you two were, in terms of skill."

Malfoy glared at Remus -- probably insulted to have his skill level compared with Harry's -- but he didn't respond to that part of it. "Why is it," he said instead, "that everyone assumes that the only way to do something is the way it was done when we were children? When you take fencing lessons you don't spar with someone who's as bad as you are. You spar with an expert. The students shouldn't be dueling with each other -- they should be dueling with teachers. People with enough knowledge to prevent mishaps and enough experience to actually teach the little brats something."

"Oh, like you, Malfoy?" Harry said.

Malfoy looked at him contemptuously. "Yes, like me, Potter. And like you, and 'Mione, and maybe even Weasley, if he's as good at dueling as he is at everything else."

After several months of mixed-house classes, Harry looked out over the Great Hall at dinner and
noticed something odd.

"Isn't Beauchamp a Hufflepuff?" he said. "What's he doing sitting with Cabot at Ravenclaw table?"

"Cabot's not a Ravenclaw, she's a Slytherin," Hermione said.

"So's Mulhall," Ron said. "Strickland's the only one at that end of the table who's a Ravenclaw."

"Oh, those four," Malfoy said. "They've got Level 4 Defense together, and they spend all their time in the library. I don't think they've seen the sun in weeks. Sorting Hat might as well have put them in Bookworm House."

"Nothing wrong with that," Harry snapped, glancing at Hermione.

"Did I say there was?" Malfoy said. He pushed a half-eaten tangerine toward Hermione. "Want the rest of this?"

"It's nice to see the different houses socializing together," Hermione said, helping herself to a segment. She looked up, as though aware that Harry was ready to disagree with her. "They're still sleeping and revising in houses; that's enough for a good influence. And maybe the Heads will set up some activities to reinforce house identity."

Malfoy snorted. "Don't start, Draco," she said. He glared at her. "I keep telling him," she said to Harry, "that someone as young as we are can't have enough authority to make a good head of house, but he insists that he'd be better than Professor Aerie."

"She's a Ravenclaw!" Malfoy said. "I'm a sixth-generation Slytherin!"

"Nothing to be proud of," Harry said.

"Should be. Used to be."

Harry was disgusted. "I can't believe you're just thinking of your own advancement, Malfoy."

"I'm thinking," Malfoy said, "of doing something important with my position, making real changes, making things better. Not that you'd know anything about that. You never wanted to do anything with your power beyond your hobbies, your schoolwork, your little rivalries."

"Oh, yes," Harry said, stung. "Defeating Voldemort -- I only did that to get points off Slytherin."

Malfoy looked genuinely angry. "Defeated him by yourself, did you? No, you got sucked into something big by accident, didn't you. Otherwise it never would have crossed your mind to use any of those gifts of yours for anything other than Quidditch and pranks. Do you know what I could have done with your name, your fame, your power? Do you know what I would have given for that? My father would --"

Nostrils flaring, he drew himself up and took a slow, deep breath. "But it's infantile to renew a schoolboy rivalry like this. We won't speak of it again."

He turned so fast that his robe spun out around his feet as he strode away, leaving Harry rooted to the spot. Draco Malfoy was accusing him of starting out with an unfair advantage?

"Gryffindors and Slytherins," Michelle sighed. "Save us."

"Gryffindor and Slytherin men," Penelope said. "It's antlers, antlers everywhere."
When Harry crossed the threshold of the library, there was a sudden shimmer in the air, and then a large gong appeared an inch from his face. He sprang back, shaking his wand into his hand.

"Sorry." Malfoy was sitting at the nearest table.

Harry clasped his hands together to stop them shaking. "What did you do?"

"Used the wrong character in the verb section, obviously. It was supposed to ring a bell, not conjure one." Malfoy began scrabbling through his calligromancy dictionary.

"Aren't we supposed to be getting rid of the mines, not making more?"

"Can't understand them without making them, can we?" Malfoy said.

"And you honestly expect me to believe that you're only making these for research, and have no intention of making them for any other reason?"

"Believe what you like," Malfoy said without looking up from the dictionary. "Some people have no appreciation for the scientific process."

In the common room, Harry sat reading a fourth-year calligromancy text while Malfoy badgered Hermione and Penelope into trying to find the key to Lucius' diary. They all looked up when McGonagall approached with a serious look on her face and Sofia in tow. Michelle and Madeleine glanced over from the other side of the room.

"Hermione," McGonagall said, "Sofia has a proposal which I'd like to talk with you about. No, the rest of you can stay; you're involved as well."

"What I wish," Sofia said, "is for 'Ermione to work with me full time to develop a cure for the seizure spells."

Malfoy stared at her. "You mean, leave the calligromancy? Sofia!"

"It iss ass I said to Minerfa," Sofia said. "I do not think you realise how fery serious our medical situation iss. If the disease proceedss ass it did with Mister Filch, there iss only a fery short time before the damage will be too great to cure. I understand that the research 'Ermione iss doing iss important for long-term security, but I feel that her help iss more urgently needed in medical research."

Malfoy was so outraged that he sat up straight. "Sofia, taking 'Mione off calligromancy for medical research would be like taking resources away from a cure and putting them into treating symptoms."

"Which sometimess one must do, in order to keep the patient alife," she said stubbornly.

"Kitty, you can't. You can't take her away. We get little enough of her time as it is, and we're so close --"

"Even if thesse children die while she works on other projects?"

"If necessary, yes! Finding the solution is the only way to prevent even more of these --"

"Oh, for heaven's sake." Penelope came to stand between them. "You're acting as though Hermione's the only qualified researcher on the staff." McGonagall turned to look at her. "Michelle did her Magisterium in medicinal herbology. If Sofia needs a partner for healing research, she's the obvious choice."
"I have some medical experience as well," put in Madeleine Aerie.

Penelope nodded at her. "Meanwhile, Remus can take all of Hermione's classes but the advanced ones, and I can do the same for Draco since I have a Muggle family, and I'm sure you'd be willing to help with Harry's courses, wouldn't you, Minerva? Because the sooner they take care of those mines, the sooner we can have access to Professor Snape's books and ingredients."

Everyone blinked at her. "Wow," Harry said. "We should have thought of that, Hermione."

"You're Gryffindors," Michelle said. "You assume your own blood and tears will solve any problem. And Draco's a Slytherin, so he assumes he's entitled to anything he needs."

"A Gryffindor will jump off a cliff," Penelope said. Her tone suggested that it was a well-worn proverb. "A Slytherin will push someone else off. A Hufflepuff will call in five hundred other Hufflepuffs, and they'll carve a stairway. And a Ravenclaw -- " She winked at Madeleine Aerie, who joined in with her: "A Ravenclaw will get hold of a flying carpet."

"The thing I don't understand," Malfoy said, leaning back in the hard-backed library chair and rubbing his eyes, "is how a sigil can use a title as a direct object. Targeting the Minister of Magic -- why can it do that when it couldn't target 'that guy with the ugly glasses'?"

"Well, it's not as though the Ministry has officially declared them to be ugly glasses," Ron said. "Hey!" Harry elbowed him.

"Not everything is about you, Potter," Malfoy sniffed.

"That's a good point, though, Ron," Hermione said. "Minister of Magic is an official title -- maybe that makes a difference."

"Why would it?" Malfoy demanded. "If Circe Stormlaw had been Minister of Magic for fifteen minutes, and Potter had been known as 'Ugly Glasses' since he was ten -- Hey! What did you do that for?" He rubbed his arm where Harry had poked him, looking shocked and aggrieved.

"Well, people don't just one day decide to start calling Circe Stormlaw 'Minister,' as though it were some sort of nickname," Ron said. "They have --"


"A ceremony's just words," Malfoy said.

"So's a spell," Ron pointed out.

Hermione had her eyes almost shut. "Names are attached to a Muggle child at a christening or something of that sort -- I'm sure wizard families must have something similar --"

"Naming charms," Malfoy and Ron said at the same time.

"Right. And titles are assigned at a ceremony. Knighthoods and Orders of Merlin ... wizarding certifications when we leave school ..."

"And the title of Headmaster? How is that assigned?" Harry asked.

"By the Sorting Hat, of course," Hermione said. "Have you still not read --"
Harry sat up suddenly. "The Sorting Hat," he said. "That's how they're catching us all to tap us."

Hermione frowned. "I don't see --"

"I do," Malfoy said. "The Sorting is a magical ceremony that binds us all to Hogwarts through our Houses. So all they'd have to do is put one mine somewhere that uses 'everyone who has been Sorted' as a direct object."

He sat up suddenly, eyes shining. "Do you know what this means? Potter, what you did against Voldemort? Pulling power from a whole circle of wizards? We could pull magic from everyone who has ever gone to Hogwarts -- can you imagine the power? They wouldn't even have to be in the same place. We could designate ourselves the Order of the Serpent or something, and everybody who joined could be named and protected in a single symbol, can you imagine?"

He beamed around the library, as though imagining that it all belonged to him. "This is the biggest step forward in half a century. And Slytherins invented it."

"There are two vital bits of information you will need to know about the Cruciatus curse." Harry had to admit that Malfoy had a certain natural sense of theater. He had the full attention of Remus' Level 7 class from the moment he took his place at the front of the room. Even Jack Talos was riveted.

"The first is that it does not kill. It continues to have its effect on the victim until the counter-spell is issued, but it does not kill."

There was a pause while Malfoy summoned a glass of water and drank it.

"The second important point about the Cruciatus curse is that the sufferer himself almost never issues the counter-spell, even though there's nothing in the curse to prevent this. My guess is that the pain of the curse itself is sufficient to drive the antidote out of the sufferer's mind." His usually expressive voice was flat.

"I saw the Death Eater Gregory Goyle suffer under the Cruciatus curse for a period of several weeks," he went on. There was a quiet gasp in the classroom. "The wizard who issues the curse can of course control its severity. During periods when his sentence was lightened, Goyle could form words. But the seven syllables of the counter-spell were at all times beyond him."

The class was silent with horror. Harry, too, felt cold with it. How could Malfoy talk so calmly about something so awful?

Finally, there came a timid voice from the back of the classroom. "Professor Malfoy?"

"Yes, Miss Galbraith?"

"Why was he cursed to begin with?"

"He was accused," Malfoy said, "of being a spy for Albus Dumbledore."

"Malfoy, why did you leave the Death Eaters?" Harry asked as they approached the staff common room after Remus' class.

"Because they were pathetic." Malfoy nodded to the Snape statue, which nodded solemnly in return, and swept into the empty room. "Ah, you wanted to hear that I saw the error of my evil ways and turned to the good, eh, Potter? But really it was Gregory, and not the way you think."
"What way, then?"

"I had thought they were ... bigger somehow, these people who'd managed to rise above petty rules
and reach out their hands to grasp the power that was there for the taking. But here they were,
giggling like naughty schoolboys kicking a puppy."

Harry remembered Peter Pettigrew's cravenness. "Most of the Death Eaters I've met have reminded
me of my cousin Dudley," he said.

"Not having met your illustrious cousin, I'll just have to assume you're agreeing with me."

Harry nodded. "But Goyle. The puppy. Did you kill him to --"

"Don't start thinking it was an act of mercy," Malfoy snapped. "There was nothing I could do for
him. But I took a certain pride in taking their toy away from them."

"It was a bit of a risk, wasn't it, performing unauthorized magic right there in the camp?"

"Oh, I didn't kill him with a curse, Potter. I killed him with a knife."

Harry blinked at him.

"I'm not even sure he knew who I was at that point," Malfoy went on blandly. "But he fought me as
best he could."

He stood for a long time looking up at the filled-in window. Harry watched his hair swing back to
reveal the two silver rings in his earlobe. "It's surprisingly difficult to cut through human muscle," he
said at last. "Like cutting into a tire. And blood is inconveniently slippery."

Harry stared. Malfoy was looking at the stones with a crooked smile. "He was very stupid, Gregory,
but rather brave. And very loyal. I killed him for myself, but you could say I became a spy for him."

Malfoy's eyes came back to Harry's, and his expression sharpened. "Well, well," he said, lengthening
the words out absurdly. "Looks like I'll have to write this day down in my memory book: The day I
said something Harry Potter didn't disapprove of." He took a step closer, reached a cupped hand for
Harry's face. "Don't you think such altruism deserves a reward?"

They hadn't touched since Christmas. Harry missed the sheer physical pleasure of it, and he missed
simple human touch even more. But it had been a relief to be free of the mixed emotions -- the
shame, the fear of discovery, the fear of saying something wrong or doing something wrong or
_feeling_ something wrong. The tedious necessity of pruning back the emotions that wanted to grow
out of any physical contact, even when it was as meaningless as this.

When Malfoy's hand brushed his cheek, it all came flooding back, all the intensity, all the
ambivalence, all the fear. All the _need._

"Not here," he said stiffly, and walked to his rooms as quickly as he could without looking back to
see if Malfoy would follow.

Malfoy followed Harry into the room with a smile that started out wicked and then turned quizzical.
After regarding Harry for a few moments, he reached out and drew two fingers very softly down the
side of his face and across his mouth.

Harry felt his mouth twist at this parody of tenderness. And real tenderness, he thought, would be
even worse. At such a time, in such a place, two storeys down from an infirmary full of children sleeping off a curse no one knew how to cure! And with such a person! Harry couldn't bear it. He took Malfoy by the upper arms and pushed him down on the couch, then leaned over him, one hand on the couch back, the other tugging at his clothes.

Malfoy's robe today was a showy swallowtail style, buttoned tightly to the waist and then open over narrow trousers. Harry hauled on the robe, and Malfoy murmured a spell that opened all the fastenings at once, leaving him bare from throat to crotch.

Harry laughed harshly. "If you're trying not to get the reputation for being easy, Malfoy, that's really not the way to go about it."

He himself still favored student-style robes worn loose over shirt and trousers, so it was easy to shake off the robe. He unknotted his tie and started on the shirt buttons, but Malfoy brushed his hands away and murmured the spell again, and Harry felt cool fingers on his suddenly bare chest. His robe, shirt, and tie were now hanging neatly on a hanger on the outside of his wardrobe door, and his glasses were on the end table.

"I can see that my magical education has some gaps in it," he said, and then, "Oh!" as Malfoy nibbled at his collarbone. Malfoy's hair brushed his neck, and he stroked it back so he could see Malfoy's pink tongue working its way toward his nipple. Malfoy glanced up and gave Harry a sweet, heavy-lidded smile that made his stomach contract. What the hell had he gotten himself into?

He pushed Malfoy's head away and dropped to his knees in front of him, nuzzling at his cock through the opened trousers, already taking the head into his mouth even as his hands pulled the gap wider.

"Ah!" Malfoy's hands were on his face, trying to make him slow down, but he was having none of it.

The trousers, with typical pureblood affectation, fastened not with buttons or zips but with laces. They unlaced right back to the inseam, and he smiled around his mouthful -- he couldn't think of any reason for that except to let his fingers do this while his mouth did that.

Malfoy fought this assault for a few seconds more, then melted, his drawling clever mouth reduced to crying "Ah! Ah!" until Harry couldn't help getting his own cock in his other hand and keeping time, giving them both all he had.

Malfoy withstood about four minutes of it before he came. Harry rested his forehead at the fragrant juncture of hip and thigh and lasted about another thirty seconds.

He wasn't terribly careful where he aimed, and Malfoy stiffened when he felt him coming. His hands, which had still been weakly stroking Harry's head, suddenly fisted in his hair and pulled him up. "I would -- I was going to --" Annoyance fought with postcoital laziness on his face, and he leaned forward for a kiss that would probably have been as rough as his earlier touch had been gentle, if Harry had allowed it.

When Harry evaded his mouth, both expressions gave way to anger. Malfoy stood suddenly. "What is wrong with you?"

"Going to tell me you didn't get what you came for, Malfoy?"

"Oh, for -- fine." Malfoy flicked his wand, and Harry found himself completely dressed again. He looked down. Hands clean, floor clean, couch clean, Malfoy once again immaculate in gray over
gray with his hair caught up at the crown with a silver clasp. "There. It never happened. Happy now? Oh, wait," and he tapped his wand on Harry's mouth, which suddenly tasted of nothing at all.

"Malfoy --" His lips were numb. Malfoy had been a little overzealous with the cleaning charm. Harry got up off his knees and sat down heavily on the couch. "I can't do this."

"I had the impression that you weren't doing it. That's what you're telling yourself, isn't it?"

"I don't know what the hell you want from me."

Malfoy studied him for a moment. "No," he said finally, "you don't, do you? And you're determined to prevent me from enlightening you." He was rolling his wand between two fingers. It was such an elegant gesture that Harry wondered if he'd practiced it in the mirror. He stared at Malfoy's fingers.

"So that's it, then," Malfoy said. "You want to split up."

Harry looked up at his face. "Split what up?" he said. "I want to quit doing things that end up with you pissed at me and me ashamed of myself."

All expression left Malfoy's face as fast as the taste of him had left Harry's mouth. "Right," he said, and walked out the door without another word.

Harry slumped down to lie on his face. The couch didn't even smell of Malfoy any more. He closed his eyes, not tired enough to sleep but too empty to do anything else.

He tried to call something pleasant to mind, but instead found himself remembering the day McGonagall's letter had arrived in Florida.

He and Sunday had had a stretch of beach to themselves, and they'd been lying in the sun, feet just touching, when Spielberg had dropped the heavy envelope on Harry's belly.

When he saw the handwriting, Harry had felt a curious mix of fear and relief, like a renegade who finally, after years on the run, sees the law inescapably closing in on him. Real life had come back to claim him at last.

He could feel Sunday's eyes on him as he broke the seal and read the short message. "My old school," Harry told him, handing over the letter.

"Y'don't look so happy about it," Sunday said.

"Of course I'm happy," Harry said.

Sunday raised his eyebrows, but didn't call him on it. He looked out over the ocean, and Harry looked, too. Somewhere in that direction were the shoes of Harry Potter, ready for him to give up this long barefoot vacation and step back into them.

"So," Sunday broke the silence. "Y'want me to come with you?"

"No!" He turned, shocked -- and then, realizing how rude that had sounded, reached for Sunday's hand. "I mean, you've got responsibilities here ..."

"Seelih's always been better'n me with the political stuff. Takes after Mama." Harry had never heard Sunday come this close to arguing about anything. Mostly he was almost Zen in his willingness to let the universe do whatever it chose.
"You could all come and visit," Harry offered. "When I've got settled."

Sunday gave him a long look, and then he turned and looked out over the water. "Never been to England." After a while he added, "I hear it's nice."

10. Finding

In the morning, when Harry came into the staff common room, Hermione called out greetings, but Malfoy hardly looked up from his books. Harry got a cup of tea from the sideboard and sat down next to her. "Don't let me interrupt."

"We've just been talking about the power source," Hermione said. "Draco thinks we should already have found -- well, you tell him, Draco."

"A power sigil," Malfoy said, his eyes flicking coolly over Harry. "Somewhere on the grounds, there has to be one symbol that gathers power and feeds it to the others."

"Why would they be stupid enough to put it here, where we could find it?" Harry said. "If I were doing this, I'd put it someplace no one would ever think to look. Cornwall. Hell, maybe Istanbul."

"That would be inefficient," Malfoy said. "Calligromancy follows the same rules as other magic -- can't travel over oceans, loses precision with distance, and so on. If it's on the grounds, it's in close proximity both to the spells it powers and to a lot of the people it taps."

"Well, then, what we need is a search charm," Hermione said.

"Just who do you think has that kind of power, 'Mione? A search charm has to examine every atom of the space," Malfoy said. "I couldn't power a search of this room, never mind of the whole of Hogwarts."

"Maybe you couldn't do it alone," Hermione said, "but I'll bet you and Harry could do it together."

"We'll start somewhere small," Malfoy said. "Potter, you'd better sit down. I'm not joking about how much this takes out of you."

Hermione put a parchment in front of them. "We're looking for something like this," she said. "Unless they're using non-English syntax or something, but the likelihood is ..."

"What do I do?" Harry interrupted.

"Study it. Know it. Trace it," Malfoy said, sweeping back his hair with one hand. "Then we'll set the boundary, and then we'll do an Exploratum to send out a pulse of magic. It will search every atom of the room, and come back to us if it doesn't find its target."

It took most of an hour before Harry could copy the symbol to Hermione and Malfoy's satisfaction, and after that he had to practice the finding spell in tiny enclosures -- a water glass, a desk drawer -- until he could do it well.

The first time he felt the magic come back at the end of the spell, he gasped. It was like a big, warm -- something -- bursting open in his chest.

"Wow," he panted. "What's it feel like when it finds the thing?"
"Try it," Hermione said. "Look for the water glass inside the drawer."

When he did, the glass looked somehow shinier, as though it were trying to get his attention. And instead of spreading and dissipating warmth, the returning magic felt like a thread gently tugging him toward the glass.

"Wow," he said again. "I wonder -- if we used the candles, could we see the thread?"

"It's like a thread for you?" Hermione said. "For me, it's like a chime."

"I get more of a ... shift in gravity," Malfoy said. "As though I were pulling something toward me."

"Always knew you thought you were the center of the universe," Harry said.

Hermione giggled. Malfoy raised his eyebrows, but didn't deign to answer. "I suppose you're ready now."

"All right." Harry gave the symbol one last long look. "Ready when you are."

It was a long incantation, and it took effort to recite it in unison, even though Malfoy carefully pronounced all the syllables instead of using his usual shorthand. Halfway through it, Hermione's eyes got big. "Wait --" she said. "Don't forget --" But they were already finishing the last word. "Oh, no," Hermione said, pressing her knuckles to her mouth as Harry felt the magic leave him.

"What?" he asked her. He felt as though he was moving in slow motion.

Her voice was urgent but soft, as though far away. "Harry, Draco, listen to me. The cancellation spell is Nolo exploro, all right? Because you forgot to close off the second --"

When Harry opened his eyes, he immediately recognized the hospital wing. His body ached as if he'd just hiked forty miles up a mountain, and then been rolled down it in an avalanche.

He turned his head and saw a pink-and-gold shape in the next bed. "We've got to stop meeting like this," said Malfoy's voice, thready with exhaustion. "People are starting to talk."

Harry ignored the insinuation. "Wha'ppened?"

"No idea."

Hermione hurried over. "Oh, good, you're awake. I'm so sorry -- it was all my fault -- I entirely forgot --"

"What happened?"

"Oh, Harry. When we delimited the spell, we forgot the second door!"

"Frozen hells," Malfoy said. "Do you mean to tell me --"

Hermione nodded. "Your search spell didn't have an adequate boundary. You might have searched all the way to Manchester before you lost consciousness."

Harry felt for a thread, but didn't feel one. "Did we find the power source?"

She shook her head.
"Obviously," Malfoy said, "it's not going to be safe to use the architecture as a delimiting shortcut."

"We'll have to figure out another way, then."

With a dose of Animaserum, they were well enough to leave the infirmary. Penelope caught up with them in the corridor.

"I hear you're working on search charms," she said. "Is there any way to tailor one to examine the books in the library?"

Hermione nearly squealed. "What a wonderful idea! It will require some research, of course ... but if it can search by character rather than atom, it might not require such a lot of power ..."

He was asleep, surely -- because ghosts didn't come into private bedrooms unless you invited them, but there was Dumbledore across from him with a benign smile.

As Harry watched, he got more and more solid, until he looked just as he had when he was alive.

"Before you go, I've something for you, my boy." Dumbledore took from his chest pocket the little oblong tin in which he had always kept sweets. There was only one candy in it now, a small square that seemed to glow. "Take it, Harry," Dumbledore said, and Harry did.

It was sweet and bitter and complicated, like dark chocolate or strong tea. "What is it?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore beamed. "My life," he said, and disappeared.

Harry sat up, gasping, and got dressed with shaking hands. Six-fifteen, and the sun probably wasn't even up yet, but he couldn't stand another night like that one.

He knew Malfoy's rooms were on the fifth floor, but beyond that he was in the dark. "Excuse me," he whispered to a portrait of a dark-haired woman with a necklace of pearls the size of eggs. She raised a lorgnette to look at him severely. "I'm looking for Draco Malfoy."

"Surely it is obvious, sirrah," she sneered. "To find the dragon, one must find the dragon's den." And she ostentatiously turned her back on him.

Harry rubbed his eyes behind his glasses and continued down the hall. He turned a corner, feeling the portraits pointing and whispering.

Around the second corner he saw Malfoy leaning one shoulder on a door frame. He was wearing a greenish-gray dressing gown made of some heavy, shiny fabric. Harry tried not to imagine what it would feel like.

On Malfoy's open door was a painting of a Welsh Green, rearing back and spitting fire. "What is all the commotion, Potter?" he said. "Tiffany told me every portrait in the hall is talking about you."

Harry couldn't help laughing. "Your dragon's name is Tiffany?"

"Sh! You'll hurt her feelings." Malfoy waved Harry through the door.

Malfoy's sitting room was darker than Harry's, full of heavy furniture and varnished wood. His bookshelves were overflowing, and books were piled on the floor. "Hurdy just sent up my personal library," he said, "and I've no place to put it. Sit anywhere." He started to summon tea, gave Harry a
sharp look, and called for coffee instead.

"Now," he said, arranging himself elegantly over a blue velvet armchair. "What brings you to my humble abode so early in the morning?"

Harry sloshed coffee on his fingers, then steadied the cup with his other hand, looking down at the coffee rather than at Malfoy. "Could you -- could you do another of those anti-enchantment spells on me? I think someone might have hit me with another nightmare mine. And my bones ache."

"Take your glasses off." Malfoy looked at him. He was close enough that Harry could see his face, but not close enough to make sense of his expression. "All right. Noloconturbo."

There was no change.

"Finit'incantatem."

Nothing.

"Venefici'abdo."

Still nothing.

Malfoy took his glasses out of his hand and put them back on his face. His expression, as it came back into focus, was impatient. "I don't know what makes you think that everything that happens to you is so special."

"What?"

"Look," Malfoy said, rubbing his eyes. "People who go from a hot climate to a cold damp one often get aches in their joints. And when that happens, they go to Sofia for some of Mother Mayfly's Icy Hot Infusion, and they take a hot bath."

Harry gritted his teeth at Malfoy's condescending tone. "And the nightmares?" he demanded.

Malfoy rubbed his forearm. "Potter," he said wearily, "all of us have nightmares."

A few moments after Harry shut his door, the owl door swung open. One of the school owls flew in, dropped a package into his hands, then swooped away before he could offer it a treat.

Wrapped in a gray-green silk handkerchief was a small bottle made of blue glass. "Bonomorphio" was written on the label. He recognized the handwriting as Snape's.

The hand on the note, though, was Malfoy's. "Keep it as long as you like; I've plenty," it said. "But if you don't mind, I'd like the bottle back when you're through."

It took Malfoy and Hermione two days to figure out an alternate method of setting boundaries. Hermione had reluctantly gone off to teach her advanced Charms class, leaving Harry and Malfoy to try the new method out on one of the empty classrooms.

"X axis," Malfoy said, pointing his wand at the wall and tracing the entire room. A beam of light emerged from the wand and left a glowing stripe along the wall.

"Y axis," he said, tracing a vertical rectangle across the ceiling, down the wall, across the floor, and up the opposite wall. A third rectangle soon joined the other two.
"Tesser'a'solve," he said, and the glowing lines became glowing planes. "Notice how they cover the doors and windows. Now we can try the search charm again."

It wasn't a large room, so Harry expected the magic to come back quickly. But the minutes stretched out with no response. "Next time I'll bring something to do while we wait," he said.

Malfoy blinked slowly at him, and Harry's mind leaped to an entirely inappropriate idea of what they could do to pass the time. Malfoy's amused look suggested that he knew exactly what Harry was thinking, but he drew a deck of cards out of the breast pocket of his robe. "Fancy a game of Stealth?"

The trouble with Stealth was that if you took one of your opponent's discards, that card would begin trying to convince your cards to defect to the other side. After losing three games with his cards flying out of his hand in a flock, Harry began to think like a Slytherin, elaborately cleaning and polishing each card, praising them until the Maiden of Stones blushed and the Scholar of Bowls smirked over his feather quill.

Malfoy was better at cozying up to the Maidens and the Knights, and of course he was an expert at kissing up to the high royalties. Harry had a knack with the lowly, from the servants and camp followers to the lesser royalty and the Younger Brothers. So they played four close games, winning two apiece, and then Harry managed a definitive victory by discarding the Tart of Sticks with particular instructions to seduce the Regent of Coins out of Malfoy's hand and into his own.

"Oh, well played," Malfoy said. "I always figured the Regents were queer."

"Dunno," said Harry. On the card, the Tart was perched on the Regent's knee, feeding him grapes. "They're not immune to flattery, anyway -- ah." A warm splash of magic had just burst in his belly. Malfoy's face looked as though someone had just goosed him. Harry decided he really didn't want to know what it felt like to Malfoy when the sending came back.

He glanced at his wristwatch and goggled. "This little room took five hours?"

Malfoy nodded. "Wait till you see how much you eat at dinner. And how late you sleep tomorrow."

"Hermione's right," Harry said gloomily. "This really isn't a practical way to search the whole school."

McGonagall pronounced the search charm "a promising direction for research." But of course in the meantime the mines were still there, and the staff and older students continued to undo them and ward them as best they could.

Even with McGonagall taking most of his Transfiguration classes, Harry felt as though he was sleepwalking half the time. Mother Mayfly's and a hot bath really did help with the aching bones. Snape's Bonomorphio potion was less helpful against the nightmares; when he took it, he dreamed less, but his sleep was less restful, so he used it only as a last resort. It was soothing, though, to look at the bottle and know it was there if he needed it.

He didn't return Malfoy's handkerchief.

"That's it, then," Malfoy said. "Two mines removed, forty-eight mines warded, Sisyphus knows how many to go. At least we're getting quick enough to get more than one room out of a candle."

Harry watched him using his thumb and forefinger to sweep his hair back off his forehead,
wondering when he'd got so familiar with all Malfoy's gestures. His robe today was made of some thin white material, with big, belled sleeves and an open collar like a pirate's shirt.

One of his sleeves was glowing.

Harry frowned. "What on earth --" He reached to catch Malfoy's arm, then froze, embarrassed at the awkwardness of the movement but not really prepared to touch him.

Malfoy followed his eyes, though, and he saw it too. He undid his sleeve button and pushed up the material. On his arm, the Dark Mark was nearly invisible under a maze of yellow neon.

"I'm mined," he said flatly.

Harry bent over his arm. "Can I see the scroll?"

"No need. I can read them." Malfoy began tapping his own arm with a finger. "Lung failure. Hands paralyzed. Fire at Ollivander's." He looked up at Harry under his eyelashes. "Heart failure, direct object Harry Potter."

Harry frowned. "Look," he said, touching a strand of light where it looped over on itself, surprised to feel the warmth of skin under his finger. "They've all got an If clause in them. If ... I can't read that."

He reached for Hermione's scroll, but Malfoy spoke. "If wearer mortally injured. If wearer cursed. If wearer killed ... If wearer casts spell on Mark." He raised his eyes to Harry's. "So that's why Higgs died when he removed the Mark."

Harry swallowed hard. "And Snape ..."

"He was wounded," Malfoy said. "In the Potions classroom. In the last volley of the duel when he killed my father." There was no expression in his voice.

"In the Potions classroom. Ginseng and orange oil and candles all over the place, salt and cornmeal in tins on the counter. He could have stumbled across something that allowed him to see the spells." Harry felt a sudden desire to kick something. "He died trying to disarm them." He stared at the Mark on Malfoy's arm, roped with spells that seemed to writhe like poisonous snakes.

"Had an eyeful, Potter?" Malfoy spelled out the candle sharply. In the sudden darkness his voice sounded much louder. "My choice of the good cost me, you see, and it continues to cost me."

Harry remembered the sound of his mother screaming. Raised his hand halfway to his forehead, then let it fall again.

"I paid for mine after," he said, and stalked out, hearing the glass rattle behind him as the door swung shut.

The most infuriating thing was the element of truth.

He was willing to grant that making it to the right side must have been an uphill battle for Malfoy, but it hadn't been without difficulty for Harry, either. He'd paid for it in ways Malfoy had no idea of.

In fact, he'd paid for it in ways he himself didn't remember clearly.

He didn't realize he'd made a decision until he was stepping into the fireplace.
The Ministry's public floo interchange was a fireplace big as a ballroom and rumored to be pre-
Roman. There was a reception desk right in the flames, manned by an important-looking witch in
immaculate black robes.

She looked at Harry dubiously when he asked for Neville. "No appointment? Well -- I can ask if he
has a few moments ..." Her expression suggested that someone like Harry was hardly worthy of a
few moments even to have Mr. Longbottom breathe on him.

She flipped through a card file, picked up a card, and spoke into it. "Chloe? There's a Mr. Potter here
to see Mr. Longbottom." Harry heard a female voice answering indistinctly, and a moment later
Neville appeared in the flames and swept him into a hug.

"Harry!" He looked the same as always -- round serious face, inkstains on his cuffs, one shoe untied.
"Come on, I've opened my private floo. Thank you, Miss Singh, and don't put anybody else through
until this meeting's over, please. If that delegation from China arrive early, Chloe can take care of
them."

They stepped out of the flames into a large office. Neville bypassed a desk and a conference table
and led Harry instead to a small couch. Almost immediately, the head of a fierce-looking, black-
browed wizard appeared in the fireplace.

"Longbottom!" he barked, making Harry jump. "I need to speak with the currency standardization
people, and none of them have their floos open."

"That's because they're not due back from Amsterdam till Wednesday morning, Ivan," Neville said.
"Get their coordinates from Lotus -- she's keeping track of that project."

A steaming teacup was precariously balanced on the arm of the couch. Harry grabbed for it, but
Neville caught it first and placed it on the coffee table. He tapped the teapot with his wand, and there
was a faint scent as it refilled with fresh tea.

An elderly witch poked her head out of the fireplace. "Neville?" she said. "What's the name of that
ambassador in Senegal?"

"Nozipo," he said, "but she's in Nigeria this week for the Pan-African Conference. Talk to Llyr -- he
knows everybody on the whole west coast. Er, sorry, Harry. Better close the floo." He spelled out
the fire.

"Wow," Harry said. "You seem so --"

"Competent?" Neville said, looking amused. "Yes, well, mortal terror takes a surprising amount of
energy. Once you get rid of that, you find you have more resources to deal with other things."

His voice was different somehow -- not just deeper but quicker and more decisive. It reminded Harry
of ...

"Severus is the one that taught me that," he said, "while we were working on the heartsease project." He grinned and put on a dark, impatient tone that was even more like Snape: "For Salazar's sake,
Longbottom, we'll never get anywhere if you don't trust me. If I were in the habit of poisoning
people who annoyed me, do you truly think you'd be alive today?"

Harry smiled. "I don't know how you could bear it, working with him," he said. "They've got his
statue outside the staff common room. It always looks at me as though I've got a smudge on my
forehead."
"He wasn't so bad, when you got used to him. Tea? *Infervesco,*” Neville said to the teapot, and then poured for Harry and refreshed his own cup. "He understood what it was like to have a boyhood that was one long string of opportunities to humiliate yourself. But he said people like us could get by if we learned not to need anyone's respect but our own."

Harry stared at him, wondering whether perhaps they were talking about two different people called Severus Snape.

Neville sugared his tea thoughtfully. "But you're not here to reminisce, are you."

"In a way I suppose I am," Harry said. "I want." He swallowed. "I want to know what happened."

"Ah." Neville fussed with the milk pitcher until Harry was ready to be looked at again. "How much do you remember about that last battle?"

"Voldemort on one knee," Harry said. "Hermione talking in my ear with the *Transauditum* charm. Ron behind me, Sirius and Dumbledore beside me -- they were all but holding me up at that point, and Dumbledore's hand was steadying my wand arm. And then it went all cold --"

"The Dementors had got through the centaurs," Neville said. "You sent out a *Patronus* without even looking around, and then --"

"Fratrium," Harry said.

"We could see that your wand and Voldemort's were locked together, but you wouldn't let go of yours," Neville said. "Finally Sirius lifted up your left arm and put another wand in your left hand --"

Harry didn't remember this. "But Sirius didn't have a wand. The Ministry didn't give him back his wand until after."

Neville's lips tightened, but he didn't speak. After a moment Harry went on.

"I remember that casting _Exadigo_ on Voldemort was almost an afterthought," he said. "He went down, and my scar felt like death for a second and then it went numb." He rubbed it. "And then Albus asked for my wand, and he used it to burn the body ..."

Neville had gone white. "Harry, Dumbledore was dead."

"But --"

"He died the same moment Voldemort did. They said afterward that it was magic fatigue -- that the power it took to hold off everything else while you focused on that one threat ..." He trailed off, looking at Harry's stiff face. "I remember that when Dennis turned his body over, he was smiling."

Harry closed his eyes, then opened them again. "I tried to get him to stay somewhere safe," he said. "He'd already sacrificed so much ..."

"And Fawkes," Neville said after a moment. "You don't remember Fawkes?"

Harry shook his head numbly.

"Fawkes came," Neville said, "and he took your wand out of your right hand. You'd almost fallen when Dumbledore fell, and Ron and Sirius were holding you up, and you were talking but not to us ..."

"To Albus," Harry said. "Because he was saying it was safe for me to leave because Voldemort was
really dead, and I kept asking how he knew."

Neville fished a lavender handkerchief out of his waistcoat pocket and dabbed his eyes with it.

"Fawkes laid your wand over Voldemort's in an X, and then he sat on them both and he burst into flames. And the fire caught Voldemort's body, and then Dumbledore's -- Sirius and Ron had to pull you out. You didn't seem to notice you were in the middle of the flames.

"And then the Dementors moved in, but you just stood there looking at the fire and talking to no one. You wouldn't fight, and nobody could get you to move, and finally I had to leave you to get everybody organized. We fought all night long, and when Sirius killed the last Dementor at dawn we came and found you looking at a pile of ash -- no Voldemort, no Dumbledore, no Fawkes, no wands."

Neville stopped to blow his nose on the handkerchief. "I went to take you away, to get you to St. Mungo's. And you were still talking to no one. You said, 'G'bye, I'll see you soon,' and then you put your head on one side like you were listening, and then you said, 'All right, maybe not soon, but sometime,' and then you said, 'I love you too,' and then you came away with us.

"It took us four more months to put down the rest of the Dementors, and by then nobody knew where you were till Hermione got that goose from Florida."

"Where did Fawkes go?" Harry said. "When he hatched out again, I mean. Where is he now?"

"Oh, Harry." Neville looked as though he wanted to pat him. "You didn't know? Phoenix fire kills the way phoenix tears heal. A phoenix's final fire can bring death beyond the possibility of rebirth. They used to use it to destroy vampires." He looked down at his hands. "Fawkes knew he could never come back."

Harry's hands and feet were numb and icy, and it took a little fumbling to get his wand out of his sleeve. He frowned at it. "It's almost black."

Neville nodded.

"My old one was light brown. And it's stiff, too. Mine was more -- springy."

"Harry," Neville said. "Do you mean you never noticed it wasn't the same wand?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't even know whose this was or where it came from."

"You should take it to Ollivander's."

Harry nodded absently, still flexing the wand.

"A lot of people," Neville said after a while, "reckoned you'd have to die to defeat Voldemort."

"I always wondered why I didn't," Harry said. He pictured himself in the last battle: Albus holding his right arm, Sirius holding his left, Ron propping him upright, Hermione's voice in his ear. Neville and Colin and Dennis and Remus and the rest battling back Dementors all around him. Hagrid killing Nagini with tears of pity rolling down his hairy cheeks.

Bill dying at the head of an army of goblins, Sirius dying with his cane in his hand, Lark Brown dying as she stepped off the boat, Dumbledore dying with a smile on his face ...

"Maybe if I'd done what I was supposed to do, I would have," he said.
He was so drained after that it seemed days since Malfoy had made his accusation. And the infirmary had to be unmined, anyway, even if he had had the energy to hold a grudge.

When he arrived with the flask of oil, Malfoy was already there, holding the candle behind his back. In the faint Lumos he'd conjured, his hair looked almost white.

"Did you tell Hermione yet? About the Mark being mined?"

Malfoy nodded without turning round. "We were able to puzzle out all the symbols and make a good copy of it for the records," he said. "Her name is on it, too. Brain tumor. I'm sure the Death Eaters all found that a very good joke."

He turned round at last and shook back his hair. "Potter. I'd like to ... apologize. For my outburst."

Harry felt his lips twitch. "Your outburst?" Malfoy was looking disgruntled, but Harry felt a bubble of hysteria swelling his chest. "Malfoy, our entire history is one outburst after another, right back to when we were eleven years old. You want to apologize for all of them?"

"Certainly not," Malfoy said tartly. "Most of my outbursts have been quite accurate. I stand by them." Harry wasn't certain, but he thought Malfoy might be suppressing a smile.

"Right, then," he said. "One apology for one carefully chosen outburst. Check." He extended his hand. "It's forgotten."

Malfoy's hand was cool in his. He held it for a moment as though he'd forgotten how to let go, until Malfoy gave him an odd look.

"I went to see Neville today," Harry said, as though that would explain anything. But in fact it seemed to, because Malfoy said, "I see," and took the flask out of his hand.

There had probably been a great many mines here to begin with, but the room had been heavily used, so most of them must have been triggered already. A few remained, though, and they took down what they could and warded the rest, working around the beds of the children immobilized by Consopium comas, around the shelves of supplies, around the nearly empty cabinet where the potion ingredients would have been stored if they'd had any to store.

Afterwards, while Malfoy rolled up his notes and threw away the candle end, Harry amused himself by levitating a stuffed rabbit from the supply of toys that Sofia kept to comfort the younger children.

"You know, you were half right," he said.

"A handsome concession." Malfoy levitated a bear in a top hat.

Harry sent the rabbit over to sweep the bear up in a waltz. "I didn't choose the light at all; it chose me," he said. "But that cost me plenty. My childhood, for one."

Malfoy watched the dancing toys with no expression. "Good idea having it now, then."

11. The League of Protection

Harry dreamed he was back in his room at the Coven, sitting on his bed reading one of Kat's issues of "Enchantment! for the Young Witch," when a letter was slipped under the door. He could see
Hermione's writing on the envelope:

Harry Potter

Coven of the Americas

Room 213

Orlando

Florida

USA

Harry picked up the letter and threw it in the wastebasket.

Two more slid under the door: Neville's scrawl, Dean's backslant.

Harry Potter

Far Shore

Atlantic Ocean

Before he could throw these away, five more followed, then three more, each wave pushing the others further into the room, until he couldn't move without stepping on piles of them.

The wastebasket was full, so he began carrying them into the bath, and when that wastebasket was full as well, he tried flushing them down the toilet. Then they began slithering out of the tap, pelting down from the shower, sliding across the floor, rucking the bathmat up against the tub.

Harry Potter

In Exile

USA

Ginny's bold confident hand, Seamus' schoolboy printing, Remus' small dark letters, Sirius' exuberant and much-blotted script.
Runaway

They were piling up -- they were over his head -- he was suffocating in them --

"Harry's right, Draco," Hermione said. "We can't just leave it there. It's endangering you and everyone around you. We've got to at least try to remove it."

"Right at the moment it's no danger to anyone unless you meddle with it," Malfoy said irritably. "Don't they ever teach Gryffindors not to poke at a sleeping viper?"

Hermione ignored him. "Harry's spoken to the headmaster in America, and he says he has a -- what was it, Harry?"

"A curse-lifting spell with blood protection." At Malfoy's blank look, he clarified: "It uses a bit of your blood in the potion, so it can't do anything that would make any fundamental change to your body. It will either lift the curse safely or do nothing at all."


Harry unrolled the piece of red flannel. "Dr. Bokor said he's always had luck with this one."

It was an ordinary black-handled paring knife, much used. A tiny bit of the tip was broken off, and many years of sharpening had left the blade slightly concave. The metal was oxidized a deep charcoal gray, but a sheen along the cutting edge suggested it had been sharpened recently.

"On his earlobe," Hermione said. "There are fewer nerve endings there."

"That's where we do it when they're unconscious," Harry said. "But there's power in the pain, too, if it's freely given." She bit her lip and nodded.

Harry turned to Malfoy and took his right hand, now bare of the usual heavy silver rings. His fingers were long and pale. His face, when Harry looked up, was paler still.

"Do you consent?"

"Yes, yes," Malfoy said impatiently. "Let's get it over without any amateur theatrics, shall we?"

"Draco!" Hermione said. "Blood magic! It's not something to be taken lightly."

Harry put his hand up and touched Malfoy's cheek until Malfoy met his eyes. Slowly and distinctly, he said again: "Do you consent?"

Malfoy held his gaze for a long time before saying, "Yes."

Harry wiped his hands on his robe, and then he picked up the knife.

The blade was so sharp that it took a moment between the time Harry slid the knife over the tip of Malfoy's ring finger and the time Malfoy hissed. Harry squeezed a few drops of the blood into the cauldron. A cloud of spicy-smelling steam immediately billowed out of it, fogging his glasses, and there was a palpable shiver of magic in the air.
"We need you naked," Harry said.

"Shield your innocent eyes, 'Mione." Malfoy laid his robe over the bed of herbs and lay down on top of it, wincing as the woody stems crackled. His familiar body looked weak and vulnerable in the light of the candles. Harry watched gooseflesh rise on his thighs.

Harry untied Sunday's braided thong from his ankle, and, feeling self-conscious, kissed it. "Draco adigo." He tied it around Malfoy's left ankle. Malfoy twitched as the trailing ends brushed the sole of his foot. The thick feeling in the air increased.

The steam from the cauldron was making Harry lightheaded, and the Mark seemed to laugh mockingly. Harry gave Hermione the brush of rosemary and took the one of basil himself. "From the heart outward to the extremities," he told her, and they began to sweep the herbs over Malfoy's skin, which was beginning to gleam with sweat.

"Sublevo," Harry murmured. The tension wound tighter. He could feel the hair on his arms starting to stand up. "Solveo. Reticulo abscideo. Ovo effringeo --"

There was a sudden bright light and a sharp choking smell. Malfoy cried out once, and all the candles fell dark.

"Harry, what --" Hermione said over the roaring in his ears, and then, "Lumos!" in a clear voice. The room brightened.

Malfoy lay panting on the bed of leaves, eyes open, looking rather frightened. The leather thong, charred and blackened, had fallen from his ankle.

The Mark was still there.

"I said no, and I meant no," Malfoy said. "You tried it once. It did no good. I've put wards on it. Now leave it alone and let's get on with something that's actually useful."

Harry looked at Hermione for help, but she shook her head. "Until we have some new method that shows some promise of working, I think we'd better leave the Mark alone."

"Hi, you three," Penelope said, backing into the library with a tremendous box of books. "Any luck on the search charms? I keep thinking of how they'd make my work easier."

The door opened again and Oliver and Ron came in behind her, both carrying more boxes of books. "I see what you mean," Harry said.

"Nobody has enough power to search a space large enough to be useful," Hermione told her. "Harry and Draco tried one in unison, but it took them half a day to search one classroom."

"Hm." Penelope tilted her head to one side the way she always did when she was thinking. "Could Hermione and I do it with you two? Maybe it would be easier with four."

"How delightfully perverted," Malfoy said. Hermione smacked him on the back of the head. "The difficulty is with the incantation. It's difficult enough for two people to say it in unison. With more than two, it's almost impossible." Harry and Malfoy had sometimes needed two or three tries to get it right.

"Hm," she said again. "Well, suppose you put a search charm into a calligromancy sigil? Then you could specify as many people as you wanted to be the power supply."
"What, put all the names in?"

"No, I see it," Harry said, excited. "Give them a -- a collective name. Like your Order of the Serpent, or whatever. A ceremony just for the purpose of binding them to the charm."

They all stared at him. Then Ron grinned and said, "Why not?"

Harry pushed his hair out of his eyes. "Um, OK -- I'm not -- exactly what do I have to do to make it magic?"

"The critical elements are for us to give consent, and for you to attach the name to us," Malfoy said. "OK, well -- do you? Give consent?"

"Oh, stones and bones, Potter, let me do it. You've no sense of ceremony."

"Fine." He yielded his place at the head of the library table. "Go ahead. I'm sure it's worth doing exquisitely."

Malfoy snickered, but once he was standing at the table he became serious. "'Mione, do you want to go first?"

Hermione stood up. Malfoy waved his hand, and all the lamps went out, leaving only candles. "Hang on a moment," he said, and murmured a summoning charm. A moment later, a wineglass appeared, full of a liquid that looked black in the low light.

"What is it?"


"Hermione Frances Granger."

"Hermione Frances Granger, do you consent to provide magic for the purpose of powering a search charm?"

"Yes."

Malfoy laid his wand on her forehead. "I declare you a member of the League of Protection." He lifted the wand and picked up the wine glass. "Drink."

That seemed to be it for the ceremony. "League of Protection?" Harry said.

"You have no idea what makes a good name, Potter, so leave that to experts. Weasley?"

Ron stood up. "State your name," Malfoy said.

"Ronald Aethelwulf Weasley." He saw Harry's grin and shrugged. "They'd used up all the normal kings' names by the time I came along." Ron straightened up out of his habitual slouch for the ceremony, so that Malfoy had to tip his head back to look him in the eye. Harry sometimes forgot how tall he had gotten.

Penelope's middle name was Elaine, and Oliver's was Wallace. "Seems to me," Ron murmured as Oliver was inducted, "that we've got an awful lot of royalty in this crowd."
"Potter? You're next. Stand here and state your name."

"Harry Potter."

"Your full name."

"As far as I know, that's all the name I've got." He swallowed. "Sirius would have known."

"Never mind," Malfoy said. "Harry Potter, do you consent to provide magic for the purpose of powering a search charm?"

Something about the sense of ceremony made Harry reply "I do."

Malfoy's wand made light, ticklish contact right between his eyebrows. "I declare you a member of the League of Protection."

The port was sweet and spicy like wine, but it made his mouth hot like whiskey. Malfoy was watching him closely.

"All right," he said. "You induct me, then."

Harry shook his wand out of his sleeve. "Your name?"

"Draco Falco Leonis Malfoy de Douce-Douleur."

"Christ," Harry said. "All right. Draco Falco Leonis Malfoy de Douce-Douleur, do you consent to provide magic for the purpose of powering a search charm?"

"Yes." This close, Harry could see minute changes in the size of Malfoy's pupils, tiny dilations and contractions in the flickering candlelight. His eyelashes were very pale.

Malfoy blinked when Harry's wand touched his forehead. "I declare you a member of the League of Protection." To Harry's surprise, he felt a little power go out of him. It was a spell, though a very strange one. He handed Malfoy the wine glass. Malfoy's eyes fell half-shut as he drank, then opened again as he set the glass on the table.

"This meeting of the League of Protection is closed," he said. "Anyone want more port, or shall I finish it?"

"All right. Shall we give it a try here?" Malfoy drew lines to delimit the spell, then drew the calligromancy symbol in the air.

Hermione muttered under her breath as she watched him: "Activate search charm ... delimit to marked boundary ... power by League of Protection ... and now he'll define the target and draw the power source character we're looking for ..."

"Everyone sitting down?" Harry dropped hastily to one of the chairs. "Chartulaviv,'" Malfoy said, and the symbols flared briefly and vanished.

Harry looked at Hermione. "What will -- oh!" because already the magic was pouring back in.

Malfoy was smiling. Harry didn't think he had ever seen such satisfaction on his face. "I'm not even out of breath," he said.

"Draco --" Hermione said, beaming. "If six of us can search the library in less than a minute --"
"Then if we had a hundred," Malfoy said, "we could do the whole grounds at once."

"Get Minerva," Penelope said. "Easter holidays are coming. We can get all the older students and call back the alumni."

To Harry's surprise, every single student who was of age stayed behind for holidays, and a large number of alumni returned, too. Ministry rules kept Neville away, but Fred, George, and Ginny came back, as did Angelina Johnson. And --

"Potter," Malfoy said. "You remember Pansy Parkinson."

"Parkinson-Tibbs, if you please." She shifted the baby to her left shoulder, wiped her right hand on her shirt, and held it out. Harry shook it.

"And Flint ... Pucey ... Nice job keeping your jaw from dropping, Potter ... Mil Bulstrode ..."

"No Zabini?" Flint said, looking around.

"Dead," Malfoy said with no change in expression, and Flint pulled him into a rough hug, and Harry's jaw did drop.

"Excuse me, Professor." Harry looked down as Tally Jones brushed past him, staring at Flint, eyes wide. "Mr. Flint -- could I -- would you autograph my jersey?"

The Great Hall was full to bursting with students and alumni, and then the great doors opened and it was fuller still, dominated by a figure who was a crowd unto himself. "Hagrid!" Harry shouted, and flung himself at him, and if Hagrid's hug wasn't quite as bone-crushing as it should have been, it was still enough to lift Harry's feet off the ground.

"There now, I tol' yeh no' ter worry yerself, Harry. Th' healers broke the curse, an' now it's jus' a question o' feedin' me up, like. Gettin' my stren'th back. Be good as gold come summertime, you wait an' see." He spotted a tankard of pumpkin juice and drained it in two gulps. "Can't stay -- got a lot o' work t'do back in Greater Wrenching -- but I asked th'Headmistress if I could be of help even though I'm not much of a wizard, an' she said, 'Hagrid, if somethin' goes wrong, someone'll have ter carry 'em all up to th' hospital wing.' "

"I hope it won't come to that, but it was well done to think of it," Hermione said.

"Sh," Ron said. "It's starting." The three of them hurried up to the dais to join Malfoy, Oliver, and Penelope, and six lines formed.

Harry expected the Weasleys to want Ron to induct them, but all of them seemed to have got in his own line. "State your name," he said to Charlie.

"Charles Edmund Weasley."

"Charles Edmund Weasley, do you consent to provide magic for the purpose of powering a search charm?"

"Yes," Charlie said.

Most of the Quidditch enthusiasts were in Oliver's line, and Penelope was of course getting Ravenclaws past and present.
"Frederick James Weasley, do you consent ..."

The waiting crowd talked, but quietly, as at a Sorting. Harry saw Dennis Creevey with a black lens over one eye and a black glove on one hand. Above him, a camera swiveled to match his view.

"Justin Michael Finch-Fletchley, do you consent ..."

Harry glanced at Malfoy, who was inducting Pansy. There was no trace of mockery in him now. His hand rested on her shoulder a moment, and she smiled.

"George Henry Weasley, do you consent ..."

It was surprising how many of the students wanted to be in Ron's line, even the timid ones who wouldn't look Harry in the eye. Even, Harry noticed, quite a few of the younger Slytherins.

"Virginia Anne -- er, say it all again?"

"Virginia Elizabeth Anne Mary Weasley," Ginny said. "Mum wanted Beatrice and Victoria, too, but Dad won that round in a chess game."

Behind Ginny was Percy. "Richard Percival," he said cheerfully. "Shall I start another line? There are an awful lot still waiting."

Harry didn't know if that was allowed or not, but Malfoy stepped aside to make room. "Can you get the whole teeming Weasley horde up here?" he said. "We need all the help we can get."

After that, things moved much more quickly, until Harry finished inducting Mignonette Dozier and found that there was only one person left in his line.

"Minerva Margaret McGonagall," she said.

Harry touched his wand gently to her forehead. "Minerva Margaret McGonagall," he said, "do you consent to provide magic for the purpose of powering a search charm?"

"I do," she said, and burst into tears.

The moment Harry lowered his wand, the tables were suddenly filled with food.

"Now?" he said. "I wanted to get on with it."

"Poor deluded child," Malfoy said, patting him on the head. "Don't you know nothing happens at Hogwarts without a feast?"

Giving in to the inevitable, Harry sat down next to Malfoy and helped himself to mashed potatoes. After a moment, Justin Finch-Fletchley dropped into the seat beside him. "Harry! So good to see you back home."

"Thanks," Harry said. "Sorry about not owling you."

"I understand completely," Justin answered. "But you really must tell me all about the final battle. The book will be useless without Harry Potter's account, don't you know. You'll have to tell me everything that happened."

Harry swallowed and glanced at Malfoy, who was eavesdropping shamelessly. "Justin," he said, "I don't remember."
"Did you get obliviated, then?"

Harry shook his head. "I just -- it will sound weak, but I think I blocked it out. I could tell you the story, but Neville's already told me that a good bit of what I saw never really happened, so I can't trust my memory at all. It was so -- you can't imagine --"

Justin's smile was sad. "Oh, I can," he said. "Hell of a thing for an historian, though, Harry. Half the eyewitnesses have the same problem."

When everyone had finally eaten their fill, McGonagall stood up.

"I'd like you all to keep your seats as the charm is cast," she said. "Even with the contributions of so very many people, we are still anticipating the need for a large outflow of magical energy. If you find yourself in need of medical attention, send up red sparks, and one of our volunteers will withdraw your consent and separate you from the charm." The volunteers were mostly students too young to join the League. Harry smiled encouragingly at Billsborough, Dunning, and Lamb, who were looking as if they could hardly contain their own importance.

A hush fell over the hall. The ghosts hovered expectantly. At last, Malfoy raised his wand and traced the complex sign that pulled all their magic together to power the search charm of the entire castle and grounds, following boundaries he and Hermione had laid out on foot earlier in the day.

The symbol glowed in the air for a moment, and then Malfoy said, "Chartulaviv!" in a sharp, attention-getting voice, and there was a murmur of breath as the magic went out.

What if they couldn't find the symbol at all? The Death Eaters might have used another language, or set it up in the archaic alphabet used before calligromancy was systematized by Dr. Cawdrey's Great Dictionary of 1604. Or ...

Harry sat suddenly upright as a thread of magic attached itself to him. The hall fell silent, and then suddenly roared with voices, and everyone followed the spell out into the corridor.

Right, left, left, past the portrait of Usher the Untidy, and the crowd stopped in the hall.

"It's in Dumbledore's office," Harry said.

The crowd fell back, and Hermione, Malfoy, and Harry entered the office alone.

Malfoy lit a candle and Hermione murmured the spell -- and they could see it, glowing in the center of Dumbledore's desk. As soon as he looked at it, Harry felt the thread of magic dissipate.

They quickly threw a ward around it, and then Hermione began drawing it so they could study how to undo it.

"I don't understand this," Harry said. "They could have put it in a place where we'd never find it -- at the bottom of the lake, in the Forbidden Forest, in the middle of a four-foot-thick stone wall. Why have it right out in the open?"

"You're not much of a symbolic thinker, are you, Potter?" Malfoy said. "If a thing is worth doing, it's worth doing exquisitely." The glowing spell cast a cold light on his face. "It isn't every son," he said, "who gets to destroy his father's greatest achievement."

Hermione and Malfoy set up an inactive three-dimensional copy of the mine in the staff common
room, as Dumbledore's office was already so full of warded mines that there wasn't much room there to work. In less than an hour, Malfoy was able to re-create it, drawing magic from Harry or Hermione or himself to power anything that could be expressed in calligromancy -- raising and lowering the curtains, transfiguring dice into mice, making two quills into a pair of legs that strutted across the table.

But while Malfoy could dismantle the mines he created, none of them could do anything to the copy of the one in Dumbledore's office, though Malfoy tried with increasing fierceness.

At last, when he began making the quills stride about and kick things, something occurred to Harry. "Malfoy," he said, "most of the New World wizardry is based on sympathetic magic. You know, if you have a heart problem, you look for a plant with heart-shaped leaves ..." 

"How fascinating," Malfoy said, and Harry could tell how frustrated he was by how devoid of expression his voice was. "And is this somehow relevant, or are you merely indulging in reminiscences to while away the dreary hours?"

"Shut up," Harry said without heat. "What I mean is, suppose that a really difficult spell that's cast by calligromancy can only be undone by calligromancy?"

"Hm." Hermione frowned. "But calligromancy can only operate on a thing with a name."

"But this is a character," Harry said. He pulled over a spare parchment and wrote, *The letter A.* "The name is the thing itself."

Hermione sketched a symbol in the air with her wand. "That's 'erase,' " she said.

Malfoy squinted at the sign, then redrew it and added the energy symbol.

Nothing happened. He blew out a breath of air, lifting his hair off his forehead.

Then he straightened up suddenly. "The thing itself," he murmured. Leaning over the copy of the symbol, he sketched the "erase" sign in the air next to it. Then, holding his breath, he drew a direct object loop out from the verb, found a loose end on the symbol, and connected them.

"*Chartulaviv*," he said.

The whole construction disappeared.

"When Draco puts out the real thing, Harry, you have to be prepared, because it may spring other traps," Hermione said.

"Wish I knew what to brace for," Harry said. "Malfoy -- have you recognized your father's handwriting in any of the other mines we've seen?"

Malfoy frowned. "Now that you mention it, I have," he said. "He favors the psychological -- paranoia, nightmares, hallucinations. None of this fire and noise."

"Great," Harry said. "So I can expect to come out of that room thinking I'm Dumbledore."

Malfoy smirked at him. "You'd look rather fetching in heels."

"Ready?"
"I guess." Harry wiped his hands on his robe and got his wand ready.

Slowly, Malfoy drew the erase sign, then the direct object loop. Down to connect with the loose end of the knot.

"Wait," Harry said. "You're standing exactly where he'd expect you to stand, and if this triggers more mines --"

Malfoy nodded, considered the room, and then clambered up to squat on the desk. "All right?" he said.

"Good plan," Harry said.

"Glad you approve." Malfoy raised his wand. "Chartulaviv' -- er --" His wand hand wavered.

"Blast."

"What?"

"There's one of those wand-deflecting charms on it." Malfoy's left hand wrapped around Harry's right wrist, and he brought Harry's hand up to cover his own. "Can you --" But even the two of them together couldn't make Malfoy's wand point at the symbol.

"No problem," Harry said. He groped on the desk and came up with an enormous reddish quill. Focusing his power through that, he concentrated on the sign. "Chartulaviva," he said.

The symbol disappeared. They waited breathlessly for a noise or a flame.

After a moment, Malfoy released a breath. "Well," he said. "That was something of an anticlimax."

Then his eyes rolled back and he collapsed backward off the desk.

Malfoy was short, but he was more solid than he looked, and it took some effort to get him down the stairs. Dead weight, Harry thought, and then wished he hadn't.

Malfoy's hair spilled over his shoulder and arm, tickling him. It smelled the same as it had before. There was something awful about that, something almost sickening, that he should be unconscious and still smell the way he smelled when he was writhing with pleasure ... Harry pressed his cheek against the top of Malfoy's head, swallowed hard, and kept on walking.

He was within sight of the hospital wing before it occurred to him that he could have used a levitation spell, and by then it seemed easier just to carry him the rest of the way.

"'ave you overextended a search charm again, 'Arry?" Sofia asked as she led him to a bed.

"I don't know what happened." Harry laid him down. "I'll go fetch Hermione."

Malfoy's eyes flickered open, and Harry sat down suddenly before his knees gave out with relief. "Don't get her out of class," he said in a thready voice. "I'm fairly certain I know what happened."

"What?"

Malfoy turned his arm over. "We took down the primary power source. Evidently I'm the backup."
12. Magic Fatigue

Animaserum restored Malfoy's energy, at least enough that he could sit up and walk, but upon testing he proved to have no magic at all, not even enough for a Lumos.

"We could try a transfusion," Hermione said doubtfully when she arrived after her Level 7 Charms class. But when they attempted it, they discovered that any magic that went into Malfoy immediately went into the mines.

"Could we create a transfusion that prevents any of the magic from going to any other source without your consent?"

Malfoy sighed. "Mione, I gave consent."

"Why are they taking all your magic?" Hermione said.

"And why are they still so weak?" Harry added. When they'd lit a candle, they'd found that the mines in the hospital wing were so faint they could barely see them behind their glowing wards.

"There were lots of followers, of course, but there were never more than about a hundred who actually wore the Mark, even at the height of the Dark Lord's power," Malfoy said.

"So you were part of the Death Eater elite," Harry said.

Malfoy raised his eyebrows. "Naturally," he said. "Now, there are about twenty in Azkaban, prevented from practicing magic somehow or other --"

"An Emagium," Hermione put in, "same as we used for you in the Wizard Protection Program."

He nodded. "And most of the rest are dead. I may very well be the last Death Eater at liberty. Which means I'm not pulling my weight as far as murder, mayhem, and Muggle-torture."

Hermione smiled. "Mother might argue with that. That stuffed hen you sent her for Easter never stops clucking and laying chocolate eggs all over the house."

"Not quite up to the old ways," Malfoy said, "but standards are always slipping."

"Well, why don't we do an Emagium on you now?" Harry said. "They can't draw from your magic if you haven't got any."

"They'll have another backup power source," Malfoy said. "Slytherins, remember?" This time he sounded less admiring than simply weary.

"You lot might as well go back to your rooms," Malfoy said irritably as Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed him up the stairs. "I can live without magic very well. I've done it before."

"Not at Hogwarts," Hermione said. "It's sure to be more difficult here. Hello, Tiffany," she said at Malfoy's door.

"G'morning, 'Mione," the dragon portrait said. Her voice was rough, but Harry supposed breathing fire would account for that. "Draco's away just now. Shall I give him a message?"

"I'm here," Malfoy said, stepping out from behind Hermione.

"Or shall I let you in to wait?" Tiffany said, never looking at him.
"Yes, let us all in, Tiffany," Malfoy said. The door stayed shut.

"She can't see you," Harry said.

"Thank you for that stunning revelation of the obvious," Malfoy said.

"Oh, dear." Hermione was tugging on her hair. "I was afraid of this. Perhaps we could use the mine technology? Come up with a sign that would open the door when you touched it?"

Ron looked up from where he was squatting by the door, examining the handle. "I think the easiest thing," he said, "would be to install a lock."

"What are you still hanging about for, Potter?"

Harry ignored him and finished putting an Autolaborum charm on the teapot, milk pitcher, sugar bowl, and biscuit tin, then added a self-cleaning charm to the cups. It was a good thing he'd spent so many summers at the Burrow, he thought as he moved through Malfoy's rooms; he probably knew more self-renewing housekeeping charms than any bachelor in Britain.

When he emerged from Malfoy's bath, which was luckily fitted with Muggle-style fixtures, he found Malfoy leaning against one of his bedposts, arms crossed over his chest.

Malfoy would certainly have chosen different clothes if he'd known he'd have to get out of them without magic, Harry thought with a smile, taking in the knee-high boots, the tight knee-length breeches, the dozens of tiny buttons on the swallowtail robe.

Someone who hadn't known Malfoy since he was eleven would probably have thought he was completely relaxed.

"I don't recall inviting you in here, Potter."

"I know," Harry said. "Nobody's ever managed to teach me any manners." And he wrapped his arms around Malfoy's shoulders.

It only took a few seconds for Malfoy to unbend and lean into him, laying his head on Harry's shoulder. They stood like that for a long moment, and then Harry stroked Malfoy's hair, remembering the scent of it as he carried him down from Dumbledore's office, and Malfoy let out a shuddering sigh and turned up his face without opening his eyes.

Harry kissed him slowly, lipping at his mouth for a long time before pressing it open to taste him. Malfoy clung to him but made no effort to control the pace.

After a moment Harry pulled back a bit and hooked his finger behind the top button of the robe. "If we don't get rid of these mines soon, you're going to have to get a valet. What's the spell for these buttons?"

"Deboutonne," Malfoy told him.

"De -- what? That's not Latin."

"Romans didn't have buttons," Malfoy said. "Or, rather, they had buttons, but were some centuries too soon for the invention of the buttonhole. And it's expedio for the trouser laces, and depero for the boots, and degenualia for the stockings ... Ah. You've found your calling."

It seemed that deerskin breeches called for knee-length underdrawers made of some soft white fabric.
There were buttons on the sides of the knees, but no fastening that Harry could see at the top. But Malfoy looked good in them, so he decided he'd wait until later to ask what spell he needed to get him out of them. "You'd better borrow some of my sweatpants until you get your magic back."

"It's not enough to unmage me. They have to deprive me of all taste and style as well," Malfoy grumbled, pushing Harry's robe off his shoulders. "At least I've got some useful Muggle experience," he added, starting on the shirt. "My mother would have been quite unable to undo a button with her hands, even to get at a nineteen-year-old gamekeeper."

"Not something I wanted in my head, Malfoy," Harry kicked off his shoes seconds before his trousers and pants hit the floor.

"Don't tell me you've got no taste for men who work with their hands."

Harry hooked an arm around Malfoy's middle and hauled him down onto the bed. "I've got no taste for your mother. No offense."

"Oh, none taken," Malfoy said politely, and licked his ear.

Harry rolled half on top of him, propping himself up on his elbows. He kissed him until he was quiet, and then he kissed him until he was noisy again.

"Oh," Malfoy said as Harry left his mouth behind and headed down his chest. "Ohh, yes. Oh, Lethe and Phlegethon, you're good at that -- ahh -- you can bite a little, I don't mind --"

Harry bit a lot, and while Malfoy didn't get any quieter, he did get less verbal.

"I like these," Harry said some time later. He was propped on his elbows again, lying between Malfoy's spread legs, stroking Malfoy's cock through the odd underdrawers -- left thumb, right thumb, left thumb, right thumb. "Nice and soft. What're they made of?"

"Mm -- mm. Muslin," Malfoy said. "Oh. Take. Take them off me."

"OK." Left thumb, right thumb. "Tell me how."

"De -- " Malfoy pulled in a gasp with voice in it. "Oh. De --" There was a wet spot on the drawers. Harry sniffed it, then opened his mouth over the spot and exhaled hotly through the fabric. Malfoy began to tremble. "Ah!" Harry tightened his mouth. "Oh, oh, I can't -- I'll remember the spell if you'll stop -- oh, oh fuck, stop, Harry, don't stop --"

Harry didn't.

There was a long, breathless silence, and then Malfoy said in a laughing voice, "Debracato to get them off, eluo to clean them up. Lavo to clean me up."

"I knew that one," Harry said, taking care of the pants quickly. "But I'm not sure I want to clean you up. I like you dirty." Malfoy wasn't really all that dirty, but he found a smear between navel and hipbone and licked it with showy thoroughness. Malfoy let out a long, happy sigh.

"Lethe and Phlegethon?" Harry said to his thigh.

"Two of the rivers in Hades." Malfoy turned on his side and ran a considering hand up Harry's arm. "So. You can --" He made an odd, ambiguous gesture at his own body. "If you want to. I don't mind." He was looking at his hand, which was now drawing circles around the point of Harry's shoulder.
"'You can,' " Harry mimicked. "You don't have some fancy pureblood word for it?"

"The classical allusions would be way over your head." Malfoy's fingers found a sensitive spot on Harry's neck. "Well? Are you interested, or shall I make other plans?"

Harry had to smile. "You say that as though you think it would be possible for me to say no."

"Well, who knows what arcane preferences you might have developed in America."

"Right. First I'll need you to put on this cowboy hat ..."

"Chaps is extry." Malfoy rolled suddenly to straddle him. His pale hair swung forward, and Harry tangled a hand in it and pulled him down for a kiss.

As soon as Harry let him go, Malfoy knelt up and positioned himself, murmuring -- and then he stopped. "No magic," he said. "You're going to have to do it."

He wasn't too much at a loss, though, to criticize Harry's choice of spells, pronunciation, and lack of patience. Harry was willing to overlook it just for the sight of him, the flush rising on his chest, the half-lidded eyes, the way he gasped as he sank slowly down on Harry's cock and then sighed as he came to rest.

"You're all right?"

"Hm. Let's see." Malfoy rocked minutely forward and backward.

Harry breathed, "Ohgod." Malfoy smiled and did it again.

"Ohgod. Like that. Yeah." Malfoy went on rocking. At first he watched Harry, but then his eyes fell shut and he tipped back his head, fists clenched on flexing thighs, panting.

Again, and again, going faster but never deeper, until Harry was half out of his mind -- and when Malfoy made that familiar whine, Harry couldn't stop his hips from jerking up. "Malfoy. God. Need more. Let me. On top."

They lost connection as they traded places, and when Harry slid back into him, Malfoy made a sound that was almost a wail. Long deep strokes, unbelievable heat, Malfoy under him slack-jawed with pleasure -- too much, too much -- and before he could even try to slow down he was coming.

"Ah --" Malfoy's cry was more than a little desperate, and Harry pulled free too fast and dove down to finish him with his mouth. "Yes --" Malfoy hissed, thrusting upward and panting. "Put -- something -- in me --" and Harry slid three fingers into that wet heat and Malfoy's back arched right off the bed as he came.

Harry pressed a soft kiss to Malfoy's hip, and then another, and then a whole string of them, closing his eyes and exploring the smooth skin with his lips, and Malfoy made a broken noise and pulled him up and kissed him hard.

"God." Harry let his head drop to the pillow, and Malfoy gave him such a self-satisfied smile that he added, "You do understand that when I say that I'm not actually addressing you, don't you?"

"You'll have to tell me all about your people's quaint little religion some time," Malfoy said. "It's omnilavo to clean us and the bed."

"I knew that." Harry did it, then pulled the covers up over both of them and hauled up the second
pillow from where it had fallen on the floor.

Malfoy leaned up on an elbow and stared at him. "What are you doing?"

"You can't use the floo, you can't light the candles -- I've got to --" Harry yawned. "Got to stay here and look after you."

"I can operate a cigarette lighter. I can walk." Harry yawned again. Malfoy flopped down on the bed. "Oh, very well. I'll be as helpless as you need me to be." He tugged the coverlet toward his side of the bed. "Bloody Gryffindors."

"Goodnight, Malfoy."

"We're going to have to separate him from the League," Harry told Ron. "There's no telling what will happen if anything tries to make demands on his magic when he hasn't got any."

"And so kind of you to talk about me as if I'm still unconscious, Potter." When Harry began to protest, Malfoy waved his hand impatiently. "Yes, yes, you can't draw water from a dry well. But get someone else to do it. You've no sense of occasion."

Just then the door to the staff common room opened and Hermione and Penelope came in. "... index the entire set of Diderot's Encyclopedia of Enchantments," Hermione was saying, beaming.

"Oh, good," Harry said. "Hermione, can you boot Malfoy out of the League? He won't let me do it because I lack elegance."

"Don't worry, Potter, you more than make up for it in petulance."

Hermione looked stricken. "Take you out of the League? Oh, but surely we don't have to go that far, Draco. Perhaps you could be an ... an honorary member or something?"

"When it comes to ceremonial magic, simplicity is key," Malfoy said. "But you can put together a Squibs' Auxiliary for me later on, if you'd like."

He started to stand up, but Harry, Hermione, and Penelope all pushed him back down. "I'm not an invalid," he grumbled.

"Yes, you are," Hermione said. "Here, I'll kneel here. Now, let me think ... All right." She shook out her wand. "Draco Falco Leonis Malfoy de Douce-Douleur, do you withdraw your consent to provide magic for the purpose of powering search charms?"

"Yes," Malfoy said.

Hermione bit her lip and touched his forehead with her wand. "I hereby remove you from the League of Protection."

"There, now, that's over with," Malfoy said. "Now, what was all that blathering about the library?"

"Oh, it's so exciting, Draco," Hermione said, worry forgotten in the joy of research. "Penelope has figured out a way to use search charms to create an index of the entire library. It's going to take some time, of course, but she and Sarah McDuff have already indexed common searches from Aardwolf to Amanita."

"It works very much like the Find command on a computer, which is what made me think of it," Penelope said. "The trickiest part so far has been to delimit it to the books in the library. It tends to
want to index every book, scroll, and private document on the grounds."

"You need to put a mark on the books," Malfoy said. "A signature. Then you could use the mark as a noun for 'Books in Hogwarts library' and not have to worry that your charm will index those love poems that Talos writes to Marlow when he ought to be doing his Arithmancy."

"Hermione," Penelope said, "you know how a Muggle computer can do a Find and then a Change? Could you do the same thing with calligromancy?"

Hermione and Malfoy stared at her with identical expressions of open-mouthed awe for a moment, and then they both began talking to each other so quickly that it was impossible to distinguish words.

Penelope glanced at Harry. "I'm going to take that as a yes."

Owls filled the air next day as they contacted all the absent League members for consent to power a Search-and-Change charm. No one expected objections, and there weren't any, but two schools, a university, and the Ministry all sent back messages that said, essentially, "Take good notes."

"If you publish this, 'Mione, it could be good enough to get you another Magis Doctor," Malfoy said.

Malfoy was better at calligromancy than the rest of them, so in the end the easiest thing seemed to be for him to guide Hermione's wand hand through the unfamiliar motions: Find pain mine, change to pain mine with erase attachment.

They tried it first in the library, where they could watch the warded mine wink out. After a brief pause to figure out how to make the charm keep going until it had found them all and another to construct the charm in such a way that it would leave alone any charm with an If clause -- and a slightly longer pause to satisfy Hermione's curiosity by bringing the charm back to make a mark on a chalkboard for each spell it found -- they sent it out to cover all of the grounds, using the boundary they'd marked earlier.

Harry and Malfoy trounced Hermione and Penelope four times at Stealth, and then the sending came back. They prowled the halls looking for any of the pain mines they'd marked, but the ward bubbles stood empty. The pain mines were all gone.

There were four hundred and sixty marks on the chalkboard.

There were more than a hundred recurring mines in their notes, and each one required a little more power to remove than the last, because the power from the wearers of the Mark was being spread over fewer mines. When Hermione noticed this, she began making sure that the most difficult mines went first, before they got too strong.

Even so, the power drain on the League increased. At first, with so many contributing, no one felt the effects. But after mines were erased by the thousand, they began to notice general exhaustion and symptoms of magic fatigue, and Hermione began limiting the number of charms they could cast in a day -- a dozen, then six, then two, then one.

And at last, one hot day at the end of May, they found they had removed every mine in their notes.

"So the next step," Hermione said, "is to examine the grounds and see if there are any left."

They searched the entire staff common room and didn't find a single mine.
Hermione beamed. "Now it will be nothing but the unusual ones, the ones we haven't encountered yet."

"That," Malfoy said, "may be a mixed blessing."

### 13. Duels

Now that he had recognized his father's handiwork in the power sigil, Malfoy was surer than ever that there would be useful information in his father's diary. He and Hermione tried everything they could think of, from complicated Chinese unlocking incantations to the simple rhymes that little girls used to keep their diaries private, but nothing worked.

"I'm certain he wouldn't have put them up without developing a simple way to take them all down at once," Malfoy said.

"Why not?" Hermione said. "If the goal was to shut down the school and then use it to wreak havoc all over wizarding Britain --"

"Ah, but that was only one of the goals," Malfoy said. "Of course all the Death Eaters wanted to destroy Dumbledore, and most of them wanted to destroy Hogwarts as well. But my father always fancied himself an educator, and if the Death Eaters had won the war, he would have wanted to return in great triumph as Headmaster."

Hermione was the one who laughed, though Harry wanted to. "Yes, yes, it's ridiculous," Malfoy said. "But reason is no match for pretension."

He tapped the diary with his wand. "Open sesame." Nothing happened. "Worth a try," he said to no one in particular.

"Here's what I don't understand," Hermione said. "Why was your father even part of the group that occupied Hogwarts? He didn't strike me as the soldier type."

"He was the general type," Malfoy said, "and as most of the Death Eaters were more on the order of hired muscle, he was sent along to see to it that someone with a brain was involved. I think the mining was his idea, as well, and the Dark Lord might have seen it as a kind of reward to allow him to oversee it in person."

"But why come back to England at all? He was at your villa in Bilbao, and Voldemort hadn't made any objection to his leaving the country. He could have stayed there until the war was over."

"And if his side lost, the Ministry would have tried him in absentia and confiscated all his property."

Harry waited, but Malfoy didn't add anything. "That's ... it? That's what was worse than dying?"

"I'll use small words for the incorrigibly middle-class among us," Malfoy said. "When my father died, the Ministry was legally obligated to transfer his property to his nearest kin. So the Malfoy ancestral lands, which have been in the family since approximately A.D. 1100, came to me. If my father had been found guilty -- and he would have been -- they would have been confiscated."

When Harry didn't say anything, he went on impatiently: "Sold, Potter. Placed on the market, advertised in the Prophet, strangers tramping through the Manor and cutting down the hawthorns and putting in a bloody dog run ..."
Harry shrugged. "I never inherited anything from my ancestors that I valued more than my life."

Malfoy was spooned up behind Harry, one hand on Harry's hip, the other arm under Harry's neck. The position put the Mark a couple of inches from Harry's face. Even without his glasses he could see it clearly.

Now that he'd seen it come apart under Hermione's expansion spell, he could see it as a calligromancy expression even without magical help. The entire grisly image was a single calligraphic stroke, and now that it was familiar he could separate that into knots. One for each eye, each nostril, each tooth. The hollows under the cheekbones, the dark interior of the mouth. The snake's eyes.

"We've got to get it off you," he said.

"And here I was thinking you might want one, too, so we could match."

"I'm serious, Malfoy."

Malfoy pulled his arm out from under Harry's head. "I know it's traumatic for you to be reminded of the years I spent putting the 'mal' in Malfoy --"

"You think I want it off because it offends me?" Harry sat up. "Malfoy, it could kill me. Me, Hermione, the Headmistress, Circe Stormlaw, dozens of innocent children, and -- oh, yes, nearly forgot -- you."

"It's warded. No one can touch it. And you might keep in mind that trying to undo it is quite likely to trigger it."

"Malfoy. It has an If Wearer Cursed on it. You're a dueling instructor. How long do you think it will be before you get hit by a stray curse? It's a wonder it hasn't happened yet."

"And I'm sure," Malfoy said with great precision, "that you have a method of minimizing the risks, such that acting is safer than waiting until we know more?" He paused a moment. "I thought not. Try to wrap your lily-white Gryffindor brain around this: Sometimes when danger threatens, the most courageous act is to leave it be until you can understand it."

"And sometimes caution gets you killed, too," Harry said through tight lips. "Maybe it doesn't bother you that they've made you their weapon, Malfoy. But it bothers me."

"Oh ... Harry." Michelle Verte stepped out of Malfoy's fireplace and looked over Harry's shoulder, as if to confirm that she had come to the right room. "Is Draco about? Remus and I have found some mines we can't identify down at the greenhouse, and Hermione's at the Ministry."

"He's here," Harry said, "but I don't know if he can floo without magic. Maybe if someone else goes with him? Like Apparating with a passenger?"

The door of the bath clicked shut. "If it doesn't work," Malfoy said from behind him, "then I'm left standing in a roaring fire. Amusing, in its own way, but on the whole I'd prefer to walk." His robe today was a neck-to-toe affair like the ones Snape used to wear, though Snape would have sneered at the row of tiny brass clasps, and Harry couldn't imagine him choosing a robe in a black that went purple where the light hit it.

"We'll meet you there in a few minutes, then, Michelle," Harry said. He thought both Michelle and
Malfoy looked at him oddly. "Well, I want to see them, too."

When they were halfway across the lawn, they heard a strange, broken wail coming from the greenhouse.

Michelle was standing just inside the open door. Her fair hair was disheveled and there was a leaf clinging to it. Just beyond her, Sofia was kneeling over Remus, whose heels were drumming on the stone floor. The wailing was coming from him.

"It must have been some sort of seizure mine," Michelle said, pressing her knuckles to her lips. "We thought we were being careful."

"Someone fetch Madeleine," Sofia said, and Malfoy took off at a run.

Remus convulsed again and made a choking noise. Sofia dug two fingers into his mouth. His legs jerked, touching off a mine. One of the panes of glass at the far end of the greenhouse shattered. Michelle knelt hastily to hold his feet.

"Petrificus Totalus," Sofia said, and he fell still just as Malfoy reappeared with Madeleine Aerie in tow.

Sofia levitated Remus' still body. "We were running low on Animaserum, were we not?" she asked Madeleine.

Madeleine nodded. "If there's enough hepatica, I can have more ready in half an hour."

"Hepatica's here," Michelle said. "Do you need leaves or roots?"

"Leaves, preferably small ones." Madeleine reached for the plants.

"Wait." Malfoy touched her wrist. "Ward these, will you, Potter? They're rife with mines."

"You can still see them?" Harry was surprised.

"There's nothing to stop other people's magic working on me."

When the mines were all in bubbles, Madeleine quickly gathered a handful of leaves. "I'll walk up with you, Sofia, and get started while you get him stabilized."

Michelle ran a hand over Remus' forehead.

"You go up with them, Michie," Malfoy said. "Potter can do a search-and-change by himself, if he has me to help him up out of the depths of his ignorance."

Harry was already sweating. He took off his robe and rolled up his sleeves. The greenhouse smelled of wet dirt and fish emulsion and some heavy, overripe tropical flower.

"Accio me that dictionary of Hebrew calligromancy out of the library, Potter," Malfoy said after a while, and, "I'm going to need a quill and parchment to record some of these for 'Mione," and, "Might as well get the chalkboard down here so we can see how many of these our search-and-changes are taking down."

"Had you noticed," Harry said eventually, "that the mines are concentrated on certain plants? The catmint is covered with stuff, and you can hardly get near the aloe."

Malfoy nodded. "Michie would know for sure, but I suspect that those are the plants one would need
to cure the results of the other mines we've been taking down. I know aloe's the first thing an herbologist would reach for after a fire, and catmint's a prime ingredient in lung-clearing potions."

"That's pretty evil," Harry said.

Malfoy crushed a leaf absently with his finger, filling the air with a minty smell. "It's the sort of thing my father would think of. He was always telling me, 'Know thy enemy.'"

"Do you think he did the spells here, too?"

"His Hebrew was pretty weak. Probably they gave this room to someone with an herbology background. Caradog Dipsas, perhaps; he had a gift for languages, when he was sober, and he was one of Father's favorite students." He leaned back against the wooden door that led into the storage shed. "After all, a man needs proteges if he has no sons."

Harry stepped closer and took Malfoy's face in his hand. The pale hair was very soft against his fingers. Harry lifted Malfoy's face and kissed the thin skin under his eyes, the tight corners of his mouth. Kissed his lips, softly, deeply. Kissed his chin and the side of his neck, ran his tongue along Malfoy's collarbone, tasting old sweat and dust.

"Wait," Malfoy said softly, "don't. I'm all dirty."

Harry gathered up Malfoy's hair and pulled gently until his head dropped back, and then he bit the side of his neck. His skin was gritty under Harry's tongue. "I don't care," Harry said, and bit him a little harder, until he whimpered and grabbed Harry's face in both hands.

The kiss knocked his glasses crooked. Harry tossed them on the potting table without releasing Malfoy's mouth, and Malfoy wrapped one arm around Harry's back under his open robe and went on licking at him wildly.

When Harry thumbed open the first of those little brass clasps, Malfoy grasped the robe at the neck and gave a practiced tug-and-shake, and they all came open at once.

As Harry had expected, he wore nothing at all underneath. Harry couldn't stop looking at him, the pale strong body laid bare, framed by the fall of purple-black fabric on either side -- hard and eager and perfectly flawless.

"God," he breathed, putting a possessive hand on Malfoy's hip, "what a prize you are."

"Spoils of war?" Malfoy said breathlessly.

"Yes." Harry pushed the robe off his shoulders. It caught on his hands for a moment and then fell to the floor in a whisper of satin.

His skin was very white, and the Mark was very dark against it. Harry put his hand over it, lifted Malfoy's arm and pinned it to the wall over his head, and Malfoy shivered. Sweat glinted along his collarbone and on his neck.

Harry leaned in and nipped at his lip, pulling back as Malfoy's mouth tried to follow his. He looked down the pale length of Malfoy's body to watch as his other hand grasped Malfoy's cock and stroked hard. Malfoy whined.

"They can't have you," Harry growled, tightening both the hand around Malfoy's arm and the hand around his cock, moving fast and merciless. "They weren't worthy of you. They will not keep you."
Malfoy moaned, pushing up into his hand over and over, rolling his head from side to side against the wall. His eyes were tightly shut. "Look at me," Harry said, and his eyes flew open. "Draco -- Falco -- Leonis --"

With a cry, Malfoy pulsed into his hand.

14. Dungeons

"He iss still in a Consopium," Sofia said. "It wass the only way we could stop the confusionss. But in such a state I cannot predict the effect of a systemic spell such as the Contraluna."

"And you also can't predict the effects of the transformation if he doesn't have the Contraluna," Michelle whispered. Sofia nodded.

"The full moon's in two weeks," Hermione said. "We've got to get into the Potions wing."

McGonagall nodded. "At this point, I'm afraid the risk of going is less than the risk of waiting."

"Well, then, let's be practical," Madeleine said. "What can we do to reduce the risk?"

"With Remus and Draco out of commission, you and Minerva are our strongest team, and Oliver and I are probably second," Penelope said.

"We need Draco, too," Hermione said. Harry's chest tightened at the thought of him down there with no magic to protect him.

"And we need someone to coordinate," Penelope said.

"Harry," said McGonagall and Malfoy at the same time.

"I don't like it." Harry paced the length of Malfoy's sitting room.

Malfoy raised his eyebrows. "Care to specify, or would you prefer to stick with that all-inclusive 'it'?"

"I'm not doing anything," Harry paced back to the desk. "You and Hermione are our experts, Penelope and Oliver and McGonagall and Aerie are unmining teams, Ron's the fixer, and then everybody says, 'Oh, Harry's the leader' because they have to keep me occupied somehow, and they know I can't bring a covered dish ..."

Malfoy frowned. "A dish of what?"

Harry paced back to the other end of the room. "It's just like before. Everybody's got some special talent, and I'm just kind of there, you know, they include me because I keep on not dying ..."

"Useful skill, not dying," Malfoy said. "And how many of these special talents would have been doing what they were doing, where they were doing it, if you hadn't been there as a focus?"

"Like a mascot," Harry said bitterly.

"Like a wand," Malfoy said.
"And you," Harry said. "Down there with no magic. We can't do without you, I know that, but I don't like it."

"And gravity. You're not so happy with that, either." Malfoy caught his robe as he paced back to the couch and began to pull him toward the bedroom. "What an agony it is for a Gryffindor to do nothing," he said. "I suppose that keeping you occupied will be my contribution to the war effort."

"I just wish we had some idea of what to expect," Hermione said.

"Ask Malfoy," Harry said. "His father is the architect of the whole thing."

Malfoy nodded. "He's the one who designed my Mark; it's likely he designed Professor Snape's as well."

"Are they likely to be the same?"

"That would be too easy," Harry said.

"No," Malfoy said. "Father designed mine as a reward of sorts, so its targets are my enemies." He raised his eyebrows at Harry.

"I'm honored," Harry said.

"Professor Snape, on the other hand, was under suspicion almost from his first days as a Death Eater, as he didn't trouble to curb his tongue." He smiled reminiscently. "I would expect his Mark to function as a kind of blackmail, targeting people and things he cared about."

"His potions," Hermione said.

"And Hogwarts," Harry added, "especially Dumbledore."

"The sigil would probably target the headmaster by title rather than Dumbledore by name, but you're probably right."

"Another thing to keep in mind," Malfoy said, "is that my father favored the psychological. So we're likely to find hallucinations, illusions, spells that try to turn us against each other."

"The staircase is missing, but all three rooms have fireplaces," Hermione said.

"But Malfoy can't floo, and we need him with us," Harry said.

"Not to mention that the fireplaces are certain to be heavily mined," Malfoy said.

"Suppose some of us go down on foot -- Ron can probably rig up a ladder or something -- and clear a path to the fireplace?" Harry said. "Then the rest of you can meet us there."

"You can do another transauditum, 'Mione, to stay in touch."

"Who's on the first team, then?" Harry asked. "You and me --"

"Kitty and Maddie," Malfoy added.

"I'll come, too," Charlie said. "Madeleine ought to have someone to watch her back, as she's the only one who'll be able to make heads or tails of what we'll find down there."
The Potions wing had caused so many injuries that the staff had been a little overzealous in keeping everyone out, and it took Ron and Charlie half an hour to take down the plywood barrier that blocked the ground-floor hallway. They all talked a bit as the wood came down, but as they walked over the fallen sheets, they fell silent.

The corridor beyond was completely ordinary, except for the glimmer of mines, the slippery feeling of Dark magic, and the grit of past explosions underfoot. They warded as they went.

At the end of the corridor, where the staircase had been, the floor came to an abrupt and ragged end. They all stared at it for a moment, thinking of what sort of power it took to uproot an entire flight of stairs. Then Ron opened his dragonhide backpack and shook out a rope ladder. It uncoiled over the edge with a whispery sound and was lost in the darkness below.

"I'll wait here," Ron said. His voice sounded very loud. "I'll keep this clear as an alternate exit in case you can't get to the fireplace. When you find the narwhal tusk, send it up as soon as you can and I'll get it up to Sofia and Michelle." He nodded to Madeleine and McGonagall, shook Charlie's hand, and after a moment's pause, Harry's. "Good luck."

Malfoy swung his way over the side, and the ropes went taut against the spells that held the ends in place. Harry jumped over, catching himself with a levitation spell that took him down slowly so that he could keep an eye on Malfoy. Madeleine went by him with surprising speed, followed by Charlie, who didn't even seem to be bothering with a spell. McGonagall floated down like Mary Poppins without an umbrella.

Harry and Malfoy were halfway down when they heard a pop, a roar, and a shriek. Harry redoubled his speed, leaving Malfoy in mid-air.

"Fire mine," Madeleine said as Harry touched down. "Charlie put it out with his cloak."

"I wondered why you brought that heavy thing," McGonagall said.

Harry lit the torches along the corridor, but they didn't do much to dispel the darkness. He remembered thinking the Potions wing was gloomy when it was full of running, shouting students. It was like a tomb now.

The corridor ended abruptly with a door in front of them and one on either side. "Workroom," Malfoy said, pointing straight ahead. "Classroom on the right, private quarters on the left. They all open into one another, too."

"We want the workroom, right?" Harry pointed his wand at the door ahead of him.

"No, wait," Charlie said. "The first priority is to secure a fireplace so reinforcements can get to us, and so we can get out in a hurry if we need to. So we should start with whatever room is likely to be least heavily mined."

"The workroom is a nightmare," Madeleine said. "The classroom fireplace will probably be the easiest to get to."

"Fine," Harry said edgily, and he spelled the door open.

It was hard to imagine how the workroom could be worse than this. The walls were blackened and webbed with cracks, a few of them precariously held together with temporary preservation spells that might have been cast by the cleanup crew before the danger became apparent. The long marble counter where Snape had given so many lectures was cracked and covered with dirt and ash and ...
that was probably blood, or maybe even something worse.

The tables held row after row of half-chopped potion ingredients, abandoned in the first Death Eater attack, and the air was heavy with the sweet, nauseous smell of decaying vegetation, mixed with a singed smell that itched in the back of his throat.

It looked as though every inch of space between them and the hearth was covered with mines, except for a handful of gaps where the search spells had taken out the more common ones. "All this just to keep us away from the potion ingredients?" Charlie asked.

"All this so my father could punish a friend who turned traitor," Malfoy said. They all did a Lumos together, and then they edged their way carefully through the door.

"Kitty, you two could start with that one," Malfoy said. "It's a stroke on all Aurors above captain rank. And you two," he said to Harry and Charlie, as McGonagall and Madeleine began repeatedly undoing the spell, "can get this lovely little number, which is set to hide mines all over Ravenclaw at the summer solstice."

It took Harry and Charlie seven repetitions of the spell to take down the mine. "This is going to take forever," Harry said, wiping his forehead with the back of his wand hand -- but Malfoy was already across the table explaining the next mine to Madeleine.

"... a Freezing Charm on the greenhouse at the next rainstorm, so you'll want to use a ..."

He came back over as the two began unspelling. "Oh, you two drew another clever one, eh? This is one of those that turn into something else when you do an Exstinguo. I think 'Mione had some strategy for those, what was it, 'Mione?"

Hermione's voice came over the Transauditum connection: "Bind it with adigo before you undo it."

It was as exhausting as their very first day of unspelling, and even more frustrating -- the room was so heavily mined that they seemed to be making no progress at all. And with every mine they took down, the remaining ones got a little stronger.

Point and speak, point and speak. Harry had been prepared for danger, not for this mindless, wearisome tedium. He fell into a sort of trance as little by little they drew closer to the fireplace.

Some time later -- though whether hours or days he couldn't say -- there was a flicker in the corner of his eye in the same general direction as Malfoy. Harry turned -- and then saw one of the heavy ceiling beams falling. He lunged to push Malfoy back against the nearest table.

But instead of the crunch of falling timber, he heard only the faint pop of two mines he'd blundered into. The room was suddenly plunged into darkness as all four of their wands went out, leaving only the faint glow of the few remaining mines.

"Lumos," Harry said -- or tried to say. No sound would come. He couldn't see any of the others' faces, but as none of them were speaking, he assumed their voices were gone, too.

"Harry? Draco?" Hermione's voice came over the Transauditum. "Harry? Harry?"

There was a click, very loud in the silence, and a sudden wash of light: Malfoy, triumphantly holding up Ron's electric torch.

That was good -- light was good - but without voices they couldn't do magic, and without magic they couldn't light a fire, and without a fire their help wouldn't be able to come through the floo. Would
Hermione bring her team down at the missing stairway when she figured out they were in trouble? How long would that take? Should they go back?

McGonagall was moving her mouth, her hands, her feet -- obviously trying to remember some form of magic that didn't require a spoken word. After a moment Madeleine began waving her wand through the air, drawing calligromantic sigils, but even they couldn't be activated without a voice command.

So close to success! -- the Death Eaters hadn't even taken away the bit of wood and kindling that the house elves always left in all the fireplaces in case someone needed to get into the floo system in a hurry, but it did them no good if they couldn't light it.

But maybe someone had matches?

Harry clapped his hands twice, the sound shockingly loud in the silent room, and mimed lighting a match. The other four looked at him blankly -- right, wizard-born, all of them, and even Malfoy had probably never seen a match -- but he tugged Malfoy's bag off his shoulder just in case.

Bottle of water, squares of chocolate, roll of bandages -- Harry just had time to admire how well prepared Malfoy was. Mechanical pencil. Spare wand -- who kept a spare wand? Small sharp knife in a dragonhide sheath -- coil of lightweight rope --

Cigarette lighter!

He was on the floor so fast he banged one knee painfully on the stones of the hearth. He fumbled the lighter, dropped it, picked it up again, and finally got a flame on the third try. The kindling caught, the tiny flameslicked up over the log --

-- and then he had to roll back suddenly so as not to get kicked in the face by Hermione, who came through the floo already shouting. "Harry? Draco? Is everyone all right? What happened?"

In the confusion, Harry found it hard to get Hermione's attention until he finally grabbed her shoulders. He pointed at his mouth, shook his head. "What?" she said. "Are you hurt?" Frustrated, he scrabbled for Malfoy's mechanical pencil.

MINES, he wrote on the wall. LOST VOICES.

"Oh, no!" she said. "And of course without your voices you can't do any magic. If it's acting on the vocal cords I might be able to use inflecto, but if it's blocking the sound waves, then I'd need a noloconfuto --"

Harry tapped her again and wrote on the wall: MERMAGIC?

"Gah! Why didn't I think of that?"

By the time Hermione had finished casting the mermagic spell on all of them, Charlie and Madeleine were examining the workroom door. "I think we can get that open," Charlie said, "and you can take a peek inside before you go back and get the others, Hermione."

The door opened with a seamless silence eerier than the squeakiest door from any haunted-house movie. The first thing that hit them were the smells, even stronger than in the classroom -- mold, herbs, decay, burning, a hundred ugly potion ingredients flung together haphazardly into a hundred accidental reactions.
In the faint and confusing light of the mines, they could see the dark maws of cupboards with their doors torn off. A cauldron sat on the work table, and the ceiling above it was blackened. Hermione backed away and went to fetch Oliver and Penelope. Harry stepped gingerly through the door, afraid, though he wouldn't have admitted it, that every step might fall on a skeleton.

Malfoy sneezed. "All right," he said, "this one's in Greek, but we've seen the parts before ..."

Harry rubbed his eyes and went to stand by Charlie, who was kneading the back of his neck with one big hand.

Harry had had only glimpses of Snape's workroom as a student, but he thought now that the fastidious professor would have been appalled at the mess, not to mention the waste. The floor was alternately sticky and gritty with spilled ingredients, and one of Snape's famously razor-sharp paring knives had been thrust inches deep into the wood of the cutting surface.

"Sure didn't look this bad when I had to serve detention here," Charlie said.

The mines here were fewer but uglier, nearly all of them targeting the person who touched them and thus probably aimed at Snape himself -- wasting sickness, poison in the blood, suicidal urges, and a particularly nasty one that combined mood swings with a suppression of inhibitions. "Father thought it would be amusing to get the traitor sacked in the most dramatic way possible, I see," Malfoy said.

The mines got brighter suddenly, and Harry was afraid they had gotten stronger, but then he saw the piles of gunpowder and cornmeal, the puddle of orange oil, and realized that they'd been right: A weaker version of the reveal potion had come together by accident somehow, enough to allow Snape to see the mines on his Mark. He'd probably caused a lot of this chaos himself in trying to unspell them.

They were making their way toward two goals: Harry and Charlie were to clear the fireplace while Madeleine and McGonagall made their way toward a cold-storage pantry that Malfoy thought most likely to contain the narwhal tusk.

But as Harry moved closer to the fireplace, a mine sprang up under his fingers, and he pulled back his hand too late to avoid tripping it. And while Charlie was still saying, "What's happened?" he felt a chill he hadn't felt in five years, and the cupboard door swung open to reveal the gray and ghastly face of a Dementor.

Harry froze, already paralyzed with terror even before the screams started.

And there were so many of them now. He was almost accustomed to the sounds of his parents' last moments, to Cedric's grunt of surprise. But now he heard Professor Sprout retching on the floor of the greenhouse, fighting the Imperius with all her strength ... Colin Creevey gasping "Save the film!" with his last breath ... the dying sigh of Albus Dumbledore ... Charlotte Rolfe's scream as her chair went over backwards ...

A slap shocked him back to consciousness, and he opened his eyes to see Malfoy's face inches from his: "It's a boggart, idiot!"

Malfoy had drawn the thing's attention, and now it flickered momentarily, and Harry got a glimpse of fair hair, a practiced sneer -- Lucius? or Malfoy himself? Harry moved back into its line of sight and it flickered back into Dementor shape again, but this time he was ready for it, and it was the work of a moment to stuff the horrible thing into Kat's flowered bikini and dismiss it with a Riddikulus.

There was a gasp and a bellow behind them, and Harry turned to see Madeleine flailing her arms
around her face, beating at nothing at all. "Another boggart?" he asked.

"Not likely he'd use the same trick twice," Malfoy said. "Try a Finite or a Noloconturbo."

As Harry drew nearer, Madeleine, leapt at him, her ascetic face contorted in a fierce snarl. He shrank back, and she pushed him against the cutting table, setting off several mines. Flames sprang up at the bases of two cupboards. McGonagall and Malfoy caught her flailing arms and held her still long enough for Harry to do the anti-paranoia spell, and then left her, blinking as though she were emerging from a trance, to attend to the fires.

"What the --" Charlie spat. "Can't get a wand anywhere near it." He stuffed his wand back into his sleeve loop and attacked the nearest fire with his cloak.

Harry cast about him for something to narrow his focus, but couldn't find anything better than a chair. Beside him, McGonagall pointed at the blaze with one of Snape's cutting knives; she gave him a grim sidelong smile.

But two wandless spells and a dragonhide cloak weren't enough -- there were probably a dozen fires burning. "We're losing that one," Charlie shouted as a cupboard blazed suddenly with a smell like incense, and Madeleine cried, "The seawrack leaves!"

There was a hiss, and white foam sprang up at the base of the cabinet. Harry turned to find Hermione pointing a fire extinguisher at the next fire. "Ron packed this bag for me," she said, and started on the next fire as Penelope and Oliver stepped out of the fireplace behind her.

When the flames were all extinguished, they stood panting, staring at each other. "It must be past dinnertime," Madeleine said. "Perhaps we should stop for the night."

"We don't dare," Malfoy said. "Some of those mines were timed hides, remember? If we don't push through to the private quarters now, we'll have to redo a lot of what we've already done." He opened his bag. "I have chocolate. That should be enough to keep us going."

Madeleine looked at the scorched cabinets doubtfully.

"Why don't you get out as much of this stuff as you can and levitate it up to Ron?" Penelope said. "There are a couple of empty crates in the cold-storage room."

As Madeleine packed a crate with seawrack and other ingredients and levitated it out the door, Harry turned to the door of Snape's private quarters. The narwhal tusk would be in there, along with Snape's private papers. And perhaps the bodies of Snape and Lucius Malfoy.

The heavy wooden door was bowed outward as though it had been hit by a train. "That's where they fought the actual duel, then," Malfoy said softly.

Oliver must have been thinking along the same lines as Harry, because he said reassuringly, "If they were still in there, we'd have smelled them by now."

"I don't know," Malfoy said. "It's awfully cold down here."

Oliver shook his head. "It's not that cold."

"Well," Penelope said, standing up, "we're not getting any less tired, and that room isn't getting any less dangerous, so let's get on with it." And she went and tried the door.

After two or three unlocking spells, Hermione went to stand with her, hauling her backpack. "Let me
try." She attacked the hinges with a prybar, and Harry made a mental note to consult with Ron before he made his next trip anywhere.

When the hinges were pried up, the door began to fall toward them, and Charlie caught it and steadied it to the floor as the rest of them walked into Snape's sitting room.

Here, too, the cupboards had been rifled, and one was overturned. The sofa was a charred frame, and the door into the adjoining bedroom had burned to ash.

Harry sniffed cautiously, but there was no smell of decay -- just orange oil and herbs, acid and dust, scorch and blood and something eerily familiar ...

"Oh, little gods," Malfoy whispered. "Tea." He pointed his torch at a sideboard, and the beam picked out a homey ceramic teapot, steam curling delicately from the spout where an Infervesco had kept it piping hot for five years.

There were few mines here, and they passed silently through the open door into Snape's bedroom.

The chaos there was even worse. There was a gritty taste to the air that made Harry's throat tickle. The gray bedcurtains, smeared with dried blood, were half ripped from their rings, draping down to puddle on the floor among piles of parchment, also smeared and spattered. Books and papers littered the floor.

Harry took a step in. Grit crunched under his shoe. His toe hit something, and he started back as it fell with a clatter.

Malfoy leaned down and came back with a cane topped with a snake's head.

"That's it, then," he said, stirring a pile of ash with the end of the cane. Bits of metal gleamed among the ashes, but he left them untouched. "Severus gave him a proper wizard's pyre. More than he deserved." An air current picked up the ash and eddied it across the stone floor, mixing it with ash from another pile that lay by the battered bedcurtains, powdering both over the scattered papers.

So Professor Snape had died here. Had lain on the cold floor, half under the bed, and set off the traps in his body one by one, as many as he could find. Squinting to see the real world past the yellow tracery of spell vision, Harry could see the long scrapes of fingernails in the wooden bedstead, the rips in the bedclothes. Alone, grating out spells in his hoarse voice, hair picking up dust from the floor ...

"Brave old coot, wasn't he," Malfoy said, poking the papers with his cane. "Vale." After a moment Harry realized it wasn't a spell but a farewell.

"Guys," said Penelope, "I think it's going to take all of us to --"

She broke off with a gasp, and Harry turned to see the biggest mine he'd ever seen, writhing and changing shape before his eyes, sending out tendrils to fill more and more of the room.

"Use an adigo!" shouted Malfoy. "Got to freeze it --" One tendril uncoiled to touch Oliver, who bellowed with pain. Another was threading toward an open cupboard behind McGonagall.

Harry repeated the freeze spell, but succeeded only in slowing the mine's movements, and Oliver leapt at McGonagall, crying, "Demons!"

"Together!" Malfoy said, running to get between Oliver and McGonagall. Harry, Hermione and Penelope all managed to say the spell together, but still the mine went on moving slowly. Malfoy had
a grip on Oliver's right arm, but Oliver was swinging wildly with his left.

"Use the League!" McGonagall said, and Penelope immediately began drawing the League sigil.

Harry threw a Finite at Oliver just as Oliver shook Malfoy loose, knocking Hermione down against the bed with the backswing, and punched at him. Oliver's eyes cleared, but his already-moving fist struck Malfoy in the left eye and knocked him into a smaller mine. "Shit!" gasped Oliver, and McGonagall pushed them back as a squadron of knives flew out of the opened cupboard door and imbedded themselves into the opposite wall.

Hermione scrambled up from the foot of the bed. "Draco! Look! The key to the diary! Professor Snape figured out the key!" She was holding a handful of parchment.

Malfoy turned from the cupboard and shoved a jar into her hand. "Narwhal tusk. Floo. Go. Go!" Hermione lit a fire in the fireplace, ducked into it with the parchments and the jar, and was gone.

And suddenly Harry realized that this was the chance he had been waiting for. They had the narwhal tusk and the key to the diary -- everything they needed to cure the curse victims and to undo the mines at the source. All they had to do now was undo the mine that immediately threatened them; after that, it wouldn't matter if the mines shifted over to a new power supply.

That would be the time to see if the League's power could unspell Malfoy's Mark.

Penelope's voice rang out clearly in the chaos: "Chartula--"

As she finished the spell, there was a scuffle and a scream behind him, but Harry didn't turn. He waited just long enough to see the mine wink out, and then he pointed his wand at Malfoy and said, "Im mobilus."

Malfoy's eyes widened as his body froze into position. The noise behind him continued as Harry pushed up Malfoy's sleeve. "I'm sorry," he said, "Draco, I'm sorry to do it like this -- Emagio."

Draco blinked wildly, staring wide-eyed over Harry's shoulder, and a tear spilled onto his unmoving face.

The Mark, as though aware of his attention, began to shift and expand, sending tendrils along the veins on the inside of Malfoy's arm. "Adigo," Harry said quickly, and then he said it again, and again, but he didn't have enough power by himself to do more than slow it down, and he didn't know how to do a freezing spell with calligromancy, so he couldn't use the League.

The little knots began to brighten in turn, as though to taunt him with all the things they could do. Hogwarts headmaster, hallucinations. Hermione Granger, brain tumor. Curse caster, instant death.

Harry drew the League sigil and the erase sigil in the air and connected them to the open end of the mark.

Another tear fell on his arm.

"Chartulaviva," Harry said.

The Mark hissed and went out.

"Finite emagio, finite immobilus," Harry said, and braced himself for anger, but Malfoy pushed him aside, crying, "Kitty!" and threw himself to the floor. Harry turned to find him kneeling over McGonagall where she lay, open-eyed and still, on the crumple of bedcurtains.
There seemed to be no sound at all in the room as Malfoy's hands went to her throat, to her wrist. Then he sagged to the ground, face against her neck, sobbing.

Harry felt too paralyzed to do anything but stare.

Some minutes later, Oliver tugged at his sleeve. "Penelope's passed out."

"You'll probably find Madeleine unconscious in the corridor, if she came back after she took the crate to Ron," Harry said leadenly, never looking away from Malfoy and McGonagall. "I think Ravenclaw was the backup power source."

Oliver nodded. He picked up Penelope and headed for the fire. "Then the Headmistress ..."

Harry shook his head. "No," he said, "I think she's dead."

"Heart-failure mine under the nightstand," Malfoy said, lifting his tearstained face. "How could you?"

"I'm sorry," Harry said, and remembered, after five years of trying to forget, how sickeningly inadequate the words were when you spoke them over the dead body of a friend.

"How could you?" Malfoy got to his feet, still clutching McGonagall's tartan hat. "What were you thinking? You could have died!" Harry blinked stupidly at him. "There was a curse on the unspeller and a curse on you by name," Malfoy said. "What were you thinking? Did you ever stop to think of what I might want?"

"Well, I should bloody well think one thing you didn't want would be to be a gun pointed at my head for the rest of our lives!"

Something clattered to the floor, and they both jumped. It was Lucius' snake-headed cane.

Without another word, Malfoy picked it up and dove into the fireplace with it.

After staring numbly at McGonagall's body for a moment, Harry followed him.

He'd thought he gave the order for Malfoy's rooms, but when he staggered out of the fireplace, he found himself in the staff common room. Malfoy was halfway up the winding staircase.

By the time he got up to Malfoy's rooms, Malfoy and Hermione were already on the sitting room floor by the cold fire -- ah, that would be why he couldn't floo directly here. Malfoy was holding his hand over the open page of the diary. He poked the point of a quill into his fingertip, wincing, and squeezed up a fat drop of blood. It fell onto the open page with an audible "thwap" and was instantly sucked into the parchment, as though absorbed.

Nothing happened.

"Blast it!" Malfoy squeezed another drop of blood onto the surface. Nothing. "It ought to work! Why won't you work, damn you? Look, it says right here in Severus' notes."

He grabbed the parchment from Hermione and shoved it at Harry. Harry squinted at the shaky handwriting. "Monkshood root loses potency -- keep under Vacuum charm ... Tell Neville he was correct re figwort blossoms ... what?"

"No, here." He sat down, and Hermione pointed at the bottom of the page. "For Lucius, blood is all: the essential distinction, the essential tool."
Harry frowned. "That could mean a lot of --"

"You don't understand him the way I do," Malfoy said.

It wasn't clear whether he meant Snape or his father, but either way, Harry had an objection: "Malfoy blood could never be a tool. You know he'd never think of things that way."

Malfoy's eyes went unfocused. "You're right," he said. "My blood is a distinction. If you wanted blood for a tool, you'd want --"

"That other kind of blood," Hermione said wryly, putting out her hand.

"See, 'Mione. I'm sure Prudence always told you: 'When you grow up, love, you can be anything you want to be.' " He had Dr. Granger's slightly shrill voice down. "'A doctor, a member of Parliament, the helpless tool of a powerful wizard ...' " He jabbed the quill into her fingertip.

"Right," she said, milking out a drop of blood. "Watch out I don't transfigure your sheets into sandpaper again."

The blood fell to the center of the page and disappeared -- and then with a shimmer the page was covered with a familiar, elegant hand in rusty red-brown ink.

Malfoy began flipping pages excitedly. "Maps, diagrams, sigils -- it's all here, all of it's here. We'll find an answer here, I'm sure of --"

There was a banging at the door, and Tiffany said, "Oliver Wood" just as Oliver himself burst through the door. "What are you people doing?" he said. "Every Ravenclaw in the castle is unconscious, Sofia's halfway through a Nervalitum potion without help, and you just walked off and left Minerva's body in the dungeon --"

Malfoy closed the book. "We have the means to avenge her now," he said, mouth hard. "Let's go see to the rest."

15. Memorials

The predawn sky was clear, pinkening and still scattered with stars, but the wind off the lake was cold. McGonagall's body was laid out in a flat-bottomed boat, looking not asleep but very, very dead.

Madeleine Aerie, face wet with tears, picked up the wand that lay on McGonagall's chest and used it to set the boat alight, then tossed the wand into the flames and gave the boat a shove with her foot. "Vale, Minerva," she said.

The boat floated slowly out into the lake, catching light as it went, and they watched it out of sight in silence.

Hagrid, who had come back in great haste for the funeral, blew his nose into a large dotted handkerchief. "Still can't believe she's gone," he said damply. "It can't ever be th' same without her."

"I wonder if she'll come back," Hermione sniffled. "To keep Dumbledore company."

"She was forever complaining about the cold," Malfoy said. "I shouldn't wonder if she decided to
haunt a nice hotel in Cote d'Azur." He blew his nose in a handkerchief that precisely matched his white funeral robe.

Harry's eyes stung, but only from staring at the burning boat. He hadn't cried for any of them, he realized. Not for Cedric, and not once since. And now -- well, he owed them more than an afterthought, didn't he.

Besides, he didn't want to start crying without being sure he'd be able to stop.

"It's a bit irregular," Madeleine said, "but I believe we'll postpone the choosing of the new Head until tomorrow before breakfast. Michelle and I are within hours of completing the Nervalitum potion, and I believe Harry and Hermione and Draco are investigating a possible breakthrough in the unmining process?"

"I imagine you'll be needin' a hand wi' the cleanup?" Hagrid asked Ron. "I can stay a bit now that I've got me stren'th back."

And they all began to move slowly up the lawn.

"We mustn't get our hopes up," Hermione was saying, though judging from how fast she was walking, her own hopes were well ahead of her. "There mightn't be a single key to bring them all down."

"Of course there will be," Malfoy said. "Taking them all down would have been an exquisitely symbolic act of ownership on the part of Lucius Malfoy, Headmaster of Occupied Hogwarts. We just have to figure out how."

As they came to the staff common room, Hermione seemed to notice that Harry was lagging behind. "Harry?" she said.

"I need to -- I have some things I --"

She nodded. "Just come to the library when you're done."

Harry pulled Hedwig's cage aside and opened the wardrobe behind it. Suitcase -- trunk -- yes, there it was: Kat's bundle of letters. He laid them on the bed, pulled the curtains shut, propped a pillow against the headboard, and began to read.

_I can't tell you how sad I was to hear about Albus. You must be ...

Rumor has it you were seriously injured in that duel, so I don't know if you'll be getting this, but I just wanted to wish you a quick recovery and to tell you to owl me if there's anything at all I can ...

You remember Lavender Brown, don't you? Her oldest brother's little girl was going to start Hogwarts this year, but ...

I'm very sorry to tell you that Sirius ...

We're off to Romania next week. Charlie's marrying a doctor named Sofia -- seems appropriate, as he spends most of his time in the infirmary with ...

You've probably already heard it from Ron, but I'm afraid Lee Jordan ...

You won't believe it, but I've been promoted. One more step up the ladder and I'll be Deputy Minister of ...
I'm sure you already know how much Colin admired you, and I think he would want you to have ...

I'm meeting the rest of them in Egypt to see Keket turn six. First birthday since Bill died, so it won't be much of a party, but she's a brave little kid -- 'brave as a Kobalin,' her godmother says ...

I'm writing a history of the war, and I was wondering if you could write me a page or two on exactly what you ...

I miss you, Harry, and I try to be patient, but you haven't sent one word since that two-sentence owl to tell me you were in America so I'd know you weren't dead. I don't even know if you're ever coming back or if Voldemort really destroyed you after all ...

All the deferred emotions were still there, waiting for him. All the guilt and the grief, all the small joys he hadn't felt he had the right to share.

For a moment he felt that same icy paralysis that had gripped him when the fat little ward matron in St. Mungo's had gently told him that Dumbledore was dead -- that feeling that the only safe thing to do was to walk away and leave his real life standing absolutely still, because every step he took into his future was a step away from a debt he owed in blood.

But only a child thought that blood could be owed and repaid like a borrowed quill. Blood just was, wasn't it; the living had it, and the dead didn't, and the only thing it was good for was being alive.

He looked at the pile of letters for a moment more, then shouldered his Firebolt and took off.

The little Weasley family graveyard was in a clearing just over the hill from the family Quidditch grounds. It was easy to recognize the small Egyptian cat statue that marked Bill's grave -- it was the only statue in the yard that looked less than a century old. It narrowed its eyes at Harry in a friendly way when he brushed away the leaves at its feet to uncover the name and the dates, but otherwise made no remark.

Harry was still Muggle enough that when he conjured a flower to leave behind, it was a red poppy. The cat sniffed it, then tasted it politely.

Just over the hill from Ottery St. Catchpole was the village of Kettlewick, where Cedric Diggory was interred in a neatly kept churchyard on the wizarding side of town. His stone, a badger, was again the only new one in sight.

It suddenly occurred to Harry what a shock it must be when wizards died in their teens and twenties, before they'd lived out a tenth of their lifespans. He remembered hiding in the Muggle graveyard behind Grimbridge Junior School, between the rows of stones for children killed in an epidemic. Martha Elizabeth, 1916-1919. Beloved daughter.

After a moment he laid a poppy at the badger's feet and took to his broomstick again.

Sirius was buried at Ravenscarp in a splendid wizard graveyard where even the topiaries were animated. Harry stood for a long time looking at the simple, unadorned stone. They'd hardly known each other, really. He'd meant to change that, to come back from America and really get to know the man as something other than a protector and a link to his parents. Not enough time. There was never enough time.

He brushed his hand gently over the name carved in the stone, then walked slowly back to the broomstick. He had many miles to go before nightfall.
Like Farnwinning, where Lee Jordan's parents had had to tell their Muggle neighbors that their son had died in an auto accident rather than name him a hero in a war they'd never heard of. Like Maryskip, where a tiny stone bird fluttered and sang on the tiny grave of Lark Brown.

And then to London and Diagon Alley.

"Ah, Mr. Potter," said Ollivander out of the darkness. "I was wondering when I'd see you here."

He didn't say "What can I do for you?" or anything else shopkeeperly. He simply clasped his hands behind his back and waited.

Harry let the wand drop from its loop inside his sleeve into his hand. It didn't feel like holding a wand that belonged to someone else. He laid it on the counter.

"Ah," Ollivander said. "It has come into your hands at last."

Harry looked at the dark wood. "It was my father's, wasn't it."

Ollivander nodded. "Mahogany, dragon heartstring." He ran a proprietary finger over the handle. Harry would have sworn that the wand rose a little to his hand, like a stroked cat. "Not exactly what I would have predicted for Harry Potter. But perhaps now the time has come when you can give over being the other half of Voldemort and become merely yourself, eh?"

Harry was surprised at the strength of the anger that washed over him. He pushed it down again and said nothing.

"And it's possible," Ollivander went on, "that the wand may have ... matured a little during its years of dormancy -- yes, young Potter, a wand is a living creature, though not precisely a sentient one, and is as capable of growing and changing as you are yourself."

"Is this -- usual? For a wizard's wand to be handed down when he's dead?"

"It's not uncommon," Ollivander said, "and a fine mark of respect, in my opinion. Some families, of course, keep to the oldest tradition and burn the wand with the body. And for the sentimental, shops such as Willow and Wombly's will transfigure a loved one's wand into a sword or a quill or something of the sort. Terribly wasteful, if you ask me. I remember a witch from Coventry who had her late husband's wand transfigured into a cane -- a most unfortunate choice, as the deceased had in life been passionately fond of a dance called the Jolly Hare ..." He smiled. "And a few find their way back to me."

"Should I leave you this one, then?"

"Whatever for? No, no, keep it, boy. If it is ever inadequate to the task of working as your partner, believe me that it will find a way to let you know."

Twilight was falling when he arrived, cold and tired, at Godric's Hollow.

His parents had been living as Muggles, and they'd been buried as Muggles, under a simple, unmoving stone marked POTTER. He stood in the little village graveyard for a long time trying to feel anything at all.

For as long as he could remember, he'd been telling himself stories about his real parents, and the truth, when he'd learned it, had been beyond his wildest tales. Handsome, clever, talented. Magical. But however he tried -- however he examined the photos Hagrid had collected for him, read the
letters Sirius had shared, stared at their tombstone -- he couldn't make them real in his mind.

A breeze blew a shower of white petals down on his head, and he shivered. What on earth was he trying to do, anyway? There was no sense in this. He hadn't known them. They were part of a life he couldn't get back.

He flew above the graveyard and headed north ... and then swung south again. He couldn't come this far without going back to where it all started.

If Harry hadn't known exactly where to look, he would have walked right past the ruins of the little cottage, convinced that he'd seen nothing but the back gardens of the houses in the next street over. The whole area was laced with Ministry spells -- not just an Inconspicuus to distract passing Muggles, but a multisensory array of illusions convincing enough to hide the spot from wizards as well.

Harry wondered what sort of magical visitors the spells were aimed at. Tourists? Vandals? Death Eaters bent on revenge?

But Remus' letter had told him how to find the spot, and with the help of Remus' spells, he walked right past the barrier of illusion and saw the place as it was.

This many years after the fire, there wasn't much left. A weed-choked foundation, a crumbling chimney, a few roses struggling to bloom among the thistles in what had once been the front garden. Harry stepped through a gap -- it might have been the remains of the front door, or only a spot where the stone had weakened and crumbled -- and walked through the weeds and rubble where the inside of the house had been.

The back wall had been of stone. It had survived the fire, only to be partly pulled down in the intervening years by some sort of vine, which now wrapped among the stones and bound them to the ground. Paper and cloth and litter were piled in a corner where a bit of surviving wall met the chimney. Harry knelt to poke at the mess with the tip of his wand, but found only nests from generations of mice.

He stared at the rain-bleached rags and bits of newspaper and felt a terrible emptiness. Of course it was a ruin -- a ruin was what you got when you burned a cottage to the ground and then left it untouched for more than twenty years. He hadn't expected to find anything recognizable.

But somehow he'd thought he'd be able to feel them.

Stupid, when you really thought about it. But he'd wanted something to come home to.

He knuckled his burning eyes and gave the litter a kick. There wasn't really so much of it; in a few moments he'd used the side of his foot to herd most of it out of the corner, where the wind caught it and swept it away.

Now there were two waist-high fragments of crumbling stone wall, at right angles to each other. Since he already had his wand in his hand, he gave it a flick and transfigured them into a stone bench. He smoothed the walls enough to stop loose rocks from tumbling onto someone's head, but left the top edge as jagged as nature had made it.

It was interesting-looking. He rather liked it.

If someone sat on the bench, they'd want something to look at right about where he was standing. A fountain, perhaps. Harry conjured a bubbling pool of water; then, thinking of Sunday, he added the
little water spider, Kananeskey Amai'yehi, bringing the first fire across the water in a bowl on her back.

A little grass now? Yes, that made everything more pleasant. A scatter of violets -- he seemed to remember Sirius saying his mother had been especially fond of those. "On the other hand, she never liked lilies that much," he'd added, and Harry closed his eyes so he could see again his godfather's smile.

When he opened them, the whole project looked silly to him -- a bench, a fountain, a few square feet of grass, entirely surrounded by weeds and ruined masonry. Really, who did he think he was fooling? It wasn't even worth doing at all.

Or else it was worth doing exquisitely.

And surely they deserved that. He rolled up his sleeves and began transfiguring in earnest.

A clump of dandelions into a cluster of pear trees, just coming into blossom. Another into a bed of firebird achillea, with a little statue of Fawkes on a perch above the flowers. Another into night-blooming heartsease -- no, wait. A twist of his hand took them out of the bed and put them instead into a planter shaped like a large stone cauldron.

He felt his exhaustion lifting a little, and realized he was singing the manito chant. He went on singing as he transfigured bare spots into stony paths, crumbling dirt into terraces, sticks into bushes. Bits of the foundation into more benches, more statues, low stone walls. Weeds into tiny hidden beds of trilliums in the shade of overhanging trees, clusters of butterfly bushes like the ones Kat had coaxed into blooming in the Coven courtyard. With a little microclimate in every corner, just enough for aloe to grow across the walkway from ferns.

He was out of breath, and his face was damp with sweat, and there was something vibrant and sweet and beautiful everywhere he looked. And let Malfoy laugh if he wanted to, but it was exquisite. It was, he thought with a warm feeling of pride, worthy of them all.

Harry stepped back onto the sidewalk and studied it, a lush little world of secrets hidden away between two cottages. It seemed only proper to invite everyone, Muggle and wizard, to come in.

He took down the Ministry illusions. Then he enlarged the last fallen stone and carved letters in it: Potter Memorial Park.

No, that wasn't quite it.

He smoothed the words out of the stone again. And then he put an Incisium charm on his wand, and stroke by clumsy stroke, in his own messy handwriting, he carved:

\textit{In memory of}

James Potter

Lily Evans Potter
It didn't even have a name yet, this war. And he was not about to put Voldemort's stupid, made-up name on a stone in honor of his victims. At last he wiped his wet cheeks and wrote:

*and all who died fighting the Dark.*

That wasn't quite it, was it? Because Goyle hadn't fought the Dark, but it had killed him anyway. And Remus and Malfoy -- they were still alive, but nobody could ever give back what had been stolen from them.

He wiped his face with his hands, then wiped his hands on his robe. He'd have to ask Malfoy, or maybe Hermione. Penelope -- she was good with words. Maybe she'd --

No, no. No procrastinating. He shook himself. It would have to be good enough.

Except that it wasn't, because it was too anonymous. He bent over one last time, and smoothed out a new space in the stone, and wrote his own name:

*Harry Potter*

That looked stupid. Egotistical. He wiped it out and flung his wand down in the dirt.

No. This wasn't some official memorial put up by a Ministry subcommittee. It was his gift to them, and he wanted everyone to know, even if it made him look like an idiot. He found his wand and put his name back in again.

His hand was cramping and the letters were misshapen. The P looked like a D. He erased it and wrote it again. The wand slipped in his sweaty hand and left a big gouge in the stem of the letter. He threw down the wand again.

He couldn't make it right.

He hauled in a great sob of breath. People he'd loved were dead. People he cared about were hurt and grieving. He'd been robbed of his family and his childhood. Nothing could make it right, not ever.

He knelt on the mossy path, and the white petals of the blooming pear trees fell on the carved stone, and he cried.

______________

Twilight gave way to night as he flew north. Weary and cold as he was, he felt something inside him relax when the bulk of the castle reared up black against the blue-black sky.

He hovered beside the Astronomy tower for a moment, and then, giving in to impulse, he laid his hand on the damp wall. A bit of stone crumbled off beneath his fingers and dropped away into the darkness, and his laugh had some tears behind it. Good old Hogwarts, one half stone and the other half spells.

His home.

He laid his other hand against the wall, too. Inside there, like the heart in a human body, were Malfoy and Hermione still working away at their research, and Ron and Charlie and Oliver and the rest cleaning up after the battle, and Remus sleeping in the infirmary while Sofia walked softly
between the rows of curtained beds. And in the dormitories the children were living out their own ambitions and intrigues and romances and disappointments ...

His family, he thought. This must be what people meant when they used that word.

Sirius' cane hung at a jaunty angle above the grand entry. Inside, the suit of armor nodded to him as he passed, and Usher the Untidy looked up to greet him before going back to trying to disentangle his lace sleeves from his waistcoat buttons.

The letters were still scattered over his bed, but he didn't feel like sleeping anyway. He flung his cloak and his Firebolt on the couch and headed up to the hospital wing. If everybody had gone to bed, he could sit with Remus for a while.

But when he opened the door, the first thing he saw was Madeleine clutching Sofia, and when she raised her face to look over Sofia's dark hair, Harry saw that her beaky face was wet with tears.

"What's happened?" His stomach plummeted.

"'Arry!" Sofia let go and ran over, laughing and crying at the same time. "Oh, 'Arry, the sleeperss wake!"

Madeleine wiped her face. "Hermione and Draco took down the last mines this afternoon, and we've just finished the Nervalitum potion and begun to administer it --"

"Charlotte iss awake, and Ursa, and Rose iss stirring --"

"Remus?"

"Here," said a hoarse voice. He was very pale and he needed a haircut, but on the whole he looked no worse than he usually did after the moon. Sofia ran to him, scolding: "You should not be tryink to walk!"

"You forget that I'm used to periodic bouts of unconsciousness." Remus turned to Harry, and whatever he saw on Harry's face made him smile a little.

He'd been the one who'd written to tell Harry of Sirius' death. Harry had read the letter this afternoon for the first time. As his executor, I'll be going through the house over the coming year. I promise I won't throw away anything of James and Lily's I find, no matter how small, he'd written. I certainly never expected to be the last of us, nor to have to mourn him twice, but nature seems to repeat the pattern: two dead, one in Azkaban, and me alone remaining as carrier of all those memories ...

Harry flung his arms around him. It seemed to take Remus by surprise, and his arms hung for a moment before coming up to return the embrace fiercely.

"Remus," Harry said. "God, I was so scared."

"Me too," Remus said into his hair.

"Listen," Harry said when they finally separated. "Are you up to visitors? Because I know Michelle will want to see you, if she's still up --"

"She'll be down at the wake," Madeleine called.

"Wake?" Remus said. Sofia put her hand on his shoulder.

"Staff common room," Madeleine said. "We'll head down after we're done here. Tell Oliver to save a
A roar of voices met him at the common room fireplace. "Harry!" called Oliver. "Come'n have a drink."

"I will in a minute, Oliver -- seen Michelle?"

"Michelle!" Oliver cried, and every hand in the room shot into the air. "To Michelle! For the hip -- the hepatica!"

Michelle blushed fiercely and raised a glass of some russet liquid. Harry leaned close to be heard over the tumult. "Remus is awake. He'd like to see you." She turned surprised blue eyes on him, then hurried to the fireplace.

"Another toast!" Oliver shouted. "Penol -- Penep -- Penny! She got hold of a flying carpet!"

"Penelopel!" they all shouted.

Hagrid pushed a drink at Harry. He took a sip and gasped -- it was like a hit of alcohol directly to the bloodstream. "What is this?"

"Oliver's making claymores," Charlie said. "Caledonian Dew, sugar, lemon, and an effervescing charm. In the Headmistress's honor, dinna ye ken." His accent was atrocious.

"So called," Penelope added cheerfully, "because they're deadly weapons."

"Harry!" Oliver cried. "Harry Potter! Our leerless feeder!"

"Harry!" they all roared, and before half of them finished drinking, Oliver was on his feet again: "Hemi -- Hermy! The brains of the outfit!"

When she heard his name, Hermione hurried over. Her eyes were red, but she was beaming. "Harry," she said, and pulled him into a long, tight hug. "Where on earth have you been?" she said as she released him. "Did you hear? Draco took them all down, every last one of them, it was his father's cane --"

"You'll have to tell me everything," Harry said. "And I've just been to the infirmary -- Remus is awake and they're giving the Nervalitum to all of them --"

"Sofia!" shouted Oliver, and they all cheered.

"Where's Malfoy?" Harry asked Hermione.

"Over there somewhere --"

Harry spotted him under the portmap with Ron and Phoenix and an empty seat where Hermione must have been, eating fruit from a bowl. He had on that same plum-colored robe he'd worn at the opening feast, and as Harry watched, he met his eyes with the same look -- recognition, attraction, a sort of cautious, well-guarded hope --

Harry edged around the crowds and took Hermione's seat. "You have food? God, I'm famished." He took a handful of grapes off Malfoy's plate.

"Ron!" Oliver cried. "For a 'lectric torch when you need it most!"
Harry grinned at him and raised his glass.

"Draco," Ron suggested, and Oliver repeated: "Draco! Still a Seeker!"

Harry looked at Malfoy, who was looking at him with a wry smile, and shouted, "Draco!" with the rest. He clicked glasses with Malfoy, and then he leaned right over both glasses and kissed him.

There was a choking sound behind him, and then a roar of laughter and applause and a whistle from Hagrid, and then someone took his glass out of his hand and he wrapped Malfoy up in a hug so tight he squeaked.

"I hear you're a hero," he said into Malfoy's ear.

"We're all heroes," Malfoy said roughly. "Every damned one of us."

Oliver proposed so many toasts that eventually he was reduced to drinking in honor of inanimate objects --"Ropeladder! Ra -- wa -- wand!" In the midst of proposing a toast to fireplaces, he fell silent, and presently from that corner of the room, over Penelope's giggles, they heard a definite sound of snoring.

Remus, who had arrived in time to be well toasted, had fallen asleep as well, his head in Michelle's lap. Hermione and Ron, eyes heavy, were crowded into a chair that was only big enough for one, but neither of them seemed to mind the close quarters.

Over by the door there was a burst of giggles; Harry looked and saw Phoenix Skye bent over Cypherus Summs' palm, and both of them were laughing helplessly until tears rolled down their faces.

"Let's get out of here," he whispered, and Malfoy nodded and stood to follow him.

Harry felt Malfoy's eyes on him as he flung the coverlet to the floor, along with all the letters that had been piled on it. He looked up and found Malfoy standing in the doorway between the sitting room and the bedroom.

After a moment Harry held out his hand. Malfoy took three steps into the room and took it, and Harry pulled him close and buried his face in Malfoy's satiny hair.

"I never asked if you forgave me," he said, relieved that he couldn't see Malfoy's face. "For freezing you. For taking off the Mark without your consent."

"For being a Gryffindor, you mean." There was a smile in Malfoy's voice. "I don't suppose you can help it."

"I wanted --" Harry began, and Malfoy raised his head.

"Sh. I know." And he kissed him softly until the desire to explain himself was gone.

When Harry moved to shake off his robe, Malfoy stopped his hands. "Let me."

"All right."

Malfoy pushed the robe off his shoulders, unknotted his tie, worked the buttons of his shirt, looking at his hands rather than at Harry's face, with a curious concentration that made Harry's throat tight. The shirt fell open, and Malfoy picked up his hands one at a time to undo the buttons at the cuffs,
then started on his trouser buttons as the shirt dropped to the floor.

Harry toed off his shoes, stepped on his socks to pull them off, shook his feet free of trousers and pants, and looked up into Malfoy's serious face. He reached for Malfoy's robe, but before he made contact, Malfoy had removed all his own clothes with a single spell, so that Harry's fingertips brushed the warm skin under his collarbone. Malfoy shuddered.

His eyes never left Harry's as he pulled him down to the bed.

It had never seemed as though Malfoy was holding back before, but now he worked over Harry's body with a slow fierceness that was new and paralyzingly good. Harry felt he should reciprocate -- should do something other than shake and whimper. But by the time Malfoy returned to Harry's mouth, Harry's hands felt so heavy that he could barely lift them from the fine, humid skin of Malfoy's back.

"Let me," Malfoy said again, and Harry nodded wordlessly and let himself be touched and tasted and opened and owned.

Malfoy, braced above him on his elbows, pinned him with eyes gone dark in his pale face. Harry struggled to keep his own eyes open against the demands of his senses as Malfoy moved in with slow intensity, all his usual playfulness burned away.

"Yes," Harry said, and it felt good, so he said it again: "Yes -- yes -- Draco!"

16. Sorting

"It's no good my telling you not to get your hopes up, is it, Draco?" Hermione said as they sat at the top table.

"I've never understood this business of not getting one's hopes up," he answered. "Is it really so unbearable to be disappointed?"

In the center of the dais sat Phoenix Skye with the Sorting Hat on her head, long legs drawn up awkwardly.

"When I was being sorted, I thought the chair must be the right size for adults," Ron murmured to Charlie. "Guess it's not the right size for anyone."

"You can't be seriously thinking that the hat might choose you as Headmaster," Harry said to Draco.

"Why shouldn't it? I've got intelligence, imagination ... no taste for odd headgear, but I suppose that could come later ..."

Phoenix left the hat behind on the chair; Madeleine Aerie picked it up and put it on, with an expression like someone bracing herself for pain, and almost immediately took it off again, looking relieved.

"Well, why you?" Harry said. "Why shouldn't it pick me?"

"Do you want to be Headmaster?"

"Hadn't really thought about it," Harry said. "But I'm sure I could do it."
"There you have it," Draco said. "Gryffindor in a nutshell."

"Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall --" Hermione began.

"Were the right heads for wartime, when what we needed most was courage," Draco said. "But the war's over now, and what we need most is vision."

"And you think you're the one to provide that vision?" Harry said.

"Who better?"

"There you have it," Harry said. "Slytherin in a nutshell."

Hermione nudged him. "Your turn, Harry."

Harry sat in the chair -- it really was ridiculously low, even though last time he'd sat in it his feet hadn't touched the floor -- and put the hat on his head.

"Hm," said the familiar voice of the Sorting Hat. "We meet again, Harry Potter."

Harry tried to project friendly greetings in his head, which was more difficult than he would have expected, but the hat replied in a pleased voice, "Why, thank you. Likewise, I'm sure," so he must have succeeded.

"Not especially interested in being Headmaster, though, are you," the hat went on.

_Not really_, Harry thought. _It would be so nice just to teach. One challenge at a time, for a change. But if the school really needed me ..._

"Oh, there's no need for further sacrifice as yet," the hat said. "Go and send Miss Granger up. I'm sure I'll be speaking with you again soon, Professor Potter."

When Hermione emerged from the chair, she was beaming so broadly that Harry thought the hat must have chosen her. But she tapped Draco on the shoulder and sat down, still grinning.

Draco's conversation with the hat wasn't as long as Harry had expected, but he looked thoughtful as he sat down. "Go ahead," he said to Ron.

"You must be joking," Ron said, and pushed Oliver toward the chair.

When everyone on the staff had had a turn, the hat sat there silently for a few moments as they all watched. Then the hat sang out:

"Oh, I'm the smartest hat there is. My brains are packed in tight. And if you're half as smart as me, you'll know I'm always right."
Harry looked at Hermione. "Surely it doesn't plan to ..."

"Sh," she said. "Sometimes you just have to humor it."

"It took bold hearts to win the war.

But put all that behind.

The tasks that lie before you now

Will call for clever minds.

I've had a sit on every skull

And rummaged all about.

So I'm quite sure I know the man

To sort old Hogwarts out."

There was a pause while the hat made the most of its moment in the spotlight, and then it called out in a loud voice: "The new Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is ... Cypherus Summs!"

"Summs?" Charlie looked shocked. "I thought he was going to retire straight away."

Draco was still looking off into the distance, lost in thought, but at Charlie's words his eyes suddenly widened. Then he began to applaud. After a moment the others joined in.

Cypherus stood up shakily and nodded to the hat. "I appreciate your confidence," he said. "And your patience," he added to the staff. "I had originally planned to return to my home in Arden at the end of this school year, but the Sorting Hat has convinced me to postpone my retirement for a year or two longer help Hogwarts make the transition from war recovery to a new era."

"Do you see it now?" Draco murmured to Hermione. "What an intriguing choice."

She rolled her eyes at him. "It gives you just enough time to find the perfect green fedora."

He drew himself up. "I wouldn't settle for less than a silk top hat."

"Can you stay awhile, Hagrid?" Hermione asked. "Or do you have to go back to Greater Wrenching?"

"Bless yeh, no -- I'm back t'stay," Hagrid said. "Another scone?"
"Stone, did he say?" Draco whispered in Harry's ear, feeling his jaw gingerly with his fingers. Harry hid a smile and went on shredding his own leathery scone into crumbs in the hopes that it would look as though he'd eaten it.

"It was good to be wi' my people, but Hogwarts'll always be my home," Hagrid went on.

"You'll want to be back with the animals." Ron shifted uncomfortably. "I suppose Charlie can teach, er, arithmancy?"

"Does he know anything about arithmancy?" Hermione asked. Ron shrugged.

"Rubbish," Hagrid said stoutly. "Groundskeeper's what Dumbledore made me, rest his soul, an' groundskeeper's good enough fer me."

There was a tap at the door of the hut. "Come in!" Hagrid bellowed, and Harry grabbed for his teacup as the table rattled.

"Might I interrupt for a moment?" Summs stuck his head through the door. He was wearing a purple baseball cap that said, "Arithmancers Do It By Number." At their stares, he touched it. "It turns out to be indispensable," he said, winking at Hermione.

Hagrid had stood when Summs entered. "Headmaster! Sit yerself down. Scone? Tea?"

"Thank you, Hagrid, I will," Summs said. "Two sugars, please." Harry stared with fascinated horror as Summs, with some difficulty, broke off a piece of scone -- and then dropped it into his cup and used a spoon to poke it under the surface of the tea.

"I wanted to speak with you all about some matters of concern before convening the entire staff," Summs went on, tucking a napkin into the collar of his robe. "First of all, as studies have been so badly disrupted by the events of the year, I'd like to offer a summer term, if you would be willing to forgo your vacations to teach remedial classes."

There were nods of agreement all round. Hermione looked especially pleased with the idea.

"We must also address the school's financial condition, which I fear is shockingly weak."

"The hiatus, the damage -- it must be," Draco said, frowning. "I never considered that."

"Of course you wouldn't," Summs agreed, with Ravenclaw wryness. "With your upbringing, I wouldn't expect you to have a lick of financial sense. Which is why I'm inviting you to lend Hogwarts a substantial amount of money to fund our repairs -- at a competitive rate of interest, of course."

Draco beamed. "I'll arrange it immediately." Ron and Hermione snickered, and he glared at them. "It's an extremely sensible investment," he added pointedly, "as it will guarantee my future interest in the school's finances."

Summs' eyes twinkled in a way eerily reminiscent of Dumbledore, and Harry found himself grinning at him. "Now, Remus has kindly agreed to take the position of deputy headmaster. Madeleine is willing to step into my place as Head of Ravenclaw, which creates another vacancy. I believe you have expressed an interest in overseeing the fortunes of Slytherin, Draco?"

"Like he's going to say no," Ron said, and Harry looked at Draco's cheek, flushed pink with pleasure, and had to resist the temptation to kiss it.
"Another position which remains to be filled is that of caretaker, which has been vacant since the tragic death of Argus Filch," Summs said, and turned to Ron. "Perhaps you would be willing to take on this responsibility?"

Draco snorted loudly and raised his teaspoon in salute. "Congratulations, Weasley. Your first real job offer. Your mother will be so proud."

Ron tilted his head to one side. "Yeah," he said eventually. "I reckon Peru can wait a while." Hermione flung her arms around him, squealing, and Hagrid caught his hand and pumped it vigorously.

"This is the famous Ravenclaw wisdom?" Draco inquired with elaborate concern. "A Weasley in charge of maintaining order?"

Ron just gave him a lazy smile over the top of Hermione's head. "I grew up across the hall from the famous Weasley and Weasley, Limited. I know all the pranks and then some."

Hermione released him to smile at Draco. "And you've met his mother," she said. "He also knows all the punishments and then some."

"Say!" Ron grinned suddenly. "If I catch someone meddling, I can use her Toolfinger Charm!"

"Or punish eavesdroppers with Wall Ears," Harry said. "Or tattletales with Taffy Tongues ..."

Draco looked out at a few students who were playing broomstick croquet on the lawn. "Poor little urchins," he said. "They won't know what hit them."

"Y'don't mean t'go spoilin' all their fun, now?" Hagrid said to Ron, looking worried.

Ron just grinned. "Reckon I know what's fun and what's bloody dangerous, having done a great deal of both."

Summs cleared his throat. "Which brings me to one last appointment."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other. "Arithmancy?"

"No, not just yet," Summs said. "Nor will we be addressing the need to add calligromancy to the curriculum at the moment. There is another matter which must be foremost in our minds at all times: the well-being of the children." He fished the scone out of his tea with his spoon and chewed it placidly, glancing around the circle. "Many of our students have lost friends and family in the war, and of course the mines have created their own traumas. Childhood is always one of the first casualties of war, and the effects can endure long after the fighting is done." His eyes rested on Harry for a moment, and Harry's own eyes stung. He felt Draco's shoulder pressing against his, and reached down to touch his hand under the table.

"To that end," Summs said, "I'm creating a new position on the Hogwarts staff, the Children's Custodian. We need someone who will always be there, offering children comfort and wisdom in all their worries, large and small. Hermione nodded enthusiastically, and Summs smiled gently at them all. "And I think you'll agree that the person best suited to the role is our host, Rubeus Hagrid."

There was a second of silence and then a great roar of applause. Harry leapt from his seat to hug Hagrid; Ron and Hermione had gotten there first, but there was enough of him for three of them to hug at the same time. Above their heads, Harry could hear him saying damply, "I'd be more'n honored, sir," and then blowing his nose.
"You really were a superb choice for Headmaster," Draco told Summs admiringly. "My compliments to the Sorting Hat."

Summs stood and tapped his baseball cap, which rearranged itself to read, "Thinking Cap."

"Watch and learn, my boy," he said. "Watch and learn."

As a murmur went through the hall, Harry looked up and saw Spielberg, flanked by an escort of suspicious-looking owls, with a small parcel tied to his leg. Harry quickly cleared a spot on the table, and Spielberg flopped down gracelessly and began eating out of the kipper dish while Harry untied the parcel.

"I asked Kat to send some American sweets," he said, opening the box.


Hermione sniffed at a mint and pulled back. "Potent," she said.

Spielberg honked at Harry and poked the parcel. "What is it?" Harry asked him.

"There's something else in there." Ron rummaged through the wrapping and handed something to Harry.

Sunday must have forgiven him; it was a new speedwell.

Harry pulled down his sock and tied it around his ankle. Draco's mouth tightened. "Lovely," he said. "As though you didn't project enough of an air of savagery already."

Harry smiled. "Want me to ask him to make you one, too?"

He took his bag and walked around the outside of the staff table to the other end where Dumbledore's ghost hovered. He'd been talking to Professor Binns, but Binns was walking Harry's way now, a puzzled frown on his face.

"It's a very odd thing," Binns said as he drew even with Harry. "Albus has been bringing some matters to my attention, and --" He passed his hand thoughtfully through a nearby chair. "It appears that I am emeritus."

There didn't quite seem to be a right answer to that, but Harry finally offered, "Congratulations."

Binns brightened. "Why, thank you," he said. "Perhaps now I may devote myself to finishing my monograph on the 1660 Treaty of Osnabrug ... I had been awaiting the opportunity to consult some letters which the library has recently acquired ..." And he walked off, mumbling happily to himself and seeming not to notice that he had gone right through the table.

Harry turned to find Dumbledore's ghost watching him cheerfully. "Harry," he beamed. "Have you forgiven me yet?"

Harry looked up sharply. Dumbledore was twinkling as usual. "I didn't -- there's --" He took a deep breath. "Yes," he said. "I'm sorry."

"All in good time, my boy, all in good time. I've nothing but time now."
"I have something for you," Harry said. "From America." He opened the box of sour candy and held it with two fingers.

Dumbledore passed his mouth through it, just brushing Harry's fingers with icy cold. "Ah! I can almost taste them," he said. "Thank you."

"Dr. Bokor sends his love," Harry said. "He wants to know if you can still dance a hornpipe."

"Oh, better than ever, Harry! For a dancer, freedom from gravity can only be a most welcome improvement." And he rose and began to kick until his ghostly shoe-buckles flashed.

Harry found Draco sitting at the foot of the Snape statue. "And in the meantime, I've already spoken to him about the Slytherins, now that Madeleine is moving over to Ravenclaw," he was saying. "Such plans I have, Severus! Fourth-years and up need to have an independent study, I think -- no more spoon-feeding. Do you suppose those blasted Weasleys would be advisers for the business-minded? I know 'Mione would help with the ones who want to make their mark on the sciences ..."

As Harry drew closer, he could see that Draco had a tabby cat on his lap. At Harry's approach, it stood and stretched, and Harry recognized the glasses-shaped markings around its eyes. Draco's hand passed right through its head. Harry smiled as the cat stalked through a wall and away.

"The Headmaster wants us all to meet and discuss candidates for History of Magic, Draco," he said.

"Tolkach-Rychag, of course," Draco said.

Harry looked at him, startled. "I thought you might be interested yourself."

"And leave the school's most important subject to some lesser intellect?" Draco smirked. "After all, the second Battle of Hogwarts was won on the strength of a fire extinguisher, a rope ladder, a mechanical pencil, and an electric torch."

"Ah. Best see to it that it's taught exquisitely, then," Harry said.

"Of course." Draco stood and stretched gracefully. "I've got Tolkach-Rychag's CV upstairs -- I owled her for it after Christmas. Tell everyone I'll be there in a moment." He made a half-bow to the statue. Harry watched him walk off -- robe falling immaculately to the floor, hair clasped at the crown with a gently writhing emerald snake, a perfect model of Slytherin magnificence -- and smiled.

After a moment the statue made an impatient noise. "Mr. Potter? Is there some way I can assist you, or did you simply wish to stare vacantly?"

Harry turned his attention to the late Potions master. "That's the wrong sort of cauldron, isn't it?" It was the student style, deep and narrow with a rolled rim, rather than the straight-sided models Harry had seen in Snape's workroom.

"Of course it is," Snape said in tones of great annoyance, "and the Magical Artists' Guild should be ashamed of themselves for overlooking an error that's obvious even to you. I was not accustomed to working with inferior tools in life, and I don't see why I should be reduced to it now."

"We'll get it fixed," Harry said. "Someone from the Guild will be out next week to do M -- Minerva's portrait. They can take care of it." He touched the spot on the stone forearm where the Mark was etched. "You want that off as well?"
"No, Mr. Potter, I do not," Snape said. "Someone must serve as a rebuke to the extremely short memory of the wizarding world, now that young Mr. Malfoy has been rendered tabula rasa."

"All right." On impulse, Harry gripped the outstretched hand. "Professor ... thank you," he said. "I mean. You know. For everything."

The huge stone fingers tightened briefly around his. "You're most welcome."

"Ah, Harry." At Summs' approach, Harry stood up from the luncheon table. "I wanted to ask a favor, if I may."

"Sure, Headmaster," Harry said around a mouthful of Linzer torte.

"When I returned to Hogwarts last year, as a temporary measure I was placed in an upper suite," Summs said. "I never expected to stay more than a year, and now that I've taken on the headmaster position, I'm anticipating that the stairs will quickly become a burden. As your rooms are on the ground floor, would you perhaps be willing to relocate?"

"I'd be happy to," Harry said. "I'd love to get higher up and have a better view."

"Good, good," Summs said. "I'll be vacating the Gray Suite. Fifth floor, South Tower. I believe you already know the way." And indeed Harry did; the Gray Suite was right next door to Malfoy's rooms.

"Sleeping chamber's a bit -- cramped, on account of the -- bookshelves," Summs panted as they arrived on the fifth floor, "but when the windows are -- restored, the view will more than -- compensate." He stood for a moment catching his breath before continuing. "Let me just show you the trick of the doors. The thing to do with Captain Raleigh is always to approach from the right, on account of the eye, as you see," he said, walking up to a painting of a pirate with one patched eye and truly disreputable hair. "Captain Raleigh!"

"Evenin', Your Grace" the pirate said, grinning a toothy grin that rather reminded Harry of Hagrid.

"Let me introduce the newest resident of the Gray Suite, Harry Potter."

The Captain gave Harry a salute made grisly by the silver hook that replaced his hand. "An honor and a privilege, young sir," he said.

The bedchamber was indeed tiny, with hardly room for more than the curtained bed and the bookshelves that lined three walls right up to the ceiling. The fourth wall was filled with a curious sculptural frieze of a gruesome scene from the Goblin Rebellion.

But the sitting room was spacious and comfortable, with a cozy study corner and two broad windows that would probably look out over the lake when the stone was removed.

Even after he'd unpacked all his books and supplies, the sitting room was awfully bare. He sat for a moment looking around at the walls, and then he started digging through his trunk. He had no memory at all of packing to go to Florida, but this trunk had stood at the foot of his bed in his dormitory room, and he'd been in the habit of throwing all his souvenirs in it, so ...

Ah. There they were, underneath his old Quidditch robes -- piles and piles of old photographs. And there were still more of them in Kat's parcel of letters.
The biggest of the bunch was a shot of him, Ron, and Hermione, taken by Colin Creevey the day after they'd taken their N.E.W.T.s. Already then the war had made schoolwork seem like an afterthought, and their pale young faces showed the strain of trying to make themselves into soldiers. He smiled reassuringly at them. "Cheer up. We made it," he said, and put the picture up on the wall behind the desk.

And here was the whole Weasley family on a summer trip they'd taken to Romania while Ron was still at school. Bill and his wife were trying to get baby Keket to wave at the camera, but she was more interested in grabbing for Bill's long braid and stuffing it into her mouth.

He smiled even wider at the next one, a group shot of all four seventh-year Seekers. Phoebe Benedict and the Hufflepuff boy, whose name he'd forgotten, were smiling and waving with a fine show of sportsmanship, but Harry and Draco could barely be bothered to look at the camera in between the murderous glares they were throwing at each other.

Here was the Gryffindor group photo from fifth year. Harry smiled sadly at Lee Jordan's happy, hopeful face. He'd wanted to be an announcer for Wizard Wireless, but he'd never even had the chance. Beside Lee, the Weasley twins were proudly holding up a sign: Weasley & Weasley, Ltd., Novelties and Surprises. It was the same sign that still hung over the door of their Hogsmeade shop.

A group shot of the Coven staff, taken when Harry was still new enough that his pale face looked ghostly among their tanned ones. Kat was already casting knowing glances at him and Sunday. "Next time you tell me to lighten up, I'll try to actually do it," he told her.

A Chocolate Frogs collecting card of Nicolas Flamel, and another one of Albus Dumbledore ... Seamus and Omar, beaming, at the door of their cottage in Limerick ... a poster from Angelina Johnson's first year on the Puddlemere main squad ... Colin Creevey, taking his own camera away from his face for just long enough to smile and wave ... a newspaper clipping of Neville taking oath as Deputy Minister of Magic, with Circe Stormlaw looking stern behind him ... Remus in his first year as professor, looking threadbare and half asleep ... Sirius at his parents' wedding, looking carefree and a little bit dangerous. Sirius a few months before his death, looking thin and grave.

His parents, looking young and happy and only a little bit worried. Himself at age one, hair standing out in all directions, waving bye-bye over and over.

A rumbling sound from the bedroom interrupted his thoughts. He looked through the open door and saw the carved panel sliding back, revealing Draco leaning on the wall and smirking.

"Adjoining rooms -- lovely! I've been longing for a library, and this will make a fine one, once we get this silly little bed out."

"What, you want me to sleep in the cage with Hedwig?"

"I want you to sleep," Draco said, "where you've been sleeping for the last four nights. All right?"

Harry looked at Draco's happy, impatient face and pushed down a great bubble of joyful laughter. "Your bed's too soft," he said solemnly.

"Oh, for --" Draco pushed Harry back against Hedwig's perch and kissed him soundly while she clucked in mild alarm. "All right, then. I'll just shove you out on the floor when I'm finished with you."

Harry laughed against Draco's red mouth. "You'll never be finished with me."
"May I have everyone's attention?" The buzz of after-dinner conversation stopped as Summs spoke, and the staff common room fell silent.

"This is an historic moment," he said. "Having dealt with the most urgent repairs, we can finally begin removing the stones from the windows." There were muted cheers around the room. "Why don't you start right here, Mr. Weasley?"

Ron stood up, and Harry and Hermione vacated the couch so he could get closer to the window. He pointed his wand at the stones and murmured, and gradually each stone turned into a square or rectangle of leaded glass.

"Um. It wasn't like that before, was it," Ron said.

"No, no, leave it," Hermione said hoarsely.

It was a cloudy night, and no stars were visible, but in the distance Harry could just see the dark sky give way to the still darker trees of the Forbidden Forest.

"It's beautiful," Harry said.

---

**Epilogue**

"Taylor, Maggie."

"Hufflepuff!"

"Venable, Gavin."

"Gryffindor!"

"Weasley, Keket."

There was a long, breathless pause. All that could be seen of Bill's daughter was the fringe of black-and-copper hair that peeked out beneath the Sorting Hat.

At last the hat said slowly and distinctly: "Slytherin!"

"A Weasley," Draco said. "In Slytherin. My, my, we are in for an interesting year."

Keket hopped down from the stool, waved gaily at the staff, and skipped off to the bottom of the Slytherin table.

Ron blinked. "I don't think there's been a Weasley in Slytherin since ..."

"Sixteen-something," Charlie said. "Eustacius, I think his name was. Wound up in jail for fraud -- bilked a bunch of lords with some sort of scheme to set up a settlement of Brownies in the Virginia colony."

A grunting noise made them look up -- Penelope had transfigured her salt shaker into a pig with wings and sent it buzzing around their heads, oinking madly. Draco swatted at it and she grinned.

"Whitcomb, Ian."
A crowd had gathered around Keket. Harry squinted to see what was happening, and then Charlie clapped his hands over his eyes. "Oh, no," he groaned. "Somehow or other she smuggled that aerolizard in." He turned to Ron. "Good luck, little brother. You get to be the one who takes it away from her."

"I don't suppose she's good enough to transfigure it into an owl?" Ron said glumly.

"Wright, Rosemary."

"Slytherin!"

Among the Ravenclaws, Mary Logan was whispering to the first-years and pointing at the top table, but Harry couldn't tell whether she was drawing their attention to Draco or himself.

"Yang, Helen."

"Hufflepuff!"

Down at the student tables, the older children were elbowing each other and watching the newcomers, waiting to see who would scream when the ghosts came in. The new first-years were gaping at the enchanted ceiling, examining the teachers, sizing one another up, wondering what was going to happen next.

Harry grinned. There was no telling.

End Notes

Julad is the mighty priestess of narrative and the oracle of What Happens Next. She's been nursemaiding this story since its awkward, red-faced, screeching infancy two years ago. Most of the best stuff in the story was her idea, including Draco talking to the Snape statue, the "A Gryffindor will jump off a cliff" proverb, Lucius' involvement in the mines, the memorial to James and Lily, the Sorting Hat's poem, Hagrid's new job, and giving Sunday Coneskey a sex change.

Calico, Cesca, Fox, Julad, and Mia did beta duty and saved me from all sorts of embarrassing errors.

I had tons of other help along the way, too.

In chat, Fox and Rivier helped me pin down Ron's characterization, and Julad, Laura Jacquez Valentine, Luthien, MB, MamaDeb, and Sinopeq talked me through the Slytherin character (with some ideas originally proposed by Minerva McTabby).

Sineala suggested the structure of goblin names, then provided a nifty list of mix-and-match name possibilities.

The multi-lingual Fox gave me a ton of language help: working out the likely shape of a goblin language, correcting syntax in Hermione's archaic reference book, providing one of Malfoy's names (Douce-Douleur means "sweet pain," if you're curious), and coming up with
an undressing spell when I was defeated by the lack of a Latin verb for "unbutton." She's also the one who suggested the final shape of the windows.

Livia helped me with a lot of thinking-out-loud in the early stages of the story, and she offered useful suggestions on the Muggles Memorial. (What do you think, Livia -- would it be a good idea to send Scott Luniak down to Florida to meet Sunday Coneskey?)

Dale gave me valuable critique and encouragement on an earlier draft; due to her input, Hermione became a little less of a Super Witch, which created the opportunity for a larger role for Neville.

Calico, Llew, and Rivier explained all about card shopping in the UK so I wouldn't make the newsagents look more like an American Hallmark store.

And I wouldn't be writing Harry Potter slash at all, or even reading it, if it weren't for Shalott's Harry/Draco stories.

The songs Ginny's band sings at Christmas are "The Bonny Bunch of Roses" (one of those pretty little folk songs about Napoleon) and a Christmas folk song called "There Was a Pig Went Out To Dig."

Julad and I did a DVD Commentary Track, too.

Works inspired by this one: Night-blooming heartsease by julad, Verwandlungen by Antana

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!