A letter from home? A letter from family? Well, Harry Potter knows he has neither, but all the same, it starts with a letter from Surrey. Whatever the Durleys have to say, it can't be anything good, so Harry's determined to ignore it. But then, his evil schoolmate rival spots the letter and his slimy excuse for a teacher intercepts it and forces him to read it. And that sends Harry down a path he'd never have walked on his own.

It will be a year of big changes, a year of great pain, and a year of confronting worst fears. It will be a year of surprising discoveries, of finding true strength, of finding out that first impressions of a person's true colours do not always ring true. It will be a year of paradigm shifts.

And from the most unexpected sources, Harry will have a chance to have that which he has never known: a home ... and a family.

A sixth year fic, this story follows Order of the Phoenix and disregards any canon events that occur after Book 5.
Notes

When starting this, please keep in mind that A Year Like None Other was started long before HBP came out. It was always my intention to write an alternate 6th year and when the canon Year 6 was published, it meant that my own little saga seriously diverged from canon. So reading this, imagine that Years 1-5 did occur, but nothing we discover from HBP and DH is necessarily true this time around.

The most important divergences are these: In this universe, Snape *is* a pureblood and his father's name was Hostilian (which tells you a lot all by itself). Dumbledore never died -- and certainly not at Snape's hand!

This story is completely finished and is about 760,000 words long. It took me a while to get it all posted here at AO3, but I am very happy to report that the whole thing is now online for your (hopefully) intense enjoyment!

And now, on with the show, which begins with A Year Like None Other (completed), continues on into A Summer Like None Other (also completed) and wraps up with A Family Like None Other, a Year 7 novel that I am still writing.

See the end of the work for more notes.
If there was anything that Harry Potter liked more than chocolate frogs or sugar quills, it was getting
mail from his friends. Sometimes, that had been all that had got him through those miserable
summers with the Dursleys. He honestly didn't know how he'd managed to make it through the
monotonous vacations back before he'd known Ron and Hermione and Dean and Seamus and
Remus and Neville… Of course, there'd been that awful summer when Dobby had charmed all the
owls away, when his Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had been furious that he'd spent an entire year
at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. They hadn't wanted him to go, which actually
puzzled Harry whenever he thought about it. It had got him out of their hair for an entire school year.
You'd think they'd have been delighted to send him off to any boarding school, even if it was one
that taught magic. So what if they hated magic? They hated him more.

"Going to open that, mate?" Ron asked between bites.

"Yeah," Harry answered without looking up. It was no wonder that seeing this letter had brought to
mind all those times he'd been stuck at the Dursleys and gasping for mail from his friends. He was at
school now, sixth year, surrounded by happy Gryffindors gulping down a quick lunch -- although
how anybody could be happy before double Potions was a good guess -- and it seemed he'd got a
letter, delivered by magic owl, from those same Dursleys, the ones who hated anything magical.

Nah, couldn't be, Harry decided. It was a joke, right? From Fred and George, even though Harry had
no idea how the twins could have gotten his Muggle address. Sure, sure, they could find his house, if
they had another enchanted car, that is, but to know how to write out the location of it, Muggle style?
But there it was, written right there on the envelope: 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey…

Harry sighed, thinking it less and less likely this could be a joke. Fred and George's father might
work in the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Department at the Ministry of Magic, but since he'd once
asked Harry what the precise purpose of a rubber duck was, Harry didn't think that Mr Weasley
understood much at all about Muggles. And this letter… well, even if you ignored the address, it had
Muggle written all over it. The envelope wasn't made of a nice parchment, it was just paper, and long
and white like the envelopes Uncle Vernon used for business. Besides, a return address? Wizarding
letters didn't need those, and they certainly didn't bear postage!

Sighing, Harry began picking at the little profile of the Queen, just for something to do. It was better
than opening the letter, that was for sure. In over five years, the Dursleys had never once written him
at school. It couldn't be a good sign that they were starting now.

"Eh, Harry?" Ron prompted again, this time with his mouth full. "You want me to open it for you?"

"Nah." Harry shook his head. "I just think… maybe it'd be better if I waited a bit. Yeah. Until after
Potions, you know. Best to go into that with a clear head. That slimy excuse for a teacher'll take a
thousand points off Gryffindor if I let my potion boil over again like last week."

Hermione looked up from the book she'd been obsessing over for the past day and a half, Countering
the Countercurse: Reversing Reversals. "How could you mistake salamander eyes for sea grass,
though, Harry? You should know by now that adding animal elements to a potion based on poppy
seed oil is going to have repercussions! Don't you remember the principles we learned third year,
about animal, vegetable, and mineral, and how some ingredients just want to stay true to class?"

"Ah, Miss Granger. Showing off again, like the arrogant Gryffindor you are." A cool voice from
above made them all look up. Snape, of course, his lips twisted, his eyes burning like twin torches,
only black. Just the sight of it made Harry want to shudder. No, cancel that. It did make him shudder, because he remembered that same look near the end of last year, when the Potions Master had refused to go help Sirius, no matter that Harry was pleading.

Come to think of it, maybe he'd refused because Harry was pleading. In any case, Sirius had died. Suddenly, instead of being worried that Snape might have heard the "slimy excuse for a teacher" remark, Harry hoped he had.

"And Mr Weasley, with his mouth crammed full as usual, dropping crumbs for the house-elves to magic away. Ten points from Gryffindor for sloppiness." His eyes passed over the three of them, but Harry didn't look up. No point, not when he'd just lose points for his house. The rage smouldering in his eyes would be enough to set Snape off. Not that Snape had ever needed an excuse, let alone a reason, to take points off Gryffindor.

Snape slid past them then, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

"The nerve!" Hermione hissed as soon as Snape exited the tall doors at the end of the hall. "He knows perfectly well that the house-elves don't have to sweep this floor! But that's good, isn't it? I mean, they have enough to do. Whoever spelled the floor to blink away debris about to hit it must have thought so---"

"Hermione!" Ron groaned in exasperation. "Do you have room for anything in your head except studies and house-elves? Harry's got a letter he's afraid to open, or didn't you notice?"

She noticed then, plucking the envelope from his fingers and flipping it over twice as she examined it. "Oh. Sorry, Harry."

Ron still didn't know which end was up. "What? What's the matter?"

"It's from the Dursleys," Harry groaned, though how his Muggle relatives had got their hands on a magic owl was still a good question, in his view.

"The Dursleys," Ron slowly repeated. "They don't ever write you."

"So it can't be anything I want to hear," Harry concurred.

"Aw, they can't do much to you," Ron replied, stuffing another slice of carrot cake between his teeth. "It's not like they can take you out of school, is it? Dumbledore'd never stand for it. For one, you're safe here, and for another, how're you going to fight You-Know-Who if you don't become a fully trained wizard?"

"I suppose," Harry murmured, taking the letter back from Hermione. He should probably open it, right? What could the Dursleys do, after all? They'd been cowed the whole summer, just because Mad Eye Moody had given Uncle Vernon some strict advice regarding Harry and mistreatment. In a lot of ways, it had been his best summer yet. The Dursleys had ignored him completely, had looked right through him and acted like he wasn't even in the house, but that was better than chores from dawn until dusk and rants about his parents.

"Read your letter after Potions," Hermione suddenly agreed. "It's probably nothing, Harry, but you don't want to risk it, not with Snape. He's really had it in for you this year, worse than before."

"Yeah," Harry said again, thinking of the pensieve, of Snape's worst memory. Even as angry as he was over Sirius, he was still sorry he'd pried like that. Or maybe he was sorry not so much because he'd offended Snape, but because he'd seen things he really didn't want to know. About his father. About Sirius. "Time for Potions, then," he groaned, pushing to his feet.
"What about the letter?" Ron urged. "It can't be that bad. Why don't you read it on the way?"

"Later," Harry refused. "Much later."

In fact, if he had his way, he just might never open that letter. Harry's expression brightened at that, even if he was on his way to Potions. Yeah, that was it, he'd just never open the letter. The Dursleys wouldn't have written him anything he wanted to read, so that was that. Of course he might have some explaining to do when summer rolled around, but that was months away, still.

Harry shoved the letter deep in his bag, determined to forget about it.
Harry sighed and shoved his Transfiguration textbook away with both hands. He could do the spells, sort of, so why did he have to learn so much blasted theory? And what good had theory ever done him, anyway?

Well, his memory chimed in, if you'd have understood that twinned wands cancel each other out, you'd have been better prepared to see your parents flowing out of Voldemort's wand...

Harry groaned out loud and flopped his head down onto his arms.

"You read it, huh? Was it so bad, after all?"

Looking up, he saw Ron just stepping through the portrait hole. "Oh no, it's not that." A scowl twisted his lips as he'd thought of how close he'd come to reading the letter. He'd actually opened the stupid envelope before he'd chickened out and shoved the whole thing back into his bag. Now why was it that he could face down Voldemort, but he was afraid of one lousy, measly little letter? Ron was right: the Dursleys couldn't really hurt him, not any more. He wasn't small, and helpless, and friendless, now. But still, that letter in his bag was unnerving him more than anything he thought he'd ever faced.

"It's just the extra reading McGonagall assigned," Harry went back to his previous line of thought. "Honestly, we just need to learn to do the transfigurations, don't you think, not be able to explain every last element of each swish and flick..." Harry glanced to the side and barked a pre-emptive, "Don't say it, Hermione!"

She closed her mouth, but her eyes said it for her.

"How about a game of Wizard Chess?" Ron suggested, plunking himself down on the opposite side of the table from Harry. "That'll get your mind off things."

That was just too much for Hermione. "He doesn't need to get his mind off things, Ron!" she sharply rebuked. "He needs to get his mind on them. Or do you think that Potions test is going to just go away? When have you ever known Snape to threaten a test and not give one? Honestly!"

Potions test... that was right, Snape had promised one for Friday. Harry had written it down in his notes... somewhere. He dug in his bag, upending books and whatnot, and finally found his potions notes... yeah, Friday, that was what they said. It had seemed a long ways off, back on Tuesday when he'd written it down. Tuesday, the day he'd got that letter.

No, don't think about the letter, he scolded himself. You're going to forget it ever came, right? In fact, if anybody asks about it, you're going to lie, no matter what the sorting hat has to say about Gryffindor honesty and valour.... And if they point out that owl mail never goes astray, you'll say...

"You all right there, Harry?" Ron prompted, elbows on his knees as he leaned close.

"I was just remembering that I'd forgotten all about the Potions test," Harry sighed, leaning back in his chair. "And here it is Thursday night. Ugh. Maybe I could skive off my morning classes and study. What do you think? Hagrid wouldn't mind. Well, not much."

"You are not skipping classes in order to get study time!" Hermione erupted. "You have to get better organized than this, Harry! Start with that bag of yours. I've never seen a messier assortment of quills and texts and extra sheets of parchment. Honestly, how can you even find anything in there?"
"Has anybody ever mentioned how irritating you can be?" Harry shot back.

Hermione only smiled. "That's why you love me."

"Yeah, guess so," Harry admitted with a sheepish smile of his own. Then he glanced at Ron. "Not like that, mate. You know. Friends."

"Yeah," Ron echoed, glancing between the pair of them. "Well, Wizard Chess is off, then. I suppose we have to cram for Potions." Flipping open a book, he groaned. "Okay, who knows the ten most common uses for dragonfly wings in potions with a base of flobberworm fat?"

"There's seventeen primary uses," Hermione pointed out.

"Snape's not going to ask us for all seventeen!"

"Want to bet?" she challenged.

Harry just sighed, and fished his own Potions text out of his disorganized bag.

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The next afternoon in Potions, as Harry read the first question on the test, he had to repress a strong desire to chuckle.

*Describe in detail the seventeen primary uses for dragonfly wings in potions based on flobberworm fat. Give examples of the potions incorporating each use. Explain the primary healing effects of each potion, including the advantages and disadvantages of ingestion versus topical application.*

Actually, the question wasn't all that funny. By the time Harry had finished reading it, he was scowling instead of smiling. Who was Snape kidding? Nobody could answer this, although no doubt Hermione would give it a stab. Oh yeah, and that twit Malfoy. At least Hermione honestly didn't know when she was showing off. She was just enthusiastic about learning, and it sort of bubbled out the top of her head and spilled all over the place. She honestly didn't understand that when it came to some subjects, her enthusiasm wasn't catching.

"Is there a problem, Mr Potter? Is there a reason you've yet to so much as touch quill to parchment?"

The ominous voice boomed from the front of the classroom, startling him so much that he almost upset his ink pot. He righted it with one hand while the other one clutched his quill so hard it threatened to snap.

"Is the content of my lectures too much for your hero's brain to absorb? Perhaps we need to send you back to Remedial Potions again, this year?"

The reference to Remedial Potions made Harry see red, but it also reminded him that what he should do to keep from getting so angry was to Occlude his mind as Snape had taught him. Trouble was, the Potions Master never had really taught him. He'd just yelled at him and demanded he do it, without once so much as explaining what it was he was supposed to do, never mind how. Occluding his mind wasn't much of a choice, in the circumstances, and realizing that fact just made Harry even madder.

Clenching his eyes shut to keep from glaring at the insufferable git, he spoke through gritting teeth. No choice, if he properly opened his mouth, he'd say what he really felt like saying, and if he did that, he'd be every bit as stupid as Snape liked to claim. He'd learned his lesson from Umbridge. With teachers who hated the very air you breathed, you limited your comments to what was strictly
"No, sir," Harry replied, his eyes shut so tight that he could see stars at the back of his vision.

"Then get to work!" Snape shouted. "Now, Mr Potter! Or do you think yourself above the rest of your classmates, whom I might point out are ignoring the spectacle you present and working, something you've never had the slightest inclination to do? I will say you come by it honestly, though. Your father was the same way, not to mention your sainted godfather--"

Harry suddenly screamed, but not because he'd lost control of his tongue. By the end there, he was biting his tongue to keep from replying. But those last insults had been too much, Snape having the nerve, the unmitigated gall to ridicule Sirius when Harry knew that Snape was responsible for his death, when that same ridicule had driven Sirius out of Grimmauld Place and into danger! It was too much for Harry to take.

The fingers holding his quill tightened, snapping it clean in half, and a shard of brittle feather stalk speared his right palm. So of course Harry screamed, though it was more a yelp of surprise than a full-throated scream of pain. He'd endured the Cruciatius Curse at the hands of Voldemort himself, so a little accident with his quill was hardly going to make him cry.

Well, Snape was wrong about one thing, Harry thought. One thing more, that was. His classmates weren't ignoring him now. They were staring, and not even trying to hide it, and Hermione was mouthing something at him, but he couldn't catch it.

"Are you quite through with today's demonstration of your colossal carelessness, Mr Potter?" Snape sneered. "Shall I have the class thank you, one by one, that at least today you have endangered no one but yourself?"

"Professor, he's bleeding!" Hermione called out.

"I am well aware of the fact, Miss Granger," Snape rebuked her, coming down the aisle in a flurry of billowing robes. "Five points from Gryffindor for speaking out of turn." Glaring down from his imposing height, he watched without comment as Harry yanked the quill out of his flesh and flexed his fingers. Harry tried his best not to so much as wince, not with Snape's beady eyes watching his every move, but a small gasp as it slid out did cross his tightly clenched lips.

Hermione was wrong, he thought as he stared at the wound. He really hadn't been bleeding before, but now the wound was gushing. Fumbling, Harry fetched a handkerchief from his overflowing school bag and wound it tightly around the injury.

"Shall I owl the hospital wing to have your favourite bed made ready, Mr Potter?" Snape sniped. "I'll just get on with my test, sir," Harry calmly replied, though he felt anything but calm inside. Hmm, maybe he wasn't as bad at Occluding his mind as he'd though. Still, if he was really Occluding it, should he still feel a raging boil of anger just begging to spill out?

"Do that, Mr Potter," Snape sneered, and when Harry didn't so much as move, he continued, "Well?"

Harry ignored him as best he could, and bent down again to fish through his bag for a new quill. Everyone else got back to work when it seemed the confrontation was over. Truth to tell, Harry was almost relieved that Snape had had his say. After all, the Potions Master basically attacked him in every class session. At least this time, he'd got it out of the way straight away. Now Harry could relax somewhat, and just do his best on his test, for what that was worth.
Relaxing, he soon realised, wasn't going to be an option, but not because of Snape.

As Harry dragged a fresh quill from the tangled contents of his bag, he dragged something else out, too. An envelope, one he'd been trying to forget existed. Unfortunately, he wasn't the only one who saw it. Draco Malfoy, sitting right across the aisle, glanced down, probably to make some snide remark of his own about Harry's mishap.

He said nothing though, his gaze merely resting on the odd Muggle envelope.

Then he looked at Harry, and raised an eyebrow.

Horrified, it suddenly occurred to Harry that Malfoy had just seen his summer address.

Harry snatched the letter up onto his desk and began to smear ink all across the numbers and letters on the envelope. 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey.... He covered it all up, and then sat back with a silent sigh, and tried to remember what he was supposed to be doing. Oh yeah, the test, that was it.

Harry shoved the letter underneath his exam paper, and with his injured hand began to scratch out an answer about dragonfly wings, but before he'd even got to the fact that it made a difference whether you harvested them off dead or live insects, a harsh voice was accosting him.

Again.

And this time, it wasn't coming from across the classroom; it was coming from directly in front of his desk.

"What you have slipped beneath your exam paper, Mr Potter?"

Harry glanced up, a bit disoriented from the sudden shift from dragonfly wings. Then he remembered, and flushed. "Nothing, sir."

"Nothing, Mr Potter?"

Somehow, Harry thought, Snape could manage to make any three words in a row sound sarcastic.

"Nothing important, Professor," he clarified.

"Allow me to be the judge of what might be important, Potter. Hand it over."

Harry blanched. "I'll just put it away sir," he said, the words coming out coherently although it felt just like he was babbling.

Draco Malfoy chose that moment to pipe up, "I saw him taking it out after the test began, Professor Snape. I bet it's some sort of cheat sheet--"

"It's not!" Harry erupted, turning a fierce glare on Malfoy.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for yelling during class," Snape calmly intoned.

"What about him?" Harry spat. "He accused me--"

"Ten points from Gryffindor for arguing with a staff member," Snape interrupted. "Ten points from Gryffindor for not doing as I requested, at once. Now, will you hand it over, or shall I spend the remainder of the class period taking points from Gryffindor?"
"I wasn't cheating," Harry mumbled as he slid a hand beneath his exam paper and drew out the envelope. It was sticky with ink, as was the back of his test, Harry realised. Grimacing, he handed it to Snape.

"Can't even keep your secret notes clean?" Snape sniped when he saw the item. "And why conceal them in an envelope at all, let alone one such as this? Haven't you heard of parchment by now, or is that too big a leap for your Muggle-raised mind to manage?"

"It's a letter!" Harry shouted, out of patience. "Haven't you heard of them, you great big--"

"Harry!" Hermione cut him off.

"Twenty points from Gryffindor for insolence," Snape snapped. "And twenty more for speaking out of turn again, Miss Granger." He turned the envelope over in his hands, the smirk on his face growing more evil the longer he stared at the letter.

"So it's a missive, is it? Passing notes in class now, are we, Mr Potter? Well, as you've chosen to disrupt my entire class with it, I think it only fitting that the entire class hear what it has to say, don't you?"

Without waiting for an answer, he drew a piece of plain paper out of the envelope and began to read it out loud.
"Potter," the letter began, Snape's awful tone of voice making it sound worse than it probably was. Almost as soon as he had begun, though, the Potions Master broke off from reading the text. Aloud, at least. Harry was glaring so hard by then that his vision was coming and going in waves, but he was sure... well, almost sure... that Snape had swept his eyes over the rest of the letter before he folded it, the sound crackling in the dungeon, and shoved it back inside the stained envelope.

Harry's glare changed to a stare, then. An incredulous stare. What, Snape was going to pass up an opportunity to humiliate Harry Potter? Of course, Harry reflected, he didn't know what the letter said. Maybe it was something Snape couldn't read out loud in class no matter how much he could hurt Harry with it. Maybe it was from Uncle Vernon and contained some of the foul epithets Harry had grown used to hearing over the years. Phrases like "you goddamned fucking little freak" weren't exactly appropriate, were they? Not even in the dungeons.

At any rate, Snape appeared to have gone off the idea of reading the letter out loud. "Resume your tests!" he snapped as he sat behind the potions counter up front and stared at them. After that, not a sound did they hear except the scratching of quills until one more barked command came ringing through the air. "Pass in your papers!"

Harry's lips twisted as he complied. Of course his grades in Potions were almost always awful, thanks to Snape hovering over him like a crazed bat, taunting him until he could hardly remember which cauldron was his. But this test was bound to set a new record. Could you get a score below zero? It shouldn't be possible, but if your answers were stupid enough, Harry reasoned, Snape might take off sufficient points to manage it.

He began to pile away his schoolwork, wondering why he was even bothering to continue in Potions, anyway. So what if his O.W.L., graded by an unbiased scorer, had been Outstanding? That didn't make any difference to the likes of Snape, and if Harry had thought that past years were bad, well, he just hadn't known how mean and awful Snape could get, had he? Now he did. Snape was determined to get even with Harry for that pensieve incident; it didn't even matter to the man that Harry had apologised at the time, and meant it, or that he'd never breathed a word of what he'd seen to anyone... well, except Sirius.

About the only reason he was still in Potions was because he needed it to enter the Auror's programme, and whatever Snape wanted to do to him in class, he couldn't mess up Harry's N.E.W.T. scores. Unlike class tests, official wizarding exams were graded by somebody other than hook-nosed, greasy-haired, just plain mean Potions Masters.

He was just turning toward the door, his school bag draped over one shoulder, when the summons came. "Stay behind, Mr Potter."

Harry reluctantly turned back, catching Ron and Hermione's glances. He shook his head a bit when they looked as though they might hang back to be on hand. Snape was wise to that trick. Might as well just face him down and get the whole thing over with.

"Sir?"

Snape looked up from the exams he was stacking, his features unreadable for all his dark eyes remained intense. Before he spoke, though, he warded the doors with a hissed Silencio, waving his wand in an arc that encompassed all the cracks around the heavy wooden frames. "Aren't you forgetting something, Mr Potter?"
Harry could have scratched his head, he was so baffled. Then it came to him. "Oh, you mean the letter?"

The Potions Master's gaze grew even more intense, if such a thing were possible, but strangely, his voice went soft, and not in that menacing way he sometimes used. He sounded almost... sympathetic, though Harry was positive that couldn't be the case. "Yes, I mean the letter, you idiot child. Why haven't you asked to see the Headmaster about this?"

Harry swallowed, not really knowing what to answer. See the Headmaster? Why on earth should he do that? What did the blasted letter say, anyway?

"Er... I didn't really feel that was called for, sir," he finally offered, then stepped back suddenly when Snape stood to hover over him.

"What did you say?"

"I... er... well, it just seemed like, er..."

"Stop your blathering," Snape suddenly commanded, staring straight down into his eyes. "You're making less sense than usual, Potter, and believe me, that is saying something significant."

Harry just stared back, determined not to admit to the truth that he'd never even read the stupid letter.

Snape gave a long-suffering sigh, and only then did Harry recall what a skilled Legilimens the man was. Even without a wand, or a spoken spell, he'd caught enough of Harry's thoughts to draw his own conclusions. Unfortunately, those conclusions were all too accurate.

"What an ungrateful brat you are," Snape remarked, the comment delivered with level precision, not the biting sarcasm Harry usually got from him. Snape didn't sound like he was trying to make him angry now, he just sounded like he was stating facts. Depressing facts. "A letter from your relatives delivered on Tuesday, and here is it Friday, and you've yet to so much as read it."

"How do you know when I got it?" Harry hotly demanded. "For all you know, it came at lunch today and I haven't had time."

"Credit me with some powers of observation, Mr Potter. You were holding it in your hand the day you commented that I was a 'slimy excuse for a teacher.'"

Harry gaped, then recovered himself enough to hold his hand out. He wished it wouldn't shake. It was ridiculous that he could single-handedly defeat a Basilisk, yet quail before this man. Then again, words could cut deeper than fangs, especially Snape's poisonous words. If there was one thing the Potions Master knew inside and out, it was the art of the insult. "Can I have my letter back, sir?"

"An apology is in order, first," Snape imperiously commanded, crossing his arms. "For that remark."

"Oh yeah, right," Harry murmured, his back taut with resentment. Snape insulted him all the time. When had the professor ever apologised? But if it would get him his letter back, he could do it. "Sorry, sir."

"Like your potions, barely passable," Snape commented. "Ten more points from Gryffindor. All right then, about your letter, Potter. Do you ever plan to read it?"

Harry didn't see what business that was of Snape's, but he also didn't see the point of another argument, or losing more points. "Yeah, right. All right, yes. Fine, whatever."
"I don't believe you," Snape announced, those eyes that could see right through minds piercing him with some sort of dark anger that Harry really didn't understand. "You may have it back on condition that you read it now, in my presence."

Harry clenched his fists. "What's it to you, sir, whether I read my mail or not?"

"Disappointed it's not fan mail, Potter?"

"So much for your powers of observation," Harry retorted, "sir. If you had significant ones, you'd notice that I hate that vapid stuff people send me."

"Let's be clear, Potter. If you won't read your own post, I shall read it to you."

"Oh, just give it over," Harry sighed, feeling defeated. If he wanted anything less than to read the Dursleys' letter, it was to listen to Snape's sarcastic commentary about it. "Fine, all right? I'll read it."

Snape handed him the inky envelope then, and sat down and watched carefully as Harry wandered to a free desk and dealt with the letter.

His hands shook as he took the letter out and smoothed it flat. Even when it was lying there before him, and he was staring at the words, he had the devil's own time getting started reading. Deep down, he didn't want to know what the Dursleys had in store for him, but there was no avoiding it, now.

Sighing, his brows puckering with reluctance, Harry began to read.

Potter, the letter began.

Petunia says she doesn't know where your freak school is, or we'd have sent this the way normal people send post. Arabella Figg heard us talking about needing to reach you, though, and offered us an owl. We never knew she was one of those. Bet you knew, though, and didn't tell us, did you, boy? There ought to be a law.

Get back to Surrey, Potter. Your aunt's much worse. She's in hospital now; the doctors say it doesn't look good. I don't care if you come on that freak train, or if you have to ride a damned broomstick or something, you get yourself back here. If you know what's good for you, you'll make it fast, and you won't bring a single one of those freaks you associate with along. Petunia doesn't need to see anything like that. It's bad enough she has to see you.

Vernon Dursley

Harry looked up then, not knowing what to feel. It was probably wrong to be glad that Aunt Petunia was ill. Yeah, it was definitely wrong. He was supposed to be upset, at least. But he wasn't. Well, at least he hadn't sunk so low as to be happy about it. Not even the littlest bit, he told himself, swallowing back a rush of something horribly shameful.

Snape drew in a sharp breath, then it seemed he deliberately steadied his breathing. "Just how ill is your aunt, Mr Potter?"

"Don't know," Harry admitted, shrugging. "First I've heard of it."
Snape began speaking in his I-can't-believe-a-human-can-be-so-dim voice, each word delivered slowly and enunciated with maddening precision. "What does she have?"

"I told you, I don't know!" Harry retorted, a little impatiently. "Listen, sir, I'm going to be late for Transfiguration if you don't dismiss me, now. May I leave?"

Snape looked absolutely thunderstruck, just before all that astonishment converted itself to burning rage. "Transfiguration! You're still not going to ask to see the Headmaster, you gibbering fool? You don't have the slightest idea what's at stake here, do you? You should have been gone on Tuesday; it may be too late already."

Somewhere in the middle of all that, Snape had grabbed his forearm. Harry tried to shake him off, but Snape only gripped him all the more fiercely. Fed up, Harry finally yelled, "What do you care if I go see her or not? It's my own personal business if my family doesn't give a flip if I live or die and I feel the same--"

Snape leaned down, practically spitting with fury. "Your personal business, is it? If your aunt dies, the wards protecting you fall, Potter! We might like to at least be aware that such a thing has happened, you selfish brat, so that we can make other arrangements to keep you safe and sane. Or do you really think that Neville Longbottom is going to rid the world of the Dark Lord?"

Harry felt like he would fall over, but that Snape's fierce grip kept him upright. "Dumbledore told you about the wards, about the prophecy?"

"The Headmaster and I have few secrets. Now, as I don't trust you further than I could throw you, Mr Potter, I believe we'll both go the headmaster to arrange your departure."

"But if the wards are in danger of falling, surely I should stay right here?" Harry pleaded desperately.

"I do believe you are the most spoiled, egocentric, thoughtless child I've ever had the misfortune to know," Snape replied. "Your aunt is dying, Mr Potter. Apparently that means less than nothing to you, but your family has requested you go see her, and that you will do, like it or not."

"I can't believe you care if I see my dying aunt!"

"Quite correct," Snape confirmed, finally letting go of Harry's arm. "What I care about, Mr Potter, is that you don't irrevocably alienate what little remains on this earth of your mother's blood."

"You mean my cousin Dudley?" Harry gasped. "But you know what he's like! I mean, you saw, over and over, last year! You know, during the Occlumency lessons--"

"Do not call to mind any incidents of last year, Potter, particularly not those incidents!"

Harry mentally stepped back, realizing that it wasn't such a good idea to bring up anything that might remind Snape about how Harry had sneak a look in that pensieve. "All right, sorry," he muttered, then spoke louder. "But Dudley? You have to be joking. He's not going to participate in any warding, I can tell you that. He'd like to see me dead, him and my uncle both. God only knows why my aunt went along, she hates me just as much--"

"You're hysterical," Snape announced. "Enough, Potter. We're going to the Headmaster to show him this letter, is that clear? And you're going to go to Surrey and beg your family's forgiveness for whatever you did to offend them, is that clear? I don't care if you have to plead on bended knee, Potter, you will be warded by your mother's blood, and if that means making peace with your cousin, then so be it! Now, come along!"
"Yes, sir," Harry muttered, but he might as well not have bothered. The dungeon doors were flying open by then, the *Silencio* spell sizzling as its vapours dissolved, and Snape was dragging him down the hall toward the stairs.

From behind a carved granite column, Draco Malfoy smirked.
"This is quite serious, Harry," Albus Dumbledore commented, waving a vague hand to include Severus Snape, who sat with folded arms and a tightly controlled expression. "You'll have to do as the Dursleys ask, of course. This isn't a time for family members to be apart."

Harry sat stone-faced, unwilling to give vent to his true feelings about certain family members. It was bad enough that he'd exploded all over Snape about it a few minutes earlier. Telling Snape, of all people, that his family had always hated him and always would. Well, at least the greasy git hadn't taken him seriously. He'd decided that Harry was hysterical, instead. And that was fine by Harry. He'd rather be thought emotional and immature than give Snape some true fodder for insult. God, he could just imagine it, Snape sniping at him in class about how nobody had ever loved poor, pitiful Harry Potter. Is the supply closet too reminiscent of your cupboard, Potter? he would say. Is that why you rush in and out of it in a tizzy, because being famous Harry Potter doesn't stop you from being scared of tight places? Have a touch of claustrophobia, do we, Potter?

All right, Snape would probably die before he used a word like "tizzy," Harry admitted, but he could easily see the rest of it coming out of that hateful mouth. That, and worse.

So yeah, he'd rather Snape believe that those comments had been born of hysteria. Better that than the horrible man, than anyone, in fact, know the simple, awful truth that he'd never had a home, let alone a family, until he'd come to Hogwarts. While you are here, your house will be your family, he recalled McGonagall saying. And she'd been right. Gryffindor was his family, his only family.

"Are you listening, Harry?" Dumbledore prompted.

"Yeah," he answered, indignant, and then realizing he hadn't been, admitted in a low voice, "No, not really."

"Quite understandable," the headmaster returned, ignoring the way Snape snorted. "News like this is never easy to absorb, particularly when you've had your differences, to say the least, with your family. Severus is right, though; none of that matters, not against the need we have to keep you well-warded. Another cup of tea, Harry?"

Since Harry had yet to so much as touch his first cup, he stared at the headmaster rather incredulously.

"Sherbet lemon, then?"

"No," he sighed, tired of the old man's games. What did he think, that Harry was still a child to mollify with sweets? Actually, Harry reflected, refusing to read that letter hadn't been the height of maturity, and complaining about going to his aunt's deathbed was even more infantile, even if there wasn't the whole issue of his mother's blood staring him in the face. He had been acting like a child, and he was determined to cut it out.

"So I'm off to Surrey, then?" he accepted, launching right into the next logical issue. "I suppose the Order will go on guard duty again, round the clock watches to keep me safe?"

When Dumbledore nodded, Harry conceded. "All right, then. Does the Hogwarts Express run in October, or should I floo to Mrs Figg's house?"

"Floo, I should think, Headmaster," Snape put in. "But not alone. This isn't like the summer when he stayed mainly in and around the house. The aunt's in hospital; Mr Potter will have to put a fair
amount of time in there, and in transit. Given that he'll stray far out of bounds of the wards, it's not enough to merely have invisible Order members guarding him."

"He happens to be sitting right here," Harry interrupted. "Don't talk about me like I'm not!"

Snape spared him a cursory glance. "If you want to continue sitting there and listening, don't interrupt again. Now, as I was saying, Potter needs one of us within reach at all times. A visible presence, the better to deter any attempts on his life."

Harry couldn't help but snort. "I thought you read the letter, Professor. No wizards, remember?" He snapped his mouth shut before he could say something more, like They hate magic worse than poison, and me worse than either one."

"I am in fact literate, Mr Potter," Snape sneered. "I'm well aware of your uncle's terms."

Until that moment, Harry actually hadn't been sure that Snape had read the whole thing. That glance he'd given it had been so swift... Harry clenched his fists, wishing he could hit something, groaning a little when the palm of his hand complained. Irritated, he unwound the bandage to inspect the damage. Hmm, not too bad. Didn't even really need Madam Pomfrey, though it was terribly sore. Still furious, but determined to put a mature face on it, Harry stood up and faced the Headmaster. "Sir, before I go, I would like to file a complaint against a member of your faculty."

The figure in the chair beside him stiffened, but Dumbledore remained relaxed. "Yes?"

"Professor Snape had no right to read a letter addressed to me, or to begin reading it out loud to a class full of Death Eaters in training."

"Is this true, Severus? You read this aloud?"

Harry was pretty sure that Snape's flashing glance was on account of hearing his dear Slytherins described that way, not because he thought he'd done anything wrong."

"One word," he drawled in a low, mocking tone. "Just to teach Potter not to deal with his post during class. And as for reading the letter in its entirety? Somebody had to."

"Unfortunately true," Dumbledore agreed, but Harry wasn't about to let it go at that. He might not be able to make capital out of the letter, given all the circumstances, but he was determined not to leave this office until he'd shown Snape that teachers weren't the only ones with power."

"There's another matter," he blithely went on, ignoring Snape's gaze boring into the side of his head. "Because Professor Snape had confiscated an extremely personal letter, and because also I'd had an accident with my quill just as class began, I wasn't able to concentrate on my test. I'd respectfully request that you require him to give me a make-up."

"That certainly seems fair," Dumbledore murmured. "Especially given as you were a bit distraught over your aunt, as well."

"Albus," Snape scathed, "he didn't even know about his aunt until after the test. He didn't care to know."

"Ah, well, there is that. Still, Severus, I'd think you could relax your stringent standards just this once."

"I offered Mr Potter the chance to go to the hospital wing when he so stupidly injured himself."
"No, you didn't," Harry insisted, turning toward the Potions Master and ignoring the way that black gaze seemed to bore into him. "You sarcastically asked if you should owl Madam Pomfrey to reserve my favourite bed. You ridiculed me for being hurt. When Hermione said I was bleeding, you _took points_, and never even bothered yourself to look and see if it was serious--"

"Which it wasn't."

The more Snape argued, the more determined Harry was to get his way on this. It was a matter of pride, he supposed. Snape regularly smashed his all to pieces, and Harry was powerless to stop it. Just once, he was resolved, he'd make the Potions Master swallow something he didn't particularly care for.

Extending his hand, Harry unfurled his fingers to display his palm to the headmaster. "No, it's not serious, and of course I don't need Madam Pomfrey. But that's not the point. I wasn't in any mental or physical state to take that test, and it's Professor Snape who caused the difficulty. If he hadn't insulted me, I wouldn't have snapped my quill."

"I wouldn't insult you if you'd apply your brains to something other than Quidditch and playing hero, Mr Potter. If you don't like the way I conduct my classes, I suggest you drop them, given that sixth year Potions is in no way required---"

"It is required," Harry interrupted. A N.E.W.T. in Potions was required for the Auror's programme, but Harry wasn't about to go into details, not with Snape. Not even with Dumbledore, really. Dumbledore, who always kept Harry in the dark. He'd only ever told McGonagall about his career plans, and that was only because he had to, if she was going to place him in the classes he needed.

"Enough," the headmaster intervened. "Severus, you will prepare an alternate test for Harry; I don't think that's too much to ask. And Harry, in return you will stay close by your escort at all times, is that agreed? The Order will still be watching, but Severus is right: what we need this time is someone who can grab your arm and Apparate at an instant's notice. Will you do as I ask, Harry?"

"Sure," Harry agreed. What else could he do after Dumbledore had just shoved Snape into a corner for him? The satisfied feeling that engulfed his heart spread until he could feel it tingling in his toes. Yeah, serve the greasy bastard right, that he had to take his time to write a special test just for Harry Potter, that he had to do something he didn't want to do, and do it for Harry Potter, of all people.

"So whom do you suggest, Severus?" Dumbledore mildly inquired.

Snape swallowed back something which looked suspiciously like disgust. At first, Harry thought the Potions Master was just reflecting on the fact that he'd lost a battle to Harry Potter, but when Snape replied, he decided there was something else going on.

"Lupin," Snape replied, grimacing. "If he's willing."

"Oh sure, Remus'll be glad to pal around with me," Harry volunteered. "I know he was my professor and all, but we're actually pretty good mates."

"We're not talking about that mangy werewolf actually being responsible for your safety, Potter--"

"Why not? He saved my life third year. If not for teaching me that Patronus charm, the Dementors would have got me for sure--"

"Yes, you and Black," Snape grated.

"Well, he _was_ innocent, you know! I know you know!"
Snape made a visible effort to get the conversation back on track. "We're talking about Polyjuice Potion, Potter. I'll look like Lupin, but I'll be the one with you at all times. At all times, is that clear?"

"You! You can't," Harry sputtered. "I mean, what about Voldemort--"

"Call him the Dark Lord!" Snape snapped.

Harry went right on. "Listen, being seen protecting me isn't going to do your standing among the Death Eaters any good--"

"Hence the Polyjuice Potion," Snape explained in that voice he reserved for first years. "Assuming your dear beloved werewolf will donate a few shards of hair."

"No," Harry protested, only to stop at Dumbledore's raised hand.

"It really is the best solution, Harry. Severus alone is in a position to know Voldemort's plans and intentions regarding you, therefore, he's the only one equipped to truly protect you. As well, I might add, Professor Snape is the foremost expert available on defensive spells, not to mention battle tactics. You'll be in good hands."

"If he's so good at defence, how come you never give him the job?" Harry sniped.

"That is really a matter between Severus and myself," the headmaster lightly chastised. "You go back to your dormitory and pack whatever you might need, while we contact Remus Lupin to ask for his help. Oh, but Harry? Need I mention that you must at all costs stick to the cover story we have devised? You're going to visit your relatives, and Lupin will accompany you. I wouldn't even mention to anyone that your aunt is ill. We don't want to give Voldemort any ideas about how those wards might have been constructed."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. Of course Ron and Hermione would never betray him, he was sure of that, but try convincing Snape of the fact. He couldn't help but ask, though, "How's it going to be such a good cover story if Professor Snape disappears from Hogwarts just the same time I do?"

"But he won't," the headmaster assured him. "I'll use the Polyjuice, too, and take charge of his classes, assuming you're still away on Monday, of course."

So much for that idea. Harry tried another. "But we can't leave now," he pointed out. "Polyjuice takes a month to make. And by then, my aunt could well be dead, sir."

"You really think I don't keep essential potions on hand at all times, Potter?" Snape inquired, raising an eyebrow.

"Won't Remus' hair turn you into a werewolf, though?" he wondered out loud, the danger just occurring to him.

"If you paid the slightest attention in Potions class, Mr Potter," Snape sneered, looking down his long nose as though at some particularly gruesome species of slug, "you would know the answer to that. No, it won't change me, unless I happen to take animal hair for my resolvent. And who, pray tell, would be such a blithering idiot as all that?"

He sounded exactly like he knew about Hermione and the cat hair. Harry gulped. "Well, all right then. I'll just go pack like the headmaster said."

"Bring something to study. I recommend your Potions text," Snape abruptly instructed. "Unless, of course, you've changed your mind about wanting another test?"
"No, I think you'll enjoy writing it," Harry shot back, headed out the door.

"I think I shall," Snape agreed, a dark laugh rumbling up from his chest. "I knew you were stupid, Potter, but this is a new low even for you. To demand another potions test? From me? Oh yes, it will be great fun devising questions especially for you."

Harry froze, realizing that he really should have thought of that, sooner.

Snape stepped closer, his dark cloak swirling around him before it settled into folds that swept the stone floor. "But something else shall be even more fun," he whispered against Harry's ear. "Watching you with you cousin. Watching you beg. It isn't just for your protection that I accompany you, Potter. I want to be sure you do it. I want to see it." All at once he stepped back, his demeanour completely different. "Now, get out so the adults can get some work done!"

"Go, Harry," Dumbledore said, more softly. And Harry did. As the door was closing, he heard a chiding, "Severus, you really do need to get your temper under control. He's just a boy--"

"He's a spoiled, selfish, Gryffindor brat who can't see beyond the end of his own nose."

Then the revolving staircase swept him around and down, and Harry turned his footsteps toward the path that led to Gryffindor tower.
There was something altogether creepy, Harry decided, about looking at an exact replica of Remus Lupin and knowing that someone like Snape was lurking inside. Actually, just looking made his head ache. He supposed it was the horrible juxtaposition of friendship and malice.

He trusted Remus, after all. Really, Remus was the only adult he did trust. When he was younger, he could have said that of Dumbledore, too, but no longer. The headmaster knew too much about Harry, things he refused to speak of with Harry, though he apparently felt free to give Order members all sorts of information.

And now he was staring up at Remus' friendly features, remembering how his defence teacher had looked while talking to him of his parents. At the time, he'd been gasping for an image of them... an image besides the one the Dementors had plagued him with, the one of his mother screaming as she died. Remus had given him that image, and more. Remus had been there for him, had tutored him, had cared.

Harry wanted to throw himself at that beloved figure, and hug him tight, and thank him, and say that he was so, so sorry about Sirius...

But he couldn't. The man standing with Dumbledore wasn't Remus, no matter how convincing the evidence before his eyes. Snape's habitual sneer wasn't even possible on Remus' face, and though the mannerisms weren't entirely what he would call Lupinesque, they certainly didn't call Snape to mind, either. Harry supposed that the Potion Master's normal hostile bearing just wasn't quite possible, not now that he was wearing a body conditioned to hold itself differently.

Not Remus, he said to himself, hating the feeling that he was going to have to repeat it quite a lot. *This is not Remus.*

At that moment, Snape said something to the headmaster, something quiet that Harry didn't even catch, but it came out in Remus' voice. Polyjuice potion would do that, of course; Harry knew it would. Hadn't he and Ron sounded exactly like Crabbe and Goyle as they'd questioned Malfoy about the heir of Slytherin? Harry forgot about all that, though, in the rush of happiness that drenched him just hearing that voice again.

"Remus?" he asked out loud, thinking that sure, it was possible. Remus had come through the Floo to give Snape some hair, hadn't he? Maybe he'd stuck around a bit. Maybe Snape was still down in the dungeons fetching the Polyjuice potion...

"No," Snape quickly returned. "He's already departed."

Harry blinked, disappointed on more than one front. "Oh. He couldn't even stay until I got back up here?"

"Apparently not," was Snape's snide remark.

"Why?" Harry heard himself asking. He hadn't meant to say it, really. It made him sound too wistful. And he wasn't wistful, not really. He didn't waste his time wishing for things he couldn't have, like a real home and a family who gave a damn about him, or a forehead that didn't announce his destiny to any wizard who cared to look... He tried not to think of such things, full stop.

At least Snape hadn't noticed that plaintive tone. "Look at the moon, Potter, and think," the Potions Master sneered, but to Harry's ears it was Remus belittling him. He swallowed, and told himself...
again. Not Remus, definitely not Remus. Even when Remus had to rebuke you about sneaking out to Hogsmeade, he did it gently, without insults.

Or maybe Snape had heard more than Harry would have wished, because he was suddenly snapping, "Oh, here!" and thrusting a small roll of parchment at Harry. "I dare say I won't have to force you to read this one."

Harry ignored him to tug off the tattered ribbon and unroll the note.

Dear Harry,

Albus hasn't told me much of the situation you're facing, but I do agree with him that if you need protection, Severus is the best choice. I also understand why it would be better for him to not quite be himself, so to speak. In a few minutes I'll floo through to do whatever I can to help. Albus has already told me that you're up in your rooms packing. Probably that's just as well, Harry. I don't see enough of you, but I'd frankly prefer you not see me like this. If you'll recall, I used to take three days off teaching before each full moon. Even with Severus' potion--and yes, he is still graciously providing it for me--the coming transformation leaves me weak, and shaky, and ill.

Keep me apprised of anything more I can do to help you, Harry.

Yours,

R.L.

Drawing a deep breath, Harry moved to tuck the note away in the front pocket of his snug black jeans, only to have Snape snatch it from his fingers and toss it into the fire with a growled, "I don't trust the werewolf's discretion!"

"It didn't say anything!" Harry protested, thinking that gracious was an overstatement and a half. Snape was never generous, except maybe with Slytherins, so if he was still making the Wolfsbane potion for Remus, it had to be from some other motive.

"Then you won't miss it much, will you?"

Dumbledore eased into his peacemaker role, then. "All set, Harry?" he asked, gesturing toward the school bag Harry carried. He'd repacked it with all his textbooks, not just Potions, and had made Hermione promise to take extra thorough notes in all the classes they shared. What was he worried about, though? Hermione's notes had been extra-thorough since first year, and he wouldn't be gone that long, would he? Trouble was, he really didn't know how long the Dursleys would want him around.

Of course, Harry didn't much care what the Dursleys wanted, though he supposed it was only right that he did see Aunt Petunia before it was too late. It was the decent thing to do, he knew, and whatever he'd suffered in her house, she had in fact protected him when he'd most needed. She'd taken him in as a baby, offering him refuge from the Death Eaters determined to put an end to the Boy Who Lived. And yes, she'd done it unwillingly, ungraciously, hell, resentfully... but she had done it. Harry knew that he was supposed to appreciate that, somewhere deep down. He had to,
right?

The truth was, though, that any gratitude he might possibly feel was buried beneath a whole mountain of ill-will.

So yeah, it didn't matter to him what the Dursleys wanted. If he had his way, he'd just pop over to the hospital for a quick hallo, and rush right back to Hogwarts. Just enough so that if his conscience bothered him in years to come, he'd be able to tell himself that no, of course he hadn't ignored a deathbed summons.

Since when did Harry get his way, though? He was the Boy Who Lived.

He was the Boy Who'd Better Keep On Living, the Boy Who Was Going to Grow Up to Kill Voldemort. The Boy Who Needed His Mother's Sacrifice To Keep Protecting Him Until He Was Old Enough To Do His Duty.

Harry was good and sick of thinking of himself that way, and being reminded of it every time he so much as sneezed.

The entire wizarding world was relying on him to solve their problem, though not all of them knew it. They all had an inkling, though. He hadn't needed a prophecy to confirm his fate, had he? It had been emblazoned across his forehead since he was a year old, and even if people could have managed to forget that, Voldemort's coming for him again and again and again certainly tended to make people believe that he was the only one who could vanquish the evil git. Why else would Voldemort be so intent on killing him off?

So until he had the age and experience to protect himself, he needed all the warding he could get. Even if it came from a lumbering, cruel, gluttonous boy like Dudley Dursley.

"Of course I'm ready," he finally answered the headmaster.

"Excellent. Now Severus, I know this may be difficult, but you must endeavour to stay wholly in character at all times... except perhaps when you and Harry are alone and thoroughly warded."

"I think if I can manage to fool the Dark Lord himself as to my loyalties, a topic in which he is intensely interested, I can pretend to be Potter's friend, thank you," Snape returned. Harry had the feeling he was trying to use that icy tone he favoured, but Remus' voice just couldn't carry it off. It came off like a touch of self-pity, actually.

Talk of staying in character, however, brought another issue to Harry's mind. "Remus doesn't call me Potter," he felt obliged to point out. "You'd better call me Harry, or it'll look strange to anyone who's ever seen me with Remus. And you never know who might be watching, do you?"

"Didn't you hear what I just said?" Snape challenged, but Harry wasn't through.

"Remus isn't a professor here, any longer," he went on, thinking he might as well give it a shot. "So no fair taking points off Gryffindor, no matter what may happen. Remember, you aren't acting as head of Slytherin house. In fact," here Harry had to choke back a slight laugh, "in this guise, you're a Gryffindor, yourself!"

Snape ground his teeth together and didn't bother to reply.

Throwing a pinch of powder into the flames, Dumbledore called, "Arabella, we're ready now." Then he gestured for Snape to floo first. Before Harry stepped into the cavernous fireplace, Dumbledore cautioned, "Do come back safely, both of you."
"Arabella Figg's house!" Harry shouted, and went up in a tower of flames.

Mrs Figg helped brush him off, her hands a bit too motherly for Harry to endure. Why did everybody insist on treating him like he was still eleven years old? "It's all right!" he finally protested, giving her a slight push away. "You'd think I'd never flooed before!"

"Wizards' robes repel the ash a bit better than what you've got on," she insisted in her high voice as her hands tried to still fuss. "For pity's sake, why did you both come through without wearing any?"

Harry glanced down at his maroon dress shirt. "You know what they're like. Remus here isn't going to let on that he's a wizard, either."

"That probably would be best, dear." Mrs Figg began biting her lips. "Are you going straight to hospital?" She glanced out the front window of her home. "The car's gone, that's likely where they are. It's where they are every day."

"I have to change first," Harry announced, and then to make their act look authentic, beamed a strained smile over at Snape. It had to be strained, right? He was supposed to be a little worried about his aunt, but he was also supposed to be great friends with Remus, so he offered, "Say, have you ever got a close look at the inside of a Muggle house? I'll give you the grand tour. You'd be amazed what they can do without magic."

"That sounds interesting," Snape said in his Remus-voice, and Harry nearly had to strangle a laugh. The comment was banal and meaningless, the type of thing Snape liked to denounce at great length as utterly inane. The fact that it had crossed his lips just proved that Snape was in fact aware of utterly inane things like social niceties.

So Snape was usually rude on purpose, eh? It wasn't just a case of him not knowing any better? Figures, thought Harry. Maybe he's only rude to Gryffindors.

Snape chose that moment to give Mrs Figg a slight smile as he said in Remus' easygoing yet cultured tones, "So nice to see you again, Arabella. Thank you for the use of your Floo."

"Anytime," she offered, before turning her attention again to Harry. "Do let me know how Petunia is doing, will you?"

"Of course, Mrs Figg," Harry returned. "And yes, thanks. Well, let's go, Remus."

He led the way down the street, Snape trailing behind him.

The door to Number Four Privet Drive was locked, and the key wasn't under the mat or the flowerpot, or hidden deep inside the drainpipe in the side yard. Harry shrugged, figuring they must have moved it again. Typical. As soon as Harry knew where the key was, they moved it, even though Dudley was a bit like Neville Longbottom when it came to remembering things like how to get through the door.

"You'd better do it," he finally whispered to Snape. "I'm not allowed--"

"I am actually aware of the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry, P--." Wincing, Snape eased his wand out the sleeve of his wool coat. "Alohomora."

Once they were inside, Harry headed up the stairs. "I won't be long."
He would have taken longer if he'd had any notion what awaited him downstairs. It didn't surprise him that Snape would have methodically walked through every room and hallway, his wand held before him as he searched for hints of dark magic in the place. He'd even explored upstairs, and in the cupboard under the stairs; Harry surmised that much from the way the half-size door was hanging open.

What did surprise him was what Snape had found out.

"There's black energy scattered all throughout this house," he announced. "Though it's a different sort from what I would associate with the Dark Lord. Any explanation?"

Harry shrugged. "Muggle houses don't exactly spell themselves weekly with good luck charms."

"It's more than that," the Potions Master mused, tapping a finger against the side of his cheek. The gesture was quintessentially Snapeish, yet on Remus it looked wrong. All wrong. Harry had to repress a shudder.

"The blackness is strongest there," he pointed at the cupboard, "and inside the room where you were changing--" Snape's eyes grew rounder as his mind caught on a single thought, as he really looked at Harry. "Merlin, what could possess you to change into that? What are you trying to prove?"

Harry shrugged as he glanced down at his Dudley cast-offs. These ones were a couple of years old, so while they were loads too big, it wasn't as bad as it could have been. "Nothing, all right. Let's just go."

"We are not going to visit your aunt in hospital with you looking like some-- some-- vagabond!" Snape exploded. "Have you no shame at all? Or are you trying to sabotage this whole enterprise? Don't you want the wards extended?"

"You don't understand," Harry began, but that was the wrong tack to take. If there was one thing Snape couldn't stand --one thing besides Harry, that was-- it was to be told he didn't know everything.

"No, you don't understand!" Snape growled, leaping across the space that had separated them. "You're going to get back upstairs and change again, this time into some decent clothes! The ones you had on before were fine. Change your shoes, too; I don't even see how those huge things can stay on your feet! Now, move!"

Harry probably would have; he knew better than to defy that particular tone of Snape's, but since the tone was softened marginally by the fact that it was filtered through Remus' voice, he managed to stand his ground.

"No," he calmly answered, again that feeling of Occluding his mind, well sort of Occluding it, anyway, pressing in on him. It was like his anger had gone someplace else, someplace not very far away, yet still somehow distant. "This isn't sabotage, Professor."

He added the title quite deliberately, knowing that it would catch Snape's full attention. Besides, it wasn't that big a slip. Remus had been a professor, too.

"Listen, I know you think you know all about me, but you really don't," Harry went on. "Not that it matters, you understand." Quiet dignity suffused his voice, but to maintain it, he had to look away. He didn't want to say these things, not to anyone, and Snape least of all, but the fact that he looked and sounded like Remus just now... well, it helped. Harry knew that was stupid of him; he
understood that this was all just an illusion. But still, it helped.

Because if he had needed to, he could have told Remus these things.

"I want the wards extended," Harry confirmed, encouraged because Snape was at least listening instead of reacting, finally. "I'll do all I can to achieve that, Professor. I know what's at stake; I do see beyond the end of my nose. Look, I don't even know how to explain about the clothes. It's just that they'll be happier--well, not happier--but less upset to see me if I'm dressed this way, all right? My whole idea here is to try not to upset them, so that they might agree when I ask... look, you might as well know right now that they absolutely loathe magic, so it's not too likely that Uncle Vernon will even let Dudley take part in any warding, but I will do my best, all right? This is part of it."

Snape was staring at him by the time he finished. Harry was absolutely sure he couldn't have withstood that stare, not if it looked like it was coming from Snape. But coming from Remus, he could. Just barely.

This isn't Remus, he told himself again. Of course it's not. Remus would be giving me a hug by now. Not that I need one. I'm sixteen, I'm not a baby...

The Potions Master cleared his throat. "You aren't making any sense, Pot--... Why would your relatives be less upset to see you dressed in rags than your own clothes?"

Harry closed his eyes. "Don't you get it? These are my clothes, Professor. The Dursleys have never even seen the other ones. And if they do, they're going to wonder where I got them, how I paid for them. I guarantee you, it'll make them angry to see me in something nice."

"Where did you get those other clothes?" Snape quietly asked.

"Does it matter?" Harry sighed. "Oh, fine. Marks and Spencer. Ron and Hermione and I went there right after Madame Malkin's last summer. And before you start yelling that I shouldn't have left Diagon Alley, that Muggle London could be dangerous for me... Hell, I know that. You're right, all right? I admit it. Death Eaters everywhere. But I couldn't stand another year of throwing nice robes over clothes like these."

Snape didn't state the obvious, that Harry had been stupid to value fashion sense more than his life. "Why are there locks on the outside of that door upstairs? I presume that is your bedroom?"

Now it was Harry who was staring. What was wrong with the man? Of course, this was Snape, so Harry knew the answer to that. "You're going to make me say more than I have already? What do you want, even more dirt to feed to your nasty little--" Slytherins, he had been going to say. A single word, but it could prove to be a fatal slip if anyone overheard.

"This is a stupid discussion," Harry decided, frowning, his voice dropping until he was talking to himself, saying the same things that had helped him all along. Well, since he was eleven, anyway. "None of this matters, not one bit. It's just the way things are. Let's just get on with the rest of it so I can go back to my real life."

Walking past Snape and into the kitchen, Harry snatched the telephone receiver from its cradle and quickly rang Directory Enquiries. "Surrey, Frimley Park Hospital. Yes, National Health!" he bit out, memorizing the number as it was recited to him. Five plus years at Hogwarts would do that to you.

Snape had followed him, still staring incessantly. Harry hoped it was because he'd never seen a phone in use, before. He turned his back on his professor as he was connected to the hospital and finished the call.
"All right, she's there," he finally announced, absolutely determined to forget he'd said a single thing about the clothes, let alone the rest. "How do you suggest we get there? Can you Apparate us both?"

"Not to a place I've never been, not without some call towards it," Snape returned, finally turning his gaze aside. It seemed, though, that he couldn't leave the other subject behind. "Are you certain you should go like... that?"

"Yes," Harry answered, the single word so sharp it cut the air. "All right, what do you want to do, take a taxi? Umm, that's like a Knight Bus for Muggles. Did you bring any Muggle money? They won't take Galleons. I'm guessing the Knight Bus itself isn't an option, bit conspicuous, and Stan's seen me before, it'll get around..."

"I've no objection to a walk."

"A long walk, Professor."

Snape nodded, and headed out the front door. Now it was Harry who was staring. How could the man look like his robes were billowing when he wasn't wearing any? When, in fact, he was wearing the quaint, slightly old-fashioned suits Remus tended to favour?

Well, at least he looked somewhat like a Muggle in them. Harry groaned, wondering if he needed to explain yet further about the Dursleys. *Nah,* he decided. *Probably not.* After all, *don't bring any freaks along* and *they loathe magic* were hints enough. Snape would know better than to act the wizard while in view of the Dursleys.

And Harry would know better than to so much as mention magic, or Hogwarts, or any part of his real life. He'd just smile and nod as they insulted him, and hope against hope that Snape wasn't paying too much attention to detail.

*Fat chance of that,* Harry thought to himself. *What is the entire discipline of Potions but details? Snape's even said so. "It's all in the details, Longbottom! Wormroot elixir is *not* unicorn blood!"*

This isn't going to be a pleasant visit. He's going to notice everything they say, every nuance, every word. And when we get back to Hogwarts, if not before, he'll use it all against me.

Poor Harry Potter, he'll sneer. Nobody's ever loved him. Is that why you play the hero, Potter? Are you looking for approval? Well, you won't get it here, will you? Not unless you can manage to produce a halfway decent Pepper-Up Potion, and we all know how likely *that* is, don't we?

Poor Harry Potter...

Shoving his hands in his pockets, Harry grit his teeth and trudged along.
By the time they were heading down Portsmouth Road toward the hospital itself, Harry was really beginning to wonder about the Polyjuice Potion. An hour, he’d thought. That was all the time it gave. That was why Crouch had had to drink all the time from that hip-flask, back in fourth year when he was pretending to be Mad-Eye Moody, because the effects only lasted an hour....

He’d wanted to ask Snape about it for the better part of an hour, because even without a watch, he was sure that at least two must have passed. He most definitely didn't want to talk to Snape, though. Not about anything. They'd passed the entire walk in absolute silence so far, except for the time when Snape, not understanding the difference between a red light and a green one, had stepped out into oncoming traffic. And even then all Harry had uttered was a low hiss of warning to get the man back onto the curb.

Still, this was getting ridiculous. Snape's life was at stake if he accidentally transformed into his true shape. As much as Harry detested Snape, he didn't want to be responsible for any more deaths. Besides, if worse came to worst, the Order would lose its spy, and all the potential information that spy could bring to bear in the war against Voldemort. Harry had no idea how a potions expert like Snape could be so careless as to let that happen, of course, but still... something had to be on the man's mind, right? Why else would he be neglecting his potion like this?

Harry pressed his lips tightly together, knowing all too well what was likely on his professor's mind. Why couldn't Snape just have let matters be? Why did he have to poke and pry until Harry had admitted to those awful things?

Simple answer, he didn't trust Harry Potter.

Yeah, well the feeling's mutual, Professor, Harry thought. The rumours about his magic-hating, Harry-hating family would be all over Hogwarts as soon as they returned, he just knew it. Par for the course, as Uncle Vernon would say, though Harry tried his best not to emulate his horrible uncle.

That was all beside the point, though, Harry told himself, trying his best to stay in the mature mould he'd been cultivating for the past few hours. Whatever was wrong with Snape, Polyjuice Potion was nothing to fool around with. What if Snape snapped back into an imposing, downright sinister-looking Potions Master right in front of the Dursleys' faces? They'd both be thrown out of the hospital on their ears, litanies of I said no freaks, boy, don't they teach you to read at that damned school? shouted after them.

Okay, so like it or not, he had to mention the fact that Snape was overdue on his potion. Harry chewed his lower lip, wondering how to phrase it. Getting his head bitten off for trying to help --an all too common occurrence in class, though granted, he was usually trying to help Neville, not Snape-- was never very fun.

The mature thing would be just to say it, wouldn't it? Harry had been working hard on doing the mature thing. If not for that, he wouldn't be here, and he certainly wouldn't have explained about his clothes. A more childish version of himself would have changed clothes when Snape had ordered it, and left it to the Potions Master to sort out the almighty row that was sure to erupt when Vernon saw him wearing something that Harry James Potter couldn't possibly have afforded. Harry wasn't even sure what might have resulted --an accusation of shoplifting, perhaps-- though it was a sure bet that after that, all hope would be lost when it came to the warding.

But it wasn't going to come to that, and why? Because he'd done the responsible thing, painful as it
was. He would live to regret it when all of Slytherin House made capital out of his pitiful excuse for a childhood, when the comments followed him up and down the halls, but the point was that he would in fact live.

So too with this, even if he had to listen to Snape's typical barrage of sarcastic remarks.

"Isn't it time, sir?" he asked, trying for a simple, matter-of-fact tone while cloaking the question for the benefit of the Muggles all around them. "For you to take more of your... er, medicine?"

"It's an improved formulation," Snape answered, sparing him a cursory glance. To Harry's shock, there wasn't any derision present in those eyes, and none in the words that followed. "It should last eight hours, but I'll drink it every six to be sure I don't have..." he seemed to be searching for an appropriate Muggle term. "A relapse."

Harry didn't have to ask who had improved the formulation. They didn't hand out the title of Potions Master for nothing. Now, if the man could just teach as well, he might actually be suited for his job. Of course, Snape couldn't teach at all, not even something as simple as potions safety precautions. He'd just rather watch the students melt cauldrons and blow themselves up, then yell at them afterwards. As far as Harry could tell, Snape had never even bothered to try to teach them.

Frimley Park finally looming before them, Harry strolled straight up to the glass hospital doors. When they slid aside to allow him entrance, Snape looked a tad suspicious, as if he suspected Harry had muttered a quick, illegal Alohomora of his own. Did he think that Harry's wand work was that clever, that he could slide it out of his baggy sweatshirt sleeve and spell a door without Snape even seeing? Or did Snape actually suspect that Harry could do wandless magic? Of course he couldn't do any such thing, but the idea of leading Snape up the garden path was awfully tempting. Stupid, though, not to mention immature. Snape would just report the illegal magic to Dumbledore, and Harry would have to admit that he'd only pretended to have such a talent, and then he'd come off looking exactly like the attention-craving brat Snape liked to claim he was.

"It's just Muggle stuff," he admitted in a low voice as they approached the reception desk. "I told you, they can do interesting stuff, too." Snape raised an eyebrow and nodded, though he didn't appear satisfied until he glanced back and saw the doors sliding aside for several other hospital patrons.

"Petunia Dursley's ward," Harry requested of the lady in the starched white uniform, cap perched neatly on her head. "Can I have the number, please?"

The nurse swiftly tapped out something on her keyboard, then studied the computer screen. Snape was watching the whole process rather incredulously.

"She's in intensive care, and visitors are restricted. I'll have to check if you're on the list. And you are?"

"Harry Potter, her nephew." What a relief that was, to say his name to someone who didn't immediately gasp and look for his scar. Actually, she didn't react in the slightest, but just kept waiting. "Oh, yeah. And this is Remus Lupin, a friend," Harry added.

"I'll ring through while you sign in," the nurse announced, pointing out a gridded sheet of paper attached to a metal clipboard.

Harry did, and was a little startled to see Snape writing out Remus Lupin in a script that almost exactly matched the writing in the letter he'd read earlier that day. Weird.
"Yes, I understand. I'll send him up, straight away," the nurse was quietly saying. Hanging up the phone, she swivelled on her chair and regarded the pair of visitors again. "You can go through," she said to Harry as she pointed. "Take the lift. Ward 328." Her gaze snapped to Snape's. "You'll have to wait here, I'm afraid."

Snape narrowed his eyes, and Harry didn't have to be a Legilimens to know what he was thinking. He wasn't even surprised when Snape leaned over the reception desk, stared straight into the woman's face, and quietly murmured, "Obliviate minimisco." Only one thing surprised Harry: Snape could do wandless magic. Some, at least. He wondered again why Dumbledore didn't give the Potions Master the Defence Against the Dark Arts job. Of course, maybe it was because Dumbledore knew that Snape couldn't teach to save his life, and the headmaster would prefer that the students actually acquire some real defence skills. But that didn't really tally, did it, considering the absolute clowns who'd held the coveted post year after year. At least this year he didn't have Umbridge again, but in Harry's view, Professor Aran was very nearly just as bad. He wouldn't let them do much in the way of practical magic, either. On the other hand, when he gave detention you didn't have to write lines in your own blood. That had to be worth something, even if the most useful thing they'd learned in weeks of class was that you spelled kappa with two p's.

Absolute, utter rot, that Defence class, just like every one he'd endured outside of third year.

Good thing they'd kept the D.A. running. Somebody had to try to get the students ready in case it came down to a battle with Death Eaters, let alone Voldemort himself. And if the teachers wouldn't do it, the students would do it for themselves.

Yet one more reason why Harry had lost most of his respect for Dumbledore. He could hire decent defence teachers; Harry was sure of it. Yet he didn't. He chose to expose the students to idiocy instead. No doubt he had his reasons... a big, undulating tangle of rationalizations for why he had to do things that way, and why he had to keep it all a secret... Dumbledore thought he was some great strategist or something. Well, too much strategy had ended up with Sirius falling through a veil of death at the end of last year. Harry was sick of putting up with it. He couldn't force the headmaster to reveal his little intrigues, or tell the whole truth. All he could do was what he'd been doing.

His best.

By the time Harry had reasoned all that out, the nurse was shaking her head as though coming out of a dream, her voice a low slur of sound. "Ward 328, I said. Well, off with you." That time, her languid wave encompassed them both.

They headed toward the lifts, but only got halfway there before Harry said, "Wait. I should have thought of this, sooner. Do you have any Muggle money on you? I don't."

"The headmaster thought it would be prudent," Snape murmured, fishing in a vest pocket. Really, Snape in a seersucker vest was just too much, though Lupin could carry the look rather well. "What do you need?"

"Flowers." Harry pointed at the florist-and-gift-shop they'd just passed.

"Ah. Well, here, then," Snape said, and thrust several fifty-pound notes towards him.

"Put most of that away, Remus," Harry stressed. It was a pretty bad gaffe, but at least if any of Voldemort's supporters were lurking in the shadows, the mistake wouldn't strike them as strange. How would they know how much Muggle money would be appropriate?

Snatching a single bill off the top, Harry shoved it in his pocket, crossed over towards the shop, and
quickly surveyed his choices. The lilies were lovely, he thought... but nah, better not. More than likely, they'd just remind Aunt Petunia of Lily Potter. Besides, they were expensive. He ended up with a half dozen posies smashed into a small glass vase. Pretty paltry, really, but he knew that if he bought anything more extravagant, Uncle Vernon would accuse him of conjuring it. As it was, he was going to have to explain how he'd afforded even these few.

"Thanks, Remus," Harry said, putting on a bright face as he extended a fistful of change towards Snape.

"Keep it," Snape growled, turning aside.

"No, really--" Harry insisted, but Snape was already walking away. "Well, fine. Thanks for the loan," he added as he caught up.

Anything Snape might have replied was cut short by the sight of the lift doors opening and people streaming out. The man looked dumbstruck again, which was fairly ludicrous considering Snape could claim with a straight face to be able to bottle fortune, brew fame, and put a stopper in death. What was so fascinating about a simple lift? It was Muggle magic, that was what. Except that it wasn't magic, it was just machines. Harry knew that, and of course Snape did, too, but it sure seemed like he'd never seen any of those machines close up, before. Probably best not to snicker, Harry decided. He just hoped that Snape would be able to cool it in front of the Dursleys. If he gawked at the hospital equipment like a two-year-old discovering the loo, Harry's family would know he was a wizard for sure.

They stepped in, and Harry pressed the button for the third floor, trying not to smile when the lurching motion of the lift almost knocked Snape off his feet. No doubt about it, magic gave you a much smoother ride.

"Okay, 328," Harry said when the doors opened. He checked the arrows on the wall. "This way." In no time at all, he had found the right room and glanced inside. There were ten narrow beds, five on each side of the room. All in all, the setup wasn't too different from the hospital wing at Hogwarts, although of course here there was medical equipment everywhere. Harry didn't really recognise any of it, but he wasn't going to let on as much to Snape. He'd spent enough time feeling clueless in Potions class that this little role-reversal was rather heartening.

"You're a Muggle, remember," Harry hissed under his breath just before they entered. Then one more thing occurred to him. "Listen, when Uncle Vernon loses his temper, he tends to be indiscreet. There's no telling what he might say, so can you place a silencing spell all around us? Er, can that be done without walls or curtains or something to attach the spell to?"

"Defence is no better this year than any other, I gather," Snape remarked, though he did nod at the suggestion.

Harry couldn't resist. "Oh, but you were great, Remus, really great. Best teacher at Hogwarts, that's how I always think of you, the absolute best."

With that, he swept ahead into the ward. Once he got inside, though his smile didn't last for long.

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A few patients turned their heads as they walked past, but most people in the cancer ward were asleep. That included the Dursleys. All the Dursleys.

Aunt Petunia was lying on the bed nearest the window, her features bonier than Harry had ever seen,
her skin so pale it almost seemed translucent. In places it was actually bruised. Her eyes were closed, her face turned toward the light, her thin chest moving up and down in rapid, shallow sequence. Harry gulped. Of course he'd heard that she was ill, that it was serious, even. For some reason, though, he'd expected her to look like her usual self. Acerbic, sizing him up and down, lips twisted in dismay as she yelled at him for muddying the floor, or putting too much salt on the roast, or getting better marks than Dudley.

Instead, she looked ill. Very ill, so much so that Harry could scarcely believe his eyes. For a long moment, he just stared. He'd before never seen anybody in a state like this, not even Cedric in those awful moments after Voldemort had hissed, "Kill the spare."

That had been bad enough, but this was worse. Slow death, Muggle death. It was positively hideous, what the cancer was doing to Aunt Petunia.

In that instant, Harry faced the truth inside himself, a truth very nearly as hideous: when he'd first read the news of her illness, he had been just the tiniest bit glad that she might suffer. After all, he'd suffered, too, and at her hands. He'd believed that she deserved this, that she was getting her just deserts.

Well, he could attest that Aunt Petunia was far from perfect, but he'd revised his opinion of cancer. Nobody deserved this. She was rotting away while still alive, her body clinging to hope when there clearly was none. His stomach tightened with the sensation of wanting to be ill, but swallowing helped. Some, at least. Drawing in a few bracing breaths was even better. Only then could he tear his horrified gaze away from the sight of her.

He wasn't crying, not over Petunia, but tears were pricking at his eyes. Tears of shame. One or two spilled over to wet his face, but Harry didn't even notice them until Remus silently passed him a plain white handkerchief. No, not Remus, he had to remind himself, though this time it was harder.

"Thanks," he whispered without looking at Snape. Thank God it wasn't Remus standing there beside him, or he might have said more, might have babbled out his guilt that he'd practically wished this on her. But he hadn't known, he hadn't really understood what death could mean. He should have, after Cedric, after Sirius. But no, he'd been stupid and thoughtless and immature. About everything.

Harry thrust the handkerchief back at Snape and determinedly ignored him to survey the rest of the scene. Vernon Dursley was asleep in a chair shoved up against the bed, his head tilted to the side as he lightly snored, and Dudley was in another chair, leaning over front ways to rest his head and arms near the foot of the bed. There were day-old carnations on the night table, and a small pile of opened cards.

Harry stared for a moment, unsure of what to do, then shrugging, he set the small vase of posies down next to the carnations, and went to lift an unoccupied chair from one of the sleeping patients. Setting it soundlessly down a short distance from Petunia, he gestured that Snape should sit. After that, Harry fetched another chair for himself.

They sat there in silence for a few minutes, Harry coming to terms with himself, getting used to the dreadful facts that this visit encompassed. Facts not just about life and death, but about himself. Maturity again, he fairly grimaced.

At some point, he realised that he should have brought a book to read. Then again, he didn't have any books except Hogwarts texts, and those certainly wouldn't go over too well. He'd been right to leave them back in his bare bedroom in the Dursley house. There were other books in the house, of course, but Harry knew better than to so much as touch them.
Snape seemed more restless than Harry had ever seen him, but he supposed that made sense. Since when did the Potions Master ever just sit and do nothing? In class he was a frenzied ball of activity, rushing from table to table to sneer at the Gryffindors’ potions and praise the Slytherins’, even though they often looked remarkably the same. When he did sit down in class, it was to mark papers, one finger steadily running down the scroll as he read, the other hand furiously writing comments such as *It seems you have mislaid your entire brain, this time. Pray do not return to class until you have located it.*

Even when he was just watching them take a test, he would also be clarifying solvents, or sorting through potion components, his sharp eyes on them all the while. No wonder he’d seen Harry slip that letter underneath his exam paper.

Now, Snape had nothing whatsoever to do, and Harry could tell it was going to drive the Potions Master mad before too long.

Snape abruptly stood, his steps taking him to the foot of the bed where a scribbled chart was hanging. Snatching it up, he set to reading, his finger moving down it line by line, just as when he was marking essays.

"I don't think visitors are supposed to look at that," Harry pointed out, whispering.

"It's no use anyway; it's completely illegible," Snape all but snarled.

Harry thought that was a fine comment coming from that quarter. All that kept some first-years from crying when they got their Potions essays back was that fact that half the comments were written in a long curling scrawl that nobody in his right mind could hope to read. Just as well. After you'd seen *If you truly believe that fermented yew sap is not poisonous, I suggest you prepare some and drink it. Do be sure to share it with your fellow Gryffindors,* written in the margin, you really didn't need to know what the other comments might say.

Snape's snarl hadn't been loud by any means, but it had been enough to wake up Dudley.

The boy stretched out his arms, mumbling something, and then his head came up, wobbling with exhaustion. He stared at Harry, and blinked several times.

For his part, Harry couldn't help but stare back. Dudley looked nearly as ill as Petunia, and though he didn't have that wasted away look his mother bore, he had definitely lost weight. A lot of weight.

Of course Dudley was still grotesquely fat, but still, it was a marked improvement. Strangely enough, though, the family hadn't bought him any new clothes to fit him better. Dudley's shirt and pants were rolled up just like Harry's were.

Thinking quickly, Harry made sure his wand was fully tucked up his sleeve. Then he stood, and went over to his cousin, and knelt down on one knee beside his chair. But not to beg. He wasn't *going* to beg, no matter what Snape had to say on the matter. It wasn't pride stopping him, though, it was just reality. If the Dursleys didn't want to help him, then they wouldn't, it was as simple as that. Begging wouldn't change matters. He'd learned that much before he'd turned five, and he hadn't begged since. Not once.

In any case, it was too soon to talk about the wards. That wasn't the kind of thing he could just come out with. He'd have to figure out how to ease into the whole subject, how to not make it sound completely crass and self-centred to worry about himself when Aunt Petunia was lying there so ill.

Kneeling now... it just seemed simpler than dragging his chair over. It seemed less intrusive too, and...
more respectful of the atmosphere in the hospital room, of Dudley's own obvious grief.

"Hallo Harry," his cousin finally groaned, still disoriented enough to state the obvious. "You came."

As Harry nodded, Vernon Dursley began to stir, and he had more to say on that particular topic. A great deal more, as it turned out.
Uncle Vernon cracked open first one eye, then the other, and wiping his mouth on his sleeve, saved his talking until he was fully awake. Even then, all he said at first was, "Took you long enough, boy."

Harry flushed, unwilling to admit that he'd ignored the letter. Instead, his glance passing over Aunt Petunia again, he quietly murmured, "How long has she been... er, how long has she had...?"

Uncle Vernon stared at him like he'd grown six heads overnight. "How long?" he gasped, lumbering to his feet and marching over to tower over his nephew. "How long, indeed! Are you blind and deaf as well as just plain stupid? You sound as though you don't even know what ails her!"

"But I don't," Harry quietly pointed out, rising to his own feet. Some part of him was aware of Snape getting up, too, but that only made the sensation of being threatened even worse. Bit stupid, really; he knew Snape was there to protect him. He even knew that Snape had saved his life, way back in first year.

Trouble was, Snape had never once acted like he was glad he'd saved Harry at all. In fact, Harry suspected he deeply regretted it. Or would, if not for the prophecy. Yeah, that awful prophecy did make Harry sort of necessary to the wizarding world, but it still didn't mean Snape was happy Harry hadn't fallen to his death.

"You don't know what's wrong with her, you say?" Vernon spat. "I suppose you're going to claim now that you don't remember this past summer at all!"

"I remember that we stayed out of each other's way for once," Harry returned in level tones. He thought better than to add that it had been his best summer yet.

"Hmph. Well, there is that, I suppose," Vernon admitted, rubbing a fat hand against the back of his neck in a seesawing motion. A series of loud creaking noises ensued as he stretched his neck first one way, then the other. "Maybe I didn't tell you at that. We were all of us just so upset, and we didn't know what you might take it into your head to do if you knew Petunia was under the weather. Don't think I've forgotten Dudley and the python, or the damned car that broke the bars off your window, let alone the time you blew up your aunt or when your stupid friends messed with Dudley's tongue or you summoned demons to kill him--" For a moment, he appeared to have lost his train of thought.

One more glance in Harry's direction gave Vernon renewed focus, though, because he'd finally noticed Snape. "Who's this, then?" he snarled, grabbing his nephew by the forearm and roughly shaking him. His voice became a low, furious growl. "I told you, I was clear as day, no freaks, you worthless little snot! Just seeing you will probably be the end of poor Petunia, the shape she's in, but it better not be, you hear me? 'Cause you'll be next, boy. Don't think I don't mean it!"

Harry saw Snape stiffen slightly, but all he did in reaction was extend a hand in greeting. "This is Remus Lupin, Uncle Vernon," he rushed to say, wiggling his arm a bit until it was let go. "And he's not... well, he's not like me, all right? He's a Muggle. I mean... he's a normal person."

"Didn't know there were any normal folk up at that school of his," Vernon muttered suspiciously, though he did take the other man's hand and pump it up and down as though testing Snape's mettle.

"He's a full professor," Harry interjected, knowing that his uncle had a tendency to respect titles. "Of,
er..." Here he lowered his voice a bit and launched into his plan. "They call it Muggle Studies. See, he's supposed to help people like me learn to act, er... less weird. That's actually a huge part of the curriculum at my school," he added, deciding that he might as well lay it on thick. The whole idea here, after all, was to placate the Dursleys. Oh yeah, and putting on a bit of a contrite expression wouldn't come amiss, either. Harry opened his eyes wide and let his lips quiver a little as he went on, "See, they know we're all... well, they know that kids like me need help. Er, controlling ourselves, like with Aunt Marge. I'm loads better now, thanks to Professor Lupin. I'm really, really sorry I've been so awful, Uncle Vernon."

Remus' clothing rustled beside him. Harry glanced swiftly to the side and noticed Snape staring fixedly into Vernon's eyes. Uh-oh... Legilimency, and without a wand. It didn't last long, though, so Harry wasn't sure how much Snape might have learned.

Oblivious to the fact that magic had been at play, Vernon was giving a definite nod. "Highly approve," he commended Snape, bobbing his great weight up and down on the balls of his feet. "First time I've heard the boy apologise for what he is. So what's your connection with Potter here? Just have him in class?"

"The headmaster didn't trust the boy to travel down alone," Snape flatly offered, his gaze deliberately seeking out the window. "He's a troublemaker."

Uncle Vernon smiled in an oily, satisfied sort of way. All it took to improve his uncle's mood was for someone else to badmouth Harry, apparently. Well, that figured.

"Troublemaker. Yes, he is that," Vernon echoed, sighing a bit as he went to sit down, again, the padded metal chair straining under his weight. He waved Harry and Snape back to their seats, then glanced at Petunia. When he saw that she was still asleep, he went on talking. "We took him in as a baby, you know. Had to. His wastrel father got himself killed in a car crash. Him and his wife, both. Driving drunk, he was. James Potter never was worth a wad of spit, and that one's even worse. Sure as I'm sitting here, he'll never amount to anything. My sister Marge knew it the first time she saw him, she did. Bad blood will out, she said, and mark my words, truer words were never spoken."

So much for meek. Harry felt anger washing over him in waves. He tried to control it, tried to build walls in his mind to hold the roaring tide back, but it kept seeping through the cracks, demanding an outlet, and the longer his uncle talked, the worse it got.

"Had to teach him a lesson more times than I can count," Vernon went on, convinced that anyone who taught Muggle Studies --at least as Harry had explained it-- would see eye to eye with him on all matters Potter. "Not that the boy ever learned. You'd think a whole month of weeding twelve hours a day would make him think twice about sneaking his books up to his room so he could learn more spells to curse us with, but no. I had to get out the strap before we were through, and he still insisted he needed to do his homework, he did. The nerve. One summer we actually had to burn his books to put an end to it. Can you believe what he said then? Claimed some great ugly twit of a teacher was going to make fun of him in Potions class!"

The vase holding the posies abruptly cracked clean through.

Snape gave him a warning glance. Harry stared stoically back.

Dudley, finally fully awake, had flinched back a yard at the noise. "Dad..." he ventured, shaking and pointing at the broken pieces on the nightstand.

Vernon's eyebrows drew together as he rounded on Snape. "Looks to me as though he needs a few more lessons in self-control!"
"He'll get them," Snape promised in a tone Harry recognised even through Remus' voice. It was intent. Cold, merciless intent.

Vernon wasn't through, though. "Now, where'd those damned flowers come from, boy? You'd better tell me the truth, or by God I'll have a thing or two to say about it! Did you--" Vernon halted, and continued the rest of the question in a low, thoroughly revolted tone. "Did you magic them here?"

"No, I bought them in the gift shop downstairs," Harry said, trying to make it sound gracious. It was difficult when what he really wanted to do was pummel somebody. "I thought they might cheer up Aunt Petunia."

"And since when do you have money to cheer up anybody, boy?" Vernon ground out, leaning forward as far as he could over his massive rolls of fat. "It's not like your worthless father had any to leave you, is it? No, you were left to burden us, weren't you, and you've done your best to be a burden--"

"Professor Lupin lent me some money," Harry interrupted, rather desperate to cut off his tirade. He should have known better than to have bothered.

"Oh he lent you some, did he! So how do you think you're going to pay him back, eh? We've fed and clothed you all these infernal years, much against our will, I might add. You think we wanted our sweet Dudley exposed to the likes of you? Well, boy? Where're you going to get two pence to rub together? You're just like your father. He never did a lick of work, either, just sat around boozing. Unemployed, you know," he added to Snape, who made a noise that could be interpreted as concurrence. Vernon turned his attention back to Harry. "You're a waste of space, but you'd damned well better learn to do some work sometime in your life. Money doesn't grow on trees, you know, and we don't just hand it out like sweets!"

"When did you ever give me a sweet?" Harry erupted. *Oops, wrong tactic.* "Sorry, Uncle Vernon, that was rude. What I meant was, I already promised Professor Lupin that I'd scrub his floors every weekend for a month, to pay him back. He thought it was a fair trade."

"Make it two months," Vernon advised Snape. "He's a slacker, that one."

Mention of sweets had got to Dudley, who said he was going to get something from a vending machine down the corridor. Harry repressed an urge to roll his eyes.

"Wipe that smarmy look right off your face, boy!" Vernon rebuked him. "Dudley's been wasting away with worry for his mother. Didn't you see how his clothes just hang on him, now? He needs to keep his strength up. Hell, he's only eating now because he's relieved you're here. We've been waiting for days and worrying ourselves silly that that stupid owl wouldn't know a letter from a field mouse. Owls, honestly! It's an outrage, and I'll have a thing or two to say about that Figg character when the neighbourhood council meets, just see if I don't!"

Harry knew from long experience how best to reply to rants like that. "Yes, Uncle Vernon."

Snape broke into the conversation again. "Mr Dursley, I'm afraid that Harry didn't explain very well when the headmaster instructed me to come along. May I ask about the situation with your wife? I'll need to notify the school if Harry will be here for an extended time."

"Ach, maybe Harry couldn't have known what to say," Vernon gruffly admitted, seeming to calm again. Snape was having that effect on him, Harry realised. He wondered how much of it might be due to a subtle spell. Or maybe it was the tone of voice he'd used; one of Remus' very softest ones. "This past summer's just one long blur of worry to me. I can't remember telling him. Course, how
could I have? The boy made himself scarce, and I wasn't in any mood to seek him out, not after that
creep with the bulging eye told me I'd get what-for if I so much as looked at him cross-eyed."

Snape waited patiently for Vernon to get to the point, which was more than the Potions Master had
ever done for his students. Except maybe for the Slytherins.

"Anyway, it's leukaemia," Vernon glumly admitted, making it sound as though the word itself was
strangling him.

Harry could see Snape trying to decode the word, break it into Latin parts perhaps, to glean some
meaning from it. He could also see him failing to truly understand. In that, the professor wasn't alone.

Leaning forward a bit, Harry quietly asked, "Leukaemia? Is that um.... some sort of cancer?"

"Blood cancer," Vernon sighed, looking suddenly so weary that it was a wonder he stayed awake.
"Add that to your course outline, professor. The stupid boy doesn't even know basic facts about how
normal people live and die. Anyway, she's on the waiting list for a bone marrow transplant. Dudders
and I applied to be donors, but we weren't compatible." His voice caught on the last word. "It's a
long list and the doctors say she might not be able to make it until..."

Vernon abruptly stopped talking and closed his eyes, his hands clenching on the arms of his chair,
his whole body shaking slightly.

"I'm sorry," Harry offered, wishing he had the kind of family relationships where he could at least
lay a hand on someone's arm as he said that. But he didn't, and he knew better than to try. The few
times when he'd hugged his aunt's or uncle's legs --three-year-olds couldn't reach up much farther
than that-- he'd been shoved unceremoniously aside and screamed at. We don't like your kind, so
keep your distance. Now, back in your cupboard until you learn to keep your grubby hands to
yourself..." Harry flinched slightly, remembering the awful click of that bolt sliding shut, remembering
the stifling air inside.

"You should be sorry," Vernon balefully returned, recovering, a glare growing in his eyes despite his
obvious exhaustion. "This is your fault, boy, every last bit of it! All those years of worry, of having
to put up with you, Petunia reminded of her freakish sister at every turn! The outright lies you told
us! Floating puddings, indeed! I thought I'd be able to beat the dishonesty out of you, but here you
sit, still exploding vases without so much as a by your leave! Is it any wonder she's fallen ill? The
sheer stress of raising you is like to kill her!"

That time, Harry had Occluded his mind in time to better tolerate Vernon's barrage of abuse. Or at
least he thought he had. It was hard to tell Occlusion from stoicism. Maybe they were the same,
Harry thought. Maybe he just needed to feel less. About everything.

No amount of stoicism, however, could have prepared him for the next outrageous words that came
spilling out of his uncle's mouth.

"You can pay her back, now, though," he said, lowering his voice to a pitch that Harry could barely
hear no matter how he strained. "You know we don't like this funny business you're always up to,
and no wonder, but if you've learned anything at all up at that school of yours, you must have
learned to do some good with it, eh? That's why we called you back here. You didn't think any of us
wanted to see you, did you? We want just one thing from you, and it's to make Petunia well again."

Harry swallowed, hoping he'd misunderstood. He had to have, right? "You... er, you actually want
me to do magic, Uncle Vernon?"
"Yes, boy! Are you simple? You twiddle your wand over her, or whatever it takes, and get her blood back to normal! Well? Get on with it!"

Horrified, Harry couldn't help what he did next.

He looked to Snape for guidance. *Snape.*

But he had to; there was no one else.

The Potions Master looked to be deep in thought, and it was a long moment before he spoke. "Mr Dursley. That is... an unusual request. Harry's not been trained to heal. Perhaps you'd allow me to look into the matter?"

Vernon's eyes narrowed still further. "You look into it all you want, Mr Lupin, but when all's said and done, the boy had damned well better save my Petunia."

"I understand," Snape murmured, his voice still that one that vaguely reminded Harry of a calming draught. "I must point out, however, that it may well be beyond his capabilities—"

"Ha!" Uncle Vernon shouted, unwilling to concede that. Whatever spell Snape had been using on him, it certainly wasn't working now. "I've put up with his freak magic for years! Awful things he's done to me and mine! If he can't use his abnormality to do one single thing I request, well then, he can just starve on the streets for all I'll care! You got that, boy? It was Petunia took you in, and Petunia who insisted you stay even after you cursed Dudley with those whatever-you-call-'ems that live in... what did she say, Bazakan! It's been Petunia sticking up for you all along. Now you'll do what's right for her, or I'll chuck you out on your ear, and good riddance!"

Harry cleared his throat, began to croak out some sort of reply, only to feel Snape's hand abruptly catch his fingers and give them a tight squeeze. Well, that was just as well. It wasn't like he had the slightest idea how to reply to his uncle's insane demand. Truth to tell, by then his vision was starting to tunnel in.

Panic, he recognised, as his legs tried to buckle.

And it was Snape, of all people, who was holding him up.
Snape shifted his grip to Harry's forearm, the better to keep him upright. "We'll have to take the matter under advisement," he was smoothly explaining. When Vernon went to speak, the professor held up his hand to forestall it. "Yes, I understand completely that time is of the essence. That doesn't change the fact that you're asking for an unknown spell. If the magic you're requesting is possible at all, it will have to be developed."

"Well, how long will that take?" Vernon demanded.

"The sooner we begin work on it, the better," was Snape's final word on the matter. "Now, I believe Harry could do with some food. Look at him. He's shaking."

Harry thought that a rather large exaggeration, though he couldn't deny that he was hungry.

Vernon started to grumble, something about how the boy'd gone hungry plenty of times before, and been no worse for it, but his typically heartless comment was completely overshadowed by what Dudley did.

"You want a sweet, Harry?" he asked.

Harry could hardly believe his ears, but when he glanced towards the other side of Snape, his cousin was extending a chocolate-almond bar, still wrapped. Dazed, he somehow took that in, also noticing that Dudley hadn't eaten much of what he'd bought. Harry supposed that Aunt Petunia's illness really was getting to his cousin.

"Uh, sure, yeah," Harry diffidently replied. What had happened to the Dudley who terrorized the neighbourhood, beating up on anybody smaller than him? Who never said anything to Harry that wasn't either an insult or a threat? It occurred to Harry to wonder if the offer was some sort of trick.

But it wasn't. Dudley passed the chocolate bar over without hesitation.

"Uh, thanks, Dudley," Harry managed to say. Really, he was feeling a bit better, and Snape didn't have to be holding onto him any longer, but when he gave his arm a tug, the Potions Master didn't let go.

"Save that until later," Snape directed. "After dinner."

Hmm, maybe it was a good thing Snape hadn't let go, at that. Harry's wooziness returned in force, then. How on earth was he going to do what Uncle Vernon had asked? He couldn't, could he? Harry didn't think anyone could, but he wasn't exactly sure. And what about the wards protecting him from Voldemort? The Dursleys would never let Dudley take them on, not if Harry let Aunt Petunia die, no matter that he couldn't do anything about it---

"Breathe," Snape quietly said beside him, just before addressing Vernon again. "Perhaps you could recommend an inn where we might stay the night?"

Vernon had turned aside to stroke Petunia's forehead. Distracted, he didn't hear the question until Snape had repeated it.

"What? Oh. Er, well actually..." he cleared his throat and seemed to consider that, his chest puffing out with self-importance when he began to speak. "Until I say otherwise, the boy's welcome at the house. He's let me down plenty of times, but this won't be one of them, will it? I'm sure he'll do right
for his family. Won't you, boy?"

Snape's hand squeezed his arm, harder than before; when Harry glanced up, it was to see his professor giving a tiny shake of his head.

Harry didn't know what that meant, but since it wouldn't be a good idea to answer no, he gave a non-committal noise and looked back down at his floppy, oversized shoes.

"I'm afraid I have to stay wherever Harry does," Snape was saying. "Headmaster's orders. Hence my request."

"Troublemaker, yeah," Vernon mumbled, leaning further over Petunia. "She hardly ever wakes up, these days. Well, professor, I guess the headmaster knows what he's about. I don't exactly want the boy alone in my house, anyway. No telling what he'd do. You take his room; the boy can sleep on the living room floor."

"Alone in the house?" Harry croaked, confused. "Aren't you coming home?"

"Well, of course not!" Vernon erupted. "Dudders and I have got a room just around the corner, but we hardly use that, as it is. I'm going to be here whenever Petunia happens to wake up, don't think I won't! We haven't been to the house in days!"

Harry managed to shake Snape's arm off, that time, only swaying slightly once he was standing unassisted. He didn't know what to say to his uncle's outburst, except a hesitant, "Should I stay here, too, then?"

"Go with your teacher," Vernon sighed, leaning his head back on the wall, again.

Harry tried not to look back as he left. He didn't want to see Aunt Petunia looking so awful, again; he really didn't. Something compelled him, though.

As Harry glanced back over his shoulder, what he saw was Dudley, standing at the foot of the bed, rubbing his eyes as he tried not to cry.

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"You're in no shape to walk back," Snape announced as they entered the lift. This time he didn't seem fazed by it.

"Oh, I'm all right," Harry insisted, stretching a bit. That panicked feeling had receded into the background, but he knew it was lurking on the edge of his consciousness, ready to sweep over him again if he thought too hard about what his uncle wanted.

"Spare me your hero routine. Have you ever Disapparated?"

"Um, well I've portkeyed," Harry thought to say, rubbing his forearms with his hands. Snape had known that already, he felt sure. The third task, Cedric... "I didn't like it."

"This isn't much better, especially if you're not used to it." Without any warning at all, he took a step toward Harry and pulled him tight against his own body. "Close your eyes and stay still--"

"Let go!" Harry shouted, struggling, though the feel and smell was that of Remus. Not Remus, not Remus, he chanted as he thrashed.

"Fine," Snape spat, stepping back again. "Be it on your own head."
And with that, the world around Harry dissolved into a sickening mush of colours. There wasn't a hook behind his navel, or the feeling of being yanked somewhere. There was just a horrible certainty that the whole world had melted around him. Then it was melting into him, his bones aching with it, his muscles protesting, his mouth filling with acid as his body fought a battle and lost.

Harry abruptly found himself on his hands and knees on the front lawn of Number Four Privet Drive. For a long moment, he stayed perfectly still. It seemed to him that the earth was whirling at a dangerous speed, and if he stood up, he just might be flung off it. After that moment, though, the spinning slowed to a smooth roll and he pushed up with his arms, ending up in a kneel.

"Not much better?" he questioned, balefully glaring at Snape, who stood a few feet distant, arms crossed, a slight smirk on his features. "How about a thousand times worse? You could at least have warned me!"

"I tried to absorb the shock of it for you, if you recall."

"Ever think of telling me that?"

Snape narrowed his eyes, though on Remus the expression wasn't nearly as intimidating as the Potions Master intended, Harry felt sure. "Experience is the best teacher. You'll hold onto me next time, I warrant."

"Don't bet on it," Harry muttered, getting to his feet. It was dark out, which made him wonder how long they'd been in the hospital. Dark was good, though; it meant the neighbours probably hadn't seen them arrive. As for their departure, however... "Just so you know, most lifts have cameras installed. Somebody might have us Disapparating on film. That's a lot worse than people claiming to have seen a flying car."

"Hmph." Snape merely replied. "Alohomora. Your uncle told you to stay here, but didn't think to give you a way to get in."

"Yeah, well he just figures I'll do what you did."

"Are you in the habit of disregarding the Decree?"

"No!" Harry shouted, out of patience. "I've never done any magic here except what I couldn't help, all right?" That admission just reminded him of the vase breaking, and of what had caused him to lose control. All that virulence, directed at him, and plenty of lies to top it off with. And Snape had heard it all.

Sighing, Harry walked past Snape and headed toward the kitchen, where he started opening cabinets, looking for something he could cook without much fuss. Soup, maybe.

"Sit down," Snape directed. When Harry didn't, he actually took him by the shoulders and shoved him over towards the table and into a chair.

"I thought you said I needed to eat!" Harry erupted, pushing his chair back. "We don't have any house-elves here to do the cooking. Or were you going to do it?"

"Be still, you idiot child," Snape bid, taking a seat across the table. Leaning his palms on the mahogany surface, he spoke with quiet intent. "You've had several serious shocks today, and you've just experienced a sensation not unlike being turned inside out. Take a few deep breaths. Unless you let your body calm before you eat, you'll make yourself ill."
"Sod off," was Harry's reply to that. What did he care what Snape thought? He'd been looking after himself for... well, forever, basically, and he didn't need a snide interfering bastard of a teacher regulating his meals.

"Five points--" Snape broke off, chuckling slightly, but Harry didn't see the humour. As far as he was concerned, things rapidly got even less funny, because the next thing the Potions Master said was, "It's fairly obvious that you've been the house-elf here, Harry."

Harry huffed. "So you don't think I'm famous Harry Potter, primped and pampered and spoiled?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "No, I think you're tired, overwrought, not as old as you'd like me to believe, and in need of a good meal. One you don't have to cook, yourself. I also think we have quite a bit to discuss. Is there a restaurant around here you'd recommend?"

For some reason, Harry wanted more than anything to say Sod off again. Strange, considering that Snape was being... well, almost like Remus would be, actually. Maybe he just didn't trust it.

"Oh, just let me order a pizza," Harry groaned. "I don't need any more calamity raining down on my head tonight. Inside this house, supposedly, Voldemort can't get to me, so hand me the phone."

"Why supposedly?"

"I don't believe half the things Dumbledore says, any more," Harry sighed. "Case in point. He said it was a mistake to have asked you to tutor me, last year. Said he should have realised that past history was going to make the whole thing the disaster it was. Yet here we are again, thrown together at his direction."

"This is rather different from Occlumency," Snape pointed out. "Who should look after you, here in Surrey? Mundungus Fletcher? Arabella Figg?"

"How about the real Remus?"

"Who will shortly become a werewolf asleep in a locked room. Besides, if the Dark Lord's interest in you suddenly spikes, I'll know before anyone else on our side. That could be critical, and Albus knows it."

Our side. Strange to hear it put like that. Too many years of thinking of Snape as a nemesis. Which he was, oh, he most definitely was... but that was something apart from the war.

"I suppose," Harry muttered. "Still, if you want to know why I don't trust Dumbledore, you don't have to look any further than his inconsistencies."

"Life isn't a quartz crystal. It's fluid, and constantly changing. If you judge Albus too harshly merely for reacting to altered circumstances, then you're a fool."

"I thought I was a fool, anyway, in your books."

"You certainly are, if you're dim-witted enough to believe that half the things I say in class aren't on display for Malfoy to report to his father." Snape passed a hand over his hair, stroking Remus' brown strands back from his forehead. "In retrospect, I realise I shouldn't have stopped your Occlumency sessions, though I will point out that your complete refusal to practice rendered them close to worthless no matter what I did. At any rate, I would suspect that Albus believes he's giving me a second chance. I would further speculate that my bringing you and the letter to him personally convinced him I could... do better, this time, no matter the past."
Snape waited for a reply, and when none was forthcoming, prompted, "You were going to 'order a pizza,' I believe?"

"Yeah, well I said to hand me the phone." Harry found he had to explain. And point. If he'd been in a better mood, it would have been funny. Maybe. "That blue thing, on the wall." He didn't feel like getting up to find the phone book, so he rang Directory Enquiries again to get the number he needed.

Snape wandered off, his wand at the ready as Harry dialled. Harry didn't know exactly what he was up to, but he didn't care. Let him go looking for the black energy in the house. Hell, let him find it. There wasn't much left to figure out, was there?

Laying his head down on the table, Harry stared bleakly into space and waited for the stupid pizza.

He must have gone to sleep, because the next thing he knew, the pizza was already on the table, along with plates and utensils, and Snape was trying to figure out how to serve the thing.

Harry sat up groggily, listlessly beginning to eat the misshapen slice Snape had finally transferred to his plate. He didn't really get any energy up until he noticed Snape take one bite and gag. Yeah, well it couldn't be worse than some of the foul concoctions he likes to make us swallow... But that thought reminded Harry of something. "Did you take your, er... dose?"

Snape stared at him, which Harry took as a definite yes. Feeling better, he got up to fetch them both some water. This time, Snape didn't try to stop him.

"All right," Harry launched right into it. "You heard what they want. What do I do?"

"That decision can wait," Snape replied. He drained his entire glass of water without pause before resuming, and grimacing, used his knife and fork to eat another bite of pizza. The image would have been positively bizarre, if not for the fact that Harry could imagine Remus, at least, eating pizza. When Snape had finished his slice, he set his utensils down, automatically lining them up parallel, as if they were tools on a Potions desk. "Let's analyze your uncle's behaviour. He writes you a letter whose wording is offensive, to say the least, and then berates you at length to your face. This, in front of a stranger? One of your own teachers?"

"So Uncle Vernon's an insufferable pig," Harry admitted. He'd never said that out loud before, and found it was relief to get it off his chest. "Big deal."

Snape wrinkled his brow as though he thought it was, but Harry figured he just didn't know how to control Remus' expressions very well. "My point, Mr Potter---"

"If you're going to call me that, I hope you cast Silencio." Come to think of it, Harry realised, he should have thought of that a few minutes before. Just went to show how tired he must be.

Snape just gave him that stare again. That I-am-the-teacher-and-you-are-the-student stare. Harry stared right back, only to find himself nonplussed when Snape apparently relented. "That and Imperforable," the Potions Master sharply replied. "Now, as I was saying. Your uncle's motive for summoning you was to request a rather significant favour, yet he hardly acted the supplicant. From what I could deduce, he did all he could to insult you. It gives the term irrational new meaning."

"Well, you're the one who Legilimized him. Yeah, I noticed. Anyway, you must know what he's like. He gets angry, he doesn't think so well. Why does it matter?" That said, Harry picked up his pizza with his hands and set to eating.
"It matters because understanding him means we understand how best to deal with him, Mr Potter. Legilimency serves to unlock memories, not psyche. If we're going to convince him to let us extend the wards, we must determine how best to influence him."

"Well, that's easy, isn't it? Use Obliviate to make him forget how much he hates me, then ask. Hmm, if that's not enough, I'm sure there's a spell you can use to give him some level of concern about me."

"We definitely need a better Defence course," Snape muttered. "Although perhaps sacrificial magic is more a seventh-year topic. Well, be that as it may, you can't trick people into participating in protective wards. It simply doesn't work."

"Dumbledore distinctly said that my aunt took me unwillingly, Professor."

"Dumbledore whom you don't trust?" Snape lightly mocked. "It's a matter of semantics. She might not have enjoyed taking you in, Potter, but she did in fact do it willingly. Nobody forced her; nobody hexed her. She wasn't even bribed. Her conscience alone dictated her actions, and that's what we're going to need from your cousin."

"So I can't even offer them some of my gold," Harry glumly concluded. "Not that I'd give them Galleons, anyway; they'd think they carried curses, I bet. But I'd thought I might convert some to pounds. You're sure that won't help, not at all?"

"Not even if you beggar yourself; you can't buy good will. Your uncle's lack of any could be quite a problem, assuming that Dudley won't agree unless his father does."

"You don't have to tell me they lack good will, Professor."

"I'm sure I don't." Harry didn't look up, sure that Snape would be half-smiling. "But it goes beyond the mere lack thereof. Your uncle's memories of you are all rather twisted. He believes you're to blame for all your misfortunes."

Misfortunes. Well, wasn't that a nice, neutral term for rampant emotional abuse, not to mention chores until midnight and the occasional slap across the face? Harry resolutely went on eating, determined not to be upset about just what memories Snape had likely accessed. So what if the Potions Master knew everything? So what if he did spread it around Slytherin, or worse, spit it out bit by bit during the usual barrage of insults during every Potions class? Worse things had happened to him, that was for sure. Yeah, like having his own blood help raise Voldemort to a terrifying new reign, like knowing he was to blame for every subsequent death. Like realizing he wasn't a boy, he was just a scar and a prophecy.

Like unintentionally luring Sirius to his death.

"Well your childhood wasn't a picnic, either!" he suddenly exploded, not even caring, this time, if Snape got mad about what Harry knew.

"True," Snape acknowledged, tilting his head to the side to regard Harry thoughtfully. "I think perhaps we are even."

"Oh, goody," Harry sniped, too upset to realise that was a significant admission coming from the likes of Severus Snape. "That just makes my day. Well let me tell you just one thing, Professor! I said I was sorry at the time, and I was sorry, and I never breathed a word about it, not to anybody except Sirius, and I only asked him because I needed to know what he thought he was doing, needed to know how my father could have been such a complete jerk-off arsehole, all right? So if we're even, then... oh, forget it," he ground to a halt.
"If we're even..." Snape mused, narrowing his eyes, studying Harry in a way that Remus never did, like a predator sizing up prey. "Ah. Would that outburst be an awkward and somewhat infantile way of asking me not to share what I've learned about you?"

Harry glared down at his plate. Really, pizza looked quite repulsive when half-eaten. He had a strong urge to throw it at the wall and watch the tomato sauce drip down the hideous floral wallpaper.

"Mr Potter?"

That supercilious tone coming out in Remus' voice had him looking up, green eyes still fuming. "I wasn't asking for anything, sir. I don't ask for what I can't get."

"No doubt one more legacy of living here," Snape commented, shaking his head. He hesitated, then went on, "I'm certain my timing leaves something to be desired, but might I inquire what your godfather replied when you questioned him?"

"Oh sure, why not? Pick my whole life apart," Harry groused. "He said they were both idiots. That they were fifteen, and everybody's an idiot at fifteen."

Snape eased back in his chair, steepled his fingers together, and solemnly regarded Harry. "Your father, Mr Potter. Contrary to what you've been told, he was not unemployed."

Harry didn't quite know how the conversation had got around to that, but it seemed to take the sting out of what had passed before. "I know," he admitted. "And he didn't die in a car crash, obviously, and he wasn't a penniless good-for-nothing."

"He wasn't penniless, no," Snape returned, a comment which could have been snide as hell, but it hadn't sounded that way. More like... Snape couldn't admit that the fifteen-year-old had grown up and left his idiocy behind.

Harry finished another slice, then wiped his mouth on his sleeve, thinking that pepperoni was a lot oilier than he'd remembered. But these were Dudley's clothes, so it wasn't worth getting up to find a napkin, even if Snape curled a disdainful lip.

"Let's return to our previous line of thought," the Potions Master directed. "Your uncle. Do you have any notion why he would deliberately antagonize you at a time when he needs your aid?"

"Oh, that's easy," Harry replied, shoving his plate away and wiping his hands on Dudley's pants, just to see Snape wince again. "Uncle Vernon never persuaded anybody to do anything in his life. All he knows is intimidation." Harry frowned, remembering scores of things to back that up, then forced his mind back to the topic at hand. "He'd figure I wouldn't do it if he asked nicely."

"Granted, he didn't ask nicely," Snape returned, a comment which could have been snide as hell, but it hadn't sounded that way. More like... Snape couldn't admit that the fifteen-year-old had grown up and left his idiocy behind.

"He wasn't penniless, no," Snape's lips quirked slightly. "But that brings me to another matter. Why did the asking make you hyperventilate? I've heard detailed accounts of you, both from Death Eaters and from Albus. Frankly, you've faced down the Dark Lord with far less anxiety than you display before your relatives. You can't possibly find them more frightening than him."

"Yeah. I don't know..." Harry raised a finger to trace his scar. "Maybe at least with him, there are things I can do. It's not like I think I can dent him; I was terrified in that graveyard. But I had... I don't know. Choices. Spells. Something. Besides, every time I've faced him down, as you call it, I've also had help. First it was the Mirror of Erised, then Fawkes and the Sorting Hat, and um, my parents coming out of his wand, and actually Dumbledore and some statues the last time."

Snape didn't question a word of that ramble. Well, he'd probably heard it all from his sources, as he'd said. Wasn't it just peachy to be the Boy Everybody Talked About All The Time?
"Anyway, what does it matter?" Harry asked, recognizing the impulse toward self-pity and trying to reject it. "They feel the way they feel, and I can't change it. Not even saving Aunt Petunia would really change it, I don't think, though Dudley did have me wondering."

"He saw what your uncle didn't," Snape quietly affirmed. "That alienating you wasn't the best way of asking for help."

"Ha." Harry fished out the chocolate bar as he spoke, and started eating. "Personally, I think the Dementors scared some sense into him. Either that, or when they were trying to suck out his soul, they managed to extract just the worst bits. Yeah, it's probably all linked. I mean, think about it, he didn't give me the caramel-coconut thing, he gave me chocolate." It wasn't funny, but for some reason Harry laughed.

"Don't joke about Dementors," Snape chided.

"I wasn't. I really do think they might have changed Dudley for the better." Harry leaned back and studied the ceiling. It sort of wavered before his eyes, which only went to show how tired he was. That was likely what loosened his tongue to say, "You know, it's too weird, sitting and talking like this. I don't think you've insulted me in the past three minutes."

"Would it make you feel better if I did?" Snape asked, a little snottily. Well, that was better, Harry supposed.

"Yeah, it probably would," he admitted, standing and stretching. "It'd remind me that you aren't Remus. Well, I'm beat. Uncle Vernon'll pitch a fit if he finds out, but I'll take the sofa, not the floor. You can have my room like he said. Don't guess there's any point in keeping you out of it, not now. Good night."

"Go upstairs to your room," Snape directed. "I'll be right up."

"What for? I haven't needed someone to tuck me in since--" Oh, crap. Aunt Petunia had never tucked him in, but he was hardly going to say so and sound like a sorry-for-himself little twerp.

Snape was shaking his head. "This house may be soaked in your mother's blood sacrifice, but if your aunt dies during the night, the Dark Lord will enter. You should not have let Mr Malfoy see this address. There is no doubt that Lucius has communicated it to all interested parties, by now."

"So you knew it was a letter, you knew before you even took it that I wasn't cheating!"

"Yes," Snape confirmed without remorse. "I keep aware of what is happening in my class, Mr Potter."

"If you did, Neville wouldn't add dragon scales when he needs pixie skin!"

"Mr Longbottom is required to learn by experience, as are you all."

"And it doesn't matter to you that we end up learning nothing at all!" Harry retorted. "That's just brilliant, sir. Anyway, if it's so bloody perilous here, we should go right back to Hogwarts, shouldn't we?"

"Not without transferring the power of your mother's sacrifice to your cousin. That's imperative. When all things are considered, this house is safer for you than Hogwarts, which has allowed Voldemort entrance multiple times since you arrived." Snape frowned at the electric lights in the kitchen, but before Harry could move to turn them off, he'd waved his wand to extinguish them.
All Harry's anxiety came rushing back over him until he felt submerged in it. "Dudley may have given me a sweet, but he won't go against his father, and Uncle Vernon won't lift a finger to help me as long as Aunt Petunia is lying there sick. So what are we going to do about that? I mean, I obviously can't cure her, but is there anything that would? Some potion you know, something St. Mungo's might have, something, anything at all?"

Snape started up the stairs and beckoned Harry to follow. "No."

"Are you sure?" Harry asked, that feeling of panic closing in on him again.

"Wizard remedies work by interacting with the magical core inside our own bodies. With rare exceptions, they're either useless or lethal when used on Muggles."

"Shite."

"Shocking language for a pure-hearted Gryffindor like yourself, Mr Potter," the Potions Master drawled as he strode upwards.

"See, I knew you couldn't go three minutes without insulting me."

Snape whirled on a riser, and stared down at him. "You consider that an insult? And here I was restraining what I really think."

"Sure you were," Harry shot back. "I know what you really think of me. You make it clear every time I go to your class, not to mention at random times in the hallways, and don't you tell me that it's all just some show. You started it back when Lucius Malfoy didn't have anybody to report to."

"The events of your second year should show you the error of that conclusion."

Snape waited until Harry had climbed past him and their faces were on a level. Then he leaned close, his eyes gleaming in a way that actually called Snape, not Remus, to mind. His voice thrummed with confidence in his own words.

"Allow me to share what I really think of you, Mr Potter. At the hospital today, you called yourself not normal, and made up stories about what Muggle Studies really is. You subjected yourself to insult and abuse, and said hardly a word to refute it."

"So what?" Harry retorted, standing his ground even if it did seem like Snape was breathing down his neck. He felt like Snape was calling him a coward, which just went to show how little the man understood. "You're the one who said I'd better get on their good side!"

"What I think, Mr Potter, is that you should have let the Sorting Hat do its job!"

So much for clenching his jaw; Harry's mouth dropped completely open. "You know about--"

"You bought those flowers," Snape resolutely continued, "in a deliberate bid to provoke an argument about money so that you could claim that someone else was working you like a house-elf. You knew your uncle would like that idea. You lied, Mr Potter. You manipulated. You manoeuvred. It was positively Slytherin."

Harry stiffened and spoke through clenched teeth. "That's hitting a bit below the belt, don't you think?" Of course it was. Snape was a Slytherin, himself. Since when did they fight fair?

"What I think, Mr Potter, is that you should have let the Sorting Hat do its job!"

"Of course I know; I was there," Snape softly returned, finally backing away. "Gryffindor valour and honour, such noble traits. I suppose they have their place. But to bring the Dark Lord down will
take a great deal more. It requires cunning, something you'd have mastered by now if you'd been placed in my house."

"Gee, thanks, I always wanted to be a cheat and liar," Harry drawled, shaking his head. He didn't want to think about what would have happened to him in Slytherin, he really didn't.

"You are imprudent to exclude any battle tactic that might win this war." With that, Snape strode down the hall to gaze at the series of locks outside Harry's door, no expression whatsoever on his face. That was pretty hard to pull off with Remus' features, Harry thought.

When Snape opened the door and stepped in, Harry decided he'd had just about enough. "Look, this is mental. I don't need a nursemaid, and even if I did, there's only one bed in there--"

"Do you think I plan to sleep?" Snape enquired, chin lifted a bit in challenge. "No. You will sleep; I will keep watch. I truly do not think your aunt will die tonight, but I am not willing to risk you if she does."

"I can't sleep if you're going to sit there and watch me!"

"Yes, you can. I have potion--"

"Stuff your potion!"

"Harry," Snape said quietly, his voice completely level, "Stop this idiocy and go to bed."

Maturity could go hang, Harry thought. "Look, the couch is sounding better and better--"

"You will sleep in your bed," Snape flatly announced, "or you will sit up with me and explain the black energy in the cupboard under the stairs. No? I thought not."

Harry crawled under the covers fully dressed, and snapped his eyes shut, his whole face scrunched up into a scowl so fierce it actually strained the muscles. He wasn't going to go to sleep with Snape watching, he just wasn't. It wasn't obstinacy, or idiocy as Snape had said, it was just the truth. He couldn't relax, not even if a soft spell drifting through the air made the sheets smell slightly like a meadow. Not even if his eyelids were getting heavier, and the faint noise of a chair scraping on the floorboards seemed like it was being woven into a dream, and the room was slowly being swallowed in a rush of warmth... and comfort...

Not even if...

"Hey," Harry murmured sleepily, rolling onto his side, his hands hugging himself beneath the bedspread. "You called me Harry... um, I think, when nobody was around to hear it."

"Somebody was around," Snape quietly replied. "Hush, now, Harry. Let yourself sleep."
When Harry opened bleary eyes the next morning, it was to see Snape leaning back in the desk chair, a book propped open on his crossed knee, his black eyes rapidly scanning text.

Harry shook his head, his hair flying wildly as he tried to think past a fog of early-morning confusion. Something was wrong, something beyond the fact that Severus Snape would be in his bedroom at all, or that Harry would be at Privet Drive in October. Something else... why was Snape wearing Remus' clothes, which didn't even fit him?

The Potions Master glanced up as Harry shoved the covers aside and sat up. "Good morning."

It was Snape's voice... It took Harry only a second longer to put it together. "Your potion!" he accused.

Snape brushed a long strand of black hair away from his eyes. "No need to panic," he chided. "We're safe in here." Setting his book aside, he fished in a pocket for a small metal flask much like the one the false Mad Eye Moody had used. "I'll take more now, though. It does seem to make things... simpler."

Harry ignored that remark to focus on the one before. "We're safe, you said. So Aunt Petunia's still all right?"

"She's still alive."

Harry looked away as Snape sipped from the flask. He remembered the flavour of rotting cabbage, the awful nauseous feeling sliding down into his stomach as he'd drunk that same potion, then the wrench of the change, itself... But the potion didn't seem to bother Snape. Either the man was used to drinking horribly noxious substances, or his formulation had improved on more than mere duration.

It was Remus' familiar voice again that said, "I found this book downstairs. Read this part."

Harry took the proffered tome, *Leukaemia: Diagnosis and Treatment*, and ran his eyes over the paragraph Snape had pointed out. "I... I don't really understand this, Professor," he admitted when he'd read it through twice. Without even realizing he was doing it, Harry braced himself for a caustic comment.

"No doubt you don't. It's badly written," Snape succinctly replied. "Muggle publication, so what can you expect? Pity they can't even write to the level of the average Hufflepuff, but still, after wading my way through the extraneous verbiage, I gleaned a few useful things. Get up, we'll discuss them over breakfast."

Remembering all they had discussed in the kitchen the night before made Harry wary. And resentful. But he didn't know how to broach that, so the resentment spilled out in another direction. "Are you going to let me make breakfast," he sniped, "or will it be another pizza?"

"If you'd seen your face, whiter than Mr Malfoy's as you stumbled off the lawn, you wouldn't have tried to stay on your feet. But you look fine, now, so by all means play the house-elf if you like."

"I don't like, but food doesn't just make itself, not here."

"Pity," Snape replied.
Harry shuffled through the bedclothes for his shoes and socks. Funny, he didn't remember taking them off. Must have kicked them off in the night... except that they were laid out neatly on the floor, socks folded, laces tucked away inside the gaping shoes. Irritated, Harry shot Snape a nasty glance. "Don't touch me, all right? Especially not when I'm asleep."

"You were thrashing," Snape explained, "and it looked all too likely that those huge... things would fly off your feet and hit something. What was in your dream?"

"Nothing."

"The Dark Lord? Death Eaters?"

"Nothing!"

"Cedric? Crouch?" Snape drew in a breath. "Black, Harry?"

"Aunt Petunia and Dudley, if you must know!" He rapidly pulled on his shoes and socks, and without another word, stomped out the door, down the hall and stairs, and into the kitchen. There wasn't much to eat, really, and the milk in the fridge had gone sour. Harry found some tinned milk and dry cereal -- god awful sugary stuff that Dudley had demanded ages ago-- and had a simple breakfast on the table in under three minutes.

Snape didn't comment on the cuisine, though he didn't eat much, either. Harry had three helpings, washed down with some orange juice he'd mixed up from frozen, and afterwards, he felt a lot less grouchy.

"All right, let's have it. What did you find out from that book?"

"You're in the range of relatives who might be bone marrow compatible."

Harry scratched his head. "Yeah, all right, I guess that makes sense. Uncle Vernon said he and Dudley had tried to donate, and been refused. You think I could donate, then?"

"It's within the realm of possibility," Snape answered. "And this book is well-thumbed; I'm sure your uncle knows that you should be tested, at least. But he didn't mention that. All he asked for was your magic."

"Weird," Harry had to say. He poured himself another glass of juice. "It's not like he's come around to thinking that magic is all right, so why wouldn't he rather have my marrow than... oh, so that's it."

"Come again?"

Harry flashed the sort of grim smile that always accompanied epiphanies about his relatives' regard for him. "Bet you anything they think my bone marrow would taint her, or something. You know, with magic."

"Interesting notion," Snape murmured. "Wizard blood is in fact a highly magical substance, and Muggle theory insists that blood cells themselves are born in the marrow. Though that may not hold true for us, you understand. Still..."

Harry laughed. "Oh, please. Petunia as a witch." Suddenly it wasn't funny, not at all. "You know, I think she would rather die. No wonder they didn't ask me to donate. The way they figure it, magic to heal her would be safer. Controlled. Though it's anybody's guess why Uncle Vernon would associate magical control with me. He's never seen me do a real spell, just... accidental magic."
"All wizard children do that," Snape lightly observed. "It only means that you are in fact normal."

"For a wizard."

"Yes. For a wizard."

Harry piled the dishes in the sink, then turned back towards the table where Snape still sat. "So, what do we do about Aunt Petunia, then?"

"It's your choice," Snape replied, fingers tapping on mahogany. "You can pretend to do some sort of spell, and hope they believe it worked. I could even place a glamour over your aunt to make matters look authentic, though that wouldn't change her true state of health."

"Can you glamour the machines, too?" Harry pressed. "There's one for blood pressure, I think, and they probably track her temperature. And... well, I don't know what else, but you could just make all the equipment show normal readings."

"I wouldn't know what constitutes normal for a Muggle," Snape pointed out. "Although research could remedy that problem. Still, magic is highly organic. It's wedded to the natural world, to be used by living beings for living beings. Altering complex machines with it could have... unforeseen consequences."

Harry remembered Hermione's many lectures on how Muggle technology didn't even work in the presence of excess magic. "Yeah, better scratch that idea," Harry conceded. "Okay, so we can fake a spell, but not very well. Well, Uncle Vernon's like you; he doesn't trust me farther than he can throw me, either--"

Snape sat up straighter. "What did you just say?"

"I think you heard me." Leaning on a counter, Harry reiterated, "You actually are a lot like Vernon Dursley, you know. You both enjoy cutting people down to size, especially relatively helpless people, like students who can't fight back. You both just love to threaten people and watch them squirm. And it's more than threats, too. One after another yesterday, you both grabbed my arm and held onto it until it pleased you to let go, no matter what I had to say about it."

"I was keeping you from falling, you stupid boy!"

"I'd rather fall than be manhandled. Just like I'd rather sleep in my shoes if I want! If I need help, I'll ask, all right?"

Snape shoved back his chair so hard it clattered to its side on the linoleum. "That's just the problem, you don't ask!"

"Yeah, well I sure as shite asked for help with Sirius, didn't I? And all you did was look down your supercilious nose at me and tell me to sod off, because you wanted him dead! You knew he was blameless in my parents' deaths, but he wasn't innocent, not in your books, and you couldn't look past the fact that twelve years in Azkaban was punishment enough for-- for--" Harry abruptly stopped talking, because it was either shut up or burst into tears. Turning away slightly, he blinked to dispel the feeling.

"All right," he finally said when he felt more in control, though he didn't actually know if Snape was still in the room. It felt almost as though he had lost a span of time, as though he hadn't been conscious of anything for a few minutes. What had happened to his resolve to be mature? Sirius was dead, and Snape was glad about it, and no amount of blubering would change a thing. Harry's hands had been gripping the counter until he felt like his bones would snap, but then he deliberately
let go, and tried to wall his anger. "All right, so it seems like pretending to spell her is out. If the price of the wards is returning her to health, that leaves me donating bone marrow, I think. What else is there?"

"Is that rhetorical, or are you asking for help?" Snape stiffly replied.

Feeling suddenly drained, Harry moved toward a chair and waved for Snape to sit down, too. "I'm asking what you know, what you got from the book."

Snape didn't sit down, but he did answer, pacing back and forth as he reasoned, talking his way through the problem. Harry just watched and listened, his eyebrows drawn together in a frown. It didn't sound like bone marrow donation was a big deal for Muggles, but Snape was all too aware that Harry was a wizard, and an unusually powerful one, at that. Was Harry aware, he asked -- without waiting for an answer-- that fewer than half of fully-trained wizards could produce any Patronus at all, let alone a corporeal one? And Harry had done it at the absurdly young age of thirteen. Preposterous, really, but Snape reasoned aloud that it shouldn't have surprised him overly much, given that Harry's own father had developed Animagus powers, without any training, while still at school.

It was well known, Snape continued after a short pause, that wizards and Muggle medicine didn't mix well, and the effect tended to be magnified for more powerful wizards, though very little was really known about the phenomenon; most wizards had enough sense to call a healer when they were ill. Still, children, the younger the better, were thought to tolerate Muggle interference better than adults, though this again was based on the occasional anecdote, which was hardly a basis for belief. And then there was the whole issue of wizard blood itself carrying the magical signature of an individual. It might make Petunia worse instead of better, especially as she had a strong aversion to magic in general and Harry in particular. On the other hand, Snape reasoned, it could instead serve as a catalyst to change Petunia's own core. Her sister Lily had been a powerful witch even when Snape had known her at school, and then later she had actually managed to save her child from the Dark Lord, so there had to be highly significant wizarding bloodlines in the Evans family tree, even if they'd lain dormant for long enough that the family had forgotten all about it... and on and on it went, Snape pacing and talking the matter through.

"You've given this a lot of thought," Harry had to admit when Snape finally did stop. "But if they only agree to help me because I'm going to give them marrow, isn't that a lot like bribery, anyway? You said that wouldn't work."

"I don't think Galleons can generate true good will," Snape corrected. "This could, if you're willing."

"If I'm willing?" Harry echoed. "What do you mean? What happened to you're going to get on your knees and beg even if I have to make you?"

Snape had the grace to look a little chagrined, at least. "I thought you were an ungrateful child who took your relatives' love and care so much for granted that you couldn't bother to even read their letter. James was a bit like that. He tended to put fun with his friends above family."

Harry thought about that, realizing with dismay that it did fit what he'd seen of his father as a fifteen-year old. "I wish people would stop confusing me with James," he murmured. "Well, I suppose there's not much choice to be made, is there? I'll have to donate my marrow. I don't see another way of generating enough good will."

Snape sat down across from him and splayed his hands on the table. "I think, perhaps, your only real choice is to leave your aunt to her fate. If we lose you in an effort to maintain the wards, we have lost all that matters. You've heard the prophecy."
"Lose me?"

"To Muggle medicine!" Snape hissed, scowling. "Weren't you listening? You are not a Muggle, Harry. You should not subject yourself to doctors, full stop. I should likely not have even mentioned it."

"So why did you?" Harry asked, head tilted curiously to the side.

"Because you are not fifteen and not an idiot," Snape sharply retorted. "You do better with more information rather than less, a notion the headmaster is beginning to appreciate as well, though I'm sure you don't believe that. You can weigh these matters for yourself. I said it was your choice, did I not?"

"Yeah," Harry mused. "I do know what you mean about Muggle medicine. Mr Weasley tried some stitches last year; they didn't work out so well. Of course, that might have just been because of the venom. But you know, I was Muggle-raised, which might give me an edge, and you said children could tolerate things better. See, I was listening. Although I sort of remember something strange about doctors, hmm..."

Snape eyed him critically. "What?"

It took Harry a minute for the memory to come clear, and even then he wasn't sure he wanted to reveal it. But after what Snape had just said about sharing information, he thought he'd better. "Well, I can remember going to the doctor lots of times, but mostly it was just for Dudley. One time, though... I don't know, I must have been three, maybe. Dudley was getting shots, and the doctor said that I was supposed to, too." At Snape's blank look, he explained, "Um, that's where they stick this needle in you so they can inject a... um, I guess it's sort of like a potion?"

Snape was barely breathing, Harry noticed, but he had air enough left in his lungs to say, "Was this done to you, Harry? This..." he sounded thoroughly revolted. "This injection of potion?"

"Yeah," Harry admitted. "But they had a time of it. When the nurse showed me the needle I screamed. I mean, really screamed. They had to hold me down, but when it touched my skin I felt this strange shivery wave sort of coursing through me. I... uh, made the needle bend double, I think. I'm not sure. I just know that Aunt Petunia started screaming, too, and then she hissed at them to get another one, and that time she held her hand over my eyes when they did it."

"I imagine you were punished," Snape surmised.

Harry shrugged it off, his mind so lost in the past that he'd forgotten, really, who he was talking with. "Whatever they injected, I had a reaction. I can't really remember the details. Just getting sick, so sick, and it was hot and sweaty in the cupboard, and I wanted to rinse my mouth, but they wouldn't let me out." The memory was one of his most chilling, probably because at the time he'd been too young to understand why nobody would help him. Harry shrugged again, and tried to leave it in the past. "Anyway, I never had to get another shot. I don't know how they got out of it, come to think of it. I have this idea that I should have had more, to be allowed to attend school." He gave a mirthless laugh.

"You were locked in that cupboard whenever you did accidental magic?"

"Oh, no, I lived in there all the time," Harry explained, then could have cursed his Gryffindor forthrightness. He should have just let Snape believe the other thing; it would have explained the black energy just as well. Some part of him, though, was relieved to let go of the secret. Yeah, the confused part of my mind that almost thinks he's Remus, he caustically told himself. Then he realised
that wasn't really true. Or fair. *Maybe it's the part of me that remembers yesterday. He tried to make the Disapparating easier, he made me sit down and rest instead of cook, he sat up all night to be sure I'd stay safe. He researched the leukaemia, and without even pointing out that I should have had the brains to think of that on my own.*

"Harry?" Snape questioned, and somehow, the name clinched it.

"You aren't going to tell anyone," Harry murmured, but it wasn't a question, or a command.

Snape's gaze was level, almost non-committal; he didn't give any reaction at all, though he did say, "You aren't the only one with a sense of... decorum, about such things."

Harry supposed that was Snape's way of saying he'd understood that Harry had needed to talk to Sirius. Or maybe he was trying to thank Harry for not spreading Snape's worst memory all through Gryffindor Tower. A little of both, Harry decided.

"Yeah. Decorum, good word."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, until Snape prompted, "So. It is your choice, Harry. We can go back to Hogwarts without further comment and never speak of this again. No doubt your aunt will die, and the wards will fall, long before summer comes, which will free you from the necessity of ever coming here again."

"Talk about tempting," Harry admitted. "But you're the one who said Hogwarts wasn't completely safe. And how could it be, when Dumbledore's idea of a Defence teacher is a bloke with Voldemort sticking out the back of his head? Much as I hate it here, I probably do need to hang onto the one place on earth that might actually keep me secure. And if that means Muggle medicine gets its hands on me?" He lifted his shoulders.

"Hogwarts may be a safer option than subjecting yourself to the marrow extraction procedure," the professor pointed out. "From your account, you were highly averse to Muggle medicine even as a child. And now you're nearly full-grown, and the medicine in question is far, far more invasive. *Accio book,*" he suddenly called, waving his wand toward the upstairs bedroom.

After the book landed on the table with a thud, Snape flicked his wand to make the pages turn themselves at high speed. He muttered an incantation at the flipping pages, some series of Latin phrases Harry had never heard before. The book abruptly went still, and Snape flipped it around to face Harry. "Read this chapter before you decide," he instructed.

So Harry did, pulling awful faces all the while.

"Oh, ick," was about all he could say when he first finished reading. "That was completely gross from start to finish. And they use needles. Just what I need."

"You can see why I have reservations."

"Yeah," Harry admitted. He did wish he could run away home to Hogwarts, but he knew the wish was selfish, on several fronts. "Um, but it doesn't really matter, you know? I mean, I'd have to do it even if I wasn't angling for the wards. She is my aunt."

"You do know how irrational that sounds?" Snape returned, shaking his head. "She may share your blood, but she's been your aunt in name only, Harry. You do not owe her a thing."
"I owe my mum," Harry clarified. "She wouldn't want me to let Petunia die, not when I might be able to forestall it."

"You might be surprised," Snape tightly informed him, eyes fierce. "I knew Lily Evans. I heard her talk about her magic-hating Muggle sister. That alone should have told me that my assumptions about your first eleven years were erroneous. At any rate, I have no doubt that your mother would not want you to undergo a painful, highly dangerous and dubious procedure in hopes of saving someone who has treated you so shamefully."

Harry didn't know what to say to that, since the Potions Master did have a point.

"Furthermore," his teacher went on, "your mother gave her own life to save yours! Do you think she would want you throwing that away for the likes of Petunia Dursley?"

"A little dramatic, as scenarios go," Harry shot back. "Get a grip, would you? I'm not going to die!"

"How do you know that? Have your Divination skills improved?" Snape sneered, waving his hands in a random manner Harry'd never seen from him before. "I did see your O.W.L. results, Mr Potter!"

"Look, if I can survive Cruciatu, I can put up with a needle shoved through to bone."

"Cruciatus," Snape gasped, his hands falling gracelessly to the table, so hard it would leave bruises. "What do you mean, Cruciatu?"

"Aren't as well-informed as you think, are you?" Harry sneered. "Yeah, you heard me. Voldemort cast it on me after he snatched me from the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Imperio, too, and I still made it out of there alive. I'm pretty adaptable; if I wasn't, the Basilisk would have got me! So just stuff your worries in a sock or something--"

Harry abruptly shut up, his mind clanging on a single thought. Oh, shite. That's it, that's why he's looking so shattered, why he can't meet my eyes. He's worried about me. Not the prophecy, not the future... me.

"It'll be all right, you'll see," Harry resumed in a lighter tone. "Trelawney would no doubt predict my demise, but she's been wrong every time yet, so you don't have to... er, be concerned."

"Cruciatus at fourteen. Dear Merlin." Snape's fingers curled into claws. "Haven't you endured enough? Why must you do this, too? Don't excuse it on account of your mother. I guarantee she would not want this."

"Well," Harry murmured thoughtfully, glancing sideways at Snape, "Hermione would say it's because I have a saving-people thing."

"That is singularly not funny, Mr Potter."

"Better switch back to Harry; I want to go out."

"Out?" Snape looked like he was still contemplating the curses Harry had endured.

"Yeah, can we? You don't sense any dark magic outside, do you? We should head to the hospital, I guess, but I really don't want to Disapparate if it can be avoided."

Snape nodded, pointing his wand, revolving it in a slow sphere, even pointing it towards the floor and ceiling at times, as he incanted Finite Incantatem. Then he swept the wand in a wide arc, his eyes blazing with concentration. When he finished, he shook his head in dismay.
"I think perhaps you'd better come here, Harry."

Understanding what the professor hadn't said, Harry stepped close. Remembering the last time, he closed his eyes and stayed still, only flinching slightly when Snape laid an arm across his shoulders. Then the world was melting around them and through them, but at least when Harry realised he was in the hallway just outside Ward 328, he was still on his feet.

Swaying, almost incoherent, his stomach somewhere near his knees, but he was on his feet.

He took a moment to breathe deeply, some vague part of him glad to still have that arm around his shoulders. Even better, when he went to shake it off, it moved away at once.

"All right?" Snape asked, but not in a pitying way. Just matter-of-fact. Harry liked that.

"Yeah, fine. Winded, but fine. Er, thanks."

Snape gave a slight gesture as though to brush that aside. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Harry grimaced, but nodded. How bad could it be? Not worse than that dunce Lockhart removing his bones and Madam Pomfrey having to regrow them, surely. Certainly, it couldn't be any worse than *Cruciatus*, even if he didn't respond to the procedure the way a Muggle would.

An audible breath escaping his lips, Snape remarked, "I must admit, I find myself hoping that you won't be considered compatible, Harry."

"Ha. With my luck?"

"Perhaps your family will refuse, on account of..."

"My abnormality," Harry finished. "Well, there is that. I may just have to insist."

Snape placed a hand on his shoulder when Harry tried to go in. "Miss Granger may be right, you know."

"About my saving-people thing?" Harry sighed. "Well, let me just get to it, then."
It was good to be back at school, Harry thought, even if he knew he was going to find the waiting rather difficult. He wanted to be doing something about Aunt Petunia's problem, which was after all, his problem as well, but that wasn't how the Muggle world worked.

He'd gone into Ward 328, Snape in Remus guise at his side, and between the two of them, they'd somehow managed to get it through Uncle Vernon's thick skull that magic just wasn't going to be an option. The spell didn't exist, they said, and it couldn't be developed. Magic didn't work that way; it wasn't for Muggles. Of course that was an oversimplification, to say the least, but Snape had insisted that Vernon was best equipped to deal with nothing more complex than simple axioms, Harry. Your uncle's not exactly Ravenclaw material, now is he?

All in all, the news hadn't gone over too well. Vernon had yelled and blustered and pretty much disowned Harry and threatened to kill him, but he took most of it back when Snape calmly laid out the alternative. Harry's willing to donate bone marrow to your wife, the Potions Master had explained. I really do think you ought to thank him.

Of course Harry hadn't got any thanks, but after talking the matter over a bit more rationally, Vernon had glumly agreed that marrow donation might be Petunia's best hope. Sure enough, he'd admitted to being leery because of "freak side effects," as he put it, but Snape had smoothly allayed all his fears, telling him that such a thing was most definitely not possible.

Very Slytherin of him, Harry had thought at the time, since he knew full well that Snape believed the transfer of marrow to Petunia might indeed render her magical. He told Harry later that in all likelihood, any such change in the woman would be gradual. In the meantime, the wards would be extended to Dudley so that even if Petunia relapsed, Number Four Privet Drive would continue to be a haven. Actually, Snape had sneered that last word.

Harry was thankful that he'd left it at that. Just a sneer to show what he really thought of the Dursleys. Snape didn't do what Hermione would have if she'd found out the truth; he didn't try to get him to open up and talk about his feelings. He just let Harry be Harry.

Convincing Vernon had taken about an hour, an hour during which Dudley had been nowhere around. Harry had wondered about that; he'd rather wanted to test out the waters a bit, and see if his cousin was still in a friendly mood. It might be important for the wards, but Harry didn't get a chance to see Dudley.

Directly after Vernon had agreed to let Harry be tested for compatibility, and told a nurse so, Harry was whisked away for a series of tests that made the O.W.L.s seem like a picnic. Physical tests, most of which he'd never heard of before, though the nurses guiding him through it were perfectly willing to explain things as they went.

It all started with a questionnaire he could hardly read for the unfamiliar words, and then a lengthy interview designed to ferret out even more information. Personal information. Question after question about his parents; questions he couldn't answer. How many times did he have to explain he'd been orphaned at the age of one and had never been told anything much about his mum or dad?

Then came the questions about him. Harry didn't know what to say to half the things they asked. Did he drink, even on occasion? Well, sure, I'm not averse to a butterbeer or two... What medications had he taken in the past year? Calming draught, Pepper-Up Potion, way too much Dreamless Sleep... Had he used any recreational drugs in the past three months? I don't know. Can what the
twins produce rightly be called drugs? They're definitely recreational...

Unable to answer with anything remotely approaching truthfulness, Harry had basically *ummed* and *errred* and mumbled his way through the whole process, while Snape sat there smirking, no doubt thinking unhelpful thoughts about Slytherins and cunning. Harry was irritated by the smirk, but truth to tell, he was glad that Uncle Vernon had loudly insisted that Professor Remus Lupin was his representative who was to accompany Harry through the entire testing process. That was Snape's idea, no doubt spelled onto an unsuspecting Muggle, but the medical staff accepted it since it did come from Harry's legal guardian. It might not be comfortable with Snape in the room, but the dark shadows on Privet Drive that morning had been warning enough; Harry knew he needed to stick close to the one who could Apparate him to safety.

Still, he found it increasingly uncomfortable to be put through these medical paces with Snape looking out on it through Remus' kind brown eyes.

The medical interview was bad enough, but at least they let him keep his clothes on for that part. Shortly afterwards, things got faintly ridiculous, as far as Harry was concerned. Why did they *need* all this stuff from him? Just take his marrow and be done with it! But no, they had to have his blood and tissue typed. Actually, those necessities he understood, once they explained the phenomenon of *rejection*, which scared him silly. He didn't want to be responsible for Petunia's death.

But why did they need to x-ray his chest, let alone attach him for an hour to a machine that recorded his heartbeat? He'd had to take off Dudley's stained, oversized sweatshirt for that part. Then they drew blood again, explaining that he'd have to be tested for what seemed like a whole alphabet of problems. And then *more* blood for what they called DNA analysis, which would be the final watchword on whether his marrow was suited to be introduced into Petunia's.

Harry was starting to wonder if they were planning to *leave* him any blood. He winced every time a needle came near, and clenched his eyes, and told himself, *You've had a basilisk fang embedded in your flesh. Surely you can withstand a thin little needle.*

Somehow, though, the needle was more frightening, probably because he had to sit there and just take it. At least he'd got to fight the Basilisk. Harry actually had to restrain himself from using magic to make that needle go away. He was just itching to, especially on the last draw, when the nurse was having trouble finding a vein. Over and over she slid the horrid thing in, while Harry scrunched up his eyes and shook from head to toe, his arm holding still only because the nurse's grip was surprisingly firm.

Up until then, Snape hadn't done much but watch, but for that last draw he went to stand by him. Not touching, not speaking, not even casting a wordless spell to calm him. He just stood there, reminding Harry that he wasn't alone.

And it had helped.

As soon as the nurse was loading vials of his blood into a tray, Snape had returned to his chair.

Harry had thought the ordeal was over, then. They'd bled him nearly dry --well, seemed like it to him-- so what else was there?

He should have known it was only going to get worse. Because then, they had to ask him for urine. At first he'd just stared, shocked speechless that a pretty redhead nurse's assistant no older than eighteen was handing him a small plastic cup and telling him to go into the adjoining bathroom and urinate on demand, then *hand it back to her, filled.* He didn't think he'd ever been so humiliated, and there sat Snape, listening to every word.
His professor evidently thought he was over-reacting, though. "It's not so different from what you'd have to do to brew some of the more advanced potions," he nonchalantly offered, leaning back in his chair, legs languidly extended as he closed his eyes.

Decorum again, Harry sensed. Snape had quite a lot more of it than he'd ever let on. Harry did as he'd been requested, blushing as he handed the sample back to the pretty nurse's helper.

Only to find out that after all that, he had to wait for all those tests to be performed and evaluated.

They'd explained and said a quick good-bye to Uncle Vernon --still no Dudley in sight, Harry noticed-- asking him to use Mrs Figg's owl again as soon as he had word of the results. Vernon had scowled, but agreed.

And then, after a long day of discussion, and decision, and Muggle medical idiocy, Harry had finally flooed back through to Hogwarts, Snape in his wake. The headmaster's office was deserted when they arrived.

"Dinner hour," Snape explained, and Harry groaned. No way could he eat, not after all that.

Snape seemed to understand what he was thinking. "It's only going to get worse, Potter," he quietly pointed out. "What they did to you today wasn't much compared to the extraction procedure itself."

"I know, I read the book!" Harry snapped, not wanting to think about it.

"It's not too late to change your mind."

Harry stared up, trying hard to see Snape somewhere inside Remus' features. It wasn't easy.

"It is too late," he argued. "I already said I'd do it."

Snape shook his head, a single, disdainful word lancing the air: "Gryffindor." Then he was striding from the room to return to his dungeons.

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"Oh, you're back!" Hermione cried out as she launched herself at Harry's sofa in the Gryffindor common room. "What great luck!"

Harry cast a glance over her shoulder at Ron, and mouthed, "Luck?"

"'Cause you were only gone for the weekend, mate," his friend explained, twirling a finger near his ear so that he wouldn't have to say mental out loud. "You know, you didn't have to suffer the shocking tragedy of missing an actual class--"

Hermione just laughed, and curled up next to Harry, kicking off her shoes. "So, how is Remus?"

A strange, half-strangled noise erupted from the back of Harry's throat. "Oh, er... well, you know Remus." Then an answer came to him, an answer Hermione would figure out anyway, he was sure, so he might as well say it. "It was the full moon part of the time, you know. He slept through it. Apparently he's still got Snape making the Wolfsbane Potion for him. And when he wasn't... er, sleeping it off, he didn't look so good, honestly."

It occurred to Harry to wonder, then, if Remus had been the best choice for Snape's disguise. Wouldn't anybody watching be a bit suspicious to see the werewolf looking human during a full moon? It wasn't as if Remus Lupin wasn't known to be one. Snape had made sure that everybody in
Slytherin found out, after all. That still steamed Harry, it really did. Somehow, though, he couldn't resent Snape as much as he should, not now. But it had still been a rotten thing to do, revealing Remus' secret like that.

The secret was out, though, which left Harry to wonder just why Dumbledore would send Snape out looking like Remus when everybody knew Remus should be a werewolf at that time. One thing was for sure, though. Something was going on, something far beyond problems of leukaemia and warding. Harry didn't know what, though. He didn't have much hope of figuring whatever intricate plan Dumbledore had woven into their trip to Surrey.

Only one thing was sure: whatever was going on, Dumbledore hadn't seen fit to tell Harry about it. As usual.

Ron flopped down on the other side of Hermione and with a wink at Harry, pulled her away to settle her against the length of his side. Hermione half-heartedly hissed him, then melted, a soft smile curling her lips. Ron wasn't quite so relaxed, though; mention of the Wolfsbane potion had turned his thoughts toward Snape. "That vicious greaseball hates Remus," he grumbled. "Lost him his job, the louse. Fixed it so he'd have to resign, and Remus really needed that job! Wonder what Snape thinks he's up to now, making him that potion? Maybe it's a slow poison?"

"I thought that the first time I saw it," Harry reminded Ron. "And I was wrong."

"Well," Ron mused, "maybe it's a really slow poison."

Harry felt himself bristle a bit, and then wondered over it. Granted, greaseball was rather crude, and accusations of attempted murder a bit melodramatic, but Harry had certainly said his share of nasty things about Snape. Five-plus years of nasty things. But he didn't want to say them now, not even though Ron seemed to be expecting it.

Thankfully, Hermione sailed in with an answer, about the potion at least. "Snape and Remus are both in the Order," she pointed out, and then, with a confused look —it didn't sit well on her features— she pressed Harry, "Why'd Dumbledore send Remus along with you if it was going to be his wolf time?"

She was right, that didn't make much sense at all. "Well, for moral support," Harry tried, almost cringing as he heard how nuts that had come out. Thinking fast, he added, "I mean, he didn't know I'd only be gone for the weekend. It might have been longer."

"Bit of a shock for the Muggles, though, a werewolf in the den?" cackled Ron. "Say, how's your cousin's tongue?"

Harry ignored that, because Hermione was pressing on, "Why'd you need moral support, Harry? You never did tell us what was in that letter."

"Snape nearly did," Ron had to put in. "In class there, you looked like you were about to fall over dead, mate."

"It was just... family stuff," Harry whispered, miserable. He hated keeping things from his friends, but he did see the necessity. He wondered if that made him as Slytherin as Snape had said.

Ron completely misunderstood Harry's mood. "’Bout time you had some family stuff to be going on with," was his pragmatic observation. "Welcome to my life, family pesterling you all the time. Can't even get away from it at school," he added as Ginny sailed through the common room with a group of friends.
"Yeah," Harry said, casting about for another topic. Any topic. "So, what did the two of you do with your weekend?"

Hermione directed her gaze down, and Ron appeared to find the granite wall of some interest, and then they looked at each other, and giggled with mad glee, their legs twining further together.

"I see," said Harry in his darkest possible tone, which only made Hermione blush and hide her face against Ron's sweater.

"Well, we did go to Hogsmeade, too," Ron exclaimed, because Harry was waggling his eyebrows up and down like a stage-show villain. Hermione squealed louder at this tacit acknowledgement, which had Ron rolling his eyes a bit, but for all that, he looked happy enough.

"Come out, Hermione," Harry called, and when she did, he gave her the kind of grin that would put anybody at ease. "Well, I'd say congratulations are in order. How about we all sneak down to the kitchens? Dobby'll give us some butterbeer--" When Hermione's brows drew together, he quickly added, "if we ask nice. Oh, for pity's sake, Hermione! Dumbledore's paying him, you know. Dobby's the one house-elf you shouldn't get upset about. It's not even past curfew, yet. You've got no complaints."

Harry was a bit apprehensive the next morning as he headed down to the dungeons. It had been one thing to conclude back on Privet Drive that Snape would keep mum about all the awful things he'd learned... In the first place, Snape had looked like Remus, and in the second, it was unreal to have a wizard staying with him at that place, anyway! Looking back, the entire scenario just seemed fantastical. And unlikely.

Now that he was back in the real world, he was having a hard time reconciling memory with reality. Snape discussing decorum? Snape, almost sympathizing when Harry'd had to face all those needles? It just didn't seem possible, not when the Snape he knew here never passed up an opportunity to humiliate Harry Potter.

Besides, it had only been two days. Nothing much could really change in two days, could it? Harry nodded to himself and braced for the worst. Conveniently ignoring the plain fact that in only two days, his entire concept of Severus Snape had undergone a radical rethinking, he slid into his usual seat, prepared his materials as usual, and glanced up in trepidation as he heard the teacher's entrance to the room creaking open.

"Today we will be endeavouring to make Scaradicate Salve," Snape sneered, emphasis on the word endeavouring. His robes billowed as he swept into the room, his voice as imperious and menacing as ever. "No doubt there are among you miscreants who will offer up cloudy, miscoloured abominations for my perusal, but let there be no mistake: this is a simple potion, well within the range of your idle hands and feeble brains. Anyone who fails to produce a satisfactory salve will receive a detention with Mr Filch."

Across the aisle from Harry, Neville Longbottom gulped. Harry darted him a sympathetic glance. Neville had wanted to drop Potions altogether after fifth year, but Professor Sprout had insisted that Herbology without an adequate foundation in Potions would be all but useless.

"I would like to say that you will test your potions on one another," Snape continued, eyeing the Slytherins as though to give them ideas, "but alas, house rivalries have yet to render any of you sufficiently scarred. No, Mr Weasley, acne scars do not count."
Uh-oh, thought Harry, suddenly understanding what *Scaradicate* must mean. Well, at least *I* can see *this one* coming.

"However, we do have Mr Potter and his scar of rather dubious acclaim." Snape strode up the aisle towards him as he spoke. On the other side of the room, the Slytherins twittered, and Draco whispered something to Pansy, something that Harry felt sure must resemble *This is going to be good...* "Unfortunately for Mr Potter, his is a curse scar. Mr Malfoy, what are the primary properties of a curse scar?"

"It's hideous and disfiguring, sir."

"Indeed. Five points to Slytherin."

Hermione gave a low growl of protest, followed by a hissed, "That wasn't even a proper answer!"

Snape ignored her. "The other distinguishing characteristic is that unlike other scars, a curse scar cannot be removed by mere potion. I am afraid that Mr Potter will have to bravely struggle on despite his... how did Mr Malfoy put it? Ah, yes. Hideous disfigurement."

Harry stared up, eyes furious, mouth clenching. *He said it was an act*, a voice whispered in his mind. Trouble was, Snape's so-called act seemed all too real. Hell, it was real: Harry was being held up to ridicule as usual. But what did he care if Snape went back to being... well, Snape? He'd sort of expected it, actually. He'd known it would be idiotic to expect anything else.

Snape gave him a longish stare, then drawled, "I do believe our Gryffindor hero is on the brink of tears. Do not be a fool, Mr Potter. Show us some decorum."

And with that, Harry knew he could relax. Nobody else would catch the hidden meaning in those words, but they meant something significant to Harry. It was just a game, a game of trick-the-ferret. However much Snape might have meant his hurtful comments in the past, he didn't mean them now. Well, not like before, anyway.

Harry gave his usual glare back, playing along, but he wasn't expecting what Snape did next.

"Honestly!" Hermione fumed as they climbed their way back out of the dungeons. "The nerve of that man, refusing to so much as score your test! He knows you didn't cheat, knows it was a letter! And assigning you a second test, today, without any warning! You were called home on family business; you couldn't possibly have studied over the weekend! I think you should take it up with the headmaster, I really do!"

Harry couldn't help but snort, imagining Dumbledore's mock-befuddled reaction if Harry came to him complaining about a test he'd demanded in the first place.

"It doesn't matter," he told Hermione. "I'm sure I got a mark of Troll no matter which one he scores. Troll-minus, more likely."

"Well, it's just disgraceful! He took points off of Gryffindor because you didn't complete your potion, but how could you complete it when he slapped an exam paper on your desk and demanded you do that instead?"

Harry had to admit that part *had* been disgraceful.

"Were the questions even on the same material?" Hermione railed on. "Or did he test you only on the
alternate readings, which he knows you hardly ever do?"

"Alternates," Harry answered, unable to help grinning a bit. He knew it seemed unfair to Hermione, but to him, it was just funny. He'd sort of asked for it, after all. "Forget it," he advised his friend. "You complain and it'll get back to him, you know it will. Then it'll be--" Harry lowered his voice to approximate Snape's deep, sarcastic tones. "Ten points from Gryffindor for expecting justice to prevail despite all evidence to the contrary."

"Having fun, Potter?" Draco Malfoy's sneering voice came up beside them.

"Yeah, actually," Harry admitted, knowing that nothing would get to Malfoy quite as much as the fact that Harry was feeling happy. "How about you?"

Malfoy smirked. "Have fun in detention, too."

Hermione clenched her fists. "Oh, you just have to run to the teacher with everything, don't you, Malfoy?"

Malfoy's silver eyes went wide and innocent. "Nothing to do with me, Mudblood. Professor Snape already assigned it. Penalty for not finishing his potion."

Hermione gave a strangled scream.

The detention was definitely unfair, Harry thought, but he'd served unfair detentions for Snape before. Things were just getting back to normal, he supposed. Snape was making sure of it, and Harry understood. Things had to look like business as usual.

Argus Filch gaped at him when he reported to the caretaker's office. "First I's heard a any detentions fer tonight, Potter," his hoarse voice rasped. "Though I do got me a few billygriffs runnin' wild in the halls by night, an' I need fresh bait to snare 'em. You're jus' about the right size--"

"That's all right," Harry quickly said, stepping back. "My mistake."

Only, it wasn't. Snape had definitely assigned a detention. Sighing, Harry made his way down to the Potions classroom and knocked on the open door. "Professor?"

"Ah, Mr Potter," Snape drawled. "Five minutes late, so five points from Gryffindor. It's really quite kind of you to make detention so enjoyable for me. Perhaps next time you could arrange to be even later?"

Harry gritted his teeth. "I reported to Mr Filch, first."

"Bizarre behaviour. Idiotic, one might say, considering you have a detention precisely so that you can brew the potion you missed."

"Oh," Harry said, his voice low. Snape was going to make sure he didn't fall behind on account of the extra test Harry had demanded... he actually hadn't thought of that.

"Before you begin, however, I've finished marking your exam."

When Harry took it from Snape's outstretched hand, his own was shaking a bit, but not because he was worried about his grade. You couldn't sink any lower than Troll-minus, so there was nothing left to worry about, was there?
"Do sit down to read it, Mr Potter," Snape sneered, then returned his attention to another stack of papers he was marking. "I dare say you may be shocked at the things I have to say to such a vaunted and celebrated Gryffindor as yourself."

Shocked was right, Harry thought as he dropped into the nearest chair and ran his glance over the paper.

Troll-minus without a doubt, the comments read. *You can't expect much better if you continue to ignore the alternate readings, Harry. Keep the following points in mind:*

1) Bobotuber pus is unstable in bronze cauldrons and will actually explode if heated in them.  
2) Mandrake root must be shredded *and* pounded before the juice is extracted.  
3) Bicorn horn and unicorn horn are not remotely similar.  
4) Mr Malfoy is almost certainly eavesdropping.  
5) Burn this beneath your cauldron when you start your potion and be sure you mix the ashes well with the others in the grate.  
6) A little raving would not come amiss. Emphasis on little, or I will find myself in a position where I will have to take points.

It was a little much for Harry to take in all at once. No insults? Even more surprising, some helpful tips? Hermione did sometimes get those, and more rarely, Ron and Neville, but he'd never seen them couched in impartial language before. Usually it was *Whatever possessed you to believe that toadstools form any part of Salivary Potion? Were you raised under one?*

Harry looked up, saw Snape's lips quirk, and realised that it was the first time he'd actually seen *Snape's* lips quirk. The sight was decidedly bizarre, but Harry knew better than to laugh out his relief. He'd understood the message in those last three points.

With a muttered oath, he shot to his feet, mashed his test paper into a crumpled ball, and announced, "Professor! This grade isn't fair! I didn't even know the test would cover the alternate readings! I wasn't prepared!"

Snape barely spared him a scornful glance. "Does it break your Gryffindor heart that life isn't fair, Potter?" Then he stood, robes swirling. "Get that insolent look off your face before it's ten more points from beloved Gryffindor. Now, you have a potion to brew, do you not?"

One gesture of a wand, and the instructions for Scaradicate Salve appeared on the board.

Harry set to work, burning his exam paper as asked. When he set his finished vial up front on the professor's demonstration table, Snape didn't say a word. He just looked up, and nodded, and went back to marking papers, but his gaze returned to Harry as the boy walked up the aisle and left the room.
The owl came during lunchtime, a week and a half later.

Harry stared at the Muggle envelope, half-afraid to open it. He didn't want to know the test results, not really. He didn't want to go back to Frimley Park and have a big needle stuck in his hip, all the way through to bone, and lie there as his marrow was sucked out. Sure, he'd told Snape that if he'd survived the *Cruciatius* curse he could survive anything, but looking back, that sounded like bragging. Like arrogance.

Strange that Snape hadn't called him on it, considering all he'd had to say in years past regarding Harry and arrogance...

Well, bragging that he could take anything was well and good, but now that he had this letter in hand, he was realizing that he really didn't want to follow through on what he'd promised back in Surrey. No hope for it, though, right? Not unless the letter said he wasn't compatible, after all. But what chance was there of that? Harry doubted that Uncle Vernon would bother to write, were that the case. This letter had to mean what he thought; it just had to.

Without really intending to, Harry found himself glancing up towards the raised platform where the teacher's table was. Snape was leaning over, deep in conversation with Madam Pomfrey, something he'd been doing a lot, lately. Well, what had he expected? The Potions Master wasn't going to pay any attention to Harry in public --well, not any attention except the thoroughly negative kind, that was.

"Don't let the Muggles get you down," Ron said by way of sympathy. "Your last visit went all right, it seemed. Yeah?"

"Sure," Harry agreed, slipping a knife beneath the flap and drawing out a sheet of paper. What he saw there made his eyes bug out a little. It wasn't a letter from Uncle Vernon at all, it was a single page of densely typed medical information summarizing, Harry supposed, all his test results. He couldn't make much sense of it, except for a few lines at the bottom.

*Compatibility factor: .93 (.85 is the minimum threshold for transplant.)*

*Please report to Frimley Park Hospital at 8:00 a.m. on October 22 for the extraction procedure. If you are unable to make this appointment, inform us in writing at Frimley Park Hospital: Oncology, Portsmouth Road, Frimley, Surrey GU16 7UJ or ring us at 01287 408965.*

It all sounded so... official, Harry thought, as he felt the blood in his face rush down towards his stomach, which was twisting itself in knots already. The letter slipped through his fingers to flutter to the floor.

"What is it?" Hermione asked at once, her fork clattering to her plate as she put an arm around Harry and turned him to look at her. Lowering her voice, she barely breathed, "Your scar?"

"Er... no," he croaked, wondering what on earth was *wrong* with him. It was just a needle, right? It was just a big, long, needle spearing through his pelvis, going all the way into bone, six times, or maybe eight...

Ron had leaned under the table to scoop up the letter, but he didn't try to read it, just handed it back across the table to Harry.
Hermione had no such compunctions. Snatching the letter from Ron's fingers, she scanned the page, her eyes rapidly assessing the text. "Harry..."

"Not here," Harry hissed. Yanking the letter back, he stuffed it into his pocket and stood on unsteady feet. "Room of Requirement. Now."

He didn't notice Snape's black eyes watching as he left the dining hall, his two friends in tow.

"Are you going to explain?" Hermione challenged, hands on hips as she stood on a Persian carpet. All along the base of the walls, incense holders, some of them shaped like Aladdin's lamp, were sending pungent smoke aloft. "And what sort of room did you wish for, anyway? This place looks like... a... a harem!"

"I think the room's just trying to calm me down," Harry murmured. "I'm kinda worried about--"

"About your transplant?" Hermione demanded. "Harry Potter, you will tell me right here and now just what is going on!"

"No, he will not," another voice smoothly answered as Snape slid into the room, closed the door, and crossed his arms. After only a moment more, however, he was turning back towards the entrance and casting several silencing charms upon it. Then he strode forward, black robes swirling as though a tempest were spinning inside him.

"Look, I have to tell them," Harry explained, feeling defeated by the whole situation. "Hermione saw the letter. She's going to figure it all out, anyway."

"Not after Obliviate," Snape mercilessly sneered.

Harry jumped to his feet, all apathy vanishing. "No!" he shouted, but Snape was already pointing his wand, an ugly light in his eyes as he began to twirl it in a way Harry recognised, for all the motion was less theatrical than the one Lockhart had used down in the Chamber of Secrets.

Hermione was fumbling in her robes, trying to draw her own wand; Ron's was out already, and pointing; Snape at once incanted, "Accio wands!"

Harry's wand flew out of his pocket.

Snape deftly caught all three as they sailed his way, and tucked them away in his cloak as he continued to stare at Hermione, his wand still swirling in that disturbing arc that meant Obliviate might be only a heartbeat away.

Furious, Harry stomped up to Snape and tilting his face up, yelled, "Don't you dare, don't you fucking dare, you got that?"

Ron's eyes went huge. "A thousand points from Gryffindor," he moaned, though points were the least of their problems at the moment.

"Oh, shut up," Harry spat. "He's not going to take points, and if he does, it'll be well worth it." Then he spun his head back to face Snape. "Just read it for yourself, all right? And then we'll figure the rest of it out."

With that, Harry thrust the sloppily folded letter up at his teacher, and ignoring that damned wand, still pointed, turned to look at Hermione.
She had sunk to the floor, and was hugging her knees and rocking back and forth. Ron was doing nothing more helpful than muttering, which irritated Harry no end. Kneeling beside Hermione, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close to breathe against her ear, "Shhh, it's all right. He won't do it. I swear he won't. I'll tell you later how I know, but I know, all right. Trust me, Hermione."

Hermione nodded, and stopped her frenetic motion, but she still looked worried.

When Snape stopped reading, he addressed himself to Harry. "I am seriously disappointed, Mr Potter, that once again, you cannot manage the simple matter of keeping your post to yourself!"

Ron's courage came sailing back upon hearing his friend unfairly attacked. "That's rich!" he yelled. "You're the one who takes his letters away to read them out loud, sir."

"Keep your mouth closed, Mr Weasley, or it will be points from Gryffindor," Snape growled, which did have the effect of shutting Ron up, though his eyes flashed a question at Harry: After what you said, he's not going to take points?

"I'm sorry I dropped the letter, Professor," Harry told Snape, keeping his tone even as he stood up. It was almost killing him to not give vent to anger, but the instinct that had helped him survive five years of trials was telling him not to escalate the situation further.

The tactic seemed to help, at least. When Snape next spoke, his tone was matter-of-fact rather than snide. "Obliviate really would be the simplest solution."

"No," Harry insisted. "You can't. If you do that to her, I'll explain the whole situation, every last detail. And I'll do it as many times as you use Obliviate, so there's not much point."

Snape's eyes flashed. "Perhaps I should just wipe your memory clean then, as well!"

"I don't think Dumbledore will approve of you obliterating any of us," Harry retorted, refusing to fold.

"Sometimes I really do hate you, Potter," Snape snapped back, while from behind Ron mouthed only sometimes? "All right, Miss Granger, calm down. I suppose Mr Potter has convinced me to leave your considerable intellect intact. Do try to use it for something other than showing off, will you?"

Hermione dusted herself off, though she wasn't dusty, and waved a bit at the smoke coming from the nearest genie's lamp, but when Ron finally went to her, she all but collapsed against him.

"Sir?" Harry asked, indicating the pillow strewn floor. "Please."

Snape scowled, but he did sit down cross-legged on the floor, his robes pooling around him. Only after Harry had sat as well did he speak.

"We seem to have a situation," he sneered. "Miss Granger knows more than she should, and no doubt Mr Weasley will weasel what she knows out of her during a passionate tryst, or what passes for grand passion among inept sixteen-year-olds."

"Can we do this without the insults?" Harry requested, which got him a baleful glare. But what was the point of Snape going on like that? Ron and Hermione both would already have figured out that something was up. They'd seen Harry swear at Snape and get away with it, so there was no sense in pretending, not with them, that the old animosity was still as thick and potent as ever.

Although, Harry thought, after this, all the old animosity might come roaring right back.
He was surprised at how much the thought dismayed him.

"It's Order business," Harry thought to say to his friends, since Snape had gone silent. Maybe without the insults, he just didn't know how to talk to students? No, that wasn't fair; he'd done all right with Harry in Surrey... "So I really can't talk about it," Harry concluded. "Sorry."

"How is it Order business that you need a transplant?" Hermione looked up to say. "And since when are you in the Order?"

"I'm not in it," Harry confirmed. "I'm just involved, as usual. And as for the other, you'll just have to trust me, Hermione."

Tears filled her eyes. "But a transplant, Harry? I know, I know, you were Muggle-raised like me, so maybe you don't know, but you really shouldn't be going to a doctor for a procedure like that."

Wrenching herself away from Ron, she leaned forward to rest a hand against Harry's knee. "Isn't there something else that can be done? Have you been to St. Mungo's, spoken to a healer, something?"

Snape stepped into the conversation, his voice markedly calmer. "I'm afraid, Miss Granger, that in this particular case, magical remedies will not prove efficacious." He paused, clearly reluctant, but finally went on, "May I have your word, yours and Mr Weasley's both, that you will not press Harry for more information? That you will not investigate on your own? I cannot stress this more strongly: delving into this issue will put his life at risk. I think it's been at risk quite enough in the past few years, don't you agree?"

Ron was staring open-mouthed, but he managed to nod in reply.

"Miss Granger?"

When Hermione hesitated, Harry reached down and caught hold of her hand, still resting on his knee. "I'm not in danger," he assured her. "Not unless you start to pry, which could end up calling more attention to my... situation."

"But Muggle doctors," she softly moaned, meeting his eyes. "Harry, I nearly died twice before my parents figured out to steer me clear of doctors. They thought I was allergic, to medicines, immunizations, whatnot, but it wasn't an allergy. It was my magic, not wanting to be trampled."

Harry thought better than to tell her his own Muggle doctor horror story. "I know what I'm doing," he said instead, wishing he felt as confident as he sounded. "And Professor Snape knows."

"That's not exactly reassuring, mate," Ron broke in, with a sideways glare at the professor, who raised his nose a bit, as though even incense couldn't mask the stench of a Weasley sitting five feet away.

"Well, Dumbledore knows, too, all right?" Harry tried, then realised he didn't know that for a fact. "Um, you did tell him?" he asked Snape.

"The headmaster was disappointed you didn't come to see him, yourself," Snape pointedly answered. "But yes, he knows the particulars of your situation."

"And he approves?" Hermione challenged.

"It's not an ideal situation, Miss Granger!" Snape bit out. "But we will all do our best if you will be so kind as to let us!"
"Promise me, Hermione," Harry begged, scared that if she objected too much more, Snape just might Obliviate her after all. "Promise you won't interfere. I'll tell you about it when I can--"

"Mr Potter!"

"When I can," Harry stressed. "Hermione? Promise."

"Oh, all right," she grudgingly agreed.

Snape audibly scoffed.

"I won't do a thing to find out more!" Hermione insisted, letting go of Harry's hand and sitting up straight. "Harry has my word on it."

"Break your word," Snape sneered, "and I'll not only see you expelled for phenomenally bad judgment, I'll use every Dark Art at my disposal to hex you into a quavering ball of mush!"

Harry sighed, thought about offering a calm Hey, don't threaten my friends, but decided he'd better not. He'd presumed enough, already, and for all he knew, Snape was heartily wishing he'd never gone to Surrey at all.

Hermione made things worse, though that wasn't her intention. "I don't break my word, sir," she haughtily replied, sniffing as though the very idea was offensive. "I'm a Gryffindor."

"So was Peter Pettigrew," Snape caustically replied, yanking his robes tightly around him as he rose to his feet. "There's nothing sacred about your house, loath though I am to destroy the pathetic misconceptions that no doubt lull you to sleep at night. Or is that Mr Weasley's job?"

"Professor," Harry warned.

"Potter," he mocked back.

Harry sighed. He didn't really know what to say to the man. Everything had been so much simpler in Surrey... of course, it hadn't seemed that way at the time, had it?

"May I have my letter back?"

"No," Snape said, his tone leaving no room for argument.

"It is his," Hermione pointed out, though Harry tried to shush her.

Snape's only reply was to toss three wands onto the Persian carpet underfoot before he stalked out.

What the hell was that, Harry?" Ron demanded the minute the door slammed shut.

Harry put a finger to his lips as he fetched his wand and performed the most thorough Silencio he could. He hoped it would be enough; he didn't know how to cast Imperforable. Gesturing to his friends to join him at the far side of the room, he sat with them on the cold granite floor. When Snape had slammed the door upon leaving, the harem scene had vanished, but that was all right; Harry didn't think it had been what he'd needed, anyway.

"Use quiet voices," he cautioned.

"All right," Ron whispered back. "What the hell was that? Answer me, this time."
"It's true that I can't tell you what I'd like to," Harry stressed.

"That's not what I'm asking and you know it," Ron shot back, his whisper furious, this time. "What was that with Snape? I'm sorry I dropped the letter, Professor!" he snidely mimicked. "What was that, Harry? He tortures you in Potions, makes fun of your scar and encourages the Slytherins to do the same, assigns you an extra test for no reason at all and gives you detention because you actually do it, then tries to hex Hermione right of of her mind, and all you can do is ask him to sit down, please. You practically offered him tea!"

"Don't be a prat," Harry growled. "I stopped him from hexing Hermione! All you could do about it was mumble about our stupid house points!"

"Stupid!" Ron objected.

"Yeah, stupid," Harry confirmed.

Ron looked to say more, but Hermione held up a hand to confirm, "Compared to what Harry's facing, Ron, they are." With that, she leaned in so close that her nose nearly bumped Harry's. "You said he wouldn't really do Obliviate. I guess you were right, but what made you so sure?"

Harry's answering smile was grim. "I know for a fact that he can do it without a wand, that's how," he explained, thinking of Snape spelling the reception nurse at Frimley Park. "He was putting on a big show of doing it, but if he'd really intended to do it, he'd have just gone ahead."

"Vicious bastard," Ron breathed. "Making Hermione think a thing like that. What did she ever do to him?"

Good question, Harry realised, but there was in fact an answer. "Well, third year all three of us did hex him," he remembered out loud. "And we never even got punished. For attacking a teacher! I'm thinking that little scene, taking our wands, was Snape's way of getting even."

Yeah, he's big on things being even....

"Anyway, it doesn't matter," Harry continued, still in a whisper so low that Silencio probably wasn't even necessary. "What matters is that you do keep your own counsel, both of you. I'll have to go away again --don't ask me for what, but I bet you can guess-- and while I'm gone, you just stick to whatever cover story I spread around the Tower, all right? It's important. Not just for me, but for the war."

"We'd never endanger you, Harry," Hermione swore. "Are you... I mean, can I ask, are you going to be gone for more than a weekend, this time?"

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "But do what you can to keep me up in class, will you?" He paused, uncomfortable. "Are we all right, now? I can't tell you, and I'm sorry I can't tell you, but I will let you in on everything just as soon as it's all... settled."

"Well, we weren't going to stop being your friends, Harry," Hermione said in a startled tone. "We love you."

Harry hugged them, wishing he could tell them how scared he was. But he couldn't. All he could do was hang on.

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The stairways in Gryffindor Tower were misbehaving more than usual, Harry thought as he trudged
upward in Ron and Hermione's wake, but all was explained when he saw the Potions Master lurking in the shadows, crooking one tapered finger to indicate that Harry should follow.

Harry hesitated, hating all the subterfuge, but with a sigh, acquiesced.

"Hey," he called up the staircase, "I'm going to go talk to Dobby for a bit, all right?"

"Bring us back some pudding," Ron said as he and Hermione turned a corner.

Snape didn't speak until he had drawn Harry into an unused office halfway to the dungeons and cast wards across the door. It was pitch black inside, and Harry was tempted to get out his wand and utter *Lumos*, but he decided he'd just as soon not see the look on his teacher's face.

"I've discussed your letter with the headmaster," Snape announced, his deep voice eerie in the dark. "Be prepared to floo out of here early in the morning on the 22nd. We'll use his office as before."

"We?" After the scene in the Room of Requirement, Harry hadn't been sure.

"After a fashion." Snape curled a lip. "I'll look once more like that beast you call a friend."

Harry thought that over, surprised to find himself a little disappointed. He didn't like it, he realised, when the boundary between Snape and Remus blurred beyond recognition. He liked even less the feeling of not knowing where he stood. Things had been clear, before. Convoluted, but clear, if that made sense. Now, everything was in murk. "I suppose the disguise is necessary," Harry murmured. "Um, sir?"

He could almost feel Snape's glance as it speared him through the blackness. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry I had to yell at you."

"Is that supposed to be an apology, Potter?"

It took Harry a moment to figure out what his teacher meant, then he felt a little chagrined, though it was difficult to figure out why. "Yes, sir. It was supposed to be."

A low noise echoed off the granite walls. Harry was slow to recognise it as dark, grim laughter. "Sir?"

"I was just thinking of Mr Weasley's face when you uttered that foul word."

"Oh," replied Harry, not sure what to say to that. "Well then, good night, sir."

"A moment, Mr Potter."

Harry turned back, nervous despite Snape's apparent calm. But of course he couldn't see the man, so maybe that accounted for his feeling of unease.

"Why did you say the matter had to do with the Order?"

Harry shifted on his feet. "Doesn't it? I figured if it's Order business to stand guard duty on me all summer, then my wards would be, too, and by extension this whole... project. Why?"

"Mention of the Order was the one thing likely to gain your friends' agreement to our terms."
"Uh-huh," Harry returned, still feeling confused.

Robes rustled as Snape swept nearer. "I'd thought you'd said it to manoeuvre them."

*Slytherin,* Harry thought, and winced. "No. Just being honest. As much as I could."

Snape raised his voice a fraction. "Do you believe Miss Granger to be just as honest? If she scurries to the library to investigate, and Mr Malfoy makes it his business to follow her research track, the Death Eaters could well reason out what you are doing, and why."

Harry shook his head in the dark. "Malfoy's not so likely to follow Hermione around the library, Professor."

"I assure you, it is all too likely he will do precisely that," Snape snapped. "He'll suspect she knows something about your disappearance. He'll be looking for any clue he can pass to his father!"

Another rustle, and the voice spoke right beside his ear. "Lucius Malfoy will not hesitate to kill your aunt and cousin, Mr Potter, to dismantle the wards. And you will be next."

"I trust Hermione," Harry insisted. "And Ron."

"The Dark Lord trusts me." The warning chilled the air where they stood.

"Yeah, but you're a Slytherin," Harry protested, shivering. "You know how to play both ends against the middle. Hermione's a ..." He didn't want to say *Gryffindor* and get insulted. "She's a friend," he concluded.

"She does care for you," Snape commented, sounding a trifle puzzled. "Deeply."

"You think it's strange that someone might care for me?" Harry bit out.

"I did not say that."

"Then why'd you sound so mystified?" Harry retorted, wondering if this whole conversation wasn't just one more exercise in Slytherin cunning.

"Because a person's loyalty is most often only to himself."

"You need to get out of the dungeons more," Harry told him. "Can I go? It's almost curfew and I still have to make it to the kitchens before I go up to the Tower."

"The 22nd," Snape reminded him. "Early. Bring your books again. You may need something to read as you... recover."

*Recover.* Harry didn't like the sound of that. He was used to an overnight stay in the hospital wing fixing just about anything. While he was still thinking about that, Snape recited something soft and Latin, then opened the door.
Snape hidden inside Remus' form was strange enough, Harry thought, but to see that form dressed in surgical scrubs? Too bizarre for words. Still, at least the sight helped distract him from the panic looming ever larger in his mind.

And no wonder, for Snape's bare forearms were on display. Or Remus', that was; if Harry thought about it for too long, he tended to confuse himself. He'd been curious about the Polyjuice Potion, though. It had given Snape Remus' outward form, but was it strong enough to obliterate the Dark Mark?

Apparently, it was. Harry was pretty impressed; he'd figured that the ugly snake-and-skull symbol would persist. Of course, Polyjuice had gotten rid of his own curse scar, temporarily, so maybe he shouldn't be so surprised.

Once he'd reasoned that out, he didn't have much else to think about except the obvious. Panic began flooding his airway until he had to pant to breathe. He wanted more than anything to hug something to him. A pillow, maybe. Or a teddy bear. He'd never had a teddy bear, and he'd used to really, really want one. Harry clenched his eyes to stem what felt like tears, and told himself to stop being such a stupid crybaby.

Right. Time to grow up, act his age. He was sixteen, for pity's sake. *Uh-oh, he's staring at me*, Harry realised. Well, if Harry was sure of anything, it was that he wasn't going to let one of his professors see him cry. Except Remus, he added, a thought which was unbelievably unhelpful.

"So you convinced them to let you stay, eh?" Harry tried to joke. It was either that, or lose it completely, but he recalled at once that Snape was hardly likely to laugh, not when he'd been taciturn and downright nasty-tempered the whole morning. No doubt the Potions Master was still miffed about events in the Room of Requirement. Harry wished he would just get over it.

He had, and he'd had a lot more to forgive than Snape did.

"I think you know how I convinced them," Snape obscurely replied. "And why."

Yeah, Harry knew why; it had been discussed at length with Dumbledore that morning, no doubt for Harry's benefit, the whole conversation staged. There were still shadows circling Privet Drive from time to time. Voldemort knew something was up, he just hadn't figured out what. And if that wasn't enough to keep Harry within arm's reach of Snape, there was the whole issue of the medical procedure itself. No telling how Harry's body might react. The plan was for Snape to rush him to St. Mungo's the instant it appeared that anything serious was going wrong, though of course they all hoped nothing like that would happen...

*Blah, blah, blah.* Harry almost stopped listening after a while, it was so nauseating to be discussed like this, the two of them talking over his head as though they didn't realise Harry was sitting right there!

Snape had seemed disinclined to look at Harry since the other evening --maybe that was why he'd insisted on talking in a perfectly black room-- but now, he finally settled his gaze on the boy laying nervously on the operating table.

Remus' brown eyes warmed, just slightly, though with Snape behind them it was actually hard to tell. "Do not be apprehensive."
Well, that was just a bucketload of comfort before he went under the knife, wasn't it? Not that Harry needed coddling. He'd never been, and he never expected to be, and he couldn't imagine Snape offering consolation, in any case. "You stink at this," Harry suddenly exclaimed, fed up. "You're supposed to--"

Snape stepped closer. "Yes?"

*Hold my hand, tell me it'll be all right...* "Never mind," Harry muttered. He wasn't asking for things he wouldn't get.

Some part of his need must have communicated itself without words, though Harry was sure he hadn't been Legilimized. But still, in the next moment Snape was stepping closer yet again, just alongside him, and murmuring, "I truly do not think you need to worry, Harry--"

"Yeah, sure. You were the one who said this would kill me."

"But you said it would not," Snape pointed out. "And your instincts are often quite good. So what has you holding yourself so taut?" Harry didn't say, so Snape pressed on. "Is it the needle?"

"Great, remind me, rub it in," Harry moaned. "You *totally* stink at this."

He wished the real Remus could be there to stand by him as the operation progressed. Remus would know what to do. He'd lay a hand on Harry's brow, and talk about how proud his parents would be of him, he'd say that it would all be over soon....

Harry had to give the man credit, though; Snape did try. "You did well with that," he assured the boy, gesturing toward the intravenous tube the nurses had inserted in Harry's arm to provide hydration.

"Yeah, well that was plastic," Harry stressed. "Or rubber or something, I don't know, I was trying not to see! It hurt, but it wasn't gigantic, and it wasn't going to go straight through me like the--" he gulped.

"You won't even see the... it," Snape pointed out, sounding as though he were keeping his voice calm with great effort, and only for Harry's sake. "Don't you recall? They're going to administer... some sort of vaporous Potion, I believe it is, and also feed a medicine through that tube so that you will go to sleep."

"That just makes it all the more horrible," Harry opened up enough to say. "It's the helplessness that's the worst thing. To have to just lay here and *take* that needle, to be unconscious so that I can't fight back even if I need to..."

He knew he wasn't making any sense. After all, he'd chosen the *general anesthetic*, as the Muggle doctors called it. He'd been offered an injection in his groin instead, but Harry knew better than to stay awake for the procedure. His terror would overcome him, he just knew it. Reflexes would kick in. Accidental magic would spill out of that deep place in his soul to vanish the extraction needle clean away.

If he wanted to go through with this, he didn't have any choice but to render himself helpless, but that didn't mean he had to like it.

"I will fight for you, if it comes to that," Snape solemnly promised.

"Don't leave me," Harry heard himself beg, and cringed.
"I would not."

Harry nodded, strangely reassured, but before he could say much else, the surgical team was coming in. A few preliminaries, during which Snape took off Harry's glasses to pocket them. Then Harry saw a needle after all; something was being injected into the tube that had been fed into a vein in his arm. He jerked slightly, though the needle hadn't touched him, and felt a hand suddenly clasp his fingers in a warm, secure grip, a grip that promised it would be there as long as he needed it. It helped focus him, helped him remember that he wasn't alone with the Muggle doctors. There was someone here who understood, who would help him if things went horribly wrong.

A sensation of unbearable sleepiness began to wash over him. Harry closed his eyes, barely feeling it when a mask was put over his mouth and nose, when he started to breathe in something cooler and moister than usual.

And still that hand held his, an anchor he could cling to, though his fingers were losing all grip.

Harry's last thought before he went under was, Well, what do you know? Maybe Snape doesn't stink at this as much as I thought.

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The next thing he knew, vague voices were bouncing off the walls all around him, and he couldn't open his eyes. He couldn't move, either, but it seemed like less than half of him even wanted to, so he wasn't bothered.

Snatches of conversation revolved around him, drifting in and out of reach, some force outside himself pulling them closer, and then away. Harry was vaguely reminded of a trip to Brighton when he was little, the waves lapping the shore, Dudley running in and out of the water, splashing Harry until he cried. Chips, Harry suddenly thought, his mind veering off. Really good chips. With vinegar... Tincture of Anatase is in no way similar to vinegar, Mr Potter... but no, Mr Potter is my father, isn't he? .... wait, do I have a father?

Suddenly feeling distressed, Harry made a little whimpering noise.

He heard footsteps approach, and this time it seemed his ears could reach out and grasp snippets of speech, disconnected ones that took a while to make sense, though he could tell by then that it was Remus' beautifully calm voice talking. Remus, and someone else.

"They said four hours..."

"Too long... been days..."

"...wish he would wake up..."

"Remus," Harry managed to surface enough to croak. He didn't want Remus to be worried about him; he was awake, now. Well, sort of. It seemed like he went right back to sleep after saying the name, though he could still hear and feel through his slumber. A hand stroked the hair back from his forehead, then somebody was washing his face, though a cleansing spell would have done just as well, surely... but the water felt good, so very good. Warm, and lightly scented, easing him right back into sleep.

Harry drifted under and dreamed of a long-haired witch crooning lullabies to a tiny, dark-haired baby.

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"Harry," a voice came again, this time each sound distinct, like his hearing was amplified instead of muddled.

Harry blinked, then felt his eyelids start to ache. The sensation spreading, he realised that his whole body throbbed with low-level pain. Ignoring it, he blinked again, then managed to keep his eyes open. The world wavered before his eyes like ripples of heat across a windswept landscape. Harry stared at it, not seeing the room he was in or the corridor beyond the open door. All he saw was Remus, looking a bit less-defined than usual, but still recognizable.

"Hey, Remus," he groaned, squinting a bit. How long had it been since he'd really got to talk to Remus?

Remus pulled a chair close to the bed and laid a hand on Harry's forehead. "No fever," he commented, but when he went to pull his fingers away, Harry awkwardly caught hold of them and sighed, intertwining their fingers as he pulled Remus' hand to rest beside him on the bed. Why was it so blasted hard to move his own arm? No matter, he felt ever so much better now that he had Remus.

"Why would I have a fever?" he thought to ask, though the question seemed nonsensical. He wasn't even sure he'd really heard right.

"You had one for hours," Remus explained, flexing his fingers, but Harry tightened his own so the man couldn't get free. But why would Remus want to pull away? Remus had never been reluctant to offer him comfort, before. Maybe Remus was mad about what had happened to Sirius? No, that couldn't be it. That short note he'd got hadn't been angry at all. At least, he didn't think so...

Remus' quiet words came back to him, then... You had one for ours... But the words didn't make sense.

"Ours?" Harry echoed, his brow furling. "Our what? Oh, you mean our study sessions?" A hazy expression somewhere between a frown and confusion settled on his features. "I feel really bad, Remus."

"What is it?" Remus sharply questioned, leaning closer. "You slept forty hours when they said it would be four. You could be having yet more complications--"

"Huh?" was all Harry could make of that. "No, I feel bad about our study sessions, silly," he chided. "I don't think I ever thanked you. Hmm, maybe I did. Seems like I can't remember, but third year's a long time ago. Or was it second year I had you for Defence?"

Next to him, Remus stiffened as though quite surprised by the question, but then he slowly nodded. "It was third year when you... ah, had me for Defence, Harry," he replied in a voice that sounded somehow off. Amused? No, not amused, more like bemused, Harry thought. "And I'm quite sure you must have thanked me."

"Nobody else ever tutored me, Remus. Nobody. Not once, not ever." Harry said, pushing up a bit groggily. It hurt, but so did lying prone.

Remus seemed to frown at that, which befuddled Harry until he figured out Remus had noticed that he needed the bed adjusted. The man pulled his wand from inside his warm vest and spelled the mattress to tilt slightly upwards.

"Ahhh," Harry moaned, stretching out his back against the incline. Wasn't that just like Remus to be so attentive and considerate? "Mmm. Thanks, Remus. I feel loads better, now."

He looked at Remus again, this time noticing that he was sort of funny looking. Blurry. Hmm, the
whole room was blurry. It didn't occur to him to ask for his glasses, though, or even realise that he usually wore them. Actually, the blur was sort of nice, he thought. It matched the fuzzy feeling in his brain.

"Do you like lemonade?" he asked, clear out of the blue.

"Too sweet," Remus answered, sounding as though he was having rather a hard time not chuckling. "Would you like some, Harry? Are you thirsty?"

But Harry's thoughts had already gone sailing past that. "Do you think the house-elves have a thing against citrus? Say, remember the chocolate? That was really strange."

It looked like Remus blinked to Harry, but things were so bleary, he couldn't be sure. "The chocolate your cousin gave you?"

"No, the chocolate you gave me, silly," Harry said, squeezing Remus' fingers. It was so good to talk to him. He could tell Remus anything. "On the train. You know, after the Dementor nearly got me. Did I thank you for the chocolate? Anyway, it was... really strange."

"Er... what was strange about it?"

Harry closed his eyes and shivered. "That something like chocolate could make me feel better, after hearing my mother screaming, pleading for my life, dying to save me..."

"Is that what you hear whenever Dementors come near?" Remus barked.

Harry woozily cracked his eyes again, though the world was still a blur he could hardly make out. Hmm, Remus sounded appalled. Maybe Harry hadn't thanked him for the chocolate? Oh no, it was the other thing, wasn't it? But why would that surprise Remus? "I told you all about it, third year. Or was it second when I had you for Defence?"

"Third," Remus sighed. "Why don't you try to rest more, Harry? I don't think you're aware of it, but you're rambling a bit. Sleep is definitely in order."

"I don't want to sleep," Harry said, petulant, his lower lip quivering. "I'll have those dreams. I want to talk. I never get to see you, Remus. I wanted to see you, that whole awful year when they made me compete in the Tree-Blizzard Tournament." A sob caught in his throat. "I really, really wanted to see you. I bet you'd have known about Sillyweed. You could have told me where to get some, too. I thought I was going to drown, 'cause I'd never heard of it and didn't have any idea how to be a mermaid. Good thing Dobby knew where some was." All at once, his mind seemed to jump clear across the lake. "Um, can I ask you something? It's... sort of personal. You can tell me to sod off if you like. We'll still be mates."

A blurry nod answered his question.

Harry rolled a bit on his side, and stretched again, trying to remember what he'd wanted to say. Oh, yeah.

"Does it hurt to change into a werewolf?"

"How long have you wanted to ask that?" Remus gasped, sounding like he was holding his breath. "Since third year," Harry patiently explained, sounding rather as though Remus was the one who was rambling. "Or was it second when I had you for Defence?"
Another strangled laugh. "Second year you had Gilderoy Lockhart, Harry."

The fingers he was holding slid from his grasp, then Remus' voice came from farther away. Harry squinted, and saw him talking with a mediwitch wearing sage-coloured robes. Hmm, mediwitch. He wondered why he wasn't with Madam Pomfrey, if he was hurt. Hmm, how had he got hurt? Quidditch?

"Will he remember any of this?" Harry heard Remus say.

"Doubtful," the mediwitch replied. "We'll start the rest of his treatment once he's more lucid. I usually wouldn't hesitate, but given what sent him here in the first place? Best to be a bit cautious."

Harry sat up completely, realizing rather dimly that he wasn't in school robes. He was awkwardly swivelling his legs over the side of the bed, thinking he'd better get dressed for Transmorgrification, or Transmigrification, or Trans-something, anyway, when when Remus came back and gently lifted his legs back onto the cot. Pushing him down onto his back, Remus tucked the covers around the boy. Harry felt like he was melting clean away, but this time, it was a good melt. He could trust Remus, he thought. He could tell him the awful truth.

"I didn't like Lockhart," he admitted, unaware that it was completely irrelevant. "I had him for detention. He made me sign his fan mail using my own blood."

"What?"

Strange how a roar could be quiet, Harry thought. "Yeah," he blithely went on, the memories swirling, muddled... but there. "There was this quill that scratched your skin and took your blood. Whatever you were writing, it got carved into your arm. Yeah.... I must not tell lies, all over those photos of Lockhart on the broom, and on my arm practically down to the bone."

Remus made some sort of strangled sound.

"I still have the scar," Harry sighed. "One more scar. Did you know that the... um, primary characteristic, I think it was, of a curse scar is that it's hideous and disfiguring? Oh, wait. That's two characteristics, isn't it?" He furrowed his brow. "Maybe it's just hideous. I can't remember--"

"Your scar is not hideous," Remus quietly affirmed.

Harry paused, a vague glimmer of information seeming to shine through the fog in his mind. "Oh, you know what? I think the lines were for somebody else. Snape maybe? Nah, he's not so bad. Did you know he's not so bad, Remus? He just doesn't like werewolves, or students, or me, or teaching I think, or Gryffindors, or Hufflepuffs really, or scratched cauldrons, or Snuffles, or Ravenclaws much, or me saying Voldemort, or--"

"What did you lie about?" Remus interrupted, sounding rather tired of the conversation.

Harry settled himself more comfortably against the mattress. "Lie? In bed, silly. You know what Ron says? Slytherins lie like a rug." He suddenly giggled, the humour cut short only by a wide yawn. "And there's way too much pumpkin juice, would you let Dobby know? Um, can you wake me up in time for class? I have Transfoogriffination next and I can't miss it. I'm really bad at it."

"I'll wake you up in time for class, Harry," Remus drawled, adding after a pause, "Shall I call a mediwitch and ask if you might have some Dreamless Sleep?"

"Doesn't work on me any longer," Harry murmured, oddly lucid as a wave of exhaustion pulled him under. "Scar makes me dream. Or... something else. But sometimes I dream of Snuffles, so that's all
"We need to resume Occlumency lessons," he heard Remus sigh. But Remus had never taught him Occlumency. Did Remus even know it?

Confused, Harry let the questions slide from his mind, and leaning against the arm that curled around his shoulders, went to sleep.
"Feeling better, now?" a voice at Harry's elbow asked.

The world still looked bleary when Harry opened his eyes, but this time, he knew enough to reach for his glasses. Before he could find them, however, a pair of hands was gently settling them atop his nose.

He felt stiff and sore, and his hip was throbbing, inside and out, but that only stood to reason, considering. At least he was through with needles; that had to be worth something. "Yeah, better," Harry finally answered, glancing up.

"Have some lemonade."

For some reason, that sounded really, really good. Harry guffed the glassful handed to him, thinking that maybe all he'd really been was thirsty, because the tangy citrus drink seemed to wipe the pain clean out of him. Wiping his lips on a pajama sleeve, he looked around, recognizing the ward as one at St. Mungo's. No way would Frimley Park have not a single medical machine in evidence.

Snape went and closed the door, then warded it, before turning back to ask, "Do you know who I am?"

"Yeah," Harry answered, wondering why he'd ask. Glancing around, he saw that his bed was the only one occupied. Even so, he didn't feel completely comfortable answering too openly. "You gave me a Troll-minus on my test, along with some interesting comments."

Snape gave him a hard look, then resumed his place in a chair at the side of the bed. He turned it to face Harry, before asking, "So you're not still feeling confused? About anything?"

"Why would I be confused?"

"Well," Snape drew out the syllable, seeming with enjoyment, "you seemed to take my appearance a little too much for granted, for a while." He smiled at the look of shock on Harry's face. "Actually, it was a bit as though you'd taken a Babbling Beverage. Very enlightening. I gained the clear impression that you felt at perfect liberty to say anything you liked to Remus Lupin."

Harry was not the slightest bit amused. "You aren't serious?" Hmm, seemed like he was. "What did I say?"

Snape shrugged, though the impression was belied by the way his shoulders shook with repressed laughter. "Most of it was nonsensical. You couldn't seem to count to three with any accuracy, for instance."

"That's not true!"

"I assure you, it quite is. You also reminisced over tutoring sessions and chocolate, and asked me if it hurt to transform to a werewolf."

Harry felt himself going red in the face.

"Don't," Snape said, his voice more soothing. "They warned me at Frimley Park that it's entirely normal to speak rather freely when one emerges from the anaesthetic potions."
"But I can't remember waking up, let alone talking, and anyway, I have wondered, but I wouldn't ever ask Remus... that."

"Apparently, you would," Snape pointed out, his lips beginning to twitch again. "And your lack of recall is also perfectly normal. I wouldn't fret over it, Harry."

"It seems like I just had a little nap," Harry murmured, part of him still wondering if Snape was having him on. "It was just this morning when we left Hogwarts, wasn't it?"

"Today is the 26th," Snape insisted. "If you don't believe me, ask the mediwitch when she comes in. Or," he suggested sardonically, "would you like to see the Daily Prophet?"

Harry shuddered. Sure, the Prophet had finally deigned to report Voldemort's return, but as far as he was concerned, it was still a disgraceful rag of a newspaper. "Um... no. I don't think so."

Still embarrassed, Harry did his level best to let the matter go, though he did wonder what else he might have said. Had he talked about Snape, or revealed something that might get Ron and Hermione and him expelled, such as their own dabbling into Polyjuice Potion? Had he admitted that he'd saved Sirius from the Dementors, explained Hermione's time turner?

It was hard to imagine Snape being so friendly if he'd talked about any of those things, though, so Harry decided not to worry about it. "This isn't Frimley Park," he pointed out. "So what happened?"

"You ran a tremendous fever for hours, and didn't regain consciousness when you should have," Snape explained, his brow wrinkling with remembered concern. "Those fools wanted to administer more Muggle medicine through that tube they shoved in your arm, as if they didn't realise that their foul, misbrewed potions were responsible for your condition in the first place!"

"It's all right," Harry said, thinking it strange that he should be the one to do the comforting.

"Perhaps it is now," Snape admitted, his hands still clenching one another. "But you lay either senseless or rambling for almost four days. And too, the healers here recognised you."

Harry's nostrils flared with irritation. "That could be a problem."

"Yes. I should have Apparated you to a safe place, then summoned a healer from the Order. But I feared there wasn't time. I'd never seen a fever as high as that, nor one even close. I... I panicked."

"Oh," Harry answered in a small voice, rather shocked. "Um, well that's understandable. I must have been in a bad way."

"Quite."

"So, what did you tell them?"

"You went driving a car and crashed it, injuring your hip. While you were out senseless, emergency doctors dosed you; you were obviously having a reaction to the inappropriate treatment."

"They bought that?" Harry exclaimed. That book had boasted pictures of the marks left by a bone marrow extraction: tiny slashes, aligned in neatly spaced parallel rows. Nothing like the injuries that would result from a car crash. "Didn't they even look at me?"

Snape couldn't meet his gaze. "They...ah, I didn't let them use any spells to scan you, nothing that might detect your missing marrow. I insisted on potions only, ones that would clear the tainted substances left over from your surgery." At Harry's suspicious look, he added, "I conjured them into
your stomach myself. At any rate, there's no need to fear that anyone here will realise the full truth."

"Yeah," Harry pressed, "but didn't any of them look at me?"

"Perhaps you should do so," Snape weakly replied, and turned away.

Harry did, peeling back the covers and peeking beneath the waistband of his pyjamas. Ugh, ick. His hip area looked lacerated, like the surface had been scrubbed away and the flesh sliced open the way Aunt Petunia had taught him to score a roast.

"Oh," he finally said, a little surprised it didn't hurt. "You... er, you spelled this onto me?"

"It was necessary," Snape stiffly insisted, arms crossed so that the threadbare elbows of Remus' coat showed. "But I do apologise for the intrusion."

"Um... well, good thinking, I guess," Harry replied, trying to laugh it off, though he did find that a bit difficult. He couldn't help but wonder if Snape had had to bare his hip in order to conjure the injury. Nah, probably not, he decided, but he certainly wasn't going to ask. Time for a new topic. "How's Aunt Petunia? If I was out that long, she must have had her own operation by now?"

Again, Snape seemed to have great difficulty meeting his eyes.

"Well?" Harry prompted, worrying his lip with his teeth as Snape still said nothing. "I can tell there's been some problem. She rejected it, like they talked to me about? Is that it?"

"No, Harry," Snape quietly told him, then reaching over, took both his hands in his. "I am sorry, but there is no easy way to tell you this. Your aunt has died."

Harry stared at the wall in front of him without really seeing it. "Oh. Um, I guess it's pretty awful that my first thought is about the wards."

"Practical, I would say," Snape assured him, those hands squeezing his lightly.

"No, it's Slytherin," Harry decided, but he didn't sneer the word. He wondered what sort of person he'd be by now if he hadn't argued with the Sorting Hat. He sat up in the bed, again feeling that stymied need to do something, but there was nothing to be done. "I should be upset. Some, at least. I mean, especially considering."

"Especially considering what?" he softly asked.

Snape hesitated, then moved one hand to the back of Harry's neck and began to rub the knots there in slow circles. His touch was tentative at first, but when the tension in the boy's frame began to wane, he increased the pressure, his fingers expertly seeking out the healing loci where certain potions were best applied.

"Especially considering what?" he softly asked.

Harry knew he was being managed, perhaps even manoeuvred, but it felt so good to be taken care of that he honestly couldn't bring himself to mind. Not even about the fact that it was Snape comforting him; Harry knew that all he had to do to make it stop was say a single word. He didn't want it to stop.

"Well, you know," he answered, relaxation creeping all across him as those fingers continued to massage the vertebrae in his neck, though the subject was hardly comfortable. "It wouldn't have happened if not for me."

"But it would have, Harry," Snape insisted, placing a finger under Harry's chin until the boy looked
at him. "It did. This isn't your fault. You saw the state she was in."

"I can't --" Talk about it, he had been going to say, but his teacher seemed to understand.

"All right," Snape easily agreed. "I'll inform the healers that you're awake and lucid. I imagine they'll make short work of your outward injuries, though as we can't mention your operation, you'll have to rely on my potions to help with the pain inside."

"There's no pain inside," Harry protested, though in a certain sense, that wasn't true.

"There will be, once the Helasbreath elixir I put in your lemonade wears off."

Harry nodded, weary. Not so very long ago, the idea that Snape had slipped him something would have been positively gruesome. Now, he just couldn't bring himself to be concerned about it. Ron would say he was a nutter, but then again, Ron didn't know Snape.

And Harry barely knew him, but he did know enough. "Thank you," he said, laying back down. "For all of it, staying with me through the operation, being here with me, now. For the potion, for..." He didn't know what else to say.

"You're very careful to thank people, aren't you?" Snape observed, rising to his feet and brushing lint from Remus' wool trousers. "You don't need to thank me, Harry."

Then, as if ill at ease with what he had just said, he briskly announced, "I'll summon someone to see to you. In the meantime, if you feel up to it, you might catch up on some schoolwork."

Following his glance, Harry noticed his books piled on the night table. He hardly felt like studying, but maybe it would take his mind off everything else. As Snape departed, Harry pulled Transfigurations: Sixth Year Theory and Cases from the pile and began to read.

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"One would think you hadn't eaten in four days," Snape lightly commented when Harry polished off his second dinner tray.

"Yeah, well I haven't," Harry returned, then wondered at his teacher's smirk. "Have I?"

"I couldn't let you starve, could I?"

"Once you would have," Harry mused, then realised that wasn't true. Even first year, Snape had been looking out for him, protecting him when Quirrell hexed his broom, for instance. He'd been merciless with criticism, and had acted for all the world as though he'd like nothing better than to see Harry dead, but when it came right down to it, they'd been on the same side, even way back then.

"So you spelled something into my stomach?" he reasoned.

"Pumpkin juice," Snape quipped, then quirked a grin at Harry's expression. "No, of course not. It was a nutritive potion, very light, but enough to keep you alive indefinitely." He shrugged. "No one knew how long it would be before you regained consciousness."

"Well, I'm fine now," Harry announced, swinging his legs over the side of the bed to stand up. Hmm, fine might be a slight overstatement; he was a tad unsteady on his feet. However, it was nothing that he couldn't handle. "All I need is a phone. I don't suppose St. Mungo's has one?"

"A... phone," Snape echoed, nonplussed.
"Yeah, to call Uncle Vernon," Harry explained, and when Snape still looked blank, exclaimed, "Could be wizards do things differently, I don't know. But I have to find out about the funeral. Maybe we should just make our way back to Privet Drive."

"I didn't think you would care to go to any funeral," Snape cautiously offered.

"Well, you thought wrong," Harry retorted, feeling defensive, miserable, and vulnerable all at once. All in all, it was a dreadful combination. "It's the decent thing to do, and before you start going off about how Gryffindor loyalty is utter rot, think about our objective here. I'm not likely to get on Dudley's good side after this, but he certainly won't agree to any warding if I skive off his mother's funeral. Though..." Another thought occurred to him. "When did she pass on, anyway? I suppose the funeral might have come and gone while I was out of it."

"She died the day before yesterday," Snape offered.

"So, I wouldn't have missed it, not yet."

"Likely not. Though we can still excuse any absence by saying that you were too ill to come."

"No."

"Harry--"

"No."

"All right," Snape acquiesced. "I will endeavour to locate a phone, since I do not recommend you return to Privet Drive without talking to your family, first. Your uncle is too volatile."

Harry didn't know how his professor had managed, but the man was back in a few minutes, proffering a slim, silver mobile. Harry had never used one. It took him some time to realise that there was never going to be a dialling tone, and a little longer to figure out that he had to turn it on.

After he heard another phone ringing, he whispered over to Snape, "Would you mind?" and more or less waved him from the room. Snape didn't leave, although he did step away, toward the warded doors.

Harry took a deep breath and braced himself to weather Uncle Vernon's wrath, but it was Dudley who picked up the receiver.

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Dudley, who'd obviously been blubbering, Harry thought. He could barely make his cousin out.

"Oh, H-- Harry," he sobbed. "It's awful, awful. D-- Did you hear, did they tell you?"

"Yeah, they told me," Harry softly replied. "I'm sorry, Dudley. I know it doesn't help, but I'm really, really sorry."

"D-- Dad thinks you did it on pur-- pur-- purpose!" Dudley said, his tone somewhere between a screech and a moan. "Said you can't come home, Harry. Ev-- Ev-- Ever!"

Some gulping noises ensued, and then it seemed that Dudley had managed to get himself more in hand.

Harry had more or less assumed that Vernon would refuse to take him again; that not just the wards, but his only home outside of Hogwarts was well and truly lost. It surprised him a bit that Dudley
sounded so regretful, but Harry chalked that up to general emotional devastation. It occurred to him that if you had to have your mother die, maybe it wasn't so bad having it happen when you were only one year old, and couldn't understand the loss.

"Can you tell me when the funeral is?" Harry asked. "And where?"

"Ooooh, you'd better not come, Harry," Dudley urged, his voice insistent. "I mean it. Dad's going to kill you."

"Well, you know he always says things like that," Harry murmured. "To me, at least."

"Yeah. I used to think it was funny. I'm sorry about that. But now..." Dudley gulped again, and began talking quickly, as though he'd heard someone coming. "You haven't seen him. He's got this look in his eyes. It's scary, Harry. Don't come, all right? Don't come."

"Dudley--"

"I've got to go," his cousin yelped. "Don't call again! But... well, you can write me. I'd like that, if you didn't use an owl. Bye!"

The line went dead. Harry stared at the phone for a while before remembering to turn it off. When Snape came back over, Harry said, "I don't think Dudley hates me," but his voice sounded dead. "That won't be enough to keep my mother's sacrifice active, will it? I mean, if Uncle Vernon won't have me in his house, there's no place to ward."

"I think we should return to Hogwarts," Snape announced. "The sooner, the better. I can see to anything else you need as you recover."

"No," Harry said again, trying to figure out why the idea filled him with such distress. "Don't you see? I... I don't know if my parents even had a funeral. I can't just go off and act like nothing's happened. I can't pretend that it's nothing to do with me that Aunt Petunia died!"

When Snape still looked reluctant, Harry pressed, "We'll stand at the back, all right? We'll just sort of lurk... out of sight. But I have to go, Professor. I just have to."

"When and where?" Snape sighed, taking the phone and slipping it into Remus' vest pocket.

"Dudley didn't say. " Harry didn't think his cousin would say, either, even if he rang back. "Get me some papers from Surrey, then. There'll be an announcement."

Snape stared.

"Don't want to help?" Harry sniped, worried he'd miss it after all if Snape remained so intractable. "Fine. I'll wander around Muggle London looking for Surrey papers, myself. I'll yell if I see Voldemort, how does that sound?"

"Stop being so childish. I can't hunt up your heart's desire either, not unless I leave you alone here, which I will not do."

"Conjure them!"

"Your faith in my powers notwithstanding, Potter, I can't."

Harry gaped. "You can't?"

"It is heartening to see you so shocked at the notion that I can't do everything," Snape sneered, his
dissain for the whole topic clearly evident even in Remus' tones. "But no, I can't."

"Then get someone from the Order to go collect them!" Harry shouted. "Now!"

"I don't much care for your tone, Potter!"

Harry wasn't about to give an inch. "I don't care at all for yours!"

"This is descending to something rather infantile," Snape drawled, contempt lacing every word. He glared at Harry, then turned his back. "Stay here, do not move. And control your hysteria. I will get you to this funeral, much good will it do you."

Harry flopped back into bed and told himself that when all this was over, he didn't care if he never saw Severus Snape again.

---------------------------------------------------------------------

The day was cold and wintry, storm clouds brewing in the south, the cemetery cast in long afternoon shadows. Harry shuddered as he stood in the distance, watching the burial progress. Wind whistled in his ears so that he couldn't make out the words of the hymn the mourners were singing, but that was all right. He just wanted to watch, and know that he was brave enough to bear the sight.

They'd ended up missing the funeral proper. Snape had deemed the parish church too small to afford any hiding place, and had caustically asked Harry if what he really wanted was to cause a horrid scene at an event which should appear, to all intents and purposes, sacred. He hadn't been amused when Harry had suggested using an invisibility cloak, but then again, Harry hadn't been joking. If the charmed cloak hadn't been back in his trunk at Hogwarts, he'd have used it. Too bad an Accio charm wouldn't work on something all the way in Scotland. He wondered if it might, for someone like Albus Dumbledore.

Or Voldemort.

The burial service ended, Harry watching from behind a tree as one by one the mourners wandered across the rolling lawn to cars parked a short distance away. Mrs Figg was among them, and a few other people he recognised from the neighbourhood. Uncle Vernon and Dudley were the last to leave. Father and son, mourning together, shaking slightly, the older man's arm encircling the boy's shoulders. Harry wished he could walk over to them, and say again that he was sorry, that he hadn't known it would come to this, that he'd only wanted to help.

He knew better than to make that speech, but standing there behind the tree, clutching Remus' coat around himself, he mouthed the words, and told himself that would have to be enough.

Snape was eyeing him. "Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not all right. She's dead, dead. And it's my fault. And my hip hurts something fierce, your damned Helasbreath elixir is lousy! It doesn't even work anymore! And she might not have loved me, but she did raise me, and I owe her something, don't I, for taking me, letting me stay even after the Dementors attacked Dudley to get to me? And I can't even attend her funeral except by skulking around! No, I'm not all right!"

"Yeah, fine," Harry answered. He peered out into the distance and saw that the Dursleys had left. "I want to go up and see the grave."

Snape frowned, but answered that he'd felt no darkness there save that of grief.
"You..." Harry gulped. "Wait here, then. I want to be alone."

"I will not be far," Snape assured him, shivering a bit. Harry didn't think it was from fear.

"Here, take your coat back," he offered, starting to shrug out of it.

Snape shook his head. "It is Remus' coat and he would rather you have it, if you are cold."

"No, that's all right--"

"I would rather you have it, as well," Snape announced. "Go."

Harry found the grave restful, and couldn't help but think that was rather wrong of him. He knelt before the gaping hole, looking at the mound of freshly turned earth beside it, and tried to think of what to say to Aunt Petunia.

The cemetery stopped being restful then, and his voice hurt when he spoke.

"You were supposed to love me," he started, trying to think his way through the tangled emotions choking him. "I was just a baby, and it wasn't my fault I got left on your doorstep. It wasn't my fault I wasn't a Muggle! Did you know how much I tried to stop my magic, to be something you could love? But you were supposed to love me no matter what, you were!" He paused, smearing a palm across wet cheeks. "I guess you knew I didn't love you, either. I guess it doesn't matter, now, but I didn't hate you... well, not the way you hated me. I didn't want it all to end like this, leaving Dudley without his mother--"

A sob climbed up from his belly, because he knew what it was like to wish for a mother who wasn't there.

The talking wasn't helping, Harry decided. It was just making him more upset. He knelt a while longer in silence, hugging Remus' coat to himself. It was more than warm, now; it was comforting.

Twilight began to paint the graveyard grey.

Harry stood up, realizing that Snape must be freezing, must think that Harry was positively daft to kneel here for so long, and all over a woman who'd never meant much to him while she was alive.

"You!" a voice came charging over the lawn as he rose to his feet. "How dare you! Come to laugh, to desecrate her grave?"

Before Harry could so much as run, Vernon had felled him with a vicious swipe across the face. Harry flew several feet before crashing to the ground, stars spinning behind his eyes, familiar rage sweeping him, rage that required an outlet and would find it.

But nothing exploded from his soul; no accidental magic stretched forth to save him. Vernon was stomping towards him, fury consuming his features, his fat jowls shaking with it. And Harry was thinking the hell with the Decree, I'm not going take this, not this time. Reaching into his jeans pocket, Harry brandished his wand with confidence as he roared, "Petrificus Totalus!"

But nothing happened, absolutely nothing. Vernon Dursley didn't even quail in fear. He just kept coming, screaming about Aunt Petunia and Harry and unmitigated gall.

"Petrificus Totalus!" Harry shouted again, pulling all his powers into the hex, the wand an extension
of his furiously pointed hand. An impotent extension; once again, no force flowed through him to erupt from the wand. "Immobilis!" he tried. "Impedimenta Forneo! Serpentsortia! Avunculare Evanesco!"

Vernon was nearly on him when Harry began scrambling backwards, flailing in his panic. "Exilio Fumare!"

And then magic exploded around him, a shower of liquid greenish sparks that boiled the air as a low boom of thunder shook the ground beneath his feet. Vernon fell face-forward with a deafening thud, and Dudley ran up from behind to scream at Harry, "What did you do? All we wanted was another minute here beside my mum! I told you not to come, I told you!"

Harry somehow swayed to his knees, then looked down at his wand, which still lay cold and useless in his hand. It wasn't his magic that had stopped Vernon, that much was clear.

Snape shimmered into view, just steps away, and Harry stared, and weakly told his cousin, "It wasn't me, it wasn't mine, I didn't do--"

Then Snape started to say something, but it was just a rush of noise to Harry. He fainted dead away, collapsing to the grass with his head at the Potions Master's feet.
Harry woke up in a room that was eerily familiar, though it was far less grimy than the last time he'd seen it. What was he doing here, in Sirius' bedroom at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place? Harry groaned out loud, rolled over onto his side, and pulled his legs up toward his chest. He closed his eyes, but it seemed like he could still make out the sight of the room bathed in hazy, pre-dawn light.

"Harry?" Remus' familiar voice asked at once.

He kept his eyes clenched shut. "Get me out of here, all right? I'm not sure what you thought you were doing, bringing me here of all places, but get me out!"

"I didn't bring you here," Remus answered. "Severus did."

"Severus?" Harry uncurled and awkwardly sat up on the double bed, balancing himself on one bent leg as he stared at Remus. "What do you mean, Severus!"

"He's downstairs," Remus explained, "but I'll call him if you like--"

"Hold up," Harry ordered, flushing as he heard how rudely the words had emerged. "I mean, you aren't..." It came to him rather belatedly that with Polyjuice Potion, anybody could impersonate Remus, so he'd better watch what he said. "Um, when you were at Hogwarts, where'd you used to go at a particular time each month?"

"Oh, Harry," Remus laughed, but when the boy's expression remained fixed, he murmured, "The Shrieking Shack."

Still suspicious, Harry went on, "What does mischief managed mean?"

"It wipes the Marauder's Map clean. Really, Harry!"

"Oh, okay," Harry conceded. "I guess you're you. So Severus... er, I mean Professor Snape is downstairs? Is he back to his usual self?"

"I wouldn't say that," Lupin replied. "Oh, the Polyjuice has worn off, if that's what you're asking. But he's... a bit unsettled, we'll say."

Harry looked around the room again, and started shivering. "Well get him up here, will you?"

"Harry," Remus quietly said as he stood up from the bed. "We will solve this, all right? We will."

That was when Harry remembered the graveyard, and Uncle Vernon, and hex after hex that had refused to flow through him and into his wand. He looked up, green eyes wide and slightly wild as the truth twisted his stomach into tight knots. "I've lost my magic, haven't I?"

"We will solve it," Remus repeated. "Let me get Severus for you."

Harry sort of goggled when his other teacher did come up; he didn't think he'd ever seen Snape in casual clothes before. Well, except once when a boggart had impersonated him, but that hardly counted. Now, the Potions Master was wearing dark grey trousers and a Slytherin green turtleneck sweater. The look could have worked if worn with robes, he supposed, but without? It just wasn't Snape.
"We were premature to think you had recovered," Snape opened the conversation, standing stiffly in the doorway as though reluctant to draw any closer to Harry. "You were unconscious for several hours before you began to truly sleep, which facts strongly indicate that you still need to heal."

"Not to mention that I tried about ten, twelve hexes on Uncle Vernon," Harry muttered. "They didn't even make him twitch, and they sure didn't stop him from coming. It was like he knew I couldn't catch hold of my magic any longer!"

"He was simply angry."

Harry gave a half-hysterical laugh. "Does it count against the Decree if the curses you try to throw don't fly anywhere? Not that it matters if they break my wand, not now. It's not much use to me, is it?"

"Obviously, the bone marrow extraction has affected your level of magical control," Snape brusquely explained, and at Harry's intent look, added, "Yes, yes, Lupin knows everything. He has to, as you'll be staying here with him until the situation is resolved."

Harry's eyes bugged out. "Here? I can't stay here!"

"Where else should we safeguard you?" Snape inquired, a little of his old sneering tone evident. "You will never return to Privet Drive, and Hogwarts is quite out of the question."

"Hogwarts sounds good to me," Harry staunchly replied. "I have to get back to my classes."

Snape made a snarling noise reminiscent of Remus in his wolf-form. "Have you gone completely daft, Potter? At the moment, as far as we can tell, you have no powers! Yet you propose to resume attendance at an institution where almost every class session requires you to utilize active magic? How long do you suppose you can you conceal your condition from your classmates?"

"Ron and Hermione would never tell a soul--"

"Merlin spare me from simpleminded idiots!" Snape exclaimed. "Not everyone at Hogwarts is a simpering, sycophantic Gryffindor just itching to keep your secrets! You share lessons with Draco Malfoy several times a week in your programme, do you not? Do you suppose it will escape his notice that you can no longer perform the simplest spell or charm?"

Harry hadn't realised he'd been holding his breath until he let it out. "Oh. I get it, I think. You're worried about Voldemort finding out."

"Brilliant deduction, Mr Potter," Snape sneered.

"Now really, Severus, you and I have had several hours to reason this all out," Remus broke in. "Be fair."

"Ah, Gryffindors and fairness," came the contemptuous reply. Snape did seem to calm after that, however. Stepping further into the room, he continued speaking to Harry. "The Dark Lord would like nothing better than to see you dead. You have bested him, Mr Potter, a fact which he can hardly endure. Should he learn that you are currently defenceless, he will shove hell itself aside to get to
you. Hogwarts, for all its ancient protections, has been far from safe for you, in the past. Only your vast capacity for magic, along with a great deal of luck, has kept your skin intact!

"All right, all right, I understand," Harry bit out. Geez, he could have stopped after the first sentence; he didn't have to treat him like a complete dunce. "I don't like it, in fact I pretty well hate it, but I suppose you're right. Number Twelve Grimmauld Place is probably the safest place for me. Unplottable, location only able to be revealed by a Secret Keeper, who happens to be the only wizard Voldemort's ever feared! All right, all right? I get it!"

"He sounds distressed," Lupin commented under his breath.

"What do you expect?" Harry exclaimed. "Sirius loathed this place! He hated being cooped up here, with nobody for company but that screeching portrait of a mother who despised him, and the most disloyal house-elf in the history of wizardry!" An ugly light made Harry's eyes blaze iridescent, and when he next spoke, his voice was cold and calculating. "Where is Kreacher, anyway?"

"Kreacher's dead," Remus announced.

"Is his head mounted on the wall?" Harry sneered, hands clenching with disappointment. He'd wanted to kill the little shite himself. Yeah, wring his neck until his eyes bulged and popped out of his skull, then twist the head off and give it a good hard kick, over and over until it was nothing but a bloody, pulpy mass.

Dark shadows swam in his eyes as he contemplated it.

"Get yourself under control, Mr Potter!" Snape suddenly roared, stepping forward to take Harry by the shoulders. He didn't shake him, though, just held on to get his point across. "The issue at hand is not your house, nor house-elves you hate, nor any other meaningless notion that should flit across that distractible mind of yours. It is your magic."

"Or lack thereof," muttered Harry, looking up at Snape. His long black hair was half-concealing his face, obscuring his expression. Yeah, Snape did like to hide... It came to him then that his teacher's sarcasm and anger was masking something else, something he'd seen before, though he'd seen it on Remus' face at the time. But Snape had been inside that face. Snape was worried about him, practically frantic. Unsettled, Remus had called it.

Either way, it killed Harry's own anger and left him feeling just... defeated. Because not even Snape's concern could fix this, could it? "It's sort of ironic, isn't it?" Harry said, swallowing as he shrugged off his teacher's hands. "I spent years trying to wish my magic all away. And now, just when the Dursleys have done with me for good, it goes away on its own!"

Remus' soft tones offered assurance and hope. "I expect it's a temporary aberration, Harry. We've had you examined by a healer, already."

Harry took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes, and put the glasses back on. "And?"

"She spelled you up and down," Snape flatly announced, still standing just inches from Harry's knees, "and concluded that your prolonged high fever is largely to blame. Combined with the tainted Muggle potions in your system, it burned your magical core down to ash. It did not help that while this was underway, your body was recognizing that it had lost marrow. Focused on that, instead of what mattered, your blood did not defend itself against the problem. Or so Healer Marjygold believes."

"You believe differently?" Harry asked, afraid the answer might be more unpleasant than what he'd
"The situation is more complex than Healer Marjygold is in a position to appreciate," Snape explained. He sat down on the foot of the bed, but turned to face Harry. "She is in the Order, and I trust her, else I would not have summoned her, but there are inconsistencies in her theory."

Harry sat up straighter. "Such as?"

"The Helasbreath elixir eased your discomfort. If your magical core had been completely burned through as Marjygold claims, the potion would have been either useless or lethal, as I once told you."

"It did work at first." Harry told him, a constriction in his chest making it difficult to breathe. "But by the day of the funeral, it was useless." *Good thing it wasn't one of the lethal ones.*

"You were in pain and didn't think to tell me, Harry?"

"Look, I'm pretty much used to not complaining, all right?"

Snape nodded, his features thoughtful as he exchanged a significant glance with Remus.

"What?" Harry prompted, and when they hesitated, added, "Come on. What?"

It was Remus who spoke. "Severus mentioned a few things you've said in recent days, Harry. About... blaming yourself, thinking you're at fault when other people die. We wonder if you're trying to punish yourself. We suspect the healer's missed the truth completely. No doubt your core is charred, at least, from the fever, but the real issue could be your desire to suffer for giving your aunt the marrow in the first place."

Harry felt like he might throw up. Is *that* what Remus really thought of him?

"You don't believe that claptrap, do you?" he demanded to know, shifting away from Snape as he asked him, then on second thought, letting his glance include them both.

"You chose to suffer in the cemetery rather than ask for more elixir," Snape pointed out.

"Yeah, and good thing, because otherwise a magic potion might have killed me!" Oh, wait... the elixir had turned out to be one of the useless potions, not the lethal ones. Well, that was beside the point. "And I had a lot on my mind!"

"Exactly," Remus softly averred. "It's probably not just your aunt, either, is it? You blame yourself for Sirius, and Cedric Diggory, and no doubt for Voldemort being resurrected in the flesh."

"Had a nice long chat, you two, did you?" Harry scathed. "Well, let's see. Hmm, I did act like a complete nitwit and charge into danger, dragging Sirius in my wake, and I *did* insist, just like a Gryffindor, wouldn't you know, that Cedric share the stupid Tri-Wizard Cup with me, and it *was* my blood that helped raise that murderous arsehole, so I'd say my perceptions are pretty much spot-on. Why don't we just finish the list, shall we? If you want to get right down to it, it's my fault my parents died, as well! Voldemort was coming after *me*, we know that now. If not for *me*, Remus here would still have his best friend. Two of them, actually!"

"Black was my fault as well," Snape averred.

"I know that," Harry yelled, jumping to his feet. "And Dumbledore, and the Death Eaters, and Voldemort, and if you come right down to it, Sirius himself! I don't think it's *all* my fault. Hell, you're partly to blame for my parents too, aren't you? You were spying already by then, and you didn't do a
bang-up good job of it, did you?"

"Harry--" Remus broke in.

"Let me talk," Harry interrupted right back, pacing to the end of the room and back as he assembled his thoughts. "All right. There's plenty of blame to spread around, and I'm not stupid enough to pretend that none of it's mine, no matter what platitudes you want to drench me with. But your other idea?" He laughed, the sound so harsh it bordered on a cackle. "I'm punishing myself? What a load of crap. I bet neither one of you has a psych degree, so just lay off analyzing me, all right? Think about it! Oh, sure, I'm punishing myself by losing touch with my magic! That makes sense, doesn't it? 'Cause now there'll be nobody to fulfill that prophecy, nobody to put an end to that snakelike shite once and for all. So loads more people can die, and I can feel even guiltier. Thanks for your sterling opinion of my character, but I am not that barmy!"

"He does have a point, Lupin," Severus replied after a moment.

"Yeah, he does," Harry mocked. "How old do I have to be before you stop talking over my head?"

"Speak to us with some respect," Snape rebuked. "Lupin's here to help you, as am I."

_I'll speak however I damn well please_, Harry wanted to scream back, but he knew his teacher was right. He'd vented, and got it all off his chest, and now it was time to take stock of the situation.

"So what's the plan?" Harry calmly asked them both as he leaned against the wall, rather enjoying their dumbfounded expressions. He supposed they had expected him to keep raving for a while longer. Maybe they were remembering the fact that he'd gone so out of control last year that he'd wrecked Dumbledore's office.

He could do something like that again, he knew. He was angry enough. Actually, he felt like that black energy from the cupboard had wormed its way right down into his injured marrow. But he wasn't going to explode with it, not any more than he had already. He was going to hold it together, and get the problem solved, like Remus had said.

Snape assessed Harry's calm facade for a moment, then explained the plan, as Harry had put it. "Lupin is going to tutor you to rouse your magic. He'll stay here with you as long as it takes, and for the time being, the rest of the Order will not visit headquarters. The less that is known of your... problem, the better. I must return to Hogwarts to resume my post, and my duties for the Order, but I will floo here each evening, as I can, to help you master Occlumency."

Harry raised a hand to his scar. "You think this is still a conduit, even with me a.... a... squib?"

"You are not a squib," Snape at once contested. "You have been injured, but you will recover." He paused, but Harry said nothing. "As for your scar, I have no reason to believe that the Dark Lord has been tapping your magic when he sends you dreams, which is why you must learn at all costs to shield your mind."

"But how can I do that, without any magic of my own?"

Snape looked surprised. "To discipline your mind does not strictly require sorcery, Harry, though of course it helps. At any rate, I expect your magic will begin to re-emerge as you work with Lupin throughout the length of each day."

"So Occlumency," Harry murmured, nodding. "Right. If Voldemort looks into my mind, and sees my powers gone, I'll be in deep shite."
“Exactly.”

“But Dumbledore said he should have taught it to me, himself,” Harry remembered. Not that he wanted to work with Dumbledore, but he supposed the headmaster might insist. "Wouldn't that still hold true?"

"Professor Dumbledore, Harry," Remus chided.

Snape raised his chin a bit. "Have you objection to my teaching you? Should that be the case, I will certainly express as much to Albus." He paused, and looked away. "I know this morning has not been easy, but I thought we had got beyond that, Harry."

"We have," Harry murmured, sort of embarrassed to have to admit to that in front of Remus. "It's just..." He didn't know how to say it; it wasn't like he wanted to snipe, or score points off Snape. He didn't even want to hurt his feelings, assuming he could, that was. But this was too important to just ignore, so he plunged ahead. "Are you going to teach me, this time? Last year, all you did was yell and threaten. Oh yeah, and attack until I could hardly see straight."

Remus chuckled slightly. "Rather like old Trutt in Charms, Severus. Remember? Of course you were a quick study, but I do recall that even you occasionally found his style... irksome."

"I do not instruct like Trutt," Snape breathed, clearly appalled. "That man was worthless."

Harry didn't know about any Trutt, but he did know what he thought of Snape's own teaching style. "You just kept insisting Occlude your mind, Potter, over and over. You are letting me win, you are handing me weapons!" he mimicked. "But you never once told me how not to!"

"I told you to clear your mind each night before you slept, you ungrateful little twit!"

"Yeah, and I didn't even try," Harry admitted, not wanting to think about why he hadn't bothered. "Okay, so back to blame: we're both at fault and I know it. I'll do better, I swear. I'll do my part this time; I do understand what I stand to lose, what we all stand to lose, if Voldemort gets a good look inside me, now."

"Severus?" Remus prompted, as if he thought that Harry's offer had been more than fair.

Snape huffed a bit. "I will endeavour to explain matters better, and help you practice."

"There, see how easy that was?" Harry lightly taunted. "Say, can I write to my friends while I'm here?"

Snape's tapered fingers pushed long strands of black hair back from his scalp. "Yes, but be careful what you write. Do not owl your letters, though. I will take them when I come, and post them from Hogwarts' own owlery."

Harry thought that a bit paranoid, but supposed that if anyone was watching, it wouldn't do to have owls coming or going from Grimmauld Place.

"You just can't leave my post alone, can you?" he quipped.

A slow smile crept across Snape's face. "What's the matter, Potter?"

"Oh, pipe down," Harry lightly replied. "Or I'll tell Remus here how you read a personal letter out loud in Potions class one day."
"Severus!" Lupin gasped.

"Relax, he relented," Harry laughed, thinking that he'd really needed a good laugh. It was sort of satisfying that he could have one with Snape, who was breathing a bit *too* deeply, as though trying hard to hold it all in.

As for post, though, could owls even find Grimmauld Place? It's not like *they'd* been told personally by Dumbledore that the place existed.

"Um, I need a favour," he ventured. "Ron and Hermione need some way to write back to me. I'm guessing the owls aren't a good option. Can I tell them that they can slip letters into their Potions essays, you know, roll them up real tight in the scrolls, and you can bring them by?"

"I suppose," Snape drawled, trying for a dark tone he didn't quite achieve. "Do mention to your little friends not to *drop* any letters on the dungeon floor, would you?"

"Yes, Professor."

Snape nodded briskly. "I really must go now, Harry. You will be all right with Lupin, here?"

"Well, sure." Harry wondered why he'd even ask.

"Do not take him out of the house," Snape cautioned Lupin. "It deflects Dark Magic, more so now than when Kreacher lived inside. It is possible that the Dark Lord may not be able to communicate via the scar, just so long as Harry stays within. It may give us the time we need for him to come to terms with Occlumency."

That time, Harry didn't bother to point out that he was standing right there, even when Snape continued, "He still looks pale, Lupin, and he may need to work with me well into the night. Be sure he sleeps several hours during the afternoon."

"I don't guess I'm allowed a sleeping draught?" Harry questioned. "Useless or lethal, I'll bet."

"Those are useless."

"Um, how about something we could get from a pharmacy? You know, Muggle medicine?"

"Do you really think it wise to expose yourself to more of the bastardized substances that contributed to your condition in the first place?" Snape haughtily questioned.

Put like that? No, Harry didn't think it was such a good idea. He sighed.

"I am sorry I can't do more for you," Snape softly admitted, all haughtiness gone. "No doubt your hip still aches, but that, too, will just have to be borne."

It ached something fierce, and Harry had a feeling that the pain itself would tire him out long before it was afternoon, but all he said was, "It's all right. I've had worse."

Snape nodded. "I will see you late tonight, then," he remarked to Harry, before he strode to the hearth and snatched a bit of Floo powder from the mantle.

Harry turned to Remus as the Potions Master vanished in a flash of green fire. "So, I'll get dressed then?" He looked down at the unfamiliar too-large pyjamas, vaguely wondering if these had belonged to Sirius. The thought made him feel queasy and comforted, all at once. "Um, is any of my stuff here?"
"Severus brought some through the Floo," Remus explained, gesturing to a battered chest of drawers.

Harry wondered how he'd pulled that off. As Remus, maybe. Somehow, he just couldn't see the dreaded Potions Master strolling into the Gryffindor common room and casually announcing that he needed Harry's clothes. But there they were, neatly folded, an assortment of shirts, jumpers, and jeans. Even shoes and socks. No school robes, but he wouldn't need them here, would he?

"Hey, where are my textbooks?" Harry called. Remus had left the room so that he could get dressed.

"Severus said you wouldn't need them," Remus called back, and Harry, just pulling on his jeans, nearly tripped.

"What's he think, I'm on some sort of holiday?" Harry shouted, yanking open the door while he was still doing up the zip. Remus was just outside. Oops. "Sorry, didn't mean to deafen you."

"We both think you need to focus on the only thing that matters at this juncture," Remus softly explained.

"Yeah, well my N.E.W.T.s matter too," Harry retorted, before coming to his senses. "But not if I can't do magic, I don't guess. Okay, first things first. So what's first then, Remus? How do we even get started?"

"Fetch your wand; it's in the lower drawer," Remus directed. "And come downstairs. But don't worry, Harry. I can't believe your magical core is burned completely through. We'll find an ember left, and coax it back to life."

"Yeah," said Harry again, but deep inside, he wasn't so sure.
Kneeling just before the hearth in the downstairs parlour, Harry pointed his wand at the scattered ashes within, and bellowed with all his might, "Incendio!"

A single tendril of ash fluttered slightly upwards, then cascaded back to join its fellows in the grate.

"See, that was better," Remus said, all encouragement. "That time something happened."

"Remus, I blew on it, is all!"

Harry flopped onto the floor and stretched out full-length, almost wishing a doxy or a grindylow would come flying out of the shadows. At least then, he'd get to watch Remus do some magic. His own, he was sad to admit, wasn't working at all.

Well, at least Remus didn't have Snape's awful habit of snapping that he wasn't trying, even when he was. He had been trying, with all his might. To visualize the flash of fire from his wand, to feel the sizzle deep inside him rising to the surface of his skin and then beyond, to make the spell come out.

But it was just no use.

"Come now, back to work," Remus quietly insisted, pulling Harry up by one hand. "We can't let a few setbacks get us down, Harry. Perhaps Incendio wasn't the best place to start. We need something simpler, Wingardium Leviosa, perhaps."

Harry shook his head. Spells didn't get any easier than Incendio, and Remus knew it. Who did he think he was kidding? You only needed one split-second of power to light a fire; raising something aloft and holding it there required you to sustain the magic.

But still, Remus wanted him to, so Harry tried. "Wingardium Leviosa," he incanted at a bit of fluff that had torn loose from inside a cushion on the sofa. He stared at it hard, willing it to rise, but the fluff just stared back. Smirking at him, Harry thought with disgust. He turned to Remus as if to say, Now what?

"Harry, anyone who could produce a Patronus at the tender age you did could not have lost his magic over a mere fever." Rocking on his heels slightly, Remus lost himself in thought. "Ah, perhaps that's what the matter is."

"What?"

Sitting down on the mouldering sofa, Remus patted the spot beside him until Harry sat down, too. "These last few days have concentrated your attention on rather dark thoughts, haven't they?"

"Um... well, not really. I mean, I felt a lot worse at the end of last year," Harry admitted, wondering what his former defence teacher was getting at.

"But being thrown into the thick of things with Severus, Harry--"

"Hey, Snape and I are getting along all right, didn't you notice?"

"Professor Snape, Harry, and it was good to see. But still, it can't have been comfortable for you at first. Add to that your worry over the wards, your aunt dying and your uncle attacking you, which I gather has not been an uncommon occurrence, not to mention the terror you felt when you had to
subject yourself to general anesthesia, and--"

"Snape's got a big fat mouth," Harry grumbled.

"The point," Remus quietly continued, "is that all these things have weighed on your mind, one after another. I think you're in a dark place, emotionally--"

"Oh great, another load of psychological crap. Are you going to cast me as a masochist again, or just a run-of-the-mill coward this time?"

"Where did you learn a word like masochist?" Remus gasped, taken out of stride.

"Remus, I'm sixteen, not twelve," Harry retorted. "And I read it in a Divination text."

Remus tried to get his thoughts back on track. "You're in a dark place," he repeated, his voice going about as stern as Harry had ever heard it. Which wasn't very stern, all things considered, but it still reminded Harry to stop interrupting. To show a tad more respect, as Snape had said. "Believe me, Harry, it's not nonsense. It's well-established that mental attitude affects healing. You have injuries that need to heal, both physical and magical. Your depression might well be keeping that from happening.

"Therefore, I suggest we work first on the Patronus Charm, which as you know, requires overwhelmingly joyful memories to propel it. By forcing your mind to dwell on those, we will convince your injuries to begin healing."

That was about the daftest thing Harry had ever heard from Remus, primarily because he knew he wasn't depressed. Sure, his life had been dark lately, but when hadn't it been? From cupboards to Voldemort to friends petrified to friends actually dying to his disaster with Sirius, life just hadn't been a bed of roses. But he'd never been depressed, not like Remus meant. He'd just learned to ignore the awful bits, push them aside, and keep going.

Though it had hurt to push Sirius aside, it really had.

Maybe, Harry thought, he was a little bit depressed, after all. He frowned, not liking that idea. Did he seem depressed to Snape, too?

"It's perfectly normal to be feeling blue, after all you've endured," Remus soothed, his glance on him sad and understanding all at once.

Seeing that glance, Harry felt like a hippogriff whose feathers had been ruffled the wrong way. Or maybe more like a hippogriff that had just been insulted. He didn't need coddling, and what was more, he didn't need Remus thinking that he did.

On the other hand, he did understand that Remus was just trying to help. For the sake of their friendship, not to mention his magic, Harry decided, he'd concentrate on mastering his lessons, not on pointless arguments about his feelings.

"All right, Patronus Charm," Harry murmured, standing up and assuming the familiar stance. Now for the memory. Something suffused with positive glee, with giddiness unchecked. That magical, perfect moment when he'd believed he'd get to live with Sirius...

Harry flung his arm out, wand held out at an upward angle. "Expecto Patronum!"

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.
By afternoon, Harry had felt happy thoughts until he was quite literally blue in the face. Hours worth of screaming *Expecto Patronum*, every minute of them riddled with frustration, hadn't exactly improved his mood.

And for all that effort, he'd not got so much as a silvery hiss from his damned wand.

Well, Harry thought, if he hadn't been depressed before, he certainly was now. He went upstairs to get some sleep, mainly because he didn't want to be nodding off during Occlumency, later. Snape was going to see, this time, that he was taking the skill seriously.

Instead of returning to Sirius' bedroom, he headed into the one he'd shared before with Ron. The beds in there were stripped, but Harry didn't care. He lay down on his uninjured side, and eyes shut, started counting backwards from one thousand. Sometimes that helped him sleep, sometimes not. This time, it did.

*Kreacher was standing on a table, sloshing wine from a fifteenth-century silver goblet bearing the Black family crest as he screeched in rage. Mistress' portrait had been removed, and the tapestry too, by a blood traitor in flowing black robes, the one who came but never stayed. Oh, he'd used Dark Arts to unstick them both, he had, spells and incantations and curses rising through the air, though he wasn't a proper dark wizard at all. Oh yes, Kreacher knew, Kreacher knew, and Kreacher would be revenged, as he'd been revenged on the nasty little master who'd broken Mistress' heart...

Whirling motion, Kreacher spinning round and round, and then the whole room was spinning, then the city itself, until the spinning stopped, and Kreacher was gone, and Number Four Privet Drive came into view.

Dark energies were lurking under the stairs, then streaming out through cracks in the door to whip around corners and fill the house to overflowing. Dudley was screaming on the lawn, no, no, make it stop, make it stop, but it didn't. The house filled, expanding with the pressure. Windows blew out, and whirling gases flooded forth, blackening Privet Drive and Magnolia Crescent beyond, and through the thick, choking mass of black magic, Harry could see the house, imploding now, withering away to nothing, until it wasn't so much as a speck on a patch of charred and wounded earth.

And above it all, the Dark Mark hung ominously in the sky.

Gasping, Harry bolted upright and flung a hand to his forehead.

But that was pure reflex; his scar wasn't hurting. Not even in the dream had it been hurting. The dream hadn't come from Voldemort, Harry decided, but from within his own mind.

Maybe, he reflected, he was a little more depressed than he'd thought.

The absence of any house-elves had meant that magic practice had to stop so that someone could prepare dinner. *Good thing*, Harry had decided. Directly after his nap, Remus had set him right back
to working on the *happiness spell*, as Harry had come to think of it. But it hadn't made him happy, now had it? One more failed *Patronus* Charm and he was liable to strangle somebody. *Too bad Kreacher's not around, after all,* Harry thought darkly.

He'd never adored cooking, though he'd got fairly good at it. With Remus helping out, though, it wasn't such a chore. Not that salad and a couple of roast chops were much work to begin with.

Harry couldn't help but notice, however, that Remus refrained from using any magic in his presence. He'd even opened a tin of grapefruit juice by hand, though he clearly didn't know the first thing about using a tin opener. If that wasn't a telling indication of how Remus really felt, Harry didn't know what was.

After the meal was over and the dishes washed, Remus rubbed his hands together and suggested another stab at the *Patronus* Charm. Harry would sooner puke than face that again so soon, so he said he had to get some letters written before Snape came.

"Professor Snape," Remus had chided, right on cue.

"Yeah," Harry muttered, and fled upstairs to his bedroom, only to find no parchment in there. Sighing, he went along the landing to Sirius' bedroom, and paused outside.

But then he went in, telling himself that Sirius was dead, and no amount of hating the house was going to change that.

---------------------------------------------------------------------

Parchment and quill were easily found in a big, old desk in the corner of the room. Unable to resist, Harry quickly searched through all the drawers. He didn't know what he was looking for; he just wanted to look. But someone had been through here before him; there was nothing personal of Sirius' left. Even the quill looked like it had been purchased at Flourish and Blott's just a week or two before.

Sighing, Harry sat down and prepared himself to write. One letter, he thought. Might as well; Ron and Hermione were practically glued together, these days. But he had to be careful how he put things, just in case the letter fell into the wrong hands. Harry chewed on his quill for a while, mulling it over.

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Dear Ron and Hermione,

*I'm fine, but things have got a little complicated and it'll be a while before I can come back to school. I wish I could tell you everything, but I know you'll understand when I say I can't. Remember summer before last, when Dumbledore swore you to secrecy about a bunch of stuff, and you kept your word and didn't tell me, not even in letters? This is sort of the same. I know you'll be every bit as understanding as I was. (Don't remind me now that I screamed and yelled and basically carried on like a spoiled little prat. I'm sure you'll handle it much better than I managed to.)

So, how are classes? It's funny not going to any, but I'm keeping pretty busy. Hey, at least I don't have to go to you-know-which class taught by you-know-who.

I'll write you again, soon. Speaking of a particular class, though, I have something to tell you. It's going to sound a little strange, but just do what I say, okay? To get a letter to me, you have to roll it up inside an essay and hand it in. Which class, you ask? Hmm,
well Ron's acne was a recent topic (Sorry, Ron). Yeah, that class. I've only hated it since the very first day. And while we're at it, I've been told to warn you to not let this letter out of your hands. Really, I'd recommend you burn it and scatter the ashes in the hearth, just in case somebody who shall go nameless but just might be a nasty little ferret at heart, decides to try his hand at a reconstitution spell.

Don't worry about me, okay? I'm doing fine.

Harry

He read the letter through twice more, and decided it would do.

Harry was dozing on the couch downstairs. Every so often he would drift awake, and wonder if he should give up and go to bed. After all, Snape hadn't said that he'd come every night.

Two things kept him downstairs, though.

One, he really didn't want to bother making up a bed, or sleep in Sirius', and two, he really did want to see Snape.

Strange thought, that, Harry mused. But it was true. Remus might think he knew everything about Harry, but it was Snape who had stood by him these past few days. Snape, who'd seen that cupboard but had never let on about it in class. Snape, who'd refrained from making any fun when it turned out that Harry was afraid of needles. But he hadn't been as afraid, had he, not with Snape standing there beside him.

Harry drifted back to sleep, again.

The noise of someone flooing in woke him, and as he sat up on the couch and fumbled for his glasses, Snape was striding forward, his robes billowing around him as dramatically as ever. Dark and imposing, he looked as though he'd stepped directly from the dungeons into Sirius' house, but of course, he more or less had.

"Hey," Harry greeted him, blinking a bit and rubbing his eyes. "Um, things with my magic didn't go so well today."

"Good evening," Snape replied. "And yes, I know; I've already spoken with Lupin."

Harry remembered Dumbledore saying that Order members had more secure ways of communicating than owls and fireplaces, so that made sense. It brought to mind, though, the letter he'd written. Harry took it from the lampstand by the sofa and standing, went to hand it to Snape. On the outside of the envelope he'd simply scrawled Ron Weasley & Hermione Granger, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Snape took it, but instead of concealing it in his robes, he turned it over twice in his hands, and asked, "May I?"

Harry gulped. "Read it, you mean?"

A dark, sardonic glance said without words that the question had been inane.
"Why do you want to?" Harry asked. "Don't you trust me?"

"Do you have several hours, Mr Potter? I believe it would take at least that amount of time to even begin to define the parameters of my trust as it applies to you."

"You could just say no," Harry pointed out. "Since you obviously don't."

Snape flicked a bit of ash from the shoulders of his robe. "I trust your intentions, I should say. It's to your own advantage to be discreet about your situation. However, I have concerns about the execution of that discretion. And frankly, Mr Potter, I place a far higher value on your life than on your privacy."

"Fine, read it," Harry gave in. He had a sneaking suspicion that if he refused, Snape would read it anyway, most likely in front of him. Harry could do without having his pride trampled quite that much. "But no taking points," he added.

Snape raised an eyebrow as he slit the envelope open with a quick charm from his wand. Harry tensed, and held his breath, remembering how he'd written that he'd hated Potions since the very first day. Well, at least he hadn't used the words *greasy git* or worse, *that slimebag hell spit out.*

"Well worded," Snape decided as he crisply folded the letter back in fourths. "You will need to prepare a new envelope. A repair would be invisible, but still detectable if one had suitable spells at one's disposal."

*Definitely paranoid,* Harry thought, but he found he didn't really mind. He was too relieved that Snape wasn't going to say anything about the contents of the letter.

In that, however, Harry was wrong. As he handed a freshly addressed envelope to Snape, the Potions Master remarked, "I did not realise you understood *Reconstitutio,* Harry. Did Miss Granger discover the spell during one of her frequent forays into the Restricted Section?"

Harry covered his surprise well, he thought. "Restricted Section? What's that?" he brazenly lied, though of course every student had heard of it within a week of the Welcoming Feast. "And why do you want something on Hermione, Professor?"

"Why do you think?" Snape replied, moving toward the sofa. "She's a Gryffindor. She sent you these, by the way," he added, fishing in his robes for an enormous, tightly curled roll of parchment. "Class notes since the 22nd. The girl needs to learn not to write down every word of every lecture. Notes are supposed to be just that, not bloody transcriptions."

Harry chuckled slightly, not just at Snape's dead-on depiction of Hermione's idea of diligence, but also at the next-to-last word. It didn't seem like the Potions Master of Hogwarts to speak so unreservedly, but then again, Harry was realizing that there was more to Snape than he'd ever suspected. A lot more.

Then another thought occurred to him. "Um, how'd she know that you could pass these on to me? She hasn't got my own letter yet!" And then, on the heels of that thought. "Oh. She figured it out. Well, that's Hermione for you."

"Disgusting amount of intellect for someone her age," Snape scathed, though Harry could tell his heart wasn't really in it. Truth to tell, Snape looked a bit as though he'd found cause to admire Hermione. Reluctantly, though. Very, very reluctantly. Snape was frowning as he sat down and crossed one leg over the other, his long, slender hands taking a moment to arrange his robes.
"I probably revealed too much when I followed you into your... well, I honestly don't know what it was, Mr Potter. Arabian boudoir, perhaps? At any rate, Miss Granger knew then that I was involved in whatever difficulties you were facing. Irritating girl. I was tempted to hex her when she handed me those, not the least because you don't need schoolwork cluttering up your attention, just now."

"Right, Remus and I covered that earlier," Harry agreed, tossing the notes aside as he sat down on the other end of the sofa, sitting sideways so he could see Snape. "We covered a lot of things, actually," Harry added darkly. "Like the fact that he knows about my uncle not being the nicest person ever to grace the earth. Like the fact that famous Harry Potter was terrified to go under the knife! Whatever happened to decorum, eh? To discretion?"

Snape flicked his wand at a lamp to turn it on, then laced his fingers together before he replied. "Did I ask you to apologise for discussing my personal business with your godfather? No, I did not. Nor will I, ever. You had a purpose for speaking with him, a valid purpose. And so too did I with Lupin. I quite assure you, I never once referred to you as 'famous Harry Potter,' though I did tell him all I deemed necessary."

"Necessary!" Harry exclaimed.

"Lupin's quite intent on a theory that mental, physical, and magical states of being are irretrievably interwoven."

"I noticed! Not only does he think I'm a bloody masochist hell-bent on my own destruction, he also believes my bad attitude explains my lack of magic." Harry moved his hands in an outward arc, and shot a glance at his teacher. "He thinks I'm depressed!"

"It would not be abnormal, in your situation." Snape thought to say.

Harry wasn't about to let him skive off that easily, though it didn't surprise him that Snape hadn't gone for the verbal bait. The man knew how to manoeuvre, no doubt about that. But Harry wanted to know, so he asked: "You don't think I'm depressed, do you? I mean, not just today, but lately? In general?"

Snape tapped his index finger against his cheek, and looked at Harry as he considered that. "You wrote your friends that you were fine. I think you believe this, yourself. But that does not necessarily make it true."

As answers went, that one was about as ambiguous as they came, but Harry let it go. "How were your classes?" he changed the subject. "Dumbledore covered for you, er, pretended to be you while you were with me all last week?"

Snape stared at him a moment more, then drawled, "He taught every level first through sixth to reduce fruit sugars down to lemon drops."

Harry almost laughed --the image was ludicrous-- but instead felt a cold, hard rage gripping him, rushing up from his core to spill out his fingertips. "That fool!" he shouted, fury ripping through him so fiercely it hurt. "What's he playing at? Nobody would believe for an instant that you would let us make candy in class! The whole school's got to know by now that it was Dumbledore on Polyjuice, so that leaves them knowing that I'm gone while you're gone, and two and two makes four, doesn't it, last time I checked! Hermione's not so effing smart after all, is she--"

"Harry, Harry!" Snape was shouting over his outburst. "I was joking, Harry."

Harry stopped yelling and gave his teacher a long stare. "You don't joke."
"Well, I certainly won't in future," Snape retorted. "You seem... tense, which isn't going to help with Occlumency. I thought a little humour might help relax you. Instead, you snapped like an old wand. And please, keep a civil tongue in your head. Albus Dumbledore is not a fool."

Harry thought of last year, of secrets kept from him too long, of the price he'd paid simply because the headmaster had ignored him, and kept his lips firmly pressed together.

"Perhaps we should commence what I came here, for," Snape suggested, his voice markedly calmer. "It is late already, and I cannot stay all night. Have you practiced clearing your mind?"

"No, because I don't know how!" Now Harry's hands were drumming against his knees. "What am I supposed to do, just think of nothing? How can anybody who's alive sit around and think of nothing?"

"That's not precisely what clearing your mind entails," Snape explained. "I spent a while today, thinking about your comments regarding last year's lessons, and doing some research. It is true that I was impatient for you to learn. I felt it most imperative that you exclude the Dark Lord from your mind at the earliest possible instant, and so I rushed you." He stopped, looking pained. "You said after your operation that no-one but Lupin had ever tutored you, which of course is not true, as I had also. But that you could believe that gave me food for thought, Harry. Last year, I resented your presence being foisted on me. I had no... understanding of you, not then. I thought of you as James, in fact. Your abominable behaviour, not practicing, not respecting my privacy, did not help."

"Right," Harry agreed, his hands coming to a halt atop his thighs. "I never said I'd been the perfect student."

"But more fundamental, perhaps, is this," his professor continued, his gaze like storm clouds held at bay by force of will. "Occlumency for me came as naturally as breathing. I have an innate facility for it, which is just as well, considering how often I must be in the Dark Lord's presence. Frankly, I expected you to be the same."

"Because I could produce a Patronus at thirteen?"

"I suppose that might have played a part; I did know you were a strong wizard. But mainly, Harry, I expected so much of you because it is difficult for me to imagine Occlumency being any sort of a challenge. Potions are the same. They make inherent sense to me."

"Well, they don't to me, or to Neville, or to Dean, or to pretty much anyone in sixth year except Malfoy and Hermione, you know."

"I am beginning to see," Snape obscurely answered. "At any rate, as concerns Occlumency, I have today consulted some texts by leading authorities. Teaching texts, Harry. We will not begin as we did last year. I see now that I was demanding you fly before you had even learned to crawl."

"So how do I learn to crawl?"

"By trusting me," Snape simply answered. "To teach you, I will have to be in your mind."

Harry's tongue felt thick in his throat. "Legilimency, again?"

"No, not that. I will not wring memories from you as before. It is more a case of sharing thoughts and working toward a common goal. But Harry, I cannot do this for you unless you let me. Hence the need for trust."

"Do you have several hours?" Harry weakly joked, then added, "No, that was stupid. I don't think
you're going to--"

"Invade your mind for the purpose of opening it to the Dark Lord?"

Harry winced. "Geez, Dumbledore does tell you everything, I guess. No, I don't think that any longer. I remember the headmaster saying he trusted you, and I remember thinking what utter rot that was, and how I'd rather fling myself into a cellar stuffed with Devil's Snare than trust the likes of you, but... yeah, okay. I've grown up since then, I guess."

"You have," Snape confirmed. Drawing forth his wand once more, he waved it in a swirling motion and conjured two glasses filled with an amber liquid and clinking cubes of ice. One glass bobbed its way through the air over to Harry, and settled in his hand. When Harry sniffed it, he wrinkled his nose.

"It's very fine whiskey," Snape insisted. "Single malt."

"Not firewhiskey?"

"That has magical properties, so for now, you'd better drink the Muggle kind." He lifted his glass. "Cheers."

Harry sipped at it, made a face, and sipped a little more. "What are we celebrating?"

"We are relaxing," Snape explained. "Relaxation is conducive to the rest of the process. So drink your whiskey, Harry."

"You say that in the same tone Mrs Weasley says, 'Drink your pumpkin juice.'"

"Well, she cares for you too, I should imagine," Snape gruffly commented.

Without looking at Harry, then, he tilted his head back and downed his entire drink.
"I do believe that's quite enough whiskey for now," Snape announced, leaning forward to pluck Harry's glass from his fingers. "We want you relaxed, not falling down drunk."

Harry giggled a little bit. "I only had one and a half. No, two."

Snape pointed his wand at the hearth and set the fire alight with a quick Incendio, then seated himself cross-legged on the floor near the flames, gesturing for Harry to join him. When Harry sat down facing him, Snape indicated with a whirling motion of his fingers that the boy should spin around and scoot back.

"Is this comfortable for your hip?"

Harry had a feeling it wasn't, really, but everything had such a pleasant haze to it, after the whiskey, that he really wasn't too aware of it. He yawned a bit. "S'all right."

"Good. Now, lean back. Rest your weight on your palms if you like. I need to touch your temples."

After Harry had done as he was told, he felt cool fingertips sifting through his hair to massage both sides of his scalp. The feel of it seemed to revive him from the lull of the whiskey. Imagining the picture the two of them must make, he couldn't help but giggle again.

"Hmm?"

"Um, I was just thinking it's a good thing you didn't try this technique last year," Harry admitted. "I'm sure I'd have tried to hex you, and things would have gone from bad to worse. Though, I don't see how they could have got any worse in the end, actually."

"You're thinking of the pensieve?"

"No," Harry admitted. He'd been thinking of Sirius. "Did you use the pensieve before you came?"

"No, Harry," Snape's voice came across, a lazy drawl as his fingers continued to massage Harry's temples. "This won't be like that battle last year, when I would snatch your memories and feared you might do the same to me. This will be... harmonious. Now, stay relaxed. Lean back more if you like; you won't knock me over."

Harry let a little more of his weight fall onto his palms.

"Good," Snape soothed. "We're going to work on clearing your mind, Harry. It doesn't mean to think of nothing, not the way you took it to mean. It means to focus on one thing until it fills your whole mind, until there is no thought left, just an image that consumes you utterly. When done well, you'll cease to be aware even of the image, so completely will it block all thought."

"Uh-huh," Harry mumbled. He was losing himself in sensation, in the steady drone of his teacher's voice, and past all that, it was hard to concentrate. He shook his head a bit, trying to clear it, and Snape's fingers tightened on his temples.

"You were doing fine before," he said. "Relax, again."

But Harry couldn't. "You're practically putting me to sleep," he complained. "And I won't be able to follow your instructions."
"Stop tensing. You're doing fine, I said." With a slight oath, Snape stretched his legs out on either side of the boy, and pulled him fast against his chest. "Feel my breathing," he urged. "Match yours to mine. This is like hypnosis, Harry, have you heard of that? You don't need to concentrate on keeping your mind clear. You need to let go of thought and let me guide you to an image."

Harry pulled in a breath when Snape did, and as he let it out, those fingers returned to smooth up and down across his temple. Snape kept speaking, his voice low and calm, and Harry found that every time he exhaled, he leaned more against his teacher, until he felt boneless. It was a feeling he hadn't liked when Lockhart had caused it, but now, it was actually pleasant.

"All right," Snape murmured. "Now don't try to think, Harry, don't try to feel, or remember, or react. Just let yourself go, let yourself just be. Yes, that's it, melt into me. I'm going to enter your mind, now, but don't be alarmed."

On one side of Harry's head, those fingers still caressed him, but on the other, they were replaced by the hard tip of Snape's wand.

Incantations filled the air, breathy whispers that Harry thought he could have understood, had he really listened. They drifted all around him, twirling themselves against his neck and face, and then it seemed he breathed them in through his nostrils, and he felt an otherness, a presence, alongside him in his mind.

It wasn't like being possessed by Voldemort, or being under Imperio. He was still there too, and in control, but the wispy otherness was there with him. Snape, he was slow to recognise. Snape, waiting patiently for Harry to let him enter further.

Harry slumped, leaning completely against his teacher, and let his teacher fill his mind.

*Rivers flowed through him, wide rivers such as never could exist outside the realm of dreams. Then, just one river, widening as he watched, until it filled the entire landscape of thought. He saw it from above, until the waters rose in incandescent glory to engulf him. Submerged, surrounded on six sides, he felt the current, felt the coolness, felt the lull of the waves.*

*And then the tableau before him underwent a change, for he was no longer in the water, feeling and seeing it; he had become the water itself, and there was nothing in all existence save that great river. No Harry any longer, and with him, no memories. Just a huge rush of water that filled the universe to overflowing, baptizing all creation in a realm of purest being.*

Coming out of it all at once was rather like being dunked *in* the river he had just been visualizing, it was such a shock. Harry gasped, and tensed against Snape, but his teacher's arm held him fast until his breathing had slowed to something approaching normal. Then Harry levered himself up, and swivelled his head to look at Snape.

"That was... well, bloody magnificent, I think."

Snape nodded, his eyes half-closed, his body mired in lines of exhaustion.

"Is *that* what Occlumency is supposed to be like? I thought I was supposed to turn off my emotions, or something."

"No wonder you did so poorly, last year," Snape wearily replied.

Harry felt like he'd just caught the snitch; it was that same sensation of triumph and excitement, the
same surge of adrenaline filling his veins. "Last year, why didn't you tell me it was about... I don't know, non-existence instead of stoicism?"

A long, painful sigh greeted the question. "Don't you understand? It's not even a learned skill for me, Harry. It's a birth power. I just needed to be pointed towards it, really, and the one who taught me was... rather harsh in his methods."

"Oh," Harry said, thinking that over. What Snape had told him before the session was coming back, and making more sense than it had then, even through the drink and the rush of sensation that was Occlumency. Snape had taught Harry the only way he'd known, the way he himself had been taught. But it hadn't worked well, had it, because for Harry this wasn't a birth power. "Hmm, I guess Occlumency is for you a bit like what Parseltongue is for me," he murmured. "Though that's not strictly a birth power, I don't think. But still, I've never had to work at it. It just is."

Snape just gave a groan in reply to all that.

Feeling a bit of a jerk that he'd only thought of himself up until then, Harry turned around more and took a good look at his teacher. "That was kind of hard on you, I guess. I'm sorry. Is it that terrible being inside my mind?"

"The questions you ask," Snape roused himself to murmur, frowning as he crossed his legs again and bent low over them. "It's as if all those years listening to your uncle speak of normal people have convinced you that you aren't one. It's no more terrible being in your mind than anyone else's, Harry. Directing thoughts can be exhausting, that is all."

"Anyone else doesn't have Voldemort lurking around in his mind."

"Not true, although no one else has quite your scar, certainly. At any rate, the Dark Lord wasn't in there tonight. I think that eliminating Kreacher from your house has helped considerably to strengthen the protections charmed onto the structure."

Something about Snape's wording caught Harry's attention. Come to think of it, he'd heard that phrase earlier, too. Your house. He wanted to ask about it, but first things first. "You... um, you don't look so good, Professor. Is there anything you need? A glass of water, maybe, or more whiskey?"

Snape pushed himself off the floor, stumbled slightly, and collapsed into a thickly upholstered, if tattered, arm chair. "Just talk," he said, the request strange in Harry's ears.

"Talk?"

"Yes, is that too complex a concept for you to follow?" When Harry recoiled slightly at his tone, Snape sighed, tipped his head back against the cushions, and explained, "I could Floo back now, though it wouldn't be wise when so debilitated, but neither should I fall asleep here. So talk with me, Harry. Keep me awake until I feel... more myself."

"Uh, okay, sure," Harry replied, flopping full length onto the couch and plumping up his cushions to hold his head up enough to see Snape. "So, how long since you have slept, Professor?"

Snape gave a low, harsh chuckle. "A while. That's not your worry."

Hmm, not exactly a fruitful avenue for conversation. Well, Snape had mentioned that the house was safer for Harry now that that evil excuse for a house-elf was dead, and Harry had been meaning to ask, so he went ahead. "Okay... what happened to Kreacher?"

At that, Snape opened one eye and stared rather fixedly at Harry as though determining how much to
divulge. A long moment passed, and then another, until finally Snape said three words Harry wasn't expecting:

"I killed him."

"You. Killed. Him," Harry slowly goggled, his mind feeling like it was playing leapfrog with itself. "Um, because of what he did to Sirius?"

"That certainly made it easier to kill him," Snape admitted, his voice absolutely flat. Harry got the feeling that the Potions Master didn't give a fig that he'd killed a house-elf. Not that Harry had any love lost for Kreacher; he probably would have killed him himself, given half a chance. He was frankly shocked that Snape had done so, though. It wasn't like Snape had gone into mourning over Sirius, now was it?

But Snape confounded him once again, by detailing, still in that level, emotionless tone, "I know what you think, Harry, but I didn't want Black dead. I did once, I won't deny it, but at the time I did honestly believe him responsible for both your parents' deaths and a massacre of Muggles. It took a while for me to rethink all that and understand it had been Pettigrew all along. After that, everything you saw pass between us... it was just the old antagonism still festering. But he was fighting the Dark Lord as he could, as was I. I shouldn't have still been jeering at him for wounds inflicted over twenty years earlier. I'm not proud of it."

"That's what he said," Harry recalled, rolling onto his side and propping his head up on an arm. "About how he and James treated you. I'm not proud of it."

Snape raised his knees to sit sideways in the chair, letting it cradle him.

"But Kreacher," Harry pressed. "Why did you kill him, if it wasn't for Sirius?"

"Many reasons," Snape sighed, curling his body a bit more. "He betrayed his master last year; he couldn't be trusted. He'd already shown an affinity for dark wizards, and for the Malfoys in particular. To give him clothes would send him straight to them, and though he couldn't betray the location of this house, he could give out information the Order needs to keep quiet. Freeing him was out of the question, but so was keeping him underfoot, once you were here. How could I know he wouldn't leave this house again, this time telling tales of Harry Potter having lost his magic?"

"Once I was here," Harry repeated. "Wait. Just when did you kill him?"

"About an hour before you woke up this morning."

Harry blew out a breath. "Couldn't you have waited for me?"

"So you could strangle him?" Snape questioned in an odd tone. "I thought you might want to, but it's not an impulse I would encourage. Besides, it takes magic to kill a house-elf; they do have rather formidable defences, not to mention the capacity to survive quite a lot of punishment."

Harry thought of Dobby beating his head against the wall, and winced.

"It takes Dark Arts," Snape added.

Harry gave a startled laugh. "You used Dark Arts in the house? Today?"

"Yesterday, to be precise."

"I thought you wanted the place free of taints," Harry admitted, confused. "You know, so that
Voldemort can't reach me through my scar."

"Sometimes only evil vanquishes evil, Harry," his teacher explained. "I'd already used Dark Arts to unstick that infernal portrait and tapestry from the walls. Kreacher wasn't pleased, though I don't think he realised that he was next. And then, once I'd dealt with him, Lupin and I cleansed the house of dark magic, which is no simple matter, I assure you. He's a better Defence teacher than I gave him credit for, I think. We finished the respelling shortly before you woke up. Hmm, it occurs to me to wonder if that was a coincidence, or part of the reason you did wake up."

"Kreacher was standing on the kitchen table guzzling wine out of Sirius' silver goblet!" Harry exclaimed, his dream snapping into vivid focus in his mind.

"And how, exactly, would you know that?" came a soft question from Snape's tensed lips.

Harry tensed, too. "Um, I dreamed it, just this afternoon."

"You dreamed it," Snape repeated, all scepticism.

"Well, how else would I know? I mean, is it true?"

"It's true, and you would know if Lupin told you."

"Well, he didn't!" Harry retorted. "If you think I'm such a liar, then ask him."

"Harry, it's just that I've seen your Divination marks. You're not exactly a seer. But if you say you dreamed it, then you did, all right?" Snape uncurled and sat up straighter. "Well, at least this goes to show that Marjygold missed something. Your magic isn't completely gone, not if you're divining things while you sleep. What else did you dream?"

"It's a good thing you killed the little shite; he was making plans to get you, in between congratulating himself for what he did to Sirius," Harry recalled out loud. "Oh, and I also dreamed that the Dursley's house spit black energy out all the windows and sort of... collapsed in on itself while Dudley screamed on the lawn. Oh yeah, and the Dark Mark was in the sky."

Snape sat bolt upright and stared at him, then surged to his feet. "You didn't think to mention this to Lupin? You didn't think to tell me straight away that in this house I thought I'd made safe for you, you had a dream from Voldemort this very day? The very first day?"

Snape took him by the shoulders, as he had that morning, but this time, he shook him roughly and bellowed, "I need to know these things, Harry!"

Harry jerked his face backwards as far as he could, reflex taking over as he arched out of Snape's grip and slid to the floor. Once free, he jumped up and backed warily away, prudence and experience taking him far out of striking range.

"Dear Merlin," Snape breathed, his expression aghast as he pushed up from the couch himself, and saw Harry's distrustful stance. Then, in tones of self-reproach, he whispered, "I wasn't going to hit you, child."

"I know," Harry whispered back, feeling about as awful as Snape looked. "I mean, I do know that, Professor. I mean, if you didn't beat me to a pulp for looking in your pensieve--"

Snape shook his head. "I should never have told you about Kreacher."

"No, it's not that!" Harry exclaimed, shocked, taking a step forward when it seemed that Snape was unable to move towards him. "I'm not afraid of you, Professor. Getting away is just instinctual, that's
"You did," Snape softly pointed out. "You said that we were quite alike."

"You both belittle people," Harry tried to explain. How had he ever said a thing like that to Snape? The truth was, both men knew how to be unpleasant as hell, but the reasons for the behaviour were night and day. "But with you, it's just some dark sarcastic humour thing going on, do you think I don't know that? Or else it's absolute and genuine. I mean, when you scream at someone who's just had a cauldron explode, you're actually angry, I think, and eager to inspire a little well-placed fear so stupid mistakes won't happen again. Though I do think you could get your point across more effectively if you left us some pride," he had to add. "But with Uncle Vernon, it's just... well, it's sadism, basically. He likes to see me cower."

Harry took a bracing breath and looked Snape in the eyes. "The fact is, when he got really, really angry, he used to shake me by the shoulders like that, and I learned I was better off getting away than staying put to be slapped."

"Muggles," Snape breathed in disgust, shaking his head.

"Don't blame it on that," Harry corrected him. "I've seen Lucius Malfoy with Dobby. Er, he's a house-elf. Anyway, Malfoy was much worse to him than Uncle Vernon's ever been to me. Wizards can be just as bad as Muggles. Worse, if you take into account the kinds of curses we can throw."

"True," Snape admitted, sighing deeply. "It occurs to me to wonder why you haven't asked someone to check on your family, after a dream like that."

Harry widened his eyes. "Same reason I didn't mention it to you sooner. I knew the dream wasn't from Voldemort; my scar didn't even twinge."

"If it does, tell me, or Lupin, at once."

"I thought I was just mad at them," Harry admitted, wincing. "It never even dawned on me to think... But if the thing about Kreacher was true? Do you think...?"

"No," Snape announced, his tones short. "If an attack upon your house had been carried out, or even contemplated, I would know."

"Can we have a firechat with Mrs. Figg, just to be sure?"

"Not at this hour in the morning."

"But--"

"Trust me, Harry. Nothing has happened on Privet Drive. If you still feel unsettled about it later, have Lupin talk to Mrs. Figg through the Floo Network. In no case are you to speak to her yourself."

"Yes, sir," Harry murmured, recognizing the value in that advice. It was probably also why Snape didn't want to deal with the situation; the fewer people who knew he was involved with Harry, the better. "Will you at least tell me what you did to Uncle Vernon in the cemetery? I mean, is he all right? I've been meaning to ask," Harry added, feeling more than a little guilty that he hadn't done so sooner.

"I frankly fail to see why you would care," Snape drawled.
Harry actually had to think about that one; it came to him that he'd asked more out of a sense of right than any heart-wrenching interest in the matter. "Hmm. Well, you're right. Part of me doesn't care, but then there is Dudley to think of. Not that there's much love lost between us, but he really was decent during that last visit. He even warned me not to go to the funeral. And he's just lost his mum, see? He hardly needs to lose his dad, too, even if Uncle Vernon is a right git."

Snape pondered that for a moment, before volunteering, "I used Troneo-Relampagare to knock him unconscious, that's all. A thunder-lightning blast. I imagine he was up and on his feet within five minutes of my Apparating you to here. No doubt he was still screaming abuse."

"Yeah, no doubt," Harry murmured. He'd never had a decent dad. He used to wish for one, before he'd met Sirius. After fate had snatched away all chance of living with his godfather, though, he'd more or less come to accept that there were some things he'd never have.

"I think I'm able to floo, now," the Potions Master continued. Funny how he could keep his face in shadows when it suited him, Harry thought. The lighting didn't seem to matter. He wasn't sure how Snape managed it.

Harry nodded his understanding. "All right. Thank you, Professor."

Snape halted on his way toward the hearth. "I told you not to thank me."

"Yeah, but I have to," Harry started to explain.

"Tell Miss Granger you have a thanking-people thing too, will you?" Snape snapped. Clearly, the man was at the end of some sort of tether. "I will not stand for this idiocy, Potter, is that clear? You will get Occlumency lessons, and whatever else is deemed necessary, because you need them to survive what is apparently to be your lot in life. I would prefer you not die and plunge the Wizarding world into an era of endless dark. No thanks are necessary."

With that, the Potions Master snatched a handful of grey powder from the mantle.

Harry thought about just shutting up, but the truth was, he didn't want to. "I wasn't thanking you for the bloody Occlumency," he called across the room, with some difficulty refraining from adding on a phrase like you great git.

Surprisingly enough, Snape went for the bait. "Oh, do enlighten me," he sneered.

"You treat me like I'm normal, not like I need to be pitied, or worshipped, or hated and feared," Harry announced, standing his ground against a glare from a pair of very, very black eyes. "And you may not believe it, but you're the only adult who does. Ye gads, even Remus today oozed with compassion until it made me ill. But you? You're not afraid to use your magic in front of me just because right now I have none. You don't think I'll break down over it. You don't think I'm weak."

Floo powder fell through Snape's fingers as he flexed them. "I don't," he confirmed. "But Harry, sooner or later, everyone breaks down over something."

Well, that gave Harry some food for thought, but he didn't have time to ponder it then, because Snape wasn't through talking. Just before he flung the Floo powder down and yelled out a destination in the Hogwarts dungeons, he added one more thing.

"And Harry? You are welcome."

With that, he was gone in a shimmering flash of green fire.
"Snape doesn't think I've lost all my magic," Harry announced over scrambled eggs on toast the next morning.

Remus paused as he lifted his teacup to his mouth. "The Occlumency went that well?"

"It was ok, yeah," Harry acknowledged. "Turns out Snape does know how to teach, when he really wants to."

He waited for the expected Professor Snape, Harry, which came right on cue, but managed not to snort in derision. Remus didn't deserve that, though Harry was coming to realise that he much preferred Snape's entire attitude towards him. Snape didn't feel sorry for him, and he certainly didn't try to make him say Professor Dumbledore. He'd even given up on making Harry call Voldemort that asinine title, the Dark Lord.

"Anyway," Harry continued, finishing up his breakfast, "the magic thing is more due to a dream I had night before last. There was a part about Kreacher, how he was standing here on this table toasting Sirius' death, and also a part about Dudley's house sort of... crushing in on itself while the Dark Mark floated overhead. Snape said the Kreacher part was true, but not the other, but he said I could ask you to firechat with Mrs. Figg this morning, just to be sure?"

"I'd be happy to," Remus responded, pushing back from the table. "Straight away?"

"Please."

Harry hid in the corridor just off the parlour while Remus confirmed that Number Four Privet Drive was still standing and had experienced no strange phenomena. At one point he thought to hiss, "Wait, wait! Tell her to get me a mobile, okay?" But Remus couldn't hear him; technically, his ears were all the way in Surrey.

Harry sighed the minute Remus pulled out. "I meant to tell you to have her get me a mobile. You know, so I can call home and check whenever I want, so we won't have to bother her in case I get another dream like that."

"Are you expecting more dreams like that?" Remus asked, rubbing the side of his head.

"No... I don't know. Maybe. Er, if it's a bother to ask Mrs. Figg, maybe you could go out for a bit and get one? I have some Muggle money Snape lent me. I think I could still find it--"

"Absolutely not," Remus flatly refused. "I'm not leaving you alone in this house."

"Why not? It's cleansed of dark magic, now. Snape said you were actually a fair hand at Defence, did you know that?"

Professor Snape, Harry...

Remus, as it turned out, wasn't so easy to manoeuvre, if that's what Harry had in fact been doing with that bit of flattery. He wasn't actually sure, himself. Then again, the whole phone thing had been worked out ahead of time; Harry just didn't know as much. "Here," Remus said, opening a drawer in the parlour. He handed over a phone Harry had seen before, the slim silver one he'd used while at St. Mungo's. "Severus said you might want it."
For just a moment, Harry wondered where Snape had got the phone. And too, he wasn't quite sure how things worked with mobile phones, but wasn't somebody getting a bill for the calls, the way the Dursleys would get bills for their house phone? Hmm. He wondered if he should mention that to Snape, offer to pay with some of his Gringotts' gold, something like that? On the other hand, Harry didn't know how many calls he could make before the phone's batteries would go dead, so maybe the whole thing was a moot point.

One ring, two... Harry waited until ten had passed. Obviously, Uncle Vernon and Dudley weren't there. Not that Harry knew what to say, in any case. He felt sort of tongue-tied, probably because he couldn't recall a time he'd called home, except for that once to find out about the funeral. And that hadn't gone so well, had it?

It wasn't lost on Harry that Remus had sat down in Snape's armchair from last night, and was just watching him make his call. Harry had an ugly, squicky sort of feeling that even if he'd connected, Remus would have remained there, listening to every word.

It was hard for Harry to believe; mind boggling, in fact, but the truth was staring him in the face. Literally.

Severus Snape had more decorum, and respect for Harry, than Remus Lupin.

At least Snape had asked permission to read that letter the night before. Of course Harry had his suspicions about what might have happened had he refused, but still, Snape had done him the courtesy of asking. Even if he hadn't meant it as much as he should have, it still counted for something.

Whereas Remus was still sitting there, apparently unaware that a young man of sixteen violently estranged from his only family just might want a bit of privacy for his phone call home!

Harry turned the phone off and thrust it in his pocket, deciding that he'd try again later, and that he'd do it away from prying eyes... and ears. Of course, being as Remus was a werewolf, and Harry had long suspected he had unusually good hearing, that might take some doing. Still, Grimmauld Place was a big house. He'd find a quiet spot in which to talk. Somewhere.

That reminded him.

"Snape keeps saying this is my house," Harry volunteered as he jumped to his feet. "Is that just a turn of phrase, seeing as I'm staying here for who knows how long?"

Remus looked surprised. "No, it is your house, Harry. Sirius left you everything he had, right down to the socks in his drawers. You didn't know?"

"There were no socks in his drawers," Harry remembered bleakly.

"True. While Severus was dealing with the portrait and the tapestry --Merlin, you have no idea what he had to go through to unstick those monstrosities-- I cleared out Sirius' bedroom for you."

"What on earth for?"

"Well, they were reminders--"

"Yeah, reminders I might have liked, you great lout!" Harry exclaimed. He suddenly had a strong urge to hit someone, most likely Remus; his wand hand actually began itching as though it wanted to throw a violent curse. Thinking that might prove useful, he ran upstairs for his wand, nursing his fury all the way, and then took the stairs three at a time on the way back down, his right arm extended as
with a rapid spiral movement he hurled "Rompere!" at Remus.

Or rather, at Remus' reflection in a mirror; Harry wasn't really going to hex Remus, even if he was mad enough to do it.

In the end, though, it didn't matter. The mirror didn't so much as waver under the curse, let alone crack clean through.

Frustrated, Harry yanked off one of his trainers and threw that at the mirror, which still didn't break. "Oh, yeah?" he shouted, thinking that he'd had about enough of this. The next item to go sailing through the air was a small bronze statuette.

Remus flinched when the mirror shattered into a thousand pieces. "Harry..."

Turning toward the voice, Harry gave a sheepish smile. "Um, I'm not as out of control as it probably seems. The shoe was pure anger, I'll admit. But then I wondered if the damned mirror had been spelled unbreakable, if that was why my hex failed." He shrugged. "There goes that theory. By the way, though, don't toss out anything else that belonged to Sirius. It really wasn't your place."

"Nothing's been taken from the house except the two things Severus removed," Remus soothed. To Harry, even the tone implied an insult. "Everything else was boxed and put down in the cellar."

"His cellar," Harry thought, the phrase itself rather unnerving. He really owned the house, the whole house? "Why didn't anybody tell me all this was mine? Snape seemed to think I knew already."

"Professor Snape, Harry. As to the other, I don't know. Albus should have let you know, as he was appointed executor. Maybe it has to do with the way Sirius died, the circumstances somewhat nebulous."

"It doesn't keep," Remus said, a slight smile curving his lips. "Though you're right; it is quite expensive. As long as Severus and I work together in the Order, I think he will continue to supply me. But I do thank you, Harry."
"It's nothing," Harry answered, and meant it.

Remus kept Harry busy until nightfall not only with more failed Patronus charms, but with a whole host of ego-shattering experiences. Not that Remus had intended as much, Harry knew. That, and that alone was about all that had kept him from actually yelling at his former Defence teacher.

In a way, it was ridiculous. Just how many times did Remus have to see him stumble, before he concluded that this spell or that just wasn't going to work? Not that Harry thought his magic was gone for good; he'd believed Snape's comments about his dream. He just thought, by then, that Remus' methods weren't going to yield anything of use.

He'd dreamed again, that afternoon, though until he checked with someone, he wouldn't be able to say if these latest dreams were in any sense prophetic. Again, the dream had seemed to have two distinct parts separated by a sensation of mad whirling. This time, though, nothing in the dream had seemed particularly alarming. He'd seen Snape and Remus in Dumbledore's office, exchanging mild pleasantries for a few moments; Remus had looked absolutely awful. Ashen-faced, weak, trembling, his eyes a bleary red, but he'd sat there, polite as you please, and answered, Why yes, Severus, Lucinda is quite well. And Snape had smiled and nodded, rising from his chair, a murmured If I may? crossing his lips before a small stroke of his wand had severed a few strands of Remus' hair.

Then the dream had spun round in faster and faster circles, Dumbledore's office vanishing into a rush of swirling colour, and Harry saw a forest scene, an empty glade, tree branches shifting as a slight breeze picked up. The woods were peaceful and dark, late at night. Abandoned. But something was coming, someone was coming...

Harry woke up before anyone or anything arrived.

Remus had offered to help him in the cellar, but Harry made it pretty clear that he wanted to be alone. He had more than one reason for that. This time, after he flipped open the mobile and dialled, Uncle Vernon picked up. Harry opened his mouth to speak, but in the end, he didn't say a word. He'd wanted to talk to Dudley, but when it came right down to it, he found he didn't have the nerve to so much as ask for him.

You've faced down the Dark Lord with far less anxiety than you display before your relatives, Harry remembered Snape saying.

Disgusted with himself, Harry vowed that next time Vernon Dursley answered, he'd face him down, too.

The phone call out of the way for the moment, Harry quickly found the boxes piled high with Sirius' things. Clothes filled most of one largish box. Several smaller ones held personal items, among them titleless leather-bound books spelled to stay shut. Curious, Harry laid those aside and kept diving through the boxes.

He found an old wand, probably one Sirius had outgrown, and tried a few failed spells with it.

Last, at the very bottom of a box, he found a small mirror, the companion to his own. Harry clutched it, moaning, experiencing again the awful feelings he'd suffered when he'd found his mirror after Sirius' death. It wasn't just grief that he'd never be able to talk to his godfather in the mirror, it was a horrible, gut-wrenching sense of guilt. Damn it, he'd had a way to contact Sirius, a way Kreacher's
machinations wouldn't have been able to confound. He'd had a way all along, and he hadn't known. If only he had opened the package Sirius had given him! If he had, Sirius would be alive today. Harry would have known not to go on that wild-goose chase to the Department of Mysteries, if only he'd known at the time about the mirror.

Stupid, stupid! Irredeemably, unforgivably stupid!

Harry sat down hard on the ground, bent low over the mirror, and sobbed.

Harry didn't know how much time had passed, but eventually, his tears trickled to a halt. He sat cross-legged, staring at the walls, which were lit only by a dim glow spelled to go on whenever anyone was present in the cellar. The mirror still lay cradled on his lap, unresponsive and dead. Like Sirius.

Pain gripped his heart anew, but he had no more tears to shed. Somewhere deep inside of him, he felt cold. Freezing, to the very core, the bite of frost so fierce it felt like it was cleaving him.

A slight noise caught at the edge of his consciousness. Mired in grief, Harry didn't register it until it repeated itself at irregular intervals. Then he looked up, and saw a tiny snake slithering forward by slight degrees. Pure maroon, yet with a golden iridescence shimmering as it moved, the snake drew closer, and raised its head, flickering its tongue at him.

Harry blinked, remembering the python at the zoo. This snake, though no longer than his own arm, regarded him with the same curious, somewhat somber expression. It certainly didn't call to mind the more frightening snakes he'd encountered, such as Nagini and the Basilisk.

"Well, hallo there, little fellow," he said by way of greeting, wiping slightly at his eyes.

He didn't know he'd spoken in Parseltongue, which sounded just like English to his own ears, until the snake replied in a hiss which Harry understood completely. How could he not? It sounded like English to him.

"You have been here a long time, man-boy."

Harry sat up a little straighter, and set the mirror aside. "Yes. And you? Do you live down here?"

"There are mice here," the snake replied, slithering forward again, stopping just shy of Harry's knee. Harry patted his leg, inviting the snake to climb, but it continued to just regard him thoughtfully. "My name is Harry, not man-boy," he offered. "Do you have a name?"

The snake shook its head back and forth in confusion.

"Cold. But there are mice here. I eat, then I climb."

Harry glanced toward the cellar stairs, and understood. "Have you eaten enough for now? I will climb, now, and take you up to warmth, if you like."

At that, the snake nodded, winding itself around the wrist Harry held out.
Upstairs, Harry lit a fire in the parlour, and throwing some cushions down in front of it, relaxed on the floor. The snake slithered down his arm to the floor, and settled itself in coils on the rug, its head propped up on itself.

"Why do your eyesss drop rain?" it asked, and Harry supposed that as snakes couldn't cry, Parseltongue probably didn't have a word for tears.

"I was upssset," Harry answered in tones that would sound like hissing noises to anyone save himself.

The snake nodded slightly. "Are you ssstill?"

"Yeah, think ssso."

They sat in silence for a few moments, the quiet punctuated only the crackling of fire in the grate. "So warm," the snake finally said. "But it is not the sssame for you, man-boy? You feel warm, but you are still up-sset?"

"Call me Harry," Harry explained again. "But yeah, being warm doesn't really change anything for me."

The snake crawled onto his lap and settled on his thigh. "Becaussse Harry is warm at all timesss."

"Yeah, maybe ssso."

His thigh itched a bit as the snake wriggled a bit. "Then what up-ssets Harry?"

Harry couldn't help but smile a bit. Was he really going to sit here and pour out his troubles to a snake? Well, why not? Better that than let Remus find him brooding. Remus, who would conclude something daft about depression blocking all access to his magic.

Well, it wasn't all blocked, was it? He had more than dreams to base that on, now, he had the Parseltongue itself.

Feeling more like a wizard than he had in a while, Harry finally answered the snake's question. He explained about the Dursleys, about things he'd almost forgotten, they were so long ago. He spoke of his parents, of Sirius trapped in Azkaban when it was Pettigrew all along who had belonged there. Of saving Sirius, and letting Pettigrew go, only to have his kindness repaid in the foulest way after the Tri-Wizard Tournament. He talked of being the Boy Who Lived, and how he'd never wanted the acclaim and expectations that went along with it. He didn't even want to be The Boy. Just... a boy. A man-boy now, as the snake had said.

"Who's Lucinda?" Harry asked after dinner, absently wondering what Remus would say if he poured himself some whiskey; Snape had left the bottle behind.

Remus gave him a hard look. "Where did you hear that name?"

"Today in a dream," Harry tossed out. "I told you, Snape said parts of my dreams were divining things."

"Professor Snape, Harry."

"Yeah, whatever. So anyway, I saw you both in the headmaster's office, and I guess he had asked
about this Lucinda, because you were answering that she was well. Who is she?"

Remus hesitated. "A friend."

Well, Harry thought, never let it be said that he couldn't take a hint. "Okay," he answered easily. "Here, have you met Sals?"

He watched Remus' brows arch in surprise as he began speaking to the snake that had been resting comfortably inside the sleeve of his jumper. No doubt Remus was hearing the slurred, hissing noise that was Parseltongue, at least as Hermione had described it.

And then Sals poked his head out Harry's cuff, tongue flickering. Harry brought his other hand around to catch her, and drew her out. "Beautiful, don't you think?"

That one must have been in English, for Remus answered, "Yes..." in a hesitant, wavering voice.

"What, you aren't afraid of snakes, are you?" Harry thought to ask.

"No, I just didn't expect one to come crawling out your sleeve. Was it in there all during dinner?"

"Yeah. Asleep, I think. Sals does a lot of that."

"Sals," Remus repeated dubiously.

Harry smiled. "Well, it was going to be Sally, but then I realised I didn't know if Sals here was a girl snake. And I guess I could have asked, but it... felt wrong. Hard to explain. I mean, I think I could have got the question across in Parseltongue, but it would have been awkward. So I just decided that Sals would be better. You know, it kind of covers either possibility."

"Why didn't you ask the snake its own name?"

"I tried," Harry acknowledged. "I don't know, maybe they don't have names unless a wizard dubs them. Sals didn't seem to understand at first, but now I think it's clear."

"This is Remus, Sals."

The snake hissed something at Remus. Harry frowned, and shook his head.

"What?" Remus prompted.

"Nothing." Harry swallowed another gulp of tea, wishing more than before that he'd had the nerve to help himself to the whiskey. That wasn't a good idea, though. It might disrupt the strange rapport he'd managed to build with Snape.

"Why did you frown?" Remus pressed. "Did Sals threaten to bite me or something? Should I keep my distance from your little friend?"

Harry glanced up in surprise. "Oh no, Sals isn't dangerous. It's nothing like that." He uttered a few hissed syllables at the snake. "Sals asked if you were my father, that's all. Actually, it was more like asking if I used to be your egg. Parseltongue can be a bit odd in certain respects."

"And you frowned because...?"

"Geez, do you ever lay off? Why do you think I frowned?" Harry retorted, raising his voice. He'd managed to withstand Sals' question fairly well, because of course the snake hadn't known better than to ask, but Remus damned well should. The more he thought about it, the angrier he became, and things he'd never meant to say out loud came spilling past his lips. "Because I might have liked..."
to have had a father for ten bloody minutes I can remember? Oh wait, scratch that. Maybe it's because I'd have liked to have had a father I could actually respect! Oh yeah, that must be it! James Potter, Gryffindor. *You're so much like your father, Harry,* everyone says. My Patronus, just like his. And then I find out last year what he was really like, a vain, selfish, cruel little arsehole, and my bloody brilliant godfather excuses it all with some incredibly lame-brained excuse about how they were idiots as if that makes everything all right!"

"Harry--"

"You should just stop trying to pick apart my emotions!" Harry yelled. "Shite, I never thought I'd rather spend time with Snape than you!"

"Professor Snape, Harry," Remus corrected, and Harry saw red.

"I don't need you to tell me how to speak!" he exploded. "Say that to me again, and I'll start to call him Severus, I swear!"

A slight noise caught his attention, the sound of a throat clearing.

Harry turned, light-headed, almost afraid to look. He knew already who was there. Who else would it be? The whole Order knew to leave Grimmauld Place alone for the time being. Everyone except Harry, Remus, and... Snape.

"How long have you been there?" Harry gasped.

"Long enough," Snape replied. "Apologize to Professor Lupin."

"He's the one who should apologize to me!" Harry erupted, snatching up Sals from the table. All the shouting was making the little snake scared; he could tell.

"Severus," Remus quietly said. "It's all right. Harry's under a great deal of stress."

"When is he not?" Snape challenged. "Mr Potter has most specifically told me that he would prefer to be treated as a normal young man of his age, his special circumstances aside. In that spirit," he turned toward Harry and leaned over slightly to demand, "apologize to Professor Lupin. Now."

Alternating waves of hot and cold coursed through Harry from his scalp on down. He knew Sals could feel them; the snake was getting more frightened all the time. He also knew that Snape was likely right. He couldn't claim he liked being treated like anyone else would be, and then rail against it when the going got tough. And... oh, hell. Remus had just been trying to help, no matter that he was going about it in entirely the wrong way. Harry had overreacted and he knew it.

"I apologize, Professor Lupin," Harry stiffly announced, and then in softer tones. "Really, Remus. I'm sorry."

Sals wrapped around his upper arm, Harry did his level best to maintain a sense of dignity as he left the dining room to the adults.
Snape found him in the parlour some time later. Since Harry didn't know what Snape and Remus could have been discussing for so long, it occurred to him to wonder if the Potions Master had just been giving him time to cool off. Irritated that might be the case, Harry ignored his teacher's entrance and just kept up his conversation with Sals.

Snape listened for a while, leaning on the mantle, before commenting, "Beautiful snake."

Deciding that ignoring the clear overture would be too juvenile, Harry forced himself to meet Snape's eyes. "Yeah. I found Sals down in the cellar."

"Interesting name."

Harry unwrapped Sals from his bent knee and set the snake on the floor, shooing it away with a slight hissing noise, then glanced up again. "Well, I thought first of Gryff, actually. You know, for the colours. Burgundy and gold. But in the end I settled for Sals."

"Short for Salazar?"

Caught off guard, Harry choked back a laugh. "Oh, as in Slytherin? No, that didn't cross my mind."

Snape went to sit down, then, and Harry started feeling nervous. Hating that, he prompted, "So, more Occlumency tonight?"

"In a bit. I need to relax, first." He didn't say that Harry did too, though it was fairly obvious.

"Whiskey?"

Snape gave him a long look. "I think not. We'll talk. Have you thought about what your new pet portends?"

"Yeah. You do mean the Parseltongue, right?"

"A wizard gift," Snape nodded, looking out at him through half-closed eyes. "Most assuredly, your magic is not gone."

"Hmm, I thought so too, at first. But you know Dumbledore doesn't think my being a Parselmouth has much to do with my powers. He thinks the talent got transferred to me along with this." Harry tapped an index finger against his scar.

"I disagree," Snape informed him, stretching out his legs and propping them on a low table. Harry stared, then reminded himself that the man wanted to relax, after all. Leaning back into the couch, Harry stopped holding himself quite so tensely.

"Albus is a brilliant and powerful wizard," Snape was continuing. "Still, the headmaster's knowledge of the Darkest Arts is far from comprehensive. The talent to be a Parselmouth could not have found fulfilment in you, had you yourself not possessed the requisite power to utilize the gift."

"So Parseltongue is Darkest Arts, is that what you mean?" Harry gasped.

"Certainly, but do not be alarmed. Darkest Arts is hardly an ethical classification. It's a convenient term to describe magic of a kind that can be put to the foulest use imaginable. That same magic can be used for neutral or higher purposes. I thought you understood that. Were my spells to unstick that
"Parseltongue is thought to be evil primarily because it has been put to terrible use," Snape explained.

"Yeah, Voldemort told Nagini she could eat me after he was through with me," Harry recalled, shivering.

Snape chuckled, a response Harry found baffling until the Potions Master clarified, "You know, Harry, it gets a bit difficult to treat you as a normal sixteen-year-old when you come out with claims like that." He cleared his throat. "I am trying, however."

Harry appreciated that, but he managed not to say thanks.

"At any rate, I would expect you to be fully at ease with your facility in snake language, by now," Snape went on. "Since second year you've known, haven't you? It shouldn't still be troubling you."

"Ha, and wasn't that fun, having everyone think I was the Heir of Slytherin out to cleanse the school of Muggleborns."

"An unlikely scenario," Snape concurred, smiling slightly as he folded his hands across his waist.

"Except for a python at the zoo when I was ten," Harry volunteered, "I've heard Parseltongue only from Voldemort's pet snake, the Basilisk, and that serpent Malfoy conjured in a duel. Not exactly a catalogue of heart-warming experiences."

"Well, then chat with Sals more," Snape suggested. "You might as well get used to your talents, Harry. They are part of you, whatever the headmaster may have said."

"Let's just get on with the lesson, Professor," Harry sighed, tired of talking about it.

"In a moment. Do you actually know what your father did for a living, Harry?"

Harry snorted, thinking that Snape had heard a good deal more than he'd let on. "Did he do anything?" he retorted. "I mean, considering the Potters have more wizard gold than the rest of the world thinks decent?"

"That sounds like Lupin talking. I won't deny that James was rich, or that I didn't appreciate the way he treated me during our school years. The fact that you looked so much like him at first glance certainly influenced me... for years, Harry. But the picture you've built up since looking in that pensieve? It's not a good one."

"You don't have to tell me that!" Harry hotly disclaimed. More uncomfortable by the second, he scooted to the floor where they'd worked the night before, and prompted, "Occlumency?"

Snape stood, and reaching down, pulled him up to stand, then leaned down slightly to speak face to face. "I do have to tell you this," he vowed. "The pensieve is not objective, Harry. What you saw was a reconstruction of my perceptions of that day. No doubt they have their truth, but they also have their flaws. And what you saw was but one day out of your father's entire life."

"Sirius told me they were always picking on you!" Harry objected.

"True, but that day was exceptionally grim," Snape informed him. "James does not come out of it
well, but you have apparently decided that he was entirely without worth. That..." The Potions
Master cleared his throat. "That is not so."

Harry huffed. "Next you'll be saying that when all was said and done, you ended up liking him!"

"I did not like him," Snape denied. "I never liked him. By the time we were grown, there was too
much... water under the bridge, if you will." A moment of indecision, and Snape was settling his
hands atop the boy's shoulders. "But Harry, he wasn't fifteen forever. He became a fine man, and
though we could never have been friends, in the end I did respect him. He and Lily thrice defied the
Dark Lord, you know that. James was in the Order, a dedicated wizard doing all he could to protect
probable victims and bring Death Eaters to justice. He did the work of an Auror, though he refused
all pay. That was not just due to his family wealth; the Ministry then was not much more competent
than it is now. James preferred to remain unaffiliated with official policy, which was unfortunately all
too apt to bend to political whims."

Not knowing what to say to all that, really, Harry admitted, "Nobody's ever told me that much about
him at once, Professor."

"When people say you are like him, they are thinking of the man he became, you know," Snape
answered, "not the one you saw in my pensieve."

Harry drew in a deep breath, then released it. It shouldn't matter to him that Snape had practically
admitted that in the end, he'd forgiven James. It shouldn't matter... but somehow, it did. He felt better.
Not about everything, but at least about some things.

Still, he shrugged off his teacher's hands to say, "Can we get to the Occlumency, now?"

"You're still nervous," Snape observed.

"Well, I can't not be, can I?" asked Harry. "I mean, it was great and all, but having you fill my head
with... stuff, was still pretty weird. Honestly, I do think some whiskey would help."

Snape stepped back a measured pace. "You must be able to achieve a cleared mind without such
aids. And without me, Harry. Tonight we will go about things a little bit differently. We'll try it
without physical contact."

"And then, without you even entering my mind, I bet," Harry guessed. "And then what? Is that it? I
think it'd help me to know the whole plan, if you don't mind. I mean, if it won't be counterproductive
or something."

"It shouldn't be," Snape commented. "Your being able to repress all thought, and to do it without
external aid, is the first critical step, but it is by no means the last. You must be able to maintain your
calm even in the face of attack. Beyond even that, however, is the fact that the Dark Lord is a far
more skilled Legilimens than I. What you truly need is the ability to convince him not to attack you
with all his strength."

He motioned for Harry to sit, then sank to the floor facing him, his robes billowing out as he knelt.

"How am I going to convince Voldemort of anything?" Harry questioned, hands lightly gripping his
own knees at the sound of the question itself. "I can't see him backing off on my say-so."

Snape raised an eyebrow in unmistakable challenge, and drawled, "Oh, come now, Mr Potter, surely
you see the way?" When Harry just shook his head, Snape's voice grew slightly more biting. "Only
part of you is a pure and honest Gryffindor, you know."
"Cunning... Slytherin cunning... "Oh, you're talking about... misdirection, aren't you?"

"Why are you afraid to call it what it is?"

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it, not knowing what to say.

"Lying is no more evil than are the very Darkest Arts, Harry," Snape remarked in an entirely conversational tone. "It all depends upon the purpose to which the misdirection is put."

"Right," Harry answered, feeling more confident. "Voldemort is stronger than me, so I have to be smarter than him--"

"The Dark Lord is not stronger than you. He marked you his equal."

Harry stared at his teacher, feeling like all the blood in his body was rushing away from his brain to make him remarkably stupid. Snape couldn't have meant what he'd just said. He couldn't. It was ridiculous. He wasn't even Snape's equal, let alone Voldemort's!

"Look, I told you," Harry began. "Everyone thinks I've bested him, but it isn't true. I had help, every time, I told you that!"

Snape waved a hand as though none of that was of any import. "Nevertheless, the Dark Lord has no more power than you do; the prophecy speaks to that. What he does have is a far better grasp of how to channel his magic. You have virtually no such grasp."

"I have virtually no magic, Professor," Harry argued, his thoughts roiling. "I should have listened to you and Hermione, and stayed well clear of Muggle doctors! It's my own stupid fault I've lost my powers, I should have left Aunt Petunia to her fate, as you said. It's not like I ended up helping her any, is it? And now if the whole Wizarding world falls, that will be my fault, too! I'll be responsible for every last thing that dark bastard does--"

"Much as it gratifies me to be classed with Miss Granger in anything," Snape smoothly interrupted, "you should not forget that your motive was to safeguard your wards. You were trying to protect yourself until such time as you were ready to face the Dark Lord. I know this, as does Albus."

"Yeah, well fat lot of good my pure Gryffindor motives do us now," Harry bit out, chewing the inside of his cheek, he was so agitated. "I should have let the damned hat put me in Slytherin."

"Well, at least you named your new friend Sals."

The remark relieved some of the tension gripping the room, as did Snape's quirked smile. "As for what is past, Harry, you must let it be past. Even the most unfortunate decisions can turn out well, when one takes a longer view of matters."

Obscure words, but Harry somehow knew that Snape was talking of the Dark Mark branded into his arm. His gaze drifted to it, though it was covered with voluminous robes, and most likely, more than one sleeve.

"Yes," Snape merely murmured, the single syllable spoken low and slow. "You understand me."

Harry nodded.

"Good, then let us begin," Snape decided. He moved marginally closer to Harry, but avoided any contact, and held his hands up before his face, fingers spread.
"Match your hands to mine, but do not touch me," he intoned, his voice dark, but also calm. Harry felt like he was falling into it. When he did as requested, he could feel a frisson of energy pulsating through the air between their hands. It was like the time he'd played with Dudley's magnets and felt how when turned backwards, the energy between them became a tangible propulsive force.

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It took longer, that time, for Harry to fall into the mental water and merge with it, but once he got there, it seemed he could sustain the state for longer, too.

When Snape finally drew back, his hands dropping exhausted to the rug, he confessed, "You were by yourself, in the end, Harry. I had left your mind some time earlier. Did you sense that?"

"No," Harry murmured, slumping. Occlumency was a lot more tiring when he didn't have Snape to prop him up, mentally or physically, he supposed.

"That means your Occlusion was quite complete. Very well done, Mr Potter."

Harry had to resist an urge to preen. When had he ever got a compliment from Snape? It meant more than it should, he thought, but he was actually too tired to try to figure all that out.

"Tomorrow," Snape directed, "spend some time thinking of an alternate image you can lose yourself in. Water is mine, you understand. I would like to believe that my own Occlumency is skilled enough that the Dark Lord never sees the image I use to withstand him, but I should not care to risk my life if he should ever sense my hand in your powers."

"Oh..." Harry hadn't thought of that. Using Occlumency against Voldemort could actually endanger Snape? If Harry did it wrong, that was? "Yes, all right, Professor. I'll do as you say."

"Remarkable words." Snape stifled a yawn behind a hand. "Ones I never thought to hear you say, let alone mean."

"I do mean them!"

"Yes, I know, Harry," Snape admitted in a sardonic drawl, before leveling his voice. "I did not mean to imply otherwise. By the way, I have asked Lupin to not bother himself with whatever you wish to call me."

Harry stared. "Er... why?"

"I told him that our Occlumency lessons require a certain level of mental closeness, and his insistence on upholding my authority as a teacher could only endanger the progress we have made."

Something about Snape's phrasing caught Harry's attention. "You told him, you said. Wasn't it true?"

"Thinking like a Slytherin," Snape approved.

"Is it true?"

"I don't know," Snape admitted, awkwardly coming out of his kneel and pushing to his feet. Ouch. Harry was sure he'd heard some bones creaking, in there. "It may be; we will see. At any rate, it is time I went."

"Are you able to floo, so soon?" Harry asked, concerned. "Maybe you should stay a while. We could talk again, keep you awake."
"Do you need to talk about anything?" Snape softly asked, sounding as though he genuinely wanted to know.

Harry thought about his dream, then shook his head. It hadn't been much, after all. Just a scene of Snape finalizing the Polyjuice Potion, and then an empty clearing in the forest. Nothing dire, not like the previous dream.

"I will return now, then," Snape announced, stepping into the cavernous fireplace that graced one whole wall of the parlour. "Remember to practice, Harry. Clear your mind several times tomorrow, and do try to lose yourself in an image other than water."

Before Harry could answer, Snape was gone.

"Yes, I will," he answered anyway. "And thank you, Professor. For everything,"
Dreamscape

Over the next few days, Sals became Harry's near-constant companion. He took the little snake everywhere, sometimes tucked away in a shirt pocket, sometimes wrapped around his wrist, sometimes dangling around his neck like exotic jewellery. It got so that Parseltongue came quite readily to his lips. At times, he was still speaking it when he turned aside from Sals to address one of his teachers, though of course he didn't realise as much.

The funny look Remus or Snape always gave him tended to set him right, however.

Harry spent several hours each day practicing spells and charms and incantations, not a single one of which ever worked. Thank goodness, he would tell himself, that he was making more progress at night, when he concentrated on mastering Occlumency. Those long sessions with Snape continued to yield results which frankly astonished Harry, but of course he was finally doing what he should have done last year: taking the training seriously. He completely cleared his mind several times each day, and on Snape's suggestion, began doing so during everyday activities. *See if you can carry on eating breakfast in that state,* Snape had suggested. *Try it while you're washing your hair. Don't get soap in your eyes.*

That last had been thrown out a bit like a jest, but it wasn't, not really. Harry knew what the professor had meant: he needed to be able to Occlude his mind at any time, and do it without others realizing it was happening. If he had to enter a trance state for the Occlumency to be effective, its use would be limited. Harry understood that limits were dangerous. Voldemort certainly wouldn't respect them.

Of course he no longer immersed himself in water for his image. Horrified that his use of Occlumency might someday put Snape in danger, Harry wasted no time in searching for an image of his own. At first he tried placing himself at Hogwarts, but there was too much detail to keep track of. He'd find his mental self traversing corridors, looking into hallways, *thinking.* He needed something more elemental, he sensed, and after a few more false starts, found himself able to fall quite readily into the sensation of fire. He could become the flames, yet never burn.

"Fire," Snape had mused when he'd been in Harry's mind as it blazed. "It's a dark force, associated with death, with retribution. Symbolic of destruction, Harry. Even annihilation."

"It also represents purification," Harry had argued, not liking Snape's take on the matter.

"Purification?" Snape had assessed him for a long, silent moment, his dark eyes raking Harry up and down. "Very Gryffindor of you to think so. Let us continue."

And so Harry had meditated on fire, maintaining the image for longer and longer each time he tried, Snape moving out of his mind by slow degrees as Harry's grasp of Occlumency strengthened. Once he could manage to block all thought without any assistance, his teacher nudged him toward the next step, that *misdirection* Harry had guessed at.

"The Dark Lord will press his mind all the harder into yours if ever he senses that you are blocking him," Snape had explained. True Occlumency, it seemed, involved protecting some thoughts while letting other, less harmful ones, range free. "It must seem that he has vanquished you, Harry, though you must let him see only what you wish him to see. Prepare an arsenal of memories and impressions that he can access without restriction. Cast these above your image, in layer after layer for him to sift through. Never give him cause to suspect that anything more lies beneath."

So now, in addition to working with Remus and practicing clearing his mind, Harry spent several
hours each day with quill in hand, cataloguing a huge array of memories he was willing to let Voldemort lay hands on. Each evening with Snape, he practiced placing those memories above his wall of fire, casting them so thickly in his mind that the fire itself could not be perceived.

And then it was time to test his mental discipline against a true Legilimens.

Surprisingly enough, Snape came through the Floo that night carrying Dumbledore's pensieve. He set it down on the low table before the couch. Harry hung back near the entry to the parlour, nervously stroking Sals, who squeezed his wrist almost as though in understanding that he needed a little hug. The thought made Harry wonder about the little snake's intuition. It was uncanny, the way Sals could sense what he was feeling, but of course, he'd spent so many hours talking to his pet that he decided he shouldn't be surprised. Sals knew him by then, that was all.

His teacher beckoned him, one crooked finger brooking no opposition. "Have you ever used one of these?"

Harry nearly choked.

"No," Snape patiently explained, a ghost of a smile on his lips. "I didn't ask if you had looked into one. I think we both know the answer to that. Have you ever used one, yourself?"

Harry mutely shook his head.

Snape put one hand lightly on the boy's shoulder. "Would you like to, tonight? Before we begin?"

"I don't know why you're offering," Harry whispered, guilt welling up inside him. He'd grown used to the almost unthinkable fact that Severus Snape could indeed be kind --when it suited him--, but it was wrong for Snape to be so kind about this, wasn't it? After what Harry had done? "I mean, you didn't last year."

Maybe he really meant it when he said that we were even, Harry thought, his brow furrowing.

"Last year," Snape quietly explained, his fingers tensing on his shoulder, though not painfully, "I violated you repeatedly, and in a particularly heinous way. I told myself that the Dark Lord would have no pity and that it was best for you to accustom yourself to such. I believed that your horror of having me see . . . certain things, would motivate you to fight me off. But it was ill-done of me, and not the usual way to proceed with such lessons. And so, Harry, if there are things you'd prefer I not see, you may use the pensieve."

Harry gave a shaky laugh. "Um, I think you know most everything, by now. And I don't know how to make it work, and besides, my wand's pretty well useless these days."

Snape touched the tip of his own wand to Harry's temple, whispering, "Pensare non pensatum," before saying, "Now, think."

Harry closed his eyes and thought of the first time he'd realised what a birthday was, and had understood why he'd never got any presents. As Snape drew his wand slowly away, Harry felt a sensation of something moving in his head, something being drawn out through his skull. He didn't watch as Snape deposited the silvery white strand into the pensieve.

"Again?" Snape asked.

Harry swallowed. "I don't see the point. I mean, it doesn't matter what you see. Not now."

"Of course it matters, you foolish child. Everyone has things they would prefer to hide." Snape
touched his temple once more. "Pensare non pensatum."

Harry thought then of something he’d prefer to hide, after all: how much he was beginning to trust Snape, and how much the thought of it sometimes worried him.

"Again?"

"No, I'm through." Feeling a bit better, Harry gave a cocky little smile. "I didn't need that, anyway. You're not breaking through. I know how to hold it together, now. Must have had a good teacher, this year."

"Confidence will help," Snape agreed, ignoring the praise. "Arrogance, you will find, can be counterproductive." He moved the pensieve out to the kitchen, then returned, brandishing his wand. "Shall we begin? _Legimens!"

As Harry tensed, Sals scurried down his leg and disappeared between a crack in the floorboards. Startled, Harry almost lost his grip on his image. He felt Snape pressing inward, broaching his defences, but at the same time, he felt himself filling with fire and blocking all thought.

They battled for what seemed an eternity.

Then Snape broke it off, conjured him something cold to drink, and demanded they begin all over again.

Snape didn't hold back; didn't coddle him. But Harry had been right; he was ready. He could hold his concentration steady against the strongest of Snape's attacks. He practiced letting harmless memories drift free, practiced keeping them layered atop his fire, even against the sensation of Snape's questing mind. He never once found himself collapsed on the floor, helpless and practically retching, as had happened so often the year before.

"Your magic must be at play in this as well," Snape finally said one evening several nights later, as they were resting after a session. That time, Harry had kept up his defences for a solid hour.

"You said even Muggles could learn mental discipline," Harry reminded him, wiping at his brow with a damp cloth. Sighing, he laid his head on the kitchen table, letting the tension drain from his frame. He felt Sals returning, crawling up his back, then diving down his shirt to curl up against him.

"Muggles can't acquire the skill as well or as fast as you have," Snape assured him. "The way your Occlumency is coming on, I'm tempted to wonder if it's a birth power for you, as well."

"You can't think that, not after I was so bad at it before."

"Before," Snape stressed, "you did not want to learn it. That much was painfully evident."

Harry gave a harsh laugh. "True enough. I didn't want my dreams blocked. I thought Voldemort was trying to get a weapon from the Department of Mysteries. I was trying to find out what he wanted." He paused, and drank his cooling tea, then continued in a calmer tone. "I also didn't want to learn it from you. I mean, why would I have? You obviously hated me, and half the time I did think you were . . . messing me up on purpose."

"Perhaps you didn't hear me when I told you to put the past in the past, Harry."

When Sals slithered out his collar and whispered something in his ear, Harry replied in a rush of Parseltongue, the sounds more clipped than slurred, his hands curling into fists on the table.
"What is your snake saying?"

Harry rolled his eyes a bit, and tried for a semblance of calm. "Now Sals wants to know if you're my father. Honestly, are snakes all so obsessed with family?"

"I wouldn't know. What did you reply?"

A bit strange, that question. What _would_ he have replied? Feeling a bit on edge, even more so than when Sals had asked the question, Harry admitted, "I said I didn't have one and never would and not to ask again, though I don't know as _Enough, already_ really goes over so well in Parseltongue."

"I think you offended her." Snape pointed at Sals, who was winding her way down a table leg before slithering off across the floor.

"Her?"

"Speculation."

"I think she's just hungry," Harry decided, accepting the speculation as fact. Might as well; he'd never really liked referring to Sals as an _it_.

"Hmm." Snape returned, watching until the snake vanished. "There's just one more thing you need to master in Occlumency. We'll start it tomorrow: you must learn to push me out of your mind."

"All that effort to control what you see," Harry weakly laughed, "and now you want me not to let you see it?"

"From a wizard of your calibre, the Dark Lord will expect resistance; you must be able to push out at him, and do it in a way that doesn't rend the false fabric of thoughts you've woven atop your image."

Harry stared, a little bit confused. "Last year you _started_ with that. _Push me out, Potter . . ._ if I heard you yell it once, I heard it a thousand times."

Snape's teacup clattered to his saucer as he scowled. "I have said to let the past be past! What part of that concept is not soaking through your skull to reach the dubious grey matter beneath?"

"I just wondered why Occlumency was so one-dimensional last year," Harry defended himself. Relaxing a fraction, Snape admitted, "Last year, the primary goal was to help you block your dreams. Albus' notion, though a sound one since the Dark Lord was actively manipulating you through them."

"And now?"

Snape's expression hardened, reminding Harry that he didn't tolerate fools. "You know the answer to that."

"Yeah," Harry slowly agreed, realizing as he spoke that he did. "You're trying to make sure I'm ready, not just for dreams, but for the next time I have to face down that ugly bastard."

"Another encounter does seem inevitable." Snape looked down at his hands, and then at Harry. "I wish that I could spare you."

Harry shivered, one word sparking an unwelcome memory. _Kill the spare . . ._ Shaking his head, he submerged himself briefly in mental fire. It wasn't stoicism, but strangely enough, it did help.
All at once, an awful look crossed Snape's face, like agony wrapped in horror but coated in resignation. No . . . resolution. The man had his right hand pressed to his left forearm as he stood and stumbled toward the Floo.

"Shite!" Harry yelped, understanding coming all at once.

"Go to Lupin," Snape bit out, the words wheezing through clenched teeth. "Stay with him tonight. Do not leave this house for a single instant, do you understand me?"

"Yes!" Harry shouted over the sound of Severus screaming out the code words that would take him back to his dungeon quarters. From there, Harry supposed, he would don his horrid robe and mask, then Floo to someplace else . . . someplace from which he could Apparate towards Voldemort's call.

"I wish that I could spare you, too," he said, talking to the thin air.

Remus made it his practice to retire upstairs and leave Snape and Harry strictly alone during the Occlumency sessions. It was a small courtesy, but one Harry had come to appreciate. He felt a little bad, actually, that he'd believed Remus had no sense of decorum.

He knocked on Remus' door and was bid at once to enter.

"Snape's gone. Dark Mark," Harry bleakly explained, shaking a little as he remembered the awful look on his teacher's face.

"Oh, Harry!" Remus crossed the room in two strides and enveloped him in a comforting hug. "I've seen it happen during Order meetings. Not a pretty sight."

"No," Harry agreed, voice muffled against Remus' soft flannel shirt . . . oh, pyjama top, he was slow to realise. "Um, were you asleep?"


"But Snape hates you," Harry stated, feeling the leading edge of a headache coming on.

"He's good at making me think so," Remus laughed. "But every so often he slips up. I don't know; perhaps he intended the book as an insult. With Severus, it's difficult to be sure."

"He always calls you Lupin, never Remus. Like he used to always call me Potter, back when he hated me."

"I'm glad you know he doesn't hate you, now," Remus quietly commented.

"Yeah, well I wish he didn't hate you, either. It's kind of awful, when people I ---" *People I care about*, he had been going to say. He decided he wasn't ready to admit to that about Snape. At least, not out loud. "When people I have to hang around with can't stand each other."

When Remus smiled, Harry knew the man had heard what hadn't been said. "Perhaps you'll feel better, Harry, to realise that Severus has never stopped supplying me with Wolfsbane Potion. That's right; not three weeks after losing me my job at Hogwarts, he was owling me a supply. And every month since, right as clockwork."

Harry rubbed his temples a bit, but it didn't help his aching head. Funny, when Snape had done it
that once, the massage had released all his tension.

"Here," Remus said, and took over, his own massage more than competent, although nowhere near as skilled as Snape's had been. "You're worried about him."

"Yeah, well if you could have seen him when the Mark started to burn, you would be, too."

"I've seen, I know," Remus repeated. "You know what's odd about the potion he makes for me, though? Severus won't accept thanks. He would get positively hostile when I used to try."

"You're trying to get my mind off what's probably happening right now," Harry muttered, stepping away from Remus' caring fingers. "What if the Death Eaters are on one of their rampages? Killing Muggles, Muggleborns? I feel ill, Remus. Snape does those things too, doesn't he? I mean, he'd have to, if he's going to keep up appearances so he can spy for the Order."

"I should have spoken with you earlier today, prepared you," Remus murmured.

"What? How could you know he'd be called tonight?"

Remus gave him a long, strange look and said, "Well, Harry, it is Halloween."

Harry started. "I'd lost track," he realised.

"You've had a great deal to occupy you," Remus sympathized. "Why don't we go downstairs and have some cocoa? It might help soothe your nerves so you can sleep."

All at once, Harry was absolutely, positively sure of one thing. "You're barking mad," he calmly declared. "No offence, all right? But how can you think I would sleep? I'm not going to, not until Snape gets himself back here, and probably not even then."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"Stay with you," Harry answered. "He said to. I'll be right back."

He returned a moment later carrying a pillow and a pile of blankets, then settled down on the floor and made himself a nest of sorts. Remus stared like Harry was the one gone barking mad, but Harry ignored that. He figured he was in for a long night and he might as well be comfortable.

"If you want to stay with me," Remus offered, "there's no need to lie on the floor. The bed is easily big enough for both of us."

Harry was sure it was, but he was also sure he didn't want to be treated like a child. If he went over there, Remus would fuss over him, probably offer cocoa again, or milk and cookies, or something. Harry didn't think he could take it.

"Nah," he refused. "I'm ok, here."

Remus didn't push the offer, for which Harry was grateful. It came to him again that he shouldn't have been rude to Remus, all those times. Remus really cared about him. He just didn't always know what Harry needed. The magic lessons were a case in point. Thinking happy thoughts was not going to yield his Patronus, not until whatever else was going on was resolved. But what was going on? By then, Harry rather doubted he could blame his missing marrow. They'd claimed at Frimley Park that his marrow would restore itself in about ten days. It had been that long, nearly. Of course, maybe wizards were different, as Snape had said. And it was true that not all his magic was gone, but still . . . Harry was starting to feel discouraged.
"So," he prompted when, after five minutes, Remus had yet to say another thing. "Let's talk about my magic. Why do you think it's only coming back in three respects? Snape feels that might be significant."

"Parseltongue, Occlumency, and divining dreams." Remus nodded. "Severus is right; it's odd that only those three manifestations of your powers remain. No charms, no spells, nothing that requires a wand . . ."

"Maybe I need a new wand?" Harry wondered out loud. "Though it's hard to see why I would. And I'd be afraid to use any other wand, anyway, now that I know mine and Voldemort's cancel each other out." He sighed. "Anyway, I found an old school wand of Sirius', down in the cellar. It didn't work for me, either."

Remus thought about that for a moment. "Have you had other divining dreams?"

"Only every day," Harry drawled. "Or night, that is, ever since I've felt well enough to stay up all day long. You know what, though? I've noticed a distinct pattern to them. They're always in two parts, and the first part is always about the past. And as the days go by, I'm going ever deeper into the past in those dreams." He paused a moment, counting on his fingers, and detailed, "First it was Kreacher, then I saw Snape cutting your hair for the Polyjuice. And in the days since, I've seen the Slytherins plotting out some Quidditch cheats, and Dumbledore hiring Aran for the Defence job, and Hogwarts being respelled over the summer . . . things like that. It's all fairly innocuous, except for Kreacher where it started."

"And you're sure that everything you've dreamed is true?"

"Well, a couple of days after the Quidditch dream, Ron mentioned in a letter some things that confirmed what I'd seen. And I asked Snape about the respelling; he seemed absolutely gobsmacked that my dream had been so . . . comprehensive and detailed, he put it. I don't know about Aran getting his robes eaten by Dumbledore's spiral staircase, but I suspect that's true as well."

Remus frowned as he settled himself back into bed. "What about the second part of each dream, Harry? Any patterns there?"

"That's where things get more confusing," Harry confessed. "I mean, I think there is one, but I haven't been able to figure it out. I get impressions that are sort of random. The Dursley house destroyed, okay, I told you that. Then it was just a clearing in the forest, nobody around, but it had a creepy atmosphere, I can tell you that. The next time I saw a small stone room, empty, almost claustrophobic, though it made me feel really thirsty, of all things."

"What else?"

"Hmm," Harry had to stop and think, not because he didn't remember, but because he really didn't know how to put things into words. At least, not these things. "I've been in the hospital wing at Hogwarts, wracked with pain. I couldn't see, but I knew it from the smell . . ." Remus smiled, and Harry figured that a werewolf would know what he meant. "And I was screaming and screaming for Snape. Anyone else came near me, I flailed, but at the same time I felt like I needed only him, just the smell of him made me positively nauseous." He paused. " Weird, huh?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say so," Remus denied. "Anything else?"

"Um, yes, but it just gets weirder. I'm down in the Hogwarts dungeons, living there instead of in the Tower, and Ron and Hermione come to visit me. Hmm, I can see again in that one. Ron says something derogatory about Slytherins, and I hit him--"
"With a hex?" Remus sounded excited.

"No, with my fist. Learned it from Hermione; she's decked Malfoy a couple of times." Harry paused, trying to recall more. "Oh, and then there's this one where Malfoy calls me his brother, and I laugh. Now if that's not sick, I don't know what is."

"Would you like to hear my analysis of your dreams?"

Surprised that Remus had asked, Harry turned over more towards him. "Does it start with you're in a dark place, emotionally?"

"I take it you don't want to hear."

"No, no, I do," Harry decided. "Might as well. Maybe I am in a dark place, like you said. I didn't think so at the time, but these dreams, especially the parts about me, aren't exactly sweetness and light."

"That's the first thing I noticed," Remus commented, pushing up to lean against his headboard. "The second part of each dream is about you."

"Except for Privet Drive."

"You don't think images of Privet Drive are about you, Harry?"

"Hmm. Maybe they are."

"Now, you're likely right about the first part of each dream divining the past. Interesting power, especially as I don't believe you've really possessed it before."

"You've seen my O.W.L. scores, too? Or Snape told you?"

"Intuition," Remus corrected. "Based on the fact that the true gift of second sight is exceedingly rare. I would say," he continued, "that you're divining the past for one reason only: to force you to understand that these are no mere dreams. They are visions, rather, and your powers are telling you to take them seriously."

"Like it matters if I know that Professor Aran is too dumb to ride Dumbledore's staircase without getting his robes caught and ripped to shreds!" Harry couldn't help it, he laughed. "And I don't need visions to know that Slytherins cheat like mad, Remus."

"Exactly."

"Huh?"

"Those things don't matter, you're right. They exist as markers only, so that you will realise the other parts of your dream need paying attention to. The parts about you, Harry."

Harry plumped his pillow. "All right, I understand. So what of those parts? Do you see a pattern in them, somewhere, other than the fact that they mostly concern me?"

"They reflect your ambivalence," Remus told him, brown eyes steady. "About many things."

Harry had a feeling he wasn't going to like Remus' interpretation. "Go on," he said darkly, staring right back.

Remus abruptly shut off his light, though he winced as he used magic to dispel the magical glow
emanating from the lamp. "You hate the Dursley house, but you've come to have confused feelings about your cousin, as I understand. So you dream of the house being crushed, but not with him in it."

"Yes . . ."

"You feel trapped here. You want out, but you know it isn't wise. You dream of stone rooms, walls closing you in, making you thirst for what you can't have, yet when you dream of clearings, an image of apparent freedom, the image strikes you as creepy."

Harry raised an eyebrow, rather impressed. He did both hate and not hate Dudley, these days. He did feel trapped, but realised that leaving could be even worse. "Go on," he quietly replied.

Remus took a deep breath, then plunged on. "Then there's Severus. Years of distrust and hate between you. More years than you've been alive, on his part. But now you're both managing to build . . . a friendship of sorts. You're ambivalent about that. I think you like him now, at least sometimes, so you dream of calling for him. But you fear you're being blind, so you dream that you cannot see. He makes you feel sick because no matter your feelings now, you can't help but remember all the misery he's caused you."

"He's out causing misery right now," Harry muttered, hating the thought. He couldn't bear to ponder it, to visualize what the man might be doing. "All right, what else?" he asked Remus. "Don't tell me I'm ambivalent about Malfoy, too, because I know that's not the case. He's a right bastard, just like his evil father."

"I wouldn't say you're ambivalent about Draco, but about yourself. You dream of hitting Ron because he insults the Slytherins, and of a Slytherin calling you a brother. I would say that Draco in your dream is representative of the house into which you were very nearly sorted."

"Now I know it had to be Snape who told you that."

"Mmm. He waxed philosophical about it. I don't know if you realise as much, but he takes his Head of House duties very seriously."

"Yeah, never seen him take a point from Slytherin yet," Harry grumbled.

Remus softly snorted. "Oh, Severus is very partisan, no doubt about it. But that's not what I meant. He knows all the children very well, and their families too."

"That's because they're all purebloods, just like him. Sirius explained that tapestry to me, you know. The pureblood families are all interrelated. Snape's probably known most of his charming little Slytherins since they were born."

"They aren't all pure-blooded, Harry. The ones who aren't learn quickly to keep their background quiet. Regardless of bloodlines, Severus spends a great deal of his free time seeing to his students. He talks to them, after hours, makes sure they adjust to life at Hogwarts. He goes over end of term grades with each, admonishing and counselling them as needed. When the Slytherins get testy, he's a nearly constant presence in their common room."

"Well, he'd have to be, wouldn't he?" was Harry's sour response. "Slytherins aren't Gryffindors. When they get mad, the result might be murder." When Remus just waited, Harry grudgingly admitted, "Okay, okay. It sounds like he does a bit more than McGonagall, all right?"

"He'd have done all this for you, too, if you'd been placed in Slytherin," Remus continued.

"Oh, sure."
"No, he would have," Remus insisted. "Severus has . . . a peculiar sort of honour. Being a Slytherin would have made you his own, Harry, and he takes care of his own, no matter that he can't stand the sight of some of them. I think he would have seen you for who you are, much sooner, if he'd been in a position where he had to get to know you, more."

"Yeah, well, what's past is past," Harry murmured. "The dreams . . . so you think I'm ambivalent about having chosen Gryffindor over Slytherin?"

"I think you're starting to realise, inside yourself, that you are both. Or perhaps merely that the Gryffindor way of honour and loyalty is not the only useful way of looking at things."

Harry crossed his arms behind his neck and stared at the ceiling. He'd have to think about that, but not now. Thoughts of Snape at the Death Eater meeting crept back into his mind, and to banish them, he wondered aloud, "What do you think's going on at Hogwarts, tonight? Halloween is always great fun. Well, except for the year Quirrell set a troll loose in the dungeons. Um, Quirrell was the defence teacher two years before you."

"Some defence teacher," Remus returned.

"You don't know the half of it. He was possessed by Voldemort."

"You're having me on."

"No, I'm not. Ask Snape. Quirrell tried to hex me off my broom, Voldemort's doing. Snape incanted a counter-curse to save me, though at the time I believed he was the one doing the hexing."

Remus let silence reign for a moment, then said in an odd tone, "I don't suppose you've ever thanked him for that."

"No, and I don't suppose I will," Harry admitted. "He might bite my head off."

"He would." Remus' yawn was accompanied by rustling noises as he rolled over and got more comfortable. "Good night, Harry."

"Good night," Harry quietly replied, though he knew he wouldn't sleep. He lay there thinking about Hermione's last letter, mentally composing a reply he'd write at first light. And then he couldn't fight it any longer: he thought about Snape. Memories assailed him of the Death Eater meeting he'd been unwillingly portkeyed to after the Third Task. Voldemort, vengeful and cruel to his own followers. The 

**Cruciatus** curse. Wormtail cowering.

Was Snape at a meeting like that one, a circle of Death Eaters worshiping Voldemort as he spouted his evil plans? Or were they on a rampage tonight, terrorizing some half-wizard village, slaying half-bloods and Muggleborns?

Just as well he'd decided not to sleep, Harry realised. He wouldn't have prophetic dreams, not tonight. His every thought was the stuff of nightmares.
By the time Remus woke up, Harry had written a letter to Hermione and another one to Ron, leaving both of them unsealed so that he wouldn't have to address another envelope in case Snape wanted to read them. He hadn't asked to do so again, not since Harry's very first letter from Grimmauld Place, but it wasn't every evening that Harry saw the Dark Mark flare to life, was it?

He'd said nothing whatsoever about that, of course, which left him in a bit of a quandary. What should he write to his friends? He couldn't tell them that he was getting on better with Snape. Not only would Ron think he'd gone nutters, information like that would get Snape killed if the letter fell into the wrong hands. So too with explaining how much better Occlumency was this year, and how good he was getting at it. He probably shouldn't even mention staying in the house with Remus, he realised. Anything to do with an Order member was best kept secret.

In the end, Harry settled for a long description of Sals and how funny it was to have chats with a snake. He asked about their Halloween, and how classes were going, and tried not to sound too worried.

But he was worried. About Snape.

Harry left Remus' room when his teacher began stirring, and for lack of anything better to occupy his mind, cooked up a breakfast that would do a house-elf proud. Cooking wasn't so bad, really. Not when you had someone appreciative to eat the results, that was.

"We need the Daily Prophet," was the first thing he said when Remus appeared after his shower. "I want to know if there were any Death Eater attacks last night."

"I don't think you should read about them, if there were," Remus replied, serving himself a plate full of pancakes, bangers, and poached eggs.

Harry wasn't about to be put off so easily. He set down his fork with a definite thud. "I am not a child, Remus. I have to know what Snape was doing last night!"

Remus set his fork down too, albeit more gently. "You are not a child, no. But you are not an adult, either, and you are certainly not Severus' keeper. All you have to know about last night is that he was doing his best to help the Order win this war. It's not for you to judge him, whatever he may have had to do."

Harry gnashed his teeth. "I'll find out sooner or later. You might as well just get me the paper, like I asked!"

"I'm surprised you would believe a word written in the Prophet," Remus admonished. "I certainly don't believe what I read in there about you."

"Well, there is that," Harry grumbled, though he was scarcely mollified. "It's nothing but a mouthpiece for Fudge and his cronies. They've been reporting Death Eater activity, though. Finally."

"You'd do better to concentrate on your wand-work than worry yourself over what Severus' own responsibilities might include."

"My wand-work's hopeless and you know it." Harry took a huge swig of orange juice, wondering if Snape would even notice a couple of inches less in the whiskey bottle. He could pour it into something like juice, couldn't he? Remus would never know. Hmm, well maybe he would, with that
sense of smell that came along with werewolf territory.

"I know you seem to need some sort of catalyst," Remus was admitting. "I thought focusing on joyful thoughts would do it."

"It won't."

"I'm beginning to accept that," his teacher quietly acknowledged. "Do you have any ideas, Harry? Any at all?"

Shocked that Remus had asked, Harry gave it some hard thought as he ate. "Hmm. You know how nearly everybody thinks that Parseltongue is a sign of a dark wizard? Well, I'm starting to think that my dreams are pretty dark, too. Not the past bits, so much, as the ones about me. I don't know if Occlumency is a strictly dark skill, though. Hmm, maybe it is, for me. The image that works best for me is one Snape associates with death and destruction."

Remus sipped his tea. "What are you getting at?"

"I don't know. It just seems like . . ." Harry shrugged. "I don't know, really, just that everything I can do now seems . . . well, not dark, not exactly. But other wizards would look at it that way. What do you think we should try next?"

"I think we should try an ice-cream sundae from Florean Fortescue's," Remus replied. "And I'm not saying that because I think you're a child, Harry. You just need a break from this awful house. I can see why Sirius hated it so."

"Yeah, me too," Harry murmured. "I don't like it here. Sometimes I don't think I even want the house, though it's useful for the Order. I wonder if I should deed it over? Not that it's officially mine, yet, what with Sirius' death being . . . rather problematic. I mean, has it actually been declared? Legally?"

"You'd have to inquire at the Ministry of Magic, or ask Albus. He would know."

"He's back to his old trick of ignoring my existence," Harry pointed out. "You know, it used to be that when I was in the hospital wing, he'd make time to come see me. We'd talk. When I was in St. Mungo's, he didn't bother to so much as send me a message. And nothing since, either."

"Severus is keeping him informed, Harry."

"Bet you are, too."

Remus had the grace to look away, at that. "It's necessary."

"I know," Harry admitted. "But it wouldn't kill him to ask me how I am for himself. About the ice-cream, though? It sounds good, but I'd better not leave the house."

"Of course you'd better not," Remus agreed. "I wasn't seriously suggesting it. And as for what we should really try next about your magic . . . I don't know, Harry."

"Me neither," Harry sighed. "Look, let's take a break today. You read your wolf book or something, and I'll try to get through Volumes One through Ten of the class notes Hermione's been sending me."

"I wouldn't think you'd consider studying a 'break,'" Remus observed.
"Compared to spending hours incanting spells that don't work, it is. And one more thing, Remus. Can you please stop thinking I'm going to crack in half if you do a bit of magic in front of me? I'm not that fragile, all right? And I am so sick of doing the washing up by hand. How about a little Scourify on that skillet, and a bit of Lavare spread all around? All right?"

Remus looked reluctant, but he did clean the kitchen with a few waves of his wand.

"Good," Harry thanked him, and went upstairs to wade through some of those notes.

Snape came through the Floo late that afternoon, but Harry didn't know as much until a hand was shaking him awake.

"What?" he grumbled, flipping over onto his back, expecting to see Remus' friendly features. Instead, he looked up into a face that he used to think harsh and forbidding. Now, for all the cruel angles that made up the planes of Snape's face, the overall effect wasn't one of menace, not for Harry.

But still, he couldn't help but wonder what sorts of cruelty and menace the man had perpetrated the night before. It made him sick even to think about it, but he had to know. Harry looked away, unable to really meet Snape's eyes as he asked, "Er... you all right today?"

"What were you dreaming?" Snape replied, sidestepping the question. "You were screaming like a man possessed."

Harry rubbed his temples, trying to remember. Normally he didn't have any trouble recalling his seer dreams, as he'd taken to thinking of them, but of course, he normally wasn't forced to wake in the middle of them.

"Um, I don't know," he finally had to answer. "But my scar doesn't hurt, so it probably doesn't really matter."

"Lupin and I have just been discussing your dreams, Mr Potter, and we both believe they matter a great deal," Snape returned, brushing his robes aside as he sat down on the edge of the rumpled covers. "We have yet to determine how they matter. So think harder."

Harry did, not that it helped. "Maybe if you told me what I was screaming, that would bring it back."

Snape stared at him, his dark eyes disturbed. "I am not able to repeat your words, or interpret them. They were in Parseltongue."

Now Harry was the one who was staring. "I was screaming in Parseltongue? I didn't think that was even possible. I mean, you really have to hiss it; it's hard to hiss a scream--"

He broke off because Snape was regarding him with that expression he reserved for particularly inane babbles, as the Potions Master termed them.

"All right, sorry, don't know," Harry finished. "I can't remember."

"What were you thinking of as you fell asleep?" Snape pressed, those black eyes boring into him, now.

"Um, Charms, mostly. I was reading Hermione's notes."
Snape's first response to that was a disgusted expression. Harry didn't know if that was because he wasn't supposed to be devoting his attention to classwork, or if it was just a general disdain for Hermione.

"And before that, Mr Potter?"

"What's with the Mr Potter?" Harry challenged, unnerved, but not so much by the name as by what he had been thinking about. "You haven't called me Harry since you got here!"

"Since I just came from instructing a class, that shouldn't astonish you," Snape dryly replied. "Now, answer my question, Harry. What were you thinking of before devoting your valuable and better-spent time to the encyclopedias Miss Granger feels compelled to copy?"

"Well, if you must know," Harry erupted, "I was worried about you being at that meeting! It had nothing to do with Parseltongue!"

"Worried about me," Snape repeated. "Harry, I've withstood the Dark Lord's attacks before."

Harry blanched, remembering his own experience at Voldemort's hands. Without thinking, he settled a hand atop Snape's sleeve. "Cruciatus, you mean?"

Instead of pushing him away, Snape covered Harry's hand with his own. "I meant Legilimency, but I am familiar with the other."

Harry swallowed, hating the thought of that, hating even worse what he was going to ask next. But he had to know, he just had to. Remus had been right about ambivalence, he thought. He trusted Snape, or at least he thought he did . . . or maybe it was more a case of wanting to be able to. Really wanting to be able to.

Harry suddenly jerked his hand from underneath his teacher's, deciding that he couldn't bear to keep seeing him day after day, wondering all the time what horrors the man had done on Halloween. He was tired of everybody keeping secrets from him, tired of them deciding what he needed to know.

"I was worried about you because I worried what you were doing," Harry clarified, yanking himself off the bed to pace around the room in sock feet. "Did Voldemort round his Death Eaters up for an attack on Muggles? Muggleborns? Half-bloods like me?"

"By my reckoning, you are not a half-blood. Both your parents were magical."

"Yeah, well my mum was a Muggleborn as you well know, so I'm not exactly a pureblood, either," Harry tightly elaborated. "And what about last night?"

Snape folded his hands together and remained seated on the bed. "All you need to know has been reported in the Prophet."

"Remus won't let me have a copy," Harry retorted, anger roiling up inside him. "And I'd rather hear it from you, anyway. Was there an attack, Professor?"

"Yes."

Harry stopped pacing. "What happened?"

"What do you think happened, you idiot child?" Snape questioned, soft tones underlying hard words. "The Muggleborns didn't stand a chance, any more than did the half-blood witch who came to try and help them."
Harry's teeth started to chatter. "Was it at least quick?"

Snape's voice grew caustic. "No, it wasn't quick. Where's your mind, today? It's never quick. Can you truly want to hear the sickening details?"

He didn't, not really, but he wanted to hear Snape recount them, so he could know for sure that the man was in fact sickened.

"Yeah."

"You're even less a Gryffindor than I thought," Snape snarled. "You don't want to cling to your comforting illusions? To believe that the world is a place in which right triumphs over might?"

"No," Harry answered, and when it seemed like Snape still wouldn't tell him, added, "How in bloody hell am I supposed to defeat Voldemort unless I know everything there is to know?"

"Knowing things such as I could tell you will not help you defeat him!"

"Let me be the judge of that!"

"Does it not occur to you," Snape harshly whispered, "that I do not care to describe the meeting yet again? I have done it once already, for Albus!"

Harry glared. "I have to know. Don't you get it?"

Snape clenched his fists. "So be it, then. In case you didn't know, the Dark Lord thrives on torture," he spat. "This time, it was a family of Muggleborns trying to hide their magic in a Muggle village in Cheshire. The Dark Lord sat like a king on a throne and watched as Cruciatus was cast at the son, about your age, until he tore handfuls of hair and scalp out. The parents had to watch, too, then under Imperio kick him until every single one of his ribs broke in half. It was about this time the young witch showed up. I don't think she'd had a day of magical education in her life, but there's no doubt she'd have been sorted into Gryffindor. Brave and foolish, all at once."

Lips curling at the memory, Snape detailed in icy tones, "She was passed around, as was the wife, whom the Dark Lord released from Imperio so that she could understand the full horror of struggling to no avail. Do you really need to hear just what was done to these women at the hands of over fifteen angry, vengeful men? Men who believe that only purebloods are fully human? Perhaps you'll be satisfied merely to know that after the women's voices were screamed raw, the Dark Lord had them both gutted! While they were alive!"

Something horrible and foul rose up into Harry's throat. Gagging, both hands pressed into his stomach, he forced it back down.

"Enough?" Snape sneered, rising to tower over him. "There's more, if you still need to know everything. I haven't divulged yet what happened to the man, or the boy in the end, or how Legilimency can end up being Darkest Arts when you use it to force upon your victims the things they most fear in all the world--"

"Enough," Harry finally found voice to answer.

"It should be!" his teacher roared. "It's sufficient that I must be there, that I must speak of it to the Order! I do not wish to relive the experience vicariously for your listening pleasure, as well!"

Harry was never sure, really, where he found the nerve, but he heard himself asking the question that had haunted him ever since he'd seen Snape rushing to Voldemort's call. "So which parts of all that
Snape's brows drew together, his expression thunderous. "What concern of that is yours?"

"It is! It has to be!" Harry yelled, desperate to know. "I let you in my mind! I trusted you!"

"You knew I was ostensibly in his service," came Snape's cold reply. "If the thought of what that entails offends you, then you shouldn't demand to know what happens on a raid, now should you?"

"Answer my question! How many Unforgivables did you cast? Did you take your turn with the women? Was it your wand that gutted them?"

"Your audacity is beyond belief, Mr Potter," Snape retorted, his voice all the more dangerous now because it had gone quiet. "But I will answer you, since you are possessed of such a burning need to know. None, no, and no."

It took Harry a moment to match the answers to his questions, and when he did, he was filled with stark disbelief. "Right," he drawled, incensed. "What do you want me to think, that you stood there a pillar of virtue and Voldemort didn't even notice? I know you had to be doing those disgusting things right along with the rest of them!"

"You know nothing," Snape announced, "but you are going to find out. Not because I wish to vindicate myself. I care nothing for what a sixteen year-old whelp thinks of me. I care nothing for your trust, either, such as it is! But I will show you all that happened, regardless. For one reason, Mr Potter."

Leaning down, he hissed at Harry's face. "If you are old enough to hear about such things, you are old enough to see them, too. In fact, I insist."

Robes billowing, he spun for the door, one clenched hand beckoning Harry to follow.
The Pensieve

Harry didn't know quite what Snape had in mind until they reached the kitchen and he saw the pensieve sitting in the middle of the table. It hadn't been there, earlier. Harry supposed that Snape had brought it through the Floo again, which meant that he'd intended for them to practice Occlumency. But Snape had never arrived in Grimmauld Place before nightfall, before.

"How come you're here so early?"

"We can dissect my schedule after you know everything, Mr Potter," Snape sneered, yanking his wand from inside his robes and jabbing it to his temple. He drew out a silvery strand that roiled and twisted under its own weight, then sank heavily toward the floor as it drifted towards the pensieve. With a furious motion of his wand, Snape propelled it into the stone receptacle.

Harry backed up a step. He didn't want to see last night's Death Eater meeting. He hadn't even wanted to hear about it, not the way Snape thought, anyway. He'd just wanted to be sure he knew what his teacher thought of Voldemort's . . . methods.

"Get back here!" Snape barked, even as he withdrew another heavy strand from his mind.

Harry didn't. "This isn't necessary, Professor," he argued, trying for a tone that might calm the man down.

"I beg to differ, after your insistence upstairs that you must know everything about the Dark Lord!"

"All right, all right!" Harry shouted, wrapping his arms around himself. "That was misdirection, all right? Or lying, whatever you want to call it! I didn't want to know all that, those things you told me! I just wanted to know if I could trust you!"

"You would have made a dreadful Slytherin," Snape sneered, still pouring memories into the pensieve. Harry sort of shuddered. "Trust! It matters so much to you that you feel you have every right to trample my clear request to not discuss last night's festivities, does it? Then so be it, as I said. You will watch the meeting, Mr Potter. You will know not to question me again!"

"Look," Harry tried. "You're angry. I'd be angry too, if I were you. I'm sorry I asked, and I'm sorry I doubted you. I just . . . Look, it's hard for me, all right? I . . . like you, now. Well, most of the time, anyway. And I couldn't just split my feelings up into neat little slices where one part of me ignores what the other parts know, and I didn't want things to change and go back to how they were--"

"Stop babbling and look in the pensieve!"

"No!"

Snape took a step towards him, his teeth clicked together as he snarled in clear intent, "Look in the pensieve, Mr Potter, or I will shove you in!"

When Harry didn't move, Snape snaked out a hand, wrapped his fingers around the back of his neck, and began to thrust him towards the edge of the kitchen table.

Harry struggled, but since he didn't have much chance against a grown man, he did the only thing he could think to do, in the circumstances. "Remus!" he screamed, his lungs close to bursting with the force of the yell. "Remus! REMUS!!! REEEEEMUS!!!!"
Snape gave a harsh laugh and tightened his fingers. "Your beloved werewolf is not here. He went to get you ice cream. He thinks you are a little child who needs protecting. But you're not, are you? You're old enough to challenge me. You're old enough to know everything."

As Snape began to remorselessly shove him towards the pensieve again, Harry screamed, desperate, "I don't want to violate you, not again!"

At that, the Potions Master let him go, releasing him so suddenly and unexpectedly that Harry half-stumbled across the floor, knocking into the table. The liquid in the pensieve sloshed towards the rim, but didn't spill.

Unable to really believe Snape had relented, Harry froze in place and cast a wary glance over at his teacher.

Snape still looked furious, but now, he also looked controlled. Yanking out a chair, he seated himself on the far side of the pensieve, and glared at Harry. The glare quickly became a scowl. "You can wait for Remus and your ice cream sundae," he sneered, "or you can prove yourself an adult and finish what you started."

Harry pulled out a chair, too, and flopped into it, feeling sick with relief. "How does it make me an adult to look in that again? I told you, I don't want to violate you!"

"You violated me already, upstairs," Snape returned in a voice coated with ice. "You demanded my version of events, though you knew I preferred not to speak of such things. Not to mention, you made it clear you didn't trust what I'd said."

"I thought you didn't care about trust!"

"I don't," Snape snapped, curling his fingers and looking away. "Unfortunately for me, your trust is necessary to fight the Dark Lord effectively. We failed last year, Mr Potter. You doubted my intentions, my very allegiances, and Sirius Black died! Now the Order has one fewer member to carry on the fight. I will not allow that to happen again!"

"I do trust you, all right?" Harry was starting to feel even more desperate than he had when Snape was threatening to plunge him into the memories by force.

"You don't," Snape returned in that cold, hard voice he hated, his gaze seeking Harry's again. "You can't. It was evident upstairs. You need to see for yourself."

All true, though Harry was ashamed by then that he hadn't had more faith in Snape.

"Are you a man or a child?" Snape taunted.

Without another word, Harry yanked the pensieve towards him, leaned his face down into it, and felt himself sucked into a scene of carnage and horror far worse than anything he'd ever imagined could exist.

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Snape's hand was on his neck again, though this time he had his grip on the collar of Harry's shirt, and was pulling him backwards. Disoriented, still caught up in the cyclic terror whirling in the pensieve, Harry fought, but Snape was stronger, and jerked him free.

"Drink," he ordered, shoving the pensieve out of the way and slamming down a glass of something clear yet viscous.
Harry quaffed the liquid, which tasted vaguely of rotting melon. It quelled his churning stomach, though not completely, not after all he'd seen. Upstairs, he realised now, Snape had told him just the barest outline of what last night's victims had suffered. The truth was worse, so much so that he felt tainted. Dirty. Reeking with it.

"I'm sorry," Harry whispered, his voice rasping painfully against a lump of regret in his throat.

"I'm certain you are," Snape returned, his voice still glacial, though without that dreadful fury that had filled it, before.

"I . . ." Harry gulped, not knowing really what to say, after all that. "I think I need more potion."

Snape narrowed his black eyes. "You are going to be sick?"

"Um, probably not, but my stomach still feels . . . awful," Harry understated, pressing his hands into his midsection. Then another thought came to him. "You gave me potion! I thought I wasn't supposed to have magical cures until my own magic came back!"

"It is back, as I have painstakingly laboured to explain to you. You simply do not have clear access to it, except through certain restricted avenues."

"Oh, right," Harry murmured, rolling his shoulders a little. It felt like he couldn't get his bearings. The images in the pensieve still haunted him, and as a particularly gruesome sequence replayed in his head, he felt the sickness in his stomach surge up into his lower throat. He swallowed it back down, gasping, "Can I have more potion? Please?"

His teacher shook his head, then tilted it to the side as he considered the request at greater length. "The amount you drank should have worked completely. Apparently you can tolerate magical cures at present, though they are not as efficacious as they should be. Interesting."

It wasn't terribly interesting to Harry at that moment, though he was relieved that the Potions question appeared to have calmed Snape down. Unable to bear the taste of acid in his mouth, he pushed up weakly, filled the glass with water, and sat back down, drinking it with a sigh.

"So, you just happen to carry Stomach Calming Draught around with you?" Harry asked, thinking to keep the conversation on safe ground. He wasn't too comfortable chatting with Snape, not after a few words put wrong upstairs had led to so much fury. He wondered how long it would be until Remus returned.

"I conjured it," Snape shortly replied.

"Oh." Harry actually hadn't thought of that. "Um, how come we don't just learn to conjure them, then, instead of make them? It'd be quicker. Less mess." Fewer explosions.

Snape stared at him as if not even a blithering idiot would ask a question as daft as that one. "I conjured it from my personal stores, not from the thin air," he drawled.

"Oh," Harry said again, thinking that that would be the end of his Potions questions for a good, long while.


Harry's gaze snapped up. "What, about Potions?"

"Merlin preserve me," Snape intoned, jerking a thumb towards the pensieve. "Of course not, Mr
Potter. About that. What you saw.”

"I don't have any questions," Harry denied.

"We'll work on your pathetic inability to lie convincingly another time, Gryffindor. Ask your questions."

"It's called civility," Harry retorted, his stomach finally calming. "You didn't want to talk about it, remember? I'm trying to respect that."

"So you can lie convincingly?" Snape mocked.

It was on the tip of Harry's tongue to say Sod off, Snape, but he thought he'd better not. "Where did Remus go for that ice cream?" he said instead. "All the way to Diagon Alley?"

"Stop procrastinating and ask your bloody questions!"

"Okay, okay." Harry held up his hands as though to ward off Snape's rudeness. "Since you insist. How come Voldemort let you just stand there and watch? I mean, every other Death Eater there, he told them what to do and they did it." A low shudder coursed though his shoulders at the thought of just what the Death Eaters had done.

"Every other Death Eater?" Snape mocked.

"Turn of phrase," Harry excused it. "Don't pretend you didn't understand me. I know you did."

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"Be glad I trust you enough to be insolent," Harry snapped. "I'm not stupid, you know, whatever you like to call me. I wouldn't speak my mind around you if I didn't feel safe doing it."

"That explains a great deal," Snape retorted, nostrils flaring. "I suppose I can understand what makes you so horrendously rude to Lupin, in that case. You must feel extraordinarily safe with him."

"Yeah, well, I do. So what about my question?"

"Ah yes, the Dark Lord." Snape sat up straighter in his chair and conjured a cup of tea for himself as he assembled his words. "He trusts no one else to make his potions, Mr Potter, and contrary to what you might think, not all the elixirs he needs are strictly Dark Arts. Many consist of what the uninformed tend to term 'Light Magic.'" He paused to sip his tea. "I convinced the Dark Lord years ago, during his first reign of terror in fact, that the preparation of certain elixirs requires my hands to be clean of blood."

"How'd you convince him of that?" Harry had to ask. Compared to Snape, he didn't know much about potion-making, but he knew enough to recognise a cock-and-bull story when he heard one.

"My position as the foremost Potions Master in Britain helped," Snape informed him, nose lifted a bit. "Add to this the fact that many of the elixirs I refer to are my own development. No one else can make them, thus the Dark Lord is in no position to dispute me when I tell him what such potions require."

"And you're good at Occlumency, lies, and misdirection," Harry added.

Snape sneered down his long nose. "You think matters are so simple, Mr Potter? I don't break under Crucius; that's the main reason the Dark Lord believes my claims. He summoned me every night
for a week and cursed me as thoroughly as his powers would allow. And when I still insisted that I
could not have blood on my hands, then he finally let me be."

"Cruciatus every night for a week?" Harry gasped, closing his eyes. He remembered the
Longbottoms, tortured with the curse until they lost their minds, and realised with some measure of
respect that Snape was far stronger than he'd ever given him credit for.

"I, however, was not fourteen," Snape admitted, his eyes a bit shadowed at the memories.

Harry cleared his throat. "Um... how come you didn't tell him, while you were at it, that you
couldn't watch things like that, either?"

"A spy is not much use unless he has a chance to be present," Snape dryly explained. "Who can say
what the Dark Lord might reveal of his plans and intentions during one of these... sessions? He
finds them recreational, did your poor pure Gryffindor brain not glean that much from what you
saw?"

"Yeah, I got that," Harry answered, deciding to ignore Snape's phrasing.

"He is more likely to let things slip over his tongue when he is relaxed," Snape said with some
measure of disgust. "It was during a raid on Muggles that he revealed his plan to capture a certain
prophecy, for example. I have to be there to hear such things."

Harry swallowed, nodding. "But..." Tears rose to his eyes, though he didn't let Snape see. "But
don't you wish that you could stop it, save them?"

"I don't wish anything," Snape flatly denied, his eyes hard. "I can't afford to. I Occlude my mind,
and layer my thoughts so that he sees nothing but bloodlust, and rage, and deep-seated regret that I
can't partake as the others can."

"How do you make yourself feel things like that, things you really don't feel at all?" Harry
whispered, appalled.

Snape's lips twisted into an expression of self-loathing. "I have a memory, Mr Potter. Unlike you, I
know how to use it."

"You mean you used to like seeing people being tormented and torn apart?"

"You oversimplify everything, which, I might add, is one of your major failings in Potions class,"
Snape mocked. "Shall I explain it in terms even you can comprehend? Once upon a time, I was an
angry young man. The Dark Lord used that. And before you decide, in your Gryffindor nobility, to
somehow idealize me as just one more of his victims, allow me to share another shard of truth. I fully
agreed with his views on blood purity." He snapped his fingers, the sound almost explosive, it was
so abrupt. "I would not have thought twice about killing your mother, and even less than that about
killing you."

Harry was quiet for a long moment, before he asked, "What changed?"

Snape scowled. "I found I could not agree with executing blood traitors, as the Dark Lord called
them. Any fool could see that there were too few purebloods as it was."

Harry didn't like the sound of that. "That's it?" he quietly questioned.

"At first, yes. But it led me to other questions, other conclusions." Snape sighed, and leaned his chin
on his hands as he sat at the table, his dark eyes turbulent. "I began investigating bloodlines and
discovered to my dismay that everything I had believed about wizardkind was founded on entirely false suppositions. There are no purebloods, not in the sense I once thought. We all have Muggle heritage; yours is simply more proximate than mine. And to say that only wizards are fully human is a complete misrepresentation of reality. We are the ones with non-human ancestors; it's where the magic comes from."

"I just knew Malfoy was part veela," Harry weakly joked, biting back on the other part he wanted to add, that Snape was likely part vampire.

"A hundred generations back, or more," Snape merely commented. "It's why Muggleborns exist, in fact. The magic mated into the bloodline finds full expression at some point in time. Pure-bloodedness is a myth. You are no less a full wizard than I, and your mother was every bit a witch."

"But about the Death Eater meeting . . ." Harry gestured hopelessly with his hands, trying to communicate regret that he still didn't understand. "Afterwards . . . when you get back to your dungeons, when you're free to really think, don't you wish then that you could have saved them?"

Snape suddenly shoved his chair back as he stood. "I can't save them. It's not in my power. I stand there with twelve, sometimes twenty, Death Eaters, every one of them intent on worse than murder. If I make a move to save anyone," he sneered, "it will not succeed. I will have sacrificed my only advantage for nothing!"

"I know you can't save them, Professor," Harry murmured, his words washing over Snape's obvious pain. Pain the Potions Master was trying to deny, he recognised. "I'm sorry you have to see those things, time after time, and even sorrier that I asked you about them. You're a brave man."

Snape turned away, each of his hands grasping the opposite elbow, but before he could reply, Remus was strolling through the front door, a large white bag in his hands. Animated ice cream cones across the front of it appeared to be involved in a food fight. "Anyone for sundaes?"

"Um, I'm not really hungry," Harry denied. In fact, he felt a bit like his stomach would never tolerate food again. "But thanks, Remus. It was really sweet of you to go out and get me some."

"Severus?"

Snape huffed. "I'd thought to advance Mr Potter's Occlumency, but I am distinctly not in the correct frame of mind."

With no more comment than that, he stalked from the kitchen. Not a moment later, the whoosh of the Floo told them that Snape had gone.

"What was that about?" Remus asked, setting the ice cream down next to the pensieve.

"I asked him what he got up to last night," Harry admitted, miserable.

"I asked him what he got up to last night," Harry admitted, miserable.

"Ah." Remus didn't add that he thought that hadn't been such a capital idea, but he did inquire, "Do you want to talk about it?"

Nice of him to ask, Harry thought, instead of just launching into a reprimand, or worse, a discussion. Harry didn't need one. By then, he felt every inch the idiot child Snape liked to call him. A tightness in his throat had him gulping a bit, and casting his thoughts about for something to distract him.

"I'd rather talk about my dreams. I was trying to stay awake, but I dozed off over Hermione's notes, and when Snape woke me up, he said that I'd been screaming in parseltongue. I don't remember a thing from the dream, myself."
Remus stared at him. "Do you feel ambivalent about parseltongue?"

"Not really. Well, I used to. A lot. But even then, it was more a feeling from outside, than one of my own. I mean, half the school thought I was up to no good, and the other half didn't trust Parselmouths on principal. That's probably why I pretty much tried to forget I was one. But since chatting with Sals so much . . . and Snape and I had a talk about it, too . . . No, I really think I'm okay with it."

"I don't know, then," Remus admitted. "Maybe it was just a nightmare."

"Maybe," Harry acknowledged, but he really didn't think so. The dream meant something; they all did. He felt like the knowledge was just out of his grasp, that if he could reach out a bit further, he'd finally understand.

"Where is Sals, anyway?"

"Haven't seen her all day," Harry realised. Surely the little snake couldn't have been offended as Snape had claimed. Could she have? Just because Harry had basically told her to stuff her questions about fathers? "Oh, she'll come out when she's ready," he decided, scooping up the ice cream bag to stow it in what passed for a freezer. The fridge was pretty similar to an old-fashioned Muggle appliance, he decided; it was just kept cold through magic instead of electricity.

"Well, if there's not going to be an Occlumency lesson tonight," Harry announced, "let's you and me work some more on my magic. Wandless, I think. See if my wand, or even a wand, come to think of it, has been the problem all along."

"Could you cast wandless spells before?" Remus gasped.

"Nope, not one whit," Harry replied, trying to get himself into a cheerful frame of mind. "Not intentionally, anyway. I don't count accidental magic. I mean, all children do that; Snape told me it was normal. I don't think it means we can all bring it under conscious control. But I have to try something different than we have been doing."

"All right," Remus agreed. He went to move the pensieve out of their way.

"Don't look in that," Harry quickly cautioned. "It's full."

"With your thoughts?" Remus glanced about as if afraid to offer, but aware that he probably should, as Snape had left so abruptly. "Shall I help you put your memories back, Harry?"

"They're not mine," Harry told him, deciding he'd let Remus draw his own conclusions. "Come on. We'll go out to the parlour where Snape and I always work. And for Merlin's sake, Remus, don't be afraid to use your own wand. It's all right. I'm okay."

Harry didn't glance once at the pensieve as he strode from the kitchen.
Snape didn't come to Grimmauld Place for three nights. The pensieve, still full of his memories, sat abandoned in the kitchen. Not wanting to even see it, Harry stopped doing any cooking, grateful when Remus took over without a word as to why Harry was avoiding the kitchen. They started eating in the dining room, even for breakfast.

Harry had got nowhere with wandless magic, and since both he and Remus were basically out of ideas, their lessons fell by the wayside. Harry occupied his time penning more letters, studying, practicing his Occlumency, and searching for Sals, who had yet to make an appearance.

He also found time, and the requisite nerve, to attempt another phone call to Privet Drive. Sitting in the damp, cold cellar, his eyes scanning for Sals by habit, Harry dragged the phone from his pocket and tapped out the number on the keypad, then held his breath as he listened to the ringing on the other end.

"Hallo?" A man's voice answered. Harry very nearly hung up before he remembered that he wasn't going to let his uncle intimidate him, ever again. *Keep that thought*, he told himself.

"Dudley Dursley, please," he politely requested, though he knew it wasn't likely to be as simple as all that.

Sure enough, it wasn't. "Who's this, then?" Vernon barked down the phone.

*Breathe*, Harry had to tell himself. *Swallow. He can't do a thing to you, not now. He can't even threaten to eject you from the house. Been there, done that. "It's Harry."*

A stream of invectives had Harry holding the phone a foot from his ear. He didn't hear all of it, though *ungrateful freak* and *should have chucked you out into the street, basket and all, the minute we found you on the stoop* stood out from the rush of words.

"Let me talk to Dudley," Harry finally ordered over the harangue.

"You can go straight to hell, boy!"

"Let me talk to Dudley or I'll come there in person," Harry tried. As expected, the threat worked. There was no way Vernon wanted Harry within a hundred kilometres of his home.

"Hallo, Harry," Dudley's voice came on, his tones sullen.

"Uncle Vernon!" Harry shouted, exasperated at the sounds of two people breathing into receivers. "Get off the extension!"

"How'd you know--"

"How do you think?" Harry tried for that icy tone Snape used to scare the students witless. "Now get off the phone so I can talk with Dudley, and while you're at it, get out of the house, too!"

"Don't you *hex* him, boy! I had a headache for a week after that stunt you pulled at Petunia's grave, God rest her soul. Have you no shame at all? At her grave, it was!"

"I didn't *hex* you," Harry snapped. "That was my teacher, who unlike you, is a decent sort. For some reason, he didn't want you to kick me senseless when all I'd done was go there to mourn!"
"Kicked senseless is too good for the likes of you," Vernon railed. "You killed my Petunia!"

"No, he didn't." Dudley had finally spoken again. He still sounded sad, but not as resentful as before. "He was trying to help Mum."

"Oh, grow up and smell the coffee, boy! He knew what he was about, the whole damned time!"

"Uncle Vernon," Harry broke in. "Get out of the house so Dudley and I can talk."

"Who are you to tell me what to do in my own home, by God?"

Harry sighed. He'd known all along that it would come to this. "I'm a wizard, and pretty soon here, I'm going to be an angry wizard! You know what happens when I get angry! Remember Aunt Marge? Now, get off the line!"

A phone slamming down was the only reply Vernon made to that. After a moment more, Dudley quietly announced, "He went to the backyard, Harry."

"Good," Harry said shortly, then willed himself to calm down. "How are you, Dudley?"

"You called to find out that?" Dudley sounded confused.

"Yeah. Are you doing all right? It must be really hard."

"I miss her," his cousin moaned.

Harry didn't know what to say to that, since he could hardly make the standard claim of I miss her, too.

"Was it really your teacher?" Dudley went on. "Who did that to Dad, I mean?"

"Yes."

"But I saw you cursing him!" Dudley argued. "It sounded like a whole bunch of different . . . er, spells, I guess. And then this big boom and blast all around . . ."

"Listen, Dudley," Harry tried to explain. "You were right to tell me not to come to the funeral. I think Uncle Vernon really was going to kill me. I didn't do any magic, but if I had, it would have been in self-defence."

"But you were screaming curses, Harry," Dudley went on. "How can you say it wasn't you?"

Harry wasn't about to get into that, so he merely replied, "I was just trying to scare him, Dudley. But he was too mad to listen, so my teacher helped me before things could get even messier."

"Your teacher's a wizard, then."

In other circumstances, Harry would have laughed. Dudley sounded like he'd just solved the Riddle of the Sphinx, or something, when all he'd done was state the obvious. Harry didn't laugh, though. Nothing was very funny at the moment.

"Yeah, he's a wizard."

"You said he wasn't. You lied to Dad."

"Yeah, well you lie to him about a hundred times a week," Harry pointed out.
"I do not!"

"How many times did you sneak puddings and deny it?"

Dudley gave a groan. "I haven't done that lately. I'm never hungry anymore, Harry. I think I've lost two stone since I saw you."

"Well, don't stop eating completely," Harry urged, concerned despite himself.

"How are you, Harry?" his cousin asked, a question which took Harry completely by surprise.

He shifted position, leaning on the wall as he sat cross-legged. "Um, all right, I guess. I was really sore for a while, after the operation."

Dudley drew in a little breath. "Oh, yeah. I'm sorry, I forgot. That's stupid, isn't it?"

"No, it's not stupid," Harry insisted. "You had enough to do, thinking about your mum."

"Yeah," Dudley acknowledged. "But I think Dad still doesn't really get it, what you did, what you tried to do, for her. It's kind of awful, actually. I didn't think much about it at the time, but I'd be scared to have an operation like that, and you're younger than I am, and Dad didn't even go sit with you, or anything. Even if he wouldn't, I could have, but honest, Harry, I didn't think of it until you were already gone. I'm real sorry."

Shocked almost into speechlessness, it took Harry a moment to answer. "Well, I had my teacher there, you know. So it was okay. Don't feel bad, Dudley. You were where you were supposed to be, with your mum."

"She never even woke up!" Dudley cried. "I didn't get to say g-- g-- goodbye!"

"I'm sorry," was all Harry could think to say to that. He heard a slight slithering noise, and darted his gaze towards it, but didn't spot Sals.

"You didn't get to say goodbye to your parents, either, though, I bet," Dudley said in a slow, sad voice. "Harry? I'm really, really sorry I was so awful to you. I mean, calling you scarhead, and little orphan Harry, and getting so mad when Mum and Dad let you move out of the cupboard, and forgetting your birthday and . . . stuff."

Who are you and what have you done to Dudley Dursley? That was the question on the tip of Harry's tongue, but instead of asking it in quite that way, he tentatively ventured, "Um, Dudley? Why are you being so nice all of a sudden?"

Harry heard a long sigh come down the line. "You remember those . . . things, Harry? In the alley? I couldn't see them, but I could feel them, coming closer until they were just all over me."


"I . . . um, well I thought you made them attack me, at first," Dudley admitted. "I mean, I thought that for a while. You were already gone away to school before I realised that you made them stop."

Since Vernon had specifically said that Harry had set demons after Dudley, Harry wondered where his cousin's insight had come from. Somehow, he couldn't imagine Aunt Petunia getting it right, either. "That's true, I made them stop," he agreed.

"With . . . your wand, and some white-silver thingy galloping around," Dudley whispered.
"Yes. My Patronus," Harry explained. "Sort of a magic . . . saviour. I didn't think you saw it, though. Um, I'm not even sure that Muggles can. You can't see Dementors, after all."

"I don't know if I actually did see it," Dudley admitted. "But I know what it looks like. I bet that sounds strange."

"Er, well . . . yeah, it does."

"It's like this," Dudley explained, his voice catching a bit. "M-- M-- Mum was really worried about me, afterwards. I couldn't sleep but two or three hours a night, and those were filled with awful, horrible dreams. Like I'd never, ever be happy again. I don't think I can really explain what it was like--"

"You don't have to," Harry murmured. "I know. So, um, are you still having trouble sleeping?"

"Some, but that's because I miss Mum," Dudley sobbed, though after a few seconds he got himself under control again. "Those really awful dreams stopped after Mum took me to a . . . a therapist. Oh, Mummy and Daddy had an awful row about it, they did. Dad said it made me a Nancy boy, but Mum insisted."

"Your mum was right," Harry assured his cousin. "The therapist helped you, I hope?"

"Yeah . . ." Dudley mumbled something as if figuring out what to say, then went on, "Um, she hypnotized me, Harry. And that was when I remembered what you did to those . . . things in the alley. I don't know if I saw you make that silvery animal thing, really, but I could see you do it under hypnosis, if that makes sense. Um . . . can all wizards make those things?"

"Not all," Harry admitted.

"Yeah, that's what the therapist told me. She said you must be a really powerful wizard and I was lucky you'd been there to save me. She said those awful things were trying to suck out my soul and I'd have been a goner if I hadn't had a cousin who could stop them."

Harry dropped the phone.

"Harry?" he heard his cousin's voice asking. Harry scooped the phone up.

"I'm here. I was just surprised. You . . . you went to a therapist who knows about . . . um, people like me?"

"Yeah. Mrs Figg recommended her. Told Mum she'd better take me to someone who could understand what had happened, because otherwise I'd be locked up for a raving loony before too long. Mum didn't like it, but after a while I stopped sleeping completely, and I guess she figured Mrs Figg was right. Dad pitched a huge fit, but well, you know what Mum's like--" Another sob. "What she was like when she was determined to get her way."

Harry did know. Vernon would have thrown him out after the Dementors had attacked Dudley, but with a little prompting from Dumbledore, Aunt Petunia had put her foot down and insisted he be allowed to remain.

"I'm glad you got some help, Dudley," Harry said sincerely. "I hope Uncle Vernon isn't still being a git to you over it."

"Nah. Well, as long as I call you a freak every so often, he figures I'm doing okay. But I don't mean it anymore, Harry. I'm . . . I'm real glad you turned out a wizard, and one powerful enough to . . .
stop those, you-knows. I've felt bad that I went barmy and blamed you when I should have been thanking you, that night."

Harry gave a low laugh. "Feels like I'm meeting someone new, Dudley. Hallo, I'm Harry Potter, pleased to meet you."

"I wanted to thank you at the hospital," Dudley confessed. "But with Dad there? I thought I'd better not."

"Good thinking," Harry approved. "No sense getting his back up."

"I gave you the chocolate hoping you'd understand it wasn't just chocolate."

_For Dudley, Harry thought, that's a pretty complex concept. "I appreciated it."_

Dudley cleared his throat. "I feel really bad about Mum. I mean, not just because I miss her, but . . . well, I was the one who told Dad that we should let you try some magic to heal her. After I knew what you'd done to those you-knows, I was sure you could do anything."

"I'm sorry I couldn't, Dudley. You do understand that, don't you? I did want to help, but there are some things magic's just no good for."

"Yeah, I get that, but it's hard to take. I mean, a wizard in the family, but what good did it do Mum? No offence, Harry."

"None taken."

"The worst part though is that I made Dad write that letter. He didn't want to, not at first. And . . . and then--" Dudley gulped in what sounded like a bucketful of air. "You offered what you could, the marrow I mean, but she rejected it, and died, and in a way it's all my fault because if I hadn't made Dad write you, you'd never have known, never have tried to help!"

"Oh, Dudley," Harry moaned, easily recognizing the sentiment, the fatal chain of logic leading to the flawed conclusion. "No, you can't do that to yourself. It's not your fault. You might as well say that your father's right and I'm to blame. It was my marrow."

"You were trying to help!" Dudley immediately objected.

"But so were you," Harry calmly insisted.

"Yeah," Dudley admitted, reluctance coating the word. "I tell myself that, sometimes. Part of me knows you're right, but there's this other part that keeps going over it, over and over, you know?"

_Oh yes, thought Harry. I do know._

"I worked through a lot of things with Marsha," Dudley rambled on. "That's my therapist. Anger, mostly. And why I wouldn't stay on my diet. I . . . I'm glad you called. Dad says if you come around here, he'll show you what-for, and I figured after the . . . after what happened after the funeral, you'd know not to come home for the summer, or even try and visit, and well, anyway . . . I thought I'd never hear from you again, you know?"

"I'll keep in touch," Harry promised, surprised to realise that he meant it. "Are you still seeing Marsha? You know, to help you deal with . . . um, your mum dying?"

"Dad knows she's talked to me about . . . er, people like you, so now that Mum's not here to insist, he
won't let me even mention her." Dudley sounded dead hopeless.

"Hmm. Well, tell you what, Dudley, I'll see if I can persuade him to be more reasonable."

Harry could hear Dudley swallowing. "I don't really think you should go around threatening people, Harry."

"That's a bit rich, coming from you," Harry coolly observed.

"Yeah, but--"

"No buts. Your therapy is really important, Dudley. Now, just one thing, all right? If you don't hear from me for a long time at a stretch, don't think it means anything. Things can get busy at a boarding school, and besides, we don't have phones or regular mail. Just owl post."

"How're you calling me?"

"Oh, long story," Harry told him. "I can't really get into it."

"You're hiding, huh?" Harry could almost hear Dudley nodding. "Dad's been saying that somebody's trying to kill you. Er . . . a wizard. A real bad one."

For a moment, Harry wondered how Uncle Vernon could know about Voldemort being after him again. Then he remembered that after the Dementor attack, it had all sort of come out right there in the Dursleys' living room.

"I have to tell you, Harry," Dudley admitted in a hushed, fearful whisper. "Dad'll be furious, but I just have to. Ever since the funeral, he's been going on about how he'd just love to help this whoever-it-is. Says it's time you got what you deserve, and who cares if it's some evil wizard who's after you, he'd help the devil himself if it would put you six feet under."

Harry almost dropped the phone again, but managed to say, "Uh, thanks for telling me that, Dudley. Though I really don't know what Uncle Vernon could do. I mean, this evil wizard isn't exactly in the habit of asking Muggles for assistance. In fact, you should warn your father to steer clear of him. He's really, really dangerous. He kills Muggles all the time."

"Yeah, well you be careful, too, Harry."

"I will," Harry promised. "Let me talk to your father now, okay?"

"Don't threaten him."

"No more so than he does me," Harry grimly replied.

Surprisingly enough, Dudley understood. "Yeah. Guess you have a point there. Okay. I'll talk to you later." Harry heard the phone being set down, then a bellowing voice growing fainter as Dudley walked away. "Dad! Harry wants to talk to you! Oh, come on, Dad! Come in!"

The next thing Harry heard was Vernon roaring "What now?" down the line.

"Can you guess what the Incendio curse would do to you?" Harry pleasantly inquired. "Or Petrificus Totalus? I didn't mean any of my hexes after the funeral, which is why it took my teacher to fell you, but I won't be so restrained if you go about offering to help other wizards arrange my death."

Vernon began stammering, but Harry cut him off.
"You're not to take it out on Dudley that he mentioned it to me, either! Just be glad that he has sense enough to appreciate family! And one more thing, Uncle Vernon."

The silence on the line was palpable.

"You let him see Marsha as often as he likes, and don't you dare give him a moment's grief over it!"

Vernon was cowed, but not so much so that he'd take that lying down. "Now just a minute! Who do you think you are, telling me how to raise my boy?"

"I think," Harry drawled, trying again for that glacial tone Snape could do so well, "that I'm sorely tempted to hex you right now over the phone. No reason why it shouldn't work, really. Shall I start with Alohomora? Trust me, you don't want to know what that'll do to you."

"I'll take him to his damned shrink!" Vernon screeched, rage punctuating the fear in every syllable.

"Good," Harry replied. "I'll be calling again to make sure you have. Good-bye, Uncle Vernon."

The only answer he got to that was the sound of the receiver slamming down hard enough to shatter it.

Harry sighed. Uncle Vernon was probably angry --and stupid-- enough to wish he could betray Harry to Voldemort. It wasn't a good feeling, knowing that his own uncle would gladly do that to him. But at least Uncle Vernon wasn't his blood. He was just an uncle by marriage.

Dudley, however . . . Dudley was different. In more ways than one, now.

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Harry had finally made his way through Hermione's notes for Charms and Transfiguration. He was just bundling them up, along with the letters he'd written in the past three days, when he heard Snape and Remus talking downstairs. A peculiar sort of nervousness washed over him, similar to what he'd felt last year when he'd had to go to Potions after that horrible Occlumency session, the one during which he'd seen pieces of Snape's past. Similar, but somehow even worse. Back then, he'd trampled his professor's privacy, which was bad enough. But this time, he felt as though he'd done worse: he'd betrayed a friendship.

Why hadn't he just accepted it when Snape didn't want to discuss the Death Eater meeting? Why hadn't he believed the man when he'd claimed not to have taken part in those awful goings-on?

Because I didn't, simple as that, Harry admitted to himself. Snape was right; I had to see for myself. . . Doesn't mean I'm proud of it, though.

Well, there was nothing for it but to go downstairs and face the music, was there? Snatching up the parchments and letters he'd bundled, Harry made his way down to the parlour.

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"Mr Potter," was Snape's level greeting. No emotion there at all, not that he had expected any.

"Professor," he replied, nodding slightly. He felt like he was in a fancy-dress play, or something, even his words stilted, but he didn't know how else to speak, not after what had happened last time. "I have some things for you to owl to my friends, if you'd be so kind."

Snape took them from his outstretched hand, but kept his gaze averted.
"Severus has been asking about your dreams," Remus volunteered, looking from one to the other. He tapped an impatient foot as though he didn't care for what he was seeing. "I had to tell him that you haven't mentioned any new ones."

"I haven't had any," Harry explained. "Not that I can remember."

"Just as you don't remember screaming in Parseltongue, Potter?" Snape frostily inquired.

"I can't help it if I don't remember," Harry sighed. He really didn't want to go on, but he knew he'd better, all things considered. "Um . . . there's something else you both really should know, though. Probably the Order should know, too. I was talking to Dudley this morning, down in the cellar, er . . . on the phone, I mean, and--"

"Is this leading to an actual point, Potter?"

Harry took a breath, this time organizing his thoughts before he spoke, though it was difficult when what he really wanted to do was let fly with a few choice words about sarcastic arseholes. He managed, though, and succinctly announced, "Vernon Dursley's said that he'll sell me out to Voldemort, first chance he gets. I tried to discourage him, but knowing him, he'll say to hell with the consequences and do it anyway."

"What consequences?" Remus asked.

Harry closed his eyes, wishing he didn't have to admit it, especially in front of Snape. "Um . . . I told him I'd cast Alohomora on him, actually."

"Alohomora," Snape repeated, one half of his mouth curling in disdain.

"Look, he doesn't have a clue what it means," Harry retorted, tired of being polite. "What should I have threatened him with, a little friendly Avada Kedavra? And don't say I'd have to mean it, because for him, I damned well could!"

"Stop it, you two," Remus demanded. He glared at Harry. "Don't talk about the Unforgivables, Harry. It's obscene at your age. You shouldn't even be thinking about such things!"

"What's my age got to do with anything? Is it going to keep Voldemort from Avadakairaing me? I'd think the lot of you would be training me to wield the Unforgivables, because if you don't, I'm pretty much a walking dead man! Or did you think I was going to fulfil my destiny using Cheering Charms? Maybe I should just offer him a plum pudding and be done with it!"

"Potter, you're hysterical," was Snape's cold-hearted response.

"No, I'm aware I'd rather not die, thank you very much!"

"Please, sit down, Harry," Remus broke in. When Harry did, he turned his brown eyes on the Potions Master. "And you, Severus."

Remus took a chair only after Snape had sunk into one. "Now," he directed, "the question before us tonight isn't how best to help you once your magic comes back in full. It's whether Vernon Dursley poses any sort of real threat."

Snape blew out a breath through his teeth, and laced his fingers together. "The Fidelius Charm speaks to that. Potter may own this house, but he's not its Secret Keeper. He can't have told Dursley where it is, not even by accident or implication. Ergo, as long as he manages for once in his life to do as he is told, and stay here, he will be perfectly safe, his uncle's animosity aside."
"Harry?"

"I don't trust Uncle Vernon." Harry grimaced. "But like the professor, I really don't know what he could do to hurt me. I just thought I ought to mention it."

"I'm glad you did," Remus warmly replied. "I'll go let Albus know, too. So if you don't mind, Harry, I'll leave you and Severus to your Occlumency lesson."

Harry almost wished he could call him back, but he wasn't that much of a coward. The minute Remus had swept up the stairs, Harry turned to Snape and waited.

Snape regarded him for a long, silent moment. Harry cracked first.

"Do you have any letters for me?"

Snape withdrew a packet from his robes and leaning forward, passed it to him.

Harry sighed. Well, he'd known this wouldn't be easy. He was tempted, in the face of the man's silence, to go ahead and read his post, but decided that wouldn't really help matters. "I'm sorry, all right?" he finally offered, setting the letters aside. "I should have trusted what you told me."

The Potions Master narrowed his eyes to black slits. "Inadequate, Mr Potter."

"Inadequate? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Inadequate," Snape recited. "Insufficient. Unacceptable. Incomplete. Unequal to the purpose; deficient; not meeting the requirements especially of a task--"

"I know what it means!" Harry erupted.

"Then perhaps you shouldn't inquire as to the meaning."

_The man was impossible. Absolutely impossible._ Harry spoke through gritted teeth. "What do you want me to say, Professor? Let's just start with that, so I can say it, and we can get past this!"

Well, that was a lot of help. Snape gave him contemptuous look and didn't reply.

"Oh, the hell with it," Harry gave up. "Fine, hold your grudge. It's not like I'm not used to you hating me."

He'd sort of hoped to spark a reaction there, something along the lines of _I don't hate you, Harry, of course I don't hate you. Now as to your reprehensible behaviour last night..._ At least it would have got them talking. Snape, however, declined to take the bait.

"Let's just get started, then," Harry conceded. "Get out your wand and yell _Legilimens_, and I'll start working on trying to push you out, all right? I've been practicing, but without someone to push against, I can't tell if I'm doing it right."

Harry saw Snape take a breath, and fancied the man relaxed, just marginally. " Aren't you neglecting something?"

Harry furrowed his brow. "Um, no, I don't think so."

Snape muttered something that Harry couldn't catch, but he was pretty sure he heard both _foolish_ and _Gryffindor_ in there somewhere. "The pensieve! Bring it, Mr Potter."
Flinching a bit at touching it, Harry carried the pensieve out of the kitchen and set it in its usual place on the low table before the couch, watching without a word as Snape incanted the Latin that would allow him to withdraw his own memories from it. Then, as he had done so many times before, he touched his wand to Harry's temple and whispered, "Pensare non pensatum."

Taking a chance, Harry thought of how much he regretted having pressed Snape to tell him about the Death Eater meeting.

"Again?"

"No," He arched back from the tip of the wand.

"Very well." Backing off a few paces, Snape cautioned, "This will be harder, Potter. Every time you push out at me, I will push in harder. Keep your focus. Centre yourself in the fire. Legilimens!"

It had been their most gruelling session to date. By the time it was over, Harry was dripping sweat and felt close to passing out. Collapsing on the couch when Snape finally lowered his wand, Harry leaned back against the cushions and closed his eyes, gasping.

"It will be worse with him," Snape saw fit to warn. "Magnitudes worse."

"Yeah, got it," Harry moaned. "I'll keep practicing, now that I have more of an idea what to do."

"Do that, Mr Potter." Snape flicked his robes as though preparing to leave. Moving his wand toward the pensieve, he began chanting the incantation that would let him restore Harry's memories.

"No, not just yet," Harry blearily requested.

Snape arched a sarcastic eyebrow and waited for Harry to explain.

"I . . . I . . ."

"Yes?" Snape asked darkly.

His head felt like a lump of granite, but Harry lifted it anyway, green eyes searching out Snape's dark ones. "You said my apology was inadequate. Maybe it was, I don't know. But I'd really like you to accept it, anyway. Please. I thought we were . . . I don't know. Friends, in some respect at least."

Harry couldn't have said that Snape's expression softened, but at least it didn't get any worse. That alone was probably what gave him the courage to finish. "I want you to look in the pensieve. I mean . . . I put my apology in there. Maybe this time you'll think it's adequate."

A sigh escaped Snape's lips. "You don't have to do that."

"Yeah, well I want to. Professor?"

Snape shook his head. "Apology accepted, Potter. We'll leave it at that."

"But I really do want--"

"Do me the courtesy, this time, of respecting what I want."

"Like I should have done to begin with," Harry acknowledged, understanding dawning. "Yes, all right. Thank you, sir."
Snape gave another sigh. "I do believe I prefer you insolent, all things considered."

"I'll work on it." Harry grinned slightly. He didn't feel entirely at ease, but decided to try to act as though he did. Maybe that would get Snape to ease up, too. "Speaking of which . . . just tell me to sod off if I shouldn't ask, and this time I will, I swear, but I was wondering why you came here at all on Halloween. You must have known you'd have to leave. Did you want me to . . . um, see you getting summoned?"

An incredulous look, Harry thought, was at least a reaction.

"Okay, I guess not," he surmised. "I couldn't think why you'd want me to see, but you are a Slytherin, so I figured it had to be some sort of manipulation."

"Hardly," Snape denied, though he didn't look in the least put out at having been called manipulative, Harry noted. "The Dark Lord's summons usually comes at midnight both on Halloween and Samhain. I had planned to be gone before that hour."

"Samhain?"

"The cross-quarter day between the autumn equinox and the winter solstice," Snape snapped. "Really, Potter, this is very basic Astronomy! You should have known all this before you ever set foot at Hogwarts!"

"Yeah, well I was raised by Muggles," Harry drawled. "Remember? Most of them aren't so big on cross-quarter days, or all the other stuff you teachers assume we ought to know. It means I have trouble in a lot of my classes."

"It doesn't appear to trouble Miss Granger," Snape returned.

"We're not all brilliant." Harry smiled. "But I will pass on your compliment, Professor."

Snape didn't look concerned. "She will never believe I said it."

"You think? Nah, she'll trust a fellow Gryffindor."

To Harry's disappointment, Snape didn't acknowledge the banter by so much as a raised eyebrow. *Damn.*

The Potions Master merely gave a slight nod toward the pensieve. "We had best restore your memory before too long has passed. Hold still, Mr Potter."

After Snape had placed Harry's thoughts back where they belonged, Harry had to ask, "Why'd you leave your own memories in there for three days, then?"

Snape narrowed his eyes a bit. "I wasn't eager to draw them in and out of my mind, repeatedly. It was simpler just to leave them be until everyone concerned had looked his fill."

Harry wrinkled his nose. "Huh?"

A long sigh, then: "Albus needed to see them too, to look for patterns I might have missed, and since disembodied memories don't typically survive magical travel, he had to come here. His schedule didn't permit that until late last night."

Harry stared, a familiar fury filling his veins until they felt like they might burst. "The headmaster was here in this house last night? And he didn't even bother to see me, talk to me? What, does he still
think Voldemort's going to reach out through me to get him? Even here?"

"Albus has to do what he thinks best," Snape answered. "I do not know why he has been avoiding you of late, but I could hazard a guess."

So could Harry, once he thought about it. "Yeah, he wants us to learn to get along."

"I should think it's more a case of . . . he wants you to have someone you can turn to," Snape clarified. "You were angry enough to destroy half the contents of his office last year, so he doesn't imagine you long to turn to him. But you do need someone, especially now that Black is . . . gone."

Harry closed his eyes, then clenched them. It helped. "I have Remus, still," he managed to say. "And Ron, and Hermione."

"A teacher whom even you admit doesn't acknowledge that you are growing up, not to mention one whose condition makes him regularly unavailable; and inept adolescents who cannot possibly understand the weight both of past and future that you must bear."

"Great, now I feel more alone than ever."

"You are not alone."

Green eyes opened, eyes that were old before their time. Eyes that had seen too much. "Of course I am. I can't firecall you in the middle of the night if I have a bad dream, or go on about how much Dudley baffles me, these days. It's not your problem."

"You may wake me anytime you have need," Snape steadily returned, though he didn't look the slightest bit compassionate about it. Just . . . factual. Analytical. "Any need. As for your cousin, who else can you tell? For all you say you have them, you have never told Lupin or your friends the full truth about Privet Drive."

"Yeah, well I never told you, either. Not really."

"Regardless, we are where we are, you and I." Snape paused for a delicate moment. "Might I ask what you meant about your cousin?"

"Nothing," Harry passed it off, then realised that Snape might be a good person to ask the one question that had been bothering him. "Just . . . I'm starting to think he might be willing to ward me, even if Uncle Vernon objects. But it's not his house. Does that matter?"

"It does."

"Figures. Oh well, it's not like I want to go back, anyway."

"Even were the wards intact, you would not go back to a home whose owner might conspire with the Dark Lord."

"Too bad he didn't say he'd do it sooner, then," Harry quipped. "I'd rather have spent summers here with Sirius."

"Black would have liked that," Snape admitted. "He asked Albus, more than once."

It was good to hear that, but it hurt. Terribly, reminding Harry of all he'd missed. He clenched his teeth, and purely to distract himself, asked, "So when's this Samhain?"

"Three nights hence." Snape bit out the words as though they were something frozen and distasteful.
"And before you worry yourself again over what might transpire on that night, allow me to elucidate that for the Dark Lord, Samhain is ritual, not recreation."

Shivers convulsed Harry. He'd seen Voldemort engaged in ritual, after all. The blood of an enemy . . . the bones of his father . . . the sacrifice of a servant. "Oh, ick. That's probably even worse."

Snape didn't answer that, saying instead, "I will be not be here, tomorrow, although if you need something from me, Lupin can contact me through the Floo."

_He wouldn't ask_, Harry told himself. _He wouldn't ask. He didn't need to know, he wouldn't ask._ . . . "Why aren't you coming?" he heard himself ask.

"The same reason I have not been here these past few nights. I have been brewing the Wolfsbane Potion for your mangy friend."

Harry whooshed out a breath. "It's that complicated?"

Snape got a strange look on his face, one Harry really couldn't even read, until the Potions Master admitted, "The first batch was unfortunately ruined."

"You failed to brew a perfect Potion, Professor?"

Snape scowled. "I had things on my mind. Do not inquire further."

That time, Harry knew enough to let it go. He certainly wasn't going to say what Snape always said in class: _If you can only be competent when there is nothing to distract you, then you are not competent!_

"All right," he murmured as Snape moved toward the Floo. "I'll see you day after tomorrow, then?"

"Yes. Late," Snape confirmed. "Until then, keep practicing, Mr Potter."

Harry nodded, and watched him go, belatedly realizing that not once all evening had his teacher chosen to call him _Harry_.

_Apology accepted_ and _You are not alone_, he decided, were pretty much meaningless, in that case.

Harry was still frowning over it as he headed up to bed.
"Still no luck?" Remus asked the next afternoon as entered the small room downstairs where Harry was working.

"Still no luck," Harry echoed in disgust, laying aside his wand. "I really thought that might do it, you know? If I just worked completely alone so I could really concentrate, so I could Occlude my mind while I cast the spells, if I just took hold of the dark powers that seem to be all I have left . . ." A harsh laugh rebounded against his clenched teeth. "Oh, well. At least now I have an excuse for being so bloody bad at Transfiguration."

"Is that what you've been trying all this time? You missed lunch."

"Not hungry," Harry excused, scowling at the wooden cooking spoons he'd collected from the kitchen. "And yeah. I figured I'd try something ridiculously simple, something McGonagall would laugh at, it's such a joke. No shift in function, let alone life force. No real change in structure, just a transmutation in form. Spoons to ladles, what could be easier? But I can't even do that."

"Perhaps simplicity itself is the problem. Have you tried something complex?"

"Yeah, when I got good and sick of these spoons. No luck there, either."

"How about something dark?"

Harry blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Or rather, what other wizards would term dark, Harry? Have you tried that?"

"Well, no . . ." Harry had to pause to think. "I mean, the magic I seem to have left would strike most wizards as somewhat dark, but that doesn't mean I know any dark spells. Besides, the one time I did try an Unforgivable, I couldn't make it work. And it's a sure bet I don't know anything that would qualify as a dark transfiguration, unless you mean . . . change something good into something evil?"

"Just a thought," Remus shrugged.

A shudder coursed across Harry's shoulders. "I . . . I can't. I mean, what would I make, assuming I could? What's evil, aside from people? A cursed object? Ummm, the Dark Mark?"

Remus just watched him, until Harry said again, this time with more force. "I can't. If the only magic I have inside me now can only come out as Dark Arts, then . . . I don't think I want it."

"Your Parseltongue is not Dark Arts. You know that. I don't think your dreams are, either."

"Yeah," Harry admitted, rubbing his neck as he stood up and stretched. "I just feel . . . confused. Speaking of Parseltongue, though, I think I'll go hunt up Sals. If I can find her, that is."

Still wondering if dark magic was somehow the catalyst he needed to fire up his powers once again, Harry pocketed his wand and made his way down to the cellar.

"Sals," Harry hissed, keeping the snake's mental image in mind so that hopefully, the words slipping past his lips would be in Parseltongue. He looked around the dim interior of the cellar, wishing that whoever had spelled it to glow had been a little more liberal with the Lumos. "Sals . . . come out.
Where are you? I'm sorry for what I said about fathers, okay? I just know better than to wish I had one, but sometimes I wish that, anyway. Come on, Sals . . . I wasn't upset with you, not really . . ."

Harry heard a slight slithering noise, very faint. "Sals?"

No answer, but the sound came again, even fainter than before. Harry stopped moving, and listened closely. Hmm, behind that dilapidated chest of drawers, maybe. Harry tried to shove it aside, but it was heavy, and it had sat in the same place for so long that its square legs were embedded in the dirt floor of the cellar. Harry couldn't budge it, not even when he leaned his shoulder into it and shoved with all his might.

Never one to accept defeat, he did as he used to do when Aunt Petunia would demand he move things far too heavy for his small frame. The key was leverage. He sat on the floor, bracing himself against the wall, and planted both his feet squarely on the lower edge of the chest. Deep breath . . .

It moved a finger's breadth.

After fifteen minutes of shoving, Harry had got the chest pushed far enough aside that he could see a hole behind it. Just about the size of the air vents in the foundation of Number Four Privet Drive, the hole was torn out of ragged concrete, the opening so old that the cement was crumbling to dust. Beyond the hole, he saw a larger space rapidly swallowed up in darkness. No sign of Sals.

Harry poked his head through the hole, anyway, and brought the snake's image to mind, again. Too bad he couldn't tell for sure if he was speaking Parseltongue . . . "Sals? Come on, Sals. I said I was sorry. Are you back there?"

No more slithering noises, not a one, but Harry thought he heard . . . something. Very, very faint. Could you detect a snake's breathing? If so, it sounded shallow and rapid . . . and very irregular.

All at once Harry felt positively awful. All this time, he'd thought that Sals was upset with him because he'd overreacted to the "father" comment. Now, it seemed more likely that the little snake was ailing. Hurt, maybe. Or ill, and without enough strength to climb out of the cellar to the warmer rooms above.

"It's okay, Sals," Harry assured her, stretching out his arm. "You're cold, huh? Can you reach my hand? Just coil around my wrist like you used to, and I'll take you up and light you a nice fire, okay?"

He strained to hear a reply, but the only noise he could detect was that stressed breathing.

Sighing, Harry drew back from the hole, and after a minute, announced, "I'm going to make the vent wider so that I can get in there to help you, Sals. Don't be frightened at the noise."

With that, he was using a loose brick to carefully chip away at the opening. It was slow going, but Harry was afraid to slam brick against cement, for fear that shards of it would be propelled backwards into Sals.

"Okay, I'm coming in for you now, Sals," Harry finally said, this time insinuating his head and shoulders into the space. It was still a tight fit, but he managed, wishing he could do a spell to see just where Sals might be curled up. It was absolutely pitch black in there. "Sals?"

No reply. Again, just that breathing, along with a slight slither. A restless noise with no direction, but it told Harry that Sals was a bit further down the air space. He slithered forward on his belly, feeling a bit like a snake himself, and reached out his hand, gently patting it in a semicircle in front of him as he gingerly felt for Sals. His fingers clattered against odd bits of junk as he searched.
Hope she doesn't bite me, Harry suddenly thought. Normally Sals would never do that, he felt sure, but if the snake was ill, and startled, it could happen. Keep talking, don't surprise her...

Harry inched forward a bit farther, still whispering, "Sals? It's just Harry, nothing to be afraid of..." He angled his feet to get them through the air vent, and made his way forward again, still reaching out for the snake.

Then he felt her, a cool shivering ribbon only loosely coiled. Gently scooping Sals up, Harry cradled her between his palms and brought her close to his face. He squinted in the darkness, and thought he could almost see a faint shimmer of gold. Blowing some warm breath on her, he whispered, "It's okay, Sals. I've got you now. I'm just going to back up, and then we'll climb up to the warm place, all right?"

He felt the swaying of a tiny head lifting, the flickering of a tongue coming out to taste his skin. "Harry?" Sals slowly asked, the name sounding like slurred English to Harry's ears.

"Yeah, it's Harry," he repeated, blowing warm air on her again. The little snake seemed to sigh in pleasurable response, relaxing in his hands. Harry delicately transferred Sals to just one palm so that he could use the other to start pushing himself back out of the vent, whispering that everything was fine and Sals would be upstairs in the nice warm place in no time at all.

And that was when it happened.

Quite what happened, Harry wasn't exactly sure. All he knew was that one second he was ensconced in the calm, cool, dark, talking quietly to Sals, and the next, Number Twelve Grimmauld Place shook on its foundations. The walls surrounding the air space ripped like paper torn in half, and the wooden beams above him seemed to blast apart before they rained down all around. Instinct had him cupping his hands around Sals and ducking his head behind his arms.

Daylight streamed onto him, the light harsh and unforgiving on eyes that had spent too long indoors.

And then a snarling laugh as a pair of black boots thudded to the earth in front of him. Disoriented by the explosion and the brilliant sunlight, Harry squinted, and tried to see, but the image before his eyes wavered like a half-formed mirage. Before he could so much as reach for his wand, he felt himself wrenched to his feet, the hand on his shoulder so fierce that nails punctured shirt and skin both. He was yanked against someone tall and very cold, someone whose entire bearing screamed menace in a way that not even Snape ever had.

The fog across his mind clearing, Harry flailed with all his strength and reached for his wand -- sheer instinct overriding all knowledge that it was useless to him, these days. The man was stronger, though, easily able to hold him secure while he plucked the unused wand from between Harry's clenching fingers.

"None of that now, Mr Potter," a smoothly polished voice announced. "The Dark Lord has no interest in duelling you again. Oh, no indeed. He has much better use for you than battle."

"Malfoy," Harry gasped, the man's sleek curtain of white-gold hair coming into focus.

"Draco will be so pleased to see you," the man murmured against his ear. Harry struggled, but felt himself pinned. "I've had no end of letters from him lamenting your mysterious absence from school."

Harry abruptly dropped Sals to the ground. "Get Remus," he hissed in Parseltongue, though he had little hope that the sick little snake would even be able to. "For me. Make your way past the
"You think to frighten me?" Malfoy mocked the hissing sounds. "I rather think you are the one who should be frightened, Mr Potter."

And then he was pulled even more closely against the man, his face smashed into thick velvet robes until he couldn't breathe, and he felt the sickening sensation of the whole world melting into him as Lucius Malfoy and he both Disapparated.

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It was worse than it had ever been with Snape. Much, much worse. Harry found himself deep underground again, falling to hands and knees on a hard stone floor, throwing up what seemed like everything he'd eaten for the past three days. Even when there was no more point to being sick, dry heaves convulsed him until he thought he'd black out.

*It's because my magic is blocked,* Harry thought as he writhed against the floor, agony twisting his intestines into knots. *That's why it's so bad.*

When the contractions wracking his belly finally calmed to slow, roiling tremors, Harry pulled himself into a sitting position, knees tight against his chest, and tried to assess his surroundings. He was in a stone room, but not the one he'd seen in his dreams; this one was larger, though like the other it had no windows, or even doors. Just blocks of pebbled granite on six sides, and magical light infusing the air with a moderate glow.

Definitely, not the dream room, though, because in that one, he'd been all alone. And here, Lucius Malfoy was standing a short distance off, examining his gleaming nails with a studious air of indifference as he waited for Harry to recover.

"All better now?" he lightly sneered when Harry's breathing began to resemble something normal. "My, but you are quite the weakling, aren't you? Draco hasn't carried on like that since he was nine."

Aware that Malfoy was trying to get him to look up in retort, he closed his eyes and found that place deep inside himself where the fire dwelt. He didn't know for sure that the other man was a Legilimens, but he didn't know that he wasn't, either. What he did know was that Legilimency required eye contact, except perhaps from Voldemort himself.

Lucius' voice grew deliberately contemplative. "Of course, Draco comes from decent stock. What can one expect of Mudblood spawn like yourself? I dare say Severus is right, and it's only luck that's kept you alive until now."

Harry said nothing, the mention of Snape snapping him into a state of instant alert. Whatever happened, whatever was going to happen, he knew he couldn't risk betraying his teacher's true allegiances. Just so much as a thought out of place could do it. Harry instantly began to think of all the reasons he'd collected, year after year, to hate one Severus Snape, layering those thoughts along the top of his mind as he strengthened the rest of his mental defences.

*Snape, greasy git, sarcastic arsehole . . . dropping Harry's nearly perfect potion so all that hard work would add up to another zero . . . twenty points from Gryffindor . . . Snape practically foaming at the mouth at the prospect of the Dementor's Kiss being forced upon Sirius . . . "I see no difference," . . . Hermione bursting into tears . . . "When I want you to spout nonsense, I shall have you drink a Babbling Beverage, Potter . . ."

"What, nothing to say?" the older man mocked, stepping closer, his heeled boots clicking on the
stone floor. "No diaries to return? I still owe you for that, Mr Potter. Never let it be said that a Malfoy doesn't pay his debts."

With that, he reached down and viciously backhanded Harry across the side of the face, his signet ring flaying open a cheek.

Harry felt the pain and the sheer physical jolt try to draw him out of his mental fire, but he was easily able to redouble his efforts and keep his thoughts submerged. All that practice Occluding while I brushed my teeth, while I ate, while I read, even, he pondered, deep down beneath the fire, where it was safe to think. All that practice . . . good thing. I'm safe against distractions, I can do this. I can stay in the fire no matter what they do. They won't know the things I know, I won't let them see . . .

But what he knew, Harry didn't dare to think, not even beneath the fire protecting his mind. Discipline, discipline, he told himself, as he kept his eyes trained on the floor and concentrated on thinking things he didn't mind Malfoy seeing. Hogwarts, Quidditch. Hating Snape. The giant squid. Ron laughing with his mouth full. Dobby . . .

Malfoy raised his hand to strike again, but another voice interrupted him. A chiding voice. "Samhain, Lucius."

Harry glanced up quickly through his lashes and saw that a second man had Apparated in, one he didn't recognise.

"Indeed," Lucius drawled, dropping his hand. An expression of rank disgust crossing his sneering features, he angled his wand at the floor and murmured a contemptuous Scourgify, then pointed his wand at Harry. Expecting Legilimens, Harry braced himself against the wall and dove his thoughts all the way to the bottom of a well of fire, but Malfoy merely repeated the cleaning spell to mop up Harry's clothes, though he did nothing to stem the flow of blood trickling down his cheek.

Incantations filled the air, and a thin, vertical opening appeared in the stone wall behind the two men. Lucius waved at it, his wand executing an elaborate flourish before he thrust it back into his elegant walking cane. "Your accommodations, Mr Potter. I do so hope our Lord's hospitality meets the high standard of habitation you have long been accustomed to."

Since Harry wasn't willingly going anywhere Lucius Malfoy wanted him, he didn't move a muscle.

"Oh, come now," the blond wizard mocked, his voice that syrupy sneering one Harry had always hated. "Surely you aren't afraid of tight spaces, after all that time spent huddled in a cupboard?"

Against his will, Harry visibly flinched.

"Oh, but you are afraid," Lucius continued in mock consideration. "Poor boy, you're a veritable mass of scars. Such a shame your relations had no concept of the proper way to treat a wizard, but that's what one gets for having a Mudblood mother, I'm afraid." With that, he took hold of Harry's injured shoulder and thrust him through the crack and into a much smaller stone room. "You'll wait here for the Dark Lord," Lucius hissed. "And while you're waiting, Mr Potter, why don't you spend your time wondering what else we learned from your great fat lout of an uncle? Oh, my, yes. We do know a few things about you, Mr Potter. It must be awful to have relatives who are so very . . . common, not to mention Muggles, of all things."

Harry stumbled, falling to his knees after he was shoved inside the smaller room, and thought to himself, Fire. Fire fire fire. Firefirefirefirefire . . .

But his mental discipline could not sustain all Occlusion, not when Lucius Malfoy spoke again.
"I really must remember to thank Draco for letting me know you'd wandered far afield of Hogwarts," he drawled. "I wonder what would be appropriate. A new broom, do you think? Perhaps a house-elf of his very own? Ah, well." Lucius turned away slightly, and addressed his companion, all sneering humour entirely gone from his voice as he gave the command.

"Annihilate the dwelling standing at Number Four, Privet Drive."
What Must Be

This stone room, Harry instantly recognised, was the one from his dreams.

An instant after Malfoy had thrust him inside, the narrow vertical gap between the stones vanished. Hoping the solid surface was just an illusion, Harry threw himself against the wall, but of course it was useless. Malfoy wouldn't knowingly leave him a way out.

_Time to take stock_, Harry thought.

Not that there was much to take stock _of_. This was more a cell than a room, and so tiny that he could sit down only if he bent his legs. A soft glow emanating from the blocks meant that he could see despite the absolute lack of natural light, but there were no windows, no doors, no openings of any kind, just solid block, and all of it several feet thick if the gap he'd been thrust through was any indication.

Now that he was secured in the cell, there were no doubt anti-Apparition wards up all around to keep him in place, not that he had ever Apparated on his own, or had the slightest idea how to go about it, even. But such wards would keep anyone else from showing up to rescue him. Knowing Voldemort, they'd even prevent the use of Portkeys, though of course only Voldemort's closest henchmen were likely to have one linked to this place. _Closest henchmen_ . . .

Still Occluding his mind, though less fiercely than before, Harry carefully avoided thinking anything that would incriminate . . . anyone. Not even in his deepest mind did he permit himself to attach a name or an image to the vague hope stirring deep in his soul. Truth to tell, he tried to squash the hope, too, just in case it was too much a giveaway.

He concentrated on his own situation, such as it was. Even that required him to tread carefully through his mental fire, lest Voldemort, unbeknownst to him, was attempting to access his true thoughts. Was the ugly git such a skilled _Legilimens_ that he could, without using eye contact, or even being physically present, sneak past Harry's formidable defences, undetected? Harry simply didn't know, but he was all too aware that just a few months earlier, Voldemort had actually possessed him. Not that he'd been Occluding at the time, but _still_ . . .

Harry saw no reason to take any chances, so he deliberately didn't think about having lost proper access to his magic. He merely pondered, at the forefront of his mind, _I don't have my wand. Malfoy took it_, and refused to consider the greater issue at stake.

Stretching his arms as high as he could reach, he began to systematically pound on each and every one of the stones encasing him. Up and down the walls he struck and shoved, testing for weaknesses which, he found to his disgust, didn't exist, at least not physically.

_What about magical weaknesses?_ he wondered. Of course he didn't have his wand, but he'd just recently been thinking about all the times during his childhood when he'd done magic without one. Accidental magic, perfectly normal for a wizard child. All it had taken was enough emotion, and the fierce, instinctive desire to _do_ something with it.

Closing his eyes, Harry tried his best to summon those surges of fury that had plagued his childhood. From memory after memory --ones he didn't care if Voldemort saw-- he called forth the rage that used to make the glass over Dudley's photos shatter. The anger that had momentarily silenced Aunt Petunia once, that had more than once blown the door of the cupboard clear off its hinges.
Dark thoughts, dark memories, the dark core of himself, the one he hid from everyone else, the one that had started creeping forth after he'd seen Cedric die. Harry reached deep down into it, all the way through the fire shielding it, and reached for his power, for the magic he knew was there, the magic that was coming forth in dreams almost every time he slept.

All around him, the stone walls rippled, as though they were water disrupted by a falling rock.

Eyes closed, Harry didn't see it, but he felt it, that surge of magic flowing from his soul.

Reaching even deeper, he tried again, tried for an emotion worse than anger, worse than rage. A longing to kill, to murder, to destroy as he had been destroyed, day past endless day of never having had a family, never having had a home, nobody to care, nobody to give him the love that any child, even a freak, craved with every fibre of his soul . . .

Annihilate the dwelling standing at Number Four, Privet Drive, he heard Malfoy say again. Harry laughed, a harsh cackling sound more reminiscent of an insane old man than a sixteen-year-old boy, and snapping his eyes open, watched the laughter claw the walls. The air itself vibrated with the force of magic spilling past its confines. The blocks rippled again, then shimmered, the surface layers glowing translucent until it seemed he could see the very heart of the stones.

By that time, though, Harry had drained himself of all he was. His legs giving way beneath him, he slumped in the cell, falling gracelessly to the stone floor, gasping for breath. Every muscle in his body felt as though he'd been straining on his broom for hours, and his mind itself seemed to have become some mushy substance that could hardly even sustain Occlusion.

Somehow, though, he managed to keep that wall of fire up, right up to the moment when he lost consciousness and his head hit the wall with an ugly thump.

Harry awoke to one thought only, and it wasn't fire.

Thirst.

Horrible, gut-draining thirst, his very bones parched with it.

How long had he been confined in this cell, how long had he lain unconscious, dreaming---

That was when it hit him, something that should have been obvious far, far sooner. My dreams! Remus was wrong; they aren't symbolic. They aren't about ambivalence, or being in a dark place emotionally, though by now I suppose I truly am. My dreams, though, are something else. They're literal. They're coming true . . .

In a rush of panic, Harry raised his wall of fire, scattering thoughts of loneliness and despair above it as he dove beneath to contemplate his dreams. Annihilate the dwelling standing at Number Four, Privet Drive . . . that must have happened by now; Malfoy gave the order hours and hours ago, if my thirst is any indication. So is Dudley safe? He wasn't inside when the house began to crumple, not that it means anything . . . The clearing, somebody coming, something coming . . . I was seeing the site of the Death Eater meeting . . . this cell, the awful thirst . . . it's all come true.

And so, what's coming next? The answer should have frightened him; it was terrifying enough. But somehow, it didn't. It gave him strength.

I'll survive, Harry realised. Whatever happens on Samhain, I will survive. I'll get back to Hogwarts . . . in the hospital wing. I'll be blinded, though, and my body horribly broken, but none of that will last.
I've healed before; I'll heal again. I saw myself later, doing fine, though I was still kept away from the Tower, from my regular classes, for some reason. I was down in the dungeons, and I actually seemed comfortable being there . . . Oh, no, oh crap, it's true . . . I'm going to hit Ron for insulting Slytherins and laugh when Malfoy calls us brothers, and it wasn't a you-are-such-an-idiot laugh, either, it was more of a yeah-we-sure-are-brothers laugh . . .

I'm going to be screaming like a man possessed, screaming in Parseltongue . . . if that one was a seer dream, that is . . .

Something Trelawney had said impinged on his consciousness, then:

_Dreams show you what may be, not what must be . . ._

Harry groaned out loud, deciding that now was probably _not_ the time to decide the Divination teacher knew what she was talking about. He had to cling to his dreams, even if the last few were more disturbing than he cared to think on. He could deal with that later. For now, he had to focus on the first few, and believe that no matter Voldemort's filthy plans for him, he would come through it alive.

It helped, knowing what was going to happen, at least in part. He'd be tortured, but not killed. He'd be blinded, but he would escape. Somehow. No need to dwell on the who or how, thoughts that were, at the very least, a peril he'd better avoid.

All he could do was prepare himself as best he could, Harry decided. Since knowing some things had really helped, he decided to figure out what else Voldemort had in store for him. He had more than dreams to help him with that; he had Lucius Malfoy's vicious comment about cupboards, about what else the Death Eaters might have learned from Uncle Vernon.

Uncle Vernon, who wanted nothing more than to see Harry suffer and die. Uncle Vernon, who was certainly dead himself by now, having chosen the wrong allies in his fight against Harry. Hmm, what would Vernon Dursley have talked about, besides cupboards? Of course, maybe he hadn't _talked_ at all; everything Lucius knew could have been gleaned by means of Legilimency, but as far as Harry was concerned, it boiled down to the same thing. Uncle Vernon had meant him ill, after all.

So what could he reveal that would tend to really, really hurt Harry?

Hmm . . . Realizing he was getting distracted, Harry bolstered his wall of fire, spreading above it a few innocuous memories of learning to paint at primary school. Then, deep down in a safe place, he resumed his contemplations. Funny that Lucius would think the cupboard would frighten him. It didn't, though come to think of it, Harry had made the same assumption before, thinking that . . . certain people . . . who heard about it would believe him claustrophobic. Strange how life turned out. Sure, sure, he'd blasted the door off the cupboard a few times, but not because the enclosed space frightened him. He'd just wanted to show Uncle Vernon who was really in charge. The little bedroom itself was actually sort of comforting. Cosy. Back when he was little, and he used to wish he could have a hug, he'd huddled under his blankets at night and fantasized that the walls close in were cuddling him, that he was sleeping in a warm, safe embrace. Besides, even when it was daylight out, and he was playing with broken toys filched from the rubbish bin, he was relatively happy under the stairs. Nobody else ever came into his cupboard, so there was nobody in there to call him a freak and a misfit. And really, it wasn't like the cupboard had been a prison. He wasn't _always_ locked in there. Most of the time he'd stayed in there by choice, because compared to a house full of Dursleys, a little room all to himself was a haven.

Anyway, Lucius had got it wrong when he'd decided that being locked in a tiny cell would demoralize Harry. Definitely, his current surroundings weren't comforting, but they didn't really bother him, either, except insofar as they were keeping him here to wait for whatever Voldemort had
planned.

So, what did Voldemort have planned? That was the real question. What had Lucius told him? And what did Samhain really involve? Wishing that he'd paid a bit more attention in History of Magic, Harry wracked his brains for anything Binns might have mentioned about cross-quarter days in general, or Samhain in particular. Hmm, it predated Halloween, didn't it? Yeah . . . once Muggles started depending more on their calendars and less on the stars, they'd fixed All Hallows Eve to fall on a particular day. But Samhain still varied a bit, though it tended to presage the same sorts of things. In particular, death. Harry had a strange idea that fire was somehow associated with Samhain as well, but he couldn't really remember how it fit in. Too bad Binns wasn't interesting enough that you could actually pay attention to his lectures. And anyway, it wasn't like Harry had heard any of this recently. When you score a grade of Troll on an O.W.L., you don't tend to go on in the subject, do you?

And as for what Lucius Malfoy might have learned from Uncle Vernon? Harry didn't really know. What did Uncle Vernon think he was afraid of, besides the cupboard? Hmm. Nobody on Privet Drive could think he feared hard work or insults. And while he was obviously smart enough to avoid a thrashing when he could, it wasn't like the thought of one made him hysterical, either.

There was one thing, though, that did make him hysterical . . . or at least, that used to. He'd done better with it lately, hadn't he? Of course he'd had help to cope, but still, he had done better. Uncle Vernon didn't know that, though. All he knew was that when Harry was too little to even understand what a needle did, he'd unleashed defensive magic and screamed to wake the dead, just because he'd seen one in a nurse's hand.

Needles, he thought with a gasp of horror. Bet you anything, anything at all, they're going to use needles.

All at once, he knew with blazing insight just how they were going to blind him.

Harry swallowed back the bile that had risen to his throat, and straightened against the wall, bending his legs into a more comfortable position. He wanted to escape, to get away before the worst could happen, but he knew he couldn't. His dreams were true, every one. He was going to be blinded, and he was going to somehow manage to endure it.

But he didn't want to go through that. He really, really didn't want to.

Harry thought of summoning once again that dark surge of magic, a stronger one this time, one that would do more than fade parts of the stones away. Something that would shatter them, or make them melt, so that he could run as fast as his feet would carry him.

It was hopeless though, and he knew it. It wasn't just the dreams that told him so, it was the fact that unleashing all that energy before had hurt him more than it had helped. It had weakened him, something he could ill afford. He had to stay strong, he sensed, to make it through whatever Voldemort had in store for him.

Right now, he had to stop thinking about needles, about blindness, about becoming some semi-Slytherin who punched his best friend in the face.

Pulling his knees up to his chest, Harry closed his eyes against the steady light, and shifted his Occlusion so that there was just the fire, with random thoughts drifting atop it, but nothing beneath. He let himself sink deeply into fire, into nothingness, into a mind cleared of all worry and fear. He closed down his thoughts, and let himself simply rest.
So that he would be ready, come what may.

The light in the cell changed, became slightly brighter before it steadied again, and Harry opened his eyes to see that a gap, wider than before, had appeared in the wall. Beyond it stood a Death Eater in full meeting regalia, simple mask and robe, yet the whole effect was hideous.

Harry stared, bleary-eyed, but with enough presence of mind to realise that he was Occluding already.

He knew it was Malfoy even before the foul creature spoke with saccharine intent.

"Too weak to stand, Mr Potter?"

Harry pushed up from the floor, reeling. He didn't know how much longer had passed, only that the constant ache of thirst had gone numb by then. His tongue was thick in his mouth, his skin like a dry husk, but it no longer hurt. It just was, and he would survive it, as he would survive anything Voldemort cared to inflict. Not because he was famous Harry Potter, the Boy Who Bloody Well Wouldn't Die, but because of the magic still inside him. The magic that gave him dreams couldn't be wrong. His magic had never been wrong, had never truly failed him, though at times it might have seemed that way. Even when he'd thought it gone, it had been weaving a dark spell inside him, granting him dreams to keep his mind and soul free no matter that his body would be soon be subject to torments unspeakable.

"Come," Lucius beckoned, gloved fingers elegantly curved. "It's time."

Harry didn't move, but it didn't matter. Lucius entered the cell through the wider opening, and strangely, stroked a leather-clad finger straight down his cheekbone, tracing the raw scar he'd inflicted with his ring. His head tilted, he regarded next the holes torn in the shoulder of Harry's shirt, the blood spotting the pale fabric.

"Tsk, tsk," Lucius commented, shaking his hooded head from side to side. "These won't do at all." His wand out, he pulled Harry from the cell, turning him around to look at him from all angles.

"Contusio evanesco," he incanted, pointing his wand at the place where Harry's skull had collided with stone. Then he was sweeping his wand in an arc to encompass Harry's whole body. "Lavare. Sanare."

His skin tingled all over, the sensation painful as it coursed across the scar on his cheek and the small wounds scattered across his shoulder, and then Lucius was regarding him once again.

"The shirt could be made presentable," he lightly sneered, "but I should think the Dark Lord would prefer you without. Besides, if memory serves, it will soon be filthy again in any case. Remove it, Mr Potter."

Harry didn't, but again, it didn't matter. One quick spell later, and the shivering cool of the stone room was washing across his bare chest and back.

Lucius pulled him close, yanking him into a hideous parody of an embrace, and whispered, "Harry Potter, guest of honour at Samhain. Whoever would have thought?"

And then, the whole world dissolved, a sensation that was becoming rapidly familiar to Harry, though no less distressing.
Harry lost his concentration as he was forcibly Disapparated, though he didn't realise as much until a new world came into focus around him. A dark forest clearing, the one from his dreams, but it wasn't true now that somebody was coming.

Something had arrived.

Voldemort.

And with him, a horde of Death Eaters, all of them wearing those hideous masks as they stared at the spectacle before them. It certainly was a spectacle; even Harry could recognise that much. He'd fallen to his hands and knees immediately upon appearing in the clearing, and was in the throes of vile convulsions, his body violently objecting not just to Apparating, but also to the lack of any food or drink in his belly. His stomach wanted to reject something, and when it couldn't, it twisted itself in tight knots instead, and tried to propel itself surging up his throat. Or so it seemed to Harry.

He began Occluding the moment he saw Voldemort's fierce red eyes fixed on him, but by then, it was too late.

Laughter rang out in the clearing. Horrid, evil laughter made all the more sinister by the fact that as soon as Voldemort began it, his Death Eaters echoed the sound en masse. A symphony of laughter as Harry crouched, retching. He thought it was his condition Voldemort found so amusing. Yeah, nothing like a bare-chested sixteen-year-old boy tossing up his socks to get your jollies going, he mentally commented, placing that thought above the fire, where any Legilimens could see it. But he'd misunderstood Voldemort's laughter.

The Death Eaters stood motionless, a slight breeze ruffling the hems of their robes while their leader stepped down from the raised platform where he'd stood. Two scaly hands reached out to grasp Harry firmly by the shoulders, the contact on his bare skin horrible, just horrible. Voldemort pulled him upright until he was kneeling, naked from the waist up, then leaned down to peer directly into Harry's eyes.

Fire. Fire. Firefirefirefirefire---

But damn it, damn it! Voldemort's powers were strong.

"You're thinking of your home destroyed," the Dark Lord softly whispered, moving to speak against his ear, though a rustling of Death Eaters told Harry that they could all detect the quiet voice. "You don't care much about that, though." Voldemort laughed softly. "I told Lucius you wouldn't, though it was a fitting end for a houseful of Muggles who thought to use me instead of the other way around. Ah, and you think so too, I see. We're alike, Harry, more so than you know. I told you that; do you remember? You should have listened."

All that passed through Harry's consciousness like candy floss across his tongue, dissolving before he'd had the barest taste, though it grated to hear Voldemort use his name. What mattered was to protect his mind, protect his secrets, to let the evil wizard think he knew Harry to the core, when he didn't know anything at all. Or, not anything that mattered.

But that wasn't true, as Harry found out in the next instant. Voldemort did know something that mattered.

"Pity you've lost your magic," he purred, his hands reaching out to cup Harry's face, his rough
fingers caressing his temples, stroking his cheeks. "Of course it's in there somewhere . . . you know it, so I know it, but you can't find it, can you? My dear Lucius didn't need to take your wand, after all. You're like a child among us, wand or no. No defences, none at all."

Someone in the circle of Death Eaters jerked. Flinched, it seemed to Harry, though his vision was starting to waver. Voldemort was staring deeply into his eyes again, which meant that Harry had seen the slight motion with his peripheral vision, if he'd seen it at all. Lucius Malfoy--or the one he thought was Lucius; it was difficult to be sure now that the man had joined the circle--moved slightly, too. A sharp motion of his hand, palm facing the ground, as though forbidding something.

Harry tried hard not to wonder who it was that had flinched, just as he applied every scrap of mental discipline he'd ever had to not contemplating which one of those masks hid the one he wouldn't think of. Not here, not now.

*Discipline, fire, maintain your focus. You can do it, Harry.*

Finally recovering from Apparating, Harry found the strength to knock Voldemort's hands away from his face, and then, the strength to stand, though day past day without any water meant the ground beneath his feet felt strangely unstable. Voldemort rose with him, to tower over him, and kept gazing into his eyes.

He felt it again then, even stronger than before, the pulsing sensation of seeking, searching, a mind inside his own, trying to find his defences, trying to broach them, trying to rape his thoughts. Harry pushed back as he'd practiced, just enough for Voldemort to perceive the fight, just enough for him to think that Harry was resisting . . . giving him what he expected, protecting his mind from an even greater assault . . . then a semblance of yielding, of exhaustion, as Voldemort pulled from him memory after memory, thought after thought . . .

Though only those which Harry was allowing him to plunder.

The world collapsed into a whirlpool of blood, the red of Voldemort's eyes encompassing the whole of his vision, but Harry kept his mental fire burning, and kept all that really mattered safe, though his hands twitched convulsively as Voldemort searched layer after layer in his mind. It was ever so much worse than he had imagined, far worse than he'd been warned. Like slime oozing across the surface of his mind and then sinking into every cell. Caustic slime that burned where it touched, that left in its wake an imprint of evil to taint his soul.

Finally satisfied, Voldemort stepped back and smiled, wicked enjoyment painted across his face. Harry blinked, clearing his vision of all that red, and noticed Nagini slithering in a circle behind the Death Eaters.

Voldemort clapped his hands just once before he announced, "Behold, the so-called saviour of the world. Is it not delightful, the prospect he brings to us this night? Harry Potter, without a shred of power. The Boy Who Lived, without a trace of magic." A slight frown wrinkled his scaly face. "I'm surprised you didn't note this yourself, Lucius. It's been true for some while. The boy . . ." Here, Voldemort laughed. "The boy thinks that he can hide the truth, fancies himself adept at Occlusion, but I saw it all the moment he graced us with his presence. He's become little more than a squib."

Harry clenched his fists, knowing that wasn't true, but other than that, he didn't let Voldemort's antics from distract him from what really mattered: keeping his thoughts so well hidden that the Death Eaters didn't even know they were hidden.

"Well, we shall have to change our plans," Voldemort was announcing, his voice consumed with mock sorrow. "Wizard tortures won't mean nearly as much to the boy now that he's barely a
wizard." He licked his thin, almost non-existent lips. "Lucius, I believe you had a suggestion?"

A robed man came forward to kneel at Voldemort's feet, right next to where Harry was standing, and again, Harry had the fleeting sensation that someone in the crowd had drawn back from the sight.

"My Lord," came Malfoy's obsequious voice. "Your brilliance exceeds words, my Lord."

Voldemort laid a hand atop Malfoy's hood, and pulled it off, then rippled his snakelike fingers through the man's white-gold hair, separating strands from the tie which had bound them in back. "So good to hear you think so," he purred. "And your suggestion, Lucius?"

"As the boy's little more than a Muggle," Malfoy purred right back, "let him be tormented as a Muggle until it's time to make the sacrifice."

That time, Harry was the one who flinched. Sacrifice?

"Ah, yes," Voldemort replied to the slight gesture. "Lucius didn't explain, Harry? How remiss of him. I take a sacrifice each Samhain. The blood of an enemy, Harry." He shivered, his eyes glowing a deeper red. "How delicious that this time, I'll partake of you."

From somewhere, Harry found his voice, though it hurt to feel words rasping through a throat parched with thirst. "Each Samhain?" he mocked, the sound rough. As much as it hurt, though, speaking seemed to help with the dizziness that had plagued him ever since he'd stood. It gave him something to focus on besides the raging whirlpool of fire that was keeping the real him safe. Besides, cowering had really never been his style. "Each Samhain! Can't you bloody well count? There's only been one Samhain since you crawled your way out of the ooze and into a body, Tom."

A ripple of disbelief coursed through the circle of Death Eaters, the sensation so strong that Nagini stopped moving and stared, her tongue flickering strangely. One Death Eater actually stepped back, out of the circle, but remembered himself a moment later and moved forward again, though the motion seemed . . . almost reluctant.

Harry couldn't help it; beneath the fire he felt himself think, Oh no, don't give the game away, Snape! You can't be so foolish as to let them see the truth, you just can't. Show them what they want to see, you're the one who taught me that!

Harry spoke again mainly to distract himself from thoughts he knew he shouldn't be indulging, even if it definitely seemed that Voldemort had desisted from the Legilimency.

"What, don't your lackeys use your name, Tom?" He cleared his throat when the dryness in it threatened to choke off further words. "Lucius here knows it; he did have your diary, after all." Harry smirked then, a wicked smile of his own, and glanced down at the kneeling man. "Dobby's doing fine, by the way. Shall I tell him you said 'hi'?"

"Why, you--!" Lucius was on his feet in an instant, his hand reaching out for Harry's neck, but Voldemort was faster still. His wand appearing from nowhere, he gave a flick, and "Crucio" fell from his lips, the incantation sounding almost idle, as though Voldemort had much better things to do and this was a tiresome task indeed.

Lucius Malfoy fell to his side and writhed in the dirt while Nagini, interested, slithered her way into the middle of the circle to watch.

"Finite Incantatem," Voldemort murmured after a moment. "Really, Lucius, you must learn to control your temper. Do you see me spilling his blood before the proper time? And as for you--" He returned his attention to Harry. "You're a foolish boy if you think I wasn't celebrating Samhain for
many years before the night I slew your parents."

*It's not going to work,* Harry thought, deep down where it was safe. *You're not going to make me lose my temper. I'm going to stay in control of myself, and keep Occluding, and watch for my chance to escape. It has to be coming, it just has to. The dreams are real, the dreams are true . . .*

Defiant green eyes stared back at Voldemort as Harry spoke with the utmost contempt ringing through his rough, raw vocal cords. "Too bad for you that when you slew them, you missed me."

"I did not miss you," Voldemort hissed, stretching out a finger to trace Harry's scar, which burned as the evil wizard touched it. "It's there, for all the world to see, proof that you've been honoured for a time to bear my mark!"

"It's hideous and disfiguring," Harry said flatly, remembering the way Draco Malfoy had described the scar that day in Potions class. Someone in the crowd gave off a choking sound, and it was all Harry could do not to think *Shut up, Snape!* or really, even yell it. "It's a curse, not an honour," he went on. "Just like those godawful ugly burns on everybody's arm. I notice you don't have one yourself, Tom. Is that a case of you being able to dish it out, even though you can't take it?"

"I'd bind your mouth if I didn't wish to hear your screams," Voldemort spat back. "Perhaps you won't be quite so insolent once you understand your position, Harry. First we shall have some fun. Muggle-style, since it's all you deserve. And then, the sacrifice. I'll have to bleed you, I'm afraid. Tradition, you know. My tradition. You didn't think I let you get so thirsty for no reason at all, did you? Oh yes, I know how thirsty you must be. It's to thicken your blood. And then . . ."

He pulled Harry to him by the shoulders, his arms so strong that Harry knew it was magic, not muscles, compelling him forward into a close embrace, his entire chest pressed against Voldemort's robes. A chill came straight through them, a chill that suggested the evil wizard wasn't truly alive, though of course he was. He dipped his head to rest his lips against Harry's ear, his tongue flickering out to lick his neck as he spoke in soft, almost loverlike tones, though the words were hardly lovely. "Ah yes, I'll drink mine enemy's blood, and when I've drunk my fill, the sacrifice proper shall begin. You'll burn, my sweet child. You'll burn while you're still alive, and I'll inhale the sweet tang of the smoke, and when it's all over and you're nothing but a blackened husk, why then, I'll grind you into dust. There are Potions, you know, Dark Potions that use such dust. We'll toast you every Samhain, Harry. Literally."

The purpose of the speech had been to frighten him, to make him crumple as though the deed were done already. But Harry wasn't frightened, and he wasn't about to crumple, not when he knew with absolute confidence that it wouldn't come to that, that it couldn't.

*And if the point of these ridiculous theatrics is to see me quail with fear, then I'll do just the opposite,* Harry decided as Voldemort let him go, expecting no doubt to see his legs collapse beneath him. They wanted to. Harry locked his knees and stayed on his feet.

"Fuck off, Tom," was his casual rejoinder, delivered just as though he really didn't have time for this garbage. *And* as though he found Voldemort stupid beyond belief.

Voldemort, it seemed, had had enough of games. "Severus," he called, turning slightly to the side. "Come hold him for us. We'll have no magical bindings here, not tonight. No, that would make things easier for him. The boy positively detests you; it's all there in his mind." Voldemort cackled. "He knocks over so many potions in your class because he shrinks away whenever you pass by; he can't abide the thought that you might touch him! So doff your gloves, Severus. Lay your bare hands on him, now, and we'll see how long his reckless courage lasts."
A robed man, tall and thin stepped forward, his voice slightly muffled by his hood as he replied, but Harry easily recognised it. He Occluded all the more fiercely as he braced himself to act his part, to feel again the hate that had since grown into something rather different.

*How do you do it?* he remembered asking, though it seemed he'd asked in some other life, not this one. *Make yourself feel things you don't feel at all?*

And the answer. *I have a memory. I know how to use it.*

Harry had a memory, too, and what was more, after all the time he'd spent with Snape, he had a sense of misdirection. *Act the part,* some deep piece of him whispered. *Play the role.* *What would these Death Eaters expect to see, to hear?* You hated Snape, and you thought he worked for Voldemort; any fool would have suspected that much. But you didn't know for sure, did you? They would all expect Snape to have been too wily for that. And so they'll expect surprise, betrayal, outrage . . .

"You rat bastard!" Harry shouted, and as Snape came near, he pulled back his hand and slapped the man across the face, just as hard as he could manage. In his condition, it wasn't that fierce a blow, but of course all that mattered was that it appear authentic. "Albus Dumbledore trusted you! But you're on the madman's side, after all! I knew it! I knew it all along!"

Voldemort laughed in true enjoyment. "Ah, his hate before is nothing to what it is, now, Severus. Well done. Well done, indeed."

Harry raised his hand to hit Snape again, but the sight of Voldemort's upraised wand gave him an excuse to back down. "Enough of that, young Harry," the Dark Lord intoned. "Or I shall have to use Imperio on you. Should you like to try resisting it again, and in your current state?" He curled a contemptuous lip.

"My Lord," Snape was saying, on his knees by then, removing his black leather gauntlets even as he spoke. "My hands, the light magic, your potions, my Lord . . ."

"Oh, we won't bloody your pure precious hands," Voldemort laughed. "Lucius has more finesse than that." He turned to Harry. "Get on your knees!"

Harry stayed upright, defiant. Proud. If the bastard wanted him on his knees, he could damned well make him kneel. Let him try Imperio. It would be a victory, of sorts, that he wouldn't bend, not on his own.

Voldemort, though, was relishing another kind of force, this evening. The Muggle kind. "Severus," he prompted. "Now."

Snape stepped behind him, and then Harry felt warm hands on his shoulders, the grip firm enough to leave bruises as he shoved Harry straight down and forced his legs to bend. *It isn't real,* Harry told himself beneath the fire. *It's a feint, just like those last few Potions classes I attended. It has to look real; it has to look sadistic, and vicious in intent . . .

But it felt real enough as Snape grasped his arms from behind and dragged them remorselessly together until the slightest move on Harry's part sent agony surging through his shoulders. He didn't think he could wrench himself away without dislocating a joint. Not that *that* was a remote danger. Dehydrated, starved, still half-weak from Apparating, he wasn't in any shape to brawl, and even if he were, he was still only sixteen and small for his age.

"Lucius, up," Voldemort was saying, his robes rustling as he conjured a chair and seated himself to
watch the show. "You shall have your revenge, now, but at my direction, is that much clear?"

"Yes, my Lord," murmured Lucius as he crawled to the seated man and kissed his robes. Voldemort patted him on the head much as a kinder man might pet a favoured hound. "Conjure needles, my Lucius," he throatily whispered, holding out his hand. "The boy hates needles, as you well know."

A pile of glimmering silver shards appeared in Voldemort's palm.

"Oh, you can do better than that, surely?"

A larger pile materialized, the needles thick and stout like the ones Aunt Petunia used to use with yarn. Only sharper. Far, far sharper.

"The boy's afraid," Snape sneered from behind him, though the hands holding his arms in place said something different. His teacher's fingers shifted in a deliberate motion. It wasn't methodical, and it wasn't anything as obvious as a caress, but it served to bolster Harry, nonetheless. It reminded Harry that however it looked to the rest of the gathering, he in fact wasn't alone.

"He should be afraid," Lucius replied, the words as dark as his tone as he held out his own hands for the needles. Voldemort dropped them one by one into his palms.

"The face, first," came Voldemort's command. "And then you may indulge your wildest dreams, Lucius, but for one thing. Save his eyes for last."

"Yes, my Lord," said Lucius, silver gaze glinting in the moonlight. He'd never replaced his hood. Even knowing his dreams, even knowing what must be, when a needle came into his line of vision, Harry did again what he'd done in the cell. He reached consciously down into the well of anger, hate, and horror that had been so much of his life, and tried to pull forth an explosive force the likes of which had made those stones half-vanish. But this time, there was little answering reaction. Was he too weak from thirst to manage it? Had he drained himself too far with that last huge surge of magic?

He made the needle heat a bit; that was all.

Not the result he wanted, for Lucius had taken his gloves off as well--for dexterity, Harry supposed--and when he felt the sharp shard of metal warming, his silver eyes narrowed in appreciation. "Ah, very nice," he smoothly remarked, before glancing back at his master. "Heated needles, I should think, my Lord."

He spelled his hands to not get blistered, then used Calorum to make the needle glow red-hot, and brought it close again. Harry tried to bear it bravely, not even whimpering as the thick, ugly needle came close, but when heat and pain pierced slowly through his cheek, he sucked in a harsh breath and clenched his teeth, and whimpered, his eyes filling with tears.

"Auspicious beginning," Lucius murmured, smiling, though the expression didn't reach his eyes. He wasn't sated. Far from it. "Are you sure you wouldn't like one, Severus? Just one?" Another hot needle danced before Harry's eyes as Malfoy held it up for Snape to see.

"You know I can't," Snape growled, shifting to hold both Harry's wrists with one hand. His free arm came around the boy in an embrace that pinned Harry's back against the length of Snape's torso. "Do your worst. For me."

"Save his eyes for last," Voldemort repeated, his voice gone lazy with pleasure. "But do be creative until then. Make the insolent child ask me for mercy."
I don't ask for things I won't get, Harry clearly thought, some part of him satisfied to see Voldemort startled by the claim, though it warned him to keep clear hold of his protective image. I don't. I won't. I can't . . .

"And make him scream," added Voldemort, leaning back in his chair, hands held idly in his lap.

And that, Harry couldn't deny his captors, though he did try. Six times he felt the blazing needles shoved viciously through his flesh. Six times he held his breath and gritted his teeth and waited for the pain to pass. But all Lucius did in response was conjure larger needles, and begin plunging them like daggers into places where they'd scrape against bone.

Harry screamed, then. He screamed himself hoarse, and thrashed against Snape's tightening hold, and before it was over, he lost all semblance of control and bucked like a wild horse, but Snape held him in place, for all of it, every bit, even the last. By then Harry was stripped completely naked, and flat on his back on the dirt. Every inch of his skin was riddled with puncture wounds, needles sticking out of him at hideous angles. More needles were fully embedded inside him, stabbing the interior of his back and legs every time he breathed. They were spelled to stay hot, to burn him for just as long as it pleased Voldemort to watch him suffer.

And then, as the sound of his last screams rebounded off the distant mountains and echoed in the clearing, the worst came to pass.

Lucius sat atop him on his chest, and another man held his legs, but it was Snape who had his large palms affixed to either side of his face. Snape whose thumbs and fingers pried his eyes open and held them that way as Lucius did as the Dark Lord had commanded, and saved his eyes for last.

Harry prayed for death, though he wasn't disposed to go quietly. When Malfoy's fingers passed too close to his teeth, he growled just like a dog and tore a vicious chunk from the bastard's hand, spitting it out like so much offal.

Lucius' response was swift and merciless, though he glanced at Voldemort first and waited for a nod of approval before swinging back his other fist and crashing it straight into the side of Harry's face.

Stars, stars inside the fire . . . stars and sparks and whirling flames inside the firefirefirefirefire . . .

Harry thought then that he would faint, and counted it a mercy, but the feel of Snape's strong hands holding him in place became an anchor keeping him there to endure it. The needle came back, wavering before his eyes, undulating like a serpent about to strike. He struggled to close his eyes, but the reflex was thwarted by those thumbs digging cruelly into his face.

His blood curdled in his veins as the thing came closer, and plunged straight down through the centre of his vision.

Not once, not twice, but over and over in some hideous dance of fear and pain. Tears slid down his face, thick hot pungent tears dripping from his eyes and draining into his mouth. They tasted odd, slick and coppery and cloying, and it came to him that these weren't tears at all. It was blood from his wounds. Blood, coating his skin, and as it flowed, the hands released him. Different hands took over. Colder ones, holding him again so that the other eye might suffer the same fate as the first. But these hands weren't an anchor.

Losing his grip on reality, Harry felt himself slipping away into the depths of a great, deep sea, into waters that quenched his fire, that cooled him and healed him and whispered, deep in his mind, that he had done well.
For he hadn't begged, not once. He hadn't given the craven monster the satisfaction.
Harry surfaced to an awareness of pain coursing through his entire body, though after a moment or two he realised that the needles were all gone. He was upright, which was a strange, disorienting position to be in just upon waking, wasn't it? Perhaps not; he could feel magic all around him, holding him up, supporting muscles that on their own, were little better than puddles of tired silk. His mind felt the same way. Woozy, wavering. Almost blank.

Harry shook his head to clear it, his hair so lank and sweat-soaked that it remained plastered to his head, and blinking fiercely through the agony that used to be his eyes, tried to adjust to the fact that the whole world had gone formless and black. It was too much to take, too much to believe. He kept expecting each blink to bring the world into focus.

The expectation was pointless, though. All he was managing to do was make himself sick to his stomach, the fierce stinging in his eyes roiling down the back of his skull and straight through his spine until he thought he would pass out again.

Tempting option, but even through his blazing headache he was beginning to think more clearly now, and knew that giving in to pain and fear wasn't in his best interests. He had to be ready to flee, didn't he? Even blind, he had to be ready to seize the chance that was coming.

What must be, what must be . . .

It was getting harder to believe that he was really going to get out of this, though, divining dreams or no, an impression that was bolstered when the magic holding him upright began to fade away and with maddening slowness, he was left to stand on his own.

He tried to take a step forward, and couldn't, and only then did he realise his position -- in more ways than one. Heavy, rough manacles encompassed his wrists, which were held behind some sort of pillar. Stone, he thought, from the cold scraping feel of it on his bare back and buttocks. He was naked still, breezes brushing his knees, and all around him he could hear the murmur of voices as somewhere below him, Voldemort held court with his Death Eaters.

Below . . .

He must be on the raised platform, then.

He must be on display, for the sacrifice.

Harry began Occluding, again, though this time not so much to protect his thoughts as to protect his sanity. Fear like he'd never known was clawing up from his guts, but he'd learned by then that submerging himself in mental fire did help him be more stoic. At least, sometimes.

And what helped, too, was thinking about something other than himself.

Fire danced atop his mind as he let his private thoughts wander. Dudley. What has happened to Dudley? Did he survive the destruction of Uncle Vernon's house? Did he just stand out there on the lawn like a dolt, until some Death Eater noticed his mouth hanging open? And what of Sals, and Remus? Sals was sick, Sals felt awful in my hand. So chilled, so cold, far more than she should have been, even down in that cellar. Did she make it up the stairs and back to Remus? But what if she did? What was I thinking, sending Sals to warn him? He's no Parselmouth. And anyway, what if there was no upstairs left for Sals to get to? I don't know how Malfoy got to me, though it seemed the whole building was destroyed right on top of my head! What if Remus is gone--
A voice outside himself roused him from his thoughts. Lucius' voice.

"My Lord, my most precious Lord. The hour approaches."

It seemed to Harry that Voldemort must have Apparated directly next to him, for one second he felt himself entirely alone on the dais, and in the next, a rush of frigid air snaked its way around him as an evil voice hissed straight in his ear.

"So it does," Voldemort crooned, his voice bursting with anticipation. "Wormtail. The knife."

The flat edge of a cool, smooth blade caressed Harry's cheek. "You remember this knife, don't you, my sweet, dear child? You've seen it before--" Soft laughter broke the sentence into parts. "Ah, but you can't see, can you. Such a pity. No magic, no sight."

Harry shuddered. He'd have been only too pleased to spit in Voldemort's face--or at least in his general direction--but the lack of moisture in his mouth nixed that plan. His voice came, hoarse, croaking, weaker than before. So weak it disgusted him, actually, but at least he didn't quail. "Fuck . . . you . . . Tom."

"My Lord," Lucius' smooth tones came though, far closer than before. "I should be honoured to be the one to bleed him for you, if you so desire."

Sound of robes brushing wood, and someone's hair being tousled. His hearing was unnaturally acute, almost preternatural, Harry thought. That was supposed to happen when you were blind, he'd heard, but wasn't it supposed to take a while to develop? All he could think was that his magic was at play, amplifying the slightest noise until it filled the limits of his universe. The sensation was strange, but helpful in a way.

"Severus, the potions," Voldemort said, as Harry heard steps approaching, boots on dirt, then someone climbing the platform.

He thought about yelling a few more insults about treachery and such, but really didn't have the energy. Or maybe it was something else. Snape's mere presence near him made him shudder violently. Images spilled through his mind, the feeling of being held tightly down, being restrained so that Lucius might ply the needles. A roaring in his head made him almost pass out before he forced it back by sucking a huge, harsh gasp of air into his lungs.

More breaths, coming faster. The feeling that he was hyperventilating, blended with a feeling that he wasn't breathing at all. He forced himself to stop it, to slow, to think beneath the fire burning in his mind. To listen, and stay aware.

Clink of glass as a vial was opened, and a smell wafted through the air. Cinnamon, clove, and other things he couldn't identify, though Merlin only knew he'd smelled them at least a hundred times during Potions class. "It merely awaits the finishing touch," Snape was explaining, the position of his voice making Harry suspect a kneel, as well. It was all he could do not to kick out in Snape's general direction, and this time, the violence wouldn't be a feint to fool Voldemort.

"Ah yes, fresh blood." Was Voldemort actually licking his lips? Sounds like it, Harry thought, managing to get his mind off Snape. He found to his disgust that he could actually smell the blade on that knife, could smell his own blood from last time still coating it in dried flakes. Or was that Wormtail's blood as well? Another vision flashed through his mind, an older one. Wormtail, cutting off his own hand, the sight so gruesome that even as a memory it made Harry ill. Had Wormtail used the same knife, though, the same one he'd used to bleed Harry?
At that moment, Harry couldn't actually remember, but decided that the idea of his blood and Pettigrew's being mingled was the most disgusting thing he'd ever heard.

It was almost a mercy that nobody gave him any longer to hold the thought. Someone moved behind him--Lucius, he guessed--and without any further ceremony at all, the manacle was shoved up towards his forearm and his left wrist was slashed. Strange that it didn't hurt much at all. Were his arms gone numb from being pinioned so long behind him? Or was it just the fact that after all those needles, his nerve endings had had about as much as they could take? Either way, it was a mercy that the vicious cut felt no worse, really, than when he'd stabbed himself with his quill.

He felt blood dripping down his fingers, though that sensation seemed muted, too, and realised only slowly that his fingers were touching something made of glass. He was bleeding into the vial, completing the Potion. He heard it froth as his blood hit it, smelled the spicy odour once again, though this time it seemed the spices had gone rank and sour. How long they let him bleed, he didn't know. It seemed like hours, but it also seemed like it passed in just a moment. Harry let his head loll forward, his jaw slack, and wished like hell that even if they were going to burn him as they'd said, somebody would give him a fucking drink of water, first.

Another clink of glass, the potion capped, though Harry felt the blood continue to drip down his fingers. He heard it spilling onto the platform, splashing against the wood.

"Enemy's Bane," Voldemort murmured in tones of ecstasy as the liquid in the vial sloshed slightly, as though he was holding the Potion up to the moonlight to examine it this way and that. "But more potent than the last few batches you've made up for me, Severus."

"No doubt, my Lord," came the Potions Master's voice.

"Burn him. Now," was the answering command, ringing out in the darkness that was Harry's mind.

No wood at his feet, no kindling carefully arranged, but these were wizards. They didn't need props to their theatrical. "Incendio Conflagare," Lucius' voice calmly intoned.

And Harry began to burn from the inside out, his magical core lighting like a torch, the fire blazing all the way to the bottom of his soul.

Strangely enough, it was a familiar sensation, one not so very different from the mental fire he could create himself. Without conscious thought or decision, he felt himself snapping fully into the image of his fire, more completely than ever before. Fire burning, fire raging, fire chasing demons from his mind, from his core.

Firefirefirefire . . .

Dark powers engulfed him until he was drowning in the flames. But these were his flames, or rather, these flames were himself; they couldn't harm him. These flames existed at the very core of his magical being, that core that had never quite burned itself through, that had come alive in dreams, and Parseltongue, and fire itself.

His core was burning now, but it didn't matter. When it came to fire inside him, Harry was in control. Fire battled fire as Harry fought off Malfoy's spells. He fought the intrusion into his core, forced it back, as images of Snape began to play inside his mind. Harsh images from the year before. Force me out, Potter. Force me out.

He hadn't known how to, not then, but he did now. He could push thought with thought; it wasn't much different to push fire with fire.
So Harry pushed, his consciousness bound up in the fight, his body straining with effort, his head coming up, blind eyes blazing with power, though the fight was purely mental.

A pulse of power cracked in half inside him, a shock wave so fierce he thought it would rip him apart as it tore through his muscles and blasted through his skin. He felt it ripple through the clearing much as it had rippled through the stones before, only this surge of magic was far more powerful. Screams shot out from every direction, the Death Eaters scattering, though Voldemort was still issuing curses. Even his voice though, sounded as though it were coming from farther away. Had he been flung back by the blast of magic?

Harry tried to fathom that, but the content of the curses caught his attention instead. Fire curses again, but these were literal, designed to set him ablaze from the outside in.

"*Fuegarum diablare! Infierno!*"

Smoke began to curl at his feet, heating his toes, filling his nostrils with its acrid scent.

And then, it seemed that everything happened all at once. Someone tall and hard was wrapping his arms completely around him, encircling the pillar, too, pressing the entire length of his body into soft robes that smelled vaguely of wormwood, and lavender, and oil of clove.

He knew who it was even before he heard the voice, or felt the sweep of hair close against his cheek. Hair he'd felt before, when Snape had cradled him in the hospital, or pulled him close to practice Occlumency.

Healing waters doused him again, the instant he was pulled into that embrace, and he heard his teacher's voice close against his ear, but warm, so warm. Not cold like Voldemort's. A rush of warmth to ply the waters in his soul through every limb, every aching bone.

"Hold tight, Harry."

That was all he said, just those three words, before something blazing hot was pushed against his shoulder, connecting with both Snape's finger and his own skin.

The familiar jerk behind his navel yanked him from the meeting site, yanked his hands free of the manacles, and sent him crashing down into a damp meadow that smelled strongly of clover. A robe was wrapped around him, and he was lifted, cradled firmly against Snape's warm chest, and carried forward. No merciful numbness, not now. Every step jarred his wounds, and Harry cried out softly, but then he was lowered to some sort of pallet, his limbs carefully arranged when he could not move them on his own.

He felt a hand come up to stroke his brow, though it stayed well clear of his eyes.

He heard a spell, felt a wand touching lightly here and there, fleeting like a feather. Was that a spell being incanted? A long spell . . . or maybe there were several, overlapping in his ears. He tried to make them out, but his head was full of cotton wool, and anyway, they didn't make sense. That didn't matter, though. He felt his belly fill with something warm and wet that washed across his veins, felt the pain tracing every nerve begin to fade.

"...--mire," was the last thing he heard before he was sent slowly spinning into a great vat of drowsiness that pulled him underneath the healing waters in his soul.

The next thing he knew, he was in the hospital wing, familiar smells surrounding him, and someone's
hands were tightly grasping his. Gnarled hands, knobby with age. Harry pulled his own hands away, and rolled awkwardly onto his side, pain coursing through him, though it was manageable. Even his eyes were just a dull ache, assuming he still had eyes. He didn't know, didn't want to touch them to find out, and certainly didn't want to ask.

So instead he asked, "Remus?"

"No, it's Albus," the headmaster softly replied.

*I'm blind, not an idiot,* Harry wanted to snarl back, but he wasn't quite so far gone as to actually do it. "I was asking for him, not saying you were him," he groaned instead.

"I'm sorry, Harry," came the headmaster's muted voice. "Remus Lupin can't be here."

"Is. He. Safe?" Harry enunciated with staggering precision, just so there'd be no more room for misunderstanding.

"Oh yes, of course," Dumbledore murmured.

"There's no 'of course' to it, not from my viewpoint!" Harry shouted, just before his last word sent him into near hysteric that emerged as mad laughter, until with a furious scream, he forced himself to cut it out. He wasn't going to fall apart over this; he just wasn't. "I bloody well don't have a clue what's happened! To anybody! Is Snape safe?"

"Professor Snape will be back shortly with some potions he's been brewing for you," Dumbledore replied, calm in the face of the storm. "To restore your sight. They may take some little while to work, though. We aren't sure how long."

"Are you going to tell me what the eff happened at my supposed safe house, or not?"

"You left it," the headmaster sighed, a hand reaching out again to touch Harry, this time lightly on the arm.

"Don't," Harry said shortly. "Don't. I don't want anybody laying a hand on me, is that clear? It . . . reminds me."

"All right." Robes rustled as Dumbledore leaned back in his chair. "Is there anything you need, Harry?"

"I need to know about Remus! And Sals! And Dudley! And what do you mean, I left? I'm not as daft as that! And if Snape had a Portkey on him, why'd he wait so bloody long to get me out of that hellhole? Do you know what that arsehole had done to me? What the fuck is wrong with everybody? Talk, damn it!"

Another voice echoed from the direction of the doorway. Pretty much the last voice Harry was expecting to hear--well, short of Voldemort's, anyway.

"Oh, come now, Headmaster." Draco Malfoy's smooth tones, so much like his father's drifted into the ward. "You've got to take points from Gryffindor for language like that."

Dumbledore didn't have to tell Malfoy to get out. Before the headmaster could say a word, Harry had sat bolt upright in bed, the pain be damned, and was screaming in incoherent rage, his hands reaching blindly out to grab whatever was handy and fling it toward that hateful voice. A vase of flowers, something fruity, and then several vials of potion went flying, judging from the sounds and smells as they crashed against the walls.
"Too bad you missed me," Malfoy said, his tone a smirk, but then, his entire attitude changed completely. "Oh, shite. Look, I didn't mean to say that, Potter. I just came to . . . oh, fuck it. I'll talk to you when you're feeling better. Here, catch."

A small package landed on Harry's bed just as he heard Malfoy walking away.

"Ten points from Slytherin for language," the headmaster murmured, a tiny bit of humour lurking in his voice. "Ah . . . Mr Malfoy appears to have given you something, Harry. Would you like to unwrap it? Or shall I?"

"Ha. Not likely," Harry retorted, laying back down. "Check it for curses. Or maybe just consign it to deepest hell on principle. Whatever. Just get it away from me."

"As you wish." More rustling sounds, robes, footsteps, and the noise of cleaning spells to wipe away the mess near the door. Then the door was closed, and locked, though Harry didn't think it had been warded. That was rather odd. Then again, Voldemort knew his magic was messed up, and he sure as hell knew that Harry had been blinded, and unless his fuzzy memories were playing tricks on him, he also knew by now that Snape was loyal to Dumbledore. And Harry. So maybe, there weren't really any secrets left to keep.

"I think perhaps it would be better if we weren't disturbed again," the headmaster said as he settled back down into his chair. "I have quite a lot to tell you, though I'm sure you won't understand the full story until Professor Snape's brewing reaches a point where he can join us."

"When's that going to be?" Harry groaned, not sure if the emotion pressing in on him was fear, or reluctance, or worry, or anger, or hope, even. He cut the feeling off by filling his mind with fire for a few seconds. Useful trick, and he was glad to know he could still pull it off, even though some part of him was warning him that he couldn't resort to it every time his emotions became overwhelming. It isn't healthy, he could almost hear Remus saying.

And it wasn't, he could tell that in the next instant, because he just began shivering, violent shudders wracking him from head to toe as the fire consumed him and he remembered what it had been like to stand there chained, naked, helpless, while Lucius Malfoy tried to set him afire from the inside out, while Voldemort tried to burn him with physical flames . . .

Harry stopped all efforts to Occlude, all efforts to protect his thoughts and mind and self, and that was when it struck him.

"What's this about Remus Lupin can't be here?" he pressed, sudden panic washing over him, because the answer to his question was obvious, wasn't it. "Can't be here!" he gasped out. "That's the most baldfaced lie I've ever heard! Remus would move heaven and earth to be here with me, Remus would kill anybody who stood in his way, Remus would never, ever, not in a hundred billion eons let me wake up alone after what I've been through! He's dead, isn't he? Dead, dead, dead like Sirius--"

"He's incapacitated!" the headmaster interrupted, raising his voice to him. That was so unusual that it quieted Harry at once. "When you went missing, Professor Snape disregarded everything else, to search for you and devise a means of rescue. Everything else, Harry. Do you understand?"

Oh, dear Merlin. "Yes," Harry moaned, guilt welling up in him, though surely it wasn't his fault, the things that had happened. "You mean the Wolfsbane . . . Snape said he'd ruined a batch and had to start over, he was going to be working on it that day, the day Malfoy found me." Panic crowded in on him, again. Blind panic that actually had him trying desperately to see the headmaster's expression. "Incapacitated, you said. But you said he was safe . . .?"
"He's in bad shape. Rather . . . torn up, and not recovering as well as he used to. It's been years, you understand, since Professor Lupin had to endure his moon time without the help of the Wolfsbane Potion. But he will be fine, Harry, he will. He just needs time. I'm sure he'll come to see you the instant he's able."

"Yeah, okay," Harry said, swallowing back the rest of his panic. "So how did Lucius Malfoy get into my house? 'Cause I didn't leave it."

"Are you sure you wish to hear everything just now, Harry? Miss Granger and Mr Weasley have expressed a strong desire--though demand would be more the word, I should think--to be informed the instant you wake. They'd be here now, missing all their classes and meals as well, if we hadn't chased them out." Dumbledore chuckled slightly. "Repeatedly. I'm afraid I had to confiscate your Invisibility Cloak, Harry. But never fear; I shall return it. I doubt you're feeling up to wandering, just yet."

The truth was, he didn't feel up to visitors, either, not even his friends. Besides, he recognised the misdirection for what it was. He was being managed, just like he'd been managed all along, strung along by Dumbledore like some sort of puppet dancing to his tune. The headmaster was seeking to distract him, probably hoping he would lay back and rest. But Harry needed to hear the truth. He needed to understand.

"Please," he sighed, sinking back into the pillows. "Explain what happened. No more secrets. Just tell me. Everything you know. And don't leave out Dudley." Exhaustion began to swamp him, though he felt awake enough to listen for hours, if need be. "Um, he's my cousin. Not sure if you knew that. Go on, talk. I need to know."
Explanations

It didn't take hours for the headmaster to explain all he knew, but it did take a good while, as he interrupted his narrative to answer Harry's frequent questions.

Yes, Number Four Privet Drive had been utterly annihilated on Lucius Malfoy's command. The Ministry of Magic was quite put out that Death Eaters were getting bold enough to strike as fiercely as that, and in broad daylight, and in a crowded Muggle neighbourhood, no less. They'd explained the destruction of the house as a gas explosion, despite the fact that after the windows had blown out, it had quite obviously imploded. And as for the Dark Mark in the sky, they'd used Obliviate on enough Muggles that the rest of them were starting to doubt they'd ever seen it.

Dudley . . . yes, the headmaster knew that Harry's cousin was called Dudley. Professor Snape had mentioned that the two boys were getting on a bit better than in years past. Yes, yes, Dudley was fine, at least physically. He'd been out walking, taking some much-needed exercise his therapist had recommended, when the attack began. He'd seen the Dark Mark hanging over his own house. He'd run home, and just as in Harry's dreams --which the headmaster was well-informed of-- he'd stood screaming on the lawn. No doubt the Death Eaters would have made short work of him had Arabella Figg not rushed over and spirited him away into her own house. Dudley was there, still, and asking to see Harry. No, no, he hadn't been one of the ones Obliviated. The Ministry, in an odd fit of lucidity, had thought it best to check with Harry before taking a step like that. But yes, Dudley was still with Mrs. Figg. He was going to see his therapist every day now, instead of twice a week. The Ministry was paying, though really, the boy was seventeen and should be capable by now of supporting himself.

"Dudley's not really seventeen, not where it counts," Harry had murmured, rolling over slightly and reaching out for the glass he'd been sipping from every few minutes. When the headmaster placed it in his hands, their fingers brushing, Harry flinched, though he didn't mean to. "If you want to talk maturity, he's more like twelve. Maybe thirteen."

Dumbledore hadn't disagreed, though he hadn't dwelt much more on Dudley. Vernon Dursley was dead, he'd said, and Harry had nodded.

As for Harry's own house--as the hospital wing was unwarded, the headmaster didn't call it by its address--Lucius Malfoy hadn't broached the intricate defences at all. Harry had left the house. Hadn't he realised that air vent in the cellar was in an exterior wall? He'd inadvertently entered a crawl space in an adjoining house. A Muggle house, though it was no more; Lucius had demolished it completely to get to Harry so that he could Apparate him away.

As far as Harry was concerned, parts of the story didn't make much sense. "What, Malfoy just happened to be walking past just as I went looking for my snake? And he can see through walls and floors, now? I was in the cellar, for crying out loud!"

"He didn't happen to just be walking past." Dumbledore gave a heavy sigh. "It troubles me to have to tell you this, Harry, even though I know from Professor Snape's reports that you're well aware your uncle meant you harm. But the truth is . . . " Another sigh. "Lucius boasted to Severus that your uncle had led them straight to you."

"I didn't tell Uncle Vernon about Grimmauld Place!" Harry insisted, his voice rough with emotion. "Even if I'd wanted to, which believe me, I never ever would have, it wouldn't have mattered! The Fidelius Charm! I'm not the Secret Keeper!"
"No, no, you're not. But Harry," here the headmaster's voice went very soft. "When you went to the hospital with Professor Snape, you introduced him to your uncle as Remus Lupin, do you recall? After your aunt died, your uncle remembered that. He was angry."

"To say the least," Harry muttered.

"Death Eaters had been snooping around Privet Drive ever since Lucius Malfoy had learnt you were not present at Hogwarts. Your uncle recognised them as wizards at some point, and ascertained that they were not, shall we say, much enamored of you. When they mentioned that you had still not returned to school, your uncle informed them that you were with Remus Lupin; that if they found him, they would find you."

"But so what?" Harry pressed. "Remus stayed in the house with me. They couldn't have found him, either . . . oh, oh no." It came to him in a flash of understanding. "He went out one day to get me ice cream. He went to Diagon Alley, and he didn't Apparate back in, he was trying to avoid magic around me, so he walked in the front door."

Silence. "I can't see you when you nod, Headmaster," Harry felt obligated to point out.

"Yes, of course. At any rate, Professor Lupin unwittingly led them back to you, though because of the Fidelius Charm, they could not perceive the house, let alone get in. But they knew that you were somewhere in the vicinity. They began searching."

Harry closed his eyes. Strange how he kept having that urge to look out through them, though it was utterly pointless. "So they were out there when I crawled through that vent. But I still don't understand. It's ridiculous. I was underground, and it's not like I was shouting to give my location away. I was afraid of frightening Sals, so I was just whispering, really quiet."

"In Parseltongue," Dumbledore needlessly reminded him.

"Well, sure, in Parseltongue. At least . . . well, the truth is I can't tell when I'm speaking it, not until somebody gives me a look or a snake replies or something. But anyway, I might not have been speaking it at first, but then I picked Sals up, and then she answered so it must have been Parseltongue then . . ."

He sensed rather than saw the headmaster's long, pointed stare.

"Oh," Harry said, his voice almost inaudible. "Parseltongue. As far as anybody knows, I'm one of only two Parselmouths around."

"Well-reasoned," the headmaster commented. "As soon as Lucius knew you had to be somewhere nearby, he cast a spell over the entire area, a spell that alerts him to any use of Parseltongue. It seems they've used this before, to try to locate you. Well. The spell was of no use whilst you stayed inside the house, but once you left its confines?"

Harry nodded. "And what happened to Sals? Did she make it back upstairs to warn Remus?"

"Your brave little snake nearly expired from the effort, but yes, she did. She wrapped herself around Professor Lupin's ankle and pulled and tugged until he got the message and went into the cellar as she seemed to want. He put his head through the vent she indicated, and after that, it was fairly clear what had happened. Apparently the warding on Grimmauld Place meant that nobody inside could hear the blast itself, but thanks to your snake, Professor Lupin alerted Severus and me at once."

"But Sals is okay, now?"
"Harry, in between trying to find you, and rescue you, and then endeavouring to heal you once Severus had you safe, there hasn't been time to spare to look for your snake. No doubt she's still in your house, and doing fine."

"No, she was sick, really sick . . ." Harry suddenly stopped speaking, then resumed. "Oh, no. You don't think she was a Voldemort plant put there to get me to speak Parseltongue, do you? Tell me you don't think that."

"She could not have been," Dumbledore softly assured him. "Nothing with evil intent toward you could have been introduced into that house, not after Severus and Remus spent most of a night spelling it specifically to safeguard you. And that, Harry, isn't even counting the Fidelius Charm which guarantees that Voldemort could not have found where to plant her. Have no worries on that account; your snake is entirely blameless."

"Well, I know that," Harry murmured. "I just didn't want anybody else getting het up over it. Um, would you send some of the old crowd over there to look for her? Sals was so cold, I don't know how much longer she might have had . . . Please?"

"Certainly," Albus agreed, "though Harry, you should know that it's been a few days since Samhain."

"I've been lying here unconscious for days? Again?"

"Most of the time you were actually unconscious in an unplottable shack in Devon. Severus patched you up, kept you safe until the Death Eaters stopped swarming the Apparition boundary surrounding Hogwarts."

"I didn't go to St. Mungo's again?"

"It was safe to go there last time, since Voldemort was unaware you'd been injured donating marrow. This time, he anticipated such a move. It was being watched."

"Yeah . . ." Harry thought back to St. Mungo's. "Snape said then that it would have been better to take me somewhere safe, and summon a healer."

"Yes. He did exactly that, but as your magic is still . . . somewhat in flux, the treatments Marjygold recommended were largely, though not exclusively, Muggle in nature."

Vague memories stirred in Harry, then, memories less substantial than dreams. Mere wisps, only. Something tight wrapped around one wrist, and fragrant poultices laid across his brow . . . no, over his eyes, or what remained of them. And spells, so many spells, interspersed with bouts of swearing. He supposed he must be remembering Snape's frustration that magical cures didn't work quite as they should on him, any longer. But most of what he'd taken for dreams didn't seem magical at all, just as the headmaster had said. Thin broth spooned into him, hour after hour, while he lay barely able to swallow. And lemonade, and something a bit thicker, something that had tasted of barley, or oats. The more he pondered it, the more the fog in his mind began to part. Warm fires banked each evening, and gentle fingers applying salve to each and every wound that dotted his body. Whimpering, and being rocked to sleep, the arms around him tightening every time the nightmares sprang to life. Those same arms again, holding him through awful chills. A hand lovingly clasping his. Lovingly? Well, maybe not. But caringly, at least . . . and a voice, that voice, quiet and soft, talking to him hour past hour as he lay enduring pain and fever that the potions couldn't cure. Talking of . . . well, nonsense, really. Harry couldn't put it together. Stories? Something about a yellow-eyed cat, and a herd of hippogriffs in Ireland, and cookies that made you sneeze.
He hadn't been awake, but he hadn't been asleep, and he actually didn't think he'd been unconscious, either. Just . . . drifting.

Harry brought his mind back to the story. "Um . . . so after Remus saw the cellar, he firecalled you, right?"

The headmaster hesitated, then divulged, "Severus immediately left his Potions lab and found some pretext for contacting key Death Eaters. He sounded them out, but not even Lucius would admit that you had been taken, let alone tell him where you were being held."

"They suspected he was a spy," Harry breathed.

"No, I think not. They know how to guard their secrets, that is all. However, there is no doubt now that Severus' true loyalties are known. In full view of Voldemort, he portkeyed you away."

*The Dark Mark,* Harry thought. *Voldemort will torture him now, through the Dark Mark.*

Harry lifted his water to his mouth, but his hand was shaking so much he spilled most of it down the soft pyjama top he was wearing.

The headmaster took the glass away, set it down with a decisive clink, and cleared his throat. Then he waited until Harry calmed. "Severus and I have talked, though your condition made it rather superfluous. It is quite obvious what he allowed to happen to you at that meeting, but I understand it went beyond that, Harry." A long pause. "That he held you . . . for them. Harry, it may take some time, as I said, but we will see you healed of all your injuries. I must tell you, my boy . . . I am so very sorry for all that Severus had to do."

*Had to do.* Even the sound of the phrase made him sort of sick. "Um . . ." he answered, swallowing hard, then reaching out for his glass, finding it, and drinking what little was left of the water. "Um, well . . ." His voice cracked. "I know."

"Harry, Severus does not often . . . he does not care to show emotion, but---"

A roiling nausea rocked through Harry. "I need Stomach Calming Draught," he choked out, struggling not to disgrace himself.

It took only a moment, and a whispered conversation, for Dumbledore to procure some from Madam Pomfrey. "There, there, drink it all," he murmured as he held it to Harry's lips. By then, the boy's hands were shaking so badly there was no question of his managing on his own. "Better now, Harry?"

"A bit," Harry admitted, drawing in a few deep breaths. "Potions sort of halfway work on me just now."

"Yes. Severus mentioned as much. You may have to be in the hospital wing a little longer than the usual."

Harry shrugged, not really caring about that. He was pretty well used to it, even if his typical visits had him patched up overnight and ready for Quidditch again in the morning. "So, the story. S-- er, S- - Snape, nobody would tell him where I was being held. And . . .?"

"With Samhain just two days away, he deduced that you would be presented by Voldemort to be . . . sacrificed. We delegated the search for you to several dozen Aurors, Tonks included. Then, Severus and I devoted ourselves to the question of how to rescue you from the meeting itself, assuming the Aurors' search efforts failed."
Harry drew in another breath. The Stomach Calming Draught was helping a bit more, now. "Okay, it's simple then. Snape brought a Portkey to the meeting."

"You cannot believe things are as simple as that," the headmaster chided. Harry heard robes rustle as he leaned forward, and flinched back a bit, but the old wizard merely rested his hands on the bed sheets, not touching Harry. "You must know, Harry, that Severus would have portkeyed you out of there instantly had that been an option."

"Yeah, I know that," Harry admitted. "It's just hard, thinking he had it on him the whole time, but I had to wait . . . through that . . ." Deep shudders coursed through his shoulders. "So, what's the story then? Anti-Apparition wards snapped into place the minute Malfoy brought me through to the meeting? Um, anti-Portkey wards, anti-pretty much anything wards?"

"More or less." There was a sad smile in the headmaster's voice. "I had taken the precaution of placing a tracking charm on Severus. A very weak one, or Voldemort would have noticed it, but it was enough to give the Aurors and me a focus for our spells. We drained ourselves, spent hour after hour trying to unlock the wards, to find some way through to you, while Severus watched for his chance on the inside. The Portkey was spelled to heat when it became active, so that Severus would know within an instant that there was finally a way out for you."

"Oh, okay," Harry sighed, starting to understand. "He had to wait until your spells broke through."

"And in the meantime," the headmaster continued, sounding as though his hands were softly patting his robes, "he had no alternative but to act the part of a loyal Death Eater. If he had attempted to rescue you before he had a true means, he could only have achieved both your deaths."

"Yeah, yeah, I got that, all right? I'm not stupid!"

"No, but you've been through a terrible ordeal, and at the hands of someone you . . . to be honest, Harry, I'm not quite sure how you've felt of late."

Harry waved his hands wildly until his sore muscles protested. "It was a terrible ordeal at the hands of someone I trusted, all right? Trusted! It was horrible." Feeling like he was strangling, he began gulping air, and it only slowly came to him that he was trying to cry. Trying . . . but he couldn't, and not because he was ashamed to blubber like a baby, though that was certainly true. No, the real reason he couldn't cry, he thought, was because of Lucius Malfoy's vicious use of the needles. He hadn't just jammed them into Harry's eyes, he'd damned near mangled everything in the vicinity. Tear ducts, too. Harry gulped again, and tangled his hands into the bedclothes, gripping them with both fists. It was either that, or give in to a reflex to rub his eyes, and he really didn't want to find out how bad that would hurt.

"Ah, Severus," the headmaster abruptly said, his voice sounding as though he had turned to face another direction. "So good to see you out of your laboratory. Harry and I were just talking about the . . . ah, incident . . . at Samhain."

"Mr Potter has my most sincere apologies," Harry heard his teacher stiffly say. He sounded so formal. Not just that, but angry. Stiff. It came to Harry in an awful rush of understanding that Snape had been acting just this way the last time he'd seen him before Samhain. They'd fought over Harry's having asked about the Death Eater meeting, and Snape had insisted he look in the pensieve and see it for himself. And afterwards, he'd been so very cold toward Harry. Snape had said that Harry could firecall him in the middle of the night, if needed, but he'd sounded so methodical about it. As if . . . there were certain things he'd bring himself to do because they were necessary, but he'd do them without compassion, or affection, or sympathy.
That conversation seemed so long ago, now. Unimportant, distant. But maybe it wasn't, not for Snape, since this behaviour was more of the same.

"I have brought the boy's potions," Snape was saying, his voice completely without emotion. "The green one first. Let it cool completely, then have him take it with food. An hour after, the blue."

A whirl of robes, and the Potions Master was turning to go, without a word to Harry.

"These are for his sight?" the headmaster prompted, halting the man's exit.

"Yes," Snape snarled, actually snarled. "If that is all, Headmaster, I have more brewing to do."

"I believe Harry needs to speak with you--"

"What Mr Potter needs," Snape loudly announced, "is Scaradicate Salve, and Blood Replenisher, and Skele-Gro for his chipped bones, and no doubt, a great deal more Healing Draught and Painless Sleep! And he needs them all made fresh, to maximum potency, if they are to have much hope of interacting with his magic, which as you know, is in an indeterminate state that at present defies all diagnosis! And I have more Eyesight Elixir to tend to in the dungeons, or did you wish the child to remain blind?"

"Go, Severus," Dumbledore said in tones of defeat.

"Wait!" Harry called, but when he heard his teacher's stomping steps pause, he didn't really know what to say. It didn't help that he felt so very ill just knowing Snape was near, or that he could feel himself shaking with an absolutely irrational fear. He fought his way past it. "Um, er . . . will you come back later, sir? I . . . I really did want to talk with you."

A pause, and then a longer pause, still. "I will endeavour to be back later this evening, Mr Potter," Snape heavily announced, as though the prospect of such a visit was second only to drinking pure hemlock.

Harry, the boy thought rather desperately, but didn't say it. Snape hadn't called him "Harry" since before the disaster with the pensieve. From the sound of things now, he never would again.

The footsteps stomped off.

"Harry," another voice said. Dumbledore, again. "Would you like to eat now, and take your potions? Or should you like to hear the rest? There isn't much more."

"Let's just finish," Harry said, the words somehow feeling heavy. "The potion has to cool first, anyway. You were telling me about the Portkey. You finally found a way to wake it up, despite all Voldemort's wards?" He huffed, and crossed his arms before his chest, a feeling of being hurt welling up inside him. But this hurt wasn't physical. Somehow, it was worse. "Kind of convenient, wasn't it, the timing and all? I mean, wait until after I've been tortured and blinded, wait right until Voldemort's giving up on letting Malfoy burn me and is starting in on me himself!" He knew he was being unfair, but he couldn't seem to stop the words. "Couldn't you lot have found a way to break through a little sooner?"

"But that's just it, Harry," Dumbledore softly admitted. "We never did break through his wards. You did. Your magic went completely wild for an instant, and nullified every spell for leagues around. Severus felt the ring heating, and leapt to touch it to you. The timing . . . well, you did that."

Harry was staring without seeing, trying to comprehend that. He vaguely remembered a feeling of utter power blasting through his bones and flesh and skin, the sound of Death Eaters scrambling for
"I did that," he acknowledged, nodding. "I did something similar when I was locked alone in the cell, but it was weaker . . ." His eyes closed. "If I could do it at the end, then, why not any earlier? I did try, I did. I felt . . . too drained. The needle didn't even bend," he added irrelevantly.

The headmaster ignored what Harry had said about not being touched, and lightly patted his hand. Harry shivered, hating it, but managed not to do something drastic like roll away. "Wild magic, such as you did, is called that for a reason. It's not well understood. I think perhaps you needed something truly remarkable to happen before you could unleash it."

"Headmaster," Harry groaned, "having my eyes practically shredded while they were still in my skull was truly remarkable, don't you think?"

"A physical intrusion. What happened later was a magical intrusion, Lucius Malfoy attempting to set your very magical core on fire. You fought back. Admirably well." Fingernails clinked against glass as he touched his hand to a vial of potion. "This has cooled, but you must take it with food, as Severus said. Shall I summon you a meal? Do you feel able to eat?"

"Yeah." Strangely enough, he wasn't ravenous, and it had been a while since he'd eaten at the cottage, hadn't it? Maybe, since he'd been at Hogwarts, Snape had been spelling nutritive potions into him, or something. Or better yet, Madam Pomfrey, because now it seemed to Harry that Snape wouldn't bother doing that himself, not now that he hated Harry again. Maybe all those memories of the cottage weren't memories at all, but dreams. They were so faded and blurry, Harry couldn't really be sure. Ha, he thought. I've always really, really wanted somebody to hold me and take care of me when I was feeling ill. Ten to one I dreamed all that just because I wanted it so bad.

At least the headmaster, and Madam Pomfrey too, had enough sensitivity to leave Harry alone for his meal. They didn't even offer to help feed him, or arrange for someone else to, and Harry was grateful for all of it. In the first place, he wasn't very good company at the moment, and in the second place, he really didn't want anyone watching as he fumbled blindly about. He made a right mess of everything: tray, sheets, his own clothes, but he didn't care. He wasn't even thinking about it, which probably explained why he was so clumsy. It wasn't like him.

But he had other things on his mind. Why was Snape so blasted mad at him? Surely Harry was the one who should be angry! Well, actually he was. Mostly at Voldemort and Lucius Malfoy, and Death Eaters in general, but Snape was mixed up in there somewhere, even though Harry wasn't stupid and he did understand what his teacher had done, and why.

But why was Snape so mad at him? So mad he wouldn't even talk to him! Just like he'd been about the pensieve, only worse . . .

Harry suddenly felt all the food he'd eaten try to rush back up his throat. He swallowed hard--dang, he was getting pretty good at forcing back queasiness--and felt again that peculiar sensation of needing to cry and not being able to. Because that was it, wasn't it? It all went back to that night when Snape had made him look in that horrid pensieve. Harry had demanded to know what went on at a Death Eater meeting, and Snape had been offended at the question, let alone the way Harry had gone about pushing it.

And now, he knew what went on at a Death Eater meeting, didn't he? He knew personally just how evil and sick and twisted that snakelike son of a bitch could get. And Snape probably thought that Harry had got what he deserved. He'd wanted to know, and now he did.

Great gasping sobs took hold of him as he shoved his tray away with both hands and heard it clatter on the floor. Collapsing to his side, Harry shoved a fist in his mouth, and bit down hard to stop his blubbering. So Snape was an unfeeling prick. So what? It wasn't like he hadn't known that from way
back. But it hurt, even though it shouldn't. It hurt, it really did.

At least he was calm by the time Madam Pomfrey came to scourgify everything in sight, Harry included. Even better, she knew better than to so much as pat him on the head. Harry supposed she wasn't a licensed Medi-Witch for nothing.

"Come now," she said in brisk, professional tones. "It's time for the second half of your Sight Restorative Potion this evening."

She let Harry push up on his own, let him take the vial and drink it unassisted, just as she'd let him eat on his own, no matter the mess it made.

"Now, sleep, I should think," she continued. "Do you need anything else, Mr Potter?"

Drowsiness was already washing over him. Something from the Potion? He didn't think so. It felt more like emotional exhaustion. "No," he said, flopping back. "Thank you . . ."

He was asleep before he even heard her moving away.

How long he slept, he couldn't have said. But at some point, he seemed to wake . . . though it was more like those drifting, dreamlike states he'd experienced in the cottage in Devon. He couldn't move, but he surfaced to some sort of awareness.

He heard voices, over by the door. Snape and Dumbledore, whispering, their tones low and hushed.

". . .no," Snape was hissing. "No, Albus. Do not suggest this again."

"But surely," the headmaster softly insisted, "if you would just speak to him, Severus . . ."

"I will not speak to that irresponsible idiot if I can possibly avoid it, Albus, is that not clear to you by now? He left the house! You know what that led to."

"Severus, be reasonable. He didn't realise--"

"Oh, he never realises, that one," Snape quietly snarled. "Never thinks of anyone but himself. But he should have, Albus. What are we to do now, to stay ahead of the Dark Lord's mad schemes? Thanks to him, the Dark Lord will never trust his secrets to me, again!"

"Severus--"

"No, I will not talk to him. And what is more, Albus, I am of half a mind to stop making his potion, as well. Let him suffer. I certainly can't bring myself to care."

A heavy sigh, and footsteps stalking away.

Harry bit his hand again, and told himself it was just as well he couldn't cry.
Harry woke up to the sound of a furious voice shouting in outrage, "What are you doing in here?"

Groggy, he opened his eyes. Reflex, since he couldn't even detect light levels. He pushed up with a groan, and asked, "Ron? Is that you?"

"Damned straight it's me," Ron snarled, stepping across the floor as though headed into battle.

Hermione's voice broke into the fray. "Put that wand away, Ron! His isn't out, and you might hit Harry!"

"Not," Ron sneered, "until he tells us what he thinks he's doing! Harry, why are you letting him sit in here?"

"There's no letting to it, since I was asleep until you started screaming your head off," Harry retorted, grumpy. "And I'm blind, in case nobody's thought to mention it! How should I know who's in here?"

A chair scraped back as someone stood up.

"Well, what of it?" Ron pressed, his voice directed over Harry's head, that time. "What do you think you were doing, hanging about in here while Harry's asleep?"

"I think," came Draco Malfoy's slightly sneering tones, "that I was waiting for him to wake up. I suppose I could have shouted to achieve my aim, like you did, but that's a bit common, don't you think?" Draco drew a breath. "So what did you think I was doing, Weasley?"

"Waiting to hex him, more likely!"

"You're the one with the wand out," Draco drawled, the toe of his boot tapping on the hard stone of the floor. "And really! If I'd had the slightest urge to hex him, why would I have been waiting around? I have much better things to do than waste my time."

"Then why are you in here, Malfoy?" Hermione questioned. Something in her calm tone made Harry think she'd put a hand on Ron's wand arm.

"You're the smart one, Granger," Draco came back. "I thought it would be obvious. I was sitting with him, and I was letting myself be seen sitting with him. Put that together with the fact that I'm definitely not in here to waste my time, and figure it out."

He walked out without a word to Harry.

"Merlin's balls, Harry!" Ron exclaimed, dragging over a chair for Hermione before he sat down in the one Draco had vacated. "What do you think he meant by all that?"

"Oh, what does he always mean?" Harry sighed. "It's some Slytherin plot. Listen, I have no idea why he'd come sniffing around; I'm just glad you guys stopped by. The thought that he was sitting there, right next to me, while I was asleep and helpless and blind, and without my wand?" He shivered. "I don't know why Pomfrey would let him. It's not exactly a secret that he'd just love a ticket straight to Voldemort's heart. What better way than through me?"

"Yeah, what's wrong with that Pomfrey?"

Before Ron could get too far into that topic, Hermione leaned close and spoke. "So, how are you..."
feeling?"

"Oh, fine," Harry lied. She hadn't touched him, but she was near enough that she could, and Harry found that even the idea made him feel all jittery inside. He pushed back on his hands to give himself more room, but the pressure on his palms and arms made him wince.


He angled her a sheepish smile, and wished he could see her expression. Tone of voice only went so far in conveying emotion; he wondered just what nuances he was missing every time anybody spoke to him. "Oh, I'm sore," he admitted. "Really sore, all over, and I have an awful headache most of the time. Probably because of my eyes. Um, I don't know how much they told you? About what happened?"

"You don't have to talk about it, mate," Ron assured him, placing a small box in his palm. Even that made him shrink back a little. "Here, we brought you some Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans."

Harry fumbled to open it, realizing as he felt the small candies that without his sight, he'd really have no idea what flavour to expect each time he popped one in his mouth. The idea sort of unnerved him, but he tried one anyway. Hmm, paint. The funny thing was, it wasn't half bad.

"Maybe he wants to talk," Hermione was chiding, sounding an awful lot like Remus. Harry didn't mind that. He missed Remus, and wondered how long he'd have to wait to see him. "Maybe he needs to get it all out of his system."

Harry really didn't, though he also didn't want to say as much. "Maybe he wants to hear what's been going on around here for the last three weeks," he said to distract them, though it occurred to him that that was a stupid question. It was a school, after all. "Um, are you guys missing classes to be here?"

"It's lunchtime," they said in unison, and then giggled. Harry could just imagine them holding hands, their fingers twining together.

He gave a little smile of his own, but it was tinged with sadness. "I don't know how I'm going to catch up on everything I missed," he admitted. "I mean, I didn't even know before, but now . . .?"

"Oh, you'll get your sight back," Hermione assured him. "And your magic, too."

Harry gulped. "Um, everybody knows, huh?"

"Well, it was sort of hard to miss," Ron explained. "Sorry to have to tell you this, but you made the front page again. Captured Death Eaters confirm that Boy-Who-Lived poses no more threat to You-Know-Who, something like that."

"Captured? Where?"

"Here. We all had to stay inside the castle for a few days after . . . er, Samhain, 'cause there were so many Death Eaters in the vicinity. Quidditch practice was even cancelled! Oh, shite, sorry!"

"Sorry," Harry blankly repeated, but Ron's telling silence cleared up the mystery. "You can mention Quidditch, Ron," he assured his friend. "And chess, and whatever else you like, even if I can't see it, all right? But tell me first about the Death Eaters."

"Not a whole lot to tell, since they couldn't get onto the castle grounds, or so we were told, anyway. Hermione here has her suspicions. Anyway, they started going away after the Aurors began capturing them."
"Who'd they get?" Harry wanted to know, though his throat felt thick when he went on, "Lucius Malfoy?"

"Nah. Sorry. We sort of heard it was mostly Malfoy who um, well, you know, did those awful things to you."

"Sort of heard?" Harry questioned.

"Er, well," Harry could almost hear Ron blushing. "Even after that story came out, you were gone for days, and we were so worried, 'Mione and me. So the instant they got you in here, we came running. But then they kicked us out, so we sneaked back using your dad's old cloak and kind of eavesdropped."

"Kind of eavesdropped?" Harry echoed, laughing that time. Ah, did it feel good to laugh, even if it jarred his headache a bit. "I guess that's why the headmaster said he'd confiscated my cloak."

"Oh, he told us you'd get it back," Ron assured him.

"Still, I think it's horribly irresponsible of the Prophet to print that story," Hermione huffed.

"I think it's bloody magnificent," Harry declared, amazing them both. "You don't know what it's like having everybody always looking to you, expecting you to be this amazing hero just because Avada Kedavra bounced off your head when you were too young to remember."

"I think people have a few more reasons than that to look up to you, Harry," Hermione objected.

"Yeah, well, I could use the break," Harry decided. "Not that I can see them looking, anyway, but that won't last forever. I'll get my sight back."

"That's the spirit," Ron encouraged. "Buck up. Good job."

"This isn't positive thinking," Harry corrected him. "I know I should be panicking or freaking out or, well, something. I mean, darkness all around. It could be pretty scary . . . but I know, I just know I'll get my vision back. I've been . . ." He hesitated, but knew his friends wouldn't think he was pulling a Trelawney if he told them. Actually, some students at Hogwarts would, but not these two. "See, I've been having dreams that come true, lately. Er, not all my dreams, but lots. I even dreamed this, that I'd be blind and in the hospital. But I also dreamed that I could see again, later, so it'll be okay." He frowned, remembering what else he'd dreamed. Things about Slytherins, and Malfoy, and hitting Ron.

"What is it?" Hermione pressed, seeing that frown.

"Oh, nothing," Harry excused, but before she could Harry . . . him again, he went on, "Hungry, I suppose. I mean, I slept through breakfast."

"You need the rest," Hermione acknowledged. He heard her leaning down towards him, but at the last moment some look on his face must have made her think twice about touching him. "Ron and I will tell Madam Pomfrey you want some food, all right?"

"Tell her to keep that Malfoy git out of my face," Harry growled. "He's been by here twice, now. It's getting pretty creepy."

"Twice when you were alone?" Ron pressed.

"No, the first time Dumbledore was with me," Harry remembered. He thought about mentioning the
mysterious gift, but decided that it wasn't a good idea to set Ron off, again.

"Well, I'm sure he gave the little twit what-for," Ron approved, sounding like he was nodding vigorously.


Ron was building up a head of steam, and was far from through. "I should think so! Imagine him having the gall to come around here when it's his own bloody precious father who got you into this state. Well, him and Snape."

As hurt as Harry was feeling after what he'd heard in the middle of the night, he wasn't about to stand for anybody badmouthing Snape. Well, not about the Samhain stuff, anyway. "No," he argued. "That isn't true. Not the last part."

"Oh, come on," Ron urged.

Harry crossed his arms. "You can think what you want. I'm not going to listen to it."

"Harry--"

Harry interrupted him to turn in the direction of Hermione's voice. "You have Potions class today, don't you? Give Snape a message from me. Tell him I'm sorry. He'll know what about."

"You're sorry," Ron gasped. From the sound of it, he was turning a nice shade of red. Or purple, even. "You're sorry! You're absolutely mental, you are! What have you got to be sorry for, that you didn't have three eyes for those bastards to skewer?"

"Ron, you're not helping," Hermione chided. A scuffling sound ensued, and Harry suspected she was pushing Ron away. "Just calm down," she whispered from a short distance away. "Harry's not himself. Can you blame him?"

"Harry can hear you," Harry called. "And I'm managing just fine, thanks. I owe Professor Snape an apology, and--"

"He owes Snape an apology!" That time Ron sounded like he was positively choking. "Of all the nutters things I've ever heard, Harry, that's the nuttiest, bar none!"

"Shut up, Ron!" Hermione flatly commanded. She took a few steps toward Harry. "I'll tell him, yes. Is there anything else you need?"

Harry took a moment to think about that. "I need Ron to say we're all right."

Ron sort of mumbled for a second before he admitted, "Well, 'course we're all right, Harry. I just . . . I just think you haven't really realised what that git put you through."

"That git," Harry snarled. "Saved my life! Again!"

"Yeah, well it took him long enough!"

"He did what he could!"

"Maybe we'd better leave," Hermione broke in. "We'll come by later when tempers are cooler."

"Yeah, do that," Harry agreed, his teeth still clenched. "And let's all agree here and now that we're
"not going to talk about Snape, all right? Is that goddamned good and clear? Don't you two even mention Snape to me! I can't bear it!"

"Fine," Ron snapped.

Hermione, however had gone strangely silent, until she said, "Oh. Hallo, Professor."

Harry's breath froze solid in his chest. "Professor?"

No answer.

"Um, he walked on past," Hermione admitted, a niggling sound telling Harry that she was worrying her lips with her teeth. "He was carrying some vials, probably went into Madam Pomfrey's office using the corridor entrance." She sighed then, and said to Ron, "Even you have to admit that Snape's been working day and night preparing Harry completely fresh potions for all his . . . er, injuries."

"Yeah," Ron did admit. "Even during class. He's brewing away while we get stuck doing bookwork. Well, all of us except his little pet creep."

"You don't mean--"

"Yeah, I do mean," Ron groused. "Malfoy. He gets to be up at the demonstration table, snarky little teacher's pet that he is, and help Snape make batch after batch of glop."

"Malfoy's helping brew my Potions?" Harry sucked in a huge, panicked breath, only to find he'd accidentally inhaled a Bertie Bott's Bean. He tried to breathe again and couldn't, at least not until Hermione abruptly pounded him on the back. Shite, did that hurt. All over the pinpricks that hadn't quite healed over. And worse than that, it gave him the creeps to have Hermione's hands on him, which was just plain ridiculous! At least she hadn't touched his skin. That made it bearable. Barely.

Once recovered, Harry didn't know what to say. Draco Malfoy was helping make his Potions? And Snape was letting him? It was beyond strange; it was downright alarming. The only thing he was sure of was that he wanted to be alone to think about it. "Um . . . you said lunchtime. I think I'd better eat, okay?"

"An excellent notion," Madam Pomfrey practically sang as she sailed into the ward from her office. "Professor Snape has just dropped off both halves of your Sight Restorative. You remember the procedure, Mr Potter? Green first, with food, and an hour after, blue."

"I can't see green from blue," Harry pointed out. "Though I think I can smell them apart. The follow-up potion's absolutely gross. Tastes like liquorice that's been half-digested and vomited back out."

"Are you quite sure of that, Mr Potter?"

"Well, maybe it's more like rotten liquorice that's been half-digested and--"

"Are you quite sure you can't perceive any colours whatsoever?" the Medi-Witch clarified, impatience ringing in her tones. He heard a wand swishing in front of his eyes, heard a quiet *Lumos Maxiliare*. "What can you see?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" she echoed in disbelief.

"Pitch black," Harry clarified.
Her robes rustled as she put something away. The wand, he suspected. "Well, drink your potions anyway." She waited while he sniffed them both, then set the blue one aside. "Very good, although I'm sure you'll be able to see light before too long, and detect colour as well. Ah, here's your food."

Harry felt the tray descend on his legs, then lift up to float slightly above. Patting around, he found what seemed like a carrot stick, and began munching it. It turned out to be a turnip stick, and as he chewed his way through it, he realised that he didn't really care if Ron and Hermione stuck around for the whole meal and saw him making a total mess of himself.

Apparently, Poppy Pomfrey did. "Well, off with you!" she shooed the students. "You'll be needing your own lunch too, and the house-elves only serve another fifteen minutes, you know. I wouldn't think Miss Granger would care to give them extra labours."

"Hermione," Harry reminded her between bites. "Give the professor my message. Don't forget."

Over the next two days, Harry grew used to being interrupted every few minutes, or so it seemed, by loads and loads of visitors. Every single one of his teachers stepped in, with the notable exception of Snape, though he was around plenty. Harry heard him sometimes, a low voice beyond the wall, talking to Madam Pomfrey each time he delivered a fresh batch of potions. He could make out enough words, too, to know that he was telling the Medi-Witch just how to use each brew, no matter that he'd given her the same instructions every time he'd come. It irritated Madam Pomfrey, Harry could tell, but Snape didn't appear to care at all about that. Even when she told him, point blank, that she'd been healing children since you were here at school, Severus, he'd merely replied Mr Potter's treatment will not be compromised for anything, Poppy, not even your considerable pride.

It didn't sound to Harry like the man positively hated him, and he certainly hadn't stopped making his potions as he'd threatened, but that was little solace after the awful things he'd heard Snape saying to Dumbledore. And too, there was this business about Snape letting Malfoy help make the various salves and elixirs Harry was taking every day and night. It gave him the heebie-jeebies every time he had to swallow something, but he did trust Snape, so he went ahead and swallowed anyway. After all, Snape was a Potions Master. He'd know if something had been adulterated. And anyway, Harry was pretty sure that even an angry-at-that-stupid-Potter Snape wouldn't hesitate to expel Malfoy if the Slytherin boy actually tried to poison him.

All the same, he didn't like the idea that Malfoy had been hovering around his potions.

And he liked even less the fact that Snape was obviously avoiding him like the plague.

Ron and Hermione came back several more times, mostly for short chats during which no-one dared mention Snape. Each evening, however, Hermione felt absolutely compelled to lecture Harry on all he'd missed in the last few weeks of classes, Potions included. Harry put up with it in good humour, though; he really did want to catch up, though it all seemed rather daunting, the things the students had moved on to while he'd been away. At least after a couple of hours of it she was willing for the three of them move on to another topic.

All the sixth-year Gryffindors stopped by to see him, and loads of the older and younger students, too. A fair number of Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws visited, as well. Mostly the students came in groups of three or four, and stayed just a few minutes while Harry tried hard not to feel like he was some freak on display. He often wondered what he looked like, now. Madam Pomfrey had mentioned in passing that his eyes weren't bandaged because exposure to the air, and to normal variations of light as the day waxed and waned, would help with healing. He remembered the needles, vividly remembered the pain, and so he knew his face must have been utterly mangled. But
nobody who came to see him gasped in shock, or even spoke in the stilted way people had when they tried to bear the unbearable, so he knew he couldn't look *that* bad. But surely he couldn't look normal, could he, not when Potions worked but half as well as they should?

There wasn't anyone he could ask, he realised. Every kindly soul who visited, even Ron and Hermione, would soften the truth with good will, or little white lies. So Harry didn't ask, though from time to time he still wondered.

With so many people coming by to see him, Harry got pretty good at opening cards he couldn't see. Thankfully, most of them were a benign version of Howlers, so pretty voices would chant, or sing, or sometimes positively *chime* messages at him. He got *very* good at unwrapping candies, sight unseen, and was just thankful that Fred and George weren't there to gift him with their strange ideas about what made a sweet fun.

There was no shortage of flowers beside his bed, mainly because a few of the Hufflepuff girls got pretty ridiculous and sent him self-propagating bouquets. By the second night, the room smelled like the greenhouses in full spring bloom, but when Harry complained a bit, Ron said the girls were sending the flowers because they liked Harry. When Harry said *well sure they liked him*, Ron and Hermione started giggling madly again. Then Hermione explained that Brenda and Strella and Halsey and Kat didn't just like him, they *liked-him-liked-him*. Harry said *that* was a stupid way to put it, and when Ron agreed, he got to listen to Ron and Hermione bicker over it.

Just to shock them into forgetting their argument, he unwrapped a Chocolate Frog and caught it before it could really go anywhere.

Ron seemed to be having a hard time talking, but finally he came out with, "Are you having us on, mate? Your vision's back!"

"Nah. Just Seeker reflexes," Harry passed it off.

Suddenly feeling tired, he lay back and closed his eyes. He didn't want to ask, he really didn't, especially not in front of Ron, but he'd been waiting for two days for Hermione to bring it up, and she hadn't. Probably for the same reason: Ron.

But he couldn't wait any longer.

"Did you tell him?" Harry abruptly asked, brushing the Chocolate Frog wrapper off his bed.

Hermione didn't have to ask *tell whom what*? She knew. "Yes. Of course I told him."

She wasn't going to say anything more? She was going to make Harry drag it out of her? Well, fine then. "What did he say?"

Hermione's robes made a fluttering little noise. Harry's guess was that she'd bent down to retrieve the Chocolate Frog wrapper, to save the house-elves some work since the hospital floor wasn't spelled to eliminate its own messes. It couldn't be. Sometimes the Medi-Witch had to see just what foul substance a student's body had decided to produce.

"Hermione?"

"He didn't say anything, mate," Ron put in, sounding as though he was trying to be helpful. "I had to stay after to scrub cauldrons. Heard the whole thing."

"Liar," Harry accused, but without rancour. "Oh, not about the cauldrons; I'm sure that's true. But come on, how bad could it have been? You went up, and you said . . . well, what, exactly? How'd
you put it?"

Hermione thought back to two days earlier. "'Sir. May I have a moment of your time? Harry asked me to pass on a message. He wants you to know that he's sorry.'"

"And think, she didn't even choke on it," Ron put in. "Just stood there, polite as you please, and gave him your message like you wanted."

Harry could appreciate, really appreciate, that Ron was trying to behave, so he overlooked the "choke" comment to simply press, "But what did he reply? Hermione?"

"Don't make me tell you," she begged.

*Oh, Merlin. It's bad, then.* Well, the way Harry figured it, he might as well know the worst. "Hermione," he chided, in exactly that tone she always used to get him to spill.

"Oh, all right," she grumbled, the candy wrapper making crinkling noises as she twisted it. "All right! So, I had just said, 'He wants you to know that he's sorry,' and Professor Snape looked straight down at me in that glaring way he has, and growled two words."

"Two words?"


"Shite," Harry swore out loud.

"Yeah," Ron agreed, evidently thinking Harry was calling Snape a shite. "And I didn't even do anything to be assigned cauldron duty, either."

"Not anything?"

"No--"

"Ron, you only glared at him like he was the devil's own spawn for two solid hours!" Hermione reminded him.

"It was my way of sticking up for Harry!"

*Uh-oh.* Harry could see the trend of the conversation, and he didn't like it. "That's it," he shortly announced, his nerves set on edge. *Get. Out. What was that?* "I'm really tired out. So I'll see you two tomorrow, okay?"

"Yeah, okay," Ron agreed.

"'Night, Harry," Hermione bid him, quietly leaning over to peck him on the cheek. Harry flinched back a yard, almost knocking himself completely off the bed.

"Harry!"

"It's nothing," he insisted, levering himself back into a stable position.

"It's not nothing if you can't stand a simple touch!" Hermione exclaimed. "This is really serious!"

"You," Harry said in a hard tone, "do not know what I went through. I don't care what you heard
"I care nothing for what a sixteen year-old whelp thinks of me . . . . You are not alone . . . . Trust is necessary to fight the Dark Lord effectively. We failed last year, Mr Potter . . . . You will know not to question me again . . . . We'll work on your pathetic inability to lie convincingly another time, Gryffindor . . . . I do believe I prefer you insolent, all things considered . . . . Let him suffer. I certainly can't bring myself to care . . . . You may wake me anytime you have need, any need.

That last phrase started circling his thoughts, taking hold of them in a stranglehold, refusing to let go.
You may wake me anytime you have need, anytime you have need . . .

But he couldn't, could he? Because Snape hated him now, didn't even want to brew his potions, was letting Malfoy help with them! Snape had promised to come to talk to him, and he hadn't, not once, not even after Harry sent the apology!

Still that voice kept talking, though: You may wake me anytime you have need. Any need. Any need . . .

Inside his dream, Harry started shrieking, his throat on fire as he poured all his pain and anger and fear into one word. One word, but he screamed it ceaselessly, over and over, his body aching to be touched and held again, even while his mind rebelled against that very prospect. The whole horror of Samhain coalesced into a single name as he flailed on the bed, his dream bleeding out into the hospital wing, into a life where people heard him and came running, footsteps all around, hands trying to calm him.

Hands he couldn't stand, hands he couldn't trust.

The margin between dreams and real life shattered, then, and Harry came awake, but he couldn't stop flailing, or stop his screams for Snape.
The windows in the hospital wing shattered into millions of tiny shards as the stone walls abruptly buckled, then righted themselves.

And still Harry screamed, even as he felt another enormous surge of magic washing in him and out through his skin. The walls all around began to blaze with such fierce, unnatural light that Harry could feel it even if he couldn't see it.

The world began collapsing all around him; only his screams were real. Beyond desperate, they were begging, pleading, frantic, and this time, there was more than a name to them. Snape. Now. Now.

Now. Snape. Now!

A litany, pouring through his brain and out his teeth.

Then other noises broke through his frenzy, even as he flailed and kicked and batted hands away. He heard the whoosh of a Floo, and solid footsteps coming towards him, and a voice he recognised shouting, "Harry!"

But Harry couldn't tell if Snape was calling his name from inside the dream, or from just beside his bed. He couldn't see to find out, either. It felt like darkness was consuming him, like it wasn't just something surrounding him with endless black; it was deep inside him, too, running through his veins, lodged within his marrow. Panic taking over completely, Harry convulsed and screamed again, behind it a horrified gurgling noise, for he could feel a third surge of magic beginning to gather deep down in the pit of his bones—-

"Harry, I'm right here!" The voice came again, louder, as strong fingers snatched up both his hands and squeezed them. Hard. He'd fought the other people reaching out for him; he'd thrashed like an enraged basilisk, unable to bear it, screaming all the louder every time they tried to grab him. But this touch was different. Some part of him recognised it, even though the grip was so fierce it actually hurt. That wasn't important. All that mattered was one thing: this touch brought him back to a consciousness of himself. He became Harry again, not a mindless well of need that lashed out at everyone with fists and voice and magic, all at once.

This touch tamed his wild magic.

Snape's grip levelled off the moment he stopped thrashing. Harry felt like he'd just been trampled, but his hands held securely in his teacher's, he started to calm down. He'd been breathing for forever through his mouth, it seemed; screaming so much it actually felt dry inside. Closing it finally, rolling his tongue over his teeth, he sucked a breath of air in through his nose, and at once smelled something so rank and awful that it made him think he'd lose every bit of food he'd ever eaten.

He didn't know if his face had turned puce, or if his queasy groan told the tale, but Snape realised the problem at once. "Albus, my robes!" the Potions Master commanded, his hands still locked to Harry's. "Vanish them away, inner and outer both! And apply a freshening charm to my clothes."

The air near him tingled with magic, and as the awful smell vanished, Harry inhaled a scent he'd come to know in Devon. His scent, laved by spells and charms until there was nothing left but just the clean smell of his clothes, and the man inside them. To Harry, it was a scent that meant care and comfort; warm buttered oatmeal and honeyed water; and restfulness instead of panic, even while his injuries had ached and the world all around was endless dark.
Harry breathed the smell in deeply, and relaxed still further.

It came to him that Snape hadn’t let go of his hands. Harry flexed his fingers, but not to free them. He just wanted to feel that the grip was really there, that he was awake now, and no longer in that half-dreaming state he’d come to know so well in Devon.

Madam Pomfrey began chastising in her high, sing-song voice, "Has no-one any sense? That magic he just let loose! Let him go, Severus! The boy can't bear so much as a finger applying salve--"


Even without sight, Harry could tell she was, that she was staring. Hating the sensation prickling at the back of his neck, he rolled until he could hide his face against the side of Snape's torso, burrowing his cheek against the man's soft shirt. Cotton . . . well-worn, well-washed cotton, the weave fuzzy with age. It would be black, he thought, and long-sleeved to hide the Dark Mark. Frowning, Harry shifted closer to his teacher, wondering what was going to happen to Snape now that Voldemort's harsh summons would have to be ignored.

"This is not how trauma recovery proceeds," Madam Pomfrey was still insisting. "I am a trained Medi-Witch, as you well know! Severus may have had the best of intentions, but he was present at the events, participated in them. And now Mr Potter is clinging to him; Albus, this is not healthy for the boy--"

Thankfully, that was all Harry heard. Her voice faded down the corridor where Dumbledore had--gently but firmly, no doubt--led her.

As soon as her protests faded off, Snape slid an arm beneath Harry's shoulders and effortlessly drew him up so the boy could rest a cheek against his chest. Good thing, thought Harry. He'd almost started to suffocate there, with his face pressed in against his teacher's side.

For a long time after that, Harry lay silent, just soaking in the feeling of someone who would sit quietly with him, someone whose presence didn't make him feel like he had to put on a show of being cheerful and brave. He wasn't brave, not now; he was afraid to so much as speak. Or maybe it was a case of being confused, of not knowing what to say, or how to say it, even. Madam Pomfrey had a point, after all. Snape had been there, had helped hurt him, or at least, allowed others to. But he hadn't had much option; Harry understood that, when he could rise above the memory of the staggering pain, and think about things rationally. Samhain . . . that wasn't who Snape really was. That had been a feint.

Afterwards . . . that was what mattered.

Afterwards, when Harry had lain dazed and half-conscious, unable to recall or remember much of what he'd suffered during Samhain. Snape had held him and held him, hour past hour just like this, sitting beside him, holding his hands, letting Harry lean into his strength and draw from it. His body remembered that, recognised the comfort, he thought. His body knew, just like the thinking part of his mind, that Snape was no threat. Strangely, his teacher's touch was the only one he could bear, but more than that, it was a touch he wanted. Craved, even. Now that he was being held, he realised it was like getting water after an eternity of thirst. But perhaps that wasn't so strange, after all. Snape's touch was the one thing that stood apart from the horror, because Harry had been given so much of it then, all he could want, really, in that time before he'd woken up. Before he'd realised he was supposed to be afraid.

It was Snape who finally broke the silence enveloping them.
"Better now, Harry?"

Harry gave a jerky nod, his cheek brushing against the hard little buttons on Snape's shirt. He wanted to ask so many things, but every one of them sounded stupid even to him. Do you have to hate me now? You aren't really going to stop making my potion, are you? Why did you have to be the one to hold me down while they tormented me . . . He cast about for something better to start off with, something that wouldn't have Snape sneering at him and going back to Mr Potter.

"Um, Professor? What was that terrible smell?"

Snape's chest moved up and down in a slow, calming rhythm as he breathed. "Sight Restorative Potion. I believe you're familiar with it."

"Oh, yeah." Harry shuddered, thinking he'd almost rather stay blind that drink that dead liquorice flavour twice each day. He didn't say that, though. Some frightened part of him couldn't bear the thought that Snape didn't like him, not really, not anymore. He'd move away if Harry said something insulting, wouldn't he? And Harry needed to be held, even if his teacher was only here because he'd thrown a screaming fit. "Smelling it was worse than drinking it," he settled for explaining.

"It would be," Snape remarked, easing one hand from Harry's and bringing it up to rest it very gently against the back of the boy's head. His fingers wove themselves through the strands, but other than that, didn't move. "You're sensitised to it because it's in your system. It took me a moment to realise; nobody else could detect the smell at all."

"You were making it, again?"

"I was spilling it, you idiot child," Snape softly replied, pulling his head a little bit more snugly against him as he said it. It came to Harry then, that strange as it might seem, when Snape said that phrase he meant it . . . affectionately. It was sad, in a way, as though Snape hadn't ever had anyone he could care about, and didn't really know how it was supposed to work.

Though come to think of it, this slow hug where he could feel the man's heartbeat through the slightly fuzzy fabric of shirt . . . this was pretty good. If it lasted. That was the part that worried Harry. What if Snape was only being nice to him because he so obviously needed it? Because if he didn't, Harry's wild magic might lash out again?

"I spilled it all over me when Albus connected the Floo to my laboratory, and I heard you," Snape went on, his voice calm and matter-of-fact. Not even angry, and when had Snape ever not been angry over a potions accident? It was odd, but Harry lost track of the strangeness as his teacher talked on. "Poppy should have let me know at once that you wanted me, but I don't think she realised you were screaming my name as a summons." He paused. "Was it a nightmare, Harry?"

Harry nodded, a desperate little sob catching in his chest, somewhere near his heart. "Should be used to them," he muttered, feeling cowardly and ashamed, by then. He was glad Snape had got there, and helped him stop those awful, uncontrollable surges of violent magic, of course, but still, he'd been having bad dreams for years and years.

"These aren't your usual nightmares, I expect," Snape returned, sighing, his fingers moving downward until they rested on Harry's nape. He began to rub the pads of his fingers there, in slow, tiny circles that made the boy's tense shoulders loosen and finally droop. "Samhain, yes?"

Harry shook his head and muttered something unintelligible, his shoulders tautening again, but then Snape said very slowly, as though it was being dragged from him, "I have nightmares about it, as well."
Harry brought his cheek up, wishing he could see his teacher's expression. "Really?"

This time there was no pause before the admission. "Yes."

They sat a while in silence after that, probably because, Harry thought, neither one of them needed to detail out loud just what was in their dreams. They knew.

"Do you need me to say how sorry I am, Harry?" Snape abruptly demanded, his voice gone cold.

"Sorry I have nightmares?" Harry said without thinking, but then his mind caught up. "Or sorry because you were um . . . there, with them?" Helping them, he almost said, but didn't.

"Don't be a bloody fool," Snape sneered. "Of course because I was there with them."

Harry shivered a bit, the twice-repeated phrase making him a bit ill. He didn't want to talk about Samhain, he really didn't. Or at least, not yet. "I know you're sorry," he offered, and then heard himself volunteering, "I dream about Devon too, you know."

Harry felt Snape's breathing jerk as his teacher questioned, "You recall being at the cottage?"

"Yeah . . ." Biting his lip, Harry tried moving a bit. He hadn't realised at first, probably because he'd still been so recently emerged from the nightmare, but it was a little bit awkward leaning just his cheek against Snape, who seemed to be sitting on the edge of the bed. He didn't want to lose the touch, which really helped, but he was starting to think he might slide down into the sheets if he didn't get into a more stable position. Easing one hand from his teacher's grasp, Harry pushed up on it and moved his cheek up, until it was just beneath Snape's chin. That let him sling an arm around the man's ribs, and gave him something to hang onto. Of course, he held his breath the whole time, even though by then, it didn't seem too likely that the man would shove him away.

Snape didn't shove him away. In fact, he scooted more fully onto the bed, propping his back up on Harry's pillows before gathering him close against the length of his side, tucking his head into the curve of his shoulder. Ah, did that feel good. Strange that it would, though, with the childhood he'd had. Really, nobody had ever lain beside him, offering comfort and warmth. Not once, not ever, not anyone.

Not until Devon.

"I remember you holding me," Harry went on after a bit. "Just like this, for hours. I remember wishing there could be a house-elf to stoke the fire and bring my broth, because I hated it when you had to get up and leave me."

"It's odd you would remember," Snape mused, his chest rising and falling in that comforting rhythm. "You were asleep."

"No," Harry yawned, a lull washing over him. "Half-dreaming."

Snape accepted that, saying only, "You're almost half-dreaming again. You need your rest; I'll leave you to sleep, now--"

"No!" Harry cried, the word now doused with fear. "Stay. Please, Professor. Oh, please. I don't want . . ." Gritting his teeth, Harry broke off speaking. It was awful, what he had been going to say. Awful, but true.

His teacher hadn't moved. "You don't want what?" And then, when the boy didn't answer, in a harder tone, "What, Harry?"
Harry felt his legs clenching up just thinking about it, and a surge of anger, and something else he
couldn't identify, churning inside him. "I don't want to have to blow the windows out again, just to
get you up here, all right?"

Snape's voice went low and hard, as he spoke in clipped syllables, each one distinct. "What do you
mean?"

Harry sat up a little bit straighter, all exhaustion burned away by the anger and the other feeling
clawing up inside him. Hurt, that was it. Yeah, hurt. Because he'd needed this before, damn it!
Needed to talk, to be held! And Snape had ignored him and sneered on and on about potions to
Dumbledore, and walked straight past to Pomfrey's office without a word to Harry, and told
Hermione to get out when Harry had sent that apology!

"Well that's what it took, didn't it?" he challenged, almost reeling with it, he was so angry. "You hate
my guts again, just like before, and don't think I don't know it! You're only here now because the
headmaster was afraid I'd let my magic really fly if I didn't get my way! I bet he thought I might burn
down a whole wing of the castle, or something, or blow the stones apart or---!"

Snape pulled him back down and settled him close against his chest, the embrace firm and safe as
Harry trembled.

"Hush, you idiot child," he whispered against his hair, tightening his arms about the boy until he
stilled. "I don't hate you, Harry, of course I don't. I haven't hated you for . . ." his voice dropped still
lower, to wryly admit, "well, for a while, we'll say."

"Oh, sure," Harry sneered.

"I should probably tell you how I, what I . . ." Snape muttered, his teeth clicking in an agitation
Harry could feel communicated through the man's hands, as well. His teacher cleared his throat,
started to say something, then abruptly stopped. Finally, after yet another abortive attempt, he
managed to admit, "Harry. Listen to me. I don't hate you at all."

As declarations went, that one was absolutely, incredibly lame, Harry thought, but he liked it all the
same. For one thing, he could tell it was true. But beyond that, it seemed to him that Snape was
covering something he felt but couldn't say. Severus does not care to show emotion, the headmaster
had said, so yeah, Harry could listen to I don't hate you at all and know that there was more to it than
that.

When Snape shifted slightly, Harry clutched at him, afraid he was going to leave. He wouldn't want
to sit with Harry now, would he? After he'd just unbent enough to say something like that? If he
knew Snape, the man would disappear again. Either that, or hide behind some cold mask of
indifference. "Don't leave yet," Harry softly cried. "I want to talk, all right?"

"All right," Snape agreed, his own voice surprisingly easy. Harry thought then that maybe he didn't
know Snape as well as he had thought. The man seemed . . . well, okay, even after what he'd just
said.

Snape shifted back, adjusting them more comfortably on the narrow bed. "We'll talk a while longer."

Harry nodded, and then thought for a while, trying to decide what they'd better talk about. It seemed
like dozens of questions were crowding his mind. Even worse, the more he melted against Snape, the
safer he felt, which just meant that he could dream up even more things he'd like to say. But that was
good, wasn't it? It was nice to finally feel safe; it meant he could to admit to one of the things that had
been bothering him. "That first day when I woke up here, you said you had to work on potions . . .
which I think is true, but I also think you were using it as an excuse to avoid me. Because you said you'd come by later, when you had time, and you never did!"

"I did, Harry," Snape insisted, still in that easy voice that Harry could centre on. "You were asleep, but I sat with you, for a while. Albus can tell you that; he was there."

"Okay, fine," Harry muttered, deciding he could accept that at face value. It wasn't like he needed to check up on Snape's story. Actually, he thought it was strange that his teacher had mentioned the headmaster like that. "Why haven't you come back since, even after I apologized? And why were you so nasty at first, anyway?"

Snape sighed, a long drawn-out sound as he inhaled and exhaled, then muttered, "I truly do not know where to begin . . . Harry, when you first woke up here, I felt . . . it's difficult to explain. I was certain you would remember Samhain; I didn't expect you to remember Devon in the least. I anticipated that speaking with you would be . . . well, difficult. But still, I did intend to try. A little, at least."

"Then why didn't you?"

Snape pulled him even closer, and wrapped an arm completely around his back. "Because when I came through the door, you were telling Dumbledore what had made Samhain so very horrible. You were hurt by someone you trusted."

"But that is what made it so horrible," Harry murmured, slow to understand. "Or one of the things . . . Oh. Oh, no . . . I get it. You thought I meant I'd been hurt by someone I had trusted and didn't any longer?"

"It would be a perfectly rational reaction on your part," Snape quietly admitted.

"No, it wouldn't," Harry argued, wondering how to explain. "'Cause I knew, see. I knew from my dreams that there'd be a way out, that I wasn't going to end up dead that night. You had to wait for a chance, watch for it." He gulped, his fingers knotting in Snape's shirt. "Samhain was awful because I couldn't hate you for it, Professor, not even during. It sounds stupid, I know, but it's true . . . hating you would have made things, I don't know. Easier." Harry paused, then plunged on. "Anyway, I thought you didn't care about trust."

"Ah. Well . . . so did I."

For another long while, they just lay there, listening to the wind whistle through the open stone portals that used to be windows. It came to Harry that Snape was being deliberately quiet, letting Harry guide the conversation. Maybe it was because Harry had insisted he wanted to talk; his teacher was letting him.

"Why did you tell Hermione to get out like that?" he finally gathered his nerve to ask. "I was just trying to apologize, you know. I'd have told you in person if you'd have come up here."

Snape rolled slightly onto his side, facing Harry, settling the boy's head onto a pillow. It came to Harry to wonder how much light there was, how much Snape could see of his expression. Wondering that made him want to hide.

"I suppose," Snape said after a moment, "I used that tone of voice because I mistook what your apology was for, Harry."

"Huh? What did you think it was for?"
He felt his teacher's legs shifting on the bed. The sound of it was restless. "I had been delivering potions shortly before, when you were yelling at your friends not to even mention my name. After Miss Granger saw fit to announce my presence--tactless girl--I surmised you were apologizing that I had overheard how much you detested me."

"But I don't detest you."

"Yes," Snape drawled beside him. "I had gathered as much."

Harry almost wanted to punch him lightly in the ribs, but decided it was a little too juvenile for the Professor to tolerate well. "What you heard was me yelling for them to just shut up, 'cause Ron seemed to think you could have saved me from everything if you'd wanted to bother," Harry admitted, frowning. "He doesn't get it. You were all I had, at that meeting, and you had to keep your head and keep yourself alive so you could get me out!"

"I think you actually do understand," Snape murmured, sounding rather startled.

"Yeah, of course I do," Harry muttered. "I'm not the least bit stupid. But even so, you know . . ."

"I know," Snape commiserated. "Well, then. I suppose I must have frightened Miss Granger."

"Hermione's pretty fright-proof."

"Ah, yes, the first-year who thought she could handle a Mountain Troll all by herself."

"Oh, she just made that up," Harry clarified.

"Hmm," Snape murmured, but didn't ask more. Or rather, not about that. "It occurs to me to wonder why you sent Miss Granger with that apology, Harry."

"Uh-oh."

Harry braced himself, and admitted in a small, guilt-ridden voice, "Because you can't . . . er, work for the old crowd any longer, at least not doing your usual job, if you catch my drift . . . and now when your forearm starts to hurt, you won't be able to do anything about it, and . . . well, it's all my fault!"

"It is?"

Whatever Harry had expected to hear, it certainly wasn't that. "Well, yeah," he went on, thinking it a bit weird he'd have to. "I mean, I left the house."

"Ah." Snape laid a hand on his shoulder. "This reminds me of another conversation we've had. I think it's a habit of yours, this taking on of far more blame than is warranted by the circumstances."

"Professor, I left the house," Harry tried explaining again, his tone that time the same kind of one he'd use to get a point across to a five-year-old.

"Yes, I know, Harry," Snape replied in exactly the same tone. "But this isn't like your typical escapade. You didn't use your father's invisibility cloak; you weren't trying to sneak out of bounds."

"What difference does that make? I ended up next door," Harry protested. "And . . . and . . ." he gulped. "I figured you'd think I al- almost deserved what I got, 'cause I wanted to know what it was like at a m- m- meeting, and I was really rude to you over it, and then I found out the h- hard way---"

The hand on his shoulder squeezed, hard. "That is obscene, Harry. You didn't deserve what happened."
"I didn't say I deserved it, I said you probably thought I did!"

"You can't really think that of me," Snape quietly asserted, but then his voice lost its confident edge. "Can you?"

"Guess not," Harry said after a moment. "Um, I mostly wondered about it after Dumbledore explained how Malfoy managed to nab me, 'cause you'd been up here being so mean to me. But then later . . ." Harry sighed. "I shouldn't have let it happen, I know that."

Snape sounded like he was scowling when he countered, "I'm the one who let it happen, Harry. It was my job to protect you! Mine, and Lupin's, I should say, but I was the one who inspected the cellars. Quite obviously, I didn't do an adequate job of it, as I left not only an exit, but one which didn't even appear to be one." He paused to draw a slow, controlled breath. "It is I who should apologize to you."

"If you think that," Harry cried, those awful feelings from that night welling up in him, "why'd you tell the headmaster you didn't even want to make my Eyesight Elixir? You said you'd rather see me suffer!"

Snape went absolutely rigid as the words shot from between his teeth. "Harry! I wasn't talking about you!"

"You called me an irresponsible idiot," Harry blubbered, tears spilling into his eyes and down his cheeks as he balled up a fist and punched his pillow. "You always call me that."

"Because I've seen you be one," Snape dryly put in, but then his voice gentled once again. "But not this time, Harry. You didn't know you were leaving all margin of safety. You weren't indulging your saving-people thing."

"It was a s-- s-- saving-snake thing," Harry miserably admitted, sniffling, raising a pyjama-clad arm to wipe at his eyes. "I just w-- wanted to find Sals, that was all."

"Shhh," Snape murmured, stroking his hair. "It's all right, Harry. When I realised what had happened, I was horrified, but I wasn't angry with you, I promise."

"Yeah, well you were angry at somebody," Harry returned, unwilling to let it go.

"Lupin."

"Remus?" Harry questioned, lifting a confused face, though it didn't do much good when he couldn't see.

"Yes, Remus," his teacher snarled, abruptly losing all semblance of calm as he yanked both his hands off Harry. "That idiot werewolf left the house, and then, as if that weren't irresponsible enough, sauntered back in broad daylight, just as if he'd never heard of a Floo! He practically invited Lucius Malfoy to investigate Grimmauld Place! And for what? Bloody ice cream, as though you were a child to be comforted by sweets!"

Harry didn't think he'd ever heard Snape be angrier, not even when Sirius had mysteriously escaped the Dementor's Kiss. He shivered, glad that all that fury wasn't directed his way. On the other hand, he didn't want it directed at Remus, either.

"It was an innocent mistake," he pointed out. "Kind of like mine. I mean, Remus wasn't trying to give away my location."
"It was nothing like yours!" Snape sneered. "Short of examining blueprints, you had no way of knowing that you were following your snake through an outside wall. Lupin knew full well that certain parties wanted you and were more than capable of following him to you!"

"But he didn't know Uncle Vernon had blabbed I'd been hanging about with him!" Harry said in Remus' defence. "He didn't know anybody would think to follow him!"

"He knew it was possible!"

"You're just still mad at him from your school days! You've never stopped!"

"Don't presume to judge my anger, Harry," Snape warned in a voice that was cold, clear through.

"I won't." Because Snape's anger, after all, wasn't really the point, was it? It was what he did with it that mattered. "But please, Professor, you can't stop making his Wolfsbane over it! Please tell me you won't. That's just awful!"

"Yes, it would be, wouldn't it?" Snape drawled in a dark, sardonic voice.

"You can't hate Remus so much that you want innocent people to get killed!"

The Potions Master scoffed at that. "Oh, but Lupin's a noble Gryffindor, Harry. Not too much unlike you, actually. He'll chain himself so that he's no option but to attack himself when the moon goes full."

"Stop it!" Harry cried.

"Oh, I will make your mangy friend's potion," Snape growled, placing a finger across Harry's lips when it seemed the boy would speak. "Just do not thank me."

Harry nodded, thinking that was fair enough, and wiped again at his eyes. It hadn't seemed significant while emotion had just been churning inside him, but now that he was calmer, he realised that he was crying. It was probably too late to hide his face, but he tried it anyway, feeling defensive. Severus Snape had probably never cried. Or not since he was little. Sixteen, though, wasn't so little.

"Don't," Snape urged, nudging Harry's head a bit away from him. "If your tear ducts have healed, it means the Restorative Potions are beginning to work as they should. Lumos." Harry heard the swish of a wand. "Can you see any difference?"

"No . . . maybe something. It's not light, though. The blackness looks . . . well, less black."

"Grey? Colours?"

"No, just less black. I can't really explain." Snape hadn't said Nox, so Harry figured this was as good a time as any to ask what he'd been wondering about ever since he'd woken up. "Um, Professor?"

"Hmmp?" Snape sounded like he was still peering closely at his face.

"You'll tell me the truth if I ask for it, won't you? The plain honest truth, no matter how horrible it turns out to be?"

Snape considered that a moment before answering. "Are you asking me never to misdirect you?"

Harry didn't want to open that whole can of worms, not right then. "Actually, I was just wanting to know what you saw. Um, you know, when you look at me."
Snape sounded a bit puzzled. "Dark hair, green eyes--- ah, you mean your eyes and what they look like, now. Yes, I'll tell you the truth. Hold still." Harry heard the wand moving again, and felt his eyelids being pried open. He couldn't help it; he jerked himself away.

Snape said nothing of it, merely detailing, "Your eyes are intact, the irises still green, although the colour may be more . . . intense than before. Glossier, somehow. At any rate, I can see residual scarring on your cornea. Like scratches on glass, Harry. Faint to imperceptible, unless one looks closely. You're nearly healed. I think tomorrow you should begin the Eyesight Elixir."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. All in all, things didn't sound too bad. But Eyesight Elixir? "Haven't I been drinking it all along? That rotten smelling stuff?"

"Potter," Snape drawled, effortlessly snapping into full Professor mood, "Sight Restorative Potions and Eyesight Elixir are completely different in formulation and use."

"Yes, sir," Harry muttered, before another thought occurred to him. "Do you have a batch that Malfoy hasn't had his finger in? Because Ron and Hermione told me he's been helping you make my potions, and . . . well . . ."

"Yes?"

"That's just gross," Harry announced, lifting his chin. "And . . .""Oh, please do speak your mind," Snape put in, sounding . . . well, Harry didn't know. Sort of snide and amused, all at once.

"Yeah, well you asked for it," Harry muttered, deciding that he might as well. It's not like this was some little thing he could just ignore, was it? "Letting Malfoy anywhere near my Potions is pretty irresponsible of you, don't you think, Professor? No offence, but are you thinking? His shitefaced father did just try to burn me alive, you know."

"Draco Malfoy is not his father," Snape briskly stated, abruptly levering himself off the bed and away from Harry. "Nonetheless, he has not been helping make your potions. Your friends are mistaken."

"Then why doesn't he have to do the bookwork everybody else has been getting?"

"I thought you trusted me," Snape remarked. Harry could almost see that raised eyebrow.

He thought of saying I thought so, too, but decided it was petty, not to mention untrue. And really, it sort of touched him that Snape appeared to care about his trust, so he figured he'd better not abuse it. "Listen," he sighed. "I trusted you through tortures from the pits of Hell, so don't you dare claim I have to prove myself by not asking what's going on. It's my right to know, damn it! Besides, Malfoy keeps coming around here, and . . . it worries me. I don't know what he's up to."

"He's not up to anything."

"Yeah?" Harry challenged, pushing up to lean on an elbow. "Don't you know you can't believe a word that comes out of that Slytherin's mouth?"

"I'm a Slytherin, too, don't forget," Snape smoothly reminded him. "Now, as for Mr Malfoy, he has come to the hospital wing on my orders. Mine, and Albus'. He has been endeavouring to speak to you. It is . . . a condition. The rest you must hear from him."

"And in class?" Harry pressed.
"Malfoy did not ask to help me," Harry interrupted.

"Oh yes, he most certainly did, and as he's really quite good at brewing, I set him to making Painless Sleep Draughts. He doesn't know I've been pouring his results into the general student supply, and I ask that you not tell him."

"That little misdirection might end up poisoning somebody," Harry pointed out, flopping onto his back.

"Do you really believe I ever stock the infirmary with a potion, even one of my own making, without verifying it thoroughly, first?"

Harry didn't mean to be dim, but that just didn't make sense. "So if you've checked Malfoy's draughts and they're okay, why not give them to me? I mean, either they're safe or they aren't, Professor."

"The Potions you need just now," Snape tightly announced, "are more potent than standard formulations. Draco is fully competent to brew them, but I have not allowed it because I knew it would make you uneasy. As indeed, it has."

Harry winced, and wasn't sure if it was at the mild rebuke, or the fact that Snape had just called Malfoy Draco. He didn't like that. "Sorry, sir."

"No more apologies," Snape said brusquely as he stood up. Funny, without the robes Harry had a much harder time hearing how he might be moving. "Are you all right to sleep, now, Harry?"

"I wanted to ask something else," Harry yawned. "Um, bunch of stuff, but I can't remember. Oh, the Portkey, that was it... hmm, something about the Portkey...?"

"I think it's time you rested," Snape remarked, leaning over to help pull up his blankets and tuck him in. Another first, for Harry. Or maybe not. Snape had probably tucked him in at Devon. But nobody else had, not ever, except probably his parents, but it didn't count for much when you couldn't remember.

Even under the blankets, though, Harry started to shiver. He wanted Snape's warmth back.

His teacher must have figured the breezes were what was making him cold. Harry heard a brief series of Reparo spells, along with the noise of glass chinking itself back together, and could almost imagine the sight of the windows putting themselves to rights.

"Sorry about that," Harry murmured, forgetting that Snape had asked for no more apologies. "I wasn't trying to do that, at least, I don't think I was. I don't even know how I did it, really."

"I suspect I do," Snape muttered darkly. "But now is not the time. We will discuss it tomorrow."

"Promise? You won't disappear again?"

"I will bring your Eyesight Elixir," Snape assured him, and that time, Harry caught the subtle shift in the conversation. The Potions Master was veering it away from the personal into the impersonal. Well, okay. Harry could go along with that.

"Is that like the final step? I mean, tomorrow I'll be able to see?"
"I doubt matters will proceed quite so rapidly," Snape clarified. "The Restorative Potions have helped prepare your tissues, but it will take some time for the Elixir to take full effect." With that, Snape was helping him sit up a bit and pressing a vial into his hand. "Dreamless Sleep for tonight, but far more potent than the variety you once told me didn't work on you. Drink, Harry."

"I don't need it," Harry protested. "I won't have another nightmare, I don't think, not now I've talked to you."

"Nonetheless," his teacher drawled in that insistent voice he recognised. Giving in, Harry awkwardly tilted the vial and tipped the contents into his mouth. Hmm, it bubbled on his tongue a lot more than the regular kind. Tasted fruitier, too.

He almost thought Snape had left; Harry was so sleepy, it was hard to tell. But then a hand gently settled onto his forehead and stroked his hair back from his face. It felt nice.

"Will you promise me something, Harry?" Snape softly asked. "It's important."

"Promise?" Harry drowsily asked.

"Yes. Listen to Draco Malfoy when he comes to talk to you, all right? Will you do that?"

Harry thought hard about that, because he knew that something just wasn't right, something more than the obvious. The timing, that was it . . .

"You got me wuzzy first before asking," Harry announced in a voice that anyone but a Potions Master might have taken for falling-down-drunk. "That's not . . . nice, Pre.. er, Professor."

"Just tell me you'll speak with him--"  

"Slytherin," Harry accused, a wave of silliness seeming to dance across his tongue. It loosened up his vocal cords, too. He'd never realised he knew so many nice S words. "Sly scheming 'spicious Slytherin. S--- . . . um, sneaky snakey snarky snacky snooty snarley singy-songy Slyth'rin . . ."

He thought he heard his teacher mutter something like I do believe I got you a shade too "wuzzy," but he couldn't be sure of that, any more than he was sure about what happened next. He hadn't really felt what he'd thought, had he?

Nah, he decided. Couldn't be. Snape wouldn't lightly brush his lips against the scar on his forehead, would he? It was just the wuzziness of the potion making him feel warm and silly and happy, and well, not hated.

Not hated at all.

Harry giggled once or twice before falling into the happiest sleep he'd had in weeks.
Draco

Harry spent the next morning catching up on some reading. Or rather, some listening. Hermione had stopped by early, bringing some of her books, along with a quill she'd charmed to read out loud. It was a neat trick, Harry thought. It took him a little while to get the hang of dragging it across lines of text without letting it drift up and down, but other than that, it worked fine. Well, except for the fact that it read out loud in her voice. Harry loved Hermione and all, but she really did have a way of talking like she knew it all.

*Be sure to drink all of your pumpkin juice, Harry,* she'd said at least a dozen times that morning. *It's high in vitamin A, so it'll be really good for your eyes...*

She hadn't let up until he'd drained the entire glass. At least she hadn't tried to get him a second one or something, before she'd had to rush off to class. It was kind of dull in the hospital wing after that, with just *fussy* Madam Pomfrey and a talking quill for company. She'd salved him *again,* talking in that high sing-song voice about how everything would be better soon, he'd see, and it had been all Harry could do not to shout at her that no, *he didn't see!*

Barmy old bat. She wouldn't even let him go to the bathroom alone! It was as if she didn't realise after six years of Voldemort and Quidditch and sundry Potions accidents that Harry had been in the hospital wing enough to navigate it blindfolded, let alone blind!

Finally she'd left him alone, though, and Harry had managed to listen to Hermione spouting her way through an entire chapter in Transfiguration. He was still behind, but tired of that subject, he flipped another book off the pile on his bedside table and opened it at random, then ran the quill across a sample line. Hermione's girlish voice rang out:

"Although Ulber of Normandy's classification system remains in limited use today, the true distinction between mood charms and attitude charms is not one of intent but rather of--"

Draco Malfoy's voice interrupted the quill as his footsteps strode forward. "Granger, what the hell are you teaching Potter? We won't be covering that rot for *weeks* yet--" The voice came around the fabric divider Pomfrey had Accio'd over when she'd last applied Harry's salve. "Where's Granger?"

Harry set his lips in a straight line, and closed his eyes as though Draco wasn't worth looking at. The effect was probably ruined, seeing as he was blind, but oh, well. "She Disapparated when she heard you coming," he threw out, just to see what the Slytherin would do with *that.*

Draco gasped, but tried to cover it with a slight cough. "You don't mean to tell me that that Muggle---, that Muggleborn knows how to Disapparate."

Interesting change of terms, especially for Draco Malfoy, but all it meant to Harry was that the Slytherin was . . . well, being a Slytherin, playing some sort of sucker game. "Sure she can Disapparate," Harry answered in his you-are-so-stupid-and-I-am-so-bored-of-it voice. "What, can't you?"

"Potter," Draco drawled. "Nobody can Disapparate inside this castle."

"House-elves can," Harry pointed out. It was too good, making Draco think Hermione could out-magic him. Of course she *could,* but try getting a high and mighty pureblood to admit to it. "I've seen Dobby do it. You remember Dobby, don't you, Malfoy?"

"You think I keep track of the hundreds of house-elves running around this place?" Draco gave a
sneering laugh.

"He used to be your charming father's," Harry fairly spat and when Draco didn't react, added, "'Til one day there was this sock . . ."

"Oh, that one," Draco merely muttered.

Interesting, that the boy didn't take up for his father as he usually would, or rail against Harry for having freed the elf. Interesting, yes, but probably just one more angle to his game. "Anyway," Harry continued with forced cheer, "Hermione spends loads and loads of time with the house-elves. Part of her cause. You remember SPEW, don't you? The Society for the Protection of Elfish Welfare? Well, I was as shocked as you when she started popping in and out of rooms just like they do, but then she told me she'd taught her the trick."

When Draco gave a snort, and stepped closer, Harry had to force himself not to visibly tense. Inside though, he was coiled, ready, almost shaking with suppressed violence. He could feel a low hum of power vibrating deep inside him, somewhere near his core, and darkly wondered if he could unleash it just onto Draco. Probably not, though. He'd likely blow the windows out again.

"You're a really good liar for a Gryffindor," Draco was saying, apparently oblivious to Harry's unease. "You had me going for a moment, there." A scraping noise ensued as Draco helped himself to a seat.

"Oh please, be my guest," Harry said, waving a sarcastic hand. His urge to lash out had decreased when Draco had sat down, though, so the windows were probably safe. "Anyway, what makes you think I was lying? Hermione's quite talented, you know. Even heard her called the cleverest witch of her age, by a couple of people who ought to know."

"Oh, you're a liar all right," Draco drawled, sounding like he was fussing with his robes, or maybe his tie; hard to tell. "The house-elves hate that freedom crap she tries to shove down their throats. They're not her mates. Besides, there's no way in hell Granger would Disapparate if it meant leaving you to my tender mercies."

Or, he hadn't had a chance yet.

When Harry felt a hand brush against his blanket-covered calf, he kicked out at it. Hard.

"Shite! Ow!" Draco yelped, leaping back. "What in hell's your problem?"

"Get your stinking hands off me!" Harry yelled back, even louder.

Madam Pomfrey was there almost at once. "What's this then? Mr Malfoy?"

"Potter here kicked me! Damned near broke my wrist!"

"Yeah, well keep your stinking hands off, like I said!"

"I wasn't going to hurt you, idiot! I was just reaching for the Charms text, thought I'd read you the
"You were going to read out loud to me," Harry echoed, scoffing. "Sure you were. Listen, Malfoy, I don't want you lurking around, I don't want you watching me while I sleep, and I sure as hell don't want you making any more potions for me, got it? Now, get out!"

Dead silence greeted his pronouncement. Harry didn't hear so much as a cloak rustle.

"Madam Pomfrey," Harry tried, "make him leave."

The normally strident Medi-witch seemed oddly reluctant to eject Draco. She hemmed and hawed about Harry needing company, ignoring his strongly worded objections, finally ending the argument by announcing, "I'll be in my office, Mr Potter. I'll certainly hear you if you need anything." Turning, she said to Draco, "Mr Malfoy. Keep your distance or I wager you'll have more than a bruise to contend with." With that, she was walking away.

"Fuck," Harry swore. "What's going on around here?"

Apparently taking the Medi-Witch's advice, Draco slid his chair back another foot, away from Harry. "Oh, she heard Dumbledore telling me to catch you awake sometime, that's all."

Harry sneered, knowing he was slandering Pomfrey, but after putting up with days of her smothering crap, he didn't care. "Are you sure you didn't just bribe her with a load of your family's Galleons?"

Draco went strangely silent, and then said, "They didn't tell you."

"Tell me?"

"About my family."

"I don't want to know," Harry snapped. "Unless you have something nice to say, like Gee, Potter, my father's just been thrown back into Azkaban, and this time he's not crawling out or Gosh, Potter, my father was just smashed flat as a pancake by a fleet of falling lorries, or--"

"Golly, Potter," Draco drawled, "my father's just disowned me and put out a warrant for my death."

Harry snapped his mouth shut, but his shock only lasted for an instant. "Oh, please! What are you up to, with a story like that? What's the plan, you get in good with Dumbledore so that you can double-cross him and he can be the next person dear old Dad attacks with needles?"

"It may come as a shock to you to hear this, Potter, but I'm not exactly brimming with ecstasy over what my father did to you!"

"Oh, I'm sure you wept rivers of tears," Harry sneered. "Hogwarts washed into the lake. Last I heard, the giant squid had gobbled up the castle."

"Well, you wouldn't know what it's like, would you?" Draco sneered right back. "You, with your perfect father everybody always fawns over. James Potter. Pure-blooded and rich, just like mine. But yours was a paragon, noble and brave, even gave his life for a worthy cause. Bet he never did a thing anyone could fault!"

Harry stiffened, then grabbed the edge of his blanket and folded it down, just to give his hands something to do. "My father's not the issue," he spat back. "And you're not going to convince me you're broken with grief over how yours turned out, not when you've been playing Junior Death Eater around here for years and years!"
"Think what you want," Draco quietly replied, sounding all at once . . . subdued, actually.

"I will, thanks." Harry waited a moment, and when no reply was forthcoming, prompted, "So, is that it then? You just popped 'round to entertain me with a bit of fiction? Or is this another case of you wanting to be seen sitting with me?"

"No. Although that's good."

"Good?"

"Yeah, good," Draco said in a scowling tone. His voice was closer when next he spoke, so Harry figured he had leaned forward. "Listen, it's not like I expect you to believe me. I sure as shite wouldn't, if I were in your place. But I have to tell you, even if you think it's a pack of lies."

"This would be the pack of lies you have to tell me as a condition Dumbledore and Snape put you under? Condition for what?"

"Staying at Hogwarts, you dolt!" Draco erupted. "My parents were my legal guardians, you know. My father summoned me back home, but I knew he'd kill me if I went, so I went to Severus instead for help--"

"Severus!" Harry exclaimed, shocked.

"Yeah, well maybe it never dawned on you," Draco mocked, "but there's this little matter that he's my Head of House? You know, those adults who're supposed to help you when your life's been fucked to Chelsea and back?"

"Don't be stupid, I know what a Head of House is for!" Then again, Harry had to recognise that Snape's approach to his students was very different from McGonagall's. When he'd gone to her for help, like first year when he'd known the Philosopher's Stone was in danger, she'd told him he didn't know what he was talking about. It had been up to him to help himself. "You call him Severus?"

Draco sounded like he was running his fingers through his hair, but he stopped at that last word. "Oh. Well, I've known him really well ever since I can remember, so yeah. I've always called him that, but when I came here he said to make it Professor in class and such. Anyway, after I convinced him I was dead if I ever went back home, he got it all set up for me to never have to."

"What on earth is your game?" Harry gasped. "Why would your father want to kill you?"

"Oh, a bunch of reasons," Draco returned, rising from his chair. "But the main one is this. Don't kick me again, okay? I just want to give you something."

"I don't want anything you could give me," Harry sneered.

"Yeah, Dumbledore gave me back that little token I tossed you," Draco acknowledged. "But this is different. You'll want it, or my name isn't Mal . . . well, never mind. You'll want it, that's all."

Harry felt a slight weight settle onto his stomach. "What did you just put on me?"

"Touch it. Go on . . ."

To Harry's ear, Draco had an inordinate amount of interest in Harry's reaction, which of course made the Gryffindor suspicious. "For all I know, it's a sleeping baby blast-ended screwt," he erupted. "I could lose a hand if I go on!"
"You really think I could smuggle in livestock, right under Pomfrey's nose?" Draco chortled. "That's so flattering! I think it might be the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"Just get it off me, whatever it is!"

"Where's that famous Gryffindor bravery?"

Harry drew in a deep breath, intending to let fly with another scream for Madam Pomfrey.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake," Draco sighed, his teasing manner vanishing clean away. Ignoring the likelihood that Harry would lash out at him, he quickly picked up Harry's hand and settled it atop his abdomen, then let go. "There, see?"

If Harry had made a list of all the things Malfoy would never, ever give him, this would have been emblazoned straight across the top in letters ten inches tall.

A wand.

And not just any wand, but his. He felt the smooth holly, caressing the length of it, recognizing it not just with his hands but with his magic, too. Magic he couldn't quite reach, but he could feel it, all the same. It was there, a beautiful glow inside him just like it had been that first day in Ollivander's shop, the sensation one he hadn't felt since before his operation at Frimley Park. Harry sighed with pleasure, forgetting Malfoy for the moment, and wallowed in the delicious feeling of magic flowing through him.

What he wouldn't give to try casting a spell . . . but hard on the heels of that thought was the realization that Malfoy was sitting there, watching. The Daily Prophet might have blabbed his lack of magic to the whole Wizarding world, but that didn't mean that Harry was disposed to fail a simple Lumos with the Slytherin boy watching.

"How'd you get this?" he finally asked Draco.

"Nicked it from my father."

Harry drew in a breath. "Oh. That would certainly get you disowned."

"And marked for death, don't forget."

"Yeah, well that part doesn't sound half bad to me, even if you did just give me back my wand."

"Don't joke," Draco urged him. "Not about that."

"What the hell makes you think I'm joking?"

Draco sighed. "Because I've been there, Potter. I've wished you dead. Hell, if you want the truth, I wished you tortured first, too. But I didn't really understand the ugly reality of a wish like that, and when I heard what my father had done to you, I was just . . . well, revolted isn't even the word. I knew then that I didn't really want a life like that, doing things like that. So . . ."

"So you stole my wand to get in good with Dumbledore," Harry surmised, curling a lip. "Very Slytherin."

"Yes, it was," Draco unapologetically returned. "But it wasn't like you're thinking. I didn't do it for some coldhearted advantage. I did it because I had to. For one, leaving the family business would put me squarely on your side in this war, and that wand's your best weapon! See, I know who has the
twin, and what that means. And for another, I was in deep shite, trying to escape my father's plans for me. I needed help, and that meant I needed a good-will token to prove my intentions, because otherwise, not even Severus would have believed I was sincere!"

"Yeah, well don't think I believe you, whatever Snape has to say," Harry put in, and then dropped a broad hint. "Shouldn't you be in class? It's not the weekend."

"Potions," Draco explained. "Severus let me out."

"Oh, Severus had let him out."

"Well, run along and tell him you did your good deed for the day," Harry sniped. "Brought the blind boy his wand, aren't you just the sweetest thing?"

Draco didn't move, not one muscle. Well, as far as Harry could tell.

"What part of get your fucking arse out of this room do you not understand?" Harry bellowed, frustrated.

Footsteps came running, and then Draco was smoothly remarking, "He's fine, Madam Pomfrey. Just blowing off steam. Most probably healthy, wouldn't you say?"


"Professor Snape asked me to catch him up on what he's missed," Draco explained, his voice so much the personification of innocence that Harry could have screamed. "We're all really concerned that Potter here doesn't fall too far behind. N.E.W.T.s are just two years off, you know!"

The Medi-Witch was muttering as she moved away, that time.

"You're a really bad liar," Harry sneered. "Snape didn't ask you to do any such thing!"

"No, but I bet he'd approve," Draco confidently asserted. "What do you say? I'll just read to you from Potions, and tell you what we did in class with each chapter. It's got to be better than lying here bored to death."

"Fuck off."

Draco's voice went as smooth as glass. "Oh, come now. You'll love listening to me; I've had diction lessons since I was three. I do wondrous declamations. Would you like to hear something classical so you'll know what you're passing up? Perhaps Adelafa Steppleburn's Sonnet 253?" He launched straight into it. "Wast thou awake beside my bed, / By Thor's own hammer, dearly led. / A pair of nifflers I declare, / would be thy trophy in my lair--"

"Shut up," Harry ordered, trying hard not to laugh. It might give Malfoy the wrong idea, might make him think that Harry found him amusing, or Merlin forbid, could actually stand him. "That poem stinks, and as for your declaiming--"

"I'll keep right on with it unless you want to hear about Potions," Draco threatened. "Hmm, you know what would be really fun? How about I start with Sonnet 1 and work my way up from there, see how many I can remember? Hmm, I think I know through about 62 really well--"

"Fine, Potions!"

Draco laughed and pulled a book from the stack. "Oh, don't look so put out, Potter. I do have an
The Slytherin's voice lost all amusement. "Well. I'm sure you remember that I like to be on the winning side. And you're sort of our vanguard, see? So it won't do to have you leave school unqualified for the Auror's program, no indeed. And no offence, but you need some serious help in Potions."

"I scored Outstanding on my O.W.L!" Harry objected.

"But the advanced level is ten times harder than Ordinary Wizarding," Draco came back. "Tell Granger to tutor you, she's good enough at it. But don't let it slide. We can't afford it."

"We?" Harry questioned, nostrils flaring.

"Yeah, we. The good guys, don't you know." Draco smothered another laugh. "Oh, one more thing. Put Granger's stupid talking feather away. I don't want it reading on top of me and ruining my delivery."

"How did you know--"

"I've only been staring at it for ten minutes. Did you know it's tinted Gryffindor colours?"

"It isn't . . . Really?"

"Yes, really. Don't take my word for it, though. You'll be able to see for yourself, soon enough."

Harry snorted. "Oh, now I know I've heard everything. A Malfoy, trying to cheer me up!"

"No, I wasn't," Draco defended himself. "I was just letting you know. Severus is whipping up a batch of Eyesight Elixir as we speak. He's bringing it up here for you straight away when class lets out."

Harry frowned, puzzled. "I heard him saying days ago that he was making the Elixir then."

Draco slapped a hand to his forehead. "You're really in your own little world up here, did you know that? He's been making a fresh batch of it every single day, in case your eyes were ready."

"Well, he doesn't hate me at all, Harry felt like saying, but he certainly couldn't say it to Malfoy. Or Ron or Hermione either, he suddenly realised. Not that it mattered. He knew; that was the important thing.

"Okay, so Potions," Draco started off. "Let's see, right about when you vanished, we were starting Chapter Five: Uses and Abuses of Dragon's Blood. Let's see . . . okay, here we are. Ready? Don't fall asleep; you'll hurt my feelings. But stop me if you have any questions."

"Shut your festering gob and just read," Harry rudely demanded.

Draco's teeth clicked as though he were biting back a response to that. In the end, though, all he said was, "All potions based on dragon's blood share the following characteristics . . ."
"I think I put him to sleep, though," Draco admitted. "He hasn't asked a question in . . . well, let's see. He never asked a question. That's not the best way to learn, Potter. Haven't you ever heard of the Socratic method?"

"No. What is it?" Harry challenged, pushing up and proving he was awake.

"Uh, not sure," Draco murmured. "Sounds good, though, huh?"

Harry's mattress lurched a bit as Snape sat down next to him and placed a hand on his chin, steadying his face. "Looking better again," he pronounced. "Lumos . . . Can you see any change?"

"The black is less black, just like before. Professor . . . is Malfoy still here?"

"Hmm? Yes, he is."

Talk about not taking a hint. "Get rid of him!"

Snape turned to address the Slytherin boy. "Did you return his property?"

"Can't say I got so much as a thank you very much, I know you risked your life to bring me this, but yes, the boy's got his wand again."

"Thank you, Malfoy," Harry loudly said, if that was what it took. "You can go now."

"Professor?" the blonde boy asked.

"Stay."

"I don't want him here!" Harry objected.

"You've made it abundantly clear," Snape replied. "I want him here."

"Why?"

"Nox," Snape said, ignoring the question.

Harry was about to object again, in terms that were even more abundantly clear, but just then Madam Pomfrey bustled over. "It's time for his Scaradicate Salve again," she announced.

"Yes, I brought fresh," the Potions Master told her.

"Well," the Medi-Witch sniped, "as you're here and you're the only one who can touch him without him kicking up such a fuss, perhaps you'd better do the honours!"

"Poppy's feeling a tad territorial," Snape remarked when she moved off.

"She's a complete bit--"

"Harry," Snape warned, his tone deep and dark.

"A witch," Harry finished, and when his teacher's fingers tightened, insisted, "Well, she is."

Draco made a sound halfway between a snort and a laugh.

"Well, off with your top, then, Harry," the Potions Master directed. "We'll see to this, first, and then tend to your eyes."
Harry raised his voice. "You expect me to strip off in front of Malfoy there? And me blind, not even able to see how much he's smirking? Are you stark, barking mad?"

Draco started making a low humming noise which didn't encompass words, but somehow seemed to suggest *sounds like points from Gryffindor to me . . . eee . . . eee . . .*

Snape didn't say a word about points. "Just your pyjama top," he explained. "Draco's been helping with your treatment, remember? I'd like him to see how you're doing." His tone though, communicated another message entirely. *Do this for me, Harry.* Harry just hoped there was an *I'll explain later* in there somewhere, as well.

"Oh, very well," he moaned with ill grace, undoing the buttons down the front by feel alone, and shrugging it off.

Draco pulled in a harsh gasp when he saw Harry's bare chest.

"Oh, thanks," Harry drawled. Then to his teacher, "You said my eyes looked all right, more or less. Is the rest of me such a mess? I mean, I'm not too sore any longer."

"Mr Malfoy?" Snape prompted as he began to dot a greasy salve across each wound.

"Oh, you look all right, Potter," Draco said, though the words sounded like they were being pulled from somewhere other than his throat. His gut, maybe. Harry had a feeling that the boy had glanced at his teacher before going on. "The . . . er, scars just look like furious red dots now. They aren't festering, or gross or anything."

"Well, that explains your thoroughly disgusted reaction," Harry retorted. "Not that I care one whit if I disgust you, you understand."

"It's just that there are so many," Draco quietly admitted, his voice sounding actually ill, that time.

"Yeah, four hundred and twelve!" Harry snapped. "Approximately. I lost count when that Voldemort-arselicking fucking excuse for a human being known as your father started in on my eyes!"


Harry shifted resentfully, though he was grateful he wasn't having to go through this *again* with the Medi-Witch. He couldn't stand her hands on him. Hers, or anybody's, except Snape's. Not for the first time, Harry wondered how long that was going to last . . . and what it implied about his mental state. If Remus had thought he was depressed before . . .

"When can I see Remus?" Harry suddenly asked. "He must be okay by now."

"You call him Remus?" Draco snidely inquired, scoring a point.

"When, Professor?" Harry insisted, ignoring the other boy.

"May I have a moment to consider the matter, Harry?" Snape calmly replied, one hand holding Harry's shoulder steady as he stroked salve on the wounds inflicted behind Harry's ears. "How about after your vision is back to normal?"

"Look, I know you think Remus coddles me, but--"

"My concern is rather different than you know," Snape drawled. "Lupin blames himself for your
condition, and rightly so. Inviting him here while you're still blind is going to heap more guilt on him. Normally, this wouldn't perturb me in the least, but as you'll end up feeling just as guilty, let's leave it for now, shall we?"

"Fine," Harry snapped, not really up to arguing it in front of Malfoy, anyway.

"Lupin did find your snake, by the way," Snape remarked as he dotted the last few needle marks that showed above the boy's waistband. "Sals had curled up in the corner of the Floo. That might be what made her ill in the first place, assuming she caught a wash of magic as someone came in or out. Non-magical creatures don't always react well to spell residue. At any rate, Lupin set up a little nest in a box for her, and is coaxing her to learn to sleep there, instead."

"So Sals is okay, then?"

"Yes. If you want Lupin to bring her when he comes, though, I'd recommend they take the Express. Sals might react very badly to going through the Floo, or Apparating." Harry heard his teacher wiping his hands on something. "Can you do your own salve below the waist? Just smear it everywhere. It'll be a bit messy, but I think you can manage."

"I can. At least you'll let me, unlike that-- witch, who clutches me like I'm a lifeline or something, every time I have to go to the bloody loo! I told her I could make it across the room by myself, but nooooo . . ." Harry abruptly remembered that he had bigger fish to fry than his gripes against Madam Pomfrey. "Will you please tell Malfoy there to leave me in peace, Professor?"

"We'll wait outside while you do your salve, then come back to do the Elixir," Snape announced.

"Come back alone," Harry shouted after them.

"He's really disrespectful towards you, sir," Harry heard Draco remarking as they walked away. "You'd have given him detention for life if he'd ever said half those things in class."

What he couldn't hear, however, was Snape's response.

"I don't want Malfoy here," Harry gritted, rearing back when his teacher's fingers brushed his face.

Draco gave a long-suffering sigh. "I didn't do this to you, Potter. Can you get that through your skull? And I'm not enjoying seeing you this way, if that was the next idiotic claim going to come out of your mouth."

Harry ignored him. "Why are you insisting Malfoy hang about like this?" he demanded.

Snape's tone was short. "For approximately the same reason the headmaster kept flinging you and me together. Now, tilt your head back."

Harry did, fuming. He forgot his outrage the instant Snape's fingers pried one of his eyelids open. It was like the previous night, only worse, the pressure fierce like on Samhain. Unable to control his own reflexes, Harry screamed, his back convulsing.

Snape sat back and thought for a moment. "Were you trying to let me put the drops in?"

"Yes, I was bloody well trying! Just let me do it myself, like with the salve!"

"This is more important than the salve. The whole surface of your eye must be coated before you
blink and introduce tears into the mixture. What do you want to do?"

Harry didn't see much option. He thought he could endure it, just barely, if Snape held him down for
the drops to be put in, though it would no doubt be creepy in the extreme. "You'd better um . . . hold
me down to get them in. Ugh, I think you know how, at least."

"Are you sure that's a wise course of action, Harry?"

"Well, just do it fast," Harry grumbled. "I can take it, all right? I might scream bloody murder, but it's
not like I'm going to um . . . mean it, really. It's just reflex."

Snape shifted a hair closer. "Considering the reflex I just observed, I think I'll need both hands
merely to hold you still."

"Yeah," Harry thickly groaned, the parallels haunting him. "Okay, well, I guess Madam Pomfrey
can apply the drops, then. Just tell her first not to be so mamby-pamby about it."

Malfoy went to get her, but reported back, "She's stepped out. Shall I go look for her?"

"No," Snape decreed. "You can put the drops in, Draco. I'll watch to be sure you do so correctly."

"Just hold it," Harry exclaimed. "He's not getting near my eyes when it's his father who--"

"I'm not my fucking father!"

"As I recall," Snape growled, "you didn't like it too well when your father's faults were continuously
attributed to you, either, did you Harry? I think we all know who did this to you; you needn't harp on
it any more, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Harry muttered resentfully, not wanting to think about the fact that Snape just might have
a point.

"Now, will you let Draco help you?" Snape's tone lost its mocking edge. "He does want to help,
Harry. I told you that. You really should believe me."

"Why does he want to help? That's the part I don't get."

"He happens to be standing right here!" Draco interrupted, reminding Harry of . . . well, himself,
actually. "And I want to help because what my father did to you was sick and cruel. If that's not a
good enough reason to suit you, Potter, then you can just fuck off!"

"Well, that convinces me," Harry sniped, but then he gave up. Truth to tell, he wanted the stupid
Elixir over and done with, and with Snape right there, there wasn't much Malfoy could do to
sabotage the treatment, was there? Not that he believed Malfoy's protests about sick and cruel just
turning his stomach. Not too likely, Harry reminded himself. This was the same boy who'd tried his
level best to engineer a horrible death for Buckbeak, after all. Sick and cruel was just the name of the
game, to Malfoys. All Malfoys.

Yeah . . . Malfoy might have snowed Snape, but as far as Harry was concerned, his story just didn't
add up.

And Harry's instincts were usually good. Even Snape had said so.
"Well, that was certainly great fun," Harry said when it was all over. "Nothing like being drenched in sweat from head to toe as a pair of Slytherins hold me down and pour sticky goo all over my eyeballs."

"If you want a freshening charm, you should just ask for one," Draco pointed out.

"I wouldn't ask you for the time of day--"

"Too late!"

Harry felt a surge of super cooled air rushing all around him, tickling even inside his ears, before it was over. As it whooshed through the flannel of his pyjamas, though, it sucked out every bit of moisture and odour. Really, it was quite a nice charm, far better than the ones Harry knew, but that didn't make it right.

Before he could so much as protest, Snape was snapping, "That's quite enough, you two. We have more important concerns than petty rivalries! Harry, blink a few times. Lumos."

The world slowly swam into view. "Oh, wow, how absolutely wild . . ." Harry breathed. "It's almost like . . . er . . ."

"What, Harry?" Snape pressed. "What do you see?"

"It's like he's high on Muggle drugs," Draco supplied. "Trust me; that is what he was going to say."

"Oh, Harry," Snape sounded a bit amused, but the tone was overlaid with worry. "That's really not wise. Especially for you, after what recently happened. But ah . . . we'll talk about it later."

"What recently happened to him?" Draco rudely questioned.

"Mind your own sodding business!" Harry shouted, reaching out a hand and shoving at Malfoy when he saw his blurry shape start to lean in too close.

Draco appeared to shrug it off. "Whatever. But yeah, stay clear of the Muggle drugs. You can get better effects with magic, anyway."

"Then why'd you try the Muggle kind?" Harry gibed.

"Slumming. Why did you?"

When Harry didn't answer, Snape shook his head, incanted Nox, and tucked his wand back into his robes. "Let's try your glasses," he suggested, setting them carefully on his face. Harry remembered then, Snape taking them off partway through the torture. Presumably, his teacher had kept them for him, ever since. "Any better?"

"Ah, no. Actually, they really make my eyes hurt." He reached up a hand and took them off, pushing them onto the night table. Draco's hazy outline deftly caught the item that had been shoved off the
"Flowers, Potter? Ooh, from Halsey Kiersage. Mmm, and nicely spelled to last."

"Stop mucking about in my personal stuff!"

"Fine," Draco answered, and dropped the vase.

"Draco!" the Potions Master exclaimed. "We talked about this!"

"You talked to him about not smashing presents from my friends?" Harry jeered. "Isn't he a little old to be learning that? Did you also talk to him about not trying to get other people's pets executed? How about not stealing things he happens to find lying around in the Slytherin common room, or--"

"We talked about impulse control," Snape interrupted, laying significant stress on the final two words as he trained his gaze on Draco. "Well?"

"Oh, fine," Draco drawled again. "Vasula reparo. Floreuesco. Wingardium Leviosa. There, good as new, even renewed their lovely floral perfume."

The vase settled itself back down onto the night table.

Harry decided the better part of valour might be pretending that Draco Malfoy was nothing but a patch of air. "Professor? What do you think is going on with my vision? Why do my glasses hurt?"

"I suspect the Elixir's repairing your eyes to the state they should be in," Snape surmised. "You might not need glasses after this."

"I'd rather have skipped getting my eyeballs poked full of holes, all the same."

"I have no doubt. Well, I do have quite a few potions to tend. Is there anything else you need at the moment, Harry?"

"Yeah. I need to talk to you alone. Seriously alone, Professor."

"I will come eat dinner with you in a few hours," Snape promised. "Anything else before I leave?"

"Take him with you, and send Hermione back. I need to write a letter, and while I think I could sort of see the parchment now, I don't think I could write worth a damn."

"Draco will be pleased to assist you," Snape smoothly announced. "Am I correct?"

"Certainly, Professor," Draco replied, just as if he'd helped Harry with correspondence a thousand times before.

"Harry?" Snape sounded a tad less smooth when he posed a similar question to Harry. "Will that be acceptable?"

Funny he'd be asking, when the man had been so bloody autocratic before, had been all but shoving Draco at him, but Harry suddenly realised that yeah, it was acceptable. Just probably not for the reasons Snape thought.

There were, after all, far better things to do with Draco Malfoy than ignore him.

"Yeah, all right," Harry groused, making it sound good and reluctant. Snape was as wily as they came, and it wouldn't do to rouse his suspicions. "But he has to promise to get out when I say, this
time. That's not negotiable. And you have to promise you'll take points from Slytherin if he sticks around after I've said to leave. A hundred points, say."

"Mr Potter drives a hard bargain," Snape observed, sounding rather . . . satisfied by that, actually. Harry almost snorted. He knew what his teacher was thinking: that Harry's bargain was rather Slytherin itself. "Can you abide by those terms, Mr Malfoy?"

"Oh, certainly," Draco said in his holier-than-thou voice, which Harry had always thought really suited his angelic appearance. It just didn't suit the demon he was inside. "However, in the interests of Slytherin, I should like to point out that you will have only Potter's word for whether I go when asked, or not. That is, unless we'd like to ask Madam Pomfrey to referee us?"

"I think we can trust the word of a Gryffindor," Snape drawled. "Even if he is a marginal one."

"Marginal?" Draco caught the meaning, but not the implication. "His middle name's practically Godric! What do you mean?"

"Harry knows. All right, then?"

"All right," the two boys echoed in unison.

Harry waited until Snape's footsteps had echoed away, before snarling with vicious intent, "Yeah, all right. Have you got a quill and parchment handy? Let's get started."

Of course he had no intention whatsoever of actually sending the letter. To anyone. He just wanted to write it, or rather, have Draco write it. Dudley would never see one word of what Malfoy was going to write, but the Slytherin boy didn't have to know that.

And as for his real letters, Hermione could help with those. Yeah, a letter to Dudley, and another one to Remus. But those were none of Draco's business.

This one, on the other hand . . .

A slow smile split Harry's face in two.

"Dear Dudley," Harry recited, leaning comfortably back on the pillows he'd demanded Draco fluff. Five times, until they were just perfect.

Draco obediently started writing, no doubt in the extremely elegant, looping script he always used on his essays. It was practically calligraphy, and took considerable effort and time, but that was okay with Harry. He wanted Malfoy to have to linger over every word and absorb every phrase.

"Who's Dudley?" Draco asked as he carefully drafted out the name.

"My cousin," Harry explained, letting each fact sink in before he moved on to the next. Sort of like Draco would have to do with the letter. "I grew up with him. His dad just died. Guess how? Death Eaters killed him. Guess why? You gave them his address."

Draco froze in mid-stroke, his jaw working though he didn't seem able to speak.

"What, you didn't know you were a murderer already?" Harry sniped. "Yeah, his dad, my uncle. Dead, at your hand! Not that you'd care; he was, after all, only a Muggle. But I've got just one relative left in the whole wide world, and his father just met his end in a horrible, absolutely
sickening way. Now maybe you'll understand why I didn't feel so compelled to thank you for giving me back a stick of wood!"

Draco's quill slipped from his slack fingers and drifted to the floor.

"Well, pick it up!" Harry impatiently ordered, able to track the motion even with his half-healed eyes. "I thought you wanted to help me. Isn't that your new mantra? I've got a lot more to say to my cousin than just 'Dear Dudley,' so hop to! Or do you not want to help me so much any longer?"

"Just dictate," Draco muttered. "Accio quill." A scratching sound told Harry that the other boy was finishing the salutation.

Harry paused a moment to collect his thoughts, then began speaking phrase by phrase, with long pauses in between so Draco could keep up.

"Dear Dudley,

"I'm really, really sorry over your recent loss. I can't even imagine what it must have been like for you, to stand out on your own front lawn and watch all that black smoke come pouring out the broken windows, knowing your father was trapped inside. How absolutely horrifying for you. And then to see the house crush in on itself, like that, and wonder if your father somehow made it out, and then realise he couldn't have, realise he's dead and gone forever . . . Dudley, I am so, so heartbroken that you had to see all that.

"It must be even worse for you, seeing as your mother passed on too, just three weeks ago---"

At that point, Draco broke off to gasp, his voice stricken, "His mother, too! Is that true?"

"Oh, yes," Harry ground out, squinting to try to make out Malfoy's features. Pointless, really. The most he could see was a blurry white face surrounded by a wavering halo of silver-gold. Surreally angelic. But this was no angel. He deserved to know what he'd done. Him, not his father, not this time.

"Now Dudley's got no-one," Harry blithely went on, calculating every word to be a blow. "I know what that's like, don't forget. No parents . . . You think of it every Christmas, every birthday. Well, hell. You think of it every day."

Draco's teeth were chattering. "How did she . . . ah . . . was that Death Eaters as well?"

"No, leukaemia," Harry snapped. No point to secrets now, was there? Voldemort knew everything already. "It's a Muggle disease. I left school to try to help her, but it didn't work. She died, and I got wizardsick."

"How could you help her?" Draco questioned. "We can't cure Muggle diseases."

Harry debated for a moment, though he knew all along, really, that he was going to tell him. Might as well; it was one more way to twist the knife.

"They stuck a really big needle in me, Malfoy, and sucked out some of my bone marrow--"

"They did not!"

"Ask Severus," Harry sneered. "'Cause yes, they did. Muggle doctors. My marrow was supposed to make hers grow back right, or something, but she had a reaction to it instead, and died."
"But you're afraid of needles!" Draco exclaimed, the parchment sheets falling through his hands, that time.

"Yes, I am! Sweet of your father to play on that, wasn't it? He found it out from my bereaved uncle who was almost insane with grief that the operation had ended up so badly! But hey, no harm done, right? At least your father got to have his jollies reminding me, over and over, how stinking awful it was for me to try to help my aunt!"

"I feel sick," Draco announced, sounding every bit the part.

"Too bad," Harry spat. "Stop your pathetic whinging and write."

Harry went on, then:

"It must be even worse for you, seeing as your mother passed on too, just three weeks ago. I wish I knew what to tell you, Dudley. I only really know one thing, and it may not help, but then again, it just may.

"All the time growing up, what was hardest for me about being an orphan was not knowing who was to blame for my parents' deaths. *Car accident*, I was told--"

"Car accident?" Draco echoed. "What car accident? It was *Avada Kedavra*, wasn't it--"

"I can't explain every bloody thing about my childhood; we'll never get the letter written! Now shut up and write!"

Harry continued:

"*Car accident*, I was told, with no more detail than that. I used to fantasize about finding out just how that accident happened. I used to dream I'd track down the man responsible and beat him to a bloody pulp with my bare hands. The way I figured it, because of *him* I'd lost everything, and I was going to take every last thing from him, in recompense. But I couldn't do any such thing, not knowing who was even at fault in that accident. Then I found out I was a wizard, of course--"

"Oh, you have got to be making this up," Draco broke in again, shouting that time. "You didn't know you were a wizard? How is that even possible?"

"This is every word true," Harry hissed. "Like I said before, ask your Head of House. He knows. Now, are you going to write it? Because I'm this close to telling you to get out!" He held his thumb and forefinger a smidgen apart, and flung the gesture up right before Draco's eyes. Nice to be able to see well enough to aim, finally.

Draco didn't say a word, though he did set quill to parchment once more.

"Then I found out I was a wizard, of course, and learnt there was never any car accident, and suddenly, all my hate and anger could have a focus. Another wizard killed my parents, and I know who it was. Now, when I think of bashing brains against a wall, I can picture him, and hope.

"You may not see what all this has to do with you, Dudley, but you will, in just a second, here. See, while Aunt Petunia's death was really no-one's fault at all, like we talked about on the phone--"

Draco made some sort of gasping noise, probably over the picture of a wizard on the phone. Either that, or because he didn't have any idea what it was.

"...like we talked about on the phone, your father is dead because of one person, and I can tell you
who he is. Draco Malfoy. He found out my summer address one day in class, here. And God knows
why, but the little shite thought it would be amusing to pass this information on to his father. That's
just the kind of person he is. Thoughtless, cruel, evil. Sick, in fact. See, he's known for years and
years that his father's number one goal in life is to suck up to his boss (the evil wizard who killed my
parents, by the way) by delivering me to him to be killed.

"So Draco gave his father your address in Surrey, and when his father was finished getting all he
could from Uncle Vernon about me . . . well, you saw what happened. Draco's to blame, for all of it.
He's the reason you'll never have that really nice sauce your dad used to make to put on the steaks.
Every time you eat a steak for the rest of your life, you'll think of your dad, I know. You'll miss him,
and wonder why it had to be this way. But at least now you can have a focus for all that hate and
anger. It helps, trust me."

Draco was gasping with practically every breath by then, his hand a trembling blur as he wrote out
line after line of self-condemnation. Harry closed his eyes and listened to the scratching sound,
waiting for the Slytherin to catch up. Then, in absolutely glacial tones of utter contempt, he went on:

"I thought I'd describe Draco Malfoy so you'll know how to picture him. It's how I see him, anyway,
though believe me, he's such an unpleasant person to be around that I really do try not to look his
way if I can avoid it at all. Anyway: tall and thin, with skin so white you'd swear he was some flesh-
eating ghoul that had never been above ground. White-blond hair he fusses over constantly. In fact, I
think his hair is his main interest in life, which goes to show you how he could do something like he
did. I mean, he just doesn't care about anyone or anything except one Draco Malfoy. His eyes are
silver, which would almost be a nice colour if they weren't constantly narrowed with hate.

"Because, you see, that's what Draco does. That's all he does: he hates. He's what they call a
pureblood wizard, which basically means he thinks everyone else is beneath him. He hates Muggles
(that's people like you), and he hates wizards and witches that happen to have Muggle parents, and
he even hates wizards who are descended from anybody who had Muggle parents (that's people like
me). Hate, hate, hate. I swear it must be his middle name. Want to hear a good one, though? Draco
has this a close friend named Severus, who's a well-educated and intelligent wizard, really worthy of
respect. And Severus recently explained to me that he'd done a lot of research, and found out that
every wizard has Muggle ancestry, even Draco. So, if Draco has the least shred of integrity (which
he doesn't), he really ought to start hating himself. Fat chance of that, though. He'll probably just
decide to hate Severus, instead. Anyway, it doesn't really matter if Draco hates himself, 'cause I bet
you can hate him enough to make up for it. I sure do.

"I absolutely hate his fucking guts.

"Well, Dudley, enough about that ugly git. I hope to see you soon, and figure out where we go from
here.

"Love, Harry"

It took Draco a few moments longer to write out the final phrases, and then, all he said was, "What
do I tell the owl?"

But his voice was dead.

"I'll take care of the owl," Harry tightly informed him. "Hand me the sheets. I have to make sure you
wrote it right." He waited until he had the pages of parchment firmly in hand, and said, "That's it
then. Get out."

It looked like Draco was swallowing something as he choked out, "Look, Potter, I--"
"Get out!" Harry screamed. "A hundred points, remember? OUT!"

"Points," Draco gasped. "Merlin's balls, you think I give a flip about points?"

"Out," Harry menaced in a low voice, that time. A low, determined voice. "Get the hell out. Or I'll start screaming for Severus, and you can explain to him why you aren't trustworthy in the least and how you don't bother keeping the promises you make. Now, GET OUT!"

And Draco finally did.

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Harry wanted to use the enchanted quill so that he could hear if Draco had really written everything as dictated, but Madam Pomfrey was back by then. He certainly didn't want her hearing the letter.

Well, Harry reasoned, no time like the present to see if he could cast a simple charm of his own.

Drawing his wand out from where he'd stashed it--beneath his pillow since the pyjamas had no pockets--he waved it in an arc, concentrated, and uttered Silencio...

But the magic didn't flow. Strange that he could feel it now, flowing through him... that was an improvement, certainly, but it didn't help him know how to make it come out through his wand. He didn't know how to make it come out at all, except in those surges of fury. But he couldn't control those, so they weren't much use. After all, he hadn't really wanted to shatter the windows. All he'd wanted was to see Snape.

He tucked his wand back under his pillow, and stuffed the letter under there for good measure, and stared around at his surroundings for a while, trying to identify things by their blurs. It was really a pretty boring game. Besides that, it made his eyes feel tired. It didn't take long before Harry's eyelids were drooping and he was dropping into a light sleep.
Snape was there when he woke up, looking like a great black smudge. Well, a smudge with something propped on his crossed knee. Book, maybe.

Harry yawned and sat up. "I can still see," he admitted. "Not too well, though." His glance swept the hazy outlines of the room. "Anybody else in here?"

"No." All the same, Snape proceeded to draw his wand and cast *Silencio*, which of course reminded Harry of his own failure.

"Ah, well that's one of the things we should discuss," Snape said when Harry mentioned it. "Your magic. More specifically, your wild magic. But let's leave that for a little later."

A tray levitated over towards the bed, then hovered atop Harry's knees.

"What about you?" Harry asked as he began to eat, squinting at his food. "You said we'd have dinner together."

"You really can't see too well," Snape sighed. "Mine is just over there." He waved somewhere off to his right, and then Harry saw the vague outline of a tray floating over. "So, Harry. What did you want to talk about? *Alone,* he mocked.

Well, that was as good a place to start as any, Harry figured. "Can you please tell Malfoy to stop lurking around? I really don't want to see him."

Snape finished chewing something before he answered. "I'm afraid I must decline your request."

"*Why?*

"Put yourself in Draco's place." Snape's voice was deliberately calm. "He's been raised all his life to follow the Dark Lord. Every family and social connection he had was predicated on this expectation. He's given it all up. Now he has nothing, Harry."

"Disowned or not, I'm sure he's still got piles of gold," Harry scoffed. "I've heard him brag about how he has his own vault stuffed with money he inherited from his great-grandfather."

"You cannot be so immature as to think money can compensate for family," Snape rebuked him. "Wouldn't you trade all your Galleons for ten minutes with James?"

That was true enough, Harry realised.

"And before you say that Lucius Malfoy isn't worth a Knut, let alone a Galleon," Snape continued, "I'd like you to consider the fact that we don't get to choose our fathers."

Another good point, but Harry had heard just about enough Draco-pity for one evening. "Yeah, well he gets to choose his own behaviour, doesn't he? He dressed up as a Dementor to make me fall off my broom! Last year he was square in Umbridge's corner. *This* year on the train on the way here, he- -"

"What is he choosing now?" Snape interrupted. "To turn his back on his family allegiances. To return your wand to your hand. To do his classwork late at night so that in class he can help me brew draughts for you."
"But don't you see?" Harry pushed his finished tray aside, letting it hover beside the bed, and went on, "This could all be some sort of plot--"

"It's not."

Snape's absolute certainty was nothing short of infuriating. "How can we know that?"

"Apply your mind to the problem!" Snape snapped, losing patience. "What plot could possibly include returning your wand?"

Harry blew out a breath through his nose. "All right. Just for the purpose of argument, assume that during some fit of insanity, Malfoy stole my wand. Maybe he was mad at his father or something, and figured it would be a good way to get him in trouble with Voldemort. So he did it, without thinking, probably. And now he's stuck. It doesn't mean we can trust him in the future!"

Snape reached out for one of Harry's hands, and clasped it gently. "Does it mean we should reject him, and drive him right back into the ranks of the Death Eaters?"

Shite, Harry thought, sighing. He would have to have a point.

"I am not saying you should trust Draco Malfoy, Harry." Snape pressed his advantage, giving his hand a squeeze. "I am saying you should think about your own choices. What can you accomplish by openly inflicting your hate and enmity on him? I happen to trust him, but let us suppose you are right, and his loyalties are wavering. Shouldn't you seek to capture them, rather than hand the Dark Lord yet another follower?"

"I hate his guts," Harry said, scowling. "He's the real reason I ended up at Samhain, you know. Lucius Malfoy only got information to find me with because he talked to my uncle. And just how did he know where to find my uncle? Draco Malfoy gave him the address!"

"Oh, that explains why the Order's been watching you like a hawk the past two summers, someone on guard duty every hour of every day," Snape mocked. "Because the Dark Lord didn't yet know your address. Be serious! He's known for years where to find you. He just couldn't get through the wards!"

Harry snorted. "You're the one who told me I shouldn't have let Malfoy see that address, that there was no doubt he'd communicated it to 'all interested parties!'"

"There is no doubt," Snape snapped. "He did in fact tell his father your address. But since Lucius had long known it, that made no real difference to anyone. When I said you shouldn't have let Malfoy see your address, I was trying to make you realise how very foolish you had been! What if the letter had slipped out of its envelope and you'd handed Draco information the Dark Lord didn't yet have?"

Too Slytherin by half, Harry thought.

"When you were missing from school and no longer on Privet Drive," Snape continued, "that's when the Dark Lord took enough interest to have your uncle Legilimized and that idiot Lupin followed. What happened to you has got nothing to do with Draco!"

Harry's stomach sank somewhere down to the region of his knees as the truth sank in. "Um, so it's not his fault either that Uncle Vernon got killed?"

Snape just glared at him, his inky eyes coming clearer the longer Harry stared.
"All right, all right, so it's not his fault," Harry conceded, though he declined to feel too bad about the letter. Draco was a hate-filled little shite, and Harry was glad he'd had to hear that, and write it down in his own hand. Actually, it was sort of strange that he'd put up with that, assuming he had of course. Harry hadn't had a chance to check what the letter said. For all he knew, it was a list of people Draco wanted to hex. "I still don't trust him."

"That's your prerogative. Just consider this, Harry. The Dark Lord did not want your wand taken out of his reach. Therefore, either Draco was sincere when he stole it, or he was indulging some childish whim that he may or may not regret in future. If he was sincere, he deserves more from you than complete and utter scorn. If he was simply getting some petty vengeance against his father, then his recklessness has placed him in our sphere of influence. Shouldn't we try to influence him?"

"I don't know how you do it," Harry muttered, rubbing at his eyes. Funny, they hadn't been itchy before. Well, not like this. "Somehow you make be nice to Malfoy sound so sensible."

"Think about it," Snape merely advised. "Is there a problem with your eyes?"

Harry opened them again, and groaned. "Everything's gone dark again!"

"Lumos . . ." Harry sensed his teacher leaning closer, so close he felt a sweep of long hair against his shoulder. "Completely dark? Or not quite black, as you described before?"

"Not quite black." Harry flopped to his back as soon as Snape uttered Nox. "What went wrong?"

"Nothing. I told you it would take time. We'll dose you again with Elixir before I go."

"My vision's supposed to fade in and out like this?"

"Ideally, no, but your magical state is still indeterminate."

"You were going to tell me something about that wild magic," Harry reminded him.

"It takes a violent form because it's a manifestation of dark powers," Snape explained. "You've had them all along; you were the source of the black energy in the Dursley house."

Harry crossed his arms. "I'm not a dark wizard, Professor."

"I didn't imply you were. What you are is a normal wizard, although very powerful. Having dark powers doesn't mean you use them for ill. I have them myself."

"What does it mean, then?"

"There are nine primary classification systems in use, but the best definition, in my view, is this: you have the ability, should you wish to wield it, to control and harm other creatures, wizards included. You can utilize the power in other ways, perfectly acceptable ways. But what makes it dark is the potential for abuse."

Harry frowned, and rolled over on his side. "By that definition, all wizards have dark powers."

"To one degree or another, yes. You have more than most."

"Like Voldemort," Harry whispered, thinking of the prophecy. Marked his equal.

"But unlike him, you don't want to use your dark powers for evil. It's like your Parseltongue, Harry. You use it to chat with Sals. He uses it to possess Nagini."
"Or Occlumency," Harry murmured.

"Ah, Occlumency," Snape thoughtfully murmured. "On Samhain, you held off the Dark Lord, and even misdirected him into thinking I was still the bane of your existence. You credited me last night with saving you, but the truth is that in large measure, you were instrumental in your own rescue, Harry."

It wasn't a compliment, but Harry still felt praised, though he had to own, "Well, only 'cause you taught me how."

"I would say it was because you made the effort to learn," Snape corrected. "You practiced."

"Yeah," Harry said, wishing with all his heart that he'd practiced when it would have mattered to Sirius.

Perhaps Snape sensed the direction of his thoughts, for he brought the conversation away from past regrets. "Occlumency is a dark power," he explained, "but it is not necessarily evil, as you demonstrated on Samhain. All dark powers, however, are very deep and strong."

"Okay, I get it," Harry announced. "Dark's not even that good a word. We ought to be calling them deep powers, or something. But what does it have to do with my wild magic?"

"After the operation, when you ran that high fever, your magical core was severely charred. It wasn't burned completely through, as Marjygold believed; the deepest of your deep powers remained. These are the hardest to bring under conscious control, which is why Occlumency is so difficult for most wizards. That you could acquire the talent so rapidly suggests that you were tapping into your dark powers."

"That's why I can't even tell when I'm speaking Parseltongue!" Harry exclaimed. "It's not really conscious . . ."

"And neither are your dreams. All dark powers," Snape confirmed. "And too, dark powers are what erupts as accidental magic. They did this when you were a child, Harry, though as you've undergone such traumas in the past few years, your capacity for rage has grown as well."

Harry thought about that for a while before he replied. "How do I get the accidental magic under control?"

"The usual way is through magical education, which teaches you to use light magic instead, to deal with this or that problem as it arises. Your capacity for light magic has been incinerated. It took some time for even your deep powers to grow back from the spark that was left, but they are present in full, now. Yet you still have no surface magic to calm them, which explains how when you grow enraged, your deep powers go completely wild."

"But how do I get my light magic, surface magic, back, then?"

Snape had let go of his hands a while earlier, but at that, he clasped them again. "I don't think you ever are going to get it back, Harry."

Harry just stared, seeing nothing, a choking feeling of utter panic coming up to cut off his air. He swallowed, but it was still there. It felt like the room was spinning, or like his head was floating up off his shoulders, or something---

"Breathe," Snape dryly recommended.
Harry tried, he really did, but a lead weight was pressing down on his lungs, constricting all movement. It hurt something fierce, almost like he'd taken a Bludger to the chest---

"Breathe," Snape said again, more stress on the word. "Breathe, you idiot child!"

He couldn't, though, not until a sharp blow between his shoulder blades startled him so completely that he gasped, then sucked in a huge wheezing rush of air to compensate. After Harry had got his wind back properly, which took a minute or two, he couldn't help but narrow his eyes, because damn it all, that blow had really hurt!

"I think you're supposed to slap someone who's hysterical, Professor."

"That would go over well, after the way your lout of an uncle used to treat you."

Good point . . .

For a moment more, Harry concentrated on breathing again, because really, he couldn't think what else to do. *His light magic was gone, just like that? All he had left were the dark powers that were so . . . well, powerful, that they scared even him?*

Then it came to him that Snape was wrong, that he *had* to be. Harry fetched his wand out from beneath his pillow, and held it as though intending to cast a spell, and once again, he felt a warm honeyed glow climbing along his spine, heating him up from the inside out, the feeling so thoroughly *good* that he couldn't be discouraged. Could he? "This feels the same as the first day I held it," he told his teacher. "I can just tell my magic's back inside me, sir."

"You're feeling your dark powers trying to make themselves useful."

"But it's the same as in Ollivander's--"

"Yes, it would be," Snape agreed. "Because you're the same as then, without any access to light magic. Then, it was because you didn't know how to reach into yourself and grasp hold of it. Now, it's because there isn't any to call forth."

"But my wand feels the *same,*" Harry repeated, feeling like he didn't really follow Snape's argument.

His professor paused a moment. "The same as when you first held it, yes. I understand. Has it always felt that way to your hand? Third year, for instance, when you would take it out to practice defence spells with Lupin, did it light you up inside before you even began to work the charms?"

"No . . ."

"Because by then, it was well-wrapped in the light powers you had used it for, year after year. It wasn't drawing energy from the deepest well of all, the dark powers at the bottom of your soul. Now it is again, just as when you first purchased it."

"You have got to be wrong," Harry insisted, the idea unthinkable, really. Magic was all he *was.* Oh, sure, he'd spent eleven years thinking he was a Muggle, but it wasn't like he'd done all that well as one, was it? *Not* being a wizard meant being hated and despised. *Being* one was all that made him . . . well, *him.*

"Harry, I would like to be wrong," Snape admitted, a heavy sigh interrupting his words. "You don't know how much. But just as with the condition of your eyes, I thought you would want to know the truth, no matter how unpalatable it may prove to be."
"Unpalatable?" Harry echoed, outraged. "You just told me I'm as good as a squib, after all!"

"Would you stop using that word?" Snape rebuked him, rising to stand. "I told you no such thing. Now, listen!" He leaned over Harry, planting a hand on either shoulder, his face so close that Harry could feel as well as hear his words. "You. Are. A. Wizard. You have not lost your magic. You have, in point of fact, far more magic than any other student in this school! You, and you alone, are the Dark Lord's equal, you gibbering fool!"

"Geez, calm down," Harry stammered, a little freaked out. It wasn't that he thought Snape would do anything if he lost his temper, but he didn't much like getting shouted at from six inches away, either. Or being called a fool. *That one* wasn't a good insult, like *you idiot child*.

"I am not the one periodically forgetting to breathe," Snape sneered. "You calm down!"

"Okay!" Harry shouted, backing up a little. "I'm a wizard, not a squib. But see, that hardly makes me feel better, considering. Squibs at least get to know where they stand. They don't go blowing out windows whenever they get upset!"

"Neither will you, once you gain control over your dark powers," Snape assured him from what sounded like the chair, again. "The balance inside you has changed. You simply need to learn to compensate, and you will be able to direct the flow of magic both through you, and through your wand. In fact . . ." Snape paused a bit. "You've seen me do a charm or two without a wand. I wager you'll be able to do a fair sight more than that, once you know how to force your dark powers to do your conscious bidding."

"Wandless magic?" Harry breathed. "Me?"

"You're the Dark Lord's equal, and he's no stranger to it," Snape explained. "Moreover, you've done it already, though it was certainly uncontrolled. The windows, making the stones here fade to transparent--"

"Transparent?" Harry squeaked.

"You wouldn't have seen," Snape realised. "But they were, yes, when you made them blaze."

Harry remembered then, those surges he had called forth from his anger when he'd been in that tiny stone cell. He'd made the stones there fade, too, although only halfway . . .

"Um, were they see-through all the way, or just kind of half there?" he asked.

"We could all see the bailey outside, though it was quite a feat through the glare the stones were putting out."

"Then my dark powers have grown since S-- Samhain," Harry concluded, hating the way he stumbled over the word. He had to say it twice more as he explained his reasoning to his teacher.

"Postulate the following," Snape suggested. "Each time you experience a grave trauma: the marrow extraction, your aunt's burial, Samhain . . . your dark powers become more accessible to you, though it takes time for you to be able to reach into them. A few weeks after the extraction, you were able pull them forth out of your fear in that cell. That was even consciously done. A handful of days after Samhain, your emotions here again dragged the powers forth, to much greater effect. But that was not consciously done. The pattern would suggest that with more time, you can bring it to the conscious level, as you did when you were imprisoned."

"A few weeks, then?"
"I would speculate that the greater the trauma, the more time you may need to accept the powers being cleaved open inside you."

"But even when I controlled them, I didn't really," Harry pointed out. "I wasn't trying to make the stones vanish. I was just trying to do something."

Snape must have leaned forward, for his voice sounded nearer. "Your level of control is non-existent to abysmal, I agree. But that will improve. You have already gone through this process once, I hope you realise. When you started Hogwarts, you had no talent with a wand. Then we taught you to channel light magic to do your bidding. Simple charms, *wingardium leviosa*. Any wizard can accomplish as much, because surface powers are so near the wand hand; they are easily siphoned off. What you need to learn now will no doubt be harder. Consciously channeling your deep powers into your wand, or channeling them without it, is not something most wizards can achieve. But Harry, they are not the Dark Lord's equal."

"You do realise you sort of harp on that?"

"Hmm," Snape murmured, clearly lost in thought for a moment. "Yes. I think that is because for most of your time here I've thought you rather arrogant, as I'm sure you know."

It took Harry a minute to follow that. "Oh. Um, you mean now you maybe think I'm not quite as arrogant as you supposed?"

"You are not your father, any more than Draco is his," Snape quietly affirmed. "You're actually prone to believe that you could *not* be the Dark Lord's equal. Yet is it your magic, Harry, that nullified his wards and defences that night."

"My accidental magic, you mean."

"Exactly. So we are back to what matters. You must get your dark powers under conscious control, because then, you will be more than his equal."

Harry drew in a shaky breath. "You don't mean . . ."

"Yes."

"But I'm just a . . . a kid, and he's . . . Voldemort--"

"To think I ever called you arrogant," Snape groaned. "Listen, Harry. *He* has not had his darkest powers split wide open and made available for his use, as you have. *You* will have far more power than he can dream of. All that remains is to learn to channel it." His teacher paused. "Do you remember when I told you that your instincts were often good?"

"Yeah. It's why I don't trust Malfoy," Harry put in.

Snape ignored that. "Deciding to have your marrow tampered with . . . for quite some time now I have felt that it was a serious miscalculation, leading as it did to your illness, and then indirectly to Samhain as well. Now, though, I begin to suspect that it was as I said: a good instinct on your part. The end result may be your ascendance into powers that can finally vanquish the Dark Lord." *Yeah, sure, find the silver lining,* Harry thought. "But Professor," Harry protested, "has anybody ever done what you're suggesting? Brought deep powers completely under conscious control?"

"Not to my knowledge, no," Snape confirmed.
"Do you know how I would start? I mean, how to even try?"

"I don't."

"So what's the point to any of it, then?"

Snape reached out and patted his hand, the touch light and reassuring. "I think you once believed that you could not Occlude, either. We'll find a way through this, too."

Harry just felt exasperated, and wanted to get off the subject. For the moment, anyway. He'd think about it more when he was alone. Try some things with his wand, maybe. Hmm, maybe all he really had to do was think of Draco before he let a spell loose . . . anger had worked to unleash that accidental magic, maybe it was the key to making dark powers flow at all. "I remembered my question about the Portkey," he abruptly announced. "The headmaster said my wild magic nullified every spell for leagues around. So why did the Portkey even work, after that?"

"That would be instinct again," Snape explained. "The headmaster's, this time." A clinking noise drifted through the air as Snape settled something around Harry's neck. "It's a wide gold ring studded with emeralds. I've hung it on a chain for you." He paused, then said, "It's the ring your father gave to your mother on their wedding day. Albus recovered it from Godric's Hollow the night they were killed; it's been in his keeping every since."

Harry fingered it, imagining how it must look. "Um, so this was spelled to be the Portkey? It . . ." he cleared his throat, not really wanting to cry again in front of Snape, and changed what he had been going to say. "It's tiny. This wouldn't fit on any of your fingers."

"It's a wizard's ring," Snape drawled, clearly amused. "It was made in Lily's size, but it'll change to fit whatever finger it's thrust onto. That's why I put it on a chain for you. I thought you might like to keep it the way she had it."

"Yeah," Harry murmured. "Thanks. But . . . I still don't understand why it worked after I unleashed my dark . . . um, deep powers."

"You might as well call them dark," Snape advised. "I think half the solution to getting them under your control will be to accept them. However, as regards the ring. Your parents' love for one another is bound up in that ring, and it's that same love they gave to you, right up until the night they died. I suppose some part of your wild magic recognised it as safe, as part of yourself."

"You suppose?" Harry echoed. "You don't know? That isn't why the headmaster made the Portkey this ring?"

Snape gave a sharp, dry laugh. "We were hardly expecting you to run amuck, magically speaking, and enable our escape."

"Then why the ring?" Harry pressed, before the answer came to him. "Oh, simple. Because it could be bound to my mother's sacrifice. Like . . . warding."

"Our hope was to keep the Dark Lord from detecting that it had been spelled," Snape agreed. "Of course his own wards kept the spell from functioning, until you obliterated them. Albus and the Aurors were casting like madmen to try to break through . . ." Snape groaned in remembrance. "I could do nothing for you save keep my hands on you so that the ring would transport us both out the moment it began to heat."

Harry glanced up, though he could see nothing. "Oh, I get it . . . so that's why you didn't really object to holding me down to be tortured!"
Snape's voice went low and cold. "Why did you think I didn't voice more than a token objection?"

"Well, I didn't know!" Harry cried. "I thought it was odd that you would . . . er, almost join in like that. I suppose I thought that you had to because Voldemort had asked, and defying him would have made him suspicious . . . It's not like I thought you intended to enjoy yourself, Professor! I trusted you, I really did. I just didn't really . . . understand."

"I suppose," the Potions Master replied, sneering at the memory, not at Harry, "it's a good thing the Dark Lord did demand I participate. Otherwise, I would have had to ask for the honour of restraining you to be tortured. I would have had to beg, and I dare say you'd not have trusted me so readily after hearing that."

"Of course I would have--" Harry objected.

"Don't be stupid!" Snape barked, that time unmistakably at him.

"All right, maybe not," Harry conceded. "You did know when I slugged you that I didn't really mean it. Didn't you?"

"I should hope you didn't. You barely bruised me."

That set Harry's teeth on edge. "Well, I was sick to my stomach from just Apparating, not to mention seriously dehydrated, reeling on my feet, and scared to death!"

"All the same, it clearly demonstrates a need for you to be trained in some more effective fighting techniques. It's folly to rely solely on magic, which can be foiled in various ways. Still, I will admit that your verbal misdirection---so I'm a rat bastard? what a charming epithet---was somewhat more believable than your pitiful blow."

"It wouldn't kill you to utter a simple Well done, you know," Harry groused.

"Indeed," Snape drawled, "I do believe I am still alive."

"What?"

"As I recall, I was most forthcoming on the subject of your Occlumency and misdirection during your ordeal."

"Yeah, well you didn't say well done," Harry groused.

Snape softly laughed, the sound sardonic, but also rife with amusement and resolution both. Harry didn't really understand, not until his teacher spoke again, suggesting an agreement that was Slytherin to its very heart. Something Snape wanted, for something Harry wanted. But that was all right, Harry supposed; the agreement was well balanced. "Let me put in the Elixir without holding you down, Harry, and then, I'll most decidedly say well done."

It wasn't pleasant by any means, and it took them more than one try to get it right, but by the time Snape headed off towards his own quarters, he was able to deliver those words that meant so much to the Gryffindor boy. He even ruffled his hair a bit as he said them.

"Well done, you idiot child."
The hospital wing wasn't a terribly fun place to be. Harry had known that ever since first year, but of course he'd never been laid up for quite this long before. At least at first he'd had plenty of company, people dropping by at odd hours, catching him between classes; visitors from every house but Slytherin.

Well, every house including Slytherin, if you counted Draco Malfoy. At least his newfound affinity for Harry's company hadn't lasted past Harry's stunt with the letter. Draco had made himself absolutely scarce in the two days that had passed since then.

But then again, so had nearly everyone. Ron and Hermione still came by three times each day, but nobody else, not even from Gryffindor. His only other visitors were staff members. McGonagall came by just once, Harry noted. He couldn't help but think dark thoughts at that. In contrast, Snape, who wasn't even *his* Head of House, was a surprisingly frequent presence despite his heavy work schedule. They talked more about magic, and ate together more than once, and whenever it was time, Snape would salve just his back and let Harry take care of the rest of it. He also told the Medi-Witch to stop worrying whenever Harry wanted to get out of bed. Blessed relief -- Harry could *finally* make his own way over to the loo.

He *still* hadn't had a chance to carefully examine the letter Draco had drafted. He knew from squinting at his textbooks that his eyes weren't up to reading yet, so he'd have to use the talking quill, and he never had a moment alone! Well, unless he wanted to take the letter to the loo, but he wasn't that desperate to hear it. Actually, the thought of hearing it made him feel faintly ill; he had really said some terrible things . . . but then again, Draco had deserved to hear them, so Harry wasn't going to feel that bad about it.

Still, he couldn't quite help remembering the things Snape had said. Indulging his anger like that was probably pretty Gryffindor of him, but it certainly hadn't been cunning in the least. What if Draco had really been trying to turn, and Harry's complete contempt for him really *did* end up pushing him back toward Voldemort's camp?

Of course that was ridiculous -- Draco wasn't *really* turning toward the light. He couldn't be. He had no real reason, and that vapid rationale of his . . . *It was just so awful what my father did to you . . .* well, that wasn't going to wash, it really wasn't. The Draco Harry knew wouldn't give a shrivelfig about the Boy Who Lived being tortured and killed, so that was no real reason to switch loyalties.

Which meant, of course, that Snape was wrong. Draco had some trick up his sleeve, some evil plot, something positively diabolical, and it was anybody's guess what part the wand played in all of it. Harry sighed thinking about it all. He really, really wished that Snape hadn't got drawn into this Draco-is-good-after-all fantasy. Still, maybe it wasn't so surprising that the normally wily Potions Master had been taken in. It must get awfully lonely being the *only* good Slytherin in the history of the house.

No, no, Draco simply wasn't to be trusted; Harry was sure of that much.

He was sure of something else, too: there was something odd going on at Hogwarts. Why had his floods of well-wishers suddenly disappeared just at the time when, paradoxically, he was never left by himself in the ward? It was very strange. Before, there'd been times when nobody was around . . . Or at least he *thought* so; he had been blind, after all. *Now* though, there was always an adult present. *Always.* Usually, there was more than one about, and they were never too far away from his bed, either. Like . . . they were expecting something.
Harry had had just about enough of it, and enough of the hospital wing, for that matter, "When can I start going back to classes?" he abruptly demanded one day.

He didn't think he could have caused a bigger ripple of shock if he'd asked instead when he could go visit Voldemort. The room fell silent, absolutely silent, which was really saying something, as the moment before Ron had been telling Hermione a joke, Professor Snape had been debating some Latin incantation with the headmaster, and Madam Pomfrey had been fooling around with the enchanted quill. She said she was examining its usefulness for the hospital wing, but Harry thought she just plain liked to hear it blathering on and on as she made it read from mediwizard texts.

"What?" Harry pressed after a second or two of that dead silence. "I can see for about six hours at a stretch, now. Stuff's awful blurry . . ." Now that was an understatement . . . "but even if all I could do was listen, I'd still want to attend lessons."

Still, dead silence, until in exasperation Harry finally exclaimed, "Hermione, what's the matter? I can't believe you want me to fall further behind!"

If he squinted hard, he could just make out a fuzzy image of her sort of drooping. "Nobody wants you to fall behind, Harry," she quietly asserted. "But . . . ah . . . I don't think you really realise what's been going on while you've been laid up."

"Perhaps Mr Weasley and Miss Granger should leave," the headmaster gently suggested.

"Why should we?" Ron erupted. "We already know what you're going to tell Harry! Everybody knows!"

It was very disheartening, Harry thought, to once more know less about himself than everyone else seemed to. "Yeah, well why don't I know?" he waspishly demanded.

"We didn't want to upset you while you were recovering," Hermione delicately began.

Ron scoffed out loud. "Oh sure, like finding out Draco Malfoy's in deep shite is going to upset Harry!"

"It's stress," Hermione hissed, "because Malfoy's problems are the same as Harry's! And he doesn't need more stress, Ron! Don't you remember yesterday? The juice?"

Harry scowled. She would make a big deal of it. So what if he'd yelped and flung pumpkin juice all over the bed when Ron had handed him the glass? He'd just been startled, that was all. Ron's fingers had brushed his when he wasn't braced for it . . .

"It is so nice to be mental enough that my friends are afraid to talk to me about anything real!" Harry suddenly shouted. "There's more news than just Dennis and Colin dating the same girl without knowing it, I take it? And you didn't tell me!"

Ron cleared his throat, and put in, "The headmaster said it would be better---"

"Oh, the headmaster keeping me out of the loop. Big effing surprise, there!"

"Gryffindors, out!" Snape announced, advancing on Harry's friends, who bid him a rather alarmed goodbye before the Potions Master practically swept them from the room. Harry heard the door being slammed, then thoroughly warded, and wondered over that.

"Mr Weasley's asinine convictions aside," Snape sneered as he stalked back, "everybody does not know all we must reveal to you."
Harry sighed, pushing away from his pillows to sit up straight. He reached awkwardly out to grasp the water on his night-table, and took a drink. Good thing he hadn't given into the urge to throw it. He was just sick of secrets, even though he knew he was just as guilty as his friends of not coming completely clean about everything. Since waking up at Hogwarts, he'd told them about his aunt, and the operation, and he'd even admitted he was afraid of needles . . .

He hadn't told them, though, much about Samhain. Or Devon, or about Snape not hating him at all. Or about how he really needed Snape sometimes, now. They wouldn't understand . . . well, Hermione might understand some of it, he supposed. She wasn't quite so irrational about Snape as Ron was, but the way she liked to play amateur psychiatrist was so annoying that he didn't want to get into details about his stress and how he was dealing with it. She'd probably agree with Madam Pomfrey that he was nutters to want Snape touching him, after all that. And of course Ron would blow a gasket if the word touch came up in the same conversation as the name Snape.

Well, his friends were gone now, he told himself, so it was time to calm down. Way down. "All right," he prompted when he felt able to speak politely. It was a little bit of a trick, but he did it. "What do I need to know?"

"Several things," the headmaster quietly answered, moving forward to sit lightly on the end of Harry's bed. Harry couldn't help it; he bent his legs to pull them back. He could see Dumbledore shaking his head at that, though he didn't say anything.

"First," he began, rhythmically stroking his beard, "and this is the part your friends realise, the entire house of Slytherin, with one exception, is united against you. They've sworn to accomplish your death."

Snape moved to stare out the windows, his back to the boy in the bed.

"Just because I survived Voldemort again?" Harry scoffed. "You'd think they'd know how to get over it. That only happens almost every year!"

"Ah, but this time you've done something that doesn't happen every year. You've stolen away, so to speak, one of their own. He's loyal to you now, and not to the cause their families support, and as he's the only son of Voldemort's most important supporter, well . . . they find the whole thing an extreme offence."

"Malfoy," Harry realised. "Um, the whole house of Slytherin? You mean he's told everyone about his . . . er, supposed change of heart?"

"It isn't supposed, Harry," the headmaster chided. "And yes, he's told everyone."

"You made it another condition," Harry accused.

"Not precisely. Mr Malfoy was told to do what he could sway elements in his house away from loyalty to Voldemort. He also had to be seen to be publicly, overtly loyal to you. We told him we wanted no more intrigues. Unfortunately, Mr Malfoy synthesized all these objectives--"

"The fool," Snape harshly broke in.

"Yes," Dumbledore simply agreed.

"Making grand proclamations like an idiot Gryffindor--"

"That's enough, Severus."
"What did he do?" Harry asked.

It was Snape who answered, stalking away from the windows in a haze of swirling black. "Directly after speaking with us, he came here and sat with you until an hour after curfew. The state you were in evidently influenced Draco for the worse. When he left your side, he went straight away to the Slytherin dungeons and went from room to room, banging his way in and making loud pronouncements about Voldemort being weak and demanding weakness from his minions!"

"That's why you said you had talked to him about impulse control?"

"Of course! I expected more subtlety from the idiot child!"

_Idiot child._ That was even worse than Draco calling the Potions Master _Severus_. More to distract himself than for any other reason, Harry asked, "How'd he get to the girls' rooms? Aren't they warded against boys like in Gryffindor?"

"For all I know, he used his broom!" Snape snarled. "What matters is that _before_ his little theatrical, we had thwarted Lucius from getting him home to be killed. Once word of Draco's fit of idiocy spread, Lucius arranged for his student plants to announce a reward. Five thousand Galleons for his son's head."

Harry swallowed. Five thousands Galleons was an awful lot of money, but what struck him harder was the thought of a father doing that to his son. "Uh, have there been any attempts?"

"What do you think?" roared Snape. "They're Slytherins!"

_All right, all right, so Malfoy had some problems._ It wasn't like Harry cared all that much. And besides . . . "I still don't see what this has to do with me attending class," Harry entreated.

Snape threw up his hands in disgust, while the headmaster made a calming gesture and said, "Harry, we haven't even been letting Mr Malfoy attend his classes, and you're in more danger than he is. You've lost access to your magic, not to mention . . . the price on your life is . . . far higher."

"And I'm far more hated," Harry acknowledged, before frowning. "But Malfoy's been going to Potions, I thought?"

"Not since the day I came up here to find him reading you the text," Snape clarified. "There was an . . . incident."

_Severus let me out_, Harry remembered Malfoy saying. The comment had been tossed out with such studied casualness that it had rung false at the time, but Harry had been so angry to have Malfoy near that he'd overlooked that. Now he realised that he shouldn't have. Since when did Snape just _let_ students out of Potions class? You had to blow up your cauldron, or get yourself coated in something horribly caustic, at least. You _never_ got to leave just because a fellow student was laid up in the hospital.

"Incident?" Harry questioned.

Snape sighed, his brows drawing together. "I knew the Slytherins were growing restless. That was another reason why I had Draco helping me brew Potions, Harry. I thought if I kept him close during class, no one in my house would dare make an attempt, not there. But that day someone incanted _Serpensortia_ prior to class and released a viper spelled to attack only Draco."

_Sounds about right to me_, Harry thought, remembering how Malfoy had used the same curse on him, once. Then of course he had to remember that Snape, even hating Harry then, had got rid of the
snake for him. So . . . no doubt he'd do at least as much for Draco. "You used an _evanesco_ spell, then?"

"Draco can take care of himself," Snape said, running a hand through his hair. "That's not our main concern. The failed attempt, though, will encourage the Slytherins to take more chances next time. Students will end up hurt or worse if we let him attend classes."

"But isn't he in just as much danger in his own common room?"

"The other Slytherins are the ones in danger if they cross him," Snape scoffed. "Nevertheless, we have made arrangements to keep him . . . rather isolated."

"So who conjured the snake?" No answer. "Oh, come on! All you have to do is check their wands. _Priori Incantatem?_

"Someone at Hogwarts, most likely more than one someone, has access to additional wands, Harry," Dumbledore explained.

"No doubt the wand was destroyed as soon as it was used," Snape added. "We've begun closely monitoring the post." He grimaced. "Much as Umbridge did, I'm afraid. Though Lucius most likely has other means of getting wands to his cohorts here."

"I thought the wand chose the wizard, and all that?"

"Ollivander loves to exaggerate, though it's quite good he sold you the wand he did," Dumbledore sighed.

"Veritaserum, then," Harry pressed. "I remember that Professor Snape here keeps a supply."

"The serum I gave Umbridge to use on you was counterfeit, Potter!"

Harry sighed. Even back then, Snape had, in his own way, been on Harry's side. Harry thought better than to thank him, though. "Hmm, yes. You've got the real stuff on hand, though. Don't you?"

Snape gave a sneering laugh. "Oh, brilliant, Potter. We're to administer doses of illegal truth serum to mass numbers of students? Hogwarts would be shut down within minutes of the first owl out!"

"All right!" Harry shouted. "I'm just trying to help you figure out who the troublemakers are, so I can get back to classes!"

"Are you deaf as well as half-blind?" Snape roared. "Draco Malfoy is not presently allowed in classes, and _he's_ well able to both see, and defend himself with magic. You're helpless as a kitten!"

"The Gryffindors'll look out for me," Harry insisted, grinding his teeth. "And I am _not_ helpless, Professor. I have that wild magic. Anybody tries to mess with me and they'll just end up dead."

Snape fluidly cursed, or at least Harry thought he had. It was hard to tell, since it had been in Latin or something. "Listen for once, Potter!" he grated when he switched into English. "Our goal is not to have Hogwarts students _end up dead_, even if they are Slytherins and in your estimation worthless! Moreover, if you are placed in a situation in which your wild magic is let loose, you are just as likely to kill friends as enemies! You may well even kill _yourself_ if your magic crumples the castle walls and brings the roof down on your head! The whole essence of your dark powers is that at present, they are entirely uncontrolled!"

"Well, I have to keep up with my studies _somehow_," Harry shouted.
"We are working on it," Dumbledore assured him.

"Why can't you just expel them all?"

"Expel the entire house of Slytherin," Snape scoffed. "I don't think you have the faintest conception of the uproar that would ensue. Pureblood families deluging the Board of Governors with Howlers, the Ministry taking the most politically expedient stance--"

"All right, so it wasn't such a practical idea," Harry admitted.

"There's another matter," the headmaster gravely informed him. "Quite a problematical one. We've intercepted some magical communications indicating plans to attack the hospital wing."

"Oh, that explains all the hovering," Harry muttered. "And all but two of my friends going missing. I bet you spelled the corridor to keep everyone but Ron and Hermione out."

The headmaster merely inclined his head, and continued, "We haven't been able to determine if the communications originated in Slytherin, or from outside the castle, but in either case, we need to ward you with the strongest magic possible."

Harry clenched his eyes shut, seeing again his vision of that house he'd hated crumpling to nothing. "Well, thank goodness you can't send me back to Privet Drive any longer! And as for warding anyplace new, Aunt Petunia's dead, along with all my mother's blood . . . oh, not quite all. You're going to use Dudley, aren't you?"

"In so far as he shares the maternal bloodline, there is some connection to exploit, yes," the headmaster murmured.

"So I have to leave Hogwarts and go live wherever he is?" Harry gasped. "Oh, wonderful. You know, Mrs. Figg's a really nice lady, but she's a squib, so I'm hardly going to keep up my studies under her tutelage!"

"Potter," Snape snapped, "would you please stop obsessing over your studies and allow the headmaster and myself to explain?" Only after Harry nodded did he go on. "We don't want your education disrupted any more than do you. Nor do we want to monopolize the old crowd with guard duty once again. Everyone has a great many vital matters to attend to, besides child minding--"

"I thought you were going to explain!" Harry erupted.

"We propose to ward your living spaces here. You'll be perfectly safe as long as you remain in them, just as on Privet Drive you were in no danger until you ventured outside the walls."

"No danger?" Harry mocked.

"No danger from Voldemort, at least," Dumbledore clarified. Harry saw red. "You knew! You knew how bad it got there! You've always known! Addressing my Hogwarts letter to the cupboard under the stairs. Don't you have a clue how sick those people were? What they did to me, year after year? I've never been wanted! I've never been loved! How dare you sit there on my bed like some kindly old grandfather figure when you're nothing but an interfering crackpot old coot!"

"Harry!" Snape gasped. "Apologize to the headmaster!"

Harry was hardly repentant. He looked straight at Dumbledore's blurry visage and distinctly
announced, "I'm very sorry that you're an interfering crackpot old coot."

"It's all right, Severus," the headmaster wheezed, unsteadily pushing himself to stand. "I did what I had to, but as Harry's the one who suffered for it, I don't expect him to understand." If Harry didn't know better, he'd have said there were tears in the old man's voice. But that was probably just one more of his ploys, on a level with the constant offers he made of candy. "If you could explain the rest to him, Severus . . ." His voice drifted off, and then he did as well.

Snape watched him go, his breathing ragged, then stalked to the doors to re-establish the silencing charms. When he strode back to Harry, his expression alone spoke volumes: anger, disappointment, impatience, rage. Funny how clear all that was, even if the image of his face was blurry . . .

Snape's voice was low, cold, and methodical when he spoke.

"The sacrificial magic used to extend the power of your mother's love to you can potentially be applied to many things. Unfortunately for you, the only blood left in her line belongs to your cousin, who has lived almost all his life in a house imbued with one particular kind of warding. Her blood that lives on in him is therefore most appropriately applied to the same kind of warding."

Harry didn't follow that at all, although Snape's stress on the word love wasn't lost on him. He'd been wrong to say he'd never been loved; his parents had loved him enough to die protecting him. There was no stronger love, Harry knew that. It just didn't help to know it, when he'd lost it before he'd really learned to remember, or feel love himself.

"I don't understand, Professor," he admitted in a small voice.

"Well, allow me to explain in simpler words," Snape snarled. "Your cousin cannot ward the entire castle. He can only ward a personal residence."

"The Tower, then," Harry nodded. "So I'd be safe when I'm there, at least, though I still don't know what I'll do about getting to classes . . ."

"Who do you think the Tower recognises as its owner, Potter?"

Harry frowned. "Uh, I don't know. There's dozens and dozens of us rooming there."

"Your own room, then," Snape smoothly inserted, though he didn't sound too far off from the snarl of the minute before. "Who do you think your room believes is its owner?"

"Well, there's a bunch of us--"

"And though your age mates and you stay together, you change rooms each year as in Slytherin?" Snape pressed. "Not to mention vacating the Tower entirely for a full fourth of each year. So, think about this carefully. Wouldn't the room you're in now be rather confused as to who owns it?"

"I suppose so . . ."

"Then it's not a personal residence, not in the sense the warding spells will require," Snape abruptly announced. "The Tower cannot be warded by Dudley Dursley, nor even your own room in it. To keep you safe from the students out for your blood, not to mention from the Dark Lord himself and Lucius Malfoy, who not incidentally, blames you for his son's treachery, you will need to live in a place the spells will recognise as the longstanding domain of a consistent resident."

Something about the way Snape was looking at him made Harry's hair almost stand on end. Well, more than it usually did all by itself. "Longstanding?" he echoed, starting to catch on. "Just how
longstanding are we talking here? Like, about twenty years?"

"I see you've deduced the plan," Snape announced, his voice cold. "You shall come to live in my own quarters until the worst of the danger has passed. At that point we can re-evaluate."

"The headmaster actually okayed this?"

"It was his idea, Potter," Snape sourly informed him. "So you might as well just save your protests. You know what he's like when he takes a notion into his head."

Harry wasn't about to stop his protests. Sure, sure, he and Snape were getting along these days, and Snape had even gone so far as to admit that he didn't exactly hate Harry's guts, but that didn't mean Harry was prepared to leave beautiful Gryffindor Tower for the bowels of the earth! "The whole idea's ridiculous," he asserted. "I'm sure the Dursleys didn't live in their house for twenty years before I came along."

"I'm sure they had clear title to their own property, too," Snape sneered. "It's a matter of convincing the spell, Potter. Your cousin can't ward an area without consent of the owners. I don't have title to my little corner of the dungeons but by sheer right of domicile for so long I feel they're mine, so the spell will serve its function."

"Look, you and Dumbledore are great at magic; I'm sure you can figure out a way to bend the spell so it can attach itself to the Tower--"

"That won't produce a teacher fully trained against the Dark Arts, there to safeguard you when the next hex or curse comes your way! It also won't carry with it the sheer deterrence my quarters will. My Slytherins will think twice before they mount an attack there!"

"Will they?" Harry questioned. "No offence, but you've got to be high on their list of people to kill, too. I mean, they must know by now that you were the one who got me away at Samhain. Your cover as a bad guy is completely blown to smithereens."

"Yes," Snape silkily agreed, "but you're forgetting two things. One, I am their Head of House, which means I can expel them at will. Meddling with my private space is a shade different from bringing a snake into my classroom. I have wards and spells plastered across my quarters to catch anyone who violates my privacy, and well they know it."

"And two?" Harry pressed.

Snape glanced heavily at him. "I know all those Dark Arts they lust after, and I'm quite capable of murder if provoked enough. Expulsion is the least of their worries. Believe me, no one will dare attack a student right under my own roof."

"If your sheer presence alone is warding enough, what do we need with Dudley?"

"My presence won't hold off the Dark Lord, or Lucius Malfoy. My own defensive measures might not even reject the former, but with the blood sacrifice shielding you, you will be perfectly safe. Remember, the Dark Lord himself could not do a thing to harm you at Number Four Privet Drive, could not even touch the building around you, not until your aunt died and the wards fell."

"I could just have a Portkey that would take me down to your rooms at the least hint of danger," Harry suggested, beginning to feel desperate.

"And what if the danger is yourself? Have you thought of that? Where do you want to be if you have another nightmare and your magic goes wild? In the Tower where your power might lash out to hurt
the other Gryffindors? Or with me? Last time I was the only one who could calm you."

"That was just because we weren't all right and it was really bugging me!"

Snape shook his head. "There is more to it. I've seen your dark powers firsthand, when I've been in your mind guiding you towards Occlumency. They know me. And too, you might consider that you still cannot bear to be touched by anyone except me. Is that a burden you wish to inflict on all your friends?"

Harry didn't know what to say to that. It was true that he didn't want to unleash his wild magic in the Tower, or freak out his friends with his aversion to any contact. But still, live in the dungeons with Snape? The Slytherin dungeons, no less?

Taking advantage of Harry's hesitation, Snape briskly announced, "As your own question about classes indicates, you are well enough to finish your recuperation out of hospital. Therefore, I will have the house-elves move your things at once--"

"But I don't want to live with you!" Harry erupted, only to feel himself taken aback by Snape's irate reply.

"Yes, you've made that quite evident! Well, I don't expect it to be a basket of roses, either, but in the interests of keeping you alive, Potter, I've been good enough to agree! I frankly don't see what issue you can have with it. Or do you think I'll take my chance to poison you if you have to eat at my table?"

Harry was about to ask why he'd be eating down there at all; didn't they even think the Great Hall could be made safe for him? But that question was overshadowed by a greater one. Why would Snape bring up poison?

I frankly don't see what issue you can have with it . . .

"It's nothing personal, Professor," Harry murmured, suddenly realizing he'd made it sound like it was. "I mean, um . . . you've been really good to me lately, the operation, and Occlumency, and telling me my father came out all right after all, and saving my life again, and then Devon, and the night the windows smashed and you held me again. It's not like I don't appreciate all that, and all those potions too . . . I've been meaning to thank you--"

"Merlin preserve me," Snape drawled.

"Oh, cut the attitude," Harry chided. "You want more? I even like you, sarcasm and all. Breathe, Professor . . . anyway, don't bring up poison like that. It's stupid."

Snape's eyes narrowed, though he didn't look nearly so angry any longer, at least in Harry's estimation, which was getting fuzzier all the time. He was used to the sight by then; it meant the Eyesight Elixir was waning. "Then what is your objection?"

"I have friends in Gryffindor," Harry explained, thinking it was really weird he'd have to. It was pretty bloody obvious, wasn't it? Then again, maybe it wasn't to someone like Snape. He didn't appear to have friends now; maybe he'd never had any, so he couldn't understand how Harry must feel. "I've just got back here after what seems like a month in Hell, Professor, and we've barely caught up. And now it looks as though I won't even get to see them in classes. So when am I going to, if I move out?"

"Harry . . ." Well, that was good at least, a break from the infernal Potter Snape had been going on with. "There are more important things than friends."
Harry shook his head. "No, see? That's where you're wrong. Or maybe it's just you being Slytherin, I can't really tell. But there isn't anything more important. What's the point of fighting Voldemort if when it's all over, there isn't anybody I did it for? If I give up everybody I care about just to win, then I'm giving up my reasons to bother winning."

Snape said nothing, just stared at him, his dark eyes calculating. Just what they were calculating, Harry couldn't have said.

"I am a Gryffindor, you know," Harry continued. "Whatever the Sorting Hat might have wanted for me at first, whatever you think would have been best, I ended up there, and five years has an impact. Professor? Summers with the Dursleys weren't so much a misery for me because of the weeding and the occasional slap, it was because nobody there cared about me. After I'd been in with Gryffindors for a year, I knew how much that meant. The worst part of summers was missing my friends. You know, that's why I never read that letter until you made me?"

Snape had appeared to be listening carefully, and he was without a doubt one of the smartest people Harry had ever been around, so he was slightly stunned when his professor merely replied, "Come again?"

"Uh . . ." Harry paused, trying to think how to explain. "I'd never got a letter, except from Hogwarts or my friends here. And in the summers, sometimes I'd think the letters were all that kept me from going barmy--"

"You are stronger than that."

"Yeah, maybe so, but it felt that way. And then I got the letter from the Dursleys, and I knew it was going to be filled with insults and such . . . all right, laugh if you want, but it just seemed like opening it would make it real. And I didn't want it to be real, 'cause then the whole idea of letters would just be shot for me. I mean, it would ruin the only good thing I got to have each summer. See?" he finished hopefully.

"No," Snape shortly answered. "That is wholly irrational."

"Well, it's true, all the same," Harry answered, quirking a small smile. "We're not all cool composed Potions Masters. Really, Professor. I need my friends."

"Oh, very well," the man sighed, which lifted Harry's spirits considerably until he continued, "your imbecilic Gryffindor friends will be allowed to visit you in my quarters."

"That's not what I meant--"

Snape's voice came across as imperious, as well it might, Harry supposed; that had been quite the concession he'd just made. Actually, Harry was touched, and impressed, though he hadn't managed to say so yet. For Snape to allow Hermione and Ron and maybe even Neville into his private living space . . . that spoke volumes. A warm sort of fuzzy glow crept over Harry, making him feel like he'd eaten his fill of buttered pancakes or something.

"You have another difficulty?" Snape was snapping out, the words practically a lash.

"Oh Merlin," Harry thought, "that's it. I'm hurting his feelings . . . Funny how life turned out. If anyone had told him a year ago that he'd be worried about hurting Snape, that he'd feel really really bad about it . . . well, he'd have died laughing."

"Just some questions," Harry sighed. "Try not to fly off the handle."
"I do not fly--"

"Yeah," Harry cut him off, managing not to add sure you don't, right. "I know you've said not to fret over this, but what about my classes?"

"I will see to that," Snape replied rather dismissively.

"You mean you'll tutor me at night, or something? Um, no offence, but do you know all that much about every subject? I mean, I'm sure you're ace at defence and Potions, maybe Charms, that's sort of related--"

"Would you like to see my own N.E.W.T. results?" Snape drawled. "Or my curriculum vitae, perhaps? Don't be an idiot!"

All right, maybe that had been a little dumb. "What about the days? I mean, you teach. What am I supposed to do all day, rattling around in the dungeons all by myself?"

"Why, I'm sure you'll study. Isn't that your main preoccupation, getting caught up to your classmates? Without games of Exploding Snap and candies that turn you into a rhinoceros to distract you, I'm sure you'll learn more in a week than you acquire in months with all your friends about."

"Um, I don't suppose you know how long I'll have to stay with you, do you?"

"No, I don't suppose I do," Snape mocked. "We'll see how long it may take Draco Malfoy to do the job he's been assigned, and sway Slytherin to your cause. Our cause, rather. I must learn an entirely new way of speaking, do you realise that? Well, no matter. In the alternative, I imagine that the Tower will be safe for you once your powers are fully recovered. Certainly, they will be so after you put the Dark Lord in his grave, for good this time, one would hope."

"Voldemort," Harry suddenly corrected. "Say Voldemort."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous--"

"Do it. Say Voldemort. You give him power when you won't say his name. I understand when you were spying and all, you had to distance yourself from Dumbledore, who uses it. And me too, probably, when it came to that. But that's all over."

"I tried to make you say the Dark Lord as well, much good it ever did me," Snape reminded him.

"Come on, you can do it . . ." Harry thought for a second, then plunged ahead. "Tell you what, you say Voldemort for me, and I'll come live in the dungeons like you want."

"You have no choice in that. At any rate, you have already tacitly agreed."

Harry thought a moment. "True. Well, you say Voldemort then, and I'll overtly agree."

"Why does it matter to you so much, what I say?"


"You'll agree to reside in my quarters until we're agreed the danger is passed? No matter how difficult you may find it to live there?"

"I'm sure we can figure out how to co-exist," Harry murmured. "Yeah. All right, yes. But you have to say it from now on. You can't go around acting like you're still his minion."
"Voldemort," Snape said, smiling slightly.

"See, it was easy," Harry mocked.

"Taking up residence in my quarters may well not be the same for you," Snape warned. "But that's settled, now. Can you see well enough to navigate your way down with me?"

"Ah, no, don't think so."

"More Elixir, then. Hold still, Harry. Dare I say that's been well done of you the last few times?" He paused to put it in, one hand prying each eye open in turn while the other dosed him. "There. Now you'll get dressed: Minerva fetched some of your clothes so that you wouldn't have to wander the halls in your pyjamas."

Harry groaned. "Oh, no . . . there I was thinking all about myself, but what are my friends going to think when all my stuff gets moved out, when they hear I've gone down into the Slytherin dungeons to live?"

"No doubt they'll descend on me like locusts," Snape lamented. "I imagine your cousin will make it even worse, though really, he did seem much changed in that hospital."

"My cousin?" Harry gasped, nonplussed.

"Yes," Snape said, wiping his hands on a towel and neatly corking the flask of Elixir. "You didn't think he could ward my rooms from a distance, did you? Dudley Dursley will have to come here if he wishes to help you."

"Oh," Harry returned, blinking several times. Seeing that his teacher had walked off toward the windows--decorum again--Harry hurriedly swapped his pyjamas for the clothes laid out, and after slipping on his shoes, hopped off the bed. Hmm, he was still sore, but not enough to even need a pain draught any longer. Thinking fast, he stuffed the letter to Dudley into a trouser pocket, and picked up the enchanted quill from where Pomfrey had laid it. Then he pulled on his robes--now those felt nice at last--and walked over to join Snape, feeling rather proud that he only stumbled once as he navigated the hazy room.

"Dudley will want to help me," Harry admitted. "But . . . he's a Muggle, professor. I mean, he won't even be able to see Hogwarts, will he? He'll see some crumbling old ruin . . . how will he even get in, or down to the dungeons to ward them?"

"It will be a bit of a trick," Snape admitted, slanting him a look. "I suppose we shall have to use magic."

Harry was hardly amused. "We can't do this to him," he protested, his voice increasing in volume. "He's . . . fragile, Professor. Mentally, I mean. And he was raised to really, really fear magic, you know."

"Albus has spoken with his therapist, who feels it will be to his benefit to come here," Snape insisted, looking down at him. "Yes, he fears magic. But you are his only family left, and magic is an integral part of you. Your cousin needs to see you in your natural element. It will help him to know that magic is more than Dementors attacking him."

"But to stay in the dungeons, with you?" Harry couldn't help but scoff. "No offence, all right, but look at you! You'll make him pee his pants, Professor!" When Snape's soft laugh sounded wickedly amused, Harry snapped, "I'm not joking!"
Snape frowned, his eyebrows creasing as he leaned forward. "Your cousin already knows me as Remus Lupin," he commented rather darkly. "Shall I Polyjuice back into his mangy form for a few days?"

"Oh, Merlin, no," Harry gasped. "That wasn't what I meant."

"Good," Snape approved. He walked across the length of the hospital wing and beckoned Harry to follow. Hmm, a little nerve-wracking, walking unaided all that way, Harry thought. But he managed. At least he wasn't completely blind any longer.

"Good?" he lightly joked as Snape issued a series of *Finite Incantatem* toward the warded doors. "You didn't like being Remus?"

"I did not," Snape murmured, throwing wide the doors to the corridor. "But that is not what *I* meant. It is good if I remain my usual self, so to speak because . . ." he looked down at Harry, a sardonic gleam dancing in his eyes, and finished, "Anything else would, I think, truly baffle Draco."
"Draco!" Harry shouted at Snape, incensed. "What do you mean, Draco will be baffled?"

Snape made a sharp motion with his hand. "We aren't behind warded doors any longer. Now, stay close to me as we make our way down. Students should be in class at this hour, but some enterprising soul may be lying in wait for us."

"I thought you were too all-fired intimidating to be attacked by your own Slytherins," Harry sniped, furious as he began to realise why Snape had made that comment about Draco.

"Unfortunately," Snape sneered back, "not every fool in Hogwarts gets sorted into Gryffindor."

Harry fumed, but after that he managed to shut up and follow Snape. Walking all the way to the dungeons was actually a lot more daunting than he would have expected. In the hospital wing, he'd got somewhat used to walking around half-blind, but the floor there was at least flat. Now, he was walking down slopes at times, and even staircases, some of them without handrails, and it was disorienting at best, downright scary at worst. Mad as he was, he still found himself having to clutch at Snape's arm at times. It was either that, or fall.

He couldn't help but realise it was a good thing it was Snape walking him down. Otherwise, he'd probably end up falling, since he still had this thing about touching anybody else.

Snape's rooms were down in the lowest levels of the castle, even further underground than the Slytherin quarters Harry had once visited in disguise. The halls down there were dark and gloomy, lit up only by Snape's muttered Lumos. After he said it, though, he gave Harry his wand to hold, so Harry figured that Snape could probably walk this route in the dark. Holding someone else's wand was rather interesting. It didn't make his insides glow like his own wand did, but it did sort of tickle at his magic, and make him want to spill some.

Snape's rooms weren't guarded by a painting or statue, or by anything at all, as far as Harry could see. The doorway was disguised as an uninterrupted expanse of stone. Even more strange, there wasn't a password like everybody else seemed to use. Well, Harry had concluded before that the man was positively paranoid, but as his own life depended on good security, Harry supposed he couldn't object too much.

Instead of talking to the wall, Snape set his hand flush against a stone. Taking up his wand again, he tapped his own fingers in some rapid sequence; Harry could only see it because the wand was still casting a narrow beam of light. Nothing happened, though. Harry was about to question that when Snape murmured, "I was simply telling it to expect another resident."

His grip firm, he placed Harry's hand, fingers splayed, on a lower stone, and tapped his fingers with the glowing wand, too. Harry couldn't tell if the sequence was the same. Snape pulled his palm away, and said, "It knows you now. Put your hand back; use the same stone."

Harry did, and the stone vanished to reveal a wooden door set into an archway. As it opened, it revealed brightly lit rooms within. Snape went to go inside, but Harry put a hand on his sleeve and asked, "Um, I don't need my wand working to get in?"

"No, though I'll set the door to require magic from you, too, as soon as that becomes feasible."

Impatient, Snape tugged Harry inside, just as the door began to close on its own. From the inside, Harry noted, it stayed looking like a door. Appropriate for a dungeon, too. Hard, thick planks of
wood were welded together with thick iron strips.

"All right, what's all this about Malfoy," Harry gritted. "Spill."

"He's right behind you," Snape merely commented. "And as I'm sure you've reasoned out on your own, he's living here too, for the time being. Draco, would you show Harry around? I do believe I have some potions to tend."

With that, Snape was striding straight away, but not in the direction of the door. Harry squinted after him, bemused, then whirled around at the sound of a dry laugh.

Draco stood there, just as Snape had said, a blur of grey clothes leaning against the dark stone wall. "He doesn't, you know," the boy said, pushing off it and taking a step toward Harry.

"Doesn't what?"

"He doesn't have a potion brewing at the moment. I was just in there, I would know. That's Severus' oh-so-subtle way of saying he doesn't want to referee us all the time."

"What did he mean, you live here too?" Harry asked, warily backing up a step.

Draco's smeared visage either frowned at that, or gave a twisted little smile. Harry couldn't tell. "Just what he said. The headmaster and he moved me down here even before Pansy loosed that snake, but since then, I haven't been allowed to so much as leave."

"Pansy," Harry slowly repeated.

"Yeah."

"The way I heard it, nobody knows who incanted Serpensortia."

"Oh, they don't officially know," Draco answered, chuckling deep in his throat, "but I know. The look in her eyes, Potter."

Harry knew what look he meant; it was the way Malfoy usually looked at him. Harry squinted, wondering if the Slytherin boy was looking at him that way, just then. He couldn't really tell. "So what happened to Parkinson?"

Draco shoved his hands in his pockets, and scowled. "They fixed her up at St. Mungo's and sent her back."

"She was hurt?"

That time, there was no mistaking the smile curving the other boy's lips. "Oh, yes. You don't think I just let attempted murder slide, do you? Anyway, though, it got me kicked out of the only class they were still letting me attend. As if I needed Severus to protect me, anyway."

"If you feel that way," Harry pointed out, "you should just go back to Slytherin to live."

"Severus is a bit concerned that I'd be the only Slytherin left." Draco shrugged, then. "So. Do you want the tour? It's not much, but it's home sweet home." By the end, there, he was sneering, and Harry wasn't sure if he was just trying to insult Severus' quarters, or insinuating that he'd been disowned and couldn't go back to his own home, again.

"Uh, sure, the tour," Harry agreed, still wondering quite how to handle the whole situation. Normally he wouldn't have any trouble being completely rude to Malfoy, but Snape's nearby presence sort of
put a damper on the impulse. The last thing he wanted was another be nice to Malfoy lecture, this one possibly delivered with Malfoy right there.

"All right," Draco agreed, his smooth voice easy. "How well can you see now, anyway? I wouldn't want you to trip and break your neck. Can you imagine the fit Severus would throw?" He actually laughed.

Harry didn't think that was so funny. "I can manage," he said in a tight voice. "Tour away."

"All right," Draco said again, stepping carefully around Harry so he didn't even brush against him. That was interesting. Snape must have warned him I get spooked when touched, Harry decided.

"This, as you might have deduced already, if you can see at all that is, is--"

"The living room." Harry interrupted the pompous narration, gesturing around at the blobs that looked like couches and chairs. It was actually a lot more pleasant than he would have expected from Snape's rooms. Larger, too.

"Oh, please," Draco drawled, crossing his arms in a gesture that looked elegant even when blurred. "The living room. Do you realise quite how Mugglish that sounds?"

"I was raised by Muggles," Harry said through gritted teeth.

"Yes, yes, and some of your best friends are Muggles, no doubt," Draco breezed. "It doesn't mean you can't use proper language in a wizarding setting, does it? Now, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, this is the sitting room, sometimes referred to as a parlour. That's a bit of an old-fashioned word these days, though I have heard Severus use it on occasion."

Harry ground his teeth together again; he was getting a bit tired of Draco constantly saying Severus. "Are you giving me a tour or an elocution lesson?"

Draco had the gall to laugh again. "Oh, you didn't have enough of Sonnets that day? But of course I realised afterwards you mustn't have any appreciation for nuance, and rhythm, and metaphor. Your own composition was so appallingly blunt and crude. Heard back from your cousin yet, have you?"

Harry knew a certain satisfaction in drawling back, "Oh, Severus didn't mention? How remiss of him. Dudley's going to come here to live with us for a while."

That certainly wiped the mocking smile off Draco's face. "You're joking."

Harry beamed a smile of his own. "You think? Ask Severus."

"I doubt he'd want you calling him that," Draco sniped. "You haven't known him for ages, though from your behaviour in class I'd certainly hazard a guess that you've hated him for what must seem that long."

Harry kept right on smiling, though it was making his face ache a bit. Actually, he ached all over, but he wasn't going to show a trace of it, not in front of someone he didn't trust. "You're really in your own little world down here, aren't you?" he echoed Malfoy's words from hospital. "I don't hate him at all."

He was expecting Draco to gnash his teeth, at least, but the other boy just shrugged a bit. "Well, you're wising up then. That's worth something. Hatred between allies is not exactly useful, is it?" Draco drew his wand, which made Harry flinch, but all he did was hold it dangling from his hand, the tip pointed at the ground as he headed across the room toward a stone corridor. "Shall we resume?"
The hallway was short, and flanked at the end by doors on both sides. Draco flung them both open using his wand, giving a little flourish with his hand as he explained. "Now, this is Severus' private office. He doesn't keep it locked as you can see, and he doesn't seem to mind me coming in if he's in there, too, but I have it on good authority that I will die a messy, painful death if I step over that threshold when he's not within. I'd imagine the same applies to you." Draco turned and pointed at the other open door. "This one's his bedroom. We're not welcome in there at all. He's got his own bath in wizardspace tucked into that wall, there. Slytherin legend holds that it's fabulous, but of course it's probably not as nobody seems to ever have seen it." Draco smirked. "Besides, Severus just doesn't seem the type to lounge about in the tub, does he? I can't picture that."

Harry was having a hard time even listening to blather about it, but that was nothing to his irritation with the effortless way Malfoy seemed to swing between antagonism and casual ease. "Office, bedroom, living room," he grated. "Got it. Can we move on now, or do you have more commentary about the Professor's bathing habits?"

Draco strode back out into the living room. "There's no kitchen, because of course wizards have far better things to do than cook, Merlin forbid, but here is the fireplace where you can shout your requests over to the house-elves. Take my advice though, and don't ask for anything in a Béarnaise sauce. They simply have no notion how to get it right, though they do make a passable Hollandaise.

"Do you have to try to be such a pretentious git, or does it come naturally?"

"If you mean my aristocratic bearing and sense of culture," Draco smoothly replied, "it's a gift. Now, where was I? Oh, yes." He strode past the fireplace and waved a laconic arm toward a deep alcove containing a large round table surrounded by four wooden, straight backed chairs. "That's where we indulge ourselves with fine food and witty conversation three times a day." Moving slightly to the left, he indicated a closed door to the side of the alcove; this time he made no effort to open it. "Through there is Severus' private potions laboratory, and a couple of storerooms filled with the most delightful ingredients. Really interesting. He hasn't minded me poking about at all, but then, I've a great talent for brewing as you've no doubt noticed."

"Why does the Professor need a lab down here?"

Draco gave him what seemed to be a rather suspicious look. "Oh, I know you're a Gryffindor, but honestly, you can't be as innocent as all that, can you?" When Harry didn't respond, he shrugged and went on, "He was posing as a Death Eater, Potter. Now, what do you suppose they have their friendly neighbourhood Potions Master do for them, hmm? He had to brew up all sorts of nasty stuff, things he couldn't let the children see, see?"

"But he let you?" Harry bit out.

"Gryffindor really is synonymous with imbecile, then," Draco scathed. "No, he didn't let me see! Severus has a brain, Potter! He knew what I was being groomed for; he was hardly going to let me watch as he adulterated the Dark Lord's poisons! I understand the principles involved in potion making, you know. Unlike that complete git he pretended to serve, I would have known why his potions didn't have quite the intended effect, time after time."

"So how do you know he was brewing anything at all, then?"

"Oh, I used to hear my father talk." Draco suddenly drew in a sharp breath and brusquely announced, "Sorry, Potter. I wasn't meaning to mention him. Won't happen again. All right, what's next? Well, that's about it actually, except for our room."
"Our room," Harry echoed faintly, still thrown off balance by Draco's conciliatory comments the moment before.

"Of course," Draco smoothly informed him, all discomfort gone from his voice. "Just how much of his private space did you expect Severus to give up for us? Of course it's been my room for a few days now, so I'm contributing to your well-being too, you understand."

Harry certainly didn't like the idea of rooming with Draco, but was also uncomfortable at the idea of inconveniencing Snape. "The Professor had to change his quarters around?"

"Of course," Draco said again, "He'd hardly expect me... oh, or you either, I suppose, to sleep on a couch, Potter. Anyway, my room--oh, our room, right, *that'll* take some getting used to--used to be Severus' private library, but he moved his books into his office. They wouldn't have fit, but he spent most of an hour spelling together the most amazing wizardspace, so that's all right, then. And he did a bit of rock magic to shift a storeroom so I could have a bit of a wash without pester... Anyway..." Draco led the way to a door right next to where he'd been leaning before the tour had started. "Voila."

Harry pushed it open, and stepped into a room that held little more than elaborate twin beds on opposite walls, an antique mahogany wardrobe, and two student trunks. Through an open door he could make out the fuzzy shape of a small but functional bathroom.

"Pitiful, I know," Draco lamented. "Honestly, I've seen cupboards larger than this."

Harry gave him a sharp look, wondering if that was some sort of dig, but Draco appeared to be oblivious, rattling on, "And now I have to share it, too."

Harry thought the room would be splendid if not for that aspect. "Which bed is yours?"

Draco sighed and murmured, "Oh, I could hardly care. Take your pick, Potter."

"I'll pick the one that you haven't been sleeping in, thank you. And so?"

"I transfigured my nice comfortable double bed into separate ones this morning, when Severus said he'd be bringing you down," Draco airily announced.

"You transfigured--" Harry cut himself off. So Malfoy was good at Transfiguration, at all his subjects, actually. Well, he wasn't as good as Hermione. That was worth something.

"Yes. Do you like the colours?" Draco put in. To Harry's ears he sounded snide, as well he might. The bedcovers were, predictably, silver and green. So were the oval rugs lying parallel to each bed, and the curtains half pulled back around each bed.

Really, Harry thought it would be immature to demand his side be made over into Gryffindor colours. He wasn't even sure what Draco was trying to prove. "They're lovely," he said, picking the nearest bed and dropping down onto it. The room sort of spun a bit as he relaxed, and only then did Harry realise how tired he was getting. "You should look into a career in interior design."

"Auror," Draco corrected.

"Oh sure, Draco Malfoy as an Auror," Harry sneered. "Like they'd ever trust you."

"Potter," Draco said, his voice suddenly serious, "someday, even you will trust me."

"I trust you right now!" Harry shouted. "I trust you to run home the moment you learn anything your
father's lord and master might find useful!"

"Are you stupid? I can't go home!"

"Yeah, well I can't go home either, can I?" Harry retorted. "Your father ordered my house crushed to smithereens!"

"Oh, don't be a git, Potter," Draco retorted right back. "Hogwarts is your home. You were treated worse than shite in that house. Word gets around."

"Gets around Death Eaters, you mean!"

"Yeah, well I'd have figured out something was up anyway, wouldn't I, from that bizarre letter? You can't possibly give a flip about your cousin, writing him crap like Every time you smell a steak, for the rest of your life, you'll think of your father . . . what were you trying to do, make him burst out crying? You may be the hero of the age and all that, but you're pretty twisted, if you ask me!"

Harry swallowed, and gestured rather incoherently, and something about all that must have given the game away, for Draco suddenly executed a sweeping bow, and drawled, "Oh, why thank you. I should have realised at the time that you had no intention whatsoever of owling that letter. I'm honoured that you went to such great effort to insult me."

When Draco stepped forward, Harry darkly wondered what Snape would have to say if his wild magic came lashing forth and did some real damage to his private quarters.

Draco stopped moving, maybe at the look in his eyes; Harry wasn't sure. "Well, you look done in," he said, his voice all at once perfectly polite and composed. "I have some studying to do, so I'll leave you be. Severus will be gone soon, he's got a class about to start, I think, but if you need anything, you can just let me know."

"Yeah, right."

Harry was tired enough that he didn't say it, though. Shrugging off his cloak, he let it fall to the floor as he lay down on his side and pulled the pillow firmly beneath his cheek. He watched listlessly as Draco shook his head and levitated the cloak so that it would hang on a bedpost. Then the Slytherin boy left, closing the door behind him, but not all the way. Harry was beyond caring. He shut his eyes and went to sleep.

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The sound of a heavy door thudding closed woke him from his nap. Harry stretched a bit, opening his eyes to see if Draco had come back in, but the whole world had gone not-quite-black, a circumstance that was depressingly familiar.

A moment later, he realised that the loud noise must have been Snape returning; both his voice and Draco's emanated from outside his room. Relieved to know Draco wasn't in there watching him while he couldn't see, Harry sat up on his bed and smoothed his hair down.

"How is Harry?" He heard Snape's deep voice question.

"Sleeping," Draco said.

"Ah," Snape replied.

Harry heard the scraping noise of a chair being pulled out, and realised that the two of them must be
back in the dining alcove. It was a bit odd, how acute his hearing had gotten. Harry wondered if it would return to normal when his sight came completely back.

For a few minutes he only heard occasional noises like the clink of a teacup on a saucer. Then Draco was commenting, "Potter seemed surprised to hear I'd sent Pansy to St. Mungo's." When Snape didn't reply, the boy pressed, "Why didn't you tell him?"

"I hardly think it benefits his current state of mind to know in detail just how hazardous your company can be."

"Well she did try to kill me, Severus. And right under your nose, too. You'd think allowances could be made. I'm not the one who should have been punished."

Something slammed closed. Book, maybe. "We have only your vague hunch that she was to blame for the snake."

"Oh, she's to blame," Draco tightly insisted, sounding like he was talking through his teeth. "Pansy knows I hate snakes."

A Slytherin who hated snakes? Harry was irrationally tempted to laugh, but didn't want to admit he was awake. A little niggling conscience told him that eavesdropping was really wrong, on a level with something Malfoy might do, but the practical part of his mind won out. How was he going to figure out Malfoy's schemes if he didn't take any advantage he could get?

"Why did you throw a snake at Potter in that duel, if you hate them so much?" Snape asked, sounding genuinely curious.

"Well, if I hated them, I thought a Gryffindor would have to detest them ten times as much. But no," Draco sneered. "He has to go and be a Parselmouth and get on just fine with snakes!"

"That did rather eclipse your marvellous Serpensortia," Snape murmured, which apparently made Draco see red.

"It was marvellous!" he declared. "I'd like to know what other second-year, or even fourth-year for that matter, could cast that spell. But nobody even noticed that, oh no, not after Potter there decided he'd just chit-chat with the snake and become the talk of Hogwarts for months on end!"

"Hmm," Severus merely returned.

"At any rate, it was Pansy," Draco went back to insisting. "I know you don't know that just on my say-so, but all you have to do is drop a bit of Veritaserum on her tongue and that will be that!"

"Veritaserum is illegal."

"Didn't stop you from using it on me," Draco sneered.

"Your story was more improbable than hers," Snape firmly answered. "That's enough about Miss Parkinson."

Apparently, it wasn't enough for Draco. "Pansy should not be back here, flouncing around to classes again! It's going to make it more difficult for me to influence Slytherin."

"And how is that going?" Snape diverted the conversation.

"Well, it would go a fair sight better if you'd let me actually speak to anyone, you know, Severus."
"Not while tempers are still so hot. I'm tired of arguing this, Draco. You'll have to owl them for now, and that's final. Do you have any more letters for me to send?"

"Three."

A silence ensued, and Harry wondered if Snape was reading the letters to see just what Draco was writing his fellow Slytherins. When the conversation resumed, it took a strange turn that Harry couldn't quite follow.

"Did you tell him?" Snape was asking.

Draco seemed to understand what the question referred to. "No," he said shortly. "I can't think he'd appreciate it very much. To my way of thinking, you're reminder enough. Here, read this."

A moment passed, and then Snape said, "This reference was for my own use, Draco."

"I'm at least a week ahead in every class," Draco drawled. "What do you expect me to do down here all day, file my nails? Hmm, though, they are getting a bit ragged. Limare. There, that's better."

"I know you aren't stupid enough to go into my office," Snape darkly announced. "So how did you get this book?"

"Accio'd it from your desk in there," Draco breezed.

"I do not appreciate being lied to, Draco."

"Oh, fine. You left it out last night. Can I help it if I wonder what you've been poring over for the last few days?" A light shudder caressed his voice. "Imagine my surprise when it turned out to be a Muggle book. By Muggles, for Muggles."

"That didn't stop you from reading it, I observe," Snape shot back.

"No." A long pause. "Did you really tell Potter that wizards all have Muggles somewhere in their family trees? No exceptions?"

"Yes," Snape said.

Draco's voice was fainter when he replied. "Oh. That's... really rather gross. I actually feel a bit sick. I suppose you'll be offended if I ask if you're sure?"

"I have been in your place," Snape dryly announced. "I know it's disturbing. You'll get used to it, assuming you prefer knowing the truth to believing convenient lies. At any rate, I surmise that you and Harry must have done a bit of talking today?"

"We had a nice fight, as I'm quite sure you heard before you left." Draco merely said. "Good of you to stay out of it. I wouldn't want Potter there thinking I'm so hazardous that you have to rescue him from my evil clutches."

"You're the one who'll need rescuing if you get him angry enough to lose control."

"Hmm, his wild magic is really something," Draco murmured. "Shall I wake him for dinner?"

"Not yet. Are you really a week ahead in all of your classes?"

"Well, except Astronomy, but that's just because I'm waiting for answers to a few questions I owled the professor."
"Good," Snape approved. "You'll need to make sure you stay caught up, which will be harder now that you're to start tutoring Harry."

Draco sighed. "You really should recruit Granger, or somebody else. I can't tutor someone who every second will sit there thinking I'm about to hex him."

"And you wonder why I didn't mention Pansy to him," Snape mocked.

"Well, you saw," Draco insisted. "He lay there like a lump and let me drone on about potions, but he wasn't even listening! Besides, there's this thing with his magic. Wild outbursts aside, he won't even try to spell if I'm anywhere in the vicinity. I saw it in the hospital, Severus. He was practically itching to try out his wand, but he wouldn't do it, not with me there."

"I have great faith in your powers of persuasion," Snape drawled.

"Yeah, I get that," Draco groaned. "What you mean is, don't fuck it all up like you did with Slytherin that night."

"Language," Snape rebuked. "But yes. You should have worked Slytherin from the inside, instead of alienating yourself so thoroughly that even the half-bloods and Muggleborns were terrified to side with you."


"Whom do you think I'm owling?" Draco tightly replied.

*Draco was owling the half-bloods and Muggleborns in SLYTHERIN?* 

Harry felt like his head might split open from the shock, and that was before Snape replied, "I know whom you're owling, you idiot child. Keep to the strategy we discussed. Now, let me read."

After that, they lapsed into a long silence. Harry stretched again, and fumbled his way into the bathroom, managing with some difficulty to take care of matters, even blind. All that practice in the hospital wing had helped.

Then, knowing he couldn't put it off forever, he made it back to the door of his room and flung it wide.

"Ah, Harry," Snape noticed him at once. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," Harry lied, "other than needing the Elixir."

"Let's dose you then," Snape answered, his footsteps coming forward. "Draco, you see to dinner."

Snape took his arm in a firm grip, led him back into his room and sat him down on the bed, his fingers coming up to frame his face. "Ready?"

"Yes." Gritting his teeth, Harry opened his eyes wide and thought of Devon as Snape spread his eyelids apart. It helped. The physical sensation hearkened back to Samhain, but he kept the fear at bay with memories of care and comfort. Because *this* was care, too. It was just . . . difficult.

Harry blinked. "That's better."
He saw Snape looking down at him with a rather severe expression. "Are you getting on adequately with Mr Malfoy?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess," Harry murmured. He could have complained about some of the things Draco had said, but he didn't want to be some kind of crybaby or something. Besides, Draco had his fair share of complaints about Harry, too. The letter, for one. Snape would not appreciate that at all, Harry thought. Then again, there were things that Harry didn't much appreciate, either. "That was a nasty trick, not telling me he'd be here," Harry grumbled.

Snape laid a hand on his shoulder and lightly squeezed. "Yes, but now you get to hear me say Voldemort, which is apparently worth any sacrifice. Now, onto more important matters. Did Draco warn you not to go into my office?"

"Yeah, and your bedroom's off-limits too, I heard. What about your potions lab?"

"You can enter it if you need to, but don't brew anything unsupervised." Pausing, he incanted a Lumos and looked carefully into Harry's eyes. "The colour's definitely deeper and glossier than it used to be, and the scratches are nearly gone. Have you noticed any improvement in vision, other than the Elixir lasting longer than it did at first?"

Harry shrugged. "Things are getting less blurry. It's like you said, I think. It'll just take some time."

"Ah. Well, I realise you're on a somewhat different schedule than the rest of us after so long in hospital, but Draco and I will be dining momentarily. Do you feel up to joining us?"

"I'm not an invalid, Professor," Harry announced, standing up.

As far as Harry was concerned, dinner became a synonym for insult the minute Draco Malfoy was put in charge of the preparations. They all sat down at the round table, Snape incanting Comiere to tell the house-elves they were ready, and what appeared?

Two lovely china plates full of elegant, obviously refined food, and one rather plain plate bearing a hamburger and chips.

Draco burst out laughing, and reached for his wine, which of course caused Harry to notice that the hamburger had come with juice. It was orange juice though, which was rather interesting.

"Draco!" Snape snapped. "When I asked you to set the menu I never dreamed--- Would you please explain why the two of us have crown roast of lamb in mint sauce with Duchess potatoes, while Harry only has that . . . repulsive looking thing?"

Draco was laughing so hard that he hadn't managed yet to sip his wine, so he certainly couldn't answer.

"It's obvious isn't it, Professor?" Harry grated. "He's making a point. His nasty father told him all about my awful childhood, so Draco's making me feel right at home! Though he really missed the point, I think. I should just wait around and have your scraps, assuming there are any. But then if we were being nostalgic, I'd have cooked as well!"

Harry stopped, because Snape was looking at him with a fair amount of horror in his expression. Meanwhile, Draco had stopped laughing.

"Sweet Merlin above," he drawled, "are you always so vain, Potter? The whole world is organized
around you, right down to the *catering*?" He almost began to cackle again, but this time he swallowed some of his ruby red wine to quell the impulse.

"Well, you explain the menu plan, then!" Harry shouted.

Snape held up a hand for silence. "You told them to serve what suits, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course," Draco huffed, glaring at Harry. "It's not my fault your tastes are utterly plebeian."

"What?!!"

Draco twirled his wine glass in his hand, sipping it again before he spoke. "You have *that* to eat because you wanted it, Potter! Nothing to do with me."

"So why do you and the Professor have the same," Harry sneered, "if it's just a matter of individualization?"

"Hmm. Maybe it's the way I phrased it. I said, *Send Severus and me something that will suit us. Oh, and Harry Potter will be dining as well. Send him whatever he would like.*"

Harry was still glaring, though by then he was beginning to feel a little bit foolish. "Oh."

"The funny part," Draco laughed again, "is that you could get so *offended* merely because you were provided what you wanted. Honestly, Potter!" He leaned over a bit, and asked in a puzzled tone, "Why is your pumpkin juice such a bright colour?"

"It's orange juice, Malfýy," Harry shortly answered. "I didn't think the house-elves knew what that was. We never get it here. But how come you get wine? That's not served to students!"

Draco shrugged. "Severus knows I like my meals civilized."

Harry didn't actually like wine, and didn't really want any, but he didn't like Draco getting special privileges, so he challenged Snape, "Can I have wine, too?"

"Oh, right, a nice robust Merlot will really go well with that . . . what *is* that, some strange Muggle sandwich?" Draco drolled.

"You can have wine when you're through taking potions," Snape announced. "Mixing alcohol with the Elixir could be deleterious."

"Besides," Draco put in with a sneer, "wine like this would be wasted on you. I can't think you would have the palate for it, Potter."

"Shut up, Malfýy!"

"Be quiet, both of you!" Snape roared. "I am not having every meal disrupted by this petty bickering!"

"I didn't *ask* to come live here," Draco exclaimed.

"Yeah, well neither did I," Harry shot back.

"Nevertheless, you are both here now, and *I* will not have my home become a battleground, is that clear? I had thought the two of you mature enough to put your differences aside in the interest of a common cause."
Sure, just like Snape had done with Sirius, Harry bitterly reflected.

"What common cause?" he questioned out loud. "I told you, Professor, this is just some weird stunt of his to catch us unawares, or something."

"You ungrateful prat," Draco snarled. "I should have just snapped your wand and brought it to you in pieces!"

"Oh sure, he's on the up and up," Harry mocked, glancing at Snape.

The professor, however, was not amused. "We are going to set some ground rules," he grated, his voice cold and determined. "Harry, you may think what you wish but you will not deride Draco's loyalties out loud to him. Draco, you will not taunt Harry about his wand, or magic, or vision. Is that clear?"

"Yes," Draco murmured.

"Yeah, all right," Harry muttered.

"And you will call each other by your first names," Snape smoothly continued.

"What? Oh no, I won't," Harry grumbled. "It's not like Malfoy there is my friend."

"I really think that Potter suits him better," Draco put forth.

Snape glanced between the two of them, and hissed, "Ten points from Gryffindor; ten points from Slytherin."

"You can't take points from Slytherin!" Draco exclaimed, "You never take points from Slytherin! It's . . . it's . . . well, its un-Slytherin of you!"

"It's also just been done," Snape announced, picking up his wand and waving it. "The counters have been adjusted. In fact, with a little research, I'm sure I could spell my quarters to automatically inform the counters whenever either one of you contravenes my wishes."

"Don't do that," Draco exclaimed. "I guess I can call him Harry." He did rather sneer it, though, Harry noticed.

"Harry?" Snape prompted.

Determined not to be outdone by Malfoy, Harry shrugged. "Draco it is, then. Anyway, we might as well. We're about to have a Muggle houseguest and all this last names business would really make him uncomfortable." He threw an evil grin at Malfoy as he said it, then picked up his hamburger and took a big bite.

After the house-elves had magically whisked away the dirty dishes, Draco excused himself and left Snape and Harry sitting at the table alone.

"Wonder what he's up to now," Harry mused, eyes narrowed. "I don't believe he really needs to wash his hair."

Snape sighed. "He washes it every night. I do wish you could learn to be just a little less suspicious of him, Harry."
"For all I know, he's going through my things right now," Harry insisted, patting his pocket and relieved to feel the letter still in it. "You know, Ron said the other day that Dumbledore had returned my dad's invisibility cloak. I bet it's in the trunk the house-elves sent down here. What if Draco steals it?"

"You are being utterly ridiculous."

"He said you moved some rooms around," Harry mentioned. "Couldn't you do that again and um, get us separate places to sleep? Really, I don't need much space."

"You are afraid he'll hex you," Snape murmured, almost to himself. "Harry, he won't. What would be the point?"

"Well, I'd tell you, but I don't want to give him any smart ideas! Use your imagination, Professor!"

"I thought you'd be a little less irrational about him after you heard him mention the Veritaserum, Harry."

Taken aback, Harry gasped, "You knew I was awake?"

"I suspected our voices would wake you," Snape corrected. "Harry, listen to me. The headmaster and I have more reason to believe him than just his word. When he brought us your wand, we interrogated him using truth serum. Draco does not want to be a Death Eater and he does not approve of what happened to you on Samhain."

"Why didn't you tell me before that you used truth serum on him?"

"There are some things I want Draco to tell you for himself. Just as I could have returned your wand myself, but asked him to do it."

Harry put his head down on the table, groaning. "Serum or no serum, I can't trust him, Professor. It's as simple as that. It's an instinct."

"Maybe you'll feel differently later," Snape merely replied. "He'll be teaching you your subjects; you did gather as much?"

"Yes," Harry admitted.

"You're to let him, Harry. That means trying spells when he says, even if you fail at it."

"Even when I fail at it, you mean," Harry bitterly returned, rolling his face to the side. After a moment more, he sat up. "How am I supposed to catch up to everyone else, when my magic's in such a repressed state that I can't do first-year spells?"

"Practice those too. Try Occluding your mind first; that may help you reach into your dark powers. But above all, and I mean this quite seriously, Harry, be honest with Draco about how your own efforts feel to you. He has great intuitive talent for magic--"

"All that inbreeding," Harry put in.

"Perhaps so, but the talent is there. Will you do as I ask?"

"He has to be nice to Dudley," Harry proposed in exchange. "Really nice."

A voice sounded from behind them. "I've no intention of terrorizing your bereaved cousin," Draco announced, sounding sincere for once, instead of oozing with sarcasm and dark intent. "I have
perfect manners when I want to use them. You'll see."

Harry turned, but at that distance, the other boy was just a blur.

"Severus, will you please excuse us?" Draco inquired, perhaps trying to demonstrate some of his perfect manners. "There's something I'd like to show Harry."

"Good night," Snape said, standing up. "No sleeping in tomorrow. You may not be going to classes, but you'll be on a Hogwarts schedule from now on." Reaching into his robes, he drew forth two vials and handed them to Harry. "You recognise these by now, I trust?"

Harry touched each in turn. "Yeah. Painless Sleep and Dreamless Sleep. Um, I thought maybe I could stop taking so much of them."

"As you wish," Snape agreed. "But keep them in case you have need. One swallow only," he warned. With that, he was striding off toward his own bedroom.

"Well, come on, Harry," Draco urged, laying a little bit of sarcastic stress on the name. Not too much, Harry realised. More like he was uncomfortable using it. "I want to see what you think of something." He disappeared back into their shared room.

When Harry followed him through, he was bemused to see that his own bed curtains, rug, and bed coverings had all been transfigured into beautiful, glowing shades of crimson and gold. Draco's side of the room hadn't changed.

"I don't get it," he murmured, looking around. "I mean, before, you wanted to rub my nose in the fact that I'm stuck down in Slytherin territory."

"No, I didn't," Draco returned, walking over to sit on his own bed, facing Harry, who sat down too, then, and stared across the narrow space separating them. "That wasn't it. I just thought..." He cleared his throat, and made a show of looking at the wall as though he found it of great interest. "I thought that if I did the whole room in my colours, you'd have to ask me to change them, see? And then that would be something I could do for you. Not much, of course, but I thought it would be a start. To show you that... I would do something for you, if you asked."

Harry blinked, considering all that. It seemed a very Slytherin way of going about things.

"But you never asked," Draco said, a note of complaint in his voice.

"You could have offered," Harry pointed out.

"Well, I might have, but by then I wasn't feeling too charitable, as I'd just figured out what that little exercise in correspondence was all about. Dear Dudley," he scoffed. "And people say I'm evil."

"I actually didn't think you would sit there and write it all out like that," Harry exclaimed. "I just wanted you to leave! Didn't I make that perfectly clear? And you wouldn't, so then I thought I'd kill two birds with one stone, you know. Let you know how awful you've been, how much you've hurt people, and get you to finally get out, too!" Harry paused, and then ventured, "Why didn't you leave as soon as the letter turned nasty?"

Draco put his hands on either side of his legs, and leaned forward a little. "Well, at first it was because I didn't want you complaining to Severus that I hadn't helped you after I'd said I would. And then, when you really started to let fly, I suppose I thought you must need to get it all off your chest, and it was better to get it over with, because then maybe you'd calm down and we could... ah, get past that."
"It's quite a bit to get past," Harry dryly remarked.

"Well, I got over five-plus years of you taunting and upstaging me, didn't I?"

"I don't know," Harry slowly said, careful not to deride Draco's loyalties even while he made it clear he didn't trust them. "Whatever you've done, you didn't do it out of love for me. You can't convince me that just because I got tortured you had this sudden change of heart. That doesn't make sense, and no offence, but that's not who you are. It's not even close."

Draco abruptly unbuttoned the cuffs on his grey shirt and pulled up his sleeves to show his bare, unmarked forearms. "This is who I am," he quietly asserted. "I'm my own man. I'm not his." And then, when Harry didn't react, he added, "Can you see from there? I'll come show you--"

"I can see you're not marked."

"But it doesn't make a difference to you," Draco bitterly realised. "Oh, that's irony for you. You trust Severus, who is, but not me, who isn't."

Harry just shrugged.

Draco shrugged too, after a moment, and added, "Anyway, about the colours. I thought I'd better just go ahead and change your side to Gryffindor. Otherwise, every time you came in the room you'd probably look at all the green and think dark thoughts about me."

"I didn't care very much about the colours one way or another," Harry admitted.

"So I'll change them back?" Draco asked, his voice lilting a bit.

"No," Harry laughed. "Leave it now."

"Hmm, might as well, as Severus warned me your friends are allowed to come down," Draco groaned in mock agony. Or maybe part of it was authentic. "I'd just hate for them to think I was mistreating you."

Harry set his potions down, and carefully said, "I suppose it would be asking too much for you to demonstrate your perfect manners when they come, too."

"Depends on them," Draco muttered. "I'm not the one always starting things."

That wasn't how Harry saw matters, but he let it go. "Well, there is something else you could do for me, if you would," he ventured, more to gauge Draco's reaction than for any other reason. "If you are going to go and wash your hair, could you finite the lights in here, first? I'm really tired and I'd like to go to sleep, straight away."

Draco nodded, though he said, "You wash up first, all right, and then I'll do the lights."

A few minutes later, after Draco had incanted spells to make the stone walls stop illuminating the room, Harry pulled his bed curtains closed and changed into his pyjamas. He heard the sound of water running, and of all things, Draco singing in the shower. But then the world began to fade away, and Harry drifted into a sleep that was dreamless even though he hadn't taken any potion.

He clutched his mother's ring as he slept.
"All right, that's enough of that, I think," Draco abruptly announced late the next morning, reaching out and closing the book Harry had been using. "You can only listen to theory for so long before your brain dries out, you know."

"You're just tired of hearing Hermione's dulcet tones," Harry mocked, waving the enchanted quill back and forth.

"Actually, I'd like to get a sense of what you've learned." Draco pulled the book towards him, but didn't open it. His fingers drifted back and forth over the cover as he quizzed Harry. "Explain why you don't need to delimit an area before you cast Alegrarus."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Because the act of choosing a person to charm will keep the spell from spilling past the boundary the wizard intends."

"Good," Draco crisply approved. "Now, name three charms that do require you to delineate boundaries first."

Harry thought back for a second. "Uh . . . Fulminare, Hummos pacta, and Tempestadus."

"You might also have said Loviosa or Helare, or really, treated the weather charms as a class of their own," Draco added. "So, why didn't they teach us to delimit way back in first year when we learned Incendio and Wingardium Leviosa and all that?"

"Because we were always focused on an object at that stage."

"Well, you certainly have decent listening comprehension," Draco commented. "I wouldn't have believed it."

"There, I knew your perfect manners wouldn't last for long!"

"My, my, you do take things personally," Draco drawled. "All I meant was, I couldn't listen to so much text at once and get as much from it. I can hardly stand lecture for the same reason. I learn better by reading."

Harry flushed slightly, but forgot about it when Draco went on, "Now, I'll want twelve inches on the drawbacks of using walls to delimit charm structures."

"You're my tutor, not my professor," Harry pointed out. "So don't think you can go assigning essays just for me."

"What did I just tell you about taking things personally? It's merely the assignment the rest of us had to do for Chapter Four. Don't you think Professor Flitwick would like you to do the same? Never mind, don't answer that. Severus collected last month's lesson plans for me to use with you, and the essay is clearly noted right here." Draco shoved a bit of parchment across the table at him.

"Very funny, when you know I can't read it," Harry scowled. "And how am I supposed to write an essay, anyway?"

"Well, you could at least try, P-- Harry." Draco smirked. "Here, take a blank sheet and a quill. I know you can't focus your eyes so well--and no, I'm not ridiculing that--but you can probably produce something at least legible."
Harry thought a moment, squished his eyes nearly closed in an effort to focus them, then wrote an opening sentence for his essay. "How's that look?"

Draco sighed. "All right, maybe legible is a stretch. It's worse than your usual scrawl. I suppose you'll have to borrow my spelled quill. We'll just have to explain to the professors why all your work is in my beautiful script."

He returned in a moment and handed Harry a long, tan feather along with a fresh length of parchment. "Just set it upright, and let go, then dictate what you want it to write. It's self-inking."

Harry did as Draco had said, only to see the quill flutter its way back down to the parchment the moment it was let go.

"Now what?"

Draco paused to think before he answered. "I suppose it's reacting to your . . . ah, condition . . ."

"You can say lack of magic, Draco," Harry retorted. "I do know about it, you know."

"Right. Well, let me try." He set the tip of the quill in place, and watched it stay upright as he let go, then said, "Now, you dictate."

The quill slowly moved across the surface of the parchment, scripting out the words *Now, you dictate.*

"Finite!" Draco exclaimed, snatching the quill up much as if he meant to strangle it. After a moment though, he picked up his wand from where he'd set it on the table, and tapped the feather a few times as he talked to it in soft, whispering Latin. Harry only caught a few words: *you, he, not me, talk,* and something that sounded suspiciously like a muttered English *if you know what's good for you.*

"All right," Draco finally announced. "You can't activate it, that does require magic, but once I set it to parchment, it should respond to your voice, now."

When the feather worked as predicted, Harry felt himself rather taken aback. Hermione's talking feather was certainly impressive, but it paled beside a quill that could write out the words it heard. He almost would have thought it was something Draco's father had bought him, just the thing for a spoiled-little-rich-boy away at school, except for the fact that Draco had just adjusted the spells on the fly. Clearly, the magic in the quill was Draco's own, and he could manipulate it to new forms with scarcely a moment's thought.

*Draco has a great intuitive grasp of magic,* Snape had said, and now, Harry thought he had a sense of what he had meant.

"Thanks," he murmured, and Draco laughed.

"You'd better say undo thanks now," he pointed out, motioning toward the moving quill. "Anything you want scratched out, you say 'undo.' If you actually need the word 'undo' in your essay, say 'undo naught,' assuming you haven't used that word recently. Oh, and stopping the quill requires a Finite, so you'd better just give me a wave. If you try to pick up the pen to stop it, it'll start writing all over your arm and such."

"Undo thanks," Harry said, nodding to show he understood, and after that, he restricted his comments to ruminations on walls and charm delimitations. Draco watched him for a while, raising his eyebrow as Harry hesitated over a few details, but eventually he opened his Potions manual and began studying the ingredients and procedures for some concoction, periodically closing the book.
and writing out the instructions from memory until he could produce them letter-perfect.

"I'm going to make this, now," he told Harry as he stood up.

Harry nodded again and went on talking about charms.

That afternoon before dinner, Draco suddenly glanced up from his reading and said, "I think your fan club has arrived."

Harry didn't know what had alerted the Slytherin boy to that.


But Harry couldn't; it didn't have a handle. A lot of things in Snape's rooms were like that; the simplest task might require magic. Harry didn't much like asking Draco to do things for him all the time, but he supposed it could have been worse. At least the bathroom facilities were spelled so that they'd respond to touch. He didn't need incantations to turn on a tap, or flush the loo. The door, though . . .

"It won't open for me and you know it," Harry said. "And so?"

"Oh, very well," Draco acquiesced.

"Wait!" Harry stopped him as he lifted his wand. "How do you know who's there?"

Draco pointed to a decorative scroll hanging on the wall beside the door. Harry had noticed it, but had only been able to make out an intricate inked border on the parchment; he'd supposed the centre was some artwork executed in lines so thin and fine he couldn't make them out no matter how he squinted. When he walked to it now, however, it was displaying names. In letters so big that even he could read them, the scroll announced Hermione Granger, Ronald Weasley.

"I've heard of enchanted mirrors that show who's outside," Draco commented, "but that parchment is better. It's supposed to list the true identity of anyone on the other side of the wall, so you can catch out impostors on Polyjuice."

Harry supposed that was one of the security measures Snape had mentioned when he'd explained how safe his quarters were. It was kind of comforting to know that the people waiting for him weren't two Slytherins pretending to be his friends. "Okay, let them in."

Instead of waving his wand from where he reclined on the couch, Draco unfolded his lean body and walked to the door, throwing Harry a sly little smile when he got there.

"Draco," Harry warned.

"What?" he asked, all innocence. "I do know how to behave in company. Watch and learn."

With that, he incanted an Abrire, catching the edge of the door as it began to open, and throwing it wide. "Ron, Hermione!" he exclaimed, flashing perfect straight, white teeth as he grinned. "How nice of you to visit our little corner of the dungeons. Please, do come in."

Hermione raised an eyebrow as she stepped inside and glanced around. Ron was more vocal. "Ron!" he echoed in tones of disgust. "Hermione!"
"Oh, we're on a first-names basis down here," Draco smoothly explained, closing the door with another spell. "Severus simply insisted."

"Severus!" Ron sputtered, looking over at Harry.

"I'm so sorry we don't have a house-elf to see to your well-being," Draco prattled right on, motioning the Gryffindors further into the room. "Although considering Hermione's deep and abiding concern for the lesser forms of magical life, that's probably just as well. It wouldn't do to have our guests ill at ease, no indeed. In that spirit, may I take your cloaks? Severus keeps his quarters rather warm and I certainly wouldn't want you to feel the slightest bit uncomfortable."

"Don't pay him any mind," Harry said, glaring. "He doesn't know the difference between mannerly and mocking. Come on, sit down."

"Yes, do take a seat," Draco smoothly invited, pocketing his wand with so much flourish that no one could miss the fact that he'd put it away. "Would you care for something to drink? It's a bit early for an aperitif, but I'd be simply delighted to provide you with something lighter. Tea, perhaps? Ron, I believe your family does a fair bit of drinking; would you be averse to a butterbeer?" His smile grew wider as he turned to face Harry. "Of course, I could just ask the kitchens for whatever suits. Wouldn't that be great fun?"

"Nothing, thank you," Hermione announced as she primly seated herself on a low couch and crossed her ankles. "We'd like to talk to Harry." With that, she stared at Draco in clear challenge.

"That means get out," Ron translated, plopping down onto the sofa.

Draco appeared to hesitate, but then merely said in his composed voice, "I'll leave you to your friends then, shall I, Harry?" Nodding to himself, Draco quirked another smile and said, "Well, it was absolutely lovely to see you both. You must grace us with your presence again sometime soon. Will you please excuse me?"

He strode off to his bedroom and softly shut the door.

"He called you Harry!" Ron complained.

"That entire conversation was just too spooky," Hermione commented, waving a hand parallel to the ground to indicate they should use moderate voices.

"Cast a silencing charm," Harry recommended as he dropped into a chair. "But still be careful what you say. For all I know, Draco spelled a countercharm across the room while my back was turned."

"Draco!"

"Ron, that is really getting old," Hermione chided him as she waved her wand. Harry noticed her delimiting boundaries before she spread the spell across the space surrounding the three of them.

"Plus it's ten points from Gryffindor every time I call him by his last name," Harry added.

"Oh, that is too evil of that Snape," Ron groused. "I bet that's why he dragged you down here, just so he could take points left, right, and centre. How many have we lost so far?"

"Just ten," Harry said, his voice tightening. "But he took ten from Slytherin as well, so I hardly think his motive for taking me in was anything to do with house standing, Ron."

Ron's eyes almost bugged out. "Snape took points from Slytherin?"
"Yeah, to make Draco call me Harry, so don't give me any more grief about names, okay? Anyway, I'm glad you guys came. I'd like to know what you were told about me living here."

"McGonagall came and Accio'd everything into your trunk," Hermione said. "She had the house-elves move it, but she didn't really explain."

"She just stood in the middle of the common room," Ron reported, "and announced in a real snooty voice, For reasons passing understanding, Mr Potter has been assigned to live in Professor Snape's private quarters until further notice. He will not be attending classes. If you wish to visit him, I will escort you down."

"Did she come down with you?" Harry asked. The scroll hadn't mentioned anyone else.

"Yes, she told us to stand in a particular spot and just wait. It looked like a blank wall to us, but after we'd been there a couple of minutes a door appeared and Malfoy opened it," Hermione explained.

"Is that ten more points now, since she called him Malfoy?" Ron wondered. "Or twenty points, counting me, too?"

"I don't think Snape's little rules apply to you," Harry murmured.

Ron nodded, while Hermione gestured toward the closed door and said, "What was all that exaggerated courtesy about?"

"I think that was his idea of a preview," Harry answered, shuddering a bit. "My cousin's supposed to come see me, and Draco said he'd be polite. I'm really kind of worried about the whole thing."

"Your cousin," Ron said in tones of extreme doubt. "Visiting. Er, this is the cousin who liked to sit on you when you were little, then decided using you as a punching bag was more fun?"

"Yeah, but we've been getting on better than that, lately," Harry said, and explained a bit about recent events. Not too much though. He couldn't forget for an instant that Draco was probably listening. "Anyway, he's my only family left," he finished, shrugging as he decided not to mention anything about warding. If Snape hadn't told the Slytherin boy the whole plan, Harry sure wasn't going to.

Hermione was equally doubtful, but for other reasons. "I didn't think Muggles could come here."

"Snape's working on that end, that's all I know."

Ron frowned. "What do you suppose McGonagall meant with that for reasons passing understanding remark? It was really strange."

"Oh Ron, isn't it obvious?" Hermione pulled her hair back into a ponytail as she spoke. "Harry's a Gryffindor; she's Head of Gryffindor. If he needs extra protection from all the nasty Slytherins, she should be the one to take him in. I'd say she mentioned as much to Dumbledore and was firmly rebuffed."

"Yeah, in favour of Snape," Ron growled. "Ick, yuck. I know you're brave and all, Harry, but honestly, Snape and Draco both? How can you stand it?"

"Snape's not that bad," Harry felt compelled to say. "It's decent of him to let me stay in the one place the Slytherins won't attack."

"Yes, it is," Hermione agreed, with a warning look at Ron. "Though I have my concerns about how
"Who saved my life yet again," Harry finished, his glance daring her to contradict him. "That's what it was. That's what he did."

"All right, I understand you see it that way," Hermione sighed. "But how are you going to get caught up for your N.E.W.T.s down here?"

"Oh," Harry suddenly felt very uncomfortable. "Um, Draco's tutoring me."

Hermione dropped her hair. "Is that going all right?"

Now Harry was really embarrassed, but since he didn't want to lie to his friends, he admitted, "Um, we just started this morning but yeah, I think it is, actually. He knows a lot, and he's been sort of helpful."

Ron snorted. "He'll probably teach you everything all backwards just to mess you up."

"I'm using the same textbooks as you, Ron," Harry drawled.

"Why can't Hermione tutor you?" Ron shot back. "She gets way better marks than Malfoy."

"Maybe because Hermione has to be in class all day, and Draco and I are stuck down here together, anyway? We might as well use the time for something."

Ron hung his head in his hands. "I can tell where this is going. Pretty soon it's going to be Draco's not that bad," he mimicked Harry's voice.

"No, Draco is that bad," Harry assured his friend. "I just haven't figured out quite what he thinks to gain from pretending to turn on Voldemort."

A crashing noise ensued from the bedroom Draco and Harry shared.

"Well, that certainly answers the question of whether he's listening," Harry announced, deliberately raising his voice. "I guess he doesn't know that perfect manners don't usually include eavesdropping."

"Isn't it awfully strange he'd give the game away like that, though?" Hermione wondered, her own tones still pitched low.

Harry laughed. "I have it on good authority he has a problem with impulse control, so I'd say it's par for the course."

"Par for the course?" Ron queried.

"Muggle expression," Harry answered, and he and Hermione both laughed. "Means it's typical."

"It's a bit of a worry, you thinking you know what's typical for Malfoy," Ron pointed out.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "But just to warn you, it'll probably get even worse. We're rooming together down here."

"Poor Harry," Hermione sympathized, reaching out to pat his hands. Halfway there, though, she reconsidered and pulled her own back. "Um, Harry? Are you getting better?"

"I see better every day, but my vision still fades off after a while."

"I don't think he's going to turn on Voldemort," Harry assured her.

"I know you're glad to see him back," Hermione said gently, "but he's still a Malfoy."

"He's changed, Hermione," Harry replied. "I think he really wants to be good."

"Then let's hope he keeps it up," Hermione said, her tone a little less caustic.

"I will," Harry promised. "And I'm glad you're here. I really needed you."

"As long as you're glad to see me," Hermione said, and they both laughed.
"No, I meant, er . . . are you less jumpy?"

"No, I think Draco lurking around makes me more so," Harry answered, and listened for another crash. That time there wasn't one. "But I feel really comfortable around Snape, so that sort of balances things out."

"Comfortable around Snape," Ron groaned.

"Yes." Harry dug around in his pocket and pulled out the letter he'd dictated but never sent. Afraid that Draco might steal it and show it to Snape, he'd been keeping it on him practically every second. "I need you to read this, Hermione, okay? Out loud, but in the quietest voice you can manage."

She did, and it was written out exactly as he'd said it, right down to the last insult.

"Wow," Ron breathed when it was over. "I take it back, Harry. That's some letter."

"Yeah," Harry answered, somehow feeling less than proud about the whole incident, now. He saw Hermione looking at it curiously, and knew she'd recognised the writing, but she didn't comment. "Um, I can't send it, though. It'd hurt Dudley too much, so I was hoping one of you would Incendio it for me."

"Oh. Still having trouble with the old wand," Ron commiserated. "I'm sorry. Here, I'll do it." He took the letter and set it in the hearth, then set it ablaze.

Hermione was frowning. "I've just realised how hard it must be for you in here without magic. I didn't think about it before, probably because you're Muggle raised like me; you know how to light a fire with matches. But Professor Snape wouldn't have any matches."

"Or light switches," Harry agreed. "It's sort of tough. I found out this morning I can't even order from the kitchens unless somebody else tosses the Floo powder in. It won't work for me, though the house-elves can hear me well enough once a wizard establishes the connection."

"Oh, Harry. You're a wizard."

"Well, working on it," Harry only said as Ron came back, wiping his slightly sooty hands. "So, um. . . this'll probably strike you as very weird, but do you want me to ask Snape if you can stay down here and eat with us? I bet he'll say it's all right. I mean, after he's done trying to scare you off. That part's probably not optional."

"Uh no, no thanks, Harry," Ron quickly said. "Is he due back soon? Because, no offence, but today in class he gave me another detention with Filch, and I just can't take seeing him."

"We really do need to be going," Hermione added, a bit more diplomatically. "Okay, Harry? We'll come back again soon."

Harry saw them to the door, but of course he couldn't even open it. Hermione tried three spells, but then she found the one that worked. After they were gone, Harry fell onto the couch and lay full length, a sinking feeling in his heart. He had a feeling that his idea of soon and theirs were bound to be different.

"Gone so soon?" Draco came out and jibed in the next moment, almost as if he'd read Harry's mind.

"Shut up," Harry said, and turned on his side to face away from Draco.
Their days fell roughly into a pattern. Breakfast with Snape, lessons all day interrupted only by lunch, which the two boys usually took alone, then dinner, which was often, though not always eaten with the Professor. Evenings were usually occupied by Snape grading papers while he listened to Draco quizzing Harry on the day's lessons. Snape would occasionally interrupt to ask Draco about his own studies, or to question his progress with Slytherin House. Harry didn't understand all of those conversations; he remembered that Draco had been told no more intrigues were wanted, but it sounded to him that the letters Draco were owling out all the time were nothing but. And yet Snape seemed to approve. It was all beyond Harry.

Too Slytherin.

Harry was getting caught up in all his subjects, at least when it came to the theory he'd missed, but he continued to be frustrated by his efforts to actually invoke any magic.

Draco had seemed to have roughly the same idea as Remus on how to proceed. "Let's have you do some practical magic today," he suggested after a few days of sticking strictly to book work. "How about starting with *Lumos*? That shouldn't put too much strain on . . . well, whatever is going on inside you."

Harry didn't want to, didn't even want to pick up his wand again in Draco's presence, but he wasn't going to get his magic back without trying, was he? Besides, they'd studied Transfiguration for hours that morning and Harry was really ready for a change from thinking about Protoplasmotic qualities. Even a depressing change.

He fished his wand out of his pocket, held it loosely in his fist, and muttered, "*Lumos.*"

Nothing. Well, of course. Harry was pretty well used to that by then.

Draco frowned. "You know, Harry, it's not just the Unforgivables you have to mean. That was pretty feeble incanting. Did you even *want* any light?"

"No," Harry admitted. "Why would I? Snape keeps this place pretty brightly lit for a dungeon."

"Enough said," Draco drawled, pulling out his own wand and arcing it about the room incanting *Finite* along with some other spells. One by one the walls dimmed and then went out, until they were plunged into complete darkness. This wasn't the not-quite-black of Harry's periodic blind spells, but rather a blacker-than-black that was so engulfing it absolutely unnerved him.

"That's not funny," Harry complained. "Spell the lights back on!"

"It's not supposed to be funny. You spell a light on."

Harry sighed. "*Lumos.* See? Nothing!"

"You don't want it, yet," Draco's voice came from closer alongside him. Harry couldn't help but shiver. Draco Malfoy, armed with a wand, sneaking up on him in the dark . . . not a scenario Harry was likely to appreciate. "You're still focusing on being angry that I made it dark, instead of pouring your will into getting yourself out of it."

"Get away from me," Harry hissed, striking out blindly. But there was nothing there to hit.

"I can't say it didn't cross my mind to *scare* you into wanting some light," Draco drawled from the direction of the couch, "but I heard what you did that night in the hospital wing. So, I think perhaps I'd just better wait until the dark gets so utterly banal and boring that you want to end it."
With that, the lightless room fell into a silence broken only by Harry's harsh breathing.

It took him perhaps a full five minutes to calm down, and then he tried again. *Lumos.* Nothing. And again, and again, and again, until he was shouting the word, demanding his wand do his bidding.

Nothing.

Draco came up behind him at one point, saying in a quiet voice, "Don't panic. I'm not here to hex you. Switch your wand to your other hand and take mine, all right? Just to see."

But Draco's wand didn't work for Harry any more than Sirius' old school wand had.

"All right," Draco finally said, taking back his wand and incanting his own *Lumos.* "This is obviously not the way through to your magic." A few words from him, and the room returned to its former level of brightness.

Harry sat down in an easy chair, exhausted, and glared balefully at Draco. "Did you enjoy that?"

"Oh, certainly. It's a hobby of mine, sitting about in the complete dark, bored out of my mind, listening to spells that don't work," Draco languidly returned, sarcasm dripping from every word as he stood, one hand leaning on the round table they ate at.


"If I'd wanted to *see* it, I'd have left the lights on," Draco replied in the same bored tone. "Rather strange I extinguished them, don't you think?"

"Ha, very funny!"

"Oh yes, it's hilarious," Draco grated, irritation beginning to win out over the scorn in his voice. "I'm convulsing with laughter, can't you tell? Nothing is so *funny* to me as knowing my life is in your hands and you can't even do a *Lumos.* In case you hadn't noticed, I've thrown my lot in with yours, so I hardly find it amusing to see you struggling with spells the Dark Lord mastered sixty years ago!"

"That's ten points from Slytherin!" Harry shouted. "You aren't supposed to deride my magic!"

"I'm deriding your *idiocy,*" Draco scathed. "You need your magic back under your control, and I do not *enjoy* watching you struggle to accomplish that. But you know what occurs to me? This is all very much simpler than you make it out to be. You won't be getting your magic back until you actually *want* it back."

"Are you *mental? I do want it back!""

"No, you don't. You're like Longbottom, now. He's got everything it takes to be a great wizard, including the bloodline, but he's too scared to grasp hold of it. And no wonder, with what happened to his parents--"

"You know about--"

"Death Eater gossip," Draco admitted, starting to pace back and forth in Harry's line of vision.

"Neville *hates* Voldemort and would love nothing more than to avenge his parents!"

"At one level yes, I'm sure that's so. But at another level, he knows full well that it's only strong, confident wizards who've ever dared to tangle with the Dark Lord. His parents, your parents, *you.* He doesn't want to die or be tortured into insanity, so he's decided not to be a strong, confident
wizard. You've apparently decided the same."

Harry sat up straighter. "That's not true! I've been trying as hard as I can! For weeks and weeks! You know nothing about it!"

Draco gave him a twisted grin. "It's not like I'm judging you, Harry. I'm sure you're sick of all this shite, a madman trying to lure you places to kill you, then too stupid to actually do it when he's got you at last! So you escape and it starts all over again. I'd be ready to quit too, if I were you."

"Oh, so you think Voldemort should have killed me!"

"That is not what I said," Draco stated, clenching his hands. He stopped pacing, and pulled over a wooden chair to face Harry, then sat in it, his whole frame tense. "What I think is that he spent hours watching needles get poked into you when he could have just had your head lopped off, so of course he's stupid!" Draco sat back, shaking his head. "But that's not the point. Here's what is. If you want your magic back, you have to get over this inappropriate desire to stay clear of the war."

"I don't desire to stay clear of the war," Harry sneered.

"Well, now you're just in denial," Draco pronounced.

"Denial!" Harry objected. "Where are you getting this crap?"

"From Severus' text on Muggle psychology."

Harry didn't normally feel completely out of his depth with Draco, but that answer was so unexpected that he simply said, "Huh?"

"You heard me. Adolescent Trauma: The Road to Recovery, it's called. He left it out one day, and I read it cover to cover."

Harry drew in a breath. Snape had got a hold of a Muggle book about helping children recover from traumatic experiences? This must be the book Snape had been upset about Draco reading, the one Draco had said Snape was poring over every night. Nobody had ever gone to that much trouble for Harry before, had they? It made him feel warm inside.

That, however, didn't mean he appreciated Draco sticking his nose into Harry's trauma.

"So, based on one day's reading, you consider yourself some sort of expert?" Harry scoffed.

Draco gave a wave toward the table, where they'd spent days studying together. "You know I do a fairly good job with remembering and synthesizing what I read. Now, listen, because I have it all figured out. According to the book, it's perfectly normal for you to try to withdraw from anything that might pull you back toward the same kind of trauma that hurt you in the first place. In your case, that means magic. You don't want to face the Dark Lord, ever again, so you're holding yourself back from even the simplest spell."

Draco's silver eyes looked determined, which took Harry aback. The Slytherin obviously did believe what he was saying, though it was completely erroneous. "You have it figured out wrong," he argued. "I lost touch with my magic before Voldemort ordered me kidnapped and tortured. This is not a response to trauma."

"Didn't your problems with your magic start just after the trauma of subjecting yourself to Muggle medicine?"
"I had an operation, Mal--" Harry started over. "I had my bone marrow tampered with, which turns out to be not such a good idea. Anyway, the cause of all my troubles is physical, not mental, okay?"

"You were afraid of needles and you had to deal with one," Draco countered. "A big one. I think that was the real trauma. What my . . . what happened later just made it worse."

"Well, stuff this little fact into your weird theory," Harry scathed, starting to feel offended. He wasn't a coward running away from a fight! "So my wand is useless to me, so what? It doesn't exactly gain me any benefit to be this way. Voldemort is still going to do his best to hunt me down and kill me. Why would I want to make myself an easier target?"

"How's your scar been feeling lately?" Draco suddenly questioned.

So dormant I haven't given it a thought, Harry suddenly realised.

"Hasn't twinged at all, has it? Don't you think that's strange? The Dark Lord had you just where he wanted you, he was about to burn you to a crisp, the way I hear it, and you just up and vanish right from under his nose. Don't you think he'd be furious and ready to lash out at you? Shouldn't he be making that scar blaze day and night? But he hasn't. He knows your magic's gone, he couldn't care less about you, now. And you know that, too, subconsciously, so you've decided to hide in some fantasy world where you can't get your magic back no matter how you try!"

"That doesn't make sense," Harry pointed out. "He saw me unleash wild magic. He'd count me a greater threat than ever, seeing that much raw power."

"How does he know it was you? Maybe he believes the headmaster broke through his wards. I bet he thinks Severus had something to do with it, working from the inside to disrupt the meeting."

"Well, speaking of Severus, isn't it strange that his mark hasn't been burning too, in that case? I'm sure Voldemort wants to kill him for helping me escape, so wouldn't he be calling him all the time just to torment him? But he's not. So maybe my blast of wild magic disrupted some part of Voldemort's powers, and he can't reach out any longer. Not to me, or the Professor."

"Nice theory, except for one problem. Severus' mark has been burning."

"Well, he sure doesn't let on!"

"Yeah, but don't ask him how he manages that. It's pretty personal and if he wants you to know I'm sure he'll tell you."

"But you know, do you?"

"I helped him with it," Draco flatly explained. "But I won't say any more about it, and I seriously don't recommend you ask him. Believe me, the conversation won't go well. My point is merely that the Dark Lord's powers are the same as ever. I think this book is right. You won't get better until you want to."

"That book is full of it," Harry exclaimed. "Listen to yourself; it's Muggle psychology! I'm not a Muggle."

"But you were raised by Muggles, as you were so quick to point out to me. I'm sure some of their tendencies must have rubbed off. Actually, I know they have. You're definitely in denial."

Harry threw up his hands. "The book is wrong, okay? Wrong!"
"Well, it's wrong about at least one thing," Draco admitted. "You're supposed to shove Severus away with both hands, even if he did help you, because he's a reminder of the trauma."

"See? The book doesn't apply. It's only for Muggles."

"Maybe," Draco murmured, tapping a finger against his cheek. "Or, your newfound affection for Severus, of all people, might just be a case of you overcompensating."

"Oh, stop using words you don't even understand!" Harry barked, more than a little unnerved to hear his feelings described that way. Affection? He hadn't thought of it in those terms, himself. Actually, he'd resisted the impulse to think about it much. He just knew that Snape was all right, these days. Both with him, and in general.

"Overcompensation," Draco effortlessly quoted the text. "The exertion of effort beyond what is needed to offset a psychological defect. Alternately, an extreme neurotic striving for approval because of a feeling of insecurity."

Harry glared. "I didn't say you couldn't memorize huge chunks of whatever. But a definition isn't like some list of instructions you can follow, you know. Tell me honestly, do you have even half a clue what that really means?"

"Honestly?" Draco mocked. "No. I need to read the book again, but Severus has been careful to keep it to himself since that one day."

"Well, that should tell you that he doesn't want you trying to pick me apart like this."

"You think? They why'd he leave it out that one day? Do you have even half a clue what kind of person Severus is? Every last thing he does is calculated for effect. He doesn't make careless mistakes."

"You think?" Harry imitated Draco. "He spilled a potion when he was worried about me!"

"When your screams startled the living shite out of us both, you mean!"

"You were awake that night?"

"I don't think anybody in Slytherin was asleep after your caterwauling came through the Floo!" After a moment, though, Draco amended that. "No, we could probably only hear you in here, but still . . ." He shivered. "Listen, Harry. The mere fact that you're having nightmares that fierce is proof in of itself that you have some . . . issues to work out."

"I am not a nutter!"

"Nobody's saying you are!" Draco exclaimed. "Maybe you should read the book for yourself. Or listen to it, for now. Ask Severus for it."

"Well, maybe I will," Harry retorted, but he didn't have any intention of mentioning it to Snape. He didn't even want to admit he knew about the book. The whole thing made him feel unsettled. Why should it, though? It only meant that Snape actually did care about him, whether he could say so out loud or not. That was good, wasn't it, having someone who really did care? He'd only ever had Sirius and Remus, but their whole reason for loving Harry had a lot to do with his dad, and not so very much with him. Snape certainly didn't have that problem. Besides, even when Sirius had been alive, Harry hadn't ever got to see much of him. Snape, on the other hand, was here, and with classes and all, would stay part of his daily routine even after Harry got to go back to the Tower to live.
So Snape caring enough to wade through a Muggle book in an effort to help Harry through his problems... that was somehow both more profound, and more threatening, than anything Sirius or Remus had ever done.

_Maybe that's why I feel unsettled, Harry thought. I'm afraid it might not last. Nothing good ever lasts, not for me. I lost Sirius twice, first to his need to stay one step ahead of the Ministry, and then to the Veil. And I thought I was close to Remus, but when I lost him to Snape's spite, I didn't see him again for over a year. People who care about me never stick around for long. One way or another, they leave me._

He came to himself with a start, realizing that Draco was waving a hand back and forth before his eyes. "Are you all right? Do you need more Elixir or something? We've been pretty lucky so far, timing things so that Severus is around to put it in."

"No, I can still see," Harry answered. "I was just thinking. Um, the Professor mentioned something I might try to help me with my magic--"

"Occlumency," Draco agreed, proving that Snape had obviously discussed the matter with him. That sort of bothered Harry, but Draco's next comment took the sting out of it. "Would you rather I stay and watch, tell you if I notice anything significant, or leave you to try that on your own?"

"Uh, on my own, I think," Harry murmured, a little startled by the offer.

"All right." Draco gracefully unfolded his body from the chair. "I'll be in our room, writing some letters."

Occlumency, Harry found to his dismay, made no difference at all. He still couldn't do a _Lumos._

"So," Harry said one evening at dinner, "have you figured out a way to get Dudley safely here?"

Snape paused, then resumed cutting his portion of Chicken Kiev into neat slices. "The headmaster and I are still working on it."

"You say that every night."

"It's true every night."

"Yeah, but after a whole week, you'd think the two of you could cobble together some sort of a plan," Harry complained.

Draco poured himself a second glass of white wine, and sipped it as he listened.

"Not even Albus' private library has any references to Muggles gaining access to Hogwarts," Snape pointed out with some impatience. "But we are endeavouring to find a solution."

"The problem is that he won't be able to see things correctly, isn't it?" Draco put in. "He'll only see a ruin? Why don't we have someone _Stupefy_ him, Apparate him through the platform to the train, and _Mobilicorpus_ him on in. We could _Ennervate_ him once he's in here. I doubt these rooms are spelled to look like a ruin from the inside."

"That is a thought," Snape murmured.

"Not it's not!" Harry objected. "Dudley will end up stark, barking mad if we do something like that
"Well, it's not like you love him, is it?" Draco challenged. "Weasley made it sound like you spent your whole childhood getting sat on!"

Harry glared at Draco, then turned to his teacher. "Perhaps you could explain to Mr Manners here that eavesdropping is not very nice!"

"Speaking of manners," Snape calmly returned, "Perhaps you could consider that unlike you, Draco can't have visitors. Perhaps you could include him when yours come by." He neatly speared a halved Brussels sprout with his fork.

"Look, back to your cousin," Draco pressed after giving Snape a look that seemed a mix of pleading and exasperation. "Maybe too much magic will induce lifelong paranoid delusions or schizophrenic manic-depressive tendencies--"

"Stop playing psychiatrist!" Harry shouted. "I swear, you're sounding just like Hermione!"

Draco looked rather startled at that pronouncement. "Oh, well then, I will stop. Merlin forbid. My point is that it doesn't matter if your cousin loses his mind. You only need him for the warding, anyway!"

Harry slammed his knife down to the table and rounded on Snape. "You told him about the warding, too? Why don't you just shout all our plans from the ramparts? There just might be some Death Eaters who don't know the whole of them, yet!"

"Ten points from Gryffindor," Snape announced, laying aside his utensils so that he could wave his wand to enforce it. "I told you not to deride Draco's loyalties to his face."

"I'm deriding them to your face!"

"What do you want, Potter?" Draco snarled. "You want me to go under Veritaserum again and let you ask the questions this time around? Yeah, I know Severus told you about my interrogation. So, see? I'm not the only one he tells things to!"

"Since you obviously have a way to trick the serum, no, I don't want that!" Harry shouted. "And how about points from Slytherin, now? He called me Potter."

"Very well," Snape agreed, waving his wand again as he shook his head. "You two are really being extremely childish. Now, as for Harry's cousin, his sanity actually is something we ought to take under consideration--"

"Gee, thanks!"

"--because," Snape went on with a glare towards Harry, "young Mr Dursley can't participate in any warding if he loses what little mind he ever possessed. We need him able to give consent. Harry, do you think your cousin could handle being moved here as Draco suggests if the whole process is explained to him in advance?"

"No," Harry decided. "That would just scare him worse."

"What we need, then," Snape mused, "is some sort of warding for him, but not the typical protection against attack. Warding him so that he can tolerate the presence of sorcery, so that he can see it . . ."

"Warding away his inherent Mugglishness," Draco put in.
"That's not even a word," Harry complained, but Draco and Snape both ignored him.

"Have you considered the Isedral Charm?"

"That only works on squibs," Snape answered.

"Sakenhaim's second principle?"

"Do you happen to have a Turkish half-vampire bound to your will, not to mention a shield of ill-repute?"

"Well, no. Hmm." Draco tapped his magically manicured fingernails against the lacquered surface of the table. "What about reciprocal magic? Harry's mother and his aunt could be the focal points."

"A Muggleborn and a Muggle," Snape sneered. "Be serious. The headmaster and I have been at this for a week. Do you think a sixth-year student is going to notice something we've overlooked?"

"You still have something against Muggleborns?" Harry challenged, a strange, taut feeling constricting his chest. He was only one generation removed from a Muggleborn, himself.

Draco rolled his eyes. "If he did, do you think he'd go on and on to me about Granger's marks in every class proving that blood isn't everything?"

"Then why are you sneering about Muggleborns?" Harry pressed, wishing that Snape would answer instead of Draco.

"I was sneering at Draco's sudden poor command of spell dynamics," Snape explained in a tone not far removed from yet another sneer. "And since I'm going to all this bother to arrange for a Muggle to come here to my private residence, I'd think you could be appreciative instead of insolent!" He turned to Draco and spoke more moderately. "Reciprocal magic was invoked by the relatives themselves, who also served as the focal points. Moreover, it requires pure blood, with a squib as the recipient, so it really doesn't apply at all."

"Those aren't requirements," Draco insisted. "Not in the sense you mean. They're just... happenstance."

Snape shook his head, though he did say, "Explain your reasoning."

"Well, the spells were only useful to pureblood families, if you think about it. Who else would have bothered with it, especially way back then?" Draco briefly turned to Harry. "This is all very archaic, hasn't been used in centuries, I think."

"I suppose it might be possible," Snape mused.

Draco drank the rest of his wine without pause, which was rather unusual. He normally sipped it quite slowly. "Well. If you really believe what you told Harry," he added in an uncomfortable tone, "then it's more than possible. Because..." he sighed, clearly reluctant, and avoided looking at Harry as he went on, "How can pure-bloodedness truly be a requirement if by your own reasoning, there's actually no such thing?"

Snape looked up at that, his black eyes narrowed. "You believe that now, do you?"

Draco shrugged, and didn't meet his eyes, either. "Let's just say that for the purposes of this spell, I don't think it matters. Anyway, about the reciprocal magic." He rushed back to a less threatening topic. "All the elements are there, aren't they? Same degree of relationship bounded by... we need
five opposites, but that shouldn't be too hard. Let's see . . . Harry's aunt was a Muggle; Dudley's aunt
was a witch . . . " Draco began counting on his fingers and talking to himself, then said, "I only need
one more. Harry, I'm sure you can come up with at least one."

"I don't even know what you're doing!" Harry objected.

"We're going to invoke reciprocal magic on your cousin, but we need one more element, so think."
Harry shoved his plate away and turned to Snape.

"It's an old spell to let family squibs temporarily see protected magic," he explained. "Think of a way
in which your aunt and mothers were opposites."

"Uh . . ." Harry thought, but had to say, "I never really knew my mother."

"You don't have some memories from when you were little?" Draco inquired, lifting his eyebrows.

"What do you remember from when you were one year old?" Harry shot back, defensive.

"Latin lessons," Draco smugly announced.

"This isn't the time for levity," Snape rebuked him. "Do you truly remember nothing, Harry?"
Harry's voice was emotionless. "I remember her screams from the night she was killed."

Snape sat back and steepled his hands, sadly murmuring, "And you only remember that because the
Dementors drew it out of you. I'm sorry, Harry."

"Yeah, me too," Harry said, his voice still flat. Then, in more suspicious tones, "Did Remus tell you
that?"

"No, you did, when you rambled after your operation."

"Oh, okay."

"I can't say this isn't fascinating," Draco drawled, "but we still do need one more element to
complete the star."

Harry closed his eyes, and shakily ventured, "My mother died in agony, my aunt died in her sleep?"

He felt a hand reach out to cover his, warm long fingers squeezing slightly as if in sympathy. It
helped, even if the faint odour of some Potion wafted up and really put him off his food. Not that he
was hungry any longer, anyway.

"It needs to be an element that involves you and your cousin," Snape quietly remarked.

Draco cleared his throat. When Harry opened his eyes, he saw the other boy staring at the way
Snape was holding Harry's hand. Draco didn't comment on that, though. "Well, we'll keep working
on the last element."

"We'll need a symbol, in any case," Snape pointed out. He looked expectantly towards Harry. "I
believe you have something that can represent your mother?"

Harry nodded. "I've a few photos."

"The spell will bind much better to something personal."
Oh, he meant the ring. Harry pulled it out from beneath his shirt, holding it in his cupped hand. "I . . . uh, will I get it back? I mean, you don't have to dissolve it in a Potion or something, do you?"

Snape laughed, and let go of his hand. "Dudley will need to wear it en route and while he's here, but yes, Harry, you'll get it back."

"Oh, okay,"

Harry made to take it off, but Snape said. "Keep it for now. It will take Draco and me some time to adjust the incantations. I think we should be prepared by tomorrow evening to invoke the spell."

Draco uttered a small groan. "All this effort so that we can have a Muggle over for tea."

"More than tea," Harry pointed out, dropping the ring back down his shirt. He liked the feel of it against his skin. "Dudley has to stay here a few days."

"Days?" Draco echoed. "Days means nights, I hope you realise. Where's he going to sleep, I'd like to know? Severus, I don't suppose you'd let me share your bed for the duration?"

Snape gave him a hard, black look. "I don't believe I would, no."

"I don't snore--" Draco wheedled.

"Yes, you do," Harry put in.

"Well you talk all night in your sleep!" Draco shot back. "Oh, you don't believe me? Last night it was something about Granger turning into a cat—I suppose you're going to tell me she can change form as well as Apparate, now?" he mocked. "Oh, and is the Shrieking Shack really haunted by werewolves? That's actually quite strange."

"Miss Granger can Apparate?" Snape asked with some concern.

"No, and she's not an unregistered Animagus, either," Harry groused. He didn't like the idea that he talked in his sleep, and decided he'd have to go back to using Dreamless Sleep, after all. He wondered what he'd said that Malfoy hadn't mentioned. "It's just dreams. You know, they don't have anything to do with anything."

"Your dreams of late have been rather significant," Snape insisted.

"I haven't had any divining dreams for a while."

"What are you, the new Trelawney?" Draco jibed.

"Why do you think they've stopped?" Harry pressed on. He'd been relieved about that, so he hadn't given it much thought, but it was a bit odd, wasn't it?

"Maybe you know all you need to, for the moment."

Draco glanced between the two of them, and gnashed his teeth. "Oh, great. You're actually serious! Didn't you have enough talents before, talking to snakes and warding off Dementors, and throwing off Imperius like it's nothing more than a blanket? Now you get to be a seer, too? Do you even know how bloody irritating all this is? Well, what are you waiting for? Let's have it, let's hear what the future holds!"

Harry wasn't about to answer that, but he didn't have to, since Snape gave Draco a fearsome look.
After Draco looked away, humming, the professor Accio'd some parchment, ink, and quill to him, impatiently muttering spells to vanish everything else off the table, and began to sketch out a large oval with a ten-pointed star occupying the centre of it. As Snape began to adorn each point of the star with Latin phrases, Draco forgot about dreams and began discussing the incantations with him.

Harry left them to it, and sat down on the couch to listen to Hermione's feather teach him more about Transfiguration.
"Oh, Harreeeee," Draco trilled out. "I do believe the door's for you."

When Harry peered closely he saw that the parchment by the door this time read, Ronald Weasley, Hermione Granger, Neville Longbottom.

"About time," Harry muttered. His friends had visited almost constantly while he was in hospital, so he certainly hadn't been prepared for them to act like he'd dropped off the edge of the earth just because he was living in Slytherin land. "Um, Draco, would you?"

"Certainly," Draco airily replied. "Do allow me. Abrire."

Harry braced himself for a repeat of last time's obviously false courtesy, but as Draco opened the door, all he said was, "Hallo, there. Come on in."

Ron and Hermione took up their previous places on the living room furniture, but Neville was still at the door, leaning in, worried eyes peering around. "Er . . . Professor Snape's not here just now, is he?"

Before Harry could reply, Draco calmly stated, "No, he's not. Come in, Longbottom. Have a seat."

"What happened to Ron, Hermione, so very delighted to see you?" Ron sneered.

"Severus mentioned it might be politic if I didn't lie straight to your faces," Draco returned. The words could have been snide, but Draco delivered them with an air of simply stating facts. "And I think the first-names rule is more a thing for just Harry and me. Severus doesn't want to feel like he's living in a war zone. Not that Harry and I get along, but he'd probably appreciate it if we'd at least try."

Neville had sat down by then, and Harry too, and Draco was standing over them, hovering. Uncomfortable with that, and remembering Snape's strong rebuke on the subject of visitors, Harry murmured, "Um, Draco--"

"Right, fine," the Slytherin interrupted, whirling on a heel. "I'll get out of your way."

Harry bit his lip, ashamed to say it, especially in front of Ron, but even more ashamed not to say it. "No, I was going to ask if you'd like to join us?" he ventured.

Draco froze mid-stride. When he turned, one eyebrow distinctly raised toward his hairline, he wore an expression Harry couldn't really interpret. Part amusement, part fascination, and part cunning. Harry braced himself for some sarcastic rejoinder like Why, Harry, I didn't know you cared . . . but Draco merely said, "Sure," and dropped into a chair.

"Harry," Hermione said in a warning tone. "We . . . er, might want to talk over some Gryffindor House matters--"

Ron, surprisingly, made no objection, although it wasn't exactly polite of him to turn to Hermione and point out, "Yeah, well he'll hear us either way, won't he? At least this way, none of us will forget he's listening."

Draco looked between Ron and Hermione, his silver eyes calculating something, but he didn't say a word.
"So, what took you so long?" Harry changed the subject. "I never thought I'd have to wait over a week between visits." He didn't mean to sound so accusing . . . or maybe he had. It hadn't been any fun waiting around for his friends to remember him. He'd almost owled them several times, but if they were his friends, he shouldn't have to beg. Besides, what with using Draco's spelled quill, the letters wouldn't be as private as he would like. It was bad enough that Draco had probably heard his letters to Remus. Harry had written them while the other boy was in the shower, but he didn't rely on that to mean anything. Draco was nothing if not tricky. He was a Slytherin . . . enough said.

"Oh, that's McGonagall's fault," Ron griped. "She said she'd walk us down, remember? And then the next day we asked again, and it was Mr Potter has far more to attend to than his social calendar . . . and the next day it was I rather think Professor Snape would prefer not to have his quarters constantly deluged by Gryffindors . . . and then the next day it was Are you prepared for your Transfiguration test, Mr Weasley? Surely your free time would be more appropriately devoted to that enterprise . . . and then, Harry, honestly, the next time we asked she scheduled a Prefect's meeting just to keep us from coming!"

Well, that certainly explained a lot, although not everything. "You could have just come down without her," Harry pointed out.

"We tried three times," Neville exclaimed. "Hermione was sure she knew the way . . . I can't tell you how many different patches of wall we just stood and stared at!"

Harry remembered walking down himself; it wasn't that complicated.

"The corridors change themselves around," Draco put in. "You get a feel for them if you live down here."

"Well, that explains a great deal," Hermione murmured.

"No, it doesn't," Harry objected. "Why didn't you owl me?"

"We thought he might read your letters," Ron sneered, jerking a thumb towards Draco. "Well, anyway, McGonagall saw fit to walk us down, today, so here we are."

"What do you think her problem is?" Harry asked, but nobody had an answer.

"Oh, honestly, and I thought Granger was supposed to be so smart," Draco smirked. "Isn't it obvious? Severus told her to keep you away."

"Snape wouldn't do that," Harry objected, kind of upset at the mere suggestion. "He said I could have my friends down."

"I know," Draco agreed. "But he wants us to learn to get along, don't you think? He doesn't want them down here every day." He turned to Hermione. "I'm surprised you didn't try a simple Point me spell."

"It made her wand spin around in circles," Neville admitted.

"Ah, well it appears Severus had thought of that," Draco shrugged. "I don't have any other ideas that might help. Sorry. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some correspondence to take care of." With that, he elegantly rose to his feet and went into his room, closing the door with a slight click.

Hermione leaned forward to speak quietly to Harry. "That was even spookier than last time."

Ron guffawed. "Oh, he probably knew Point me was useless before he suggested it. No way was he
really trying to help. It not like he wants us find our way down here."

"I think he really was trying to help," Harry put in. "Me, that is. He's actually been really helpful this past week."

"I knew it," Ron groaned. "Didn't I tell you this would happen? Draco's not so bad, that's what you're trying to say!"

"All I'm saying is he could have been a whole lot worse," Harry evenly returned. "Neville, you look sort of sick. What's wrong?"

"I . . . I think we should be going, Harry," the other boy wheezed. "S- S- Snape'll probably be coming home soon--"

"Oh, no you don't," Harry rebuked. "If my mates are going to go days and days without a visit, well then they can just stay a good long while. Past dinner this time. I mean it. You're all staying."

Hermione cleared her throat. "Ah, don't you really have to check with Professor Snape first, Harry?"

She was probably right, Harry thought, but he felt on pretty safe ground declaring, "No. I live here, and he already said I could have my friends down. I'm inviting you, not him. And you're accepting."

Neville shook a bit. "Really, Harry, you'd better ask permission. Snape's been a bit . . . er . . ."

"Bigger bastard than usual," Ron supplied. "I get detention every week now, the git."

"What are you doing to earn detentions?" Harry asked.

"Well, I like that!" Ron exclaimed. "You may be fast friends with him now, Harry, but I'm sure you remember what class with him is like! All I have to do is look at him wrong, or breathe too loudly, I swear--"

"Please do not swear in my home, Mr Weasley," a dark sardonic voice requested as Snape came in and shut the door. His black gaze rapidly assessed the group. "Miss Granger, Mr Longbottom."

Then, in even darker tones to Harry, he added, "A pity Draco couldn't join you."

"Oh, he did for a while," Harry assured his teacher.

"Hmm."

"My friends want to stay for dinner," Harry said, not caring that he was vastly overstating the case. "But, um, they said I should ask you. It's okay, isn't it?"

"I can think of nothing more delightful than having your friends for dinner," Snape drawled, his robes billowing as he stalked down the corridor toward his private domain.

"See?" Harry said, smiling.

"He means he'd like to see us served as the dinner, Harry," Hermione exclaimed.

"Oh, yeah, I know that," Harry laughed. "He can't just say yes, can he? You are Gryffindors."

"So are you," Ron put in.

"I know, Ron," Harry replied, rolling his eyes. "Look, we'll do something really fun for dinner. Did you know the house-elves will whip up whatever you'd most like, without you even telling them? It's
really interesting. I don't know why they don't ever let us personalize meals in the Great Hall."

Hermione was frowning, no doubt over the poor overworked house-elves. Harry noticed, however, that when Draco came out later to throw in the Floo powder so they could all order, Hermione said "whatever suits" just like everybody else. She ended up with lasagna, apparently another Muggle dish Draco had never heard of before. Surprisingly, though, he didn't say anything rude about it as he ate his own way through lobster in wine sauce.

Snape was . . . well, Snape. He was hardly going to be happy eating dinner with five teenagers. He insisted that Neville transfigure two easy chairs into proper straight-backed wooden chairs to use at table, and sneered that the results were barely tolerable, when in fact they were quite good. He quizzed Hermione on Potions, asking her questions up through seventh year, then mockingly pointed out that she still had a great deal to learn. He told Ron that he'd keep getting detentions just as long as he believed class time was an appropriate venue for glaring, and mockingly remarked that since there was no such thing as a Gryffindor Death Glare, he might as well just give it up.

Then, just as if they didn't have guests at all, he focussed his attention on Harry and Draco and went over with them in detail every lesson they'd studied that day.

When it was all over, and Harry was under the covers, about to go to sleep, he knew he had to say something. After all, Dudley was due to arrive the next day, and Harry didn't want Draco going back to his mocking, sarcastic version of manners. Dudley wouldn't know how to deal with a sneering Draco, he just wouldn't.

"Um, you were all right with my friends," he admitted as he lay on the bed, staring at the dark shadows shifting on the ceiling.

"What's that?" Draco called, emerging from the bathroom with wet hair. "I didn't hear you."

"Yes, you did."

Draco laughed, a low sound wicked with delight. "I did? Hmm, I suppose so. Well, I don't know why you're so surprised. I did tell you I had manners."

"Yeah, but you actually used them," Harry murmured. He heard Draco 
\texttt{Finite}\n the lights in the bathroom, and slide into his bed across the room. "You even talked Quidditch with Ron."

"Pity he suspected I only wanted an inside scoop on Gryffindor strategy," Draco drawled, adding, "You know, if he'd been less guarded, I might have learned something of use."

Harry laughed slightly. "You miss it, huh? I hadn't realised until tonight, that you were off your team just like I'm off mine."

"You'll see better than ever by the time Severus is through with you," Draco muttered, a shade of bitterness creeping into his tone. "There's no Elixir to get me back in Slytherin. So don't crow about Quidditch to me, Potter. You'll get back onto your team."

"Don't call me Potter," Harry said.

"Going to tell Severus and get me in trouble?" Draco sniped.

"No." Harry yawned, then, and reaching out, took his nightly sip of Dreamless Sleep. "Good night."

He was almost asleep before he heard Draco answering, "Yes. Good night."
It was a couple of hours past lunch the next day when the door parchment suddenly read, *Albus Dumbledore and pet*. Draco choked back a laugh. "Harry. I don't think reciprocal magic takes care of everything. Come look at this."

Harry was less than amused. "Pet?" he exclaimed. "That's rude."

"Well, it's not my fault!" Draco said, still laughing. "The scroll's not spelled to interpret anyone but wizards, that's all. Well then, shall I do the honours?"

The door swung open to reveal the headmaster in robes that were, for him, extremely subdued. That wasn't the biggest shock, however. Dudley stood there in robes himself. Student robes, embroidered with a Hufflepuff crest. His face was even thinner than it had been last time, and it looked nervous.

He wasn't the only one who felt that way. Harry was all but squirming with worry over which persona Draco was about to adopt: normal student, aristocratic pureblood snob, or a sneering parody of courtesy.

The headmaster didn't give Draco time to be much of anything, though, at least not right at first. The moment the door opened, he stepped straight in without being invited and said, "So, here we are then, arrived safe and sound. You know Harry, of course, and the other boy is Draco Malfoy. I'm sure you'll meet Professor Snape later. These are his rooms, but he's been kind enough to share with a couple of boys in need."

"Uh, hallo there," Dudley said, looking warily at Draco. Well, no great wonder there. Even when he wasn't particularly trying, Draco all but oozed an aura of wealth and privilege. Harry managed to deal with it by telling himself that Draco wasn't the only one with a vault stuffed full of gold. Dudley couldn't tell himself that.

"Hallo," Draco serenely replied. He wasn't smiling, but he wasn't sneering, either. That had to be worth something.

Dudley held out his hand, and Draco stared at it like he wasn't at all sure he was prepared to touch a Muggle, of all things. With both Harry and the headmaster expectantly looking on, though, he did do it.

"So," Harry invited, relieved that Draco hadn't proceeded to wipe his hand on his shirt, or something, "have a seat, Dudley, Headmaster."

Dudley moved to sit on the couch, Draco wincing slightly as it lurched under the great weight. The headmaster, however, was shaking his head. "I have other matters to attend to," he explained, peering over his half-moon spectacles. "And I imagine you and your cousin have a fair bit of talking to do."

"Oh, okay," Harry agreed, walking him back to the door. It wasn't far, certainly not far enough for him to figure out what to say and how to word it. "Uh, Headmaster?"

"Yes, Harry." The door open already, one hand on it, Albus simply waited.

"Um, I said some awful things to you and I wanted to apologize," Harry whispered. "I just . . ." He glanced over toward Dudley, aware it wouldn't be considerate to say too much about it. "It's hard, knowing you were aware of . . . certain things, and didn't help me."

Albus slowly shook his head, his ancient beard swaying. "Harry, the thing I was most aware of,
every day, was that in that house you were alive. I wanted you to remain so. It was the best help I knew how to give."

"I know," Harry sighed. "Well, thanks for meeting Dudley in Hogsmeade."

A gentle smile. "You are most welcome." He spelled the door to shut itself behind him as he left.

When Harry turned back into the room, he saw that Draco had sunk into a chair as well. He still wore an expression Harry was coming to recognise as careful, controlled neutrality. He wasn't letting on what he thought to be sitting there with a Muggle.

_Probably just as well_, Harry decided as he took his own seat. "So, it's good to see you, Dudley," Harry began. Really, he felt incredibly awkward, and not just because Draco was sitting there watching the scene unfold. He'd never had any sort of relationship with Dudley, and a couple of phone conversations didn't really make for one, but there was nothing for it but to plunge right ahead. "Um, why don't you relax, take off your robe? Draco and I don't usually dress formally down here, although Professor Snape tends to."

When Dudley stood up and set the robe aside, Harry couldn't help himself. He stared at his cousin in shock. "Wow, Dudley, that's incredible. You have lost so much more weight! Good for you!"

Draco made a noise that started as an astonished guffaw, but rapidly transformed itself into a coughing fit. "Sorry," he said, the word half-strangled as Harry glared. It was perfectly clear to him what that was all about. Despite all the weight he'd lost, Dudley was still grossly fat; Draco was having a hard time believing the boy had been even more spherical before. "Er, think I need a drink," Draco said, still trying to cover his gaffe. "What would you like, ah . . . Dudley?"

Dudley had blushed, and Harry didn't know if he was embarrassed by Harry's own comment or if he'd understood Draco's little display. Probably the former, Harry told himself. Dudley never had been one to pick up on subtle insults, when his own family was so appallingly blunt with words. "Diet Coke," he quietly answered.

Draco looked to Harry for help.

"Um, I'm not sure we have any of that here," Harry admitted. "The house-el . . . um, the servants here can get you pretty much anything natural you want, but they might not know so much about Muggle products."

"Oh, okay," Dudley said, thinking that over. "Water with lime."

"Harry?" Draco prompted.

"Uh, the same, I guess," Harry said. What he wanted was a butterbeer, but he didn't think it would be very polite to drink one when Dudley was only having water.

Draco rose and strode toward the hearth, his hand reaching up toward the bowl of Floo powder on the mantle. "Wait," Harry called, and leaning forward, said, "We tend to do magic all the time down here. Is that going to bother you?"

Dudley shook his head. "Mrs. Figg and I talked about it. Do you know she grew up in a m-magic family but without any herself? And then that nice Mr Lupin who came to hospital with you, he spoke with me, too. Plus Marsha. I think . . . well, it might be nice to find out more about what you're really like, Harry. So it's okay."
"Are you sure?" Harry pressed. "A lot of things will seem really strange to you--"

"Oh, for Merlin's sake," Draco broke in. "Are you going to make me stand here all day dropping Floo powder on Severus' hearth rug? He said it's fine! Besides, he survived the walk down, didn't he? How many ghosts do you think he saw?"

"Ghosts?" Dudley gasped, his eyes going wide with alarm.

"Gee, thanks, Draco," Harry drawled. "Yeah, we have ghosts, but they don't hurt you or anything."

"Unless you count being bored to death by them endlessly telling the same stories," Draco mocked. Without further ado, he tossed in the Floo powder and called for the kitchens. Dudley reared back into the cushions when a house-elf's face popped out of the flames and asked how it might be of service. "Two waters with lime and a butterbeer," he ordered. "No ice."

Not ten seconds later, a wooden tray inlaid with ebony triangles popped into existence on the low table between them.

Dudley sucked a whistling breath in through his teeth, and shook his head sort of frantically when Harry tried to hand him his drink. "Uh, no. Not so thirsty anymore."

"Dudley, it's just water. It won't hurt you."

"Give him a chance to settle in, why don't you, Harry?" Draco suggested, the sneer back in his voice, but only in a muted way. It vanished when he addressed Dudley. "You've had a long journey. Did you enjoy the train?"

"Yeah, how did you get onto the platform?" Harry wanted to know.

"Mr Lupin took me through," Dudley said, shivering a bit. "I was standing on the platform, the regular one, at King's Cross, and he took my arm and said to close my eyes--have you ever noticed what a soothing, kind voice he has?--and then he said it wouldn't hurt but I might feel a bit sick, and then it felt like I was melting or something. And when I opened my eyes I was on a different platform."

"I don't like Apparating either," Harry commiserated. "Makes me sick to my stomach."

"Mr Lupin," Draco mused, his voice thrumming with contemplation. "You said he was with Harry at the hospital?"

"Yeah, but you know, he didn't seem as nice that time."

"I would imagine not," Draco returned, looking straight at Harry. "He probably didn't seem the same at all. I'd say, he wasn't even himself."

Harry shrugged. Trust Draco to figure a few things out. It was probably inevitable. "So, Mr Lupin put you on the train, but didn't come himself?" Harry pressed.

"He said he couldn't," Dudley said. "He said it was almost time for his monthly retreat, and he couldn't miss it, and you would understand."

Giving up on handing Dudley his water, Harry set it down and began drinking his own.

"So, tell us about the train," Draco prompted.

"You've both been on it," Dudley remarked, looking from one to the other. "Harry, I . . . I need to
ask you something." His large eyes began to swim with tears. "Um, this is really hard. I . . . I know
you didn't have it so easy, growing up, and you wouldn't be normal if you didn't have some awfully
hard feelings about it all, b- b- but when Mum was buried, you came. I thought I'd see you at Dad's,
too. Not for him . . . for me."

Harry clenched his hands together. Some part of his mind registered that in the middle of Dudley's
speech, Draco had quietly exited the room, leaving them to hash out family business alone. "I'm
sorry. I . . . I would have. I couldn't."

Dudley's quietly challenging gaze made Harry realise he'd have to say more. "It's complicated," he
began. "The evil wizards who destroyed your house--"

Dudley made a choking noise.

"Sorry," Harry rushed to say. "I . . . I don't know if I should tell you. What happened to me is all tied
in with what happened to you. Is it better not to think about it?"

"Yeah," Dudley admitted. "No, that's not true. It's just easier. I know Marsha would tell me that it's
better to face it down. You . . . oh, just go on." Forgetting perhaps how the water had arrived on the
table, Dudley grabbed his glass then, and began to steadily nurse it as he listened.

Harry didn't tell him everything, just what he thought would make sense to someone like Dudley.
The evil wizard who had tried to kill him when he was a baby had tried again. Harry had been
injured. Blinded, in fact, and almost comatose for over a week, but all that was getting much better.
Professor Snape had rescued him and taken care of him, and Harry had to live with him now because
the evil wizard just didn't know when to quit. Harry was still in danger, but he'd be in less danger if
Dudley would help the professor with some protection spells.

"Oh, yeah, Mr Lupin mentioned those, too," Dudley remembered. Then he said with a strange
expression, "I thought my things would be here by now. I didn't pack much. I don't
have
just
a few things Mrs. Figg bought me."

"Uh, I sort of thought you might go live with Aunt Marge," Harry remarked, grimacing.

"Marsha thought I'd better not, not if I wanted to get on better with you."

Hmm, Mrs. Figg had probably told the therapist about the exploding-aunt incident, Harry figured.
Aunt Marge had been obliviated, of course, but it didn't take a genius to figure out that she was
probably just as wizard-averse as her brother. "Well, you're seventeen, I suppose you can do as you
like, even get a job and all that, right? Have you thought of what you'd like to do?"

"No idea," Dudley admitted.

"Well, you have time to think it over."

"Do I?" Dudley finished his water and began to suck on the wedge of lime. Harry was profoundly
grateful then that Draco had left. The other boy would probably have made a gagging noise, then
faked another coughing fit to cover it. "I can't stay with Mrs. Figg forever."

"No, but you'll figure it out," Harry assured him.

"I suppose. Um, do you know how much longer until they bring my things? Your headmaster said to
leave them on the platform and they'd be brought up straight away."

"I'm sure they're in the bedroom already. The house-elves--those are creatures like the one you saw
talk to us through the fire--don't tend to fetch and carry so much as pop things in and out of rooms directly."

"Oh, like the drinks," Dudley murmured, nodding. Harry thought he looked slightly more at ease. "Okay. Can we go see? Because Mr Lupin sent you something, and he told me to make sure you got it as soon as possible."

The door was closed, so Harry knocked and Draco called for them to come in. He was propped up on his bed, reading a seventh-year Transfiguration text. When he closed it, it transfigured itself into a small stone. Dudley stared, his own belongings forgotten, and Draco shrugged. "Some stupid writer decided to make the students practice their wandwork every time they want to crack the book to study," he explained, a mock grimace on his face.

"You . . . you can change it back?" Dudley gasped.


"Wow," Dudley said, the sound layered with less fear and more admiration. Harry figured he really was getting used to magic. "Can you do anything?"

"Sure," Draco quipped, his neutral expression beginning to crack a little. A hint of smile. Well, that figured. Draco Malfoy liked showing off, and you could hardly ask for an audience easier to astonish. "Well, within limits."

"So, this must be your stuff," Harry said with a warning glance at Draco. "Um, why don't you get settled in, unpack whatever you want. You can have my bed, Dudley. I thought I'd sleep on the couch."

"No, no," Draco interrupted. "That won't do. I'm sure you have all sorts of cousinly things to discuss. What better time than the dead of night? Anyway, Severus and I decided already that I'll take the couch."

"When did you and Severus discuss this?" Harry questioned, his brows drawn.

"Oh, you'd be surprised what we get to talking about over a Potion or two," Draco let out.

"And you're okay with that? Draco Malfoy, sleeping on a couch? What kind of bribe did that take?"

"Well, it's not going to be a couch for long," Draco sneered. "Dudley here can see something a bit more impressive than stone to book, if he cares to watch. And it didn't take a bribe at all, Potter! I don't suppose it crossed your mind that I might be capable of an ounce of consideration for someone else? Of course it didn't! I'm a Slytherin!"

"Slytherin's nothing to do with it," Harry retorted. "I happen to like one certain Slytherin, don't forget!"

"Yeah, like I could, when just like a Gryffindor, you practically ooze with it!"

"Who's Severus?" Dudley broke in.

Harry took a deep breath. "Um, that's the professor's first name."

Dudley's brow furrowed. "Why don't you call him that, if Draco does?"
"Well, because he's my teacher," Harry explained. "I don't know. The other seems a liberty. Inappropriate."

"He's my teacher, too," Draco smirked. "But he's also my friend."

"He's not your friend, too?" Dudley questioned.

"Oh, he is . . . um, maybe you'll understand when you meet him," Harry muttered, frustrated. "I just can't imagine calling him Severus to his face."

"Never bothered me in the slightest," Draco breezed, his nose in the air.

"Shut up, Malfoy."

"I thought you two were friends," Dudley said, confused.

Draco burst out laughing, which for some reason really irked Harry.

"We have a history," he said tightly, and when that comment just made Draco laugh harder, he lost his temper. "Draco's father is the one who tried to kill me and blinded me and put me in the hospital for days and days," Harry spat. "And he looks just like him, so you'll pardon me if he's not my favourite person to be around!"

Dudley had drawn a box out of his nylon duffle bag. Holding it loosely in his hands, he said in a quavering voice, "Well, my father was never very nice to you, either. I . . . I didn't think you were like this, Harry, judging people by their fathers."

"I'm not!"

"Oh, sure you're not," Draco sneered.

"Well, I'm sorry!" Harry shouted. "All this just because I didn't think you'd be willing to take the couch? Well, sorry again! It just didn't seem much like you to go along with a plan like that. Or did Snape insist?"

"Potter, you don't know what's me and what's not," Draco heavily announced. "Because you won't bother yourself to find out! And no, for your information, Severus did not insist. We discussed it and decided it was probably the best arrangement."

"Because you're so concerned that I have time alone with my cousin. Right," Harry drawled.

"Because we were concerned you wouldn't sleep for a week if I was in a room alone with your cousin, you absolute arse!" Draco shouted, his face going pink with anger. "Severus knows you don't trust me! And he was concerned for you, as usual, I might add! You might think about accepting a gracious offer in the spirit it's given! If you have any manners of your own, that is!"

"Maybe I should sleep on the couch," Dudley tentatively offered.

"Ha!" Draco erupted. "The Muggle has better manners than you do!"

"Don't call him Muggle like that," Harry grated.

Draco threw his hands in the air.

"Here, Harry," Dudley broke in, thrusting the box into his hands, his intent obviously to divert attention from the rapidly escalating fight. As their fingers brushed, Harry flinched back.
"Sorry," he muttered. "It's not you. I can't stand much contact, ever since . . . it was pretty bad, what happened to me a few weeks back." He made an effort to stand straighter and strengthen his voice. "So, this is from Remus? Er, Mr Lupin?" He quickly tore the wrappings off to reveal a wooden box with holes in it. Harry peered through one. "Sals!" he exclaimed.

There was a note pinned to the top of the box. Harry hurriedly tore it loose and opened it, instinctively turning toward the wall to have a bit of privacy as he read.

Dear Harry,

Thank you for your letters. I am fully recovered, yes, and just in time to face the moon yet again. I do hope to see you soon. I have owled Severus several times about it, and received one word replies consisting variously of "No," or "Later." I have thought of appealing directly to Albus but considering your living arrangements, I think that would truly anger Severus. It was so good to see the two of you learning to get along, Harry. I have no wish to cause trouble between you.

Your little snake seems fully recovered from the mishap with the Floo. Would you please explain to her that she needs to find another warm place to rest? I failed miserably to get the concept across, and have found her in the fireplace several times. I was concerned that Apparating onto the platform might affect her badly, so I have taken the liberty of putting her into a trance. A simple enervation spell will wake her up. Severus will do it for you, I'm sure, if you are still having difficulties with your wand.

I will continue to ask Severus when he will permit a visit. Don't be angry with him, Harry, not over me. He's a good man, and yes, he is still making the Wolfsbane for me. I know he thinks he is doing what is best for you. I have to respect him for that even if I disagree with his reasoning.

At any rate, Harry, I really am very sorry about everything you have gone through on my account. Your own letters make it clear you do not blame me, and while I appreciate that deeply, I do hold myself responsible. Severus is not wrong to criticize me.

I wish you all the best and hope to see you soon,

Remus Lupin

Harry blinked, and took the lid off the box to lift out Sals. She was smaller than he had remembered, and very limp. Harry gently tickled the top of her head with a finger, but she gave no reaction.

Sighing, he turned around, intending to ask if Draco could perform an Ennervate. It rankled to ask for anything right after their row, but he was worried enough about Sals that he'd do it, anyway. This limpness reminded him too much of Sals in the tunnel, barely able to move. And yet Sals had moved, had made it all the way upstairs and found a way to warn Remus that Harry was in trouble. Harry could hardly credit it, but he knew he owed Sals a lot, and he couldn't stand to not know for sure if his snake was all right.

Draco wasn't in the room when he turned, but Dudley was.

"Oh, ick!" Dudley screamed, and jumped back a yard. Maybe two, Harry reflected. "Help!"

Draco was back in the room instantly, his silver gaze assessing the situation. "What?" And then, "Oh, that. Ick is right. What are you doing with a snake?"
"Remus sent her," Harry explained, remembering then what he'd overheard. Draco was afraid of
snakes. But this was just Sals. She wouldn't hurt anybody. "This is Sals. She's my pet."


"She's a sweet little snake," Harry insisted. "But Remus put her to sleep for the journey. Um, I'm
sorry to have to ask, but would you please enervate her for me?"

Dudley was up against the wall by then. "Enervate," he gasped. "What's that?"

"I'll wake her up," Harry explained.

Draco crossed his arms. He hadn't stepped any closer since he'd seen the snake, Harry realised. From
a distance of several feet, he announced, "If you have to have a snake in here, I really think I prefer a
stupefied one, so no."

"Draco," Harry said in a warning tone.

"Harry," Draco mimicked back. "What part of no did you find confusing? It's a fairly simple word."

"Come on," Harry cajoled. "Listen, Sals here won't hurt you. There's no reason to be afraid--"

"I," Draco glacially interrupted, "am not afraid. I simply think that snakes are rather gross."

"You're a Slytherin!"

"Thank you, for pointing out the obvious. I suspect you wouldn't want a lion in here, either, so that
argument's hardly relevant."

Harry knew this was ridiculous, and he could just wait for Snape to help him later. By then, though,
he was feeling fairly desperate to see Sals awake and moving. Desperate enough to say, "Draco.
You told me you'd do something for me if I asked--"

"Oh, and don't I?" Draco smoothly put in. "The lights. The meals. Interrupting the headmaster's
conference with Severus when you simply had to have a word with him. My quill. Accioing you
every last thing you say you want--"

"All right, you've been nice!" Harry admitted. "Is that what you need to hear?"

Draco's lips curved in a slow, calculating smile. "Well, well. You really do want your little snake
awake. Hmm, as you said, I am a Slytherin, which means I need a moment to figure out what might
be in it for me . . . Oh, I know. How about Draco, I apologize for my rude behaviour earlier."

"You're kidding," Harry gasped, torn between outrage and laughter.

"Am I?" Draco lifted a hand and casually studied his fingernails.

"Yes, I know," Draco stressed. "Severus knows what I think of snakes, but he will no doubt, once
again, put your interests above mine. Why not? You're the hero who will save us all! You could take
this as a chance to admit you're not so effing perfect despite all that, you know. But no, you'll just
lord it over me instead, and wait for Severus--"

"Draco, I apologize for my rude behaviour earlier," Harry sighed.
"I apologize too," Draco said, stunning him. He drew his wand and softly whispered the spell, then backed away when Sals began to stir.

"Hi there," Harry murmured down into his palm, his finger stroking along Sals' head and back. "Remember me? I missed you a lot."

Dudley's jaw dropped. "Wh- what is he doing?"

"Oh, that's parseltongue," Draco remarked, shuddering. "Snake-language. Harry there can talk to snakes. Disgusting, isn't it?"

"It's . . . awful," Dudley moaned. "Oh, I feel sick, it sounds so . . . it's like a great long ugly hiss . . ."

Sals lifted her head and swayed it from side to side, finding her bearings. Delighted, Harry bent further over his palm and dropped a little kiss on her head.

"Oh, my God!" Dudley exclaimed, just as Draco groaned, "Dear Merlin."

Harry grinned, and looked up from Sals, his gaze studying the way both Draco and Dudley were keeping to the far side of the room. "Looks like you two have something in common," he said, and laughed.
Harry was sitting with Sals curled around his neck as he watched Draco showing Dudley magic tricks. Dudley was nothing short of fascinated, his fear of magic continuing to diminish, but then again, Draco wasn't demonstrating anything terribly threatening. It had started off with floating feathers, and rapidly proceeded to Draco making some Every Flavor Beans waltz across the tabletop. Now he was seeing how many pairs he could make spin at once.

He'd even seen fit to warn Dudley that *every flavour* meant exactly that, and not to be surprised if the dark brown one ended up tasting like dirt—or worse—instead of chocolate.

Dudley had just shaken his head and said he was off sweets, anyway.

"So what about you, Harry?" Dudley asked when Draco finally let the beans fall. Harry noticed a greenish one that was sort of panting from exertion. He almost laughed.

"Me?"

"Yeah. What tricks can you do?"

"Magic isn't about silly tricks, Dudley," Harry sighed. "Remember the Dementors? For me, it's about survival."

"What he means to say," Draco lightly sneered, tossing jelly beans into his mouth in between words, "is that he's chicken. He can do all the *silly tricks* he likes, but they might mean someone expects him to do something real. And it's so much easier just to hide in here and let Severus protect him—"

"You stop talking about Harry that way!" Dudley shouted, lurching to his feet. "He's not chicken, he's not! Don't you know it takes a whole lot more guts sometimes to do nothing? Harry could have hexed me a whole bunch of times, and I've deserved it, too, but he was *brave* enough to restrain himself so he wouldn't get expelled from school! And then to protect me from those demon things, he *did* do some hex or something, and he almost did get expelled! And that was brave, it was!"

"I didn't think you knew about me getting in big trouble for that," Harry murmured, a little shocked by the impassioned defence.

"Mrs. Figg told me. When I said you must not l- l- love me after all, 'cause you didn't show after Dad died, and never even *called* me, but she said you almost got kicked out of school for me! And I know how year after year school is all you had to look forward to," Dudley cried, wiping his eyes. After a moment of blubbering, he rounded on Draco again, actually stepping forward and jabbing a pudgy finger into the Slytherin boy's chest. "So don't you *dare* call Harry a coward! Don't you *dare*, ever! He's not! He's just not!"

Horrified, Harry surged to his feet, yanked Dudley away from Draco, and planted himself between them. "Don't curse him!" he yelled.

Draco could say more with an eyebrow, Harry thought, than most people could say with an entire face. "Curse your cousin?" he scoffed. "When he's the only way of warding this place properly? You're either really stupid to assume I'd do a thing like that, or you truly do think I'm evil. In which case, I'd like to point out, you have to believe Severus is stupid for trusting me. And if you think Severus is stupid, then you *definitely* are."

"Don't you call Harry stupid!" Dudley shouted out, just as Harry was furiously erupting, "What are
you angling for, Draco? It's like you're trying to provoke Dudley!"

"I'm trying to provoke you, you twit!" Draco grated, shoving Harry away with one hand. "Why do you think Severus insults his students? He's giving them a chance to prove him wrong!"

Harry stumbled, then righted himself and glared. "So you thought if you called me a coward, and in front of Dudley, too, I'd suddenly realise I could do magic after all?"

"I thought it was worth a try," Draco sneered. "Well, at least we know why the headmaster sorted your cousin into Hufflepuff. Loyalty personified. But if he hadn't jumped to your defence, you just might be hexing me by now!"

"And you were just going to stand there and let yourself get hexed!"

"Yes, I was!" Draco shouted, planting his feet more firmly.

"Really?" Harry blinked. It felt like the world had just flipped upside-down. *Black is white, war is peace, enemies are friends...*

"I think I can stand a little jelly-legs if it would help you get your confidence back," Draco stated, sounding completely sincere. "And anyway, I doubt you'd let me suffer for long, what with your cousin watching. But Harry..." He gave a deep sigh. "You didn't even think of magic. You jumped up and put yourself between us. A Muggle response."

"Well, you shoved me," Harry retorted. "What sort of response is that?"

"A restrained one," Draco pointed out. "I won't hex you even when I'm irritated as hell. But you, not even realizing magic is an option... it's very worrisome. Your instinct should be to go straight for your wand."

"It all happened so fast--"

"What about your snake then?" Draco inquired, his gaze going to Harry's neck where Sals still sat wrapped. He shook his head. "You needed an enervation spell, were obviously desperate for one. Did you even think *once* of trying one, yourself?"

"I knew it wouldn't work," Harry murmured.

"As long as you know that, it won't work, Harry," Draco insisted. "But the magic is still inside you. It's itching to get out, that's what all that wild magic is about, I think. And you're repressing it."

"Don't go psychological on me again," Harry told him, but there was no real heat in the words. He just felt tired. Tired of battling his magic, himself, Draco, even Snape. Everybody wanted things from him, expected things, and sometimes, Harry just wanted *out.*

But there was no out, he knew that. Not until Voldemort was dead and gone, hopefully for good this time. Until then, Harry was stuck, whether he liked it or not.

"Ask Severus for the book, Harry," Draco said, and then leaning sideways, said, "Everything okay there, Dudley? You aren't still mad? I didn't really mean those things about Harry. See, he got sick lately and it messed up his magic, and I just thought that I could maybe goad him back to normal."

Dudley twisted his lips into a fat pout. "That's not very nice."

"Oh, I know," Draco admitted. "Sit down and I'll explain. See, Harry there's a Gryffindor, and
As soon as Dudley understood that Harry was missing class and Draco was supposed to be tutoring him to make up for it, he insisted on letting the other two boys study.

"After all, Harry," he said as he looked up from the deck of wizard cards he was looking through, "catching up to your classmates will probably help your magic come back. You work on your studies. I'll be fine over here."

Harry could have told him that there was a world of difference between dull, dry theory and actually using magic, but he didn't want Draco to start spouting words like avoidance and denial. Again. He went to sit at the dining table with Draco, and they began to go over the in-depth study of dragons that Hagrid was presenting to the sixth-years. From time to time Harry would glance at Dudley. It looked like he was trying to play a game of Patience, but was getting frustrated by the way the cards behaved. One face card--Harry couldn't tell which although by that time his vision was getting fairly good--kept jumping up and running around in circles, wailing that it didn't like its neighbours.

"Harry," Draco chided, so he returned his attention to the breeding patterns of Norwegian Ridgebacks, and gradually tuned out the noise of the cards who were by then beginning to argue amongst themselves.

His concentration was broken, however, when Dudley suddenly yelped out loud. Thinking a card had bitten him--they did that sometimes when you kept moving them to places they didn't want to be--Harry turned. What he saw, though, was Snape gliding through the door, and Dudley rearing back as far as he could into the edge of the couch, his eyes wide with terror, his fat jowls quivering with it.

"Dudley," Harry spoke calmly, going to his side and kneeling down next to him. "It's okay, Dudley. That's just Professor Snape. He lives here."

"H-- h-- h--" Incoherent with fright, Dudley couldn't even talk.

"H-- h-- h--" Incoherent with fright, Dudley couldn't even talk.

Harry gritted his teeth until they positively ached, and somehow, managed to lay a hand on top of Dudley's shaking shoulder. He squeezed gently, remembering as he did it how much sheer comfort Snape had given him in just this way. "Shh, it's okay. He helped me, Dudley. He saved me from the bad wizards who wanted me dead."

Dudley lifted a quaking arm, pointing, and screeched, "He's a vampire!"

Draco burst out laughing, but cut it short when Snape made a chopping motion with his hand. Without a word, the professor stepped past the terrified boy on the couch, and strode toward his own bedroom.

"Oh, of course he's not a vampire, Dudley," Harry was saying. With Dudley so horribly scared, it only seemed right to fold him into a hug and sort of rub his back. It seemed right, but it was awfully hard to do. Harry felt like needles were piercing him all over, but the sensation faded somewhat as he hung on, rocking his cousin. "We've seen him walk around in the daylight, okay? He eats regular food. He's . . . um . . ."

"I would have thought you could list three characteristics of the common vampire, Mr Potter," Snape drawled from behind him. "I believe the next point in your proof might be, He can endure the sight of a crucifix."
"Oh yeah, crucifix," Harry mumbled, pulling back from his cousin. He saw that Snape was holding one out, a large one wrought in delicate silver. Harry took it, and handed it to Dudley, who, eyes still wide, held it up before him as though to ward Snape off. Snape just stood there looking down at it, dark eyes unblinking.

After a moment Dudley gave it back to Harry. Still shuddering horribly, he said, "Ha-- Harry said there were g- g- ghosts here--"

Snape narrowed his eyes at Harry. "I'd think you'd use a bit better judgment about what you see fit to mention!"

Harry could have told him that Draco had actually been the one to bring up ghosts, but it seemed a pretty petty thing to mention.

"And there was this horrible creature in the fire, all green and wrinkledly-looking," Dudley was going on, wringing his fat hands as though he thought he was in trouble, "and . . . and . . . I didn't hear you come in, and then I looked up and you were just hovering there all black and m- m- m--"

"Menacing?" Snape inquired, his eyes glittering with sardonic light. Harry could tell, he liked the description. Well, all except the vampire part of it. "I'm afraid the students do find me so. But you needn't. I quite assure you, there are no vampires here at Hogwarts."

"I'm s- s- sorry."

"No, none of that. Perfectly understandable mistake," Snape told the quaking boy. He stepped forward quite slowly and extended a hand. "My name is Severus Snape."

"Dudley Dursley," the Muggle boy mumbled, obviously still deeply embarrassed as he pushed to his feet and shook the professor's hand.

"We've been looking forward to your visit, Mr Dursley," Snape replied softly, his whole attitude reminding Harry of Hagrid's gentle way with frightened creatures.

Dudley was in no shape to appreciate it. He promptly burst into tears. Not knowing what else to do, Harry folded him back into a hug as his cousin blubbered, "Mr Dursley was my f- f- father!"

"It's okay, Dudley," Harry whispered. "He didn't mean anything."

Dudley wiped at his face, pudgy fists furiously trying to erase all evidence of grief. "Stupid," Harry heard him say.

"No, it's not," Harry told him. Looking up, he realised that Snape and Draco had left. Thinking they were probably in the Potions lab, Harry urged Dudley to his feet and got him moving. "Come on and wash your face. And then we'll go introduce you properly, okay?"

"I can't believe I thought he was a vampire," Dudley was gasping. "Gah! Stupid, stupid!"

"No, it's not!" Harry said again. "Listen, we actually did have a teacher who was a werewolf once, Dudley, and we still have one who's a ghost, so it's not stupid at all." He wet a washcloth and handed it to him. "This place is really, really strange, and as if that isn't bad enough, you've been told for years how awful magic is, so of course you're jumping at shadows. Besides, Snape startled you! I'd have thought he was a vampire, too!"

"Dresses like Dracula," Dudley muttered. "Spooky. And his face is sort of scary, too. Well, mostly the eyes. Like he's giving you the evil eye."
"Yeah, imagine having him yell at you when you mess up in class," Harry joked. "It's sort of nerve-wracking. But it's true what I told you. He got me away from the evil wizard who was trying to kill me. Well, actually, he's saved my life a bunch of times, Dudley. He isn't going to hurt you."

And when Dudley still looked too scared to go meet Snape properly, Harry did the only thing he could think of to do. He told a story, about nice Professor Lupin, whom Dudley of course knew, and a boggart in a cabinet, and Professor Snape wearing old lady's clothes. He left out, though, any reference to Lupin actually being the werewolf Harry had mentioned earlier. By the time Harry had finished, Dudley was shaking with laughter instead of fear.

Snape had been entirely himself during his dinner with the visiting Gryffindors, which was to say that he hadn't put himself out to be any less unpleasant than usual. Of course, he had probably figured that the students were perfectly capable of dealing with him on his own terms. In a way, it was an offhand compliment to them, Harry supposed.

The Potions Master definitely wasn't paying the same compliment to Dudley. There wasn't a trace of dark sarcasm or veiled insult as he dealt with Harry's cousin. Harry figured that after Dudley had assumed him a vampire and burst out crying—very Hufflepuff, that—with seconds of meeting him, Snape had decided that Dudley Dursley couldn't handle much more strain. And probably, Snape was right, though it made for an odd evening, watching the Potions Master speak so gently and patiently with a stuttering young Muggle.

Draco was amused by the whole thing, Harry could tell. But of course even Draco was playing into it, treating Dudley like a child much younger than himself when the Muggle boy was in fact a year older. Draco wasn't condescending about it, though. Just...carefully friendly and casual. If he was disgusted to be eating alongside a Muggle, he sure didn't let on.

After Harry had finished eating, Sals came slithering out of his shirt pocket and wound herself around his upper arm. Draco didn't hide his disgust at that. He actually pushed his food away, his perfect manners breaking beneath the distinctive gagging sound made. Harry just grinned, and urged Sals down toward his wrist so that he could play a little game he'd grown used to in Grimmauld Place. The snake began winding herself through his fingers, in and out, looping over and around them. It always gave Harry a shivery sensation he really liked. Draco grimaced and looked away.

"Harry," Snape chastised, shaking his head.

"But it gives Draco and Dudley something to talk about," Harry protested. "They both have a thing about snakes."

Draco gave him a sharp look at that, as though he suspected some hidden meaning. Just like a Slytherin, always suspecting a plot. To Harry's surprise, however, Draco appeared to have concluded not only that Harry was trying to tell him something, but also that he should listen. The blond boy turned to the pudgy one, who was eyeing the snake warily but was still eating the large salad he'd requested.

"So, Dudley," Draco smoothly began, "why do you dislike Harry's little pet?"

"Uh-oh. Harry hardly wanted Dudley to become a source of endless information on one Harry Potter. "Oh, Dudley doesn't want to discuss snakes," he hurriedly put in.

"Oh, it's okay, Harry," Dudley countered that. "I forgave you a long time ago, you know."
No, Harry didn't know, but at that moment, neither did he care. Before he could figure out a way around it, though, Dudley was recounting, "I used to think snakes were pretty neat. Until Harry set a big ugly one on me, that is."

Draco's voice went deep with interest. "Oh, really? Do tell."

"We were at the zoo for my birthday, and Harry here made a boa constrictor nearly bite off my leg---"

"It only nipped at your heels as it slithered past!" Harry objected.

"Piers always did swear that he saw you talking to it. I guess you were, huh? Is that why it attacked me?"

"Harry," Draco drawled, "that was very, very naughty. I'm surprised at you."

"Harry made the glass front of its pen disappear, and it escaped," Dudley added, shuddering. He stabbed at a bit of radish, the action almost vicious. "He had to stay locked in his cupboard until summer, that time."

"Locked in his cupboard," Draco repeated with an assessing gaze toward Harry.

"Oh yeah," Dudley babbled on. "I used to think he was getting his just deserts. Serve him right, cause he'd make the strangest things happen even though he knew Mum and Dad couldn't stand magic. Did you know one time the engine disappeared from the car?" Suddenly remembering more of that incident, Dudley gave Harry an apologetic look. "I feel really bad now that I didn't at least sneak you some food when they would lock you in for days and days. You must have got really hungry in there, sometimes."

Harry felt himself flushing. "It's okay," he muttered. "Er, water under the bridge."

Draco had put his brass goblet of mead down and looked as though he were trying to figure out something to say. Actually, he looked a bit as though he regretted starting Dudley talking. Then he put in, "Harry, if you could make parts of the car vanish, why couldn't you make food appear in your . . . er, cupboard?"

Either he was a pretty good actor, Harry thought, or Lucius Malfoy hadn't told his son all he'd learned from Legilimizing Uncle Vernon. "It's called accidental magic for a reason," Harry pointed out. "Besides, I didn't even know I was doing it! I didn't know I was a wizard, remember?"

Snape's brows went up at that. "When did you tell Draco that much?"

"Oh, it was in the letter to Dudley," Draco absently murmured.

"I didn't get any letter," Dudley protested, while Harry exclaimed in dismay, "Draco!"

Draco gave a slow smile, and in one heart-stopping moment, Harry realised with horror that the other boy might know how to spell a burned letter back together using Reconstitutio. He did know some pretty advanced magic, in part due to intensive private tutoring he got every summer. Nothing but the best for Lucius Malfoy's son, Harry had thought when Draco had let on about it.

The smile, though, didn't end up meaning Draco was about to whip out the letter and hand it over. It just meant he was being a Slytherin and figuring out how to play the scene.

"Oh yeah, Harry wrote you a letter," Draco drawled. "Actually, that was back when he was completely blind, so he dictated it to me and I wrote it out. And I meant to send it, too, but then I
realised I'd written it out in disappearing ink! Harry was so mad. I'm surprised he didn't set a boa constrictor on me. And... and then he got sicker for a while so there was no question of rewriting it, er, and... oh yeah, by the time he was well enough he knew you were coming to visit anyway, so...

Pretty transparent set of lies, Harry thought, though he didn't much like the idea that Draco was a bad liar. He'd called him that once, back in the hospital wing, but he hadn't really meant it. Now it seemed like it might actually be accurate, and that had implications Harry just didn't want to consider. At all.

"What did the letter say?" Dudley asked, his jowls quivering a bit.

"Just that I was really, really sorry about your Dad," Harry murmured.

"Yeah," Dudley mumbled, blinking a few times. It seemed like he was trying to get his mind off it when he turned to Draco and said, "Um, so how come you don't much like Sals, either?"

Harry didn't really expect the other boy to answer that, figured Draco would fob Dudley off with something vague like I just don't, or She's ugly, Gryffindor colours, you know...

Instead, he offered a quiet, "I had a relative of mine set a snake on me, too. I couldn't learn a spell that conjured one. Think I was about oh, nine or ten, and my tutor had complained about it. I had to stand in a full body bind while a cobra crawled all over me. You know what they say, familiarity breeds contempt. Anyway, after that I did learn the spell." Draco stood, then, his hands shaking slightly. "If you'll excuse me, I have some things to take care of." He went into his bedroom and closed the door; a moment later, Harry heard the shower begin running.

"Perhaps you shouldn't taunt him quite so much," Snape broke the silence to say.

Harry nodded, feeling pretty bad by then. He quickly slipped Sals into his pocket.

"You don't have to be an orphan to face a trying childhood," his teacher went on.

"Yeah, okay, I got it," Harry told him.

"Have you? Lucius punished him like that more than once."

"Yeah, well Lucius likes to go for the jugular," Harry muttered, thinking of the needles. It only made sense. Malfoy was an evil, evil man. Whatever your weakness was, that's what he'd use against you, and not even his own son was exempt. It surprised Harry, as he'd always thought Draco was so spoiled. Well, he was, no doubt about it, but Harry figured that he'd also had his share of problems.

"Can we not discuss Lucius?"

"Certainly." Snape stood, and said the usual, "I'll be in my office if you need me."

Dudley turned and watched him go. "He's really not much like a vampire at all. Still looks like one, though."

Harry nodded, sighing as Sals shifted in his pocket. How was he to know that Draco had such a good reason to be afraid of snakes?

Dudley finished his salad then, while Harry thought in silence. After a few moments, he went into the bedroom. The shower was still running, but he didn't think he was ready to talk to Draco in any case. He got the wooden box Remus had shipped Sals in, and slipped the little snake inside, then took it back out to the living room and put it on a table in an out-of-the-way corner.
Later that night, Draco seemed recovered. He was showing off for Dudley again, this time demonstrating how to transfigure the couch into a bed. Dudley was rapt and full of amazement, which of course only made Draco get more and more extravagant with his wandwork and incantations.

"Now, if we want a canopy," Draco was saying, "we really ought to first change the wood to something a bit more stout."

"Oak," Dudley suggested, *oohing* and *aahing* as the dark wood faded to a golden hue.

Seeing that the other boys would likely keep busy for quite a while, Harry took his chance to go talk to Snape alone. Although Snape had, almost every night, issued that casual invitation for Harry to join him in his office, he'd never gone before. Sometimes he'd wanted to talk, but the idea of seeing Snape behind a desk had always put him off. It was like . . . Snape would go back to being his teacher if he went in there. Of course Snape still *was* his teacher, but he was something more now, too. Something Harry didn't really even know how to name. Or maybe he did, but he was choosing not to. He felt shaky and vulnerable just thinking about it, afraid that if he looked too closely, it would go away.

But tonight, he needed to talk enough to fight his way past the feeling.

He stopped at the open door of the office and looked in to see Snape bent over parchments, a quill scratching out comments in red ink as he read. When the man didn't notice him, he tentatively reached inside the room to rap his knuckles against the door.

"Come in, Harry," Snape beckoned, waving him into one of the two chairs that faced his desk. "Your cousin seems to be settling in well. Better than I would have expected."

Harry nodded. "I'm starting to think that he's not really afraid of magic. It was drummed into him, but it was never something that came from inside himself, if that makes sense."

"Quite possibly," Snape agreed.

They fell into a silence then, broken only by the crackling of the fire dancing in the small hearth that kept the office warm. Finally, Snape spoke again. "Did you need me for something in particular?"

"No . . . yes . . ." Feeling utterly defeated, Harry hung his head in his hands and rubbed his temples. "Maybe a headache potion."

"Certainly," Snape said, reaching into a drawer for a small phial. "Drink it all."

Harry downed it, then wondered, "You keep potions in your office, too? Are you ever without?"

"I try not to be," Snape told him in all seriousness, then allowed a smirk to soften his features. "I often mark student work in here, and so I stock my desk with, at a minimum, Headache Calming Draught and Boredom Balm."

"That bad?" Harry asked.

"You tell me." Snape passed him the topmost essay, something from a second-year. Harry didn't really read it; he didn't care what Holly Hornbrown had to say about yeast spores. Snape's comments were what interested him. *Is this an essay or a rumination on bread and muffins?* his teacher had written. *If you are hungry, adjourn to the Great Hall and then resume your homework.*
"Draco says you insult the students to prod them into working harder," Harry remarked, looking up. "Is that true?"

Snape set his quill aside and leaned both his arms on the desk as he blandly met Harry's gaze. "In some measure. I haven't given the matter extensive thought, but I did notice early in my career here that a well-placed insult often had a salutary effect."

"But you don't insult the Slytherins," Harry pointed out. "Don't you want them to work as hard as the rest of us?"

Snape's gaze hardened perceptively. "I don't insult them publicly, certainly. There is such a thing as house loyalty. And too, Slytherins don't respond well to being shamed. You might consider that in your dealings with Draco."

When Harry didn't reply, the Potions Master shuffled the parchments meaningfully. "Well. If all you needed was to rid yourself of a headache and critique my instruction, I think we've covered that, so if you don't mind--"

"I didn't have a headache," Harry interrupted. "Well, not enough of one to need help. And I didn't come in here to criticize."

Snape stared at him. "No?"

"No. I just . . . I don't know. I wanted to talk to you."

Snape waited for him to go on, but Harry didn't really know what to say. He didn't even know why he'd come in, really. He'd just known he needed to talk, but not about anything in particular. His mind felt stuffed with conflicting needs and impressions.

"For someone who wishes to talk, you aren't saying much," Snape finally pointed out. Harry nodded wearily and got up to go, but Snape waved him back into his chair, and after a moment longer, softly inquired, "Have I done something to upset you?"

Harry glanced up from his contemplation of his hands. "No, it's just . . . well, maybe you have, actually. Did you tell Professor McGonagall to not let my friends down here very often?"

"It seemed prudent, as they have been known in the past to provoke Draco."

"He's the one who provokes them!"

"I don't believe it was Draco who tried to hex another student into eating slugs," Snape quietly returned, his fingers lightly tapping on his desk.

"He called Hermione a Mudblood!"

"Has he used the word since Samhain?"

"Not that I've heard," Harry grudgingly admitted. "But it's not just my friends from the Tower. You won't let me see Remus, either."

Snape's voice went cold. "He should be strangled for what he did to you."

"No, Lucius Malfoy should!" Harry retorted. "But instead, you arrange things so I have play nice with his son!"

Snape abruptly surged to his feet, the door slamming closed as he waved his wand. "It's warded
now," he announced. "What happened to decorum, Harry? Draco is just down the hall!"

Harry felt his lip curl. "That's why I can't talk to you any longer," he cried, jumping up from his chair. "Everything ends up being about Draco!"

"Do not be absurd," Snape rebuked. "I have known him all his life, and I understand the pressure he is under as few can, but he is not my sole concern."

"Could've fooled me," Harry muttered.

Snape shook his head. "Harry. This childishness ill becomes you. I care about you both."

Harry abruptly dropped back into his chair and stared at his teacher with wide eyes.

Sighing, Snape walked from behind his desk and took the chair facing Harry, pulling it so close that their knees almost touched. "Harry. You cannot tell me you didn't realise this. Do you think it my practice to invite Gryffindors to live with me?"

"No, but that was circumstance," Harry murmured. "And duty too, considering that stuff Trelawney blathered out about me."

"The prophecy makes you significant," Snape levelly agreed. "It is not, however, what makes you important to me. I was not thinking of duty when I opened my home to you."

"No?" Harry knew it was bad of him to fish for more, but he felt scrubbed raw inside. He needed more, needed to hear it.

"I am pleased to help you," Snape elaborated, tilting his head to study the boy. "You look . . . distressed that I would say as much."

More silence, Harry hanging his head again, rubbing his temples even though the splendid potion had erased all trace of pain. Snape drew in a deep breath and reached for Harry's hands, pulling them away from his skull to clasp them loosely. "Harry, talk. I still don't even know why you came in tonight. You trusted me at Samhain, can you not trust me with this, too? Whatever it is?"

"I don't know what it is," Harry groaned, clenching his eyes. "I just . . . wanted to see you, without Draco listening to my every word."

"I have wanted that too," Snape returned. "And now we have it. So what is troubling you?"

Harry just shrugged.

"Then I will tell you what begins to trouble me," Snape pronounced, squeezing his hands lightly and then letting go. "You, looking so . . . upset, ever since I mentioned caring."

Harry realised then that just as when he hadn't jumped at the chance to live here, he was in danger of hurting Snape. And Harry didn't want that, even if he didn't really understand how he felt inside himself. "I'm not upset, I don't think," he tried to explain, biting his lips in agitation. "It's more . . . I don't trust it. Oh, not because I don't trust you," he rushed to say. "I don't trust adults, that's more what I meant. I mean, adults who are supposed to care for you. Because . . . well, too many times they just don't."

"Your relatives would certainly bear that out," Snape said, his tones disgusted. Then his voice became more meditative. "But Harry. Black loved you dearly, through all those years of Azkaban, and right up until his death."
"He was never around very much," Harry sighed. "I don't blame him, but the fact remains. And Remus was even worse, in a way. He wasn't on the run, forced to hide. I thought he really cared about me, you know, really cared, not just like I was some promising student or his best friend's son, but cared about me. But I never heard from him, not once through that whole horrid year when I had to compete in that awful tournament."

Snape's dark eyes went even darker than usual. "Lupin really does care about you, idiot though he is, running off for ice cream like that."

Harry had a feeling it had cost Snape something to say that. "I know he cares, but he's not as dependable as . . ." He looked away, changing what he had been going to say. "As I'd like."

"You've never had an adult be dependable for you," Snape murmured. "Or, at least you don't believe you've ever had that. The headmaster cares about you too, you know. Last year he had his reasons for pulling away--"

"Well, that's just it then, isn't it?" Harry crossly erupted. "There are always reasons! Either you're a little freak nobody could love, or your godfather's in Azkaban, or there's Order business that just has to be seen to, or Voldemort might surge up inside you and hurt somebody! All that means is I've learned the hard way not to depend on anybody!" He didn't say the rest, though it was fairly clear by then.

Even you.

Harry waved a hand, wanting to get away from that. "Anyway, I guess I'm so used to having to take care of myself that it's a little unnerving living here like this, with you in charge. And . . . well, I know you don't appreciate my attitude with Draco, and I guess I wonder if sooner or later you'll get fed up with me and decide you can't stand me, after all. Not that I think you'd make me go live in the Tower if it wasn't safe, but . . . listen, I didn't set that snake on Dudley on purpose, okay? And I didn't know that Sals bothered Draco all that much."

Aware that he was rambling, Harry shut his mouth.

"You seem to be under the misapprehension that I merely tolerate your presence here and am eager to be rid of it," Snape quietly said. "Perhaps I gave you that impression when I said Albus had insisted you live with me. But Harry, it was my suggestion in the first place. He was insisting on the plan to Minerva, who did not approve."

"What's her problem?" Harry had to ask.

"Apart from her fear that you and Draco would kill each other inside of a day," Snape explained, "and her mistaken conviction that I still viewed you as another James, she took offence at the idea that House Gryffindor could not take care of its own. I told her the Sorting Hat had wanted you in Slytherin," he added conversationally.

Harry laughed. "Oh, no. Maybe that's why she was so snooty to Ron and Hermione." Another thought chased his smile away. "You don't think she'll tell my friends about that, do you?"

Snape narrowed his eyes. "You are ashamed?"

"No, I just don't think they'd understand." Shaking his head to clear it, Harry went back to their earlier topic. "Um, well I didn't know what I wanted to talk about when I came in; I just felt like I wanted to talk to you. But now I'm wondering if I wasn't realizing I ought to tell you that, um, even with Draco here and all, living here hasn't been er . . . half-bad, though I am starting to go a little stir
crazy, I think. Isn't there any way you could let me outside for a while? Oh, but that's not what I wanted to tell you. I just wanted you to know that I really appreciate how you've been."

"Ah, your thanking-people thing," Snape mused. He didn't seem offended, though he did remind Harry, "I don't need to be thanked, or desire it."

"I know, but you've been good about everything, and you've been taking really good care of me--"

"By feeding you and not locking you in a cupboard, I presume you mean?" Snape softly snarled, though the anger wasn't directed at Harry. "I don't know what Albus thought he was doing, leaving you to grow up like that."

"Well, I might have had it bad in a wizarding family too," Harry tried to pass it off. "Like Draco, his father punishing him that way."

Snape gave him a sharp look, as though he suspected sarcasm, but relaxed when he found none. "In some ways," he revealed, "Draco has had worse to deal with than even you. Your relatives expected virtually nothing of you, I suspect, which is wounding in its own way, but he has always been expected to excel beyond what is possible. Serpentoria, not taught here until the upper levels, and for good reason, but he was forced to learn it years before he came. His great animosity for Granger isn't so much because she is a Muggleborn--"

"Oh, yes it is!" Harry hotly disputed.

"He has Muggleborn friends in Slytherin, Harry. Or did, until they feared for their lives if they associated with him. But let me finish. His great animosity for Granger is primarily rooted in the way she outperforms him on test after test. Draco has gone home at the end of each term only to be reviled when his marks weren't first in his year. I believe Lucius has had rather a lot to say on the subject of his son and heir not even measuring up to a Muggleborn, and a girl at that."

"That's just some story he made up," Harry disagreed. "It's ridiculous. How would Lucius Malfoy even know what marks Hermione got?"

"Sitting on the Board of Governors does have its perquisites."

"Doesn't mean it's not a lie."

Snape gave him a hard look. "Draco never has been able to lie well. Disappearing ink, Harry? I don't know what the truth about that letter is, nor do I wish to know, but I am positive Draco did not do something as idiotic as use disappearing ink!"

"Uh, no," Harry quietly admitted.

"Draco has his faults, I will not dispute that," Snape admitted. "He has antagonized you for years, and particularly in the last year, done things that may well be unforgivable. I am not ignorant of his failings. But you do not know as much about him as you think, Harry. He called Miss Granger Mudblood so frequently because he hoped that embroiling her in emotion would make her perform less well in class."

"Still wasn't a nice thing to do."

"No, but he was facing a wizard's wrath if he didn't find some way to rein her in." Snape clenched his fingers into fists. "I don't know all Lucius may have done to punish him, but knowing him as I do, I seriously doubt the cobra was the worst of it."
Harry let out a breath he'd been holding and met Snape's eyes. "Aren't you breaking his confidence, telling me these things? I mean, if his biggest problem with Hermione is his grades, why doesn't he just say so himself?"

"Draco knows you are more likely to listen to me than him." Snape shrugged. "He told me to proceed accordingly."

"Why would he want my trust that badly?"

"You really aren't arrogant in the least, if you have to ask that," Snape sighed. "He's in an enormous amount of danger, Harry. He's been marked for death, which is no small matter in the circles in which he was raised, but he's thrown himself into our camp. He sees you as the leader of the light, perhaps not in a tactical or literal sense, but--"

"He called me the vanguard," Harry remembered.

"Ah. Yes, the vanguard. He is quite literally terrified, I think, that if you do not come to believe in his sincerity, he could summarily find himself thrown back to the lions."

Harry scoffed, "You wouldn't do that to him."

"Of course not, but he is nothing if not a Slytherin. He is looking ahead to a day when your influence with Albus may outrank mine. In all honesty, I think he believes such a day may come quite soon."

"Do you?"

Snape softly laughed. "No. Draco cannot possibly appreciate how very young the both of you seem to Albus. The idea is absurd." He gave Harry a wry look. "I see what you mean. The conversation has wound its way back to Draco as you predicted. Was there anything else on your mind?"

Harry wrinkled his forehead. "Well, it's no big deal, but I was a little surprised you had a crucifix."

"Do not mention this to your cousin," Snape sternly instructed, "but there have been vampire sightings in the Forbidden Forest from time to time. When I used to answer the Dark Mark's call, it was prudent to travel prepared."

_The Dark Mark_. . . Harry grimaced. Draco had said not to ask, but he felt like he had to. "Do you still get those calls? My own scar hasn't been burning at all."

Snape stiffened and sat back in his chair. "I think your scar will behave as always once your magical abilities have sorted themselves out. As for me, I have found a way to deal with the call. You don't need to worry yourself about it."

"But . . ." Harry hesitated. "Um, are you in a lot of pain?"

"Do I seem so?" Snape haughtily inquired, looking down his nose at Harry.

"No," Harry admitted.

"Then whatever the case may be, I am managing adequately," Snape pronounced. "You are sixteen, Harry, and have spent these past years assuming burdens no one your age should have to bear. This one is mine. I do not wish to inflict it on you."

"All right," Harry slowly said, not because he didn't want to be _burdened_, but because Snape obviously wished to dismiss the topic. "Um, one more thing."
Snape merely waited while Harry hesitated.

"Draco said you had a book I should read," Harry finally admitted.

"About anything in particular?" And then when Harry looked away, Snape murmured, "Ah, that book."

"He thinks you left it out on purpose," Harry blurted, "so he'd read it and could kind of... I don't know, beat me over the head with words like denial and overcompensation and guilt complex. Not that I think he knows what he's talking about, but... did you mean for him to read it?"

"No. I was simply tired and laid it to the side without thinking, late one evening." Snape shook his head. "If you spend enough time with Draco, you will quickly understand that he sees plots literally everywhere. A consequence of his upbringing, I suspect."

"Uh, okay," Harry said. He'd have to think about that one, later. "So, can I borrow it?"

Snape assessed him for a long moment, then wordlessly rose and fetched it from a drawer in his desk. Harry turned it over in his hands, feeling more insecure than ever.

"Um, do you think I'm..." Harry cleared his throat. "Sort of mental, after Samhain?"

"No. That's not what the book is about, Harry. If Draco has implied as much--"

"No, he didn't," Harry admitted. "He acts like he really wants to help."

"My impression as well. As for the effect Samhain had on you, I would say you're coping admirably." A small smile curled his lips. "Ah, but I remember. You don't read between the lines quite like a Slytherin would. You need to hear me say well done, as I recall. It was good to see you able to embrace your cousin, Harry. That was well done, indeed."

"You were really great with Dudley, too," Harry murmured. "He'll never believe me that you yell in class, I don't think."

"I do not yell. I lecture," Snape elucidated in a carefully bland tone. "And, I will admit, I try to guarantee that students with no facility for Potions are thoroughly discouraged from dabbling on their own. I am thinking purely of their future safety, of course."

"Oh, of course," Harry agreed, just as blandly. "Well, I'll leave you to mark your essays, I think. Thank you, Professor."

Snape stood up when he did, and placed a hand on his shoulder. "You are always welcome to come talk with me, I hope you know. It is a bit awkward at times, with Draco, but the office door does ward itself with silencing spells the moment it closes. We can speak of anything, in here."

Harry nodded, and tried to pull open the door, only to find that it needed magic to open. Thinking of Draco's complaints, he pulled out his own wand and tried, before appealing to Snape.

"It will all come back, Harry," his teacher assured him as he performed the required spell.

The hall and living room were dark as Harry sneaked through them, past the ostentatious four-poster that had replaced the couch. He slipped into his own room, and found his pyjamas in the dark, slipping into bed a moment later. He'd thought Dudley was asleep, but the other boy murmured, "That you, Harry?"
"Yeah."

"Do the ghosts come out at night?" Dudley sounded worried, Harry realised.

"They won't come in here at all," Harry assured his cousin. "Professor Snape's a really great wizard. He has protection spells all over his rooms. They can't cross them."

"Glad you're in here, then," Dudley murmured, rolling over to go back to sleep.

_Yeah, so am I,_ Harry thought.
Sometimes it Just Takes a Muggle

It only took Dudley three days to decide he wanted to try some magic for himself. Harry watched gobsmacked as Draco lent the Muggle boy his wand and talked him through a simple swish-and-flick. Of course, nothing happened; Dudley wasn't going to really learn any spells, but he seemed to enjoy the fantasy of trying. When he was tired of it, he gave the wand back to Draco and turning to Harry, admitted, "Well, I can sort of see why my mum hated yours so very much, I think. It would be pretty easy to get jealous, wouldn't it?"

Harry blinked, realizing he'd never really thought of it in those terms. Something inside him didn't want to, either. "Aunt Petunia wouldn't ever have seen much magic," he protested. "I mean, my mum wouldn't have done any when she was home on school vacations."

"Yeah, well Mum didn't like to talk about it, but she dropped a few hints over the years. She saw enough," Dudley merely said. "I'd probably be jealous of you, you know, if Marsha hadn't talked to me about it, about how people are all different, and that's just how it is."

"Jealous of me," Harry scoffed. "I can't do any more magic than you, right now, unless you count talking to Sals, and I somehow don't think you mean that."

"Defeatist," Draco murmured as he strolled past.

Harry ignored him, but Dudley didn't. "He's right, you know. Or at least, he says the sorts of things I can really see Marsha saying. You probably should have a more positive outlook about your magic. It's like my diet. I couldn't lose weight until I decided to, simple as that."

Draco turned around and beamed. "See, there now! You'll listen to your cousin, won't you? He's been seeing a professional therapist for . . . how long, Dudley?"

"Almost a year."

"Almost an entire year," Draco stressed. "And even he thinks you're doing this to yourself."

"Oh, that's rich," Harry scoffed. "You're taking a Muggle's word for what's wrong with a wizard?"

"Why Harry," Draco remarked, his smile sly. "You sound as though you have something against Muggles. I'd watch how I phrase things, if I were you."

"I don't have a problem with Muggles and you know it," Harry retorted. "Why don't you watch what you say?"

"I have been," Draco flatly announced. "If you tell me you haven't even noticed, I'll tear my hair out. Just think what a mood I'll be in, then."

Sensing that he'd really upset Draco, Harry murmured, "No, I noticed. I just can't tell how serious you are, about anything." He cleared his throat. "Listen, I heard you talking to Snape when I first got here, and you said it made you practically throw up even to think about having Muggles in your precious pure wizarding bloodline. But then you're actually nice to Dudley here, and he's as Muggle as they come. So which one is the real you?"

"I am actually listening to all of this," Dudley put in.

"Oh, sorry," Harry realised, chagrined. "I don't mean anything, Dudley. It's just that some wizards
have a thing against Muggles. Not me."

"You do?" Dudley asked Draco, the question sounding so very hurt that Harry was tempted to go hug Dudley again. He resisted the impulse, but not just because behind the temptation was a wailing sort of mental pain warning him away. It was also the fact that Dudley wouldn't appreciate it. The other time had been different; Dudley had been deep in shock and crying.

Draco sighed. "I can't help it, after sixteen years of indoctrination on the subject. You're actually the first Muggle I've ever spent any amount of time with."

Dudley sighed and lay back on the couch, which Draco re-transfigured each morning.

"It's not so different from Harry's aunt and uncle hating him just because he had wizarding bloodlines, you know," Draco defended himself. He appeared to be talking to the room in general, but Dudley took him up on it.

"Sure it is," the Muggle boy insisted, staring at the ceiling. "They were scared of what Harry could do to them, though now it all seems sort of stupid, the way they went about things. Marsha and I talked about it. Mum and Dad really should have given you the nicest room and all that, and made sure you never had cause to curse them, if you ask me. But anyway, they were scared." Turning on his side, he cast a glare in Draco's direction. "But your kind, what do you have to fear from us?"

Dudley made a scoffing sound. "Seems to me you hate us just because we exist, not because we're any kind of threat."

"Have you ever heard of the Middle Ages?" Draco icily inquired. "Witch burning was all the rage."

"Oh, come on!" Harry erupted. "We learned all about that from Binns. The Muggles were burning each other. Mass hysteria, remember? And when they did get a wizard, he'd just use a flame-freezing charm--"

"You need the to study the unedited version of the Middle Ages," Draco retorted. "You think they're going to teach the sweet, innocent little children at the school an ugly truth that just might drive young, impressionable wizards into the Dark Lord's camp? I don't think so, not as long as Albus Dumbledore heads up Hogwarts. There were real wizards burned to death, and plenty of them. Where do you think the contempt for Muggles came from?"

"A real wizard would just Apparate!" Harry shouted. "Or are you going to tell me that the Muggles cast anti-Apparition charms across the burning places?"

"Some wizards aren't so skilled at Apparition, as I'm sure you know," Draco heavily returned. "And there were other factors at work, but if you think I'm going to discuss them in front of a Muggle, you're not thinking much at all. Anyway, it's not just witch-burning that could happen to us these days. At least the killing curse just kills one at a time. We don't have weapons that can level whole cities, killing everybody at once, Muggles and Wizards alike."

"So what's your point?" Harry pressed, narrowing his eyes. "That you were right to be such a hate-filled little shite?"

"That there are real reasons why the Dark Lord's philosophy appeals to purebloods!"

"Even though he's a half-blood himself," Harry scoffed.

"Well, that's the thing about hate," Draco pointed out, his voice markedly quieter. "It's irrational."

"That's true," Dudley put in. "If anybody ought to hate Muggles, it would be you, Harry. How come
you don't?"

Harry stared at his cousin, his green eyes shadowed. "I . . . I don't really know. Maybe because I learned so early on what it's like to be hated for something you are, something you can't help being."

"Oh." Draco paused a moment, then asked rather diffidently, "Did you get the book from Severus? Because it covers emotional abuse too."

"Maybe you should read it," Harry retorted. "I mean, for your own benefit."

"I did," Draco admitted, then turned away. "Dudley, do you play any chess? No? Hmm. Well, let me show you wizards' chess anyway. I think you'll like it."

Sighing slightly, Harry got the book from under his pillow and found his place.

Ever since that talk in Snape's office, Harry had settled into a new routine. Most nights, after dinner, he'd spend a few minutes, sometimes longer, chatting with Snape. The first night when he went back, things still seemed awkward, but after he realised that his teacher really didn't mind being interrupted, Harry realised he didn't have to have to bring some earthshaking problem into the man's office. It was all right to go in there just for company. To talk about nothing, it seemed. Sometimes, even, just to sit and read while Snape marked essays.

By then, his vision was largely recovered; he no longer needed any help reading and writing. He didn't even need the Elixir except once each morning. Sometimes when he woke up in the night needing to go to the loo, he thought he was blind again, but since he didn't have a light to see by in any case, he couldn't be sure.

"Book not keeping your interest?" Snape casually inquired one evening in his office.

Harry realised that he'd been staring into space for a while. He wondered how long ago Snape had noticed. Disconcerted, he dragged his gaze away from his teacher's piercing black eyes. "It's the book," he murmured, finally gaining enough presence of mind to look down at the passage that had sent him into a blue funk. One finger indicating a passage, he flipped the book around and leaned forward to push it across Snape's desk.

Snape raised an eyebrow and read out loud, "Dreams reveal the focal points within us, showing in concrete images our hopes, dreams, loves, and fears."

"I was wondering how much of the dreaming stuff in this book even applies to me," Harry admitted, "considering . . . um, how much did Remus tell you about my seer dreams?"

Snape set down his quill and capped the bottle of red ink he'd been using. "Enough."

Harry looked up, his eyes haunted. "The only thing that kept me sane on Samhain was believing that my dreams had to be right, Professor. They'd said I'd live past it, no matter what Lucius Malfoy did to me. I clung to that with all my strength."

"Excellent stratagem, in the circumstances."

"Yeah, but now I don't want the rest of the dreams coming true."

"Harry. I am certain that your friendship with Mr Weasley can withstand a bit of fisticuffs."
Harry sighed. "Remus really did tell you everything, I guess. But see... just the day before yesterday, I almost *did* hit Ron. Thanks for letting my friends come down more often, by the way."

Snape inclined his head slightly.

"Anyway," Harry rambled, "that was great of you, but sometimes I just can't believe how stupid and immature Ron can be. Almost the first thing he said to Dudley was, *How's the tongue?* which is just really cruel. It goes back to a joke the twins played on Dudley one time; they got him to eat some candy that made his tongue grow really long. Ten feet! Anyway, I just could not believe he would say that! I almost slugged him right there on the spot!"

"But you didn't."

"No. And see, I wonder if that was just it, then. That was my chance to punch Ron, and I passed on it. Would the future be that simple to change?"

"Quite possibly." Snape steepled his fingers together. "Divination isn't like Potions. I can't advise you with exactitude."

"Yeah, well I'm not asking Trelawney."

"No," Snape agreed. "Don't."

Harry nodded, and resumed his reading.

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"This letters business is getting really old," Draco complained over dinner a few nights later. "Honestly, Severus, I need to talk to some of these people!"

"No," Snape replied, shaking his head for extra measure. "The mood in Slytherin is still too dire. Someone will provoke you, Draco. We don't need that."

"Look, I lost it with Pansy. I admit it. Shouldn't have hexed her so hard she flew into the wall and cracked her head open. What do you want, a gold-plated apology? It won't happen again!"

"A cranial contusion was the least of what you did to her," Snape asserted as he calmly set his spoon down beside his half-finished bowl of vichyssoise. "Lucius trained you for battle, I know. But this isn't battle, Draco, it is *war*. Sometimes the most substantive results come from working behind the scenes."

"And you don't trust my impulse control," Draco sniped, slamming his own spoon down so hard that Dudley flinched.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "When you have just dented my antique mahogany table? No, I don't."

Draco snatched his wand out of his pocket and repaired the damage. "You say I have to stay here until there's no more danger, but the danger won't lessen until you let me *out*, Severus. I used to have a lot of sway in Slytherin, you know. I could get it back if you'd let me apply my charismatic charm to the problem. I could convince people that Potter here's not so bad."

"Call him Harry," Snape instructed, reaching for his wand. "Ten points from--"

"I'm just saying it how I'll have to say it to them," Draco stressed.

Snape didn't finish the command to the house counters.
"We're never going to get out of here at this rate," the Slytherin boy continued. "You have to let me do something--"

"Mr Malfoy," Snape icily broke in, "You are labouring under a misapprehension. I do not have to let you do anything. You have to abide by my requests if you wish to continue living here. That decision is yours since, as you well know, you have been emancipated from all parental authority."

"I appreciate what you did, Severus--"

"Thank the headmaster. He is the one whose influence overcame your father's strident objections."

"I appreciate everything you're doing, Severus," Draco went on, raising his voice. "It's just . . . I want to do my part, too! Like I said I would! And I can't, not so long as I'm penned up in here."

Snape rose to his feet. "For now, your part consists of doing what I say, Draco. Write your letters. Keep up with your studies, and see to it that Harry gets caught up. I will know when the time is ripe for more direct action." Without another word, he strode toward his office.

Harry finished his grilled cheese sandwich and drank some milk. He wasn't sure what to say, especially not with Draco still fuming. Besides, he was getting a little desperate for some fresh air and sunshine, too. He could understand Draco wanting out.

"Christmas isn't too far off, you know," he finally thought to offer. "You know how most students go home for the holidays? Well, maybe the professor will let us out a little bit, then."

"Thank you," Draco sourly returned, "for pointing out that I no longer have a home to go to, for holidays or anything else. And what makes you think Severus wants to be stuck here?"

"Hey, Harry never got to come home at Christmas, either!" Dudley began, but Harry waved for him to fall silent.

"I didn't mean it that way."

"Well you wouldn't, would you? No offence, but the way this one talks," he hitched a thumb toward Dudley, "it sounds to me like you've never had a home at all. Some of us don't relish being stuck in the dungeons all through vacation."

"My point was that maybe we won't be."

"Yeah, sure," Draco muttered.

"Now who's being defeatist?" Harry lightly jeered, though Draco had given him something to think about, he really had.

Later, when Draco was reading and Dudley was moving wizard chess pieces and watching them smash each other, Harry went and knocked on Snape's open office door.

His professor shook his head at him. "I've told you before; you needn't knock."

Harry closed the door after he went in, which made Snape's brows rise up a tad. "Problem?" he inquired with deceptive mildness.

"Not really." Harry sat down in his usual chair and gravely regarded his teacher. "Just thinking. You're actually related to Draco, aren't you?"

"I'm sure I could ascertain the exact degree given an extensive family tree and several hours with
which to peruse it," Snape dryly admitted. "But yes. How did you come to this stunning bit of knowledge?"

"Sirius told me that all the pure-blooded families are interwoven."

"As indeed we are. The Potters included."

"Right," Harry agreed. "But see . . ." He leaned forward. "I was thinking about Christmas, actually. I've always stayed at Hogwarts for the holidays. Much better than going to the Dursleys, not that they ever wanted me to, of course. But . . . er . . ." Harry took a breath, then plunged ahead. "Well, I was thinking that you shouldn't be stuck here on my account, and Draco's bound to get pretty depressed when it really hits him that he can't be at his usual family whatever, besides which he's already depressed being down here so long with just me for company all day long."

"This reminds me of your more garbled answers in Potions class," Snape observed. "What in Merlin's name is your point?"

Harry swallowed, nervous because he knew he was intruding into areas where he had no business. He hadn't seen much about Snape's family in that pensieve the year before, but what he had seen hadn't been pleasant. Still, decades had elapsed since those memories had been forged.

"Harry?" Snape sharply questioned.

"Sorry," he quickly came back. "Um, well I just wondered what your usual Christmas routine was, because whatever it is, I think you should follow it and take Draco with you, that's all."

"Follow it," Snape blankly repeated.

"Yeah," Harry urged, surprised that he would have to explain. "You know, get away from Hogwarts, see your Mum and Dad, or . . . um, whoever it is you usually see. You must have some family, I'm thinking."

Snape leaned back in his chair and crossed his hands across his chest. "You are proposing I should leave you here alone? Your cousin will be gone by then, I hope you understand."

"Uh, yeah, I understand that," Harry murmured. He'd sort of got used to having Dudley around, he realised.

"Do you have any concept how daft a notion your suggestion is?" Snape inquired, his eyes beginning to glare. "You, in the Slytherin dungeons, completely alone!"

"Well, they should be warded with the blood sacrifice by then--"

"You can't even Floo for meals without a wizard's assistance!"

"I thought we could just arrange for Dobby to pop in each morning and night and see what I need--"

"I did not think you were finding my company so intolerable," Snape glacially remarked.

"It's not that," Harry protested. "I mean, I don't! It's just . . . I just realised you would probably have plans if I wasn't in the way, and I don't want to wreck your Christmas, that's all!"

Snape's hands sought the arms of his chair, and gripped them. "You aren't in the way."

"I . . . " Harry didn't know what to reply. He didn't actually know why he'd said that. Or said it like that. It sounded stupid when he heard it repeated back out loud, though it made perfect sense inside
his own head.

"As a matter of fact," Snape casually volunteered, "I do have holiday plans. I plan to spend the Yule season with you and Draco, if that's quite all right with you?"

"Um, yeah." Harry smiled, a little bit chagrined.

"Have you any other suggestions for my social calendar?" Snape snidely went on. There was a hint of a smile about his mouth as he said it, though, so Harry didn't figure the man was really all that angry.

"Well, I don't know that it needs to be in your calendar," Harry put in, "but I still think Draco could use a change of scenery."

"Just Draco?"

"I already told you that I'm going stir-crazy," Harry reminded him. "But I think it bothers Draco more. I mean, he can't even have his friends come down! Um, does he have any friends left?" When Snape didn't answer, Harry exclaimed, "Oh, just sneak him out onto the Quidditch pitch or something, would you? Let him go flying! You can borrow my invisibility cloak if it'll help."

"I'll take it under advisement," Snape dryly remarked. Then, with a strange glint in his eye, he offered, "As I recall, your spelling is adequate for your age. Now that your vision has returned in force, would you be willing to assist me with this endless pile of essays? You could check over the first years' efforts, correcting their atrocious spelling."

"Sure, all right," Harry said, though he had to add, "you know, the pile is only endless because you assign your students way too much work."

"Ah yes, I had forgotten you considered yourself the foremost authority on instructing adolescents."

"I'm just saying, there's more to life than Potions."

"There is," Snape agreed, shooting him a wry smile. He quickly sorted though the parchments and drew out a set for Harry to use. "But where would your beloved werewolf be if some of us weren't devoted to pursuing excellence in the field of Potions and promoting it in others?"

"Touché," Harry murmured. "Hey, speaking of Remus, you said yourself my vision's no longer much of an issue. When can I see him?"

"Determined to surround me with Gryffindors, Potter?"

"Hey, I'm the one who's outnumbered here," Harry protested, taking the quill and ink his teacher pushed across the desk. He noticed the way Snape had sidestepped his question, but decided not to push things. Not just yet, anyway. Scooting his chair up closer to the desk, Harry frowned down at the first essay. "You can't be serious. It's almost Christmas and this girl still spells Potions with s-h-u-n-s?"

"Leona Ellingsworth," Snape said without glancing Harry's direction. "Hufflepuff. What can you expect?"

Surprised at Snape's ready answer, Harry pressed, "Oh yeah? Well, what little quirks do my essays tend to have?"

The Potions Master smirked slightly, even as he continued writing commentary on a seventh-year's
paper. "You've yet to use a transition, you ramble on for three paragraphs before deigning to mention your thesis, and for some reason you believe that Quidditch analogies will shed some light on the topic. Allow me to enlighten you: they don't."

Harry laughed, remembering a few . . . no, a few dozen, comments to that effect. "What about Ron?"

"Apart from the fact he thinks that ten inches equals a foot?"

"And Hermione?"

"Addicted to the words *therefore, insofar, and of all things, hitherto.*" Snape lightly shuddered.

*One more,* Harry told himself. Then he'd stop.

"What's wrong with Draco's essays?"

Snape stared at him for a moment, then levelly admitted, "Generally nothing but that ridiculous calligraphic script he favours."

"He *cheats,* you know," Harry offered. "He's got a spelled quill to do that fancy script for him."

"That is not cheating. It's being--"

"Slytherin," Harry finished, just as Snape also said the word.

"Mmm," Snape agreed. "Though it would be better for his work to look less like a work of art. Harry. It is good to talk with you, but I really do need to mark these, now."

"All right, Professor." Harry grinned, and corrected spelling without much comment from then on.

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"Blood," Dudley blankly repeated late one night.

"Yes," Snape patiently explained, just as if he hadn't just gone through the whole thing twice already. "The spells for the warding involve specific demands of the participants. You must have a nearly continuous physical presence here for the magic to remain active. Your blood integrated into the spells will achieve this."

"I'm absolutely positive my Mum wouldn't have agreed to er . . . any hocus-pocus like this. I mean, it sounds like . . ." Dudley shivered, and gripped the edge of the dining table. "Voodoo."

A muscle twitched in Snape's jaw, but he was doing an admirable job of repressing his yell-at-imbecilic-student response. Dudley wasn't his student, and they needed him, so terrorizing him was out of the question. Too bad Neville couldn't fall into that category, Harry reflected.

"Transferative warding wouldn't have been required at Number Four Privet Drive, as the proxy for Lily Potter's blood actually did reside there," Snape began, but Draco cut him off.

"It's like this," he explained, leaning over the table. "Your Mum really lived there, see? Her just being around would make the spells work, so all she had to do was take Harry in. This is a little different. You don't live here, so you have to leave a little bit of yourself behind, or the magic'll fall apart. Does that make sense?"

Dudley opened his mouth, a long "oh" sound coming out. Then, he asked, a little diffidently, "Why blood, though? I could just clip a fingernail, couldn't I?"
Draco answered that one before Snape could start in with big words for bigger concepts. "Blood's actually better. It's a powerful magical force, which explains why what Harry's mum did for him is called a blood-sacrifice, see? Besides, all we need is a couple of drops."

Dudley measurably relaxed. "Oh, all right. Why didn't he say so? I can do that."

"Good," Draco approved, beaming an encouraging smile. Perfect teeth, Harry thought, then immediately discounted that as more Slytherin cheating. Magic braces, something like that. "So, are you ready then? We won't need the blood for a few minutes. First Severus has to do the incantations and draw power from the air and stuff like that. Then he'll ask you some questions, and then, we'll seal the warding with your blood, and voilà, it'll be done."

"Questions?"

"Yeah, they're sort of like vows. You have to agree to all this to make the magic work."

"I get to make the magic work," Dudley marvelled, his eyes sparkling a bit.

"Yeah, we couldn't do this without you, Dudley," Harry put in, nodding. "So thanks. It means a lot. With the spells in place, nobody who means me ill will be able to get into these rooms."

"It's all just a way for me to make Severus let me live in Slytherin," Draco joked, but his silver eyes were wary as he watched Harry take in the comment.

Harry glanced at him, but said nothing in reply.

"Well, even if she didn't have to . . . er, bleed, I still can't really see Mum letting wizards into her house to wave wands all around."

"No, she wouldn't have," Harry agreed. "All she had to do was take me in. But she was closer to the original power of my Mum dying for me, Dudley. I mean, she knew her sister, right? Grew up with her, all that. So for her, the transfer was sort of natural. Professor Snape has to do more formal magic to transfer my Mum's blood sacrifice to you. It's pretty complex stuff."

"I think you offended Severus," Draco said in a stage whisper. "It's interaxial multidimensional sorcery he's about to perform, not complex stuff."

"No wand waving or silly incantations?" Harry laughed.

"Be quiet, both of you," Snape instructed. "Just watch. Maybe you'll learn something, Dudley. I need you to stand next to me."

And so it began. Harry stood up from the table and backed away as he watched Snape begin both wand waving and incantation, but none of it was silly. He chanted rhythmically in a language that sounded somehow Latin, and yet older than that as he pointed his wand at all the corners of the room. Silver threads formed from his wand and spun out to those corners. The threads wove themselves into a shimmering spectral fabric that began to coat the walls.

Draco pulled Harry away from the granite before the shining tapestry touched him. Harry couldn't help what happened next. He flinched violently away, stumbling so severely that his feet slipped out from under him. He landed on his arse, his skin feeling like it had been doused with boiling oil, even though Draco had only touched sleeve, not skin.

He looked up, only to see that Draco looked absolutely ashen, his silver eyes haunted.
Harry remembered then, what Snape had said, that Draco was quite literally terrified that he could someday be thrown to the wolves on Harry's say-so. Harry certainly didn't trust the Slytherin boy... not even close... but he didn't want Draco thinking he'd lurched away because of that. It was more that he'd been startled. Even Snape's hand on his shoulder could disconcert him if he wasn't expecting it.

Harry couldn't explain all that without speaking and disrupting the spells being cast, so he did what he could. Biting his lips to hide his grimace, he extended his hand towards Draco.

The Slytherin boy's eyebrows rose, and for a moment he just stared, but then he helped Harry up.

Snape began walking, continuing his chant, entering every room and spelling it in the same way, one hand on Dudley's elbow keeping the Muggle boy with him all the while. Following along, eyebrows raised, Harry noticed that Snape warded the ceilings and floors, too, the silver shimmer of the phantom tapestry acquiring an aura of gold as it continued to weave itself thicker.

When the entirety of Snape's quarters were coated in the stuff, all of them stepping in it despite Draco's earlier caution, the Potions Master fell to his knees and incanted one last spell.

Instantly, all the warding flew back towards his wand to coalesce into a glowing ball floating in the air above Snape's outstretched hand.

"Dudley Dursley," he said, the English sounding harsh after all those soft Latinate sounds, "do you give consent that this domicile may host the powers that will protect and preserve your mother's sister's son, Harry James Potter?"

"Yes," Dudley whispered, looking sort of appalled, of all things. Harry figured that just came from him never having seen any ritual magic before. Draco's dancing candies definitely didn't count.

"Do you consent to yield up blood such that his mother's love-sacrifice may continue to reside in this place?"

"Yes," Dudley said again, and that time, he just looked plain scared. Probably the mention of the blood.

"Harry," Snape said, prompting him. They'd discussed this. It was taking all Snape's power just to hold the warding spells in place for the blood binding. That pulsating sphere above his hand was made of spells. Snape couldn't both keep it coalesced, and drip the blood atop it.

Stepping close, Harry took the ceremonial blade Draco held out, and with an apologetic wince, made a tiny slash in Dudley's palm. Holding his cousin firmly by the wrist--and ignoring the tremors that caused him--he turned the palm to face the floor and let the blood drip onto the warding spells Snape was holding steady.

Instead of being absorbed and made a part of the magic, as they all expected, the blood fell straight through the luminous sphere to drip onto Snape's own palm.

And then the concentrated magic in that sphere wavered, the ball undulating, unravelling, and vanishing from existence.

Snape uttered a long, low curse, and shakily pushed himself to his feet.

Draco stopped breathing.

Dudley rubbed his sore palm and looking around, said, "Is that it, then?"
It was left to Harry to conclude out loud, "I think it didn't work."

"No, it didn't," Snape concurred, his tone rather bleak. "The physical manifestation of the spells should have turned the colour of blood, and then, the colour of your mother's love, and flown back out to melt into the very stones that comprise these rooms."

"What went wrong?" Harry pressed.

Snape didn't answer that. "Draco, Floo the kitchens for something light to eat and drink." He sat at the dining table and beckoned everyone to join him, shaking his head at all questions until he'd drunk a full cup of tea and eaten a couple of finger sandwiches. Then he observed, "The form of the incantations was definitely not the problem. I think it must lie in the applicability of the spell."

"You said Dudley's blood could only be used to ward a personal residence," Harry remembered from their conversation in the hospital. "Maybe this doesn't count as one, even if you have been the sole occupant for years and years?"

Snape shook his head. "I did some other spells to check for that. The rooms here believe I'm the owner."

"Then that's the problem," Draco pronounced, waving a hand toward Dudley. "He should be the owner, surely, if he's going to be the key to warding this place. We're looking for things to be parallel, right? Harry's aunt owned her house, after all."

"But she didn't," Dudley gulped. "I mean, the bank owned most of it. Mortgage."

"Mortgage," Draco blankly repeated.

"They borrowed money to buy the house," Harry explained.

Draco's expression adopted a faintly sneering superior air, as if he was thinking, Borrowing money, how very vulgar.

"If your aunt could ward a place she didn't literally own, then Dudley's lack of ownership here can't be at issue," Snape mused out loud, his black eyes calculating possibilities. "And with the physical presence of his blood bonded to the spells, his lack of residence shouldn't be the problem, either. So why did the spell fail?"

Dudley suddenly laughed, a smile breaking out on his fat face as he stared at the three puzzled wizards. "It's him," he announced, pointing a pudgy finger at Harry. "He's the difference between that situation and this one. Isn't it obvious?"

Snape glanced at Harry, who only shrugged. "Yes?" the Potions Master prompted.

Dudley leaned his elbows on the table. "Of course your spells wouldn't work," he explained. "Harry was supposed to be living on Privet Drive. We were his family, bad as we were at it. And the spell is a family thing, isn't it, his mother's blood and all that? Harry belonged with us, had a right to be with us. This place is just a set of rooms to him. The blood dripped straight through that gooey magic thing because it saw that he doesn't have any real right to live here!"

Snape stared at Harry for a long moment, his gaze piercing as he considered that argument. Then, without any warning, he shoved his chair back and strode for the Floo, his robes billowing. Curious, the three boys stood and followed.

Snape threw a handful of powder into the fireplace, called for the headmaster, and waited until the
man's head appeared in the flames. Then, he had just one question.

"Albus, if you bring your considerable influence to bear, how soon can I be signing adoption papers on Harry Potter?"
Silence, absolute dead silence after the startling question Snape had tossed forth.

And then, several noises at once.

A thud, as Harry's legs buckled and he sat straight down on the dungeon floor.

Draco, snarling something foul as he stalked to the bedroom door and slammed it with so much force that the sound echoed across the stone rooms.

And Dumbledore, his head still in the fireplace, calmly saying, "Severus, perhaps we should discuss this in my office. Would you Floo up here straight away, please?" With that, he vanished from sight.

Snape turned to Harry, who stared back up at him with shocked green eyes. For a moment that seemed to stretch out into infinity, the Potions Master just looked at him. Waiting for him to speak? Harry didn't know. Besides, he didn't think he could speak, or even croak. Not one word.

"Severus," an impatient, disembodied voice beckoned from the Floo.

That broke Snape out of his contemplation . . . or whatever it was. "Are you going to be all right?" he asked Harry, bending down to pull the boy to his feet.

Harry nodded, a little surprised that his legs were able to support him. Then he shook his head. Then he shrugged. Actually, he wasn't sure what he felt, or even what the question meant . . . Sure, he was going to be all right as far as say, not fainting dead away on the spot. No, he wasn't going to be all right with being adopted just so that some stupid spell could work! Of course, as spells went, he supposed that this one wasn't so very stupid. It could keep him alive . . . not that Voldemort likely to come bursting right into the Hogwarts dungeons . . . still, Riddle had invaded the place before, hadn't he? And sent his minions in as well.

All right, so the spell wasn't stupid at all.

Feeling like he was a rubber band being pulled in about six directions at once, Harry just shrugged again.

"We'll talk when I return," Snape promised, then stepped into the Floo and disappeared in a blazing emerald bonfire.

"Wow," Dudley said, his eyes about as wide as Harry's, though for different reasons. "He just went up in a pillar of flame. Can you do that, too?"

Harry winced, and found he had a voice after all. "I used to be able to."

Dudley nodded, reasoning as he went, "So he went off to talk to that other man? It's a way to travel? Wow. That's really weird. Er . . . will your teacher be all right?"

That time it was Harry nodding. It felt like his head was too heavy for his shoulders. Exhausted, he sank down onto the couch and leaned his neck back against the cushions. "He won't get burned or anything, Dudley. It's just a way wizards get around. Um, you did see me do it, once, remember?"
Harry groaned then, remembering something himself. Dudley had been rather preoccupied the only
time Harry had flooed in front of him. *Ton tongue toffee* . . . And it wasn't like he'd seen the
Weasleys arrive in the fireplace, either, what with that whole disaster of it having been bricked up.

Dudley smiled, his features relaxing. Harry didn't know what that meant. He was pretty sure his
cousin hadn't actually forgotten the horrible incident with the twins' candies.

As it turned out, the smile meant that Dudley's thoughts had moved past that to something far more
important. It also meant that he couldn't sense the tension in Harry's frame, because what he said
was, "That's really great, though, Harry. I'm happy for you."

Obviously excited, he plopped down on the other end of the couch and sort of bounced as he sat
there.

Harry looked up through eyes that felt somehow dry and tight. Or maybe the feeling was in his
throat; he couldn't really tell. "Oh, that . . . I . . . er, I'm not even sure what he meant by that, really."

Dudley stared at him like he'd grown an extra ear. "Seemed clear enough to me. I guess you're just
shocked, huh? 'Bout time you had a dad of your own, if you ask me."

Dad? Harry's stomach did a flip inside him. Then it started twisting like it had the time he'd added
too much dragonwort to his Sneezing Syrup. The feeling was awful, just awful. "Dudley . . ."

Sighing, Harry lifted his head so he could look at his cousin. An ache started deep in his temples and
radiated out to wrap around his head as he tried to find the words that would make Dudley
understand. "Don't say anything like that again, all right? Especially not once Professor Snape gets
back here. Because . . . well, assuming he even really meant what he seemed to, he's really not the . .
. um, dad type, all right?"

Dudley was shaking his head, a stubborn look on his face.

"It's just for the spell," Harry explained. "It's . . . a legality. A technicality. It doesn't mean *anything*,
Dudley!"

His cousin started babbling something, but Harry couldn't hear what, because Draco was storming
back out, slamming his wooden door into the stone wall as he flung it open, his voice about as irate
as Harry had ever heard it. "You ungrateful little prat! Doesn't mean anything, eh? Yeah, well when
*I* needed help Severus sure as shite didn't come up with a plan like that for me, did he?"

It took Harry a moment to assimilate the fact that Draco was jealous, of all things. "You needed a
different kind of help, that was all," he quietly said, looking at the other boy but not really seeing
him.

"He could have adopted *me*," Draco raged, stomping back and forth across the room, "instead of
setting things up so I'd be emancipated from my parents' control. But adoption . . . didn't even occur
to him, I bet. Never mind the fact that *I'm* a Slytherin while you're just a bloody irritating Gryffindor.
Never mind that *I* was the one who's known him forever and ever, while up until what, late-September
he absolutely *hated your guts!* And you just throw it all back in his face with this it's just for the spell
crap!"

"But it *is* for the spell," Harry insisted.

"The spell's just a catalyst!" His sneer becoming more pronounced, Draco scathed, "Oh, no wonder
you don't get it. In the first place, with your lousy marks in Potions, I bet you don't know what a
catalyst even *is*! And in the second, you probably don't think Slytherins have any feelings!"
"I never said Slytherins don't have feelings!" Harry protested.

"You sure did! You do, every time you forget I gave you back your damned wand, every time you make some snide remark about how I just must have a way to fool Veritaserum, every time you act like I'm some species of slug incapable of the slightest loyalty!"

"Yeah, well Veritaserum or not, I know you lied to me!" Harry shot back. "I just felt so bad when I heard what my father did to you . . ." he cruelly mimicked Draco's aristocratic tones. "Even Snape says you're a bad liar, did you know that? And you were lying! I know it and you know it. About the only one who doesn't seem to know it is Snape! So don't go on about how he's choosing a Gryffindor over you, Malfoy! If he was doing that, I wouldn't have to put up with your lying face!"

Draco was as ashen as earlier, but somehow more composed. "I take back everything I said about the book," he calmly announced, brushing his hands against the front of his trousers as though the atmosphere in the room was tainted. "You aren't overcompensating at all. You're completely mental, Potter. And there's something wrong with the Eyesight Elixir, since you're blind as well! You honestly can't see that Severus cares about you?"

"Well sure, he cares," Harry admitted, shrugging. "He's a decent man where it counts. But why does he care? Because I'm the vanguard of the war effort, just like you said! Snape'll do anything it takes to make sure I can fulfil my damned destiny! One look at Dudley here is all you need to prove that true!" Harry turned to his cousin, giving him an apologetic look, and then resumed talking to Draco. "Snape didn't want a Muggle in his quarters! But he went to a lot of trouble to arrange for it, just to keep me safe so that I can off Voldemort some day! This latest idea of his is more of the same. It's strategy, Draco. I'd think a Slytherin could see as much!"

"You aren't just strategy!" Draco shook his head. "For Merlin's sake, he lets you go chat him up every night!"

"Yeah, well I read the book, just like you kept harping on about, so that's not so hard to explain, is it? Very clear in there, all that stuff about trauma victims needing someone trustworthy to talk to. He knows he's just about the only person I trust these days, so he's trying to be there for me. I said he was a decent man, didn't I?"

Draco bared his teeth, then opened his mouth as if he had a few more choice things to say. When he spoke though, it was to urge, his voice a little shaky. "Harry . . . it's not like that. Listen, all right? Severus . . . he told me he'd wished you'd been sorted into Slytherin. Said it would have taken him one hell of a lot less time to see who you really are, if . . . crud, Potter, just how dense are you? Severus is really fond of you."

Harry retreated, pushing himself more firmly into the corner of the couch, his hands shaking.

"You're a complete mess, do you know that?" Draco questioned. "You'd better just hope that the spell does mistake technicalities for real relationships, 'cause you're so psychologically damaged, you can't wrap your mind around the idea of family, can you?"

"Don't be mean to Harry!" Dudley erupted, jumping to his feet, his hands balled into fists at his side.

"That's it," Draco pronounced, throwing up his hands. "I'm going to bed."

The bedroom door slammed again, though with less force than before, leaving Harry and Dudley staring at each other.

"Uh . . . I guess he forgot he's supposed to sleep out here," Harry murmured, beginning to wonder
just where Draco would be sleeping. It was hard to imagine him willingly sliding into the bed Dudley had been using, even taking into account cleaning charms and the like. It seemed equally unlikely, though, that Draco would take his bed.

The faint sound of water dripping drifted through the air. No singing though, not tonight.

"He's mean, but he's right, you know," Dudley slowly said as he turned to face Harry. "I don't know your teacher very well, but he seems to really like you."

"He's . . . I don't know," Harry said, rubbing the sides of his head.

"You look done in," Dudley said sympathetically. "Why don't you go in to bed? I'll take the couch. No big deal."

Harry couldn't help but sigh. "No, I'd better wait up for Snape. Um, you look pretty tired too. You go use my bed, all right?"

"All right," Dudley murmured. "'Night, Harry."

"Good night," Harry returned. Once he was alone, he fetched Sals from her little box, and let the snake slither up and down his arms. After a while, he lay down on his back and stared at the ceiling, remembering how it had looked being spelled with that silvery spectral fabric.

"Harry is up-ssset," Sals hissed, her tongue coming out to flicker lightly against his ear.

"No, not really," Harry hissed back, closing his eyes. "I'm just tired."

"Sssleep," Sals suggested.

Harry didn't think he could, especially considering that the room was still brightly lit, but as the minutes ticked past, each one slower than the last, he found that what had started off as an excuse quickly became the truth.

"Ssstay with me, Sals," Harry whispered as he felt the weight of sleep begin to drag him under. Sals curled up into a coil on the boy's breastbone, her head lightly bobbing as she watched Harry sleep.

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The loss of Sal's slight weight was enough to rouse Harry from his slumber. He cracked an eye to see Snape cradling the little snake in one palm, then tipping her carefully into the box she slept in.

Shaking his head to clear it, Harry pulled his feet off the couch and sat up. His first thought was rather inane, but he was still half-asleep. Besides, he didn't think he'd seen Snape touch Sals before. "You aren't afraid of snakes?"

"Not at all," Snape replied in a level tone.

"Right," Harry said. Snape was doing it again, just looking at him. Staring, sort of like Harry was some mysterious Potion ingredient, and Snape had to decide if he should chop him, mince him, or toss him in the cauldron whole. The sensation of being studied was so strong that Harry abruptly broke out into shivers all over. "Um, could you spell the lights off for me?" he ventured, a little desperate to just end that stare. "I'm sleeping out here, tonight."

"Not at all," Snape replied in a level tone.

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Snape's lips firmed into a thin, straight line. "You don't think we might have a few things to
discuss?"

Harry shook his head. "No, sir."

Snape took a seat on the chair nearest Harry, and settled into it, a look of profound contemplation on his face. Almost on cue, the staring began again. "Really," he drawled.

"No, sir," Harry repeated.

"You're willing to have me adopt you, just like that."

"Yes, sir."

"Stop this yes, sir . . . no, sir nonsense at once," Snape snapped, his fingers curling into claws. "I'd appreciate knowing what you actually think of the idea."

Harry's headache roared back in full force. The truth was, he didn't know what he thought of the idea. He wasn't even sure what the idea was. Adopt him, sure. That made sense. Just for the spell though, right? Just until Voldemort was defeated? And it would just be pretend, right? Oh sure, legal and all that, but not the slightest bit real . . . Right?

"Um, well . . . I think it's a pretty good plan," Harry finally managed to say.

"Plan," Snape slowly repeated, sounding almost as though he'd never heard the word before.

Harry nodded, not knowing why he was suddenly short on breath. He sucked in a couple of draughts of air, but somehow ended up feeling even more breathless. Go figure. His headache was pounding in his temples now, the pain so severe it was beginning to make him queasy.

"It wasn't so much a plan as a paradigm shift," his teacher clarified.

Like Harry knew what that meant. "Whatever." He glossed that over. "Dumbledore, though, he thought it would work? I mean, to trick the spell?"

"I think you're missing the point," Snape announced, resting his wrists on his knees as he leaned forward to peer closely at Harry. "I have no interest in adopting you in name only."

"You mean I have to change my name?" Harry gasped. "Um, Harry Snape?"

"That wouldn't suit you," Snape said with a small smile which vanished as quickly as it had come. "Are you being deliberately obtuse? I'm not talking about anything as shallow as names."

Harry tried another deep breath. It didn't make his temples throb any less, but at least it took the edge off his nausea. "Well, good," he shortly retorted, then warmed to the topic. "'Cause I like my name. And whatever my father did to you, he was my father and even you said that in the end he came out all right. I think Potter's a fine name. Besides, as much as I hate being famous for something stupid like managing to live even though I got my parents killed, the name's kind of stuck to the war effort now. You know, how's it going to look if Harry Potter isn't Harry Potter any longer?"

"No one is remotely suggesting you change your name," Snape patiently repeated.

"Well, good," Harry said again, his tone rather defiant by then. "'Cause I won't. Now, if you don't mind, could you spell off the lights? I think my headache would go away if I could just sleep."

"Why didn't you say you needed a potion?" Snape asked, sounding surprised.
"Because I don't! I just need to be left alone to sleep!"

"Not until we settle things." Standing, Snape crooked a beckoning finger. "Come into my office where we can speak in private."

Harry followed, feeling like he was dragging himself down the hall. The noise of Snape closing the door made him sort of jump. When the man offered him a small vial of Headache Calming Draught, he downed it in one gulp, then waited. And waited.

"Didn't work," he finally announced, frowning. "Can't I please sleep?"

Snape narrowed his eyes. "No. Sit down." When Harry didn't, his teacher took him by the shoulders and gently shoved him into a chair, then stood behind him and began to knead and massage his shoulders. "It's a tension headache," he determined. "Did the draught not help at all?"

"Well, all right, some," Harry admitted. Actually, the potion had worked fairly well; it just hadn't cleared his headache entirely.

"Stop trying to avoid this conversation," Snape growled, his fingers digging into muscle with more force. Not too much, though. He did know how to ease the tightness in Harry's neck and shoulders. "Just relax, you idiot child."

Minute by minute, Harry began to. It probably helped that Snape stopped talking. It also helped that the light in the office was far less bright. Definitely, those hands helped. Fingers against his vertebrae, working out every kink.

"You're good at this," Harry finally said, the words emerging a bit sluggishly.

"Enough?"

"No."

Snape lightly chuckled and kept it up for a good while longer, then said, "I know your headache must be gone by now."

"It is," Harry admitted.

"All right then. Time to talk." Snape took the seat facing Harry, and looked him straight in the eyes. "I meant what I said, Harry. Quite sincerely."

"Well, I figured that out," Harry murmured. "I mean, you wouldn't suggest it unless you thought it would work."

"You're still thinking of the warding spells," Snape sighed. "That isn't the central issue--"

"Will it work?" Harry interrupted. "Did the headmaster think so?"

"We think your cousin is right about why the spells failed, yes."

"Well, that's it, then," Harry said, nodding to himself. "That is not it," Snape disagreed, lacing his fingers together. "Sure it is."

Harry shifted in his chair, only to hear Snape tersely order, "Sit down! We aren't through!" He saw
Snape take a deep breath, and then another... just as if he were a little bit nervous. That struck him as strange.

"Harry." Snape said finally, his head inclined to study the boy. "Dudley's epiphany, while valuable in of itself, has managed to... confuse one thing with another. The truth is, I'd been thinking along the lines he suggested well before the warding spells failed to lock themselves in place."

Harry twisted a lip. "Right. You were going to adopt me anyway. Sure you were."

"I admit, I hadn't got quite that far in my thinking," Snape shot him a smile. Brief and strained, it didn't reach his black eyes. "Long before Samhain, I'd realised that we got on surprisingly well. And after your uncle was killed, it came to me that you had no guardian left... Actually, that you'd never had any adult caretaker truly looking out for your interests. Not since James and Lily."

"Professor..." Harry swallowed, realizing that Snape actually was nervous. It wasn't like him to ramble. "Why do you think I never let on to anyone about the cupboard and all that? Ron and Hermione don't even know; not the worst of it. You went on in class for years about how pampered and spoiled I was, and I never said a word to refute you, did I? Why do you suppose that was?"

"That's another conversation--"

"No, it's this one," Harry insisted. "Go on, think about it. Why didn't I tell people I'd been mistreated and unloved almost my entire life?"

Snape twisted his lips. "I suppose you were embarrassed. Possibly you were even ashamed."

"Possibly," Harry admitted, thinking back to when he was eleven. It was hard to remember all he'd felt then, when it was so overshadowed by how he felt about things, now. "But the main reason, way more important than those, was that I didn't want people feeling sorry for me. You see?"

Snape took a moment to consider the question. "You think I pity you, then."

"Well, you did just say I'd never had anyone... a grown-up, I mean, who really took care of me. Me, not the child-of-prophecy or the warrior-in-training. Sirius could have, I think... but Azkaban left him... I don't know. He loved me, but he was... damaged. It's like fate's conspired to snatch away from me anybody I get, one way or another. I know how pitiful that is."

"The fact that people look at you and see something other than your true self is unfortunate," Snape agreed, his gaze steady. "I myself have been guilty of this, as you well know. I see you now, Harry, or at least as much of you as you will permit me to see. But when I think of the wasteland that has been your entire childhood, it isn't pity I feel."

Harry couldn't hold that sombre gaze; he looked away. He didn't want to know, he told himself. He just didn't. He wouldn't ask.

But he did. "What, then?" came whispering from his lips.

It took Snape a long while to answer. "Admiration is there," the man finally said. "Because I have suffered too, Harry. It is easy to become embittered... but you have risen above the impulse. Forgiving that cousin of yours..." He lightly shuddered.

"Oh, Dudley isn't so bad."

"Now, perhaps," Snape conceded. "But I knew you before you could Occlude. You will never convince me that it was easy growing up alongside him."
Well, that was one thing about Snape, Harry reflected. He knew things about Harry that went deep. Memories that had scarred him, way down where nobody knew to look. But Snape knew. Actually, he knew, and he'd never used those memories to hurt or taunt him, not even back when they were enemies, not even after Harry had looked into that Pensieve and Snape had wanted to get even.

Deliberately dropping his potion assignment, Harry suddenly realised, though vindictive and reprehensible, hadn't been the worst Snape could have done. Not by a long shot.

Harry shrugged. "I'm not really that admirable. If you knew how many times I wished the Dursleys dead, all of them, even Dudley--" He stopped, because Snape's lips were twitching despite the gravity of the conversation. "Oh. Right. You do know." Because that, too, was woven throughout the whole matrix of his memories.

"You're entirely normal," Snape told him. "And that, perhaps, is my whole point. You've never been treated normally. You went from ten years of base deprivation to being held up to honour and glory which you'd done nothing to merit. You said a moment ago that you managed to live despite getting your parents killed. But you did neither the one nor the other, Harry. Your mother shielded you with her love. She managed to make you live, and gave her life in the process. And the consequence for you was to make everyone treat you as something other than normal."

"Tell me about it," Harry muttered.

"Everyone except me," Snape added.

Harry's eyes opened wide at that. "Oh, you have got to be kidding me! No offence, all right? Because it's over, but you spent five years being awful to me, absolutely awful!"

"I wanted to hurt James," Snape admitted. "Irrational and inappropriate response--"

"Immature, arseholish response," Harry put in.

"Yes. Because I had let myself become embittered. Yes, Harry. When I would shred your ego to ribbons in Potions class, and see the hurt on your face, I somehow thought James was hurting for you, wherever he was. And that satisfied me. But for all my own . . . issues, I am the only one here who insisted--tried to insist, rather--that no matter what nonsense the Daily Prophet spouted about you, within these walls we should ignore your celebrity status."

"Is that part of why you were so mean? You were trying to balance out all the damned hero-worship I got from other quarters?"

"No. You imbue me with too much altruism . . . Don't sugar-coat how I treated you. It was ill-done of me. In my own way, I was reacting to image as much as anyone, just in a different sense."

"Then why do you say you treated me normally?" Harry tilted his head to the side, trying hard to understand.

Snape tapped his fingertips together. "It was more a case of trying to make the headmaster do so," he admitted. "I wasn't able to rise above my anger to do it myself, but I entreated him to keep you to the same rules others were required to abide by. First-years are not allowed to have brooms at school or play on house teams; you were. Neither is it standard practice to issue students invisibility cloaks. Time and again he allowed you to circumvent the rules, his purpose being to forge in you the strength to fulfill that prophecy. Worse than that, he set you to challenges no child should have to face. Fawkes could have rescued you from the Chamber of Secrets, you realise. He did carry you out in the end. Instead, the headmaster had his blasted bird deliver you the Sorting Hat so you might
have a sword. A twelve-year old, expected to slay a Basilisk! And as if that weren't outrageous enough, he wanted to see if you could vanquish the memory of Riddle, as well! The fact that you could do it didn't make it right to subject you to what amounted to another form of abuse. Albus and I have had words on the subject, more than once."

"You can't be saying you cared about me all those years ago," Harry mumbled.

"No," Snape admitted. "I thought you were arrogant, and that raising you as a saviour instead of a boy would make you even more unbearable. I even thought it would be counterproductive; that you would begin to disregard your elders' instruction, which would make you less likely to fulfil your destiny, as it were. I was not concerned about you as a person, not at all, not then. But still, I was the only one who fought Albus, who argued that you should be treated normally."

Harry felt tears welling to his eyes, awful globs of tears he couldn't stop. "You were right," he gasped. "I was arrogant, just as you said! Everybody told me to learn Occlumency, and I thought I knew better, and Sirius died because I was too stupid to listen to advice!"

Snape's hands wrapped themselves around his wrists, and gripped them firmly. Only when Harry looked up did he speak, his voice intense with sincerity. "Your godfather died because I made those lessons an exercise in humiliation instead of strength. He died because Albus spent five years conditioning you to save others, because he deliberately inculcated in you the conviction that you are responsible to do so! Fawkes could have spirited Miss Weasley out of the chamber, Harry! The second task did not need to be one that endangered a loved one! Diggory's death only hit you so hard because by then, you had been taught that you should be able to save anyone!"

_Dumbledore could have saved Sirius from the Dementors himself, Harry mentally added, instead of sending me back with Hermione to do it. Dumbledore could have got me out of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Binding magical contract or no, he could have found a way. But I saw that glimmer in his eye when the Goblet spit out my name. He wanted me to compete. He wanted me to face those Tasks, and develop my reflexes, build my skills . . . no matter that without all the help I got from Crouch I'd have failed, and failed again . . . _

Things seemed more clear to him than ever before. What he had taken for leniency . . . the broom, the cloak . . . had been nothing short of strategy. Dumbledore, moulding him into a warrior for the Light.

"But you think you can treat me normally?" Harry prompted.

"I think you present challenges in that regard," Snape returned, squeezing his wrists, then releasing them and sitting back again. "Because from the moment Voldemort marked you his equal, you ceased to be an average child, to say the least. I also think, however, that I am the only one who so much as realises that you are a child, Harry."

"I'm sixteen, in case you've forgotten."

Snape's hair billowed slightly as he shook an amused head. "The only one who realises it's wrong to expect you to live and breathe as a quasi-adult instead of an adolescent," he amended.

"You aren't the only one," Harry had to say. "Sirius wanted me to be a kid. He wanted to take me in, even, offered way back in third year. Did you know that? For a long time I blamed you that I had to keep going back to the Dursleys, when I could have spent my summers with Sirius. I never got to know him, not really. And I could have."

"Do you still hold me at fault?"
"Not as much," Harry answered honestly. "Dumbledore wouldn't have allowed it, I'm thinking now. I mean, I don't think a godfather has any real say; it wasn't like he was my legal guardian. The headmaster would have made me stay where I was warded. And really, the fact that Pettigrew got away, that Sirius lost his chance at exoneration, had more to do with Remus transforming than with the fact that you stormed in and muddied the waters. Suppose you'd never shown up at all that night?" Harry shrugged. "The moon would still have risen."

Harry drew in a deep breath. "Anyway, Mr and Mrs Weasley think I'm a child, too. Well, they would. They have enough children of their own to recognise one. I . . . I don't know them very well, though," he added shakily. "I might, by now, if the headmaster had let me spend summers there or something . . ." He shrugged. "Anyway, that saving-people thing has been . . . what's your word . . . inculcated in me for good, I think. I can't get rid of it, Professor. Which means I couldn't dream of letting the Weasleys adopt me, assuming they would even offer. It would make them targets for Voldemort." A dry laugh almost made him choke. "At least you're a target already. Hell, at least you have a decent shot at defending yourself."

He didn't even realise his eyes had closed until he felt a glass of something cool being pressed into his hand. Looking at it, Harry lifted a brow. "Wine? I thought you said it would interfere with the Elixir." He moved his hand down to hold the glass by the stem.

"It should be fine," Snape murmured. "Sip it to moisten your throat."

Harry did. "Oh. That's really nice. Sort of . . . light and fruity." He drank a slightly bigger sip, and smiled.

"Were you expecting something foul?"

"Well, I'd only ever had a taste of Aunt Petunia's cooking sherry, and it was sort of icky," Harry admitted.

"Ah."

Harry slowly drained the glass, then leaned sideways to set it down on Snape's desk. "All right. This adoption idea. It's not just for the spell?"

"I see it's not solely a classroom behaviour, this failure to pay attention."

"Sorry," Harry admitted. It had been a stupid question, considering all they'd discussed. "The spell was a catalyst."

"Perhaps you do sometimes pay attention."

Harry decided not to mention that he'd picked the word up from Draco. "All right, you um . . . cared about me before the warding failed, I got that. But you said your thinking hadn't got as far as actually . . . er, getting yourself stuck with me for good. So what were you thinking, then? That's what I'd like to know."

Snape's lips curled in a rueful smile. "I was thinking I didn't want to lose the understanding we'd come to have, Harry. More than that, I wanted to be in a position where I could help you if you needed it, and I most certainly don't merely mean with warding, or even magic in general. I want to be able to help you with life. Adoption didn't occur to me as parenting is rather outside my area of experience." He slanted a glance at the boy, "I had actually toyed with the idea of offering you an apprenticeship when you graduate."

"An apprenticeship," Harry gasped. "In Potions . . ." He couldn't help but laugh at that image.
"Daft idea, I know," Snape agreed, chuckling a bit. "You could be . . . adequate in the field, with more work and study. You do not have the makings for a Master. It was the best idea I'd had, however, until Dudley spoke up and I experienced a paradigm shift."

That time, Harry asked. "Paradigm shift?"

"It means a rethinking of one's beliefs, in such a profound way that the entire universe appears to be afterwards altered."

"Oh . . ." Harry remembered, then, reading the phrase before. It had been in a book about cosmology . . . Hermione's recommendation. Harry had only read the first couple of chapters, and he'd thought you said the word para-digum, but he understood the concept. "Like when astronomers realised the world wasn't flat, it changed their whole idea of everything. Right?"

"The world isn't flat?" Snape chuckled again. "Yes, like that."

"And your great rethinking was . . . ?"

"I'd never considered adopting you because, quite simply, I couldn't possibly conceive of myself as a parent. Then Dudley pointed out how much you needed one, and . . . the universe changed, Harry. I could see myself in the role."

Then Harry got it, really got it. The spell had been a catalyst, nothing more. He wondered how Draco had known that. "Um . . . so, say we do this . . ." That thought got sidetracked into another. "Will they let us do this?"

"Oh, I think so. The headmaster has a way of getting what he wants."

"And he wants this?"

"He was rather startled, I will say," Snape sighed. "He hasn't seen us together very much of late. His primary concern appeared to be that I would . . . I believe the word was bully you into it. Do you feel unduly pressured?"

Harry crossed his ankles and thought about that. "Not by you, so much. I keep thinking about the wards, about how Voldemort isn't too likely to just pop in for lunch, seeing as this is Dumbledore's domain . . . but also how he keeps finding a way in here. And Samhain . . . I can't even say how awful that was. I need those wards up, especially after . . ."

"After Samhain?"

"After my magic comes back, I was going to say," Harry admitted, his voice pitched low. "I think Voldemort assumed that wild magic was coming from other quarters; you rescuing me, or the headmaster. I think, as long as he believes I'm powerless, he won't bother about me. But after I get my magic back, he'll know it. He'll start in on my scar again. He'll send me those awful dreams . . . if the wards aren't up by then, he might come here to get me!"

"So you do feel pressured to accept my offer."

"Yeah, if it'll make the spell work," Harry said, a bitter, strangled laugh catching in his throat. "That's ironic, isn't it? I was upset at first, and sort of depressed, thinking that you wanted to protect me but you didn't really want me, and it turns out you do, but that I can hardly stand the idea of anybody being my parent. Because I've never had one, Professor. I . . . I guess I need a paradigm shift, too."

"That it's all right to depend on someone." Snape nodded. "That sixteen isn't grown."
"Something like that." Harry picked up his empty wine glass, needing to do something with his hands. He twirled the stem, looking anywhere but at Snape as he spoke. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be rude. It can't be nice, hearing me say yes just to let the warding proceed."

"What would be nice," Snape softly said, the words washing over Harry like a vow, "is to hear you say yes at all. Because the rest . . . well, it will either come or it won't, but I would like to have a chance to let it."

Bracing himself, Harry looked up. "Is it awful if I have some questions, first?"

"Prudent, I would say. And so?"

Now that the time had come, Harry didn't quite know what to ask. It wasn't as though he'd ever contemplated having a conversation like this one. He'd figured out a long time ago that it just wasn't going to happen, that Sirius was on the run and couldn't take on the responsibility, and nobody else would ever offer. His mind was blank, and Snape was waiting, and Harry blurted out the first thing that came to mind. Actually, once he heard it come out of his mouth, he realised it was the only thing on his mind.

"What would you do to punish me?"

Snape's eyes instantly flashed so much anger that Harry was tempted to say never mind, even though he did want an answer. "I didn't mean it that way," he said instead. "I mean, I'm not trying to say in advance I plan to break your rules--"

"You breaking rules is almost certainly inevitable," Snape snapped.

"Well, if the mere prospect practically sends you into a fit, we're probably not a good match, then!" Harry snapped back.

"My fit, such as it was, was sheer unadulterated rage that those Muggles made care and punishment somewhat synonymous in your mind. I am not angry with you for asking the question, however." Snape tapped his fingers together. "What would I do to punish you? I don't honestly know. I suppose the same sorts of things I've had you do in detention. Or . . . extra assignments? I certainly won't hex you, as Lucius favours, or maltreat you as seems to be the Muggle way."

"All right," Harry agreed. "So what about rules, then? What would they be?"

Snape stared at him. "I have no idea at the moment. We'll need to negotiate them as needed, I should imagine."

"Negotiate . . ." Harry cocked an eyebrow. "You mean that?"

"I do know you aren't six, Harry," Snape pointed out. "I know you have needs and opinions of your own, and a mind fully capable of appreciating multiple points of view. There will doubtless come times when you will have to accept my judgment on certain things, and accept it even though you vehemently disagree. But when it is feasible, yes, we will negotiate."

Harry thought he could live with that. Actually, it was a better deal than he'd expected to get. Snape seemed more the authoritarian type . . . but that was probably confusing his classroom demeanour with the man himself. Potions class, after all, wasn't a place where much negotiation was possible, not when one wrong ingredient could make cauldrons go off like rockets.

He tried to think of anything else he needed to ask. "Is the whole thing going to have to be some secret I can't tell anybody?"
Snape seemed slightly surprised. "You may tell whomever you wish."

"So can you," Harry quipped, and when his teacher jerked slightly, added, "Oh, I mean yes. I probably should have said that part first."

"Yes?"

"Yes."

As though reluctant to believe it, Snape cautiously confirmed, "You have no more questions?"

"No. Do you have any?"

Snape shook his head, but Harry couldn't tell whether it was in answer or some kind of disbelief. Definitely, the man seemed a little bit shocked now that things were more or less settled. He covered it by conjuring a second wine glass, his wandwork just a little more grandiose than required. The bottle from before was still on his desk. Snape cast a cooling charm across it, then poured out two half-glasses of pale amber liquid. Harry's glass was still in his hand; he held it carefully still while Snape poured, afraid that making him spill might mean bad luck, or something.

And Harry felt like he needed all the luck he could get.

Snape lifted his glass. "To the future," he softly said, then clinked his glass against Harry's.

Harry knew he should say something back, but he didn't think he could. A sort of choking feeling was coming over him. Not fears, not tears . . . he wasn't really sure what it was, but he wanted it to go away. He went ahead and took a big swallow of wine, but it didn't help.

The feeling remained, a lump in his throat, a slight tremor in his hands. Harry ignored it as best he could. This adoption thing would work out all right, wouldn't it?

Of course it will, his rational mind answered. Never mind that behind that thought were countless others. Aunt Petunia stuffing him in that cupboard, saying he deserved nothing better. Remus, practically dropping off the face of the earth just when Harry had finally started to believe in him. Sirius, wishing Harry could be James, instead. Sirius, falling through the Veil . . .

Unable to bear such thoughts, Harry brought up his defences, raised a wall of fire in his mind, and hid himself inside it. He didn't know what else to do, how else to manage. But because he did trust Snape, he didn't try to hide the fact that he was Occluding.

Snape studied him for a moment, his dark eyes intent, but said nothing of it.

After a moment, he drank his wine as well.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Confession: About the last line from the previous chapter . . . that is, Snape's abrupt question, "Albus, if you bring your considerable influence to bear, how soon can I be signing adoption papers on Harry Potter?" Well, I must confess all at this point. My brilliant, beautiful, and absolutely wonderful kind-hearted beta, Mercredi, is the one who came up with that particular phrasing. I wanted to give her credit for it earlier . . . but I was afraid that if I said she came up with the last line, people might skip to the last line
and miss all the fun build-up to the climax. And I so wanted everyone to enjoy the whole ride and get the full impact of the *whamo!* Mercredi helped me plot. She's truly a gifted writer, and so much help, chapter after chapter. Anyway, I grant her full credit for the line now, as well as *all* her help -- she hears *every* theory about how the plot might go, and helps me eliminate the really bad ones. She comes up with the greatest ideas herself, things that just mesh perfectly with what I had in mind . . . plus of course, some truly stunning lines. And so, I take off my hat and humbly bow down to Mercredi.
Breakfast the next morning was such a tense affair that even Dudley couldn't miss the undercurrents. Harry was exhausted, having only had a few hours of sleep after that long conversation with Snape. Worse than that, he had no idea how to act around the man. He tried his best just to behave normally, but ended up self-consciously analyzing every possible phrasing and intonation any time he had to talk. It got to be so nerve-wracking that practically all he could come out with were variations on the yes, sir . . . no sir theme. Harry didn't know if Snape understood just how mixed-up he was feeling, but he was grateful that the man didn't rebuke him for all those "sirs" the way he had the night before.

And then there was Draco, who pushed his food around his plate, smearing a trail of egg yolk all over it, but didn't eat a single bite. Draco, who kept his lips pressed tightly together and his comments inside, but slammed his fork down every time Harry used the word "sir."

Snape didn't say anything about that, either, though it couldn't have been lost on him that Draco was angry. And jealous. Harry figured that Snape probably planned to talk to Draco about it later, when he could get the Slytherin boy alone. While they were brewing together, maybe. They did a lot of that, and Harry didn't usually join them. Potions just weren't very interesting.

He smiled a little bit, thinking it was sort of nice that Snape wanted him around even though potion-making wasn't Harry's favourite thing. Had wanted to apprentice him, even, just to keep him around.

Draco glanced up, saw the smile, and made a strange sort of growling noise.

Evidently having had enough of the strained atmosphere, Snape rose to his feet and pulled on the outer robes he kept hung by the door. "I'm sorry to spoil your Saturday, but I believe the headmaster has some paperwork for us to complete in his office," he announced to Harry. His gaze swept over the table. "Have you finished?"

Harry's glance skittered off to the side. Paperwork meant legalities, and legalities would make the adoption official. He suddenly couldn't face it. "Um . . . I think I might like another cranberry muffin-"

"You haven't eaten more than a quarter of the one you have!" Draco all but exploded.

Dudley shifted his chair over, away from the other boy, and ate his watermelon in worried little nibbles as he glanced from Harry to Draco and back.

Snape narrowed his eyes and gave Draco a short glare, but when he returned his gaze to Harry, his expression was mild. "Procrastination, Harry? Where's your Gryffindor courage?"

"It gets people killed," Harry bitterly stated, mashing the tines of his fork into his muffin until it was a pulpy mess.

Snape put a hand on Harry's wrist to still his frenetic movements. "That answer is misdirection. Can't you tell me what is the matter?"

"I . . . " Harry groaned, then managed to whisper, "I just keep asking myself what my father would have to say about all this."

"Your father's dead!" Draco erupted. "In case you haven't noticed, Severus here is alive and willing to take you on, even if it does get him killed. You might consider not being such a spoiled little arse
to him, you know!"

"That's enough," Snape said before Harry could reply. Not that Harry knew what to say to that. "Get your cloak, Harry, and we'll floo up."

Harry got his cloak, but said, "I can't floo anywhere, Professor."

"Not done procrastinating yet?" sniped Draco.

"E-nough!" Snape snapped, enunciating the word with more force than before.

"I might burn up!" retorted Harry.

"Nonsense," said Snape, wrapping his robes around himself in preparation. "I wasn't planning to send you alone. If we go together, my magic will pull you through without incident."

"Well, even so, I don't much like the idea," Harry stubbornly insisted. "Is it so much trouble to walk up?"

"Mr Potter," Snape said, his voice adopting full professorial tone, "I quite assure you, there is no reason to be concerned. My own magic will shield you from any ill effects. I know whereof I speak."

"I can't believe you ding Hermione for using hitherto," Harry muttered, before he realised that insults probably weren't the best tack to take. All in all, he wasn't quite clear on just why Snape even wanted him around. He'd understood, when he'd thought the adoption was just to make the warding spells work. Now though . . . well, Snape had said Harry was somewhat admirable, but Harry didn't think he was. So where did that leave him? Harry couldn't shake off an awful premonition that he could still blow it with Snape, and that would leave him with nobody. Again.

He suddenly wished he hadn't mentioned his father, even if Snape had asked. He really, really wished he could agree to floo, but not even to keep things on an even keel could he risk what the flames might do to him.

"Um, I mean, a walk would make for a really nice change, sir," he murmured, shifting nervously on his feet. "I'm sure you can protect me in the Floo," he lied, hoping to mollify the man, "but I haven't had a chance to really stretch my legs in weeks."

Draco gritted his teeth and clenched his fists, then hurriedly shoved them under the table.

"And besides," Harry miserably added, "the idea sort of reminds me of . . . er, Samhain."

Snape uncrossed his arms. "I didn't realise. Well, I suppose this is one of those times when we negotiate, then. We'll walk. Are you ready?"

Harry nodded. "Dudley, will you be all right here?"

"No, I'm going to kill him and stuff his body up the chimney," Draco suddenly snarled, every word bitter. "Of course he'll be all right! Do you trust me that little? If I'd wanted to do something foul to your cousin, I've had plenty of opportunities before now!"

"I didn't mean that--" Harry began, but Dudley cut him off.

"It's fine, Harry. You go off and sign papers with your new dad."
Harry cringed and stared at his shoes. Snape might want to be his *guardian*—though even that word made Harry rather shiver, reminding him as it did of the Dursleys—but no way did Snape want to be his *dad*.

Draco abruptly stood up and left the table, without even excusing himself—a breach of manners that Harry recognised as quite unusual for the Slytherin boy.

Snape didn't reply to Dudley's awful gaffe or react to Draco's rudeness. He merely opened the door for Harry, saying little to nothing as together, they left the dungeons.

"You know, it really is nice to have my world expand beyond the confines of your quarters," Harry remarked as they were riding the enchanted staircase up to the headmaster's office.

"No doubt."

"Don't you think Draco would be in a better mood if--"

"I suggest you leave Draco and his attitude problem to me," Snape smoothly interrupted.

As hints went, that one was pretty hard to miss. That didn't mean it stopped Harry, though. As much as he still resented all the things Draco had done over the years, he couldn't help but feel a bit bad for him now. At least Harry had never been under any illusions at the Dursleys; he'd known he wasn't loved. It must be awful to believe you came first with your parents, then find out that you came a distant second to a crazed snakelike monster. Talk about a paradigm shift!

"Um, Draco kind of resents this whole idea, you know," Harry ventured.

Snape gave him a look which clearly said, *You think?* At that, Harry shut up. Let the Slytherins work it out for themselves. He had enough on his plate.

The headmaster opened the door just as Snape had raised his hand to knock. In other circumstances, Harry would have laughed out loud at the sight of Snape yanking his balled fist back just in time to avoid rapping Dumbledore on the nose. As things stood, though, he just felt too undone to appreciate the humour. He felt a bit like a Quaffle that had been hit way out over the pitch. He didn't know where he was going to land . . . or if he was going to land safely.

"Come in, my dear boys," the headmaster enthused. "Quite a day, eh? Quite an adventure." He waved them into seats, beaming from ear to ear. "Sherbet lemon? Peppermint? Jolly Roger? Ah, I know just the thing for you, Severus." He snapped his fingers, and a thick, ridged strand of black liquorice appeared, wafting through the air toward the Potions Master.

Snape scowled deeply, but to Harry's surprise, he did take the candy. He didn't eat it though, but tucked it into a pocket, presumably for later.

"Harry, anything you would like? Anything at all?"

The boy shook his head.

"Tea, perhaps? Orange juice? I hear the house-elves have been conjuring it especially for you."

"Nothing, sir. Thank you."

"All right, then." Dumbledore briskly rubbed his hands together. "Now, as you may or may not
know, Wizard Family Services has the authority to grant adoptions. It is an organization loosely affiliated with the Ministry of Magic, though not under its direct control. Good thing, in my view. We don't want Harry's guardianship treated as a political matter, certainly."

That sounded sensible enough; Harry nodded. Snape, he noted, was simply listening.

"I contacted Wizard Family Services early this morning," Dumbledore continued, "to ascertain procedure, that sort of thing. When I explained the gravity of the situation, they were more than agreeable to expediting their usual process. It wouldn't do at all to have bureaucracy stand in the way of . . . " The headmaster broke off that train of thought and shuffled some papers on his desk, but not before Harry divined the rest of the sentence.

*It wouldn't do to have bureaucracy stand in Harry Potter's way. He's the Boy Who Lived. He'll be the Saviour of Us All. Promised almost from birth to destroy Voldemort, don't you know . . .*

Not even Wizard Family Services was going to look at him and see him for what he was. Harry sighed, and curled his legs in tightly against the chair, wishing he could somehow hide.

"There are some initial forms the two of you will need to fill out," Dumbledore was continuing. "I suggest you take care of that here, in the privacy of my office, as Severus' quarters are a wee bit crowded at the moment." He beamed another smile. "For the sake of Harry's safety, Family Services is willing to interview the two of you at Hogwarts rather than insisting you come to London as would be usual."

Interview? Harry didn't like the sound of that. What were they going to ask?

His concern must have shone in his eyes, for the headmaster began explaining, "They simply wish to determine whether the two of you are compatible and ascertain that Severus can provide an appropriate physical, emotional, and magical environment for your needs."

Harry twisted his hands together, thinking *uh-oh . . .*

"Harry?" the headmaster queried.

"Um . . . do they interview anybody else? Because . . . um, if they start asking around, my friends or . . . well, pretty much anybody really, I don't think the word *compatible* is so likely to come up. You know, Professor Snape and I have a reputation for not getting along so well."

Dumbledore nodded sagely, though he said, "Not to worry, my boy. Wizard Family Services has a fair number of Order members on staff, many of them from the old crowd assembled the last time we had trouble with Voldemort. They're familiar with the service Severus here has rendered the cause of Light. They know that he's had to play a double role here at school. I foresee no problems in that regard save . . ."

"Save what, Headmaster?" Snape crisply inquired.

"Ah. Well, Harry . . . I strongly feel we can't proceed unless I understand why you would agree to this."

All at once, Harry felt his Slytherin side rise to the surface of his mind. The headmaster's query wasn't rooted in any true concern for his well-being; it was nothing but strategy. Dumbledore was angling for information, trying to figure out the best way to forge Harry into the warrior they all needed, trying to figure out if this adoption would serve that end, or not.

Dumbledore didn't give a hoot if it served any of Harry's own needs. Given that, Harry felt singularly
uninterested in answering.

"Harry?" Dumbledore prompted again.

"My reasons are personal," Harry told him, raising tired green eyes. All of a sudden, he just wanted to go to sleep, and wake up when it was all over, the paperwork, the interview, the whatever. Or better yet, he wanted to sleep until Voldemort was buried sixty feet deep, until somebody else, somebody who might actually be capable, saved the Wizarding world.

"I was afraid of this," Dumbledore sighed. "Severus has convinced you it's for the best, hasn't he? I can see it in your eyes--"

"I'm Occluding," Harry broke in, though without much spirit.

"Oh, Harry . . . I wouldn't Legilimize you without saying so . . ."

Harry believed that about as much as he believed that Ron would sing for joy when he heard Harry's big news.

"I warned Severus not to browbeat you into agreeing to this," the headmaster went on.

"Professor Snape hasn't done any such thing," Harry thought to say, though he felt like he really didn't know how to explain. Anything. At this rate, he was going to make an idiot of himself in any interview. A bitter smile ghosted across his lips. "I think we all know I'm not so swift at following his instructions, all right? If I were, I'd still have a godfather and I wouldn't need anybody else. So you can take it as read that I'd only agree to this because I want to."

Dumbledore leaned both arms on his desk, stacks of paper automatically moving aside for him, and peered more closely at Harry, those ludicrous half-moon spectacles practically falling off his nose. "But why do you want to agree?" he softly inquired, then waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Harry kept expecting Snape to break in. To press him as the headmaster was. To prompt him. Something. But Snape was apparently content to watch Harry founder about like a snitch with one wing.

"It's between the professor and myself, nobody else," Harry finally offered. What did the headmaster want, Harry's emotions out on a chopping block where they could be sliced and diced and sorted?

Dumbledore firmed his lips. "Harry . . ."

"No," Harry insisted. "This is my life. If I choose to have him in it, it's nothing to do with you. Why do you even care what my motives are?"

Dumbledore sighed, his bushy white eyebrows drawing together. "I have only your best interests at heart, you know that."

No, Harry didn't know that. What was worse, he frankly doubted it. Dumbledore's primary interest was what it had always been.

Voldemort, Voldemort, Voldemort.

"Severus," the headmaster appealed.
"What do you wish me to do?" the Potions Master questioned, his stance as composed as a statue's. "Pretend he's not old enough to choose his own confidants? I fail to see how that will help matters."

Harry breathed a deep breath, feeling it flow through him and edge out a little bit of his tension. He began to see Snape's earlier silence in a different light. The Potions Master hadn't been letting him founder; he'd been letting him make up his own mind.

And now, he was respecting Harry's decision.

"I cannot in good conscience approve this without knowing how Harry feels about it," the headmaster objected. He bit down on his sherbet lemon and cracked it in half.

"But you could in good conscience send Hermione and me back into the Forbidden Forest even though a werewolf was on the loose?" Harry scoffed. The gall of the man was unbelievable!

"This scheme--"

"It's not a scheme, Headmaster," Snape cut the man off, that time. "I was quite clear with you on that point."

"Does he know that, though?" Dumbledore questioned, glancing at Harry.

"What I know," Harry stated, sitting up straight, "is that I told you already that the professor had done nothing wrong, and that I'm agreeable to the idea. You can believe me or not; that's up to you."

"Harry--"

"That really is quite enough, Albus," Snape announced, standing up and taking hold of the stack of papers Dumbledore had shuffled earlier. "Harry will not confide where he feels no confidence. Is that not clear by now?"

Dumbledore sighed, and rose unsteadily to his feet. "Very clear. I'll leave you to your forms, then." He glanced down at Harry, who was still seated. "My door is always open to you. I do hope you know that."

Harry wordlessly nodded, but what he was thinking was that he'd rather go knock on Snape's office door, than stand before the gargoyles in the hall downstairs and call out random candies until he hit the password. Snape had made him welcome. But Dumbledore said he was welcome even when he clearly wasn't.

Harry knew which of the two he trusted most.

Name, birthday, natural parents. Date of birth, place of birth, all residence addresses from birth up to the present. Family still living. Godparents.

Reason for request.

Harry had been writing steadily for a while, but that one stalled him. Reason for request . . . he somehow didn't think it was such a good idea to write, Warding spells require legal right to reside in adoptive father's quarters . . .

Father? Somehow, that was every bit as daunting as dad.

Harry mentally hemmed and hawed for a good while longer, then finally cleared his throat and
quietly said, "Sir? I think I need help with this one."

Snape looked up, his black eyes distant, his mind still clearly on whatever question he'd been answering. Harry started to wonder then, what Snape's form asked. It seemed a lot longer than his own: sheet after sheet of thick cream parchment.

Harry pointed to the question at issue, and said with some desperation, "What kind of answer am I supposed to give? An honest Gryffindor one that'll have them hexing the whole request to oblivion, or a big fat Slytherin lie that'll come unravelled if they use truth serum during the interview?"

Snape set his quill down and surprisingly, began to eat his liquorice. Harry thought he'd never seen anything so absolutely bizarre as the Potions Master nibbling on candy. "Where to start," he mused, then detailed, "A need to feel secure, Harry, even physically secure, is hardly going to doom your application. Though granted, for a sole motive it isn't ideal. Now, as for Slytherin lies, by which I presume you mean cunning, you need have no fear of Veritaserum. No-one from Wizard Family Services would use it; the serum is highly controlled by the Ministry."

"Didn't stop you from--"

"Some things are best left unsaid," Snape interrupted in a hard tone, and Harry caught his meaning at once. Don't talk about it, not even here where you are supposedly safe. The walls have ears, literally. Harry glanced up at the portraits and shivered.

"Yes, sir," he whispered.

Snape studied him for a moment. "You'll be in my house too, when this becomes official, so write an answer that is both honest and cunning." A wicked light entered his eyes. "Or lie completely, if you wish. It certainly won't trouble me."

Harry nodded, and chewed the end of his quill, an action that didn't go unnoticed by Snape. "Hungry?"

"No, sir."

Snape snapped off a piece of liquorice. "Have that anyway."

Harry didn't much like liquorice, especially not the strong tang of the black variety, but he put the piece in his mouth. He didn't want to seem ungrateful, as Draco had accused. "Thank you, sir," he murmured.

"Why are you so nervous?"

Harry didn't know how to explain, so he shrugged.

"Are you still thinking about what James would say?"

"No, sir," Harry lied. He could tell his teacher didn't believe him.

"James loved you," Snape gently asserted. "He would want you to be safe. He would want you to have what you need."

"I feel . . . disloyal, I guess," Harry whispered, pushing back his hair with a shaking hand. "It's stupid and pointless, I suppose. Draco's right: my father's dead and gone, and you're alive and here, and . . ." Harry's face went a deadly white as he realised out loud, "The last thing I should be doing is dumping all this on you. It's really good of you to offer to do this for me. I guess you don't want me
to thank you, but--" Harry stopped abruptly, then put his forehead straight down on the table, wishing he wasn't such a complete idiot.

"Would you like a Calming Draught? Harry?"

Harry finally sat up again. "Uh, no. I still have to fill all this out." He gestured at his forms. "Who knows what I'd write if I was . . . er, under the influence. Anyway, I guess I'll just get back to it, sir."

"Consider calling me Severus," Snape suggested, then without waiting for an answer, went back to filling out his own forms.

It took Harry a while to get back to his. Consider calling him Severus? Too presumptuous by half, Harry decided, even if Draco used the name. That was different. Draco had known Snape for simply forever.

He glanced down at the paperwork again. Reason for request.

Harry swallowed his liquorice and slowly wrote, My late guardians, Vernon and Petunia Dursley, have for many years seen me only during the summer. During the school year, however, I have had almost daily contact with Professor Snape and have come to know him as a man of strength, integrity, and great magical prowess. I respect his opinions and would value his guidance as I enter the challenging N.E.W.T. years of my education. Additionally, I know from long experience that I can trust him with my life, which is no small matter considering the forces that continue to threaten me.

"There," Harry said, passing his sheet across the small square table they were sharing. Snape look at Harry, not at the parchment. "You don't need to show me what you wrote."

"I want to."

"Why?"

He'd refused to answer a similar question from Dumbledore, but somehow, it was all right to reply to this one. "You should know what I think of you."

"You went with a Gryffindor answer?" Snape questioned.

"No, it's both . . ." Harry lightly shrugged. "Cunning isn't only lies, I guess."

"Hmm," Snape merely said as he read the parchment. "I see you've realised what a transition is."

"Caring about what I'm writing helps it come out better," Harry admitted.

"You don't care about your Potions essays?" Snape drawled. "This comes to me as an utterly shocking piece of intelligence." He passed Harry's form back. "Well done."

Half an hour later, Harry had finished all his questions; Snape was still madly scrawling away. For a while, the boy amused himself glancing around the headmaster's office, but really, he'd seen the place before. He thought of striking up a conversation with the Sorting Hat, but decided it would be better not to distract Snape. Besides, there was no telling what the Hat might decide to say. You would have done well in Slytherin . . . With nothing to do, Harry finally resorted to watching Snape, peering at his answers and trying to read them upside down.
"Having fun?" Snape asked, a question which eerily reminded Harry of the time he'd violated Snape's private memories.

"Sorry, sir," he quickly said, and pushed his chair back, away from temptation.

"You might as well see," Snape announced, crooking a finger to beckon him back. "Your interview may go better if you know more about me."

"Oh, getting our stories straight?" Harry quirked his lips a bit.

Snape shrugged. "Come sit beside me."

Harry moved his chair around to the other side, and began to read through the pages his teacher had already filled out. Much of it was basic information, similar to what Harry had supplied, but there was a lot more of it for the adult party to the adoption. Marriages, other children. Education. Employment history. Professional affiliations. Financial status. And on and on and on.

Some of it was interesting. Snape had taken Divination through N.E.W.T. level, but earned a score of Troll on the exam. Even Ron could do better than that. The man wasn't rich by any means, but he had a lot more money than Harry would have expected. He wondered if teachers were paid better than he'd thought, or if Snape's family possessed a modest fortune.

The essay-type questions were the most interesting things on the application, though. Snape's answers were very Slytherin.

How do you feel about your vocation? . . . Teaching adolescents is a challenge which has required me to develop keen communication skills and a profound understanding of the teen-aged psyche. These skills will stand me in good stead when it comes to being a father . . .

Describe your relationship with your own parents . . . From an adult perspective, I can see that my father was domineering, possessing a need to control both my mother and myself. Because this led to unfortunate consequences in my own life, I comprehend the inherent danger in being too dictatorial in my own relationships with adolescents . . .

And most interestingly of all, perhaps:

What would be your expectations for your child? . . . I expect Harry to fully develop his own potential, whatever it may be.

"They won't like this answer," Harry pointed out. "I think you're supposed to say that you'll make sure I have the training and education necessary to defeat Voldemort."

"They wouldn't like that answer," Snape returned, his dark eyes tired as he glanced up. It came to Harry then that Snape hadn't got much sleep the night before, either. "They'd think of that as Hogwarts' job, or more likely, Albus'. You should keep in mind that Wizard Family Services isn't the Ministry. They won't review this application in a political light. I'm expected to take a broad view of your needs, Harry. That's a father's job."

Harry flushed, wondering yet again what his real father would say to all this. The phrase rolling in his grave came to mind. But then again, his real father was the one who'd thought it was all right to hex someone for no better reason than to alleviate a friend's boredom.

He was fifteen. Everybody's an idiot at fifteen.

Well, Harry was sixteen and felt like he was still every inch an idiot. Why couldn't he appreciate
what Snape was willing to give him? Why did he have to keep second-guessing himself and trying to be loyal to someone he'd never really known? Why did every bit of this hurt so much when really, it was nothing but a good thing? He'd have someone, finally.

Someone who could claim him. Someone who knew what it was like to tangle with Voldemort. Someone who could understand what he'd had to deal with these past few years. Someone who looked at him and saw the boy. Not the scar, not the prophecy, *him*.

It was great, wasn't it? So why did he feel like crying?

Biting back a frown, Harry watched as beside him, Snape wrote out answer after long answer about what a splendid father he would make.
Sometimes It Just Takes a Wizard

The next few days were wrenching ones for Harry.

The headmaster had said their interviews would occur just as soon as Wizard Family Services had "thoroughly reviewed" the application. Harry wanted it all to be over. He kept glancing over at the parchment by the door, wishing he could will it to announce the arrival of some Family Services staff. Every night when Snape walked in, Harry asked straight away if he'd heard anything, anything at all.

But for all his anxiousness to get it over with, Harry also began to deeply wish he'd never stuck his foot in this mire. Because he felt like he was sinking fast. He tried a couple of times to call Snape Severus, but the name stuck in his throat. Sir was just easier . . . and far less daunting. His nervousness around his teacher was just getting worse as he lived in this not-quite-adopted limbo. With the rational part of his mind, he knew he wasn't in any danger of being rejected at this late stage. Even if he did manage to thoroughly irritate Snape, his teacher would still go through with the adoption, for the spell if for no other reason.

But Harry didn't want it to be just for the spell, and so he walked on tenterhooks around the man. He started carrying Sals around more, though he didn't flaunt the snake in front of the other boys. The presence of his little friend was comforting, though, and when Harry felt particularly frustrated, he would retreat to a corner and speak to Sals in soft Parseltongue. Funny how that made him feel so much better, now. When he'd discovered the skill in himself, it had horrified him. But now, it was just a part of himself, whether Voldemort had put it there, or not.

Sals, Harry found out, was a bit of a know-it-all when all was said and done. Of course, Parseltongue wasn't English; when Harry wanted to explain about the adoption, he ended up having to say that Snape hadn't been his father then, but was going to be soon. Even that didn't make too much sense in snake-language, but Sals seemed to get the point.

"I knew you would like a father," Sals hissed, wrapping herself around and around Harry's wrist as they sat alone in his room.

"What I'd like," Harry changed the subject, "is for you to stop sleeping in the corner of the Floo. Please, Sals, we've talked about this. You'll get sick again. Don't you remember?"

"The ssstones are warm," Sals replied. "It was sooo cold in the cccellar, Harry . . ."

After the third time he found Sals ignoring instructions, Harry asked Snape to bring some rocks from outside. Harry put these in the corner of the Floo, and rotated them out, one at a time, into Sals' box so the snake would have somewhere else warm and comfy to sleep. But Sals still preferred the fireplace to her little box.

Observing this, Snape said a bit sardonically that negotiation apparently didn't always work. Harry got the point--he had sort of taken on Sals' well-being the way Snape had taken on his--but he still found the comment a bit perplexing. What was he supposed to do, give his snake a detention if she wouldn't behave? Or was Snape trying to say that he found Harry just as hard to deal with as Harry found Sals?

It was all a bit much for Harry to figure out.

Living with his cousin was also getting to be a strain for Harry. Dudley thought this adoption
scenario was nothing short of splendid, and that Harry ought to be a whole lot happier about it. Harry tried to explain that things were more complicated than that, but Dudley didn't get it. "Call him Dad," his cousin would whisper to him two or three times a day, usually within sight of Snape, though no doubt Dudley thought the Potions Master couldn't hear him. Fat chance of that, Harry would think. From a hundred paces, Snape can hear whether you drop two newt's eyes instead of one into your cauldron.

Thank Merlin, Snape pretended he didn't hear the way Dudley kept egging Harry on.

Strangely enough, the only person who wasn't getting on Harry's nerves these days was Draco. Of course the Slytherin boy was still resentful; Harry could see it in the twist of his lip, but Draco had apparently decided to stop putting his anger on full display. Maybe Snape had talked to him about impulse control? Harry didn't know. He just knew that while Draco tutored him in subjects, or tried to help him practice magic, he acted mostly the same as he had before. Aristocratic and smugly superior, but genuinely helpful, too. He even started reading Harry's essays before they were owled out, and suggesting improvements.

Just like Hermione, though Harry decided he'd better not point that out.

It was during a Potions lesson one afternoon that the Slytherin boy suddenly said, "Someone's here."

He did that a lot; every time Harry's friends came by, Draco knew about it, even if he couldn't possibly see the enchanted scroll. "How do you do that?" Harry finally asked.

"The spelled parchment sort of makes a . . . buzzing in my head," Draco explained.

It's a magic doorbell, Harry thought. Honestly, sometimes he wondered why wizards made everything so complicated. Why not make the thing just ring out loud?

Draco spelled the fire under their wart-removal Potion to a tiny flame, then performed a cleaning charm on his and Harry's hands before walking out to the door, where the parchment read Albus Dumbledore, Horace Darswaithe.

"No pets?" Draco quipped, ignoring Harry's groan. "Abrire."

The headmaster was a bit brusque, Harry thought. Possibly he was still reacting to Harry's refusal to confide in him? Hard to be sure. Not that it mattered much to Harry if Dumbledore left directly after introducing Mr Darswaithe as a casewizard from Wizard Family Services.

The casewizard was a tall, thin man. He looked young, but his sparse brown hair appeared to be prematurely balding, which struck Harry as pretty unusual for a wizard. He had a sudden, bizarre urge to suggest the man ask Snape for a hair tonic.

Nervous, definitely nervous, Harry recognised, realizing that he had to get himself under control. He had a feeling that flippant answers in the interview wouldn't help his cause.

Darswaithe took a moment to survey his dungeon surroundings, saying, "Very interesting down here. I was in Hufflepuff; never thought to see the inside of Professor Snape's private residence. It's less austere than I would have thought."

Draco made a face at the mention of Hufflepuff. Thankfully, he was behind the casewizard at that point, so Mr Darswaithe didn't see. All Harry needed was the casewizard getting offended enough to deny the adoption. He tried to warn Draco with his eyes, but couldn't give him too harsh a look, not
with Darswaithe looking at him.

"Mr Potter," the casewizard enthused, teeth gleaming in a wide smile. "A pleasure to meet you, I must say. A great pleasure indeed!"

At that, Draco began pretending to gag, but he wiped the expression from his face and assumed a neutral, bored visage when the casewizard turned to greet him as well. "So, Mr Malfoy. Your application recently came before us. Dire circumstances, very dire. How are you finding it, being emancipated from your parents?"

Draco managed to look even more bored. "Oh, all right."

"It can't be easy making so many changes at once," Darswaithe sympathized, shaking his head as though he were lecturing to someone who held an opposite point of view. "First your family, and now your living arrangements . . ." He clucked his tongue.

"Severus is very good to take me in," said Draco sincerely.

"Quite so, quite so," murmured the casewizard as he thumbed through a sheaf of papers. "I'll need to speak with you as well, but I believe I'll begin with Mr Potter."

Draco shifted to a laconic, careless stance, his silver eyes puzzled. "Harry's the only one getting adopted, you do realise?"

"True, but you reside here as well, so I'm interested in what you have to say." The casewizard turned to Dudley, glanced down at his papers, and said, "Now, you must be Mr Dursley, I expect? Harry Potter's cousin?"

Harry put a hand on his cousin's arm before any tears or blubbering could start. "Yeah," the pudgy boy said, his voice twanging with sadness. "Yeah, I am."

"My condolences on your loss." The sympathy was perfunctory at best, which Harry thought a little bit strange in a social worker. Because Vernon was relevant to Harry's application, Darswaithe must know the awful circumstances of the death . . . Well, perhaps his main focus had to stay on the adoption.

Dudley sighed, his eyes beginning to water despite Harry's calming palm moving down to his wrist.

"Shouldn't Professor Snape be here?" Harry questioned to distract Dudley.

"My colleague is interviewing him as we speak," Mr Darswaithe replied. "It's policy to conduct separate interviews. We don't want his presence influencing your answers, or vice-versa. Later, we'll visit with the two of you together."

That made sense, Harry supposed, so he nodded.

"Now, is there a place where we can speak privately, Mr Potter?"

"Uh, yeah. Professor Snape changed his office wards so I could let people in," Harry murmured. He'd also altered the spelled door so it would open to Harry's touch. "This way."

Draco cleared his throat. "Ah . . . can I take your cloak? Would you care for any refreshment before you begin?"

Harry flushed, realizing he probably should have thought of all that. He just didn't have much
practice at being a host, though. Definitely, he didn't have Draco's perfect manners. Sometimes, Harry felt like he might as well have been raised by a family of baboons.

"No thank you," the casewizard refused, pulling his robes about him as though he might be cold, when it was really quite comfortable in Snape's magically heated quarters. "I'll be speaking to you in a bit, then, Mr Malfoy. And a bit after that, I might want to exchange just a few words with you as well, Mr Dursley."

Once they were in the office, Darswaithe did in fact take off his robe, slinging it over the back of his leather armchair before he seated himself and began the interview.

"You've been attending Hogwarts for over five years." Holding a self-inking quill poised on parchment held magically rigid by some spell, Darswaithe questioned, "How would you characterize your relationship with Professor Snape over the course of that time?"

Harry nibbled bit on his lower lip, then cut it out when he realised he was doing it. It wouldn't do to look anxious, would it? Just like it wouldn't do to be too forthcoming with his answers. Cunning, misdirection, just enough truth to sound reasonable . . . "Um . . . let's see. Well, I've had him for Potions the whole time. It's not my best subject so there's been a little tension in that regard, I guess. Way back in first year, though, he started looking out for me. First there was this hexed broom, and then a werewolf, and most recently on Samhain he rescued me from Voldemort himself. So . . . I'd say we have a pretty good relationship."

Harry tensed, expecting to be asked any number of follow-ups, but all the casewizard said was, "I see," before jotting down some notes and moving on to something else. "Have you discussed the adoption with your friends?"

"Oh, sure," Harry said, stretching the truth way beyond recognition as he continued, "Draco knows all about it."

"Just Mr Malfoy, then?"

"Um, well, my other friends haven't been down since it was all decided," Harry explained. That was true enough, though it was misdirection all the same. Harry wasn't going to breathe one word to his friends, not until the thing was finalized and done.

"How did Mr Malfoy react?"

What to say, what to say. "It took him a day to adjust," Harry explained. "Not because he doesn't think the Professor and I won't be good for each other . . . but because, well.. you know about his situation. His family just disowned him; it only stands to reason he'd be a bit sensitive right now."

"Hmm," the casewizard said, continuing to write. He glanced up at Harry after a moment. "You're in a unique position, to say the least, being the Boy Who Lived, and Professor Snape . . . well, it's no secret in certain circles that he bears the Dark Mark. Any concerns in that regard?"

Harry felt like his eyes were bugging out. "Oh, no, no. Of course not. Not at all." He gave a nervous laugh. Wasn't Dumbledore supposed to have taken care of this sort of query?

"Oh, come now," probed Darswaithe. "You must have given the matter some thought?"

"Professor Snape is absolutely trustworthy," Harry declared. He pushed up with his palms to sit up straighter, and looked the casewizard in the eye.
"My understanding is that until quite recently—the incident at Samhain, to be exact—he attended Death Eater gatherings and was in the full service of He-Who- Shall-Not-Be-Named?"

"He attended, yeah," Harry explained, "but he wasn't in Voldemort's service. Don't you know what he was really doing?"

Harry was almost ready to end the interview right there, because something just wasn't right, but at that, the casewizard nodded sagely and said, "Oh, of course. Spying for the cause of Light. Yes, a few of us at Family Services do know that. I had to be certain that you fully comprehended it. Do you understand?"

Misdirection from a Hufflepuff? It seemed odd, but Harry nodded.

"All right then," the casewizard continued. "We're aware that Professor Snape no longer attends Death Eater meetings, but it's a matter of concern to us that You-Know-Who is presumably still calling him through the Dark Mark. How is he managing to resist?"

"I . . . I don't know. He is managing, though."

"Has he complained of his Mark burning? Or conversely, mentioned that it's not?"

The question curled Harry's toes. "I think you'd better ask Professor Snape yourself if you want to know things like that."

Darswaithe wrote a longish answer down, his quill moving so slowly Harry wanted to grab it and transcript the interview himself. "How do you feel that he keeps things from you?"

"I don't know that he does," Harry said, not liking the sound of that.

"Have you seen his Dark Mark, lately?"

"What sort of questions are these?" Harry objected, his voice emerging at a higher pitch than he had expected. "Of course I haven't seen it. The Professor is a private person. There's nothing wrong with that. He can still be a perfectly good guardian for me."

Darswaithe stared at him, then wrote another long answer. Probably something using the word defensive, Harry glumly figured. He schooled his expression into something resembling calm, and waited for the next question.

"You mentioned tension, earlier. Would some of that be attributable to the dual role the professor's played here at Hogwarts?"

"Oh yeah, loads of it," Harry answered, trying for a lighter tone. The ready-made explanation helped. It gave him a way to explain away their enmity without getting into how Snape had hated him on account of his name and reputation. That certainly wouldn't make for much of a character reference.

"So how long have you been aware of his true allegiances?"

"Uh . . . not really until after the Tri-Wizard Tournament," Harry admitted, feeling a bit more comfortable. "So, a year and a half, something like that."

"Since that time, have you ever had any cause whatsoever to doubt his loyalties?"

"No . . ." Of course he'd blamed Snape for Sirius dying, but he'd been wrong to do so, so he was
hardly going to get into that, even if, at the time it had happened, he'd had some dark and forbidding thoughts about Snape and the Order.

"Have you had specific cause to trust him?" The casewizard pressed on, eyes intent, though strangely enough, he was lifting his hand to stifle a yawn.

"Well, yeah. Sure. Of course I have." Harry's comfort began to evaporate, leaving nothing but confusion in its wake. Wasn't this interview supposed to be about something other than Snape's Mark and his allegiances? Sure, those were relevant, considering Harry's scar and whatnot, but what about feelings, expectations, anticipated difficulties? What about Harry's own personal history and how it was likely to influence his ability to form relationships?

*I've spent too much time reading that damned book,* Harry suddenly realised.

"Such as?" Darswaithe verbally prodded him.

"Such as what?" Harry blankly returned. He'd lost all track of the conversation.

"Reasons you have to believe Professor Snape is no longer in You-Know-Who's service, Mr Potter," the casewizard repeated with impatience.

"Uh, well Lucius Malfoy kidnapped me for Voldemort, who wanted me tortured and burned alive, and Professor Snape--"

"Yes, yes, I know all that," the casewizard interrupted. "It's in your written statement. Please do make an effort to focus. What other reasons do you have to know that Severus Snape is on your side and not his?"

"I don't know what you're asking for," Harry murmured, feeling his whole body tense.

"Information he's passed to Albus Dumbledore about You-Know-Who's activities, for example. Specific information."

A voice rang inside Harry's mind. *Your instincts are usually good . . .*  

Harry moved closer to the edge of his seat. "Um, you know . . . I think Draco actually mentioned something about that the other day, but I can't remember exactly what . . . Just a second, all right?"

Moving quickly, Harry stood, walked the few steps to the door, and placed his palm face-down on the wooden panel Snape had spelled for him. The door began to swing open just as Harry saw the casewizard, moving rather sluggishly, pull a wand from a pocket of the cloak draped over the chair. That was enough for Harry.

He sprinted down the hall, calling "Draco!"

The other boy rose from his seat at the dining table just as Harry burst into the living room. "What?"

Harry opened his mouth to explain, but at that instant heard an incantation behind him. He didn't know what the hex was, or what it would do to him, but those instincts Snape had praised had him instantly falling sideways and rolling away from the path of the spell, which zinged past him as a jagged shard of sapphire light. The light licked out as it passed, one vicious tendril nipping at Harry's left foot. Pain exploded in his bones, making him gasp out loud.

The rest of the spell connected with the wall, fracturing the stones and making them smoke.

"That!" Harry shouted, though by then Draco didn't need to be told a thing. He had thrown himself
under the moving hex, drawing his wand as he landed, and by the time Harry shouted, Draco was already pointing it at Darswaithe and shouting, "Petrificus Totalus!"

The casewizard froze into a rigid block and toppled over where he stood, his arms snapping to his sides as he hit the ground face-first.

"Stupefy," the Slytherin boy incanted for good measure, then rolled Darswaithe over and made sure he was completely out.

Draco's next order of business was Harry. "You all right?" Then he looked at Harry's face and blanched a bit. "Oh, shite, you're not!" Without missing a beat, Draco flung some powder into the Floo, and shouted for the Potions office. "Severus, get down here, now!" was all he called before he rushed back to Harry's side and gasped, "You can breathe? Heart still beating? That curse has been known to send full-grown wizards into shock. Oh crap, you're losing all colour!"

"It hurts," Harry groaned. "Foot feels mashed. Bad. But I've had worse--"

Snape stepped into the room, accompanied by a short, overweight witch with red hair pulled back into a rather unattractive bun, her robes a horrible cherry-red. The Potions Master's eyes swept the scene, taking everything in at once. "Draco," he sharply rapped out, angling his head to the side.

Harry was slow to understand; he just wasn't Slytherin enough. Draco, in contrast, immediately levelled his wand on the casewitch standing alongside Snape. "Your wand," he demanded. "Give it to me."

"Honestly!" she exclaimed, but when Draco snarled, she handed it over. The Slytherin boy immediately charmed it with an anti-summoning spell, then passed it to Snape.

"Now back!" Draco ordered, brandishing his own wand in a way Harry had never seen. The motion almost looked... haphazard, as though Draco might accidentally let a hex slip through if he got any angrier. Since Harry didn't think the other boy's impulse control was *that* bad, he concluded that it must be a deliberate tactic. Draco wanted the casewitch to think he was about to lose his temper. It did the trick; when he roared, "Over there, in the corner! Move!" she didn't waste any time arguing about it.

Snape had glanced assessingly at Harry before turning his attention to the man downed in the corridor. "Petrificus and Stupefy?" he verified with Draco, then drew his own wand, his eyes blazing, and incanted a long chant to bind the spells so that only his own *Finite* could end them.

And all the while, Draco kept the casewitch well away from Harry.

Once he felt all danger was neutralized, Snape turned his attention to the boy on the floor. "I'm all right, really." Harry said through gritted teeth when Snape began to pick him up. "Just my foot. I think the bones are broken. *All* the bones."

Snape laid the boy on the couch and gently spelled away his shoe and sock, then knelt on the floor and pointed his wand at the toes and instep of the injured foot. "Shattered," he clarified, turning his head to the side. "Accio oseo potion. Accio firming balm."

He gave Harry the potion to drink, then spread the balm all across his foot and began to massage it. Harry could feel his bones becoming whole again as the treatment continued. The process wasn't precisely painful--he suspected the firming balm contained a heavy-duty numbing agent. Despite that, he felt strange pressures coursing in waves through his foot, a sensation which was rather upsetting. Harry held his breath through most of it, then finally said, "That feels all right, now. You
"why aren't you a medi-wizard, sir? You really know your treatments."

"Pomfrey knows more. She'll check you, too. A bit later, I should think." Snape glanced over at Draco. "What happened here?"

"He attacked Harry with a bone-breaking curse!" Draco scathed. When Snape gave him a look as though to say, *I do have eyes, Draco*, the Slytherin boy drew in a breath and said, "All I know is Harry came running out of your office calling for me, and the wizard followed throwing hexes. Well, one hex. After that, he was mine."

"I think the headmaster needs to hear this," Snape murmured as he strode to the hearth and firecalled for him.

Once Dumbledore had arrived, Snape indicated that the casewitch should take a seat. Draco still kept his wand on her, but he seemed less tense about it, now that he had two older wizards to back him up if she tried anything. "All right, what's the meaning of this?" Snape demanded, hovering over the witch, his black eyes glaring daggers at her. "You come here under the pretext of conducting Family Services interviews, and end up attacking a minor child? Who are you really, and what were your intentions with regard to my prospective son?" By the end, he was roaring.

Harry bit his lip.

"I am Amaelia Thistlethorne, from Wizard Family Services!" the casewitch exclaimed, indignant. "And he's Horace Darswaithe, from the same! We've worked together for six years! I don't know what went on down here, but I can't imagine Horace would hex any client, let alone a child!"

"Show me your arms," Snape rapped out.

She didn't pretend to misunderstand; within moments, her bare arms were on display, completely unmarked. Draco went to check the casewizard's, then reported back, "He's not marked, either."

"Harry, perhaps you could tell us why Mr Darswaithe attacked you?" Dumbledore calmly questioned.

"I don't know why!" Harry exclaimed. "The interview was . . . peculiar. It was all about Professor Snape, and how I could be sure he wasn't still . . . ah . . ."

"Go on, it's all right," Dumbledore encouraged. "Miss Thistlethorne knows all there is to know."

"Uh, all right." Harry swallowed. "Darswaithe there, he kept implying the professor was still a Death Eater. Then, once I'd insisted enough that he wasn't, he wanted . . . I don't know, proof . . . He kept asking if the Mark was burning still, and he wanted to know exactly what Professor Snape might have told the Order about Voldemort's plans."

Snape narrowed his eyes in a sharp look. "What did you reply?"

"Well, nothing! I don't know anything, do I? But he just kept pressing. Things just didn't sound right to me, so I decided I'd better get Draco--"

"Draco," Snape slowly drawled.

"Well, yeah! I could tell by then I was probably going to need help, and I sure didn't think Dudley was going to hold off Darswaithe, if it came to that. I needed a wizard!" Harry sighed then, and accepted something that should have been obvious before then. Draco really was on his side. If he wasn't, he'd have helped the casewizard who, Dark Mark or no, was obviously working for
Voldemort. "Thank you," he said sincerely, glancing into Draco's silver eyes. "You did a really good job protecting me."

Draco snorted. "Oh, sure I did. I should have deflected the curse and immediately cast Protego around you at the very least, instead of letting your foot get smashed all to hell. I'm out of practice, obviously. We need to get your magic roaring back so we can duel." His eyes flashed anticipation.

"I think you did fine," Harry murmured. "Say, where is Dudley, anyway?"

"He said he was tired and wanted a nap. Right after you disappeared into the office. Actually, I think he was depressed." Draco glared briefly at the casewitch. "That arse Darswaithe brought up his recently killed father." His gaze met Harry's, again. "Seems strange he could sleep through all this, though."

"Oh, he's slept through worse than this," Harry said without thinking, then flushed. "Um, nightmares. In the summer I didn't have potions, couldn't cast silencing charms . . ." He shrugged.

"The question remains," Snape said in a hard tone, "why a supposed casewizard would be trying to ferret out information about my Mark or the Order."

"Polyjuice?" Draco ventured.

"Impossible," the casewitch insisted, though that time her voice was a good deal less indignant. Hearing Harry's story had taken the wind out of her sails. "Horace and I took the train. He was with me the entire time, and he didn't eat or drink anything."

"Maybe you missed it," Harry guessed. "Or he was clever about it. Or . . . er, he has an improved formulation of the potion?"

Snape shook his head, which Harry took to mean that the longer-lasting Polyjuice he'd used was his private brew, not yet shared with anyone -- well, except maybe the Order.

"I didn't miss it," the casewitch asserted. "Really, Horace seemed quite exhausted; he largely dozed on the train, which is actually quite unlike him--"

"Imperius," said Snape, Dumbledore, and Draco, all at once.

The casewitch sucked in a horrified breath, her pasty face blanching. "Oh no, surely not," she gasped. "I'd have known, I'd have noticed something . . ."

"You mustn't fault yourself, Amaelia," Dumbledore calmly nodded. "It's notoriously difficult to detect." He turned to Snape. "What do you suppose the plan was?"

"Determine how I can resist Voldemort's call, and ascertain what the Order knows of Voldemort's activities," Snape crisply reasoned. "I suspect that when he'd exhausted Harry's usefulness as an unwitting informant, he'd have spelled him to sleep so that Draco could be interrogated as well, under the same pretext of a 'family interview.'"

"He did say he wanted to talk to me," Draco confirmed.

"That would be standard practice," the casewitch pointed out. "Though I must admit, his questions to Mr Potter certainly weren't." Her whole face wrinkled as she frowned.

"So Darswaithe had orders to get as much information as possible, then floo us both away?" Draco asked.
"Oh great, I'd have been fried to a cinder!"

Snape cast a brief glare Harry's way. "Don't be ridiculous. The man was a Hufflepuff. You know what they're like. He wasn't going anywhere, not through my wards. He couldn't even have left through the door. A Hufflepuff must have planned the entire effort, it makes so little sense."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Ah, Severus, my boy... you may as well know, Amaelia was sorted into Hufflepuff as well. Before your time here."

The look on the Potions Master's face was akin to I should have known, but the words crossing his lips were a smooth, "My apologies for speaking out of turn. The stress of the situation, I'm sure you understand." He actually gave her a slight bow.

Draco was the one who went ahead and said what Harry was thinking. "What's with this let's-all-be-friends routine? For all you know, she's under Imperius as well!"

"What makes you think so?" Dumbledore softly queried.

"Because my father likes redundancies!" Draco spat, pushing off the wall he'd been leaning against. "You don't think the Dark Lord cooked up this plan, do you? His style is to have everybody brought to him for questioning, no matter that he loses advantages doing things that way. He likes to watch the torture, you know? Besides, dear old dad, as Harry put it, has got his fingers into every last department in the Ministry, even an adjunct office like Family Services. I'd say someone heard about this adoption and tipped him off. What better way to infiltrate Severus' quarters? We all know he's dying to get to me... well, with this plan, he could kill two birds with one stone and get his hands on Harry again, as well."

Draco drew in a deep breath, and went on, "As for flooing... well, it certainly wouldn't be like my father to leave that to the off-chance that some casewizard under Imperius could manipulate Severus' wards. So I think..." He disappeared down the hall, his wand at the ready, then returned a moment later, levitating a pocket-watch before him. "There's magic wrapped inside it. Portus, probably. I bet it's activated with a spoken spell. And before you say that nobody could Portkey through your wards, Severus, just consider that my father's visited enough to study them. Plus, I bet he knows a fair bit about your magical habits." With a jab of his wand, he impelled the floating watch toward the headmaster. "Evidence. For the Aurors. If they can manage to arrest my father and keep him in Azkaban this time, maybe Slytherin House would finally calm down enough to let me get out of here."

Snape levelled his wand at the floating watch and softly incanted a series of spells. "Lucius' magical signature," he pronounced, "cleverly disguised, but no doubt about it. I've put the item in stasis so a careless word won't send it hurtling back to him."

Dumbledore sighed. "I'm sorry, Amaelia, but in the circumstances I'm afraid I'll have to insist the two of you be examined by the Aurors."

The casewitch nodded. "I quite understand. This whole incident is such a blot on our reputation. We pride ourselves on looking after each child's interest. To think we've been... infiltrated by You-Know-Who... that one of our own workers has tried to put Harry Potter at risk..." She shuddered. "The Aurors should investigate the entire department."

"We'll retire to my office and wait for them," Dumbledore indicated. "Severus, if you could help me with the other one?"

Malice danced in Snape's dark eyes. "It would be my distinct pleasure."
The headmaster held up a hand. "On reflection, I think not. We need him alive. Mobilicorpus." The body of the casewizard floated out of the hall and followed Dumbledore and Thistlethorne into the Floo.

Snape handed Dumbledore the casewitch's wand before altering the binding spell he'd placed on Darswaithe. Harry wasn't sure, but it sounded like Snape was making sure the Aurors could Finite the man out of his stupefied, petrified condition.

"Keep me apprised," Snape requested as he took an ebony box from the mantle. He held it out towards Dumbledore, who reached for a handful of powder--

"Wait!" Harry shouted from the couch. "Sals! Check for Sals!"

"His snake likes to sleep in the fireplace," Snape explained as he knelt down and peered at the dark back corners. Harry heard a sigh, and then saw his teacher back out, bearing a tiny maroon-and-gold snake in his palm. "We really do have to do something about this tendency of hers," Snape chided as he deposited Sals in Harry's outstretched hand.

"Sals!" Harry rebuked his snake, asking with worry, "Were you in there when my soon-father came-in-fire a little while ago?"

Sals shook her head. "I sssaw the flamesss and knew it would be warm for aftersss.

"He's a Parselmouth!" a high voice exclaimed.

"And a good thing, too, Amaelia," Dumbledore calmly reassured the casewitch, who looked close to fainting. "We need a Parselmouth on our side, wouldn't you agree?"

"Your Floo powder, headmaster," Snape broke in, proffering the ebony box again.

Harry watched them Floo away, absently noting that Snape's powder produced a flash of fire that was more turquoise than emerald. Feeling stupid sitting there with one bare foot, the boy gingerly used his recently healed foot to toe off his remaining shoe and sock.

"You've seen Imperius cast a bunch of times," Draco remarked to Snape. "Would you say she's under it?"

"She seemed to know her own mind, not Voldemort's, when it came to Parselmouths," Snape murmured, turning back toward Harry. "I somehow doubt she's under Imperius."

"Too bad," Harry sighed, shifting his legs. "Because in that case, I think we can forget all about you adopting me. She'll never sign off on us."

"Hopeless, is it?" Snape probed. He moved Harry's feet off the couch, then sat down and took them into his lap, his fingers carefully examining the contours of the foot that had been injured. "Does this hurt? No? This?"

"Not too much," Harry passed it off. "And yeah, if she's on the up-and-up, of course it's hopeless! Draco held her at wandpoint, you insulted her, and now the Aurors get to have a field day with her whole department. She's not likely to be thrilled with this case. In fact, I bet she hates the lot of us."

"You sound . . . disappointed?"

"Shite, I don't know," Harry muttered. "I was getting used to the idea, all right? Or, sort of . . . Mostly, I just wanted it to be over. Settled, so we could finish the spell. Dudley does have a life to
get back to, you know."

"Yes, I know," Snape murmured as though his mind were on other things.

"That fat witch'll hate me, maybe," Draco drawled. "The two of you'll have nothing to worry about. I mean, think about it! She's a Hufflepuff. All emotional, you know." He gave a light shudder, and viciously added, "Too bad for her the wart-removal potion has sat too long. She could have used it. Did you see her neck?"

Harry awkwardly reached around his back and arranged the couch cushions so he could lean on them. "Sometimes, I think you Slytherins hate Hufflepuffs even worse than Gryffindors."

Draco laughed, his eyes full of mirth. "Oh, well, that's easy to figure. We hate everybody, Harry. Ravenclaws are just too disgustingly smart--Severus here really should have been a Ravenclaw, but I suppose the Hat knew he'd end up being more useful to the cause in Slytherin--. . . and, let's see, Gryffindors are just so idiotically brave that it's ludicrous; no cunning at all . . . and a Hufflepuff'll weep all over you if you aren't careful. Anyway, she got an eyeful of you and Severus together, saw how he couldn't give a shrivelfig for her opinion if you were at risk. Your safety and welfare were his absolute top priorities. Shite, he even went to pains to take good care of your pet! My guess is, she'll ooze approval all over the adoption papers."

Draco sat down on the chair next to Harry and absently studied his nails.

Harry rolled on his side to face the other boy. "I . . . I suppose I really ought to thank you--"

Silver eyes glittered with surprise. "You did."

Snape rose fluidly to his feet, the motion careful so as not to jar Harry's feet. "Harry has a thanking-people thing. I dare say we'll have to get used to it."

Was what so terrible about thanking people? Maybe Slytherins just took everything for granted, but Harry couldn't. The Dursleys had drummed it into his head that he didn't deserve anything, from anybody, and after all those years in the cupboard, after all those Christmases and birthdays without presents, he believed it. That meant, though, that maybe Snape was right, and his thanking-people-thing was a bit overdone.

"Harry," Draco interrupted. "What are you trying to say?"

Funny how hard it was to say it, when it was nothing but the truth. Harry took a deep breath. "I'm just really, really glad you were down here with me."

"I'm glad, too," Draco simply replied, and smiled.

Harry frowned, wondering if he should say more. It seemed pretty obvious by now that Draco wasn't hatching some bizarre scheme. First he'd returned Harry's wand . . . and now this, snatching him right out from under Voldemort's nose and figuring out that the whole evil plot was his own father's doing . . . Draco just had to be sincere about his change of loyalties. So . . . Harry should acknowledge that, right? He should say he trusted Draco . . .

But he couldn't say that, because even after what had just happened, it wouldn't be true. Harry knew there was something else going on. Draco's story of why he'd changed allegiances didn't really make
sense. And until it did, Harry had to go with his instincts.

His frown reached his eyes as he thought about it.

Draco and Snape both gave him a careful look, but let him be. While Draco went back to his schoolwork on the table, Snape firecalled Pomfrey and asked her to drop by as soon as an opportune time presented itself.

Harry didn't think he was tired, but apparently being interrogated, then having his bones shattered and fused back together had drained all his energy. Imagine that. He thought briefly of going to the bedroom, but he didn't want to walk on his foot just yet, and asking to be levitated would just be too embarrassing. Harry slid into a more comfortable position and closed his eyes.

He was almost asleep when he felt the softness of a blanket being draped over him, and realised that strong fingers were brushing the hair away from his eyes. Snape's hand smelled vaguely of mint and cinnamon, Harry thought, turning his face into it slightly as he inhaled again.

The scent was comforting, making it seem that everything would be all right.

A thought had him surfacing momentarily, cracking his eyes though the light all at once seemed unbearably bright. "Professor? I'm sure you must have things to do . . ."

Snape kept stroking his hair as he picked up a Potions journal off the low table beside him and began flipping through it. "I'll stay here with you."

Harry yawned. "But your students--"

"Will be fine. I cancelled my entire afternoon to make time for the interview."

"Really?" Harry leaned into his teacher's hand, liking the feel of it. Snape's fingers were strong, his fingertips rough and callused, but that was all right. It was a hand he could trust to protect him.

"Of course. You take precedence."

"I do?"

Snape's fingers tugged a bit on his hair. "Yes, Harry. That's enough fishing, now. I'm surprised you're still conscious; the bone-breaking curse is notoriously draining. Get some sleep."

Harry couldn't keep his eyes open any longer, though through his sleepy haze he managed to complain, "You forgot you idiot child. You're supposed to call me an idiot child."

"I'll call you an idiot," Draco volunteered, his laughter floating across the room. "Idiot Gryffindor, how about that? Blithering idiot. Idiocy personified--"


". . . all right. . ." Harry went to sleep to the sound of pages steadily turning as Snape read beside him. It was nice, he dazedly realised. Nice to have someone with him, someone who cared.

Maybe, he thought as he drifted off, Snape was more the dad type than Harry had realised.
"We can talk up there, I guess," Harry said, turning away from Darswaithe to study an imposing gargoyle. "Um, Sugar Babies? Shock Tarts? Baby Ruth?"

"Liquorice," Snape purred as he floated past, ghostlike, his robes streaming behind him.

The gargoyle moved aside, the enchanted staircase beginning to revolve, turning Harry and Darswaithe up and up and around, but when they got to the door at the top, it opened onto a forest scene, the air thick with the scent of pines. The full moon rose high in the sky as a werewolf's plaintive cry echoed off the distant hills.

Darswaithe's kind demeanour vanished utterly, his balding scalp gleaming, his eyes twin fires flaring to life as he leaned down to glare at Harry. "The Dark Mark!" he demanded. "Have you seen it? Is it burning? How is Professor Snape resisting its call? What has that traitor told Bumblebore about the Dark Lord's plans? Tell me, Potter, tell me!"

Clawlike fingers capped by ragged nails dug into Harry's shoulder as the casewizard's face shifted and changed, his eyes glowing red now, his skin thickening, then becoming scaly as his nose flattened into a horrible, snakelike slit . . .

Harry scrambled away, tripping through the grass, hexes flying past him as he cried out, "Draco! Draco!"

But this time, there was no Draco to save him.

Harry ran between the trees, ducking curses, and suddenly found himself before a portrait of a Fat Lady in a lacy pink dress. "Draco!" he yelled, pounding on the painting. "Draco, open up!"

"This is Gryffindor Tower, dear," the Fat Lady said. "Draco isn't here."

"I'm a Gryffindor!" Harry screamed. "Let me in!"

"Password?" she asked, her voice going haughty.

"Liquorice," Snape mouthed from the shadows, just before he faded away.

The word a Portkey all its own, Harry abruptly found himself running through Dumbledore's office again, Darswaithe close behind. Darswaithe again, not Voldemort. Bone-breaking curses exploded all around him, shattering chairs and tables and narrowly missing Fawkes before one caught Harry's foot in a wicked tendril of pain. He fell to the granite floor with a hard thud, but kept crawling, gasping with the agony of shattered bones until yet another curse flew straight at him.

This one severed his spine.

Harry went limp, his arms and legs instantly becoming useless lumps of flesh. All pain vanished, only to be replaced by a nothingness that was all the more horrible, all the more frightening, than any pain could ever be. Immobilized, unable to so much as push up off the floor, the boy saw Darswaithe approaching, his wand pointed straight at Harry's heart.

His wand? Or was it Harry's? Holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches long, nice and supple, sparks shooting from the end of it as Harry tried to scream. Before he could so much as draw a breath, though, a spell wrapped itself tightly around his throat and squeezed: "Silencio, Harry
His screams trapped inside now, his body unresponsive to his own frantic commands, Harry could do nothing as Darswaithe drew closer, and closer, and closer.

The casewizard knelt beside Harry, his lips curled in a cruel smile as he brushed the boy's hair off his forehead, the gesture a parody of the caring one Harry'd had from Snape. "Draco isn't here," Darswaithe crooned, his words an echo of the Fat Lady's. "You didn't think a Malfoy would save you, did you?"

Harry tried to fling a fist into Darswaithe's smirking face, but his arms were pinned by the force of nerves cut adrift. Slack, unresponsive, he couldn't even back away when Darswaithe yanked him up into his arms and strode for the Floo.

They passed a table on the way, and as Darswaithe stalked past it, Harry noiselessly gasped. There it was, the mirror, the mirror Sirius had given him, and it wasn't even broken any longer! If only he could reach out and grab it! Sirius would help him, Sirius would tell him what to do!

Wingardium Leviosa, Harry thought, but of course nothing happened. Spells never worked any longer, not for him.

"The Dark Lord has a present for you," Darswaithe hissed in his ear as he stepped across the hearth. "I understand you do so love needles?"

What reason did he have to worry about needles when the act of flooing itself would be the end of him? He was going to burn alive, like on Samhain. He'd be burnt clear through to ash. He'd be dead. Dead like Cedric, dead like Sirius, and after that, he'd never, ever have a father. Would Snape even miss him?

Sals would, Harry knew.

Sals!

Looking down, his neck the only joint he could really move, Harry spotted Sals in the corner of the fireplace. The smell of past flooings filled the air around him as deep inside his mind, he thought, Oh Sals, what am I going to do? I really need that mirror! Sirius wouldn't let me burn, Sirius would tell me what to do . . .

The mirror, as if sensing his desperation, appeared before his face. Harry mouthed silent words at it, explaining, frantic because Darswaithe was reaching for the Floo powder now, his hand holding an ebony box though Dumbledore kept his in a brass urn, didn't he?

A face wavered in the mirror, a face he recognised and loved, Sirius' features swimming forth from the land beyond the Veil. Hardened by suffering and yet softened by love, he smiled out at Harry and began to speak, but before he could say a word, his face became ghostly, dissipating into a great swirling fog, and another man's face took its place.

A hooked nose, thin lips twisted into a sneer, dark eyes full of anger as Snape looked out of the mirror, glaring at Harry, and suddenly, Harry could see Sirius behind the other man! But if Snape was in the same place as Sirius, it meant that Snape was dead, too! Had he fallen through the Veil? No, no, that was Sirius. Harry couldn't remember Snape dying, but there he was, trapped in the Great Beyond! And he looked so furious as he glared out at Harry!

Harry tried to scream again, to explain. I didn't know you had died, Severus! It's not like I wanted you to die! It's not my fault, it's not my fault!
But he couldn't scream. He couldn't even call for Draco to help him! He was helpless, helpless to stop any of it--

 Except, he wasn't.

 He felt his magic lash out, a pulsating wave of wild power that filled his core and exploded outwards to blast the Floo powder away before it could fall to the ground. The shock wave loosened Darswaithe's grip; Harry fell hard to the hearthstones beside Sals, who crawled up over his hip to seek his wrist.

 The snake wrapped herself around his wrist, her gold and maroon skin glittering like silver as she changed, becoming a gleaming bracelet he wore like a badge of honour as magic poured from his innermost core.

 Darswaithe ran for the door, but it wouldn't open for him. He turned back toward Harry, his narrow face going slack with shock as he saw raw, unleashed power blazing forth from brilliant emerald eyes.

 The magic streamed from deep inside Harry like water over a cliff, a raging torrent, enough to drench everything in its path. Wild magic, natural magic. Magic that knew nothing of boundaries; magic not leashed in by spells or incantations.

 The stones that formed the walls became liquid and began to drip, the office around him melting, though he was safely ensconced in the Floo--

 Darswaithe was all the way across the room, his brown eyes transfixed by terror.

 But someone else was beside Harry, right alongside, one hand shaking his shoulder softly, very softly, as though afraid to startle him, as though he was a wild and dangerous animal, one who needed gentling . . .

 Harry's eyes snapped open to see Draco so close he could feel the fall of his breath. Gasping, the Gryffindor flung himself into a sitting position, his hands clutching at his throat. His eyes wild, the magic still gushing out through his skin, he had to struggle just to breathe.

 "It's all right, Harry," Draco said in a slow, hushed voice. "Just . . . quiet yourself, all right? Before the walls melt completely. Everything's fine, there's no reason to be afraid. You're awake now, the dream is over, it's all going to be all right . . ."

 Draco's familiar voice, droning on and on with words of encouragement and calm, became a focal point for Harry. Something he could concentrate on, something to distract him from the waves of fear and fury still pounding through him. Drawing in a replenishing breath, he looked around, seeing in the dim light that the castle was leaking. Was it raining outside? Rivulets of water were running down the surface of every stone. But such strange water . . . the droplets hung for too long, dripping slowly over the granite, actually stopping as he watched.

 "Good," Draco breathed. "Good. There you go, it's all over now, nothing's wrong . . ."

 Harry didn't know what he was talking about. "What happened?" he croaked.

 For some reason, it struck him as amazing that his voice worked. Now why was that?

 "You tell me," Draco lightly scoffed, pulling himself up from the floor to sit on the edge of Harry's bed. "What was your nightmare about?"
Nightmare? It was like the outpouring of wild magic had wiped his mind clean. "Oh, did I scream the roof down?" Harry groaned, his voice emerging like a wisp of torn tissue paper.

"You weren't loud, no." Draco's hovered a hand over Harry's forearm, then evidently decided he'd better not touch him, after all. "Anyway, I wasn't asleep. I was just reading, and you . . ."

"What?" Harry asked, drawing his legs close in to his chest and hugging them. Then it came to him. "I fell asleep out on the couch! What am I doing in here?"

Draco shifted away. "You slept straight through dinner. When Severus went to bed he decided you'd be more comfortable in here."

"He . . . carried me?" He wasn't usually a deep sleeper; how could that not have wakened him?

"No, he Mobilicorpused you!" Draco laughed. "Of course he carried you!"

"And . . . what happened?" Harry asked, shrinking himself into a smaller ball as he hugged his legs more tightly. His whole mind was a complete blank.

"You slept for a while longer. Then you called my name a couple of times in a row, so I glanced your way . . ." Draco swallowed. "You were thrashing like a maniac, then all at once you went so still it was really scary. I think I understand now, the phrase silent scream. Anyway, the whole room began to fill with . . . well, magic. I could see it, like the air was getting thick with twisting, coppery tendrils coming from you. They were soaking into the walls to make them gooey. I might have gone for Severus, except I felt like there was no time to lose. I didn't want to come back to find you'd liquefied the whole room."

Harry uncurled enough to reach a hand out toward the nearest wall. The granite was strangely smooth, as if the whole surface had melted and then reformed. Tracks that almost looked like tears streaked the walls at irregular intervals. Harry touched one, and found it was made of stone. "I did this?"

"Well, I certainly didn't!"

Harry sighed, and tried to get his bearings. "Where's Dudley?"

"On a nice soft bed I transfigured from the couch," Draco explained, shrugging. "He got really upset when you were sleeping like the . . . er, dead . . . so Severus explained you were recuperating from a curse. And that meant we had to tell him the rest, about Darswaithe and all. Your cousin was pretty horrified, and said he wanted me in here with you in case anybody snuck in and tried anything." He paused for a moment. "How are you feeling?"

"Oh, all right," Harry lied. The truth was, the details of his nightmare were starting to filter back through his consciousness, and he was far from fine. He began shaking convulsively, and tried to cover it by pulling more blankets around him. *Snape in the mirror. Snape, dead.*

"I'll get Severus," Draco offered.

Harry shook his head, insisting though chattering teeth, "I'll just go back to sleep." He lay down, curled almost into a fetal position, and clenched his eyes shut, but it didn't help. The shaking was getting so bad that he began to actually feel nauseous. He started biting his own fingers, trying to squelch the sensation.

Draco sighed, sat down again, and this time didn't hesitate to touch Harry, pulling his hand from his mouth and holding onto it when Harry tried to yank it away. "Look, it's pretty clear you're used to
just toughing it out. Those awful Muggles would get mad if you woke them up, right? But Harry, you have Severus, now. He's not like them. He'd want to help you with this."

Harry shifted back, as far from Draco as he could get, which wasn't far considering the other boy had a death-grip on his hand. "I don't need help," he insisted.

"You're so screwed up you don't know what you need," Draco answered, the words harsh but the tone far less so. "Whatever's on your mind has to be dealt with, Harry" ---his voice began to rise--- "because until it is, you're a hazard to yourself, me, Severus--hell, probably everybody in the dungeons, period. What if you have another nightmare and turn the place into a furnace? You're talking to Severus, and that's all there is to it!"

With one almighty yank, Harry succeeded in freeing his hand from Draco's grip. "You just want him to see me at my worst so he won't want me any longer!"

"Idiot is about right," Draco muttered, shaking his head. "Severus wants to be your father, Harry. He's not going to think less of you just because you admit for once that you might need one."

"I don't need one!"

"Oh, sure you don't. You're only shaking like a leaf, white as chalk, and practically about to puke. Oh yeah, you're fine. No chance of another nightmare at all."

"Good, then we're in agreement," Harry weakly spat, balling his fists in the covers as though he could stop trembling through sheer willpower.

Draco stood up in one smooth motion that communicated both impatience and disdain. "You can do as you wish," he announced. "But if you won't go to Severus' door on your own--"

"You'll drag me there?" Harry sniped. "I'd like to see you try! What are you going to do, force me with magic? 'Cause I'd take you in a fair fight, not that you've ever fought fair in your life--"

"You are so utterly Slytherin," Draco scoffed. "No strategy. Why would I fight you when all I have to do is go get Severus myself?"

Harry narrowed his eyes. "You'll stay out of this, Malfoy."

"Oh, no I won't. And I swear by Merlin's wand, Harry, if I have to be the one to wake up Severus, I'm going to tell him you were scared he wouldn't want you if you went to him yourself!"

"You are so utterly Slytherin!" Harry shouted, swivelling his feet off the bed, deliberately knocking them into Draco's shins. Too bad he wasn't wearing shoes; that way, he might have left bruises. The stones were cold when he stood up, but Harry ignored that to stomp to the door. "Be asleep before I get back," Harry spat, "or at least pretend you are. I've had enough of you for one night."

He went to shut the door, only to find Draco holding it open from the other side. "I'll watch until he opens his door to you," he said, putting a quick end to Harry’s idea of just waiting in the dark living room for a while. When Harry made a sort of growling noise, Draco added, "I'm just being a friend."

Harry scowled, but left it at that.

Harry scowled, but left it at that.

"Harry," Snape said with some surprise as he peered out into the dark hall. He pulled a thick turquoise-coloured night-robe more tightly around him as he glanced up and down the hall. "Is
The sound of another door closing echoed through the dungeon as Harry murmured. "I'm very sorry to disturb your rest, sir." He felt embarrassed beyond belief, though why that should be was anybody's guess. Tremors convulsed his shoulders, more dream-details coming back to him as he stared into Snape's face, lit from behind by the soft light streaming from his bedroom. *Snape's face in the mirror, so very angry... "I just need a potion, if you don't mind?"* Harry gulped. "I've used up all you gave me."

"Of course I don't mind." Snape leaned down a bit as he incanted a *Lumos* to the side of Harry's face. "Painless Sleep, then? Madam Pomfrey thought your bones had healed quite nicely."

"Dreamless Sleep," Harry reluctantly acknowledged. "Draco woke me up from a nightmare."

Snape frowned. "I didn't hear anything."

The walk across the cold floor had left Harry's left foot aching strangely, healed or no, but that was nothing to the awful feeling that twisted inside him as he remembered what he'd done to the room that used to be Snape's private library. "Um... right," he said. "I'll just go back to sleep; I'm sorry to be so much trouble."

"You misunderstand," Snape asserted, opening his door wider. "Come in."

"In," Harry doubtfully repeated. *The Fat Lady hadn't wanted to let him in... "That's all right, I can stay out here while you get my potion."

"*In, Harry,*" Snape insisted, raising his eyebrows as the boy crossed the threshold. "Your feet must be freezing; the warming-stone spells fade off at night. Go sit on my bed and wait."

Perched on the very end of it, Harry nervously smoothed his hands across the rumpled velvet bedcover. He knew an insane urge to ask why it was a deep midnight blue instead of the more expected green, but shelved the question as just too stupid. It probably only came to mind because he was trying so hard not to think about his nightmare.

When Snape returned, he spelled the lights brighter and pulled a chair up close to the bed, then took Harry's left foot onto his lap and poured a warming potion over the skin. Heat soaked straight through it to ease the ache in his bones, and the feeling only got better as his teacher massaged the potion into every joint. "How's that?"

"Good," Harry nodded, feeling his eyes drooping with exhaustion. He wasn't trembling now; more than likely, reaction to the nightmare had burnt itself out, leaving nothing but lethargy. Or maybe it had only been the cold making him shake so much. Yeah, the cold, that was it. It was mid-December, after all. "Thank you, sir."

"Shall I do the other one?"

"That one doesn't hurt," Harry admitted, pulling his feet off his teacher's legs.

"Very well." Stoppering the small amber bottle, Snape pointed his wand at his open bedroom door. *

Harry heard the muffled thud of a trunk closing, then the creak of a door before a pair of thick maroon woollens came flying into Snape's hands. "Thank you, sir," Harry said again, bending over to put them on.
Snape waited until Harry had straightened to say, "As for Dreamless Sleep, I'm afraid I can't provide you any more tonight."

Shuffling back marginally, Harry sighed. "You're out, too?"

"No, but I already gave you a full dose earlier, in case your experience with Darswaithe led to repercussions."

Snape had anticipated he'd have a nightmare? Harry didn't much like that idea. Was he really such a weakling? Instead of smoothing the coverlet, Harry started twisting his hands into it, his voice strained when he objected, "I don't remember any potion."

"You were . . . 'out like a light,' is the Muggle phrase your cousin used."

"How could I take the potion if I was that out of it?"

"Do you doubt my word?"

Harry shrugged and looked away. "Well, you're the one always going on about cunning and misdirection, aren't you?"

"Answer me." Snape's tone brooked no disobedience.

"No," Harry slowly admitted. "I don't doubt your word." A deep sigh lifted and collapsed his chest. "Well, if regular Dreamless Sleep didn't work, can you brew a stronger version for me?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "You haven't had much regular potion since Samhain. That particular one was already five times normal strength."

Harry rubbed his temples, glancing up hopefully. "Maybe you could double it again?"

"I don't think that's wise."

Harry hadn't wanted to tell him, but at that, he figured he'd better. "Well, you have to do something, Professor, because now I'm back to unleashing wild magic in my sleep."

Snape leaned forward to pat a hand against Harry's knee. "Tell me about your dream, then."

Harry awkwardly moved out of range. "Not too much to tell. You know dreams, they're full of stuff that doesn't make much sense . . . Basically though, Darswaithe had got me, and Draco wasn't around to help. There was nothing I could do but release my powers, so I did that. I felt the magic flood out of me, and . . ." His voice fell to a whisper. "Uh, let's just say there aren't any windows to break, down here."

As if realizing the boy needed more room, Snape leaned back and folded his hands into his lap. "Did the wild magic wake Draco up, then? I suspect I would have heard if you were screaming."

"He cast Silencio on me."

Snape's brows drew together. "Draco cursed you?"

"No, Darswaithe. In the dream." Harry shook his head. "I'm not explaining very well. In the dream, I was er . . . sort of paralyzed, I think, and after the spell, I couldn't even scream. I guess I was sort of acting it out." Harry bit his lip, only then realizing that Draco had seen him in a truly awful state. Wasn't that embarrassing. "He said . . . Draco, I mean, that I was just laying there pouring out magic. He woke me up before it got too bad, I guess."
"He should have summoned me."

Harry cleared his throat. "Uh, he was sort of concerned that if he left to do that, the walls might . . . um . . . collapse."

Snape's head snapped up, his eyes piercing as he demanded, "Explain that."

Harry hid his face in his hands, his voice muffled as he admitted, "I melted them. The walls, I mean. I am so completely sorry, sir. I really, really am." He peeked between his fingers to see how Snape was taking it.

His teacher stared at him for a long moment, then appeared to deliberately relax. "Well. You can't have done too much damage, I don't think. If Draco was in danger, I trust you'd have mentioned it?"

"I think it was just the surface layer of the stones," Harry sighed. Realizing how childish he must look trying to hide behind his hands, he managed to straighten up, only to begin nervously swinging his legs. "Anyway, the walls aren't craggy any longer. More like . . . obsidian, I guess, only grey instead of black. I'm really, really sorry," he repeated.

"Can you live with it?"

"Sir?"

"Harry," Snape chided. "Did you think I was going to adopt you and not offer you a place to live?"

"Oh, God," Harry thickly groaned, which all by itself showed how unravelled he was becoming. He might throw phrases like that around in the summer, but he tried his best to avoid Muggle oaths while he was at Hogwarts, even if *Merlin* didn't rise so spontaneously to his tongue as it did to Ron's. "That's incredibly nice of you," he went on, anxious to cause no offence. "Really, it is--"

"It's no such thing. What sort of parent would begrudge you a room?" Snape narrowed his eyes, his gaze patiently seeking out Harry's. "Ah, but I think I know the answer to that. Your expectations are positively abysmal. Nonexistent, in fact."

"Yeah," Harry acknowledged, pain he'd repressed his whole life trying to rise up and choke him. He didn't know what to do with the feeling except make light of it. "Well, at least it won't be hard for you to earn an Exceeds Expectations."

Snape didn't let him dwell on that. "I spoke to the headmaster a few hours ago." He changed the subject. "Darswaithe has been purged of *Imperio* but is still in the Aurors' custody. Miss Thistlethorne has been cleared of all suspicion. She'll be back here tomorrow to finish our interviews."

"So soon?" He'd spent days wanting it all to be over, but now he thought he'd rather put everything off, or just cancel it altogether, and *that*, despite the fact that he *did* want a father. The only thing he was truly sure of was that Draco was right: he was a complete mess.

"Normally, we'd have to wait for another casewizard to be assigned." Snape explained. "In the circumstances, they've decided that our application can be reviewed by Thistlethorne alone."

"I don't trust her," Harry said, his whole body tense. "Really, after *that*, I'm not inclined to trust anyone. Constant vigilance, right? So while I'm sure the Aurors know what they're doing--"

"I'm not," Snape darkly asserted. "I speak from experience. Half of them are sadists, and a good portion of the rest are idiots."
Harry nodded, ignoring for the moment the fact that he planned to join the ranks Snape held in such contempt. "So you'll understand I don't want to be alone with her, no matter what Family Services claims their normal procedures are. What if the Aurors missed something, or she gets put under Imperius between now and tomorrow?"

"You don't have to be alone with her," Snape assured him. "I'm sure Albus would be willing to sit in on your interview. Or Minerva."

"You sit in on it," Harry insisted. "I don't want anyone else here hearing my private thoughts on things."

Snape gave him a doubtful look. "Are you certain you want me to?"

Harry thought about that. "I guess it's sort of like your letting me read your answers on those questionnaires, you know? That was good. I feel like I know you a little better, now."

Doubtful became incredulous. "You didn't notice I was more intent on furthering my agenda than on providing open, honest answers?"

"I was reading between the lines. You'll have to do the same when you listen to me, I suppose."

"For me to listen to your private interview is specifically against their stated policies," Snape remarked. "You're supposed to feel unconstrained so that you can speak with absolute freedom about whatever you wish to share."

"Yeah, right, like I'm going to bare my soul to a total stranger," Harry scoffed. "I'd end up reading about myself in the Prophet. But say, there's an idea. If she objects to you staying for my interview, I'll threaten to give Rita Skeeter an exclusive all about how Wizard Family Services tried to assassinate the Boy Who Lived--"

"She's hardly likely to respond to us favourably if you issue threats. No doubt she'll think it's my influence making you so ruthless." Snape's voice took on a sardonic cast. "On his own, the Boy Who Lived couldn't possibly be anything but sweetness and light."

"Or mentally unbalanced," Harry added, thinking of all the Prophet had printed the previous year. "I guess we don't want to add anything to that part of my reputation. So . . . how about we play on her being an overemotional Hufflepuff? If she tries to make you leave, I'll burst out into tears and say I'm scared and you're the only one who makes me feel safe."

"She might see that as over dependence."

"Hmm." Harry frowned, then. "Um, speaking of over dependence, though . . . Listen, it is really thoughtful of you to give up your library for me, and I can hardly say how much I appreciate it. But you know, I was thinking . . . Actually, I was sort of hoping that, er . . . when my magic is back under control, and I wasn't in any danger, or not any more than usual, I mean . . ." Harry remembered his dream, the Fat Lady not wanting to let him in, and shuddered. "Can't I go back to live in Gryffindor?"

Snape crossed one knee over another and rested his hands on the armrests of the brocade chair. Harry thought he looked entirely relaxed, which struck him as unfair since he felt like nothing but one huge knot of tension.

"What would make you think I have any other intention?"

Harry swallowed with relief. "Well, you saying it's my room, for starters."
"Don't your friends have rooms at their parents' homes? That doesn't constrain them from boarding in Gryffindor for the school year."

"Yeah . . ." Harry acknowledged, glancing back and then away. "It just seems strange to me. I mean, Ron can hardly go back and forth to the Burrow every day, but if I had a room here . . . I guess I thought you'd expect me to use it." He flushed, feeling like he'd stuck his foot in his mouth or something.

"You're welcome down here at any time," Snape assured him. "But I don't expect you to leave the Tower. Your friends are very important to you, as you took great pains to point out to me, not too long ago."

"Yeah, but when I did, you got all bent out of shape."

"I became appropriately concerned about your failure to appreciate the danger you were in," Snape corrected, his voice a tad acerbic. "Until your magic is back under your control, you'll have to continue living with me. Afterwards, I thought your room here would be something you'd use during holidays. I trust you don't wish to stay in the Tower once all the other Gryffindors have gone home for the summer?"

"I don't think so, no," Harry murmured. "You know, after Uncle Vernon died it dawned on me that I'd never have to go to Privet Drive again, but I didn't really think about where I would go. I guess I wondered if the headmaster would let me stay at the Burrow, maybe." He waited, aware that after the adoption, decisions like that would be up to Snape, but his teacher didn't volunteer anything. Harry was aware he should probably stop there--it was a long time until summer--but some shred of unease about the future had him blurting, "I mean, you probably don't want me hanging around all summer long."

"I don't see why not," Snape mildly returned. "I am, after all, going to considerable effort and expense to make you my son."

It was nice to be wanted, Harry thought, though he felt a little bad about the expense bit. It had never even dawned on him that Wizard Family Services would charge for their their services. That just showed how naïve he was when it came to the whole wizarding world. He didn't know how anything worked. "I have money," he heard himself offer. "Is it really expensive, arranging an adoption? Can I help?"

"Would you like to fund your own Christmas present, too?" Snape scathed. "No, of course you can't help!"

"But I have scads of money, sir. I'd really like to--"

"What I'd like," Snape interrupted, "is for you to put your key away somewhere safe and not touch it again until you're grown and out on your own. I can provide for you perfectly well, Harry. Do you even realise that I'm supposed to?"

Harry thought better than to offer again, though he did wonder if Snape's refusal had something to do with his teacher somehow not wanting to take money from James Potter.

Snape waved a hand as though to start over. "Enough of that. Let's discuss your dream."

Harry crossed his legs on the bed and resisted an urge to hug himself. He wasn't a little child. So he'd had a bad dream, so what? He had them all the time. "I know what you're going to say. Same stuff McGonagall blathered off the one time I went to her in the middle of the night. Voldemort's been
trying to kill me for years, big effing surprise. There's no need for me to get so upset about it. I
should just relax because I'm safe while at Hogwarts, the staff would never allow anything to happen
to me, etc. etc. etc."

"I'm disappointed in Minerva," Snape remarked. "A sense of false security is hardly what you need."

"Yeah. What I need is a potion. I guess it'll be all right, having a Potions Master for a . . . um, adult
taking care of me."

Snape gave nothing away as he looked at Harry through half-closed eyes. "You do realise that there
are problems potions won't solve?"

"What sort of Potions Master are you?" Harry weakly joked, then realised it wasn't funny. Snape
was serious, and beyond that, he was right. "Yes, I realise that," he acknowledged. "I don't want to
talk through my dream though. I mean, not any more than I have already."

"I need you to answer one question," Snape informed him, his tone serious.

"All right!" Harry snapped. "You were in it, all right? You were in the mirror with Sirius and I
thought you'd died, and even if I'm not too swift with dream interpretation, it'd be hard to miss the
implications of an image like that! Never mind that Sirius didn't have his mirror when he fell through
the Veil, and so couldn't possibly show up in my own. Besides, mine's broken, so enough said!"

Snape's eyes bored into him. "I have absolutely no idea what you are talking about."

Oh yeah . . . Harry could have kicked himself. Instead, he ended up wrapping his arms around
himself anyway, and rocking back and forth on the bed. Like a basket case, he thought with some
amount of disgust, not that knowing he looked completely mental was going to stop him from
looking that way. "It doesn't matter," he muttered, staring down at his socks.

Snape was silent for a long moment, then pressed, "Harry?"

The boy just shook his head.

"All right," Snape conceded, shrugging. "That wasn't what I needed to know."

That had Harry glancing up. "No? What, then?"

Snape laid a hand on his bent knee; that time, Harry didn't shift away. "Was it a seer dream?"

"No," Harry said, his tone short. When Snape seemed to want more, he detailed, "Those always
have a past-then-future pattern, with this sort of whirling in between. And they don't have weird
images like casewizards changing into Voldemort or snakes becoming bracelets or headmaster's
doors opening into the forest. This dream was just a nightmare, honest."

His teacher nodded. "You must tell me if you have another seer dream, Harry. It's important."

"I will . . . Listen, I'll tell you if anything in my dreams starts to really bother me. Promise, I will. But
for tonight, can't you just help me out? I don't want another nightmare, Professor."

Sighing slightly, Snape informed him, "More Dreamless Sleep isn't advisable. As I see it, your
choices are to sleep without aid, or try the potion I make to help me deal with my own nightmares."

Reaching behind him, Snape drew out a small vial from a drawer. He handed it to Harry, who held it
up and tilted it back and forth to study the thick, brackish fluid within. "Looks like used motor oil.
What do you call it, Sleeping Sludge?"

"Truthful Dreams."

Harry dropped the vial into his palm. "Something tells me it won't stop my nightmares."

"It's not designed to."

"Then what good is it?"

"It has a number of uses," Snape murmured, passing a hand over his eyes as though he really didn't know where to begin. "As the name suggests, it focuses your dreams on factual rather than imaginative matters. It takes whatever experience is uppermost in your mind, and shows you absolute truth."

"You lost me," Harry admitted.

Snape paused to think. "You'd be surprised how much information your mind takes in about an event, Harry. Truthful Dreams will unlock your subconscious memories, bringing them out into the light of full awareness. I developed the potion to help me recall Death Eater meetings with greater accuracy, so that I could give the Order reports that were more highly detailed."

"Wouldn't a pensieve do just as well?"

"A pensieve shows me what I know I remember. The Potion shows me what I remember, but didn't know."

"I get it," Harry ventured, looking down the viscous dark fluid. "But Professor, why would I even want this? It sounds like it was useful for you, what with spying and all, but it makes nightmares worse, doesn't it? By making them more real?"

Snape flushed slightly. "I had to put in an emotional dampening agent for just that reason. It lets you see quite dispassionately all the truth there is to know. Even when you are awake again, and remembering your dreams, you'll be able to distance yourself from them. After you take Truthful Dreams, your nightmares won't trouble you nearly so much as before, awake or asleep." He shrugged, high colour still dotting his cheekbones.

Harry was flushing too, but not with the slight embarrassment that seemed to be affecting Snape. The boy's reaction was anger. "It numbs nightmares? It helps you accept them and move on! Why didn't you think to offer this to me before?"

"Because you'd been having seer dreams," Snape snapped, sitting up straighter in his chair. "The potion hadn't been tested in such a case, and I do not experiment on students, not even on bloody irritating Gryffindors!"

That certainly took the wind out of Harry's sails. "Oh. Right. I guess that would be a problem. Sorry."

Snape stared at him, then gave a tiny shake of his head. "Don't be. I suppose it was a reasonable thing for you to wonder. At any rate, you haven't had a seer dream since before Samhain, so I see no problem if you wish to try Truthful Dreams, now."

"Will it stop my wild magic from lashing out?"

"Probably. You'll see the past with less emotion; therefore, you'll have less cause to panic."
Harry nodded. He didn't exactly want to remember his nightmares even better, but if the potion helped him accept them and move on, it might be worth it. "All right," he agreed, standing up. "Is this a single dose vial?"

"Sit down," Snape directed. "You can't take it unsupervised the first time; you might be allergic to Purple Loosestrife. You'll have to sleep here tonight so I can observe you."

Harry hesitated. "Um . . . well, not to put you out or anything, but you could drag a chair into my room, couldn't you?"

"If we wake up Draco, he'll talk to me all night and keep you up."

"So? Cast Morpheus on him. Or me."

"I don't ply magic unless it's the best solution, Harry. You'll sleep here. End of discussion."

"What happened to negotiation?"

"I told you, sometimes you'd have to accept my decisions, did I not? It really is becoming more and more apparent to me that you have no idea how to be somebody's child."

"Yeah? Well I'm not your child yet, am I?" Harry challenged. "And besides, what makes you think you know so much about being somebody's parent? You're as new to this as I am!"

"True," Snape acknowledged. "I suppose we will have to learn by experience, you and I."

"You're big on that," Harry scoffed. "Learn by experience . . . You know, I bet I'd know more about potion-making by now if you'd ever tried demonstrating a new potion before you make us brew it and possibly blow ourselves to Mars!"

"And this is relevant to the current topic of sleeping arrangements, how?" Snape snidely inquired.

It wasn't really. It was just a distraction, and Harry knew it. He said, though, 'You might lay off, that's all. You said it yourself: I've never been anybody's child before, not really, so how about you let me actually have some experience to learn by before you expect me to just have this all down pat? I mean, come on! I'm not even adopted yet!"

"Point taken," Snape calmly conceded, though his lip was still twisted. "Now, about the Truthful Dreams. I need you to decide if you wish to take it."

Taking it meant sleeping in Snape's bed, and possibly remembering more than he'd care to about Samhain. Or Darswaithe. Or Lucius Malfoy. Or Voldemort, Cedric, Sirius . . . the list was pretty much endless. But not taking it might mean wild magic. What if Draco wasn't as quick to wake him, next time? What if he did light the castle on fire, or something?

That raised another issue in his mind.

"If I say no," Harry ruefully realised, "you're going to insist I sleep here anyway, aren't you? Because you're worried another nightmare tonight might make me lose control, again."

Snape merely inclined his head.

"Oh, all right, fine," Harry decided. "So I do drink the entire vial, right?" He broke the wax seal and pulled out the stopper.

"Yes. Ah, Harry. Do you really wish to sleep in your clothes?"
"I already was," Harry pointed out, and then felt bad. He hadn't meant to complain, and rushed to cover it with, "Anyway, I thought we didn't want to wake up Draco."

"At times, magic is the best solution," Snape murmured, levelling his wand at the open doorway. "Accio Harry's pyjamas!" He tossed them to the boy, then incanted something at the wall. A door appeared. "Go change in my bathroom."

"Is it as fabulous as Slytherin legend says?" Harry joked, pulling open the door. "Oh, I guess it is. Nice tub. Not as many taps as in the Gryffindor Prefects' bathroom, but still, nothing to sneeze at. Well, not unless Sneezing Syrup comes pouring out of one of them--"

"You have an important interview tomorrow," Snape observed, "and your sleep has already been disrupted once. I suggest you stop chattering inanities and get to bed."

Harry glanced back at him. "If you sit up all night watching me, you won't be at your best, either."

"I, however, am well used to going days without sleep."

"I guess you would be, what with Voldemort and all," Harry realised. "All right." Once he was in the bathroom with the door closed, it didn't take him two minutes to wash his face and change into the pyjamas. The prospect of going out there in them and climbing into Snape's rumpled bed really bothered him. The whole situation was too . . . well, parental, maybe. Or maybe the problem was that he was really the wrong age to be doing something like that. If he was four years old, it'd be all right, but sixteen? On the other hand, there was that wild magic to consider. It was only prudent for somebody to watch him and make sure the potion really did repress it. For all that though, he felt really bad about turning Snape out of his bed, even if his teacher was being perfectly agreeable.

When Harry emerged from the bathroom, he began to feel a little bit better. The bed was made up for him, which made sliding in somehow feel less . . . personal, and what was more, Snape wasn't even watching him fold the covers down and get in. He was at a desk, writing something on a long scroll.

Decorum, Harry sensed. Right. He should have remembered that Snape knew all about it. He slid into the bed and arranged the pillows how he liked, then with a glance at Snape, uncorked the vial again and drank the Truthful Sleep Potion. Ugh. As thick as honey it was, but the flavour was more what you might expect from swamp muck. Or worse. Two swallows and it was done, but downing that second swallow took almost as much willpower as Harry had.

Snape came to sit beside him, a glass of water in his hand. Harry took it gratefully, then wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

Feeling a bit unnerved, he lay down in the bed and closed his eyes. Moments after that, he was asleep and dreaming, but not of Samhain, or Darswaithe, or Lucius Malfoy. For all his nightmare before, those weren't really what was most on his mind now. Something else was. Something he thought he'd never have.

More to the point, something he'd thought he'd never had.

A real family.

He had been part of one . . . a long, long time ago. He knew that, but he'd never been able to remember it. Truthful Dreams changed all that for Harry, opening up to his sleeping mind images he'd absorbed during his first year of life.

He saw his mother's face peering down at him, her mouth making cooing noises as her arms rocked him back and forth. He heard his father clapping with delight when he toddled forward on uncertain
feet. He saw them both, smiling, tucking covers around him in his crib as they put him to sleep.

Truthful Dreams . . . and the truth he learned was one he'd longed for ever since he'd realised that children weren't supposed to live in cupboards:

Once upon a time, Harry Potter had been dearly, tenderly loved.
Harry stretched in the bed, a little disoriented when he opened his eyes and saw the unfamiliar room. Then he remembered. *The nightmare about Darswaithe, the talk with Snape.*

*Truthful Dreams.*

Sitting up, he noticed that he was alone, but before he could so much as reach for the clothes he saw neatly folded on a chair, Snape was walking through the open door to look down at him. "How was your night?"

"Oh, fine."

Snape sat down next to him and raised an eyebrow, his deep voice insistent when he asked, "Would you care to elucidate? I can't in good conscience give you more of the potion unless I know what effect it had on you, although I think it's safe to say you aren't allergic to Loosestrife." He smirked a bit. "If you were, you'd be covered in green boils by now."

"You might have warned me about that," Harry murmured, then yawning, detailed, "Your warnings about the potion . . . er, repressing emotion weren't quite accurate, you know. It only represses negative emotion. I had some nice dreams at first and didn't feel distanced at all." The look of surprise on Snape's face took Harry aback. "You didn't know it worked like that?"

Then he realised the truth.

And what an awful truth it was.

"You've never dreamed of pleasant memories?" And the corollary. "You don't have any?"

"Don't waste sympathy on me," Snape half-snarled, skirting the question even as his non-answer gave a lot away, all the same.

*Snake's a private person,* Harry remembered telling Darswaithe. *Snake would want me to shut up.* But he didn't. "That can't be right," he quietly asserted. "You must have had some good things happen in your life."

Snape's black eyes smouldered, but his voice was cool. "I remember feeling enormously happy and proud of myself when I took the Dark Mark," he admitted, snidely adding, "Would that be the sort of memory you had in mind?"

"What about when you were brave and strong enough to leave all that?"

"By then," Snape scathed, "I was a broken man."

Harry closed his eyes to avoid seeing the accusation written on Snape's face. He should have listened to his instincts and halted these questions at the outset. "I'm sorry, sir."

Snape was silent for a moment. "You said you had nice dreams at first," he finally went on, his voice calmer. "Am I right in thinking you also had some species of nightmare?"

"Yeah," Harry admitted, remembering. "Several. The potion does make those easier to bear. I mean, last night when Draco woke me I thought I might actually sick up. But now I feel all right, even though I can remember everything really well." His brow furrowed. "Talk about details. Truthful
Dreams must have come in really handy for reporting to the Order."

"Samhain?" Snape tensely questioned.

"No, just the Dursleys," Harry answered, frowning. "Awful stuff. But don't worry. I'm all right. What time is Thistlethorne coming?"

"Ten," Snape gave him a twisted smile. "I had to cancel classes again. If your fellow students knew why, you'd be a hero all over again."

"Good they don't know, then," Harry sighed. "I get enough worshipful blather--" Realizing what he'd said, he quickly amended, "I didn't mean I wanted this to be a secret, sir."

Snape though, didn't appear bothered either way. "Who you tell, and when, and how, is entirely up to you. The staff will all be immediately informed, of course." When Harry nodded, Snape went on, "My understanding is that the casewitch will talk to me first and finish my interview. It was rather abruptly terminated, you realise. After lunch she'll speak with you."

"With us," Harry corrected.

"I do not think that's feasible."

"Well, it had better be--" Harry started to say, only to have Snape cut him off.

"I have, however, found what I believe to be an acceptable solution." Snape paused. "Would you be amenable to Lupin sitting in on your interview?"

"Remus?" Harry thought about that for a minute. Part of him would actually rather have Snape there, but he supposed Remus would be able to protect him well enough if the casewitch tried anything. Actually, that sounded pretty unlikely now; it was probably just his nightmare that had made the whole thing seem so hazardous. On the other hand, he could hardly refuse a chance to see Remus again. "Yeah, all right," he agreed.

"He'll floo in sometime before lunch, then," Snape explained.

Harry felt kind of awkward around Draco that morning as they did their lessons. It wasn't lost on him that he'd gone to "talk" to Snape and had stayed all night, while Draco had never so much as been allowed to set foot in the man's bedroom. If Draco had been jealous before of Harry getting adopted, he was bound to be sick with it now, wasn't he?

Apparently, he wasn't.

Draco demonstrated a few advanced transfigurations to Harry so he'd know what their class was doing by then, and then worked with him trying to get his first-year magic back in line. Harry frankly wondered how Draco managed to be so patient with him day after day, always trying to get Harry's magic working again . . . and always failing.

Remus Lupin stepped calmly out of the fireplace just before noon.

"Hallo Harry, Dudley . . . Mr Malfoy," he greeted the young people scattered about the room.

"Professor Lupin," Draco said in a voice gone suddenly cold.

"Remus!" Harry jumped up from his chair, almost toppling it. "I've missed you so much! Come in,
come in, sit down. How have you been?"

"I believe that should be my question to you," Remus softly observed, his voice amused and pleased all at once. "You're certainly looking well."

"Well, you know Professor Snape and his potions," Harry shrugged, grinning. Then his grin faded a bit. "Er . . . what did he tell you when he asked you to come here?"

"You're being interviewed with an eye toward him adopting you, and wanted an adult with you as the last interview went rather askew." Remus cleared his throat. "Harry, are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"I thought you said it was good to see me getting along better with Professor Snape."

"An amicable working relationship is certainly a good thing, considering," he admitted, with a glance toward Draco. "But . . . adoption?"

"If you don't like the idea, maybe you shouldn't sit in on my interview," Harry ventured. He didn't want to hurt Remus' feelings, but neither did he want him giving the casewitch reasons to deny the application.

"It's not that I don't like it," Remus said. "It just strikes me as . . . unexpected."

"That's funny; I sort of figured the whole Or-- er, I mean, the 'old crowd,' would have been told all about it by now."

While Remus shook his head, Draco rasped, "You can call it the Order, Potter. You can even call it The Order of the Phoenix. You think I don't know all about it? The way gossip runs through the circles I used to frequent," he snarled with a glance at Dudley, "I just might know more than you!"

"My, don't you take things personally," Harry lightly mocked, refusing to let the comment upset him. "How should I know what you know? It's better to err on the side of caution, that's all."

Draco grimaced, still looking a bit put out as he went to the Floo to arrange something for lunch.

Remus was a good conversationalist, and managed to include Dudley in their conversation during the meal, but no matter how he tried, Draco remained standoffish, if not downright rude. Harry put up with it as best he could, but finally, even the euphoria of his baby-dream wilted a bit under Draco's persistent jibes at Remus. Exasperated, Harry demanded, "What in hell's your problem? Did Remus fail you in defence, or something?"

Draco's silver eyes glittered with malice. "Oh, he knows enough to recognise talent when he sees it, but we should never have had his type teaching us in the first place!"

"His type?" Dudley asked, his eyes wide. "What does that mean?"

*Don't say it, don't you dare say it,* Harry warned Draco with his own eyes. Out loud, he answered his cousin, "Remus has a wizard disease. It's not catching or anything, though."

"Not under normal circumstances," Draco darkly added.

"Remus has never hurt anybody, and never will," Harry stressed. "So the only reason you could have to be in a snit is you're not really over your obsession with pure blood. You think his . . . ah,
condition, makes his tainted, or something!"

"Harry," Remus quietly broke in, "I don't need a defender. Mr Malfoy's feelings are . . . not uncommon. I'm quite used to this."

"I don't care; it's still unreasonable!" Harry snarled, pushing back from the table to stand up. "If you want me to trust you, Draco, you can't go around antagonizing--"

"Your friends?" Draco sniped. "So you won't trust me as long as I have my own opinions, is that it? Nice! Very Gryffindor, actually, all that camaraderie and esprit de corps!"

"I wasn't going to say that!" Harry objected. "If you're against Voldemort now, you have to be able to work with the rest of us who are, you imbecile! And Remus is, so get over your . . . whatever, will you?" Draco paused, his golden eyebrows drawing together in one fine line. "Oh. Well. I suppose you might have a point." He drummed his fingers on the table, and looked up at Harry who was standing, glowering down at him. "Does that mean you believe me?"

"I said if." Harry reminded him, face flushed because once upon a time he would never had said even that much. Something in him crumpled. "Oh, shite, I don't know any more. Let me think about it, all right? You still don't make very much sense to me, if you must know. In the meantime, it wouldn't kill you to show a little respect for Remus even if you don't like him."

Draco thought about that, then nodded and put on a smile Harry recognised. It was his being-polite-though-I-hate-it smile. "Professor Lupin, would you care for some dessert?" he inquired, though not sarcastically. That was worth something, at least.

Shaking his head, Remus rose to his feet. "Thank you, but no. I believe Harry and I should take this time to discuss the coming interview. Is there a place where we can speak alone, Harry?"

Harry led the way to Snape's office, while behind him, he heard Dudley pressing, "What disease?"

"Oh, um . . . some really rare condition I er . . . can't remember the name of," Draco lied.

Harry sighed with relief. He really didn't want Dudley in hysterics when the casewitch arrived. Good thing Dudley wasn't quite sharp enough to realise that Draco was a dreadful liar.

"Do you know what she's going to ask?" Harry wondered, slouching in one of the armchairs. He'd sort of wanted to sit in Snape's chair behind the desk, just for a lark, but decided he'd better not.

"No idea," Remus admitted, crossing an ankle over one knee and leaning back as though exhausted.

"You all right?" Harry frowned. "It's a little while past the last full moon, you should be um . . . recovered, right?"

"Yes, but not having had the Wolfsbane for my change in November . . ." Remus sighed. "It will take several lunar cycles for me to completely recover, I suspect. Of course I used to never have the Wolfsbane," he mused. "And things weren't this hard. I think the potion must produce a sort of dependency. Not that I blame Severus," he was quick to add. "The Wolfsbane is marvellous and even the best Potions Master in the world can't control every incidental effect."

"You think Professor Snape is the best Potions Master in the world?"
Remus tilted his head. "That was rhetorical, but actually . . . yes, I do. At any rate, I shall get stronger each month now that I have the Wolfsbane again."

"I'm sorry," Harry had to say, twisting his hands together. "It's my fault you didn't have it in November. You know he made a batch and it got ruined? Snape's never said, but I think maybe that was because it was right after I'd pried into his . . . um, Death Eater activities, and I think that upset him more than he let on at the time. And anyway, he started making the potion again for you, but that was that day when I finally found Sals. If I hadn't gone after her and left the house, Snape wouldn't have had to drop everything to look for me--"

"No, no," Remus sternly chided. "It is I who am sorry, Harry. My suffering was nothing to yours. When I think of how I led Lucius Malfoy straight to you . . ." He shuddered. "You have always had a kind and gentle spirit, Harry, but even so, I don't know how you can forgive me."

"It was an accident, and anyway, it's over now. And . . ." He gave a strange little half-shrug. "You know, I hadn't thought of it before, but all this, the adoption, everything . . . I don't think it would have happened if I hadn't been hurt at Samhain. I mean, it was Snape taking care of me afterwards that sort of helped us get a lot . . . er, closer. Without that, he'd probably still just want to be my teacher."

Remus slowly nodded. "Odd how things work out, yes. Have you any thoughts on what you'd like me to project during the interview?"

"See, I knew Slytherins weren't the only ones who had heard of strategy. Um, yeah, actually I have. I don't think you're supposed to talk, but your whole attitude sitting there could make a difference. You know how I used to complain about Snape all the time? Well, don't be surprised if I don't mention that. I want this to go through, so I pretty much plan to sugar-coat everything."

"Don't overdo it," Remus warned. "The casewitch will be looking for truth, and she'll know how to recognise a marked lack of it."

"Oh, there're plenty of good things I can say about Snape," Harry returned, nodding. "But yeah, I know what you mean. Say, Remus . . . I'm really glad you're here, and not just because I missed you. Remember how you analyzed those prophetic dreams I used to have?"

Remus had the grace to flush. "Your dreams have since turned out to be quite literal visions of the future."

"But your analysis was really good, Remus," Harry insisted, sitting up and leaning forward. "I've been thinking about it a lot. Well, today anyway," he admitted. "The dreams have come true, some of them, but what you said they meant also made a lot of sense. Everything you said I was feeling, I really was, and it was reflected in the dreams, just as much as the future was. So . . . I wondered if you'd help me unravel a dream I had just recently. Nightmare, I mean. It was really confusing, full of weird shifts and changes and stuff that would just never happen in real life."

A kind smile curled Remus' lips. "This is quite a change, Harry. Back at Grimmauld Place you were eager to stop me from prying into your private feelings."

"I should apologize for being so rude to you," Harry realised. "I'm sorry. Things just . . . got out of hand." He flushed, but met Remus' eyes. "I understand more now, what Sirius meant when he said that lots of people are idiots when they're young. I didn't mean to be such a cheeky little snotrag. I didn't even know I was. But when I think back . . . well, I shouldn't have thrown my shoe at the mirror, for starters."
"It's all right," Remus assured him. "I was young once, too. So, your dream?"

Harry told him the whole thing, sparing no detail, adding, "I figured out already why Snape was like a ghost at first, and then was with Sirius. I'm afraid of getting him killed, and no wonder, after what happened with Sirius. And Uncle Vernon, come to think of it, not that his death breaks me up. But still, he's dead because he was connected to me. I have this nasty habit of endangering people, see."

Thankfully, Remus didn't try to argue with him about that. "Severus is aware of the danger, and very well equipped to handle it," he pointed out.

"Wasn't Sirius?"

"Not to nearly the same degree."

"Yeah," Harry acknowledged. "Well, that still hurts something awful. I usually don't even think about it." He paused a moment, dragging in one deep breath after another, and managed to move on. "So why do you think I dreamed about Snape going past saying all the passwords? It was weird how they worked, too. The first one opened Dumbledore’s office; the second one portkeyed me back into it..."

"You're subconsciously wondering if Severus has all the answers?" Remus suggested. "But you're realizing that his answers won't always work as you expect."

"Hmm, maybe. Why Portkey me there, though? For my real interview, I was with Darswaithe right here."

"Darswaithe means danger to you. Perhaps you thought you'd be safer in Albus’ office. Or it could be a sign that you distrust Professor Dumbledore in some measure, perhaps."

No perhaps about it, Harry thought. "Talk about distrust. His door opened up into the forest. I didn't realise where at first, but it was the forest where I was tortured."

Remus nodded. "Not that the headmaster was in any way complicit, of course."

"No, I didn't mean that," Harry murmured. "What else? Well, the Fat Lady wouldn't let me in, but that just goes back to me feeling sort of insecure, I guess. About Gryffindor. But I asked Snape about moving back and he didn't have any problem with it, as soon as things go back to normal."

"Normal," Remus repeated in an odd tone.

"Normal for me," Harry clarified, smiling.

"Harry," Remus suddenly said, "I don't think I've ever seen you so much at ease."

"Yeah, I feel good," Harry agreed. "Um, happy. You know, it's really a pretty strange feeling for me. I can't think of when I was last happy. The only thing that still bugs me is that I don't have my magic back. But you know what?" He quirked another smile. "It's kind of... neat, I guess, that Professor Snape wants to adopt me now, when I'm missing it."

"Because he's adopting you, not some sort of Wizarding saviour."

"Well, he's never really seen me as that," Harry murmured. "But yeah, that's what I meant."

A knock on the door interrupted them, then. Harry had to place his palm on it to make it open. Draco was standing there, the look on his face resigned and resentful all at once, but the expression was
wiped clean almost as soon as Harry saw him. "They're here," he quietly said.

Snape had walked the casewitch down after they'd concluded their interview in the office adjoining his Potions classroom. Now, since the proper formalities had been sidestepped the day before, he introduced her to everyone in the room, then gesturing toward Remus, explaining that given the fiasco with Darswaithe, Harry had expressed a preference to henceforth be chaperoned while with Wizard Family Services staff.

Harry all at once felt about three years old. Chaperoned.

Amaelia Thistlethorne didn't appear to find the request disquieting. "I understand," she merely murmured, casting a sympathetic glance toward the boy. "Would you be able to remain in your quarters until I've finished with Mr Potter, Professor Snape? If possible, I'd like to conclude this business, today."

Snape inclined his head in acknowledgment.

Draco suddenly cleared his throat, his voice emerging rough with repressed emotion, which seemed rather odd, as what he had to say was, "Please excuse me. I need to finish a . . . an essay, and Floo it to Professor Sprout."

Harry cast him a strange look. "But we haven't had an essay in Herbology in ages."

Draco huffed. "Some of us are taking advanced topics."

It was the first Harry had heard of such a thing, but he just shrugged.

"Shall we?" inquired the casewitch, fussing a bit with her voluminous robes. Purple, today. They still clashed with her awful red hair.

Remembering Draco's perfect manners, Harry thought to offer, "Ah, can I take your robes and get you something to drink, before we begin?" Never mind that when it came to the drink, he'd need to ask for some help.

She shrugged out of her robes to reveal a garish dress, equally purple. Snape took the robes without a word, and draped them over one arm, his face a careful blank though Harry could tell he didn't like touching them.

"Nothing to drink, no thank you," she murmured, but added, looking carefully at Harry, "I thought perhaps you might feel better about the situation if I let Professor Snape have my wand for the duration?"

That was certainly unexpected. "Uh, yeah. Sure," Harry agreed, though his Slytherin side didn't take the offer at face value. How was he to know if she'd given up her real wand? For all that though, he wasn't terribly worried that she would attack him.

Thistlethorne handed a length of pale maple to Snape, and then followed Harry and Remus into the Professor's warded office.

As soon as the door was closed and the three of them were seated, the questions began. Thistlethorne didn't even fetch out a quill and parchment with which to record Harry's answers; she just listened to them.
The first question really threw Harry for a loop. He'd expected some preliminaries, but Hufflepuff or no, the casewitch apparently believed in delving straight to the heart of the matter.

"Why do you wish to be adopted by Professor Snape?"

Harry's mind went almost blank, though he managed to say, "I explained that already on the forms I filled out."

Thistlethorne had done her homework; she didn't need to consult those forms. "Yes. Your answer centred primarily on respect, Mr Potter. But I'm sure you have profound respect for many people. You aren't petitioning that the others adopt you. So think a little more deeply for me, if you would."

Harry did, though it was a little difficult as interlaced into all his thoughts was an awareness that he wanted Snape's quarters warded for his safety. While it might not be terrible to mention that aspect, he remembered Snape saying it wasn't very good for a sole reason to be adopted. "Hmm," he mused, closing his eyes as he considered it. "I haven't analyzed it much myself," he admitted. "It just seems right. But thinking about it now . . . you know, I think it's because he treats me normally."

Harry opened his eyes and saw the casewitch watching him closely, her blue eyes intent. "Is that so unusual, Mr Potter?"

"Yeah, it is. People see the scar on my face and either love me or hate me for it. Just to give you an inkling of what my life is like, not even my adoption interview could go normally. When's the last time a casewizard tried to abduct a child?"

"Point taken," she murmured.

"Imagine a life just stuffed with events like that," Harry added, taking a deep breath. "Then fill in the rest of the days with people fawning over you, practically worshipping you over something that happened when you were a baby. Worse, something that for you is a personal tragedy, nothing to celebrate."

"It must take a toll."

"It does. But from the first, Professor Snape has insisted that I should be treated just like any other student." He laughed. "Now, I haven't always been exactly appreciative of that, mind. I'd go sneaking out after curfew and hope not to get caught, obviously. I'd think it was unfair and all that rot when Professor Snape would assign me a detention. But he was determined that the last thing I needed was special privileges and exceptions. I think he knew from the first that I'd got too many of those from the moment I'd entered the Wizarding world. He knew it wasn't good for me."

Harry couldn't tell what she thought of all that; the woman's expression was absolutely non-committal. Well, so much for the overemotional Hufflepuff theory.

"Has he given you many detentions over the years?" she next asked.

Oooh, dangerous territory. For all Harry knew, she'd seen his records and knew the truth. "Well, quite a few," he temporized. "Like I said, I didn't appreciate them at the time, but I have made . . . uh, almost a habit of breaking the rules."

"What I'm getting at is this," she detailed. "How are you going to handle your father being one of your teachers? Do you foresee any difficulties, there?"

"Hmm. Well, it's not even going to come up for a while, as I'm currently not attending classes. You know about that, I suppose?"
"I've been informed that you're in far more danger than usual and are currently defenceless as your magical abilities have to all intents and purposes, vanished."

*So they didn't tell her about the wild magic,* Harry realised. *Interesting.* "Right. You see what I mean about my life never being normal. But even now, Professor Snape's doing his best. He makes Draco and me get up on time and do classes just like always. Anyway, though, you were asking about for later. I think we can work out any problems that arise. You'd have to know how Professor Snape operates to really understand. Like, he really does want what's best for me, so when it comes to marks, say, he's more likely to be harder on me on account of being my . . . um, guardian. I don't think he'd go easy on me because of it."

"You stumble over the word *guardian,*" she softly observed.

"Well, I'm not exactly sure what to call him." Her eyebrows lifted. "You haven't discussed it?"

Harry thought back. "He said to consider calling him *Severus,* actually. And I am. Considering it, I mean."

"Would you say you had a positive relationship with your previous guardians?"

Harry's most recent nightmare flashed into his mind, but thanks to Truthful Dreams, he didn't flinch, at least not visibly. He wondered what to say in answer. Should he play the sympathy card and try to get her to think that Snape, unlike the Dursleys, would be a real parent, something he desperately needed? Or would that make him seem too psychologically damaged for Snape to adequately handle? And how much did she know already? What had Snape told her, or Dumbledore? Whatever he said had to coordinate with everybody else's statements.

"The truth, if you would, Mr Potter," she prompted as the silence wore on.

"I was foisted onto them as a baby and they never let me forget it," Harry abruptly announced, taking care not to look at Remus. "Plus, they disapproved of magic, which wizard children can't help doing. I was no different."

"How did they react to your accidental magic?"

Harry frowned. "I thought this interview was supposed to be about Professor Snape and myself?"

"Your experiences in your last family setting are relevant to the prospects for this one," Thistlethorne calmly explained.

"Well, they punished me," he admitted, deciding to downplay just how. "They sent me to bed without dinner, things like that." No need to mention that the bed was in a cupboard, or that he'd often gone without breakfast, lunch, or dinner . . . sometimes, for days at a time. He thought of a way, though, to turn the story to his advantage. "Growing up there was very oppressive, and then I was plunged into this other life where I'm practically hero-worshipped and I'm given *too* much leeway. I mean, for example, everybody broke all the rules to let me compete in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. I wasn't old enough by any means, but I'm *Harry Potter.* If anybody else's name had come spinning out of the Goblet, they'd have found a way to get them out of it, for their own safety. But I'm supposed to be this super-wizard, don't you know, so I had to compete, like it or not. Professor Snape argued against that, by the way. But my point is just that: he knows how to strike a balance that nobody else even notices I need."

Thistlethorne nodded, though it looked more like she was indicating she'd heard than she was...
actually agreeing. "Just a few more questions," she announced. "Has Professor Snape discussed with you why he joined You-Know-Who all those years ago?"

Harry's mouth fell open. Oh, for Merlin's sake, not again . . . "These are just the sorts of questions Darswaithe went on and on about," he complained to Remus, his eyes going wide with anxiety.

The casewitch held up a hand before Remus could speak. "Please, hear me out. I am not asking you to tell me why he once sided with the forces of Darkness. I am asking you if the professor has spoken to you of his decision."

Harry debated with himself what to say. "Well, he doesn't try to justify it, if that's what you mean. And actually, he's talked to me a lot more about just how he realised that Voldemort was wrong about everything, why he left, that sort of thing. But yeah, we have talked about all of that."

"What about his well-known animosity for your father?" she pressed, and at Harry's look of shock, sagely added, "Oh yes, it's no secret to those who were in the Order the first time around."

"Right. Well, he knows I'm not my father," Harry defended Snape. "I mean, he's crystal clear on that." Finally, Harry thought, but didn't say.

"I was asking if the two of you had discussed Professor Snape's antipathy toward your father," she patiently explained.

"Oh. Yeah, we have. Several times. He says that--"

"I don't need to know what he said," the casewitch interrupted. "I would like to know if you are comfortable with it."

"Yes, absolutely," Harry answered, looking her in the eye. "And I understand you don't need to know what he said, but I want to tell you this. I grew up being told that my father was an unemployed drunkard who got himself and his wife killed in a car crash."

Despite her professional demeanour, that tidbit had the casewitch gasping.

"Yeah," Harry acknowledged. "Terrible slander. But I believed it, had no way of knowing differently until Rubeus Hagrid--he's a teacher here, now--collected me so I could attend school. Anyway, though, animosity or no, when Professor Snape found out I'd been told those things about James Potter, he cared enough about me to speak to me in detail about what my father accomplished before he died. And if that doesn't say he'd be a decent parent for me, I don't know what would."

Another rather distant-looking nod. "Has Professor Snape discussed discipline with you?"

"Well, he's a very disciplined person," Harry had to admit. "I'm sure he'd try to raise me to be . . . oh, you mean as in punishment, huh? Oh yeah, we've discussed that."

"This time I do need to know what was discussed," she gently asserted.

"Well, first we talked about rules and decided we'd have to negotiate some we could both live with, you know, 'cause I'm sixteen and not six, as he put it. Then he said that sometimes he'd have to have the final say on matters, and if I disobeyed him he'd give me detentions or extra assignments, that sort of thing."

She cracked a slight smile. "Very teacherish consequences."

Harry smiled, too.
"Is there anything you'd like to ask me, then?" she said, an air of finality hanging over the words.

"When can the adoption be made official?"

"Ah. Well, as you said, it's a rare day when you are treated just as anyone else would be. We've fast-tracked your application as we understand that having Professor Snape as your father will be very useful in preparing certain defences which you urgently need. Therefore, pending my approval--"

"You don't yet approve?" Harry gasped, gripping the arms of his chair.

"I do," she gently put in, and he practically slumped with relief. "There are a few more procedures to get through before I can sign off, however. I will need to speak with Mr Malfoy. He may be emancipated, but he's de facto part of the family dynamic, here. Then I would like to interview you and the professor together, after which the final papers can be prepared for signature. Wizard Family Services will need to emboss the contracts with their seal of approval, of course, and--"

Harry began thinking he might be twenty before all that got done. His despondency must have shown on his face, for she said, "Tomorrow, Mr Potter. With any luck, you'll be his son by tomorrow."

Son . . . The word still gave him a funny feeling, one he wasn't sure he liked, but after the dream about his parents, it wasn't as frightening as before.

"That is fast," Harry admitted. "Thanks."

"I'll see Mr Malfoy now," she said. "If it's not too much trouble, I'd appreciate that cup of tea?"

"Oh, certainly," Harry said, opening the door. "I'll get it for you and send Draco in."

"Help me get her some tea," Harry said to Snape as he emerged into the living room. "She wants to talk to Draco, now."

"He's in your bedroom," Snape murmured, moving toward the Floo. "You do realise I'll have to completely respell my office wards after all this?"

Draco had a book open and was writing something when Harry walked in. The book definitely looked to be Herbology, but it wasn't their regular text. At any rate, the moment he noticed Harry, he slammed it closed and hid his parchment behind his back. What sort of essay was all that secret?

Pushing the question aside, Harry explained that the casewitch wanted to see Draco.

"I still don't see what I have to say about any of it," the blond boy muttered as he rose from where he'd been sitting on his bed. As though it was second nature to him, he flicked his wand and murmured a straightening spell to the bedcovers, then pulled his curtains closed and said darkly to Harry, "Don't go looking in there."

"I wouldn't," Harry stressed, not sure whether to laugh at the idea or get offended.

"I mean it."

"If I say I won't, then I won't!"

Draco gave him a close look. "Yeah, probably you won't. Gryffindor."
"Why are you so . . . testy?" Harry thought to ask. Although, maybe Draco wasn't any different from usual; maybe, it was just that Harry was more relaxed than he'd been in ages. That nice dream had restored something, something he'd really needed.

Draco ran a hand through his hair, mussing it. *Not like him at all,* Harry thought, giving up on the it's-just-me theory. "Come on," he prompted. "What's wrong?"

"*Her,*" Draco all but snarled. "What am I supposed to say to her? What if I fuck this whole thing up? Severus will never forgive me! And you . . ." His sneer faded to pure distress. "You seemed iffy at first, but now I think you really want to be adopted, which means you'll never trust me if I blow this for you!" His voice dropping to an undertone, he muttered, "Though why that should bother me when you don't trust me anyway is a good question."

"Look, I said I didn't know anymore, didn't I? You hated me for five years, Draco. And it's only been a little more than five weeks since Samhain. I can't just trade one for the other, you know."

"Yeah, I know," the other boy glumly admitted. "So, her. What do you want me to say?"

Harry stared at him. "Uh, well, I don't know what she's going to ask. But . . . well, I just wouldn't go into any ancient history, you know. Not mine and Snape's, or mine and yours, either."

"Ancient being anytime prior to this past October." Draco nodded. "Very well, I'll do my Slytherin best."

Harry didn't know what that meant, but strangely enough, he was sure that Draco had meant it in a good way.

It seemed to Harry that Draco was in there forever. Maybe that had something to do with the mood out in the living room. Snape might have invited Remus here to help out Harry, but he definitely hadn't forgiven the man for his unwitting role in Harry's abduction. About all that kept the atmosphere civil was Dudley's presence. Harry's cousin was sitting at the dining room table, idly doodling on a parchment Draco had spelled to produce animations of anything drawn on it. Dudley laughed uproariously and couldn't get enough of it, even though his artistic talents didn't stretch much beyond stick figures.

Well, they were lively stick figures, now.

Harry tried in vain to remember a time when the wizarding world had seemed so harmlessly magical to him, too.

Snape, meanwhile, was sitting with his arms crossed and a scowl on his face. He hadn't asked anything about Harry's own interview, which Harry found rather surprising. Remus kept trying to engage him in conversation, but Snape was a taciturn as Draco had been earlier.

*Slytherins,* Harry thought, shaking his head.

"So, what did she ask you?" Harry tried drawing Snape out a bit.

He got a glare for his trouble. So much for that line of inquiry.

"Do you know what Draco's Herbology project is?" Harry gave it another stab. "He seemed really intent on it, earlier."
Snape laced his fingers together and leaned his head back to stare at the ceiling. "I do not live in Professor Sprout's pockets, Potter."

Uh-oh, Potter. Well, Harry didn't need to be told three times to back off. He glanced over at Remus and mouthed the word hopeless. Remus smiled and nodded.

"Stop talking about me," Snape growled, his gaze still fixed to the granite overhead.

Harry couldn't help it; he burst out into giggles. Now Remus was glaring too, telling him to cut it out, but Harry couldn't. The laughter some sort of release valve on all the tension, he began chortling, his sides actually starting to hurt he laughed for so long.

"What's so funny?" Dudley asked, ambling over. He sat on the floor without a qualm, and began to fiddle with the ring he was wearing around his neck. Lily's ring. Harry stared at it, a strange sort of pain enveloping his heart. The dream had helped with some things, but not with that.

Unusually perceptive, Dudley saw his look and quietly said, "You'll get it back, Harry. Soon, huh? No offence, but as soon as that spell gets redone, I'd like to be on my way."

The prospect of Dudley's imminent departure sparked something in Snape. Well, he always had been unfailingly patient and kind with the Muggle boy. It was almost out of character for him, but Harry knew why he was doing it. They needed Dudley to complete the spell, and Snape, Slytherin as they came, was astute enough to realise that Dudley couldn't possibly cope with his usual temperament.

"So, Dudley," Snape drawled, moving to sit in a more normal position, "have you given any thought to your plans?"

Dudley all at once looked rather uncomfortable, his glance at Harry apologetic. "Um, I thought I'd spend Christmas with Aunt Marge, actually. I know Marsha said she might make me backtrack into bad habits with my diet, and um . . . hating your guts, but she's family too, you know, and . . ." He gulped. "She did just lose her brother."

"I know," Harry said. He'd never forgiven Marge for those horrible things she'd said, but that didn't have to involve Dudley. "Say hallo from me," he added, just a touch of malice in his voice. "Tell her I'm sending her a balloon bouquet for Christmas."

Dudley cleared his throat. "Uh, she doesn't remember The Incident."

Harry knew that. "Pity," he said, and Dudley hid a laugh behind his hand.

"After Christmas, I'll look about for a flat and a job," Dudley said, sighing. "Mum and Dad spent most of what Dad brought in, but there's a little money there to tide me over until I find something. Um, there's no phones here, right? So what do I have to do to write you, buy an owl?"

"I'll write you," Harry promised. "Care of Mrs. Figg, who can use Muggle post to get the letters to you. Keep her current on your address, and send her anything you want me to get here. She can take care of owling things to me. How's that sound?"

"Complicated," Dudley sighed. "But maybe as good as it's going to get."

Remus stretched his long legs out before standing up. "Harry. It's been wonderful to see you, and see you doing so well, but I have a number of tasks ongoing for the 'old crowd' which I should really return to."

"I understand," Harry murmured, standing up and walking Remus to the Floo. "Um, when can I see
you again, though? Oh . . ." A thought occurred to him. He glanced back to see Snape pointedly ignoring the conversation. Harry wished he knew what that meant. "It's probably up to Professor Snape," he admitted, a little bit glum. It was good, of course, that Snape had let Remus visit finally, but Harry couldn't help but be aware that it had taken a pretty serious need to make his teacher relent. It didn't seem to have thawed the ice any, more's the pity. He didn't want Snape and Remus at odds, he just didn't!

"Actually," Remus volunteered, "I'm shortly off on a trip abroad. You remember Hagrid's mission, recruiting . . . allies? Mine is similar."

Harry got that at once, and knew Remus was speaking cryptically so as not to alarm Dudley. "Oh," he said, disappointed though he knew it might be valuable, having the werewolves on their side. "Well, good luck."

Remus leaned down to speak much more quietly. "The mission is well and good, but I also think the headmaster has another goal in mind."

"What?" Harry whispered back.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake," Snape erupted. "I can hear you! The other goal is just Albus playing chessmaster as usual. He thinks you and I need time to adjust to our new situation, without other parental influences interfering." He cast a slightly derisive glance towards them. "Enjoy Germany, Lupin."

Remus nodded, and with a last smile at Harry, flooed away.

Harry went to sit back down, and the waiting continued. What is Draco saying in there? he wondered, wishing Snape would cast a listening charm or something. It would be the Slytherin thing to do, wouldn't it?

Draco finally emerged. "She's ready for the two of you," he said without expression, his hand elegantly waving toward Harry and Snape. "Excuse me, I must go finish my project."

"What is this project?" Harry pressed.

"You'll find out. Soon, I think."

Harry didn't know what to make of that. Shrugging, he made his way down the hall after Snape.

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Snape had apparently got the casewitch more than a mere cup of tea; a china pot decorated with animated roaring dragons was sitting on a trivet on his desk. From time to time one of the dragons let loose a volley of fire, after which the pot would steam. It was one of the more clever self-heating spells Harry had seen. Beside the pot sat a little cup frowning indignantly. Harry wondered if that was because it was almost empty and wanted to be refilled.

The other two cups appeared contented enough. Snape poured tea for both himself and Harry, and topped up the casewitch's portion, at which point the little cup brightened considerably.

The casewitch was sitting behind the desk, which Harry thought rather impertinent even if he'd wanted to sit there earlier, himself. Maybe she just needed the space, however. She had most of the surface covered in sheets of parchment. She was filling one out, her script careful, precise, and rather ornate. Harry noticed as he sat down that everything she wrote was being magically transferred onto all the other sheets as well. She glanced at them from time to time, presumably to be sure everything
was well in order.

Snape took the other armchair, balancing his saucer on a crossed knee, and waited silently for Amaelia Thistlethorne to speak. It took a while; she was intent on her paperwork. Finally, she looked up. "Everything here appears satisfactory," she said. "However, Professor Snape, I wonder if it has occurred to you how your changed relationship with Mr Potter is likely to affect Mr Malfoy? We emancipated him because it was necessary to ensure his safety, but his having been prematurely made a legal adult does not mean he has the emotional resources of one."

"I'm well aware of his jealousy," Snape coolly admitted. "There's not a great deal I can do about it."

She paused, appearing to delicately balance confidentiality against practical needs. "I'm sure, then, that you've realised he looks on you rather as a father figure? Unsurprising, as you've managed to achieve what he no doubt wishes his own father would."

"Leaving Voldemort," Snape acknowledged. "I understand how he feels, yes."

"Have you not considered then . . . " She paused, clearly at a loss for how to proceed. "That is, at present both young men have fairly equal claims on your time and attention, but the adoption will skew the balance in Mr Potter's favour." She glanced at Harry. "Mr Malfoy would not be normal if that didn't greatly perturb him. I think he'll have a difficult time dealing with the situation."

"What do you suggest I do?" Snape asked, though clearly without meaning it. "Eject him from my quarters if his behaviour troubles myself or Harry? I can't do that, Miss Thistlethorne. His safety, not to mention that of Slytherin in general, depends on him staying here for the time being."

"But Draco seems all right," Harry broke in, though he wasn't completely sure he was supposed to talk. On the other hand, this was their interview, wasn't it? Not Snape's alone. He ignored Snape's warning glance at him and continued, "I mean, when we first decided to do this, he seemed pretty upset, but he got over it. I mean, mostly."

"What caused him to 'mostly' accept the idea?"

"I have no idea," Harry admitted, running one finger along the edge of his teacup. "One day he was sniping at me, and the next he was back to just helping me with my homework and being his regular self."

Thistlethorne levelled her blue gaze at Snape. "You know, though, what occasioned the change."

Snape shrugged. "I told him his attitude had to improve and I'd take a hundred points a day from Slytherin if it didn't."

Harry's whole hand jerked so badly that tea sloshed into his saucer.

Snape gave him a glare. Nothing terribly special about that, of course, but on this occasion, Snape was also on the receiving end of a glare. Thistlethorne's. "Are you quite sure," she said in a high-voiced, smarmy way, "that threatening Mr Malfoy is the best way to address the problem?"

Snape's own voice was cool. "He's a student and he happens to be living in my personal rooms. I will not tolerate blatant rudeness under my own roof."

"Still, to take what is essentially a family matter and make it fodder for points . . . " She sounded hugely disapproving.

"Draco is intent on Slytherin House welcoming him back," Snape mildly replied. "Huge point losses
on his account would interfere with that goal. I knew the tactic would be effective."

"Still ..." she muttered again, auburn eyebrows raised in challenge.

"Rest assured, such measures are not my only strategies for dealing with ... ah, familial discord. Perhaps you're unaware of this, but I've known Draco Malfoy literally since he was born. I know how he thinks, and I was confident he would respond well to my gambit. As indeed, he did."

Her blue eyes had taken on a rather calculating gleam by the time Snape finished. "Ah. Well, if you're so well-acquainted with Mr Malfoy, and you're aware he looks to you more-or-less as a father already, it occurs to me that a better way to address his jealousy might be simply to adopt both young men?"

Harry's heart dropped straight into his shoes, because he knew exactly what Snape was going to say to that. His dream had laid it all out in vivid colour. *So I guess we're brothers*, Draco had said, and Harry had laughed in reply. And not a derisive laugh, either. Actually, the feeling that had swamped him in his dream had been relief. Profound, heartfelt relief, like he had never been so glad in his life to hear Draco mention they were brothers!

But he didn't want to be brothers with sodding Draco Malfoy, he just didn't! And if Snape was going to adopt them both, well . . .

All of a sudden, Harry wasn't so sure he wanted to be adopted at all.
Snape was shaking his head almost before the casewitch had finished uttering her asinine little suggestion. "Adopt them both," he dryly echoed, managing to make the notion sound positively irrational. "Out of the question."

"May I ask why?"

"To begin with, Draco Malfoy is a proud and intelligent young man. He will not appreciate being an afterthought, I quite assure you."

The casewitch spread her hands on the desk as she pondered that.

"Moreover, there are serious practical considerations," Snape continued, his voice taking on rather a sardonic note. Harry got the feeling that Snape thought the casewitch should have considered a few more things before opening her big, fat mouth. "Because Draco came of age early, he is now in nominal control of a large fortune previously held in trust for him. If he reverts to minor status now, Lucius Malfoy will petition for the funds to be returned to the estate proper. Need I mention that in that case, Draco will never see another Galleon from the vault that is supposed to be his and his alone?"

"Surely the younger Mr Malfoy could withdraw all his money beforehand?"

Snape shook his head. "Nominal control," he repeated. "His access to the funds is limited in several ways until such time as he marries and produces a 'worthy' heir."

"Worthy?"

"Pure-blooded and not a squib."

"Ah." Amaelia Thistlethorne sighed. "Well, that is a problem. Depriving him of his remaining inheritance is bound to exacerbate the emotional burden he already bears from having been disowned."

"It is not merely an emotional issue," Snape said, his voice going flat. "It is political. Draco has been taught since birth that money is power, and power is all that matters."

"Mmm. You've given this some prior thought."

Snape's dark eyes glimmered. "Evidently."

"So Mr Malfoy would not be an afterthought," she said on a note of triumph.

"What matters is not what he is, but rather what he thinks he is." Snape neatly dodged the question. "It is also not lost on me that there is little to be gained from enraging Lucius Malfoy further. To release Draco from his control was offence enough."

The casewitch frowned, the desk chair squeaking as she shifted her weight. "But Mr Malfoy has already sworn to kill the boy. It was on this basis that we emancipated him, so that he could stay here in safety even in the face of his father's objection. How much more enraged could he get?"

Even Harry knew what a stupid question that was. He had to really admire Snape's ability to reply to the question with a marked lack of sarcasm. Normally, the Potions Master would cut a strip off
anyone speaking so brainlessly to him . . . But Snape was nothing if not Slytherin to the bone. He wasn't about to offend the casewitch, whose approval was so vital to getting this adoption put through.

The idea made Harry sort of glow warm inside.

Of course, that might be mostly due to the trend of the conversation. Harry could tell already that no matter how much the interfering old biddy tried to insist, Snape was not about to adopt anybody but him.

Just. Him.

He felt like shouting, So there!

"I do not dispute that Lucius wishes to kill Draco," Snape was replying. "At the moment, however, his primary motive for so doing is to restore himself in the eyes of Voldemort. Draco has defied his Death Eater heritage to provide significant assistance to Harry, you see, therefore Lucius himself has fallen under suspicion. He hopes to allay this by sacrificing his son. However, if Lucius learns that I have taken for my own that which he believes is his, his desire to see the both of us slain will increase a hundredfold. Do you really think that the worst Lucius Malfoy can do is enlist Horace Darswaithe to infiltrate my quarters?"

"I see your point," Thistlethorne admitted at last. "A pity. I happen to think the young man could benefit from a more formalized relationship."

Snape gave a sharp nod. "I will still be here to guide and counsel him. I am, after all, his Head of House and an old friend of the family. It is my full intention to do all I can to assist Draco."

Harry felt like he'd been watching a tennis match or something, and that Snape had finally won. He'd been holding his breath without realizing; now, he let all that air out in a whoosh. Snape gave him a derisive glance, which Harry tried to counter with an innocent look. He could tell it wasn't working. Snape knew what he'd been thinking, that he really really didn't want Draco adopted alongside him.

Well, that obviously wasn't going to happen, crazy brothers-dream or not.

So what was that dream about, then?

Had he managed to change the future, and set them all on a different timeline? There was that day when he'd really wanted to punch Ron's smirking face . . . but Harry had resisted. For all he knew, that that one decision had changed everything that followed. Maybe, there'd be no punching-Ron, ever, and no brothers-with-Malfoy idiocy to worry about.

Maybe, Divination was just as big a crock as he'd always thought, and his so-called seer dreams--some of them, at least--were just complete malarkey.

Harry smiled.

Snape's black eyes narrowed.

Harry shrugged.

Snape's nostrils flared before he looked away.

The casewitch had gone back to her forms for a moment. Now, she signed one with a flourish and announced, "My recommendation that this adoption be approved. Now, the two of you will need to
provide signatures. Then, after the documents have been granted final sanction and recordation by Wizard Family Services, you will officially become a family."

She offered a quill to Snape, who ignored it to turn to Harry. "This is a magically binding contract we are about to sign. Do you understand the implications of that?"

"Well, yeah," Harry drawled, a little bit affronted. "I might have grown up in a Muggle home but I have been paying attention the last five years or so. It means it's a serious thing, me becoming your . . . er, adoptee."

"Adoptee?" Snape echoed, rolling his eyes.

"Give him time," the casewitch gently advised.

"Anyway," Harry rushed past that, feeling really bad. Adoptee . . . where had that come from? "I don't have any magic to bind, so that's sort of a problem, isn't it?"

"You have magic to bind."

He probably meant Parseltongue, Harry figured. Just as well not to remind the casewitch about it, as she hadn't seemed to like it any too well. Too Voldemortish, probably, not that Harry could help it. He couldn't even control it, for Merlin's sake. Put him face to face with a snake and it just came out. "So where do I sign?"

Snape took the parchment Thistlethorne extended and passed it to Harry, though he didn't give him a quill. Harry shrugged and reached over to the desk for one, only to be brought up short by a drawled, "I recommend you read it before you commit yourself."

Harry took Snape's advice, though it was a bit difficult to concentrate through the feeling of incredible stupidity swamping him. Sometimes he felt like he was six. He did know better than to sign contracts without reading them, though who would believe that now? He glanced up, expecting to see Snape's eyes mocking him, but the man was simply reading another copy of the contract.

All in all, there wasn't that much to the legal document, though it was very long. It seemed to Harry that it used an awful lot of words to convey just a few ideas.

Most of the contract seemed perfectly reasonable to Harry. Basically, Snape was agreeing to take care of him and Harry was agreeing to let him, including acknowledging that Snape would have a parent's rights over him and could direct his education and things like that. Since Harry trusted Snape, none of that gave him any cause for concern.

He was a little uncomfortable, however, when he ran across the phrase right of inheritance. It reminded him of Snape's face in the mirror. He didn't want to end up getting Snape killed, and the idea of inheriting all Snape's money afterwards made him feel faintly ill. It didn't help that precisely that sequence of events had happened with Sirius. Not for the first time, Harry wondered what he should do about the Black vault and 12 Grimmauld Place.

Pushing that thought away, Harry kept on reading. "What's right of abode?" he asked a few moments later.

"It means you're entitled to live wherever I reside," Snape answered, his voice rather distracted.

Forgetting the casewitch completely, Harry blurted, "Don't you always reside right here?"

Snape glanced up, his black eyes amused. "I do have a life outside Hogwarts."
"Oh, okay," Harry murmured, feeling even stupider than before. He put his contract down on his legs and took up his tea again, though by then it was completely cool.

"Have you any other questions?" Snape asked, drawing a quill from his robes.

"I don't think so, no . . ."

Looking closely at Harry, Snape extended the quill. "Are you quite certain?"

Harry might not pick up on every nuance in Snape's speech, but he couldn't miss the double meaning in that inquiry. Snape wasn't just asking if Harry's questions had been exhausted. He wanted to know if Harry was ready--really, truly ready--to be adopted.

All at once, Harry felt just awful about his reaction to the whole Draco thing. He didn't want the Slytherin boy for a brother, but now that that issue had been dealt with, he could see that it had been a bit childish to sit there fuming that he might have to share.

He would want to be adopted, he suddenly realised, even if Snape had decided to extend a similar offer to Draco. Or, Merlin forbid, even if he still did decide that. It could still happen, right? Snape could figure out some way around the money thing. Or Lucius could be given the Dementor's kiss--unlikely as that was when the man practically owned the Ministry. The obstacles could vanish; that was the point. And where would Harry be, then? He'd be brothers with Malfoy, just as the dream had foretold.

And the simple truth was, if he couldn't stomach that, he had no business agreeing to this.

But he wanted to agree to this, he realised, even if later, he ended up stuck being brothers with Malfoy.

"Yes, I'm quite certain," he calmly answered, though he was aware Snape had raised an eyebrow at his long silence. For all his confident words, his hand was shaking a little bit as he reached out for the quill Snape was still holding out.

His teacher's fingers brushed his, the touch imparting encouragement for all its lightness.

"Sign here," the casewitch instructed, pointing a stubby finger at a line near the bottom of the parchment.

Harry did, jerking a bit in surprise when he noticed Snape's own signature magically appear above his own. He glanced at the papers scattered across the desk and saw it happening everywhere. "My own signature didn't transfer," he pointed out when he had finished writing his full name.

"The parchment must be spelled to interact with Light Magic," Snape murmured. "It's all right. Just sign each by hand."

There turned out to be nineteen copies, which struck Harry as a ridiculously excessive number.

The casewitch performed a drying spell on them, then summoned all but two of them into a dragonhide case. "These interim copies are yours," she explained. "When the adoption becomes official, you will know it, as the Wizard Family Services seal will appear over your signatures."

"And that will happen when?" Snape inquired.

"Should be tomorrow," Harry volunteered. "I . . . um, I already asked."
He liked it that Snape looked sort of pleased by that.

The casewitch, however, held up a cautioning hand. "I said tomorrow was likely. At any rate, you will be provided with an additional official copy, embossed and suitable for framing, shortly after Wizard Family Services grants final approval."

"That will be very much appreciated, Miss Thistlethorne," Snape politely concurred as he got up to place his copy of the contract in a desk drawer. "Does that conclude your business here?"

Talk about decorum, Harry thought. Snape knew how to tell her to get out without it coming across rude at all. Well, he'd seen way back with Mrs. Figg that Snape did know how to be polite, when he wanted. He just usually didn't bother.

Taking the hint, Amaelia Thistlethorne stood up. "Do be careful of Mr Malfoy's feelings," she thought to warn them. "However good your reasons, his little chat with me clearly indicates that he's bound to feel somewhat rejected by this turn of events."

Snape inclined his head in answer, and walked the casewitch to the Floo.

"So, is it done?" Draco asked with what seemed like forced brightness when Harry went back into their room. All the Herbology stuff was put away, Harry noticed, but before he could comment, Draco was saying, "You're a Snape?"

"I'm not changing my name."

"I meant metaphorically, of course," Draco said with a slightly haughty air.

"It's supposed to be official tomorrow," Harry said, feeling like he was walking on eggshells. He wanted to ask if Draco was all right, but decided the question was too intrusive and that Draco wouldn't answer honestly, anyway. He'd seen everything was perfectly fine, because any other answer might cost Slytherin a hundred points. That really was a lot of pressure, Harry realised, frowning. And if Draco was really trying to recruit Slytherin to fight Voldemort, he couldn't afford to upset his house . . . oh, shite. In that case, it was a tonne of pressure.

"What's wrong?" Draco asked, pointing that Harry should sit on the other bed, facing him.

"Oh, nothing," Harry denied, though he did sit down.

"You're not having second thoughts, are you?"

"No."

Draco curled a lip. "Oh, I know what it is. Not too surprising you'd be a bit squeamish, really."

"Snape does not make me squeamish!" Harry objected. "I like him!"

Draco laughed, the sound darkly amused. "Oh, that's fairly obvious, surreal though it still seems to me. I just thought you must be uncomfortable about your change of house, actually."

"Huh?"

"Severus said he told you," Draco commented, grinning like he was savouring something tasty. "Your house, Harry. There's an old rule here, goes back to the 1400's or something, that if a professor's child is in residence, he's automatically a member of the teacher's house in addition to his
own, assuming they're different. It has to do with not undermining parental authority, you know, so you can't tick off Severus and then skip off claiming that only McGonagall's allowed to do anything to you. *Didn't Severus mention it?*

Harry felt a bit frozen with shock, but had to own, "Um, yeah. Actually, he did. Sort of in passing. At the time I was worried about filling out my forms . . . I wasn't really listening."

"I'd think five years in Severus' classes would have taught you better than that. He doesn't talk just to fill the air." A strange smile hovering on his lips, Draco probed, "Are you all right with it? Being a Slytherin, too? Being *known* as one?"

"Guess I have to be," Harry lightly passed it off. Since the truth was that he'd have been in Slytherin all along if he hadn't insisted otherwise, he couldn't get all that upset. And he couldn't claim that Snape hadn't warned him, could he? "You thought I'd be upset?"

"I thought you'd be *mortified.*"

"Nope," Harry said, hesitating to comment further. Some impulse inside him kept insisting, though. Draco had done a lot for him, after all. Returned his wand . . . tutored him endlessly . . . And despite his jealousy, the Slytherin boy hadn't used his own interview to derail the adoption. Of course, he'd done some of that more for Snape than for Harry, but *still,* what had Harry ever done in return?

Not much. So he had to tell him, he just had to. Because, the tiniest little part of him *was* starting to trust Draco, even if Harry just knew there was something he'd missed about the Slytherin boy's big conversion to the Light.

"It's like this," Harry finally ventured, blushing a little bit. "The . . . *er,* Sorting Hat sort of wanted to put me in Slytherin to start with."

"*Sort of* wanted?"

"Well, it was more like the Hat was trying to talk me into it."

Draco blew out a long breath. "Well, that's interesting. It can only mean that you *are* a bit Slytherin at heart. How'd you end up in Gryffindor, then? I mean, the Hat's not really supposed to let you pick or anything."

"I just kept thinking . . . well, actually saying too, *Not Slytherin, not Slytherin* until it gave in."

"Oh, very flattering," Draco drawled. "Though I suppose you'd heard the Dark Lord had been sorted there, so it stands to reason you wouldn't want--" He stopped when he saw Harry shaking his head.

"I wasn't thinking of Voldemort. *You'd* already been sorted; that was the problem."

"Oh, *very* flattering," was Draco's reply to that. He didn't appear to take great offence, however. "Does Severus know about all this?"

"Yeah, he said I should have let the Hat do its job."

"Though if you had," Draco pointed out, chuckling, "I'm sure you'd never have lived down all that *Heir of Slytherin* stuff you got sort of painted with."

"Ron and Hermione and I all thought *you* were the heir," Harry admitted.
"Oh, now isn't *that* sweet considering it turned out to be some half-blooded maniac who was opening the Chamber."

"Again with the blood, Draco?" Harry sighed.

"No, that isn't what I meant. It's just that Salazar was big on pure-bloodedness, right? So it's idiotic to think that Riddle, could be his so-called true heir. He wouldn't even qualify to attend here, not if Salazar had had his way." Draco gave Harry an assessing look. "So you're a Slytherin too, and *not* just in name . . . Well, Slytherin's current attitude to *me* notwithstanding, we tend to really stick together. Usually, that is."

"You're saying you'll stick by me?"

"Shite, Harry, I've been saying *that* for weeks. This adoption deal, though . . ." Again, that strange half-grin curled his features. "I guess it makes us brothers, huh?"

Harry stared at Draco as the whole world flipped upside down and began spinning. He laughed, good humour chasing all his worries away as the most profound sensation of relief swept straight through him like a cleaning breeze. *All that anxiety*, he thought, chortling, *and the dream didn't even mean what I assumed! What made me think that 'brothers' only had one meaning? The dream was true, true all along, but it's no big deal, it's no problem at all . . .*

Clapping a hand over his mouth, Harry practically *screamed* with laughter.

Draco appeared puzzled, if anything. "I know the other houses are a little bit odd by our standards," he ventured, "but *don't* you Gryffindors regard yourselves as a brotherhood?"

Harry tried to get himself under control. "Uh, yeah, sort of, I guess," he managed between chuckles. "Never heard anyone use that word, though." Another fit of laughter had him collapsing to his side on the bed. "You know what? We're half-brothers! 'Cause I'm only half-Slytherin! Or maybe we're stepbrothers," he gasped. "'Cause I'm joining the, uh, family 'bout five years late--"

And then the laughter shook the foundation of his soul, the sensation veering on hysteria as inside his mind, the words merrily trilled, *Snape's not going to adopt Draco, Snape's never going to adopt Draco, we'll never ever ever be brothers! Snape's going to be my guardian, not his, I won't have to share, never ever ever!*

It was like a bad dream had suddenly faded completely from view.

Which, of course, it had.

"Harry, you forgot your-- Merlin, what is going on in here?" Snape's sharp voice inquired.

Shakily pushing himself back into an upright sitting position, Harry saw his teacher standing in the doorway, a copy of the contract in his hand. He tried to talk, to explain, but too much humour was still bubbling up inside his throat.

"He thinks being in Slytherin as well as Gryffindor is bloody *hilarious*," Draco announced, snorting.

"What's funny about it?" Snape challenged, his voice edged with offence.

That quieted Harry's laughter, although not for long. "Um, I was just imagining wearing maroon and silver and gold and green all at once," he hastily invented. The story spilled past its boundaries before he could stop it. "See, I thought Dobby could maybe cobble scarves together for me, oh, and I'd have to wear mismatched socks, and maybe I could split a couple of ties up the centre and glue both
"Just add a snake to the crest on your cloak and be done with it!" Draco erupted. "There's no need to go around looking all stupid, Potter!"

"Ten points from Slytherin," Snape sighed, waving his wand. "Really, I thought you two were past this squabbling."

"Malfoy just doesn't like my fashion sense," Harry returned, throwing out the name deliberately to see what would happen.

"And ten from Gryffindor," Snape added, with another flick of his wand. Then his face went still, as though he was listening to something far, far away. He closed his eyes in concentration. "The counters," he groaned. "I hadn't realised."

"What?" Harry prompted, though he had a suspicion he might know, already.

Snape glared at him. "They took ten from Slytherin. And then, they took five each from Gryffindor and Slytherin because they knew I'd docked points on your account."

Harry burst out laughing again. He'd wondered what this be-in-two-houses arrangement would do to the point counters. Now, he knew.

"It's not funny!" Draco objected. "And why would that happen, anyway? The adoption's not official until tomorrow, Harry said!"

"I signed a magically binding contract," Snape announced. "I don't need some Ministry adjunct to make things official in my mind. That's why." He handed Harry his copy of the contract. "Put that somewhere safe. After the seal's appeared, you should safeguard it in your vault."

Still outraged, Draco complained, "If we fight and you dock us both like usual, it'll sink Slytherin through the floor, and hardly even dent Gryffindor! Harry here could sabotage the whole house system!"

Snape barely spared a glance for Harry. "He could, but he won't."

"Why wouldn't he?" Draco demanded, baring his teeth.

"Because he's a Gryffindor, too," Snape announced, and not in tones of disdain. Harry liked that. "Harry. Given how the house counters have just behaved, I think the warding spells will take root, now. We will perform them tonight. Would you let your cousin know?" His sneering expression said more clearly than words that he did not particularly care to have the Muggle boy asleep on his couch in the middle of the afternoon.

"Okay, sure," Harry said, smoothing out the adoption contract and looking at it. Draco shifted restlessly on his feet, then suddenly bolted from the room, calling back that he had a Potion to finish.

"And there I thought he was so caught up in this mysterious Herbology project," Harry lightly joked. "He doesn't have a Potion brewing. If he did, you'd be starting in on a lecture about not leaving it unattended."

"He obviously wishes some time alone," Snape pointed out, his black gaze narrowing on Harry. "I may not have agreed with Thistlethorne's remedy, but her analysis of the situation was not to be
faulted." His gaze fell on the adoption contract. "Don't flaunt that. Put it away as I said."

"I wanted to wait to see the seal appear--"

"Put it away."

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir."

Snape looked like he might say something more, but in the end, he merely muttered that he had work to do in his classroom, and swept out the door.

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"Your friends came by," Dudley mentioned over dinner. "The red-headed boy was really angry that Draco wouldn't let him see you."

"You and Severus were in with the casewitch," Draco calmly explained, elegantly spearing a butterflied shrimp. "I thought better than to interrupt."

Harry couldn't argue with that. "So, Ron and who else?"

"Granger, Longbottom, and one of the Patil girls; I've no idea which."

"Okay, I'll owl them," Harry decided.

"Going to tell them all about recent developments?" Draco inquired, silver eyes cool as they studied Harry.

"Yes, of course!" Harry snapped, but at a glare from Snape, added in a more neutral tone, "Not in a letter, though, I don't think. Ah . . . what did you tell them?"

"That you were busy," Draco drawled.

"Too busy to see them," Dudley added. "The red-haired boy didn't believe that, though. He called Draco a lying snake. Then the bushy-haired girl told him to calm down, and the other girl tried to step across the threshold and got a nasty shock and said she knew they shouldn't try to visit Harry here, and couldn't he come eat in the Great Hall or something, and then Draco said she was stupid to try to enter without being invited in, and didn't she think that a teacher would know how to ward his own quarters--"

"Thanks, Dudley," Harry cut him off. Snape was glowering already, and rather than add to the negative mood by rounding on Draco, Harry decided to just let the matter go. They were going to redo the warding spells after dinner, after all. It was better for Snape to be calm. Or at least Harry figured that was probably true; he didn't really know.

Hmm, maybe that was why his own magic wasn't working? Because every time he tried a spell he felt frantic inside, worried that it might not work, anxious that he'd never get his powers back?

Later that evening, Harry wasn't sure just how calm Snape might be, but the warding spells worked as expected. His teacher knelt, calling forth all his powers to hold the spells in place, and Dudley vowed he would willingly give his blood to protect Harry. And this time, when Dudley's blood dripped down into the glowing silvery-gold orb Snape held aloft, the spells caught it and bonded it to the very fabric of the magic.

The orb turned swirling crimson, and then began to shimmer a dark, iridescent green. And then it
exploded, spraying outward to coat the walls, floor, and ceiling anew, the spells reaching into every room, even flowing into the Floo and up the chimney past Harry's line of sight.

Snape rose shakily to his feet, and staggered slightly, but this time, he wasn't cursing. He looked satisfied. "It's done," he said, before making his way to a chair and all but collapsing.

"Is it ever," Draco murmured in wonder, glancing about before he turned to eye Harry. "Very Slytherin colour."

"It's the colour of my mother's love," Harry realised, remembering what Snape had said before. But why was his mother's love that particular shade of green? Harry didn't think it had to do with her eyes. As far as Harry was concerned, the walls were tinted *Avada Kedavra* green, because the essence of his mother's love had been to take the curse for him. To die, for him.

It wasn't a colour he much liked looking at, all things told.

"Could somebody please heal Dudley?" he asked to get his mind off it.

"Severus, you're drained," Draco said when Snape made a motion as though to get up and do it. "I'll take care of it." One quick flick of his wand and a simple incantation had the cut vanishing from the Muggle boy's hand.

Two fat tears rolled down Dudley's quivering jowls. "I . . . I wish you could have helped Mum like that, you know. Dad and I thought it would be so s-- s-- simple . . ."

"Oh, Dudley . . ." Harry couldn't help it. He wrapped his arms around his crying cousin and pulled him close. This time, he didn't feel the phantom needles haunting him; he just felt sad for Dudley.

"I'll miss you a bunch," Dudley admitted when they pulled apart. "Strange, huh? We grew up together, all those years, but it's only now I feel like I've ever got to know you."

Harry could have told him that it was hard to get to know someone when you were punching them, chasing them, or sitting on top of them. "You'll see me again," he promised.

Dudley swallowed. "Uh, well now that you've got a real wizard to live with, I'm not sure how often you'll end up visiting the er . . . Muggle world. *When* will I see you?"

Harry hardly knew what to say, as it wasn't up to him. He looked expectantly towards Snape, who had his eyes closed, though he was clearly listening, as he said, "Summer, if his magic is back under his control. If it's not, well, we'll arrange something."

"Thanks," Dudley said.

"It is I who should be thanking you," Snape corrected, rising to his feet. "For helping me safeguard Harry, you have my most profound thanks. Now, if you will excuse me, I must sleep and recover. In the morning, the headmaster will help you return to your aunt's house . . ." Snape's voice began to waver, his words a bit rambling as he went on, "Remember to return the ring to Albus Dumbledore before you part ways . . ."

He swayed, and Draco caught him under the elbow, saying, "Come on, Severus," as he led him down the hall to his bedroom. The wards flickered slightly as Draco's arm entered the room to gently nudge Snape inside towards the bed.

"Do you trust Severus' spell casting?" Draco questioned when he returned.
"Well, yes," Harry replied, mystified. "Of course I do."

"Good. I want to show you something." Draco strode to the door. "Abrire."

"What are you doing?" Harry cried. "You can't go out!"

"I have to." But all Draco did was step outside into the dark corridor, wait five seconds, and stroll back in, right through the filmy haze of green that hung across the open doorway. He shut the door with his hand.

"What's that all about?" Dudley questioned.

It took Harry a minute to reason it out himself. "Oh. The wards aren't supposed to admit anyone who intends me harm." Harry turned to the Slytherin boy. "I suppose you think that means I have to trust you."

"No, Harry. You don't have to. Ignore the fact that your new father's wards trust me just fine. That's right. You go live in your own little world. Don't mind me at all."

"Oh, you want facts?" Harry sneered. "How's this for one? Number Four Privet Drive was good and warded, wasn't it? It wasn't supposed to let in anybody who wanted to hurt me. So how come my Uncle got to stroll in every night after work? How come Dudley here--sorry, Dudley--was able to walk through the door?"

"Because they lived there!" Draco hotly retorted, and then said in a meekish voice. "Oh. I thought that would do it, I really did."

Dudley looked from Harry to Draco and back. "I think I'll go to bed. Um, Draco . . . could you?" He gestured vaguely at the couch.

Draco shook his head, his mood still subdued as he said, "Harry doesn't need me in there to protect him, not now that the wards are up. You should take a last chance to catch up before you have to leave."

Nodding, Dudley wandered off towards the bedroom.

Harry was tired too, but he wanted more Truthful Dreams potion. Snape's door was closed now, though, and he hated to bother him, especially since the man was likely to tell him it wasn't terribly smart to take it every single night.

But he wanted to dream of his mother and father again.

"What?" Draco asked, just sounding tired.

"I . . . never mind," Harry gave up, miserable. Maybe it was wrong to long for dreams of his dead parents, on this first night he really had a new one. Wizard Family Services might not consider it "official" quite yet, but the counters and the warding spells did. And Snape did.

And that was good enough for Harry. He was adopted, now. It was final.

I really should have said something to Snape, he realised. But what? He doesn't much like thanks. Maybe I should try to call him Severus like he asked.

"What?" Draco demanded again.

"The colour on the walls is fading," Harry thought to say. It was true, but definitely wasn't the reason
he was dithering in the living room.

Draco shrugged, then ventured, "Look, I know your cousin doesn't like your snake any more than I do, but I can't sleep knowing it might come creeping out all over me . . ."

"But you've been sleeping out here for nights and nights!"

"Yeah. I, um, sort of kept casting *Stupefy* on your pet."

"Draco!"

"Shh, you'll wake up Severus and he needs the rest. Interaxial magic really takes it out of you. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is I don't want to keep doing that, okay? So could you please take the bloody snake into the bedroom with you?"

Harry looked at him doubtfully. "Well, sure, but you know she could just crawl out under the door while you're asleep."

"Are you trying to give me nightmares?" Draco sighed. "I'm planning to cast a breachment spell across the crack."

"All right," Harry agreed. He went and gathered Sals up, ignoring Draco's look of disgust, and went in to bed.

Maybe it was because Sals was curled around his arm, the light motion of her breathing somehow comforting, or maybe he was just all dreamed out, but whatever the cause, Harry didn't have any nightmares that night.

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By noon the next day, Dudley was gone.

By evening, Harry had his mother's ring back around his neck; the headmaster had collected it from Dudley after they'd arrived at King's Cross Station and made it back onto the regular platform.

The promised adoption document, however, had not arrived; nor had an official seal appeared on Harry's copy. He knew, because he checked it every half-hour or so. After Harry had made about six such forays into his bedroom to peer at the contract stashed in his trunk, Snape insisted he get his mind onto something else. "A game of chess, perhaps," he suggested.

Harry was pretty sure Snape would wipe the floor with him, but that wasn't what made him shake his head. "What if they say no?" he asked, surprised and a little dismayed to hear his voice wavering as it emerged.

Snape pointed at the sofa until Harry stopped his restless pacing and sat down. "Why would they do that?"

"Well, you know," Harry muttered, looking down at his own hands.

"You are thinking of my past, perhaps?"

"No," Harry exclaimed, shocked. "You saved me from Voldemort, for Merlin's sake! Nobody could seriously think that's an issue . . ." His face fell. "Could they?"

"The headmaster assures me not."
"Oh, great," Harry muttered. "He's still upset I wouldn't blurt out all my deepest feelings to him. I mean, he hardly said two words when he brought Darswaithe by, and today when he returned my ring, he was even less talkative--"

"If Albus Dumbledore did not think the adoption a good idea, he would most assuredly have not sent Lupin to the Continent."

"I guess I just think things never go my way," Harry admitted. "I mean, I've never had a normal year, yet."

"A circumstance in your favour, I should think. Who would have predicted during this year's Sorting Feast that December would see you adopted by your hated Potions Master? Willingly, no less."

Harry looked up. "I . . . I don't hate you."

"My point exactly."

"I was thinking I should probably try to call you Severus," Harry admitted, frowning a bit. "But . . . I don't know. It doesn't feel right. Too many years of class with you. I guess it's different for Draco. He knew you before."

Snape leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. "I certainly don't recommend Severus in class, no. But outside of it, you may do as you think best."

"Hardly matters. I'll never get back to class," Harry sighed.

"You will."

"I wish somebody could tell me when."

"Divination not being my specialty, I'm afraid I can be of no use, there."

That observation lightened Harry's mood. "Why'd you take it to N.E.W.T. level, Professor? I mean, what's the point of taking the exam if you're going to earn a score of Troll?"

Draco heard that from inside the bedroom, and came strolling out. "Oh, do tell. Severus scored Troll on something?"

"Divination," the Potions Master growled.

"But anybody can fake their way through Divination," Draco laughed. "All it takes is half a brain--oh, sorry. That didn't come out right."

Harry had never before heard of a good-natured glower, but Snape managed to direct one toward the Slytherin boy.

"Come on, tell us the rest," Draco urged, taking a seat next to Harry. "I know there's more to the story. I know you could easily lie your way through it the way Harry and I did. So why didn't you?"

The glower got a little bit less friendly as Snape admitted, "I was possessed of some vainglorious notion that I could prove the discipline a complete farce. My N.E.W.T. essay topic was something along the lines of Discuss five different Divination techniques and for each, give detailed examples of prophecies that have been subsequently fulfilled."

Draco chuckled low in his throat. "Let me guess. You discussed five techniques at length, all right."
Snape's lips curled in fond remembrance. "Oh yes, great length, but my detailed examples tended
toward refutation, to say the least. I believe my thesis was, *There never has been, and never will be,
any possible means of foretelling the future*. Of course from the perspective of twenty years I can see
that my point of view then was overly didactic."

Harry glanced at Draco and was relieved to see the other boy looking puzzled, too.

"I was wrong," Snape clarified, exchanging a look with Harry.

*The prophecy . . . born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies . . .*

"Yeah," Harry nodded.

Draco clearly didn't follow the conversation. "You mean Harry's seer dreams?"

"Among other manifestations. But what they have in common is they aren't solicited." Snape
steepled his fingers and looked at the two boys over them. "The future doesn't reveal itself on
command. But when it wants itself revealed, it will find a way."

"So, what does the future hold?" Draco asked, shifting towards Harry.

"Got me," Harry lightly returned.

"Not going to tell me, then?"

Snape got him off the hook. "There's still the issue of interpretation, Draco."

"Yeah, I don't really know anything," Harry insisted. And wasn't *that* true, considering how little
he'd understood about what the brothers-dream actually meant. It was about his feelings regarding his
Slytherin side, really. Just as Remus had said.

While Harry was still pondering that, a package tumbled out of the Floo. Flat, square, and wrapped
in parchment, it had tied atop it a small, folded note. Harry started to get up, but Draco grabbed his
arm and yanked him back down to the couch.

"What's your problem?" Harry erupted. "It's the adoption certificate!"

"Wait," Draco only said, pointing toward Snape, who was circling the package cautiously, his wand
at the ready. A few spells later and he was satisfied.

*Constant vigilance*, Harry remembered. Sure, the Floo was warded from here to Sunday with
Snape's usual safeguards as well as blood-protection for Harry, but it still paid to be cautious.

Snatching the note off the top, Snape unfolded it and read aloud, "Severus, this was dropped at your
place in the Great Hall this evening during dinner. I shall speak to Wizard Family Services about
their obtaining some more intelligent owls, as you were most definitely not present. Perhaps you
would consider joining your colleagues for the occasional meal. Yours, etc, Albus PercivalWulfric
Brian Dumbledore."

Harry realised he was grinding his teeth in irritation. "You're there most days at lunch! Dinner too,
sometimes."

Snape shook his head as he tapped his wand to dissolve the parchment wrapping to reveal a simple
wooden box.

"What, you're eating in your office when you're not with us?"
"You're skipping meals?" Harry reasoned, finally. "Well, that has to stop."

"You," Snape stressed as he slid a document from the box and handed it to Harry, "are not the parent here."

*Well, neither are you,* was Harry's automatic response, but he couldn't say that now, could he? Not with the adoption contract staring him straight in the face. Each corner bore a small seal of authenticity, and over their signatures was a larger one depicting a large bird hovering over several smaller ones. Snape handed it to Harry, who looked it over with a feeling like satisfaction welling up inside him. Fear was there too... fear of the unknown, fear of getting in too deep, fear of this *mattering* to him more than it should.

But mostly, the feeling was one of contentment.

"What do we do with this?" Harry asked.

"Thistlethorne suggested framing it."

"Yeah, Thistlethorne," Harry mocked. "She was full of suggestions, wasn't she?"

"That's enough of that," Snape warned, his expression easy to read, at least for Harry.

"Yes, sir," he quietly said.

"May I see?" Draco asked, surprising them both.

"Yeah, sure," Harry agreed, passing it over.

Draco looked at it for several moments, but didn't seem to be reading it; his eyes were fixed on the document as a whole, rather than scanning it line by line. Then standing, he handed it back to Harry and said, "Please do excuse me."

Harry thought it best to say nothing at all about Draco's hasty departure. "Here," he said, handing Snape the parchment. "I have a copy already, after all. You decide what to do with it."

Nodding, Snape rolled the parchment up, transfigured a bit of lint into a white ribbon, and tied it around the scroll. He placed it on top of a bookshelf in the living room. "I strongly recommend you keep your own copy in your trunk until you get a chance to place it in your vault. This copy, however, is designed for show. I'll leave it here in case you wish to let anyone see it."

"I'm not ashamed," Harry declared. "First chance I get, I'll tell my friends."

Snape's nostrils flared. "You're not a Hufflepuff, Harry; there's no need to be so demonstratively loyal to me. I won't mind in the least if you apply a little cunning to the matter of whom to tell, and when. You've said yourself how important your friends are to you. What sense is there in upsetting them over this?"

"If they have an ounce of sense, they'll be glad I finally have a...uh, someone to take care of me. Not that I can't take care of myself," Harry rambled. "Because I can, you know. Well, mostly. I mean, I'm not going to be *that* much work..." Realizing how mixed-up he sounded, Harry decided the smartest thing he could do would be to shut up.

"Ronald Weasley may well not possess a single ounce of sense," Snape bitingly informed him.
"It's not fair to judge him just on his work in Potions," Harry insisted. "Not that he's even all that bad at them."

"Potions aside, Weasley most definitely lacks some portion of his brain. Didn't he spend an entire year casting spells with a broken wand, to disastrous effect at times?"

"Geez, he was only a second year," Harry grumbled, deciding he'd just as soon not mention that Ron's family maybe couldn't have afforded another wand that year. Ron sure wouldn't want Draco overhearing that. "I bet all you Slytherins just howled with laughter over the slugs incident," he complained.

"I do believe we did."

Harry was saved from answering by Draco's reappearance. And what a reappearance it was! Harry could hardly believe his eyes. The Slytherin boy had been wearing black jeans and a grey shirt before. Now, he was attired in velvet green dress robes trimmed with a narrow edge of glinting silvery fur. In his hand he carried a small bouquet of... well, Harry wasn't actually sure. Flowers, definitely, but also berries, and spices... even pine needles. The whole thing was neatly tucked into a potions vial filled with a brown flaky substance.

He strode calmly across the room to stand before Snape, who had gone still and silent at the sight the boy presented. Then in one smooth motion, Snape had moved to stand.

From that moment, Harry was aware that something important was going on, something he didn't understand. Both Snape and Draco seemed completely caught up in solemnity. Or ceremony, perhaps.

Or formality, even, because Harry had never seen Draco act this way before.

After giving a slight nod, Draco stepped closer to the Potions Master and clasped both his outstretched hands, the odd little bouquet held between them. "Severus," he said, his voice warm, his words holding the sound of a vow, "upon this hallowed day your joy is made complete. May the years to come be many, and overflow with all I wish for you and yours."

Snape had been gazing into Draco's eyes, his own a little stunned, but at that, he glanced down at the bouquet. Studying it for a long moment, he finally murmured, "Well chosen, Draco."

Draco nodded again, the gesture solemn, then lifting each of Snape's hands in turn, lightly kissed them. Finally, he reached up on tip-toe to lay a kiss against the man's cheek.

With that, he neatly turned on a heel and walked toward Harry. Unsure of what was going on, or what he was supposed to do, the Gryffindor boy rose uncertainly to his feet. Dear God, Draco wasn't going to kiss his hands and cheek too, was he?

But Draco merely handed him the bouquet, and with a slight bow, turned away and went back into the bedroom.

Nervous about the whole thing, Harry gave a shaky laugh and lifted the bouquet to his nose to smell it. It was like an evergreen forest wrapped in kitchen scents.

Snape, he saw, still looked rather startled by Draco's behaviour.

"Uh, what was that?" Harry had to ask.

The question seemed to drag Snape from his reverie. "A well-wishing ceremony," he explained,
coming to stand by Harry so that he could take another good look at the bouquet. "Pureblood tradition."

"Are adoptions so common?"

"No." Twin spots of colour stole into Snape's cheeks as he admitted, "It's used for births, to welcome a new child into the family. Normally the flowers and herbs would be placed around the newborn's cradle. Draco's adapted the tradition by giving them into your hand."

Harry hated to be dense, but on the other hand, he hadn't been raised around wizarding traditions. "What's he trying to say?"

"That he accepts you as my son, I imagine," Snape murmured.

Harry lowered his voice. "Why did you say 'well chosen'?"

"Every well-wisher assembles an offering of plants, each of which is imbued by its nature with specific magical properties. In choosing huckleberry, pine, gardenia, loosestrife, thyme, woodruff, tea, and leek, Draco is expressing particular wishes with regard to your future."

"So what do they all mean?" Harry pressed.

"Ah, but I can't tell you that. Each well-wish is spelled to last so that when the child grows old enough, he can find out for himself what friends and family long ago wished for him."

"I bet I can get Draco to spill the beans."

"I seriously doubt that. He'll expect you to uncover the meanings just as he had to do when he was twelve and was given all the well-wishes laid around his own cradle."

"Oh, come on," Harry urged, grinning a bit as he plucked out a purple blossom from the tiny bouquet. "You said loosestrife. That would be purple loosestrife, right, like in the Truthful Dreams Potion? You've got to tell me what that does. I mean, you dosed me with it!"

"And you were so very interested in its properties that you asked me about it at once," Snape sarcastically remarked. "I recall it well. You insisted on full disclosure of all of loosestrife's characteristics before you would so much as taste the Potion. It was quite the argument there for a while--"

"All right, I didn't care a bit until right now, I admit it!" Harry laughed. "But seeing as it was both in the Potion and showed up here, I'd think you'd satisfy my curiosity. Or should I just keep guessing? So, it promotes truth. Draco wants me to tell the truth? He's saying I'm a liar? What kind of wish is that?"

"Oh, just tell him the about loosestrife before I have to listen to any more idiocy," Draco called from the bedroom, proving that he was eavesdropping as usual. Then again, the door was open, Harry realised. Draco couldn't really help but hear.

"Loosestrife provides both peace and protection," Snape supplied in a smooth voice. "It's the emotional dampening agent in Truthful Dreams."

"Speaking of which, could I have . . . er, more?"

"You fear you may have nightmares tonight?"
"No." Harry cleared his throat. "I mean, not particularly. But I do tend to have them a lot. I'd sort of like to get dreamed out. I mean, if I could run my normal course of awful dreams with the potion to help me er . . . cope, then maybe I wouldn't need to worry about nightmares as much." Harry sighed. "Does that make any sense at all?"

"It does," Snape acknowledged. "Wait here. I'll get you a few single-dose vials."

While his teacher . . . oh, adoptive father, Harry realised . . . was gone, he started to feel a little guilty about what he'd just said, because true as it was, it wasn't the whole truth by any means.

"Um, Professor?" he ventured when Snape held out the requested vials. "That last thing I told you? I was being sort of Slytherin. I . . . er, the real reason I wanted the potion was because last time I had a dream about my . . . um, parents, and I was hoping to see them again."

Snape placed the vials in Harry's hand and curled the boy's own fingers over them. "I have no problem with that, save the one I believe the headmaster cautioned you about regarding the Mirror of Erised."

"It does no good to dwell in dreams and forget to live," Harry acknowledged. "I understand. Thank you, sir."

Snape merely inclined his head.

When Harry went in to bed, Draco was in his pyjamas and under the covers, but still awake. "Why can't you call him Severus?" he inquired as he leaned on one elbow to prop himself up.

Harry shrugged, sitting down to slip off his shoes. He massaged his left foot briefly. Though it was no doubt completely healed, it still did ache a bit.

"He's your father now, for Merlin's sake!"

"Maybe that's just it," Harry murmured. "Did you call your father Lucius? I can't think I'd have called mine James had he lived."

Draco choked back a laugh. "You don't mean you're going to bow to your cousin's suggestion and start calling him Dad, do you? I'd like to see the look on Severus' face."

"Dad's not right either," admitted Harry. "Or anything else I can think of."

"Try Pa," Draco drawled in a truly horrendous imitation of an American southerner.

Harry shuddered theatrically and did his best to get the conversation off names. "Thank you for the bouquet, by the way."

"It's hardly a bouquet," Draco clarified in a superior tone. "It happens to be a well-wish. However, you're welcome."

"Doing that . . . it was thoughtful of you," Harry admitted. "Er . . . why didn't you say anything to me like you did to Snape?"

Draco laughed. "Well, as far as the ceremony goes, you stand in the position of the newborn child. There's a presumption that a baby of a few days won't understand much in the way of vows."

"Oh, right," Harry murmured. "Okay. Um . . . I don't suppose you'd tell me what thyme stands for? Or pine needles?"
"Do your own research, you lazy boy," Draco yawned. "I had to. Hey, at least you didn't get any banana leaves like I did. They represent fertility and potency. You know, I'm supposed to have lots of little pure-blooded children to populate Wizarding Britain."

*Lots of little Dracos...* Harry almost made a face. Instead, he grabbed a quill and parchment, setting the well-wish aside so he could write. "Can you tell me what's in it again?"

"You really don't listen when Severus talks," Draco lightly gibed.

"I'll listen to you," Harry said with false sweetness, which earned him a laugh first, and then a recitation of the components of the well-wish. He wrote them all down and said, "I'll be in to sleep in a little while. I'm going to start cracking on this research. Uh, can you lend me the books you were using?"

"Sorry," Draco airily replied, sounding anything but. "I returned them all to Professor Sprout when she flooed through with the plants for me."

"Oh, come on! Another teacher strolled through here without me noticing? Without even asking to talk to me?"

"Oh, she asked. But you and Severus were in with the casewitch." Draco grinned then, a devilish light in his eyes. "I swore Dudley to secrecy, and he actually complied. How's that for Slytherin cunning? I mean, no offence, but he is a bit of a blabbermouth. You'll have to owl Madam Pince for some resources."

"Oh yes," Harry agreed. "I'll just go write her a letter straight away. Oh, and I told Sals not to crawl on you, okay? And she said she wouldn't. Actually, she said she never had, because you sort of creeped her out."

"She did not!"

"Yeah, she did. What did you expect after you *Stupefied* her all those times? Anyway, she won't bug you, so I was hoping you wouldn't get upset if I wanted to bring her in here from now on. She slept wrapped around my arm last night and it was really nice; I could feel her little breaths--"

Draco looked like he was about to sick up. "Enough said," he gasped out. "I'll put a breachment spell around my bed, just in case your darling little snake decides to wander."

"She won't."

"Well, she won't crawl on *me*, that's something certain," Draco announced.

"Good night, then," Harry answered, grabbing the well-wish before quietly closing the door behind him. He walked out in sock feet, sat at the kitchen table, and placing the well-wish in the centre of it, began his letter.

It didn't start *Dear Madam Pince.*

No, Harry had a much better idea of how to get some research help.

*Dear Hermione,* he wrote. *I'm sorry I missed you when you last came down. Was it Padma or Parvati who came along with you? Whoever it was, say hallo from me, and say hi to Ron and Neville, too. Anyway, I was in an important meeting at the time. I hope Draco wasn't too rude, but it was really for the best that the meeting wasn't interrupted. I want to see you soon, though. Really, as soon as you can make it down again. I have some things to tell you. In the meantime, though, could
you look up a few plant properties for me? I need to know the magical qualities of leek, pine needles, thyme, huckleberry, woodruff, tea, and gardenia . . .
"Oh, good, you came down straight away after classes," Harry said as Ron and Hermione took up their usual seats in the living room. "Um, Hermione. I don't suppose you had a chance to look up those plants I owled you about?"

"Harry, I'm shocked," Draco reprimanded him. "That's cheating."

"You didn't say it was for an assignment!" Hermione objected.

"Since when does a Slytherin object to cheating?" chimed in Ron with a glare in Draco's direction.

"I don't object to it on general principle," Draco smoothly replied, a sly little smile curling his lips. "But when it's Harry Potter? Maybe he's not quite as Gryffindor as he'd have you believe, hmmm?"

Sensing that this could quickly spiral out of control, Harry hurriedly put in, "Draco, could you floo the kitchens and get a round of butterbeers?" Then he turned to Hermione. "It wasn't for an assignment; I wouldn't do that to you. Draco's just being . . . well, never mind. So what did you find out?"

"Spells that use thyme tend to grant someone courage," she said, taking the butterbeer Draco extended toward her. Interesting that he served her first, Harry thought. Of course ladies first was the rule in the Muggle world, and maybe the Wizarding one too, but Harry was still surprised that he'd extend the courtesy to a Muggleborn girl. "Thanks," she briefly acknowledged him. "Now huckleberry, that was very interesting. It's powerfully endowed with dream magic and is used in a lot of hex-breaking potions."

"Courage, magical dreams, and hex-breaking," Harry mused, nodding.

"And pine needles ward off hunger," she added.

Harry almost wished the floor would open up and swallow him. It was really embarrassing that Draco had found out he'd been locked in a cupboard and starved. On the other hand, the wish did show that the Slytherin boy had put a fair amount of thought into the little ceremony he'd performed. Harry wasn't quite sure what to make of that.

"After that things get very strange," Hermione admitted, frowning. "Leeks appear to have a lot to do with 'domestic industry.' Housework, I guess. And gardenias are used to communicate that somebody is your secret love--"

"What?" Beyond shocked, Harry almost spewed his butterbeer.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake!" Draco erupted, savagely yanking the cap off his own bottle. "What kind of reference did you use, a book on Victorian flower language? We're all wizards here, in case you hadn't noticed. Leeks mean luck, not housework! And secret love, would you be serious! It's healing, all right? Gardenias represent healing!"

With that, he flopped into a chair and gave Hermione a truly fearsome glare.

"Sor-eeeee," she drawled, clearly not meaning it. "And for your information, flower language derives a lot of its meanings from the spell properties of various herbals, due to the increasing incidence in the Victorian age of wizards courting Muggles."
"Aren't you just a compendium of facts and figures," scathed Draco. "Next time Harry asks you to do his research," he transferred his glare to Harry, then back to Hermione, "you might consider actually getting it right!"

"Did she get the thyme, huckleberries, and pine needles right, though?" questioned Harry.

"Yes," Draco admitted, closing his eyes as though he was sick of the lot of them.

Ron, who had been observing silently, finally spoke. "Why don't you just tell us who's having a baby," he suggested. "I mean, that is a well-wish sitting there on the table, isn't it? You put it together and you want to make sure you did it right, Harry?"

"Should have remembered that Ron would know all about the well-wishing ceremony," Harry realised. But he didn't often think of Ron as a pureblood, though of course he was one. To Harry, pureblood meant snooty and stuck-up about it, and Ron was anything but that.

Hermione wanted to know what he was talking about, so Ron took a minute to explain.

"Oh, all right," she nodded. "So who's the well-wish for, Harry?"

"Uh, let's just finish the list of plants," Harry said, feeling rather desperate. He wanted to tell them, but he didn't know how. Somehow, he'd never figured he'd have to tell them with Draco sitting right there, but he didn't feel right telling the Slytherin boy to get out, so where did that leave him? "Tea," he gasped. "What does tea mean?"

"I couldn't find any other answers, Harry," Hermione murmured.

Draco smirked a bit, no doubt thinking that Harry would still have to hit the books, but his grin faded when Ron chimed in, "Oh, that's a common one. Although I've never seen tea leaves fill the vase--a potions vial? now that's weird--like in that well-wish there. Anyway though, tea would be more courage, and also strength."

"And woodruff?"

"Well, it's a little bit crass, isn't it, but basically woodruff is a wish for money."

"Money!"

"Victory," Draco coolly corrected. "Well, actually it's used to represent both, but in this case it means victory." He looked down his nose at Ron. "Incidentally, it's only ever poor wizards who think that having money is crass."

Ron clenched his fists, his body tautening, but he managed to let the comment pass.

"So who's having a baby?" Hermione pressed. "You didn't say."

"Um, nobody, actually," Harry admitted. "I'll get back to the well-wish in a minute. First, though . . . you remember how I couldn't see you the day before yesterday?"

"Yeah, too busy to see us," Ron groused. "Not that I believed it, Harry. But Padma found out that unless this Slytherin here actually said 'come in,' or something, we couldn't! Which left Malfoy free to say whatever!"

Draco gave Harry a questioning look, the exact content clear as day to Harry's eyes. Well, here we go, it said. He's wrong about me and you know it. Not that I care what he thinks, but it should be
interesting to see where you stand. With your Gryffindor friend even when he's being rude and stupid? Or will you defend a fellow Slytherin?

Funny how Draco could convey so very much with those silver eyes of his.

"Actually, I was too busy to see you," Harry admitted with a sheepish look. "Sorry, but it's true. See, I was in a conference with a casewitch from Wizard Family Services."

"Wizard Family Services?" Hermione questioned.

"Oh yeah, they'd want to place you with somebody," Ron realised. Harry noticed he didn't bother apologizing to Draco, even after he knew he'd been wrong. On the other hand, Draco had been pretty rude the other day; Harry knew that much from Dudley. "I didn't think of it before, but your aunt and uncle dying would mean you don't have a guardian. Didn't you think of asking my Mum and Dad, Harry?"

"I'm too hazardous. You don't want Voldemort dropping by the Burrow for Christmas."

"There is that . . ."

"But they put you in a foster family, is that it?" Hermione tried to understand. "Does it work like in the Muggle world?"

"Er, I don't think so," Harry admitted. "I mean, I don't know how it works in the Muggle world. I don't think Dumbledore went through Wizard Family Services for me; he just left me in a basket on the Dursley's stoop. Now, though, I guess you might say I've been . . . er, placed."

"Placed where, mate?" Ron wanted to know.

"Uh, here, actually."

"Here, Hogwarts?"

Harry shook his head, braced himself for an explosion, and quietly said, "Here, Snape's quarters."

Ron paused in the middle of a swig of butterbeer. "Come again?"

Hermione's mouth dropped open, but she was still more lucid than Ron. "Here, Harry? I know Snape said you could live here until things are safer for you, but you mean he's your foster father as well, now?"

"Er, no, not exactly."

"Well, what exactly is he?" Hermione asked, her voice strident.

"Um, well . . ." Harry took a deep breath, then another.

Then another.

Then he cleared his throat.

"Oh for the love of Merlin, just tell them!" Draco finally shouted.

"It's like this, Snape adopted me," Harry blurted.

Ron burst out laughing. "Sounded like you just claimed that Snape adopted you!"
"I think he did claim that," Hermione slowly said, studying Harry closely.

"Harry's not that stupid!"

"Yes, I am!" Harry shouted back, only to flush a deep red when he realised how that had come out. "I mean, it's not stupid at all, Ron!"

"Yeah, well it's sure as shite not smart, is it?" Ron spat back, jumping to his feet. "What did he do, feed you a Gullible Potion? You can't want Snape in charge of you!"

Harry stood up, too, his vision narrowing so that he barely noticed Draco doing the same. "Who says I can't?"

Hermione seemed to appear from nowhere, inserting herself in Harry's line of sight. "Maybe you should explain, Harry. You made it clear in the hospital wing that you'd got a little . . . er, attached to Snape, but you know we didn't really understand how that had come about."

"It's hard to explain," Harry admitted, frowning.

"You're Confunded, then!" Ron snarled.

"No, I'm not!"

"How do you know?" Ron took a step forward, his fists clenched. "He could have done anything to you!"

"What he did," Harry shouted, eyes blazing, "was keep my awful family history to himself, and hold my hand in the hospital, and keep me safe on Samhain, and--"

"He let his Death Eater mates use you for an effing pin cushion!" Ron screamed, hurling his bottle of butterbeer to smash against the dungeon floor.

"He kept me alive until he could get me away, you arse!" Harry screamed right back. "What did you want him to do, the noble, heroic thing? Blow his cover early? I'd be dead! Don't you get it? Dead, dead, DEAD!"

"Let's just calm down," Hermione softly recommended.

Ignoring her, Ron stomped across to Harry and put himself in his face. "Talk about attached! After Samhain he was the only one you'd let touch you! You let him put his hands all over you, rubbing in that salve all the time. And then you had to go live with him, too. Are you sure it's Malfoy you're sharing a bedroom with?"

"That's completely uncalled-for," Hermione snapped. "And it's sick! What would make you even suggest such a horrible thing, Ron? I can't believe it even occurred to you!"

"Why do you think it comes to mind? Harry here's just got more and more distant the longer he's been down here! I had a feeling something wasn't quite right. It's not like I blame him! It's Snape, it's all Snape! He spent all that time mixed up with Death Eaters, remember! They're depraved, all of them!"

"Snape is not a Death Eater, and he's not depraved, you moron!" Harry leaned forward to shout the words directly into Ron's face.

"Oh yeah? Well, have you ever slept in his bed? Well, have you?"
"He hasn't, and I would know," Draco lied, twisting a disgusted lip. "Granger's right, Weasley. That's a really foul accusation."

"Oh, like I would believe anything a Slytherin has to say," Ron scathed. "I notice Harry hasn't denied it, has he, now?"

"If I have to deny that, there's nothing left to say," Harry retorted, swallowing back a rush of bile. "The ground beneath his feet began to tremble, ever so slightly. *Oh God, no, not wild magic, not now.* Harry thought, snapping his eyes closed so he could concentrate. He tried to rein it in, to get himself under control, but he was just so furious---

Draco felt the tremor and knew the cause. "Severus adopted him because the warding spells wouldn't work otherwise," he rushed to say. "And he really needs warding, Weasley! There's already been another attempt on Harry's life. The spells wouldn't stay put unless Harry had a right to live here. If he's Severus' son, he does."

As an attempt to mollify Ron, Draco's words failed miserably.

"Con-veeen-ient," Ron sneered.

Harry saw a flash of red behind his eyes, an anger so burningly brilliant that he felt charred, but at least the floor was rock-steady again. Draco's intervention had given Harry some time to recoup what little control he might have over the violent surge of magic just itching to lash forth. It didn't, however, give him as much control over his tongue. "Just get out!" Harry abruptly ordered. "And don't come back until you're ready to do the decent thing and wish me well like Draco did! Yeah, that's right, the well-wish is mine! I'm the new child in the family! I haven't had a real parent in fifteen years---believe me, the Dursleys don't count!---so you might try being happy for me! But noooooo, you have to get all bent out of shape 'cause it's Snape---"

"Severus is the one who's bent!" Ron shrieked.

"He's my father," Harry bellowed, his anger surging back, worse than before. He could taste it, thick and coppery in his mouth, could feel a sensation like a whiplash gathering strength inside him, the violence ready to fly-- Harry tried desperately to stave it off with words. "Don't you get it? I'm lucky to have him!"

"Lucky would be if the Slytherins had enough guts to kill him like they said they would!"

The wild magic tried to loose itself again, and Harry shoved it back down, but that meant his anger had to explode in some other way. Unable to stop himself, Harry lashed out with his fist, landing a fierce blow against Ron's jaw, a blow which knocked the other boy flat on his back.

"Harry!" Hermione screamed, and not just because he'd punched Ron. In his surge of fury, he'd bodily shoved her out of the way so that he could get to Ron. He hadn't been aware of it at the time, but now, seeing her half-sprawled against the edge of Snape's low table, he knew what he must have done.

Ron yanked his wand out of his pocket and began to brandish it, but before he could so much as utter a hex, Draco was standing over him, his own wand straight and steady. "Don't," was all he said.

Muttering, Ron pocketed his wand again as he lumbered to his feet. "I wasn't going to use it," he complained. "I just didn't want Harry punching me again."

"Then don't express a death-wish towards my father!"
"Shite, Harry, he's not your father! I think you really are Confunded!"

"Get out!"

"No, seriously, think about it," Ron urged, his voice not so much insulting now as earnest. "He fed you all sorts of potions cooked up special just for you, and who was helping him, I ask you? This one, here!" Ron pointed to Draco, who still had his wand levelled on him. "Slytherins, the two of them. They could have done anything to you, and you wouldn't even know!"

"I started changing my mind about Snape before I took all those potions, you dolt! Oh, what's the point? You've got it stuck in your head that Snape's the soul of evil!"

"Yeah, well he has been a black-hearted git to you for five years, Harry!"

"Yeah, that was awful how he kept Quirrell from tossing me off my broom!" Harry retorted. "And I really hated it when he Evanescoed the snake Draco conjured in our duel. And then there was the Tournament, when you so stupidly believed I actually wanted to compete, and he tried his best to get me out of it! And last year, when he alerted everybody that I'd been lured out to the Ministry building. I would so much have rather faced down Voldemort without Dumbledore to save my bacon! Yeah, that was terrible!"

"It was, seeing as he got your godfather killed!"

"Snape's not to blame for that!" Harry insisted, panting, he was so angry. "He did the right thing, the responsible thing. I'm sorry how it all turned out, more than you can know, but it's not his fault!"

"He's a Slytherin; I bet he had it all plotted out, right down to the Veil!"

"Slytherin doesn't mean evil!"

"A Slytherin killed your parents, Harry, killed your real father, or have you forgotten all about him?"

"He had help from a Gryffindor, namely your damned rat, or have you forgotten about him?" Harry retorted. "And anyway, I'm a Slytherin, too, by virtue of the adoption. So just go figure that out, why don't you? Figure out how all Slytherins can be dark wizards if the poster-boy-who-lived-hero-of-the-Light is one of them!"

"You're . . . not," Hermione quietly put in. "Not really, Harry?"

"Ha. I sure am. When I lose points, I lose half of them from Slytherin, now."

Ron clenched his teeth. "If the adoption did that to you, you can't help it, I guess. And I didn't say Snape was a dark wizard! How could I, when I know for a fact he's a member of . . . er . . ."

"Draco knows all about the Order."

"Oh great," Ron scathed. "Just blab everything to him. Trust him completely, why don't you?"

"Yeah, well maybe I will," Harry threatened. "He hasn't tried to hex me once since I've been down here. He hasn't made nasty suggestions about my relationship with Snape!"

"Now it's a relationship!"

"And just what the hell do you have with your father?"
Ron's nostrils flared, but then he made a visible effort to push his anger aside. "Harry," he said, taking a deep breath. "This adoption thing. Just say it was only because of the warding and I'll understand. Who wouldn't want to be safe? Just admit he isn't really your father, and we'll be fine."

From off to the side, Harry saw Hermione give a slight nod. Good advice, probably. He could smooth everything over with Ron if he'd just agree to that version of events. It was even the version Harry had been halfway telling himself for the past few days.

But it wasn't true, and he'd known that all along.

And suddenly, Harry knew he didn't want to lie to his friends the way he'd been lying to himself. If Ron couldn't stomach who he really was and what he really thought about all this . . .

"It wasn't only for the warding," Harry admitted, the very words taking a huge weight off his mind. "I wanted a father, and I wanted it to be him."

"Let's go, Hermione," was all Ron had to say to that. "Next thing you know he'll be saying he's glad to be in Slytherin, since his new father's so admirable, and I really don't need to hear that."

"He is admirable, and you know what, I don't mind being in Slytherin one bit, you git! The Hat said I'd be great in Slytherin, as a matter of fact! And I plan to be!"

Ron stomped to the door and tried to spell it open, but it wouldn't open for him. Draco waved his wand, his twisted lip saying he'd be only too glad to get rid of their guests. Once in the hall, Ron tapped his foot obnoxiously as he waited for Hermione.

She ignored him. "What was that about an attempt on your life?"

"The Death Eaters Imperiused someone to abduct me so Voldemort could finish what he started on Samhain," Harry bluntly announced, raising his voice, "and Draco here saved me!"

Hermione gasped, her hands shaking as she contemplated that. "But the wards you mentioned, they're in force now?"

"Well, they're supposed to be," Harry nastily put forth. "But seeing as they let in somebody who wanted to hex me, I don't know now, do I?"

"I wasn't going to hex you, Potter!"

"So says you," Harry shot back.

"Harry," Hermione broke in, her voice waverling with concern, "I think I understand why you're desperate for a family . . . but this? It's a huge mistake, don't you see? You're . . . sort of emotionally needy, I think, and you got over-attached to Snape because you ended up isolated with him after Samhain, and you were sick and hurt, which made you regress, I think, into early childhood when you'll bond with anyone just so long as they're taking care of you, and--"

"Oh, if this is what I sounded like when I talked about the book," Draco interrupted, "then I'm glad you told me to shut up, Harry. What utter rubbish!" He rounded on Hermione. "If he's needy, it's because he's got every cause to be, you Muggleborn cow, and if he's friendly with Severus, it's because --gasp!shock!-- they've become friends. Why don't you just get out now like Harry said?"

"Don't insult my friends," Harry told Draco, but without much heat. By then, he felt like an old shoe that had been worn too long. Far too long.
"Let's just go, Hermione," Ron called, keeping his gaze fixed on the corridor rather than the inside of the room.

"We'll come back," Hermione softly promised.

From the doorway, Ron loudly snorted.

_I'll talk to him_, Hermione mouthed, but Harry had had just about enough, by then.

"Talk to yourself, first," he retorted. "Because until you can accept that Snape's actually good for me, which he is, I don't think you're going to have much luck convincing anybody else."

"Good for you," Ron echoed, giving up on the silent treatment. "Tell you what, Harry. I'll keep this under wraps so that when you come to your senses, which you will, you won't be too totally humiliated in Gryffindor!"

"I think I'll ask the headmaster to make a general announcement," Harry coldly retorted.

"That's it, I'm done," Ron snarled, and stomped off down the corridor without Hermione.

"Harry," she softly inquired, "don't you think it's possible your point of view has got a little bit . . . ah, skewed from spending so much time all by yourself down here?"

"I'm not by myself, I have Draco and my father," Harry told her. "Looks to me they're about all I have, too."

"Harry--"

"You'd better catch Ron before he sees one of my house mates and insults him," Harry pointed out. "He could still end up a splat on the wall."

"I'll . . . I'll talk to you later, then," Hermione murmured.

"Yeah, and when you do, remember one thing," Harry told her. "Draco here heard my news and wished for me to have courage, and strength, and healing, and victory. The pair of you dumped a bunch of shite all over me. Think about that before you come back."

"It's just that it was such a big shock--"

"Yeah, yeah, everybody has excuses," Harry interrupted her. "If you'll excuse me, now, I have things to do."

She took the hint and left to hurry after Ron.

Harry slammed the door after her, then leaned his forehead on it and gave it a couple of vicious kicks. Mistake. His left foot ached afterwards. Actually, his fist really hurt, too.

He heard Draco behind him using spells to clean up the mess left by the broken bottle. Harry finally turned around. "Thanks for lying about the night I spent in Snape's bed," he thought to say. Draco could have made things a lot worse, and hadn't.

"I'm just glad he didn't go back to gardenias meaning a secret love," Draco scathed. "As it was, I was this close to hexing that filthy mouth right off his face." He held up a thumb and forefinger very nearly touching.

Harry sighed. "Yeah. Well, good job on the impulse control, I guess."
Draco laughed, the sound dark and rife with tension. "Good thing you decked him and saved me the trouble."

"It's not funny," Harry groaned, sliding down the wall to sit on the floor. He hung his head in his hands. "I know Ron. He won't be able to resist ranting about this all over the common room."

Draco sat down on the floor next to him, a sight Harry had never thought to see. Draco Malfoy, sitting on the floor? Then again, he'd slept on a couch without complaint, so perhaps it wasn't so very surprising. There was more to Draco than Harry would ever have guessed.

"I thought you didn't care who knew," the Slytherin boy lightly reminded him.

"I don't, but when Ron's mad he talks first and thinks later. He might repeat those awful things he said to me."

"If he does, he'll be expelled for slandering a teacher. I say good riddance."

"I don't want him expelled."

"I know," Draco admitted. "Don't worry. They'll come around."

"To thinking Snape's all right?" Harry shook his head. "I don't think so. He's just taken too many points from Gryffindor over the years. I mean, maybe you don't see it, but he's been blatantly unfair."

"Well, he had to do something, didn't he, to counter the partisan interests supporting Gryffindor," Draco pointed out. "Dumbledore tossing out hundreds of points at a go, cheating Slytherin at the last minute. And then last year, McGonagall got into the act, too."

Harry gave a weak laugh. "Yeah, well they were trying to make up for Snape's own abuse of the point system. Hmm. Well, at least Snape can't take points off me any longer. I mean, it'll sink both my houses."

"Well, there's always Longbottom's Potions," Draco joked. "The guy should have dropped the class after the O.W.L.S."

"He needs it since it's so closely tied to Herbology."

Draco stretched his legs out, crossed them at the ankles, and leaned against the wall. "Speaking of Herbology, I was rather surprised you were so interested in the well-wish."

"Well, Snape said the plants were 'well-chosen,'" Harry admitted, "I wanted to see what he thought would be good wishes for me."

"Now you know."

It wasn't exactly fishing, but Harry thought he caught a hint of something in the comment. Insecurity, maybe. "They were really good wishes," he told Draco. "You did a great job with it."

Draco flashed him a smile, then pushed to his feet and gave Harry a hand up. "You want to decide what's for dinner tonight?"

Harry could just imagine Snape withholding comment as he forced down fish and chips with coleslaw. "Uh, no," he declined. "Not hungry, anyway. Actually, I've got a splitting headache. I think it's from holding in the wild magic that wanted to get loose."

"I'll get you a potion," Draco said, returning in a moment with a small vial. Harry recognised the
colour, but that didn't mean much. It could still be adulterated with anything, just like Ron had said. Draco would know how to mask a poison.

But Draco didn't want to poison him.

Harry took the vial and downed the contents without even hesitating. "Thank you," he said, feeling the headache begin to clear.

"Thank you," Draco quietly answered.

They both knew for what.

Harry gave him a smile, but it was tinged with sadness. He didn't want to gain a rapport with Draco only at the expense of his other friendships. "I'm going to have a lie-down," Harry sighed, gathering Sals from the Floo before going into his room.

Harry didn't exactly sleep through dinner, he just didn't answer when Snape called to say it was ready. He was half-asleep, anyway, drifting in and out as Sals crawled around on his chest, occasionally climbing up to hiss in his ear. Strangely enough, Sals missed Dudley.

*Maybe it's because afraid or not, Dudley never hexed her,* Harry thought. Not that Dudley could have, but Harry didn't think Sals understood the difference between a Muggle and a wizard. No great shock, there. Harry had been stuck in between the two ever since he'd known Sals.

He wasn't hungry, so missing dinner was no big deal, but somehow he still appreciated it when Snape came into the bedroom later carrying a tray laden with most of Harry's favourite foods. A chair followed him in, bobbing through the air rather like some dishes Harry had once seen summoned in a American Muggle cartoon about Merlin. Thank goodness the Dursleys hadn't caught him watching it!

Harry sat up, setting Sals to the side before he ran a hand through his hair. "Oh, thanks," he said, glancing at the tray. "Dobby must have helped with this?"

"You think my powers of observation don't encompass what you eat?" Snape set the tray on Harry's legs and made it hover a couple of inches above them, then pulled the chair close to the bed and sat down.

Picking up the glass of orange juice, Harry sighed, "I really don't have much appetite."

"Classic symptom of depression."

Harry didn't like the sound of that. "No, no, I'm not depressed," he insisted. "Honestly, Professor. I'm very happy to be your, ah--"

"Adoptee?"

Tone of voice made all the difference in the world, Harry thought. The question could have drenched him with shame that he'd been so self-centred as to say that. But Snape's voice held no anger or sarcasm; it was merely coated with that sardonic lilt Harry had come to recognise as teasing.

"I'm very happy to be your son," he said unflinchingly.

Snape reached out and held his hand for a moment, lacing their fingers together and squeezing before
he let it go. "Good to hear. You are, however, depressed. Not too surprising, considering the scene
that transpired here, today."

"Shite," Harry swore. "Oh, sorry. It's just that I didn't think Draco would tell you. He's a fine one to
call Dudley a blabbermouth! Of course, he's probably hoping to get Ron expelled. That's not very
nice! Even if he does hate him, you'd think Draco would spare a thought for what I might like—"

Snape held up a silencing hand. "Draco never mentioned a word about Mr Weasley's vile and rather
uninspired comments."

"Then how do you know about them?" Harry couldn't help but ask. Too upset now to even drink, he
set his glass down.

"When Draco told me you had almost unleashed wild magic, but had managed to restrain it, I
insisted on viewing the entire incident in a Pensieve." Snape gave Harry a considering look. "He
actually objected to releasing the memory, but in the end, I prevailed."

"Oh."

"I found myself rather impressed by your impassioned defence of me," Snape murmured. "However,
it was not necessary. I do not care what your friends think."

"I know, but I care," Harry explained, horrified to feel tears actually start to well in his eyes. How
ridiculous could he get? They weren't true, those awful things Ron had said, so why should they
bother him so much? He shoved the tray to hover down near his feet and crossing his legs, bent over
them as he tried to get himself back under control.

He felt an arm come around his shoulders, an arm that tightened, giving him the feeling that he
wasn't alone. But of course, he wasn't. "Shhh, you idiot child. It's probably little consolation, but I
suspect Mr Weasley did not truly believe the nonsense he decided to spew."

"Why spew it then?" Harry asked, unbending enough to look up. He snatched at the handkerchief
Snape was holding out, and rubbed it against his eyes.

"Likely because he was angry and wanted to hurt you. By refusing to be distraught about the
adoptions, you effectively chose your own perspective over his. Mr Weasley did not react well."

"I don't know," Harry murmured. "He doesn't trust you, so maybe he does really think . . . you
know."

"Harry, he said at the end that he would be 'fine' about your living here if you would agree that it
was only for the warding. Do you truly think he would offer that compromise if he was convinced I
was molesting you?"

"Uh, no. Put that way, I guess not. Well . . . you sure are taking this a lot more calmly than I would
have thought."

"You are not an appropriate outlet for my ire," Snape said, his eyes glimmering with intent.

"Uh-oh. Are you going to try to get Ron expelled?"

A dark smile transformed Snape's face into an expression of wicked amusement. "And place him out
of reach of my wrath? I think not."

Harry swallowed. As mad as he was at Ron, he didn't like the sound of that. "What do you have in
Snape waved a careless hand, but the gesture was offset by the clear malevolence in his eyes. "Nothing until after Christmas break. We'll let him have a while to ponder his foolish insults. In the meantime, I have taken the liberty of writing to Arthur and Molly Weasley to inform them of his behaviour."

"In other words, you decided to ruin his Christmas."

"Will it do that, really," Snape murmured in tones of mock-innocence. Harry wasn't fooled.

"Aren't you concerned about what the Weasleys might say about our news?"

"Perhaps you didn't hear me when I said I did not care what people think."

"Not even Order members?"

Snape shook his head. "I need no-one's permission." He brought the tray back up within reach. "Perhaps you will eat something now?"

"Still not hungry."

"Oblige me," Snape requested in a hard tone. Harry reluctantly began to nibble on a cookie. "Oh, very healthy," Snape scathed, but for all that, his teacher didn't really try to stop him. "So. You are definitely making progress with your magic, Harry."

"I don't follow."

"Wild magic is by definition, exactly that. Your being able to tame it is a good sign."

"Yeah, well you saw what I had to do to manage that."

Snape smirked. "And a good job you did of it, too. I retract what I said about your not being able to land a decent blow."


"Enough about that rather tawdry incident," Snape decided. "I would like to know how you did with Truthful Dreams last night."

"Oh, fine." Snape just stared at him, waiting for him to elaborate. "You know how you said it sort of makes you dream about whatever's been on your mind? I . . . uh, dreamed a bit about you, actually."

"You have some concerns? Doubts?"

"No . . . I don't know why I dreamed that, actually. But . . . well, I almost hate to mention this, in case you stop, but do you realise that when you call somebody an 'idiot child,' you do it sort of . . . uh, affectionately?"

"I hadn't noticed," Snape mused. "It might perhaps be true."

"It is," Harry stated with confidence. "Anyway, I dreamed about that awful day when you confiscated my letter in class, remember?"

"I am hardly likely to forget," Snape silkily remarked.
Harry knew what he meant by that. If not for that letter, they wouldn't now be father and son. "Yeah," he acknowledged. "Anyway, you hated me then, I know you did. But I saw something pretty startling in the dream. Yeah . . . I was leaving class, and you asked if I wasn't forgetting something, and I asked if you meant the letter, and you said, 'Yes, I mean the letter, you idiot child. Why haven't you asked to see the headmaster about this?' And you know, at the time I thought you even sounded sympathetic there for a second, but I convinced myself I was just imagining it. But you hated me, so . . . I guess I don't understand."

"Hate and sympathy are hardly polar opposites," Snape quietly remarked.

"Come again?"

"The fact that I believed you a vain, spoiled, arrogant young man did not preclude my feeling some measure of pity when you received such a letter. You must understand, Harry, I presumed your aunt to be a mother to you, so when you received news that she lay ill in hospital shortly to die, of course I had some sympathy for your situation."

"But you knew I'd had the letter for days and hadn't even asked to go home." Harry shuddered. "At first I assumed you were trying to stave off harsh reality by ignoring it," Snape admitted. "When I realised you hadn't even bothered to read a letter from home, I was incensed. Of course it only reinforced my view of you as thoughtless beyond belief."

"That was pretty awful of me," Harry admitted. "I didn't know she was sick, though--"

"I know."

"I just thought they couldn't possibly have anything to say that I wanted to hear," Harry went on. "I mean, I even thought they might be trying to pull me out of school or something, because they had never, ever written me a proper letter before--"

"I know, Harry."

"Oh, right," Harry acknowledged. "You do."

"Any other Truthful Dreams you'd like to share?" Snape asked after a while.

"Not really." Harry sighed. "I wish I hadn't hit Ron, but at the time it seemed like the stone underfoot would just split if I didn't release my anger another way. Not that I had time to reason all that out, but still . . ." He sighed again, shaking his head. "See, it was one of my seer dreams, that I'd punch him. And I'd decided I wouldn't do it, but you know how much good that did me. I guess I don't like the idea that I can't change anything I saw in my seer dreams."

"Are there dream-events yet to transpire that concern you?"

"No," Harry admitted. "I don't know why it's bugging me so much, unless it's because . . . no, that can't matter so much. I mean, I'm not even sure I understood it right."

Snape raised an eyebrow.

"Um, well it's just that I dreamed everything in a certain order," Harry explained. "Chronological order, I mean. And it all came true in just the sequence it should, except for punching Ron. That was actually supposed to happen before Draco said-- er, before something else, but it happened after. So
now I don't know what to think. There was that day when I _almost_ hit Ron. Maybe that one was the real fulfilment of the seer dream, and I did successfully resist the script of the future. What do you think?"

"I can't help you in this regard, I'm afraid."

"Well, neither can Trelawney," Harry scoffed. "Seer dreams or no, Divination is a total crock."

"Trying to teach it certainly is," Snape agreed. "True prophecy is spontaneous, but there is such a thing. You _will_ have powers the Dark Lord knows not, Harry."

"Voldemort," Harry reminded him.

"Direct quotation," Snape countered. "Eat some protein."

"You're a fine one to talk about regular meals," Harry groused as he picked up a barbecued chicken drumstick and took a couple of bites.

"I believe I mentioned that only one of us is the parent, here?"

"I understand that," Harry admitted. "But . . . you know, I'd like to think I can bring something to this, too. I mean, it would be nice if I could do something to help you, Professor. Because so far, and I don't mean since you adopted me, I mean since the beginning . . . I feel like I've just taken from you."

"You've given, too," Snape said seriously. "Wounds that had been festering for years . . . don't, now. I also never thought I'd have a son, Harry. I poured my energies into guiding my Slytherins, but some part of me, I think, knew that being Head of House wasn't quite the same."

"Remus says you do really well at it, though," Harry murmured. "And I can see why, sir. I'm not too happy with Ron, but I do feel less depressed, now."

"Good. Come out and join Draco and myself in a game of Wizard's Scrabble."

"Wizard's Scrabble?"

Snape narrowed his gaze. "Is there another kind?"

Harry broke out into a weak laugh. "Uh, do the letters attack each other? Actually, I can't see much point in that . . ."

"The points tally themselves."

"I'm really a bit tired," Harry begged off, but Snape was having none of it.

"You're not going to brood all evening alone in your room. Come out and play."

"With your vocabulary? Not likely," Harry scoffed. "It's bad enough you wipe the floor with me every time we play chess."

"You'll be evenly matched against Draco," Snape pointed out.

"Hardly. I mean, he's played before, hasn't he?"

"Ah. You want concessions."
"No, I just--"

"How about . . . you can use Muggle slang against us," Snape interrupted, eyes glittering in challenge.

"That's silly--"

"Oh, all right," Snape groused. "Muggle slang and your E's are worth five points each. Will that get you out of your room?"

It was such a bad bargain for the others that Harry couldn't resist. "You're on," he said, tucking Sals into a pocket before hopping off his bed.

Draco objected to the terms, of course, but gave in after Snape delivered him a withering glare. Harry watched as Snape spelled the game to give Harry extra points on every E.

And then the fights truly began. Draco claimed *ronk* wasn't really a word, even after Harry dutifully used it in a sentence: Hold your nose when you go in the boy's toilet, it *ronks* in there. After *ronk* came *kak*, *meff*, and *emmas*, all of which elicited mighty protests from Draco.

"He's just making up anything that'll use up his letters!" Draco finally erupted.

"No, he's not," Snape calmly countered.

"Oh, right. I suppose you're going to say you knew that *emmas* were hemorrhoids?" Draco scathed, his eyebrows drawn together in irritation.

"I trust Harry."

"Oh, 'cause Gryffindors wouldn't cheat? The boy sent Granger out to do his research, how's that for not cheating?"

Snape laughed out loud, a rare occurrence indeed. "Draco, don't you think that if Harry wanted to cheat, he'd at least have enough intelligence to use all seven of his tiles doing it?"

"I suppose," Draco muttered. By then it was a moot point; they were all down to their last few tiles. Draco all but screamed when Harry neatly laid down his last three letters: the sequence T W E right next to the E in Snape's word *lignite*.

"You aren't going to whinge that *twee* isn't a word, are you?" Harry said, poking Draco in the shoulder when he didn't answer.

"Sixty points for *twee*," Draco only moaned in answer.

"Oh, surely not," Snape remarked, even though the magical counter was already reflecting it. "Hmm," he murmured. "Double-letter score on that E . . . triple-word score. Hmm. I suppose everything's in order, then. Sixty points. Well played, Harry."

"This is what comes of making his E's worth so much!" Draco roundly censured Snape. "He's won the whole effing game!"

"But he's smiling after a hard day," Snape countered.

"Yeah," Draco admitted, as he smiled too. "That part's good. You were pretty glum after the Weasel left."
Harry's smile died. "Don't call him that."

Draco's silver eyes were hard. "Still going to pretend he's a friend? I suppose you're even going to give him his Christmas present!"

Harry gritted his teeth. "Oh, very funny! You know I haven't been able to go out shopping!"

"Owl-order, Harry," Draco scathed, but his voice lost all rancour a minute later. "Oh, sorry. You didn't think of it?"

"I grew up with Muggles, in case it slipped your mind."

Draco flushed. "I can show you how it works tomorrow, if you like."

"I think I can manage to figure it out," Harry dryly returned. "But thanks."

"I trust the two of you can find your beds before it gets too much later?" Snape inquired, standing, one wave of his wand clearing away the game.

"Sure," Harry agreed, while Draco nodded.

They stayed up past midnight, though. First there was the rematch. They agreed on E's worth their usual one point, but both Muggle and Wizarding slang allowed. After Draco won by a hair, they got to talking Quidditch strategy for a while. When Draco finally got so tired that he didn't even flinch at the sight of Sals climbing out of Harry's pocket, Harry knew it was definitely time for bed.

Harry forgot to take his Truthful Dreams Potion, but he slept the whole night through regardless . . . though before he drifted off he made a mental note to ask Snape if *quizzex* was really a word.
The next day, Harry spent a fair amount of time figuring out what he wanted to do about Christmas. He'd already decided what he wanted to give Snape, and it wasn't even something he would need to order by owl, but he decided to buy him a little something also. Just a token, really, but he thought Snape would appreciate it.

It went without saying that he'd better get Draco a present, too. That took more thought. And of course Harry wanted to get something for Dudley; he'd owl it to Mrs. Figg who could Muggle post it to Aunt Marge's house.

That just left his Gryffindor friends.

Harry wasn't too happy with Ron, and he didn't really want to get him a Christmas present, but he didn't like the idea of doing anything to make the situation between them worse. Leaving him out of Christmas was like admitting that things between them weren't going to get better, wasn't it? And anyway, Ron's Christmas at the Burrow was likely to be a real disaster. Even if Arthur and Molly Weasley didn't approve of the adoption--a highly likely scenario in Harry's opinion--they certainly wouldn't stand for the kinds of nasty allegations Ron had decided to make. Ron was going to have a miserable holiday. Not that he didn't deserve it. But still . . . sighing, Harry added a couple of items to one of the orders he'd already written up.

Hermione was less difficult to decide about. Harry didn't appreciate her view of him as somehow so damaged that he couldn't make an informed decision about being adopted, but at least she hadn't taken it as badly as Ron. He got her a somewhat nicer present in consequence. Finally, he wrote up an order for some Wizarding Christmas cards to send to the rest of his friends.

"Essay about done?" Draco said as he wandered back from the Potions lab. He set down a large bubbling beaker of something orange and creamy, and made a move as though to take hold of the parchments Harry had stacked next to his book.

Harry hurriedly gathered them up. "You can't see."

Draco gave him a twisted grin. "You don't want me to know your views on second-stage transmutations? I didn't realise they were all that personal."

"I haven't started the essay yet," Harry explained.

"Oooh, do tell," Draco teased. "What were you writing out here, love letters?"

"Christmas orders," Harry said, laughing.

Draco's grin grew wider. "I like diamonds and emeralds. Oh, and racing brooms--"

"I actually do need your help," Harry interrupted, shaking his head at the other boy's antics. Had Draco always been this . . . well, friendly and easy-going? Somehow he didn't think so. "How do I pay?"

"Well, the normal way would be to include an imprint of your key and specify a maximum amount they're allowed to withdraw. That protects you in case they think you're ordering something expensive you didn't mean to. You could probably skip the key and say you'd pay them in person later, though. Any Wizarding shop in Britain would be so pleased to have Harry Potter patronize them they'd be glad to wait for payment."
Harry frowned. "I don't want special privileges. How do I include an imprint of my key?"

After Draco showed him, Harry wrote in some maximum amounts and rolled up the letters into scrolls for Snape to take up to the Owlery. He really missed Hedwig; one of the drawbacks of living in the dungeons had been that he really couldn't keep an owl here. Hedwig wouldn't like being cooped up what felt like miles from the nearest sunshine. Not that Harry liked it any too well, either, but that was no reason to inflict it on his beautiful snowy owl.

"What is that?" he asked Draco, who was idly toying with the glass stirring rod sticking out of the Potions beaker.

"Oh, camouflage potion," the Slytherin boy answered. "You're supposed to make some; it's in Severus' lesson plans, but it has to be charmed to bind the chicory to the edelweiss . . . I thought you might as well get a feel for how it should come out, though."

"How do you know it came out right?" Harry asked doubtfully.

"I tested it."

Harry nodded, and picking up the beaker, tilted it to and fro to study the viscosity.

Draco bit his lip. "I probably should have mentioned this sooner. But . . . ah, you haven't seen your snake around lately, have you?"

"No, why---" Harry abruptly narrowed his eyes and set the beaker down with a thud. "You tested your potion on Sals!"

"I was testing it on one of those crickets Severus keeps for just that purpose. Sals . . . uh, ate him."

Harry wasn't sure he believed that load of bollocks. "How'd she see him?"

"How should I know?" Draco exclaimed, crossing defensive arms. "She's a snake! Maybe she smelled him or something."

"Oh my God," Harry moaned. "That Potion is supposed to be topical, only! What does it do to you if you eat it?"

Draco had the decency not to point out that the required reading had actually covered that. "Um, well it's a bit toxic for wizards," he admitted, hurriedly adding, "But Sals isn't that, so maybe it'll be all right."

Panicking, Harry jumped up. He froze as his chair clattered to the ground. "Wait! Don't move, don't take a step. You might squish her!"

"Why don't you just call for her so we know where she is?"

Good idea. "Sals," Harry called.

"In Parseltongue, Harry," Draco impatiently clarified as he stood perfectly still.

"I can't make it come out on its own!" Harry protested. "It only works when I'm talking to a snake, or at least a picture--"

"Well, pretend, Potter!"

Harry closed his eyes and tried. "Sals--" The snorting noise Draco made told him well enough that
he hadn't managed any Parseltongue. Well, Draco was a fine one to complain. "I can't believe you didn't tell me what you'd done instantly!" Harry raged.

"I couldn't tell you!" Draco shouted back, standing as still as a statue. "At first I was hoping it would wear off, and then I realised you'd get pretty mad at me, like you are--"

"Oh, don't be an idiot!" Harry snarled. "I'm not mad at you!"

"Could have fooled me," Draco muttered.

"It's not like I think you did it on purpose. I'm worried, all right?" Harry paused, his mind racing. "Hrm, tell you what. Pat down the area near you to make sure she's not there, and then kneel. We'll crawl all over, sweeping our hands on the floor to try to find her. I'll check the Floo first, of course, but I can't walk there in case I step on her. Got it?"

"Got it," Draco echoed, his voice churning with nausea. "You want me to rub my hands all over the filthy floor in hopes I might actually be fortunate enough to touch a sodding snake."

Harry was already on his hands and knees, carefully feeling the floor all around as he moved toward the fireplace. "I know you have issues, Malfoy, but are you planning to help or not?"

With a few muttered oaths, Draco got down on the floor too, making awful faces as he patted the stones as though they might bite him. By then, Harry had made it to the Floo. "She's not here!" He started to shake, his hands trembling so much that he could barely keep searching. "And what are we going to do even if we do find her? Is there a counter-Potion or something?"

"The textbook doesn't stretch to counter-Potions for every creature under the sun," Draco snapped. "And it didn't list one for wizards, either," he admitted.

Harry stood up, careful not to shift his feet, and grabbed some Floo powder off the ebony box on the mantel. Without thinking, he tossed it in and called, "Potions office!"

Nothing happened, absolutely nothing. Well, what had made him think his magic might be coming back? Just because he could repress his wild powers didn't mean he could access them, did it?

"Severus has a class just now," Draco reminded him.

Grinding his teeth in exasperation, Harry flung more powder in and yelled for the Potions classroom.

When Snape's torso and head leaned forward out of the fire, Harry squeaked in shock and fell backwards onto his arse. "It worked," he mouthed, scarcely able to believe it, himself.

"Problem?" Snape snapped, his gaze swinging to take in the entire room in a glance.

"S . . . Sals is lost," Harry started to explain.

"Mr Potter, I am currently endeavouring not to let a cohort of first-year Hufflepuffs damage my classroom while they mangle themselves beyond recognition. Kindly allow me to continue."

With that, he vanished to leave Harry staring slack-jawed at the crackling fire.

Mr Potter? Then it came to him that Snape was with students, so he was in full Potions Master mood. Still, he could have listened for longer than a second and a half.

"I could have told you he wouldn't leave first-years while Potions are brewing," Draco pointed out. "The walls might be spattered with Hufflepuff guts when he returns. But look on the bright side; the
Floo worked for you! Go get your wand and see what else you can do--"

"Sals is still missing!"

"Oh, right." Sighing, Draco dropped to his knees again and began gingerly sweeping the floor, his fingers trembling as he extended them.

"Sals is still missing!"

"Oh, right." Sighing, Draco dropped to his knees again and began gingerly sweeping the floor, his fingers trembling as he extended them.

Harry was the one who found her, coiled up in the corner of the bathroom, her steady breathing saying that all was well. *Camouflaged*, though, didn't begin to cover it. She was completely invisible.

Scooping her up, Harry carefully carried her out to the couch and held her between his palms. "Sals?" he asked, "Sals. How do you feel?"

No answer.

"Still no Parseltongue?" Draco dryly inquired as he summoned a towel, moistened it with a *Hydratus* spell, and fastidiously wiped his hands clean. He used a cleaning charm as well after that, and all Harry could figure was that the Slytherin boy really didn't like to get his hands dirty.

"I thought that was," Harry protested.

"English, clear as day."

"Well, I can't tell! It all sounds the same to me."

Harry drew in a deep breath. He'd thought that holding Sals' cool body would be enough to spark his Parseltongue, but apparently he needed to *see* a snake to make the language emerge. Well, that figured. Even when he'd opened the Chamber of Secrets, he'd had that tiny engraving of a snake to talk to. Harry concentrated, staring at his hands, trying to imagine that he could just make her out.

"Sals, say something to me," he tried.

"English," Draco informed him, banishing the towel away.

Harry squeezed his eyes closed so hard his head ached, and forced himself to focus. He imagined the Basilisk looming before him, those horrible yellow eyes ready to blind him if he looked into them, and said, "Sals, did the cricket taste funny?"

"What sort of question is that? Of course it tasted funny, it was doused in potion!"

"Shut up, Malfoy, I'm trying to concentrate." Pouring even more energy into imagining himself with a *visible* snake, Harry felt himself drawn back into a distant memory of the zoo. "Sssals. Can you ssssee yourself, Sssals?"

He heard Draco's breath hitch, and felt Sals turning around in his hands, the motion sluggish as though she were just waking up. Her little tongue flickered out to taste him, the sensation somehow reassuring. "Where am I, Harr-eee?" Sals asked. "I ssssee you, but not me . . . ."

"It's going to be all right," Harry said. "You ate . . . er, a bad bug, but my father will be home soon and he'll know how to get you back to normal." *I hope*, Harry mentally added. "I can't ssssee you either, Sals. I had a hard time finding you. If I put you in your box, would you pleasssess stay?"

"Yesss," hissed Sals.
"No Floo," Harry sternly warned. "I mean it, Sssals."

He felt Sals nod, and gently lowered her into her box.

In the end, they didn't need a counter-potion. Before Snape even arrived home that afternoon, Sals was looking a bit more visible. "Camouflage Potion is only toxic for warm-blooded creatures," Snape explained, holding the snake and squinting until he spotted her against his hand. "Even then, it's not fatal unless you drink gallons of it."

Draco couldn't wait to break the news. "Harry called you on the Floo!"

Snape settled Sals back into her box and laid it on a low, square table. He cast a rather baleful look at Harry. "Heartening as the event may have been, you need to use more judgment about disturbing me while I am with students, Harry. Ernie Cumberbund's hand very nearly disintegrated while my back was turned."

"Severus, Harry used the Floo," Draco stressed. "It's never worked for him before!"

"I'm quite cognizant of my son's indeterminate magical state, thank you!" Snape said, rounding on Draco until the Slytherin boy flushed and glanced away. Snape returned his attention to Harry.

"Contacting my by Floo when I am with students is to be reserved for emergencies only, Harry. Is that clear?"

"It was one! We couldn't find Sals anywhere, and I thought she might be poisoned and need an antidote," Harry protested, his heartbeat thudding against his ribs.

"If your life or safety is in danger, or Draco's is, you may interrupt me during a class. Otherwise," Snape leaned close, his hawk nose menacing at close range, "do not. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Harry muttered. "My mistake. I thought you would care."

"I cannot leave students unsupervised to see to a snake, Harry. Not even your snake."

Harry crossed his arms and looked away. "Right. Got it."

Sighing, Snape ran a hand through his hair. "So, the magic. Fetch your wand and try a few spells."

Harry'd done that already, but he wasn't feeling too charitable towards Snape, so he didn't say a word, other than the obvious ones: _Lumos, Incendio, Wingardium Leviosa_, and so on and so forth. He even did an _Expecto Patronum_, though that wouldn't have worked even if his magic _was_ back, as he wasn't concentrating very hard on a happy memory. He couldn't. He was too irritated with Snape.

Anyway, none of the incantations worked. Not a single, solitary one.

Draco only made it worse. "Harry," he said, following him into the bedroom where the Gryffindor boy was putting away his wand, "she's just a snake. You can't expect Severus to endanger his students--"

"Shut up," Harry snapped. "I don't want to talk about it, all right? Everything's perfectly clear to me."

"At least yesterday you had a reason to sulk--"

"Shut up."

"Shut up."
At that, Draco wisely did.

Harry was tempted to skip dinner again, but he had a feeling that Snape wouldn't be nearly so tolerant a second night in a row. Besides, he was hungry, so cooping himself up in his room was a bit immature. Even he could see that, mad as he was at Snape.

The meal was a rather tense affair, but only as far as Harry was concerned. Snape seemed perfectly content to chat with Draco, discussing why a camouflage potion would have different effects on a cold-blooded creature. More than once, Harry knew a strong urge to mouth off that Snape was a cold-blooded creature, wasn't he . . . but he managed to resist the impulse. He didn't particularly want to lose points from either of his houses, though come to think of it, he wasn't sure Snape would resort to points if he wanted to punish Harry. He might make him clean cauldrons or something, Harry silently fumed.

Dessert was something creamy, sweet, and burnt called crème brulée. It looked a bit off-putting to Harry's eyes, and when he first scooped up a spoonful, he was tempted to describe it as slimy and refuse to eat it, but Draco made such a face of ecstasy with every bite that Harry couldn't resist trying it out.

Shite, it was almost delicious enough to drag him out of his foul mood. Almost.

Snape hadn't touched his portion, preferring instead to nurse a glass of something called Riesling. After Harry had finished his serving of the creamy burnt custard, Snape drew a letter from a pocket and passed it across the table. "This came earlier. How would you like me to respond?"

A bit surprised by the question, Harry unfolded the parchment sheet and read:

Dear Professor Snape,

I am sure you know by now that Ronald Weasley and I came down yesterday to visit with Harry. We were very surprised to hear that you had adopted him. I am afraid our reaction tended to rather upset Harry. I wanted to apologize for that. I wish Harry only the very best and would never want to cause him any distress.

That said, however, I feel I must mention a few things to you. No doubt you will say that none of this is my business and I am quite out of line. I beg to disagree. You appear to be friendly with Harry these days, but I have been fast friends with him for five years, so I consider that his welfare is my business and I am not being presumptuous when I point out that you may not know him well enough to really understand the complexities of his personality. How could you? You have spent most of those five years being deliberately vindictive and cruel to him. I do know, of course, that you have also been instrumental in safeguarding his life at times, but you also made his life a misery much more often than you saved it.

Is it not therefore rational to suspect that if Harry has grown fond of you, he must be doing it for less than sound reasons? I don't know all the details, but that so-called family of his definitely excluded him from what the rest of us would regard as normal family life. He's been burdened since he was eleven with not only a fame he doesn't embrace, but the knowledge that many in our world wish to annihilate him for something he did as a baby. It can't be healthy that you were one of their number, once. And yet now he's calling you "father" quite adamantly. Doesn't that strike you as strange?
I respectfully suggest that perhaps Harry has become fixated on you because after his horrible recent experience with the Death Eaters, he had no one else to turn to. If you think about matters, you'll realise this must be the case. After all, good intentions aside, you were instrumental in helping hurt him terribly during Samhain. It is not normal for you to be the person he appears to now most trust. It can only be that during that vulnerable period afterwards, while he was no doubt in excruciating pain and utterly dependent on you for everything, he formed an unhealthy bond with you. This adoption is sealing that bond legally, but because the bond itself is unsound, so too is the adoption a poor idea.

I understand that for the present, for you to be Harry's father is actually quite advantageous, and of course I'd never deliberately endanger him, so I'm not suggesting you change your legal status at this time. But please, don't encourage him to grow any more attached to you than he has, already. It isn't good for him to regard you as his father when really, you're just the person who happened to be there when he needed someone.

Sincerely,

Hermione Granger

"Are you going to take points from Gryffindor?" Harry asked when he'd read the letter twice through.

Snape shook his head. "I don't appreciate her sentiments, but I do recognise them as sincerely and politely delivered. My question stands. How would you like me to respond?"

"Uh . . . well, just don't hex her," was all Harry could think to say.

An impatient noise catching in his throat, Snape observed, "Harry. If I'm not going to take points, I have no plans whatsoever to chastise the young lady."

Harry thought a moment. What did he want Snape to do about Hermione? "I suppose you could write her back and explain why she's wrong. I mean, I tried to explain but she wasn't about to listen to me, not when she thinks I'm completely deluded."

He expected Snape to refuse. After all, it wasn't quite the done thing for teachers to write to their students. Snape, however, merely said, "Very well," and summoned a parchment and quill. He spent perhaps five minutes mentally composing a reply, then wrote it without appearing to hesitate or scratch out anything. "Would you like to see?"

Still a bit irked, Harry groused, "Would you like me to see?"

"I'm indifferent," Snape replied, his black eyes unreadable. "Do as you wish." Standing, he left the table and headed toward his office where he no doubt had essays to mark.

"He deserves better from you," Draco complained, using a spell to banish the dishes to the kitchen. "There wasn't even anything wrong with Sals. How would you feel if he'd left his class and then you found out that somebody had to be sent to the hospital wing as a result?"

Draco had a point, and Harry knew it, but it still didn't sit right with him that Snape had yelled at him for using the Floo. He hadn't even been happy that Harry's magic had been enough to work it. "Just let me read the letter," he grumbled, pulling it close to study the long scrawls that made up words.

Miss Granger,
Your sedulous concern for Harry's welfare aside, you should be more chary of asserting as truisms your own puerile suppositions. Harry's rapport with me is not in any sense pathological. It is based on a confluence of several factors and was established well in advance of the infelicitous events of Samhain.

Moreover, I take personal affront at the allegation, implicit throughout your prolix missive, that I do not regard him as my son.

*Psychology, Miss Granger, does not appear to be your métier.*

*Professor Severus Snape*

Harry couldn't help but gawk by the time he had got through the letter. Without a word to Draco, Harry marched straight through into Snape's office and challenged, "What is this, a dictionary challenge? I only understood one word in three!"

Snape looked up from the ink-spattered parchment before him. "A bit recondite, was it?"

"What!"

Smirking slightly, the man set down his quill. "It used too many big words?"

"You know it did! What are you trying to do, prove you're smarter than Hermione? She knows that, all right? If you ask me, it's pretty mean-spirited of you to rub it in like this!"

Snape pushed his hair off his face. "In actual fact, I was paying Miss Granger a compliment."

"Prolix, for Merlin's sake? You think she knows a word like prolix? Get real!"

"That one was perhaps a bit much," Snape admitted.

Harry narrowed his eyes. "You let me win at Wizard's Scrabble, didn't you? Why bother letting me use slang if you weren't going to play your best, anyway?"

Snape smiled. "I couldn't miss out learning a fascinating word like *ronk*, could I?"

"This letter *ronks,*" Harry retorted, though he couldn't help but smile, too. "Could you just tell me what it means, more or less?"

Snape grasped the letter in both hands as Harry held it out and translated, "I can tell you're worried about Harry but you're completely wrong about everything. He's fine and we liked each other before Samhain. How dare you suggest he's not really my son. You don't know a thing. Sincerely, etc."

Harry bit his lip. "Um . . . I guess maybe the educated-sounding version is a bit more . . . er, appropriate for Hermione."

"I thought so, yes," Snape murmured, rolling the parchment up and addressing it. "I'll take this to the Owlery now so that she can peruse it with her morning oatmeal."

Harry nodded. "I have some post too; can you take that as well?" He went and fetched it, checking if Draco had anything to send. When he was back with Snape again, he took a deep breath and did the mature thing, admitting, "It bothers me that you wouldn't listen to me about Sals, sir."

"It bothers me that you believe I should endanger my students at your convenience."

"I didn't say you should!"
Coming around the desk, Snape took the letters Harry held clutched. "You thought I should. And it can't be like that, Harry. You aren't my only responsibility. Nothing takes precedence over you, but you must understand that the principle simply can't apply to your pet."

"I just wanted you to listen for a second," Harry objected. "If you hadn't vanished in a huff I'd've explained about the accident and asked if there was an antidote to Camouflage Potion."

"Which would have opened up a whole conversation about the brewing thereof, at a time when Cumberbund's hand was almost down to bone, already!"

"I see your point," Harry sighed, and looked down at his shoes. "But you were so mad that you didn't even care I got the Floo to work. I mean, you weren't even happy for me."

Snape placed a finger under the boy's chin and nudged his face back up. "I would not lead you to believe that my pride or pleasure in you rests in your powers, Harry."

Harry blinked. Wasn't that the equivalent of I'll care about you, magic or no? He'd known, of course, that Snape hadn't adopted him because he was supposed to kill Voldemort or anything like that, but now, it seemed more like something he could reach out and hold.

"That's all right, I guess," Harry admitted, shooting Snape a sidelong glance. He sort of wanted to hug the man, but wasn't quite sure how to go about it. Even the idea felt awkward. "About the Floo, though. What do you think it means?"

"You wanted very much to speak with me," Snape observed, stepping away. "Perhaps a sense of desperation helps unlock your powers. It is urgency that impels your wild magic, and yesterday, urgency that caused you to exercise control over it."

"So you're saying Draco's right, and the problem all along has been that I don't want to get better, since that'll mean I'll have to face Voldemort someday?"

"I fear you will face him again, regardless."

"Me too, but that doesn't answer my question."

Snape lifted his shoulders. "Perhaps volition may be part of the issue. Either way, I think you need to worry about it less. Your magic will be there when you are ready for it to be, and no amount of anxiety will rouse it any faster."

"But . . . what if I never really do get it back? I mean, using the Floo's not worth much if I can't cast spells. I have to be able to duel if I'm going to defend myself."

"If it never comes back, then it never comes back," Snape softly vowed, a sentiment which made little sense to Harry until he went on, "It won't make you any less my son, if that's what troubles you."

Harry felt touched, but for all that, he groaned. "It'll make me less me. You don't understand. I wasn't anything before I knew I had magic. And now, all anybody sees when they look at me is Harry Potter, wizard extraordinaire. They think I won the blasted Tri-Wizard Tournament! I'd like to take out an ad in the Prophet announcing that Crouch cheated me right up to the top, but of course I can't, because people need a hero, don't they?"

"You're rather fond of exaggeration. All anybody sees is Harry Potter, wizard?"

"Well, not you or my friends," Harry admitted.
"Or anyone who actually knows you," Snape amended that. "I could just as easily make the same complaint. Only those who truly know me have the slightest idea of who I really am, Harry. My very appearance all but shrieks dark wizard, does it not?"

"Yeah, but you cultivate that image," Harry retorted. "You dress all in black like walking death. And um . . . well . . . er . . . you sort of let your, er, appearance seem kind of off-putting, don't you?" He thought of mentioning the hair directly and decided he'd better not. "And that's not even counting the nasty attitude you deliberately project."

"The point is that I'm judged on that basis. As Draco is judged by his money and his name, and you by your scar."

"And Hermione by her reputation for brains, and Ron by his brothers. All right, I get it. I still think I have it worse than any of you lot, though."

"You do," Snape agreed. "But the difference is one of degree, not nature. You aren't as alone as you think, in how you feel. As for your magic, Harry, give it time. Your dark powers are maturing, that much is clear. First you could control them to the extent of dragging them back in. Now you can manipulate the Floo, at least when you become desperate to do so."

Harry was saved from answering by Draco clearing his throat at the office door. "There are some people here to see Harry."

"People?" Snape sharply questioned.

"Gryffindors."

"Ron and Hermione?"

"More like Hermione and a pack," Draco grumbled. "Don't ask me who. You think I know all your house mates' names? Oh, well, I did spot Longbottom in the throng. And that Patil girl again, or the other one."

Harry had been walking to the office door, but at that he stilled. "Just how many people are we talking about?"

"Ten or twelve. I don't know, they pretty much fill the hallway."

"You didn't invite them in?" Harry gave Draco a brief glare.

"Considering last time, no," Draco said, his voice about as serious as Harry had ever heard it. He turned his attention to the Potions Master. "I wanted to ask you first, Severus. Their mood seems awfully grim. I'm a bit concerned they're here to kick Harry out of Gryffindor."

Harry set his teeth. "Oh yeah? We'll just see about that!"

"They can't do anything of the sort," Snape assured him.

"They can make him feel unwanted enough that it boils down to the same thing," Draco pointed out.

"Why don't we just go see what they want?" Harry suggested, his stomach in a knot. This was so unfair. He shouldn't have to choose between his newfound father and his house! But he shouldn't have had to choose between Snape and Ron, either.

But he had to, so he'd done it.
"Well," Harry decided, "putting it off won't make it any easier." He was almost at the open office door when he realised that Snape had gone back to marking essays. "What are you doing? You have to come out there with me. For moral support."

"My presence is bound to exacerbate matters," Snape quietly protested. "And truly, Harry, I have no wish to come between you and your friends, much as I may dislike them."

"And I have no wish to pretend you aren't what you are to me, much as they definitely do dislike you," Harry retorted. "I'm your son no matter what, remember? Well, it's the same on my end. You're my father no matter what, so come on, now."
"Come in," Harry said, opening the door wider, but as Hermione tried to cross the threshold, a wicked green light flashed over her. She yelped and jumped back, shaking her hands as though to rid them of a sharp pain.

"I knew it!" Draco exclaimed, pointing an accusing finger. "They're up to no good, and she's the ringleader!"

"Mr Malfoy is a bit prone to jump to conclusions," Snape smoothly broke in. "The wards simply aren't responding to Harry's magic at this time. Do come in, now."

After Snape's invitation, the Gryffindors were able to pass through the doorway without incident. Harry scanned the crowd. Hermione, Neville, Dean, Seamus, Ginny, Parvati, Colin, Dennis . . . along with a few first- and second-years. No Ron. He wasn't sure whether to be upset or relieved at that.

There weren't seats enough for everyone, so they all remained standing. Nobody much seemed inclined to speak, at first; in fact, most of the Gryffindors seemed positively terrified to be within the private quarters of the dreaded Potions Master. Of course, most of them hadn't visited before, so that was easy to understand. Neville, however, looked so nervous that Harry suspected there must have been an accident that very day in class.

Maybe there had been one before the first-year Hufflepuffs had arrived, Harry mused. That would explain why Snape had been so on-edge about Harry's firecall having distracted him during class.

Harry opened his mouth to say a few choice words, something along the lines of I have it on good authority that you can't kick me out of Gryffindor just for getting adopted, if that's what this is all about, but before he could speak, Snape was opening the conversation himself.

"Miss Granger," he began. "I'm rather surprised to see you this evening. I would have expected you to await my reply to your letter."

Recognizing the criticism, Hermione lifted her nose a fraction and airily asked, "Oh, were you planning to reply? Given that I saw you reading my letter at breakfast this morning, and it's now nearly curfew, I'd concluded you'd decided not to bother."

Snape gave her a smile as thin as a razor's edge. "I needed time to consult with my son."

"Uh-oh," Harry thought. Talk about throwing down a gauntlet. He felt his whole body tense as he waited to see what the Gryffindors would do with a comment like that.

A ripple of discontent coursed through the visiting group, so palpable that Harry could practically smell it.

Hermione, however, appeared a bit stunned. "You showed Harry my letter?"

"Of course." Snape levelled a glare at her, as if to say, Did you miss the part where I mentioned that he was my son?

Hermione looked away to focus her gaze on Harry. "I didn't mean any offence. I hope you understand, it's just that the whole thing seems . . . weird."
"It's not weird to me," Harry announced, shoving his hands in his pockets. "And I happen to think that my opinion is the only one that matters. If you have a problem with me being Professor Snape's son, it's your problem, not mine."

Hermione bit her lip, looking as though she most definitely had a problem, but what she said was, "We're not here to argue with you, Harry. We thought you might appreciate a show of support."

"Support," Harry slowly repeated, his eyes bugging out a bit. Everywhere he rested his gaze, reluctant nods greeted him. Well, except for Neville. His nod actually looked a bit more definite than the rest, and he had a slight smile on his face as well. For all that though, he didn't look overjoyed. He was shifting on his feet, a bundle of nerves.

It occurred to Harry that he didn't really know what might have transpired up in Gryffindor Tower, though something evidently had. "Um, I suppose you all know, then? About Professor Snape adopting me?"

Hermione flushed. "Well, once you'd said you were going to have the headmaster make a general announcement, Ron didn't see any reason not to . . . ah, vent his spleen. He was a bit taken aback this morning when no such announcement came, Harry."

"Serves him right," Harry coldly returned. "So what exactly did he vent about, then? Just my adoption?"

Hermione gave a tiny shake of her head, answering an unasked question as well as the obvious one. "He kept . . . ah, most of his complaints to himself," she said out loud.

Harry had a feeling Hermione had had something to do with that.

"But he told everyone about the adoption and your change of house," she added.

"I'm still a Gryffindor!" Harry thought to stress, glancing all around to make sure everyone understood. "It's just that I'm in Professor Snape's house as well, now. But when my magic comes back I plan to return to the Tower and all that." There was so little reaction to that comment that Harry couldn't help but scathe, "If I'm welcome?"

"Of course you're welcome, Harry," Hermione gasped, clearly taken aback. "What would make you think--"

"How about that whole scene with Ron? How about the fact that the lot of you are standing there all grim like I'm in trouble or something?"

Ginny spoke up, then. Harry had to lean to the side to see her, since she was sort of buried at the back of the group. "My brother was a real git," she announced in a tone that made Harry think that she, at least, had heard the worst of Ron's accusations. "I'm sorry about that, Harry. But if we look sort of grim, maybe it's because you aren't being exactly welcoming, yourself."

Harry bit his lip. "I . . . thought maybe you'd come down here all formally like this to tell me you didn't consider me a Gryffindor any longer."

Ginny stared at him like he'd grown an extra head. "No, Harry, of course not! We all love you!"

Someone in the middle of the crowd snickered, which made Ginny's face go approximately the same shade of red as her hair. "Not like that," she growled, turning to elbow the offender.

"I love you guys too," Harry returned, swallowing. He was careful not to look directly at Ginny as
he said it. "It really bothered me that I might have to choose between my house and my father."

A few of the Gryffindors stiffened at that. Harry nearly sighed. "Well, he is," he insisted. "Here, look." And with that, he was walking over to the bookcase and standing on tip-toe to retrieve the fancy embossed adoption contract. As he began to unroll it, Colin whipped a camera from inside his robes and snapped a photo. Harry blinked from the bright flash.

He handed the scroll to Dean and Seamus, mostly because they were trying to look over Hermione's shoulder to see it better.

Hermione gave him a contemplative look. "Nobody doubted your word that it was done through official channels, Harry."

"Yeah, I know. But seeing that makes it real," Harry answered. "Right?"

A vague chorus of affirmative answers drifted through the crowd of Gryffindors as the parchment was passed around. Hermione got it last, and handed it back to Harry without so much as looking at it. Instead, she was casting a cautious glance at Professor Snape. "Listen, Harry," she said. "Your . . . er, father, looked pretty angry over breakfast when he read my letter. And it occurred to me then--probably should have occurred sooner, come to think of it--that getting you mad at us wasn't going to do you any good. If you need somebody to talk to, I want you to feel you can come to us."

Harry yanked his hands from his pocket and stood up a bit straighter. "I have a father to talk to, now. How do you think we started getting on so much better, Hermione? I've been talking to him about everything for months."

"I understand," murmured Hermione, sounding like she actually didn't. "But you might need somebody else, sometime. You know, a more . . . er, youthful perspective."

Harry knew it was wicked of him to reply as he did, but some part of him really needed to. Was it just that he wanted to shock the Gryffindors? Was he still trying in some measure to get back at Ron, even though Ron wasn't even there to hear it? Maybe, he reflected, his reply had more to do with Snape. His father had asked him ages ago to give Draco a chance, and Harry was willing to, now, but he'd never really said as much to Snape. What better way to admit he had changed his mind than to say so to Snape and the Gryffindors all at once?

"If I need somebody my age to talk to," he lightly said, "it's good to know I have my mates upstairs. But don't forget, I've also got Draco right here to bounce ideas off of."

The ripple of dismay this time was palpable, a low murmur that seemed to soak into the walls before it faded off. Hermione, Harry couldn't help but notice, was gritting her teeth so hard it sounded like they might snap. "If you should happen to need a Gryffindor perspective," she grated, clearly at the end of some sort of tether, "we're here for you."

Harry felt bad, then. He shouldn't have said that bit about Draco; it was almost like throwing down a gauntlet of his own. On the other hand, he didn't want to hide who he was. Not about the adoption, not about his membership in two houses, and not about who his friends were.

All his friends.

Sensing perhaps that Hermione was about to blow steam out both ears, Neville stepped to the front of the group and took both Harry's hands in his. Neville's fingers were cold and trembling, and he still looked horribly nervous, but then again, why wouldn't he, with Snape just five feet away, arms crossed, looking over the whole scene like a hawk about to pounce? Harry had a feeling his father
was just waiting for anybody to put one word wrong, and he'd rake them so far over the coals that they'd be charred for weeks.

"Harry," Neville said, his voice sincere for all it was wavering with tension. "We don't understand, all right? Why you would like this idea of . . . but we don't have to understand, that's the point. You're our friend and house mate and Seeker too, when you're up to flying again, and that's all there is to it."

Ginny pushed her way to the front, then, fishing something out of her robes as she moved. "We made this for you, Harry. All of us."

As she pushed a small bouquet of herbs and flowers into his hands, Harry felt tears rise to his eyes. "A well-wish?" he questioned, though it was hardly necessary to ask, really.

Ginny nodded, her own eyes a bit moist. "We can't be inside your head, you know. We can't know how this all came about unless you tell us, which you really haven't--"

"You haven't bothered to visit," Harry pointed out.

"I've been down here six times," Hermione retorted. "And you never told me what was going on, either."

"I didn't want to fight about it! And besides, you knew I was getting on better with Snape, and with Draco as well. I didn't hide that!"

"What matters," Ginny sternly interrupted, glaring at them both before her gaze softened, "is that no matter how . . . wrong, all this seems to us, we see that it doesn't strike you that way, and we've realised that we need to support your decision. We wish you well, Harry. And we'll welcome you back as soon as you can get back up to the Tower."

"You tried to get Ron to come say this as well, and he wouldn't come, would he?" Harry asked mournfully. Sighing, he held the well-wish cradled in one hand and said, "Thank you for this. It . . . it means a lot."

Ginny turned to address Professor Snape, then. "I wish you well too, sir," she said, the declaration clear and honest.

"Thank you, Miss Weasley," Snape murmured, bowing his head slightly.

Hermione cleared her throat, the rasping sound echoing in the dungeons. She looked as though she were grasping for words. Was she trying to make herself wish Snape well, but unable to go through with it? Or did she have something else to say? Whatever her intent, Snape spoke before the burgeoning silence became too oppressive.

"It is past curfew," he pointed out, his head moving slightly as he counted the visiting students. "Thirteen Gryffindors out of their dormitories at such a late hour," He shook his head, making a little tsking sound with his tongue. "I do believe the behaviour before me is a matter for the house counters."

"Please, sir--" Harry protested. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Draco smirking.

"You must let me handle this, Harry," Snape interrupted, his tone stern.

"But Professor--"
"Enough, Harry," Snape said, his voice level. He stared a moment longer at the boy, and when
Harry remained silent, quietly announced, "Twenty points to Gryffindor." He waved his wand to
solidify the command.

A stunned silence followed the pronouncement. It was Neville who finally squeaked to Seamus, his
voice hushed but still clearly audible, "To? Did he say to?"

"No, you're hallucinating, Longbottom," Draco put in, his tone rather nasty.

"That's quite enough, Draco." Snape then addressed Neville, who was quaking a bit by then. "Yes,
Mr Longbottom, I said to. However, I shall be forced to take back an even greater number of points
if you and your friends linger much longer. Much as I laud your efforts here toward Harry, I believe
it is well-established that I do not approve of students wandering the halls at night."

Hermione nodded. "I'll be down to see you tomorrow, Harry," she promised, her voice suggesting
that she'd be down there every day if she could manage it. To check on things, to be there in case
Harry needed her . . . "I think I know the way by now. I . . . I wish I didn't have to go home for the
holidays; I'd rather stay here and see more of you--"

"Hermione," Harry softly said, "you don't understand, yet. I'm fine here. I'm looking forward to
having a family Christmas for once."

"Your reply, Miss Granger," Snape announced, holding out a small, parchment scroll. "Not as prolix
as your own, I'm afraid."

"Mine wasn't long!" Hermione objected.

Snape gave Harry a sidelong glance, which had Harry looking away. So Hermione did know some
fancier words than Harry had figured on . . . well, Snape was always reading her essays. It figured
that he would know. "Miss Granger," Snape expounded. "When I ask for twelve inches on a subject,
you invariably give me thirty. I have yet to see you be succinct."

Hermione scowled, then quickly schooled her face into a more neutral expression as she turned
toward Harry. "Good night, then."

"Good night," Harry echoed, saying it several more times as he ushered the Gryffindors out. When
the door finally closed behind them, he leaned on it, his knees almost buckling with relief.

"That went as well as could be expected," Snape neutrally remarked.

Harry nodded. "Thanks for the points."

Snape waved a hand as though to say it hardly mattered.

"No, really, it was great," Harry insisted. "I never thought you'd give Gryffindor any points, sir."

"Ah, well. I can always take an extra twenty off Mr Longbottom the next time he melts his potions
desk."

Harry clapped a hand over his mouth. Neville had melted many a cauldron, but his desk, this time?
"Did that happen today, sir?"

Snape's flaring nostrils were enough to answer that.

"Well, it was brave of him to come, then," Harry decided.
Snape didn't reply to that, but then again, he didn't need to. The points sort of spoke for themselves, didn't they?

Draco loudly snorted. "Oh sure, Severus. Give them points for stealing my brilliant idea."

"Your idea?" Harry questioned, eyes puzzled.

"Well-wishes are for babies, Harry." Draco complained, his tone biting. "I thought of making it an adoption thing. Your house mates there are just a bunch of plagiarists."

"I do believe you would admire any Slytherin who saw a good idea and passed it off as his own, Draco," Snape pointed out.

"Yeah, well they're not Slytherins!"

"They're my friends," Harry reminded him. "I don't appreciate their efforts any less than I appreciate yours. And besides, Draco, it's not like I don't know who dreamed up the first well-wish for me. The credit's all yours."

Draco twisted a lip, but brightened a bit as he realised, "Well, at least this time Granger'll know better than to help you look up the plants. Her, and all of Gryffindor. You'll have to do your own research, so that's all right, then."

"I could always write Padma," Harry threatened.

He'd expected a reaction from Draco, but it was Snape who took exception to that. "You," he announced, casting his full gaze on Harry, those eyes dark with insistence, "will comport yourself as a proper young wizard this time, which means discovering your friends' wishes for yourself."

"Yes, sir," Harry murmured, lowering his eyes. It hadn't occurred to him that asking Hermione before was any big deal. It came to him now that he'd disappointed Snape. He realised that he didn't like how that made him feel. "So . . . what plants do I need to look up?" He thrust the well-wish out a bit so Snape could see it better.

His father crossed his arms. "I do believe an appropriate consequence for last time is that this time, you must fathom that out as well. I will tell you this, though. Your friends may not have a way with words, but they have spoken their fill by means of that little token you hold."

Harry couldn't help but smile. Snape could be so very Slytherin, sometimes. "You're just trying to pique my curiosity so I'll do the research."

"Draco?" Snape oddly questioned, but the other boy understood what he meant.

"It's not your average well-wish, that's for certain," Draco responded. "Sneaky, in fact. I thought Gryffindors were supposed to be so brave."

"All right!" Harry admitted, laughing as he flopped down into a chair and set the well-wish on the table in front of him. He waved for the other two to sit down, too. "That's enough! I'll decipher it!"

"You'd think Granger could tell you to your face what she really thinks," Draco went on, undeterred. "Oh, but she did," Harry insisted, his laughter dying an abrupt death. "Really, I'm not sure whether I should be irritated at her attitude or touched by her concern."

"What do you mean, Harry?" Snape asked, eyeing him carefully.
"I can't believe you didn't pick up on it," Harry murmured, shaking his head. "Hermione said they'd come to offer me a show of support. And that's what it was, a show. I mean, she doesn't really support my decision; she just thinks she ought to act supportive. You know, so I'll have somewhere safe to run when the adoption turns out to be a disaster. Not that I think it will," he rushed to say. "I'm talking for Hermione."

"Obviously," Snape wryly returned, stretching his legs out. "I can't fault your analysis of Miss Granger's intentions, though I did sense a tad more sincerity from others in the group."

"Yeah, Neville and Ginny," Harry agreed. "But that makes sense. Neville knows what it's like to long for parents, and Ginny was trying to make up for Ron being so foul. Decent of them both, really. I mean, the truth is that you've been worse than foul to Gryffindor all these years."

"I told you, Potter, Severus had to do something about Dumbledore's total prejudice against Slytherin--"

Snape gave a long suffering sigh as he reached for his wand. "Ten points from Slytherin--"

"No," Harry interrupted. "Please. I call him Malfoy every now and again when you're not around. We don't mean it in a bad way, Professor, not any longer."

"Defending Slytherin already," Snape nodded, surprise lurking in his eyes as he slipped his wand back into his cloak. "I must admit I approve."

"I was defending Draco," Harry murmured. "Long past time to return the favour."

"I suppose you two are indeed getting on, then," Snape remarked, relaxing still further.

"Yeah, I suppose we are," Harry admitted. He glanced over at Draco, expecting a smile, or at least amusement, but the Slytherin boy's silver eyes were hard and glittering. "What is it?" Harry asked. "What's wrong?"

Draco shook his head as though to clear it, and adopted a rather bored façade. "Oh, nothing. I was just remembering something."

"Draco," Snape prompted in a low, intense voice.

"It's nothing," Draco snapped. "Leave it, Severus." With that, he was stomping from the room.

"Uh . . . did something I said get to him?" Harry asked.

"You intimated that you trust him," Snape remarked. "How much did you mean that?"

Harry leaned forward, his gaze on the well-wish. "Uh . . . I don't know how to measure it. I mean, I think he's on my side, now. But I still can't say I really understand why he would be, all things considered. I mean, he always hated me, before. Why would he risk being disowned, risk being killed, to help me? See, this is why I try not to think about it, Professor. Because it doesn't make any sense, what he did, and the longer I think about it, the less I trust him."

"But . . . ?"

"But it doesn't make sense, yet there's so much to it," Harry sighed. "The wand. All the tutoring. Darswaithe. And even with my friends, it's like he's on guard to protect me. You saw it in the Pensieve; he jumped right in to make sure Ron couldn't throw a hex my way. Yeah, okay then. I do trust him, I guess. I just don't know why he'd want me to."
Snape tapped a finger against the side of his face as he pondered something.

"Professor?"

"Go tell Draco I wish to speak with him, alone," Snape announced.

"About me?"

Snape gave him a cool look. "About him."

After the office door closed behind the two Slytherins, Harry fetched Sal from her box, and squinting at her half-camouflaged form, went to bed. He didn't know how long Snape talked with Draco; he only knew that the other boy hadn't returned by the time Harry drifted off to sleep.

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Snape wasn't there for breakfast, the second day in a row. From what Hermione had said, Harry knew that Snape had eaten in the Great Hall the previous day. He wondered if Dumbledore's note had had that effect. Was Snape going to eat more meals with his colleagues, as suggested?

Of course, Harry didn't know that Snape was in the Great Hall again. For all he knew, the man was back to skipping meals. Harry had been hungry enough during his life to get pretty upset about someone passing up perfectly good meals that were freely available. He did know that he really shouldn't nag Snape about things, but he couldn't help but wonder what he could do about the man's tendency not to take good enough care of himself.

Draco seemed unusually quiet, and rather disinclined to eat, but that couldn't be because he disliked the food. Harry had got up first, and had successfully used the Floo to order "whatever suits." He was rather pleased that despite his lack of "urgency," as Snape had put it, the Floo had still seemed to work for him. Maybe, Harry reflected, having faith that he could perform a particular type of magic also helped his powers flow.

Draco had ended up with poached eggs and rye toast, but instead of eating anything, he just kept swirling the tines of his fork through his egg yolk. He looked like he hadn't got any sleep at all.

"Draco," Harry prompted.

The other boy raised bloodshot eyes but didn't reply.

"What is it?" Harry gently asked. "Didn't talking to Snape help? It always helps me."

Draco's reply was so quiet that Harry almost missed it. "It didn't help me."

That surprised Harry. As far as he was concerned, Snape had quite a keen way of analyzing problems and seeing solutions. He thought it must come from all those years of taking his Head of house duties so seriously. "Didn't Snape have any suggestions at all?" Harry pressed.

"He wants me to do something I can't do," Draco murmured, letting his fork clatter down onto his plate.

Harry thought back, trying to make sense of that comment. Really, he could only think of one thing it might mean. "Oh . . . um, he wants you to testify against your father?"

Draco jerked so sharply that the feet of his chair skittered on the dungeon floor. "What are you playing at?"
Harry blinked, then stared. "Nothing. Are you all right? You aren't making much sense."

"Well, what did you mean, he might want me to testify against my father?"

"About what Darswaithe did. About finding the Portkey your father spelled."

"Oh, that." Draco seemed to slump. "No. My father's rather immune to prosecution, if you hadn't noticed. As far as I know, he's never even been charged for abducting you--" He drew in a shaky breath. "Sorry. Didn't mean to mention that."

Harry acknowledged the apology with a nod. "What does Snape want you to do, then?" he questioned.

"I don't want to talk about it," Draco said, standing up. "I'm going back to bed."

"Brooding in our room isn't going to help whatever's troubling you," Harry pointed out. "Weren't you the one who told me to stop sulking?"

"I," Draco stressed, "was up half the night arguing with Severus, and it's not as though he gave me a magic potion to make my problems all go away. So if you don't mind, I'm going to try to sleep, now."

"Potions can't solve all my problems, either," Harry protested. "Listen, if talking to Snape didn't help, why don't you try me? Maybe it's like Hermione said last night... you need a more youthful perspective?"

Draco scowled. "The day I take advice from a Muggleborn-- Never mind. I can't tell you my problem, Potter. It's as simple as that."

"Why not?" Harry demanded.

Draco's tone was weary as he answered, "Harry, you are my problem."

With that, he was closing the bedroom door with a definite thud. Not willing to leave it at that, Harry went to pull the door open and found it stuck fast. Draco had secured it with a spell. Harry pounded, then realised there were probably silencing charms up as well.

Well, if Draco needed solitude that badly, Harry reasoned, he ought to have some. Anyway, it wasn't as though Harry could do anything about it. He couldn't even contact Snape, since this definitely didn't qualify as an emergency. Sighing, Harry worked a bit on a Potions essay, careful to include plenty of those transitions Snape thought were so important, then went to study the bookshelves for some texts that might help him unravel the Gryffindors' well-wish.

It didn't take him long to conclude that he was going to need Madam Pince to direct him to the right kind of books. Once, that would have meant owl post and a delay of several hours, at least. Now, Harry used the Floo, though first, he had to scoop up Sals, who had slithered in sometime after breakfast. At least she was fully visible, now.

Harry lifted her to his face and gave her a mock growl. "What am I going to do with you?" he grumbled. "You know better than to sleep in the Floo!"

It must have been Parseltongue he'd spoken, since Sals replied readily enough, saying that the fireplace was the nicest spot in the whole house.

Harry sighed, and let her curl up around his neck as he sat in front of the hearth and tossed in some
powder so he could contact the library.

Snape didn't ask after Draco when he came in that evening, but he likely thought that the Slytherin boy was just reading or studying in the bedroom, as often happened. How was Snape to know that Draco had spent the entire day holed up in there, the door spelled so Harry couldn't even get in?

Harry didn't want to get Draco in any trouble—or at least, not any more than he was apparently in already, but he had a feeling that Draco's depression, or whatever it was, would just get worse if something wasn't done about it.

"I'm really worried about Draco," he admitted, wandering into the office where Snape was taking off his teaching cloaks and draping them over the back of his desk chair. "I tried to talk with him, but he pretty much refused. And then he slept all day. Or pretended to. Do you know what the matter is?"

Snape neatly evaded the question. "What did he say the matter might be?"

Harry sighed. "He said his problem is me. How can that be? It's ridiculous. I think he knows I actually do trust him now . . ."

"What if he's afraid that one mistake will have him losing your trust?"

"Well, he doesn't trust me much if he thinks that would happen," Harry retorted. "Look at what happened to Sals. I didn't hold that against him."

Snape came to stand just in front of Harry. "I think it will all work out. Perhaps it is as you said, before, Harry. Draco has been trapped too long down here."

Harry sighed. "Well, there's nothing for it, unless you've reconsidered my invisibility cloak idea? You know, let him fly a bit around the pitch wearing it . . . nobody would know . . ." Snape was giving him such a dark look that Harry abruptly shut up. He knew the man didn't approve of Harry even having such an item. All Harry needed was for Snape to go all fatherly about it and decide to confiscate it until Harry left school. "Never mind," Harry quickly covered his mistake. "Bad idea."

"To say the least," Snape caustically put in. "I understand that the item has been passed down to you from James, but you have put it to more than sentimental use these past several years. I strongly suggest you place it in your trunk and keep it there, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir, perfectly clear," Harry all but gulped.

"I think perhaps there may be something we can do for Draco, all the same," Snape mused, his expression lightening. "Perhaps we can go somewhere for Christmas."

Harry blinked with astonishment. "Are you serious? That'd be great! But uh . . . would it be safe? You know Draco's father's going to be looking for him . . . not to mention me . . . and then there's always Voldemort out to get me . . ."

"I think something can be arranged. After all, Harry, neither Voldemort nor any of his minions will have reason to suspect we aren't here. The place I have in mind should be at least as safe as Black's old house. No, safer still, as the fireplace has never been on the Floo network."

Harry felt his face go chill, and wondered if the blood was draining from it. "But Professor, Sirius' house was so unsafe that Lucius got his hands on me there . . ."
"Only because Lupin led him to it, and you accidentally ended up outside the building proper. That won't happen again. Everything will be all right." Somehow, those last words sounded like Snape was talking about several things at once. "Shall we go inform Draco?"

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Snape wasn't too pleased when he realised that Harry's door was charmed shut and that silencing wards were blocking out his every call for Draco. Unlike Harry, however, Snape knew how to deal with it. He drew his wand from a deep trouser pocket and made short work of Draco's makeshift wards, then strode straight in without even knocking.

Draco was sitting cross-legged on his bed, awake but staring into space. He cast Snape a cursory glance when the man flung the door wide, but other than that, didn't react.

"How would you like to go away for Christmas?" Snape opened the conversation.

Draco briefly looked up, his silver eyes wounded. "I . . . I don't have any place to go, Severus. I thought you understood, my relatives have sided with my father, every one. But you and Harry will be wanting to have a father and son holiday, I suppose--"

"No, Draco," Harry said, coming to sit beside the distraught boy. He hesitated a second, then laid a hand on Draco's knee. He almost expected to feel the Samhain needles again, or at least a sick reluctance churning in his belly, but no . . . it was all right. Maybe, he was finally over it, finally healed, inside and out. "We want to get away from the dungeons for Christmas," Harry explained. "All of us. Snape and I never once considered not having you along. Don't be silly."

Draco gave a weak smile, though distress still lurked deep in his eyes. "Oh. Well, that's all right, then. I think if I had to look at these stone walls all through the holiday . . . well, never mind. Yeah, let's get away." He drew in a deep breath and looked fully at Snape. "Anyplace in particular?"

"Yes, but I do believe I'll keep it a surprise," Snape smoothly returned. "I'll go request dinner for the three of us."

"When can we leave?" Harry asked, eager to be somewhere else now that he knew it was a possibility.

"The Hogwarts' express will take most of the students home for holidays on Saturday morning. I think . . . that evening," Snape decided. "We'll be gone most of a fortnight, so pack accordingly."

Harry laughed. "Three days to get packed. I think I can manage it."

Draco dragged himself slowly to his feet, acting more like a man of sixty than a boy of sixteen. "I think I'll have a shower."

"No," Snape sternly announced. "Wait until after dinner, and until after you show me what you've accomplished today in your courses."

"Well, that won't take long," Draco muttered under his breath.

Snape ignored the comment, though later he did insist on Draco catching up on the work he'd neglected during the day.

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"Ready, Harry?" Snape asked, eyeing the worn duffle Harry was carrying hefted over his shoulder.
When Harry nodded, Snape turned to Draco, who was levitating an entire trunk behind him.

Harry couldn't help but goggle. "We're only going to be gone two weeks!"

Draco gave Harry a superior sort of smirk, the kind of expression that would have once had Harry longing to smack him. Now, his main reaction was relief that Draco was finally acting more like himself. Harry suspected, however, that the problem, whatever it had been, hadn't really been solved; Draco was just managing to ignore it. *Avoidance...* it was a technique Harry recognised in himself as well, though he wouldn't have known what to call it if not for that book of Snape's.

"I can't possibly live out of a *duffel*," Draco drawled, his tone suggesting the prospect to be a fate worse than death. "Some of us have standards, Potter. *Some* of us have a certain *je ne sais quoi* without which we'd just be *peasants...*"

For once, Snape didn't threaten points over the "Potter" part of the comment. Harry liked that.

"Some of us know how to *pack,*" Harry teased back. "You don't bring your entire wardrobe with you on a trip, Malfoy. You prioritize."

Draco laughed. "Please. You prioritize; I'll accessorize."

"Enough banter," Snape announced. "We'll all Floo together--"

Harry swallowed hard, all amusement abruptly vanishing. "Ah... didn't you say this place was off the Floo network?"

"Unless you want to walk across the grounds to the Apparition boundary, which would put you in full view of any Death Eaters lurking about, not to mention the few Slytherins who have stayed here for the holidays, flooing is the best way to depart."

"Portkey," Harry suggested, grimacing.

"I haven't one prepared," Snape said, narrowing his eyes. "You've been using the Floo a bit of late. Don't tell me you still think it will roast you alive."

"Well..."

"Harry, you will be with me. *My* magic will pull you through regardless of the state of your own."

"And mine," Draco chimed in.

"But--"

Snape looked him square in the eyes. "You are my son," he stated quietly. "Can you truly believe I would do anything to bring you to harm?"

"Or do you think you know magical principles better than Severus does?" Draco added.

Harry thought about that, and nodded. "All right. I guess I'm just remembering... ah, Samhain. I think I sort of have a thing about fire, after that." He swallowed. "But if spell residue from the Floo made Sals sick, she certainly can't go through it with us."

"Excellent point," Snape announced. "You have her in your pocket, there? Wrap her around your wrist."

Harry did, angling his body away from Draco. Incanting something under his breath, Snape touched
Harry gasped, but before he could protest, Snape was assuring him, "She'll be fine, Harry. Much better than if she had to floo in her corporeal state."

Draco regarded the bracelet with distaste. "We could always leave her here," he pointed out, clearly not enthralled with the prospect of bringing Sals along on holiday. "She's a snake; she knows how to take care of herself."

"She's a nice little snake," Harry sternly announced. "You shouldn't judge her as evil just because she's a snake. I mean, I got over you being a Slytherin, didn't I?"

To Harry's surprise, Draco sort of paled. It wasn't a good look on a boy who was already so fair-skinned to start with.

"Shall we just go?" Snape suggested, his voice all at once exhausted.

They flooed to Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, Harry stumbling a bit as he exited the fireplace into the room familiar from his long Occlumency sessions with Snape. It surprised him a bit that Draco had managed to Floo through, considering the Fidelius Charm and all, but Harry supposed that at some point, Dumbledore must have told Draco about the house's true purpose.

"The Death Eaters know about this place," Harry protested. "It can't be safe for us to spend Christmas here."

"The wards will keep them out of your house," Snape returned.

"Wait, your house?" Draco questioned, looking around.

"Inherited it from my godfather," Harry quietly replied.

"Oh?"

"Sirius Black."

Draco gaped, and Harry didn't know if it was because of Sirius' criminal record, or the fact that Harry's godfather had been a relative of the Malfoys. Maybe Draco knew from Death Eater gossip that Wormtail had been the one who had belonged in Azkaban? Either way, Harry didn't want to talk about it. He didn't even want to be here. "Professor," he protested, "this really isn't a good place for me to spend the holidays."

"I never imagined it was," Snape returned. "I merely needed a safe place from which to Apparate us." He beckoned to Harry, and when the boy stepped close, pulled him into a warm, firm embrace. "Do you remember doing this in Surrey?"

"I'm hardly likely to forget," Harry murmured, cheek against his father's chest. "You said I'd have enough sense to hang onto you the next time."

"And so you do. Apparition will likely still not agree with you, but with me to absorb the worst of the shock, you shouldn't find it quite so arduous a process." He glanced over at Draco. "I will be back for you in just a moment."

Draco assumed an expression that was bored, smug, and superior. "I've known how to Apparate since I was fifteen," he informed his teacher. "You really ought to teach Harry. But by all means,
please do return for me, as I've no idea where to Apparate to."

Snape ignored the barb.

A moment later, Harry felt himself melting and reforming, the sensation sickening, but not nearly as much so as when he'd suffered it unaided. Snape's body was taut as he tried to cushion the impact Harry felt. It helped, it really did.

When Harry could open his eyes, he found himself in a small stone cottage. Sparsely furnished, it had the look of a place that was seldom, if ever used, yet there was no layer of dust such as one would expect. Something about the place was vaguely familiar, but Harry was certain he'd never seen it before. His brow furrowed as he puzzled over that.

Setting down his duffel, Harry studied the room more closely. No, he'd definitely never seen that huge stone fireplace before, or the window view overlooking a fragrant meadow.

Fragrant . . .

That was it; the place smelted familiar. Harry breathed it in, sorting out the scents. Clear, clean grass . . . the slightly musty odour of a thatched roof above . . . acrid ashes sitting in the hearth . . .

Other scents came to him, phantom ones he couldn't smell just now, but they'd been here once. Memory brought them wafting back. Hot cider and oatmeal, the pungent odour of Muggle salves. He heard rain against the eaves, though it was a clear day, now.

But he'd been here when it was raining, hadn't he . . .

"Devon!" Harry suddenly exclaimed. "We're in Devon! This is where you took care of me after Samhain!"

Snape inclined his head. He had been studying Harry closely, and holding his shoulder in case the boy still needed support, but at that he let go and stepped slightly away. "My own little cottage in the wilds," he lightly mocked himself. "Albus refers to it as a 'shack,' I do believe. But short of Hogwarts, it's as safe a place as there can be. The entire meadow surrounding us is unplottable, and the house itself coated in wards. Of course there is no blood-protection here, but neither do any Death Eaters suspect its existence." Snape returned his gaze to Harry's. "I will return for Draco now, if you feel secure?"

Harry nodded, and wrapped his arms around himself, shivering a bit. Well, it was December . . . Ironic, really, that the dungeons were warmer than this cottage, but then again, Snape kept them well-spelled. Except for during the night . . . "Yeah, go get him," Harry answered. He didn't think he was nervous, really, but some part of him must have been, for he heard himself babble next, "he's probably been all around Sirius' house by now."

"Your house," Snape gently corrected.

"Could you help me get a solicitor or whatever wizards use?" Harry suddenly asked. "I don't want it. I think I'd like to give it away."

"That's a discussion for after the holidays, I believe. I will be back in a moment with Draco."

Harry nodded, and watched his father Disapparate.
Draco was less than impressed with the cottage. "I thought we were going on holiday," he complained. "This whole place is smaller than the measly quarters they allot you at Hogwarts!"

Harry elbowed Draco. Hard, but the Slytherin boy chose not to take the hint. "And just one bedroom," he continued. "And that *bathroom* looks like it hasn't been re-spelled in a hundred years! Honestly, how are the three of us supposed to survive here for two weeks?"

"We can always go back to the dungeons if my house offends your sensibilities."

Draco stilled. "Oh, no, not the dungeons." He gave a theatrical shudder. "I'd rather go *camping* than go back there just yet... wait. Did you say *your* house, Severus?"

Snape merely nodded, his dark eyes unreadable.

"Oh," murmured Draco in belated understanding as he sat down on his trunk. "Well, it's... ah, lovely, Severus. So... um, cozy, yes. And quaint."

"Give it up," Harry groaned. "You are one lousy liar."

"Am not. Weasley believed me when I told him you'd never slept in Snape's bed."

"As I recall, he didn't," Harry returned. He looked all around the small room they were in, which appeared to be some sort of general purpose space. A rather tattered sofa along one uneven stone wall, a rough-hewn dining table shoved up against another, and in between, nothing but a rug that looked as though it had been crocheted out of rags. There wasn't even any kitchen, though several crates on the table suggested that food might have been laid in. "Where should we put our things, sir?"

"I thought you and Draco could share the bedroom," Snape answered, waving toward the door.

Draco had already been in there. He nodded slightly. "Sure. I'll just transfigure the big bed in there into two smaller ones, like before." He drew his wand and flexed it as though already visualizing what he had in mind.

Harry couldn't believe the Slytherin boy's insensitivity. First insults, though unintentional, and now this? "We can't put you out of your room, Professor," he earnestly insisted, walking over to where Snape was beginning to *Incendio* a fire to ward off the pervasive chill in the cottage. "Really. I'd rather sleep on the floor than take your bed again."

Draco scoffed. "Wizards don't *ever* sleep on the floor, Harry. All you need is a stick of wood and a minimal knowledge of Transfiguration, and *voilà*, a proper bed appears."

"Draco exaggerates but he does have a point," Snape murmured. "If I cared to, I could turn this place into something a bit grander. At any rate, I insist the two of you share the room. I want you both to have a happy Christmas."

Harry could have told him that he could be just as happy camping out in the living room, whatever Draco thought of the prospect. To refuse again, though, would be ungracious. "Thank you, sir," he softly said.

Snape gave him an irritated glance, which Harry supposed must mean that thanks weren't needed between father and son. Harry happened to think they were, but that was one more thing he decided not to argue about.

"Just go settle in," Snape advised. "Feel free to move anything that's in your way. Make yourselves at home. Actually, Harry, you *are* at home."
Right of abode, Harry remembered, nodding. The whole concept still seemed strange to him; he was too used to thinking of himself as without a home. It was nice to have a room in Snape's quarters, but sometimes, he still felt like a guest there, though he knew he really shouldn't. This place... Harry glanced around, again. He liked the dungeons well enough, he supposed, but there was something about this place that he really liked. A lot.

Maybe it was the lack of clutter, or the comfortable, worn feeling all around. It seemed the opposite of the house he'd grown up in, the house that had never been a home. Harry smiled. He didn't feel like a guest, here. It was like things were just right.

When Harry entered the room, Draco was lying idly on the bed, flicking his wand to and from to make his clothes levitate themselves over to an armoire that had seen better days. The clothes proceeded to wrap themselves around wooden hangers, which Harry thought a pretty neat, if relatively useless trick. He for one didn't think that wizard had to mean lazy. "What's that?" he asked, prodding a slightly dusty box beside Draco on the bed.

Draco barely spared it a glance. "Found it stuffed in the armoire," he answered, shoving it over toward Harry. "Must belong to Severus."

"I'll go ask him what to do with it, then," Harry answered, since there wasn't really anywhere else to put it except on the floor. That hardly seemed polite. He was just turning away with it when Draco came up on his knees on the bed, and leaning forward, neatly snatched it from Harry's hands. He lifted the largish box to the side of his head and shook it to and fro.

"What are you doing?"

"Maybe it's a Christmas present," Draco trilled, a wicked grin lighting up his features. "I wonder if it's for you or for me." He began to lift the top off the box.

"If it were a present it would be wrapped," Harry objected. "Put it down; it's Snape's personal stuff, whatever it is."

"He said to make ourselves at home," Draco reminded Harry, whipping the box top off before the other boy could protest further. "Hmm. Just some old clothes," he commented, pulling something black out of the box and shaking it out.

Something fell to the stone floor. As Harry went to pick it up, his breath hitched, his hand freezing in midair.

Draco realised at the same moment just what he was holding. "Shite!" he exclaimed, shoving the garments away with both hands and jumping back from the ominous black fabric that settled gracefully to the floor, splaying itself out in a long line suggestive of the human form. Beside it, almost at the level the head, lay the item that had fallen from its folds.

Side by side on the grey floor they lay.

Robe and mask.

Hooded robe, Death Eater mask.

Harry stiffened, his whole body feeling like it had gone into some sort of paralysis. It wasn't clothing lying there before him, it was the last person he'd seen wearing the evil garments Voldemort demanded of his followers.

Lucius Malfoy, in full Death Eater regalia.
Harry's eyes felt on fire as fury boiled up inside him, as a longing to hurt as he'd been hurt seemed to consume his every cell. He could feel it again, everything he'd suffered at this man's hands. The thirst, the needles, the burning.

Draco was yelling something, his hands gesturing wildly, but Harry couldn't hear anything past the roaring in his ears, an avalanche of sound made up of nothing but his own screams on Samhain. Layer past layer of agonized wailing, sensations rushing through him, fear and pain and horror . . . and then something else, coming in the wake of all that. A hatred too intense for words. Vengeance beyond Azkaban, beyond the petty niceties of trial and accusation and sentence. Vengeance that wouldn't wait, that didn't care that Unforgivables were called that for a reason.

His hands jerked upwards, palms facing out, fingers widely spread as power ricocheted through him like a Bludger gone berserk. Heat rose through his skin and spilled over into the air. Wild magic, unfurling itself like a banner, unleashing itself to blast the house and occupants and meadow all around.

Except, it didn't.

Harry could feel the magic lashing forth from him, could feel the hatred and rage eager to immolate the countryside itself, but he felt something else, too.

Power. Control.

With a scream of absolute pure fury, he yanked his hands together and stretched his arms forward to point at the horrid clothing on the floor. A flaming emerald jet of magic shot from his fingertips to immolate the offending garments. It went on and on, a blaze of anger, of raw magical energy, the air filling with acrid smoke as the clothes caught on fire and the mask began to melt. Harry kept screaming, his throat rasping with hoarseness, his lungs deprived of oxygen because he couldn't stop long enough to take a breath.

The mask's mouth and eye holes contorted as though in pain as the clothing twisted in the fire, and Harry could see Lucius lying there, Lucius burning . . .

Time seemed to slow, and almost stop. Draco was moving sluggishly, but Harry saw that only from the corner of his eye. His whole field of vision was taken up with the fire. A pyre, now, reaching up almost to the thatch roof overhead, the flames a brilliant Avada Kedavra green.

It might have gone on forever, but Harry felt himself abruptly yanked from behind, his hands pulled to his sides and forcibly held there, a palm clapped over his eyes to blind him like on Samhain. He struggled, his screams changing calibre from full-throated adult rage to frightened adolescent horror. Time snapped in on itself, the room seeming to jerk as though the whole world had been yanked elsewhere by a Portkey.

The roaring in his ears stopped, his senses filling with present instead of past. Draco, white-faced, water spraying from his wand as he fought the fire back from the ceiling. Hand hands holding him, the grip fierce. Bitter smoke clogging his nostrils and lungs.

Harry coughed, sputtering, and heard Snape murmur, "Thank Merlin, you're out of it, now. Breathe, Harry . . . yes, good. Come on now, sit down on the bed with me."

For a long moment there was no sound except the swish of water splashing against stone, and then Snape spoke again. "Are you going to be all right, now?"

Harry leaned weakly on Snape, feeling light-headed and ill. He tried not to glance at the floor, but his
gaze seemed pulled there. The robe and mask, ruined beyond recognition, lay in a puddle of water blackened with ash.

"I'm sorry," he heard himself say, the words coming from some deep core of certainty inside him. It frightened him, this certainty. This wasn't like a seer dream, to be questioned and analyzed and doubted from start to finish. This was true prophecy, or perhaps more aptly, it was simply truth.

"Oh, the house isn't damaged," Snape replied, his hand rubbing circles against Harry's back. "For wild magic, that was remarkably well-controlled. In fact, I don't believe I would term it wild at all. Your powers did what you most wished."

Harry shook his head, hair flying wildly as he tried to make them understand. "No. Wasn't talking to you. Him. Draco," he gasped, the words slipping out of his grasp the minute he tried to say them. Taking a moment, he consciously tried to calm himself, dragging in breath after cleansing breath.

Draco's silver eyes clouded over with puzzlement and fear in equal measure. He glanced at Snape. Harry felt the man shrug. "Pardon?" Draco asked.

Another breath. Then Harry looked again at the charred remains of robe and mask, a testament to all the evil that had filled his life since he was one year old. "I'm going to do that again someday," he said through gritted teeth. "To another set of clothes. One with your father inside them. And when I do, it'll hurt you. And so..." he almost couldn't say it, since he hated Lucius Malfoy so very much. But he didn't hate Draco, and no matter how evil Lucius was, he was still Draco's father. Draco might wish him in Azkaban, but he didn't wish him dead.

But Harry did.

He looked Draco full in the face. "I'm sorry," he said again, the sound a rasp of pain and resolve. He knew what it was to lose a parent... but that wasn't going to stop him when it came to Lucius, it just wasn't. Unable to bear those silver eyes a moment more, Harry closed his own, turned his face into the warm, soft wool of his father's cloak, and wept.
It seemed to Harry that Snape let him cry forever. The man didn't chastise him for being such a baby, or tell him nice lies like that everything would be all right. He just held him against his chest, the arm around him warm and comforting, and let Harry shed through tears the pain and frustration that had for so long knitted his soul.

When at last the storm ended, Harry raised bleary eyes and looked around, blinking. "Um . . . where's Draco?"

Snape pulled Harry back to him when the boy would have moved. "He left a few minutes in. I suspect he thought it wasn't quite right for him to stay and witness such a personal moment."

Harry grimaced. "Bet he hates me now. Oh God, after what I said, he might even want to go back--"

"To Voldemort?" Snape shook his head. "He hadn't yet joined Voldemort, you must understand. It was simply expected of him. And too, he knew long before tonight that your anger toward Lucius was without limit."

Harry shivered. "Yeah, but saying I'd kill his dad . . . I mean, as much as I think Lucius a right bastard, even I could tell how awful it was to say that to Draco."

"Why did you say it, then?"

Harry stiffened and pushed away, that time ignoring Snape's attempts to draw him back into an embrace. He rubbed his cold hands together, then looked down, expecting them to be charred despite the chill he felt in every finger. All that anger, fire practically pouring through me . . . but no, his hands looked fine, though they ached with a sort of bone-deep intensity.

"I had a . . . I don't know. It was almost like a vision, except it wasn't actually visual, if that makes sense. I just suddenly knew, Professor. I am going to kill Lucius Malfoy, just like that."

"I sincerely hope not," Snape sternly averred, the words so unexpected that Harry gaped until it came to him why the man would speak that way.

"Oh, I know I'm no match for him now," Harry admitted, shaking his head. "It's not like I plan to go asking for trouble. Even when my magic's back in full I don't know that I could take him on; I've a lot of learning left to do." His voice thrummed with intensity. "But someday, he's going to pay for what he's done to me--"

Snape took him by the shoulders and gave him a shake so firm it seemed to jar him out of the fantasy he was falling into. "Don't speak that way, Harry. His crimes against you are heinous and deserve to be punished, but you are not jury, judge, and executioner fused into one. You're angry and venting it, which is most likely healthy, but becoming obsessed with revenge is not."

"He and his kind cost me my parents and a decent childhood and any chance I'd ever have to have someone of my own!" Harry cried, wrapping his arms around himself and rocking to and fro as he sat on the edge of the bed.

Snape pulled him back and hugged him tight, arms curled around him from behind even as Harry kept hugging himself. "You have someone of your own," he reminded the boy, his voice intense. "I know the other still hurts, and this . . . it isn't the same as you would have had with James. But you are not alone any longer, Harry. You have someone who l-- cares about you enough not to let you
"do this to yourself!"

"Do what?" Harry cried, thrashing a bit, little good that it did him. Snape held on fast.

"Let anger turn you into someone you don't wish to be," Snape said, his tone low, earnest, and sincere. "It happens bit by bit, Harry, so slowly that you can't see it from inside yourself, but this is the start, this thirst for vengeance at any cost. I will not quarrel with you if you hate Lucius, or wish him dead with all your heart, or fight with all your might to bring him to justice for his crimes. But we will have a quarrel if you take it upon yourself to determine what is justice, if you mete it out."

"I'll wait until I'm old enough to take him on and win--"

"No," Snape urgently demanded. "No, Harry. If you devote yourself to a cause like that, you'll wake up one morning the Dark Lord's equal in a way you weren't marked to be." Snape's callused fingertips reached up to trace Harry's scar, the touch so careful that the boy felt made of blown glass. "What do you think made Voldemort the way he is, but lusting after vengeance against those who had offended him, and their kind?"

"But I'm supposed to kill Voldemort!" Harry yelled, twisting in Snape's arms so that he could see the man. "What's the difference if I kill Lucius effing Malfoy as well? I'm already fated to be a murderer!"

"You're going to slay Voldemort because he'll give you no choice!" Snape roared. "You know that! The prophecy itself speaks to it. And if you kill Malfoy in the same way, namely, in self-defence, you'll have my blessing! But not like this, not for revenge!"

"You know what he did to me," Harry grated, his face wet and warm once more, though he couldn't remember when he'd started crying again. It had been a while since he'd really thought about Samhain, but the mask and robe had brought it all back, every last thing. "You were there!" Harry accused, though he truly didn't blame Snape for any of it. "The needles . . . oh my God, those huge, sharp needles sticking into me everywhere! And then the fire, trying to burn me like it was the Middle Ages all over again--"

"I know," Snape quietly vowed, his eyes shining with regret when Harry looked at him. "But Harry, I know something else. You will hurt yourself much worse than Lucius can ever do if you let hatred take control of you.

Harry turned, unable to bear the sight of Snape so concerned, so very worried. Was this what it was like to have a father? You did what you thought you ought, and then ended up feeling just awful afterwards when your dad told you you were wrong, told you why?

He didn't mean to look at the dreadful charred mess on the floor, but that was where his gaze ended up. Ugly, it was so ugly, what he had done. And then to say he'd do it to a person, and not just that, to a friend's own father? Of course, Lucius Malfoy was a snake . . . no, that wasn't right. To call Malfoy a snake was an insult to sweet little Sals. Which reminded Harry.

He held out a wrist surrounded by a golden coil. "Would you?"

Perhaps sensing that the two of them needed a break from the previous topic—though that one was far from settled, as the resolve in Snape's eyes attested—the Potions Master tapped the tiny metallic head with his wand, then traced his wand tip over Sals' entire length. "Vivicalus anovare," he whispered, moving quickly to catch the snake as she fell in an untidy heap to his palm. He transferred the little reptile into Harry's hands, then moved back marginally to give the boy some room.
Harry lifted Sals to his face and peered intently into her sleepy eyes. He thought she looked fine, though she definitely needed to warm up. Tucking her into a shirt pocket, he patted her a few times through the fabric. "You should have asked before you did a thing like that to her," Harry rebuked his father.

Snape's dark eyes stared down at him. For a moment Harry thought he'd gone too far. But then Snape nodded slightly and drawled, "Indeed."

"What does that mean?" Harry asked, exasperated.

Another slight hesitation, then: "I suppose it would indicate that though apologies do not fly so readily to my lips as they would to a Gryffindor's, I do acknowledge that you are right."

That was so much coming from the likes of Snape that Harry's jaw almost dropped. Snape, saying he was sorry? Well, he'd done it concerning Samhain, but this was another case entirely. Harry found he didn't want to rub it in, and heard himself murmuring, "Well, Sals seems all right, so no harm done."

Snape accepted that with a slight nod.

"So . . . " Harry tried another tentative glance at the man's eyes. "Are we . . . all right? You were pretty upset."

"At the prospect of watching my son become the next Dark Lord?" Snape leaned in close again and spoke with deadly determination. "You have no idea just how upset I can become."

"The next Dark Lord?" Harry gasped. "That's bloody ridiculous!"

"It's bloody likely if you start holding vengeance so dear, you idiot child!" Snape sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Harry, listen. Were you any other student, I'd believe such bloodlust likely to produce a rather warped adult. But you are not any other student. You will have powers the Dark Lord knows not. If you don't wish to become him, you'd better also have a good deal of wisdom and restraint!"

He'd started off calmly, but by the end, was yelling once again.

"Yeah, yeah, I got it."

"Do you?"

"Yes!"

Snape gave him a look as though to say that they would see about that. Which was fine with Harry. He was tired of talking about it. He did detest Lucius Malfoy and he did want revenge, but he didn't want to end up a twisted, bitter, hate-filled arsehole like Voldemort, so where did that leave him? Feeling suddenly boneless, Harry flopped onto his back and sighed. Maybe he wasn't so tired of talking about it, after all, since he groaned, "You know, I am just sixteen here, so it's not like I have it all figured out. I don't think I'd know what to do if were were just talking about girls and dating or something, so I sure as shite don't have a clue what I'm supposed to do about having been stabbed to within an inch of my life by a raging maniac working for another raging maniac who's wanted me dead since I was only one year old!"

Turning on the bed, Snape looked down at Harry. "I know what you should do. Listen to your father."

Propping himself back up on one elbow, Harry dryly questioned, "Don't go thirsting for vengeance?
. . . No offence, Professor, but what were you doing when you announced to all of Slytherin that poor Remus was a werewolf? And what about last year, they way you constantly taunted and belittled Sirius?"

"I was thirsting for vengeance," Snape admitted, raising an eyebrow. "How do you think I know how destructive it can be? Hogwarts lost the best defence instructor it has had in years. My actions opened the door for Crouch to walk through, the next year, and Umbridge after him. And as for Black . . ." The man sighed. "He died in part because of my taunts."

Harry was silent for a long moment. "He'd have come to my rescue regardless," he finally admitted. "I even told Ron it's not your fault. Anyway, about this listen-to-your-father business. It might help if you told me what you think I should do, instead of just what not to do."

"For the moment," Snape mildly replied, "I think you should go find Draco."

"To apologize again?" Harry grimaced. "He's probably too angry to listen. I would be, if some person I hadn't even been friends with for long suddenly said, Sorry, but I am definitely going to roast your father alive. I mean, it's not much of a sorry, is it?"

"Are you going to do as your father advises, or not?"

"Yes, Father," Harry said, testing out the word. He wasn't sure it fit. Snape certainly looked uncomfortable hearing it. Then again, that might be because Harry'd said it in a rather sarcastic way. "Sorry," he quickly murmured. "I'll just go, um, look for Draco. He went outside, huh? Um, how far is the property unplottable? I'd hate to wander out of bounds by accident again."

"Don't go past any low stone walls," Snape advised. Then, apparently misunderstanding Harry's apology, he added in a low, strained voice, "You may certainly call me 'Father' if you wish."

"Uh, great," Harry said without much enthusiasm. He felt really bad that he'd even stepped into such a quagmire. "I'll, uh, think about it."

Snape inclined his head, his eyes shadowed when Harry glanced at him. The boy left quickly, before he could utter something else that would be phenomenally awkward.

Draco wasn't in the house, but he didn't seem to be in the lush green fields outside either. At least, not until Harry thought to look up.

The Slytherin boy sat astride his broom, looping in slow circles through the sky. When he spotted Harry down below, he executed a few neat turns and twists, then skidded to a halt just a few feet from the ground and hopped off. The broom followed him as he walked toward the Gryffindor.

"All better?" he asked, his voice somehow tense and brisk all at once.

Harry nodded. "Listen . . . I, um, really think we should talk."

Draco bent down, snapped off a blade of grass, and transfigured it into a snowy white handkerchief complete with a DM monogram stitched in fancy silver thread. As he set to wiping his sweating brow with it, he advised Harry, "You should go in. You aren't dressed for the weather."

Only then did it occur to Harry that it was wicked cold outside. He didn't know how he could have not noticed that, unless it was because he just had too much on his mind to pay attention to extraneous details. "No, I need to talk to you," Harry insisted, though now of course he was
Draco scowled, and fished his wand out of the winter Quidditch robe he was wearing. "Oh, very well. *Accio* Harry's jumper!"

A thick wool one came flying forth from inside, hurtling itself through the meadow to reach them. It was one Mrs. Weasley had knitted, the motif a rather enormous cursive H. It wasn't the sort of thing Harry would have chosen for himself, but given the number of presents he'd ever received, he'd really appreciated the thought.

Still did, even if Draco was looking down his nose at it like he'd rather freeze solid than wear such a thing. Well, maybe he just didn't like the Gryffindor colours, Harry told himself. He hurriedly whipped it on, but ended up still stamping his feet from the cold.

"So, if we need to *talk,*" Draco heavily sighed, "I suppose Severus must have told you." Reaching behind him, Draco grabbed his broom, stood it on its bristles, and leaned his weight on it. The posture itself told Harry how disturbed the other boy must be feeling; nobody who cared about Quidditch treated a high-quality racing broom that way.

"What would Snape tell me?" Harry questioned, his voice lilting.

Draco gave him an incredulous look, but quickly covered it by looking particularly bored. "Hmm, you know, I didn't bring my books along on this little jaunt. I need a break from all the studying. But have you figured out what we're going to do out here day after day in the wilds of . . . Cornwall?" he hazarded a guess.

"We're in Devon," Harry corrected, impressed that Draco was just one county off. Just how well did Draco know England? "What did you think Snape would tell me?"

Instead of answering, Draco pressed his own attack. "You said you had to talk to me. So, talk."

Harry chewed his lower lip. "Actually, I was hoping you weren't too terribly mad at me. I mean, Snape said you left because I was . . . uh, crying so much--" Harry blushed, but soldiered on. "I wondered if there might be more to it?"

Draco made a scoffing noise. "Oh, I knew well enough that Severus would end up giving you the vengeance-is-bad-for-you speech, and frankly, I didn't want to hear it again." Harry must have looked a bit confused, since Draco shook his head and drawled, "Well, really, you don't think Severus was pleased about that little Pansy incident, do you?"

His brow furrowing, Harry averred, "But that was self-defence--"

"More like the heat of the moment," Draco admitted. "I'd already taken care of the snake she set on me. I didn't have to smash her into a wall, or follow it up with-- well, never mind. The point is, Severus lectured me endlessly afterwards, and he had that look again." He shrugged.

"Oh. Well . . ." Harry's throat convulsed as he struggled to find the right words. "Um, what I said about your father . . . that was sort of a heat of the moment thing, too, I think. I mean, it seemed really real at the time, but after talking with Snape?" Harry shrugged too, then, and began rubbing his hands together to warm them.

"That's the thing about the heat of the moment," Draco sighed. "At that moment, you just can't stop yourself. Listen, Harry. It doesn't matter whether or not you want to kill my father. I've been well aware for quite some time that at some point, you might just have to. In battle, or self-defence, or . . ." Shuddering, Draco looked away as his words trickled to a halt.
"How can that not make you mad?" Harry cried out. "He's your father!"

"Well, leaving aside the fact that he'd just love to kill me," Draco quietly said, "I know that if it comes down to that, you're too Gryffindor to really enjoy it."

"I wouldn't count on that," Harry darkly muttered.

"No, you are," Draco stated with confidence. And then, more urgently, "Don't stoop to their level, Harry. You're better than that. And besides, all this slow, lingering death crap... it's really..."

"Horrible?"

Draco's eyes looked like burnished steel in the dying light. "Inefficient," he corrected. "Stupid. Like I said before, you'd be dead ten times over by now if the Dark Lord was more intent on winning than on nursing his grievances. So don't you nurse yours, all right?"

Draco looked a bit as though he might say something else, but he abruptly shook his head instead. "I have to finish unpacking. Why don't you go see what Severus plans for us to do about meals way out here in the middle of nowhere?" His features wrinkled a bit. "I don't suppose there's a house-elf coming to take care of things like that?"

"I wouldn't think so," Harry murmured, starting to walk back alongside Draco. He thought of Kreacher, and all at once knew that Snape had no intention of allowing a house-elf anywhere near this cottage. Too much risk. Of course a Hogwarts house-elf could probably be trusted, and Dobby would certainly never do a thing to harm Harry, but that wouldn't make any difference to Snape. Reasoning as he went, Harry went on, "Snape must have got this place ready all by himself. I mean, stocking it, cleaning it up a bit..."

Draco was looking at him strangely, Harry noticed, and it wasn't merely because Harry ought to realise that with magic, such chores weren't all that arduous. "What makes you think he came here and cleaned?" he asked, a frown furrowing the skin between his eyes.

"This is where he brought me after Samhain," Harry murmured. "He took care of me here until everybody was sure the Death Eaters wouldn't launch a full-out attack on Hogwarts. I can't remember it all, but I have this idea he didn't take much time away from me to straighten up..."

Draco growled something under his breath, and lengthened his stride until he was practically stalking toward the cottage.

The scent of lamb stew hit Harry the moment he opened the rough-hewn cottage door, and he knew at once that the food hadn't been conjured up from nothing. Snape was sitting cross-legged on the hearth rug, leaning slightly toward the fire. In his right hand he held a long-handled wooden spoon, and what was he doing but stirring the cauldron that was floating in mid-air, suspended low over the flames. In his other hand, he held a wand.

Apparantly, Harry mused, Severus Snape knew how to cook. This didn't come as an enormous shock to Harry, since the man had spent his life brewing potions. Compared to them, simmering a stew was a straightforward procedure. Of course, wizard cooking was a bit different from the Muggle kind, mostly because there were so many shortcuts one could take. Just like Mrs. Weasley had made cheese sauce swirl from her wand one time, Snape had all sorts of tricks up his sleeve. It was actually quite fascinating to watch. A few blades of rosemary minced themselves on a chopping block at the table before streaming across the room to deposit themselves in the cauldron. A moment
after that, a single clove of garlic was rising from the broth and vanishing itself away.

Snape evidently knew what he was about. Harry didn't think that the man often cooked while at Hogwarts, but maybe he'd learned because he came here in the summers and didn't bring along an elf to rely on?

That made Harry wonder if he'd be spending the summer here as well.

Assuming, of course, that Snape still considered the cottage safe.

Draco apparently did find it an enormous shock to realise that Snape could cook, and he obviously didn't find it very wizardly. Personally, after Draco's awful gaffe about not liking the house, Harry would have expected the Slytherin boy to be a bit more careful what he said, but he wasn't. He was impossibly rude about everything, just as if he were trying to provoke the man into a full-fledged argument.

Snape had enough forbearance to ignore Draco's scathing commentary, everything from don't you think this is beneath you? to you're really too tall to pull off this elf act.

Snape might have an astonishing amount of patience with it, but Harry didn't. "Cut it out," he finally hissed. "What's your fucking problem?"

"Language, Harry," Snape mildly rebuked, perhaps to prove that he wasn't as deaf, after all.

"Snape there knows what my problem is," Draco snarled.

_Snape?_ Draco never called the man that. Definitely, the Slytherin boy was angry. But at what? He couldn't be that upset that the cottage was a bit rustic, could he? The only other thing Harry could think of was that Draco hadn't appreciated finding the Death Eater clothing, but why blame Snape for that?

Harry waited until Snape had moved slightly away, then said under his breath --not that Snape couldn't hear him; that man heard everything-- "Listen, I'm sure the professor just forgot he'd left his robe and mask here--"

Draco gave him a derisive glance. "Didn't I tell you he's got plans inside plans?"

"What are you going on about?" asked Harry, completely baffled.

"Yes," put in Snape, his dark voice holding some meaning that escaped Harry. "Tell Harry, Draco. Tell him about these plans of mine. You evidently think I left those items for you to find. Tell Harry why I would do such a thing."

"Because you're an unmitigated bastard, that's why!" Draco suddenly screeched, his pale face filling with blood as anger rose up inside him.

"Careful, Draco," Snape sneered, the firelight sculpting his features into something sinister. "We may not be at Hogwarts, but I can certainly still take house points."

"Oh, you do that," Draco sniped right back. "Why not? You're so eager for me to destroy all the progress I've made, you might as well make sure Slytherin keeps hating me, too! Sabotage it all, why don't you?"

Harry stared at them both, two Slytherins facing each other as if about to duel. "Let's just eat," he suggested. "I think the stew's ready. You like lamb, don't you, Draco?"
"I like gigot d'agneau à la provençale," Draco snarled. "Not that tripe Snape's planning to pour down our gullets!"

"Draco!" Harry said with dismay.

"You're perfectly welcome to go hungry," Snape calmly announced, his voice announcing that he'd recovered his equanimity and wouldn't allow himself to be provoked again. "Harry, would you set the table? You'll find what you need in that crate, there." A flick of his wand had the lid flying off the crate in question.

Draco was panting, his fists clenched, looking like he was just itching to hit something. Most likely, Snape. Shuddering at the awful tension in the room, Harry quickly set out bowls and spoons for three. Hopefully, Draco wouldn't take Snape up on that offer to starve.

A few more wand flicks, and Snape had magically transferred portions of stew from the cauldron hung in the fireplace to their individual bowls. Draco sat down with bad grace, but he did sit down. They ate in relative silence around the small, squarish table, their only light a hovering orb that Snape had conjured.

When he'd finished his meal, Snape magically split that orb in two, banishing the new one into the bedroom. Then, from a trouser pocket he fetched a vial holding a thick, brownish-black liquid. "Truthful Dreams," he reminded Harry, pushing it across the table. "I think you'd better have it, as you'll almost certainly revisit Samhain tonight as you sleep."

Harry nodded, grateful that the man had plans inside plans, as Draco had put it. He didn't want to face Samhain without some potion to help him through it, he just didn't.

Draco, however, looked positively horror-struck, which was a sight Harry'd never thought to see. "Truthful Dreams?" the Slytherin boy echoed, dropping his spoon in mid-swallow.

"Oh, yes," Snape drawled, his voice deceptively mild. His eyes told the real story. Black and blazing, they challenged Draco at some primal level. "Harry will dream the truth about Samhain. The full truth, Draco. Every last detail."

Draco stiffened, then answered in a way that was meant to be careless but which came off rather stilted. "Oh, please. Who's to say he'll dream of Samhain at all?"

Snape's smile grew positively predatory. "Harry, tell your house mate just how this particular potion works."

Harry wasn't quite sure what was going on, but definitely, Snape was trying to make some sort of point. Harry just wished he knew what the point was. "Well... it makes me dream about whatever's most on my mind." He couldn't help but groan. "I think it's a safe bet to think that tonight, that'll be Samhain. I'd really rather not go to to sleep at all--"

"What else does it do?" Snape interrupted, leaning forward and staring at Draco.

Harry didn't see the point of all this, but saw even less point in annoying Snape, who was in an admittedly dire mood. "It makes you see things the way they actually happened, including stuff you might not have noticed consciously--"

Without any warning at all, Draco lunged sideways, trying to snatch the potion out of Harry's hand. He ended up knocking him clean out of his chair. The vial slipped from Harry's grasp as he fell.

"Accio Truthful Dreams!" Snape snapped, causing the vial to fly towards him rather than smash
against the stone floor. "Explain yourself!" he snapped at Draco, who had fallen too and was getting to his feet.

"I . . . uh . . . well . . ."

Harry dusted himself off and stood. Had he ever heard Draco be quite so incoherent?

"Explain yourself now," Snape roared.

"Uh . . . I just didn't want Harry to suffer all those horrors again!" Draco blurted, though his tone sounded off, somehow. Like he was worried almost to the point of illness, but whatever his worry was, it wasn't centred on Harry. "You heard him, he'd rather not sleep at all than go back there! I don't know what you think you're doing, brewing him something to make him! Isn't it bad enough he had to go through it once?"

Harry rubbed at the place where it felt like his elbow would bruise. "Uh, well, thanks, I think. I'm pretty much fated to dream Samhain either way, after what happened earlier. Anyway though, I won't feel things quite the same way. The potion's full of, ah . . . Loosestrife, I think it was."

"Peace and protection." Draco actually grimaced, though he surely should have thought it was good news that Snape had included that emotional dampening agent.

"Any other objections to Harry dreaming some Truthful Dreams, tonight?" Snape sneered.

Draco opened his mouth, then shut it without having said a word.

"Anything else you'd like to tell Harry before he goes to bed?"

"No, but there's something I'd like to tell you," Draco grated. "You're a right arsehole, you are, and I won't forgive you, I just won't!"

Snape sighed, the sound long-suffering. "Apologize to Harry and then get yourself out of my sight."

"Sorry I slammed into you," Draco stiffly said, adding in a dark undertone, "Pleasant dreams."

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An explosion of light and sound, walls crashing down on every side.

A guttural snarl, shining black boots raising dust all around as they slammed down right in front of him. At first, all he could see was a wash of brilliant light, the sight of it wavering and uncertain. His shoulder exploded in pain as nails pierced it and hauled him to his feet. He felt one break off in his flesh as he flailed.

He sputtered and coughed, dust choking his lungs, his fingers trying to clench around his wand. Lucius snatched it easily from him and said that the Dark Lord wasn't going to be duelling Harry, not this time . . .

"Draco will be so pleased to see you at Samhain," Malfoy went on, hot breath against his ear making Harry cringe.

"Draco will be so pleased to see you, Draco will be so pleased to see you . . ."

More words from Malfoy, ringing clearly in his ears. They hadn't before, not even the bit about Draco. Harry had been too shocked by the explosion, too worried about Sals. He heard them now, though, threat piled upon threat as Harry's face was smashed into Malfoy's stifling velvet robes, as
the man forcibly Disapparated him.

He was in a stone room . . . and then he was Disapparating again, and Apparating onto bare earth smelling richly of forest loam. He bent over and retched, the taste foul in his mouth, the twisting pain in his belly mocking his efforts to bring something up.

Lucius Malfoy moved aside, booted feet crunching over leaves and stone as he took his place in the circle, standing smotheringly close to a Death Eater somewhat shorter than the others . . .

Harry felt himself yanked to a kneel as Voldemort tried to Legilimize him and failed. Fire, Fire, Fire, Fire in Harry's mind and in his soul. Fire to protect his thoughts, to keep him safe even as the red eyes above him demanded knowledge, demanded everything he was . . .

Voldemort began to mock him then, cruel rasping words about how Harry had lost his magic, and someone in the circle of Death Eaters flinched wildly, a masked face thrown back in shock, shoulders tensing. It was the short one, the one by Lucius. The short one's robes fluttered in the breeze, then wrapped themselves around a slender, youthful form . . .

As Lucius motioned sharply, the younger Death Eater froze . . .

Harry knocked Voldemort's hands away from him and stood on his own two feet, swaying, breathing in the scent of pine needles trampled underfoot. His hands balled into fists as Voldemort ridiculed him anew, he focussed on staying upright despite the thirst roiling through him.

A crunch of pine needles, the scent wafting stronger as Lucius fell to his knees beside him and spoke of torture. Moonlight glinted off Malfoy's white-gold hair as Voldemort pushed back his hood and toyed with the strands and bragged of how he took a sacrifice each Samhain.

"Each Samhain?" Harry mocked Voldemort's words, locking his knees to stay in place, determined not to kneel, not to cower . . . Every word seemed to shred his desiccated vocal cords, but that wasn't going to silence him. "Can't you bloody well count? There's only been one Samhain since you crawled your way out of the ooze and into a body, Tom."

A ripple of sound, of words almost unspoken, coursed around the circle of Death Eaters. Hushed noises blending with the breeze through the trees just beyond the clearing. Noises of disbelief that a boy could speak so to the Dark Lord. Nagini heard it too. She abruptly stopped her slithering and tilted her head to and fro, to and fro, tongue flickering out to taste the ground, and then the black boots of the short Death Eater Lucius had rebuked earlier . . .

The short, masked one lurched back from the circle, almost falling over backwards, the motion was so convulsive. Harry saw him shudder, a bone-deep trembling wracking him from head to toe. Then Lucius' silver eyes were glaring, promising dire retribution, and the short Death Eater steelied himself against the horrid gigantic snake so close, and stepped forward again, joining his fellow Death Eaters in the circle around Harry . . .

Voldemort's smile was feral, his red eyes vicious as he reached out toward Harry's scar and touched it, making fire blaze in Harry's forehead. Harry couldn't stop Voldemort, but when the evil wizard spoke of the scar as a badge of honour, proof that Harry had been touched by the Dark Lord himself, Harry knew no shame to tell the truth.

"It's hideous and disfiguring," he bluntly announced, the words tasting like metal on his tongue.

The short Death Eater made a sound low in his throat, as if he were being garrotted by the air itself, his whole body clenching in a paroxysm of strong emotion.
On the forest floor nearby, where Lucius lay in the after throes of Cruciatius, a threaded hiss of noise brushed against the leaves scattered all around. The blond man barely spoke, his lips moving only in the pale remembrance of a word, the curse having rendered him limp and useless.

But speak, he did.

One word.

A word that ruptured Harry's dream and split his world apart.

A word rife with dismay, with worry, with fear for what would happen now . . .

"Dragon," Lucius barely breathed, the sound all but lost amidst the rush of the wind and the biting exchange of Harry and Voldemort's own conversation.

Dragon . . .

The dream world snapped in two, Harry's mind rejecting the Truthful Dreams Potion in order to ponder what it had seen. His body curling like a shrimp on the narrow bed Draco had transfigured, Harry drew his knees up to touch his chest. Arms came out to clutch his calves, his eyes clenching as the dream spun away from what had actually happened to what it must have meant.

He was standing in the clearing, Death Eaters all around, Lucius collapsed by his side, still pinned by the aftermath of Voldemort's powerful Cruciatius curse. Yet nothing was moving. Nagini lay motionless in mid-slither; Voldemort himself stood with drool dripping down one thin lip, his open mouth caught upon a word.

The world was a frozen tableau. A painting, for Harry to explore.

Better yet, there was no more thirst to plague him, and no more pain. He was in the dream but not of the dream, an outsider this time, an observer, instinct telling him that he could do and say whatever he wished.

Truthful Dreams was but a memory.

Harry stretched out one arm in front of him and used the flat of his palm to push Voldemort. The dark wizard toppled backwards, falling stiffly over like a statue yanked to the ground. Too bad he didn't shatter, Harry thought, as he turned away in contempt.

His gaze lit on a hooded, masked Death Eater, the one he'd thought was Snape. Snape, giving the game away, flinching and stepping back from the circle when Nagini had licked his boots . . . but that was nonsense. Snape had been a spy for years and years; he knew how to mask reaction, mask emotion. Besides, Snape wasn't afraid of snakes. Not at all, he'd said.

It was Draco who hated snakes, Draco who couldn't stand one near him.

Draco, who had called Harry's scar hideous and disfiguring . . .

Dragon . . .

Without even pausing to draw a breath, Harry strode across the clearing to the Death Eater who had caught his eye. Even frozen solid by the force of Harry's dream, the man . . . no, boy . . . was wracked by a horrible convulsive shivering, his eyes through the mask portraits of distress.

Silver eyes, but not hateful like Lucius', not now.
Harry ripped the mask from the face and hurled it to the side, then stared into the face of Draco Malfoy.

Harry curled his body even more tightly into a ball, as two words came crashing through his dream-consciousness.

Paradigm shift.

The whole world changing around him, and changing him with it.

Deep inside his dream, Harry stood and stared into Draco Malfoy’s glittering silver eyes.
When Harry woke up the next morning, he realised that he'd dreamed far more than just Samhain. Once his emotions had recovered from the shock of finding out that Draco had been there, the Truthful Dreams Potion had seemed to regain power over his mind. For the rest of the night, his sleeping thoughts had ranged far and wide, seeking out things Draco had said and done. Patterns . . . ones that Harry should have noticed sooner.

The time early on in the hospital wing when Draco had stopped by, when Harry had thrown things at him . . . _Too bad you missed me_, Draco had said, and then all at once had groaned _Oh, shite. Look, I didn't mean to say that_ . . . At the time the words hadn't made sense, but since dreaming Samhain, Harry could see the connection. He'd said those same words to Voldemort: _too bad you missed me_, when they'd been sparring over the curse that had killed Harry's parents. Draco had obviously realised that he'd repeated Harry's words, and he'd been dismayed . . .

Yes, that made sense, as did other things that had baffled him at the time they'd happened. When Harry had first moved into the dungeons, he'd overheard Snape asking Draco, _Did you tell him?_ And what had Draco replied? _I can't think he'd appreciate it very much. To my way of thinking, you're reminder enough_ . . .

From just a few days after Samhain, Draco had been doing his best to help Harry. From returning his wand . . . to trying to avoid references to Samhain . . . to reading a book written by Muggles, for Muggles. That last was probably the most impressive, considering Draco's long-established views on all things pure-blood.

Draco's sudden conversion to the Light made a _bit_ more sense now, but Harry thought he must still be missing something. Granted, seeing torture carried out was a far cry from just hearing about it second-hand . . . so maybe Voldemort's utter ruthlessness had sickened Draco? Maybe he hadn't liked learning that his own father had such a vicious streak? But that didn't really make the pieces come together, not for Harry. After all, he knew from bitter experience that Draco Malfoy had a vicious streak of his own.

Maybe it had more to do with the way Draco would go on about Voldemort being stupid enough to let Harry get away, over and over? That certainly made sense. Draco wanted to be on the winning side; maybe he'd concluded that Voldemort was just too _inefficient_ to ultimately triumph.

Harry frowned, because the idea that _that_ might be Draco's motive for everything tended to rather taint the friendship they'd developed. How far could he trust the boy if it all boiled down to the simple fact that he thought Harry was a better bet than Voldemort? If that was the case, then how could Harry know that Draco wouldn't change sides again, the moment some other dark wizard looked like a better bet, still?

Harry sighed, and then went motionless, wondering if he'd alerted the Slytherin boy to the fact that he was awake. When he cracked his eyes to check, though, he realised he was alone in the room.

Sitting up, Harry took a few moments to decide how best to handle the entire situation. Definitely, he had to talk to Draco about Samhain. If anything was certain, however, it was that Harry didn't want to hassle all this out in front of Snape.

Thinking of Snape, though, brought a whole other question to Harry's mind. Why hadn't the man told Harry the truth ages and ages ago? _There are some things I want Draco to tell you for himself_, the Potions Master had once said. Harry supposed he could understand that . . . but when it had
become clear that Draco just wouldn't own up to his presence on Samhain, why hadn't Snape spoken up then?

Draco and Snape were already eating breakfast by the time Harry had washed up and got dressed. The smooth scent of warm, buttered porridge wafted from the table, reminding Harry of his time here after Samhain. The memory had a calming effect on Harry.

Draco, in contrast, was anything but calm. He was scowling into his porridge, his forehead wrinkled, his normally shining hair lank and dull as he sat there slouched. At the Gryffindor boy's entrance, he glanced up, a quick panic darting into his eyes, but this was almost immediately masked by the familiar superior, bored look he adopted just before he looked back down at his meal.

Snape trained his gaze on Harry, the intensity in his dark eyes reminding the boy a bit of Legilimency, though he didn't feel any tell-tale pressure on his thoughts.

"Morning," Harry casually greeted them both, pulling out his chair and dropping into it. He wasn't quite sure what else to say. He didn't like the feeling that the two Slytherins had been sharing a secret about Samhain the whole time they'd been rooming together down in the dungeons. It would serve Snape right, Harry decided, to have a taste of his own potion. Yeah, let him wonder what's really going on with me, Harry thought to himself. Do him some good to see what it feels like to be kept in the dark.

"Seems like a nice day out." Harry smiled at them both, trotting out the words as though he hadn't a care in the world.

He saw Snape and Draco exchanging a puzzled glance. Harry wondered what they had expected from him. Tears? Shouts of recrimination? It was rather amusing, he decided, to watch the Potions Master taken out of stride for once.

With that thought in mind, Harry applied himself to eating his porridge.

For a moment, Snape didn't seem to know how to react, but he didn't remain flummoxed for long. "How did you sleep?" he inquired after Harry had taken about six bites.

"Oh, all right," Harry returned, deadpan. He made a little show of stretching a bit, and glanced at Draco, who was barely breathing by then. Since it wasn't his goal to torment the Slytherin boy, Harry lifted his lips in a bit of a smile. "I've got a crick in my back, though. Think you could transfigure the mattress to be a little harder? Like the one you did for me before. That one was perfect."

Draco slowly nodded, but his silver eyes remained wary. Harry mentally shrugged, figuring there was only so much he could do to put the other boy at ease.

"Did you dream of Samhain, Harry?" Snape took a more direct tack.

Harry thought briefly of lying, then decided it would be pretty stupid, considering that Snape would know everything before the day was out. So perhaps casual unconcern was the correct tack to take. "Among other things," he answered, reaching for his juice. Orange juice. That was nice. Actually, it made him feel a bit less like watching Snape twist in the wind.

Just a bit, though.

"And?" Snape prompted, his voice beginning to sound impatient.
"And what?"

"Harry," Snape chided, tired of the game.

Harry decided it would be hard to manage the conversation unless he threw Snape something to keep
that keen mind occupied. "I did find out one really interesting thing," the boy admitted, belatedly
realizing that words like that were almost guaranteed to panic Draco. "About the potion," he rushed
to add. "It didn't exactly work right."

Reaching out, Harry took another swig of orange juice. A long swig. After that, he carefully wiped
his mouth with his napkin, though normally he wasn't so fastidious about his table manners. He was
just stalling for time as he figured out how much he wanted to admit.

"I surmise the difficulty wasn't with the Loosestrife," Snape fished.

Harry gave a slight smile. "No, that worked perfectly well. I feel really relaxed. Have you ever
thought of marketing some of your inventions, Professor?"

He should have known that Snape was hardly a man to let flattery distract him from his objective. "In
what respect did the potion fail, Harry?" he asked, his voice a tad acerbic.

"Oh, I wouldn't say it failed," Harry explained. "Could you pass the salt?"

Snape did, shoving it into Harry's hand with a little more force than was warranted. Deciding that
he'd made the man wait long enough, the boy went on, "I was dreaming Samhain for a bit, but then it
seemed like I somehow broke free from the truthtelling part of the potion. Things began to happen
that I know perfectly well never occurred in real life." Harry couldn't help but notice that at that little
tidbit, a sly smile curled Draco's lips. Ignoring that for the present, Harry detailed, "For example, the
whole dream sort of froze solid . . . I walked over to Voldemort and shoved him straight onto his
back."

Snape leaned forward. "Did it seem as though you were able to wander at will through a scene
reminiscent of ah . . . a Muggle photograph?"

"Muggle photograph?" Draco questioned.

"They don't move," Harry informed him.

Draco made a face. "How perfectly bizarre."

"It's not," Harry laughed, thinking it was good that Draco seemed to be unwinding a bit. Maybe if
Harry could keep him that way, he'd be less guarded when they got around to having the big talk.
"Anyway, Professor, I was the only one who could move, so yes, it was like walking through a
Muggle photograph."

Leaning back again, Snape crossed his arms and regarded Harry through hooded eyes. "I'm familiar
with the phenomenon. What do you think precipitated it?"

Uh-oh, dangerous ground. "Uh, I don't know," Harry hedged. "It just sort of . . . ah, happened."

"I seriously doubt that."

Harry gave Snape a look that said to leave it alone. Much good that it did him.

"I've walked through Truthful Dreams too," Snape informed him, one eyebrow raised. "In all such
cases I had seen something unexpected, something profoundly shocking."

Laughing low in his throat, Harry brushed off the pointed hint. "Hmm. Well, Samhain was nothing but one big shock from start to finish, wasn't it . . . so . . . that must be it, then. Thanks, sir."

Snape narrowed his eyes as though he had a good bit more to say on the topic. Thinking quickly, Harry turned to Draco. "I didn't bring my Firebolt along, but yesterday when I saw you on your Nimbus 2001, I started wondering if a broom might work for me. You know, like how I can use the Floo now? Would let me try out your broom?"

Draco shook his head, which Harry thought was pretty petty, until the other boy admitted, "I'd be concerned your magic might fail in mid-flight, Harry." He pushed away his bowl. "You could plummet to your death."

Since all Harry really wanted was to get Draco out of range of Snape's phenomenal hearing, he conceded. "Fine. We'll save the flying for later, but you owe me for the disappointment. You're coming with me out into the meadow to look for plants we can identify."

Draco actually snorted. "Still trying to cheat on your latest well-wish?"

"Well, I am half-Slytherin," Harry reminded him, sort of liking the phrase. It gave him an easy excuse for any number of things, didn't it? Not that he needed an excuse this time. "Besides, it's not cheating. We're just going on a little nature stroll. Can I help it if the wilds of Devon happen to share some similarities with a certain bouquet I recently received?"

"You're incorrigible," was Snape's wry opinion on the matter. "And somewhat lacking in critical thinking capacity. It's December, in case you hadn't noticed, and the meadow outside isn't a charmed Hogwarts greenhouse. You're not likely to find anything of use."

At that, Draco openly smirked.

"Well, come on a walk with me anyway," Harry crossly erupted. Just how hard was it going to be to get Draco alone? This was getting ridiculous. It didn't help that by the end there, Snape was regarding him with what could only be called a knowing look, as if all Harry's subterfuges were pretty transparent. "I need some fresh air."

"Only if you wear something a bit more substantial than that horrid jumper you had on last night."

"That jumper was a present, and a right good one," Harry defended Molly Weasley. "But it wasn't as warm as I would have liked, so all right." He headed to the bedroom to fetch his warmest cloak, adding gloves and a scarf as well.

After all, he'd probably be talking to Draco for a good, long while.

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After they'd walked to the far edge of the substantial property, they began to follow the boundary line marked by an uneven stone wall no taller than their waists. Now that he had no more reason to put off this discussion, Harry realised he felt completely awkward. How did you open a conversation like the one they had to have?

Maybe, Harry thought, the best way to begin would be to simply tell the truth.

"I didn't feel like talking to Snape about my Samhain dream," Harry admitted, leaning against the wall. "But I do want to discuss it with you."
Draco’s shoulders tensed. "I can't imagine why."

"I think you can."

Draco planted his feet, his whole body taking on a defensive stance. "I thought you didn't like it when I speculated on trauma recovery and your psychological needs and all that."

"I don't. That wasn't what I meant."

Draco pulled his cloak more tightly about him and shoved his hands more firmly into the pockets. "Anyway, you're fine now, right? Thanks to Severus, you don't even have any scars. So there's no need to talk about the matter."

"I think there is," Harry insisted. He waited for Draco to look at him, but the other boy seemed resolved to study the horizon instead. Well, fine. Harry'd had enough of circling the issue. "I know, Draco," he said. "I know you were there on Samhain."

Draco's skin went ashen, his expression looking as though he'd just been punched in the gut. Even his lips seemed to whiten. He rallied quickly enough though, protesting, "That's just bloody ridiculous, it is. You're not going to believe what you saw in a nightmare, are you?"

"Truthful Dream," Harry corrected.

"But you said yourself you broke free of the potion," Draco smoothly countered. His colour was coming back now, so Harry supposed the boy felt himself on firmer ground.

"Remember how the professor said that something horribly surprising could cause that to happen?" Harry raised an eyebrow in unmistakable challenge. "What do you suppose I saw that shocked me so very much?"

"How should I know?" Draco coldly snapped back, his voice beginning to waver. "Unlike you, I'm not given to spouting off bizarre predictions."

Since Harry hadn't ever shared his seer dreams with Draco, that charge was spurious at best. Recognizing the red herring, Harry ignored the insult completely. "I saw you there, Draco. You reacted when I echoed your comments about my scar. You panicked when Nagini licked your boots. You--"

uuot;I'm not listening to this, Potter! I'm going back in!"

Grabbing Draco's arm when the boy would have begun to stalk back toward the distant cottage, Harry insisted, "That's why you tried to grab the potion away from me last night. You didn't want me to know you were there with your father on Samhain!"

"Let go of me, Potter," Draco drawled in a low, dangerous voice, the muscles in his forearm tensing until they felt like braided steel.

Harry held on more tightly, determined to have this out, once and for all.

"Look, I wasn't there!" Draco suddenly yelled, yanking his arm away so forcefully that he fell over backwards into the stiff winter grass. "I wasn't! I don't care what you think you dreamed, I just wasn't! How can you think that of me?"

Harry stared down at him, seeing fear in those silver eyes. Or really, terror. Draco wasn't just scared of being found out a liar, or frightened that Harry might reject him.
It was as Snape had said: the boy was literally afraid for his life.

When Harry thought about that, it made sense. If he were to denounce Draco and regard him with distrust and suspicion, the Order would follow suit . . . and with Lucius out for his blood, Draco needed all the help he could get.

Reaching down, Harry extended a hand to help Draco up.

The Slytherin boy must have thought their dispute was over, for he took Harry's hand without hesitation and let himself be helped. Harry held firm to that hand even after Draco had gained his feet. "You were there," he said again, doing his best not to let the simple statement emerge as an accusation.

He might as well not have bothered. "I wasn't!" Draco shouted, clearly defensive.

"Then how do I know your father calls you Dragon?"

When Draco started to protest even that, Harry squeezed the boy's fingers hard to make him stop. "Enough with the lies, Draco. I saw the truth. I know! Are you trying to make me angry?"

Draco went frighteningly still. "Angrier, you mean."

"Is that why you never told me?"

Giving up on the pretence, Draco simply groaned, his gaze seeking the ground.

At that, Harry let his hand go. "You should have explained."

"What good would that have done? You didn't trust me as it was."

"And after I did?"

"Well, I couldn't tell you then, could I?" Draco cried, flinging his hands upward, his grey eyes turbulent. "I didn't want things to go back to the awful way they'd been before!"

Harry sighed. "But Draco, the reason things were that way was because I couldn't trust you, not when your sudden conversion to the Light just didn't make any sense."

Draco's brow furrowed. "And now it does?"

"No, not really," Harry admitted. "But I think now that maybe it can. Why don't you explain? The whole truth, this time."

"I was at that meeting to take the Dark Mark," Draco murmured, a low flush creeping up to stain his face. Shame? Harry wasn't sure.

"Did you know I was going to be . . . er, sacrificed?"

Draco nodded. "My father told me. I wasn't supposed to take the Mark until I was a little older, but my father liked the symmetry of me joining the Dark Lord on the night he finally did away with you. One era displacing another, something like that. Anyway, I--"

Looking away, Draco swallowed back whatever he'd been going to say.

"The whole truth," Harry reminded him.
Another nod, that one stark with determination. "All right. You have to understand, back then all I really knew about you was that you were this snotty little whelp who kept messing up the Dark Lord's grand plans, not to mention constantly showing me up at school. I figured you deserved what you got, and I was looking forward to seeing you get it."

_No lack of honesty there_, Harry thought. He smiled a little bit as though to reassure the other boy that he knew things between them had been different. "So what changed your mind?"

"This is going to take a while," Draco informed him. "And like you said yesterday, it's wicked cold. Why don't we do something about that?" With that, he was transfiguring his cloak into a thick, soft duvet for them to sit on.

"Why not just _Accio_ a blanket?"

"Snape might get curious and follow it out."

Harry nodded in agreement, though it seemed to him that without a cloak, Draco was going to get awfully cold. He should have known that the Slytherin boy had a plan for that. "Draw your wand," Draco went on. "Delimit an area for us and then cast a weather charm."

_If I can_, Harry thought, then chided himself for being _so defeatist_, as Draco would put it. He'd controlled and channelled his so-called wild magic just the day before, though that had been more instinct than intent. All the same, maybe he could access some sort of power through his wand now . . .

Or maybe, he couldn't. Harry repressed a sigh, and tried not to get too discouraged.

Draco pursed his lips, either in sympathy or impatience--Harry couldn't tell--and performed the charm himself.

Sitting down on the blanket, Harry shrugged off his own cloak and basked in the warm air that now surrounded him. "Nice," he complimented the other boy.

Draco gave him a look that seemed to say, _Of course. I am a wizard_ . . .

"Now, you were telling me how much you were looking forward to seeing me tortured and killed," Harry reminded the other boy, seeing no reason to sugar-coat the truth. "What changed your mind?"

"_You_ did," Draco said, dropping down to the blanket himself and gazing morosely past the shimmering curtain of magic that surrounded them. "I thought it would be so glamorous, you know? The hero of wizardry brought low. But that's just it: you _weren't_ brought low, and no matter what the Dark Lord did, he couldn't _bring_ you low. He simply didn't have the power." The Slytherin boy turned to look into the green eyes steadily assessing him. "You were so fucking brave it was ridiculous. You stood there and called him _Tom_ to his face. You stood up to him. Sweet Merlin, you had the guts to tell him to fuck off!"

Harry mulled that over for a bit. "I'm surprised you don't just sneer _Gryffindor_ about that. I mean, why would it impress you? It probably just means I'm brave to the point of idiocy."

Draco abruptly covered his eyes and bowed his head, his whole body shaking. _Was he crying?_ Harry couldn't be sure, not until the boy spoke. "Because my father was there beside you, Harry, but _he_ was on his knees!" Draco sucked in a harsh breath. "It was awful! He was _grovelling_, calling that _arsehole_ my Lord, acting just as though he were some kind of slave! And there _you_ were, right alongside, steadfastly refusing to degrade yourself! The pair of you . . . I knew what I was seeing, Harry. It was impossible to miss! Weakness and strength . . . and since _you_ were the strong one, I
knew then and there that I'd been on the wrong side, all along." Draco's other hand came up to rub his eyes.

Harry wished he could transfigure something into a handkerchief, since Draco at that moment didn't seem coherent enough to realise he needed one. The best Harry could do was reach out and pat the other boy's knee.

Draco flinched away, and raised a tear-streaked face. Then, as if realizing just how much he was revealing, he muttered a spell to dry the tears away. It didn't disguise the redness in his eyes, though.

"So . . . you changed sides to fight against your father because you were ashamed of him?" Harry hazarded, but not to rub it in. He was just trying to understand.

"No! Well, maybe partly, I guess," Draco immediately revised his instinctive denial. "But that wasn't the main thing, Harry. I swear it wasn't. I know you think I'm shallow, but even I'm not as petty as all that."

Harry folded his cloak across his bent legs, but not for warmth. It was more that his hands had begun aching again, and he thought the feel of the brushed wool might soothe them. "There's more to you than I used to realise," he slowly said. "Or maybe, there's more to you than there used to be. But you're not in Lucius' shadow now, Draco. So what was the main thing that made you change sides?"

"You didn't even have any magic," Draco stressed, waving his hands randomly as though it was hard for him to find the words he needed. "Or not any that you knew of, at any rate. You didn't have a single hope of getting out of there alive. I know now that you were counting on Severus to do something, but that must have looked pretty unlikely at the time. You were helpless, but still strong enough not to bend one inch. And then there was my father, abasing himself, practically begging to lick that arsehole's boots, and getting Cruciatu for his troubles! I could hardly believe my eyes, Harry. It was like the world had been turned completely upside down! I mean, I'd been taught all my life that pure-bloods were superior in every way. But I could hardly miss the contrast, could I? You were superior to Lucius Malfoy. A boy with a Muggleborn mother! But even reduced to a squib, you were the only one there with pride and courage! All the Death Eaters had was submission and fear. I . . . I swear, Harry, I think I blacked out for a second. And then I looked again, and it was still true, and I remember thinking, Oh, shite. I can't possibly take the Dark Mark after this . . . crap, it was like I went there living one life and came out of it living another!"

"Paradigm shift," Harry murmured.

Draco didn't need the phrase explained. "Yes. Epiphany, exactly. And Severus was part of it. Because . . ." Draco closed his eyes on a rush of pain. "I'd always admired him, always, Harry. I thought following the Dark Lord had to be the right thing to do if someone as brave and strong and intelligent as Severus Snape had made that choice. But on Samhain I watched him get on his knees, too, and I thought I'd sick up. What he was in that clearing . . . that wasn't the man I thought I'd known."

"You never wondered if he might be playing a part?"

"No, not once. Which meant that when he portkeyed you out, I thought my heart would stop from the shock of it all. There I'd been so bitterly disappointed in him, wondering how he could possibly welcome the utter slavery the Dark Lord insisted on, wondering how he couldn't see that you were the only strong one in that clearing. But it was all an act." Draco's shoulders collapsed as he gave a heavy sigh.

"That's actually a good thing," Harry dryly pointed out.
Draco nodded, but didn't smile. "I know, and I wouldn't wish it otherwise, believe me. For all that, though, one part of it all bothers me." The boy raised distressed eyes, the grey reminiscent of storm clouds about to burst. "Severus was watching me follow a path he knew to be a colossal mistake, and he didn't do anything to stop me. Not one single thing."

Lacing his fingers together in an effort to stretch away the ache, Harry sighed too. "Be reasonable. What could he have done that wouldn't have placed his life in danger?"

"Yet he risked his life to save you," Draco quietly pointed out. He said it without resentment of Harry, but not without pain.

Harry thought about that. "Yes, but when he did, he didn't have to worry about me turning on him, Draco. I mean, he could trust me to protect him too, right? I'm not trying to hurt you, but you can't hide from the truth. You weren't trustworthy back then. Snape couldn't risk trying to help you when you might have run straight to your father with the news that a certain Hogwarts teacher wasn't so loyal, after all."

"I know," Draco admitted, but he hardly looked mollified.

"He does care about you," Harry insisted. "He even told me so. I care about you both, he said."

Draco twisted a lip. "Not equally. Not even close. He cares about me; I'll give him that. But you're the one he loves."

Loves? Harry couldn't help but flinch a bit. He caught himself doing it, and wondered why the word bothered him. Unable . . . or maybe unwilling . . . to complete that thought, he heard himself arguing, "He wouldn't have offered to adopt me except for the fact that we needed it for the warding. You know that!"

"The warding was nothing to do with how he felt, that's what I know," Draco retorted. "All it did was give him an opportunity he wouldn't otherwise have had. In fact, it made you get past your fear of attachments. Well, far enough to agree, at least. Personally, I think you still have some . . . issues accepting Severus as your father."

That was so accurate that Harry almost gaped. Maybe Draco really had learned something useful from that Muggle psychology book. Not liking the feeling that he was so transparent, Harry abruptly changed the subject. "I've often wondered what the reaction was among the Death Eaters when Snape and I vanished like that."

Draco still looked a bit glum as he detailed, "After you released all that wild magic, it was pandemonium. Voldemort had been flung flat on his back. I remember him screaming . . . screeching, really. My father was nearby, almost unconscious from the force of your magic striking him."

"What did you do, in those first few minutes after I'd gone?"

The other boy gulped. "I was ashamed of my father, all right? But I still wanted to know if he was all right. I crawled over to him, but when I got close, I saw his arm, Harry. The way he'd landed, the sleeve of his robe had fallen away from it. And there it was, his mark. It had always looked so . . . exciting to me before. Something to bear proudly. But then . . . I saw it for what it really was. Dark, ugly, burned black. A mark to make a Malfoy into a slave! I didn't want it any more, but I knew I wasn't going to have a choice! If I said no, my father would do worse to me than I'd just seen him do to you, and if after that I still resisted, he'd kill me without the slightest hesitation!"
Noticing that the other boy's fists were clenching, Harry softly reminded him, "But that won't happen now, Draco. Snape and I will keep you safe."

"Right." The word sounded thick, and Harry couldn't tell if it was with doubt or gratitude. "Anyway, when I could rip my gaze away from that awful mark, that was when I saw your wand sticking half out of his pocket. I couldn't have been more surprised than if the Dark Lord had welcomed you into the fold! That is, my father had mentioned your wand to me, but I'd assumed he'd already handed it over. I don't know if he was supposed to do it when he first presented you, and you distracted everyone with your open defiance --Merlin's balls, calling him Tom to his face!-- or if the plan was to give up your wand as some sort of ceremony after you were burned, but the fact was, my father still had it. I slid it out, smooth as I could, but my father felt it move. He tried to reach out and strangle me, but I scrambled away. Thank Merlin, he was too weak to try to follow. When I looked back I saw that he'd fainted, actually."

"When did it strike you," Harry wryly put in, "that with my wand, your whole story would sound a bit more believable?"

Draco's lips tightened. "The moment I saw it. But beyond that, Harry, I knew you needed that wand. Besides . . ." He sighed. "When I realised that you were strength and Voldemort was weakness, it was a foregone conclusion who was going to win this war. I wanted to be a part of that, instead of getting bound for life to servitude and defeat."

Harry stretched out his legs and laid his cloak to the side. His hands still hurt, but he tried to ignore that in favour of reaching some sort of understanding with Draco. "But that's what worries me," he admitted. "This obsession you have about being on the winning side. If you're with me only because you think I'll win, you might run back to Voldemort the moment it looks like he's gained the upper hand."

"He's revolting!"

Harry wasn't about to let it go at that. "Yeah, but that's not proof of much. You didn't use to like me any too well, either. Yet here you are, on my side."

Draco leaned his chin on a curled fist as he pondered that. "This time, Harry, my loyalties don't depend on who I like and who I hate. My decision's based on truth. The Dark Lord makes his followers weak, simple as that. I'd have seen it earlier if I'd ever been allowed to attend a meeting. And you . . . you Gryffindor . . ." Draco coughed to cover a slight chuckle. "You have so much pride and strength that you don't need to leach it out of others. I'm better off on your side, Harry, and I know it. That's never going to change."

A memory glimmered in Harry's mind, something Snape had said about Draco . . . He went about the Slytherin dormitories, banging his way into every room, announcing that the Dark Lord was weak and made his followers weak . . .

Suddenly, Harry wanted the rest of the story out of the way. "So what happened after you got my wand for me?"

"I . . . uh, tried to Apparate to the road outside of Hogsmeade," Draco muttered, clenching his teeth, another wave of colour washing into his pale cheeks.

"Tried?" Harry questioned.

"Look, I was pretty weak from being blasted, and not really able to concentrate," Draco defended himself, speaking quickly. "I do know how, all right? But that night . . . I, er, splinched myself
getting away. Lost a hand. Thankfully, not the one clutching your wand, but still . . ." He shivered slightly. "Not an experience I recommend. Anyway, I made my way back to Hogwarts on foot, and threw myself on the headmaster's mercy. Of course, I had to stand there half the night before he arrived, and then, of course, he would have Aurors with him."

"They'd been trying to break through Voldemort's anti-Apparition spells so they could get me out."

"Yeah, but they wouldn't tell me anything," Draco complained. "Not that I can really blame them, considering who I am and how many years I'd spent sort of flaunting my anti-Harry Potter attitude--"

"Sort of flaunting?" Harry mocked.

"All right, spewing it," Draco corrected, waving a hand as though to say that was ancient history as far as he was concerned. "The point is, I was frantic! The last I'd seen, you were dripping blood from about a thousand places and blind as well, and that's not even counting what the fire at your feet might have done. I just wanted to know that you were alive somewhere, but Dumbledore wouldn't tell me a thing. He took your wand, and then watched as the Aurors questioned me up one side and down the other. Hours and hours of it, and all the time me sitting there missing a hand! A couple of times he left me alone with the Aurors . . . and they got a tad rough--"

"How rough?"

Draco's expression turned bitter. "Let's just say there's a reason why Severus doesn't like Aurors any too well. Some of them aren't exactly shining examples of the Light, especially when they're questioning known or suspected Death Eaters." He shook his head at the look on Harry's face. "Don't panic. They backed off when the headmaster returned, and besides, it wasn't anything compared to what the Dark Lord did to you. It didn't even compare to the wizard's beatings my father would dole out to me."

Wizard's beatings? Harry didn't like the sound of that, but figured he could ask Snape about it later. "You weren't arrested?"

"I hadn't done anything to be arrested for, though the Aurors seemed to think just attending a meeting ought to do it," Draco grimaced. "Dumbledore kept reminding them that I'd handed in your wand, which was strongly to my credit, though I know perfectly well that at the time, he still had his doubts about me. At any rate, about noon the next day Dumbledore finally told them to charge me or leave, so they left." Just thinking about the Aurors made Draco look a bit as though he'd just finished sucking on a lemon.

Harry couldn't help but ask the question that sprang immediately to mind. "Why were you saying just a few days later that you wanted to be an Auror?"

Draco shrugged. "It's the best chance I'll have, isn't it? The Death Eaters want me dead. I'd rather be on the offensive than work a normal job wondering when they're going to show up to attack me. Or you, or Severus."

Harry supposed that made sense. "So the Aurors left," he prompted, phrasing it a bit like a question.

"Right. Dumbledore told me that Hogwarts could protect me from my father, but only if I did everything he asked. I had to stay confined in this little room beneath his office, and if I set one foot outside it, woe betide me. Those were his exact words. He got my hand back for me, though, just after I started my little self-imposed incarceration, so it wasn't as bad as it could have been. Madam Pomfrey came along and reattached it. And then I had nothing to do but sit there wondering if you'd survived. Dumbledore still wouldn't tell me a thing."
With a wave of his wand, the Slytherin boy conjured a glass of water, then quaffed the whole thing without taking a breath. "After a few days, Severus and the headmaster showed up to announce that I could stay at Hogwarts if I let them verify my story using truth serum. Technically illegal, but . . ." Draco shrugged as though to say it was just as well Snape could make his own and dispense it as needed. "After I answered all their questions, Severus told me you'd lived, but that for the moment, you were still blind. When he gave me back your wand and said I should be the one to return it to you, I was pretty well horrified."

Harry's eyebrows drew together. "You were afraid to see me that way?"

"Not that. It was the wand, Harry. Proof positive I'd been in that clearing on Samhain!" Draco exclaimed. "I might as well have just announced, Say, Potter, I'm so trustworthy that I was this close to taking the Dark Mark." He blew his breath out through his nostrils. "I could hardly believe it when you didn't put it all together. How did you think I'd got your wand?"

"I guess I just figured you'd gone home for the weekend and nicked it from your father's study," Harry murmured. "Either that, or he'd visited you here. I didn't know he had it with him on Samhain."

Draco nodded, his eyes like storm clouds. "About Samhain, Harry. I feel ill that I couldn't do anything to help you."

"Not even Snape could help me until that Portkey woke up, Draco," Harry assured the other boy. "I have to say, though . . . it's not a shining character reference that you went to that meeting expecting to enjoy seeing me suffer."

"But I didn't enjoy it," Draco objected, as if that made up for everything. "And I wouldn't have expected to if I'd known how gross and awful it was going to be."

"Got it," Harry returned, his voice level.

"You're going to hold it against me, I can tell," Draco sighed. "Not the fact that I was there, but that I went there with such a vicious attitude."

"I don't know if hold it against you is the right way to put it." Harry pursed his lips. "I don't like it, and you can hardly expect me to, but I'm trying to be mature enough to look more at what's happened since." Closing his eyes, Harry did his best to recreate all that. It was more difficult than he would have thought. Even with Truthful Dreams to help him, the memory of Samhain was just so potent . . . and just two months ago, Draco had wanted him to suffer that way. How could they possibly move past that?

But Draco did put himself at risk to steal your wand, his conscience reminded him. And ever since, he's been trying to help and protect you as best he can. He figured out the reciprocal magic so that Dudley could safely come to Hogwarts to ward you. He tutored you in every subject and spent hours and hours trying to get your magic working, and in his free time, wrote endless letters to students in Slytherin, all in aid of you. He saved your life when Darswaithe would have delivered you back to Lucius.

And as if all that wasn't enough, he pushed down his own jealousy and sense of rejection when it came to the whole adoption thing. He could have told the casewitch something to stop her from signing on, but instead he went along with what you needed even when it was something actually hurtful to him . . .

"Harry?" Draco prompted.
Harry tilted his head a little as he opened his eyes to look at Draco. It seemed so strange, looking at him now. They'd been enemies for so many years. And now . . . they weren't exactly friends, but they were house mates, as Snape had said. And whatever the past, Draco had proven himself worthy of trust.

"I understand about Samhain," Harry finally answered. "You were fifteen and an idiot."

"I'm sixteen, just like you," Draco stressed.

"It's a saying, all right? It means . . . Your behaviour was disgraceful and you really should have known better, but you needed to grow up more before you could."

Draco nodded but his silver eyes remained uncertain. When Harry tried to look more fully into them, the Slytherin boy actually shied away. "What?" Harry pressed. "Come on. You can't start holding back now, not when we're finally getting the air cleared! Draco?"

"It's nothing," the Slytherin boy muttered, looking away as his cheeks burned with embarrassment. "Worse, it's completely stupid."

"I don't care," Harry stressed. "After everything else we've discussed, how bad could it be?"

"It's not bad, it's just . . . kind of personal."

"What?" Harry pressed, but Draco pressed his lips together and gave a small shake of his head. Determined to make the other boy open up, Harry tossed out the most outrageous suggestion he could dream up on the spur of the moment. "You secretly love Hermione?"

For an instant, Draco looked a bit as though he'd just swallowed his own tongue. "Perish the thought," he drawled, that familiar aristocratic light creeping back into his eyes. "Credit me with a little taste."

Harry narrowed his eyes. Just as well he'd mentioned Hermione, since Draco's obsession over pure blood was another thing that needed clearing up. "There is nothing wrong with Muggleborns, Draco. You can't think you're on my side if you're still going to believe Voldemort's bigoted propaganda. My mother was a Muggleborn."

"Yes, yes, and some of your best friends are Muggleborns. Literally." Draco paused, clearly thinking. "Look, I may not have it all figured out, but I'd be pretty stupid if it hadn't dawned on me that supporting you means I can't believe blood to be everything. You're the vanguard and you're only a half-blood yourself!"

"The fact that you even notice things like that is what bothers me," Harry retorted.

Draco squared his shoulders. "I can't help categorizing wizards. It's something I learned to do as a child, same as you learned to chew your own lip when you're feeling worried."

Harry's voice was dry. "It's hardly the same sort of thing."

"No," Draco admitted. "But just answer me this. Have I said one word against Muggleborns since I gave you your wand?"

"You sure have! You called Hermione a cow!"

"Not because of her parentage! That was because she was being one, bleating all over the place about how Hermione-knows-best!"
"It's sheep who bleat."

"Well, forgive me for not being a farmer!" Draco shouted.

The wisecrack somehow broke the tension. Harry felt his lips quirking into a grin, and it only got worse when a nervous laugh bubbled up Draco's throat. "What do you still need to tell me?" Harry pressed a moment later. "Whatever it is, Draco, it'll be all right. I promise."

"It's stupid like I said," Draco muttered. "But it's been on my mind some, and it's one more reason I just couldn't stand the thought that you might figure out Samhain on your own. Of course, I didn't know Severus was going to sneak the truth in by means of his dratted potion, did I--"

"Draco, just tell me!"

Inexplicably, the other boy blushed a deep crimson. "Er . . . well, it's just that since I was there on Samhain, you know . . . I, er . . . " his voice dropped to a whisper. "Saw you naked."

"So?"

"So, I thought you might be embarrassed. Just so you know, I tried not to look, all right? I certainly didn't want to see . . . er, that. No offence."

"Oh, none taken," Harry murmured, raising a hand to his mouth in a vain effort to quell his humour. He finally had to bite the side of a finger before he could get control of himself. It really hurt; his hands were still sore from the not-so-wild-magic he had performed. "Draco, be serious. By the time the Death Eaters stripped my clothes off, I had needles sticking out of me all over at bizarre angles. I had much bigger problems on my mind than who might see what!"

To Draco's credit, he didn't even smirk. "Right," he agreed. "I halfway knew that, but . . . well, sometimes people can get awfully strange about things like that. And with you Muggle-raised, I honestly didn't know how you might react. Are we . . . " He fortified himself with a breath. "Can you still stand me, then? Even with what you know about Samhain?"

"What have I been saying for the last little bit?" Harry couldn't help but ask. "Of course I can. I'd have trusted you a lot sooner if I'd known all this. I kept thinking you seemed so changed, but that it must be an act because nothing you'd told me could explain what had changed you."

Draco made a face. "Severus said that was the problem. In fact he said, and I quote, I know Harry Potter quite well these days, and I do assure you, Draco, he is not so mean-spirited as to resent you for past errors in judgment which you have since rectified." Harry couldn't help but smile at that. It felt nice to know that Snape had had such faith in him. He was really glad he hadn't disappointed the man this time.

Draco acknowledged Harry's smile with a slight one of his own. "Anyway, he kept urging me to tell you the truth. But I couldn't. I was so sure it would ruin everything. I guess . . . he knew you a lot better than I did."

"You owe him a big apology," Harry sternly told the Slytherin boy. "Personally, I think after the way you acted last night, you should have to cook the three of us some . . . uh, gigot d'agneau à la provisoir."

"À la provençale," Draco dryly corrected. "The other sounds like leg of lamb cooked temporary-style. I don't want to know how that would come out."

"Some of us didn't learn French in the cradle."
"Obviously. And some of us didn't learn to cook, full stop. I believe I told you wizards had much better things to do?"

"Not out here, we don't," Harry argued. "Why should Snape have to do all the work? I say you and I should cook him Christmas dinner. Wouldn't that be nice?"

Draco slanted him a glance that clearly announced that no, nice wasn't a word that even remotely applied. "Christmas will be a great deal more enjoyable if the meal is edible," he lightly scathed.

"Oh ye of little faith," Harry murmured, and when Draco looked confused, added, "Muggle saying. I . . . hmm, not sure if I should mention this, but I think I'll go out on a limb. I want you to apologize to Hermione, too. For the cow comment."

"Sure, I'll just tell her it was really sheep I meant."

Harry glared. "No."

"I'll apologize to her the minute she admits that she was wrong," Draco compromised. Of course, his heart wasn't really in it, since in the next moment he was qualifying that with, "And since we know that Granger never ever thinks she's wrong about anything?" He favoured Harry with a smug, self-satisfied smile.

"She is wrong, though," Harry agreed. "Snape's turning out to be pretty good at this father business."

"Then why do you keep calling him sir?"

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "Unless it's because . . . well, I lost my real father before I could even talk, so I obviously didn't call him anything. And since Uncle Vernon was never remotely like a dad to me, I just don't have any uh . . . experience. Everything I can think of to call him just seems . . . clumsy."

Draco was frowning by the time Harry finished. "Don't mention in front of Severus that he's not your 'real father,' Harry."

"I meant real as in bloodline, not real as in real, and you know it!"

"What I know is that Severus is too Slytherin to let you know every time you hurt him."

Harry sighed, and crossing his legs again, bent over them. That was probably true, but it had never really occurred to him. Now, it made him wonder how many times he'd hurt Snape without meaning to. "I'll do better," he told Draco, glancing through his fringe at the other boy. "I mean, I know you care about him. I . . . do too, you know."

"Harry, it's Severus who should know."

"Yeah," Harry said, the single word almost sticking in his throat. "Um, well I think he knows without me saying so."

"Oh, you think Slytherins are so intuitive?" Draco sneered.

"Well, you're not doing half-bad."

"Touché." Draco stood up, then, this time offering his hand to Harry. In just a moment more, he had restored the duvet back to its original form. Before dissolving the warming charm around them, he donned his cloak and wrapped it tightly around him. "By the way, I have to tell you something else.
"Your scar. It's not hideous and disfiguring."

Harry self-consciously tugged his hair down to hide the scar in question. "I know how it looks."

"Harry, I only ever said that because... well, I was sort of jealous of you."

Harry scowled. "I thought you didn't want to be marked by Voldemort."

"I don't. I wasn't jealous because of that. It was more how you always got so much attention, and special privileges, and well, it seemed to me like you had such a perfect life. I said your scar was hideous just to get to you."

"Oh, perfect life," Harry scathed. "Yes, the Dursley house was a lovely place to grow up. It was also wonderful when the whole school thought I was an assassin, and when Dementors had to swarm the grounds because an assassin--or so they thought--was looking to kill me. And it was marvellous when all of Hogwarts thought I was a liar, and when the press took up the theme--" Harry abruptly stopped whinging on about his troubles. "The Dursley house," he repeated. "That was horrible of you to give your father the address, even if he already did know it."

Draco didn't bother defending himself. "It was," he agreed. "It was one in a long string of horrible things I'd done to you. But Harry. It's the last in that long string. I promise."

Harry nodded, determined that they'd say no more about it. "Let's go in and talk to Snape, now."

Draco's answering smile was sly. "You do realise by now that Severus wanted me to find that mask and robe, wanted me to open that box?"

Harry froze in mid-step. "The professor wouldn't deliberately try to shock me into doing wild magic. He may have plans inside plans, but he has my best interests at heart."

"Oh, no doubt," Draco agreed. "It was a warning, Harry. For me, not for you. Severus told me a few days ago, when we had that late-night chat, that I wouldn't like what he'd do if I kept refusing to tell you about Samhain. I think the Death Eater clothing was his way of threatening to bring it all out into the open himself."

"That's... ah, pretty Slytherin," Harry had to admit. Almost on a level with Draco changing their room into silver-and-green so that Harry would have to ask for other colours. It was the same sort of manipulation. Still... "How could Snape know you'd open that box, though? It's pretty far-fetched. I mean, I might have opened it."

"Oh, please. I bet you've never opened a Christmas present early in your life."

"Well, no," Harry admitted. "But that might be because I haven't got very many."

"Hmm. At any rate, Severus knows I have a bad habit of it. My father used to have to hex the boxes to make me behave. Severus would expect that I couldn't resist peeking into any mysterious box right about Christmas time."

"So that's why you were so mad," Harry realised. "I thought it was just because he'd been careless."

"He's about the least careless person I can imagine," Draco retorted. "Anyway, I just thought you should know. I can admit I was being a prat last night, but I was seriously provoked."

"And if you hadn't been?" Harry challenged. "I wouldn't have seen the clothes, and dreamed of you at Samhain, and realised once and for all that you did have a reason to switch sides."
"So you're justifying his behaviour?"

Harry thought about that. "Yes, I suppose I am. Even if it didn't work out as planned, he had to do something to make you tell me."

Draco snorted. "You are half-Slytherin. Well, I suppose that's good. You'll probably like your Christmas present pretty well."

"What is it?"

"Oh, you expect me to spill? I thought you didn't open presents early."

Really curious, Harry joked, "Oh, but that was before I knew I was half-Slytherin, see? Come on, just give me a hint."

Draco lengthened his stride, forcing Harry to hurry to keep up. "All right, one hint," he allowed. "It's something I tried to give you before."

Now Harry was the one who was snorting. "You've never tried to give me anything except my wand."

"Wrong, though I don't blame you if it slipped your mind. You were under a lot of stress. It was in the hospital wing. I came by to visit, and you threw your food at my face. Good aim for a blind boy, even if you hit the wall instead of me. So I tossed you a little get-well present I'd owl-ordered for you. You didn't open it though. When Dumbledore gave it back to me, he said you thought it might be hexed."

"Oh, sorry about that," Harry murmured. "I didn't have any reason to trust you at the time."

"But Harry," Draco said, grinning by then, "it is hexed."

And after that, no matter what Harry asked, Draco wouldn't give him any further hints.
"You two were gone quite a while," Snape levelly commented as Harry closed the wooden door of the cottage and shrugged off his heavy cloak, gloves, and scarf.

The Potions Master had been writing something, but as Harry approached, he set his quill aside and performed a drying spell on his parchment. After that, he looked up at the boy, one eyebrow raised. Quite obviously, he knew there'd been more to their walk than a need for fresh air. "And so?"

_Oh sure, Harry thought. You kept me in the dark for ages, and now you just expect me to spill all on your say so? I don't think so._

"We had a bit of a chat about Samhain," Harry answered, deadpan.

"Samhain," Snape slowly repeated, shifting in his chair to look at Draco, who nodded.

"You know, Samhain?" Harry lightly mocked, his irritation starting to rear its head. He'd managed to repress it fairly well before, but that was just because he'd been so determined to get Draco alone so they could talk. "I'm sure you remember it. You were there. Oh, that's right, you were both there. Funny how in all these weeks, nobody once thought to mention that."

"I told you, there are some things I believed Draco should--"

"Yeah, yeah, tell me for himself," Harry interrupted. A little imp began to whisper in his ear, telling him what to say. Of course, Harry knew he shouldn't say it, but he needed to, after all those weeks of worry that Draco might just be waiting for a good chance to hex him and drag him to Voldemort! He wanted to wipe that smug expression off Snape's face.

"Draco did tell me," Harry sighed, careful not to make the noise too theatrical, the way Draco often did. "He told me everything. Explained how it only took one meeting for him to see the truth about serving Voldemort. No way could Draco here stand to be a Death Eater when it would mean putting up with a honking great snake every time he got summoned--"

"Draco!" Snape shouted, his skin flushing with anger.

Draco cast Harry a panicked glance. "That's not what I said!"

Harry barked with laughter, but cut it off pretty quickly when Snape started to look even more incensed. "Sorry," he apologized, though he wasn't, not really. "Couldn't resist."

"I'm surprised you regard this as a laughing matter," Snape rebuked him, eyebrows still drawn together.

"I don't!" Harry retorted, shifting on his feet. "I just don't like secrets, and I damned well don't appreciate it that when you decided the truth ought to come out, instead of just opening your mouth like anyone else would, you had to get all Slytherin and start planting clothing around the house!"

"You told me you approved of that," Draco remarked, his silver eyes puzzled.

"I approve of the fact that he finally did _something_ about the problem," Harry raised his voice. "But no, I don't happen to think it was the best idea I've ever heard. I'd rather he'd told me all this months ago, and in some halfway normal way!"
"If I'd done that," Snape explained, "you would have missed out on struggling with your decision to trust Draco despite everything. And it's out of struggles like that that the strongest kinds of loyalties are born."

Harry sat down on the floor in front of the fire and noticed Sals warming herself on the hearthstones. With a whisper of Parseltongue, he called her to climb up on his knee. After patting the little snake a few times, he lifted his face to Snape, who was still sitting at the table. "Did you plant that mask and robe?"

His eyes half-closed, Snape shrugged. "Define plant. I left them here when I brought you back to Hogwarts. Even then, I had an inkling that you might need to come live in my quarters, and I certainly didn't want you to encounter such items there. When I formulated our Christmas plans, I was aware that the robe and mask could well come to light."

Harry snorted. "So Draco's right. You were counting on him to investigate that box in hopes it was a present." When Snape said nothing to either confirm or deny the allegation, Harry went on, "You knew your spying days were over when you rescued me from Samhain. Why didn't you destroy those awful clothes?"

"They could have been of use to the Order in future."

"Right..." Harry murmured. "Well, not any longer."

"No. You did a rather thorough job of immolating them."

Harry took a moment more to think, his fingers stroking Sals' little coils as he sat and pondered the whole matter. All in all, he wasn't too pleased with how Snape had handled Draco's presence at Samhain, but neither did he want to let it stand between them. "I wished you'd have told me the truth much sooner," he announced, his serious gaze seeking out his father's half-concealed one. "And... I hope you won't be keeping secrets from me in future... but anyway... I forgive you."

"Oh, very magnanimous." Snape breathed out, his nostrils flaring as he leaned down, resting his arms on his knees, and peered more closely at the boy sitting on the floor. "But have you forgiven Draco?"

Harry favoured his father with a cool look. "I have, yes. But if you don't mind, I'd rather not go over it in detail. It's between him and me."

"Just as Draco's attending a Death Eater meeting was between him and me?"

"That involved me and you know it!"

Snape's voice was smooth and polished as he countered, "I had to do as I thought best."

Harry's voice was smooth too, but not in the same way. Rough edges of pain and resentment lurked beneath the surface tones. Edges he was consciously trying to blunt. "We disagree about what was best, sir. But... like I said, I forgive you."

Snape stared at him for a moment more, then briskly nodded. Harry noticed, though, that he kept watching both boys quite carefully for a while, as though verifying that the two of them were indeed able to get along.

Draco came and stood by Harry, a position which was awkward for conversation since Harry was at his feet. The Slytherin boy didn't seem to know what to do until Harry wryly remarked, "You could actually sit on the floor, Draco. You did the other day, remember? It didn't kill you."
"Come sit with me by the window," Draco suggested, gesturing toward the worn couch on that wall.

"There's a draft there; it's too cold for Sals." Realizing that he was still petting his snake, Harry slipped her into his pocket where she slithered in a circle, getting comfortable. "There, all gone. Sorry about the Nagini crack."

Draco grimaced. "Well . . . the truth is, I wasn't too thrilled to see a . . . what did you call it, 'honking great snake' there at the meeting."

"I know," Harry admitted. "Sit down, why don't you?"

Draco made another face. "It'll dirty my clothes."

"Aren't you a wizard? Cleaning charms and all that? Come on."

With that, Draco finally acquiesced, sitting cross-legged on the stones.

Harry leaned in towards him, a little conspiratorially. "Good. Well done, even. Now, let's make a little plan for Christmas dinner, shall we? While I was asleep this morning, I don't suppose you managed to sneak a peek into all those crates Snape brought along . . . no? Okay, I'll distract him while you see what sorts of ingredients we have to work with. No, wait. You probably don't have a clue how to assemble a meal. Okay, you distract him while I sneak a peek--"

A slight noise of magic dissolving wood cut through his words.

"If you want to investigate the supplies I've laid in," Snape drawled, waving at the now lidless crates, "there's no need to sneak around to do so."

"But we're all Slytherins here," Harry gibed, feeling happier than he had in months, really. "Or sort of. We like sneaking, sir."

Draco burst out laughing. "That's not quite what Slytherin means." Jumping up, he took Snape up on that offer to sort through the crates. Harry wondered if the other boy was actually hoping to find some presents. No such luck, though. If Snape had brought along any, he'd secreted them elsewhere.

Two of the crates were spelled to stay cool, and a third one was actually frozen inside. Harry grinned, realizing that with wizardry any sort of container could become an icebox. "Hmm, looks like roast goose for Christmas dinner," he pronounced. "And we can thaw out some of these mince pies . . . Or did you have them in mind for Christmas eve?"

Snape shrugged as though he didn't care. "Why don't you and Draco decide the details? In fact, why don't the two of you work up something for our lunch?"

"Sandwiches," Harry decided.

Draco gave one of his theatrical sighs.

"It's about the easiest meal there is," Harry chided him, and proceeded to demonstrate. He had to laugh, though, when instead of doing something as "Mugglish" as slicing bread with a knife, Draco figured out how to make his wand do the cutting for him.

Just as well that the other boy took care of it, though, however he chose to do it. Harry's hands were really aching again. He wondered if the magic streaming through them had damaged the nerves.

Leaving Draco to finish making the sandwiches, Harry took his problem to Snape, who examined his hands carefully with several spells.
"I don't sense damage," Snape finally pronounced. "But whatever's happening is definitely tied in with your magic. Something inside you is coiling, trying to break free. The conflict is causing the pain."

"So I just have to put up with it until I get my magic back?"

"I didn't say that." Snape tapped each of his fingers with his wand and lightly chanted some soft Latin phrases that wiped the pain clear away. "Ask me to renew it whenever you have need. I'll teach the charm to Draco too, so he can assist you as well."

Harry flexed his fingers, amazed at how light and free they suddenly felt. "You know, I expected more of a potion," he admitted.

"A potion might stop the source of your pain," Snape told him, "but to do so, it might have to repress the conflict inside you. If your magic is struggling to be reborn in full, I hardly wish to stop it. But the charm should be harmless. I merely told your hand to forget it hurts."

"Wish I'd have known a charm like that after a few of the rougher Quidditch matches," Harry said, smiling.

"It works best on magical, not physical, injuries."

Harry nodded. "Right. Well, thank you, sir."

Snape merely inclined his head.

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The days passed more quickly than Harry would have expected. Maybe that was because the lack of any house-elves meant that there was quite a lot for them to do. Of course, Draco and Snape freely made use of magic to perform all their chores, but still, even spells took a certain amount of time.

Draco went flying every day, performing twists and dives and turns to do any Seeker proud. Harry wasn't too jealous of all that until the day he noticed Draco actually chasing a snitch. Then he realised how much he missed Quidditch.

The first chance he got, Harry put his Slytherin sneakiness to use and tested out his magic on Draco's broom. He didn't actually plan to ride it; he just wanted to see if it would respond to his command of _up_.

It didn't, which put him in a foul mood.

The mood didn't last long, however. How could it, when there was Christmas to prepare for? Harry would have thought, after spending every Yule holiday at Hogwarts, that he knew all there was to know about a wizarding Christmas, but he soon found out that he had a lot to learn.

First, there was the tree.

"It's a bit of a shame to chop down and kill a beautiful tree, I've always thought," Harry remarked when Snape said they'd see to the tree the next day. "Although I suppose it's not a total waste if we burn the wood after the season's over . . ."

Draco stared at him like he'd grown an extra head. "Chop down a tree! Honestly, Harry! We're _wizards_!"
"They always have trees at Hogwarts," Harry pointed out. "Twelve of them is the usual number, I believe?"

"And you thought they were real?" Draco asked in mock astonishment, his silver eyes glittering smug and superior. "They're spell-trees, Harry. Although I suppose it's a compliment to the house-elves that they seem so completely real." He appeared to muse that over a bit. "I wonder how many of the Muggle-raised students assume they are."

"Well there was a tree in the Gryffindor common room that was real!" Harry protested. "I know, because after Christmas was over it started to turn brownish and drop needles!"

"Some Muggleborn arranged for a real tree, then," Draco surmised, shuddering a bit. "It's horrible bad luck, though. Goes back to old wizarding ideas about the forest gods and all that. The fact that Muggles cut down trees just shows how utterly uncouth they can be--"

"Oh, stuff it," Harry said, turning to Snape. "Don't you think it's a bit ridiculous that I've been at Britain's premier wizarding school for six years, and I still don't know anything about basic customs? Why doesn't Hogwarts take into account that not all the students arrive at school already knowing all these things?"

Draco opened his mouth, but then shut it without speaking. Just as well. Harry really wasn't in the mood to hear him spout, Because Muggleborns aren't supposed to be there to begin with, Potter."

"Perhaps in addition to Muggle Studies we ought to provide a Wizard Studies course," Snape suggested, nodding slightly. "I'll discuss the matter with the headmaster."

The spell-tree turned out to be a difficult bit of magic. Normally house-elves saw to providing one, but a strong, skilled wizard like Snape could also perform the necessary spells. He walked the boys to the edge of his property and let them study a little grove of pines growing on its western edge. After a bit of wrangling, they settled on a short, squat tree with widely spaced branches. Snape pointed his wand at it, enveloping the plant in a slight bluish haze for a moment . . . and incanted a few sentences that didn't sound like Latin at all to Harry. Celtic, maybe, considering what Draco had said about the old forest gods and such.

When they returned to the cottage, a perfect replica of their chosen tree was standing to one side of the hearth. It took up a good quarter of the room, and even made the whole cottage smell like the woods. Harry reached out and touched it, hardly able to believe it wasn't completely real. When he looked down, though, he saw that it couldn't be. There was no snowy tree skirt to conceal the cut end, and no tree stand to keep it upright. The spell-tree looked like it was growing straight out of the stone floor.

"Candles now," Draco announced.

Reaching into a crate, Snape drew out some green and silver tapers. Since Harry had been all through the boxes by then, he knew there'd been no candles laid in. Definitely, one crate was charmed to deliver up things on demand. Snape's demand, that was. Perhaps that was where the Potions Master was hiding their presents. Harry grinned a little when that though occurred to him. Draco's Slytherin influence was rubbing off; previously, Harry would never have dreamed of searching the cottage for gifts. Maybe, however, he just wasn't used to Christmas being a very exciting time. Draco's intense interest in what he "might be getting" really did spice things up, Harry thought . . . even if the other boy was a bit more materialistic than Harry thought good.

Snape lit the candles one by one with a spell, and sent them levitating amongst the branches of the tree. Overall, the effect was quite nice, the candles obviously magical in their own way. They put out
light and heat, but didn't consume any wax . . . or drip any. Nor would they light anything on fire, Snape assured them. Candles like that could be safely left lit night and day.

Harry thought they were brilliant. Still, he couldn't help observing, "Slytherin colours, sir?"

"I thought you said we were all Slytherins here," Draco retorted.

"I said sort of, didn't I?"

"It's Severus' house, so of course the candles represent him," Draco explained, his tone just a bit sneering. "He's not just a Slytherin, he's Head of Slytherin! Now, if he were a cursebreaker, his colours would be purple and white. If he worked at St. Mungo's, we'd see orange and yellow candles on the tree. If he--"

"I don't actually need fifty examples before I get the point," Harry interrupted, wishing more than ever he'd had a chance to take a Wizard Studies course. "Are all the decorations going to be in Snape's colours, then?"

"For Merlin's sake, Harry! His name is Severus!"

Remembering Draco's words on the subject of real fathers, Harry managed not to reply to that.

Snape ignored the entire issue in favour of educating Harry a bit in wizarding customs. "It's no great wonder Harry has questions," he said with a brief glare at Draco. "Traditional Yule decorations are based on plants, so they aren't so colourful as the garish displays I've seen in store windows in Muggle London. However, this is your home too, Harry. There's no reason why we can't strew about some crimson and gold if it will make the holiday seem more festive to you."

Garish, Harry thought, was a pretty dead-on accurate description of Aunt Petunia's typical Christmas decorations. "Wizarding traditions will be fine," he answered, somewhat subdued.

For all that, though, Snape charmed the berries on the holly to be both red and yellow. Draco huffed at that, but Harry thought it a rather touching gesture.

Draco claimed he wanted to save the goose for Christmas Day, and though Harry personally suspected the other boy just wanted to put off the work that would go into roasting it, he agreed. They had chestnut soup on Christmas eve, along with piping hot whole-grain bread. Snape got that from the magic crate, but the rest of the meal they prepared at the cottage. It wasn't too much work, though. The house-elves had packed a lot of half-prepared items. The soup, for instance. It only needed to be thawed and then simmered a bit, which with magic was no problem at all, but Draco just wouldn't stop moaning.

Well, not until Harry threatened to withhold his Christmas present if the other boy didn't start behaving himself.

"You wouldn't," Draco sputtered, outraged. "That's just nasty, that is."

"I will if you don't stop all your whinging," Harry retorted. "Honestly! You don't complain like this in Potions class when you have to chop and stir and boil things!"

"An interesting comparison," said Snape from the table, where he was writing letters. Harry wondered who they were to, but felt that asking would be a bit presumptuous. "You've handled enough meals for us that I know you cook quite well, so why aren't you more skilled at Potions?"
Harry half-smiled as he sprinkled a bit of pepper into the steaming soup. "Well, with cooking if you add too much of an ingredient, you don't tend to get an explosion, you know. There's more room for error."

"Maybe Longbottom should train as a chef, then," Draco gibed.

"Maybe I'll send your present back owl-return," Harry threatened. "Neville's doing the best he can. I don't want to hear you insulting him. In fact, when we get back to class, why don't you try to help him for once? There's probably no better way to convince the Gryffindors that there might be something decent inside you, after all."

Draco huffed in indignation, and didn't directly reply.

"Speaking of owls, though," Harry continued, "I was wondering if the cottage is charmed to keep them away."

Snape nodded. "There is little cause for concern, but still..." He lifted his shoulders in an eloquent gesture.

Harry nodded as well. "Right. Constant vigilance. I just thought it might be nice if my friends' presents could make it through, though. They'll be delivered to Hogwarts, won't they, not returned to the senders?"

"I did apply a sensible directing spell, yes," Snape drawled.

Harry couldn't help but notice the slightly offended tone underlying those words. "You're a great and powerful wizard," he admitted, and then realizing what he had said, chortled a bit. "Sorry," he gasped when Snape and Draco both gave him a look. "It's a line from a Muggle movie. Um... *The Wizard of Oz*. I just laughed because the 'great and powerful wizard of Oz' couldn't possibly be more unlike you, Professor."

Draco quite obviously didn't get it. "Where's Oz?" he asked Snape, who looked a bit bemused.

"It's fiction," Harry stressed.

"Oh, like *My Broom Can Zoom*?" Draco asked. "That was my favourite book when I was little."

"Uh, yeah, bit like that I guess," Harry mumbled.

"So how am I different from this 'great and powerful wizard'?" Snape inquired.

Harry blushed. "Oh, well really he wasn't a wizard at all, didn't know any magic, he just knew how to invent things. I think. I don't remember it very well."

"Muggles have very odd ideas about wizards."

"We definitely need that Wizard Studies class," Draco agreed.

Later that night, Snape set a snowy white candle on the table. Unlike the tapers that were glowing everywhere --apparently in some pureblood families, it was traditional to have no wizarding light on Christmas eve, only candles-- this one was one of the tiny votives Harry had seen burning in churches. Not that he'd been to church much at all, but Uncle Vernon had had a thing about midnight mass on Christmas eve. Mostly, Harry remembered being yelled at the whole way there to keep his
hair flattened down over his scar, then yelled at the whole way back that somebody had probably seen it.

And then the next morning, his "misbehaviour" at church the night before would be used as a pretext for why he didn't have any presents.

He'd always known that Christmas was supposed to be a happy time, but it really never had been for Harry, not until he'd spent one at Hogwarts.

Looking at the votive now brought back bad memories, but Harry didn't know that his eyes were actually haunted with them. He wasn't even aware that he was nervously tugging down his fringe, not until Snape reached out and placed a hand over his, guiding it back down to the table, then holding it firmly. Harry looked up, a bit surprised. He might have told Snape about the cupboard and the missed meals, and Snape was smart enough to guess that Harry'd never got proper presents from his relatives, but he was sure the man didn't know what the small, short candle represented to Harry.

Apparently, though, Snape didn't need to know details. He knew Harry, which was better. He could tell when the boy was lost in painful recollections.

To Harry's great surprise, the unlit votive upset Draco as well. The blond boy stared at it, leaning both his elbows on the table, his shoulders rising then collapsing in a sigh that wasn't theatrical in the least. "I'm the youngest here too?" he confirmed with Snape, who nodded.

"All right," Draco breathed, pushing off from the table. "I wonder who's doing this at . . ."

He never finished the sentence.

Harry watched in confusion as Draco touched his wand to the wick to light the candle, then walked to set it on the windowsill. He charmed the curtains to stay apart enough that the flame could be seen through the glass. That done, he flopped onto the worn couch, leaning against one end of it and propping his crossed ankles on the other as he stared and stared and stared at the flickering candle.

His attention on it was strange enough, but what was even more unusual was the Slytherin boy's posture. Draco usually sat as though he was demonstrating an etiquette lesson, which was one reason why it was hard to get him to unbend enough to join Harry on the floor.

The smell of melting wax floated through the room, making Harry think the votive might actually be a regular candle, the kind that slowly melted into nothingness.

Realizing that Snape's long fingers were still clasping his, Harry pulled his hand away. "What's wrong with Draco?" he whispered.

The words breaking the vigil, Draco shifted on the couch to make room for Harry, then beckoned him over. He waited until Harry was next to him, then murmured, "It's just that I'm youngest at home, too. So, the candle . . . you know." A brief pause. "Oh, maybe you don't. I don't know if Muggles have the tradition."

"The youngest in the family puts a candle in the window to await the arrival of Father Christmas, that's all." His voice broke slightly. "My father used to hold my hand when I was little, and we'd incant Incendio together to make it light . . . Sorry. I know how much you hate my father. I hate him too. Well, most of the time."

"It's hard when the people who are supposed to love you the most . . . don't," Harry softly answered, feeling Draco's pain as he never had before. He should have realised sooner that Christmas, being such a family time, would bring it out. Draco was probably wishing everything could be different,
wishing he could be home . . . and knowing that things had changed forever and he'd never go home again.

"Yeah, I suppose you would know," Draco murmured. "I wonder if everybody's messed up inside, or if it's just us."

"I think most people have problems," Harry admitted, glancing toward Snape. The man didn't appear to be listening; he had a book open by then, but Harry didn't count that for much. "Take Neville, for instance, with his parents where they are." Normally Harry wouldn't have mentioned that, but thanks to Death Eater gossip, Draco knew already. "Or Ron--"

"Oh please, what problems has the Weasel got, except for a stunning lack of brains?"

Harry supposed Ron probably deserved that. His comments about Snape truly had been brainless. "He's got five older brothers and one younger sister," Harry retorted. "He's lost in a crowd at home. And with me for a best friend, he's sort of overshadowed all the time at school, too."

"Best friend?" Draco scathed. "My, we are forgiving. No offence, Potter, but I can tell you're going to be an idiot and still want him for a friend. Well, mark my words, all right? He won't even bother sending you a present, that's how little he wants a half-Slytherin Harry Potter for a friend."

"Presents can't get through to us anyway," Harry retorted.

"Assuming he could even afford to buy anything," Draco sneered.

"That's just plain mean, judging people for things they can't help."

"Maybe it's better than not judging them for things they can help, Harry. If you ask me, after what he said about Severus, you ought to never speak to him again!"

"Well, I'm none too happy with him, but never is a bit much, don't you think?"

"Not if you're going to give Severus the respect due him as your father," Draco sternly replied. "But enough of that. I'm not going to let a Weasley ruin my Christmas . . . So, we've done the candle . . . Severus," he called. "Maybe we should let Harry here do one of his Christmas traditions, too."

Turning, Draco looked at Harry expectantly. "Well?"

Dumbfounded, Harry questioned, "You want to do a Muggle tradition?"

"No, but I want Christmas to seem like Christmas to you." Draco shrugged. "So, what sorts of Muggle things did your family do?"

"Um . . ." Harry actually had to think about that. It had been years and years since he'd celebrated the season with the Dursleys, and even back then, he hadn't really done much celebrating. He hadn't been included. "Oh, well there's this deal where you go around singing carols to all your neighbours. Christmas songs," he clarified. "I never went . . . actually, the Dursleys weren't so big on going carolling, but I used to hear the groups strolling past singing."

"All right then," Draco nodded. "Sing us one of these carols."

Harry blushed. "I don't sing. And I don't know the words very well, and--"

"Oh, come on. You can defeat a Norwegian Ridgeback with your eyes closed, practically, but you can't sing us a single song?"
"It was a Hungarian Horntail!"

Draco smirked. "So I wasn't such a big fan of yours back then. From now on, I'll pay attention to your mighty exploits. Hmm, maybe I'll write a tell-all book. *The Time I Lived with the Boy Who Lived . . ."

"That sounds a bit salacious," Snape put in, pulling a chair over to join them by the window. "How about . . . *Down in the Dungeons with Harry Potter?"

"Stop it," Harry laughed. "I don't want a book about me. It's awful enough reading about myself in the *Prophet* ."

"Oh yes, getting all that attention must be just *dreadful,*" Draco sneered. Then he seemed to calm. "I'll forgo my million-Galleon book deal if you sing me one of those Christmas songs."

"Professor," Harry protested. Fat lot of good that did him.

"I'd like to hear one," Snape merely replied. "If you would?"

"Oh, fine," Harry muttered. "I *don't* know the words so well. So don't say I didn't warn you." He thought for a moment, then came out with one, his voice wavering on an uncertain, off-key tune,

"*It came upon a midnight clear,*
*that glorious song of old,*
*From angels bending near the earth*
*to touch their harps of gold.*
*Something, some-omething, something-ing,*
*From heaven's all gracious King.*
*Something, some-omething, something-ing,*
*To hear the angels sing."

When the room fell silent, Draco glanced at Snape and then back at Harry. "What does that even mean?"

"I have no idea," Harry admitted, feeling a hot blush suffuse his face. "I told you I didn't know all the words!"

"But the words that were left didn't make any sense either!" Draco retorted. "Not that I expect Muggles to make sense, I suppose. So that's all right. How about another one, Harry? There must be one you know better than that."

"No way," Harry announced. "I've been humiliated enough for one evening."


That time, Harry scoffed. "Oh, I think I could write just as many embarrassing things about you."

"Ah, but nobody wants to read about me," Draco argued.

"They'll read anything I write, won't they?" Harry argued right back. "Anything by Harry Potter'll fly right off the shelves. So don't tempt me, Malfoy."

"He *is* sort of Slytherin," Draco complained to Snape.
"The Sorting Hat does know what it's about." Drawing his wand, Snape summoned forth three drinking vessels that looked a bit like Uncle Vernon's imposing brandy snifter . . . except that these were made of engraved bronze. They were half-filled already with mulled wine fragrant with clove and cinnamon. Harry cupped his hands around the goblet and savoured the warmth.

After they'd drunk their wine, Harry and Draco each hung a sock from the mantel. A real sock. Harry thought they looked a bit silly; he was used to bright red fuzzy Christmas stockings. Large ones that could accommodate some pretty serious presents. Of course, Harry'd never had such a stocking, but since Dudley had had three all to himself, the Dursley mantle had looked quite festive indeed.

Perhaps even garish, Harry allowed.

Whereas this mantle looked . . . homey and comfortable, like the cottage itself.

"Well, then, off to bed with you both," Snape announced as he set out mince pies and a miniature wine glass filled with sherry.

Draco laughed. "We aren't children, Severus. We know you're the one going to be eating the tidbits left out for Father Christmas."

Snape's brow furrowed with what looked like genuine puzzlement. "You don't believe in Father Christmas?"

"Well, I don't," Draco lightly scathed. "I can't speak for the Muggle-raised among us."

Harry supposed he could have taken offence, but actually he thought it was pretty funny. "Hey, the way I was raised, I barely believe in Christmas at all," he informed them.

"But he's quite real," Snape insisted. Harry studied his dark eyes for a twinkle, but didn't find one.

"So why did my parents take credit for all those presents over the years?" Draco challenged.

"Yeah, and Dudley never deserved anything, believe me," Harry added. "So if Father Christmas is real, he's doing a pretty terrible job of deciding who's been naughty and who's been nice." He decided not to mention that Draco had also belonged on the naughty list every year.

"Ah. Well, he doesn't visit Muggles, so that explains your cousin's bounty," Snape announced, shaking his head. "And as for your family, Draco, no doubt a great many of those presents were from your parents."

"And your point is?" Draco asked, his own brow furrowed by then.

Snape shrugged. "Nicholas is a notoriously unreliable wizard."

"What?" Harry gasped, never having expected to hear that. In a strange sort of way, it made sense, though, didn't it? If there was a Father Christmas at all, he'd have to use magic . . . Hmm, and elves definitely did exist . . . "Oh, you're having us on," Harry said when he'd got over the shock.

Another shrug. "As you wish. I'll merely say that there's a reason he doesn't visit Muggles; he long ago realised he couldn't keep up with the work load. And of course wizarding parents know better than to depend on him. My understanding is that some years he stays up most of the night drinking wassail and then rushes out, only to turn back from Finland at dawn."

"That's a completely stupid story," Draco objected.
"Perhaps so," Snape allowed, "but one thing I do know for certain. On the years when he does make his rounds, he doesn't stop at homes where the occupants are still awake. Now, if you don't mind, I'll need the two of you to remove yourselves so that I might get to bed, myself." He made a shooing motion with his hand.

Once Harry and Draco were in their bedroom, the door closed, the only light the single candle Draco had snatched off the tree as he'd passed it, Harry whispered, "He looked serious. Was he, do you think?"

Draco snuggled down into his covers and quietly called across the room, "How should I know?"

"You grew up a wizard! If Father Christmas actually is one, wouldn't you know?"

"Well, everybody says he is, but you get to a certain age and you realise it's all just a story," Draco explained.

"What if it's not a story?" Harry mused. "I mean, it could be true."

"No, it couldn't," Draco retorted. But then he said, "Tell you what, though. Let's go to sleep now . . . just in case."

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Harry was woken the next morning by the feel of a hand shaking him awake. "Get up, Harry, up," he heard Draco's voice urging him. "Come on! It's Christmas!"

"Ten more minutes," Harry mumbled, brushing off Draco's pestering hand and rolling onto his other side.

"No!" Draco shouted, sitting down on the edge of the mattress and bouncing on it. "You can't sleep in on Christmas! You have to get up! We'll have presents!"

Half asleep, Harry groaned at the way his bed was wiggling and jiggling. Instinct had him booting the other boy off the mattress. Literally, his feet kicking out to shove Draco arse-first onto the floor.

That turned out to be a mistake. The next thing Harry knew, the bed and mattress beneath him vanished into thin air and he was sent hurtling to the floor in a tangle of sheets and blankets.

"Draco!" he chided, sitting up. "Control your . . . er, enthusiasm. There's no rush! You aren't even dressed!"

Draco was practically jumping up and down. "Honestly, who gets dressed before they open their presents? Come on out!"

"In pyjamas?"

"Yes!"

Unable to wait any longer, Draco snatched Harry's hand, yanked him from the bedding on the floor, and literally dragged him to the door.

Harry hung back. "Snape might not even be out of bed. What time is it, anyway?"

Letting go of Harry's hand, Draco snatched his watch from the windowsill where he'd set it the night before, and thrust it in Harry's face. "See? See? See?"
Sure enough, a tiny dial was pointing to even tinier lettering, but when Harry looked close, he could read the words.

_Time to open presents._

"All right," he finally gave in, laughing. "Just let me find some socks. The floors are freezing here, not spelled warm for the morning like in Snape's rooms . . ."

Draco waited impatiently while Harry pulled on his warmest pair, then yanked open the door and rushed to the mantle. He was about to pull his sock down when a chiding voice from the sofa said, "Patience, patience, Mr Malfoy."

Snape was sitting there, looking as though he'd been awake for hours. As he'd done throughout the holiday, he'd left off his voluminous robes. Dark grey trousers and a black jumper weren't terribly Christmassy, Harry supposed, but anything more colourful than that just wouldn't be very Snape, would it?

Harry gave him a sleepy little wave, then wondered what he was supposed to do, really. He wasn't used to a family Christmas, to say the least.

At Snape's words, Draco had backed away from the mantle. Harry actually wondered what the big attraction was, there. Presents were strewn across the hearth and under the tree. He recognised the ones he'd given to Snape to hide when it became so very obvious that Draco simply could not be trusted to wait for Christmas morning. He supposed the others were from Snape and Draco, but that wouldn't account for the numbers he was seeing.

And why was Draco still staring at his sock, which looked . . . well, like a sock and nothing else?

"Happy Christmas," Snape said, nodding at them both.

"Happy Christmas," the boys echoed in unison. Immediately after the formalities were seen to, Draco began to complain. "I'm about out of patience. What is it, you want Harry to look in his sock first?"

Harry cleared his throat. "There's nothing in it. I can tell that from here."

"Oh honestly, we have got to make a proper wizard of this boy, Severus," Draco complained. "Go on, Harry, look."

"Look together," Snape mildly corrected. "I didn't want you rushing ahead of Harry."

When Harry took his sock down, it felt oddly heavy, though it looked like a perfectly normal sock. Out of it, however, he pulled a candy cane that must have been two feet long. It was in Gryffindor colours. Draco, he noticed, had a similar candy cane in green and black. Along with the candy cane spilled a variety of small, wrapped chocolates and, of all things, a top.

Draco whooped and set his spinning at once. It shot off sparks in every direction . . . sparks that rose toward the ceiling before exploding like miniature fireworks. Harry tried his too, then . . . and found out that once the top was started, it seemed it would spin forever on its own. He watched the fireworks going off all around, his green eyes a bit dazed by the display.

"So, what first," Snape asked, a small smile on his features as he studied Harry. "Breakfast, or presents?"

"Presents!" Draco shouted, clapping his hands down on Harry's top and then his own to stop their frantic activity.
"I rather thought you’d say that," Snape dryly remarked. "Harry?"

He didn’t want to seem greedy. It reminded him too much of the disgusting way Dudley had always behaved. "Perhaps breakfast," he temporized, frowning slightly as he wondered how Dudley was faring with Aunt Marge this morning.

"Harry," Snape quietly advised, "There's nothing wrong with wanting your presents first. In fact, as I'm aware you've never had a proper Christmas in your life, I'd thought to make this a truly memorable one?"

"I just thought you might be hungry . . . sir," Harry murmured, distinctly uncomfortable.

"Presents first it is," Snape announced in answer to that. "Go sit by the tree, both of you. I've already warmed the stones."

Harry noticed that Draco had no trouble sitting on the floor on this particular morning.

Once the boys were in place, Snape flicked his wand at a gift and made it fly to Harry.

"From Professor Dumbledore?" Harry wondered aloud, glancing at the charmed tag which featured a little animation of two teacups madly dancing with each other. "Did he . . . er, stop by?"

"He portkeyed it to me," Snape explained. "Along with some other things." A pause, and then, "Are you going to open it?"

Harry tore off the wrapping to reveal a pair of socks that were actually furry, they were so soft. Of course purple fur was a bit strange, but Harry liked them all the same. He slipped them on over his other socks and wiggled his toes. Mmm, nice and warm. "He told me once that a man can never have enough socks," Harry remembered, laughing.

Snape flicked his wand again, sending another gift spinning through the air to Draco.

The Slytherin boy looked at the package doubtfully. "This is from the headmaster, too. It's probably also for Harry."

Leaning over, Harry pointed to the clear writing on the tag. "D. R. A. C. O., see? That's not how I spell my name."

"Let me guess, it's more socks," Draco drawled, prodding the wrapping a bit. "And if you got purple, these are probably . . . pink."

He wasn’t too far off; they were a warm peachy colour. Draco didn’t put them on, but Harry thought he looked pleased, all the same.

Snape’s present from the headmaster wasn’t socks. Harry thought that a pity. Instead, Snape received a tall, thin bottle of something called Galliano.

"Liquorice flavoured liqueur," Draco explained. "Muggle-made, but Severus has adored it for years. My turn now, I think." With that, the Slytherin boy rose onto his knees to sort through the presents until he’d found what he wanted. He shoved one into Harry’s hand and tossed the other one through the air at Snape.

Harry found himself holding a thin rectangular box, and saw that Snape had a cube-shaped package. Both were wrapped in shiny silver paper and tied with a green ribbon.
"From you?" Harry asked Draco, a little unsure what my turn actually meant.

"No, it's from Crabbe and Goyle," Draco joked, his grin about as bright as Harry had ever seen it. No doubt about it, Draco just adored Christmas. "Go on, open it."

"After you, sir," Harry said, gesturing towards Snape.

He thought Snape gave him a bit of an odd glance, but then the man was opening his gift, his stained fingernails neatly slicing through the wrappings, ribbon and all, to reveal a plain white box. Opening it, he withdrew a small round jar fashioned of clear glass. Inside the jar was a thick, viscous substance that shimmered with gold and blue highlights as Snape tilted it in the weak sunlight streaming through the window.

The jar was unlabeled, but Snape seemed to know what he'd been given. "Thank you, Draco," he said in a voice gone suddenly serious. "This is . . . very much appreciated."

"What is it?" Harry had to ask.

"Oh . . ." Draco looked to Snape before answering, his voice purposely offhand, "Um, just some skin cream."

"There's more to it than that," Harry retorted. "I can tell when you're holding something back, remember?"

Draco flushed. "Well, if you must know, it's one of Severus' own formulations, but I did a bit of experimenting in his lab over the last few weeks, and I think I just might have improved it! A little, at least."

"All right, all right," Harry said, verbally backing away before the exchange could spin itself into an actual fight. Snape didn't seem the skin cream type to Harry -- pampered was actually an adjective that fit Draco far better-- but there was no doubt that Snape had really liked the present.

"Open yours now," Draco urged, apparently forgetting they'd just had words. "I want to see if it works."

Harry tore the wrappings as he answered, "Why would you give me something you aren't sure works?"

"Works with your magic," Draco clarified. "It should. It's triple-charmed so the slightest whisper of active magic will do the trick--"

He stopped talking as Harry pulled a shirt out of the box. A deep, beautiful maroon with gold buttons embossed with the figure of a lion, it was one of the nicer shirts Harry had ever seen. The fabric was completely opaque, yet so thin it fell through his hands like water. "It's beautiful," he thanked Draco. "I really like it. But . . . um, what's magical about it?"

"I think you have to put it on to see," Draco explained. "Go on . . ."

Harry wasn't too sure it was the done thing, but with Draco looking so expectant and excited, he found himself quickly shrugging off his pyjama shirt and doing up the buttons on the long-sleeved shirt.

"Looks good on you," Draco smiled. "But I bet it looks even better when you touch the top button three times in a row. Try it."
Harry did, and jumped back startled when the shirt instantly changed itself to a dark green with silver buttons bearing a snake figure.

"I knew it!" Draco crowed. "It works!"

The shirt was no less beautiful than before, but now, Harry felt a little bit strange. Wizards didn't go around wearing magical clothes very often. At least, not that he knew of.

"I got the idea when you said you were going to have that house-elf sew ties together so you could wear the colours of both your houses at once," Draco explained, smiling triumphantly. "That would have just looked stupid. But with this, you can go from common room to common room and feel right at home in either."

Harry nodded, but said, "I can't really see being welcomed in the Slytherin common room, even so." Another thought crossed his mind. "Hey, you said my Christmas present was that thing you tried to give me while I was blind in hospital. You didn't know I'd be in both houses, not then!"

Draco looked mildly offended. Or scandalized. Harry couldn't really tell. "Did you think I was only giving you one present, Harry?"

Harry set his teeth. "I only got you one. So sorry if that's not the way wizarding Christmases are done, but I didn't know!"

"No, I meant . . . it'd be pretty rude to make a present do double duty, Harry. That other one was really your get-well present! I decided a long time ago to try to give it to you at Christmas, but that was just because I thought you might accept it, then. It was never really your Christmas present. Anyway . . . think I'll give it to you a bit later, if that's all right."

"Oh, okay," Harry said, though it seemed to him that Draco was putting a lot too much importance on being proper, and not enough on just being a friend. "Well, it's a lovely shirt," he said again, tapping the top button three more times to turn it back into a Gryffindor shirt.

Draco actually stuck out his tongue at that.

"My turn now, I do believe," Snape murmured, distributing presents with his wand.

Perhaps realizing that he'd been behaving like a nine-year-old all morning, Draco waved for Harry to open his first.

"A . . . box," Harry said, looking down at the gift he'd unwrapped. That's all it was, an empty box. Made of slightly tinted glass --oddly rough glass, come to think of it-- it was about the same size as one of his fattest textbooks. The strange thing was that there was no way to open the box. No hinge, no lid . . . though it did have a hole the size of a Galleon on each side. "It's really beautiful, sir," he said, anxious not to offend. "Really. I've . . . er, never had one . . ." Giving up finally on being polite, Harry turned to Draco. "Um, is this some wizarding thing I'm supposed to have heard of by now?"

Draco burst out laughing. "I was going to ask you later if it was some Muggle thing I've never heard of!"

Both boys turned to look at Snape.

"It's a box for Sals," the Potions Master explained. "It's charmed to warm up to the temperature of the Floo whenever she crawls into it."

Harry's mouth dropped open in astonishment. "Oh, thank you, sir," he said with much more
enthusiasm. "It's just perfect! And something I really need . . . I've been worrying myself silly that someone will come through the Floo when Sals is in there . . . she just won't listen to me . . ."

"Yes, raising pets is very challenging," Snape drolly agreed. "Sometimes they think they know what's best, but with your superior experience you know perfectly well they don't--"

Somehow, Harry knew that Snape wasn't thinking of pets when he said that.

"I get it," he laughed. "Really, I do." Unable to stop himself, Harry went to the couch and wrapped the man in a big hug. Snape stiffened, seeming very surprised, but then his arms came around Harry and pulled him close.

"Ehem," Draco broke in after a moment. "I am actually waiting to open my own present from Severus, you know."

"Go ahead," Harry said, moving out of Snape's embrace. Liking the feeling that they'd passed some sort of obstacle, though, he sat down next to his father on the couch.

Next to his father. Harry sort of hugged the phrase to himself as he watched Draco pull a picture frame from a box. Just a frame . . . no painting or photograph within.

Unlike Harry, Draco wasn't baffled by the present. "Brilliant," he said, smiling brightly at Severus. "Let me think . . . it will show me what I most want to see?"

"Hold it up to a wall and find out."

When Draco did, the frame filled with a view of the meadow outside. "It's to help me endure yet more months of being confined to the dungeons," Draco surmised. "It shows whatever's at ground level on the outside of a wall."

"At times," Snape murmured. "If you concentrate, though, I think you'll find you can view any part of the grounds."

Draco's smile grew devious. "Oh, indeed. I can find out just who's kissing whom in the rose garden . . ."

"Knowing you as I do, Draco," Snape drawled, "I took a few precautions. The frame won't show you any people, though you may watch the giant squid to your heart's content."

"Oh, thank you, Severus," Draco returned, the words a tad sarcastic. But his smile was still just as delighted . . . and devious. Harry had a feeling Draco intended to tamper with the frame just as soon as he could. Snape had probably thought of that, though, so Harry wasn't too worried.

"Harry, this one is for you," Snape remarked. Now that the boy was closer, Snape summoned the present to himself and simply handed it to Harry.

"From Hermione," Harry said, reading the tag. It wasn't charmed like all the others had been, and the wrapping paper had that dull sheen that meant it had come from a Muggle factory.


The other boy's tone set Harry on edge. "Perhaps I should open this later," he quietly murmured to Snape. "I mean, I doubt she sent Draco anything at all, so--"

"Oh, please, I am not as immature as all that," Draco interrupted. "Open it. I'd like to see what
Granger thinks you need. Because I bet you that's what she did, Harry. It would be just like her to ignore what she knows you want, in favour of what she thinks you need."

Harry had a feeling Draco was going to be right. That would be just like Hermione. Harry was just surprised that Draco knew as much. Then again, he'd been there to hear her bleating like a sheep about how she knew more than Harry did about whether Snape would make a decent father.

It was a book. Not too surprising, considering Hermione, but this wasn't just any book.

"Oh no," Harry murmured in dismay, hanging his head over the book in his lap. "Hermione . . ."

"May I?" Snape asked, waiting until Harry had weakly nodded to slip the book free. "Adolescent Trauma: The Road to Recovery," he read the title out loud.

"Oh, dear Merlin, it's the book, that Muggle book you bought when you wanted to make sure Harry got over Samhain!" Draco erupted. "What a completely rude present! Happy Christmas, Harry. By the way, I think you're mental and in need of some serious intervention," he said, imitating Hermione's habitual know-it-all tones. "First that Weasley tries to hex you just because you've got yourself a father at last, and now this one uses Christmas as a pretext to get in another one of her little digs about how you only like Severus because you've lost your mind? Honestly, Harry, you have the worst friends I've ever heard of, and considering I've spent over five years in Slytherin, that's really saying something!"

"Ron wasn't going to hex me," Harry said, suddenly exhausted. "He wasn't, all right? And Hermione's just trying to help. I'm positive she doesn't know how rude this present is."

"Well, when her birthday rolls around, I just hope you buy her a ten-volume edition of Brains Aren't Everything: How to Make and Keep Friends!"

"No offence," Harry had to say, "but you're hardly an expert on that topic, yourself."

"I think we're getting a bit away from the spirit of the season," Snape said before Draco could retort. "Harry. You have some other presents from your friends. Albus ported them here. Why don't you open those a bit later, though?"

"Good idea, considering how Hermione's present had set Draco off. For all that though, Harry couldn't help asking, "Um . . . was there anything for me from, er, Ron?"

"No," Snape admitted, his eyes hooded as he studied Harry.

"Right," Harry said, ignoring the sharp twist his heart gave. He hadn't expected anything, not really. Had he? No . . . he guessed he hadn't.

At least Draco had the decency not to say I told you so.

"Well, that just leaves mine, I guess," Harry said, getting up to fish through the remaining presents. He spotted wizarding tags as he did so: Neville, Ginny, Colin & Dennis, Parvati . . . really, house mates who had never given him more than a card before were being awfully generous. He wondered if it had to do with Gryffindor solidarity, with his friends trying to help him past this rough patch with Ron.

There was also a present from Dudley, the Muggle wrapping paper featuring a homey Christmas scene with a family all gathered around a roaring fire. Harry stared at it, wondering if Dudley remembered earlier Christmases like that . . . or if he was saying that Harry finally had a real family, now.
More likely, Harry decided, Mrs. Figg had wrapped the present.

"Okay, here we are," he said when he spotted the paper he'd used to wrap his presents to the others. In his owl-order, he'd specified wrapping paper and ribbon, and been surprised when he'd received glossy maroon paper featuring a golden snitch madly racing all over its surface. Even stranger . . . when he'd cut the paper to wrap the separate gifts, the snitch had duplicated itself so that each package would have one. Most impressive of all, after he'd wrapped the boxes and added the gold ribbon, the snitch began to sometimes zoom over the ribbon, too . . . changing its colour to crimson whenever it hovered atop gold!

The receipt that came from the shop had read, Dear Mr Potter, We thank you for your patronage. We are pleased to provide you with complimentary one-of-a-kind wrapping paper personally charmed for you. If we can be of any assistance to you in future, please do not hesitate to owl.

How a shop all the way in London knew he played Seeker was a good question. Had the Prophet actually mentioned that? Hmm, probably, back when Harry had used his Firebolt in the First Task. Apparently the shop hadn't heard the latest, that he was off the Quidditch team these days. Or maybe they had, and they were being polite.

Harry handed a box the size of his fist to Draco, and a somewhat larger one to Snape.

"After you," the Potions Master politely deferred.

"Can't imagine what you'd get me," Draco murmured, casting a quick glance at Harry.

"Oh, I'm as bad as Hermione," Harry admitted. "I got you what I thought you needed. Actually, I didn't have much choice as I really didn't know anything you might want. I mean, you have everything you want."


"But you have all those," Harry laughed back. It was true, too. At least, he thought it was. Harry was no judge of gems, but he was almost sure that buttons on some of Draco's shirts were made of precious stones. And that wasn't even counting the ring he sometimes wore on his middle finger . . .

"Nice paper," Draco said, turning the present over in his hand. He had torn into his previous gifts, but this one he seemed to be treating with a bit more reserve. He actually pulled one end of the ribbon, slowly unfurling the bow . . . but then with a flourish, he yanked it suddenly free and shouted, "I got it!"

Harry noticed that the ribbon now had a crimson snitch frantically flying up and down its length.

"Oh, very good," he approved. "A hundred and fifty points to Slytherin."

"I wish," Draco softly sighed, but then he was ripping the paper off, his mood brightening as he saw a small, velvet-covered jeweller's box. He popped it open and pulled out a silver chain with a bluish-green amulet dangling from the end. Holding it up before his eyes, Draco studied the flat turquoise disk, then nodded to Harry and slung the necklace around his neck. He tucked the amulet beneath his pyjama top so it would rest against skin.

"Very nice," he said. "Very nice, Harry. Especially considering you had to have ordered it before we'd worked everything out."

"Oh, so you know that turquoise is supposed to impart some protection to the wearer . . .?"

"Not supposed to, Harry, does. Did you know it also represents friendship?"
Harry bit his lip. "No, actually I didn't know that. But . . . that's all right, then." Another thought occurred to him. "If you're so sure the turquoise has this protective effect, why wouldn't you have had some long before now?"

Draco laughed. "Ah. Well, in certain circles it's considered a rather barbaric form of magic. The best turquoise comes from Tibet, you know, and Asian wizardry isn't at all like the European kind. My father didn't approve."

"But you do?"

The Slytherin boy appeared to think about that. "Well, it's a bit much for British purebloods to practice all the Dark Arts they can get their wands on, and then call a piece of rock uncivilized, I always thought."

Harry nodded. "Um, it's supposed to turn more bluish when you're in danger. Maybe you should put it where you can see it?"

"I'll feel it change," Draco assured him. "I can feel it thrumming pleasantly along right now. Quite nice. Thank you, Harry."

"You're welcome." The boy swivelled on the couch to face Snape.

"I somehow doubt I'll catch the snitch unwrapping this," the Potions Master murmured as again, he used a fingernail to neatly slice through paper and ribbon. The box inside contained several dozen lengths of Honeyduke's best black liquorice.

"Ah, you remembered. Very thoughtful, Harry," Snape said with a brief smile at the boy.

Harry didn't really know how to say it. Now that the time had come, he hoped he wasn't being hopelessly stupid about everything. But it was what Snape had said he'd wanted, and more than that . . . it was probably what Harry needed, too. Strange as that might seem.

He swallowed hard and cleared a throat suddenly gone rough. "Um, Professor. The liquorice is just a little something I added in because I knew you liked it. But your real present . . ." Harry looked away, his voice dropping to a whisper. "It's underneath the tissue, sir."

Raising an eyebrow, Snape pushed the liquorice to one side and slid his fingers beneath the crinkled green tissue paper, then emerged with a tiny key.

Draco's eyes went completely round. "Oh, sweet Merlin above, you're giving him your entire vault?"

"No," Harry said shortly, wishing Draco hadn't said that. Snape wouldn't think that was what he was doing, would he? Harry's heart began to beat a painful rhythm inside his chest, and it wasn't because he was afraid of losing his money. That wasn't it at all. He just didn't want Snape to think he was completely brainless, doing a thing like this. "There's a note," he admitted, glad now that he'd included one. He didn't think he could explain. Not coherently, anyway. Especially not with moneybags Malfoy listening in.

Snape pulled a slip of parchment from the box. His lips set in a thin, straight line, he read it through without comment. Harry practically cringed, wishing he would smile or something. Didn't the note explain matters well enough? He'd gone through a ridiculous number of drafts to get it right. It wasn't eloquent, and it probably lacked transitions, but for all that, it was right.

He just hoped Snape would think so, too.
Dear Professor Snape, it read,

Would you take this key and put it away somewhere safe for me until I'm grown and out on my own? You told me not so long ago that that was what you would "really like," and after I'd thought about everything we'd discussed, I realised it was a good idea. You see, I told you once that I didn't know how to be anybody's son, and while that's probably still true, I do know one thing that I didn't then. You do know how to be a father. You're actually really good at it.

I want to be your son, I really do. But it seems like up until now, I've really just been saying that I am. I haven't actually been being it. And that's where the money comes in. I'm just so used to looking after myself. But in doing that, I feel like I've missed out on some huge part of life, and as long as I remain a "quasi-independent adult," as you put it, I'll never know what I'm missing. You thought I didn't even realise you were supposed to support me, but I do realise that. It was just out of reach for me, if that makes sense. But now I think it's not.

So . . . would you take this key and put it away somewhere safe for me until I'm grown and out on my own?

With deepest respect,

Harry James Potter

Harry knew for a fact that Snape wasn't a slow reader, so the time he took over the note had to mean that he was reading it over several times. Finally, though, he looked up, his eyes about as dark and expressionless as Harry had ever seen them. Like endless tunnels, those eyes.

Except now, Harry didn't assume that meant that Snape had no feelings. Actually, he thought it meant the man was keeping his feelings hidden.

"Harry," Snape said at last, his voice rough as he looked into Harry's eyes, "This is . . . well done of you, but not necessary. I worry that you are trying to please me. Don't you realise . . ." The tunnels in his eyes flooded with emotion. It was masked in a moment, no more than a fleeting glimpse of something profound, but Harry had seen it. That was all that mattered. "You already do please me, faults and all."

"Thank you," Harry whispered, keeping their gazes locked, difficult as that was. He wanted to run away and hide. That would be easier than all this need, all this raw emotion. But that was because you were thinking of me. I knew you didn't want the key for yourself; you wanted it for me."

Snape shook his head. "I never wanted it at all. If you recall, I said I'd like you to put it away somewhere safe."

"Oh, right," Harry murmured, breaking his gaze away, finally. "I know. But that's just the thing, sir. You wanted me to put it away and not use it until I was really an adult, but I'm not sure I can manage that. Don't you understand? Since I was eleven I've had to handle my own financial needs! I don't think I can let you handle them unless I have to, and I won't have to unless I don't have my key, and I really, really want to know what it's like to have someone who will handle things like that for me." He swallowed back a sigh, wondering if he sounded as completely stupid to everyone else as he did to himself.

Draco certainly seemed to think he wasn't sounding any too smart. "It's just a vault, Harry," he
interjected, ignoring Snape's warning glare to stay out of it. "I've had my own vault for forever, too."

"Look, I know you have your own problems, but they're not the same as mine," Harry wearily explained. "You weren't raised by people who constantly told you how much they resented spending any money on you. I didn't have a childhood, okay? I want one now, and whether it makes sense to you or not, that money's in the way."

Snape extended a black length of candy. "Have some liquorice," he said, strangely reminding Harry of Remus and his chocolate-solves-anything obsession. Not that Remus really thought that. It just seemed that way, sometimes.

"I appreciate the gift, Harry," Snape said, but since the key was still where he'd set it, atop a fold of tissue, Harry didn't know what he meant.

"The liquorice?"

"The trust."

Harry tore off a bite of liquorice and nodded. So that was it, then. No flowery speech, but he wouldn't expect one from Snape. "I already did trust you, though. I'm sure you know that," he pointed out.

"Yes. This, however . . ." Snape fingered the note Harry had written, and reaching beneath his jumper, slipped it into his shirt pocket. The key followed. "This is trust made real."

"Yeah," Harry mumbled. Now that it was done, he was nervous already. Almost regretting it. That key had been a source of security to him for over five years. However bad the Dursleys had gotten, Harry had known that he had options. Choices. A way out if he ever really couldn't stand it any longer.

And now all that was gone.

Now, all he had was Snape.

But that's all he should need, right? The man was his father, had been for a while already. Harry knew it was true, knew it was legal, knew it was real, but somehow, it hadn't felt as real as it should have.

Snape had been right, Harry thought. He just plain didn't know how to be anybody's child. But he was going to learn. He was going to learn by experience, as his father had said.

And nothing as stupid as money was going to stand in his way.

Steeling himself even though he had no fear whatsoever of being rejected, Harry shifted close to his father and gave him a quick hug. Strange . . . it was harder than last time, but then again, that one had been spontaneous. This one though, was more important. It was sealing something.

"Happy Christmas, sir," Harry said when he pulled away.

"It certainly is," Snape answered, his dark eyes once more fathomless. For all that, though, Harry could tell his father meant every word.
"Well, that was without a doubt the best Christmas I've ever had," Harry said a few days later as they were getting ready to Apparate from the cottage.

"But the worst-cooked goose," Draco added, chuckling.

"I told you Incendio wouldn't work," Harry scolded. "It has to roast slowly. We went over that!"

Draco shrugged. "I thought it was worth a try. How was I to know that Severus couldn't make it raw again with a wave of his wand? I thought we'd be able to start over!"

"Instead we had burnt goose for Christmas dinner!" For all that though, Harry was laughing. It hadn't been any big deal, especially since the house-elves had packed loads more food than they'd really needed.

"You are both ready to depart?" Snape interrupted the good-natured argument.

"No, I need a moment more," Draco murmured. He popped open his floating trunk and pulled something from it. "Here, Harry. I never got around to giving you this. I was going to say, 'I hope you get well soon . . .' Hmm, I suppose I can still say that, only I'll make it, 'I hope your magic gets well soon,' all right?"

A heavy weight settled in Harry's palm as he took the gift wrapped in foil and ribbon. This time though, it was gold foil with crimson ribbon. Harry set his duffel down and fingered the gift uncertainly. "You . . . you said it was hexed?"

Draco smirked a bit. "Well, it is. Just a bit. But not in any bad way."

Harry didn't understand, but since he didn't think Draco was out to hurt him, he went ahead and tore off the wrappings.

What emerged from the foil was a tiny figure of a griffin. Silver-coloured, no taller than three inches, it sat on its haunches in Harry's hand, eyes closed and wings neatly folded in. The moment Harry breathed, however, it came to life, furling out its wings and puffing out its chest as it gave a tinny little roar. The griffin began looking around, darting a fierce emerald glare all about. Harry lifted it closer and decided those eyes were definitely gemstones.

"This is very interesting," Harry said, returning his gaze to Draco, who actually looked a tad nervous. "A Griffin, but in Slytherin colours? Are you so sure you bought this back before I got adopted?"

"Yes. I'd just seen you at Samhain, remember. And I remember being impressed with your cunning. You hit Severus just to keep up appearances, when all the time you were relying on him to save you . . . things which I figured out later, obviously. But when they said I could see you in hospital, I thought . . . he's brave like a Gryffindor's supposed to be, but there's more to him than that . . ."

Draco suddenly grinned. "Besides, you were blind. You weren't going to know the griffin was platinum."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "This isn't silver?"

"Oh, please. Silver . . . that's practically an insult, you know."
"Your amulet's on a silver chain," Harry reminded him.

"Oh, well that's different, as you were raised with different standards," Draco retorted, reaching below his collar to pull up the turquoise disk and dangle it for a moment before tucking it back away. "I like the amulet, Harry. Really."

Harry sneaked a glance at Snape. "Well, I hope so. Because unless I can get . . . ah, Severus here to give me some sort of allowance, I won't have any money for Christmas next year."

"What happened to your cunning?" Snape smoothly inquired. "That's about the least subtle way of raising the subject I can imagine."

"No, the least subtle would be 'How much is my allowance?" Harry joked. He was a little bit put out when Snape didn't comment further. Harry really had been wondering what he'd do when he needed money.

"So, the hex is that the griffin moves?" Harry asked, turning back towards Draco.

"That part's a charm. The hex is . . . if you're holding it when someone who truly hates you approaches . . . it'll try its best to bite them."

"That's a bit nasty."

Draco gave him a bland look. "Useful, I'd say. It's not a bad thing to know who your enemies are."

Harry understood, then. "And you were going to make sure I knew, in hospital, that the griffin wouldn't bite you?" He shook his head. "That wouldn't have proven much. I'd just have thought you were lying about the meaning of the spells."

Draco shrugged. "It was all I could think of to do." As if still needing to prove himself, he reached out a finger and stroked the griffin's back, right between the wings. The little figure purred.

"It means a lot that way back then, you were already trying to make sure I knew you wanted to be a friend," Harry murmured. "Thank you. Hmm, Slytherin colours . . . it's almost like you had foreknowledge."

"You mean that you'd end up as Severus' son?" Draco openly scoffed. "After five years of Potions class with you, how could I possibly doubt that? You've always had such a deep and abiding love for one another!"

Harry and Snape exchanged a significant glance then . . . but neither of them spoke until Snape briskly announced, "I'll charm Sals into a bracelet again, now." He did it with a single touch of his wand. "Draco, can you Apparate back to the safe-house on your own or shall I return for you?"

After hearing about Draco having splinched his own hand off, Harry shuddered at the question. The Slytherin boy, however, lightly said, "Apparate away. I'm right behind you. And so looking forward to flooing back to the dungeons where I'll no doubt remain confined until the next school holiday."

"You might try thanking him for the lovely time he's given us," Harry pointed out. "He didn't have to let us out at all, you know, or open his home to us--"

"Harry, this is your home too," Snape sighed.

"Oh, right . . ."
"Well, I for one have had quite enough father-son moments this holiday," Draco announced, sounding suddenly put out. "So I'll just travel ahead of you both, shall I?"

With no more warning than that, he was vanishing on the spot.

"I'll talk to him about his attitude. Again," Snape told Harry.

"No, please don't," Harry begged. "Draco's usually all right, and times like this . . . I think you ought to let him . . . um, vent."

Snape looked doubtful, but waved a hand to indicate that for the moment, he'd hold off any rebukes. Pulling Harry into his arms, he held the boy to his chest and absorbed the shock of Apparition as he whisked them both back to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place.

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The next morning after Snape had flooed up to his classroom office, Harry was surprised to see Draco already back to writing letters.

"The other students won't arrive for three more days," Harry pointed out, pulling up a chair to the dining room table. "Can't your endless letters to Slytherin wait?"

Draco barely glanced up as he replied, "It's a thank you note."

"Who do you need to thank?"

That had the Slytherin boy looking at him. "The headmaster, Harry," he said in a patronizing tone. And then, when Harry still looked blank, Draco went on, "The socks?"

Harry was really quite startled, but since Draco did have perfect manners --not that he always put them to use-- he thought to ask, "Oh . . . think I should write one, too?"

Draco's golden eyebrows drew together. "You mean even with your thanking-people thing, you've been neglecting the requisite cards?"

"Just take it for read I was raised by people with no manners, all right, and explain."

That familiar, superior look descended on the Slytherin boy's features. "Well, it's really very simple, Harry. If someone's given you a gift, you either thank them in person at the time, or write them a card at your earliest possible convenience."

Draco sounded like he was quoting someone, most likely his mother, Harry assumed, but he also sounded serious, so Harry nodded. "Okay, got it. Um, do you have some cards I can borrow?"

Draco pushed a sizeable stack across the table. "That's the drawback to being so popular, Potter," he snarked. "The thank you cards."

"Yeah," Harry realised, counting on his fingers without realizing it. "I'd better do Dumbledore, and Neville, and Ginny, and . . ." His voice changed to a more contemplative tone. "Oh, Hermione . . ."

"Now that's a card I'd give my eye-teeth to see," Draco hinted, an absolutely enigmatic smile brightening his expression.

Harry was hardly moved. "Forget it, it's between Hermione and myself."

"Oh, fine." Draco gave a reasonable imitation of a long-suffering sigh. "Well, my cards are done for
the year. All one of them. I used to get loads of presents, I hope you know. The Malfoys are connected to just about everybody and they all wanted to curry favour with my father."

"But now you've got Professor Snape's respect," Harry pointed out. "Not to mention a chance at missing out on Azkaban, where you were definitely going to end up, the way you were headed--"

"I didn't say it wasn't worth it, Harry," Draco interrupted as he stood up. "It's just . . . more adjusting than you probably realise."

Harry could have pointed out that he'd had to adjust to magic being real, and then to losing his. In the end, though, all he said was, "I'll get cracking on these cards, then."

Draco left him to it.

Some of the cards practically wrote themselves.

Dear Neville, Thanks for the chocolate-covered raspberries. It was good of you to remember those were my favourites. Every time I eat one I remember how you came down here and said I was still your friend and house mate and even Seeker when I'm all better. That means the whole world to me, Neville. You're a great friend and I want to see a whole lot more of you, all right? Don't let Snape scare you away. He takes some sort of perverse joy in putting the fear of Merlin into Gryffindors, but I don't think he can help it. I know for sure that he wants me to be happy even if that means having Gryffindors swarming down here, okay . . .

Dear Colin & Dennis, Wow, an entire photo album stuffed with nothing but pictures of me. I'll be sure to give a present like that all the attention it deserves . . .

Dear Dudley, I was really impressed when I saw your present sitting right there on Christmas morning. You did a great job navigating all that complicated Mrs. Figg/owl post stuff it takes to get things to me. I hope you liked the Wizard Chocolate I sent you. You can believe the label, it's got no sugar and no fat, and the store swore it'd taste just as nice to Muggles as it does to wizards. Anyway, I just wanted to be sure you weren't alarmed at the idea. It's not like the wizard candies you ate a couple of years ago, promise. It won't do a thing to you except make you smile from ear to ear. Your own present to me was really thoughtful. I know it probably seems amazing but I've never had a diary before. I bet it's right, what Marsha wrote on the note you tucked inside . . . keeping a journal might be a pretty healthy way for me to sort through some of my feelings. And boy, do I have some things to sort through. You know how I told you that Professor Snape wasn't so much the "dad" type? I'm starting to think he really is, and I'm starting to realise more and more how much I want just that. Anyway, it's a lot to come to terms with. Tell Marsha "hi" from me, okay, and that the journal was a super idea . . .

Dear Professor Dumbledore, Thank you very much for the nice purple furry socks you sent me for Christmas. I'd also like to thank you for porting all my presents out to the cottage. It was a wonderful surprise to wake up Christmas morning and see that so many of my friends had remembered me . . .

Dear Parvati, I'd forgotten what it was like to wear glasses until I slipped on those charmed ones you sent me. They made the whole world look like a kaleidoscope. Too bad I didn't have a pair to wear during Binn's history lectures. It would have been nice to have something interesting to watch. Thanks so much for thinking of me this Christmas . . .

Dear Ginny, The best present in the whole world was that well-wish you handed me a few days before the holidays. I know it was from all of Gryffindor, but it means a lot to me that you presented
it and that you wished Professor Snape well, too. I hardly expected anything more, but then to find
that you'd sent me a Christmas present of a book on well-wishes... that's really special beyond
measure. I'd like to say that I've unravelled the entire well-wish by now, but Severus is insisting that I
figure out without help what plants are even in it. (Long story, but basically, I cheated on the well-
wish Draco gave me.) Anyway, once I figure out the plants, I'll be using the book you gave me to see
just what Gryffindor wished for me...

And finally, after he'd written still more cards, Harry got to the one most on his mind. It didn't
exactly write itself, but after three drafts Harry gave up on trying to not let his irritation show at all.

Dear Hermione, it read,

Thank you for the psychology book. It'll be nice to have my own copy. Up until now, I've been
borrowing the one Professor Snape bought right after Samhain. Same book! But really, if it's the
book Severus chose when he realised I needed help, you can be sure it's an excellent text indeed.
Actually, I've been reading it for weeks and I can vouch for it. If not for this particular book, I don't
know if I'd have ever really been able to accept Severus as my father. You might be interested to
know that even Draco has pored all through it, too. He thought it had great potential for helping me
understand myself better. So see, I just knew the two of you had something in common...

Harry sealed up all his letters and left them on the middle of the table where Snape couldn't fail to
miss them. Also... where he'd be able to see if Draco tried to charm them open or something. He
liked Draco these days, but a Slytherin was still a Slytherin.

"Mr Weasley will be down here after dinner in the Great Hall ends," Snape announced on the first
evening after classes had resumed.

Harry dropped his fork into his mashed potatoes, then hurriedly picked it back up and tried for a
nonchalant tone. "May I ask why?"

Snape's dark eyes seemed even more heartless than usual as he replied, "There's a little matter of a
consequence for his ill-considered comments."

Harry could think of only one reason why Ron would have to come to Snape's quarters for his
consequence. "Please," he entreated, "don't make him apologize to me. That'll just make everything
worse, sir."

Snape's nostrils flared. "No doubt that particular young man wouldn't apologize even if I flayed him
to the bone." Catching the look on Harry's face, he went on, "Oh, don't look so dire. I assure you,
I've an entirely more... civilized chastisement in mind for your erstwhile friend."

"Personally, I think the flaying sounds fine," Draco remarked, tipping his head back as he downed
the rest of his wine. That was unusual. The Slytherin boy usually sipped at it with great solemnity,
and to Harry's surprise, had never once drunk enough to even get tipsy. Tonight he seemed to be
inviting it, though. He poured himself another full glass, then frowned when Snape pointed his wand
at it and evanescoed half the contents away. "Spoil-sport," the boy muttered.

"Better that than spoiling for a fight," Snape sternly countered. "I didn't insist Mr Weasley come
down here so that matters could become even worse. Is that understood, Draco?"

"Yes, sir."

Snape was hardly satisfied. "If you can't keep a civil tongue in your head I fully expect you to keep
yourself occupied in your bedroom or the Potions laboratory, is that understood?"

Draco's answer to that was to push off from the table, stalk to his bedroom, and slam the door.

"And as for you," Snape continued with scarcely a pause, "I trust you'll remember that Mr Weasley is down here for punishment, not to socialize."

"He's hardly going to want to socialize with me," Harry pointed out.

"All the same, you're to leave him to his consequence. Comport yourself as though he's not here at all, in fact."

"Fine!" Harry snapped, a little unnerved. "What is his punishment, anyway? I mean, since you obviously feel that ruining his Christmas wasn't vindictive enough."

"Oh, he merely has to write lines," Snape said, waving his wand to clear away the dishes.

"Write lines? "Oh, God, don't," Harry begged, pulling up his sleeve where the faint tracings of an old punishment were still etched into his hand.

"I'm frankly insulted you could compare me to that imbecile Umbridge," Snape scathed, reaching out to shove Harry's sleeve back down over the offending scar. "For the record, Potter, I don't physically torture students to make a point, any more than I experiment on them or transfigure them when they offend me!"

Taken completely off guard, Harry stammered, "I . . . I didn't think you knew about Umbridge, sir . . . ."

"You told me when you were babbling after your operation. As you weren't in your right mind, you claimed it was Lockhart, but I reasoned it out. Pity the Scaradicate Salve didn't heal it after Samhain, but a blood quill causes a curse scar to form."

"I didn't mean to imply you'd make Ron use a blood quill!" Harry objected.

"Then what did you mean, pray tell?" Snape inquired in what was possibly the snidest voice Harry had ever heard him use.

"I . . . I don't know! I just know you said write lines and I couldn't help but think of the last time I had to, and it was awful sir, just absolutely awful!"

"No doubt Mr Weasley will believe his punishment equally awful though it involves nothing but a regular quill and parchment," Snape scathed. "Such is self-pity, a trait most adolescents possess in exceeding abundance. Thank Merlin you have less of it than your peers. With your history, were you inclined to self-pity, we'd all drown in the tears."

Harry wasn't actually sure if that had been an offhand compliment or just more Ron-bashing. "If all Ron has to do is write lines," he decided to ask, "why does he have to do it down here?"

He wondered if Snape would be honest and open enough to reply, So I can berate him to his face for hours on end, of course . . .

"So he can't cheat," Snape snarled. "Or did you think that was the exclusive province of Slytherins? Half-Slytherins, in your case. I won't have him duplicating lines by magic, or even using a self-inking quill. He's going to write his lines out the old-fashioned way and think about the error of his ways."
Personally, Harry thought that writing lines wouldn't make Ron do any such thing. It would just make him resentful, and angrier at Harry, probably. He also thought, though, that Snape wouldn't react too well if Harry pointed out that Ron's behaviour was really more a family than a school matter. The man was mad enough already. Harry figured if he crossed one too many lines, Snape would take a huge number of points from Ron, just to make a point. Bit of a miracle, really, that he hadn't done that already.

Or at least, not that Harry knew of. But he felt fairly sure that Snape would have mentioned it if he'd adjusted the house counters.

"Yes, sir," Harry murmured. "I understand."

Snape gave him a look that seemed to say, *You don't understand nearly as much as you think*, which made Harry really wonder what his father was plotting. There was something Slytherin going on here, he was sure of it.

His lips twisting wryly, Harry decided that maybe Ron's real punishment wasn't lines at all. It was having to put up with a whole evening spent in the last place he would want to be.

Draco didn't come out when the door parchment announced Ron, which Harry took to mean that the Slytherin boy was going to make himself scarce -- as Snape had suggested. In the circumstances, Harry thought that a pretty smart move.

Snape went to open the door, and Harry followed along, a little anxious. He knew Ron wasn't likely to be in a good mood; Snape's detentions were *never* very enjoyable, and he knew how he'd have felt if last year, he'd been ordered to serve one in the Potion Master's private quarters . . . but still, it had been almost three weeks since Ron and he had had words. Didn't that mean the whole thing had probably already blown over?

Harry tried not to think about how fourth year, it had taken all the way until after the First Task for Ron to apologize for his behaviour.

"Mr Weasley," Snape greeted the boy, his voice about as deep and dark as Harry had ever heard it. Anger simmering just beneath the surface, it actually sounded sinister. Or . . . maybe malevolent. Like Snape was going to very much enjoy this particular detention.

For all Harry knew, though, he enjoyed them all.

"Professor," Ron replied in a sullen voice.

"Do come in."

As Ron moved past Snape, Harry saw that the boy was carrying a package wrapped in paper that featured a group of children grinning as they pulled Christmas crackers. Hope rose in him for just an instant, that everything was going to be all right---

Ron squelched the hope by shoving the present in Harry's general direction, averting his eyes as though even *looking* at Harry might contaminate him. "From my Mum," he ground out, adding, "If it was up to me I wouldn't so much as deliver it, but I don't want to get a month's worth of Howlers!"

Harry winced, gathering from *that* that Ron had endured a miserable Christmas, indeed.

"You aren't here to be rude to my son, Mr Weasley," Severus sternly announced, shutting the door
with a definite *thud*.

Not the least bit cowed, Ron said through his teeth, "Perhaps I ought to write my lines elsewhere, then, *sir*!"

"Perhaps you'll be writing another full set when you finish the first one, if you speak that way to Harry again," Snape informed him. Arms crossed, he glared down at the boy, almost daring him to object. When Ron didn't, the Potions Master gave a brisk nod. "Go to the dining table then, and get to work. I've laid out a quill and inkwell for you, but you may use your own parchment."

As Snape turned his back, Harry saw Ron mouth something rude. It looked a bit like *Thanks for nothing, you great greasy git,* but he couldn't be sure.

Ron pounded his way across the room, slammed his bookbag onto the table, and with a muttered oath, flopped into a hard wooden chair. More noises followed as he violently fetched parchment from his bag, making a great show about how unfair he felt his entire consequence was.

Harry had felt the slightest bit sorry for him earlier. Now, Ron's complete unwillingness to acknowledge that he might deserve a comeuppance for his words made Harry glad Snape was making him write a few lines. He watched as Ron dipped his quill--actually splashing ink in the process--and began to scratch out a sentence. Curious as to what it was, Harry took a step toward the table. He got close enough to see Ron copying something, but not close enough to actually read it, before Ron was barking out, "Going to just *stare* at me all night long, are you, Potter?"

*Potter . . .* Now that made him mad, it really did.

"No, think I'll just have a look at this present and then write your Mum a chatty thank-you note," Harry gibed. "Anything you'd like me to tell her for you?"

Ron glared, but still didn't actually look at Harry. He was glaring at a point over Harry's left shoulder. "Yeah," he drawled. "Tell her there's a box of Sugar Quills I tossed in the trash. Ask her to give them to someone who might actually want them, since I *don't*.

Well, at least Harry knew now how well his Christmas present to Ron had gone over. "I'll be sure to mention that," he said, vindictively hoping Ron *did* get a Howler for such terribly childish behaviour. With that, Harry was doing some stomping of his own, going over to the couch and plopping down to rip open the box from Mrs. Weasley.

*Another jumper . . .* Gryffindor colours as usual. There was a plain parchment card atop it, though. That was different from previous years. A little apprehensive, Harry pulled it out and opened it to read,

*Harry dear,*

*Severus owled to tell us your splendid news. He also explained in rather distressing detail Ron's unfortunate reaction to the situation. Be that as it may, I want you to know that Arthur and I are very excited for you. Of course we've heard complaints about Severus for years and years from all the children, but honestly, what can you expect? Nobody ever likes their Potions instructor, and as much as I love Fred and George, I shudder at the thought of what they must have got up to in class. It's no wonder Severus feels a need to be strict with his students, Ron included, so don't you let any complaints from that quarter trouble you.*

*Arthur and I know Severus quite well from our work with the old crowd, and to tell you the truth, dear, I've never had cause to regard him with anything but respect. I know the two of you have
a bit of history to overcome, but all that really matters is that you feel comfortable taking that challenge on. I'm hoping that Ron will come to his senses soon. I'm also hoping that you'll remember one thing: Ron has always had a large family surrounding him. If he seems unsympathetic to your wanting a family bond with Severus, I'm sure it's because at heart, he can't imagine longing for a family. I'm afraid he rather takes us all for granted.

You're quite welcome to visit us at the Burrow whenever you wish, with or without Ron. You're special to us, Harry, and had things worked out differently, we'd have been pleased to include you in our family. Perhaps it's best this way, though. I think in some respects, Severus can support you in ways that would be beyond us.

Love,

Molly Weasley

Harry was smiling by the time he finished the letter.

"Good news?" Snape casually asked as he came out of his office, a pile of scrolls in his hands.

No longer in the mood to rub things in, Harry didn't want to say too much in front of Ron. "Yes . . . here, I'd like you to see. It's nice."

Snape took the letter and perused it with hooded eyes, then merely nodded. "As we finished revising all your lessons over dinner, this evening, I thought you might have time to help me with these essays?"

"Oh, sure." Harry started to walk down the corridor toward Snape's office.

"No, I thought we'd work at the table."

Was that just so he could supervise Ron's lines?

Shrugging, Harry took a seat opposite Ron --about as far away as he could get-- and unrolled a scroll at random. "Just spelling this time?" he checked, taking a green never-out quill from Snape's outstretched hand.

"Grammar as well, I should think," the Potions Master murmured, a frown between his eyes as he began to read. "You've a decent enough grasp of it. Just mark any awkward wordings, though if you have a question, don't hesitate to ask."

Ron, Harry noticed, was resolutely ignoring the activity around him. He hadn't even looked up when Snape had settled into the chair to his left. He just methodically kept writing, line after line after line, his face screwed up in an expression that was resentful yet stoic.

Harry started in on an essay, but the steady scratching noise of Ron's quill drew his attention across the table. Just what was Ron writing over and over? It was too far for Harry to really tell --not that he was great at reading upside down to begin with-- but whatever it was, it looked awfully long.

"Harry," Snape softly chided.

Shaking his head to clear it, Harry resumed checking spelling and grammar while Snape read for content and wrote scathing phrases about this or that student's complete incompetence in the subject. After about an hour, Harry began correcting essays Snape had already had his hands on. He tried not to read the red ink in the margins, but sometimes he couldn't help it. And when he did, he couldn't help but sigh.
"Problem?" Snape briskly inquired.

Harry bit his lip to keep from saying anything, but when Snape continued to stare at him expectantly, he murmured, "This commentary here . . . it's just that it's a bit harsh . . . don't you think? I mean . . . I'm sure this student doesn't actually have mush for brains."

Instead of growing immediately furious at Harry's presumption, Snape remarked, "Read the paragraph alongside my remark, and then tell me just how intelligent you feel Mr Higglesloth might be. Of course, my request assumes you fully able to appreciate the dangers inherent in inadequate ingredient preparation . . ."

As Snape's voice drifted off, Harry began to read the student's paper. Really read it for meaning. "Oh," he said, frowning. "I think the adder's tongue would cause the potion to come out wrong, somehow, if you pulped it like he's saying to . . ."

A hint of a smirk played about Snape's mouth as he confirmed, "The excess blood released would in fact cause a simple hair-growing potion to grow hair inward, causing extreme discomfort, and if the antidote was not administered promptly, quite an ugly death."

"Right," Harry murmured. "But could uh . . ." He glanced down at the parchment. "Henry . . . really have been expected to know that?"

"It was covered in lecture on no less than three successive days, in addition to being prominently mentioned in the text. No doubt you feel a bit sympathetic toward Mr Higglesloth because your own synthesis of text and lecture during second year was slipshod to say the least."

Harry made sure he kept his voice calm. "No, I'm sympathetic because telling him he has mush for brains isn't going to help him learn anything. I know how it feels to get comments like this on my essays--"

Ron muttered something under his breath, something which sounded like "Bet you don't any longer, do you . . ."

"Hey, Snape still grades me just as hard as ever, I'll have you know!" Harry objected. "Uh, I mean Professor Snape, er, Severus . . ."

Ron snorted loudly as he resumed writing.

"Harry, let me see that parchment," Snape calmly requested. Once he had it in hand, he used his quill to add something to it, then passed it across the table once more.

The comment now mentioned apparent mush for brains. "Well, that's better," Harry allowed, "but you're still going to hurt his feelings."

"Mr Higglesloth will survive," Snape dryly remarked. "You do understand that we'll be making this potion next week and I would prefer he take my admonition seriously? When it comes to a dangerous discipline like Potions, there is no place for coddling. I've never had a student die in class yet, and I don't intend to begin with Mr Higglesloth's unfortunate partner."

Another muttered comment from Ron. That time, Harry couldn't catch it at all, but Snape's finely tuned hearing picked it up.

"No, Mr Weasley," he drawled, "I did not mean that I sent students to the hospital wing so they would not die in the classroom proper."
Ron flushed in anger and pressed his quill harder to the parchment, actually snapping the tip of it off.

"You may sharpen it," Snape loftily informed him. "Using a knife. No magic."

Harry was a bit surprised Ron didn't throw the knife he fetched out of his bag. As it was, he used it with such vicious strokes that he butchered the quill.

"Here, let me," Harry said in an undertone after Snape had gathered up the scrolls and returned to his office.

Ron ignored him completely and finally managed to cut a decent end on his quill. Then, with an ostentatious show of having far more important things to do than talk to one Harry Potter, he bent over his lines again.

Completely sick of his attitude, Harry gave up on subtlety and grabbed a scroll Ron had already finished to read:

56. As the teaching staff at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is comprised of thoroughly dedicated professionals deserving of the utmost respect, I will earnestly endeavour not to impune Professor Snape's good name again.

57. As the teaching staff at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is comprised of thoroughly dedicated professionals deserving of the utmost respect, I will earnestly endeavour not to impune Professor Snape's good name again.

Harry lowered his voice to the barest whisper and leaned forward across the table. "Uh, not sure, but I think you spelled impune wrong."

"And you're his little proofreader these days, aren't you now?" Ron sniped, making no effort to moderate his own tone.

"Listen, I'd go barmy with boredom if I didn't have something to do down here."

"Oh, you love it here and I know it. Why else would you be so stinking proud of having him for a father?"

Before Harry could answer, a deeper voice called out from the office down the hall. "I should be hearing nothing but the scratch of a quill, Mr Weasley."

Ron openly glared, pulling back his lips in a horrible grimace that really made his whole face look very ugly.

Harry shook his head, and decided that he should probably just leave Ron to it. Gathering up Molly Weasley's letter, he headed for his room . . . then realised he was in no mood to deal with a fuming Draco. Sighing then, he sat down on the couch and began to figure out what he'd like to say in his thank you note to Ron's mother.

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It was much, much later when Snape came out again. Looking over Ron's shoulder, he announced, "Three hundred and twelve. Well, that's not much progress, is it? I'll see you back here again tomorrow then, I suppose."

The Potions Master collected the scrolls Ron had filled up, and banished them onto a shelf.
Ron didn't acknowledge the comment, or even say good-night to Harry. He just stuffed blank parchment back into his bag, threw Snape's quill down onto the table, and stomping to the door, shouted the charm that would open it and let him out.

"Well, that was certainly uncomfortable," Harry remarked as the door slammed shut with a resounding thud. "Just how many lines does he have to do, anyway?"

Snape tossed out the answer in a casual tone. "Oh, a mere ten thousand."

Harry felt his jaw drop. "Ten thousand?" he echoed. "Ten thousand? That'll take him weeks!"

"Will it."

"You know damned well it will!"

"What I know," Snape said with that same nonchalant attitude, "is that Mr Weasley will think twice before he maligns me again."

Still outraged, Harry objected, "But you said yourself that he didn't really believe the rubbish he was spewing--"

"And has it not occurred to you that that circumstance makes his behaviour all the more reprehensible? If he genuinely thought you were being . . . assaulted down here, his invective would be more understandable. As his sole motive appears to be jealousy, however--"

"Jealousy!" Harry gasped. "But he's got a family all ready! What he's got to be jealous of?"

Snape's dark gaze sought his out. "That you might now have loyalty to someone besides your clique of Gryffindors?"

Harry laced his fingers together. "Not might, Professor. I mean . . ." He swallowed. "Severus. But that just sounds so wrong to me . . . I mean, I feel like I'm being disrespectful! What kind of son calls his father by his first name? And I know, I know, Professor is just ridiculous sounding, but I've never called anyone Father, and when I try I feel like I've been slammed down into an old-fashioned Muggle novel or something, it just doesn't feel natural--"

"Breathe, Harry," Snape dryly advised. "I think you're putting yourself under too much pressure over the whole matter. Or perhaps it's Draco who's applying the pressure. For my part, I care little what you wish to call me. Other things are of far more import."

"But you said to call you Severus," Harry weakly pointed out.

"I said to consider it," Snape corrected. "It was never my intention for the issue to torment you. I think if you merely give yourself more time, you will find that it resolves itself. A Muggle saying might be apropos . . . Thebes wasn't built in a day."

"I think that was Rome," Harry murmured.

"Ah. Yes, perhaps."

"Okay," Harry said, feeling more relaxed. Snape was right. He hadn't even been adopted a month yet, so it was probably completely normal not to have it all figured out. "About these ten thousand lines you've assigned Ron, then--"

"Harry," the man interrupted. "Cast your memory back to Christmas day. I believe we are
experiencing one of those times we discussed, when we disagree about the best course of action. You have a definite opinion, but with my superior experience, I know precisely what will best instruct Mr Weasley. I intend to proceed accordingly."

"Yeah, but ten thousand times? Come on! Don't you think five thousand would get the point across? Or two thousand, even? And did you have to assign him such a long, smarmy sentence?"

"It's not up for debate," Snape told him, his tone stern. "I suggest you drop the matter, now." Then, his voice a tad more contemplative, the man continued, "Perhaps we should discuss instead another issue that's been on your mind. Namely, arrangements for what you termed an 'allowance'?"

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Oh, that's very Slytherin. You were saving that, weren't you, for a time just like this, when you wanted to change the subject!"

"Is it so very wrong not to wish to argue with my son?"

Put that way, Harry supposed it wasn't.

"How much money do you feel a rational amount for a young man your age?" Snape pressed.

*Slytherin was right . . . definitely right.*

"Oh, fine," Harry gave in. "Let's discuss an allowance."

He could always bring up Ron's punishment again later, he decided. After all, his father wasn't the only one in this family with a Slytherin sense of timing.
With ten thousand lines to complete, Ron had to come down to the dungeons night after night after night. The first few evenings remained as strained as the first. Draco managed not to hex Ron into oblivion, but only by hiding out in his room. After about a week of that, though, the Slytherin boy grew tired of his self-imposed imprisonment. He came out and joined the family, so to speak, doing his lessons at the table right alongside Harry... though he acted like Ron nearby was nothing more than a patch of thin air.

With the school term well underway, Harry's evenings fell into a familiar pattern.

Dinner first, usually with Snape but occasionally alone with Draco. Before Christmas, they'd almost always ordered *whatever suits* from the kitchens. Now, with some new spirit of camaraderie seeming to be growing between them, Draco suggested they take turns "setting the menu," as he put it. Harry couldn't decide if it was a way for Draco to make sure that Harry was actively practicing what little magic he could—as the Floo had continued to work for him—or if the Slytherin boy was making some other kind of point. Like... he was trying to be less of a complete snob? He wanted to seem accepting of Harry's Muggle background? Harry couldn't be sure. For all he knew, Draco was just in the mood to try a few new foods.

It was sort of interesting to watch his reaction to Harry's picks. For instance, Draco absolutely detested meatloaf. One bite, and he was claiming, complete with theatrical little shudder, that whoever decided steak tartare would be better off cooked should be sentenced to life in Azkaban. On the other hand, he liked pot roast so much that Harry wouldn't be surprised if Draco got it the next time they asked for whatever suits. For his part, Harry found out that *gigot d'agneau à la provençale* was actually pretty good stuff. *Escargot*, on the other hand, was awful, and not just because it involved eating snails. The things were tough and rubbery, and doused in too much garlic. Harry tried just one that night, and then discreetly hid the others under his salad.

"No subtlety at all," Draco had lamented. "And *such* a waste of fine *escargot*.

"You can have them," Harry had offered.

"It's not quite the done thing to help yourself to unwanted food from a dining companion's plate," Draco had explained with a soft laugh at the very idea.

So much for Draco Malfoy trying to be less of a complete snob.

Even when Snape ate in the Great Hall—at least Harry *hoped* he was eating there and not skipping meals again—he arrived home shortly after dinner. Sitting at the table with Harry and Draco, he would steadily revise all their lessons with them. On most evenings, Ron arrived while they were still doing this. He would sit down at the table without a word, drag out a long scroll of parchment, and taking up the quill Snape left out, get straight to work. After the first few evenings, he no longer bothered to bang his materials around or glare. He just sat there and wrote.

And wrote, and wrote, and wrote.

The same long sentence, over and over, until Harry could hardly stand the sound of that quill scratching along. He couldn't even imagine how Ron must feel.
Sometimes during the evening Harry would glance at Ron out of the corner of his eye to check just what number he had got to. Two thousand sixty one . . . then several nights later it was four thousand five hundred and three . . .

He'd taken the matter up with Snape again, of course. More than once. The Potions Master hadn't got angry with Harry's attempts to interfere -- in fact he seemed to tolerate them with fairly good humour, for Snape-- but neither did he budge. Not one inch. Harry couldn't even talk Snape down to say, nine thousand five hundred lines.

Poor Ron . . . By then, Harry had to think his friend had learned his lesson. He wouldn't insult Snape again . . . or at any rate, not like that. Of course that didn't mean that Ron and Harry were on better terms. The other boy still wouldn't look at him.

But at least he wasn't glaring and muttering angry little comments any longer.

Harry actually wondered how much of that was due to the lines, and how much he owed to his fellow Gryffindors. They were visiting quite often, usually in the free time students had between their last class and dinner. And almost without exception, at least once each visit someone would claim to be "working on" Ron. Usually that was Ginny. Sometimes it was Neville or Seamus. Sometimes, it was even Hermione.

As much as Harry appreciated the support, he almost wished they wouldn't bother haranguing Ron, though. How much was a friendship worth if the friend couldn't see on his own that there was something there worth preserving?

Hermione came down at least two or three times a week, at times with others, but more often alone. The first time she arrived after Christmas, she'd been by herself. Harry soon found out why; she had some words for him about his thank you note. She actually implied that Harry had been joking about already having read the book, but she'd shut up quickly enough when Harry fetched the copy he'd never returned to Snape and set it alongside the one she'd given him.

Shortly after that, the conversation had taken a turn towards the truly bizarre.

"I think Harry's in denial about his powers," Draco had seen fit to inform Hermione. "That is, he'd prefer not to have to battle the Dark Lord, and this is how he's coping with that desire. What would be your view?"

Hermione's jaw practically hit the floor. Not a good look for her, Harry decided, even if he couldn't blame her for being shocked beyond belief. It was one thing for Draco to put on his best manners and converse with Harry's guests . . . he'd done that before. Plenty of times, by then. But treating Hermione's intelligence with respect and even eliciting her opinion . . . Draco had never, ever behaved that way before.

"Ah . . . there might be a physiological cause for his powers to be lying dormant just now," Hermione had rallied. "After all, Harry did have a . . . er . . ."

Correctly interpreting the hesitation clouding her eyes, Harry put in, "It's all right. Draco knows about the bone marrow extraction and all the rest."

She gave him a look as if to say, Is that wise?

"Draco's on my side," Harry explained, not that he expected Hermione to take his word for it.

Another look, but that time Hermione couldn't hold in her worries or her indignation. "He's a Malfoy!"
"Yes, and your parents are Muggles, aren't they?" Draco drawled. Harry tensed, expecting something truly dreadful to come out his sneering mouth . . . except, he wasn't actually sneering. Not then. "But you're a witch."

"And your point is?" Hermione coolly inquired.

"What my father is doesn't determine what I am."

The Gryffindor girl primly crossed her legs and leaned back into the couch. "I think we've all known what you are for approximately the last five years. Or was that not you calling me a Mudblood all those times?"

Draco began to look extremely frustrated at that. Probably because while he knew that all those Mudblood comments really did put his loyalties in extreme doubt, it just wasn't his style to apologize. Especially not to Hermione Granger.

Especially not to Hermione Granger.

Harry had to hand it to him though; Draco really did try his best to get past all that.

"Truce," he suggested, drawing his wand and extending it towards Hermione with the blunt, fat end pointing her way.

Hermione glanced down at it. "If you think I'm going to touch my wand to yours to say all is forgiven, you're crazier than a loon. Besides, that's a pure-blood tradition and you've just taken great pains to point out that I'm not one!"

"It's a wizarding tradition and what I just pointed out was that you are in fact a witch!"

"It's a stupid, hypocritical tradition," Hermione railed. "Do you know how many wand-truces have been broken almost the moment they were sworn?"

"No, but I bet you do," Draco coolly returned. "No doubt you've done exhaustive research to determine the exact count."

His wand was still extended. Hermione glared at it as though it were covered in something warts or something.

Shrugging, Draco shoved it into a trouser pocket as he rose to his feet. "Suit yourself." Then, just as if he hadn't been snubbed the moment before, he was blithely going on, "I'm going to have a glass of honeyade. Would you like some as well, Hermione?"

Hermione? Draco hadn't called her that since the time he'd dedicated himself to being a sarcastic little snot. There was no sarcasm about him now, though.

"I prefer my honeyade without poison, thank you very much," Hermione smartly returned, lifting her pert little nose in the air.

The insult seemed to slide right over the Slytherin boy. Harry couldn't tell if Draco had even noticed it. "Harry?"

"Uh sure, honeyade," he agreed, narrowing his gaze at Hermione. "It wouldn't kill you to be polite," he grated in a harsh whisper the moment Draco had moved off a bit.

"Harry, all this time with Slytherins is really affecting you," she countered that, leaning forward to
gaze earnestly into his eyes. "I didn't say that about the poison to be rude. It's a distinct possibility! How can you not be aware of that? I'm really worried about you!"

Harry didn't mind so much if Hermione didn't care to trust Draco--look at how long it had taken him to come around, and he'd been with the boy day in, day out for weeks and weeks. What he did mind, though, was her singular conviction that she knew what was best for him.

"All this time with Slytherins," he mocked. "Don't you get it? I am one, Hermione."

She shook her head. "That's just a technicality. I read about it in Hogwarts: A History. Parents on staff and all that. You might be in Slytherin too, but you aren't actually anything like a Slytherin, Harry!"

Draco came back and handed Harry a glass of honeyade, then remained standing as he drank his own, his eyes carefully studying the two of them.

"Yes, I am," Harry insisted. "I told you, the Sorting Hat said I'd be great there, tried to put me there, but I wouldn't agree. So it sorted me into Gryffindor, because I'm that, too. Come on, we're all of us more complicated than just one set of traits, don't you think? I bet if you'd have objected to Gryffindor, the Hat would have sent you into Ravenclaw. Now me, Hermione. I've always been both. The only thing different now is that it's official."

Hermione was still shaking her head. Stubborn, stubborn girl. "That's just plain ridiculous, Harry. You aren't even a pure-blood, not by their definition of the term."

"Harry told me I was too focussed on bloodlines," Draco broke in to say. "But have you ever listened to yourself, Hermione?"

"Stop calling me Hermione! And as for being focussed on bloodlines, you're fine one to talk. Everybody knows that Slytherins are focussed on practically nothing but!"

"There are Muggleborns and half-bloods in Slytherin," Draco told her, a slightly self-deprecating smile curling his lips. "Which I point out only to correct your blatantly inaccurate stereotypes. These days I'm trying not to think in those terms. Trust a Gryffindor to force me back into bad habits."

_Had habits?_ Hermione mouthed at Harry, looking a little bit baffled for an instant. The expression sat rather oddly on her face. Then she rallied, "What Muggleborns and half-bloods?"

Draco made a _tsking_ noise with his tongue. "Such ignorance. It's positively shocking."

"Draco," Harry warned in a low tone.

"Right," he said, some trace of cunning sliding in and out of his eyes as Harry watched. "I suppose you wouldn't know so many students in Slytherin. Not that I blame you for that; I couldn't have named all the members of that little Gryffindor delegation you led down here. But I would have thought you'd be able to name at least one rather prominent half-blood who was sorted into my house." When the girl didn't answer, Draco drawled, "Tom Riddle?"

If there was anything Hermione didn't appreciate, it was being told she'd overlooked a salient point. "Well that just proves that Slytherins are evil, doesn't it?" she hotly retorted, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

"I'm a Slytherin!" Harry shouted. "I'm a Gryffindor and a Slytherin both, and that just proves that not all Slytherins are evil, doesn't it! Unless you're going to go with a theory that the enemy of your enemy is also your fucking enemy!"
"Er . . . maybe you should calm down before you burst a blood vessel, Harry," Draco said, actually reaching down to touch Harry's shoulder. "Or, as Severus always tells you, breathe . . ."

Harry did, and then he shrugged off Draco's fingers. The touch didn't feel like needle pricks--Harry thought he was probably completely over that particular problem--but neither did he like it.

Hermione's eyes had gone so round that Harry had the feeling she was expecting him to strike Draco for that simple touch. Couldn't she understand? Actually, maybe she couldn't. The last time Hermione had tried to touch him, he'd upended his juice or something, he'd been so startled.

"We're friends," Harry softly said, and reaching out, caught her hand in his. "See? I'm better now. It doesn't bother me to have a little human contact. Not with any of my friends, Hermione."

She just looked at him sadly. "I'd better get to dinner," she murmured, "Ron needs the moral support, having to come down here night after night."

"Yeah, I tried asking Snape to cut that ten thousand back a tad but . . ." Harry sighed. "He's determined to really teach Ron a lesson."

"And that doesn't concern you, choosing a father who's just vindictive, Harry?"

"It does, but I'm not in charge of him, you know."

"You should be worried having a man like that in charge of you," Hermione announced, jerkily yanking herself to her feet. "What's going to happen when he gets mad at you, if he's as cruel as that to Ron? Have you thought of that, Harry? Have you?"

"Cruel would be demanding Ron be expelled," Harry coldly retorted, not appreciating her dire predictions one bit.

"Harry . . ." Hermione walked to the door, then turned around just before leaving. "This . . . what you think you have, it's all going to unravel. You can't depend on Snape for anything! Can't you see that?"

"Funny, the Order seemed to depend on him an awful lot. And guess why? He was dependable!"

"That's different!" Hermione shouted. "It's your emotional well-being I'm talking about! The man's a walking neurosis complete with vengeance fantasies against your father!"

"Professor Snape is my father!" Harry shouted right back.

"You think so now, but mark my words, it's all going to fall apart--"

"You'd better go," Harry interrupted. "Now. Before I start calling you a bleating sheep."

Hermione hung her head a bit, soft hair falling across the side of her face. "I don't want to argue," she softly averred. "I love you."

"I know." Harry drew in a breath. "Listen, Hermione. I know you care, but you've got to stop acting like Snape adopting me is the worst thing that ever happened to me. It's an insult to us both."

"I'm just so worried you're going to get horribly hurt, Harry . . ."

"Then I get hurt," Harry calmly replied. "I'd rather take that chance than go through life the way I had to before, without anyone I could really call family. If you want to worry, then worry. I can't stop you. But I just don't want to hear it any longer, all right? You make me feel like I'll have to
choose between friends or father. It's very bad of you to make me feel that way. And if you keep on . . . it's going to come between us, even though I love you too."

"I . . . I have to get to dinner," Hermione gulped, just before she fled.

Harry pushed the door closed and leaned against it, fighting an urge to knock his forehead into it a few dozen times.

"She loves you?" Draco said from behind him. "I thought she and Weasley . . .?"

"Not like that," Harry said without turning around. "We're friends."

"I stand by my observation that you have lousy friends."

Harry couldn't help but scoff as he whirled around to study the Slytherin boy. "You're a fine one to judge. What were Crabbe and Goyle?"

"Sycophants," Draco freely admitted. "But I knew they were that at the time."

"Let's just organize dinner," Harry sighed.

"One more thing," Draco said in a much harder tone. "Don't go begging Severus to reduce the Weasel's punishment again. Severus should be your top priority, not that foul-mouthed little prat who made such outrageous accusations."

"Severus seems not to mind discussing the matter," Harry retorted.

"I told you, didn't I, that you can't always tell when you're hurting a Slytherin!"

"Listen," Harry snapped. "He's my father, not yours, so stay out of it!"

He felt a little bad when Draco flinched . . . but not bad enough to call the words back.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

"You appear to be quite comfortable with the Floo now," Snape commented one evening as they all ate the coq au vin Draco had ordered.

Harry wasn't sure he'd go quite that far. Tossing in powder and shouting for food was a far cry from travelling anywhere unaided. Not that Snape would let him go anywhere alone at the moment, anyway. So why was he bringing the Floo up at all?

"Why don't you attempt a firechat with someone?" the man went on.

"I don't really want to stick my face in a fire," Harry said, shaking his head. "Just in case it burns off, you understand. It's bad enough having--"

Snape raised an eyebrow at the rather bald silence that ensued. When that didn't work, he verbally prompted, "Yes?"

Harry just shook his head again, which left it to Draco to quietly reveal, "His scar, Severus. He thinks it actually is hideous and disfiguring."

"Shut up, Malfoy," Harry grated.

"I told you, it's not ugly at all--"
"I know what it looks like, thanks," Harry cut him off.

Snape stepped into the conversation, then. "Harry, I've never got the impression that your scar bothered you overly much, except insofar as it sometimes causes physical pain."

Harry gave a sort of desperate little laugh. "Well, I try not to wander the halls whinging on about things that can't be changed, Professor."

"Draco is correct; it is not ugly--"

"It's not pretty either," Harry snapped. "But that's not why I don't like it. The majority of the world hasn't been blessed with Draco's perfect features, after all! It's what it means, all right? Two things, actually. That I've always had it instead of a mother, and that every person I've met since I was eleven assumes they know me inside and out the minute they see my face!"

Snape steepled his fingers, then solemnly nodded. "As you said, some things cannot be changed."

Harry appreciated, more than he could say, the respect he heard in that comment. "Yeah," he agreed, wanting to drop the subject. "Anyway, back to the firechat. I don't think it's such a good idea."

"I will be right next to you to pull you out if you experience any difficulty," Snape promised, his dark eyes unblinking.

"Plus, he's got plenty of burn salve on hand," Draco added. "Come on, Harry. What if your magic is a bit like a muscle, and you have to exercise it to make it grow stronger?"

"Samhain," Harry protested.

Usually, that word was almost like an incantation, it held so much power of its own. Harry could count on it to make the others back off. Not this time, though.

Draco openly scoffed. "You've already sent your whole body through the Floo, twice, so don't tell me you can't stand the thought of flames. It's like I told your Muggle cousin--"

"Don't call him that!" Harry erupted. "We all know he's not a wizard. You don't have to mention it every time he comes up! I thought you were going to be less focussed on blood!"

As a distraction, it didn't work so well. "Fine. It's like I told Dudley," Draco went on with hardly a pause. "You're just chicken."

"I hardly think names are going to help matters," Snape mildly inserted.

"Oh yeah?" Draco challenged. "Chicken!" he yelled. "Chicken, chicken, chicken!"

"Draco!"

"Oh, it's all right," Harry laughed. "It's pretty funny, him thinking I'm that easy to manipulate."

"Well, you are part Gryffindor," Draco drawled.

Harry jumped to his feet. "Don't you insult Gryffindor!"

Then it was Draco's turn to laugh. "And the boy thinks he's not easy to manipulate," he lightly sneered to Snape. Then with a more solemn air, he turned to Harry. "Sit down. Now, listen, because this time I'm not just trying to get under your skin. You're letting fear control you, and it has to stop."
"And there I thought I was simply avoiding recklessness," Harry countered.

"You're just avoiding danger," Draco corrected, leaning forward. "Or perceived danger, since there really isn't any. Where would you be if Severus had done the same? Do you have the slightest idea how dangerous it was for him to lie to the Dark Lord time and again?"

Harry sighed, recognizing the debt he owed. Turning toward Snape, he asked, "Who did you want me to firechat with, sir?"

"I thought perhaps you might like to speak with Hagrid."

Harry blinked. "Hagrid's hut is on the Floo Network?"

Snape's shrug was entirely too casual as he tossed out, "It is now. I asked the headmaster to arrange a connection."

"Well, that was certainly Slytherin of you." Exasperated, Harry shook his head. "I can't turn down a chance to talk to Hagrid and you know it. All right, fine. But . . . I would like you right beside me, like you said. Just in case."

"Certainly."

Draco, Harry noticed, was wrinkling his nose. He decided to ignore it, instead saying to Snape, "Hagrid came to see me in the hospital wing, a bunch of times, but it seems like forever since then. I expect the dungeons remind him of how Tom Riddle got him expelled, though, so I guess I can't blame him for keeping his distance."

"You could," Draco huffed, "blame him for never once writing."

"No, I couldn't," Harry disagreed. He'd never seriously expected a reply to any of his letters. Hagrid just wasn't big on the written word. It all went back to his not being able to spell so well. Standing, Harry strode over to the Floo powder, took some in hand, and knelt. "Let's do it, then."

As soon as Snape was kneeling beside him, Harry drew in a big breath and initiated the firechat, hoping "Hagrid's hut," was enough of a name to satisfy the Floo Network. Then again, Snape would have said something if it wasn't. The rush of fireplaces whirling past was nauseating, but Harry gripped the inside of the hearth tightly, his fingernails finding purchase against stone, and then it was over, and he was looking out at the interior of Hagrid's rather oddly furnished little cottage.

The half-giant's back was to him, but the moment Harry called his name, he whirled around, a blur of furry coat and patched leather boots, his enormous face breaking into a grin as he sat straight down on the floor to get close to the boy's face.

"Harry!"

Harry smiled, adjusting his position a little so it was easier to look up at the half-giant, who towered over him even when sitting on the floor. Then it occurred to Harry that kneeling on the hearthstones was a bit silly. Obviously, the Floo wasn't going to burn him up; if it was, he'd be singed by now. With that thought in mind, Harry started to crawl forward so he could have a proper visit with Hagrid.

Two things stopped him. One, the feel of strong hands suddenly grabbing his ankles and holding him in place from behind. And two, Hagrid's own hand on his shoulder firmly pushing him back until once more, only his face showed.
"Yeh better stay safe down in Professor Snape's rooms, Harry," Hagrid explained, his voice thrumming with gentle regret. "I'd not say no to a visit, yeh must know that much. Still, better safe 'n sorry, I always say."

"All right," Harry said, understanding. He really should have thought of that himself. Hagrid's hut wasn't warded with Dudley's blood, after all. Of course, Snape's cottage in Devon hadn't been, either, but that was a bit different. "I've missed you, Hagrid," he added.

For some reason, the half-giant blushed a bit. "Yeh saw me most ever' day when you was laid up in hospital."

"I didn't see you much at all," Harry weakly joked. He hadn't intended to discuss this, he really hadn't. He'd defended Hagrid to Draco and meant every word. But now that the others couldn't overhear, he realised he was blurtin', "Why haven't you come to visit me at Snape's? I know you're awfully busy with your classes and your creatures and all the rest, but Hagrid . . ." His voice broke.

"I thought we were friends!"

"Course we're friends, Harry," Hagrid assured him, one big hand reaching out to ruffle his hair just as though he were still eleven. "It's jus' that yer new father, he said--"

"Wait, you heard about my adoption?" Harry questioned. "Who told you, Hermione? Ron? One of the other Gryffindors?"

"Jus' hold up there a minute, Harry," Hagrid laughed. "Professor Snape told me hisself."

_Hall the staff will be informed at once, of course,_ Harry heard Snape saying in his mind. "Oh yeah, right," he murmured. "So what did Snape say? You were going to tell me something."

Hagrid appeared to debate with himself, his jaw sort of moving as he thought. "He came here to ask summat about yer snake," he finally told Harry. "Said the poor little mite was sleepin' in the Floo and likely to be gettin' sicker 'n a cursed niffler agin. Asked me what ter do. I thought a charmed box for sleepin' might be jus' the trick."

"It works great." Harry beamed his pleasure. "That was a really good idea, Hagrid. Sals hasn't misbehaved once since Christmas. That's when Snape, uh, Severus, gave me the box."

"I heard a fair bit 'bout yer snake, Harry. If yer father woulda let me visit, I da had me a good look at Sals ter see if she's summat magical."

"If my father would have let you visit?" Harry questioned, a dark suspicion growing in his voice.

"I shouldn'ta told yeh that," Hagrid realised with a twang.

"So that's why I haven't seen you for months!" Harry shouted, outraged. "It wasn't anything to do with you hating the dungeons! And what, you just agreed, Hagrid? I don't care if he is my father and these are his rooms, he's got no right trying to keep my oldest friend away!"

"Wasn't nothin' like that, and yer doin' Professor Snape wrong, sayin' it was," Hagrid said, shaking his head. "You was havin' trouble with yer magic, that's all, an' the Professor, he said it'd be best if when yeh was ready to use the Floo by yerself, yeh had a real good reason to want to."

"I still think it stinks!"

Hagrid balled his hands into meaty fists. "Would yeh've used the Floo ternight, Harry, if yeh'd seen me ever' couple a days since yeh got out of hospital? I don' fault yer father fer doin' what he thought
"Yeah, all right, Hagrid," Harry agreed, mostly because he didn't want to fight about it. "Um, you sound like you think it's all right how I got adopted. I'm getting a lot of that. It's really nice. But Ron and Hermione are being total gits. I don't suppose they've talked to you about it?"

"Yeh don't think on that, Harry," Hagrid advised. "Don't yeh think on that 'tall. If yer happy with Professor Snape, the rest'll sort itself out. Yeh'll see."

"Yeah, all right," Harry said again, though he had serious doubts about that.

"I got some treacle fudge right here. Want a piece?"

"Uh, no, Hagrid." Harry felt heat begin to wash over him. "I think I'd better go, actually," he admitted. "The Floo's starting to not work so well for me. 'Bye!"

He was already drawing back into Snape's living room when he heard Hagrid bidding him good-bye.

Harry collapsed on the hearth rug, panting, his face and shoulders blazing.

"Here, burn cream," he heard Draco's voice say, and then Snape was smoothing it over his face and neck. Harry sighed with relief-- Snape's salves were really very good--and once he felt a bit better, managed to sit up and shrug out of his shirt. Without a word, Snape applied the cream to his back as well, then let him do his own chest.

"Better?"

"Yeah." Harry glared, a little balefully. "I told you my magic wasn't strong enough for the Floo!"

"It should be strong enough to travel on your own," Snape corrected. "Staying in the fire long enough to chat requires more magic."

"Well, thanks for explaining that in advance!" Harry shouted.

Snape's nostrils flared. "Hagrid must have told you."

"Told him what?" Draco asked.

"Only that Severus here wanted to make sure I'd be willing to try the Floo, so he made Hagrid promise not to come visit me!"

"Oh, good thinking, Severus," Draco approved.

Harry saw red as he rounded on Snape. "Secrets are not good thinking! It was bad enough when you were just keeping things from me. Now you're actually creating things to keep secret!"

"Hardly a secret," Snape scorned. "Had you asked me about Hagrid, I would have told you that you could see him as soon as you were ready to brave the Floo. As it was, you left it to me to suggest you see your friend."

"Because I wasn't about to badmouth Hagrid for not visiting!"

"How was I to know that was your reason?" Snape asked, his tone so utterly reasonable that it made Harry long to throw something. "Were you keeping secrets from me?"
Harry stared for a long moment, and then gave in. "Oh, shut up," he muttered crossly. "It wasn't like that and you know it, but I don't want to fight."

"I've no wish to fight either," Snape assured him.

"So you'll tell Hagrid he can come down anytime?"

"That's not a capital idea. He frightens Draco something awful."

"I thought we weren't going to let fear control us," Harry sneered at the Slytherin boy.

"That's enough, Harry," Snape said in a stern tone. "You can firechat with Hagrid again sometime. We'll wait until your magic is a bit stronger. Until then, letters will have to do."

"It's not my fault Draco tried to get Buckbeak killed, or that he's been a snot in Creatures class ever since Hagrid got the job! I shouldn't have to be the one to suffer for it!"

"If you think that Draco is not suffering for his poor past decisions," Snape growled, "then you are sadly deluded!"

Harry supposed his father did have a point. "I need some more burn cream," he muttered, snatching it up and smoothing it up and down his arms. When he'd finished, he announced, "Guess I'll go to bed, then."

"It's pretty early," Draco put in. "Weasley isn't even here yet."

"I'm pretty tired!"

An exaggeration at best; Harry just didn't know how to cope at that moment. He wasn't going to get his way when it came to Hagrid; he could tell, and that realisation made him simply furious. How dare Draco tell the Potions Master not to let Hagrid come down!

How dare he not face his own damned fear, after he'd lectured Harry to do just that!

"What are we supposed to say when Weasley asks where you've got to?" Draco inquired, arms crossed.

"How about we tell the open, honest truth for once?" Harry sneered. "Tell him I'm mad at my father for deciding he has to Slytherin me into doing things instead of treating me like a reasonably intelligent wizard!"

A strange look crossed Draco's face. "Oh, I hardly think that's going to help matters."

Harry glanced at Snape to see that he, too, had a similarly odd expression. "What?"

It was Draco who replied, his gaze hard again by then. "Do you really want Weasley spreading it around Gryffindor that things are falling apart already? That Granger was right all along?"

"No," Harry admitted. As upset as he was, he didn't want to imply anything like that. Not to Snape, and certainly not to Hermione, who was just waiting for Harry to come crying to her.

"We'll tell him you're a bit under the weather, then," Draco announced, nodding with some sort of smug determination that baffled Harry. He had the feeling he was being left out of something. As usual.

"Snape better tell him," Harry sniped. "You're a terrible liar, remember?"
Draco turned to Snape, his eyes flashing with anger. "Let's tell Weasley that what Harry's got is life threatening. Then we'll see if this is all a waste of time, if he hates Harry!"

"If I wanted to check if he hates me, I'd ask him to pet the griffin!" Harry shouted. "But I haven't! Guess why not? It's a little thing called trust between friends! He's going through a hard patch, and Snape's just making it harder--" With that, Harry glared at his father. "Don't go mucking about with stupid stories that put me at death's door. This is between Ron and me!"

He turned to go, adding, "If Ron asks after me, just say I needed an early night."

Snape's voice forestalled him. "Harry." Expecting some sort of rebuke, Harry turned back, but all his father said was, "Do you still have an adequate supply of Painless Sleep Potion?"

Harry blinked. "Yes. Why would you ask . . . oh, the burn? No, it's just about gone, I think." He ran an experimental finger over his arms and neck. "Yeah, feels a bit like a sunburn, is all."

"Do not hesitate to come get me if you need anything," Snape said in a low tone.

Harry nodded.

"I mean it," Snape stressed. "You must wake me if you need me, is that clear?"

"I . . . yes, sir," Harry weakly answered. What did Snape think was going to happen? Nightmares? Wild magic? Or was this just one more Slytherin plot, Snape's way of trying to say he cared? Harry really did feel tired now. Too tired to fathom it all out.

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Harry lay in bed with the lights fully burning, because of course he still couldn't spell them off. The heat of them slightly irritated his reddened skin, but after that scene out in the living room, he wasn't about to go ask Draco for help. He'd rather lay in the blazing light all night long than say three friendly words to the Slytherin boy.

It was difficult to stay angry with Draco for long, though, considering what happened when he came to bed. Actually, first he did all the usual things, including singing those pretentious foreign songs in the shower. But then, as Draco was sliding between his sheets, he murmured, "Harry? Are you still awake over there?"

Harry debated answering, then finally called, "Yeah. Um . . . did Ron ask where I was?"

"No." After a moment, Draco added, "Sorry," but Harry thought he didn't sound sorry at all about it. In fact, he sounded glad, which made Harry want to throttle him, but only until something else occurred to him.

"Draco," he ventured. "Um . . . maybe you don't know this, but a person can have more than one friend."

"Have you been drinking unauthorized potion or something?" Draco scathed. "Of course I know that!"

"I don't think so," Harry murmured, as politely as he could. "I mean, have you ever had a friend, let alone several at once? You said yourself that Crabbe and Goyle were just hangers-on."

He heard Draco say on a sigh, "What's your point?"
Unsure really how to get to it, Harry tapped his fingertips together as he talked. "You . . . well, you seem a little threatened by the fact that I have other friends. I think you believe that if I start getting along with them better, it'll leave you out or something."

"Oh, please," Draco sneered. "What do you think I am, five years old? Afraid I'll lose you to your other friends . . . I've never heard anything so infantile."

"Is it?" Harry questioned. "I'm sure you're well aware that my other friends would strongly prefer I have nothing to do with you."

"Well, there is that," Draco gruffly admitted.

"It doesn't help that you've spent five years calling Hermione a Mudblood and making fun of Ron's family," Harry added, biting his lip in the dark. "I'd really rather we could all get on, but I suppose that's probably asking a bit much, considering. Why don't you just try really hard to not insult them from now on out, all right? That would help."

"You didn't notice how perfectly pleasant and conciliatory I've been with Hermione?"

"Yeah, I have noticed, actually. What's up with calling her Hermione all of a sudden?"

He heard Draco rolling over to face him. "Well. Severus said--"

"Oh great, now Snape's sticking his nose into how you treat my other friends?"

"No, he's not, just listen! Severus said to call you Harry, remember? I didn't want to, but it turned out to be easier to get along, that way. So . . . I thought I'd try it with Hermione, that's all."

Harry thought about that for a moment. "All right, that makes sense, I guess. Except, why would you want to get along with Hermione?"

"Because I'm not stupid! If you end up in the middle of a war zone among your own ranks, it can't be good for any of us." Harry nodded, thinking that was probably true, only to hear Draco add in a small voice, "Besides . . . I don't want you to have to choose."

If Ron or Hermione had said that, Harry would have known it was because they were being a real friend. From Draco, he figured it meant something else. Draco was afraid he wouldn't be the one Harry would choose, that was all. And to Draco, that meant danger. He was still terrified he'd end up abandoned by the Light.

"It's good to have you on my side," Harry said by way of reassurance. "Really, it is. I think you'll make a great friend, Draco."

For some reason, that comment appeared to perturb the Slytherin boy. "You were right before," he abruptly announced. "I don't know how."

"You're doing all right."

"No, after what you said before, a friend would . . ." His voice fell silent.

"What?"

"Look, it's just . . ." Draco rolled to one side, then the other, then announced, "I don't have perfect features, all right? My lips are too thin."

The remark was so unexpected that Harry almost did a double take. "Uh, all right," he managed to
reply, wondering if he was supposed to agree, or argue, or what.

"And my eyebrows are almost invisible, they're so pale," Draco lamented. "And the bridge of my nose is too long, and one of my cheekbones is a bit higher than the other--"

Now that was just too much. Harry rolled over in the dark to face Draco, grateful that Snape's Potions had repaired his eyesight so well that he could see in little light now. To Harry's surprise, Draco looked distraught, not dramatic. Like . . . he really didn't think he was Merlin's gift to the wizarding world. Now how could that be?

"But you're completely vain about your looks," Harry protested. "I mean, everybody knows you are! And all those showers pampering yourself, the time you spend on your hair . . ."

Draco huffed, the sound of it defensive. And insecure, though of course the other boy would never admit to that in words. Actually, Harry was surprised how much Draco had admitted to. He thought his lips were too thin? Why on earth had he suddenly come out with that? Surely not just because Harry felt bad about his scar! Then again, Harry had sniped about Draco's "perfect features" during that same conversation, and here was Draco trying to prove he wasn't so perfect-looking after all.

Except, he was. "You could be a model, all right? You've got no worries."

"Model?"

"Muggle thing. It means . . . um, you've got the kinds of looks the rest of us envy."

"Oh, sure," Draco scathed.

"I bet you've had loads of girlfriends."

"Ha. I certainly don't have girls wandering down here to say they love me."

"I don't either!"

"Only two in as many months," Draco retorted.

"They didn't mean it like that!"

"Don't be coy, Potter. You could have any girl you wanted just by snapping your fingers, and you know it."

"You think I want some girl that likes me because I'm the effing Boy-Who-Lived?"

"Ancient history," Draco mocked. "You're Tri-Wizard champion, that's what you are."

"Only because Crouch cheated to get me through the tasks."

"Hmm, I know . . . Death Eater gossip . . . but on the other hand, everybody else was cheating, too."

"Not Cedric."

"Hmm," Draco said again. "Anyway, you're barmy if you think the boy-hero mystique is all you've got. Even girls in Slytherin go on about you. Girls whose parents are Death Eaters, whose parents would kill them for so much as thinking about any sort of . . . liaison with Harry Potter, and they ooh and aah and giggle and basically just make the rest of us want to sick up! You should hear them!"

Harry thought he'd actually like to, not that he could. So he settled for the next best thing, which was
clearing his throat and asking, "Um . . . well, what do they say, exactly?"

Draco gave a low laugh. "What don't they say? Listen, I'm not going to lie in bed and list all your good points, because that would be just too weird. But it's all about how you look, Harry. Ye gods, I sometimes think that's why some of us in Slytherin started hating you even worse these last couple of years. We were just so sick and tired of listening to them call you handsome Harry," he finished on a sneering note.

Harry laughed too, self-consciously. "Well . . . I think the girls in Gryffindor really disapprove of you. You know, Draco Malfoy, Death-Eater-to-be, Slytherin, mean, heartless, cruel--"

"I get the point," Draco sourly interrupted.

"No, I meant, they think all that, all right, but even so . . . um, I hear them talking too. About you. Er . . . same sort of stuff you said the Slytherin girls said about me."

He could practically hear Draco perking up. "Oh, really. What do they say?"

"You didn't really tell me what the girls in Slytherin said," Harry pointed out, feeling a bit Slytherin himself as the words emerged.

"Well, let's trade. You tell me one thing, and I'll do the same. You go first, since the trade was my brilliant idea."

Even though it was dark and Draco couldn't see him, Harry blushed. He didn't want to go on about Draco . . . but the deal was too good to pass up. "Um . . . well, one time when I came down into the common room, a bunch of third- and fourth-years were giggling something awful. I sort of . . . er, stopped on the stairs to listen . . ."


Harry crunched his eyes shut. "It was all about how you stalked down the hallways between classes, looking . . . uh, darkly majestic, I think, were the words they used, and how they all just wished you'd corner them in an alcove sometime and . . . um, kiss them breathless."

"Names, Harry, I need names," Draco drawled. "I don't fancy snogging the wrong girl and getting slapped for my trouble. Or slugged, even. Hermione taught me that girls know how to land a punch, too."

"I'm not giving you their names."

"Then I'm not telling you what I hear the girls go on about."

"Yes, you are," Harry told him.

"Oh, very well," Draco replied in a long-suffering tone. Probably, Harry thought, he was using it to cover his own discomfort at discussing Harry's physical attributes. "One thing I've heard far too much about is your eyes. Such a stunning green, they say. I could stare into his eyes all day long, that sort of thing. Nauseating, really, and just think, that was before you lost the glasses. The minute you get back upstairs, you'll have girls falling at your feet! I'll probably just have my ex-girlfriend trying to kill me again."

Harry all but gaped. "You mean Pansy?"
"Yes, I mean Pansy! Just how many murderous ex-girlfriends do you think I've got?"

"I mean . . . I knew you took Pansy to the Yule Ball year before last, but I didn't think it was serious . . ."

"Oh, it wasn't serious," Draco breezed, but underneath the airy tones, Harry thought he heard a world of hurt. "If it was serious, she'd have let me at least explain why I switched sides. But no. All she cared about was that I wasn't a--" here, Draco began to sneer, "proper Slytherin any longer, and that was that! As if being a proper Slytherin means you have to switch off your brain and hand it over to some maniac who's going to get you killed at worst and make an abject slave of you at best! But would she listen to me about what it's really like at those damned Death Eater meetings? Nooooooo . . . She's never been to one, how would she know anything? But would she trust me, trust my judgment? Nooooo . . ."

Harry really hadn't meant to open up such a Pandora's box. "Well, she doesn't sound like much of a girlfriend," he told Draco. "You're well-rid of her."

"I'd like to be completely rid of her!" Draco snarled. "But Bumblemore, with his typical anti-Malfoy attitude, won't believe me about who set that snake on me!"

"I think he just needs evidence," Harry said in a placating tone.

"Ha!" Draco shouted, incensed. "How much evidence do you think he'd need against me if, say, Pansy showed up dead? Now there's a pleasant thought . . . But anyway, motive alone would be enough if I were the one being accused, but when it's anybody but a Malfoy, we need to have evidence . . .!"

"Breathe, Draco," Harry advised, his voice as dry as Snape's sometimes got, and at that, Draco chuckled slightly.

"Yeah. I should get over it, I know. Water under the bridge, all that. Like you and your cousin. Ha, see? There. I didn't call him anything but your cousin that time. Anyway, though . . . yeah, I had a bit of a thing going with Pansy. Ten to one that's the only reason she managed to catch me off-guard with that snake." He sighed, a heavy sound in the stillness of the room.

"Maybe what you need is a nice Hufflepuff girl. You know, somebody really loyal." Harry grinned in the dark. "Susan Bones . . . now she's pretty cute, I think."

"Yeah, if you like the vapid, brainless type."

"She is not!"

"She's a Hufflepuff."

"That doesn't mean stupid any more than Slytherin automatically means evil, you git."

"Slytherin means cunning, not evil, you git."

"My point exactly," Harry agreed. "And speaking of cunning, how about this? You apply a little of your fabled Slytherinness to getting over your fear of Hagrid. Personally, I think you ought to start by apologizing for the whole Buckbeak incident. Oh, and also for complaining about his teaching to that toad Umbridge."

"I do not fear him," Draco loftily informed Harry, conveniently ignoring all the advice about saying sorry. "Those were Severus' words, not mine."
"Fine. I'll tell Snape you don't mind if Hagrid has dinner with us tomorrow, then."

"All right, all right!" Draco erupted. "He's not my favourite person."

"He's one of mine, so you're going to have to get over your . . . whatever."

"Or," Draco proposed, "you could get over your . . . whatever . . . with your magic, and get out of here and back to your regular life, in which you can visit your big hulking friend to your heart's content."

"I'll work on that," Harry promised, as he fussed a bit with his blankets. Even after he'd got as comfortable as he could, sleep seemed a long way off. It was always like that when he was angry. For Snape to manipulate him like that about the Floo . . . to use his friendship with Hagrid against him . . .

Harry sighed. His father meant well; he knew that. But somehow, that made things seem worse instead of better. Why did everything with Snape have to be so . . . Slytherin? What was wrong with talking occasionally, instead of hatching plots inside plots, as Draco had once put it? No matter what the Sorting Hat had said when he was eleven, Harry just didn't think that way. Too many years in Gryffindor, perhaps.

He might be half-Slytherin, but as he was finding out, that was a far cry from being cunning clear through . . . or approving of those who were.

At that moment, it seemed to Harry that he and Snape were never going to learn to get along.
"Okay, I've got it at last," Harry said one night as he pored over the thick books Madam Pince had lent him weeks earlier. "You'll tell me if I'm wrong, won't you? Even if it's just one plant I've misidentified?"

Draco did his best to look bored and superior, but he nodded.

Meanwhile, Ron growled as he kept writing his lines.

Harry gave his friend a sympathetic glance. He didn't know how far Ron had gotten, but he just had to have made it well into the nine-thousands by then.

Catching the friendly look Harry gave Ron, Draco growled too.

Harry decided he'd do better to ignore them both and focus on what mattered for the moment: the Gryffindor well-wish. "Okay, here goes," he announced, checking the notes he'd built up over the past few evenings. "Bluebell flowers, almond blossoms, strawberry leaves, sage leaves, sunflower seeds, and iris flowers!"

"Not a wrong answer in the list," Draco confirmed, nodding.

"But not a complete list, either," added Snape from across the room. Harry glanced up to where his father was seated on the couch, legs elegantly crossed as he read a potions journal.

"I've covered every blossom, leaf, and seed, sir," Harry objected. "What do you mean, the list isn't complete?"

Snape smirked a bit. "The sunflower seeds have been adulterated. In fact, I'd advise against eating them."

"Poisonous?"

"No, merely unpleasant."

"I'll never solve it," Harry lamented as he plucked a seed out of the vase and studied it. "They're a bit browner than usual, I suppose, as though coated . . . but how am I supposed to know what they've been soaked in?"

"You might try asking a Gryffindor," Snape pointed out.

"Now you're recommending I cheat?"

"Actually, identifying the plants is often done through direct inquiry," Snape admitted. "Especially if one is not gifted in herbology or its sister science, potions." He was looking at Ron as he said it, which Harry thought odd, until it occurred to him that his father was giving him a pointed hint. Ask a Gryffindor . . .

"Ron," Harry ventured, a little hesitantly. "I don't suppose you'd know what Ginny and the others put in my well-wish?"

The Gryffindor boy kept resolutely writing, his brow wrinkled in concentration as he scratched quill across parchment.
"Ron," Harry tried again to get his attention. No such luck.

"Mr Weasley," Snape drawled in a tone that could only be thought threatening, though it was no louder than Harry's had been. Sure enough, it did the trick.

Ron looked up, his gaze a bit clouded. "Yes, sir?"

Snape narrowed his gaze. "Harry was talking to you."

Ron grimaced, the lie blatantly obvious as he all but sneered, "Oh, was he? So sorry, I didn't hear a word. What did you want, Potter?"

"Oh for Merlin's sake, you've been my best friend for five years!" Harry exclaimed. "Stop it with this 'Potter' rubbish! You sound like Snape and Draco used to, which I'd think would be enough to cure you of it."

"Perhaps he needs to write several thousand repetitions of Harry has a first name," Snape mused, the words idle for all his tone of voice remained a potent threat.

"Harry," Ron conceded, scowling. "What did you want?"

"I think you heard me. About the well-wish?"

Ron didn't bother denying it, not with Snape there just itching to assign more lines. "Since it's not from me--not one part of it, is that clear?" he scathed, "I've no idea what went into it. Now, if you don't mind, I have seventeen more blasted sentences to write!"

Only seventeen? Harry couldn't help feeling relieved for his friend. As badly as Ron was handling the whole adoption thing, Harry hadn't enjoyed watching him come down night after night to suffer this punishment. He didn't care what Snape had to say about it, ten thousand lines was unreasonable. It had amounted to over four solid weeks of detention, which was completely out of line for something that was not in fact a Hogwarts matter. It wasn't as though Ron had vented his anger during class, or in the halls, or even to Snape himself. The incident had been a fight between friends, nothing more, and not for the first time, Harry felt a wave of frustration overtake him that Snape couldn't see that.

"I'm glad you're almost done," Harry softly vowed, not that it appeased Ron one whit.

"Yeah, me too," Ron grumbled, and he didn't mean merely that a relief from writer's cramp would be welcome. He meant he didn't want to be anywhere near Harry; it was clear to everyone in the room.

Speaking of writer's cramp, though . . . Harry went over to his father and sat down on the couch with him, saying, "Could you spell my hands again, sir? The charm seemed to last about six days this last time, but now they really hurt again."

Snape took out his wand and touched it to each finger and palm, murmuring in Latin, and then quietly said, "Arabic gum, Harry."

"You'd like me to fetch some?"

Snape laughed, the deep sound imbued with a father's pleasure. "No. Your well-wish. The sunflower seeds are coated in Arabic gum."

"Oh . . ." Flexing his hands, Harry beamed. "Thank you, Professor."
Out of the corner of his eye, Harry caught Ron watching him with his father. When Harry glanced that way, though, the Gryffindor boy wasted no time in looking down at his scroll.

"Well," Harry said, making his way back to the table, "with Ginny's book, it should be a snap to find out now what the well-wish means."

"Won't that be interesting," Draco snarked. "I'm looking forward to seeing your face when you unravel it."

Harry couldn't imagine Ginny and Neville and the rest of them wishing bad things for him, so he didn't have any idea what Draco meant. Sure, none of the Gryffindors would have chosen for him to have Snape as a father, if it had been up to them, but they'd more-or-less accepted it . . . except for the two who'd always been his closest friends.

Not that Ron was acting like such a friend just then. Or Hermione either, really . . . though she wasn't anywhere near as bad as Ron. At least she had the grace to try to keep their friendship going, even as she hinted at her concerns and worries.

"You're just having me on," Harry told Draco.

"Use your book," the other boy told him. "You'll see."

"Professor?" Harry questioned, beginning to feel a bit anxious.

"Your friends have expressed their sentiments with exactitude," was all Snape would say. That didn't sound too bad. But then again, Snape was a master of the diabolical double-meaning.

"I'll just get to work then," Harry decided, flipping open *Well We Wish You* to look for the entry on bluebells.

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The research, even with Ginny's book, was a bit harder than Harry had anticipated. In the first place, the book didn't cover all seven things that were in his well-wish, and in the second, the entries it did have were far from complete. It covered sunflower blossoms and stamens but not the seeds, for instance. He'd just managed to figure out that strawberry leaves were a wish for luck and love -- didn't sound bad to him-- when Ron shuffled his parchment and announced,

"There. Ten thousand, Professor. Now, if you don't mind, I'll be on my way--"

"One moment, Mr Weasley," Snape interrupted.

Ron was half-way to standing, but that had him flopping back down in his chair. "What?"

"You went from seven thousand nine hundred and eighty-one to seven thousand nine hundred and eighty-three, skipping the intervening number," the Potions Master intoned, some horrible kind of dark humour lurking in his voice. "Your punishment was for a full ten thousand sentences."

Harry was about to object that *that* was awfully petty, but Ron had already snatched the quill back up off the tabletop and was scratching off another sentence. Probably for the best. It was sure to get Ron released more quickly than arguing over the matter.

Or was it?

"There," Ron said again, stressing the word.
This time he stood all the way up before Snape drawled, his voice unmistakably ringing with dark pleasure, "There's also the matter of numbers eight hundred fifteen, two thousand forty-seven, and five thousand one hundred and four, all of which are positively illegible and do not come up to the standard I demand of my students."

"Professor!" Harry cried out. "Be reasonable!"

"I don't need you taking up for me, Potter," Ron snarled. Without even sitting, he rushed out three more sentences and then fuming, stomped over to where Snape sat and dangled them in his face. "There! Satisfied, now, you . . ." Apparently thinking better of whatever insult had been about to cross his lips, Ron hastily amended it to a scarcely more polite, "Sir?"

"Allow me a moment to consider the matter, Mr Weasley," Snape softly replied, but Harry heard the dangerous undertone in his father's voice. Uh-oh . . . He sat on pins and needles while Snape studied the scroll he'd taken from Ron, the feeling only growing worse when his father stood up and from a high shelf, fetched the heavy roll of parchments that held the rest of Ron's sentences. One by one he unrolled the scrolls and examined them, his dark eyes rapidly assessing the massive amount of work Ron had accomplished.

Quite obviously, Snape didn't consider his revenge sufficient yet. His voice was rich with unholy glee when he finally announced, "It appears you have misspelled impugn on every one of these ten thousand sentences." Shaking his head with obviously false sympathy, he pronounced, "You will simply have to begin again and do the entire set over, Mr Weasley."

For a moment, absolute silence permeated the dungeons. Then it was broken by incoherent rage.

"I'm not doing the entire set over!" Ron screamed, his face going a tomato-red shade that was really very ugly.

"Professor, that's just vindictive," Harry pointed out, trying to keep his voice calm. Snape respected reasoned argument far more than emotional scenes, after all. "If the spelling really matters to you so much," he offered by way of compromise, "then require Ron to fix each sentence, all right? Don't make him start from scratch."

Ron, Harry noticed, didn't tell him to mind his own business, not that time. In fact, he looked between Harry and Snape with a light in his eye that almost looked like he hoped Harry had a little family influence to put to use . . .

"Since I went to the trouble of writing the sentence out for Mr Weasley in the first place," Snape told Harry, "the least he could have done was honour his punishment enough to copy it correctly."

"I copied it perfectly!" Ron yelled, his colour only getting redder, though Harry would have sworn that wasn't possible. "I spelled impune just like you did! I know, 'cause I checked! Harry told me it was spelled wrong, and I snuck a peek at the one you wrote, and I was writing it the way you said! I can prove it!"

"By all means," Snape said, his tone confident and relaxed about the matter. Well, it should be. Harry didn't think the Potions Master ever spelled anything wrong.

Ron curled a lip and stomped pell-mell over to his bookbag, where he made a mess of the table, strewing things left and right as he searched for the spare bit of parchment Snape had written on, all those weeks ago. For a while there, Harry thought he must have lost it and the argument would be moot. But then, at the very bottom of the largish leather pouch, Ron's fingers encountered a scrap he snatched up and held triumphantly in the air. "See?" he crowed. "See?"
"I suggest you see," Snape recommended. "After which you can clear my table of the detritus you've littered across it. Then, you may begin again at number one."

Ron bared his teeth and glared down at the model sentence Snape had written. Without warning, the most horrible look Harry could imagine crossed his face--purple by then. The expression was raw fury, and confusion, and then wiping both those out, an absolute longing to kill someone with his bare hands.

Someone? It seemed pretty clear the one he wanted to kill was Snape.

"You blood-sucking Slytherin!" he screamed, his voice going hoarse with the force of it. "This paper said impune with a U-N-E, I know it did! I checked! And now it says something else, 'cause it was hexed to change the minute I'd completed my detention, wasn't it, you great greasy git!"

"Ron!" Harry shouted, appalled.

"Oh, don't believe me?" Ron snarled, turning his ire on Harry. "What, you think I'm a liar? You think I'm so stupid I don't know a G from an N? Or that I'm trusting enough of him not to check, for Merlin's sake, when you said I was making a mistake?"

"I believe you!" Harry shouted back, because he did. He knew Ron well enough to be sure. "But stop calling Snape names before you get in worse trouble! Let's just get this worked out, all right?"

"I'm perfectly amenable to a resolution," Snape calmly announced, which heartened Harry until his father went on, "It merely needs to include another ten thousand lines."

So much for not calling names, Harry decided. "You really are being quite an arse about this whole thing," he told his father in a conversational tone.

"Yeah!" Ron shouted. He fell silent at a glare from Harry.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "I believe I told you that I knew what would best instruct Mr Weasley. Accepting substandard results is decidedly not it. I don't believe your friend has learned much at all from the past several weeks of detention."

"Ron," Harry announced, turning his way, "tell him you're sorry, all right? Tell him you know he wasn't doing anything nasty to me, 'cause you know full well he wasn't. Those were rotten things you said. Now apologize and mean it!"

Ron swallowed something. Whatever it was, it looked huge. Turns out, it was. He had swallowed his pride. "I'm sorry, Professor," he choked out, looking at the floor instead of at Snape. "I... That was bad, saying you were... you-know, with Harry here. I know that's not the case." When Snape appeared absolutely unmoved, Ron added in a panicked rush, "I'll never say anything like that again, I swear! Not to anyone!"

"I'm certain you shan't," Snape remarked in a tone so smooth it was almost oily. "After all, twenty thousand lines is bound to deter anyone. Now, clean my table off and get to work!"

"Stop it!" Harry ordered, at the same moment Ron screamed, "I won't!"

Snape chose to reply to Ron's statement instead of Harry's command.

"You won't?" he echoed, brows lilting. "That's quite a thing to say to your Potions Master. You won't... Well, I believe that Hogwarts policies are quite clear about what happens in an instance like this, Mr Weasley. Should you choose to reject your chastisement, that is certainly your
prerogative. Mine is to expel you, and do not think for an instant that I'll hesitate to do just that.”

"You wouldn't," Ron and Harry both gasped at the same time.

"Didn't I just say I would?" Snape inquired of the air. "I thought I was quite clear."

"That is so unfair!" Harry shouted. "He did your punishment already!"

"He hasn't done the punishment I had in mind by any means," Snape calmly disagreed, a hint of a smile playing about his mouth. "Whether he will or not is up to him, but one thing not to be tolerated in Britain's premier school of wizardry is outright defiance."

"Fine, expel me!" Ron declared, stomping to the table and shoveling all his belongings into his bag. "I don't care. Fred and George are getting along nicely without a fancy-pants Hogwarts diploma, and so will I!" He began to head for the door.

"You need your N.E.W.T. scores if you're to have a decent career!" Harry called out to forestall him.

"Oh yeah, you and my Mum agree on just everything these days, don't you?" Ron sniped. "Well, I say Fred and George had the right idea. They had more pride and guts than to put up with Umbridge's shite, and I have enough respect for myself and Gryffindor, than to put up with his!"

The door was open by then, Ron practically yanking it off its heavy hinges, his pull was so violent. "Don't go," Harry implored. "We can work something out. I'll write some of your lines for you, for God's sake!"

"I don't believe you will, no," Snape put in, his voice composed. "Esprit de corps is all well and good, but in this instance, you can't do Mr Weasley's learning for him."

"Look, I know you hate him, but--"

"Mr Potter," Snape remarked, a layer of frost coating his words, "being my son doesn't give you carte blanche to criticize me, especially in the presence of third parties. There is such a thing as filial respect."

"I'm going before I start casting Unforgivables!" Ron screeched, and then he was running down the hall, not even bothering to close the door.

Snape closed it for him with a laconic wave of his wand.

Harry drew in a breath. "Well. He's gone now, so let's hash this out. What the hell do you think you're doing? You can't expel Ron!"

"Actually, I can," Snape returned, still with that same cold calm.

"Ron's done a tonne for this school," Harry said firmly. "Dumbledore will never stand for this."

"Oh, no? Let's review the facts, shall we?" Snape favoured Harry with a thin smile. "One, Ronald Weasley is not the projected saviour of wizardkind who must be shielded from outside danger at all cost. He is most decidedly not immune to expulsion. Two, he grossly slandered a faculty member in the presence of other students, no less. Shocking behaviour. Three, though I was entirely reasonable and proposed an alternative to expulsion, he has refused to do it to my satisfaction."

"Your so-called alternative was crap and you know it!" Harry shouted. "And what's more, it's not like Ron spread his comments around the entire school! It was just down here, just that once, and
then he buttoned his lip up tight! And nobody believed him anyway, so it didn't do your reputation or your career any harm at all!"

"His comments were slanderous, all the same."

"If you expelled every student who slandered you, half the school would be gone by now! We all thought you were an evil bastard hell-bent on helping Voldemort! You did everything you could to make us think that, so of course we slandered you!"

"As you say, students were meant to think that. The misdirection suited the Order's needs. Anyone intelligent enough to form conclusions was going to form the ones we wanted."

"It started way back before the Order needed to misdirect anybody! And speaking of the Order, the Weasleys will have your head if you expel him. And so will Dumbledore, just like I said!" Harry folded his arms in front of his chest and glared triumphantly in Snape's direction.

The Potions Master didn't look worried in the slightest. He didn't even raise his voice, though it did hold quite a sneer as he announced, "I quite assure you, the headmaster will see things my way no matter what arguments Arthur and Molly Weasley may bring to bear. Potions Masters are notoriously difficult to engage. Very few have the patience to deal with children--"

"Yeah, including you!"

Snape completely ignored the interruption. "Albus Dumbledore certainly needs me more than he needs the goodwill of a minor official in the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Department."

"All right, maybe it's within your power to to expel Ron," Harry acknowledged, going to stand right before Snape. "But don't, please," he entreated, looking up, green eyes intense. "For me. He's my friend."

"He," Snape stressed, "is no friend at all."

"He is, but even if you don't think so, that's beside the point. What counts is that I'm still his friend, Professor." Reaching out, Harry rested his palms on Snape's forearms. "So I'm asking. I'll beg if that's what you want. Don't expel Ron, sir. Please, please don't. For me."

Something like regret filled Snape's eyes, telling Harry even before the man spoke what his answer would be. "This isn't a matter for you to decide," he announced, shaking off Harry's touch. "I can't abide open defiance. If you'll excuse me, I do believe the expulsion paperwork awaits me in my classroom office."

As Snape flooed away, Draco burst out into raucous laughter.

"Shut up, it isn't funny!" Harry immediately objected.

"The fuck it isn't funny," Draco retorted, still laughing. "The little shite should have been expelled when he tried to make me eat slugs, but no, everybody decided that his hex backfiring was punishment enough. I've been waiting for this day for years!"

Harry narrowed his eyes in warning, but Draco wasn't deterred in the slightest. "I wonder if the house-elves will send up some champagne if I say we've cause for celebration," he mused.

"You're so hateful!" Harry cried.
"It's his own Gryffindorishness getting him into hot water," Draco said, laughing even harder at the word he'd coined. "All that insistence that life should be fair. Well, it isn't fair! If it was, you wouldn't have lived all those years with people who hated you, and I wouldn't have lost the lion's share of my money when I made the choice to side against my father. Weasley needs to grow up. Hell, anybody with half a brain would just have written the next ten thousand and been done with it. If he's stupid enough to throw away his education, he's too stupid to be here, anyway!"

"Ron doesn't deserve what Snape's decided to do!"

Something flashed in Draco's eyes. Something ugly. "Oh, you want to discuss what people deserve, do you? What about what Severus deserves from you? You said you believed Weasley over him!"

"I did not! Snape didn't deny the paper was hexed!"

"You took a Weasel's side, over that of your father and Head of House!" Draco raged on, stomping up to yell straight into Harry's face. "Your behaviour about this whole detention issue has been disgusting from start to finish! I've lost track of the times you've tried to get Severus to lighten Weasley's punishment!"

"Because it was unreasonable!"

"No, it wasn't. It was merciful, you idiot! Severus generously let Weasley write lines instead of expelling him forthwith, and why do you think that was? Because the Weasel is such a good friend of mine? Shite, Harry, Severus did you a huge favour and what did you do? You argued with him for weeks, called him an arse to his face, and when it came right down to it, took sides against him!"

"I stood up for what was right!" Harry shouted. "Ten thousand lines is bloody vengeful, that's what it is!"

"Oh yeah? Well what do you think would happen to me if I accused McGonagall of shagging a student in her spare time?" Draco grimly nodded at the look that crossed Harry's face. "Brings it home, does it?" he sniped. "You can't imagine her merely assigning lines, can you?"

"No," Harry admitted.

"Well, there you have it," Draco pronounced. "Severus stood up for you, so to speak, and I for one don't blame him in the least if he's decided it just wasn't worth it. You chose Weasley over the man who rearranged his whole life to help you, then let you in it! You don't deserve to be his son!"

"You're just jealous," Harry accused.

"Jealous, of you?" Draco scoffed. "Of a Gryffindor so cowardly that he has to be bribed before he'll try the slightest trace of magic on his own? I might burn up!!" he mimicked Harry's worries, saying them in a high, girlish voice. "Yeah, I'm jealous. I really, really wish I made a habit of stomping all over Severus every chance I get, right. I wish I was so effing stupid it took me weeks to identify a few plants, or that I was pathetic enough to make a sodding snake my closest confidant while I completely ignored a father who clearly wanted to be there for me--"

"Shut up!" Harry screamed, stung by the criticism. "You are jealous! You said it yourself, when you ran into trouble Snape helped get you emancipated, but me he adopted! And you can't stand it, that he passed you over and chose me, can you?"

"He chose you, yeah!" Draco shouted back. "And I dealt with it! But it makes me sick that after that, you keep choosing Weasley! Fuck, Harry! It's like he's all that matters to you!"
"And what matters to you, Malfoy? Money! Yeah, that's right. Money matters and that's about all that does!"

Draco clenched both his fists. "How can you say that? I lost a shitload of money coming over to your damned side in this war, Potter!"

"Big effing deal when you knew you'd have a big pile left!" Harry accused. "I know about your trust account, the one you have nominal control over even now. Yeah, money matters to you. You just about choked when you thought I was giving my vault to Snape! And even when you knew I was just giving him control of it until I'm grown, you told me I was off my rocker!"

"Yeah, because that was bloody stupid of you!"

"You think so because your money is all that matters to you!"

"That's not true! Look at where I'm living, look at what I've chosen! Severus knows--"

"I'll tell you what Severus knows," Harry interrupted in a deadly cold voice. "He knows you'd choose money over him in a flash, Malfoy. Why do you think you weren't adopted, too? The casewitch wanted things that way. She practically demanded it. And Snape said no."

Draco blinked in shock, almost seeming to wilt before Harry's eyes. "He . . . he did not," the Slytherin boy weakly asserted. "You're . . . you're making that up."

"He said he knew you'd rather have your mountains of Galleons than him for a father!"

"Harry!" said a shocked voice from behind him. A voice that was cold, clear through.

Turning, Harry saw his father highlighted by the dying flare of the Floo. Caught up in the vicious argument, he'd never heard the roar of the flames.

Harry cringed, wondering how much Snape had heard. He wasn't left to wonder long. "Five hundred points from Gryffin--" the Potions Master began to roar.

"No! Stop!" Draco cut him off, blond hair flying as he rushed forward. "Don't take points! Half of them will come from Slytherin!"

"True," Snape acknowledged, lowering his wand, but only for an instant. "Well, well. An interesting dilemma. However, as Mr Potter is not the only Gryffindor who has seriously displeased me this evening, I do believe a solution is at hand," he growled, glaring at Harry. "Five hundred points from Gryffindor on behalf of Ronald Weasley!"

Furious that Snape would involve Ron like that, Harry sniped, "That's a bit like ten thousand lines, isn't it? Do you even know any punishments that aren't laughably excessive?"

"So you're laughing, are you?" Snape scathed, disgust lacing every syllable. "I've misjudged you, it seems. How dare you say such things to Draco!"

"How dare I tell the truth, you mean?"

"Your truth, not mine," Snape retorted. "Did I say he'd choose money, Harry? Did I give him a choice?"

"You didn't give him a choice because you knew what he'd choose!"

"I didn't give him a choice because that was best for him, you simpleton! I care about Draco too, or
has *that* conveniently escaped your slipshod memory?"

*Simpleton, not idiot child.* That stung. But Snape wasn't through. "Moreover, information about Draco's trust was private, arising in the context of a confidential interview! You knew I expected you to respect that! Now you not only bandy it about, you attribute to it motives I certainly never intended it to have? You have betrayed my trust!"

"He called me stupid!" Harry defended himself. "He said I didn't deserve to be your son!"

"At the moment, you *are* being stupid!" Snape harshly announced. "And you *don't* deserve to be my son!"

Harry stood rooted to the spot, something in him dying with those words. "Professor--"

"No!" Snape shouted, taking a step forward, his eyes glaring daggers. "Don't say another word. What you have told Draco is indefensible, absolutely indefensible!"

"But--"

"Get out of my sight," Snape ordered in a markedly calmer tone. To Harry, that was all the more frightening. Yelling and blustering he could take; Uncle Vernon used to do it all the time. But this deadly *cool* voice, coming from a man who sounded like he genuinely didn't care if Harry lived or died . . . this was worse. Much, much worse.

Harry nervously cleared his throat. "Professor?"

"Now, Harry. Out of my sight. I don't wish to see you."

*Ever.*

The word hung between them, unsaid yet tangible, the past months shattering under the force of it.

Harry went to his room and slammed the door, then got into bed and buried himself under the covers.
Out of Sight

Get out of my sight.

The words haunted Harry as the hours wore on that evening.

Get out of my sight.

He kept thinking that Snape would relent at any moment, would come in and . . . well, do something. Assign a punishment. Yell at him. Talk, so they could get past all this. But he didn't. He left Harry completely alone.

After a while--it must have been past midnight by then--Draco did come in, but all he did was storm past Harry's bed and into the bathroom. Harry heard the rush of water, but no singing, not that night. And then Draco was stalking his way back through the room, his wand angrily flashing through the air as he charmed all the lights off. He almost slammed the door--almost, but not quite--and then Harry was alone once more. Draco, evidently, was back to sleeping on the couch.

Morning seemed a long, long way off.

At some point Harry must have slept, but he woke up remembering nothing but the hours of staying awake. He knew it was morning only because Draco's enchanted picture frame was showing a view of daylight over the lake.

A bit unnerved that even after a night's sleep Snape still hadn't come to see him, Harry hurriedly washed and dressed, then poked his head just a little bit into the living room to see what Snape or Draco might be doing. It was Saturday; his father should be home.

Nobody was in sight, though. Not even Draco.

Then Harry heard voices coming from behind the closed door of the Potions Lab. A bit relieved, he realised that Snape and Draco were merely working on something together. That often happened. Harry had tried to join them a few times, but he'd been bored beyond belief. He might have earned an Outstanding on his Potions O.W.L, but that was just from sheer hard slogging--and a burning desire to prove the Potions Master wrong after five year of ridicule in class, he acknowledged. O.W.L. or no, he just didn't have the innate fascination for the subject that the other two shared.

As Harry glanced around the room, he couldn't help but start to feel a bit apprehensive. There were breakfast dishes on the table; two dirty plates proving that Snape and Draco had breakfasted together, and not invited Harry to join them. When had that ever happened? At least there was a plate for him, and plenty of food left over. He didn't want any of it, though; he wasn't hungry in the slightest. Actually, just looking at the table made him feel a bit ill. Was his presence so distasteful that Snape didn't even care to share a meal with Harry any longer?

Even stranger than not calling him for breakfast was the fact that neither Draco nor Snape had summoned a house-elf to clean away the debris. It seemed they'd left it to him to take care of the dishes. He could have yelled through the Floo for an elf to come get them, he supposed, but Harry decided he'd rather leave the dishes unattended. If he was too upset to eat, he was certainly too upset to clean up after the people who had.

Moving away from the table, he found himself once more hovering outside the door to the Potions Lab. He wanted to go inside, to work things out . . . but he was afraid to. Afraid of that terrible frost in Snape's black eyes, afraid of hearing again that Snape found Harry a complete disappointment.
But he wasn't a Gryffindor for nothing, so fear or no fear, he laid his fingers on the doorknob and began to turn it . . . only to discover that the door was locked.

Another first. He'd never been locked out of where Snape and Draco were working. He'd always been welcome, but clearly he wasn't welcome now.

Voices drifted to him as he stood there.

"The powdered lichen now, Draco," Snape said, sounding entirely focussed on the task at hand. As if he'd forgotten Harry completely, in fact. As if in all the world, nothing mattered except the Potion underway . . .

"It didn't turn quite that shade of orange last time, did it?" Draco said after a moment.

"Spell the cauldron warmer until the hue approaches rust . . ."

Draco really did connect with Snape on a level that was beyond Harry. No matter how hard he tried at Potions, he'd never have the enthusiasm and drive for it that Draco had. It hadn't bothered Harry before, or not much, since Snape had seemed to like him well enough as he was.

But now, things were back to where they'd been before this year had even started. Harry had done something unforgivable, and Snape didn't like him at all.

Resolutely telling himself that he didn't care, Harry snatched up Sal's box and took it back to his room.

-----------------------------------------------

His room wasn't a cupboard of course, but Harry couldn't help but feel a bit the same as he had all those times he'd been punished at the Dursleys. It was the isolation, he supposed. He'd been shoved under the stairs as a child to teach him a lesson, true, but more often, the sole motive had been to keep him out of sight.

Get out of my sight. I don't want to see you.

Depressed, Harry slept a while, Sals wrapped around his wrist.

When he awoke it was just noon, as the enchanted window showed, but peeking out into the other room revealed that the breakfast dishes had yet to be cleared away. Draco and Snape were still working on some Potion or other, obviously. Harry told himself he didn't care. What was it to him if he was left out?

It occurred to him that it was probably bad strategy to just let those dishes sit there. Snape being so Slytherin, maybe the dirty plates were some sort of test. Harry couldn't figure out just what the purpose of that could be. Of course, given the way Harry had been raised, he figured it was actually more likely that extra chores were being given as punishment. He knew that was a stupid conclusion, since flooing the dishes down to the kitchen wasn't really much of a chore at all, but what else could he think?

Well, whether the dirty plates were supposed to be a test or a punishment, Harry decided he'd better just play along and take care of them. Snape and Draco were still in the Potions lab; he could hear them. Maybe Snape wouldn't realise that Harry had waited until noon to do the job he'd apparently been assigned.

He went and fetched his wand from his room, deciding that if he was going to magic the dishes
away, he might as well try to avoid lifting them by hand while he was at it. *Wingardium Leviosa* didn't work, though. Maybe it would have, Harry thought, if he'd have said the words with more force, but he didn't want to speak above a whisper. He didn't want Snape to hear him trying magic and failing. Harry hadn't been ashamed of his lack of strong magic, not before. He'd just been frustrated--at times even wondering if Draco might be right and his inability to use his magic really did hint at some deep psychological problem.

Now, though, he realised he was ashamed. Actually, he felt worthless. He was no good as a son, and not much better as a wizard.

Well, at least he knew he could use the Floo, though after the burn he'd got he wasn't too eager to put his face in there again. Still, Madam Pince had flooed books through for him, more than once. Amazed by that the first time, Harry had asked Draco how on earth the books managed not to burn up on the way. Draco, predictably enough, had scoffed at Harry's "Mugglishness" and had explained in a voice dripping with scorn, *Well, it is called magic, Harry...*

The memory sort of stung him, making him remember all kinds of other things Draco had said over the last few weeks. The Slytherin boy might not be as vain about his looks as Harry once supposed--all that fussing over his hair was apparently some form of overcompensation--but he was definitely vain about his magic. Most of the time he was pretty patient with Harry's lack of any, but once in a while his real feelings came out in force. He was impatient with how long it was taking for Harry to get over his "whatever." He held Harry pretty much in contempt for letting himself become so very vulnerable.

Harry told himself that none of that should bother him. He didn't *care* what Draco thought, did he? Trouble was, some tiny little part of him actually did.

Even more discouraged than before, Harry piled the dishes--including all the congealed food--into the fireplace, then tossed in some Floo powder and shouted for the kitchens. He wasn't actually sure that was the right way to go about things; Snape and Draco seemed to know how to contact house-elves; more often than not, the dishes simply vanished straight off the table when the meal was through. It did work, though. Or at least, the dishes went *somewhere*. As long as they weren't in sight any longer, that was good enough for Harry.

He went back to sitting on his bed, letting Sals slither through his fingers as he poured out all his troubles to his pet... making a snake his confidant just as Draco had said. But who else was there? Snape didn't want to talk to him; that much was obvious. So Harry talked and talked to Sals. He explained how Ron had said a bad thing but had been punished more than enough already; how Snape just wouldn't listen to reason. How Draco had blown it all out of proportion, and then Snape had too, taking five hundred points for something that wasn't a school matter at all.

The points really worried him because of the *way* Snape had taken them. Off Gryffindor only, even though any son of Snape's would be in Slytherin, too. So where did that leave him?

Sals listened. She didn't understand about the points, and no amount of Parseltongue could make it clear. What she did understand was that Harry needed a warm place to curl up in. Warm places always made her feel better, Sals said, adding that her new box was very nice.

Harry sighed, wishing things could be that simple for him.

Draco came in again late that afternoon, looking oddly unlike himself. His skin unnaturally pale, his blond hair plastered to his head. Well, he *had* been working over a cauldron for something like ten hours, which might account for his foul mood, Harry supposed.
He took one look at Harry and sneered, "What have you been doing all day, playing with your damned snake?"

Harry looked away, hiding Sals inside his hand. "I cleaned up the dishes you and Snape left on the table."

"Well, that must have taken ages," Draco drawled, so obviously contemptuous that Harry felt something inside himself wither. He didn't want Draco's good opinion, he told himself. Maybe the Slytherin boy's scorn bothered him so much because it was an echo of Snape's. They were both angry at him.

"Shut up, Malfy," Harry returned, but without much spirit. "I don't want to fight."

"Well, isn't that a huge surprise," scathed the other boy. "And here you've spent the months since your operation trying just so hard to get your magic back so that you can go vanquish the Dark Lord. But that's right, you haven't! Most days you don't even try a single spell, and then when Severus arranges things so you'll want to use the Floo or such, you actually resent him for it!"

Harry's patience began to evaporate. "Well I did get burned, you know, so you tell me who was right about that firechat!"

"And Harry Potter is right about everything, isn't he!" cried Draco. "You're every bit as arrogant as Severus always said! Ha, you know what he told me? He warned you not to get that operation in the first place! Told you that wizards had no business letting Muggle doctors anywhere near them! But you insisted! You know what I think? You were hoping all along that the operation would destroy your magic! You wanted an excuse to wimp out of the war!"

Harry saw red. What had Snape been going on about trust for, when he had taken private conversations with Harry and shared them with Draco? Just as he'd done before with Remus, only now, he didn't have the excuse he'd had then, did he?

"Yeah, well you told me you understood that, remember?" Harry shouted. "You said if you were me, you'd have wanted let out of the fighting, too!"

"That just proves I'd make a lousy you!" Draco shouted back. "But we expect better of the Boy-Who-Lived! We need better!"

"Don't call me that!"

"I'll call you whatever I damned well please. Coward, how's that for starters? If you ask me, you practically worship that burned out core that's keeping you from doing magic!"

"Oh yeah? Well it's money you worship, isn't it?"

"Severus explained about the adoption," Draco retorted. "He didn't think I'd choose money over him, but he didn't see why I should have to lose what little I have left, either. Because either way, I'd still have him."

Harry turned his face to the wall and hugged Sals, just a bit.

Draco went and had his shower. That time, he sang. Just as though he hadn't a care in the world.

---------------------------------------------------------------------

The dinner hour came and went, but Harry stayed in his room. Snape wasn't out there anyway; he
could tell that from the fact that the silence was only broken by the clink of fork against plate. Draco was evidently eating alone.

Harry still wasn't hungry, but he ate a couple of the chocolate covered raspberries Neville had sent him for Christmas, and drank water from the tap in the bathroom. Not exactly a balanced meal, but he just didn't have the stomach for more.

He read for a while, and found out that Arabic gum was a wish to purify evil, but even the mystery of the well-wish had lost its allure. He was just so tired. Nothing really mattered, not even Snape being so angry. All day long he'd waited for his father to come talk to him. All day . . . and not one word.

Harry might have thought that Snape was waiting for him to make the first move . . . except if he was, why lock Harry out of the lab? No, it seemed clear enough to Harry that Snape didn't want him around. And Harry had learned the hard way that when adults didn't want you around, your best course of action was to make yourself scarce. So of course he'd stayed in his room all day. But how much longer was it going to take for Snape to forgive him?

Slytherins weren't by nature the most forgiving of souls, were they? And Snape was supremely Slytherin. Sure, he'd finally forgiven Harry over the pensieve incident, but this was different. Snape had never trusted Harry before, so Harry's snooping hadn't really been a betrayal, it had simply been rude. But this time . . . Harry hung his head just thinking about it. Snape had said it himself: he had trusted Harry to keep quiet about the things that had been discussed with the casewitch.

This time, Harry had betrayed Snape's trust.

He had no idea how long it took a Slytherin to get over something like that. Knowing Snape, he might resent it for a long, long time.

Enough of such morose thoughts. Harry took a shower to try and clear his mind, but it didn't work. He ended up sitting on the floor of the granite stall, letting the water pour over him as he wondered what he could have done differently. The trouble was, the root of the problem was Snape's treatment of Ron, and Harry couldn't have approved of that, he just couldn't have. Not even to appease Snape could he approve of it now.

Harry towed himself off, shivering in the cold air, wishing he could perform a warming charm or two. He often had such thoughts, but tonight, the thought itself actually chilled him. Because . . . if Snape really was never going to forgive him, he'd want rid of Harry, wouldn't he? But he couldn't make him go live elsewhere, not as long as Harry was without magic . . .

Which meant that he might gain his magic back only to lose his father.

Then again, hadn't he all but lost him already?

You don't deserve to be my son, Harry. Points only from Gryffindor, not Slytherin. Get out of my sight.

When he finally emerged from the bathroom, he saw Draco was propped up in bed, reading one of Snape's Potions Journals. Of course. No wonder Severus liked him better.

"I do hope you've finished sulking," Draco smoothly said as he set the bound parchment book aside and spelled out the lights.
"I haven't been sulking," Harry tightly informed the Slytherin boy. He found his way across the room in the dark, and slid into his own rumpled bed.

"What do you call hiding in the room all day?"

"Snape said to get out of his sight, so I did."

"Oh, I get it," Draco drawled. "You're playing the martyr card. And there I thought you had some Gryffindor guts."

"Actually, you think I'm cowardly and stupid," Harry gibed. "Isn't that what you said?"

"What about what you said, Potter?"

"You started it!"

"No, you started it, siding with that damned Weasel!"

"Well, you won't have to worry about that any longer, will you?" Harry shot back. "Ron's probably expelled already!"

"See, there you go again! All this concern for Weasley!"

"You'd be concerned too," Harry scathed, "if a friend of yours was getting expelled. Oh, but that's right . . . you don't have any friends. Maybe that's why you don't seem to have a clue how I feel!"

"I don't care how you feel! I just want you to stop being such a little shite to Severus!"

"I'm being a shite?" Harry gasped. "What about him? He hasn't so much as said one word to me today!"

"Just as well for you that he hasn't," Draco snarled. "He wasn't exactly in the best mood. But you wouldn't know about that, would you? And why not? Because you sulked all day, instead of bothering your head to see how he was!"

"It's hard to see how he is when I'm locked out of the room where he is!"

Draco went unnaturally still. "The door was locked?"

"You know it was! Come to think of it, you probably locked it!"

"No--" All at once, Draco's voice changed completely, to those smooth tones that meant he was lying through those perfect white teeth of his. "That's right, I locked it. Let's just get to sleep now, all right?"

Something wasn't quite right; Harry could tell. Obviously, it was Snape who had locked him out, but why would Draco lie to him about it? Not to spare his feelings, not after he'd just called him a shite and a coward and all the rest. No, there was something else Draco knew, something else he was trying to keep from Harry. Secrets, as usual.

"What aren't you telling me?" Harry exploded.

"Nothing."

"What!"
"There's nothing!" Draco exclaimed. "Listen, I need to sleep, all right?"

"You tell me what went on in that Potions Lab today!" Harry shouted.

"It's up to Severus to tell you," Draco retorted. "It's his business. Not mine, thank Merlin."

After that, no matter how Harry harangued him, Draco wouldn't say another word.

Finally, Harry let the other boy sleep, but he didn't sleep much himself. Locked out of Snape's lab . . . ignored all day . . . he couldn't help but wonder if there was more to this than just his father still needing to get over their fight. Maybe that locked door was symbolic of something bigger, like being locked out of Snape's life, now. That would be the Slytherin way of going about things, wouldn't it? If a Slytherin was mad enough, he'd just cut you off or kick you out, and Snape couldn't do the latter since Harry still did need the warding. It wouldn't do to endanger the Boy-Who-Was-Supposed-to-Save-Them-All.

But clearly, Snape personally couldn't stand him. It was as if this year had never happened at all.

Feeling suddenly jittery, Harry finally decided he'd put up with just about enough of this. Snape might have told him to get lost, might have underscored the command by locking Harry out, but Harry'd had enough of hiding. He was going to make Snape talk to him again, if for no other reason than to know just where he stood. Unable to bear the not knowing even one second longer, Harry fished around for those warm furry socks Dumbledore had given him, and padded out in pyjamas to the Potion Master's door.

He raised his hand to knock, then almost thought better of it. If Snape was mad already, maybe the best course of action wasn't to rouse him from a warm bed. Uncle Vernon would have pummeled him into the ground for waking him up like this. Snape though, wasn't Uncle Vernon. He'd even said, just recently, that Harry should come get him if he needed him at night.

He did need him, Harry decided. Even if it wasn't over a nightmare or wild magic, he really did need to see Snape. Steeling himself for the worst, Harry rapped his knuckles on the door, then loudly whispered, "It's Harry, sir. Can I come in?"

No answer greeted him except the gloomy silence of the dungeons themselves.

Again, Harry knocked and called, that time a bit louder.

But it was no use. Snape either wasn't in there, or he was ignoring Harry.

More depressed than ever, Harry slowly made his way back to bed.

Where, for the first time in weeks and weeks, a dream of past and future stole into his mind to lodge itself deep inside his soul.

It was Christmas again, Christmas Day in Devon, and Snape and Draco were sitting on the tattered sofa, engaged in conversation. "You never asked what I did to improve the Lotion Potion," Draco was saying, a sly smile on his lips.

"That's a remarkably vapid name," Snape commented, his tones a shade acerbic.

Draco smirked. "I invented it, so I get to name it."

"On the contrary, Mr Malfoy, I invented it. You merely enhanced its properties, or so you claim."
"Too bad you can't test it now. I guess we have to wait for---"

"Don't speak of such things. I don't want Harry to know."

"Well, he can't hear us anyway. He's way out over by that old oak, talking to his snake."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "It's far too cold outside for Sals to be alert."

"He's got her in the box you gave him," Draco explained.

Harry wanted to hear more, wanted to know what else Snape was keeping secret from him, but all at once the dream began whirling, a sickening spinning sensation sending the whole world into a twisting tornado that dizzied him until he could scarcely breathe. And then the dream began again, but he wasn't in the past any longer. He was in the future. He knew that, because he was in his room in Snape's quarters, and Draco's enchanted picture frame was showing the Whomping Willow trying to bud out into new leaves. It was spring, early spring, and Harry was alone in the room.

When he looked around, he noticed an envelope laying on the shelves where he normally kept his books and some of his Christmas gifts. They were all missing now, though; there was only that envelope. Curious, Harry wandered over to the shelves and broke the plain wax seal keeping it closed. A tiny key dropped forth into his hand. A Gringott's key.

Voices drifted in from the living room, distracting him from the key. Amaelia Thistlethorne was talking, her high voice unmistakable. Harry put the key back in the envelope and set it down, then went to the door to listen, peering out through the crack to spy on Snape as he talked with the casewitch from Wizard Family Services.

"Well," she was saying. "I certainly never thought to be back here so very soon, and under such terrible circumstances."

"Have you brought the paperwork?" Snape asked, his voice businesslike and determined. "I want this over and done with, as soon as possible."

The casewitch pursed her lips. "I am under a great deal of pressure not to permit you to take such a step as this, you understand."

A sneering expression settled on Snape's face as Harry looked out at the scene in the living room. "I need not ask from which quarter. He does so love to pull those strings. No doubt he doesn't care for this development, but . . ." Snape shrugged. "I'm afraid it is necessary." His eyes narrowed. "You won't let his influence dissuade you, I trust."

"Of course not. Wizard Family Services' sole concern is the best interest of the child. Are you certain this is the only way to resolve the situation?"

"I am absolutely certain," Snape replied, his arms crossed in resolution.

"I understand that your feelings may have changed, but this is so sudden--"

"On the contrary. It is long overdue."

The casewitch shifted on her feet as though considering how best to get through Snape's stubbornness. "I'm sure the young man must be very upset, which is only natural, considering--"
"Miss Thistlethorne," Snape softly said, his tones ringing with decision, "it is time to end this . . . standoff, so that both he and I can move past the regrettable position we find ourselves in. I trust I make myself clear?"

"Very clear, Professor."

With that, the casewitch extended a parchment. Snape took it, and summoning a quill, signed it.

"I'll speak with Harry now," Amaelia Thistlethorne said. "He really should have been informed of this in advance, you realise."

Snape nodded, a sweep of long, black hair brushing his face. "No doubt."

Harry woke up thrashing, his hair sticking up wildly, his eyes haunted from what he had seen.

Wizard Family Services, here again. The situation "unfortunate" and "regrettable," so it couldn't possibly mean that Draco was being adopted as the casewitch had once wanted. In fact, she had seemed to be arguing against whatever was up for discussion. But what could that have been?

Snape had talked of pressure, of someone pulling strings to stop them . . . well, who else could that be but Dumbledore? He had so much influence with Wizard Family Services that he'd got them to rush Harry's adoption through in the first place. Snape didn't call the headmaster the chessmaster for nothing. And now both Snape and Thistlethorne were prepared to do something that Dumbledore didn't want . . . something that would have Harry and Snape moving past the "regrettable position" they found themselves in . . .

And then there was the vault key . . . and the fact that the room had been so strangely bare. In fact, everything he'd been leaving out had been gone. Nothing of his remained in the room, except his trunk and that key . . .

Somebody had packed his things, without even telling him he was going to leave!

But that made sense, didn't it? If Snape was going to sign those papers, if they meant what they seemed, then of course Harry would have to be packed to go. Of course he would need his key.

His first panicked thought was that maybe it wasn't true. He had plenty of dreams that weren't seer dreams, after all. But the pattern was all there: something from the past, a whirling, then something from the future. And the future part always came true.

Always.

He'd tried his very best not to hit Ron, but that had come true.

It had been completely absurd to think that Draco Malfoy would ever call him a brother, but that had come true, too.

And now, another seer dream. Something else that was going to come true.

Something Harry should have known even without the dream. Why else would Snape leave him to sit in his room all day and brood? When he'd been upset before, the man had insisted he come out and play Wizard Scrabble! Not this time, though. This time, Snape just didn't care.

But that made sense. It was all there, in the dream.
Snape wasn't going to forgive Harry, ever. He was going to give him back his key, instead. He was going to call Wizard Family Services, and say it hadn't worked out, and defy Dumbledore who would no doubt say to give Harry more time.

But Snape wasn't going to give Harry more time; the dream made that much clear enough.

He was going to unadopt him, instead.
Harry all but cringed. *Unadopt?* Was that even a word?

He shook his head to clear it of irrelevant thoughts, and tried to get his mind back onto what mattered. *The dream.*

All right, so he'd had a seer dream about Snape unadopting him. Pretty scary, considering all his seer dreams to date had come true. Of course, there *had* been that time Snape had woken him up claiming that Harry had been screaming in Parseltongue. Harry had counted that as a seer dream for a while, but later he'd really wondered if it had been. In the first place, he didn't remember dreaming it so couldn't know if it had followed the past-spinning-into-future pattern. And in the second place, he wasn't sure Snape knew what he was talking about. He still didn't see how anybody could scream in Parseltongue, anyway!

So, that one probably didn't count, which left Harry with a horrible fact to face: his seer dreams always came true, and he'd just seer dreamed that by the beginning of spring, Snape wasn't going to want Harry Potter for a son any longer.

Of course, for all Harry knew, the man felt *that* way already. Yesterday's events would certainly seem to bear that out.

But the dream had very strange implications, considering Harry's entire situation. In the dream, he'd been all packed to leave the dungeons, so clearly he was going to go back to the Tower. But Snape would never make him leave the protection of the wards, not unless Harry's magic was back in full. But an unadoption would undo the wards anyway, wouldn't it? Even hating him, Snape wouldn't take a step like that . . . unless, again, Harry didn't need those wards any longer.

Harry took a breath. All right, all right. So what did the dream mean? If it was true, it just had to mean that by early spring, his magic would be back.

But what if the dream *wasn't* a seer dream at all? He'd woken up sort of assuming that was the case, but panic had a way of choking off rational thought. Now that he was more awake, and calmer, it occurred to Harry that in one important sense, he'd never had a seer dream like that one.

Because in *that* one, he'd dreamed about a real concern, a real problem, something already on his mind.

He *hadn't* gone to sleep back in Sirius' house worrying about the house on Privet Drive being destroyed or fretting that he'd punch Ron or that Draco Malfoy, of all people, might start declaring them brothers. Those dreams, and all the others, had come from absolutely nowhere. Whereas this one . . .

Well, he *had* gone to sleep last night worried and upset and pretty much wondering if Snape was ever going to forgive him. It hadn't just been the fight causing him to feel that way. It was all day with a locked door, and the fact that Snape hadn't answered Harry's knock in the night. Though for all he knew, there might be a good reason for that. Still, he'd been worried. Horribly worried.

And then he'd dreamed.

He remembered what the Muggle psychology book had had to say about dreams. *They reveal our deepest fears . . .*
Well, that certainly fit. He'd never felt exactly secure as Snape's son. It had always struck him as . . . well, fantastical. After all, this was Severus Snape. There was too much past history between them for the adoption to seem completely natural so soon. And then that awful fight, and the way Snape had taken points, and the horrible thing he'd said, so of course Harry ended up filled with jitters about whether he was really wanted or not.

Anyway, he was used to being unwanted. The other feeling was the one that was hard to believe, and even harder to get used to. So maybe the dream hadn't been prophetic. He'd just been living out one of his worst fears. When he thought about it that way, everything made perfect sense. Even the key. To Harry, Snape having his vault key really sort of cemented their new relationship. So what else would his mind dredge up to scare him, except a return of the key?

But what about the pattern? some thought snuck through to ask. The past. The spinning. The future. If it was just an average dream, why did it follow that particular pattern? Why did the dream disguise itself as something more than it was?

Good question, but when Harry thought about it, there was indeed an answer. Because the seer dream pattern is known to me by now, he firmly told himself. It was my . . . what did that book say? . . . it was my subconscious, taking hold and making the dream the worst sort of nightmare I could have, the kind I'll actually wake up still believing. Or maybe it was my subconscious trying to warn me, even. Like . . . look out, Harry, this could end up happening . . . if you let this latest fight get out of control. Maybe my mind was trying to tell me that I'd better work harder to work this all out, or I could lose my father.

And I don't want to lose him.

I really, really don't.

So, Harry realised, whether the dream was a warning or just a nightmare, making the first move toward a reconciliation would be the mature thing to do. It seemed like forever since he'd thought about it, but he'd started this year trying to be a bit more mature, hadn't he? Lately, in the upheaval of the adoption and everything else, he'd lost track of that.

But Draco had been right; hiding in his room sulking--yes, he recognised it now, he had been sulking--was pretty childish behaviour. Even if he'd sort of been trained to make himself scarce when Uncle Vernon was on a rampage. Snape wasn't like Uncle Vernon; Harry knew that.

Of course, Harry told himself, he hadn't been completely juvenile the day before. He had in fact already tried to work things out with Snape, but the man had locked the lab and then later, hadn't answered the knock on his bedroom door. Well, maybe he'd still been too angry to talk. Or maybe he hadn't even been home. How would Harry know? It wouldn't be the first time Snape had worked in his classroom office, or the larger potions lab that adjoined it, until the wee hours of the morning.

Give the man the benefit of the doubt, Harry decided.

Give the dream a good dose of doubt, too, he mentally added. Until he had some real reason to believe it, he was going to assume the dream had just been his own wandering mind. Because that's what most dreams were, right? They reveal our deepest fears.

So . . . he'd work hard to get back on good terms with Snape, and try his best to stay that way. And then the man wouldn't have any reason to unadopt him, right? Everything would be fine.

But your seer dreams always come true, a nagging little voice whispered in his mind. Always. Always always always.
Harry mentally shouted back at the voice: *Shut up.*

Because he wasn't going to think that way. He just *wasn't*. Rolling out of bed, he fetched some clean clothes, and went into the bathroom to shower and change.

When he emerged, Draco was sitting up in bed. "You're up early."

The Slytherin boy's voice was matter-of-fact, holding none of last night's scathing scorn. Maybe he'd got it out of his system and was ready to be friends again? A bit encouraged by that, Harry made sure his own tone was level as he admitted, "Yeah, I didn't sleep so much."

"Nightmare?" Draco's voice that time was actually concerned, which of course made Harry feel like even more of a jerk than before.

"No, just . . . feeling guilty, I guess," he quietly admitted. "I shouldn't have said that, about your money. I'm very sorry."

Draco gave a shrug as though it wasn't any big deal, but to Harry the gesture seemed deliberate, not relaxed.

At a loss for how to proceed, Harry ventured, "What would you like for breakfast? I could Floo for whatever suits . . ."

"You go have breakfast with Severus," Draco advised. "I have a feeling the two of you are overdue for a little father-son chat."

Now Harry was left feeling like a total heel. "Oh, no . . . I mean, I don't want . . . well, I do, but . . ."

He started over. "I really do think that Severus would have liked to adopt you, too--"

"I know," Draco interrupted. "We had quite a long talk about it."

"I know," Draco interrupted. "We had quite a long talk about it."

"So come on out to breakfast," Harry urged. "I don't want you to feel excluded."

"Are you afraid to go out there alone and face him?" Draco challenged.

Hearing it put that way made Harry realise that he actually *was*. It was one thing to tell himself that he hadn't *really* had a seer dream about being completely rejected, but it was quite another to believe it. If he went out there to breakfast, and the man was still hateful and awful, still telling him to *get out of his sight* . . . well, that would be bad enough news that Harry was frankly reluctant to leave the room at all.

Giving up on waiting for an answer, Draco went on, "Listen, I shouldn't have said you were a coward, all right? I know for a fact you aren't. Your bravery on Samhain was impossible to miss, and it showed the Death Eaters up for the weaklings they are, and that's what opened my eyes to what I was about to choose." The Slytherin boy met Harry's eyes. "I somehow doubt I'd have lasted long in his service, which means your lack of cowardice saved my life. So . . . what I said about your magic . . . I just meant, I'm really frustrated and worried that it's taking so bloody long to get it back, and I guess I think you have some . . . issues, getting in the way."

*Yeah, issues . . . like dreams predicting an unadoption.* If Harry was sure of anything, it was that he definitely had some issues. Starting with, how was he going to approach Snape to get them past their awful fight? What if his father still hated him?
"I'm not afraid to face Severus," he lied, biting his lip. "But um . . . just for reference, do you know how mad he still was last night? I mean, did he say anything about it?"

"We were actually pretty wrapped up in a Potions project."

Harry wasn't sure what he thought about that. He decided the best thing he could do was shelve it. "Are you sure you won't come out and have breakfast with us?"

"Think I'll have a lie-in," Draco said, faking a yawn. He slid back down into his bed, and waved a laconic hand for Harry to leave. "You go on."

So, Harry did, wondering all the while what sort of reception awaited him on the other side of that closed door.

"Good morning," Snape calmly said when Harry emerged from the bedroom. The man had been perusing the Daily Prophet, but he laid it aside as Harry slid into his seat at the dining table.

"Er . . . good morning," Harry slowly answered. He wasn't quite sure how to act. Snape didn't seem boiling over with fury, certainly, but Harry still felt apprehensive. He poured himself a cup of tea, only to stare into his cup when he realised it was actually coffee. Ugh.

"Not your preference, I take it." Snape conjured a pot of tea along with a new cup, then poured and added milk, just the way Harry liked it.

"Thanks," Harry murmured, glancing at Snape over the top of his cup as he wondered what else he should say. Small talk, maybe. Before he could come up with anything, Snape broke the silence.

"Has your scar been bothering you?"

Harry almost flinched. All he could think was that Snape was trying to see if his magic was finally starting to stream back. Was he so eager to be rid of Harry?

"No, sir." Something inside him seemed to deflate with the quiet words, and it only got worse when Snape pressed:

"Are you certain? Not even a twinge?"

Shaking his head, Harry decided he'd better change the subject. "Er . . . anything interesting in the Prophet, sir?"

"You might say that," Snape drawled, pushing the paper across the table. Horror in the Lake District, the headline read. "There was a large-scale Death Eater meeting yesterday."

So that's why he asked about my scar, Harry realised. The dream must have set him on edge; he was seeing double meanings everywhere. And he had to stop it, otherwise he might get so jittery that it caused yet more problems. He had to act like everything was normal. "Um, does the Order know anything? About what Voldemort might be planning?"

Snape shrugged. "There was a survivor to the latest carnage. A cat, actually. The Order is meeting later today to discuss whatever memories Minerva or Albus can charm from the animal." Correctly interpreting the look on Harry's face, Snape growled, "No, you may not attend the meeting."

Well, that certainly seemed like things were back to normal. Pushing his chair back, Harry went to
the Floo and ordered some breakfast. When the food appeared on the table, Snape raised an eyebrow. "Hungry, are we?"

Hmm, maybe he had overdone it a bit. "I didn't each much yesterday," he excused himself, and began loading bangers, eggs, French toast, and thick ham slices onto an empty plate.

"How much is not much?" Snape darkly inquired.

Harry thought briefly of exaggerating a bit, then decided that would be bloody stupid in the circumstances. "Couple of pieces of candy," he admitted, flushing as he began to eat.

"A couple of pieces of . . . " Snape frowned, then assessed him critically. "Were you feeling ill?"

Harry swigged down some orange juice as he wondered how to answer. He could just say yes and that would be that. But just as before, he had a sense that lying to his father wasn't going to help them in the long run. And after that dream, it was the long run that concerned him. "Just worried, I think. I mean, you were awfully mad at me."

"And this made you stop eating?" Snape asked, his voice incredulous.

"I wasn't hungry."

Snape stared at him for a moment, his eyes calculating something, but instead of replying, he served himself some eggs and began to eat. Only after he had finished did he speak again. "Did you find some time yesterday to decipher the Gryffindor well-wish?"

"Not so much, no."

"You worked on your assignments?"

"Um, no."

Again, a long stare. "You are feeling more yourself today, I trust."

"Yes, sir."

Nodding, Snape pushed to his feet and began draping himself in the formal robes he hung by the door each night when he returned from teaching classes. Harry watched in confusion. "It's Sunday, isn't it?" Then it came to him. "Oh, the Order meeting."

Snape shook out the folds in his robes. "That's a bit later. At the moment I must attend a conference with the Weasleys."

So much for appetite. Memory crashing in on him, Harry shoved his plate away. He'd begun feeling a bit better when it seemed that Snape wasn't angry at him any longer, but the Ron issue brought all his own anger roaring back. He struggled to repress it, to stay mature even in the face of Snape being anything but. "Ah, Professor . . . don't you think you overreacted that night? To Ron and all?"

"I've actually been extremely patient with Mr Weasley's idiocy," Snape had the gall to claim.

"You call ten thousand lines patient?" Harry gasped.

"Harry," Snape drawled, his booted heels clicking on the stone floor as he approached the boy again, "why do you think I required him to write his lines down here?"

Baffled, Harry remembered, "So he couldn't cheat, you said."
"Don't you suspect I could have accomplished that objective another way, had I wished?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, I figured you had Fred and George in class enough years to be a bit wary of Weasley inventiveness."

Mouth quirking a bit, Snape murmured, "There is that, I suppose. However, I required Mr Weasley to serve his detention here because his true punishment wasn't lines at all."

"I don't follow."

Snape's hair swayed as he shook his head. "I thought you would, eventually. Draco realised almost at once what was really going on. He didn't like it, but I told him it was none of his concern. But you . . . you never once questioned the arrangement? At times you aren't very Slytherin at all."

That comment stung. Harry didn't think it was meant to, not particularly, but it did. What was more, it brought up a whole host of resentments that had been festering for far too long. "I'm a Gryffindor, too," he pointed out. "And . . . but . . ." Harry swallowed, wondering if this was the right time to broach this particular subject.

"But?" Snape mildly queried.

That certainly sounded like he was willing to listen, at least, which caused a strong sensation to wash over Harry. Acceptance. The dream was just a dream. Everything was going to be all right. "Well . . . it's just that I think you expect me to be like a Slytherin, sir. And . . . that's not working for me. Because I'm not as Slytherin as you," he scowled, "or Draco. If you'd explain your plans instead of just plotting circles around me, I'd really appreciate it."

Snape had raised an eyebrow at the phrase plotting circles.

"Like Samhain," Harry sighed, deciding he'd better explain. "I know you think that trust born of struggle is the strongest kind or something --kind of like your learn by experience theory-- but honestly, I'd have realised sooner that Draco was sincere if I'd have known why he abandoned Voldemort's cause. All your plotting did was put me under one hell of a strain for months. Do you even know what it's like to feel like you might get hexed into oblivion any second?"

Snape pulled his chair back out and sat down, his expression intent. "I suppose the Weasleys can wait a few moments," he decided. "As for knowing what it is to live in fear for my life? Yes, I do know what that is like."

"Right, Voldemort. Spying. All right, I'm sure you do. But imagine feeling like that here in your own home, every hour of every day, for weeks, and you can't even leave to get away from it! There were actually times near the start when I thought Draco might poison me. Don't laugh. I'm not joking."

"I see that you're not," the Potions Master murmured.

"And Hagrid, there's another example. You had to deprive me of his company for weeks and weeks, just so that when I might be able to Floo, I'd really want to? But being cut off from all my friends isn't going to make me want my magic back sooner, Professor. It's just going to depress me and make everything a whole lot worse. Because I'm a Gryffindor, too. I need my friends." Harry sucked in a breath. "You treat me like you think I'm a Slytherin--"

"Which you would unequivocally be had you not imposed your foolish whim on the Sorting Hat."

"Wouldn't the same as is," Harry pointed out. "I've been raised Gryffindor, so to speak. It's too late now to turn back the clock. It's part of who I am. Besides, do you really think the Hat would have let
me veer into another house if I hadn't fit in there as well?"

Snape stared at him for a moment. "No," he finally admitted, his voice quiet. "You are both. I do actually know this."

"But you forget it whenever you have to make a . . . er, a parenting decision," Harry claimed. "Or, seems like, anyway."

"So what do you suggest?" Snape inquired, his tones a big haughty.

"Talk to me," Harry simply said. "Look, you said we'd negotiate. That's all I want."

"That was in reference to rules," Snape pointed out. "But . . . I do see your point."

"Good," Harry approved, thinking that was probably enough of that. For now, at least. He still didn't think that Snape really got it--plotting was just too ingrained in the man--but maybe he'd think twice about using quite so much manipulation. Back to the reason this had all come up. "So . . . you implied that Ron's lines were another one of these Slytherin plots, I think? They weren't his true punishment? Then what was?"

Snape drained the cold coffee in his cup, grimacing as though he didn't care for the taste, then poured himself some fresh. "I'm not even certain that 'punishment' is an apt term. I merely thought that if your friend was required to spend enough time here, he would eventually come to realise that you were going to be fine."

Harry felt his eyes go wide. "The lines were nothing but a pretext?"

Snape sipped his coffee and nodded. "This adoption has disrupted your relationships with your closest friends. You have repeatedly told me what your friends mean to you. Harry." He waited until the boy looked at him once more. "It was never my intention to deprive you of them."

Talk about plots inside plots . . . It took Harry a moment to really grasp it, mostly because the scheme was so completely misguided. "So that's why you gave him such a huge number of lines?"

Snape shrugged. "Mr Weasley, however, is proving recalcitrant indeed."

Well, duh, Harry almost said, but he knew that rudeness wasn't going to help his cause. "This is just what I was trying to explain before," he pointed out. "Your plan. It's way too Slytherin. I could have told you it wouldn't work, if you'd just discussed it with me."

A rather derisive look settled on Snape's face. "You, of course, being an expert on teenaged boys."

"I just know Ron. He doesn't do subtle. He's got more of an all-or-nothing sort of personality."

Snape appeared to think that over. "And so? What would you have advised, had I brought the matter up beforehand?"

"Well, that he needed to see a lot of us together. And more than that, he needed to see you being a father. Because . . . all right, it's like this. Even when you were spending time with me, you were mostly being like a professor, you know."

"You still think of me as primarily your teacher," Snape gleaned, sounding . . . well, not too pleased by that, actually. That was nice.

"No," Harry insisted. "I don't, but Ron would have thought that. Look . . ." He tried to think back.
"What he mostly saw was you quizzing me. Ron wasn't going to see that and start thinking, there's Harry's father, right?" Harry gulped, and crossed his fingers for luck, juvenile and Mugglish as that was. "I'd just like to know . . . are you going to let Ron come back next year, Professor?"

Snape's sigh sounded exasperated. "Harry, I thought you understood by now. I've no interest in expelling him."

"So that was just an awful threat to try to make him do another ten thousand lines?" Harry's own sigh was even more exasperated. "There you go again. No offence, but--"

"Why is it," Snape asked sardonically, "that whenever you say no offence, you invariably follow it with something highly offensive?"

"But tricking him into extra lines was a terrible idea," Harry went right on, undeterred. "How's Ron going to calm down enough to stop and think about what he sees here if he's boiling over with rage?"

Snape raised his chin a fraction. "Mr Weasley was in charge of his own punishment. For all I cared, he might have done a mere hundred lines. I planned to release him from detention the moment his behaviour indicated he understood that you were in no danger here."

"But he doesn't think I'm in danger!" Harry exclaimed. "He knows, and he even said, that he doesn't think you were, er . . . you know . . . with me."

"I should hope not," Snape retorted, crossing his arms. "He does however think the adoption likely to be to your detriment."

Harry scowled. "And you did a really good job convincing him otherwise, didn't you? He probably thinks you punish me the same way, with months of lines."

Snape shook a rueful head. "In that case, I shall simply have to take your advice and be sure Mr Weasley has more opportunity to see us interact as a family."

"You . . . then you aren't going to expel him?"

Now it was Snape who was scowling. "Didn't I just say that was never my intention? I have explained the entire situation to the Weasleys, including the matter of the misspelled word, and while they too disapproved of my methods, they did not think it amiss that their son be required to learn that his . . . hysteria is misplaced."

"When'd you see the Weasleys?" Harry asked, wondering if that was where Snape had been the night before.

"I have not seen them in person, Harry. Order members have a variety of ways to communicate."

Oh yeah, Dumbledore had mentioned that. "All right, but if everything is settled, then why are they coming here for a conference?"

"It yet remains to persuade Mr Weasley to resume doing lines."

Harry thought a moment about that. It was wrong. Horribly wrong, but should he push his luck with Snape? Then again, the stupid dream hadn't been a seer dream; of course it hadn't. Snape wouldn't unadopt him. Some deep part of him knew that the same way he knew his name. It was fixed. Permanent. He had a father, now. And he wanted to be a son, which didn't mean just blindly accepting whatever bizarre Slytherin manipulations Snape could dream up. It meant discussion, give-
"Don't you think the Weasleys were really good about the adoption?" he asked, deciding he'd sort of smooth into his real topic. Snape would probably notice, but then again, he would probably approve. He liked to see Harry manoeuvre; he'd said so. "I mean, they could have come unglued like Ron did; they have sort of looked on me as another child in the family. But they were really, really great. Didn't even resent it."

Snape gave him a longish stare, probably wondering what he was up to. "Arthur and Molly Weasley are rational adults," he finally answered.

"Yeah, but they have feelings, too," Harry pointed out, then went in for the kill. "Don't you think they'd appreciate it if you showed their son a little of the consideration they've already shown yours?"

Snape's nostrils flared. "Oh, very good, Harry. However, it's in Mr Weasley's best interests not to toss away a close friendship. His parents concur. He will have to do his lines. This time I will put forth more effort to see that he comes to terms with me being your father."

Harry bit his lip. "I appreciate that, sir, I really do. But all this manipulation . . . I don't like it. I really don't. I mean, I got pretty upset when you tricked me into using the Floo, so how can I help you trick Ron like this?"

"The alternative is to let him decide when next he will venture down here."

"No, the alternative is to get him down here in some less cruel way," Harry retorted.

Snape frowned. "That would create the unfortunate impression that a professor, a master of his craft, had not been allowed to enforce his standard of discipline."

"Yeah, I'm real worried about your reputation," Harry sourly put in, then realised that had come out awfully rude. "Sorry. I meant, I think you'll still be able to terrify the pants off--" Shite, that wasn't much better, was it?

Snape, however, cracked a smile. "I really must go speak with the Weasleys, now," he announced. "What do you recommend I tell them?"

Harry did a double-take. "You're asking me? Night before last, I begged you to relent!"

"I admit, at that time I was frankly irritated with your inability to see what I was really doing. But now that you know my plan, if you still think it ill-advised . . ." The Potions Master lifted his shoulders. "You're my son, not my student, though hopefully soon you will be that as well. Still, here, you will always be my son first, and as we have established, there is a time and place for negotiation. So. What do you wish me to do?"

That put Harry in a bit of a quandary. He didn't have any brilliant ideas for how to solve this mess. He just knew one thing for sure. "Don't make him do any more lines. Or anything else that looks like a punishment," he hastily added, seeing horrid visions of Snape demanding Ron scrub the floor without magic or something. He wouldn't put it past him. "But . . . well, I do like the idea of him spending time down here. You'll think of something."

"I'll think of something," Snape echoed, shaking his head. "You haven't any more constructive ideas than that?"

Harry looked up, and smiled. "No. I trust you to handle it, now that you know how I feel."
"Now that's manipulative," Snape remarked, sounding more pleased than not. "I really must go now. You will not likely see me again until evening."

"Oh right, the Order meeting," Harry murmured. "Are you still using Sirius' house for that, even after what happened with Lucius Malfoy?"

"We are still using your house, yes," Snape stressed.

Which reminded Harry. "You said you'd see about getting me some legal help to sort that out--"

"Let's discuss that this evening when I return," Snape suggested. "All right?"

"All right," Harry slowly agreed. Things seemed all right now --or at least Snape didn't seem angry any longer-- but Harry was strangely aware that all those things that had been said the night before last were still hovering between them. Get out of my sight. You don't deserve to be my son. And Snape must have meant them, at least somewhat, considering he'd stayed away from Harry the entire day before, even locking him out of the Potions Lab. He couldn't help but feel they'd better talk that out. It didn't feel right to just ignore the horrible fight they'd had. Ignoring things made them worse . . . like when he'd ignored the whispering in the walls, and students had ended up petrified.

He wasn't going to be as immature as that. Not this time. Even as he decided that, however, a choking feeling swept over him. He didn't want to bring up all the ugliness of their fight, he really didn't. But . . . it seemed like he probably should. Otherwise, those awful words would always be lurking around in the back of his mind. "Yeah, all right. We'll discuss it tonight."

Snape moved toward the door, then looked back. He looked as though he might say something more, but after a moment, he swept out into the hallway without a word. A wave of his wand, and the door thudded closed behind him.

Harry took in another deep breath, and told himself acceptance.

*He does accept you; it's obvious. He does . . .*

All the same, he couldn't help but feel a bit unnerved by the conversation he still had to have with his father.

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By the time Draco emerged, Harry had recovered his equilibrium and finished his breakfast. The Slytherin boy served himself and cast a warming charm to freshen his food, then looked straight at Harry to suggest, "Let's make sure you finish researching that well-wish, today. How does that sound?"

"Like you've been eavesdropping. You heard Severus ask about it."

Draco didn't deny the allegation. He didn't even look disturbed.

"I don't know that I'll be able to concentrate," Harry murmured, wondering what was going on in Snape's conference with the Weasleys. Maybe he shouldn't have left matters to his father, considering the daft scheme the man had come up with last time. Ten thousand lines . . .

"You need to do something," Draco insisted. "I'll even help you, all right?"

That certainly startled Harry out of his morose thoughts. "You're offering to help me cheat?"
Draco laughed and leaned back in his chair. "Slytherins always cheat. I thought you knew that." Then he sobered slightly. "But no, I wasn't, actually. I thought I might just nudge you in the right direction. You do want to know what your house wished for you, don't you?"

"Yeah," Harry admitted. "I'll go get that book Ginny gave me."

"No rush, I'm going to enjoy my breakfast first. But as long as you're collecting books, fetch one called Plant to Potion from my trunk. I think it might come in handy."

Looking in Draco's trunk turned out to be a rather enlightening experience. The sheer volume of stuff the boy kept in there! Harry couldn't believe it. The trunk contained wizardspace, obviously, holding vastly more than its physical dimensions would indicate. Might be something to ask for next Christmas, Harry mused. He wondered how expensive a trunk like that would be.

After Harry brought out all his books and notes, spreading them out on the table which Draco had already cleared of breakfast items, the Slytherin boy asked what Harry had discovered so far.

Harry checked a scroll of parchment. "Arabic gum to purify evil; strawberry leaves for love and luck."

"Luck only," Draco corrected. "You only got the smaller leaves, which represent the secondary quality."

Harry thought that little tidbit was quite a nudge, but he wasn't complaining. Draco wasn't done, though.

"I'll give you a hint about what's left," the Slytherin boy offered. "Except for the bluebell, they all mean the same thing. The same wish, over and over. I think your friends were trying to make sure you didn't miss their point."

"Which was . . .?"

"Unravel the plant meanings and find out," Draco shrugged. So, Harry did.

It was easier with Draco there to keep him from going up blind alleys in the research. It was also a lot easier with Draco's book, which covered practically everything. Still, it was more than merely looking things up. The book focussed heavily on potion properties, which Harry had to think about a while before he could relate them to more general magical characteristics.

He was nibbling a turkey sandwich as he finished the last item on his list. Setting his quill down with a sigh, all he could say was, "I'm not quite sure what to make of this."

Draco looked up from his own lunch. "So you're done?"

Harry nodded. "The bluebell's a wish for truth. And the almond, iris, sage, and sunflower all represent wisdom."

"Ten points to Slytherin," Draco lightly joked, nodding in approval.

"Half of them will go to Gryffindor," Harry retorted, thinking of how Snape had circumvented the house counters when he'd been mad at Harry. That had been just awful, and not only because Gryffindor had got the short end of the stick.
"Right. So forget that," was Draco's reply. "Well, you know all the wishes now. Any thoughts?"

Harry checked his notes, then murmured, "Hmm. Well, my friends were nice about it, mostly, but they aren't too comfortable with the adoption. They've wished me luck and to be able to purify evil, probably because they think I'll need those to survive being down here in Slytherin." He looked up, but Draco didn't smile. "Then they want me to have the truth . . . I suppose that means they think I'm fooling myself. But most of all, their wish for me is wisdom. All right, I get it. They think I don't know what I'm doing, so they're wishing I would see reality and know how to deal with it."

"That's about it, yes."

"So why did you say you couldn't wait to see my face when I found out?"

"That they wished wisdom for you no fewer than four bloody times?" Draco scoffed, "It's so transparent. But ironic, too. Because whether they know it or not, Severus is an incredibly wise choice of father. Who but Severus both knows the Dark Lord so very well and is on the side of Light? Who else could teach you whatever dark magic you need to survive the coming battle, yet make sure it doesn't corrupt you? Severus has been there. He's been through Hell and come out on the other side, so he'll know how to keep you from making the same journey."

Harry swallowed. "You've . . . um, you've given this a good deal of thought."

Draco shrugged. "When he adopted you, it was either that or leave here. And of course I couldn't leave. So yeah, it bothered me, how things worked out, but I got over it."

"I really am sorry I said--"

"You must have an apologizing-thing as well," Draco interrupted. "You already said sorry once today. It's all right, Harry. I was mad at the time but since I've said no end of mean things to you, including some rotten things that very night, I suppose we're even."

_I suppose we are even_ . . . the phrase reminded him of something Snape had once said. Wanting to get even must be a Slytherin thing. Strange how Snape and Draco liked to deride Gryffindor fairness, when they were so obsessed with getting _even_ . . .

Thinking of fairness, though, reminded Harry to ask something that had been on his mind a little while. "Do you suppose I have to write a thank-you note for the well-wish, now that I've deciphered it?"

"Considering as they're usually given to newborn infants," Draco laughed, "I don't think so. Say, I know. Sometime when Hermione comes tromping on down, mention that Severus is wisdom personified, and see how she reacts."

"Don't be snide about Hermione," Harry rebuked the other boy. "You know perfectly well that she hasn't gone on about the adoption for weeks, now."

"I know her nose is still sort of raised whenever she's down here, like she suspects a stench or something."

"I'd like to see how haughty you'd look if you had to spend some time in Gryffindor Tower," Harry retorted. "It's your own fault she looks that way. No offence, but you don't exactly inspire confidence, Draco. She is a Muggleborn and you have made it rather clear on several occasions that you think that makes her less than human."

Ignoring that last accusation, Draco rallied, "That's just it, Harry. She doesn't _have_ to spend all that
time down here. Three, four afternoons a week? Don't you realise she's checking up on you? She might have finally shut up about you being unhealthily attached to Severus, but she obviously still thinks it's true, or else she wouldn't be hanging about quite so much."

"I happen to like her hanging about," Harry coolly insisted. "I like her, in case you haven't noticed."

"She's a real prat!" Draco erupted. "She's just not being so bloody obvious about it any longer."

"She's a friend," Harry corrected, his irritation with Draco fading as he began to understand. Wisdom, he thought. The Gryffindors might have meant that wrong, but it was a wonderful wish, all the same. "She really cares about what's best for me; we just happen to disagree about what that is. I'm not going to hold that against her."

Draco made a face.

Remembering how little the Slytherin boy understood about true friendship helped, Harry thought, as he went on, "You've been really good the past few times she's come down. I mean, I know her attitude angers you, but I'm glad you don't let on to her at least."

"I suppose it helps that she's behaving herself as well," Draco drawled. "About time she emulated my perfect manners."

"Like eavesdropping, you mean?"

Draco had enough sense to flush a bit at that, but he rallied quickly enough. "Just make sure you tell the Gryffindors that their wish has come true because, after all, Severus really is a wise choice of father."

Harry didn't doubt that, but as much as he respected Snape, he knew the man was far from perfect. His ten-thousand-line-plan, for example. Sheer idiocy from start to finish.

But wisdom, Harry sensed, would be to avoid another argument with Draco, who had admired Snape for so long that he simply couldn't see the man's flaws.

Harry could see them. But he could see past them, too. Snape wasn't perfect, but then again, neither was Harry. Then again . . . he hadn't said that Snape didn't deserve to be his father, had he?

It was no wonder the comment had given him that awful nightmare. Harry wasn't going to dream again of being unadopted, though; he was going to work things out with Snape. Things that morning had been mostly amicable, but Harry counted that for what it was worth. They both wanted to get past the fight, that was all. It didn't mean they'd dealt with it like they should have.

But they were going to. Harry was determined on that much.

And maybe that, too, was simply wisdom.
Snape came in that evening while Harry and Draco were eating dinner. "Ah, good," he remarked as he wearily hung his robes and took the chair between them. For all the comment, though, he didn't help himself to any food.

At Draco's quizzical glance, Snape seemed to remember something. His expression darkening, he caustically requested, "The next time Harry stops eating entirely, could you see fit to mention the matter, Draco?"

Draco cast an accusing glare Harry's way. "You didn't eat yesterday? Not anything? I thought you were sneaking meals at odd times to avoid us."

Harry flushed. "I had some chocolate-covered raspberries--"

"Harry," Draco drawled, "just because your relatives starved you as punishment doesn't mean you have to do the same thing to yourself."

"I wasn't!"

"No?" Snape challenged, his cool black gaze steady on Harry.

"I just wasn't very hungry." Harry started to explain. "I . . . I don't know. I suppose I might have learned early on that skipping meals goes right along with being upset."

"You didn't skip meals as a child; you were abused," Snape corrected, his voice harsh. "Do not do that to yourself again."

"I won't," Harry promised, brow furrowed.

"You won't," Draco echoed, shaking his head. "Just like that, you won't. Where's your sense of strategy? Here you have a perfect opportunity to blackmail Severus into eating more regularly, too."

"I don't want to blackmail anyone."

Draco raised an eyebrow as he looked at Snape. "He doesn't care to apply a little judicious blackmail? When's this boy going to get a bit more Slytherin?"

"No doubt Harry will act as Slytherin as he likes when he feels that to be his best strategy," Snape said, his black eyes flashing as though to say he didn't care to be challenged on the point again. "But that is up to him."

Harry appreciated Snape's comments, but the topic still made him uncomfortable. "So, are you hungry, sir?" he changed the subject. "Can I get you something?"

"I ate dinner with the Order," Snape admitted.

"I thought you never stayed . . .?"

Snape looked a bit amused. "While I was spying, Harry, it wasn't a good idea for me to get too social with the side of Light. I had an image to maintain. By the way, Arthur Weasley sends his regards. I dare say he thinks you've been a good influence on me."

"And vice-versa," Harry quietly acknowledged.
"That as well," Snape agreed, his amusement turning dark. "Molly Weasley had no end of conversation on that very topic. Just as well she can talk and cook at the same time, else we'd all still be waiting dinner."

"Ugh, she cooked?" Draco asked, no thought in him of tact. He pretended a bit of contemplation. "Ah well, I suppose she'd have to as the Weasels can't afford a single house-elf. Pitiful. No offence, Severus. So what did you end up eating, stewed newspaper clippings with a side of old shoes?"

"She makes excellent cheese sauce, I'll have you know!" Harry erupted, and then turning to his father, pressed, "How did it all go?"

"With the Order?" Harry had meant with Ron, actually, but Snape kept right on talking. "Minerva gleaned from a feline memory that Voldemort seems determined to cast his net across the English Channel. We've warned the wizarding authorities in France that attacks on Muggleborns may begin at any time."

"The Dark Lord blabs his plans to cats?" Draco questioned.

"He grows giddy watching torture and speaks immoderately," Snape corrected. "The cat that happened to be there for the Lake District atrocities has no understanding of what it witnessed, but when Minerva managed to draw the memories out, she realised what Voldemort had said." Snape folded his hands together and seemed to bolster himself before speaking again. "Draco, you should be aware that indications now suggest Voldemort wants you returned to him alive."

The Slytherin boy froze with his spoon halfway to his mouth. "What indications?"

"Your father has withdrawn the warrant he put out for your death, but the reward being offered for your person has tripled. Students in Slytherin are now being suborned to simply remove you from the Hogwarts grounds."

Draco slumped. "It's going to be torture, then."

Snape nodded in grim agreement. "No doubt as part of the interrogation. You've been living in a room with Harry Potter for months. Voldemort will want to know what you've learned."

Draco shivered all over. "Excuse me, please. I feel a need for a shower."

Harry felt his own flesh crawl at the look on Draco's face. And no wonder; after witnessing Samhain, the Slytherin boy knew only too well just what kind of fate awaited him at Voldemort's . . . or possibly his own father's, hands. "I'm . . . sorry," he whispered, realizing as the words slipped out how inadequate they were. He hadn't regretted being friends with Draco before, but now, hearing that the friendship actually put the other boy in danger?

It was an awful feeling, just awful.

The Potions Master drew in a breath. "Draco . . . I am sorry to have to tell you this, so soon after the other, but you need to know. Mr Weasley will resume his detentions tomorrow."

Narrowing his silver eyes, Draco assessed Snape's expression. "There's something more; I can tell. Well? Let's have it, Severus."

"Harry's friend will be taking dinner with us until further notice."

At that, Draco curled a lip. "Salt for my wounds?"
"Separating Harry from his friends weakens him," Snape calmly observed. "And as your life depends on a Harry strong enough to defeat Voldemort, I expect you to fully support this new plan. You will cease being rude to Mr Weasley, is that clear?"

"As Lubaantum," Draco coldly answered, turning his back on them.

Harry waited until the bedroom door was closed. "Lubaantum?"

Snape waved a tired hand. "Wizarding crystal. Quite renowned, though I doubt Draco's ever seen any. Lucius wouldn't have approved as it's not European."

Harry thought that was more information than he probably needed, but in his rush to find out about Ron, he didn't stop to wonder why his father was a bit less succinct than usual. "So . . . um, Ron. You aren't still going to make him write lines, are you?"

Please say no, he thought. Please please please say no . . .

A mocking glance from those black eyes announced that Snape knew exactly what Harry was thinking. "As it turned out, Mr Weasley himself supplied the solution to our dilemma. Not unlike what you did a few months back when you demanded that extra test from me." A low chuckle rumbled from his chest. "Your friend claimed that his grades had taken a sudden downturn ever since he was obliged to spend so much time doing lines. He was behind in all his classes, he said. Well. What could I do but insist he join the nightly revision I am already running for two other students in his year?"

Harry's breath caught. "I imagine he tried to back out as soon as he heard that."

"Mmm, quite valiantly. I told him that of course his studies were paramount and out of deference to that, we would consider his lines at an end, just so long as he continued studying here until such time as I pronounced him competent in each subject." Snape smirked. "The Weasleys hailed me as eminently reasonable, which left their son adrift in a fog of objections no one was listening to."

"And then," Harry surmised, "you mentioned that since we usually began our revision over dinner, he might as well join us."

"The coup de grace," Snape murmured.

"Well, that should give him lots and lots of time with us," Harry recognised. "Though we'll have to make sure it's not just studying he sees. Thank you, sir."

Snape merely nodded his head.

"So, going back a bit to this morning . . ." Harry ventured, "Are there any solicitors in the wizarding world? I really don't know how anything works. Can you tell me what needs to be done about . . ."

"The matter of your house? Shall we discuss it in the office?"

Harry didn't know why it mattered if Draco overheard, but he nodded and followed his father down the hallway. "So," Snape began as he shut the door and took one of the two leather chairs that faced the desk, "as I understand it, you wish to divest yourself of the property."

"And Sirius' vault," Harry added.

"Albus has the key," Snape volunteered. "As executor, he has instructions to hold it and all deeds until you reach your majority."
"Then we need to talk to him."

Harry's father shook his head. "Tell me, why this haste to rid yourself of the things your godfather wished you to have?"

"I . . . " Harry leaned his head back on the chair back. "You know how I feel."

A flick of Snape's wand had the fire in the office grate merrily blazing to life. "Yes. You feel responsible."

Harry groaned. "Please, sir, can we not go over this whole thing again? I do understand that there are other ways to look at the matter, but I still feel horribly guilty."

"Perhaps so," Snape admitted, laying his wand aside. "Nevertheless, it's far too soon for you to lay aside the bequest. You may feel differently later."

Staring into the fire, Harry vowed, "I'm never going to change my mind. Never, sir. I swear."

"Harry, you are sixteen, not sixty."

"Sixteen's mostly grown."

When Harry would have continued, Snape held up a hand. "Trust me when I say that someday, you may well be grateful that I required you to wait. You told me at Christmas that you wanted to know what it was like to be a child. That you wanted to be able to depend on someone. So . . . can you bring yourself to depend on me, on my wisdom in this matter? Harry . . . let me be your father in this."

Put like that, it was hard to refuse. Actually Harry thought he might start bawling or something. Well, not really, he supposed, but there was sort of a tight feeling in his throat. "All right." He nodded to emphasize his agreement.

Snape favoured him with a small smile. "Excellent."

Harry didn't think so. Oh, the father part was, but not the house part. He still didn't want it. It was a strange feeling, though, the idea that now he had somebody to help him with decisions like that. Somebody to give him advice. Somebody who cared enough, even, to give him advice he'd rather not have heard.

No, not somebody.

A father.

Feeling less alone than he had in a long time . . . well, less alone than he ever had, really, was probably what gave Harry the confidence to venture, "About Ron. Can I suggest, sir . . . " Unsure how to phrase it, Harry chewed his lip.

"Yes?"

"It's just . . . remember, I told you Ron doesn't do subtle? Well, why don't you try sitting him down for a talk? I think he'd appreciate being treated like a friend of your son's, instead of um . . . like some bothersome insect you'd just as soon swat."

"I'll treat him as your friend the moment he begins acting like one," Snape replied, his black eyes implacable.
"That's not right for you to wait for him to make the first move," Harry pointed out. "You're the responsible adult. The professor. You're supposed to be more mature."

"Supposed to be?" Snape slanted him a glance.

Harry sighed. "The way I hear it, back when I was blind you were taking points off Ron just for glaring. And don't say you did it because the behaviour was inappropriate. You've been taking unfair points off Gryffindor for years, for no other reason than that . . ."

"Yes?" Snape asked, rather darkly.

"Well, you hate Gryffindor," Harry said, his tone suggesting that that was pretty obvious, after all.

"I . . ." Snape snapped his mouth shut, only to resume speaking a moment later. "Well. There is one Gryffindor whom I assure you most emphatically I do not hate."

"Yeah, I remember." Harry grinned a little bit, the memory still one that warmed him. "You don't hate me at all." When Snape said nothing, Harry went on, "Honestly, I don't think you hate Ron either, do you? Or Hermione. Hmm, maybe you do actually hate Neville."

"Hatred is a very strong emotion," Snape merely said.

Harry didn't know what that might mean, but he figured they might be heading into dangerous waters if he kept on, so he only said, "Well, think about what I said, okay? Ron's more likely to see what's in front of his nose if you don't get in his face."

"That is a horrible concatenation of imagery," Snape saw fit to inform him.

"I'm talking to my father, not writing an essay," Harry retorted.

"Your essays show the same flaws," Snape countered.

"Will you sit Ron down for a talk or not?" Harry asked, exasperated.

Snape levelled a serious glance at him. "I will consider it." Harry figured that would have to be good enough. For now, anyway.

They sat in silence for a few moments, Snape merely watching the flames, apparently content to just share in Harry's company. Harry, however, was anything but content. Their fight was obviously over, which was all well and good, but he knew he still needed to talk to his father about it. Draco and Snape could apparently just skip that part and go on. Maybe it had to do with being Slytherin. Harry didn't think he was exactly an overemotional Hufflepuff, but neither could he just ignore the awful things Snape had said and done.

"I . . . I'm a bit surprised you still haven't brought up what happened on Friday night," he hesitantly admitted as he turned toward his father. "Not the Ron part. I mean, the Draco and me part."

Snape shrugged. "Are you asking if I've plans to punish you yet further? I thought five hundred points was likely chastisement enough."

"Points and being locked out," Harry ventured, biting his lip until it really hurt, that time.

Snape glanced up, his black eyes deeply shadowed, yet glimmering with surprise. "That wasn't punishment. I was simply occupied."

"With . . ." Harry had been going to say Draco, but decided it would make him sound like an
ungrateful jealous little shite. "With something more important than me," he amended, only to realise that wording wasn't much of an improvement.

"It was not more important," Snape corrected, closing his eyes. "It simply could not wait."

"But why'd you have to lock me out?" The question came tumbling out on its own, sounding so plaintive that Harry cringed.

When the Potions Master opened his eyes, Harry realised the man looked absolutely exhausted, as though he were suffering from a fatigue that went far beyond the physical. "Never mind," he hurriedly said. "You should go get some rest, I think, sir."

Snape shook his head. "That can wait, especially given how deeply I slept last night."

Harry blinked. "So that's why you didn't answer my knock?"

Sitting up straighter, Snape urgently pressed, "You needed me in the night?"

"No . . . well, yes. But just to talk. I guess . . . well, I couldn't help but notice that you were avoiding me all day Saturday."

A sigh broke the air. "I admit that I was still angry. But that is not why I locked the door. I . . . needed to eliminate distractions."

"Draco isn't a distraction, but I am?"

Snape's long hair swayed as he denied that. "Draco has helped me before with the task I was engaged in. And you . . ." His voice dropped. "The full truth is that I locked you out because I would prefer you not know certain things."

Harry tensed, his fingers almost clawing the leather arm of the chair as his dream danced before his eyes.

"My Dark Mark was flaring," Snape quietly admitted, his voice a low hush, barely audible against the crackling of the flames.

"The Death Eater gathering," Harry breathed, appalled. He'd asked once how Snape was managing, and the man had put him off, and Harry had been only too willing to forget the matter. But he shouldn't have been, he realised now. "Oh, sweet Merlin. No wonder you were so cross about Ron, that night. Are you in horrible pain very often?"

"The pain commenced some hours after your friend left. And as for often . . ." Snape paused, clearly reluctant to divulge, "I have found a way to tolerate it, but my solution is . . . inelegant."

Harry understood, then. "You and Draco were working on the remedy all day yesterday."

A low curse crossed Snape's clenched lips. "Remedy is far too kind a term. You have probably heard that the Mark is somewhat akin to your own curse scar? That it cannot be removed?"

Harry slowly nodded, his eyes wide with distress.

"It cannot be magically removed," Snape corrected, all at once sounding much the teacher. "Skin can always be sliced off. However, the Mark returns as the wound heals, which happens at a preternatural rate, as the spell's purpose is to keep me marked. Do you follow me thus far?"

Harry swallowed back the foul taste that had risen to his mouth. "Yeah. You've been cutting it out of
"Essentially," Snape admitted. "Even that strategy would be of little effect, however, if not for a topical Potion I began developing shortly after Samhain. Necessity truly is the mother of invention, I have concluded. This Potion greatly slows healing, and so delays the need for another session with the knife. Don't look so ill, Harry. I put a strong numbing agent in the Potion, obviously."

quot;And so yesterday . . ."

"The Mark had grown back. When Voldemort began to call his followers, I felt it. Draco helped me cut it out again."

Ashamed that he'd looked so obviously nauseated, Harry rallied, "I could have helped you, Professor. It's not just Draco who can stomach . . . oh, I think I understand. Draco has to help you because you're applying a little of what that book called *aversion therapy*.

"It started that way," Snape admitted. "You were blind and in the hospital wing, and the Mark had grown back--I first cut it off myself back in Devon. Healer Marjygold visited you in the cottage and gave me a salve that worked remarkably poorly . . . It was not until we returned here that I could develop something better . . ." For a moment that stretched out almost endlessly, Snape closed his eyes and simply rested. Then he added in wandering tones, "Did I say poorly? It might have been a Longbottom creation, it was so inefficacious. Hog's swill, truly. Perhaps that was the active ingredient . . ."

"Sir . . ." Harry cleared his throat, recognizing not only that Snape was rambling, but that he'd been doing so earlier, too, when he'd spoken of Lubaantum. The man's behaviour began to make more sense. "Perhaps you should have an early night, after all?"

"No, I want to finish this," Snape insisted, wiping a hand across his weary eyes. "Where was I? Oh, yes. The next time the Mark flared, I decided that Draco might benefit from getting a good look at what Voldemort does to his followers."

Snape was rolling up his sleeve by then, turning back the fabric in neat, methodical folds to bare a large expanse of bandage on his forearm. It looked just like a Muggle wound dressing to Harry, except for the lack of any tape.

As Snape began to peel the dressing back, Harry cried out, "You don't have to show me, Professor! I believe you!"

"It never occurred to me that you didn't," Snape calmly returned. "But now that you know, there is no reason why you should not see."

Beneath the bandage was an expanse of . . . well, the best Harry could do was liken it to raw meat.

Snape flipped the bandage back down and unrolled his sleeve, neatly buttoning his cuff as he spoke. "As for last night, Harry. I simply didn't hear your knock. You didn't assume the worst, I trust?"

By then, Harry was ashamed he'd doubted the man. "I thought you must have gone out," he exaggerated. Snape probably knew it was a bit of misdirection, but he didn't comment on it. "You were just asleep, then?"

"More like comatose," Snape admitted. "Even now, I'm still not quite my normal self. And for that you may blame Draco. While my back was turned, he laced my herbal tea with an overdose of the Painless Sleep I make for you."
"But mine's made five times normal strength!" Harry gasped. "Oh, dear. That's a bad mistake for him to make."

"It was no mistake, I quite assure you," Snape drawled. "The young man had seen how worn out I was after hours in pain, had realised that a direct assault on the Mark entails a magical drain besides. Undisturbed sleep is actually the best treatment. He meant well."

"Yeah, but what if he'd accidentally given you enough to do you harm?"

Snape gave him a look. "I assure you, I would have taken a purgative at once."

Harry gaped a bit. "You knew at the time?"

Snape softly snorted. "I am a Potions Master, after all." He tapped the side of his nose. "Not much gets past this."

"I guess not," Harry murmured. "I'm surprised you drank it in that case."

"In retrospect, I see I should have gone to speak with you first." Snape briefly hung his head in his hands, then sat up again, his dark eyes seeking out Harry's gaze. "I must ask your forgiveness, I think. It is no excuse . . . but by then I had been in agony for some hours. Looking back, I can only think I was not quite in my right mind."

"It's all right." Harry drew in a breath. "Caffeine must be an antidote to the Potion, huh? I thought it was weird this morning, you drinking all that coffee. Why not just use some Pepper-Up, though?"

"I did use some," Snape told him. "I needed all my faculties for the Order meeting, after all. Caffeine helps the effects of Pepper-Up last a good while longer, hence the coffee."

"But it's all worn off now," Harry noted, frowning. "Maybe you should take some more?"

Snape shrugged. "I believe I told you once that Potions aren't the solution for everything. At this point I merely need more rest. Natural rest would be best, I do believe. One would think I'd be more used to the process of dealing with the Dark Mark by now. I have done it several times."

"I don't remember you ever locking the door before, though," Harry pointed out.

"You're just not often up and about at the late hour when the pain usually strikes. I would use a charm to silently summon Draco, and leave you to sleep."

That made sense. "How come you wait until the pain strikes to cut it off, though?" Harry had to wonder. "It seems like you could avoid feeling Voldemort's call completely if you . . . er, sliced the Mark off as soon as it started to show at all?"

Snape sighed. "A reasonable supposition. However, there are other matters to consider." Another sigh, this one a long, tired one. "It's quite a literal matter that a curse scar cannot be destroyed, Harry. The flesh that's taken off me will not decay, and since Voldemort's magic is inside it, it is not something I can merely leave for the house-elves to sweep away. Nor can I allow it to sit out unprotected. Without a physical connection to my own magic, the spells forming it could become unstable and begin to permeate the air and building around us. To counter this problem, Draco was helping me renew the stasis Potion I have been using for . . . storage. We did that first. By late afternoon we had proceeded to deal with the Mark itself."

"Oh God," Harry thickly groaned, imagining all those hours with the Mark burning . . . no wonder Snape had succumbed to the lure of being comatose for a while. No wonder, even, that he had
needed help in the lab. "What did you do in Devon, sir? You said you first cut it off your arm, there? You didn't have a stasis Potion ready to receive it, did you?"

"No such Potion existed, not then. This has been trial and error." Snape looked a bit grim. "Back in Devon, Albus took the Mark away with him after he came bringing supplies for you. We had high hopes that perhaps we could confound Voldemort should he attempt to track me through the Mark. All we accomplished, however, was to spill dark magic inside Hogwarts. Hence the urgent need for a stasis Potion."

"You're really good at what you do," Harry admitted, a little bit in awe. "And you're really brave."

Snape frowned, but didn't say anything.

When Harry glanced at Snape's sleeve, he almost fancied he could see through fabric and bandage to the bloody flesh beneath. "I have to hurry up and kill that son of a bitch," he realised. "Because until I do, you'll keep on doing this to yourself."

The frown reached the man's eyes. "Why do you think I kept it from you, Harry? You have long had more worries than anyone your age should. This problem is mine."

"Yeah, but I could end it--"

Snape leaned forward, his tones urgent, his dark eyes not so much endless tunnels now as filled with earnest intent. "Someday you shall, I have no doubt. But only when the time is ripe, Harry. Only when you are grown and ready. If you push yourself into battle unprepared, you will lose us the war--"

How could the man be so dense? "I don't care about the war," Harry cried. "I care about you!"

"Ah." Snape's whole body seemed to marginally relax. "Yes. I... Thank you, Harry. That's... good to hear, hyperbole and all."

"Huh?"

"Hyperbole. Exaggeration. That is, I'm certain you're concerned about the war as well. But as for caring about me... well. If you attempt to help me before you are ready, you can only make my situation far more dire."

That was certainly true. Harry gave a jerky, reluctant nod.

"Enough of that," Snape decided. "So. Did you come to me in the night merely to inquire about the locked door?"

_Say yes, something inside Harry urged him. _Tell him that's all you had on your mind, and that everything's fine now. Because everything is._

But fine or not, was that the kind of relationship he wanted to have with his father? One in which he pretended he wasn't bothered even though he was? What Snape had said had been just horrible. And yeah, it seemed like they were past it now, and it wasn't like Harry wanted to hold a grudge or anything, but... well, he couldn't just sweep it under the rug.

Even if Snape could.

Harry brought his knees up to his chest and hugged his legs as he looked at his father with wide, distressed eyes. All at once the ring hanging around his neck felt unbearably heavy. He reached
beneath his jumper and pulled it out, turning it over and over in his fingers as he admitted, "I was pretty worried about the things you said, Professor."

"In the heat of anger, people say hurtful things," Snape returned, looking straight into his eyes. "I refuse to believe you are not old enough to realise this."

"Yeah, but--"

"Another thing you might keep in mind," the man interrupted, "is that quite often family members are the ones who say the very foulest things of all. Think about it. People will say things to their family that they would never dream of saying to a mere acquaintance. The closer the bond, the more willing people are to test it to its limit."

Harry couldn't help but scoff, "By that measure, Professor, my Muggle family and I were as close as two peas in a pod. They had no end of foul things to say to me."

Snape tapped his fingertips together. "True. I should keep in mind that you lived fifteen years without a decent model of family. So. Perhaps you should refresh my memory as to what was said."

Harry doubted Snape was that forgetful, but if the Slytherin wanted to play it that way, fine. "You said it was unforgivable, what I told Draco."

"I said it was indefensible," Snape corrected. "Which is not quite the same thing."

"Equally indefensible, I should think." The man gave a heavy sigh. Then, proving that his memory hardly needed refreshing, he detailed, "I do believe my exact words were, At the moment you are being stupid and you don't deserve to be my son. And at that particular moment, Harry, you didn't. I expected more of you."

"Yeah, but the way you handled the points also showed that you didn't want me any longer," Harry confessed, looking down at his hands as they fiddled with the ring. "And that really hurt. Maybe more so than the comment, because that might have been off-the-cuff, but to accomplish the points thing, you had to give it some thought. And you still did it."

"I took points from Ronald Weasley, not you."

"No, you didn't. You used Ron so you could punish me without punishing Slytherin. But if I'm really your son, I'm in Slytherin too. Taking points only from Gryffindor is like saying I'm nothing to do with you." When Snape didn't reply, Harry pressed, "Can't you see that?"

He looked up to notice Snape regarding him thoughtfully. "You felt I had somehow denied the adoption by so doing?"

"Well, yeah," Harry admitted. "I even had a bad dream about it. Because . . . well, you said the adoption became real when it was real in your mind, remember? And if it wasn't any longer . . ."

"You daft boy," Snape softly murmured, picking up his wand. He waved it all around, incanting spells that sounded vaguely like the ones he'd used to ward his quarters, and as Harry watched, a brilliant green glow began to creep forth from deep in the walls. "There, Harry, there they are. Strong and thick as ever, protecting you. Now, watch."

He spoke again, a chant involving tempus, but the warding spells reacted not at all, remaining a steady, constant glow.
"That was a time spell," Snape explained. "Showing you the condition of the wards for the past few days. Did you see them so much as flicker?"

Harry shook his head.

"They never wavered because I have never wavered. Would you like to watch the spells spun all the way back to the beginning?"

"No." Harry thought a moment. "But if belief is all you need to make the magic take root, why did we need Wizard Family Services at all?"

Snape paused to think too. "I think perhaps we needed them because you needed to believe, too."

"Yeah, the adoption wouldn't have seemed real to me without the legal end of things, I guess," Harry realised. That explained the dream, too, didn't it? After all, it had been about nothing but legalities.

"Having availed ourselves of the legal process has certain advantages, however," Snape continued. "Suppose you were to grow angry enough that you no longer wished me for a father--"

"That won't happen, sir," Harry interrupted. "I promise."

"I speak in hypotheticals." Harry couldn't help but notice that the man looked pleased, even as he went on. "As I was saying, if you were that distraught, the spells might flicker, but I seriously doubt they would vanish, since now those selfsame spells rest on a contractual as well as an interpersonal basis. Do you follow? You are very secure here. Nothing short of mutual repudiation can erase a magically binding contract. And I assure you Harry . . . in fact, I promise, no matter how irate you or I might become, I will never repudiate you. Never. Do you begin to understand?"

The dream faded further away, dissolving into the mist where nightmares were born. Except that this particular nightmare had died. He'd just been hysterical, or something. Nothing in that dream could possibly be real, let alone prophetic.

"Yes, I understand," Harry murmured. Some part of him must still have needed reassurance, though, for he heard himself asking, "Um, so . . . I guess you think I do deserve to be your son, then?"

That time he thought he caught an idiot child crossing the man's lips as he stood up. "Come here, Harry," Snape said, opening his arms and then folding the boy into them in a warm, close hug. Harry pressed his cheek against the soft black fabric covering his father's chest, a feeling of reassurance swallowing him as the man's heartbeat thrummed, a steady thud, thud, thud, the rhythm as faithful as the man himself. Knowing he was home, Harry leaned completely against his father and melted into the embrace.

"You miss my point entirely," Snape whispered, one hand moving up to stroke the boy's hair. "This, what we are . . . Harry, deserving has got nothing to do with it. Think about it for a moment. How could a bloody irritating Gryffindor deserve to be my son? For that matter, how could a former Death Eater with a bad temper and abysmal family ties of his own deserve to be famous Harry Potter's father?"

For once the phrase didn't trouble Harry. Snape wasn't using it to belittle him, not this time. He was making a point. A weight lifting from somewhere in the region of his chest, he dropped Lily's ring and wrapped his arms around the man, squeezing him tight. They stood there for a long while, just holding each other.

Accepting.
Snape finally stepped back, his dark eyes somehow looking satisfied. He murmured an incantation to make the warding spells descend back into the granite walls, then gruffly admitted, "I suppose I should correct my error." His wand flicked through the air. "Two hundred fifty points to Gryffindor. Two hundred fifty points from Slytherin. There. I trust that is better?"

"Yeah," Harry admitted. "Though I still think that what I say to Draco down here isn't a school matter, sir. It's not like we were disrupting a class."

"I suppose you're going to claim that if two Gryffindors were screaming abuse at each other in the Tower when Minerva walked in, she'd say it was a private matter?"

"The Tower's a student area. This is my home."

Snape began to look a bit sour, probably from having taken so many points from his own house. "A valiant effort," he sneered, "but I made it clear from the start that I didn't care to have squabbling disrupt my home."

"Draco was squabbling just as much as I was," Harry mildly pointed out.

Every inch a Slytherin, Snape took that as an opportunity to change the subject. "Have you and Draco worked things out? You seemed quite amicable over dinner."

"Yeah, we're okay," Harry admitted. "I mean, I apologized."

"And?"

"Uh . . . he's forgiven me, I guess."

"Hmph. I think perhaps Mr Malfoy needs to be in on this discussion." Snape said a charm, and a moment later, there was a tentative knock on the door. When Snape threw it open, a thin, grim smile was on his lips. "Mr Malfoy, how kind of you to join us. What time is it?"

Draco's silver eyes almost bugged out, the question was so bizarre. "About half-past eight, I think . . . ."

"Look at your watch," Snape purred, menace in each syllable.

"What's this all about?" Draco asked, glancing to Harry for help. But since Harry had none to offer; he mutely raised his shoulders.

"Look at your watch!" Snape barked.

A bit unnerved, Draco did, then retorted, "It says Time for cocoa, Severus! So you're thirsty, are you! Shall I floo for refreshments?"

Snape's hand lashed out to grab Draco's wrist and yank it close. He peered down at the watch himself, then shook his head. "Pardon my presumption. I thought it would point to Time to apologize."

"Oh." Draco took a step back, then glanced from Harry to Snape and back. "Well, actually, it did say that all day yesterday."

"Yes, I know," Snape drawled. "Did you in fact apologize? Harry here seems to have missed it."

Harry held up his hands. "Whoa. I wasn't complaining. I said we worked it out."
"We did, Severus," Draco insisted, and when the Potions Master still looked sceptical, added, "We're not first-years. We don't need our Head of House to tell us what to do and when to do it."

"Good. Now sit down, both of you." He pointed his wand at the two leather armchairs.

"He just told us what to do and when to do it!" Draco complained to Harry.

"Better just do it," Harry advised.

When the boys were both in their place, Snape began to pace back and forth in front of them, as though considering his words. At length he stopped in front of Harry. "You," he said, enunciating each word clearly, "are my son."

Walking two paces, he looked Draco in the eye. "You are my son in all but name."

Stepping back from them both, he continued, "We are a family, gentlemen. Granted, we are far from typical. An orphan by circumstance, an orphan by choice, and a man who never thought to be a parent at all, but here we are. A family. And as a family, we need to reach an understanding. Namely, that this ridiculous rivalry between the two of you has got to stop. As I have told you both, I care about you both."

Draco had looked a bit apprehensive toward the start, but by the end he was his usual scathing self. "All this because I don't like Harry's snotrag friends?"

"You don't care for Mr Weasley," Snape conceded. "But that is not what has made you be so rude about his presence here. Your worry is that in going to such lengths to have him reconcile with Harry, I am somehow choosing Harry over you."

Draco opened his mouth to reply, but Snape shook his head.

"And you," he accused, stepping back to Harry, "worry just as much that Draco's love of Potions will have me preferring his company to yours."

"You do spend a awful lot of time hovering over a cauldron together," Harry murmured.

Draco's mouth dropped open still further. "For pity's sake, Harry! You had a mother and a father willing to die for you, and now you have Severus here who'd do the same! All I've got is a Death Eater foaming at the mouth to torture me, and a mother who hasn't bothered her pretty little self one bit over that fact!"

Snape looked a bit put out by that, Harry thought. "Were you not listening? You have me just as much as Harry does," he insisted, the words not quite a roar, but not too far off, either.

His arms crossed, his eyes hooded, Draco drawled, "Well, I appreciate all you've done for me, Severus, and I understand that you'd have liked to adopt me as well, --dearly liked, I think you said-- but the fact remains that I don't have you the way Harry does."

Snape summoned a third chair over from the wall and sat in it, leaning forward to speak about as intently as Harry had ever seen. "What do you think a family is?" he asked Draco, black eyes steady. "A piece of paper stamped and approved by some imbecile working for a Ministry adjunct office?"

When Draco said nothing, Snape briefly rubbed his temples.

"He's awfully tired," Harry told Draco. "Your fault. Don't give him my sleeping draught again. He ended up comatose."
Draco's silver gaze shot to Snape's. "Oh. *Oops.* Sorry there, Severus."

Snape huffed. "Harry tried to talk to me in the night and thought I was ignoring him, Draco!"

"I didn't *think* so," Harry insisted. "I just . . . um, wondered."

Draco huffed too, then. "Honestly, Harry. You ought to know better than that." Then he grew a bit more repentant. "I didn't do it in order to worry you."

Harry nodded. "Right. Well, enough of that. Like I said, Severus here is pretty tired. If you ask me, we ought to fetch him some cocoa and send him off to sleep."

"Mr Potter, I do believe I can regulate my own bedtime, thank you."

"You're welcome," Harry said sweetly, turning back to Draco. "Do you know what kind of cocoa Severus likes best? Chocolate, double chocolate, chocolate mint?"

Draco smiled at Harry's easy tone, and said in a mock whisper, "Well, I don't know as Severus is really the *cocoa* type, but if we want to get some down him, I say we throw in a splash of Galliano."

Turning a mild glare on Draco, Snape growled, "Mr Malfoy. Don't you think you've laced enough drinks for the time being?" Relenting then, he loftily informed them, "I'd be delighted to have Harry serve up cocoa once we've finished. Now, answer my question, Draco. What do you think a family is?"

"As far as I can tell," Draco answered in a cool, smooth voice—a defensive voice, Harry thought—"a *family* is made of people dedicated to turning you into what they want. People who toss you away without a qualm once they've decided you're not worth the effort."

*So much bitterness,* Harry thought. But he could empathize. Probably Snape could, too, based on what he'd said a few moments before. The Potions Master wasn't going to admit to his own pain so openly, though; he'd never discussed his family, not even when Harry had hinted at it before Christmas. Wanting Draco to feel like he wasn't alone in his sentiments, Harry added, "Yeah, sometimes families really ronk. Mine was more the lock-you-in instead of the chuck-you-out type, though."

Snape grimly regarded them both. "I'm tempted to assign twenty inches on the topic."

*Uh-oh.* Harry could tell he was seriously contemplating it. "I say we learn by experience," he volunteered, smiling brightly, and not just in jest. "Really, sir. A wise man once told me that's the best way to make a concept sink in."

"Remarkable lack of subtlety," Snape lamented, ignoring the praise. "However, as an idiot child demonstrated to me not so very long ago, some things need to be talked through." He paused, a look of extreme exhaustion pulling at his features. "In all the ways that count, both of you are equally my son, is that much clear?"

"Guess we really are brothers in that case," Draco joked, but Harry didn't laugh, not that time.

"Then *as* brothers," Snape continued right on, "the two of you need to start communicating better."

"Oh, sweet Merlin, he's been reading that damned book," Draco moaned.

Snape ignored him. "Constructive criticism is in order, I do believe. Emphasis on constructive or there may yet be essays assigned tonight. Harry, you go first."
"Sir?"

"Tell Draco something he does that bothers you, and suggest a way for him to improve."

Harry thought this was stupid, and unlike Snape, but perhaps the man's fatigue explained a great deal. Probably it was better to humour him. "Um . . . hmm. Well, he--"

"Talk to Draco," Snape sighed, sounding a bit impatient that time.

"You call my best friend a weasel."

"He calls me a ferret," Draco drawled back.

"Well, you were a ferret for a while, weren't you?"

"Harry, that is not helpful!" Snape erupted.

_Oh right, constructive . . . "I'd like you to call him Ron. Remember your Hermione theory? It's harder to stay at odds with someone when you're on a first-name basis?"

"Hermione's at least a bit pretty," Draco grumbled.

"Oh, really?" Harry raised an eyebrow, fascinated.

"Gentlemen, we can discuss our love lives another time--"

"She's not part of my love life," Draco said, glaring at them both. "And she's not likely to be. I don't fancy a walking library for a girlfriend, let alone . . . never mind. But yes, I can make nice with your little friend and call him Ronnie."

"No sarcasm," Harry warned.

Draco gave a rather regal nod.

"Now you, Draco," Snape prompted.

The Slytherin boy looked down his nose at Harry. "You scrape your toast and it's simply got to stop. Every morning, scrape, scrape, scrape, the rhythm so smooth and regular I think I'm at the bloody symphony. I might understand if you ordered it burnt to begin with, but no, it arrives a perfectly done medium-amber. But are you satisfied? No. Scrape, scrape, scrape--"

"Be serious, Draco," Snape wearily commanded.

"Oh, but I am."

"Fine." Clearly, Snape was too tired to press the point. "At least be constructive."

"Order crumpets instead," Draco haughtily advised.

"Sure," Harry mildly agreed. For some reason Draco wanted to make a joke of things, but it wasn't worth an upset. He glanced at Snape and saw that this little family counselling session was likely at an end. "Sir? Shall we go have that cocoa now?"

For a lark, he ordered it with toasted crumpets, neatly laying one on each saucer after he poured. Snape even got the Galliano out and laced his as suggested, though he declined to share the liqueur. Draco stuck his tongue out when Snape's back was turned. Harry almost spewed his cocoa.
When they'd all drunk their fill, Snape leaned back in his chair and lightly rubbed his abdomen. "That was excellent cocoa, Draco. Truly excellent." Quirking a smile at Harry, he continued, "I do believe an adjustment is in order. Two hundred fifty points to Slytherin."

Draco strangled a laugh. "Excuse me? Two hundred fifty points to Slytherin for cocoa Harry ordered?"

"Ah, but it was your idea," Snape reminded him, eyes hooded. "Time for cocoa. Quite a sound idea that was. Well worth points."

"He really is tired," Draco remarked.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Very funny," he informed Snape.

"Clever, I thought," Snape murmured. "Are you going to have a problem with it?"

"No."

"Are you certain? No identity crisis?"

Harry laughed. "No. It's fine."

"Well it's not fine with me," Draco objected. "My own Head of House, the Potions Master, wouldn't give me one measly point for improving the Lotion Potion, but I get hundreds because my watch had a clever suggestion for a late-night snack?"

Lotion Potion . . . Harry froze, a bad feeling beginning to spill out from his heart. "Lotion Potion?" he echoed, his voice a croak.

"Yeah, it's for the--" Draco abruptly went silent.

"It's all right," Snape informed him, passing a hand in front of his eyes. "Harry knows what we were doing yesterday."

"Oh, good." Draco glanced at Harry as if to check how the Gryffindor boy was taking things.

"It's . . . it's that skin cream you gave Severus for Christmas, isn't it?"

"Oh, good guess, got it in one." Draco beamed, delighted as ever to show off. "I found a way to numb the Mark a bit even while it's burning. Not that it does much; Severus says it only takes the edge off, but every little bit helps, I suppose."

"Are you all right, Harry?" Snape pressed. "You've gone pale."

"Uh, I think the cocoa disagreed with me," he quietly invented. But what was he going to do, admit that the phrase Lotion Potion had confirmed a seer dream? Damn it all, he had seen a glimpse of the future! Quite obviously, Snape didn't believe for a moment that cocoa was the problem. "Harry. I won't lock you out again, all right? Next time my Mark flares, you will help us renew the stasis Potion."

"I'll show you how to make the Lotion Potion, too," Draco volunteered.

"See if you can help Draco settle on a less inane name," Snape bid.

Worse and worse. In the seer dream, Snape had termed that name vapid. Harry knew a strong urge to
Harry forced himself to calm down. The dream was . . . well, it was what it was. An idiotic conclusion if ever he'd heard one, but it made a strange sort of sense to Harry. It was a seer dream, yes. That much seemed clear. Did that mean it had to come true? Did it even mean what it seemed? And even if the answer to both those questions was yes, the dream hadn't been about his real relationship with his father. It had just been about legalities.

"I think Lotion Potion is quite a clever name, actually," Harry murmured.

"Teenagers," Snape muttered.

"Brothers," Harry corrected, because the moment before, he had finally understood the truth, the full truth. Paradigm shift . . . this one had been a while in coming. He wondered if that was because of what Snape had said. Had fifteen years of bad family experiences blinded him in ways far more profound than Lucius Malfoy's needles?

Maybe so, but now he could see the truth. As much as he liked the fact that his name and Snape's were side by side on those adoption papers, the paperwork wasn't what had made them father and son. Commitment was what did that. And since Snape was committed to both his sons, Harry and Draco couldn't be anything but brothers. They really were a family, all three of them, just as Snape had said.

"I thought you didn't like that," Draco murmured. "When I said we were brothers earlier, you didn't even smile."

"Because it's serious," Harry said, sensing now that he'd hurt Draco's feelings. Maybe that explained the you scrape your toast nonsense. "Sorry I laughed so much the other time when you said it. I didn't get it. But I do, now."

"Oh, you do," Snape softly confirmed. "Both of you do. The sheer level of sibling rivalry in this home has defied belief. Whether you realised it or not, you two have been acting like brothers for some time."

"Well, that just proves you have two normal sons, I think," said Draco. "That's what the book says, anyway."

"The damned book?" Snape mocked.

"Information can be misused as well as used, Severus," Draco returned. "I told you Harry and I didn't need you to interfere. We can get along on our own."

"Good point," Harry said, turning to Draco. "By the same coin, Severus and I can get along on our own. I don't need you lecturing me ten hours a day about how I should treat him."

Draco's eyes sparkled. "Well, at least you're finally calling him Severus, though not to his face, I can't help but notice."

"That's just what I mean! What I call him is between him and me, and so is whatever else I might have to say to my father!"

"Oh, father," Draco approved. "That's even better."

Harry threw his hands out in disgust. "Oh, you're hopeless, you are."
Draco laughed. "No, I'm not. I'm just having you on. Well, sort of. I'll try to watch it, all right?"

"All right."

Snape cleared his throat. "Well. As you two seem to have matters well in hand, I do believe I'll have that early night Harry suggested."

Once he was gone, Draco turned to Harry. "Would you like to play some Wizard's Scrabble or something?" When the other boy shook his head, Draco wheedled, "I'll give you five points an E . . . ."

"Another time, I promise," Harry assured him. Strange to think that Draco needed reassurance, too. "Right now I have some writing to do, that's all."

"Oh, very well. I suppose I should get caught up on my own correspondence. Shall we work at the table together?"

"Think I'll work in the bedroom."

"Love letters, is it?"

"I wish. No. Just . . . regular stuff."

Draco nodded, then got his things and settled in at the table. Harry went into the bedroom and shut the door. What he had to write was personal, but not because it was a love letter. In fact, it wasn't a letter at all.

He fetched the journal Dudley had given him from his overstuffed trunk. He'd never used it before, but now, he had a lot to think about. Writing it down, he thought, would help.

It did. As it turned out, it helped a lot.
The main thing Harry learned from writing in his journal was that even though no dream could affect his relationship with his father, he still really did want to know if the stupid thing was going to come true. If it was . . . well, he could handle it. Maybe for some reason as yet unknown to him, Snape was going to have to adjust their legal situation. It wasn't a prospect Harry enjoyed contemplating, but neither was it the end of the world. After all, he and Snape would still be father and son where it counted. Nothing was going to alter that; he knew it right down to the marrow of his bones.

All the same, he wanted to be prepared. And that meant finding out, once and for all, if seer dreams were fated to come true. Was the future already written out in full? Could he do nothing but read it? Or could he alter the flow of time itself?

He knew from experience that Snape had no real answers, not to questions like these, and of course it went without saying that he was going nowhere near Trelawney with a Divination question. That left it to him to research the matter.

But that was all right with Harry. Actually, it was high time he did something about his own magical problems, instead of waiting for Remus or Snape or Draco to hand him solutions on a silver platter. The problems were his, and he'd just been drifting, letting everybody else suggest techniques for him to try. It was time to take responsibility for himself, Harry decided. And as the latest manifestation of his magic was this seer dream, he'd start there, and investigate his own powers as best he could.

The day after they'd shared cocoa and crumpets, Harry flooed a note to Madam Pince asking for some books on prophetic dreams. It took him a few days to read the materials she'd sent and conclude that they weren't too helpful. They all did agree on one thing, though. Dreams and emotions were inextricably interwoven, and seer dreams were no exception. Begin a dream diary, the books invariably advised. Write down your dreams in as much detail as you can possibly recall. Write them down the moment you awake, and meditate upon the meaning of it all.

That last bit was a bit too Trelawney-esque for Harry's tastes, but he didn't think writing down the dream was a bad idea. Already, the details were starting to blur in his memory. He figured he'd better get things down on paper before they got even fuzzier. The journal would serve well enough for that, too.

That night after dinner--it was Ron's fifth night studying in the dungeons--Harry waited until Draco was out of the room, then quietly brought out his journal.

"Sir," he quietly said, taking the journal over to the couch where Snape sat reading Ron's latest Potions essay, "I need a spell."

"Your hands?"

"No, they're fine for the moment." He dropped his voice a tad. "Could you charm this so it will only open at my touch? And . . . well, just make sure that it's fortified in particular against Draco, all right?"

Ron definitely heard that, Harry thought. The guest in the dungeons snorted.

Snape didn't comment at all; he simply charmed the journal and handed it back. Then he was taking up the essay. "Mr Weasley, a word if I may."

Ron lumbered over, his posture screaming resentment even if his words were carefully polite. "Sir?"
Snape glanced him over. "Don't stand there like a stump. Take a seat."

Ron slid into one the easy chairs but held himself tensely.

"Properties of Charmed Potions," Snape read the title of Ron's essay. "You've explored only two subtopics when the assignment specified four. Continue, if you will."

"It's twelve inches," Ron pointed out, his jaw clenched. "As requested, sir."

"It's half the assignment no matter what your ruler may have to say. The points you make are well-developed, but the topic as a whole is incomplete."

Ron took the parchment Snape was extending. "W . . . well-developed?"

Snape looked faintly bored. "Without belabouring the point, yes. You have submitted half of a good essay. Need I point out that half equals fifty percent, which is an abysmal grade. Hence the request to continue."

"Good essay." Ron still sounded gob smacked.


Finally getting over the way that had gone, Ron wandered back over to the table and chewed a quill as he looked through his Potions text again. After a while, he leaned forward a bit to peer at what Harry was writing. "Diary?" he whispered.

Harry glanced up in surprise. Ron had been carefully civil ever since his return, but this was the first time he'd shown a real interest in anything except doing his schoolwork and getting back to the Tower.

"Yeah. Dudley gave it to me," Harry nodded. "I . . . There are some things I have to work out, and I think writing them down will help."

A faint frown creased Ron's brow, but then a cynical light in his eye eased the worry from his features. "At least you've got enough sense to know that Slytherin would do practically anything to get his hands on your private thoughts."

Harry thought about saying that Ron's brothers would do just the same. He frankly couldn't imagine Fred and George not breaking their way into a sealed diary . . . and leaving behind a surprise or two, most likely. He knew he'd better not mention anything about Draco being his brother, though. It definitely wouldn't go over so well. Maybe later, much later . . . after Ron had got used to the whole Snape-as-father situation.

"His name is Draco, not 'that Slytherin,'" he merely commented, making sure to keep his voice nice and mild.

Ron still saw fit to huff. "What's this with him calling me Ron? I mean, when he did it before, at least he was smarmy. Now he's just acting . . . I don't know. Weird."

Harry shrugged. "I asked him to call you Ron, actually."

"What is he, your pet Slytherin? He just does whatever you say?"

"He knows I'm sick to death of my friends treating my life like a duelling platform."

Ron jerked back in his chair almost as though he'd been slapped. "Friends? Him, you mean?"
"No, I meant you. Listen . . . I don't want to fight with you. Not about anything. But as long as he's treating you politely, you might consider doing the same."

When Ron rolled his eyes, Harry left it at that, and kept writing in his diary.

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He wrote down the entire dream once a day for three days in a row, completely from memory, and then compared the versions. Interesting to see how much more he could recall on the third retelling. He was sure the memory was accurate, though. When he wrote it out the next time, no further details emerged, so with that, Harry figured that he'd done all he could to reconstruct it.

So, now what? His books all stressed that some seers dreamed in symbols, but Harry suspected that didn't apply to him. His dreams so far, at least the ones that had come true, had been literal. Even the brothers one, though apparently it had been presaging something far more profound than mere brotherhood in Slytherin House. The books didn't address literal dreams, though, so Harry concluded that he what he really needed were some better books. Much better books, and in a place like Hogwarts, that meant just one thing.

The next night, he waited impatiently through Snape's explanation of retrograde motion, his mind really more on his plan than on the planets. At length the Potions Master snapped his fingers to vanish away the miniature solar system he had conjured, and told them to finish their Astronomy essays. Accurately, this time, he specified, but not as rudely as he might have. Harry couldn't help but notice that the man really was trying hard not to set Ron off again.

Once Snape walked away from the dining room table, Harry set to work, but not on his essay. Behind his propped up text, he was scratching out,

Dear Hermione,

Thanks so much for coming down here every couple of days for the last few weeks, and bringing so many different Gryffindors along. It's better having Ron down here now that he doesn't have to do those ridiculous lines. I'm not blind; I thought Severus was horribly mean-spirited about the whole thing. It turns out he also had some complicated scheme in mind that he thought would help me. Anyway, the whole thing was completely mental. Sometimes Slytherins are just too sneaky for their own good. We got in a big fight about that and about some other stuff--I was pretty miserable for a while--, but in the end we talked it all out.

Strange as it might sound, I'm sort of glad we argued. Because now, it's not like I'm waiting on pins and needles for the other shoe to drop. (Sorry about the mixed metaphor. Severus complains I use too many Quidditch analogies in my essays, which I thought was pretty funny considering that's what you always say. I guess I should stop now before I mention that you have a lot in common with him. Yeah, definitely I'll stop.) Anyway, about the fight. I have this feeling now that we can get through good times and bad, just like regular families do. And that's a good feeling, it really is.

Well, enough news. I actually do have a reason for writing instead of just waiting for your next visit. I need you to do me a really important favour. Remember how you told me that you had a pass into the restricted section for the rest of the term? I know, I know, it's a limited pass and you're only supposed to use it to work on your advanced Arithmancy studies. Turns out
though, that I need some books for a project of my own. I've exhausted everything Madam Pince has in the general student section. Anything you could get me about prophetic dreaming or seer dreams would be really helpful.

It's good to know I have friends I can really count on. Since I need the books just as soon as you can possibly manage, do you think you could use your pass tomorrow, smuggle some texts out, and either bring them down here yourself or send them with Ron when he comes? Thanks, Hermione. Thanks a million.

Love,

Harry

P.S. Draco says you're pretty.

He slipped the letter into an envelope and passed it across the table to Ron, then realised that maybe he should erase the bit about what Draco had said. Then he shrugged. He trusted Ron not to sneak a peek, so that was no problem, and Hermione wasn't likely to misunderstand the comment. She wouldn't think Draco liked her or anything. Harry wasn't even sure why he'd put that bit in. Maybe he just wanted Hermione to know that Draco wasn't quite as prejudiced as he liked to make out.

Clearing his throat, Harry whispered to Ron, "Could you make sure Hermione reads this tonight?"

Snape's sardonic voice broke in before Ron could answer. "So. Miss Granger is consulting with you on retrograde motion, is she, Harry?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "It's a letter."

"You have a penchant for dealing with your post at the most inopportune times."

"I'll write the essay in the morning. It's not due until Friday, anyway, and I'm in a mood tonight to do something besides study, I think." Harry gave his father a rather pointed look.

Snape seemed to understand the unspoken message. "Shall we play a round of Wizard's Chess, then?"

"Sure." Harry got the set from its place on a bookshelf and began tapping the pieces with a fingernail to wake them up. The white queen yawned and cradled her head in her arms, but came to attention at a baleful glare from Snape.

Ron pretended to ignore them as they began the match, but Harry could see him watching out of the corner of his eye. He winced the first time Harry moved a knight and actually groaned out loud when he castled. An amused glint lit up Snape's dark gaze.

When the match was over, Snape winning as usual, the Potions Master turned toward Ron. "So you believe you could do better, Mr Weasley?"

Ron looked startled as he glanced up from his essay. Assessing the board briefly, he nodded.

"Should you like to demonstrate that?" Snape inquired.

Ron looked sorely tempted--no doubt he was fantasizing of soundly trouncing the Potions Master--but all he said in reply was, "No thanks. I've got this to finish and a big pile of other work."
"Ah, well, another time then." Snape went and sat on the sofa where he resumed flipping through a potions journal.

"Don't forget to give Hermione the letter," Harry reminded Ron. Then, taking up his Astronomy text, he went to sit beside his father where they proceeded to read in comfortable silence.

The next afternoon, when Draco was in the Potions lab working up some new concoction, the Floo abruptly flared to life. Harry jumped about a yard, almost knocking his half-finished astronomy essay off the table.

When he turned toward the sound, he expected to see Snape. The Potions Master didn't often contact them during the day, but it did happen on occasion. It wasn't Snape's familiar features peering out of the fire, though.

"Harry," Albus Dumbledore requested, his features lacking their usual solemn smile, "could you please Floo up to my office for a chat?"

Harry's first reaction was shock to be invited at all; it seemed to him that the headmaster had been avoiding him for a long, long time. His second reaction was to remember how he'd got burned while talking with Hagrid. Instinct had him backing away from the fireplace.

The headmaster looked a bit impatient. "Now please, Harry," he prompted, sounding rather ominous. "I need to speak with you."

Harry blinked. "Um, well I suppose you could Floo down here, sir."

"I'd really prefer to discuss this matter in the privacy of my office."

_This matter?_ It didn't sound to Harry like this was a social chat. More like he was in trouble.

The headmaster sighed. "Shall I Floo through and bring you back, Harry? I understand you've had some concerns about travelling alone through the network?"

Hearing it put that way brought Harry up short. He knew he shouldn't have those concerns any longer. He'd flooed just fine with Snape at Christmas, and though he _had_ got burned during that firechat, Snape had claimed that travelling through the Floo would require less access to magic than the chat had. Which meant that Harry should really be fine to Floo.

It was just a case of deciding he'd do it. Of deciding to take responsibility for himself, he sensed.

What was he going to do, put off flooing until Snape got tired of it and tossed him into the grate? His father would do it, too, if he thought it would be best for Harry.

Harry could just imagine the fight _that_ would cause. Far better for him to get over his fears on his own, he decided. It was time. Actually, it was past time.

"I'll be right there, Professor Dumbledore," Harry finally said, cementing his decision. He thought of going into the Potions lab to tell Draco where he was going, but decided that he was nervous enough without adding in an audience to watch him Floo away. Neither did he want to just vanish, either, so he got his Floo powder ready, stepped across the hearth, and then, just before flinging it down, called out, "Draco, I'm Flooing up to talk to the headmaster."

He heard a muffled reply, and then he was throwing powder toward his feet and shouting, "Professor Dumbledore's office!"
After the initial flash of fire, he spun away into darkness, tumbling past random fireplaces until the Network spat him out onto the headmaster's hearth. Harry sat up, laughing as he brushed cinders from the shoulders of his shirt. He was reeling, but not from the trip. It was giddiness, pure and simple.

He'd flooed alone! He'd done it!

And he wasn't burned at all!

Dumbledore came from behind his desk and extended a hand to help him up, surprising Harry with the strength of his grip. The headmaster might look old and frail, but that was misdirection at its best. Harry finished dusting himself off, then settled himself into a wide, comfortable chair and took a sherbet lemon from the candy dish the headmaster pushed his way.

"So," Dumbledore said, pulling out his chair with a wave of his wand, and settling in with a sigh, "I imagine you've already realised why I thought we ought to talk."

_Dumbledore, getting straight to the point?_ Harry had been expecting a few minutes of small talk, most likely over a cup of tea. At any rate, he didn't know why he'd been summoned. "Um, you thought it was time we did a little catching up?" he guessed.

"Harry," the headmaster chided. "Really."

"What?"

"How many times have I told you that you may come to me with anything?"

Harry took a deep breath. "I don't know why you wanted to talk, Professor Dumbledore. I really don't."

"Ah." Dumbledore appeared to pause to think, then leaned forward and peered at Harry over the top of his half-moon spectacles. "A certain Gryffindor prefect has been caught making unauthorized use of the Restricted Section. Does that clear matters up for you?"

_Uh-oh_. Harry gave a weak smile and tried to act at ease, but he could tell it wasn't working. That was pretty interesting, since if he was sure of anything, it was that if Hermione had been caught, she would have taken all the blame. She'd never have mentioned that Harry had put her up to it.

Harry had to mention it, though. Sometimes it was pretty inconvenient being a Gryffindor.

"Don't blame Hermione," he urged, splaying his hands on top of the desk. "I asked her to get me some books. It's not her fault. Um . . . how did you know I was involved, anyway?"

The headmaster narrowed his gaze. "The content of the books she had collected was highly suspect. To my knowledge, there is only one student who has been dreaming the future of late."

"Severus . . . er, I mean, Professor Snape told you about my dreams?"

Dumbledore smiled. "I know I used to rebuke you for failing to show him sufficient respect, Harry, but seeing as he is your father now, I think 'Severus' will do nicely. By the way, how are things between you? Everything going well?"

_Now_ he was going to indulge in the small talk?

"Oh, fine, fine," Harry answered, deciding he didn't need to mention their recent fight.
As it turned out, what Dumbledore had in mind wasn't small talk at all. He cut right to the heart of the matter, pressing, "If that is indeed the case, why send Miss Granger to the Restricted Section to smuggle you out those books? I'm sure you're well-aware that Severus could get them for you."

"Uh . . ." Harry didn't have much of an answer to that. "I just wanted help with some questions," he murmured. "I started with regular books and when they weren't much help, it just seemed logical to . . ."

"You didn't think to take your questions to your father?"

"Well, seeing as he scored a Troll in Divination, no."

Another warm smile. "The two of you have been talking, I see. Good to hear, good to hear. But as concerns your dreams, Harry, perhaps I might be able to answer your questions?"

"Well, it was mainly one thing," Harry admitted. "Come to think of it, I actually did ask Severus this a while ago, and he didn't have an answer. But maybe you would. Do seer dreams have to come true?"

The headmaster pushed a bit as his glasses and popped a sherbet lemon into his mouth before answering, "Well, they wouldn't be seer dreams if they didn't, would they?"

"I suppose not," Harry admitted. "But . . . well, it's like this. Suppose something was going to come true, but the mere fact that I dreamed it changes that. Like . . . I dream I'm going to die falling off a broom, so I stop going flying. Can't I change the future if I know how to react to it?"

Dumbledore's voice went absolutely serious. "Are your dreams presaging someone's death, Harry?"

"Oh no, not at all. That was just an example."

"You're certain?"

"Well, yeah. I wouldn't keep something like that to myself."

"I should hope not," Dumbledore sternly admonished. "However, I can't help but notice something alarming, Harry. Back at Grimmauld Place, you had no hesitation to tell Remus Lupin about your dreams. But now . . . I must think this surge of research means you've had more of them. Evidently they concern you, yet you've spoken with no one?"

"Yeah," Harry thickly admitted.

"Harry . . ." Dumbledore paused, then said rather delicately, "Your dreams are not just your own, I hope you know. When they touch on anything to do with Voldemort, or the war, or the Order . . . well, you really mustn't keep them to yourself."

Harry had been aware for years that his life wasn't his own. Maybe that was why he liked Severus. The Potions Master saw him as himself, not as some hero whose sole purpose in life was to save the world.

He sighed. "My dreams don't involve any of those things."

Stroking his beard, Dumbledore softly questioned, "Wouldn't you have said that before Samhain, as well? And yet though you did not realise it, your dreams were indeed informing you of matters concerning Voldemort. So how can you know for certain now that these latest dreams aren't?"
"Not dreams," Harry corrected. "Dream. I didn't have any for months, Professor. And now it's just the one."

"But you haven't spoken to Severus about it? Not at all?"

Harry looked away and shook his head.

"My boy . . . I think you should consider telling him."

"I actually have been thinking about that," Harry admitted, biting his lip. "A lot."

"If the adoption is working out satisfactorily, why the hesitation?"

Harry didn't have an answer for that. Or at least not one he was willing to share. He wanted to tell his father; it seemed wrong to keep something like this a secret. Yet . . . knowing that an unadoption was coming was an awful burden to bear. Harry wished he didn't know, even. His best hope had been that seer dreams sometimes failed.

Dumbledore was shaking his head. "I really must insist you speak with an Order member, Harry. If you are positive that you cannot broach the matter with Severus, perhaps you could have a talk with Arthur Weasley--"

"No," Harry instantly rejected that idea. He couldn't imagine how his father would feel if he went to someone else with the dream. "I'm sure it's nothing the Order needs to know about, sir. Actually, it's a personal matter. Look, I didn't want to stir up a great froth; I just wanted an answer to my question."

"If seer dreams are fated to be," Dumbledore sagely nodded. "I'm afraid they are indeed, Harry. Prophecy wouldn't be much use if they weren't."

Harry frowned. "If prophecies come true regardless of what anybody does about them, then why have you been so determined to turn me into some wizarding saviour? I mean, you've done everything but give me combat lessons--"

"I'll be speaking to Severus about that as soon as your magic's back in full," Dumbledore offered. Harry winced. He could think of few things he'd prefer less than to duel with his father, for a number of reasons. Hmm, maybe Snape could supervise while he trained with Draco. That would be better.

"Why bother?" he pressed. "If the future's already written, then what's the point in anything?"

"In your case, quite a lot. Neither can live while the other one survives, Harry. That prophecy doesn't write the whole future; it lays out two paths."

"All right, I understand that," Harry murmured. "But isn't that wording sort of strange? I mean, we are both alive right now, aren't we?"

"Well, prophecy is notoriously difficult to interpret," Dumbledore passed that off. "All the more reason why you really shouldn't keep a seer dream strictly to yourself. Tell Severus, Harry."

Dumbledore wasn't going to let that go; Harry could tell. "I'll talk to him," he conceded. All that had kept him from it before, he suddenly realised, was the uncertainty attached to the dream itself. Why upset Severus if the stupid thing wasn't going to come true?

But it was . . . or at least Dumbledore thought so. And when it came to wizarding knowledge,
Dumbledore really knew his stuff. So there was going to be an unadoption, simple as that.

And since there was, it really was wrong to keep it from Severus. Knowing about the future in advance, after all, was what had kept Harry strong and confident during Samhain. Now, that same knowledge was going to get him through the unadoption, too. His father deserved the same consideration. Because after all, it wasn't going to be an unadoption in any way that mattered, was it? They'd still be father and son where it counted. He'd still have a room in Snape's quarters, still be welcome there . . .

Or will I? a niggling little voice chewed at the edges of his thoughts. Maybe I was packed to go because something strange and bizarre is going to happen, and me staying with him would land him in Azkaban or something . . . Hmm, I don't see how that could happen, but what if it did? The casewitch said she was visiting under terrible circumstances, after all. I'd sooner leave and never see him again, father or no, than be responsible for something awful happening to him . . .

They'd still be father and son, Harry had no doubt of that, but that might not be enough. He wasn't going to lose his father, not over anything, but that didn't mean that he'd really have him, either, not in a world like the one they lived in.

Voldemort . . . Fudge and his band of idiots . . . Azkaban . . . Wizards who would never, ever understand that Snape's Dark Mark didn't represent who or what he was . . . And he was famous Harry Potter, the Boy Whose Life Belonged To Everyone Except Himself . . . Really, there were any number of things that might come between him and his father.

His uncertainty must have shown on his face, Harry realised, for the wily headmaster clearly didn't believe he intended to tell Severus a thing. "On to other matters," he announced, his tone short. "As you've incited Miss Granger to break school rules--causing her to lose her pass to the Restricted Section, by the way--your Head of House must of course be informed. Ah, but that's right. You have two Heads of House these days. Well, I suppose they shall have to confer as to the appropriate consequence."

"And you'll no doubt make quite sure Severus knows just what books I was asking Hermione to get," Harry realised out loud. "So he can ask me himself about why I haven't mentioned having another seer dream! Are you sure you weren't a Slytherin back when you attended here?"

"Oh, we all have a little Slytherin in us," the headmaster airily replied. "Do we!" Harry dryly remarked. His mind racing, he realised that as he was going to tell Snape about the dream anyway--he'd already decided that much on his own--he might as well play it for all it was worth. "How about we reach another sort of agreement, sir?" he proposed, sitting up straighter. "Hermione's to be given back her pass to the Restricted Section and she's to receive no consequence for helping me. In exchange, I'll do as you wish and speak to my father about my dream."

"You'll speak to him about that in any case," Dumbledore mildly pointed out. "Seeing as you'll have no choice."

"Ah, but if you let Hermione off I'll have good will towards you, sir," Harry sweetly pointed out, his tones growing acerbic when Dumbledore remained mute. "Oh, come on! You've let me get away with breaking about a thousand school rules! You've facilitated my breaking them, as long as it was in a good cause. This is just more of the same."

"Keeping secrets from your father qualifies as a good cause?"
"No, but trying to understand my magical state on my own for once, instead of just whinging on about it certainly does!" Harry retorted. "Sir? Please."

"Well . . ." Dumbledore granted Harry one of his most beatific smiles. "As luck would have it, I hadn't yet got around to speaking to Minerva about Miss Granger . . ."

_Luck, my arse_, Harry almost said. Instead, he murmured. "Thank you, sir."

Dumbledore sternly regarded him, no smile about him that time. "Seer dreams, Harry, are never trivial. You've seen something significant, something that most likely _does_ involve matters the Order should be informed of. See to it that you do discuss the matter with your father."

Harry nodded, those last two words catching at his consciousness. "When Severus and I came up here to sign papers together, I thought . . . it seemed almost as though you didn't want to let him adopt me. But now you keep calling him my father, so I think you must have got over that?"

Dumbledore snapped his fingers and several things appeared on his desk. A steaming pot of tea, a plate of cucumber-and-watercress sandwiches, and a little tray of butter cookies dusted with castor sugar. He served Harry a cup, then gestured for him to help himself to the other items. "I don't suppose Severus has mentioned that he takes tea with me at least twice a week?"

"No, I don't suppose he has," Harry echoed.

"Mmm." Dumbledore popped a cookie past his teeth. "I like to stay up to date with all my staff, of course. When it comes to Severus, though . . ." The headmaster smiled. "Well, I can't help but ask how you're doing each time, and then we get to talking . . . He's taken to fatherhood like a broom to the air, hasn't he? I should have known. He always has been a most conscientious Head of House."

Harry thought about that for a moment. Maybe Snape having been a Head of House for so long explained some things. "Hmm," he said, wondering how to proceed. "Well, you know, we've had some ups and downs--"

"Only to be expected, my boy."

"Oh sure," Harry agreed. "But the thing is, it's a habit with him, I think, to react to things the way a Head of House would. Maybe you could mention sometime over tea that it's not so fatherly to punish me with points over things that are really strictly family matters?"

"Maybe you could mention it," Dumbledore gently pointed out.

"Oh, I have, believe me. But I'm not quite getting through."

The headmaster gave a sage nod. "I'll have a word with him. Just so long as you know, Harry, I'm quite certain Severus will guess that you had a word with me first."

Harry sipped his tea and hid a smile. "That's all right."

Whatever Dumbledore might have said in reply was cut completely off by the sound of the Floo flaring to life. Snape tumbled out, his robes in wild disarray, cinders flying everywhere as he made a completely undignified entrance into the room. The shock of that, however, was overshadowed by the words escaping his lips, words which began before he had fully exited the smouldering fire.

"Harry's gone missing!" he cried out, stumbling off the hearth as though his legs were about to give way.
"No I haven't," Harry said, jumping up from his chair so that Snape would notice him.

Snape's jaw dropped, his black eyes screaming relief, and for a single moment, absolute silence reigned in the stone chamber. Then he said something that was quite possibly the most inane thing Harry had ever heard Severus Snape utter. "You're here."

"Well, yeah." Harry tried for a soothing tone, sensing that his father was still deep in some state of shock. "Professor Dumbledore invited me up for a chat--"

In less than an instant, Snape was across the room and pulling Harry into a tight, almost suffocating hug, yanking him urgently into his arms and holding on as though for dear life. Before Harry had quite adjusted to that, however, his father was shoving him away and roughly shaking him by the shoulders, shouting, "You are without exception the singularly most thoughtless child I've ever known! Draco was out of his mind with worry--"

The shaking suddenly stopped as Dumbledore laid a hand atop one of Snape's. "Only Draco, Severus?"

Snape huffed and took an abrupt step back, crossing his arms with a snapping motion. "What utter rot. I am quite rightly concerned over this idiot child's scatter-brained decision to sneak off without so much as a word!"

Harry took a breath. "I told Draco I was coming up here."

Sneering, Snape retorted, "Be that as it may, when he interrupted my session with the fourth-year Slytherins, he was in a state of extreme panic! So much so that he couldn't even manage to guard his tongue! By nightfall, the whole castle will be abuzz with rumours of Voldemort entering Hogwarts yet again!"

"Look," Harry said, "I'm sorry Draco missed it, but I did tell him. I even thought he replied."

"Any particular reason," Snape snidely inquired, "why you didn't wait long enough to find out what he had replied? For all you know, it could have been, What was that, Harry? I didn't quite catch it."

"I didn't want anybody to see me try to floo!" Harry exclaimed, only then realizing that he should share his news. "I flooed, Professor! All by myself! And I didn't get burned at all!"

Something in Snape's expression softened. "So you did."

The quiet, proud undertone in those three words did more to affect Harry than any rebuke could. "I didn't want to worry anyone," he offered. "I thought Draco heard me say I was coming up here, I really did. I'm sorry."

Snape briefly closed his eyes, but not before Harry saw a flash of pain darken them far past black. "I thought I had lost you," he admitted in a cracking whisper lashed with a fear that was all too real, even now. "I thought the wards had failed. That you would be killed. That you had been killed, already."

That time it was Harry who flew across the room, wrapping his arms around his father to pull him tight. "I'm sorry!" he said again, the words a muffled wail.

Dumbledore, Harry noted, had enough decorum to turn away as Snape tightened his hold and bent to briefly touch his lips to the boy's hair.

"Well, you didn't intend to upset anyone, I'm sure," Snape finally said, his voice rather gruff. He
stepped back and cleared his throat to get Dumbledore's attention. "Headmaster, I hate to impose, but I think it best if I am there with Harry when he explains to Draco just what transpired. Would you be so good as to assist my Slytherins in finishing their Ossifying Potions?"

Harry remembered that one. One sip of it would strengthen your bones, but more than that . . . or the slightest mistake in the complicated formula . . . and the results were bad. He swallowed something hard and painful as realisation hit. "You left your students in the middle of brewing?"

"I do believe I mentioned once that you were my first priority, Harry," Snape drawled, a slight flush still tinting his cheekbones. He returned his gaze to the headmaster. "Should anyone need it, there is an antidote in my top left desk drawer. The orange vial. I don't want any of my Slytherins turning completely to bone, after all." His colour returned to normal as he smirked. "Now, had I been instructing Gryffindors when Draco's firecall came through . . ."

Harry chuckled and lightly poked his father in the shoulder. "Yeah, yeah. I'm wise to you now."

Snape favoured him with a supremely cool look. "I've no idea what you mean."

"I'll bid you good day, then," Dumbledore broke in, his wizened old eyes satisfied as he glanced at them both. With that, he was flooing down to see to Snape's students.

Grabbing his father's hand, Harry tugged him toward the hearth. "Watch me Floo--"

"Another time," Snape declined. "I shouldn't like to follow you down and find that Draco has hexed you for giving him such a fright."

"Oh, he wouldn't hex me!" Harry exclaimed. "I think maybe that fight gave you the wrong idea. We usually get on really well."

"Draco's lack of impulse control is most apparent when he's under a great deal of stress," Snape explained.

"Oh, all right, we'll go together," Harry agreed, stepping into the fireplace and waiting for Snape to join him. "But I get to throw down the powder."

A flash of green fire consumed them both as the boy shouted, "Harry Potter's home!"

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The Floo Network usually liked to belch Harry out rather emphatically, but with Snape standing beside him, it decided to behave. They spun back down to the dungeons and stepped calmly into the living room just as Draco's voice rang out in commanding, imperious tones, "Point me Harry Potter!"

A wand on the floor spun around then stopped, its tip pointing directly at Harry's ash-coated shoes.

"Ha ha, ah ha!" Draco shouted, practically jumping up and down. "It worked, it worked!"

Then he glanced up and saw Harry. "Oh, you're here."

"Hmm, Harry thought. Maybe Slytherins under stress feel a strange need to state the obvious."

"Yeah, sorry that I worried you," Harry admitted, stepping back against his father when Draco's eyes began to glitter in a way that looked a bit dangerous. "Dumbledore invited me up for a chat, and I thought I'd go, that was all. I did tell you before I went, but I guess you didn't hear me."

Draco glared. "Next time you might want to just check that I have, Potter! Honestly, Severus
probably has a classroom full of dead Slytherins by now or something. And that's sure going to do my reputation in my house a lot of good, isn't it?"

"Sorry," Harry said again, a little bit sheepishly.

Draco glared a moment longer, then admitted, "Well, it's good that it was nothing, I suppose." He scooped his wand up off the floor, shaking his head.

"Experimenting with the Point Me charm?" Snape mildly inquired, though Harry thought his voice sounded rather intrigued.

"Yeah, I thought it was useless on people," Harry said, going to flop onto a sofa. "It only works if the person's in the same room with you, so what good is that?"

"Oh, I don't know," Draco drawled, looking Harry up and down. "It might come in handy if, say, a certain sneaky little Gryffindor had, oh . . . I don't know . . . an invisibility cloak, for example?"

Harry breathed out a sigh. "You know about my dad's old cloak?"

"No, I actually did think your head had visited Hogsmeade without the rest of you, that time!" Draco snapped. "Of course I know! Besides, I found it when I was looking for you."

Now it was Harry who was glaring. "You were looking for me in my trunk?"

"Look, how should I know what strange thing you might take it in your head to do?" Draco scathed. "You stopped eating last time you felt troubled, didn't you? I thought maybe you'd got upset again and . . . ah, regressed a bit further into your childhood, that's all."

Harry burst out laughing. "You thought as there wasn't a cupboard handy for me to escape to, I'd just crawl into my own trunk and shut the lid?"

Draco must have realised that put that way, it did sound a bit daft. "Well, how was I to know it was quite so small inside? Honestly. You ought to get one spelled with wizardspace. No wonder all your stuff sits out. You couldn't cram it all in there if you tried!"

Harry knew that; he had tried. He glanced over at his father, who had sat down a short distance away. "You know, I thought I might ask for a new trunk for Christmas. Or my birthday, maybe."

"Months away," Snape remarked.

For some reason, that startled Harry. "You know when my birthday is?"

"Born as the seventh month dies."

Of course; he'd know it from the prophecy, Harry realised. For a moment there he'd thought that Snape had taken the trouble to find it out. It would be on his school records, and the adoption papers. But no matter.

Draco looked a bit puzzled, but instead of pursuing it, he pocketed his wand and admitted, "I was trying out some things with the Point Me spell. Trying to find you, Harry. I thought I might be able to make the charm work even if you were miles away."

"Fully trained wizards have been attempting that for hundreds of years," Snape explained.

"Well I had to do something!" Draco retorted, his pride obviously a bit stung. "I wasn't about to just sit here practicing cleaning charms while Harry was Merlin-knows-where!"
"Thanks," Harry said.

Draco's nostrils flared. "I didn't do anything to be thanked for, Potter," he half-snarled. "For just one second there, I thought it had actually worked, thought I had done it . . . but no, that was just the spell reacting to the fact that you stepped into the room." He narrowed his eyes. "You came back through with Severus. But when you left, did the headmaster come fetch you for this chat, or did you floo up by yourself?"

"By myself!" Harry fairly beamed. "I feel great! Now I can go anywhere! Just think, I can floo out to see Hagrid any time--"

"Any time we can be certain his hut won't be attacked by stray Slytherins," Snape corrected. "Or that Death Eaters won't enter the grounds undetected."


Snape waved a hand to say it didn't matter. "You can floo without incident, which means your magic is coming back into your control. Considering the sheer amount of wild magic you channelled in Devon, I would say you need have no worries about being attacked, just as soon as you gain control over your dark powers as well."

Draco nodded, his eyes rather wide at the thought of it. "Direct access to your dark powers, Harry. Think about it. Not even the Dark Lord has that."

"Power the Dark Lord knows not," Snape confirmed. "You will get there, Harry."

The confidence in his father's voice should have encouraged him, Harry knew. Instead, it only brought his mind around to the things he'd realised while up in Dumbledore's office. He would get there, obviously. He was going to have to leave the dungeons; he was going to be all packed up to go, so clearly his magic would be coming back soon. The prospect of returning to the Tower was pretty good in of itself, but what if the circumstances that were going to compel an unadoption would also mean that he really couldn't see Snape again?

What if leaving here meant leaving for good? What if he couldn't pop down for a chat and a butterbeer when he needed to talk to his father?

"Something is troubling you," Snape softly observed.

He was supposed to tell Snape about his dream, he knew. And now was the perfect opportunity, but the words just wouldn't come. Damn it, Snape cared about him! How was Harry supposed to announce that all the caring in the world wasn't going to make any difference? That like it or not, Snape was going to end up signing those papers?

"Is it something Albus said?" the Potions Master pressed. "Why did he want to see you, Harry?"

Harry clenched his lips. The more concerned Snape was, the more he wanted to tell him everything, but still, he just didn't know how to begin.

"Harry, look at me," Snape urged.

He did, his green eyes great pools of sadness. Why hadn't his dream been more specific? Why hadn't it shown him just how the casewitch had got involved again? He didn't even know what was required, really, to dissolve a wizarding adoption! Well, mutual repudiation, his father had mentioned that much---
All at once, Harry felt a cool sensation inside his mind. A pool of water . . . no, a tide, gently lapping at the shore of his own thoughts. No, not a tide. A wash of someone else's thoughts, someone who had been in his mind before . . .

With a hoarse cry, Harry raised his wall of fire up and up and higher. He'd hardly used the talent at all since Samhain. Something about it, something about the idea of burning had just given him the ebbie-jeebies afterwards. He'd resorted to it once or twice, and then again a bit when he'd tried to access his dark powers through Occlumency. That was weeks and weeks ago and Harry hadn't once tried Occluding again. He remembered how, though. It was effortless, and complete. He wasn't about to let Snape read his thoughts. Especially not these thoughts.

Too late, though. The subtle Legilimency had done its work, and his father knew full well what he had been thinking. It was all there, in the man's ashen face, his shaking hands. Snape's black eyes were filled with two words: mutual repudiation.

Then the Potions Master seemed to come back to an awareness of himself, and his whole expression hardened.

"In my office," he snapped, flinging a hand out to point the way. " 
Harry nervously paced the confines of his father's office, his footsteps taking him from the bookshelves to the hearth and back. He didn't know what Snape was saying to Draco to explain the sudden shift of mood out in the living room, but he wasn't too worried about it. He wasn't even worried about the way his father had sneaked into his thoughts, though that had been underhanded to say the least.

The only thing on his mind now was the conversation to come.

Suddenly wanting to escape, Harry fixed his gaze on the fireplace. So tempting. He could Floo now; there was nothing keeping him confined.

That would be the height of cowardice, though, and his father deserved far better from him. No matter that the conversation wasn't likely to be pleasant. Severus needed to know the truth.

"Sit," the man said the moment he had closed the door to ward them in.

He took a chair facing Harry, and began by taking a deep breath. His gaze was sombre when it met Harry's, but anger still blazed in the depths of his eyes. "I cannot imagine," he roughly grated, "what that devious old codger hopes to gain by this latest gambit."

It took Harry a moment to realise who Snape meant. "Oh, Dumbledore? It's nothing to do with him, what I was thinking about."

"Really," Snape mocked. "You just happened to be contemplating mutual repudiation for no reason at all, I suppose?"

It felt like something hard was lodged in Harry's throat. He swallowed, but the sensation persisted. "There's a reason," he began, struggling for words. "Listen--"

"I thought you understood my sentiments on this point," Snape interrupted, "but apparently you don't. Allow me to elucidate. I do not particularly care what new difficulty may have arisen; I will not repudiate the contract, Harry. Ever. That is, after all, what the words I promise tend to indicate. So, whatever your little problem is, I will resolve it as your father! Do you begin to understand me now, or shall I repeat myself a few thousand times?"

"I understand," Harry murmured, raising his eyes.

"I should hope so!" Snape rose to his feet, his expression becoming even more a glower. "Now, as I do not for an instant believe that Albus didn't start you thinking along these ludicrous lines, I shall go have words with him, as well!"

"He'll just send you back down here to talk to me," Harry exclaimed. "It's not him. It's all me! And I'm sorry, but yelling at me that there's no problem doesn't mean there isn't one." His voice broke. "Because there is."

Snape sank back down into his chair. "I didn't say there wasn't a problem, Harry; I said that we would get past it." All at once the man looked deeply exhausted. "So it wasn't some idea of Albus' that the best thing for us would be to repudiate the contract?"

"No, it wasn't. And it's not my idea either, all right?"
Harry wasn't too surprised when Snape missed his point. He knew he wasn't explaining things so well. The man looked at him, black eyes steadily assessing, though this time there was no hint of Legilimency involved. "Perhaps you should just tell me why you would wish to dissolve the adoption, Harry. I thought we were getting on rather well, all things considered."

"We are," Harry firmly agreed. "Listen, sir..." He cleared his throat, trying to soften the blow. "I love being your son, I really do. These past few months... well, I've never had anything like this, and I've always just been sick with jealousy that everybody else did." He looked away. "I was really looking forward to this summer, sir. I thought maybe we could spend more time in Devon, Draco too, and... well, without the pressures of keeping up in class and you teaching and all that, we might have more time together. I mean, I know you pretty well now, I think, but sometimes I realise I don't know you quite the way a son should know his father. So anyway, there's no way I want to end things."

"Then why was that the only thought ringing through your mind?"

Strange how hard it could be to say just two words.

"Seer dream," he finally croaked.

The silence in the room was palpable, after that. Snape stared at him, his eyes intense. Harry just waited. There was no way he could say another word, not until his father responded to the last two.

"Seer dream," Snape at length repeated.

Harry reluctantly nodded.

"When?"

"Uh, week and a half ago, something like that. The night we had that awful fight, actually."

"Is this the bad dream you said you had?" Snape huffed with ill-concealed disgust. "You were worried I wanted rid of you, and then you dreamed about that very thing? Doesn't that tell you anything?"

"Why do you think I didn't go into details sooner? I thought it was just a regular dream, even though it followed the seer dream pattern. Then I realised it couldn't be just any old dream! I saw the past, too, and it turned out to be true! Lotion Potion," he added irrelevantly. "Anyway, it's a seer dream all right. And ever since, I've been doing research, trying to figure out if it really does have to come true."

"If what has to come true, precisely?"

"Your unadopting me, that's what," Harry cried. "I saw it, Professor. That casewitch was back here saying how unfortunate it all was, and you were saying that people didn't want you to actually do it, but it was for the best, or something..." He stopped and took a breath. It was either that or blubber, and he wasn't going to break down, he just wasn't.

Snape was shaking his head. "I am not going to... ah, unadopt you, Harry, no matter what you think your seer dreams presage in this regard." He paused, his gaze becoming a piercing black that seemed to spear straight through Harry's soul. "Matters between us are really very simple. You aren't just some boy I took in to get him warded." His voice dropped to a bare whisper. "You're my son by choice, not obligation. When I thought today that I had lost you... well, it occurred to me that I ought to tell you."
"Tell me I'm your son?" Harry ventured, a little bit confused.

"No . . . You may realise this already, but . . ." Snape cleared his throat. "Harry. I could not love you more had I sired you myself."

Harry blinked. At some level the words came as no surprise. Severus had made it perfectly plain that he cared deeply about Harry, after all. That was all that was making the seer dream halfway bearable. That Severus would say the words, though . . . Severus, who didn't care to show emotion . . . that meant a lot. An awful lot.

Harry reached out and took his father's hands in his, squeezing them a little, as Snape had done so many times for him. "I love you, too, sir," he said, smiling a little as he met the man's startled gaze. "Oh God, that sounds so stupid now, doesn't it, calling you sir after a sentence like that? I guess I really will have to switch to 'Father'." He drew in a breath. "Is that all right?"

"I've no objection, certainly," Snape answered, solemnly nodding, though his eyes still looked a bit unsettled.

Harry nodded too. "All right, Father. Yes, I can do that. I like it, in fact. I'm not sure why it seemed so hard before. Hmm, maybe even Dad sometimes?" He glanced up, smiling. "I told Dudley you weren't the Dad type . . . but you know, sometimes I think you're not too far from it."

It came as no great surprise to Harry that Snape quickly changed the subject. "About this dream, then. You must be mistaken. It cannot possibly come true."

"Dumbledore said that seer dreams always do," Harry confessed, twisting his hands, all his euphoria fading away under the hard force of the truth.

"You went to him with this," Snape realised out loud, sounding not so much angry over that as . . . well, disappointed.

"I didn't," Harry denied. "I was reading up on seer dreaming, trying to figure it out on my own. I didn't want to talk to you until I knew what I was talking about, see? But the books Madam Pince flooed me were almost worthless. So I . . . uh . . ."

"Yes?" Snape darkly questioned, eyebrows raised.

"Oh, fine, take points if you want. Off Gryffindor and Slytherin, remember," Harry muttered. Then, in a louder voice, "I asked a friend to smuggle me out some better books from the Restricted Section. Only she . . . or he . . . got caught. And that was why Dumbledore invited me up for that chat, sir. I mean, Father."

The barest trace of smile might have slid across Snape's gaze; Harry couldn't be sure. "When Miss Granger was apprehended misusing the Restricted Section, I would think the logical course of action would have been to inform her Head of House, not involve Albus."

So Snape had effortlessly figured out who the friend must be. "Well, Madam Pince knew I was researching that very topic. Maybe as it's to do with me, she decided to go straight to the headmaster." Harry took a moment to gather his thoughts. "Anyway, I didn't tell Dumbledore what was in my dream. I just mentioned having had a new one, that's all."

"And?"

Harry snorted. "What do you think? He insisted I had to tell you about it, which I was planning to anyway, by the way. I just hadn't quite got up the nerve. After that, Dumbledore went on and on
about what a great father you're turning out to be!" Harry slanted his father a glance. "It's kind of strange you would suspect him of putting the unadoption idea in my head, actually. Does he give you the impression you're not good for me?"

Snape quirked a lip. "No, quite the contrary. However, I don't take what he says at face value."

Harry sighed. "You just see plots everywhere, that's all . . . Anyway, twice a week he has you for tea, he said. Is that why you sometimes hardly eat any dinner? You fill up while you and the headmaster gossip about me?"

"We talk about more than you," Snape informed him, ignoring the other question. "Well. You're apparently convinced that this dream of yours means something serious. So, let's hear it, Harry."

"Let me get my diary," Harry murmured. "I wrote it all down until I had it reconstructed just perfectly."

Snape nodded, and waved his wand, causing the office door to gently swing open.

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"What's going on?" Draco asked the moment Harry entered the bedroom.

He didn't want to answer nothing, but neither did he want to get into it. "Severus could tell I needed to talk to him," Harry answered. "He sort of insisted."

"More than sort of," Draco noted. "Anything I can do?"

"I don't think so," Harry murmured. "But thanks."

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"I believe you've made an error," Snape said after he'd read through all of Harry's dream accounts.

The boy had been sitting slouched, a little bit despondent, but he perked up on hearing that. "Yes?"

Snape cast him a glance that was all at once derisive and understanding. "Frankly, I'm still inclined to think this merely means you went to sleep worried about my intentions regarding you."

"Then how do you explain the first part?" Harry pressed.

Snape crossed one knee over the other as he considered that. "It is true that Draco and I had that conversation one day in Devon while you were outside," he mused. "However, that does not mean the second part is also accurate."

Harry grimaced. "I'd like to believe that, I really would, but it sounds like wishful thinking to me. No offence."

"None taken." Snape paused to think. "You went through a cycle of seer dreams back in Grimmauld
Place, did you not? You could hardly sleep without experiencing one, and then they ceased completely. Am I correct?"

"Yeah, I haven't had one in ages."

That time Snape's expression was definitely derisive. "Three months is not ages, except perhaps when one is sixteen. At any rate, there is no reason to believe that this cycle of dreams holds true to the pattern established by the last cycle. Especially if, as I suspect, that cycle ceased because it was disrupted. Tell me, Harry, what was the last thing you seer dreamed prior to coming here to live?"

Harry thought back. "Hmm, hard to say. I mean, it might have been that bit about me screaming in Parseltongue, but I only have your word for that. I never have been able to remember that dream."

Snape nodded, his dark gaze thoughtful. "I woke you, yes. No doubt that was a mistake, but what is done is done. What matters is simply this: your seer dreams may well be following a different pattern this time around. Perhaps you've started to view the future in symbols instead of literally. Perhaps the second half serves merely to highlight your considerable anxieties. You are in fact not accustomed to being anyone's son."

"Perhaps," Harry said, but only to be polite. His father just didn't want to believe the dream; that much seemed obvious. Harry could hardly blame him.

Hearing what Harry hadn't said, Snape went on, "Suppose, however, your dream will literally come true. I still believe your interpretation tends toward the hysterical, to say the least."

_Hysterical?_ Harry thought that was a bit much. "What else could it possibly mean?"

"Let's review the salient points. Apparently you and I will be caught in the midst of something unfortunate. I have decided to take some sort of legal action to remedy the situation. There are those who are resisting my remedy, but I insist. You have not been informed in advance of what I intend, though you should have been." Snape favoured him with a thin smile. "Personally, _if_ I believed your dream to be true, I would suspect it predicts a simple change of name."

Harry gaped at him. "Excuse me? Change of name?"

"Harry Snape," the Potions Master mocked. "Harry James Snape? Hmm. Not sure I care for that. Your middle name may have to go as well."

Harry felt himself go hot all over. "I thought we agreed--"

"We did agree," Snape interrupted, all vestige of humour gone. "I'm not saying I intend to ask such a thing of you. I simply wish you to realise that this interpretation fits the parameters of your dream at least as well as your previous one."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Does it, though?" Grabbing his journal back, he flipped through the pages detailing his dream. "Well, I suppose it would explain why the casewitch called this a drastic step, but why would she say that bit about how you had changed your mind?"

Snape flicked a bit of lint off his trouser leg. "It came up during my interview with her, the issue of your name. She seemed relieved that I was content for you to remain Harry James Potter."

Harry blinked. "Well, I guess this version of things explains pretty well why she's reluctant, then. She was in the Order the first time around, I think Dumbledore mentioned. She wouldn't want my name to lose its... uh..."
"Cachet is, I believe, the word you're grasping after," Snape inserted. "Your name has symbolic meaning, even more so now than when you were younger. Winning a Tri-Wizard Tournament will do that."

"I didn't win it," Harry muttered. "Not really."

"Definitely a Gryffindor."

Harry was still caught up in the dream. "Suppose you're right. What unfortunate circumstances could make it so necessary for you to change my name? I mean, what on earth would that solve?"

Snape shrugged. "Who can say? Up until recently you had living relatives, thus the Ministry has known itself restricted with regard to you. Now, in a certain sense, you are more vulnerable. Imagine that the threat from Voldemort intensifies. Fear sweeps the land. Fudge desires to use you for public relations purposes, and I quite rightly object. As my status as your guardian is not based on blood, they attempt to abrogate it. I conclude that changing your name would dissuade the Ministry."

"That seems a little unlikely."

"It is, I assure you, far more likely than your insane interpretation." Snape shrugged again. "Harry, there are literally dozens of possibilities. Wizard Family Services has a policy of follow-up visits. They want to be sure you are adjusting well to your new situation. Perhaps one of these goes awry. Frankly, I am surprised the casewitch hasn't dropped by uninvited already. I suppose Albus must have told them to allow us a little breathing room."

"Uninvited?" Harry echoed.

Snape waved a hand. "Random inspections," he lightly sneered. "They want to see slices of normal family life. As if there is any such thing." The man frowned. "Perhaps the 'unfortunate circumstances' refers to something she becomes aware of during a visit, and I have to sign an acknowledgement that our status is being reviewed."

"But how would that fit in with the talk of someone not wanting you to take 'such a step'?"

"Who can say? That's not the only possible scenario, Harry. Maybe a solicitor discovers an error in the adoption paperwork, and correcting it involves some less-than-legal manoeuvres. Or, perhaps someone decides to challenge the adoption. Shall I go on?"

Harry shook his head. "I see your point, sir . . . Father. But none of those scenarios really fits the dream just so, you know. Well, I suppose the name one comes closest . . . but I just can't imagine changing my name."

"Precisely why, should it become necessary, I would change it for you and inform you afterwards. You see? It does fit."

"No, it doesn't. None of your ideas explain why I'd be packed and ready to leave, or why you'd give me back my vault key."

"Maybe it wasn't your vault key at all. Maybe it was Draco's."

Harry snorted. "Draco doesn't leave his vault key lying about. And what reason could he have to seal it in an envelope? I'm pretty sure he's got no intention of owling it off!"

"Maybe it was the key to Black's vault, and Albus had sent it down here to you."
Harry supposed that was remotely possible, but still protested, "Then why was I packed?"

A little impatiently, then, Snape retorted, "I want you packed, Harry. I want you back in Gryffindor where you belong, with these friends who are your strength. I begin to suspect that being so isolated is interfering with your access to your magic. You have told me that you need your friends; evidently this is quite true."

Harry huffed a bit. "Well, that's just great. I need to be around my friends to get my magic back, but I'm not allowed to be around them much until it already is back? That's a . . . um . . . ."


"It isn't funny!"

"It also isn't as dire as you make out. You will recover your magic."

Harry flushed. "Draco's right; I haven't been trying as hard as I should have. But I've started to practice every day, now. There's got to be some magic down inside me. I mean, I can Floo just fine. But . . . " He swallowed, then went on, "I almost wonder if I should stop trying. What if getting my magic back somehow starts some chain of events that means you have to unadopt me? I don't want that."

Snape leaned his head back and studied the ceiling for a long moment. "Harry, you won't have to choose between a father and your powers, because I am not going to unadopt you. Now, I have no doubt whatsoever that you will fully recover your magic, but I have no notion as to when. You think it will be by the time the casewitch brings me legal papers, but this is mere supposition on your part, based on a belief that you were packed to leave. Perhaps you weren't. Assuming the dream is true, something which I do not assume, by the way, all we really know for certain is that your things were put away for once."

"They couldn't have been," Harry protested. "My things don't all fit in my trunk, remember? And it was my trunk I saw in the dream, not some new one with wizardspace inside."

"Perhaps you had lent your things to someone."

"Sure," Harry mocked.

"Harry, I am not going to unadopt you!" Snape insisted, raising his voice and pulling his feet in against his chair. "I know you find adults to be undependable, but this, you may depend on! Shall I swear a blood oath as well as sign a contract, or can you simply trust me?"

Harry flinched a bit. "I do trust you, all right? But that doesn't solve anything . . . Listen. Right after my operation, I bet you'd have shouted from the rooftops that you'd never, ever hold me forcibly down and pry open my eyelids so Lucius Malfoy could blind me with needles, right? But you did."

Snape's fingers curled into claws as his breathing became a hiss. "I thought you had forgiven me that."

"There's nothing to forgive," Harry stressed, leaning forward to stare intently at the Potions Master. "Nothing, do you understand? Sometimes things just line themselves up in a certain way and you end up doing things you'd normally never dream of doing. That's what I'm afraid of, actually. What if you have to go through with an unadoption because it will save me somehow? What if something awful happens and I'll end up in Azkaban if I stay tied to a former Death Eater?"

"That is absurd."
"Oh yeah? Well, what would you have said in October if I'd told you what you were going to do to me on Samhain?" Harry challenged.

Snape sighed. "I do see your point, Harry, loath though I am to admit it. Nonetheless, I do not believe your dream will come to pass, at least not in the form you envision. I cannot conceive of it."

"I didn't want to believe it either," Harry admitted. "I really didn't. But then I realised . . . Not knowing how to explain, he ventured, "Do you remember that night you were so tired and you decided to . . . um, run a little family counselling session with Draco and me?"

The Potions Master huffed. "I did no such thing. I presume you mean the night the two of you needed a stern talking to."

"Whatever," Harry thought. "Right. Anyway, you asked Draco if he thought a family was . . . uh, a paper stamped by some Ministry idiot, something like that, and . . . well, this'll sound awfully stupid, I bet, but up until then, I sort of did think it was the paper that had made you my father." He gave the man a rather somber glance. "You were right when you said that fifteen years with the Dursleys really took a toll. I wasn't wanted there, and short of you being willing to do something as serious as sign a contract, I don't think I'd ever have believed I was wanted here, either. But . . . well, I think I'm past that now."

"Meaning?" Snape inquired, one eyebrow raised.

Harry tried to organize his thoughts. "You and I don't need a certificate embossed and suitable for framing. I mean, you don't have one for Draco, do you? That doesn't make him any less your son."

"No, it doesn't," Snape drawled, sounding pleased that Harry knew as much. "Be that as it may, I for one rather like having things between us be official."

"Yeah, me too." Harry flashed his father a slight smile. "I like the idea that this is more than a private arrangement; you've got the legal authority to go tell Fudge to take a flying leap. I know you'll do what's right for me no matter what the Ministry has to say about it."

"But if something's going to happen to wreck that . . . well, I think we'll still be all right. You'll still be my father where it counts most."

"Very mature," Snape commended. "Though as I said, I can't agree that it will ever come to that. However, if you feel that way, it occurs to me to wonder why your thoughts in the living room were quite so morose."

Harry's lips turned down. "Maybe it would be better if you didn't pry like that. I don't much like the idea that I have to go around Occluding here in my own home."

"You make it sound as though I Legilimize you on a continual basis."

"You shouldn't do it at all. Or at least, not without warning me."

"Who is the father here?" Snape demanded to know.

Harry, however, was wise to him, just as he'd said up in Dumbledore's office. Snape was trying to put him off the topic, which probably meant that the man knew it hadn't been right to pry that way. "You're the father," he easily admitted. "And you have the makings of a really, really good one--"

"The makings," Snape echoed.

"Yeah, but some things need work. I'm sure you'd say the same of me, right? But we're talking about
you, this time," he added, before Snape could sidetrack the conversation. "If we're practicing
duelling or something, that's one thing. Or if I was sick or hurt and couldn't talk, I guess. Other than
that, I think you'd better not Legilimize me. It's just not right." When Snape still looked a bit
stubborn, Harry reluctantly added, "It's a bit like sneaking a peek in somebody's Pensieve, don't you
think?"

"That's a line worthy of a Slytherin," Snape scoffed.

Well, Harry reasoned, it was good they were so far past that. He'd been a little leery that the mere
mention of the Pensieve would get him a glare, even after everything that had happened since. Not
wanting to push his luck, he dropped the matter of Legilimency and went on. "Anyway, about me
being morose. There was a reason. Up in Dumbledore's office, I started wondering just what awful
thing might happen to cause an unadoption . . . I'd already figured out that it wouldn't really matter,
right? But then I thought, what if after you unadopt me, it'll put you in danger if I so much as come
by? I realised it wasn't going to be much use having an 'unofficial' father if I can't even see him. That
idea was pretty upsetting. I mean, it'd be even worse than--" Harry abruptly shut up.

"Worse than what?"

A bare whisper was the most Harry could manage. "I just mean . . . there were times growing up
when I wished so much that I could talk to my father, right? But I knew it wasn't possible. And I
didn't really know him anyway, or even know what it was like to have anybody, so I didn't know
what I was missing, if that makes sense. But this . . ." A shiver coursed through his shoulders. "If I
lose you, I'll know what I've lost."

Snape reached out and laid a hand on his knee. "You are not going to lose me, Harry."

Harry gulped. "I started wondering if the Ministry was going to . . . um, you know, hold your past
against you and send you to Azkaban, actually. It could happen. You know how stupid and unfair
Fudge is."

"He's not quite stupid enough to incite a revolt," Snape dryly remarked, leaning back again. "I
rescued the Boy Who Lived from certain death. You may not realise this, but the events on Samhain
were widely reported."

"Ron mentioned something about that . . ."

"I am hailed as a hero," Snape said with some measure of disgust. "The Ministry even saw fit to
reveal my years of espionage, the fools, though it was never them I reported to, but the Order." He
shook his head. "At any rate, imprisoning the man who saved you, who afterwards took you into his
own home . . . the man you now call Father? Not even Fudge is that great an imbecile. You could
sway public opinion against him in an instant."

"If I had that kind of influence," Harry weakly protested, "the Prophet wouldn't have spent months
printing lies about me."

"Fudge's last ditch effort to pretend Voldemort had not returned," Snape brushed that off. "He knows
better now, which means he definitely needs you. Even without knowing the prophecy I'm sure he
realises that. He wouldn't dare trump up charges against me, so stop tormenting yourself, Harry. As I
said, you are not going to lose me."

"I hope not," Harry whispered.

"You won't," Snape promised. "I don't even believe that any legal adjustments will be in order. I
Harry nodded, his eyes still a bit shadowed. He couldn't help but think that some awful problem was going to rear its ugly head and force them apart. There was no point in discussing that, though, not any longer. Snape knew what he thought, and he knew what Snape thought, and as for the rest . . . they'd just have to watch the future unfold and see.

The mood around the dinner table that night was a bit strained. In between bites, Draco kept shooting Harry odd little glances, as if trying to figure out what had gone on in the office earlier that day. Harry didn't want to discuss the prospect of unadoption. It had been bad enough going over all of it with Severus.

And he certainly wasn't going to bring the matter up in front of Ron.

Ron usually ate quickly and launched straight into his homework, sometimes while the others were still finishing dinner. Snape had been remarkably tolerant of the borderline rude behaviour, but this evening, Ron had enough sense to tread a bit more carefully. He didn't even say anything about the fact that the conversation wasn't centred on revision, though to Harry's eyes it did seem that he was looking at them all a bit curiously. Ron lingered over his dessert, only setting his fork down when Harry did, breathing an almost inaudible sigh of relief when Snape left the table and headed for his office.

He waited until the door was closed before leaning forward over the table and quietly whispering, "What's the matter?"

Harry firmed his lips. "Nothing."

"Don't give me that," Ron hissed. "You look like your best friend has died or something!"

"Well, you haven't, have you?" Harry weakly joked.

Ron almost flinched, his gaze straying to Draco, then back to Harry. "You still count me as your best friend?"

"Yes," Harry said. "Though this has been even worse than fourth year."

Draco had been sitting quietly throughout dinner, apparently content to listen and observe, but that comment got the better of his restraint. "What happened fourth year?"

"Tri-Wizard Tournament," Harry shortly explained.

"So?"

Ron clenched his fists, then quickly shoved them under the table. "I thought Harry had snuck his name in the Goblet, all right?"

Draco grinned, the expression a little bit malicious. "Well, that's not such a horrible crime, is it? I mean, we all thought he was a glory-seeking attention-addicted little arse."

"I should have known better," Ron groused. "It makes me sick to think I was momentarily in the same mindset as you."

"Hmm, you'll be ill for a long while then," Draco breezed, standing up. "I plan to be an Auror and
join the Order and all the rest, so unless you plan on changing sides . . ." He let the suggestion hang in the air, a challenging lilt to his eyebrows.

"You may have Harry snowed twenty feet under--" Ron hotly began.

"Don't," Harry interrupted.

"Don't?" Ron groused.

"Yeah, just don't. You don't have to like Draco and you sure don't have to trust him. I know how long it took me, and I was around him twenty-four hours a day, all right? I understand where you're at. But don't pick a fight, all right?"

"Pick a fight!" Ron complained. "He was the one taunting me!"

"He's going to stop that," Harry said with a hard glare in Draco's direction. "Right?"

Draco gave a careless shrug. "Well, seeing as you've switched to crumpets for the duration, I suppose I may as well."

"What?"

"Never mind," Harry said, waiting until Draco had gone into the bedroom and closed the door. "He means he'll try."

"Things are very strange down here."

"Yeah, tell me about it," Harry agreed, leaning back. "I bet all families are like that, though."

Ron gave him a doubtful look as he drew his wand to clear the table and Accio over his school bag.

"Family?"

"Well, Snape is my dad, you know," Harry pointed out.

"Hey, seeing as he's your dad and all, think you could go ask him why Ingrid's fifth principle doesn't apply to weather charms? 'Cause I just don't get it."

Harry thought briefly of agreeing, but then had another idea. "Why don't you ask him?"

"Yeah, right. He gives me detention if I so much as look at him wrong."

"When's the last time he gave you any detention at all except one where you have to come down here?" Harry pressed.

Ron's brow furrowed. "Hmm. Um, I don't know. A while before that whole lines garbage."

"You were very rude to him," Harry pointed out. "Look, I didn't think he reacted so well to that, but think about what you said. What if someone had come up and accused you of . . . er, touching Ginny like that?"

"That's different!" Ron exclaimed. "Ginny's my sister!"

"Yeah, but I'm his son," Harry tried to get across.

"Not really," Ron muttered.
"Yes, really."

"Whatever."

Harry gave it up, for the moment. "Anyway, I think you should just go ask him about Ingrid's fifth principle, all right? You are down here to be tutored, aren't you?"

Ron crossed his arms, a mulish expression settling onto his features.

For a while there, Harry had thought Ron was making progress... Well, actually he was, but it wasn't quite there yet, so Harry gave in to a depressing impulse to bribe him into talking to Snape himself. He didn't want to be a go-between, after all. Ron needed to learn for himself that Snape wasn't such a monster. Maybe that would help him come around, finally.

"Remember, the sooner he declares you caught up in your subjects, the sooner you can stop coming here," Harry prompted. "Go on, go ask him your question. He won't bite, I swear."

Sure enough, that did the trick. Definitely, Ron didn't do subtle.

Shoving back his chair, the other boy stood up and marched to the door, looking for all the world as though he were steeling himself to face a dragon or something. Harry repressed an urge to loudly sigh as he gathered his own books and things and settled in at the table.

He'd criticized Draco for eavesdropping, more than once, but Harry knew he wasn't above it himself, on occasion. This was one of them.

A knock, timid at first, and then a veritable pounding as Ron's nervousness spilled out.

"Enter!"

Snape sounded pretty irritated, Harry thought. Uh-oh. Maybe this wasn't such a capital idea... In the end, though, he was proud of his father. True, the man had been snappish and more than a little brusque, but that was just his personality. He hadn't gone out of his way to insult Ron, though he had seen fit to ask in sardonic tones if it was a Gryffindor trait to ignore the alternate readings.

"I read them," Ron defended himself.

"Thoroughly?" Snape drawled.

"Uh, no," Ron admitted.

"Consult them again," Snape advised. Ron was already half-way through the door he'd left open--Harry hurriedly turned around so it wouldn't look like he was trying to hear--when the Potions Master added, "If you are still confused afterwards, return."

Ron flopped down into the chair opposite Harry and dragged out some crumpled parchments.

Harry knew he should probably just stay quiet, but he couldn't resist. "See, that went all right," he had to point out.

"Yeah, well he could have just answered my question," Ron grumbled, adding in a lower tone, "But at least he didn't take points, so... yeah, all right."

Smiling, Harry returned to his own study of weather charms.
Harry was determined on one thing: he was going to do a *Lumos* even if it killed him. He'd had enough of just sitting around waiting for things to happen to him; it was time he took charge of his own life and his own destiny, he thought. It was just like with the seer dreams. He could wait for them to happen and let them control him, or he could decide *he'd* stay in control no matter what.

Besides, if something horrible was going to happen to keep him away from his father, Harry was damned if he'd face it without his magic. He was going to get his magic back so that he could help Severus if need be.

*Must be my saving-people thing,* Harry thought, but for once, he didn't cringe at the phrase. That was just part of who he was, he decided. And maybe accepting who he was would help him finally get his magic back.

He started spending hours each day practicing, and this time, he didn't let repeated failures deter him. He tried *Occlumency* again to help with the spell, tried immersing himself in his dark powers in the hopes that they would flow free once he was reaching down inside them with his mind. He raised his wall of mental fire, and when that didn't work, tried to see inside himself a blinding light, instead. He pictured himself casting *Lumos,* casting a ray of light so pure and brilliant it blinded everyone around.

Visualizing his powers didn't seem to unlock them, but Harry kept right on trying, day after day after day. It no longer bothered him to have Draco see him fail. Draco *wanted* him to succeed; Harry was certain of that. The Slytherin boy had no more good ideas on how to make the magic flow, but that was all right.

Harry's *instincts* were screaming inside him that the solution to his problem lay inside himself. That it was up to him, him and no one else, to get the magic to pour out through his wand. Nobody else could solve this for him, he just knew it. Not anybody, not even his father.

Strangely enough, there was a certain comfort in that. Harry supposed that was because he'd spent so many years learning that it was stupid to depend on anyone besides himself. He was trying to unlearn that now; he *did* trust his father, after all. But too long in one mindset had . . . oh, he didn't know . . . *damaged* him, maybe. He wanted to change right along with his family situation; he *wanted* to let himself depend on others.

But some part of him just couldn't, not yet.

And maybe *that* was why he'd had so little success with finding a path into his magic. *He hadn't been looking for one,* not really. He'd been waiting for Remus, or Draco, or Snape to tell him what to do and how to do it. But that wasn't going to work, not when the deepest part of him had apparently decided to reject all their tutelage, all their advice.

He was on his own in this, and it had to be that way, Harry sensed. But that was all right, because he *was* going to solve it.

"*Lumos!"* he shouted again, his arm flung out in a straight, determined line, his stance something he might normally use in a duel.

"Maybe that's enough for right now," Draco said, coming in and spelling on the lights he'd extinguished for Harry earlier.
"Ten more minutes," Harry said without turning around. "Get rid of the lights again."

He heard Draco give a sigh. "You're leaving me all alone out there with the Weas---" With a groan, Draco started over. "That is, your good friend Ronald has seen fit to inflict his presence on us yet again. Perhaps you could be so gracious as to help me entertain him?"

"Yeah, perhaps I could," Harry drawled, ignoring the sarcasm. "In ten minutes. You'll survive until then."

Draco sighed again, but then he whispered a command to the lights and shut the door.

Over dinner a couple of nights later, Harry held his fork with stiff fingers and forcibly stopped himself from wincing with every bite. He didn't particularly want anybody to notice how much his hands were hurting.

Snape did notice, though. "Harry. That's the fourth time you've tried to spear the same stalk of asparagus. What's wrong?"

Harry shook his head to say it was nothing, and when his father kept staring at him, passed it off with, "Oh, you know, I maybe overdid it on the essays earlier today. Got a bit of writer's cramp, I think."

Draco's gaze shot to his at that, his silver eyes frankly disbelieving, and Harry almost flinched, thinking that the Slytherin boy would surely chime in that Harry hadn't done a bit of schoolwork that day.

Draco said nothing though, and Harry didn't know why. Brotherly loyalty, perhaps? Hmm, that wasn't a very Slytherin explanation. Maybe it was as simple as the other boy wanting something to blackmail him with. Harry felt a little bit bad, thinking such dark thoughts about Draco, but on the other hand . . . well, it was Draco.

It was Ron who chimed in something, actually. "Would writer's cramp make your hands so . . . um, red?"

"They aren't red!" Harry denied. True, they were perhaps a bit more reddish than usual, but he hardly wanted Snape deciding to give them a closer look.

"Hmm," Snape only said, and resumed eating his own marinated asparagus as he began to question them about their latest topics in Transfiguration.

After dinner was over, Harry got his books from his room and launched into his assignments. The stack was depressingly tall, but how could it not be, when he'd spent the last few days practicing spells instead of keeping up? Unfortunately, most of what he had to do wasn't reading; he had some essays to catch up on. Not what he wanted to do with his fingers practically screaming with pain . . . but, oh well.

He scratched out his name at the top of a sheet of parchment, longing for the good old days when he had Draco's magical quill to use. Biting his lip as he went on, he managed to sloppily write out the title: *Transfigurationate Ethics*. That much done, it was all he could do not to go soak his hands in some cool water or something.

Snape sat down right beside him and glanced at his work. "Perhaps Ethical Issues in Transfiguration would be a better title," he lightly remarked. "I don't believe transfigurationate is actually a word."
Harry knew it wasn't, but he'd been trying to avoid writing anything longer. It would be bad enough getting through the rest of the essay with his hands in this state, and honestly, McGonagall wouldn't mark him down for a made-up word, would she? She never had graded their essays anywhere near as hard as Snape. "It'll be all right," he said, his tone shorter than he had intended. Well, pain would do that.

Snape leaned close to him and spoke quietly against his ear. "Harry, your hands are obviously giving you a good deal of trouble. It's been too long since we spelled them. Let me help you."

"No thanks," Harry answered. "I'll be fine." With Gryffindor determination, he resumed writing out his essay, his breathing going jerky and uneven the longer he kept on. After a while he couldn't keep it up. Sighing as quietly as he could, he dropped his quill, spattering ink on the table, and stretched out his fingers.

A series of cracking noises interrupted the silence in the room as bones and tendons popped back into their proper places.

Snape had been marking papers for the past few minutes, but at that, his patience evaporated. Glaring a bit at Harry, he indicated with a crooked finger that the boy should join him over on the couch. Harry went reluctantly, not looking forward to the conversation at all.

Ron, he noticed, was watching the interchange carefully. At that, Harry nearly gave another heavy sigh. He didn't want his friend to see him in conflict with Snape . . . but there was probably no avoiding it.

Once Harry had settled onto a cushion, holding himself tensely on the edge of the couch, Snape took the initiative and challenged, "So. What is the matter? Your hands are evidently in agony but you don't wish help?"

Harry grimaced. Couldn't he have talked low enough for Ron not to hear? "I'm trying to get my magic back, all right?" he hissed. "I'm really trying, this time. What if the pain is the magic trying to get out? I can't very well just block it, can I?"

"That's precisely why we've used a spell rather than a potion. The spell doesn't block anything; it enchants your fingers to believe the pain isn't real. I thought you understood that."

"Yeah, I do," Harry admitted. "But I thought, just in case . . . you know, what's a little pain? It's nothing like Cruciatus, after all."

Snape made a low growling noise. "The fact that you have suffered horrible curses before does not render you immune to pain, Harry. Stretch out your hands for me."

Harry hid them behind his back. A childish reaction, to be sure, but he didn't want Snape to go all fatherly and do what he thought best no matter what Harry thought about it.

"Harry, I merely wish to examine them," Snape announced, growling a bit.

"Promise," Harry entreated.

Snape was growling more than a bit when he returned, "The mere request is both offensive and infantile, but yes, Harry. I promise."

Ignoring the snark, Harry whipped his hands out and thrust them toward Snape.

The Potions Master lost his haughty attitude as he took his son's fingers in his and lightly massaged
each digit. The touch was careful in the extreme, but Harry still pulled in a harsh breath. "My apologies," Snape murmured, though he still kept on. "A magical examination now, I should think," he added in the same low tone.

Harry trusted him enough that when the man pulled his wand, he left his hands out in plain view.

Snape was frowning by the end. "$The pain is only going to get worse if you don't let me help you, Harry," he pronounced. "$I think your joints will become even more stiff, as well. If you are determined to suffer this, I will say no more, but . . ." he lowered his voice. "$Gryffindor bravery is quite admirable at times, but this is more like foolhardiness. You will soon be unable to move your fingers at all at this rate, and I doubt that will be conducive to your endless wand practice."

"You told him," Harry complained, glaring at Draco.

"Your hands told me," Snape corrected, one thumb tapping against the chafed, red place on Harry's palm. "$This used to be quite callused."

"Sorry, Draco," Harry sighed, pulling his hands back to his lap. "$I guess I shouldn't have let myself get so far out of practice," he admitted. "$Well. If I won't be able to hold my wand with stiff fingers, I guess you'd better spell my hands, after all."

"Or you could try it wandless," Draco put in from across the room.

"Wandless!" Ron exclaimed.

"I have tried that," Harry said. He was about to add that it was hopeless, but remembered in time that it wasn't hopeless. He was going to get his magic going again, he was, and that was that!

"Ready?" Snape questioned. When Harry nodded he touched his wand tip to each finger and palm.

"Oh, that's very good," Harry said on a sigh of relief. "$Thank you . . ." he had been about to add sir . . . force of habit . . . but catching himself in time, he said instead, "$Thanks, Dad."

Ron made a half-strangled noise, but that was nothing to Draco's reaction. He burst out laughing, clapping at the same time, then abruptly cut it all out and gasped, "$Right, between you and him, got it."

With that, he escaped to the bedroom. Through the closed door more laughter could be heard.

Harry figured that Snape was actually irritated with Draco, but with him safely out of the way, he turned a rather fearsome glare on Ron instead.

"What?" Ron gulped, clearly nervous. "$I didn't say anything!"

"You look as though you'd like to," Snape drawled in one of his darker voices.

Harry thought it was unfair to practically invite Ron to insult their relationship, but before he could say so, Ron rose to the occasion. Looking away from them both, he airily returned, "$Who, me? No, I don't have anything to say."

"Good," Snape snapped. He gave Harry a look then, a mix of dark amusement, consternation, and surprise, and then he was walking down the short hall toward his office. Harry thought of calling after him Thanks again, Dad, but decided he'd better not.

He turned to Ron, who picked that moment to grumble, "$I don't need another flurry of Howlers, do
Harry sighed and got back to his essay, this time scratching out the title and writing in the one his father had suggested.

"What happened to you?" Harry asked a few nights later when Draco opened the door to reveal a panting and dishevelled Ron.

"Ran all the way down," Ron wheezed.

"You're still late," Draco pointed out a bit snidely, raising his voice when Snape stepped out of the Potions Lab. "Though I suppose it's bit much to hope for points from Gryffindor, no matter that we waited dinner for you."

Snape appeared to ponder that a moment. "Perhaps we should do Mr Weasley the courtesy of eliciting the reason for his tardiness."

Harry let out his breath; until then, he hadn't realised he'd been holding it.

Ron shot Draco a rather fearsome glare. "I had to take Ginny to the hospital wing after she was hurt at Quidditch practice!"

"Ah, well there you have it," Snape smoothly put in. "Family must come first. Wouldn't you agree, Draco?"

The Slytherin boy muttered something almost inaudibly.

"Yeah, family's important," Harry echoed, catching on.

Ron looked from the Potions Master to Harry, and back, and sighed slightly.

Harry was almost afraid that Snape would press the point too far, but he realised a moment later he shouldn't have been. Too cunning to overplay his advantage, Snape merely inquired, "And how is Miss Weasley? Hale and hearty again, I trust?"

"Yeah, what happened?" Harry asked.

"Just bad luck. Two bludgers came at her from opposite directions, and when she flew straight up to avoid them, she collided with one of our beaters, Ginny broke a leg in the fall, but Pomfrey's already got it knitted back together. She said it'll be good as new in the morning."

Harry gave a relieved grin. "That's good. She can play this Saturday, then, right?"

"Yeah, no problem with that. She can practice again tomorrow."

Snape nodded, his visage calm. "Excellent. It wouldn't do to have Gryffindor play Slytherin with even your reserve Seeker out of commission."

"Yes, it would," Draco muttered, more loudly that time.

"You're just sore that we've been creaming Slytherin all year!" Smirking, Ron returned his attention to Snape. "Ginny's fine now, Professor. Thank you for asking."

Draco wasn't about to let Ron get away with badmouthing the Slytherin Quidditch team. "If you've
been winning," he coolly observed, "it's probably because Slytherin is minus our star Seeker." He executed a little bow as he said it.

"Gryffindor's been minus our star Seeker, too," Ron snarked back, waving toward Harry. "And somehow we still manage to win, don't we? It's called teamwork, Malfoy."

"Ginny's very good," Harry rushed to insert before the conversation could get even uglier. "I wish I could see her play, I really do. I miss Quidditch."

Ron glanced uncertainly at the Potions Master. "Um, maybe your . . . er, maybe Professor Snape would let you come to the match? I mean, I'm sure he could charm some part of the stands for safety, or maybe you could just lurk about . . ."

"Unseen?" Draco questioned. "It truly is a lovely invisibility cloak."

"You told him about it?" Ron accused, eyebrows lifted in outrage.

"Oh, around here it's share and share alike," Draco breezed, waving an airy hand.

"You let him touch it?"

"Ron," Harry gently remonstrated, "he's just trying to get to you. And you're letting him."

"Hmph. Well, I still say you should come to the match."

Harry looked beseechingly at his father, and noticed Draco doing the same. "Is it possible? You go to all the matches anyway. We could sit right by you in case anything should happen . . ."

Shaking his head, Snape admitted, "I can't think it wise. However . . . perhaps I can do something that will mitigate the loss. Perhaps you can watch the match from here."

More used to wizard furnishings than Harry, it was Draco who figured out what he meant. "Oh, the enchanted picture frame? But you said that wouldn't display people."

"I do believe I can persuade it," Snape drawled, and strolled into the boys' bedroom.

Ron looked around curiously as he followed; it was the first time he'd seen Harry's room. He appeared oddly comforted by the fact that half of it was done up in Gryffindor colours.

The picture frame was showing a view of starlight out over the lake. Tapping it three times with his wand, Snape murmured a few low incantations. "There," he said to Draco. "It is just a viewing plane; therefore, it will never be able to let you hear what transpires outside, but it should be able to show you people on the grounds, now." His eyes grew fierce. "Do not misuse it. I will change it back after the Quidditch match, of course."

"Of course, Severus." Draco came across a bit smarmy, so much so that Ron rolled his eyes. "Now, where would I find people out and about at this late hour?" he mused. When Ron flinched slightly, a satisfied expression darkened Draco's eyes. "Oh, I see. Gryffindor team is still practicing, are they?"

"I miss Night Quidditch a lot," Harry groaned.

"You wish is my command," Draco lightly gibed. Closing his eyes, he gripped his wand and waved it. Instantly, the picture frame filled with a view of the Quidditch pitch. Several students on brooms were racing in tight circles, avoiding the lighted bludgers that whizzed in all directions.

". . . five . . . six . . ." Draco counted under his breath.
Ron abruptly threw himself in front of the picture frame. "He's counting the bludgers, trying to *ferret* out our team secrets!" he exclaimed. "Make the picture frame go back to the lake, Harry!"

"I can't. No magic."

Ron turned in appeal to Snape. "He's *cheating.*"

"Strategizing," Draco corrected. "Though you Gryffindors really are a sorry lot. Only eight practice bludgers?"

Tapping the ornate frame again, Snape commented, "It won't show the Quidditch pitch again, except during games. I trust that is satisfactory, Mr Weasley?"

"Uh, yeah," Ron murmured, clearly astonished.

"Not too Slytherin of you," was Draco's sour complaint. "We might win if you'd let me keep looking. And don't say that winning that way isn't any sort of victory, because you know perfectly well that it *is.*"

"Mmm, but considering that my family is not entirely Slytherin, some sacrifices must be made."

Draco glanced once at Harry, then back at Snape. "You'd let me watch if he didn't know though, I bet."

Snape didn't deny it, Harry noticed, though he did say, "Ah, well as he *does* know, sacrifices must be made. As I said."

Draco seemed to take that in stride. On Saturday, however, he had some words about it. Snape had gone off to attend the match, and Harry and Draco were sitting side by side on one bed, waiting for the magical picture frame to start displaying the pitch.

"The fact that you're Gryffindor as well as Slytherin has some interesting implications, I think," Draco suddenly remarked. "Have you thought about what you're going to do once you get out of here?"

Harry sent him an inquiring glance.

"About Quidditch," Draco explained, a sneaky smile curling his lips. "You have two houses now, don't forget. Since one of them is Gryffindor, you have this compulsion to be fair about everything, don't you? Doesn't that mean you can't *cheat* one of your houses when it comes to Quidditch?"

Harry gaped. "What are you going on about?"

"Oh, it's probably a moot point for this year," Draco drawled. "But next year, Harry. I'll probably still be stuck down here, but I'm sure you'll be back to classes. And Quidditch. Now to be *fair*, you'll have to play for Slytherin at least half the time, don't you think?"

"I'm not playing for Slytherin!"

"I thought you were all right with being in Slytherin?"

"Yeah, but . . ." Harry repressed an urge to shiver. "Listen, I'm not going to live in Slytherin, either. That's just the way things are."

Draco looked at him seriously, all teasing gone from his voice. "I've been trying to show them that the Dark Lord's a bad deal, but I can't turn them all by myself, Harry. I need your help. Promise me
something, all right? If you get out of here before I do, you have to acknowledge Slytherin proudly and be one of us, too."

"I am not playing Seeker for Slytherin, Draco," Harry sighed.

"I didn't mean that. Just . . . don't act like an outsider, all right? You aren't one now, and they all need to know it. Go hang out in the common room, sit at the Slytherin table for a meal now and then. Act like we're your house, too. Because we are."

"I don't have a death wish."

"How is Severus going to feel if the minute you leave his rooms you start pretending he's not your Head of House, when you know perfectly well that he is?"

"I thought," Harry carefully remarked, "that we agreed you'd stay out of how I get along with Severus."

"I thought," Draco remarked just as carefully, "that you wanted to win this war. You could have practically all Hogwarts on your side if you played your cards right, that's all I'm saying. Being placed in Slytherin at this late date has given you a strategic advantage, the opportunity to work us from the inside. Don't let your Gryffindor pride lay all that to waste."

"I'll think about it," Harry promised, and then thankfully, before Draco could reply, the game flashed into the picture frame and the two boys began to argue Quidditch instead of house politics.

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Ron seemed unaccountably nervous a few nights later. He kept watching the door, evidently waiting for Snape to come home. He seemed positively anxious, as though he had something to say, Harry mused . . .

Sure enough, the moment Snape stepped into his living room, Ron jumped up from the table and blurted, "You aren't going, are you? I mean, are you, sir?"

Snape seemed to take some sort of dark delight in drawling, "Why, of course I am, Mr Weasley."

Ron made a face and muttered something about letters from home always containing bad news.

"Where are you going?" Harry asked, looking up.

His lips slightly twisted, the Potions Master admitted, "I've been invited to dine at the Weasley residence this evening."

Ron gave a little shudder, no doubt at the prospect of Snape standing in his family home.

Harry couldn't help but feel a bit offended at that. "How would you like it," he challenged, rounding on his friend, "if I kicked up a fuss about your father dropping by my house?"

"Yeah, well I might understand perfectly if my father was your teacher and you were in trouble with him already, don't you think?"

"Oh," Harry said, blinking. He actually hadn't thought of that. He felt a bit embarrassed now that he'd leapt to Severus' defence.

"Mr Weasley," Snape said, waiting until he had Ron's full attention. "You are not in trouble. I imagine that your parents merely wish to hear about your progress in all your classes, a subject with
which I am intimately acquainted."

Ron groaned. "In other words, Howler City."

"You have such a low opinion of your academic abilities?"

"No, but you do."

A low laugh rumbled through Snape's chest. "I told you that your Potions essay was well-developed, did I not?"

"Yeah, when it was half-done. Once I'd slaved to finish it, it was Charmed Potions cannot solve all the world's ills, Mr Weasley, though it is quite Gryffindor of you to suspect they can. Next time please apply a modicum of thought to your conclusion."

Snape was already standing, but at that he straightened still further. "The comment perturbed you?"

"Yes, it perturbed me," Ron groused, his face going a bit red. "I did apply a modicum of thought, and if it sounded like I didn't . . . well, why don't you just come right out with it and say you think I'm stupid?"

The Potions Master turned to Harry. "I suppose you were right that students were apt to take my words a bit more literally than I intended."

Harry nodded, resisting an urge to add Told you.

Snape turned back to Ron. "I merely meant that what had been quite a strong essay was flawed by wild speculations in the concluding paragraph."

Ron blinked. "Oh. That's not so bad. Maybe you could say that next time, instead of the other."

"I rather like the notion of Gryffindors quailing at the mere sound of my footsteps," Snape remarked. "Though now with a Gryffindor for a son . . ."

"This is pathetic," Draco put in.

"I don't believe I elicited your opinion, Mr Malfoy," Snape rebuked him. "Now, Mr Weasley. You're performing at an adequate level in most subjects though I wouldn't recommend we desist from tutoring as of yet. And that's all I plan to say to your parents on the subject."

Ron slowly nodded, looking a bit as though he couldn't believe his ears. Then that expression faded to something more like pure disbelief, as though he thought Snape was lying to him outright. Harry swallowed back an urge to defend Snape yet again.

"Harry," Snape said to get his attention. "Arthur said to be sure to tell you that you were invited as well, though he knows you couldn't accept, considering."

"That's all right," Harry nodded. He didn't want Voldemort attacking Ron's house, after all. "Tell him thanks."

"Any message I can bring from you to your parents, Mr Weasley?" Snape inquired as he hung his school robes and reached for the less imposing ones hanging by the door.

"No," Ron said, a bit mulishly. He evidently still hadn't forgiven his parents for forcing him to endure yet more evenings in the dungeons.
"As you wish," Snape merely replied. "Harry, if you should for any reason need me, do not hesitate to shout through to the Burrow."

"All right." He watched his father Floo away, feeling a little bit glum about the whole matter. Maybe it was Ron's attitude rubbing off. Or maybe, he reflected, it had more to do with the fact that Snape could get out of the dungeons whenever he wanted. Harry was glad for his father, but he knew more than a niggle of jealousy that he didn't have the same freedom, not even now that he could Floo.

But that, too, was up to him. He just had to get his magic back.

Correctly interpreting Harry's motion toward the wand in his pocket, Draco shook his head. "No," he said. "Not more practice, not until you eat."

"What are you, his mother?" Ron erupted.

"No, I'm his friend," Draco coolly replied. "What are you?"

"Shut up."

"Let's just have dinner," Harry broke in, trying to distract them. He really didn't want to have to firecall the Burrow to report that the other two boys were duelling, or something. "And then I'll work on Lumos again."

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From the look on Ron's face, Harry thought that the other boy probably wouldn't have stayed . . . except for one thing. He knew he had to be there when Snape flooed back in from the Burrow. Otherwise, the Potions Master just might report the matter to his parents.

Harry was fairly sure that Snape wouldn't do any such thing, of course, but perhaps it was for the best that Ron believed it. At least that way, he didn't leave.

Dinner with just Ron and Draco had been more than a bit uncomfortable, silence alternating with careful civility . . . but at least both the other boys had refrained from coming to verbal blows. Harry was grateful for that, even if Pass the salt, if you'd be so kind didn't make for scintillating conversation. Straight away after dessert, Draco had announced that he had a potion to brew. Harry knew for a fact that wasn't true; it was just Draco's way of escaping the strained atmosphere. But since Draco's barrage of slightly superior comments really tended to grate on Ron, Harry thought it was just as well that Draco backed off to give them all breathing room.

Harry flooed the plates away and then, standing in the middle of the living room, tried to imagined magic flowing through him and out his wand. He remembered what the wild magic had felt like; he tried to put himself back in that same condition, only this time with himself in control of the surge of power. "Lumos!" he insisted, imbuing the incantation with pure confidence. Nothing for it, though; his wand remained nothing more than a stick in his hand.

A stick that still filled him with the warm glow of magic wanting to be released.

Ron glanced up from the dining room table, evidently tired of determining how a drop of thestral's bile would affect each of five different potions.

Harry gave him a slight smile and just kept on. He was tired of hiding in his room to practice magic alone, as though it was some shameful hobby or something. So what if he didn't have so much talent for it, just now? That was a problem he was going to solve. It certainly wasn't anything to be humiliated over, and he shouldn't have acted like it was.
I'm going to get a Lumos going even if it kills me, he said to himself again, his lips moving with the words as he cast one failed spell after another.

Sals wandered out of her box, slithered across the floor, and wound her way up his leg.

"Hey," Harry said, scooping her up off his hip. He kissed the top of her little head, and gave it affectionate scratch, gratified when Sals arched her neck in response. He'd been so focussed on magic practice for the last few days that he hadn't been making much time for Sals, he realised with a little twinge of guilt.

"What is Harry doing?" Sals asked, her tongue flickering out to lap at the sore spot on his wand hand. Ouch.

Motioning for the snake to curl around his wrist, Harry explained, "I'm trying out a myssstyery-talk." Spell, he'd meant to say, but some things just didn't translate well into Parseltongue. Strange how he could think one word and yet hear it emerge as something else.

Sals circled his wrist a few times before settling in. "Myssstery-talk?"

Hrm, Sals never really had understood the whole concept of magic, though of course she realised that she'd never met another man-boy who could talk with her. She thought that made Harry special, and when he'd tried to explain before that Snape and Remus were wizards too, even though they couldn't talk to her, Sals had just got confused. "Yeah, it's a myssstyery-talk for making light," Harry explained, thinking hard what to say. He tapped his wand very gently against her little snout. "This is a ssspecial kind of ssstick. If I wave it right, and say the right words, I should be able to make things happen that don't usually happen."

"Things?"

"I should be able to make it glow," Harry explained. "I used to be really good at it, but lately the ssstick hasn't been working so well for me."

Sals frowned slightly. "How can a ssstick glow? Harry puts it in the fire-cave?"

The Floo, she meant. Harry shook his head. "No, it's nothing to do with fire."

"Show Sssals?"

"I can't." Harry thought a moment and sought Ron out with his eyes to be sure he'd say the next bit in English. "Ron, how about you demonstrate a Lumos for Sals here? She's curious."

Shrugging, Ron pulled his wand as he stood up to oblige.

Sals made a hissing noise that didn't translate at all; Harry supposed it must be the snake equivalent of a gasp. Crawling her way down Harry's hand, she stretched out full length on his arm and poked her head off the end of his hand, the better to peer at the glowing wand. Ron looked a bit wary, but at the snake's clear interest, he stepped closer so she could get a good look.

"I want to see Harry put sunlight inside wood," Sals softly urged.

"I've been trying," Harry lightly grumbled, "but all right." He stretched his arm out again, taking up his most determined stance, pointing his wand toward the granite wall ahead. "See, I hold the myssstyery-ssstick out, and call up the myssstyery-words inside myself. I have to believe in the words, and say them meaning them, and then all I'm supposed to have to do is say an old, old word for light." Lumos, he tried to add, but even though he felt himself saying the word, he didn't hear it come
out. Weird. Well, maybe he couldn't transform Latin into Parseltongue.

"Word?" Sals prompted.

"Uh, I don't know it in snake language," Harry admitted, readying his wand again. "But it's sort of like demanding, *Light up!*"

A bright beam of energy, more like a bolt of lightning than mere light, surged from his wand. In that same instant, Harry was flung backwards, the force of the spell propelling him straight into the granite wall behind. For a moment he thought he really had been struck by lightning, but the brilliance pouring from his wand didn't flicker away like lightning. Slumped against the wall, he squinted against the incandescent coppery ray and felt just a momentary surge of joy that the blinding light was, indeed, coming from his wand.

At least, he thought it was. His head had knocked against the stones so fiercely that stars filled the whole frame of his vision. *Funny,* he thought, his brain feeling like it was thinking in slow motion. *I never really believed that people actually *did* see stars when they took a hard blow to the skull...*

Or maybe those stars were from the brilliant wand light. Raising his wand a bit, he blinked a few times trying to clear his vision. *Oh crap!* The beam streaming from his wand was burning everything in its path! A smouldering streak scorched part of the floor across from him and the lower part of the wall dividing the living room from his father's office.

In the same instant, he heard Ron mumbling what seemed to be some potent profanities. Still struggling to see through the stars, he turned toward the place where Ron had been. The other boy wasn't standing there any longer; he'd been flung to the floor.

Harry couldn't see any more than that; the effort of turning his head had produced a wave of agony that caused his knees to buckle and his stomach to turn. Weakly, Harry felt himself sliding down the side of the wall, some vague part of him aware that his wand was still blazing with power. "Nox," he gasped as he slumped, but the incantation did no good. The lightning blasting from his wand kept blazing, the beam so hot he felt like he could hardly breathe.

Gasping, he reached out his other arm, using it to steady his wand hand so that he could keep it aimed at the middle of the wall across the room. It was either that, or risk catching something on fire.

Suddenly a mussed redhead sat bolt upright. He was rubbing his nose gingerly and still mumbling, but Harry couldn't make out his words past the rushing sound pounding in his ears.

Then another voice was shouting, sounding so far off that he could hardly make it out until a door seemed to slam inside his head and the noise became louder. "Fucking hell, Weasley! What did you say to set him off?"

As Harry's gaze drifted up to see Draco running into the room, he also caught sight of the scarred wall. Only the wall wasn't just scarred now. In the few moments he'd kept the wand steady, a gaping hole with steaming crimson edges had formed. The opening was the size of a school cauldron. He could see right into his father's office, and beyond..."*Finite Incantatem,*" Draco snapped out, coming as close to Harry as he dared, tentatively reaching out toward the wand, but deterred by the heat and light. "Shite," he swore when nothing happened in response. "You say it, Harry," he urged, glancing back toward the still widening hole in the wall dividing Snape's office from the living room. "Damn it all, say it now!"

Harry swallowed hard and noticed a coppery taste in his mouth. He must have bitten his tongue
when he hit his head. Maybe that was why he was having such a hard time ending the spell. Panting for breath a bit, he struggled to form the words.

"Finite," he groaned.

"He was trying to do Lumos; have him say Nox!" Ron shouted, apparently unaware that Harry had already tried that.

"Nox!" Harry said again, but the light continued to burn like a laser on a Muggle telly show. It was so bright that a brilliant glow bathed the entire room. Strange he hadn't really noticed that before. Then again, the waves of nausea were coming at faster intervals, and his vision was trying its best to tunnel in, so maybe it was no wonder he wasn't seeing straight.

"Louder, Harry!" Ron prompted.

"Nox!" Harry cried as loudly as he could, increasing the pounding in his head tenfold. All at once he couldn't hold the wand steady, and as the fierce, hot beam shifted angles, scarring wall and furniture in its wake, the sofa caught on fire. Acrid smoke began to fill the room.

Darting closer, Draco snatched the wand from Harry's hand and screamed Nox at it himself, but all he accomplished was to cause more damage to the contents of the room as he changed its angle yet again. He almost blasted Ron, who jumped to one side and yelled, "Watch it, will you?"

The moment after the wand was out of Harry's hand, he began to feel himself weakening. It was as though a crutch had been pulled away from him. He slumped sideways, the floor rushing up to meet him with sickening slowness.

And then it began raining inside Snape's rooms, droplets of water pelting him from head to toe. I really like rain, Harry thought rather irrelevantly as pain seemed to split his head open. As the latest wave of agony receded, his thoughts became a bit more coherent. Severus must have a magical sprinkler system installed, he realised, and suddenly burst out into wild laughter.

Draco ceased in his attempts with the wand just long enough to order, "Weasley, don't just stand there, help Harry!"

The whole world was turning red by then. Harry stopped laughing and closed his eyes, his existence contracting into the simple need to draw air. But his chest was so constricted. Or was that Ron, yanking him up a bit and pulling him close? He felt his consciousness slipping away, but then somebody was shaking him. Ron, must be. Harry's head flopped to and fro, almost making him sick up. He clutched at Ron like a lifeline, trying to stop it, but somehow that just made it worse.

"Quit jolting him, he doesn't like it!" Draco barked.

"I think he's concussed! You want him to faint and never wake up?" Then Ron's voice went lower as he spoke to Harry. "Come on, mate, stay awake. You can do it--"

Ron kept talking, but after that, Harry couldn't hear a thing past the roaring in his ears. He thought he felt a light weight sliding up his leg, the sensation so vague and unfocussed that he couldn't be sure. Sals, he tried to murmur. Don't go by the fire, Sals. Bad . . . But he no longer had the strength to form the words aloud.

Harry's last thought before he lost consciousness was that his father would be proud. He had done a Lumos . . . even though it had killed him.
What's in a Name?

Harry woke up to an odd feeling of weight resting on his chest. It wasn't that awful constriction like he couldn't breathe, though; it was simply a presence. Something resting on him.

No, someone, he realised when he cracked his eyes open and recognised his father's long, dark hair. Confused, Harry angled his head slightly and glanced around. He was in his bedroom, lying on his own bed, and there was Draco on his, fully dressed on top of the covers. Ron was slumped in a chair that had been dragged in from the living room. Leaning against the wall, the red-haired boy was snoring as he slept.

And his father was in another chair, one pulled right up to his bedside, but instead of sitting up, he was leaning over to rest his cheek on Harry's chest.

Not too Snapeish of him, Harry had to think, but some deep part of him was touched, nonetheless. He remembered casting a spell that had gone horribly wrong, remembered hitting his head on the wall, remembered the room sort of spinning as Ron held him and told him to stay awake. But he hadn't, had he? All he could suppose was that he'd been injured and Severus had been taking care of him, but that didn't explain why the man had decided to sleep on him.

Knowing that his father wouldn't care to have the other boys see him like this, Harry lightly poked him on the shoulder. "Severus," he whispered. "Hey, Dad. I think you'd better wake up."

A sweep of lank, greasy hair slid over his fingers as the Potions Master stirred. Hmm, have to do something about that, Harry thought. No doubt a gift of shampoo would be hopelessly unsubtle, which reminded him to ask something he'd been wondering about for a little while. He really should have paid more attention to the details on the adoption application, he thought, but he'd been too upset at the time. "When is your birthday?"

"What?" As Snape sat up completely and stretched, a series of cracking noises broke the silence in the room. Wincing in sympathy, Harry noticed the other boys beginning to shift positions.

"Your birthday," he repeated, still whispering. "When is it?"

"Are you delirious?" Snape softly sneered. "You've just channelled dark powers, managing to concuss yourself in the process, and all you wish to know is when my birthday is?"

"I feel all right," Harry insisted, moving to sit up himself. "And I have been meaning to ask."


"Oh, I didn't know," Harry murmured, feeling really bad. He'd been Severus' son by then, but he'd missed his birthday! "Sorry. Um, so what happened? I remember the spell, and wrecking the living room, and passing out . . . Er . . . sorry about your sofa, and the office wall, and um . . . anything else I managed to destroy." Harry took a breath. "Ron must have firecalled the Burrow to get you back here, I guess?"

Still glowering, Snape growled, "I didn't need anyone to summon me, not when my office wards had been breached in a particularly egregious way."

"Listen, nobody went into your office, all right?" Harry yelled, then rubbed his head. "Ouch. Why are you so angry, anyway? It's not like I wanted my wand to blow apart your walls!" By the end he was yelling again, which of course only made his head start to hurt once more. Suddenly exhausted,
he flopped back down to the pillows and glared at Snape.

"I am not angry about the walls," Snape stressed, sighing a bit as he leaned over and stroked a hand across Harry's hair. "I am not angry at all. It's been a long, hard night."

"What, it's morning already?" Harry turned his head and saw through the enchanted picture frame that it was. "Oh. Sorry."

"Please do stop apologizing," Snape entreated in a weary tone. "Just assure me that you're all right."

"I said I was," Harry pointed out.

Snape wiped his hands on his trousers, nodding in a way that Harry thought was supposed to be brisk. "Yes. Madam Pomfrey assured us you would be. She came down here and spelled away your concussion, then said you would need to sleep a good while. She warned me you would probably feel weak upon awakening. Is that the case?"

"Hmm. Bit weak, yeah," Harry realised. "Uh . . . can I ask . . ." He lowered his voice. "Why did you fall asleep on me?"

Snape flushed slightly. "You needed to be held."

Raising an eyebrow, Harry simply waited to be told more.

"You were unconscious but . . . distraught," Snape admitted. "You only ceased thrashing when I was holding you. Not too surprising, really. You had just channelled dark powers through your wand, which must have been an unsettling experience. Your dark powers recognise me, Harry, as a safe harbor, because I've been in your mind."

"Oh, yeah . . ." Harry remembered Snape saying something about that, before.

"I tried to stay awake . . ." Snape shrugged.

"All right." Harry could figure out the rest.

"Now then, perhaps you could enlighten me as to exactly how you managed to destroy the walls."


A warm hand suddenly covered his, his father squeezing and then letting go. "The protection spells weren't damaged. They recognised your magic and let it stream through. Doubtless if the wards had battled your spell, we would have a problem. Now, explain if you would, Harry. What happened?"

"I don't exactly know," Harry realised, thinking. "Um . . . let's see. I was talking to Sals. Explaining *Lumos*, actually. And, and . . . it just happened."

Awake by then, Ron pulled his chair over to Harry's bedside. "You don't remember any more than that? You were holding your wand and hissing at the snake, and then you pointed your wand at the wall just like before when you'd been practicing, and . . . *kablooey!*"

"Thank you for that scientific analysis," Snape dryly inserted, shaking his head. "You were speaking Parseltongue, then. What did you say?"

Harry wrinkled his brow as he thought back. "Um, stuff like, 'here Sals, this is how you do it' . . . and then I stretched my wand hand out and tried to say *Lumos*, but I couldn't. It's weird, I can't make Latin go to Parseltongue. Anyway, I was trying to demonstrate, so I said instead, 'Light up!'"
"In Parseltongue."

"Well of course in Parseltongue! I was talking to a snake, you know!"

"No need to get defensive," Draco put in, swivelling his legs off his bed as he sat up and yawned. "I should have thought of it sooner, that you might be able to incant in Parseltongue."

"That doesn't make sense!" Harry objected.

"I think it does, actually." Snape conjured a glass of water and passed it to Harry. "Parseltongue is itself a dark power, as we discussed. Apparently in your case, it takes one dark power to unleash the rest of them. It's as I said, Harry. Your magic was never missing; it merely remained to find the key to unlock its new form."

Harry shuddered. As far as he was concerned, dark was right. "I was just trying to do a *Lumos*," he protested. "I never meant to blast the wall apart."

"I would say you produced a *Lumos*," Snape assured him. "It was merely one of staggering power. All of which we discussed before, if you recall. Dark powers are very strong. Normally, filtering them through surface magic mutes them. But you have no surface magic any longer, which means you're delivering dark powers *directly* into your wand."

"Well, that's just *great*," Harry groaned. "I really wanted to get my magic back like *this*, didn't I? I'm not going to be able to do normal spells any longer?"

"Oh hush, you idiot child," Snape bid. "Now that we know it's a simple matter of speaking Parseltongue, all that remains is to learn to control it more accurately. Everything will be fine."

In the next instant, Harry had cause to doubt that. His scar began to burn and blaze with heat, the sensation seeming to cut straight across his skull. "Owww!" he wailed, and slapped a hand up to his forehead in reflex, trying to crush the pain back out. It didn't work though; when had it ever? And it had never been this bad before. His head was exploding. Harry rolled onto his side, crunching his legs up against his chest, and bit into his own hand so hard he broke the skin.

"I knew that half-blooded arsehole hadn't forgotten Harry!" Draco exclaimed, rushing forward. "Shite, what do we do, cold compress or something?"

"Yes, go get one," Snape calmly requested, and when Draco snatched his wand from the night-table, added, "No magic, not for this."

As Draco rushed into the bathroom, Ron shook his head at Snape. "Cold compresses never did do much to help with this." He lowered his voice. "I bet you know that. You were just giving Malfoy something to do?"

Ignoring the question, Snape leaned forward to gently reach between Harry's teeth, prying them part before he could do more damage to his hand. Taking both Harry's hands in his, Snape held them firmly and leaned down close to speak just inches away from Harry's contorted features. "Oclude," he urged, his tone intense. "Do it, Harry; you know how. Raise that wall of fire and force the pain outside it."

Harry suddenly screamed, a loud, ear-shattering wail.

"*Now, Harry!*" Snape insisted. "Oclude your mind!"

*Easier said than done,* Harry thought. Now that he'd broken his dark powers wide open, Voldemort
was feeding on *them* to make his scar blaze. His whole head was coming apart, he was sure of it. He felt a sticky wash of something begin pulsing down his face, and through a haze of pain heard Draco groan, "Oh, sweet Merlin *above* . . ."

"Occlude your mind, Potter!" Snape yelled, squeezing his hands until Harry thought his finger bones would shatter. Strangely enough, it helped. The fierce pain outside his head drew his attention, reminding him that he was more than a scar. He was a wizard, and a powerful one, and if he had to put up with simple charms blasting walls apart, then he'd damned well better be able to Occlude like never before, too!

Gritting his teeth, Harry reached deep down inside himself, the world going black as he concentrated on finding the very source of his darkest powers. His eyes rolled back in his head, a gasp hissing through his teeth, but then he was pulling a wall of fire up to surround his true self. With an almighty mental shove he thrust Voldemort's intrusion through the flames, propelling it with such force he could *hear* the evil wizard screaming as he was cast out of Harry's mind.

And then the room was silent save for his own harsh breathing.

Calming, Harry opened his eyes to see the other three wizards staring at him incredulously. It wasn't often one got to see Severus Snape open-mouthed with astonishment, Harry thought. "What?"

Snape recovered first. "Here, wipe your face," he urged, taking the cool, damp cloth from Draco's hand and passing it to Harry. It came away from Harry's face smeared with blood.

"*I thought* my head was splitting open," Harry weakly joked, but nobody laughed. "What?" he asked again.

"*This ball of fire* came shooting out of your forehead, mate," Ron said, his voice low. "And . . . and . . ."

"*We saw the Dark Lord's face* in it as it whizzed past," Draco added. "*He looked livid.*"

Snape took the cloth and dabbed a bit at some places Harry had missed, then took a moment to cast a healing spell on his hand, obliterating the teeth marks below one thumb. "Are you all right?"

Swallowing, Harry admitted. "Uh, feel a bit queasy, actually." When his father made a move as though intending to help him to the loo, Harry shook his head. "No, it'll be all right. Just give me a minute."

Snape did, waiting until Harry's harsh breathing had slowed to ask, "Are you still Occluding?"

Harry slumped against his pillows. "Yeah. Do you think I have to keep it up all the time? That'll be pretty exhausting."

"I suspect Voldemort will think twice about reaching out through your scar in future," Snape told him, laying aside the cloth and straightening Harry's covers for him. "For the time being, however, I would recommend you shield your mind, yes."

Nodding, Harry ventured, "Um . . . was it my magic surging back that brought *him* running, do you think?"

The Potions Master considered that, then nodded. "Of course we cannot know for certain, but I would suspect that he has been regularly seeking out a connection ever since you escaped him at Samhain--"
"Ever since you rescued me, you mean," Harry put in, hoping Ron was listening for once.

Snape merely shrugged. "At any rate, I would say that until now, the conduit that is your scar has been blocked."

"Until now," Harry repeated rather darkly. "So, do you think Voldemort realises about my dark powers and all?"

"It is a distinct possibility."

"More good news," Harry groaned. "Now he'll just start incanting in Parseltongue, too. So much for power the Dark Lord knows not."

"It was physical and mental trauma that both incinerated your light magic and broke your dark powers open," Snape reminded him, his glance warning Harry to stop quoting the prophecy. "And that's what's made them accessible to Parseltongue. Voldemort is not likely to inflict on himself the suffering that brought you to this pass."

"Yeah, he is a cowardly little shite," Harry realised, glancing at Ron. "That must have been pretty scary, last night. Um . . . I almost hate to ask but . . . where's my wand?"

Snape drew it out from the folds of his clothing and laid it on the bed-side table.

Harry sighed with relief. "I was almost afraid it had got burned up or something . . ." The wand looked dormant enough now, which prompted him to wonder, "How'd you get the spell to end? I kept trying but it just didn't work, not for me."

"Your spell stopped by itself when you fainted," Draco told him. "And you weren't trying in Parseltongue, were you?"

"People don't think straight when they're concussed," Ron leaped to Harry's defence. "And why should he think of that, anyway? He didn't really realise what had happened, I don't think, and even if he did, that snake wasn't around any longer--"

"Yeah, where's Sals?" Harry broke in. Probably hiding, he figured. That Lumos had to be especially frightening to a creature that didn't really comprehend magic.

"She's safe in her box," Snape volunteered. "Shall I fetch her?"

"Not just now." Harry sighed, relieved. "It's enough to know she hasn't tried to leave or something."

He shifted in the bed, feeling slightly grungy, and remembered water falling on him. His damp clothes must have dried on him as he slept? That confused him a bit, as he was pretty sure his father would take better care of him than that . . . but then again, he'd apparently needed to be held. Hard to both hold someone close and dress them in pyjamas. It occurred to him then that nobody else had changed clothes, either. Not even Draco, and for him to wear a rumpled, wrinkled shirt . . . well, that was so unusual that it spoke volumes.

And then there was Ron . . . Harry had been trying not to mention the obvious, but he suddenly couldn't hold back the question. "Shouldn't you do something about your nose?"

Ron grimaced slightly and rubbed at the burned spot he'd got when Harry's Lumos had flashed past, too close for comfort. "It looks worse than it is."

"Draco, fetch Mr Weasley some standard burn salve, if you would."
"Nah, that's okay; I can just pop over to the infirmary--"

Snape abruptly turned toward the Gryffindor boy. "You are a student at this institution as well as my son's best friend, Mr Weasley. Not to mention, I dined with your parents just last night." His voice went grim to match the glower in his eyes. "Do you truly suspect I would poison you?"

Harry held his breath, all too afraid that Ron was going to mutter yes.

Instead, his friend let out a long sigh and mutely shook his head.

By then, Draco had returned with the burn cream. He lifted one blond eyebrow when Ron took it without comment and dabbed a bit on the tip of his nose. Instantly, the scarlet red blisters there faded to freckled skin. Capping the jar of salve, Ron passed it back. "Thank you, Professor."

Snape studied him for a long moment. "No thanks are needed. You have my apologies that I did not think to offer sooner."

Ron flushed a bit. "Yeah. Um, well . . . you seemed pretty occupied with Harry, there." He turned to his friend. "So, you're all right, are you?"

Harry nodded. "Thanks for staying all night. That means a lot." He wondered if he should stop there, but something wouldn't let him. "You didn't need to, though. I mean . . ." He didn't know how to go on, since saying I had my father to take care of me sounded completely like he didn't appreciate Ron at all.

Surprisingly enough, Ron heard what he didn't say. Maybe he did do subtle, sometimes. "I thought I needed to," he volunteered, glancing at Snape. "But . . . um, guess I was mistaken. Not that I'm sorry I stayed," he rushed to put in, as though worried Harry might misunderstand. "I don't suppose I could have left really, since it was just horrid watching you pass out like that. I had to see for myself that you came out of it all right. But . . . um . . ."

Drawing in a deep breath, Ron seemed to steel himself for something as he lifted his face to meet the Potion Master's eyes. "I owe you an apology, sir. A sincere one, this time. I'm very sorry I didn't understand about you and Harry. I mean, I didn't really think you were . . . uh, doing anything . . . er, you-know, with him, but I also didn't think you . . . um . . . cared about him." Defensive, Ron babbled, "How could I? You've spent years making us all think you hate him--"

"Oh, I most certainly did hate him," Snape freely acknowledged.

"Yeah." Ron thickly swallowed. "Well, anyway, I can't think you do, now. I mean, when you stepped out of the Floo I was sure there was going to be hell to pay for the damage to your office. But all you saw was Harry . . . you still haven't even gone in to see what can be salvaged, have you? And that's not even counting--"

"That will be enough, Mr Weasley," Snape drawled. "Your apology is accepted."

"That's not counting what?" Harry pressed.

Unaccountably, Ron blushed. "Um . . . well you wouldn't calm down until he held you, Harry but the thing that really got me was . . . um . . ." He chanced a quick look at Snape. "He . . . er, sang to you."

"You sang to me?" Harry asked his father. It sort of reminded him of Devon, of hour after hour of stories. Maybe Severus had sung a bit to him there, too.
Snape raised a challenging eyebrow. "I hummed."

Ron made a telling face, but didn't contradict his teacher. "I'd better get back," he mentioned to Harry. "People will be wondering where I've been all night."

Narrowing his eyes, the Potions Master announced, a trifle harshly, "You may state that Harry was ill and needed company. You may not share any information about his magical state. Is that clear?"

Harry furrowed his brow. "Doesn't Voldemort already know everything anyway?"

"As one can't be certain of that, I see no reason to offer him aid."

Draco gnashed his teeth. "I say we Obliviate Weasley and be done with it."

"There will be no Obliviate," Snape lightly sneered as he turned an assessing gaze on Ron. "Mr Weasley has managed to keep his own counsel before in matters regarding Harry. I believe we can rely on him to do so again."

That wasn't what Draco wanted to hear, as was obvious from the Slytherin boy's crossed arms and hard silver eyes. When the Potions Master merely gazed impassively back, Draco muttered something under his breath and stormed from the room. Ignoring all that, Snape spoke to Ron. "A word in private before you go, Mr Weasley, if I may."

Ron glanced at Harry, no small amount of alarm in his eyes, but then he stood up, shrugging. "All right. Bye, Harry. I guess I'll see you tonight as usual, eh? You get some rest until then."

With that, Ron was smiling briefly and leaving the room.

"Harry, I believe your friend is correct; the best thing for you would be more sleep," Snape said, spelling out the lights as though to underline the suggestion. "When you have rested, you and I will work out a way for you to practice magic without risking hearth and home, is that clear?"

"Yeah, clear as Lubummum," Harry murmured, slumping back down into the pillows and closing his eyes.

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Sleep, though, was hopeless. Harry tried for about an hour before concluding that he was just too keyed up to relax. Or maybe it was the light in the room. Snape had spelled off the glow that usually emanated from the stone walls, but he hadn't done anything about the enchanted picture frame. By the time Harry gave up, it was showing a view of the Dark Forest.

The sight only reminded him of why he couldn't sleep. Was Parseltongue the entire answer to his magical problems? A dark power to unlock dark powers? He didn't like that, he really didn't. But what else could explain the night before? He remembered trying to say Lumos to Sals and realizing that the word had emerged without voice, remembered thinking that Latin must not translate. But then, why should English rendered into snake-language end up being magical? Regular English wasn't . . . well, not usually, he amended, thinking of the Marauder's Map and the Point Me spell, among other things.

Unable to bear it for a moment longer, Harry hopped out of bed and reached for his wand. When he picked it up, he felt that same surge of warmth and joy flooding him, the one he'd felt in Ollivander's. That hadn't meant anything before, though. Could he incant with it again? Something in him had to know, and had to know right then.
Of course he wasn’t daft enough to try another *Lumos*, but what harm could there be in, say . . . *Wingardium Leviosa*? He just wouldn’t try to levitate anything that might break, and then that would be all right.

Shaking a bit, Harry slipped his pillow out of its decorative sham, then set it on the floor and backed away. Wand at the ready, he tried the charm in English first . . . just in case. When nothing came of *that*, he realised he’d have to try it in Parseltongue. Sals was nowhere around, though, and he was hardly going to go looking for her, since that would only have his father wondering what he was up to. Remembering how impossible he’d found it to speak Parseltongue without a snake image to look at—or at least an invisible snake to *hold*—Harry hurriedly sketched one out on a scrap of parchment. Then, looking straight at it, he said *Wingardium Leviosa* and heard nothing emerge. Good enough; it meant he was definitely speaking snake language.

So it was definite: he could not transform Latin into Parseltongue; he could only transform English.

Now, for the charm . . . Harry set the snake drawing on top of the pillow, then backed up, pointing his wand. "Lift up!" he said, hearing it emerge as English though it must surely be Parseltongue, focussed as he was on the drawing of the snake. He might as well have said nothing, though; the pillow didn’t move an inch. "Levitate!" he tried, though he heard *that* come out using the same two words, *Lift up*. Hm . . . this was a little harder than he’d thought, Harry realised, sitting down on the floor to ponder the problem. "Raise," he said next, chin on hand, wand held rather carelessly by then.

Maybe, he had to think of a way to get *Wingardium* as well as *Leviosa* into the incantation. And what the heck did *Wingardium* mean, anyway? He couldn’t translate Latin to English to Parseltongue if he didn’t know what the Latin stood for in the first place, could he? Not that *Wingardium* sounded particularly Latin to him, anyway . . . "Guard your wings and lift up!" he hazarded a guess, only to see the pillow vibrate softly as though trying to obey. Interesting. He tried a few more combinations of words, his gaze firmly fixed to the snake drawing, and finally settled on saying what the charm had always seemed to mean to him. "Take wing and fly!" he commanded, his voice still pitched low, moving his wand just as he’d learned all those years ago.

The pillow flew up off the floor with such speed that Harry could hardly track it, but there was no mistaking what happened next. A muffled thump as it smacked into the ceiling, the fabric rending in a hundred directions at once from the impact. Then feathers and scraps of wool were raining down all around him, coating every surface in the room.

"Oh shite," Harry swore, shaking his head. He suddenly had an image of his father coming in and just *glaring*. Without even thinking, he waved his wand around to perform a *Reparo* spell, only realizing afterwards that right, regular incantations were no use. Dropping to hands and knees, he sifted through mounds of white, fluffy feathers until the snake drawing was visible again. "I repair you," he told the mess all around. Hmm, nothing. Well, with the other charm it had been incanting what the spell meant to *him* that had worked, not some literal version of the Latin words. So . . . "Like new!" he hissed.

Well, he got what he had asked for, he supposed. *Exactly* what he had asked for, magnified as all his spells seemed to be, now. Instead of a neatly repaired pillow, what he got was one bleating sheep and no less than five honking geese! One of the birds lumbered awkwardly onto his bed and looked to be settling in; the sheep began to graze on Draco’s bed hangings.

"Shite, shite, shite!" Harry groaned. It was on the tip of his tongue to demand *Silencio* from them, but for all he knew, an amplified silencing charm might remove their vocal cords permanently or something! Frustrated, he hung his head in his hands as he sat there on the floor, his wand flung to one side.
"What is going on in here?" Draco exclaimed as he flung the door wide. "Harry, what did you do?"

Snape wasn't far behind him. He was wiping his hands as he entered, just as though he'd been interrupted in the middle of some complicated brewing, something he often did on Saturdays. Great. His father hated to be yanked away from those potions of his . . . Sure enough, the words that came snapping out Snape's mouth were, "Potter? Explain!"

"Uh . . . I just wanted to see if things were better today, magic-wise," he sheepishly admitted, ducking his head.

"What spell did you incant?" Draco sneeringly inquired, using his wand to prod the sheep away from his bedding. "Aparecium livestock?"

"It was a Reparo spell on my pillow, if you must know!" Harry retorted. By then he was having a difficult time not laughing, though he knew he'd better not. Snape did not look amused. Thinking better than to keep sitting on the floor, Harry pushed to his feet.

Snape drew his wand and cast Immobilus before the animals did any more damage to the room. Then he turned a rather grim expression on Harry. "Did I or did I not," he thundered, "make it clear that we would work on your magic later, Harry?"

"Not," Harry quickly answered, to which Snape ground out, "I beg your pardon!"

"You didn't make it clear," the boy insisted. "I mean, not that you wanted me to wait."

"I should think that would be clear without words," Snape sneered. "You do recall torching half my quarters, I trust? If not, perhaps you should glance about the shambles in the parlour."

"I thought I was your first priority, not your furniture," Harry muttered as he followed Snape out of the room. It was even worse than he remembered. Blackened gouges criss-crossed the walls. The sofa was half-immolated. And there was a gaping hole straight through the wall of Snape's office. The bookcase wall. Harry almost swore again. He'd browsed those shelves plenty of times as Snape had sat marking papers at his desk, and he knew that a lot of the volumes . . . hell, most of them, probably, were rare and valuable Potions books.

Yet another hole in the far wall of the office showed a view of a dark hallway, or maybe an unused storage room; hard to tell.

"I'm sorry," Harry groaned, suddenly feeling really really bad. So much so that his stomach was twisting, actually. "Um, if you let me borrow my vault key I'll write away to Gringotts' for some money so you can start replacing whatever was lost, and I guess I should pay for the repairs as well--"

"I do not want your money!" Snape erupted, taking him by the shoulders. Harry was sort of expecting to be shaken, but all Snape did was manoeuvre him over to a somewhat charred chair and shove him down into it.

"Well, you're upset about all the stuff I wrecked--"

"I am upset that the knowledge of what your Lumos did has had apparently no impact on your thought processes! Practicing magic alone," Snape scoffed. "What if the spell had injured you again?"

Harry actually hadn't thought of that. He'd just been so excited to feel like a wizard again . . . Blushing, he admitted, "Um, well . . . Gryffindor recklessness, you know. Sorry, sir. Um, I mean
Snape still looked furious as he drawled, "Merlin preserve me. Two sons with impulse-control issues."

"Can you just change the . . . uh, livestock, back into my pillow?"

His father gave him a rather sour look, but then stomped back to the bedroom. Harry and Draco followed, Harry blushing again to see the bizarre results of his spell. His face flamed even hotter when he realised that Snape's *Finite* would almost certainly coat the room in feathers and wool scraps. Then, of course, he'd have to explain how he'd destroyed his pillow in the first place.

Or not . . . because as it turned out, Snape's rather emphatic *Finite* did nothing except cancel out the *Immobilus* spell. As the animals began milling about again, Snape cast another *Finite* at them. That time, nothing whatsoever happened.

"What does that mean?" Draco put in, his brow furrowed.

Snape took a moment to consider the matter. "The spell that created them was incanted in Parseltongue," he decided. "Apparently the counterspell must match that."

Draco whistled through his teeth. "Brilliant," he said, flashing Harry a smile. "Nobody else can undo your spells, then."

Harry wasn't nearly as happy. He was sick and tired of being such a freak. "Voldemort could; he speaks Parseltongue," he pointed out, though it hardly made him feel better. He didn't want to be like that madman, not in any respect.

"The Dark Lord can speak it," Draco agreed, nodding, "but I'd bet my vault that he can't incant in it. You had to have your dark powers split wide open by all that trauma, remember? The Dark Lord's still got all his surface magic getting in the way."

"Oh, for pity's sake," Harry erupted. "Why can't you call him Voldemort like Severus and I do?"

Draco was so startled that he took a step back. "I've never given it any thought." He cleared his throat. "Remember, I heard about him all the time when I was growing up and it was always the Dark Lord . . ."

Harry knew how deeply a childhood could affect you. Even after six years in the wizarding world, he still sometimes thought of himself as a freak, he realised. Which was wrong and stupid; he knew that. But the thought still surged up inside him, like it had just the moment before. Really, it was remarkable that Draco had come as far as he had. Draco, who'd been reared to believe in all that pureblood rubbish . . . but who now could admit that a Muggleborn witch was both cute and smart. Well, he hadn't actually said that last bit, but calling Hermione a walking library came close, didn't it?

"Give it some thought," Harry advised him, deciding he wouldn't push the matter. Then, to Snape, "So should I try my own *Finite*?"

"Until we better understand the dynamics of your dark powers, I would advise caution. Is that explicit enough for you? If not, allow me to be clear. You are not to cast any spells without adult supervision. There is simply no telling what might happen."

Draco scoffed at that. "Well, I think we can probably guess. It looks to me as though his dark powers just magnify the intended effects of the spell. So *Lumos* produced light so bright it burned holes in the walls; *Reparo* restored items to their original condition--literally."
"Wingardium Leviosa made the pillow hit the ceiling . . . hard," Harry reluctantly admitted.

Snape gave him an exasperated glance, no doubt at learning that *Reparo* wasn't the only spell he'd tried while alone.

"Hmm." Draco was still lost in thought. "What would *Alohomora* do, blow a door off its hinges? Or *Enervate* . . . hmm, would that make a person never able to sleep again, or something? Oh . . . I wonder what your Unforgivables would be like. The Killing Curse delivered with raw dark powers--"

"That's enough, Draco," Snape interrupted.

But it wasn't. "I bet *Rictusempra* would be an Unforgivable for you," he kept going. "You'd cause such bad tickles that they'd lead to a seizure or a heart attack! And *Serpensortia* . . . sweet Merlin, you'd probably cast a *Basilisk.*" He shuddered.

"That will be quite enough," Snape said, raising his voice that time.

Harry wasn't finding any of this very amusing. "If I can't practice without adult supervision," he asked in desperation, "how am I going to get these powers under control?"

"You are going to have plenty of practice time. What do you think I've been doing while you were supposed to be sleeping, but endeavouring to formulate a plan to provide you with just that!" Snape's glare became intense. "And I am quite serious that you are to control your reckless impulse to try things on your own, Harry. Do *not* make the mistake of thinking that just because you are my son I will hesitate to discipline you!"

"I don't," Harry assured him, thinking *ten thousand lines* was probably nothing. *Hell, he'll take ten thousand points . . . oh wait, no, he'd wouldn't take thousands off Slytherin . . . would he?"

"Good, because I should hate to confiscate your wand," Snape remarked.

"My wand!"

"If you can't be trusted with it, *yes!*"

Harry frowned. "That's mean, threatening to take away my wand just when I've got it working again."

Draco suddenly laughed. "Oh, this is rich. Are you going to take his *hands* away as well, Severus?"

The question confused Harry, but Snape seemed to follow it well enough. "Perhaps I should *Obliviate* you," he sneered. "As you evidently can't keep your own counsel about anything!"

"Keep secrets from my brother, you mean," Draco shot back. "And that'd just be wrong, wouldn't it? Or did I misunderstand when you were telling Weasley that family had to come first?"

"Stop calling him Weasley!" Harry erupted. "Why have you started that up again?"

Draco shrugged.

"And what's this about my hands?"

Draco smiled, the expression sly. "You'd have realised it yourself if you'd grown up in a magical family, I bet. But as things stand . . . Severus, would you like to do the honours?"
"I'd rather he work with his wand a while longer," Snape growled.

"Fine, I'll tell him," Draco decided. "Don't you know what a wand does, Harry? Why wizards generally need one? It's an amplifier. Filtering our powers through surface magic mutes them, and a wand helps bring them back up to a level that can do some good. Now, certain very strong wizards have so much magic that even after it's been muted, it can still work spells without aid. Hence, wandless magic. You're another case entirely. You're bringing dark powers to the surface and not muting them at all, and then you're still channeling them into your wand? You don't need a magic-amplifier, Harry."

Harry stared at him doubtfully. "You're saying I could do normal spells if I tried them wandless?"

"Well you did pour wild magic through your hands that once. And I think your physical self must have liked it. Ever since, your hands have been aching with magic trying to get out."

"What do you think?" Harry asked his father. "Should I try?"

"Not unsupervised," Snape said, shaking his head.

Harry gestured at the livestock. "Well, you're here now, so can I?"

"Not here, certainly. We'll go to Devon where we can work out-of-doors. Draco makes things sound so simple, but wandless magic is generally more unpredictable than the wanded variety."

Harry immobilized the animals again, then shrank them and popped them into a trouser pocket. "Shall we?"

"Now?" Harry looked down at his rumpled clothes.

"Well, you were eager as I recall," Snape reminded him. "Besides, it is better to be absent when the house-elves arrive to effect repairs."

"I'd rather have a shower, actually; I feel sort of sticky. And I bet Draco would appreciate a change of clothes, too--"

Draco, though, was shaking his head. "Such Mugglish thinking." Without further comment, he cast a cleaning charm across all three of them. Harry's clothes felt crisp and new after that. He suddenly wondered what result he'd get if he tried to cast that spell. Would his dark powers scrub the fabric so hard that clothing disintegrated? Of course cleaning charms worked on skin, too. That could get awfully messy. Harry frowned, realizing it had been terribly foolish to try magic without his father there to help him get it under control.

"Don your warmest robes for the journey," Snape was saying. "You as well, Draco."

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

They travelled as before, flooing to Grimmauld Place and from there Apparating to the meadow outside the cottage.

"Can we come here for the summer?" Harry asked, glancing at the ramshackle little building.

"Part of it, I should think," Snape agreed, but laid a hand on Harry's forearm when the boy made as though to go in. "I do believe we ought to practice out-of-doors, don't you?"

Harry shivered, his robes not doing much to ward off the bitter cold. "Cast a temperature charm then, would you?"
"I doubt you'll be cold for long." Snape suddenly jerked his head to the left. "Draco, where do you think you are going?"

The blond boy froze in mid-step. "Thought I'd take a seat on that rock, as I'm really just here for the fresh air."

"You're such a prat," Harry complained before Snape could reply. "You're here to help me."

Draco scoffed. "Oh yes, my vast store of experience in wandless magic will prove invaluable, not to mention that my own Lumos spells melt walls every day of the week."

"Harry needs someone to aim hexes at," Snape dryly inserted, raising an eyebrow when Draco paled. "For Merlin's sake. You can't believe you're no more use to him than that. You're here to pay attention. I want someone besides myself thoroughly cognizant of how Harry can best channel his dark powers."

Strangely, Draco paled yet more. "I appreciate the trust," he offered, walking closer, "but how wise is that, really? If the Dark Lord does get his hands on me, it's probably best I know as little as possible."

From close up, Harry could see that the Slytherin boy was sweating despite the biting cold.

Grass crackled underfoot as Snape leaned down to speak to Draco. "I stand by what I told Harry when he first came to live with us. You have a great intuitive grasp of magic. I want you to understand his powers and his limits so that you can help him should he ever need it."

Draco still looked doubtful, but he shrugged in agreement, then backed away slightly to observe.

Snape magically cleared a large area of grass and debris, then instructed Harry to recreate his Lumos.

That, Harry thought, was when it first struck home just how limited his dark powers were. "Uh . . . how about you summon a snake from the woods, first? Because I can't speak Parseltongue without one." He frowned. "You know, I thought I had done it once down in the cellar of Sirius' house . . . um, my house, but now I think I must not have managed it until I actually scooped Sals up." That, after all, had been when Lucius Malfoy had burst in. "Yeah, I have to see a snake, or at the very least feel myself holding one--"

"Normal snakes aren't out and about on a fine winter's day," Snape reminded him, just a touch of sneer in the answer.

"Could we dash back and get Sals, then? Or if you've got a quill, I could sketch something on my hand--"

"Oh for pity's sake!" Draco shouted. "Look at my cloak."

Sure enough, the Slytherin crest did the trick. When Harry commanded his powers using Parseltongue, lightning shot from his wand, lightning that kept pouring forth instead of dissipating as a bolt normally would. It blackened and scarred the bare earth, but this time, prepared for the force of the blast, Harry had planted his feet in time to avoid being thrown backwards.

"Now Nox," Snape instructed.

Harry had heard in class that Nox meant darkness, or maybe night; he couldn't remember. Neither one of those words worked, however. Then again, his Parseltongue spells had worked before only when he'd used words to indicate how he'd always thought of the spell. "No more light," he tried,
smiling when the lightning bolt streaming from his wand abruptly disappeared.

His father had been right; he wasn't cold any longer. The magic streaming through him had solved that problem, so much so that he shrugged off his robes and tossed them aside. No doubt his *Lumos* didn't warm the others the same way, especially in the out of doors, but they could always cast charms if they needed them.

Snape spelled the ground to extinguish the smouldering embers left from the experiment, then glanced approvingly at Harry. "So. You merely need to brush up your Latin translations, apparently-"

"Not exactly," Harry interrupted, then explained that what he had said hadn't precisely been *Nox*.

The Potions Master frowned. "You'll need to produce a personal spell lexicon," he decided. "One by one you'll need to go through the spells and charms and curses you've learned, determining how to produce each with your new powers. This will take some time."

Harry frowned. "Um . . . I was sort of hoping I could start going to classes again on . . . um, Monday?"

"Give yourself a few weeks to become adept at the use of your dark powers," Snape advised.

"A few weeks!"

"Yes." Snape speared him with a look. "The part of me that is your father would prefer you not resume classes at all, Harry. It is dangerous, more so than you likely realise. What do you think Albus and I do at all those teas, but analyze the continuing threat from Slytherin?" He shrugged, then. "However, you need to become a fully trained wizard, and it won't happen in isolation from your peers. You will take up residence in the Tower when you begin classes again."

Harry grinned. "Thanks, Dad. But don't worry. I'll visit plenty."

"You'd better," Draco sourly put in. "And you'd better remember what I told you."

"Which was?" Snape prompted.

"Harry knows."

The Potions Master glanced over them both, but let the matter drop. "Now that you know how to stop and start the spell, we'll see if your power levels are more acceptable without a wand," he advised Harry.

By then it was nearly dark. "Um, shouldn't we be getting back?" Harry objected. "Ron'll be wondering where we've got to."

Snape looked down his long nose at him. "I must say," he fairly smirked. "Mr Weasley is not the only Gryffindor who doesn't 'do subtle.' Why do you think I spoke with him in private this morning?"

Harry actually hadn't thought about that at all. He raised his shoulders to say so.

"I have released him from any further detention."

That made sense, Harry realised. Ron *had* apologized, after all, and what was more, he'd admitted that Snape was doing all right as Harry's father. Really, there was no reason left to make him come
down. Still . . . "Great. Now I won't see him for weeks," he grumbled, noticing rather glumly that Draco looked pleased by that notion.

"Wandless," Snape drew his attention back to the lesson.

"I don't want to," Harry muttered. "It's . . . too weird. Besides, it reminds me of the robe-and-mask incident." Even as he said it, though, a deep twitching in his palm and fingers told him that his body wanted to perform wandless magic even if he didn't.

"It is not weird," Snape scoffed. "The average wizard would give his wand, literally, to possess such an ability."

"Yeah, well the average wizard might also think it'd be great to have the Killing Curse bounce off his head, but I hate this scar!" Harry shouted. "All I ever wanted was to be normal, and I made a lousy Muggle because I wasn't, but almost the moment I found out I was a wizard I found out I wasn't a normal in this world, either! My name marks me as much as this scar, and it's just getting worse and worse! Parselmouth, Azkaban escapees supposedly hunting me out, Tri-Wizard Fiasco, getting my own godfather killed, and now this!"

Draco had been watching silently for some while, but at that, he stomped across the field to Harry and abruptly pulled him into a hard, harsh embrace. "You stop being a prat," he hissed in his ear. "You made a lousy Muggle because you weren't one, you bloody great idiot, and if you want to talk about a name marking you, at least yours marks you for greatness! You don't know what it is to be ashamed of your father, do you? Ashamed of your name!"

Harry had struggled at first, but talk of fathers had him going still. He did know what it was to be ashamed of one, though he couldn't explain much about that unless he betrayed Snape's worst memory. And that just wasn't in the cards. Gripping Draco back, Harry quietly talked in his ear: "Severus is your father. Now who's the bloody great idiot?"

"You are, whinging on about being normal! If you were normal, you'd be dead several times over by now, and the rest of us would end up slaves to the Dark Lord, so forgive me if I don't care to attend your pity-party!"

"If you're quite through insulting one another," Snape coolly inserted, reminding Harry that the man could hear a cauldron bubble at a hundred paces, "perhaps Harry can attempt a wandless charm before we all freeze to death?"

"Fine," Harry muttered, shaking Draco off and stepping a safe distance away. Habit had him brandishing his wand even so, until an Expelliarmus from Snape snatched it from his hand. Resisting an urge to say something about that, he stretched his arm out before him, fingers splayed, and reluctantly asked, "How is this supposed to work, exactly?"

"Most wizards have to perform near-perfect Occlumency just to concentrate enough to make the magic flow," Snape explained, raising his voice over the breeze. "I somehow doubt you are going to experience the same difficulty. Just look at Draco's crest, and say your charm."

Glancing to the side to get the snake into view, Harry miserably whispered at his fingers to light up.

And they did. Well, three of them. His thumb and pinky finger appeared normal, but the others were glowing ever so slightly, the light barely perceptible, but definitely there. Still, it wasn't anything like the brilliant Lumos that Harry had seen Snape's wand produce.

"Great," he scathed, striding over to show his father and brother. "With a wand I blast holes in walls,
and without one I'll end up tripping. This is about the most pathetic *Lumos* I've ever seen!"

"Ha. You haven't seen Longbottom's, then."

"Quiet, Draco." Snape took Harry's wrist in his long fingers, and turned the boy's hand this way and that to examine the light. "Go back where you were, extinguish it, and incant with more feeling."

Harry tried, but since he didn't really *want* wandless magic, the results were no more impressive than before.

Draco had seen enough. "If I have to come back over there to shake some sense into you," he threatened, "I'll smack you while I'm at it! For Merlin's sake, Harry! How dare you act like wandless magic is noxious and you're so far above it!"

"Voldemort can do it!" Harry shot back.

"So can Severus! *And* your precious Dumbledore!"

Harry actually did know that, though in his panic it hadn't been his foremost thought. Now, the idea that he was insulting his father was rather distressing. He hadn't meant to imply that wandless magic was evil . . . he just wished he could be like his friends, instead of constantly different. But there was no avoiding it, was there? Draco was right. He *was* being a prat.

"Light up," Harry said again, this time with more determination.

Rays of light flowed from the same three fingers, this time illuminating the meadow all around. He could see fifty feet by this light, at least, but what was more interesting was that it streamed outward from his fingers in all directions. Rather disorienting, actually, especially when he moved his hand around.

Drawing his wand, Snape incanted *Lumos* himself and walked to Harry's side. "Can you match it to this?"

Concentrating, Harry gazed at his fingers and willed them dimmer and dimmer until he had a glow about the same strength as his father's.

"Good," Snape approved. "It's to your advantage if such powers are kept under wraps as much as possible."

"That's going to be a little bit difficult with light streaming out my fingers," Harry pointed out.

"*Lumos* by its nature is problematic, I do agree. You should probably avoid it. Most spells do not produce a sustained visual effect, however. If you are holding your wand in a certain manner when you incant, no one will assume you are doing wandless magic."

Harry stared at him. "You want me to perform wandless spells with a wand in hand."

"I hesitate to even suggest it," Snape admitted, "as you are so diffident about your special talents. However, the misdirection may well save your life. The less an enemy knows of your weapons, the better."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "So . . . *Incendio* next?"

"Dinner next, I should think. We will work on shielding and the spell lexicon tomorrow. You will *not* attempt any spells, wandless or otherwise, without me present, is that clear?"
"Yes, sir."

He must have sounded more irritated than he was, for Snape at once added, "Harry. I will lift that restriction as soon as I feel confident that you are past the mishap stage."

"It's all right," Harry sighed. "I'm just tired, I think. Um, maybe I should get my pillow back while we're still in the out-of-doors? Just in case it goes wrong again? Um, I messed it up with a wand so I figure I'd better fix it the same way . . ."

Fetching the animals from his pocket, Snape quickly enlarged them and ended his immobility spell, then watched as Harry extended his wand. One quick glance at Draco's crest, and the boy was hissing in Parseltongue, "End the enchantment!"

Nothing. Harry tried a few variations on that theme, but didn't hit the right words until it dawned on him that whenever he'd used *Finite* in the past, he was usually thinking in more specific terms. Sort of like with *Lumos/Nox*. That spell was only cancelled by using a special incantation just for it. So . . . what would he think of to cancel a *Reparo*? "Go back the way you were!" he commanded, and saw the animals vanish in a *poof* of feathers and fabric scraps. Then, lowering his wand so that he would be sure to use just his fingers, he called out, "Like new!"

A pillow popped into existence and fell to the damp ground.

Snape seemed pleased enough with his progress, though Harry felt he had to admit, "I can't do a standard *Finite*. Apparently I have to counterspell with words that more closely match exactly what I want to see happen."

"So include that in your lexicon. Come Harry, home. You *do* look tired."

He was, but his mood picked up as soon as they flooed back home. There on the hearth was a folded piece of parchment, the name *Harry* scrawled across it writing he'd recognise anywhere.

Snatching it up, Harry read,

> **Dear Harry,**

> *I came by to see how you were doing, but after about twenty minutes standing in the corridor--I'm sure I know which one, by now--I figured nobody must be home. Dumbledore saw me sneaking down to the kitchens for a bite, though, and when I explained he said I could use his Floo to let you know I tried.*

> *I guess Snape told you my detention's over, huh? Ha, about damned time. Snape tried to tell me that he only assigned so many lines 'cause he was trying to make sure you and I got back on good terms. I don't really believe that but I think he does, which is kind of interesting. Honestly, Harry, how do you stand so much Slytherinness?*

> *Anyway, you know how I apologized to Snape? I think I'd better tell you I'm sorry, too. I should have listened when you tried to tell me that you and he were getting along. I just couldn't imagine it, and I was pretty sure it was some sick game to him. Like, he'd kick you out the minute you really needed him, or something. But not even to trick you, I think, would he humiliate himself by singing to you like that. (Humming, my arse.) Well, Dumbledore's sort of tapping his foot so I guess I'd better finish this. Let's see . . . tell Snape that nobody heard it from me about what happened last night. Not even Hermione, and boy did she push me for details. I had to say that you'd hit your head before I even got there (that way she couldn't ask me how, see) and you were just*
concussed enough that I wanted to wait until you woke up. So where'd you go tonight, anyway? I hope you were well enough to celebrate you-know-what. You'll have to tell me what Slytherins do when they're happy.

Friends,

Ron

Snape must have recognised the writing too, for he asked in a cautious tone, "Everything is all right, I trust?"

"Yeah," Harry admitted, grinning like an idiot. "Everything's great. Ron says to tell you that he kept quiet like you wanted."

Draco made a low, growling noise.

Harry shook his head at him. "Go back to calling him Ron, all right? Why did you switch back to Weasley?"

"Well, at first I thought he'd cheesed you off and made your wild magic fly . . . and after that . . ." Draco sighed. "I could tell, all right? Just looking at him, I could tell. He was worried. The two of you were going to make it up!"

"Yeah, well that's what friends do," Harry announced. "And we were friends all along, however it might have looked there for a while."

Draco turned away slightly.

"Brothers forgive each other too," Harry added.

That had the Slytherin boy turning back to fume, "Are you implying I've done something that needs to be forgiven?"


"Something recently, Potter?"

"Oh, recently." Harry smiled. "I think the wand's in the other hand when it comes to recently. Actually, what I meant was that you'd been good to forgive me for being so rude and ungrateful to you at first. So, see? I can overlook Ron's bad attitude the same way you overlooked mine."

"That's different," Draco admitted, narrowing his eyes. "I need you to keep me out of Azkaban where my name's likely to land me. You don't need that red-headed twerp for anything."

"Yes, I do. I need him to keep me from getting too Slytherin from all the time I spend with you."

"Won't be a problem soon, will it? You're going back to all your friends," Draco sneered. "You'll visit Severus in his classroom office and never make it all the way down here."

"Oh, that's just bloody ridiculous," Harry laughed. "Are you saying that to make me contradict you? Listen, Draco, you and I are going to have the whole summer together. And it's going to be brilliant. Just think, I can fly again! So we can play one on one Quidditch!"

"Yeah, well that's summer," Draco huffed. "I still have the rest of the winter term to get through, and all of spring term. I'll be stuck here all alone again, and you'll go back with all your smarmy little
friends and forget you even have a brother, I just bet you will!"

"Want to bet your vault?"

Draco swallowed. "Excuse me?"

"You did mention it earlier, betting your vault." And then, "I'm joking, Draco. I'm not going to forget you just because I go back to Gryffindor! I'll visit here, I promise. Hmm. Wonder if I can get the headmaster to let me use his Floo."

"It's not that long a journey by foot," Snape put in, his dark eyes steady on Harry. Challenging him to keep his word about visiting? Harry wasn't sure.

"I was thinking more of stray Slytherins out for blood, actually," he explained.

"You can't avoid them," Draco pointed out. "Remember? You're a Slytherin. Common Room. Slytherin table. Seeker--"

"Not Seeker."

"Well, the others, then. You did promise."

"I did not! I said I'd think about it, is all."

Snape cleared his throat. "Harry is in fact going nowhere for a good while yet. Now, shall we enjoy our dinner?" He waved at the table and food appeared; Harry supposed Snape must have ordered while he and Draco had been arguing. Hmm, looked like roast duck in orange sauce with a rather fabulous Pavlova for dessert. And a bottle of champagne. Wow, he'd have to tell Ron that this was how Slytherins celebrated.

The food was really good, but not because it was so gourmet. By then, Harry had eaten plenty of fancy dishes, though he was hardly jaded. But this food was special because for the first time in a long time, he felt hungry, eager, and enthusiastic. Things were looking up. His magic was back, and it looked as though with some work he'd be able to control it fine. Granted, he didn't love the idea of doing spells without a wand, but at least that wouldn't have to be so very obvious. Yeah, incanting in Parseltongue was going to upset the other students enough, without doing it wandlessly as well. It would all work out.

Even Slytherin, he thought, some part of him wanting to take charge of that situation, too. It was like with his magic. Things had only got better when he'd decided to do something about his problem. So . . . it was time to find out just what he was up against. Good thing he had some experts to consult. Ron and Hermione wouldn't be any help with this particular problem, would they?

He finished up his portion of duck, then wiped his mouth with a napkin before venturing, "I guess you'd better tell me all you can about my new house mates, then. You know, which ones can I win over and what's the pecking order and which ones are definitely going to try to kill me no matter what?" He remembered something then. "Hmm. Let's start with the half-bloods and Muggleborns. Who are they? And how are you coming along with your letters to them, Draco?"

The rest of the evening had Harry immersed in the intrigues that had been occupying Draco all along.
Dreaming of Draco

Harry groaned a little as he reached for his juice a few afternoons later. As much as he was enjoying being a practicing wizard once more, he definitely wasn't enjoying the injuries, bruises, and sore muscles that came with it. It wouldn't be so bad if his powers would behave the way they used to, but even his wandless magic was a bit unpredictable, still.

It didn't help that he kept accidentally channeling power through his wand and getting thrown back from the force of the spells.

It also didn't help that his father was a vicious bastard when it came to training him. Of course they weren't actually duelling as of yet; that could wait until Harry had a firmer grip on spell intensity, as Snape put it. No, what they were doing was practicing shielding, which basically meant that Harry had to block curse after curse from not just Snape but Draco as well, the two of them trying their best to catch him off guard. _Draco_ had even started flying about above him, throwing random curses out while Snape was trying to explain something. Harry called that unfair; his father said it was sound practice and that if Harry was going to attend classes, he'd best be prepared to defend himself at an instant's notice.

Harry had ended up on his arse more times than he cared to think about. He'd even broken his arm--twice--when particularly nasty curses had come out of nowhere to flip him up in the air at high speeds. Of course Snape had taken care of that at once. One quick potion and he was back on his feet, ready to shield again. Rather handy, Harry thought, having a Potions Master for a dad.

When they'd started all this training, however, Snape had seen fit to mention that _imbibing too many healing potions_ was far from healthy. Harry had taken that as a strong hint not to go to Snape with every ache and pain. That suited Harry, though. It used to be his motto that he wouldn't ask for things he wouldn't get. There was a lot of comfort in knowing that since he had a real dad now, he _could_ ask for whatever he needed. He was positive that Snape would heal him anytime he asked, but there was also such a thing as pride. Growing up with Dudley had taught him well enough how to tough out minor cuts and scrapes and bruises. Harry had a new motto now. He wouldn't ask for help unless he really, truly needed some.

Of course, he might start needing some more often now that Snape had decided it was time for Harry to learn some _physical_ fighting techniques as well. Just in case his magic failed him, Snape had explained, and when Harry had scoffed that _that_ wasn't too likely, was it, the man had flung him to his back on the grass and straddled him, pinning his hands over his head as he hissed into his face that anything was possible and no son of _his_ was going to end up helpless in a fight, not if _he_ could help it.

That was when his bruises began to get both more frequent and more colourful. But still, Harry didn't often complain. He concentrated instead on keeping an eye out for Draco's wand--or Snape's--while he and his father warily circled each other. It was all worth it, though. Not only was his magical control improving all the time--Snape's _learn by experience_ theory actually working for once--but he was getting better at Muggle-style fighting as well. Of course, he could hardly hope to best his father yet--the man was taller, stronger, and heavier than he was, not to mention a surprisingly good brawler, but he was getting there.

He could probably take Draco on, he mused with a little smile, though it faded when he lifted his juice to his mouth and felt the wrist he'd wrenched the day before complain. Bitterly.

A noise chimed in his head, warning him to look at the door parchment. Really, now that he could
Hear the magic-doorbell, as he'd taken to calling it, he thought the system quite ingenious.

*Hermione Granger, Ginny Weasley* the parchment read. Setting his juice down on the low table in the living room, he jumped up to open the door. then he remembered that he'd better not. By then, Snape had cleared Harry to do certain simple spells without supervision, but he certainly wasn't allowed to do them in front of people who had yet to find out that his magic was back.

"Draco," he called, and the Slytherin boy appeared, smirking slightly.

"So you do still need me for something."

"Don't be a git."

Yawning as though bored, Draco cast a careless *Abrire* then wandered back into the Potions Lab.

"Come in, come in," Harry invited the two girls as the door swung open on its own. "Wow, it's pretty early in the day for a visit."

Ginny took up her usual place on the couch as Hermione explained, "Sprout had to end class early when one of those big Venus flytraps took a chunk out of Ron's hand."

"Ouch." Harry made a face. "He's all right?"

Hermione nodded. "Pomfrey's regrowing his fingers as we speak."

"Some sixth years got me out of Divination to see him," Ginny chimed in, "but Madam Pomfrey told us both to get out and let him rest. Anyway, he wanted us to tell you he'll be stuck up there for the rest of today, but that he'll come down tomorrow right after Quidditch practice."

Harry smiled at that, though he couldn't help wincing a bit as he shifted in his seat. Hermione's gaze was on him in a flash. "Your back's still sore? Maybe you should have Madam Pomfrey come down here and take a look at it."

"It's okay," Harry said, wishing she'd give it up. Ever since he'd started nightly magic practice with Snape, Hermione's visits had become one long question about his various aches and pains.

"It is not okay," she insisted now.

"Listen, Hermione--"

"Harry's fine," Draco interrupted in a cold tone as he strode out of the Potions Lab and slammed a flat-bottomed vial down on the table.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Harry weakly echoed. He wished he had something better to say, like *Look, I've got my magic back but it needs a little work and Severus is a hard taskmaster, but he's only doing what's best for me...* He really didn't want to have another fight with his father, though. For now, Ron was the only student allowed to know that Harry was a real wizard again.

Harry figured Draco was trying to help with that goal when he directed the conversation away from Harry's injuries. "What's this about fingers getting bitten off? I don't even know why we have a Care of Magical Creatures class. No proper Hogwarts-trained wizard would end up choosing to be a gamekeeper, for Merlin's sake. Talk about a low-class occupation--"

"Hagrid's ace as a teacher!" Harry defended his friend. He wasn't actually sure by that point if Draco was completely sincere about the insults or if he just wanted Harry to flare up over them. Either way,
if he and Draco started arguing then Hermione would forget about his sore back, wouldn't she?

"Oh yeah, ace," Draco mocked. "Never mind that he almost got me killed on his first day--"

"You insulted Buckbeak after Hagrid specifically told us not to treat a hippogriff that way!"

"Yeah, well how did your good friend Ronald get injured then today, eh?"

"It happened in Herbology!"

Hermione cleared her throat and proved that she wasn't as easy to distract as Harry had hoped. Like a dog worrying a bone, she went right back to her previous line of thought. "I suppose you think that just because Professor Snape is a potions expert he can heal anything," she sternly told Harry. "But he's not a licensed medi-wizard. It's neither safe nor healthy for him to be so possessive of his son that he won't even let you get proper medical care!"

"It's not a case of not letting me," Harry thought to say. "I don't need any, that's all!"

Hermione's pointed stare sought out the place on his neck where last week, she'd seen a bruise. It hadn't been anything serious; Harry's shielding had wavered at the wrong moment and he'd caught the tail end of a curse, that was all.

"If you've been injured you need to see Madam Pomfrey!" she insisted.

"He hasn't been injured, for Merlin's sake!" Draco broke in. "He just er . . . slept wrong!"

"He slept wrong," Hermione drawled. "For two weeks running? Because that's how long he's not been able to sit up straight without practically groaning!"

Draco huffed a bit. "Um, I retransfigured his bed a couple of weeks ago and haven't been able to get it right, since. You know, too hard, too soft, too long, too short."

"Yeah, like Goldilocks," Harry agreed, knowing Hermione would catch the reference.

If she noticed it, she didn't let on, instead glancing from one boy to the other. "And just why did your bed need retransfiguring in the first place?" she inquired with false sweetness, suddenly barking when Draco opened his mouth, "You just pipe down for once. Let Harry answer."

"Well . . ." Harry thought fast. Draco wasn't going to like this, but it was all he could come up with. "Draco here was the one who transfigured it in the first place, you know. There used to be a double bed in there. Anyway, the spell didn't hold, that's all."

Draco scowled at the slight to his magic, but didn't contradict the story.

As Hermione's gaze raked Draco up and down, Harry couldn't help but think she looked a little bit smug. That wasn't so nice. On the other hand, Draco had spent years rubbing in comments about how her type didn't belong at Hogwarts, so perhaps she was entitled to feel proud of her magic.

Seeking to move the conversation onto smoother ground perhaps, Ginny quietly asked how Harry was getting along in Herbology without access to a greenhouse. Grateful, Harry gave her a wide smile and prattled on about it for a while.

Hermione just listened, rarely taking her eyes of Harry until she was nudging Ginny to murmur that they'd be late for their next class if they didn't get started on the long climb out of the dungeons.

"I thought the house-elves you dedicate your valuable time to had taught you how to Apparate
around the castle," Draco put in, his voice a touch nasty.

"Draco!" Harry turned to him and scowled. "That's low, taking our conversations and twisting them like that! I told you, I can have more than one friend!" And then to Hermione, "Sorry. We were . . . um, just joking around about that one day."

Draco gave a rather aristocratic shrug just as Hermione raised her nose. "You and Draco Malfoy were making fun of your fellow Gryffindors. Well, I like that!"

"It wasn't that way," Harry sighed.

"Come on," Ginny urged, pulling Hermione up to stand. "I don't know about you, but I have Potions next and I'm not about to arrive there late considering--"

She abruptly closed her mouth.

"Considering what?" Harry pressed.

Ginny gave him a pleading look that seemed to say, I'm trying to be a peacemaker here--.

Harry had a sudden, ugly suspicion. "Has Snape been picking on Gryffindor like he used to?"

"What made you think he ever stopped?" Hermione erupted.

Ginny glared at her, and corrected, "He's been picking on everyone lately, Harry. Not just Gryffindor. He's been in a really foul mood. You haven't noticed?"

"Uh . . ." Harry didn't know what to say to that, since it made him sound so completely stupid to admit that no, he hadn't. What sort of son didn't even notice when his father was out of sorts?

"We had an accident in here and a bunch of Severus' books got destroyed," Draco saw fit to share. "Rare books. Probably some of them are irreplaceable, so chalk it up to that."

"He did throw Neville's book across the room," Ginny thoughtfully remarked.

Harry couldn't help but goggle. "He did what?"

"Well, Neville had let his potion boil over onto it. Snape really lit into him about showing a bit more respect for tomes of knowledge, as he put it . . . So I really do have to get going, Harry. I don't fancy a detention."

After the girls had gone, Harry flopped back down onto the couch and stared up at Draco. He hated that he had to ask something like this, but the question just wouldn't go away. "Um . . . you know, sometimes I think you know Severus better than I do . . . so anyway, did you mean what you said? About his books? Is he mad that I destroyed his own . . . er, tomes? I mean, he hasn't said so to me, not once . . ."

"Harry, I had to tell them something," Draco exclaimed. "Think strategy for once, will you? If Severus is out of sorts it's probably because he doesn't particularly enjoy class each day, knowing that after he leaves, he has to take us to Devon so he can hex and attack and pummel you! I'm sure you didn't want me to tell Granger that. She's a bit too curious about your injuries as it is! I think you'd better have Severus start healing anything that shows, all right? Otherwise she might decide you've been duelling, and we do not need her to start asking questions about your magic being back. What if she asks Weasley what he might have seen down here, eh?"
"I'll have Severus heal anything serious," Harry compromised. "But I can't go to him for every last thing. Some of those healing potions are built on an opiate base, you know--"

"Yes, I know," Draco drawled. "I thought you liked to dabble in the Muggle drugs?"

"Not opium," Harry laughed. Then he sobered. "And not since Severus lectured me about it."

"Yeah, the drugs-are-bad-for-you lecture. Second only to the revenge-is-bad-for-you lecture. I've been there. Although with me he tends to veer toward proclaiming that drugs are potion ingredients, not opportunities for recreation."

"Haven't heard that one," Harry admitted.

"You don't want to; it goes on for hours," Draco moaned. "Anyway, just make sure your friend," he sneered the word, "doesn't see any more bruises, all right? Hmm, I wonder if she's so curious because Weasley did say something to her about that Lumos. I knew we should have Obliviated him-""

"Ron's as trustworthy as they come," Harry sighed. "Listen, he had to explain why he was down here all night, so he told her he'd got a concussion but he didn't know how, not exactly. He told her it happened before he ever showed up to visit."

Draco seemed to scowl at Harry's defence of Ron, but brighten at the information itself. "Oh. Well, that's all right, then. She might be smart, but even she can't reason things out without any evidence at all, so your secret's safe." He looked over toward the table where their schoolwork was scattered. "So, Transfiguration next? You're only up to third year spells in that one."

"Yeah, all right," Harry agreed, his mind still on Hermione. And Snape.

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It didn't take a genius, Harry realised later that night, to figure out that Ginny was right; something was bothering his father. They'd gone to Devon as usual, taking advantage of the lengthening twilight that heralded the approach of spring, but Snape had seemed on edge. The man was never very generous with praise, but he usually gave Harry some sort of encouragement. That night though, it was nothing but criticism and mocking disdain.

When Harry thought about it, he realised it had been coming on for a while. Yeah, Snape had been out of sorts for a bit. He probably should have noticed sooner, but it was hard to notice much when you were being hexed from all around. But even when they'd gone back home, Snape had been a little . . . standoffish, hadn't he? Like he had something on his mind. Something big. Evidently it was getting bigger.

That night after they returned home, Snape hardly spoke at all, except to demand that Harry show him his latest Potions essay as soon as they'd finished dessert.

A frown creasing his brow, Snape read the scroll from top to bottom in under a minute. Then he snorted and tossed it back toward the table with a contemptuous flick of his wrist.

Harry swallowed. "It's not that bad, is it?"

Snape glared. "Did you by any chance destroy your own books while you were destroying mine? Because this," he actually slapped the parchment, "certainly shows no sign of having been researched!"
Harry flinched, but tried to be fair. "I didn't check as many things as I should have," he admitted. "I've been busy with the spell lexicon and trying to figure out ways to word charms, things to try when we go to Devon each afternoon. I mean, I'm trying my best to make sure I can do something useful in this war--"

Snape abruptly stood up and stalked from the room.

Horrified, Harry jumped to his feet and called out, "I didn't mean that potions weren't useful, honest! Oh, come on, Dad!"

Snape turned back, his features schooled into hard lines, though what he said was, "Harry. You worry too much. Now attend to your studies." With that, he was closing his office door with such a definite thud that Harry knew better than to go after him.

"Maybe the books bothered him more than he was willing to say," Harry said, his eyes confused as he met Draco's gaze. "But what can I do? He won't let me have my key, so it's not like I can try to replace them."

Draco was looking at him like he thought Harry was brainless, which made Harry abruptly realise there was another solution at hand. "Um, Draco . . ." he ventured, more than a little uncomfortable. "Do you think you could lend me some money?"

The Slytherin boy's only reply was to burst out laughing.

"Well, sorry!" Harry snapped. "I know you think borrowing money is vulgar--"

"That's not it," Draco managed to choke out. "It's . . . oh sweet Merlin, have you always been this . . . dense? You don't need money to order things, I told you that."

*Oh, right. Harry Potter could just say he'd pay later,* Harry realised. He hated the idea of trading on his name, absolutely detested it. But if it would help Severus . . . Sighing, Harry drew out a blank sheet of parchment and began to wonder how he was going to figure out exactly which books had been destroyed. Hmm . . . the house-elves had magicked the walls whole again, and repaired the charred furniture . . . maybe they had cleared away the damaged books? Dobby might be able to find out some of the titles . . .

Draco put a hand on Harry's wrist as the Gryffindor boy reached for the quill. "I didn't mean you should order any books. I don't know what's on his mind, Harry, but it's nothing to do with your *Lumos,* all right? He's glad your magic's back and told me a few books were a small price to pay."

"A few dozen, more like," Harry muttered. "What is it, then?"

Draco shrugged. "It could be anything. Maybe I was more right than I knew, earlier. It could be he really doesn't like what he has to do to you in Devon. Or maybe the Hufflepuffs are melting more cauldrons than usual, or he's finally getting disgusted with the way his own house wants him dead."

"Maybe," Harry murmured, taking up the essay Snape had thrown down. He couldn't seem to get his mind onto it, though, no matter how he tried. He kept wondering instead what was bothering his father.

 Well, that's it," Harry pronounced a few days later. "All the major spells Hogwarts covers up through the end of fifth year. If anybody ever sees this, they'll think I have the worst grasp of Latin in history. Some of the 'translations' aren't close at all. But it's what the spell means to me that counts."
"All the major spells," Snape echoed, giving him a stern look.

"Well, yeah! If you make me figure out every last little charm, I won't get back upstairs until I'm old and grey. I mean, I have tried. Some spells just don't seem to work for me any longer."

"You just haven't hit the right words, that's all," Draco broke in. "Keep experimenting. You'll get there."

Snape charmed the scroll of parchment so that nobody besides the three of them could read it. "The lexicon needs to be completed, yes, but the bulk of that can wait until summer. As your spell control is coming along nicely, I estimate you will be ready to resume normal student life in little more than a fortnight."

How could that sound like no time at all, and also sound like forever?

Draco took the scroll and began to scan it as he commented, "I think you'll be able to defend yourself in the hallways, but this list won't help you too much in class. What are we planning to do about that, Severus? Have Harry learn all his charms in advance so that by the time they're presented he'll know how to incant them?"

Frowning, Snape shook his head. "I've considered the matter and decided that a little misdirection wouldn't come amiss."

A bad feeling washed over Harry. "Misdirection?"

Snape gave him a wry glance. "Yes. You are undoubtedly a Gryffindor, but as I told you long ago, you should take greater pains to develop a little Slytherin cunning. Don't look so appalled at the prospect. We don't want others to know you can perform wandless magic, or that your wanded powers are quite so remarkable. The corollary to that is that the less powerful you seem, the better off you will be when it comes to surprising Voldemort in the final battle. Therefore, you will not learn your lessons in advance. You must resign yourself to appearing a bit . . . inept, in class."

"Rotten deal," Draco sympathized. "But I think Severus is right about this being our best strategy."

Harry shrugged. He was just grateful that his father hadn't smirked and reminded him just how much experience he had at looking inept in Potions class. Because then, Harry would have had to point out that it was Snape's insulting manner that had made him too nervous to perform well . . . and he didn't want to fight with his father about how class with him used to go, he just didn't. Actually, he was a bit nervous again, wondering how things would go now, having his father as a teacher.

"I don't care if it takes me a while to get the hang of new spells," Harry ventured, "but you know how you don't want anyone knowing how my magic works now? Well, I think I can hide the wandlessness, but I don't see how we can avoid the other students finding out I have to say my spells in Parseltongue." He shivered a bit just thinking about it.

His father, he noted, was watching him closely. "I thought you had accepted that part of yourself. In fact, I thought that was what was allowing you to incant in Parseltongue."

Harry remembered that . . . Snape saying in the hospital that accepting his dark powers was likely part of the key to making them do his bidding. "I'm all right with it," he explained. "It's just that second year . . ." he sighed. "Parseltongue is really going to upset the other students."

"Not as much," Draco put in. "We all know you're a Parselmouth, now. And besides, it never did make any difference to your friends, did it?"
"No . . ."

"Well there you have it, then."

"But incanting in Parseltongue is going to seem a hundred times more creepy than just speaking in it," Harry complained.

"That," Snape told him, "will just have to be borne. As for the risk that the key to your dark powers will become known, I see no way around that. The alternative is to keep you hidden away, and that, I do believe, has gone on quite long enough."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, almost expecting Draco to start complaining again about being left behind. All he did though, was pierce Harry with a steady silver gaze, and mouth one word, "Slytherin."

Harry turned away, but some part of him was realizing that he didn't want to leave the dungeons. Wasn't that daft? If anybody would have told him months ago that he'd feel this way, Harry would have laughed himself silly. Now, though, this place was a little bit like home. And he'd never had a home, let alone a father to talk to, or a brother . . .

But as much as he didn't want to leave, he also didn't want to stay. It was true, what he'd said before; he needed his friends in the Tower. But now he knew that he needed his family just as much. Hmm, maybe he was finally finding out what it was like to be normal, to be pulled between home and school instead of regarding Hogwarts as a refuge from everything that was wrong with his life.

"On to other matters," Snape crisply announced. "I've decided that quite a few of the books that formerly were in my office needn't be restricted. I'll be purchasing replacements; you and Draco will be shelving them in here."

Draco crossed his arms. "Do I look like a house-elf?" he haughtily inquired.

"I can always resume keeping them off-limits," Snape told Draco, his voice quite a bit more stern than Harry felt was warranted.

"Shelving it is," the Slytherin boy returned, beaming Snape a smile that was fake all the way through.

Snape actually bared his teeth, which prompted Harry to wonder out loud, "Is everything all right, sir? I . . . " Should he offer to pay again, after all? Or apologise once more? It was hard to believe that either of those would help matters . . . "You seem a little bit out of sorts," he decided to venture. "Is there anything I can do?"

Sighing, the Potions Master ran a hand through his hair. "No, Harry, there's nothing you can do."

It suddenly came to him what the matter was, what it had to be. "You're starting to think that my latest dream is going to come true after all, aren't you?"

That seemed to snap Snape out of his introspection. "No, not at all. You mustn't think that. I merely have some Order business on my mind."

Draco had looked rather intrigued at the mention of another seer dream, but that comment had him stiffening. "What Order business?" When Snape said nothing, he pressed, "It's about me, isn't it? There's some new Malfoy plot afoot to take me to the Dark Lord to be tortured!"

The Potions Master hesitated just a moment. "You may as well know, Lucius has never ceased his
attempts to remove you from Hogwarts. His latest gambit was to argue to the Board of Governors that as you've missed a considerable number of classes, your student status should be revoked. However, Albus headed him off by pointing out that petrified students a few years back missed a great deal more class than you have, and no one penalized them."

Draco sighed. "I somehow suspect that wasn't the first time Lucius has tried to use his influence on the Board to get me kicked out of here."

"He is persistent," Snape agreed. "Perhaps you'll feel better to know that his influence has waned a bit since his incarceration in Azkaban."

"Didn't make him any less rich, or less likely to curse them into oblivion if they don't do whatever he wants."

"No, but it made them far more aware of what fate will await them if Voldemort loses this war and they are seen to have been allied with his second-in-command. Thus far, the Board has seen through his vapid excuses to force you from the sanctuary of the school. Believe me, Draco, I have little respect for the Board of Governors, such as they are, but in this instance, I am confident. They will not expel you except upon solid grounds."

"I hope not . . ." Draco shivered, then surprised Harry by pressing, "There's something else though, isn't there?"

After taking a long moment to consider matters, Snape divulged, "I mentioned it before. Voldemort is making inroads into Europe. France, in particular. The wizarding authorities there make our own Ministry look as though it's staffed by geniuses. They refuse to believe the threat is real, though Muggleborns have already been the subject of several attacks." When Harry stiffened, Snape cautioned, "There is nothing you can do about it, Harry."

"There is something I can do," the boy disagreed. "And I'm the only one who can do it."

"You are too young as of yet," Snape erupted. "I only mention Voldemort's activities because you do better with more information rather than less, as I believe I once told you. Be that as it may, you are to finish your education before you so much as think of taking that madman on!"

Draco glanced from one to the other. "Am I missing something? I know Harry's got the name and the mystique; he can't help but be the vanguard of the war effort but . . . the only one who can do it? You are talking about killing the Dark Lord, I presume?" When neither Harry nor Snape said a word, Draco went on, "This must be the prophecy my father was after at the end of last year?"

Snape looked carved from granite, his entire face a harsh mask. Not liking secrets, Harry reluctantly nodded in answer.

"Potter," Snape growled.

"We are a family," Harry reminded him. "Besides, you said you wanted Draco to know how to help me if it ever came to that. So he might as well know how this war has to go, don't you think?"

As though sensing an advantage he could press, Draco narrowed his gaze on Harry. "So only you can kill the Dark Lord. Makes sense in a way, considering that Lumos. What about your dreams, these seer dreams you've never told me about?"

Harry drew in a deep breath and revealed, "I knew in advance that I was going to be blinded at Samhain, and that I would live down here and end up punching Ron. I also knew you were going to
say we were brothers."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "So that's why you laughed so much, I suppose. Well, what else? You said there was a latest one. It sounds as though it hasn't come true yet?"

"Severus doesn't think it will come true," Harry told him. "I dreamed he was going to unadopt me."

Draco's eyes just about bugged out. "Un-adopt you," he slowly repeated. "That's just daft, it is. You don't believe that, do you?"

"I didn't, and then I did . . ." Harry shrugged. It was too difficult to explain all he felt about the seer dream.

"Severus, tell him you aren't about to unadopt him!" Draco demanded.

"I don't believe that particular dream was a seer dream at all," the Potions Master flatly announced. "Harry was merely living out his fears in the dead of night."

"Yeah, well I thought so too until Draco brought up the Lotion Potion and it reminded me of the dream," Harry protested.

Draco frowned. "Wait, you knew about the Lotion Potion--"

"In advance!" Harry interrupted. "Or, sort of. It's hard to explain. Anyway, it was definitely a seer dream. And I know Severus doesn't want to unadopt me, but I think something's going to force his hand."

Snape cast Harry a scathing glance. "The silly Gryffindor refuses to believe that even if his dream is true, a sixteen-year-old with issues may not be the world's foremost authority on dream interpretation!"

"I have however decided that it won't really matter," Harry put in, ignoring his father's mood. He was probably just infuriated that Harry had gone ahead and told Draco about the prophecy. "Because legalities aren't what a family is really all about. How's that for dream-interpretation, Severus?"

When his father said nothing, Harry frowned. "I'm sorry I didn't come to you with it right away. I should have. I remember promising to tell you if anything in my dreams disturbed me."

Snape speared him with a glance. "Indeed. Twenty points for phenomenal bad judgment."

"That's ten from Slytherin!" Draco complained.

"Then teach him some strategy!" Snape shot back. "Even a first-year Slytherin knows better than to invite me to take points!"

Draco thought that over for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah, your new house mates are going to eat you alive if you aren't more careful!"

"It's late," Snape scathed. "Go to bed, both of you."

They went as asked, but Harry couldn't sleep. Too hot, too cold . . . he thought again of Goldilocks and had to stifle a slight laugh.

"You can't sleep either, huh?" Draco asked, sounding as though he were rolling over to face Harry.
"Too much on my mind," Harry passed it off. "I want to stop Occluding all the time but I'm kind of scared to. It really hurts when my scar goes off." Hoping to distract himself, he asked, "Why can't you sleep?"

"Lucius," Draco sighed. "I keep thinking he's going to find a way to get to me, you know? I think about--" He abruptly went silent.

Harry rolled onto his side as well. "About what?"

"Needles," Draco whispered. "Except for me it'll be snakes, I bet. He'll probably toss me into a pit of vipers--"

Harry thought better than to point out that the Slytherin common room likely qualified as one. "He's not going to have a chance," he said instead. "Severus won't let him get anywhere near you."

A noise of distress caught in Draco's throat. "You've never seen them together, Harry. Well, except at Samhain I suppose, but that hardly counts as Severus was playing a role. I grew up around them both. And Severus... well, I wouldn't say my father exactly intimidates him, but there was always a certain deference there."

"Yeah, because he was playing a role then, too," Harry insisted. "Look, you're right; I don't know anything much about it. But I suspect Severus always knew to keep an eye on your father."

"The war was over, Potter," Draco scathed. "Nobody knew the Dark Lord would rise again!"

"Yeah, but your father was trying to help it happen, wasn't he?" Harry asked, thinking of Tom Riddle's diary. "Severus probably had his suspicions. However he acted around your father, it was misdirection."

"Think he was misdirecting me as well all those times he called me the whinging wonder?"

That had Harry laughing out loud. He could just see a bratty little Draco deserving of the name...

"We don't want to wake Severus up, not in the mood he's been in," Draco whispered. "Cast Silencio. Wandless, remember. Or did Severus not clear you for that one, yet?"

"He did." Remembering his father's admonitions that he shouldn't get into the habit of displaying wandless magic, Harry fumbled for his wand, then cast the spell using just his hand. "Whinging wonder, really?"

"Well," Draco drawled, "I just might have been a tad spoiled in my youth. Still, it's better than idiot child. You think he's fond of Longbottom, too? I did hear Severus call him idiot boy once."

"I think Neville's safe," Harry dryly admitted. "Severus uses a certain tone of voice to me, you realise. Well, usually."

"Yeah, he's got some real idiosyncrasies," Draco mused. "When something amuses him and he doesn't want to let on, he clenches just his left fist. It's really pretty weird."

Thinking back, Harry decided that was probably true. "Say, have you ever noticed how he sometimes crosses his arms in a certain way when he's angry? You know, with the fingers of one hand tapping on the opposite forearm?"

"Yeah, it means he's impatient to get back to his potions," Draco chortled. "Half the time he's so impatient he only gives you a half-hearted reprimand. Did you know he holds his breath a little bit..."
when he's figuring out if he should yell at you?"

Harry grinned, blandly imitating Snape's intonations to announce, "He doesn't yell, he lectures."

"He yells his lectures, you mean."

That had Harry chuckling so hard his sides started to hurt. "What about when he says I do believe?"

He gasped out. "It sounds so Victorian! And . . . oh, God, I've been meaning to ask. What are we going to do about his hair? I mean, I used to sort of like the fact that he was all greasy, back when I hated him. You know, one more thing to hate him for. But now it's just . . . well . . . embarrassing, having my father go off to teach his classes looking like that!"

"Well, you've been in his bedroom before," Draco choked out. "Make up some excuse to go in there again and use the bathroom--"

"Been in there, too," Harry smugly announced. "Slytherin legend's right. It is pretty fabulous."

Through the dark he could just barely make out Draco sticking out his tongue.

"So find what he uses to wash his hair," the Slytherin boy suggested. "Try to get a sample, and I'll see if I can't . . . ah, improve the formulation a bit."

"Make it actually work, you mean," Harry drawled. "I don't understand. He's a Potions Master, for crying out loud! He ought to have the best shampoo in the whole world!"

Draco snorted. "But he doesn't care what people think, remember?"

"Not even us?"

"Well, he'd never admit it," Draco drolled. "After all, we are his idiot children."

Harry couldn't help but laugh even harder at that, but it only got worse when the door was abruptly flung open and Snape stood there, a glowing wand illuminating his glowering face as he bit out, "I told you both to go to sleep! What are you up to in here?"

"We weren't trying to disturb you, Severus. Harry, I thought you cast a silencing charm?"

"I did cast one!" Harry sat up more, wondering just how long Snape had been listening. Oh God, had he heard them talking about shampoo? He could feel his face burning. "Did it not work at all?"

"I don't know! Were you two talking or just laughing like crazed hyenas?"

"Uh . . . both," Harry admitted.

"It blocked your voices but not your levity," Snape growled. "What incantation did you use?"

Harry frowned. "Hmm. Well, I've found a whole bunch of ways to cast silencing charms. I think that time I told the door to not let out what we said."

"What you said."

"All right, so it needs work!"

"I do believe it does."

Harry couldn't help it. He started laughing again, and it wasn't long before Draco was joining in.
"Idiot children," Snape pronounced, shaking his head.

Of course that just made the situation worse. Harry practically howled with laughter. Draco started hyperventilating.

"Breathe, you idiot child!" Harry gasped out as soon as he could draw breath.

Draco managed to calm down, but he was still panting as though he’d just finished a Quidditch match.

"When I say to go to sleep I expect to be obeyed," Snape began in a hard tone.

"But we did obey you," Harry broke in. "You said to go to bed. Draco, have you been out of your bed at all since we came in?"

"I do believe I haven't."

"Stop it!" Harry gasped.

"Go to sleep now," Snape thundered, then whirled on a heel and stormed out, his midnight blue night robe billowing almost as majestically as his teaching robes did. Harry wondered how he managed that with toweling cloth.

He and Draco didn't go to sleep right away. They talked a while longer, though not about anything in particular. Harry had always wondered what it would be like to have a brother. Now, he knew. It was having someone you could depend on and whom you could be silly with. Someone who could see you at your absolute worst and not think worse of you.

It was a little sad to be leaving the dungeons just when he'd come to appreciate what a good brother Draco could be. He felt like he was losing Draco, though he knew that wasn't really the case at all. He would visit plenty.

It was on that thought that Harry fell asleep and began to dream. Images tumbled through his head too fast to catalog. Forest. House with a thatched roof, an owl sitting on a perch outside. Lucius Malfoy striding past him, his long-legged gait taking him to the house. Harry flinched, needles pricking him all over, but Lucius didn't even know he was there. A woman and a man answering the door. French accents. Conversation. Something about the Dark Lord . . .

Then the dream began spinning, whirling him straight out of France and into another place, one he recognised straight away. The Gryffindor common room, but his house mates couldn't see him any more than Lucius Malfoy had been able to back in that forest.

"Thrown from the Owlery," someone was saying in a tone that suggested the phrase had been repeated several times before.

"I always thought if something like that happened, they'd go for one of us. A Gryffindor. Not one of their own . . ."

"Yeah, but remember that day in Potions?" Parvati shook her head. "It was pretty clear something like this would happen eventually. The threat was made right there in the open, right in front of the professor, for Merlin's sake!"

A hushed voice murmured, "I heard the funeral has to be closed-casket since the body's just . . . a mess."
"Slytherins are a mess dead or alive," came the hard reply.

Harry turned away, only to see Hermione and Ron sitting close together on the sofa that faced the fireplace.

"This is just awful," Hermione was saying, a frown creasing her face.

Ron made a noise reminiscent of a grunt. "You can't convince me you're upset about a dead Slytherin!"

"I'm upset about Harry!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Yeah, well at least now we don't have to worry about him being around sodding Malfoy all the time," Ron scoffed.

"Ron, you know what Harry's like! He's going to blame himself for this. He'll tell himself he should have stopped Malfoy from leaving Snape's rooms! Never mind that without magic he'd have no hope . . ."

Ron got a strange look on his face when Hermione mentioned Harry having no magic, but he right away covered it up with a fresh surge of anger. "It's not Harry's fault Malfoy took himself up to the Owlery! And what was Draco Malfoy doing up there, anyway? That's what I'd like to know! My guess is he went up there to betray Harry! And something went wrong!"

"That's beside the point." Hermione said, standing. "Come on, we have to go see Harry, see if we can help."

Ron rose to his feet and caught Hermione's hand in his own. "Yeah, let's go. But don't get your hopes up, all right?"

Hermione visibly swallowed. "You're right. It didn't make much sense to me, but Harry was really getting along with Malfoy. I don't think anything we can say or do is going to cheer him . . ."

Scowling, Ron agreed, "Yeah. But that's not what I meant. It's just . . . I'm not even sure we can get in any longer. After this, I bet Snape's put up a ton of extra wards."

"True, he won't be in a mood to trust anybody. And who could blame him? Well, all we can do is go down there and try to make him let us in."

Ron and Hermione headed toward the portrait hole . . .

Harry sat bolt upright in bed, his eyes wild, his hair sticking up in all directions as though he'd been violently turning in his sleep. For a moment that seemed to last forever, he couldn't breathe. Suddenly all his jokes earlier seemed incredibly stupid. Had it really been just a few hours ago that he'd been so very happy?

Dragging in a harsh breath, finally, Harry shakily rose from his bed and went to stand over Draco. Shivers convulsed him, though he scarcely noticed the chill night air of the dungeon, or the freezing stones beneath his bare feet. His dream haunted him, and the longer he stared down at his brother, the worse it got.

Draco . . . thrown from the Owlery . . .

Funeral . . . the casket closed . . .
He should have stopped Malfoy from leaving Snape's rooms . . .

Shaking, Harry reached out a hand toward Draco's hair.

Before he touched a single strand, a strong grip snaked out to imprison his wrist.

"Why are you standing over my bed like some sort of ghoul?" Draco darkly inquired, his silver eyes glinting.

Harry wanted to yank his wrist free, but strangely, he also wanted to let Draco keep holding it. Or maybe it was more a case of Harry wanting to hold onto Draco. To have him for a brother . . . while he could.

"Um . . ." He cleared his throat, not knowing what to say. How could you tell someone they were going to die? How could you not tell them?

*Are your dreams presaging someone's death?* Dumbledore had asked, and what had Harry answered?

*Oh no, I wouldn't keep something like that to myself . . .*

But the headmaster had meant that he should tell an Order member.

Then it came to him. His promise. He didn't have to deal with this alone. He didn't have to break it to Draco alone, either. His father would help him. His father would know what to say, what to do.

"Bad dream," Harry choked out. "I . . .um, thought I'd better let you know I have to go talk to Severus, all right? In case you woke up and saw me gone and wondered--"

Aware that he was babbling, Harry shut up.

Draco was giving him a strange look, and no wonder. "Harry, if I wake up and notice you gone, I'll assume you've gone to talk to Severus. Where else would you be?" Then he yawned. "Well, I suppose you might be in the loo. I'm just glad I don't have to twist your arm to go talk to him this time."

Nodding, Harry fled . . . but not without looking back at the Slytherin boy. Almost asleep again already, those features peaceful. A horrid feeling stole over him that he was looking at Draco's body . . . at a corpse. But of course Draco wasn't going to look like that, was he, after he'd been thrown from the Owlery . . .

His throat suddenly tight, Harry knocked five times on Snape's door, and when it opened, stumbled across the threshold and into his father's arms. "You have to do something!" he cried as the thud of the door closing echoed behind him. "You have to help!"

He looked up to see his father rubbing tired eyes, but the irritation that had been there all week was masked by something else now. Concern. Caring. Even love. They didn't often say the word, but they knew it was there. That was what counted.

Not even love would help with this, though.

"Draco's going to die!" Harry hoarsely announced. "He's going to die a horrible death and we have to find a way to stop it!"
Snape's voice was little more than a rasp as he harshly questioned, "Seer dream, Harry?" The boy nodded, the motion jerky, his mouth dry as he tried to explain further. Before he could, though, Snape was biting out, "Don't say another word!"

One arm yanked Harry close against him; with the other he began warding the closed door with silencing charms. Lots of them, Harry noticed as he quaked, Snape's strong embrace all that was holding him up. He couldn't tell if his father was recasting spells that had failed, or layering ward upon ward deliberately. Probably the latter, Harry decided, since even a distraught Severus didn't seem likely to miscast a silencing charm. Besides, hadn't his father once told him that the door warded itself whenever it was closed? Snape must be reinforcing the automatic protections . . . Or had those been just on the office door? At that moment, Harry couldn't remember. His dream kept spinning through his mind, the horror of it only growing the longer he thought on it.

It was all he could do to keep hold of his tongue until Snape was through casting spells and they could talk without fear of Draco bursting in.

Finally deeming the room secure, Snape set aside his wand, which Harry took as a sign to get to it. When he tried to speak past his dry throat, though, the words got all jumbled up inside his ears, the thundering sound still rushing through him like a great current. "We . . . oh dear God, the Owlery, it was. We have to stop it--"

Both Snape's hands descended to his shoulders, the pressure so firm that the boy almost winced, his voice a low, insistent thrum. "Calm down, Harry."

Right, because he had to explain the whole dream, everything he'd seen and heard. Steeling himself against the panic he could feel racing along every vein, Harry tried to speak in complete sentences, though what he heard emerge wasn't too much better than before. "Somebody's going to throw Draco off the Owlery! Other Slytherins, sounded like, that's what the Gryffindors were saying, there was a threat made first, though, and I was supposed to stop it--" It felt like something inside him was dying as he blurted, "Oh my God! They were all going on about his funeral--"

"Quiet!" Snape snapped, abruptly steering him over to the bed to sit him down. "If you don't do as I ask, and stop talking," the Potions Master threatened, upper lip curled, "I'll bind your mouth with Mudos! Are you listening to me, now? Every word you say solidifies the dream in your conscious memory, which is quite a bad thing considering that what we need to do is pensieve it from your subconscious! So for the love of Merlin, stop telling me all these details! Is that clear, Harry? Absolutely clear?" By the end there, Snape was shouting so loudly that Harry actually leaned back from him.

The message got through, though, there was no doubt about that. Harry nodded his agreement, cautiously sat up straight again, his eyes on Snape, and questioned, "Dreams can be pensieved?"

Snape gave him an impatient glare. "Not unless the dreamer cooperates. We'll get nowhere until you calm down."

Harry nodded again, though his thoughts were still a riot. After what Snape had explained, he tried to not think about the dream, but little parts of it kept replaying inside his head.

Perhaps Snape saw as much in his eyes, for the man pressed a glass filled with something thin and transparent into his hand. "Drink this. Slowly. Try to identify it."
Harry was in no mind for guessing games, but the rational part of his mind knew that Snape couldn't
be indulging in one, strange as the order seemed. The liquid tasted clean and clear. He strained
harder with his tongue, with all his senses, concentrating, trying to taste any elusive hint of anything .
. . and all the while, the Potions Master stared at him as though studying the rise and fall of his chest .
. . as though he were counting his breaths. Snape had that same intensity of focus that he had when
he needed to stir something a specific number of times . . .

Not liking the feeling that he was a potion, Harry finished off the drink. "Water," he announced, his
voice wobbling. "Where's the pensieve, then?"

"You aren't calm enough yet." Snape explained, beginning to pace before the bed.

"Give me a proper Calming Draught, then!" Harry exclaimed, frustrated. "What possible use was it
to give me water?"

"That wasn't mere water, it was an attempt to make you think of other matters," Snape dryly
informed him. "As for an actual potion, I hardly think it wise at the moment."

Harry felt stupid then, realizing that of course taking a potion might interfere with being able to
pensieve the dream. He really should have figured out the water ploy sooner, too, which proved that
his father was right, and he did need to calm down. He could hardly think straight! But if getting his
mind onto other matters would help with that, Harry decided, he'd ask the next logical question.
"Dad . . . if dreams can be pensieved, why didn't we do that with the unadoption one?"

"Perhaps," Snape sighed, "because you waited a week and half to mention it to me." He pushed his
hair back from his forehead in a gesture that betrayed his own anxiety, though his voice remained a
level, soothing drone. "A pensieve needs to be used the first night, if at all. And too, you had already
reconstructed your dream in writing, which process no doubt shifted portions of it from your
subconscious to your conscious mind."

Realizing that talking of something else was making his panic recede a bit, Harry went ahead and
pressed, "But what about back in Grimmauld Place? That time you woke me up when I was
screaming in Parseltongue? Why didn't we use a pensieve then?"

"Then, if you recall, not a single seer dream of yours had come true yet. Lupin didn't understand
what we were dealing with, and unfortunately neither did I."

Just the words seer dream had Harry's panic thundering back in. He felt his breath catch, only to
have Snape notice at once. Sitting down on the bed, too, the Potions Master turned slightly to regard
the boy. "Harry. You simply must get yourself under control. The dream, whatever it means, won't
emerge coherently if you are still upset when we attempt to draw it from your mind."

Harry looked down at his bare feet. "I understand. But . . . well, I can't not be upset after dreaming
something like that."

Snape patted the spot beside him as he spoke. "I would suggest Occluding but I believe you're still
doing that as a matter of course?"

Harry nodded as he shifted over and felt the comforting warmth of his father wrapping an arm about
his shoulders. "Tell me about the Gryffindors in your year," the man invited. "What sort of career do
you think each will pursue upon leaving Hogwarts?"

It was a ploy to get his mind off the dream and onto a more pleasant topic; this time Harry was aware
of that. He was even aware that Snape was certainly not that interested in the Gryffindors, and that
once upon a time, Harry would never have considered giving the Potions Master such information. Who knew what he might do with it? The art of the insult... Snape could turn even the most innocuous details into scathing commentary, were he so inclined.

Ginny and Hermione had made it clear enough that adopting Harry hadn't made Snape any fonder of Gryffindors in general...

But all that aside, Harry did trust the man. Snape would be as snide as he liked and might never get over his tendency to take unfair points from Gryffindor... but what he wouldn't do was misuse whatever Harry told him now.

"Um, I don't know," he said, thinking his way through it as he relaxed in his father's embrace. It was hard to let the dream go, it really was, but like Snape had said, for Draco's sake he had to. "Let's see. Hermione. I can't think that Hogwarts is going to be enough education to suit her. I could see her at Oxford or Cambridge, except I'm not sure she'd want to go to a strictly Muggle university..."

"And Mr Weasley?"

Harry smiled slightly. "Seven years of formal education will be enough for him. But afterwards... hmm. He talks sometimes about joining Fred and George in their business, but he'll want something with steadier prospects, I expect. A regular job with a regular salary so he won't have to wait too long before he can--" Harry abruptly shut up and began chewing his lip.

"Propose to Miss Granger?" Snape drawled.

"I don't know if things'll get all that serious or not," Harry backpedaled.

"Well, I've thought for a good while now that Mr Weasley has 

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written all over him," Snape said, his tone making it sound far from a compliment. "Not too observant, doesn't do 'subtle.' Can't bear, in his capacity as prefect, to enforce a rule against a friend though woe betide his enemies. Perfect Auror material."

Harry knew, of course, that Snape had good reason to hate Aurors, but it still bothered him to hear the man speak that way. He knew Harry wanted to become one, didn't he? And now Draco did as well. What was he going to think when both his sons were part of the ranks he so despised?

If Draco lived that long, that was.

Feeling his panic rushing back in, Harry abruptly redoubled his Occlumency and pushed the emotion outside the fire protecting his mind. The effort made him a bit lightheaded, but he ignored that.

"I don't think Ron's got much wish to be an Auror," he said before Snape could warm to the theme any further and mention how the lot of them were all sadists, or something. "Anyway, where were we? Oh, yeah... Dean. You know, sometimes I think he'd like to get an apprenticeship to become a Medi-Wizard..."

Snape let him rattle on for a few moments after that, and then standing, opened a large cabinet and fetched forth Dumbledore's stone pensieve. It surprised Harry a bit that Snape would have it so handy, but he shrugged off that issue and tried to remain calm as his father set it on a writing table and beckoned him forward. He couldn't help but feel his tension returning, though Snape helped it quite a bit when he sighed and pointedly asked if Harry ever thought to put on slippers before wandering from his bed at night.

"I had more on my mind than cold feet, you know," Harry mumbled, only realizing then that cold was washing up from the floor in waves to drench him. Had been, for some time. Maybe that was
why he'd been trembling so much.

"Well, as we don't want to risk waking Draco . . ." Shrugging, Snape Accio'd a pair of his own socks. "Put these on. Then we'll begin."

Harry slipped on the socks, hopping first on one foot then the other, ignoring Snape's slightly derisive stare at the behaviour. A toasty warmth at once enveloped his toes, and he realised the socks must be charmed. Before he could comment on that, though, he felt the tip of a wand touching his temple. He began thinking of his dream, of course, but instead of the familiar *Pensare non pensatum*, his father began instructing, "Close your eyes, Harry. Now, I realise you're habitually Occluding already, but this time when I say to clear your mind, I need you to do what you used to think it meant. Think of nothing at all--"

Harry jerked, his eyes opening in reflex. "You don't want me to remember the dream so you can pull it all out?"

"Imposing conscious thought on it will corrupt the purity of your memory," Snape reminded him. "Precisely why I didn't want you going into details out loud. So now, do exactly as I say. Clear your mind of all thought, all emotion . . ."

Harry thought he wouldn't be able to; he'd never had much luck before in achieving a state of complete mental blankness, and goodness knew he did used to try . . . Now that he finally did know how to Occlude, however, this other skill came without too much effort.

He wasn't exactly thinking of nothing, though.

He was falling into a great pool, a calming lake that soothed his every worry and fear, a smooth clean pond that surrounded him with waters that were strangely warm.

Or maybe it wasn't water at all; it was just a sense of being loved. Of knowing he could let go and be safe. Of knowing he could trust.

It was like something inside him unlocked, then, and he felt himself draining away. And then, his mind did clear. Completely. His defences fell, the fire he'd been hiding behind finally quenched as all thought ceased and he simply drifted, disembodied. Calm.

Finally, completely calm.

"*Pensare non reves,*" the syllables drifted through his consciousness, flowing all around him though the sound didn't seem to impinge upon his thoughts. He had no thoughts; he was simply existence. "*Pensare circundatae . . .*"

There was nothing to him but the sensation of a gentle pulling, of a long stream of knowledge being drawn from inside him, leaving him weak and gasping and shocked by the loss. He felt himself falling over sideways, felt a strong arm supporting him and keeping him from collapsing.

Harry's eyes flew open, the air itself seeming to strangle him as his stunned eyes sought out his father. He tried to draw a breath and couldn't, his mind caught up in some sort of tangle as it hunted for what was gone, no thought to spare for something as irrelevant as the fact that he might need oxygen.

For once, Snape didn't drawl *breathe, you idiot child* at him. As if knowing that this was something beyond a mere panic attack, Snape quietly urged, "Drink, Harry," wrapping the boy's fingers around a teacup brimming with something blue and frothy.
Harry opened his mouth and tried to breathe again, but he still couldn't, so in desperation, he gulped down a huge swallow of the potion, only to spew half of it out, the taste was so foul. It did the trick, though. All at once it was like his brain snapped to attention, or something, and a violent rush of air expanded inside his lungs though he didn't think he actually had breathed, yet. But now he could, he realised.

Snape wordlessly handed him a small towel and watched him mop off his face and hands, then gestured that Harry should drink the rest of the potion. Harry made a face, but complied. It made him sweat a little, so he was glad of the towel again afterwards.

"Better?"

Harry blinked, and wiped a bit more at his face. He felt hot . . . and above all, confused. Like he'd just woken up . . . that disoriented feeling when you realise you've been asleep. Only worse. He couldn't remember going to sleep at all, and certainly not in Snape's bedroom--

"What . . . um, what happened? What am I doing in here?" Harry's gaze took in his own pyjamas. Then he noticed Snape's socks on his feet and almost did a double-take. It seemed such a terribly personal thing to be wearing them. Uncle Vernon would have flayed him alive . . .

Snape though, wasn't anything like his Uncle Vernon. He'd been foisted on the Dursleys, and they'd never let him forget it for one instant, but what had Snape said? You're my son by choice, not obligation.

"Thanks," he said, his voice a bit rough, and when Snape looked at him a bit incredulously, Harry explained, "For the socks."

Snape suddenly scowled, his mood shifting like quicksilver. "If they weren't dead already," he muttered, but then his expression cleared. "Harry, you're entitled to have your father love you enough to lend you a pair of socks."

Harry nodded, a little bit embarrassed that his insecurities were so transparent, but that thought got lost when he noticed Snape's long robe, so blue as to be almost black. His gaze skidded across the simple silver clock hanging above his father's bed. "It's the middle of the night!"

"Yes. Prepare yourself for a shock," Snape dryly announced, gesturing toward a chair. He pulled another chair around the table to place it alongside Harry, speaking again only when he was seated as well. "You've had a bad dream and this time, you had the sense to come to me with it at once. We've just pensieved the dream from your mind--"

The boy noticed the stone bowl, then, so close he could touch it. Funny how he hadn't realised it was there. "You can do that?"

For some reason, Snape's answering nod looked a bit weary. Actually, Harry had a vague sense that they'd had this conversation already, but for the life of him, he couldn't really remember . . . His whole head felt like it was stuffed with candy floss . . . but also like he was missing some vital part of it, too.

"Pensieving dreams is a notoriously difficult endeavour," Snape was explaining by then. "And highly unpleasant, as you've no doubt discovered. The mind is well able to cope with the temporary loss of a conscious memory; pensieving a dream, however, involves removing a part of your subconscious. The mind doesn't appreciate it." He suddenly stopped speaking and peered closely at the boy. "Do you need another dose of Breath of Life?"
"Ugh, that blue stuff?" Harry moaned, rubbing his temples. "No, I don't want more." He tried to think past the haze of confusion churning in his mind, though what he wanted more than anything was just to go to sleep. For days, something like, "All right, so I had a dream," Harry said, reasoning his way past the huge empty place in his mind. "And I can't remember it because you already took it out of my head, right. But . . . um, why can't I even remember coming to you, though? Actually, the last thing I remember is joking around with Draco--"

Fortunately, the exact content of that conversation came clear to him before he finished the sentence and mentioned something about the two of them making so much fun of Snape.

"Your conscious memories at the fringes of the dream were drawn out too," Snape explained. "The better to be sure I swept the whole dream out of your mind."

Harry swallowed, trying harder to remember going to sleep. Had he and Draco kept making silly plans to steal shampoo? He'd die if Snape saw that; he'd simply die. Of course it was hopeless trying to figure out what other nonsense he and Draco might have spouted; his bedtime memories were in the pensieve, not inside his head. "So, um . . . you're going to see what Draco and I were laughing about, I guess," he murmured, feeling his face heat at the prospect. Better to get it over with, right? Because if Snape was going to see anyway . . . yeah, better to pay the piper. Or face the music. Actually, Harry wasn't sure why metaphors like that were coming to mind. Probably because he just felt stupid, now. Snape had taken him in, warded him, cared for him, made him his own son, for pity's sake, and what had he done in return? Cackled and howled at the man's expense.

His stomach a churning vat of acid, Harry weakly ventured, "Listen, Professor . . . Draco and I . . . we were goofing around a bit. Um, talking about you, actually, but we didn't mean anything by it, honest. I mean, you're a really good father and I do love you, I swear. We were just having a spot of fun--"

Snape was shaking his head. "Harry, do you remember me telling you that you worry too much? I assure you, whatever you and Draco were laughing about, I'm not likely to take offence. I was actually quite pleased to see you two at such ease with one another."

"Could have fooled me," Harry muttered, glancing up through his lashes. Snape was going to be furious with them both, he just knew it. And Harry was the one who'd brought up the whole hair thing, wasn't he, had actually said that his father's appearance embarrassed him? He wished the floor would split open and swallow him, he really did.

"Perhaps I am more pleased looking back on it than I was at the time," Snape allowed. "You woke me up and my sleep of late has been particularly disturbed. But that is no matter. At the moment, we have far weightier concerns to occupy us."

"My dream." Harry nodded. Funny how that was the whole point of his being here, and he could barely even keep that in mind. But then again, he couldn't remember it, so maybe the distracted feeling in his mind was normal. He looked around his father's bedroom, a dark feeling stealing across his soul to freeze it. He wouldn't wake Snape up in the middle of the night, especially not after the man had been so angry with them earlier, unless the dream had been very bad indeed.

Snape seemed to know what he was thinking. One warm hand covered both of Harry's as he pulled the stone bowl closer. "I'd best prepare you before we have a look. Actually, I'd suggest you not watch your dream, but seeing the pensieved version will likely help you understand it far better. If you're up to it?"

Harry bristled and stood up straighter. "I'm no coward, Professor."
Snape raised his eyebrows. "I would never suggest you were." He paused, clearly debating something, then went on, "You came to me because you'd had a seer dream. I don't know a great deal about what it entailed, as to preserve the integrity of the dream I stopped you from talking much about it, but the salient point is this . . ." He paused, his hand gripping Harry's a bit more firmly, as though trying to give him strength. "You dreamed that Draco would die."

Harry felt like he might sick up. "Oh God, that's awful," he cried out. And all his dreams came true, didn't they? Or would . . . "I always lose people," he complained, the words bitter. "I'm afraid of losing you, too. I dreamed you were with Sirius, you know, but that one wasn't a seer dream." He gulped, suddenly hopeful. "Maybe this one isn't, either? I mean, you thought the unadoption one wasn't, right? You still think that."

"Why don't we just watch it and see?" Snape gently suggested.

Harry gulped. "Do you want to go first?"

"We go together," his father clarified. "If you are prepared?"

Harry nodded, flexing his fingers. Snape however, didn't let his hands go. After a moment, the boy decided it was nice to be taken care of, after all. Relaxing, he took a look at the pensieve, at the ghostly tendrils he could see foaming a bit at the rim. Funny, the last time he and Snape had been in pensieve together, they'd been bitter enemies. It wasn't even that long ago . . . but it seemed like something from another life. He couldn't imagine hating Snape, not now.

His father looked at him and nodded slightly as though to indicate that he, too, was ready.

Together, they leaned forward and plunged inside Harry's dream.

The first few images weren't of a dream at all, though.

". . . and then the next year she came out with Broom of Doom," Draco was yawning as he lay on his side in bed, his head on one pillow, his arms curled around another one much the way a younger child might hug a toy bear. "But that one I never liked as much. The dark magic in it didn't make sense. I mean, cursed potions were a big part of the plot, when any fool knows that you can charm a potion but not curse it . . ."

"You knew things like that when you were only eight years old?" Harry sleepily asked.

"I don't know how I knew that, actually," Draco murmured. "When I read it, it just didn't seem right."

"Great intuitive grasp of magic. Like Severus said."

"Mmm. Well maybe my great intuitive grasp will extend to his hair care products," Draco softly laughed. "So get me some shampoo if you can. Go tell him you had another nightmare; he'll let you in."

"You go tell him you had a nightmare," Harry retorted, rolling over. "I'm not going to lie to my father."

"Gryffindor," Draco accused. "I lied to mine at least twice a week--"

"Really?"
"Have I mentioned how gullible you can be? Honestly, Potter. Lucius is almost as good a Legilimens as Severus. I wasn't too likely to lie to him when it meant a wizard's beating for sure."

"What's a wizard's beating, anyway?"

Draco hugged his pillow even tighter, "Lucius had me whipped, see? Not that he'd dirty his own hands with something so Mugglish. I was actually surprised when he did the . . . ah, needles, himself to you, Harry, but I suppose he was showing off for that idiot who actually demanded Muggle tortures for you. So anyway, the house-elves did it--"

"House-elves?" Harry gasped. "You're having me on again, right?"

"I wish," Draco spat. "There's a reason I don't like them much, Potter. They'll do whatever they're told, whatever."

Harry went completely still. "You don't mean Dobby--"

"Oh, your little elf-friend?" Draco sneered. "No, not him. Bunch of his little mates, though. Lucius had them beat me half to death. Ha, more like three-quarters."

Harry cleared his throat. "Um, but why's it called a wizard's beating if the house-elves did it?"

"Oh, but I haven't got to the good part yet," Draco drawled, all bravado though his voice shook a bit. "My marvellous father healed me, don't you know, his wand tracing over every lash mark, every welt. Except, instead of just healing them, he was recording them, you see. Wrapped them all up together inside some fancy spell his father had taught him. Family tradition. Really lovely coming from an old-fashioned pureblood family sometimes, I can tell you that. Anyway, afterwards, whenever Lucius was angry at me, all he had to do was cast one curse and I'd relive the whole whipping from start to finish, as many times as he cared to toss it my way. Just the pain though, not the marks. Lucius thought it was splendid. He could curse me all afternoon and then drag me out to a Ministry dinner where I had to sit up straight no matter that I felt flayed all over, and nobody could prove a thing."

"Wouldn't using that over and over be pretty dangerous? Like Crucio, you know, Neville's parents?"

"No, the spell's too specific for that." Draco sighed. "Anyway, if you believe I'd lie to a man who used to wizard's beat me for so much as sneezing too often . . . well, you just don't know what it's like to grow up Slytherin."

"But that's just so awful," Harry exclaimed. "I mean, Uncle Vernon used to slap me sometimes, but nothing like that, and not even that often, and most of the time it was just chores they punished me with, and the cupboard, but after the first few years I sort of liked it in there so that was no big deal--"

"They starved you, or have you forgotten?"

"It still wasn't like what you had to deal with. Beating you, and like that, just because you'd sneezed?"

"Oh, all right, I might have exaggerated a tad. Not about what it was like, mind. But . . . well, he didn't ever do it because I'd sneezed, he just said he might," Draco admitted, shrugging as he lay there. "And the Ministry thing only happened once, and if you absolutely must know, most of the time I was pretty much spoiled rotten. But I still knew better than to lie to Lucius."
"But couldn't you just Occlude?"

"Great intuitive grasp doesn't mean great innate power, you know," Draco sharply admitted. "I might have got over your awful snub on the train a lot sooner if you hadn't turned out to be so hideously magical. A Malfoy being out-flown by a Muggle-raised half-blood who'd never so much as touched a broom before." He sighed. "And it just got worse and worse. Every time I turned around you were talking to snakes or mastering charms grown wizards can't do or throwing off Unforgivables. You made it very easy to hate you."

"You're a fine one to claim that," Harry protested. "And I didn't snub you on the train. You snubbed Ron and I was sticking up for him. And as for that very first flying lesson . . . well, all right, I had touched a broom before, all right? Hagrid lent me one and I flew the whole summer before first year--"

"Really?"

"Now who's the gullible one?" Harry lightly gibed.

"There's your Slytherin side," Draco approved. "Remember that when you visit the common room or eat with them, all right? We like to verbally cut each other to ribbons . . . but you're catching on all right, I think. Anyway, they'll never think you're one of us if you can't join right in . . ."

Draco yawned then, and fell silent, and shortly after that Harry drifted off as well.

The images in the pensieve shifted, becoming tinged with grey, then dissolving into a vast pool of fog that slowly rolled across the scene to drown every image. Harry glanced at Snape, who even inside the pensieve was still holding his hands. Thank goodness the man didn't look angry, but Harry supposed the comments about hair care didn't mean much compared to all that had followed. He felt a bit chilled just hearing those things about Draco's childhood, even if the Slytherin had exaggerated a bit.

"You're asleep now," his father explained, gesturing at the mist all around. "But you aren't dreaming yet. Wait."

How long, that was what Harry wanted to ask. But he didn't bother, as he knew the answer already. They would wait as long as it took, it was as simple as that. And then they'd see the seer dream . . . the one Harry knew about already in one sense, though in another it was about to unfold anew before him . . .

The fog parted onto a forest thick with pine trees, the ground underfoot layered with their needles, the bright noon sun beating down on them though the air itself was sharp with winter chill.

Harry looked about, a little bit confused as to what this scene could have to do with Draco dying. Then he remembered. Seer dream, right, so this must be the past, something that had already happened. His first thought after that was of the forest where he'd been tortured, but no, this was another place. There was no clearing here . . .

But there was a sense of menace, all the same. Of someone coming . . .

Lucius Malfoy strode forward, his long-legged gait self-assured to the point of arrogance as he stalked through the forest as though he owned it. His footsteps took him toward a little house with a thatched roof, and an imperious knock had the rough-hewn door swinging open as an owl hooted once on its perch, then flew away.

A woman peered out, a scarf covering her hair, her dark gaze studying Malfoy closely before
flicking to either side of him as though to ascertain that he was alone. A man joined her at the door as she spoke a hesitant, "Out?"

Malfoy glared down at her as though to intimidate by the sheer strength of his presence. "You are in danger, both of you," he quickly rapped out, one hand flashing through the air in a commanding gesture. "The Dark Lord intends to attack this house. You must leave and never return."

"Ze Dark Lord?" the woman gasped, a hand at her throat at the dreadful title.

"But we have done nothing," the man protested, shaking his head.

Malfoy was resolute, his own eyes narrowed in grim determination. "You are a half-blood, Monsieur," he sneered, clearly filled with disdain to so much as speak with such a one. "And your wife worse, filthy Mudblood scum. The Dark Lord needs no more reason than that to seek your deaths. You must leave here and never return."

Inside the pensieve, Harry gaped at Snape, but the Potions Master ignored him, intent on watching the scene unfold.

"But always we live here," the man lamented in broken English. "Where to go?"

Malfoy raised his upper lip in a distinct sneer, one Harry had seen before, and swept an arm free from his robes, shoving his sleeve up to display his left forearm. "Do you want one such as I to know your whereabouts, truly?"

The woman cowered back, actually crossing herself as she shrank from the Dark Mark clearly on display. The man paled, but stood his ground. "Why come here to warn us, Monsieur, if already you are his?"

Malfoy shrugged, the gesture careless and contemptuous all at once. "I grow weary of these pointless attacks. By the fifteenth of February at the very latest, the Dark Lord will burn your house to the ground and torture to death anyone he finds within."

"Zat is ze day after tomorrow!" the woman gasped, stepping back yet again.

"The attack may come yet sooner," Malfoy impatiently grated. "Have you and this Mudblood no sense at all? You must leave at once! Take only what you need, do not use a Floo until you are well away from France."

As though disgusted with the pair of them, then, Malfoy stepped back, fastidiously wiping his hands on a monogrammed handkerchief which he then dropped and burned to ashes with a quick *Incendio* spell. Then he was Apparating away, leaving the couple at the door staring out in shock at the nothingness which the moment before had contained the Dark Lord's greatest supporter, come to warn and protect them . . .

Harry turned to Snape to say something, but before a sound could leave his mouth, the whole world all around them began spinning. Brown lurched into green as the trees stretched, elongating as they whirled, and then the two of them were flung straight out of the forest and into another place, one with rich red rugs underfoot and grey stone walls worm smooth by countless generations of students leaning up against them.

"Thrown from the Owlery," Parvati was saying, her tones hushed with horror.

"Thrown from the Owlery," Ginny answered back, nodding as she spoke. "I always thought if something like that happened, they'd go for one of us. A Gryffindor. Not one of their own . . ."
“Yeah, but remember that day in Potions?” Parvati shook her head, her dark ponytail swaying, the motion was so emphatic. "It was pretty clear something like this would happen eventually. The threat was made right there in the open, right in front of the professor, for Merlin's sake!"

A hushed voice from behind them chimed in, "I heard the funeral has to be closed-casket since the body's just... a mess."

"Slytherins are a mess dead or alive," came a hard reply from Seamus Finnegan.

Harry felt his hand let go as Snape began to walk around the common room, examining the scene from all angles, his dark eyes analyzing every gesture, every nuance of expression as the Gryffindors gossiped amongst themselves. Harry stood up too, then, and motioned that his father should listen to Ron and Hermione, who were sitting close together on the sofa that faced the fireplace.

"This is just awful," Hermione was saying, her lips turned down as she frowned.

Ron grunted even as his hand reached out to lightly pat her skirt-clad knee. "You can't convince me you're upset about a dead Slytherin!"

"I'm upset about Harry!" Hermione exclaimed, brushing his hand away. "What do you think this will do to him?"

"Yeah, well at least now we don't have to worry about him being around sodding Malfoy all the time..."

"Ron, you know what Harry's like! He's going to blame himself for this. He'll tell himself he should have stopped Malfoy from leaving Snape's rooms! Never mind that without magic he'd have no hope..."

"It's not Harry's fault Malfoy took himself up to the Owlery!" Ron spat back, vehement. "And what was Draco Malfoy doing up there, anyway? That's what I'd like to know! My guess is he went up there to betray Harry! And something went wrong!"

"That's beside the point." Hermione said, standing. She impatiently tapped a foot when Ron remained on the sofa. "Come on, we have to go see Harry, see if we can help."

Ron rose to his feet and caught Hermione's hand in his own. "Yeah, let's go. But don't get your hopes up, all right?"

Hermione swallowed so loudly that it was almost a gulp. "You're right. It didn't make much sense to me, but Harry was really getting along with Malfoy. I don't think anything we can say or do is going to cheer him..."

Ron lifted a derisive lip to admit, "Yeah. But that's not what I meant. It's just... I'm not even sure we can get in any longer. After this, I bet..." he hesitated ever so slightly before continuing, "Snape's put up a ton of extra wards."

"True, he won't be in a mood to trust anybody. And who could blame him? Well, all we can do is go down there and try to make him let us in."

Ron and Hermione turned as one toward the portrait hole and quietly stepped outside without a word to the others.

The dream ended, but this time as conscious thought returned, the pensieve didn't fill with fog. Instead, in the glimmering of an instant, Harry found himself back in his own bedroom, looking at
himself sitting bolt upright in bed, horror and terror written across his face as he sought for breath and eyes wild, scanned Draco's bed . . .

With that, his father yanked him backwards out of the pensieve.

He ended up falling out of his chair and onto the hard floor.

"Oh God," Harry moaned, the horror of it fresh and crisp since of course he had no prior memory of having dreamt all that. Snape had warned him, or had tried to, anyway, but the impact of it was still so great that his hands were shaking like he had some horrible sort of palsy or something. Ashamed of how that looked, Harry staggered to his feet, weakly collapsed onto his father's bed, and slid his hands underneath his thighs as he sat.

Pulling over a chair, Snape sat down to face him. "And you assume that to be a seer dream because . . .?"

Harry stared rather blankly at his father, the question barely registering for a moment. "Oh. It follows the pattern. Past, whirling, future."

"And the past being true is the marker that proves it an authentic seer dream," Snape calmly confirmed, leaning forward.

"Yeah." Harry blinked again, hating the tight feeling in his throat, afraid it meant he was going to cry. He didn't want to, not in front of his father, even if he had bawled and blubbered all over him back in Devon.

"Then this is no seer dream," Snape pronounced, shaking his head. "That so-called 'past' is ludicrous. Lucius Malfoy popping 'round for a quick visit with a Mudblood and her husband? And what does he say, that they'd better pack quickly to avoid Voldemort? Be serious, Harry."

Harry flinched a bit from the open scorn in his father's voice.

Snape frowned. "What were you thinking of as you went to sleep tonight, Harry? Apart from my shampoo?"

"Oh, God," Harry moaned. "I was afraid of this. We shouldn't have been talking that way, Professor. I'm really, really sorry--"

"I do believe we've covered this ground," Snape impatiently put in. "Forget your discomfiture, Harry. Now, tell me. What were you thinking about as you fell asleep?"

"Well I can't remember, can I?" Harry asked. "You sucked it all out of my mind."

"Ah. True," Snape admitted. For the Potions Master to have overlooked that was so unlike him that Harry knew then and there he wasn't as blasé about the dream as he wished to appear. "Are you ready to have your memories restored, then? It shouldn't be quite the physical shock that removing them was, but . . ." He paused. "You can remember your dream now, but restoring it will make you aware of having lived through it. The experience can be . . . intense."

"It can't be any more intense than seeing that was," Harry sighed. He forgot about getting his memory back in place as the images of that forest churned through his mind. "That part about Lucius Malfoy . . . it just doesn't ring true, but . . . you . . . you don't suppose he could possibly have changed, do you? I mean, yeah, I know, it's ludicrous like you said but . . . well, look at Draco. He's not so bad, now. You know, Ron said I was going to say that. Funny . . ."
"Harry, wouldn't your dream indicate that Lucius Mafoy's conversation with the French family took place around noon on the thirteenth of February?" He waited until the boy nodded. "There is a Board of Governors meeting every month on the thirteenth, and for the past few, I have been present, the better to fend off Lucius' attempts to expel Draco from the school. Lucius was here at Hogwarts from early in the morning until well past noon on February thirteenth. He was not in France."

"Maybe I was seeing last February or the one before that. Lucius looked about the same age as at Samhain, so I don't guess it was decades ago, but maybe the scene was from before he was ever on the Board?"

"He's been on it since Draco was quite small," Snape asserted, shaking his head. "Except for one brief spell after that incident with the Chamber of Secrets. And he's always gone to every meeting. Even while he was sacked he went to observe!"

Harry almost snorted. "We're talking Lucius Malfoy! He can't be that civic-minded."

"He's mad for power," Snape sneered. "I don't think you realise quite how much power the Board exercises over Hogwarts, not to mention that influencing the curricula here can potentially yield a dark wizard an entire army of young, malleable, minds! Use your head, Potter! Nothing but Azkaban would keep him away from those meetings! He certainly wouldn't miss one to run around the Pyrenees warning Muggleborns of their coming doom!"

"Okay, so he was with the Board of Governors like you said," Harry decided. "But still, he can Apparate all the way to France, I just bet he can. So maybe he slipped away for just a few minutes and went and talked to these people--"

"He was not out of my sight for one instant. Do you hear me? Not one instant, Harry. I wouldn't let him out of my sight for fear he might slip down here and attempt something foul."

"Uh . . ." Harry thought hard. "Maybe the person in the meeting with you was some other Death Eater on Polyjuice, right? So the real Lucius could be over in France--"

"I cannot believe that you are seriously arguing that the man who tortured you with needles has suddenly become determined to save Muggleborns from Voldemort's tender mercies!" Snape exclaimed. "Are you listening to yourself? This is like your other dream, Harry. It's about you, not the future. You know how Draco longs for his father to be redeemed, to achieve what I have and turn away from darkness. The casewitch even told you that he yearns for that, and then what did you do when you were upset about how horrid Lucius has been to him, but dream that very thing!"

"But my seer dreams always come true, you know that, so there must be something to this--"

"In case it's slipped your feeble mind, I am not going to unadopt you! Though you may well wish I had if you insist on going on about Lucius like this!"

"All right, so it's not too likely Malfoy's changed his stripes," Harry admitted, rubbing his temples. "What if it was the other way around, and it wasn't him in France. Say, he was here trying to expel Draco as you witnessed, and somebody was in France impersonating him. You know, on Polyjuice."

"Yes, I do know about Polyjuice," Snape snidely put in. "How much do you know? Or, to put it another way, when you were wandering the Slytherin common room a few years back pretending to be Crabbe--or were you Goyle?--just how easy did you find it to walk in another person's body? Did you feel you could copy the needed mannerisms in any remotely convincing way, or speak with the right intonations and lexicon even though you possessed the right voice?"
Harry stared. "You knew? You never said, you didn't take points, you just let us get away with it?"

"I hardly think coughing up fur balls constitutes getting away with much. My one regret is not getting to see the catwoman in person. But your utter idiocy years ago hardly matters to me now, Potter, though I'd hope you'd realise from this that I was never as stupid as you believed--"

"I've never once thought of you as stupid!"

"The point," Snape interrupted, "is the Polyjuice does nothing to help one act the part of another. It's a costume, nothing more. How successful was my impersonation of Lupin? Be honest. Suppose Dumbledore hadn't let you in on the deception. How long would you have needed to realise I wasn't in fact the werewolf?"

"Don't call him that," Harry muttered. "Um, I don't know. Maybe five minutes." When Snape scowled, Harry blurted, "Well, you said to be honest! I know Remus, is all. I could tell the difference."

"And Lucius Malfoy, in your dream. Didn't he seem exactly the way you picture him? Down to the last mannerism, the last detail?"

Harry blinked. "Well, yeah. But if that means it couldn't have been somebody else on Polyjuice, then it means it was really him, and we're back to wondering why he's suddenly gone good!"

"No, what it means, you young fool, is that he matches your impressions perfectly because it is your subconscious that conjured him! Of course he appears exactly as he should, Harry! He's the product of your memories. Had you in fact seen someone else on Polyjuice, 'Lucius' would be behaving distinctly strangely, I do assure you."

"All right, all right, the Polyjuice is out," Harry raggedly admitted. "And I can't believe he's reformed, not really. Though I sort of want to, I guess, for Draco's sake. And that's just sick, it is. 'Cause what I really ought to want is him dead and buried. Well, part of me wants that too, I guess, but then I think of Draco and the whole feeling sort of gets twisted up. Actually," he slowly admitted, "it was easier to hate Lucius when I hated Draco too. Maybe that's why I fought so hard not to trust him, you know? I probably knew it would make everything a lot more complicated." Harry frowned, then. "But how did Lucius strike you? I mean, as himself?"

"No," Snape announced. "One thing was wrong. One thing more that proves we are discussing a figment of your mind, and not the actual man. Lucius Malfoy, Harry, speaks absolutely flawless French. Yet you dream of him in France, speaking to French wizards, but conducting the entire conversation in English, even though their command of it was obviously lacking in several regards? If you really dreamed the past, why wasn't Lucius speaking French as is his custom whenever he crosses the Channel?"

"Uh, because I don't know any French?" Harry hazarded a guess.

"A seer dream would not take that into account. You would have heard exactly what was said, though you would have understood nothing. But as your own mind, not any psychic force, was creating the images and sounds in the dream, you had recourse only to languages you know. Though, I would expect your French extends to oui and monsieur, correct? Exactly the words scattered amid all the English. Amazing, isn't it? Not to mention that your idea of French people appears to include some very hackneyed bad accents--"

"All right, you're right!" Harry conceded. "Obviously the dream wasn't real at all. Well, not that part, anyway. And if not that part, then not the other, either, I suppose. But . . . listen, if what was really
going on was that I went to sleep sorry for Draco and wishing something good for him, then why did I end up dreaming he was going to die?"

"I expect you'll know the answer to that once your memories are back in place."

Harry closed his eyes and braced himself. "Do it, then. I'm ready." And he thought he was, but it was still a shock, as Snape had said, to feel the experience of that dream rushing back into his mind to take up residence. He staggered slightly, then righted himself. And then he gave a long sigh and said, "Oh. So that's it. Yeah, I would be thinking that. I've been thinking it a lot, actually. And it makes perfect sense."

"It being, specifically?" Snape sounded a bit impatient.

Flushing a little bit, Harry admitted, "Um, well I have to move up to the Tower pretty soon, and this'll sound stupid after all the complaining I used to do about him, but I'm going to miss Draco. I mean, I'll visit like I promised but it won't be the same, and it's a bit like losing a brother just when I've finally got one, that's all."

"And you always lose people," Snape echoed his own words back to him. "Or so you believe."

"Yeah," Harry sighed. "So what are we going to do, then? I mean, the dream probably wasn't true in the least, I grant you that. But just in case, shouldn't we warn Draco? He can't get shoved off the Owler if he doesn't leave here, after all, and if he knows he might get killed going out, he'll stay where he belongs . . ."

"Oh, warn him by all means," Snape announced in a hard tone, waving a sarcastic hand toward the door as though urging him to it. "And when he asks how you know your dream to be prophetic, do be sure to explain that you always dream a factual past, and go right on to taunt him with the prospect of his father doing something decent for once in his miserable existence!"

"I don't have to tell Draco about that part," Harry weakly protested.

"No? How are you going to prove to him that he is indeed in danger, then?"

"I'll, er, misdirect him a bit, I guess," Harry decided. When Snape scoffed out loud, the boy protested, "I can keep a secret--"

"Not ten hours ago you proved the opposite! Do not get me started on what I think of your having decided, despite my clear disapprobation, to tell him about your birth prophecy!" Curling a lip, Snape mercilessly went on, "I know you, Potter. You aren't nearly Slytherin enough to keep up a lie when someone you care about begins pressing you for details. If I liked, I could make you tell me here and now just exactly what you thought you were doing with that Polyjuice all those years ago!"

Probably true, Harry reflected, but still, he objected, "I kept my promise not to tell Ron or Hermione about my operation until it was safe to talk, you know!"

"But you didn't misdirect them, which is what this situation will require. You refused to speak of it, and to their credit, they didn't press you. Draco will press you for details about your dream. Who wouldn't, after being told their own death has been forecast? And will you be able to sustain a lie?"

He wouldn't, Harry reluctantly realised. After all, if it wasn't for Draco stopping him, he'd have told Hermione about his magic when she started pressing for details about his aches and pains. And that, despite knowing that his father would be furious . . .

"I might end up mentioning what I saw Lucius doing," Harry finally admitted. "And that would just
about kill Draco, wouldn't it? I mean, he'd want it to be true! He might want it to be true even if it meant he'd get into a fight in the Owlery." Harry suddenly felt sick. "Oh, God. Draco's really proud of his duelling skills. If he hears about the Owlery he might start thinking of it as a challenge or something. I mean, he does have that problem with his impulse-control . . . But no, I don't think he'd really go looking for a fight . . . But what if he thought the Owlery thing had to happen so that the other part could, so that his father would turn good? What if he thinks they're both the future? Telling him about the dream might make him want to go up to the Owlery!"

"I seriously doubt Draco is quite that irrational," Snape put in. "But Harry, to tell him anything at all would be simply cruel. Not very Gryffindor of you, in fact."

It was just like Severus to use his Gryffindor tendencies against him at will. "Manipulative bastard, aren't you?" Harry remarked, though pleasantly. He wasn't trying to score a point; he just wanted to show his father that he understood the motive behind that last remark.

"Actually," Snape deigned to inform him, "I thought you classed me a rat bastard. No, of late it's been vicious bastard, I do believe."

Shocked to the core, Harry exclaimed, "You said you wouldn't sneak up on me with any more Legilimency!"

"I don't recall promising that."

"But wait, I've been Occluding like mad . . . Oh, no. Am I letting my defences down without realizing from time to time?"

"They're down right now," Snape pointed out. "You dropped them as you cleared your mind so I might pensieve out the dream. To no ill effect, I am gratified to see. But no, Harry, you haven't failed at Occlumency to my knowledge, and no, I haven't surreptitiously read your thoughts. I don't have to, not when you mutter vicious bastard under your breath almost every time we visit Devon."

"Well, you are," Harry defended himself. "Vicious, I mean. My whole forearm still hurts from the way that Troneo curse slammed me all the way across the field and into that stone wall."

Snape's expression was tightly shuttered, as though he regretted his viciousness but wasn't disposed to change it, or apologise. "Shall I heal it?"

A little ashamed to be complaining when Snape was doing his best to make sure Harry would survive whatever life threw at him, the boy shook his head. "Nah. It'll be okay."

Snape gave a brisk nod. "Now, the dream. Since it was merely some species of nightmare, you will say not one word to Draco. Is that clear?"

Harry raised troubled eyes. "I don't think it's a seer dream, all right? It's stupid, the whole thing, and I just don't. But what if we've missed something? What if we're wrong? We have to do something to protect Draco, we just have to."

"Very well," Snape sighed, clearly irritated. "This will be a colossal waste of my time, but I will go to the Owlery personally and ward it to be sure that only birds can pass in and out. If someone attempts to throw Draco off, they'll do no more than knock him against an invisible wall. Will that set your fears to rest?"

Harry thought about it and decided it would. "Why isn't there a spell like that already?" he asked, more from curiosity than any other motive.
Snape gave him a look Harry hadn't seen in a while, the one that said Harry wasn't being any too bright. "There is. Believe me, it is not terribly likely a student could fall from the Owlery, let alone be thrown. I will, however, augment the protections as I have said." His voice went silky, then. "And in return, you will do something for me."

"Right, keep quiet about the false seer dream."

"Something else as well. You will resume taking Truthful Dreams each night."

Harry stiffened. "You don't experiment on students, remember? I can't take that stuff when I've been having seer dreams!"

"What you've been having are paranoid delusions," Snape retorted. "And because something in your twisted psyche is making them masquerade as seer dreams, they are distressing you beyond all reason. And me as well, arguing about such tripe as you're going to unadopt me and Draco's going to die," he sneered. "You said once you wished to become dreamed out. A sensible notion, I have decided. You will take Truthful Dreams and deal with all the nightmare experiences that are causing these nocturnal disruptions, and that is an end to the matter."

"Oh, no it's not--"

"You will do as I say," Snape stressed, glaring down at him. He looked away then, his gaze strangely evasive as he added, "The potion takes a week to make. Once I have it prepared, you will take it each night without fail until I say otherwise. Is that understood?"

Strange, whenever Harry had asked for some Truthful Dreams before, Snape had had some on hand. He'd even had some with him in Devon. But now . . .

"What happened to Don't you think I keep essential potions on hand at all times, Potter?" Harry inquired, intrigued when something like a dull red flush began to stain the hollows of Snape's neck. The man clenched his jaw, clamping down some sort of iron control, and the colour stopped spreading. More curious than before, Harry pressed, "Dad? Is something wrong?"

"Apart from your defiance?" Snape icily inquired. "Nothing whatsoever."

That, Harry clearly sensed, was misdirection. Or more like a big fat lie. And wasn't it strange that he could tell? Unlike Draco, Snape was an exceptional liar. He'd had to be. But now he wasn't meeting Harry's eyes. And the reference to defiance . . . that was very odd. Snape didn't talk to him that way, not any longer. They talked things out.

Whatever was going on, it had to do with this potion, Harry sensed. "Why don't you have any Truthful Dreams already made up?" he softly asked.

"It is not a subject for discussion. Leave it."

Harry shook his head.

"Would you defy James like this?" Snape tossed out, the question delivered as though the Potions Master thought it would put an end to the conversation, once and for all.

"I don't know; I never got to know him enough to find out," Harry flatly returned. "But it hardly matters. You're my father now. And there's more to being one than just caring about me. You need to let me care back. But you won't even tell me why you're low on a stupid potion! How's that supposed to make me feel? It sure doesn't make me feel like your son, Dad."
"I cannot believe my brewing habits can precipitate such potent angst," Snape sneered, standing so abruptly that he knocked his chair to the stone floor. "So I've no Truthful Dreams on hand! Would you take it if I did?"

"Why don't you have any?"

"Obviously, because I stopped making it, you half-witted moronic excuse for a student!"

"Why?" Harry said, and that time his voice emerged as a full-fledged shout. "Why, damn it?"

"Don't you rail at me," Snape scathed, pointing a shaking finger at the door. "Get out of my sight! Now, Potter, this instant, out!"

The words brought Harry up short, brought his own sarcasm to the surface. "Is your next line going to be that I don't deserve to be your son? And what are you going to say to drive me away if that one doesn't work either?"

At that, Snape seemed to realise how far things had gone. Or perhaps, how far they had come. "I don't wish to argue," he quietly announced, passing a weary hand over his eyes. "I merely wish to be alone, Harry. Please, just go to bed."

"No."

"What did you just say to me?"

"No," Harry calmly repeated. "I want you to tell me what's wrong. Tell me about the potion." And when Snape said nothing at all, Harry added, "Please. Please, Severus."

The last word seemed to unlock something. Snape picked up the chair that had toppled over, sank into it, and looked at Harry with eyes that seemed decades older than they were. "I . . ." He cleared his throat, and said in a rambling tone, "Harry. I used to think that all I wanted from you was that you be respectful, but now I want your respect, which I find is a much more difficult thing."

Harry thought that over, but found that all he could reply was, "I don't understand what you mean . . . ."

Snape waved a hand through the air as though to start over. "The potion. I'd rather you not know. It reflects badly on me. Were I not a Potions Master, it might be excusable, what I have done . . ."

Harry still didn't understand, though he was finally getting a sense that they were getting somewhere. "You . . . um, messed up brewing it? Well, you're human, aren't you? You've seen me do worse in class, I'm sure. And besides, I already know about the time you made a mistake brewing the Wolfsbane."

"I can brew Truthful Dreams in my sleep," Snape lightly sneered, though it seemed his heart wasn't in it.

"Then what?"

Snape suddenly appeared to find the wall of great interest. "You have no idea how long I've taken it, obviously, nor any grasp of what the formulation means." He looked back at Harry. Another long pause. "You have noticed that I am not in the best frame of mind, as of late?"

Talk about an understatement . . . "It's not just Death Eater activity eating at you," Harry guessed, though he'd guessed by then that being left out of the war might be bothering his father just as much.
Hadn't he taunted Sirius for having to sit it out? "It's something to do with this potion."

"It's the lack of the potion, Harry," Snape admitted. "I stopped making it deliberately, to deprive myself of any supply. Taking it had become a . . . habit, I had recently realised. Actually, it was telling you to be careful not to become . . . ah, addicted to healing potions that brought me to my senses. It came to me then that I'd been taking Truthful Dreams for well over a year. It was necessary for a long while, believe me. I had to be able to report to the Order in great detail about each and every meeting I attended. I tried to stop taking it once that part of my work was over." He sighed. "But then I began to have such nightmares over Samhain that I resumed, and after that . . ." A low shrug coursed through the man's shoulders as he sat slightly slumped. "I was simply so used to taking it that I made no effort to stop again. Until quite recently."

"Oh," Harry murmured. "You're . . ." He didn't want to say addicted, even if Snape had. The word seemed sort of judgmental, though he knew he was wrong to think so. But Snape had said that thing about wanting his respect, so Harry didn't care to say anything that might make the man think he'd lost it, or even come close. "So you're . . . uh, suffering from withdrawal, I guess," he compromised. Snape nodded, the motion stiff as he sat up more, his posture acquiring the precise one he usually favoured. "Purple loosestrife. The abrupt loss of it has rendered my temper . . . a bit more volatile than I'd like."

"I'm glad you told me," Harry said, making his voice as warm as he could. And then, realizing that it wasn't right to expect Snape to admit to things if he wouldn't, he went on, "I'd rather know what's really going on with you, see? Because I'd actually started to wonder if you were angrier about the books I ruined than you were willing to say. I . . . um, I even asked Draco to lend me some money so I could try to replace them, but he told me that wouldn't help."

His father's glance on him was wary. "You can't really have thought it would."

"You . . . yelled at Neville and threw his book across the room when he ruined it, I heard. And I thought, maybe you overreacted to that because you really resented what that Lumos did to your own books . . ." Harry flinched a bit, but went on, determined to make Snape understand. "I . . . um, growing up, I wasn't allowed to touch much on the Dursley shelves, including the books. Something about my grubby little fingers staining the pages, though nobody seemed to mind chocolate sauce spilled all over the place if it was Dudley doing it. I don't think you're like them, honestly. But I wasn't very comfortable, either, knowing I'd ruined so much of your stuff. Habit, I guess. Like with you and the potion."

"Speaking of which," Snape briskly resumed, "I will have a supply ready in a week and you will take it."

Not this again . . . "Maybe you shouldn't make it," the boy suggested. "You know . . . um, temptation?"

"I think I can restrain myself," Snape dryly announced. "My withdrawal, as you put it, is well underway. It just seemed simpler in the interim to not have any on hand. But as you now need it--"

"Just because this last dream fooled me doesn't mean I'm done with seer dreams entirely," Harry put forth. "The unadoption one still could be one. In fact, I'm sure it is. Lotion Potion, remember?"

"I know what is best--" Snape began, but Harry cut him off.

"Like you knew what was best with Ron?"
Snape narrowed his eyes. "When it came to Mr Weasley's punishment, I perhaps had more than one agenda," was all he would admit. "Be that as it may, I did in fact think that protracted time in the dungeons, even time spent doing lines, would be salutary for the young man's ability to see what was laid before his stubborn eyes."

"I know you thought that." Harry leaned forward, hands on his knees, and looked his father in the eye. "You were wrong, though. No offence, and no hard feelings, and I do respect you, honest, but all you accomplished with those lines was to make Ron mad, and as long as he was mad, he couldn't see that there might be more to you than you like to show in Potions class."

"I fail to see any purpose in this post-mortem," Snape remarked. "Unless you want me to agree that you know more than your father, perhaps? That sixteen is the height of wisdom?"

"I don't know more than you," Harry admitted. "I just don't want you forcing a potion down my throat."

"Of course I would not force you, you idiot child," Snape stiffly conceded, though the last three words helped soften the harsh tone he'd used. "I happen to believe you will continue to have highly disturbing dreams and that the potion would have helped you. I was hardly going to let it become a habit for you, if that was your concern?"

"I know that. It's just what you said about not mixing it with seer dreams. The Draco one isn't, I agree. But . . . more are coming."

"You can't possibly know that."

"No," Harry admitted. "But my instincts are often good, remember?"

"I have a feeling you won't ever let me forget having said as much."

Harry smiled, the expression fleeting. "Dad . . . I think you should tell Draco about the potion. He's noticed your . . . um, mood swings, too. Don't worry. He'll still respect you in the morning."

Snape was looking at him rather quizzically. "You wish me to wake him up and tell him now?"

"Oh, no. That's just a Muggle phrase. Means . . . never mind, it's stupid."

"I think the onset of babbling definitely indicates a need for more sleep."

"Yeah." Harry yawned, suddenly so tired that he could feel himself drooping. "Um, want your socks back before I go?"

"No. Just go. Good night, Harry."

"Good night," Harry echoed, thinking that was much better than the previous Get out Snape had so scathingly delivered. Hmm, they'd managed to have a fight and come out the other side of it all right, and without it taking days to work things through. That was a nice thought, Harry decided as he padded out the door Snape waved open for him.

Once in his own room, he looked down at Draco for a moment, keeping his distance in case those Slytherin reflexes sensed him again. He couldn't help but think about his dream. It would be all right, wouldn't it? The stupid thing wasn't a seer dream, and Snape was going to secure the Owlery anyway, and Draco did know better than to leave the dungeons---

"Playing ghoul again, are we?" Draco's voice broke into his thoughts.
Slytherin reflexes were better than he'd figured. Harry reminded himself to keep that in mind when it was time for him to face his new house mates in their own territory.

"No, just thinking," he answered.

"Did Severus sort out your dream?"

"Yeah..." Harry rolled wearily into bed and fussed with the blankets until he had them just right.

"Good..." Draco lapsed right back into sleep.

And after just a moment more, so did Harry.

Harry didn't know if Snape actually had told Draco about the potion; he just knew that for a couple of days, the Slytherin boy didn't mention anything about Snape's mood or his temper. Just as well. Harry thought he'd have a hard time not explaining the situation, and it really wasn't his place.

That morning, Snape had returned from breakfast in the Great Hall with a series of packages bobbing through the air behind him. Books, he'd explained, with a wry glance at Harry. A quick indexing spell performed on each neatly wrapped box revealed the contents. Snape banished one package into his office, and said that as it was Saturday, Harry and Draco could work on shelving the remainder of the books that morning. He promised to take them to Devon that afternoon, which made Draco grin and Harry sort of groan, and then Snape was leaving again, muttering something about sometimes feeling he was more a Detentions Master than a Potions Master.

Draco wasted no time in performing a box-splitting spell, but when he tried to levitate the books out, a flashing red light surrounded the cartons for a few seconds. "Looks like some of them, at least, must be warded."

It was news to Harry that books could be, but these were wizarding books, so he simply pitched in and started lifting stacks out of the boxes. It didn't take him long to realise that after those first few seconds, he was the only one pitching in.

"It won't make you a house-elf to help me, you know," he commented as he heaved a set of dark black books onto the table.

Draco looked up from a slim volume that had caught his attention. "Hmm? Oh, well. If you insist." Instead of helping, though, he set himself to studying the spines of several stacks already on the table. "You know, I wonder if this is some sort of test," he mused.

Harry gave him a curious glance.

"To see just how we'll shelve them without direction," Draco mused. "Severus probably wants to see what we come up with."

Harry stopped unpacking then, and studied the book titles himself. "Alphabetical or by subject, then?"

Draco gave a rather sly grin. "I know. Just for fun, let's put them on the shelves by height. Tall ones on the bottom shelves, shortest ones at the top." And when Harry shook his head, he urged, "Oh, it hardly matters, you know. When Severus wants a book he can just Accio it by title."

"But you said the books were warded--"
"Not against *Accio*," Draco announced in that smug voice he did so well.

Harry had to agree, it would be a little bit funny to see the look on Snape's face if they organized the books that way. It was a harmless prank . . . nothing like making fun of the man's shampoo--or lack thereof . . .

"The worst thing that can happen is he makes us reshelve them," Draco wheedled. "But he might laugh, you know. And . . . well, Severus could do with a laugh, I think."

Harry gave the other boy a sharp look, but couldn't tell if Draco was referring to Snape's withdrawal from Truthful Dreams, or not. It was true, however, that he thought it would be good to see his father have something to laugh over.

Nodding, Harry began scooping up some of the tallest books and putting them away. Draco didn't help, but by then Harry wasn't expecting him to. The Slytherin boy probably considered he had done his part just in figuring out how the books should be organized, even if his solution was more a joke than anything else. At any rate, before Harry could complain, the magic doorbell rang and Draco was sauntering over to look at the parchment which read simply, *Hermione Granger*.

"You think she'd give us the weekend off," Draco lightly complained, but at least when he opened the door he was civil. That was all that counted to Harry.

Hermione's eyes widened as she took in the scene in Snape's living room. As Harry might have guessed, the first words out her mouth were, "Oh, what wonderful books--" and then she was down on her knees, fishing through boxes and oohing and aahing over the contents. "Mostly Potions, a smattering of defence, and a few that look a bit like Restricted Section material . . ." Sighing with pleasure, she looked up at Harry. "This must be the best part of living here. I always suspected Snape would have a really marvellous research collection. Does he add to it regularly? Do you get new books all the time down here?"

Harry shook his head, relieved for once to be having a normal conversation with Hermione. He should have thought sooner to get her mind onto books . . . "These are replacements for some books that got destroyed," he explained. "Draco told you about it, remember?"

Hermione glanced once at the Slytherin boy, who was by then seated at the table reading that same slim volume that had caught his eye earlier. Harry strained to see the title and was pleased that even at a distance, the small type was visible. *Blood is Thicker than Potion* . . . Harry wasn't sure what a book like that would cover or why Draco would be so interested in it.

Scooping up a few tiny little treatises on various seeds--they might have come in handy when he'd been researching the Gryffindor well-wish--he reached up to place them on the topmost shelf.

And that was when it happened.

Hermione looked up to ask something else about Snape's books, and as she did, Harry's loose sleeve pulled back to display his entire forearm, and the ugly black-and-yellow bruise that marred it.

Hermione drew in a harsh breath, and Harry thought, *Uh-oh, I really should have let Snape heal this one*. But he'd wanted his father to respect him, too, not think of him as a crybaby, and anyway, it was inches above his wrist where nobody would see . . . except that Hermione *had*.

Harry hurriedly pulled his sleeve back down, but not before Draco, sensing the change of mood, had glanced up from his reading and taken the entire scene in.

"Harry--" Hermione began.
He would know that tone anywhere. It meant that she'd had just about enough of his lies and evasions. It meant she was done holding her peace about it. She was going to do something. She was going to tell someone that Snape was abusing him, for pity's sake! Or maybe she thought that Draco was to blame and Snape wasn't doing anything to stop it. Either way, she was going to report the matter to Dumbledore, or maybe Wizard Family Services, and that horrid casewitch was going to come back to take him away, and make Severus sign some awful paper saying he wasn't a fit father or something. Harry could see it unfolding in his mind.

I might as well just tell her, Harry abruptly came to a decision. Severus will just have to deal with it. It's not like her knowing is any real problem. Hermione'll keep my personal business to herself, just like Ron's been doing.

"It's like this," he cut across her words. "I've been working really hard to get my magic back--"

"And he decided to try flying, of all things," Draco smoothly interrupted, his silver eyes glittering in potent warning that if Harry didn't shut up, Draco would find a way to make him. "On my broom no less. I could have told him if he'd asked, that I'd hexed it years ago to throw anyone but me. Trials of living in Slytherin," he explained almost as an aside.

Hermione had narrowed her eyes, and no wonder. Draco wasn't a great liar at the best of times, and he'd delivered most of that with such an undertone of hostility that the whole thing sounded fishy. Maybe Hermione would just think Draco was angry that Harry had supposedly touched his broom without permission? Of course Harry knew the truth. The Slytherin boy was fuming because Harry had come so close to confessing the truth about his magic being back.

"You were thrown from a broom," Hermione echoed in a blank sort of voice, as though that were so daft she was having trouble even repeating the words. "And that would be where, here in the living room?"

Draco gave off a laugh that almost made Harry cringe, it sounded so fake. "Oh, Severus lets us out sometimes. Haven't you come down recently and noticed nobody was home?"

Hermione slowly nodded, her eyes still suspicious as she pressed, "But where do you go?"

"Well, that has to stay secret," Draco informed her. "Sorry. We're a bit paranoid for Harry's safety, but you can't possibly object to that, I'm thinking."

When Hermione still looked extremely dubious, Harry ventured, "Listen, I know that bruise looked bad but you don't understand--"

"Stop talking, Potter," Draco snapped.

"I just want to say that--"

"There's only one thing you should say," Draco darkly warned, "and it's that you won't try sneaking off on my broom again!"

It came to Harry then that this was a conversation he really shouldn't have with an audience. Things were bound to get too ugly. So, rolling his eyes, he sneered, "I wouldn't touch your lousy broom again. Some of us have a Firebolt, you know."

"And the reason you didn't just try out your Firebolt if you wanted to test your flying, Harry?" Hermione smartly inquired. "Hmmm?"

"Draco's broom was handier," Harry invented, relieved that he could at least tell the truth as he
added, "He brings it along sometimes when the three of us leave the dungeons."

"I see," Hermione said, in a tone that announced she didn't, not at all.

*And* that Harry hadn't heard the end of this.
For once, Hermione didn't linger, though she did cast Harry several rather dire looks, as though challenging him to come clean. He probably would have, if not for Draco standing right there. It was just stupid to let Hermione go away without clearing this up. He knew though, he just knew, that if he tried to tell Hermione the truth, Draco would interrupt straight away with more nonsense about falling from brooms, or possibly something even more patently ridiculous.

Of course, Harry reflected, he could just go ahead and blurt everything out, but with Draco's impulse control problems? He might lose his temper and hex Harry or something --goodness knew he'd got enough practice at it in Devon-- and that would be just great, wouldn't it? All Harry needed was for Hermione to leave here with some actual evidence that he was being abused, instead of just vague suspicions.

Far better, Harry decided, to hash it all out once Hermione had gone.

The moment the door was closed, Harry rounded on Draco and pinned him with a glare. "We're going to have to tell her."

"Oh, don't be an imbecile," Draco scathed, scooping up the book he'd been reading before. He spared Harry a cursory glance. "Severus doesn't want that Muggleborn knowing about your magic, and that's that."

"Don't call her that!" Harry erupted.

"Why shouldn't I?" Draco smirked as his eyes returned to his text. "It's what she is, Harry."

"It means you think of her as something less than you or me, and don't think I don't know it!"

Draco just shrugged as he turned a page.

Fed up, Harry glanced once at Sals who was quietly basking in her charmed box, then flicked his hand in Draco's direction and hissed a summoning charm Parseltongue, "Book, get over here!"

The instant *Blood is Thicker than Potion* leapt into his hand, Harry tossed it behind him, onto a low shelf, and growled, "I'll have it out with Severus when he gets home from his detentions, but I've had it with lying to Hermione. It's not working anyway, she's starting to wonder what's going on down here--"

"Well she wouldn't wonder, would she," Draco sneered, stomping over, "if you'd got your bruises healed like I told you to! What the hell's wrong with you, showing off your battle wounds like that? Maybe you are an attention-seeking little arse like I used to think! Or maybe your little girlfriend is so important that you wanted her to guess you've been fending off curses like mad almost every day! Is that why you showed her Potter? Well, is it?"

Harry wasn't sure what to react to first. "She . . ." He cleared his throat, a little embarrassed to have to point it out, but Draco didn't seem to realise the real problem, so he detailed, "She doesn't suspect I've been practicing magic, Malfoy. Hermione thinks I'm getting beat up or something!"

Draco stopped breathing for a second.

"Yeah," Harry emphasized, now that he had the other boy's attention.
"If you knew she thought that, why didn't you tell her you aren't?"

"Maybe because every time I tried, you started butting in with rubbish about transfigured beds dumping me on the floor!"

"Maybe that was because you were going to tell her the whole fucking truth, instead of just the part she needs to know! Well, it's certainly good to know the truth about you, Potter. You go on about being half-Slytherin sometimes but deep down, she's the one who's really your mate. Her and Weasely!"

"I told you the whole truth too, you arse!" Harry shouted, fed up with Draco's insecurities. "Against Severus' advice, too, and don't think he wasn't pretty upset with me! I told you about the prophecy that's basically crapped up my entire life! Which, by the fucking way, I've never told Ron and Hermione about. Well, not completely, anyway, so get over yourself, will you? I like you too!"

When Draco looked rather stunned at that outburst, Harry calmed slightly and added, "Ron hasn't betrayed my secret, not even to Hermione, and she's just as trustworthy. I think you even know that, at some level. But you want me not to tell her because you like having one over on her. Because it makes you feel like . . . you're closer to me than she is."

Having recovered from the moment before, Draco leaned against the wall and arched an eyebrow in an extremely studied pose. "You make it all sound so maudlin, Potter," he drawled. "Do you really imagine I'm remotely interested in competing with Gryffindors?" He gave a low, derisive laugh.

"Yes," Harry flatly answered, ignoring all the misdirection going on. "You're more than interested. You're obsessed, and with good reason. I haven't forgotten what you told me about your last name, how it could end you up in Azkaban all on its own, practically, and I might be all that stands in the way."

Draco, Harry noticed, was doing his best to look bored.

"You aren't competing with Ron and Hermione," Harry tried. "There's no competition--"

"No contest, you mean," Draco bitterly broke in.

"There's no competition," Harry stressed, "because all my friends are important to me, all right? You as much as them. And for pity's sake, Draco, you and I are brothers these days!"

Draco's nostrils flared. "Well, just remember that when you're ensconced in the heart of Gryffindor again, why don't you?"

"I won't forget," Harry promised, then frowned. "I might have to go back sooner than Severus has planned, if we don't do something to fix this Hermione situation, you realise."

Draco snorted. "Oh, please. You think that Hufflepuff casewitch is going to believe for one second that Severus is abusing you? I don't think so, not after all the love and care he showered on you right in front of her!"

Harry actually wasn't sure what the casewitch might think. "She might think you're doing the abusing, Draco. And that Severus isn't doing enough to put an end to it."

"Why would she think that?" Then Draco softly swore. "Oh, shite. Maybe she's read my school file."

"Yeah, you haven't been the nicest guy in the castle," Harry merely said, relieved that he didn't have to mention the other motive the casewitch was sure to consider, which was that Draco was jealous
over how Harry'd been adopted and he hadn't. Speaking of which, Harry groaned, "Remember the
dream I told you about? Unadoption?"

Draco paled. "You think Family Services will believe this tripe and decide Severus isn't a fit father?"

"I think I'd better make sure they don't get a chance to hear Hermione's wild suspicions," Harry
nodded. "When Severus comes home, will you help me convince him that she needs to know the
truth?"

Draco looked a bit ill at the prospect of letting the Gryffindor girl in on the secret, but he nodded.
Reluctantly.

Very reluctantly.

Then of course, being a Slytherin, he immediately had something he wanted in return. But in the
circumstances, it was hardly something Harry could resent. "You forgot to hold your wand to cover
that Accio charm," he pointed out. "Better not get in the habit of letting anybody see your wandless
magic."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, better not. Thanks."

Draco merely nodded, then summoned his book back to himself and resumed his reading.

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Harry was actually in two minds about waiting for his father to get home. He was just itching to call
the man on the Floo, but this wasn't really an emergency, was it? Certainly, he couldn't claim that his
life or Draco's was in danger, and that had been Severus' criterion for disturbing him when he was
with students.

Even if the man was just supervising a detention instead of conducting a class, Harry figured he'd
better just wait.

But how long was it going to take the man to get home? It was already long past noon, and hadn't he
promised to take them to Devon? Maybe, Harry darkly thought, considering how black Snape's
mood had been lately, those detentions weren't going very well. He felt pretty sorry for whichever
unlucky student was stuck scrubbing desks under Snape's watchful eye.

That made him remember, though, how Snape had been with him the night before. Volatile, sure,
and he hadn't flinched from insulting Harry or throwing out quite nasty comments like out of my
sight or would you speak to James this way . . . but for all that, he'd been remarkably tolerant in other
respects. In the end, he'd opened up enough to admit to something really personal. That was actually
pretty amazing. Maybe even more remarkable was the fact that he'd given up on trying to make
Harry take Truthful Dreams if he didn't want to.

They'd negotiated . . . just like Snape had said they would when Harry had first asked him about
rules. Harry felt pretty good about that. Like . . . not only was he getting to know his father better,
like he'd wished, but also like Snape was a good enough father to hold it together even when he was
under a huge amount of stress.

Like they were going to be okay, really okay . . .

That, of course, only made Harry all the more worried about the immediate future. Since when did
things ever work out okay for him? As far as Harry was concerned, getting hopeful was almost an
omen that his hopes were going to be dashed.

The minute Snape came in the door late that afternoon, Harry rushed to him, blurtling, "Hermione was here and she saw my bruise and I'm sure she thinks something absolutely awful is going on! I mean, she's noticed before when I've been sore, but this seemed like it was the final straw for her--"

Snape hung up his cloak as Harry spoke, then interrupted, "Miss Granger stopped by to see me about the matter, yes."

"Oh, God," Harry groaned. One part of him was glad that Hermione had enough sense to go to Severus with her suspicions, but the rest of him was just humiliated that his friends were so horrid to his father. Ron accusing him of molestation had been bad enough. And now this . . . "I'm so sorry," Harry said, swallowing. "It's my fault. I should have let you heal that bruise when you offered."

"Evidently," was all Snape replied as he crossed to Floo and ordered a pot of tea.

Draco glanced up from his reading but didn't say anything.

Snape poured three cups, pushed one over to Draco, and gestured that Harry should join them at the table. "Don't blame yourself for Miss Granger's assumptions," he calmly advised.

"You don't sound . . . er, too angry about them," Harry ventured.

The Potions Master shrugged. "I expect your friends to be negatively disposed toward us as a matter of course. It could be worse." Harry thought he meant Ron, but then Snape continued, "At least when she thought such things she had the courtesy to confront me rather than file an official complaint about the adoption."

Harry thought that sounded rather promising. "So did you tell her the truth, then?"

"I hardly thought that necessary," Snape drawled, sipping his tea. "I informed her that as I'm not comfortable with the prospect of my son remaining utterly vulnerable, I've been training you in hand-to-hand fighting."

"She bought that?"

"It has the benefit of being in part true," Snape pointed out. "I also told her that you and I had mutually agreed only to heal the worst of your injuries, as the potions in question can be quite addictive."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, that'll be all right, I guess," he murmured.

"One wonders why you didn't tell her that yourself," Snape suddenly remarked, setting down his cup with a clatter and narrowing a glare on Draco. "Instead, I hear you've filled her all-too-astute mind with no end of nonsensical stories."

Draco flushed. "Well, I had to think on my feet, you know--"

Snape's glare only became more feral. "In case you've never noticed," he snarled, "Miss Hermione Granger is quite highly intelligent! I would appreciate it in future if you would treat her as such, and spare me the necessity of sweeping up after you! I must say, she was very interested in why the two of you," here his glare shifted to include Harry, "didn't simply tell her that I was training Harry in self-defence."

_Uh-oh._ Harry froze, then managed to groan, "How did you explain why we didn't just admit to
Snape gave him a disgusted glance. "The day I cannot misdirect a sixteen-year-old Gryffindor is the day I tender my resignation," he sneered, taking up his cup again. He made Harry wait through several sips before continuing. "I told her that Draco was embarrassed a wizard should have to learn such a thing. And that you, Harry, were worried if Gryffindor learned of it, they might assume your magic was never coming back. That you were horrified at the prospect of demoralizing the war effort."

"Good thinking, Severus," Draco approved with a slight smirk in Harry's direction. You'd never known he'd been rebuked the moment before. No, he was too busy gloating. Harry could practically hear him. See, Harry? Severus has everything under control and there's no way we're letting that Muggleborn in on a thing . . .

Harry wasn't about to leave it at that. "I still think we need to tell Hermione the truth," he staunchly asserted.

"No," Snape snapped.

"Look, if she thinks you're teaching me Muggle fighting, it's just a short stretch from that to her deciding that you're being a little too rough on me and it's your . . . uh, past hostility at James making you hurt me--"

Snape's eyes darkened in a way Harry recognised as dangerous. "And just what would Miss Granger know about my hostility toward James? You told me you hadn't shared what you saw last year!"

"I didn't!" Harry yelped, a little bit alarmed. "It's common knowledge, Severus! Oh, not that incident in particular, but the fact that you hated him, yeah! Even the casewitch knew about it; she asked me if I was worried you might confuse the two of us!"

At that, the Potions Master appeared to calm. "We will not be telling anyone further about your magic, Harry. Anyone. If Merlin himself walked through that door and offered congratulations on your Lumos, I'd expect you to ask him what he's going on about. Do you understand me?"

"But Dad," Harry objected, "I'm sure it's just a matter of time before Hermione goes back to thinking--"

"I do not care what your friends think!" Snape erupted. "Or what anyone thinks, for that matter!"

"Well you'd better start," Harry shouted back. "Because if Wizard Family Services hears what she thinks, they'll probably take me away from you!"

Snape opened his mouth to yell again--Harry could tell--but was startled out of it by the same noise that in the same instant made Draco glance up, and Harry nearly jump out of his chair.

The magic doorbell, clanging inside all their heads.

Harry glanced at the door parchment, hoping it would read Hermione Granger.

But it didn't. Instead, his horrified gaze read names that sounded a death-knell inside his mind.

*Amaelia Thistlethorne, Richard Steyne.*

Harry nearly fainted, and the feeling only got worse when he saw Snape calmly rising to his feet. "Don't answer it," he begged.
Snape paused to look at him. "That's hardly going to help matters." When Harry closed his eyes in defeat, his father added, "Whatever happens, we will surmount it." And then, "Harry. Look at me, Harry."

The boy did.

"Occlude your mind," Snape urged. "And school your features. She will be watching your every expression to determine whether something is wrong. I know you feel unsettled, but you must show her how much you feel at ease. Do you understand?"

"Yeah," Harry groaned, getting himself together. Or trying. He wasn't sure how well he was doing, but he saw Draco give him an encouraging nod. Harry smiled back, practicing. And then Snape was opening the door.

The casewitch stood there, her garish red robes clashing with her hair. She was accompanied by a blond man barely taller than her.

"Miss Thistlethorne," Snape greeted her, bowing ever so slightly in a gesture of deference. "What a pleasure. Please, do come in."

The casewitch wasn't smiling, Harry noticed. Nor was the wizard with her, who looked stiffly about as though searching for evidence of abuse right there in the living room.

"Professor Snape," she levelly replied.

Remembering Draco's manner with guests before, Harry stepped forward. Best to act like he was perfectly at home, right? Well, he was perfectly at home in Snape's rooms, come to think of it, but best to make them see that. "May I take your cloaks?" he politely inquired, modulating his voice to a tone both relaxed and polite.

The casewitch shrugged out of hers, revealing a dress just as horribly red, but the wizard declined with a sharp shake of his head. "My new assistant, Mr Richard Steyne," Thistlethorne introduced him. "This is Mr Harry Potter. Of course you're well acquainted already with Professor Snape, and I dare say you recall Mr Malfoy from your own student days."

"Mr Steyne, a pleasure to see you once more," Snape drawled in a deep voice that somehow indicated a lack of pleasure, for all it also sounded sincere.

"Professor," Steyne replied, the single word just short of curt.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "I thought your name sounded familiar, though I don't believe we ever much talked--"

"No, seventh-years don't tend to fraternize with the lower forms," Steyne interrupted, his gaze still critical as he glanced around. When it settled on Harry, Steyne looked for his scar.

Harry covered an urge to sigh by politely asking, "Has Mr Darswaithe left the department, then?"

The casewitch looked a tiny bit put out. "Wizard Family Services is not a department," she corrected. "It is an adjunct services office."

Harry nodded as though he really understood the difference. Or cared.

"Horace Darswaithe has transferred to superintending an orphanage for squib children," she added, making Harry wonder if Darswaithe had transferred or been transferred.
Snape, Harry noticed, was gesturing that their visitors should sit down, but both Thistlethorne and Steyne ignored him. "I must admit, I was anticipating you might conduct a routine review soon," the Potions Master tried prompting.

At that, Amaelia Thistlethorne's voice grew positively frosty. "This is not routine, Professor Snape. We are investigating a complaint."

"A complaint?" Harry echoed, furrowing his brow as though he couldn't imagine what she meant. "About what?"

The casewitch glanced with disdain at Snape and Draco both, leaving Harry a bit confused as to just which of them she had decided to blame. When she looked back at Harry, her gaze softened, though not by much. "It has come to our attention that this placement may not be adequate to your needs, Mr Potter."

Harry widened his eyes, careful not to overdo it. "But I'm really happy here," he protested, looking at her as though any thinking person ought to know as much. "Look, I'm sure you know Severus has a lot of enemies who'd say . . . well, anything, to get back at him, but I couldn't ask for a better father."

"Be that as it may," the casewitch pompously interrupted, "I will need to interview each of you, alone. I'll start with you, Mr Potter." She paused then, seeming to consider something. "Do you feel a need for us to be chaperoned, again?"

He thought of saying yes and claiming that he had to have Snape in there with him, but was pretty sure she wouldn't allow that. And really, wouldn't it be better to show her how much good it had done Harry to live here?

"I'm sorry I demanded Remus sit with us before," he admitted. "I was on edge after Samhain, you know. Who wouldn't be? But I'm over that, now." Glancing over at Snape, he asked, "We can use your office, can't we, Dad?"

He didn't miss the slightly sardonic light in his father's eyes as Snape said, "By all means." Snape drew his wand to open the door, only to go still when Steyne drew his as well.

"I'm afraid I can't allow you to cast anything, Professor Snape," Steyne announced, her voice stiff and stern all at once. "I'm sure you understand."

He meant, Harry sensed, that Snape might be sneaking an eavesdropping charm onto the room. Or something even more underhanded.

The Potions Master had lowered his arm, though he said, "I certainly understand. However, short of allowing me to unlock my office wards . . ." He shrugged, and said with perfect confidence that was somehow not in the least arrogant, "It will take several hours for Aurors to dismantle them, if they can manage it at all."

"We will floo through to the headmaster's office," the casewitch decided.

Snape was calm, yet resolute. "I do believe your own policies and procedures specify that all complaints and investigations thereof will remain absolutely confidential. As this issue will no doubt be amicably resolved, I have no wish to have it brought to the attention of my employer."

"Take her into our bedroom, Harry," Draco suggested with a slightly strained smile. "After which Mr Steyne or Miss Thistlethorne can no doubt apply silencing charms or whatever is usual in a case like this."
"Will that be all right, Miss Thistlethorne?" Harry thought to ask.

She nodded, and waited for him to lead the way. As the door began to close behind them, Harry heard Draco complain --in a fake-sounding voice, no less-- "Severus, what is going on?"

"I'm afraid I can't allow you to answer that, Professor Snape," Steyne answered, sounding professional but also rather satisfied with himself. "If you've read our policies and procedures you must know that my role here is to assure that the two of you don't communicate before my colleague has a chance to interview you--"

Harry didn't hear the answer to that, as by then the door had closed completely.

"So who complained?" Harry pressed first off, sitting down on his bed as the casewitch took up a position on the one opposite. He knew, of course, that she wouldn't tell him, but he figured a normal reaction would be for him to want to know.

"You heard your guardian. The whole investigation is confidential," Thistlethorne reminded him.

"Father," Harry corrected.

She gave him a long, considering look. "When last we spoke you couldn't even call yourself his son."

"I know," the boy admitted. "It took me a while to get used to having someone. Severus was great about it. He just let me be me, insecurities and all." A frown creasing his brow, Harry added, "I understand if you can't say who complained, but you can tell me what they said, can't you? I mean, placement not adequate to my needs? What does that mean, Severus has to give me more homework or something?"

The casewitch gave him a long, level stare, her gaze not one he'd seen before. "I'd like to see your arms, Mr Potter."

Shrugging as though he couldn't see why she would ask for that, Harry shoved up both his sleeves in turn and held his arms out. One of them was still horribly bruised, of course. He wondered if he should have taken a healing potion after Hermione had left. But he'd been waiting to talk to Severus. And at any rate, that might look suspicious in of itself, like he was hiding something.

"That's a rather serious injury, wouldn't you say?" the casewitch pressed.

Well, at least Snape had handed them a decent explanation. "Oh, that?" Harry asked, as though only slowly realizing that someone else might make something of it. "Well, it's a little sore . . . not too much, really."

"Is there anything you'd like to tell me about it?"

"Oh, I get it," Harry said, nodding slowly. "Yeah, I guess it does look a bit . . . Well, the thing is this. Severus is a Potions Master, see? He told me when he first started teaching me to fight that I'd have to use a little judicious care, as he put it, in how I used healing potions afterwards. A lot of them can be addictive . . ." Harry shrugged. "I bet it's my friend Hermione who complained, huh? I know she's noticed my bruises. In fact, she was here earlier and saw this exact one. Well, I'm sorry if she thinks my father ought to cure me of every last cut and scrape, but he's doing the right thing."

Since that story must dovetail in perfectly into what Hermione had reported--at least it would if she'd
reported her conversation with Snape--Harry figured it would go a long ways toward convincing the casewitch that nothing bad was going on.

"The person who complained--and I'm not saying who that is--seemed to be in some doubt as to how you got those bruises in the first place," Thistlethorne put in.

Harry frowned. "Well, I couldn't tell her," he exclaimed. "She's a girl!" And then, as though a bit repentant, "No offence."

"Perhaps you could explain."

"Yeah, okay." Harry cleared his throat, not needing to feign his nervousness at the prospect. "Like I said, she's a girl. I didn't think she'd understand about the fighting. She thinks you can just always talk everything out. Look, nobody really gets what my life is like, except maybe my father. I'm a target, and I need to be prepared. Now . . . you know my magic's not quite what it should be, these days. Severus is a good father. He wasn't going to let me just stay vulnerable, was he? Not that the self-defence he's teaching me will go far against hexes, let alone curses, but it's better than nothing." He chewed his lip. "And besides . . ."

"Besides?"

Harry let his glance slide across her and then away. "Well, the headmaster mentioned you were in the Order the first time around, so I guess I can tell you. This'll sound . . . uh, conceited, I guess, but I'm significant, you know? I thought if it got out that I was learning Muggle-style fighting, people would start to think that I, uh . . . was never going to get my powers back. And then the Daily Prophet would run stories about it, and the Ministry would issue press releases, and Rita Skeeter would probably tramp down here to get an inside scoop, and . . ." Harry sighed. "I just didn't need all that. Not to mention that if people started to get scared that I wasn't a wizard any longer, it might make it harder for them to keep up their spirits for the fight against Voldemort."

Thistlethorne didn't give away any clue as to what she was thinking. "And how are things with Mr Malfoy?" she went right on.

"Good," Harry answered. "Really good. Well, actually he is pretty jealous that I have friends in Gryffindor, but other than that we get along."

"What about him having some ill-will due to the fact that Professor Snape only adopted one of you?"

Harry debated about telling her, but realised that if she thought Draco might be abusing him, it would be good to make her understand how little motive he had.

"Well, I know Severus threatened to take points over his attitude," Harry offered, leaning forward on his palms, "but just so you know, he never did. Anyway, though, it ended up that Severus really listened to you and what you said about not leaving Draco out. I mean, there is the money thing which means he'd rather let Draco stay officially emancipated, but he made it clear that where it counted, Draco and he and I were all in this together. All one family, I mean."

Amaelia Thistlethorne raised both eyebrows. "How did he do that?"

Harry laughed a little bit in remembrance. "Well, Draco and I do get along, but we also quarrel sometimes. Severus was tired of it. He took us into his office and sat us down, and said in his deepest voice, first to me and then to Draco, You are my son. You are my son in all but name. We are a family and this sibling rivalry is going to stop, gentlemen . . . Something like that, anyway. And you know, that was when I realised that Draco and I really were acting like brothers. And since then,
we've talked about it a bit. It's like he's adopted too, it really is. Severus is all insistent that things be even . . . right up to having us open our Christmas stockings at the same time, as if we were five! But I've learned living down here that Slytherins sort of have this thing about things being even . . ."

With that, Harry realised that he had let his tongue get away from him, just a bit. But that was good, right? It would make what he'd had to say seem natural.

"Do you have any concerns about your placement here, or how things are going?"

Harry looked at her curiously. "I don't know what to say to that. I mean . . . I like having a father, and you're here to investigate a complaint, of all things, so I'm hardly going to add complaints of my own. But on the other hand I'm worried that if I say that everything's perfect, you'll know well enough that that can't be quite true, either. And then you'll think I'm lying, which you might think means I'm hiding something . . ." Groaning, he admitted, "I can't win."

"Frankly, I'd have concerns if you had none of your own," the casewitch prompted.

Harry recognised that as a ploy to make him talk, but he also took the not-so-subtle threat seriously. "Concerns," he repeated, thinking. "Well, I can't help but worry about my magic, though I don't suppose that's anything to do with the adoption. Sometimes Severus sort of expects me to think like a Slytherin, and that can be irritating . . ." Actually, Harry reflected, this whole conversation proved that he could think pretty much like a Slytherin.

"Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?"

Harry debated saying that he loved Severus, then decided it would come off as desperate to keep him, which wasn't the impression he should be making. He shook his head.

"And how are your classes going?"

"Fine . . ."

Harry's puzzlement must have shone through the single word, for the casewitch began explaining that as she'd not yet conducted a routine visit to check on him, she might as well do so now. After that the questions were fairly innocuous, and seemed designed to put him at ease, an impression that was bolstered when completely out of the blue, she inquired, "How did learning Muggle fighting put bruises on your neck, Mr Potter? Those were reported as well."

Caught off guard despite his determination not to be, Harry murmured, "Those. Oh, those were a while back. Um, I think Severus was showing me a new hold . . ." Realizing that if he wasn't careful, his lie was going to sound as bad as Draco's usually did, Harry finished, "I can't really remember."

"I see," she said, in exactly that same tone Hermione had recently used. Before Harry could try to mitigate the damage, however, she was going on, "I believe I'll speak with Professor Snape, next."

"Nobody here is hurting me!" Harry protested. "If that's what you think. I mean, it's not, is it?"

She waved a wand toward the door, unlocking whatever protections her colleague had placed on it. "Summon your guardian for me, will you?"

"Father," Harry corrected, that time with a good deal more heat. He paused at the door, trying to think what else he could say to help, but the look on her face said there wasn't much.

Emerging from the room with grim features, Harry sighed and said, "She's ready for you, now, Dad."
Snape nodded, then with an encouraging glance in Harry's direction, disappeared into the room.

"We aren't allowed to talk to each other," Draco spoke up as Steyne began warding the bedroom door.

"We have to sit here and say nothing?" Harry asked the casewizard, who merely shrugged.

"Um, why do you have to interview us?" he tossed out. "I mean, like this. Can't you just use Veritaserum or a pensieve to make sure I'm being treated all right here?"

Beside him, Draco stiffened.

"Wouldn't it make more sense?" Harry pressed. "I'd be glad to do it if it would clear this up."

"We at Wizard Family Services do not violate a child's rights," the casewizard pompously announced, remarking Harry a bit of Percy's self-important way of speaking.

He thought Draco must have caught on--about time for a Slytherin--for the other boy chimed in at that point, "You don't? That other fellow . . . Darswaithe, was it? He actually tried to abduct Harry here to deliver him to the Dark Lord! I had to save him. Good thing I was down here to do it."

"Good thing, yes," Steyne agreed in a tone that was somehow off. Or maybe, Harry reflected, he was just being too suspicious. Of course it was difficult not to be, after Darswaithe . . . "You are happy here then, Mr Malfoy?"

Draco, Harry noted, gave a nod that was very carefully bland.

"No regrets about the prospect of never returning to Wiltshire?"

"Wiltshire?" Harry asked, furrowing his brow.

"It's where the manor is," Draco said in a level tone. And then, in a harder voice to Steyne, "No, no regrets. Are you implying I should have some?"

Styne raised one eyebrow. Personally, Harry thought the man was trying to pull off a bit of a Snape-impression, but he just didn't have the sort of sheer presence required for a thing like that. "I simply find your recent choices curious. We may not have spoken much, Mr Malfoy, but I do remember you. You used to go on for hours in the common room about your favourite topic. And now to see you friendly with him?"

At that, Harry had to raise an eyebrow of his own. "What, I was your favourite topic?"

"How much I hated you was," Draco admitted, scowling at Steyne for making him mention it. "People change. I'd think a casewizard would know that much. Didn't you have to take some psychology or counselling courses or something to get this job?"

"Draco!" Harry admonished. He couldn't believe that blatant rudeness would help their cause any.

"People don't change that much," Steyne flatly announced. "You, for instance. If you weren't holding court over how you detested Harry Potter, you were bragging about your father's millions. And now you've lost all that money, haven't you? And you expect me to believe you have no regrets," he scoffed.
"I have money of my own if you must know," was Draco's cool rejoinder. "And I for one find your comments impertinent."

"I'm doing the job I was hired to do," Steyne put in, his tones sardonic by then. Again, he couldn't carry it off the way Snape could. "I'm investigating the situation here to see if it is in the minor child's best interest to remain."

Harry didn't much appreciate being called the minor child, but the comment gave him a way to insert, "Oh, it is. Draco's been tutoring me in all my subjects and I've learned loads more than I would have in class, I bet. And Severus is really a wonderful father."

"Must be all that experience as a Head of House," Draco put in. "Mr Steyne could vouch for that, I bet."

"I think that's just about enough propaganda," Steyne cut them off. "And quite enough discussion. You two aren't supposed to be talking to one another. Not about anything."

Harry thought about that. "We can play cards or something, can't we?" After Steyne nodded, Harry got out the Wizard's Scrabble from its shelf and began to shuffle the tiles. He'd hoped to be able to spell out a few words. Hints for Draco, about what he planned to say if the casewitch seemed to be taking Hermione's complaint too seriously. Steyne, though, was too smart for that. He watched them like a hawk, casting Harry a suspicious glance when the boy grinned over realizing he could use his x tile to make the word prolix.

Snape sat beside him on the couch while the casewitch interviewed Draco. His father, Harry noted, was projecting an attitude of casual unconcern, as if he had no worries whatsoever about what Draco might be saying. His legs crossed one over the other, a potions journal propped up on his knee, Snape was simply reading, apparently wholly absorbed in study. Catching on after a few moments, Harry fetched the book that had caught Draco's interest earlier, and settled in himself to read Blood is Thicker than Potion.

It was really over Harry's head, but seemed to be about how certain classes of potions only affected specific wizarding bloodlines. It didn't interest Harry in the least, but he kept reading, mostly because he wanted to know what Draco had found so fascinating about the topic.

Harry thought that Draco and the casewitch were holed up in the bedroom for an awfully long time, but finally they came out, and she announced that she would speak to them all together. Harry wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not, but he quickly decided not when she glared down from her less-than-impressive height and announced, "I am not satisfied as to the explanations I've been given for Mr Potter's injuries."

Shite, Harry thought, as on the other side of Snape, Draco went stiff and still.

"And the reason for your dissatisfaction, Miss Thistlethorne?" Snape inquired, his voice as mild as if he were merely asking for the date of his next shipment of shrivelfigs.

She glared even harder. "The complaint lodged against this placement was very specific, detailing a plethora of injuries that have yet to be explained to my satisfaction. If Professor Snape is indeed teaching you to fight, he is being far too rough. Wizard Family Services did not place you here so that you could be pummeled by your own guardian. Professor Snape has been negligent in his duty to ensure your physical well-being, Mr Potter--"
"He hasn't!" Harry objected. "He's been great to me!"

"Your opinion aside, this matter must be referred to Wizard Family Services for review."

"Severus isn't too rough on me, I swear--"

"You aren't the best judge of that, I'm afraid. Professor Snape is an adult. He should have realised that things were going too far during this . . ." She paused delicately. "Training."

This is it, Harry thought. Unadoption. She doesn't believe it's training at all. She thinks something else is going on, like that Severus is being purposely cruel, or that he's confusing me with James after all. She's going to follow her stupid policies and procedures, and some committee will look at this all wrong, and they'll probably think I had no business being adopted by a former Death Eater in the first place, and the casewitch will come back and it'll be my dream all over again. Snape'll have to give me up . . .

And then, one more thought rang through his mind. Time to change it. Time to defy the future.

"Sorry, Draco," Harry abruptly announced, jumping up from the sofa and walking away from the other boy. "We never counted on something like this, did we? I have to tell her."

Draco opened his mouth as though to object, then snapped it closed, his teeth making a clicking sound. Good thing he isn't trying to play along any more than that, Harry realised. What with him being such a lousy liar . . .

"You're right," Harry said, turning on a heel to face the casewitch. "Those would be too many injuries if I'd been getting them from Severus, who really does know better than to pummel me, as you put it. That's not how I've been getting hurt, though." Harry gave a heavy sigh. "I'm a Gryffindor, you know? I'm supposed to keep my word. And I promised Draco . . . but if it means clearing this up I guess I have to tell. The truth is, Draco and I have been messing around playing rugby."

"Rug-bee," the casewitch repeated, the word clearly unfamiliar to her. And that was enough of a clue for Draco.

"Muggle game," the Slytherin boy put in, the first word of that coming out with predictable disdain.

"We shouldn't have kept it a secret from Severus," Harry admitted. "And I definitely shouldn't have told him I was fine when I was really sore, and wore long sleeves to hide the bruises, but I knew that if he found out about the rugby, he'd put a stop to it," the boy sighed. "And I really missed it. I used to play rugby all the time before I came to Hogwarts. Neighborhood league, you know. And Draco caught me sketching out plays on parchment one day, and thought it was interesting looking, and one thing just led to another. So when Severus arranged for us to have some time outdoors, we thought we'd try a few rugby moves . . ."

"It surely can't be that violent a game," the casewitch said, frowning. "A Muggle sport?"

"Watch it on the telly some time," Harry advised, knowing that the comment would remind her how he'd been raised, and make it just a little bit more credible that he'd wanted to play a Muggle game. "Rugby's the reason why Quidditch has never seemed rough to me," he brazenly lied.

"And the reason you didn't simply explain all this when you had the opportunity?" she crisply asked.

"I told you, I didn't want Severus to know, and besides, I'd promised Draco--"
Actually, it was Mr Malfoy whom I was asking," she clarified, turning a challenging gaze his way.

Draco flushed as he caught Harry's eye. Harry didn't know how well he was communicating the silent message For Merlin's sake, for once in your life tell a lie and make it stick . . . but in any case, the flush worked to their advantage, since it made the Slytherin boy look uncomfortable. That went along quite well with his drawled, "You know a bit about my background; do you think I'd want it getting around that I'd been spending my time on rubbish that Muggles dreamed up?" His silver eyes began to glint even as his voice went cool with satisfaction and arrogance. "And then there was the fact that I was so much better at it than Harry. That is, he was the one to come off the worse every time we played, which makes sense in a way. After all, I am a pureblood so it stands to reason I'd have finer reflexes and coordination and all that. But still, I hardly wanted people to know that not only did I play a Muggle game but that I was good at it."

"You lied to your father?" Snape icily inquired, standing to stomp over to Harry. "I was good enough to get you into the fresh air and sunshine as you asked, and my reward is to have you claim you're just going for a run to keep in shape, when in actual fact you're sneaking off to practice highly dangerous sports? It might surprise you to learn, Harry, that I've seen a spot of this rugby before! I do not appreciate finding out that you've been engaged in what to me seemed nothing short of organized suicide!"

Harry bit his lip. "Sorry," he murmured, and then in an undertone to the casewitch. "You can see why I didn't want to tell him."

"And to think that you concealed injuries," Snape spat in disgust. "I could have helped you, you idiot child!"

"But I knew you thought I'd already taken way too many potions recently, considering Samhain and all," Harry exclaimed. "I mean, that is why you warned me about not getting dependent on them, isn't it?"

"Dependency would not be a likely prospect had you not got yourself injured in the first place," Snape roared, rounding on Draco, who rose gracefully to his feet. "You've been aiding and abetting this, have you? Not only that, but you knew Harry was sustaining injuries, and you just kept on playing this imbecilic game with him? What sort of brother are you?"

"A good one," Draco retorted. "Look, you haven't been around all the times he moaned for Diet Coke, or all the other Mugglish things he can't have here at Hogwarts. I was trying to cheer him up, if you must know, and if it meant playing a Muggle game--"

"If you're so enamoured of Muggle activities, perhaps I ought to have you scrub out all my cauldrons without using magic!"

"I don't believe Muggles have cauldrons at all," Draco pointed out, a comment which almost made Snape's ears steam.

"I'm sorry we lied to Severus, and I'm even more sorry we lied to Hermione," Harry hurriedly put in. "It's just that Draco was so embarrassed! And I was too, if you must know. Oh, not about the game itself, but that Draco kept getting the better of me? I didn't want Hermione to know that. I . . . um, sort of, er, like her, see?"

The casewitch studied them all, from Harry's blush to Snape's fatherly glower to Draco's defensive posture, and then turned to her assistant. "Richard?"

He took a moment to study them all as well, but his scrutiny somehow seemed colder than the
casewitch's had been. "I've never seen it played," he finally admitted, with a significant glance at Snape, "but rugby is reputed to be quite a violent sport."

Harry must have looked a bit puzzled, because the casewitch explained, "Mr Steyne holds a degree in Muggle Studies."

"Oh, then you understand," Harry said, making sure he sounded relieved though what he was really thinking was, What sort of programme gives you a degree for knowing about Muggles, but doesn't even make you watch an actual rugby match?

Steyne's glance at him was strangely unreadable.

"The matter will still have to be reported," Amaelia Thistlethorne decided. "However, considering the circumstances, I will recommend nothing more than a warning."

"Warning?" Harry gasped, outraged. He didn't like the sound of that. Who knew what a warning in their file might lead to? "Draco and I were the ones breaking the rules, and you're going to punish Severus for it?"

"Professor Snape must be admonished to keep closer watch of his charges," the casewitch announced, only to colour a bit and correct herself, "Charge, rather."

"But that's not fair," Harry objected.

"You must forgive his presumption," Snape broke in, his tone apologetic. "It's the province of Gryffindors, I'm afraid, to believe life should above all be fair. I for one appreciate your having visited us today." His glower came roaring back. "If not for that, it would doubtless not have been brought to my attention that my supervision of the young men has been a bit remiss. Rest assured, there will be no more rugby," he sneered.

"And their consequence?" she inquired.

Harry thought she was the one being presumptuous. What business of hers was that? Actually, the question alarmed him. Why would she ask it, unless she thought the Potions Master likely to be cruel and vindictive?

Snape gave his sons a bland, superior sort of stare. "I do believe I have some books that have been grossly mis-shelved," he announced, flicking a derisive glance at the bookcases. "No doubt a pair of whimsical house-elves with no sense of organization whatsoever are to blame. The young men can correct the matter. Both of them," he added with a significant look at Draco. "And after that, we will have a talk."

"A lecture, he means," Draco confirmed to Harry.

"We get a lot of those," Harry sighed to the casewitch.

Amaelia Thistlethorne studied the three of them for what seemed an interminable moment, but in the end, she gave one of her brisk, businesslike nods, and indicated with a gesture that she and her colleague would be taking their leave. "We will, however," she thought to warn, "return unannounced for future random inspections."

"Of course, of course," Snape said, much in the tone of someone trying to soothe ruffled feathers.

"And of course if we receive further complaints," the casewitch added.
"You won't," Harry assured her. "Cross my heart. No more rugby."

Steyne turned back from the doorway to stare at him. "I should hope not."

The moment the casewizards had gone, Snape motioned for silence, then drew his wand and wrote in fiery letters that hung in the air, Watch what you say for a few minutes. There may be eavesdropping spells left in place but my wards will make short work of them.

Draco nodded, and turned to Harry. "What was that last bit? Cross your heart?"

"It's a Muggle thing. A way of saying that you promise . . ." Thinking back, Harry began to recite the entire poem. "Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye--"

Draco curled a lip. "That's not funny, Harry."

"No, it's not," he admitted, frowning. "But I'm not making it up. That is what Muggles say sometimes when all they mean is that something is true for sure."

"No wonder that Muggle game was so violent," Draco retorted, shuddering theatrically. Good thing there was no-one left to see it; it hadn't looked real at all.

"Well, you liked it, didn't you?" Harry came back, playing along.

"I didn't like getting Severus in trouble, though, but that's hardly my fault. It was your idea in the first place to play the stupid game--"

"It was your idea not to tell him--"

"That's quite enough," Snape broke in, shaking his head in amusement though his voice remained grim. "You two have some books to reshelve. I suggest you get on with it."

He left them to it.

And this time when Harry began heaving books from the bookcase to the table so that he could sort them properly, Draco actually helped.

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Snape checked that his books were coherently arranged in the bookcase, then informed them, "I've ascertained that there never were, in fact, any listening spells left behind."

"That makes sense," Harry remarked, frowning. "That Steyne fellow was pretty proud of the way their department doesn't violate a child's rights. As if he's forgotten about Darswaithe already! Not to mention, he was completely rude to Draco!"

"It's not a department, it's an adjunct services office," Draco scathed. "Which means, I suppose, that it's a bunch of people a little too full of their own importance, if you ask me. Sort of like your friend Hermione!"

"We will deal with Miss Granger later," Snape announced, his tones so dark that Harry shivered. He wondered what his father had in mind, though he was certain it wouldn't be expulsion or ten thousand lines. It might be something even worse.

Not that Hermione didn't deserve it, Harry thought, his thoughts going just as dark as Snape's voice. As though aware Harry needed a distraction, Snape abruptly summoned a wrapped box from his
bedroom, then handed it to the boy. "I had thought to keep this until you began attending classes once more, but considering your rather Slytherin performance today, I think it appropriate you have it now."

A present? Harry didn't know what to say. He covered the feeling by saying, "You caught on quick enough to my lies. And so did Draco . . . I guess he's better at misdirection than I thought."

The Slytherin boy shrugged. "I suppose it's easier to follow a lie than make one up. Might explain why there's usually only one Dark Lord at a time," he mused.

"And Voldemort's lie was?" Snape briskly inquired.

Harry looked from Snape to Draco and back, intrigued.

A long-suffering sigh hissing through his teeth, Draco complained, "You're going to make me say it? Out loud?"

"I think you'd better," the Potions Master advised. "Because Harry will be leaving us soon, as you well know. What do you want him to remember about you when the Gryffindors begin--as is unavoidable--to complain that he's mistaken to trust you?"

"Oh, fine," Draco sighed, rolling his eyes. "Blood isn't everything, all right? Your mother was a Muggleborn, but here you are, the fruit of her loins, and a finer wizard the world's never seen. There, I said it. You're just as good as I am."

"Perhaps without the sarcasm, this time," Snape dryly inserted.

"I've said it to him before, if you must know," Draco exclaimed. "When we talked about Samhain. I admitted that pure blood hadn't given Lucius the guts to stand up to the Dark Lord! I admitted that I had some rethinking to do!" Then he glanced at Harry, and added, "I didn't mean it when I said I had better coordination because I was a pure-blood, you know. I was just playing into your lie."

p>"I knew you didn't mean it." Harry gave his brother a considering look, but knew better than to press for more. He was surprised that Snape had pressed that way, actually.

Draco gestured toward the package he still held. "Well, if that's all cleared up, then let's see what you've got."

After fumbling a bit with the simple grey ribbon, Harry popped off the lid of the box to reveal some tissue paper. Beneath that lay a pile of black, folded cloth, the weave fine for all the fabric itself was luxuriously thick. Curious, Harry lifted the garment and shook it out.

"A student cloak," he realised, smiling. The ones he'd bought at the end of the summer were getting a bit snug, he realised. "What a thoughtful present, sir. Thank you."

Draco suddenly barked a laugh. "Oh, that's marvellous, Severus. Who did the artwork?"

That was when Harry noticed the crest. The familiar Gryffindor lion, just as he'd worn for years, but with it, a snake, the symbol of Slytherin. A beautiful silver, the snake's tail was wrapped about one of the lion's paws; it's head was on a level with the lion's eyes. They were looking at each other, no hostility between them, as though his two houses were equal, and at peace.

Harry's smile reached his eyes. "Draco's right, that is marvellous."

Snape seemed to be watching him carefully, Harry thought. "You feel no apprehension at the
thought of wearing it?"

"No. None. I am both and it might as well be acknowledged. I mean, I know people know already, but my friends are probably going to try to ignore the whole thing. I'm not about to do the same." Harry traced the snake with a fingertip, thinking. "It's a really good idea combining the two symbols. How did you think of it?"

Draco scoffed. "How did he think of it? I like that! It was my idea. You were going on about cobbling scarves together or some such nonsense, and I said to just add a snake to your crest and be done with it, remember?"

Snape nodded. "Though now of course the crest will serve far more than a mere symbolic function."

"Yeah. I really am both inside," Harry agreed. "It's not just because of the adoption." An impatient noise from Draco had Harry glancing at the Slytherin boy.

"It's more than that, Harry," Draco drawled, smug as always though he looked pleased to Harry's eye. "Your powers, remember? You happen to have quite an urgent need for a snake sometimes. What did you think you were going to do, cart Sals along with you to all your classes so you could cast spells?"

"I thought," Harry drawled right back, "that I'd make sure to have a drawing to look at. A doodle, on the cover of each textbook--"

"That wouldn't help you in the Great Hall during meals," Snape pointed out, elegantly seating himself and crossing his long legs.

"I don't incant much over mashed potatoes."

"You'll need to if you're attacked." Snape gave him a longish look, those dark eyes challenging him to think about the matter.

"Yes, sir," Harry quietly murmured. Then, sensing that his father needed more from him than that, he added, "We can't really stop people from knowing about the Parseltongue, but I suppose it would be best if they didn't know how much I need a snake to make it emerge. Cunning, right. The crest'll come in handy for that."

The Potions Master smiled in approval. "Look in the pocket."

When Harry did, he came up another snake-and-lion crest.

"For your Quidditch robes," Snape confirmed. "Let me know if you need further ones. I do not want you to be without, is that clear?"

"Yeah, put one on your pyjamas, too," Draco joked.

Laughing at the image that conjured up, Harry thought to wonder, "Where'd you ever hear of Diet Coke, anyway?"

"Dudley wanted one, remember?" Draco shrugged. "Actually, even before that I used to overhear your little girlfriend whinging on in the Great Hall about how she wished she could have one."

"For pity's sake, will you get it through your thick skull once and for all, she's not my girlfriend!"

"Sure she isn't. You only told the casewitch that you liked her--"
"That was misdirection and you know it. But speaking of liking her, why were you listening to her during meals, anyway? Maybe you're the one who likes her!"

Draco shivered. "Don't make me ill, Potter. Now, back to what matters. Did you happen to notice that when I said *Diet Coke*, Steyne there got a funny look in his eyes? Like he wasn't really sure what it was?"

Harry thought back. "Yeah, I got the feeling that degree in Muggle Studies or no, he didn't actually know all that much about Muggles."

"Why would a Slytherin pursue a degree like that, I'd like to know--"

"There you go again with the *attitude*, Draco. There's nothing wrong with Muggle Studies, and there's nothing wrong with Ron's father being fascinated by the topic, and while we're at it, there's nothing wrong with being poor, either!"

"Thank Merlin I'm not, though," Draco sneered.

Repressing an urge to sigh again, Harry turned to his father. "Thank you very much for the new cloak, Professor."

"Again with *Professor*?" Draco huffed.

"You said you were going to stay out of what I call Severus!"

"I concur that you should," Snape put in with a stern glance at the Slytherin boy. "Not only is my relationship with Harry *mine* and not yours, but it also might interest you to know that his verbal habits can be quite telling. For example," at this he turned back to Harry, "you tend to revert to *Professor* when you are feeling unsettled, worried, or insecure. So what is the matter?"

Harry thought of saying that nothing was, but his father's steady dark gaze challenged him to really consider the question. "I guess I feel sort of . . . strange, getting a present like this."

"I thought you were comfortable by now at the thought that I would provide for you."

"I am. Well, mostly . . ." Harry chewed his lip. "It's just that I forgot your own birthday, sir. I mean, Dad."

Snape shook his head slightly. "It's hardly accurate to say you forgot when in fact I hadn't ever mentioned the date to you, Harry. I honestly don't care whether people notice my birthday or not."

"I'm not *people,*" Harry complained. "I'm your son!"

"So you are." Snape paused for a moment. "Perhaps you could help me with some correspondence? As I recall, you seemed to think my usual style of writing was a bit much."

A bad, bad feeling settled in Harry's chest. "You don't mean . . .?"

"Indeed." Snape's black eyes glittered as he flicked his wand and summoned parchment. "I do believe it is time we dealt with Miss Granger."
"Yes, let's deal with Miss Know-it-All Granger," Draco put in. "Hmm. That really was extremely nasty, wasn't it, reporting on a teacher? I don't suppose you'd consider expulsion, Severus? Oh well, I thought not. How about a thousand points from Gryffindor?"

Harry gave the Slytherin boy a very dark look. Blinking as though just realizing something, Draco said on a long-suffering sigh, "I can see it's going to be bloody inconvenient, having a Gryffindor brother."

"You just keep your nose out of Gryffindor's points."

"Oh, fine. So then I won't congratulate you on a job well done? I won't ask Severus to award points for that very Slytherin set of lies you told the casewitch," Draco drawled, challenging Harry with a **ha, got you**, stare.

Hardly fooled, Harry drawled right back, "Pity. Slytherin would have got half of them." Draco opened his mouth to retort, but Harry went right on speaking. "Besides, the lovely new cloak is more than enough reward for me."

"Now there's a Gryffindor," Draco lightly snarked. "Our hero. He performs feats of brilliance, nothing short of changing the future itself, and all he asks in reward is a humble student cloak."

"What do you mean, changing the future!"

Definite derision that time. "Your seer dream. Unadoption, right?"

Harry bit his lip, thinking about that. "Um . . . well actually, the headmaster said that seer dreams couldn't be changed. And anyway, what just happened didn't match my dream at all. For starters, in the dream the casewitch came alone."

"Of course it didn't match your dream," Draco interrupted, impatiently crossing his legs as he sat on the couch. "You've probably changed things so that **that** dream will never happen at all. The way I look at it, the casewitch was worried about you, right? She might even have demanded an unadoption or something, but now she won't. Ever."

Harry hoped not, but he wasn't so sure. **Could** you defy a seer dream? **Could** you take matters into your own hands and force the future into a new mould, one more to your liking? He'd asked Dumbledore something like that . . . *what if I dream I'm going to die falling off a broom, so I stop going flying . . .* The headmaster had never really answered that, had he? But it made sense to Harry. If you arranged matters so that events you had dreamed could not possibly occur, then of course you would change the future, right?

Not that he was terribly worried about the adoption any longer; he and Severus would be all right no matter what happened.

Part of him though, was still a tiny bit worried about Draco.

"There will be no unadoption," Snape stressed with a significant glance at Harry. "Your seer dreams, **all** your recent seer dreams, are in fact no such thing as I believe we have discussed at length."

Trust Snape to realise that Harry had shifted to thinking about the Owlery . . .
"Enough of such nonsense," Snape bit out. "It is time we dealt with Miss Granger, as I said."

Harry frowned. "Well, you know, I really don't appreciate her high-handedness here, but I don't think we can be too hard on her. I mean, unlike Ron, she did have some reason to think I might be getting hurt. In a way it's my fault she thought that, really. She's smart enough to see through our lies . . ." He swallowed, the sensation actually painful. "Though I wonder just when she actually reported her complaint. I can hardly believe she did it before talking to you, but why would she do so afterwards?" He decided not to mention that thing Severus had said about tendering his resignation.

"Obviously my own lies did not do enough to placate her," Snape grudgingly admitted. "Well. I did say she had a disgusting amount of intellect for someone her age."

"No, she must have filed the report before she ever went to you, daft as that sounds," Harry decided. "Otherwise, how could the casewitch have had enough time to get here? Last time she took the train, remember."

Snape shook his head. "Family Services policies specify that if a child is possibly in danger, casewizards will Apparate in to investigate. No doubt they were in Hogsmeade within minutes of reading her ridiculous claims."

"Then she wrote them a complaint right after talking to you? I guess if she told the owl to hurry, that might work."

Snape merely glowered.

"You aren't planning to make her write lines, are you? I . . . no offence, sir, but I actually doubt you could make that stick. I mean, she wasn't trying to be malicious or anything. Technically, she probably has a right to file a report on us."

"All this concern for Granger is going to make me sick up," Draco grimly warned as he turned a page.

"Loath that I am to admit it, Harry has a point," Snape admitted, sinking into a chair and tapping his fingertips on the dining room table.

"That Granger was right to report her unreasonable suspicions?" Draco erupted, setting his book aside.

"No, that the headmaster might well overturn any punishment I level at her," Snape explained, the words staccato with irritation. "At any rate, in the circumstances I think the wisest course of action may be to invite Miss Granger to dinner."

"You want Hermione to come over for dinner," Harry slowly repeated, a bit dumbfounded.

"Unless you have a better idea."

Snape, Harry noticed, was already beginning to scrawl Dear Miss Granger across a sheet of parchment.

"But what's the plan?"

The Potions Master curled a lip upward. "Much as it might satisfy me to tell the young lady my true opinion of her loathsome meddling, I think our best strategy lies elsewhere. It occurs to me that we had better display for her the same sort of familial tenderness that finally convinced Mr Weasley that you were safe in my care."
Harry thought better than to ask if Severus planned to sing to him again. "But with Ron it was only the truth that convinced him, not some show we put on. So wouldn't it be better, not to mention simpler, to just tell Hermione--"

"No," Snape refused, pinning Harry with a glare.

"She won't tell anybody, any more than Ron has! Listen, the mere fact that she doesn't know about my magic proves how trustworthy my friends are. Why can't you see that? Is it because they're Gryffindors?"

"It is because they are teenagers," Snape retorted. "As are you. I would never have allowed Mr Weasley to know you could destroy walls with a mere Lumos either, had I had any choice. As regards Miss Granger and your other friends, we will stick to your rugby story, and that is an end to the matter. Now, do you wish to assist me in the writing of this, or not?"

Harry sighed. "What do you have against teenagers?"

"I've seen them break under torture," Snape bluntly informed him.

"I didn't! Samhain, remember?"

"I am hardly likely to forget!"

"And fourth year, Cruciatus--"

"You are not typical!" Snape rebuked him. "Your friends, loyal as they may be, are easy prey for Voldemort. And what is more, their inability to Occlude means that given the chance, he will sense where best to ply his tortures! Are you beginning to comprehend? There is more at stake here than your rather naïve desire to include your friends!"

"Adults break under torture, too," Harry muttered.

"And you'll note I haven't proposed we inform any! Only Albus knows about your dark powers flowing free, and he only knows because the Order must have some sense of how the Light may fare against the Dark!" Breathing heavily, Snape took a moment to let that sink in, then asked in wearied tones, "So shall we invite Miss Granger to dine, or no?"

"All right, all right," Harry conceded, pulling up a chair to join his father. He glanced at what his father had already written, and frowned. "First thing is, if you want her to come so you can fill her head with rugby stories, this needs to sound a little . . . um . . ."

"Yes?" Snape darkly inquired, eyes narrowed.

"Er, well . . . this just sounds a bit like you plan to poison her during dinner," Harry admitted. "I mean, you're angry and it really, really shows. And I think we want her at ease, not looking at the food and all of us with suspicion. I know. Let's invite Ron as well so it seems more like a social occasion."

"Ron," Snape repeated, his eyes studying Harry closely.

"Yeah. Hermione wouldn't think you'd bring her down here to yell at her over the complaint, not if it meant informing him of its existence."

"Unless she already told him all about the supposed abuse you've suffered at our nasty Slytherin hands," Draco reminded him.
"But that's just it," Harry argued, swivelling his head to look at Draco. "She can't possibly have shared her concerns with Ron, because if she had, he'd have come down here to warn me about it."

"Unless he also suspects your bruises might have dire causes."

"After he saw Severus singing to me?" Harry scoffed, then added with a quick glance at his father, "Or humming, I mean."

"Quite," said Snape, crossing his arms.

"Besides, Ron saw how much a mere Lumos beat me up," Harry went right on. "If Hermione complained to him that I'm getting hurt down here, he'd have known it was magic practice doing it. He'd have done his level best to convince her that nothing bad was going on, and failing that, he'd have told me straight away that she was likely to cause us some problems."

"Why do I have the feeling that I'm being manoeuvred?" the Potions Master inquired with an arched brow.

Then it was Harry's turn to shrug. "Because you just saw me lie my head off?"

"I would not be pleased to find that my son had treated me the same way he treated a certain idiot Hufflepuff casewitch," Snape announced in a hard tone.

Personally, Harry thought that his father's withdrawal from purple loosestrife might be affecting his mood, but he didn't think it would be wise to say as much. "Well then, don't invite Ron. I just thought it'd make everything a lot less tense than if Hermione comes down here alone."

Snape's gaze on him was still rather suspicious, but he appeared to relent, gesturing that they should just get on with it.

"Do you want the invitation to sound like it's coming from me?" Harry thought to ask.

"I don't believe I want to put the young lady that much at ease," Snape drawled. "How about this... Dear Miss Granger, It has come to my attention that you are labouring under a misapprehension that must at all costs be rectified. You are therefore invited to dine with Harry, Draco, and myself tomorrow evening so that we may discuss why your latest crusade to save those in no need of salvation is a serious misjudgement indeed."

Leaning his chin on a hand, Harry considered that. "Maybe something more like, Dear Miss Granger, Although I am certain that you care deeply about Harry, there are things you do not know. Perhaps it is time to come clean. Please join Harry, Draco, and myself for dinner so that we may discuss the matter."

Draco called from across the room where he was reading once more. "Severus would never write come clean."

"All right... Perhaps it is time for us to reach an understanding," Harry amended.

"I suppose that will do," Snape said, nodding slightly.

"Not too prolix," Harry quipped, but his father didn't smile as he scrawled out the message on a fresh scroll of parchment.

"Should we write a separate one for Ron, do you think?" Harry added.
Sighing, Snape picked up the quill again and added, *You are welcome to bring Mr Weasley if you wish.*

"If you ask me, Granger deserves something a bit more painful than a dinner," Draco snarled.

"Well, we weren't asking you," Harry returned, levelling his gaze at the other boy. "And no offence, but I think it's fortunate we don't all get what we deserve, don't you?"

Draco didn't answer, though he did take the hint. He stopped complaining . . . but his ostentatious show of reading his book made it clear that he was far from happy at prospect of dinner with Hermione Granger.

The next morning over breakfast, a whoosh of fire in the Floo had all three wizards reaching for their wands, but all that arrived was a tightly rolled parchment which fluttered gracefully down to the ashes in the grate. For all that though, Snape examined the letter with every verification spell Harry knew and several he didn't, before pronouncing, "It appears to be innocuous enough."

"Perhaps it's Granger's refusal," Draco sniped.

"Perhaps it's time you accepted that I can and will have other friends!" Harry retorted.

"Some friends," Draco muttered, though he dropped that subject when he peered at the letter, which Snape was by then reading. "Steyne!"

"Indeed," Snape confirmed, shaking his head as he read.

"What does he want?" Draco pressed.

Snape gave the Slytherin boy a telling look, then read the letter out loud:

*Dear Professor Snape,*

*How lovely it was to see you once again and to meet your son, the famous Harry Potter. I must say, I was beyond astonished when I first heard that the Head of Slytherin had adopted him. Knowing you as I do, however, I expect you must have your reasons.*

*I believe the conclusion of my visit to your quarters was satisfactory? I would like to believe I had a small hand in it, being as I was the disinterested party who assured my superior that rugby is indeed a hazardous activity. I think it was that additional confirmation of your story which convinced her, actually.*

*I must say, sir, that I have always admired your expertise in Potions. I am pleased to have been able to assist you in this matter. I trust you will remember it in future should I have a need to call upon you.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Richard Steyne*

"As letters go, that seemed all right," Harry neutrally commented, only to have Draco all but snort.

"Such innocence," the Slytherin boy mocked. "Don't you get it? It's a deal! He helped Severus, and
he's serving fair warning that he's going to want something in return, and that Severus had better deliver."

"He didn't say that."

"Oh, didn't he?" Draco held out a hand for the letter, and when Snape gave it to him, went on, "Let's just read between the lines, shall we? It as good as says . . ." With that, he translated:

_I could tell it mattered to you keeping Harry Potter as your son, not that I believe you adopted him just so you can play daddy. You're as Slytherin as they come, so you want him for something, don't you?_

_I let you have him, Snape, and I didn't do it out of the goodness of my heart. Any idiot would know that rugby's got nothing to do with Potter's injuries. He's getting hurt down there, but you don't want anybody to know how, so I lied to my boss for you. I kept your secret._

_I'm far too intelligent to actually blackmail you, as your reputation for poisons is unparalleled, but I will be asking you for something. When I do, you remember that you owe me._

Harry's jaw dropped. "Oh, it's not as bad as all that, surely."

Snape's own look was grim. "Draco's interpretation is sound. In fact, Mr Steyne did have a marked tendency to blackmail his fellow Slytherins while he was in attendance here. I would say he's continued the pattern into his professional life."

"I see," Draco agreed, nodding. "Now it all fits. Slytherins are supposed to have ambition, right? I kept wondering why one would work a dead-end low-wage job like Family Services."

"Oh yes," Snape agreed, a bit of a smile playing on his features. "That does make sense."

"Just so you know, you two are speaking some foreign language," Harry complained, stabbing at his scramble. "Slytherinspeak, something like that."

"The files, Harry," Draco laughed. "Steyne cut his teeth on blackmail here, and then what did he do but go find himself a plum job where he gets to sit in an office all day, surrounded by files that contain the most personal kinds of information imaginable."

Harry thought then of the lengthy questionnaire Snape had had to fill out as part of the adoption, and winced. Personal was right. It had even asked about income and assets; perfect for a blackmailer.

"Well, at least we know now why he specialized in _Muggle_ studies." Draco shuddered. "Doesn't Family Services have to deal with a lot of squib children? That degree probably gave Steyne an edge getting the job, since he could claim to be able to counsel them."

"_Claim_ being the operative word," Snape remarked as he began to spread jam on a scone. "My guess is that he got through his degree programme blackmailing his professors. Certainly that would explain why he didn't know much at all about the Muggle world."

"Thank Merlin he knows not to blackmail _you_, though," Draco put in.

"Oh, I doubt we've heard the last from Richard Steyne."
Harry chewed his lip, worried. "How many Galleons do you think it'll take to keep him quiet?"

Snape gave the boy a dry look. "I think he'll want something that's not in your vault, Harry. Or mine, for that matter. A potion. Quite possibly a poison. But he doesn't need it now. He's biding his time."

"Would you brew him a poison if it meant you could keep me?" Harry blurted, not sure which answer he would find more horrifying, a yes or a no.

"No, but I might well dose him with one," Snape levelly answered.

Draco laughed out loud, then assured Harry, who had gone quite white, "He's joking! Can't you tell he's joking?"

"I am not joking," Snape contradicted. "I don't take kindly to someone threatening to part me from my son, as Richard Steyne will find out if he is foolish enough to pursue the matter."

As if hearing that, the letter abruptly dissolved itself to ash, the cinders burning cleanly away to nothing.

"Evanesco," Snape said anyway, then turned to Harry. "Don't think on it, except to remember the salient point. Steyne may ask me for something, and he may be fairly unpleasant about it, but he won't press it as far as blackmail, not with me."

Harry weakly nodded. Just thinking of his father poisoning someone made him feel ill. But Snape used to make poisons for Voldemort all the time, didn't he? "I guess your . . . reputation is useful, sometimes," he finally said.

"You look a bit disturbed by that."

"Uh, just wondering if it influenced Hermione," Harry said, though it wasn't true. With that, he turned his attention back to breakfast and tried to ignore the weight of Snape's stare as it settled on him.

"Miss Granger, Mr Weasley, do come in," said Snape that evening as he swung open the heavy door to his dungeon quarters.

Ron sauntered inside without hesitation, but Hermione looked a bit as though she were crossing a street, the way she glanced both ways before moving forward. It didn't help that Snape, obviously enjoying her discomfort, drawled a sardonic, "Today, if you would."

Colouring slightly, Hermione stopped dithering and stepped inside.

"Would you care for an aperitif before we dine?" Snape blithely went on, waving first Hermione and then Ron into separate chairs.

"Firewhiskey," Ron answered without missing a beat.

Snape raised an expressive eyebrow as he turned on the red-haired boy. "I believe I offered an aperitif, not an invitation to get falling-down drunk."

Harry thought it was a bit much to expect his friend to even know what an aperitif was—he certainly wasn't sure—and when Draco strode forward, he could just hear the insults sure to fly . . . something about Ron's family being too poor to afford anything but water . . .
But the Slytherin boy merely looked levelly at their guests, then turned to Snape and suggested, "I'll order a round of something appropriate then, shall I?" At Snape's nod he went to do so.

Harry sat down on the sofa and said in a casual tone, "So, Severus and I thought it might be good to have you both down for a chat."

"Any particular reason, Harry?" Hermione smartly inquired. Clearly she had no intention of pretending this was a social occasion.

"Actually, yes," he retorted, a little bit of his anger with her seeping through. He'd been trying hard to repress it, to be mature, to recognise that she'd only been trying to help when she'd filed that dratted report . . . but that knowing look in her eyes was his undoing. She still thought Snape or Draco was abusing him, he could just tell. And that steamed him, it really did. "We had a visit yesterday, Hermione, from Wizard Family Services!"

"Good," she had the gall to reply.

"How dare you file a report against Severus!"

"Hermione?" Ron questioned, his brows drawing together. "What's Harry talking about?"

"Your bloody-minded girlfriend has decided that I'm getting beat to a pulp down here, that's what!"

"Oh, honestly, Potter," Draco smoothly drawled as he came back from the Floo, "you have no concept whatsoever of proper manners. I leave you for ten seconds to arrange refreshments and you're at our guests' throats." The Slytherin boy glanced at the coffee table expectantly just as a tray appeared, then levitated it upwards with a few careless flicks of his wand as he said politely to Hermione, "Mimosa?"

"Mimosa!" she echoed.

"Mmm, champagne and apple juice--"

"A mimosa's made of orange juice, Malfoy," Hermione snapped.

"Really. I will have to try that some time," Draco returned, nodding his head slightly. "Though of course orange juice is hardly known at all in wizarding circles. I must say, I've quite grown to like it since Harry began getting it so frequently."

Harry had the feeling that Draco could make polite small-talk with his worst enemies all night long if it suited him. Must be all those Ministry dinners he'd been dragged to by his father. Well, little good it did him here; Ron and Hermione were far from through with the previous topic.

"Don't you call Hermione bloody-minded," Ron said with a glare at Harry before turning to her. "Now what's this rubbish about Harry getting beat up?"

"He's only covered with bruises from head to toe some days," Hermione said, vastly overstating the case. "You visit a lot. Don't tell me you've never noticed."

"Some people," Harry loudly stressed, waving away the mimosa Draco tried to hand him, "are smart enough to not go thinking they know more than they do!"

Snape spoke then, his tones somehow both measured and curt. "Miss Granger, when I spoke with you in my office I explained that in the interests of helping my son I had been teaching him physical self-defence techniques."
"I know what you told me," Hermione said, lifting her face to look up at her teacher.

"You were perhaps understandably perplexed as to why Harry didn't simply explain this straight away when you noticed his injuries, but I thought we had covered that matter to your satisfaction--"

Hermione interrupted then, her eyes slightly glimmering with tears. "Sir. I can't deny being upset to learn Harry had lied to me, but that isn't why I owled my concerns to Wizard Family Services." She looked away then, her gaze seeking out Harry's furious expression. "Professor Snape said that you were just embarrassed in case people thought your learning Muggle fighting meant your magic was doomed forever. He said that was why you weren't going to Madam Pomfrey, so that there'd be absolutely no chance that anyone would realise about your training. And that made enough sense that I was going to come back and talk to you about it, I was. But that was when I realised that it didn't matter."

Harry stared, wondering what she was getting at. "Well?"

"Harry . . . I'm sorry you resent my having owled off that complaint. But I had to, don't you see? If the whole story about you learning to fight was a lie, then obviously something horrible was going on, but even if it was true . . ." She stopped and drew a breath. "Well in that case Professor Snape needed someone with authority to tell him he was taking the lessons too far, because it's not right for him to incapacitate you, not even in an effort to help you."

A sole tear dripped from her lashes; Hermione wiped it away and just stared at Harry with wide, sad eyes.

"Incapacitate me?" Harry frowned, and shook his head. "But that's ridiculous. So I had a sore back for a while, and then my arm took the worst of a fall, and you saw some bruises on my neck one time I think--"

"Harry, someone concussed you!" Hermione cried out, clenching her fists. "Somebody concussed you so badly that Ron had to spend the whole night down here to make sure you would wake up and be all right!"

Oh no, Harry thought. That's right . . . she doesn't know the Lumos was at fault. Ron was under orders not to tell her about my magic, so he told her . . . what did he say in that letter? . . . oh yeah, he told her that I'd been concussed before he ever got down here that night, and he didn't know how it had happened . . . Hermione might not have given it much thought at the time, but ever since then I've been sporting injury after injury . . . so she put five and five together and got forty-six . . .

"Snape didn't concuss Harry!" Ron stormed in, only belatedly adding, "Professor Snape, I mean. He wouldn't!"

Snape inclined his head slightly, though whether at his correct title or to acknowledge the assertion, Harry didn't know.

"Ron, not two months ago you still thought he was . . . er . . ."

"Oh, I never really thought that!" Ron insisted, shaking his head so quickly that his red hair became a blur. "I was just mad at Harry 'cause we don't like Sn-- . . . I mean, 'cause Snape hates Gryffindor . . . I mean--"

"That will do, Mr Weasley," Snape drolled.

Hermione was sighing by then. "The fact is, Ron, you can't possibly know how Harry did or didn't get that concussion. You weren't here to see."
"I was here, though," Draco put in, bending down to set his mimosa on the coffee table.

"Oh, and I'd sure trust your word on the matter," Hermione shot back. "For all I know, you're the one who concussed him in the first place!"

"I am the one who hurt him, yes," Draco admitted, shrugging slightly. "Bowled him right over and into a stone fence. And you're right that there's no excuse for it. I was playing too rough. We toned down the rugby after that, though obviously not enough."

"Rugby!" Hermione breathed, shaking her head at Harry. "That's a Muggle sport! You expect me to believe you've been playing rugby with Draco Malfoy, who'd sooner die than so much as breathe the same air as a Muggle?"

Draco barked a laugh. "Do I have to quaff a Diet Coke before you realise you're exaggerating a tad?"

"Why do you think we didn't tell you?" Harry exclaimed. "We didn't think you'd believe it, and sure enough, you don't! So Draco made up stories about beds and brooms and I don't remember what else, and Professor Snape took all the blame on himself, and you still don't believe us, even after Family Services came down here to investigate on your say so! Even after they cleared us, for crying out loud!" Realizing that he was gesturing a bit wildly, Harry forced his hands to calm.

"Why didn't Professor Snape tell me the problem was rugby, then?" Hermione all but snarled.

Harry was about to say that Severus hadn't known about the rugby, but that wouldn't work, would it? Because Severus had clearly known about Harry's concussion, hadn't he? And any decent parent would ask questions about a how a thing like that could have happened . . .

"Because we knew you wouldn't believe that," Harry tried again, glancing desperately around for some help. He tried to think of something else to convince her, but his mind was going blank. Shite, he felt like swearing. It was so easy to dream up stories to feed the stupid casewitch! Why can't I come up with anything now?

"Honestly, 'Mione, I wish you would have told me what you were thinking," Ron broke in to say as he caught Harry's eye and then looked away. "I'd have told you there's no way Professor Snape would hurt Harry or let this one do him any real harm. I'm not blind. I saw the bruises too, you know, but I knew better than to go mental like you did! I just figured Harry and Malfoy were roughhousing a bit."

"A bit!"

"Yeah, well at least they're about the same size," Ron went blithely on, avoiding Harry's gaze by then, as if afraid he might crack a grin at the novel pleasure of the two of them outsmarting Hermione. "Listen, maybe you don't know what boys in the same house get up to, but I sure do. Now, don't get me wrong. It's not like I enjoy the thought of Harry getting into a little friendly competition with a sodding Malfoy, but I'd sooner believe that's the case than think anything really bad is going on down here."

"And I suppose you had bruises like that when your brothers used to roughhouse with you?"

"No, I had worse," Ron admitted. "A lot worse. Like I said, they were a lot bigger than me. But Harry's all right here, really he is. Family Services, Hermione? That's just low of you, it is. What the hell were you thinking?"

"Maybe," Hermione hotly retorted, "that Malfoy never seemed to have a single bruise on him!"
"So Harry's still got his pride," Draco scoffed, snatching up his mimosa again. "Or did, until you decided to tramp down here and smash it all to bits. He didn't want me casting constant healing charms on him, and he didn't want to go to Severus with every last thing."

"Harry, you've gone awfully quiet," Hermione remarked, actually reaching out and tapping him on the shoulder.

Of course he had, because too many thoughts at once were colliding inside his mind. _Sodding Malfoy_ . . . Ron's words, but they'd resonated inside Harry and sparked a potent memory, one that had never really been out of his mind. _At least we won't have to worry about him being around sodding Malfoy, _Ron had said . . . Or would say, rather. It was a part of his dream, a part that had yet to happen.

_At least we won't have to worry about him being around sodding Malfoy all the time_, Ron was going to say, and then Hermione was going to add that Harry would blame himself for not stopping Draco from leaving the dungeons, no matter that without magic Harry had no chance at all of stopping Draco from doing anything . . .

_That's it_, Harry thought, something akin to excitement starting to hum in his mind. _That's it, that's the thing I can change! In the dream, Hermione still doesn't know that I have my magic back! What if I tell her? I'll change the future, like Draco was talking about yesterday! I'll make it so that my seer dream--if it even was a seer dream, that is--can't possibly _ever_ come true!_

"I'm fine," he finally answered Hermione. Oh, Severus was just going to _kill_ him, but he had to do it. He had to tell, and he knew better than to wait until they could talk the whole thing over. His father would talk him out of it, he just knew it, the same way Snape had talked him out of worrying about Draco in the first place!

But Snape wasn't right about everything, was he? Look at how he'd gone about swaying Ron, all those ridiculous lines! Not to mention the way he'd failed to convince Hermione to overlook his bruises . . .

So Harry's worry was back with a vengeance, because if he was sure of anything, it was that there was something to this latest series of seer dreams. It might be something he didn't really understand yet, but there was _something_ to them. It couldn't be a coincidence that he'd dreamed of unadoption and then Hermione had reported his bruises to Family Services. Maybe Draco was right, and his lies _had_ changed that part of the future!

What if the Owlery dream came true, and he could have stopped it, and he _hadn't_? It would be like Sirius all over again, only worse, because at least then he'd only realised _afterwards_ how stupid he'd been.

 Enough was enough, Harry thought. He wasn't about to let Draco die. He _just wasn't_.

But maybe he could manage the whole thing without completely alienating his father. He hoped so, anyway.

"Listen, what's actually been going on is that my magic has come back," he blurted, nerves making him stand up as he said it. "And it's out of whack and really weak. Pitiful, actually, but I have to go back to classes soon and Severus is trying to make sure that I don't get completely torn to bits by . . . er, Slytherins, actually, so we've been practicing duelling, is all!"

Oh God, he could feel Snape's stare just _searing_ him to the spot. The man was angry.
Hermione gave him a pitying look. "Oh, Harry. First you're having strange accidents nobody could possibly believe, then you're learning to Muggle-fight, then neither one of those is true but you're playing rugby, a sport you've never once mentioned to me in over five years, then that's not true either but you're practicing magic you don't have? Credit me with a little sense."

Thinking he'd have to show her, Harry drew his wand. He saw Hermione's interest pick up at the fact that he had it on him.

"Potter," Snape warned in a dark, dangerous tone.

"He didn't want me to tell you," Harry said. "Hence all the stories. Though it was true he was teaching me to Muggle-fight as well, Hermione. He has to, given how pathetic my restored magic's turning out to be. I mean, I'm barely a wizard at all--" he babbled. "Snape's really worried--"

"I can speak for myself, Potter," Snape put in, still in that same you-are-in-so-much-trouble voice.

"Put that wand away!"

"Everybody's going to know in a couple of weeks anyway," Harry argued as he stepped farther away from his father. "When I'm in class." And then, before Snape could lunge across the room and stop him, Harry pointed his fingers at Ron's empty champagne flute, making sure his wand looked like it was in use when it wasn't really.

Glancing at Sals in her little box, he said in Parseltongue, "Take wing--"

"Accio Harry's wand!" Snape interrupted, brandishing his own.

Harry was speaking on top of him, though, beginning his countercharm the instant he heard Snape begin that accio. His reflexes honed from all the duelling they'd done, he shouted, "You stay put right where you are!" the words still in Parseltongue. Good thing he'd figured out anti-summoning charms when he was working on his spell lexicon.

His wand remained firmly grasped in his hand.

Hermione rose shakily to her feet, a hand pressed to her mouth. "You . . . your spell . . ."

"Oh for Merlin's sake!" Draco erupted. "Yes, he's a Parselmouth! You knew that already!"

The invective seemed to break Hermione out of her transfixed state. "Harry . . . your spell overcame his," she breathed, her comment proving that contrary to Draco's assumption, it wasn't the Parseltongue that had astonished her. She chanced a glance at Snape, and then, as if unsure whether he would be angry, quickly looked away.

"Uh, that wasn't a spell," Harry lied, horrified as he realised what a can of worms he'd just opened. He tried to think of something to tell her, anything to cover the unassailable fact that Snape's accio had failed utterly to do a thing to Harry's wand. It seemed like lies were dancing all around him, just out of his grasp, and it was all he could do to dredge up a paltry explanation such as . . . "It was . . . er, well, it's like this. Um . . . Snape's been having some trouble with his magic too, see? 'Cause what I had, you know, that made my magic vanish? Well, it was contagious, turns out--"

"Harry, do I actually look stupid? Because frankly, I'm getting sick of you acting like you think I am!"

"Oh, God," Harry moaned. This was going all wrong. He'd only meant to show her that his magic
was back. He hadn't meant her to realise how strong it was.

"The truth, if you would. The real truth, this time," Hermione demanded. And when it still wasn't forthcoming, "Never mind, I can guess the rest of it. Your spell overcame his . . ." she slowly repeated. "Therefore, your magic's back, but it isn't weak at all, is it?"

"Uh--"

Picking up momentum, Hermione exclaimed, "It's not! Your magic's powerful, probably frighteningly powerful, which stands to reason if you have to incant your spells in Parseltongue, which is thought to be rare because the power is so hard to access. You've obviously found a way straight into your deepest powers, Harry! Why would the Professor try to summon your wand to stop you? You most likely don't even need it any longer, have you realised that? But with a wand your spells are probably so strong they're unreal--"

"That's quite enough, Miss Granger!" Snape erupted.

"I bet you concussed yourself!" Hermione gasped, ignoring the Potions Master. "With some spell that caught you off guard, right? And the professor has been helping you learn to control this new, violent magic, so it's no wonder you've got banged up quite a bit. Oh, Harry, I am sorry I wrote to Family Services! I wouldn't have, if you'd have told me--" She suddenly gasped, and took a step back from Snape. "Oh, dear. You weren't supposed to tell me. And now you're in trouble . . ."

"In trouble but not in danger," Snape growled. "Unless you are now going to file another report claiming that you're worried Harry's Slytherin father can't handle a little family discord without resorting to his wand, or perhaps his fists?"

"No, sir," Hermione breathed, appalled. "I don't think that of you! I never thought that. I just . . . well, honestly, I thought Malfoy might be the one who was hitting Harry. It seemed like the kind of thing he'd do! And besides, I'd never seen Harry so cowed before. Right in front of me, Malfoy would tell Harry to stop talking, and he would! It was really worrisome!"

Harry sighed, chancing another glance at Snape, who still looked so grim that Harry shivered. "Draco knew it wasn't such a good idea for me to disobey my father. He was trying to help me all those times he told me to shut up."

Ron didn't say anything, but he looked as though the prospect of a helpful Draco was a bit hard to swallow.

Harry couldn't help but frown. The sodding Malfoy remark still eating at the edge of his consciousness, not to mention Hermione's easy assumption that Draco would hit him, of all things, he had to say, "Look, the part about me going back to being a regular student is true, so I'll see a lot more of you. And there's something we have to get clear. You can't go around badmouthing Draco, all right? I know you can't stand him, but like it or not, he's my friend too, now."

Ron made a little sound of disgust, then quickly changed the subject. "Harry did concuss himself, 'Mione. I know, because I was here and saw the whole thing. I wasn't supposed to say anything about his magic being back, so that was why I said I didn't know how it had happened."

Hermione furrowed her brow and slowly turned to face Snape. Harry saw her think twice about questioning him at all, but in the end her curiosity won out. "But . . . I don't understand, sir. Why the secret? If Harry's coming back to classes soon, wouldn't we all know soon anyway, that he'd recovered his powers?"
Snape drew himself up to his full height, and sneered, "I did not care if you knew his magic had returned, *per se*. I did not want anyone to realise quite how forcefully it can emerge at times."

"Oh . . ." Hermione nodded. "Strategy, right. We wouldn't want the Death Eaters to know in advance the kinds of spells he can do. So you're planning to have him hide what he can, right, just like Harry was saying . . . I don't suppose you can hide the Parseltongue, but the sheer *strength* of his spells . . . oh, and the wandless magic. Best not to put that on display--"

"If you are quite through showing off your powers of deductive reasoning," Snape scathed, "perhaps we can return to the problem *Harry* has presented us with by telling you his secret!"

"As if I'd *tell* anybody!" Hermione exclaimed, followed closely by Ron declaring, "Yeah! I never even told *her*, that's how trustworthy *I* am!"

"You may prove less than trustworthy if you are interrogated via torture," Snape spat. "Unless of course we resort to *Obliviate*--"

"Oh, God, *please,* not this again!" Harry groaned. "You just won't be satisfied until you *Obliviate* some student or other, will you?"

"I was not in fact suggesting it!" Snape sharply rebuked him. "You are lucky I don't propose *Obliviating* you! I'd think you of all people would be aware how much Voldemort and his lackeys adore administering . . . what did you call them? Torments from the pits of hell? Not to mention that they have a multitude of other ways of gleaning information!"

Ron glanced from Snape to Harry, and back. "Uh, sir . . . what *are* you going to do about Harry having told Hermione the truth?"

"That is, I believe, my business!" the Potions Master roared.

"Just asking," Ron murmured, blinking.

Draco cleared his throat a bit ostentatiously, and when Snape looked his way, quietly put in, "I'm not quite sure of the protocol at this point, but I thought I might mention . . . dinner is served." He gave a little wave toward the table where individual cheese soufflés were waiting for each of them.

Harry nodded, a bit desperate for something to break the tension. "Yes, let's eat," he chimed in, trying to sound enthusiastic about the prospect. In reality, his stomach was grinding something awful, and not with hunger. Actually, he felt like he'd already had a full dinner of sawdust; his throat seemed choked with the stuff. Snape hadn't moved, hadn't even glanced at the table. He was too busy glaring at Harry.

"Perhaps some wine," Draco smoothly suggested, pouring it already. Just one glass though. For Snape. When he held it out toward the man, only to have Snape ignore it, the boy added, "Galliano?"

"Don't be an idiot," Snape growled. "You think I'm some *Muggle* you can ply with drink so I'll relax?"

Shrugging, Draco offered the wine instead to Hermione, then poured some for Ron and Harry as well, serving himself last. "Shall we?" he prompted.

Harry moved hesitantly toward the table, not quite sure what to do. He knew a hysterical urge to laugh when Draco's perfect manners actually extended to his pulling out Hermione's chair for her. Ron scowled at that, but Hermione actually seemed too shell-shocked to notice.
Snape glared at the lot of them as they sat down, nobody making a move to touch a soufflé until their host joined them.

He never did join them, though. With a disgusted snarl, the Potions Master whirled on a heel and stomped off towards his office.

Harry gulped. "I guess I should go say I'm sorry . . ."

"To quote a great man," Draco returned, lifting his wine as though in tribute, "'Don't be an idiot.' Give him some time to calm down, at least. By the way, are you actually sorry?"

"No, not really," Harry admitted.

"All the more reason to let sleeping dogs lie," Draco advised, then glanced at their guests. "Well? Don't stand on ceremony. Eat. There's loads more coming. Shrimp vinaigrette, then some lovely mango to clear our palate, then Cornish game hens basted in kumquat butter, and--"

"I can't eat," Harry miserably announced, laying aside his fork as he hung his head in his hands.

"We covered this already," Draco impatiently lectured. "You're not to punish yourself with hunger, Harry. Severus is angry, but he's been angry with you before and the two of you managed to get through it. Just try to relax, and eat your dinner."

Hermione took a tentative bite of soufflé. "It's really good," she said as if in encouragement.

"Yeah," Ron echoed, trying it as well. "Go on Harry, eat."

Harry did, just a bit.

"Have some wine as well," Draco advised.

"You're not his nurse, Malfoy," Ron objected.

Hermione tilted her head to one side. "I think he's just trying to help again, Ron."

"Quite right," agreed Draco.

"I was just trying to help, too," Hermione quietly said. "Harry, what was I supposed to do? I thought you were getting hurt and you really needed someone to step in."

Harry couldn't help but sigh. "Don't you think I could owl Family Services myself if I wasn't being treated well?"

Biting her lip, Hermione admitted, "Well, you could, but I didn't think you would, Harry. I mean . . . I thought if you were so desperate for a family that you'd agree to have Professor Snape adopt you . . . well, I guess I thought you'd put up with anything to keep your new father. You are a little bit, um, needy, I think."

"And you're a little bit bossy, and a little bit nosy, and a little bit--" Shaking his head, Harry switched to saying, "I don't want to fight."

Ron scooped up the last of his soufflé, then said, "Harry didn't let Snape adopt him because he was desperate or needy, Hermione. You haven't seen them together the way I have. When Harry hurt himself discovering his new magic, Snape was . . . well, he was just like anybody's dad would be. Worried, I mean. And caring."

Draco cast Ron a stern look then, maybe to warn him not to mention the singing.

"Yeah, he was," Ron said. "How do you think I got over feeling awful about the whole thing? Harry's all right down here, he really is. And I'm not talking about something as blatant as whether he needs Family Services to come investigate! He's getting what he needs, that's what I mean. And it was wrong of us to try to tell him that he shouldn't get that if it meant Snape was involved."

Draco had too much pride to tell Ron out loud that he approved of the sentiments, but he did top up the other boy's wine glass after Ron finished speaking.

"But why Snape?" Hermione pressed. "Harry, anybody you wanted would adopt you!"

Looking his friend in the eye, Harry admitted, "I love Severus, Hermione. I love him a lot. He understands me and he's good for me and I don't want anybody else for a father."

"You don't love him; you have an unhealthy attachment because he took care of you when you were horribly mangled on Samhain!"

"And just why do you love your parents?" Ron challenged, waving a hand for Harry to let him talk. "Because they took care of you when you were little! Because they've been there for you! Same for Harry, only he just started later than we did with this whole parent thing. And anyway, why should Harry have to justify himself to you? You ought to be glad he's finally got what we've been lucky enough to have all along, but instead you try to pick his emotions apart and tell him he's wrong to have them! If you ask me, you've got one hell of a lot of nerve!"

"Ronald Weasley, how dare you--"

"It's like with the house-elves!" Ron railed, warming to his theme. "They're happy! They're bubbling over with delight at their little lives! They couldn't be happier, and what do you do but try to force them into a freedom they don't want and won't like! And here you are trying to make sure Harry ends up an orphan again. Merlin's balls, Wizard Family Services! At least when I was as full of myself as you are, I didn't go that far trying to mess Harry's life up!"

Hermione actually shut up for once as she thought about that.

"All right," she finally said in a slightly grumbling tone. "I get the point. Harry's happy."

"Well I was," Harry sighed, "until you stuck your nose into all of it and I ended up disobeying Severus. Now I'm just bloody miserable. Thanks, Hermione." Glancing up, he saw that she looked absolutely crestfallen. Served her right, even though he knew that what he'd said hadn't been exactly fair. He'd had other reasons for telling her about his magic, after all.

"I said I was sorry--"

"Yeah, but are you sorry for writing Family Services, or sorry that you treated me all along like I was too stupid to know what I was doing?"

Hermione swallowed, hearing it put that way. "For both, I guess," she quietly answered, her voice barely audible.

"Well, good," Harry answered. "You stay that way. You stay sorry. Because when I move into the Tower again, I don't want to hear my father being badmouthed either. Well, not just for being my father, I mean. You can complain about points from Gryffindor or impossible potions assignments all
you like. I know he isn't perfect."

The house-elves chose that moment to invisibly whisk away the soufflés, replacing them with little shell-shaped dishes filled with the promised shrimp vinaigrette. Harry took one look at his and groaned.

"Perhaps we should just cut dinner short," Draco suggested.

"Good idea," Hermione echoed, shoving her chair back. Ron followed suit, though he eyed his shrimp longingly as he stood.

"So when are you coming back to lessons?" Ron asked.

"As soon as I develop a little better spell control."

"Good idea, after that Lumos . . ."

"Oh, it was a Lumos that concussed him?" Hermione nodded sagely. "So that's what destroyed the professor's books, I suppose."

Draco made his way over to the door and waved it open. As Hermione passed him, he held up a hand to delay her exit, but he didn't touch her. "You really are quite clever. Cleverest witch of your age, I heard Harry say you'd been called. Listen . . . I resent your owling Family Services, and I really hate the way you took it on yourself to decide Severus wasn't good enough for Harry, but for all that . . . I'm sorry I called you a bleating cow."

Hermione stepped back almost reflexively, shock written all across her features. Then she recovered enough to return, "It's sheep who bleat, Malfoy. But . . . I accept your apology."

"Sorry you called her Mudblood, too, are you?" Ron challenged, looking none too pleased by this development.

"Actually, I'm sorry she is one," Draco returned, but that only made Ron look angrier.

"Draco," Harry groaned, finally pushing up from the table. "Not this again. You said you weren't going to be so focussed on--"

"All I meant was that like it or not, a lot of doors will be closed to her," Draco haughtily clarified.

"Yeah, sure," Ron growled, fists clenched. He wasted no time in ushering Hermione out of there.

After the door was closed behind them, Draco laid a hand on Harry's elbow and steered him back towards his dinner. "I know you want to go see Severus, but you really should eat a bit more, first. He won't be happy if I have to tell him that you're starving yourself again, remember?"

Yeah, Harry thought. No point in disappointing him still further. He took a bite of shrimp and tried to savour it. A little bit of tart flavour soaked through the sawdust feeling in his mouth. "So why'd you apologise to Hermione?" he had to ask.

Draco lifted an eyebrow. "Oh, don't tell me you've forgotten our deal. I said I'd apologise for the cow remark as soon as she admitted she was wrong about you and Severus."

Harry ate another shrimp as he considered that. "She didn't say she was wrong, though."

"Oh, as good as," Draco passed that off. "She won't be putting herself in the middle of it again, I could tell. And I didn't want you thinking I didn't keep my word."
"You're a Slytherin; you don't keep your word except when it's in your own best interests."

"Yes, well I think you understand where my interests lie, these days. But Harry, even if you weren't the prophesied saviour of the world," he lightly mocked, "I still would stand with you. Because . . . oh, hell. It's too Hufflepuffish to even say, but I'm going to anyway. Now that I know you, you're actually pretty likeable. Well, sometimes. I certainly wouldn't want to see you dead."

"Oh, good," Harry drawled, his spirits momentarily picking up. "You like me sometimes and you don't want to see me dead. What a sentiment. Have you considered writing greeting cards for a living?"

"I just wanted you to know that I'm not just on your side only because you're so hideously disfigured," Draco drolled back, staring pointedly at Harry's scar.

"Yeah, I know that," Harry admitted. "We're brothers." He set his fork down, realizing as he did so that he'd eaten over half his portion. He felt better for it, too.

He knew, though, that he'd soon be feeling worse. It was time to face his father.

------------------------------------------------------

"Enter," Snape said at his tentative knock, the single word sounding unfriendly. It only got worse when the boy went in, closed the door, and perched on the edge of a chair in front of Snape's desk. The Potions Master sat behind it, features dark with displeasure and resentment, and Harry had a sudden, awful feeling that he'd been transported backwards several months in time, and he was in here to be yelled at and assigned detention.

Which was stupid, of course. Snape had certainly never had him down to his private quarters just to give him detention.

"I thought I should come in and apologise, sir," Harry started.

"Not if you don't mean it," Snape barked, and at Harry's quick look, added, "All that power, but what good is it if you can't think critically enough to realise that the silencing spells on my door only work in one direction? Yes, I heard you!"

Harry suddenly began to feel embarrassed that he'd gone on out there about how much he loved his father. Not that Snape appeared to have overheard that, but still . . .

"Well I am sorry that I couldn't be a better son," he quickly said. "I didn't want to disobey you, really. I was trying not to, even. I was going along with the rugby story--"

"Until you decided you'd had enough of lying to your precious friends," Snape spat. "No wonder you insisted Mr Weasley join us. I knew you were up to something! I should have trusted my instincts, by Merlin!"

"I wasn't manoeuvring you when I suggested inviting Ron down!" Harry insisted. "I honestly thought he'd be a big help--"

"I dare say he was a far bigger help than you'd anticipated, supporting the rugby lie the way he did." Cold, that voice. Cold all the way through. "Were you hoping he'd mention the Lumos the moment your injuries became a topic of discussion, perhaps? But he didn't, which left it to you to tell Miss Granger flat-out despite my clear order to the contrary!"

"But I had to tell her--"
"Do you not recall my saying that I would not appreciate being treated to lies and misdirection from my own son?"

"Well, punish me then!" Harry yelled.

"Oh, I shall," Snape promised, a grim look about his mouth.

"But I didn't lie to you," the boy insisted. "I disobeyed, but I didn't lie. And I have to tell you why I disobeyed. It's really important! Oh, God. Is the door good and warded now?"

"Of course it's warded, you foolish boy; it's closed! Did you not understand before? I could hear you but you could not have heard anyone in here!"

"I understood, but can you check? Please?"

Snape gave him a rather disgusted look, but he did wave his wand and nod.

"All right." Drawing in a breath, Harry said all in a whoosh as he exhaled, "I was trying to save Draco from being thrown off the Owlery!"

"You do have a saving-people thing," Snape sneered, his voice only growing louder and more derisive as he continued, leaning forward on his desk to practically breathe fire into Harry's face. "What the bloody hell does anything you said out there have to do with the godforsaken Owlery?"

Harry couldn't help but rear back from the raw fury pouring over him in waves. His back complained as he arched it past its normal curve, the buttons on the leather upholstery cutting so fiercely into him that he could feel them through his thick jumper.

The reflex action sparked something in Snape. "Oh, for Merlin's sake! If I wasn't going to hit you back when you weren't my son and I didn't have Miss Granger snooping around, I'm certainly not going to do it now that you are and she is!"

"I didn't think you were," Harry denied, feeling a bit ill over the whole topic. "Just stop yelling though, all right? For five seconds. I had every intention of doing as you thought best, I did. I thought Ron would help me get through to Hermione. Which he did, actually. That was the only reason I wanted him to come along. But when he said sodding Malfoy, it occurred to me that in my latest seer dream--"

"It was no such thing!"

"Listen," Harry urged, scooting his chair up to the desk, determined to stay there this time even if Snape yelled again. "I've been wishing all along, about a lot of my dreams, actually, that I could do something to contradict them. So they couldn't come true ever, right? Dumbledore says it's impossible. Or implied it, anyway--"

"Your five seconds have long since expired."

Well, at least that comment had been calmer, for all it was supremely irritated. "Are you going to listen or not?" Harry asked, studying his father's features. "Because if you aren't, you should just tell me what my punishment is and we'll call it a night."

"You wanted to change the future," Snape sighed, leaning back finally, his fingers drumming lightly against his desk. "And so?"

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. "Well out there, in the middle of the conversation, I suddenly
remembered that in my seer dream, or whatever it was, Hermione said I didn't have any magic! And I thought, that's it, that's how I can guarantee that Draco never goes up to the Owlery at all. I can tell her about my magic, and then she won't say I don't have any, and then the dream can't come true, and Draco'll never die!" Harry paused, flushing. "Well, I mean he will, but not anytime soon."

"You place a higher value on Draco's life than on Miss Granger's?" Snape mocked. "How very interesting. Of course I heard my two sons swearing fraternal loyalty a moment ago, but I had no idea you took it so very to heart. So much so, that merely on the strength of this theory, you decided to expose her to the tender mercies of Voldemort's interrogators, chief among whom is Lucius Malfoy! Have I mentioned that her being a Muggleborn is not going to work in her favour?"

Harry felt himself begin to get angry then, because Snape sure had a nerve laying that charge at his door. "It's not my fault Hermione found out enough to get her interrogated if a Legilimens sees what she knows!" he shot back. "I don't know as you noticed, but I was trying to tell her that my magic was back but was extra weak! Same story we were going to feed all the students once I went back to classes, remember? You told me to look inept, told me to let rumours spread that I could barely defend myself! What difference did it make if Hermione heard the story a little early, huh? But you had to decide to accio my wand and send the whole plan straight down the loo! What was that, anyway? I thought you didn't want her to know I was doing my spells wandless!"

"My summoning spell was an attempt to stop your foolishness! I did not appreciate my order being countermanded, Harry!"

"But it didn't matter if I showed her a wobbly levitation charm! I was going to make sure it looked really pathetic! It would have been all right!"

"Harry," Snape said, his voice all at once sombre. "You have a marked tendency to believe yourself invincible. In the main that's not a bad trait. Confidence in battle is often key to victory. But you are sixteen; your judgment is far from invincible. This is a case in point. You have utterly misinterpreted your dream. I saw it too, remember."

His father's sudden quiet tone brought Harry up short. "Misinterpreted?"

Snape nodded. "When Miss Granger said, He'll tell himself he should have stopped Malfoy from leaving Snape's rooms! Never mind that without magic he'd have no hope, she was dissembling."

"What?"

"Lying, you foolish boy. You really ought to pay more attention to the fine nuances of tone and expression. She was lying, making it seem in front of the other Gryffindors as though your magic had never come back, when she knew full well that it had indeed!"

"Oh, that's just ridiculous, it is--"

"Is it? You think I can't recognise a lie when I see one? I've spent most of my life among people who say one thing and mean another. It's part of being Slytherin, like the way Draco had no trouble at all reading the truth behind Richard Steyne's flowery words. Think about my years spying on Voldemort, Harry. I'm only alive today because I know how to discern misdirection when I see it!"

Harry bit his lip. "You knew Ron was lying to himself about thinking you'd . . . touched me wrong, before he even knew it was his anger making him talk that way . . ." Bolstering himself, Harry asked, "So, in the dream, you thought Hermione was lying about me having no magic? Just because her tone of voice was off?"
"Her voice, her gestures, the look in her eyes," Snape clarified. "Not to mention Mr Weasley's rather
telling reaction. He immediately leapt to your defence, insisting that it wasn't your fault Draco had
gone up to the Owlery, just as though he knew what Miss Granger must be thinking--that it could be
your fault. That you could actually have stopped him, given that your magic was back in full force
and she knew as much!"

Harry suddenly felt horribly sick as the truth of what he had done struck him. He sucked in a gasp
and pressed his hands deeply into his lower abdomen. "Oh, dear God, he moaned. "Oh, no . . . You
can't mean . . . It can't be like you're saying, it just can't."

"It certainly can," Snape returned, all compassion vanishing from his voice. "In trying to make sure
the seer dream could not come true, you have made sure of the opposite! You have guaranteed that
your dream can proceed apace! Perhaps, even, that it will!"

"I . . . I'm sorry!" Harry cried, and meant it that time.

"Your sorries won't be worth much when your brother is a puddle of muck after a three-hundred foot
fall!"

Something foul actually surged into the base of Harry's throat. He almost gagged on it before
managing to swallow it back down. Ugh. He was never going to eat shrimp again.

"Let's discuss just why you've sentenced Draco to a horribly painful death," Snape remarked in a
conversational tone, though his eyes still gleamed like chips of grim, black ice. "Because you trusted
entirely in your sudden brilliant idea, which I must say was less than intelligent in my estimation.
Didn't the headmaster address this issue with you? He told you that seer dreams always came true,
that prophecy cannot be defied! But of course, he only has a mere hundred and forty years' more
experience than you, so what would he know?"

"He didn't explain things very well--" Harry tried defending himself. He should have known it
would be better to just keep his mouth closed.

"Oh, he didn't, did he? Is that going to be your excuse every time you refuse to listen to your elders?
As I recall, you trotted out the same pathetic line over your miserable failure to master Occlumency
when I first endeavoured to teach you! But of course you knew better than your elders then as well,
didn't you?"

"But he didn't explain," Harry insisted, determined not to get sidetracked into arguments about
Snape's horrid teaching during fifth year, or what his own failure to learn had led to for Sirius. "I
even asked him what would happen if I changed something so a dream couldn't happen, and he
didn't answer the question, Professor!"

Snape stared at him for a long moment, and then corrected, "Severus. Or Father. Or Dad. Even
furious, I am still your father, Harry."

Harry knew that, but he appreciated that Snape would say it, and in the middle of their fight, no less.
He gave a jerky little nod.

"Now, as for Albus, he was probably wary of tempting fate," Snape went on in a heavy tone. "Either
that, or he feared you were too young to understand the concept of paradox. I dare say you
comprehend it now. Trying to defy the future has done nothing but assure it. But it wasn't only Albus
you ignored in this matter, Harry. I was most specific with you on the matter of not divulging your
magic to Miss Granger. Now, why was that? Could it be that I have more experience than you as
well? Enough, as I said, to recognise when someone is lying?"
Harry sort of gulped. "Is that why you said not to tell her? Because you knew she did know about my magic in that dream, and you were trying to make sure it couldn't come true? What happened to the future cannot be defied?"

"I did not say I believed that, only that Albus did."

"But he doesn't believe that!" Harry blurted. "How could he, when he sent us back in time third year so I could rescue Buckbeak and save Sirius from the Dementor's kiss . . ." He suddenly stopped speaking, realizing what he had said. *Uh-oh . . .*

"I am going to kill that old man before all this is through," Snape abruptly announced, standing up and beginning to pace. For one awful second, Harry thought Snape was reliving his old fury over Sirius' escape, but then the man went on, "He gave you a time-turner? He gave a thirteen-year-old a time-turner, and sent him out into a forest where a werewolf was running free! Wonderful!"

"Um, but we changed the future," Harry pointed out, standing up too, and going over to where Snape had stopped, by the hearth.

"You changed the present," Snape amended. "And in any case we are not discussing time-turners, but seer dreams. If seer dreams are in fact fated as Albus believes, then even using a time-turner would be of no help; you would merely encounter another paradox."

"But you think the seer dream can be defied, and you were trying to defy it," Harry glumly concluded. "And I messed it all up."

"You see now why you might consider listening to your elders occasionally?" Snape darkly inquired.

"And Draco's going to die now?" Harry cried. "And it will be my fault! It's like with Sirius, just like you said, with the Occlumency, I didn't listen! Draco's going to end up muck and it's all my fault, isn't it!"

Snape stared at him for a long moment. "I should say yes," he gruffly admitted. "I had intended to, when I started this. Your punishment. After your outright defiance tonight, you fully deserve to believe that Draco will die because of your actions. But . . ." He looked away. "I find I cannot do a thing like that to my own son."

Harry looked up through bleary eyes, his face wet as he rubbed at his cheeks. "Huh?"

A hint of pity in the hard line of that mouth, now. "You already blame yourself for too much that is not your fault. I can't add more shadows to your eyes, especially not such specious ones as these."

"I don't . . . what do you mean?"

"Draco is not going to die, you idiot child. You appear to have forgotten something key to the whole issue: I do not believe your last few dreams predict the future."

Harry's thoughts went into a spin. Too many branching possibilities, too many paradoxes, and all of them so tangled up in lies and misdirection that he hardly knew where the truth began or ended. He finally made enough sense of all that had been said to weakly assert, "But . . . you said you wanted me to not tell Hermione about my magic because you were trying to stop the dream from coming true . . . if you were just lying about that to punish me, then why didn't you want me to tell her even that I had some weak powers? I mean, she was going to find that out anyway when I went back to class."

"I wasn't lying to punish you," Snape told him, reaching out to take his hands. Snape's were warm,
astonishingly so, which made Harry realise that his own must feel frozen. "I was . . . overstating the case, perhaps. It is true that I wanted you to step back from your own convictions and realise what might result from your charging ahead. It is also true that when I saw in the pensieve how Miss Granger appeared to already know about your magic, though she was determined to hide it from her fellow Gryffindors, I realised how I might arrange things to ensure that the dream could not ever come to be."

"But you believe in my dream then, sir? Uh, Father?"

"No," Snape's lank hair swayed as he shook his head in emphatic denial. "I do not. I do not for one instant, Harry. But just as I went and warded the Owlery with extra spells, I thought it would do no harm to ladle this layer of protection atop Draco as well. Because . . . I do not believe it is a seer dream, but I recognise the possibility that I may be mistaken." The Potions Master sighed. "I thought it would be a simple matter to keep Miss Granger fooled just a short while longer. That was all the time we needed, you realise. It was clear from your dream that events in the Owlery would transpire before you ever moved back to Gryffindor Tower."

"Let me go back tonight, then," Harry begged. "Even if you don't believe in the dream. I don't either, not really. Not even when I told Hermione. It was like you said . . . just in case."

"You are not ready to go back," Snape said, giving his hands a harder squeeze. "I love you both, as you well know. I would not risk you to save Draco, nor would I risk him to save you. And besides, if it is a seer dream then I think that tonight's events have shown conclusively that trying to defy it is indeed a fool's game. Sending you back early will merely create another paradox, another way for the future to manifest itself regardless."

Harry couldn't help but shudder. "Why didn't you tell me your plan in advance, even if it meant explaining paradox? I mean, I thought you said I did better with more information. Dad?"

"I didn't formulate my plan, as you put it, until after our own conversation had long since ended," Snape gruffly admitted.

"You still could have told me--"

"No, I could not, because you were already too fixated on the dream and just a heartbeat away from telling Draco about it. I did not want that, Harry. You know why. And despite my plan with regard to Miss Granger, I truly do not think your dream foretells Draco's death. My own little scheme was, indeed as you said, just in case."

Harry shivered, tremors coursing through him from head to toe.

Stepping away, Snape opened a cabinet and withdrew something, then handed Harry a small vial. "Warming draught," he explained. "It seems you need it."

The potion sent a rush of dizzying heat spinning through Harry. It was all he could do to stumble towards his seat and collapse into it. "That's . . . potent," he admitted, panting slightly to ease the warm feeling rushing up inside him.

"Perhaps you need weaker formulations now," Snape mused, studying him carefully.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Of that at least. The healing potions though, the few we used, seemed to be about right."

"Interesting."
Harry didn't think so, not particularly. He was even less interested in the next topic Snape brought up.

"Your punishment," the Potions Master intoned, his voice going grim again, though not as horribly as before. "You ignored my instructions, defied my clear advice, and even went so far as to countermand my attempt at discipline."

Harry glanced nervously at his father. "I thought . . . making me think Draco would die was my punishment."

Snape scoffed at that. "Well it was, but I couldn't actually do it for longer than twenty seconds, could I? I do hope having a Gryffindor son isn't turning me soft. I'll have to make sure it's not, in fact, in the matter of your punishment. So . . ." He appeared to be thinking the matter over.

_Ten thousand lines_, Harry thought with dismay. _No, a hundred thousand . . ._

"Potions practicals, I do believe," Snape announced. "Yes. I know you; you won't enjoy that at all. And it serves a double purpose, as your laboratory work has been woefully neglected for far too long."

"Well sixth year has a lot of charmed potions," Harry complained. "And you knew I couldn't perform any charms for the longest time. And even regular potions didn't like _me_ brewing them, not when my magic was locked down tight."

"Difficulties that have been resolved," Snape coolly observed. "Every Saturday, all day Saturday, for . . . well, for the balance of the school year, we'll say. _That_ should make you think twice about disobeying me again."

"What about Hogsmeade Saturdays?"

"Missing out on Hogsmeade will reinforce the lesson you obviously need to learn."

"No it won't," Harry disagreed. "Listen, how about we negotiate? You'll let me off for Hogsmeade Saturdays, but those weeks I'll come brew on Sundays. All right?"

Snape regarded him for a long moment. "Well, if we're _negotiating_," he finally stressed, "let's be a bit clearer about our terms. You may substitute Sunday for Saturday with my permission, which I will not grant unless I am pleased with your demeanour in general and your mastery of Potions in particular."

"What does it matter for my _mastery_ if I brew on a Saturday or a Sunday?"

"Motivation matters a great deal, especially with Gryffindors more interested in their social lives than in making the most of an expensive Hogwarts education."

"Hey, I pay my own way here!" Harry exclaimed, and then realised, "Oh, that's right . . ."

"Yes, your school fees are my responsibility now," Snape nodded. "Which is as it should be, but I will not have my money going to waste, is that clear? You will come down here to brew on Saturdays unless I give you permission otherwise."

"You're just trying to make sure I still see plenty of Draco," Harry accused, still a bit irritated that he hadn't completely won the negotiation. "As if you don't believe me when I say I plan to visit!"

"If you think that, I can have you do your practicals in a classroom laboratory--"
"No, it's okay. I'll do them down here," Harry groused. "Serve you right if I misbrew something and blow up your rooms."

Snape had the gall to laugh. "If you have that severe a mishap then Hogsmeade Saturdays will definitely be a thing of the past for you. In fact, I may well decide you need to do practicals all through the summer. Three full days a week, perhaps. It won't do for any son of mine to be less than competent in potions."

"I got an Outstanding on my O.W.L., as you know perfectly well, Dad!"

"Ordinary Wizarding Level," Snape scathed. "Emphasis on ordinary. I'm talking about real brewing, N.E.W.T. level at the very least. And one more thing. I want a promise from you, and I'll want you to keep it, do you understand? You're to swear to me that if you have any more brilliant ideas about your dreams, you'll come to me at once, not act on them, is that clear?"

"Um . . . well, yeah, it's clear, but what if there isn't time? I mean, what if it's an emergency and somebody's going to die right in front of me if I don't do what my instincts are screaming at me to do?"

"Ah yes, negotiations," Snape snarked. "You may have a caveat, then. You will promise to come to me unless unassailably dire life-or-death circumstances preclude it. But you are to come to me at once, not mull things over until you have no choice but to act. Are we agreed?"

"Yeah, it's a deal," Harry answered, then realizing that a promise should sound more formal, "I mean, yes, Severus. We're agreed."

His father looked him up and down. "Swear it. Swear it on your honour as a Gryffindor."

"You think Gryffindor honour's a joke!" Harry exclaimed. "Peter Pettigrew, all that!"

"Yours is no joke. In fact one of your major failings is having too much of it, but in this case, I suppose I don't mind using that to my own advantage. Now swear, Harry."

"Fine," Harry bit out, more than a little irritated. "I swear on my honour as a Gryffindor, by all that Godric himself held holy, all right, that I'll come to you the instant I have any more brilliant ideas about any of my dreams."

"Adequate, if a trifle sarcastic," Snape commented.

Harry was saved from answering that by a knock on the door. When Snape waved it open, Draco poked his head inside a little hesitantly. "Everything all right in here?"

"Were you expecting mayhem?" Snape mocked. "Harry is fine, though it astonishes me that you should feel a need to check up on him when he is with me." He made a show of glancing from Draco to Harry and back. "However, if you want to be protective of your brother, I suppose I can't object. After all, you did go to rather Hufflepuffish lengths to assure him that you might occasionally be able to tolerate his presence these days."

Draco coloured slightly, muttering, "Oh yeah, the one-way wards. Should have remembered." Then he rallied, "I wasn't worried about him, Severus, though after that accio and counteraccio out there, I did wonder if the two of you were duelling again."

Thinking about their argument, Harry had to nod. "Yeah, I guess we were, sort of. And before you ask who won, I think it was a draw."
"That's all right then," Draco pronounced. "Well, the real reason I knocked was because I thought you might like to know about the letter that just came whooshing out the Floo."

Snape frowned. "Steyne again?"

"No, it's for Harry. Looks like Granger's writing." Draco thrust the letter forward, then as though realizing that Harry was in no shape to get up and walk to him, he went and sat in the chair opposite him and handed the letter over.

Harry turned it over in his hands, almost afraid to read it.

Snape leaned against the mantle and studied the pair of them. "It was good of you to make amends with Miss Granger, Draco."

"Oh yeah, you heard that too," the Slytherin boy realized. He looked a little bit embarrassed. "Well, I didn't want to, you realise. Of course I didn't want to. There's no excuse for her filing that complaint with Family Services. I'd much rather have given her a piece of my mind than offer her yet another truce, considering she so rudely rejected the last one I suggested."

Harry thought back to that night's dinner, and realised something. He'd been dreading his confrontation with Severus so much that he hadn't noticed it at the time, but ... "Hey, all through the meal you didn't give her that piece of your mind. And you could have. I mean, I was yelling at her, and Ron was too . . . why didn't you?" Then it came to him. "Oh, right. You were being Mr Perfect Manners from the drinks on forward. You even lectured me on being less than polite to a guest."

"It wasn't that." Draco cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable. "I . . . I actually wanted to talk to you both about it. This . . . well, Severus is sure to lecture me, next, but I feel I really do have to point out . . ."

"What, Draco?" Snape asked.

The Slytherin boy closed his eyes, and admitted, "That girl is bloody brilliant. She saw him counter-incant you in Parseltongue, which she can't of course understand in the slightest, and from that she figured out every last thing. That his magic was strong not weak, that it must be duelling causing his injuries, that he can do magic wandless now . . . Merlin, even that a Lumos was what ruined the books!"

"You came in here to inform us that Miss Hermione Granger is bloody brilliant," Snape echoed. "Well, thank you for that scintillating bit of news. It's not as though I ever noticed this fact during almost six years of instructing her, you realise."

"Oh, shut up, Severus," Draco groaned. "You think this is easy for me? Well, it's not. She's a girl. And a Gryffindor. And a . . . never mind. But anyway, I told her she was clever and I meant it. And now I'm telling the pair of you because . . . well, Harry's a good liar, but only when he doesn't care about the person he's lying to. Trust me Severus, he's an awful liar when he's with those Gryffindors. He can hardly bear deceiving them."

"I noticed that tonight," Snape remarked. "And so? Get to your point."

"He's going to need help, and damn it all, who better to help him keep his dark powers a secret but her? She can think on her feet, we saw that tonight. I came in here to tell you that Harry was right to tell her what he did, and what's more, we really ought to bring her out to Devon and let her see exactly what Harry can and can't do, now. Weasley as well, since he knows anyway."

"You are seriously proposing I make Harry's Gryffindor friends a part of our inner circle, as it were,"
Snape said, wincing a bit. Harry wasn't sure if that was at the idea, or the term *inner circle*.

"Yes!" Draco retorted. "I can't protect him once he leaves here, can I? Since you won't let me out! You should, you know. I could go back to Slytherin and keep an ear to the wall for word of any plots against Harry--"

"We are not getting into this discussion yet again," Snape announced, his glance on the boy hard.

"What do I have to do, promise not to kill anybody if it can possibly be avoided?"

"You've promised that already, at least twenty times!" the Potions Master raised his voice. "I am in no mood to go through it all once more. You know my views!"

"All right, fine," Draco sullenly returned. To his credit though, his voice acquired a normal tone as he went on, "So, where was I? Oh yes, I can't help him if I'm required to stay here, but neither can you, with all your classes to teach and what not. But his Gryffindor friends can stick close to him, most of the time anyway, and if the Slytherins are . . . well, being the slightest bit *Slytherin*, he's going to need backup! They'll attack when he's least expecting it. Now who do you want hanging around Harry when that happens, a couple of Gryffindors who don't have the slightest idea what to expect from him in a battle? Or some well-informed, well-*practiced* allies who might realise, for instance, that in the dark he'll need some help because he won't be able to see the snake on his crest?"

"So that's why you said Hermione was clever," Harry realised. It had seemed a little odd at the time. Unexpected, and not like Draco at all, in fact. But now Harry understood. "You'd realised you had a use for her intelligence."

"I'd realised you had a use for it, Harry. And anyway, I told you ages ago that I was trying to put our enmity in the past."

"Right, a war zone in your own ranks is no good for anybody . . ." Harry murmured.

Draco gave a definite nod at that, even if his silver eyes still held a bit of consternation at the notion of a Muggleborn as an ally.

"So, Severus," Draco resumed, turning in his chair to look at him. "Devon. What do you think?"

Snape looked annoyed and condescending all at once. "Well, as those two know anyway, I suppose we may as well turn that to our advantage." And then, in meaningful tones to Harry: "And too, you told me once that your friends are your strength. It appears that will be more true than you likely thought at the time. Draco's notion is sound. If your new house is going to turn against you, it is just as well that there are those in your old house who can support you fully."

Harry made a little choking noise. All this talk of imminent attack . . . "I don't think I'm invincible," he admitted.

"You aren't," Snape agreed. "All the more reason to have your closest friends informed of your limitations and able to assist you."

"I'm surprised you didn't think of that earlier," Draco mused, his brow furrowing.

"I had a whole host of other reasons to keep knowledge from Miss Granger. They're irrelevant now, so don't ask."

"Plots within plots," Draco nodded. "Well, good thing that Harry here is the type to make such loyal
friends, I suppose."

"You're a loyal friend," Harry suddenly said, turning back to Draco. "I shouldn't have said you didn't
know how to be a friend. You're thinking of what I need now, even when it means helping me get
closer to my other friends--"

"Oh, don't go melodramatic on me," Draco airily replied. "I just like to be on the winning side. That's
all."

"Sure, that's all," Harry said, smiling.

"Just read your letter, Potter, all right?"

Harry broke the wax seal Hermione had applied. Probably she'd used one to keep Draco out of the
contents, he thought, but it was a bit strange of her considering that Draco could easily defeat
Muggle measures like that. "Did you read this?" he thought to ask.

"Oh, please."

"You did! You read it!" Harry accused, though he found he was laughing as he said it.

"As if I care what Gryffindors have to say to each other." Draco lightly shuddered.

"Hey. I'm half-Slytherin," Harry objected.

"I didn't read your letter!"

For some reason, Harry believed him that time. It turned out to be true, even; Harry knew that much
a few moments later. He grinned a bit, absolutely positively sure that had Draco read the letter, he
could not have refrained from commenting on the contents.

Dear Harry, the letter read,

Ron and I aren't speaking. He's pretty mad about the whole Wizard Family Services disaster. I suppose I can't blame him. Looking back, I can see a huge list of things I should have done and didn't. I could have talked to you again and told you that I was getting worried enough to file a complaint. You'd have probably told me the truth, then. And even if you let me still wonder, I could have reported the matter to Dumbledore first, or even McGonagall as your Head of House. Either one of them would have made sure you were being treated all right. When I think about it now, involving Family Services seems like it was a bad idea all around.

So, what I'm trying to say is that you were right about what was driving me. I didn't think Professor Snape was the best dad for you to have, and I guess I was just determined to get you out of there, any way I could. Not that I thought of it that way at the time, you understand. I really did think I was doing you a favour. I can see now that it was pretty presumptuous of me to decide Snape wasn't suited to be your father. If anyone would know
about that, it would be you. And you seem pretty happy with him, so . . . enough said.

I have to admit that Malfoy surprised me with that little speech of his at the door. Ron didn't appreciate that, by the way. That's actually the main reason we're fighting. He wanted me to agree that Malfoy's up to something, calling me clever to my face. I told him I thought it was . . . well, not sweet. I'd never say Draco Malfoy was that. But he wasn't as nasty as usual, was he? Do you think it's because he's been away from his common room for so long? Or maybe it's got to do with being separated from the terrible influence of his parents?

I have to be honest with you, Harry. Almost six years' worth of experience is telling me not to trust him at all. And I don't. That is, I can't possibly, no matter how well you think you know him or how convinced you are that he's reformed. But I don't want to make the same mistake with him that I just did with Snape, so if he continues to be civil, I will be as well -- just for as long as you want me to, that is. If he double-crosses you, I'll waste no time in telling him what I really think of him.

Hermione

P.S. Did he really say I was pretty?
"Well, that's quite a _Lumos_," Hermione understated with something approaching aplomb.

Harry quickly incanted his Parseltongue version of _Nox_ and watched as the brilliant blast of light dissolved.

"It looks better indoors," Ron saw fit to declare. "I mean, it was just the same, but it's only when you see it melting walls that you really get the full impact."

"Or when it flings you backwards _into_ a wall," Harry added as he waved a hand to indicate the Devon countryside. "You can see why Severus decided I ought to practice out here instead of at home."

Hermione, Harry noticed, didn't react to that last word, though she did stiffen a bit as Snape walked over from where he had been talking to Draco. That worried Harry, at least until he understood it. She wasn't so much resentful now as remorseful. "Professor? Thank you for Portkeying us all out here so we could see what Harry can really do now. I..." She straightened her posture a bit. "I really am sorry I didn't realise there was a perfectly valid explanation for everything."

Snape looked down at her, his black robes billowing in the breeze, but in the end, he didn't reply to her apology. Harry didn't like that, but it did fit his attitude towards her. He'd refused to side-along Apparate her and Ron out to Devon, had said when he was explaining his plan to Harry that it would put him _rather closer to Miss Granger than he cared to be_. Harry had worried that a Portkey might open up Devon to intruders, but his father said that a Portkey into a location protected by Fidelius would only work for people who already knew the secret.

Earlier that day, Snape had taken Ron and Hermione up to the headmaster's office so they could be told by the Secret Keeper himself that there was a cottage hidden out in Devon.

And now here they all were, supposedly allies, but Snape was still furious with Hermione. Harry could tell, and so could she, obviously. He saw her give a tiny sigh as the Potions Master ignored her apology and shifted into full teaching mode.

"As you have seen," he began, "Harry's wanded spells these days are vastly amplified. Indeed, far beyond what he intends, quite often with catastrophic results. He knows not to use his wand except, perhaps, when he is under attack."

"Wandless," Ron breathed, glancing at Hermione. "You were right about that!"

The girl lifted her chin as though she was still not really speaking to one Ronald Weasley.

"Harry," Snape directed, "demonstrate another wanded spell so that your house mates have a better idea of just what _catastrophic_ might mean."

"All right," Harry agreed, pausing to think for a moment. "Um, maybe you should all move back a tad," he urged, motioning. He knew by then that his _Incendio_ produced an explosion, not a spark, so he pointed his wand away from Snape's little cottage, and at a rock in the area of meadow that previous practice had rendered devoid of any grass to burn.

Ron flinched as the spell took effect, but Hermione merely nodded as though expecting it.

Harry swayed on his feet, then remembering that his father had told him to be honest about his
weaknesses, admitted, "I get tired really easily doing wanded magic, now. I think that was why I fainted over that first *Lumos*, Ron. I didn't know how to turn it off, so it drained me way past what was safe."

"Yeah, you should have seen him after he cast the Basilisk," Draco added. "So it's not just extended spells that can wipe him out. Extreme kinds of magic can do it as well."

Harry couldn't help but note the oh-so-casual way Draco tossed that out. Yeah, no mention of the way he'd yelped and zoomed high into the sky on his broom the minute the Basilisk had appeared, or how afterwards --still shaking a bit-- he'd groaned to Harry that seeing as he'd joined the cause of Light, there weren't *supposed* to be any "honking great snakes" hanging about!


Glaring a bit at Draco for mentioning it, especially in front of someone who had been petrified by one once, Harry nodded. "That's *Serpensortia* for me. Well, wanded. Without a wand I cast a normal viper." And then, when Hermione still looked horrified, he went on, "I won't do it again. I only did it that once because I wanted to see what would happen. Good thing I still had enough energy left for a couple more wanded spells that night."

"Gryffindor recklessness," Snape drawled.

"You're a fine one to complain about it," Harry murmured, repressing a smile as he explained to his friends, "Severus made me *Stupefy* the Basilisk so he could collect scales and venom to brew with!"

"One doesn't have much chance to acquire such items off a living specimen." Snape lightly shrugged, just as casual as Draco had been, when on the night in question, he'd practically rubbed his hands together with glee, he'd been so excited!

"Turns out a wanded *Stupefy* causes a coma so deep it's practically death," Harry added.

"Which was just as well in the circumstances," Snape allowed. "But *I* never requested you incant something as daft as *Serpensortia* in the first place. That was reckless in the extreme, Harry." He turned his attention to Ron and Hermione. "You can see why I'd like him to have some friends close by when he resumes classes, though seeing as the two of *you* are Gryffindors as well . . ."

He let the comment hang in the air.

"We'll keep him safe, Professor," Hermione assured the Potions Master, threatening Harry with a stern look.

"Yeah," Ron promised as well, "even if we have to take his wand away."

"No, we can't do that," Hermione declared. "He's supposed to keep his wandless magic a secret, I suppose? So *that's* why you tried to *Accio* his wand that night. You thought it would stop him."

Nodding briskly, she turned to Harry. "So, you have to hold your wand but make sure you don't incant through it. Is that difficult?"

Harry nodded too. "You would not believe how much," he moaned. "I sometimes cast wanded spells by accident out here, though they're not usually fully-wanded, if that makes sense. I can make most of the energy flow through my hand and out my fingers, but once in a while a little spark gets misfired through my wand and the spell comes out stronger than I intend."

"At this point," Snape informed her, "errors on his part are actually quite rare. It is only when he is *not paying attention* that they tend to occur. So your role in helping him will also consist of making sure he is fully focussed on the task at hand when he is using magic, be it in class or to defend
himself in the corridors."

"Yes, sir," Hermione answered, clearly taking the admonition seriously. "Could I watch the two of you practice duelling for a while, so I get a sense of how Harry is managing?"

"The three of us," Harry corrected. "Draco too, I mean. And it's not exactly duelling. It's more like me defending from all angles while they both take their best shots."

"Well that won't do," Hermione declared. "You have to practice offensive spells."

"Are you volunteering for target practice?" Harry wryly asked.

"Ron and I are both volunteering," the girl insisted, even though Ron was shaking his head no. Actually, it was more like no, no way, no effing way, but that hardly deterred Hermione. "We need to simulate a battle. All four of us will attack you. You concentrate on defending yourself and taking us out. Because defence alone isn't going to end a battle, Harry."

"I might accidentally melt your face off or something if a spell misfires!"

"You'll be concentrating. You won't let slip into wanded, and certainly not fully-wanded." Having said that, though, Hermione appeared to reconsider. "Maybe to start you could do without your wand, just as a safety precaution."

Harry cast her a doubtful look. "No, my father wants me to--"

"Miss Granger's suggestion is sound," Snape interrupted. "You have had enough practice with defence exclusively, but neither do we want accidents."

With that, the four of them moved to surround Harry, though Ron, he noticed, joined in only reluctantly. Resigned, Harry pocketed his wand and stretched out his hands to opposite sides as though to ward everyone off at once. Good thing, he thought, that he'd got quite used to taking lightning-fast glances at his crest to orient his language. With four opponents hexing him at once, he definitely hadn't time to really gaze at the snake image.

He managed to block everything they could throw at him, though his concentration faltered when Draco silently slipped away, only to return on his broom, tossing hexes down from above. A stream of silver light catching him unawares, Harry failed to deflect the Rictusempra and found himself collapsed on the ground, laughing uncontrollably as hundreds of phantom fingers sought out his most ticklish places.

"Finite Incantatem!" Snape roared, and then before Harry could so much as stand up straight, his father was hurling Diffindo at him.

Harry countered it with a hastily constructed shield, but his focus was off and a partial hex filtered through to split apart the sleeve covering his right arm, and the skin beneath. "Shite!" he yelped, expecting Snape to call a halt. He always had before when Harry was hurt. This, though, was more than practice. It was a mock battle, and the way Snape was raising his wand again reminded Harry that in battle, his enemies wouldn't stop when he was down; that was when they would attack all the more fiercely.

He got a decent block up before another Diffindo could rupture some other part of him, then gritted his teeth and cast his version of Furnunculus at his father and a quick Expelliarmus at Hermione who was sneaking up on him from behind.

"Enough," Snape pronounced, approaching.
Wincing at the ugly boils that now covered his father's face and hands, the boy glanced down at his crest and murmured, "Go away boils," as he pointed one hand toward Snape. And then, in miserable tones, "I'm sorry, sir--"

"It is no matter," the man said, though he frowned. "It concerns me that you did not fight back until you were injured, Harry."

"Well, I didn't want to hurt any of you!" Harry exclaimed. "Besides, I'm sort of in the habit of just blocking. You know." He clenched his teeth as Snape applied a healing charm to his arm, and at Hermione's look said, "I'm not very good at those."

"No-one's very good at self-healing, I don't think," the girl murmured as she walked closer to examine the results of Snape's spell. "And now you have another huge bruise." She cast reparo on his sleeve for him.

"Severus has a potion to make that go away too," Harry said defensively.

"But drinking it too often isn't a good idea. Yes, Harry, I understand. I do understand now, all right?"

"Yeah, all right."

Hermione took her wand back then. "I'm relieved at least to hear that your combat spells aren't all as long as the counter accio you used against the professor. I was a bit concerned."

"Oh, that." Harry thought back. "Hmm. Well, I have several versions of some spells. I could have just said stay put, but I was actually pretty worried that wouldn't work against Severus, especially doing it wandlessly, so I used the strongest one I've found: you stay put right where you are."

Ron whistled in through his teeth; Harry wasn't sure why. Was Ron excited that Harry could best Snape?

The Potions Master must have thought that was the case, for he flared his nostrils in irritation as his gaze raked the red-haired boy up and down. "Given my son's probable future," he scathed, "I certainly hope he can defeat me. Voldemort, you understand, is far stronger than am I."

Ron nodded, looking shamefaced; Hermione looked up with interest at hearing Snape say Voldemort, but didn't remark on it, instead saying, "Again. Are you ready, Harry?"

Harry glanced at his father, correctly reading the look in his eyes. "Don't bother asking," he sighed. "My enemies won't."

And with that, they began again.

They didn't stop until after dark, expressly so that Ron and Hermione could realise just how much the lack of a snake image affected Harry's powers. "So you've got to be there to cast Lumos for him," Draco finished explaining as they sat inside Snape's small cottage. "He can't cast it for himself once it gets too dark for him to see the crest, or Sals. Though it seems like if he's holding Sals he has a bit of an edge. Seeing her is better, though."

"I could just go around with a permanent Lumos on," Harry suggested. "Oh, wait, that's no good."

"Yes, fingers glowing in the dark would be just a bit conspicuous," Hermione wryly observed.
Severus, who was at the table conjuring food from one of the charmed boxes he'd left there since Christmas, stopped for a moment as though having a hard time not laughing out loud.

"Wandless Lumos will pretty much reveal my secret," Harry agreed. "And wanded Lumos is definitely out."

"Unless you want to melt somebody's face off," Ron added. "You never know when you might meet a Slytherin around the corner--"

"Harry's a Slytherin," Draco pointed out in a hard tone. "And make no mistake, he's going to show himself one. He may be going back to live in Gryffindor, but he's going to eat at the Slytherin table sometimes and spend time in their common room, and he's not going to 'melt their faces off,'" he sneered, "unless he's cornered and he really can't help it!"

"Well, of course he's not," Ron laughed. "Lighten up, Malfoy."

"You're not really going to brave their common room, though," Hermione commented. "Are you?"

"Yeah." Harry swallowed, sort of hating this part. Well, not hating it, but hating having to discuss it with his friends. "This crest isn't just some badge to help me with my casting," he gruffly admitted. "I told you before, I am both. I'm both inside, Hermione. Besides, my father is Head of Slytherin. I'm not about to . . . uh, disown that, not with my words or my behaviour or anything."

By then, Snape was pulling votives from the box and transfiguring them into extra chairs, but Harry could tell he was listening. For that matter though, when did his father not listen to everything going on around him?

"You might not be safe in their common room, mate," Ron pointed out. "Look, don't get me wrong. I'm used to the Slytherin thing, now. I didn't even say a word about your crest, did I? But there's a difference between . . . er, telling us loud and clear you're proud to be a Slytherin, and acting like you have a death wish. I mean, they'll kill you. Or try, anyway. And yeah, you held us off pretty well today, but we're not Slytherins--" At a snorting noise from Draco, Ron amended that to, "I mean, nobody here actually wants you dead--"

"About time you wised up to that," Draco mildly remarked.

Ron flushed a bit. "You won't be safe in their common room, though," he insisted. "Even with your special magic. They'll find a way around that."

"I do plan to accompany my son the first few times," Snape informed them, beckoning that the meal was ready. Draco didn't pull Hermione's chair out again, Harry noticed, but he did wait to sit down until after she had seated herself.

"How am I going to explain my absence from dinner?" Hermione thought to ask. "Ron can say he ate with all of you again, everybody's used to that because of all his detentions, but people will raise eyebrows if I claim I was invited down to dine two nights in a row."

Snape raised an eyebrow as he liberally peppered his endive salad. "Ah. I'm afraid I rather anticipated that difficulty and forestalled it by assigning you a detention for . . . now what did I write on the paperwork?" He levelled a hard look at the girl. "Oh yes. Abominable judgment that could have led to deteriorating staff-student relations, that was it. Of course I had to take points to make the whole thing look authentic. I'm sure you understand."

Hermione gritted her teeth. "How many points, sir?"
"A mere five hundred." Snape shrugged. "Don't look so outraged. Harry's had that many taken before."

"Five hundred?" Hermione gasped, laying aside her fork with such care that Harry suspected she'd been tempted to throw it. "I was only trying to do what was right for a friend!"

"True. That's where the abominable judgment part of the offence becomes significant. Think about it, Miss Granger. Had we not been able to satisfy the casewitch that Harry was in a perfectly good home, we would have faced the prospect of either his losing that home, or explaining about his magic, which would certainly have endangered his life, considering we have excellent reason to believe that not all Family Services staff would hold his secret in confidence!"

Hermione sighed, admitting, "It could all have turned out very badly."

"Yes, it could have," Snape agreed rather darkly.

Ron finally spoke up. "Five hundred points, Harry? Say something!"

Harry finished chewing his bite. "I love Gryffindor, you both know that. But . . . Severus is important to me too, and I can't get in the middle every time he takes points. Even unfair points," he added with a significant glance at his father.

Snape neatly speared a small red potato from the serving bowl. "So little subtlety," he lamented. "Though I appreciate the other sentiments. Just as well, I suppose, that I took a mere ten points. Yes, Mr Weasley, you heard me. Ten."

Hermione gave a weak laugh of relief, while Draco rolled his eyes and muttered, "Figures."

"Thanks," Harry said, laughing a little bit too.

"Well, there's a first," Draco drawled, apparently recovered. "Famous Harry Potter thanking the Potions Master for points from Gryffindor."

"Just Harry thanking his dad," Harry corrected. "Although it's not very nice to make everyone think five hundred just so we won't argue when it's ten."

"But you didn't argue regardless," Snape observed, and though his tone was cool, Harry could tell the man was pleased with him. Harry felt a little bit bad, then, that he'd pretty much assumed the headmaster would do something about the points in any case. Though, since Snape knew as much--he'd said so to Harry, hadn't he?--maybe this discussion had been staged so that Harry would have a chance to demonstrate his loyalty to Snape? Too Slytherin . . . Harry was just glad he'd passed the test, or whatever it had been.

"One thing I wanted to ask," Hermione changed the subject, "is how you knew so well how to block Harry's spells, sir. Except for that one, you hardly got hit at all. But as Harry's incanting in Parseltongue, you don't know what he's casting, so how do you know how to counter it?"

Snape favoured her with a sardonic look. "There is such a thing as a blocking spell which repels a wide range of hexes, Miss Granger. We don't teach them as they take a certain level of maturity to master."

"Bet Harry knows them, though," Ron suggested, pointing with his fork.

Harry saw Draco grimace at the lack of manners.
"Not magical maturity," Snape clarified. "Harry may have a prodigious amount of that, but he is still a boy."

Hermione was nodding as though she'd read things that confirmed what Snape was saying. "Speaking of that, though," she wondered out loud, "aren't the Underage-Magic-Detectors going to be working overtime tracking us down after all the casting we did out there?"

"I must admit, certain things will be simpler once Harry and Draco turn seventeen this summer. This property, however, is surrounded by enough safeguards that we should have no worries. Extremely common in pureblood families," Snape shrugged. "What parent wants to wait until their child is eleven to begin some instruction in magic?"

"Harry's not a pureblood!" Hermione objected.

"He's been adopted into a pure-blooded family, nonetheless," Snape returned, beginning to eat his portion of grilled chicken breast in mustard sauce.

"I was practicing magic for years before my letter came," Draco said in a slightly gloating tone.

"I was, too, Malfoy!" Ron put in, then at Harry's challenging stare, mumbled, "Well, some."

Hermione huffed a bit. "Turn this stupid fat rat yellow didn't work, as I recall."

"Because Scabbers wasn't really a rat, now was he?" griped Ron.

"Yes, what was it like having your lifelong pet turn out to be the Dark Lord's right-hand man?" Draco snootily asked.

"How do you know--"

"He knows a great deal, I dare say," Snape interjected. "And if you think about that, you'll know why. Now as I didn't arrange this dinner so that I could listen to adolescent bickering, perhaps we could discuss Harry's training."

"All right," Hermione said in a casual tone, before tossing out, "You seem extraordinarily capable of teaching defence, sir. Ah . . . have you ever thought of applying for the job?"

Snape narrowed his eyes. "You wouldn't by chance be referring to that old rumour that I want it, would you?"

"Rumour?" Harry asked, his interest picking up. Even Draco and Ron appeared to have forgotten their dispute.

"Misdirection," the Potions Master shrugged. "Voldemort had ordered me to secure that position with all possible speed so that I could instruct his initiates in Dark Arts under the cover of private tutelage in defence. I hardly wished to cooperate with that plan, though of course I had to look eager for it, and disgruntled each time the headmaster 'passed' me over."

"But now," Harry prompted, "without a double-role to play, you could take the job and make sure Hogwarts has an ace defence curriculum. I think you'd be really good teaching that."

"And you don't care for my instruction in Potions, I take it," Snape half-growled.

"Well . . ."

"I am a Potions Master. The other is incidental," Snape announced. "I am afraid you will have to
somehow tolerate matters as they stand."

"Okay, Dad," Harry said without looking up.

Snape's nostrils flared as though he suspected a bit of manipulation in that answer, but when Harry said nothing more, the Potions Master went back to his meal, ignoring the students after that.

One more week, Snape had said. One more week, and Harry would be going back to live in the Tower.

The prospect actually filled Harry with equal parts excitement and dread. It would be great to be with the Gryffindors again, but going back to classes meant going back to Potions, and he couldn't help but feel nervous at what that might be like. Especially since he'd been neglecting Potions quite a bit this year. He hated to admit it, but his father was probably right about his needing more sessions in the lab.

Well, he was supposed to seem a bit inept in classes, but Harry didn't want to look like a complete idiot, did he? With only one week left to prepare, his changed his routine a bit and rushed through his other lessons so that he could spend most of the day in Snape's private laboratory, practicing making the Potions he should have learned during the last two terms. Draco thought his sudden interest in brewing was a bit amusing, Harry could tell, but he was pretty good-natured about it, bringing in his books and studying in there so Harry wasn't brewing "unsupervised."

Severus, they knew, wouldn't approve of that at all.

Harry was simmering a wart-removal potion he was supposed to have mastered months earlier when the magic doorbell rang inside his head.

The Slytherin boy cast Tempus with his wand, the action almost a reflex, and raised an eyebrow when he saw that afternoon classes would just have started. "Not expecting anyone, are you? Well, I'll just go see, then."

Harry let him; if he left the potion now he'd have to start it completely over. In the next moment, though, Draco was calling in a voice which sounded distinctly off, "Harry. Maybe you should come help me with this."

Since Harry couldn't recall a time when Draco had asked for his help, it wasn't something he could ignore. He gave his wart-removal potion one last glance before reluctantly casting Evanesco over it.

Better that than he let it sit unattended when it was approaching a volatile state. Grabbing a rag on his way out, he wiped his hands as he walked over to where Draco was standing. The other boy was staring at the door parchment, his silver eyes a bit wild with apprehension.

Dubby, the parchment simply read.

"Do you know a Dubby?" Harry asked.

"Um. Yeah." Draco cleared his throat, his hands moving nervously in a way that was really quite unlike him. "House-elf."

Harry blinked. The house-elves didn't tend to knock; they just popped in and out of places as needed. Though, come to think of it, they didn't usually treat Snape's quarters that way. In fact, the only house-elf he'd seen in his father's rooms had been a disembodied face in the Floo. Harry was almost sure that the elves had actually come in to repair the charred furniture and wall after his Lumos, but
he was equally sure that they did the vast bulk of their magic from the outside. Maybe they had to be specially invited in because of the wards?

That still didn't explain why one was knocking, though.

"Malfoy house-elf," Draco croaked, and then several things at once came clear to Harry. Why the elf had to knock, for one, and why Draco looked a bit like he'd just been punched in the gut. "Ah . . . Harry. This'll sound a bit odd, quite likely, but can you find a way to see through the wall for me?"

"See through the wall," Harry repeated.

Draco ground his teeth. "Yes, Harry. That parchment's reliable for wizards, but Severus never said anything about it being able to read magical creatures."

"I can't see through walls. What about the enchanted picture frame?"

"Doesn't show sentient life," Draco muttered. "Not that Dubby's all that sentient, mind . . ."

They tried it, to no avail.

"I guess we'd better alert Severus, then," Harry announced, frowning. He hadn't forgotten how adamant Snape had been about not disturbing him in class, but surely this would count as an emergency! An envoy of Lucius Malfoy standing right outside their door? "He can't get through the wards, I don't think," Harry murmured, thinking his way through it. "But for all we know he's been sent here to kill us--"

Draco leaned both hands against the door then. "I highly doubt he's here to kill us. Well, you maybe," he amended. "My mother's heard me complain about you enough."

When Harry just stared at him, the Slytherin boy explained, "Dubby's my mother's house-elf, Potter. I mean, he's bonded exclusively to her, has been for years. Anniversary present," he spat. "Before that he belonged to Lucius but now he can't take orders from anybody but Narcissa Malfoy."

"So your mother . . . um, you don't think she would . . . " Harry wasn't quite sure how to phrase the question, but Draco had no trouble finishing it in bitter tones.

"No, my mother wouldn't send him here to kill me. You'd have to meet her to understand. She's the quintessential society wife, my mother is. She's never said a word against my father that I can recall, and when he announced a price on my head she probably just said, yes, dear with a vapid little smile, but she wouldn't take the initiative like this."

"But . . . if your father told her to send him here to kill you?"

"She'd just bat her eyes and say that it was up to him to rule the family, and that Dubby was terribly occupied finding her a hundred perfect tea roses or something."

"Uh, okay," Harry answered, not really understanding. "Let's call Severus now--"

Draco suddenly pounded a fist against the door, his whole face transforming into an ugly mask as he snarled, "What the fuck do you want with me, Grubby?"

"I don't think the wards let sound through--"

Still leaning on the door with one hand, Draco shot him an irritated glance. "Please. He's an elf, not a student! A Malfoy elf, and I'm a Malfoy, and I just directed that at him! You see why we need a
better Magical Creatures teacher? You don't know anything!"

Sure enough, in the next moment a high, squeaky voice came through the walls. "Master Draco? Dubby's bringing a letter for you."

A letter? Draco mouthed at Harry. If anything, that news made him look even more worried.

"From whom?" Draco shouted, baring his teeth. Harry thought then that he was expecting it to be from Lucius.

"From Master Draco's mother," came the answer. "Can Dubby come in, Master Draco?"

"No, Slubby can't come in," Draco scathed. "Master Draco remembers you, you twisted little green lizard!"

"Dubby mustn't return to Wiltshire without delivering Mistress' letter--"

"Then attach it to an owl and get the fuck out of here!" Draco screamed.

"Mistress said to be putting it into Master Draco's hands--"

"Well, you can't!" Draco harshly retorted.

At that, they began to hear a rhythmic pounding on the door. Thud, thud, thud, the rhythm coming at slow, perfectly spaced intervals.

Draco snorted, then curled his lip in derision. "You think I give a shrivelfig if you bash your bloody head wide open on the door, Blubby? Go on, just go on!"

"Draco, we can't just let him bang his head against the door--"

"Who says we can't?" Stepping back, Draco brushed his hands on his trousers as though even speaking to a house-elf had somehow sullied him. "I just wish we had some thumbscrews to lend the little shite!"

"I'm firecalling Severus," Harry announced, shaking his head.

Draco sat down in a plush chair and tilted his head. "Yes, you do that," he said. "But by all means, take your time. I'm just going to sit here and enjoy a good listen."

"Draco, that's cruel!"

"Oh, shut up, Harry!" the Slytherin boy erupted. "You don't know what you're talking about! I grew up with that damned elf and I know what he's like. I hope he drops dead from massive head trauma!"

All at once the truth came clear for Harry. "Oh, God. Is he one of the elves who . . . um . . ."

Draco ignored the question, saying only, "Are you going to get Severus in here to help us? No rush, mind."
A bit worried about Draco's sudden bloodthirsty frame of mind, Harry kept one eye on him as he used the Floo and listened to the persistent *thud, thud, thud* filling the rooms to overflowing.

As it turned out, Snape was in a preparation period and not with students. He came at once, frowning to see Draco listening to the noise as though it were the finest of concertos. Draco just gave a careless little shrug.

"Make him stop so I can talk to him," the Potions Master brusquely ordered after one glance at the parchment.

"He doesn't take orders from me, I'm afraid," the Slytherin boy announced as he affected a yawn.

"I think you'll find a Malfoy has some influence," Snape dryly returned.

Draco lifted his hand in an indolent wave, much as though he was lord of the manor. "I expect he'll stop when he passes out. Hmm, wonder just how long that might take?"

"Now, Draco."

"Oh, very well." With lazy grace, Draco pushed to his feet and went back to the door. "You've got a letter for me, have you, Scrubby?"

The pounding noise stopped at once and was replaced by a wobbly, drunken-sounding voice. "Can Dubby come in and deliver it now, Master Draco?"

Snape waved his wand several times, muttering, then *Accio'd* a vial from his office and sprinkled it at the base of the door before giving Draco a significant glance.

"Pass the letter across the threshold, Stubby!" the Slytherin boy bit out.


Swearing a bit, Snape at once set to work restoring the wards his potion had weakened.

Harry bit his lip. "It could be a trap, do you think?"

"Thud, thud, thud," the noise began again, but this time Draco was in no mood to savour it. "Just get out of here, Tubby!" he screamed. "Tell my mother not to bother her pretty little self about me! Since she obviously *loves Lucius better*, I hope they rot in Azkaban together!"

"Thud, thud, thud," the sound this time interspersed with words. "Dubby mustn't--- leave without--- delivering Mistress' letter---"

Snape growled something about being able to handle this one if he could handle Kreacher, then wand at the ready, instructed Draco, "Open the door."

"Are you *insane*?" Draco demanded. "Like hell I'll open the door! What if he attacks Harry?"

"Thud--"

Snape began counting on his fingers. "One, house-elves have little offensive magic at their disposal.
Two, Harry can almost certainly defend himself and if he can't I know enough Dark Arts to obliterate a house-elf. Three, I don't fancy a dent in the magic making my door masquerade as a wall! And four, as any Slytherin worthy of my house should figure out for himself, I'd like to see this message to determine if Lucius has a new plot afoot! Now, let him in!"

THUD--

"Fine," Draco muttered, pulling out his own wand. He cast Abrire, then yanked the door open so suddenly that the house-elf tumbled inside on mid-thud and lay sprawled at his feet. Draco slammed the door, in the same moment pulling back his foot to give the elf a vicious kick in the head.

"Draco, don't!" Harry yelled in dismay, but he was too late. Dubby flew across the room and hit the wall. Cloaks from the hooks above rained down on him as he lay in a pitiful heap, but then he crawled free of them and rose unsteadily to his feet, his little hands rubbing against his forehead which was bruised and sore from all those thuds. A slow trickle of greenish blood oozed from where he'd been kicked. Draco glanced toward it, his eyes sparking with satisfaction . . . and something worse.

"That's quite enough!" Snape roared.

"He's the one who helped with the wizard's beating--"

"I said, that is quite enough," Snape coldly interrupted.

Draco gave the Potions Master a disgusted glare, his hands clenched at his sides as he stood with his feet apart as though prepared for battle.

Clearing his throat, Harry laid a tentative hand on his brother's arm. He could feel muscles underneath the silk sleeve of Draco's shirt, muscles that were pulled taut, braided with tension. "It's not right to kick him," he softly said, only to hear Draco make a snarl deep in the back of his throat.

"I'm a Malfoy, in case it's slipped your mind! We aren't much for turning the other cheek and letting bygones be bygones! I give back as good as I get, and I owe this elf a right proper beating!"

"You may hate the house-elf but you will not assault him, not while you live under my roof!" Snape rebuked the Slytherin boy, his own gaze glacial.

"You mean if I kick him again I get to go live in Slytherin like I want?" Draco sneered.

"I'm hardly likely to reward you for outright defiance. Now, I believe there is the matter of a letter to attend to? Or would you rather indulge your rather Gryffindor recklessness, Draco, instead of concentrating on strategy?"

That certainly brought Draco up short. "I'm not like a Gryffindor," he snapped at Snape, before turning to the house-elf, who was by then cowering in the corner, hands covering his head. "Well? I thought you had a letter for me, Grubby!"

"Calm down, Draco," Snape advised. "And take no letter from his hand until I allow it. Come here, house-elf."

Dubby began rubbing trembling hands up and down his sticklike arms. "Dubby is obeying Mistress only," he protested a bit sullenly, shaking his head.

"You do what he says, you little twerp," Draco railed, "or I'll never take the fucking letter and you can spend the rest of eternity ironing your ears or something! Got that, Grubby? You do whatever he
Harry saw the Slytherin boy take a deep breath and hold it, presumably to prevent himself from bursting out into yet more insults and threats.

The house-elf hesitated for a moment more, then moved reluctantly to where Snape had pointed, standing still as the Potions Master fetched a piece of coal from his potions stores. Snape dropped it to the ground, then smashed it to powder with the heel of one booted foot. "Spread the coal in a circle around you," Snape instructed. "Use your hands, not magic, and leave no gap."

Dubby squeakily muttered as he did as he was told.

Snape began using his wand then, the tip of it blazing a strange dusky blue as he wove a net of spells around the elf. The Potions Master studied them for a moment, then apparently satisfied, nodded his head and allowed them to dissipate. Harry noticed that the spell seemed to have used up the coal. Certainly, Dubby no longer seemed bound by the former confines of the circle. Shaking himself all over rather like a wet dog, he wasted no time in scrambling away from all three wizards.

"He's still bonded to Narcissa alone, for what that's worth," Snape confirmed.

"I could have told you that," Draco snorted. "I did tell Harry that."

"If his bonds were changed once, they could have been again," Snape explained in an impatient tone. "And I will know if a creature beholden to Lucius Malfoy has entered my rooms!"

"Yes, sir," Draco muttered under his breath.

Snape ignored him, saying instead to Dubby, "Come here again, house-elf. Hold out the letter."

The house-elf crept forward by slow degrees, hunched over as though expecting Draco to kick him again. As Dubby extended the rolled parchment, Snape glanced over at Draco. "You've seen me examine correspondence arriving here enough, I dare say. Let's see what you've learned."

Furrowing his brow in concentration, Draco took the letter through the phalanx of spells Snape habitually used to verify a letter's sender and intentions. "Definitely from my mother," he finally pronounced. "It doesn't appear jinxed, or able to eavesdrop, or . . . well, it doesn't seem to contain latent magic in the least, actually."

Snape examined the letter himself, then nodded.

"Poisons," Harry suggested.

"The fact that the elf is touching it limits the range," Snape explained. "Not to mention that Narcissa's touch is all over the parchment."

"She even kissed it," Draco added, looking strangely vulnerable at the thought.

"Excellent detection," Snape praised him before turning to Harry. "And what is more, the dead tell no tales."

Harry understood that easily enough as a reference to Voldemort wanting Draco taken alive. And a hint that they had a rather big-eared audience.

"Yeah, well I'm still not touching it," Draco announced. "May I?"
Snape seemed to understand; he gave a sharp nod.

Sighing, Draco incanted *Wingardium Leviosa* and floated the letter out of Dubby's hand and onto a table where another spell made the scroll unroll. "My mother's writing," he murmured as he began to read. "Hmm."

"Draco?" Snape questioned.

The boy glanced up, his gaze a bit misted with emotion, though his words that rose to his lips were harsh. "Get rid of the little green-skinned shite so we can talk about it."

A high-voiced protest split the air. "Dubby must be waiting! Mistress said not to be leaving until Dubby had a reply to carry away!"

A malicious grin curling his lips, Draco drawled, "Well you won't get a reply, ever, Blubby, unless you play this our way! Yeah, yeah, I know you're Narcissa's elf, not mine, but you want that answer, don't you? So . . . why don't you just run along and find your long-lost cousin, eh? Yeah, you just go see how he's doing!"

Harry wouldn't have thought that a house-elf could pale, but mention of a cousin had Dubby's skin fading to a white-tinged green. "That one . . . here?"

Malice turned to pure recreation as Draco nodded. "Oh, yes. And such a disgrace he is. The way I hear it, he gets paid for his work!"

Dubby abruptly clapped his little palms over his ears and chanted, "Not true, not true, not true!"

Harry's eyes opened wide. "You don't mean--"

"Actually," Draco mused, smiling by then, "I don't think there's much work involved, at that. Yeah, Dubby mostly lolls around the kitchens stuffing his face and trying on new clothes--"

"Disgrace, disgrace, disgrace!" Dubby screamed, hopping up and down in his agitation.

"He's got an entire wardrobe stuffed full of clothes!" Draco gleefully reported. "Wizard's robes, mostly. I hear he steals them from the rooms he's supposed to be cleaning--"

A high-pitched wail split the air as a heavy silver candlestick flew through the air into Dubby's hand. He began whacking his own shins with it, each blow looking harsh enough to shatter bone.

"Stop taunting him, Draco!" Snape rebuked.

By then though, Harry had given up on Draco in favour of helping the poor elf directly. Kneeling down in front of Dubby, Harry snatched the candlestick and dropped it at his side, then grabbed both the elf's wrists and held on for dear life as the creature thrashed. "It's not true!" he yelled, not even knowing if Dubby could hear him through his own screams of anguish. "Dobby works really hard and he doesn't steal clothes and he hardly ever wears them, even! He goes around in that old pillowcase, all right?"

Dubby stilled. "Disgrace all the same," he muttered, and then eyeing Draco critically, asked, "Master Draco lied to Dubby?"

"Draco," Snape darkly warned, eyebrows drawn together in almost a straight line, "Get this situation under control, now. I mean it."
Clearly put out at having to give up his little game, Draco sneered, "Of course I lied, Slubby. How can you doubt that? You've got his word for everything. Honestly, would Harry Potter lie?"

Harry genuinely did think that Draco was trying to do as Snape had said, but in his anger, he'd miscalculated the effect of his words.

"Harry Potter!" the elf screeched. Quick as a flash, it had the candlestick again, only this time it was beaming Harry over the head with it. A horrible cracking noise echoed through the dungeon.

"That's it, the elf's dead!" Draco screamed, already lunging.

"Do I need to body-bind you to make you behave?" Snape didn't roar that time, but his words did carry.

Pulling himself up short, Draco frantically shook his head no.

Meanwhile, Harry had scrambled back, sort of crab-walking, to get away from the elf.

Dubby though, wasn't following up on his attack. His round eyes wet with tears, he had conjured a lit candle for the candlestick, and was methodically dripping hot wax on his toes, softly wincing and yelping with every drop. "Dubby attacked a wizard," he mournfully complained as though talking to himself. "Oh, bad bad Dubby. Evil wizard, but still, bad bad Dubby must be being punished--"

With an audible sigh expressing equal parts disgust and pity, Snape walked over and blew out the candle. "Firecall this Dobby," he said quietly to Harry before turning back to the elf. "You want Draco's answer to the letter," he reminded Dubby, who looked up, his ears quivering with his sadness. "You will have it if you do exactly as I say. You are to go to the kitchens with your cousin and stay there with him until we summon you back. Do not leave his side for an instant. And do not think to trick him. Dobby is loyal to the wizard you have just attacked and will do as he instructs."

Dubby flushed a deep green, though he muttered, "Bad wizard ruin perfectly good elf trick Master give him a sock--" He paused, grumbled, "Betrayer--" and promptly bit his own hand for having insulted a wizard.

By then Dobby had bounced into the room, his tiny form so swathed in clothes that he actually looked a bit fat. No fewer than eight knit hats were piled on his head, the precarious tower swaying as he eagerly rushed forward. "Harry Potter called for Dobby! How can Dobby be serving Harry Potter sir?" In the next instant Dobby evidently spotted Dubby, for he splayed himself in front of the boy, flinging his hands wide, and was quickly warning, "No harm shall come to Harry Potter!"

"Relax, your creepy little cousin came alone," Draco drawled.

Dobby looked left and right all the same, evidently expecting to see Lucius or Narcissa. His tones were still wary as he offered in greeting, "How is Master Draco?"

"Loyal to Harry Potter," Draco replied. Harry wasn't sure if he'd said it to ease Dobby's evident concerns in that regard --the last thing he needed was an overeager Dobby "protecting" him again-- or if the words were really intended for Dubby to take back to Malfoy Manor.

Either way, Dobby remained in his protective stance until Harry leaned down and tapped him on the shoulder. "He is, all right? Loyal, I mean."

Dobby cast Harry a rather incredulous look --actually, he looked as though he thought Harry was an idiot--, but he did drop his hands to his side as he only then got around to saying, "Hallo, Dubby."
Dubby looked his cousin up and down, his lips curling in disdain at the multitude of clothes Dobby wore. Nose in the air, he didn't deign to reply directly, preferring instead to say to the air, "Horrid, horrid, bad house-elf wearing clothes! And Harry Potter did lie!" His voice dropped to a mutter. "Bad, bad wizard tricking betters giving house-elves clothes--"

Harry knelt down again, though he couldn't help but remember how the position had got him soundly whacked with a candlestick just a moment before. "Dobby," he urged, "I need a favour. I want you to take your cousin down to the kitchens for us and entertain him there."

"That means," Snape clarified, "you keep him in your sights at all times. All times."

"Yeah, stick to him like glue and don't let him leave the kitchens at all," Harry added.

"As Harry Potter is wanting, yes, yes, Dobby is already doing all of it, every bit!" Without missing a beat, Dobby grabbed his cousin's arm and dragged him through the Floo.

"Are you all right?" Snape asked, gesturing at the way Harry was rubbing his head.

"Oh, sure," the boy passed it off. "I don't think he gave it his full strength. But ow, it's pretty sore."

Draco walked closer and gave it a good look. "Severus should have let me pummel the worthless little shite."

"Draconis, your father can't hurt you any longer," Snape quietly pointed out. "And the incident involving the elf was years ago. You need to dismiss it from your mind. To let your anger unbalance you . . . it's a weakness you can ill afford."

Abruptly sitting down on the couch, Draco hung his head in his hands, the unrolled letter just a few inches from his hair as he sat there hunched over. "I know. Impulse control, all that." He glanced up slightly. "Call the bastard Lucius, though. You're my father in all but name, remember?"

"I remember."

The Slytherin boy nodded, but Harry noticed that he still didn't look toward the letter so close. "Um, should Severus and I give you some privacy to finish reading that?" he suggested.

Instead of discussing the matter, Draco shook his head, leaned over the letter slightly, and read out loud:

_Dragon my treasure,_

_I have missed you terribly all through these past months. I know you may not believe that, my darling, but it is every bit true. Of course I found your behaviour beyond shocking, stealing that horrid boy's wand from your very own father and then running with it to Hogwarts to yield it to our Lord's greatest enemy. Those first few days, I hoped against hope that you would come to your senses and make your way back home. I understand why you could not, though; your father had taught you too well to fear his wrath. I have stood with him publicly, our stance united against you, because quite frankly I can think of nothing else to do. You've turned your back on all that both our family lines stand for, a choice I find altogether perplexing. You have angered me, though not so much that I truly wish you ill. Yet I must act as though I care nothing if your father kills or tortures you; surely you can see as much? I have no Severus Snape to shelter me_

I have stood with him publicly, our stance united against you, because quite frankly I can think of nothing else to do. You've turned your back on all that both our family lines stand for, a choice I find altogether perplexing. You have angered me, though not so much that I truly wish you ill. Yet I must act as though I care nothing if your father kills or tortures you; surely you can see as much? I have no Severus Snape to shelter me..."
from the certain death sure to fall upon me should I defy your father. My magic is nothing to his. I thought it best that I stay alive for the day when I could be of some use to you.

That day has come, Dragon my treasure. I have long despaired that you have no longer any family to call your own, but I have realised recently that I was mistaken. Doubtless you believe that every last relation of ours has sided with your father? In the past days, however, it has come to mind that my great-uncle Walpurgis would have no issue with the choices you have made. Indeed, he might well be proud.

I know that you have pride as well, Dragon my treasure, but I will sacrifice my own to beg that you write to him. Just a friendly note, just enough to let him know that for all you've never even seen the man, you do consider him family. You never know when you may find it useful to have some. You need not dwell on your dispute with your father; I am certain Walpurgis must be well aware of all it. Write him something chatty about your classes, Dragon my treasure, something light and amiable so that if later you need his aid, you will already have established some rapport.

I miss you as I said, but I would far rather you were safe than near. Tell Severus that for keeping you safe against your father's many schemes, I thank him with all my heart.

"Unsigned," Draco added when he had finished.

"You have doubts?" Snape quietly intoned.

A long sigh lifted collapsed the boy's chest as he levitated the letter higher and whispered briefly at it. When the parchment gave no reaction, Draco sighed again. He let the letter settle back down to the table, then glanced up. "No, no doubts, Severus. It's not just in her hand; it sounds like her, sentence by sentence. And besides... Lucius doesn't even know she calls me Dragon my treasure. It was sort of..." Harry saw the other boy swallow. "Well, honestly, she only called me that after he would punish me, 'cause he used to call me Dragon sort of affectionately, but he'd withhold that whenever he was angry." Looking away from the both, the boy rasped, "That's her way of telling me that he's still out for my blood, I think. As if I doubted it."

"So then, the question becomes, what is Narcissa scheming towards," Snape mused.

"I thought it was a rather sweet letter, really--"

"Oh, you would, Potter!" Draco scathed. "You thought Steyne's letter was sweet too, didn't you? I don't believe for an instant that my mother is so worried I need family that she'd recommend Walpurgis Black of all people!"

Black... Harry knew, of course, that Draco's mother had been a Black, but he didn't often think about it. "So this Walpurgis was a relative of Sirius Black's?"

"Some relation, I'm sure," Draco muttered, his brow creasing in irritation. "Look, I don't know exactly what he is to my mother, even. She calls him her great-uncle but that's just for convenience. He's her grandfather's second cousin once removed's uncle or something just as complicated. Anyway, what matters now is whether I should write him. I don't like the feeling I get from the letter.
"My mother's got some plot brewing, sure as I'm sitting here."

Snape lowered himself into a chair and crossed leg over another as he lightly tapped his cheek with one long finger. "Just what do you know of this Walpurgis? I must confess, despite all the time I've spent in Malfoy Manor, I've never once heard the name arise."

"Well, it wouldn't." Draco levitated the letter over toward Snape. "We don't talk about him much. Too much shame involved. He's sort of a black sheep. Or, considering my family, maybe Walpurgis is a bit more of a white sheep. Though that doesn't really fit as he's a criminal through and through."

Feeling like an intruder into deep dark Slytherin secrets, Harry stopped hovering uncertainly and announced, "I think I'll go back to the lab and start my potion over--"

Draco's hand snaked out to grab Harry's wrist and yank him down next to him on the couch.

"Okay, I'll stay," Harry changed course.

Snape chuckled softly, but his humour died almost at once. "Walpurgis, Draco," he prompted. "Coherently, this time, if you would."

Nodding, Draco took a minute to assemble his thoughts. "Okay. The letter's right; I've never even seen him. All I know is he's some distant relative of my mother's and she used to see him when she was little. But the family cut him off because his ah, business practices came to light. Well, not to light, but we found out about them, I mean."

"Business practices?"

Draco gave Snape a sour look. "Do I have to go on? It's really quite tawdry and not very relevant."

"I think anything that illustrates just how great the divide between Walpurgis Black and your--excuse me, Lucius Malfoy, is quite relevant. I'm trying to decide if you should write the man as your mother suggests."

"Oh, well the divide is more like an abyss, if that's what worrying you. Lucius can hardly stand Walpurgis' name to be mentioned, Severus. Because . . . well, you see, he's what we very politely call a blood traitor--."

"He married a Muggle?" Harry guessed.

Draco laughed. "Oh, it's worse than that. Much worse. He cooked up a plan ages ago to switch squib and Muggleborn babies at birth--"

"What?" Harry cried out, horrified.

"Just listen," Draco advised. "Walpurgis developed a highly complicated and very illegal charm that can sometimes identify a squib just hours after birth. Identifies Muggleborns, too. But it's not so reliable. Well, what I mean is, if the charm responds to the baby it's completely accurate, but most of the time it doesn't respond at all, see? Anyway, for apparently forever, Walpurgis has been discreetly offering his services to wizarding families. He'd swap out squibs, when he could find them, for babies guaranteed magical, all for a hefty charge. Well, when the family found out he was tainting bloodlines all over wizarding Britain with Muggle spawn, they cut him off completely. The way I hear, it wasn't any great loss. He'd stayed well out of the war, anyway, so he already had a big black mark against his name."

"Just how many children's lives did he ruin?" Harry demanded.
"How would I have any idea?" Draco haughtily inquired. "And besides, Harry, wouldn't you have been happier growing up in a magical family?"

"Yeah," Harry admitted, still frowning. "But why would purebloods agree to this? I mean, the parents had to know, right?"

"Oh, I'm sure good old Walpurgis didn't have many hard-core blood purists among his clientele," Draco drawled. "Though you must realise, Harry, that in such families as that, squibs are sometimes killed outright." He ignored Harry's gasp of horror. "At any rate, there are plenty of moderates who'd believe their own squib children are better off growing up Muggle. Why taunt the children with things they can never have? And in exchange, they got to take in some magical child who otherwise might have been persecuted and tormented in the Muggle world. My mother explained to me that that was how Walpurgis must have seen things, though of course she was careful afterwards to tell me how wrong he was to encourage people to corrupt their families with Muggleborn children, who of course weren't told their true origins and might end up marrying into pure-blooded lines."

"You really did grow up . . . steeped in this . . . um, philosophy, didn't you?"

Draco favoured him with a rather superior stare, but said, "Call it tripe, why don't you? If the boy with a Muggleborn mother can stand up to the Dark Lord when purebloods cower . . . well, I told you I knew then that blood wasn't everything."

"Yeah," Harry admitted, glancing over at Snape who seemed content to just listen for the moment. "So . . . this Walpurgis. Um, your family found out what he was doing. Why didn't they have him thrown in Azkaban? You did say it was illegal."

"Yes, swapping babies tends to be," Draco drawled. "Especially as the Muggle parents didn't know it was going on. I believe he used a fair amount of memory charms to pull that one off. And the identifying charm is illegal too, of course. Mostly because blood purists would love a tool like that. It's so inconvenient waiting a few years to see if a child manifests any magic. Far easier to know from the start so one can commit infanticide."

"Your family's sick," Harry pronounced.

Draco shook his head. "My family's here," he merely corrected. "Now, where was I? Oh yes, Azkaban. Well, Lucius hardly wanted it known that his wife's relative was going around tainting bloodlines like that. Not something that tends to get you into the Dark Lord's favour, besides the mere fact that the public scandal would put the Malfoy name into deep disrepute. So the family hushed it up, and tried to influence Walpurgis to close down shop--well really, it's quite vulgar to even indulge in commerce at all, don't you know--but as he never cared much what others thought to begin with, I don't know if he ever did stop swapping babies. This is all years and years ago, you understand. For all I know, he's tired of it by now."

Snape finally spoke again. "Who told you Walpurgis' story, Draco?"

The boy shrugged. "Lucius and Narcissa both, with a bit of grandparents and aunts and uncles chiming in about the shame, the shame . . . You see, they all knew. I guess it came out in a way nobody in the family could miss. Nobody who was alive then, I mean. But as for me, it was Christmastime, and Lucius was hosting his annual fête at the manor, and I'd been in the attic exploring my mother's old school books. I'd found a story book inscribed to her from your dear old Uncle Walpurgis, and I'd wandered down with it, innocently asking, Who's Walpurgis, Mother?"

Draco shuddered. "Lucius hit the roof. First it was how dare you befoul your tongue with that name, Draco? and then he rounded on my mother and it was, How could you keep anything his filthy
hands once held? And it all got worse from there, with everybody chiming in bits and pieces about blood traitors and such, and all of them yelling at me until I ran upstairs to get away." He shrugged again, that time clearly defensive. "Well, I was only about six or so. My mother came upstairs after a while and explained it all again because I think she could tell I'd been confused by all I'd heard down in the parlour." He smiled a tiny bit in remembrance. "She gave me eggnog with lots of nutmeg."

The room fell silent for a while, until Draco offered, "I can't see why she'd want me to write to him now, though. I don't believe her reasons, that's all I know."

"I think you should do as she asks," Snape decided. "Narcissa's letter no doubt holds some deceit, but I suspect it is in aid of you. Walpurgis Black does not sound like the type of person Lucius would involve in any plot. Therefore, Narcissa's urging you towards him can have nothing to do with Lucius. And she is right that in the future it may prove useful to have him to turn to."

"Besides," Harry put in, "she said just to tell him about your classes. So you mention that your books are a bit dry and Transfiguration is up to studying associative blends. No matter what your mother's up to, neither she nor Walpurgis can put that to any use, can they?"

"I certainly don't see how," Draco murmured.

"Then write your letter and let me see it before we call the house-elf back." Snape stood up and shook out his robes. "And there will be no more assaults on him, verbal or otherwise, do you understand me?"

"Yeah, okay," Draco absentmindedly muttered. He was already summoning parchment so that he could write his response. Harry watched for a moment, and then deciding that Draco didn't need any help, he went to ask his father if he could supervise some brewing practice. Snape, however, told him to wait until his first Saturday detention, saying he could devote his full attention to Harry, then.

Harry thought that sounded all right, even if it had contained the word detention.

------------------------------------------------------

That night, Harry dreamed.

Draco was sitting on the couch in the living room, chewing the end of his quill as he thought about what to write on the parchment before him.

Then there's Care of Magical Creatures, Uncle Walpurgis. I don't like that class at all. The oaf who teaches it is a half-giant who thinks it's perfectly fine to endanger his students.

Suddenly sitting back, Draco appeared to take stock of what he had written. Shaking his head, he used a spell to obliterate the reference to Hagrid's race. Then he added,

Though a friend of mine did get to ride a hippogriff during that class. Actually, he wasn't a friend at the time; I thought he was a stuck up little prat. Seems like a long time ago now that I thought that. We get on great these days.
I think my favourite class of all has to be Potions. I've been doing a little research lately into kinship potions and I've found out they don't work at all the way I would have assumed.

The dream began whirling then, flinging him hither and yon in wildly oscillating circles that dizzied Harry. And then, another scene, this one in his own bedroom.

Draco was lying in bed, snuggled down into his blankets, just the top of his white-blond hair showing, the blankets muffling his words as he talked in his sleep, though Harry could make them out. "Not Puccini! Verdi, you Hufflepuff cretin," he was insisting in condescending tones. "Didn't they have music where you grew up? Honestly!"

The Slytherin boy thrashed a bit then, rearranging his blankets, his sleeping face emerging from the folds as he went on, "Lemon, lime, or lemon-lime, Pansy? I am so glad Bertie Botts has branched out into every-flavour gelato. Beans are a bit juvenile, don't you think?"

Harry woke up then, sitting straight up in bed, blinking until the haze in his mind cleared. Then, the only thought to occupy him was why on earth he had dreamed all that! The seer dream pattern, true, but filled with nothing but inconsequentials! So Draco had changed his mind about calling Hagrid a half-giant in the letter he'd written that day. Probably wise, considering that this Walpurgis Black fellow, for all his nasty baby-stealing tendencies, wasn't a blood purist by any means. He might not even be prejudiced against non-humans the way Draco was. But then the so-called future part of his dream . . . so Draco had dreams of his own, so what? Dreams of showing off to Hufflepuffs and going out for ice-cream with an ex-girlfriend!

Weren't his seer dreams supposed to be about things that mattered? This one certainly wasn't, which left Harry wondering if his father had been right all along, if all his recent seer dreams were made of nothing but his own subconscious playing with him.

Harry was rubbing his head, thinking about that, wincing slightly when he touched the spot where Dubby had hit him with the candlestick, when a noise from the bed across the small room had him looking up.

"Not Puccini! Verdi, you Hufflepuff cretin," Draco announced in a voice dripping with disdain, though his face was tangled in a mass of thick blankets. "Didn't they have music where you grew up? Honestly!"

As Draco began to thrash, flinging his bedclothes about to free his face, Harry thought uh-oh . . .

"Lemon, lime, or lemon-lime, Pansy?" Draco asked, his tones this time perfectly pleasant, if a trifle self-important. "I am so glad Bertie Botts has branched out into every-flavour gelato. Beans are a bit juvenile, don't you think?"

Harry's mouth fell open, but before he could react further, Draco was babbling on, something about the crème brûlée gelato looking far too much like the bread pudding flavor. Harry didn't want to hear it; he felt like he'd intruded too much already. That tone of voice the other boy had just used, as if so eager for Pansy Parkinson's good opinion . . . Harry hadn't even known Draco still had feelings for Pansy!

Be that as it may, he had to ask Draco something, and not about his love life.

Moving across the room, he shook the other boy by the shoulder to wake him up. "Draco. Draco!" he hissed. "Come on, Draco, wake up!"
Apparently dreaming repressed Draco's finely honed reflexes, for it took him a minute to surface. "Harry?" He pushed up on his elbows, frowning.

"Did you write Walpurgis Black that Hagrid was a half-giant?"

Draco ran his hands through his hair. "Of course I did, you know that! You read the letter, for Merlin's sake, you and Severus both, to make sure I wasn't saying anything anybody could use . . ." And then, in tones of dawning realisation, "Oh. That's odd. Well, I did mention that about Hagrid, actually, but then I thought it might not be too politic, considering, so I got rid of that bit--"

Sitting up straighter, Draco demanded in wry tones, "You've been dreaming again, haven't you? Have I mentioned that it's a bit much, living with a seer? Well, what does the future hold now, Harry? Don't be shy."

Harry shrugged as he perched there on the edge of Draco's bed. "Well, I did dream the future, but it already came true. I saw you dreaming about music and gelato just before you dreamed those things."

Draco's forehead furrowed. "Now you're dreaming other people's dreams? That's quite odd . . ."

"No, I didn't dream it, I saw you dream it," Harry tried to explain. "Never mind, it doesn't matter. You go back to sleep. Try the bread pudding flavor."

"Excuse me?"

"Never mind," Harry said again, sitting back on his own bed so that he could pull on the socks he'd somehow lost as he'd slept. That done, he headed towards the door.

"Oh, don't tell me you have to report your every bizarre dream to Severus," Draco lightly scathed. "Anyway, if that one already came true there's not much left to be said."

"I just need to talk to him, is all," Harry insisted, pausing at the door. "Good night."

Draco stared at him for a moment, before murmuring, "Well, all right. Good night."

------------------------------------------------------

"Harry?" Snape asked, drawing him into the room and over to his bed.

The boy swallowed. "Um, sorry to wake you. It's not an emergency or anything, but I did promise to come right away if I had any . . . er, brilliant ideas about my dreams."

Nodding slowly, Snape waited as the boy explained the dream he'd just had.

"And so?" he finally asked.

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it?" Harry rubbed his arms with his hands as he sat there, then gratefully took the throw his father draped about his shoulders.

"At least this time you've realised what socks are for," the Potions Master lightly gibed. "And Harry, I can certainly see the pattern for myself, but I'm interested to know your own conclusions before I state mine."

"Yeah." Harry could see the sense in that. "Well, I think the series has ended, that's all. The series of seer dreams," he clarified. "They were going in order at first, forwards in time. And then you woke me up in the middle of one and it somehow warped whatever magic had been sending me dreams,
because these latest ones . . . uh, unadoption, the Owlery, this, I think they're in . . . er, backwards order."

"And your further conclusions?"

Harry bit his lip and drew the blanket a bit closer around himself as he sat facing his father. "Well, one, that the seer dreams have come to a close, I think. And two, and this is why I came in really, Dad . . ." Harry drew in a breath. "The last one dreamed has already come true. So if they're going in reverse, that means the Owlery is going to happen next."

Snape laid a hand on his knee as he sat there shivering. "The wards I prepared will let nothing so large as a human pass through the vast windows of the Owlery, Harry. Nor will Draco leave my rooms. You've seen him these past months. He chafes at every turn at the confinement, but has he even once broached my rules by leaving it?"

Since Harry couldn't in good conscience count the time Draco had merely stepped into the hallway in an effort to prove the wards trusted him, he shook his head.

"It will be all right, Harry," Snape assured the boy. "This last one was a true seer dream, past and future both without flaw. Can we say that about Lucius Malfoy wandering France yet speaking English, warning Muggleborns that Voldemort may soon attack?"

"That one's nothing but one big flaw from start to finish," Harry acknowledged.

"Perhaps the sequence of seer dreams is overtly closing because your magic has finally realised that your last few have been . . . hopelessly muddled."

"Yeah," Harry admitted, rubbing his head again. "That makes sense. I mean, maybe you waking me up that time muddled them, even. I mean . . . there hasn't been one since that made good sense, until tonight." Harry gave his father a wry look. "I know you aren't going to unadopt me, though I think it took a while for that to really sink in." He sighed. "Can I have a headache potion after all?"

Snape studied him rather intently in the dim light he'd spelled on after answering the door. "Certainly. In the bathroom, first shelf on the left. After what the elf did to you, I think the one in the thin blue bottle will best serve."

Harry paused on his way there. "Why not just label them?"

"I can't have either of you two miscreants knowing which one is my shampoo, can I now?"

Harry laughed, suddenly feeling much better.

About everything.

It was a feeling that wasn't destined to last.
"Honestly, Potter!" Draco exclaimed. "How many times are you going to pack and unpack that battered old trunk of yours?"

"Until I can get all my stuff crammed in," Harry complained, shoving harder at his folded jumpers so he'd have room for the rest of his clothes.

"One might almost think you'd been raised Muggle," Draco drawled.

Harry tried to give him a nasty look, but found himself laughing softly instead. Apparently, that was all the prompting Draco needed. "Oh, very well," the Slytherin boy sighed in that theatrical way of his. "Much as I've enjoyed seeing you make a fool of yourself, it's getting a bit tiresome, so watch and learn."

With that, he flicked his wand back and forth, causing Harry's trunk to eject everything piled inside. Books, gifts, clothes, and assorted paraphernalia flew out and landed in scattered heaps throughout the room.

"Hey!" Harry objected. "Some of that's breakable!"

"As if I didn't attach a happy-landings spell," Draco boasted, smirking. Then his know-it-all smile vanished. "Oh, shite. I broke your mirror--"

Harry snatched it up and hugged it to his chest, swallowing past the tightness in his throat. It suddenly struck him what Sirius might have to say about him regarding one Draco Malfoy as a brother . . . but then again, Sirius wouldn't have approved of Snape for Harry's guardian, let alone his dad, would he? In some ways, that was still a disturbing thought, though Harry knew it shouldn't be. "It was broken already," he admitted, a familiar sense of failure washing up to choke him.

_Breathe, Harry . . . _

Somehow, he did, and then managed to set the mirror down on his bed. He tried not to look at it after that.

Draco gave his behaviour an odd glance before shrugging the topic aside. "All right, now," he mused, leaning forward to examine the trunk carefully. "Let's see just what we have to work with . . . hmmm . . . "

"What are you up to?"

"Patience," Draco softly chided, intent on his task. Latin began to fill the air as his wandwork became ludicrously extravagant.

"Show off," Harry accused, consciously trying for a lighthearted tone.

Draco ignored him to finish the incantations. One final flourish, and he was tapping the open lid of the trunk and pronouncing, "There, all done. Now wasn't that easier than spending all weekend mashing your things together?"

"I don't even know what you did!"

A soft laugh mocked him. "It's a going away present, Harry. A wizardspace trunk. Don't think I
haven't noticed you admiring mine. Yours should hold about three times as much as before, now."

"You spelled yours yourself, then?"

"Oh, please. Mine was professionally done. I actually intended to buy you a proper wizard's trunk, but when I mentioned it to Severus he said he thought you had a rather pathetic sentimental attachment to the one you'd used since first year--"

"He did not use the word pathetic about me!"

"No, he didn't," Draco allowed. "Very good. But he did say the rest, so I thought I'd just enhance the trunk you were already so pathetically attached to."

"Prat."

The Slytherin boy smiled. "You're welcome."

"Oh. Right, thanks," Harry thought to add.

Draco, it seemed, wasn't through being superior. "I must admit it was quite a show you put on trying to make things fit. Why in Merlin's name didn't you just shrink them?"

Harry stiffened. "You've seen my spell lexicon. Was that one in there?"

A bit nonplussed, Draco raised an eyebrow. "You mean you can't? That's odd. Hmm, do you suppose some spells require only surface magic, then?"

"Could be," Harry admitted. "Though I shrank things by accident when I lived with the Dursleys, so I suppose that particular spell has to be drawing on dark power. The trouble is, I can't seem to figure out the Parseltongue for it." Harry shrugged. He had his new magic fairly well in hand, but that didn't mean that he could do anything he pleased. Like Draco's insane see through the wall request, or any number of spells that seemed to defy translation. Magic, even Harry's, still had its limits.

"You poor thing, you," Draco drolled with a marked lack of sincerity. "Such a terrible pity. You must just weep in your soup over being so very weak and helpless, barely a wizard at all--"

Harry lightly shoved his brother. "Oh, just shut up about it and teach me the wizardspace spell."

"I only know the simplest variant," the Slytherin admitted, grinning--no doubt at the fact that even so, he knew more than Harry did. "I can't spell a whole wall like Severus can, and I certainly can't help you with the snake language. You do realise that it sounds rather gruesome, don't you? At least it does to me, even after all the hissing you've been doing lately . . . Anyway, though, let's work on wizardspace tomorrow when Severus is home. You know, in case you turn yourself into the twelfth dimension or something."

Harry grimaced a bit as he remembered the schedule his father had laid out. "Tomorrow'll actually be my last free Saturday. After this I get nothing but Potions lessons, unless I can persuade Severus to let me go on the occasional Hogsmeade visit."

"My heart bleeds," Draco dryly put in. "Considering the likelihood I'll get a Hogsmeade Saturday."

"I'll bring you some things," Harry promised.

Draco's eyes were a bit bleak, but he tried to make light of it. "All right. Well, you know me. I like emeralds and diamonds. Oh, and racing brooms--"
"And every-flavour gelato," Harry joked.

"They have that?"

"Just kidding." Harry flashed his brother a slight smile, enjoying the puzzled look he got in return, then set to packing all his things neatly away in the trunk . . . even though this was just Friday, and he wasn't going back to Gryffindor until Sunday night.

"Well, there's one good thing about your returning to a normal schedule," Draco said later that day as they were finishing the afternoon tea he'd declared he just had to have. "With you eating in the Great Hall and me tending the home fires, we'll be able to compare notes and see how many meals Severus is really skipping."

"Good thinking, except I found out he snacks a lot with the headmaster."

Whatever Draco might have replied to that was cut short by the abrupt appearance of flames in the Floo, followed by a scrolled parchment popping into existence and rolling out onto the hearth.

"Steyne again?" Harry wondered, setting down his biscuit as he went to kneel in front of the letter.

"Relax, I recognise the ribbon. Pansy used the same kind last week when she flooed a letter through."

Harry personally wouldn't have pegged Parkinson for the pink type. "Uh, you didn't mention a letter from her," he hinted.

"I don't mention half my letters," Draco drawled, though he relented enough to add, "She sounded like she might be ready to listen to me, though. Said a contingent of Slytherins were starting to question some things—ha, if I know Pansy, probably the fact that the Dark Lord's a half-blood. But you have to start where people are, I hope you realise . . . what's wrong?"

"How could she Floo you a letter?"

Draco stared at him. "Very easily, I should think. Listen, she couldn't Floo through a dagger spelled to stab any of us, or anything overtly harmful. Still, Severus and I check letters over carefully because a really subtle hex or curse might slip by the wards. Though you're in no danger at all, of course. Sacrificial magic really is quite something."

"I'm not stupid. I meant, where could she have Flooed it from? I didn't think many fireplaces in the castle were hooked to the network."

"Well, I don't suppose she used the headmaster's connection," Draco gibed. "But there are some others. Umbridge let the Inquisitorial Squad use them." Catching the look on Harry's face, he added, "Look, all that . . . it seemed like a big game to us, like one more round of Gryffindor versus Slytherin--"

"Some game," Harry muttered.

"I thought we were beyond all that."

"It wasn't a game, Draco!"

"I know that! I said it seemed like a game, all right? It was stupid and bloody dangerous and I was
fifteen and an idiot just like you said! So can I read my letter?"

Harry breathed in once, twice, three times and got himself under control. "Yeah, all right. But check it out first. Just in case."

Draco did. "Definitely from Pansy," he pronounced after the letter had passed his complete gamut of identity spells.

"And you're sure it's not set up to hex you at all?" Harry asked in a doubtful tone. "I mean, you did put her in St. Mungo's. Don't you think she wants to get even?"

"It's clean as a whistle," the other boy insisted as he grabbed the scroll to unroll it. Considering he'd declined to ever lay hands on his mother's letter, Harry raised a brow. Then again, since Dubby had snapped his fingers to wink Narcissa's letter out of existence the minute he'd had that reply in hand to deliver to Walpurgis Black . . . Harry sighed, remembering the scene that had caused. Clearly put out at having his mother's letter destroyed, Draco had tried to throttle the elf; Harry'd had to hold him back until Dubby was gone.

Severus had taken points from Slytherin.

"Well?" Harry asked now.

The Slytherin boy looked up, his eyes startled, then furrowed his brow as he cast Tempus to check the time.

"What does she say?"

"I think she might be going sweet on me again, actually." Draco shrugged and didn't meet Harry's eyes. "This is a bit . . . hmm. I don't know that romantic is quite the word to use, but it's definitely not hostile." The smile he'd been trying to hide cracked through his façade. "That last letter of hers was the same."

Well, that explained the dream, Harry supposed. "But what does she say about Slytherin, Draco?"

"Not too much," Draco claimed, but by then his eyes were so shifty that Harry knew something was going on. "Say, you know that potion I've got simmering? It needs fifty stirs clockwise and twenty counter-clockwise, but I'm of a mind to reply to Pansy straight away. Um, can you go tend the potion for me? You won't be brewing unsupervised, you'll just be stirring and it's a really stable mix, nothing will go wrong--"

"Sure," Harry answered in an even, steady voice. He casually strolled off in the direction of the Potions lab, even went in, then stopped and listened as intently as he could. No sound of parchment unrolling, no scratch of quill . . . just the quiet, almost inaudible creak of a trunk being opened.

Edging quietly into his bedroom, Harry took in the scene before him and chided, "Draco!"

The Slytherin boy spun around, Harry's invisibility cloak clutched in his hands.

Harry wasted no time in snatching it from him and bundling it back into his trunk. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Uh, nothing," Draco babbled. "I mean, I was just going to borrow it for a bit. Really. I'm feeling, er, shy, you know, with Pansy getting all hot and bothered in the letter, and I wanted some privacy so I could reply, you know. Oh, come on! Didn't you ever sit on your bed with the curtains closed and think of that Patil girl you went to the ball with?"
Harry narrowed his eyes. "Well, if you want privacy I can certainly oblige. I'll just leave you to write your reply in peace. I'll sit out in the living room until you finish. How's that?"

"Lousy. My potion needs stirring--"

"Then stir it and write your letter later," Harry very reasonably suggested.

Draco's hand clenched around the letter. "Listen, Potter, I'm not in the mood to brew. Just go stir it and let me concentrate!"

"You listen, Malfoy," Harry announced, stomping up to the other boy. "The only thing you want to concentrate on is keeping me busy in the lab so you can sneak out of Severus' quarters! Didn't I tell you I wasn't stupid?"

"I'm not planning to sneak out of--"

"There's only one reason you could want my cloak, and it's to hide, and since I don't imagine you need to hide from me, you've obviously got plans to leave the rooms! So out with it! The truth, this time!"

"Oh, you think you know so much," Draco began to sneer.

"What does the letter say?"

"It's none of your business, Potter--"

Harry looked around for Sals, who thankfully was in her box on his night table, then pointed his hand and yelled, "Get over here, Draco's letter!"

The Slytherin boy swore as the parchment ripped itself from his grip and sailed across the room.

"I think about what you've written all the time," Harry read aloud. "I feel so bad now about that night in Slytherin--"

Draco lunged. "Give me that!"

Jumping up on his bed, Harry held the letter behind his back. "Tell me the truth. The truth, or I'll floo this letter straight to Severus--"

"Oh, fine!" Draco scathed. "She's ready to listen to what it's really like to serve the Dark Lord! She's waiting for me, right now, has some questions, and I have to go talk to her."

"No you don't. She can put her questions in her next letter."

"She's Slytherin, Potter. She's not stupid enough to write her questions down! In the wrong hands it'd be as good as a death sentence." Draco paused. "Get off the bed. You look like an imbecile."

Harry lithely jumped down. "She can't write down her questions but she can write down that she wants to hear what it's really like to serve Voldemort?"

"Of course she can't! I'm reading between the lines, as usual, though of course I realise that concept is a bit of a stretch for a Gryffindor!" Draco retorted.

"I'm Slytherin too, as you take such pains to point out to my Gryffindor friends!"

"Then just read it!" Draco erupted. "Go on. I won't object this time."
Harry gave his brother a suspicious glance, then looked down at the letter. There was no salutation or closing; just a single long paragraph of text filled with writing that reminded Harry of those essays from the lower forms he'd spent so much time correcting.

*I think about what you've written all the time. I feel so bad now about that night in Slytherin. I wish now I'd listened better, because I can think of any number of things I should have asked. It's hard for me to believe it was really that bad, you know, what you saw that night. but you keep saying the problem wasn't that it was bad for him but that it was bad for us.... you know, that didn't used to make any sense to me, but now some things have got me thinking more about it, more about everything you've spent months trying to get through to us. I've been wondering for a while if I should just talk to you about it, all of it, because the letters just have too many limitations, you know? And besides, I remember when we used to talk. Maybe I just miss it. Even after everything that's happened.... you know, I must have written this letter a dozen times over the past few days, trying to get it just right.... I guess what I'm trying to say is I really want to see you. Its just after last class now. I'll send this, then go to that old, unused supply closet where we used to... well, you know the one I mean. I'll wait twenty minutes. If you don't come... well, you know how you keep writing all of us about what makes for true strength, true power? If you don't come, I'll know that your recent choices have made you weak, not strong. We'll all know.*

"Twenty minutes," Draco emphasised, flicking his hand toward the ghostly little clock that was still ticking away. "I have to get going."

"You're not going anywhere," Harry scowled, shoving the letter deep into a trouser pocket. "Write her that if she's so desperate to talk, she can come here to do it."

Draco gnashed his teeth. "She won't, Potter. Nobody will risk being seen hanging about this corridor, not after what Snape did for you at Samhain! Too much Death Eater gossip running rampant through the dungeons. I told Severus ages ago that I had to go to them. And if I don't go when Pansy asks me, she'll think it's because I'm afraid to sneak out! She'll tell people that it's only cowards who leave the Dark Lord's service, and believe me, the ones who are still loyal to him will milk that for all it's worth!"

"It's not a matter of cowardice," Harry carefully said. "Severus told me that you were too smart to leave his rooms without permission."

"Oh, nice try at manipulation," Draco sneered. "Remind me to give you some lessons later in how it's done. Listen, I've been working on Pansy for a while now because she's a lot like me, not about to sign up as a slave once she knows that's what it really is--"

"I thought you were owling the half-bloods and Muggleborns in Slytherin!"

"Well I started with them like Severus said, but they are in the minority, you know! And besides, is it wrong of me to want to save a few purebloods from a fate worse than death? The more potential allies I can steal from the Dark Lord, the better!"

"All right, fine," Harry bit out, because that wasn't the issue. "How do you know this letter isn't some ruse to lure you out there and kill you?"
"I know Pansy, all right? I know her really well!"

"You know her so well that she loosed a snake on you!"

"Yeah, well if I'd had a better grip on my impulse control and hadn't fucked it all up by telling Slytherin too much, too soon, she wouldn't have!"

"You're having an impulse control problem right now!" Harry shouted. "Stop and think, would you? It could be a trap! It could be Lucius standing in that supply closet waiting for you! Or Voldemort himself, for that matter!"

"For fuck's sake, Harry! This is the chance I've been waiting for all along! I keep telling Severus I need to see these people in person to influence them!"

"You're not leaving, and that's final!" Harry grabbed his brother's arm for good measure, determined to keep him there by force if necessary. What he really needed, of course, was for his father to come deal with this. Severus would know what to say --or do-- to a stubborn Slytherin. Snape wasn't Head of Slytherin for nothing.

With that thought in mind, Harry started dragging his brother toward the bedroom door so he could get them both to the fireplace in the living room. He'd hang onto Draco with one hand and toss the Floo powder in with the other--

Good plan, but Draco was a better Muggle fighter than he used to be; he'd obviously been listening to the Potion Master's advice out in Devon about how to free oneself from an assailant. One quick twist of his wrist, one rapid downward jerk, and Draco had shaken Harry off, the whole manoeuvre over so fast it seemed almost effortless. The Slytherin boy started to stalk away.

Harry felt like he was being pulled in two directions at once. *Just get to the Floo...* He could see himself doing it, screaming, "Dad, get down here now!" Snape would floo through at once, the mere tone of Harry's voice enough to signal an emergency. Taking the time to firecall his father, though, would give Draco time to slip out and get disappear into the bowels of Slytherin. Not that Snape couldn't find him, but by the time the search began, Pansy's nasty little scheme, whatever it was, might have already lured Draco up to the Owlery!

Pansy, though, wasn't the only one who could scheme. Harry was a Slytherin too, and if contacting Snape directly would give Draco too much chance to escape, then maybe there was a more roundabout way of getting the Potions Master to return to his chambers.

"I'm a seer, remember?" Harry shouted, catching up to Draco and grabbing hold of his arm again, his grip this time so tight it made his own hand ache. Draco tried his twist-and-yank move again, but braced for it now, Harry managed to hang on as he yelled, "I know things! I know the future! *Your* future, Draco Malfoy! Whoever's in that closet is going to take you up to the Owlery and throw you off and leave you a bloody mess at the bottom!"

That stopped the other boy cold, if only for a second. "Nobody can get thrown off the Owlery, Potter," Draco sneered. "The place is plastered with anti-gravity charms. You aren't talking to some casewitch who's never heard of rugby, you know. *I* know a lot about Hogwarts and its defences, so you'd better come up with a better lie than *that*."

*So far, so good...* Draco hadn't exactly gone for the bait, but Harry thought he could get him there. . . "It's not a lie," he insisted, raising his voice yet again. "I dreamed it, dreamed the whole thing! If you leave here, you're going to die!"
"Sure you dreamed that," the other boy scoffed. "You dreamed my death and never once thought to mention it? If you still hated me, maybe. Ha, probably not even then, you Gryffindor. But now that you don't hate me? You just don't want me leaving! You'll make up anything!"

That's it, his inner Slytherin announced. Harry would make up anything to keep Draco in the rooms, and Draco knew it, which gave him the perfect opening, the one he'd been angling for.

"I'll take Veritaserum, all right?" Just the thought of it made him shudder. While he was under the potion's influence, Draco could ask anything . . . and most likely would. Hopefully, though, Snape would realise what was going on long before Draco managed to find the right bottle and get three drops measured out . . . Harry drew in a breath, thinking this is it, time to spring the trap . . . "Seriously. I will. Go get some, and then you'll know. Well, what's the problem? Oh, come on! I bet you know where Severus keeps his truth potions!"

Draco was regarding him thoughtfully, at least. That had to be worth something. "If you think he keeps it where I could get a hold of it, you're barking mad. Severus knows me better than that." A slight laugh.

Harry pretended to think that one over. "Oh. Right. But remember my Lumos? If I use my wand, I bet I can find a way through the wards--"

Draco gave him a rather disgusted look. "I do remember your Lumos, yes! And I remember what followed! Severus is alerted the instant his wards are attacked, but that's what you're counting on, isn't it? You're trickier than you look!"

Draco was starting to twist his arm again. Anticipating that, Harry let go of Draco's arm just as the other boy began to yank it downwards. Caught off balance, Draco lurched on his feet, just as Harry threw himself into him, propelling the other boy backwards into the wall just beside the doorway. Harry shoved with all his might against the other boy, pinioning him chest to chest even as he glanced over his shoulder at Sals in her little box, and hissed, "Get over here, travel-fire dust!"

An urn of Floo powder yanked itself off the mantle and came sailing straight at the boys as they struggled in the open bedroom doorway.

His Seeker reflexes still honed though it had been ages since he'd played Quidditch, Harry deftly caught the urn in one hand. The idea was that he would hurl it back into the fireplace and yell for Snape, all without ever letting go of Draco, but the Slytherin boy, of course, had other ideas.

He plucked the urn from Harry’s hand and flung it himself, straight against the wall behind Harry’s night-table.

Harry flinched slightly as a crashing noise filled the bedroom and fine dust billowed upwards. This is spiralling out of control, he abruptly decided. The best thing to do, he realised all at once, was Stupefy his brother first and then somehow get Severus down to deal with the whole mess. Would Dobby hear him if he just yelled without benefit of Floo powder? Ha, if not, he'd just keep Draco under the hex until their father came home for the evening.

Funny, though, how reluctant he was to use magic against Draco, when he'd spent years wanting to do just that, when he'd practiced doing that very thing out in Devon. But this wasn't practice. This was for real.

Harry held his hand out, fingers pointed at Draco's face even as he planted his feet more firmly and leaned against the other boy to hold him still.
Strange though; Draco wasn't resisting nearly as much, now. He didn't even look alarmed that Harry was obviously about to cast a wandless spell straight at him. And no wonder, as Harry found out when his gaze flicked to where Sals had been.

For now, the snake was nowhere to be seen. Worse, her charmed box lay in jagged pieces, a shattered urn mixed in among them. *Draco probably frightened her away on purpose so I couldn't use any magic to keep him here,* Harry realised. *I've been out-Slytherined. Well, no wonder, considering who I'm dealing with. But if he hurt Sals with that little stunt I'll have a thing or two to say later!*

But that could wait for later.

For now, what he had to do was buy time until he could find a snake image to use. Damn! Draco wasn't wearing his student cloak, and since his own was buried somewhere in his trunk, lost in all that wizardspace, Harry was left scrambling for a solution. No doubt Draco wasn't going to wait around while Harry drew a snake!

He tried looking at his shoelace and imagining it was a snake. "Stupefy!"

Draco shoved him away and made a little show of dusting himself off. "Your need for a snake is a liability we need to address," he commented conversationally, just as though Harry hadn't just flat-out attacked him. Or tried, at any rate. Well, Draco could afford to be magnanimous, couldn't he? *He didn't have to worry about Harry's magic at all, now that he'd taken Sals out of the picture.* "We'll talk about it when I get back. And I will come back, Harry. I know your dreams upset you sometimes but you need to be a bit less hysterical."

"Two minutes!" Harry begged, trying not to look as though his gaze was sweeping the floor in hopes of spotting Sals.

Draco glanced at his *Tempus* spell and shrugged. Maybe it was his way of making up for having done that to Sals? Harry wasn't sure, but he wasn't about to waste what might be his last chance -- ever-- to make Draco consider the danger that awaited him on the other side of the dungeon door.

"I know the Owler thing is true because my dreams always come in two parts!" Harry rushed out, feeling like the words were tripping over each other, they way they were flying off his tongue. "The past first, then the future! It was a real seer dream Draco, it was. You have to believe me!"

"And just what did you see in the past?"

*Uh-oh.* Exactly what Snape had warned that Draco would ask! Harry stared, not knowing what to say.

"Oh, that's simply fascinating," Draco drawled. "Did a niffler get your tongue?"

*Not Lucius in France. Anything but that. He won't believe that*-- For what seemed like forever, Harry's mind was flooded with thoughts of nothing *but* Lucius, but then finally another idea came to him. An awful idea, but the words came spilling out his mouth before he could stop them. "I saw Ron and Hermione having sex!" he blurted.

Draco burst out laughing. "And you know this is true because you what, asked them for pointers? Would you be serious?"

"No, they mentioned it in passing--"

"Potter, if there's one thing I'm sure of about Granger--besides the fact she's just as disgustingly
intellectual as Severus always claimed--it's that she's got a bit more *class* than to kiss and tell!"

"Uh, well really it was just Ron who mentioned it--"

"Your two minutes are just about up, and since I don't believe a word you say--"

"All right!" Harry shouted, fed up. Maybe he was supposed to tell the truth. Maybe *that* was why he'd dreamed of Lucius turning good, not because it was true, but because he was supposed to have something completely shocking to tell Draco, something that would make him want to live long enough to *see* his father again so he could ask him about France. Maybe *that* was why he'd dreamed about the Owler right after, because seer dreams *could* be changed and his magic was trying its best to let him know how to go about doing it!

"Lucius Malfoy has been going around France warning Muggleborns to get out before Voldemort attacks them," he admitted, his voice hoarse with needing Draco to listen, to *understand*.

Draco's breath hitched. "*Excuse me*?"

"That's what I dreamed," Harry gasped out, feeling as though he'd been running a race and could hardly breathe. "Honestly, Draco, it is. He was talking to this man and his wife, saying how Voldemort was planning an attack--"

"Lucius doesn't say Voldemort!"

"The Dark Lord, he said the Dark Lord, all right? I'm just re-telling it, is all! Anyway, the man and woman didn't want to leave; your father, er Lucius, had to sort of talk them into it--"

"So you speak French now, do you?"

"It was all in English!"

Draco, apparently, had heard enough. "English! At this point I don't even know what you're trying to accomplish, Harry! *The man raised me!* And yeah, he wants to kill me and I somehow deal with that, but that doesn't mean I want to be . . . *taunted* with what it could be like if he'd see things my way!"

"But maybe he *has* had a change of heart--" Harry tried.

"He'd have to have a heart in the first place! But maybe you don't think I have one either, making up something like that! What's your problem? You want to see if I'm human? You want to see if I bleed?" Draco bared his teeth then, in a feral scowl that probably would have made Neville faint dead away. "Oh, I know what it is, it's payback for that damned elf! You didn't like me taunting *him* so you thought to give me a taste of my own medicine! Nice, Potter, very nice!"

"I just don't want you tossed head-first off the Owlerly!" Harry cried, dashing around Draco to block the door. He glanced behind him into the living room. No sign of Sals there either--

"Enough with the fucking *Owlerly*!" Draco screamed. "I'm meeting Pansy right here in the dungeons, *underground*, you complete nitwit, so get out of my way!"

"I swear, Draco, I dreamed everything just exactly like I said! Except the Ron and Hermione sex thing; I just didn't want to have to tell you about Lucius, is all. But I did dream that about him, *I did!* I swear, all right? I swear it on my mother's blood!"

Draco paused, then, panting as he heaved in breath after breath, the anger on his features fading. "If
"You're not that reformed," Harry dryly pointed out, thinking of Dubby.

"The point," Draco went right on, "is that your seer dreams obviously aren't reliable. If they were, you'd have warned me before this. And I am not missing my best chance yet to get through to Slytherin because you have an overactive imagination, I'm just not."

"Draco--"

But that was all he got to say, just that one word. Before another one could so much as cross his lips, something hard and solid connected with his left eye, smashing straight into the soft, vulnerable tissue.

Draco's fist, he realised with something approaching astonishment.

Draco had just punched him in the face, and what was worse, the Slytherin boy really knew how to land a blow. In one blinding flash of insight -- a flash originating in his eye, wouldn't you know -- Harry understood what Snape and Draco had been working on in Devon while he'd been in the cottage writing up observations in his spell lexicon. No doubt Snape hadn't intended Draco to use the tactic against Harry, but trust a Slytherin to use any advantage at his disposal.

Even this one.

Even against his own brother.

Harry fell over backwards, thrown off his feet by the force of the sudden attack. He recovered quickly though, all that practice in Muggle fighting kicking in as he scrambled to stand again and charge the other boy, to give as good as he had gotten--because as long as Draco was busy brawling with him, he wasn't leaving the rooms, was he?

Draco, apparently, had thought of that.

"Petrificus totalis," he quietly incanted, his wand out now, and pointed straight at Harry's heart.

Harry's hands snapped to his sides, his legs jamming themselves into a straight position that caused him to topple over sideways.

Draco caught him before his head could smash against stone, and gently lowered him to the floor, laying him on his back.

Harry tried to struggle, but he couldn't move. Not one muscle, though he could still hear and see perfectly well. He couldn't even shout any longer!

"I'll unhex you the second I get back," Draco promised as he left Harry's sight. Harry heard a whispered Evanesco and figured Draco was eliminating the Floo powder that had spilled all over. Did Severus keep a second supply of it somewhere? Not that it would do Harry much good if he did, considering he couldn't say a spell now even if Sals climbed into his range of vision. Harry tried again to move his lips, just enough to crack them open--but it was no use. Draco had mastered Petrificus years and years before. The casting had been flawless; there was no weakness to exploit.

A slight creaking noise caught his attention, a noise he'd heard before. When Draco emerged back at
his side, the invisibility cloak that had started the whole argument was draped over one arm. "I'll take
really good care of this, I promise," the Slytherin boy said, his voice rasping with something Harry
couldn't identify.

Kneeling down at Harry's side, Draco reached into Harry's pocket for the letter, then from the other
one slid out Harry's wand. "Just in case," he murmured, leaning over closer, still that strange rasp in
his voice. "It'll be okay, it really will. I won't go anywhere near the Owtery, I swear, and I'll be back
before you know it. But I'm almost late; I really do need to go, now."

_No, Draco_, Harry tried to say, but no words emerged. _No, don't go! Don't go, don't go---_

He was still mentally chanting the words when he heard _Abrire_ from the living room and a moment
later, the heavy thud of the dungeon door.

And then, nothing but silence.
Harry's field of vision was limited to the stone ceiling above, the hex so absolute that he couldn't even shift his eyes to either side. *Severus is going to kill me.* That was his first thought after he heard the door slam shut. *All that practice out in Devon, and the first time I really needed my magic, I let myself get caught off guard. But I wasn't expecting Draco to hex me for real, was I? Let alone hit me like a Muggle would--*

He wasn't quite sure how long he'd been laying there; his thoughts seemed to be oozing like treacle, as though time itself had slowed down. By the time he'd got to wondering about Draco hitting him, though, a harsh, discordant noise began exploding inside his mind. Long, loud, and shrill, it just went on and on, a high pitched whine that demanded attention.

*The magic doorbell*, he was slow to realise. *Somebody's at the door. Maybe it's Draco trying to come back in! But no, that doesn't make sense; he knows how to open the door from the outside... unless Severus never showed him? Maybe he didn't. Maybe Severus made sure that Draco couldn't get in again if he left, a ploy to keep him from leaving in the first place... very Slytherin. Well, at least now I know why he never snuck out before. He probably thought I wouldn't let him back in... and I actually might not have, at least in those first few weeks...*

All of a sudden, it was like Harry's mind snapped to full attention inside his head, his sluggish thoughts only slowly catching up to implications he should have realised the instant he first began to hear the doorbell ring. *That could be Draco out there, running from Lucius or maybe a bunch of Slytherins out for his blood... That could be Draco, pounding and begging to get back in, and you're laying here doing nothing!*

*But there's nothing I can do against Petrificus...*

On the cusp of that denial, though, came another one. *Maybe there is something...* Remembrance assailed Harry then, the images still moving in slow-motion, every thought taking an age to form. A cell where he'd turned stones translucent until he could see the heart of them. The hospital wing, noise ricocheting all around, light so bright he could feel the heat, windows shattering under the force of his anger, the force of his need. A robe and mask, the anger that time wrapped around a need to kill, to destroy, to rip asunder--

And now, he had another need.

Drawing deeply into his core, Harry braced himself and thought, *I can do it, I can do this. Wild magic, that's what I need. Or not so wild, because now I'm in control of my dark powers, aren't I? I channelled wild magic that one time in Devon, made it do what I wanted it to do, and I didn't need a snake to make it happen. Or my wand... All I needed was enough anger, enough rage...*

Too bad he wasn't angry at Draco. Well, he was, but it wasn't anything like the fury he'd directed at that robe and mask. His anger now was woven through with something else, something far more potent.

A need to help.

He didn't want to blast Draco with his dark powers, he really didn't. *All* he wanted was for the other boy to come home safe. Draco had been wrong to hit him, wrong to throw that hex, wrong to leave, but he shouldn't have to die for it.
How to save him, though?
It was emotion that had set him free on Samhain. Emotion, fierce emotion . . .
Memories rained inside his head. Draco, giving his wand back. Challenging him day after day to
work his way back toward his magic. Insisting that Hermione had to come to Devon because she
could be with Harry when Draco and Snape couldn't.
But those were memories, not feelings, and Harry's every instinct was screaming at him that emotion
alone could spark his wild magic. So what did he feel for the Slytherin boy? He didn't hate him;
Harry knew that much, but he'd never given much thought to what he did feel. They were brothers,
sure, but as comfortable as that usually was these days, it said nothing about emotion. Snape had
made them brothers by unequivocally accepting them both as his sons.
But what had they done as brothers?
Memories filled him again, this time not so much ones of what Draco had done to earn his trust, but
what Harry and Draco had done together. Memories of the good times they'd shared.
Studying together, day after day, Draco laughing at the bats Harry liked to doodle as he read . . .
Comparing notes on the girls in their year . . . Watching Quidditch on the enchanted picture frame .
. . Joking around about Snape's peculiar habits . . . Wizards' Scrabble late at night, rematch after
rematch with Draco making up slang . . . Trying to sneak Galliano from their father's tall bottle of it,
only to find that Snape had warded his liquor cabinet to turn intruders' hands a glowing green . . .
Brewing the counter potion in the lab that same night, the both of them saying "hush, shhh, quieter!"
every few moments . . .
What was it that Draco had said? That he could sort of stand Harry's company now, every now and
then? That was a bit like Snape's I don't hate you at all declaration, wasn't it? They weren't brothers
just because Snape had set things up that way and told them so. They were brothers where it
counted.
Even if the Slytherin prat had just punched him in the face, hexed him, and made off with his wand.
I care about Draco, really care, Harry thought. That's the key. I can do this, I can, but this time it'll
be love, not hate or fear or anger unlocking the wild magic that still lives inside me. I've always
wanted a brother and I'm not about to lose the one I've finally got. I can do this, I can. I can break
out, I can break the hex--From somewhere in the middle of his soul he felt a stirring like a snake coiling, preparing to attack.
Break the hex, break the hex, he mentally chanted, the words flowing faster through his mind. The
coil inside him grew tighter, stronger, gathering energy as his thoughts became a mental blur
streaming through him like a gale force wind.
Breakthehexbreakthehexbreakitbreakitbreakbreakbreakbreakkkk--The serpent inside him struck, lashing out, energy and power blasting through him in one fell swoop.
It didn't flow out through his fingers this time, though; didn't break windows or melt walls. It
cleansed him, or so it felt. Draco's hex fell away from him under the force of it, the change so sudden
it was almost cataclysmic, like Harry had been scrubbed raw from the inside out. It hurt, actually,
waves of pain resounding all through him, but Harry scarcely noticed that. A surge of adrenaline
masking the pain, Harry blinked to moisten his eyes. Or eye, because it seemed like the other one
was swollen closed, puffy and weepy. With just one eye to see with, his vision was skewed, things


not looking quite the way they should, everything strangely flat.

No depth, that was it, but Harry didn't give it much thought as he pushed to his feet and stumbled towards the front door. His body didn't seem to be moving correctly, or obeying his commands; he lurched more than walked, but somehow he made it, splaying one hand against the wall so he could lean, panting, his fingers out to perform Abridre.

No thought in him of holding his wand to cover the wandless magic, not now. No time to waste, not with that doorbell still pealing away inside his head. Draco needed him now. Besides, he didn't even know where his wand was. Had Draco taken it with him when he'd left?

If he loses my wand to a bunch of Slytherins, Snape will kill us both, Harry thought. What will it be this time, ten million lines?

It came to Harry then that his thoughts were terribly jumbled and disconnected, like he hadn't eaten or slept in days, like he was walking around in a daze, actually. What did it matter what their father would do? Getting Draco inside; that was what mattered, and he wasn't going to accomplish much with Abridre, was he? He needed Parseltongue, needed Sals. . . but when his glance skittered across the door parchment, it didn't say Draco Malfoy in any case.

Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley, it simply read.

His anxiety growing tenfold in one instant, Harry scooped his cloak off its peg—thankfully nearby—and focussed his eyes on the crest, then held out a shaking hand and whispered in a hoarse, raw voice, "Open up, now."

The door swung open, and there were Ron and Hermione as predicted, wands at the ready. Ron craned his neck a bit to look around at the interior of the room. "Everything all right in here?"

Before Harry could get a word in, Hermione was exclaiming, "We've been waiting forever, seems like! We sent Ginny running to tell the Professor that neither you nor Malfoy appeared to be at home- -" She tried to cross the threshold then, but as Harry hadn't actually invited her in, a nasty green light flashed across the entrance. Yelping in pain, Hermione jumped back slightly and rubbed both her arms.

"I'm on my way out," Harry quickly said before either one of them asked to enter the rooms.

"The hell you are," Ron interrupted.

Ignoring him, Harry crossed into the hall, intending to go after Draco. Fat lot of good that did him. Ron and Hermione were in his way; Harry tried to push through them. With a muttered oath, Ron grabbed hold of Harry's arm and peering closely at his face, abruptly questioned, "What's all this, then? You didn't take a hex in the eye last night!"

"Still going to claim that Draco Malfoy's as harmless as baby wombat?" Hermione railed, her keen intelligence working overtime as usual. "Because I know full well you didn't get that practicing magic! We were there!"

"Draco!" Harry gasped, struggling against Ron's grip. His muscles were still so uncoordinated that he couldn't quite shake the other boy off. Actually, it felt a bit as though this time, instead of melting the walls, the wild magic had melted him, from the inside out. "I have to go find him- -"

"Do you want Wizard Family Services visiting again? They'll get a flurry of Howlers if you run 'round the halls with your face looking like that!"
"What?" Harry could hardly make sense of Ron's comments. Sure, his eye hurt more all the time, and he still couldn't seem to open it, but he couldn't have a bruise already from that awful punch Draco had landed, could he? Just how long had he been caught in that hex? It couldn't have been that long, or Snape would have finished in his classroom and come home.

Ron was shaking a solemn head, his grip on Harry still so tight that Harry had no hope of slipping it, not when he felt as weak as a half-drowned kitten. "You stay put. Listen, I know how much this thing with Snape means to you, and since it's not his fault Malfoy punched your lights out, you really don't want Family Services thinking they need to come investigate. Especially not after last time."

"Let go!" Harry shouted. "It's not like that! I have to go help Draco, he's in horrible danger! He's going to somehow end up in the Owlery; let me go or I swear I'll have to make you--"

He reached back inside and snatched his cloak off its peg, only realizing just then that he'd been heading out without it. That punch and hex must have rattled him more than he'd thought . . . Well, no matter, he had the cloak now. Fixing his gaze on the crest, he was already raising his hand to Stupefy his friends, when a grim, dark voice broke his concentration.

"I shall go after Draco," said Snape as he emerged from the Floo. "Mr Weasley. Thank you for sending your sister to alert me to the situation. Now, if you'd be so kind, this matter is private family business." He waved an expressive hand, and when the students were slow to react, shouted, "Gryffindors, out!"

"We were never really in," Ron muttered, letting go of Harry. Actually, he gave him a little push toward Snape. In other circumstances, Harry would have found that amusing.

"We'll check back lat--," Hermione tried to assure Harry as Snape literally shut the door in her face.

Before his father even had a chance to turn around, Harry began blurtng, "Draco got a letter from Pansy and left to talk to her in some supply closet near here!" He had to stop and take a breath then. Or several, really. It was ridiculous. All he could think was that breaking out of the hex had exhausted all his reserves, since a little tussle like he'd just had with Ron really shouldn't have left him gasping for air. "I tried to stop him but he caught me off guard--"

"I should say so," Snape interrupted, looking him up and down. "Harry. Sit down before you fall over."

"Sit down?" Harry echoed in stark disbelief, sucking in more air even though it singed his throat. "Draco could be in the Owlery, fighting for his life right this very second! He said he wouldn't go anywhere near there but they probably won't give him a choice. Come on--"

But Snape knew what he was talking about, evidently, because just as Harry grabbed for his father's hand, a wave of absolute dizziness crashed into him, buckling his legs, and he found himself abruptly falling straight onto the hard dungeon floor, the room spinning around him as he sat there by the door.

Snape scooped him up and deposited him on the sofa, the motion so economical it took but a second. Then he was conjuring ice from thin air and wrapping it in a handkerchief he fetched from a cloak pocket. He thrust it out in one quick motion that said he was restraining his anger only with great difficulty. As Harry took hold of the makeshift ice-pack, the Potions Master brusquely instructed, "Put this on your eye but take it off every few moments to let the tissue rest. You will stay here, is that clear? I will go look for Draco--"
The room all around him lurched as Harry tried to stand up, the ice-pack in his hand already forgotten. What on earth was the matter with him? His head was pounding, and it seemed like the light in the room was intensely painful for the one eye still in working order, and only now was he realizing that all his muscles hurt, every one, the pain soaking through his flesh to make the bones hurt too.

He wasn't going to leave Draco to his fate though. What was a little pain? Well, a lot of pain. Not to mention weakness and a whirling disorientation unlike anything he'd ever felt . . . still, Harry pushed up off the couch and clutched his father for support, both his hands on Snape's forearms. "We won't be able to see Draco, he's got my cloak!"

"Your cloak," the Potions Master quietly snarled. "Is that why he hit you, in the eye, no less, because you were trying to keep him from leaving with your father's precious cloak?"

"He hit me because I wouldn't let him leave, full stop!"

Snape shook his head, his eyes still black with fury as they passed over Harry's injury.

"And you're my father," Harry added, wishing it hadn't come out like such an afterthought. Well, his thoughts were jumbled, to say the least, otherwise he would have realised sooner that cloak or no, they did have a way to find Draco. "I've got a map that shows people under invisibility cloaks! We can take it with us to see where Draco's got to--"

"We will be going nowhere--" Snape began to stress, but Harry wasn't waiting for his answer. Stumbling, he made it to his room, dropped to the stone floor, and fished in his trunk for the folded sheaf of parchment, dropping the ice-pack carelessly to one side. Another wave of dizziness assailed him, but that was all right since he was already sitting down, this time. Snape followed him in, the sudden silence from his quarter ominous.

Touching the map with his finger instead of a wand, Harry looked up at his father's Head-of-Slytherin crest, and groaned out the Parseltongue sentence that came closest to the English one he needed. Good thing he'd practiced the charm in advance, but he'd thought, what with going back to the Tower and all, that it might come in handy. Usually his Parseltongue version of that map charm made him chuckle a little, but there was no humour in him now.

None at all.

The Marauder's Map began to fill with familiar writing, an introduction scrolling across parchment. Flipping past that, Harry quickly scanned the rooms, searching for a tiny lot labelled Draco Malfoy.

He saw himself in the dungeons, his father close alongside, but the corridors criss-crossing the dungeons showed no trace of his brother. With a sinking feeling, Harry traced his finger across the parchment, seeking out the Great Hall, and from there, the route he knew to--

"Oh, my God!" Harry thrust the map out, his finger jabbing at it. "He's in the Owlery already!"

Snape knelt down beside him and leaned over, his hawk nose casting a shadow on the parchment as he took it with both hands to study the two dots there. Pansy Parkinson, Draco Malfoy. Pansy's dot was hovering just beside the thin inked line representing an outside wall of Hogwarts; Draco's dot was alongside, so close their names overlapped, so close it seemed to Harry that they must be kissing.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe his dream had been just a dream. He loved Draco, he knew that now, but it had taken awful, awful worries to make him realise as much. Maybe his
subconscious had just been trying to tell him how much he'd come to value his brother. Because there was nothing to worry about now, was there? Pansy and Draco were completely alone; nobody else was anywhere near them; there wasn't even anybody on the long staircase that led to the Owlery.

And if anything was certain, it was that Pansy Parkinson wasn't about to get the best of Draco Malfoy. Not physically --she was a tiny thing-- and not magically, as Draco had proven months and months ago in Potions class when he'd hexed her so badly that she'd ended up in St. Mungo's. No, Draco was the dangerous one, the one with an impulse control problem, the one who'd been kept out of class for ages because he couldn't be trusted, when challenged, not to do his fellow Slytherins serious harm.

He and Pansy had made up though. They must have; they were kissing; their dots were right up against one another now, not a speck of blank parchment between them. Or maybe they weren't actually kissing . . . their dots were touching, but hadn't overlapped; maybe they were just standing before the great open windows that faced the west, Draco behind Pansy, watching the sun begin to set.

Snape made a noise that could be interpreted as disgust, then drew his legs in toward his body as he sat cross-legged on the floor, his dark gaze rapidly assessing the entirety of Hogwarts. "Well. Draco should know better than to trust Miss Parkinson, but at least it appears as though no ambush is contemplated. None of my Slytherins have placed themselves in strategic locations and there are no strangers present in the castle or--" Another quick sweep of eyes over parchment. "Or on the grounds."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, but with my dream? Let's go get him anyway."

Snape glowered. "I will 'get' him. You will leave Draco and his Gryffindor recklessness to me." Gesturing toward the ice pack Harry had yet to use, he added, "Use that while I am gone. The magic binding your vision is not designed to withstand such mistreatment, and I would prefer your eye not revert to it's condition after Samhain!"

"Uh-oh. This was bad. Really bad. Harry picked up the ice pack and lightly rested it against his eye, wincing, and not just at the jolt of pain that resulted. He was thinking of his brother as he watched the map with his good eye. Draco was really in trouble . . .

In the next moment, though, Draco got into worse trouble still. Much worse. It was all there on the map, something beginning to happen, something so horrible that it curled Harry's toes.

Draco's dot shoved Pansy's, shoved her right through the inked line that represented the western wall of the Owlery.

Pansy's dot ended up on the outside the lines denoting the castle wall. Outside, hundreds of feet up in the air.

Beside Harry, Snape sucked in a breath through his teeth, his hands shaking slightly as they held the map.

Draco's dot remained pressed right up against the windows. Maybe he was reaching out, trying to help Pansy, trying to drag her back in? Maybe she hadn't been pushed after all . . . maybe that kiss had grown so intense that she had lost her balance and fallen? And maybe the wards were keeping her out there, hovering--

Hovering? Harry's eye went wide as he stared at that fateful speck of ink. Because she wasn't
hovering, that much was clear. There were horrid little marks all around her dot now, as though it was rushing at great speed. The Marauder's Map wasn't designed to show pure vertical motion, but the charms laid on the parchment were so powerful that it was trying its best, marking Pansy's dot with tiny wavering specks.

Pansy was moving, even if her dot wasn't. She was falling. *Plummeting.*

*Plummeting straight down to earth, plummeting to her death . . .*

Harry's mouth dropped open, his gaze seeking out his father's rigid features. "He . . . he . . . no, this can't be happening! My dream, it was Draco who was going to be thrown--"

Snape didn't reply though his eyes, narrowed as he watched the map, glittered like polished coal.

One more glance down at the parchment and it was all over. As Pansy hit the grassy earth outside the castle, her dot grotesquely swelled on impact. Thinking of what her body must look like, Harry shuddered.

Her name faded away, and then her dot, as Harry thought with dawning horror, *the map shows the living, not the dead. Pansy's dead now. Draco had . . . Oh God, what had Draco done?* And what was he doing now, standing there alone in the Owlerly, his dot up against the windows as though he'd leaned out to watch Pansy's long fall?

"He . . ." Harry gasped, his tongue feeling thick in his mouth. So strange to feel the shock convulsing first one muscle and then another. He'd known for five years that Draco Malfoy was going to kill somebody someday; the other boy had a vicious streak, Harry had told himself, more times to count. It was just a matter of time.

But the Draco who had become his brother . . . well, he was still *Draco*, complete with all the faults and flaws his last name implied, but for all that, he was different, too. The map, after all, didn't tell the whole story, did it? Harry moved the ice to a new position on his eye as he tried to reason out the truth.

"Oh . . . God . . . it . . . do you think it could possibly have been, er, self-defence?" he choked out, looking to his father for reassurance.

Snape just stared back, his eyes black and hard, challenging Harry to answer that for himself.

Which the boy did. "But . . . why would Draco need to push her out? Even if she was . . . *attacking* him, he could handle it without it coming to *that*. And . . . I can't think he was startled or something by an attack from behind . . ." Harry's gaze frantically scanned the map, this time *hoping* to see someone else . . . someone else for the Aurors to arrest. "Oh, no. There's nobody else there . . ."

Feeling like he was grasping at straws, Harry murmured, "Maybe it was some kind of accident?"

A derisive glance, that time. "Did your fool of a brother also dismantle my wards by accident?"

Harry frowned at that. "But Dad . . . how could he dismantle your wards at all?"

"Draco intuits magic. Quite skilfully, at times."

"I know, but still . . . *your* wards?"

The Potions Master scowled down at the map. "Invincibility is a myth. Whatever can be warded can be unwarded."
"Imperius," Harry said, that time his tone more definite as he moved the ice pack to let his eye rest, as Snape had said. "That's it, right? Somebody cursed him while he was in the closet, or something, and they're making him do this--"

"Draco could not dismantle my wards while under Imperius," Snape scowled. "Forging a gap through them would require highly complex magic and a fair dose of intuition. You'll note that Darswaithe was given a Portkey for that very reason, not that he had any intuition to begin with."

"Pansy, then--"

"Miss Parkinson unwarded the windows herself so that she might be thrown outside?" A harsh noise resounded through the Potions Master's teeth. "Or did she do it under Imperius? Stop grasping at straws and look at what is right before your face!"

Harry did.

Draco's dot was moving now, backing slowly away from the windows. Had the Slytherin boy lingered so long because he was restoring the wards he'd somehow managed to take down? Erasing the evidence that might point to him, obscuring his magical signature? Harry's heart dropped somewhere into the region of his toes, and throbbed there painfully. It was clear enough what had happened up in the Owlery, but that didn't mean Harry understood it.

"He . . . but why would he kill Pansy? He was excited to get the letter, thought she might be . . . uh, falling for him again."

"Perhaps he discovered that her renewed interest in him was nothing but a ruse to get him from the rooms."

Impulse control, thought Harry, remembering the way Draco had kicked Dubby. No doubt about it; Draco had a violent side. The last time he'd been angry with Pansy he'd almost killed her, and this time . . . Harry looked at the place where Pansy's dot had been, and felt positively nauseous. Pansy had never been his favourite person, of course, but to think that she was dead, just like that?

Draco had apparently finished whatever needed doing in the Owlery. His dot began moving, heading across the expanse of the room and then creeping down the stairs. He moved slowly, as though aware that he could be heard if not seen. Some other students were climbing the stairs now; Draco stopped moving completely and flattened himself against the wall to let them pass.

Harry leaned over closer, peering with one eye at the map Snape was holding. A Ravenclaw, a couple of Hufflepuffs, and then the names Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger trailing up the Owlery stairs. To Harry's horror, the two Gryffindors actually stopped right alongside Draco, as though they could smell him . . . but then they moved on, upwards toward the Owlery, where Harry had said Draco would be. How could a dot look so angry? But Ron's did; it was moving in a jerky manner, as though Ron were pounding up the stairs, and Hermione's wasn't much better. Draco's dot, in contrast, seemed calm and collected, moving slowly but surely.

What if Ron and Hermione had sensed him strongly enough to pull off the invisibility cloak, exposing his presence there for all to see? Harry suddenly felt ill. "Shouldn't we go bring him back, now?"

Snape's mouth was a straight line, his angry gaze not leaving the map for an instant as it tracked Draco's progress. "I thought you understood. Why do you think I'm merely watching? I'm loath to startle him when he's trying to hide beneath that cloak. It might publicise the fact that he's not where he ought to be."
So they were going to let Draco come to them . . . That made sense in the circumstances. Draco would be all right; he did have the cloak, after all. Still, Harry felt sicker than ever as he nodded, because by then, his father's plan was perfectly clear.

They were setting up an alibi.

They were going to claim that Draco had never left the dungeons, that he'd been with Harry the entire afternoon . . .

That story had one problem though. Well, besides Veritaserum. "Ron and Hermione know the truth," Harry groaned out loud, his stomach filling with acid at the mere thought. Ron, who would like few things better than to send one Draco Malfoy to Azkaban. "I told them I thought Draco had gone up to the Owlery, even. They'll think they've just missed him, or something, but they know for certain that he wasn't here where he belongs when the . . . um, accident happened."

Snape's eyes were still following Draco's route. "Call it murder, Harry."

"Oh, God," Harry moaned again, feeling like he'd been saying that far too much. On the other hand, it wasn't every day that he saw someone he cared about commit . . . even in his own mind, he couldn't quite say the word.

Snape was merely watching the map, his features taut.

"Um, you're taking this awfully calmly," Harry cautiously observed, wondering if that meant his father was completely over his withdrawal from purple loosestrife. He wasn't sure it was the right time to ask a thing like that, though.

"Giving vent to anger would hardly be the best strategy," Snape returned, but Harry wasn't blind. Or not yet, at any rate. There was a muscle ticking in his father's jaw. Snape wasn't calm at all, not inside. But he was controlled, because right now they had to keep their wits about them so that they could help Draco.

Harry wasn't the only one who loved the Slytherin; he knew that.

He laid a soft hand on his father's arm as they sat there together and watched Draco's progress on the map. He was still making his way down the long, long staircase that led from the Owlery. Harry almost wished they could go out there and get him; it was torture to wait like this, but Snape was right. They had to go about this like Slytherins would. With stealth. Making it clear to the castle that Draco had snuck out was practically a death sentence, considering his history with Pansy.

"It'll be all right," he assured his father, a little bit encouraged that the man hadn't moved away from his hand. Severus wasn't often demonstrative, and Harry thought that was all right, but sometimes a little touch could really help. Strange to think that it was Severus himself who had taught him that.

Snape's shoulders shook slightly with repressed emotion. Harry really couldn't tell if that was from grief or fury. Most likely both. But then the man firmed all his muscles to sit rigid once more, his black eyes derisive as he shook Harry's hand off to make a vague wave toward the boy's face. "So. I assume Miss Weasley had to fetch me because that blow to the eye had rendered you unconscious?"

For a second, Harry thought about answering yes. After all, Snape already knew about the punch, so why mention the hex as well? Considering what Snape had said about blindness, however, it was probably a bad, bad idea to imply that Draco had hit Harry's eye hard enough to knock him out.

"Actually, he punched me first and then cast Petrificus," Harry started to explain.
Snape's hands tightened on the map, creasing it that time, though he didn't look up. "Your friends managed to enter my rooms and Finite the curse? Perhaps all my wards need looking over."

"No, they never even got inside." Harry frowned. "You didn't notice?"

"Considering the way you were pushing and shoving at them in your efforts to leave, I surmised they had come in and you were ejecting them. If not, though, then why are you not still under Petrificus?"

"Uh . . ." Harry didn't actually want to say it. One more thing that made him different, when all he'd ever wanted was to be normal. But there was no escaping who he was; his dark powers had taught him that much. "Nobody broke in; I broke out . . . of the hex, I mean," he admitted.

That caused Snape's gaze to snap up, all right. "You broke out--" In the next moment he was back to watching after Draco, whose dot was by then approaching the corridor at the base of the Owlery, the movement still careful and slow.

Sly, Harry thought it.

"Well." His father appeared to have recovered from his shock. "You can resist Imperio so I suppose that makes some kind of sense."

"It wasn't anything like that," Harry whispered, spinning around to lean against his trunk. He felt so very awful, like all his bones were laced through with pain. "It was . . . I called up wild magic, I think. And it took an awful lot out of me. You know, before the wild magic was always lashing out of me. This time it was directed inside, and it didn't hurt at first, but now it really does."

Moving the map so that he could keep it in view even while he studied Harry, Snape laid a hand against his son's temple, his touch the sort of one he used with the most delicate of his potions vials. Harry couldn't help it; he leaned into it a little. It just felt so . . . right, that now he had somebody he could depend on, somebody he could trust, in good times and bad.

"Perhaps the wild magic explains your black eye," Snape mused, his long fingers probing the margin of the injury with such care that Harry only felt a feather touch; nothing that could make him flinch. He flinched anyway, at the phrase he'd heard. "My black eye?"

"Swollen shut, black and purple both. Not to mention oozing," Snape elaborated, dropping his fingers away from Harry's face. "As though Draco struck you the day before yesterday instead of just a few minutes past."

Well, that explained Ron and Hermione's reaction to his appearance, Harry supposed, though he still didn't know quite why his wild magic would have made the bruise flare up so much earlier than was normal.

"I wonder . . ." Snape mused, drawing his wand and waving it in an arc all around the boy. "Hydratus . . ."

All at once, Harry's headache receded, as did the pain in his joints. He blinked, his vision clearing, though his injured eye still refused to open.

"How long since you had a drink of any kind?"

Harry's voice came much easier than before; the hoarse rasp was completely gone. "Afternoon tea . . . not long."
Frowning, Snape glanced at the map to check Draco's progress, then returned his attention to Harry. "I suspect you broke the hex by accelerating personal time. That's why your eye looks quite so dreadful, why you were weak from thirst. You aged about two, possibly three days in the space of a few minutes."

"Uh . . . that's weird," was all Harry could think to say. "Though . . . I was thirsty on Samhain too, you know. Really thirsty. And it wasn't the same at all . . ."

The Potions Master shrugged. "Wild magic imposed upon oneself is something that's never been studied. I'd avoid it in future if possible. Too much of it might damage you in . . . unpredictable ways."

He meant his vision, Harry sensed. Or maybe his dark powers . . . all the magic he had left. If he lost it, would he be a squib?

Snape abruptly rose to his feet, the map still in his hand. "Draco is veering away from the dungeons," he bit out, annoyance in every syllable. "He is headed toward the grounds. The idiot child looks to be fleeing Hogwarts."

Harry pushed up off the floor, grabbing hold of his father's arm to steady himself. He felt better after the Hydratus, but still, nothing like his usual self. "Well, Ron and Hermione went up the stairs. Draco's probably worried they looked down and saw the body, that Aurors will be here any minute now--"

"Be that as it may, he is safer here than outside the Apparition boundary where any passing Death Eater can serve him up as a tasty morsel for Voldemort's next revel," the Potions Master spat. "Harry. I must go fetch him in. Have something light to eat while I bring him back. Sleep if you can."

"Eat, sleep?" Harry gasped. "You're joking! I'm going with you--"

"No, you are not," the Potions Master insisted, both hands descending to grasp Harry's shoulders. "I've no wish for anyone to see the state you're in."

"Heal it! Or cast a glamour--"

Snape glared. "I'm not ladling more magic atop the injury, not until I've had sufficient time to consider the matter. You'd still be blind if I'd proceeded as recklessly as that after Samhain, I hope you know!"

Oh. Harry actually hadn't thought of that. He was so used to his vision being perfect--no need even for glasses, any longer--that he didn't often consider how much his father had done for him . . . or what life would be like if he'd not had someone to help him after Malfoy had finished with his needles.

Malfoy, who even now might be waiting outside the Apparition boundary. Waiting for Draco . . .

Snape was thinking the same thing, Harry sensed, for the hands on his shoulders gave him a sharp shake to underline the command. "Do not follow me, Harry! I will not lose both my sons to Draco's fit of idiocy!"

Harry barked a laugh. "I can take Malfoy. One wanded spell and I can blast him straight to Mars!"

He thought better than to mention that his wand was currently missing. Snape wouldn't like that at all.

Sneering by then, Snape harshly questioned, "And when Amaelia Thistlethorne drops by next? Will
you 'blast' her as well? I should think you'd realise by now that I was mistaken and your latest series of dreams is coming true! If we are not careful, unadoption may well be next!"

"I'll risk it to save Draco!"

Snape's voice dropped to a low, intense murmur as he moved to speak against his son's ear. "No, you will not."

"For Draco!"

The Potions Master moved away a tad. "Apply your mind to the problem," he rebuked the boy. "Why do you think I am not rushing out? Look at the map! Draco is alone on the grounds; I am hardly going off to face an attacking mob. I am perfectly capable of stealthily retrieving your brother on my own. I will not be able to do that if you follow me and attract attention!"

Harry slowly nodded. Surprising how hard it was to stand on the sidelines when he wanted to be out there in the thick of it . . . but maybe that was part of growing up. His resolve to be mature, to comprehend that he and he alone didn't have the solution to every problem . . . it was a sobering realisation.

A paradigm shift.

Too bad it had come almost a year too late.

If I'd stopped to think instead of being so insistent on helping Sirius . . .

That thought was enough to bring Harry to his senses. He wasn't about to let his "saving-people thing" get in the way this time, of actually doing something good and real and lasting, like keeping Draco well away from Azkaban. Like getting him home, so they could get that alibi set up and then figure out the next step . . .

"Yes, sir," Harry added to his nod. "I'll stay right here, I promise. Uh, I mean yes, Dad."

The Potions Master obviously had his doubts. "If you follow me out looking like that, you will lend credence to any speculation about Draco being dangerously violent--"

"I know!" Harry said, raising his voice. "I trust you, all right! Go get him," Harry shouted, pushing lightly at his father to urge him towards the door. "Go find him before the Aurors do, before Voldemort realises he's on his own!"

Snape looked back just once, his black eyes intense, his knuckles white as he clutched the map. "Do not leave here for an instant," he reiterated. And then, "As for your trust . . ."

Harry braced himself.

"I thank you," his father finished.

Harry nodded in reply, but Snape didn't see it. One quick Abrire, and the Potions Master was gone.

Sighing, Harry closed the door and leaned against it. He wanted more than anything to rush out after his father. He wanted to catch up to him so they could find Draco together, and together, bring him home.

But his instincts, those instincts Snape had praised, were screaming inside him that this time, he'd already done his part in saving Draco, that to leave the dungeons now would only complicate matters
and make it harder to help his brother.

And what was more, his instincts were telling him to do more than just say he trusted his father. They were telling him to actually do it. They were telling him that he wasn't all alone in the world any longer, that he had someone he could depend on, in good times and bad.

That he had someone who truly did love him, now. Someone who cared.

Pushing off from the door, Harry went back to his bedroom, sat down on his bed, and put the ice-pack back on his eye. It turned out to be wizard's ice, never melting, reminding Harry what a competent, capable wizard his father was.

It would be all right, he told himself. It would. It would.

Too bad he couldn't quite believe that. Oh sure, Snape would get Draco home safe and sound; Harry didn't have any doubt of that. But what about afterwards?

Harry closed his eyes in despair, but it didn't help. Behind his eyelids, he saw nothing but nightmare visions of Azkaban.
Perspectives

There was no question of Harry eating and sleeping as his father had instructed; he was far too upset to spare energy for anything aside from the questions bombarding his every thought. What was going on out there on Hogwarts' vast grounds? Was Draco all right? Had he passed the Apparition boundary already and vanished himself away, and if so, how long would it be until Voldemort had him snatched up?

*Did Draco feel even the slightest remorse for the horrible thing he had done?*

*He must be feeling something if he's running away,* Harry reasoned . . . of course, that might just be Draco's sense of self-preservation. *Sneaky, but not such great strategy.* Surely, Draco must realise that he and Severus would never let him be thrown into Azkaban. Thinking of what that place had done to Sirius, Harry couldn't help but shudder.

So why was Draco running *away* from the only people who would be inclined to help him deal with this mess? Why would he be running *toward* certain torture and death at Lucius' hands? It didn't make sense. It didn't make any sense at all!

With that, his seer dream began to unfold anew inside his mind. Ron and Hermione had been worried that Snape might not let anyone in to visit Harry . . . but not because they had learned that Draco had died at the hand of vengeful Slytherins. They must have been concerned that **Draco** was the dangerous one, and with him on the loose, Snape had warded his quarters against **Draco** to protect *Harry* . . .

Was that why Draco was running, because he'd come to a similar conclusion? Because he thought there was no going back?

*No,* Harry decided. *That's daft, it is. Draco would trust Severus a good deal more than that.*

*Trust . . . trust . . .* An insidious little voice inside Harry's mind began to worm its way through his concern for Draco. *What if Ron has it right, and Draco is running because he did go up to the Owlerly to betray me somehow? What if the Pansy letter was nothing but a feint . . .*

Harry clenched his fists and gritted his teeth and sternly told that voice to shut the hell up. He did trust Draco, *he did.* He wasn't going to turn on his brother, no matter what Ron had to say about that blow to the eye, or about what had gone on in the Owlerly.

But what *had* gone on? And why was Draco fleeing the very people who might be able to protect him? Fleeing Harry, whose dark powers could most likely keep the Aurors at bay if need be?

*Imperius,* Harry suddenly decided. *It has to be. It's the only thing that makes sense. Someone is making Draco head toward the Apparition boundary. Severus said that Draco couldn't have lifted the wards on the Owlerly while under Imperius, but what if somebody else . . . an evil genius of wizardry like Lucius, say, lifted them beforehand? And then from a distance, Lucius made Draco commit murder . . . though that's a bit strange. Why would Lucius Malfoy want Pansy dead? Well, maybe he had his reasons. And now he's getting Draco to come to him . . .*

Of course there were holes in that scenario. Lucius was a school Governor; he could come into the castle any time he liked. Once Draco had left Snape's rooms, all Lucius had to do to remove him from school was lay one finger on him and use a Portkey. Making Draco cross the length of the grounds was rather irrational . . .
But still, *Imperius* made more sense than Draco having so little impulse control that he would throw away his only chance at safety.

Worried sick by then, Harry began pacing the rooms. Back and forth across the living room, and when that palled, he started walking circles inside his own bedroom. As much as he understood the wisdom of staying behind, the helplessness really chafed. What if Lucius *was* out there waiting? Severus might need his help! And even if Lucius wasn't involved at all, Severus might need Harry to distract bystanders while he convinced Draco to come back.

*Convinced?* Harry almost scoffed. Severus was hardly likely to debate the matter with the Slytherin boy. *What is he going to say? What **could** he possibly say to Draco?* Then again, Snape knew what it was to be redeemed from horrible deeds, didn't he? What had the headmaster told him, all those years ago, something like, *"What you did was wrong but as long as you do enough good deeds to make up for it, the Light will overlook your crimes . . ."*

_Crimes._ Oh, God. Harry felt his stomach churn. If Draco wasn't under *Imperius*, then he was a murderer. A few months ago that wouldn't have surprised him, but now? The scene with Dubby aside, it just didn't seem like the Draco he'd come to know.

_Maybe you never really knew him,* that horrid little voice whispered again.

Harry shook his head to clear it. *Of course I know Draco! He's my brother! . . .but I know Severus, too. Severus, who holds grudges for eons...* Nothing will ever be the same again.

In the course of a single afternoon, his precious new family was starting to slip through his fingers. *How could Draco do this to us?* Harry railed. *We all of us need this family!* He kicked his school trunk once, and then feeling the frustration crest within him, kicked it several more until his foot actually began to hurt.

With a world-weary sigh, he began pacing again, somehow satisfied with the soreness in his toes – at least it distracted him from his throbbing eye. *What's taking so long?* Had Severus run into trouble on the way? If only he had the map, he could find out!

As he crossed in front of the enchanted picture frame, though, it came to him that he did have a way to find some things out. Or at least, he *might* have a way. The frame was supposed to respond to wishes, after all. Draco's wishes . . . but maybe that was just because Harry had never tried to command it. Of course, the frame wasn't supposed to show people, but Severus had forced it to display that Quidditch match, so it clearly could . . . It was just a matter of unlocking the restrictions placed upon it, of plying the right magic.

A snake. He needed a snake. No time to hunt up Sals, though; his crest would have to do. Harry went and put his robe on so he'd have the image with him, and then, brow furrowed, stepped up to the picture frame and touched it with his fingers as he tried to call upon his magic.

"*Show me Draco,*" he hissed as he focussed his eyes on his crest and his thoughts on his brother.

One glance at the frame revealed that he'd accomplished nothing. It was still displaying the path to the greenhouses.

Thinking harder, Harry tried, *"Let me see my brother snake,"* as Parseltongue had no better word for Slytherin, and when that also failed, *"Show me my nest mate!"*

Exasperated, Harry ground his teeth together as he wondered how else he might word the charm. It would help if he knew just what Snape had said to the frame that once . . . hmm, maybe he needed to
be a bit more forceful?

Or maybe not, since I command you to show me Draco, didn't work. Nor did any of the variations he dreamed up.

Finally, in a last-ditch attempt he knew was silly even as he said it, Harry hissed, *Reveal the Dragon!*

Nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

Well, Snape had spelled the frame to begin with, and his father was a formidable wizard, so it only stood to reason that Harry couldn't just undo the spells; he probably couldn't channel enough power to overcome wards Severus Snape had placed--

Harry's thoughts abruptly skittered to a halt. *Power*, he realised. *That's it. I need more power behind my spell if it's to have any hope of breaking through the protections charmed onto the frame. But I have all the power I could ever want, don't I? I just need my wand.*

And on the heels of that realisation, *That was really low of Draco to take my wand with him!*

For just an instant, Harry fumed. Then the solution occurred to him. He would simply summon his wand. He'd got good enough at summoning charms to bring his Firebolt flying all the way out to the grounds for the First Task, after all. And now that he could do wandless magic, he should surely be able to call his wand home when it went astray . . .

*But what if Draco needs your wand?* he abruptly realised. *What if he's somehow lost his own? Maybe that's why he took it with him, why he said, "just in case" . . . he wanted to see Pansy, but he had a niggling suspicion that she might lead him into danger. He thought a spare wand could help him outfox his enemies . . .

Harry didn't know if that was remotely the case, but still, he wasn't too enthusiastic about summoning his wand away from Draco if the other boy had an urgent need for it. So . . . he'd just be careful about how much power he put into the spell. Parseltongue had turned out to be quite useful in that regard. He had already figured out several wandless silencing spells, some weaker, some stronger. He'd just word his *accio* carefully . . . so it would stretch out into the dungeons, but not onto the grounds where Draco had fled.

*Just in case. As Draco had said.*

All right. If his wand was going to come flying to him, it would probably stop at Snape's front door . . . unless the wards were smart enough to recognise it as *his* wand . . . Harry wasn't sure. He went out into the living room anyway, so he might hear if something collided with the wall outside, and holding out his hand, hissed a very mild summoning charm. "If you are near, come here, Harry's wand!"

Something came flying, all right, but not from outside.

His wand flew across the room and smacked into his palm so hard it stung.

Startled, Harry glanced around and saw a slight flurry of dust billowing down from the top of a bookcase. For a moment he just stared, he was so astonished. Draco had put his wand up where it would remain out of sight unless one used a step to see the very top of the case. *He hadn't taken it with him at all.*
Even despite the pain in his eye, a warm sort of feeling suffused him. Draco's loyalty was beyond doubt . . . not that he had really doubted it. But this . . . this was unexpected.

Impulse control problem or no, Draco hadn't put his wand in danger.

Which meant that now Draco might be the one in danger! What if, despite all appearances, there had been a fight up in the Owlsery, and Pansy somehow had got her hands on Draco's wand? What if she'd tossed it out the window? Was that why Draco had lost his temper and pushed her out? What if he'd run out onto the grounds simply to retrieve his wand . . . it would be evidence, wouldn't it, placing him at the scene of the crime?

Of course that overlooked Imperius, which Harry counted a distinct possibility, and it didn't account for the fallen wards, but by then he had so many theories running through his mind that he honestly didn't know what to think about Draco's sudden taste for murder.

Not sudden, that unhelpful part of his mind chimed as Harry strode back toward the bedroom. Draco was awful to Dubby. Given half a chance, he would have killed the elf. Severus said it took Dark Arts, but Draco's a Malfoy, so I bet he knows how. Of course he felt he had cause to kill Dubby . . . a score to settle. Maybe he felt the same way about Pansy. Maybe he realised that she was lying, that she hadn't gone sweet on him again . . .

By then, Harry was at the enchanted picture frame again. One part of his mind was vaguely aware that he shouldn't be attempting this, that his father had quite strictly ordered him to perform no untested wanded spells without supervision, but Harry was too concerned about Draco to pay heed to that.

Leaning fully on the frame with one hand, the boy used the other to touch his wand to the gilded surface, and glanced down at his crest. It was all there, in beautiful stitched embroidery. Gryffindor and Slytherin, equal, standing together as friends. As brothers. Harry let concern for Draco flow through him, and pushed the horror of the murder away. He loved Draco, no matter what, and he had to know that Draco was all right, he just had to.

"Show me Draco!" he hissed, putting all his need, all his desire, into the simple incantation.

The frame beneath his hand abruptly melted away, becoming air, and he felt his palm smack against the cold stone wall. And then that was dissolving too, so suddenly that he nearly fell through the wall and into his father's potions lab. Stumbling, Harry managed to rear back from the wall -- or what used to be the wall.

Now, from one end to the other of his bedroom, it was a vista of green grass blowing slightly in a breeze.

For the first instant, Harry couldn't do much more than stare. It was as if the wall had transformed itself into a movie theatre screen . . . only this screen was as insubstantial as vapour. He could reach his arm straight through it and grab something from the potions lab, if he cared to . . . If he squinted hard, he could even see the lab through the expanse of rolling grass.

But where was Draco? He'd said, show me Draco, damn it, so where was he? There was nothing on display except the grounds, except . . .

Oh, God. A pair of boots. Draco's black dragon-hide boots, that was all that was left of him. Soles facing the castle --which Harry could make out in the distance if he squinted-- toes pointed toward the sky . . . What had happened out there? Where was Draco, and why had he left his boots behind?
But that was idiotic, of course; Harry realised as much almost at once. He was seeing Draco, but the boy was under the invisibility cloak. The question was, if Draco was trying to hide, why would he let his feet stick out?

And the answer: he wouldn't.

Draco wasn't huddled under the cloak in an effort to conceal himself; he had somehow collapsed while running away. He'd fainted, perhaps. Could being under Imperius for too long do that to you? No, Darswaithe had been under the curse the whole way in on the Hogwarts Express. Then again, maybe the casewizard was used to being under Imperius . . .

Could it be that despite how it had looked on the map, Pansy had hexed Draco up in the Owlery, debilitating him? No wonder Draco had been so slow to leave the Owlery, to descend the stairs! If he'd been struggling for consciousness all along . . .

"Get up, Draco, get up!" Harry implored, but the boots remained stock still.

Frustrated, the boy tried to reach out and give his brother a shake, but all he accomplished was to lurch partway into the potions lab. He drew back, wishing he could do something more than just watch and wait.

Watch and wait . . . Now he knew, didn't he, the smallest part of what Samhain must have been like for Severus to endure?

Thankfully, Harry didn't have to wait long. As if his last thought had somehow called the man forth, Snape suddenly stepped into view, his black robes blowing in the breeze, his stride long and measured. Not panicked, not hurried.

If anyone was watching from the castle proper, Snape would merely look like he was taking some exercise that evening.

The map was in his hand, though tightly folded to conceal its existence. Snape glanced at it surreptitiously from time to time as he stepped across the grassy earth.

He was heading straight towards Draco.

Harry shouted, "Over there, right there!" and pointed for good measure, but the man quite obviously could not hear a thing from the dungeons.

It's a viewing plane only, Harry remembered the Potions Master explaining.

The restriction went both ways; he couldn't hear Snape either, not even when the man reached Draco and dropped to his knees, his position shielding Draco's boots from view of the castle. Harry saw Snape pick up a stick and prod lightly at the boots, but there was no answering response from Draco. In fact, those boots hadn't once moved, not one twitch, in all the time Harry had been watching.

Snape began speaking then, but even as his lips parted, his fingers began sifting through the grass as though he were collecting something for a potion. More misdirection, Snape doing his best to let no one watching realise he had come onto the grounds to fetch Draco back in, even though his back was to the castle . . . for once, though, Harry was profoundly grateful for his father's paranoia. This was too important. They couldn't let Draco end up in Azkaban, especially not now. Harry didn't know if Draco had just been acting in self-defence, or he'd been under some sort of mind control, but the most important thing was that he was innocent. Innocent.

He hadn't pushed Pansy at all! Harry gulped as it came to him that he'd been only too quick to
assume that Draco had. He'd thought his own brother a cold-blooded murderer, and on practically no evidence at all! Of course there was the map, but it wouldn't tell you if someone was under Imperius, would it? And it wasn't that detailed . . . certainly not detailed enough for Harry to have straight away believed it couldn't possibly have been self-defence.

Draco's condition now, though, not to mention his strange run out onto the ground . . . that was proof positive that there was more going on than met the eye.

And oh God, what if Draco did end up in Azkaban . . . for a crime he hadn't even committed! It would be like Sirius all over again. Awful, absolutely awful . . . and Draco couldn't resort to an Animagus form to help keep himself sane, could he?

His expression firming into a mask of resolution, it suddenly occurred to Harry to wonder just what his Patronus charm would be like now . . . if he used his wand, that was. Instead of just repelling Dementors, would it kill them? He could wipe them clean out of Azkaban to free Draco . . . except, he couldn't. The Light would still need a place to imprison the Death Eaters.

With a huge force of will, Harry cut off that line of thought and simply watched his father on the magic wall. What on earth was Snape saying to the boy? The Potions Master's expression was cast in rigid, controlled lines, no emotion whatsoever on his features. Was he talking to Draco even though the boy couldn't hear? No, Snape wouldn't waste time like that. So he must be uttering incantations, trying to break the hex . . . No wand was in evidence, but that meant little; Harry had seen his father do wandless magic before . . . although not much, that was for certain . . .

An insane temptation suddenly filled Harry from the inside out. Couldn't he just brandish his own wand and demand the wall let him hear? He'd know what was really going on, that way . . .

That would be moving from the realm of foolhardy into idiotic, though, he sensed. The frame hadn't been designed with sound in mind. There was no telling what might result if he tampered still further . . . and anyway, in the next moment Snape finished speaking, so it all became a moot point.

Keeping his back to the castle, though the rigid line of his spine suggested he was staying alert to all that might transpire behind him, the Potions Master quickly rearranged the cloak to hide Draco's boots. Then he was standing, brushing dirt from his trousers, a few sprigs of closed blossoms clutched in one hand. His lips moved again, just once, briefly, and then he was walking away, striding across the grassy field.

What, the man wasn't going to pick up Draco, carry him in, bring him home?

Draco, of course, had utterly vanished from view the moment Snape had adjusted the invisibility cloak. So where was he?

Forgetting about his earlier qualms, Harry did move his wand again then, pointing it at the wall and demanding once more, "Show me Draco!" But the scene didn't alter, save to change aspect, following Snape as he casually strolled toward Hagrid's Hut.

Following Snape . . .

So that was it! He hadn't said to show him his father, though apparently once the frame's restrictions against displaying sentient life were broken, it would let you see anybody in range. But if the whole wall before him was following Snape when he'd only demanded to see Draco, then it must actually be showing Draco . . .

His father was far, far too wily to scoop up his other son to bring him home. He wasn't about to
make it obvious that he was carrying an invisible person. He was using *Mobilicorpus*, or something similar . . . and when he'd first spoken, he'd probably been applying sticking charms to the cloak, so that it wouldn't slip off while Draco was being levitated . . .

And now Snape was knocking on Hagrid's door, and when no one answered, letting himself in. Probably a simple *Alohomora* would do the trick since Hagrid didn't practice much magic at all. Snape waited an inordinately long time to close the door behind him, but of course that made sense: he was waiting until Draco had fully floated in. Harry supposed the plan must be to floo them both home. Good thing his father had arranged for Hagrid's hut to be placed on the Floo Network--

Something caught on his consciousness. Something important. Something he should be aware of.

His eyebrows drawn together as he made his way back into the living room, Harry wondered why it seemed like there might be a problem with the Floo . . .

_Sals!_ That was it! *Sals was in her box when Draco smashed it. And she likes to be warm when she's upset, it helps her feel better. Sals must be in the Floo and Severus is about to floo through with Draco--*

With an almighty lunge, Harry threw himself at the hearth, his arms stretched out, his hands already scrabbling for the stones. Sure enough, Sals was in there, huddled in the very back, her body limp because she'd already been in there when Snape had flooed home to find Harry about to leave in search of Draco.

"Sals," Harry chided in exasperated Parseltongue as he backed out of the hearth, "you know better--"

"Harry . . ." Sals trembled slightly as she rubbed her little head lightly against the base of his thumb.

Without warning, the cold hearth flared with sudden green fire and Snape emerged, almost stepping on Harry as he strode forward. Harry hurriedly scrambled further backwards as his father, who was clearly carrying something invisible, knelt to lay Draco gently down on the floor. One whispered charm later, that one with Snape's smooth wand work in force, and the Potions Master was pulling the cloak gently away from Draco's prone body and handing it to Harry, who laid it to one side since his hands were full of frightened snake.

Snape's withering glance speared Harry even as the man began to touch his wand to Draco's neck and wrists. "I tell you to eat and rest and instead you have been _crawling_ around on the floor?"

Harry ignored that, since apart from the ache in his eye he felt all right. Not great, but certainly able to stay awake and find out what had happened to his brother. But what _had_ happened? Draco was so very pale! Of course, the Slytherin boy was fair-skinned to begin with, but now he was positively _white_--

"What's wrong with him?" Harry blurted, his voice coated with panic as he cupped Sals in both hands.

"I am trying to ascertain that, if you would be so kind as to _let_ me," Snape scathed.

Harry went silent after that, his eyes sombre as he simply watched his father examine Draco. The other boy was breathing, but that was little solace. His shallow breaths that were barely detectable, hardly lifting his chest at all. Still, at least he was alive.

*Stay that way*, Harry found himself suddenly thinking. *Stay alive. Don't give up--*

Snape drew in a harsh breath as though realising something. In the next moment he was prying
Draco's eyes open. Harry felt himself go cold. There was no hint of grey there, no silver, only a bloodshot white; the boys eyes had rolled up into his head. Frowning even more than before, Snape leaned down close to Draco's face and sniffed, deeply inhaling the boy's slight exhalations of breath.

"He's imbibed a potion," the Potions Master bit out. "Somulus. It induces a comatose state."

Uh-oh. That sounded bad. Really bad. "You're sure it's Somulus on his breath?"

The Potions Master curled a lip in answer.

"Sorry. Of course you're sure," Harry admitted. "Um, is there a counter-potion?"

"I have one already prepared," Snape sighed, worry in his dark eyes as he studied the boy laying prone on the floor. "The problem is that he's not reacting normally to Somulus. He shouldn't be anywhere near this pale."

Harry's breath hitched. "He's allergic, do you think?"

"Draco's symptoms don't suggest that. What they indicate is that he ingested the potion while under the influence of a spell. Specifically, a hex or a curse. I couldn't say which one. It's since been lifted, and in such a way that there's no direct proof of it any longer."

"There's no way Draco would willingly take a coma potion out there and leave himself open to attack," Harry pointed out. "That's proof enough for me."

"Of course," Snape murmured as he touched the back of his hand to the side of Draco's neck. Harry's eyes flicked up from Draco's prone form to his father because by then it was obvious, wasn't it? Snape knew it too; Harry could see the knowledge glittering in those dark eyes. Something strange was going on.

Had Draco been chased out onto the grounds, perhaps? But no, the map hadn't shown anything remotely like that . . . But still, if Draco hadn't dosed himself with coma potion, then someone must have been with him. Yet the puzzlement in his father's eyes said that he'd seen no such person on the map as he'd traversed the grounds . . .

What mattered most now, though, was getting Draco back to normal. "Will he be all right?" Harry rasped, his throat gone dry. "Will the counter potion work if the Somulus got . . . um, messed up by the curse?"

"It did not get messed up," Snape scathed. "It's strength was greatly magnified." The Potions Master frowned fiercely. "However, I do believe the only viable course of action is to administer the counter potion."

Harry jumped up, popping Sals into his front shirt pocket. His snake would be all right; he could tell. And even if not, Draco was more important.

Snape ran a hand over Draco's forehead, his long fingers stroking through the boy's hair. "Green frothy potion in a triangular bottle, fifth from the left on the second shelf," he requested in a low murmur, waving his wand to unlock the cabinet in question.

Harry wasn't too surprised when Snape examined the potion thoroughly before administering it. He was surprised, however, that before uncorking the vial, the man paused and said in a low voice,
"You need to be prepared, Harry. What Draco suffers now is a coma more severe than the one commonly associated with *Somulus*. I do not know if the counter potion will work as expected."

Harry nodded, the motion brief and grim. "Let's just . . . do it," he pleaded.

Snape nodded as well, then leaning over, opened Draco's mouth, his fingertips on the boy's lips utterly gentle.

Harry held his breath, only to let it out in a horrified *whoosh* when six drops on his brother's tongue seemed to have no effect at all.

Catching his worried glance, Snape explained. "The best we can hope for is that the counter potion will simply take longer than usual to work its way through his system."

"That's the *best*?" Harry croaked.

Snape leaned forward and slid his arms beneath Draco's shoulders and knees to lift him. "Yes," he answered, his voice still low and serious. "You need prepare yourself to face the worst, as I said. The truth is . . . if the hex involved any form of mind control, then Draco's brain would have been in a particularly vulnerable state when he imbibed the potion. In that case, the likely result of combining the two is some degree of brain damage."

"*Brain* damage," Harry echoed, ill at the mere thought. "But Madam Pomfrey could cure it, surely?"

"Possibly," Snape conceded, though he was shaking his head as he began to walk toward the bedroom, Draco cradled securely against his chest. "We will cross that bridge if we come to it, Harry. My greatest concern at the moment is . . ." Snape abruptly stopped speaking.

"What?" Harry pressed, laying a hand on his father's arm as they reached the bedroom door. "Tell me. Please, Dad. *Please.*"

The Potions Master cleared his throat as he studied the boy held in his arms, but then he looked up at Harry to hoarsely admit, "My greatest concern, I suppose, is that if the hex spelled onto him was a strong one . . . Harry . . . I am sorry to tell you this, but . . . your brother may never wake at all."
Snape came to an abrupt halt when he entered the boys' bedroom and caught sight of the wall where the enchanted picture frame used to hang. With that wanded spell still active, the entire wall was still doing as Harry had demanded, and showing Draco. But since now, Draco was right there in the bedroom, cradled protectively against Snape's chest, the wall had become rather like a mirror, reflecting all three of them.

For just an instant, Severus gaped. But then he glared.

At Harry.

"I can't possibly discuss this right now," he scathed. "Just restore the wall and frame."

Harry quickly nodded, though inside he was a little unsure about how to go about it.

"Now, if you would!" his father barked.

Harry turned away, his face flushed as he took a stance similar to the one he'd used before, though of course he didn't lean this time. He merely set his palm against the patch of air where the frame should be, and held his wand at the angle he'd used previously, and looked straight ahead at his own reflection, at the crest which would enable his Parseltongue to flow free. Concentrating on how good it was to have Draco back home where he belonged, he whispered, "Go back the way you were," hoping that would do it.

Thankfully, it did. Harry watched as the wall hardened and the frame materialised to hang upon it.

By the time he turned around, Snape had settled Draco atop his green-and-silver bedcovers, and was sitting on the bed beside him as though observing a vigil. But it was nothing like that, Harry knew; his father was deep in thought, considering what they knew about the Owlery, and how best to proceed now. Loath to break his concentration, Harry thought better than to sit down on the bed as well. But he wanted to be close alongside when Draco woke.

For the moment, Harry refused to consider that the operative word might be if . . . if Draco woke.

He lifted a hand to Accio a chair from the dining room, then realised two things all at once. One, he was so tired that he'd forgotten his father's restriction against getting in the habit of displaying his wandless magic. He hardly needed to hand Severus yet more reasons to be irritated with him . . . and two, after forcing the enchanted picture frame to do his bidding, his magic felt shaky and depleted.

Or maybe that was just Harry himself feeling the effects of accelerating personal time. His father had re-hydrated him, but as far as his body was concerned, it had still gone two or three days without food or rest.

Either way, it just seemed simpler to trudge out of the bedroom to fetch the chair he wanted. Funny . . . under certain circumstances, doing something through physical means was actually less work than using magic.

Snape didn't appear to notice him leaving.

As Harry crossed back from the dining alcove, fire erupted in the hearth, and there was Dumbledore's face, creased with worry. "Harry? You're safe, are you?"
"Yeah," Harry nodded, setting down the straight-backed chair and standing behind it. He knew he couldn't claim that everything was perfectly fine, not with his eye in the awful state it was in. The way it was throbbing reminded him he'd better use the ice again, but he pushed that thought aside as the headmaster spoke once more.

"I have Miss Granger and Mr Weasley here with me. They're most concerned about you, and I can certainly see why. Did Mr Malfoy give you that bruise, Harry?"

Harry opened his mouth to reply, not at all sure what to say, but then the answer came to him. "I think maybe you'd better talk to my dad," he announced, his voice a bit wobbly as he wondered how on earth they were going to get Draco out of this mess. "But can you tell Ron and Hermione I'm fine and that they shouldn't come back down just now? Severus is taking care of everything. And tell them not to tell anybody about my eye, all right? They don't know what happened. Tell them that. They don't know what happened!"

Dumbledore peered closely at him, then slowly nodded. "Very well. For the moment, I will accede to your wishes, my boy. But I expect a thorough accounting of everything from your father, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Harry murmured, spotting his invisibility cloak on the floor. He hoped the headmaster hadn't noticed it . . . but what chance was there of that? Albus Dumbledore rarely missed anything.

"Thank you, sir," he added as he changed positions slightly to block the swath of multicoloured fabric.

"One moment," the headmaster murmured, his face vanishing. Hoping that the interruption was so that Dumbledore could dismiss Ron and Hermione before anything more about Draco was discussed, Harry hurriedly stuffed the invisibility cloak into a pocket. When the headmaster came back, it was to ask with a deliberate sort of calm a question Harry had definitely not expected. "Have you been out of the dungeons in the past few moments, Harry?"

"No!" Harry instantly denied. Good God, was he going to be accused of Pansy's murder? "What on earth would make you think I had?"

"Is it common practice for you to wear your school cloak about down there?"

Harry could have groaned as he realised that was a bit strange. "Trying it on," he brazened. "New. Severus gave it to me. What do you think of the crest? It's not a Hogwarts' regulation one; do you think it will do?"

"Seeing as a Head of House has personally commissioned it, I expect so," Dumbledore murmured, his tone saying that he was aware he was being managed. And also, that he'd had enough of it. "I'll speak with Severus, now."

"Uh, he's rather busy; I don't know if he can talk just now--"

A familiar voice interrupted him from behind. "Harry. Go sit with your brother. I'll be back in a moment."

Harry gave his father a doubtful look, then carried the chair on through into the bedroom, deliberately leaving the door ajar. He figured Snape had noticed that, but as the man didn't object, Harry figured that he didn't mind being overheard.

"Brother?" the headmaster questioned. "Isn't that rather overstating that case? But no matter. It is my duty to inform you that there has been a death in your house, Severus. Something tells me that this
"You are misinformed, Headmaster," Snape coldly bit out. "It comes to me as a horrible shock indeed--"

"Mr Malfoy is obviously there with you now," Dumbledore interrupted. "I have been informed, however, that he was absent from the dungeons a short while ago, during which time Miss Parkinson fell to her death from the Owlery. Miss Parkinson, Severus, whom as you well know your charge threatened with a gruesome death some months past!"

Harry reached out and took Draco's hand, holding it tight as he listened.

"Have you informed the family?" Snape asked, just as though he'd not noticed the implication of Draco's guilt.

"Severus--"

"Or shall I, as the decedent's Head of House?" the Potions Master smoothly went on.

"You don't appear surprised to hear that it is Miss Parkinson who has died!" Dumbledore sharply rebuked, his voice so much louder that Harry suspected he'd given up on firechatting and had stepped into the dungeon. "You have obviously received advance notice of this news, so how am I to believe that Mr Malfoy has said nothing whatsoever of his . . . antics this afternoon?"

"Mr Malfoy," Snape roared, "even now lies in a potion-induced coma that defies proper diagnosis because he was hexed half to death first! I know nothing definitive of his antics, as you call them, save that he and Harry came to blows earlier!"

"And doesn't that demonstrate to you that the boy is dangerous?" Albus softly hissed as footsteps came closer. "I know you've long wished to safeguard him from his father's evil influence, but surely now you can see that the effort was wasted? He's a liability, Severus, and one we can ill afford--"

"He is my son," the Potions Master spat.

"I know you've taken fairly well to fatherhood but isn't that taking things a bit far, Severus? He hit Harry, the very boy he swore he would support and protect in return for our protecting him!"

"He shall have to answer for it," Snape promised. "If he can. Albus, the boy lies ill and may well never wake!"

The headmaster appeared not to have heard that last bit. His voice still taut, Albus ground out, "He shall have to answer for Miss Parkinson as well--"

Harry jumped up the instant Snape and the headmaster pushed open the bedroom door. "Draco said this would happen!" he burst out, too angry to hold it in. "He said that if anybody else was accused of murder there'd need to be some actual evidence, but if he ever was, his last name would be enough to get him sent to Azkaban! Where's your proof, eh? That's what I'd like to know!"

Dumbledore glanced once at Harry before turning his attention to the boy on the bed. "This condition he's in, it wouldn't be your handiwork, Severus? A desperate attempt to stave off justice?"

"What justice? You've got him convicted already!" Harry shouted in complaint.

"That is not true," Dumbledore rebuked him, his voice stern. "Mr Malfoy shall have all the due process to which he is entitled as a student of Hogwarts and a member of the wizarding community."
"Now, Severus, answer me."

"As flattering as your unqualified confidence is," Snape sneered, narrowing his eyes, "I am not, in fact, in the habit of deceiving you!"

Albus was hardly intimidated. "By your own account you regard the boy as a son. You can hardly fault me for suspecting you would go to any length to protect him, Severus. And you are well practiced at deceit!"

"After years of spying for you, I should be!" the Potions Master retorted. "You may believe what you like; that is your prerogative. But the fact of the matter is that Draco was dosed with Somulus, but not by my hand. I have administered the antidote, which if it works at all, will have a delayed effect. I believe I already mentioned that Draco had been thoroughly hexed before the potion was administered?"

Dumbledore appeared to consider that for a moment. "Very well. The Parkinsons have been informed--"

"You told them by owl that their daughter was dead?"

"Harry." Snape was the one to rebuke him that time. "I am sure Albus merely meant that the Parkinsons have been informed they must come speak with him."

"With us," the headmaster corrected. "Yes. However, anticipating that I might need a while to sort matters out, I applied a slight Confundus charm to the owl. The message will take longer than usual to be delivered. I have also taken the precaution of recalling all other owls and ensuring that no more go out until further notice. Before the wizarding world at large becomes aware of matters, I must understand just what it is we are dealing with." The headmaster paused, his gaze straying to Draco, lying pale and prone on the bed. "So, Severus. Explain."

"Would that I could, Headmaster," Snape said on a sigh as he sank back down to sit beside the boy. "This whole incident appears to be the fulfilment of a seer dream."

"I dreamed it, that's right," Harry put in. "But we don't understand what happened. But whatever did, it was fate."

"Not guilty by reason of foreordination? There is no such thing." Albus Dumbledore patted Harry lightly on the shoulder.

Harry twisted away. He wanted to say that not guilty by reason of self-defence, or even Imperius, was more to the point, but he didn't want to admit that he knew Draco had been alone with Pansy in the Owlery. Better to keep that a secret if they possibly could. Frustrated, he scathed, "You're just angry that he hit me. You want to see him sent to Azkaban--"

"Albus would not see an innocent boy sent to prison," Snape announced. "Yes, Headmaster, innocent. When all the facts are arrayed, I believe that is the only conclusion to be reached. We are meant to believe Draco guilty; matters have been arranged to suggest just that. But to proceed with accusation and trial would be playing into Lucius' hands."

Framed . . . Draco had been framed, that was what his father meant . . .

Harry gave a sharp nod of agreement. Of course Draco had been framed. Somebody had given him Somulus, after all. Somebody who wanted him found, looking like he was fleeing the scene of a crime.
"Lucius is trying to condemn him to Azkaban?" Harry questioned aloud. That was awful. Very Lucius, of course . . . but an awful thing for Draco to have to contemplate. It was bad enough that the man who had raised him now wanted him dead. Draco didn't talk about it much, but from what little the Slytherin boy had said, Harry knew that Lucius' attitude hurt him deeply. And now Draco might never wake up . . . that would probably suit Lucius just fine, wouldn't it? Then again, knowing Lucius . . .

"Oh, God. What if Draco doesn't ever get better? Could Malfoy still insist he stand trial?" Harry clenched his hands. "They wouldn't send him to Azkaban in this state, would they? He'd have no defence against the Dementors, none at all . . ."

"I doubt very much that Azkaban figures into Lucius' plans," Snape answered, his fingers stroking through Draco's blond hair until with a slight jerking motion, he appeared to realise that he'd yet to offer the headmaster a seat. Gesturing irritably, Snape indicated that Dumbledore should help himself to the chair Harry had brought in earlier.

Harry glanced at his bed, but realised he didn't feel like sitting down as well. He almost would have started pacing again, except that he thought it would make him look nervous, which was the wrong way to look.

"We lack true knowledge, but I suspect the scheme was thus," Snape quietly began to explain. "Lucius has wanted to remove the boy from the school's protection ever since he turned Harry's wand over to us. His plans in that regard have come to nothing, thanks to your swift intervention to emancipate Draco and your assistance in smoothing over the incident in my class."

Albus snorted, his eyes hard as they studied the Potions Master. "I suggest you cease all flattery. I may be old, but I am not yet so far into my dotage that I have lost my reason, Severus. The incident, as you so delicately put it, nearly got Mr Malfoy expelled, and for good reason. Do you know what it took to sway the Governors to my point of view, when the boy's own father was urging expulsion, saying that students here would remain in danger just so long as Draco attended?"

"Oh, and he said it with such concern," Snape sneered. "As if he deeply regretted the prospect of Draco being deprived an education, when all along he wanted the boy gone from Hogwarts so that he might be brought before Voldemort and killed! And ever since he has revisited the theme of expulsion, using such flimsy excuses as the fact that emancipated students have never before attended, or for Merlin's sake, non-attendance from classes when it was his determination in the first place that Draco was too dangerous to be permitted near other students!"

"Neither will your rage and indignation sway me," Albus coldly announced. "It is unfortunate that Lucius was permitted to resume his place on the Board after he endangered students himself, but as he was, he will use these events to press for expulsion once again. Not to mention, there will have to be a criminal investigation. As such, if you wish me to conclude the young man innocent, you had better begin discussing the evidence, as Harry stressed."

"Guilty until proven innocent, is it then?" Harry at once objected. "I learned in primary school it was the other way around, but I suppose I should know from my own experience that wizarding justice is pretty doubtful! Sirius still hasn't been exonerated, not to mention that I very nearly had my wand broken or something--"

"That's quite enough," Snape interrupted, his tone weary. "For good or ill, the world is what it is, Harry. The headmaster is correct. Our best hope of helping Draco is to focus on the evidence. So, here it is." The Potions Master paused a moment as though to assemble his thoughts, then plunged ahead. "Draco, as you well know, has scrupulously obeyed our dictates ever since he came to you after Samhain. He befriended Harry, and you have my word that Harry most decidedly did not make
that easy. But Draco was not to be deterred. He allowed himself to be confined and did his best to sway his house. In fact, he was so cooperative to the cause of Light that when it turned out that the blood-sacrifice wards had interfered with the alarms that would alert me to either boy leaving my quarters, I was not unduly concerned--"

"You put alarms on us?" Harry gasped, so outraged that he began sputtering. "That's . . . that's--"

"Slytherin, I believe, is the word that fits," the Potions Master dryly announced. "Of course I had alarms on you. Sixteen-year-olds are not noted for their restraint in the face of temptation. I attempted to re-establish them, but when I realised they would not work in conjunction with the blood wards, I desisted. Actually, I rather doubted you would go sneaking out sans your magic--you are reckless but not a complete nitwit. And as Draco had by then been utterly obedient for some weeks . . ." Snape shrugged. "To continue. At some point Lucius must have concluded that to get his hands on Draco, he would need to force matters. Therefore, Draco was sent a letter, ostensibly from Pansy, to lure him out of the dungeons--"

Harry made a noise of protest, horrified that Snape was confirming that much, but the man went right on.

"The basic plan must surely have been to kidnap him from Hogwarts once he left my rooms, but just in case that was somehow thwarted, Lucius arranged circumstances to ensure that Draco would be removed from our protection via an arrest. Therefore, before the kidnap scheme was implemented, Draco was implicated in another student's death. For if Draco were to fall into Ministry custody . . ."

"Bribes would do the rest," Dumbledore thoughtfully finished. "Soundly reasoned, Severus. But entirely conjecture, all the same."

"Not entirely," Snape corrected, strands of black hair hiding his features for an instant as he shook his head. "I've seen this type of gambit before from Lucius. Power struggles among the Death Eaters, wizards discrediting each other with plots that make this one pale. Believe me, Albus, being found out as a spy was most definitely not the worst danger I faced among those ranks."

Harry walked over to lay a hand on his father's shoulder, wishing he could communicate with his touch the same comfort Snape was obviously trying to impart to Draco.

"I think we must conclude this series of events to be Lucius' doing," Snape murmured, thinking out loud. "For nothing else makes rational sense. Imagine that Draco did commit a murder. Do you think he would seek to evade capture only to sabotage his own escape with self-administered hexes and potions? And how could he have removed the hex --it is indeed since gone-- after he had imbibed Somulus, which as you know works instantaneously?"

The headmaster stroked his beard as though carefully considering all possible scenarios. "Perhaps the young man unhexed himself and then took the potion?"

"No. Somulus has interacted with the hex," Snape said with regret so clearly painted in his voice that Harry tightened his fingers a bit. He wished he could say that everything would be all right, but he knew his father better than to think the man could be comforted by meaningless platitudes. Above all else, Severus was a realist.

And a strategist also, a fact the headmaster knew only too well. "We have only your word for that, Severus?"

"If you are suggesting yet again that I am lying through my teeth, Albus--"
"No." Albus shook his head. "I am suggesting merely that whoever attacked young Mr Malfoy was not in fact aware that his methods would alert us to his existence."

Snape inclined his head. "Someone in addition to Lucius was involved in the plot, then. He would not make such a mistake."

"Indeed not," the headmaster calmly agreed. "And this other person is not a Death Eater, or at least, not one of long standing. It is a wizard who has no true sense of your expertise, who never saw you in your capacity as Voldemort's Potions expert."

Harry flinched a little bit, hating to hear his father described that way.

"A student then, or several," Snape announced, shrugging off Harry's hand to sneer, "Students who thought they could rub a few herbs across Draco's teeth and lips to mask the scent of Somulus. We were all meant to think he had run away, and lost consciousness en route."

"So it seems," the headmaster concurred.

Harry sat down on his bed then, and regarded both the adults. "So that's it? Lucius' plan is foiled? We can prove Draco's been framed?"

"We have no direct proof whatsoever that Draco was hexed," Snape reminded him. "The perpetrator covered his . . . or her . . . tracks too well for that."

"Yeah, but what about the Somulus?"

Snape glared briefly. "It has been metabolised. We've nothing but my testimony which will be regarded as partisan if not biased."

"But . . . he's still comatose! That must count for something!"

"Not unless we can prove how he got that way."

Harry huffed. "Well, there's no real proof against Draco, either," he announced in a loud voice, resolved that he'd never mention the map to a soul. "So, I'll just convince Ron and Hermione not to say anything about him leaving the rooms--"

"Good luck with that endeavour," Snape muttered, moving his hands to clasp both of Draco's.

"Listen, I know you hate Gryffindors on principle but my friends aren't so bad--"

"Your friends know Draco to be responsible for your black eye," Snape snapped. "And pray tell, what did high-minded Miss Granger do the last time she suspected you were being . . . mistreated here? Not to mention that Weasley's antagonism for Draco is evident in his every word! I think it will suit both your friends admirably to see Draco locked away where he can never, ever threaten you again!"

The headmaster cleared his throat. "Ah . . . so Mr Malfoy threatens you, does he, Harry?"

"No, he's been great," Harry retorted, his tone short.

The headmaster peered at him over the top of his half-moon glasses, his gaze inscrutable.

"Look, he's not perfect," Harry admitted. "He's full of himself and irritating as hell sometimes, and yeah, you've seen my eye. But that's just . . . um, normal brothers stuff. You have to believe me, Professor Dumbledore! Whatever happened to Pansy was Lucius' doing. Or someone else's. It's not
Draco who killed her, it's just not."

"Unfortunately," Snape drawled, "the conspirators will provide proof to the contrary. Draco's wand is missing."

Harry gasped.

"You might have mentioned that earlier," the headmaster pointed out.

The Potions Master glared. "I ascertained its loss while I was in Hagrid's hut with the boy, but since then I have been rather occupied with other matters, Albus!"

His palms sweating, Harry tried to reason his way out of a mire. "But can't we use that to prove that Draco's been . . . um, tampered with? I mean, come on! He wouldn't lose his wand! It's obviously been taken--"

Dumbledore's quiet voice broke across Harry's objections. "The presumption, I am afraid, will be that in a moment of panic after killing the girl, Draco dropped his wand."

"He didn't kill her."

Harry was pretty depressed when the headmaster said nothing to that, but he didn't have long to consider it. Snape's posture all at once went rigid, his black eyes studying the boy on the bed more intently. "I thought I saw--"

"What?" Harry pressed. "What?"

The Potions Master leaned forward, his hands shaking slightly as he lay them on Draco's chest. "Thank Merlin! He's beginning to stir, I do believe." He hovered over the boy for a moment more, then, as if aware it might be better to give Draco some room, Snape moved back and beckoned for Harry to come stand alongside him.

"Oh God," Harry moaned, a sick feeling roiling up through his belly. He tried to kill the sensation with a heady dose of hope. "What's it been, only about ten, fifteen minutes since you gave him the antidote? That's pretty quick, right? That must mean there won't be any . . . uh, brain damage like you said?"

"It all depends on the type of hex used on him," Snape tightly reminded him. "If it encompassed a degree of mind control, we can expect there to be . . . ramifications."

The headmaster cleared his throat, all at once sounding a bit regretful. "Oh, my word. *Imperius* and *Somulus* . . . yes, that would be an exceedingly bad combination."

"To say the least," Snape murmured, his eyes growing more worried the longer he stared at his ailing son.

All at once, Draco's breathing hitched, his mouth opening as he began gasping for air. He pulled in one breath, two, three . . . and then his body seemed to adjust and he began breathing regularly, his chest moving up and down in an encouraging rhythm.

Harry couldn't stand it. "Come on, Draco, come on. Wake up!," he whispered, the sound intense. "I'll be all right, Severus and I will stand by you . . ."

The Potions Master leaned an arm across Harry's shoulders and pulled him close as they watched and waited for some sign that Draco would indeed pull through this all right.
Another moment passed. An eternity.

Then Draco's fingers twitched, his feet moving ever so slightly as he seemed to come to an awareness that he was awake, that he was alive . . .

Without any warning whatsoever, the Slytherin boy lunged upwards on the bed to sit bolt upright, and from between his lips came the most appalling scream Harry had heard in years.

"Ow, shite, owww!" Draco yelled the minute he was lucid enough to start screaming in words. "Get it off, get it off!" His hands began scrabbling at the back of his neck, frantically jerking at something until with one frenzied motion, he yanked something over his head and flung it to the floor, where it lay a dusky blue against the grey stones.

A turquoise blue.

And yet Draco still screamed, his hands now tearing at his shirt. A couple of buttons popped free as he struggled with it.

"Calm yourself!" Snape insisted, raising his voice. "Whatever is the matter?"

"That fucking amulet burned me to a crisp, that's what!" Draco yelled, his angry gaze seeking out Harry. "You didn't tell me it would get that hot, did you! Some Christmas present that turned out to be--" Then he seemed to notice Harry's appearance. "Oh, shite. Sorry about your eye."

Recriminations could wait, Harry thought. "The amulet heated up when you . . ." Oh God, the headmaster was still there, listening to every word, so Harry hardly wanted to admit that Draco had not only got a letter from Pansy but had actually left the rooms to go meet her . . .

As it turned out, the cat was let out of the bag by Draco himself. He hadn't yet seen the headmaster, who was behind him now that Draco was sitting up in bed.

"Is Pansy all right?" he gasped, his voice turning urgent.

Snape glanced at Harry, as though in warning to let him handle this.

"Why do you ask?" the Potions Master inquired, no hint in his tone that the girl was in fact dead.

Draco shook, his hands clenching the coverlet as he detailed, "Because they hexed her, too! Is she all right?"

"They," Snape pressed. "To whom do you refer?"

"I don't know!" Draco yelled. "Tell me about Pansy! She had the most awful look on her face! We were in the closet, and the door behind me opened . . . Look, all I know is that the damned amulet blazed to life just as I saw yellow jets of fire hit her. And before I could even turn around, I felt them hit me, too, and the next thing I know, I'm waking up here! So where is she?"

"Draco . . ." From the tone of his father's voice, Harry knew to brace himself.

And yet it was the headmaster who finished the sentence, who rose to his feet and came into Draco's field of vision to say, his eyes intent on the boy all the while, "Mr Malfoy, I'm afraid we must tell you that Miss Parkinson was found dead at the foot of the Owlery tower just a short while ago."

Draco's eyes went huge in his face, the tendons in his throat distending as he swallowed several times in succession. "D-- d-- dead?" he stammered, shock etched across his every feature, his hands
practically shredding the coverlet, he was grasping it with such force.

Draco, who couldn't lie well unless he was being led . . .

If they hadn't reasoned it out before, Harry would have known the truth then: Draco was innocent.

Questions remained, of course. The map. The wards. The hex. The Somulus.

But Draco hadn't killed Pansy; he hadn't even been conscious when the Slytherin girl had died. That was the most important thing. The rest could be sorted out later.

Harry went to sit on the bed, and said in what he hoped was a soothing tone, "We don't know much, Draco, but yes, Pansy died. She either fell from the Owlery or she was pushed."

"The Owlery? The Owlery like you dreamed about, that Owlery?"

Harry winced a bit, but nodded.

Draco's eyes were wet as they searched out Snape's face. "But . . . the wards, the protections . . . Things like that don't happen at Hogwarts--" Harry saw his throat distend as he gulped, "It's not true. It can't be. That dream of his was bloody ridiculous--"

"It was prescient, and I should have known as much." Snape swore under his breath. "I was so obstinate, so certain of my own powers of deduction!"

The Slytherin boy went positively grey. "You knew? You and Harry both thought I was fated to get thrown from a tower and you didn't tell me, didn't warn me?"

"I did warn you, Draco!"

"Oh sure, Potter, when I wanted to leave and was just about guaranteed to not believe you!"

"The entire problem," Snape pointed out, running his hand haphazardly through his lank hair, "was that we didn't think it was fated. As indeed it was not, as we misunderstood everything. Harry's dream was true, but it was about you being accused of murder, not a victim of it."

Listening to that, Harry was eerily reminded of the prophecy that ruled his life.

Gasping, Draco suddenly reached out and clutched the Potions Master's hand. "True," he whispered, almost fearfully. "True . . . oh sweet Merlin, then it was a seer dream, just as Harry tried to tell me. That means it's true, the other part as well! Lucius . . . it seems incredible, but he's been helping French Muggleborns escape the Dark Lord!" Draco's silver eyes went slightly wild as he babbled, "He probably can't do it here, too much danger he'd be recognised, but he must want to escape that madman like I did, don't you think?"

Albus Dumbledore took a step back as Snape shook his head. "Don't do this to yourself, Draco," the Potions Master implored. "I cannot explain that part of Harry's dream, but you know as well as I do that Lucius would not defy Voldemort by attempting to rescue those already marked for death--"

"You did," Draco breathed, his gaze skittering to Harry and back. "You saw his shite for what it was!" Then, with a deep sigh, the boy was admitting, "But he's a far cry from being you. I know that, Severus. After all, if he really was reformed, he'd want me to stay here where I'm safe instead of constantly trying to get his damned friends on the Board to expel me."

With that, Draco seemed to recall that the headmaster was with them. His gaze, not so much wild as
panicked, sought out Albus. "Accused, that's what Severus said, and that's why you're here, isn't it? I'm expelled already? No, wait, the Board wouldn't have had any chance to meet yet, would they? Unless . . . is it still Friday? No, wait, you said 'a short while ago' so I suppose it must be." Draco paused and heaved in a breathing, looking as though he was aware he'd better get in control of his mouth. "Sir . . . I have a right to speak to them before they kick me out, don't I?"

"You do," Albus murmured, his wizened gaze firmly fixed on Draco's eyes. Legilimency, Harry felt sure. "As things stand, however, your father has not yet called a meeting. Nor will he, I feel certain, until news of the death has become public."

"My father's right here," Draco crossly erupted. "And I wish to Hades I had his blood in my veins instead of Lucius' swill! Maybe then, I might stand a chance of not being expelled! As far as being accused goes, though, Severus is not going to stand idly by while you turn me over to the Aurors, he just isn't!"

"The Aurors don't even know yet," Harry assured his brother.

"They will know soon, however," Albus corrected, "and they will need to speak with you."

"Why, for fuck's sake? I wasn't even bloody awake when it happened!"

"Language," Snape reproved, which Harry thought a trifle silly under the circumstances. Perhaps, however, the Potions Master thought it best if the headmaster perceived Draco as respectful rather than the opposite.

"Tell us about this state of non-consciousness," Albus broke in to prompt.

"Well, seeing as I was knocked out cold the entire time," Draco exclaimed, "I don't know what I could possibly have to say!"

"I think they're trying to find out if you were hit with Imperius," Harry murmured.

"Oh, that's just bloody wonderful," the Slytherin boy snarled. "Another Malfoy excusing his crimes by means of Imperius. I don't think the Wizengamot will buy that a second time around, especially seeing as I don't have the political pull of a Lucius Malfoy! Why don't we just skip the fucking trial and send me straight to Azkaban?"

"Show some decorum in front of the headmaster!"

That brought Draco up short, though he muttered, "I just . . . I apologise, Professor Dumbledore. I just don't much like the idea of Imperius."

"With your family history, I should imagine not," Albus replied in a soothing tone.

Draco rolled his eyes but didn't bother saying my family's here. Maybe he was trying to be respectful, as Snape had said. Or maybe it was tactics, Harry thought. He'd realised that arguing with the headmaster wasn't the best possible strategy.

"There was no Imperius," Snape asserted. "We can treat that as a certainty, now."

"Yeah, Draco seems to be thinking all right," Harry agreed. "I don't think his brain's been . . . ah, damaged."

Draco looked from father to son and back, shuddering. "You . . . you thought I was going to wake up a mental incompetent, or something?"
"We worried," Snape briskly corrected.

Harry gave a shaky laugh. "Yeah, I even thought you might, um . . . have amnesia, forget Samhain, something like that. Go back to hating me and wanting me dead, I mean."

"Dead," Draco blankly repeated, his eyes seeming to go into shadows, almost looking sunken. "I . . . look, my brain's all right, I can think, but I can't seem to think my way around it. With . . . um, Pansy, that is. Are you sure there hasn't been some mistake? Pansy can't be d- d- dead; she was just with me! She was so warm . . ."/p>

"You must face reality," Snape calmly advised. "Think strategy, Draco, and prepare yourself to be interrogated. Rumours about your involvement have no doubt already reached every house in Hogwarts."

Draco glared at Snape for a moment, then wiped furiously at his eyes. "What rumours? Nobody saw me except Pansy and whoever hexed us . . . oh, no.. I'm really in it deep."

Lost by the turn in the conversation, Harry gestured for someone to explain.

"Whoever hexed me will be busy planting little seeds of suspicion everywhere. They'll make sure the Aurors come to the 'right' conclusion." Draco swallowed hard, one hand sliding into his trouser pocket and fishing about. He swiftly checked his other pocket, and when his hand came up empty fluidly swore, "Fuck, fuck, fuck! They took my wand, the motherfuckers--"

"Draco, impulse control!"

The Slytherin boy snapped his eyes shut and gritted his teeth.

Snape waited, but when Draco said nothing further, went on, "No doubt the conspirators will plant it in some compromising location. Most likely, they used it to cast additional hexes on Miss Parkinson once they had you both in the Owlery. Your own wand will incriminate you."

"No, it won't," Draco disagreed, opening his eyes, something like agony coating them as his dart glanced from Snape to the headmaster, and back. "I . . . um, just trust me, it won't."

"I think you'd better explain," Albus insisted, the command gentle yet firm.

Draco hesitated a moment, and then, as if knowing himself lost, groaned, "I . . . ah, well . . . I was reading this book of Severus', about kinship potions, and I . . ." Draco hung his head in his hands. "I found one that keyed magical items to one family name."

"Not exactly?" growled Snape.

"Well, I was just dabbling, really--"

"Dabbling!"

"Can you stop repeating me, Severus?"

Dumbledore cleared his throat and directed a stern glance at both father and son. "The consequence for Mr Malfoy's dabbling can wait until the matter of Miss Parkinson's death is resolved, is that clear?"

"I should have just let Pansy take the Mark," Draco groaned. "What good were all those letters I
wrote her? All they did was get her killed!"

Harry recognised that tone of voice; he'd heard it enough inside his own mind. "Draco, whatever happened in the Owlery, it wasn't your fault--"

Draco shook his head. "She wanted to break with the Dark Lord's supporters here, Harry. She died for no other reason than because she came to meet me--"

"She was bait," Harry quietly insisted. "Pansy wanted to lure you into the open so the others involved could grab you and take you to Voldemort!"

Harry wasn't prepared for Draco to suddenly start yelling.

Blond hair flew in all directions as the Slytherin boy violently shook his head, "You weren't in that closet with us, Potter! You don't know anything! She loved me, she did! She cried when she saw me after so long, and Pansy never cried! And if she was bait, if she was with them, huh, then why'd they kill her, eh!"

"They double-crossed her is all--"

Snape stepped between the two boys. "The girl has passed on, and for the moment, I see no advantage in debating Miss Parkinson's true loyalties," he sternly announced.

*Good point,* Harry thought, deciding a radical change of subject was in order. It was no wonder Draco's emotions were seesawing all over the place. The girlfriend he'd wanted to reconcile with was dead, and he was implicated; the man who had raised him had arranged it all; and as if that wasn't enough, he was in trouble with Snape for his poor judgment and with Hogwarts for his dabbling. "Let's just get your burn seen to," Harry suggested. "Everybody seems to have forgotten that but it probably needs some salve or something. Can you take off your shirt?"

"Well, of course I can take off my shirt," Draco scathed, undoing the two buttons that hadn't ripped free earlier. "I'm hardly incapacitated. It's just a little--" As the silk fabric slid off his shoulders and he looked down, the Slytherin boy gasped.

"It looks pretty bad," Harry agreed in a level voice, deliberately understating the case. The burn was enormous, a furious crimson splotch almost the size of a dinner plate, the whole of it puckered and blistered. It was a miracle Draco hadn't complained more, but maybe the shock of hearing that Pansy had died had blunted his awareness of the pain. "I'm sorry the amulet hurt you--"

"I'd think you'd be delighted, considering," the other boy huffed, glancing down at his chest and then back up at Harry. His eyebrows drew together in puzzlement. "Why in Merlin's name is your eye already so . . . black?"

"I'm afraid that bruised tissue doesn't react well to being flung in and out of *Petrificus!*" Snape harshly returned. "And neither do magically healed eyes take well to being pummelled! We'll be lucky if Harry doesn't go blind again!"

Draco's lower lip began to quiver, but then resolve seemed to fill him and it firmed. "Oh, very good," he snarled. "It's not punishment enough that I got my g- girlfriend killed? Go on, make me think I've blinded Harry! Make me think I'm as bad as Lucius! You're not Head of Slytherin for nothing, are you, Severus--"

"So you think I speak in jest, do you?" Snape ground out, his eyes blazing anger by then. "You think I haven't healed his eye because I've not had the time to fetch a potion? Are you an utter imbecile? Perhaps you have suffered some brain damage, you completely irresponsible *twit*--"
"That's enough!" Harry shouted, hoping to calm them both. "He shouldn't have hit me, and his paltry little sorry hardly makes up for it, and he sure shouldn't have wrecked Sals' box and scared her right back into hiding in the Floo, but he's my brother and I love him, so enough said, all right?"

Dead silence descended, broken only when Draco gasped, "You . . . excuse me, you what me?"

"I thought you were going to be thrown from the Owlery, remember?" Harry bit out, glaring because Snape had raised an eyebrow at the sudden declaration. Defensive, he insisted, "When you think someone's about to die, you . . . realise things."

Suddenly embarrassed, Harry ducked his head down to look more closely at the huge swath of burn marring Draco's chest. "The books I consulted didn't mention anything like this ever happening. Let's get it healed so it won't scar over. I'm not sure Scaradicate Salve would work on this." He looked to his father for confirmation.

Snape jabbed his wand toward the furious scarlet tissue and frowned. "It's akin to a curse scar in a way . . . magically induced . . ."

Draco, Harry noticed, looked a bit ill, though he had enough presence of mind to object, "Scaradicate Salve healed those needle pricks on Harry after Samhain, and they were magical in nature, weren't they? Lucius made the needles heat up?"

"Physical heat," Snape discounted that. "This injury isn't primarily physical. If it were, the burn would match the shape of the amulet instead of being so widespread." He quickly performed a slightly longer examination. "Waves of magical energy running amuck caused this. It's really quite odd . . . at any rate, if left unhealed, the resultant scar may well be permanent. Nonetheless, I must insist the burn remain until this entire matter is resolved."

Harry frowned. "I know you're angry, but um . . . that's a really bad way to punish Draco for hitting me--"

"Merlin's balls!" Snape yelled. "First he thinks I'm misdirecting him about the prospect of blindness in that eye, and now you suspect I want to see my own son scarred? The pair of you are fit for nothing but sheep fodder!"

"Now Severus, calm down," Albus soothed. "Harry's not dealt with the Aurors as you have. He simply needs a bit of explanation."

"I'll thank you not to tell me what my son needs, Albus!" Snape snapped. But then he was explaining, "The burn is evidence, Harry. It demonstrates that Draco must have spent a considerable amount of time in close proximity to wizards who wished him dead." Calming finally as Albus had said, Snape pushed a strand of sodden hair away from his face. "When Draco did not react to its warning, the amulet must have intensified its efforts to get his attention. Of course as he was unconscious the effort was in vain."

"So we can use the burn to prove Draco was under threat?"

"It is so nice to be discussed like I'm not even in the room!" Draco shouted. "I'm just to be disfigured, is that it? I'm supposed to just live with a hideous blotch of a scar all over my chest?"

"Would you rather be thrown to the Dementors?" Snape scathed, his eyes gleaming with fury. "If you think I will destroy exculpatory evidence merely to assuage your vanity, you are deeply deluded!" Those black eyes began to glitter, then, and Harry thought so much for calm, just before the Potions Master exploded, "Perhaps you'll consider the consequences beforehand next time you
are possessed of an urge to do something so phenomenally stupid! You should be thankful it's only a burn you suffered! You could have been thrown off the Owlery while unconscious, I hope you realise! Flinging yourself into the path of danger as if you've no cunning at all! Are you mad? Do you remotely believe I want two Gryffindor sons?"

"All right, that's enough," Harry levelly announced.

"On the contrary, Potter, I've barely got started!" Snape snapped.

"You've said enough," Harry repeated. "Look at Draco, would you? Really look!"

The Potions Master's nostrils flared in irritation, but then he did look. Harry just hoped he could see past his anger. Draco had backed up all the way to his headboard, his feet tangled in the covers, his expression speaking volumes. That last question of Snape's had broken through the façade Draco so often projected, and now, his emotions were flayed wide open for them all to see.

He was expecting to be tossed out on his ear, no matter that Snape had said they were family. Or maybe, because Snape had said it. After all, Draco had admitted to them both that to him, family meant people who would turn on you the moment they decided you weren't worth the effort of keeping around . . .

A heavy sigh emanated from Snape's direction, and then the Potions Master was gruffly conceding, "I am not about to abandon you, Draco. Idiot child though you are."

Still slightly huddled, Draco sort of sniffled.

"The scar won't be bad," Harry rushed to console him. "Really. I mean, it won't show unless you take off your shirt, and anyway, you can always tell people it's a battle scar, that's sort of dashing--"

"It's a mark of defeat," Draco muttered, wiping a bit at his eyes as he unbent from his crumpled posture.

"You did your best--"

"You think that makes things better, Potter?"

"Do you hear me whinging on that you got the best of me, Malfoy?" Harry shot back.

"Yeah, well at least Petrificus doesn't sting like the devil!"

Harry was about to say that a blow to the eye did, but before he could speak, he felt his father laying hand on his forearm. "There's no need for you to be in pain, Draco. Harry and I will go fetch a potion that should serve to block sensation."

Block sensation . . . "Why don't we use that charm, the one that helped when my hands would get so sore?"

Snape gave him a rather significant glance, Harry thought, as he insisted, "The potion will be more effective in this case. Come with me."

"Uh, all right . . ."

Puzzled, Harry followed his father into the lab, where Snape said in a low whisper, "You do realise that there is no way to keep Draco from the Aurors? They will insist on interrogating him."

Remembering what Draco had said about the last time, Harry whispered back, "Don't leave him
alone with them--"

"I will not," Snape promised. "Harry, listen carefully. We must keep knowledge of your dark powers from Ministry hands. Voldemort has too many moles . . . Therefore, say nothing whatsoever to Draco about breaking that hex on your own. Let him continue to assume I countered his _Petrificus_, is that clear?"

Harry blinked. He didn't like the idea of keeping secrets from his own brother . . . but considering that _Veritaserum_ might be used on Draco, he supposed he'd better. Still . . . "Ron and Hermione saw me right after--"

"They have no idea that you were hexed in the first place, only that you were physically struck," Snape said with distaste. "I will tell Albus the truth, but only we three should be cognizant of the event in question. Do you understand me?"

Harry nodded.

Snape studied his expression, and then, apparently satisfied, went on, "The Aurors will perform _Priori Incantatem_ on Draco's wand the moment it is turned over to them, you realise. When the spell reveals a _Petrificus_--"

"They'll assume he hexed Pansy so he could push her out!" Harry leapt to the conclusion. "But wouldn't she have . . . um, shattered, in that case?"

"You take _Petrificus_ a bit too literally. At any rate, Draco will be forced to explain that it was in fact _you_ he hexed, which will hardly endear him to his interrogators, I should imagine. Their next question will be who broke the hex . . ."

"Oh, I get it. Your wand has to be able to disgorge the counter to _Petrificus_," Harry finished. "Yes, I understand."

Snape vaguely gestured towards a squat glass box on a nearby counter. "As I doubt anyone will think to _Priori Incantatem_ your fingers, be so good as to _Petrificus_ one of those live centipedes for me."

Harry scooped Sals from his pocket as he pointed his hand and spoke in Parseltongue. "_Be made of stone_ . . ."

He flinched a bit as one of the centipedes snapped into a straight line and stopped moving. Ugh. _Petrificus_ was really a horrid thing to inflict, and now that he knew what it was to suffer it himself, he felt worse than ever about first year and Neville. He couldn't even remember if he and Hermione and Ron had ever properly apologised . . .

Snape made short work of ending the spell on the centipede. It was a good thing, Harry realised then, that his father _could_ counter the spell. When Harry used wanded magic, only a Parseltongue incantation could undo the effects, but at least his wandless magic seemed to behave a bit more normally.

Without another word, Snape scooped up a vial of violent purple fluid and was striding back toward the bedroom where Draco waited.

To Harry's great surprise, when they entered, Dumbledore was sitting on the bed with the boy, both Draco's hands in his own, his voice soft with reassurance, though Harry couldn't hear the words.

By then, Draco looked like he was struggling not to cry.
The headmaster patted his hands before standing up to announce, "I fear I can no longer delay the inevitable, Severus. The Parkinsons will be here shortly; you and I both will need to speak with them, and it would be prudent for Ministry Aurors to already be present in the castle by the time they arrive. In case the worst comes to pass, I would like Mr Malfoy removed from Hogwarts at once."

Draco didn't react to that, though he seemed to shrink a bit, as though trying to hide from an unpleasant necessity.

"You can't make Draco leave Hogwarts!" Harry blurted. "Lucius will take him to Voldemort to be tortured!"

Dumbledore sighed as he looked at Harry over his half-moon spectacles. "You must trust me, Harry. I will use my influence to see to it that we get Order Aurors to handle the investigation into Miss Parkinson's death, but if I am thwarted in that, we may well have to deal with some quite unpleasant types who will demand Draco be taken into custody. He must not be here to be taken."

"Severus and I won't let them in--"

"They will force their way in, Harry," the Potions Master clarified, grimacing. "Aurors can be quite zealous."

"Your wards," Harry scoffed, but then he remembered. *Whatever can be warded can be unwarded.* "Fine, then. I'll ward your quarters, Severus. With my wand in full force. Let them try to get in after that."

"You have no experience at warding," Snape began.

Draco interrupted him. "It's all right, Harry. I'll be safe in Devon, you know that, and I'd really rather you didn't let slip any hint of your dark powers before you absolutely have to."

"They'll think the wards were constructed by Severus," Harry argued.

"At first. When they can't break them they'll investigate. They have pretty good detection spells . . ." Draco sighed. "It really is better that I not be here. Better for you, better for me. I hardly want to think what'll end up of me if you lose in battle because the Dark Lord finds out too early about your dark powers."

Harry sighed. "Right, then." He turned to his father. "How long will Draco have to stay away?"

"Until the Aurors have declined to charge him, I would think," Severus murmured. "Headmaster. I will see to Draco's departure. If you inform me when the Parkinsons arrive, I shall join you to assist with any arrangements they desire."

He meant the funeral, Harry realised with a sick sort of dread.

Draco must have thought so too, for he suddenly blurted, "I didn't kill her! I swear I didn't, I was knocked out like I said, I don't know anything--"

"Hush, my boy," the headmaster soothed. "We will all do what we can." And then, to Snape, "I will expect a full accounting later this evening of everything you know about this entire matter. *Everything.* Is that clear, Severus?"

The room remained silent as the headmaster left through the Floo, though Snape had nodded in answer to that last question. The moment the three of them were alone, the room exploded in noise.
"What happened, how did I even get here?" Draco was asking, while Harry insisted, "You don't mean we're going to tell him about . . . er . . ." Realizing that he didn't want to mention the map in case Draco was treated to a dose of Veritaserum, Harry fell silent.

"What?" Draco wanted to know, his grey eyes still panicked and wide in his face.

"We haven't much time." Snape thrust the vial of potion towards Draco. "Topical. Use only enough to blunt the worst of the pain. The Aurors will need to see that burn, and the amulet that occasioned it. Now, as it's not wise to trust one's Apparition after all you've been through in the past hour, I will accompany you to Devon."

Harry nodded his agreement. They didn't want Draco to splinch himself as he had on Samhain.

Draco dribbled a bit of potion on his chest, his features rigid as it steamed against his burn, then dressed himself in a clean shirt. Then he yanked on some robes and stuffed the vial of potion into a trouser pocket.

"Can I come along to keep him company--" Harry suggested.

"No." Snape glowered. "I will need you here."

The Potions Master put his hands on Draco's shoulders and gave him a sharp shake. "I'm tempted not to mention this at all, but I feel I must. I will show you where I keep a spare wand. You may need it to Incendio a fire; the cottage is still quite chill at this time of year. Don't you dare use it to attempt any healing spells on that burn."

Draco trembled slightly under the weight of Snape's disappointed gaze. "I . . . thank you, Severus. I won't do anything I shouldn't."

"You had best not. Extracting you from this situation will prove trial enough." Relenting somewhat, Snape gave the boy's shoulders a gentle squeeze. "Now, come to the Floo. It's time you were gone from here."

Draco swallowed, and glanced at Harry. "I . . . I am sorry, all right?" he said in a more contrite voice than last time. "Um, you should put some ice on that eye." And then to Snape. "You can make it all right, can't you? Make him see?"

"I do not yet know."

"Shite." Draco stepped out to the living room, but when he reached for the missing urn of Floo powder, his arm went stiff. "Sorry about your snake, too," he muttered. It seemed his mind was going in several directions at once, for then he said, "Think the headmaster can conjure Floo powder? Don't know how he left otherwise. And Pansy. Are you sure she's . . . er, gone? Did you see the . . . er . . . I mean, did you check for Polyjuice? Did she . . . have any last words?"

"Draco, you are going into shock, I suspect," Snape quietly explained, pushing the boy into the Floo. "No." Harry could hear Draco gulping as he struggled for control. "I'm just . . . no. Malfoys don't get afraid. I'm not. I'm not."

Snape reached for a wooden box inlaid with ivory, opening it to reveal more Floo powder. A small amount in hand, the Potions Master joined the boy in the Floo, though he spoke to Harry, his voice stern. "I expect to find you resting when I return, is that clear? But you must eat something first. Accio wizard's ice . . ." He tossed it to Harry. "There. Now keep it on your eye for a few minutes at a stretch this time."
"I will . . . Draco? It'll be all right. Don't worry."

The Potions Master looked down at his other son. "Are you ready?"

Draco managed a shaky nod. "You . . . I . . . Harry . . . oh, bloody hell."

"Number Twelve Grimmauld Place!" Snape commanded, flinging down the powder. And then they were both gone and Harry was left alone.

Too tired to even reach for the Floo powder himself, Harry went with an instinct and simply shouted, "Dobby!"

And just like that, the house-elf was there with him, beaming ear to ear. It was an expression that didn't last long, however.

"What has happened to Harry Potter's eye?" Dobby demanded, hopping up and down in agitation.

"Oh . . . um, slipped in the shower," Harry invented, so tired he couldn't think of anything more plausible. "Listen, you did worse to me with that rogue Bludger that time, all right? It's fine."

Apparently Dobby couldn't conceive of Harry lying, for his beatific smile returned at once as he began bouncing so enthusiastically that his tower of hats threatened to cascade straight off his head. "How can Dobby serve Harry Potter, sir? Whatever Harry Potter is wanting, Dobby is doing it already!"

Flopping down onto the couch, Harry blearily requested, "Orange juice. Grilled cheese sandwich . . ." When the food glittered into existence just inches from his hand, he sighed in appreciation. Three swallows of orange juice and he was feeling slightly better. Enough, certainly, to realise that a house-elf like Dobby could come in handy at a time like this.

"Do me a favour, Dobby. Pop up to the Owlerly. Don't let anybody see you, all right? But check around for Master Draco's wand and bring it back. Check at the foot of the tower, too, all right? And on the stairs, and out onto the grounds a bit. Just, try to find it. I need it. Accio it if you have to. I suppose elves can do that, if the wand hasn't had some sort of anti-summoning charm put on it . . . And whether you find it or not, don't ever ever tell anyone that I asked you to go look, all right?"

A sly grin curled Dobby's wrinkled features. "Oh, now Harry Potter is giving Dobby orders more like what Dobby used to get, back before Harry Potter freed Dobby! Harry Potter is plotting, eh? But Dobby is happy to be helping! Dobby is trusting Harry Potter!"

One snap of his fingers, and Dobby was gone in a sparkling shower of silver dust.

Plotting? Harry almost laughed as he bit into his sandwich. At least Dobby knew him well enough to know that his plots would be benign. Or maybe he approved because he thought Harry was plotting against Draco . . . well, either way, he knew Dobby would do as he had asked.

When he was done eating, Harry lay back on the couch. He was horribly tired, which stood to reason, but he didn't think he could sleep until his father came home and told him how Draco was doing. Or at least, until Dobby arrived with some news . . .

Before he knew it, a hand on his shoulder was gently prodding him awake.

Harry opened his eyes to see Snape leaning over him. Shaking his head to clear it of bleary thoughts, Harry sat up. "Is Draco all right? I mean . . . he seemed more than a little unsettled when he left here. He probably needs some food and rest too . . ."
Picking up the ice Harry had left on the table, Snape pushed it into Harry's hand and gestured for the boy to use it.

"Sorry," Harry apologised. He kept forgetting about the ice, and wondered why that was. Maybe he just had too much on his mind? "Um . . . so did you get Draco settled in, you got him the wand and all that? It is possible to start a fire without using magic, you know."

Snape sighed. "Draco's more dependent on sorcery than you are. In some ways your experience with those Muggles is an asset." With that, he was hanging his robes and withdrawing a folded wad of parchment from a trouser pocket.

The Marauder's Map.

The map they'd relied on to condemn Draco. They'd thought him a murderer . . . but he couldn't have pushed Pansy out of the Owlery, let alone have snuck down the stairs or run out onto the grounds. He'd been senseless the whole time! So had someone impersonated him? But no, the map had led Snape straight to his unconscious body! And what about the wards? What about--

Harry stopped asking himself questions when his father sat down next to him and began to speak, slow deliberation in every word.

"You may well hold your brother's life in your hands," Snape heavily announced. "And this may be the key that frees him."

"It . . . it lied," Harry groaned, feeling awful as he took it in hand. The dots swarming over the surface looked hideous to him, now. "I thought that was impossible! I thought the map was perfect. It sees through Polyjuice, it knew that Moody was really Crouch! It's always been dependable, it knew all along that Scabbers was Peter Pettigrew--"

"It knows, I suspect, more than it chose to show," Snape interrupted, reaching out a hand to still his son's shaking shoulders. "Understand me, Harry. I intend no disrespect; I can understand why you trusted the map. James helped make it, and Lupin, and Black. Three wizards you've put your faith in, in one way or another."

"Not Wormtail." Harry grimaced.

Snape waved his free hand in a contemptuous arc. "He was useless in school. But the others . . . Well. The map is an impressive work of magic, to be sure. But something is wrong with it, and it is up to us to fathom out precisely what."

"I don't even know how it works . . ."

"Nor I," Snape admitted. "But we are going to find out what it is concealing, all the same."

"How?"

"Let us begin," the Potions Master decided, "with you telling me every last thing you know about this spare bit of parchment."
Harry glanced up to meet his father's eyes. "Um, so I guess you know already that this is the parchment that... um, insulted you that time. And you obviously know who made it... I don't actually understand much at all about it. I wish I did, wish I could explain how it could possibly have made Draco look so guilty, or why..." Looking away, Harry gave a heavy sigh and adjusted the position of the ice against his sore eye.

Leaning forward, Snape took the map and spread it out on the table, then with a sparse gesture conjured a glass of water and motioned that Harry should drink it. "You're no doubt still a bit woozy from breaking out of Petrificus. I'll give you something to help you sleep in a few moments."

"All right," Harry agreed, draining the glass and setting it down next to the other dishes. He briefly considered banishing them, or levitating them over to the Floo, but his magic still felt so depleted that he decided not to bother.

Snape seemed to realise what he had in mind. "Better all around not to risk staining the map," he murmured, waving his wand to clear away the mess. "I will be in contact with Lupin as soon as Albus can arrange it. For the moment, however, you are my sole source of information. So... instead of lamenting what you don't know about this parchment, tell me what you do know."

"Well, I know how to work it, is all." Shrugging, Harry detailed, "You tap it with your wand and say, 'I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,' to make it show itself. And then you tap it again and say, 'Mischief managed' to wipe it clean." A sense of how much things had changed suddenly swamped him. Not only was he telling Severus Snape the secrets of the Marauder's Map, it hadn't even occurred to him to hesitate.

Snape's eyes went dark with remembrance. "Mischief managed... now that does sound like something James Potter would have thought amusing."

"I haven't used the map to play any nasty tricks on anyone," Harry objected.

"No? You weren't the miscreant who pelted Draco with mud that time in Hogsmeade and then came back with this in hand?"

"He started it," Harry defended himself. "And as for my... er, as for James--"

Snape waved a hand through the air as though to erase something. "I wasn't casting aspersions with my mischief managed remark. Your father liked alliteration; that was all I meant."

"You're my father," Harry retorted, furrowing his brow. "What's alliteration, anyway?"

Snape's dark eyes assessed him in a way they hadn't for some time, leaving Harry feeling like a potion ingredient again. But then Snape seemed to put off whatever he had been going to say in favour of merely explaining, "Alliteration. Repeated sounds. We seem to be drifting from the point."

The Potions Master studied the map, checking the position of a few dots, including his and Harry's. "This does seem to be highly accurate... have you never seen it err before?"

"Never once," Harry swore.

Snape considered that for a moment, then pressed, "What about the provenance of the map? I recall
Lupin saying he would take charge of it; I presume he must have returned it at some point, but how did you come into possession of it in the first place?"

"Fred and George Weasley gave it to me." Harry swallowed, feeling strangely like he was betraying them, though surely now it couldn't matter if Snape found out the truth. "They stole it from Filch's office. I've always assumed that Filch had confiscated it from my . . . er, from one of the Marauders. But that's just a guess. I don't honestly know how he ended up with it, and I've no idea how Fred and George figured out what it was or the incantations . . ."

"What of your own incantations?" the Potions Master asked, and then with a small frown, added, "In the stress of the moment, I confess I can't quite recall . . . did you tap the map with your fingers or your wand to activate it so that we might find Draco?"

That, more than anything else, told Harry how worried Snape had been; it wasn't like the man to overlook any detail, no matter how small. "Um, fingers," he admitted. "Sorry, I know I'm supposed to be concealing that, keep my wand in hand and all that, but it wasn't handy." He decided he'd just as soon not mention that he'd believed Draco had taken his wand out of the dungeons.

Snape sighed. "Harry . . . I do hope you are aware that I have good reasons for the rules I set you. The circumstances surrounding your use of the map were extraordinary, so I certainly understand your not stopping to fetch your wand. But the untested, wanded spell you decided to perform unsupervised so that you could view Draco outside? You simply must use better restraint."

That disappointed tone was more a rebuke than lines or points could ever be. Still, Harry rallied, "I had to know what was going on." When Snape's nostrils flared in irritation, Harry wished he hadn't said that. Because now his father would announce a punishment, surely . . . Except, he didn't. Harry wasn't quite sure why not.

"Back to your current means of manipulating this map," Snape abruptly pronounced. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good does not strike me as the sort of thing one might render into snake language. Can Parseltongue encompass words to conceptualise an oath?"

Harry flushed. "Uh, no, not really. But my spells these days don't always match the original ones so well, you know."

"And so?"

A deeper flush, that time one he could feel emanating from the roots of his hair. "Um. I'm sure it can't possibly matter what I say in Parseltongue," he muttered, chewing a little on his lower lip.

"We are endeavouring to solve a mystery," the Potions Master reminded the boy, his tone a trifle curt. "The more I know about how this parchment responds to stimuli, the better our chances of exonerating Draco. There is no telling where the smallest clue may lead, so oblige me."

Harry sighed, knowing he would have to. What was a little embarrassment against his brother's life? "I tried at first to translate the solemnly swear incantation, saying things like I've got no good plans at all, I just don't, but I couldn't get the map to work for me until I . . ." He drew in a bracing breath. "I have to say what a spell means to me, you know. And when I first got that map --third year, by the way-- um, I guess I was pretty interested in not running into you when I went wandering the hallways at night. So anyway, that was what I was thinking about, mostly, when I would solemnly swear to be up to no good."

Snape's expression by then was a strange blend of impatience and something else, something Harry couldn't identify.
"So now I have to say," he went on, clearing his throat, "Show me everything to help me hide from the greasy git."

The Potions Master stared, his eyebrows raised. "Oh, indeed."

"We didn't get on then," Harry reminded the man, thinking a bit odd he would have to.

"Hmm, I know," Snape mused. "What I find interesting is the degree of intimidation the phrase implies. For when I would encounter you in the halls, you never struck me as particularly cowed. It used to irritate me no end."

"Bravado," Harry explained.

"Hmm," Snape said again. "No wonder you reminded me of James."

"Can you just stop bringing him up?" Harry asked in a desperate tone.

"I see no particular reason to," Snape remarked, again studying Harry with that strange stare. "However, for the moment I think we should finish with the map and all it implies. So . . . your charm. You seriously expect me to believe that Parseltongue has a word for git, do you?"

"Parseltongue is very odd," Harry tried to explain.

"Enlighten me," Snape drawled.

Well, he had asked, Harry reasoned. Besides, he would rather discuss the map than talk about his . . . than talk about James with his father. Of course Snape had implied quite a while back that he'd forgiven James and come to respect him in the end, but that hardly helped. Harry didn't like the feeling that he'd reminded Snape of that younger version of James . . . that he called to mind the boy who had made Snape's life such a misery back in their school days.

So it was actually a relief to direct the conversation back to Parseltongue, even this bit of it. "I was trying to say greasy git," he admitted, "since that is how I thought of you back when I first learned to use the map. I could feel my mouth moving to make those words . . . but they don't exist in snake language, I guess, so what I heard coming out instead was big-nosed horrible oily man."

"Interesting. Normally one would think that git implies nothing whatever about nasal capacity."

"Well, it identifies you all right."

"Yes, though it lacks the alliterative charm of the original," Snape lamented, his dark eyes almost piercing as he said it. When Harry didn't react other than to stiffen, he brusquely questioned, "And your version of 'mischief managed', then?"

"Done being Slytherin."

"Really."

"Yes, really. It felt Slytherin to me, all that sneaking around."

"You weren't, perchance, tapping into some sense of your own future in the house? After all, you do have some seer traits, as we have since learned."

"Oh, I don't know," Harry crossly muttered. "Enough about the incantations, all right? Let's talk strategy. The map could convict Draco, and he's innocent! So what on earth did you mean, agreeing to tell the headmaster everything? You can't possibly intend to let him know what we saw happen,
Snape gave a sharp nod. "I must. I have no way to contact Lupin. Only Albus does, and he is unlikely to assist us unless he understands the urgency. For the moment, though, let us return to the provenance. I presume this is the map Crouch referred to as Potter's Map?"

"Yeah, he borrowed it from me," Harry admitted on a sigh. "Before the Second Task. I didn't get it back until after Voldemort was reborn. Well, you heard. You were there in the headmaster's office when Crouch confessed."

The Potions Master narrowed his eyes. "I was there," he agreed, grimacing. Probably, Harry thought, because he hadn't put it together a lot sooner. "So, this map was in the possession of a crazed supporter of Voldemort for literally months. He could have done anything to it! He could have found a way to confound it; he could have made a copy, or several! Didn't you think of that before you lent it out to all and sundry?"

"I didn't lend it to the whole world, just to the man I thought was Moody!" Harry objected. "I thought he was an ex-Auror, remember? I thought he could use it to prove you were up to no good, and just why did I think you deserved some scrutiny? Because you deliberately misdirected students to think so! And anyway, it's not my fault Crouch 'borrowed' it. He was going to take it away anyway if I hadn't agreed! He knew the map could prove who he really was and ruin his pretence of being a Defence teacher!"

"True," Snape acknowledged, though he still looked a bit as though he thought Harry had been reckless.

"You know," Harry railed, old resentments surging up from some dark place inside him, "if you'd have just let Remus alone the year before, he wouldn't have had to resign and we wouldn't have ended up with a Death Eater in disguise for a professor! So if it's anybody's fault the map fell into nasty hands and got messed with, it's yours!"

"This isn't about finding fault," Snape answered in a level tone, but Harry was hardly mollified.

"You just don't like Remus! You were cruel to him for no better reason than something he couldn't help what happened ages ago!"

"Cruel would be to stop making the Wolfsbane," Snape retorted. "As for the rest, my objections to having a werewolf on staff were perfectly sound, not the least because I knew first hand what it was to encounter one during the full moon."

"You knew he was safe as long as he took his potion--"

"Which he, in fact, forgot to take."

"You've just never forgiven him for being friends with my-- with James!"

Snape held up a hand. "How I treated Lupin years ago is not at issue, Harry. Nor is what I think of him now. Is there anything further you can tell me about this map?"

Forcing himself to calm, Harry searched his memory. "No. Well, just that it hasn't left my possession since I got it back after Crouch had it. And that as useless as Wormtail might have been in school, he probably knows something about how it was put together. He could have helped Crouch figure out how to . . . tamper with it, I suppose. I mean, Wormtail was guarding Crouch's father, so I'm sure they had plenty of contact."
"A pity that Voldemort didn't ever discuss the map in my presence," the Potions Master mused, tapping the side of his face with one long finger.

"I had it back by the time you . . . returned to him," Harry pointed out.

"Yes, but since then he hasn't mentioned it, which means I wasn't as privy to his inner circle as I thought."

"Infighting," the boy surmised. "Like you told the headmaster."

"Perhaps." Snape studied the map for a moment longer, then tapped it with his wand. "Mischief managed."

The Marauder's Map went obediently blank.

"Interesting that it can understand both the old charm and your new Parseltongue one," Snape remarked. "Charmed objects are often a good deal more finicky. Sometimes a mere shift in tone of voice can be enough to throw an incantation off. But the map is able to respond to words not even in English. It's really something quite astounding." The Potions Master turned his gaze on Harry, who only sighed.

"I wonder . . . do you think maybe if I did a wanded spell, it might show us what really happened up in the Owlery?"

"I think the most likely result of that would be to destroy the map."

"Wanded magic didn't destroy the enchanted picture frame--"

"It very well could have," Snape insisted. "Moreover, I cannot undo your wanded magic, as you well know. What if instead of destroying the map, a wanded spell sucked you into it, Harry? Only a Parseltongue incantation could get you out! I rather think Voldemort would refuse the request!"

"I could say the incantation--"

"Once you were in the map, you might not be able to tap the surface any longer!"

Harry blinked, realizing that was a good point. "All right. I was just asking, you know."

"I hope you are done being Gryffindor for the time being. Yes? You aren't going to do something completely mad like try to solve this all on your own?"

"Uh, well I did send Dobby off to try to find Draco's wand . . ."

A flash of green fire in the grate interrupted them. "Severus, I have the Parkinsons in my office. Would you be so good as to join us?"

"Certainly, Headmaster," Snape calmly answered. With a rather telling look at Harry, he folded up the map and tucked it into a trouser pocket as he stood up. Before he went to join Dumbledore, however, he stepped into his own bedroom to don a fresh set of teaching robes. Emerging with a single dose vial of something thin and rose-coloured, he explained, "A very mild sleeping draught. It will do you good to get some worry-free rest. Your temper seems . . . rather frayed."

"Yours too," Harry grumbled, though he took the vial and downed the contents. "After all that's happened, I think we both need some sleep. I wish you didn't have to go--"

The effects of the draught hitting him already, Harry broke off that sentence to widely yawn.
"Into bed with you. No more sleeping on the sofa," Snape gently chided. "And as for Dobby and the wand, I will take care of matters. You're not to meddle again without speaking to me, is that understood?

"Yeah . . ." Harry mumbled. As he stumbled through the open door to his room he heard the sound of his father flooing off.

A few steps more and he collapsed onto his bed to let sleep take him away.

The ringing of the magic doorbell roused him.

*Good thing the draught was so mild,* Harry thought when he dragged himself out to the living room to check the door parchment. Otherwise, he might have slept straight through Ron and Hermione's visit. He hated to think what sorts of rumours *that* might have caused. It was bad enough that they knew about his eye. He hardly wanted them to start thinking he'd gone missing.

He looked about for his cloak, spotting it on the floor beside the couch, the crest facing up. That was enough to help him do the spell to open the door. "Come in," he at once invited, eager to get the door closed again before some passing Slytherin saw his black eye. The fewer people who knew about that, the better.

Hermione and Ron both had their wands out.

"Is he here?" growled Ron before Harry could say anything else.

Harry didn't have to ask who he meant. "No."

"Good," said Ron, glancing around as though to be sure Harry knew what he was talking about. "I didn't think Snape would let Malfoy back in, but with Slytherins you never know."

"Let's sit down," Harry suggested.

"Yes, let's," Hermione agreed, perching herself on the edge of the couch cushions. Ron took a chair, but he didn't flop into it like usual. Watchful, as though expecting Draco to emerge from the shadows at any instant, he sat upright and kept his wand in hand.

Harry almost sighed, but managed to think constructively instead. "Um, so you were up in Dumbledore's office with him when he, um . . . found out about Pansy Parkinson?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, he already knew by the time we got there. Susan Bones was out for a walk and spotted the . . . er, spotted her. Anyway, she's in a bad way, but who wouldn't be, seeing . . . that. Apparently she told a few people, sort of babbling it all out hysterically. Then one of the teachers overheard and informed the headmaster."

Harry tried to take all that in, tried to form a mental timeline that would account for everyone's movements. "Uh, so you went to Dumbledore to tell him about my eye, I guess? You could have left it for my dad to straighten out, you know. I mean, we really don't want another visit from Family Services."

Hermione leaned forward to put a hand on Harry's knee. "I know. When we couldn't find Malfoy anywhere--"

"Yeah, I was going to give him a right good punch in the face, thought I'd see how he liked it!" Ron
interrupted, fists clenched, his face flushing with anger.

"Well, he wasn't anywhere around," Hermione went on.

"So there went that plan--"

"Ronald, are you going to let me explain or not?"

Muttering something, Ron finally tucked his wand away and sarcastically gestured that that floor was hers.

Hermione pressed her lips together in irritation for a moment, then continued, "We couldn't find Malfoy, but as we came back down from the Owlery we heard Susan screaming about finding Pansy dead--"

"Wait," Harry said, thinking fast. Wasn't the funeral supposed to be closed-casket because the body was in no fit state to be seen? Maybe things were diverging from his seer dream, because it sounded just like . . . "Susan could tell it was Pansy?"

Hermione grimaced. "Not exactly. Um, her descriptions were pretty awful." Lowering her voice, the girl disclosed, "The way she went on, it sounds a bit as though the . . . er, body . . . practically splashed, Harry. Oh dear, this is horrible to have to say. I can't imagine actually seeing it. Poor Susan. But anyway, she said the body must have landed face-up, though there was not much face left. But that hair . . . Pansy's colour, and sort of floating on top of . . . whatever was left of her, was that locket, you know the gold one she was showing off right after Christmas . . ."

Harry gave her a telling look, at which Hermione sighed, "Oh, right, you don't know. Well, it was inscribed with fancy lettering. Two P's intertwined rather like snakes. But anyway, that was how Susan knew who . . ." Hermione abruptly stopped talking and looked away as she heaved in a couple of bracing breaths.

"Want some Stomach Calming Draught?" Harry offered, deliberately keeping his tone casual, and not just to soothe her. It was strategy, too. "I know where Severus keeps some."

"No, it'll be all right," Hermione whispered, though she did sound a bit ill as she said it. She waited a moment, then resumed. "So we went to the headmaster because we knew full well who must have pushed Pansy off the Owlery. We thought he should know at once, before Malfoy had a chance to hurt anybody else."

"Draco did hit me, but he didn't kill Pansy," Harry said at once, and at their doubtful looks, "It's true. What makes you think he did, anyway? Just because he was out of Severus' quarters right at that same time?"

"It is a pretty big coincidence," Ron pointed out.

"No, it's not. It was planned that way. Deliberate, see? Draco's been framed."

Dead silence greeted that pronouncement.

Hermione was the first to break it. "And you believe that because?"

"It's the only thing that fits the facts." Harry sighed, wondering how much to tell them. Too much information could be just as confusing as too little, in his view. "Listen, you didn't see him afterwards. I mean, Severus went and got him, and flooed back in with him, and Draco was out cold. Comatose, I mean, from a combination of some hex that knocked him out and a dose of Somulus.
Somebody . . . Lucius, we think, is determined to get him expelled, even if it means sacrificing another Slytherin so Draco can be blamed for the murder."

Ron snorted. "Mate . . . hate to tell you this, but I think you were sold a bill of goods. Malfoy's smart enough to make it look like he's been framed so he can get away with murder. Very Slytherin, that. Besides which, if it's all just some big scheme of his father's, then why'd he hit you? Sounds to me like he's showing his true colours."

"Draco and I had a disagreement," Harry admitted. "He didn't handle it as well as he should have. That doesn't mean I'm going to turn on him. I'm a better friend than that."

"You're a better friend than he deserves," Hermione quietly insisted.

"I hit Ron, didn't I?" Harry reminded them both, shifting in his seat to challenge first one, then the other, with a hard stare. "We got over it. That's what friends do."

"Yeah, well I was pretty much asking for it, spouting off muck like . . . well, you know what I said," Ron admitted, his skin looking a bit ruddier than usual.

"Right, so you understand." Harry paused a moment, thinking. He didn't like lying to Ron and Hermione, but he couldn't admit to them that Draco had hit him because he was so desperate to go meet Pansy. They were too prone already to think him guilty. But he had to explain that punch somehow . . . "I said something I shouldn't have, too. And Draco couldn't take it. I . . . well, this isn't going to make much sense, but the truth is, I told him about a dream I'd had, about Lucius."

Hermione crossed her arms as she shook her head. "Really, Harry. If Draco Malfoy hit you for badmouthing his horrible father, that ought to be all you need to tell you that he hasn't really changed at all."

Gritting his teeth slightly, Harry levelled a glare at her. "You really shouldn't open your mouth when you don't know anything about the subject, Hermione. I'd told Draco that I dreamed his father was helping Muggleborns and half-bloods escape from Voldemort! And Draco got really upset. Lucius redeemed is something he'd really, really love to see, and he knows deep down that it'll never happen! So he hit me! And you know what? I can't really blame him, considering . . . I'm certainly not prepared to watch the two of you decide he's capable of murder over it!"

Ron and Hermione were staring at him, looking sort of shell-shocked. Hmm, well it was probably an awful lot to take in.

"Why would you tell Malfoy about a dream like that?" Hermione wanted to know.

"Hell, why would you dream that in the first place?" was Ron's question.

"I don't know," Harry answered Ron first. "Look, you haven't been living with Draco for months. This thing with his father really hurts him. How would you feel if your own father had put a price on your head? Maybe I was just feeling bad for him. And as for telling him . . ." Harry sighed. "I shouldn't have, all right? He was getting really depressed about how little he's been able to do to sway Slytherin, and I had dreamed that about Lucius. I guess maybe I thought that it might give Draco something to work towards. But it backfired in a big way. Well, obviously," Harry added, reaching for the ice pack he'd left on the table and putting it over his eye.

"You have some seriously messed up dreams," Ron sighed.

"You're probably feeling conflicted over getting to like Malfoy so much," Hermione said, her expression thoughtful. "You wonder if it's wise, so when you sleep you're inventing fantasies that he
doesn't come from such a horrible family."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, nodding for good measure. Thank goodness, neither of his friends had connected the strange dream to his habit of seeing the future while he slept. He'd much rather have Hermione try to analyze him than have to deal with *that* conversation.

Ron made a face. "Well if you're *conflicted* over liking Draco Malfoy, then at least you haven't gone completely mental."

"Being conflicted would also explain why you're so reluctant to believe him guilty," Hermione pointed out, her tone almost professorial that time.

"I'm reluctant to believe it because he's *not* guilty!" Harry exclaimed. "Draco wasn't even awake when Pansy got killed!"

"How would you know that?"

"I saw him when Severus' potion finally made him wake up! He didn't even know Pansy was dead, Hermione! And he didn't take it very well. I mean, when he left he was still protesting that she couldn't be."

"Hmm," Hermione said, her eyes narrowed as she considered that. "What do you mean, when he left? If he's innocent, shouldn't he stay here to tell the Aurors his story?"

"The last time he told the Aurors anything, he got roughed up for his trouble," Harry explained. "He returned my wand and they . . . well, I don't exactly know what they did when they got him alone, but whatever it was, it was cruel and uncalled for. Severus and Dumbledore are determined to control the Aurors' access to him better this time."

"Dumbledore?" Ron questioned, his tone sharp.

"Yeah, he was here. He knows Draco is innocent," Harry exaggerated. Well, it *might* be true . . . Dumbledore hadn't committed himself to anything, but the way he'd been talking to Draco at the end, with such soft compassion, as though the boy was fragile and one more harsh word might shatter him . . . that had to be a good sign, didn't it? Harry decided it did. "He was here when Draco woke up from the *Somulus*. And . . . well, I actually think he was using a bit of Legilimency on Draco at times. *He* was the one who insisted Draco be moved to where he could be kept safe from the Aurors."

"Don't you think Malfoy knows at least the rudiments of Occlumency?" Hermione pressed.

"No, Lucius wouldn't have wanted Draco using it to hide things from him," Harry decided. "And like I said, you weren't here. Draco wasn't in any fit state to even *think* of it. You have to be calm to *Oclude*. He was too shocked over Pansy, for one, and that's not even counting the way he woke up screaming--" Harry stopped talking, but he knew he couldn't leave it at that. "Don't let on you know, all right?" he begged. "Draco would be really upset, I think, but he's got this awful burn all over his chest. See, I gave him this amulet that was supposed to heat up when he was in danger, and it ended up really causing him some damage. Severus won't let the burn be healed because it's evidence that Draco spent a long time near people who wanted to do him harm."

"Well, it's either evidence or a clever way to throw you off the scent."

"Hermione--"

"A girl's dead, Harry," she explained in a hard tone, just as if he didn't know that. "I understand that
you feel a compulsion to take up for Draco these days, but you can't know for certain that he didn't do it."

"And you can't know for certain that he did!"

"I can know it's highly, highly suspect that he had wandered out of the dungeons just at the right time. And the way you tell it, he was on some sort of . . . rampage, over what you said to him about that dream. Have you thought, Harry . . . maybe your dream made him feel like the Malfoy name was losing some of its evil mystique, and he was determined to reclaim it even at the expense of Pansy Parkinson's life--"

"If he'd wanted to reclaim evil mystique, he'd have tossed a Muggleborn off the Owlery! Somebody like you, Hermione!"

"That's uncalled for!" Ron loudly objected.

"So is her calling Draco a murderer!"

"I didn't say that," Hermione gritted.

"You meant it!"

"Yes," she admitted. "Harry . . . I'm sorry I can't believe in Malfoy goodness as you obviously wish to. But I can't, all right? Do we have to fight about it?"

Harry looked at both his friends for a moment. "I don't want to fight, no. Actually, I need something from you. It's important. It's really important."

Hermione pursed her lips. "I can't let Draco Malfoy get away with murder, so if you're going to ask us to lie then I for one just won't do it."

"I won't, either," Ron said, shaking his head. "I'd lie for you, but see, I'd believe you were innocent. With him . . . well, it's just different."

"You don't have to lie," Harry sighed. "Just don't go talking about things that are really irrelevant to what happened in the Owlery."

"Huh?"

"He means his eye, Ron," Hermione said with a brief glare before she returned her attention to Harry. "It's not completely irrelevant, you know. It establishes the kind of mood Malfoy was in when he stormed out of here."

"Do you want Draco convicted of killing someone because he killed someone, or because you're angry he hit me?" Harry challenged. "I'm just saying, let's allow any evidence of murder to speak for itself, all right? What if he's innocent like I believe, but he gets tossed into Azkaban because the Wizengamot thinks badly of him for hitting the Boy-Who-Lived? Really, it could happen! So promise me, promise, you won't say a word to a soul about my eye!"

Ron looked torn between his sense of Gryffindor fairness and a strong inclination to see Draco Malfoy in Azkaban.

"You owe me!" Harry erupted. "Snape was going to make you do those ten thousand more lines, just like he said! He was going to make your parents make you, and I told him it was stupid and petty and vengeful and made him come up with another way to get you down here so you could see how
good a dad he could be! You owe me for giving you an out, for not making you choose between getting expelled and doing another set of lines!"

Ron pressed his lips together, then gave a sharp nod.

Satisfied for the moment, Harry rounded on Hermione. "And you owe me as well! You owe me for that whole Family Services fiasco! You almost lost me my father by jumping to conclusions too fast. So this time, just hold off, all right? Let the Aurors make up their own minds about just what Draco did and didn't do."

Hermione went still. "Oh, very well," she conceded, sounding put out. "I won't tell a soul about your eye, I promise."

Harry started to think strategy, then. "Who knows besides Dumbledore?"

"Nobody . . ."

"You haven't seen Ginny since she alerted Severus that nobody was answering the door?"

"Well, we saw her but not to talk. She was trying to calm Susan down to get her to the infirmary. We didn't want to distract her from that -- Susan really needed help, and nobody else seemed to realise it! So anyway, all we told Ginny was that Professor Snape had come and was taking care of everything. Then we went to tell Dumbledore about Draco hitting you and going up to the Owlery."

"You don't know he went to the Owlery, you just know I was afraid he would," Harry pointed out, slumping back in his chair. He needed more sleep, but it could wait. "Now, think carefully. After you left Dumbledore's office, did you tell anybody about my eye?"

Ron shook his head. "The headmaster told us not to. Told us not to fan the flames of rumour, too. By then, anyway, I'd realised you might not want the whole school to know that Malfoy had decked you. Bit embarrassing, that. And besides, I knew that Snape would take care of everything."

"Has he, though?" Hermione pressed. "Your eye looks just as awful as before . . ."

Harry hurriedly lifted the ice up to cover it.

"Yeah," Ron agreed. "If you ask me, it looks a bit too awful. When you opened the door before, you acted like Malfoy had just left, which would mean he'd just hit you, right? But your eye was already black and puffy . . .?"

"Yeah, that's why Severus is a bit leery of jumping right into a treatment without considering everything carefully," Harry invented. "Remember all the magic he poured onto my eyes to heal them? He thinks this early bruising might be a result of that. He's holding off on adding more magic to the mix until he can research the matter and be sure he knows what the results will be."

"In other words," Hermione remarked, her tone sharp, "he's been busy dealing with Malfoy. Has anyone thought of the possibility that without immediate treatment, you might lose your sight in that eye?"

"It's just as likely that not letting the tissues heal before applying magic could have a bad effect," Harry defended his father. "Severus isn't ignoring the issue, Hermione, and I resent your suggesting that he is! He's a good father!"

To both of us, he wanted to add, but decided he'd really better not. It wasn't that he was ashamed to admit that he considered Draco Malfoy his brother . . . it was more that to admit it would do nothing
but fan the flames, as Dumbledore had put it. Harry didn't need Ron and Hermione getting even more angry about things, he just didn't.

"Listen," he entreated them both. "We need a cover story and we all need to agree to stick to it. Of course, the two of you probably won't be questioned at all. No reason to involve you as long as you don't go involving yourselves . . . but just in case . . . Let's see, Ginny came down here with you, but you sent her off to find Severus when it seemed like nobody was home. Then you told her that my father was taking care of everything. So . . . when you see her again, just say that Draco and I couldn't answer the door because we'd been experimenting with um . . . deafening potions. And that's what Severus was taking care of, right? He came home to find us in a state . . . he answered the door and told you he would help us brew the counter potion and that everything was going to be fine."

Ron cleared his throat. "That's . . . hmm. That's a pretty good cover story, I guess."

"Yeah, I just have to tell Draco to stick to it, too . . ." Harry sighed. "Though if they put him under Veritaserum I guess the truth about my eye will come out."

"Too bad they can't, then," was Hermione's opinion.

Harry crinkled his forehead, then cut it out when he realised it made his eye ache worse. "Huh?"

"Oh, Harry," she chided. "It's all right there in your potions text. Veritaserum can't be used on wizarding minors--people under seventeen--" she clarified, just as if she thought Harry was completely ignorant, "without parental consent. And as Malfoy's been emancipated, he's his own parent, so to speak. All he has to do is refuse and the Ministry can't do a thing about it."

"Are you sure? Maybe being emancipated will mean he's not really a minor any longer," Harry worried.

"No, he's still a minor. He's just empowered to make his own parenting decisions, including this one," Hermione insisted. "If the Ministry wants to use truth serum, they have to get him to agree or wait until he's seventeen."

Harry's first thought was of Umbridge, and how she certainly hadn't asked the Dursleys if she could slip Veritaserum into Harry's drink, but of course Umbridge was hardly one to respect the laws. Come to think of it, even Snape and Dumbledore had broken that law --when they'd insisted that Draco prove his change of loyalties via truth serum-- but Harry could hardly compare them to Umbridge for that. Or resent them, even.

What he did resent, just a bit, was the fact that his father had never once mentioned that Draco couldn't legally be forced to take Veritaserum. And if Snape and the headmaster weren't going to leave Draco alone with the Aurors, then he wouldn't be illegally forced to take it, either . . . so truth serum just wasn't a danger. Yet Snape had let him believe that it was, had let him believe that they had to go to great lengths to keep Draco from realizing that Harry could break out of Petrificus!

But there was nothing to worry about, right? As long as Draco kept his head and didn't let himself be tricked by clever psychological ploys, Harry's secrets should be safe. All his secrets. His black eye. His dark powers. The prophecy Voldemort still wanted to get his scaly hands on . . .

"You all right there, Harry?" Ron questioned. "You've gone awfully quiet all of a sudden."

"Just thinking," Harry passed it off. "Bit worried about Draco."

He noticed the pitying look Ron and Hermione gave him, but decided to ignore it.
Good thing, too. He wouldn't have wanted his father to floo into the middle of an argument; Severus was already too inclined to think the worst of his Gryffindor friends.

"Mr Weasley, Miss Granger," Snape formally greeted them as he brushed ash from the shoulders of his robes. "Harry. I thought you would be sleeping. Good to see you using the ice, at least."

"I did sleep for a while. Doorbell woke me up . . . um, did you get everything settled with the Parkinsons?"

Hermione flinched a little bit. Harry supposed she was realizing what it would be like for her own parents to hear that their daughter had died.

Snape gave a solemn nod. "They will support an inquest though like most purebloods, they balked at the suggestion of an autopsy. The Aurors are here and have started investigating the scene of the crime as well as the condition of the body, though as I said they will tolerate no physical intrusion into it . . ."

"You seem pretty tired, Dad," Harry softly observed. "Maybe you should get some sleep, too?"

"No, there is much left to be done. The funeral is set for Wednesday, here at Hogwarts. As Head of House I have some responsibilities related to that. And too, I promised to go speak with Draco tonight."

"I'm coming too," Harry promptly announced.

Snape glared. "You need your sleep."

"I can sleep in--" At that, Harry abruptly realised that there was something besides the black eye he had to get Ron and Hermione to keep secret. "You can't tell anybody about Devon," he insisted, knowing they would soon figure out just where Draco must have gone.

"No, we can't," Hermione agreed, her tone strangely dry.

Seeing how puzzled Harry was looking, Ron thought to explain, "She means the Fidelius charm won't let us, Harry. We literally can't tell anybody about Devon. Not even under truth serum, I don't think."

"I thought that just meant you couldn't tell anybody the location?"

"It means," Snape explained, walking to Harry, "that nobody save Albus can so much as reveal the existence of my cottage. The Aurors will not know that Albus and I are hiding him; they will merely know that he is unavailable."

Harry knew a moment's fierce rage at Wormtail. Godric's Hollow should have been so safe! Well, at least the headmaster would be a reliable Secret Keeper. He might not be completely convinced of Draco's innocence yet, but he was getting there. Harry just hoped that telling him about the map wasn't a terrible mistake. "Just as well we have a good place for Draco," he murmured.

Snape's robes rippled as he crossed his arms in front of his chest. "And you have worked everything out with your friends?" he pressed, the last word half-sneered.

"They weren't here to see what an awful state Draco was in, so they don't have the same kind of confidence in him that you and I have," Harry said, deliberately understating just how hostile towards Draco the Gryffindors were.
Snape curled a disdainful lip, clearly reading between the lines.

"But they won't tell anybody about my black eye," Harry rushed to add. "They promised."

"Oh, Gryffindor promises," the Potions Master scorned. "Obliviate would be a good deal more reliable, you realise. No? Well, then, I'll want a promise of my own, for whatever it's worth," Snape drawled, his dark gaze seeking out and assessing his son's friends. "You two will in no way assist the Aurors in their investigation, is that clear? You will not tell them that Draco was absent from the dungeons at the time of the murder. If you've disclosed that little tidbit to anyone besides the headmaster--"

"They haven't," Harry interrupted.

Snape never stopped speaking. "You will retract it! You will say you misunderstood Harry and you now realise that Draco was here the entire time--"

Harry interrupted again, that time raising his voice. "Look, they're going to say that Ginny had to go get you because Draco and I had been messing around with deafening potions and we didn't hear the door, all right? We already worked it out!"

Snape looked slightly impressed, Harry thought, as the man considered that and finally pronounced, "Very Slytherin."

"I thought so," Ron put in. "Guess you do belong in both houses."

He said it in a neutral tone, not one of disgust or approval, but that was all right with Harry. "I do," he quietly agreed. "I told you that Slytherin didn't mean evil. When you think about Draco, remember that, all right? He's not. I mean, he has issues and he's a long way from perfect, but he's not a murderer."

Ron and Hermione looked at each other again, but had enough sense not to reply to that while Snape was in the room. No doubt about it, if the Potions Master was pushed too far, he might use Obliviate to solve his problem.

"It's almost curfew," Hermione murmured. "We should be going. Harry, are you still going to move back to the Tower on Sunday?"

Harry glanced up at his father. "Um, not sure."

"Assuming I can arrange matters so as to conceal or heal his black eye, yes he will," Snape crisply answered.

"But if Draco has to be in Devon for a long while I think I should go stay with him for moral support--"

"I think you have been out of proper classes for quite long enough."

"But--"

"I also think," Snape interrupted, "that I am your father and you will do as I say. And," he held up a hand to stave off Harry's attempt to speak, "I further think that this is a family matter and you would do well not to argue with me in front of your friends."

Snape had said something like that to him before, Harry remembered. Respect, at least in front of others, really mattered to the man; maybe it had something to do with Slytherin ambition.
"All right," he conceded. "Um, Ron, Hermione. I'll let you know, all right? About moving back. And in the meantime, I think you'd better not come visit again. I don't want the Aurors realizing you're here a lot and that you might have information. It'd just be better for them not to know to ask you anything, right?"

Harry fished Sals from his pocket so he could open the door --though under his father's scrutiny, he was careful to conceal his wandless magic-- then ushered his friends out before Snape could bring up the benefits of Obliviate again.

"So what about Devon?" asked Harry after the door was firmly shut. "Can I come? It's not like you and the headmaster could want to talk to Draco alone, is it? I need to be in on everything so I can be sure to... uh, keep all the stories straight in case the Aurors question me... say, why didn't you tell me that there wasn't any danger of Draco having to take Veritaserum? Hermione says it requires parental consent."

"Perhaps," Snape coolly informed him, "because I wanted you highly aware of the importance of monitoring what you say to Draco or in front of him."

"Oh, come on, he's not going to break under interrogation. Draco's too tricky for that. So unless they rough him up again --though remember that didn't work last time-- he'll be all right. And anyway you aren't going to let them get violent, I'm sure--"

"Harry," Snape interrupted, his tone so soft that Harry knew to brace himself. "You don't appear to comprehend what sort of state Draco is in at present. Yes, he's possessed of a fine intelligence and an excellent sense of strategy. But learning so abruptly that Miss Parkinson had died... it's unbalanced him. When I got him to Devon and the truth began to sink in past his shock and denial..." The Potions Master frowned. "I tell you this in confidence; do not repeat it. Not to him or anyone else, not under any circumstances. But you must know, so that you will appreciate the need for caution."

"I won't say a word," Harry swore, realising at once why his father seemed intent on pounding that point home. "I'm sorry I didn't respect your confidence before, back when you mentioned the restrictions on Draco's vault. It won't happen again."

Snape waved a hand as though to say that was all forgotten. "I'm sorry, as well. For what I said at the time. You are a fine son, Harry, and..." The Potions Master looked away then back, his gaze meeting Harry's as he said the rest. "I want to be certain you know how very proud I am of you. When you stayed here as I requested and let me be the one to bring your brother back home, you did the right thing. The mature thing."

Harry shuffled his feet nervously. "Thank you," he whispered past a choking, lumpy feeling in his throat.

"Thank you," Snape answered. "You let me concentrate on Draco alone, instead of causing me to be torn by worries about what dangers my other son might encounter. It helped, Harry. You helped."

Harry couldn't help but frown. "That's good, and I like hearing that you're proud of me, but... you know, something really bothers me. My first cycle of seer dreams helped give me what I needed to face down Voldemort and survive Samhain. But this latest cycle... I just can't see much point in it. What good did it do to know about the Owlery in advance? None! But I can't believe the dreams serve no purpose at all, I just can't! Prophecy is supposed to be good for something, isn't it?"

Snape tilted his head to one side. "I think perhaps your dream did indeed serve a purpose, Harry. The sheer urgency of thinking Draco likely to die is what brought your feelings for him into clear focus."
"Well, yeah," Harry admitted. "But still, I keep thinking I should have been able to do something more than just . . ." For some reason, he couldn't say love him again. Too embarrassing, somehow. He knew it shouldn't be, but it was.

Snape's nod seemed to say he understood the reticence, but that made sense. He'd only ever said that he loved Harry that once, after all. But this last thing, admitting he was proud . . . that was worth just as much. Maybe even more.

It took Harry a minute to remember how they'd got around to talking of love and pride. "Um, you were going to tell me something about my brother?" he prompted.

"Yes," the Potions Master paused as if considering how to phrase it. "When I was alone in Devon with him, Harry, Draco broke down and cried."

Harry felt his eyes go wide. Well, one eye. The other one, he realised, couldn't feel at all. Thinking he'd used the ice pack for long enough, he set it on the table before asking, "Cried? You mean he cried tears? Draco?"

"Harry, the girl he loves is dead."

"But . . . he tried to kill her himself just a few months ago!"

"Believe me, if Draco Malfoy had truly tried to kill her, she would have died then. He was angry and acting on it. Impulse control, as you know. But he never meant to do worse than make certain she would not attack him ever again."

"But . . . how can he love her?" Harry had to ask. "He went months down here without mentioning her at all, and then when he started getting letters from her, he kept them secret-- oh, I get it, I think." Harry sighed. "He didn't know if he could believe her letters at first, he didn't want to be played for a fool, he was going to make sure he didn't end up humiliated or something."

"Yes, so don't humiliate him by letting him realise you know about the tears. I would not have told you, except you need to understand that he is not his usual self at the moment. He may be more vulnerable to the Aurors' machinations than we would like."

"I understand grief," Harry admitted, thinking of Sirius. He'd been beyond depressed all through the previous summer. He'd hid in his room and ignored the Dursleys completely, so much so that he'd never even realised that Aunt Petunia was ill. Of course, they'd told him she was visiting this relative or that to explain her absences, but even so, he'd barely noticed she was gone.

Then again, his grief had been more than sorrow at losing his beloved godfather. He'd felt responsible for Sirius . . . but didn't Draco feel to blame for what had happened to Pansy?

Even counting that, though, there was a crucial difference between the two situations. Sirius had really loved Harry in return, whereas . . .

"Pansy was just leading him on, trying to get him to leave the rooms so she could double-cross him!" Harry erupted. "How can Draco not see that?"

"Love is blind?"

"Yeah, but how could the conspirators have known he was in that closet with Pansy unless it was all part of a bigger plot? Draco's got to realise--"

"Harry," Snape interrupted. "Love is blind."
"All right, I get it," Harry agreed, nodding. "Draco's not going to listen to us, not on that point."

"Not at the moment, certainly. I think we need to let him grieve. Trying to convince him that the girl wasn't worthy of him can only divide him from us at a time when he needs our support."

"Speaking of support, can I come along with you?"

Snape sighed. "At some level I would prefer to keep you out of the fray, but I suppose you are right. You do need to stay apprised of our full strategy for dealing with the crisis. And too, when the Aurors finish with the Owlsery and the body, they may well come down here to investigate Draco's living space. The seeds of rumour being planted by the conspirators will already have taken root, I have no doubt. I'd no more wish you to face Aurors alone than I wish Draco to do the same."

"Yeah, and the way you tell it, if I won't let them in then they might just break in." Harry shuddered, wondering more than ever why he'd wanted to be an Auror. Then again, there were some good ones, weren't there? "What about Tonks, or some of the other Order Aurors? Couldn't the headmaster arrange for them to investigate?"

"He is doing his best, but at present, Tonks and the others we might trust are unavailable. Shortly before Miss Parkinson was killed, the Dark Mark appeared over Parliament Square."

Harry felt his heart drop. "Over Parliament Square?"

"Briefly." Snape amended. "Nevertheless, only the most inexperienced and junior of Aurors have been sent to investigate a mere murder. The others are preparing for an attack on London. Possibly, an attack on the Muggle government."

Snape's tone alerted him to the truth. Well, that and the fact that an attack on Parliament struck Harry as completely ludicrous, once he'd got over his initial shock. "Lucius planned all that merely as a diversion . . . so we'd get stuck with the Aurors he's most likely to be able to influence. Green ones."

"Precisely. And so you are right. It is better for me to be here with you, or both of us gone," Snape decided. "Though I would have preferred not to announce the Devon visits to your friends, you understand."

Harry nodded.

"But what's done is done," Snape continued. "So. Go fetch Draco's schoolbooks. He might as well have something to occupy his mind."

Nodding, Harry went and got them. Remembering that he had popped Sals back in his pocket after he'd let Ron and Hermione out, he lay the snake gently down on his bed, sternly cautioning her to stay out of the Floo as he and Severus would be using it. Then he shook out his cloak and ran a quick charm over it to smooth out the worst of the wrinkles. Definitely, tossing the garment on the floor like he'd done more than once today wasn't very good for the fine fabric.

"You're back to hiding your wandless magic. Good," Snape approved as he walked in. "Ready?"

Harry looked about for a moment. "Draco likes reading, but I wish I could think of something more to cheer him up."

"Consider asking Albus. He did Legilimize the boy; he may know what might help."

Harry stiffened at the mention of the headmaster. Legilimency or no, Dumbledore's attitude toward Draco had been awfully harsh. His brother had been right; he was judged on the basis of his name.
Harry knew what that was like, but at least he was usually judged kindly. Maybe it wasn't so bad being the Boy-Who-Lived. Better than than have everyone at first acquaintance start thinking of you as the Boy-Who-Probably-Belongs-in-Azkaban-where-His-Lousy-Father-Should-Have-Stayed. Of course Draco had brought a lot of that on himself, but now he was trying to stand up for the Light. Couldn't the headmaster have given him the benefit of the doubt? Given him one second to explain before assuming him guilty?

"The headmaster's in Devon already?" Harry thought to ask.

"No, we will join him at your house and Apparate to Devon together," Snape explained. "We will explain the matter of the map to him and attempt to contact Lupin before we journey on."

"I sure hope we can reach Remus," Harry said, slipping his cloak on. Looking down, he saw that his hands were beginning to shake. What if Remus couldn't tell them anything useful? He might have helped construct the map, but that didn't mean he would know how it had been fooled this time . . . His hands trembling even worse at that thought, Harry was about to shove them out of sight, but his father, noticing his unease, reached out to hold them instead.

Cool hands on his, Snape's long fingers comforting as they wrapped completely around his and squeezed.

"We will solve it, Harry," his father promised. "Whether Lupin can assist us or not, we will find out exactly who has done this horrible thing. And when we do . . ." Those fingers tightened again, though not enough to hurt. "I may end up with blood on my hands, after all."

Harry was about to say that Severus would have to stand in line, but he didn't want to hear another lecture on the dangers of vengeance. "Um, I thought you didn't approve," he ventured, "of taking revenge, of . . ."

"I don't approve of you doing it, certainly," the Potions Master admitted, his features twisting as though in acknowledgment of his own hypocrisy. "But I am hardened already. Beyond all redemption, some would say."

"That's not true. You saved me, took care of me, took me in--"

"I did none of that in search of redemption, I hope you realise."

I hope you realise . . .

That told Harry something; it really did.

"Of course I realise," he exclaimed, moving closer to his father, moving to lean against him while they still held hands. That didn't last long, though. Letting go of Harry's fingers, Snape wrapped his arms about the boy and pulled him close.

"I know you didn't help me after Samhain just to prove to people that you were spying all those years or something," Harry went on, that choking feeling washing back over him. "I know, all right? I know. I never once even thought that was why you started being so good to me."

A low, rumble shook the Potions Master's chest. Harry was slow to recognise it as . . . well, not laughter, not exactly. Some sort of dark chuckle, perhaps.

"To think I gave up my Order of Merlin," Snape softly remarked. "Oh, but that's not quite accurate. I didn't get one to give up. Albus put a stop to it for me before it could get to that stage."
"For you?" Harry blinked, the world sort of going out of focus for a second. "You . . . but I thought you'd always wanted one."

"I can't deny it has a certain . . . appeal," Snape admitted, moving one hand to the back of Harry's head and simply holding him. "But I found out after Samhain that I most definitely did not want one if it came at the price of your believing that was why I saved you, or why I worked so hard to restore your sight."

"I wouldn't have thought that," Harry immediately denied, but then, giving it a bit more thought, realised, "Well, all right, maybe I would have thought that a little. Just a very little, though. We weren't . . . very close yet, back then. I wonder if you can still get your Order. What if I wrote . . . no wait, I don't want to ask Fudge for anything . . ."

"Another reason the Order would have been rather tainted, as Cornelius Fudge has lost what shard of respect I might have once borne him. And too, he only wanted to give it to me as part of his transparent campaign to recoup his own public image after he had vilified you only to be proven wrong about Voldemort's return."

"Well, maybe we can get you onto a Chocolate Frog card instead," Harry lightly joked. "Severus Snape. Worked for years toward the overthrow of the dark wizard Voldemort. Saved Harry Potter's life on multiple occasions . . ."

"Two," Snape corrected, letting him go. "Don't exaggerate."

"More than two, depending on how you count them," Harry rallied, smiling. When he remembered what they were still facing, though, his expression went solemn. "I suppose we'd better get going so we can ask the headmaster to let us talk to Remus."

Snape cast him a sideways glance. "I somehow never thought I'd be so eager to speak with Remus Lupin."

"I'm eager too," Harry admitted, following his father out to the Floo. "Um, and not just because of map. I miss Remus something awful. Does that . . . um, does that bother you?"

The Potions Master gave the question some serious thought. "Yes, it does," he finally admitted. "But not because I suffer some twisted form of jealousy. I simply cannot respect the man much."

"Just because he's a werewolf?" Harry thought that patently unfair. It wasn't like Remus wanted to be a werewolf, or had chosen to be one, even.

"Because he has no strength of character," Snape sighed. "Lupin ignores his own convictions. He takes the path of least resistance rather than the one he believes to be right, simply because it is easier."

"You're judging him by things he did when he was still in school here--"

"He's scarcely distinguished himself since. Recruiting the werewolves," Snape scoffed. "Hardly a dangerous assignment, is it?"

"It could be very important!"

"It could be," Snape agreed. "But my point is this: were it important and dangerous, Lupin would not agree to it. Do you know what he was doing while I spent years risking my life and sanity so that Dumbledore might have a firsthand account of Voldemort's activities? He was working in Muggle London, among Muggles, doing absolutely nothing for the cause of Light!"
"Well, it's hard for him to get work in the wizarding world," Harry pointed out.

"It wasn't then; his affliction was known only to a select few. But the wizarding world was becoming engulfed in war. Lupin made quite certain to stay clear of battle. James and Lily, you understand, did not. Lupin is not a man worthy of your respect."

"You . . ." Harry sighed. "I guess some part of me knew that you would never, ever like him."

"Like him," Snape mocked. "It would be more apropos to speculate on whether I will ever be able to tolerate him."

Something deep inside Harry started hurting, then. "Draco can't stand him either. I'd just hoped . . . no, I didn't really hope. I knew it would be stupid to. Beyond stupid. But . . . I'd have liked it if we could have all been friends, instead of the two of you hating him so much. He's . . . look, he's not anything like what you've become to me. I don't look on him as a father, not at all. But he's really nice! I know you can't see it . . . but he is."

The Potions Master considered that for a moment. "Perhaps you misunderstand. I am not saying you may not see him, Harry."

That certainly came as a shock. "I thought you wouldn't let me," Harry confessed, biting the inside of his cheek, he was so agitated. "I mean, you didn't, for the longest time, and you weren't even really in charge of me, then. Well you were, I guess, but not like you are now. But you will? Let Remus visit?"

"Yes," Snape confirmed, though he didn't look too pleased. "But Harry . . . remember what we have discussed here tonight. Lupin is . . . perhaps not the best choice of friend."

"He's not really the way you make him out," Harry insisted. "He's just . . . got a different way of working for the Light, that's all. Not everybody can do the most dangerous assignments, you know. Everybody's got different strengths."

"Lupin's has been staying safe and warm."

As it turned out though, Snape was wrong.

Remus Lupin had been neither safe nor warm during his time abroad.
"Headmaster," Snape greeted the older man as he and Harry strode from the fireplace at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. "Have you any news of import?"

Albus Dumbledore's eyes were sad and sombre as he nodded. "I remained with the Aurors while they investigated the Owlery and examined the young lady's body. Even without an autopsy they were able to determine that she was subjected to the Corpus Aqueous curse before she was killed."

Snape flicked a glance towards Harry. "It increases the water content in the body. Corpus Aqueous alone would kill were it allowed to last sufficient time." His dark eyes assessed Dumbledore again. "And so?"

"She was cursed immediately before being flung from the Owlery; she died on impact."

Snape frowned. "I see. The Aurors presume Corpus Aqueous was inflicted out of sheer spite? It would appear the only purpose for it was to allow the body to be greatly damaged."

"Its purpose is to link the crime to someone who is believed to virulently hate Miss Parkinson. And indeed, the Aurors have already heard from several 'helpful' Slytherins how angry Mr Malfoy became that day in your class, Severus, how he screamed that he would make her and her parents sorry."

Again, the Potions Master explained for Harry's benefit, "Between Samhain and the incident in my class, Miss Parkinson spent a weekend at home. She had already broken off her... dalliance with Draco, but attacked him only after she returned from visiting her parents. Draco has long blamed them for the way her attitude towards him suddenly hardened. Unfortunately, he did rather advertise this fact that day in class."

"And so now the Aurors believe he deliberately arranged for her death to be particularly gruesome, so much so that her parents would not be able to see in the body the daughter they love." The headmaster's beard swayed as he sadly shook his head.

Harry couldn't help the question that came to mind. "But Draco didn't do it, not the Aqueous curse nor the murder itself. So, instead of the curse being used to help frame him, maybe it was supposed to disguise the identity of whoever was killed? Maybe Draco's right, and it's not Pansy at all." Of course, that wouldn't account for what they'd seen on the map, but they'd concluded already that the map had to have been fooled ...

"Well-reasoned, my boy," Dumbledore praised him, though there was no twinkle in those kindly old eyes, not now. "However, there is no doubt that it is Miss Parkinson who has passed on. The official Hogwarts roll magically updates itself, and her name has been crossed out with the notation deceased written alongside."

Dumbledore sighed, then sadly continued, "Besides, when her parents went to see her, they could recognise her magically if not physically. A little bit of a person's magical signature lingers for a short time after death, you see. It's not enough for strangers to detect, generally, but someone who has known you throughout your whole life can often sense it."

"Can't Polyjuice Potion mimic the signature?" Harry pressed.

Snape sighed. "Harry, I can see what you are trying to do. Having heard how very much her death distresses Draco, you are trying to find some hope for him. But there is none. It is Pansy Parkinson..."
who was killed, and to suggest otherwise to Draco would be abominably cruel and only prolong his grief."

"All right," Harry sighed. "I'll cut it out. I just think . . . the Aqueous curse sounded more than a little strange. Suspicious, I mean."

"No doubt the intent was to apply the curse using Draco's wand. When the conspirators could not make it perform, they doubtless still reasoned that the curse itself would help incriminate Draco, as all of Hogwarts was aware of how vicious his anger seemed that day in my class."

Dumbledore stiffened slightly. "You have certain knowledge, Severus?"

That question confused Harry until Snape drew out of his robes a smooth wand Harry recognised as Draco's. "Not as of yet, but I believe this may be of some use to us." He held the wand out towards the headmaster, who took it in hand.

"How did you get that? Dobby was supposed to return it to me," Harry objected.

"He wanted to," Snape confirmed. "He was rather adamant, but he is in fact employed by Hogwarts these days. The magical constraints governing house-elf behaviour require him to do the bidding of staff members above students, even favourite students."

Harry frowned. "But . . . Dobby's not bonded to Hogwarts, is he?"

"Technically, no," Dumbledore murmured as he turned the wand over and over in his hands, staring at it almost as though Legilimising it. "I thought better than to do that to him, especially considering that Lucius Malfoy is one of the governors. I did tell him that he must do as staff asks, however."

"I still don't like it," Harry argued. "I told him not to tell anybody, anybody, I'd sent him to look for the wand."

"He didn't tell me," Snape said impatiently. "I already knew. Harry, I have no doubt the elf is loyal to you, but he is aware both that I am your legal guardian and that I have your best interests at heart. I told him I had given you a sleeping draught and that I would return the wand as requested. Even so, I had to apply a bit of . . . magical pressure, shall we say, to get the wand from him."

"You didn't hurt him?"

Snape tone was impatient. "I haven't time to argue the ethics of making a recalcitrant house-elf do as it is told."

"The circumstances of your obtaining this," Dumbledore murmured. "Tell me."

"The conspirators must have realised, when the wand would not do their bidding, that keeping it in their possession would incriminate them rather than Draco. Neither could they leave it in the Owlery since it would not contain the Corpus Aqueous curse Miss Parkinson suffered. Therefore, they took it with them onto the grounds. Thinking, I presume, that Draco might attempt to Accio it, they applied rather heavy anti-summoning charms to a large area of soft earth and then thrust it straight down into the dirt. Snape took a breath. "A large rock was further warded and was then placed over the site. I suspect this was to mark it in case the conspirators wished to retrieve the wand at some point. Dobby, by the way, is now standing guard nearby with strict instructions to alert me the instant anyone appears to take an undue interest in that particular area of the grounds."

"So Dobby Accio'd it, is that how he got it?"
The Potions Master shook his head. "No, as it turns out, the kinship potion Draco applied to his wand renders it immune to any magic not issued by a Malfoy. Not even I could summon it, now. I doubt I could have found it, either, but as Dobby is a former *Malfoy* elf--"

"The kinship potion!" Harry exclaimed. "It made the wand . . . uh, just scream Malfoy or something? I mean, in a way Dobby could detect?"

"Yes, precisely. It bonded the wand so tightly to the Malfoy name that the elf could track it, after a fashion. And since I am a staff member, I could track him. When I reached him, he had just finished unwarding the earth so that it would release the wand."

The headmaster frowned. "This is a distressing development, Severus. If *Accio* will not work on the wand then perhaps, neither will *Priori Incantatem*."

"Agreed, Headmaster. The variant of the potion Draco used prevents anyone but a Malfoy from using the wand or applying magic to it."

"So the wand can't exonerate Draco?" Harry sighed. "If he's the only one who can cast *Priori Incantatem* . . . the Aurors won't trust the results. Or . . . well I suppose Lucius Malfoy could cast it but we're hardly about to trust him . . ."

"A sticky situation," Dumbledore concurred.

Harry looked towards where his father stood with his arms crossed. "They why did you say the wand might be of some use?"

"The headmaster at times has a sixth sense . . ." Snape murmured in reply.

"Unfortunately, I can get no sense of who may have handled this," the headmaster said, shaking his head. "I can't even detect you or Dobby, let alone the conspirators. It is as Harry said . . . this wand now simply resonates *Malfoy*."

Frustrated, Harry shoved his hands into his pockets. "Why did Draco have to mess about with that potion!"

"If he had not," Snape reminded the boy, laying a hand on his shoulder, "his wand would disgorge *Corpus Aqueous* and serve as key evidence against him."

"So you are defending his dabbling, are you, Severus?"

"No," Snape answered, his tone short. "He will most definitely be punished, and I will take greater care which books I leave within reach of my sons."

"Hey, I didn't do anything--"

One look from Snape, and Harry fell silent.

Albus Dumbledore took the scene in, his blue eyes steady as though in deep contemplation.

"What?" Harry pressed.

Dumbledore coughed ever so slightly, then popped a lemon sherbet into his mouth. For just a second, Harry wondered if the headmaster's deep pockets were charmed to constantly supply them. Then the man spoke, and Harry forgot all about sweets.

"When Severus instructed you to *go sit with your brother*, I rather expected you not to appreciate the
phrase, all things considered."

Snape shifted on his feet. "Albus, I told you some time ago that I--"

"Yes, yes, I know what you told me, Severus," the headmaster interrupted. "You were rather
vehement on the topic, as I recall. That says nothing about what Harry feels."

"I think you heard how I feel about Draco," Harry dryly murmured. Then a memory took hold of
him . . . the headmaster, insisting Harry explain why he wanted to be adopted. "Is this more strategy
for the war?" he suddenly asked. "You're trying to figure out if Draco being my brother is an asset or
a liability? Or maybe you already think you know, since you did call him exactly that!"

"It should not startle you that I was dismayed by the report your friends delivered. And then to see
your eye . . ." Albus Dumbledore lifted his shoulders. "I perhaps overreacted. At that moment it
seemed quite likely that Mr Malfoy had gone completely mad and could very well have pushed Miss
Parkinson to her death."

Harry got that, sort of, but it didn't help him feel a whole lot better. "Are you apologising?" he
pressed. "For assuming he did it? Because I think Draco's the one you should apologise to!"

A kindly look, that time. "I already did, when you and Severus disappeared into the potions lab to
arrange for his wand to disgorge Petrificus."

So the headmaster knew already all about Harry's hex-breaking abilities? Harry noted that, but went
right back to the topic uppermost in mind. "If you apologised then why was Draco practically in tears
when we got back to the bedroom?"

Dumbledore sighed. "I thought it best he understood a few facts about expulsion. The Ministry
cannot charge him, let alone convict and imprison him, without a certain amount of proof. This
works to our advantage, assuming we can outwit those who actively seek to manufacture evidence
against him. However, expulsion is an entirely different matter. Hogwarts is a private institution.
Students are permitted to remain entirely at the pleasure of the Board of Governors. Any student can
be summarily expelled at any time for any reason whatsoever."

"Or no reason at all," Snape added.

"I thought . . ." Harry frowned. "Severus made some threats to expel Ron. I thought teachers were in
charge of deciding that?"

"Teachers may make a recommendation to expel; the final decision is up to the headmaster, after
which parents can appeal the decision to the Board if they wish. All of this is spelled out in the
school's charter, Harry. The Board can also move to expel a student. Draco will be allowed to
present a defence, but should the Board proceed with the expulsion, there is no right of appeal."

"Not even to the Ministry?"

"Hogwarts is a private institution," the headmaster repeated. "We are subject to educational edicts as
I am sure you recall, but the expulsion of an individual student is not a Ministry matter."

"What if the Ministry passed a new charter saying it was?"

"Do you seriously want Fudge deciding who is entitled to a magical education and who is not?"
Snape challenged. "Or, Merlin forbid, some idiot determined to promulgate a pureblood aristocracy?
All the half-bloods and Muggleborns would find themselves summarily ejected from the school!"
"To think you once advocated that very thing," Dumbledore murmured.

"My son," Snape returned, "does not need to be reminded of that! He is well aware that when I was his age, I held decidedly different ideals and aspirations than I do now. He also knows how I came to understand the truth about wizarding lineage."

"Your son," Albus questioned, "or both of them?"

Snape waved an irritated hand. "I've discussed the matter with Draco as well. At length. He remains more prejudiced than I would prefer, but I understand the reasons for that."

"Draco's all right," Harry protested. "I mean, he used to think blood was everything, and now he says it isn't. He told Hermione she was clever, and he insisted that she be involved in my training so she could be prepared to help out if I get attacked when I'm back in class. And yeah, he's still stuck-up and all, but . . . well, he's all right, that's all . . . none of that is going to help him, is it? If the Board of Governors can expel at will . . ."

"They can. My fear is that Lucius will ensure that they will."

"Why don't they know better than to listen to the likes of him?" Harry erupted. "It's ridiculous! He tried his best to kill students at one point! And they've got to know he belongs in Azkaban. And he's spent months trying to get Draco kicked out of the castle -- don't you think this'll look just a little bit convenient, this whole frame-up?"

"I think Lucius has considered quite carefully how to proceed," Snape murmured. "Well, let's get on with it, shall we? Headmaster, Harry and I will need to speak with Remus Lupin at once. We witnessed the murder on a rather fascinating map, one I believe you have at least a passing familiarity with? Lupin may be able to shed some much-needed light on the entire incident."

Dumbledore narrowed his gaze. "Ah, the map Crouch had for a time." He glanced once at Harry. "Which you made good use of last year to outwit Dolores Umbridge."

"Yeah, thanks for returning it to me."

"What else could I do, given that you have so little of your father's?"

"It wasn't just his. Remus helped make it. So we have to talk to him about how it was made."

Dumbledore tapped his fingertips together, then glanced rather sternly over his half-moon spectacles. "Remus Lupin is occupied at present with Order matters. Vital Order matters, one might say. I would rather not disturb him."

"We most likely only need a few moments of his time, Headmaster," Snape said, the polite words a thin veneer over hard, determined tones.

"It is not a matter of time," Albus explained, turning his back on them to walk over to the couch and sink into it. He gestured for them both to be seated as well. Harry waited until his father took the cue, then followed suit. "What Professor Lupin is doing . . . well, let me just say that I would prefer he concentrate on it, and not on Hogwarts matters. And too, we should not forget that he had Miss Parkinson in class when he taught here. Yes, yes, far better to leave well enough alone and allow him to focus on his assignment."

"I somehow doubt," Snape drawled, "that Remus Lupin is going to be overcome with a paroxysm of grief that one Slytherin has died and another is accused. In point of fact, he detests both Draco and Pansy. He complained to me more than once that they both were unfailingly disrespectful to him, and
insisted I intervene as Head of Slytherin." A thin smile curled Snape's lips. "Naturally, I refused. His lack of classroom management skills was his own problem."

Harry thought that entire speech was unfair, from the presumption that Remus would be uncaring about a Slytherin death to the information that Snape had been as unhelpful as possible towards his Gryffindor colleague. But since arguing those matters wouldn't help convince Dumbledore to put them in contact with Remus, he stayed silent.

Besides, his father had a real thing about respect, didn't he? Probably it was better all around to wait until they were alone before he called Severus an arse.

Dumbledore didn't go so far as to call Snape names, but he made it pretty clear he was thinking them. "Really, Severus!" he exclaimed, shaking his head in a theatrical way that actually called Draco to mind. "Slytherin or no, the young lady was his student, and I can't believe Remus Lupin so hard-hearted as to be completely unaffected by her tragic end. And to hear from your own lips that you aided your students to make his year here rougher than it need be! Moreover, when you knew full well that he was often weakened from his battles with the moon? For shame, Severus, for absolute shame."

"If he was too weak to be teaching, then he should not have been teaching!" Snape roared, the issue still obviously a sore point with him. A really sore point. In fact, such a sore point that his usual strategic demeanour had shattered.

"We don't have to tell Remus about Pansy dying," Harry rushed to say, both to give his father time to calm down and because it was true. "We just need to ask him how the map was put together, and what he knows about how it might have been fooled. That's it, really. We don't need to bring up Draco or Pansy at all."

"I'm afraid I really still must refuse."

"And why is that, Headmaster?" Snape challenged, leaning forward in a way Harry could only think of as predatory. Harry reared back almost instinctively, a bit unnerved even though he knew his father's anger wasn't directed his way.

"I have my reasons," Albus answered in a level voice.

"Do you doubt my discretion? Or Harry's? Perhaps it has escaped your memory that each of us is an expert Occlumens who has resisted Voldemort himself?"

"Stop this, Severus," the headmaster chided. "It's not a matter of trust or confidence. It's simply the way things must be."

"Must they?" Snape questioned, his tone by then acidic. "The way things must be... Yes, I recall that phrase. You use it whenever you know your actions to be indefensible. You told me that it was just the way things must be when you refused to discipline that mongrel Black for nearly feeding me to the damned werewolf!"

"Sirius Black was severely disciplined as you well know--""

"Three months of detention," Snape scoffed. "And now the way things must be just happens to mean that yet another Slytherin shall be sacrificed on the altar of keeping Remus Lupin safe and warm? If you think I will stand for it, you are gravely mistaken!"

"Yet another Slytherin..." Harry blinked. "What do you mean?"
"I told you I was an angry young man, did I not?" Snape cast a brief glare his way. "What do you think made me that way, if not his determination that to avoid making Lupin's life difficult, my near-death could be overlooked?"

"Severus, you cannot blame those few Gryffindors for your own heinous mistakes--"

"Are you deaf?" the Potions Master coldly interrupted. "I believe I intimated that I blamed you."

Harry could see that this was going nowhere fast. "Look," he broke in, directing a pleading glance at Dumbledore. "We really do need to talk to Remus. It could mean the difference between freedom and Azkaban for Draco! And Severus has a point. I mean, you haven't even bothered to ask us why we think he could make that difference. All you can say is no, no, no."

"There are reasons, my boy..."

"We saw the murder as it happened, right there on the Marauder's Map," Harry stalwartly put forth, ignoring the bile almost rising up to choke him. His father had been right about needing to tell the headmaster everything, so Harry went ahead and explained. "We saw two people in the Owlery, only two... we saw Draco push Pansy straight out the window. But we know it didn't happen quite like that. Somebody else had to have been up there, somebody the map failed to show. And Remus can tell us how to find out who it was... or at least we hope he can. There's nobody else to ask, Professor Dumbledore! So let us ask him! Please!"

Dumbledore looked about as sorrowful as Harry had ever seen him. "I... I do understand your need, Harry. And I have listened. But I have more to consider than you can possibly realise. I must, I regret to say, refuse your request."

Harry's mouth dropped open. He'd been sure, so completely sure, that the headmaster would come around.

"Then I regret to say," Snape calmly countered, standing up as though to lend his words weight, "that I must tender my resignation effective immediately."

The headmaster stood up as well, his blue eyes all at once fierce and gleaming. "Oh yes, Slytherin to the core," he grated, clearly furious. "You know how much I need you--"

"What I know, in fact, is that you do not need me as much as formerly," Snape replied without much emotion.

"You may no longer be a spy but you are of inestimable value to the Light nonetheless--"

Snape appeared not to have heard a word. "Of course Potions Masters are difficult to engage, as so few of us wish to come within a thousand leagues of a school, but Hogwarts has the kind of reputation that will attract someone, I feel sure. Accio parchment," he announced with a flick of his wrist, no wand in sight. Then he was withdrawing from his robes a never-out quill. He stepped over to a table and bending over slightly, began to write.

"Severus, you are being ridiculous!"

Snape paused, lifting his quill off the parchment. "You do not understand," he remarked. "This is not petulance and it is most certainly not blackmail. Shall I outline the facts of the matter since they seem to escape you?" Standing up straight again, he turned to face the headmaster. "I will not see Draco unjustly confined in Azkaban. Lupin is the best hope we had. If you will not put us into contact so that we may exploit whatever advantage he can offer, I have no choice but to take other measures to protect my son. We will leave the country, Albus. I will use every last trick I learned as a spy to hide..."
where no one from the Ministry can ever find us."

"Severus, I have told you that I will use my every influence to ensure that justice prevails--"

"Albus," Snape quietly broke in, his tone thrumming not with anger or malice any longer, but only with determination. "I know what you have told me. But you give me little cause to trust your intentions when you will not even do us the small courtesy of putting us in contact with Lupin."

_Put your money where your mouth is_, Harry thought. _Put up or shut up._

"There," Snape said as he signed the resignation.

Albus clenched his hands when the Potions Master extended it with a slight flourish. "I do not accept it. You are under contract to Hogwarts."

"You may certainly sue me for breach of contract if you wish." Snape shrugged.

At that, Albus glared, and the resignation abruptly went up in flames. Snape dropped it before his fingers could become singed, then calmly stepped on the little conflagration with one booted toe.

"Harry. I would prefer you come with Draco and myself but I leave the decision to you. Flight will mean you will likely not have the chance to properly complete your education--"

Harry stood up and walked to his father's side. He didn't actually know if Snape was bluffing, but then again, he didn't need to know. He was going to stand by his father and brother no matter what.

"I'm sure you can teach me anything I want," Harry said, looking up into Snape's dark eyes. "Actually, I'm sure you _will_ teach me anything I _need_, and you'll make certain I learn it, too."

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, Harry," Dumbledore entreated. "What of the prophecy?"

For once, mention of it didn't fill him with despair, or worry . . . only with resolve. "The prophecy robbed me of a family once, sir. It's not going to do that to me again."

Snape grasped his hand briefly, then let it go to say, "If it _is_ a prophecy, Albus, then I am sure it will come true. I don't believe we need to sacrifice Draco to it."

"I am _not_ sacrificing Mr Malfoy. I am doing my best in a difficult situation!"

"As am I, Headmaster."

Harry cleared his throat. "Sir. Have you realised . . . you always call Draco _Mr Malfoy_? To you I'm Harry, and he's Severus, and I've heard you use first names with Ron and Hermione, too. But Draco's always Mr Malfoy. It's like . . . he _is_ worth less to you than any of us."

"Oh, Harry . . ." Dumbledore sadly murmured. "There's a great deal at stake, here. More than you realise. But . . . very well. As you insist, I will arrange for you to speak with Professor Lupin tomorrow, or Monday at the very latest--"

"Tonight," Snape interrupted. "Now. _This instant._"

"Oh really, now that's unreasonable."

"It's not," Harry insisted. "By tomorrow the Aurors will be asking to talk to Draco. If we refuse, or even if we don't, they might charge him. We can't waste time. We have to know _now_ what's going on with the map."
"Moreover," Snape added, "The moment they charge him, easy routes out of the country become more difficult to find. I will not delay, Albus. I will speak to Remus Lupin now, or I will collect my sons and leave. And the choice, as I am sure you have divined, is entirely yours."

Dumbledore glared at them both. "And you wonder why I had reservations about the adoption, Severus. The two of you make a formidable team, as I feared would happen."

"We will be a formidable team in your service if you will but allow us," Snape retorted.

"Oh, very well," Albus muttered, walking towards the fireplace and lowering himself to his hands and knees with a great show of creaking joints. Harry didn't buy it. He knew the headmaster could be as spry as he liked when it suited him.

Albus turned his head to glare at them one final time. "You can speak with him now, as you wish. But be it on your own heads if you don't much like what you find out."

"Is Remus hurt, is that what you mean?" Harry pressed as Snape snatched Floo powder from the mantle and held it out towards the headmaster. "Did the other werewolves turn on him or something?"

"Wolves," Albus scoffed. "Oh, he's been among the wolves, all right. A sheep in wolf's clothing, as it were." Tossing a bit of Floo powder in, he shouted, "Nombre Cinq, Rue Bois de Marseilles, Nîmes, France!"

As the headmaster thrust his head and torso into the fire, Harry turned to his father. "France? I thought he'd gone to Germany."

"France," Snape slowly repeated, dark undertones colouring the word black.

Before Harry could make sense of that, the headmaster backed up into the room again, rising shakily to his feet as he murmured, "Prepare yourselves for a shock . . . Ah, Harry. Might I have your wand for a moment?"

Harry glanced at his father, who answered, "I will hold it."

Shrugging, Harry passed it to Snape.

The headmaster clicked his teeth in irritation. "And who will hold yours, Severus?"

Snape's eyes gleamed a fierce black. "I do believe I can manage to control myself, Headmaster."

"What, you think I can't control myself?" Harry questioned, confused. Then, to Severus, "Dad?"

At that moment, the fire flared again and a tall, lean figure was stepping forth into the living room of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. But it wasn't Remus Lupin who emerged from the flames. It was Lucius Malfoy, his long blonde hair pulled back behind his shoulders, his grey eyes impassive as he looked at the wizards assembled to greet him. When his gaze settled on Harry, though, those eyes narrowed, a low hiss of noise escaping Lucius as all his features tightened with wrath.

He must have killed Remus, Harry thought, panic engulfing him. He forgot completely that the headmaster had brought him through, that the headmaster had demanded his wand . . . He even forgot about Fidelius, the spell that guaranteed Lucius could never, ever enter.

Harry forgot everything. All that mattered was that Lucius fucking Malfoy was standing there in his
house, standing just feet away.

Harry couldn't help what happened next. Rage filled him, pure black rage like he'd only ever felt once before in his life, that time in Devon when he'd blasted the robe and mask. Of its own accord his hand jerked up, fingers splayed outward, fury building inside his belly, a fiery ache that had to be quenched--

"No!" Snape harshly whispered, grabbing his hand and yanking it down to his side, where he held it in a firm, warm grip that Harry couldn't shake. He pulled the boy in against his side, tucking Harry's face into his robes for good measure, similar to how he'd covered his eyes back in Devon to calm him down, and leaning down close urged, "A shock, remember? It's Lupin! The fool's gone and taken Polyjuice!"

"It's not Remus!" Harry screamed against the suffocating cloth as he struggled, Snape holding him back. "Remus wouldn't look at me like he hates me--"

"Harry, somebody's blacked your eye!" Remus pointed out, though he spoke with Lucius' characteristic snobbish lilt to every word. "If I look angry, it's because I don't much like what I see! Has Severus not been taking proper care of you, then?"

"You'll be lucky if I don't take proper care of you," Snape darkly muttered before glancing down at his son. "Harry, all right now?"

"Yeah," Harry croaked, but stayed huddled against his father. He could feel himself start to shake all over, a peculiar sort of trembling that started at his toes and quaked its way by fits and starts across every muscle in his body. "Oh, God. I think I'm going to sick up." And then when Snape made as though to reach inside his robes, "No, no draught. It'll pass."

Snape pulled him a little closer and rubbed his back as he grated, "To think you said I had no shame, Albus! The last time Harry saw this particular face and figure, he was having his eyes stabbed out--"

"No need to remind me," Harry gasped, gulping in some air.

Snape moved his fingers upward to stroke Harry's nape as though in apology for having mentioned it, but his tone was no less harsh when he spoke again to the headmaster. "I'd think you could have had the common decency to give us one word of warning, one word beyond prepare yourselves for a shock!"

"There wasn't time," the headmaster explained. "I'd hoped to find Remus out of character, so to speak, but as fate would have it . . ."

"There was time," Snape retorted, raising his voice. "All you needed was two seconds to say, By the way, Remus Lupin is the idiot who has been traipsing around the Pyrenees warning half-bloods and Muggleborns to escape before Voldemort can attack them. He's still on Polyjuice as we speak!"

"That would have taken considerably more than two seconds, Severus," Albus defended himself. "We needed to close the Floo connection as quickly as possible in case the fires were being watched. I would have told you in advance had I known for certain that Remus would be in this guise."

Hardly appeased, Snape growled, "Have you lost what little brain you used to possess, Lupin?"

"You're certainly as surly as ever," said Remus in Lucius Malfoy's voice. "Harry. What did happen to your eye?"

Harry chanced another glance then, and saw Lucius' silver eyes filled with things he'd never thought
to see. Compassion. Caring. Concern. The sight so unnerved him that he immediately hid his face against his father's robes once more, and breathed in deeply the scent of clove and cinnamon that clung to them.

"Harry?" Remus questioned again.

"Oh, give him a minute, for the love of Merlin," Snape barked. "Shock doesn't even begin to cover it."

"No, I'm all right," Harry decided, pushing away. He was a little surprised when Snape resisted the move, but that only lasted a second; the Potions Master let him go.

Bracing himself, Harry looked "Lucius Malfoy" up and down. In one sense, he knew it was Remus. Snape believed it, and Dumbledore also, and there was no way in hell Lucius Malfoy would ever look at Harry with love in his gaze . . . but in another sense, it seemed like his emotions were slow to catch up to his mind. "What's the incantation to erase the Marauder's Map?" he demanded.

A genuine smile curled Malfoy's lips. "I think we've had this conversation before. You thought I was him," Remus indicated Snape with a wave. "And now you won't believe I'm me? 'Mischief managed', Harry. And the answer to the other question you asked me that time is 'Shrieking Shack.'"

"All right, you're you," Harry pronounced, though he still couldn't help but shudder. "Oh, God. No offence, but you look awful that way."

"I am very sorry it came as a shock."

"Be that as it may, Headmaster," Snape rasped, "I rather think you were letting your irritation with Harry's defiance show."

"Harry, you've been defying the headmaster?" Remus pressed, stepping forward cautiously as if worried it might startle the boy.

"No," Harry answered, confused. "I don't know what he means." Then it came to him. "Oh, we'd all just had words and Severus threatened to quit his job and I said I'd rather go with him than stay at Hogwarts . . ."

"You idiot child," Snape quietly broke in. He glanced Remus over again, and sighed, then looked back down at Harry, his gaze softening even as he lamented, "You have absolutely no discretion."

Remus cleared his throat. Loudly. "Will someone kindly explain to me why Harry has such an awful black eye?"

"That's right, you've only seen him the once since Samhain so you wouldn't realise. The bruising comes and goes, perfectly natural. Sometimes it's both eyes at once, Lupin." The Potions Master let loose a deprecating laugh. "You didn't think restoring his sight could proceed apace, did you? Every so often the injuries attempt to throw off the magic I've woven into the tissues. Things are slowly stabilising, however."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. He didn't like lying to Remus, but neither did it seem like a good idea to admit that Draco had hit him. Look at how badly the headmaster had taken it, not to mention Ron
and Hermione! "I went almost a month between black eyes this last time. If you ask me, I'm really lucky to have a Potions Master for a father. Nobody else could have done half as well to get me all healed up."

"I'm sure that's so," Remus commented, and then in much softer tones. "You do sound happy, Harry."

Harry gave a tremulous smile. He wished he could give a more enthusiastic one, but smiling up at Lucius' face was difficult to begin with, even though he knew Remus was inside. "You know, I am. I'm really happy, Remus. Severus is really good to me. Um, for me. I couldn't ask for a better father."

Remus just smiled in answer.

"All right, now that I've apparently passed your wizard parenting examination," Snape scorned, "perhaps you'd be so good as to answer my own question?"

"Question?"

"Have you lost what little brain you ever possessed?" shouted the Potions Master.

"Ah, that question." Remus walked to one of the easy chairs facing the couch and sank into it. "I suppose this is my cue to ask how you know about my activities in the Pyrenees?"

"Seer dream," Harry said, rubbing his temples. His head hurt just remembering, but somehow it hurt a little bit less when Snape urged him to sit down on the couch and then took a place right alongside.

"I saw you in the recent past, though I didn't know it was the past and I didn't know it was you. I woke up and told Severus, who helped me pensieve the dream so we could really get a close look at it. We decided it wasn't a seer dream at all. I mean, we were sure Lucius Malfoy couldn't possibly be doing what he seemed to be doing!"

Harry thought Remus might be trying to look bemused, but with Lucius' features the expression came across as rather scornful instead. "Severus, you are a Potions Master. I refuse to believe you didn't consider Polyjuice."

"Oh, we considered it," Snape said, sounding like he was grinding his teeth. He probably was. Merlin only knew what it cost him to praise Remus for anything. "But the impersonation was so perfect, we discounted that explanation at once!"

Remus chuckled slightly. "It's your improved formulation. It does more than simply last longer at a stretch."

"I took it myself, you complete imbecile, so I know what it does and doesn't do, thank you!" Snape snapped. "It only improves the emulation of fine motor function, and primarily at a subconscious level at that!"

A memory suddenly washed over Harry: Frimley Park Hospital, Snape in Remus-guise at his side. Snape, signing Remus Lupin on the register, his handwriting exactly like Remus' script, which Harry had just seen on the letter Remus had sent him . . .

"It does not turn one into a master mimic!" Snape continued.

"It helps a great deal," Remus insisted. "And my experience in the theatre did the rest."

"Theatre?" Harry questioned.
"London, West End." The werewolf shrugged. "Small productions. Tiny, actually, and I was never more than an understudy, but I picked up a great deal of useful technique."

"Technique can only take you so far. An actor needs to study his subject," Snape snarled. "When did you ever have a chance to study Lucius bloody Malfoy at length?"

Remus stared at him as though simply waiting for the penny to drop.

Snape suddenly leaned back against the davenport, one hand raised to rub his own temples. "Oh, sweet Merlin. That year you taught, you went to all the Governors' meetings, every last one, and all the Hogwarts-Ministry joint functions . . ." His glance, disconcerted, sought out Albus. "Don't tell me . . ."

"It was why I hired him," Dumbledore revealed, finally sitting down as well. "Don't mistake me, Severus. Remus is a fine teacher and more than proficient in his area of expertise, but primarily, I invited him to Hogwarts so that he would have an opportunity to study Lucius Malfoy."

"Mmm, I wasn't about to be invited to any high-society dinners, you understand. Even before you told your students of my condition, I didn't have the sort of social standing that would grant me entry to Malfoy's circles. A professorship in the school his son attended seemed just the thing to allow me some contact with him."

Baring his teeth, Snape gritted, "Oh, and this is why you complained so incessantly to me of Draco's behaviour in class, why you none too subtly demanded I arrange a parent-teacher conference!"

"Draco Malfoy was intolerably rude; I did want a conference. I also wanted to study Lucius further. You did nothing but obstruct both goals!"

"Wait, wait!" Harry shouted to get their attention. "I'm confused. If you wanted a conference with Lucius Malfoy you could have just asked for one yourself."

"It's customary and polite to go through a student's Head of House," Remus explained.

"But you went to the Weasleys directly," Harry murmured, looking at his father. "When you were angry with Ron."

"As a courtesy to you," Snape explained. "I presumed you did not wish your friend to lose all standing with Professor McGonagall?"

He did have a point, Harry realised. "Okay, but what's this about studying Lucius? I mean, how could you have known way back then that Voldemort would even return, or that Lucius would be the one Death Eater you wanted to impersonate?"

Remus chuckled slightly. "Oh, Harry. The headmaster's plots go back much further than that. Why do you think I ever studied acting to begin with? You know me. You can't believe I'm possessed of any desire whatsoever to see my name in lights."

It took Harry a moment to process that. He glanced at the headmaster. "You knew before my . . . before James and Lily ever died, you knew that you would someday want Remus to . . . uh, infiltrate Voldemort's ranks?"

"Oh yes," the headmaster assured him. "Before you were ever born, Harry, that plan was being forged. You see, in concealing his werewolf nature so skillfully from the other students, Remus Lupin demonstrated a great untapped potential for acting. A potential I urged him to develop, so that when the time was right, the side of Light might benefit from it." Dumbledore nodded to himself. "He
could have had his name in lights, Harry. If he was never more than an understudy it was because he abided by my request that he remain a relative unknown, that he linger in the theatre world purely to hone his craft. The headmaster turned his head towards Remus. "There were others I guided into more . . . heroic ways to help fight the war. Harry's parents. Severus, when he came to me. Tonks, whom I urged to join the ranks of the Aurors. And many others . . . But your years of silent labour count for no less than their efforts, I hope you realise, my dear boy."

Remus gave a slight nod, the gesture positively regal-looking on Lucius.

"But what made you think my third year was the 'right time,' then?" Harry pressed. "It wasn't until the Tournament that we knew for sure Voldemort would be back . . . oh, I get it." He shuddered slightly. "The Chamber."

"Precisely. Lucius Malfoy's mad bid to return Voldemort to life. For all I knew, his next attempt might well succeed. When, during the summer, the other Governors were insane enough to reinstate him with full honours, I decided I must start looking forward to the day when it might be possible to discredit him among the ranks of the Death Eaters. I hired Remus and gave him strict instructions to acquire as much contact as possible with Lucius."

"I'd intended to become great friends with Draco Malfoy," Remus confessed, taking up the thread of the story. "I had hoped to be invited to dine at Malfoy Manor, something like that, study the man in his own element. But that plan proved unworkable. And why was that, Severus? Can you guess? Could it be because you poisoned the boy's mind against me well before our first class together?"

"I . . ." Snape abruptly closed his mouth.

"Ah well." Kind as ever, Remus let him off the hook. "It's also true that I had recognised Harry on the train, and after that I had a difficult time tolerating the young Slytherin so intent on making James' son miserable. Observing Draco at close range, however, did help me learn quite a few Malfoy mannerisms. The boy really is quite like his father."

"No, he isn't," Harry quietly disagreed.

Remus pursed his lips at that, but said nothing further on the topic, instead detailing, "The only flaw in the headmaster's long-range plan was the fact that Polyjuice in and of itself was so limited. Until a formulation was made that could help my acting bridge the gulf between Lucius and myself, there was little hope of putting our plan into action. We knew my impersonation would have to be flawless to pass muster . . . But then you improved the Polyjuice Potion, Severus . . ."

Snape's nostrils flared, which told Harry all too clearly that that had been no accident. Dumbledore had demanded a better version of the potion, and Snape had laboured to produce one. "It's a bit of a daft plan to discredit Lucius Malfoy by having him help Voldemort's victims at a time when Lucius could quite reasonably claim to have been at a meeting of the Board of Governors! Voldemort has heard of Polyjuice, Lupin!"

"He's also heard of Apparition," Remus mildly returned. "Lucius can get to France and back in the blink of an eye, and all my 'appearances' were carefully timed. And too, if Polyjuice began to be suspected, it was just as likely for the Death Eaters to wonder if the real Lucius was in France while a Malfoy-trained decoy sat in on meetings at Hogwarts. Besides, Severus, the plan at present hasn't been so much to convince the Death Eaters of Lucius' disloyalty as it is to simply sow discord and dissention in their ranks. Rumours of a blond aristocratic man issuing warnings . . . the Death Eaters arriving at targeted houses only to discover them abandoned. You've told Albus of the infighting. We hoped to capitalise on it, perhaps leaving an impression that Lucius had plans of his own, ones that might not coincide with his lord and master's."
Harry sat up a little bit straighter, and said in an over-loud voice, "Wow, Remus. It sounds to me like you've been doing a job that's both important and dangerous. And you've been dedicating yourself to this job for how many years? Since the first war, is that right?"

"Idiot child," Snape muttered.

"Well, you said he wasn't doing anything to help, and he was, learning acting and all that," Harry declared. "I bet he wasn't even very keen on it. He did it for the Order. He even knew back then that he was learning it so that he could eventually impersonate some Death Eater or other, so he knew how dangerous it was all going to get, and he still plunged ahead. Now that's brave."

"Quiet, Harry. I've no need of Severus' approbation after all this time," Remus said with a smile that looked all wrong on Malfoy's face.

"Just as well," Snape growled. "I don't hand out certificates of merit for fool Gryffindor stunts. To my mind this whole enterprise qualifies as one. And how dangerous has it been, really? I don't expect you've been in the Dark Lord's own presence trying to ferret out his secrets, have you?"

A strand of Lucius' hair fluttered as Remus shook his head. "No, Severus. Indeed I have not. You remain the bravest man I know."

"But you would do it if you could, I bet," Harry pressed. "Right? If there was a way. I mean, if Lucius somehow disappeared and we knew he wouldn't ever surface, then you'd take his place and spy for the Order just as Severus did--"

"You'd be asking him to kill people," Snape harshly pointed out. "I rather doubt Lupin has the stomach for it."

"As Lucius Malfoy is not likely to hand us such an opening," the headmaster broke in, "I suggest we not discuss the ifs of the situation."

"Good idea," Harry announced, taking a deep breath to steel himself. What he had to say . . . well, his father wasn't too likely to appreciate it. But he had to say it anyway. "Um, Severus. Dad, I mean. You owe Remus an apology for thinking him weak and spineless and all the rest. He's not. I'd think you'd have to admit that, now."

Remus shook his head. "I've no wish to come between you, Harry. Let's not make an issue of it, any of it."

"Hey, he makes me apologise when I've been insufferably rude," Harry protested.

"He is the parent," Remus replied, still shaking his head. "It's not your place to raise him, Harry."

"Yes," Dumbledore echoed, though his tone was decidedly more . . . Slytherin than Remus' had been. And wasn't that strange, considering that Remus was speaking through Lucius Malfoy's vocal cords? "Severus is a grown man, Harry, an adult. Now, if he is not mature enough to admit to his own errors, that is his affair. It is entirely inappropriate for you to rebuke your father as though he's still in nappies, no matter that his conduct does rather suggest him to be little more than a toddler at heart--"

"Enough!" Snape roared. He glared at Harry, clearly blaming him for starting this, but the boy just stared back, challenging him to be the adult this time.

The Potions Master curled a disgusted lip. "You and I will have to have yet another talk about respect, I see."
"I do respect you," Harry declared. "It's just . . . I'd respect you more if you could look past your anger to see the man he really is. How many times did you tell me to stop judging Draco by his past mistakes? Well, same goes for you. Remus isn't the boy who sat there and did nothing while James was being an idiot! He's grown past that!"

Snape looked like he'd just love to throttle Harry, and then Remus, and then probably the headmaster for good measure. All he did though, was cast one derisive glance at the werewolf and gruffly admit, "I'm . . . satisfied you weren't killed pursuing this insane plot, Lupin. And that's as much apology as you're ever likely to get."

"Oh, very nice," Harry said in a scornful tone, but he decided to shut up when Snape's glare became almost volcanic.

"Now, if we've quite finished dealing with Lupin's bizarre appearance," Snape growled, appearing to be speaking to no one in particular, "I suggest we discuss the matter for which we needed him in the first place!"

"The Marauder's Map," Harry said, nodding. "Somebody knows how to make sure they don't show up on it. We thought you might know how to manage a trick like that?"

Remus furrowed his brow, the expression looking very odd on Lucius' features. "We experimented with a few spells and charms, but we couldn't get any of them to work properly. Some of them caused an awful skin rash, actually."

"Madam Pomfrey would have the records?"

"No, we treated ourselves," Remus admitted, a small smile curling his lips at what was obviously a fond memory. "We gave up all attempt to fool the map after a while. It got old breaking out in pustules."

Harry couldn't help but make a face at the sound of that.

"Oh, a quick charm would do away with them, for the most part," Remus assured him. "In the end we concluded that the map could not be fooled. We never even came close."

"So, will you be leaving the country after all, Severus?" Albus challenged with a bit of a haughty look. "As Remus has been unable to help you?"

"The salient point was your unwillingness to help us," Snape retorted. "Lupin. I'd like you to write down everything you can remember about the magic that went into making the map work in the first place. Everything. Conversation is well and good but I'd like a written record, and I'd like you to sign it."

Harry wondered if his father was set on having one for legal reasons. What if Remus were to get killed during his mission in France? To help Draco, they might need to be able to prove things about the map . . .

Remus nodded, then immediately went on, "Though I must tell you from the outset that the true credit must go to James and Sirius. It only stands to reason. They had such talent with magic that they taught themselves to become Animagi."

"As did Pettigrew," Snape spat. "How much would he know about the creation of the map?"

Remus thought that over carefully before he answered. "Oh, very little, I should imagine. He was always hanging about, but he hardly participated at all in the casting of the magic. It would be like
learning to brew from books, without any practical experience, Severus. Besides, James and Sirius were very synergistic in their approach to magic. I would get lost watching them at times and I was paying closer attention than Peter."

"But you will write out what you know?" Snape rapped out, so insistent on it that Harry was suddenly sure of one thing: his father was aware that Remus' assignment was highly dangerous.

"Yes, of course," Remus said, staring at each wizard in turn. "So what's all this about?"

"Ah, I'm afraid that information is on a need-to-know basis, my boy," Albus soothed, standing up and walking to the Floo, where he beckoned to Remus to join him. "And you most definitely do not need to know. I need you back in France continuing your work, which is dangerous, little though Severus seems to realise as much. You mustn't fret about the goings on at Hogwarts; we have them well in hand."

"Harry's not in any trouble, though?"

"Harry's not the one we're concerned about, not this time. Now, you just go back and gather your things and move on to the next safe house set up for you. You know the one I mean? Good. And write your recollections of the map straight away; you know how to get them to me, that's my boy--"

"Why do I have the feeling I'm being shooed away? I could stay here to write--"

"Oh, no, no, certainly not," Albus insisted. "We have several other things to do in connection with solving the issue that brought you here. And time is of the essence. So, if you could simply say your good-byes to Harry and be off?"

Remus held out his arms and smiled.

Harry couldn't move into them, though, he just couldn't. "I... Sorry," he said, shaking his head. "I know who you are, but looking the way you do just now... no. I hope I see you again, Remus. If my last memory of you is wearing his body... ugh."

"I understand, Harry," Remus softly answered. "Severus, take good care of him."

Snape lifted his chin. "I do, Lupin."

"Yes, I can see that you do." Sighing, Remus stepped into the Floo and took a pinch of powder. "Good-bye, then."

And then he was shouting out his address in Nîmes, shouting it in French.

Harry turned to his father. "But... the dream... if Remus knows French why wouldn't he be speaking it as he goes about his assignment?"

"He doesn't know enough French to pull that off," Snape scorned. "Certainly not the old French Malfoy loves to show off. Lupin wouldn't seem fluent, which would put a quick end to any impersonation. It seems his acting training didn't include a proper course of languages!"

"Actually," Dumbledore put in, "it did. But there are times when he wants to make it appear as though Lucius is attempting to cover his tracks."

"Misdirection," Harry breathed.

Snape shot him a glare. "From a Gryffindor? Please."
"Such venom," Albus commented, his own tone mild. "I'd think you'd be delighted to know that
counter to your every complaint over the past . . . oh, I've lost count of the years, now isn't that a
testament to how old I'm getting . . . at any rate, I'd think you'd be quite pleased to realise that Remus
Lupin is not only *pulling his weight*, as you have so often demanded, but has been so doing for a
long, long time?"

Stomping over to the Floo to stare down at the shorter headmaster, Snape rasped, "Perhaps in the
confusion of Harry thinking Lucius Malfoy had come to gouge out his eyes once more, you missed
our discussion of the *seer dream*, you doddering old fool? Harry came to me with foreknowledge of
the Oowlery, and we concluded his dream had no prophetic nuance! And why, I ask you? *Because
you failed to mention to me that Remus Lupin was going about France masquerading as a Death
Eater,* perhaps?"

"I hardly thought you needed to know a detail like that."

"Oh yes, your need-to-know justification!" Snape shouted. "I thought, as a highly valued --so you
say-- senior member of the Order I would be kept apprised of important developments!"

"Ha." Harry knew it wasn't funny, not really, but he couldn't help but laugh a bit. "Now you know
how I feel."

"In retrospect I see that it would have done you good to know, Severus," Dumbledore admitted.
"However, before you grow too enraged, consider the fact that you never told me about this seer
dream. Had you, I would have realised at once that it was indeed accurate and told you so."

"But you still wouldn't have told me about Lupin!"

"No, likely not."

Snape gnashed his teeth.

"*You* lied to Remus Lupin just now about the reason for Harry's black eye," the headmaster pointed
out. "*What* was that but misdirection?"

"I hardly needed him furious with Draco," Snape retorted.

By then, Harry had heard enough. He knew from long experience that there was no winning this
argument, but it was good that Snape had an inkling how he felt. Actually, though, Snape had
indicated his empathy on the issue a long time ago. *You do better with more information rather than
less . . . a notion the headmaster is beginning to appreciate, as well . . . *

Well, Harry wasn't sure at all that Dumbledore was beginning to appreciate that. What he was sure of
was that his brother was waiting for them. "Draco," Harry urged. "Can't we go now, to Devon? He
must be in an awful state, wondering what the Aurors have been told, wondering what's going to
happen to him."

"Yes, to Devon," Snape agreed, nodding, opening up his arms in invitation, offering to absorb for
Harry the worst of the awful impact of Apparition.

Harry went into them without a word, but just before they Apparated away, it occurred to him to ask,
"*Do you think when I see the *real* Lucius Malfoy again someday, I'm . . . uh, I'm going to freeze up
like that?"

"You didn't 'freeze up,'" his father assured him, pulling him closer against the warmth of his body.
"You would have attacked had I not stopped you, and had you had your wand . . . "
"Yeah," Harry groaned, realising he could very easily have killed Remus. His father had been right; he did need to work on his self-control. He couldn't bear to be responsible for the death of another loved one. "Thanks," he sighed, rubbing his cheek against the soft, fragrant fabric covering his father's chest. "Just . . . thanks."

Albus Dumbledore coughed slightly. "Shall we? Harry is right; Mr Malfoy . . . Draco, that is, will be impatient to know what has transpired during his absence."

Harry pushed away slightly so that he could look up at his father. "I don't suppose we're going to tell him what Remus has been doing, settle that dream for him once and for all?"

The Potions Master shook his head.

"Need-to-know basis, Severus?" the headmaster lightly gibed. "And you marvel that I have had to make similar determinations in the past. Do you realise how important Lupin's mission could turn out to be? Do you--"

"Yes, Headmaster, I do," Snape affirmed, his tone harsh. "What you fail to understand is that as I am these days fully embroiled in every last nuance of Harry Potter's life, I need to know every last detail you can dredge up! I expect to be kept informed of Lupin's progress, is that clear, Albus?"

"And I expect the same!" Harry declared, only to find himself on the receiving end of Snape's fierce glower.

"You are not an adult and you are not an Order member. You are not even a fully trained wizard." He lowered his voice. "Besides, you told me that you wanted to know what it was to be a child. You just told Lupin that I was a good father. Are you now going to resist my honest attempt to be that for you?"

Harry thought about that, and sighed. "All right, I understand what you're saying. But just make sure you're a good father to Draco too, all right? Because . . . look, I don't claim to know what he needs, but I'm pretty sure that ten million lines or thousands of points off Slytherin is just going to make him feel resentful."

"Thousands of points off Slytherin," the Potions Master mocked. "I wouldn't dream of it."

"I'm sure you wouldn't," Harry admitted. "Let's go. He's probably climbing the walls by now."

"Not likely."

"What, because Draco's got such a calm personality?"

"No, because I gave him a Calming Draught," Snape averred. "Hold tight now so you won't need the same."

Closing his eyes, Harry hugged his dad as the whole world around them melted.
They Apparated into the field outside the cottage as usual, Snape holding onto Harry just a moment longer than was really necessary, but Harry thought that was all right. When the Potions Master's arms did drop to his sides, Harry glanced about the meadow with a frown. There wasn't any light coming from the cottage, which meant he couldn't see much, but how far away would Dumbledore be?

"Wasn't the headmaster coming, too?"

Snape's eyebrows drew together. "Perhaps he's gone to London to try to persuade Fudge to release some Order Aurors from the situation there."

"Hmm. Well, as long as we're alone for the moment . . ." Harry lowered his voice, then ventured, "Was that a real resignation you wrote out?"

Snape began to walk toward the cottage. "Oh, it was authentic."

Something in the man's tone caught on Harry's Slytherin consciousness. "It was authentic . . . but?" he asked, lengthening his stride to catch up.

"Ah, reading between the lines at last," Snape approved with a slight nod, before confessing, "I knew full well Albus wouldn't accept it. Be that as it may, however, had he not produced Lupin as requested . . ." The sentence hung in the air, unfinished.

"I understand." Harry murmured. Snape's loyalty to his family would be impossible to miss, he thought. "Um, I guess maybe I shouldn't have put you on the spot about Remus . . ."

"You guess that maybe you shouldn't have?" Snape mocked. "Is that supposed to be an apology?"

"Yeah, it was supposed to be one," Harry murmured. Funny, they'd had this same conversation before. Same words . . . but now, everything was different. Harry didn't mind that Snape might be annoyed with him. He didn't like it either, but they'd get over it; he was sure of that much. As far as apologies went, anyway, he thought his was a lot better than Snape's to Remus, but since it probably wouldn't do much good to point that out, Harry just frowned and said, "I wish Remus didn't have to do such a dangerous job--"

"Rubbing it in?" Snape said, his tone that time a bit more snarling than mocking.

"No, I just . . . never mind."

The Potions Master's feet stomped against spring grass as they made their way through the blackness. Harry didn't know how late it was, but it had to be nearing midnight. He did want to talk with Draco, but part of him began hoping his brother would be asleep. Draco probably needed a break from everything, and Snape hardly seemed to be in a sympathetic mood . . .

The interior of the cottage was dark, but a quick series of spells from Snape solved that. Lighted orbs made an appearance in the corners of the main room, casting eerie shadows in all directions. Glancing around, Harry saw that Draco was stretched out, laying full length on his back on the tattered sofa beneath the window. He wasn't asleep, though. His eyes, their hue a dull grey now, were wide open and staring at the ceiling. He looked almost . . . catatonic, Harry realised. Like all his joy in life had been sucked clean away. He didn't react when they came in; didn't even blink at the sudden onslaught of light.
"Draco," Snape urged, perching on the edge of the couch as he gently shook the boy's shoulder.

With a miserable groan, Draco rolled over onto his side and then levered himself into a sitting position, his every motion slow and awkward, like he'd grown old before his time. "Hallo there, Severus," he managed, the words a bit slurred.

Snape narrowed his eyes. "Are you all right?"

Draco just sat there, his own gaze a bit unfocussed, though he did say, "Harry," when the other boy sat down on the opposite end of the sofa.

Harry gave him an encouraging smile. "Rough day, huh?"

A slow blink, like Draco had needed a while to understand the remark. "Oh. Yeah . . . Hmm, your eye. Sorry about that."

"You said sorry already," Harry reminded him.

"I did?" Draco looked puzzled. "Oh. Sorry."

"Draco, did you take a second dose of Calming Draught?" Snape asked, his tone perfectly level, though Harry thought he caught a flash of genuine annoyance in his eyes.

Again, a pause as though Draco were struggling to make sense of the question. "Oh. Um, yeah. Couple of times, or maybe three . . . this awful feeling kept . . . anyway, you said to stay in the house but I was going barmy . . ." A loopy looking grin curled his lips. "Potion made it better. Thanks, Sev. Um, Severus."

Snape looked positively disgusted. "You must be considerably over the usual dose to think calling me Sev is appropriate at any time," he scorned, standing up so that he could fish in his voluminous cloak for one of the many potions he seemed to always carry. His hand emerged with a single dose vial held between long, elegant fingers. "Antidote," he said briefly, extending it towards Draco.

Harry leaned forward to grab his father's wrist before Draco could take hold of the tiny glass vial. "Maybe it's better to let him stay . . . er, relaxed?"

"After he's only recently emerged from Somulus? I think not," Snape retorted, staring at his wrist until Harry released it.

Draco grinned again, the expression even more silly than before, but his face was washed clean of any humour whatsoever the moment he swallowed the potion. He stretched, grimacing, muttering something derogatory about the couch. Then he seemed to remember he wasn't alone. "Oh. Sorry, Severus."

"That's three times now you've said sorry," Harry pointed out, concerned, and not just about the fact that it wasn't like Draco to apologise so profusely. There was also the fact that he'd apparently spent the whole evening on the couch, just staring into the blackness . . . of course the Calming Draught might account for that, but that was a concern in of itself.

To Snape as well, who proceeded to rasp, "Explain yourself. What did you think you were doing, taking an overdose of Calming Draught after I had specifically cautioned you to use it sparingly?"

Fidgeting a bit, and then actually sitting on his hands in an effort to still them, Draco admitted, "I was trying to stay in, that's what I was doing. I told you I wouldn't do anything stupid." He glanced at Harry's eye. "Anything else stupid, I mean . . . but I kept having such an awful urge to go outside for
some air. The draught was all I had to help with it." He cleared his throat nervously, his gaze skittering over Snape and Harry both before fixing itself on the floor.

"The word tomorrow means nothing whatsoever to you?"

"Well, it was almost midnight," Draco muttered. "Technically that's tomorrow. And I couldn't breathe."

Harry noticed then that all the windows were open, and remembered all the times Severus had said Breathe, you idiot child to him when he was panicking. But Draco had been here all alone with only a potion to help him . . . When Harry thought about it, his heart sort of twisted inside his chest.

"We're here now," he offered with another encouraging smile. "We'll help you."

"Ha," Draco said, his usual personality back in force by then. He looked down his nose at Harry. "Nobody much can help me, the headmaster made that much clear. If Lucius can get the Board on his side, then that's it. I'll be kicked out of Hogwarts, and nobody can do a thing to get me back in, not even famous Harry Potter."

Ignoring that last bit, Harry confessed, "You know, I don't know much about boarding schools; it's not like the Dursleys were ever going to pay for me to go to one, but that no appeals rule strikes me as a little harsh."

Draco's face transformed itself into a scowl. "I know you were raised without a shred of proper culture, but do try to keep in mind that you're not in the Muggle world now, Harry. Hogwarts is a wizarding school, in case you hadn't noticed. Only a blithering idiot would think that Hogwarts would have to be run remotely like whatever passes for education where you're from--"

"Too bad you can't have more Calming Draught," Harry interrupted.

Draco looked about to make a scathing retort, but a glance from Snape cut it off. Merely sighing, then, the boy groaned, "If I get expelled, they'll probably take away my wand. Or break it, even . . . Severus, do they still do that?"

"After your dabbling you hardly deserve to keep that wand, do you?"

Personally, Harry thought Snape could stand to be a little more compassionate. Draco had made some dreadful mistakes, but he hardly needed them thrown in his face at the moment. He wished he could tell his father as much, but the mood Snape was in, it would just lead to an argument.

"We did find your wand, though," Harry thought to say, trying his best to stay positive. That was what Draco needed, surely? A little bit of hope?

"Can I have it back?" Draco asked, his voice slightly more cheerful. "I mean, at least until they--"

"No," Snape answered, his tone short. "Albus has it for the moment, and it will stay in his possession until further notice. You may use the wand I showed you."

"That old thing . . ."

"Was my grandfather's," Snape announced, his voice dangerously level.

"Oh." Swallowing his complaints, Draco gave a sharp nod. "Well in that case, I'm honoured," he softly admitted, the formal tone of the words reminding Harry of the well-wishing ceremony. "All I meant was . . . well, it works all right for me, but you know how it is. It's just not what I'm used to."
It was the first time Snape had mentioned anything much about his family, though of course the fact that his grandfather had possessed a wand was hardly news. Harry wanted to ask a few leading questions, but it hardly seemed the time. And besides, at that moment the door creaked open.

"Bit chilly in here," remarked Albus Dumbledore. A slight wave of his wand had the windows shutting themselves and the curtains fluttering half-way closed.

"You have been to the Ministry?"

"No, back to Hogwarts, Severus." Turning toward the couch, the headmaster glanced at the two boys sitting together. "And how are you doing . . . Draco?"

Harry was sure that slight emphasis on the name was no mistake. Dumbledore was making a point. Too bad Harry wasn't sure what it was. It could be that the headmaster was recognizing a mistake and correcting it . . . or the name could simply be strategy. Or maybe, he thought, he'd been a bit wrong about the names business to begin with. Now that he thought about it, hadn't that Christmas present from the headmaster to Draco been labelled with just the boy's first name?

Whatever the truth was, the shift wasn't lost on Draco himself. He started, then shrugged. "Um, I suppose I'm all right." Harry could see him hesitate, then plunge ahead, "It . . . It was Pansy who fell, then? There's no doubt, none at all, no possible way she's . . ."

Seating himself on the low table to face Draco, the headmaster shook his head. "I wish I had better news to bring, my boy."

Draco drew in a long, shuddering breath and blew it out like a sigh. "I think I won't really believe it until I . . . I don't suppose I might be allowed to go to her funeral?"

Harry was a little bit surprised when Dumbledore didn't answer that, even though Draco had clearly been speaking to him, not Snape.

"I am sorry, Draco," Snape answered, a little of the compassion Harry had hoped for there in his voice, at last. "The Parkinsons want the funeral held at Hogwarts, but they were adamant that you not attend. They know you put their daughter in St. Mungo's some months back; when we told them of the accident they assumed straight away that you were responsible. We did our best to dissuade them . . ." Snape shrugged as though to say that as expected, it was a lost cause.

Draco nodded, the motion jerky and disjointed, his eyes blinking so furiously that Harry was sure he must be near tears, though of course the Slytherin boy was far too proud to actually break down in front of Harry. "Can I at least see her beforehand?" he said, the words about as close to begging as Draco Malfoy could possibly come. Or perhaps he could come closer than Harry realised, for he continued, "Please? Please, Severus. Just one minute, that's all I need. I . . . it's all so . . . it's like I can't believe it, like it can't be true, but if I saw her . . ."

Snape nodded, but in sympathy, not to agree to the request. "You need closure," he simply stated, the word reminding Harry of the things he'd read in that Road to Recovery book. "It is only to be expected that you can't truly accept what has happened without proof of some sort, Draco. But as for viewing the body . . ." Snape sadly shook his head. "That will not help, I am afraid. After the violence of her passing, Miss Parkinson does not resemble herself."

"Oh, that's ridiculous," Draco objected.


Draco pulled his hands out from beneath his legs in a reflexive motion, raising them to his mouth as
though to hold in a sudden surge of nausea. Clearly, he didn't need the curse explained, though between his fingers he did moan, "I . . . I'd still really like to see her one last time, Severus . . ."

"No, my boy, you wouldn't," Dumbledore softly insisted. "It's far better to remember her the way she was in life."

Draco glanced up then, his eyes a dull grey covered by a sheen of tears. One dropped past his lashes as he gave another one of those awful uncoordinated nods.

"Here, I've brought something for you to read," Dumbledore went on, reaching inside his robes for a thick scroll of parchment.

"Expulsion papers?" Draco bitterly joked, wiping furiously at his cheek as though disgusted with that single tear.

"It's the school charter," Albus explained. "Not the full charter, of course. That would be a few dozen scrolls, most of them in Latin. But this section was revised within my own lifetime." He smiled slightly. "There were those who wanted to maintain the entire document in Latin, but Headmaster Dippet and I managed to convince them that it was time to include English in our venerable tradition."

"Uh, thank you, sir," Draco murmured, breathing deeply as though to get himself under control. "But . . . why provide me a copy of this?"

The headmaster merely gestured for him to unroll the scroll and begin reading. "Oh." Draco looked up with sombre eyes. "I understand. It's about expulsion. Procedures, student rights, parental rights. Ha, like those matter a shrivelfig."

"All parental rights rest in your own person because you are an emancipated minor. And forewarned is forearmed," the headmaster pronounced. "Should it come to that, it is best for you to fully understand what we are facing."

"Should it come to that?" Draco repeated, clearing his throat. "That's an odd thing to hear. Word of the murder's got out by now, I expect."

"Yes, but there's been a notable silence from the Board as of yet."

Harry felt relief washing over him. "There, you see? Lucius must have realised that this plan is simply mad, he can't possibly get away with it--"


Draco nodded agreement. "Tactics, Harry. He's waiting for the Aurors to do their job. Once I've been charged with murder, it hardly matters if I'm expelled as well. And if by some miracle I'm not charged . . . well, Lucius has failed before to expel me, so I expect this time he'll have someone else push for it. He's going to go to great lengths to look neutral . . ." The Slytherin boy sat up straight, holding himself so rigidly that Harry knew he must be afraid he might crumple. "He might even speak on my behalf, but it'll all be a feint to make sure this time, everything looks above-board." Draco's hand tightened around the scroll, but not enough to damage it. "Thank you, Headmaster. I'll make sure I understand the procedures, make sure I'm prepared to put forth the best possible defence."

Albus favoured him with a quiet smile. "Do. And keep in mind, we are working on that miracle for you."
"We?" Draco sighed. "Oh, you and Harry and Severus."

"The Order of the Phoenix," Albus corrected. "We owe you a great debt. Indeed, one it would be most difficult to repay, Harry's wand being of uncalculated worth in this struggle."

Draco glanced down. "I . . . When you said you'd help me, I thought you just meant . . . you."

"I suspect that what you actually thought was that I didn't mean it in the least," Albus returned, his voice keeping to the soothing tones he'd used since his arrival at the cottage.

"Well, you were sure I'd killed her," Draco pointed out, his own voice small.

"I did think that, yes," Albus admitted. "It did not sit well with me that after all I had done for you, you turned on Harry."

"I didn't turn on him," Draco exclaimed, looking horrified at that interpretation.

"I know," Albus soothed. "You acted your age, which took me aback, I suppose, because during these past months you have vastly exceeded my expectations. It cannot have been easy, what you have lived through. That I was so very disappointed in you must show you that I had come to believe quite firmly in your fealty to Harry. To depend on you as an ally in this war, Draco."

"You can depend on me--"

"I know," Albus said again, his blue eyes steady and sincere. He stared at Draco a moment more, as though testing whether the Slytherin boy believed him. Then rising to his feet, he announced, "Severus is right that I should take a short trip to London . . . I'll leave you three to family matters, then."

Snape's glance at him was swift and assessing, but the Potions Master said nothing as Dumbledore let himself out through the door.

Harry waited until he heard the slight pop of Apparition before questioning, "Family matters?"

"I believe Albus is indicating his acceptance of the situation," Snape explained. "You did rather emphasise the point when you rebuked him on the matter of names. Not that it is your place to lecture the headmaster--"

"What did Harry say?" Draco asked, looking from one to the other.

"Oh, nothing," Harry passed it off.

"He only declared," Snape wryly detailed, "that if I found it necessary to leave the country with you to keep you safe from the Dementors, he would come wander the world with us."

"Yeah, well he's the one who resigned," Harry pointed out.

Draco's face went paler than usual. "Severus, you resigned from Hogwarts? Over me?"

"You are my son, are you not?"

"I don't want to cost you your job--"

"The headmaster didn't accept the resignation," Harry hurried to explain, wondering why his father hadn't made that clear. "Severus still has a job. So that's all right."
Harry would have thought that the news would have Draco feeling better, but the other boy still looked ill. Probably the mention of the Dementors. "We won't let anything bad happen to you, Draco," he promised. "We won't, all right? We'll go hide where the Ministry can never find us if it comes to that. We know you didn't do anything wrong."

"We know you didn't commit murder," Snape coolly interrupted. "However, there is the matter of your wand, Draco. Your dabbling. Under the circumstances that worked out well, as it foiled the conspirators, but still, I cannot condone your foray into the Dark Arts. Particularly not considering the way you were raised; you may be more susceptible to the lure than you realise."

"Then why'd you leave the book in plain reach?" Draco rudely questioned, going on the offensive. "You know how potions fascinate me, and you knew I was looking into bloodlines and such, and you left a book on kinship potions in the stacks Harry and I were supposed to shelve?"

"I did not know that you were baffled as to the essential difference between reading and brewing!"

"Yeah, well I'm susceptible to the lure, remember?"

"It's not Severus' fault you brewed the potion," Harry told his brother. "You could at least have discussed it with him first."

"Oh, like you're so sodding perfect--"

"Harry is not the issue, nor will you fashion him into one," Snape rebuked the Slytherin boy. "To return to what I was saying. I have been thinking on your punishment. You have a great deal of time to fill; you may as well be thinking on improving your character. Hence, I have decided to assign you some lines."

Draco crossed his arms and just waited, his whole posture braced to hear the rest.

"Ten thousand," Snape added, a little bit snidely as far as Harry was concerned. "Since you told me more than once how appropriate the number was for Mr Weasley."

The Slytherin boy looked as though he might object to that, but in the end, all he said was a sullen, "Fine."

"Without your magic quill, and on parchment charmed to resist... shall we say, any creative attempts to avoid writing all ten thousand." Snape glanced at his other son. "Harry, fetch some... where are the things you brought from home?"

"Um, left them back in Grimmauld Place," Harry admitted with a small smile. "Sorry. You know, things got pretty, uh... hectic, there."

"What was hectic?" Draco wanted to know.

Harry bit his lip.

"Oh, I get it. Secrets..." The Slytherin boy sighed. "I don't blame you. Well, actually I do, it wouldn't be Slytherin not to, after all, but I do understand. The Aurors will be demanding to see me, and I'm probably more rattled by all this than a Malfoy ought to be, so it's best you keep your secrets from me. Too bad I know so many of them already, Harry. But I will watch what I say, though after today I'm not surprised you don't trust me much--"

"Draco, shut up," Harry finally urged. "Look, I dreamed ages ago that we would end up brothers, but I never dreamed it would be like this. I do trust you, all right? And even if this eye goes blind, I
won't hold it against you, because I know you weren't trying to blind me when you lost your temper."

"Merlin's robes, you really are too Gryffindor sometimes, do you know that?" Instead of appearing to appreciate Harry's sentiments, Draco scowled. "I'd never forgive anybody who blinded me. That's just . . . stupid, Harry."

"The amulet I gave you burned you," Harry countered that. "And you may end up scarred. So is that it, then? You're never going to forgive me?"

"You didn't make it heat up like that," Draco argued, blowing out his breath through his nostrils. "But I'm not going to wear it again, if that's what you're asking. Severus?"

"Albus will decide when to best inform the Aurors of the amulet and the resulting scar," Snape explained, understanding what the other boy had meant to ask. "The amulet is in his possession."

"Good," Draco shortly announced. Without a word, he reached into a trouser pocket and drew out the wand Snape had lent him, holding it rather awkwardly as he pronounced a charm to undo the top few buttons on his shirt. "There. See, I didn't heal it. I can do some things I'm told without fucking them all to bits."

"We didn't think you'd healed your burn!" Harry exclaimed.

"Just as well to take a closer look at it, though," Snape announced, drawing his own wand to examine the wound, which was only slightly less inflamed than before.

Draco shrugged away, buttoning up his shirt by hand, his fingers fumbling. "For Merlin's sake, Severus! If you're going to play mediwizard, it's Harry's eye you should be examining!"

"It's my best judgment that the swelling needs to recede before I attempt any cure or glamour."

"Well it has receded compared to last I saw it."

Snape stared at Harry as he considered that. "Yes, but not enough."

"Look, I'm sure everything will be fine," Harry said, thinking to lighten the mood. "After all, I only dreamed of going blind once--"

"Yeah, and we all know how reliable your dreams are, don't we?" Draco closed his eyes. "Any more dreams of Lucius, Harry? I can't stop thinking about that. I keep saying to myself, what if . . . even though I know the whole thing is daft. But I can't stop thinking it. And then I panic, thinking that there's some sort of chance I'm wrong. And then I panic in case I'm wrong to think I could be wrong." Opening one eye only, Draco flicked a glance at Severus. "That was why I couldn't breathe. Well, that and the fact that dear old Dad and I might end up in the same cell in Azkaban. And you wonder I needed a few extra doses of Calming Draught!"

Harry cast his father a pleading look. "We have to tell him. Anything else is just cruel. He's going to be all alone here for who knows how long, and it's going to prey on his mind, and you know Draco and his impulse control . . . he has to know the truth, don't you think? What if he panics again and makes another truly horrible decision?"

"Thanks for that sterling opinion of my character," Draco said, leaning back, looking completely defeated. "Not that I know what you're talking about."

Severus glanced at the boy, his brow wrinkling. "You were right before that I am concerned about
how . . . unlike yourself you are at the moment, Draco. Rattled is not a bad description, all things considered. But Harry is right as well, that it seems you must know certain things about that dream."

"It's like this--"

"Certain things," Snape repeated, directing a stern glare at Harry. "I will tell him what I deem advisable, and you will not augment what I have disclosed. Not one additional detail, is that clear? And Draco, you will not ask for details. You will not attempt to Slytherin them out of Harry." He waited until Draco and Harry had both nodded. "We found out the truth about Lucius."

The Slytherin boy sat up straight, his eyes faintly gleaming silver as they leapt open. "And?"

"It was not Lucius whom Harry saw helping Muggleborns; Harry was mistaken. More than that I will not say, but I quite assure you, there is no doubt whatsoever."

"I'm not so good at taking things on faith, Severus."

"No, nor I," Snape admitted. "But in this case, I am afraid you must."

Draco glanced from father to son, then shrugged. "All right . . . I knew it couldn't really be what it seemed. Though it was nice thinking it might be, even though I knew it really couldn't be and I knew better than to think he could ever be nice . . ." Draco began to rub his temples, his brow deeply furrowed. "Merlin, I sound like I've taken a Babbling Beverage. I don't suppose I can have any clear-thinking draught?"

"On top of everything else, no." Snape stared at him for a moment, then stepped closer to both boys. "What you need most, I think, is healthy natural sleep. Which not coincidentally, is what your brother needs as well."

"How long until I get to come home?" Draco asked, sounding plaintive.

Snape looked from one boy to the other, then sighed. "I'm in two minds about this, to say the least . . ." His voice firming, he announced, "I'm reluctant to leave you here alone tonight, Draco, but I must return to Hogwarts to monitor the progress of the investigation and assist Albus with anything we can do to bring some Order Aurors into it. I cannot bring you home until I have some assurance that you will be safe there--"

"It's all right," Draco interrupted, grimacing. "I know you can't do anything. I told you I was babbling."

"I can do something," Snape corrected. "Loath as I am to admit it, leaving you here alone was an error. Harry will stay with you tonight. In the morning we can re-evaluate how . . . rattled you remain."

Draco's face flushed pink. "How humiliating. I need a keeper now? I can't be trusted to behave?"

"You just need some company, I think," Harry chimed in. He was about to add that he'd be mental, too, if he was facing what Draco was . . . but at the last second, he decided it wouldn't help to say that. Jumping up, he glanced into the small cottage's sole bedroom. "Hmm, one big bed again? Did your transfiguration from before come undone?"

"Oh, please, Potter," Draco sneered. Harry could tell it was an act, though. Deep down, Draco was pleased and relieved that he'd have someone to talk to for a bit. "Unlike you, I'm actually quite skilled at transfiguration; my spells don't just fall apart! I had to do something to practice with that wand. Can you blame me if I thought it might be nice for a change to really stretch out--"
"You could have practiced using the wand on the charmed box," Snape pointed out, waving toward the table where it still sat. "I told you the spell, but I gather you haven't bothered to eat? You're to rectify that while Harry and I return to Grimmauld Place to get the things he left there."

"You could leave him here so I have some company during dinner," Draco wheedled.

"I have a few things to say to him," Snape explained.

Draco made a face. "Things about me?"

"Things about him," the Potions Master coolly corrected. "We will be some time."

Harry didn't like the sound of that, but he didn't fool himself that he had much of a choice. "See you in a bit, Draco," he said, standing when Snape made an impatient gesture.

"Yeah . . ." Draco stood up and made his way over to the table. "Thanks, Harry, Severus."

Snape seemed about to say something, but whatever it was never found voice. Instead, he beckoned Harry to walk outside with him. Without a word, they Apparated back to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place.

"Thanks for deciding I could stay over in Devon," Harry murmured before pushing away from his father's embrace. "I think that'll be good for Draco. It's too bad you can't join us. It was great there at Christmas, the three of us together. Well, after Draco and I worked out the Samhain thing."

"Assuming recent events do not completely change my plans, we will spend some time in Devon this summer," Snape assured him. "All three of us together."

"A family, like Dumbledore said. You know, I think he's starting to come around--"

"Professor Dumbledore," Snape interrupted. "And yes, I know it's been a long while since you heard me insist on his proper title. I begin to think I've made an error in judgment with you. Sit down."

An error in judgment . . . An image of the unadoption dream flashed through Harry's mind, but he pushed it away as he sat down in one of the armchairs nearby. Snape seated himself in another one, but first he pulled it to face Harry, tugging it so close that when he did sit down, their knees nearly touched.

"Do you think Professor Dumbledore is beginning to view us as a family?" Harry tried again.

"I think he has realised at least that he might as well accept matters," Snape explained, steepling his fingers and looking at Harry over the top of them. "I also think that you are trying your best to direct the flow of this discussion. I did not bring you here to discuss the headmaster."

Harry leaned back, away from those piercing eyes. "Right, you wanted to discuss me." He was about to ask if he would have to write lines alongside Draco, something like I will not attempt untested wanded magic alone again, but at the last moment he realised that it wouldn't be too Slytherin to remind his father about the way he'd changed that picture frame into a viewing wall. "Um, so what about me?"

"Oh, surely you can guess," Snape drawled, leaning forward yet further, his eyes piercing Harry's. "Considering the context? And what I just said about an error in judgment?"

Harry slumped slightly. "Oh. Yeah, I can guess. Respect."
"Indeed."

"I said I was sorry--"

"No, you said you guessed that maybe you should not have spoken to me thus." Snape's fingers tautened, the steeple they were forming about to fly apart from the stress. He looked as though he was having trouble speaking, or perhaps deciding what to say, Harry thought, an impression which was confirmed when the man practically spat, "Do you have any idea what would have happened to me had I ever spoken to my father like that? And what would have happened had I had the temerity to apologise with words like guess and maybe?"

Finally, a real detail about Snape's childhood, his family . . . and it had to come in a context like this. Maybe that was the only way, though, Harry reasoned. "No, I don't have any idea," he quietly admitted. "I can't possibly have any idea, because you don't much talk about things like that."

"And why do you think that is?"

Harry could feel his neck growing hot. "Well, I figured out a while ago that your childhood must have been about as bad as mine."

Snape just stared at him.

"All right, worse," Harry sighed. "What does this have to do with respect, though? I'm sure you must know that I respect you one hell of a lot, Severus. You've been through awful things, but you've overcome them. If I didn't respect you I'm sure I couldn't really have made you my father where it counts. I don't mean on the adoption papers."

"You show in many ways that you deeply respect me, Harry," Snape admitted, dropping his hands to his lap as he leaned back. "Sometimes to an excessive degree. But that's another conversation. This one is about a concept you appear to have difficulty mastering: public respect."

"It was so bad of me to point out that you've really misjudged Remus?"

"To point it out, no." Snape narrowed his eyes. "To point it out when we were not alone, yes. And that is not even considering the way you ordered me to apologise, as if you indeed were the father and I the child. This fact may escape your attention, but for all that Albus is a friend of many years' standing, he is also headmaster at the school where I am employed. Your behaviour caused my employer to speculate, in my presence no less, that I was no more mature than a toddler," he sneered. "Is that your idea of respect, then?"

"I'm sorry!" Harry blurted. "I am, all right? But Remus doesn't deserve to be treated the way you keep treating him."

"And I do not deserve to be treated the way you keep treating me!" Snape countered, raising his voice. "We have discussed this before, Harry."

"Look, just because your father never let you speak your mind doesn't mean that you and I have to follow the same rules--"

Wrong thing to say. Definitely, the wrong thing. Harry knew that much from the way Snape's lips curled in disdain. "Merlin's blood, Harry! How dare you imply that I have taken my father as some sort of model! I do let you speak your mind. In the privacy of our own home, I let you say any stupid thing you like to me, and you know it! I am not like my father!"

"All right, all right," Harry backtracked, holding up his hands.
But Snape wasn't finished. "My father did worse to me than the Dursleys ever did to you," he continued, fingers now curling into fists on the arms of the chair. "I will not discuss the details; you have nightmares enough already. But you would do well to leave my father out of any discussions you and I conduct."

"Yes, sir," Harry murmured, a little taken aback. What had the man done to Snape?

Shaking his head, Snape conjured a small glass of something and began to sip at it. When a smell reminiscent of liquorice wafted across the short distance to Harry, he thought it must be Galliano. He wasn't sure what to think about that. He was driving his father to drink? That was a pretty awful thought.

"Does it impress you," Snape asked rather caustically, "that you have this evening compelled me to break an oath? I swore I would not talk about my own father to you, Harry. Ever. And now I have. Are you proud of yourself?"

"No," Harry answered honestly. "But . . . about this not talking. That's no good. I mean, it's not like I want to pry just for the sake of it. I need to know you better. Otherwise, it's kind of like . . . um, like we're not family at all, actually."

"I will not infect this family with even remnants of the illness that plagued my childhood," Snape retorted. "And you will not persuade me with pseudo-psychological arguments. You do not know what you are talking about."

"What about the book? It said it was good to talk, you know . . ."

"Sometimes it is also good not to." Snape sighed, shaking his head. "Samhain, Harry. That was a horrendous experience for you. Have I ever sought to make you speak of it, relive it out loud? The book recommended you be encouraged to talk about it with someone whom you trust, but I knew you better than any book. You needed someone you could trust, yes. I have sought to be that for you, but I will not press you to suffer again that which you should never have suffered at all. I ask the same consideration of you."

"All right, I understand." Harry nodded.

"Good." Pausing, Snape glanced at Harry over his glass. "I should have asked, would you like something to drink as well?"

Harry wasn't thirsty, but it seemed like Snape was trying to be civil, so he didn't want to refuse. "Um, sure, some lemonade would be nice."

Snape flicked his wand in three precise arcs and a glass glimmered into existence in Harry's hand.

Smiling his thanks, Harry tasted it. Hmm, bit more sour than he liked, but he passed that off as Snape not being in a very sugary mood. "Thanks," he murmured.

Snape nodded briefly, then lapsed into a silence broken only by the clinking of ice. For a few moments, Harry thought it was just a pause for the man to assemble his next rebuke; he was slow to realise that his father was waiting for him to respond to all that had already been said . . . giving him a chance to speak his mind. In private.

He could say anything he liked to Snape now, he knew. Anything at all; Snape wouldn't punish him for speaking his mind. He just wanted him to wait until they had a time like this, a time alone, before Harry began to rail against him. Was that so much to ask? Uncle Vernon had never made Harry feel as if his comments were allowed at all.
The boy stared down into his lemonade, suddenly glad he had something to hold, because only then did he begin to understand something of what his behaviour must have looked like to his father. It was a sobering realisation. At that moment, he wondered why the man even wanted to keep him around. "I am sorry," he said, the words that time heartfelt. "I wasn't trying to humiliate you or anything like that. I just wanted you to be fair to Remus."

"Another thing we had best discuss," Snape sighed, taking a rather large swallow of Galliano that time. "Harry, I am Head of Slytherin. Fairness is not a quality I have ever aspired to. Moreover, you have known me for six years, most of that time in a context guaranteed to ensure that you became well-acquainted with my harsher qualities. I refuse to believe that you can really entertain fantasies about me changing so radically."

"I . . . well, I think I understand that's not going to happen," Harry acknowledged. "And it's not like I want you to change everything. I like you as you are, and I think we get on, and um . . . I think Mrs Weasley was right that you can give me the kind of support I really need. You're a good father," he finished, looking down because what he had to say next was harder. "There um, are some things you could improve on, though. I mean . . . I understand I shouldn't have gone about things the way I did, but you did apologise to Remus in the end. That was good. I mean, I thought so."

Snape downed the remainder of his liqueur and set the glass down with a thud. "I did not think so, and furthermore, I have no need for my interactions with other adults to be managed by a sixteen-year-old. Do my wishes mean literally nothing to you?"

Harry coloured. "I just don't like the two of you at odds."

"Be that as it may, in front of others you simply must refrain from criticising me, Harry. Even if you believe I am being grossly unfair. Even if I am being unfair to Gryffindor and your friends are insisting you do something about it."

"You're thinking of class," the boy realised.

"We'll be in class together soon," Snape affirmed. "It will be good for you to return to a normal routine, but I admit I am not looking forward to sixth-year Potions with you."

That sort of hurt Harry's feelings, even though he had often felt approximately the same way.

"You have never particularly appreciated my classroom demeanour," Snape went on, "or my methods of instruction. As far as I am concerned, you are entitled to an opinion. But now, being my son, you may well feel entitled to voice your opinion in full view of the other students. That, I cannot tolerate."

"I won't say anything in class," Harry heavily promised. "I won't, all right? I'll just take notes and brew and clean up my own boilovers as best I can, and I won't ask you for a thing, I swear. I'll pretend I don't know you from Adam."

"Who?"

"Never mind," Harry muttered, feeling progressively more awful. "It'll be like this year never happened, that's what I meant."

Snape drew his feet in toward his chair, his hair swaying as he shook his head to reject that solution. "I don't expect that; I don't even wish it. Everyone does already understand that you are now my son, and I've no desire to claim otherwise in class or out of it. What I ask is that you not argue with me in front of other students."
Harry mutely nodded.

"It's an easy thing to promise," Snape pointed out.

"I'm a Gryffindor," Harry stressed, glaring. "I keep my promises."

"See that you keep this one. If you try to talk me out of points from Gryffindor I'll have to take points from you, and you know what that does to the counters. I'll be quite annoyed if Slytherin loses points on your account. Remember that."

Harry relaxed a little, then. "But you don't take points from Gryffindor like you used to, do you? I mean, for no reason at all?" When Snape merely raised his eyebrows as if to say, I do believe we just covered that, Harry suddenly felt as though he had swallowed a bellyful of lead. "You mean Ron was right? You kept picking on Gryffindor, even after you adopted me?"

Snape didn't nod to acknowledge that, but neither did he deny it.

"You kept right on taking unfair points, giving Hermione all the hardest questions, ignoring the way Crabbe and Goyle practically fall into their cauldrons?"

"Crabbe and Goyle are not in sixth-year Potions," Snape pointed out.

"You know what I meant."

"Yes," the Potions Master admitted. "Harry, what is fair is very rarely strategic. As estranged as I have been from many of my Slytherins, I've no desire to alienate them yet further. Changing my classroom practices could only accomplish that. Surely you can see that much?"

Harry could, but all the same . . . "Do you still hate Gryffindors on principle?" he blurted. "I mean . . . if the Sorting Hat had never wanted to put me in Slytherin at all, would you still . . ."

"Love you?" Snape blew out a breath. "How can I answer that? What if I had never masqueraded as Lupin? What if your aunt had been cured by the bone marrow and you had never fallen ill? What if Lupin hadn't had a hankering for ice cream--"

"I get the point," Harry dryly put in. "But you didn't answer my question, did you? Do you still hate Gryffindors just because of where they were sorted? Because, no offence, but that's not very strategic."

Snape's lips curled slightly upwards. "Using my own words against me. Now that, Harry, is quite Slytherin."

"I think I'm actually more Gryffindor--"

"I know for certain that you are," Snape calmly interrupted. "I have accepted that I have a Gryffindor son, that I in fact chose a Gryffindor son. It doesn't change who I am and it certainly doesn't make me like Gryffindors on principle. That really should be enough for you."

It was and it wasn't, but Harry couldn't think about it any longer, not just then.

Levering himself to his feet, the Potions Master studied the books and school folders stacked on a side table. "Draco will need more parchment," he decided, abruptly drawing his wand and summoning some from upstairs.

"For ten thousand lines, I guess so," Harry sighed. "Well, since we are alone maybe it's a good time
for me to ask why you have to be so . . ."


Harry said nothing, his own gaze merely challenging Snape to think about it.

The Potions Master stacked the parchment that had flown into his hands and extended it towards Harry. "Draco's going to have great deal of time to fill," he pointed out. "The lines will give him something on which to focus. And too, the finite nature of the assignment will help him, I think. He needs to be able to see an end in sight. Not to mention, what he has to write will tend to make him angry. Better that than he broods."

Accepting his father's judgment --strange and Slytherin as it was-- Harry took the parchments from Snape's hand. "So what does he have to write?"

"You'll see," Snape answered. Harry took that to mean that he didn't want to debate it.

Harry gathered up the rest of Draco's schoolbooks and notes, then looked expectantly toward his father.

Instead of pulling him close so they might Apparate, however, Snape held up a hand as though to warn him. "I am quite serious about your keeping Lupin's secret from Draco," he insisted in a tone that would brook no disobedience. "If I find out that you have contravened my wishes I will be most displeased, especially as it means I would not trust you again to keep Draco company. So see to it that you keep hold of your tongue."

"Yes, sir."

Snape gave him a slightly impatient glance. "Save that for class, Mr Potter."

Harry thought about that for a minute. "You like to divide things up, I think. One thing for class, another thing for home. But if we're having a serious conversation and I say yes, sir, it doesn't mean I'm thinking you as my teacher. It just means . . . I want you to know I'm taking you seriously."

"Hmm." Snape beckoned him so they might Apparate. "That will do, I suppose. But please . . ."--his mouth quirked a bit--"restrict Professor to class alone."

"Sure, Sev," Harry quipped, smiling back. "No? Oh, all right. Dad it is."

----------------------------------------

"You were gone forever," was Draco's petulant greeting when they entered the cottage for the second time that night.

"Twenty-eight minutes is not forever, Draco," the Potions Master dryly informed him, his gaze sweeping the table. Apparently unsatisfied with what he saw there, he pressed, "Have you eaten?"

"Yes, lobster bisque followed by duck à l'orange with wild rice, if you must know," Draco haughtily replied. "And I asked the box for a nice bottle of Château Manos, and it gave me milk. Milk, I tell you! To go with duck! It's practically sacrilege."

"Actually, it's under orders not to provide you with liquor."

Draco's mouth dropped open. "I didn't ask for liquor, for heaven's sake, just a civilised dinner. What is this, Severus? You never objected before to me having wine with the evening meal!"
"I object to it when you're depressed and dining alone."

"Well, there is that," Draco murmured.

"Here," Harry put in, stepping between them. "I brought your school things."

"Oh, those will do me a lot of good. I'm shortly to be expelled, remember?"

"You need an education whether you are expelled from Hogwarts or not," Snape announced in a tone that would brook no dispute. "And you will get one, make no mistake."

Draco grimaced a bit and didn't reply. He did take the books and parchments though, briefly glancing through them before setting them aside.

"Keep up with your assignments," Snape advised. "Harry and I will keep you apprised of what those might be. Furthermore, I expect you to make good progress on your lines. All ten thousand of them, is that clear? I believe it took Mr Weasley something over thirty days to complete his--"

"Will you kindly stop throwing Weasley in my face?" Draco gritted. "So I laughed that he had lines to write! What are you trying to do, teach me that I shouldn't have?"

"I'm trying," Snape calmly returned, "to help you understand the gravity of your offences. That trick with your wand, alone, is enough to get you expelled. When Mr Weasley committed an expellable offence I gave him ten thousand lines. The same will do for you."

Draco threw his arms up into the air. "Severus, you know perfectly well that half of Slytherin dabbles in dark magic every chance they get! And you never say a word about it. In fact your silence implies approval!"

Leaning forward, Snape spoke into the young man's face. "And you know perfectly well that the roles I have played both before and after Voldemort's return in the flesh have severely limited my latitude. What you do not know is how I have dealt with Slytherin since Samhain, so kindly keep your assumptions to yourself!"

Draco pressed his lips together for a moment, then ventured, "But--"

A look from Snape had him falling silent.

"Better," the Potions Master approved. "I will not debate your consequence. You will write your lines without further complaint. Write the first one now so that you do not forget the wording."

He Accio'd some parchment from the stack, then performed a rather intricate spell over them before handing them to Draco. "Fetch an ink pot and quill, now." He waved toward the kitchen table where he had spent so many hours at Christmas penning letters.

Draco took his time, walking to get them instead of using magic, the resentful tilt of his head reminding Harry strangely of Ron.

Snape raised his eyebrows, but merely waited until the boy had sat down on the couch and assembled his writing materials on the low table in front of it. "Ready?"

Draco muttered something inaudible; Snape ignored it.

"You are to write, I am at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to learn to defend myself from the Dark Arts, not to practice them. Furthermore, as the Sorting Hat never once so much as contemplated placing me anywhere but Slytherin, I will cease at once my recent lamentable
"tendency to believe I am a Gryffindor."

"Oh, that's nice." Draco looked up, glaring. "I'm not going to write that."

"Yes, you are. And what's more, you're going to abide by it. Rushing pell-mell from my quarters with no thought to danger was the sort of idiotic behaviour I would expect from someone with more bravery than cunning. I expect sensible conduct from you."

Draco set his teeth, but evidently thought better of arguing. Bending over the parchment, he began to scratch out the sentences Snape had dictated.

"Gryffindor doesn't just mean stupid and reckless, you know," Harry quietly pointed out to his father. "I mean, it doesn't mean stupid and reckless. That's like saying Potions are foul, or Slytherins are criminals--"

"It's a generalization many in your House have contributed to, including yourself," Snape retorted.

"Oh, I was just supposed to let the Basilisk roam the halls?"

"You were supposed to tell a teacher what you knew."

"Yeah, well the year before we did tell McGonagall . . . um, I mean Professor McGonagall, about the Philosopher's Stone being in danger, and that worked out well, didn't it?"

"I regret that your Head of House let you down," Snape replied, staring at Harry in a way that would be hard to miss. Now you have me . . . that was what Harry read in the dark tunnels that were Snape's eyes. Harry gave a nod to say that he understood.

Snape nodded too, and then proving that he hadn't forgotten Draco, suddenly leaned over and cautioned, "Mind you don't misspell Gryffindor or you might find yourself doing the entire set over."

"Very funny," Draco snarled, but Harry noticed he did give the word a good look. The Slytherin boy's pale face flushed as with a growl of irritation, he found a way to squeeze in a second "f" beside the first one. Then sighing deeply, Draco neatly numbered a "2" on the sheet of parchment and began yet another line.

"No," Snape gently told him, leaning down to take the quill from his hand. "You may resume tomorrow, after you have spent the day pursuing your subjects."

"Wonderful," Draco sighed.

"And Draco . . ." Snape laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Your impetuousness has put us all in a rather untenable position. But . . . I remember being sixteen and making unwise choices. My regard for you has not changed. Do you understand?"

Draco looked down at his shoes as he nodded.

"It is time I returned to assist with matters at Hogwarts, I think," Snape pronounced, stepping away. "Draco, please do use care with the Calming Draught. I understand that you may need it, but no more than one dose every ten hours. Harry, I will return for you in the morning and we will make a treatment decision about that eye. It's just as well that you are here; I've no desire for the Aurors to see you in your current state, and they may well decide to pay Draco's quarters a visit."

"If they ask for me, what are you going to say?"
Snape looked back from the door. "You recall that in class you are to look a bit inept managing your new magic?"

"Yeah, to throw Voldemort off the scent . . ."

"In that same spirit, I plan to tell the Aurors that since Samhain you have been most fragile emotionally and were having so much difficulty dealing with the stress of a death right there at Hogwarts that I removed you to help avert a nervous breakdown--"

"You're going to tell them I've become a nutter?" Harry shouted, appalled.

"Not in those words, no. It's strategy, Harry. And though the imputation may be unfair to you--"

"Unfair!" Harry choked back a bitter laugh. "I want to be an Auror, in case you've forgotten. You get the Aurors Corps thinking I'm mental and they'll never let me in!"

"They also won't let you in if you're dead," Snape bluntly announced. "If my ruse keeps you alive by lulling Voldemort into thinking you will be easy prey, I am not disposed to alter course, whatever you may think of the misdirection."

Seeing the look on Snape's face, Harry felt his outrage subsiding. "Oh, all right," he groused, though he didn't like it any too well.

Snape glanced at both his sons. "You both need rest. Do not stay up too late. As I told Draco already, Harry, shouting that you need me will trip a ward alerting me to a problem here in the cottage. Stay inside at all times--"

"And be sure to use a cleaning spell on your teeth before bed," Draco interrupted. "Do you also want to tell us to use the toilet, Severus? For pity's sake!"

The Potions Master gave them a longish glance, clearly reluctant to leave at all. "Be good," he added to all he'd said. Letting that be his final word, Snape he walked outside, shutting the cottage door with a definite click. Harry watched through the window but it was too black outside to see the Potions Master once he stepped away from the house.

Draco waited until they heard the tiny noise of Apparition, then asked, his voice intense, "I have to know about your dreams, Harry--"

"I think we'd better heed what Severus said earlier," Harry interrupted. "No details, all right? He'll assign me ten thousand lines, I bet."

The Slytherin boy scowled. "Funny how you objected to that left, right, and centre when it was Weasley who had to write them."

"I stood up for you too," Harry assured him. "But it didn't do any good. Just like with Ron."

Draco searched his features, then shrugged. "Well, all right. Anyway, I wasn't going to ask about your Lucius dream, Harry. I'd just like to know one thing . . . have you had any about dreams this, about what I can expect? I know . . . well, you thought I was going to be killed, I know . . ." He looked away. "But now that you know that was all wrong, can you think of anything you dreamed that would tell you if I'm going to stand trial?"

"Sorry, I've no idea what you might have to face," Harry admitted. "But Draco, whatever it is, Severus and I will stand by you. Even if we all have to leave Hogwarts to keep you safe."
"Yeah," Draco said, his voice thick in his throat. "Yeah. Um, do you happen to know if Severus has any money? Any real money, that is? Because . . . my vault, the terms of the trust . . . I'm pretty sure that my entire inheritance will revert to Lucius if I'm expelled or even if I leave school on my own." He looked away, his gaze seeking out the blackness outside the window. "So . . . Severus quitting his job isn't such a good idea, see? I mean, unless he can support us without it."

"He has some money," Harry said, and at Draco's quick glance. "Not that he's ever discussed it with me, but there was a section on finances in the adoption application. Don't worry, Draco. He can take care of us."

"Good," Draco sighed. "Well, not good, actually, but better than having to . . ."

"What, depend on my vault?" Harry shrugged. "Snape has the key. If he needs to use it to help the family I have no problem with that."

"Well I have a problem with it," Draco snapped.

"Come on, all this worry is just going to make you sick. Let's get to bed . . . Have you sorted out the bedroom?"

"No," Draco sighed, glancing at his watch. "Ha, time for cocoa again. Well, a hot drink'll help me sleep, so I'm going to see if that stupid box will let me have some. You want any?"

"Yeah, and get us some biscuits too," Harry said, trying to make light of matters. What else was there to do?

"You transfigure the bed," Draco added.

"I don't know the spell in Parseltongue," Harry yawned, slipping off his cloak.

"All right, I'll go do it . . . you light a fire for us. It's getting a little cold in here."

They drank their cocoa in silence, the only noise the steady munching of shortbread. The quiet was actually rather soothing, Harry thought, after the kind of day both he and Draco had had.

Evidently, though, it wasn't soothing for the Slytherin boy. He was fidgeting restlessly, his silver gaze repeatedly darting between Harry and the table. The longer they sat there, the more nervous Draco seemed to get.

Nervous, and upset.

"I have to tell you something," Draco suddenly blurted.

Harry licked a bit of whipped cream from the corner of his mouth. "Hmm?"

The Slytherin boy swallowed and backed his chair away. "Remember how you said you loved me?"

Harry felt himself flushing red, but he wasn't about to go back on it, so he brazened it out. "Yeah, what of it?" Hmm, that had come out sounding a tad belligerent, he realised after the fact.

Draco didn't appear to notice. Wrapping his hands around his mug, now empty, he held to it as though it were some sort of lifeline. "Well, I wanted to make sure I told you that I love you too," he whispered, tension in every line of his face. "I love you with everything that's in me. With all my heart."

That declaration was about the most awful thing Harry had ever heard. It was just . . . all wrong,
from the words --nothing like the Slytherin way Draco would put such a sentiment--, to the evasive
glint in the other boy's eyes, to the way Draco held himself afterwards . . . to the tone, which
announced far clearer than words that the declaration was anything but sincere. It had been said
deliberately, calculated for effect . . .

It wasn't a declaration at all, in fact. It wasn't even true. It was strategy.

Harry's heart almost broke apart inside him, because he did love Draco, and this . . . this was proof,
wasn't it, that the other boy was insecure about everything. Not just about his future, or staying out of
Azkaban. He was insecure about Harry, too.

Not that Draco Malfoy would ever admit to that. No, he'd just lie and try to play the situation to his
advantage, because he was Slytherin, after all. Harry supposed he could play along and pretend to
believe the lie. It would be the easiest thing to do . . . but he didn't think that was what Draco truly
needed.

"You don't love me," Harry quietly said, pushing his mug to the side. Draco's gaze skittered away.

"I . . . I think you believe you have to say it back," Harry went on, hurting for the other boy. "You
said once that I might be the only person who could keep you out of Azkaban . . . and now, I guess
you think that if you don't say it back, I'll sooner or later get upset about that, and then I might not
help you when you need it. Is that what you're thinking?"

"No, no, I really do," Draco insisted, though his voice sounded weak and ill to Harry's ears. "I do
love you--"

"If you did, you wouldn't be so miserable at the thought of sharing my money," Harry countered.
"Listen to me, Draco. You don't have to pretend you feel something you don't. It's not the price of . . .
. my support, or anything."

Draco was staring at him as though he'd grown an extra head. "Why did you say that to me if it
wasn't so I'd say it back?"

"I didn't mean to say it," Harry admitted.

"But . . . why did you?" Draco pressed, still obviously confused.

"Because it's true, you imbecile!" Harry shouted, frustrated. "Hasn't anybody ever told you they
loved you before?"

"Not unless they wanted something," Draco admitted, staring across the table at Harry, his gaze clear
and honest that time.

Harry got it, then. Love wasn't love to Draco; it was a means to an end. It was manipulation. Family
love, at least. Romantic love was probably different, but Draco wasn't talking about that.

At that moment, what Draco had said sank in, really sank in. Harry knew he should just shut up, but
he couldn't, because what he'd realised was so very horrible.

"Even Severus?" he asked, confused. "He . . . Draco, after all this time, how can you think he wants
something from you when he says he loves you?"

Draco lifted his mug and took a sip, his every motion casual, just as though it didn't matter to him in
the least, what he was going to say. But it did matter. Harry knew it did.
"He doesn't say he loves me," Draco corrected. Standing up in one smooth motion, the Slytherin boy added, "He's never said it. Can you see to clearing away the mess, here? I'm tired. I'm going to bed."
Harry didn't know what to say to Draco after that. Just as well that the other boy was asleep --or pretending to be-- by the time he went into their bedroom. Of course cleaning up after the cocoa hadn't taken long . . . it was the lighted orbs that had delayed him. They refused to be banished. Harry didn't know the right spell to make them turn off, and since he'd never used orbs like that before, he wasn't about to experiment. He was lucky enough that his father hadn't really done anything yet about his stunt with the enchanted picture frame.

Actually, that still surprised him, but he chalked it up to the fact that Severus had been so proud of him for staying in instead of rushing out to help save Draco.

Since he couldn't make the orbs go away or stop glowing, he thought about herding them all into the chimney, but decided that they'd cause a beam of light to stream skywards. The cottage was unplottable and under Fidelius and all that, but Harry still thought it wouldn't be too clever to send out a beacon announcing its presence. In the end, he settled for levitating the orbs over to the couch where he wrapped them over and over in a blanket to dampen their light.

And then he went in to talk to Draco, only to realise when he stepped into the dark bedroom that he still didn't have the faintest idea what to say.

*Of course Severus loves you . . . or maybe something more like, Don't be a complete git! You know perfectly well that Severus loves you . . .*

Because the Potions Master did. Harry didn't have the slightest doubt. The thought of it used to make him feel a little bit angry inside, but not any longer. Not since he'd realised that sharing his father didn't mean he was being cheated of something.

Draco was the one being cheated, obviously.

No doubt, Snape must have his reasons for never having said *I love you* out loud to his Slytherin son. Knowing Snape, he probably had several reasons, and Harry wasn't so dim that he didn't know what they were. Some of them, at least. Slytherins weren't known for sentimentality. Look at the way Snape had first expressed love for Harry. *I don't hate you at all . . .* Even now, he didn't often say the actual word "love." Snape would agree with the old adage that actions speak louder and all that. And then there was the issue of Draco being Slytherin, as well. Maybe Severus thought the words would make him uncomfortable.

As indeed they *had*, Harry realised with a grimace as he slid between his sheets. Pre-warmed sheets . . . Draco had evidently cast a heating charm when he'd transfigured the big bed in half.

*Actions speak louder . . . yeah, that applied to Draco as well.*

Severus probably knew that if he talked of love to Draco, the Slytherin boy would suspect at least a shred of manipulation behind the sentiment. So he showed how much he cared, instead, even to the point of resigning if that was what it took to keep his family safe.

It all made sense, but it still left Harry frowning as he lay awake that night.

The morning brought him no closer to a solution. Harry honestly didn't know if he should try to talk to Draco, or Severus, or both of them, or leave it to them to work it out on their own. He *had* told
Draco more than once to stay out of his own relationship with his father, so maybe he should follow his own advice.

Or maybe not, since Draco struck Harry as really in need of reassurance.

At any rate, Draco wasn't in the room when Harry finally rolled out of bed to face the day. Harry hurriedly splashed some cold water on his face and pulled on last night's clothes, then opened the door to find his brother.

Draco was sitting at the square dining table, parchment laid out before him, bent over low with a quill in his hand. But there were no books anywhere at hand, so Harry didn't think it was schoolwork that had the other boy occupied.

"I'm pretty sure Severus meant for you to do your lines after dinner," Harry exclaimed. "Not all day long."

Draco leaned back in his chair, shaking his wrist a bit as though to loosen it. "As if I'd spend the whole day writing how I'm not a Gryffindor." Picking up the maple wand laying nearby, he tapped the parchment and whispered a drying spell, then stood up as he brought it over to show Harry.

"What do you think?"

Harry stared at the drawing, which showed a bare arm holding a wand. Inked across the back of the wizard's hand was a snake coiled to strike. A rather ugly snake, but of course that wasn't the point. Harry didn't have to ask what was.

"You're thinking of a tattoo?" he asked, feeling a bit sick at the thought. He didn't like being marked. Not by anything, not even his famous scar, but at least that could be hidden behind his hair most of the time. This would be out on display for everyone to see. It would have to be, if it was going to always be in full view for Harry.

Harry shivered. He couldn't help it; the idea, not to mention the image, reminded him too much of the Dark Mark.

The Slytherin boy wasn't slow to pick up on his mood. "I know, it's not your dream come true," he murmured. "But Harry, we have to do something. You're about to go back to classes. Too many people at Hogwarts want you dead, and the way you can't incant unless a snake is in sight... it makes you too vulnerable, don't you see?" He shook his head, his eyes deeply troubled. "I don't want anybody else able to get around you the way I did."

It wasn't lost on Harry that this was proof, as if he needed it, that Draco did care about him. Draco just wasn't ready to call it love... and for all Harry knew, it wasn't. But it was certainly something.

"Harry?" Draco shifted on his feet.

Right, the snake tattoo... "You're one of the privileged few who understand how much I need a snake," Harry pointed out. "I bet everybody else will think I can speak Parseltongue at will."

"I bet," Draco raised his voice, "that in short order, everybody else will realise something odd is going on. Come on, Harry. Like it or not, using Parseltongue in class is going to draw every eye to you! How long is it going to be before the other students notice you glancing at your crest every single time you try to cast a spell? It's going to be pretty obvious how to shut off your magic!"

"You think a snake tattooed on my hand is going to make it less obvious?"

"It's going to be obvious anyway. I think the tattoo will keep you alive. Look, it could be in
"Gryffindor colours. Like Sals."

"Colours aren't the point." Before the other boy could reply, Harry held up a hand. "I agree that glancing at my crest all the time has its drawbacks, so what about . . . hmm, a ring with a little snake carved in it? Isn't that better? Just like with the tattoo, I'll naturally be looking its way when I want to cast, but a ring would call much less attention to itself."

"A ring can be summoned right off your finger; a tattoo can't."

"I'll ward it with stay-put charms. Wanded ones," Harry insisted. "The thing'll be practically welded to my finger. But see, the thing is, we could come up with a reason why I have the ring. I'll say Severus said I had to wear it to remind me that my father's Head of Slytherin and that I'd better not lose any points from his house, something like that."

"Hmm. You might be right," Draco said. "The tattoo would be a good deal harder to explain. People would probably think of some rather nasty parallels with Severus and his mark, now that his Death Eater past is all out in the open." He abruptly flicked the wand he held and incanted *Incendio*; the parchment began to burn. "Just make sure you don't set foot outside the dungeons without the ring glued to your finger. Severus has enough to do, trying to get me out of trouble."

"Speaking of which," Harry said, wondering where to start. Getting Draco out of trouble was likely to be quite a feat, considering everything involved. Funny, all that effort to make sure the Petrificus in his wand could be explained as having nothing to do with Pansy . . . and now it was a moot point since nobody could make the wand give up its secrets. But things were better this way. Now, there was no reason to let the Aurors know that Draco had ever hexed him. The fact that Draco couldn't be forced to take truth serum simplified things considerably, not that the situation that remained was simple.

"All right, listen carefully," Harry said after he'd taken a minute to think it through. He wished he could tell Draco the whole truth, but with their father so adamant that Harry's hex-breaking remain a secret . . . "Ron and Hermione came down while I was under *Petrificus*. They got worried when nobody answered the door, so they sent Ginny off to tell Severus something was wrong. He flooed down at once and broke me out of *Petrificus*. So far, so good, but this is where it gets complicated. Severus and I answered the door and I sort of . . . um, let it slip that I was afraid you'd run up to the Owlery. Sorry about that. Anyway though, later on we worked out a story which'll cover why we didn't answer the door and they had to send Ginny off. You and I were working on deafening potions, see? And we made them too strong, so we couldn't hear the magic doorbell. Severus found us both down there. That's what Ron and Hermione are going to tell Ginny, so that's the story you and I have to tell, got it? You never left the dungeons at all."

"That's going to make sense, considering my burn," Draco said, frowning. "Or do we not mention that?"

"Well, I thought that this way we could ask Severus to heal it." Harry waited until Draco had nodded to tell him the rest. "There's one thing I'm not so sure about, though. Pansy's letters. Do you think you should mention those? I suppose if you do the Aurors might want to read them . . . but if you say there aren't any and somebody else in Slytherin has already said otherwise, that could be a problem."

"They'll be blank by now, anyway." Draco gave a long, deep sigh, his eyes taking on a dull grey cast. "Her letters always went blank after a few hours . . ."

Personally, Harry thought that made it all the more likely that Pansy had been playing some game of her own, but Draco was upset enough already. "It'll be all right," he said instead.
"She's dead, Harry," Draco countered, blinking as he looked out the window. "How can that be all right?"

Snape arrived while they were still eating breakfast, but waved away their offers of tea and toast. He had a decidedly strange look on his face as Harry went over the cover story again, explaining how the situation with Draco's wand meant they could neglect to mention any hex to the Aurors, and how that meant that they didn't have to admit that Draco had ever left the dungeons.

"Just making sure all three of us have our stories straight," Harry finished, just as a horrifying thought occurred to him. "Oh, no. You said last night that the headmaster would decide when to tell the Aurors about the amulet . . . has the headmaster already mentioned it to them? If they know he's been burned from being right with the conspirators then there goes our story about how he never even left the dungeons--"

"Albus Dumbledore is a bit more cagey than that, Harry."

"Well, check with him even so before we get too deep in lies to back out," Harry worried aloud.

"A wise precaution." Snape nodded, then turned to his other son. "Are you feeling better, this morning? No chance you will overdose yourself again?"

Draco bristled. "You can take your Calming Draught away with you for all I care."

"Actually, it's Harry I'll be taking away. That eye needs seeing to. Back at Hogwarts, where my private laboratory is at hand should anything go awry."

Draco gave a shrug as though it was nothing to him if he was left all alone. "You look as if you have news, Severus. Bad news. Any plans to tell me soon?"

"Two young Aurors came by early this morning." Snape's dark eyes were unreadable. "They carefully examined all your shirts and found it quite interesting that one had several missing buttons."

Draco looked puzzled.

"You ripped some of the buttons free when you tore your shirt off yesterday," Harry reminded him.

"Well, it hurt! It stung like you wouldn't believe, rubbing up against the burn."

"The disturbing thing," Snape put in, "is that when I explained that you had disrobed rather carelessly, one of the Aurors cast a localised Accio to summon any strewn buttons. Only three leapt into her hand, though the shirt is clearly missing four."

Draco sucked in a harsh breath. "Don't tell me, let me guess. The fourth button was found in the Owlery to confirm my presence there?"

"The Aurors declined to comment, but one must presume something of that sort. We are dealing with Slytherins, after all. When your wand refused to cooperate they settled on an alternate means of incriminating you."

"I would be wearing the shirt with the diamond ones," Draco groused. "Damned distinctive handmade buttons. Well, if I get through this perhaps it'll teach me to purchase things off the rack."

He shuddered at the mere thought.
Harry thought that gemstone buttons were a bit much in any case. On the other hand, if Draco really
did lose all his money on account of being expelled, at least he'd have a little laid by in the form of
those buttons . . .

"Luck does not seem to be with us," Snape agreed. "Had we realised earlier that a button was
missing, I could have removed it from the Owlery before the Aurors found it."

"Maybe they haven't found it," Harry mused. "The house-elves clean the Owlery, don't they? And
Dumbledore . . . sorry, Professor Dumbledore said he was with the Aurors when they searched it. He
didn't mention them finding anything of note."

"It does not take much sleight of hand to collect surreptitiously something so tiny," Snape pointed
out. "And Aurors who are not in the Order have no particular reason to share information freely with
Albus, despite his having presided over their education here at Hogwarts. Be that as it may, I feel
certain they found it. Their own questions to me were too . . . leading."

A bad feeling began creeping over Harry. "Did you mention the burn at all? I mean, when you had
to explain why Draco ripped off his own buttons?"

Snape's lank hair swung as he shook his head.

"Well good, then we can still heal it," Harry said to Draco.

"I think not," Snape said. "I believe a better course would be to let the injury demonstrate that Draco
was in metaphorical rather than physical peril. That is, a conspiracy to incriminate him was afoot and
the amulet did not know how to interpret the danger. This scenario even accounts for the fact that the
amulet behaved atypically, as it should not have produced sufficient heat to burn the wearer."

"What the hell kind of gift was that, that's what I'd like to know," said Draco.

Harry figured that the other boy was cross over having to keep the burn, so he didn't react.

After a moment, Draco seemed to recover his panache. "So where were we? Oh, right. If the Aurors
have found a button of mine in the Owlery, they won't believe I was never up there. Why didn't you
say something when Harry was explaining his Slytherin little cover-up?" A moment later, the blond
boy narrowed his eyes. "Oh, I see. You have a Slytherin cover-up of your own, don't you, Severus?"

Snape shrugged. "As it happens, I did mention a certain house-elf who recently visited us on the
pretext of delivering a letter. It's no exaggeration to say that I have been frankly suspicious ever since
as to his true motivations for gaining entrance to my quarters. Not that he came to steal a button, but
the Aurors needn't know as much. What matters is that my door parchment will confirm Dubby's
visit; Dobby can verify that his cousin is in the employ of Narcissa Malfoy. Therefore, the button can
be viewed alternately as evidence against you or as one more indication of a conspiracy originating
with the Malfoy family."

"That's perfect," Harry said, nodding. "What else would he use to frame Draco except something so
tiny it might not be missed, like a button? Though it's a bit odd you'd be wearing that same shirt the
day of the murder."

"Mmm, I might have dropped a hint about Dubby also casting an influence charm to that effect, and
since a great deal of elf-magic is difficult for wizards to accurately detect . . ." Shrugging, Snape let
the boys draw their own conclusions.

Draco's was rather extreme. "This story's getting less and less likely. So are we all leaving Scotland
before they can charge me? That is . . . "--he paused, but only for a fraction of a second--"after you
see to Harry's eye, of course."

"If Draco's about to be charged with murder my eye can wait," Harry staunchly declared, looking towards his father in hopes of communicating a silent message. *Tell him he matters, too. Tell him you love him every bit as much as you love me . . .*

If Snape perceived Harry's plea, he ignored it.

"New investigators are due to arrive this afternoon," he informed them both, "including at least one senior Auror who will take charge. Ironic, isn't it? Fudge resisted Albus' every machination, but when the Parkinsons themselves threatened to go to the press to complain that the case hadn't been assigned a single seasoned professional? At the very least, they've bought us some time." The Potions Master paused, then added, "The junior Aurors currently at Hogwarts wanted you questioned this morning, Draco, but Albus and I maintained that you were distraught and should really be interrogated only once. The matter has therefore been deferred."

Draco glanced across the table at Harry. "There, all better? Now we're *both* known as mental."

"Distraught is hardly a character judgment," Snape chided.

"It is when your name is Malfoy." Draco crossed his arms and scowled, then looked as though he was trying to rise above it. "Enough about my problems. Harry, tell him about your ring."

Snape raised a concerned eyebrow. "Something has happened to your mother's ring?"

It was only then that Harry realised he hadn't thought about it in ages. He still wore it, looped around his neck on the chain Snape had supplied, taking it off only for showers and the like, but he'd grown so used to its constant presence that he didn't clutch it in his hand as he used to. It almost seemed a part of him now.

Shaking his head to answer the question, Harry briefly explained Draco's idea about the tattoo and how they had decided that a ring might be a better solution.

By the time he finished, his father was nodding. "Well-reasoned, all of it," he commended them, his glance encompassing them both. Standing, Snape laid a hand on Harry's shoulder. "I will see to it that Harry acquires a snake-shaped ring before he ventures out into the castle. Draco, you will be all right on your own?"

"Oh, but of course," the Slytherin boy said, eyebrows raised as if the very question had been preposterous. "No need to worry about *moi*. Malfoys don't curl up and die at the first sign of distress. We have *backbone*, or failing that, enough good sense to lie our way out of trouble."

*Tell him, Severus, Harry thought. Tell him you love him; tell him you do worry.*

"Be good," Snape merely admonished.

"Oh, always," Draco gibed. "Though I can't claim to be a perfect little *do*-gooder like Harry there."

"I do believe I made my opinion of this sibling rivalry perfectly clear," Snape rebuked him. "Harry and you complement one another; haven't you realised as much?"

A long sigh lifted Draco's chest as he nodded.

Snape's eyes were steady as he studied the boy. It seemed to Harry that the Potions Master was on the brink of saying something more, but he evidently thought better of it. Drawing Harry up out of
his chair, the man pulled him close to Apparate.

In the instant before the world melted around him, Harry almost thought Draco was going out of his way not to look at the two of them together. But he could have imagined it; he wasn't sure.

Once they had flooed from Grimmauld Place back into Snape's quarters, the Potions Master took Harry into his private potions laboratory and with a wave of his wand, cleared off a central counter. "Up," he instructed.

Harry thought it was a bit odd, but he obediently hopped up to sit on the counter.

Snape threw him a wry smile. "Idiot child. On your back, I meant. How else am I going to properly examine that eye?"

Flat on his back, Harry used his one good eye to stare up at the ceiling.

"Lumos," Snape incanted, and shined the light at his face. "Hmm. The swelling is largely reduced though the skin still remains colourful, to say the least. Can you open your eye at all?"

The first few times he'd tried, the attempt had been painful enough that Harry had decided he'd better wait. At his father's urging though, he strained again. "Ow, that really hurts," he groaned.

"Wait," Snape advised, leaning over closely. "I suspect some mucus has more or less glued the tissues together. Possibly a side effect of freeing yourself from Petrifcus."

Reflex had Harry closing his other eye as he saw a vial and dropper approaching. Something ice cold and slick was dribbled atop his injured eyelid, and then his father's fingers were very gently massaging the potion into the corners of the eye, working the salve towards the centre.

"Try again now."

It seemed to take a while, but finally Harry found that he could open his eye. Somewhat, at least. "That's bright," he complained when the brilliantly glowing tip of Snape's wand came into view.

Snape moved his wand aside. "Keep your eye open as wide as you can and let it adjust," he instructed. "Can you see colours? Can you focus on objects both near and far? Do you feel you have depth perception--"

"Give me a minute." It seemed like bright light was still flashing inside his eyeball, but as that sensation gradually dissipated, the room came into a hazy sort of focus. It was like looking through a thick film of cobwebs, or perhaps fog. Harry found it disorienting, given that his other eye still had perfect vision. He had to repress a strong urge to snap his weaker eye shut. "Colours, yes. But things are a bit blurry on the left," he said, feeling a bit like someone was sitting on his chest. He could almost hear Severus saying breathe . . . Dragging in a gulp of air, Harry looked up at his father. "Can you make it better?"

"You've been so nonchalant about the whole matter that I'd begun to doubt it worried you."

"Well, I just figured you could fix it!" Now somebody was practically jumping on his chest. "I mean, you got me past everything from Samhain and that was worse. A lot worse. I never really believed you couldn't heal this too--"

"Hold still," Snape interrupted, shining that bright light again as his fingers forcibly pried his son's
eye open wide. Harry couldn't help but gasp. At that, the Potions Master moved his hand to the boy's shoulder, his fingers curling snugly. "Memory is a powerful thing," he murmured, his tones smooth. "But I know you can let me do this. You did before, and that was right after Samhain. Very impressive, actually--"

Harry appreciated hearing that, but had to admit, "I'm not spooked. It's just really sore when you yank the eyelids apart, that's all. Go on though, it's all right. I want to know why I can't see. Did my eye just not like getting smashed? I hope that's all."

Snape's touch was more careful that time as he examined the eye. "A significant amount of scarring has returned to your cornea. This is more than one would expect from blunt force trauma . . . Draco's blow has indeed disrupted the delicate balance of magic in your eye. Eyesight Elixir may be of use . . . Regular strength, this time, I should think; we can use what I have on hand." Harry heard the clink of a vial. "Remember, the Elixir must coat the entire surface of your eye before your tears dilute it."

The drops stung oddly, making him desperate to blink, but Harry resisted. Funny, the Eyesight Elixir had never hurt before . . . "That should be sufficient," Snape finally announced.

Harry mashed his eye shut and rolled it around and around inside the socket, creepily reminded of Mad Eye Moody. But he wasn't going to end up like him; Snape would make everything all right.

When he opened his eyes again, he expected to see perfectly. Instead, the world remained half-blurred.

"Shite." Harry groaned out loud. "I really thought you could do it."

"No improvement? Well, the Elixir was far from instantaneous the first time, you will recall."

"Yeah, but this time felt different. It hurt."

Instead of commiserating, Snape gave that some careful thought. "Like salt on a wound?"

"More like vinegar. Sort of an acidic kind of sting," Harry tried to explain. "But sharper."

The Potions Master nodded. "I will research the matter, Harry, but I feel certain now that it will be safe to heal the tissues so that you can return to class."

"I can't return to class half-blind!" Harry stopped grumbling, though, when his father began to smooth bruise salve across his left eye.

"Don't you still have your glasses? Madam Pomfrey may be able to ameliorate the situation through a skilful charm or two."

Strange how Harry hadn't once thought of his glasses. He'd got so used to life without. Too bad he couldn't cast a powerful reparo on his own eye, but considering what had happened to his pillow, he didn't dare risk it. "Can't you charm them?"

"Optics is not my specialty," Snape admitted. "A licensed mediwitch will be a great deal more familiar with ways to assist students with vision problems."

"So, Pomfrey then. Sorry, Madam Pomfrey."

The barest hint of a smile ghosted across his father's features. "It is good to see you making an effort in that regard."
Sitting up, Harry passed that off with a shrug. "I don't think the last name thing is all that disrespectful. It's just how students talk when the teachers aren't around." Hopping down from the counter, he changed the subject. "I know I'm supposed to start classes come Monday, but I was sort of thinking it might be better if I went back to Devon to stay with Draco until he's allowed to come home. I mean, I know he said he was fine, but I think he's just saying that. Actually, I was surprised you left him there alone this morning. What if he panics again?"

The Potions Master slanted Harry a sidelong look. "I quite assure you, I shall know before matters grow too dire."

"Oh, you warded the Calming Draught to tell you if he drinks too much again?" Harry guessed. "Well, no offence but Draco might go a different direction next time. Something you can't predict. He's rattled, remember?"

"He's fine," Snape said in a voice that would be hard to misinterpret. He was saying that the subject was closed. But it wasn't, not as far as Harry was concerned.

"How can you know he's fine?" the boy insisted. "You can't. You're relying on how he was acting this morning, but couldn't you tell that was all an act? A cover? Draco's really upset! There's no telling what he might take it into his head to do--"

"At the moment," Snape interrupted, "he's ignoring his problems in favour of juggling."

Harry thought he'd heard that wrong, it was such a strange comment. "Juggling?"

"The orbs. He spent a while charming them different colours and now he's trying to teach himself to juggle."

Harry glared. It felt a bit odd with only one eye working correctly. "And how exactly do you know that?"

Snape opened his hand and showed Harry a flat glass disc. Harry had to close his injured eye to bring the disc into focus, but when he did, he saw Draco deftly tossing three orbs in a circular pattern. He couldn't keep it up for long; within just a few seconds he missed catching the purple one and all three crashed to the floor.

"Salazar's balls!" the tiny image of Draco exclaimed. Then the boy shook his head, and said in a passable imitation of the Potions Master, "No, I do believe these particular balls would be my balls . . . " Chortling, Draco picked all the orbs up again and began over.

Harry felt himself colouring, though surely it wasn't his fault Draco was talking that way. "I don't think we should be spying on him. He wouldn't like it."

Snape shrugged. "I recommend you never mention it, then."

"It's . . ."

"I believe the phrase you are searching for is regrettable but necessary, Harry. You were quite right that Draco might do something unpredictable. What do you suggest I do? Bring him home before I feel assured of his safety here? I saw no alternative but to leave him in Devon alone, unless you would prefer I ferry Mr Weasley or Miss Granger out there to watch over him?"

"You don't need to get all sarcastic about it, you know."

"Actually, I truly did consider that option."
"Oh," Harry said, a little bit shocked. Not over the concern, of course; he knew that Snape cared about the Slytherin boy. But that he would think about using Ron and Hermione to help? That was sort of interesting, considering Snape's basic opinion of all things Gryffindor. Still, he had to say, "That's not such a good idea. I mean, they agreed to help with the deafening potion story, but for all that they're not exactly convinced of his innocence--"

"Yes, I know." Snape heavily sighed. "I also know that they would go there if you asked them to, though no doubt Miss Granger would complain about missing classes. However, Draco and Mr Weasley would likely come to blows at some point. And as for Miss Granger . . ." A grim expression settled on the Potions Master's face. "That might be even worse."

Harry couldn't think what his father meant by that, unless . . . "Oh, oh no," he murmured. "You've got the wrong end of the stick on this one. I know Draco said a couple of things to us about Hermione being clever, and then he sort of apologised to her that once, but he doesn't like her like her. Unless you're worried that he's going to . . . uh, lose his mind with grief over Pansy and--"

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, I didn't mean that," Snape scathed. "He's got his pride, Harry. For the girl who's beaten him academically time and again to come watch over him would wound it inordinately, I've no doubt. He might lose his resolve and start calling her Mudblood again. That's all we need."

"All the more reason for me to go to Devon," Harry argued. "Look, I've been out of classes for forever. What does another week or two matter?"

"For you to be missing from Hogwarts for that long without good excuse will have Lucius pressing for your expulsion, not to mention it will make you look every bit as mental as you claim not to want. No, you'll be in classes on Monday and that is that."

"But--"

"You will return to class."

Harry could tell this was going to be one of those you are my son and you will do as I say times. "All right," he acquiesced. "Just . . . don't hold anything Draco says or does against him. I mean, unless he does something you have to put a stop to." Then, because it seemed like he might have a little bit of influence seeing as he'd just capitulated to his father's demand, he ventured, "Um . . . speaking of Draco, you might also want to consider telling him that you love him, all right? Because . . . well, I'm sure he must know that you do, but the fact you tell me but not him . . . well, it's not even, and you know how important that can be to a Slytherin."

Snape glanced at the glass disk in his hand, then closed his fingers around it, but he said nothing at all.

The silence itself was telling, Harry thought. A vague suspicion began to form inside his mind. "You don't seem surprised that I know you've never told him."

Yet more silence.

Then finally his father spoke. "I suppose you'll resent it if I attempt any misdirection. You've obviously figured matters out."

"Well, it seems pretty bloody obvious that you had that," Harry pointed at Snape's closed fist, "going full blast last night when Draco and I were talking. And this morning too, huh? I thought you looked a bit odd when I was going over the cover story! No wonder, you'd heard the whole thing not ten minutes before!"
"It was interesting to watch it evolve."

"I'll tell you what's interesting," Harry scathed. "How you could listen to all that last night and not rush right back to say that of course you love him! Or at the very least you should have told him this morning! You're the one who goes on about sibling rivalry. Can't you see that this sort of thing will just create it?"

Snape pushed his hair off his face. "I see more than you think, Harry. Come into the living room," he bid, shaking his head.

Harry followed, blinking a bit in hopes that his vision would clear, but things remained horribly blurry on one side.

"Do you recall, Harry," Snape said in serious tones after they had sat in silence for a moment, "I told you that Draco broke down with me and cried? He was . . . I did not know how to help him, so I used a touch of Legilimency—" He held up a hand when Harry would have spoken. "I am aware you disapprove. The point is that I saw what was on his mind, and it wasn't only grief, or the situation with the Aurors, or even the fact that he blames himself. It was also what you had blurted out in your relief. He's my brother and I love him, just like that. You didn't even say it to him, you were talking to Albus and myself. And still, it was enough to . . . Harry, it hurt him to hear that."

"What, just because he couldn't say it back? I mean, sincerely?"

Snape leaned forward. "Obviously he felt you would require that, though that is not what I meant. Harry, think about matters from Draco's point of view." The Potions Master curled his upper lip in disdain. "You cannot imagine what this year has been for him. What has he learned? That those who loved him will see him tortured and killed because he has failed to live up to their demands. That love, in fact, is worth nothing because loyalty will trump it every time."

Harry closed his left eye as the disparity in his vision was starting to give him a headache. "The Malfoys are loyal to Voldemort, not Draco. I see what you mean."

"I hope so, since Draco gave you the highest compliment he can imagine when he declared loyalty to you."

"But . . ." Harry sighed and started over. "I understand your point. Loyalty, yeah . . . and you've declared yours to him on a pretty constant basis, protecting him from Lucius and standing up for him to the headmaster and resigning too if need be. And I'm sure he gets all that. But Dad . . ." Harry tapped his fingers on his knee. "I still think Draco needs to have you tell him that you love him. Out loud, I mean. Even if at first he takes it badly. There's some part of him that wants to hear it even if it hurts."

"I honestly wonder what is best at this juncture. There are already enough parallels between Lucius and myself. I hardly wish to draw more. I want him to think of me as his father, but not as that father, if you see what I mean. And Lucius did say those words quite often, though with him it tended to be I love you but . . ." The Potions Master shook his head. "Narcissa would say it without provisos, but given that she publicly stood with Lucius against her own son, that can be little solace, her letter notwithstanding."

"Sounds like you've given this some thought," Harry said, pushing to his feet. "But I suppose you would have given that you were monitoring us last night. So . . . any plans to spy on me when I'm back in the Tower?"

"Students being so inquisitive," Snape said with a hard glance at Harry, "the castle blocks attempts to
see what happens inside its own walls. There is a reason why Draco's picture frame shows only views of the outside. Frankly, it is a complete mystery to me how your father and his friends could have made that map function correctly. It should not be possible, and nothing in Lupin's summary sheds much light on the matter."

At least he'd said the man's name without the customary sneer, Harry thought. It wasn't exactly progress, but he'd take what he could get. Resisting an impulse to worry out loud about the danger Remus might be in, Harry casually asked, "So that came through already? Can I read it?"

"Certainly." Snape waved his wand to summon a parchment from his office, then set the glass disk down on the table between them. Harry knew it was wrong, but he couldn't resist sneaking a peek to see if Draco was still juggling.

The Slytherin boy was in the bedroom, laying on his side, apparently asleep.

Glancing up, Harry caught his father's gaze on him. "You see why I keep the spy-glass active," the Potions Master remarked. "First juggling and now a nap before lunch? Neither one is much like Draco."

He waited a moment, but when Harry gave no reply, not even a nod, the Potions Master passed him the parchment.

After he'd read everything Remus had written, Harry had to sigh. "Nothing about how they got around the castle's wards against this sort of thing. Nothing more about how anybody could have hidden themselves from the map. Looks like you were right, though; it was James who came up with mischief managed as an incantation."

Feeling the weight of Snape's stare, Harry looked up. "What?"

Snape shook his head as though to himself, and picked up the spy-glass. "Your bruising is gone. Find your glasses and we'll see what Madam Pomfrey can do about your vision. I'll go with you."

Harry somehow doubted that was what Snape had been thinking about, but by then he was so tired of his eyes being off-kilter that fixing his glasses sounded simply marvellous. "I can go alone," he thought to say, then bit his lip. "Actually, I suppose I can't. You wanted me to keep my friends close between classes and such . . ."

"I believe the phrase I used was Go nowhere alone. There is simply no sense in inviting a conflict with those who wish to see you dead." The Potions Master suddenly frowned. "I suggest we first see to this ring you mentioned earlier."

When his father glanced about as if searching for something he might transfigure, Harry lifted the chain around his neck and drew out his mother's wedding ring. "Can't we use this?"

Snape moved next to Harry and took it in his hand. "I thought you wanted to keep it the way she had it."

Harry looked down at it. "You know, I did. But that was before . . . it seemed like it was all I had, because I didn't believe I could believe . . . I mean, I knew you were going to do your best to look out for me but I thought there'd always be this distance. Um, teacher-student, something like that. But you really are my father now--"

The Potions Master placed the ring back into Harry's hand and closed the boy's fingers over it. "Keep it, Harry. Something else will serve. You needn't surrender the only thing you have of Lily's."
"It's not like that," Harry said, smiling a little as he met his father's dark gaze. "It's just . . . I used to feel like I didn't have anybody, that's all. And now that I do . . . Besides, I guess I think she'd like it if something of hers was still protecting me. All right?"

Snape studied him. "If you're certain."

His father's voice was serious enough that Harry gave it some thought. Then he drew the chain over his neck and dropped the ring, chain and all, back into Snape's hand. "Yes, use it."

The spy-glass went into his pocket while Snape held the ring between thumb and forefinger and examined it. "I can release the gems or conceal them in the interior of the snake."

"Inside," Harry decided, watching as the Potions Master went to work. A tap of his wand, and the ring split apart and unrolled to become a straight band studded with emeralds. Another tap, this one with a murmured Latin incantation, caused the band to fold in upon itself, wrapping the emeralds inside.

"Now for the tricky part," Snape murmured. "I am no artist, you understand, but a snake is a rather simplistic form."

It took a few minutes for him to shape it, prodding his wand this way and that, Snape muttering when an emerald poked through the soft metal. Soon enough, though, the end of the roll of gold was tapered to resemble a tail while the other end sported a snake's head complete with fangs. Snape had even etched the surface of the tiny snake to mimic scales, and had drawn forth two more emeralds, this time deliberately, to serve as eyes.

"You're no slouch as an artist," Harry had to say when the man had finally convinced the snake to loop itself back into a circle, its head overlapping its tail. Taking it up, the boy slipped it onto his middle finger. The snake slithered a bit, moving to fit him.

"I thought I'd ward it to stay on no matter what," Harry murmured, pulling his own wand out of his pocket. "All right?"

Snape nodded, but his eyes were shadowed. Harry didn't know what that might be about.

He applied his strongest anti-summoning charms, feeling his dark powers flowing through his wand. Afterwards, when he wiggled his finger, it felt like the ring was a part of his hand; he couldn't pull it off no matter how he tugged. But it looked normal enough, so he thought that would do.

"I'll go get my glasses."

Another silent nod, which caused Harry to stop and look back. "What?" he asked again. "Something wrong?"

"It truly is nothing," Snape said, waving him away, but Harry stood his ground.

"Tell me. Please?"

Snape's lips twisted in a wry, bitter smile. A smile without happiness, without warmth. "My father said I had no talent for art." And then, almost as an afterthought, "He was an artist himself . . . among other things."

Harry nodded, this time listening to that inner voice that told him not to press for more. He looked down at his ring, seeing two things all at once. It wasn't just Lily's any longer; it was part and parcel of Severus, too. Two people, who would do anything they could to protect him. He felt loved, truly
loved, and he wished more than ever that Draco could know what that was like.

"Go put on some clean clothes," Snape advised, changing the subject as if he regretted letting slip a little of his own childhood pain. "And Saturday or no, don your robes. You might as well look presentable."

"We're just going up to the hospital wing," Harry reminded him.

"There were reporters in the castle earlier."

Harry made a face. "Just what I need."

Sighing, he went to dig through his trunk for his glasses.

The halls weren't exactly brimming with students, but neither were they empty. Harry lost track of the number of times he had to stop as an exclamation of "Harry!" was accompanied by running footsteps. Snape was remarkably tolerant about all of it. Once upon a time, he'd have made some scathing remark about famous Harry Potter and his fan club, but now, he just backed up to a castle wall and leaned against it with his arms folded as he watched Harry greet his friends.

Of course, he was doing more than watching, Harry knew. He was assessing the mood of Hogwarts, and listening for any mention of Draco or the murder. Unfortunately, there was no shortage of discussion on that point. "He didn't do it," Harry insisted, over and over. "He couldn't have done it. He was with me the whole time."

And when that drew objections, Harry heard himself asking, "Well, who are you going to believe on that point? Me, or some Slytherins who have it in for Draco because he's on my side? Think about it."

He was frankly grateful when Snape finally rescued him from it all, simply by imperiously stepping into the latest throng surrounding Harry and announcing, "My son and I have some matters to attend to." That was it, just those few words, though of course they were delivered in a voice that demanded instant obedience. The crowd parted almost as though a spell had been cast. His robes swishing majestically, Snape took Harry by the elbow and led him on down the corridor.

"Thanks," Harry murmured. "I hate being the centre of attention like that."

He didn't miss the sardonic look his father gave him, as if to say, I do know, though once upon a time I never would have guessed.

When Madam Pomfrey heard that Harry's left eye had relapsed, she insisted on a full vision exam. Harry had to hold a paddle over his right eye and read a patch of air she filled with indecipherable symbols. Runes he'd never seen before? When the mediwitch demanded he cover his left eye and read with his right, though, he realised the truth.

"Oh. Hufflepuff, Slytherin, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw," he groaned, feeling stupid. Well, he hadn't often seen the house emblems in black and white before, and they were rather tiny. "How come there's no Gryffindor?"

"Again, Mr Potter," the mediwitch briskly demanded, flicking her wand to produce a second line below the first.

"Okay, Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Hufflepuff, Slytherin," he read off. "Still seems like an excessive
amount of Hufflepuff," he had to say.

"The right eye needs no correction," she said, just as if they didn't know that already, as if they hadn't told her to begin with. Harry held in his impatience, though, even when she launched into her know-it-all act. "Such a pity the magic in the other one didn't hold true, Severus. I did mention that it was possible to make that Elixir a bit too strong, if you recall?"

Snape said nothing. He didn't even glare. Well, not much.

"We're using the Elixir again, ma'am," Harry said as he set the paddle aside. "The regular kind, though. So . . . I was hoping that you could charm my glasses, maybe copy the good vision on one side over to the other one?"

Sure enough, that got her off the subject of Severus' supposed failings as she prattled on for a while about her own expertise. "You'd have no depth perception, Mr Potter. And a spell like that would induce a fair bit of vertigo; you'd be falling over your own feet."

"Well this way I'm getting one hell of a headache!"

"Harry," Snape said, the single word a warning.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, rubbing his temples as he spoke. "That was rude. I just meant that this vision thing really does give me a headache."

Madam Pomfrey glanced at Snape in some surprise, and then said calmly to Harry, "There are a few complex vision charms that might be of use, Mr Potter, but none of them are indicated for use while that eye is receiving Elixir. The best I can offer you is what amounts to an eye patch."

"An eye patch! I'll look like a ruddy pirate, I will--"

"Nonsense," the mediwitch said, her voice once more taking on its usual preening tone. "A magical eye patch, Mr Potter. We'll affix it to your glasses and make it transparent from one side. It will ease the strain on your eye and keep those headaches at bay, but all anyone else will see is a boy wearing his glasses."

"Oh, all right," Harry said, stepping back as she began to brandish her wand. Even after the complicated spell was cast, and Harry had his hand out for his glasses, the mediwitch kept fussing over them, applying a polishing charm to every surface. At last she handed them over though, and he settled them atop his nose.

The eye patch spell was very odd; he could actually feel something like cloth touching his face. His headache didn't instantly vanish, but it did begin to recede. That was worth something, though Harry didn't like the prospect of going about half-blind, even if nobody else knew about it.

Still, he could always hope that his father might be able to manage a second miracle for him.

Instead, it seemed that Dumbledore was the one who had arranged a miracle . . . the one he'd promised Draco.

"Harry," the headmaster greeted him as he and Snape were walking down a ground-floor corridor on their way back to the dungeons. Dumbledore swept forward, his orange and chartreuse robes swishing madly. "Harry, my boy, so good to see you up and about. You must be feeling better." He motioned to either side of him, to a tall black wizard sporting an earring and a shorter blue-haired witch beaming from ear to ear. "You remember Tonks and Shacklebolt, I'm sure."
Harry's first thought was *Order Aurors, that's more like it* . . .

His second thought was of the last time he'd seen Kingsley Shacklebolt. *The Department of Mysteries. Sirius, falling through the veil. Shacklebolt continuing to battle Bellatrix Lestrange right up until he was wounded himself* . . .

The events of that day swept through him all over again, the pain of losing Sirius still fresh and sharp. It might have happened just hours ago, instead of nearly a year past. Harry struggled past it, forcing it down and away as he'd done so many times before. He told himself that it was over and done with, that it was all right, but Draco's words came back to haunt him. *How can that be all right?*

When he'd first seen the Order Aurors, Harry could have leapt for joy, but now all he felt was numb. "You're here to take over the investigation?" he asked, his voice subdued.

"What sort of way is that to greet an old friend?" Tonks playfully demanded, her hair turning from blue to pink and back as she strode closer.

"Wotcher?" he tried instead, trying to force his thoughts back to the present. He managed a grin, though he was sure it looked strained. But that was all right, considering.

"There you go!" Tonks enthused, doing everything but swinging him around on his feet as she wrapped him in a big hug. "Gosh, you've grown, Harry!"

Kingsley Shacklebolt, not too surprisingly, was more circumspect. "Mr Potter," he greeted him as soon as Tonks had let him go. His voice was low and calming; listening to him was like taking a deep breath. "It's good to see you looking so well."

"You too," he admitted, feeling a little more able to cope. "I don't think I ever got a chance to thank you for helping me out when I was in trouble for having DA meetings."

"My pleasure," Kingsley said, nodding amiably.

Harry remembered something else then. "And for trying to break through to rescue me on Samhain," he added, the comment that time encompassing them both. "Thanks. So, um . . . have you just now arrived?"

"Mmm, time to face the press," Tonks nodded, momentarily sprouting claws as though in unspoken defence of Harry. "The Minister wants us to speak with them straight away to assure the public we're doing everything we can to bring the guilty party to justice."

Harry surmised that was Fudge's way of fighting back against the Parkinsons' threat to use publicity. All at once, he had a better sense than ever of what his father had meant all those months ago when he'd explained that James Potter had done the work of an Auror but had preferred to remain apart from official Ministry politics.

"Or guilty parties," Harry had to chime in, stressing the plural. "Right?"

"That sounds like a rather pointed hint," Shacklebolt commented, his earring glinting in the light as he tilted his head. "Is there something you'd like to tell us?"

Harry raised his chin slightly and just for good measure, Occluded his mind. Not that he thought that Shacklebolt would Legilimize him. He actually didn't think that. But in some strange way, it helped him concentrate. He reminded himself to remember that the next time he had to take a Potions test. "You'll hear it soon enough so you might as well hear it from me," he announced. "Somebody has it
in for Draco Malfoy and they're trying to make it look like he's the killer. But he's not. There's a conspiracy against him, people who don't like it any too well that he turned his back on Voldemort. Just keep that in mind, that's all."

"Harry," Snape interrupted. "It's time to let the Aurors do their job."

Harry translated that to mean stop talking before you let slip something best kept secret.

"All right," he easily agreed. "I've got a quite a lot to do, anyway. I'm finally back to classes day after tomorrow. Enjoy your press conference," he added, slanting a tiny grin at Tonks.

"We'll be talking with you later," Shacklebolt nodded, just before the headmaster led them away towards the bailey where, Harry supposed, the reporters were waiting.

"Let's get back home before some bloodsucker from the Daily Prophet spots me," Harry urged, tugging a bit on his father's sleeve. "And speaking of home, you know how you taught the door to recognise me all those month ago? Could you go over again how to open it from the outside? You know, the finger tapping thing . . . oh, and you said you'd tell the door to require magic from me, remember? Unless . . . well, once I'm living in the Tower again would you prefer me to knock when I come visiting? Or, not knock I guess, but stand outside until you hear the--"

He stopped talking when Snape gave him an impatient look. "Does Mr Weasley knock when he goes home to the Burrow? Do you suppose for one second that Draco used to knock for entrance to his family's estate?"

"No," Harry admitted. "Sorry. I didn't mean to insult you. I just thought it might be polite to offer."

The Potions Master glared for a moment longer, then relented. "Well. I haven't forgotten that those Muggles preferred to conceal from you the key to their house."

That time, Harry waited until Snape had taught him the way in, and they were safely behind closed doors, to say, "Could you please not call them Muggles in that . . . awful tone of voice? They were awful, yes. I admit it. But Muggles in general aren't like them. Hermione has a perfectly pleasant family from what I can tell. And I think . . . well, listen. I know you don't think Muggles should all be killed or something, but you make it harder for Draco to get over his prejudice when you . . . uh, display your own."

Snape narrowed his eyes, but all he said was, "I shall take it under advisement."

As far as Harry was concerned, that exchange could have gone a lot worse. Snape was probably trying to reward him for waiting until they were alone. "Speaking of Draco, is he still all right?"

The Potions Master glanced at the spy-glass in his pocket, something he had surreptitiously been doing throughout the day. "He's still asleep."

Harry bit his lip. "Are you sure he hasn't . . . um, taken something to make him sleep so long?"

"The potions in the cottage are now warded, as you surmised earlier," Snape volunteered. "Draco hasn't dosed himself except to deaden the pain of his burn."

"I guess he's just depressed, then. Who wouldn't be? Think we can go have dinner with him?"

"I think," Snape carefully said, "that by then he'll be in the headmaster's office being interrogated. In which case, it's just as well he'll be fully rested. It's likely to be quite a strenuous evening."
Harry couldn't help but stare. "The Aurors won't hurt him, not now that a proper one is in charge. And anyway, you said you wouldn't leave him alone, not after what happened last time. Um . . . what exactly did happen last time?"

"Enough to put you off all notion of becoming an Auror yourself," Snape darkly muttered.

"I think I'm entitled to a little more detail than that--"

"Draco asked me not to speak of it to anyone, particularly you," his father interrupted. "And so I won't. But as for what I meant by strenuous . . . being questioned, even when the exchange remains entirely verbal, can be a singularly unpleasant experience."

Harry thought of Rita Skeeter and winced. "Yeah, I think I know what you mean."

"I hope to Merlin you never find out what I mean," Snape quietly corrected. "But you might, I suppose, when the Aurors come to question you."

Harry wrinkled his brow. "Well, we're talking Order members now, assuming they come without the other ones. So should I still lie my head off? About Draco never leaving the rooms, and how the burn can prove that? About how Dubby stole the button and planted it and Draco never got a letter from Pansy at all? Oh, those are blank so I guess he can say he got them." Rubbing his head, the Gryffindor boy admitted, "Keeping it all straight is getting to be a strain."

"And imagine, you aren't even being questioned yet," Snape pointed out with a knowing look. "But to answer you: yes. I think we had best all maintain the story we devised this morning. I had an extremely brief firechat with Albus while you were fetching your glasses earlier and he has not in fact alluded to the amulet yet. He liked the misdirection about what caused the burn and agreed that the wisest course would be to insist that Draco was safely ensconced in my quarters throughout the entirety of the murder."

"He doesn't trust Tonks and Shacklebolt? Um, I mean Miss Tonks and Mr Shacklebolt--"

Snape looked amused. "In her case, Harry, I suppose Tonks will do. It is her preferred mode of address. But as to not trusting them, nothing could be further from the case. However, they do have to report through official channels, and Albus would prefer that Draco's name remain completely above suspicion throughout the Ministry. Insisting that Harry Potter himself can vouch for his whereabouts will help with that."

"Only until next time the Minister decides I'm cracking up."

"That's unlikely to recur," Snape demurred. "Harry, Floo the kitchens. You need to eat, and then you should do a bit of reading on deafening potions. I'll direct you to a few articles that should be of use. The whole topic is somewhat obscure so I doubt that Tonks or Shacklebolt will know enough to challenge you, provided you acquire a decent amount of background on their formulation and particularly, how one can get them wrong. Come see me if you have any questions; I'll be in my office researching why the Eyesight Elixir might have stung you so."

Harry appreciated that, all of it, but he still had to say, "You need to eat, too--"

Snape got that look on his face, a look Harry recognised. *I hardly need a sixteen-year-old to regulate my mealtimes . . .

What the Potions Master said though, was, "So I do. Order me a sandwich, will you?"
"No trouble hearing it this time," Harry weakly joked as the magic doorbell went off in his head. Quickly banishing the notes and articles Snape had provided on deafening potions, he rose unsteadily to his feet. Oh God, would he be able to keep all the lies straight? And what about Draco later? He was a terrible liar!

Harry's head started to ache, right then and there.

"Everything will be fine," Snape said, his whole manner exuding calm as he strode to open the door to admit Tonks and Shacklebolt. "Good afternoon."

"Severus." Shacklebolt nodded pleasantly.

Tonks popped her gum, waving a hand in greeting as she walked past Snape.

Harry eyed the empty hallway as his father shut the door. "Where are the other Aurors?"

"It seems they've taken ill," Shacklebolt said, his deep voice adding layers of implication to the words. "Both of them."

Harry couldn't tell quite what he meant by that. He wondered if Snape had somehow slipped the other Aurors something to make them sick, or if Shacklebolt meant that he'd arranged matters that way himself. Or maybe Dumbledore had done something . . . whatever the truth was, Harry hardly believed this sudden illness was a coincidence.

"You're stuck with just us," Tonks said, helping herself to a seat without waiting for one to be offered. She patted the cushion beside her until Harry took the hint and sat there.

"Please." Snape indicated with a hand that Kingsley should make himself comfortable as well. "May I offer you any refreshment?"

"No thanks," Tonks answered for them both. "Albus stuffed us with tea and sweets while he filled us in."

Leaning back in his chair, Kingsley studied Harry for a moment. "You seemed a little upset before, Potter. Not to mention, adamant about Draco Malfoy's innocence. I understand the two of you have become close friends?"

"Yeah, we have." Harry thought about saying they were brothers, but decided it would only bring up questions like And you'd say anything to save your brother, wouldn't you?

"An interesting development," Kingsley commented, slanting a glance at Snape. "Though we do of course know that it was Malfoy who rescued your wand from Death Eater control."

"He's been great. Seriously."

Kingsley raised an eyebrow but didn't comment. Well, not on that, anyway. "I'm not quite sure how to put this, Potter. I thought my colleagues would be here and we'd be forced to question you to make it all seem above board, but in the circumstances . . ." He shrugged.

"You're not going to interrogate me?"

Tonks burst out laughing. "You make it sound like we brought thumbscrews and a rack, Harry! We
were never going to *interrogate* you, for Merlin's sake! What do you think we are, the Pestago?*

"Gestapo, I think you mean. But I don't understand. You don't have *any* questions?"

Kingsley crossed his long legs. "Ordinarily, we would. You've been living with the prime suspect and would presumably be aware of his movements on the day of the murder. But these aren't ordinary times. Albus has assured us in strictest confidence that you three have been working on some important matters that might come to light if a full investigation were conducted. Matters he'd prefer even the Order to remain unaware of at the present. If our colleagues were here I'd have to do some fancy footwork to make sure these secrets don't see the light of day. As it is . . ." Another shrug, that one accompanied by a slight smile.

"So that's it?"

"Not quite," Kingsley admitted. "Order or no, we can't allow Draco Malfoy to remain at large if he's the killer, so we've reached a compromise with Albus. As long as we're personally satisfied as to Malfoy's innocence we'll leave the three of you out of any subsequent investigation, even if that means playing fast and loose with the truth when it comes to the written reports."

That didn't sound too bad to Harry, but he wondered what *personally satisfied* might entail. Snape was obviously thinking along the same lines.

"You refer to *Veritaserum*, I presume?" said the Potions Master.

"It seems the only viable course. Albus was concerned that using a Pensieve might inadvertently reveal things best kept under wraps."

Snape looked Kingsley in the eyes. "Will you trust *Veritaserum* of my own brewing?"

The Auror dodged the question. "As this is an official investigation I have Ministry-official truth serum with me."

The Potions Master leaned back, his features impassive though Harry could somehow tell that he wasn't too pleased. "Indeed."

"It can have unpleasant side effects, I know," Kingsley admitted, shrugging.

Harry didn't like the sound of that. "I thought you couldn't make Draco take truth serum. I mean, without his own consent. He's an emancipated minor, so he gets to decide--"

"Unless he wants us poking and prying through these secrets, he'll consent," said Tonks. "He's got nothing to worry about unless he's guilty, since *all* we're going to ask is a few pertinent questions about the murder. That's our deal, Harry. We get to hear under truth serum that he didn't do it, and the questioning stops right there, before he spills anything the rest of the Order doesn't need to know yet."

Harry tilted his head to the side. "That doesn't bug you, being told you don't need to know this or that?"

"Well of course it *bugs* me," Tonks said, laughing. "We'd all like to feel indispensable. But learning that you aren't all that matters is part of growing up, I suppose."

Harry thought that sounded well and good, but in his case, with that prophecy looming over him, he wasn't sure it really applied.
"Once Draco satisfies you as to his innocence, what do you plan to write into your official report?" Snape asked.

"Whatever it is had better coordinate with the evidence our colleagues have already collected. Notably, one diamond button found at the base of the Owlery window from which the young lady was pushed. There are also a number of rumours that Draco Malfoy was seen just before or after the murder, but thus far no eyewitness accounts."

"Of course not," Harry said. "If they come forward we'll know who was involved in the conspiracy."

"The diamond button is easily explained in any case," said Snape.

"Ah yes, the Malfoy house-elf who visited. And the innuendo about the boy's whereabouts won't be worth much against direct contradicting testimony which I presume you and Potter can provide?"

"Draco was with me the whole time," Harry said, catching on that he was being prompted. "We were working on a potions project, actually, and Severus came down to help us. We were all three together when we got word that Pansy had died."

"Remember for the record that you told me that under Veritaserum yourself," Kingsley advised. "That's the way the report will read. In the interests of clearing this matter up without delay, your father authorized its use. Yes?"

"Yes," Snape confirmed. "I also want it on record that Draco used to habitually wear a turquoise amulet, one which gave him a severe burn on the day of the murder."

Kingsley raised an eyebrow. "Turquoise shouldn't do that."

"It did; you can examine the amulet and burn for yourself. Our presumption is that the protective amulet somehow sensed events in the Owlery and was trying to warn Draco of the threat of Azkaban."

"Still an odd thing for turquoise to do, but I see the implication."

Harry couldn't help but frown. "Can't you leave the burn out of your report? Severus hasn't let it be healed because it's evidence that somebody was trying to mess with Draco when they pushed Pansy, but I know Draco would really rather not have a scar."

"Your father's right; better to keep the burn," Tonks said. "It'll bolster our conclusion that the young man's been framed."

A niggling little doubt began to bother him. Harry coughed slightly, uncomfortable about what he needed to say. "Um, no offence, Tonks... it's great to see you again and I'm sure you're a right capable Auror and all that, but don't you think you're the wrong person for this investigation? I mean..." He smiled apologetically. "You are first cousins with Draco."

"Yeah, and we're really close, too," Tonks said sarcastically, somehow rolling her eyes and glaring all at once. "I never miss a Malfoy family barbecue. Roast Muggles. Mmmm, my favourite."

"I didn't mean you liked him. I was just thinking of public perception--"

"Damn straight I don't like the snide little git. As for public perception, Harry, my opinion of all things Malfoy is pretty well known. Their stance on blood purity is an insult to my own father, not to mention me. Draco may have got clever enough to not want to go into the family business, but if you
try to tell me he's morphed into some bunny-hugging type who dreams of all the wizards in the world holding hands and singing songs of peace and friendship, I'll probably sick up right here on the spot."

"Tonks, that's enough," Kingsley said, the reprimand gentle. It was enough though.

Tonks took a breath, nodding. "Right, boss. But Harry? Considering how much I despise him, I'm the perfect person for this investigation. If I say he's innocent, that implies he really is." She looked towards Severus, and said with an air of putting an end to the discussion, "So, when can we see him?"

The Potions Master rose smoothly to his feet. "Right now, if you're amenable. I'll be back with him in a few moments. No," he said when Harry started to get up. "Stay here and see to our guests."

Our guests. Harry really liked that. He waited until Snape had flooed away to ask, "So, are you sure I can't get you anything?"

Ignoring the question, Kingsley regarded Harry gravely. Uh-oh. Harry started to wish he'd gone off with his father, because now there was no telling what the Aurors might ask him. On the other hand, Snape would never have left if he'd had the slightest doubt about what would happen in his absence. By that measure, everything was all right, but Harry still felt his palms getting a bit sweaty as he sat there.

"Nice crest," the black Auror finally said.

Harry's brow furrowed for a moment, since he wasn't wearing his robes.

"I noticed it before," Kingsley added. "Reminded me of a couple of potions labels I've seen over the years. Specially made brews, things Severus worked up for the Order. He always draws the snake twisting just so . . ."

Of course. Draco had asked Snape at the time who had done the artwork on Harry's new crest, and Snape had basically ducked the question, but now it all made sense.

"Yeah, my dad's a man of many talents," Harry said with more than a little pride.

"Your . . . dad."

Harry glanced at Tonks. "Yeah, my dad. What's the matter? You knew he'd adopted me, didn't you? I thought pretty much everybody knew these days."

Tonks chewed her gum loudly as she replied. "Sure, I knew. It just sounded odd the way you said it, Snape a dad and all. I had him for Potions, don't forget."

"There's more to him than Potions," Harry smiled. "Though I will admit I'm just a little bit nervous about having him teach me again after all this. Not that he hasn't been teaching me all along, but class is something different. He said he was leery of it, too."

"You'll be fine," said Kingsley.

"Too bad Draco can't partner me; he's really good at Potions," Harry mused. "I'm all right, but Draco just eats them up. It's funny, you know. I used to go to Potions class dreading the prospect of getting paired with him but now I know I'd get better marks if he could be allowed to go back to class . . . What?" he asked, because Shacklebolt looked like he had something to say.
"Your faith in him is absolute?"

"He didn't kill Pansy. You'll know that yourself soon enough."

"I wasn't referring to the murder," said the Auror, his deep voice gone more intense than Harry had ever heard it.

"Oh, you meant in general? Then yes," Harry answered, giving Tonks a significant look. "My faith in him is absolute. I'd trust him with my life. Actually, I have . . . the Order was briefed about Horace Darswaithe, right? So you know that Draco saved me that day. I could go on, scads of other things he's done that prove his loyalty, times he's put my safety above his own needs, but I think you get the point."

Instead of answering, Tonks made a show of fishing another stick of gum from a pocket sewn into the seam of her Auror's robes. Kingsley was still wearing his as well, Harry realised. "Um, I can hang your robes if you'd be more comfortable without--"

"We keep them on for the intimidation factor," Tonks explained, popping the gum in her mouth. "Not that it's so necessary when Veritaserum comes into play, but it's Ministry policy. Might as well make this investigation look as above-board as we can."

"The Aurors who came to question Draco after he turned in my wand . . . they weren't very above-board. I think they practically tortured him or something, but Severus and Draco won't really go into details. Whatever they did, it was bad. Is that Ministry policy?"

"What were they supposed to do?" Tonks asked in a hard voice. "Your wand was checked nine ways to Sunday, but it had been in Death Eater hands. Anything could have been done to it. New spells, things the Ministry can't yet detect. And then it's 'returned' by a boy who could well have just been doing his father's bidding. And his father just happens to be a charter member of You-Know-Who's inner circle? They had to make sure it wasn't some sort of ruse. It's a rough world out there and if we aren't ready to fight fire with fire then we ought to just all go hide in our cellars, see?"

"It just seems a little . . . well, sadistic," Harry said. "I mean, they knew already from the Veritaserum that he was sincere."

"You think Lucius Malfoy gave his consent for Draco to take truth serum?" asked Kingsley. "He was still the boy's legal father at that point."

"But . . ." Harry frowned. "Draco did take truth serum."

"Not officially," said Tonks. "It would have been illegal. The Ministry doesn't issue Veritaserum except under very strict procedures. We have to account for every drop."

Harry's heart sank a little bit as the truth came to him. "So the Ministry, the Auror corps, they all sort of think Draco might be a double agent or something? Still?"

Tonks popped her gum again. "Well, face it, his last name is Malfoy. Now, maybe he's turned over a new leaf and all, but it's a bit much to swallow when you don't know that Albus and Severus verified his change of heart using truth serum. Hell, it's a bit much to swallow even when you do know that. The last name thing again. Like it or not, Draco Malfoy has a lousy reputation."

"But Tonks, he wants to be an Auror when he finishes here," Harry whispered, looking from her to Kingsley.

"Pigs'll fly first," was her immediate assessment.
"It doesn’t look good," Kingsley said in a more moderate tone. "Applicants are judged as much on moral worth as magical skill. There's just too much potential for corruption, otherwise. Take that diamond button, for example. If Malfoy found something like that he might just pocket it instead of turning it in as evidence. And then there's the whole issue of exposure to the Dark Arts. Not to mention his racism. We don't want Aurors who are going to trust purebloods over Muggleborns, do we? Or not investigate properly when the victim of a crime is someone they think deserves to be victimised?"

"But it's all right to mistrust and victimise him because of his bloodlines? To keep him out of the Auror program?"

"We've read his student files, Harry," said Tonks, shaking his head. "This isn't simple prejudice on our part. His record speaks for itself."

"But--"

Anything else Harry might have said was cut short by the sound of Draco and Snape flooing in. The Aurors stood up, and after a second's hesitation, Harry did as well.

The Slytherin boy stepped forward out of the hearth just as though he owned the whole world and everyone in it, but his hands were out of sight, thrust deep into his pockets of his cloak. Harry thought they were probably trembling and Draco didn't want anyone to see.

"Kingsley Shacklebolt, Draco Malfoy," Snape made the necessary introductions. "And of course your cousin, Nymphadora Tonks."

Draco drew a hand out, then, holding it rock steady, though Harry could see from the strain lines around his eyes how much effort that took. "I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance," he said to Kingsley, looking him in the eyes. He shook his hand, then turned to Tonks. For a long moment they simply looked at each other, Draco's expression reserved even though Tonks' was close to hostile. Harry thought Draco was probably figuring out the best tack to take.

"Thank you for coming," he finally said, shaking her hand as well. Tonks looked a bit surprised.

"You had a pleasant journey to Hogwarts?" Draco went on, addressing them both. "Scotland is lovely this time of year."

Harry almost winced, because in the circumstances, Draco's perfect manners were only going to remind the Aurors of Lucius. The elder Malfoy had the same urbane way of making small talk. When the Aurors didn't respond to his pleasantries, Draco moved on to the reason they were all there. "I believe you have a parchment for me to sign."

"Yes." Drawing his wand forth, Kingsley conjured a form from thin air. "Standard consent for administration of Veritaserum to an underage wizard, though in your case we'll have to amend the document slightly."

Draco shrugged off his cloak and hung it by the door, then took the form Kingsley was still extending. "Shall we all sit at the table, do you think?" he invited, gesturing towards it. He waited until the Aurors were seated before pulling out his own chair. After that, Draco read the parchment through from start to finish without comment.

Snape took off his own robes, then sat down in the chair next to Draco. Harry wasn't sure what he should do until Draco finished reading and spotted him hovering. "Join us, Harry," the Slytherin boy urged, so Harry went and sat on his other side.
"I'll write in a notation that I'm signing as my own parent, so to speak," Draco said, reaching for the never-out quill Harry had left on the table. He didn't actually sign anything, though. Instead, his silver eyes steady on the senior Auror, he said, "Severus assures me that your questions will be quite limited in scope."

"We merely wish to feel confident that we should look elsewhere for the murderer."

Draco looked from Kingsley to Snape, and shook his head. "That won't do. You're going to use a transcribing spell, correct? To record my testimony? And this will become part of official Ministry records?"

"The transcription will be part of our official written report." Kingsley narrowed his eyes. "Is that a problem, Mr Malfoy?"

"It should be. You're not just Aurors; you're members of the Order of the Phoenix," Draco returned, his voice level. "And no, before you start to wonder, Severus did not tell me that. Or Harry. I knew it already. I know a great many things, Mr Shacklebolt. You wouldn't believe what Death Eaters will say when they think there's nobody listening. I told Harry it was all gossip, but now that I'm about to go under truth serum I suppose I'd better amend that. I had some . . . creative ways to eavesdrop on Lucius and his frequent guests. Now, the Order is already fully informed of everything I know, as the headmaster and Severus were really quite thorough when they interviewed me about my loyalties. But in my view the Ministry should know these same things through official channels; it would quite likely make the Order's work a good deal easier. Would you concur?"

Tonks' mouth dropped open, her gum falling to the table with a wet squishy plop. She hurriedly covered it with a hand and stowed it somewhere inside a pocket.

Kingsley was more reserved. He folded his hands together on the table. "Is this your idea, Severus?"

"No. When I told Draco that you would ask him only about the murder, he thought it was a wasted opportunity to make legal use of Veritaserum serve our ends. I must admit that I agree."

Tonks had recovered enough by then to say, "I'd think you'd be more concerned about saving your own skin than about what the Order needs."

Draco favoured them both with a dry smile. "Hard to believe in my altruism, is it? Perhaps you'll feel better if I clarify that my skin's not really in much danger. The Veritaserum will clear me. And as for the Order, I plan to be in it someday, so it's to my own advantage to do what I can to position it more strategically."

"Just as it's to your own advantage to have a couple of Aurors believing you'd put the war above family loyalty," Kingsley accused.

"Harry, have you been telling the good Aurors my career plans?" Draco asked in a mocking voice before swivelling back to face the Aurors. "No doubt you both told him how daft the idea was? Well, it's nothing I haven't heard before. Harry laughed in my face when I first told him. When it comes to family loyalty though, you appear to be grossly misinformed. It does come first, but in case you've forgotten, I've nothing to do with the Malfoys any longer. My family, my only family, is sitting right here."

Tonks shoved a new stick of gum in her mouth. "You mean Severus?"

"He means Severus and me both," Harry corrected. "I was going to tell you myself that Draco's my brother, but I thought it might cast his alibi in doubt. Now that you're going to clear him using truth
serum I guess it's all right for you to know."

Kingsley stiffened slightly even as he shook his head. "In what possible sense is he your brother?"

Harry thought better than to say "I love him as one, and that's all that matters. "Severus is his father too. Unofficially, but that doesn't make it any less real. And the family loyalty goes both ways. I want your report to prominently mention that in your opinion, Draco Malfoy has overcome the questionable influences he was exposed to during childhood and that his last name should not be counted against him when it comes time for him to apply for an Auror's apprenticeship."

"I doubt I can word it as strongly as that."

"For the information he's about to make official, you ought to," Harry said in a dark voice. "Harry, don't burn your own bridges with the Aurors here," Draco said, taking up the quill to sign the consent form. "You're acting Slytherin and I get the impression they don't much like Slytherins."

"I am Slytherin," Harry told Kingsley. "That crest you admired wasn't just symbolic, you know. I'm in both houses. And I expect some consideration for my brother here. He doesn't have to put himself under truth serum--"

"Kingsley is a man of conscience," Snape interrupted with a warning glace at Harry. "I'm certain that we can rely on him to further the interests of the Light, whatever it involves. At any rate, you can't dictate how his report reads."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, chastened.

Draco pushed the completed form across the table to Kingsley. "Will that do?"

The Auror studied the parchment before answering. "Yes. Thank you. Shall we set any more parameters for the questioning?"

The Slytherin boy shrugged. "I'm sure Severus can keep you from straying into things I'm not supposed to talk about. Let's get this over with."

Nodding, Kingsley withdrew what appeared to be a small bottle of water from his pocket. It was labelled, but not with a proper potion name. The inscribed vellum encircling the bottle bore ominous phrases like "Registered to MLE; Authorized Use Only. The Auror set the bottle down on Draco's consent form and pronounced a spell Harry didn't recognise. He assumed it was some way to inform the Ministry that three drops of the potion were about to be put to authorized use.

Draco had shoved his hands out of sight again, this time deep into trouser pockets. Harry gave him a sympathetic smile. Draco stuck out his tongue, but not to be rude. Tonks was behind him by then, an eyedropper in her hand. She quickly dripped three precise drops onto his tongue and stepped away.

Meanwhile, Kingsley cast the transcription spell, though the look he gave Snape told Harry that the self-writing quill standing at attention wasn't going to have the final word about anything. Kingsley had ways, Harry decided, to change the transcript after the fact . . . just in case Draco let slip something best kept out of the official record.

Beginning in a formal tone, Kingsley asked, "What is your full legal name?"

Draco's eyes had rolled back slightly in his head, but the question caused him to snap to attention. "I
"What name were you given at your birth?" Snape quickly questioned.

"Draco Alain Gervais Walpurgis Malfoy," the boy said.

"His school records read **Draco Alain Gervais Luthien Malfoy,**" Kingsley said, his brow furrowed. "Perhaps the serum is flawed."

"He didn't know how to answer you at first," Snape explained. "His name was changed at a young age but I'm certain Draco indeed does **not** know if the change was duly recorded with the Ministry. At any rate, the potion seems . . . adequate."

"Ah, very well." Kingsley took a moment to regroup, then asked without preamble, "Did you kill Pansy Parkinson?"

"I don't know."

Kingsley set his teeth, and tried again. "On the day of the murder, were you present in the Owlery with Pansy Parkinson?"

Draco's features by then were serene. "I don't know."

The Auror glared at Snape. "Adequate?"

"Allow me, if you would," murmured the Potions Master. "Draco, do you know who killed Pansy Parkinson?"

"No."

"Why don't you know who killed her?"

"I was unconscious at the time of the murder."

"Did you want to kill her?" Kingsley broke in, his glance telling Snape to let him take it from there. Draco shook his head. "No."

"Did you threaten to kill her this past November?"

"Yes."

"Did you intend at any point to make good on that threat?"

"No."

"Did you entertain fantasies about killing her?"

"No."

"Not even once?"

"Never," Draco said, looking Kingsley in the eyes. Even without the **Veritaserum,** Harry would have believed him utterly sincere.

"Then why did you threaten to kill her?"
Draco sighed, the sound full of regret as he looked away to admit the truth about himself. "I was angry. Also, I wanted to hurt her parents. Also, to warn Slytherin to leave me alone. Also, I was sick and tired of the way she was looking at me. Also, I don't like snakes--"

"That's enough," Kingsley calmly interrupted. Apparently satisfied on that matter, he turned to a new line of questioning. "I understand you were burned by a protective amulet on the day of the murder. May I see the injury?"

"Yes," Draco readily said, though he made no move to unbutton his shirt until Snape gave him a pointed look.

Tonks and Shacklebolt both looked a little taken aback at the extent of the burn. It was still red and raw to Harry's eyes, but less inflamed than the first time he'd seen it. Kingsley spent a few moments evaluating it with spells, then quietly told Draco he could do up his buttons again.

"Albus has the amulet," Snape volunteered. "Cross-spelling will demonstrate that it is what caused the burn."

Kingsley nodded, then started in again with questions. "On the day of the murder, what caused you to become unconscious?"

"A hex." Draco didn't mention the Somulus but Harry figured that was because he didn't technically know it for a fact; he'd only been told about it afterwards.

"Did you hex yourself?"

"No."

"Who hexed you, then?"

"I don't know."

"Who would be able to identify who hexed you?" pressed the Auror.

"Pansy Parkinson," Draco said, his voice going blank, though he shifted restlessly as though uncomfortable. "Also, whoever carried out the assault. Also, whoever was with them. Also, anyone who might have been walking past. Also, any ghosts who might have been nearby--"

Kingsley glanced at his automatic quill to stop it from moving, then raised his voice a notch to cut Draco off. "That's enough. Why would Pansy Parkinson know who hexed you?"

"They hexed her, too. She saw them."

A pause as the Auror considered that. "You were with Pansy Parkinson the day she died."

Draco nodded as he reached up to tug at his collar a bit.

Kingsley frowned. "Did you cast Corpus Aqueous on her?"

"No."

"Did you hurt her in any way?"

"No."

"What did you do to her?"
Draco opened his mouth to reply, but no words issued forth. Harry thought he must be fighting the *Veritaserum*. Fighting, and losing. Draco's face flushed as he looked down at the table and began to speak. There was no serenity in his voice now. He sounded like every syllable was being dragged from him.

"I kissed her. Also, I ran my hands through her hair. Also, I told her I loved her. Also, I asked if she liked the locket I got her for Christmas. Also, I put my hands up her skirt and--"

"That's enough!" Harry blurted, glaring a bit at the Aurors, Tonks included, though none of it had been her fault.

Kingsley looked apologetic as he said, "Would you like a drink before we proceed?"

Draco didn't look up. "No."

Since that was no doubt as true as all the rest, Kingsley nodded in brisk agreement. Tapping his quill to wake it up, he said in an entirely different tone, "Mr Malfoy. Before you were disinherited you came into possession of a great deal of information the Ministry would find useful. We're going to talk about those matters, now."

"Thank you," Kingsley said as he was preparing to leave. Shaking Draco's hand once more, he smiled gently. "I hope the experience wasn't too upsetting?"

"It was nauseating."

Harry almost laughed at the look on the Aurors' faces. "Hey, you shouldn't ask unless you want to know."

"You are fully satisfied?" Snape asked.

"Yes," said Kingsley.

"No," said Draco.

The Potions Master smiled wryly as he turned to his Slytherin son. "Not every question is for you, you idiot boy."

Draco nodded, the motion slightly jerky. "I think I'd better go have a lie-down and let it wear off. Should I go back to . . . ah . . ." The *Fidelius* charm stopped him from saying anything more.

"You'll stay here," Snape assured him, patting his shoulder twice, then dropping his arm. "Go to your room and rest for as long as you need."

"My room," said Draco, looking just a little bit dazed. "I . . . you know I think I thought I'd never see it again."

"You can't get rid of us that easily," said Harry. "Do you need some Stomach Calming Draught?"

"No."

"Sure?"

Draco shook his head in emphatic denial. "It was the experience that was nauseating, not the potion. I'll be all right." He turned to go, then turned back. Harry thought he seemed unsteady on his feet.
Snape seemed to understand things differently. "The Aurors are satisfied, Draco. You can rest easy now."

"I have to hear it from them--"

"Mr Malfoy, our report will read that your own Veritaserum testimony demonstrates you could not have killed the young lady. You will not be charged. Moreover, we will indicate that we have uncovered evidence of a conspiracy to unjustly incriminate you. Will that suffice?"

"I don't know," Draco murmured, still compelled to be utterly truthful.

"Go rest, Draco," Snape instructed, then watched, his dark gaze troubled as the boy nodded, walked away, and shut his door.

"Can I have a copy of your report?" Harry asked Kingsley. "I'd like to show it to a couple of friends."

"A copy will be placed in his student file. As your father's on staff I imagine he could allow you access to it. Just so you know, Tonks and I will be applying some creative editing to parts of the Veritaserum transcript. I think it's best to eliminate all reference to him meeting Parkinson on the day of the murder. Too much fodder for speculation. Tell Malfoy that his testimony matches yours. He was here all day with you."

Harry nodded. "Good . . . So, are you going to put a good word in for him? You see now, don't you? He's not what you thought."

"Potter, if and when Draco Malfoy applies to the Aurors' program, I'll speak my mind. And in the meantime, I'll keep my eye on him. That's the best I can do."

"All right. Um, what about Lucius Malfoy? Will he finally be charged for what he did to me on Samhain? You've got several witnesses now; you've got an account of the whole thing given under truth serum--"

Harry stopped speaking because Snape was giving him a rather stern look. "What? That wasn't disrespectful, was it?"

"No. We'll speak about it after the Aurors leave."

Taking the hint, Harry fell silent, though he listened carefully as Snape saw the Aurors out.

"Have Albus read the transcript in full and suggest edits," the Potions Master was quietly urging them. "Make sure you excise everything he wants left out. There's quite a lot at stake, though I'm sure you realise I can't explain further."

Kingsley nodded and shook Snape's hand, then left. Tonks shrugged lightly but then she shook the Potions Master's hand as well.

The minute the door closed, automatically warding them in with silencing spells, Harry blurted, "Don't you want Malfoy to stand trial for what he did to me? Bloody hell, I'm half-blind now and it's not Draco's fault at all, it's his--"

Snape drew his wand and warded the door to the boys' bedroom so that Draco couldn't hear anything further. "I want Lucius dead or in Azkaban for what he did to you, make no mistake," he said, eyes narrowed with anger. "I want to kill him myself, Harry, to burn him alive as you once threatened to do. But think. Think strategically! What good is Lupin's masquerade if Lucius is
publicly convicted for the atrocities he's committed?"

Harry chewed his lip. "I'm not used to all this cloak-and-dagger stuff. I guess I should get used to it. So that's why he's never been charged? I sort of figured it was the way he practically owns half the people who work for the Ministry."

"You exaggerate, though it would be unwise to underestimate his influence, certainly." Walking to the Floo, Snape threw some powder in and called through for a pot of tea. Only when he was seated with a cup in hand, watching Harry serve himself, did he resume speaking. "You must understand, Harry. For a long while after Samhain I was utterly caught up in healing you physically, and then in arranging the blood wards here and trying to understand your rather Gryffindor needs. I wanted Lucius brought to justice but I wondered if being forced to relive Samhain at a trial would be the best thing for you." Snape sighed and sipped his tea. "I let Albus put me off, but in retrospect I can see that his excuses were vapid, feeble things. Had I been less focussed on you, I would have guessed he had some scheme underway regarding Lucius."

Hearing the apology that Snape really hadn't said, Harry put a hand on his father's knee and squeezed lightly. "It's all right. I didn't blame you that he wasn't sent to Azkaban. I just figured it was one of those things." He thought Snape still looked upset about how he'd handled the matter back then, so Harry went on, "Listen, I don't like Lucius out making trouble, but maybe Remus can make enough trouble for him to make it worthwhile. And I can't complain about your focusing on me, can I? I've . . . well, I'd never really had that before. I needed it, and you did a good job of it, too. All the more so, now that I understand you better."

Snape looked tired as he glanced up, his eyes hooded. "What do you understand?"

Harry thought about that for a minute. "It goes back to Gryffindor needs, like you said. Draco makes sense to you because you've been there. You know what it's like to think that someone's just using the word love to get you to be what they want. But after you got to know me, after you knew about the Dursleys, you could tell I needed to hear it even if you weren't very used to saying it." Harry drank his own tea for a bit, then set his cup down. "You know what I think?"

"I suspect I will in a minute."

Harry laughed. "Yeah, you will. It seems to me that you're good at whatever you put your mind to. Potions Master, that speaks for itself. And spy. And becoming a father to Draco and me, messed up as we are. And when you really wanted to teach me Occlumency, I mean when you weren't doing it because your arm was being twisted, you were fantastic. In fact you should teach it to Draco. Anyway, that's what I think."

"I suspect I will in a minute."

Snape set his own cup down with a little more force than was warranted. "I am not a fool. That is not all you think. You are getting at something."

Harry thought about denying it, then decided that his father really would listen to anything when they were alone. Standing up, he stretched before admitting, "It's just that you could be a really good teacher if you put your mind to that, Severus. But don't worry, you won't hear one word of complaint from me in class. Promise."

"You're not as far removed from Draco as you think," Snape murmured.

"Come again?"

Rising to his feet, Snape crossed the distance separating them and looked intently down at his son. "You don't view love as manipulation, but somewhere deep down you do suspect it's conditional.
How could you not, with the way those . . . the Dursleys, treated you? Harry, I trust you not to take this as license, but if you offend me we will get through it. You don't have to be perfect."

"I know." Harry sighed then, stepping close enough so that he could lean against his father. Snape's arms came around to hold him, which helped him admit, "When I was little I did try really hard to be perfect. I wanted Aunt Petunia to like me, but I couldn't be good enough to make it happen. Well, of course not. I couldn't get rid of the magic, I see that now. It's kind of funny when you think about it. She didn't have any logical excuse for caring so much if I was a wizard. But you . . . you had every reason in the world to want me to stay magical, but you loved me even though I'd lost my powers. That's pretty much unconditional."

He felt Snape lightly patting his back. "Perhaps you understand rather more than I thought."

If he did, it was because Snape had put himself out to meet those Gryffindor needs, Harry thought. He didn't say that though; there was no cause. He knew what Snape had done for him, and Snape knew that he knew . . . and that was enough for the moment. He wriggled a bit so his father would let him go, then grinned. "If I need to understand still more I'm sure I can learn by experience, eh?"

"Cheeky," was Snape's reply to that, but his dark eyes looked pleased. "I'm of a mind to let Draco rest. He'll need it after being subjected to that sludge the Ministry has the effrontery to term Veritaserum. Why don't you set the menu for all of us, Harry, and cast a warming charm over his portion?"

Harry nodded, and then because he thought Draco deserved something special, he told the kitchens they all wanted gigot d'agneau à la provençale with crème brulée for dessert.

Draco slept straight through until almost ten o'clock. Harry kept checking on him, a bit worried, though Snape had assured him that it was entirely normal after imbibing, as he put it, less than perfectly brewed Veritaserum.

Finally Harry heard the shower running, though Draco evidently wasn't in a mood for singing. When he came out in fresh clothes, his hair still a tiny bit damp, he looked like he needed another twelve hours' sleep. Hunger, apparently, had driven him to leave his bed.

"Dinner, good," he said, sitting down to tuck in. "Where's Severus?"

Harry took a seat facing his brother. "He said he had to see to some things." Frowning, he gestured toward Draco's glass of pumpkin juice. "Sorry, I forgot to keep that cool. Should I get you some fresh?"

"Leave it, it's fine."

"Or would you rather have tea?"

Draco slanted him a glance. "Potter, I don't know what's given you the impression that I've become an invalid, but I assure you I can Floo for an alternate drink if I want one."

"All right." Harry worried his lip a little with his teeth. "So . . . has the truth serum worn off then? Completely?"

"Hmm, let's see. My name is Alistair Fiddlejumper the Third and I was born during the Goblin Wars of 1247 . . . Yes, Harry, I seem to be completely over my bizarre fixation to be truthful. I suppose now you won't trust me when I say the pumpkin juice is fine?"
Laughing a bit, Harry admitted, "I just didn't want to make you talk when you were still under the influence. You know, it wouldn't be fair."

"Gryffindor." Draco took a bite of his lamb and sighed. "Mmm, now that's very nice." Another bite, this time lingering over it, and then, "Thanks, Harry."

"For dinner?"

"For not taking advantage, I meant. It's not too horrible having a Gryffindor for a brother. Well, sometimes it's horrible. You know."

"Yeah, I know," Harry said. And he did. He knew exactly what Draco meant.

After dinner, Draco insisted that he wanted to wait up for Snape, but he was so exhausted that he could barely keep his eyes open. It didn't take long before he fell asleep sitting up on the couch. Sighing, Harry shook him awake and sent him to bed, feeling oddly like he imagined Molly Weasley must.

He stayed up alone for a long time, pulling this book and that off the shelves in the living room, just killing time until Snape came home, but he finally got so tired himself that he had to give it up. By then, Snape had been gone for hours and hours. What could be taking the man so long? For that matter, what was so urgent that it needed Snape's attention tonight? Didn't the man know that Draco would be feeling bruised and raw and in need of reassurance?

Actually, Harry was positive that Snape knew that.

Sighing, he looked down at his ring to summon some Parseltongue, then called for Sals. She'd been hiding, though not in the Floo, thank goodness. She'd crawled behind some of the books on the lowest shelf of a bookcase, and though she poked her head out at Harry's call, she wouldn't really slither forth until he assured her that Draco was asleep for the night. Harry supposed he really couldn't blame her. Sals had always been a little afraid of Draco, and that was before he'd smashed her box with her in it.

Harry went to sleep with the little snake curled up on his wrist, and dreamed that Basilisks were chasing him until, strangely, their scales erupted into blisters. The Basilisks collapsed, groaning, unable to move, but Snape was there with his potions, tending them . . .

Harry awoke with a start, shuddering, and dosed himself with a dollop of Dreamless Sleep before laying back down.

On Sunday morning Draco had more colour in his cheeks, though he slumbered on. Harry showered and dressed, and when none of the resulting noise caused his brother to stir in the least, he thought he'd better go get their father to check on him. But just then the Slytherin boy rolled over, mumbling something about dragons looking for treasure. Or maybe it was Dragon my treasure. Hard to tell. Either way, Harry frowned.

Snape was buttering a slice of rye toast when Harry joined him at the table. There was a full breakfast laid out with three plates. Harry served himself a healthy pile of scrambled eggs and a banger. "Draco's still sort of out of it."

The Potions Master nodded. "He did wake up last night to eat?"

"Yeah, and he wanted to talk to you," Harry said. As hints went, that one was pretty pointed, but
Snape didn't take the bait. "All right, where were you?" he finally gave in and asked, his frustrations sort of boiling over. "Did the Aurors need you for something else? Were you helping them edit the transcript? Whatever you were doing, I hope it was important."

"Very."

"That's it? Very?" Harry stabbed at his eggs with his fork. They were just as delicious as always, but for some reason the taste didn't appeal this morning. A heavy sprinkling of pepper and salt helped, though not much. He thought about asking the kitchens for ketchup but decided not to bother. "Is it something I don't need to know, is that it?"

"Harry, I had a number of things to do," Snape told him. "Kingsley needed me to fill out an authorization for *Veritaserum* to be used on you. Otherwise, we can't claim that Draco's alibi has been verified via truth serum."

"Did he remember to pour out six drops more so it looks like he potioned you and me both?"

"He's a senior Auror, Harry," Snape said, shaking his head. "He's not going to overlook a detail like that. I also went to Devon to collect Draco's books and yes, I did spend some time consulting with elements of the Order. Your brother's not completely secure yet, I hope you realise. It might interest you to know that Fudge has arranged for a special meeting of the Board of Governors for this coming Friday. There is but one topic on the agenda."

"Expelling Draco," Harry said, groaning. "The minister himself is going to push for it? I really hate that man."

Snape curled a lip. "Oh, but he's doing it in the interests of protecting the student population at *Hogwarts* if one is to believe his official communiqué."

"That's so unfair! Draco hasn't even been charged with anything!"

"Which is almost certainly why Lucius has persuaded Fudge to begin making moves. By late last night, Lucius had realised that we had managed to subvert his scheme to use Magical Law Enforcement against Draco. This is his contingency plan. In some ways it is a stronger gambit still. Some of the Board will be in Lucius' pocket as a matter of course. The others need only be persuaded that Draco poses a danger to other students, even if there was insufficient evidence for the Aurors to bring formal charges in the murder."

"Great." Harry shuddered. "So, how's the weather in Argentina this time of year? Oh, I think the seasons down there are reversed or something, it might be coming on towards winter. Well, we're wizards. I suppose we can manage. I'll really miss Hogwarts, though. Just my luck. What'll I get, five days back in the Tower before you resign again, this time for good?"

"I wouldn't plan on leaving just yet. The Order is doing what it can to foil Lucius. As am I."

Which explained the man's absence the night before, Harry supposed, but on some level it still bothered him. "Dad . . . I appreciate how hard you're working on that, and I'm sure Draco does too, but don't you think he'd feel a lot better if you sat him down for . . . um, a father-son talk?"

Snape finished his last bite and banished his plate away, then folded his hands on the table. "What makes you think I haven't done that? I don't hold my talks with you when he is present, do I? I quite assure you, Draco and I had ample opportunity for discussion when I went to fetch him yesterday."

Harry was glad to hear it, but he still wanted to know one thing. "Did you tell him that you love him?"
Snape's eyebrows drew together, a storm gathering in the dark tunnels of his eyes, but he mastered his anger enough to speak in level tones. "It's best if you don't lecture me on how to treat my other son."

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I wasn't lecturing, I was just asking."

The Potions Master challenged him with a stare to rethink that claim.

"All right, I was lecturing some," Harry slowly admitted. "I didn't mean to but . . . it's just that you didn't see him last night. He kept watching the Floo, waiting for you. He had something to say, I could tell."

"More likely he wondered what I would have to say about the fact that he's written a grand total of three lines. I told him we'd be discussing the matter later."

"I guess that would trouble him." Worried, Harry slumped a bit in his chair. "Making him write that he's not a Gryffindor is . . . um, pretty harsh, I think. What if he won't do it?"

"Oh, he'll do it," Snape said, his eyes glinting with determination.

"Otherwise, what? Cauldron duty? You won't let him go to Devon to go flying?" Harry stopped talking when he realised he might be giving the man good ideas. His breakfast finished by then, he pushed back his chair. "So . . . today's the big day. Funny, I thought I'd be more excited. Well, I am but it's sort of overshadowed by this whole mess. I wonder if I should even bother packing all my stuff. Well, at least I can pack it all now. Did I mention Draco had spelled some wizardspace into my trunk?"

Snape rose fluidly to his feet, his features far from pleased. "I told him to leave your packing problem to me."

"Why?"

Snape glared. "I thought you needed one of those father-son talks you're so inordinately fond of. The topic being, why you felt compelled in the first place to gather up every trace of your life here and transport it all to the Tower."

Harry blinked. "Well, because it's my stuff, I guess. I mean, I always take everything along when I go back to school . . ." It suddenly felt like the floor did a smooth roll beneath him; Harry actually grew dizzy for an instant. Paradigm shift. Again. "Oh," he softly said, feeling ten times a fool. His father had told him ages ago that that room was his room and would remain so even after he returned to the Tower, but when the time came close, what had Harry done but moan and groan about how all his stuff wouldn't fit in his trunk!

"I get it," he finally said, the room steadying around him as he took a calming breath. "Will it help if I apologise?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm hardly angry; I merely want you to understand that when I say you're welcome here, it's not some theoretical construct. You're my son, for Merlin's sake--"

"I get it, I do," Harry assured him, but Snape didn't seem able to stop his stream of thought.

"I don't want you knocking, I don't want you acting like a guest when you visit, and I certainly don't want you erasing all indications that you ever lived here," the Potions Master went right on. "I know that home is an abstraction at best for you, but it's time you understood--"
"I understand!" Harry shouted, then could have groaned at the tone it had come out in. At least Snape had stopped talking, though. He went on in a more normal voice, "I just didn't think about it, I swear. I never had a place where I could leave anything; I'm used to shoving it all in my trunk. It's habit, that's all. I know this is my home."

"Good." Snape nodded as though satisfied.

"I'll go figure out what to leave behind then," Harry said. "I guess I don't need some of my books from previous years. Though I don't have anywhere to put them except in my trunk. I feel sort of bad to leave them cluttering up the room. I mean, won't they just remind Draco that I've gone back to classes while he's stuck here? Hmm, that'll be moot if we all have to leave the country--"

"I have absolutely no intention of brushing up my Spanish."

"Well, Brazil, then. Oh wait, do they speak Spanish in Brazil?"

Snape gave him a derisive glance. "I'll tell Albus we ought to offer a geography course."

"Portuguese, all right. I just forgot for a second, no need to pile more classes on us. Well, let me go figure out what to leave here and where to stow it." At that, Snape got an odd look in his eyes. Uncertainty? Whatever it was, it didn't much suit him. "Is something wrong?" Harry asked.

"No." The word and tone were short. "I told Draco to stay out of your luggage angst because I already had a solution--"

"Luggage angst!" Harry narrowed his eyes.

"I should have known that teenagers would believe they had to solve it all themselves," Snape drawled, his posture a little tense. "As I was aware that Draco would not care to be tripping over your belongings, I thought I would offer you the use of my old school trunk so that you could have one here as well as one in the Tower."

"Oh!" Harry felt a grin threatening to break. "Thanks, Dad. That's really sweet."

"Sweet." Snape looked a bit as though he might bite his own tongue in two.

"Considerate, I meant," Harry quickly said. He couldn't believe he'd just called Snape that. "Um, is your trunk is inscribed with your initials?"

The man still looked sour. "It is."

"I'll take yours with me to the Tower, then. I'd like to be able to casually toss out that you lent it to me. You know, it'd go a long way towards showing some of the more stubborn Gryffindors that you really are my dad."

Snape huffed slightly at that. "Just do not tell them that you consider me sweet."

"I'm trying to avoid a reputation as a nutter, remember?" Harry laughed. "Besides, Fred and George thought it was loads of fun to do strange things to other people's stuff. Before I left Gryffindor all those months ago, it looked like a few people were trying to carry on the legacy. But nobody would dare lay a finger on your trunk, sir. I mean, they'd expect it to be hexed in about a thousand different ways. No offence."

The Potions Master's eyes took on a mirthful gleam. Devilish, Harry thought. "Well, there's a time and place for fear. As it happens, your friends would be right. I believe you've even encountered this
particular hex. It's the same one I utilized to ward my liquor cabinet."

Harry felt his face heating, but decided the Slytherin thing would be to brazen it out. "Oh, you
warded it? I never knew."

"Just like you never stole my Boomslang skin and Gillyweed?"

"I didn't!" Harry drew in a deep breath, the old accusation bothering him more than it probably
should. "You really should believe me."

"It hardly matters now." And then, at Harry's crestfallen look, "Very well then, if you must know, I
do believe you about that, but not about the liquor. Enough of such matters. The question now is
what to do with the hex on my trunk. We can either alter it to recognise you as well as me, or
dispense with the warding altogether."

Harry thought about that. "Well, it's not like I live in Slytherin, you know. I can see why you needed
to hex your own trunk, but--" He stopped talking when Snape actually snorted. "What?"

"I didn't hex it to fend off fellow Slytherins, you idiot child. I was tired of a certain Gryffindor using
his invisibility cloak to sneak about in the dungeons. Your father used to target my belongings for his
pranks, but that put an end to it."

His stomach twisting a bit, Harry frowned. "You're my father."

The Potions Master's eyebrows drew together. "Sit," he directed, pointing, his tone of voice almost
harsh.

Confused by the lightning shift of mood, Harry sank into a chair. "What's wrong? I've been calling
you that for a while. You said it was all right."

Snape took a place on the sofa and leaned forward intently, his black eyes steady on Harry's face. "It
is not all right for you to distance yourself from James, Harry. I am your father, yes. But so was he.
Don't deny it again."

"I don't--"

"You do, every time you say James in reference to him."

"Well, that was his name, you know." Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Are you sure I've been
calling him that?"

"I've been meaning to speak to you about it."

That sounded sort of ominous. Maybe that explained why it felt a bit hard to breathe. "All right, I'll
work on it."

The Potions Master lapsed into thought for a moment. "You seem to be caught in a dichotomy. But
there's no need for one."

"Really?" Harry folded his arms in front of him. "It'd probably help if I told you I don't know that
word."

A slow smile curled Snape's lips. "There's no need for you to make an either/or choice of father,
Harry." His smile fading, Snape continued, "It occurs to me that you've been doing this all along.
When the adoption first took place, you actually experienced guilt over agreeing."
Harry thought back. It seemed like a long time ago. A lifetime, but he could still remember. That awful clamping feeling like he was doing something wrong... visions of James Potter spinning 'round and 'round in his grave... Harry sighed. "I did think at one point that it was pretty disloyal to James... shite, you're right, I do call him that."

Snape took Harry's hands in his. "Say my father."

"Right." Words starting tumbling over his teeth as he tried to make sense of his own tangled feelings. "I know that by the time my father died you weren't horrible enemies any longer and you were on the same side and knew it and all that, but I still thought that if J... my father could see me signing on to be your son, he'd basically sick up. I needed the blood wards but I could hardly stand the thought of what I was doing..." When Harry thought back over what he'd said he could have cringed, but Snape merely looked at him with a steady black gaze and gave him time to work his way through it.

Harry didn't say anything else, though. He didn't know what to say.

"At some point your perceptions about being adopted changed," the Potions Master finally prompted.

"Hard to say when, exactly, but yes. Obviously." His throat felt dry, so Harry went over to the Floo to throw some powder in. "One Butterbeer." He belatedly threw a glance over his shoulder. "Do you want something?"

"Just for you to be at ease."

Talk about tall orders. Harry sat down with his drink and started nursing it. He wished it was later so he could claim to be sleepy and avoid this. Snape probably wouldn't buy that, though, not before lunch. Then again, he'd just let him have a Butterbeer before lunch. That was pretty interesting.

"So, you started off as my son feeling you had to stay loyal to your first father," Snape prompted. "I was aware of that, so don't feel you must spare my feelings, Harry. When did you start thinking that your loyalty was something to overcome?"

Harry's hand clenched on his glass. "I don't know. It's not like I woke up one day and decided. It just happened, bit by bit. I think maybe it started after that big fight we had. See, I realised that I really wanted you to be my father. And then... well I know he was fifteen and an idiot and all that, but it wasn't right, how he treated you in school. It was almost like saying my father was a slap in your face. Because you were the one who was being a father to me."

Snape frowned. "James was a father to you as well. A very good one, in fact."

Harry felt a bit ill but a big swallow of cold Butterbeer seemed to calm his stomach. "I know. Sort of. I mean, I have memories now, from Truthful Dreams. But it's like they're someone else's memories. I can remember dreaming them, but not them really happening. The dreams helped me at first. I felt so loved... but after a while I started thinking that it hadn't done me much good. I mean, he died and I was left with... well, you know. And I forgot about the love until I had you to show me with the potion that it had ever been there." Harry glanced up. "I owe it all to you, even the memories, that's all. I know you don't like me thanking you but honestly, I don't think you understand how much I appreciate everything. And then there was Draco saying Lucius instead of my father, you know, and it just seemed like... if he could move forward then why should I still be clinging onto the past?"

"Draco," Snape carefully said, "is trying to distance himself from his father, but there is no reason for you to feel ashamed of yours."
"But he was so *awful* to you," Harry protested, a thin film hazing the vision in his good eye. It went away when he blinked, so he told himself he wasn't crying, not really.

Snape waited until his son looked at him. "Your allegiance to me is impressive, and I do appreciate it, but you need to forgive your father, Harry. My old wounds no longer fester, as I told you . . . but it seems that you have taken them on yourself. My doing, likely. I vented my rage on an innocent child, simply because he was a reminder. I don't believe I have ever even apologised--"

"We're past that now," Harry quickly said. "It's all right."

"It was ill-done of me and I am in fact sorry." Snape brushed his long hair away from his face. "More than you can know, because I see now that my own displays of bitterness have led you to deny James. Back then, I wanted you to be ashamed of him. It was a way of getting back, that I could make his own son despise him. But you're the one I've hurt with my pettiness."

Harry rolled the empty glass between his palms. "I don't *despise* him. I just never have understood how he could be so mean. You didn't even do anything to him that day."

"What your father did is nothing to what I myself have done. How can you overlook crimes worthy of Azkaban yet resent James Potter's pranks? Draco has done worse to you, yet you've forgiven him."

"He hasn't spun me upside down so everybody can see my-- Sorry."

Snape ignored the reference. "He dressed as a Dementor, knowing full well that you might lose consciousness and fall from your broom while flying at high-velocity. That was worse. What he did to help Umbridge was worse. Attending Samhain eager to see you tortured was worse."

"He's probably awake and listening."

"Don't change the subject. James Potter was and *is* your father, and I do not expect to hear differently from your lips. And I am your father as well. There is no dichotomy and no competition. Is that clear?"

Harry nodded. Strange how it could feel good to be lectured, he thought. But it did. The tight knot of tension in his belly was easing some. Maybe it just came from knowing that Snape wanted what was best for him . . . that Snape could care enough about him to talk like this. The old wounds obviously had closed over. Harry hadn't really believed that before, not completely. But he could see now that it was true.

He nodded again, the gesture that time more definite, and told himself he'd try to notice if he said *James* again. So he could stop it. "Um, I actually was serious about Draco probably listening. He's not going to feel great that we were sitting out here discussing all his past mistakes."

"We were hardly doing that, but as it happens, the door is still warded from last night." Snape studied Harry, apparently satisfied with what he saw. "So, you never answered me. Shall we remove the hex on my trunk or would you rather it continue to stain prying hands?"

"No hex. Your initials alone should be enough to scare everybody off. Besides, it's not like the other Gryffindors would steal from me or anything."

"Very well, no hex. Go see if Draco is awake, Harry. After he's had breakfast we can all of us work together on removing the spells on the trunk."

Harry chuckled. "Aren't you worried that if you include us, we'll know how to break the ward on
your liquor cabinet?"

Snape's answering glance proved he was amused, too. "Worried? No."

That made sense. No doubt Snape was much better at magic as an adult, than when he had been a student. There were probably several layers of wards on the liquor cabinet, with lock-down spells woven through the mix. Harry still figured he could probably blast through it all with a wanded spell or two, but he decided it wouldn't be very polite to say as much. "I'll go get Draco," he murmured, getting up to do it. "Um, when I pack should I take some Eyesight Elixir? I'm sure Ron could put it in, you know, waiting until nobody else is in the room?"

"I'd prefer to finish researching why it might have hurt you before we proceed with the treatment."

Harry nodded, and turned away towards his bedroom.

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The day passed quickly. Too quickly.

Before Harry knew it, dinner was over and he was standing at the front door of Snape's quarters, a battered old trunk inscribed with SS levitating behind him. Draco was leaning indolently against the opposite wall, a strange smile curling his lips. "Don't forget," he said, his gaze flicking to the crest on Harry's robes. "You're both."

"I'm not going to forget."

"When are you going to start visiting Slytherin, though?"

Harry reflexively smoothed his fringe down over his scar. "I wouldn't think you'd be as concerned about that, now, with people in Slytherin trying so hard to get you imprisoned or expelled."

"Some of them would still make good allies against the Dark Lord." Draco's voice dropped and he looked down at the floor. "Pansy would have. I know it. But even if you don't believe that, well you have that saving-people thing, don't you? Some of them are worth saving, Potter. And you didn't answer me. When are you--"

"Tonight is for Gryffindor," Snape interrupted, his hair swaying as he shook his head at his other son. "As for the other, Harry and I will have to judge the mood of Slytherin and decide. He is going nowhere near the common room until I take him there to introduce him as my son."

Draco pushed off from the wall. "They already know about that."

"No matter. The protocols will be observed. And too, Draco, you might consider that for the moment, Harry is to keep either Miss Granger or Mr Weasley, preferably both, close to him whenever he leaves the Tower."

"That'll make visiting Slytherin a tad difficult."

"Unless I myself am with him," Snape added.

"Hmm. Well, small steps, I suppose. They don't all hate you, Severus. Well, I'm sure you know that."

"Harry, shall we?"

The Gryffindor boy nodded. "I feel sort of funny leaving you here," he said to Draco. "I mean, I feel
like we've been in this together up until now."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "I'm not helpless, Harry. I was down here alone at first, you realise." His arrogance fading a bit, the Slytherin boy admitted, "I just hope I get to stay. I . . . I'm pretty worried I'm going to get expelled. After all, the headmaster doesn't have Order members on the Board. I think I'm sunk."

Snape's voice was brisk. "We have a number of schemes underway to keep you afloat."

"Thanks, Severus." Draco drew in a huge breath. "Well, I guess this is good-bye, then."

"This is see-you-later," Harry corrected with a smile. He sort of wanted to hug Draco, since it seemed the other boy was in need of a little affection, but didn't really dare. "I'll visit soon, promise. So, see you later."

Snape opened the door with a wave of his wand and ushered Harry's borrowed trunk out, but after stepping into the hall with Harry, he glanced back at his other son. "We'll talk when I return, Draco."

The last thing Harry saw as he walked away was the door closing, Draco's face behind it looking wan and forlorn.

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"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed, jumping up from where she was studying to run across the room and enfold him in a big hug. "Oh, we're so glad to see you! McGonagall said you'd be coming back tonight. For good, right? And we wanted to throw you a welcome-back party, but it's a bit awkward." She lowered her voice. "Because the funeral is on Wednesday. Pansy wasn't my favourite person but it still seems wrong to be celebrating."

"That's all right, I didn't need a party--" Harry started to say, only to be blinded by the flash of a camera. "Stop it, Colin!"

"Nice to see you as well, Professor Snape," Hermione said politely, looking over Harry's shoulder. She stepped back then, into the crowd of Gryffindors who had heard her shout and come down from their dormitories.

Snape merely inclined his head in reply, which disappointed Harry a bit. It seemed to him that Hermione was going out of her way to make up for her awful gaffe in contacting Wizard Family Services. Snape obviously hadn't really got over that. Well, he did know how to hold a grudge. Harry was just glad he wasn't holding one against James . . . against his father, any longer.

"Finite Incantatem," the Potions Master said to the floating trunk, which promptly settled to the floor. "I will leave you to your friends, then."

"All right." Everybody was staring at him. He didn't like that at all, but it wasn't going to stop him from doing what he needed to do. Stepping closer to Snape, Harry looked up into his eyes. "Thank you. For everything, Dad."

A collective gasp ripped through the Gryffindors.

Snape looked half-amused, half-exasperated, and half-proud, even though that made three halves. "You are most welcome, son. Well, if you need anything from home you know where I am. And I will see you in class shortly. Be good."

With that, he was stepping through the portrait hole, still open.
Dean frowned at that and waved his wand, but nothing happened. He went over and closed it by hand, muttering something about the Fat Lady never acting *that* way before.

"Maybe she's scared of Snape," Seamus put in.

Harry felt like he was being pulled in different directions. Or maybe, like he was being tested straight away. Tested on where he really stood. He thought of saying, *Listen, Snape's all right*, but since there weren't too many Gryffindors who would believe that, it wasn't a very good way to start off.

"Bet you didn't know he can get into the Tower any time he likes," he said with a little laugh. "Turns out the teachers all have special passwords. Good thing, too. *I* couldn't get in. My old password wasn't working."

"Oh, I'm *sorry*!" That was Hermione, practically groaning. "We changed it in your honour when we heard you were coming back. But we forgot to tell you, what with everything . . . anyway, it's *Laetissimus*. You know, very happy."

Harry didn't know, but he believed Hermione. "Nice," he said to thank her. "Where's Ron?"

"Night Quidditch. *I told* him he was going to miss you stepping through the portrait hole, but he said you wouldn't come until later. Said Snape would keep you almost until curfew unless he missed his guess." Her eyes sparkled. "I suppose he missed his guess, then."

Well, that explained where Ginny was as well, Harry thought. He frowned, wondering what to do about Seeker. He hadn't played in forever and he really wanted to, but it seemed awful to kick her off the team at this late stage. There were only a couple of Quidditch games left in the season.

"New trunk, Harry?" said Neville as he eyed it. "Well, not *new*, it looks like it's seen better days but . . . " Harry knew the exact moment when Neville must have come far enough around the front of the trunk to see the initials. He actually jumped back in alarm.

"Yeah, Severus lent it to me so I could leave my other trunk at home," he said, tossing the sentence out just as casually as he had planned, though he was watching everyone carefully to gauge their reactions.

"I think that's just grand," Hermione said, nodding staunchly. "Right?"

"Yes, it's very . . . uh, nice." Neville nodded his agreement, though he kept his distance from the trunk.

"Snape, *nice*!" That was Seamus, guffawing. Then he caught the look on Harry's face. "Sorry. It's just . . . well, you know. I'm sure you two get on. It's just . . . Merlin's beard, Snape, *nice*!"

Harry wasn't going to argue the merits of Snape's personality, especially since the man himself had said not to call him sweet or anything, but neither was he going to pretend the adoption wasn't real. Best to make that clear from the start, he thought. "Listen, everybody," he announced, clearing his throat. "You don't have to like Snape, and you can complain all you like about Potions lessons or points from Gryffindor. But don't insult *him*, or at least, not to me. Nobody here would like it if I made mean jokes about *your* parents. Or grandparents," he added, with a glance at Neville.

"Yeah, but Harry--"

He cut Seamus off. "Severus Snape is my father and I love him. Does that settle it for you?"

Harry didn't know if that *settled* it, but it certainly did shut everyone up. Everyone except Neville,
that was. And Hermione.

"Well of course you do," she said, glancing about in challenge. Harry almost laughed. It seemed clear to him that Hermione was really sorry about her earlier behaviour. So very sorry, in fact, that now she was determined to stand by him and Snape. He was proud of her, even if it had taken her an awfully long time to realise she didn't know everything.

"Harry's right," was all Neville said, but Harry really appreciated it all the same.

"I also don't want to hear anybody here accusing Draco Malfoy of murder," Harry continued, staring at several Gryffindors in turn. "He's been cleared by the Ministry, and that's that."

"You don't want much, do you?" asked Ron as he stepped into the room, the Gryffindor Quidditch team close behind. He was smiling, though, so Harry didn't take him too seriously. "Good to see you here, mate!"

"Good to be here." Tired of being the centre of attention, Harry flopped down onto a couch. "Don't mind me. I'm not the resident celebrity, you know. I'm just glad to get back to normal life."

Most of the Gryffindors drifted off, leaving Harry alone in the common room with a few of his closest friends. He lost a chess game to Ron, then looked at Quidditch magazines with Ginny, and watched Hermione valiantly struggle to ignore the books and essays that were clearly calling her. Ron and Hermione managed to draw him aside at one point and ask how he really was; he quickly told them about his eye so they'd know he didn't see well to the left.

Between all the chatter and fun, Harry didn't get to bed until after midnight. He'd forgotten how great it was in the Tower. As he drifted off to sleep, though, Sals in a little heap by his side, his thoughts wandered down into the very bowels of Hogwarts.

He was happy, he was. He really was. But for all that, Harry Potter missed his family already.
The first thing Harry did when he entered the Great Hall the next morning was glance toward the head table. Snape wasn't there. That was all right, though. Harry didn't want Draco to have to eat breakfast all alone on Harry's first day back. He was actually glad to see Snape's empty chair up on the dais... though he did wish he could give his father a little wave. He wondered what Snape and Draco were talking about over tea and toast.

Hopefully, the subject of lines wasn't too prominent.

His own breakfast seemed pretty typical at first. Gryffindor table, of course; he didn't feel up to braving the Slytherins yet. Platters heaped with food, students laughing and talking and eating all at once. Hermione reminding them all that there was a test scheduled for Charms. Everything just as it usually was. Except...

"Be good, Harry," said Seamus in a slightly mocking voice as he stood up and grabbed his book bag.

What struck Harry about it was that Seamus had never said anything remotely like that to him before. Be good... what was that about?

"Yeah, be good," Dean echoed, a wide grin on his face.

A bunch of the students who remained started laughing.

"I don't get it," Harry said, looking around, but that only made them laugh harder.

Ron leaned over to speak quietly to Harry. "Way I hear it, that's what Snape said last night when he left. Be good."

Harry shook his head. "What's so funny about that?"

Ron finished his juice, then stood up so they could make their way to Charms. "You're kidding, right? Snape, going all fatherly and saying a thing like that right in front of students? It's hilarious."

Harry didn't think so, but he didn't want to argue about it. Besides, by then he was thinking back to Hermione's comment about a test. He hadn't known about that, though he had been keeping up with the readings and essays for the Charms class. He'd even finally got caught up in his spell casting, though the Parseltongue incantations didn't have always have exactly the same results as Draco's Latin ones. The differences weren't too important, and it wasn't like Flitwick had ever graded them that hard to start with, but Harry was still nervous.

Or maybe he was on edge at the prospect of incanting in Parseltongue in front of anyone but his family and closest friends.

Hermione must have sensed his nervousness; she smiled kindly at him as he walked down the corridor, Ron on his other side, the two of them flanking him as they'd agreed. Ron was taking guard duty, as he'd called it, pretty seriously; his gaze was constantly swinging from left to right, left to right as if he was trying to identify in advance anybody that might try to cause trouble for Harry. He even had his chest sort of thrown out in a don't-mess-with-my-friend stance.

The Slytherins didn't seem like they wanted trouble, though. In fact, they were subdued. Thinking back, Harry realised that yes, their table had been awfully quiet during breakfast. Maybe it was the
funeral coming up. One of their own . . . all right, so he'd never been able to stand Pansy and frankly thought her last letter to Draco had been a ploy to return him to Voldemort, but she'd had friends in Slytherin. A lot of them. And they were still reeling from her sudden death, obviously. The Slytherins he saw on his way to class looked seriously depressed. Almost ill with it, in fact.

It was probably wrong to be glad for that, Harry thought. Yeah, it was definitely wrong. But he couldn't help it, not if their depression meant that nobody felt like tangling with him. He really didn't want to have to fight with anybody in Snape's house. In his house, he told himself. Too strange, that thought. It was one thing to recognise Slytherin tendencies in himself. It was quite another to really feel like he was a member of their house. Back in the dungeons, it had been almost theoretical, and visit their common room, sit at their table, Harry had sounded a lot less daunting than it really was.

"All right there, Harry?" Ron said as the reached the door to Flitwick's classroom.

He'd been lost in thought and hadn't even realised they'd arrived. "Oh yeah," he said, stepping back to let a few Ravenclaws rush into the room. He lowered his voice. "Um . . . bit nervous, I guess. Been a while."

Hermione understood what he hadn't said. She knew he was leery of speaking Parseltongue in front of everyone. "They're going to have to know sooner or later," she said, giving him that kind smile again. This time Harry found it sort of irritating.

"You think?"

Ron put a hand on his arm. "Come on, it'll be all right. It's a written test anyway."

Harry felt better, then. He knew he couldn't put off the inevitable forever, but still . . . yeah, he felt a lot better. Going in, he sat at a long table with Ron at one side and Hermione on the other. Neville saw him sit down and gave him an encouraging smile, and started to say something, but Flitwick started talking then so he had to fall silent.

"Wands away, everyone. Parchment and quill, that's what you'll need for this morning," the little man said in his usual jovial voice, beaming at all of them from the raised platform he used for lectures. He surveyed the hubbub for a moment, then added, "Ah, look who we have back with us. Mr Potter, nice to see you here. Very nice indeed. Class, everyone say welcome back to Mr Potter."

They did, a good number of them grinning like idiots as they parroted, "Welcome back, Mr Potter!"

Harry ducked his head. "Uh, thanks. Good to be back." He hoped his other teachers weren't going to make a big deal over him. He wanted to be just Harry. He mentally reviewed his course programme. Transfigurations next, and then after lunch Double Care of Magical Creatures. McGonagall probably wouldn't demand the class welcome him, but she might give him a frosty lecture about Transfiguration not being his best subject and how he'd better work extra hard now that he was in class again. He didn't even want to think about what she might say about his snake-and-lion crest. She had to know already that Harry was in both houses, but Harry still didn't think she was going to care for his crest. And as for Hagrid . . . he'd probably give Harry a big hug and pick him up and whirl him around, or something equally embarrassing.

He suddenly wished he had Potions on Mondays, so at least he'd have one teacher who would act like it was just ordinary and usual to have Harry Potter returning to class.

Harry looked up to see a piece of chalk beginning to write out the exam question. Compare and contrast hunger and thirst charms. Include a discussion about the ethical considerations of the use of each.
Suddenly buoyed, Harry dipped his quill in ink and began to scratch out his answer. He knew loads about this topic. Draco and he had even played around one day with the hunger charms, seeing if they could make each other hungry enough to eat things they normally wouldn't touch with a ten foot pole. Harry had won when he'd made Draco gobble down some meatloaf. Hmm, maybe he could include that when he got to discussing ethics. It wasn't too nice to make somebody eat food they hated . . . unless you were just fooling around, of course . . .

"Mr Potter."

Flitwick's thin, reedy voice made him look up. "Sir?"

"I'd like to use this time to see you perform a few of the charms we covered in your absence. If you would come up here with me? Come along, now."

Up to the raised platform where he'd be on display for the whole class to gawk at, especially when Parseltongue began spilling out his mouth? Harry didn't think so.

"But I need to finish my test, don't you think, sir?"

Flitwick shifted from foot to foot, reminding Harry strangely of a dancing goblin. Not that goblins ever danced. "No, no, your earlier essay on this subject was more than adequate to demonstrate your grasp of it. Consider yourself excused from the test."

Harry had to frown at that. He didn't want special treatment, especially when all it did was garner him resentful glares from the Ravenclaws. "Really, sir, I'd rather do the test and then see you during office hours for the other," he said rather desperately.

Beneath the table, Hermione patted his knee. Harry knocked her hand off of him and gave her a warning look not to coddle him again.

"Young man, I set this test on purpose so that I might have time to assess your wandwork. Written assignments are all well and good but we mustn't forget that we are here primarily to learn the practice of Charms."

Great, now the Gryffindors were glaring at him, too. Like it was his fault the Charms teacher had decided to give a test.

"Now, Mr Potter."

Flitwick's voice at the end was about as stern as it could get. He even sounded like he might take points if Harry dithered any longer. And that was all he needed. The Gryffindors would get angry; they hardly ever lost points in Charms class. And half the points would come from Slytherin, which would not do Snape's temper any good.

"Yes, Professor." Sighing, Harry pushed back his chair. It didn't help that when he got to the end of the row, Seamus snickered and told him to be good. Harry had a strong urge to cast a hunger charm right then and there. A strong one, so Seamus would have to sit there starving while he tried to write about the topic.

Mastering the impulse, he joined the teacher on the raised platform. There was hardly room for them both up there, but Flitwick didn't seem worried. "Well? Wand at the ready. Let's start with weather charms. Localized, please. The other students surely don't want their hard work drenched. So, a bit of rain, right there." Flitwick pointed to a strip of empty space below them. "All right, then?"

"Yeah," Harry muttered. It felt like his throat was closing over. People were staring at him already. It
wasn't every day students got called up to give private demonstrations, and besides, they'd all heard months ago that he'd lost his magic. Death Eaters had spread the news far and wide, hoping to demoralize the Order. So of course they were curious. Harry really couldn't blame them for that.

He couldn't even blame Ron and Hermione for looking alarmed to see him begin to brandish his wand. They knew he was pretty good at making sure his magic didn't flow through it, but they also knew just how violent his spells could get when his wand did come into play. They were probably imagining the whole classroom flooding, washing students, desks, and a screaming Flitwick out into the corridor.

With a deep breath, Harry adjusted his wand angle to one that looked good but wouldn't work, and then, looking down the length of his arm and at the ring his father had transfigured, he began to murmur the incantation for rain. He didn't put much effort into it, but that part wasn't resentment at being put on display like this. It was because he was supposed to look a little bit inept. Word was supposed to spread that for all Harry Potter was back in class, he wasn't so great at magic these days.

He might as well not have bothered; nobody paid any attention to the water falling from the ceiling, not after they heard what he had to say to put it there. He could hardly hear himself over the shocked gasps that began to ripple through the classroom. He's doing it again . . . Haven't heard that in years . . . Could have gone without ever hearing it again, myself . . . Was that Parseltongue? . . . No, it was German.

That last comment actually reminded him of Draco. Harry might have laughed if not for the fact that several students were actually rearing back in their chairs.

There was no snake here this time, though, nothing to frighten them.

Nothing except Harry.

"Well done, Mr Potter, well done!" Flitwick bounced with enthusiasm, his eyes alight with pleasure as he studied the drizzly rain now falling into the middle of his classroom. Clearly, he'd been briefed to expect Parseltongue and thought very little of it. Snape had likely told the other teachers in advance, for which Harry was grateful. "Nicely localized indeed. I don't believe a single drop has strayed. Now, a Finite and a sunlight charm, please. A strong one to dry the stones."

If Harry had been reluctant before, now he was practically paralyzed. Every single student's eyes were trained on him, and most of them looked pretty well horrified. But there was nothing for it but to grit his teeth and cast the charm. It was Parseltongue magic or no magic. Not much choice at all.

A wavering beam of light began to filter down from the ceiling, though it looked as though it would dissipate before it ever reached the wet stone floor.

"Oh come now, a bit stronger than that," Flitwick urged. "Go on, try again."

Harry did the Solare charm once more, using slightly different wording than before, as he had several Parseltongue variations of it. The light stabilized somewhat, though it wasn't what anybody could call strong.

"Well, that is some improvement, even if somewhat orange," said Flitwick in a slightly puzzled voice. Only then did he appear to realise that nobody was working on the exam. "Thirty more minutes," he chided the class, his hand making a shooping motion. "To work then, all of you to work."

They did start working, but most were watching through lowered lashes even as they scribbled out
sentences on their parchments. The wariness level, at least from some students, seemed to decline as Harry kept casting. Others appeared to be just as horrified as before.

Finally, Flitwick released him with a jolly, "There now, I can see you have kept up with the class. You might want to practice more as your spell power seems a bit off, but we'll chalk that up to the fact your magic's taking a slightly new form and you're still adjusting. All things considered, I think your father didn't exaggerate when he mentioned how hard you've been working . . . yes, five points to Gryffindor!"

Harry wondered how the counters would divide an odd number, but that speculation was cut short by a wave of snickering, the word father repeated several times in low voices. Well, at least it helped distract them from the whole Parseltongue issue. And too, some of the Gryffindors weren't snickering. That was worth something.

Transfigurations was both better and worse than Charms. McGonagall didn't publicly welcome him or turn him into a one-man show, but she did harrumph rather ostentatiously when she caught sight of his crest. Harry stared levelly back. What did she expect him to do? She knew as well as he did why he was in both houses now. Maybe she didn't approve of the adoption? That sort of bothered Harry, but he chalked it up to her Gryffindors-can-take-care-of-their-own attitude. She had been pretty upset when he'd first moved down to the dungeons. This was probably just more of the same, so he mentally shrugged it off as class began.

This year they had Transfiguration with the Hufflepuffs, and the current topic was a review unit on same-name transfigurations. They were supposed to be simple, though Harry had never found them so. Today's task was turning gloves into foxgloves. McGonagall gave them each table several different gloves to work with: lady's lace ones, thick canvas work gloves, even a dragonhide one.

"Now," she lectured from the front, "be sure to focus your magic on the word glove as I'm sure we don't want any dragons running loose in the castle."

A couple of Hufflepuff girls began giggling at the image. Or maybe it was at him, since Harry caught a hint of a comment, something about the Triwizard Tournament and the First Task. Thinking he was being made fun of, he turned to give them a bit of a glare, only to see the pair of them flush red just like Ginny Weasley always used to do around him.

"Concentrate, Miss Bones. We don't want lace, do we?"

Hermione poked him in the shoulder. "Harry, pay attention! Let's get started. The incantation is Gantus Floramus."

"Not for me, it isn't," he muttered, and then, in a lower voice still, "I didn't learn this one in advance." He waved his wand over a work glove, back and forth as McGonagall had demonstrated, though he held his wand so the end of it wouldn't touch his palm. Now came the hard part. When he had to incant a brand new spell, he never really knew what words would do the trick. He was still thinking
about it when the noise of someone clearing a throat made him look up.

"Is there a problem, Mr Potter?" she asked, her voice as haughty as ever, her stance critical.

"No, Professor McGonagall. I'm just thinking of how to do it."

"Perhaps if you thought out loud?"

Harry lowered his voice. "Um, in Charms the teacher seemed to know already that I cast a bit differently than I used to. Did my father, I mean, did Professor Snape tell you about that?"

He hadn't spoken quietly enough; someone behind him made a gagging noise at the word father. Harry felt his face heating but decided to ignore it.

McGonagall had evidently decided otherwise. In her most supercilious tones, she inquired, "Are you taking ill, Mr Finnegan?"

"No, no, ma'am."

"Then you'd best see to getting some flowers made, hadn't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

McGonagall returned her attention to Harry, her gaze less icy than before. "I believe Professor Snape informed all your teachers, yes. So that we could be prepared in case other students needed reassurance. And so?" She gestured at the table he was sharing with Hermione. "Gantus Floramus, Mr Potter, however you need to say it."

"That's just it." Harry lowered his voice to a bare whisper. "I don't know how to say it. I have to figure out each spell as it comes. My own wording, I mean. Sometimes the obvious thing doesn't work."

McGonagall replied in a voice loud enough to carry. "I suppose you shall have to simply muddle your way through, Potter. It's a pity that magic is more difficult for you than formerly, but that's no excuse to do poorly."

Harry glared up at her suspiciously, only to receive a bland look back, but that was enough. McGonagall had done that on purpose, and not to humiliate him, either. She was in the Order, after all. She might not know about his wandless magic or what happened when he used a wand, but either Snape or Dumbledore had told her it was in the Order's interests to spread the story that poor little Harry Potter would never be the same.

"Yes, ma'am," he said quietly, looking back down at the gloves as he began to wave his wand again. The ring was really perfect, he thought. He couldn't help but see it every time he cast. "Turn yourself into flower," he tried. Nothing, though it wasn't lost on him that the Hufflepuffs were backing away. Hannah Abbot even turned and ran for the door.

"You will return to your seat," McGonagall called over the general hum of alarmed noise. "There is no cause for concern. Unless you're seriously proposing that Potter here is a dark wizard?"

"No, ma'am," said Hannah in a shaky voice that implied the opposite.

"I rather think if he were a dark wizard then You-Know-Who wouldn't be trying so hard to kill him. You did read the papers this past November, I trust?"
"Yes, ma'am." Hannah walked back toward her place then.

"You mustn't let it bother you, Potter," McGonagall told him, her voice still loud enough to carry. "It's an old prejudice, this idea about Parseltongue. Well, keep trying."

She walked off then, and Harry did try. It wasn't too hard to make sure he looked inept, not in this class. Finally, when he ordered the glove to *Bloom*, it did, sprouting flowers out each finger. But they weren't foxgloves, they were carnations.

"Maybe you need to be a bit more specific," said Hermione at his side. *She*, of course, already had a beautiful bouquet.

"I don't know if there's even a word for *foxglove* in Parseltongue. I try to say it and I just hear the word *flowers* coming out." Discouraged, Harry leaned one hand on the table. "I mean, how many snakes are botanists? This is impossible. The words don't overlap in Parseltongue the way they do in English."

Hermione plucked a beautiful pink foxglove from her bunch and handed it to him. "Ask Sals what she would call it. Then you'll know."

Harry smiled his thanks, and told the glove to go back to the way it had been.

Snape was in the Great Hall for lunch, but Harry had reconsidered his idea of giving him a little wave. He'd already had enough teasing. Sitting as far as he could manage from Seamus, he settled for just catching his father's eye.

The Potions Master gave him a rather regal nod, no more greeting than that, and then glanced at the Slytherin table. Looked like a significant glance, too. Harry couldn't help but wonder if it was a message. Was Snape telling him to keep his promise to Draco and go sit with the Slytherins? His father had said he didn't expect Harry to brave the common room without him, at least not for the time being, but maybe he thought a table in the safety of the Great Hall was another matter.

*Tomorrow*, Harry told himself. It was just his first day back, and after all, he was a Gryffindor, too. He'd been in Gryffindor for a lot longer. Nobody, not even Snape, would seriously expect him to sit elsewhere on his first day back, right?

A wave of laughter from down at Seamus' end of the table made it just the slightest bit tempting, though. Especially when he caught half a sentence, something about *wonder if Harry can convince him to wash his hair*. Draco and he had joked about the same thing, of course, but somehow that was different. They hadn't meant anything by it, not really.

"What's his *problem*?" Harry asked, grabbing a toasted cheese sandwich from the platter that had appeared.


Harry was still fuming. "Well how long is he going to keep it up? He's known about the adoption for ages. *He* came down with the well-wish--"
"Uh, yeah. Sorry about that. Not coming too, I mean."

"I didn't mean that. We're all right." He wondered if this would be a good time to mention that Draco was his brother, but decided he'd better put it off. As for Seamus, maybe it was best just to ignore him.

"So, been a while since you saw Hagrid, eh?" Ron was saying as Neville slid in beside them. "He'll be right glad to have you back. He's told us a bunch of times how much he misses you." When Harry looked alarmed he added, "Not in class. When we go visit him, you know."

Harry let out a breath. "Oh, okay." He'd been following along with Care of Magical Creatures using his book, but it had been difficult to really feel he was keeping up. Snape had agreed to have a few plants in his quarters from time to time so they could learn the practical aspects of Herbology, but he'd drawn the line at the kinds of dangerous creatures Hagrid liked to feature in the curriculum. Hermione's class notes had helped quite a bit, but Harry still thought there was nothing like the real thing.

He glanced a couple of times at his father as lunch progressed, but Snape was always looking at the Slytherin table. Looking for signs of trouble, looking out for Harry? Or maybe he was just worried about his students. He did care about them, Harry knew. He even cared about the ones about to make the same dreadful decision he'd once made.

Studying the Slytherin table himself for a minute, Harry decided they still looked despondent. Some of them were evidently too depressed to eat; about a third of the house was missing entirely. Maybe it would get better after the funeral? At this point Harry wasn't so sure about his plan to eat with them tomorrow.

He decided he'd let Care of Magical Creatures decide the matter for him. He had that class with the Slytherins. He'd sound them out, just a little bit, and see how it went.

"'Arry!" Hagrid picked him up in a hug, lifting him off his feet in his enthusiasm.

"Good to see you, too," Harry said sincerely, though he poked at the half-giant's shoulder.

Hagrid let him down, but ruffled his hair affectionately.

"Tell him to be good," Seamus called out, and at the continued joke, half the Gryffindors convulsed with laughter.

"Ach, no need to tell our 'Arry that," said Hagrid, smiling ear to ear. His pleased expression faltered when he saw the Slytherins hanging back from the lesson. "What's this, 'ere?"

Harry's first thought was that the Slytherins were reluctant come near him. When he glanced their way, though, it seemed that maybe they were just tired out after walking to the Magical Creatures class. Not that it was that far, but they sure did look exhausted. Depression could do that to you, Harry knew.

"Hi," Harry said. It was probably a weak start, but since he normally didn't greet the Slytherins at all, nobody could claim he wasn't making an effort. Besides, he didn't really know what else to say. I'm
As Crabbe and Goyle stiffened and Zabini actually clenched his fists, Harry braced himself for the worst.

The only Slytherin to so much as move, however, was Theodore Nott, who pushed his way to the front of the group and came slowly forward, looking Harry up and down as he approached. Beside Harry, Ron and Hermione both tensed, hands on wands. Harry had a sudden vision of having to explain to his father just why he had hexed someone on his first day back in class.

"Potter," Nott greeted him, coming to a halt an arm's length away. Even though he looked even more depressed and exhausted than his house mates, he still held himself in a way that reminded Harry slightly of Draco. Harry wondered then, if during Draco's long absence, Nott had become the leader of the sixth-year Slytherins.

"Nott." Harry nodded as he said it. He was civil, nothing more.

Theodore's gaze sought out Harry's crest, his voice quiet as he said, "Snape told us you were in Slytherin. I can't say I agree with seeing our house symbol polluted with a lion there--"

"Polluted!" Ron clenched his wand.

"Easy," Hermione murmured in a low whisper.

Theodore flicked a contemptuous glance towards them both, then returned his attention to Harry. "Welcome to Slytherin," he merely said, sounding strangely like he might mean it. Maybe that was just because his voice seemed so very tired, though.

Nott held out his hand, clearly waiting. Harry, not knowing what to do, went ahead and shook hands.

After Theodore stepped away, Harry glanced at his friends, mouthing Welcome?

Ron and Hermione only shrugged as if to say there was no explaining Slytherins.

"Don't let your guard down," Hermione whispered as Hagrid began the lesson.

Harry nodded to show that he understood. He kept an eye on Theodore and all the Slytherins as he listened to Hagrid begin a discussion of hydars. That was a bit alarming, though; surely Hagrid didn't have an actual hydra on hand? He suddenly thought it might not be so bad to learn Care of Magical Creatures out of books, after all.

Before the lesson could proceed to the practical, though, Theodore Nott suddenly let out an awful groaning noise. Harry had noticed him shifting restlessly on his feet, had seen him rubbing his hands up and down his arms more and more as the lesson had progressed, but he hadn't thought much of it. Now, however, the Slytherin boy's face was puce.

The other Slytherins backed away from him as Hagrid walked their way. The half-giant looked Nott over, shaking his head. "Best get yer ta see Madam Pomfrey, I'm thinkin'," he announced, his voice tinged with concern. "Yer got yerself some sort a rash, I 'spect."

By then, the boy's face, neck, and hands were all spotted. As Harry watched, the spots grew larger and bulged out, then began to ooze thick yellowish fluid streaked with black. Theodore swayed on his feet for a moment, then fell over backwards into the grass.
"Yer all dismissed," Hagrid said, scooping the boy up into his arms and striding off.

"Wonder what's wrong with him?" Hermione tilted her head to one side as she thought about it.

"You don't suppose he could have had an allergic reaction to shaking Harry's hand?"

"Don't be silly," Hermione told Ron in a chiding tone. "It was quite odd, though."

"It was," Harry said, wondering about it.

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Half the Slytherins were missing from dinner, and a rumour was going around that they weren't just depressed, they were actually sick. Two more students, seventh-years, were in the hospital wing with Theodore Nott, their symptoms the same as his. The others were apparently just feeling nauseous and having a lie-down, or so Harry heard.

"What do you think is going on?"

Hermione shrugged as she sprinkled a bit of pepper on her pumpkin soup. "Well, nobody seems to know quite what was wrong with those first Aurors who came in to investigate. Just that they got sick and had to be bundled straight off to St. Mungo's. Maybe they infected the Slytherins."

"They did spend more time with them than with anyone else," Ron said, nodding. "Yeah, that would work."

Harry stabbed at his fried chicken with his fork as he glanced at the empty chair up on the dais.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing."

Ron wasn't fooled. "You're homesick."

"Not exactly."

"Yeah, you are."

"No, it's not that." Harry shrugged. "I'm fine, but if Severus isn't here then I guess he's with Draco. And I'm wondering how Draco's holding up. I guess I'm a bit worried about him."

"Put me off my food, why don't you?"

"Ron, nothing could put you off your food," said Hermione, her voice crisp. "And as for Professor Snape, maybe he's brewing potions for Nott and the others."

"Pretty weird how Nott got sick right after shaking your hand," said Ron, chewing.

"He was sick before that if you took a good look at him."

"Oh, now you're taking good looks at Slytherins?"

"I'm trying to figure out how to fit into my new house."
Ron laughed. "Well, that's easy enough. Lie, cheat, and steal, not to mention kill--"

"Draco did not kill anyone!"

"I think he was speaking in general terms, Harry."

Harry didn't think so, but he wasn't going to argue about it. What he was going to do was his bit to help Draco. "I saw him take Veritaserum myself--"

"Snape-brewed though," Ron said with a glitter in his eyes.

"No, as a matter of fact, Ministry official. And I know it was real because he ended up saying things I know he doesn't want anyone to know. Personal things--"

"Like what?"

"Oh, be quiet, Ron," Hermione said, leaning closer. "And?"

Harry turned to look her straight in the eyes. It put his back to Ron, but he was a little irritated with Ron at the moment, so that was all right. "And they went over and over what happened, Hermione. They left no stone unturned, you know? And he didn't do it. Do you want to read the transcript? Severus would probably let me have a copy. But it would be nice if you'd just believe me."

Behind him, Ron laughed. "Well, you are wearing a snake on your robes these days, Harry--" When Harry rounded on him, though, the other boy put up his hands, widely splayed. "Joke, all right? Joke. You're awfully touchy."

"Do you believe me about the Veritaserum or not?"

Ron stared for a moment. "Well, I guess I don't really want to, that's the problem. I'd rather Draco Malfoy landed his snide Slytherin mouth, along with the rest of him, in Azkaban. But yeah, I believe you. So . . . all right."

When Harry turned back to face his plate, he saw Hermione nodding. "I believe you, too. And as for Malfoy . . . hmm. I can't forget what he said to me--"

"Oh, you just like to hear how clever you are."

Hermione glared at Ron, then continued. "But it's more than that. I was watching Malfoy all the time we were . . . uh, revising Defence down in the dungeons . . ."

Harry figured she meant when they were in Devon.

". . . and, well look. I'd hate to be wrong about this, and when Ron and I popped down to see you and nobody answered, and then you came to the door looking, um, you know how you looked . . ."

Harry figured she meant his black eye.

". . . and then we heard about the Owlery . . ."

"Hermione, get to the point!" Ron said, leaning over.

She grimaced. "I suppose I'd rather not, but here it is, then. Malfoy seemed like he was really trying to help you. He had good pointers and such when we were all practicing together. Don't get me wrong, Harry. I don't exactly think he's changed. But . . . well, he's not quite the same, either, is he?"
Ron started rolling his eyes. "If he's trying to help Harry with Defence, it's because he's hedging his bets in case his father gets his hands on him."

"I know," Harry admitted, shrugging. "I'm not going to tell you that he's perfect. But if you think about what you said, you'll see it means Draco is actually on our side, now."

Ron didn't reply to that. Neither did Hermione, but she looked like she was turning it over in her mind.

After dinner, Harry thought of going down to the dungeons to see Draco, but he wasn't supposed to go alone and he thought he'd really rather give Ron and Hermione some time to think things over. Too bad he didn't have his invisibility cloak so he could sneak down . . . Snape had insisted Harry leave it at home. In fact, he'd announced that he would keep it safe and sound, which meant, of course, that Snape had squirreled it away in his office, or perhaps his bedroom.

That development hadn't thrilled Harry, but neither had it come as any great surprise. Snape didn't approve of Harry having a thing like that. Besides, Snape had said he wanted Harry to understand that he had help now, with anything.

Oh well, Harry thought. Even if he had the cloak he couldn't really use it, not for this. He might be able to get safely down to the dungeons, but once he got inside his father would be pretty upset he'd come without an escort. Of course Snape might not even be home at the moment. If he had the Marauder's Map he'd know. But that was another thing he'd had to leave behind. Evidence, Snape had explained. He and the headmaster were still investigating it, trying to figure out how it had been tricked.

So that was that. At least he still had his Firebolt, though of course he'd rethought the whole idea of Seeker. In the rush of excitement, that first night back in Gryffindor, he'd more or less forgotten that his vision problem pretty much ruled out Quidditch. Competitive Quidditch, at least. It would still be fun to play a pick-up game now and again, but he'd feel awful if Gryffindor lost because he couldn't see to the left properly.

So . . . it was time to clear that matter up. No sense in letting his house mates think he could play. "Ginny."

She looked up at him from across the common room, and smiled. Harry walked over to where she was. "How's the team doing? Good practices, all that?"

"Sure. But everybody's looking forward to having you back," she said, nibbling a bit at her lip.

Harry sat down next to her. "I'd love to play but . . . well, you've done almost the whole season, and you're brilliant, you know. I watched a couple of matches, and I think you mesh with the other players really well, and . . . well, I think I'd just as soon have you finish out the season. How's that sound?"

"Awful." Ginny looked at him with wide eyes. "I like playing but I knew I was just filling in for you, Harry. You're very nice, but honest, you don't have to worry about hurting my feelings. I'll go back to reserve Seeker. It's fine."
"Listen Ginny," Harry tried. "I feel like I have a lot to keep track of, just getting back into classes and all. Really, I'd rather you finish out the season for me. All right?"

Ginny stared at him and shook her head. "Not all right," she said in a louder voice. "I told them, Harry, I told them I wasn't taking your position away. It was just temporary." She suddenly laughed. "How can you say you don't want to finish the season? Honestly! You always had plenty of schoolwork before, and managed just fine! And besides, you'd only just got that ridiculous lifetime ban lifted when all this other stuff happened! You're just trying to do the right thing for me, I'm sure, but it's not necessary. I'm a big girl, I can handle being second string!"

He was trying to do the right thing for the team, but since he couldn't tell them all about his eye, they weren't going to believe that. Harry pressed his lips together, frustrated.

"You're just nervous because you've been off the team for so long?"

"Ginny . . . " Harry sighed. "I haven't even flown in forever. There's not a lot of room for it down in the dungeons. And . . ." He lowered his voice. "Well, look. I'm in Gryffindor and Slytherin both. This is a lot like taking sides, don't you think?"

Ginny looked taken aback at first, but then she lifted her shoulders. "Well, maybe. Honestly, Harry, I think Professor Snape would understand why you have to keep playing for Gryffindor. But you haven't been adopted very long, really, so if you'd rather not open that can of worms . . . I guess I can understand." Her expression darkened. "I don't know that Ron will, though."

Ron, of course, knew about his eye so Harry wasn't worried on that score.

"What am I supposed to tell everybody?" Ginny went on in an undertone. "You don't really want me to say it's to do with your dual houses, do you? That's bound to cause resentment."

"Yeah, just say . . . " It occurred to Harry that there might be a way to turn the situation to his advantage. "Just say my magic's a little unstable and that since I haven't flown in so long, you're the best Seeker Gryffindor could have."

Ginny blushed. "I'm not saying that!"

"Say that I said it, I meant."

"I'll tell them to ask you yourselves."

"All right." That was probably better, anyway. More opportunity to spread the word about his magic.

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Herbology with the Hufflepuffs the next morning went fine. Nobody asked him to do Parseltongue magic and nobody needed to be taken to the hospital wing. Lunch went fine as well, though Harry couldn't help but notice that Snape wasn't there. Nor had he come to the Great Hall for breakfast. Well, half the Slytherins were still missing, so probably he was dealing with house matters.

Besides, Harry told himself, Potions was next. He would see his father in Potions. He wished he felt
a little more upbeat about that, but as lunch drew to a close and it was time to go, he was nervous instead.

"It'll be all right," Neville murmured in his ear as they filed into the classroom.

Harry glanced around. Theodore Nott should be in the class, but he must still be ill. Some of the other Slytherins were absent as well. The ones who remained favoured Harry with cool, calculating glances . . . like they were trying to figure him out. In between looks, they just seemed tired, like all the Slytherins.

Snape was late, which didn't help Harry's anxiety any. Harry kept rearranging things on his workbench as he waited.

"Do you know what we're supposed to brew today?"

"Harry," Hermione said in exasperation, "that's the third time you've asked. No, I don't know."

"Sorry, just thought I could review the potion in my mind--"

"Mr Potter, if you could cease your chattering I do believe we might be able to begin class," was Snape's opening salvo as he finally entered the room, robes billowing out behind him.

Well, that was a bit snide but it hadn't been said in too dark a tone, so Harry just gave a definite nod. "Yes, sir."

From the large workbench at the front of the room, Snape swept his gaze over the assembled students. "As there are noticeably fewer Slytherins than Gryffindors present this afternoon, we will forego our practice of inter-house pairs." His glance settled on Harry for a moment. "I believe your current partners will do. Now, as you have no doubt realised already from our work this term, charmed potions are notoriously volatile. I repeat for the benefit of students who have missed a great deal of in-class instruction this year: you must follow directions exactly or certain disaster will ensue. I will not tolerate any first-year mistakes in N.E.W.T. level potions." He waved his wand at the board to make directions appear in his usual impossible-to-read scrawl.

It wasn't exactly business as usual --no Potter-specific insults as of yet-- but it was close enough to normal that Harry started to relax. He studied the board. "Magma Potion?"

"It boils over like lava when the final charm is applied," Hermione explained in an undertone as she set out the supplies they would need. "It's a defensive potion. Stable state until that last charm is applied in battle--"

"I know what it is!" Harry whispered. "I'm caught up on the readings! Well of course I am, think about where I've been living! I was just trying to read Snape's writing, for pity's sake--" A shadow suddenly loomed over him, and Harry had the awful feeling that the best thing he could do would be to swallow his tongue. "Um, Professor Snape, I mean," he said without glancing up.

The Potions Master moved on without comment. Or at least, without a comment to Harry. He had plenty to say to Neville, who had apparently chosen from the storeroom several rocks not nearly igneous enough, as Snape put it.

When Snape crossed the room toward the Slytherin half, Harry leaned over and spoke quietly against Hermione's ear. "What's an igneous rock?"

Still a bit miffed, she murmured, "I thought you said you did the readings."
"I did, I just don't remember every last thing."

"I'll go get the rocks." Hermione sighed.

After that, the brewing seemed to proceed without too much difficulty. Harry chopped while Hermione added ingredients and stirred, until Snape made a rather pointed remark about the *inequitable distribution of labour amongst the Gryffindors*. So Harry started taking his turn at stirring.

After over a solid hour of chop-add-stir, the potion was a smooth glossy blue-green, almost the shade of *mermaid scales seen underwater*, as the board indicated. Harry thought those directions were typically Snape. How many of the students had ever seen a mermaid underwater? Harry had, so he had an advantage, but he still thought Snape could have been a lot clearer about just what colour they should all be aiming for.

Regardless, he *knew* that the potion he'd made with Hermione was looking good. Snape of course, didn't comment on that. No, *he* had to go over to the Slytherins and give them points for what looked a lot more like swamp goo than mermaid scales. At least, it looked like that from across the room. Harry wasn't about to go over there to see.

"You'd better do the charms," Harry mentioned, as it was time to begin that phase of the brewing.

He'd forgotten about his father's phenomenal hearing.

"What did I just say about an inequitable distribution of labour, Mr Potter?" Snape inquired, the tone glacial as he glided over.

"Um, that if Gryffindors want the world to be fair they ought to start right here in Potions class, sir?" Harry made sure his voice was neutral.

"Indeed. And yet you were ignoring my clear instruction on the matter and once again burdening your more qualified house mate with your own portion of the work?" By the end, Snape was staring at him in a way that made shivers run up and down Harry's spine.

"Yes, sir," he murmured, wondering what his father thought he was doing. The attack was nothing like the vitriol Harry used to get in Potions class, of course, but since he hadn't expected an attack at all, he felt like he'd been cut adrift. And Snape was still just *staring* . . . like he was waiting for something.

Hermione evidently understood what the professor wanted. "Tell him," she said, poking Harry in the arm. "Harry, tell him why you can't charm the potion yourself!"

Something in Harry's mind clicked. Snape was a Slytherin, which meant he had schemes inside schemes. He wasn't just teaching Potions, or favouring his house in hopes of steering the students away from Voldemort waiting in the wings; he was using class time to advance another objective, as well.

"Professor, you know my magic's gone a bit wonky," Harry said, hating the slight whinging tone he used. It was effective, though. The Slytherins practically perked up their ears, despite the way they were all drooping with exhaustion. "You saw how many spells of mine went 'round in circles as the magic was coming back. And so with what you said about these potions being so volatile . . ."

Snape gave him a hard glare, but that was for the class. "Very well, carry on then."

"Yes, sir," breathed Harry with relief.
He was just getting back to work when pandemonium broke out. Almost en masse, the few Slytherins present began to groan, and then their hands and faces turned puce and began to spot over with those same horrible lesions Theodore Nott had sprouted during Magical Creatures class.

"Oh Merlin, not more," Harry heard Snape mutter under his breath. "Up to the hospital wing, all of you!"

But just as with Theodore, once the spots began to sprout, matters went from bad to worse. In no time at all Slytherins were passing out left and right, knocking over cauldrons as they slumped.

"Mobilicorpus," Snape said, using a single spell to lift up all of the downed students. "As all your potions are in a stable state prior to charm application, we'll continue on Friday. See to it that they are bottled correctly for short-term storage; it should not be beyond the capabilities of a sixth-year. Potter, Granger, Weasley, you three clean up this lot after your potions are put away." He gave a vague wave toward the green potion oozing in various places on the floor. "Class dismissed."

And with that, the Potions Master was on his way to the hospital wing with his sick students. Most of the other Gryffindors quickly bottled up their potions, and left grinning, Seamus calling back in a sing-song voice, "Be good, now!"

"Can't I go to a normal class?" Harry groaned as he got his wand out to try a series of Evanescos. Neville was hanging back, so Harry made sure his cleaning charms only did away with about half of each gloppy mess.

"Oh, let me," Hermione said with a sigh. In no time at all the classroom was spotless.

"Well, at least we have some free time before dinner," Ron said. "What do you want to do, go out flying a bit?"

"Um . . . did you talk to Ginny, by any chance?"

"Yeah, earlier. Team roster stuff. I get it, Harry. I know why you can't be playing Quidditch just now. I'd think you'd still like to take the old Firebolt out for a spin, see how you feel on it, all that."

"Why can't Harry be playing Quidditch?" asked Neville from behind them.

"Oh. Out of practice and the old magic's just not what it used to be." Harry shrugged. "But a spot of flying before dinner sounds fun, actually. And then . . . well, listen. I'm in Slytherin now too. So I thought I'd go sit with them for dinner, see how it goes. Nott wasn't too horrible, remember? Not that I trust him, but . . ." None of his friends said anything. "Don't get angry over the idea."

"I'm worried, not angry," Hermione said in a chiding tone. "We can't really go sit there. I mean, in theory you could invite us but I think it would cause a row, which is the last thing you need. And . . . well, what Nott did in class was sort of . . . interesting, but the house as a whole seems awfully hostile. Plus, Snape won't be there to keep them in line, not with all those students having just taken ill."

"And you've only just got back to Gryffindor," Ron complained.

It was Neville, however, who offered the sagest comment of all. "The way things are going, there might not be any Slytherins there for dinner, Harry."

And sure enough, there weren't.
"Epidemic," Luna was saying at the entrance to the Great Hall. "I took a peek in the hospital wing earlier. Filled to the brim, all of them dead to the world and covered in boils and sores. I heard the first three to come down with it actually have pustules or something on the inside, too. Not a single Slytherin has escaped the plague, but those three are the worst. There are so many sick that Madam Pomfrey has taken over several extra rooms and called in extra staff from St. Mungo's, but nobody yet knows what's wrong. I owled my father so he could have an exclusive--"

"Not a single Slytherin?" Harry said, a horrible thought clenching his stomach. He turned to Ron and Hermione. "You have to come down with me to the dungeons, now. What if Draco's sick? Nobody would know!" He glanced toward the head table, but as Hermione had predicted, Snape was missing. Harry somehow doubted he was eating at home this evening. "Come on!"

Ron looked longingly over his shoulder toward the tables already laden with food, but then sighed. "All right," he said, and began to trudge alongside of Harry. Hermione didn't comment, not on any of it.

Harry made short work of convincing the stone wall to let him in, then rushed inside. "Draco!"

The Slytherin boy looked up from the couch where he was flipping through a Quidditch magazine. "What?"

"You're all right?"

Draco's eyebrows drew together. "Apparently."

"You don't feel tired or faint? No itching on your arms, your face?"

"No. What's your problem?" Draco glanced to the side as the door thudded closed. His expression darkened slightly even as his perfect manners went on display. "Hallo there. Thanks for bringing Harry by."

"We didn't have much choice," said Hermione as she helped herself to a seat. Ron followed suit; only Harry was left standing.

"What's all this about my health?"

Harry sighed. "Something funny is going on--"

"Slytherins are dropping like flies," Ron interrupted.

Hermione gave him a critical look and then briefly explained what they'd seen in classes and heard from Luna.

"Strange it's only the Slytherins," Draco said, his brow furrowing. "I take it Severus is assisting up in the hospital wing? You know, he's seemed distracted ever since you left, Harry." The Slytherin boy suddenly swallowed, his face almost looking like it was cast into shadows. "I thought it was the funeral coming up, actually." With a shake of his head, Draco reverted to his bored façade, though again, his hands were shoved deep into his pocket so nobody would know what effort his self-possession was costing him. "If all these students have fallen ill, though? If it started yesterday? I'm sure he's very busy with that and the funeral both."
"The funeral." The implications leapt out at Harry. "Unless the sick students get better awfully fast, there's going to be nobody to attend. I mean, I think the Parkinsons were only allowing Slytherins."

"Sounds like the Parkinsons, all right." Draco wilted a bit, his rigid control weakening. Harry wished he could do something to help. "I'm not invited, Slytherin or no. But Severus said it'll be on the east lawn at noon tomorrow, and I thought that maybe . . ." Almost as if realizing he was rambling, Draco suddenly gritted his teeth and came to the point. "Harry, could you ask your friends to step out for a moment?"

What a question. Harry almost wished he could comply, but it didn't seem a good idea to start any new intrigues. "Draco, we all need to be getting along better, I think. That won't help, not at all. Don't you see?"

Draco considered that and gave a jerky nod. For a long moment, Harry was sure the other boy wouldn't speak at all, but then he finally admitted what was on his mind. "Fine, let them hear. What do I care? I just wondered if you might lend me your invisibility cloak so I could . . ." He cleared his throat. "Go to her funeral?"

Harry knew how he felt. He'd had the same idea back when Aunt Petunia had died and he'd been told he couldn't attend the services. Snape had said no then . . . and now, Harry could understand the reasons why.

"I'm so sorry," he murmured, sitting down across from Draco, ignoring the intense way Hermione was studying the entire scene. Ignoring, even, the rather cynical look in Ron's eyes. "Severus took it away, and he's not going to let me borrow it just because I ask. He never did like me having it. And . . . well, now that I think about it, he was probably intending to keep you away from the funeral when he took it."

"I know all that," Draco said with a touch of impatience. "But you could get it, I'm sure. Your magic's amazing now--"

"Harry," Hermione said in a warning tone.

Harry waved a hand to tell her to let him handle it, then spoke to Draco. "I'm not doing wanded magic to break through my father's wards, not unless it's a life-and-death situation. And besides, if you get caught lurking around the funeral, it's just going to raise more questions about you and Pansy. That's no good."

"I know," Draco said again. "I had to ask. I didn't think you'd agree, especially not in front of your friends there. So, that's it then. Fine, whatever. I think I'll just go lie down for a bit."

"I thought you weren't tired?"

"Now I am." Draco wandered off with a lost, hurt air that really didn't suit him, and closed the bedroom door with a click.

Harry leaned back, frowning, wishing he'd handled that better.

"You think he's coming down with the Slytherin plague?" Hermione asked, staring at the closed door. "That was . . . well, a bit odd. Not like Malfoy."

"He's just really depressed."

"If you say poor thing I'll sick up. Just warning you." Harry and Hermione both gave Ron a disgusted look. "What?"
Harry didn't want to argue about it, so he said nothing.

"Let's just go," Hermione said, standing up and walking to the door. Ron jumped up too.

"You two go. I think I'll wait here for Severus, see how he's doing." And see what he can tell me about these sick Slytherins. When his friends looked a bit doubtful, Harry went on, "Really. Severus can walk me back, and if he doesn't come by morning, I'll sleep over and you two drop by before breakfast to get me, all right?"

They didn't want to agree; Harry could tell. But eventually they did.

After Harry saw them out, he went into the bedroom to talk to Draco.

The Slytherin boy was sitting on his bed, cross legged, staring into space.

"I'm sorry I couldn't help you," Harry said, shoving aside the curtains so he could sit on his own bed. "I just . . . it's a bad idea, all around."

Draco shot him an irritated glance. "Stop apologising. Makes you sound like a sodding Hufflepuff."

Well, at least that was more like his usual personality.

"Granger's wrong for once," Draco suddenly said, his silver eyes narrowing. "Every Slytherin hasn't been infected with this plague, or whatever. You and I are fine."

"Well, we didn't see those first Aurors who got sick, so maybe that's why; they brought it to Hogwarts, I guess."

"Oh, guess again, Potter. That's ridiculous. Severus saw them. Apparently he's fine. And I'm sure they talked to students from other houses even if they did concentrate on Slytherin. Besides, these symptoms . . . the whole thing sounds more like a curse than a disease, to me. A dark curse, and believe me, I would know. You see a lot growing up where I did."

"Who would curse the entire house of Slytherin?"

Another irritated glance, as if he really should have figured it out by now. "Pansy. Who else? On her way down. Accidental magic. Wild magic, even, considering the amount of pure screaming . . . fear she must have felt." Draco sucked in a harsh breath, pressing his lips together as if to calm a rebellious stomach. Then he continued, his voice more controlled. "But she didn't curse me. Because she loved me. And you and Severus were helping me, she knew. And you were going to help her, too. We talked about it, all of it, in that closet. And . . ." Draco closed his eyes. "In the end, when she knew she didn't have any time left at all . . . she cursed all Slytherin but kept me safe. And I can't even go to her funeral to tell her that I understand."

Draco kicked off his shoes and abruptly lay down on his side, facing the wall. When Harry made a restless motion, the other boy said, "Go away now. Just . . . I don't want to talk about it, Harry. Just . . . just go away."

Harry hesitated, but then he did as his brother had asked, and went to wait in the living room for Snape.
Snape did come home that night. He looked pleased to see Harry there, though it was clear he had no time to talk and had mostly stopped by to check whether Draco had fallen prey to the Slytherin plague.

"Still fine, I see," the Potions Master pronounced, looking down at the sleeping boy. Beckoning Harry with a finger, he left the bedroom, closing the door so that Draco might continue to sleep undisturbed.

"I'm not so sure fine is the word, but I don't think he has whatever the other Slytherins are coming down with. What is it, Professor?"

"Harry, we are home."

It took Harry a couple of seconds to even follow that comment. "Oh. Sorry, it's hard to shift gears."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "What are gears?"

"Never mind. Speaking of class conduct, though, Dad, I don't need you prompting me to spread the story about my magic being weak."

Turning away to walk into his Potions lab, Snape merely said, "I shall remember that in future."

Harry thought it would be a little ungracious to say good, so he just nodded, though Snape no doubt didn't see. By then, the man was rummaging through his stores, gathering an eclectic assortment of ingredients into his hands.

"This Slytherin plague," Harry finally prompted. "Draco thinks that . . . ah, Pansy cursed them on her way down, and that's why he's the only full Slytherin to show no signs of illness."

"Unlikely."

"Yeah, I thought so too . . ." Harry's lips turned down. "I think he's just trying to convince himself that she really did love him. But then, what is wrong with all your students?"

"They defy diagnosis at present," the Potions Master murmured with a distracted air as he crouched down to rummage in a lower cabinet. "I am working on it. I regret that the present emergency will keep me from researching the matter of your eye and the Elixir."

"Oh, that's all right . . . I, um, pretty much resigned from the Quidditch team on account of it, but I told people it's to do with my magic. Um, I had to tell Ginny I was worried you'd be a bit irritated if I played only for Gryffindor. She said you'd understand, which made me wonder. Would you have?"

"Yes, though I have little time at present to discuss the matter." Standing, Snape gave Harry his full attention. "I really must return to the hospital wing, Harry. If there was nothing urgent you needed?"

"I . . ." Harry shook his head. "I was going to ask you to walk me back, but I guess I'll just sleep over. Ron and Hermione know to come get me in the morning. All right?"

Snape curled a lip. "You need not ask permission to sleep here."

"Right, of course. Um, good luck with the Slytherins . . . oh, just so you know, Theodore Nott shook my hand. Everybody else was standoffish."
"A pity Mr Nott is one of the worst afflicted, in that case." Snape's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing further of Theodore Nott's surprising behaviour. "I will see you when I can, Harry."

One flash of green fire later, and Harry was left alone in the living room.

He went in to sleep, really glad that his father had insisted he leave some things behind, since now it meant he had some pyjamas in his room. *His room*. There was something comforting about that, Harry thought, as he crawled between the sheets and closed his eyes.

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Harry woke up to a shivery feeling coursing up and down his spine. Opening his eyes, he saw that Draco was sitting up in bed, watching him.

"Bad dreams?" the other boy asked in a factual tone.

"No . . ."

"Sounded like it."

Harry thought back. "I can't really remember . . . well, it was some sort of ceremony, I think. Minister Fudge was holding something and incanting in Latin. And then . . . oh, it was a wand, right. And then he snapped it into little pieces . . ."

Draco scowled. "That would be my wand when they expel me, I take it."

Harry went cold at the thought. "I don't really think I was having a seer dream."

"I know you weren't." The Slytherin boy shrugged, though Harry thought it looked insecure rather than uncaring. "You were dreaming your fears, that's all. You've heard that wands get broken whenever a student is kicked out of school. But remember how Dumbledore gave me that part of the charter, how he said expulsion procedures had been revised in his lifetime? It turns out that they changed what happens to your wand. These days, it gets confiscated. They don't break it, just in case the expulsion is a miscarriage of justice."

"Hagrid." Harry nodded. "That makes sense."

Draco swung his legs off the edge of the bed and leaned forward, his gaze assessing. "How's your eye?"

"Oh, fine."

"Now isn't *that* nice. Lying to your one and only brother now, Harry? Do you think I'm stupid or something? I *heard* you and Severus, going on about you being half-blind. So let's have it. *Did* I blind you?"

"Well . . . no. I mean, things aren't great, but really, it's Lucius' fault--"

"Harry, is that sodding eye of yours back to normal or not?"

Harry felt a little chagrined, then, that he hadn't been honest from the start. "No. Things are blurry and it was giving me a headache so Madam Pomfrey charmed my glasses to block off images on that
"Marvellous." Getting up then, his movements resentful, Draco plucked his clothes off the floor and pulled them on without so much as applying a freshening charm. That told Harry something about the other boy's state of mind. Draco never wore the same clothes twice in a row, and he hardly ever started the day without a shower.

Harry gave him a sympathetic smile. "My eye will get better. Severus is working on it. Well, he will when he gets a chance."

"Pansy's curse, yeah." Draco glanced at his socks as though they'd offended him, then sighed and pulled them on regardless.

Just then, the magic doorbell began to chime. Draco scowled. "A bit early, isn't it? Not even time for breakfast, not by my watch. But don't mind me. Go off and have breakfast with your friends."

"My other friends," Harry stressed.

"So now I'm about to be expelled I'm just a friend, is that how it's going to be?" Draco yanked his shoes on and stood up.

Harry resisted an impulse to raise his own voice. "Do you want me to tell everyone that you're my brother, Draco? I will, you know."

Draco made a sour face. "Not too cunning, Harry. With Severus you had that paper to show them. With me . . . they'll think you're completely off your head, claiming a thing like that."

Harry chewed his lip. "That's basically what I thought. Um, can you go let Ron and Hermione in while I change? We don't want them assuming nobody can hear them again."

"Oh yes, I'll be just delighted to entertain your friends," Draco drawled.

Harry didn't like the defensiveness he heard in his brother's voice. "Listen, I did tell them about the Veritaserum and how it proves you didn't kill anybody."

"Didn't kill anybody yet. That Weasley might be in for it someday if he doesn't shut his flapping gums."

Since Harry thought Draco was probably angling for a reaction with a comment like that, he only replied, "Ron, remember. Call him Ron, and call her Hermione. You're backsliding."

"Trust you to keep me on the straight and narrow. But just you remember, I'm not a Gryffindor no matter what asinine line Severus wants me to copy over and over!"

Before Harry could reply, Draco was out the door.

There weren't any Slytherins at breakfast, not a single one. And none in Defence against the Dark Arts, either. That was just as well, considering how that class went. Professor Aran used to like him, but as Harry soon found out, that had definitely changed.
"Mr Potter," the teacher said in a cold tone as Harry came through the door. "You've missed a lot this year."

"Sorry, sir. Couldn't help it," Harry said, only to be brought up short by the reply he received.

"That flippant attitude had better vanish straight away, Potter."

"Yes, sir."

Puzzled, Harry slid into the seat he used to have in this class, one next to Ron.

"We'll keep working today on blocking unfriendly spells," the teacher announced. "Re-read the addendum I gave out on Friday for some cautions, and then we'll begin."

Blocking unfriendly spells wasn't exactly a sixth year topic; it wasn't even in their regular text, as they'd covered all that in years past, but that was Aran for you. Harry had always thought him sort of empty-headed. At least he'd been a change from Umbridge, but apparently the class hadn't got any more useful while Harry'd been away. Of course, he'd known that already from keeping up with the readings and assignments. Useless drivel, most of it. He'd learned more Defence from Snape in one afternoon in Devon than from a whole year of doing Aran's assignments. This addendum, though, was something Harry hadn't ever seen. He raised his hand.

"Mr Potter?"

"I need the addendum, sir."

"You haven't kept up." It wasn't a question. "I don't think I can take you back in that case."

Well, that was about the most unfair thing Harry had heard since . . . well, actually since Snape used to pick on him all the time in class. "I have kept up, Professor Aran," Harry said, pushing his anger to the side. "I just never received this latest addendum."

"Well, I certainly sent it," said Aran, huffing. "Pack up your things, Potter."

"What?"

Ron shook his head fractionally, and spoke up. "Professor, students forget lots of times to do the readings. You never made anyone leave class over it before."

"I didn't forget. I never got it--"

"Speak when you are spoken to, Potter," snapped Aran. "That'll be fifteen points from Gryffindor. And another fifteen if you aren't out that door in thirty seconds."

"Fine," Harry spat, so angry he could feel his blood boiling. Realising he was in danger of really saying something he might regret, he hurriedly Occluded. It didn't help much. He still ended up saying, "I'll just go tell my father I'm not allowed in Defence. I'm sure he'll want to talk to you about that."

Aran's face paled. "Sit," he changed his mind. "But behave yourself."

"Yeah, Harry, be good," Seamus whispered from behind him.

"Seamus, shut up," said Neville in an equally quiet tone. Quiet, but somehow very intense. "Harry doesn't understand, so just knock it off!"
"What don't I understand?"

Stomping over, Aran slapped a sheaf of parchment onto Harry's desk. "That's another fifteen points from Gryffindor after all, Potter. When I say to speak only when spoken to, I mean it!"

Harry decided he'd better not point out that he had been spoken to. "Yes, sir." He made a show of getting started reading, ignoring the way Aran wasted no time backing away from him.

Defence class only went downhill from there. After about twenty minutes of reading -- first and second year material, no less -- Aran instructed the students to pair up and practice their blocking techniques. Harry got no further than the first syllable of his incantation before Aran called a halt.

"What was that, Potter?"

Harry was still looking at his ring when he tried to answer.

"English, Potter!"

He looked his teacher in the face. "Sorry, sir."

"Sorry for speaking that foul language in the company of decent wizards?"

"Sorry for not switching to English to talk to you," Harry said, so stunned that he didn't really know how else to reply. "Foul language? "Um, didn't my father, I mean Professor Snape, didn't he explain about the Parseltongue? The other teachers seemed to know--"

"You will not, I repeat, will not use that word in here, Potter, is that clear? It's nasty. It is filthy, and I will not have it! Fifty points from Gryffindor for sheer . . . evil!"

It wasn't often that Harry's mouth fell open from astonishment.

"You think Parseltongue is evil, do you?"

Harry whirled to see who had spoken. He saw Dean, standing up straight with narrowed eyes, his fingers clenched on his wand.

"Well, you're wrong," Dean went on, eyes blazing. "Harry's been speaking it in class for two whole days and nobody's come to any harm!"

"Yeah," Seamus said, his lower jaw jutting out. "It took us by surprise but now that we're used to it, it's no big deal. Harry's not evil and you're not going to say he is!"

Harry had to admit, that took a lot of sting out of the be good nonsense that had been going on.

Parvati was nodding emphatic agreement. "Don't you read the papers, sir? Harry's had an awful year. We're glad to have him back, Parseltongue and all!"

Awful year . . . The phrase almost made him smile despite the seriousness of the situation. Because it hadn't been, had it? He'd ended up with not just a father but a brother as well, two things he'd always wanted. Those two things alone far outweighed any suffering he'd endured.

"You will not say that word!" thundered Aran.

"Parseltongue, Parseltongue, Parseltongue!" shouted Seamus.

"Yeah, PARSELTONGUE!" echoed Neville.
"Quiet, all of you!"

As the shouting died away, Aran wiped a hand across his forehead. It came away dripping with sweat. "A hundred more points from Gryffindor," he muttered, glaring at his students. At everyone but Harry, actually. He actually seemed a bit reluctant to look directly at Harry.

"I'm not dangerous, sir," the boy sighed, beginning to understand. It wasn't just ignorance driving this. It was fear as well. "Really, I'm not."

Aran weakly shuddered. "You will do the incantations properly, Mr Potter. That means English or Latin, depending on your curse or block. I'd have the same attitude towards . . . Swahili in my classroom. It's not proper magic."

_Sure you'd have the same attitude_, Harry thought. Well, at least the Gryffindors had rallied around him. He knew full well that a lot of them didn't much like the Parseltongue, but they'd stood up for him all the same. That almost made Aran's attitude worth it. "All right, sir."

Ron gave him a reproachful look. Harry shrugged. It wasn't lost on him that neither Ron nor Hermione had leapt to his defence. But that made sense; they knew all his secrets and had to be careful what they said and how they phrased it. Just like Harry had to be sure to give the right impression to all concerned.

While Aran retreated to the back of the classroom, Ron came closer and made as though he were adjusting Harry's grip on his wand. "Tell your father," he said in a low voice. "He won't stand for this."

Harry shrugged and spoke in a voice that couldn't possibly carry. "Just as well, really. Now everybody can see how bad my normal magic is."

"What they're going to see is how dependent you are."

"They'd figure that out anyway . . . hey, you called Snape my father!"

"Did not."

"Did so."

"Did not."

"Did so . . . I think you've only said it before when you were being sarcastic or something."

Ron flushed and began stepping away. "Well, anyway, you make sure you tell him."

Harry grabbed the other boy's sleeve. "I can't go running to him every time I have a problem with another teacher, Ron. And he wouldn't want me to. I'm not five years old."

"He also wouldn't want you losing eighty points your first week back, half of them from Slytherin," Ron pointed out. "He'll be coming to ask you about it."

"Shite. I bet he will."

"Problem there, Potter, Weasley?" called Aran from his position well away from Harry.

"No problem, sir," Harry said. From then until the end of class, he cast in English or Latin; Ron's every curse hit him. But Ron wasn't putting much effort into his spells so it wasn't too bad. When Aran dismissed them, Harry waved for his friends to meet him at the door, then quietly approached.
the teacher's desk. "Um, sir, can I have a word?"

Aran looked up, his face more wrinkled than usual, like two solid hours of fear had really taken a
toll. "I suppose this is where you threaten again to have Professor Snape come see me?"

"No, sir." Harry took a breath. "I'd like to avoid that, actually."

Aran slumped in his chair. "That's fine, then. But still . . . I can't have . . . that . . . in my class, Potter."

"I understand but . . . look, if you take all those points Professor Snape will come down to see you.
Because I lose points from Slytherin too, these days. I wondered if you could give me the eighty
points back? Otherwise he's going to ask me what happened."

"Oh, very well. Eighty points back to Gryffindor, however the counters want to work it." Aran
sighed, looking about as exhausted as the Slytherins had been, though Harry didn't really think he
was coming down with what they had. "Is that all?"

"No, 'cause if you can't have . . . that, in class then how am I supposed to pass practical tests?" Harry
grimaced. "Professor, I don't want to fright . . . I mean . . . um, upset you, but I have a real problem. I
think you must realise that after you saw me get knocked over about twenty times by Ron's curses.
I'm just glad he knew all the counters."

Aran shuddered. "I don't want to be responsible for the the other students being exposed to this . . .
unnaturalness, Mr Potter. You can practice on your own however you like, but not in class. As for
tests . . . well, do you have any suggestions?"

"Maybe another teacher could grade me?"

The professor's voice went dry. "You're suggesting your father."

"No . . . why don't you pick someone? Would that be fair?" After his teacher nodded, Harry turned
to go, then thought better of it. "Professor Aran . . . didn't Professor Snape tell you that my magic had
. . . uh, changed? I mean, did you mention to him that you disapproved . . .?"

"There wasn't time," Aran brushed him off. Harry heard what he hadn't said: I'm not challenging
someone like Severus Snape face-to-face. Which meant that if need be, Harry could drag his father
into the fray. He didn't want to do that, though. He could solve this on his own.

Nodding a polite acknowledgement of the lie, Harry left. Then, of course he had to argue with Ron
and Hermione, who wanted him to report Aran's behaviour straight to Snape, or at the very least,
McGonagall.

"I'll figure out what to do about Aran later," Harry cut them off. "It's almost time for the funeral.
Severus will have to attend. Either that or he'll still be dealing with all the sick Slytherins, and I just
don't think Draco should be alone."

"Oh, like Malfoy has feelings--"

Harry rounded on Ron, then decided it wasn't worth arguing over, not when he didn't have any
chance of changing his friend's mind. He wished there was someone who would understand, or at
least someone who would listen without judging. Hermione came close . . . she, at least, was willing
to admit that Draco Malfoy wasn't quite the same stuck-up self-important pure-blood-is-everything
prat he'd been before . . . but even she wouldn't want to hear that the Slytherin boy was his brother.
"I have feelings," Harry only said, looking steadily at them both. "I have to go have lunch with Draco. Walk me down, all right?"

Ron looked like he might argue with that as well, but a glare from Hermione made him fall silent.

The instant Harry closed the front door, Draco rushed out of the hallway that led to Snape's bedroom and office. He came to what Harry could only think of as a screeching halt, then sauntered forward as if he hadn't a care in the world. But the truth was written all over his face.

Harry sighed. Just as well Ron and Hermione hadn't come in. "You were trying to break Severus' wards so you could get my cloak, weren't you?"

Draco raised an eyebrow as though that were a shocking idea indeed, then turned the conversation on its head. "Where are your escorts, Harry? Severus isn't going to like hearing that you're already wandering about without them."

As threats went, that one wasn't too subtle. "They walked me down. But what are you thinking, trying to attack Severus' wards? You know what happened with my Lumos that time. Severus will know straight away if you break through! Don't you have enough lines to write, already?"

Draco lifted his chin. "Unlike some people, I wasn't planning on blasting a hole through the wall. I wasn't going to attack the wards at all, if you must know. I thought maybe I could somehow wizardspace my way in--"

"That'd never work--"

"Well, you wouldn't help me, so what was I supposed to do? Is it so much to ask, Harry? We loved each other! And all I wanted was to go to her funeral!"

Oh God, by the end there Draco sounded like he was close to breaking apart. Harry didn't know what to do. Everything he could think of just seemed wrong. The other boy was a fountain of pride, and besides, he had all those issues about love and family, so Harry was left feeling like there was nothing he could do.

"It'll be all right," he said, giving his brother a sympathetic smile.

Well, that was definitely the wrong thing to do. Draco went off like a volcano.

"How exactly is it going to be all right, you bloody irritating Gryffindor?" he screamed, stomping right up to Harry. "My girlfriend's dead! Dead, dead, dead, and she's not coming back! And as if that weren't enough, no matter what the Aurors say, half the school's going to think I killed her! I'm going to get expelled and Severus will have to quit his job, and we'll all have to live off you since my vault will revert to the Malfoy estate the instant I get kicked out of Hogwarts! And I know you're full of this simpering oh we're all family the money means nothing idealistic shite, but it means a lot to Slytherins, in case you haven't figured that out! Severus is going to end up hating me and I bet you'll resent me plenty, family or no, and--"

"That's enough," Harry said in a level voice as he grabbed his brother's arm and gave it a sharp shake. "You think you're the only one who's ever lost someone? Or who felt at fault? Just . . . just
shut up, Draco. I know you feel awful, all right? I know what it's like to lose someone and not get a chance to ever say goodbye!" Harry blinked, swallowing hard. Because this wasn't about himself; it was about Draco. And there actually was something he could do for his brother, wasn't there? Harry gave a little nod as he let Draco go. "All right, then. I'll help you."

It was as if the other boy's anger had been all that was holding him upright. He slumped, almost stumbling, then straightened again. "Really?"

So much hope in those silver eyes . . .

"I won't help you break Severus' wards," Harry clarified. "But I think there's something else I can do for you."

Draco bared his teeth, that anger returning full force. "If you say you're going to order me a Butterbeer to make it all better, I just might hit you again. Fair warning."

Harry ignored the threat. "I'm sorry you can't go to Pansy's funeral, but you just can't. There's no way. But . . . what if you could see it from here? Would that . . . " He didn't want to sound like Hermione and use a word like closure. "Um, would that let you . . . Draco, would that help?"

"What in Merlin's name are you going on about?"

"Your enchanted picture frame . . . Look, it may not work. But I made it show people once. So . . . maybe you can see the funeral from here. I can try, anyway."

Draco's eyes glittered. "Oh, the perfect little Gryffindor broke the wards on the frame."

"Yeah, to see if you were alive, you prat. Wanded magic. And Severus knows, but um . . . probably best if you don't tell him I did it again."

Harry was almost expecting another biting reply that; something along the lines of Now I'll have something to hold over you . . . but Draco was already back to thinking about what obviously mattered most. "Well? Hurry up; it's almost time."

Harry had a bad feeling about going against Snape's wishes, but the feeling of wanting to alleviate Draco's suffering was stronger still. Leading the way into the bedroom, he extended his wand toward the frame as he'd done before, but he thought better than to demand to see Pansy. He didn't want them to end up with a view of the inside of the casket, after all. Besides, there was no telling if the spell would act the same on a dead person as it did on a live one.

"Show me Mrs Parkinson," he said, staring at his ring.

The enchanted picture frame, though, didn't respond.

"That sounded a bit . . . diffident," Draco pointed out.

Harry was surprised Draco could tell as much, considering he must have spoken Parseltongue, but he supposed the other boy had heard him incant a good many successful spells by then. "I guess I don't really want to get Severus angry."

Draco's face lost all expression. "Do you want me to beg?"

"No, of course not!" Harry tried to reach down into himself and summon forth some real desire, for Draco's sake. Then he took a deep breath and incanted once again.
The wall melted away to become a neatly manicured expanse of lawn dotted with straight-backed wooden chairs painted white. A casket rested on a short dais located in the middle of the circle of chairs. A woman and a man stood holding each other as they sobbed.


Harry stepped back, only to see his brother beginning to walk forward as though in some sort of trance. Grabbing him, Harry shook him sharply. "No, you can't go through! It doesn't work that way, you'll end up in the potions lab, your lower half in the cabinets on this wall!"

Draco froze, his breathing suddenly laboured, his eyes closing. Then he nodded. Just a single affirmative motion, but it was enough; Harry let him go.

After a moment, Draco seemed to be in enough control of himself to watch the funeral again, though his eyes were the dull hue of grief as he studied the scene. "Those are her parents," he said, not even sounding angry with them any longer. Just sad, so terribly sad.

Harry glanced at the couple standing at the side of the casket. The woman was making no sound, but that was probably just because the wall was a viewing plane only. The tears streaming down her face attested to her agony. As she began to shake, the man pulled her closer, his own features wracked with grief.

Other mourners sat on the chairs, but there were no students among them. Neither was Snape present, which Harry supposed must mean that the sick Slytherins needed every bit of his attention.

Dumbledore was standing across from the Parkinsons, his eyes sad and sombre. After a few moments, he gave a slight nod. This turned out to be some sort of signal, for the mourners rose en masse. One after another, in sequence, they began enchanting the casket, their wands casting glowing white spells. The wooden sides and top of the casket took on a burnished hue, and then slowly began to glow golden. Diamonds and emeralds appeared, glinting on the handles, and then across the top of the casket arose dozens of Latin inscriptions Harry couldn't quite make out. Flowers grew up from the ground to encompass the casket. Roses and lilies and birds of paradise, the lot of them interwoven with vines of ivy.

And then real birds appeared amidst the foliage, each one of them black, though the butterflies materialising and gently flapping their wings encompassed every colour in the rainbow.

"Pansy deserved to see this." Draco sighed, and abruptly sat down on his bed, though his gaze stayed fixed on the funeral scene. "I should be there, too, to show her one last time how much I--"

Harry thought better than to tell him again that everything would be all right. Instead, he just quietly fetched a handkerchief and dropped it atop Draco's legs.

Draco mashed the handkerchief into a fist. "So, that's it, then. All right. Harry . . . thank you. I . . . well, thank you, that's all."

Harry nodded. Some part of him knew he shouldn't ask, but the entire spectacle had been so strange
that he couldn't help it. "Er . . . what happened at the end?"

The Slytherin boy glanced up as though the question itself were rather odd. Then a derisory look stole into his eyes. "I forget you're Muggle-raised, you know. Which is actually a compliment. They Apparated her into her grave, Harry. Oh, ugh. Don't tell me that Muggles actually dig . . .?"

Draco shuddered as though that image were positively gruesome.

Wanting to comfort him, Harry murmured, "She's at peace now, Draco."

"No such thing . . . she's on the Parkinson estate, I expect." He clasped his hand together. "I can never go visit her . . ." Draco scowled at the bereaved couple now walking slowly away from the empty pedestal. "Just get rid of it, Harry. Get the empty frame back."

Harry did as requested at once. "Um, so . . . you know, afternoon classes were all cancelled on account of . . . anyway, I thought I'd stay here a bit, have lunch with you, and dinner as well. Is there anything you need . . .?"

"Yes, for you to stop acting like I'll break," Draco spat, suddenly shooting to his feet, his arms crossed. "It's really offensive. Why don't you just ask the rest of your questions instead of standing there wondering if I can handle them!"

Harry didn't really have that much more to ask, but he thought maybe this was Draco's way of venting, so he went along, thinking back to the things that had confused him during the funeral. "All right . . . no speeches?"

"Oh, please. That was a pureblood funeral done in the ancient way. Why do you think those inscriptions showed up in Latin? The casket itself is inscribed with what people wished to say to Pansy, Potter. No need to be common and say it all out loud."

Harry thought that eulogies and such were really more for the living than the dead, but he decided he'd better not dwell on that. "So the casket didn't really turn gold, did it? I mean, that's alchemy. It'd take quite a bit more than a few spells."

"A glamour, same for the gemstones," Draco began to pace. "The rest of it was real enough, though. The birds and butterflies die when they're plunged underground, but too bad for them. Happens to all of us, doesn't it?"

Bitterness, there at the end.

"Well, anything else you're dying to know? Ha, dying. Death is just everywhere, I suppose."

"No," said Harry. Talking wasn't helping after all. "Are you keeping up with your assignments?"

Draco glared. "No point, as I'm shortly to be expelled."

So much for suggesting they study together. "Well, no offence, but how are you doing on your lines, then?"

"I'm bereaved, Potter. I'm suffering. How the hell do you think I'm doing on those ghastly lines?"

All right, so that had been a stupid question. "I don't know what to do to make you feel better!" Harry admitted, frustrated. Just for something to do, he adjusted the picture frame, empty now, to hang straight on the wall.
"You can't make me feel better. It's impossible." Draco sighed, all his fire seeming to go out. "I should be writing a sympathy card to her parents, but I suppose in the circumstances that's ill-advised. I think I'll just read, try to get my mind onto something else. You should probably go. Don't worry, I won't do anything Gryffindorish. No point, now. She's not just dead; she's dead and gone and out of reach, and that's that."

It sounded to Harry like Draco was going to brood. "Why don't we play a game of Wizard's Scrabble--"

"You really can't read between the lines, can you? I. Want. To. Be. Alone. All right?"

"All right." Unable to stop himself, Harry went and laid a hand on his brother's arm and gave it a light squeeze.

Draco didn't react, except for closing his eyes as he waited for Harry to go.

But Harry couldn't go, not without someone to walk him back. Well, he could . . . he could most likely take care of himself, and it wasn't like the Slytherins were in any shape to try attacking him, anyway . . . but he really didn't want to get on Snape's bad side.

"I . . . uh, I have to wait until Ron and Hermione come get me," Harry said, wincing at how ridiculous that sounded. Feeling really bad to be intruding, even if this was his home, he offered, "Um, maybe I could floo Severus in the hospital wing and ask if he could send them a message--"

"He told me not to interrupt him unless I thought I was coming down with the plague."

"Oh." Harry thought for a moment, then fished Sals from his pocket. He hadn't been taking her to all his classes, but that morning she'd complained of being afraid Hedwig would eat her. Harry didn't really think Hedwig would, but as far as he could tell, his owl was a little resentful of his other pet. It had given him a little more sympathy for how Snape must have felt when he and Draco were squabbling so constantly.

"Um, I suppose I could ask Sals to try to go get them. Though I'm not sure she knows the way back to the common room, let alone the password. And somebody might step on her--"

"Oh, just give it up," Draco said on a longish sigh. "I suppose I'm stuck with you."

"Yeah, you are."

If Draco read between those lines, he didn't let on.

After a moment more, Harry decided the right thing to do was to wait out in the living room and let Draco have the bedroom to himself.

Hogwarts' normal schedule resumed on Thursday. By then, the ill Slytherins were beginning to drift back into classes. Nott was among the first to recover, but he'd been among the first to take sick, so Harry supposed that made sense.

The cause of the illness --or curse-- remained a complete mystery. It had come on its own, and gone
the same way, and rumour had it that Snape was refusing to take credit for any cures.

Harry had Defence again on Thursday. Aran wouldn't meet his eyes, but Nott did no end of staring as Harry cast spells that didn't do a single, solitary thing. Nott didn't try to talk to him again, though, so Harry just shrugged, and ignored the other boy's intent looks.

On Thursday after dinner, Harry ignored Ron's disgruntled you could spend some time in the Tower with us, you know, and went down to see his family again. He knew he was going down there an awful lot, but between the funeral just past and the expulsion hearing coming up, Harry thought he needed to.

The only trouble was, neither Draco nor Snape was there. Harry wandered around in circles for a while, wondering where they could be. Had Snape taken Draco out to Devon so the Slytherin boy could do a little flying and forget his troubles? Or were the two of them up with Dumbledore, planning out how to handle the coming expulsion hearing?

Harry was surprised at how . . . left out he began to feel. It was wrong, he was sure of that much. There was nothing to be jealous of. But still, it felt like a little niggling ache was eating away at him, inside.

Maybe that was due to something else though, Harry thought as he paced, wandering in and out of rooms. It was getting old already, this having a secret brother. He'd never wanted to keep his adoption to himself, after all. And now, this not telling any of his friends about Draco . . . Harry felt disloyal, as though he was acting ashamed to claim Draco Malfoy for his brother.

His friends just weren't big-hearted enough to understand, not after all those years of jeers and taunts and worse from Malfoy . . .

Big-hearted . . .

A smile cracked Harry's face, then, because he did have a friend he could tell, after all. Someone didn't much like Draco, but who couldn't help but be big-hearted anyway. Literally.

Snatching a pinch of Floo powder, Harry tossed it into the flames and got ready to firechat. "Hagrid's hut!"

The half-giant beamed when he saw the boy's upper half emerge in his hearth. "'Arry!"

"Do you have a minute, Hagrid?" Since kneeling on the hard stones of Snape's floor wasn't in the least comfortable, Harry went on, "Think you can visit with me in Severus' rooms? He wouldn't want me to leave the castle alone, or I'd come through all the way."

Hagrid made a shooing motion in answer, causing Harry to back up and get well away from Snape's fireplace so Hagrid would have plenty of room to enter. He emerged a moment later, prudently crouched over, a smudge of ash across his nose.

"Have a seat," Harry invited, waving toward the couch. It creaked under the half-giant's weight, and in a moment of giddy memory, Harry was reminded of Dudley sitting there and Draco valiantly struggling not to laugh out loud at the other boy's girth. I should write Dudley again, Harry thought, nodding as he took a seat in a chair and leaned forward.

"I should have visited you sooner. It's just been such a busy week, getting back into classes, and then Slytherin, and the funeral, and the expulsion tomorrow."

The half-giant was big-hearted. In every way. He didn't remind Harry about Buckbeak and say it
was time Draco Malfoy got what was coming to him; he only sighed and nodded. "Ach. Right shame it is. I can't say as I 'old with this tendency we got to go expellin' first and askin' questions later."

"Yeah, it's awful what they did to you." Harry sighed. "Draco's been cleared, you know, but I'm still kind of worried about tomorrow."

Hagrid began stroking his beard, his kind eyes trained on Harry's wan expression. "There's moreta this than worry, I'm thinkin'."

Harry didn't need any more prompting than that. "Well, Severus adopted both of us, Hagrid. I mean, it's not legal, but he considers Draco his son too. He told us both that a long time ago, and . . . well, he was serious so I had to take it seriously. And so . . . Draco's my brother now."

Adjusting his position slightly, Hagrid rested his palms on his massive thighs. "Ach, I knew that from way back."

Harry blinked in shock. "You already knew Draco was my brother?"

Hagrid guffawed slightly. "Yer father's a closed mouthed one, 'Arry. But 'e came to me afore Christmas to tell me about yer little snake gettin' sick off the Floo. We gots to talking about this and that, and after I told 'im 'ow the little mite jus' might like a warm box of 'er own, 'e relaxes enoughta let slip 'ow that'd sure be nice, seein' as 'e already 'ad the perfect gift fer 'is other son. Now what was Ita think a that, I ask ya?"

"His other son," Harry mused. "That was before he'd even told us he felt that way. But that's all right. You . . . you didn't think it was odd for him to talk that way, Hagrid?"

"Only odd parts was 'im sayin' it, not 'is feelin' that way. If yer ask me, it makes a fair bit a sense. Yer father's always 'ad quite a care for that 'ouse a 'is. 'Sides, it takes a Slytherin to understand a Slytherin, I always say."

Harry hadn't ever heard Hagrid say that, but it raised a good point. "Um, in that case you must have thought it was pretty strange for him to adopt me."

Laughing, Hagrid began to shake a little bit like Harry always imagined Father Christmas did. "Aye, a bit, I s'pose," the half-giant admitted, a wide grin breaking across his features. "But then 'e told the 'ole Order, 'e did, about 'ow the 'at 'ad got it wrong all them years ago, 'ow yeh'd talked yer way out a Slytherin to begin with."

"He told the Order about that?" Harry crossed his arms, a little bit miffed. "Well. He's not as closed-mouthed as I thought, is he?"

Hagrid made an effort to rein in his laughter. "'Arry, 'e was defendin' yer rightta be told a fair bit more in future 'bout plans and schemes and such. Claimed yeh had good instincts, 'e did, and 'e was promisin' that with 'im to bring out yer Slytherin side, yeh'd end up with all the cunnin' yeh could needta be a full member come yer birthday."

"Oh." Harry felt his anger subside. "That's all right, I guess. So did he convince Dumbledore to let me in when I turn seventeen, then?"

Hagrid shrugged to say he didn't know. "I'm thinkin' that's atween yer father and Albus."

"Yeah, okay--"
Whatever else Harry might have said was cut off by the noise of the Floo flaring. Snape strode out, as regal as ever in his bearing, followed closely by Draco who looked all right until he caught sight of Hagrid. The Slytherin boy visibly flinched, actually stepping backwards into the flames for an instant. With a look of profound irritation, Snape grabbed hold of Draco's arm and yanked him forward again.

"Hi, Draco," Harry said, determined to be casual even if the other boy acted like a total git about having a half-giant occupying the better portion of the couch. He thought of adding, you remember Hagrid, but decided it wouldn't go over so well. "How are you holding up?"

A sneer settled onto the other boy's features. "Did I or did I not make it clear to you that I'm far from an invalid?"

Harry gave a sheepish smile as he remembered how irritating it had been to have Hermione treating him that way. "Sorry. Um, so where have the two of you been?"

Draco started to say something, his silver eyes suddenly . . . well, keen was the only word that came to mind. But before he could even finish a syllable, Snape was smoothly inserting, "We had a number of things to see to, Harry. I'm sure you can understand that. And even now, we aren't truly at leisure; Draco has to prepare a statement for tomorrow night's hearing."

Harry couldn't but notice that Draco was glaring at Snape. The Potions Master just shrugged, his dark eyes communicating something . . . an intent something, but though Harry saw it, he didn't quite understand. On the other hand, he did understand why making a statement to the Board . . . to Lucius, sitting in judgment, would be unnerving to say the least.

"Hmm, well, Draco didn't do anything wrong. Can't he just say that?" Harry raised an eyebrow as he looked at his father. "You'll have the Auror's report, won't you, to back him up?"

Draco made a slight face. "It's not a question of what to say, Harry. It's how to say it. I have to come across as forthright, upstanding, and magnanimous," the boy complained. "Or so the headmaster says."

"Actually, he said you had to be forthright, upstanding, and magnanimous," Snape corrected.

Harry understood that his father and brother had a lot on their minds, but neither one of them had so much as greeted Hagrid yet. That wasn't right. "You do remember Hagrid?" he ended up saying, after all.

Draco's perfect manners came out, then. If Harry hadn't figured out already that he used them like a shield, that would have made it clear. "Oh, yes," the Slytherin boy said, pasting a smile on his face. Any more of a smile and it would have been a smirk, but Draco kept his expression just within the margin of courtesy. "How lovely to see you again. And how is Care of Magical Creatures going this year? I do so miss the fresh air. I could always count on your class for a good, healthy dose of it."

Hagrid abruptly stood up, the couch clattering a bit as his calves brushed it. "Yeh always counted on my class for a laugh, and well yeh know it," he all but growled as he glared down.

Harry had to give his brother credit; as frightened as he was of Hagrid, he didn't quail. He did, however, abruptly step to the side. "Ah. Well, as much as I'd simply love to reminisce over old times, I do have that statement to prepare, so if you'll excuse me?" With that, Draco fled to the bedroom.

The half-giant wasn't through. "I'll be a three-eared kneazle if I'll sit 'ere and listen to 'im blatherin' on 'bout 'ow 'e misses my class, I will."
"Actually I think he said he missed the fresh air." Harry frowned. "I really wish my friends could all get on better."

As if thoughts of his other friends had summoned them, the magic doorbell began to chime. Harry checked the door parchment and saw that it was Ron alone, though. No Hermione. That was interesting.

"Hey, Hagrid," said Ron as he strolled in. He nodded politely to Snape, but spoke to Harry. "So I thought you might be ready to come back up. We want to have an Exploding Snap tournament but we're all waiting for you before we start."

"Actually, I thought I'd sleep over again--"

"Go to the Tower, Harry," Snape interrupted. "Hagrid and Mr Weasley can both walk you back."

"I . . ." Harry was all set to argue, but he suddenly realised two things. One, Snape had given him a direct order and wouldn't appreciate Harry ignoring that in front of company, and two, his father most likely needed time alone with Draco to work on this statement. As left out as Harry felt, he could see that his own presence would be a distraction at best. "All right, Dad," he merely murmured, and thought he caught a flash of surprise in the man's eyes. Perhaps even a hint of respect. That was nice.

"I'll see you tomorrow. I'll come down before the hearing starts," Harry added, then stepped briefly into the bedroom to tell Draco good night. The Slytherin boy was staring at the wall. He glanced at Harry as though he wanted to tell him something, but in the end, a brusque nod was his only attempt at communication. Sighing, Harry went out to the living room and then up to the Tower as his father had said. Hagrid stayed with him right up to the portrait of the Fat Lady. When Ron and Harry stepped inside, though, Harry admitted that he didn't much feel like playing games.

"I'll get your mind off things," Ron said, urging him toward where several other sixth-years were waiting. "Come on, it'll be fun."

"No, I think I'd better not--"

"Yeah, Harry has to be good," Seamus put in, snickering. "Snape's got such a sour face, I bet he doesn't approve of games at all--"

Harry's good-will over Seamus sticking up for his Parseltongue evaporated, just like that. "He plays chess and Wizard's Scrabble, I'll have you know!" he shouted, stomping right up to the other boy. "And what's so awful about him telling me to be good? What's he supposed to do, tell me to be bad? Oh, so that's it, is it? You're thinking he used to be a Death Eater, aren't you? Well, he was spying for the side of the Light, something you'd know if your head wasn't shoved so far up your own arse! I'm damned lucky we had somebody on the inside, you twit, or did you want me roasted alive from the inside out? And another thing--"

"No, no other thing," Neville interrupted, grabbing Harry's arm in a fierce grip. "You can all start playing without us. Harry and I will be back down in a little while."

As Neville began to drag him toward the stairs, Harry caught sight of the other boys. For a minute there, he'd got up such a head of steam that he'd not taken note of their reactions. Now, he did. Everybody looked positively aghast. Ron's eyes were about as wide as Harry had ever seen them. But Seamus was the worst. He looked like he'd been hit in the stomach by a Bludger.

Harry knew a twinge of vicious satisfaction over that.
Once in their dormitory with the door firmly closed, Neville let go of Harry and sat down on his own bed. Harry shook his arm in a little show of irritation to have been manhandled like that, but he didn't really want to complain about it. Thinking back to how he'd... snapped down there, it was probably best that Neville had dragged him away before said more.

Leaning back on his palms, Neville didn't say anything for a while. Probably letting me calm down, Harry thought caustically, even though he recognised that as a good idea.

"Harry, don't you know why they're teasing you like that?" Neville finally asked, looking steadily at Harry.

The truth was, Harry hadn't thought much about why. The reasons were bloody obvious, after all. "They hate Snape," he spat, starting to pace. "Well, it's not like I can't understand that. I mean, I used to hate him plenty, and I do know he's still sort of got it in for Gryffindor--"

"Plenty of people here can't stand your father," Neville calmly interrupted, "but that's not why they're teasing you. It's more... it's sort of hard to explain. It's like... you're just normal now, Harry. That's all Seamus means."

"Normal!" Harry stopped in his tracks and glared at Neville.

"Yeah, normal. Seamus is treating you the way he treats everybody, and the others think it's all funny because well, Snape telling you to be good is sort of funny, Harry. But more than that... Look... everybody gets teased about their family. How many times did Seamus bring up my Gran's taste in clothes after that lesson with the boggart?"

Harry's anger started to die. "Um, too many to count, I think. I mean, he didn't get off it for about a year."

"Right. And with Ron it's all those rabbit references, you know, cause his parents have so many children they must get up to a lot of... well, anyway, Seamus doesn't mean anything bad. It just means he likes Ron. And he likes Hermione too, or else he wouldn't always be joking that she'd better remember to brush her teeth, see? Everybody's family is quirky in one way or another. And if Seamus is overdoing it, well... it's only because you're just like us now. You finally have a family."

Sitting down on his bed, Harry thought about that. "But I had a family before," he said, chewing his lower lip. "Seamus never teased me about them."

"Well, he pretty much couldn't," Neville said, smiling in sympathy. "All anybody knew was that they were Muggles. Seamus is hardly going to think that's quirky. And besides, after a bit we began to realise that you never got letters, so we figured it wasn't a good situation for you at home. Nobody wants to hurt you, Harry. And that's just the thing, see? Seamus is only teasing you because he saw how you stood up for Snape the night you came back. It was sort of obvious that you... er, love him. And that makes you normal, Harry." Neville suddenly laughed. "Not that it's normal to love Snape... see, even I'm not above a spot of teasing. But all our families are weird in their own ways, and we love them anyway, that's what I meant."

"So this is Seamus' way of saying he's okay with Snape being my father?"

Neville shook his head and answered in a dry voice. "I don't think Seamus actually knows why he's suddenly teasing you. He just thinks it's funny. But he never thought it was funny that you didn't get to go home for Christmas, you know. And he never once teased about that, did he? But you're happy having Snape for a dad, and that makes it all right to poke fun. Just... try to remember, however much a buffoon Seamus ends up being, his heart's in the right place."
Harry couldn't help but sigh. Now that Neville had explained, it all did make sense. He wondered why he hadn't seen the jokes for what they were. Friendly teasing, emphasis on friendly. "You're pretty good at figuring things out, Neville. You could give Hermione a run for her money, even."

The other boy blushed. "Nah. It's just that we're sort of alike, Harry. Growing up without your parents makes you think more about family than you might otherwise."

"Think I have to apologise for yelling that his head was up his arse?"

Neville laughed. "No, because right about now Ron is probably calling Seamus an idiot, and Seamus is deciding his head was up his arse. It'll be all right, Harry. Just . . . if he says something else about Snape, take it how it's meant, all right?"

"All right. I . . . you know I still don't really feel like playing games but now I think I'd better go show there's no hard feelings."

Neville stood up and opened the door, nodding, and together they walked down the stairs.

"Sorry, Harry," Seamus mumbled when Harry sat down with the others.

"Yeah, me too," Harry admitted, even though Neville had said he didn't need to apologise. He gave the other boy a smile, and Seamus smiled back, and that was that.

Friday rolled around, along with another Potions class. This time, Harry was considerably less nervous about having his father teach him. As it turned out, though, he had no reason to be nervous at all; Professor McGonagall was the one who walked through the door when it was time for class to start. She set an essay, asking them to explain in detail the brewing sequence of the Magma Potion, including an analysis of dangers inherent in each step.

She fobbed off every question posed about where Professor Snape might be.

Harry thought he knew, though. The expulsion hearing was set for that evening, after all. Snape must still be busy preparing for it. As Draco's Head of House, he'd be expected to have an opinion on the matter; Snape was no doubt going to attempt to sway the Board of Governors toward his point of view.

Harry finished off his essay as quickly as he could, then waited impatiently for Ron and Hermione to finish so they could walk him down to the dungeons. Of course Hermione took the full class period plus ten extra minutes. It was all Harry could do not to go grab her by the arm and drag her away from quill and parchment. Finally, though, she was ready and they headed off.

Harry stopped when they reached Snape's hidden door. "Better let me go in alone again, I think."

Hermione's answering nod was brisk. "When should we come back for you, then?"

Good question. "Um, I might actually spend the weekend here," Harry hedged.

Ron made an impatient noise in the back of his throat.

"Well, I came back last night when you asked!"
"When your father asked, you mean!"

"See, you do call him my father."

At that, Ron heaved a sigh. "Harry, you're missing the point. You've been down here an awful lot already this week, don't you think?"

"Well it hasn't exactly been an average week, has it?"

"But the whole weekend?"

"Listen, if Draco gets expelled then Severus will need the company--" Not to mention, we just might be packing for Argentina, Harry thought, even though Snape had said he wasn't going to brush up on his Spanish. "Anyway," Harry added, "I'm supposed to do extra potions lessons every Saturday. I agreed a while back to come down here for that."

Ron looked as though he might argue more, until Hermione said, "I'm sure that the professor can bring you back to the Tower whenever you finish with your visit, or lesson, as the case may be."

His friends waited until Harry had the door open, before giving him a little wave and heading back the way they had come.

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Draco was sitting on the couch, a morose frown on his face. "Took you long enough."

Harry figured that the magic doorbell must have been ringing, and that Draco knew who was out there because of the door parchment. "Well, Ron and Hermione and I had some things to discuss."

"Oh, I see. It's not all right for me to talk to you alone, but it is all right for you to talk to them alone?"

Tugging off his robes, Harry settled into a chair. "I thought you wouldn't particularly want to see them just before the hearing. Where's Severus?"

The Slytherin boy shrugged to say he didn't know, but the gesture communicated a good deal more than that.

"I'm sure whatever he's doing is something to help you," Harry reassured his brother.

Draco's grey eyes blazed. "How naïve are you, Potter? There is no helping me. I'm a lost cause, always have been."

"Severus will pull a rabbit out of a hat somehow, I just know it."

"He'll what?"

Harry smiled slightly. "Muggle expression. It just means . . . well, he has plots inside plots. He wasn't even in class today, and you know how seldom that happens. It'll be . . ." He almost said all right, but remembering how badly that sentiment had gone over before, Harry cleared his throat and switched to, "Look, whatever happens, we're all three of us in it together. And we'll get through it, I swear."
"Noble sentiment," Draco sneered, then leaned his head back against the couch. "You know what, though? At this point I don't even care. I just want it to be over."

A whoosh of noise from the direction of the Floo announced Snape's arrival.

The Potions Master strode forward. "Harry. It might be best were you not here this evening."

Well, that certainly wasn't what Harry had been expecting to hear. "Huh?"

"Oh, for Merlin's sake," Draco erupted. "He thinks I don't want you to see me in a state, and after they expel me I suppose I might truly be in one. But he's wrong. I'd rather you were here when we come back so I can say good-bye."

"Would you stop with all the negative predictions?"

"Draco," Snape said in a level tone. "You do not look as presentable as you should."

"Well it hardly matters, considering!"

"Harry is right; your pessimism is not going to help matters," Snape lectured, his voice going intense. "We may have received disappointing news today but all is not darkness and despair."

"What news?"

Draco started to snarl some sort of answer, but Snape cut him off. "The powers that be are being phenomenally dim-witted, but this comes as no great shock to me. When I have news worth sharing, Harry, you may rest assured that I will do so." Harry didn't really follow that, but Snape was looking at him in a way that said to leave the matter behind, even as he instructed, "Draco, stand up now so we can get the wrinkles out of those robes."

Wanting to do something, Harry offered, "Let me--"

"I've seen your pitiful attempts at clothing charms, Potter." Draco spelled himself then, still looking a bit as though he wasn't completely at ease with his new wand. Harry supposed that Dumbledore must still have the old one. Or Snape, maybe. Draco put a bit of polish on the snake in his crest, and shined his shoes, and spelled his robes once more though by then they were looking perfectly smooth. When he was finally finished, he held out the maple wand to Severus. "Better not let them see I've got another, or they'll want to confiscate both."

"Draco, they might exonerate you!" Harry said, exasperated.

"What sort of a fairyland do you live in, Potter?" As though realising he was waving his hands rather wildly, Draco suddenly shoved them deep into his pockets. "Just you watch. Lucius will sit back, smarmy as can be, acting soooo sorry that it's come to this, while all around, his nasty cronies will be lecturing the neutral element of the Board all about how very dangerous I am even despite the Aurors' conclusions about the murder. There's not one bloody chance they'll exonerate the likes of me, you shite-faced Gryffindor optimist!"

"You truly do need to improve your outlook before we go," Snape announced in a heavy tone. "Perhaps a calming draught."

"Oh sure, force-feed me another one. Why don't you just go fuck yourself, Severus?"

Harry drew in a sharp breath, wondering what Snape would have to say to that.
The Potions Master must have concluded that Draco was under enough stress that a rebuke would serve no purpose. His eyes glittering, he merely drew a single-dose vial out of his robes and extended it. When the Slytherin boy ignored the clear command, Snape did speak. One word.

But the way he said that word made Harry shudder.

"Now."

Draco gave the man a nasty look, but then he snatched the vial and quaffed the contents in one go. "Vile as usual."

"You're being vile," Harry couldn't help but say.

By then, though, the draught already taking effect. Draco began breathing deeply, his features settling into peaceful lines. He looked almost angelic, which would have been amusing in any other circumstance.

"You will wait here for us then, Harry?" Snape inquired. "As Draco has no objection to your seeing his rather erratic behaviour."

"You shouldn't have had an objection either," Harry pointed out. "We're family."

"Yes," Snape nodded his agreement, but the word sounded off, somehow. Not diffident, and not exactly regretful . . . but somehow reserved. Maybe, Harry thought, his father just had a lot on his mind.

"Draco, I do believe it is time." The Potions Master reached out to place a hand on his son's shoulder. "Now, listen. The hearing may not be pleasant, but you must have faith in yourself. Project purity, and above all, confidence. You did not kill the young lady, no matter what slanders may attach to your name."

"My name's hardly got room for more slanders," Draco said, his tones calm now even if his words still thrummed with anxiety. "My own cousin thought I'd done it. My cousin who knows I returned Harry's wand, who ought to be smart enough to know I want to get away from being associated in everyone's mind with my horrible . . . with Lucius."

"Confidence is quite distinct from self-pity, Draco." Snape shook his head as he squeezed Draco's shoulder. Lifting his hand, Snape performed a wandless charm. It looked to Harry as though an invisible comb was neatening Draco's hair. Draco didn't appear to notice the small gesture of caring. He just gave Harry one last sad glance, and then followed his father out into the hall.

Harry closed the door after them and leaned up against it, wishing he could go with them, wishing he could stand with Draco against adversity, even if it meant coming face to face with the man who had gouged his eyes out on Samhain.

The hearing was closed, though.

Nobody was allowed in except the Board, the headmaster, the student in question, and his Head of House. Well, nobody except whatever witnesses the Board or Draco wished to summon.

There was nothing for Harry to do now but wait.

Snippets of conversations began to replay inside his mind. Draco, frantic in his worry, so much so that he'd actually told Snape to go fuck himself. Snape, insisting on the calming draught. Probably for the best, all things considered. Draco, saying, just you watch, there's not one bloody chance
they'll exonerate the likes of me . . .

Just you watch . . .

And that, Harry abruptly decided, was exactly what he was going to do. He wasn't going to stand around wondering; he was going to stand with Draco, after all. Even if Draco didn't know he was there.

Pushing off from the door, Harry headed towards his bedroom. Towards Draco's enchanted picture frame.
The Expulsion Hearing

"Show me Draco," Harry hissed in Parseltongue, his wand thrust out in demand, his whole body thrumming with tension. "Show me Draco, now!"

He could feel the magic flowing through him, could feel the zing of something vaguely akin to electricity pulsating in his wand hand, could feel his dark powers flowing through him and out.

But they went precisely nowhere, at least as far as Harry could tell. Draco's picture frame was still showing a view of the Whomping Willow in the pale dying twilight, just the same as when Harry had entered the room.

The frame hadn't appeared to hear him at all.

Frowning, Harry stepped back and thought over the times he'd forced the frame to do his bidding. Show me Mrs Parkinson had worked well enough, and the time before that, it had been the words Show me Draco that had done the trick, once he'd figured out that he had to use wanded magic. So why wasn't it working again?

What did those times have in common that this one didn't?

The grounds, Harry abruptly realised. The sodding frame was supposed to show Draco the grounds so he wouldn't feel too cooped up down here. The funeral had been outside on the lawn . . . Draco had been hexed and then abandoned out of doors . . . And the Board of Governors meeting, wherever it was, certainly wouldn't take place outside!

Harry could have groaned, and that was before the rest of it came to him. Hadn't Snape said that that castle walls themselves were warded against this sort of thing? There were protections in place so that spying spells didn't really function . . . Snape had been astonished by the Marauder's Map precisely because Sirius and James and Remus had somehow found a way to circumvent those powerful safeguards . . .

All right, Harry reasoned. Obviously, there was a way around Hogwarts' wards, and James . . . his father . . . had known what it was. Too bad he didn't have the map; maybe he could use it to somehow cajole the frame into looking inside the castle instead of out. Even if he went and broke into Snape's office, though, Harry doubted he would find the map. His guess was that the headmaster still had it as part of his ongoing investigation into who had really killed Pansy Parkinson.

So that was that, then.

Except, it wasn't, because in the next instant Harry realised that he did have something he could use.

The mirror . . . the mirror that Sirius had given him. He still remembered the note that had come with it, word for word. This is a two-way mirror, I've got the other one of the pair. If you need to speak to me, just say my name into it; you'll appear in my mirror and I'll be able to talk in yours. James and I used to use them when we were in separate detentions.

And detentions usually took place inside the castle, didn't they? Not always, but usually . . . which meant that the mirror, like the map, had some way to get around the fact that Hogwarts' walls were spelled to repel inquisitive magic.

Excitement thrummed through Harry as he lifted the lid of his trunk. Thank goodness Snape had
insisted he leave some things behind! Harry was more grateful than ever for that. He fished through his things, his hand occasionally slipping into wizardspace. Where was the mirror? He was sure he hadn’t brought it up to the Tower.

Finally he spotted the Gryffindor scarf he’d wrapped it in on Sunday when he'd been deciding what to leave behind. Good, so there was still a chance—-

His excitement, though, died quickly as he unwrapped the small, square mirror and saw his face jaggedly reflected in the shards that now filled the frame. *Sirius,* he thought, icy tentacles wrapping around his heart and squeezing hard. *Oh God. Sirius.*

He'd avoided looking in the mirror for months and months, ever since that awful day when he'd realised it couldn't help him reach a man beyond the Veil, because he'd known it would be like this. He’d known that pain would wash across him until he couldn't breathe. All at once he had more sympathy for Draco. Not that he'd been unsympathetic before, but now, with his own grief as fresh and raw as though Sirius had died but yesterday, Harry had a better sense of just how Draco must be feeling about Pansy's death . . . right down to the conviction that what had happened to her was all his fault.

Gritting his teeth hard, Harry dragged his gaze away from the broken mirror. It came to him that eyes were aching, but it was nothing like the pain he'd felt on Samhain. This pain was almost worse; it went all the way to the bottom of his soul. Heaving in a deep breath, one that seemed to sear his lungs, Harry wiped at his eyes, a little surprised to find glasses in the way. He hadn't got used to wearing them again, obviously.

It was an effort, but after a moment, he managed to get himself under control.

It was thoughts of Draco and Sirius that did it, really. Blacks, both of them, but neither one black at heart. If Sirius had lived, he’d be proud of Draco by now; Harry just knew it.

*But if Sirius had lived,* a little voice whispered in his mind, *Severus wouldn’t be your father, so Draco wouldn’t be your brother. Sirius would have been with you at Grimmauld Place after the operation, and Remus might not have gone out for ice cream. You might never have been captured by Lucius Malfoy at all, and without that spectacle of seeing you stand strong while his father crawled like a worm, Draco would probably still be siding with Voldemort. Severus wouldn’t be his father either . . .*

It came to Harry then that thoughts like that weren't helpful. He could spin the story all the way back to the beginning, too, and get angry that Sirius had suggested Pettigrew be the Secret Keeper, but what good would that do?

What was, *was.*

Sirius couldn't be here to be proud of Draco, but Harry *was* here, and he was proud, and if the mirror could help him see how Draco was holding up in that hearing, then he wasn't going to let grief get in the way.

Of course, he didn't have the faintest clue if this would work; all he knew was that it was worth a try.

Harry gingerly picked out a shard of mirror, holding it so it wouldn't cut him. He didn’t even want to think about what a drop of blood mixed in might do to the untested wanded magic he was about to perform. He also didn't want to think about what his father would say if he found out about a stunt like this. Combining magical artefacts was a tricky business, and when you added in dark powers as well . . . shivering, Harry couldn’t help but think twice about the course he'd set. Did he really want
to do this?

Yes, he did.

His wand angled as before, Harry pressed the shard of mirror flat into the wall in the middle of the picture frame, right onto the image of the Whomping Willow's stout trunk. And then he tried again, his voice a low hiss of demand as he stared at his ring.

"Show. Me. Draco."

The wall before him dissolved, a familiar sight by then, but this time, the scene before him was of a hallway, Draco and Snape walking along. Strangely, Harry's view was from behind. The scene shifted to follow them as they walked on, Snape's step brisk while Draco's was rather laconic. Probably an effect of the calming draught.

They stopped outside a doorway, Snape laying a hand on Draco's shoulder when the boy made a move as though to throw the double doors open. From a deep pocket in his formal robes, the Potions Master drew forth a wand and placed it in the boy's hand. Draco nodded, understanding written clearly across his face. He needed his old wand with him because if the Governors voted against him, he would have to surrender it.

Harry felt sick at heart just imagining that.

"Remember, Draco. Confidence, not arrogance," Snape said, his voice determined as he settled a hand atop Draco's thin shoulder.

Harry stumbled back in shock, his thoughts going into a whirl. The frame is a viewing plane only . . . It will never allow you to hear . . .

But apparently it would, when it was magically mixed with Sirius' mirror.

Harry supposed that made some sort of sense. Well, considering it was magic. The mirror, as Sirius had explained it, had been able to transmit sound, so now the enchanted picture frame could do the same. Harry nodded, coming to terms with it.

But then another thought struck him.

The mirror had been able to both send and receive sound.

Otherwise, James and Sirius couldn't have done much talking while they were in separate detentions. So probably, if Harry made too much noise, Draco and the others would be able to hear him.

Uh-oh . . . Snape would know that Harry had used wanded magic on the picture frame. Again.

But it was done now, for good or for ill, so stepping away on tiptoe, Harry sat down on Draco's bed, his breathing low and slow as he settled in to watch the hearing unfold.

Draco and Snape were inside the boardroom by then. The Slytherin boy was sitting on a round, stone stool in the middle of the room, like a prisoner facing judgment. At least there weren't any chains or straps threatening to bind him, but the image still reminded Harry of his own trial before the Wizengamot.

Shuddering, Harry raised his eyes to the rest of the scene. He wanted to see the Board, to see the men and women who held Draco's fate in their hands.
To his utter shock, the scene before him swung around to show the Governors, just like that, changing aspect until he was looking at the room from the side. He could see Draco and the Governors both. But why should that be, when he had asked only to see Draco?

*The picture frame had been ensorcelled to show whatever was desired,* Harry abruptly realised. All you had to do was look at it and think of what you wanted. When Harry had used it before, all he'd wanted was to see Draco. And the next time, the funeral. But now his desires were changing as he watched, and the frame--the magical wall, rather--was changing with them.

Coming to terms with that, Harry took a good look at the Hogwarts' Board of Governors, studying their faces one by one as he swept his gaze along the curved table where they sat. Perhaps fifteen of them in all, witches and wizards both, though Harry didn't know if all of them were Governors, strictly speaking. Some might be Ministry employees, he supposed. One of them had what looked to be a Quick-Quotes Quill out, after all.

Lucius Malfoy sat among his colleagues, directly opposite Draco. Harry hadn't noticed him straight away; maybe he'd been trying not to . . . for good reason. The moment Harry's eyes settled on that sweep of long, silver-blond hair, something inside him seemed to snap apart. A roiling burn of anger filled him, starting somewhere deep in his core and coursing through his body until it reached his fingertips. A scorching heat began to build in his hands, the same heat he'd felt in Devon when he'd blasted a robe and mask to ashes, the same heat he'd felt in Grimmauld Place when Remus had stepped from the Floo looking every bit the part of Lucius Malfoy.

Rage, fury . . . only this time, he didn't have his father to hold him back.

Lucius Malfoy sat smiling, chatting up a brown-haired witch smoking a pipe, just as if he hadn't a care in the world. As if he wasn't a man who would issue death warrants against his only son. As if he'd never dream of sitting atop a young man's chest so he could stab out his eyes with red-hot needles.

Harry rose to his feet as though pulled upward by invisible strings, his hands moving to reach forwards, his fingers widely splayed. Just like in Devon, he felt the fire surging through him, fire that could be quenched by one thing only.

Lucius Malfoy's death.

Lucius. Malfoy's. Death--

He saw smoke begin to curl from his fingertips, then a flash of fire streaming out like lightning, but in the instant before it struck the wavering image of the unsuspecting Death Eater, Harry heard something.

It wasn't his father, lecturing him on the dangers of vengeance.

It was *himself,* swearing to Draco that he'd do this very thing. And now he was about to do it, and right in *front* of Draco, and Harry suddenly saw himself as someone he didn't want to be. A murderer.

Of course he was fated to be one anyway. Either that or a murder *victim,* but his father had been right. Self-defence *was* something quite apart from becoming judge, jury, and executioner all rolled into one.

With a muttered oath, Harry jerked his hands towards the ceiling just as the jet of fire collided against stone. All Hogwarts seemed to shift on its foundations, a blast wave reverberating through granite
that had stood for centuries.

"What was that?" yelped a voice from the wall. Fudge, Harry thought, though he couldn't be sure.

"Ancient magic, nothing more," said Dumbledore in a soothing voice as his hands smoothed down his beard. "I suspect the castle is remembering how the Governors convened in this very room to consider the expulsion of Rubeus Hagrid. Terrible miscarriage of justice, that. Just terrible. A travesty . . ."

Harry didn't know why the headmaster hadn't taken the shock wave more seriously, unless it was because the man's own vast wellspring of magic knew the cause. Regardless, his tones calmed Harry, too. He sat down once more on Draco's bed, flinching a little as it creaked, and told himself that Dumbledore had done well to slip in that Hagrid reference. Everybody knew he'd been unfairly expelled; it had been common knowledge since the end of Harry's second year.

Dumbledore might just as well have said, *Mind you proceed with this matter responsibly* . . .

Realising he'd been holding his breath, Harry tried to let the headmaster's words sink all the way through him. Dumbledore was more than wise, he was *wily*. He knew that Draco was innocent, and he knew that Draco would be a great asset to Harry and the Order. *And* he knew that Snape would resign if Draco had to leave Hogwarts.

*Albus Dumbledore was not going to let Draco get expelled.* Harry knew it, he just knew it.

Everything would be all right. For once, Lucius Malfoy's money and influence would fail him. He wouldn't get his way, not in this.

Calmer, Harry glanced up again at the shimmering wall. The sight of Lucius Malfoy still made him feel like he was coiling up inside, but he had his anger in check now. He wouldn't let the wild magic loose again. Glancing away from Malfoy, Harry began to study the other witches and wizards seated at that long table. Nobody he recognised, which wasn't too surprising. He wondered again how many of the fifteen were actually Governors . . . Governesses? That didn't sound right.

Fudge was up there too, standing behind a short podium set atop the far end of the curved table. He still looked a bit alarmed by the way the room had shaken under the force of Harry's wild magic.

*Good,* Harry thought. *Keep him off-balance. Maybe he won't be quite the nasty little toady he usually is.*

Dumbledore and Snape were sitting at tables on either side of Draco, facing the Board. Each of them had a large sheaf of parchment. So did members of the Board, Harry noticed.

Draco, in contrast, held nothing whatsoever. He sat composed, his hands loosely clasped in his lap as he stared straight ahead yet avoided Lucius' gaze.

For his part, Lucius had resumed chatting amiably with the witches to his left and right. Harry couldn't quite hear him; it was just a low murmur of sound, but he saw at once where Draco had got those perfect manners of his. You'd never have guessed the building had rocked on its foundations just moments before.

A gavel banging a wooden plaque brought the room to silence.

"Let the record reflect that a transcription spell is recording these proceedings," Fudge began in a ponderous, self-important tone. It sounded to Harry almost as though the man might have applied just a touch of *Sonorus* to his voice. *Overcompensating for the shock that blast wave just gave him,* Harry thought. Hmm, maybe he had learned something useful from that book about trauma.
"The date is Friday, the twenty-first of March, 1997," Fudge formally continued. "The Hogwarts Board of Governors has convened in plenary session to determine whether one Draco Alain Gervais Luthien Malfoy, accused herein of serious transgressions deserving of expulsion, shall be allowed to continue in attendance. Let the record reflect that upon a previous offence of a grave nature, the aforementioned student was, for the safety of the student body as a whole, removed from contact with all other pupils. He continues in that status until this very day--"

"Ehem." Dumbledore cleared his throat as he riffled through the stack of parchment in front of him. "I have a correction to offer, Minister Fudge. Mr Malfoy, with the full cooperation of the Ministry, has indeed enjoyed ample contact with other students over the past several months. Notably, one Harry Potter with whom he has been sharing a bedroom until this very week, whom I might point out has come to no harm whatsoever--"

Thinking of his black eye, Harry was impressed by the flat-out lie. But then again, he'd known for a while that Albus Dumbledore could colour the truth any hue he liked.

"I have a correction to offer, Headmaster Dumbledore," interrupted Fudge in an oily tone. "Mr Malfoy may have acquired a roommate, but this was not done with the cooperation of the Ministry; it was entirely within the purview of Wizard Family Services--"

"A part of the Ministry."

"An adjunct services office, and a damned meddlesome one at that!"

Dumbledore lifted his shoulders in a shrug. From Harry's vantage point, it seemed that the headmaster's sombre blue eyes assessed each and every one of the Governors before he spoke again. "I submit for your consideration that the exact nature of the relationship between Family Services and the Ministry proper is not the point, Minister. Suffice it to say that the Ministry had full knowledge that Messieurs Malfoy and Potter were confined together, as it were. The Ministry never raised any objection, which to my mind implies tacit consent if not cooperation. I should also like to point out that on many occasions, students have visited Mr Potter in his home and thus have had contact with Mr Malfoy. There has been not a single disciplinary incident on account of this, which demonstrates that Mr Malfoy is in fact not a danger to other students."

"Wow, good defence," Harry thought, even more impressed.

"His treatment of Miss Pansy Parkinson this past November proves him to be a rather extreme hazard," retorted an elderly Board member who immediately afterwards glanced at Lucius as though for approval.

Lucius, though, remained icily aloof, neither looking at Draco nor returning his colleague's glance.

"The Board has already taken action regarding that incident," Dumbledore murmured, riffling pages again. "If you will consult page 278 of the Hogwarts Charter, paragraph C, subparagraph 2, you will note that the Board cannot at this late date go back and re-adjudicate another matter."

"Then let us adjudicate this matter," said Fudge in a hard tone, his beady eyes glaring at Draco.

"Very well," Dumbledore mildly agreed. "I would like to submit into evidence the official conclusions of Magical Law Enforcement, which indeed is a department of the Ministry. You will note that Mr Malfoy has been cleared of any and all involvement with the events of one week past. I would further like to call the Governors' attention to the Veritaserum testimony of both Mr Malfoy and Mr Harry Potter."
"Mr Malfoy is here in person," said an old witch wearing robes trimmed with ruffle after ruffle of yellowing lace. "I would think we'd hear from all the witnesses in person, as well. Transcribed testimony is all well and good but I'd like to hear from the Boy Who Lived myself, if he's going to vouch for . . ." She grimaced. "This particular young man."

"Mr Potter did not feel up to speaking to the Board personally, madam."

Mr Potter was not even consulted, Harry thought, his lips turning down at the implication that he was too weak to handle seeing Lucius Malfoy. He knew the plan was to throw the Death Eaters off guard with stories like that, of course, but he still didn't like it.

The old witch nodded, her gaze flicking to Lucius Malfoy. Harry didn't know if that meant she knew that Lucius had been personally involved in the events reported about Samhain, or she just knew that there was a long history of enmity at play.

"Professor Snape has a few words to say in his capacity as Head of Slytherin House," Dumbledore said next.

Snape rose to his feet, his robes billowing around his legs as he took one dramatic step away from his table and prepared to address the Board. "Mr Malfoy, far from posing a threat to other students, has been instrumental in helping Mr Potter recover from injuries he received earlier this year. He has proven himself an upstanding member of Slytherin and has laboured throughout this year to persuade his house mates that their best interests lie in supporting the Ministry in this war. I have reason to believe that several students with Death Eater parents may well avoid making a most unfortunate choice when the time comes, and if they do, it will be entirely on account of Mr Malfoy's tireless efforts."

Snape paused to let that sink in, then resumed, "As we have irrefutable proof that Mr Malfoy was in fact in no way involved in the tragic death of Miss Parkinson, there is no cause whatsoever to expel him. My opinion as his Head of House is that Mr Malfoy would benefit from his continued schooling here and that the student population at large would likewise benefit. As would the Ministry. Mr Malfoy is a talented wizard with an innate grasp of magic. He wishes to put his Hogwarts education to good use and become an Auror after sitting his N.E.W.T.s. Speaking as one who has been on the front lines of this war, I can tell you that there has never been a greater need for well-trained, gifted Aurors."

A wizard wearing a pointed hat tapped gnarled fingers on the table and peered over at Fudge. "Have you got nothing but accusations against the boy, Minister? Seems like it. Reminds me a bit of an incident took place here oh, 'bout fifty years ago."

Fudge looked flustered by that, but only until he glanced over at Lucius Malfoy. "Do not make your minds up yet, I beg you. These are mere preliminaries. We've yet to hear from the actual witnesses."

"So there were witnesses, Minister Fudge?" Dumbledore softly questioned. "Eyewitnesses to the death of the young lady, I presume you mean? That assertion would appear to contradict the Aurors' report."

"Witnesses, yes," Fudge said. Harry could hear him grinding his teeth, yet all the while, Lucius Malfoy sat with perfect posture, almost as though he were posing for a portrait. The same way Draco was sitting, actually. They might have been twins separated in time . . . except that Draco wasn't smirking. Lucius was, ever so slightly.

"Not eyewitnesses to the actual murder," Fudge was going on, "but to events shortly thereafter. It is not true that Draco Malfoy was sequestered in Professor Snape's rooms all that day. He was out and
about. He had both motive and opportunity to kill the young lady, his fellow prefect I might add, though of course his own prefect status has long since been revoked, as well it should have been!"

"I believe you mentioned witnesses," the wizard with the pointed hat prompted.

Fudge flushed at the mild rebuke. "The Ministry calls Erik Vanvelzeer and Belladonna Uwannawich!"

Harry didn't recognise the names, but he thought the students looked like seventh-years as the door creaked open and they entered. Belladonna was tall and emaciated with long black hair; she reminded Harry of those Muggle models who really need to eat. Erik was short and stocky, with beady blue eyes and a nasty expression.

The two of them came to a halt at one side of the long, curved table; Belladonna gave the Governors a polite little nod as she stood there with her hands clasped and her robes buttoned all the way up to her neck. Erik slouched.

"Please tell the Governors what you told the Aurors," Fudge bid. "This would be the first pair of Aurors on the scene, not the ones who subsequently completed the investigation."

Belladonna practically curtseyed, which Harry thought really odd, and when she spoke it was in a soft, almost lyrical voice. "Begging the Minister's pardon," she began, glancing at him before turning her full attention to the Board, "but I don't know as I really have much of use to contribute. I can't say that I know Draco pushed Pansy out of the Owlery. I can't say anything of the kind, as I simply wasn't there to see it."

"Yes, yes, but you did see something. Just tell the Governors that, Miss Uwannawich. And have no fear, you are not the one on trial here."

"Ehem!" Dumbledore broke in with a fierce glare.

"Rather, you are not the subject of this disciplinary hearing," Fudge said, revising his earlier wording . . . though not without curling a disdainful lip at the headmaster's point of protocol.

"I was going up the Owlery stairs to send off a letter," Belladonna began, her features strained as she gestured to the boy standing with her. "Erik came along as we were talking over the class we'd just left. This was in the late afternoon, one week ago today. The day of the . . . murder. And who should I meet coming out of the Owlery but Draco. He . . . he seemed in an awful rush, too. He all but careened down the stairs--"

He was unconscious and under an invisibility cloak, Harry thought. You couldn't have seen him at all. You're lying. You're in on it, somehow . . .

"Had a guilty look on his face!" Erik put in with a gleam of malice in his eyes. "Babbled out something nonsensical, too. Didn't think much of it just then, but looking back it seems like panic, pure and simple."

And you're in on it, too, aren't you . . .

"I . . . I can't say as I agree with that," Belladonna corrected, lacing her fingers together and then unlacing them. "That is, Draco did seem in a hurry. I can't say that it was born of panic, but he did pass us at almost a run. I remember feeling rather afraid that he would fall and take a nasty spill . . . And then, before Erik and I could even climb up to the top and go into the Owlery, we heard the most awful screaming start up from below. The . . . the body had been found. And that's all I know."
"Have you anything to add to that, Mr VanVelzeer?"

"Just that Malfoy had an awfully guilty look on his face," the seventh-year sneered.

"Why was this information not taken into account when the Aurors wrote their report?" asked a witch with red hair, the question clearly directed at the Minister of Magic, not the witnesses.

"Perhaps because Draco Malfoy's own cousin was one of the Aurors empowered to investigate the matter."

He said it with an air of triumph as he glared at Dumbledore, who stared impassively back.

Shite, Harry thought. That's the part that's going to unravel . . .

Dumbledore had pulled all sorts of strings to get Order Aurors on site, but to Fudge it might just look like the headmaster had been trying to get Tonks specifically . . .

For all Harry knew, Fudge might actually think Draco guilty; this hearing might not only be about toadying up to the Malfoy millions. The thought didn't make him like Fudge any better, but it did make him worry more for Draco.

"The boy's own cousin! Why would the Ministry allow a conflict of interest like that to occur?" questioned the wizard in the pointed hat, his gaze even more pointed as it centred squarely on Fudge. "Doesn't Magical Law Enforcement have safeguards against this sort of thing? Well? Answer me!"

"We were dealing with the Dark Mark over Parliament Square," Fudge said, a sheen of sweat coating his forehead. It looked like he was realising he might be held to account for MLE procedures. "A few details may have slipped through the cracks--"

"Hmmph," said the wizard.

"Be that as it may . . ." Wiping his brow, Fudge resumed. "Be that as it may, the Ministry is now endeavouring to correct any errors that may have occurred, by assuming full oversight over the matter of the expulsion."

Several of the witches and wizards were nodding by then, a vague chorus of affirmatives echoing in the boardroom. Harry heard mutterings, too. "Boy's own cousin . . . Auror corps ought to be ashamed . . . Veritaserum isn't foolproof, you know . . ." And the one that was the final straw, at least for Harry: "Potter must be off his head to be cooking up an alibi for a boy who murdered another student. But you know, he's been off his head before--"

And all the while, Lucius Malfoy looked like the cat that had got the cream as he sat there, smarmy as can be, a devious little smile curling his lips.

"Have the Governors anything to ask these students?" When there was no reply to that, Fudge nodded at the pair. "Very well. Thank you for your time and patience. You are hereby dismissed."

An idea zinged into Harry's head. A bad idea, maybe. But it looked to him like Draco was about to get voted out of Hogwarts, and he'd do anything to prevent that. Snape was going to be furious, and Harry had to admit that his father would have a perfect right to be, but none of that mattered, not in that instant of realising that he didn't have to just sit and watch.

Harry leapt up and took three big steps across the room until he could touch the wizardspace, or whatever it was, making up the images. Several Governors were talking at once by then, and Fudge was banging his gavel, so there was probably enough noise to cover Harry's own words.
At least he hoped so.

Snape was going to be mad enough as it was.

Thinking so exclusively of Snape had changed the image on the wall, in any case. The Potion Master's head and back now occupied almost the entire expanse of stone. Interesting that the viewing plane wasn't showing the man's face, Harry thought, but then again, he didn't really want to see Snape's expression, did he? The enchanted wall was sensing that.

Stepping even closer, until he could actually see a wavering image of the potions lab behind the wall, Harry whispered into his father's ear. "Call Ron and Hermione to testify."

Snape jerked as he sat there, his hand actually upsetting the ink pot on his table. Then his whole back stiffened. It seemed to Harry he was leaning back a bit, his head tilted at an odd angle as though to catch anything else Harry might have to say. But by then, the room was beginning to quiet down.

"Call them to refute those two lying Slytherins," was all Harry dared to add. The minute he stopped speaking he wished he hadn't put it quite that way, but there was no opportunity now to rephrase things.

"We will next hear from the mother of the victim," Fudge began saying, "who has requested leave to speak."

Snape's back receded as the viewing plane appeared to back away from him and swing to the side once more so that Harry could see the entire room.

"A moment, Minister Fudge," Snape broke in, his deep drawling voice bringing the proceedings to a halt as he stood up. There was no ink on his table now, so Harry supposed he must have evanescoed the mess away, pot and all. "Please detain Mr Vanvelzeer and Miss Uwannawich. I have witnesses to summon as well, ones who will shed some light on the testimony just proffered."

Erik Vanvelzeer gave Snape a nasty glance at that. Belladonna didn't react as much, though she did stop walking, her hands twisting around and around as she tried to hold them clasped and failed.

"I summon Mr Ronald Weasley and Miss Hermione Granger," Snape announced.

Belladonna flinched then, her gaze panicked as it shot to Lucius Malfoy's.

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow, but then wrote something on a slip of parchment. Tapping it with his wand, he sent it wafting across the room to the Minister of Magic.

Clearly disgruntled, Fudge glared at the parchment as he muttered what Harry could only think must be a spell to summon the named students forth.

Draco's cool demeanour had held firm, but calming draught or no, Snape's demand to call the Gryffindors as witnesses proved to be his undoing. He had turned to Snape and was mouthing something. Harry couldn't catch it.

Fudge evidently could.

"Do you object to these witnesses, Mr Malfoy?" he asked, gavel in mid-air.

Don't, Draco, Harry thought, but the boardroom was silent as everyone awaited the boy's answer, so he didn't dare try to convince his brother to let Hermione and Ron testify.
"Of course I object to them," Draco said, lifting his chin as he sat there. "They're thoroughly objectionable."

"Do you object to them _testifying_?"

Draco took a moment to think that one over, his silver gaze assessing Snape's expression. He must not have known how to read it. Either that, or he didn't want to do what Snape was clearly telling him to do, for he asked, "May I confer with my Head of House?"

"One minute only."

Rising from his stool, Draco walked across the room to Snape and began to speak in a low voice. Even after moving close and straining his ears for all they were worth . . . even despite the fact that the wall had zeroed in on his family and no one else, Harry could barely make out their words.

". . . _Harry's eye, for Merlin's sake_, Draco was whispering. "_Those two know. And they don't like me._"

He couldn't quite catch what Snape murmured in reply.

". . . _not about to trust my life to a pair of sodding Gryffindors_ . . ."

Harry leaned closer, just enough to hear, "_. . . your brother is a sodding Gryffindor, Draco._"

Hmmph. Well, maybe he deserved that in exchange for the _lying Slytherins_ remark.

"Mr Malfoy?" Fudge interrupted the hushed conference. "I require an answer."

Sighing, Draco moved back to his stone stool and seated himself, his back ramrod straight, his robes falling in perfect lines to the floor. But his hands, now thrust deep into his pockets, were clenching. Harry couldn't see them, but he knew. "I do not object to them testifying."

"Very well. Slytherin House calls Miss Hermione Granger and Mr Ronald Weasley," Fudge announced.

Harry didn't know how his friends had got there so quickly, but when the boardroom doors opened on their own, both Ron and Hermione were standing outside. They looked a little frightened, but Harry supposed that made sense. Unlike the other student witnesses, they hadn't been expecting a summons.

"Come in, come _in_," Fudge said, waving impatiently. "You're here to testify. I believe Professor Snape has a few questions for you."

Snape gave a slight shake of his head. "I would like Miss Uwannawich to repeat her recollection of the events of Friday past. Mr Weasley and Miss Granger may tell the Board what they think of the testimony we've all heard."

Hermione was the first to react to the story that Belladonna told. "Well, that's nothing but a _lie_," she railed, stamping her foot. "We were going up to the Owlery too, that day. We saw you on the way up. Both of you. But we didn't see any sign at all of Draco Malfoy!"

"And it's not like we could have missed him, the way you tell it," Ron coldly put in. "Careening past us all? What a load of . . ." He glanced apologetically at the Board. "What I mean is, Malfoy wasn't there."
"Oh, but he was," Erik VanVelzeer said with a snarl in his voice. "And you're saying otherwise to help him out."

"Oh, sure," Ron drawled, clenching his fists as he turned to fully face the Governors. "If I was going to come here and lie to the lot of you, you can be dead sure I'd lie to get Draco Malfoy thrown out of school, not to keep him here. He's spent six years sneering, his rich nose in the air because some of us aren't rolling in Galleons. Not to mention that he constantly calls one of my best friends a Mudblood! But the testimony you got from these two," Ron contemptuously waved to one side. "It's just a case of Slytherins turning on their own, your Honours . . . uh, your Worships . . . uh . . ."

"I'm perfectly willing to take Veritaserum," Hermione said, looking the Governors in the eye, one by one. Even Lucius Malfoy. Harry had to admit he was pretty impressed by that. "My parents won't like it," she went on. "They're Muggles. And yes, Malfoy here has called me awful names on that account. But that's all beside the point. He wasn't on the Owlery staircase this past Friday. I know, because I was, right before the screaming started. It's not right to throw people out of school for things they haven't done, even not-so-nice people like Malfoy here." She turned her glance to Dumbledore. "Shall I owl my parents for permission to take truth serum, sir?"

"And you, Miss Uwannawich," Dumbledore asked. "Will you be needing an owl as well? For if there is a dispute over who was on the Owrley stairs, I certainly think everyone involved ought to testify on equal terms."

"Uh . . ." Belladonna's face went a ghastly white. She actually swayed on her feet. "I'm a bit allergic, sir."

"You've had truth serum administered to you previously, have you, young lady?"

Belladonna flicked a glance at the witch who had asked that. "Uh, no," she back-pedalled. "We studied the composition in potions class and I think I might be allergic, I meant."

"I think we've heard enough out of these witnesses," drawled a wizard from the far end of the table. He wasn't more specific than that, but Harry somehow doubted he'd meant Ron and Hermione.

"Any further questions?" asked Fudge, sounding a bit as though . . . Harry wasn't sure. It was like the man was holding something in reserve, something devastating . . .

"I've some," said a witch who hadn't spoken before, that Harry could recall. "I see you're wearing Gryffindor crests. Are the two of you acquainted with Harry Potter?"

Ron smiled then, for the first time since he'd entered the room. "Yeah, you could say that."

"We're his best friends," Hermione answered, nodding.

"So presumably you've been down to see him a time or two while he was living in his adoptive father's quarters?"

"Many more times than that, ma'am . . ."

"When you were visiting Mr Potter, did you ever feel threatened by Draco Malfoy?"

Hermione crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Honestly, ma'am, no." She cast a sidelong glance at Draco, who was staring straight ahead, his entire posture stiff. "That's not to say I like him. He's got a purebloods-first mindset that's a threat all in itself, to people like me."

"Do you believe his attendance here poses a danger to any other student?"
Harry held his breath then, wondering what Hermione might decide to say about his black eye. Then again, both Ron and Hermione had promised not to mention it, hadn't they? They'd agreed—well, after a fair bit of argument—that if Draco was expelled it should be because he'd killed someone, not because he'd lost his temper and landed a punch.

After all, Hermione had done that much herself.

"No, ma'am, and I've been around him quite a bit of late," Hermione announced.

"And you, Mr Weasley, would you concur?"

Ron made a face. "You have no idea how much I'd like to answer yes," he said, sounding absolutely disgusted as he went on, "but yeah, I concur."

"I'd like to point out for the record that these students are sixth-year prefects," said Dumbledore.

"Which means I highly respect their judgment of their peers."

Harry saw Lucius give the Minister of Magic a very slight nod.

Uh-oh . . .

"Oh, do you?" Fudge questioned Dumbledore. "Perhaps then, we should give the Governors a far more complete picture of Miss Granger's judgment of her peers. I have here before me a recent letter from Miss Hermione Granger to Wizard Family Services, in which she expresses her clear belief that Harry Potter is in . . . now what was her phrase?" Fudge shuffled parchments for a moment, then holding one up, resumed. "Imminent and incontrovertible danger, yes, based on her good-faith belief that Draco Malfoy has been taking advantage of Harry's lack of magic to pummel him daily!"

Fudge rounded on Hermione. "Did you write this letter?"

Hermione's eyes were almost wild as she gasped out, "Yes, but--"

"So were you lying in your letter to Wizard Family Services, or have you been lying to the Hogwarts' Board of Governors today?"

"Neither! I changed my mind--"

Fudge made a scoffing noise. "So you say now."

Hermione planted her hands on her hips. "I was worried that Malfoy was hurting Harry, but Wizard Family Services came and investigated and it turned out I was wrong, completely wrong--"

"So you admit that your judgment of your peers has been erroneous in the recent past!" declared Fudge in a tone of triumph. "Then why should we trust your judgment here today?"

"It's not a judgment that Malfoy wasn't on those stairs, Minister," Hermione icily returned. "It's a matter of fact."

"As it's a matter of fact that Wizard Family Services has received a letter from you detailing numerous bruises and injuries suffered by Harry Potter while living with little to no exposure to anyone save Mr Malfoy and Professor Snape! As the professor is most certainly above all suspicion, what are we to think except that it must have been Mr Malfoy causing said injuries!"

"Minister," Dumbledore sternly inserted, "I believe the record should reflect that Mr Malfoy was cleared in that matter."
"Oh yes, he's rather good at getting himself cleared, isn't he?" sneered Fudge. "Wizard Family Services seemed willing to believe that Harry Potter had been injured playing . . . rugby with Mr Malfoy, I believe the report reads. A Muggle sport. A story so patently false that I'd be surprised if a single governor here believed it."

The words had the desired impact; already, Harry could see several of the witches and wizards seated at the table shaking their heads at the idea of a pure-blooded Malfoy engaging in Muggle rituals, as one wizard put it in a hushed, sceptical tone. Lucius himself gave a deprecating little laugh, just as though the notion were absurd and he was frankly embarrassed that anyone would give it the slightest credence.

Harry felt a headache coming on as he sat there. He'd been so sure that Ron and Hermione could settle the matter of whether Draco had been seen on the Owlery stairs . . . he'd forgotten that Hermione's earlier complaints about Draco could come up. But how did Lucius Malfoy even know that WFS had conducted an investigation? Where had he got the blasted letter? Shouldn't a matter like that be held in confidence?

Steyne, Harry thought bleakly as the answer came to him. The Slytherin WFS worker out to feather his own nest. Lucius Malfoy would pay dearly for any information related to Draco or me, any information at all. Steyne's probably been on Lucius' payroll all along!

"Anything else for these witnesses?" asked Fudge. When no questions were forthcoming, he turned a frosty gaze on all four students. Harry noticed there were no thanks offered Ron and Hermione.

"Dismissed, then. Now, if the Head of Slytherin House has no more witnesses to spring upon us, I would like to call the mother of the victim."

"Point of order," murmured Snape in a thoroughly civil tone. "I believe I speak for all of us when I say that no-one could fail to empathise with Mrs Parkinson's loss. Still, I fail to see her relevance to these proceedings. She was not present at Hogwarts on the day in question."

"Nor will she give testimony as though she were," Fudge said, glaring at Hermione's retreating back. "Some witches have more honour than to perjure themselves!"

"Minister!" admonished Dumbledore, shaking his head.

Fudge ignored the reprimand, as well he might. Board members were nodding at each other as though his words made sense. "Mrs Parkinson has asked leave to address the Board and I for one will not refuse a grieving mother such a request."

It took a moment for Pansy's mother to appear. When she entered, she was dressed in black mourning robes, a soot-grey veil over her face. She walked forward slowly, as though each step pained her, and came to stand just a few feet from Draco, who avoided looking her way.

A weak, shuddering motion of her hand lifted the veil away from her face.

No tears and sobs, not now. Mrs Parkinson's cold gaze swept the room, resting momentarily on Draco before she returned her attention to the Board.

"Madam," said Lucius Malfoy in a kind tone devoid of any sarcasm. In fact, Harry had never heard him sound so earnest. He couldn't help but find that creepy in of itself. "May I extend my condolences? No parent should have to endure what you have suffered."

She nodded her thanks, then kept nodding as each Board member, following Malfoy's lead, spoke briefly about her loss.
"I understand you wished to address the Governors?"

"Yes, Minister Fudge." The woman pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of her mourning robes and dabbed at the corners of her eyes even though she wasn't crying. "I come here today to speak for my daughter, who cannot speak for herself. This boy, this horrid, nasty boy who has dined at my table and slept in my house . . . I beg you to look at him and see how he sits before you now without a shred of remorse, without the slightest trace of shame for this awful thing he has done--"

Snape abruptly stood up, his chair making a scraping noise that cut across Mrs Parkinson's words. Harry somehow doubted that was an accident. "Would the Minister kindly remind the witness not to assume Mr Malfoy's guilt?"

Before Fudge could say a word, Mrs Parkinson was rounding on Snape, her teeth clenched. Until she started yelling, that was. "You should be ashamed as well, Severus, defending this excuse for a Slytherin! Except that we know where your loyalties lie, don't we? You were her Head of House, too! She was your prefect! And you could not be bothered to so much as make an appearance at her funeral! But why should that surprise any of us? If you had any true loyalty to Slytherin, you'd never have taken Draco Malfoy in! He hexed my daughter right into the critical cases ward at St. Mungo's, and what did the Head of Slytherin do about it? Gave him an opportunity to stay on at Hogwarts' regardless. And look at what has happened as a result of that ill-informed decision, Minister, just look! Don't you tell me not to assume guilt!"

"I would like the Board to be aware that Professor Snape was absent from Miss Parkinson's funeral in order to see to the needs of Slytherin House," Dumbledore said in a mild voice as he looked over the top of his half-moon spectacles.

"Yes, they had all fallen ill; it was reported," murmured the pipe-smoking witch.

"Rather conveniently ill," said Mrs Parkinson. "Just as the original Aurors sent to investigate fell ill so that they could be replaced by Draco Malfoy's relative. And you expect me to take their findings seriously!"

The old witch in the yellowed lace leaned forward. "Madam, I am very sorry for your loss as I said before. But the purpose of this hearing is not to malign Magical Law Enforcement or cast aspersions on Professor Snape."

"Quite right, quite right," echoed the short wizard seated next to Fudge.

When Harry saw that several other wizards were nodding, he started to feel better. It would be all right. The Board wasn't daft enough to expel Draco when the Ministry itself had basically declared him innocent of the charges.

"I am not done speaking," interrupted Mrs Parkinson in a frosty tone.

Fudge, catching the mood of the Board, cleared his throat. "You may finish, Madam. But I caution you to speak only to what you personally know."

Harry almost would have expected Lucius Malfoy to glare at that. Or at least to stiffen. But the blond man just sat calmly back in his chair. Almost as though he knew what was coming already, as if he had no cause whatsoever to worry . . .

"Here is what I know," said Mrs Parkinson, dabbing again at her eyes. "Someone here at the school killed my daughter. I personally believe the guilty party to be Draco Malfoy, though of course I can't prove it. But what we do know is that he attacked my daughter quite grievously earlier this year, and
swore at that time that he would kill her. And nothing was done about that. Nothing substantive. He should have been expelled then, at the very least. Instead he was allowed to remain in residence and continue his education.” She took a step forward, her gaze sweeping the Board from one side to the other. ”This Board sent the student body of Hogwarts a clear message on that day. That violence is tolerated, that there is no real consequence for poor behaviour, that the Board itself is weak and ineffectual. And here we see the result. Somebody, possibly Draco Malfoy, possibly someone else, felt at liberty to commit murder. And why, I ask you? Because this Board has no teeth. Mark my words, each and every one of you. If you take no action regarding this murder, you shall without a doubt see another.”

A rush of sound swept across the Board as members began to murmur to one another. Has a point, she does . . . was a time when Hogwarts was safe . . . Malfoy's record marks him as a troublemaker anyway; what's one less troublemaker . . . He probably did it, you know. Aurors' report looks a bit biased to my eyes . . . Can we risk letting him stay on if it was him?

"There is no reason for a good-faith belief that Draco Malfoy committed the murder," Snape said, standing silently that time. "The Board cannot possibly--"

"Professor Snape," interrupted the wizard in the pointed hat. "The Board will thank you not to dictate what it can and cannot do. Your recent brave and honourable services to the Ministry do not, in my view, entitle you to such presumption."

Snape nodded, his long hair falling in front of his eyes until he brushed it aside.

"Mrs Parkinson, have you finished your statement?"

"Yes, Minister Fudge." She looked at the Board in clear challenge, then stepped back.

"Very well. In that case, the room will be cleared so that the Board may deliberate--"

"Ehem. I believe that Mr Malfoy has a right to make a statement, Minister."

Fudge sighed as though that were quite the unreasonable request. "Oh very well, very well. Stand up, Mr Malfoy. There is such a thing as common courtesy--"

Draco was already halfway to his feet by then, which Harry thought more or less proved that Fudge was the one without a shred of courtesy. "Honourable members," he said, nodding politely at each--

The magic doorbell began ringing inside Harry's head.

Harry was so startled that he almost shouted damn. He tried to ignore the din inside his ears, but the doorbell just kept on, loud and insistent. Harry could barely hear Draco over it.

". . .while it is true that Nymphadora Tonks is my cousin--"

Almost snarling, Harry rushed out of his bedroom and checked the door parchment. Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley.

Great. Just what he needed. And it wasn't like he could ignore them, either. He didn't even want to imagine the scene that would ensue if his friends burst back into the expulsion hearing claiming Harry Potter had gone missing.

Yanking out his wand, Harry spelled the door open.

Hermione was first to rush over the threshold. "Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry," she gasped out, panting.
She and Ron looked like they'd run all the way down. "I had to come tell you before your father did! It's awful, it's just awful, and it's all my fault--"

"Quiet," Harry ordered, grabbing her wrist, his gaze warning Ron as well. "You don't have to explain, I know the letter came up and things don't look good. Just swear you'll be quiet, swear. Both of you."

"How do you know--"

"Just say you'll be quiet," Harry said, shaking her wrist a little.

"Uh, all right, I'll be quiet, but what--"

"Me too, mate," chimed in Ron.

"All right, but no talking," Harry warned in a low voice. "No noise at all. I mean it."

Letting her go, he stalked back to the bedroom.

Despite all the warnings, Hermione still gasped when she followed him in and caught sight of the wall. Harry gave her a look that would freeze embers, and she abruptly went silent, one of her own hands flying up to clamp across her mouth.

Ron actually handled it better, though Harry saw him mouth Bloody hell, his eyes wide with shock as he followed her in and saw the wall.

"Thank you, Mr Malfoy," Fudge was saying, though his tone was rather sneering. "Now, the Board will deliberate."

I missed Draco's statement, Harry thought with irritation. He was about to turn another rather fearsome look on the friends who had made him miss it, but the scene on the wall was changing aspect, shifting to follow Draco as he made his way out of the room, Snape at his side, Dumbledore close behind.

No, Harry thought. He wanted to stay with Draco, as it were, but it was more important to hear what the Board might have to say. He might hear something of use . . . but Draco was almost at the doors by then, and his desire to see the Board deliberate didn't seem to be changing the focus of the image.

Maybe it had to follow Draco from the room because of that initial Show me Draco command he had used.

Stepping to the wall, Harry positioned his wand once more and speaking in the lowest voice he could muster, hissed, "Show me Lucius Malfoy!"

The scene on the wall shifted, images rushing past in a dizzying circle as the vista swung back around to centre on Lucius Malfoy.

"What was that?" Fudge asked, glancing about, his mouth half-open with alarm. "Did you hear that hissing noise?"

"Minister." It was Lucius Malfoy who addressed him, his smooth tones respectful yet somehow still woven through with a sneer. Harry wasn't sure how he managed it. "The Board cannot deliberate, as you well know, until the room is cleared of everyone." He raised his eyebrows then, and simply waited.
Fudge didn't appear to catch on for a moment. Then a dull red hue rose to stain his face. "Of course, of course," he murmured, stepping away from his podium and down two risers. He nodded politely at the Board before turning his back and striding from the room.

"These deliberations are intended to remain confidential," said Lucius as the heavy double doors closed after Fudge stepped through them. "And as certain individuals hovering outside may well not respect that . . ."

He left the accusation hanging in the air. Harry was slow to understand it as a suggestion, but the witches and wizards on the Board caught on at once. Wands drawn, they began casting spells that showered the stone walls with bluish sparks.

Wards, Harry thought. *Silencing wards, but they won't do you much good, will they? I'll still hear whatever you have to say of Draco's fate . . .*

But he didn't, for as the spells grew in power, the enchanted wall before him began to grow solid, the images receding as a stone wall re-emerged into his bedroom. But there was no picture frame hanging upon it.

Sighing, Harry glanced about for any sign of the shard he'd used from Sirius' mirror, but it was missing as well. Hmm, maybe the wall would start showing the proceedings again as soon as the Governors lifted their warding spells.

Hermione, he realised, was tapping him on the back, her touch insistent. *Can we talk now?* she mouthed when he glanced over his shoulder at her.

"Yeah, it's fine," Harry said, grimacing. "Too bad, eh? I really wanted to see how Lucius Malfoy might try to sway them, and see what they decide . . ." Forcing his mind off the disappointment, he turned to face his friends. "Anyway, I guess you realise now that I heard everything you said up there. Um, thanks for trying, you know? It was good of you not to mention the black eye. I mean, I know you don't much like Draco . . ."

Hermione, Harry saw, looked about as close to tears as he had ever seen her. "I don't. But that's not why I wrote that awful letter. I just thought you needed help, Harry--"

"I know." He tried to smile. "Maybe it'll be all right."

Ron made a sound halfway between a laugh and a snort. "He obviously matters to you, even after the black eye thing. Oh, well. I do believe you, you know . . . he didn't kill Parkinson. So I guess he doesn't deserve to be expelled, git though he still is."

Harry smothered a slight smile. "Uh, Ron . . . are you embarrassed that you helped defend Draco Malfoy?"

Ron's skin flushed. "Yeah, guess so. The stuff in the hearing's confidential though, right? Nobody in Gryffindor'll have to know?"

"It's *supposed* to be confidential," said Hermione using one of her more smarmy voices. "What were you thinking, Harry, spying like that?"

"I was *thinking*--" For just a second he wondered if he should just come out and announce that Draco was his brother. He still didn't think it would go over so well, though. "Look, I had to see how he was holding up. He puts on a front for you guys, but around me he's more relaxed and . . . well, he's a little bit like a basket case these days. It's all the stress."
Hermione sat down on Draco's bed, then crossed her legs at the ankle and looked up at Harry with a frown in her eyes. "The stress must be something awful," she sympathised. "His front cracked even with us, Harry. Wednesday morning when we came to fetch you; Draco talked to us for a bit while you were getting dressed. He . . ." She broke off, clearly uncomfortable, but then must have decided that Harry needed to know. "He seemed pretty convinced that he was going to get expelled. Normally I don't think he'd let us see how much it bothered him, but Harry . . . what he talked about most was how you were going to need all the protection you could get, how Ron and I had to be on guard because . . . ah, well actually he said that he'd probably get nabbed by his father and he thought he'd break under torture and they'd find out about your wandless magic and dark powers . . . it was awful, the things he said."

"Yeah, even I felt sorry for the git," admitted Ron as he flopped down onto Harry's bed.

"I felt sorry for him," said Hermione slowly, "but what got to me more than that was . . . his attitude, Harry. He was worried about what all that might mean for you. And . . . well it was probably that more than anything else that made me want to help him with the expulsion thing. And I don't mean so that information about your dark powers stays secret. I mean . . . Draco took me by surprise, saying things like that."

Ron nodded, the gesture glum. Harry could tell his friend didn't want to respect anything about Draco. But he'd had no choice but to respect that.

"You're calling him Draco," he told Hermione. "In the hearing it was Malfoy."

"Well I didn't want to sound like I liked him. I don't like him, all right? No matter what he said about me being clever, or pretty, even, I still think he largely adheres to pureblood beliefs. But . . . I don't want you to think he's my enemy either. Because if he's for you, well, then he can't be."

Ron, Harry noticed, didn't nod at that claim. Probably more than he could stand to admit.

Harry sighed, thinking it was pretty sad that Draco had felt a need to say all that to Ron and Hermione. "He's not going to get abandoned to Voldemort just because he gets expelled. Severus and I told him that, and in no uncertain terms, too. You might as well know that if worse comes to worst, Severus will resign and the three of us will leave the country."

Hermione uncrossed her ankles and leaned forward, her palms on the edge of Draco's bed. "Leave the country, Harry!"

"Yeah, mate, you can't leave Hogwarts--"

"Sure can. Look, I don't want to go abroad, but Severus and I are not going to let Lucius Malfoy get his hands on Draco." Sighing, Harry admitted, "I wish Draco could believe that. But he doesn't understand."

"Doesn't understand what?"

Harry gave Hermione a careful glance, then studied Ron. Maybe they could stomach the truth, now. Maybe Draco's admission of concern for Harry would smooth the way. "Draco doesn't understand love," he said, sitting down next to Hermione and looking across the room at Ron. "He's got no idea how much I love him."

Ron had been fidgeting up until then, but that claim had him going completely still. "Uh . . . yeah. You . . . you know it never once occurred to me, you two sharing a room but . . . uh, oh Merlin, Harry. Are you trying to tell us you've ended up . . . uh, attached to Draco Malfoy?"
Harry didn't like the way Ron had said attached. At least Hermione hadn't got hold of the wrong end of the stick. When Harry glanced at her to check her reaction, her lips were pursed as though she'd just love to smack Ron. Hard.

Oblivious to that, Ron went on in a strangled voice, "You don't want to snog him, do you?" And then, sounding like he'd die on the spot, "Have you already? No, wait. I don't want to know. Is that all right? Some things friends just don't need to know--"

"Oh, get your mind up out of the gutter!" Hermione exclaimed, though she glared at Harry. "How long were you planning to let him make an arse of himself?"

"I just wasn't sure what to say," said Harry, colouring. "It's not every day I get asked if I'm snogging Draco Malfoy!"

"No is what you say, Harry. And I don't know why Ron's thought processes should surprise you. He's the one who noticed you could stand for Professor Snape to touch you, and all at once decided that it went way beyond a hand on your shoulder--"

"I didn't really think that," shouted Ron as he jumped to his feet. "Would you stop throwing that in my face? I never really thought that. I was just angry that Harry announced he wanted him for a father. I was so angry I couldn't see straight, all right?"

"Are you still?"

Ron sat down again and shook his head at Harry. "No. Be good, all that . . . Snape seems like he's all right as a father, as far as I can tell."

Harry held in a grin. "As far as you can tell?"

"All right, fine. He seems like a good father, full stop."

"Seems?"

"Cut it out, Harry," snapped Ron, unamused. "There's a limit to how much I can admit without sicking up, you know. It's not easy for me, and hinting around that you're falling in love with Draco Malfoy isn't making it any easier--"

"Oh for God's sake, Ron! Nobody's falling in love. He's my brother!"

Ron stared at Harry, his eyes wide as saucers. "That's almost worse."

"No, it's not. It's great, because if you get to know Draco, you find out he's got this whole family-loyalty thing that's really important to him. Except, the Malfoys have disowned him. So Severus and I are his family now. Which actually isn't the only reason Draco's on my side, but it probably helps him feel better about it."

"You three have bonded," said Hermione, nodding as though it made perfect sense.

"You've bonded?" gasped Ron, going back into panic-mode.

"She doesn't mean magically bonded! Look, Severus unofficially adopted Draco, that's how it happened. He cares about us both and Draco needed to know he was just as much a son here as I was. And I can tell you one thing for sure -- my father wouldn't have appreciated it if I'd gone on about how I was the real son and Draco wasn't. And so that was it, really. I cared what Severus thought of me, so I didn't complain that Draco being his son meant the two of us were brothers. I just
accepted it as fact and moved on." Harry gave a tremulous smile. "And just for the record, I like having a brother. I like him."

"Yeah, well I'd figured that last part out on my own," said Ron. "Why do you think I jumped to that other conclusion?"

"Because you're completely brainless, Ronald."

"I could have found a better way to tell you both--" Harry was saying, but he abruptly fell silent as the wall behind Ron began to dissolve. "Shh, shhh, the wards are being lifted," he practically hissed, waving an arm so Ron would turn around and see.

Beside him, Hermione had gone still and quiet.

The boardroom came into view again, the image centred on Lucius Malfoy since the spell, presumably, was still focussed on him. Jumping up, Harry fixed that with a quick, low, Show me Draco.

The boardroom spun on its axis until it was showing Draco from the side, as before, Lucius Malfoy still visible as well. Severus, Harry noticed, had a particularly grim look on his face. Clearly, he was expecting an unfavourable verdict.

Well, either that or he'd just recognised Harry's Parseltongue.

Harry shivered, absolutely hating the thought of what his father was going to say to him about all this.

Fudge was banging his gavel on his podium, even though most everyone was already paying attention. "The room will come to order!" When he was satisfied that every last eye was on him, he turned to face the Board members. Only when one of them gave him a sharp nod did he proceed. "I have before me the binding decision of the Hogwarts' Board of Governors regarding the expulsion of Draco Alain Gervais Luthien Malfoy."

He paused for effect, then raised his voice. "Effective immediately, Mr Malfoy is expelled on the grounds that he poses a grave danger to the safety and well-being of other students attending the institution!"

Harry saw Draco go as stiff as a board, his eyes glittering hard and silver as, for the first time since the hearing had begun, he looked directly at Lucius.

Lucius stared back, eyebrows slightly raised, his whole expression one of complacent amusement.

"Mr Malfoy," Fudge went on, "will surrender his wand to the headmaster."

"Point of order, Minister," Lucius broke in, his voice so smooth it sent shivers down Harry's spine. "The wand in question is my property. Mr Malfoy will surrender it to me."

Harry felt his fingers twitch at that, and recognised that his anger was trying to unleash itself again. He clenched his fists to keep it under control, and held his breath as he watched Draco stand up and walk stiffly forward, his entire bearing screaming that he was determined to remain composed. That Lucius wouldn't break him, not even with this.

The Slytherin boy held his wand out, holding it parallel in front of him instead of pointed at Lucius. There was no implication, that way, that he was threatening the man . . . but no offer of a wand truce, either. It was a completely neutral way to hand over a wand. Harry had to admit that he was
impressed. It was all he could do not to hex Lucius, and he wasn't even the one getting expelled.

"Why thank you, Mr Malfoy," said Lucius in a sneering tone as he took the wand in hand. The minute touched it, however, a strange expression coursed across his face. Surprise, almost. Or maybe even a touch of respect . . .

The lineage potion, Harry thought. The one that makes the wand able to be used only by someone named Malfoy . . . Lucius is a Malfoy, so he can sense it, somehow. And he's impressed at this proof that Draco's been dabbling in the Dark Arts . . .

At that moment, more so than ever before, Harry got a sense of how hopelessly twisted Draco's childhood must have been.

Draco stepped back and looked about to take his seat again, but Fudge forestalled him. "You are no longer a student at this institution, Mr Malfoy. There is no reason for your continued presence. Indeed," here he glanced at Lucius as though seeking approval, "Hogwarts bylaws require you to leave forthwith."

"The Express doesn't run until morning," objected the pipe-smoking witch. Her eyes shone with more than a little bit of compassion. "Surely the young man can stay until then?"

"My apologies, Madam," Fudge said, shaking his head as he tapped the large sheaf of parchment before him. "The procedure is quite clear. He's to have an hour at most, and that only so that he can gather up his belongings."

"If you will excuse us, then," announced Snape, standing. "Draco?"

Turning his back on Lucius, Draco faced his real father.

"Aren't you forgetting something, Headmaster?"

"No, I don't believe so, Minister," replied Dumbledore while peering out over the top of his spectacles.

Fudge's fingers tightened on his gavel, but he didn't bang it. "I believe the Hogwarts' Charter is quite clear on the matter of who has the right to wear a house crest. Students, staff, and those who have successfully completed seven years of education at the institution, including passing at least one N.E.W.T." He gave the Governors a rather thin smile, as though the situation was unpleasant but he had to do his duty, nonetheless. "Mr Malfoy no longer qualifies."

"Of course," murmured Dumbledore, sorrow in his blue eyes. "Draco, would you come here please?"

Draco now, not Mr Malfoy. Harry appreciated that, even if the scene before his eyes was simply dreadful. As Draco walked towards the headmaster, Lucius Malfoy's eyes glittered maliciously.

"Courage," Dumbledore softly murmured as he waved a hand over the crest on Draco's robes. The Slytherin crest vanished as though it had never been, leaving Draco's robes a stark, unrelenting black.

"And any other crests he might have on other cloaks or robes?" asked the wizard in the pointed hat. Dumbledore merely stared, his blue gaze somewhat fearsome, until the wizard waved a hand. "My apologies. Of course they've been taken care of as well."

"It's time, Draco," said Snape in just about the most gentle voice Harry had ever heard from him.
The boy crossed the short distance to where Snape stood, his steps unsteady now. He'd managed to hold up well while giving his wand away, but he'd been expecting that might happen. The removal of his crest had taken him by surprise. His spirit obviously sapped, Draco looked as though his legs might collapse. Snape must have thought so too; the instant the boy got close enough, he took him by the arm and with a firm grip, kept him from stumbling further. The Potions Master nodded at the Board then, which irritated Harry. Shouldn't Snape be telling them how inappropriate their action was? How they were going to lose the finest Potions Master in all Britain now?

*Shouldn't he be writing out a resignation and flinging it straight at them, accompanied by a few dozen scathing words about idiocy and irresponsibility and incompetence?*

Harry couldn't believe Snape was taking this outrageous decision so calmly.

Then again, though, there was that *discretion* thing Snape was so fond of. He'd felt free to rail and scream at Dumbledore, but apparently he had a different code of conduct when it came to dealing with the Governors. Or maybe, he just didn't want to make Lucius Malfoy aware of his plans to take Draco abroad.

Draco and Harry abroad, he mentally amended. His family wasn't going *anywhere* without him.

As Snape and Draco walked from the boardroom, the magic image followed along, obeying Harry's last spoken command. His father and brother began traversing the long corridors to return to the dungeons, Snape still holding Draco by the arm, supporting him. Neither one of them said a thing as minute past minute they walked; Harry thought that rather strange. He was just about to tell the picture frame to go back to normal when Lucius Malfoy stepped lithely out of a side corridor and stood blocking them both. How had he got there so quickly?

*Probably knows some secret passages . . .*

Harry held his breath as he waited to hear what Lucius might have to say.

"Such a pity," the blond man oozed false sympathy. "Such a terrible shame. I did what I could for you, Dragon, when the Governors convened in closed session, but alas . . . it seems your conduct has simply been too egregious to overlook, this time."

Draco looked up, his eyes dull as he surveyed this man who was supposed to have loved him. He didn't reply. He didn't even grimace. He just looked . . . lost.

Letting go of Draco's arm, Snape stepped half in front of his son as though to shield him, his stance one Harry recognised from all their practice out in Devon. His father was ready for an attack, even though Lucius likely had enough subtlety not to launch one at such a time and place. *Constant vigilance,* Harry thought anyway. *Good.*

"If you'll excuse us, Governor, Draco has several things to occupy his next hour."

Instead of responding to that directly, Lucius drew Draco's old wand out of his pocket and began to twirl it between his fingers. "It's always nice to have a spare, don't you think? Two is better than one? Given your recent behaviour, Professor, I take it you agree. Allow me to enlighten you, however." Lucius dropped his voice to a smooth, menacing whisper. "A spare does you no good at all when you end up losing them both."

Harry shuddered at the word *spare,* to say nothing of the double meaning in all that. Lucius wasn't talking about wands at all.

Snape said nothing to the taunts, which of course only inspired Lucius to continue.
"I'm rather impressed with how seriously you're taking this self-imposed commitment of yours, Severus. Especially considering what little regard you obviously have for other commitments." His lips curling, Lucius gave a casual shrug. "My cast-off as well as a pitiful mistreated little boy complete with cupboard phobias. You must really be feeling an urge for repentance." His smile grew even more smug, if such a thing were possible. "Or maybe throwing around points and detentions is no longer sufficient to vent your frustrations. If you have any trouble disciplining the pair of them I know a rather useful spell--"

"Get out of our way, Lucius," growled Snape, teeth bared.

"Ah well, I suppose the final outcome left much to be desired." Lucius pocketed the wand and brushed his hands together as though to clean them of something particularly foul. "No matter, I'm sure I'll have the opportunity to demonstrate that spell, and many others, to you very soon. To all of you, including that scar-headed misfit you took in. A *Gryffindor*. Whatever were you thinking? I hear you healed his eyes? You might as well not have bothered, as he'll certainly prefer not to see what I've been saving especially for *him*. But father knows best, eh? Until then."

With that, he was stepping past Severus and Draco and striding smartly down the hall, his booted heels making clicking noises against the stone.

Draco stumbled over to the wall and leaned his shoulder into it, breathing heavily through his mouth. Snape went to support him, pulling him straight away into a close embrace, one hand moving to rub slow circles over the boy's back. The moment he was touched, Draco made a horrible gasping sniffling noise that just about broke Harry's heart in two.

"Harry," said Hermione in a wavering voice. "We really shouldn't be . . ."

"Yeah," said Harry thickly, moving towards his bedroom wall. "*Go back to the way you were . . .*"

The images vanished into stone, the enchanted picture frame abruptly clattering to the floor. Funny, it usually emerged from the spell hanging just where it had been before. And what was worse, there was still no sign of the shard of mirror he'd used. Harry glanced about everywhere, biting the inside of his own cheek in his worry, but it was no use. As far as he could tell, the mirror had been used up somehow. Consumed by the magic, probably.

Harry sighed, trying not to let that bother him as he picked up the picture frame and muttered a sticking charm to get it to stay in place on the wall.

"Yeah," said Ron, nodding at Harry's sigh. "Not even Malfoy deserves all this."

"Draco," corrected Harry. "He's on our side now; you even admitted yourself that you knew as much."

"Draco," said Ron, sneering it.

Well, it was a start.

"You'd better get going," Harry said, setting his wand down on the bed. "Really. Severus is going to be upset enough with me over the wall thing . . . uh, not supposed to do that spell . . . anyway, if he sees you down here, Hermione, after the way Fudge used that WFS letter to discredit your testimony . . ."

Hermione leapt up as though the bed had sprouted blast-ended screwts. "Right then, we'd better be off--"
By then, though, it was too late. The front door was creaking open on its hinges.

"Oh God," said Harry, wishing he had his dad's old cloak so he could toss it over his friends before his father saw them. Or before Draco did. He'd hardly want Ron and Hermione to see him at his lowest point.

*Which they did already, thanks to me,* Harry thought, feeling guilty.

Nothing to do now but brazen it out, though. Harry headed for the living room.

"Hey," he said, looking from Snape to Draco as they hung their cloaks. He tried not to look at the empty patch where Draco's Slytherin crest used to be. "Um . . ."

"You and I will be having a rather strongly worded *talk,*" Snape bit out, his dark eyes flashing.

"Yes, sir," Harry said, chastened. "Draco, I . . . uh, heard. I'm really, really sorry."

The Slytherin boy's eyes were rimmed with red as he finally turned away from the wall to face Harry. "How did you hear?"

Harry bit his lip. "Well, I--"

He didn't get to finish the explanation, though. Ron's voice cut across his. "Harry, you should maybe come see this. Uh, Draco too . . ."

"Oh. They told you," Draco sneered as he follows Harry over to their bedroom. "And since when does Weasley call me Draco? That's all I need--" He stopped speaking abruptly when he came through the door and saw a small pile of clothes and books on the floor where his trunk used to be. "Weasley, what in bloody hell did you do to my things?"

"Me?" Ron huffed. "I was just standing here, and poof! Your trunk vanished in sort of reddish haze, and there was nothing left but that stuff there!"

"Oh, no . . ." Draco took three giant strides to cross the room and dropped straight to his knees to sift through the pile. "Reddish haze," he dully repeated, shaking his head. "Fucking goblins. Ought to be strangled, the lot of them."

"A financial spell, then," Snape confirmed. "The terms of your vault."

Draco rose shakily to his feet and tried to make light of it, whatever it was. "So much for nominal control."

"I don't understand . . ."

"Oh, how hard is it to grasp, Potter? I have to be a student here to keep my money, good standing, all that. Terms of the fucking trust. I *told* you that."

"Language, Draco," Snape said, rebuking him that time as he nodded slightly to the side. Towards Hermione.

"Oh, my apologies, Miss Granger," snarled Draco. "Forgive me if I was trying for once to treat you as an equal. Won't happen again. Have I offended your delicate ears?"

"I think my ears will survive," Hermione said in a mild voice.

"But what happened to your trunk, Draco?"
The Slytherin boy shot Harry an irritated glance. "You really are dense, aren't you? It was a wizarding trust. Magic? You have heard of it, I think?"

"Don't be a prat!"

Draco looked about to make a scathing retort, but he got a hold of himself and nodded instead. 
"Right. Yes. Well, it's all gone. Not just my access to the funds but everything I've ever bought with them. Trunk, books, most of my clothes . . . from the feel of it, right down to the pants I had on under my trousers. Well, they weren't so clean. I hope they show up right in the middle of the celebration party Lucius and my darling mother are no doubt holding as we speak." He drew in a shaky breath. 
"Well. This certainly simplifies my packing. That's something, I suppose."

"You were buying most of your own clothes?"

"Unlike you, I liked to be independent." Draco affected a shrug, but it didn't look as careless as usual. "Besides, Lucius didn't approve of the diamond buttons. Good thing he bought most of what I've got on now, though, or I'd be standing here starkers."

Ron probably didn't even hear the starkers comment, Harry thought. He was wrapped up in two words only. "Diamond buttons!"

Draco rounded on Ron. "Oh, yes. But they're gone now, along with every last Galleon I had to call my own, even the ones I withdrew in the past week trying to stave off disaster. Not that my nominal control would let me take out much, but that's a moot point now, isn't it? It's all gone back to Lucius. So just go ahead and laugh, Weasley! Well? Go on, laugh! Say it! Draco Malfoy's as poor as a Weasley! Write home, tell your friends, do your fucking worst!"

"Actually," said Ron with a not-so-nice gleam in his eye, "you're even poorer than we are. At least we have a house."

Draco lunged, only to be restrained by Snape's quick reflexes.

"Maybe you two should just go," Harry sighed. "I'll see you . . . I don't know. When I can, which might be quite a while."

Snape shook Draco slightly. "Behave yourself." Then letting him go, he turned to Ron and Hermione and spoke in cold, clipped tones. "Your efforts to exonerate Draco did not go unnoticed, I do assure you. Perhaps in future, Miss Granger, you will consider before you put quill to parchment that such things often last a great deal longer than one intends and can have less than salutary effects. Now be gone, both of you."

He all but herded them from the room.

"What the bloody hell did all that mean?" Harry heard Ron asking on the way out.

"Thanks for trying and by the way that letter you wrote was a disaster all around," Hermione translated.

The thud of the door closing behind them announced to Harry that he was alone with his family. At last.

"So I'll pack as well," Harry said in a definite tone. "Oh . . . most of my stuff's up in the Tower."

"So it is," said Snape in an hard tone. "Except items such as cloaks and maps, items no student should have. Shall we add picture frames to the list? I thought you had acquired a shred of common
"sense living here, but it appears I was mistaken! Risking yourself to the vagaries of untested magic once was not enough for you, I see! You had to do it again!"

Harry tried to brazen it out. "Well technically it wasn't untested this time--"

"Oh no?" Snape glared down at him. "I suppose the frame began to pass sounds through for no reason at all?"

_Oh, yeah._ "All right, it was untested," Harry admitted. "I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"No, it won't," Snape agreed, the claim delivered in a precise tone that was nothing short of chilling. "Because quite obviously, you can't be trusted! You're not to be alone in your room again, is that clear? And may Merlin help you if you disobey me on that account!"

Harry's mouth fell open. "But it's my room!" he protested, more than a little shocked. But then he remembered the other punishments his father had doled out. _Five hundred points, ten thousand lines._ This was more of the same, really. Overkill. "Listen, you're supposed to send me to my room when I'm bad, not tell me I'm not allowed in there!"

"And you are supposed to _respect my opinions and value my guidance,_ are you not?"

The words struck a chord in Harry, which puzzled him until he remembered the forms he'd filled out right before the adoption. Snape was throwing his own words back at him.

"I do respect your opinions and value your guidance, I do! I just . . . I had to know! I had to stand by Draco!"

The Potions Master brushed his hair back from his face. "I'm not going to argue this now, Harry. You will go to the Tower tonight and come back down here tomorrow for the first of your Potions tutorials. Those are long overdue."

"Potions!" Harry erupted. What the hell was Snape going on about? "What about Argentina?"

"You may be certain that when I have something to tell you about our plans, I will _tell you._ As I do believe I mentioned. Now, do as I have said and go catch up to your friends. Draco needs to collect his things and leave for Devon." Snape waved his wand towards the wall that flanked the hallway, presumably to halt Ron and Hermione. Harry wasn't sure what spell would do _that_.

"If Draco's going to Devon I want to come as well," he protested. "We're in this together. Besides, you remember last time, he went a bit barmy--"

"Excuse me," Draco said in a pleasant tone, though under it lay all sorts of sharp spikes. "I am actually still here in the room listening. And for your information, I'm not going to slit my wrists or do whatever it is the Muggle-raised among us do when they're distraught, Harry. After all, it's not as though my whole world has collapsed. I'll still have my N.E.W.T.s to fall back on. Oh, but I _won't._ No matter, there's always enough money to keep me in silks. Oh, but there _isn't._ But at least the love of my life will stick by me. Oh, but she _won't,_ ever, will she, because she's dead dead _dead_--"

"For God's sake, get him a calming draught," Harry begged his father.

"Ha, very funny. If I take another swig of that swill I will _die,_ Potter. I've had it with being coddled."

"Harry, go to the Tower as I said. I will stay with Draco in Devon."

"Why can't I come?"
"Because my patience has a limit and you have exhausted it!" Snape shouted. "How can I be any more clear? You disobeyed me over the frame and now you are disobeying me again! Go catch up to your friends!"

Harry took an abrupt step back.

Snape paused, breathing rather deliberately for a moment, before appearing to calm. "Harry, Draco is what matters tonight. If you could think of someone other than yourself for five contiguous seconds, you would realise that he needs time alone with his father."

Harry had been thinking of someone besides himself, but he could also see what Snape meant. "All right, I'll go to the Tower," he said, chewing his lip. A chance for Snape and Draco to have a father-son chat was a good idea, even if the way Snape had gone about it, it had sounded more like get out of my sight.

It wasn't that, though. He had said to come back in the morning, after all. "What time for my Potions tutorial, sir?"

"Eleven," said Snape in a heavy tone. "If I am not here, wait for me. Do not attempt a Potion unsupervised. Do I have to ward the lab and your room to enforce my rules or can you act your age for once?"

"I can act my age," retorted Harry, stung.

"Let us hope so."

Sighing, Harry went over to his brother and looked him in the eyes. "I'm really sorry they expelled you. It's wrong and unfair. But it'll come out all right, Draco--"

"There you go with the infernal optimism," said the other boy, looking away. "I told you there wasn't one chance in hell this would end up any other way. And it's not going to come out all right. It can't, not now."

He meant the money, Harry knew.

An idea burst forth out of nowhere to fill Harry's whole mind. He really didn't know why he hadn't thought of it when Draco had first mentioned being worried about his vault. Well, maybe he did know. Most days, he tried pretty hard to avoid thinking of Sirius. But after using the mirror, after realising that Sirius would be proud to claim Draco as family . . . he couldn't help but think that this was exactly the right thing to do.

"No, it's not gone," he said, taking Draco by the arm. "You can have it all back. More than you lost, probably--"

"Harry," said Snape in a warning tone.

Harry ignored it. "I have Sirius Black's vault, Draco," he explained. "I was his sole heir. There's even a house! And it's really more yours than mine, all of it. You're a Black, too. I'll just sign it all over--"

"Shut up, Potter," said Draco in a low voice as he yanked his arm free.

"No, really, it should be yours," Harry insisted.

"Shut up about it!" Draco crossed his arms in front of him. "You're a complete fucking imbecile. It's
not enough I have to lose my wand and membership in Slytherin. You want my pride as well?" His eyes glinted like daggers. "Well, you can't have it. Malfoys don't take charity."

"It's not charity! We're family!"

"Family!" screamed Draco, the word clearly some sort of fuse for him.

"Harry," Snape said again, his tones this time sounding more exhausted than anything else. "You'd better go. You're making things worse."

"But I--"

"Go."

So finally, Harry did.
Harry said nothing about his family when he joined his friends on their way back to Gryffindor tower, but his dreams that night spoke volumes.

He was standing before the enchanted picture frame, wand at the ready, then stepping back as the wall dissolved into the image of the double doors that led into the Boardroom. The doors were closed just then, and Snape was standing there with Draco, one hand on his shoulder as he gave the boy a last word of encouragement. The doors opened like magic, beckoning the pair inside, but instead of seeing his father and brother walk forward, Harry was suddenly transported into the middle of the hearing.

Or trial, really, for that was what it had been.

Everything was the same as it had been in his waking life, down to the last detail. The stone stool where Draco sat. Lucius, his entire demeanour composed, though he was ever so slightly smirking. Fudge, banging his gavel when the Governors began to speak amongst themselves.

Then Harry noticed his godfather, and realised that not everything was the same.

Sirius, alive and well.

He was seated at the curved table with the other Board members, just as if he had a right to be, as if he were one of them, when in fact he was a fugitive from the Ministry’s horrid idea of justice. How could he be sitting out in the open like that, with the Minister of Magic himself not twenty feet away? And what if some Aurors came in to testify? They’d recognise Sirius even if nobody else seemed to. Sirius was going to get tossed to the Dementors . . .

But not if Harry had anything to say about it.

Standing close to the wall, he thought desperately of his godfather, trying to make the wall focus on him alone so that he could whisper a warning. But nothing happened; he could still see the entire Board, and Draco, Snape, and Dumbledore as well. Snape was glaring, his black eyes fierce, but strangely, his anger didn't seem directed at Sirius.

Uh-oh . . .

Snape somehow knew that Harry was using the magical picture frame again, knew that Harry was misusing it . . .

But what did that matter when Sirius could be arrested any second?

Concentrating again, Harry thought only of Sirius, focusing his every thought on him and only him, reaching down deep into the core of his being to pull forth every bit of magic he possessed. Protecting Sirius was all that mattered. His father would be angry, but that was all right. He’d said he didn’t expect Harry to be perfect; he’d promised that he and Harry would get past whatever difficulties might arise.

It's going to be all right, Harry thought. I'll warn Sirius to get away, and once he's safely in hiding, I'll make it up to Severus. Somehow. Everything will be just fine . . .

In the next instant, though, Harry realised that things were far from fine. The whole wall before him shattered like a mirror dropped upon a hard, stone floor. Jagged granite chunks fell to the ground,
the noise of them so loud that Harry winced and covered his ears.

Suddenly Snape was there in person, in the bedroom with Harry, shaking his head.

"Idiot child, you broke Draco's Christmas present!"

"He broke mine," Harry said, and right away wished he hadn't, because he didn't really resent that. He understood the kind of state Draco had been in that day. And now his father was going to think he was an idiot, wasn't he, or at the least he would think Harry a child, a petulant child. And Snape knew how to be scathing, didn't he? He knew just how to cut Harry down to size, and he wouldn't hesitate to do just that, would he---

But all Snape said was, "Oh, but you're hurt, Harry. Let me see. Come now, let me see . . ."

Harry didn't know what he was talking about. "Huh? I'm not hurt--"

But he was only just realising that yes, he was. His whole hand felt like it was on fire, the sensation worst on the finger that bore his snake ring. "Severus," he said, his voice wavering with shock, "I think I need a potion."

"No potion," said Snape, his voice smooth like honey, yet laced with something sinister. "You don't deserve a potion after what you've done."

Snape pricked his finger then, using a thick, long needle that reminded Harry of Samhain, and Harry flinched. Blood dripped from the wound and oozed onto his mother's ring. Except, it wasn't his mother's so much now, was it? It was Severus' as well. And Severus was angry . . .

Harry yanked his hand away and began to rub it on his shirt, back and forth, trying to get the blood off the ring. But the blood remained, coating the ring so completely that no part of it was visible, now. The ring was ruined, and Snape's so-called help had been no help at all. Harry's finger felt like it was going up in flames. "Why'd you do that?"

A hard look in those black eyes. "Because your nonsensical antics got Draco expelled," spat Snape. "It's your fault, all of it!"

"It's not! All I wanted was to talk to Sirius. You saw him, he was there in the Boardroom--"

"No, he wasn't. Your godfather is dead, and if you think you saw him it's only because he's part of the mirror you used!"

Sirius was in the mirror? Harry started, his mind spinning so fast the sensation was almost painful. I've never seen Sirius in the mirror. He'd gone through the Veil before I ever found it. But maybe the mirror can somehow reach him now, and I can talk to him--

Grabbing the broken mirror from where he'd dropped it on Draco's bed, Harry grabbed another shard. It sliced his hand wide open, but he barely noticed that. He held a shard up to where the frame used to hang, though now of course he was looking straight into the potions lab, as there was no frame at all any longer, nor even a wall to hang it on. But the magic might still work, he thought, as he drew his wand and prepared to cast. Show me Sirius, that was all it would take--

His wand was snatched from him before he could say the words. "Untested magic! I do believe you've done quite enough of that already!"

"But it's Sirius! I want to talk to Sirius!"
"And I wanted Draco exonerated but instead you did all you could to send him away, calling in Miss Granger of all people!" Snape bared his teeth. "You'll stay out of your room. In fact, stay out of the dungeons entirely, Potter. I've no wish to see you. Get out of my sight!"

Harry woke up drenched in sweat, his hands tightly clenched, biting back something suspiciously close to a scream as he sat up and looked around in wild panic.

"You all right, mate?" murmured Ron, the sound muffled by the curtains around each of their beds.

The question helped Harry realise he'd been dreaming, but it didn't slow his heartbeat. "Yeah," he finally managed to answer. "Nightmare. Sorry."

Ron was suddenly there beside him, though Harry hadn't heard the curtains being pushed aside. "You-Know-Who?"

Harry shook his head.

"Want to go down and see your father?"

Harry sort of shuddered. Snape had said to stay away . . . but no, that had been the dream Snape. In real life Snape would never say a thing like that to him. His father loved him; Harry knew that. It wasn't real, that dream. Sirius wasn't alive, and he wasn't in the mirror, either.

"Harry, you want me to go down and get Snape for you, then?" asked Ron.

"He's in . . . uh . . ." Fidelius kept Harry from saying anything else, even though the other boys in the room were most likely asleep. Ron understood, though.

"Oh, right. I guess he would be, considering." Ron gave him a close look. "Sure you're all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." Harry flopped back onto his back. "Honest. I'm going to try to sleep again."

Nodding, Ron padded back to his own bed.

Harry rolled onto his side and calmed his breathing, but it seemed like a long time passed before he dropped back off to sleep.

------------------------------------------------------

After a dream like that, Harry was a bit reluctant to go down for his Potions tutorial, but he knew better than to give his father even more reason to be annoyed with him. Snape wasn't there when he arrived, so Harry sat down in the living room and prepared to wait. There wasn't much else he could do, as he was forbidden to so much as enter his own room.

Sighing, Harry settled in.

At precisely eleven, however, he received a considerable surprise. A scroll popped into existence in the middle of the room and unrolled itself as it hung suspended in the air. Startled, Harry jerked back a little, but the parchment didn't do anything further. After a moment, he got up from the couch and walked close enough to recognise Snape's distinctive scrawl.

Harry,

I am occupied at the moment but will be with you as soon as is practicable. In the
interim, you may disregard the strictures regarding your room. Draco's picture frame is unresponsive now; it shows nothing but the Whomping Willow. The spells weaving the frame together were irreparably changed when you forced them into new pathways and now, the magic appears to be dependent on the broken mirror you left lying out. I've taken the mirror away to prevent any further mischief on your part.

Severus

Harry hardly knew what to think of all that. He was allowed in his room again, which was good, but it certainly wasn't worth losing his mirror over. Then again, Snape didn't know that the mirror was from Sirius. He didn't know it had anything to do with Sirius.

Maybe if he knew, he'd give it back. Or maybe not, considering he'd never liked Sirius. He'd think the mirror was good for nothing but mischief if he knew that Sirius had been the one to give it to Harry. And even not knowing, he might think that since the mirror was broken, it was good for nothing at all.

Snape threw out Sals' box after Draco broke it, Harry remembered. Reparo was no good in that case; the magic had been too far shattered. Why would Snape treat a broken mirror any differently?

Something deep inside Harry seemed to break apart just thinking about that. He'd have to talk to Snape and make sure he didn't throw the mirror away, he decided.

I should have told him about the mirror a long time ago, Harry thought, despondent. Snape wasn't too likely to be pleased that Harry had been keeping a thing like that a secret. He also wasn't too likely to give it back, considering the use Harry had made of it.

You broke Draco's Christmas present . . .

Had he really? Harry wanted to go have a look at the frame for himself. He was even allowed to now; Snape had said he could go into his room again. Remembering how angry his father had been, however, Harry decided to err on the side of caution. He wanted to show Snape that he could be trusted . . . that he could be good.

Or maybe he was trying to show the man that he'd rather lose his room than the mirror.

Sighing again, Harry sank back down onto the couch, shaking his head a bit when the scroll responded by rolling itself back up and vanishing with another pop. He wondered if it had gone back to wherever Snape was.

After that, things quickly got very boring as far as Harry was concerned. He'd never been in Snape's quarters alone before, not for any length of time. He'd always had Draco to talk with, not that he'd appreciated that very much in the beginning. And Draco, really, was just about all he could think about now. Was he holding up all right in Devon? Did he know how soon they were leaving England, or where they might be heading? Did he know any more about Snape's plans than Harry did?

When I have something to tell you, I will tell you . . .

Harry tried to read, but since he wasn't an academic like Hermione, Snape's books really weren't all that interesting. After a while he grabbed parchment and quill from a low shelf and wrote a letter to Remus, catching him up on all the news. Well, all the news he could share. There was a lot he couldn't say, as the letter might be captured in transit. Tucking the letter away in a pocket, Harry realised he'd have to ask Severus how to get it delivered. He didn't want to ask Hedwig to fly all the
way to France.

It was almost lunchtime by then, so Harry ordered through the Floo. Grilled cheese sandwich with chips, and a big glass of orange juice, followed by strawberry ice cream, but it really wasn't very much fun eating all alone.

After lunch he just wandered for a while, back and forth across the length of the dining alcove and living room. That soon palled. It was almost a relief when he realised he needed to use the toilet. He couldn't leave the dungeons without an escort, so Snape could hardly blame Harry for going into his room after all, could he?

The moment that question crossed his mind, Harry had to ask himself why he'd even wonder that. Snape had said it was all right to enter his room, after all. He'd even taken the trouble to write it down so that Harry would know.

Harry shook his head to clear it, and tried to stop second-guessing himself as he opened his door. He noticed as he passed it that the picture frame was showing the Whomping Willow, just as Snape had said. He took care of his needs in the bathroom, then went back out to study the frame for a moment. The willow trying to bud out into new leaves. Harry could see grass fluttering in the breeze, so the image wasn't frozen in one sense. Snape was right, though; no matter how hard he thought about Hagrid's hut, or the greenhouses, or the Quidditch pitch, he couldn't get the frame to budge from showing that one tree.

Well, he hadn't really thought Snape was wrong, though he still did wonder if wanded magic would make it work as before. Not that he was going to try any; he just wondered. Same way he wondered if the missing piece of his mirror had ever come back into existence. Harry began looking around for it, thinking that if he found it he'd have to give it to Snape to keep with the other shards.

The missing shard of mirror was still missing, Harry realised with dismay. The feeling was cut short, however, by the sight of something odd in his room. Something he recognised straight away.

A plain parchment envelope, propped up on the shelves where Harry normally kept his books and some of his Christmas gifts. The shelves were empty now; not even Draco's things remained. There was only that envelope and what it contained. A Gringotts key. Harry knew that without even opening it because by then, he knew he was living out events he'd dreamed.

_The unadoption dream . . ._

But Snape wasn't going to unadopt him; Harry knew that. He wasn't worried at all, hadn't been for ages.

_Three months is not ages, except perhaps when one is sixteen . . ._

All right, so it hadn't been ages. But it had been long enough for him to learn that he could depend on Severus.

And besides, now that he was thinking about it, it came to him that his dream-self hadn't been the least bit worried about an unadoption. He hadn't been afraid at all, not while he'd still been inside the dream. Even hearing all that the casewitch had said, he'd felt just fine about it all. It was only when he'd woken up that he'd panicked.

His dream self _had_ been curious, though, about this key. Just whose was it? Wandering over to the shelves, Harry broke the plain wax seal holding the envelope closed and examined the tiny key that dropped into his hand. Not his. Definitely not his. He supposed it might be Draco's, but if Draco's
vault had reverted to Lucius, wouldn't the key have gone to him right along with all the things Draco had bought with his money?

So maybe it was Sirius' key? After all, Harry didn't know what that one might look like. But why would that key show up here, and in an unmarked envelope no less? Dumbledore had it, and it wasn't as if Snape would have gone to the headmaster to say that Harry should have it so he could pass it on to Draco. Not when Snape had tried to tell him not to bring the bequest up in the first place.

Good advice, Harry recognised. He should have listened to it. But the idea had just seemed so utterly perfect at the time. He'd been sure that it was what he was meant to do with the money. He wanted Draco to have it. And he was supposed to have good instincts, wasn't he?

Not on that count, apparently.

A thudding noise announced that someone had come in, and Harry held his breath, because this was it, wasn't it? It would be Snape and the casewitch out there, discussing something that had sounded like unadoption months ago, but now . . .

If you could think of someone other than yourself for five contiguous seconds . . .

And that, as it turned out, was what it all boiled down to. Harry had interpreted that awful dream with thought only for himself; it had never once dawned on him that the whole thing might have been about Draco. Of course not. Back when he'd dreamed it, right after that awful you-don't-deserve-to-be-my-son argument, he hadn't understood, not really, that Draco had needs too. Serious ones.

As far as Harry was concerned, it was high time that Draco got adopted too.

It was just a shame that it had to happen like this, with poverty and expulsion wrapped around it. It was a shame it had to look like Snape was doing it because of circumstances and not love. But it had looked that way for Harry's adoption too, sort of, with the blood warding being dependent on the legalities, and Harry had got past all that.

Voices drifted in from the living room, voices he'd heard before. Words he'd heard before. Amaelia Thistlethorne was talking, her high voice unmistakable. Harry put the key back in the envelope and set it down, then went to the door to listen, peering out through the crack to spy on Snape as he talked with the casewitch from Wizard Family Services. He almost wanted to go out there, but he hadn't done that in the dream, a thought which kept him in the room. He didn't know what might happen if he defied the future, but if he ended up somehow fouling up the adoption, he'd never forgive himself.

"Well," the casewitch was saying. "I certainly never thought to be back here so very soon, and under such terrible circumstances."

"Have you brought the paperwork?" Snape asked, his voice businesslike and determined. "I want this over and done with, as soon as possible."

The casewitch pursed her lips. "I am under a great deal of pressure not to permit you to take such a step as this, you understand."

A sneering expression settled on Snape's face as Harry looked out at the scene in the living room. "I need not ask from which quarter. He does so love to pull those strings. No doubt he doesn't care for this development, but . . ." Snape shrugged. "I'm afraid it is necessary." His eyes narrowed. "You
won't let his influence dissuade you, I trust."

"Of course not. Wizard Family Services' sole concern is the best interest of the child. Are you certain
this is the only way to resolve the situation?"

"I am absolutely certain," Snape replied as he crossed his arms in resolution.

"I understand that your feelings may have changed, but this is so sudden--"

"On the contrary. It is long overdue."

The casewitch shifted on her feet as though considering how best to get through Snape's
stubbornness. "I'm sure the young man must be very upset, which is only natural, considering--"

"Miss Thistlethorne," Snape softly said, his tones ringing with decision, "it is time to end this . . .
standoff, so that both he and I can move past the regrettable position we find ourselves in. I trust I
make myself clear?"

"Very clear, Professor."

With that, the casewitch extended a parchment. Snape took it, and summoning a quill, signed it.

"I'll speak with Harry now," Amaelia Thistlethorne said. "He really should have been informed of
this in advance, you realise."

Snape nodded, a sweep of long, black hair brushing his face. "No doubt. You wish to interview him
alone, I take it?" She had barely begun to nod when the Potions Master called out, "Harry. You are
in your room, I believe?"

Harry's face heated at the implication that he was eavesdropping. No matter that he was. On the other
hand, was it really eavesdropping when at least one of the people conversing knew for certain that
you were listening in? Snape knew; he had to. He'd read over Harry's account of the dream. He must
have recognised that it was coming true and that Harry was hanging onto every word.

Still blushing, Harry pushed his door wide and went out to shake the casewitch's hand.

"So, I hear you are back living in Gryffindor, Mr Potter."

"That's right."

"And how is that going?"

Harry couldn't help but smile. "All right. My friends think it's pretty funny that Severus told me to be
good when he dropped me off. You know, they don't think it fits his image, hearing him be so . . ."
Harry thought better than to say sweet. "Dad-like."

"And what do you think?"

"Um, he's doing all right. For both of us, speaking of which . . ." Harry turned to face his father.
"You didn't leave Draco alone, did you?"

"Of course not. Albus is with him."

"Oh. So, um . . . can you bring him home, now? That was an adoption paper you just signed, wasn't
it?"
"Draco has to sign it as well," Snape murmured, watching Harry closely. "And then there are a few formalities to be observed. But once he is my son in the eyes of the Ministry, he can live here whether he's enrolled as a student or not. Albus found the provision buried deep in the Hogwarts' Charter."

Harry nodded his understanding, ignoring the casewitch for the moment. "But what about the Governors? They wanted Draco gone... do you think they'll make up a special rule that he can't live here, son or no?"

"Amending the Hogwarts charter would take some considerable time." Snape's black eyes began to glitter. "Moreover, the purpose of their action was to send a message. As Draco will remain expelled no matter where he lives, the Governors, all except one that is, should be satisfied."

"And the one will keep making trouble." Harry sighed.

Amaelia Thistlethorne frowned, her fat lips turning down. "Yes, he was a complication I hadn't foreseen."

"Foreseen, how could you have foreseen anything if the whole thing only came up last night--" The truth struck him then, the blow so hard Harry was surprised he didn't stagger. "You've had adopting Draco in the works for a while," he realised out loud, hating the sound of hurt he could hear in every word. "I... Hagrid said you'd told the headmaster I ought to be told more about what's going on around me. Didn't you mean it?"

"I meant it." Snape ran a hand through his hair. "Harry, Hagrid is the reason I didn't tell you that I'd submitted an application to adopt your brother. Draco and I wanted to let you know straight away. He tried to tell you, if you'll recall, when we arrived home on Thursday evening after dealing with the initial forms and interviews."

That was right, Draco had been terribly excited over something that night. And Snape had cut him off and not let him talk about it...

"But Hagrid was here," said Snape. "He's not the most closed-mouth of individuals, and as I didn't want Lucius catching the slightest wind of our plans... I did intend to inform you, Harry. But by the next opportunity, we had encountered what appeared to be an insurmountable difficulty and it seemed the adoption would never be allowed to go through."

"Lucius," said Harry, grimacing as he remembered how Draco's mood had got steadily worse over the course of the week.

"Actually, no," supplied the casewitch. "It was the head of my own office, objecting most vociferously to the entire notion. Don't forget, we had emancipated Mr Malfoy some months earlier. In doing so, we had announced a finding that he was fully capable of functioning as an adult. To effect a custodial adoption requires us to reverse that finding." The casewitch looked away as though embarrassed. "I'm afraid my superiors took a dim view of that. They'd rather the public believe WFS is above error."

"But you just said WFS's sole concern is the best interests of the child!"

"That is in fact my concern," said the casewitch in a stiff voice. "Which is why I was advising your father not to rush into this. Your best interests are at stake here too, and with the matter of the murder being rather clouded--"

"You were hesitating because you think Draco might have done it?" Harry shook his head. "No, he's
innocent. The Aurors got it right, and Fudge cast as much doubt on that as he could because he’s in Lucius Malfoy’s back pocket, see?"

"Minister Fudge, Harry," said Snape.

"Minister Fudge. But honest, I do know for a fact that Draco didn’t kill anybody last week, Miss Thistlethorne. Lucius is behind all of this. He’s trying his best to get Draco kicked out of school. Easier to deliver him to Voldemort that way." The casewitch shuddered a bit at the name, but Harry managed not to make a face. "But if Lucius Malfoy isn’t the one pulling strings to stop the adoption, then who is?"

"Oh, now that Lucius Malfoy has realised what the charter will enable your father to do, he is indeed pulling all the strings he can."

"He’s a school Governor but he didn’t know in advance what the school charter says?"

"You’re aware of my opinion of the Governors, I do believe." If not for the casewitch, Harry thought, his father might have gone into full sneering mode. As it was, Snape managed to sound merely disdainful. "Lucius appears to have found out yesterday what I had in mind, and he at once began to place obstacles in our way. Hence Draco’s rather foul mood before the hearing—"

"Before and after," corrected Harry.

"Well, his hopes had been severely dashed. Once Lucius had a finger in the pie Draco rather doubted that Albus and I would prevail. He ought to have had more faith.” Snape’s black hair swayed as he shook his head. "At any rate, now you know why he screamed *family* at you in that irate tone. I trust you weren’t too perturbed?"

Harry grinned. "Hey, if you could put up with Draco telling you to fuck off—"

"Harry!"

*Oops. Casewitch.*

Far from becoming offended, however, Amaelia Thistlethorne was softly smiling. "I’m greatly encouraged that you appear to know when to make allowances, Professor. It’s a sign of good parenting, and I must say I’d wondered about that, what with your rather fearsome reputation amongst the students."

Harry was a little amused to see what looked like a touch of colour dotting Snape’s normally sallow cheeks. "Yes, well . . . these two boys are not my students. Unless I’m teaching them, you understand."

"He does a great job juggling the two roles."

Those spots of colour gained a shade or two. "Harry, I do not need you to laud me to Miss Thistlethorne."

"All right, Dad."

That earned him a glower, but Snape didn’t mean it in earnest. Harry could tell, which he thought was an all-around nice feeling. What wasn’t so nice, however, was thinking about how Lucius Malfoy must have found out about the adoption. Same way he’d got a hold of Hermione’s complaint letter, Harry figured.
"Professor Snape, if you might leave me alone with Mr Potter now," hinted the casewitch as she gave the Floo a rather significant glance.

"Certainly." Snape nodded briefly in her direction before turning his attention to Harry. "I plan to stay with Draco until matters are official and I can accompany him back home. You will be all right? We should return before nightfall."

"That soon?"

"I'm afraid his application is being expedited even more than yours was, the circumstances being so urgent."

Harry liked the idea that he wasn't the only one who ever got special treatment. "See you later then," he said to his father. "Tell Draco 'hallo' from me."

The minute Snape was gone, Harry rounded on the casewitch. He'd thought better than to tell her in Snape's hearing how to run her office; the Potions Master would no doubt have thought Harry was overstepping his bounds. Same as he was supposed to call everybody by their rightful title. But this was too important a matter to push aside.

"You do know you have a rat working for you, don't you?"

Amaelia Thistlethorne nodded. "Richard Steyne, yes. Your father and I reasoned that out while we were fetching Mr Malfoy's emancipation certificate from his school file this morning. Richard himself only became aware of the proposed adoption yesterday, as he'd taken a few days' leave. Almost as soon as Richard was back in the office, we began to hear from several solicitors who were quite insistent that no adoption take place." She gave a mirthless laugh. "I'm afraid that Mr Malfoy overplayed his hand. The solicitors began by claiming that Severus Snape is fit to be nobody's parent. In effect, asking WFS to agree that your own adoption was a mistake. Well, my superior wasn't about to do that. He's still clamouring for your father to be awarded an Order of Merlin for so heroically rescuing you on Samhain! When slandering your father failed, Malfoy's solicitors started in with threats, which virtually guaranteed a swift and sure adoption process. WFS will not have it said that it can be intimidated into ignoring the best interests of the child."

No, they'd only ignore that to preserve their own pride. Harry thought better than to say that, though. "You mean Lucius Malfoy railing against Severus adopting Draco has ended up getting it shoved through?"

Her eyes twinkled. "Ironic, isn't it? The head of the whole office decided it was better to admit the emancipation was a mistake than give the public impression that WFS can be bought and sold."

"Yeah, I can see that." Harry lapsed into thought, something bothering him, something that didn't quite add up... "Oh. If Draco's emancipation is withdrawn wouldn't that make Lucius his legal father again? I mean, for some small amount of time?"

"His emancipation has been withdrawn already, which is why I was charged with verifying the magical destruction of all certificates, including the one filed with the school. However, Lucius' parental rights were severed months ago when WFS became convinced he'd put out a contract for his own son's death. That is not acceptable behaviour," she understated.

"What about his mother?"

The casewitch waved a contemptuous hand. "Oh, that woman waived her rights rather than stand with her son against her husband. She's got nothing to do with Mr Malfoy any longer, either."
Harry wasn't so sure of that. He couldn't forget the time it had sounded like Draco was moaning Dragon my treasure in his sleep.

"So what about Steyne then?" he pressed, his thoughts travelling full circle. "He's going to get sacked? And charged?"

The casewitch's smile was thin and rather malevolent. Strange thing to see in someone dedicated to helping children, Harry thought. "Your father thought it might be more strategic to keep Steyne employed so that he could be used to feed false information to Lucius Malfoy."

"You agreed to that? Will your superiors go along with it?"

"They haven't realised Richard's culpability, nor will they, if I have anything to do with it. For you see, my concern truly is your best interest, Mr Potter. It seems to me that keeping Lucius Malfoy misinformed could be helpful in protecting you."

Wow, pretty manipulative for a Hufflepuff, was Harry's first thought. Of course Snape had been the one to dream the scheme up, but Harry was still impressed.

"And your soon-to-be brother," she added, watching him carefully. Harry took that to mean that his sibling-interview was about to start in earnest. But that was all right; he was ready.

Waving the casewitch into a chair, Harry took one himself and remembered to ask if she'd like any refreshment. Only after they were both sipping a rather nice blend of Oolong tea did he take her bait.

"There's no soon-to-be about it. Draco and I are brothers already. I told you that, remember? But it'll be nice to have it finally be official."

"Why is that?"

"Draco seems to handle setbacks pretty well in general, but lately I've been worried about him. See, I've been let out of the dungeons but he's still confined . . . and I got to tell people Severus is my dad while he couldn't say a word, and well, he's a Slytherin even if they did take his crest away. I think he needs things to be even."

"You sound surprisingly accepting," remarked the casewitch. "You realise it would be entirely normal for you to feel a tad resentful of this development?"

"I guess," said Harry, lifting his shoulders as he smiled. "I think I went through that already, though. We aren't forming a new family, Miss Thistlethorne. We've been one for a while."

"Well the situation here does seem to have been unusual in several respects. But as long as you're at ease with matters I see no need to recommend counselling." She looked him up and down. "I take it you and Mr Malfoy have desisted from the rough Muggle sports?"

"Uh, yeah," Harry quickly said. Maybe too quickly, since the casewitch gave him a sharp look. "I mean, mostly. We know not to let it go too far now. Though Hermione really was worrying over nothing. You know that her letter ended up in Fudge's possession?"

"Highly, highly inappropriate. The Minister should know better than to read confidential WFS documents, let alone use them in the manner he did."

"Well, that's Fudge for you. Oh, I mean Minister Fudge."

The casewitch leaned back in her chair and sipped her tea for a moment as she studied him. "You seem rather intent on obeying your father."
"Isn't that normal?"

"Actually, a common reaction to adoption is a good bit of acting out. Deliberate defiance, the child doing all he can to test the limits of his new parent's patience. Judging from the things I've seen and heard, you appear to have skipped that phase, but I thought it wise to caution you that Mr Malfoy may not."

Harry set down his half-finished tea. "Why on earth would Draco . . . He's been very rude lately, but I'm sure it's because of the awful strain he's been under. I thought it would get better as soon as he got adopted and felt safe."

"Ah, but that's just it. If he follows the typical pattern, he won't feel safe until he's thoroughly convinced himself that his new father will stand by him no matter what. Now, bear in mind that not every adopted child attempts this tactic. You didn't. But if Mr Malfoy runs true to form, he will put himself out to be as unpleasant as he can for a time."

"I understand," murmured Harry. As unpleasant as he can be? Draco knew how to be pretty damned unpleasant. "Um, what should I do? I mean, is there anything I can do to help?"

"He'll likely feel quite jealous of your prior claim to your father. I'd suggest giving the two of them plenty of time alone in the coming weeks."

"Oh." Harry didn't like the sound of that. But then again, offering Draco money had sounded very good to him, and look at how well that had turned out. Plus, Snape himself had said something similar, hadn't he, about Draco needing father-son time. About Harry needing to put his brother's needs first for a while.

And after all, Draco had put Harry's needs first when Harry had been the one getting adopted.

The casewitch finished her tea and set the cup down. "Don't fret. Just continue being patient, and your brother will eventually come to understand that he is loved and safe here."

"I don't think he--" Harry abruptly stopped talking when it came to him that he was close to betraying something Snape had told him in confidence.

Amaelia Thistlethorne looked as though she understood Draco's issues about family love, but also as though she approved of Harry's discretion. "Patience," she repeated. "And too, please realise that it may be a few days before your brother takes it into his head to test his new father's commitment. At the very start he will likely be feeling too vulnerable to even attempt pushing limits."

Harry's first reaction to that was to think she had it wrong and Draco wasn't the vulnerable sort. But then he remembered the scene he'd witnessed the night before. Draco in the hallway, leaning against Snape, sniffling in despair from Lucius' dreadful threats. So yes, Draco was a bit vulnerable. He just didn't like to show it. And if he got a bit snide with his family for a while, well, Harry could put up with that. He could help see Draco through to the other side, where he would realise what family meant.

"Well, if you have no further questions I will return to the office to see to it that the matter is concluded this evening," said the casewitch as she hefted her considerable bulk to her feet. "Though with the head of WFS supporting it now, there should be no problems."

Harry nodded. "Hmm, too bad I didn't have any warning; I'd have made a well-wish." His mind started racing as he tried to figure out what plants would be best for Draco.

"A well-wish for an adoption?" The casewitch appeared startled, but then she caught on. "Oh, I see.
That's a marvellous notion. What a nice young man you are, thinking of a thing like that."

"Draco thought of it first. Way back then. He's a good brother."

"As Professor Snape is a good father. You needn't convince me further, Mr Potter. I thought at first that this was proceeding much too hastily, especially as the murder has yet to be solved, but now I see that you all fit quite well together. Just remember what I said about Mr Malfoy's possible mood a few days hence."

As if Harry could forget.

------------------------------------------------------

Harry wasn't nearly as bored alone in Snape's quarters the second time around, because now he had a project to pursue. A well-wish. The book Ginny had given him, *Well We Wish You*, was still in his trunk, and of course Snape had loads of books detailing magical properties of plants. Granted, those were designed more with Potions in mind, but they were still useful. Draco's book, Harry thought, would have been really useful, but it was nowhere to be found. Harry didn't know if it was one of the items that had vanished when the goblins had enforced the terms of his vault, or if Draco had merely packed it when he'd gathered up all his belongings.

*Draco must have been feeling truly hopeless,* Harry thought as he glanced about the room. There was nothing of his left at all, as though he'd believed the adoption would never go through and he'd be forever barred from Hogwarts. No wonder he'd been acting hostile. Of course, according to the casewitch, that was only going to get worse . . .

Maybe, Harry thought. *I managed to skip that step; maybe Draco will too. We are already a family.*

But at some level, Harry knew, Draco didn't really believe that.

He ate dinner alone, ordering pot roast in honour of Draco, and then got right back to his research.

The flare of the Floo took him by surprise when it finally happened. Jumping up, Harry nervously glanced down at his clothes. He should be in dress robes, well-wish in hand, and he looked as though he'd come down to brew all day! Which he had, of course. Snape had entirely forgotten about his potions tutorial, but Harry was hardly going to complain about it. In the first place, Draco was far more important. And in the second, Harry didn't like potions all that much anyway.

Draco stepped through the Floo first, followed closely by Snape, who had a satchel in hand. A small satchel, yet it probably held everything Draco had left in the whole world. Harry thought that was rather sad, but this time, he knew better than to offer Draco part of his own wealth.

"Hey," Harry said, which he thought was pretty lame, but he didn't know quite what to say about the adoption. *Upon this day your joy is made complete,* something like that, except that would have to wait until he'd got all his plants together. "Is it done? Official?"

Draco nodded, not meeting Harry's eyes. He unhooked his cloak and as he shrugged out of it, Harry couldn't help but notice the black patch where the Slytherin crest used to be.

"So do you have a certificate embossed and suitable for framing?" he asked to break the tension.
"No," snapped Draco, the one short word taking Harry aback.

"Oh, I guess it couldn't make it through *Fidelius*--"

"Indeed not. Albus delivered it personally," said Snape. He withdrew a rolled scrolled tied with ribbon and extended it to Harry.

Draco sucked in a harsh breath, but Harry gave him an easy smile. "What, you think I'm going to object to something? I'm sorry you've had it so rough lately but I'm not sorry at all to have *this* to admire." Thumb and forefinger about to pull the end of the ribbon, Harry paused. "May I?"

"I think I'd rather you didn't."

"Harry, please do go ahead," said Snape, his black eyes rebuking Draco, though his tone of voice remained calm. "He's going to find out sooner or later, you realise."

"I *know* you're adopted, Draco," quipped Harry.

"You don't know the rest though--"

"What rest?" Before Draco could answer that though, Harry had the certificate unrolled and was reading it. Well, scanning it. It was the same as his own, after all. Except for the name prominently featured in glowing gold script.

_Draco Snape._

Harry's eyes just about bugged out of his head.

_Draco Snape?_

Harry checked again, but sure enough, the name was still the same.

"You changed your name?" he finally asked, keeping his tone carefully level as he glanced up. He didn't want to let on how strange he found that; it seemed to him that Draco was a bit on edge about it already.

"Yes." As if needing a distraction, the other boy went to hang his cloak, then came back and stared at Harry in clear challenge.

"Uh, all right," said Harry, smiling past his shock. _Draco Snape?_ He rolled the name around in his mind, wishing he could try it out on his tongue to see if it fit. It was just . . . too strange to take in.

Apparently his expression gave his thoughts away. "I thought a fresh start would be a good thing," said Draco in an airy tone that didn't do a thing to hide his defensiveness. "I was tired of being judged *his* in every way just because he sired me."

Harry remembered then, Snape saying, _Draco is trying to distance himself from his father._ Harry just hadn't realised that Draco was going to try quite this hard. He still really couldn't wrap his mind around it.

"You aren't jealous, are you?"

Blinking, Harry shook his head. "No, it's not that. I'm just surprised, is all. You're happy with it, right? Then that's all that really matters."

Draco inclined his head in a rather regal gesture. "I'm happy with it, Harry. It was my idea, after all."
A wicked grin suddenly curled his lips. "Of course Lucius is bound to regard it as quite a slap in the face. So that's all right, then."

"Draco Snape," Harry finally said out loud. He couldn't imagine what his friends were going to say. But then again, that hardly mattered. "Hmm. Well that'll take a bit of getting used to but if you're happy with it then so am I."

The other boy's eyes began to gleam with mischief. "Not too late to be Harry Snape yourself . . ."

"Uh, no. I don't think so." Harry glanced at his father, who hadn't spoken since handing over the scroll. "No offence, Severus. I'm proud to be your son and have the whole world know it, but I can't change my name, I just can't."

The Potions Master didn't look put out in the least; that was nice.

"Well then," said Draco, moving forward a little. He hesitated, then took the scroll from Harry and swiftly rolled it up. Only after he had placed it atop the bookshelf alongside Harry's own suitable-for-framing certificate did he resume speaking. "I guess this really does make us brothers."

Harry started, the phrase reverberating through his mind, and then he began laughing.

Draco narrowed his eyes. "What?"

Taking several deliberate deep breaths, Harry managed to get his laughter under control. "You know how you asked me once what I knew about the future? And I didn't answer? It was because I knew this, Draco. I dreamed a long time ago, before Samhain even, that you were going to say we were brothers!"

"And how exactly is it amusing?"

_Uh-oh_, Draco was starting to sound a bit miffed. Remembering how rough and raw he'd felt after his own adoption, how unsure of his welcome even though Snape had been nothing but kind, Harry rushed the rest of the story out. "It's funny because you've said we're brothers so many times that now I'll never know which time I actually dreamed! And I used to think it mattered; I was trying to figure out what order things were happening in, but you pretty much made it so I couldn't. Let's see, first it was, we're brothers because you're a Slytherin too, and then Severus lectured us about how we were both his sons, and it was so I guess we really are brothers, and now you've said it yet again!"

Draco's voice was cool. "I hadn't realised you were keeping such careful track."

"You would have, too, if you'd dreamed back before Samhain that I was going to say that we're brothers."

"Hmm, I suppose so. I can remember what I used to think about the way you always stole my thunder."

"Oh, that's rich. I don't recall distributing Malfy stinks buttons all over school."

"Not a bad idea at this juncture though," Draco said, shrugging. "It wouldn't bother me, considering. Though it might be a poor tactical move to insult one of the Governors, much as he does deserve it. Of course he'll be simply furious that Severus managed to outsmart his every scheme. And the name change. Now that's an insult. Too bad I won't get to see his face when he reads about it in the morning edition of the Prophet."
Harry almost choked. "You're advertising it?"

"It's WFS policy since I'm a minor again now." Draco made a slight face, then appeared to shake off his morose thoughts. "So, are you all right with all of it? Not the name thing. The adoption, I mean."

"Well, of course. We were family already--"

"Not like this."

"Yes, like this." Harry sighed then, because if Draco could think that a certificate proved anything, then he really never had understood that Harry loved him. *Patience*, he heard the casewitch say inside his mind. Figuring it was better not to argue the point, he smiled a little bit. "I guess the third time's a charm."

"Huh?"

"That's three times you've said we're brothers."

"Is it, though? A charm?"

How two words could hold such insecurity was a mystery. Harry took a step towards Draco and grasped both his forearms. "Listen, Draco. If I'd known in advance what you two had planned I'd have made you a proper well wish. Actually I'm a little put out to have been left out--"

"I tried to tell you--"

"I know. It's all right, really. Severus explained. Hagrid was here so he shut you up."

"I encouraged *discretion*," Snape dryly corrected.

"No, you shut me up would be more accurate," said Draco, his tones every bit as dry. "I still wanted to tell you again, even after it started to look hopeless. But Severus said it didn't make much sense to explain until we knew more. And then I got expelled and had to leave, so I figured you might as well know everything, but when Severus and I got back here, your *friends* were hanging about, gloating like mad that I'd been kicked out of school!"

"They weren't gloating."

"Weasley was."

"Only after you mentioned again how poor he is. Come on, Draco, they testified for you! They tried to make the Board see that those other students were lying. They only came down here afterwards because Hermione wanted to apologise to me that her letter was used in such a foul way."

"She *should* apologise to me," sneered Draco. Harry braced himself for a tirade, but his brother dropped that matter for one more immediate. "So what's going to happen to Bella and Erik, Severus? They conspired to get another student expelled. Not to mention, their fascinating performance in the hearing tends to suggest that they were part of the plot to murder Pansy. Why else would they be trying so hard to help frame me?"

Snape folded his arms in front of him, his dark eyebrows drawing together over eyes that glittered with unpleasant intent. His voice cut through the air like a razor. "I will be speaking with Miss Uwannawich and Mr Vanvelzeer. You may count on it."

Harry flicked a glance towards Snape, wondering what the Potions Master had in mind. He
somehow didn't think Snape would tell him, though. Which reminded him . . . "You might at least have mentioned that Argentina was off, you know."

Snape raised a questioning brow. "I did."

Oh, right. He had. "Well you know I didn't believe that! I mean, it might have been Bolivia or Kenya or something, but I definitely thought we were leaving the country. You knew I thought that!"

Snape took off his own cloak then, carefully hanging it on a peg. "How should I know what you think?" he asked, a trifle snidely. "You gave me to understand quite some time ago that I was not to use clandestine Legilimency on you except under extraordinary circumstances."

"Oh, that's a bit beside the point."

"Last night I did not feel like discussing my dearth of travel plans with you, as you had seriously displeased me with your dabbling in untested magic!"

"So leaving me in the dark, that was your idea of a punishment?"

"It was not done consciously," Snape said, his voice stiff. "I had much to accomplish and a good deal to consider besides your tender feelings."

"Harry," Draco broke in, "don't you remember what Lucius would do to me for punishment? Or what those awful Muggles would do to you?"

"Yeah," admitted Harry. "Still doesn't make it right to make me think I'm leaving Hogwarts, though."

"I didn't make you think that, you idiot child."

"Let's just drop it," said Harry. He could see that nobody was going to win this argument, and really, it wasn't so very important. He'd have handled things differently if he'd been in Snape's shoes, but then again, everyone made mistakes sometimes. And Snape hadn't been in the best position to know for sure, had he, if they might need to travel after all. At that point the adoption had still been in doubt.

Draco drew a pale wand from his pocket and levitated the satchel Snape had carried back from Devon. "Well, that's more than enough talk of leaving. I'm going to settle back in." With that he was striding into the bedroom, the satchel floating behind.

When Harry glanced back at his father, it was to see that the man was watching him carefully. "Harry," he began, but whatever Snape had meant to say was interrupted by Draco stomping back out to the living room, an open envelope clenched in one hand, a tiny gleaming key in the other.

"What the hell is this, Potter, eh? I told you no!" Draco cast a fierce silver glare towards his father. "Didn't I tell the fool no? Well, didn't I? You were there! And look at what he's gone and done!"

A tinkling sound reverberated through the room as Draco flung the key against the stone floor.

"Harry," Snape said, the name that time used in warning. But then, as though something else had occurred to him, the man turned to Draco. "It's not what you think."

"Oh, good," sniped Draco. "Because what I think is that the rich boy is showing off again, rubbing it in my face how much he's got to give and how much he must think I need it, as if I can't live without
money, for Merlin's sake, as if I'll just wither and die from the lack of it! You don't think I have a backbone, Potter? You don't think I've lived through worse than this, such as Lucius putting out a fucking contract so my own house mates will be only too delighted to kill me--"

"Shut up!" Harry finally shouted. "God, Draco, just shut up! I don't know whose key that is or where it came from, all right? You might try asking a couple of questions before you start leaping to conclusions, you know!"

"Oh, some conclusion! Just last night you were only too happy to treat me like a charity case!"

"Well, you set me straight, didn't you? You wouldn't take Sirius' money if you were starving in the street! Not too Slytherin, if you ask me!"

Draco narrowed his eyes. "Well, neither am I any longer! And what's this rubbish that you don't know a thing about any key? Gringotts keys don't just appear from thin air!"

Harry took a breath, wishing he hadn't said that thing about Slytherin.

Snape summoned the key with a whispered, wandless spell and caught it between two outstretched fingers. "This isn't Black's, Harry? You didn't ask Albus for it so that you could find it in your room and help your seer dream come true?"

"No. I didn't even know I'd be allowed in my room, did I, until I got down here this morning." A sudden suspicion began to glimmer in Harry's mind. "Oh, that's why you relented, isn't it? Things got worked out this morning and you knew it was going to go through, and you remembered I had to be in my room if the seer dream was going to happen exactly the way I dreamed it!"

Snape inclined his head. "I should actually have thought of that last night. However, I in no way anticipated that Lucius' posturing would cause Family Services to so abruptly reconsider their earlier refusal of my application to adopt Draco."

Harry nodded, that awful suspicion hollowing out a bleak place inside him. "Oh. I . . . yeah, I understand. And I'm all for the adoption. I think you know that? So, all right, you had to make an exception to your new rule. I get it."

"From the sound of things, you don't," Snape quietly remarked. "In retrospect, forbidding you access to your room was a trifle harsh, especially as I do wish you to regard yourself as welcome here. I simply didn't know what else to do at that instant."

"You didn't know what else to do." Harry was a bit stunned that Snape would admit such a thing.

"I had rather a lot on my mind." Snape quirked a small smile. "I think you know that."

"Yeah, otherwise you'd have just thought of taking away the frame, even if it is Draco's and not mine."

"Taking away that broken mirror appears to have accomplished the same end."

Harry tried not to flinch as he asked in a worried tone, "You didn't banish it or anything, did you? And don't let the house-elves think it's rubbish, all right? 'Cause it's not."

"I've boxed it and put it away," Snape said, studying Harry carefully. "As it had obviously been broken for some time I thought you must have a reason for keeping it."

"How could you tell . . ." When Draco gave him an incredulous look, Harry blushed. "All right,
magic. Some of us weren't raised around every last obscure spell, you know."

"What reason can you have for keeping a broken mirror, though?"

Harry couldn't help it; that time he *did* flinch. What if Snape didn't want to keep it once he knew it used to be a way to contact Sirius? He might think it was unhealthy for Harry to hang onto a thing like that. And that wasn't why he was keeping it, anyway. He knew well enough that the mirror couldn't reach beyond the Veil. "Sentimental value," he said, hating the way his voice croaked. "Sirius gave it to me. D- don't throw it away, all right?"

With a muttered oath, Snape took two steps forward and reached out both his arms, gathering Harry close, one palm pressing the boy's cheek against the soft black fabric of his waistcoat. "*I have* been too harsh if you can think a thing like that of me."

As long fingers carded carefully through his hair, Harry was horrified to find himself on the verge of tears. He knew that his father loved him, after all. He'd known it even when the man had been shouting at him and telling him to go up to the Tower and stay out of his room. This touch now . . . it shouldn't mean so much.

But it did, so maybe his nightmare had upset him more than he'd thought.

"Perhaps," Draco said after a long, silent moment, "one or both of you could explain this business about my frame?"

Harry pushed away from his father and blinked hard to get himself under control. "Um, remember how we got to watch that Quidditch match on it, and then we--"

"You watched the hearing," Draco at once surmised.

"Yeah, but I had to combine magical artefacts to get it to show the inside of the castle and . . ." Harry looked his brother in the eye. "I broke it. Sorry . . ."

"It was showing the Whomping Willow when I went into the room--"

"That's all it shows. I think because that's what it was showing right before I messed with it. It's . . . stuck, or something. I suppose I could try to fix it--"

"I think not," said Snape, his tone hard but not so much so that it sounded hateful. "The two of you now have an animated depiction of the willow, and the frame will be put to no further use, and that is the end of that. Draco, I trust you will assist me in this matter?"

"How am I supposed to keep Potter here in line? *Combining magical artefacts* . . ." Draco gave a shudder that didn't look in the least theatrical, for once. "Do you have any notion how dangerous that is? And you, down here all alone! A fully trained wizard wouldn't combine artefacts without researching the matter first, Harry, and he'd make sure he had help in case things didn't go as planned. But not Harry Potter, oh no. He feels free to just let fly with dark powers!" Silver eyes narrowed. "That was the jolt that shook the whole castle, wasn't it?"

"Uh, no, actually, that was me trying my best not to incinerate Lucius--"

"You could have melted the whole castle with all of us in it!" Draco glared, his eyes like chips of frozen silver as he returned his gaze to Snape. "Yes, I'll assist you. I'd rather the frame be destroyed than end up having to watch another horrid funeral after Harry goes too far and lets the damned thing turn him into wizardspace!"
"You watched Miss Parkinson's funeral, Draco?"

Harry kept his voice mild. "Yeah, you weren't objecting so much then, were you now?"

"Because you'd done it before!" cried Draco, baring his teeth. "You said you had! You can bet I'd have objected if you'd started impromptu mixing random magic in!"

Harry didn't think so; he thought Draco had been so desperate to see the funeral that he'd have risked anything. But there was no point in saying so. "I won't do it again," he quietly assured his father and brother. "I'll be good."

"Yes, you will," agreed Snape in a rather dark tone. He was thinking of the mirror, Harry was sure. He'd probably never see it again. Or not until he was twenty-one or something.

Harry looked up at his father, whose black eyes were glimmering with something like sympathy, but the rest of the man's features were carved in resolution. Harry couldn't stop a sigh. First the map, and then his cloak, and now the mirror as well. He was starting to feel like every last memento of James was being methodically stripped away from him. Harry didn't think Snape was doing it on purpose . . . after all, the man didn't even know that the mirror had probably been James' half of the matched pair.

Maybe I should tell him, Harry thought.

But what would be the point in that? Snape did know that the invisibility cloak and map had belonged to James. That hadn't got them returned, had they? And anyway, maybe Harry deserved to lose access to them for a while, if his experimental spells had been as dangerous as Snape and Draco seemed to think.

It would be nice to be trusted though; it really would.

"Well, now that's all cleared up," Draco said a bit waspishly, "perhaps we could get back to the mystery key. What was that about Harry dreaming it?"

Harry turned back to his brother. "I saw this key in a seer dream. The dream where I was getting unadopted, except it turned out I had it backwards and it was about you being adopted."

"How could you mix up those two things?"

Harry scratched a bit at his head. "I don't know anymore. It all made perfect sense at the time--"

"It most certainly did not. I told you I would never repudiate you." Snape looked over at Draco as well. "Nor you."

Draco didn't reply to that, though Harry thought he did look pleased.

"So whose key then?" mused Snape after a moment. Holding it up to the light, he turned it this way and that. "There was no note with it? No indication whatsoever as to who sent it, or why?"

"No---"

"Shite," Draco suddenly exclaimed. He'd been crushing the envelope in one hand, but all at once he relaxed his fingers and pressed the envelope flat between his palms to smooth it out. "I bet I know what's going on."

"What?"
As the other boy lifted the envelope to his lips and whispered to it, Harry felt a sense of déjà-vu surround him. He'd seen that before, hadn't he? Draco sighing and softly talking to a sheet of paper . . . but the paper had been floating in the air that time, not held tight in his hand . . .

_The letter from Wiltshire, that was it, _Harry thought. _The letter from Narcissa. Draco spoke to it, and it gave him no reaction . . ._

This time, though, the moment Draco finished speaking his incantation, writing began to scroll itself across the envelope. Writing Harry had seen before.

Narcissa Malfoy's writing.

Draco's hand was shaking as he started reading. He didn't even appear to notice when Snape took him by the arm and gently guided him to sit down on the couch.

"Merlin," he finally breathed. "I . . . you know, I was going to be mature about the money. I really was. You were going to be impressed, Harry. I had it all planned out."

Personally, Harry thought that Draco calling him a _fucking imbecile_ over the whole vault thing was less than impressive. "What are you talking about?"

"My mother." A low laugh rumbled in Draco's throat. "Sweet Merlin, she can plot circles around Lucius when she sets her mind to it. She's just not often willing to. But she _did_, for _me_." By the end there, Draco sounded like he was in raptures.

"Perhaps you could elucidate." Snape raised an eyebrow and simply waited.

"Oh, right. Sorry." Draco began to read out loud:

_Dragon my dearest treasure, if you are reading this it means that your father's schemes have borne bitter fruit and you have been expelled from school. No doubt he has already informed Gringotts that your vault should revert to the family estate. Lucius has ways of tracking even my separate finances, so I dare not oppose your father directly by offering you any portion of my own holdings. But I have no wish to see you destitute, and by happy coincidence, my great-uncle Walpurgis has suddenly taken ill and died. You will recall that he had kept himself entirely out of the war that was raging when you were born._

Draco turned the envelope over and began reading the back.

_When you first defied your family heritage, I was distraught for I could foresee nothing but tragedy ahead for you, Dragon my treasure. I went to my uncle, whom I had not seen for many years, and told him you had turned your back on us, as he had once done. I had hoped he might be willing to do something for you, but I fear he did not believe you were sincere, my Dragon. He thought the whole tale some plot to entrap the Potter boy. But I knew that a personal letter from you would convince him- -Walpurgis always did fancy himself a fine judge of character._
Flipping the envelope over again, Draco read from the front:

Thank you for writing to him as I asked. I know he never replied, but he did do something for you. He made you his sole heir, Dragon my treasure, and appointed me executor, and so I have sent you the key to his vault, now yours. There is more money in it than you could spend in a lifetime, but I still do hope you will use these resources wisely and well. I know you do not believe I love you, Dragon my treasure, and after my public stance I suppose I cannot fault you. But you have indeed been in my thoughts all these many months, and I have done what I could for you. What good would have come of my defending you openly? Your father would have had me slain, and then you would have had no mother to plead your case to Walpurgis.

I do love you, Draco, and I always will.

Narcissa Black Malfoy

Harry didn't know what to say to all that; he was a little bit embarrassed that by the end, Draco was clearly struggling to hold back tears.

"May I examine it?" asked Snape as he sat down alongside his son.

Draco swallowed twice before he answered. "Yes. But it can't leave my hands, Severus, or the writing will vanish and won't ever come back. It's a special charm my mother uses on her very private correspondence."

Nodding, Snape leaned over to read the writing on the envelope through, his dark eyes thoughtful. Each time the Potions Master glanced at him, Draco turned the envelope over so the man could continue reading.

"That's quite a charm," Harry couldn't help but say. "The front side has two different parts of the letter charmed onto it, one beneath the other."

"My mother's quite a witch." Draco's voice glowed with pride. "And now we know why she didn't simply use owl post to deliver that other letter."

"True," commented Snape. "Of course you knew at the time that she was plotting something, as I recall."

"Yeah, but I thought she was plotting against me, Severus."

"I don't understand," said Harry.

"House-elf magic," Draco explained, his resentment of house-elves so strong it came through even despite his euphoria. "Once Slubby had been invited in, it gave him a means to get back in so he could leave me this key. I suppose the blood wards would have kept him out had he meant you any harm--"
"A house-elf can break into any place where he's once been welcomed?" That didn't sound right.

"No, but he's a Malfoy elf, isn't he, and here I am a Malfoy, and I was the one who let him in--"

"But I thought you weren't a Malfoy," said Harry. "Draco Snape?"

The other boy flushed and looked away. "True. But that was only finalised today, right along with the adoption. Blubby probably snuck in last night when I still was a Malfoy."

"Draco--"

"What, Severus?" Draco huffed slightly. "What? He probably did, you know!"

The Potions Master looked steadily at the boy, and then appeared to relent. "Very well."

Harry looked at them both and then shrugged. Whatever they were talking about was between them, obviously. "If Dubby brought the key last night . . . well, you'd been expelled and your mother clearly knew that, so why would she have sent her message here? She must have known that Severus was working on adopting you? Seems strange she didn't say a single word about that."

"The mere fact she sent Tubby here with the key says enough." Draco smiled. "Remember her other letter? I have no Severus Snape to shelter me . . . . She'd rather we both hadn't turned our backs on Lucius, but now that we have, she trusts him to stand by me."

Harry nodded. "So, have you two eaten--"

"I'm fine," said Draco, yawning. "I suppose I ought to write off to Gringotts to find out just what's in this vault. I'm fairly sure that Narcissa as executor would have put there any deeds to property and whatnot; Walpurgis owned at least a couple of estates. But that can wait until tomorrow. I'm rather tired."

"It's strange your relative should die right at this particular time, don't you think? I mean . . . do you think your mother had something to do with that?"

Draco stared at him, then burst out laughing. "You're a bit slow. No, I don't think she had something to do with it; I know full well she poisoned his tea or something! Last night, probably, as soon as she heard I'd been expelled. How do you think she got that key to me so quickly? She must have been at his house yesterday."

"Her favourite uncle though?" Harry sucked in a breath.

"Well, technically he wasn't her uncle, he was her grandfather's second cousin once removed, or something similar. And she hadn't seen him in years and years because of the baby-swapping scandal. She only got in touch with him this year, apparently, so she could make sure he died and left me all his worldly goods. Happy coincidence, my arse. She offed him, plain as day."

"And that doesn't bother you?"

Draco's smile was somewhat condescending. "I didn't know him, Harry, even if I was originally named for him, at least in part. Probably that was just to line me up for his money, come to think of it, but it was a moot point once we found out about his nasty business dealings. It's tainted money as far as the Malfoys are concerned, you see. At any rate, it wasn't my idea to kill him. I didn't even know she had it in mind, so you can hardly lay any blame for this at my door."

"I wasn't blaming you." Harry turned to his father. "What about you, do you need some dinner?"
"Something light, perhaps. And then I will resume trying to discover why the Eyesight Elixir was so painful for you. I still have high hopes of getting your eye back to normal."

Mention of that made Harry remember something else that probably needed attention. "What about Draco's burn? Can't that be healed now? I mean, it's no more use as evidence, is it? With both the Ministry investigation and the expulsion settled?"

"It's as healed as it's going to get," Draco said in a somewhat sour tone. "We tried Scaradicate last night. Several times. But your damned amulet just didn't know when to stop. It wasn't only pouring out heat, but some sort of magical energy, too. It left a mark the salve can't undo."

Harry winced. "Sorry. I didn't think it would hurt you when it warmed up in warning. Really."

"Well, it did. And it left a hideous mark!"

Harry held tight to his patience. "It's not like I planned it that way, Draco."

"No, but trust Harry Potter to pick an amulet with dark powers too!" Draco's eyes narrowed. "Maybe next time you should just buy me something Mugglish, because I don't much appreciate ending up scarred for life!"

Apparently, Draco didn't need those few days the casewitch had predicted; he was acting like a complete prat already. Harry could think of a number of things to reply. At least your scar isn't known the world over. It's not even on constant display. And speaking of things I don't appreciate, how do you think I like having an eye that doesn't work, eh?"

He didn't say any of that, though. Maybe he would have, if Draco and he were alone, but with Snape watching, those black eyes of his trained on them both? Draco might forget his father was seeing him toss about these unfair recriminations, but Harry couldn't forget it, not for a minute. He didn't want to disappoint Snape again. It was bad enough that he was going to have to live down the untested magic he'd done.

"Nothing to say?" Draco gestured a bit wildly to emphasise the question, and lost his grip on the parchment envelope he'd been holding all this while. "Oh, wonderful, Potter! You made me lose my mother's last words to me! I wanted to copy them down!"

"It's not Harry's fault that you're acting like a thing deranged," Snape coldly rebuked his Slytherin son. "He meant you nothing but good with that amulet. You know that, Draco. Do you recall my asking you once what time it was?"

That last question sailed clear over Harry's head until Draco gave a heated reply.

"Yes, I remember! But I'm afraid I can't check any longer if it's time to apologise, Severus. That watch disappeared yesterday along with the better portion of everything I had with me at Hogwarts!" When Snape just glared at him, though, Draco conceded. "I am sorry for my rancour. I do know you foolishly believed the amulet would be some sort of asset."

"Draco--"

"Oh, fine then. I wore it so I'm just as much to blame as you are. Does that make it all better?"

Harry swallowed back the scathing retort dancing on the tip of his tongue. "You'd better ask Severus. I'm fine, really."

"Oh, sure you are. You're just trying to show me up again, flaunting your perfect little self like the
"Gentlemen," Snape calmly interrupted. "I do believe I told you my opinion of sibling rivalry. I won't have it. Is that clear?"

Harry nodded.

For his part, Draco gave a rather haughty shrug.

It must have irritated Snape, who proceeded to say something so close to what Harry had been thinking earlier that he gave his father a sharp look. He didn't really suspect Legilimency, but still . . . it was odd. Maybe it just meant that Snape knew him pretty well.

"I will say, Draco, that the small remaining scar on your chest is not very significant compared to the fact that your brother has been half-blind for over a week, now."

Draco looked down then, the rebuke hitting its mark. "Can I help you research the Elixir?"

_Father-son time_, Harry thought. The casewitch had warned him that they would need it. "Yeah, you two work on it," he said, backing away mentally as much as physically. "Um, do you think I could use the Floo to go to the headmaster's office? He could walk me back to Gryffindor--"

"You'll stay here as you're integral to the research," said Snape in a hard tone.

Since that all made sense, Harry found himself nodding. He could stay the night, could stick around until Ron and Hermione came back to fetch him. And then for a while he'd be careful not to visit too much; he'd make sure that Draco and Snape got all the time together they could possibly need.

His father wasn't going to accuse him again of thinking only of himself.

He just wasn't.
"Still stings," said Harry late the next morning, trying to be philosophical about it.

Snape stepped back, his brow furrowed. "I've dampened down the magical constituents of the Elixir just about as far as can be done, yet you've noticed no improvement?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, it's not like it hurts so much I can't stand it. The stinging goes away after a couple of minutes. I can put up with that if it'll eventually restore my vision back to normal." He grinned. "Or better yet, to where I won't need these glasses. The one eye still has perfect vision, after all. You do really good work."

"Not good enough," murmured Snape. "Well. I've exhausted my own texts on the subject. Perhaps the wizarding library in Edinburgh--"

"Oh, be realistic, Severus," drawled Draco from where he sat slouched. "How many Potions Masters have healed the kind of eye injuries Harry suffered? You're probably the world's foremost expert."

Injuries . . . maybe that was the key to the whole thing, Harry thought. "You know, when you first started treating me with Elixir I was in a terrible state. Taking pain-killing draughts right 'round the clock, remember?"

While Snape's rather sardonic gaze announced that he was hardly likely to forget, Draco made a derisive noise.

Harry ignored all that. "Right . . . well, I'm just wondering if maybe that's why the Elixir didn't sting. I mean, maybe it hurt like mad but I was in no shape to notice. And later . . . well, that's a question, isn't it? Later on I wasn't taking painkillers, hmm . . . "

"By then," said Snape in a dry voice, "I would think your system had become habituated to the Elixir."

"Huh?"

"You'd got used to it and your eyes had adjusted," explained Draco with a bit of a superior air. "But it's been long enough since then that they've gone back to the way they were before. Well, that would certainly account for why the potion hurts him now. Good thinking, Severus."

"Hey, I was the one who thought of it."

"Habituation," said the Potions Master, shaking his head. At himself, it seemed. "Obvious in retrospect. I can hardly believe I didn't reason it out straight away."

"Well, we all had a lot on our minds," said Harry. "It's all right."

"It is decidedly not all right for one to overlook pertinent data staring one in the face!" Snape ran a shaking hand through his hair, pushing it away from his forehead.

"Look, at the time Draco was more important; I understand that." Harry smiled to show that he really did.

"Draco is not more important, you idiot child! I love you both!"

Harry'd known that for ages, but it was still nice to hear it put so clearly. For him, at least. Draco rose
unsteadily to his feet, looking a bit as though he'd stepped off a balcony without his broom. "I . . . Severus, I . . ."

For a moment there, Harry was afraid Draco was going to come out with another completely fake \textit{I love you, too} pronouncement. Not that it really \textit{would} be fake; Harry was positive that Draco did in fact love the both of them. But Draco would think he was lying -- because Draco didn't know he loved them. Or maybe more to the point, Draco didn't \textit{want} to love them.

Because to him, love meant manipulation. He loved them enough to want it not to be like that.

"Excuse me, please," Draco finally said, retreating behind his perfect manners as he fled the potions lab.

Snape closed the door and warded it for silence, then cast a rather disparaging look in Harry's direction. "I trust you see why I've refrained from making daily declarations of my feelings, as you urged before?"

Harry had hardly urged that, but he understood what his father meant. "Well, hearing how we feel obviously upsets him, but still, I really think--"

"I told you to leave this matter to me."

"You also told me I could say whatever I liked to you in private." He gave the warded door a significant glance, then.

"So I did." Taking a seat on one of the high stools in the lab, Snape waved for Harry to continue.

Startled by how easy that had been, Harry couldn't help but chuckle.

"Consider it negotiation," was Snape's dry advice. "And bear in mind I still reserve the right to tell you to drop a topic, even in private. But I won't do it unless I believe it absolutely necessary. And so? Go on, dispense your fatherly wisdom. Merlin knows you have simply years of experience--"

"As if you \textit{do}.

"Head of House duties." Snape was smiling slightly by then, which made the dispute more like banter than an argument. That was nice. "Not the same by any means, but there are similar elements. \textit{And} I've known the boy for sixteen years whereas you've known him--\textit{him}, not his reputation--for something like six months. But you're the expert on all things Draco Malfoy, apparently--"

"Draco Snape."

"Ah, yes. You were right last night; that will take some getting used to." Snape's smile had faded by then, but there was still a pleased look about him. Something to do with the wrinkles around his eyes, Harry thought, a little surprised to feel a niggling of dismay eating away at him. It was ridiculous. He didn't resent the adoption or the name change, he \textit{didn't}.\textit{ }

"Well?" The Potions Master raised a challenging eyebrow. "I do believe you had some advice for me?"

"It's not \textit{advice}. It's just . . . I just know what I think. Draco's a big mess inside after the way his family treated him. So maybe it's a bit like with me and the Elixir. He needs to get . . . uh, habituated I think was the word, to hearing about how we feel. Even if it hurts him at first."

"So you \textit{do} recommend daily declarations. Or hourly, perhaps?"
God, but the man could be snarky sometimes. "Look, Severus, all I'm saying is that if one comes out naturally, like what you said just then, I don't think we should hold back. We should be what a family's supposed to be, all right? Draco'll get used to it."

"And how would you know what a family is supposed to be?" The question could have been cruel, but that wasn't Snape's intent. Neither was it some sort of teasing; the Potions Master looked about as serious as Harry had ever seen him. "I think you understand how I regard you, Harry, so I trust you can accept this observation in the spirit in which it's given, but . . . you also are, as you put it, a big mess inside after the way your family treated you."

Harry frowned, thinking back to his nightmare about Snape yelling at him that he'd let down Draco. Or the one from months before, with Snape and Sirius both inside the mirror, both dead. "Yeah, I know. I think we're all three of us pretty messed up. No offence. Sometimes I even think that everybody is screwed up in one way or another. That's just . . . life." Harry met his father's eyes and smiled. "If I know anything about family, it's because you taught me. Not like a teacher . . . I mean, just by being there day after day, putting up with Draco and me fighting, listening to me, talking to me . . . just, dependable. I can think about the Dursleys without flinching now. Well, sometimes at least." Harry shrugged. "I try not to thank you very often because I know you don't like that, but Severus . . . it's kind of hard for me not to."

The Potions Master gave a sharp nod, but to Harry it looked awkward. He didn't really understand that until the man spoke again. "I do of course remember telling you to consider calling me Severus . . ." Snape looked away, his voice dropping to an undertone. "However, I now find I much prefer the other."

The other. Harry couldn't help but grin, though he schooled his expression into something a bit more controlled when his father glanced his way. "I like the other, too. People in Gryffindor are even getting used to it, I think. Oh, by the way, I don't suppose you could find a way to give Neville some points? If it wasn't for him I think I'd probably have slugged Seamus straight in the face by now."

To Harry's amusement, Snape looked slightly alarmed at that thought. Definitely, the man was every bit a dad. "What on earth was Mr Finnegan doing to you that could merit an exchange of fisticuffs?"

"Oh, nothing really." Harry waved a hand. "You have to know that people think you being my dad is pretty . . . uh, strange. I mean, they can't help but remember the things I said about you for five straight years. Seamus was having some fun at my expense but--"

Snape's voice dropped to a menacing drawl. "Do you need me to speak to Mr Finnegan?"

Harry could just imagine how that conversation would go. Poor Seamus would pee his pants before Snape was through with him. "No, really. Neville sort of . . . um, mediated and it's all fine now." Not liking the look on his father's face, Harry couldn't help but add, "Swear you won't, all right? I mean it."

"You're perfectly welcome to live here if the Gryffindors are being their typical unbearable selves."

"I'll keep it in mind," Harry said, deadpan. "Nice try changing the subject, but I still want you to swear you'll leave Seamus alone. Honestly, I think I traumatised him enough all by myself."

"I'll speak to anyone I wish on your behalf, if I feel it's indicated." Harry almost objected to that, but before he could, Snape added, "However you seem to have the Finnegan situation under control for the time being."

"Thanks to Neville."
The Potions Master ignored the hint. "I didn't mention your returning to live here merely to divert your attention. I've grown accustomed to your presence."

"You miss me," Harry accused with a laugh. It wasn't nearly as funny, though, when he saw that Snape looked as though he regarded that fact almost as a character flaw. "Hey, it's all right. I miss you, too. I got really homesick that first night back, which was a new thing for me. It was always such a relief before to make it to the Tower. But . . . look, it's not so long now until summer--"

Snape's lips curled with some sort of dark humour. "You think I need consoling, obviously. It is all right, Harry. I know where you belong; Hogwarts isn't merely about learning spells and potions."

Standing up then, the Potions Master crossed his arms. "Regarding your eye, then. As all variants of the Elixir stung in equal degree I believe we may as well utilize the strongest one. Two drops in your left eye, twice a day. And yes, Mr Weasley may put them in." Snape decanted a small amount of the potion into a flask, corked it, and gave it one last critical glance before handing the potion to Harry. "Just remember to have him check that the Elixir coats the entire ocular surface before you blink. In a few days' time we should know whether the treatment is sufficient to improve your vision."

Smiling his thanks, Harry pocketed the flask.

Snape didn't smile back. "I can supply you with a painkilling draught as well if you like."

"Nah. I can manage."

"If you're thinking of my problem with the Loosestrife I can assure you there'll be nothing habit-forming in the potion I provide--"

"Actually, I'm thinking about that habituation thing. If I get used to painkillers then won't they work less well when I get a serious injury?"

The Potions Master sighed as he acknowledged that with a nod. "I do wish you didn't have such good cause to speak that way. Most young men your age would be saying if."

"Yeah," Harry acknowledged. "I'm actually surprised Voldemort hasn't made another attempt on my life this year. He's breaking his usual pattern, getting that out of the way in the fall instead of waiting until the spring term is nearly over."

"He doesn't know what to do," Snape murmured, looking as though he were lapsing deep into thought. "You've become something of an unknown quantity to him. He's aware you lost your magic and thanks to his contact with Vernon Dursley he may even have some inkling as to how. But he also knows that your powers are back now, at least in part. You threw him violently from your mind. You have kept him out ever since, yes?"

"I'd tell you the minute he came lurking around, so yes."

"Voldemort has always had a link to you, but you've managed to curtail it at last. I imagine that alarms him, but he's too wily to make any snap decisions about it. He's no doubt considering his options."

Harry nodded. "All this pretence that I can't cast a decent spell to save my life, though . . . We're making him think I'm weak. Isn't that like inviting him to attack?"

"No. It should throw him off balance as his personal experience of late has been that your powers are fearsome indeed."
"I hope so."

"You hope that it throws him off balance or that your powers are fearsome?"

The boy lifted his shoulders. "I can't help the powers thing, you know."

"Yes, I know." Snape's lips turned down. "You really aren't arrogant. I should have remembered that."

A bit puzzled, Harry thought back but still couldn't make sense of that. "When?"

"When you used your mirror to spell Draco's frame. I suppose what made my reaction so harsh was thinking that it was overconfidence which led you to take such a horrendous risk. But now I suspect you truly have no idea just how much peril you were in." Snape tapped his fingers together as he considered that. "I think the correct course of action is to require three feet on the dangers inherent in combining magical artefacts."

Harry thought about objecting to that, but he didn't want to annoy his father any more than he had already. And anyway, by Snape's standards it was a pretty reasonable punishment. "All right. When do you want it by?"

"It's not an assignment, Harry; I want it when you've learnt your lesson. Literally."

Harry nodded, though what he was really thinking was that taking risks was part of who he was. He couldn't imagine never taking one again, no matter what his father thought of the matter, but he was hardly going to say so.

Some of what he was thinking must have shown on his face, however, for Snape quietly said, "Remember, you do better with more information rather than less, Harry."

_But you said I had good instincts_, Harry mentally countered. All he said out loud though, was, "I'll try to get it done by Saturday when I come for . . . oh, wait. This Saturday there's a trip to Hogsmeade. I left my permission slip in my dormitory but I can bring it to Potions on Tuesday--"

He stopped talking because Snape was shaking his head. "You'll have to miss this trip."

Harry wasn't sure if that was because he'd missed his Potions tutorial--though that was hardly his fault--or if Snape was thinking that after the frame thing, Harry didn't deserve a day out with his friends. He wasn't going to ask, though. His father hardly needed to have both his sons being rude and rebellious. "So you'll have the essay on Saturday," he answered, nodding.

Snape looked him over in that way he had, that way that made Harry feel like he was being studied. "There's no rush. In fact, I don't want it until you've had time enough to truly consider the matter."

"Well, I'll get right on it, anyway."

Whatever Snape might have replied was lost forever as the door was flung open by Draco, who was dressed in a travelling cloak.

"All done in here?" He looked from Snape to Harry and back. "Any particular reason why the door was charmed to silence?"

"Any particular reason why you had cause to notice as much?" Severus' tone wasn't far from a reprimand.
Ignoring that, Draco brushed a bit of imaginary lint from his sleeve. "Well if the two of you are
gossiping about me I think I've a right to know. But no matter. Are you done? With the Elixir or
whatever else you were discussing? Because I've made a list and I'd really like to get through it
before teatime. Though I suppose the shops are crowded already. But I simply can't wait--"

"Can't wait for what?"

"Potter, did you or did you not notice that the better part of my possessions vanished in a fit of goblin
magic? You don't think I can live with a mere six shirts to my name, not a single one of them with
decent buttons, do you? I need to go shopping, don't I? Right now."

Harry thought that six shirts was plenty, but he didn't say so.

Snape, however, had no trouble critiquing Draco's plans. "No son of mine will be wearing a shirt
with diamond buttons. Nor emeralds," he added in a stern tone before Draco could argue the point.

Draco argued anyway. "Pearl, then."

"No."

"Merlin preserve me, mother-of-pearl," said Draco with one of his theatrical shudders. "Fine. I'll
look like a plebeian, I hope you realise."

"You'll look like a Snape."

"Black isn't my colour," objected Draco with a bit of a smirk. "If you ask me, it makes you look a tad
sallow. I know you favour dark colours but have you considered perhaps a very deep shade of
purple--"

"Draco," the Potions Master interrupted. "I think you know quite well I wasn't talking about
something as meaningless as colours." He drew in what looked like a calming breath. "However, if
you wish to go into the village I see no reason why I can't take you."

"I can," said Harry, pushing down a feeling of profound irritation that Snape had just forbidden
his own Hogsmeade request. "What if Lucius finds you're off school grounds and he tries
something?"

"Oh, please. You think he's got nothing better to do than hang about in a dreary little town like
Hogsmeade on the off-chance I'll stop in? And you might consider having a bit more confidence in
our father, Harry." Draco rolled the word our off his tongue as though he were savouring it. "He's a
strong wizard. Stronger than Lucius. And smarter, too. Or has that yet to dawn on you?"

Harry held to his temper with some effort, saying only, "Won't owl-order do just as well if you need
some things?"

"Potter, I need an entire new wardrobe and you just don't do that owl-order." Draco gave him a thin
smile. "Besides, it'll be a while before I can access my new vault. Those goblins are sticklers for
protocol."

Harry's mouth almost dropped open, because there was no missing the implications of that little
tidbit. Draco wasn't just demanding that Snape take him shopping, and now at that; he was expecting
the Potions Master to pay for everything as well! An entire new wardrobe . . . Harry'd never heard of
anything so rude as to come storming into a private conversation to demand presents!

The greediness reminded him an awful lot of how Dudley used to behave, actually, and Harry was
irritated enough by it that he almost said so. But Snape wasn't objecting, and the Potions Master never did anything without a reason. Knowing that helped Harry put himself in Draco's shoes. This was probably Draco's way of figuring out if he was really wanted or not, something like that. It all went along with what the casewitch had warned about, though Harry thought she must not have realised quite how selfish Draco could be.

At any rate, instead of yelling, which wouldn't help much at all even if it would feel awfully good, Harry tried to think about what Draco needed, or at least what would make him feel loved and accepted.

Draco began tapping his foot and making a show of checking his watch, which of course was missing from his wrist. "Today would be nice. Assuming you are done dealing with the Elixir? I know that has to come first."

The words were conciliatory, but not the tone behind them. *I know that has to come first but I really do need new clothes, so hurry up.* That was what Harry heard.

"We've finished, I do believe." Snape glanced over at his other son. "Harry, why don't you collect your own travelling cloak? We'll all go together."

Harry couldn't help it; he gaped. "What?"

"Lucius didn't poke your eardrums out too, did he?"

"Draco!" Snape glared briefly, then turned an apologetic expression towards Harry. "This is rather different from a school trip. I think those will have to be deferred until you've shown a bit more respect for the rules I lay down. For today, however, Draco and I would enjoy your company."

*You would,* Harry thought. *Draco's another matter.* And sure enough, right on cue came a petulant objection from the other boy in the room.

"Oh, but Potter has *loads* to do up in Gryffindor Tower, isn't that what he said last night?"

"*Harry* hasn't been to Hogsmeade in months either," chided Severus. "He may well need some things."

Harry appreciated the sentiment, especially the veiled offer to buy him whatever he might require, but what *Draco* needed, quite obviously, was time alone with his new father. Harry wasn't so self-centred that he could miss that, even if Snape was going overboard to make sure that everything was *even.* "I'm all right. Ron and Hermione will be around in a while to fetch me, anyway." He gave a wave of his hand, trying not to sigh at the openly satisfied gleam in Draco's eyes. "You two go on. If you're sure it's safe, that is."

"No, Potter, we're going because I'd *like* to be handed straight over to the Dark Lord--"

"Ten points from Slytherin," Snape suddenly said, waving his wand to enforce it. "Stop calling your brother *Potter."

Draco laughed. Hard, actually slapping his thigh with his palm. "Oh, good one. But I'm not in Slytherin, am I?"

"You're an honorary member courtesy of the Hogwarts' Charter and your status as my son."

"You can't deduct points from an honorary member!"
Snape arched a single eyebrow. "Have you read the charter in full? In the original Latin, no less? I thought not. I therefore suggest you not attempt to explain it to those who have."

Sputtering then, Draco protested, "But you haven't enforced the names thing in forever--"

"You haven't made me want to," retorted Snape.

Draco glared at his father for a moment, then resumed his show of fussing with his cloak. "Oooh, ten whole points. However will I live it down? Especially as that means Slytherin is only about three hundred points ahead of second-place Ravenclaw. Gryffindor's a poor third so far this year, I do believe."

"How would you know how the point counters are doing?"

Draco rolled his eyes and looked at Snape. "Six years and he still really doesn't get the magic thing, does he?"

"That will be enough, Draco!"

The Slytherin boy raised hands and shoulders as though he had no idea why Snape had suddenly raised his voice. "What?"

"You're being insufferable!"

"Potter here--oh, sorry, Harry--was Muggle-raised, Severus. Now, I've learnt not to hold that against him, though I will say it's been quite the trial and I really should be commended, but it's only natural he'd be a bit backward--"

Snape narrowed his eyes. "I can easily make it a hundred points if you'd prefer."

"No, please don't," Harry broke in. A strategy like that would only heighten Draco's resentment and make him want to compete with Harry. Well, more than he apparently did already.

Draco openly smirked. "There, see? Spoken like the good little half-Slytherin he is." After that, though, his tone became morose. "Though why I should care is anybody's guess. Honorary, schmonarary. Do I get my crest back? Because I don't want it. Why should I give a shrivelfig what becomes of Slytherin after what they've seen fit to do to me? As far as I'm concerned, the lot of them can burn."

"Draco, they didn't all scheme against you," said Harry. "You told me yourself that some of them are worth saving."

"Hmm, well my youthful idealism has died a tragic death. They did all scheme, every last one of them. That Slytherin plague was just a tad too convenient. If you ask me, they were up to something."

"I thought you believed Pansy cursed them all on the way down!"

Draco's voice went cold. "Did you or did you not hear me state not ten seconds past that my youthful idealism is as dead and gone as she is? She'd just had Corpus Aqueous cast on her! It's not too likely she was coherent enough to form a last thought, let alone hex an entire house from afar! Would you do us all a favour and get your damned Gryffindor head out of the clouds, or perhaps your arse?"

"Draco, any more talk like that and you will find your urgent shopping spree cancelled for an indeterminate amount of time!"
"Oh, fine." Draco beamed a wholly insincere smile over at Harry. "I'll just go wait in the sitting room. If you could manage not to detain Severus for too much longer, I'd be oh-so-everlastingly grateful."

With that he was stomping to the door and slamming it behind him.

Snape shook his head, then walked across the room to rest his large hands on Harry's shoulders. "That was well done of you."

"Huh?"

"Your attitude toward Draco's ill temper. Your forbearance has not gone unnoticed, Harry, and since I know you're more than capable of returning his verbal sparring in kind, I can only assume the casewitch must have spoken to you about the matter?" Snape tightened his fingers and then let go.

Hugging the praise to himself, Harry nodded. "Oh yeah, we talked. It looks like Draco's running true to form. I wish I knew how long it's likely to last. He's being a right pain."

"Quite." Snape sighed. "Are you certain you won't come along to Hogsmeade with us? You're most definitely invited, no matter what Draco has to say on the subject. Don't you need new clothes as much as he does?"

"I could use some things but it can wait. I mean . . ." Harry's lips twisted. "I don't think I need things in the same way Draco does. Well, how could I? I grew up pretty much expecting nothing in the way of gifts, but he sort of takes them as his due or something. I think this Hogsmeade demand is . . . I don't know. His idea of a father is probably someone who buys him stuff. So he's seeing if you will."

"His motivations hardly excuse his comments to you." The Potions Master frowned. "Hogsmeade, Harry?"

"No thanks. I need to start working on a well-wish for him, actually."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Your forbearance apparently knows no bounds."

"Well, I'm trying." His mind though, wasn't on Draco's snide remarks. Harry was wondering how to broach the subject of money. His face heated just thinking about what he had to ask, but it was his own fault things were like this. That had been deliberate, though. He'd known this would be hard, but he'd still wanted that experience of being someone's child, so now he was left with no choice but to go ahead and plunge past his discomfort.

"Um, about the well-wish. I still have to do some research and talk to Professor Sprout and such, but it might end up that I need to buy some things. You know how we agreed on an . . . um, allowance for me but you said I wouldn't need the actual cash until I'd moved out? Well, I've moved out. So could you . . . er . . ."

The look on his father's face was exasperated and amused all at once. "Yes, of course. It shouldn't embarrass you to ask me for things, Harry. I wish you'd do it more often."

"Like Draco?" Harry pushed the thought away. "Sorry."

"And I wish you'd do that less often," chided Snape.

"Well, I'm a mess inside like you said," retorted Harry. "But if you want me to ask for things, I'll go ahead and mention that I think my back allowance is up to about forty Galleons by now."
"Forty-four, though I certainly don't keep coins in the lab."

Harry followed his father out to the living room. Draco was standing by the front door, obviously impatient to be off. When Snape walked past him and down the hall to his bedroom, the blond boy gritted his teeth. "What, what now?"

"He has to get some money."

"Oh, please. We're not going to Kathmandu. Don't you think Severus has accounts with all the merchants in town? He can sign a vault draft, but you wouldn't know about that, would you? You didn't even know about shopping owl-order until I enlightened you, and then what did you do but order me that demon's amulet--"

Harry gritted his teeth, managing not to yell back only by remembering his father's compliments. Snape appreciated his forbearance, so forbearance it would be, no matter how it made his jaw ache. "He needs it so he can pay me my allowance."

"Oh, allowance." Draco's teeth glittered as he grinned, and not maliciously, either. More like he'd just had a marvellous idea. "I want an allowance, too!" he shouted the moment Snape came into the room. "How much are you giving Harry? Because I want at least as much!"

Snape's hands tightened on the velvet pouch he was holding, but he answered in a level voice. "Forty-four Galleons."

Draco gave off a horrified gasp. "Only forty-four Galleons a week? That's practically child abuse, it is--"

"We'll have no jests in this home about child abuse."

"Oh, right. I forgot about the Muggles who used to starve Harry and beat him half to death--"

"They never really beat me, exactly--"

"Don't defend them," snapped Snape, before turning an angry gaze on Draco. "You did not forget about the Dursleys. And furthermore--"

"Well I'm trying to. He's practically a Muggleborn. But like I said, I've done my best to overlook the matter of his breeding--"

"And furthermore," continued Snape, raising his voice, "I was talking about you as much as Harry, is that clear?"

"Yes," said Draco, suddenly subdued. He looked down as though all at once unable to face either one of them.

The Potions Master raked his hands through his hair, his expression for a fleeting instant saying that he didn't know how to proceed. But then he must have decided, for he said in a much softer voice, "As for an allowance, you are certainly welcome to the same as Harry, though I never agreed to any such ridiculous sum as forty-four Galleons a week. That amount represents his allowance from the time we first settled the matter of one."

Snape counted out forty-four Galleons for each of them, the action leaving the velvet pouch empty. Draco muttered something that sounded suspiciously like pauper, but Snape pretended not to hear it, so Harry pretended as well. When Draco shoved his money in a cloak pocket, though, the motion screamed resentment. "Just how long do you think it'll be before the goblins let me have my new
vault so I can have some decent spending money?"

"If my money offends you I can take it back."

"It doesn't offend me." That, Harry thought, was about as big a lie as he'd ever heard Draco utter. "I'm just used to more, that's all."

"You're used to so much that you saw fit to spend more on a shirt than most wizards earn in a year," said Snape. "It's poor strategy to flaunt wealth to that degree, and as my son, you will not do it again, not even when you can afford to."

"Oh, so that hovel in Devon is a case of your strategically not flaunting your own means, Severus?"

"Draco!" shouted Harry, too appalled to let that comment pass.

Draco rounded on Harry. "I told you, didn't I, that it's only poor wizards who think having money is gauche?"

"You also told me that Lucius didn't approve of those diamond buttons either!"

"Touché," muttered Draco. "Can we be off now, Severus?"

Snape just stared at him.

"Oh fine, I apologise!" Draco suddenly blurted. "I don't know why I'm in such a foul mood, I really don't. I should be happy to be adopted. I am happy. I'm ecstatic, overjoyed! But at the same time I just feel so . . . irritated! About everything!" He turned away in a swirl of cloak that echoed Snape's flair for the dramatic. But Draco wasn't being dramatic for show, not that time.

Walking over to where his brother stood, Harry spoke quietly over his shoulder. "It's horribly confusing at first. I know, Draco."

"Yeah," said Draco, turning around again, this time slowly. "Maybe that's it." He looked a bit lost for a second, and then as though he couldn't bear for anyone to see that, he adopted his superior air again. "Or maybe I just need a change of scenery. Merlin's word, I'm tired of my universe being limited to these rooms and Devon. Can we be off?"

"In a moment. Harry, do be sure to visit soon, and please remember that if you need any help with your . . . ah, project, I'll be entirely at your disposal."

"What project?" asked Draco, narrowing his gaze.

Harry couldn't imagine why the well-wish should have to be a secret, but Snape evidently felt it should be. "Uh . . . ."

"Integrating himself into his new house," said Snape with a tight smile. "Harry's still intent on that but as you've just expressed in extraordinarily clear terms just how much you detest Slytherin, I wasn't sure you'd still appreciate the prospect."

Draco made a face. "Probably still a good idea, if for no other reason than that Harry's plenty Slytherin himself." His voice acquired a smug tone as he shook a chiding finger in Harry's face. "It's no good to live in denial, you know. Best to face facts."

"I'll keep that in mind," Harry said, even as he shoved Draco's hand down.

"But . . . be careful," cautioned Draco, all at once dropping his condescending air. "I mean it, Harry.
Bella and Erik are probably just the tip of the iceberg. You won't know whom to trust, so promise me you won't trust anyone. Not one Slytherin, promise. Well, except for Severus."

"And you."

Draco gave him a swift look, but before he could reply, Snape had taken him by the arm and was ushering him out.

"Draco Snape," said Ron, shaking his head as he reached for another slice of pumpkin bread that evening at dinner. "That's just strange."

"Can you stop saying that?" Harry asked with exasperation, as that was about the fifth time Ron had brought it up. He looked around for Hermione but it didn't look like she'd ever returned from her Arithmancy review with the Ravenclaws. Too bad. She was usually pretty good at talking sense to Ron. "He's tired of people confusing him with Lucius, all right?"

"It's still strange. And you and him brothers, I mean actual brothers. . . ."

"Yeah, well we were already, I told you that. So now it's official." Harry shrugged, and made a show of concentrating on his meal. It didn't work.

"I thought you were mental and you'd come to your senses eventually! But this . . . this isn't going to go away!"

"No, it's not." Setting his fork down with a thud, Harry stared across the table at his best friend. "Are we going to have another huge row? Because I'm getting pretty tired of your not being there for me, Ron."

"I . . . Look, Harry, it's a bit much is all--"

"It's the way things are," Harry shot back. "Like Severus being my dad. I put up with shite from you over that because keeping your friendship was worth it, but I'm really hoping you can be a little more grown up about things this time."

"But it's Draco, this time! Draco sodding Malfoy, Harry--"

"No, it's Draco Snape, and he's my brother!" Realising he was breathing hard, Harry tried his best to calm down. "Look, how would you feel if I hassled you all the time about Percy?"

"It's hardly the same thing! Percy's a bit of a prat but he's not anything like . . . him."

Harry decided it wouldn't do much good to start detailing all the reasons he had to dislike Percy Weasley. "Ron, I'm not saying you have to be mates with him or anything like that. Just don't be a bastard to him, that's all I'm asking. Don't start anything."

"Like I ever have!"

Harry leaned forward on his elbows. "You're even poorer than a Weasley . . . you call that not starting anything?"
"Well, it was true," Ron said in a voice just about as smug as the one Draco had been using lately. "And serves him right after all the cracks he's made about my dad's job over the years."

"It's not true now. He's just inherited another huge vault."

"Figures. Who'd he kill?"

That was close enough to the truth that Harry flushed.

Ron's voice dropped to a bare whisper. "Oh, shite. You mean he really did kill somebody?"

"No, of course not!" Harry sighed then. "Look, it's kind of complicated and nobody has any proof, and none of it is Draco's doing, but the inheritance does look a bit sticky. Not that it bothers Draco one bit. The way he was raised was pretty sick, I think. And if I can say that then you know it really was. But that's all beside the point. Are you going to give me grief and try to get me to turn my back on him the way you did with me and Snape? Because I won't do it."

Ron cleared his throat. "Harry, listen. You're acting kind of like a little kid at Christmas, don't you think? This brother thing is like you have some new toy, all shiny and exciting. And you can't help it because you were starved for family growing up. But the shine's going to come off and you're going to see that Draco Snape isn't so very different from Draco Malfoy, after all."

"I think it's safe to say the shine's off already," said Harry, thinking of Draco's atrocious behaviour. "But you've got it wrong if you think this is only about me having a brother. As far as I'm concerned, the best thing about all of this is that I get to be a brother, see? I'm not about to be a bad one, I'm just not."

Picking up his fork, Ron pressed the tines over and over into his mushy peas, making a right mess of his plate. "Yeah, okay, I see what you mean. I don't know why you have to lecture me, anyway. I didn't pick a fight with him, not once in all those times we visited the . . . you know. And I testified at his stupid hearing. For him. Now that's going above and beyond. I don't remember him thanking me, either."

"I'll mention the oversight. So are we all right?"

"Yeah, we're all right," muttered Ron. "I don't like it but . . . yeah, we're all right."

"Good." Harry grinned, and grabbed a banana from the platter that had just appeared.

-----------------------------------------------

Monday morning dawned bright and clear. For his part, Harry found it hard to believe that only one week earlier, he'd been ill with anxiety over getting back to classes. Things just seemed normal again; everybody was even used to his Parseltongue incantations by then. Well, everybody except Professor Aran, but Harry was practising on his own to make up for class being a waste of his time. Then again, Aran's class always had been a waste of his time.

Charms and Transfiguration went fine, and with Sals there to help, Harry finally mastered the Gantus Floramus transformation and produced a lovely bouquet of foxgloves. Just for fun, he gave them to Hannah Abbot, who clearly didn't know what to do with Parseltongue-created flowers. She did take them, though. Harry supposed that was worth something.
He decided he ought to bring Sals along to all his classes, just in case he was having trouble figuring out alternate ways to say things in Parseltongue. Of course, they didn't learn too many new spells in Care of Magical Creatures, which came right after lunch, but Harry knew that if he brought Sals along he wouldn't have to listen to her later say that Hedwig was looking at her funny. Sals still thought that Harry's owl was going to eat her, though Harry had explained more than once that Hedwig would never do a thing like that to another one of Harry's pets.

Sals had replied that as Harry couldn't talk to Hedwig to be sure, she was still afraid. And Hedwig, she'd said with a little tremor coursing up and down her slender body, was simply huge.

Too bad I don't speak Owlish as well, Harry had thought more than once over the past week.

He'd got Sals another box, of course. The one Dudley had originally brought her in, but that hardly helped the situation. Any hole big enough for the snake to slither through was also big enough for Hedwig to reach a clawed toe into. And that wasn't even counting the fact that Hedwig wasn't the only familiar to reside in Gryffindor Tower. Harry supposed he could tuck the box--Sals inside--away in a drawer or something. That would keep cats and owls away, but it hardly seemed fair to his snake. So for the time being, he was stowing Sals in a pocket whenever he left his dormitory.

Maybe Hagrid will have some ideas, Harry thought as he left the Great Hall and headed outside for his Care of Magical Creatures class. As it turned out, it was in that class that his day began to get interesting, though that had nothing to do with Sals and everything to do with Theodore Nott.

The Slytherin boy left his usual clique of house mates and sort of hung out near Harry as Hagrid lectured, then moved a step or two closer just as the half-giant instructed them to choose up partners.

"Don't think I've worked with you before, Potter," Nott said casually from right beside him, so close that Harry almost jumped. "I'd say it's about time, especially as you're in Slytherin now. All right?"

"Yeah, all right," Harry said, the words coming out a little slowly. From ten feet away, Ron stopped in his tracks and frowned. Shrugging, Harry made a slight gesture indicating he could work with Hermione. Ron frowned even worse at that, but Harry didn't have time to think about it as he turned back to Nott. He needed to keep all his wits about him. "So . . . hydra eggs. Well, that's a relief. I was a little worried we'd have to tangle with the real thing."

"Maybe we will, after they hatch," said Nott, shaking his head as he walked the short distance to where Hagrid was handing them out. He came back with two and offered one to Harry. "Still, none's died yet in one of these classes, so I suppose we're in no real danger . . . hmm, though Malfoy did have that awful gash to his arm that time. How's he holding up, anyway?"

Harry couldn't tell if the question was sincere or some type of bait, and he sure couldn't forget he was talking to not just a Slytherin, but the child of an active Death Eater. Given all that, he didn't have the first idea how to answer, but he had to say something . . . "Um, he's doing all right. It's Snape now, though, not Malfoy."

Nott turned his egg over in his hands and tapped the brittle shell with a fingernail. "Yeah, we all read that in the Sunday Prophet. Bella almost fainted."

"So why would that be?"
Nott chuckled. "Didn't Mal-- . . . hmm. Draco. Didn't Draco mention that she'd testified against him?"

Harry figured that his best strategy would be to play dumb. Maybe that way Nott would fill him in, and in so doing, mention something that really was news to Harry. Or, the Slytherin boy would say something Harry knew to be untrue. Either way, Harry would be ahead. "He didn't really say much about it."

Nott gave him an odd look, but then the other boy shrugged. "Oh, all right. Well, Bella told the Aurors that she'd seen Draco on the Owlery stairs just after the murder."

"What a total bitch!" exclaimed Harry, figuring that he ought to seem mad. After all, it was supposed to be the first time he'd heard about Bella's lies. "Draco was with me all that day. We were making deafening potions. And anyway, why would the name change bother her?" Tossing out some bait of his own, Harry diffidently added, "Well, unless it's because she publicly slandered her Head of House's son. I suppose that might be a worry."

Nott's lips twisted in a wry smile. "Potter, if we worried about slandering our Head of House's son . . . Well, let's just say that your own adoption wasn't exactly welcome news to us. At least we didn't have to find that one out from a newspaper, though. Snape came and told us."

Harry wanted to know every detail, but he tried not to seem too eager. "That must have been an interesting conversation."

"Wasn't much conversation to it."

Harry wanted to ask what that meant, but he had a feeling that Nott intended for him to, so he held off. Sure enough, after a couple of minutes, the other boy resumed. "He just came in and announced it plain as day. Well, first he sort of summarised Samhain for us, and pointed out that even people who thought the Dark Lord's ideas were good ought to recognise that assassinating children wasn't . . . um, amongst the best traditions of pure-blooded society, something like that. Then he said that adoption was, and that you'd done him the honour of becoming his son, and that we'd sure as shite better remember it if we decided to mess with you."

Harry's throat felt a bit clogged after the done him the honour comment, but that last bit helped the feeling go away.

"You're having me on. No way did Snape say sure as shite."

"I'm paraphrasing, Potter." Nott looked him up and down. "Is it true you were stuck with needles all over? Snape wouldn't really say, though of course we knew about the eye thing."

"Yeah, it's true." Harry had thought he was over all that, so he wasn't sure why a convulsive shiver sort of wrapped itself around him. He shifted on his feet and looked away, biting the inside of his cheek for a second, and tried to get his mind off Samhain. "So what happened right after Snape said all that?"

Nott got a wry look on his face. "Nothing. He just looked around with those black eyes of his like he was challenging anybody to argue with him, though he must have known all along that nobody would dare. What sort of Slytherin would take an enemy on to his face?"

"So Snape's your enemy, then?"

Nott blew out a breath. "What do you expect me to say, Potter? There are quite a few in Slytherin who weren't too happy when he betrayed the cause we've been raised to follow."
"Your cause stinks. Draco had enough sense to see as much." Harry stopped then, before he overplayed his hand. It wasn't true that Draco thought the Death Eaters' cause was wrong. Well, not that Harry knew, anyway. Draco simply understood that he was better off not committing himself to the kind of submission Voldemort demanded from his followers. "Anyway, back to Bella. I don't know what her problem is, but there's no way Draco could have killed Pansy."

"Well, I never could see that he had all that much reason to," said Nott in a lower voice than before. "I know, he put her in St. Mungo's . . . but then when Christmas rolled around, he sent her this really fancy locket. She showed it off until we all just basically wanted to puke. Anyway though, there were pictures of the two of them inside it, so I knew that Draco must have got over the snake thing." Nott pulled his wand and cast *Lumos*, pointing the light so he could see the tiny developing hydra inside the egg.

As far as Harry was concerned, they'd somehow strayed from the subject he was trying to pursue. "So what is Bella's problem, then? Did she give any reason about why the announcement in the paper upset her?"

"Oh, sure." Nott rotated his hydra egg and kept peering at it. "She *said* it was because Draco had murdered Pansy and she was probably next on his list, something like that. But since I never did think Draco had killed Pansy, that just didn't add up. I figure she's afraid because she knows that Draco's not too likely to just put up with what she did. He'll want revenge, and what's more, he'll know how to take it."

Harry turned that over in his mind. "But why would she take that risk, if she's so afraid of Draco?"

Nott cast him an incredulous look. "You're kidding, right? Or, maybe not. You still do have a lion on your crest as well, so I guess you just don't think quite like we do. Bella thought Draco was going to be expelled, obviously. In fact, if you ask me, she must have had assurances to that effect or she'd never have spoken out against him. When she saw his new name and realised it must mean he was still living here . . . *then* she started to worry."

"Makes sense." Harry kept his voice casual. "But Draco won't do anything to hurt her, I don't think."

"Look, it seems pretty clear you two get on all right these days, but if you tell me he doesn't have a violent bone in his body I'll laugh, Potter. I really will."

Harry couldn't help but think of Dubby, of Draco hurling him against a hard stone wall and taking vicious pleasure in the poor elf's pain. Even Draco's casual acceptance of his new vault . . . blood money, as far as Harry was concerned, said loud and clear that for all Draco had aligned himself with the side of Light, he didn't share all their values. "No, I wouldn't say that."

Nott nodded as though in approval, then glanced down at Harry's egg. "Don't you want to see your hydra?"

"Yeah." Harry had been putting off incanting his own *Lumos*, mostly because the Parseltongue version he'd finally devised really didn't bear any resemblance to the normal spell. It couldn't, or he'd end up either with glowing fingers or a wand blasting out enough power to take apart walls. He'd figured out a way around that problem though. "*Firefly,*" he said as he stared straight at the ring his father had transfigured. "*Stuck to my stick.*"

A tiny spark of light appeared at the end of his wand. It wasn't coming from his wand, but it looked more or less like it was. Harry smiled, realising he really shouldn't have hesitated. It wasn't like Nott could understand Parseltongue and know he'd asked for the magical equivalent of a firefly. Actually, as Harry peered through the now-translucent shell, it struck him that Nott didn't seem disturbed at all
by the Parseltongue. The Slytherin boy even wondered out loud if it would work on hydas. Harry said that he expected not. After that, the boys weighed and measured their eggs as directed, not talking too much more until their work was through.

It was almost time for class to end when Nott asked, "So what's up with you in Defence this year?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, you heard . . . oh, you were out sick, right. It's just that Aran doesn't like Parseltongue. Said I can't use it."

"But . . ." The other boy looked away as if embarrassed. "Look, it's none of my business and it's probably a stupid question besides. But the talk going around is you can't cast in anything but. Is that true?"

Another shrug, this one carefully careless. Strange phrase, Harry thought, but it was accurate. "Well, I don't expect it's any secret that my magic was gone for a while and it's come back wonky."

"In that case, Aran's a jerk."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. It unnerved him to be in agreement with Theodore Nott over anything, but he tried not to let that bother him.

"Snape would take care of him in two seconds' flat, you know."

"Look, just because my father works here doesn't mean I'm going to go running to him with every little thing . . . what?"

Nott shook his head. "It's nothing to do with that, Potter," he said in slightly scornful tones. "You don't understand. No wonder, we've always thought McGonagall was a bit of an odd duck, so maybe you don't know what a Head of House is supposed to do. They way we hear it, she hardly ever even sets foot in your common room! Anyway, though, Snape looks out for us with the other teachers. You tell him about Aran and he'll set it right."

"I don't want special treatment."

"It's not special in the least, Potter. Snape would do it for any one of us. Well, except maybe Bella and Erik."

"Erik Vanvelzeer?" Harry furrowed his forehead. "You know, Snape mentioned wanting to talk to both of them. Do you know if he's had a chance?"

Nott frowned. "No idea. But back to your problem. You shouldn't just put up with Aran's shite. Snape told us way back that you were in Slytherin too, on account of the adoption. And Slytherins just don't lie down and let themselves get stepped on, Potter."

"Look, I'll handle Aran myself," snapped Harry, a little unnerved by the advice. Ron and Hermione had thought he should go to his father, and now here was Nott thinking the same, though he cast it more as a case of going to one's Head of House. Of course there was no telling what Nott's true motive was. Maybe he just wanted to see if he had any influence over Harry, which in itself was a good argument for letting the Aran situation alone.

Besides, he didn't want Draco to get the idea that Harry was competing with him for Snape's time or attention. Best to handle things on his own for the time being. And if Aran got even more unreasonable, Harry decided, he'd tell McGonagall about it. After all, he had been a Gryffindor for a lot longer, and if McGonagall stepped in, it wouldn't look like Harry had run crying to his father.
He hated that thought.

When class was winding down, Harry handed his egg to Nott to put away, then walked over to where Hagrid stood watching them. Fishing Sals out of his pocket, he passed her over into the half-giant's hands.

"Ach, she is summat beautiful, 'Arry, she surely is," Hagrid said, holding the little snake up high and reaching out a huge finger to gently stroke the top of her head. "And 'ow do yeh like yer charmed box, eh? Nice and warm, isn't it?"

Sals hissed that she liked the big man very much.

Harry smiled at that, but made sure he looked away from his snake before he started speaking. "Actually she loved that box but Draco . . . um, broke it. So now I have her in the wooden box she first came in, but Sals is afraid she'll get eaten by one of the other animals in the Tower. She is pretty small. I wondered if you had any ideas?"

"A repellin' charm might be jus' the thing." Hagrid lowered his large hands and passed Sals back over to Harry. "Yeh can look one up in the library. Don't remember the incantation, but if yeh find one with critters in mind, yeh'll be able to tell yer snake that she'll be the only thing can go in 'er box."

Harry smiled. "That sounds perfect. Um, as long as I'm at it, do you think I should look for a warming charm too?"

"Now fer that, I'd ask yer father," Hagrid said, his beard jiggling as he shook his head. "Too strong a charm there and yer snake won't exactly thank yeh."

Right, that one did sound trickier. Harry put it on his list of things to talk to Snape about once it seemed like Draco felt a bit more able to share him. "Thanks, Hagrid. Oh . . . you said once you might be able to tell if Sals is a little bit magical?"

Hagrid leaned down and peered closely at the snake. "Can't tell yeh fer certain, but I'd say she's likely jus' a snake."

Nodding, Harry tucked Sals back into a pocket, then walked back to where the students were waiting for Hagrid to dismiss them. When Harry began the trek back up to the castle, Nott fell into step beside him. Ron didn't look pleased, but he was good enough not to openly glare. He trailed along at a distance, his wand hand tensed and ready.

Harry caught his eye, then shrugged to say he was mystified by Nott but wanted to see what he could find out.

"So I was thinking," said Nott when they were about halfway up the hill. "If you're going to go around sporting a snake on your crest, you ought to get to know us a little better, don't you think?"

Harry glanced around. "Actually, I don't think anybody else in Slytherin wants to know me. Not sure why you do, actually."

Nott lowered his voice and steered Harry away from the other students, though the Slytherins were already cutting them a wide berth. "Letters," he whispered, looking left and right in rapid succession.

Harry pitched his voice equally low. "Oh. You're one of the students Draco's been writing to?"

"Yeah. He makes . . . ah, a certain lifestyle sound not so very appealing, if you catch my meaning.
Listen, I don't expect you to believe a word I say, especially since if you ask around you'll find out I talked pretty tough about how Draco must have lost his mind. I had to, Potter. I wasn't sure his change of loyalties was for real, at first. I thought it all might be some complicated scheme his father had cooked up."

"To deliver me back to Voldemort?"

Nott nodded, a muscle in his throat jerking when he heard that name. "And also to identify disloyal elements in Slytherin. But after a while, Pansy was starting to really think Draco had a safe way out. I could tell. And well, now it's all obvious that I was being too suspicious. Draco's on the up-and-up, all right. I mean, you obviously think so, and after what his father did, I figure you'd pretty much be a stickler for proof."

"To say the least," Harry murmured. "He's for real, all right."

Nott nodded, the motion slight enough that nobody but Harry could likely detect it. "So about Slytherin," he resumed in a louder voice. "You're welcome to dine at our table. You've a right to, in fact."

Harry had planned to go eat with the Slytherins sooner or later, but the offer still took him aback. He couldn't quite figure out if Nott was sincere, or up to no good. In other circumstances he'd probably repeat the entire conversation to Draco and see what the other boy said, but the mood Draco was in these days, he'd just snarl that all of Slytherin was out to get him and Harry'd be better off letting the lot of them rot. Then he'd start making fun, say something about Harry being too dim to see a plot if it was about to bite him.

"I'll think about it," Harry only said.

Nott lowered his voice again. "Good. But listen, there might be some resentment, so it'd be best to wait for a night when Snape's at the head table and can look out for you. Not to imply you can't look out for yourself . . . but, um, the way I hear it you pretty much can't. And even if you could, you've got no idea how . . . sneaky Slytherins can be."

Oh, yes I do, thought Harry, but being more than a bit sneaky himself, he wasn't going to say so. "Thanks for the advice," he said with a smile. "I have to catch up with my friends now, all right? But I'll think about the dinner thing. And I guess I'll see you in Potions tomorrow. 'Bye, Nott."

The Slytherin boy nodded briefly.

When Harry reached Ron and Hermione, he glanced back to find Theodore Nott still watching him. He met Harry's gaze, his own rather troubled, and gave a strange half-wave that anybody else would think was him batting away a bee.
"As Slytherin is once more represented adequately in class," Snape announced the next afternoon, "we'll resume our practice of inter-house pairs. Arrange yourselves accordingly and decide how to apportion last Tuesday's Magma Potions." His black gaze swept across the classroom and alighted on Hermione's raised hand. "Yes, Miss Granger?"

"But how will we be marked, sir? Each potion will have been brewed by at least three different students."

"I can always mark yours in its current state if that troubles you."

"No sir," said Hermione, glancing over at Harry as if she expected him to say something.

Ha, not likely.

"Well?" Snape crossed the classroom in a flurry of billowing robes. "Pair up!"

Nott caught Harry's eye, so Harry headed that way.

"Had me worried for a second there," the Slytherin boy quietly said as he began to organise his equipment. "Since you're sort of your own inter-house pair."

"Hadn't thought of that." Harry very nearly laughed. "I suppose I could have kept working with Hermione after all."

"Just as well you didn't attempt that, Mr Potter," said Snape in a low voice as he passed almost silently behind him.

Harry glanced over his shoulder and gave a little nod. "Yes, sir."

Nott laughed low under his breath. "It's a bit weird to see you two getting on."

Harry didn't know what to say to that, so he merely replied, "I'll go fetch my potion from the storeroom."

When he got there though, Hermione was already emerging, his cauldron in hand. "I need half of that," Harry said.

Hermione frowned slightly. "I'm a bit concerned about critical mass. I don't think this potion was meant to be split into such small quantities halfway through brewing."

She hadn't said no, exactly, and she was probably just talking for the sake of figuring things out--Hermione did a lot of that, Harry thought--but he still found the comment irritating. "Well, I'm working with Nott and he was out sick last Tuesday, so he doesn't have any!"

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "Well, I'm working with Zabini who was just as sick, so you think he does?"

"He wasn't just as sick; Snape said Nott was one of the worst affected!" Harry wasn't sure quite why he let fly with that; he just knew that Hermione was still standing there grasping his cauldron with both hands as though it was hers and she would go down fighting or something.

The moment he finished speaking, she got a very strange look on her face; it didn't take Harry long...
to figure out why.

"Mr Potter," said a cold voice from directly behind him. "In class you're to address me respectfully. I believe I was quite clear on that."

Chastened, Harry smoothed his fringe down over his scar as he whirled around, but he still found time to give Hermione a good, hard glare. "Yes, sir."

Snape's gaze seemed to reach behind him, the black in his eyes glittering when he spoke next. "Is there a problem, Miss Granger?"

"No, Professor."

"Then I suggest you stop attempting to create one, and get to work!"

Harry waited until Snape had moved off before he said in a furious undertone, "I need half of that!"

"Oh, here, take what you want." Hermione thrust the cauldron into Harry's hands. "I never said I wasn't going to share, you know! I was just a bit concerned about being able to complete the potion properly!"

Harry curled a lip and walked away. After he'd warmed the potion to a liquid, he poured half of it into Nott's cauldron and handed the Slytherin boy his own one. "Go give that to Hermione, would you?"

Nott looked a bit bemused by that; maybe he thought Harry ought to do it himself. But he did it agreeably enough, even staying a minute to chat. That was sort of interesting.

_Nah, Harry told himself. He wouldn't talk to a Muggleborn. He's just saying something to Zabini._

After their potions were bottled, labelled, and lined up in a neat row on Snape's desk, and everyone was packing up to leave, Harry hung back to talk to his father. He waited until there was no one else left in the classroom, then wandered to the front and plunked his book bag down alongside his feet.

"Professor?"

Snape gave him what Harry could only think of as a rather pointed look. But since Harry didn't know what the point might be, that wasn't too helpful. "Yes, Mr Potter?"

"I have something to ask you." Reaching down into his bag, Harry drew out a mass of folded notes and parchments. Putting them on the counter between them, he began sifting through them, looking for the one he'd written his question on.

When he couldn't find it straight away, he glanced up in apology, only to see his father's eyebrows drawn together in a fairly ominous way. "I thought we had settled this matter, Harry."

Harry followed the man's gaze down and saw that Snape was staring at the half-slip of parchment that McGonagall had given Harry when she'd announced the Hogsmeade Saturday. The permission slip.
"Sorry, sir." Grabbing it, Harry swept the parchment back into his bag, the motion so frantic that he ended up strewing his notes all over Snape's counter. Half of them scattered across the floor. Harry fell to his hands and knees to gather them up. "Sorry," he said again when he finally stood up.

Snape gave him an exasperated look and all at once waved his wand, causing the doors to the corridor to swing quietly closed. "Please do stop apologising so incessantly. Now, why are you so nervous?"

Harry thrust his papers back onto his father's desk. "Well, I wouldn't want you to think I was asking again to go to Hogsmeade when you'd already said no, that's all."

Snape looked a bit unconvinced by that explanation, Harry thought. But it had been the truth, so Harry didn't know what else to say.

"Well, what was it that you wished to ask me, then?"

"It's about the well-wish for Draco." After finding the right sheet of parchment in his notes, Harry peered closely at his own writing, trying to remember what he'd needed to find out. "Oh, right, cactus, that was it. I think it represents both protection and chastity? Well, how do I make sure Draco interprets it the way I'd prefer? Because the mood he's in these days, I'm a little worried he'll think I'm saying something about his love-life. And that'll remind him of Pansy."

"A valid concern." Snape's gaze on Harry was steady. "The things Draco has been saying of late . . . he is in fact likely to read the worst possible meaning into your gesture of good-will."

Harry frowned, then tried to laugh it off. "Yeah, and then he'll make some snide remark about my background, I bet."

"Would you prefer I rebuke him every time he says something loathsome?"

Yeah, Harry thought, one part of him really would like that. But the other part of him, the one that wanted to be a good brother, could see it wasn't such a great idea. He shook his head. "Thanks, sir. But Draco really needs things to be even. Like the allowance thing--"

Though come to think of it, Draco hadn't wanted their allowances to be even, had he? He'd wanted at least as much as Harry was getting, which was a little different from demanding exactly the same.

What a total prat.

Snape evidently thought so, too. "That," he said an emphatic tone, "was abhorrent."

Harry was hardly going to disagree, especially since it was perfectly obvious that Snape had intended to include Draco in the allowance from the start. Why else would he have emerged from his room with exactly eighty-eight Galleons in his pouch? "Yeah, it was rude and demanding of him, but do you see what I mean? If you criticise Draco every time he insults me, he'll just feel like you're favouring me over him. I think it'll make his attitude ten times worse."

The Potions Master gave a sharp nod. "I must admit I concur. So then, cactus. Interesting choice. What is your source text?"

Harry peered at his notes again. "Um, looks like Wizard's Guide to Home and Family."

"A scholarly work indeed," drawled Snape.

For him, that was a pretty restrained comment on the reliability of the source. "What, is the bit on
"A decent treatment of the subject would have mentioned that only flowering cactus is linked to chastity. As long as you give Draco any variety sans blossoms he will not fail to realise that your wish for him is protection."

Grimacing slightly, Harry started to put his notes away. "He'll probably still pretend I meant something mean."

"That is in fact likely." Snape paused. "I know that time spent with Draco is less than pleasant at present, but I would still like for you to join us for dinner this evening. And perhaps a round of Wizard's Scrabble afterwards. If you are at leisure?"

"Actually, I think I'd better go make up with Hermione."

"Another night this week then, perhaps."

Harry sighed then, thinking that he'd also better get a start on the essay his father had set him. Between his regular homework, and researching the well-wish, and finding the repelling charm for Sals' box, he just hadn't had time to work on it. Actually, he hadn't had much time for his homework, either. But Saturday was approaching fast and Harry wanted to have the essay completed as he'd promised. Besides, dinner was probably a bad idea in any case. Maybe if Draco got enough time alone with his new father, he'd stop thinking that Harry was some sort of threat, and then they'd all start getting along again.

Harry hefted his book bag over his shoulder as he shook his head. "Sorry, sir. I have a lot to do."

"Yes, loads. I remember." Snape's tone was rather dark, but then he seemed to shrug it off. "As I recall, your spell lexicon did not yet include duplication charms. Have you remedied that?"

"No, but I will, sir." Harry added it to the growing mental lists of tasks he had to somehow find time for. Just as well he'd insisted Ginny stay on as Seeker; there was no way he could fit Quidditch practise in as well.

Let alone D.A . . . Some of the students had asked him to start that up again, but Harry had decided it wasn't such a good idea. He didn't want to look like he thought he was some kind of expert . . . especially not now, when his magic was supposed to be so weak and wonky.

"Draco's professors are continuing to supply me with lessons schedules so that he can keep up with his schoolwork, but copies of your class notes would be efficacious. If you have trouble mastering the charm then please ask one of your friends to assist you." The Potions Master grimaced slightly. "I believe Miss Granger is the most likely to be competent."

"Uh, okay," said Harry, a little bit surprised. When he'd thought of Snape continuing Draco's education on his own, he hadn't realised that the Potions Master would go about things as though his son had never been expelled at all. That was good, though. It might help keep Draco's spirits up. "I'll owl my notes down every night as soon as I get copies made."

"Personal delivery would also be acceptable," said Snape with a gleam in his eye.

"And rub it in that I get to go to wander about while he's still stuck down there?"

"Hmm. You do perhaps have a point. " His father merely stared at him for a long moment. "Is the Elixir making any difference as of yet?"
"No . . ."

"You are using it as directed?"

"Yes, sir." Harry smiled, about to leave, but then he remembered the other thing he'd meant to ask. He looked back at the closed doors, then pulled out his wand and held it to cover his wandless magic as he performed a few analysis spells his father had helped him work out. When he glanced out of the corner of his eye, he thought Snape looked approving. That was nice.

The room turned out to be warded already, but Harry added his own silencing charm for good measure before asking, "Have you and the headmaster had a chance yet have a talk with Belladonna and Erik?"

Snape's eyes flashed. "Oh, yes. This is not for public consumption as we are still considering our options. But those two were administered Veritaserum without their knowledge, and--"

"Bella's not allergic?"

"I made certain she was not in advance," said Snape impatiently. "Though I did not believe she was, not for an instant. Mr Vanvelzeer maintained under quite strident questioning that he had in fact seen Draco rushing down the Owlery stairs the afternoon of the murder."

Harry felt as if he'd been punched in the stomach. Hard. "But . . . but that's not possible."

"You foolish boy," said Snape in those affectionate tones Harry loved so well. "Of course it is not possible. Your brother was unconscious."

"Then how did Erik resist the truth serum?"

"He didn't." Snape shook his head. "It is all very simple, Harry. Mr Vanvelzeer believed he was speaking the truth."

"So . . . hypnosis?"

"A memory charm is rather more likely, especially considering Miss Uwannawich. For she, you see, under intensive interrogation began to question her own recollection. Classic sign of a memory charm that didn't affix itself sufficiently. It also explains, by the way, why she got so upset at the thought of Veritaserum. Evidently whoever changed her memories realised that her mind was more resistant that Mr Vanvelzeer's. They implanted a suggestion that she was allergic to truth serum in the hopes that it would prevent any being used."

Harry frowned as he thought that over. "Why didn't they just put her back the way she was and . . . oh, because if her mind's resistant to interference, she's have remembered being messed with."

"Yes, by that time the perpetrator had made his bed and had to lie in it, so to speak."

The implications, when they came clear, startled Harry. "So she and Erik, they weren't lying at the hearing! They actually do believe they saw Draco that day!"

"Yes, though if you recall, even at the hearing Miss Uwannawich's testimony was a shade more tentative than Mr Vanvelzeer's. Evidently a result of the memory charm being more shaky in her case."

Harry sighed. "So . . . what, Lucius picked them at random? They weren't involved at all?"
Snape raised his shoulders, his robe flaring slightly as he shrugged. "That, I cannot say. However, by
 testifying they called attention to themselves. It seems unlikely that Lucius would have arranged for
the actual murderers to do so. I suspect they are both victims of machinations beyond our current
comprehension."

"But they might be involved."

"They might be," Snape conceded.

"Are we ever going to solve this, sir?" asked Harry in despair. "I want Draco cleared. I mean, really
cleared. And that will only happen if the real murderer is caught. Until then, he's innocent only on
paper. Look at the Governors, expelling him for something he didn't do!"

"We will solve it," the Potions Master promised, his eyes on Harry grim. Angry, almost. Harry didn't
know what that was about, unless it had to do with Snape hating how long it was taking. Or maybe
he was having a hard time dealing with Draco's current determination to be as rude as possible.

"Say hallo to Draco for me," Harry thought to say. "Well then, good night, sir."

Snape sighed; Harry wasn't sure why. "Good night, Harry."

------------------------------------------------------

It wasn't until Thursday that Snape came to the Great Hall for a meal. Harry had been watching for
him, and not just because he needed his father there if he was going to attempt something as
potentially dangerous as sitting down with the Slytherins. Harry also wanted to be sure that Draco
was getting plenty of time with Snape. And judging from Snape's absence from meals, it seemed he
was.

On Thursday though, he made an appearance for lunch. Dumbledore gave him a reserved smile, his
blue eyes twinkling as though he understood why Snape had been missing, but he was much pleased
to have him at the head table once more. The Potions Master nodded stiffly as he took his seat.

Harry saw all that from the far end of the hall as he came in, Ron and Hermione on either side of
him.

So then, this was it. His chance to eat with Slytherin.

All at once he didn't feel hungry in the slightest, though just a moment before he'd been ravenous.
Actually, nausea was starting to roil through him, but he was hardly going to let that stand in his
way. "I have to go eat with them," he told his friends in an undertone.

"You don't have to, Harry," Hermione said as she shifted her heavy load of books from one arm to
the other.

"Yes, I do. I promised Draco. And anyway, Snape's watching, and he's the one who gave me this
crest. To remind me that I'm Slytherin, too."

"Well then just go," said Ron, actually giving him a push. "Dithering isn't getting it done, is it?"

Harry backed up a step, startled. "What, you like the idea? Every time I talk to Nott you don't look as
though you much like that."

"I don't like any of it, but I'm trying to be there for you like you asked, so just go get it over with, already!"

"Oh." Harry smiled, feeling a bit better. "Thanks, Ron."

Hermione hesitated a moment, then gave him a look of pure encouragement. Harry liked that, even after she murmured, "See if you can find out anything about the Slytherin plague. Or Bella and Erik."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Oh, who cares?"

"Well, Ronald, there is still a murderer on the loose. Possibly more than one, right here at Hogwarts. Some of us might sleep easier knowing the culprit has been caught." With that, she flounced ahead into the Great Hall.

"Some of us might sleep easier if she'd shut up," said Ron, staring after her.

"I sort of thought you two would . . . uh, kiss and make up, sooner or later."

"Ha. She's just so full of herself, you know? She can go on for days about how I should have handled your adoption better, just as if she never wrote the most idiotic letter in the history of . . . well, letters!" Ron looked about to launch into a tirade over it, but then he just shook his head. "Go on and sit with your new friend Nott. I think he's waiting for you."

Harry didn't think so; when he looked that way, Nott was talking to Crabbe, who sat opposite him. "He's not my friend."

"Yeah, but he's going to be. I've seen this all before, with Malfoy."

"His name's Snape."

"Shite. I can't call him that. I guess it's going to have to be Draco after all." Ron made a face.

Harry laughed. "You'll get used to it."

"Maybe. Harry? I know you're nervous, but just go already!"

"All right." Harry caught his father's eye, then walked across the back of the hall and up alongside the Slytherin table until he reached Nott, who nodded and scooted to one side to make room for him. Harry glanced around at the nearby sixth- and seventh-years as he slung a leg over the bench and sat down. "Hi."

He got no response but glares, though Nott had the grace to look ever so slightly uncomfortable about his house's behaviour.

Determined to act as normally as possible, Harry served himself a generous helping of roast mutton and runner beans, then set to eating as though nothing in the world was the matter. The silence around him was oppressive, though; even the other houses had fallen largely silent as they waited to see what Slytherin would do about Harry's having gone to sit with them.

When Harry chanced a glance at the head table, he saw Snape talking with McGonagall even as his gaze steadily swept over Harry and his companions, back and forth, back and forth, the surveillance so methodical that Harry shivered. He'd seen Snape on Samhain, and before that, he'd seen him at
that horrid meeting in the pensieve, but never before had he got such a clear sense of what a formidable spy his father must have been.

Harry didn't know if it was his shiver that had done it, but after a moment of apparent indecision, Nott cleared his throat and said in a bright voice, "So, Potter. I don't imagine you've been to many matches this year, but it's looking more or less like Ravenclaw for the Quidditch Cup."

"Draco and I caught one of the Gryffindor-Slytherin matches, actually," said Harry, noticing Bella stiffening at the name. Ignoring Harry, however, she turned to one of her friends and began talking quickly.

"How's Draco?" said another voice, and Harry glanced to his other side, where Goyle sat.

"Well, I don't guess it's any great fun to be expelled for something you didn't do, but he's all right."

Goyle ate three entire rolls before he replied. "He used to help me a lot with my classes."

That was surprising. Harry wouldn't have thought that Draco had it in him to help anyone with anything. Well, not back then, anyway. But then again, there must have been a reason why Crabbe and Goyle had liked him so well.

Draco had called them sycophants . . . perhaps because he knew that their loyalty had been purchased. All in all, Harry thought it very sad.

"So how are you doing now in your classes?" he asked Goyle.

"Not so good." Goyle shrugged and went back to eating. Harry didn't really know what to say to that. At least, not until it dawned on him that this was a perfect chance to talk down his own magic and slide the topic of the Slytherin plague into the conversation.

Picking up his fork, he toyed with a bean, pushing around and around in circles on his plate. "Yeah, I sure can sympathise. Classes are really hard for me, too, now." Then, as if he'd just realised he'd said too much, he added, "After being away for so long, I mean. Say, are you still catching up from being sick last week? What was that like, anyway? Did anybody ever figure out what had caused it?"

Goyle answered while he was still chewing his last bite, reminding Harry a bit of Ron, actually. "Don't think they know what caused it. Those blisters-or-whatever really hurt. Bad enough that you were glad when you passed out . . . for me when I woke up things were much better. But Nott woke up screaming; he had it a lot worse."

"Oh yeah?" Harry turned to his other side.

For the briefest of seconds, Theodore Nott looked really irritated. Then his expression cleared and he casually said, "Yeah. Tell you about it a bit later, though."

With his friends, Harry might have pressed the matter, but the Slytherin half of his mind was telling him to drop it. Or . . . not drop it, but hold it in reserve and see if Nott ever did bring it up again.

The rest of the meal passed in more-or-less companionable silence, punctuated occasionally by a comment carefully worded to be neutral. Nobody questioned Harry's right to eat there, or said he wasn't welcome, but Harry didn't count that for much. These were Slytherins, and their Head of House was watching, so they were putting up with Harry.

For now.
"Like the other one," hissed Harry, holding his useless wand as a cover while he gestured his fingers towards a blank sheet of parchment, his other hand pointing at his class notes from that day's Defence class.

When the door to his dormitory creaked open, Harry whirled around, ready to defend himself.

But it was only Ron, who tilted his head to the side. "You all right, mate?"

Harry grinned a little bit sheepishly as he pocketed his wand. "Yeah . . . Just concentrating and you startled me. Duplicaro, you know, for Draco. It's sort of hard for me to manage." He didn't need to say more; Ron had been there on Tuesday night when Harry had worked out how to make the spell succeed in Parseltongue. Harry needed both his hands to make it copy documents properly, which meant the even though he held his wand in one, a clever observer might deduce that a bit of wandless magic was going on. Harry had resolved to use the spell only in secret . . . which was turning out to be pretty inconvenient when you shared a dormitory with several other boys.

But he wasn't going to disappoint his father. Resigning himself to the lack of privacy, he decided he'd just have to ask Hermione to help him, tonight. Snape had been right; she was the only other Gryffindor who did a really good job with the spell. Better than Harry, in fact. "Is Hermione down in the common room?"

"She's still with her study-buddies in Ravenclaw," Ron sneered. "Getting ready for an Arithmancy quiz tomorrow. We're apparently none of us smart enough for her."

Harry tried to cheer Ron up with a smile. "Oh, come on. We aren't even taking Arithmancy! And anyway, you know her; she's got a little more quizzex than it's good to have--"

Seamus had just finished wriggling into his pyjama top. "A little more what?"

"Quizzex, you know. Test anxiety."

By then, the three other boys were staring bemused at Harry. "It's wizarding slang." A sudden suspicion blossomed in his mind. "Isn't it?"

"Never heard it before," said Neville. Ron was also shaking his head.

Harry couldn't help but laugh. "He cheated, the sneak." And at his friends' puzzled expressions, Harry continued, "Draco. We were playing Wizard's Scrabble and we said slang was allowed and he cheated! He even said quizzex had two Z's so he could land one of them on a triple-letter tile!"

Seamus guffawed. "What a shock. Draco Malfoy, cheating. Have you owled the Quibbler yet?"

"Draco Snape."

"Shite Harry, we all know he's your brother!" Ron suddenly erupted. "You don't have to rub it in every time somebody mentions his old name! You think it's easy for us knowing you're brothers with that and liking things that way?"

"You think it's easy for me to deal with him having Lucius Malfoy's genes? Excuse me for not
wanting to hear him called by that awful name!"

"Are you a nutter? Lucius Malfoy doesn't wear jeans! And anyway I thought your brother's clothes all vanished--"

Ron hadn't intended to lighten the mood, Harry felt sure, but that was what ended up happening. "Genes, not jeans," he exclaimed, laughter overtaking him. "It's got to do with how you inherit traits from your parents. Oh, never mind. You know, sometimes I think this school really has a weird curriculum--"

"Does not."

"Does too--"

Neville interrupted before another argument could get started. "How could Mal . . . I mean, Draco, make a word with two Z's, anyway? Doesn't Wizard's Scrabble only have the one?"

"He used a blank tile--"

For some reason, that struck Ron as incredibly funny. "He used a blank tile, and he just happened to need it for a Z, for a word you'd never heard in your life, that just happened to land that Z on a triple-letter tile, and it never occurred to you that the git was lying his Slytherin face off?" His face reddening, Ron plopped down onto his bed and gave in to his laughter.

"I wondered about it," Harry wryly admitted. "Well, serve him right if we start using the word."

"Like he needs to be any more conceited," groused Ron.

Harry thought better than to point out that he thought Draco was a pretty insecure person at heart. "All right, no quizzex then. Well, I'll head down to the common room, then. I have to get these copied and look at those other well-wish books Hermione dug up and work on that extra essay Severus set me and--"

"Planning to fit some sleep in there somewhere?"

Harry waved off that thought. "Oh, I'll be up later. After Hermione finishes copying my notes so I can send them to Draco."

Ron frowned. "That could wait until tomorrow, you know."

"No, I promised my father I'd owl down my notes every night," Harry insisted. Neville gave him a concerned look then, but Harry ignored it. Neville couldn't understand what Snape must be going through, dealing with Draco at his very brattiest. Harry owed it to his father to be as helpful and cooperative as he could.

"Well, all right," murmured Ron, shaking his head. "I'd do your notes myself, even if they are for Draco, but my copies always have those awful smudges."

"It's all right."

Sighing then, Harry headed down the stairs to the common room.
He was halfway through his essay when Hermione finally walked in, her arms overflowing with books. "Just how late do Ravenclaws study, anyway?"

"Ha. I notice you're still at it," retorted Hermione as she flopped onto the couch on the other side of the table.

Harry sighed and pushed his essay across at her. "Tell me if that last part's clear, the bit about the wizard who strapped a magic floater to his broom and ended up being swept out to sea."

Hermione read his essay through from the start. "Looks all right so far. Though I can't think when Professor Snape has ever appreciated your Quidditch analogies, Harry."

"Yeah, he mentioned that." Harry took his parchment back and read a sentence or two, thinking they sounded depressingly like those first-year essays Snape had let him correct. Only with better spelling. "Maybe I'll just start over from scratch--"

"Harry, it's fine."

"Well, it needs to be better than fine. Severus was pretty upset with me and I want to show him that I understand why!"

"Harry..." Hermione shook her head. "No, never mind. You'll figure it out."

"Figure what out?"

"Having a dad." She paused as though weighing her words with care, but ended up not saying anything more... at least, not about Harry and Snape. Instead, she settled her books onto the table. "I'm late because of something one of the Ravenclaws said about well-wishes, actually. Did you know you're supposed to give some thought to the vase you use as well as the plants?"

*Great, more research.* Just what Harry needed. He was having a hard enough time trying to find wishes that Draco couldn't take the wrong way. "No, I didn't know that."

Hermione nodded sagely, despite the fact that she'd just found this out herself. "Whatever you pick, it's supposed to represent the father to the newborn... I mean, to Draco in this case."

"No wonder he gave me my well-wish in a potions vial," Harry said, thinking back. "I don't want to copy that though, so what's left? A model cauldron?"

"That'd be adorable!"

*Figures a girl would think so,* thought Harry.

"With a tiny fire underneath it--charmed to not really get hot, of course..." Hermione glanced at him through her lashes. "No? All right. Just as well then, that I went to the library and got these."

She pushed a stack of books across the table. "Family histories. There's something about the Snape lineage in every one. The way you keep insisting the rest of us call your brother Draco Snape, I thought you might want to make his new name sort of central to the whole well-wish."

Harry flushed, remembering how Ron had reacted upstairs to the whole name thing. "But what good are family histories going to do?" he complained. "I mean, unless there's some kind of vase that goes along with the name."
"There's a crest," said Hermione, flipping through one of the thicker books until she found it. She flipped the book around on the table so Harry could see. "Here."

_The Snape Family Crest_, the heading read. Beneath it was a full-page illustration of . . . well, Harry supposed it was some sort of crest, but it wasn't like one he'd ever seen, and not just because it was moving. No horses or helmets or feathers here . . . nothing anyone could recognise, in fact. The crest was shaped like a shield, but it bore no emblems of any kind. Instead, looking at it was like staring into a kaleidoscope. Abstract shapes swirled 'round and 'round in patterns, the colours cycling through greens and greys and blues, with an occasional hue from the rest of the rainbow. It was hypnotic, Harry thought. And weird.

But he sort of liked it.

"I don't think my _Duplicaro_ is really up to transferring something like this," he murmured. A wanded spell might be powerful enough, he thought, but immediately discarded the idea. After the research he'd done for his essay, he knew it really _wasn't_ worth the risk.

"I thought mine might be," Hermione said, smiling. She drew a piece of parchment out of another book, and passed it to Harry.

"Nice." Harry studied the copy closely. "A little too blue in places, I think . . ."

"Took me sixteen tries," admitted Hermione. "Each one was better, so . . ."

"Why would you go to all that work for Draco?"

"It's work for you, silly. You've been slaving away, putting off your schoolwork so you can figure out what to wish for Draco--"

"Well, he's hard to wish for, as it turns out."

"I bet."

"He's suddenly being a total snot, in fact."

Hermione giggled. "Suddenly, is it?"

Harry stuck out his tongue at her.

Hermione pushed her hair off her face. "Padma asked how you were, by the way. That's how this started. I said you were making a well-wish, and she wanted to know what sort of a vase would represent Snape. And when I realised you had to figure _that_ out as well, I thought I'd try to help you out."

"Oh, you did," Harry assured her. "_Snape family crest_. It's perfect! It represents Severus like it's supposed to--well, I hope it does, no telling if this is the right branch of the Snapes, but anyway . . . see, I think Draco thinks I'm a little bit jealous that he has Dad's name and I don't, and maybe this'll help show him that I'm fine with it."

"Are you fine with it?"

"Yeah, of course," said Harry dismissively, his mind on other matters. Maybe he'd been going about looking for wishes all wrong. Maybe if he started with Draco's need to be seen as something other than a Malfoy . . . "You're brilliant!" Harry suddenly exclaimed, snatching up a pile of parchments and tearing them in half.
Hermione's brows drew together. "Well, yes... but Harry, your essay really wasn't that bad..."

"No, no, those were my notes for the well-wish," Harry explained. "I just had a better idea for how to go about deciding on the wishes. Not even Draco will complain about them, I bet, not if I... well, I don't know if it will work out so I won't go into it. But I have to start my research over."

"Over!"

"Yeah. But it'll be worth it. Hmm, if I have a list by morning I can see if Professor Sprout can get me the plants. Owl-order express, something like that."

"What's the rush?"

"I want it done by Saturday when I go down for my Potions tutorial," explained Harry. "Hmm, though I have to make time to finish another foot and a half of essay, too, not to mention catching up on all my other homework..."

"Not to mention sleep," Hermione said as she stood up, yawning.

"Yeah, that's what Ron said," mentioned Harry, fishing.

"Oh, Ron has quite a lot to say, doesn't he?" Hermione was frowning as she began to gather up her things. "Don't tell him I'm helping you with the well-wish, not unless you want to hear a lot of blather about how sweet I've gone on Draco."

Harry's jaw dropped. "Ron thinks you're sweet on Draco?"

Hermione slammed a book closed.

"Um... are you? You know, sweet on--"

"Harry Potter!" Hermione glared at him, her stance fierce. "I know you regard him as your brother so I've been careful not to say what I really think! I learned my lesson about meddling in family already, thank you very much. Your father still hasn't forgiven me. But really, am I sweet on Draco? Honestly, Harry--"

"You can say what you really think," Harry interrupted. "I mean, about Draco. I'd rather not hear some half-baked theory about my neediness or anything like that."

"Oh." Hermione's expression softened. "Well, I think he's lucky to have you on his side, and that you're worth ten of him, and if he hurts you he'll have me to reckon with. And... well, I also do think he's not quite as bad as he once was. And, that thing with his father... that was awful."

Harry resisted an urge to insist, *Snape's his father*. He knew what Hermione meant, and the scene upstairs had shown him that he'd been coming across a bit pushy on that matter.

"And, well, after seeing that," Hermione went on, "it was easier to understand what made him such a vicious little prat, you know? I mentioned that to Ron, who insisted on being an idiot, of course. But don't you go asking if I'm sweet on Draco, Harry. The idea makes me ill. Even though I do know he's been a big help to you this year."

"Right, he has." Harry poured himself a glass of water from the never-out pitcher Dobby had delivered earlier. "Well, I'm going to start over from scratch on my wishes and finish this essay. If you could put the crest on some sort of glass or vase tomorrow, I'd really appreciate it."
"What sort of glass or vase?"

"Um, probably something smooth-sided I guess. Doesn't matter."

Hermione nodded. "Shall I stay up and help you with the research?"

"No, you have that Arithmancy test you were reviewing for." Harry waved her away, blinking fast to try to wake himself up. "I'll be fine. Oh, but could you copy my notes? I tried to get through them earlier but . . ."

Hermione made the duplicates, rolled them up, and tied them with a bit of string, then left them on the edge of the table for Harry to owl. Hedwig knew the routine by then. All Harry had to do was call softly to have her fly out the window of his dormitory and in the window to the common room. "For Severus," he explained, and she hooted as she headed off.

Snape probably wouldn't get them until he went to class--or breakfast if he ate in the Great Hall--but that was all right since he could floo the notes to Draco from his classroom or office, first thing.

As soon as Hedwig was gone, Harry fished Sals out of his pocket and draped her around his neck. She'd been a lot happier since he'd found the repelling charm for her box, though it had been Hermione who'd actually applied the spell. Sometimes, Harry thought, this Parseltongue magic is really inconvenient. It made mastering new spells a right pain, and this week, he just hadn't had time to spare figuring out something he'd probably only use once. Good thing he had a clever witch like Hermione as one of his best friends.

Moving to sit on the floor, the low table serving as a desk, Harry started hunting for the book that had alphabetised plants instead of listing them in broad categories by magical properties.

The Snape family crest kept calling his attention, however. It really was quite beautiful, Harry thought as he stared at the shifting colours and shapes. It was so captivating, in fact, that looking away became a challenge.

At least until his eye fell on the initials H.S . . . tiny letters in the lower right corner of the emblem.

Was this crest even for the branch of the Snapes he'd been adopted into, that was the question. Wanting to find out, Harry started reading.

The Snape lineage is an old and respected one in Wizarding Britain, though the exact origins of the family are unknown. The earliest ancestor attested to by means of genealogical spells appears to have been a cobbler who reputedly sewed shoes that would never wear out . . .

Harry grinned, imagining Draco's reaction if he found out he'd been adopted into a family of shoemakers. For his part, he found the history fascinating, though he did still wonder if he was reading about the right Snapes. Severus might know, he supposed, not that Harry planned to ask. Maybe someday, when his father eased up about discussing his family . . .

Why couldn't History of Magic have been this interesting?

The answer to that was simple, though. Harry hadn't cared about goblin rebellions. This, he cared about. A lot.

He read all the way through the article headed by the crest, then putting off his homework and essay and the well-wish for a while longer, flipped open a much thicker book and looked up Snape in that one too.
Oh, better, even if it didn't have any discussion of family crests. This book was one of those self-updating encyclopaedias; Hermione had checked out the volume covering Smo-Sni.

_Snape, Severus_, read the entry.

Descended from shoemakers, Severus Augustus Snape currently holds the coveted post of Potions Master at _Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry_. He has developed or made significant contributions to at least sixteen classes of potion still in use, including some highly regulated by the _British Ministry of Magic_. These are his known contributions. It is suspected his true accomplishments in the field of potions are more vast, though since Snape continues to decline an interview with the editors of this publication, it is difficult to determine the true acclaim he may be due.

Snape has an undeserved reputation as a Death Eater active during both the first and second _Voldemort_ wars, the latter still ongoing. However, it has come to light that his true allegiances were to the forces opposing _Voldemort_, notably _Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore_. Snape was instrumental in saving the life of _Harry James Potter_ on November 6, 1996, which led to his unveiling as a spy of long standing. Not long afterward, Snape, who remains unmarried, petitioned _Wizard Family Services_ for permission to adopt Harry Potter. On March 21, 1997, he also became the adoptive father of _Draco Alain Gervais Walpurgis Malfoy_ (see entry _Malfoy, Lucius_).

Draco, Harry thought, would be a little miffed to know that Harry had an entry of his own and he didn't. Maybe that was why the encyclopaedia hadn't updated his name to Snape . . . well, it didn't matter. Harry had found out what he needed to. The crest was for the right branch of the family.

He pushed the family history books aside before he gave into the temptation to keep on reading them all night, and pulled over the _Alphabetical Guide to Plants and Properties_. Sighing, Harry flipped it open to S.

One or two hours, he thought, to make his list of plants.

And then, he'd try to catch up on the three days' worth of reading and homework he'd been putting off.

------------------------------------------------------

Friday morning at breakfast, Harry almost fell asleep in his porridge. Well, no wonder; he'd been up all night working. The essay had taken so long to finish that he hadn't quite caught up on all his homework, though at least he'd made a cursory attempt to get through his required Potions readings. _What a grim weekend this is shaping up to be_, he thought, depressed. Not only did he have to miss out on Hogsmeade and probably put up with a full day of Draco being rude, he was going to have to spend his Sunday pouring over tomes and texts and alternate readings!

No help for it, though.

"You guys go on to Charms without me," said Harry as he grabbed an oatcake and stood to leave. "Professor Sprout has a free hour this morning so I'm going to ask her to help me get the plants I need."

"Are they rare?"
"Uh, don't really know," Harry told Hermione as he fished the list from his pocket. "Sarsaparilla, nettle, alyssum, plantain, and Echinacea. What do you think?"

"I think she'll fix you right up on everything except plantain."

"I wanted the well-wish for tomorrow," grumbled Harry. "If owl-order can't get me the plantain by then . . . hmm, maybe I should come up with something else for P."

Ron narrowed his eyes. "Why P, in particular? Oh . . . sarsaparilla, nettle . . . I get it. Why do that?"

"I'm trying to make a point. You know, I'm all right with his new name. Draco's sort of sensitive about it."

"Draco. Sensitive."

"Well, he is," Harry said, then tried to rein back his impulse to defend his brother. "Anyway, if Flitwick asks for me you can say I'm consulting Professor Sprout about some plants I need. I'll see you both at lunch."

"Harry," Hermione warned. "You aren't supposed to go anywhere alone."

Harry hadn't exactly forgotten that, but it was seeming less urgent to him all the time. Still, he hardly wanted to hand Snape even more reason to be annoyed with him. "Right. So you tag along and miss Charms, too."

Hermione's eyes went wide. "I can't skive off a class!"

Ron, Harry suddenly realised, was staring at him in a way that would have made him realise his gaffe even if Hermione's tone of voice hadn't. "Sorry," he mumbled, ducking his head. "Tired."

Hermione made a rather motherly noise. "Just how late were you up?"

"Uh, all night . . ."

She sighed, but only said, "Well, I can go see Professor Sprout with you during lunch. How's that?"

"Too late, that's what it is." Harry didn't want to be a pain, but Hermione didn't seem to understand. "I have to do the well-wishing ceremony tomorrow. If I don't, Draco'll think I don't wish him well."

"He won't be as silly as that--"

"Ha. You haven't seen him lately. But anyway Hermione, he had mine ready to go the instant my official adoption certificate came through. And the mood he's in, he'll see it as an insult if I delay any longer! For all I know, even Snape is wondering why I haven't got it together before now! So I can't wait until lunch to see if I need to order something. I have to go see Sprout now!"

"Are you more worried about disappointing your brother or your father?" asked Hermione, raising an eyebrow toward her bushy hairline.

"I . . ." Harry thought about it. "Not sure, actually."

"I'll go with you to the greenhouses," volunteered Ron with a nasty glint in his eye. As soon as he kept speaking, Harry realised the reason for it. "Some of us value our friend's needs more than an hour practicing charms."

"Well maybe what he needs is to be in class where his father expects him to be, instead of wandering
the grounds with only you to protect him!"

Harry decided this was an argument he wouldn't win. "Ron, you coming?"

Hermione pursed her lips and waved a bit sarcastically for them to leave.

Harry and Ron were almost to the door of the Great Hall when Nott fell into step alongside them. "Have a minute, Potter? I'd like to talk to you." He paused. "Alone. There's an empty classroom a couple of halls down . . ."

Reflex had Harry glancing toward the head table, even though he'd noticed earlier that Snape must be breakfasting with Draco. Which was good, he hurriedly told himself. Of course it was good.

As for alone . . . well, Harry had talked to Nott more-or-less alone that day they'd walked back from Care of Magical Creatures together, but they'd been in view of several students at all times, including Ron and Hermione both. An empty classroom, though, that was a little different.

"Ron and I are actually a bit busy," Harry said, and felt Ron relax a bit beside him. That soon changed, for Harry added, "You could walk with us if you like."

Nott frowned. "I have to be in Transfiguration in ten minutes but . . . oh, all right." After that, though, he didn't seem terribly inclined to say much. Or maybe he was just waiting until they were well away from the Great Hall.

He stopped walking when they reached the bailey.

Glancing at Ron, Harry saw that his friend's hand was on his wand grip, ready.

"So what did you need to talk to me about?"

Nott looked left and right, then stared at Ron as though deciding something. "You asked me about the plague. About why I had it worse than practically anyone else, remember?"

Actually, Harry had asked him what the symptoms were like, but he was hardly going to quibble. When he thought back, he realised his question could have been taken that way. "Yeah."

"I couldn't say anything, not there with the whole house trying to overhear us," Nott confided, his voice dropping as he seemed to shrink in size, as though trying to hide. "But I thought you ought to know, so you could tell your father. Bella caused the plague. Well, Bella and Erik both."

Harry thought a little scepticism was called for. It actually wasn't too hard to dredge up. "Bella and Erik. Right."

"The thing is . . ." Nott looked furtively around. "I think it was a mistake, see. They were trying to do something else, and it went wrong."

"Well, what were they trying to do, Nott?" put in Ron.

Nott looked Ron squarely in the eyes. "Kill me, that's what."

"But why would they have wanted to kill you?"

"Because," Nott whispered, "they'd started telling Aurors that they'd seen Malfoy rushing down the Owlery stairs! Now, if one thing is certain, it's that Draco has a better sense of strategy than that. Even if he'd killed Pansy in a fit of oh, who knows, jealous rage or something, afterwards he'd look at every angle and pick the best one. No way would he do something that made him look guilty. And
besides, I told you, I never could see that he had any reason to kill her anyway--"

"Is this leading to an actual point?"

"Well, yes, Weasley. Actually it is," insisted Nott, still in that low, cautious voice. "You see, I was sure that Bella and Erik were lying, and I wanted to know what was really going on. I watched them pretty carefully for a bit, but that didn't get me anywhere. So then, I confronted them. I . . . uh, well actually I told them that I'd been hanging out at the foot of the Owlery stairs and I didn't see Draco come down. And anyway, it wasn't too long after that I got sick, see?"

No, Harry didn't see. His expression must have said so.

"They cursed me! With some awful new spell nobody's ever heard of. My guess is they're working for Lucius Malfoy and got it from him! But they cast it together to give me a double dose or something, hoping to kill me like I said, but instead the extra power made the spell spread out all over the Slytherin common room and out as far as the dormitories. They ended up cursing themselves, even. But they must have meant to target me in particular, or else why would I have got so much sicker than most of the others? Or do you think it was a coincidence that the other students who were as sick as me happened to be the same ones who were standing right by me just a few minutes after I'd confronted Bella and Erik? My guess is, Lucius Malfoy gave them that spell to incapacitate anybody who might contradict their testimony at the expulsion hearing!"

"But it's just a guess?"

"Well, I haven't felt much inclined to confront them again, if that's what you're asking!"

Ron blew his breath out in a huffing noise. "If they meant to incapacitate witnesses then they did a pretty poor job of it. Slytherin was well on the mend by the day the expulsion hearing rolled around."

"Yeah," said Nott in the same kind of voice Hermione used when she thought someone was being stupid. "Because they didn't cast it right. They messed with it. It spread out over Slytherin instead of over time, something like that."

"And you're telling me all this because?"

Nott stared at Harry for a second, then barked a harsh laugh. "Well, shite. Did I read you wrong yesterday? Seemed to me you were pretty interested in the plague and trying not to show it. So I thought you might appreciate knowing what I've been able to figure out."

When Nott stepped closer, Harry stepped back. Had he really been that easy to see through? "Why would you care what I appreciate or not?"

"Because," Nott whispered, stepping closer yet again, "I turn seventeen over the summer! Do you know what that means, Potter? In my family, at least, it means this . . ." He thrust his left arm out of his sleeve.

Unmarked . . . but Harry still flinched back. Nott was standing too close for comfort by then.

"And why would you object to that?" questioned Ron in a harsh whisper of his own as he actually stepped between Nott and Harry. "Seems to me you used to think it was a fine idea!"

"Yeah, I used to think it was exciting and glamorous. Lure of the forbidden, you know." Nott backed off, then. "Well, it doesn't sound so attractive now. It's slavery. With torture tossed in for good measure. Who the hell would want that?"
"Oh, only just about every student in your fucking house!"

"What you know about my house wouldn't fill a teaspoon, Weasley!" Nott looked past Ron at Harry. "You might be surprised how many of us would rather just skip serving the Dark Lord now that Draco's given us a first-hand look inside a meeting. You tell your father that, Potter."

Nott hesitated a moment, then turned his back on them and headed into the castle.

"Told you we weren't really friends," said Harry. He still felt jittery inside from when Nott had come too close to him. "He wants to use me. I just can't figure out if it's for something good, like getting away from Voldemort, or if there's more going on than I know . . ."

"Well, there's more going on than I know," retorted Ron. "Draco's given us a first-hand look inside a meeting? What the hell was that about?"

Harry swallowed, not liking the tone of those questions. "Um . . . well, Draco was at the meeting on Samhain, actually."

Ron shoved his hands in his pockets. "Oh, great. Your precious brother watched you get your eyes skewered. That's just wonderful, Harry. And you never thought it might be good to mention this to me?"

"Well, it was really Draco's personal business . . . and anyway, I'm glad he was there. 'Cause that's what brought him over onto our side, Ron. He saw Lucius being a slave to Voldemort, and realised he was destined for the same if he didn't do something about it." Harry sighed. "And that's why Nott just might be telling the truth, see? Draco's spent the past few months trying to convince his house mates that what they're getting into isn't what they think it is."

Ron's eyes were still fierce with anger, but he managed to nod. "So you think he has it right, about Bella and Erik and the Slytherin plague? But wait, that doesn't make much sense, not really. You said your father had determined they were testifying based on false memories . . . that they weren't really working for Lucius Malfoy . . . well, at least not knowingly."

"You're right; it doesn't line up." Harry shrugged. "But Nott said it was just his guess. If he thinks that Bella and Erik cursed him, anyway, that probably counts for something."

"What?"

"I'm still figuring that out." Harry smiled. "Um, thanks for making him back off, anyway. The last few days I've felt a little bit . . . I don't know. Sort of jumpy."

"Yeah, I noticed. It started just about when Draco got adopted," Ron said with a pointed look. "Maybe you're not as delighted with that as you want us all to think."

"Maybe you should stop impersonating Hermione."

"Shut up, Harry."

Harry laughed, and said they'd better get down to the greenhouses before they ended up missing the class after Charms, too.
"As we finished working with Magma Potions on Tuesday," Snape said that afternoon as he swept majestically into the Potions classroom, "we will today continue our study of charmed potions by brewing Waldenholfer's Acuity Draught, which is representative of the Senseo class of potions. As you are all sixth-year students, which hopefully means you have surpassed the academic level of first-year dolts, I will assume you have all done the readings I assigned at the close of the last session. If anyone has not, I strongly advise you to leave class now and do them."

Harry sort of gulped. He had done all the readings, of course. He just didn't remember too much from them.

Of course, this would be one of those days when Snape seemed to be a vicious mood. His black eyes were almost predatory as they swept over the class . . . just as if he wanted to find some poor hapless student or other who was unprepared.

Harry gulped again, hoping he didn't get called on.

"Mr Zabini," the Potions Master quickly rapped out, "what is the general purpose of an Acuity Draught?"

"Um, to increase acuity," Zabini said, though when the teacher frowned he quickly added, "Perception, I mean. To make you see better or--"  

Snape spoke right over his answer. "And Waldenholfer's contribution to the Senseo class, Mr Potter, was . . .?"

Harry thought fast. Perception. Senses. Zabini had already mentioned sight so he took a stab in the dark and said, "His potion improves hearing, Professor."  

Snape didn't say correct, but then again, he hardly ever did. You knew you had the right answer if he moved right on to something . . . or someone, else.

"And the reason why Senseo class potions require charms, Mr Nott?"

Harry breathed a sigh of relief, but was careful not to let it show.

After a few more questions and answers, Snape appeared satisfied that his students were ready to begin brewing. He waved a careless hand toward the blackboard and the instructions appeared. "You will note, ladies and gentlemen, that this potion requires no fewer than four separate applications of charms. The colour, viscosity, and magical aura of your potion must be perfect prior to each charm, so I suggest you follow the procedure precisely as written."

The Potions Master gave a thin smile. "Since you all now have sufficient experience in the realm of charmed potions, you will be brewing individually this afternoon. I expect, however, each and every one of you to summon me to check your potion before you apply the two most critical charms." He looked down his nose at them. "I trust you all know which two I mean? You may begin."

Great, Harry thought. Individual work. He'd been hoping Hermione would keep him on track, not to mention awake. Or at least Nott, if Snape made the houses mix.

He'd just have to manage by himself, though. Starting with watching his classmates closely as he brewed, since he didn't really know which two charms were the critical ones. If he asked anyone, Snape was sure to overhear and know he hadn't studied enough.
Yeah, better to bluff it out . . .

Things went all right at first. He pulped his wild carrot roots to a fine mash—though weren't carrots supposed to be good for your eyes? Harry almost giggled, which was warning in itself. He was too exhausted to be brewing, and definitely shouldn't be working by himself, but he didn't have any choice. He wasn't about to go tell his father what a poor student he'd been this week.

So Harry soldiered on.

He prepared several more ingredients, only adding them when he noticed Hermione doing so as she hovered over her own cauldron. She tossed in the anise seeds and stirred three times clockwise, then carefully lifted her stirring stick from the bubbling brew and let every last drop of honey-coloured potion drip back down into her cauldron. But she didn't move to the next step, which would be extinguishing her fire. Instead, she raised her hand.

Harry checked the instructions. Waste not want not, which was Snape's bizarre way of saying to keep your potion completely in your cauldron, was followed by the first charm.

Which meant he only had to figure out which one remaining was the other critical one.

"A bit thin," said Snape as he tapped Hermione's cauldron with a fingernail and watched the liquid within react. How he could tell anything when the potion was at a full boil was beyond Harry. Perhaps it had to do with smell as well; he certainly seemed to be inhaling a lot, his large nose engulfed in fumes as he evaluated Hermione's work. "One more anise seed, Miss Granger."

After Hermione dropped it in, Snape tapped the cauldron once more. "Adequate. You may proceed." He turned away, his dark gaze checking on his other students' progress.

Harry thought his potion was perhaps a bit thin as well, so he dropped in an extra anise seed before raising his hand.

Snape nodded that he'd seen him, but first saw to Parvati, who'd had her hand up longer. Then he walked over, the motion so smooth he seemed almost to glide, and gave Harry's cauldron a single, strong tap. "Just a shade too much anise," he commented.

Harry's brain froze. Not that he'd expected his potion to be perfect, of course --when was it ever?-- but because he couldn't remember how to counter too much anise. He wanted to hit his head on the desk. Why, oh why had he thought it would be such a good idea to toss in that sodding extra seed?

"Neutralise the excess, Mr Potter," Snape calmly recommended, turning his face toward Harry's, his dark eyes intense.

"Yes, sir." Occluding just in case his father might be able to see more than Harry wanted, Harry reached his hand toward the shreds of ginger he hadn't used. Snape nodded and moved on.

Whew. Close call.

Harry gently lowered a shred of ginger and floated it on the surface of his potion, letting the boiling action mix it into the brew. He tapped the side of the cauldron himself and thought it looked all right. Putting out his fire as directed, he glanced up at the board.

Apply the appropriate freezing charm, it read, and maintain your potion in a semi-frozen state until the edges turn grey.

Freezing charm.
Yeah, he'd read--at about 5 a.m.--that one would be required. The other three charms he had to do were more familiar. And really, a standard freezing charm wouldn't tax him too much, but this was one specially designed to turn viscous liquids into sort of a slush. He'd meant to practice it beforehand so he got the Parseltongue version down, but Sals had been asleep and he'd been dead tired and he'd still had most of the chapter to read.

He'd meant to go back to it, he really had.

Well, nothing for it now.

Harry turned his back on his father and slid a hand into his pocket, letting Sals wrap around his fingers so he could pull her out. Snape would probably hear the Parseltongue but then again, he would just think Harry was performing the required charm, not trying to figure out how the heck to make it work.

"Sals," he whispered, bringing her up close to his face and talking as low as he could, "I want ice . . ." Damn, he'd just tried to say slush and it had come out as ice. Okay, try again. "I want my stick to make some soft ice. Like, almost frozen but not quite. Do you have any ideas?"

Sals' little tongue lapped out against Harry's cheek. "Like sleet?"

"Yeah, sleet," Harry said. "That's about right. Thanks, Sals."

Harry pointed his wand at his cauldron but held it so that a standard freezing charm wouldn't flow through it. Then, fingers in position, he steadied his gaze on his ring and said, "Be sleet."

Nothing. When he put his hand on the side of the cauldron it hadn't even cooled. Well, he was used to trial and error for new spells, by then. "Become sleet." No. Maybe he should charm the cauldron instead of the potion itself; that sometimes worked. "Make what you are holding into sleety sleet."

That was what he got for trying to say slushy sleet.

He felt a zinging sensation shoot through his wand instead of his fingers, and realised that he hadn't changed the angle when he'd switched to talking to his cauldron. Uh-oh . . . wanded magic.

It seemed to be all right, though. No sparks flew from the end of his wand; nothing catastrophic. Nothing unexpected, even. His potion started to change, that was all. Like it was supposed to. The contents of his cauldron took on a bluish sheen that got darker and darker, shifting towards black. Harry kept a close eye on his potion, waiting for the edges to turn grey.

And then . . .

Oh, no . . .

The potion stayed mushy, Harry could see that, but it must have got way too cold even if it didn't harden into ice. Must have, because nobody else's cauldron was silently cracking through, the contents somehow muffling any noise.

Slushy sleet, just like he'd asked for, spilled out onto his workbench. That in itself might not have been so bad, but his workbench was still covered with things he'd chopped and diced and mashed. Tired as he was, Harry knew that was an accident waiting to happen. He pointed his wand at the mess, more careful this time to keep his magic wandless, and hurriedly hissed his version of an Evanesco.

But his potion didn't vanish, it just kept oozing towards his shredded ginger.
Everything seemed to happen in slow motion, then.

Harry reached out his hands to sweep his ingredients out of the path of the potion.

Sals, dangling from his wrist by then, hissed as she came near the freezing slush.

Reacting instinctively, Harry yanked that arm back to his chest while his other hand shoved ginger and carrot and anise, among other things, onto the floor.

Snape shouted something, then. Harry registered the sound, but not the words, past his panic. Because any second now the potion was going to ooze right off the desk and onto the floor, and then there might be an explosion or worse--

A spell zinged past his ear, so close it seemed to burn him, at the same times some words did come clear. Well, one word. "Evanesco!"

Snape, trying to contain the damage before it was too late. But his spell failed, as Harry knew it would. It took a Parselmouth to affect Harry's wanded Parseltongue magic. Snape knew that, but he didn't know Harry had used his wand... really used it. "Helare!" Snape incanted, hoping no doubt to freeze the oozing potion solid to keep it from spreading.

"Sir," Harry began, but Snape spoke right over him.

"Out!" he abruptly shouted. "Everyone, out!"

Students dropped stirring rods and ladles and rushed for the doors, just as the oozing potion reached the edge of the desk and began to form a drop that hung for a moment, lengthening as it struggled to separate itself from the potion above.

In that moment, Harry's panic snapped through his exhaustion and he knew what to do. He lifted his wand to put an end to this, wanded magic to undo wanded magic, that was it; he'd been too tired before to think straight but there was no way a wandless spell could hope to undo the wanded magic previously applied--

"Harry, out!" Snape yelled, grabbing him by the arm and flinging him towards the door, the Potions Master stepping between his son and imminent disaster. "Evanesco!" Snape yelled again, this time pointing his wand at the ingredients scattered on the floor, instead of at the mass of potion.

Ginger and carrot and anise vanished just as a single drop of potion hit the floor and sizzled strangely.

Then a huge glop fell and the floor started to smoke, granite dissolving beneath the onslaught of magic woven through the potion, the room quaking slightly as a crater appeared where before there had been solid stone.

Snape raised an eyebrow and backed up a step, then appeared to come to some sort of conclusion. His wand flashing left and right, he began incanting spells to coat the remaining floor with marble. When the potion oozed onto that, it finally halted its slow march forward and became nothing but a blackish blob. Hard to imagine it had caused such havoc.

Harry was hovering near the door, biting his lip, when Snape stomped his way. Stepping past him, the Potions Master announced to the students in the hallway, "Class dismissed." But then he turned to Harry, his brows drawn together in a furious line. "You, however, are decidedly not. Come with me!"
Hostilian

Snape pulled Harry inside the classroom and immediately warded the doors. "When I say everyone out, I mean you as well!"

Harry took a step back, more than a little unnerved. "Yes, sir."

"I had to specifically repeat Harry, out, and that must never happen!" Snape raged on. "Never, Harry! What if the situation had been more dire? When I think of what might have happened!"

"But Professor, I had just realised how to stop anything else from happening, that's all."

Snape stared at him, then took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his own nose as he shook his head. "Yes," he gruffly acknowledged. "I see that. Still, Harry . . ." With a sigh, then, he walked to the gaping crater in the classroom floor. Harry followed along behind. "As you seem to be the only one who can rid us of this awful potion . . ."

A little wary in case something else went wrong, Harry's whole body tensed as he incanted a Parseltongue, "Get out of here." It all went fine, though, perhaps because he'd been extra careful to hold his wand just as he had when the accident had happened.

Snape's dark eyes narrowed. "Perhaps you'd care to explain why you're utilizing wanded spells during class?"

His tone sounded measurably calmer than before, but instead of reassuring Harry, it made him even more nervous. "I didn't mean to, honest. I was having trouble making the charm work, that's all, and I tried a couple of different things and then I got distracted and held my wand wrong. But just by a little bit, I mean, hardly any magic went through it, I could tell--"

Snape took several more deep breaths as though deliberately calming himself down, then moved a hand to Harry's shoulder and patted it several times without stopping. "All right, Harry. It sounds as though you need to work more on your wandless control, but nothing so very terrible has occurred."

Nothing so terrible? He'd only humiliated himself in front of the father he'd been trying so hard to impress.

Swallowing back the rest of his panic, Harry ventured. "You aren't angry any longer, sir?"

"No. Though I would hope that I could be angry without causing you to hyperventilate, Harry." Letting go of his son's shoulder, Snape took a step back. "However, I would not describe my state of mind as one of anger. Concern, perhaps."

It suddenly got much easier to breathe. "Oh, good. Because when you told me to get back in here you sounded livid."

"I wasn't pleased," Snape said in a dark tone as he waved a contemptuous hand towards the congealed potion all over the workbench and floor. "But I'd already deduced that you alone could remedy this. I could hardly tell the class that, could I?"

So Snape had been angry all right, but he'd played it up a bit so the class would think Harry was staying behind because he was in trouble? Pretty Slytherin, Harry thought. "All right," he slowly said, feeling his heartbeat return to something normal. "But won't the other students figure out that something funny was going on? They all did see your spells fail, after all. Um . . . sorry about that,
Snape's lips curled upward slightly. "Oh, they'll just assume it was like the time Mr Crabbe fouled his potion. It couldn't be banished, either, if you'll recall, not until the brew was brought out of magical flux. Charmed potions are even more notoriously temperamental."

"But you checked my potion--"

"Ah, but not your charm. You could have incanted anything, yes? Your classmates must be well aware by now how difficult it is for you to get your spells right. This incident will merely increase rumours of your ineptitude."

"Oh, great." Harry crossed his arms. Being the centre of attention for having messed up magic wasn't turning out to be any more fun than being stared at for winning that horrible tournament. But there was nothing to be done about that, so Harry tried to forget about it. There was no forgetting about the tight feeling in his chest, however. He just wanted to crawl into bed, pull the covers over his head, and pretend he'd messed up in some other class instead of right there in front of his father. Bed sounded good in any case. "Well, if we're done here, I'll head off . . ."

Snape practically glowered at him. "You don't think we have things to discuss?"

"Huh? Oh, you mean my punishment?" Harry sort of slumped. "I guess I'd better go tell my friends to go ahead, then."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Oh, indeed . . ." Striding to the door, he yanked it open to reveal Ron and Hermione hovering in the corridor. "You needed something, Miss Granger? Mr Weasley?"

"We were just waiting for Harry," Ron explained.

"Ah. Well as it happens he will be quite some time with me. I will see to it that he arrives safely at your common room. So, off with you." He made a shooing motion with his hand.

"But we were going to walk him to dinner--"

"Really, Miss Granger, I'm quite cognizant of the fact that my son needs to eat each evening," said Snape with a lilt of challenge in his voice. "Have you any further objection to him spending time with his father?"

"I wasn't objecting to that, sir--"

"Good." Snape closed the door in her face, but not before Hermione looked past him to give Harry a little wave of encouragement.

When Snape turned around, his expression was rather dark. "What did they think I was going to do? Eviscerate you?"

"They were just waiting so I could walk with them. Like we agreed, sir, out in Devon."

Snape look mildly bothered by something, which puzzled Harry as his memories of Devon were generally good ones.

"Hmm. Well, let us return to the cause of your mishap. Accidents, you realise, are very rarely strictly that," Snape said in what Harry thought of as his professor's voice. "Why were you uncertain about how to perform the charm, when I specifically assigned readings that would help you learn it in advance?"
Harry couldn't bear to answer that. Miserable, he just hung his head.

Snape sighed. "Harry, answer me. Did you do your homework?"

"Yes . . ."

A knowing look stole across Snape's features. "I am somewhat familiar with your study habits, you understand. Did you recognise that the readings were providing critical information? Did you give them your full and complete attention?"

Still looking at his feet, Harry shook his head. "I tried, honest. But it was really late and I was having loads of trouble concentrating. I didn't understand some of it, and . . . and what I did understand I didn't remember so well afterwards."

"This was last night, I presume? How late were you up?"

Harry flushed, wishing he didn't have to have this conversation. "Um, well I started in on your work at about four in the morning, something like that--"

"Four in the morning," Snape said in an ominous tone. "You started at four in the morning. I see. Is there any particular reason why you didn't attempt to do your potions readings at a more normal hour?"

"I didn't have time!" Harry cried, turning away to stare blankly at the chalkboard. "I kept trying to get to them but I had your extra essay to do, and the well-wish, and the duplication charm you told me to learn, not to mention finding a spell so Sals wouldn't get eaten and all my homework for my other classes which takes twice as long now that I can't use proper Latin like everybody else and--"

Gulping, Harry forced himself to go quiet.

"I see," Snape said, very slowly. "And who gave you leave to stay up until four in the morning to do all this?"

"Well, you know in the Tower, we sort of do whatever we like . . ."

"Minerva and I will be having words," Snape snapped, "about her thoroughly lax supervision."

Harry could have said that Snape didn't tuck his Slytherins in every night, did he now . . . but he didn't quite dare.

"Now," Snape went right on. "Did you get any sleep at all last night?"

"No, sir--"

"You will desist at once from all these yes, sirs and no, sirs!" Snape suddenly demanded, his voice fierce. "I am not calling you Mr Potter, am I?"

Harry bit his lip. "No, but you're the teacher, aren't you? You can say whatever you like in class."

"We are not in class!" Snape sighed, appearing to calm himself with effort. "Harry, we both have adjustments to make. It is more difficult than I had anticipated having my son move out of my home." He held up a hand when Harry would have spoken. "However, you are where you need to be, so we will leave that aside. But as for class . . . Harry, this is a classroom, but we are not in class unless there are others present and instruction is underway."

"Oh." Harry felt sort of stupid then, at least until he remembered something. "But you called me Mr
Potter, didn't you, when I asked about the cactus?"

"Once only, as a rather pointed hint."

"Oh, sorry, didn't realise."

Snape sank into a chair and rubbed his temples for a moment. "As I said, this is a period of adjustment. We will make our way through it, I have no doubt."

The man looked tired, Harry thought. Really tired. Harry suddenly felt ten times worse than he had at first. Snape was probably having a horrible time each night, dealing with Draco's childish demands, and what had Harry done but made his days a trial as well? "I'm sorry--"

"If I hear you say that again tonight, I will need a Stomach Calming Draught."

That was all he needed; now he was actually making his father ill. "Um, do you want some water, or . . .?"

"No." Snape pointed at a nearby chair, one facing him at a slight angle. "I want you to sit there and discuss a few things with me." He didn't continue until Harry had been seated. "If you knew you hadn't done the readings sufficiently, why didn't you take advantage of my offer to go do them?"

"Um . . ."

"Harry," Snape said, his voice going stern, "if you cannot discuss things truthfully with me--"

You'll unadopt me?

Harry almost did a double-take, sitting there. Where the bloody hell had that thought come from?

"--then it will be much more difficult for us to overcome our problems," Snape finished. "So tell me, please. Why didn't you leave class and do your readings, as I specifically suggested?"

Swallowing, Harry braced himself. Snape never had liked to hear his teaching criticised, had he? But on the other hand, he had asked for the truth. "Well, you do tend to . . . er, mercilessly ridicule people who come to your class unprepared, don't you? And anyway, I didn't want you to think of me that way."

"What way?"

"Um, what you said. A first-year dolt. Or worse." When Snape said nothing, Harry went on, "Look, I just didn't want to disappoint you! If anybody should do your homework well, it ought to be me!"

Snape leaned back and steepled his fingers. "Why is that?"

Harry leaned back too, but his whole body still felt tense. "Gee, I don't know. Because I'm your son?"

"What has that to do with anything? Even if you were my natural-born son, I wouldn't necessarily expect you to inherit either my love or my facility for potion-making."

"No, I meant . . ." Frustrated, Harry tried to figure out what he had meant. It wasn't easy. The mass of emotions inside him was like a knotted ball of feelings boiling up to the surface but then slipping out of his grasp when he tried to reach for them. "I just thought . . . look, I may not like your subject best but I really respect you, and I owe you a lot, obviously, and with Draco giving you trouble I thought the least I could do was not raise my hand and announce that I was a lousy son too--"
Harry broke off, a little bit horrified with himself. He hadn't meant to say that Draco was a lousy son.

Snape, however, had latched onto something else. "You do not owe me," he stated, lacing his fingers together now. "I would like you to respect me, but I would not like to think you do so out of gratitude. If you set yourself to learn Potions, Harry, do it because you will need the knowledge in the future, not because your father is a Potions Master." Snape waited until he had absorbed that. "Are we clear?"

Harry smiled. "Yeah, I think so. Thanks."

Snape's expression remained rather severe. "Now, as to disappointing me. Perhaps you could explain why you failed to attend your Charms lesson this morning?"

Harry's jaw dropped. "You know about that?"

"One of the disadvantages of having your father on staff." Snape shrugged. "Have you an explanation? Madam Pomfrey said she hadn't seen you."

"You checked if I'd been hurt?"

"Yes, of course I checked! It isn't like you to miss your lessons . . ." Snape's voice hardened. "And I do not particularly care how difficult it is for you to work out new spells, you will not deal with it by skipping class."

"It wasn't that." Harry shifted in his chair. "I just needed to talk to Professor Sprout about the well-wish, that's all. I wanted to have it ready for when I come down tomorrow."

"Ah." Snape huffed slightly. "You are planning to grace us with your presence, then?"

"Huh?" Harry blinked. "You've known all along I was. I'm skipping Hogsmeade for it, remember?"

"Because I assigned you to."

"Well, not just that," Harry murmured. "There's also the well-wish."

"The well-wish that caused you to miss class."

"Yeah, and besides I have that extra essay ready like I said, all three feet of it--"

"And this is what you were up so late doing, the reason why you could not start your homework until four in the morning."

"Well, that and the well-wish, actually, but I was already up pretty late so Hermione could help me get my notes copied for Draco like you wanted--"

"Harry," Snape interrupted, "it seems to me that your saving-people-thing has found a new way to manifest itself. You appear to have developed a pleasing-people-thing."

Suddenly the dungeon classroom felt uncomfortably hot. "Uh, no I haven't. I just wanted you to be proud of me, you know."

"Harry, I am proud of you!" As though realising he had been shouting, Snape lowered his voice. "You do not need to buy my affection with essays or notes or well-wishes or certainly, not with a pretence that your homework is done when it is not. I told you, did I not, that you didn't need to be perfect?"
"Yeah, but I just thought that with Draco, you know, being such a prat . . ."

Snape chuckled softly then. "Ah, I understand now. You're competing with Draco."

"No, I'm not--"

"Oh, yes, you certainly are. He's intent on proving to himself that neither one of us will abandon him, and you're intent on proving that you can be as good as he can be bad." Snape leaned forward then, and caught both Harry's hands in his. "I'm given to understand that it's actually quite normal, this impulse. I don't much care for it, however. You shouldn't put yourself last like that, going all night without sleep to see to things that can be done another time."

Harry looked down at his shoes. Or tried to, anyway. What he saw was his father's strong hands clasping his. "I . . . I just didn't want you to say that I only thought about myself, I guess."

Snape's hands tightened, the pressure somehow comforting. "I don't think that of you. I know I used to say it quite often--"

"You said it last Friday night," Harry murmured, glancing up into his father's eyes.

"Friday night . . . Draco had just been expelled, Harry!"

"I know." Harry smiled a little bit, then. "I . . . I guess you weren't in the best frame of mind and I shouldn't have taken what you said so much to heart. But it just seemed like . . . well, I realised I had been being selfish, and I thought Draco should come first for a while, that's all."

"If you thought that then why haven't you once come down to visit?" Snape's voice was ragged by then. "Harry, I realise that Draco was quite horrid towards you on Sunday, but I thought you understood. He's pushing you away because he's afraid that what he has won't last. And in letting yourself be pushed, I suspect you are confirming that fear."

Harry's smile died. "Oh. That's not good." He shifted in his chair again. "I wasn't staying away because he was so rude. The casewitch said he'd need lots of time alone with you, that's all. And I was trying to make sure he got it."

Snape squeezed his hand still more, then let go and sat back with a sigh. "Ah, the casewitch. I'm surprised you'd take her advice so much to heart, after she was foolish enough to believe that preposterous rugby story."

"I thought of that, but you know, she was spot-on about Draco turning into a bit of a prat." Harry's spirits lifted a little when Snape raised his eyebrow at the phrase a bit. "And when he straight away made it clear he didn't want me tagging along to Hogsmeade, I figured he did need time with his new dad."

"A reasonable deduction." Standing then, Snape looked down at him. "I believe you are right in part; Draco does want to have my undivided attention at present. But he also wants to see you, and these conflicting needs will no doubt cause him to continue to be somewhat antagonistic when you visit." Snape's eyes were hooded by the end. "You will visit, I hope?"

"Yeah." Harry stood up and stretched. "How about I come down right now for dinner?"

"Actually, I told Draco earlier that I already had plans for dinner tonight. I thought it was time we talked."

"Oh, so even if I hadn't destroyed the floor--"
"Yes." Snape beckoned him with his fingers. "We'll eat in my office and you can tell me how your week has gone."

"But if he knows you're up here with me, won't he feel awfully left out?"

The Potions Master lifted his shoulders as though that couldn't be helped, "Draco is not the only one who needs to spend time with his father. He will simply have to share."

Harry grinned. "You know, Draco has his good points, but I don't think sharing is really one of them."

"Then it's time he learns."

And that, Harry sensed, was Snape's final word on the matter. A warm feeling spreading through him, Harry followed his father into his office.

Eating in the potions office was a new experience. Not one Harry liked much, either. There were just too many horrible things floating in the jars that lined every shelf. Putrid, distorted things. Some of them looked alive, too. Alive and suffering.

Harry soon learned to keep his gaze focussed on his plate and his father's face. That helped.

And of course the chance to catch up with Snape made it all worthwhile.

Over roast chicken with jacket potatoes, they talked about Harry's week. Harry had a lot to say, though he left out Ron and Hermione's constant bickering. But there were loads of other things to talk about, so it wasn't until pudding that the conversation wound around to Nott's story about the plague. "Do you think it could have happened that way, Dad? Bella and Erik causing the whole thing by accident because they were trying to keep Nott from saying that he'd been at the Owlery stairs that afternoon?"

Snape took a few sips of wine before he answered. "In the first place, I cannot credit that Mr Nott would take it upon himself to so vigorously defend Draco against the accusation of murder. They used to be allies of a sort, but they were never close friends. Moreover, according to his own story, he already suspected that Miss Uwannawich and Mr Vanvelzeer had been persuaded by Lucius Malfoy to testify. I find it highly unlikely that Mr Nott would attempt to obstruct any of Malfoy's plans, especially after he's heard exactly how vicious Malfoy can be."

A reference to Samhain, Harry felt sure. "So Draco really has been writing to Nott? That part at least is true?"

"Yes. However, his story has a fatal flaw nonetheless. We know that since a memory charm was involved, Miss Uwannawich and Mr Vanvelzeer believed their own testimony. They might have been offended that Nott called them both liars, but I doubt they would find it necessary to curse him. Only a knowing accomplice is likely to act in such a way."

"True . . ." Harry poked his spoon into his trifle, over and over. "But that might just mean that he's wrong, not that he's lying. He didn't say he knew that Belladonna and Erik had cursed him. He just said he thought they had."
"All the same, I would advise you to put no faith in Mr Nott."

"Oh, I won't," Harry assured his father. "But you might see me partner with him or sit with him at the Slytherin table or something. As long as he thinks I'm likely to trust him, he'll keep talking, see? And he might let slip something useful."

"Doubtful. He's had six years in my house, Harry."

"Well, I've had six years in Gryffindor so I have to try."

Snape smiled. "Yes, I suppose you do. And given that you have already eaten with Slytherin, I think it's time to introduce you formally to my house."

Harry felt a headache coming on just thinking about that. "That's really not necessary, is it?" He tried for a weak joke. "I'm pretty sure they all know who I am."

Snape didn't laugh. "It truly is necessary. I already intimated to them once that you were under my protection--"

"Yeah, Nott told me. See, he does let slip interesting stuff I need to know."

"No wonder you wish to continue in his company." Snape sipped his wine again then set his glass down. "However, having you there at my side as I state as much again will tend to reinforce the message and make you safer here. I propose we see to it tomorrow night after your Potions lesson has been concluded."

"All right." Really, that probably was the very best time, right after the students had spent a day in Hogsmeade. Everyone would be in about as good a mood as they'd ever get. Harry wondered briefly if Snape had thought of that, then almost scoffed out loud. Who was he kidding? Of course Snape had thought of that! "Um, speaking of Potions, you never did tell me what my punishment was."

Snape tapped the table with his wand, banishing all the dishes except Harry's bowl. "No, I didn't. I think perhaps a full day of brewing with me will suffice. Before we are finished, you will have produced an adequate Waldenholfer's Acuity Draught, along with a few other potions and elixirs you missed out on earlier in the year. Tomorrow, we'll say."

Harry smothered a laugh. "I was going to come and brew tomorrow anyway!"

"Yes, but how many of your friends know that?" Snape raised an eyebrow. "So then, this will give you something to complain about. I must keep up appearances."

"I thought I wasn't going to get any special treatment on account of being your son." Harry wasn't sure why he was complaining. He didn't want to have to scrub cauldrons, after all, but neither did he like being set apart from the other students. He was tired of being different.

"You're welcome to stay late and mince flobberworms if you like." Snape stared at him as though assessing his reaction. "No? Why don't we simply agree that if you lose control of your magic again in my class, you will be assigned a proper detention. Can your very Gryffindor sense of fairness bear that compromise?"

Harry thought it was surprisingly reasonable coming from Snape, but something about it still bothered him. "Suppose I do my homework properly and all that and come to class prepared, but I still have troubles with the Parseltongue working right? That wouldn't be my fault, would it? So I don't think I ought to be punished for it."
Snape's nostrils flared. "I should expect less of you simply because your magical state poses you a challenge?"

Put like that it was hard to say yes, Harry thought a little resentfully.

"Should I also expect less of students whose magic is by its nature weak, Harry? Or should I insist they overcome that obstacle, even if it means putting in ten times as much effort as other students must devote?"

"Oh, all right." Feeling full, Harry rubbed his stomach a bit as he gave in on that one. "You're right. I'll just work harder, whatever it takes."

"It almost always takes sufficient sleep," Snape hinted.

"I'll be good," Harry promised, yawning. "And speaking of sleep, can you walk me back now? I think I'll turn in early and catch up."

"We have one more thing to discuss, actually. When you come down tomorrow, I would request you not do anything to alter the state of your room."

Harry blinked. "What are you talking about?"

Snape suddenly looked about as uncomfortable as Harry had ever seen. "Draco," he announced, his tones short and clipped. "He is being far more difficult than I had anticipated, and I admit I've been at somewhat of a loss for how to deal with him."

Uh-oh, that sounded pretty bad. "So, you changed my room around or something?"

A sharp scoffing noise filled the room. "No, certainly not. I merely told the house-elves that until they hear otherwise from me, they are to leave your room entirely alone. If Draco will not do his lines or his schoolwork, he will not have the cleaning and tidying services he takes for granted."

Harry set his spoon down. "He's refusing to do his lines and his schoolwork? I've been knocking myself out getting those notes copied every single night, and he's not even bothering to use them?"

Snape picked up his wand and banished Harry's dessert, the motion something furious. "He insists that as he has been expelled he no longer has to do any assignments. I am attempting to disabuse him of the notion."

"And the lines?"

"We've had more than one row about the lines." When Snape glanced at Harry, his dark eyes reflected pure frustration. "I can't seem to make him budge on either issue."

Harry reached a hand out and caught his father's fingers in his own, squeezing them as Snape had done so many times for him. Sometimes the simplest touch could convey mountains of reassurance; he knew that.

His father had taught him.

"Thank you, Harry," Snape said, his voice pitched low.

Harry smiled a little, but not in amusement. It was more an expression to bolster the man. "So, you told the house-elves to let Draco clean his own room, and he's being stubborn and letting it turn into a pigsty, I guess?"
"It was cleaner when you had geese and sheep in there."

Harry winced, remembering the mess the animals had caused. "I won't clean the room either, I promise. But what else have you tried? I mean, to get through to Draco?"

Snape pulled his hand from Harry's and began counting on his fingers. "All the books except his schoolbooks are charmed to stay shut, now. The Floo connects to the kitchens only during mealtimes and of course it's long been warded so he can't actually travel through it alone at any time. When he started amusing himself by taking ten showers a day I limited the hot water, as well."

"So you're grounding him, basically." When Snape stared at him, Harry murmured, "Muggle term. Hmm, I don't know what else to suggest, really . . ."

"I don't expect you to solve this," Snape assured him, rising to his feet. "I simply needed you to realise that your room must be left for him to clean. Or not -- he knows he can have the elves back in just as soon as he begins doing his own work."

"He'll come around," Harry promised, standing up too and going over to give his father an encouraging hug. One more thing he'd learned from Snape.

"Merlin, I hope so," Snape groaned. "But my hair may be as grey as Albus' by the time he does."

"Well, wish me luck," Harry said as he hovered outside his father's door, clad in dress robes and clutching a tumbler filled with flowers.

"With Draco or with the Slytherins?"

"Both, I think," Harry told Ron. He held up the well-wish. "Does it look all right?"

Ron took a moment to study the crest. "Blimey, you even got it to move!"

"Yeah, and it looks even more stunning on glass than parchment."

Harry carefully avoided looking at Hermione as he delivered the veiled compliment, but her cheeks still went pink. And Ron saw.

"Oh, no wonder it looks so good. Miss Duplicaro herself transferred it." Rounding on Hermione, he snarled, "So you've been helping out Draco, have you?"

"I've been helping Harry!"

"Oh, sure."

Hermione stamped her foot. "Ronald Weasley, you're an idiot!"

"And you're bloody pathetic, you are--"

"You're both right," said a new voice from the door that had swung silently open. Draco's voice. Hurriedly stuffing the well wish behind a fold in his robe, Harry turned around. "Hi, Draco."
"Oh, so you remember my name?" Draco turned on his heel and stomped off.

When Harry glanced back at his friends, he saw that Hermione was biting her lip in sympathy, while Ron was going red with anger. Well, at least they'd forgotten their annoyance with each other. For the moment, at least.

"He can't talk to you like that--" Ron started to say.

"Oh, like Fred and George *never* talk down to you," retorted Harry.

Ron lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. "If you ask me, he doesn't deserve all the fuss you've gone to for him!"

"Well, nobody asked you," was Hermione's crisp reply.

"Shut *up*, Hermione!" Ron shouted back.

"I'll second that," called Draco from inside Snape's quarters.

Ron turned to Hermione with an I-told-you-so expression all over his face.

Hermione ignored it. "You have a nice day, Harry. We'll see you later."

"Yeah, see you later," Ron echoed, but he hesitated when he turned to leave. "Listen, Harry, I guess he can talk to you like that if you're willing to put up with it. But when it comes to brothers, I know what I'm talking about. Don't let him walk all over you. You have to give as good as you get."

"I'll keep that in mind." After Ron was down the hall, Harry went in and shut the door, careful to keep the well-wish hidden as he hung his school bag on the peg he always used for his stuff.

"Where's Severus?"

Draco looked up from the sofa, where he'd apparently thrown himself in a fit of pique. He actually had one foot on it and the other one on the floor. "Out."

"Out? He knew I was coming . . ."

"Well, Potter--" Draco suddenly broke off and shouted at the walls, "That's ten more points from Slytherin, mind!" Just as abruptly, he went back to his quietly contemptuous voice, "We thought you'd be here at ten. But oh *no*, you couldn't bear to leave your precious Mudblood and Weasel, could you--"

"Shut up!" snapped Harry, all his patience evaporating. He could put up with as much rudeness as Draco wanted to dish out, when it was directed at him, but he wasn't going to listen to Draco insult his friends.

Jumping up from the sofa, Draco narrowed his eyes. "Oooh, and who's going to make me?"

Harry clenched his fist, concern for Draco's obvious jealousy warring with his anger that the other boy had used that awful word. "I will, and this time you won't be landing any sucker punches," he grated.

"Why, because you'll use your scary dark powers on me? Oooh, I'm so frightened, Potter . . ."

Harry took a step towards his brother. "You use that nasty word again, even once, and I'll throw you to the floor and bloody your face, I swear." Another step forward. "And if you're *Gryffindor* enough to pull your wand on me again I might just shove it up your nose!" One more step, and he was close
enough to touch Draco. "But I wouldn't pull my wand on you."

"Why the hell not?"

Harry reached out and gave Draco a tiny push that caused the other boy to tumble backwards onto the sofa. "Because I love you, you moron."

Draco hurriedly sat up, colour high in his cheeks as he muttered, "You don't fight fair."

Chuckling a little, Harry sat down, too. It was a little tricky keeping the well-wish hidden, but he managed. "I'd think you would admire that, Draco. You know, Slytherin?"

"You're a bit behind the times, but that's what happens when you can't be bothered to come down even once all week," retorted Draco. "Haven't you heard the news? I hate Slytherin."

Harry ignored the part about him not visiting. "Oh, come on, no you don't... listen, Goyle asked me how you were. Seemed to miss you helping him with his homework."

Draco flushed even pinker. "I didn't help him, Harry. I don't do that. I just let him copy off me."

"Funny, when you were tutoring me I thought you were pretty good at it. Well, after I started believing you wouldn't kill me. You never once offered to let me just copy."

"Yeah, 'cause Severus would have killed me."

"Oh, how would he even have known--"

"Apart from the fact that you're this goody-two-shoes who would have run to tell him?"

"I am not!"

"Are too. I bet you've even got your extra essay all done already, don't you?"

Now Harry was the one flushing. "How do you know he set me an essay?"

"What, you think he's your father only? He does talk to me, you know! It's not like there's been anybody else to talk to down here this week, now is it!" Draco narrowed his eyes. "So is your extra essay all ready to hand in, you show off?"

"Yes!"

"Ha! I knew it!"

"Why don't you worry about doing your own assignments instead of getting mad that I'm doing mine?" shouted Harry.

"Oh, so he told you about that, did he?"

"What, you think he's your father only? He does talk to me too, you know!"

Draco was breathing heavily by then, his chest moving up and down in rapid sequence. As if he couldn't bear to be near Harry, he moved to one of the chairs in the room, crossing his arms in front of him as he sat down in a huff. "So why are you so dressed up, anyway? It's kind of stupid considering you're here to brew."

By then, Harry was wishing he hadn't worn dress robes, or even made Draco a blasted well-wish.
"Oh . . ." Draco's expression suddenly brightened. Just as if he hadn't spent the whole visit so far being an utter arse, he all at once drawled, "He comes down in dress robes and asks straight away for Severus, and he's been keeping one hand tucked away all this time . . . I just wonder. Could he have a well-wish for somebody, hmmm?"

Harry was too irritated to go along with Draco's lightning change of mood. "Maybe I just don't want you to see the hand I melted off during Potions yesterday."

Draco's face went pale. "Severus didn't say . . . oh yeah, right, Harry. That makes sense. Dress robes go so well with a melted hand, after all." He barked a short laugh.

"Well, I did melt the classroom floor, anyway."

"You did not!"

"Yeah, I did." Harry leaned his head back and sighed. "Wanded magic, just a tad. Accident."

"Oh great, just let the niffler out of the bag, Harry! Let everyone know your secrets! It's not as if you might, say, need them to stay alive, is it!"

Well, at least that time Draco's sarcasm had a real point. He did care, he just didn't know how to say so without cloaking it in hostility. "Nobody knew what went wrong," Harry explained, suddenly exhausted. "Severus saw to that. And I'll be more careful in future."

"You'd better be, or I just might shove your wand up your nose!"

Harry thought that was a funny threat when he heard it come back at him, but he didn't smile, because it reminded him of what had started them fighting in the first place. "Don't call Hermione that filthy name again.

Draco didn't say he wouldn't. But at least he didn't start going on about how he would, either. That had to be worth something.

------------------------------------------------------

"Good morning, Harry," said Snape as he stepped out of the Floo. As he looked to his right, his gaze seemed to settle on the stack of blank parchment sitting on the dining room table. Harry thought he saw rather than heard a sigh.

"My social calendar has been rather full this morning, I'm afraid," Draco drawled. "But now that Harry's finally deigned to visit us, I'm sure my spirits will pick up and I'll be able to fit a line or two into my busy day."

Harry stood, wishing Draco would shut up. He was nervous enough without all the sarcastic commentary. Everything he'd read in the last few days seemed to blur in his head until he could hardly recall what he was supposed to do or say. Until, that is, he remembered Draco doing this months ago.

Snape had been deeply moved, Harry knew.

That helped steady his nerves.
Harry walked across the room to his father, withdrawing the well-wish from the fold in his robes as he moved. Once he was close enough to Snape, he smiled and reached out for both Snape's hands, awkwardly holding the flower-filled tumbler between them. Then, it was just a matter of looking into his father's eyes. In them, he found all the pride and confidence he could possibly need. "Severus... upon this hallowed day your joy is made complete. May the years to come be many, and overflow with all I wish for you and yours."

Snape nodded his thanks as he looked down at the well-wish. Unaccountably, his hands on Harry's tightened, but not like the way they did when he was trying to give his son some encouragement. This grip, Harry thought, was more like shock.

"Where did you find that glass?"

Well, that certainly answered the question of whether Snape knew about his family crest. "It's just a glass... but Hermione found the crest for me in a book on family histories."

Snape nodded again, his dark eyes turbulent. At least it wasn't with anger, but Harry still had the feeling he'd managed to deeply upset the man. Whatever the matter was, though, it could obviously wait, for Snape was going back to the form of the ceremony. He touched each plant in turn, his fingertip stroking softly over the leaves and flowers, then murmured, "Well chosen, Harry."

Harry couldn't help but blush at the next part, but it was part of the ceremony, so he went ahead and did it. Balancing the well-wish on one palm, he used his free hand to lift each of Snape's hands to his lips, where he brushed a gentle kiss across the knuckles. Then steeling himself, he reached up on tip-toe to try to kiss his father's cheek.

Harry wasn't tall enough, though. Snape had to bend down a little to make that work.

Draco had stood up, but been absolutely quiet throughout, Harry realised as he stepped away from their father. It made for a nice change. When he handed Draco the well-wish, the other boy looked like he might burst into tears. Harry tried to act like he hadn't noticed that as he gave a slight bow and then stepped back.

"Thank you, Harry."

"You're welcome."

"Oh, some of these are very good wishes," Draco said as he touched a finger to each plant, the way Snape had done. "Nettle, plantain, sarsaparilla, alyssum, Echinacea..."

Now who's the show off? Harry wanted to ask.

Draco apparently had too much reverence for the ceremony to wish to mar it, but now that the formalities were over, his perpetual bad mood began to come roaring back. "I must say, Harry, alyssum's a bit of a rude wish, don't you think?"

Harry shook his head, determined not to be drawn into a fight. That didn't mean he wouldn't answer truthfully, of course. After his talk with Snape--and maybe after the one with Ron in the hall, too--he felt like he didn't have to hold back so much. "Alyssum's a perfect wish for you," he told his brother, his voice a bit dry. "You really do need to learn to moderate your anger. You know, impulse control?"

Draco gave him a thin smile. "And the sarsaparilla's nice, but most probably unnecessary. I already..."
do have plenty of money. Or will, when the goblins finish setting up their greedy little fee schedules, or whatever it is they're doing to hold things up."

"It's a wish for love, Draco."

"Oh." Draco's eyes were glittering by then, never a good sign. "Well, Harry, if you choose ambiguous plants your wishes can be misread. If you had grown up in a proper environment you would know that."

"If you'd been raised by people with manners instead of your damned stilted politeness--" Harry broke that thought off and just waved for Draco to get on with it.

"Let's see, nettle for protection, Echinacea for strengthening spells . . . those are both solid wishes, if a bit common," drawled Draco. "But this is quite unusual. And really perfect for me, I suppose. Plantain for snake repelling." He laughed, clearly liking that last wish so much that he couldn't find a thing wrong with it.

"Those are very well chosen wishes indeed, Harry," said Snape from where he was still standing by the Floo.

"Oh yes, a very good first try," added Draco, his voice gone so smarmy that Harry wanted to hit him. "But five, you know, that's almost an insult. If I didn't know how ignorant you were of wizarding culture, I'd be hurt you didn't make any more wishes than that."

Harry'd had enough of being talked down to. "But five was all I could do," he explained, hiding his smile. Draco might be a know it all when it came to plants and their properties, but he'd missed Harry's special surprise, hadn't he? "Because all the wishes stand for something else, Draco. Something with five letters."

Draco stared at Harry suspiciously, then snapped his gaze down to the plants. "Alyssum, sarsaparilla, plantain, Echinacea, nettle," he murmured, clearly turning that over in his mind. "Oh. Well that's pretty rude of you, isn't it?" he suddenly snarled. "I happen to think I already am fairly eloquent, thank you very much! How dare you march in here with a well-wish that's nothing but an implication that I can't even speak properly!"

"What?"

"Aspen," Draco snarled. "Your nasty little collection of plants spells aspen! Which, as any properly educated wizard knows, is a wish for eloquence--""

Harry rearranged letters in his head. "Oh. No . . . well, it does spell that but it also spells something else."

Draco eyes blazed as he thought that over. Harry knew the exact moment when he'd got it at last; those silver eyes of his lit up with another kind of light. "Oh," he said, his voice all at once so soft Harry could barely hear it. "Snape."

"Yes." Harry smiled, and then Draco did as well. A real smile, nothing like the sarcastic awful ones he'd been sporting earlier.

"It really is a very nice set of wishes you came up with. I . . . I wish I hadn't been so . . ." Clearing his throat and looking away from Harry, Draco began to stare at the fire in the Floo instead. "I suppose you're right and I do need to work on moderating my anger. I don't know why I'm so angry, really. Well, I do know why I hate Slytherin but I really don't know why I should feel so angry with you half the time . . ."
"Half the time?" Harry gently mocked.

"Most of the time," Draco admitted, blinking. "I . . . well it didn't help that you were off having so much fun with all your friends all week, and I was stuck down here alone."

Harry thought better than to say he'd been deliberately staying away. "I'll have more time to visit from now on," he settled for explaining. "Now that the well-wish is done. I had to figure out the whole thing twice, see, once I thought of making the wishes into an acronym for your new name."

Draco smiled again. Still sincerely, though it was a little bit tired. Like he hadn't been sleeping much either . . . or maybe like he'd done way too much sleeping over the past few days. "That was really very clever."

"It goes with the crest," said Harry, glancing back at their father. His dark eyes were giving nothing away, but there was no mistaking the reaction he'd had upon first seeing the emblem. As Draco lifted up his well-wish to look at the tumbler more closely, Harry went on, "Snape family crest."

"Really?" Draco studied the shifting colours. "There's more than one branch of Snapes, I think . . ." For once, he was simply giving information rather than pointing out how much Harry didn't know. "Are you sure this one is for our family?"

"Our family. Now that was nice."

"Pretty sure," Harry admitted. "I compared facts in a couple of books and it seems like it is."

Harry wasn't going to say any more on that matter, but Draco didn't have quite his wealth of sensitivity. "Severus? Do you know?"

Snape's lips twisted as he came forward and took the glass from Draco, his fingers tracing over the outline of the crest. For a long moment he stared at it, clearly lost in thought, before slowly answering, "Yes, I know."

"And? And?" Draco's voice was lilting with excitement, sort of the way it had been on Christmas morning. All Harry could think was that shedding his Malfoy roots really did mean a lot to his brother. More than Harry had realised. Much more.

Casting Harry a wry look--as though he expected a plot, actually--Snape handed the well-wish back to Draco. "Those initials in the corner are my father's," he admitted. "Hostilian Snape. He drew the crest."

"Oh . . ." Draco beamed a bright smile all around. "No wonder it's so modern, then. Sort of like a Jackson Pollock, only without all the splotchiness. I love it, Severus."

"Who's Jackson Pollock?"

"Oh, Muggle abstract artist," Draco said absently as he went back to studying the crest. He must have caught Harry's look of astonishment, though, because a sly little grin curled his lips. "You know how I like opera, Harry. Surely it's dawned on you before now that I do appreciate a few Muggle things." His smile became more openly vicious. "Lucius would be horrified, of course."

"Harry," Snape interrupted, "I believe it's time for us to begin."

Draco seemed oblivious to the undercurrents in the room. "Severus, I think your father must have been very talented. Was he an artist by trade?"
The question was innocuous enough, but it made Snape's face go a shade or two whiter. "Yes. Now, if you will excuse us, Harry needs to change into clothes more appropriate for brewing--"

"There aren't too many wizard artists," Draco said, his tones warm with admiration. It was much better than him being so rude all the time, of course, but by then Harry was dearly wishing he'd realise how difficult this conversation was for their father. "Did he sculpt as well, or only paint? And can I meet him someday? Please?"

Please from Draco was an almost unheard-of event. Too bad it had to come at a time like this, when Snape was wound so tight. "He sculpted as well, yes," the Potions Master grated. "But you may not meet him as he has long since died."

"A portrait," Draco said, almost bouncing in his eagerness. "You must have one tucked away somewhere--"

"Why must I?"

"Because he was an artist!"

"He was a purist," corrected Snape, his voice utterly cold by then. "In more ways than one. He would never stoop to waste his talents on lowly representational art, Draco." Snape began to walk toward the potions laboratory then, his gait stiff.

Draco looked crestfallen, and not just because he couldn't talk art with Hostilian Snape. "What did I say?"

The laboratory door slammed.

"Are you completely dense?" whispered Harry. "He doesn't want to talk about his father, any more than you want to tell fond stories of Lucius or I'd like to reminisce about the Dursleys!"

Draco actually flinched. "I didn't know!"

"Well, try to remember it now that you do. And Draco, if you really want to make it up to him, then stop being such a spoiled prat and do your lines and homework!"

Closing his eyes, Draco gave a sharp nod. "All right, I will. I . . . yeah, I guess I should snap out of this . . . mood . . . Um, Harry? Just so you know, the room's a bit messy right now."

"Well if you'd do your assignments it wouldn't have to be."

"Oh, he told you that as well."

Harry shrugged and moved off toward the door to their room. His fingers were already on the knob when Draco suddenly said, his voice wavering, "Harry . . . I can tell you put a lot of work and thought into the well-wish. I really, really like how the whole thing is wrapped around my name." Draco curled his lips in a tremulous smile. "And snake repelling . . . that's just bloody brilliant."

"Well you'll still have to put up with Sals, you know." Frowning, Harry went on, "I can't understand how you can dislike Sals. She's not big enough to hurt anyone, and Hagrid told me she's not poisonous, not that she bites. She wouldn't hurt you--"

"She got you hurt pretty badly."

Harry considered that. "That wasn't her fault. And anyway . . . it was awful, but I ended up getting
the one thing I'd always longed for."

Smiling, Harry went into the bedroom to change out of his dress robes.

------------------------------------------------------

A bit messy turned out to be more than a bit of an understatement. Harry's smile died as he stared in shock at the clothes and sundry items littered all over the floor. And the towels... in the damp of the dungeons, it looked as though some of them were planning to grow mould. Wrinkling his nose with disgust, Harry picked his way around them to his trunk so he could fetch out a plain robe.

The inside of his trunk wasn't the way he had left it. Nothing seemed to be missing, but still, Harry didn't like the feeling that his things were being pawed through.

"Draco!" When the blond boy poked his head through the door, Harry slammed the lid of his trunk, his robe slung over one arm. "Why have you been going through my things?"

Draco lifted his nose in the air as though he smelled something foul. Probably the towels, Harry thought.

"Well, thank you for accusing me without so much as a by-your-leave," sneered the other boy, "but as it just so happens, Severus is the one who went through your things!"

Harry studied his brother, looking for any hint of deceit. Draco never had been a good liar, so if he was lying now, there ought to be some sign of it. But there wasn't. All Harry saw on his brother's face was anger, offence, and a desire to get even for the slur. Though why it should be such a slur was a mystery to Harry. He didn't exactly think Draco was above stealing, after all.

"Why would Severus be going through my things?"

Draco shoved his hands in his trouser pockets and did his apparent best to stare Harry down.

"All right, I'm sorry!" exclaimed Harry. "I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions."

"No, you shouldn't have," came Draco's icy reply. "Apology not accepted. You can just go straight to hell, Potter." And then, after he stomped from the room and slammed the door hard, a shout: "That's another ten points from fucking Slytherin!"

------------------------------------------------------

Harry didn't exactly appreciate that Snape had gone through his trunk, but he decided that since his father wasn't in the best of moods at the moment, he could put off asking about it. Draco had probably only suggested that so that Harry could get on their father's bad side, anyway. Why else wouldn't he just simply answer the question?

*Because you'd just insulted him, maybe?*

Harry had to admit there was some truth in that, but he still figured that Draco would blow the
misunderstanding out of all proportion and use it as an excuse to not do his lines, after all.

When Harry stepped out of his room, though, he was surprised to see Draco at the kitchen table, quill in hand, working industriously away. He'd put the well-wish in the centre of the table and was glancing up at it from time to time as he wrote.

"I really am sorry," Harry said again.

Draco looked up, his silver eyes hiding something. "Yeah, me too," he said, his tones short. "Just go brew, Harry."

------------------------------------------------------

Waldenhoffer's Acuity Draught wasn't so very difficult when he had Snape right there to help him. It was a bit harder the second time, when Snape just sat on a stool and watched, but Harry's brew was still passably good.

*Scratch, scratch, scratch* . . . that was what they heard after they'd each taken a sip of the finished potion.

"Draco's working really hard on his lines," Harry whispered. Funny, it sounded like he was talking in his regular voice.

Snape moved a finger to his lips and kept listening, though Harry suspected he hardly needed a draught to hear the sound of quill on parchment.

*Scratch, scratch, scratch.*

Nodding, the lines around his eyes relaxing, Snape handed Harry the antidote to the draught and gestured for him to drink. Once their senses were restored to normal, he asked in a low voice, "What did you say to your brother?"

Sir. Harry broke off, shaking his head at himself. "Well, at least you can always tell when I'm uneasy."

"I'd prefer you not be," Snape deftly levitated some wax into a small cauldron and began melting it so Harry could seal his bottles. "You wanted to ask about the crest?"

"No, I just wanted to make sure you knew I didn't know that H.S. stood for your father. I . . . I wouldn't have used the crest if I'd known it would . . . er, bring up bad memories."

Snape gave a single, sharp nod. "You appear to have become more than competent with duplication charms."

Harry laughed a little. "Hermione."
"Ah."

They worked for a while in silence to finish bottling the draughts and clear away the mess left from Harry's brewing, and then Snape assigned Harry to brew a potion that had been covered earlier in the year. This one, in Harry's view, was much less useful. Well, he supposed it could come in handy if you had a problem with warts, but since he didn't . . .

"So where were you this morning?" he asked as he counted out the correct number of frog eyes and wincing, began to squash each one flat.

"Albus requested a meeting."

"What about? Me?"

Snape put his hand over Harry's and showed him how to move the pestle to achieve a better result with the frog eyes. "Not everything is about you, Harry."

"Then what?"

"I am in fact attempting to improve the Wolfsbane." Snape moved his hand and watched as Harry continued to work. "Albus merely wished to know how that was going."

"Improve it how?"

"To repress the change entirely."

Harry jerked his hand, skidding the pestle sideways and sending a frog's eye flying. "Oh, that'd be fantastic!"

"Don't become too excited. It isn't going well," Snape dryly informed him.

"Well, keep at it. Do you need some help? I'd be glad to render fat or crush beetles or whatever."

"I see. All that is needed to make you enthusiastic about potions is the possibility of helping Lupin."

"Well. . . " Harry gave his father a sheepish smile. Then something occurred to him. "You've been working on this project a while, haven't you? And not trying too terribly hard to keep it under wraps, I think. So that's why you Polyjuiced yourself into Remus when it was his moon time! You wanted rumours to get out that the Order was working on the Wolfsbane!"

"Very well reasoned." Snape sounded impressed, Harry thought. That was nice.

"You know I thought at the time it was strange, your coming with me as Remus when the full moon was coming on. But then I just figured there had to be some plot afoot. I'd have worked it out sooner, I think, if I hadn't got so distracted by . . . other things."

"Yes, you've had an eventful year."

"Ha, aren't they all," murmured Harry.

"Not quite like this one, I think." Snape quirked a small smile. "I suppose that as you have figured out the bulk of the plot on your own, you may was well know the rest. The Order wanted to give the impression that such a potion was being worked on and tested, so the werewolves wouldn't be tempted by Voldemort's offers of Muggle prey. However, since it would have been a tactical error to imply the potion was ready when in fact it was not, I was quite careful not to be seen outside Privet Drive when the full moon was at its peak."
"Did it work? The plan?"

"In part. Lupin has been recruiting werewolves, you understand, as well as pursuing his . . . other duties. He has reported both success and failure." Snape scowled. "Not every werewolf, apparently, desires a more normal life. But those who do will be with us, I believe."

"When will the improved Wolfsbane be ready?" asked Harry as he tossed the frog eyes into the oil bubbling away in his cauldron.

Snape sighed. "Quite possibly never. Other potions can be tested as often as one desires, but with but one trial possible each month?"

Since Remus was away, Harry had to wonder . . . "But who are you testing it on? I mean, you wouldn't owl a potion to Remus, would you, considering . . ."

"No. Albus has contacts with those who know others in your . . . friend's situation. It is safer for them not to be seen corresponding directly with me, or indeed, with anyone in the Order."

"Well, if you do need some help chopping or stirring or anything--"

"Yes, Harry," Snape drawled. "I will keep you in mind."

Laughing a little, Harry tried to concentrate then on making a perfect wart-removal potion.

Snape and Harry worked straight through until about three, when they broke off to have some lunch. Draco had obviously eaten earlier and hadn't bothered to clean up after himself; the table was strewn with dirty dishes and used cutlery. Sighing, Snape banished everything except the well-wish.

Curious about how many lines Draco had written, Harry looked around for the stacks of parchment he'd noticed earlier, but they were nowhere to be seen. From the sound of things, Draco was taking a shower, so Harry reasoned he must have taken his work into the bedroom. He knew a strong urge to go have a look in there, but since he'd just rebuked Draco--unfairly, as it turned out--for snooping, he decided he'd better not.

After lunch they brewed yet another potion, this one a draught that made you steady on your feet. Much better than wart removal, Harry thought. Could come in handy if you had to cross a river or climb a slippery slope.

Draco was at the table again when they went out for dinner. When he saw them come out he swept his scattered parchments into a pile and hurried off to the bedroom with them, as though ashamed he'd actually been working. Well, he'd had to write over and over that he wouldn't act like a Gryffindor, so Harry supposed he probably was feeling a little bit embarrassed. He came right out to join them for dinner, though, so that was good.

What was even better was that the whole way through the meal, he didn't say one rude thing.

Of course, that might have been because he didn't say much of anything. Draco seemed to be in a little bit of a brooding mood, but Harry took his cue from Snape and didn't press him to join in the
conversation.

After dinner was when the evening took a turn for the worse.

"Here," said Harry, fetching his essay out of his school bag.

Snape unrolled the scroll and began reading it, his dark eyes intent. "You appear to appreciate the danger you were inviting," he admitted when he'd finished.

Harry nodded. "Yes. I don't suppose you want to hear that I'm sorry . . . but I am."

"Just see to it that you use better judgment in future." Snape's gaze sought out Draco, who was sitting on the sofa by then. "I should like to see your work as well."

Draco shrugged as he got up. "Sure. It's just lines, though. I didn't get to any schoolwork." He came back with a messy pile of parchments in his hands, and plunked them down onto the table.

Snape touched them with a finger, then drew his wand.

Draco took a step back, his back stiff, his hands shoved deep down into his pockets.

One whispered spell later, and the Potions Master was frowning. "Harry, I should have told you last night that it would be best if you didn't lend Draco any parchment until further notice."

Harry drew his eyebrows together. "I didn't lend him any . . ."

"Then he has helped himself, I fear."

Harry didn't actually care, though it would have been nicer if Draco had asked before taking some from Harry's bag, but still . . . "Why does it matter, Dad?"

Snape was glowering by then, but it was Draco who answered.

"Because Dad here is just like you, Harry! He doesn't trust me an inch; actually went around spelling every parchment he could find so I couldn't cheat! Never mind that I used to cheat like mad and he knew it and never said a word. In fact he liked it then. Very Slytherin--"

"It's only Slytherin if you're not caught out at it," said Harry. "Otherwise it's just stupid."

"Figures you would think so," Draco shouted. "So I duplicated lines, so what? It's your fault anyway!"

"How is it my fault?" Harry shouted right back.

"I wasn't going to take your sodding parchment, I wasn't! I was going to start in on my lines for real!" Draco was screaming by then. From the look on Snape's face, Harry had a feeling his brother had been doing a lot of it. "But then you had to go and accuse me of going through your trunk, when it was Severus who went through it, looking for parchment! Well, if the two of you are going to both accuse me of sneakiness I figured I might as well get on with it! I wanted to work on sketching the crest, anyway!" With that, Draco yanked a few sheets of parchment from his pocket and brandished them like some sort of weapon.

Harry saw version after version of the crest done in black and white, some of them jerkily moving. Well, at least he knew what all the scratching noises had been.

"It's not my doing you like to cheat," Harry pointed out, though he did keep his voice to a normal
pitch that time. "You just admitted that you used to cheat all the time."

"It is so your fault! You're a Gryffindor, so I thought you wouldn't like it much if I stole from you. And I wasn't going to! But since you already thought I had--"

"And why would I think a thing like that? Hmm, could it be because you did steal from me? As in, my invisibility cloak?"

"I borrowed it, Potter! Oh, sorry! Ten more points from--"

"Stop that at once," Snape finally said, standing up from his position at the table. "You know perfectly well you're not in charge of the counters."

"Well you are--"

"And you further know," Snape interrupted in a loud voice, "that I am not indulging your childish acrimony towards your house! Now, as for stealing, Draco, Harry and I had every reason to believe you would make free with his belongings when you felt the need was urgent! Do not use that to excuse your pitifully transparent attempt to evade your responsibilities!"

"Oh, like it was that big a deal--"

Harry couldn't believe his ears. Every trace of good feeling toward Draco--not to mention his resolve to keep his voice level--vanished straight away. "It was a big deal!" he yelled, stomping right over to where his brother was leaning against the wall. "It was a huge deal! You used my cloak to sneak out and got yourself accused of murder! You got expelled from school because you stole it! And then Dad took it away, because of you! And it was my father's!"

To Harry's horror, tears started to seep out the corners of his eyes, and he realised he wanted nothing better than to punch Draco straight in the face. Even though by then, Draco looked about as dreadful as Harry felt. Oh, maybe he just wanted to hit something. The wall . . .

Harry clenched both his fists into a tight balls.

"I meant the lines," Draco said in an undertone, shock written across every syllable. "Shite, Harry, the lines."

Whirling away, Harry gasped to get his breath back past the vise compressing his chest. He found himself colliding with Snape, who had moved to stand behind him. His father gathered him into a close hug, his hands moving up and down over Harry's back. "It's all right, Harry. Your father's cloak is safe and sound."

"Yeah, but you took it," Harry cried, the anger inside him just building and building until he felt like he'd fly apart from the pressure. Draco forgotten, Harry shoved against his father, hard, but Snape didn't let him go. "You take everything! I hardly have anything of his, and you took it all away! I thought you said you'd forgiven him!"

"Oh, Harry . . ." Snape's voice blew softly across the top of his hair. "It's only two things, you know, and I had good reason--"

"It's three things!" Harry tried to calm himself down, he really did, but the awful feelings inside him were still pouring out and he didn't know how to make them stop. He wanted them to; they hurt something awful. "You took my dad's mirror, too!"

The hands on his back had changed to patting him, now. "That was Black's, I thought?"
"No! Sirius gave me the one that used to be my father's!"

Draco spoke quietly behind him. "I'm sorry, Harry--"

Something about his brother's voice—that voice that had tossed so many insults his way in recent days—spiralled Harry's anger out of control. Snape's grip had eased off, so Harry yanked himself backwards and spun around, his clenched fist raised.

A voice inside of him was wailing, demanding he release his fury into a barrage of violence, but another part of him didn't want to hit his brother. And in trying not to, his anger came pouring out another way.

A gust of cold air suddenly swept through the room, a whooshing noise surrounding the three of them as something like a wraith rushed snakelike through the air. Draco's fringe flew up from the force of it, the manifestation coming closest to him, and then the thing, whatever it was, flew straight at the wall an inch from his head, hitting it with a noise like a thunderclap.

Draco leapt away, his mouth dropping open as he looked back at the granite wall, now coated in a fine layer of cracking ice.

"What the bloody hell was that?"

Well, at least the accidental magic had accomplished one thing. Harry didn't feel angry any longer; he just felt drained. "That was me, trying not to hit you."

"Oh . . ." Draco swallowed, one finger reaching out to poke at the icy wall.

"Perhaps you might consider before you next provoke your brother that he's prone to releasing dark powers when pushed hard enough," Snape warned. "You are unharmed?"

Draco actually looked himself over as though checking. "Yeah . . . it didn't hurt me, whatever it was."

"Harry?"

Harry felt shaken up, especially considering he'd thought his powers were under better control than that, but he nodded.

"Good." The Potions Master paused a moment, evidently weighing his options, for when he spoke it was to say, "Draco. I do believe I've been patient enough with your obstinacy. If you have now resorted to ferreting out unspelled parchments so that you may lie your way through your punishment, there is only one thing to do."

Snape held a hand out, palm facing upwards. "Return my grandfather's wand at once."

Now Draco was the one who looked shaken up. "I . . . I'm sorry, Severus. I don't know what's got into me, I really don't. I'll do your lines--"

"Yes, you will," said Snape, his voice as calm as the lake on a windless day. "What you won't do is magic. Any magic, until you're through your lines and caught up on your schoolwork. Now, return my grandfather's wand."

Draco slowly pulled it from his pocket and held it out, but Snape didn't take it. He waited until Draco reached out further and put it in his hand.
Snape wasted no time in tucking it away inside his robes.

Draco, Harry thought, looked like he might pass out. A dramatic reaction... an overreaction, in Harry's view, but then, Draco had always had magic, hadn't he? From his earliest memories, Lucius had let him start learning, ignoring the Ministry rules about underage magic. When his wand had been taken away before, he'd known that he had another.

But now... he looked utterly bereft.

"It's all right," Harry said, feeling really bad for his brother. Not that he blamed Snape, who'd tried lesser punishments first. "It's not so bad as you think. Remember how long I went without any magic, Draco... and at least you can still use the Floo and such; you don't need a wand for that..."

The other boy glanced up, his eyes dull-hued and listless. "But I'm not like you, Harry."

*I'm a pureblood*, Harry expected him to say. *I'm a real wizard and you're just a boy with a Muggleborn mother.*

But that wasn't what Draco was thinking.

"You're brave," he whispered, looking about as lost and hopeless as Harry had ever seen. "You stood up to... *him*. And I can't even say his name!" His tone started to go high-pitched, tilting towards hysteria. "I couldn't even stand up to my father and tell him I wouldn't go into that madman's service! All I could do was *crawl* to him and steal your wand." And then, eyes wild, "I gave his wand back, Severus! His wand, and you know how important his wand is-- you have to give me mine!"

He lunged, his hand making a clawing motion as he tried to reach inside Snape's robes.

Snape took one step back, which caused Draco to pitch forward and lose his balance. Righting himself at once, he glared.

At Snape and Harry both.

The Potions Master kept to the same calm voice he'd used throughout. "You shall have your wand back when you begin to conduct yourself as a proper young wizard."

"Oh, what's so fucking proper about lines?" Draco snarled.

"I won't argue this point again. Go to your room."

For a long moment, Draco looked as though he would defy that. But in the end, he turned away without a word and left them. The bedroom door closed softly. No slam. But Harry thought the noise ominous, all the same.

"Um, I lived down here without magic," he had to say. "And it's sort of tough. He won't be able to turn the lights off at night, for starters. At least the loo will flush but--"

Snape raised an eyebrow and cast a silencing spell. "You think I was too harsh?"

"Well, no... that was pretty sneaky, him finding a way to cheat on his lines, and I guess he can't do it again, not without a wand, but... I mean, didn't you use to let him cheat, like he said?"

"Not on something as serious as learning that I mean what I say." Snape made a scoffing noise. "He's referring to Messieurs Crabbe and Goyle in any case. Draco let them copy his homework."
"But you didn't stop it--"

"No, because those two are so thick that copying might well be the only way they'll learn something. There's always one or two such students each year. At any rate, Harry, you must let me handle Draco as I see fit. You aren't down here all week long seeing the sort of rubbish I have to deal with."

"I'll come down more--"

"Yes, do. But it's still my responsibility to rear him, not yours. Don't forget that. And don't do any magic for him. He can do without until he's decided to behave."

Harry felt distinctly uncomfortable about that. "Draco did magic for me all the time when I couldn't do any. He was really helpful, and I hardly appreciated it at all at the time."

"And if Draco fell ill and lost his magic I'd fully support your stepping in. But not when he's being punished."

"Well . . .all right. But what about the lights?"

"I'll arrange some sort of Tempus spell," Snape conceded. "And as you pointed out, he'll have the Floo. He'll be fine, Harry."

"He'll be miserable."

Snape's answering expression was grim. "That's the general idea, yes. But enough of that. Are you all right? You don't look very well to my eye."

"I feel a little rough," Harry admitted. "I thought I was through with accidental magic. Well, I almost loosed some when I saw Lucius Malfoy at the expulsion hearing, but that hardly surprised me."

Snape's dark eyes went thoughtful. "Not surprising, no. Significant, perhaps. Another thing I should have considered more closely. It would seem to me that if your dark powers are again surging forth when you grow angry, it may mean they have been repressed for too long. You should make it a priority to do some wanded magic every week, I would think."

"We could go out to Devon in the evening occasionally."

"Yes. We'll be there a week from today in any case. For the spring holiday."

"Oh, that'll be nice." Harry couldn't help but glance at his bedroom door, though, and wonder if Draco would ruin the holiday with sulks and tantrums and insults.

Snape wryly nodded to show he understood. "Now, to other matters. I have forgiven your father," he said earnestly, dark eyes steady on Harry. "Truly. I couldn't find a way to love James Potter's son and still hate him. He's part of you."

Harry drew in a shaky breath. "That's sort of scary. Oh, I don't mean me, I mean Draco."

"Ah. Well, Lucius is no doubt part of him as well. We'd be foolish to disregard that. It's something he must strive to overcome."

Harry frowned. "Yeah, I see that. And I understand he isn't his father. Took a while to sink in, but . . . anyway though, you did find a way to love Lucius Malfoy's son and still hate him, you know."

"Because Lucius hurt you, Harry. Or rather, you and Draco both. James . . . he only hurt me, and really, only my pride." Snape leaned down a little and spoke even more softly. "And what is more,
James was devoted to you, Harry. I can appreciate that now. Lucius doesn't deserve to have anyone call him father."

"I understand." Harry sighed, feeling pretty awful that he'd blown up like that. Why scream and yell about his cloak? Snape meant more to him than any of the things he'd taken away. "And about my stuff... you know, the map and all, I'm not that upset about it."

His father cast a glance at the water pooling on the floor as Harry's conjured ice melted. "Events here today would appear to contradict that."

"Well, I didn't think I was that upset, anyway. It's just... hard for me."

"Come into my office for some wine," Snape suggested. "We still ought to go visit Slytherin, but I think something to bolster you might be apropos."

"But we can drink our wine out here, can't we?"

Snape gave him a look. A work-with-me look.

"Oh, all right," Harry murmured, figuring his father needed to talk to him out of Draco's hearing. Though that didn't make a whole lot of sense considering the bedroom door was already warded... Shrugging, Harry gave up trying to figure it out. Once in the office, he sank down into his favourite chair and rubbed a bit at his eyes. "Do we really still have to visit Slytherin? I feel sort of done in by... everything."

"It's the optimal time," murmured Snape, sitting in the chair opposite. His hands reached out for Harry's. "This may not sound credible, but it is in fact the truth. I never realised I was steadily taking from you every last thing you ever had that was James'."

Harry heaved a sigh. "It's all right--"

"No, I don't think it is, now that I've seen it through your eyes. Now, as for the map, Albus has it, you realise, and we are still endeavouring to discover how it could have misled us."

"I know."

"The mirror is also problematic. The way you used it last has altered it. It's leaking magic now, so much so that I found it necessary to cast a stasis spell on it when I boxed it up for you."

"You're keeping it safe," Harry said, nodding. "I understand. I know I sounded like I didn't, but I do--"

"I fear you are missing my point." Snape squeezed his hands before letting go. "The mirror in its current state could truly pose a hazard; the stasis spell needs to be monitored. This, however..."

Reaching behind him, Snape pulled a book off a shelf and tapped it lightly, whispering a spell. When he opened it, there were no pages inside.

It was a hollow book containing Harry's invisibility cloak.

Snape pulled it out and unfurled it, then settled it across Harry's lap. When Harry looked down, he was sitting there without legs. He couldn't help but smile a little.

"You didn't have to show me," he said, picking the fine fabric up and letting it slide between his fingers. "I trust you. I knew you were taking good care of it."
Snape shook his head. "I am not skilled at making gestures, obviously. Harry . . . I am attempting to give it back."

Stunned, Harry dropped the cloak, then hurriedly bent down to gather it up. "Really?"

"Yes."

Laughing then, Harry hugged the cloak to himself. "I . . . I thought you couldn't trust me not to . . . you know, go sneaking around at all hours?"

"I cannot claim to be unconcerned," Snape admitted. "And as you know, I never did approve of Albus allowing you to have this. But when I took it, I was in fact far more concerned that Draco would help himself to it again and get into even worse difficulties."

"The funeral." Harry nodded.

"Yes. And now I fear he may borrow it again in order to play some prank on Slytherin. So I would ask that you keep it in the Tower rather than here."

"He can't even leave the rooms now," Harry reminded his father. "It takes a spell to open the door."

"Ah. You, of course, would be aware of the limitations. However, I would prefer not to underestimate Draco's ingenuity."

Probably for the best, Harry thought. "All right, I'll be sure to keep it in the Tower. And Dad? Thank you."

Snape inclined his head. "Do not abuse my trust."

"I won't."

"I believe that," Snape said, surprising Harry.

"Why?"

"You wrote quite a coherent essay on magical risks, just recently." Snape summoned a bottle of wine and began to pour it into the glasses that blinked into existence. "There were perhaps a few too many Quidditch analogies, but on the whole . . . yes. It was well done."

He passed Harry a half-filled glass of something dark and fruity, and raised his own glass in a toast. "To Slytherin."

_The common room_, Harry thought, dread beginning to knot his stomach. "I think I'd rather have a courage draught . . ."

"No, none of that," Snape chided, clinking his glass against Harry's when Harry sat there frozen. "Draco was correct, earlier. You are courageous enough on your own. The lion on your crest is there for good reason."

Harry thought of his snake-and-lion crest, and nodded.

Then he tilted his wine into his mouth and drank down every drop.
**Draco's Revenge**

*Now or never,* Harry told himself as Snape stopped in front of a portrait of a dark-haired, rather forbidding looking wizard. Salazar Slytherin himself, Harry presumed.

"We could have flooed in," Snape said, "but I thought you should know the passwords."

"Have you any plan to mention one?" asked the portrait in a bored tone.

Snape looked a bit irritated at that. "Brasilia." He shot a glance at Harry. "I wanted Albus to know I was serious about going abroad."

The painted wizard made a rather sarcastic gesture as the door he was covering swung silently open.

Three tunnels and two additional portraits later--Harry understood that Slytherins were paranoid but this was ridiculous--they found themselves walking into the Slytherin common room. It definitely hadn't been that complicated to reach it years before when Harry and Ron had quizzed Draco about the Heir of Slytherin. But then again, Draco had said that the hallways changed themselves around at times.

Well, it was no wonder Snape had mentioned flooing in. Who would want to go through all that each time they had to check on their house? Besides, Harry reasoned, with Slytherins, any delay might be lethal.

Though he had to admit, things in the common room didn't look as forbidding as he had expected. Probably that had a lot to do with the day in Hogsmeade. Candy wrappers were everywhere, thrown on the floor for the house-elves to tidy up, and several of the students lazing about on the couches were quite obviously drunk. Belladonna had her shirt half-unbuttoned and was snogging a tall, brown-haired boy as she sat on his lap.

Snape cleared his throat, but it had little effect since someone had charmed an odd-shaped rock to be putting out . . . well, rock music actually, though Harry didn't recognise the song. That was no wonder. He didn't listen to music where every third word was something you couldn't say in polite company.

The Potions Master pointed his wand and sent a stream of bluish lightning its way. It crackled for a second, sounding like popcorn, then fell silent.

Everyone slowly turned to stare at Snape in the doorway, Harry hovering slightly behind him.

"I wish to conduct a full meeting of the house at once," Snape announced, wand still in hand. "You will each summon those within your respective dormitories. Mr Torquay, I suggest you remove the lipstick from your earlobe."

*And possibly the lips still wearing the lipstick,* Harry thought as Belladonna untangled herself from the boy. He knew it was wrong to still be angry with her about the expulsion hearing; she'd been memory-charmed and thought she'd been telling the truth about Draco.

But Harry was angry anyway.

The moment Snape stopped speaking, the students scurried away to do his bidding. Really, it looked like they were pretty much in awe of him, which made some sense, Harry supposed. His father was an extremely powerful wizard, and he wasn't exactly known as the soul of patience. And too, Harry
still remembered that claim from second year, that if Ron and Harry had been in Snape's house, he'd have sent them back home on the train. So Heads of House could evidently eject—if not expel—students exactly as they pleased.

Still though, Harry had expected to see a little more backbone . . .

_But they're Slytherins_, he reminded himself. _It's like Nott said. Challenging Snape to his face is just stupid. They're going to pay lip service to whatever he says, then turn around and stab him—or more likely, me—in the back, first chance they get._ . . .

"No wonder Draco doesn't clean his room," Harry muttered when he and Snape were alone.

"Ah, well the elves clear away the mess daily."

"My point exactly. And what's this about your complaining _we_ have lax supervision in the Tower? I've never seen anybody undressed like that in _my_ common room!"

"She's a seventh-year," said Snape as though that explained everything.

Harry fell silent then, because Slytherins were starting to arrive. They fell into a semi-circle in front of Snape and Harry, the movement so unhesitating that Harry surmised his father must hold house meetings on a regular basis. That was an odd idea for him.

The students in front were first-years, judging from their height, not to mention the fact that their eyes were filled with a sort of awe when they looked at him. Harry wasn't sure if that was from hero-worship—though why he should be any Slytherin's hero was a good question—or if they were merely impressed that he could claim the fearsome Potions Master for a father.

The older gazes in the room were far more wary, sliding towards Harry and then away. Nobody would look him in the eyes for long, which made him wonder how much Legilimency Snape tended to use as part of house discipline. Of course _Harry_ was no Legimens, but he got the feeling that some of the students here might be wondering.

Nott was hanging towards the back, flanked by Goyle and Zabini. His gaze too was wary, though he gave a weak smile once when Harry glanced his way.

"You all know of my son Harry, of course," Snape began in a smooth voice, his hand coming to lightly rest on the boy's shoulder. "However, I suspect that very few of you really know him. Do you realise, for example, that when he first came to Hogwarts, he was very nearly sorted into Slytherin?"

Harry almost objected to his father disclosing that, but by then it was too late. And anyway, Snape's hand tightening on his shoulder warned him not to interfere with what his father wanted to say.

"Yes, that snake on his crest isn't there merely on account of the adoption," Snape went on, nodding at the slight hum of noise that had greeted his surprising pronouncement. "Harry Potter is Slytherin where it counts, at least in part. Now, I know that we have our differences with Gryffindor, but I also have full confidence that you will welcome my son into our house. To do otherwise would be less than Slytherin, to say the least, since Mr Potter's presence here could prove most advantageous to you. I shall expect you to include him in your study groups and social activities, of course, and I would like to mention that you might consider asking him to proofread your essays as I have found him to be quite proficient with spelling and grammar. In fact, he's been helping correct your submitted Potions essays for months now. You might find he has a better than average grasp, therefore, of the things that influence your marks."

_Snape swept his dark gaze around the common room. "Of course it goes without saying that any_
offence against him will be considered an offence against me . . .” His black eyes began to glitter. "And I do not take kindly to offence, as I am sure you are aware."

A hush descended over the room as Snape stopped speaking. More and more gazes began to study Harry, some of them as contemptuous as before. Others, though, seemed to be assessing him in a new light, Nott included.

Erik Vanvelzeer was the first to speak, his voice tight with barely-leashed hostility. "Did you let him hear the passwords to get in, sir?"

"He's in Slytherin," Snape calmly countered, stepping away from Harry finally. "He has as much right to the passwords as you do. More, perhaps, if you consider that I set them. I'm hardly going to bar my own son from his house."

The Potions Master swung his gaze about the room. "Have any of the rest of you questions? No? Well, my door is open to you, as always. Now, I know you have spent the day carousing in Hogsmeade, but I still thought it would be apropos to have a little celebration this evening, to welcome Harry into Slytherin. And so . . ."

Snape waved his wand in some rather dramatic arcs, back and forth over a large, round table, his lips muttering spells.

When he stopped moving, a large cauldron sat in the centre of the table. It was filled with jagged shards of ice and bottles of butterbeer. Around the cauldron there were various platters of food.

Harry thought it would be a wasted effort considering the scene they'd walked into, but as it turned out, Snape did know his Slytherins. They descended on the food and drink at once, and in the general hubbub that ensued, Harry lost sight of his father. He wasn't nervous, though. He had no doubt that Snape was keeping track of him.

Thinking it would be best if he made himself at home--though really, he could hardly have felt less at ease--Harry made his way through the students thronging the table and grabbed a butterbeer for himself, along with something that resembled a chocolate éclair but with a lot more filling than usual. His foot was stepped on twice as he retreated through the crowd. The first time caught him off guard--and had been tentative enough that it could have been an accident, he supposed. But the second time was definite, and hard enough to make him wince. Well, Harry hardly wanted to start a brawl, but he also thought Snape wouldn't want him just taking treatment like that, so he gave as good as he got.

Turned out to be good advice for Slytherins as well as brothers; nobody tried to smash his foot again.

He was half-way through the gooey éclair when a tugging sensation caught his attention. He looked down to see a red-haired girl--a first-year, unless he missed his guess--pulling on his robes to get his attention. Relieved that somebody wanted to talk to him, Harry smiled at her. He'd been a bit worried that he'd pass the whole party as an outcast, which would really disappoint Snape, whose clearly wanted Harry interacting with his new house.

The girl looked left and right before she asked in a low voice, "Can you really talk to snakes?"

Right, that would all be rumour to her. Or maybe more like ancient history. "Sure,” Harry answered, a little surprised when he heard how easily his answer came. Once, he'd found the talent dark and shameful, something to be hidden away whenever possible. Incanting all his spells in Parseltongue, though, had got him over that. "Do you like snakes?"

The girl nodded, her blue eyes big and solemn. "I'm Larissa."
Harry held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Larissa." He drew out Sals with his other hand and held her out. "This is Sals."

"Oooh, pretty," crooned Larissa. "You take her with you everywhere?"

"No, but she's afraid my owl will eat her so I take her with me most places." Harry laughed. "I've finally got a box fixed up so she should feel safe in there, but she's still a little nervous of Hedwig."

Larissa called a friend of hers over, and before Harry knew it, he was surrounded by a group of babbling first-years who wanted to know how to say their names in Parseltongue, of all things. They laughed at each other's terrible efforts to mimic Harry's hissing noises.

At one point, Harry caught Snape's sardonic gaze on him and understood the silent message in his father's eyes. Even after getting to know Draco and Snape, Harry had still thought that all Slytherins were somehow sinister at heart. Well, all other Slytherins. But these first-years were just children, full of energy and curiosity.

Innocents.

It made him realise how right Draco had been when he'd said that some of the Slytherins were worth saving.

"Come on over here, Potter," said Nott, appearing from nowhere at Harry's side. "We want to ask you something."

"But he was going to let me hold the snake!" complained Larissa, pouting.

"I'll let you next time," Harry promised, a little disturbed by the way Nott was glaring at the girl. She was just eleven or twelve, and acting her age.

Larissa looked set to argue, but when Harry nodded to underline his promise she said all right and bounded off towards the round table where she began gathering mounds and mounts of sweets into her hands.

Nott walked Harry over to where a contingent of older students was assembled. Fifth-years and up, he guessed.

"We can't help but notice that the Weasley girl is still playing Seeker for Gryffindor," began Zabini in a hard voice. "And since our own reserve Seeker isn't working out . . . You want to fit in here, Potter, you can start by showing us this is your house. Play for Slytherin."

"I'm not playing Quidditch at all," Harry said, shaking his head.

"You think your father approves of that attitude?" sneered Millicent Bulstrode. "You don't think he'd like to see you help Slytherin win?"

"I think he'd rather not see me fall off my broom from ten storeys up," Harry said, looking her in the eyes. "My magic isn't what it used to be, in case you hadn't noticed, and it's affected my flying."

"Oh."

That certainly took the wind out of their sails. All their sails, Harry noticed.

"Should have known you'd be as useless as always," Bulstrode finally muttered.

The group sort of dispersed then, and Harry was left alone with Nott. "So you need a broom that
responds to Parseltongue, you think?"

"Haven't thought about it," said Harry. "Maybe I'm just out of practise."

"But you haven't been practising with the Gryffindors, either," pressed Nott.

"Too much else do to. Which reminds me . . ." Harry began to wind his way back to Snape. Nott followed for a moment but then evidently thought better of it. Once he reached his father, Harry gave him one of those work-with-me looks and said, "I think that potion has probably brewed long enough, Dad."

"Oh yes, most likely." Snape agreed, rising to his feet and nodding at the seventh-year he'd been speaking with. "As I said, Mr Torquay. I consider every apprentice application I receive. Owl me yours, and we will talk."

Flicking his wand, Snape sent off a shower of sparks which got everyone's attention. "Hogsmeade Saturdays and celebrations aside, the monitoring spells will inform me if anyone remains out of bed past one, ladies and gentlemen. I therefore suggest you retire forthwith."

With that, he was ushering Harry out.

"It's one in the morning already?" yawned Harry as they began the long, uphill walk to the Tower.

"Yes. I recommend you catch up on your sleep tomorrow, Harry."

"Can't. Homework."

"You won't do it well if you're overtired."

"Yeah, all right . . ." It seemed like there was something he needed to tell Snape, Harry thought. Oh. "Thanks for the party, Dad," he murmured, but the feeling didn't go away. So there was something else . . . "Oh, yeah. If anybody asks, I don't fly so well these days."

"Your broomstick skills are as finely honed as ever."

"Yeah, but they want me to play Slytherin Seeker and that's just not on." Harry chanced a glance up at Snape's dark gaze as they walked along.

"No, I don't imagine it would be," said Snape. "You needn't worry yourself so much about my approval, Harry. You won't lose it merely by being yourself. Even your Gryffindor self, if I make myself clear?"

"Yes." Harry smiled.

"That said, I would like you to become more a part of my own house, so do not hesitate to let me know when you would like me to accompany you to the common room once more."

"As long as you're there, they're going to put on an act though."

"There is little choice at present. Ah, here we are." Snape stopped in front of the Fat Lady's portrait. "Well, good-night then, Harry."

Harry told the Fat Lady the password. "'Night, Dad. Oh, would you tell Draco I'll be down to see him soon?"

Snape's dark eyes reflected satisfaction as he whirled away to return to his dungeons.
Harry slept most of Sunday. Famished, he woke up in time to eat several helpings of everything served at dinner, then worked a few hours on his homework and slept again. In Monday morning Charms class, Flitwick assigned him a detention for skiving off class; Ron got one as well. Harry wasn't sure if they had Snape to thank for that; Flitwick wasn't usually so strict. But at least he hadn't taken points, so Harry decided it wasn't worth asking either one of them whose idea the detention was.

He couldn't see his family on Monday night because he ended up proofreading essays for Flitwick all evening. Well, *that* certainly cleared up whose doing the detention really was. *One of the disadvantages of having your father on staff* . . .

Another disadvantage was that your friends--Ron, in this case--didn't much appreciate getting caught in the middle when your father decided to make a point. Well, at least Ron hadn't been sent off with Filch for any truly nasty work. All he had to do was file papers without magic. Still, Ron grumbled about it the whole next day.

Hermione, of course, said it served him right for helping Harry miss a lesson.

All right, so no more skiving off classes.

Unless he had to, of course.

Harry brought his books to lunch on Tuesday and reviewed his Potions readings. He wasn't sure if his father would have the class re-brew Waldenholfer's Acuity Draught or he would stick to the schedule announced last week, but he wanted to be ready, either way. He sort of hoped they were just moving on to the next topic. He'd brewed the Acuity Draught twice on Saturday, after all, and the next potion in the text didn't require any charms to be cast. Harry thought he could do with the little break that represented.

*Anaforarian* base potion, he thought as he made his way down to the dungeons. *Let's do that one today* . . . And sure enough, they did. It was all Harry could do not to give his dad a big grin.

Class went well, with Harry earning five points for his correct answer about why the base potion would, if spilled, melt off fingers but not toes. For a moment, he wondered how the counters would apportion an odd number of points. Then Snape's intense questioning continued and he forgot all about it.

"You go on to dinner," he told his friends when class was over. "I think I'll eat with my family tonight."

Hermione and Ron went off, talking about the Prefect's meeting McGonagall had called for that evening.

Harry waited until the classroom door was closed, then walked to where Snape was shuffling through piles of submitted homework. "Do you have a lot to do? Because I was hoping you could walk me down now."

Snape glanced up, his dark eyes distracted. "I'll be along in a while, Harry. Have your friends escort you."
"They left."

"Ah." The Potions Master thought about that for a moment. "You may use my office Floo if you like. The powder is in the covered ivory cup on the mantle. Would you arrange dinner for the three of us? Ever since Saturday Draco has taken to ordering foods he knows I detest."

"Why don't you just send them back and order what you want?"

"I prefer not to give him the satisfaction." Snape grimaced. "In that vein, perhaps you'd better act as though I didn't ask you to see to this evening's repast."

"Don't worry." Harry headed off towards his father's office. "Draco won't suspect a thing."

Draco wasn't in the living room or their bedroom, which struck Harry as a little odd until he realised the other boy must be brewing. Well, it was about time Draco did some homework, and it only stood to reason he'd start with the subject he liked best. Of course the sixth-year Potions class was bound to pose him some difficulties, since the emphasis was on charmed potions. Maybe Draco was working on the Anaforarian base potion, though. He could do that one . . .

The ingredients set out on the worktable in Snape's lab, however, didn't have anything to do with their assignment. Harry didn't even know what sort of potion would use them. "What are you working on?"

Draco glanced over his shoulder, then bent down to manually adjust the flame beneath his cauldron. "Personal experiment."

"Oh yeah?" Harry though it would be better if Draco was working on an actual assignment, but he supposed this was better than nothing. Maybe it would get the other boy interested in his schoolwork again, at least.

"Yeah," Draco drawled, mimicking Harry's tone. "Is that a problem for you?"

"No . . ."

"Then get out and just let me get on with it," shouted Draco. "You go make yourself useful. Set the menu or something!"

"Sure," said Harry, hiding a smile. He went out and ordered a nice chicken curry for the three of them.

It wasn't long before Draco wandered out of the lab. "Sorry," he said, though he didn't sound terribly apologetic. "I'm not in the best mood. Turns out brewing's a lot easier with a wand."

Harry smiled. "I thought it was pretty funny when we finally got to use wands in Potions class," he admitted. "After all that there will be no wand-waving in this class business."

"Oh, wonderful. Make me feel like a first-year, Harry."

"I wasn't trying--"
Draco cut him off. "I know. Can you do me a favour and not mention my experiment to Severus? He'll just yell at me that I should have been following the class outline he gave me."

Harry had a feeling Draco had been getting yelled at a lot. "All right. Though if he asks me outright I don't know as I can lie to him, Draco."

"Gryffindor."

"Slytherin."

"Ha, not any longer." Draco seemed to make an effort then, though, and shrug off his morose thoughts. "So how is it, being back in classes?"

"Oh, Aran's as useless as ever," said Harry, though he thought better than to complain about the Parseltongue thing. It was bad enough to have Snape sticking his nose into Harry's Charms class. He didn't need any more interference.

"Aran's class was the best place to get all your other homework done, though," Draco sighed. "Well, when he gave us bookwork. His would only take ten seconds."

"Yeah, but I'd still rather have a decent Defence programme in place here. I can't figure out what Dumbledore thinks he's doing!"

"Yeah. I wish Severus wanted the job. He'd be great."

It seemed odd to be having a normal conversation with Draco, Harry thought. The other boy didn't seem to be trying to provoke him at all. Draco's mood did worsen after Snape arrived and they all sat down to dinner, but even then, he didn't make a point of throwing insults around. He just went quiet, hardly saying anything, keeping his eyes on his plate.

He seemed to be using an awful lot of salt on his food.

Snape tried drawing Draco in as he and Harry discussed plans for the spring holiday, but Draco just didn't seem interested. After a while, Snape decided to just let him be.

Later, when Snape was walking him back, Harry decided it would be all right to ask the question that had been on his mind all evening. "Has Draco started working on his lines yet?"

Snape shook his head, his black hair swaying lankly. For one insane moment, Harry wondered if Draco might have been working on brewing a shampoo for their father. But no . . . Draco wouldn't be in the mood to do Snape any favours, would he? On the other hand, maybe Draco would whip up a shampoo as a deliberate insult.

But that didn't seem to fit his thoroughly subdued mood, either.

"Maybe you should give back his wand," Harry ventured as they made their way through the deserted corridors. "I mean, I understand you had to make a point, but you made it, don't you think?"

"Considering he continues to defy the punishment I set him? No, I don't think so."

Harry frowned. "I know, but taking his wand . . . that's really rough. I mean, I could manage without magic, but I grew up differently."

"I do wish you would stop calling it his wand," Severus said in a hard voice. "It is not his wand, Harry. In fact, he is not allowed to own a wand at this point. It is my wand. My grandfather's wand,
and it is my choice what I do with it."

They walked down a long hall and turned a corner before Harry figured out what to reply. "I know. It's not his, but you were letting him use it . . ."

"Which means that should he choose to misuse it, I will be held to account for his actions." Snape sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose as they walked along. "You must allow me to do as I think best for your brother, Harry. I won't countenance your interference."

"Yes, sir."

Snape gave him a look, but said nothing more.

------------------------------------------------------

Harry managed to pop down for a brief visit on Thursday, though he might as well not have bothered. Snape was out somewhere--Draco either didn't know where or wasn't saying--and Draco was still caught up in his personal experiment, whatever that meant.

He was mincing clover blossoms when Harry walked in. Thinking of all the times he'd seen Draco do that with magic, Harry felt a little bad to see him working without now. "Here, I'll chop those for you," he said, coming alongside his brother and reaching for the knife.

"No thanks."

"Oh, come on--"

"No, Harry!" shouted Draco, swinging his whole body to the side to yank the knife out of Harry's reach.

"I just wanted to help," said Harry, a little hurt.

"Well, you can't."

"Why not?"

"Because you're . . ." Draco went red in the face, and blurted, "Because you're not a pureblood, all right? It's an experiment, I told you! You might mess it up!"

"That's ridiculous!"

"Yeah, well, deal with it," Draco rudely retorted, before shouldering Harry away from his work table. "Now if you don't mind, I've got some critical phases coming up, so it's not the best time to chit-chat."

Harry stood there, sort of dumbfounded for a minute, then turned away. "Fine. Enjoy your brewing."

"Oh, I will," drawled Draco. "I will."

------------------------------------------------------
"That's it, everybody to bed," Hermione announced at eleven p.m. that night.

Groans and complaints greeted her pronouncement.

Hermione glanced around the common room. "None of that, now. It's not my idea to impose a set bedtime on us. McGonagall insisted on it at the prefects' meeting. Eleven on school nights, one a.m. on the weekend."

One a.m . . . Harry ground his teeth together. It wasn't enough that his father had to make extra sure that Flitwick punished him for skiving off class . . . now the man had to see to it that Harry went to bed on time, too!

Even if it meant interfering with Harry's entire house!

"Hermione, I need to finish my Herbology questions," Harry complained. "I'll be up after I do the last four."

"Oh, no. McGonagall said--"

"Wait," exclaimed Ron, his forehead wrinkling. "What did she say exactly? Tell the house. Well, you did tell the house, Hermione!"

"Yes, and I noticed you didn't make any effort to, Ronald!"

"Stop calling me Ronald like that!"

"Stop it, both of you," interrupted Harry. "Look, Ron's right. McGonagall said to tell us and you told us, so you're off the hook. She didn't say to enforce it, did she?"

"Well, no . . ."

"There you are, then." Harry turned back to his Herbology, winking at Ginny who had packed up her things to go to bed, but was now sitting back down.

"Harry, I'm sure she meant for us to actually go to bed!"

"Ha." Harry looked up. "In six years she hasn't cared how late we stay up. I'm sure she just wanted to be able to tell my father that she set a bedtime. He's in a snit that I stayed up all night."

"Oh." Hermione looked around at the common room, and shrugged. "Never mind, then."

Ron started laughing. "I bet McGonagall knows we're going to ignore it. I bet she'll tell Snape with a straight face that of course the Gryffindors have been given a bedtime, and all the while she'll be snickering behind his back."

"I think she just didn't need his interference," said Harry. Snape really had a nerve, in a way, insisting that Harry not interfere in Draco's discipline, when all the time he felt free to meddle in Harry's other house!

------------------------------------------------------

During lunch on Friday, Harry started trying to figure out what to say to his father about the bedtime
thing. They were all supposed to Floo to Grimmauld Place that evening, Apparating from there to Devon for their holiday. Harry wasn't so sure he wanted to start their time away together on a negative note. But on the other hand, he did want to get the matter settled.

Snape wasn't Head of Gryffindor, so in Harry's view, he ought to keep his opinions about what went on in the Tower to himself.

As it turned out, though, Draco had already ruined their holiday far more thoroughly than Harry possibly could.

Harry found out about it when he was on his way to Potions, his last class of the day.

A small noise startled him as he walked along with his friends, and there stood Dobby, hands on hips, his elf eyes wide. "Harry Potter must come at once!" Dobby screeched, stepping forward and grabbing Harry's hand.

"What? Wait, I have Potions next and I'm almost late--"

"Harry Potter must come!" insisted Dobby, his ears twitching in agitation, tugging on Harry's hand. "Now, now, now, Harry Potter!"

"All right, all right!" Harry shouted, then turned to his friends. "Look, just tell my father Dobby needed to talk to me, so he doesn't think I'm hurt or something."

"But skipping class again, Harry?" questioned Hermione. "Snape's class?"

Harry leaned close. Well, as close as he could with Dobby yanking on him. "Dobby here was helping us investigate the Owlery thing. My dad'll remember that and think I ought to talk with him."

"Oh. Well, if you're sure--"

"For Merlin's sake, Hermione! Don't you think Harry knows his father better than you do?"

"I said all right, didn't I, Ronald?" Hermione turned back to Harry. "But you aren't supposed to go anywhere alone--"

Harry thought of Dobby repelling Lucius Malfoy's spell that time, and smiled. "Elf-magic's pretty serious stuff. Dobby'll take good care of me."

"Well, if you're sure," Hermione said again.

"Harry Potter will be in the Tower!" Dobby screeched as he bounced up and down on his heels. Just like that, quicker than the blink of an eye, Harry found himself up in his own dormitory, surrounded by hastily made beds.

Feeling like the breath had been knocked out of him, Harry sat down hard on his own bed and grabbed it to steady himself. It was a moment before he could speak; elf-Apparition was much more violent than the wizard kind. Though strangely enough, it was less nauseating.

"What's the meaning of this, Dobby?" he asked when he could talk. "Did you finally find out who it was that buried Draco's wand out on the grounds?"

"Dobby is not being concerned about Master Malfoy's wand!" The elf vigorously shook his head.

"He's Draco Snape, now," said Harry, thinking that the elves might not have heard the news. "He's
"Oooh, Harry Potter will be thinking twice on that when he is knowing what Master Malfoy has done!" exclaimed Dobby.

Harry sighed. What could Draco have done? He couldn't leave home, not without a wand. And the Floo was warded against him travelling anywhere alone. How bad could it be?

_I would prefer not to underestimate Draco's ingenuity_, he heard his father say inside his mind.

Harry suddenly had a bad, bad feeling. "What's he done?"

"That!"

Dobby snapped his fingers, and a glittering shower of pink sparks began to hover in the air. When it dissipated, a tray of fairy cakes remained. _Elaborate_ fairy cakes; they looked as though they'd come from some incredibly upscale bakery.

"These was sitting out in the Slytherin common room!" shrieked Dobby. "They is from the kitchens! The Hogwarts kitchens!"

Noticing a plain parchment card on the tray, Harry stood up and reached out for it, only to be thrown back by a blast of energy that flared into life around the tray. "Ow!" he said, shaking his right hand.

"Dobby is getting it for Harry Potter! Harry Potter must not be poisoned!"

"Poisoned?"

"The fairy cakes is poisoned!" Dobby repeated, reaching for the card. He wouldn't let Harry touch it, however. Holding it close, he opened it so Harry could see the writing on the parchment.

_For my loyal Slytherins. You know who you are, _" Harry read out loud. "L. Malfoy."

"Yes, yes, yes!"

Harry sat down again. "All right, so Lucius sent fairy cakes to the conspirators to thank them . . . wait, they're poisoned. So what's he doing, trying to kill off anybody who knows he was involved in Pansy's death?"

"Master Malfoy senior is not sending fairy cakes to Slytherin!" shouted Dobby, more frantic than ever. "Master Malfoy junior is sending these!"

Harry felt like a shock wave had travelled through him. But then reason returned. "Oh, don't say that, Dobby. That's an awful thing to say! Look, I know you don't get on with Draco but really, it's a lot more likely that Lucius would be trying to poison students--"

"Harry Potter is not understanding!" Jumping up onto Harry's bed, Dobby grabbed both Harry's wrists and held on tight. "Master Malfoy asked the kitchens for fairy cakes! _These_ fairy cakes! But they is poisoned now!"

"All right, slow down," said Harry, feeling like his brain needed a chance to catch up. First things first. "Is anybody hurt? Did anybody eat any of them?"

"No, no, no! Quilly was cleaning the dungeons and she was getting Dobby at once as soon as they arrived! The students was finishing their lunches in the Great Hall!"
Harry left aside, for the moment, the question of why this Quilly would have summoned another elf. Or why Dobby, for that matter. "Dobby," he asked, "if nobody's eaten the fairy cakes then what makes you so sure they're poisoned?"

Letting go of his wrists, Dobby drew himself up to his full height and glared. "Dobby was eating one."

"You said nobody had!"

"Dobby was thinking you meant the wizards and witches," said the elf, starting to hunch over, looking a little bit ashamed of his assumption, then. "Dobby did not know you was meaning house-elves. Dobby was forgetting Harry Potter's great kindness to house-elves--"

Harry reached out and patted the elf's hand. "That's okay, Dobby. Are you all right?"

"Oh yes, Harry Potter! Dobby sicked up twice but now is right as rain!"

Giving Dobby's hand one more pat, Harry murmured, "I'm sorry you were sick. Now, if Draco ordered a plate of fairy cakes like this, then I guess it looks awfully suspicious, but really, Dobby--"

Dobby waved the card he was still holding, though he kept it well away from Harry. "This is not Master Malfoy senior's writing! It is looking so similar that the students would not be noticing the difference! But Dobby is noticing! That is Master Malfoy junior's writing, Harry Potter! Dobby is knowing these things!"

Now Harry felt like he was the one who would sick up. He couldn't help but remember Draco's impulse control problem. Or his resentment of his house, these days. Or the personal experiment he'd been working on, the one he'd said not to tell their father about. What if he'd been brewing a poison?

Draco hadn't wanted to let Harry mince the clover. Harry suddenly remembered. It felt like something hard and heavy had portkeyed straight into his gut. Draco hadn't wanted Harry to help make that potion, and he'd said it was because Harry wasn't a pureblood . . . a claim Harry hadn't believed at the time.

He believed it even less, now.

What if Draco hadn't wanted help because he didn't want Harry implicated in the poisoning?

The whole plot was really too awful to believe, so Harry struggled against an overwhelming sense of evidence to gasp, "Draco can't get to the Slytherin common room, Dobby! I mean, he can't leave by the door and he definitely can't floo anywhere by himself! So how would he even deliver these?"

Dobby's voice grew hushed. "Quilly was seeing them arrive in the Slytherin common room Floo, Master Harry! And Master Malfoy can use the Floo to be sending food! Oooh, these past weeks he is asking for lots of food! Whole platters he doesn't touch, he floos back to us!"

And the Floo in Snape's quarters had a direct connection to the common room in his house, so he could reach his Slytherins quickly if there should be an emergency . . .

Harry slumped, but still struggled to find holes in the story. "But when Quilly saw the fairy cakes come through the Floo, she wouldn't know that wasn't Lucius' handwriting. She'd think they were from Lucius. And Lucius is a school governor and a Slytherin himself, so why wouldn't she just put the treats out on a table for the students to enjoy?"

Dobby began eyeing him strangely, his ears standing straight up. "Because the headmaster, he is
being very strict about the food-testing rules, Harry Potter. Quilly would be having to pull out her teeth if she disobeyed!"

"What food-testing rules?"

"Aaaah." Dobby nodded sagely, his ears relaxing. "Harry Potter does not know."

"Know what?"

"Dobby must be telling Harry Potter if Harry Potter wants to know--" Dobby said as though talking to himself.

"Harry Potter wants to know!"

A single, definite nod, and then Dobby was disclosing, "All food is being food-tested, Harry Potter. It all goes through elf-hands before any wizards is ever seeing it. Because the headmaster is not wanting to lose his Potions Master, he is saying, and we is knowing that he means it, after the last time!"

"What last time?"

"The last time Harry Potter's father was poisoned," Dobby said in a whisper.

Snape had been poisoned? Well he'd always had enemies, hadn't he . . . "When was this?"

"On his birthday!" Dobby began shaking his head to and fro. "Oh, it was awful, Harry Potter!"

"His last birthday?"

Dobby nodded.

Early January. Snape had said, which meant . . . "Snape got poisoned this year, almost right after he adopted me?" And he never even mentioned it?

Dobby nodded again.

Well, at least that explained why the man had been skipping meals. Being poisoned wouldn't exactly make you want to eat, would it? "Who poisoned him? And how?"

"We is not knowing who, Harry Potter! We is only knowing how! Somebody was putting poison in the Potion Master's chocolate cauldron!"

"Chocolate cauldron?"

"Oh, yes, Harry Potter!" Dobby began bouncing on the balls of his feet again; Harry felt his queasiness surge as the bed jiggled under him. "Every year the headmaster, he is giving Harry Potter's father a chocolate cauldron at breakfast on his birthday! The Potions Master, he scowls, like this . . . " Dobby made an absolutely hideous face. " . . . and he waits for the headmaster to be teasing him about it, but then he eats it, every year. But this year it was poisoned and Harry Potter's father was spending the day in the hospital wing!"

"I never heard about any of this!"

Dobby shrugged. "Maybe Harry Potter's father is not wanting to worry him?"

Maybe, but Harry was still pretty upset and angry that such a thing could have happened. And even
more angry, perhaps, that Severus had never mentioned it, not once. Not even when Harry had asked him why he was so reluctant to eat!

"Well how much was there to worry about? How bad off was Severus on his birthday?"

Dobby shuddered. "Oh, it was awful, Harry Potter. Dobby was hearing the whole story from the hospital-elves. The Potion Master's throat began to bleed and he began coughing up blood. And the headmaster, he was telling him before breakfast was even over to be seeing Madam Pomfrey. And Harry Potter's father, he was arguing, but then he went. And the hospital-elves saw blood streaming from his eyes and nose and Madam Pomfrey had to get some Blood Replenisher in him but his throat was scarring itself faster than she could be healing it and he could not swallow! And then Harry Potter's father fainted," the elf added in a hushed whisper. "And Madam Pomfrey did some spells that was not working, but then he woke up on his own and she was laughing and hugging him and saying he was a good Potions Master!"

Harry thought back to early January. Hadn't there been a night or two when Severus had had a bit of a scratchy throat and had seemed awfully tired and withdrawn? It would have been about the time Ron was doing his lines. Hmm, Ron must not have known about the poisoning attempt. Even as angry as he'd been, he'd surely have mentioned it.

"This was all kept from the students, I guess?" Harry asked, wondering if that was why it had been kept from him as well. But he wasn't just a student; he was the man's son!

Dobby nodded.

Harry glanced at the fairy cakes and tried to get his mind back onto their more immediate problem. Draco. "Who knows about these cakes being poisoned? Just you and Quilly?"

"Oh, no, Harry Potter--"

Harry wanted to hang his head in his hands and groan, because if the story was already out then Draco was as good as headed for Azkaban, wasn't he? Nobody would give him the benefit of the doubt, not after the whole wizarding world basically assumed he'd already got away with murder once.

Not that Draco deserves any benefit of the doubt, Harry thought darkly.

"Just Dobby is knowing," continued the elf. "Dobby is the only one."

Harry heard that through such a haze of fear, worry, and anger that it took a minute to sink in. "Wait. Just you? But Quilly saw the treats arrive! Oh, you mean she still thinks they were from Lucius?"

Dobby flushed, his skin going greener than usual. "Quilly gave the cakes to Dobby to food-test. And Dobby is knowing that they were from Master Malfoy junior, and Dobby is knowing he is Harry Potter's brother. And Dobby is remembering that Harry Potter was saying that his brother is being loyal to him. So Dobby is not wanting to break Harry Potter's heart, but Dobby must be knowing if the cakes are safe, so Dobby is going off alone to test them. And after Dobby is done being sick, Dobby comes straight to Harry Potter to ask, what should Dobby do?"

By the end, the elf was looking at him plaintively, his big eyes beseeching.

"I think you should come with me to tell my father, and we'll let him handle it," Harry said, quickly casting Tempus. "But he's still in class . . . well, I guess it's not an emergency at this point, so we can wait until he finishes. You're sure Quilly doesn't know any of this?"
Dobby's ears swayed as he shook his head. "Treats is coming all the time and Dobby is food-testing them, Harry Potter."

"Well, I'm sure stuff comes by owl, but through the Floo? Quilly has to know it's warded, right? Not anybody can use that Floo . . ."

"Quilly knows that Master Malfoy senior is a school governor." Dobby shrugged. "Quilly will not be thinking twice about the Floo."

"All right . . ." Harry drew his eyebrows together and stared at Dobby. "You just said that treats come all the time and you food-test them. Is that why Quilly called you when she saw the food arrive?"

"Oh, yes." Dobby beamed Harry a wide smile. "Dobby is the only house-elf who is doing the food-testing." He threw his head back so proudly that one of his hats fell off. "The other elves is always calling Dobby for it."

Harry was glad Dobby seemed so happy about the matter. Maybe when it came to elf-duties, that one was some sort of honour? Though that was hard to imagine. "How'd you get assigned a job like that?"

Dobby leapt off the bed and spun around once in his obvious glee. "Dobby volunteered!"


"Oh, do not worry, Harry Potter," said Dobby, smiling widely. "Dobby has only been poisoned three times counting today. And wizard poisons, they is not very harmful to elves. Dobby sicks up and then he is right as rain--"

"Would you stop saying that?" Harry asked, feeling a bit weak at the thought. "It's not right for you to be doing this, Dobby. Why on earth would you volunteer for such an awful job?"

Dobby jumped up on the bed again and sat down next to Harry, and looked at him with wide, serious eyes. "Because Dobby will do anything for Harry Potter. If anything happened to Harry Potter's father, Harry Potter would be unhappy. Dobby is knowing this." His voice took on a grumbling edge. "And Dobby is knowing that Harry Potter loves his brother also. So Dobby will be doing whatever Harry Potter is wanting, though Dobby thinks that Master Malfoy junior needs--"

"That'll be up to his father," Harry interrupted, just in case Dobby was about to bring up the awful wizard's beatings Draco had suffered at Lucius' hands.

"Yes, Harry Potter."

Harry cast Tempus again and wondered why time seemed to be slowing down. Nothing for it, though. Getting up, he started to pace the length of his room and back. That meant he had to pass next to the floating plate of fairy cakes. "Where was that before you summoned it here?"

"Dobby was putting it in a safe place."

Harry almost said to put it back there, but since he didn't want to risk anybody else seeing it, he supposed he probably shouldn't. So in the end he said nothing about that. He asked Dobby more about the poisonings and found out that after the chocolate cauldron incident, two untraceable owl-post packages addressed to Snape had arrived. Thanks to Dumbledore's food-testing rules, however, neither one had made it past Dobby.
Harry still felt bad about Dobby getting sick over and over, but if it kept Snape alive, he didn't feel he could put a stop to it. Besides, Dobby was so happy to help!

He decided he'd just be sure not to mention Dobby's new job to Hermione.

"Has anyone ever gone back for Draco's wand?" Harry asked after a while. "Wait, never mind. They wouldn't, not now. I guess everybody knows Draco was expelled and his wand confiscated. Sorry, I'm not thinking too well right now. I just can't believe Draco did a thing like this, trying to kill off his house mates! Even if it was just the ones who were working with Lucius against him!"

Even if it was just the ones who helped kill Pansy . . .

Harry could see him being angry, could see him wanting revenge. But murder?

Dobby jumped up and started pacing alongside Harry. "Dobby thinks he misspoke, Harry Potter. The cakes, they is poisoned and it is bad, bad, bad of Master Malfoy, but if he was trying to kill he would be using a stronger poison. This one will be making his house mates very, very sick."

Harry stopped pacing. "How sick?"

Dobby snapped his fingers and a book appeared in Harry's hand. Harry was so startled he almost dropped it. When he spotted a bookmark, he flipped it open to that page and started reading.

The blood drained from his face when he spotted clover blossoms on the list of ingredients for the potion. But that was nothing to how he felt when he read about the effects of this particular poison.

Dobby spoke very softly. "Harry Potter's father will be finished soon with his Advanced Potions class."

"What?" Harry looked up from his reading, grim-faced. "Oh. Can you Apparate us both into his office?" Then he remembered what that had been like. "Wait, give me a minute to get ready. I'll bring the book; can you bring the cakes?"

Harry took three big, bracing breaths, and then nodded, wincing this time as Dobby snapped his fingers.

------------------------------------------------------

Harry decided it was just as well he wasn't in Potions class that day. From what he could make out through the thick office door, Snape was in a terrible temper. Of course, that might be because he was a bit upset that Harry hadn't talked to him before leaving with Dobby.

Oh, who was he trying to fool? It was definitely because of Harry. Snape was picking on the Gryffindors even more than usual, and as the class drew to a close, began questioning Hermione so relentlessly about base potions that her voice started to waver. Probably he blamed Ron and Hermione for letting Harry go off, which was completely unfair since in the first place, they hadn't had much choice, and in the second, Hermione had done her level best to stop Harry.

"That will be all," Snape finally concluded in an ominous voice. "You are dismissed."

Ron and Hermione had evidently hung back to talk to Snape, mood or no mood, because the next
thing Harry heard was, "Which part of dismissed overtaxed your feeble brains?" And then, in a slightly more reasonable tone, "Fine, fine, you're concerned about Harry. Well if you would leave I could begin to investigate his latest brainless stunt--"

"I'm right here, Dad," said Harry, stepping through the Potions office door, Dobby at his heels. "Hi Ron, Hermione. Sorry for leaving like that, but once Dobby decided to Apparate me I didn't have much way to stick around."

Hermione rushed to his side. "Are you all right?"

She was practically checking him over for bruises, Harry thought with a little irritation. "Yeah, fine. But I have to talk to my father, now. Family business."

"Oh . . . all right."

She looked awfully worried, so Harry gave her a smile. He couldn't help that it was strained, though. "Look, I might not see you again before we leave for the spring holiday, so I'll just say 'bye now."

Ron glanced at him and nodded. "Right. But you need anything, mate, you know where to find us."

"Oh, why would he need anything, Ronald? He'll be with his father!"

"You're just saying that in front of his father so he might forgive you someday for that stupid letter--"

Snape interrupted him. "As entertaining as your adolescent squabbles are, I get more than enough of that listening to my own sons, Miss Granger, Mr Weasley."

"Yes, sir," they both said in unison.

"Now if you don't mind, I believe Harry mentioned some family business?" As hints went, Snape's was more than pointed; it was razor-sharp. Ron and Hermione said a quick good-bye to Harry and left.

"Office," Snape announced without delay, marching in there and clearly expecting Harry and Dobby to follow. Once the door was closed he warded it thoroughly, then looked expectantly at his son.

"Well? I presume you do have an adequate explanation for your absence throughout the afternoon session?" And then, in tones of astonishment, "What is a plate of fairy cakes doing in the middle of my desk?"

Harry collapsed into chair, feeling like he'd been carrying a hundred pounds up and down stairs. "That's my explanation. It's . . . oh, God. I don't know where to begin. But first off, whatever you do, don't eat one of those . . ." Harry shuddered. "Things."

Snape stepped towards the fairy cakes but didn't touch them. "For my loyal Slytherins . . ." A look of comprehension began dawning on his face. "That is not Lucius' writing. It is . . ." Snape practically staggered.

Harry knew the feeling. He held out the book he was still holding and said just one word. "Venetimorica."

Snape didn't need a book to know what that meant. He looked a more than a bit ill at the thought of that poison being distributed not merely by his son, but against his own house. Harry sighed, wishing he could say something to make it all better. "You were right about Draco's ingenuity."

Hmm, that probably hadn't helped.
Snape sat down behind the desk and stared blankly at the cakes, but Harry could see that he was trying to piece it all together. Or perhaps, come to grips with it. "I must admit, more context would be very . . . beneficial," he finally said.

"Dobby?"

Harry thought better than to explain it all himself. If Snape wanted the whole story, it was better for him to hear it directly from the source. Actually, Harry wished he didn't have to listen to the whole thing a second time. The more he thought about it, the sicker he felt. Never mind that he'd thought a time or two about sneaking into the Slytherin common room and playing some sort of prank on them. He'd never have done anything like this.

When Dobby's story was over, Snape looked more thunderously angry than Harry had ever seen. Which was really saying something, considering how angry Snape had got at him over the years. His eyes were a seething black beneath eyebrows stretched into a taut, thin line, and his lips were white with rage.

"And no-one knows any of this save you?" he rapped out. He'd been pacing for a while by then, but when he asked the question he stopped, fists at his side, and gazed fiercely down at Dobby.

Dobby had seen too many furious wizards in his time to take one lightly. "N . . . n . . . no-one except Quilly, but she is not knowing anything except I took the fairy cakes away to be food-testing them."

"It's all right, Dobby," Harry said in a soothing voice. "He's not angry at you."

Snape shot Harry an annoyed glance but didn't contradict him. "And normally if you investigated an item and it contained no poison, you would . . .?"

"Dobby would put it back for d-- d-- delivery, s-- s-- sir . . ."

Snape lapsed into thought. "Will Quilly remark upon it if the tray never reappears?"

Dobby got an odd look on his face, though he managed to shake his head no.

"What, Dobby? What?"

Looking apologetic then, Dobby whispered, "Quilly will not be noticing. The Slytherin rooms, they is always such a horrible filthy mess, Harry Potter, that the house-elves . . . er . . ."

"The house-elves what?" Snape barked.

"The house-elves is taking turns cleaning there," yelped Dobby. "Quilly will not be back there for another month!"

"Fine," said Snape in a short voice. "Say nothing about this matter, elf. Nothing. Ever. Not even to Harry Potter." Pausing, the Potions Master appeared to give that some thought. "Harry, perhaps it would be best if you told him the same."

Harry knelt down, grateful that Snape hadn't suggested forcibly binding Dobby to some sort of silencing spell. Or worse, Obliviate. He was actually surprised his father hadn't suggested that, but perhaps it didn't work on elves. "This has to be our secret, Dobby," Harry told him. "It's important."

Dobby gulped. "I was already telling no-one because I knew it would hurt Harry Potter."

"I know." Harry gave Dobby a swift hug. "You're a good friend."
Dobby's big eyes shined with tears. "But Master Malfoy, Harry Potter. If he is getting away with this, he will be doing it again and again, Dobby is thinking. He will break Harry Potter's heart!"

"No," interrupted Snape, his tone of voice one Harry had never heard from him before. Hard, cold, and utterly merciless. "Draco won't do this again. Draco won't do anything like this, ever again."

"What are you going to do to him?"

Snape ignored Harry's question in favour of waving for Dobby to leave. Sighing, Harry handed Dobby the book back. Snape didn't need it, and Harry didn't want to dwell on the details of that particular poison any longer.

With a final mournful look at Harry, the elf at last Disapparated.

"What are you going to do to Draco?" repeated Harry. "What else can you do? You've already taken his wand--"

"My wand!" snapped Snape. "And as for what I plan to do, I'm still considering the matter. But one thing is certain. You will not interfere."

"Dad--"

"Do you want to see your brother sent to Azkaban?"

"But Dobby won't tell anybody--"

"No doubt. He's loyal to you, but he's also quite correct. Draco will indeed do this again--or something worse--unless he's stopped now. So answer me! Do you want to see your brother sent to Azkaban?"

"No, of course not!" Harry took a step back, the look on Snape's face more unnerving than he would have thought possible.

"Then do not interfere!" Snape assessed his expression, then waved his wand to levitate the tray of fairy cakes. Once it had floated into the Floo, the Potions Master reached for the ivory cup on his mantle. "We'll go talk to Draco, now."

"And tell him what?"

Snape gave Harry a thin, menacing smile. "Oh, I'm in no mood to tell your brother anything at present. Let's see what he has to tell us, shall we?"

With that, he pulled Harry into the Floo with him and threw down the powder that would send them both hurtling home.

The shower was running when Harry and Snape arrived, which Harry counted quite a good thing since it would give him a chance to talk with his father.

"Why'd you bring those along?" he said, shuddering.
Snape deftly waved the tray over to the dining room table. "What would you suggest I do, leave them in my office so that students wandering in can help themselves to a tasty treat?"

Harry blanched even though the suggestion was absurd. "Your office is warded and besides, nobody's going to come asking for Potions help when there are no classes for a week!"

"Regardless, I'm hardly disposed to leave them unsupervised."

Harry could appreciate that. "Can't you just banish them to nowhere?"

"Oh, certainly I can," Snape mocked. "I do believe I've known that spell for some years, Harry. But I think they can perhaps be put to better use here. The card, however . . ." It abruptly vanished under the force of Snape's spell, though Harry had a feeling it had only gone as far as his father's bedroom or office. As the shower stopped running, Snape lowered his voice. "Follow my lead."

Harry waited for his father to say more, but the man just stared at him, one eyebrow lifted in challenge.

Harry finally gave it up. "What are you planning?"

"I told you, I wish to hear what your brother has to say."

"What does that mean, you want to trick him into lying to you? What?"

"Perhaps you would have to be more fully Slytherin to understand," murmured Snape. Whatever else he had been going to say was lost as Harry's bedroom door swung open and Draco emerged.

"So, are we off to Devon then?" he at once suggested. "I'm already packed--"

"Alas, Harry is not," Snape said, shaking his head. "But no matter. Tomorrow will be soon enough to depart." He took a pinch of powder and tossed it at the grate. "Whatever suits each one of us, I should think."

As the elf in the fire nodded and whisked himself away, Snape turned towards the table.

Harry knew the exact moment when Draco saw what was waiting for him there. The other boy's step faltered, his mouth falling open. He recovered quickly enough, however, and sauntered forward as though he hadn't a care in the world. "Where did you get those, Severus?" he asked, glancing at the fairy cakes as though confused. "Oh, did you fetch them from the kitchens, Harry?"

As terrible a liar as ever, Harry thought.

"I brought them," Snape tossed out. And he, Harry thought, was definitely not a terrible liar.

All those years working as a double-agent . . .

"They'd been delivered to the Slytherin common room," Snape went on, his tone almost absent-minded by then. "But the state of the room lately has rivalled your bedroom for slovenliness. I hear the elves actually fight with one another to avoid Slytherin, so I rather thought the students didn't deserve such a lovely treat."

When Draco said nothing, Harry suspected he was trying to work out how much of that he could believe. Or perhaps he was merely wondering what had happened to the card he'd forged.

"Mmm, asparagus quiche," Draco said as his food winked into existence. He began studiously avoiding looking at the centre of the table, Harry noticed. "What did you get, Harry? Meatloaf
again?" Draco screwed up his features in disdain. "With wilted salad."

"It's not wilted." Harry pushed his fork against it to prove his point. The crisp Romaine made a crackling noise.

"Well it's not a proper starter, is it, coming with your main course like that."

Surprisingly enough, Draco didn't follow up that comment with scathing commentary on Harry's upbringing. Or perhaps it wasn't so surprising. Draco had apparently already vented his day's quota of viciousness, Harry thought darkly.

"Some of us have more important things than meals on our minds," he began, only to blink in shock when Snape kicked him under the table. At least it wasn't a hard kick, but still!

"What Harry means," the Potions Master smoothly inserted, "is that he's worried about his detention."

"Filch, huh?" Draco gave a mock shudder and poured himself a glass of sparkling water from the decanter that had appeared at his place. "What did you do?"

"Uh . . ."

"Oh come now," said Snape in a thoroughly pleasant voice. "You can tell your brother, surely. Or perhaps not, considering the dynamic between you two. No? Well, the fact of the matter is that Harry neglected to attend his Potions lesson today."

Draco almost choked on a bit of asparagus. "You skived off Severus' class?"

"I . . ." The warning look he got from Snape was enough to make him play along, as he'd been told. Though he had no clue where Snape thought this was going. "Yeah, actually I did."

After a few sips of water, Draco began to laugh softly. "The good act began to pall, did it?"

"I wasn't putting on any act!"

"Oh, sure you weren't. You just wanted me to look bad and you know it."

"You sure don't need my help to look bad, do you--" Harry abruptly stopped before he got kicked again.

"Harry does have a point," said Snape as he polished off the last of his salmon mousse. "If he's been putting on a good act, you've certainly done all you could to convince us you're not worthy of the name Snape, haven't you?"

Draco's glance flicked to the centre of the table, but other than that, he didn't give himself away. "I've just been in a bad mood. You get them too, you know. Even Harry wasn't the soul of cheer right after--"

"We're not discussing Harry at the moment," Snape quietly said. "Your behaviour is at issue now. Speaking of which, did you get any lines done today?"

Draco lifted his chin. "No, actually."

"I see. What about your assignments?"

That chin went up yet another notch. "Not a one."
"Pity. Too much more of this and your professors might not bother owling down their lesson schedules, you realise."

Draco shrugged. "I don't have professors. I'm expelled, remember? Anyway, I've been busy."

"I can't imagine with what," murmured Snape, his voice going silky. "Can you, Harry?"

"Uh . . . no?"

Draco shot Harry an alarmed glance at that. Was he perhaps worried Harry would mention the personal experiment he'd been working so hard on?

Their main courses arrived at that moment, though Harry of course still just had his meatloaf. Snape stopped questioning Draco then, and began discussing suggested improvements to his cottage in Devon.

When it was time for dessert, though, the conversation again became fraught with tension. As far as Harry could tell—which wasn't far—Snape had been trying to lull Draco into some state of relaxation, even to the point of implying that Harry was in trouble for skiving off class. But now, he went in for the kill.

Lovely confections appeared on the table as their dinner plates vanished. Crème brulée for Harry, a kiwi-laden slice of Pavlova for Snape, and chocolate-dipped cream puffs for Draco. Before anyone could so much as pick up a spoon or fork, however, Snape was waving his wand and banishing it all away, though he left the delicate dessert plates behind.

Or rather, he left Harry and Draco's plates behind. His own had vanished along with his Pavlova. "I don't know what the elves were thinking," he murmured as he tucked his wand away. "You know how seldom I eat dessert. But you two . . . well, I couldn't imagine you'd want those other confections when we already have these lovely fairy cakes."

For one stark moment, Draco's face drained of colour, and Harry was sure the boy would confess his awful deed. He must have decided, though, that he could still somehow escape unscathed. How he could think that was a mystery to Harry. The horrible poisoned cakes were sitting there right in front of him, an indictment if Harry had ever seen one.

Maybe he thought Snape didn't really know the truth about them. Though that was pretty unlikely, wasn't it? Maybe he was just figuring out what sort of story he could make up to explain them? Harry almost sighed out loud, wishing Draco would just accept the fact that he couldn't lie to save his life.

Snape deftly transfigured his fork into a large serving fork, and neatly transferred a fairy cake to Harry's plate, and then one to Draco's. Sitting back, he gestured rather expansively for them to begin.

Draco picked up his fork, slowly, his gaze darting between Snape and Harry and back.

Harry didn't know what to do, since follow my lead didn't really seem to cover the situation he was in now, but as Snape's eyes glinted with some sort of grim intent, he picked up his fork as well and started to poke at the aquamarine icing atop his fairy cake. His heart was pounding so hard he thought it would bruise his ribs, and he wanted nothing more than to throw his fork--at his father or brother, didn't matter which--but he managed, somehow, to merely look as though he was getting ready to eat his dessert.

Draco had stopped his frantic glances and was now simply staring aghast at Harry.
Proof, as if they needed it, that Draco was as guilty as they came.

And it was time to confess all, surely? That must be what Snape had been working towards . . . forcing a confession past Draco's reluctant lips. Because Draco certainly wasn't going to let Harry eat poison, was he? And not just any poison, but one as thoroughly nasty as Venetimorica? It wasn't lethal, but that didn't make it any less evil, not in Harry's book.

Or Dobby's, he thought with despair, because he could only toy with his food for so long. A horribly sick feeling rushed into his gut as he realised that Draco wasn't going to say anything, not anything!

To protect his own dirty little secret, he was going to stay silent while Harry ate a forkful of poison!

Harry lifted the fork up from the icing and brought it closer to his lips.

And finally--ha, about damned time, Harry thought--Draco broke.

"Don't eat that!" Draco suddenly shouted, his face splotchy with stress, his eyes almost as wide as Dobby's.

Almost ill with relief that Draco did think of someone besides himself, Harry wasted no time in dropping his fork onto his plate. He wanted to go sick up, and then he wanted to sleep for about three days straight.

"What's got into you, Draco?" asked Snape, his voice reflecting nothing but honest puzzlement. Well, not honest puzzlement, thought Harry rather caustically, but it sure did sound authentic. Harry was nearly fooled and he knew the truth! "Why shouldn't Harry eat his cake?"

"Uh . . ." Obviously thinking fast, Draco blurted, "Because he skived off your class, Severus. Really, you can't reward him for behaviour like that. And uh, I know I've been very ill-mannered lately, so to make things even I'll forego my own dessert as well."

The Slytherin boy leaned back, his features settling into something almost complacent. Harry knew two things then. Draco was almost convinced that Snape had no idea about the poison and he thought he'd come up with a pretty clever way to avoid anybody eating those cakes.

He wasn't counting on the fact that Snape could plot circles around him.

"Draco, I can't believe you'd even suggest such a thing," the Potions Master began to lecture. "Especially after all Harry suffered at the hands of his so-called family. I would never think of using food as a punishment, and I'm frankly astonished you would have to be told that."

Uh-oh, thought Harry. Here it comes.

"Harry, I absolutely insist you have that fairy cake," Snape blithely went on. "You'll have a detention for missing class, as I said, and that's an end to that matter. You enjoy your dessert as well, Draco."

His hand trembling slightly, Harry lifted his fork again. Really, this was getting to be too much, and he didn't care what Snape had said about following his lead, he was not going to poison himself to prove a point . . .

Poor Dobby . . .

Harry thought he'd never seen such a putrid colour as that horrible bluish-green icing as it came closer and closer to his lips.
Just when he thought he'd have to give the game away, Draco stood up and forcibly knocked the fork from Harry's grasp, sending it clattering across the floor.

*Thank God,* Harry thought, his stomach seeming to drop away from him in a way that made him think he might fall out of his chair. *Thank Merlin . . . oh, thank whomever!*

Snape shoved back his chair as he stood up, towering over the table like some wrathful demon. "What's got into you?"

Draco stammered. "Harry can't eat it, that's all!"

"And why not?"

Again, that shifty-eyed look as Draco struggled to explain his bizarre actions with anything but the stark, horrible truth. "The elves, that's why!" he gasped, clutching the table edge. "They've been awfully dodgy lately! Muttering, I mean. I . . . uh, have a lot of contact with them, you know, through the Floo, and well, I think they're trying to get Harry!"

"Get Harry," Snape repeated in tones of contempt. "And that would mean?"

"Well, *hurt* him, of course."

"I see," murmured the Potions Master. "Or no, perhaps I don't. If the elves are determined to *get* Harry, as you put it, then why on *earth* did you let him eat his elf-prepared meatloaf, Draco?"

That time, Draco was ready. "Well maybe I had it wrong and they're not out to *get* Harry," the boy said, sweat beading on his brow. "But the elves are definitely up to no good . . . uh, you know, how you said you got those from the common room? Well *really,* Severus! Don't you know that? Oh! You don't have a house-elf, do you, so I suppose you can't be expected to know . . ."

Harry had to admit, that particular speech was almost believable.

"I find it hard to credit that the house-elves harbour a grudge against Harry," calmly countered Snape, "and even less likely that they would carry out said grudge by leaving tainted food in the *wrong* common room. They are in fact intelligent beings, Draco."

"Well he is a Slytherin as well--"

"If you believe that Hogwarts' elves don't know where Harry Potter spends the bulk of his time, then I will doubt *you* rank among the intelligent beings in our world." Snape let that settle in for a moment. "I strongly suggest you tell me the truth about these fairy cakes."

*Come on, Draco,* Harry almost said out loud as he sat there and watched the two standing wizards duel with words instead of spells.

Draco, it seemed, wasn't going down without a fight.

"Well maybe I had it wrong and they're not out to get *Harry,*" the boy said, sweat beading on his brow. "But the elves are definitely up to no good . . . uh, you know, how you said you got those from the common room? Well *really,* Severus, if they're *complaining* about the whole house being so messy then why would they give us treats? I suppose they were trying to get Slytherin!" And then, switching to the offensive: "But since when do *you* just blindly trust random trays of food left lying about? I'm *shocked* at you, bringing home a thing like this!"

Snape narrowed his eyes as though he almost respected that last bit of strategy. "There's very little that I blindly trust, Draco. The elves, far from *tainting* food, are in fact testing all of it to be certain it's
Draco's expression hardened as though he knew then and there that he'd been found out. But still he soldiered on. "Well they're hardly going to test that plate of cakes if they're the ones who poisoned it, Severus."

"But I say they're not poisoned. Harry, go ahead and eat one--"

"Don't you dare, Harry!" screamed Draco, darting a hand into the pocket where he always kept his wand. Or Severus' spare wand, rather. He came up empty and muttered a particularly foul curse word.

"I'm not a Quaffle for the two of you to toss back and forth!" shouted Harry, thoroughly fed up with the pair of them.

"No, of course you're not," said Snape, laying a hand on Harry's shoulder.

Irritated beyond measure--and still more than a little nauseous--Harry shrugged it off. "Don't touch me, not after--- no."

"Look how you've upset your brother with all these nonsensical ramblings about tainted fairy cakes," Snape said, frowning. "Well, well. I suppose there's only one thing to do. Quite convenient having a potions laboratory . . . we'll just test these cakes, and then we'll know whether they're poisoned or not." He stared in challenge at Draco. "And if they are, well, you may rest assured I will find out exactly who has decided to endanger my students and my son!"

"Harry wasn't in any danger until you tried to stuff a poisoned cake past his teeth!" shouted Draco.

"Stuff" was a bit much, Harry thought. All Snape had done was cajole . . . though that had been bad enough.

"Well, let's just see if it's poisoned, shall we?"

Snape led the way into his private lab.

Harry couldn't imagine what testing for poison would prove, when all three of them knew perfectly well that the cakes were tainted, but he soon began to see what his father was up to.

The moment Snape pronounced the cakes poisoned with *Venetimorica*, he announced that the only responsible thing to do would be to brew the antidote, just in case any students had taken a cake to eat later.

"How can you tell it's *Venetimorica*?" asked Draco, shaking. "I thought poisons were a little bit harder to . . . uh, detect . . . And I didn't think there was an antidote--"

"Made a study of it, have you?"

"No, I just used to do a lot of reading before you charmed all the books shut!"

Snape gave Draco a rather nasty smile. "If you'd do your work I'd lift that spell. Now, for the
antidote. The first thing we shall need is clover blossoms."

He opened the drawer where botanicals were normally kept, each in a vial charmed to keep it fresh, and raised an eyebrow. "How very interesting. I seem to be out of clover. Can you explain that, Draco?"

"No," snapped the boy.

"And I suppose it would be mere coincidence that I will certainly find myself missing considerable quantities of eel skin as well?"

"Am I to blame if you can't keep track of your stocks?"

"And powdered lignite?" pressed Snape, merciless. "And the sap of stunted hickory tree? And--"

"Shut up!" Draco screamed, his voice desperate.

Harry saw it then. Draco could ask the elves for food but not potion ingredients, so he hadn't found a way to restore the things he'd used. He couldn't even owl-order what he needed, not as long as his new vault was being held up by the goblins. He'd probably spent his all forty-four Galleons of his allowance that day in Hogsmeade . . . one more example of his lack of impulse control.

"Draco, just tell him the truth!" Harry shouted, his head aching from the amount of manipulation he'd witnessed in the past fifteen minutes. "I know you were brewing it! I saw you brewing it, for God's sake!"

Draco grabbed an empty flask and hurled it against the wall. "Fine, I was brewing it! Satisfied, Potter? I was brewing it but those damned fairy cakes are nothing to do with me! The elves must have stolen it, that's what happened, they stole my potion to frame me 'cause they're mad about my room too, I bet--"

"They don't even clean your room any longer! They don't give a flip if you live in a pigsty!"

"I've had enough of this," Snape suddenly announced. He touched the tip of his wand to the palm of his hands and murmured a spell, then reached inside his waistcoat pocket to pull out a folded sheet of parchment.

"Oh sweet Merlin," Draco thickly moaned, then quickly added, "The elves, you know, they can forge anything--"

"Interesting you should mention forgery," Snape mocked, his dark eyes glittering. "Illuminating, one might say. It might interest you to know, Draco, that when your teachers mark your homework, they have ways of knowing who has done the actual work involved. Or at least, who has done the writing. This card accompanied the fairy cakes, but you know that, don't you?"

Draco started shaking, his teeth audibly clicking together.

"It purports to be from Lucius Malfoy," Snape went right on. "But I rather doubt that. Don't you? Fairy cakes being . . . well, not at all Lucius' style. If he wished to reward his loyal Slytherins I think he'd send bank drafts. Even if he wished to poison them he'd come up with something a bit more refined than fairy cakes. But I know a little spell that will reveal the true author of this message."

Brandishing his wand, Snape swept it skyward in an arc that almost made him seem an avenging angel as he grated, "Quis vocaris!"
He struck the parchment, hard, and the ink forming the message all at once rushed towards the centre of the sheet to form a great messy splotch. But then the ink stain began moving outwards again, droplets separating themselves and drifting to become large letters.

Ten large letters in all.

**DRACO SNAPE.**

"Ah, so accurate," mocked Snape, his voice oozing menace. "Right down to your new name. My name too, as it happens. Do you think I want it splashed across the Prophet and the Quibbler, Draco?"

"That spell's a lie!" Draco shouted in desperation. "Harry, that's not a real spell! He's making you think I did it when I didn't--"

"First the elves are framing you and now Severus is?" Harry shook his head. "Draco, please just tell us the truth!"

"I am, Harry!"

Harry marched across the room to his brother and grabbed his shoulders to shake him. "Draco, we'll still love you!"

The Slytherin boy bared his teeth, looking like nothing so much as a trapped animal as he wrenched himself away. "I didn't do it, Harry, I swear, I didn't do it! It's the elves, all the elves--"

"The elves are constrained from harming Hogwarts' students as you well know," said Snape from across the room.

"Well then it's that one horrible elf!" Draco shouted, grabbing another flask though this time he didn't throw it. "That Nobby, or Snobby, or whatever his name is, that one Harry freed! He hates me and he's not constrained, now is he? He's not bound to Hogwarts! He gets paid, the nasty little green-eared shite!"

"You're the nasty little shite here!" Harry screamed, clenching both his hands. It was either that or hit Draco straight in the face, which was actually sounding better and better. "Don't you get it? Do you really think Dad found those in the common room like he said? Since when does Severus go there in the middle of the day? Dobby found out they were poisoned and he came and got me! He could have gone straight to Dumbledore. Hell, with Venetimorica in the icing he could have called in the Aurors, Draco! Dobby saved you!"

"He did not! He's in on it, I'm telling you--"

"That really is quite enough, Draco!" roared Snape. "I had hoped it wouldn't come to this but it seems you leave me no choice!"

The flask Draco had been holding abruptly slipped from his fingers to shatter against the floor.

Snape made a noise of positive disgust, then spoke in a more moderate voice. "You may know a great deal about potion-brewing, Draco, but you apparently know very little about how new formulations are developed. When I conduct my own experiments and a potion has an unintended side-effect, how do you think I determine where I went wrong?"

Clearly taken aback by the change in topic, Draco stammered, "You... you keep records, I would think..."
"Magical records."

Draco, Harry noticed, stopped breathing.

"Yes, that's right," continued Snape in a bored voice, though it was hued with fury. "I can go back to any point in time and watch myself brew. The walls are spelled to show me *everything* that happens in this room, should I care to ask. So Draco, shall I ask?"

"I . . . I . . . Well, I did brew some *Venetimorica*; I told you that," Draco weakly asserted.

"You tainted the fairy-cakes in here as well," said Snape with conviction. "Of course you did. The tools you would need are right here, and besides, you wouldn't risk contaminating another room if you could avoid it. The only question is, do you want Harry to see you doing it? Harry, the *vanguard of the Light*? Do you want him to watch you dropping poison onto confections that you will then proceed to send to *children*?"

Draco lurched backwards only to find himself up against a wall. "No," he thickly admitted.

Snape took several steps forward. "Then tell the truth!"

The Slytherin boy worked his jaw awkwardly, as though he'd forgotten how to form words. But finally he croaked, "I did it . . ."

"You did what?" Snape demanded, his voice still hard.

"Everything you said!" Evidently realizing that he had to be more specific, Draco recovered enough to stand up straighter against the wall. "I made the poison and applied it to the icing and then I sent the fairy cakes over to Slytherin, all right?"

"No, it's not *all right*. It's hideous," said Snape. "You're forgetting the card."

Draco shook. "I . . . I wrote it out in Lucius' hand, close as I could without magic, anyway."

"And?"

A whisper. A bare whisper. "I signed his name."

"The penalty for forgery is in fact five years in Azkaban," announced Snape. "Trying to poison children will at least double it."

"It's not like it was fatal!" rallied Draco. "For Merlin's sake, it was just *Venetimorica*, Severus! I wasn't going to kill anyone!"

"Just as well, since the penalty for *that* would be the Dementor's Kiss." Snape glared. "Draco, what you have done is very serious! I don't believe you have the faintest concept of that!"

"What . . ." Draco swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat, his eyes huge once more. "What are you going to do?"

Snape's nostrils flared. "What do you think I'm going to do, Draco? This isn't a simple hex in a hallway." He backed away, shaking his head. "Go to bed, Draco. I have things to arrange."

"What things?"

Ignoring him, Snape turned to Harry. "You should go to bed as well. You're positively grey. Do you need a draught?"
While Harry shook his head, Draco shouted, "What about me? What about what I need?"

"I'll decide what you need," menaced Snape, and then he turned away and left. Harry heard the whoosh of the Floo.

Draco's teeth started clicking together again. "What . . . what is he going to do to me? Why . . . why did he need to leave?"

"No idea."

"He must have t- t- told you something--"

Draco looked about ready to faint, but Harry wasn't in the mood to care very much. Trying to blame Dobby . . . that was just beyond the pale. "No, he didn't."

"Harry, what am I going to do?"

"If I were you, I'd go to bed like Dad said." Harry shrugged then, and made his way back to their room.

Only to find it such a disgusting mess that he groaned out loud. The towels on the floor were definitely growing mould, he thought, shuddering. What was worse was that Draco had taken over Harry's bed, piling loads of his dirty clothes on it. Harry bundled them up and threw them onto Draco's bed, repressing an urge to fling them to the floor and stomp on them. Fetching pyjamas out of his trunk, he headed for the bathroom, which of course was even grottier than the bedroom had been. In fact, it ronked.

By that point, Harry didn't care what Snape had said about not doing magic for Draco, he wasn't going to have his shower in such disgusting conditions. He began casting Scourgify and Lavare, then with a critical glance at the loo, decided he'd better spread around a fair bit of Sanitare as well.

He wasn't cleaning up for Draco, anyway. He was doing it for his own benefit. And if Snape said one word about it, Harry would let him know exactly what he thought about that awful game with the fairy cakes!

Though come to think of it, he might let his father know that in any case!

A long, hot shower helped his headache ease up, but it didn't really calm him down. Harry's temper was still blazing when he shut the water off and towelled himself dry. He dragged in a deep breath and tried to bring his anger into some semblance of control. Another row tonight wasn't what he needed.

When he left the bathroom, Draco was already in bed, sitting up, his silver eyes glazed with fear. The room looked like he had at last made an attempt to tidy; there were piles here and there instead of things strewn everywhere.

For all that though, the floor was still a total mess. Harry snorted in derision and picked his way across the room to his bed.

"Harry--"

Harry shook his head as he got under his covers, and spoke without looking at his brother. "It's probably better if you don't talk to me right now, Draco. I might throttle you."

"But Harry--"
Draco stopped talking when Harry yanked his curtains closed.

But he didn't stop making noise. A low sob split the silence, then the sound of someone curling up into a little ball and thumping the blankets all around. Then another low sob, and another, the sound so pitiful that Harry wished he could go over there and offer his brother some comfort.

But he couldn't do that, he just couldn't. He'd been stretched too thin by the day's events and by Draco's long, horrible string of lies. He still felt flayed by the way Draco had accused Dobby.

Harry turned onto his side, away from his brother, wishing he'd taken the draught his father had offered. When the sound of Draco's crying got too painful to bear, Harry began wiping his mind clean of everything but fire. The cool damp of the room fell away from his awareness as he Occluded. He stopped smelling the slightly sour aroma rising from the heaps of dirty clothes in the room.

And finally, he stopped hearing Draco.

Lost inside a blaze of fire, Harry slowly drifted off to sleep.
When Harry woke up, the first thing he noticed was that his brother was gone.

The other boy's bed was rumpled as though he'd got up in an awful hurry, and the piles on the floor had been disturbed, just as if someone had picked out what little they needed and then flung the rest into a great heap in the corner.

"Draco!" Harry shouted, leaping out of bed so fast he ended up with an ankle tangled in the sheets. Hastily freeing himself, he sped out to the living room, only to be brought up short by the sight of his brother calmly sitting at the table in the dining alcove, steadily moving quill across parchment.

When Harry came close, Draco looked up with tired grey eyes. "Problem?"

"I woke up and you weren't there and I thought . . . um . . ."

"You thought what, that I'd run away?" Draco gave a long sigh, the tip of his quill dripping ink. When he noticed it he swore softly, because of course without magic he had no way to clean away the messy spots on his lines. He wiped the tip of his quill on a spare bit of parchment as he spoke. "I don't have anywhere to go, Harry. Though that may not make any difference to Severus at this point. I can't figure out what made me think he'd put up with . . ."

Dipping his quill in the inkpot again, Draco went back to work, writing line after line after line.

"Have you seen Dad?"

That time, Draco didn't look up to answer. "No, and I've been out here most of the night. He's apparently still . . ." The boy's voice went quiet. Dead, almost. "Arranging things."

Harry swallowed, noticing the unevenly stacked parchment shoved to one side of the table. Completed lines, no telling how many. A lot, though. An awful lot. Pulling out a chair, he tried to give his brother an encouraging smile.

Draco didn't smile back. "Are you sure you don't know what he's going to do about . . . me?"

"No, I don't know."

"So I might have cleaned the room and done all these lines for nothing," Draco said, morose.

Harry wouldn't have called what Draco had done in the room cleaning by any stretch of the imagination, but he was hardly going to mention that at a time like this. "It's not for nothing--"

"It is if he unadopts me. What else could he possibly be arranging?"

"I don't know, but it's not that." Harry thought of saying that Draco knew Harry's secrets, so course there was no question of Draco being thrown out. He couldn't live at Hogwarts unless he was Snape's son, and if he didn't live at Hogwarts the Death Eaters would get him, sooner or later. No matter how angry Snape was, he wouldn't risk doing anything that would end up endangering Harry.

Harry decided, though, that it wouldn't be very nice to explain any of that. It was beside the point anyway. Snape was committed to Draco for reasons that had nothing at all to do with Harry.

"Well, I think I'll get dressed and then get ready to go to Devon--"
Draco finished one line and moved right on to the next. "You're delusional if you still think we're still going on holiday." He glanced up, shrugging. "But if you want to pack, go ahead. I'll get us something for breakfast."

When Harry returned, however, Draco was still writing lines, a scowl on his face.

Harry went to order breakfast himself, but when he tried to get some Floo powder, his fingers found only a scrap of parchment. Curious, he pulled it out and saw that it was actually a tiny envelope. For emergencies only was written across it in Snape's hand. Harry shook it and heard the shifting of powder.

"So much for not using food as a punishment," Draco bitterly mocked as Harry sat down at the table. "I can't even order a meal, now."

"Well, I'm sure Dad's not going to let you starve," Harry said in a reasonable voice as he sat down at the table. "He just doesn't think you should have a limitless supply of Floo powder after what you did. But look, if he didn't care about you he wouldn't have left an emergency supply. He wants you to be able to firecall him if you have a serious problem."

"Ha. He wants you to be able to firecall. I'm sure I can go straight to the devil for all he cares." Draco dotted an i so viciously that the tip of his quill snapped off.

"I'm sure he's angry," Harry corrected. "I'm angry, too. What you did, and then all the lies, and blaming Dobby . . ." Harry sighed, because as furious as he felt, he also thought that yelling at Draco just now wasn't going to do any of them any good. "Weren't you listening last night, though? We do still love you."

"I wish you'd stop saying that," Draco muttered, quickly looking down.

"I know, but I'm not going to, or at least, not until you start to understand what it means to be part of a family."

"Oh, like you would know so much about families." Draco's long fingers snatched another quill from the pile on the table.

"Yeah, well whatever I know is what Severus taught me, so I know he still loves you!"

Harry never got to find out what Draco might have replied, for at that moment they heard Snape coming into the room. And he wasn't arriving by Floo. He'd apparently been in his bedroom. But if Draco had been writing lines most of the night and hadn't seen Snape come back from his arrangements, whatever that meant, the man must not have been gone very long the night before.

"Good morning, Harry, Draco," he greeted them both, frowning as he checked his watch. "Breakfast should be here by now, I would think."

No sooner had he spoken than steaming platters and bowls full of food appeared on the table, along with a stack of three plates and assorted utensils.

Draco bit his lip, then jumped up and began prying his parchment sheets out from under all of it. He didn't speak to his father, but sort of waved his work for him to see.

"Ah, so that wasn't a mouse I heard out here all night," Snape murmured.

That seemed to loosen Draco's tongue. "You heard me working and didn't come out to talk to me?"
Snape seated himself and began methodically serving out the food. "I needed time to consider your offences," he calmly replied. "Do be seated, Draco." Snape passed a plate to each of his sons. "Now, as you may have realised already, you will no longer be at liberty to order what you wish from the kitchens. Food will arrive here at mealtimes and you'll eat whatever is being served in the Great Hall."

"Yes, sir," said Draco in a low voice.

Unlike with Harry, Snape didn't rebuke the use of sir. Maybe he thought it was high time Draco learned a little respect.

"So that's my punishment? I'm forbidden the Floo?"

Snape ate a forkful of scrambled egg before he answered. "That's merely a sensible precaution on my part since I can't possibly trust you."

Draco's lips quivered a bit at that, though of course Snape was saying nothing but the truth. "I . . . all right, you can't. I'm sorry--"

"Tea, Harry?" questioned Snape, glancing his way.

Harry shook his head.

"Tea for you, Draco?"

"Didn't you hear me?" asked Draco in a plaintive voice, "I said I was sorry."

"I heard you," Snape answered, dark eyes steady on his Slytherin son once more. "Unfortunately, I rather doubt you mean it."

"I do! I'm really, really sorry!"

He looked to Harry, then, eyes beseeching, and though Harry felt uncomfortable, he also felt it was his duty as a brother to say something. "He cried and cried last night, Dad. And when has Draco ever wept like that? I think he really does regret what he did."

"I think he regrets getting caught," Snape replied in a hard voice.

"No, I--"

"You might as well know the truth," interrupted the Potions Master. "Your poisoning attempt did actually garner a victim."

Draco's pale face went whiter than usual. "Oh, no."

"Yes, you're envisioning a longish stint in Azkaban right about now, I imagine," Snape went on.

"Did . . . " By then, even Draco's lips were white. He hadn't eaten a bite of his breakfast. "Am I to be charged?"

"Don't you even want to know who ate one of your infernal fairy cakes? Or are you too busy worrying about yourself to even care that you made someone ill? Someone not in league with Lucius, by the way. Someone, in fact, who wouldn't dream of aligning himself with Lucius. Someone innocent."

By the end, Harry thought, their father's voice was cold enough to freeze embers.
"Who?" Draco gasped.

The Potions Master stood up and waved his wand to summon Dobby, who appeared accompanied by a noise rather like a thunderclap.

"Who?" Draco asked again, and then in tones of relief. "Oh, him. Well, that's fine then."

Harry sighed, seeing now what Snape had so effortlessly seen earlier. Draco was only thinking of himself. He wasn't relieved because Dobby was obviously all right; all he cared about was the fact that Harry could tell this particular elf to keep the whole thing a secret! In fact, ignoring Dobby completely, Draco was turning to Harry to say something!

Snape raised his voice slightly. "You will apologise, Draco."

"I did! I said I was sorry--"

"You will say that to him." Snape inclined his head toward the elf, who was being uncharacteristically silent. Harry could only think that this was one of the things Snape had gone to arrange the previous night.

Draco crossed his arms in front of his chest. "I'm not apologising to a damned house-elf."

"Oh yes, you most certainly are," Snape corrected, his voice utterly cold.

Draco opened his mouth as though to object again, then closed it, his silver eyes gleaming hard. "Fine, fine. Sorry, Tobby."

"His name's Dobby!"

"Sorry, Dobby," Draco grated. "There. Satisfied?" His gaze swept the room from Snape to Harry and back.

Ignoring his son's behaviour, Snape reached into a trouser pocket and drew out a length of fine, shimmering fabric edged with silver tassels. Leaning down, he draped it around Dobby's shoulders, arranging the shawl so it wouldn't touch the floor. "For your loyal service to Harry Potter," the Potions Master said. "You have my deepest gratitude."

Dobby's eyes filled with tears. "Dobby is happy to be helping Harry Potter."

Snape smiled. "Yes, I am aware." Stepping back then, he nodded for the elf to depart.

Dobby glanced once at Harry before Apparating away.

Draco huffed a little as he poured himself half a glass of pumpkin juice. "What was all that about? If the stupid little elf is going to nick fairy cakes clearly meant for students, then I say he deserves what he gets."

"You prat!" Harry shouted. "That was the worst apology I've ever heard! And anyway, Dad told you the elves are testing any mystery food that shows up! You didn't bother to ask why, did you now--"

Snape smoothly interrupted him. "I think that's a discussion for another day, Harry."

"Oh yeah, well you can bet that you and I will be discussing it!" Harry shot back. "Because I had a right to know about that chocolate cauldron, didn't I--"
"Right now what matters is your brother," Snape interrupted again, his eyes this time glaring daggers. Harry nodded, his lips pressed tightly together.

"Oh, so I matter, do I? I was getting the feeling only Harry and elves do. For your loyal service . . ." Draco slammed his glass of juice down onto the table. "Well, I'm not stupid enough to think the worst you'll do is demand I apologise to that Wobby."

"Dobby!" Harry shouted.

"So, let's have the rest, Severus. What exactly is my punishment? I think you've let me stew long enough, don't you?"

"I'd rather not discuss the matter until we reach Devon."

"We're still going on holiday?"

"We're still a family."

Draco blinked, his eyes suspiciously bright. He turned away to wipe at them, and stared at the table. "I thought you wouldn't want to be around me much, not after this."

Snape walked across to the boy and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Draco . . . You have disappointed me more than I can say. But you're my son. I won't stop loving you, not ever."

"L- Lucius did!" Evidently frustrated with his own tears, Draco pounded a fist on the table.

Moving around to the front of the boy, Snape clasped both his hands and squeezed. "Lucius didn't love you, not as I do. When you rescued Harry's wand, that was a terrible betrayal in his eyes, and his response was to utterly repudiate you. And now, what you have done here, it is a terrible betrayal as well. Of me, this time. But I will not repudiate you, Draco. I will never disown you."

"I . . . I . . ." Draco couldn't finish; it sounded to Harry like his throat was clogging up with tears.

"That's not to say I can protect you from the consequences of your thirst for vengeance," Snape quietly went on as he moved one hand to rest atop Draco's bowed head. "We have to live with the results of what we have chosen to do, Draco. And nothing . . . not love, not family, not even the loyal support of Harry Potter can shield you from what logically must follow now."

Draco gasped and raised a tear-stained face. "The Aurors?"

"We'll talk about it out in Devon," Snape said again, then turned to his older son. "Harry, have you Sals with you?"

Harry reached into his pocket and fished her out.

"I'll hold her while you Floo up to your common room and collect your things."

Harry had already packed for Devon out of the things he had here at home, but he supposed it would be better to go get Sals' box, not to mention a few other items. Handing his father the snake, he questioned, "But wait . . . Floo to my common room, did you say?"

Snape extended a tiny vial of powder from his pocket as Sals slithered up his arm to loop around his neck. Harry thought the man looked vaguely put out by that. "My quarters connect to the Gryffindor common room, yes."
Harry wondered if perhaps *that* was one of the things Snape had arranged when he'd vanished last night. Presumably he hadn't wanted to walk Harry up as that would mean leaving Draco alone. Not a good idea considering how unstable the other boy seemed. "How long have your rooms been linked to the Tower?"

"Nearly six years."

"Six years!" exclaimed Harry.

"Yes. Albus saw to it almost as soon as you were sorted into Gryffindor. In case of emergencies. Madam Pomfrey can Floo directly in as well."

"But you hated me..."

His father curled his lips in a rather rueful smile. "Oh, yes. I do believe I told Albus in rather scathing terms that Gryffindor could see to its own. But then I found out at your first Quidditch match that Minerva had no notion of the kind of danger you were in, and I stopped resenting the connection quite as much. Though of course that didn't mean I liked you any the better."

Harry shrugged to say that was all behind them and didn't matter now. "I wish you'd told me about the Floo earlier. Well, at least now I won't have to walk down all the time--"

Snape held up a hand. "I would not recommend you use the Floo connection except when the other students are largely absent, as today. Or in case of emergency. Otherwise, it could engender ill feelings. Students are not normally permitted to utilise the common room Floos, you understand."

He laid a slight amount of stress on the word *normally*, which made Harry think the man probably knew Harry had used his to talk with Sirius. Or maybe it was a slight dig at Draco, who had flinched on hearing it.

Still, Harry said, "Oh, the other Gryffindors won't mind--"

"It was my understanding that you had no wish for special privileges."

"You would remind me of that," Harry said a little sourly.

"A father's prerogative." Snape shrugged. "So then, hurry along and collect what you need. Draco, you claimed last night to be packed already, but I'm afraid that amidst all your other lies I don't quite know what to believe. Is that in fact the case?"

Draco flushed, his eyes still rimmed with red from his crying. "I'm packed," he quietly said, meeting his father's eyes.

"I don't need to go check on this to have faith it might be true?"

That time, Draco did nothing more than shake his head.

"Very well." Snape banished away what remained of their breakfast. "You may continue your lines until Harry returns."

For just a moment--a heartbeat only--Harry wondered if Draco was going to go back to his longstanding defiance. Then he saw the other boy pull his parchments back towards him and bend over them once more, his hand trembling as he started to write.

"Harry, go," Snape urged.
Nodding, Harry uncapped the vial of powder he'd been given and stepped into the fireplace.

When he got back, broom in hand and a few other items in his arms, Draco was still industriously writing away. Snape was sitting at the table with him, a book in hand. Harry almost choked when he saw which one it was. Adolescent Trauma: The Road to Recovery.

Harry sort of doubted it was happenstance, Snape deciding to read that book right in front of Draco.

"I'll just go put these with the stuff I'd already packed," said Harry.

Snape nodded absently as he turned the page.

Harry got everything but the broom into his duffel, then took a last, depressed look around his room, wishing he could cast some cleaning spells in here as well. But Snape's we have to live with the consequences of our actions speech was still weighing heavy on his mind. Draco had lost any right to expect that Snape would trust him with magic for the time being, so he'd have to live without.

Though Harry couldn't help but wonder what other consequences Snape had in mind for his brother. He couldn't really imagine the man assigning more lines, or setting an essay, even. Five feet, Draco. Describe in detail why one should not poison one's fellow school mates . . . No, that was just bloody ridiculous.

But what else was there to do? Snape wasn't the sort of father to administer a wizard's beating, after all. Harry couldn't even imagine the man ever slapping either of them.

And anyway, what good would a slap do? Draco needed a consequence more serious than that, surely. Snape couldn't intend to call the Aurors, though. He wouldn't have arranged for Dobby's silence were that the case.

But Kingsley Shacklebolt is an Auror, Harry suddenly thought. And he's in the Order, too. Maybe Snape firecalled him last night and asked him to throw a good hard scare into Draco . . .

Would Snape trust Kingsley to not charge Draco for real, though?

Harry's head was starting to ache, so he gave up wondering what his father had in mind and went back out to the living room.

"All set," he said, planting himself alongside the table in the dining alcove.

Snape looked up from his book. "Draco. How many lines have you completed?"

Draco set aside his quill and flexed his hand. "One thousand eight hundred and ninety-seven. And a half."

Harry thought Draco must have done nothing but, all night long, to have got so far.

"Do I need to count them to be sure of that?" drawled Snape.

"No."
"Very well. You may leave those here. I trust you have packed plenty of spare parchment and ink?"

Draco sighed. "Yes, and my lesson schedules and all my books."

Harry thought of saying that he'd be happy to help Draco get caught back up in his subjects, but he decided it would make him sound too much like he was trying to show Draco up.

"Very well," Snape said again. "Harry, if I may have your permission to charm your pet into a bracelet once more?"

It was nice, Harry thought, that this time Snape had asked. But really, they ought to be asking Sals. He held his hand out for his snake and had a brief chat with her about the matter, then nodded.

"So, we'll floo to Grimmauld Place and Apparate from there as usual," Snape announced as Draco walked off to get his things. Unlike at Christmas, when he'd insisted on taking his entire trunk, this time the boy reappeared carrying a serviceable duffel much like Harry's. That made sense, in a way; Draco didn't actually have a trunk any longer. Harry supposed Snape had purchased him the duffel on their Hogsmeade trip.

"I can't Apparate without a wand," Draco said when he came back.

That surprised Harry. He didn't think wizards needed wands for that. Not that he knew of, anyway. Though perhaps Draco needed one because he had learned to Apparate when he was really too young to be doing it.

"You can't Apparate with one, either," announced Snape in a hard voice. "As you're not yet licensed."

"You never cared about that before--"

"A mistake in retrospect, as you appear to have concluded that disregarding one law means you can disregard them all."

That certainly shut Draco up. He hefted his duffel over his shoulder and went into the fireplace to wait.

When they arrived in the meadow outside the cottage, Snape staggered slightly. Apparently side-along Apparition with two passengers and all their gear was no simple accomplishment. But Snape couldn't bring them one at a time without leaving Draco alone at some point. He seemed resolved to avoid that if at all possible.

Harry took a moment to let his queasiness pass, then looked around. Wildflowers were blooming along the low stone wall which marked the boundary of Snape's property, and the trees beyond that were swaying in the breeze. Devon was lovelier than ever, he thought, beginning to walk over to the cottage.

Draco sat down straight away at the small square table opposite the door, and began pulling writing supplies out of the duffel he'd plunked down at his feet.
"That can wait," Snape announced. "It's time you and I had a serious talk about what you did."

Suddenly feeling a bit uncomfortable, Harry murmured, "Right, I'll just stow my stuff and go outside for a bit of flying--"

"Don't be absurd. You're in this family as well." Snape pointed a finger at the tattered couch beneath the window, and waited until Harry and Draco had settled in. "Now, you've put me in an awkward position, to say the least, Draco," Snape began. "As Head of Slytherin I take my students' safety very seriously. You've endangered them, and I don't believe you really even comprehend that."

"Well if you take your students' safety seriously, then don't you want Pansy's killers to pay for what they did?" cried Draco. "I understand I endangered them; don't you understand they deserved it?"

"Leaving aside the issue of whether it's up to you to decide who deserves what, you in fact endangered far more than merely the conspirators. What about the first-years, Draco? Don't you think they'd be tempted enough by fairy cakes to ignore that note you forged? Some of them are still only eleven years old!"

Harry had a sudden, awful memory of Larissa piling her hands full of sweets.

Snape must have been thinking the same thing, for he went right on, "And what about the concentration you used? Did you take into account that someone half your size might decide to eat two, three, or even four fairy cakes? Did you think at all about the fact that for my loyal Slytherins could easily be misconstrued? What if students who had nothing to do with Pansy felt pressured to take a cake in an effort to have themselves classed as loyal? Your former name carries great weight in Slytherin, as you well know."

Draco began twisting his hands together. "I didn't think of that. I was just so angry, Severus!"

"So angry you didn't stop to think of Harry either, apparently," said Snape in a scathing tone. "He has access to the Slytherin common room, now--"

"Harry wouldn't eat a cake that said it was from Lucius!"

"No, but who better to blame for those cakes once students had fallen ill? Harry has an even better reason than you to hate Lucius, Draco!"

"Well, then, whoever was investigating would have just used that Quis vocaris spell to find out who the note was from!"

"But you didn't know that anything written within the confines of the castle would respond to that spell," Snape pointed out as he finally dropped down into an armchair facing the couch. "Hence you put your brother in danger."

"Oh, I did not! Even without that spell it would've been laughably simple to trace those cakes back to me and... oh."

"Yes," said Snape in a deep voice. "You didn't think this through very well. Had any students taken ill, you wouldn't be sitting here talking with me. You'd be talking with Aurors by now." Snape made a depreciating noise. "Or not by now, certainly, as I'm well aware how slow Venetimorica is to take effect. On wizards, at least. We're fortunate that Harry's elf-friend had a more rapid reaction. But you planned for your house mates to be home on holiday before they took sick, obviously."

Draco nodded as though wary of what Snape might say next. It turned out to be a good instinct.
"Did you spare even one second's thought to the fact that the Muggleborns' parents would have no idea in the world what might be wrong?" Snape roared. "The Muggleborns whose trust you claim to want?"

"The Muggleborns weren't supposed to eat them!"

"And we've already established why that was a particularly foolish presumption on your part, have we not?"

Draco scooted back into the corner of the couch. "All right, all right! It was a bad idea all around! I was just so . . . so angry!"

Snape breathed in deeply a few times. "Angry does not excuse behaviour like this, Draco. Now, you keep mentioning the Aurors. I'd like very much to know why you didn't think of them a good deal sooner. You surely must realise that had your horrid little plan succeeded, the Slytherins would be comparing notes upon their return from holiday, and it would be only moments before they identified those fairy cakes as the common element in their illnesses. And that the elves would immediately recall those distinctive cakes along with who ordered them. Why didn't you think of all that before you set this in motion?"

Draco looked even more shaken than before. "I . . . I don't know!"

"It isn't like you to overlook such weak links in a chain," Snape continued. "Why did you?"

"I don't know!" Draco cried again. "You know I have that impulse-control problem--"

"You certainly do, but this was not done on impulse," Snape corrected in a hard tone. "Venetimorica takes days to brew. So answer me, Draco. Why did you expose yourself to the risk of Azkaban? Why did you practically invite the Aurors back into your life?"

"I didn't think about Azkaban or the Aurors! I just wanted to--"

"What, Draco?" Snape softly pressed when Draco abruptly fell silent.

"I just wanted to see if you'd stick by me!" Draco yelled, red-faced. "Or maybe I just wanted to see that you wouldn't! I can't be perfect like Harry, and I figured you might as well know it!"

"Oh, Draco," Harry murmured. "That's just ridiculous. I'm not perfect."

"Don't I know it," snarled Draco. "But he thinks you are!"

"On the contrary, I recognise your brother's flaws perhaps better than you do, and I love him regardless," said Snape. "And the same is true of my regard for you."

"Oh, you still love me, do you?" Draco crossed his arms in front of his chest. "I tried to poison your precious Slytherins and you still love me. Sure you do."

"I do, though I am not so foolish as to expect you to believe it." Snape paused a moment, his dark eyes lost in thought. "The depth of your anger with Slytherin worries me, but I think what concerns me more is the self-destructiveness I see in all this. Draco . . . in your efforts to prove to yourself whether I would continue to claim you as my son or not, you have placed yourself at enormous risk."

He held up a hand when Draco opened his mouth. "This time we managed to contain the damage, thanks entirely to Dobby the house-elf. But if you continue in this vein, you will commit a crime I cannot possibly save you from. It was luck alone that saved you this time, in fact."
"I won't do anything else," Draco said, grey eyes earnest. "I won't."

"I think you believe that," Snape murmured. "I think you intend the best, Draco. But I can't believe it, because I know you. Your rage will come stealing back, or your insecurities, and you'll find yourself doing something even more heinous than this in your quest for vengeance and affirmation."

"No, no--"

"And when you do," Snape went right on, "I will not stop loving you. But love won't keep you out of Azkaban, nor should it--"

"Why shouldn't it? You'd be in Azkaban right now, wouldn't you, if you hadn't been kept out because Dumbledore saw something worth redeeming in you!"

"We are not discussing me."

"Well I think we should," retorted Draco. "How many people have you poisoned, Severus?"

Harry's stomach churned. He didn't want to hear the answer to that.

"If you think I have not paid for my misdeeds you are sorely mistaken," Snape replied in a level voice. "Azkaban would have been a mercy compared to what Albus asked of me. Or did you think it was a simple matter to present myself to the Dark Lord as his faithful servant while I was working actively against him? And then, years after his supposed demise I was asked to take up my penance once again, an almost certain death sentence. But I undertook it without so much as a complaint, Draco."

Harry nodded, remembering the look on his father's face when the headmaster had asked him to resume his old role. Resolution and resignation.

"We must all pay for our misdeeds, Draco. You included," Snape continued. "And after all, it is your future at issue here. I do promise to visit you faithfully, whenever I possibly can, and I feel certain Harry will come often as well--"

Draco looked ill, his defiance from the moment before utterly wiped away. "But... I'm not going to Azkaban. You said I'd been lucky this time..."

"This time, yes," Snape sighed and rubbed his temples. "I am trying to help you see where this present course of yours will take you. I don't need a N.E.W.T. in Divination to ascertain the certain future in this case."

"I won't do anything like this again!"

"But I think you will. Do you know what makes me think that, Draco? Your utter lack of remorse. The only thing you regret is not planning this better. *Venetimorica* may not be lethal, but an overdose of it could well end some innocent child's life."

"They weren't innocent, not the ones I intended it for--"

"No, they were guilty," Snape acknowledged. "But now so are you. Their crime does not excuse yours. Revenge and justice are different things entirely, Draco. But this too is something you fail to grasp. You believe your anger casts all other arguments aside. Not even the fact that Dobby the house-elf took your foul poison moves you. I fear you have no empathy for anyone."

"I'll learn some then," Draco said, shivering. He looked down at his hands, now clasped in his lap,
and Harry saw a teardrop fall onto his clenched fingers. "I am angry, Severus. Angry enough to do this, which I see now was utterly stupid . . . but I don't know how to stop feeling this way, or feeling like it's just a matter of time before you can't be bothered dealing with me. But I'll work on it, I will. And I'll do my lines. And I'll stop baiting Harry. And I'll let the Aurors figure out who killed Pansy and what to do about it. And I'll catch up with all my assignments, I promise!"

Snape ignored everything except Draco's I'll work on it claim. "Do you understand that you need help to deal with these feelings and the self-destructive tendencies that result from them?"

"I . . . nobody can help me, I don't think."

"Now that is simple egotism," Snape gently rebuked him. "Your problems are so singular that nobody can offer assistance? I rather doubt it. Which is not to say that your problems are not serious. Indeed, they are, and you do need help. Do you want it, though?"

"I . . ." Draco mutely nodded, his eyes clenched closed as though he were ashamed to admit it.

"And now we come to my own egotism," Snape continued, still in a voice so gentle that Harry felt soothed as well. "I thought that having a father--a real father--would be enough to heal the terrible wounds on your soul, but I see now that you need professional assistance."

"I . . . yes," Draco said, the words barely audible.

"You'll start receiving counselling straight away," murmured Snape. "Your therapist has requested that Harry and I attend the first session with you; I suspect she wishes to get a sense of the family dynamic. After that you'll have the majority of sessions in private, I believe."

Draco seemed dazed. "My . . . therapist?"

"It's all arranged," said Snape, nodding.

"So that's what you went out last night to see to?"

Their father nodded again. "There still remains, however, the matter of your punishment. I have thought a great deal on what might serve. More lines are almost pointless in your case, I believe, and you've no privileges left for me to revoke. But neither of those would be of much use, anyway. What you need most is to understand that what you did was wrong, and I don't think you can at this point. However, there is something that might help you learn to empathise with your would-be victims or rather, with the one victim you did garner. Something that might render you sorry--truly sorry, that is--that you ever hatched a scheme such as this."

Draco's brow was furrowed; he clearly had no idea what his father had in store for him.

But Harry did. Those instincts that Snape had praised were running at full tilt, and he suddenly knew exactly what the man was about to demand.

Harry went cold all over. So cold he was shivering. Snape flicked a glance his way, but other than that, didn't pause in the least as he waved his wand toward a crate in the corner.

The lid on the crate popped off and a plate of fairy cakes floated upwards then made their way through the air to settle onto the table, right in front of Draco.

Draco might not have Harry's instincts, but he could see what was plainly sitting in front of him. "I'm not eating one of those and you can't make me," he said at once, features hardening as he glared at his father.
"No, I can't make you," Snape said in a mild voice. "But if you will eat one, you might come to understand how terrible your crime truly was. If you will not eat one I doubt you'll ever experience any true remorse over this incident, therapy or no. And without remorse, Draco, you remain a menace to my students. Which leaves me with but one option."

"Oh, great," sneered Draco, his upper lip curled. "So that's it. I have to eat one or I get unadopted, which is basically a death sentence in the circumstances. Well, gee. I guess I'll have to poison myself, then. Thanks a whole fucking lot, Severus--"

"You misunderstand." Snape shook his head. "I'm not threatening you. Quite the contrary. You are my son and you will remain my son and I will do what my son needs, no matter the personal cost to me. It's all quite simple. If you will not eat a fairy cake, you'll never truly understand that what you did was wrong, and I won't be able to set any store by your declared good intentions. I won't be able to leave you alone in my quarters while I am teaching, which means I can't teach any longer." He paused to let that sink in. "I'll resign my position and we'll live here in Devon where I can adequately supervise you."

Draco's mouth fell open. "But I don't want to live out here in the middle of nowhere!"

"You'll live wherever I do," replied Snape. "Harry will of course continue on in the Tower, but I'm certain he'll come frequently to visit. Won't you, Harry?"

Harry nodded, almost dumbfounded by the sudden sharp turn in the conversation. He couldn't quite figure out what Snape was doing. Was this all manipulation, or did he mean every word he said?

Draco was evidently having similar thoughts. "Oh, you're just bluffing," he said, contempt lacing his tones. "You aren't going to resign! That's laughable, it is."

"You believed I would go abroad to save you from Azkaban," Snape replied, still in the same mild tone. "And indeed I would have. What makes you think I won't give up my job to save you from a future there?"

"Get a grip, Severus. I'm not fated to go to Azkaban!"

"You're more than halfway there already."

"I'll change!"

"But I don't believe that," Snape patiently repeated. "Not unless you acquire some empathy, which is far from a simple matter. It's painful to learn how wrong we have been, Draco. I know this from personal experience. I have been a Death Eater and you were raised to be one, and I know better than any man alive what you need if you are to acquire a new mindset. Therapy alone will not do it."

Obviously shaken by Snape's dire pronouncements, Draco still had enough presence of mind to object, "Oh, yeah? Well what do you think Wizard Family Services would have to say about a father telling his son to eat poison?"

"I think that nobody in Wizard Family Services has been a Death Eater, so they are in no position whatsoever to judge what a budding young one needs! I think they would protect and coddle you to your detriment in this case, just as that casewitch would prefer to see Harry unbruised, even though it would mean he cannot adequately defend himself from Voldemort!" Snape rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Draco, I have no doubt they would think I am wrong, but don't you see? They do not know you or the life you have lived up to this point. They do not know that absent extreme measures, Harry and I will face the ugly reality of visiting you in prison. But I do, and I will act accordingly, no
matter what any Ministry adjunct office has to say!"

"If you make me eat a fairy cake, I'll tell them about it!"

Snape rose to his feet, his travelling robes swirling about him. "Aren't you listening to me? You either want to become a decent human being or you don't. I can't make you, Draco."

"You'll make me by threatening to quit your job!"

"I can't do my job if you are likely to attack my students. And you are more important to me than my job." Snape narrowed his black eyes as he walked over to face Draco. "As for telling Wizard Family Services, you'll do no such thing. They'd certainly remove you from my care, which may be what you want at this point, but they'd remove Harry as well. Angry as you are, I don't think you want to take his father away from him."

"No," admitted Draco in a low voice. He glanced down once at the fairy cakes. "I wish I'd never started this."

"I know," said Snape, settling a large hand on the boy's shoulder. "But you wish that now because you're faced with an unpleasant prospect. When you can wish you hadn't done it because it was a terrible thing to do, that's when you'll start to turn away from the spectre of Azkaban. But how are you to begin to appreciate just how evil this scheme of yours was? Suffering the consequence that you once wished upon others . . . that will instruct you as nothing else can."

Draco's eyes were bright with tears as he looked up at his father. "I suppose you would know. I . . . I told Harry once you'd been to Hell and back and could keep him from having to make the same journey."

"I'm trying to keep you from making that same journey as well." Snape lowered his voice. "You want to stop this now, Draco. You don't want to end up like me, with much, much worse stains on your soul. I did unspeakable things in Voldemort's service. Crimes for which I can never atone no matter how I try. I learned remorse too late. You can save yourself a lifetime of regret by learning it now."

"But . . . Venetimorica?" His lips trembling, Draco confessed, "I . . . I can't. I'm not brave like Harry--"

"You left your birth father and his way of life. Draco . . . I do know how much courage it takes to leave the Death Eaters."

"I didn't stand up to Lucius the way Harry stood up to him and the Dark Lord both!"

Snape chuckled then, which puzzled Harry until the man spoke. "Well, you don't have Gryffindor courage; I'll grant you that. Yours is the Slytherin variety, like mine. We don't see the point in standing up so that we can be knocked back down. We're more subtle than that. And there's a use for both kinds of courage, Draco. Where would your brother be now if I had stood up on Samhain and declared there'd be no needles used on Harry Potter?" Snape shook his head. "Letting Harry suffer that, Draco . . . it was a terribly hard thing, but it was the right thing to do. And so this as well."

Draco gulped, his eyes wide. "Harry . . ."

The other boy's tone spoke volumes. Harry, talk some sense into Severus. Harry, get me out of this. Harry, you can't let this happen to me. And against Draco's voice in his head, there was another one. A deeper one, telling him not to interfere.
Harry ignored both those voices and said what he really thought. "I want to be able to visit you at your house when we're grown up, not in Azkaban."

"You think I'm headed there too?" asked Draco in a pitiable voice.

Harry hated to just say yes, because he thought what Draco needed was some hope. "I think what you did here was really, really evil and you just don't get that right now," he said instead. "This reminds me of last year and the things you did to help Umbridge. Awful things. You have . . . a sort of darkness inside you, Draco. And Severus has lived in darkness and come out of it. He could help you learn to control it, if you'd let him. But if you don't let him . . ." Harry sighed, hating the truth. But Draco needed to hear it, probably more than he'd ever needed anything. "I think you might end up doing something like this again, yes. Whatever it takes for you to avoid that has got to be worthwhile."

Draco sat down and hung his head in his hands. "Then I guess I'll just stay out here. It's better than dosing myself with Venetimorica."

"It's your choice," Snape calmly said. "Though I think the other course of action provides far more hope for your future. You see, this way, Draco, you are refusing to accept responsibility for your actions. I will watch over you every second if that is what it takes to keep you from doing something as unutterably foolish as this again, but my watchfulness cannot change the kind of person you are at heart. Quite likely I can keep you from mischief until you are grown and on your own, but who will protect you from yourself then, Draco? I fear that if you take the easy road now, you will only delay the inevitable. The day will come again when you are just so angry that you strike out once more."

"And end in Azkaban," Draco finished, looking up.

"Draco, I brought up Azkaban because I thought it might clarify matters for you, but it isn't really what I wanted to communicate at all. Do you want to be a decent person? That's the crux of the matter, surely. You've taken Lucius for your model in more ways than one--"

"I have not!"

"Yes, you have," Snape sighed. "You don't even realise how much so, Draco. Your family expressed disdain for Walpurgis Black by removing his name from yours. And you did much the same when you took Snape for your surname. And this need for vengeance at any cost, that is very much like Lucius as well. He can't seem to let go of his anger against you. Do you want to be like him, Draco?"

"No," said the boy in a low voice. "I don't. I want to be a Snape. And that's why I took your name. It wasn't . . ."

"You learned growing up that names provide powerful weapons, particularly when used against family." Snape shrugged. "Draco, it doesn't matter to me precisely why you wanted my name. I merely want you to honour it. And this is not the way."

"I . . . no, it wasn't," said Draco, a little thickly. "But you can't quit your job, Severus. You have Harry to think of. He needs you there with him at Hogwarts."

Harry was about to say that was right, he did, but his father was already shrugging the objection away. "The separation would not be to my liking, but Harry and I would find a way to manage."

"You'd put me above Harry?"

"No, you idiot child. I'll do for you whatever you need, and I'll do exactly the same for him. And
right now, he doesn't need me in quite the way you do."

"He can speak for himself," Harry dryly put in. "I've gone long enough without family."

"But you would survive the bare ten weeks until summer when we could be together again."

"Well yes, but--"

"No, no, no, you can't quit your job!" Draco insisted, his voice sounding off-kilter. "If you suddenly resign, Family Services will come poking around to question why! You're well-enough known that it will get reported! And you're supposed to support us and set a good example and what if they think you're not? They might start investigating and realise that rugby story was a front, and then they'd unadopt both of us straight away from you!"

Harry couldn't let a statement like that go unchallenged. "Draco, Severus was your father before you had a certificate to prove it. You can't be unadopted, not where it counts. And neither can I."

"If they tried you'd still end up hating me," Draco said, his voice dull. "And if you hate me, then I'm a dead man."

"If they tried I'm sure I'd blame you and be angry," Harry corrected. "But I wouldn't hate you. Look, in a normal family people get angry and they get over it. I'm angry now, if you want the truth. Does it look like I'm throwing you to the wolves the way Lucius did?" Grabbing Draco's hand, Harry held tight to it. "Don't you get it yet? I l--"

"Stop saying that!" Draco's hand began shaking as though palsied. "I can't say it back, Harry! How do you think that makes me feel?"

"I don't care if you can't say it back!" Harry tried to think of how to explain. "Look, I've been around Ron a lot and he takes his family pretty much for granted. It's something he's always had. But I've never had a brother before and I like it and I'm not going to let anyone take that away from me, all right? Not even you. You're stuck with me."

"But you think I should?"

"I..." Harry couldn't say he did, not as bluntly as that. *Venetimorica* was awful, awful stuff, but wasn't a term in Azkaban much worse, and longer-lasting as well? And if the one could save Draco from the other, wouldn't the suffering be worth it, no matter how bad it became?

"Don't do this because Harry says to," urged Snape, kneeling and taking both Draco's hands in his, though that meant making Harry let go of the one he was holding. "And for Merlin's sake, don't do it on account of my job. Do it for yourself, Draco, because you know you need to set your feet upon another path, and this is the first step. The hardest, perhaps, but necessary."

Draco's skin was tinged green by then. "Severus... I... I don't want to eat one of those... things."

Snape said nothing.

After a moment, Draco swallowed thickly. "I... I suppose I will, though." He sat back and leaned against the back of the couch. "Guess it's just as well I was too upset to eat much breakfast, though I can't say as I'm hungry now, either. Maybe it could wait until later?"
"Draco."

"I know, I know," said the boy, his face growing even greener. "It's not going to get any easier. The longer I put it off the worse I'll feel." He gave a dry laugh that sounded far more like a cackle. "Though that's not really true, is it? I'll feel a lot worse after I eat the thing. Well, after it starts to . . . work, anyway."

Harry couldn't stand it any longer. "I'm sure you don't really have to eat one. Just being willing to is enough, isn't it? Dad?"

Snape shook his head.

"Oh, come on, he really is sorry now--"

"Stay out of this, if you would, Harry," said Snape.

"Better do what Dad says," said Draco, shaking his head. "He isn't going to budge."

Harry opened his mouth to reply, but the shock of what Draco had said robbed him of words. Better do what Dad says. Draco never called Snape that, never. Perhaps, in some horribly twisted way, this incident was helping Draco finally understand that he couldn't push Snape and Harry away no matter what he did.

Nodding, Harry sat back.

Draco was still staring at the platter of cakes, looking about like he'd pass out on the spot. He cleared his throat several times, then croaked in a voice so weak it was barely audible, "I . . . I think I need a glass of water to . . . uh, wash it down . . ."

"You may have one if you wish, but I seriously doubt you want to put anything unnecessary into your stomach today."

"Uh . . . yeah, that's a good point . . ."

Harry wasn't really sure Draco was going to do it, not until actually he reached out and took a fairy cake between his fingers. Dobby had been so careful not to allow Harry to touch them, and Snape had avoided contact also, which told Harry that the poison could be absorbed through the skin. Draco knew that too, Harry was sure.

Lifting it up, Draco opened his mouth and visibly winced, then lapped out his tongue and swiped it against the icing, barely touching it. "Uhhhgh," he moaned, shaking all over.

"It tastes bad?" Harry asked, all sympathy.

"No, but that just makes it worse." Shuddering even more, Draco opened his mouth wider and took a bite. Harry thought he'd never seen anything so awful as the sight of his brother chewing and swallowing, over and over, deliberately poisoning himself. At least his victims wouldn't have known what was coming, but Draco did. It was a wonder he could eat the thing, knowing what he did about Venetimorica.

Draco slowly peeled back the gilded paper clinging to the sides of the cake as he ate, until he was down to nothing but crumbs, and Snape gently said, "That will do, Draco."

Draco suddenly moaned, clutching at his abdomen so fiercely that he wrinkled the lightweight robes he was wearing.
"I'll help you to the loo--" Harry started to say, but Snape interrupted him.

"If things were that simple *Venetimorica* wouldn't have such a fearsome reputation. Draco won't be able to sick up until it's been completely metabolised. In fact he'll be perfectly fine until late this evening."

Draco shuddered. "Best not to think about it, I suppose. So then, I . . . I'll just get back to my lines until . . ."

"I don't really believe that writing the same line over and over will supply much distraction," Snape gently inserted. "Actually, I thought you might like to spend the day helping us renovate the cottage."

"Renovate . . .?"

Snape pointed his wand and banished every last trace of the fairy cakes before he answered, and cast a few heavy-duty cleaning spells as well. "We'll all come here for the summer, and while I don't mind sleeping on a transfigured divan in the short term, I would prefer to have a proper bedroom when we return here in June. Harry thought a second bathroom would be a good idea as well. How are your construction spells, Draco?"

"Uh . . . I don't actually know any."

"You will after today."

"You're going to let me do magic?"

"Supervised only, and you'll return my grandfather's wand to me when we finish for the day."

Draco nodded eagerly, though he thought to ask, "How much construction can we do in a day, though? That's large scale transfiguration, or conjuring perhaps. I think we'd be lucky to erect even one wall."

"Ah. Well it will doubtless take more than a single day, though you might consider that we have Harry to help us."

"Wanded magic," murmured Draco, nodding.

"Harry and I suspect he'll have fewer episodes of accidental magic if he routinely exercises his dark powers," added Snape as he drew a wand from his robes and handed it to Draco. "So, shall we begin?"

Construction spells turned out to be devilishly tricky to master. Harry, of course, had the added burden of devising Parseltongue versions of everything. He was glad he'd brought Sals along, though he had to apologise to her for leaving her as a bracelet for so long. He'd forgotten about her during that long, tense confrontation between his father and brother.

Sals said she didn't mind, though. She wasn't aware of anything except a dull sensation of warmth back in the dungeons, and then another one in Devon when Snape had uncharmed her.
When lunch time rolled around Draco didn't eat. No point, he said with a grimace. Harry found something to respect in the fact that Draco wasn't whinging on and on about how sick he was going to get. He joined Harry and Snape at the table for a few minutes, sipping a little water because he said his throat was dry. Then he went back outside to continue casting, his borrowed wand pointed at the bare earth they'd cleared earlier. Harry watched him through the window as he steadily conjured granite to form a floor, bit by painstaking bit. He'd only managed to create a section about the size of his hand before he stopped and leaned against an exterior wall, breathing heavily.

"In the Potions classroom that day you coated the floor with marble with just one spell and it didn't seem to tax you at all. Is your magic that much stronger than Draco's? Or is it hard for him to cast with a new wand? Or is it the {\textit{Venetimorica}} starting to make him sick?"

Snape sprinkled a bit of balsamic vinegar on his salad. "I've noticed that he still needs to settle into using a new wand, yes. And magical strength often increases with maturity--unless one has direct access to dark powers," he added with a glint in his eye. "But more than that, my marbleising spell wasn't intended to last for decades, you understand."

"So its not the poison, not yet?" Harry worried his lip with his teeth and pushed his lunch away. He hadn't eaten much at all, probably because he couldn't stop thinking about what Draco was facing.

"Not yet. A sudden coma will accompany the onset of the {\textit{Venetimorica}} beginning to work."

Harry lowered his voice, though Draco likely couldn't hear them. "Don't you think he should be resting? I mean, he didn't sleep at all last night and here he's doing all this strenuous magic and wearing himself out. Shouldn't he be saving his strength?"

"Actually, no. The coma will last until Draco's magical and physical energies are drained to a very low point. Going into it already weakened will shorten the duration. Otherwise I'd have told him last night to get some sleep instead of doing his lines."

Harry's stomach churned a bit as the implications of that came clear. "So last night, you knew already that you were going to make him eat a fairy cake?"

"I did not make him," Snape corrected, frowning.

"You know what I mean. You didn't give him much choice."

"Actually, I fully expected him to watch me resign." Snape shrugged. "Which brings us to another matter. Had I known Draco would choose his just deserts, so to speak, I would have offered at the outset for you to remain behind at Hogwarts. Albus will be in residence throughout the holiday, so you will be perfectly safe. If you wish to return--"

"You think Draco needs you to himself?"

"No, but you are not his father, Harry. There's no need for you to be present for this ordeal."

"Do you want me to leave? I offered to let you talk to him alone, you know, and you said no."

"I don't want you to leave," Snape insisted. "Nor does Draco, I feel certain."

"Then I'm staying. We're all in this together," said Harry, though he couldn't help but ask, "You really think it's going to do him good to go through this awful thing?"

"I do," said Snape in tones of finality.
Harry wasn't so sure. He wasn't sure of anything, actually, except that he was glad he wasn't the one having to rear Draco. He wouldn't have known what to do about an awful situation like this one. "Well I hope you at least brought a bezoar along, in case it gets too awful for him to bear--"

Snape shook his head. "Ineffective against Venetimorica."

"The antidote, then--"

"There's no antidote."

Harry's mouth dropped open. "Oh, God. You were lying about needing clover blossoms and eel skin and the sap of a stunted hickory tree."

"I needed to make Draco tell us the truth."

"Well that's a pretty strange way to go about it, isn't it, lying your head off so that he'll be honest?" Harry felt his face start to heat as the rest of it came rushing back to him. "And while we're on it, I didn't appreciate being put in the middle like that. Harry, I absolutely insist you eat that fairy cake . . . You're lucky I didn't kick you under the table!"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Did you believe even for an instant that I would let you come to harm?"

"No," Harry grudgingly admitted. "I knew for sure you'd banish the stupid cake but were waiting until the last second to make Draco confess. I'm not stupid. But I still didn't appreciate it! You could have made him tell the truth without involving me!"

"As it turned out, I could not have," Snape quietly returned, pushing aside his plate as though his own appetite was faulty as well. "You saw him in the lab. Even after I'd proven he must have brewed the poison, he was still intent on claiming the elves were the ones who put it to use. The only reason he finally gave up his lies was to stop me from displaying to you the spectacle of him tainting the fairy cakes."

Well, that was true enough, Harry thought, but it didn't make him feel much better. He crossed his arms as he sat there, and glared across the table at his father.

"Harry, I regret that scene at dinner last night, more than you can know. But I felt I had no choice. I had to know if Draco's loyalty to himself would exceed his loyalty to you."

"Oh . . ." Harry's arms relaxed a bit. "I thought you were just trying to make him confess."

"That was important, certainly, but far more vital was the question of whether he would protect his secret at the cost of your well-being."

Harry leaned on the table then, and met his father's gaze. "And if he had?"

Snape frowned. "I don't know. I'm exceedingly grateful it didn't come to that. I can only say that had Draco not acted to shield you from the Venetimorica, I would probably believe he could not be rehabilitated."

"I'm glad he stopped me," Harry whispered. "But for all that, he's . . . more messed up than I thought, I guess."

"Yes, I believe he is." Snape nodded, the motion sharp, as though it pained him to admit it. Or maybe what hurt was his realisation that he should have got Draco some professional help a long time ago.
Harry finished up his orange juice. "I didn't know there were wizard therapists, really. I guess I thought when you bought that Muggle book after Samhain, it must mean that wizards weren't writing about adolescent trauma." He smiled a little. "Because I remember what you said about the leukaemia book the Dursleys had. It didn't seem like you had a whole lot of respect for Muggle writers. But I figure Draco's therapist must be a wizard, right? Otherwise Draco won't really be able to talk freely, and some of his problems won't make very good sense... what?"

Snape cleared his throat. "There aren't a great many wizard therapists, Harry, but I did manage to find a highly-regarded squib psychiatrist who specialises in adolescents, actually." He paused, almost as if he was waiting for Harry to come to some realisation, and when Harry said nothing, went on, "Arabella Figg recommended her."

"Arabella Figg..." Harry nodded. "Oh. You're talking about Dudley's therapist, aren't you? What was her name... Marta? Marsha?"

"Dr. Marsha Goode."

"Good?" Harry couldn't help but chuckle. Well, maybe it was an omen. Steyne had been a nasty piece of work, so Goode had to work out all right, didn't she?

"You don't have any qualms about the matter?"

Harry didn't see why he should. "Well, she worked wonders with Dudley, didn't she? Say, is Dudley still seeing her?"

Snape's expression went slightly sour. "I inquired about that myself and was treated to a lengthy lecture on ethics and confidentiality." His gaze locked onto Harry's. "I mention qualms, however, because the good doctor would like to meet with you as well."

Confused, Harry just shrugged. "Yeah, you mentioned that. But I'm happy to help Draco. Whatever he needs."

Snape cleared his throat. "That's all well and good, but I suspect what Dr. Goode has in mind is to discuss the likelihood of your needing therapy of your own."

"Oh. Harry suddenly felt like he'd taken a Bludger to the stomach. "You said I was messed up too. Do you think I need... uh..."

"Harry, Dr. Goode has spent over a year counselling Dudley. I'm certain she's heard some rather distressing anecdotes about how you were treated as a child. She also reads the Prophet, and has long been aware of your special place in the wizarding world. It's little wonder if she questions how well you are coping with the juxtaposition of so many different sources of stress."

"You mean she thinks I must be a basket case," Harry dryly interpreted that. "But I hardly care what she thinks. What do you think? That's what matters to me."

"I think..." Snape regarded him for a long moment. "You have dealt remarkably well with your travesty of a childhood and all that has happened since."

Inexplicably, Harry felt tears pooling in his eyes, because he didn't deserve praise like that. He wasn't dealing with Sirius' death well, because he wasn't dealing with it, full stop. He tried not to think about his godfather, ever. It was just too horribly painful, even if it did Sirius a disservice.

When it came to Sirius, Harry knew, he wasn't brave at all. Or Gryffindor. And Sirius would probably be disappointed in him.
Snatching out his wand, Harry cleared away all their dishes and said they'd better go outside again and help Draco.

Snape said nothing in reply.

"Coming?" Harry pressed, glancing back.

Snape's dark eyes glimmered as he slowly nodded.

After an afternoon spent working on construction, with very little progress to show for it, Harry felt pretty fed up. "There are easier ways of building, you know," he told his father and brother. "Why don't we go into the nearest town and buy some bricks to make the floor? It can't be that hard to mix up mortar and glue them together--"

"If you'd had any sort of proper wizarding upbringing," Draco began to drawl in his most superior tones, "then you'd know, wouldn't you--"

"That sounds remarkably like baiting to me," interrupted Snape in a level voice.

The blond boy abruptly fell silent. "Sorry," he said after a moment, glancing quickly at Harry. "I'll work on not saying things like that. Anyway, maybe you could get your dark powers working here and do the whole floor with one spell?"

Harry didn't think he'd heard the last about his Muggle-raised heritage, but if Draco was going to try to curtail his rude comments, that was something, at least. "I'm a bit worried I might cover the whole meadow in granite if I'm not careful."

"Delimit an area before you begin." Draco shrugged.

"I still haven't figured out the Parseltongue for give-me-granite, let alone give-me-just some," Harry pointed out. Complaining wasn't going to get it done, though, so Harry started talking once more to Sals.

When it was time for dinner, Snape took his grandfather's wand away from Draco. That was just as well, Harry thought. *Venetimorica* could cause delusions; there was no telling what Draco might cast under its influence.

Snape asked Harry to see to their meal, which basically meant fishing things out of their magic crates. While Harry did that, Snape went into the bedroom with Draco. Probably they were talking about the poison and what Draco could expect, though Harry couldn't see a whole lot of sense in that discussion. He was positive Draco had researched the matter thoroughly and knew exactly what he was in for.

Draco didn't come out for dinner; Snape said the other boy was too tired and had decided to rest.
"It's starting then," Harry whispered, looking out the window at the setting sun. He shoved away his meal. "That's it. I can't eat."

"You didn't eat much lunch," said Snape as he began twirling cream-flecked fettuccine around his fork.

"So?"

"The best thing you can do for your brother is stay strong yourself. It's likely to be a long, difficult night."

"And day, and possibly another night." Harry stabbed at his own noodles and then half-heartedly ate some. "Fine. I know you're right."

The Potions Master poured water from a carafe into two of the crystal goblets Harry had found in a crate. The third one sat empty at Draco's place, just staring at Harry until he couldn't stand it. Grabbing the carafe, he poured a measure out for Draco as well. Stupid, pointless gesture and he knew it, but he didn't like the feeling that Draco was being left out.

"That's why you started on your room today, isn't it?" Harry suddenly realised. "It wasn't just to tire Draco. You wanted him to feel like he was still a part of the family!"

"True," Snape admitted. "This incident can only exacerbate his sense of himself as less worthy of my love than you are. I thought excluding him from our project, even to do his lines or schoolwork, would be inadvisable to say the least."

"Well, let's go take our food in there and have a picnic of sorts then." That plan was short-lived, though. Draco had already fallen into a coma. Harry sat on his own bed with his plate on his lap, and finished his meal there while watching his brother.

"You really do have quite a loyal sense of family yourself," Snape said from his position leaning against the door jamb. "But there's nothing you can do for him at the moment." He crooked a finger.

"Come play chess with me."

Harry shook his head.

"Harry," Snape interrupted, "that wasn't a request. Do as I say and come play chess. I don't want you brooding any more than I wanted Draco to, earlier."

"This isn't brooding. I want to watch for when--"

"When your brother needs assistance, we will know."

Words which proved to be prophetic, Harry later thought.

------------------------------------------------------

It started with an ear-splitting scream.

Through the open bedroom door Harry saw Draco sitting straight up in bed, his hands reaching out as though to shove somebody away. His mouth was wide open, his eyes so wild the silver in them looked molten.
"No!" he shouted, pushing out again as though trying to move the immovable. "Go! Run!"

Harry was at Draco's narrow bed in a flash, Snape beside him.

Grabbing one of his brother's hands as it madly kept shoving away at nothing, Harry held it tight. "It's all right, Draco."

But it wasn't, for in that moment Draco turned those wild eyes on him. "Harry, no! Go! Now, Harry, now!" And with an almighty yank, Draco pulled his hand free from Harry's grip and reached out to thrust Harry away from him. "Go! Run! You aren't ready for him, Harry! Get the bloody hell out of here!"

Harry lay sprawled, inanely thinking that Draco could really shove hard when he wanted to.

"Go, go, GO!" Draco started screaming, the word a litany that seemed to sear straight through Harry. "Get away! Go!"

He lunged off the bed without warning, launching himself at Harry, and would have landed atop him if not for their father's speedy intervention. Arms stretched wide, Snape grabbed hold of Draco and propelled him forcefully back to the bed.

"Severus, do something!" Draco screamed, the sound that time so high-pitched and shrill it was a wonder the windows didn't break. "Merlin's beard, he's going to be a Gryffindor, isn't he? Get out of here, Harry!"

Snape looked over his shoulder as he grappled with his son, who was flailing to be let loose. "Harry, perhaps you should leave and close the door. I think that will quiet him. Somewhat."

Harry nodded and left, closing the door as his father had said before slumping onto the couch and hanging his head in his hands. Random thoughts flitted through his mind. Draco throwing something at his bedroom door because Harry had said to Ron and Hermione that he didn't trust him. Draco saying he couldn't tell Harry his problem because Harry was his problem. Draco, almost paralyzed with dread when he'd finally admitted that he'd been at the Death Eater meeting on Samhain.

And now this.

Draco living out his worst fears under the horrible influence of *Venetimorica*.

The poison had other effects of course--horrendous ones--but the primary magical one was to force the victim into a place where their most horrible, mind-shattering nightmares seemed to become the stark reality right before their eyes.

Harry had known what was coming, in a sense, but he'd thought Draco's worst fear would be something else entirely. Lucius throwing him headfirst into a pit of snakes, perhaps. Or Nagini eating him. Or being tortured for information, Lucius casting that spell to deliver a wizard's beating, over and over.

He hadn't known that Draco's worst fear would be for Harry.

The screams in the bedroom continued unabated, mindless pleas for Harry to get out before it was too late; Draco didn't seem to have noticed that Harry had got out.

And then the screams changed to half-gulping noises and broken sobs that made last night's tears
Draco was screaming still, but this time in anguish, Harry's name the only distinguishable word. Thumping noises punctuated the distraught boy's voice, as though he was trying his best to leap off the bed and Snape was restraining him.

The noise of fabric ripping made Harry think Draco must have started tearing at his bed curtains.

And through it all, Snape's voice. A constant, steady drone telling Draco that Harry wasn't in danger, that Harry was fine and Draco would be feeling better soon. But Draco wasn't listening; he was only wailing in incoherent grief, like everything that mattered in the whole world had just been ripped straight out of his hands.

Harry wrapped his arms around himself and rocked like a small child trying to comfort itself as the horrible noises went on and on.

He couldn't have said how long it lasted. It seemed like hours before the sounds died off and Snape opened the door, looking much as if he'd been wrestling with an enraged hippogriff all this while.

Harry looked blearily up, his eyes stinging like they were bloodshot. It reminded him, anyway, that he was overdue for his elixir. Fishing it from his pocket, he wordlessly extended it to Snape, who applied it in equal silence.

Resisting the urge to rub his eye, Harry put his glasses back on. "How is he?"

Snape dropped down into a chair and pushed his hair out of his face. "Comatose again. For the moment." He took a few minutes to simply recover, his breathing ragged, nodding in wordless thanks when Harry got up and brought him over a glass of cool water. "You do realise what that was all about, I trust?"

Harry weakly nodded. Snape had told him that Draco felt he needed Harry on his side, but Harry hadn't really understood how deep that feeling went. "Draco thought I was in danger and he was trying to save me."

"At first. Then he thought you'd died and the war was certainly lost and Lucius was going to skin him alive. Literally."

"Oh, God." Harry thickly swallowed. "You tried to tell me, but I . . . I didn't really get that he felt as dependent as all that on my . . ."

"Patronage," Snape dryly said. "And it's no wonder you didn't understand. You don't view yourself as the vanguard of the Light. Not as he does."

"I don't want to be some . . . hero he clings to for safety!" Harry ground out, digging his fingers into the fraying fabric of the sofa. "I just want to be his brother."

"You are that to him as well, I'm sure." Snape sighed, the noise of it exhausted. "But the reason he's so loyal to you is the former, of course."

"Of course," said Harry, more bitterly than he'd intended.

Snape stared at him for a long, considering moment. "Give him time," he finally said. "Something a casewitch once said to me, if you recall."

Harry was hardly going to forget. He'd called himself Snape's adoptee instead of his son, and instead of telling him how horribly hurtful that was, Snape had just gone on loving him as he was, flaws and all. Well, after one short snarled comment on the matter. Snape wasn't perfect, either.
Understanding what his father meant, Harry relaxed his fingers. "All right. I'll just keep on being his brother until he can see me that way. *Really* see me that way."

For that was what Snape had done for him, of course. He'd been a father before Harry had been ready to be a son.

"When Draco wakes up is it going to start all over again?"

Snape sighed. "Most likely yes. Assuming he brewed the poison correctly, though I have very little doubt of that."

"Yeah, Draco's good at Potions," said Harry morosely. "I guess it's not a coincidence that he decided to get even with Slytherin by using one. I think it was a way of thumbing his nose at you."

Snape merely shrugged, which told Harry the man had thought of that already. "Shall we finish our game?" And when Harry shook his head, "It will be hours before Draco wakes next. You should do something to occupy your mind."

"Well, I've lost that one already," Harry said, pointing to the chessboard. "Let's start another, then."

Harry lost twice more before they heard another noise from the bedroom. Not screaming, not this time. Something more like whimpers.

Snape went to Draco's bedside while Harry hung back near the door, but this time it didn't seem Draco's fears were centred on his brother. Neither was he awake. He was thrashing in bed, caught in the grip of a nightmare, reciting a babble of Latin that didn't make any sense.

Then he switched to English, swearing that he'd try harder, that he'd get better marks next time. "Better than the Mudblood, yes, yes," he panted. "I promise, Father. I promise--"

And then the screams *did* start again, and Draco came awake for them, scrabbling up to hold tight to a bedpost as he wailed and wailed for his father to stop.

*A wizard's beating*, Harry realised, shaking as he watched it.

Snape tried to help. Yanking Draco away from the bedpost, he pulled him into a tight embrace and simply held him, but Draco was beyond all consolation. Caught in the grip of the poison, he kept screaming on and on, flinching violently as though his back and sides and legs were being flayed wide open.

And *then* his screams became truly horrendous.

Clearly, something else was happening inside his mind, something so awful that he began shaking all over, fighting Snape's hold as though he was possessed. He managed to work an arm free at one point. Reaching up, he tried to pull Snape's hair out by the roots.

Snape swung it out of reach and pinned the boy's arm to his body once more.

Then Draco went still. Completely still, not even breathing. Harry thought he'd lapsed back into a coma again. Or perhaps fainted, because the boy's legs suddenly couldn't support him. Draco slumped against his father, almost falling, but Snape easily scooped him up and carrying him, strode out to the living room where he sat down in a chair, Draco cradled across his lap.

Harry sat on the edge of the sofa, biting his lip as he watched. "Is he all right?"
Using one hand to brush Draco's fringe aside, Snape felt his son's forehead. "We're past the first stage."

Harry knew what that meant. There shouldn't be any more delusions; no more reliving of fears. But now the poison was going to wreak physical havoc on Draco's body, something that was beginning already, for the boy was starting to shiver all over, his teeth actually chattering.

"C-C-Cold," he stammered, eyes clenched as though the chills sweeping through him hurt. He started burrowing more closely against Snape, obviously trying to draw warmth from him.

Snape held him closer and said nothing except, "Blankets, Harry," when Draco began trying to work his hands in between the buttons on his father's shirt, as though seeking warm skin to chase out the cold.

Once Draco was wrapped warmly from head to toe, only his face peeking out, he seemed to calm. Leaning against Snape, his cheek pressed to the man's chest, he began breathing normally again.

Eyes closed, he drifted into sleep, held securely in his father's arms.

Harry sat down again, his brow furrowing into thought. "Why did you want blankets instead of a warming charm?"

Snape glanced up, his black eyes tired. "Applying magic to the symptoms will only prolong them. Many poisons are thus."

"Is that why Madam Pomfrey's spells to stop your bleeding failed? When you were poisoned on your birthday?" When Snape nodded, Harry went on, "But she had an antidote handy?"

"Why would you think that?"

Thinking his father sounded annoyed, Harry was going to leave this discussion for another time, but Snape prompted him with an intense glance.

"Well, Dobby said that Madam Pomfrey said you were a good Potions Master."

"She said it was good I was a Potions Master," Snape corrected, moving to shift Draco to a more comfortable position. "Long exposure to dangerous potions ingredients has given me some measure of resistance to their effects. Hence, the contents of that chocolate cauldron were debilitating but not life-threatening."

"Why didn't you . . ." Harry broke off, deciding it wasn't the right time.

But Snape was having none of it. "You want to know why I didn't tell you? I wanted you to feel safe at Hogwarts, Harry. You'd agreed to the adoption primarily in order to secure the warding, which will fail if I should die, you realise. You had nightmares enough to surmount, without fearing that poison directed at me could leave you defenceless."

"Yeah, but as your son didn't you think I had a right to know that sort of thing?" When his father didn't answer that, Harry prompted, "It's not like I didn't give you plenty of openings. How many times did I go on about you needing to eat? You could have told me why you were reluctant."

"I could have, yes." Snape had one arm beneath Draco's shoulders. He used the other to rub the side of his nose. "You were already critical of how I was handling Mr Weasley's punishment, Harry. I didn't care to give you any further cause to doubt my judgment, and I thought if you knew about the chocolate cauldron . . ." Snape's voice went very quiet.
Harry earnestly leaned forward. "Look, I know it's easy to blame yourself when things go wrong. I do a lot of that, but it's really out of place this time. It's not your fault someone slipped you poison. I bet it was tasteless and odourless and there was no way you could have known."

Snape smiled slightly, the expression rather strained. "I suppose I should have had more faith in you, but the prospect of losing your respect was simply too daunting."

"Oh, Dad . . ." Harry reached out under the blankets wrapping Draco and patted his father's knee. "If watching you convince my brother to eat a poisoned cake didn't make me think badly of you--and it didn't, all right?--then why would this?"

"It goes back to Occlumency," Snape sighed. "To the things I taught you about hiding your true thoughts by letting Voldemort see harmless memories. How do you think he knew I received a chocolate cauldron every January ninth? I let him see it, along with my genuine annoyance that Albus insists on marking the date. I embellished the memory with disdain, and let him think it one more reason I had to despise the headmaster of Hogwarts. I saw no harm in his knowing about my annual birthday present. But as I came to learn, I had misjudged the matter."

"You are handing me weapons," Harry murmured, nodding. When his father flinched, Harry patted the man's knee again. "It's all right. You didn't know you were."

"False, but there you were, vulnerable without your magic and utterly dependent on me. A responsibility I took more seriously than you can imagine. Perhaps when you are a father yourself . . . at any rate, though, I was hardly eager to give you cause to doubt not only my judgment but also everything I had taught you about Occlumency. For it was my failure there that led to my being poisoned."

Draco stirred, his eyelashes fluttering open.

Harry went to kneel alongside his brother so he could see him better. "How are you doing?"

"I dreamed I was an icicle . . ." Weakly lifting up his head, Draco glanced toward the windows facing east. "Is that daybreak? Was I sleeping?"

He seemed to have already forgotten he'd talked of having dreamt.

"Yeah, the sun is rising," said Harry as he pushed one of the blankets away from Draco's head. Beneath it, the boy's hair was soaked with sweat.

Draco looked at Harry, his eyes fever-bright. "You're up early . . ."

"We didn't ever go to sleep."

The other boy's forehead wrinkled like he was thinking hard. "We?"

"Yeah, Dad and I."

Draco nodded, the motion sort of bleary. "Uh, all right. But uh . . . where is Severus, anyway? He . . . he wouldn't leave me, or at least I don't think so . . ."

"You're sitting on me," Snape announced in a deep voice.

Draco jerked wildly, his face flushing red, and tried to get off his father's lap, but wrapped as he was in all those blankets, he didn't have much chance unless he rolled off, and Snape clearly wasn't going to let that happen.
"Relax," he advised. "If *Venetimorica* runs true to form you're going to need your strength."

His struggles subsiding, Draco muttered, "Well you could put me in bed, you know. I'm not a baby."

"Harry," Snape directed. "Perhaps a freshening charm on Draco's bed would be a good idea."

When Harry went in, the bedcovers were all askew and drenched in sweat. Drops of blood stained them in place, telling Harry more clearly than words just how violently Draco had thrashed while caught in the grip of his delusions. Shuddering, Harry got the bed back in shape to be used.

When he returned to the living room, Draco was moaning that he wanted a freshening charm applied to *him*, and Snape was patiently explaining that the *Venetimorica* would object to any magical remedies applied to his person.

"You can have a vanishing bucket when you begin to vomit later--"

"Oh, thanks," groaned Draco, the sound of it thick. "A shower then. I need a shower . . ."

By then the blankets were unwrapped enough that Draco could shift free of them and try to stand up. *Try* being the operative word. He toppled straight over and ended up on his hands and knees, his head barely an inch from the edge of the low table where the chessboard still sat.

"Would you allow us to take care of you?" asked Snape in a caustic tone. "You aren't going to have reliable gross motor control for hours yet."

Draco managed to sit up, but after that he sighed. "All right. You can take care of me, then."

Snape scooped him up and deposited him on his bed. "Now, did you want a shower or not? I'll conjure a stool for you to sit on, but you'll have to leave the door open all the same."

"Yeah, yeah," Draco groaned, though he was nodding.

While Snape helped Draco into the shower, Harry found clean pyjamas for his brother to change into, then went to pour himself some orange juice. A few minutes later Snape came out and announced that Draco was fast asleep and would probably stay that way most of the day.

The Potions Master's face was grim. "And then he'll get so sick he'll wish he'd died in his sleep, but after that passes, this will finally be over."

The acid taste of the orange juice surged up his throat when Harry thought of what Dobby's book had said about the last stage of *Venetimorica* poisoning.

"Are you all right?"

Harry thickly swallowed. "Yeah."

"You should get some rest," said Snape, waving his wand at the couch to transfigure it into a bed.

"Out here?"

"I plan to sleep here. It's been a long night for all of us." Casting another spell, Snape continued, "An alarm charm. I'll wake up if Draco is in distress, though I'll almost certainly waken before he does, in any case."

Nodding, Harry padded into the bedroom and crawled fully dressed into his bed.
Harry and his father were both awake for lunch, though Draco slumbered on and on. It was late afternoon before the other boy surfaced from his long sleep. At least this time it wasn't hallucinations waking him, Harry thought, though some part of him wondered if *Venetimorica* was actually more vicious in the beginning or in the end.

Because this was ugly, too.

"I need that bucket!" they heard Draco yelp from the bedroom.

Throwing aside the book he'd been trying to read, Harry rushed to his brother's side. Snape was there before him, having Apparated straight through the wall. He'd also summoned the bucket, a wooden one bound with strips of iron. Really, it looked like it would leak worse than a sieve, but of course a magic bucket didn't need to be watertight.

Draco grabbed it with both hands when Snape held it out, and all but plunged his face inside as a gurgling, retching noise seemed to rush up from his belly.

Snape immediately left the room, urging Harry to do the same with his eyes. *Decorum*, of course. They left Draco alone, the door open in case he needed help, and began loudly playing another game of chess.

How long it went on, Harry couldn't have said. He'd been sick a few times and could remember that horrible feeling of despair it gave you when it seemed like you'd *never* stop sickness up.

At one point Draco gave off an awful sound, almost as if he was strangling. When Harry and Snape rushed in, he was kneeling on the floor, his balled fists pressing deeply into his midsection, his hair a wild tangled mess, sweatier than before. "Something's wrong!" he cried, gasping for breath. "There's nothing left to sick up, and I just keep--"

That was all he got to say before his stomach twisted into knots once more, sending him bending down over the bucket, ugly noises echoing through the room.

That time, Snape stayed.

When Draco levered himself back up, his eyes were watering. "It won't stop! It just keeps going--Something's gone *wrong*, Severus!" Pausing, he heaved in a breath, his eyes wild with panic.

"Draco, it's just the dry heaves," Harry said, wanting to comfort Draco but knowing that the other boy wouldn't want to be touched. "Haven't you had those before?"

"Oh, *please,*" sneered Draco, though it was a feeble sort of sneer, considering the boy was chalk white and shaking. "The minute I'd feel ill at home I'd get a potion to make it go away. This sicking up business is just too . . . *undignified.*"

Harry's mouth almost dropped open. "You've never sicked up before?"

"Some pure-blooded families don't allow childhood illnesses to progress that far, Harry," Snape explained.
"Arghhhh!" Draco yelled as his features convulsed. A second later he was throwing his face back down to meet the bucket again.

"But Draco used to get sick when he was Apparated," Harry said in a low voice to his father. "Lucius told me."

"Bearing in mind that anything Lucius says may be a gross distortion of the truth--"

"Can you stop saying gross?" Draco moaned, the noise of it pitiful. "Please?"

Snape inclined his head, though Draco almost certainly couldn't see it. "I would surmise that any time Draco became nauseated, Lucius or Narcissa would give him a potion at once."

Harry nodded, understanding why Snape had spoken with Draco alone the night before. If you'd never ever sicked up, it would be a horribly frightening experience.

"I can't believe Muggles put up with this," Draco finally groaned, looking up again. He wiped at his mouth then looked with disdain at the sleeve of his pyjama.

"You're putting up with it," Harry reminded him, voice mild.

"Yeah, once. If I had to do this every time I got sick I think I'd rather die-- Arghhhh!"

And again, he began to make those awful noises as his empty stomach tried to empty itself still further.

Remembering what Aunt Petunia would do for Dudley when he used to sick up, Harry went into the bathroom to wet some flannels. Since he really didn't think Draco would want Harry wiping his brow, though, he handed them over with a slight smile. Draco stared at them for a moment like he wasn't quite sure what they were for, but then he sighed and began wiping at his face and neck. His skin looked as dry as paper, even when wet, which Harry took to mean that Draco was badly dehydrated. He wished he could offer his brother some water to drink but knew better than to even mention it.

"My head hurts," Draco whimpered, sitting back on his heels, the damp flannels resting on his knees.

Sensing they were there for the duration, Harry sat down on his bed and tried not to look as sympathetic as he felt. Draco wouldn't like to be pitied, he knew.

Or at least, not normally.

"Didn't you hear me?" said the boy in a plaintive voice as he rubbed both his temples. "My head hurts, Severus. I think it's going to explode! And every time I sick up it gets worse! I can't bear it any longer!"

"Hush, child," said Snape very softly, as though aware that too much noise would only make Draco's head ache worse. He summoned a chair and sat down next to Draco, reaching over to nudge the boy's head to rest against his knee. "I can't give you any potion; you know that."

Draco whimpered again, slumping against his father as though grateful for the support. "But the antidote," he whined. "I've been as brave as I can be, Severus. I need it."

Snape's hand stroked the top of Draco's matted hair. "Shhh, you foolish child. You know there isn't any antidote. You did your research well. You chose Venetimorica because there wasn't any way around it."
Draco shuddered. "I... yeah," he thickly groaned. "But I'd hoped... you know, you said there was one..." He looked up with bleary eyes. "Liar."

"You're almost through it," Snape assured him, his hand so soft and gentle on Draco's head that Harry realised with a start he was staring. "An hour more, perhaps."

Draco's groan said more clearly than words that an hour more of this was more than he could bear. He clung to Snape's leg, actually wrapping his arms around it as he knelt there, leaning against his father, but after a moment he suddenly yanked himself free and literally threw himself towards the charmed bucket.

A horrible rushing sound ensued as a torrent of something thick and foul rushed out of Draco's mouth and into the bucket, and for one instant, the rankest odour Harry had ever smelled choked the air.

Then the charmed bucket did its work and vanished its contents away.

Draco wiped his mouth on his sleeve again, leaving a thick brownish-green stain on the flannel. "Ugh! Ugh! Somebody kill me now!"

Snape conjured a glass of whitish fluid and merely told Draco to rinse his mouth and be sure not to swallow. "Bicarbonate of soda," he explained in answer to Harry's answering glance. "Non-magical."

Draco rinsed his mouth out five times in a row, then promptly threw up again and used the whitish liquid several more times, then sat back with a sigh. "I... oh, Merlin that gives a new meaning to the word nasty. I completely cannot understand why Muggles don't slit their own throats."

Harry might not have understood what Draco had just gone through, if not for Dobby's book which had explained in graphic detail. "Draco, when Muggles sick up they only empty out their stomachs, not their entire digestive tracts."

"Well, still," the other boy muttered, breathing in deeply several times. He looked down as to take stock of himself, and pulled an awful face. "Ye gods, I'm filthy."

He wasn't, really; he was just sweaty and had the one disgusting stain on the cuff of his pyjama sleeve, but Harry could understand him wanting to clean up, certainly.

"Is it over?" Harry asked his father.

"Oh, it's over all right," said Draco, rising rather unsteadily to his feet. He began trying to unbutton his pyjama top, but his fingers weren't coordinated enough to do the job.

Snape solved that with a single incantation, and as Draco stood there shirtless, began casting a series of diagnostic charms.

Harry bit his lip when he saw the awful scar that was left from the amulet that had gone haywire. No wonder Draco resented the mark so much. His skin was puckered and marred all around the smaller maroon mark that was the same shape as the amulet. The whole area of damaged skin was perhaps the size of Harry's palm.

He didn't want to make Draco feel even worse about the scar, but some part of him just had to ask, "Um... have you tried Scaradicate yet?"

"Doesn't work," the other boy said, shaking his head as he trailed a hand lightly over the mark. "It's
like Severus said. This is mainly magical, not physical. Like your own scar."

"I can't understand why the amulet would . . ." Harry sighed. "It was just supposed to heat up! I'm really sorry."

Draco began rubbing his hands back and forth over his upper arms, as though cold. "Well, I had just hit you. Maybe your amulet thought I deserved something in return."

"It should be safe to spell you with *Hydratus* now," Snape announced.

The minute the charm had been cast, Draco sighed in relief. "Ah, now that's much better. I'd completely forgotten what it was like to not have trolls stomping on my skull. And my bones don't ache now, either . . . Well, I think I'll have another shower. A nice long one."

"Are you certain you'll be all right on your own?"

Draco wrinkled his nose. "Well, I'm not a weakling, Severus. I think one supervised shower per day is more than enough. Don't you?"

"He'll be all right," Harry said dryly. "Back to his old self in no time."

For all that though, Snape insisted the bathroom door be left open again, just in case Draco needed something. Made sense, since the Slytherin boy wasn't very steady on his feet, yet. They actually heard him fall and start cursing at one point, though straight away his voice called out that he was all right and *not* to come bursting in.

Harry cleaned the room from top to bottom, glad that Parseltongue cleaning spells had never presented too much difficulty, then went out to see to dinner. He wasn't sure any of them wanted to eat, actually, but it wasn't lost on him that Draco hadn't had a bite of food in almost two days.

The charmed box, as if knowing something light was called for, gave him chicken soup with little crackers shaped like snitches.

Draco nibbled a few crackers and ate half a bowl of soup, not saying much at all until the end of the meal. "Well, *that* was positively sickening. Literally. Thank Merlin it's over."

"Thank Merlin some poor first-years didn't stuff themselves with fairy cakes," Harry corrected. "What about Larissa? How would you have felt if--"

"Who?"

Harry stared. "Larissa. First-year. She's about this tall--"

"Harry, what can you be thinking?" drawled Draco, his chin lifted. "I don't socialise with the lower forms."

"You were a prefect!"

"Ah, well that was given to me almost as a hereditary honour." Draco shrugged.

"It was given to you," Snape corrected in a hard voice, "in the hope that responsibility would help you become responsible."

"Well, it's a moot point now," Draco sighed, the sound so sad that Harry wondered if his brother was remembering how Pansy Parkinson had been his fellow prefect. It really hadn't been a good year for Slytherin, with one prefect murdered and the other one expelled. "But speaking of being responsible
Draco drew in a deep breath, then announced something Harry had never, ever thought to hear him say.

"I'd like to apologise again to that elf friend of Harry's. You were right, Severus. I wasn't sorry at all yesterday. But now . . . I think I see what you mean. Some, at least. Anyway, can Dobby hear you if you call him from here?"

"Oh, now you know his name?" asked Harry, one eyebrow raised.

"Yes," Draco said, grimacing a bit. "Severus was right about that too, I suppose. I was using his name like a weapon. It's an insult to not remember the name of a house-elf bonded to your family. Or once-bonded, in his case. But . . . Dobby deserves better from me than that. It's like you said that time about Professor Lupin. He's on the same side as I am, so I have to be able to work with him. And Dobby . . . he's on your side, too."

Draco cleared his throat. "Well, what are you waiting for, Severus--"

"You may speak with Dobby when we return to Hogwarts, Draco."

"I might lose this bizarre urge to humble myself," Draco dryly warned. "Like with the poison, best to get it over with, don't you think?"

"Apologising when one is wrong is not a mark of humility. Maturity, rather."

"And I've been so mature since I was expelled."

As Harry covered his mouth to keep from laughing out loud, Snape smiled. "A valid point. But I would still prefer to keep my hideaway as secret as possible. You will simply have to retain your bizarre urge until the holiday is over."

"All right. I . . . yes, I can do that."

"Good, because if your remorse only lasts a fleeting day or two, one might question how genuine it was, you understand."

Draco nodded slightly. "I think I'll just resume work on my lines, then."

Harry almost expected their father to say that Draco could forego the lines, now, but Snape must have thought the consequence could still serve some purpose.

"Do that," the Potions Master said, then added in a lower tone, "Draco . . . I enjoy having two sons I can take pride in."

Draco nodded again, his silver eyes damp as he got out parchment, quill, and ink and set to work.
Reconstruction

Ten thousand lines, it turned out, didn't take very long when one was committed to getting them done. Draco worked on them from morning until late at night, sitting at the kitchen table with the window open so he could call out suggestions—or more often critiques—to Harry and Snape who were labouring outside to get the new room into shape. Harry had found a way to make his wanded magic work, but construction spells were so draining that even with that advantage, it still took them days to finish the floor and erect the walls and roof. Harry actually felt a bit ill by the time he'd conjured enough large rocks to form the stone walls. Thank goodness Snape was the one who did most of the work of levitating them into place; though again, it was Harry's wanded magic that made them stick together.

Wizards did use mortar, Harry found out in the end. They just didn't mix it the Muggle way.

Roof thatching turned out to be a bit easier, though first Harry had to learn how to make grass grow strong and tall. It gave him a certain amount of satisfaction, after all the summers he'd spent mowing the lawn, to watch the meadow overflow with grass swaying in the breeze.

By Friday night, Snape had his bedroom in good enough shape to use, and Draco had his lines completed. The Slytherin boy had also finished several of his back assignments, though he had quite a lot of schoolwork left. He seemed willing to do it now, though. That was all that counted, as far as Harry was concerned.

Some time past midnight on Friday, an odd noise roused Harry from his sleep. It took a minute for his hazy brain to register the sound as whimpering.

"Draco?"

No answer. When Harry went over to the other bed, he found his brother shoving frantically at his blankets, but he was so tangled up in them that he couldn't push his way free. Even by the dim moonlight streaming through the window Harry could see that Draco's brow was streaming with sweat from his exertions.

Maybe it wasn't whimpering so much as panting. Or a little of both.

Harry shook his brother's shoulder. Gently at first, and then harder. "Come on, Draco. Wake up . . ."

Silver eyes finally slitted open, and the stark terror in them was so fierce that Harry shook Draco again. "It's all right. It was just a nightmare."

Draco shrugged Harry's touch away and pushed up on his palms to sit up. He looked like he was just an inch away from screaming the house down, even though he was unquestionably awake. His legs kicked frantically at the constricting bedclothes until they lay in a tangle near his feet. Then he seemed to relax, though a moment later he began swallowing convulsively. "I don't suppose that vanishing bucket's around anywhere?"

"I'll get Severus," said Harry at once, since if Draco was going to sick up then what he'd want would be a potion, surely.

"No, no." Draco shook his head, a spare little motion that Harry could hardly detect, it was over so quickly. "I feel pretty rough but . . . no, I'll manage."

"If you're sure . . ."
"No, Potter, I'm lying. I actually want half-digested Vichyssoise spattered all over my sheets and blankets--" He broke off at the look on Harry's face.

"Well, at least you're back to your usual self."

"I'll never quite be back to . . . that," Draco whispered, his sarcasm vanishing.

"Good." Maybe it was blunt, but sometimes that was best. "If you want to be an Auror, you know, you can't have a criminal record. You almost flushed your whole career plan down the loo."

"Yeah, I know." Draco sighed as he leaned back more against his headboard. "Severus and I talked about that when you were out flying."

"Today?"

"Ha. Today, yesterday, and Wednesday. No doubt I get variant number four of the same lecture tomorrow." Draco paused for a moment. "Well, I guess I'll try to get back to sleep--"

Harry held up a hand and sat down on the edge of Draco's bed. "Sure you don't want to talk about it?"

"No, I've done enough soul-searching in the guise of career planning with Severus, thanks--"

A light punch to Draco's shoulder put an end to the new bout of sarcasm. "Your nightmare, you prat. Talking helps." When Draco looked reluctant, Harry went on, "It might come right back if you don't."

"It just seems so real," Draco murmured, shivering.

"Yeah, dreams are like that."

"They aren't ever like this, Harry. It's the poison. Oh, I don't mean it's still affecting me, but when I was in that delirium, living out my worst fears . . ."

Harry nodded to show that he understood.

". . .well, it all seemed so completely real. I guess a hallucination would. But . . . um, I seem to have learned to dream more vividly. Some things, at least. The same things I had delusions about." Draco shrugged, but the motion was stilted instead of careless. "I don't suppose I have many secrets from you now. Almost makes me wish I'd let you eat that-- um, forget I said that."

"Yeah, you'd better hope I forget it," said Harry, glowering. "That's an awful wish."

"I said almost, you prat." Draco rubbed his hands all up and down his arms, shivering again. "Look, I don't really wish it. I just meant, I'd rather we were even. You know my worst fears and I don't have a clue what yours might be."

Harry relaxed a little. "Hmm. Well, I'm not even sure. I guess probably it would be losing you or Dad somehow. You know about the Mirror of Erised?"

When Draco shook his head, Harry explained how he'd seen his family standing with him, and how Dumbledore had told him what that meant.

"Sounds like you're the one who needs some therapy," Draco said with a straight face.

Harry grabbed a spare pillow and lifted it as though to bonk the other boy over the head.
"All right, I suppose I need some too," Draco admitted, that time in a long-suffering tone.

Harry laughed and tossed the pillow aside. "Yeah, you do. But enough of that. Tell me what on earth was going on in your head when you were trying to pull Severus' hair out." Draco looked confused, Harry thought. "Yeah, he was holding you, trying to comfort you and convince you there wasn't a wizard's beating going on, when suddenly you began fighting like a wild man--"

Draco suddenly looked sick again. He actually grabbed a pillow and hugged it. "I . . . uh, that's what I keep dreaming about, actually. That one delusion. I . . . don't you dare laugh."

"I'm not going to laugh, whatever it is!"

"Because it's . . . just stupid."

Harry simply waited. If Draco didn't want to tell him he wasn't going to try to make him, though he did think it would do the other boy some good to talk his way through it.

"I thought Severus was that horrible huge snake the Dark Lord keeps around, all right?" Draco finally groaned. "And it was trying to eat me, and I was trying to pull its head up, away from me. And when I dream, I don't succeed and I end up inside."

Harry couldn't help what he said in reply to that. Talk about gross. "Ugh."

Huffing, Draco crossed his arms. "Yeah, well I told you it was stupid--"

"It's not." Harry thought better than to mention that Voldemort actually did feed people to Nagini. Or threatened to, at least. Though maybe Draco already knew that from all the Death Eater gossip he'd overheard. "You said you keep dreaming about it. What did you mean, a lot tonight? Or every night?"

"Every night." Draco twisted his lips. "I usually wake myself up before you hear me, though. I guess maybe I should try to play with Sals, get used to snakes a bit. And then maybe it wouldn't hit me so hard. But I've had enough of sicking up, now that I know what it's like and I'm sure I'll need that bucket if I so much as touch a snake. There's no hope, I guess."

Harry couldn't help but stare. "Um, Draco? Your father's a Potions Master, you know."

"I'm not asking Severus for Dreamless Sleep."

"Why not, because he's the one who made you eat a--"

"He did not make me," Draco interrupted in a cold voice. "For your information, people do not make me do anything. I ate it because I didn't want to end up in Azkaban and he made it sound bloody well likely that I would if I didn't do something drastic. And believe me, that qualified. And I did my lines because I'd like him to respect me the way he does you, though that's a pipe dream if ever I heard one. And I've started my schoolwork because I think my only hope of staying safe and keeping you that way is to get into the Auror programme which as you well know, requires several quite challenging N.E.W.T.s. Which I might be able to take even if I'm home-schooled instead of recommended by Hogwarts!"

"All right, all right!" Harry held up both his hands. "People don't make you do anything, fine. But why don't you want some potion so you can sleep?"

Draco lifted his shoulders in a haughty motion. "I just don't, all right?"
Something about the situation seemed familiar, Harry thought. Only everything had been reversed. This time it was Draco who'd had the nightmare and was refusing to let his father know about it . . .

Suddenly understanding, Harry jumped up and pointed a finger at his brother. "I get it. You think it's some sort of character flaw to have a bad dream!"

"Oh, shut up, Harry. You're no better at this sort of thing than Granger, and don't forget how she almost mucked things up!"

"Draco, Severus has nightmares himself."

"Yeah, well he has reason, don't you think? He's actually been through things. My nightmares are based on delusions."

"Nagini really did lick your boots. That wasn't a delusion."

"Yes, and thank you for reminding me!"

"Just go ask for some potion, Draco!"

In answer, the other boy grabbed his blankets from the foot of the bed and flung them all the way up to his chin as he threw himself onto his side and closed his eyes.

Well, he wanted to be even, Harry thought. "If you don't go tell Severus you need some potion," Harry threatened, "I'll go tell him myself, and while I'm at it I'll mention you're afraid he won't want you if he knows--"

Draco opened one eye and glared. "You wouldn't."

"Why not? You were going to once!"

"Yeah, but you're better than me," the other boy sneered, sitting up.

"Maybe not--"

Suddenly bundling all his blankets into a ball, Draco then threw them straight at Harry, who stepped to the side before they could slam into him.

"Too bad you missed me."

"Ha, very funny, Harry," groused Draco. "All right then, fine. But you owe me."

"I owe you because I'm making you go get something you need?"

"You aren't making me--"

"Of course not," said Harry, rolling his eyes. "You decided all on your own. I'm sure Severus will respect you more, not less, for that."

"You still owe me," said Draco as he thrust bare feet into slippers and padded towards their closed door.

"Owe you what?"

"I'll let you know."
With that, Draco was gone, the door thudding behind him. Harry thought about doing as Draco had, and opening the door to make sure his brother actually was going to Severus, but then he heard another door open, and a low, deep murmur that could only be their father's voice.

Nodding, Harry curled up on his own bed again. He wasn't worried about Draco, not now. Snape wasn't the type of father who would just hand you a potion so you'd leave him alone. He'd talk everything over with Draco. And since Snape was really good at that . . . yeah, everything would be all right, Harry thought.

He was asleep before Draco got back from talking with their dad.

-----------------------------------------------------------------

"Well, that week went by really fast," Harry said when they were preparing to Apparate back to Grimmauld Place.

"Speak for yourself. It seemed like aeons to me."

"But at least your lines are done now."

"Yeah, too bad you and Severus couldn't manage to finish your own work," said Draco, lifting his chin a bit. "That second bathroom's an absolute shambles."

"It can wait until summer," said Snape. "Draco, I do believe you have something for me."

"Yes, sir," muttered the boy, though he handed over the borrowed wand readily enough. Snape had been letting him use it to duel with Harry earlier that morning. Actually, Harry reflected, Draco had got in quite a bit of practise with his wand. Snape didn't seem to mind him using it at all, as long as Draco was being supervised.

"When you've seen your therapist a few times we can revisit the matter," the Potions Master announced, his dark eyes pleased.

"Yes, sir," Draco said again.

Snape looked a bit as though he was trying not to sigh. Draco saw that, Harry felt sure. He wasn't quite sure why the other boy was being so overtly respectful. At least it wasn't open sarcasm, but Harry couldn't help but feel there was some amount of rebellion mixed up in it somewhere.

But Snape had evidently decided not to make an issue of the matter, so Harry didn't say anything about it either.

After they had arrived back at Hogwarts, Snape consulted a letter which had flooed in during their absence. "Ah, good. Draco's first session with the therapist has been scheduled." He glanced up. "In deference to my teaching duties and the fact that Draco can't travel unaccompanied, she's arranged for evening sessions. Quite good of her, really."

Harry bit his tongue to keep from laughing. He wondered how much longer Snape planned to go on making a pun of the psychiatrist's name. Or how long it would take Draco to notice, perhaps.

"So when do I get to spill my guts?" Draco asked in a tone that was so thoroughly pleasant it had to
be fake. "To a squib, no less."

"There's nothing wrong with squibs, Draco," Harry said.

Nothing wrong? Harry saw Draco mouth.

"They can't help not having magic any more than you can help being stuck-up prat," Harry explained, mimicking the pleasant tone Draco had used the moment before.

"You mustn't insult the good doctor," Snape put in. "Particularly not to her face, though I would also prefer you limit your comments in general to those that might actually serve some purpose."

When the Potions Master turned his back, Draco stuck out his tongue. "When, though?" he pressed after a moment.

"Oh, Wednesday at seven," answered Snape as he walked toward his office.

"Dad," Harry called. "The Express isn't back yet, is it?"

"No, not until later today," said Snape, turning around.

"So can I . . . um, use the Floo to get back to the Tower?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "You are so tired of our company already?"

Harry smiled. "No, but if I sleep here and you walk me to breakfast, I won't have the books I need. I'm pretty sure you don't want Slytherin losing points because I went to Charms unprepared."

"Floo up and get your books and Floo right back," he instructed.

"He just wants to use the Floo!" Draco pointed out. "How long until I get to use it again, that's what I'd like to know--"

"When you've earned the privilege."

By then, Harry was feeling like he shouldn't have brought the Floo up at all. But he had, so . . . "I need some powder--"

Snape handed some over without comment.

"Back in a flash-"

"Actually, I do believe it would be best if you took your time," answered Snape. He glanced at Draco, who gave a heavy sigh.

"Thanks, but Harry can see. Better that he does, really."

"See what?"

Another long sigh. "Me, apologising to your house-elf friend."

Harry did want to see that, but since he figured it was probably wrong to feel that way, he offered, "Oh, no--"

"Oh yes," countered Draco. "I don't want you wondering if I really did it, or if I was sarcastic about it or something. Anyway, Severus was going to let you see me putting the poison in the icing,
remember? And I'm sure you can visualise it even if you never actually saw, so . . . I do want you to see me doing something . . . well, good."

Harry nodded. He wanted to see Draco doing something good, too.

Snape summoned Dobby as he had before.

The elf's eyes were wide as he glanced around. He clearly didn't know why he'd been called, not this time. "Harry Potter is needing something?"

"No, I am," said Draco quite distinctly, each word clipped as if he wasn't quite sure it was the one he needed.

At that, Dobby's eyes narrowed. "Dobby is a free house-elf. Dobby is not bound to the Malfoys--"

"Yes, I know that." Draco cleared his throat. "I . . . would you like to sit down, er . . . Dobby?"

The elf's huge ears flattened down against his head as he said in tones of deep suspicion, "Master Malfoy is wanting Dobby to be sitting?"

Harry remembered then what Dobby had said of the Malfoys years ago, about how horribly they treated their elf-servants.

"Yes, next to me." Draco seated himself on the couch then, and waved to the place alongside him.

Dobby moved slowly and hopped up to perch on the edge of the couch. Crossing his arms in front of his chest, he repeated in a stubborn tone, "Dobby is a free house-elf. Dobby does not have to do what Master Malfoy is wanting."

"No, no you don't." Draco dragged in a breath, his gaze seeking out Snape, who was leaning against the mantle, simply watching. "You're a free elf. I understand that. I . . . Actually, all I want is for you to listen to me for a bit, but if you'd rather leave right now, I'll respect your decision."

Perhaps it was the mention of respect that did it, but Dobby's stiff shoulders relaxed a fraction, then. "Dobby can be listening."

Draco curled a wry lip as though he'd hoped Dobby would refuse and let him off the hook.

"Master Malfoy?"

"Maybe you could call me Draco," the Slytherin boy said. "That other . . . it's not even my name any longer."

"Dobby is knowing that Master Malfoy is Harry Potter's adopted brother," said Dobby, twisting his fingers together as though the whole thing still worried him terribly.

"Right, yes. The thing is . . ." Draco swallowed. "I had to do a lot of thinking over the last week, Dobby. And . . . um, the Venetimorica, that was really a Malfoy-ish thing for me to do, and I wish I hadn't done it. And . . . I'm really sorry you got sick on my account. And I know I said before that I apologised, but this time I really do mean it. I'm very sorry I let anybody get poisoned like that,
Dobby. And . . . well, I hope you can forgive me."

Dobby's eyebrows arched upward. "Master Malfoy is asking a house-elf to be forgiving him?"

"Draco is asking. Draco Snape. Will you accept my apology?"

Dobby frowned, his eyes reproaching Harry as he said, "I will be doing whatever Harry Potter is wanting."

Harry was tempted to intervene then, and tell Dobby to forgive Draco, but that was sort of like Snape's having forced an apology out of Draco in the first place. Forgiveness, like apologies, had to be freely given if it was to mean anything.

"It's between you and Draco, Dobby."

Dobby sat silent, his lack of answer to Draco's question an answer in itself.

"I understand if you can't forgive me," said Draco finally, shaking his head. "Because it's not just this last thing. That only confirmed your opinion of me, I'm sure. You saw me growing up, saw the things I did, how I treated the elves in the manor . . . All right, that makes sense. But Dobby, it's only recently that I've started to really grow up. I . . ." Draco shoved his hands into his pockets. "It's only now that I have a father worthy of respect that I can see how bad it is to emulate Lucius."

The elf pursed his lips, his eyes troubled. "The pumpkin doesn't grow far from the vine, Master Malfoy."

So much for it being between Draco and Dobby, Harry thought. "That's an awful thing to say, Dobby! And would you stop calling him that? It's not his name!"

"If Harry Potter is wishing to trust his brother, Dobby cannot be preventing it. But Dobby is knowing better. Dobby is knowing Malfoys--"

"Dobby--"

"No, Harry," interrupted Draco. "The truth is, Dobby knows a lot more about me than you ever have. And he's a free house-elf; you can't tell him what to think. And I have a longer way to go than I used to think . . . to banish Lucius from my . . . um, psycho."

"Psyche," Snape dryly corrected.

"Right, psyche," murmured Draco as he returned his attention to Dobby, who by then was looking marginally less suspicious. "Well, maybe someday you'll believe that I am loyal to Harry Potter. But whether that ever happens or not, I am sorry I made you ill. And I know this can't make up for it, not in any way, but I have something I'd like to give you." With that, Draco was pulling his hands out of his pockets. One of them emerged holding a small box wrapped in silver paper.

Dobby was slow to take it. Actually, he looked a bit as though he thought it might be hexed, which reminded Harry of how he'd felt himself, months ago. He knew what it was like to have Draco claim reform and offer gifts, so maybe he should be a tad more understanding about Dobby's reluctance to believe a word Draco said.

Eventually--probably because he trusted Harry and Snape, not Draco, Harry thought--the elf grasped the box in his bony hands. He didn't unwrap it, though. He merely looked at it, causing the box and wrappings both to vanish away.
When the glittering remnants of the spell faded, what remained in his palm was a tiny scarf knitted in Slytherin colours.

"It's mine, spelled down to fit you," Draco explained when the elf lifted a confused face. "Because that was cunning, Dobby, your thinking to go get Harry when you knew I was in trouble. I know you did it for Harry and not me, but I'm still grateful for it. I probably can't thank you enough . . . but anyway, I want you to keep using all your cunning to do what's best for Harry, all right? Because we're both on his side, which means we're on the same side."

Dobby didn't answer, though he did add the scarf to the others that were slung about his neck. He glanced once at Harry, then over at Snape, then finally back at Draco. "Dobby will be going now, Master Malfoy."

Draco stood up and nodded, his silver gaze distant, but the moment Dobby had Disapparated, the boy flopped back down to the couch and scowled. "Well, that was certainly difficult. Though I suppose I should have expected it to be."

"You did well," said Snape, leaving his position by the mantle.

Draco's pale features flushed slightly. "I . . . yes, well . . . thank you, Severus."

The Potions Master's gaze took in both his sons. "Shall we have a game of Wizard's Scrabble?"

"I'm not caught up on all my assignments," Draco refused. "And I'm supposed to ask for those back tests tomorrow, so . . ."

"You just have a little too much quizzex," Harry said with a straight face.

Draco looked startled, then smiled slightly. "Well, better too much than too little, you know. You've been in class listening to the professors blather, though. Do you want to help me study?"

"Sure."

"I'm quite certain none of your instructors blather," Snape said in a chiding tone.

"Aran," said Draco and Harry in unison.

"Ah. Well, perhaps he does," admitted their father with a shrug.

"Why doesn't Dumbledore hire a decent Defence teacher?" Harry asked, frustrated by Aran's continuing refusal to allow any nasty Parseltongue in his classroom. "Aran's useless! He's . . . he's pathetic!"

"He can't hire a decent Defence teacher, Harry," Snape explained in a heavy tone. "Surely you've realised by now that the position itself is under a curse of enormous proportions."

"Yeah, one year per teacher." Harry sighed. "So something else would have kept Remus from keeping the position, I suppose, if you hadn't gone and told your students about him being a werewolf."

"Quite likely." When Harry sighed again, Snape's eyebrows drew slightly together. "Are you having some particular difficulty with Professor Aran, Harry?"

"Oh, no," lied Harry, determined to handle things himself. "And even if I was, you know, I wouldn't want to have you intervene. Nobody else has a dad on staff, and there are already too many things
about me that set me apart--"

"Nobody else?" echoed Draco, his voice haughty. "Did I hear you correctly?"

Harry lightly pushed against his brother's shoulder. "All right, fine. Nobody but you. But it's still not

typical, you know."

"Well I for one am very pleased to have my father on staff. Typical or no."

"You prat. I'm glad too and you know it!"

"As long as I don't intervene in your course programme, apparently," Snape dryly put in.

"Yeah, as long as," Harry agreed, making a slight face.

Snape stared at him for a moment, then shrugged and said he would be in his office if either of them

needed anything.

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Nott kept trying to get himself paired with Harry in all the classes they shared. Harry let him about

half the time; after all, Nott still might know something useful. And whether he did or not, he was
definitely easing Harry's entrance into Slytherin. He more-or-less forced the other students to tolerate
it when Harry occasionally joined them for a meal. It was like he wanted Harry to think well of him.

Since Harry had seen that all before, from Draco, who had in fact been sincere about the whole
thing, Harry was left thinking that Nott might be for real, too.

He didn't really believe that, though. Some deep instinct kept telling him that Nott's story about the
plague didn't really add up, and that Nott seemed just a little too eager for his friendship.

It was a balancing act, keeping Nott at a distance while letting the other boy think he was gaining
Harry's trust.

It was also a balancing act trying to make sure he spent enough free time with both his friends and
his family. Of course, he'd just had an entire week with Draco and Snape, and he was supposed to
see them again on Wednesday night so they could all go to Draco's first therapy session. But going
down on his own . . . that was a little different. Harry was pretty sure that Draco would feel slighted
if the only time he saw Harry was when Harry had to.

So Tuesday night after Potions class, Harry hung back so that he could walk home with his father.
Actually, he wanted to ask if they could Floo instead, but he thought it was probably a bad idea.
Draco might take it as Harry showing off that he was allowed to while Draco wasn't.

Harry didn't want to do anything that might send Draco's attitude to what it had been before the
poisoning. He'd been impressed by how well his brother had handled that apology to Dobby, and he
wanted to help Draco stay in a positive frame of mind.

At first, everything at home seemed fine. Draco and he went over some assignments together and
Harry was pleased to learn that his brother was just about caught up in all his subjects. When dinner
appeared--roast chicken with mash--Draco ate it without complaint. That was good. Harry had been
half afraid the other boy would have something scathing to say about Snape's rules restricting their ordering via the Floo.

It was after dinner when things got a bit dicey. Snape reached into his pocket and drew forth a letter.

"From Gringotts," Draco breathed, running his hands over and over the envelope as though it were made of finest silk and just touching it was a pleasure.

Snape nodded, the motion stiff and stern. "When you've read it, we will need to talk, Draco."

Uh-oh. It sounded to Harry like their father had reservations about Draco's new vault. And no wonder, considering the circumstances. Draco might not have killed Walpurgis, but his mother had done it for no better reason than to get him some money, and that made the whole thing pretty icky, at least in Harry's eyes.

"Oh, I won't be buying shirts with diamond buttons, Severus," laughed Draco, his eyes sparkling so much they might well be diamonds. "You made it clear enough that day in Hogsmeade that no son of yours will be . . .what were your words? Given to public extravagance. Don't worry about it."

"I have another matter to broach with you."

Draco bounced up and down on his heels. "Well, let me just read this then and find out how much I've got." With that, he was ripping open the letter and scanning it.

Whatever it said though, wasn't what Draco had been expecting. The expression on his face fell, his eyes losing their sparkle, though they still gleamed in some hard way Harry was at a loss to define.

What was even stranger was the amount of time Draco spent reading. Harry knew for a fact that his brother was a fast reader, but he pored over the letter for what seemed like hours, his eyes like chipped ice by the end.

Then, he folded the square of parchment back into thirds and thrust it back into his pocket, his whole attitude radiating nonchalance. "So, that's that," he said, forced brightness in his voice. "Harry, let's finish our latest Potions essays before Severus here concludes we're worthless."

Harry couldn't help but stare. "What did your letter say?"

That got him a rather condescending look. "Really," drawled the other boy, "one's finances are personal. Have I pried into how many Galleons your vaults hold?"

At least that was better than a lecture on breeding or upbringing, but one thing about it still bothered Harry. Draco obviously felt that personal topics were off-limits, which of course was one more proof, as if Harry needed it, that Draco just didn't understand that they really were family.

"Yes, actually you have pried," retorted Harry. "Into Severus' finances, that is. You asked me how much money he had when you were worried we might have to leave England."

"Well that was an extraordinary circumstance," Draco said with a little toss of his head. Harry thought he looked like he was strongly tempted to say something much ruder and was controlling himself.

"Yes, it was." Harry decided he'd better let the matter go, so he fetched his Potions text from his school bag and set to rereading the section on ingredients that resisted charms.

"Perhaps you'll speak with me now, Draco," prompted Snape in his deep voice. "In my office."
Draco slanted his father a wry look. "Fine. Should be a short conversation, as these things go."

The remark puzzled Harry. It didn't even end up being true. Draco and Snape were gone for the better part of an hour. By the time they came out, Harry was looking over his finished draft for things he might have forgotten to include.

"Everything all right?"

"Of course," said Draco, his voice again that airy one that meant he was hiding something.

"Draco," admonished Snape in a warning tone.

"Oh, don't get your robes all in a twist. I said I'd tell him, so fine!"

Harry got a sense then of what had taken so long. Draco didn't want to tell him whatever it was, and Snape had insisted.

"It's like this," Draco went on after a moment. His hands were in his pockets again, a sure sign he was feeling ill-at-ease. "The letter from Gringotts. It turns out that there's no vault for me after all."

A number of emotions swamped Harry all at once. He was shocked at the news, and worried that Draco would come ung m. But most of all, he was relieved at this turn of events. He hadn't really been looking forward to watching Draco spend money his mother had killed someone for, after all. What an example of motherly love! And with that example, it was no wonder Draco's values were . . . well, almost non-existent at times. But now, with the money gone . . . yeah, Harry did feel better about the whole thing.

But on the other hand, he didn't really want Draco to be poor, either. That was awful. Particularly for someone like Draco.

"Oh," he said, realising at once that expressing his relief would be ill-advised. He was careful to keep his voice neutral. "Um, did Walpurgis not change his will in your favour then?"

"He sort of did." Draco scowled. "Walpurgis was smarter than Narcissa gave him credit for, though. He made me his sole heir, all right. But then he left instructions that if he died in any way that Gringotts could term mysterious, the goblins were to deliver all his Galleons and deeds and other property--everything--into this charitable trust he had set up years ago. He'd been funding it for quite some time." Draco glanced back at his brother. "So that's it, then. I thought I would be all right, you know, money-wise--Merlin, what an absolutely plebeian word--but as it turns out, I'm poor after all. About as poor as you can get. All I have is the allowance Severus gives us, and a few things from back when Lucius was footing my bills. You know, things that didn't vanish when the clothes and such I had bought with my vault money did." Draco shuddered a bit. "Good thing I didn't banish them all, I suppose. I was going to, as soon as my new vault was settled. I was going to buy all new things."

Harry bit his lip, wondering if he should say he was sorry even though he mostly wasn't.

"Don't everyone weep at once."

"I . . . I'm just really shocked," Harry managed to answer. "Why didn't you want to tell me?"

"Because it's nothing to do with you."

"Of course it is. We're brothers!"
Draco lifted his nose in the air. "Well, maybe I didn't want to tell you because of what happened last time. Are you going to go all superior on me and offer me charity again?"

"No, I wasn't going to offer you charity, you prat."

"Good," said Draco in a tone halfway between conciliation and a sneer. "Because the one thing I have left is my pride and I won't be trading it away to you."

"Yeah, well maybe someday you'll have more than pride," Harry said, raising his voice slightly. "Maybe you'll figure out you have a family too, and that there's nothing wrong with . . ." Catching a look from his father, Harry abruptly broke off. "Never mind. I just think . . . no, never mind."

Draco's lips twisted. "I know what you think, Harry. Same as Severus, no doubt. So never mind sounds about right. I don't need to hear twice in one evening how somebody's just as glad the money's gone."

"I did not say precisely that."

"No, you said . . . oh, what's the point?" Draco threw his hands up. "It's gone anyway, so it doesn't matter now, does it? And I did understand what you meant, Severus, about murder not being the way to fill one's vault. It's just . . . you know, it's not my fault that my mother did that. I didn't put her up to it. I didn't even know about it!"

"Does that mean you should condone her actions by accepting the bequest, though?"

Draco bared his teeth. "Well, that's what they call a moot point, isn't it now?"

"Yes, fortunately."

"I can tell you're heartbroken over my reversal of fortune."

Even through the sarcasm, Draco's voice sounded like it was about to fracture. Concerned about that, Harry walked over and put a hand on his brother's shoulder. "Are you going to be all right?"

"No, I'm going to curl up into a little ball and die, Harry."

Draco made an attempt to grin, though the expression came off looking hideous since he was obviously still quite distraught. "I can tell you're heartbroken over my reversal of fortune."

Harry nodded slowly, thinking about all the adjustments Draco had made this year. In rejecting a future with the Death Eaters, he'd accepted an entirely new way of thought. He'd lost his family, and then his fortune once before. He'd lost the girl he loved, and then been accused of her murder and expelled from the only place he felt safe.

He'd had to accept that his own father had tried--was still trying, probably--to have him killed.

And somehow he'd come through it with enough good spirits to take this new adjustment pretty well, all things considered. "Thanks for telling me about Walpurgis' will," Harry finally said. "I think it's better for family members not to keep secrets."

"It wasn't so much keeping a secret as . . ." Draco sighed, and brushed Harry's hand away. "I was trying to be mature. Strange concept, I know. I wasn't going to say anything ever. Because that's better than whinging on about it, see?"

"You haven't whinged. You've just been honest. And that's all right."
"Ha, honest. You wouldn't know honest if it hexed you, Harry. I haven't been honest at all."

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw his father turning his full attention to the conversation.

"What do you mean?" asked Harry, puzzled.

"I wasn't only trying to be mature," said Draco with a grimace. "I also thought . . . you've heard the kinds of things I say about Weasley's . . . I mean, Ronald's lack of funds."

Harry's eyebrows drew together. "And what, you thought I'd make fun of you? That's daft! You couldn't have thought that--"

"No, you prat," Draco said, shaking his head. "Put yourself in my place, Harry. Look . . . I know you're not like me, but I am like me, so when I think, I can only think the way I know how to think, all right? And when I look at people, rich or poor makes a difference. Some part of me knows it probably shouldn't, but it does, and that's me, and there it is."

It took Harry a moment to make sense out of all that, but when the meaning came clear, he didn't know whether to strangle Draco or burst out laughing. "Oh, for God's sake! You mean you thought I'd think less of you for being poor? Like you less, something like that?"

Draco's defensive shrug said more than his words did. "It crossed my mind."

"You're . . . really stupid." Harry paused to think. "So what, you'd turn your loyalties to Voldemort if I were to lose all my money?"

He hadn't meant the question seriously, but Draco took it that way.

"Well if I had a safe way to return to the Dark Lord--which isn't likely, you realise--I wouldn't take it, no. Why would I want to be his slave? I may have lost my money, but I haven't lost my mind, Harry."

"But you'd think less of me if I were poor!"

"I . . . look, I don't know, all right? Severus doesn't exactly have Galleons pouring out his ears and I've always respected him . . . but you know, deep down I thought I probably shouldn't." Draco sighed. "Anyway, what does it matter, Harry? You know now."

Recognising the olive branch, Harry nodded slightly. "All right."

Draco swiftly changed the subject. "So Potions. Your essay looks about finished. Can I read it?"

"Perhaps you should write your own before you consult his," chided Snape.

"Oh, like Harry never reads Granger's . . . sorry, Hermione's, before he starts in on his."

Harry said nothing, not that the tactic worked.

"Harry?" prompted his father.

"Well it's not cheating," said Harry, flushing. "It's just one more resource, right? And I don't copy hers. Sometimes I don't even understand hers all that well, to be honest."

Snape inclined his head, apparently giving up the argument. "It's good to see you two working well together, at any rate."
All the same, Draco waited until Snape had left the room before he held a hand out, fingers beckoning.

Laughing a little, Harry handed his essay over. He wasn't too surprised when Draco proceeded to tell him about six things he'd got wrong.

Harry's second draft was much improved, but he somehow doubted it was as good as Draco's would be.

-----------------------------------------------

Harry had eaten at the Slytherin table at lunch on Monday, but he went there again for Wednesday dinner, both times when Snape was in the Great Hall. Goyle asked again about Draco, seeming even more down than before, but when Harry said that maybe the murder would be cleared up soon and Draco’s expulsion would be reversed, he was treated to glares from every direction. Apparently Draco’s superior airs—not to mention his denunciation of Voldemort—hadn't endeared him to his house mates. Even Crabbe looked hostile; only Goyle and Nott reacted favourably to Harry’s speculation about Draco being able to return.

For all that though, more people were talking to Harry when he ate at the Slytherin table. That had to be worth something, even if the topic of conversation all too often seemed to centre on Quidditch and how Harry should start practising his Seeker skills if he ever wanted to recover them. Harry saw that as a veiled hint that he ought to get his magic back in order so that he could play again -- play for Slytherin.

Snape fetched him from the Slytherin table on Wednesday after dessert. Together they walked down to the dungeons, discussing inconsequentials since they might be overheard. When they reached Snape’s quarters, it was to find Draco dressed in robes that seemed formal for all they were stark and black.

Maybe it was the lack of any crest, Harry thought. Honorary Slytherin or no, Draco still refused to wear his house symbol. That was a bit odd considering he'd considered Slytherin colours an honour when he'd bestowed them on Dobby, but Harry figured that Draco was probably feeling confused on a number of fronts.

And his formal clothing now, that was a defence against the feeling.

It was also inappropriate, considering where they were headed that evening.

"We'll have to blend in with the Muggle population in Surrey," Snape said, frowning. "Change into something suitable, Draco. Harry, I think if you merely divest yourself of the robe your attire will do."

"What about yours?"

Snape looked down at his flowing teaching robes. "I had thought a simple disillusionment charm would do."

"Ha." Draco huffed. "If I have to go about in Muggle clothes in public then so do you."

"Very well." Snape grimaced, but acquiesced.
He emerged in a few moments wearing trousers and a long-sleeved shirt, both in unrelenting black. Draco was dressed similarly in grey, though he was wearing a pair of dragonhide boots. Snape shook his head and transfigured them to a dark brown leather. Draco petulantly complained that they pinched.

Ignoring that, Snape flooed them all to Arabella Figg's house on Privet Drive.

Draco's mouth dropped open as he stepped into the living room and looked around. He'd never been in a Muggle or squib dwelling before, Harry surmised, a little irritated when Draco moved close to him and whispered, "You grew up like this?"

Harry just nodded.

The longer Draco glanced about, the more horrified he appeared. "Merlin's beard! I knew you had a deprived childhood, Harry, but I never dreamed your house was quite as common and Mugglish as this--"

"It's good to see you again, Mrs Figg," Harry loudly interrupted. "And it's good of you to let us use your Floo."

"You're quite welcome, Harry," said Arabella Figg, her motherly hands brushing ash off his shoulders. She didn't do the same for Draco, but Harry could hardly blame her for that. "So grown up you seem now!"

"Thanks, Mrs Figg." Harry stepped away from her fussing before it grew too smothering. "Did you hear I'd been adopted by Severus? Me and Draco both."

"Yes, I read that, dear," said Mrs Figg, nodding.

"If you'll excuse us, Arabella, we'll be on our way," Snape said, ushering both his sons out. "We've an appointment to keep, but we do thank you assisting our travels."

"Oh, you're most welcome." Mrs Figg beamed.

As Snape led the way toward Magnolia Crescent, Harry couldn't help but glance back toward the site where Number Four had been. He wasn't sure what he expected to see. A blackened patch of earth, perhaps. Instead, a half-framed house stood on the site. Harry blinked, and tugged on his father's arm, but Snape murmured that the good doctor would be waiting and that the house, after all, would still be there when they returned to Privet Drive later.

"Right . . ."

Draco's lip was curled in contempt. "The homes here are all so small, and smashed close together. It must have been like living inside a box of Sugar Quills--"

"I don't believe my cottage is spaciousness itself," Snape mildly remarked as they walked on.

"Well that's different; at least you have a good stretch of land--"

"Draco--" Harry cut himself off, since he didn't think it would do them any good to get into a huge row right before they saw the therapist.

Snape slanted him an approving glance. That was nice.

a few minutes' walk later, they had reached a block of offices. Snape led them through the front the
doors and up three flights of stairs to a wooden door discreetly labelled Dr. Marsha Goode. One brisk knock, and they were admitted by a slender woman with shoulder-length brown hair.

Fortyish, her face slightly lined, she ushered them into a room that seemed more a lounge than an office, at least to Harry. There wasn't a desk anywhere, though there were several couches and easy chairs. Only when everyone was seated did she begin to make introductions.

"I'm Dr. Goode, and I've met your father once before," she said, neatly crossing her ankles. "Please feel free to call me Marsha if you wish." She glanced at the boy sitting directly opposite her. "You must be Draco Snape."

Draco curled a lip and nodded without confirming it out loud.

The therapist smiled warmly, just as if she hadn't noticed that one of her visitors was regarding her office with something less than admiration. Then she turned her attention towards Harry. Her gaze sought out his scar in a way Harry recognised only too well. If he didn't know better, he'd assume she was a witch. But maybe more squibs had heard of him than he knew.

"Harry Potter," she said. "I've heard a lot about you."

Harry repressed a desire to sigh out loud, and decided the best thing he could do was turn the tables. "I've heard a bit about you, too. From my cousin Dudley. Thanks for helping him after the Dementor attack scared him silly."

"Thank you for so warmly accepting him back into your life, even after all that had passed between you," Dr. Goode murmured. "You must be a very nice young man."

"Excuse me," Draco broke in, leaning forward, "but I thought that the point of these sessions was actually to help me, not fawn over Harry Potter."

"Yes, of course," said the therapist, an expression of extreme professionalism transforming her features. "So, Professor Snape gave me all the particulars, but I'd like to hear them again from you. Both of you," she said, her glance including Harry. "How long has it been since you were adopted?"

"Him, months; me, weeks," said Draco with a slight sneer.

"We've both been his sons for about the same length of time," Harry disagreed. "But Draco's right about when it became legal for each of us."

"Why the differential?" Dr. Goode smiled then. "I mean, why the lapse in time--"

"We know what differential means, Dr. Goode," said Draco, that time with a smile so cold Harry felt chilled. "Harry and I have both attended Britain's premier school of Wizarding and Witchcraft for six years. Though I'm now expelled, as you no doubt know. Be that as it may, you obviously have no idea how challenging the curricula are at a private school like Hogwarts, not if you think we've yet to encounter the word differential."

"My apologies," said the doctor, folding her hands together as she leaned back in her chair. "My specialty is adolescents and many of them don't have as advanced a vocabulary as you appear to."

"Oh, well if you're going to compare wizards to Harry's fat dolt of a Muggle cousin--"

"Hey, don't insult Dudley!" Harry erupted. "He can't help being a Muggle!"
"Can he help being fat, or a dolt, or a lout?"

The therapist spoke directly to Snape, then. "I see you have your hands full, Professor."

Snape gave her a look that clearly meant, you think? Out loud though, all he said was a reserved, "Indeed."

"Oh, sure," sneered Draco. "Sympathize with Severus over how awful a person I am, right. Now we've got off at the right Floo, Doctor. Oh, but that's a wizarding idiom, isn't it? So you wouldn't understand. Note however that I do know a word like idiom--"

"Draco," the therapist smoothly interrupted. "I didn't mean that your father had his hands full with you, but rather with the two of you. We won't be playing good child, bad child, not in my office. It's my hope I can encourage you and your brother not to play it at all, as it's really very destructive for both of you."

"We're not . . . playing at anything," Harry objected.

"Playing is perhaps a misnomer, but it is true that you and Draco engage in a certain amount of rivalry, Harry. I've witnessed as much already. He states the simple truth that you were adopted first, and you immediately see a need to correct his version by focusing on intangibles rather than legalities. In so doing, you position yourself as the more understanding, more reasonable son and leave him looking like the ungrateful, intractable son."

Harry would have thought that Draco would feel smug that the therapist was basically rebuking Harry, but apparently the doctor's point about rivalry was well-taken. "I thought this session was supposed to be about me," he repeated, suddenly standing up. "But if all you want to do is talk to Harry, then fine! I'll just cool my heels outside and thank Merlin to be out of your . . . exceedingly provincial décor!"

"Draco, sit down," Snape ordered.

Draco did, though he made a show of dusting off the sofa cushion, even pretending to find a flea or something. He flicked it away with a disgusted look on his face.

Dr. Goode was hardly fazed. "You were born into great wealth, I understand."

"Do you understand it?" Draco sneered. "In my experience the lesser-born generally don't."

Harry wasn't sure if his brother meant Ron or Harry by that.

"But you aren't wealthy now."

The therapist had scarcely stopped speaking before Draco was throwing a nasty look towards his father. "You keep her pretty well informed, don't you?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "I mentioned your having been disowned by Lucius."

"Oh," said Draco, his lips forming a straight line as he turned back towards Dr. Goode. "So I'm not wealthy now. So what? You'll still get paid, if that's what's worrying you."

Harry managed to resist an impulse to criticise his brother, but the look on his face pretty much spoke for him.

The therapist ignored all of it to say, "You've recently lost all you were born into, including your
"So you're not so well-informed," announced Draco with an air of triumph. "I didn't lose my name, Martha. Changing it was a deliberate decision."

"Marsha. But my point is merely this: you're feeling defensive about your changed circumstances. You take great pains to look down on others because you're anxious not to be mistaken for someone poor, especially now that you are exactly that."

A sly look slid into Draco's eyes. "Maybe I'm not so much defensive as overcompensating."

"I don't believe that's the case, no--"

"Or it could be dislocated personality syndrome," continued Draco in a bored voice. "Or perhaps more a case of manic depression. Do you think I might have a problem with displaced rage?"

"I think you've been reading psychology books."

"Muggle ones," sneered Draco. "And trust me, they don't really apply."

"Of course they do. You're human, aren't you?"

"I don't know," Draco shot back. "Harry, are Slytherins human?"

"I'm still deciding," retorted Harry.

"You self-important prat!"

"Let's just talk normally to the doctor, all right?"

"There you go positioning yourself as the good son!" shouted Draco. "Again!"

"I just meant--" Frustrated, Harry heard his own voice getting louder. "What do you want me to do, start poisoning people too?"

"Only if you want to choke down a poisoned fairy cake like I did, but you probably wouldn't have to, I bet--"

The noise of a throat being cleared belatedly reminded Harry that Draco and he had an audience. Well, one besides Snape, but he was used to watching them squabble.

"The family dynamic here is quite something," announced Marsha Goode. Her brown eyes were steady as she assessed all three of them. "I realise that you two are classed as Slytherins while Harry is a Griffinbore--"

"Griffinbore!" Draco slapped a palm against his thigh, he was laughing so hard.

"Gryffindor," Harry corrected, glaring briefly at Draco. "And yeah, that's true. But I was almost sorted into Slytherin, so it's not like I'm that left out."

Dr. Goode smiled and nodded, making Harry feel as if he was being humoured. "We'll leave that aside for the moment, I think. I have another concern, this one far more immediate. Draco, you mentioned being poisoned recently? Can you tell me the circumstances surrounding that?"

"I...uh..." Draco's cheeks flushed. "Well, it's complicated."
The therapist smiled again, this time with so much empathy that Harry wondered what she'd suffered in her life, to want to become a trauma specialist. "It always is, yes. You said the poison was in a fairy cake . . . I'd just like to know, did you realise the cake was tainted before you ate it?"

"Well, yes, but it's not like you're thinking," Draco hastened to explain. "I'm not suicidal. I'm the opposite, whatever that is. I want very much to stay alive and healthy."

"Then why did you deliberately consume poison?" The therapist shook her head. "Your father told me why he wanted you to receive counselling, you understand. I know about your attempt to poison your classmates at Hogwarts. Now, guilt is a strange thing that can take even stranger forms--"

"I'm not suicidal!" Draco exclaimed. "I only ate it because--"

"Because?"

Pursing his lips together, Draco refused to answer.

"I asked him to," Snape spoke into the void, his deep voice clearly startling the therapist. Or maybe it was his words.

"You . . . asked him to," she repeated, deadpan.

"Yes." Snape's black eyes bored into hers. "To help him learn remorse. Dr. Goode, I've no doubt you won't understand this given your background, but the world the three of us inhabit is often a world of extremes. Sometimes punishment must be as well."

Draco nodded, clearly eager to do everything he could to help Snape out of an awkward situation. "Yeah, like the time I was turned into a ferret for casting hexes."

The doctor's mouth dropped open. "Your father poisons you and turns you into a ferret."

"No, the ferret thing was a teacher. Actually, he was a spy of the Dark Lord come to make sure Harry won the Triwizard Tournament and we only thought he was a teacher--"

"Too much information, Draco," Snape softly averred. "Dr. Goode . . . I've a feeling you'd like to speak with me alone. Shall I ask my sons to wait in your antechamber?"

"Yes, please," she said rather weakly, though Harry had a feeling his father was in for a stern lecture once impressionable adolescents were out of the way. He wished he had a pair of Extendable Ears with him.

It turned out he didn't need them. Snape was more than willing to discuss his private conversation once they were walking back toward Privet Drive. "The good doctor chided me rather endlessly," he casually disclosed. An exaggeration, since he'd been holed up with her for less than fifteen minutes.

"And what, you cast *Obliviate* to shut her up?"

"She's hardly likely to be able to help you if I make her forget salient facts, Draco."

"Well, there is that . . ."

"She told me that were we under the jurisdiction of Muggle law she would be ethically constrained to report my *offence*, as she termed it--"

"À la Granger."
"Something like that yes," Snape dryly admitted. "However, she also admitted her vast ignorance of wizarding standards. The ferret example was actually quite helpful. She's now under the impression that discipline in the wizarding world is, as she put it, a different kettle of fish."

"What a quaint Muggle turn of phrase," drawled Draco.

"So she settled for merely berating me," Snape concluded. "I had to promise not to poison you again, Draco. Or you at all, Harry. Also, I'm admonished not to punish you by means of transfiguration."

"I should have complained about excessive lines," said Draco in a thoughtful voice.

"Yes, well you'll have ample opportunity to complain about whatever you wish in future, each Wednesday evening." Snape briefly patted Draco's shoulder.

"She doesn't still think I'm suicidal, one hopes."

"No, I managed to dissuade her on that account." Snape turned to Harry. "Draco's sessions are by necessity private but the good doctor wished me to convey that she is more than willing to counsel you should you feel troubled in any way."

Harry shook his head. "I'm doing all right."

"You're certain?"

"He's just showing me up again, Severus." Draco made a face. "He's the strong, stoic type who can do without help."

"Uh . . . maybe not," said Harry, for they had just then turned back onto Privet Drive and he was looking at the construction in progress at Number Four. An eerie skeleton of a house standing in the moonlight. Harry shivered.

"You needn't go look at it if you've changed your mind," Snape quietly said against his ear.

Harry fortified himself with a breath. He shouldn't be so shocked, after all. The house had been insured; it only stood to reason that it would be re-built. "I want to look."

At that hour, nobody was about. Harry wandered through the ground floor, the floorboards creaking under his feet. Dudley had mentioned something about wanting to sell the property, Harry remembered. He wondered who would buy it, wondered if they would have children who would climb the trees in the backyard. The trees had survived the Death Eater attack . . .

Harry stood staring out the space for a window, his gaze fixed on the tree he'd scrambled up when Ripper would chase him. Would the family who came to live here have an orphaned nephew to take in? Would they treat him as their own?

Snape and Draco had been silent, letting him wander Number Four on his own, but when Harry stood so long looking out at the yard, Draco came up behind him and tapped him lightly on the shoulder.

"Harry."

"I know, time to go." Harry sighed, leaning on the unfinished wall as he turned around.

"No, that's not it." Draco made an uncertain gesture with his hand. "I wanted to say . . . it must have been awful growing up here."
"Well, it's not a manor, if that's what you mean."

"No, I meant . . ." Draco's silver eyes caught a ray of moonlight and shined. "With Muggles all around, and nobody who could understand you. Nobody who even tried. Cut off from your rightful place in our world . . . it must have been rough."

"It was rough." Harry sighed and turned his face away. "But not because of that. I didn't know I was cut off, you see. I didn't know why they didn't understand me, not until Hagrid came for me. But I knew they didn't love me. I mean, I knew they couldn't, and I knew that the reason for that was that something was wrong with me."

"Not wrong."

"Yeah, of course." Easy to say, Harry thought. He'd been telling himself for six years that his travesty of a childhood had been their fault and not his. He even knew it was true. But sometimes, it was still hard for him to believe that.

"Come with me," Draco said. "I want to show you something."

Harry frankly couldn't imagine what Draco could have to show him. Harry was the one who'd grown up here, after all. And while this new floor plan didn't exactly duplicate the old, it was largely similar.

One thing was different though. And Draco had noticed, though Harry hadn't. Perhaps he'd been trying not to see.

Draco gestured to the staircase and smiled.

"There's no cupboard under the stairs," said Harry, his breath catching. Where one should be, there was instead another flight of stairs leading down into a cellar. Rough framing for a door would conceal it someday, but that hadn't been completed yet. "I bet Dudley insisted."

"Well, if so I take back what I said about him being a lout."

"I'm going to see Dudley over the summer and you're going to be nice," Harry said, turning around to look at Draco.

"Now when have I ever not been nice, Harry?"

Harry smiled wryly. "A couple of times?"

"Once. Maybe."

Harry smiled more widely. "Yes, well, that's all behind us. And there's something I've been meaning to say. About the money thing. I know, it has to be hard . . . but you're taking it really well."

"Hmm, well whinging on has a certain appeal, I will admit," Draco airily admitted. "Imagine how miserable I could make everyone. But . . . I think I've probably exhausted your patience already, what with the expulsion and the adoption and my . . . hmm, attitude lately."

"True." Harry laughed, "but if you want to whinge, I'll still listen."

"I'll keep that in mind." Draco cracked a smile of his own. "But I'm trying to be mature. Remember?"

"Yeah. You know, I remember starting this year thinking I'd try that, too. And then . . . it all just got
away from me."

Draco shrugged. "You do all right, Harry. But . . . you don't have to try so hard with Severus all the
time. That good son thing you do. Maybe it's not all about showing me up; I don't know. Maybe
you're just worried still, about losing him. You did say it was your biggest fear. But you couldn't get
rid of him if you tried." A strange look crossed his face. "Trust me on that. I know."

They stood in silence for a while after that, Harry thinking over what Draco had said, until a new
voice echoed from behind them.

"Harry, have you had enough time here?"

"I think so, Dad," Harry said, glancing once more at the space where the cupboard used to be. He
felt odd. Like things had come full circle now, and there was a chance to start again and get it right.
He turned his back on the stairway, and smiled over towards where their father was standing. "Yeah,
I'm done." And then, to the side, "Thanks, Draco."

His brother inclined his head before leading the way out of Number Four.
"Professor, could I have a word?" asked Harry a couple of weeks later after Transfiguration class.

"What is it, Potter?" asked McGonagall, peering over her spectacles in a way that reminded Harry of Dumbledore.

"It's about Defence class," Harry began. "Professor Aran said that--"

"If you're having difficulties with another instructor I suggest you take it up with him." McGonagall briskly tapped a pile of finished student work to make the scrolls roll themselves up more tightly. "Now, if there's nothing else I have a prior engagement this evening, Potter."

She meant an Order meeting, Harry knew. Snape had mentioned it the night before when Harry had gone down to dinner. He'd also mentioned that the meeting didn't start until about nine o'clock, by which time he would have returned from escorting Draco to Surrey for his Wednesday evening therapy session.

"I think you have enough time to talk with me. And before you just send me back to Aran, you should know that he was the one who sent me to you."

"That'll be quite enough cheek," rebuked his teacher. "So then, tell me what you've done."

"This isn't going well," Harry remarked dryly. "I haven't done anything, Professor. I just wanted to ask you a favour, is all. We're having a test in Defence tomorrow and I wondered if you could come mark me."

Well, at least he'd got her to stop making assumptions. Now she was staring at him, instead. "Surely your Defence teacher should be the one assessing your progress."

"Yeah," Harry said, hating this. But there was no hope for it. "It's like this. Professor Aran, he hates Parseltongue and he won't let me use it during class or in front of him. He says it's nasty. So I've been doing all my spell work outside of class time--"

"And what do you do during class time, pray tell?"

Harry swallowed. "Um, get knocked on my arse, mostly. Well, when we're doing practical work anyway."

Her voice softened marginally. "What does Severus have to say about all this?"

"Uh, not much," hedged Harry.

He should have known that McGonagall would be wise to that trick. "You really ought to tell him, Harry."

"I don't want to run complaining to my father every time I have a problem with another teacher."

"But you've no hesitation to complain to me?"

Harry shifted on his feet. "Well I wouldn't say that. I've been dealing with it on my own for weeks. And I'm not complaining. I have an agreement with Aran, that's all--"

"Professor Aran, Harry."
"Right, yes," said Harry, sighing. "So anyway, Professor Aran agreed I could take my practical tests in Parseltongue as long as another teacher came to mark me."

"How did you get him to agree to that, if he thinks Parseltongue is so terrible?"

Harry winced. "Um . . . I said I had to have a good mark to qualify for the Auror's program, so if he made it impossible to pass his class I'd have no choice but to tell my father about the whole thing."

McGonagall, Harry saw, looked amused. "I see that snake on your crest isn't merely decorative."

"No . . . the Sorting Hat suggested Slytherin before Gryffindor, actually."

"Yes, Severus mentioned as much. Hard to imagine," murmured McGonagall. "Well, be that as it may, Potter, don't you think that he would be more qualified to judge your Defence skills?"

"You're qualified enough," Harry muttered. "Will you help me, Professor?"

"I'd much rather take Aaron Aran to task than enable him to continue inflicting his base prejudice on you," McGonagall said, her voice hardening.

Aaron Aran? If the situation hadn't been so serious, Harry might have smiled at that. "I'd really rather you just come mark my spells," Harry said, cringing a little at the pleading sound of his own voice.

"If you have it out with Professor Aran, my father will hear, I'm sure. And he'll probably fillet Professor Aran. Really, it's not so bad. I mean, class with him is actually a big step up from Dolores Umbridge."

Without realising it, Harry moved one hand over the other so he could hide the scar he'd got the year before.

"Oh, Harry." McGonagall shook her head, her eyes rueful. "You've really had a time, haven't you? Well, I personally think you should tell Severus about this, or failing that, allow me to do the honours. But if you're truly determined to handle the matter on your own, then I'll come mark you, yes."

"Thank you ma'am," Harry said sincerely. It felt like a crushing weight had just been lifted from his chest and he could breathe again. Aran was fated to only last a few more weeks, anyway, and maybe for seventh-year Defence he'd get a teacher who could stand Parseltongue. So what did it matter, really?

"Directly after last class tomorrow, then?"

Harry nodded, chewing a lip a little bit. "Does my new crest bother you, Professor? You've never said."

"I'm afraid I'll always think of you as a Gryffindor," McGonagall briskly returned. "Be that as it may, I do understand the situation, Harry. You've two houses now and you must endeavour to belong to both. As you are. Severus must be very proud of you."

"I hope so."

McGonagall reached across her desk and lightly clasped his hand. "Oh, he is. I'm sure you know that, Harry."

"Well . . . sometimes he is, I know. Except for when I muck things up, he really gets angry. At least he's not so vicious about it as he used to be." Harry nodded, thinking of how his father had said that
he'd finally forgiven James Potter.

"It's a good deal for him to balance, being a father. Let alone to you and Mr Malfoy both."

"Oh, we get on pretty well these days."

"Wonders truly never do cease, then," said McGonagall dryly as she let his hand go. "I'll stop by Professor Aran's class tomorrow."

"Thanks," said Harry, hefting his school bag onto his shoulder as he turned to join Ron and Hermione, who were waiting by the door.

Aran's class the next day consisted of a lengthy written exam about ways to deal with Dark Creatures. Considering they'd covered that topic for an entire year with Remus, they really didn't need to study it again. Besides, just how often did one run across kappas and wild vampires? Harry was pretty frustrated as he wrote out answer after answer. Such a total waste of his time, when they could all be learning real Defence, could be learning things they'd really need to know to survive the coming war.

Even the practical component to this test was a joke. Aran was calling up students one at a time to his desk so they could prove they knew various defensive spells one might use against various dark creatures. Unlike with Remus, though, Aran wasn't actually making them force any real creatures back. They had to pretend.

And it was review besides.


"Well done, Mr Weasley," said Aran, beaming a bright smile.

Ron didn't reply. Harry guessed that was because anything he might say would most likely lose Gryffindor some points.

Harry gave him a thumbs-up sign, then went back to writing out the bloody obvious on his test.

When it was Nott's turn to do the practical, he went a little bit out of his way, walking past Harry's desk when he didn't have to. "Watch this," he said out of the corner of his mouth as he passed by.

"What's he want now?" mouthed Ron beside him.

Harry raised his eyebrows and shrugged, gesturing that they might as well watch as the other boy had said.

At first, everything about Nott's demonstration was ordinary, though Harry couldn't help but notice that all the Slytherins were casting him interested glances every few seconds. Apparently he'd told them to watch him, too.

"And now the charm to ward off a boggart, Mr Nott," said Aran.

Nott cleared his throat and brandished his wand. "Yerridiculous," he said, flinging his arm out so his
wand would point directly at the teacher. "Yerridicious. Yerridicious!"

"Once is sufficient, thank you," said Aran, giving no hint that he'd noticed the extra syllable, let alone the way Nott had clearly said *ridiculous* instead of the slightly odd pronunciation the charm really required.

"But I'm pretending there are multiple boggarts," Nott explained in an innocent-sounding voice. "Oh, there's another one now. Yerridicious!"

The Slytherins burst out laughing, and even the Gryffindors were having a hard time not joining in.

"Can I have extra credit for banishing more than one boggart, sir?" asked Nott, his voice that time the epitome of politeness.

"No, but you'll get full marks for a job well done," said Aran, his own voice robust.

At that, the Gryffindors burst out laughing as well.

Nott somehow executed a little bow, but without it looking like one. Aran certainly didn't appear to notice. When the Slytherin boy walked back toward his desk, he again took a slight detour that brought him alongside Harry's.

"Brilliant!" said Harry under his breath.

Nott paused for an instant. "Thanks. Meet me outside afterwards? There's something I want to ask you."

Harry gave a tiny shake of his head. "I have to stay late. You know, the Parseltongue thing. Separate practical."

"I'll catch you later."

The minute Nott was out of earshot, Ron leaned over. "What could *he* want to ask you?"

Harry shrugged. "No idea."

"Shhh!" chided Hermione, her eyes flashing.

"Oh, you *shhhh* if it's so important," said Ron carelessly.

Hermione wrinkled her nose as though there were something a trifle fetid in the air, then went back to her test, her stiff posture announcing her irritation.

"What's with you two?" asked Harry in some frustration, though he kept his voice to an undertone. "This is getting ridiculous--"

"Ridiculous?" asked Aran from just a few feet away. Any other teacher would have been in a huff that he'd been talking during the test, but not Aran. Harry soon realised why. The teacher was excited at the thought that Harry might be coming around to his point of view. "Would you like to try your practical now, Mr Potter? Using normal language, that is?"

"No thank you sir," answered Harry with an excess of courtesy. He hoped his voice was dripping with it. Aran was probably too dense to notice anything, but the students at least would get his point. "I can't spell using normal language, sir. No, my magic at the present time is thoroughly abnormal."

Aran inclined his head. "Yes, well it's unfortunate. Perhaps you'll get it sorted yet."
"Yeah," said Harry, something twisting deep inside him. Anger, maybe. It wanted to come out. "Be nice to be average. What's it like for you?"

All around Harry, students drew in sharp breaths.

"We can't all be Tri-Wizard champions," Aran retorted.

"Or decent teachers."

"If you're ever a teacher yourself you'll have some understanding of the pressures I'm under--"

"Right, because I know nothing about being under pressure," spat Harry, surging to his feet. He felt like an active volcano, long-suppressed rage just pouring out his ears. "It's not like I've spent years being targeted by Voldemort, or anything! And did I mention I'm not a fucking Tri-Wizard champion? That it was all just a plot to get me out of Hogwarts and into his clutches? And that Cedric Diggory died as a result? I hated that stupid tournament all the way through and I hate people thinking I feel otherwise!"

"How dare you talk to me that way!" thundered Aran, finally raising his voice. "Sixty points from--"

"You mean thirty from Gryffindor and thirty from Slytherin, don't you?" interrupted Harry, his own voice arctic. "Well, why don't you just go ahead? Severus will be furious with me and I'll just have to tell him what I've been putting up with from you! Yeah, you want to have a conversation with him about how thoroughly nasty and filthy and abnormal my spell-casting is these days?"

Aran abruptly shut his mouth.

"Way to go, Harry!" whispered Ron from beside him.

The comment helped Harry climb back out of his abrupt plummet into rage. He was breathing hard, his face no doubt red with it, but at least now it seemed he could think of something apart from anger. "I'll just finish my test now," he said in a calmer voice as he sat down, ignoring the expressions of shock on his classmates' faces.

"You'll do more than that, Potter. You'll have a detention, straight away after class."

Harry had to stay after anyway to do his practical, so he just nodded. It seemed like Aran was unwilling to brave Snape's wrath over points, but he was willing to do it over a detention. Assuming Harry told his father he'd got one, that is.

That made sense though, in a way. Deep down somewhere, Aran probably knew that his decision to forbid Parseltongue was indefensible. But he could easily defend assigning Harry a detention. All Aran would have to do was tell Snape that Harry had said the word fucking in class.

Harry really didn't want to know what his father would have to say about that.

By the time class was over, Harry was starting to feel like it was second year all over again, people were staring at him so much. He guessed they hadn't expected to see him stand up to Aran.

Nott, he noticed, was giving him speculative glances right until the end of class.

McGonagall showed up just as the last few students were filing out into the hallway.

"Ah, good," said Aran with forced joviality. "Well, I'll retire to my office until you've finished. And then you'll scrub desks, Potter. He has a detention," he added to McGonagall as an aside.
McGonagall spoke briskly. "Isn't this a bit silly, Professor Aran, Potter having to fetch another teacher merely so he might take a test? Can Parseltongue be that great an issue?"

"It's associated with dark wizards. Salazar Slytherin. You-Know-Who himself!"

"As chaining spells are associated with slavery. That doesn't mean there's never any use for one."

"Yes, well . . ." Aran swallowed. He didn't like defying the Deputy Headmistress; Harry could tell. Parseltongue though, was clearly so unacceptable in his view that he was willing to stand his ground. "I must run my classes as I see fit, and I won't have other students exposed to such unnaturalness!"

"You realise this will reflect badly on you when it comes to end-of-term evaluations. I'll have to make a notation that you refused to make accommodations for a student in severe need of them."

"I've made accommodations!" sputtered Aran. "I'm letting him take an individualised test in view of his . . . circumstances."

"You've ostracised him," corrected McGonagall, her glare almost as pointed as her hat. "You've demonstrated by example that intolerance is a virtue to be cherished. And you've abrogated your teaching responsibilities to another faculty member by refusing to so much as mark his practical. Does that strike you as the sort of behaviour likely to win you an re-appointment to your post?"

Aran stepped back slightly. "Well. You're misreading the situation, I'm afraid. I'm protecting the rest of the students, which is entirely appropriate. Frankly, I'm shocked that the other staff don't see things the same way!"

"Instead of looking at Parselmouths as a class, we're looking at Harry as an individual," said McGonagall. "As should you. But if you won't reconsider--"

"I certainly won't!"

"Then I will proceed to assess his skills as requested. Have you a copy of the objectives to be tested?"

Aran wordlessly handed her a parchment sheet, then made as though to climb the stairs to his office.

"Where are you going, Professor?" called the Deputy Headmistress in a strident voice.

"I'm certainly not staying here to listen to that nasty language--"

"It's not nasty, you old coot!" Harry said, bristling. "And furthermore--"

"That will be quite enough, Potter," said McGonagall. "Ten points from Gryffindor for disrespect."

_Uh-oh._ That meant five from Slytherin. And McGonagall, unlike Aran, probably couldn't be talked around. Harry gulped, wondering if five points would be enough for his father to notice.

Knowing Snape . . . yeah, they probably would.

Aran was moving up the staircase to his office by then, but McGonagall's voice forestalled him. "Your decisions about class time are, I regret to say, your own to make. Though I think I have made my disapproval clear enough. You are fostering an atmosphere of prejudice at a time when the wizarding world needs to unite against such things. Be that as it may, Professor Aran, there are no impressionable young students here at the moment, save the Parselmouth himself. You should stay and observe his testing, don't you think?"
"Actually, I--"

"I insist."

Harry knew that frosty tone of hers. It took a brave man indeed to defy it, and Aran was anything but. "Very well," he said, though his own tone was resentment itself.

McGonagall's brow furrowed as she finally perused the list of test objectives she held in her hand. "These are all third-year exercises."

"Review."

Yeah, we've been reviewing all year, Harry wanted to say. We've all got top marks in "Review," but we're here to learn Defence!

He didn't want to lose any more points though, so he held his tongue.

McGonagall still didn't look pleased, though she said no more of the matter. "Let's begin with the charm you would use to encourage a vampire to pass you by, Mr Potter."

Harry brandished his wand. Of course, given that he'd never had a vampire to practice on, he wasn't entirely sure he'd figured out the right translation. Everyone else in the class could be somewhat certain that "Expers cruentus" would probably work. Harry just had to guess, since Sals hadn't understood what a vampire was.

"Don't be so sodding bloodthirsty!" he hissed, looking at his ring as he pretended to level his wand on an imaginary vampire.

McGonagall looked blankly at him. "For all I know you just recited the last round of Quidditch scores, Potter."

"I did the charm," said Harry, feeling a little defensive by then. "Expers cruentus. I do know it, Professor."

"Another reason I'd prefer he cast his spells in the usual way," announced Aran with a slight sneer in his voice. "How am I to know what he's saying?"

"From the results, of course," said McGonagall impatiently as she studied the list in her hand. "Hmm. Well, this will be better. Let's have you ward away a boggart, and then we'll be able to tell how effective your Parseltongue charms prove. Professor Aran, where is your boggart?"

"We've just been pretending on that one as well," Harry put in, trying his best not to scowl. He didn't think he did so well, all things considered.

McGonagall's eyebrows rose up like a Seeker spotting the snitch above. "Oh really, Professor Aran! A vampire is one thing. I can understand your reticence there, especially considering the young ladies . . . but really, you should be more than capable of allowing students to have a real boggart to practise with. Especially considering how very simple they are to catch."

Aran glared.

At Harry.

Like it was his fault the man was such a terrible teacher!

"Have you one?" pressed McGonagall. When Aran shook his head, she gave a lengthy sigh. "All
right then, I'll go find one. One moment, please."

Harry tried not to look at Aran as the other teacher left, but after a moment he couldn't keep it up. *Bet you wish you'd have let me speak Parseltongue now, don't you?* he wanted to say. *Because now McGonagall's just seen a perfect example of how worthless and useless you are, hasn't she?*

"Um, how does one find a boggart, anyway?" he ventured instead.

In reply, Aran gave him a glare very nearly as venomous as Snape's tended to be. Pretty impressive, actually.

Harry never did find out how McGonagall had managed, but sure enough, inside of five minutes she returned carrying a rather stout wooden box. "Transfigured," she briefly explained.

Harry figured she meant the box and not the boggart.

"Ready, Potter?"

"Sure, anytime," Harry answered, confident. Parseltongue didn't have a word for *ridiculous*, exactly, but he and Sals had worked this one out and he wasn't worried about it, even if he'd never yet had a chance to try it out for real.

She opened the latches on the box. As the boggart swam into view, it assumed the form of Lucius Malfoy, right down to the evil twist of his lips.

Right down to the large, thick needles he was clutching in both hands.

But no . . . Lucius was losing his malevolence, losing his long silver-blond hair. It was darkening along with his eyes, though his skin remained every bit as pale. Snape's features emerged, just as harsh as Malfoy's in their own way, though they weren't hate-filled.

No, Snape's expression was one of unbearable pain, his eyes clouded with it, his hands clenching with the effort it took not to scream his agony. An ominous thud echoed through the room and Snape fell straight down to the ground, his breathing laboured and uneven.

"Harry," he gasped. "There's nothing you can do. I wasn't quick enough--"

A bloodstain began spreading over Snape's robes. A horrible red gush of blood that suddenly covered his chest, flowing so fast and fierce it dripped down to stain the floor.

Snape gave a bitter laugh. "No great wonder he'd cast a curse like this at me. I do believe he hates me worse than even you, after Samhain." And then, in tones more urgent, "But you killed him, Harry, once and for all. Don't forget that. Don't ever forget that. This is a great victory for the wizarding world. Don't blame yourself that you couldn't do everything for everyone--"

"*No!*" shouted Harry, forgetting that none of this was real, that it was only a boggart. "Madam Pomfrey will come. I won't let you die, I won't--"

"Harry."

The boy didn't look up. He had eyes only for his father, who was going grey by then, who was lying in an ever-widening pool of blood. He felt shattered inside, like the world had come to an end. Because it had. Snape was dying, and it was his fault. *He* was the one who hadn't been fast enough, else he could have defeated Voldemort *and* managed to protect his father.
Instead, he'd got him killed.

It was Sirius all over again, Harry thought, beginning to tremble from head to toe. A deep wail began gathering in the pit of his stomach. He wanted to release it, to scream demands to the heavens--

"Harry!" said McGonagall, shaking his shoulder until he looked up at her. Her voice sounded unsteady, though her words were comfort itself. "This isn't real, Harry. You're taking a test, remember? You're facing a boggart."

Harry blinked, realising that she was right. Strange how that felt. He knew all at once that this wasn't real, but the emotions he'd just been swimming through were still there, still inside him, filling him with such pain that it was all he could do not to release the scream building inside him.

If Snape died in the final battle, Harry didn't think he'd be able to bear it.

For one instant he even wished he'd never been adopted, never let himself get close to someone again. Because he always lost people, didn't he . . .

"A boggart," McGonagall repeated. "Now, compose yourself Potter, and we'll try again."

A few skillful flicks of her wand and the boggart was tucked away once more in the box.

Harry shook his head, dragging his thoughts away from what really mattered and onto Aran's stupid test. "I don't know what I could do to make that amusing, Professor. Really, I don't."

"It was a dreadful spectacle," commiserated McGonagall. "That's the boggart's greatest power, the fact that it latches onto what we fear most. Think a moment. Let me know when you're ready."

"In a real situation he wouldn't have time to prepare," said Aran in a sneering voice.

"Considering your other students did not even have to confront an actual boggart," returned McGonagall coldly, "you are hardly one to lecture me on realistic testing conditions!"

"I'm ready anyway," announced Harry. There was no possible way to make Snape's death humourous, of course, but it had just occurred to him that Remus hadn't made the actual moon all that hilarious three years earlier. He'd changed it into something else completely, something that really had nothing to do with the moon.

McGonagall unlatched the wooden box again.

The boggart became Snape at once this time. Harry figured that must mean his fears had been somehow made clearer inside his own mind. It wasn't Lucius and his needles that were his worst fear, nor Dementors, nor Voldemort himself. It was what he had told Draco.

Harry fixed a picture firmly in his mind, imagining it just the way he'd seen it all those years ago, and pointed his wand. "Silly-stupid be gone!" he hissed in Parseltongue, getting the charm out before Snape could begin to die right there in front of his eyes.

A whirling of motion and colour, and suddenly the boggart was dressed just like Neville's grandmother, right down to the hat with the vulture perched on top.

Aran began to guffaw, his laughter so enthusiastic that he was almost snorting.

McGonagall gave Harry a rather weary look. "Well done warding off the boggart, but as for this . . ." She gestured towards the spectacle Harry had created, "The joke's a bit stale by now, don't you
"I think?"

Harry shrugged. "All I could think of."

"Yes, well . . . I wouldn't recommend you mention as much to Severus."

McGonagall made short work of forcing the boggart back into the box.

"Well done, Potter. Though as it took two tries I suppose I should mark you off."

"Poor," pronounced Aran. "If not Dreadful."

"Well as you're not the one marking him, your opinion carries no weight," said McGonagall without looking at the other teacher. She kept her gaze focussed on Harry. "Acceptable. Next time don't let yourself become disoriented by the image the boggart draws from your mind. You must keep in mind what is real and what is not." She glanced at Aran, then. "Now, if you'll excuse us, Professor, I'd like to speak with Potter alone."

"He still has a detention to serve--"

"As you've placed upon him the burden of staying after class to take his tests separately, I consider that quite detention enough."

Aran had enough good sense not to argue the point, though he did frown when McGonagall thrust the boggart box his way and said that now his students could have one to practise on.

Ron and Hermione were waiting for Harry in the hallway. So was Nott. He and Ron both looked furious about something. Hermione just looked exasperated.

"You can meet Mr Potter at my office in a few moments," announced McGonagall without breaking her stride. Harry hurried along next to her.

"Am I in trouble, ma'am?" he asked as they approached her office. "You already took points over what I said."

She ushered him into her office and closed the door before answering. "That's over and done with, though I would hope you'd improve your attitude with Professor Aran. I realise his class policies are very vexing, but you still do need to be respectful."

"Yes, Professor," Harry answered, though he didn't agree. Respect could go hang; Aran certainly didn't deserve any.

McGonagall saw right through him. "It's actually not terribly Slytherin to annoy him when it can't gain you anything."

"But there's nothing wrong with Parseltongue!"

"No, there's not." McGonagall sank into a chair. "And that's not why you're here. I wanted to discuss your boggart, actually. Do be seated, Harry."

Harry did, a little wary since he didn't know what needed discussing. So he was worried about Severus dying. So he was worried he'd be responsible if it ever came to that. So he loved his father. So what? It just made him normal, didn't it?

"You're evidently quite concerned that Severus might not survive the war."
Harry felt like saying Really? How can you tell? but thought that McGonagall really didn't deserve to be treated like that. "Yeah, I guess I am. I don't think about it very much but . . . yeah."

"It's good to see that you've formed a strong bond there," said his teacher. "I must admit, Harry, I've had my doubts all along about your adoption. I suppose I didn't think you and Severus could get along well enough to . . . but enough of that. I was obviously in error."

"Is that why you didn't want me moving down to the dungeons in the first place?" blurted Harry. He'd always felt a little hurt by her attitude.

"Considering the level of animosity that had existed between you and Severus . . . well, frankly, I was unable to imagine that you weren't going to end up hexed into a puddle. Not to mention that Mr Malfoy was already living there."

"Yeah, I thought Draco might kill me at first," said Harry. The memory was almost a fond one now, it seemed so ludicrous. "He kept trying to get me to trust him and I just couldn't. Well, wouldn't. But things are all right now. I like having a brother."

"About Severus dying, though," McGonagall said, smoothing directing the conversation. "Have you discussed your concerns with him?"

"Um . . . no, not really."

"I think you should. At the very least, ask him whom he has appointed to be your guardian in the event of his death."

Harry blinked. "I don't think he's appointed anyone."

"That's very unlikely. Wizard Family Services would have demanded he make arrangements."

Harry cleared his throat. "Um, another guardian won't make a difference if I lose my father. It's not like anyone could replace him . . ." A sick feeling twisted in his gut as events of a year ago rose up to haunt him. He'd thought that nobody could ever replace Sirius, either. And before that, hadn't Sirius sort of replaced his parents? Helped fill the aching chasm inside him, the one that said he was just a child and he wanted somebody to really care about him? Even if he was nearly grown, now?

McGonagall's expression softened. "But you're obviously concerned about losing Severus, Harry. You ought to broach the matter with him."

Harry's lip started hurting; it took him a minute to realise he was chewing on it. "You think I should tell him about the boggart?"

"I think you ought to let him know, one way or another, how events are affecting you. I imagine that asking him about his contingency plans would be more comfortable than discussing what you just witnessed that boggart doing."

That made sense, so Harry nodded. Then another thought occurred to him. "Do you know that because it's you he's appointed to be my guardian if . . . um, anything happens?"

"He's never discussed the matter with me."

"Then is it Dumbledore?"

"Professor Dumbledore, Harry. And as for who it is, I suggest once more that you ask Severus . . . that you ask your father. I honestly have no idea whom he would have selected."
"All right." Harry waited a moment, but when she said nothing further, added, "Am I dismissed?"

"Yes, certainly."

Harry stood up, then hesitated. "Those ten points, Professor. I don't suppose you'd reconsider? I really am putting up with an awful lot of sh-- um, shoddiness, from Professor Aran."

"I realise that now. Very clearly, yes," announced McGonagall in what Harry thought of as her professional voice. "But you must nonetheless maintain a respectful demeanour, Potter. I will not reconsider the points."

"But half of them will come from Slytherin and Severus warned me I'd better not lose Slytherin any points."

"A pity you weren't as anxious to avoid losing Gryffindor points throughout the past five years."

"Please, ma'am--"

"No, Potter. The points stand. Though I do have a question. If Professor Aran does not require his students to ward away any actual Dark Creatures, then why didn't you simply cast the spells using the standard incantations for your practical? He wouldn't have known they were ineffective, not without an actual boggart or such to demonstrate as much."

"Um, principle I guess," said Harry. "I didn't want to let him think he'd won."

McGonagall's voice was as dry as Snape's often got. "Not very Slytherin, if I may say so, Potter."

Harry bristled slightly. "You want me to give in to his prejudice and pretend I'm something I'm not?"

"No, but you might consider choosing your battles."

"Yes, ma'am." Harry sighed, and let himself out.

Ron and Nott were out there waiting, still glaring at each other. Hermione had evidently tired of their argument; she was standing at the end of the hall.

"You just had the steal the show in Defence, didn't you?" asked Nott. He seemed pretty good-natured about it, though. "Nobody's going to be talking about the way I turned the test around on Aran, not after the things you said to him. And you even kept him from taking points from Slytherin. Now that was bloody brilliant."

"I'm just tired of his shite." Harry glanced at Ron. "Why are you two fighting?"

"He has something to ask you."

"Yeah, he said that in class." Turning back to Nott, Harry gestured for him to get on with it.

"There's a Hogsmeade Saturday coming up," said Nott. "And your little Gryffindor friend is jealous, I suppose. Because I mentioned to him that you're being invited to go with Slytherin this time."

"Go with Slytherin," Harry repeated doubtfully.

"Yeah. You remember when Snape introduced you officially, he said he expected us to include you in study groups and the like? Well, it's taken me a while to talk some of the others 'round, but Blaise and Daphne agreed to . . . er . . ."
"Be seen with me?"

Nott flushed slightly. "Something like that."

"I told him you already had plans, Harry," Ron said, his voice fierce. "Said you wouldn't dream of breaking your word."

What word, Harry almost said, but then he figured out what Ron must mean. He'd promised Severus to go nowhere without his bodyguard, so to speak. And that wasn't just so that Ron and Hermione could look out for him if he had a problem with his magic. It was also to bolster the impression that he was vulnerable and needed protection.

It was to preserve the tactical advantage of surprise.

For all that though, Harry was tempted. He needed to get closer to Nott if he was going to figure out the mystery surrounding the Slytherin plague . . . which in turn could reveal the details of Pansy Parkinson's death. Harry wanted more than anything to get Draco's name cleared so that the other boy could get reinstated into Hogwarts.

And, if he was honest with himself, he could also use a break from Ron and Hermione's constant squabbling.

Not to mention how proud Snape would be if Harry could find a way to get himself more accepted by Slytherin.

This wasn't the way though, and he knew it.

"Yeah, I already have plans," Harry said. "I promised Ron and Hermione I'd go with them."

"You always go with them," wheedled Nott. "Come on, Potter. We want you to tell us what to do to knock our Reserve Seeker into shape--

"Like he would!" yelled Ron.

"He's a Slytherin too, or are you too stubborn to really believe that?"

"Look, I hardly believe it sometimes," Harry said to shut Nott up. "Thanks for the invitation, but maybe some other time. And as for your Seeker, have him practice dives and turns. Seeing the Snitch is only half the battle; you have to be able to catch up with it as well."

Ron scowled.

Nott didn't look satisfied, either. "There's some other stuff I wanted to talk to you about--"

"Then you come with the three of us," suggested Harry.

Nott immediately backtracked. "Uh, no, that's all right. Well, maybe I'll see you in the village, then."

"Maybe." Harry shrugged. "I still have to ask if I can go, actually. Severus might refuse."

"But you missed the last Hogsmeade Saturday, too!" Ron complained.

"I said might. I'll see what I can do."

Nott gave him a long, thoughtful look. "Snape's really strict with you, I guess. Strange, I thought you'd be able to get away with more."
Snape hardly needed defending from his own students, but Harry felt fiercely protective all at once. "He's a good dad."

"Well, let me know if you can go and you change your mind about going with us," said Nott before he turned and walked away.

"Whew." Ron blew out a breath as though relieved. "I was afraid you'd say yes to him, and then Hermione and I would have an awful time trying to watch out for you."

"Give me a break. Nott? I told you I wasn't about to become his friend. I don't trust him. Not one bit."

"Yeah, but you want so much to be a real part of Slytherin. You think I didn't know?"

"Severus would really like it. Draco too, I think. Well, once he gets over being so angry with them. And vice-versa. They don't like him much any longer."

"Tell him some fat bribes'll solve all that," Ron sneered.

"Oh, but--"

Harry abruptly broke off what he'd been going to say. He'd felt all right telling Ron that Draco was rich after all, but revealing the opposite would absolutely mortify his brother, he knew.

"But what?"

He was saved from answering by Hermione. "You'd better go, Harry, before your father comes looking for you."

Harry couldn't help but stare. "How do you know about the points McGonagall took?"

"Points?" Hermione shrugged that question off. "Snape's expecting you, isn't he? Every Tuesday and Thursday?"

"And most weekends besides," put in Ron with just a touch of resentment.

"Some people actually value their families, Ronald."

"Oh, shut up Hermione!" shouted Ron. "I'm one of those people, in case you hadn't noticed!"

"Well no, I hadn't, what with the way you complain all the time!"

"Jeez, you two are going to make me wish I'd told Nott I'd go around with the Slytherins!"

Ron and Hermione both abruptly stopped talking.

-----------------------------------------------

Harry had fallen into the pattern of eating dinner with his family every Tuesday and Thursday night, as Hermione had obviously noticed. That way, he got to see his brother before and after each therapy session. He hadn't been able to figure out yet if the doctor was helping Draco or not, but figured it would probably take a while to really be sure.
He'd been in two minds about visiting on this particular evening, as the subject of points was more or less guaranteed to come up, but on the other hand, he hadn't been in the mood to listen to Ron and Hermione any longer, either. He wished the two of them would just get over it. Hermione wasn't falling for Draco any more than she would fall for a Blast-Ended Skrewt, so there was no reason for Ron to be so jealous. Not that it was all Ron's fault. Hermione ought to tell him she wasn't interested in Draco!

Either that, or the two of them should just agree that they'd be mates again, and forget the whole boyfriend-girlfriend thing.

Dinner at home went well at first. It was sort of like old times, in a way. Draco was caught up with his lessons and staying that way. When Snape began to quiz them both about this or that concept or spell that they were learning, it turned into a bit of a friendly competition, each of the boys trying to out-do the other. It turned out that Draco was getting to use the borrowed wand quite a bit, for all that Snape still insisted he be supervised.

Draco made a couple of caustic comments about that, but by and large he seemed to be in good spirits.

They played Wizard's Scrabble after dinner, Harry and Draco teaming against Snape, much good it did them. Their father's vocabulary was simply too extensive. They all had great fun though; that was what counted.

After the game, Snape poured them each a small measure of Galliano and sat sipping it as he watched Harry and Draco chatting. He wasn't really relaxed, though; Harry realised that when his father abruptly asked the question Harry had been dreading all night.

"Five points from Slytherin, Harry?"

Harry put down his empty liqueur glass and met his father's eyes. "Yes. Sorry. But you know, you don't have that much to complain about. Five points is nothing. Do you know how many points you've made me lose Gryffindor over the years? If we added them all up, it'd be about--"

"I'm not interested in recounting our rather colourful past," Snape interrupted. "I'd like to know who took points and why."

"Oh, just Professor McGonagall," said Harry, quickly deciding he didn't need to mention Aran at all. "Because I was rude. It's over and done with and it won't happen again, sir."

"Sir?"

"Well you have me in school mode now, don't you?" Harry took a breath. "Anyway though, when McGonagall was talking to me, she mentioned something . . . um, she said to ask you about it. She said you'd have it all arranged and I should just ask so I would know."

"Perhaps if you would ask, I would also know," said Snape in a dry voice.

"All right." Harry took a deep breath, thinking this should be easier than it was. He almost wished he'd never started in on it, even though it had been a handy way to get the conversation well away from questions about just what he'd said that had been so rude. "Er . . . when you adopted me . . . oh, Draco as well, of course . . . who did you arrange to take us in if you were to die?"

Snape stared at him. "I am not going to die, Harry. Put that thought out of your head."

"You can't promise that." Harry heard his own voice, heard the shakiness in it, and hated it. Inside
his mind he saw that boggart again, saw Snape's life blood pouring out of him . . . "You think Sirius planned to leave me? And you're in more danger than he ever was, what with that mark still on your arm and Voldemort wanting more than anything to get even for what you did for me on Samhain."

Snape looked frustrated. He started to say something but cut himself off after only a syllable, then began again. "The provision is a contingency only, Harry. Molly and Arthur Weasley were quite pleased when I asked them to bring you into their family in the event of my death."

"Oh, the Weasleys." Harry let out the breath he'd been holding. "That's perfect, that is. They're even Order members. And I'd be brothers with Ron, too!"

The Potions Master's lips twitched. "Disappointed I'm still here?"

Harry laughed, though behind the wry question he thought he heard a little bit of real concern. "Of course not, Dad. I just meant, that's about the best you could do, I think."

"What have you arranged for me?"

Snape's face lost all expression save one as he glanced at his other son. He was bracing himself. For what, Harry couldn't imagine, until the man spoke. "The Weasleys will take you in as well."

Draco's teeth glinted as his expression split into a wide smile. "Oh, sure. Be serious, Severus--"

"I assure you, I'm quite in earnest. Would you like to see the papers yourself?"

"Yes, I bloody well would!" Draco jumped to his feet. "The Weasleys! The Weasleys! What were you thinking?"

Snape stood up as well. "Accio Draco Snape's adoption papers," he said, flicking his wand. He kept speaking as doors opened and a tightly rolled scroll came sailing towards him. "It really was the best option. At the time I filled these out, I'd already settled the matter for Harry, and I was hardly about to separate you from your brother in the event of my death."

Draco gave a sharp nod as though that made sense. "Yeah, I'd want to stay as close as possible to Harry. Not that he probably needs protection considering his dark powers, but one never knows when another pair of eyes will make the difference." Taking the papers from his father, he quickly read through them. "But still, the Weasleys? Thank Merlin I'll be seventeen come August and be of age to decide things for myself!"

"You should have heard them when I asked."

The comment brought Harry up short. "They aren't so willing to take Draco in?"

"They are," Snape corrected. "It was not, however, a suggestion they had been expecting. It took them a good ten minutes to consider all the ramifications of the idea. But in the end they agreed."

"So you pick my new family on the basis of what's good for Harry?"

"I happen to think the Weasleys would be good for you as well," retorted Snape as he held a hand out for the papers. "They have experience dealing with difficult children."

Draco raised his chin a notch. "Ta, Severus!"

"Furthermore," Snape went on without pause, "you could hardly find a household more tolerant of Muggles. Arthur is positively enraptured by them. You would learn a great deal from the Weasleys."
"Well, my priorities have certainly changed," Draco loftily announced as he gave his father the papers.

Harry furrowed his brow. "What do you mean, you're more tolerant of Muggles now?"

"Please," drawled the other boy, wrinkling his nose.

"Well, I thought maybe talking with Marsha had . . . well, what priorities have changed, then?"

"Protecting you used to be number one. Now it'll have to be keeping Severus alive. Because I'm not going to end up brothers with Ronald Weasley. One Gryffindor in the family is enough."

"Ron's not so bad," said Harry. A moment later he was laughing. "Oh, God. That's exactly what I told him, months ago. Draco's not so bad. If it's any consolation, he didn't like hearing it any more than you seem to."

"Enlivening as speculations of my death are," put in Snape, "I do believe it's time Harry returned to his dormitory. Unless you plan to sleep over, in which case I'll walk you up before first class so you may retrieve your Charms text."

"I'll be here over the weekend," said Harry. "So I'd better get back to Gryffindor tonight. Or my friends will think I've deserted them. You know. Oh, that reminds me though. A week from Saturday there's another Hogsmeade trip scheduled--"

"Really? Heads of House are never informed of such things, you realise."

"What a thing to ask when you've just lost Slytherin points!" said Draco, his voice outraged. His eyes were twinkling, though, so Harry figured his brother was just being his usual obnoxious self.

"Apt observation." Snape assessed Harry critically. "Still, you've been doing tolerably well in classes, and I'm particularly gratified by the effort I see you making to integrate yourself into Slytherin. So yes, barring unforeseen disaster, I will sign your permission form."

Barring unforeseen disaster? "How about signing it now?"

"Do you really think I can't rescind it once given, Harry?"

"Yeah, well . . ." Harry shrugged. "Worth a try, I thought."

"I want to go, too!"

Snape's answer was about as succinct as could be. "No."

Draco sighed. "Yeah, I know. Better not. Maybe I'll get cleared soon and the governors will see fit to readmit me. They might even let me back into classes. You know, to make it up to me for expelling me for no good reason at all."

"That would not be a remote possibility had your recent extracurricular activities come to light."

"Yes, Severus," said Draco in a long-suffering voice that announced, clear as day, how many times he'd heard similar lectures. "I apologised to the house-elf, remember? What else do you want me to do, promise him my first-born son?"
"Perhaps less sarcasm would be a good start."

Draco made a face. "Perhaps you'd better get Harry back to Gryffindor before curfew. Because, you know, if you let him think he can break some rules he might conclude he can break them all. Not that he hasn't been breaking rules all along, mind--"

"And I was going to ask what you wanted in Hogsmeade," said Harry, laughing. "But now I think I won't."

He wished he hadn't said that when Draco got an awful look on his face. A look that said he thought Harry was deliberately rubbing his poverty in his face.

"I just meant . . . you can't go." It sounded lame even to his own ears.

"Please do excuse me." Draco didn't look at Harry again. He just went into their bedroom and closed the door. A moment later, he and Snape heard the sound of the shower starting up.

"I suggest you use more care what you say to Draco," Snape calmly advised. "It doesn't take much to remind him of recent disappointments."

"Then why do you keep tossing out those barely veiled pointers to the fairy cakes?" challenged Harry. "They have experience dealing with difficult children . . . eh? Didn't you believe he was sincere when he apologised to Dobby? I did."

"I have some experience with just how cagey Slytherins can be, Harry." Snape shrugged. "Perhaps you're right, however, and it's time to lay the matter to rest."

Harry nodded, hoping his father really meant that. "Um, speaking of cagey, though . . . I've been meaning to ask something. What if Walpurgis hadn't been so tricky with his will? Were you going to let Draco have all that money? I thought you were at first, but then, the things you said later, I couldn't be sure."

"I was considering the best way to proceed," said Snape, shrugging. "Just as well the goblins took their time over their investigations. I wasn't eager to alienate my son by denying him the inheritance."

"I sort of wondered . . . I mean, I actually thought you might think it was more Slytherin to take the money."

"Slytherin doesn't mean devoid of morality. I thought you knew that," said Snape, frowning.

"I do. It's just . . . well, it would be one thing if refusing the money would have helped Walpurgis, right? But it wouldn't have, so I thought you'd think it was . . . well, not all right to kill him, but . . ."

"Draco hasn't any moral centre, Harry. That money would have harmed him, knowing as he did how it was obtained. I was putting off a confrontation about it until the goblins settled matters. It was my fervent hope that the vault would be empty, since I was not looking forward to telling my son I would not allow him to have any part of such a bequest."

"But he's seventeen this summer." Harry frowned. "You couldn't have kept his money from him after that. Well, not legally."

"Yes, so Walpurgis' solution ended up being best all around." Snape donned his cloak and after Harry did the same, let them out of his quarters.

"I've been wondering about what Walpurgis did, though," said Harry as they traversed the halls. "He
must have suspected Narcissa had an ulterior motive in asking him to change his will. So why did he? He was signing his own death warrant. Knowingly."

"From what I know, he was quite old. Perhaps he was simply ready. Or he may have been ill."

"Yeah, maybe he was," said Harry, though he couldn't quite shake a feeling that there was more to the story than they knew.

Once he had reached the Fat Lady's portrait, Harry gave his father a quick hug, then said the password that would let him in.

Harry went down as usual for his Potions tutorial on Saturday, only to find that Snape was busy marking fourth-year exams.

"I'm to tutor you," Draco explained. "Severus says your potion-making is adequate when it comes to topical salves like Scaradicate, but you really should get a handle on brewing some of the more advanced healing potions." He gestured toward the counter strewn with ingredients. "Today we're brewing Skele-Gro. Why don't you tell me which three things here would not be needed for that?"

Harry stared at his brother. "Why don't you tell me what's really going on? Severus says . . . It's not like him to not just say things for himself!"

Draco lowered his voice. "This is the first time Severus has let me set foot in his potions lab without him since the evening he confronted me about the Venetimorica. I think this is his way of saying he trusts me again, this much." The Slytherin boy held up his thumb and forefinger almost touching. "Which isn't much, as you're here to make sure I don't do anything creative."

Harry frowned as he leaned on a counter. "Do you want to do anything creative?"

"No. I just want to be let back into school."

"Do you still hate Slytherin every bit as much?" When Draco nodded, Harry bit his lower lip. "Well, suppose you did get back in. Would you want to be re-sorted?"

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Why, are you wishing I could move into Gryffindor?"

"And listen to you fight with Ron all the time? I don't think so."

"But just think how red his face would get each time I went out of my way to smile at Hermione."

Harry pushed off from the counter. "You aren't attracted to Hermione."

"Ten points to Gryffindor for figuring out the bloody obvious. I told you that my idea of a girlfriend wasn't a walking library." Draco's smile fell, then, and he fixed his gaze on the floor. "Besides, I couldn't insult Pansy's memory like that."

"By dating a Muggleborn, you mean?"

"No. By dating anyone, I mean." Draco's head was still bowed as he glanced up through his fringe. "You wouldn't understand, Harry. One minute I was in that closet with her, and she was kissing me
like mad, like she'd been starving for me and couldn't get enough. And the next I was waking up and being told she was gone forever. And we'd just started to work it all out! She was going to defy her parents. I was going ask her to marry me, Harry. And then she was just gone, just like that?"

Harry didn't know what to say, but he knew he had to say something. "I know what you mean. A little, at least. When Cedric died, it was so sudden and unexpected . . . I couldn't believe he was gone, just like that."

"Cedric." Draco shook his head. "It's not the same thing at all. You didn't love Cedric."

Swallowing, Harry whispered, "I loved Sirius, though."

"Look, I'd never claim your life had been free of tragic happenings," Draco said on a sigh, "but it's still not the same, Harry. Pansy wanted to bear my children, all right? And that despite the fact that I'd been disowned not just by my parents but also by practically all of pureblood and Slytherin Britain. And she still wanted me; she told me so. I'm never going to want anybody else."

The conversation was getting a little more intense than Harry had figured on. "Um . . . well . . ."

Draco shook his head. "Yeah, you're pretty much stuck, aren't you? You can't say you're sorry because you're still not sure Pansy really had reformed. You still think it was all some elaborate set-up!"

"I'm sorry you got hurt, though."

"Yeah, well what is life but?" Draco shrugged. "Which brings us back to what you were asking about. If I'd want to be resorted. I can't believe you'd have to ask. I might hate Slytherin but I owe Severus one hell of a lot. He's always been my Head of House and I sure wouldn't trade him for Sprout or Flitwick or Merlin forbid, McGonagall."

"She's all right."

"Then why were you rude enough to her to make her take points?"

"I was just a bit fed up with Aran, actually."

"Ah, Aran. Is it too much to hope you mentioned how useless his class is?"

Harry couldn't help but remember that his father magically recorded everything that happened inside his private laboratory, so he was hardly about to mention that he'd called another teacher names. He had to say something, though. "She knows how useless his class is, I think. Ha, he's so clueless that he didn't even notice when Nott said he was ridiculous, right to his face!" Harry briefly explained the incident.

"Too bad I couldn't have seen that," Draco said, shaking his head. "I feel like I'm missing everything. But there's no hope for it. Let's get started on the lesson, all right? Which three ingredients here are no use at all?"

It only took Harry six tries to pick them out.
"Dad," Harry said later that night just before he went to bed. "Time to put in my Elixir."

Snape looked him up and down. "When was the last time you took off your glasses, Harry?"

"Except for showering and the like?" Harry lifted his shoulders. "Um, don't know. I'm pretty used to them, you know. I don't really think about it much. But I guess I should."

He slid his glasses into his shirt pocket and blinked, getting used to the sensation of having both eyes see instead of one blocked off. "Hmm. Well, one side is definitely blurry, but it's actually a lot better than it used to be."

"You may not be aware of it, but you're squinting with one eye."

Harry chuckled. "That must look a bit weird."

"Quite."

The boy tried to relax his face. "Well, even without squinting I can make out things pretty well."

Snape's voice was suffused with humour. "You're still squinting, Harry. I suggest you keep wearing your glasses until you can manage not to."

"I'm never going to get out of these bloody things."

His father moved closer and cast Lumos, shining the wand light into Harry's left eye and then his right as he compared them. "Give the Elixir two more weeks," he finally suggested. "The scratches on your cornea are barely perceptible now. When they've healed completely you shouldn't need to worry about squinting or headaches."

"So I will get out of these things," said Harry, settling his glasses back on his face.

"I would think so, yes."

Harry felt like he'd just eaten something warm and filling. "Thanks, Dad. I know you don't need to hear it, but I'm really grateful you're so good at potion-making."

Snape inclined his head in acknowledgment. "Have you considered what you will do about playing Seeker?"

"Not really." Harry frowned. "This year's practically over so it hardly matters, but you mean next year, I guess. I hate to take it away from Ginny, but on the other hand, I really miss it. Though if I start playing it'll cause hard feelings in Slytherin, I think."

"Consider the matter over the summer."

Harry blinked. "I thought you'd say I'd better not play next year either, as we'll still be wanting to keep everyone thinking my magic's all wonky."

Snape's lips twisted slightly. "Come Harry, I'm sure we can be more honest with one another than that. Didn't you actually think I'd have an ulterior motive for saying that? You think I won't want you helping Gryffindor win."

"Um . . . well . . . you have always seemed just a tad obsessed about Slytherin winning the House Cup."

"Which not-so-coincidentally, hasn't happened once since you've been here," said Snape with a hint
of the old sourness in his voice.

Harry laughed. It was so nice that comments like that didn't bother him any longer. "I know it matters to you, Dad. I wish I knew what you wanted me to do about it."

"I thought I was perfectly clear. Allow Miss Weasley to finish the season, and consider the matter over the summer."

Harry sighed in exasperation. "That's not exactly helpful advice, Dad."

"Do you want me to treat you as though you're six instead of sixteen?"

"Well, no--"

"I don't think you'll be satisfied with any solution I impose on you. But you're quite a capable young man; I've no doubt you'll work it out." Snape shrugged as though to dismiss the conversation. "Your Skele-Gro today, Harry. Draco pronounced it adequate but my standards are higher than his. You'll need to brew it again. Try crushing your pomegranate seeds more finely and for Merlin's sake, stop breathing over the cauldron."

"I knew it!" Harry made a face. "You watched us brew. And Draco thought you were starting to trust him!"

"Draco's no more likely than you to forget that I can in fact observe anything that transpires in my laboratory." Snape paused. "Offended?"

"No, not exactly. Just . . . I don't like the feeling I don't have any real privacy here." Wondering about that, Harry decided to see if he could find out if the spells on the lab recorded sound as well as image. "I mean, what if Draco and I want to talk about girls?"

Snape's expression remained absolutely deadpan, so much so that Harry couldn't tell if his father had overheard Draco going on about Pansy. The Slytherin. "The spells are on the laboratory only, Harry. And since I do not recommend you conduct distracting conversations while brewing sensitive potions, perhaps you could talk about girls in the privacy of your bedroom."

"Yeah, yeah--"

"Harry, listen to me. I don't use monitoring spells without good cause."

Harry thought of Devon, then. Draco might have done something drastic . . . actually, with the Venetimorica he had done something drastic. "Is there one on our bedroom?"

"Of course not."

Harry sighed. "All right."

"You believe me?"

"Yes."

Snape's dark eyes twinkled. "I must cure you of this lamentable tendency toward trust. Very Gryffindor, that."

"Very funny, Dad."

"I thought so."
Harry laughed, then. "Good night, Severus."

"Good night, Harry."

Defence Against the Dark Arts, Harry thought a few days later, might as well be renamed Offence Against Harry Potter. If Aran had been difficult to tolerate before, now he was positively obnoxious. After that altercation with McGonagall, he clearly knew his days at Hogwarts were numbered. And whom did he blame?

Harry.

No longer was Aaron Aran content merely to forbid Parseltongue in his class. Now he made incessant comments about its unnaturalness and how those who spoke it could never quite be trusted. Now he invariably marked Harry’s work as Acceptable or Exceeds Expectations when it was clearly Outstanding!

Even worse, now Harry couldn't get through a class session without earning a detention on one pretext or another. For Aran had noticed, of course, that while Harry had threatened to tell his father about any loss of points, he hadn't said the same of detentions. Harry thought about playing that card, but decided he'd really better not overplay it. He didn't think Aran would cave in. More likely, he'd tell Severus what Harry had said the week before.

Oh well. Summer'll be here before I know it, Harry started telling himself when Aran was being particularly unbearable. And it wasn't as though he was any stranger to detentions. Snape had certainly given him enough over the years.

For all that, though, Harry was having a hard time not telling Aran that his job would have been lost to the curse, Harry or no Harry.

"You might as well be rude to him again," said Ron on Thursday after class. "Since he's going to punish you anyway. And it's not like he's going to take points."

Harry had already thought of that. And Aran definitely didn't deserve any respect . . . but what McGonagall had said had got him thinking. It was more Slytherin to keep his options open. Even with someone like Aran.

"Stop giving him horrid advice, Ronald," said Hermione before Harry could answer. She added in a louder voice, "Ronald and I will just sit here and study while Harry cleans the tables, Professor."

Aran didn't seem to care about that plan one way or another. But Ron did.

"Ha. You study. I'm going to be a friend and help him so we can get out of here!" Ron turned his back on Hermione.

"I happen to have an Arithmancy test tomorrow, Ronald!"

"Stop calling me that!" Ron yelled, whirling around.

"It's your name, isn't it?"
"It's your tone I can't stand! Or maybe it's just you!"

Hermione went pale, then slammed open a book and buried her nose in it.

Harry went to the far end of the classroom to fetch rags, waiting until they were well away from Hermione to talk. "Listen," he said in a low voice. "This has to stop, Ron. I can't stand it for much longer, this arguing all the time."

"Well, if she'd just stop with all those Ronalds and rude comments about how much smarter she is than the rest of us--"

"And if you'd just stop with getting so angry that she won't badmouth Draco the way you want her to--"

Ron threw the rag Harry had handed him down onto a table. Droplets of water spattered everywhere. "Well I can't even figure out why she'd want such a Muggle-hating prat. Her own parents are Muggles. You'd think that'd be enough to sour her on Malfoy for good, but no . . . she has to go on about how she's so sorry she thought he was beating you to a pulp, and she so wishes she hadn't written that letter, and it's so surprising how well you two are getting on as brothers. Makes me sick, Harry. Absolutely sick."

"She's happy for me. Yeah, that's sick all right," said Harry dryly.

"No, I meant--"

"I know," Harry interrupted. "Look, you said you can't believe she'd want Draco. Well, she doesn't want Draco. No offence, but you're an idiot to even think that. And Draco doesn't want her. He's stuck like mad on Pansy. So . . . just talk to her, all right? This fighting thing is getting . . . well, it's stupid. And I'm the one who's sick. Of listening to it!"

"She thinks that Slytherin prat's handsome, though," Ron muttered, scrubbing away at a table hard enough to dent it. "I just know it. She looks at him."

"Half the girls in Gryffindor swoon looking at him, Ron," Harry pointed out. "He's got that kind of . . . I don't know. He's got a look girls like. Hermione wouldn't be normal if she didn't think so as well. It doesn't mean anything."

"Doesn't, schmuzint," grumbled Ron.

"He calls her a walking library," Harry added, more than a little exasperated. "Look, he's not after her. He's just interested in getting along these days, because he knows he can't be on my side and still be at war with my friends. If he's been a little more polite than usual, that's why. He's a Slytherin!"

"He really called her that?" Ron asked, brightening.

"Yeah."

"Tell her as much."

"She doesn't need to know what Draco thinks; she needs to know what you think!" Harry said, raising his voice.

"I need to know if he thinks," muttered Hermione from where she sat studying.

"You see?" shouted Ron.
Tired of listening to them, Harry whipped out his wand to get the cleaning over with. A couple of Parseltongue spells later and the tables were all spotless. Not that they had been dirty to begin with, of course. This was Defence, not Potions.

Aran had said *no magic*, but since he was up in his office . . .

As it turned out, Harry had calculated wrong. "Potter," snapped the teacher as he appeared on the staircase leading down from his office. "What do you think you're doing?"

"A few filthy, no-account spells, sir?" asked Harry in an innocent-sounding voice.

Aran all but sputtered. "You admit it! And you've no shame about it, none at all! And the Deputy Headmistress takes *up* for it. It's shocking. It's *shameful!*"

"Yeah," said Harry, smiling broadly. "Isn't it. Well, the tables are all clean so--"

"You've another forty-five minutes of detention to serve."

"All right." Harry dropped his school bag with a thud. "Ron, can you run and tell Severus I'm going to be late for dinner with him? Be sure you mention why, mind--"

"Fine, fine, go. Get out, all of you," growled Aran.

Once they were out in the corridor, Hermione gave a long sigh. "If you're willing to hold your father over him then why serve the detention at all, Harry? It's not like you had really earned one. Well, not today at any rate."

Harry shrugged. "Well I don't want it to be *too* obvious that I'm using Severus to fend Aran off. We have Defence with the Slytherins and word would get back to him."

"So?" asked Ron.

"Well if your father worked here would you really want people to go running to him about your problems? Even if another teacher was being an arse?"

"Hmm, bit embarrassing, that," mused the other boy. "Might be all right when you're twelve, but . . ."

"Right."

"It's not *right,*" said Hermione, stamping her feet a bit as she walked.

Harry made sure to say it before Ron could. "Well, maybe it's different for girls," he said, frowning and shaking his head a little when it looked like Ron would agree out loud.

Hermione scowled at him, and walked a little bit faster. But at least she wasn't saying something scornful to Ron.

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It was later that night when something odd woke Harry. At first he thought he was just dreaming. Sounds of a scuffle. Muffled shouts. A thudding noise that seemed to shake right through his bed . . .
Harry groggily sat up and blinked in the darkness. Then a dim light began to shine through the curtains surrounding his bed, and Ron's scathing voice said, "Oh. It's you. Miscalculated, didn't you? The girls' dorms are the other direction."

Harry thrust the curtains back and saw his brother pushing himself to his feet. Ron, Seamus, Dean and Neville all had their wands levelled on Draco, who was standing there with his arms crossed over his chest. Harry blinked again, confused. "Draco?"

"Yeah," Ron practically spat. "And what I want to know is whose brilliant idea it was to give him the password to the Tower!"

"Well, it wasn't me!" Harry retorted, a little stung by the accusation.

"I flooed in," Draco said, his tones short.

Harry fumbled for his glasses on the night table, more from habit than because he really needed them. Things actually looked really clear. "Dad let you use the Floo? Alone?"

Draco nodded, staring intently at Harry as if trying to communicate something. But Harry didn't know what it was. Actually, he was still pretty disoriented from being so abruptly yanked from a sound sleep. And he couldn't help but wonder something about that. "How come you all woke up to attack Draco before I even heard him? I'm pretty sure he wasn't making that much noise."

"I was stealth personified," said Draco in a put-upon voice. "Would you lower your damned wands? I'm here to get Harry, that's all."

"What for?" asked Seamus, not dropping his wand an inch.

"What do you think? The Dark Lord misses him!"

"Draco!" shouted Harry, appalled. "They don't know you well enough to know when you're joking! And that's not funny in any case."

"Tell them to lower their wands!"

Draco's voice was high-pitched by then, which was enough to tell Harry that his brother felt himself at a disadvantage. Snape might have let him use the Floo, but he apparently hadn't let Draco bring a wand along. Which also explained why Draco's hands weren't shoved in his pockets. He was getting ready to hit someone if it came to that.

And Draco really did know how to land a punch. Harry knew that firsthand.

"Come on guys, put your wands away," sighed Harry.

"Not until he tells us why he's sneaking into the Tower late at night to snatch you away--" growled Seamus.

"I'm here on family business, which means it's none of yours, you Irish potato-head!" Draco turned to Harry. "Severus wants to talk to you about something."

Harry's brow furrowed. "It can't wait until morning?"

"Oh, of course it can wait," drawled Draco. "That's why I ventured into the lion's den in the dead of night. To tell you it could just as well wait. So, never mind then--"

"Sorry," said Harry. "I'm still half-asleep. I'll come straight away." Then he glanced over at Ron.
"You never did tell me why I didn't wake up when the rest of you did."

The other boy sighed. "When you were hurt on Samhain we all cast protection spells around your bed, Harry. So that if anyone snuck in here in the dead of night, we'd wake up and clobber him before he even got to you."

Harry cleared his throat. "Oh. Well, that was . . . uh, nice, I suppose. Though I didn't know you all thought I was that pathetic--"

"You were blind at the time! And there was all that talk of Death Eaters trying to get in here to finish you off, remember. But then when you went to live with Snape, we sort of forgot about the spell, that's all."

That made more sense. Harry smiled. "All right. I guess you guys are pretty good mates."

Ron put away his wand and gestured for the other Gryffindors to do the same, even as he was saying, "We need a new rule, Harry. Nobody from other houses can come into the Tower."

"I'll tell Padma to stop visiting Parvati, then?"

"That's different. She's--"

"What, family?"

"I was going to say nice," snapped Ron as he turned his ire on Draco. "Listen, as Harry's all set on this brothers thing, I guess we can't really keep you out. But next time, don't just barge in through the Floo. Use the front door and wait to be invited in!"

"You listen, Weasley," Draco snarled. "If Severus tells me to floo up and get Harry, then that's what I'm going to do, and no red-headed poverty-stricken Muggle-lover is going to stop me--"

"Let's just Floo back," Harry loudly interrupted.

Draco abruptly fell silent as he gave a rather regal nod.

"Um, maybe you should get dressed, Harry?" said Neville.

Harry looked down at his pyjamas and shrugged. "I have plenty of clothes at home. I'd rather just find out what Severus needs to talk to me about." A sudden thought had him biting his lip. "It's not about Aran, is it? I haven't been . . . um, getting on so well with him lately. Did some of the Slytherins mention it, do you think?"

"Aran's the last thing on Severus' mind," Draco said in a voice thrumming with tension.

"Let's go, then," Harry said, wondering what on earth could make Snape ask Draco to Floo into Gryffindor Tower.

A image of Snape dying wavered before his eyes, making his stomach clench and his hands tremble. But Draco would have said something if the matter had been as serious as all that, so Harry made himself forget the boggart.

Or pretend to, anyway.
Snape was sitting in the living room when Harry stepped out of the Floo. The man had one sleeve rolled up past his elbow, but he wasn't wearing a bandage over his forearm now. His mark was on display, etched in shades of orange and red it was glowing so fiercely. The colours were shifting and changing, just like flames in a fire.

A good comparison, for when Harry walked closer, he could actually feel the heat of the thing bathing his face.

"Oh my God," he breathed, appalled. "This is terrible."

"Talk about an understatement--"

"Be quiet, Draco," said Snape in a weary voice. "You've seen this before and Harry hasn't."

Snape's features were drawn with pain, his cheekbones looking like they'd poke through his skin if this got any worse.

"Oh, God," Harry said again, feeling sick just looking at that awful, blazing mark.

"The Lotion Potion helps." Snape rose unsteadily to his feet. "And now that you're here, we can renew the stasis potion and remove the mark itself. Until next time." He took a step toward his lab and almost stumbled; Draco rushed in to offer him an arm to lean on.

Harry heart dropped, feeling like a stone plunging into his stomach, because the whole time he'd been arguing with Ron about whether Draco could come to the Tower or not, Snape had been sitting down here waiting for him. Suffering.

"You might have told me it was urgent!" he hissed at Draco as he followed his father and brother into the lab.

"And give those Gryffindors fodder for gossip? I don't think so."

Harry had to admit, it was better all around if other people didn't realise what Snape had to contend with. It was private family business, just as Draco had said.

A large, clear vat was sitting out on a workbench when they entered the lab. Harry glanced at it once, then looked away. He really didn't want to see the other Dark Marks his father had cut off his arm, time and again. They were blazing too, and tumbling over and over as the heat pouring from them caused the stasis potion to boil.

"You can see why it needs renewing," said Snape as he all but collapsed onto a stool.

"You can't do it beforehand so that the mark could be cut off as soon as Voldemort starts to call?" Harry flinched then. "Oh no. He's calling a meeting--"

"The Order's been informed. And no . . . the intricacies of the stasis potion require it to be renewed while the mark is burning, I'm afraid."

Harry almost said that that was lousy, but realised it wouldn't be a very helpful comment. He noticed his heart was racing as he wondered what horrible things Voldemort was going to do to Muggle-borns or half-bloods tonight. But there was nothing any of them could do about it.

I can't help them, he remembered Snape saying once in an angry voice.
So Harry didn't say anything about what the Death Eaters might do at their meeting tonight.

By then, Draco was already laying out potion ingredients in a neat row. One after another after another until there were dozens of them waiting to be used. Harry hurried off to throw on some clothes, then rushed back. Draco was still laying out ingredients.

"Why don't you start with the leaching the sap from these elm branches," he suggested.

Since Harry had never leached sap from anything before, he frowned. "Um . . ."

"Never mind, I'll do it."

"Harry, you could mash the ginger," said Snape.

"Finest pulp. Not a bit of fibrous material should remain," added Draco, already moving to deal with the branches.

Harry felt a bit like Draco was doing advanced mathematics while Harry had been set to practice his counting, but he told himself that Draco had made this several times before. And that Draco really liked brewing besides, so it stood to reason that the other boy would have far better skills.

He set to work pulping the ginger, his eyes more on Snape than on the pestle in his hand. "I understand you can't cut it off in advance, but now that we've started brewing . . .?"

"The stasis potion has to be ready to accept the mark," Snape answered, shaking his head. "Or Voldemort's magic will run wild." He gave a heavy sigh. "Believe me, Harry, I've experimented with every permutation. This one truly is the best."

Every permutation? Harry couldn't help but wonder about that as he finished pulping the ginger, and then, under Draco's direction began dividing it into twelve balls of perfectly equal size.

"Stir more rapidly, Draco," Snape advised from where he sat, looking like a rag someone had wrung out and tossed away.

"We have to do this right," Draco said, nodding as he moved the whisk around in a cauldron.
"Because if we mess it up, we have to start over and Severus will have to wait through two brewing cycles instead of just one. And trust me, one takes long enough."

"I'll begin peeling the skin from the bat wings," announced Snape, pushing to his feet.

"I have it under control, Severus. You just slather on some more Lotion Potion and relax."

"Yeah," said Harry, remembering some things he'd heard on the telly. "Tensing up when you're in pain makes it worse, actually. So you have to try to relax your muscles. Breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth---"

"What a lot of Muggle rubbish," said Draco scornfully.

"Muggles do actually know some things worth knowing," retorted Harry.

"Ha."

Snape looked like he was gritting his teeth. Harry couldn't tell if it was with irritation at his sons or the terrible pain in his arm, but he decided he'd stop arguing with his brother.

"Lotion Potion," Draco insisted, laying his whisk aside. "This needs to set until it turns gummy, now,
"Yes, do. I believe my office door is standing open. And get your wand as well." Snape sighed as his fingers began to work with the bat wings Draco had laid out earlier. His hands were shaking, Harry noticed. He also noticed that Snape tried to hide that by turning his back slightly. "You'll need it later, for the charms. I... I don't feel my magic will be at its most precise."

"Charms," Harry thought, something catching at his consciousness. "Charms... charmed potions..."

"Dad," he said when he'd chased that thought through to the end. "I was just thinking... what if I brewed some kind of charmed healing potion, and used a wanded charm to make it really powerful, and we tried using that on your wound after we cut the mark away? It might heal you up well enough that you don't have to go through this again."

Snape growled slightly. "It might also seek perfection to the point of banishing my arm into oblivion, you idiot child."

"Well, that's the thing about a potion," Harry countered. "We could test it first. On one of your crickets or something."

The Potions Master abruptly shoved his pile of bat wings aside and moved across the room to where Harry stood. "I appreciate the intended effort, Harry, but it appears to me that you are forgetting what happened just a few weeks ago in my class. Charmed potions are exceedingly temperamental, as you know. You only applied a hint of wanded magic that day, and still, disaster ensued."

"I know." Harry chewed on his lip. "But you said I shouldn't do unsupervised wanded magic. This would be supervised, right?"

Snape laughed slightly at that, even despite the pain he must be in. "You think I don't supervise my classes? This is fascinating."

"No, I meant that you weren't looking out specifically for wanded magic that day. But today, you would be."

"Today I'm in no shape to competently supervise anything, Harry."

"But--"

"That's quite enough!" Snape barked, frustration creasing his forehead. "You must restrain this saving-people thing, Harry. I've dealt with this odious mark several times without your aid, you realise. To have you insist now that you and you alone can end my torment is frankly ridiculous. I am coping, is that clear?"

Harry took a step back, understanding then that he'd somehow managed to offend his father. "I just wanted to help," he tried to explain. "I didn't mean you needed it. But..." His stomach churned with frustration. "I mean, why suffer if you don't have to?"

"Because experimenting with wanded powers is inherently dangerous. I thought you knew that, after the essay I set you."

"I do, but I'm pretty much fated to be in danger anyway--"

Snape settled his hands on Harry's shoulders, but not in anger. His fingers squeezed briefly, imparting reassurance. And love. "There's no need to court it. You will encounter perils enough without such reckless seeking after them, I suspect."
"It's worth it if it helps you--"

"No, it is not." Snape turned away as Draco came into the lab. Taking the Lotion Potion, he spread a thick layer of it on his burning mark. Steam rose up; Snape inhaled it, and visibly relaxed. "You see? The situation is not so unmanageable as you feared."

"You're putting on a front," Harry accused.

His father raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps so, but you're going to respect my wishes all the same."

"I . . . all right, then. If you insist."

"I do."

"But if I research the matter first . . .?"

"If your research is adequate I will supervise you in the matter. But not while term is underway, Harry. A project like this will require my complete attention."

"A project like what?" asked Draco.

"I want to find a way make his mark stop growing back. Wanded magic. A charmed potion, maybe."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Oh yeah, you and your miracles. Just don't blast his arm completely off, all right? Or blow yourself up during the brewing."

"I'm not that bad at Potions," Harry said, bristling slightly.

"I didn't mean you were. But I've seen your wanded magic, Mr Basilisk!"

"Gentlemen," interrupted Snape.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry," said Harry, moving back to his workstation.

Draco inclined his head slightly, which was better than nothing, Harry supposed.

It took most of the night to finish the renewal of the stasis potion. Harry couldn't help but think back to that long day when he'd been so upset because Snape had been avoiding him--he'd thought. Now that he knew what was involved to deal with his father's mark, he understood a lot better why Snape hadn't wanted to talk to him in the middle of the process.

Definitely, the conversation wouldn't have gone well, not with Snape in pain like this and needing to supervise critical stages of the brewing.

It was almost dawn when Draco finally laid aside his stirring ladle and rolled up his sleeves. "Now comes the awful part."

Harry figured he meant the actual slicing off of the mark. Which he did, in a way. But the reality of it was much, much worse than Harry could have envisioned. He'd thought that it would be a simple matter of cutting the skin away--though that just had to hurt like mad--and dropping the mark into the vat of stasis potion. And then they'd pour the renewal draught in directly after, or perhaps before.

Before, Harry decided, since Draco was starting to unscrew the enormous lid that had kept the glass vat covered. The marks within were still hot enough to keep the potion boiling, but it seemed like they were angry, too. For when the lid came off, they all screamed, a long high wail of agony, or maybe demand. Harry couldn't tell.
Draco cast a numbing spell on Snape and himself. What for, Harry didn't know, until Snape plunged his arm straight down into the vat, his features taut with dreadful expectation.

The other marks attacked his arm, clawing at it, bursts of magic like tiny starbursts erupting in all directions as Snape's face tightened still further and a low gasp escaped past his clenched teeth.

Meanwhile, Draco worked quickly. He handed Harry the finished flask of renewal draught, telling him to pour it in the instant Snape removed his arm from the vat. Then Draco snatched up a sharp knife and sank both his arms into the vat, where he grabbed Snape's wrist in a firm grip. He used his other hand to slice the mark clean off, and straight away yanked Snape's arm up out of the boiling liquid.

They both fell back from the counter, staggering, --Draco actually slipped and landed on his arse-- as Harry poured the renewal draught into the vat.

It made the other marks stop attacking the new one, at least. But it didn't stop them from burning hot and fierce.

"For Merlin's sake, Harry! Cap off the vat!" shouted Draco.

Fumbling a little, Harry did so. If in the process he dropped the empty flask, he thought that couldn't be helped.

Draco pushed to his feet. "Evanesco," he muttered as he picked up his borrowed wand from the counter and swished it in an angry arc. The broken flask vanished from sight. "Accio the damned burn salve."

Nothing happened.

"It's not actually damned," Harry pointed out. He felt a bit better about his own clumsiness, hearing Draco make a silly mistake like that.

"Ought to be," said Draco with a grimace, looking down at his arms. "Ugh. Too bad Sansdoleur doesn't take care of the burn itself, instead of just keeping the pain at bay."

Harry had to admit, the boiled-lobster colour wasn't a good look for him. Snape's arm wasn't any better. Harry summoned the burn salve himself and watched as his father and brother applied it. It got rid of the burn, all right, but Snape was still left with a gaping, bloody wound that covered half his forearm. Harry would have thought that the boiling stasis potion would have more-or-less cauterized it, but the fresh blood seeping from it told him differently.

Snape nodded rather curtly at them both. "Good work, gentlemen. I've improved the Lotion Potion to the point where this is not necessary very often, but sometimes yes, it is indeed necessary . . . I do believe."

"You're rambling," said Harry, glancing at his watch. "Why don't you get some sleep, Dad? In fact, why don't you take the day off? You have been up all night."

Draco wisely made no comment about providing Snape another spiked drink to help him sleep.

Snape winced as he spread more salve on his wound, then visibly relaxed as the numbing agent took hold. "I must go see the Order now, Harry, and help them analyze whatever information they've been able to glean about Voldemort's activities."

"Well, the headmaster'll be there. Tell him you're cancelling classes, all right?"
"No."

"All right, fine." Harry glared a bit. "But I'll be down here after classes to see how you're doing, and I'll stay here on Saturday, too."

"You'll go to Hogsmeade," corrected Snape. "Spying on Voldemort was fraught with far greater difficulties than this, Harry. I will be perfectly fine."

For all that though, he staggered slightly as he walked from the lab, the Lotion Potion clutched tightly in the fist of his uninjured arm.

"I think I ought to stay around the dungeons this weekend," murmured Harry, biting his lip.

"Why, because only Harry Potter can do anything useful? I'll be here to help him if he needs something. Which he won't. Not by then."

"I didn't say only I could help him--"

"No, but you do think that way, Harry. You're not trying to, maybe. But you do tend to have a bit of a hero-complex, don't you think?"

"You've been discussing me with your therapist!"

Draco just shrugged.

"All right. Severus will be just fine on Saturday without me," admitted Harry. "But I'm still coming down here tonight to check on him."

Draco started rolling down his sleeves, but he didn't button them. Harry figured he was probably going to take a shower and change into a clean shirt.

"Can I still ask you to get me something?"

"Sure. What do you need?"

The other boy smiled slightly. "A few chocolate frogs, maybe? Severus wouldn't let me buy anywhere near enough when he took me into the village. Said it might give me cavities. As if I don't know anything about fluoride charms."

Harry didn't know anything about them, but he did know that Draco brushed his teeth three times a day, so he couldn't imagine that cavities were really an issue. "I think he's just enjoying being a dad."

"Yes, well get me all the chocolate frogs you can carry. It's not like I can order desserts any longer. I'll pay you back."

"Oh, but--" Harry bit his tongue in time, and managed not to say that it was his treat. Draco would think that was charity, most likely.

"All right," he agreed instead. "Five percent interest only. Since you're my brother."

"Five percent!" Draco stood up straighter. "That's outrageous. That's usury, it is--"

"Five percent a month," added Harry, grinning.

"Oh, fine." Draco made a face. "Borrowing money is horribly vulgar in any case, so I'll get Severus to hand out our allowance tonight, then. And I'll send my money with you. Five percent!"
Harry laughed. "See you later, Draco. I have to go try to wake up enough to survive classes today."

Draco swished his borrowed wand. "Accio Pepper-Up Potion," he said, tossing the vial to Harry after it flew his way. "There you go. You'll be fine. Strange you didn't think of it yourself."

"I would have!" Harry laughed. "Well, eventually. After I'd fallen asleep in Charms."

"I wish I could fall asleep in Charms," said Draco, his expression falling. "I'm sick of being down here. I really am."

Harry didn't know what he could say to that. He nodded sympathetically, then went to ask his father for some Floo powder so he wouldn't need an escort back up to the Tower.
"So you're sure you're all right?" asked Harry after dinner the next night.

Snape leaned back in his chair and regarded his son over a half-finished glass of wine. "I'm looking forward to a long sleep, certainly. You needn't be anxious."

"I'm not exactly anxious--"

"Harry, you've asked if he's all right about eight times!" exclaimed Draco.

Snape's eyes narrowed as he glanced at Draco. "That's quite enough. As I said last night, you've seen me in that state before and Harry hasn't."

"I'm surprised you sent Draco up for me, considering," said Harry, sighing. "It must have been pure torture waiting for me to get here."

"I'd told you that you could help," Snape answered, smiling a bit ruefully. "I must admit, in retrospect I had cause to question a promise like that. Torture wasn't far off the mark."

Harry grimaced. "Your puns are getting worse. But if you're in a good enough mood to make them . . . Anyway, thanks for keeping your promise to let me help with the stasis potion. I'm glad to be back in the Tower and all, but I still want to be included in family things."

Snape merely inclined his head.

"The Order meeting you went to right after . . . Did anyone find out what Voldemort was up to?"

"How could they?" asked Draco. "The Order's lost its spy."

No, it hasn't, Harry thought, feeling a little guilty that in this case, Draco was the one being left out. Remus might have managed to get his hands on some information . . .

Or not.

"At the moment his plans remain largely unknown. He's definitely been recruiting purebloods on the Continent, but other than that?" Snape tilted his wine glass and downed the rest of the contents. "I do believe I'll retire, then. Good night, Harry, Draco."

"Night, Dad."

Draco didn't reply, though he did give a brief nod.

Snape's gait looked weary as he walked the corridor towards his bedroom.

"Oh, stop fretting," Draco chided his brother. "Look, if it's any consolation I think he's recovering better now than he used to. Wizards can adapt to just about anything if they have to. Well, strong wizards. You're proof of that. Marsha and I have been talking quite a bit about it. That childhood you had, those Muggles, and then getting thrown into the wizarding world with no warning and expected to save us all, for Merlin's sake, and you just take it in stride. Like you think it's normal."

Harry wasn't sure he appreciated being such a heavily featured topic in Draco's therapy sessions, but maybe it was inevitable. "Well, it is normal. For me, I mean. That's just how things have been."
"Right, because your childhood determines your frame of reference. Which is why it seems normal to me to think of Muggles as a largish form of cockroach."

"Draco--"

The other boy burst out laughing. "You look so outraged! I didn't say Muggles actually were cockroaches, Harry. Or even that I thought they were. I said it seems normal to me to think that way."

"Do you think that way?"

That sobered Draco. "You know, it takes some effort not to. But I know it's not exactly appropriate in the circles I want to frequent. So I'm working on it. I think Marsha helps. I mean, there are times now when I can actually think about what she says. I used to sit there in my sessions and only be able to think about her squibbishness. Well, when I wasn't shocking her on purpose."

"On purpose."

Draco's teeth glinted as he grinned. "Oh, come on. You saw how shockable she was. You can't expect me not to play with her a little."

Harry tried hard not to sigh. "As long as she's helping you. Is she?"

Draco raised an eyebrow in a fair imitation of Snape. "I as good as admitted that Muggles aren't cockroaches. If that's not progress, I don't know what is."

Harry thought it was pretty paltry progress. On the other hand, for Draco . . . "Yeah, well just don't mention around Hermione that you think it seems normal to believe Muggles are . . . that."

"Not even once?"

"Once more, you mean? You've made your opinion clear enough in the past. You're lucky she talks to you at all after the things you've said."

"It's not luck. You think I don't know that? It's her wanting to stay on good terms with you. Granger--excuse me, Hermione--knows her reaction to the adoption was reprehensible and she's determined to play her cards better this time around. Hmm. A tad Slytherin, if you think about it."

"Definitely don't mention that to her."

Draco fished in his pocket and thrust some Galleons at Harry. "Deal. Just don't forget my sweets."

Harry stared doubtfully at the pile of coins. "That's your entire allowance, Draco."

The other boy shrugged. "What else am I going to spend it on, trapped down here?" Then he scowled. "Besides, the house-elves hardly ever provide any dessert these days. I think Dobby put his bony little finger in somewhere."

"We had Napoleons just tonight!"

"In your honour, no doubt. No way would Dobby ever deprive you of a treat. Why don't you come to dinner more often? Severus and I would get better food. I don't care what he arranged with the elves, they aren't serving up the fare from the Great Hall when you visit. Well, not lately."

"Why don't you just ask Severus to let you order what suits again?"
Draco huffed slightly. "Because I happen to have a certain sense of self-possession?"

"He's your dad, not somebody you have to impress! Anyway, maybe he'll think it's time to ease up."

"Yeah, well he hasn't been your Head of House long if you think he's that easy to get around." Draco shook his head. "Anyway, Marsha more-or-less implied that chocolate's tantamount to an anti-depressant--"

"So Muggles have come up with something worthwhile, then."

"Oh, please. Don't you know any history at all? They nicked the recipe from wizards in the twelve-hundreds!"

"Chocolate comes from Mexico, you prat!"

"Did I ever say there weren't wizards in Mexico?" Draco sighed. "Let's not fight about who invented chocolate. Just get me plenty of it."

Harry took the gold coins from Draco and pocketed them. "All right, then."

"Be good, Harry," mimicked Ron as he, Hermione, and Harry ambled along the winding path into Hogsmeade. "You know, the way he says that really is funny. Snape the dad."

Harry had to admit, it was a little bit amusing.

"Well, I think Snape's a fine dad!" Hermione said in a robust tone. "Honestly, I do. Anyone can see--"

"Oh, crap!" Harry suddenly exclaimed. "I can see again, just fine out of both eyes! I meant to ask Severus to take me up to Pomfrey for an exam so she could clear me to leave off my glasses."

"That's marvellous, Harry!" Hermione stopped walking and enfolded him in a warm hug. When she stepped back it was to urge, "Ask him tonight, then. Oh, I remember thinking you look so dashing without glasses! Not that you don't look good regardless, but--"

"Oh, great! Now you're after Harry as well!"

"I'm just happy for him! What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing!" snapped Ron, looking as though he regretted what he'd just said. He drew in a deep breath, obviously trying to get past it. "Well, come on then, off with your glasses. You can have Pomfrey check you after the fact."

Harry grinned and slipped his glasses into a jacket pocket.

Hermione smiled brightly. "Besides, you may as well see how it goes without glasses first, right? If you get another headache or something you'll know you aren't quite there yet."

"Good thinking."
"Yeah, Hermione's good at that."

"Well someone has to be, Ron."

Harry bit back a sharp retort and thanked God they were entering the village by then. Maybe visiting the shops would distract Ron and Hermione from their constant bickering. "So, where to first?"

"I could do with a few books--"

"Hermione, there's a whole library full of books where we just came from! You remember it, right? You only live in there--"

"Draco needs some chocolate frogs," Harry interrupted.

"Oh, Draco--"

"Why doesn't he owl-order whatever he wants?"

Harry thought fast. He didn't like lying to his friends, but neither could he tell them his brother's personal business. "I didn't ask. But you know, after the whole Owler thing? I'd be a little averse, too."

Hermione's lips turned down. "Hmm, I suppose so. I'm sorry I thought he must have killed Pansy, Harry. I've thought about it a lot and it seems to me that if someone memory-charmed Erik and Bella to lie, then there must have been a plot to incriminate your er . . . brother. Which can only mean that he's innocent."

"Draco Malfoy, innocent," scoffed Ron. When Harry turned a glare on him, he held his hands up. "Oh, he might not have killed Parkinson but the one thing he's not is innocent."

Harry steered his friends towards Honeydukes, but that didn't stop the sniping.

"Draco's a right prat but at least he's trying to be more polite these days. That's more than I can say about you, Ron."

"You're the one who goes on for hours about how much smarter you are than me! How polite is that?"

"You're the one who keeps calling Harry's brother Malfoy when you know how much it bothers Harry!"

"Shut up, both of you!" Harry finally hissed, one hand on the door of the sweet shop. "Just give it a rest! I haven't been to Hogsmeade in forever and I'd like to enjoy myself!"

Ron and Hermione both glared at each other. They did stop squabbling, though. That had to be worth something.

Harry browsed a bit, checking out the new sweets on offer, though he couldn't help but make a face when he passed a display of garishly iced fairy cakes. He finally settled on some Jelly Slugs for himself and of course the chocolate frogs for his brother. A whole bagful, which cost about half of Draco's allowance. Harry really didn't want to lug around two entire bags of the things. Besides, he couldn't believe Draco truly wanted that many.

"So, a cuppa next?" suggested Hermione when they emerged. Her tone grew teasing. "Or perhaps hot chocolate for you, Harry?"
"I told you all these were for Draco," said Harry, laughing.

"Can we have three sentences in a row which don't involve Malfoy?" asked Ron, clearly exasperated.

"Sure we can," Harry quickly agreed, ignoring the whole name thing. He didn't want to fight about it. Not then, and not ever. "Right, Hermione?"

"Oh, certainly." She waltzed through the door to the Three Broomsticks as Harry held it open, and primly took a seat by the front windows. "So, what are your summer plans, Harry?"

Harry folded his hands on the table. "You know, it's the first time I can remember looking forward to a summer. I think we're going to stay in the castle for a week or two past the end of term, so Severus can take care of some things he never has time for when students are around. And then we'll all go to... well, I can't say but you've been there, right? I have to keep working on my spell lexicon, though it's not half-bad now. Severus says he'll take us all to London to see a play or two."

"Oh, that'll be grand!"

"Yeah. And I'll make some time to visit with Dudley and see how he's doing."

"Three cups of tea," said Ron when a plump young waitress came by for their order.

"Three cups of tea," mocked Hermione when the girl had left. "Honestly, Ronald. You were staring at her like you'd like to drink her straight down."

"Well, she's not bad looking, is she--"

Harry almost kicked Ron under the table.

Hermione blinked quickly and started staring out the window.

Harry sighed and tried to get Hermione to discuss her summer plans, but soon gave it up and talked Quidditch with Ron, instead. It was a relief when the tea came and relieved him of the burden of trying to make his friends get along. They all sipped in silence for a little while as they watched other students go past the window. Nott walked by with Zabini and Greengrass. Harry almost wished he was out there with the Slytherins instead of trapped between two people determined to stay at odds with one another.

"So, what next?" he asked when they were heading back out into the street.

Hermione suddenly whirled to face Ron. "You left that waitress an awfully big tip, don't you think?"

"I think it was about right."

"Thirty-four percent, Ronald?"

"Yeah, trust you to have figured that out."

"I think I know how you figured it, thank you very much--"

"That's it," Harry announced, completely fed up with both of them. He more or less herded them down a long alleyway, not stopping until they were a fair distance from the main street of Hogsmeade. "Listen, both of you, because I'm only saying this once. You're driving the whole Tower 'round the bend! Either kiss and make up and get back together or just forget the whole thing, all right?"
"Oh, very persuasive, Harry," said Hermione scornfully. "Well, forget the whole thing suits me just fine. What do you say, Ronald?"

"It's Ron! And yeah, I say forget it!"

"The both of you are being arses!" Harry shouted. "You don't want to forget it. If you did, you wouldn't be at each other's throats twelve times a day. Hermione, for God's sake just tell him you don't have a thing for Draco! And Ron, apologise for trying to get back by staring at the waitress, all right?"

"Only a complete dunderhead could think I have a thing for Draco!" exclaimed Hermione. "Is that why you've been in such a snit, Ron? Because you actually think I-- Oh, I can imagine how well that would go over. Mum, Dad, I'd like you to meet my new boyfriend, except you can't because he hates your very existence? What sort of person do you think I am?"

Ron had the grace to look shamefaced, though he protested, "But you go on and on about him and how he said you were clever--"

"Because a year ago he'd have never admitted a Muggle-born could have a single redeeming trait! Harry's been good for him, that's all I meant. Honestly, Ron!"

"Well, he's rich as Croesus, isn't he--"

Hermione spoke more quietly. "I don't believe you think I'd care about a thing like that."

"Not exactly, but still . . ." Ron stood up straighter. "You remind me that I'm not rich, and I don't like it."

"When have I ever reminded you of a thing like that? I'm not rich either, in case it's slipped your mind. Dentistry isn't exactly arbitrage!"

"What?" Ron scowled. "The tip, all right? Like I can't afford to leave a few coins on the table. Or telling me you found the most marvellous second-hand bookshop which carries all the seventh-year texts. Or--"

"You tipped that waitress too much because you couldn't stop ogling her! And what's wrong with me wanting to get three times as many books as I could get for the same price in Flourish and Blotts?" Hermione planted her hands on her hips. "Ronald Weasley, if you think I care a hoot about how much money you have or don't, then we really should break up!"

"I don't want to break up!"

"You don't?" Hermione blinked, her eyes suddenly misty as her hands fell to her sides. "I mean, I sort of thought we already were."

"Well that's not turning out so well either, is it?" asked Ron, reaching out to grab one of her hands and pull her close. "I'm sorry I looked at the waitress that way."

"I'm sorry I talk too much about Dr- Dr- Draco!" Hermione swiped her free hand across her eyes. "Harry's just so happy, you know? And I didn't see that in time last time, and I want him to know I'm done trying to get him to renounce his family, even if it has to include a stuck-up self-important vain Muggle-hating arse like Draco Malfoy! Oh! I mean Draco Snape!"

"It's all right," Harry said dryly. "Look, I think you two need a few moments alone. So I'm going to wait around the corner, all right? By that Quidditch shop."
He'd barely finished speaking before Ron had pulled Hermione into his arms and was kissing her like there was no tomorrow. Definitely time to make an exit. Third wheel and all that.

Not that he planned to go far. He headed down the alley away from the main street through town, and when he came out into the back street, found himself alongside the Quidditch shop just as he'd expected. Just two steps to the right and he couldn't see Ron and Hermione any longer. That was good. By then they were pressed so close together they looked like a single person. Thank goodness he was far enough away from them to not hear anything. He had a feeling they weren't exactly being quiet, down there.

When he'd said to kiss and make up he had more of a peck in mind, but this was good, he supposed. Actually, it made sense. All that hostility had been covering an attraction just as intense.

Harry turned his attention to the display in the shop window. Hmm, a Firebolt XL. Two feelings assailed him at once. That ache of wanting to see Sirius again. But also a longing to play Quidditch even if it would mean kicking Ginny out of Seeker position.

"I thought that was you," said a friendly voice alongside him.

Harry glanced up, startled, at Nott. He hadn't heard the other boy arrive, which showed how lost he'd got in thoughts of his Firebolt.

"So what happened to the glasses?"

"Oh, I might not need them any longer," said Harry, shrugging. He thought of explaining further but decided not to bother. "What happened to Zabini and Greengrass? I thought you were going around with them today."

"They're in line for a palm-reading." Nott rolled his eyes. "As if we didn't get enough of that in Divination to cure us of it. Actually it's just Daphne who wanted her future told, but Blaise is a little bit soft on her, I think, so he said he'd have his palm read, too. So, anything good in here?"

"The new broom doesn't look half-bad."

Nott quickly looked left and right, then spoke in a voice that was barely audible, even though he and Harry were completely alone on the street. "Just as well I spotted you. I found something else out, Potter. About that thing you were asking about."

"The Slytherin Plague, you mean?"

"Shh, shh!" Nott made a frantic gesture with his hand. "Yeah, that." A couple of students crossed the far end of the street; Nott jumped back into the shadows, his voice shaking as he whispered, "I can't risk anyone seeing me alone with you. Because you have to tell your father tonight what I found out, and after that my life won't be worth that if they find out I was the one to unravel the whole thing."

The other students were gone by then; Nott relaxed a fraction, though his gaze kept darting back and forth. "I shouldn't even tell you. What's it to me if Malfoy never knows the truth? Why should I risk my neck for him?"

"Snape will protect you; I swear he will," Harry said urgently, even as he kept his voice low. "We can go straight back and you can tell him, whatever it is."

"Ha. It's risk enough talking to you." Nott sighed. "But the alternative might be worse. I need a way out. I'll tell you." Nott edged to the side and slipped into a vacant space between two buildings. "Come on in here where it's less exposed."
Harry glanced back towards the alley where Ron and Hermione were no doubt still kissing, but it wasn't like he was going to be far. He'd be within earshot, and Nott hardly looked likely to try anything. And even if he did, Harry could handle it. Not even a summoning charm on his wand would matter, not considering he didn't need it anyway.

He stepped between the buildings and followed Nott down a few yards. "So, what did you find out? What really happened?"

Nott stopped walking and turned around, his wand in hand, already speaking an incantation as he whirled. "Conflagrare manem!"

Harry screamed as his entire right hand went up in flames. It wasn't normal fire; he knew that at once. It seemed centred on the ring he'd been wearing ever since he'd gone back to classes. Searing pain flashed through the finger wearing it, and through the leaping flames, Harry saw his ring melting. Molten gold began dripping across his skin. Instinct had him shaking his hand to try to put the fire out, or at least get the blazing hot droplets off him. Not that the manoeuvre did him any good, it just spread the tracks of liquid metal into wider streaks and actually seemed to feed the flames.

Desperate to put the fire out before his hand burned off completely, Harry dropped to hands and knees and began slapping his hand against the dusty ground, front then back, again and again.

The pain of that was unbelievable, but at least it worked. In just a few seconds he'd managed to extinguish the fire.

He glanced up to see Nott's lips curled into a satisfied smile. "You should have heard that stupid traitor's letters to the Muggleborns in Slytherin, Potter. One after another, all about how you wouldn't grovel to the Dark Lord. How you had too much pride and we should all throw our lot in with yours. But you're grovelling now, aren't you? To me."

Harry felt like he might black out from the pain still washing through his hand, but he knew he couldn't afford to be weak. Pushing shakily to his feet, he drew his wand with his left hand and prepared to hex Nott into a puddle of mush.

When he tried to cast a spell, though, nothing happened. For a second he couldn't understand why not. Then he realised he was looking down his arm at his fingers, but there wasn't any ring, not on his left hand.

Horrified, Harry glanced at his injured right hand, seeking a snake there, but it had long since melted. In fact, it looked as though the fire had consumed the metal completely. His skin from fingertip to wrist consisted of blackened flesh dotted with broken-open blisters, the whole of it coated with dust and dirt. But of his mother's ring there was absolutely no trace.

"No," breathed Harry, the single word anguished.

"No snake," corrected Nott, snarling, his earlier apprehension gone now that it had served its purpose. "Yeah, without one you're helpless, aren't you now? That's why your damned bodyguards were always hanging about. They knew your secret."

"How long have you known?" gasped Harry, playing for time since Ron and Hermione would have heard his scream and should be dashing to his aid any second.

Nott's face took on a sneering expression. "Well, I wondered from the start, what with the Parseltongue and all, and the way you always seemed to glance at your ring --new, isn't it?-- as you cast spells, but I was sure when I saw you talking to those first-years at the party. No magic then, no
need to brandish your wand, and you still looked down at your ring or at your pet snake every time you tried to say something in Parseltongue. Too bad your little familiar isn't with you now, isn't it, Potter?"

Yeah, too bad, Harry thought, his mind frantically racing. Where were Ron and Hermione? They should be here by now. Unless Nott had arranged for them to be waylaid . . . but no, Nott wouldn't have known that he'd find Harry alone outside that Quidditch shop. He couldn't have set this up in advance . . .

He could, however, cast a competent silencing charm, Harry suddenly realised as he cradled his mangled hand. That must be it. He'd turned away to glance back at the alley, and Nott had cast a spell while Harry wasn't looking. Ron and Hermione had never heard him. They didn't know he needed help.

They were probably still too caught up in each other to even realise how long he'd been gone.

Think, think! Harry told himself. He'd got out of tighter spots than this before. He took a step backwards, toward the street.

"I don't think so. One more step and I cast Petrificus, Potter."

Keep him talking, Harry thought, pain seeming to wash through him in waves. Ron and Hermione will stop kissing sometime and come looking for you . . . "I thought I could trust you!"

"Gullible. So gullible." Nott kept his wand trained on Harry, even as he leaned against a building. "Draco Malfoy may have lost his mind, and your damned father as well, but you're the enemy, Potter. And there are those in Slytherin who haven't forgotten it."

"So what's your plan? Deliver me to Voldemort so you can lick his boots for the rest of your life? Draco was smart enough to want better than that for himself."

"The plan," sneered Nott, "involves a Portkey. I might not have been able to get Draco off Hogwarts' grounds, but Lucius will still pay plenty for you, I'll wager."

Harry's stomach churned with fear, even as he shouted -- hopefully loudly enough to break through Nott's silencing wards, "I'm not touching any Portkey!"

"Oh, yes you are." Nott stepped away from the wall, his wand levelled squarely on Harry's heart. "Petrificus is it, then."

"Oh, fine!" snapped Harry, his mind turning cartwheels by then. A snake, he needed a snake . . . But he had one, didn't he, if he could just get to it . . . Damn, why was he still wearing his jacket? It wasn't that chilly out! "Just hand it to me."

Nott laughed. "And get close enough for you to hit me? Right."

"Then toss it on the ground at my feet and I'll pick it up! Anything but Petrificus, Nott. I'd rather not be body-bound to face the likes of Lucius Malfoy."

Nott laughed again, the sound this time evil. "You can't even best me, Potter! You don't stand a chance against him, either. This isn't Samhain when you have your father to rescue you!"

"Yeah, yeah," said Harry, wishing Nott would just shut up and throw the Portkey toward him. Whatever happened, he had to avoid the threatened Petrificus. Because if he couldn't move, he couldn't solve this problem of needing a snake. He had to have a cover so Nott wouldn't see him
reach toward the zipper holding his jacket closed.

"One wrong move and you'll be in a full body-bind," threatened Nott as he used his free hand to fish something from his pocket. The Portkey was wrapped inside a handkerchief. Nott flicked it just so, and the Portkey tumbled from it to land on the dirt between them.

A double-thick Galleon. Harry cynically wondered how many of those Lucius had been willing to pay to get his hands on Draco.

Nott's wand hand went tense as Harry began to lean over towards the Portkey.

Harry moved his left hand to his zipper as he bent, then yanked it all the way down. The most welcome sight in the world greeted him. Golden buttons decorated with a fierce lion, but they were a gateway to a snake. Three quick taps and he'd transformed the buttons to silver ones boasting a Slytherin snake.

The fingers of his right hand were curled in like claws, now. Harry wasn't even sure magic would flow through them, so he used his left, snapping it up, wand and all, and firing off hexes as Snape had taught him out in Devon. Disarm first, then keep your enemy from fleeing the scene.

*Expelliarmus.*

"Lose that stick in your hand!" Harry screamed in Parseltongue.

He felt the magic ricochet through him and stream out through his hand and into his wand, which amplified it into a huge sweep of power that emerged like a lightning blast gone berserk. Even before the burst had left his wand, though, Harry was already following one spell with another, just like he'd practiced with his father. The Jelly-Legs jinx. Only, snakes didn't know a thing about jelly, so he'd had to come up with something else for his Parseltongue version.

"Legs like broken eggs!"

Both spells hit Nott at almost the same instant. The boy was knocked off his feet and propelled several feet back.

He ended up knocking into a pile of cauldrons someone had stacked between the buildings. They fell all over him and for a moment, Harry couldn't see Nott, though he heard rustling noises as though the other boy was trying to get up.

Then the air all around him was filled with screaming. Awful, horrified screaming. *Hysterical* screaming.

Harry kept his wand trained on the source of the shrieks as he walked to the scattered cauldrons and kicked them aside.

"What did you do to me, what did you do to me, what did you do?" screamed Nott, flailing to sit up.

Harry ignored the question long enough to be sure that Nott's wand was gone. Probably it was gone forever, considering his *Expelliarmus* had been a wanded charm.

Harry kicked aside a few more cauldrons to be sure the wand hadn't just fallen to the side where Nott could reach it.

And that was when he saw what he'd done, when he understood why Nott was still screaming his question.
The boy's legs ended at the knee; his trouser legs lay flat after that. Or not flat, exactly. There was something inside the fabric, something jagged and uneven. Harry trailed his gaze along the seam and when he saw the rest, he felt like his heart leapt up into his throat and got stuck there.

Broken eggshells were spilling out of both Nott's shoes. Broken eggshells coated with bits of yolk and pools of filmy mucus.

His feet were nowhere to be seen.

*Legs like broken eggs,* Harry thought, sickened. It hadn't produced anything but the usual on Ron and Hermione and Draco, but this time he'd used a wanded charm, and the magic had taken him literally.

"What did you do to me--" Nott was still screaming.

Harry pocketed his wand to be sure he didn't send magic through it again. No way did he want to be taken literally when he cast *Sleep-like-the-dead* on Nott. As soon as the boy was *Stupefied,* Harry went to get Ron and Hermione.

Who were still kissing, and hadn't heard a thing.

They forgot all about themselves and the bliss of newfound love, however, the instant they took in Harry's pale features and charred hand. Hermione was the first to react, rushing over to him. "Where else are you hurt? Harry?"

It took Harry a minute to realise he hadn't answered her. He felt more like fainting than ever. In fact, now that the worst of the danger had passed, he wanted to go to sleep for about a month straight. It was all he could do to stay on his feet. But somebody might notice Nott lying unconscious in the next alley over, so Harry drew in a deep breath, bracing himself against the constant pain in his hand, and told himself it wasn't over yet.

"Just my hand," he said, shocked at how much like a croak his voice sounded. "Um, I don't suppose you know a good painkilling spell? Severus knows this really good one . . ."

Hermione did cast something to take the edge off, but it was nowhere near as good as his father's spell.

"So who did this?"

Harry winced just thinking about it. "Nott. And don't say you told me so. I told you I didn't trust him, remember?"

Ron was too good a friend to retort that for all Harry had said that, neither had Harry really expected something like this. "Where is he, then?" said Ron, menace in every word.

"Alley next to the Quidditch shop," gasped Harry, stepping away from Hermione. He felt awful when he realised what they were going to see. "Um . . . he's in pretty bad shape."

"Deserves to be," said Ron with a pointed look at Harry's hand as they began to make their way over to the other alley.

Harry still all but flinched at the thought of what his dark powers could do, but he should have known his friends would stick by him regardless. "Don't blame yourself, Harry," Hermione said when she saw the state Nott was in. "He attacked first. You've a right to defend yourself."
"Yeah." Harry didn't much like what he'd done, but he didn't blame himself. Not like Hermione worried about, anyway. "I don't think we can get him to Severus without somebody seeing, so let's just get him inside. Oh, and don't touch that double-thick Galleon. It's a Portkey . . ."

Hermione carefully put an upside-down cauldron over it so nobody would accidentally touch it.

Ron walked further between the buildings and found a back door to a shop that hadn't been open since they'd started coming to Hogsmeade. Alohomora didn't work on it, he reported. "Must be warded."

"Not against me," said Harry. One wanded charm later and the door popped open. Harry thought his father would understand.

Ron dragged Nott inside, refusing to let Harry help. Just as well, considering the state his right hand was in. All the same, Harry thought better than to leave suggestive evidence lying about, so he started to scoop up Nott's gooey shoes and socks so he could toss them inside. Hermione made a tsking noise and said to let her do it, but when she saw quite how messy it all was, she used a levitation spell instead of her hands.

Harry weakly smiled his thanks, and glanced back to where Nott had been the moment before. The space between the buildings was still strewn with broken eggs; Harry felt sick just looking at them. Or maybe it was the burn making him queasy. He just knew he wasn't in the best shape. By now he felt like he could use a year's worth of sleep.

He thought about casting a Scourgify, or asking Hermione to, but then he realised he might need all that egg in order to restore Nott. If he could restore him, that was. Harry couldn't think about it any longer, not then, so he turned away from the mess. Didn't matter if it continued to litter the alley for a little while. Nobody was going to see the broken eggs and realise what they meant.

Hermione was setting his Honeydukes bag down on a crate when Harry stumbled in; he absently realised she must have scooped it up for him. Had it really only been an hour ago that he'd been buying Draco's sweets? It seemed like weeks had passed since then. He felt shaky. Like he needed to sit down. But he couldn't, not yet. He had to make sure they'd be safe in here.

Not that Harry knew what to do, exactly. They needed Severus.

"Hermione, you go get my dad, all right? Tell him everything on the way. Ron and I will make sure Nott stays Stupefied." Harry paused to think. "Tell Severus to bring Veritaserum. Nott was trying to turn Draco over to Lucius. I bet he knows how he was framed, and probably who killed Pansy . . ."

The minute she was gone, Harry locked the door, then cast some of his best protective spells, using wanded magic for every bit of it. He didn't really think that any of Nott's other associates would show up, but he was taking no chances.

Even if, by the time he was finished, he felt like a stretch of carpet that had been trod on too many times. Practicing wanded spells out in Devon hadn't left him feeling quite as worn out as this. Maybe it was just the burn draining him.

Or maybe it was all the emotion. The screaming in Parsel_tongue. Just like in his seer dream, the one he'd never been able to properly remember, the one his father had told him about . . .

Now that he had more of a chance to look around, he saw that they were inside a dusty, disused room. It looked like somebody had moved out too fast; they'd left behind dozens of empty boxes and such. The connecting rooms were the same, and there seemed to be no display window on the street.
side; just a door. Harry warded it as well, using wanded magic again. That last spell made him stagger as he wound back through the rooms to join Ron.

Nott, thank goodness, hadn't moved. Harry wasn't sure he had another spell in him. Not even a wandless one. He collapsed onto a crate next to a wall, and leaned back, carefully keeping his injured hand from touching anything. He tried not to look at it, even. Something about the burn damage was pulling his fingers in tighter and tighter, until now he was practically making a fist. He didn't seem able to uncurl his fingers, though. And it hurt like hell to try, so he didn't.

Not after the first time, when he heard the noise he made during the attempt.

"Sweet Merlin, I wish I had something to help you," said Ron, who had yet to sit down. He was standing guard, wand at the ready, his attention focussed on Nott's prone body. "My healing spells are crap, though. I can't even do that painkilling one Hermione used. Sorry."

"Severus will set it right." Shrugging, Harry tried to get his mind off things. He kept thinking how awful it was that his mother's ring had been destroyed. It shouldn't be hitting him this hard, it really shouldn't. He hadn't had the ring until this year, so it wasn't like he should be attached to it, was it? And he had a father now. A real person, to be there for him, to love him. What was an inanimate object compared to that?

For all that though, his heart still ached as much as his blackened hand. Tears actually started welling in his eyes. Definitely, he had to distract himself. "So, is everything all right now, with you and Hermione?"

"Yeah, I think so." Ron tried to smile, but the effort was strained. "Your father's going to set me another ten thousand lines for this, I just know it. Not that I don't deserve them. We shouldn't have left you alone."

"You didn't. I left you."

"Yeah, well we shouldn't have started kissing like that and made you feel like you had to leave us alone."

"I was the one who told you to kiss and make up, Ronald."

Ron laughed. "It'll be good not to hear her call me that. I was right sick of it."

"Useful it's so easy to figure out when she's miffed, though."

"That's a thought . . ."

They lapsed into silence then, Harry gritting his teeth against the pain he felt inside and out.

"Be good to find out the truth about the Owlery, though," Ron said after a while. "And . . . oh, hell. I guess you'll like it if Malfoy . . . Draco . . . gets completely exonered, right?"

"He really was unfairly expelled. The Aurors' report said he didn't do it . . . I'm hoping if we can get the whole truth, and confessions or whatever, the governors will feel bad enough to let Draco back into classes where he belongs. I mean, I do know he did attack Pansy early in the year, but he's more than paid for that by now."

"Been nice not having him around to show us all up, though."

Harry nodded, understanding what Ron meant. He used to dread going to class with Draco, too. But
things had changed, and Ron was just going to have to get used to it. "If he gets reinstated he's going to visit me in the Tower sometimes."

"And hang around with us, no doubt."

"Well, it's not like he's got a lot of friends left in Slytherin."

Ron scowled. "As long as you're sure he doesn't have a thing for Hermione, I guess I can stand it."

"He doesn't. Trust me on that one. But I'm going to encourage him to make friends with her, and you have to be able to stand that as well."

"Harry--"

"You don't think it would be better for Draco to really start believing that Muggleborns are all right? Well, how else is that going to happen except by getting to know at least one pretty well?"

"Yeah, yeah." Ron made a face.

A noise outside distracted Harry from the conversation. "That'll be Severus and Hermione." He got up to let them in, wishing by then he hadn't used wanded magic . . . and not just because it might seriously annoy his father. It was also the fact that he had to use yet more of it to undo the spells. And by that point, he wasn't sure he could.

He did manage, though it made his stomach twist into awful knots.

"Rather formidable wards," said Snape in a questioning voice as he entered the room.

"Well, I know you said to be good, but--" Harry cleared his throat and decided to just get it over with. "Look, what do you expect? Nott was going to deliver me to Lucius Malfoy! He had a Portkey--" A terrible thought occurred to him. "We can't just leave it out there. I mean, it's not some bit of junk. Somebody'll pick it up. Well, if they see it. It's under one of the cauldrons--"

"Miss Granger showed me." Snape glanced once at Nott's immobile form, then used a spell to gently lift Harry's injured hand into better light. "Mr Nott is lucky you didn't do worse."

Harry looked away, wishing more than ever that he hadn't been holding his wand when he'd cast that Jelly-Legs Jinx.

Snape very carefully pulled Harry's jacket and sleeve cuffs farther up his arm, and studied the straight line that separated burnt flesh from uninjured skin. "I recognise the spell he must have used. This will be more difficult to treat than the average burn, but it can be done."

"You recognise the . . ." Harry gulped. "Oh. It's a Death Eater thing?"

He knew from the look on Snape's face that his father had used this on people before. A long, long time ago, but still . . .

"It's designed to be self-limiting. A good thing, since otherwise your clothes would have caught fire."

Self-limiting, so when the Death Eaters tortured people, they stopped short of killing them . . .

Gooseflesh rose all up and down Harry's arms. Well, where he wasn't burnt to a crisp.

"You are otherwise unharmed? Where are your glasses?"

"I'm fine. My eye is so much better that I took them off. No headache, even." Harry gulped, his eyes
He told himself it was from the persistent throbbing ache in his right hand. It was just that he was tired of being in so much constant pain. "The . . . the ring's gone, though. Nott destroyed it. He'd figured out I needed to see a snake--"

The Potions Master moved his wand toward Harry's clenched fingers, murmuring a spell, the one he'd used months ago to tell them to forget they were in pain. He flicked the magic over palm and wrist as well, at which point Harry's fingers uncurled a little bit on their own.

"The damaged nerves were making them clench," explained Snape. "Your nerves for the moment are relaxing somewhat. Though I don't expect the spell to function quite as well as previously."

"Talk about understatement," muttered Harry, but then he realized how ungrateful that sounded. "I just mean, it's still really sore. Not so much that I think I'll sick up, though. I mean, your spell did help."

"In a short time you'll be in the infirmary receiving proper treatment," Snape assured him, though his voice was a bit on the questioning side.

"Oh yeah, I can wait," Harry said at once. "I want to know whatever Nott knows, straight away."

"It will be difficult to strategize without that information, and I'm loath to proceed until we have it. Before we deal with Mr Nott, however, I'd like to know how you got through this scrape without your ring." Before Harry could answer, Snape gave a sharp nod. "Ah, of course. The shirt Draco gave you for Christmas. Fortuitous that you wore it today of all days."

As if only then realizing how close Harry had come to disaster, Snape pulled him into a close hug, his hands patting his son's back.

"I still had to distract Nott enough so that he didn't get suspicious about what I was doing," Harry gulped, feeling like he had to talk it all out, like if he stopped, something awful might happen. Something else awful. "You remember I was wearing the Gryffindor version of the shirt when I left? So I had to switch it over before I could get my magic working . . . I was worried Nott would notice me unzipping my jacket and put me in a body-bind before I could reach the buttons . . ."

"It's all right, Harry," said Snape in a soothing voice.

"Yeah . . ." Harry finally relaxed against his father, breathing in deeply. Somehow losing his mother's ring hurt less now. Some, at least.

Snape shifted slightly as he looked around. "Perhaps I should have allowed Draco to accompany Miss Granger and myself. He was quite insistent, but not having assessed the situation, I was reluctant to take responsibility for his safety as well as yours." The Potions Master cleared his throat. "Though you appear to have managed quite well on your own."

Harry felt a warm glow heating him from the inside out. He wasn't sure if it was from the praise or from hearing that Draco had wanted to come help.

"Professor Snape," ventured Hermione after a few moments had passed. "Nott's breathing has changed."

"Ah well, duty calls," murmured Snape, though he took the time to pat Harry's back one last time. And drop a kiss on the top of his head. Harry thought he could have done without that last bit . . . or at least, he wished Snape hadn't done that in front of anyone.

Not that Ron and Hermione were likely to make fun of it. They knew, better than anyone else
probably, what it meant to him to have a father at last.

Up until then, Snape hadn't glanced at Nott except to verify that the young man was in fact no threat. Now he studied the prone figure more closely and drawled, "Indeed, Miss Granger. I see what you mean."

Harry figured he was talking about the fact that Nott had no legs.

Snape turned to face his son. "It occurs to me to wonder if a standard Jelly-Legs jinx would not have been enough to incapacitate Mr Nott?"

"Yeah." Harry heard himself clearing his throat and wondered over it. He wasn't nervous, not really. "Um, well the whole eggs thing was an accident, actually. I wasn't sure my right hand would channel magic after he burned it, so I used my left, and I don't know how to hold my wand so well in that hand."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "While under attack, you had the presence of mind to attempt to cover your wandless magic?"

Harry's neck felt a little hot at the undeserved praise. "Oh. Well, no. I sort of drew my wand by habit. I'm just not used to doing magic without it out. You know."

"Ah."

"I also did a wanded Expelliarmus. I'm not sure what that did, except I couldn't find his wand anywhere around, afterwards."

"But the locking spells on the door, those were not accidentally done."

"No, sir," said Harry in a low voice.

"Well done, Harry. Decidedly so." The moment Snape turned his attention to the two students standing anxiously to Harry's side, however, he began glowering. "Though I would have preferred he not have been left alone."

"Don't blame them. I left them for a minute. My fault completely." Harry grimaced. "I actually thought about going back for them, but decided I could handle Nott on my own. Which I guess I could, but I see now it was a little reckless of me."

Snape looked from his son to Nott's flat trouser legs and back. "A little?"

"All right. Completely. I'm sorry, sir."

"Desist with the use of sir, if you would."

"Yes, s--" Harry cleared his throat. "Um, sure, Dad."

Snape stared at him for a moment longer. "All in all you did well." He quickly warded the building, then turned back to his son. "It is unlikely, though not impossible that someone may look for Mr Nott here. Now, to interrogating him. The Stupefy is wandless, I think? I'll reverse the effect, then. You don't look quite up to the task."

"I'm all right--"

"You sustained a serious injury and then had to follow it up with the kind of magic that every wizard in the world would find debilitating. Your good hand is shaking and your face is tinged with green.
You are manifestly not all right. I'd take you to the infirmary this instant if we didn't urgently need to understand just what we may be facing!"

Harry saw through all that to the love beneath, and abruptly sat down. "That'd be nice if you'd undo the spell, then." He almost added, And Dad? I love you, too, but decided Snape wouldn't much like that with the other Gryffindors standing right there.

Snape's smile was thin as he summoned a short crate that could serve as a seat. Only when he was settled on it with his long legs extended in front of him did he point his wand at the unconscious boy. "Finite Incantatem."

Nott came awake still screaming about his legs.

"Yes, pity, that," said Snape in a thoroughly unsympathetic voice.

The boy on the floor jerked himself into a sitting position, leaning on his hands for balance. "Pr- Pr-Professor Snape?"

"Perhaps you'll be good enough to explain why you thought you'd survive such an imprudent attack on my son, Mr Nott."

Nott's face drained of blood as he tilted it up to look at his Head of House. "I didn't know he could do this to me, did I?"

Snape's expression grew positively malevolent. "I was referring to myself. What made you think you'd survive my wrath? He's my son, Mr Nott. My son."

Harry's stomach plummeted even though he was almost sure his father wouldn't really kill the boy . . . the other part was certainly true, though. Snape had killed people before. Harry tried hard to push that from his mind.

Nott's face was pasty by then. "You're a teacher! You can't--"

"I'm a Death Eater, Mr Nott. The fact that I no longer ally myself with Voldemort hardly changes what that means. And I'd think you know quite well what it means." Snape tapped his wand to Nott's sleeve and began to trace the outline of a Mosmordre spell there.

Harry's stomach squirmed, and the feeling only got worse when his father flicked his wand upward and summoned a few of the eggshell fragments, then allowed them to rain down onto Nott's face. The boy shook his head wildly to get them off him. "You don't like them?" questioned Snape in a mild voice. "A pity, as you're about to lose your arms as well. Harry, perform the armshell spell, if you would--"

"Wait!" screamed Nott, flailing his arms out as though to implore Harry. He ended up losing his balance and flopping to his back, but he pushed himself up again straight away.

Ron tensed, his wand trained on Nott.

But Nott thought better than to flail about again. "Please don't! I'll tell you everything--"

Harry caught his father's gaze and understood. Well, sort of. He didn't really like threatening Nott, but there probably wasn't an ideal way to go about this. "Why should we believe a word that comes out of your lying mouth?"
"I'll take truth serum!" screamed Nott, his eyes wild. "Don't change my arms into eggs, Potter!"

"Hmm, he'll take truth serum," Harry said in a thoughtful voice, letting it be Snape who admitted --or not-- that he had an illegal supply.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Oh, he'll definitely do that. You can't even depend on your parents to refuse on your behalf, can you, Mr Nott? I do believe you've already reached your majority. How very convenient."

Nott gulped as though he was only then realising what he'd got himself into. "Er . . ."

"The spell, Harry?"

Harry lifted his wand as though to hex the other boy.

Nott's mouth shot open like a fish maw gaping for air.

Snape chuckled darkly as he drew a vial of clear fluid from his robes. He dripped three drops past Nott's trembling lips, then paused for a moment to allow the boy to recover. "So, who caused Pansy Parkinson to fall from the Owlery, Mr Nott?" he asked, his voice that time smooth, with no threat left in it.

Nott's pupils were dilated, his gaze unfocussed as he looked around the dusty room. "I did."

"How?"

Nott blinked several times. "I shoved Draco Malfoy into her until she toppled out the open window."

"Why was Mr Malfoy unconscious?"

"We hexed him when he was kissing Pansy in the supply closet."

"Whom do you mean by we?" pressed Snape, his voice suddenly gone intense.

"I--- we--- I---" Nott sucked in a huge breath and then looked like he was choking on it. "I--- we hexed him, we hexed Pansy, we dragged them both under the invisibility cloak Malfoy had with him and sneaked them up to the Owlery. I-- we hexed Pansy again, Corpus Aqueous. I-- we shoved Malfoy against her until she fell, and then I-- we tried to use the Portkey but it didn't work . . .!!"

Harry mouthed, we who? at his father, but Snape gave a tiny shake of his head.

"Lucius Malfoy gave you the Portkey?" Nott nodded. "For what purpose?"

"To take Draco Malfoy straight to him," whispered Nott, still gasping for breath. "Wherever he might be."

"Why did you not use the Portkey at once? Why take Draco up to the Owlery at all? Why kill Miss Parkinson?"

Nott reached down and began to pat his empty trouser legs, over and over. "Mr Malfoy's instructions. He wanted Draco framed for murder so he'd be expelled from Hogwarts in case we couldn't get him off school grounds."

Just like I thought, Harry mouthed as he glanced quickly at his friends, who were gaping much as Nott had earlier. But that made sense. They'd only recently realised just how angry Lucius was with Draco.
Snape's expression grew hard, as though he were bracing himself. "Did you kill Miss Parkinson because she was truly trying to escape from a future as Voldemort's sworn servant?"

Nott laughed, the sound harsh. "No."

"Then what were Miss Parkinson's motives in writing to Draco?"

"I don't know."

A rueful look stole into Snape's eyes as he rephrased his question. "What did Miss Parkinson say to you of her motives for writing to Draco Malfoy?"

"She agreed."

Harry wrinkled his brow, but it was Snape who asked the question on everyone's mind. "She agreed to what?"

"To take a love potion so she could convince him she was really in love."

Snape's eyebrows rose up towards his hairline as Hermione gave a little gasp and grabbed for Ron's hand. "A love potion? That's simply awful--"

"Quiet, Miss Granger," said Snape. "Mr Nott, summarise for me the discussions leading up to such an action on Miss Parkinson's part."

Nott stopped patting his trouser legs and leaned back on his palms, his face going almost slack. "Pansy hated Malfoy and wanted revenge for the way he hexed her into St. Mungo's. He'd humiliated her before all Slytherin by choosing Harry Potter over the Dark Lord. She wanted to kill him. I-- we told her we had secret instructions to kill Draco in a particularly public way. By throwing him from the Owlery so the whole world would know what fate awaited a traitor like him. She wanted in. Pansy said she'd do anything if she could be the one to push him out the window."

"Why did you suggest that Miss Parkinson take a love potion?"

Nott gave a slight shrug, his face taking on more expression, though not much. "I-- we needed a way to get Malfoy out of the dungeons if we were going to be able to deliver him to his father. He kept writing to her . . . It seemed like he cared enough about her to take a risk. Pansy wanted to floo him a letter saying to meet her outside Snape's rooms. But she thought the wards on the Floo might read her true intentions and alert him not to meet her. So I said we could potion her to fall in love with him before she wrote the letter. So the letter would slip through. And she agreed."

Harry thought of how convinced Draco had been that Pansy truly loved him, and suddenly understood.

Snape obviously did, too. "Why did you never give her the antidote?"

Nott smiled, the expression self-satisfied. "She talked about him non-stop. She mooned over him and practically worshiped the jewellery he'd sent her for Yuletide. The potion I used had a memory charm mixed in, so she forgot completely that Malfoy would get killed if he met her." Nott smiled. "She was perfect for luring him out. Well, obviously. He came, didn't he? My guess is, he still thinks she really did love him."

Hermione gasped again, that time yanking up one hand to cover her mouth before Snape could rebuke her.
The Potions Master took a moment to consider all that. "At what point did you resolve to kill Miss Parkinson?"

"From the start."

"Your reasons?"

"Who better? Malfoy had a motive to kill her. Besides, I'd-- we'd promised Pansy that she could kill him. She'd have been angry afterwards that we Portkeyed him to his father instead. She might have said something. It was better all around to kill her."

"But the Portkey didn't work, you said. What went wrong?"

"That bloody amulet, that's what went wrong," Nott said, moving awkwardly as though trying to shift his non-existent legs. "I'd-- we'd felt its warmth the whole time we were dragging Malfoy up to the Owlery, but when we tried to use the Portkey the amulet started blazing red-hot. Magic began pouring from it. Green waves of magic. And the Portkey went dead."

"So you determined to take Draco out to the Apparition boundary. What was your plan?"

"To Apparate him to Malfoy Manor where his father was waiting."

Snape's voice dropped an octave, his drawl becoming more pronounced. "Can you already Apparate, Mr Nott? As I recall, you've yet to even attempt the Ministry test."

"I can't get the hang of it," muttered Nott.

"Then how were you going to Apparate Draco Malfoy anywhere?"

"I . . . we . . . I . . ." Nott began gasping for air again, actually raising his hands to his throat and clawing his own skin as he struggled.

Snape stared at him for a long moment. "Your confederates are proficient at Apparition, though. Aren't they, Mr Nott? Seventh-year students, I expect?"

Nott fell to his back and began to thrash for air.

"Ah . . ." Snape nodded to himself, the motion so slight it was barely perceptible. "I see. Something else then, Mr Nott. What happened to the protective wards on the Owlery?"

Nott heaved in a huge breath, sounding exactly like someone who'd broken the surface after being trapped underwater as he struggled back into a sitting position. "Mr Malfoy disabled them. He went into the Owlery earlier that day and took them down. He said that as a governor, he could do it and nobody would be able to tell. And if anyone saw he'd been in the Owlery, well . . . he has a perfect right to wander the school."

Snape nodded as though that confirmed longstanding suspicions. "After the Portkey failed, why did you leave Draco Malfoy out on the grounds instead of continuing with him past the Apparition boundary?"

"I-- we got word that Pansy's body had been spotted. And we realised it would only be seconds later until the grounds would start to be searched. By hand, as well as with the map. And with that amulet still pouring out magic, our feather-light charms weren't working. Nothing magical was working."

Snape sucked in a low, harsh breath, his hands clenching as he sat there, but when his voice emerged
it was calm and level. "Tell me about this map."

"It's a magic map. Mr Malfoy said we had to be sure to fool it."

"So you were the one who arranged for the map to make it appear that Draco Malfoy had murdered Miss Parkinson," said Snape, and not in the tone of a question.

Hermione and Ron exchanged a confused glance. Then both of them stared at Harry as though to ask, something you forgot to tell us, mate?

Harry smiled sheepishly back.

Ron snorted slightly. Hermione just looked disapproving that Harry had kept a secret like that from his friends.

"Mr Malfoy arranged it," said Nott.

"How?" barked Snape.

"Lucius Malfoy knew of the map. Crouch had it during the Tournament, took it from Harry Potter. Then it went missing. Mr Malfoy told us that Dumbledore had probably taken it from Crouch. He said the map showed every person inside Hogwarts, and nobody would believe Draco had pushed Pansy unless the map made it look that way. He said to make it so Draco's hexed body would shove Pansy's out the window."

Harry couldn't help himself, then. "Lucius believed Dumbledore was going to be looking at the map at the exact instant when the murder took place?"

"Crouch and Mr Malfoy didn't have enough time with the map. They thought there might be a way to make it show the past and if so, Dumbledore would know how. So it had to show Draco committing the murder."

"And not show you up in the Owlery with him," Snape said. "Why did the map not show you, Mr Nott?"

"Mr Malfoy charmed us that morning when he disabled the Owlery wards."

Snape's eyes narrowed still further. "Tell me about this charm."

"Crouch and Mr Malfoy developed it after Wormtail said James Potter and Sirius Black had tried to develop one--"

Harry clenched the fist on his good hand, wishing for the hundredth time that he hadn't let Wormtail live.

"--the incantation was long," Nott went on. "Latin and French both, I think. And it made us all sick. But that was later. Delayed onset, Mr Malfoy said. He warned us that might happen."

"Why did this sickness spread to those who hadn't been subjected to the map charm?" Snape looked puzzled, but Nott soon cleared it all up.

"Mr Malfoy said it would look too suspicious if I-- we, were the only ones to fall ill. So he gave me-- us, a related hex. He said to cast it on the common room door as soon as we'd delivered Draco to him. So that everyone passing in or out for the next day would get just as sick as us. But it wouldn't take them off the map, he said. He said he didn't want it known that he could make the map lie."
Well, that would explain why every Slytherin except Snape, Draco, and Harry had fallen ill, Harry thought. Harry hadn't been to the common room yet, and Draco hadn't been there in months.

And Snape, of course, usually flooed in rather than use the door.

"Harry, have you any questions?"

Harry didn't hesitate. "How did Lucius Malfoy convince you to go to all this trouble and even put up with a dangerous illness like that?"

Nott sneered. Either the Veritaserum was weakening, or Harry had less sheer presence as an interrogator, for the legless boy wasn't as deferential as he'd been with Snape. "How do you think, Potter? Money. And power. The gratitude of the Dark Lord. They were going to get information from Malfoy. About you. About Snape. About the Dark Mark, and why Snape was still sane when he should have long since lost his mind from resisting the Dark Lord's call."

"Is that why you tried to befriend me? For information?"

Nott's lips twisted. "I thought there might be a way through you to Malfoy. And if not, you might let something useful slip. Which you did, the way you kept looking at your ring. And if all else failed, I thought there might come a time when you were alone and unprotected and I could use the Portkey to give you at least, to Mr Malfoy."

Snape idly twirled his wand between his fingers, but Harry doubted his father was as relaxed as he looked. "What makes you think the Portkey would still function, Mr Nott?"

"It was only the amulet blocking it," Nott said, reverting to a more respectful demeanour. "Same as it blocked our feather-light charms."

"Any other questions, Harry?" When the boy shook his head, Snape turned to the other students. "Miss Granger? Mr Weasley?"

Ron had an arm around Hermione's shoulder by then. Neither one wanted to ask anything.

"Very well, then. It's time to put an end to this." Standing up without warning, Snape levelled his wand on Theodore Nott.

"No!" gasped Harry.

"Stupefy," said Snape, who afterwards raised an eyebrow and stared at his son. "You were expecting something a trifle more . . . violent, I take it?"

"Um . . ." Ashamed by then, Harry didn't want to admit that he'd been just a little afraid he was going to hear Avada Kedavra cross his father's lips. But then again, Snape wouldn't kill Nott without finding out first who this mysterious we was . . . "Um, why didn't you insist he tell you who he was working with?"

"Ah. Because he couldn't. The way he was speaking . . . I recognise the pattern. He's under a Fidelius curse which has only partially taken. My conjecture is that he and his fellow conspirators bound themselves not to speak of the plot. But because they are not competent to cast such a complicated spell, it's only preventing Mr Nott from revealing their identities--the most salient point, surely--and leaving him free to discuss all the other particulars."

Hermione cleared her throat. "Wouldn't Lucius Malfoy have put them under Fidelius, sir? To protect himself?"
"No doubt he would have, at the successful conclusion of the plot. Until then, he would need to leave them free to recruit other allies as needed. I've no doubt, given today's events, that Lucius is still actively seeking Draco's removal from Hogwarts."

Harry sighed. "If we can't make Nott tell us who he was working with, then what are we going to do? Even if we proved Draco innocent, he couldn't go back to Slytherin. Not until we knew who was behind all this."

"I think perhaps the next logical step would be for me to take a nap," said Snape.

"What?"

"Excuse me?"

"Huh?"

Snape swept his dark gaze over all three Gryffindors before settling it on Harry. Then he said two words. Two words only, but Harry understood.

"Truthful Dreams."

"Oh . . ."

When the implications came clear to Harry, the suggestion made perfect sense. Snape had been looking at the map with Harry at the precise instant Draco had apparently shoved Pansy out of the Owlery. And what was Truthful Dreams designed to do, but show you what you'd seen and couldn't remember? Snape had seen the whole map. He'd scanned it, looking for clues.

Truthful Dreams would be able to show him not just who he'd seen in Hogwarts, but who he hadn't seen.

Truthful Dreams could show him who had been missing.

But still . . . Harry looked up, his own gaze burning with intensity. "I should do it, Dad. I saw the map as well. And I don't have your . . . er, that is, I can tolerate Loosestrife a little better than you can, don't you think?"

Snape's lips curled up a little bit, as though he appreciated Harry not mentioning his addiction in front of the others. "I've used the potion hundreds of times, Harry, and I've learned to focus my dreams on what I need to see. I had to, to make it assist my efforts to spy. And too, I spent a great deal more time looking at the map than you did. I'm far more likely to solve this riddle than are you."

"I understand that--"

"It will be all right," Snape assured him. "Though I think we've lingered here quite long enough."

Harry agreed with that, but still . . . "Getting home might be a problem. I mean, with the state Nott's in. Somebody's bound to wonder why you're levitating him . . ."

Snape tilted his head to the side, his gaze calculating something. "I don't suppose you brought along that infernal invisibility cloak?"

"Well, no . . ."

"I don't know whether to laud you or curse," said Snape dryly. "Though of course several options remain. Mr Weasley, I assume you have already side-along Apparated before. Miss Granger, you are
already seventeen, I believe. Can you Apparate yourself yet?"

Hermione shook her head, her eyes going wide. "I haven't had a chance to take lessons. I thought over the summer . . ."

"Side-along Apparition for you as well, then."

Harry remembered then, how his father hadn't wanted to Apparate Hermione before. It was nice that he was willing to now, even if the circumstances were sort of dictating it.

Hermione was frowning. "But we can't Apparate back into Hogwarts, can we, sir?"

"The fastest and most discreet route back to the dungeons is to Apparate into the Shrieking Shack and take the tunnel onto the grounds." Snape crossed his arms, his whole appearance taking on a fierceness Harry didn't often see, these days. "I suppose I can trust you three miscreants not to hex me this time."

They never had said sorry for that, Harry suddenly realised. On the other hand, Snape had pretty much got even with Hermione when he'd made her think he was going to Obliviate her.

"I know it's not your favourite place--"

"No," said Snape shortly. "But it will suffice. I wish to get back to Draco quickly. He wasn't happy being left out. Not unlike you, actually." Without the slightest warning then, Snape pointed his wand at Nott and murmured a spell.

But nothing happened.

"Ah, yes," said the Potions Master, his voice heavy that time. "Your wanded magic remains impenetrable to outside influence. Apparently any sort of physical manipulation is ruled out until you cancel the spell he's already under."

"But your Stupefy worked just fine . . ."

"It wasn't another transformation. I'd like to transfigure Mr Nott into something that will fit in my hand. It wouldn't do to alert his confederates should they see him being taken into custody, as it were."

"I feel up to it, I think," Harry said cautiously. This time his father didn't contradict him. "Um, do you think I'd better Accio all the egg bits first?"

"Not unless you had scattered them by means of a spell."

"Right. Of course." Harry closed his eyes and thought for a moment, then lifted his wand with his left hand as he looked down at the buttons on his shirt. "Go back the way you were."

Nothing.

"Regular legs . . . be bone and muscle . . ." Still nothing.

"No more eggs!" Harry finally shouted, frustrated. He relaxed when he saw Nott's trouser legs fill out again. Ron put socks and shoes on the boy.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "That sounds remarkably like what I once heard you say in your sleep."
"Yeah... I think maybe the seer dreams have all come true. About time. Anyway, go ahead... what were you going to make him into?"

"What he deserves to be," said Snape, his voice silky-smooth. *Uh-oh.* Harry wasn't quite sure what to expect, but when his father cast the spell this time, Nott vanished completely, clothes and all. In his place was a small brown insect, still *Stupefied.* "Dung beetle. Fitting."

Hermione grinned. "I have a jar you could use for him."

"Save that one for Skeeter if she comes around bothering Harry again," said Ron.

Snape held the beetle inside his closed fist. "Apparating all of you at once will be somewhat of a strain," he said. "It may not be the smoothest possible transition, Miss Granger."

"Ha. Side-along is awful. A lot worse than going to Devon by Portkey," Harry said. When he saw how Hermione stepped closer to Ron as though in need of reassurance, he felt like a right heel.

"Sorry. I just meant... um, it takes some getting used to."

"It'll be all right," Ron said in a bolstering tone. "I'll take care of you."

"Ah, you two have reconciled," Snape said in a rather biting tone. "Oh, well. I suppose points from Gryffindor over all that squabbling in class was getting a bit trite."

Harry didn't think it was too cunning of his father to remind him of all the points he'd taken in recent weeks. "You ought to take points from Slytherin for Nott attacking me, you know."

He expected his father to say *off school grounds or conflict of interest* or... well, pretty much anything that would provide an excuse.

"Done," Snape said, though he declined to announce just how many points. "There are a few things to see to before we depart," he added, waving his wand to cancel his wards. After that he stepped outside for a few seconds. Harry didn't ask, but he figured his father was fetching the Portkey. He wondered if he'd used a handkerchief, as Nott had, to keep from touching it.

Once he was back inside, Snape wasted no time. "Well? Come here, all of you."

Harry stepped without hesitation against his father, welcoming the arm that came around his shoulders. When Ron and Hermione were sort of scrunched together under Snape's other arm, Harry thought he'd better mention, "It's a lot better if you hang on tight."

While Ron looked at him as if he were mad, Hermione bunched her fist in Snape's robes, though she was clearly ill at ease doing so. "Sorry, sir--"

Snape never replied. In the next instant they were all Apparating. Harry grit his teeth as it felt like the whole world melted into his bones and got stuck there. The Apparition took longer than usual, probably because Snape was transporting so many people at once. By the time they all reached the Shrieking Shack, Harry was panting.

Not so Hermione.

"That was brilliant!" she enthused, actually twirling away from Snape the minute her feet hit the floor. "Can we do it again? Oh--"

"Yes, not exactly the optimal time," drawled Snape as he hurried them down into the tunnel. When they emerged onto the grounds, he told Ron and Hermione to go down to his quarters and tell Draco
that Harry was out of danger. "And wait there, please. Harry and I will be along shortly. He needs to stop in at the hospital wing. Then we'll deal with all the rest."

Harry waited until he was alone with his father to quietly ask, "Are you sure we shouldn't deal with... er, the dung beetle first?"

"He'll be dealt with soon enough. When I'm ready."

Harry wondered what that meant. "About Draco, though. Are you sure he can even open the door to let Ron and Hermione in? I mean, it does take a spell..."

Snape cast Harry a sidelong look. "I do actually know what I'm doing, you realise. Draco has the means to admit your friends."

That little tidbit certainly got Harry over his annoyance. "Oh, you mean these days you're letting him have the..." He thought better than to mention the wand. Technically, an expelled student was supposed to have one. Not even a borrowed one.

"Not knowing the full situation, I was hardly going to leave him down there defenceless." Snape's expression grew grim. "For all I knew, the... beetle's... activity could have been part of a larger scheme."

"I'm surprised you left him alone in that case."

"He was safest behind my wards. Until I understood the situation, at least."

Harry had to stop then, and lean against a wall. He wished he could stop panting.

"There's no shame in Mobilicorpus, you realise," Snape said after a moment of watching him.

Harry glanced up into his father's dark eyes. "Maybe not, but... um, you didn't much like it that time, did you?"

"I wondered if you'd have the nerve to bring that up."

Harry shrugged, then wished he hadn't, since Snape's painkilling spell was wearing thin by then. He'd jarred his hand. "We're past it though, right? It doesn't matter now."

"No," Snape said, his voice thoughtful. "I could carry you, you know. I did after Samhain."

"You just need to do something fatherly, don't you?" Harry did his best to smile. "I can make it the rest of the way."

"As you wish," said Snape, but he didn't move until Harry began walking again.

Madam Pomfrey did the usual amount of clucking and fussing, her comments interspersed with liberal amounts of commentary about the mischief this boy always gets up to. She did make his hand feel a lot better, though. Three different spells and one horrible-tasting potion and it looked red instead of black. Red and blistered. Still, that was a huge improvement. His fingers were no longer curled into claws.

When Harry tried a swish-and-flick with his wand, though, he was shocked at how much the movement hurt.

"What do you expect?" demanded Pomfrey in her sing-song voice. "It'll take a few treatments, you know. I'm a medi-witch, not a miracle worker! Now, into bed with you. Into bed at once, you'll be
needing to rest in between treatments--"

"He'll rest at home," Snape insisted.

"Well, don't let him improvise any more flame-throwing spells," sniffed Pomfrey, clearly put out. That was all right, though. At least she'd believed their explanation for the terrible burns. "If you won't stay here then I absolutely insist you be fitted with a sling to minimize unnecessary movement."

Yeah, Harry knew all about her and her slings. When she drew her wand and made quick work of one, though, he thought it was the strangest sling he'd ever seen. Blue fabric dotted with crescent moons woven in gold thread? And edged with tiny tassels?

Pomfrey stared at it in exasperation. "After your lengthy stay here earlier this year, the hospital wing evidently believes in making you comfortable."

"I'm not staying!"

"Yes, Mr Potter, your father made that clear. Now, you also mentioned your vision, I believe. I personally think it's highly doubtful you're ready to leave off the glasses, but we'll see--"

"I'll leave you to it, then," said Snape, brushing off his robes as though preparing to leave. "I've some things to do, Harry. I'll come back for you once you've had your vision examination."

Harry took that to mean, I have to brief Albus and arrange for Order Aurors to get here.

It seemed to Harry that the medi-witch put him through about four different eye exams. It was like she didn't want to admit the obvious. Harry didn't think that was because she wanted him to have bad vision. More likely, it was professional jealousy. She knew she couldn't have cured Harry's eyes after Samhain, not without Snape to help. She hadn't got over her resentment yet.

She was, however, an honest person once she was finally convinced. "Well, I suppose that's it. I can't find a single reason why you should have to wear glasses any longer. Both your eyes have perfect vision."

A whooping noise from the doorway had Harry turning around; there stood Ron, Hermione, and Draco. It was Ron who had cheered at the news. Harry couldn't help but notice that his best friend was standing rather deliberately between Draco and Hermione. Harry almost sighed, but other matters took precedence. "What are you doing here? I thought my father told you to wait for us in his quarters."

"This git insisted on coming to see you," said Ron, jerking his head in Draco's direction. "I thought he wasn't allowed out."

Ron said that last bit like they were talking about a pet who soiled the hallways or something.

"I'm not under house arrest, Ronald," sneered Draco as he walked forward.

"Don't call me that!"

"Sorry, I have to placate Harry," breezed the other boy, sounding not the least bit apologetic. "You know, stay on his good side, all that. And he positively insists I use your first name."

Harry thought all that was a bit of an overstatement, but he supposed it was Draco's way of saving face.
"Well . . . at least make it Ron," returned Ron, clearly disgruntled.

"And you?" Draco turned to Hermione, his lips curled in a sly smile. "Would you prefer Herm?"

"Would you prefer Drake?"

"Oh, Slytherins hate nick-names. Call Severus Sev sometime and you'll see what I mean. Well, after you regain consciousness. But Gryffindors, you know, they're sort of happy-go-lucky almost doltish types, so I thought--"

"You know, rude for rude's sake isn't exactly a goal you should aim for, Draco," said Harry, sighing. "And why are you here? Severus isn't going to be so happy you snuck out."

"I did not sneak." Draco shrugged, then. "Look, all these two could talk about was a hand half-burnt off. Well, when they weren't making eyes at each other. I could practically hear wedding bells--"

He grinned widely when Ron and Hermione both blushed at that. "Anyway, I had to see for myself that you were all right."

Harry moved so that his brother could see down the side of the sling.

"Hmm. I wouldn't duel for a while if I were you. Maybe some of Severus' burn salve would clear that up."

"My treatments are quite adequate, young man!" said Pomfrey in a shrill tone.

Draco ignored her. "I don't suppose it's too bad. You look like you'll heal."

An exasperated voice rang out from the doorway. "Draco, what in Merlin's name are you doing out of bounds?"

"I didn't realise a little fraternal concern would put me out of bounds," said Draco, lifting his chin. "Besides, how much safer could I have been? I came with them."

He said the last word scornfully, but his eyes spoke another message entirely. Harry caught it at once. If Snape trusted Ron and Hermione to serve as Harry's bodyguards, more or less, then how could he say that Draco had been reckless walking the halls with them?

As it turned out, Snape could say exactly that. "Oh, Merlin knows nobody ever came to harm when they were with them," Snape said, his tone just one shade shy of a full-blown sneer. "It's not as though they recently allowed harm to come to someone they were charged to protect, is it?"

He looked down the length of his long nose at Draco, who looked down.

"I wanted to see that Harry was all right."

"I'm cleared to leave my glasses off," said Harry, hoping to head off an argument. Or more of one, at any rate. "So can we just go, now?"

Snape gave Draco one last fearsome glare, then let the matter go. Perhaps he was remembering that if everything worked out, Draco would be readmitted to Hogwarts. "Very well."

Ron wrapped his fingers around Hermione's. "We'll see you Monday in classes, then, Harry."

"I should like you to come down to my quarters, actually," said Snape, his tone not exactly threatening but not exactly not, either.
Harry could tell that Ron was remembering doing all those lines. He tried to give his friend an encouraging smile, but Ron still said, "Um . . . well . . ."

"We have things to discuss."

"Yes, sir," said Ron in a low voice.

As it turned out, Snape didn't have all that much to say to Ron and Hermione. He just hadn't wanted to say it in front of Pomfrey, apparently. "Mr Nott will not be divulging to anyone the fact that Harry's powers are fearsome rather than weak," he announced the moment he'd shut the door behind the whole group. "Nor will he be telling anyone that Harry's spellcasting so overwhelmingly requires him to have a snake at hand. Therefore, the story will be as follows. After you two left Harry alone--"

"They didn't leave me--"

Snape silenced him with a glare. "While Harry was on his own, he became bored enough to experiment with flame-throwing spells, just as Pomfrey believes."

Harry thought that story made him sound ridiculous, but he didn't argue again.

"Because his magic is so inept these days, he burned his own hand," continued Snape. "Nott happened to wander into him and seized his chance to do Harry some harm. You two heard his cries for help and came to his rescue. Now, Mr Nott's wand has vanished into the great unknown, so it should be safe to say he cast any number of hexes. Mr Weasley, what would you like to cast to incapacitate him?"

It took Ron a moment to catch on. "Um . . . oh. I guess just a regular Jelly-Legs." He grinned and pointed his wand. "Ready, Draco?"

"Are you ready, is more to the point," said the other boy, sneering. "As I recall you have a penchant for casting hexes that rebound on yourself."

"Cast it on the floor, Mr Weasley."

"That's no fun," muttered Ron, though he did do as Snape had requested.

"Sir, what are we going to say happened to Nott's wand?" asked Hermione.

"Merely that it could not be found. No-one will have an explanation for it. Interested parties will likely assume that the Death Eaters have something to do with its disappearance." Snape paused as though expecting more questions, but none came. "Now, to finish the story. After Nott was laid low by your formidable hex, Mr Weasley, you pulled him inside a nearby building and guarded him while Miss Granger came to get me. As I'd prefer not to mention the Shrieking Shack as our point of return, we will say I Apparated you all to the far side of the grounds and walked from there."

Snape glanced about expectantly. "Are we all agreed? This story will of necessity become public information when I press the governors to reinstate Draco into Hogwarts."

"They owe me a public apology--"

"You won't get that."

"We're agreed, sir," said Hermione. "Though you know, it's not just boys who can rush in and save the day."
Snape looked a bit startled at the way she'd said that. "Ah. Well, you may say that you were occupied taking care of Harry."

"Oh, all right."

Ron, of course, didn't mind being cast in the hero role. Not one bit, so Harry didn't complain about how stupid this made him seem. He couldn't, really. It matched, more or less, what they had told Pomfrey. He was stuck with it. And anyway, if he complained his father would just say he hadn't been too clever, had he, wandering off on his own in Hogsmeade. "How are you going to make Nott tell the story right?"

Snape's eyes gleamed. "I thought you would have guessed, by now. That imbecile Lockhart is not the only wizard who can cast a competent memory charm, Harry. Nott won't know what transpired today in Hogsmeade."

Harry smiled a little bit at that. "You just couldn't make it through the school year without Obliviating a student, could you? But you won't make him forget about all the things he confessed to?"

"Of course not. He's not just going to be expelled, he's going to Azkaban."

Harry glanced at Draco. His brother had hard eyes, now, which was enough for Harry to realise that Ron and Hermione had told him that Nott was the one who had killed Pansy. He somehow doubted his friends had mentioned anything about the love potion, though. Harry chewed his lip, wondering how Draco was going to take that.

"The Aurors will no doubt need to interview you to make things official," said Snape as he showed Ron and Hermione out. "I imagine you'll be summoned at some point. Later today, most likely."

The moment Harry's friends had left, Draco looked up at his father. "Where's this dung beetle?"

"Safe. And no, you may not grind him into pulp."

"He deserves it!"

"Nonetheless," Snape said briskly. "We will leave justice to the Ministry and the governors. And remember, we still need to find out with whom Nott was working."

Draco nodded, and then, as if in need of a distraction, looked his brother up and down. "Hmm. Say, that's a really nice shirt."

"Yeah. Good present. I guess that makes us even, since the amulet saved your life."

Draco raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, Nott had a Portkey, but it failed when the amulet went crazy." Looking down, Harry mused, "You know, it's strange the amulet did a thing like that. It wasn't supposed to. I think it must have had something to do with my dark powers. Oh . . . I bet I know."

"What?"

"Well . . ." Harry glanced back up. "You'd hexed me, right? And I broke the hex, but I never really told you how. I . . . I was so worried for you, Draco. I was lying there," he pointed to the spot, "absolutely convinced you were going to get killed. I had to be able to do something to help you. I just had to. And for some reason, I guess it was instinct, I started concentrating really hard on how
much I loved you. I mean, I didn't want to lose my brother just when I'd finally got one. And then, I
don't know . . . it was like I could feel my dark powers start bursting through my skin. I thought I
was just breaking the hex but now I think I must have been firing up the amulet, too."

"Oh, Merlin." Draco stepped back, a bit unsteady on his feet, and leaned on the wall for support. "I . . .
that was you, making the amulet heat up like that?"

"Well, it kept them from using magic on you. No Portkey, no feather-light charms to get you across
the grounds faster," Harry said, a bit defensive. He was afraid that Draco was going to go off again
about how Harry was to blame for that horrible burn.

Draco's voice was quiet with shock. "I'd just punched you in the face and cast Petrificus on you!
And you saved me?"

Harry smiled. "That's about it."

He saw Draco swallow. "So you really do love me."

"I've only said so about a hundred times. What, did you think I was joking?"

"No, I thought you didn't know what you were talking about! I thought you were in love with the
whole family idea, and sooner or later you'd get tired of it. Well, of me. I didn't think you'd get tired
of Severus."

Oh, God. Draco expected that people who said they loved him would later admit that they never
really had. And that, more or less, was exactly what Pansy Parkinson had done. She'd pretended to
love him, and made it convincing by using a potion. And now they had to tell him that it never had
been true.

They couldn't just let him hear it from Nott, or keep it from him forever. Draco would want to know
the whole plot, everything about how he'd been framed. He'd demand to be present for Nott's
interrogation. And he wouldn't understand if Severus said no.

"I'm not going to get tired of having a brother, Draco. Well, not any more than normal brothers do."

Draco swallowed again. "I guess this means I can't hold the burn against you any longer. Or resent
being scarred, not if that's what kept me from being Portkeyed back to Lucius to be tortured to
death."

"Yeah, but your shirt saved me from pretty much the same thing, so it's like I said. We're even."
Harry stared at Draco for a couple of seconds to make sure he really understood. He didn't want
gratitude between them. That wasn't what being brothers was about. "Um, Dad? Do you want to do
the Truthful Dreams thing now, or should we talk to Draco? About . . . um . . . well, the Aurors will
be here soon, won't they?"

Draco looked from Harry to Snape and back. "Talk to me about what?"

"Er . . ."

"Harry, the Aurors will not arrive until I summon them. We have as much time as we need."

To get Draco through this, Harry mentally finished.

"But I thought you did ask the headmaster to contact the Aurors already. You know, during my eye
exam?"
"That was merely a contrivance so I might search Mr Nott's dormitory, given that most of Slytherin is in Hogsmeade. I found nothing of use." Snape nodded as though coming to a decision, and laid a hand on Draco's shoulder, something he hardly ever did, or at least, not in Harry's presence.

Draco looked up into his father's eyes. "Talk to me about what?"

Snape's voice was gentle. "I think perhaps you had better sit down, Draco. We really do need to talk."
Draco didn't sit down as his father had asked, or at least, not until Snape gently steered him over to the sofa and gave him a slight push onto it.

"What's this all about?"

Harry sat down too, right next to Draco, though really he felt more like lying down. It seemed to him that the burn, and then the partial cure, was sapping all his energy. Part of him almost wished he'd stayed in the hospital wing as Madam Pomfrey had said. But a much bigger part of him knew he needed to be here.

"It's about Miss Parkinson. Draco . . . before we left Hogsmeade Mr Nott enlightened us as to certain details you should be cognizant of."

Draco crossed his arms and leaned back a bit. "I can tell it's bad, otherwise the two of you wouldn't be looking at me like you think I'm about to crack in half."

"I think perhaps you can guess at the truth," Snape quietly said as he sat down in a chair opposite Draco but slightly to the side.

Draco went so stiff it didn't look like he was even breathing any longer. "You're going to say what Harry's been saying all along, aren't you? That Pansy was part of the plot. That she wanted me dead. That she was betrayed by allies instead of killed by enemies. And you're going to say you know all this because Nott spilled it under Veritaserum. That only proves that he thinks it, though, not that it's true. Don't you see? Pansy was probably telling everyone in Slytherin that she hated me. Otherwise she'd have been in danger."

Snape started to say something, but fell silent when Draco abruptly stood up. "I won't listen to the two of you slander her memory."

"Draco--"

"I won't, Harry!" shouted the other boy. "She loved me and I can prove it! Nobody could write letters like hers unless they were completely head-over-heels in love! You want to see them, eh? Or the copies I made, I mean? Well, do you?"

"No," said Harry quietly.

"You?" asked Draco, rudely pointing his finger at his father.

Rising to his feet as well, Snape said only said one word. It wasn't yes or no. "Potion."

Draco blinked, too startled to put that together for a second. Then he began to scoff. "Oh, sure, potion. That makes a lot of sense. If she hated me there's no way she'd have taken a love potion. She wouldn't have wanted to get fixated on me!"

"No, but she would have wanted her letters to deceive the protective spells on the Floo." Severus' voice was calm, but his words were relentless. "She would have wanted you to believe her protestations of love. She would have wanted to convince you to go meet her. With these objectives in mind, she consented to drink the love potion that Mr Nott had procured."

"No--"
"Yes, Draco," insisted Snape. "Do you believe I would deceive you on this account? Or Harry? Mr Nott confessed under Veritaserum that there was a bargain made. Miss Parkinson would take the love potion so that after sufficient letters had been exchanged, she would be in a position to lure you out. And in return, she wanted one thing."

Draco shoved his shaking hands deep into his pockets, his eyes dulling to the hue of storm clouds. "No."

Harry could tell he'd reached the right conclusion on his own.

"Yes, Draco," Snape said again.

A thin, off-key laugh echoed off the walls as Draco rocked on his heels. "Oh, that's just bloody ridiculous, Severus! Surely you can see that much. Why would Pansy have made a deal where she got to kill me, when the whole fucking point of Nott's plot was to return me to Lucius alive?"

"Nott lied to Pansy, Draco," Harry said, wishing he could do something to help his brother through this. "She wanted to kill you with her bare hands, she was so angry you wouldn't listen to her about going back to Voldemort. And Nott lied and said she could be the one to push you off the Owlery, when all along he planned for her to be shoved off so you could be framed."

Draco looked ill. "Pansy couldn't have wanted to kill me. She . . . in the closet, that day, the way she kissed me--"

"Draco, that was the potion."

"I . . . her letters . . ."

Snape didn't say again that it was the potion. He didn't need to. Draco's eyes were devoid of hope now, and the shade of gunmetal. And glinting with tears.

"I . . . I need a shower," he gasped out. "I . . . I can't talk about this, all right? Not ever. Not ever again."

Standing, Snape went to brace Draco's forearms with his strong hands. "That isn't likely to be a sound approach to your grief."

"I grieved already!" snarled Draco as he yanked his arms out of his father's grasp. "I've done nothing but mourn since they killed her! And now to find out she'd have danced on my grave? I loved her! And she's dead! And what does any of it matter, Severus? You couldn't just leave it be? You had to tell me these horrible things? You couldn't just let me keep thinking somebody really had loved me for once in my life?"

"Oh, Draco," murmured Harry. "We love you, you know that."

"Well, a hell of a lot of good it does me when your idea of love is to smash my dreams all to bits!"

"Mr Nott was going to do that in any case," Snape said, making no further effort to touch Draco. A wise decision, Harry had to think. By then, Draco was quaking with rage. His hands, still shoved deep into his pockets, looked like they were balled into fists. "It was best to prepare you in advance."

Yeah, the last thing they needed was Draco losing his temper and trying to kill Nott right in front of the Aurors. Tonks had it in for Draco already. She'd probably try to charge him with something if he
so much as looked at Nott wrong.

"You could have made sure I didn't have to listen to him," muttered Draco. "You could have let me keep what I thought I had."

"And how would you have taken that, had I told you that Harry would be present during Mr Nott's interrogation but you were to be excluded?"

Draco slanted Harry a glance. "Not well."

"I'm really sorry, Draco," said Harry. He stood up, but teetered a bit on his feet. "Really, I am."

"Ha. This is your big chance to say you told me so. You thought all along I was an idiot to believe in her."

"Well, I'm sorry she hurt you, anyway."

The other boy made a huffing noise. "Oh, please. Slytherins don't get hurt, Harry. We get even." He held up a hand when it looked like Snape would speak. "But don't worry. I know there's hardly any point in revenge. She's already dead, and the Aurors will get to the bottom of the plot now. Won't they?"

"Yes."

"Nott better get kissed," hissed Draco in a tone that was so hateful it was actually frightening. Here was the boy who had decided to brew poison and hand it out in the form of fairy cakes. "He'd just better. You can talk all day long about how guilty Pansy was as well, but that doesn't excuse him from killing her, not in my book!"

"He'll get the consequence the Ministry deems appropriate," Severus said in a hard tone. "And you will accept it, whatever it may be."

Draco curled his lip and turned on his heel, slamming the bedroom door behind him.

A moment later they heard the noise of the shower beginning to flow. And then the awful noise of Draco singing. Not that he sang badly; his voice was usually quite nice. He liked to brag about how he'd looked up spells to fine-tune his vocal chords.

You couldn't tell now that he'd done any such thing, though. He was belting out some foreign song so loudly and harshly that it sounded a bit like one cat screaming at another. Harry winced, and did his best not to say anything about the horrible noise. Because really, whatever helped Draco vent and feel better had to be worthwhile, right?

At any rate, it was better than having him go looking for a certain dung beetle.

Snape was evidently having similar thoughts. He didn't say a word about the brutal screeching, though he could hardly have failed to note it. Decorum, Harry thought, as his father quietly spoke. "You were allowed to leave the infirmary with the understanding that you'd be just as well-cared for here as there. I do believe you're in need of a long sleep. And perhaps a potion so that any . . . undue noises won't disturb you?"

"Good idea." Harry yawned; he really was tired. "My hand is starting to hurt some again. I don't suppose you'd dose me with something for that, as well?"

"Not wise at the moment."
"Yeah, habituation. I remember." Harry frowned. "Are you so sure you should be taking Truthful Dreams, Dad?"

When his father nodded, Harry let it go. "When are you planning to do that?"

"As I doubt it would be prudent to leave Draco unsupervised, I'll take him to Albus when he's finished showering. Then I'll proceed."

Harry yawned again. "I don't think Draco's going to appreciate having the headmaster um . . . babysit him."

"Babysit," said Snape, in the manner of one who had never heard the term before. Then he appeared to shrug that off. "I don't think Draco is in a position to expect me to leave him near Mr Nott while I slumber."

"You could take Nott into your room with you; Draco can't break past your wards."

"I have learnt, to my chagrin, that it's best not to underestimate your brother's ingenuity."

Venetimorica, thought Harry. Right.

It was sort of nice, he decided a few minutes later, to be fussed over. Well, once in a while at least. Snape brought Harry his sleeping draught and also tucked him in.

And all the while, they could still hear Draco belting out some hideous Italian song, sounding like the words were being pulled right through the jagged shards of a broken heart.

Harry frowned, but in just a few moments the potion took over and he began to sink down into sleep.

His father feathered a touch along Harry's brow, then quietly left the room.

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Harry drifted up through what felt like layers and layers of cotton wool. He heard a ringing noise, and then voices. At first far away, they gradually drew closer, though they never did start to sound like they were right alongside him. When he opened his eyes he was alone in his room and the door was closed, but Snape and Draco were definitely talking out in the living room. And someone else . . .

Tonks, he realised, recognising her voice even if her words weren't clear enough to be understood.

Harry pulled himself out of bed and adjusted his sling so it was more comfortable, then slipped on his shoes and went to join the others.

"Wotcher, Harry!" Tonks looked him up and down, nodding as she chewed her gum. "Bit of a scare today, eh? But you seem to have come through all right. Good thing you've got a friend like that to watch your back!"

Oh, so they'd already told her the Ron-saved-Harry story. Harry did his best to smile. "Yeah, he's great." He glanced over at his father, who was standing, leaning on the mantle, looking slightly wary about something. "Where's Nott?"
It was Tonks who answered. "Oh, you don't have to fret about him bothering you again, Harry. He and his nasty little crew are being tucked away in Azkaban, pending trial as we speak. Kingsley's seeing to it."

Harry blinked, sure he'd missed something. His nasty little crew? "Who . . . uh, how . . ."

It turned out that he had missed something. Lots of things. Literally. "I took the liberty of allowing you to sleep through the formalities," Snape announced, pushing off the mantle to come stand in front of his son. "You needed it."

Formalities was an odd way of putting it. He'd let Harry miss the second half of the interrogation!

"I needed it?" Harry exclaimed, more than a little peeved.

"Yeah, you did, you prat," said Draco from where he was sitting. "So don't complain."

Harry almost stuck out his tongue, but realised that would be a little immature. He sat down opposite Draco and glanced at Tonks and then his father. "Um, you already did the thing with Truthful Dreams, then? So who was Nott working with?"

"Besides Lucius Malfoy, you mean?" asked Tonks, curling a lip as she looked over at Draco like she blamed him for his father's crimes. "A couple of seventh-year Slytherins, Harry. They were all in it together. Along with Pansy Parkinson."

"Torquay and Greezer," Draco snarled, his fists clenching.

Harry didn't recognise the second name at all, but the first rang a vague bell. "Oh . . . Torquay . . ." he glanced at his father. "Isn't he the one who was talking to you about being your apprentice, something like that?"

"No doubt the better to observe me and report on my doings." Snape shook his head, clearly saddened at the behaviour of some members of his house. "The plot seems to have been limited to those three."

"And Lucius," added Draco, still in that same vicious tone. "And unlike the students, he's been officially marked, so it shouldn't be too hard to prove his loyalties. If not for him, Pansy would be alive. He's the one who demanded a student be murdered, who suborned the whole plot. So he'd better get kissed, he'd just better--"

Tonks' mouth dropped open and her gum fell out. "You want your own father to get kissed, Malfoy?"

"It's Snape!" yelled Draco, leaping to his feet. Tonks stood up too, her Auror training appearing to kick in, since her wand was out and she looked primed for combat, her eyes glowing a fierce orange as if to intimidate her opponent.

Draco wasn't intimidated, though. Harry doubted he'd even noticed. "Don't you read the papers? It's Snape, got it? And that Dark-Lord-licking-thestral's-arse isn't my father! He's just some man who f**ked my mother, all right? And then he did his best to f**k me, too, or f**k me over at least--"

"Calm down, Draco," said Snape, coming over to put a hand on the boy's shoulder.

Draco was quaking with rage, but not so much that he didn't hear the warning in his father's voice. Or maybe he could feel the warning, Harry thought. Snape's hand looked like a claw digging into Draco's shoulder. Harry thought it a bit harsh, really.
But then again, Snape knew what Harry didn't. He knew what he was going to say next. And he obviously knew how hard it would be for Draco to endure.

"Lucius Malfoy isn't going to be charged," Snape went on, his voice quiet with terrible resolution.

"What? NO!" shouted Draco, trying to wrench himself free. Snape reached out with his other hand, and pulled Draco into an embrace. More to control him than to comfort him, Harry thought. But that made sense. Draco's silver eyes were wild with rage. He looked fully capable of murder. "What do you mean he isn't going to be charged? Merlin's beard, what's wrong with you? I understood about Samhain, you didn't want to put Harry through the trauma and all that and the Order had found out that Lucius had set up an alibi anyway, so . . . but you can't let him go, not this time. He as good as killed Pansy!"

Tonks had gone white. Completely white, as only a metamorphagus can do. Her face and hair were the shade of snow, and even her eyes seemed to lack irises. She snapped out of it in a second, though, and returned to her usual self, though she still looked uncommonly pale.

"We can't charge your . . . er, Lucius," she whispered, sitting back down as though to put an end to the confrontation. She looked at Snape, almost as though asking for help with this. "We . . . ah, we don't have the evidence."

Draco yanked himself out of his father's arms and whirled to face her. "Well, if you don't, you investigate, you stupid woman! Didn't you learn how in Aurors' training? And besides, I don't believe that. You've got Torquay, Greezer, and Nott all on record as to who was pulling their strings! You've got--"

"No, we don't," Tonks quietly corrected. Her wand was still in hand. Now she used it to conjure loosely rolled scroll of parchment. "There's the official record."

"What do you mean, you don't," scoffed Draco. "I was there; I heard them." He snatched the scroll and began to read it. It didn't take him two minutes to get the gist of the matter. "Oh, nice. Creative editing. You know, somebody should really inform the Ministry that their Aurors play fast and loose with the truth."

"You weren't complaining about it the last time I was here."

"Yeah, well the last time," shouted Draco, "you were protecting the innocent, namely me! And this time you're letting a murderer off the hook! Am I the only wizard in the world who can bear to stand up to the likes of Lucius Malfoy? What's he got on you, eh?" He rounded on Snape, then. "And I have to know what he's got on you! I can't believe you're going to let this farce of a statement go into evidence!"

With that, Draco flung the unrolled scroll straight at his father's face.

It fluttered harmlessly to the ground.

Harry couldn't bear it any longer. Tonks was cooperating with the decision to leave Lucius out of it, so at some point Snape had obviously told her about Remus' secret mission. Kingsley Shacklebolt must know as well.

"You have to tell Draco," Harry said, his voice earnest. "Really, you have to. This is just cruel."

Snape gave a stiff nod. "I should have told you before, but the Order was keeping this in the strictest confidence. Not even Harry and I knew about it until fairly recently. But there's a good reason why Lucius must not be incarcerated pending trial, Draco. Or kissed. Or interfered with in any way."
Draco sat down again and crossed his arms. "Well, I'd just love to hear it, Severus. Because I personally can't imagine why you want to keep the man in a position to do these awful things. He's killing students in your own house. And trying his best to kill your sons. Now, I know you aren't the most fatherly of wizards, to say the least, but I still think you'd have a shred of concern about a homicidal maniac sitting on the Board of Governors free to wander the castle at will--"

"Draco, let him talk!" interrupted Harry.

"Oh, certainly," sneered Draco. "Well?"

Snape sighed. Harry wondered then if it was costing his father something to say good things about Remus.

"For months, a certain Order member has been impersonating Lucius Malfoy at key moments. The purpose being to sow discord among the Death Eaters and cause Voldemort to devote his time and attention to the trouble in his own ranks. Judging by the relative lack of Death Eater activity in England, I would say the plan has been at least partially successful."

Draco leaned back in his chair, his eyes still blazing, but his features calmer otherwise. "That's . . . hmm. Pretty risky, don't you think?"

"I do, but I wasn't consulted."

"Sow discord how?"

Snape scowled. "All we know for certain is that this . . . individual has been warning attack victims in advance to clear off. Therefore, Voldemort will believe that someone in his ranks is not trustworthy."

"Harry's dream!" Draco said, his own mouth dropping open much as Tonks' had earlier. "That . . . that was true. You weren't seeing Lucius, you were seeing this other . . ." A deep sigh, then. "You might have told me. I mean, I know perfectly well that Lucius is an evil arsehole, but the whole time I've been wondering why my prophetic brother dreams he's helping Muggleborns." His voice grew derisive. "And there wasn't any alibi for Samhain, was there? That was just something you said to shut me up when I told you that Lucius ought to be locked up."

"Yes." Snape summoned a chair over to Draco's side and sat in it. "All I knew at that point was that Albus had persuaded me to drop the matter. And in light of Harry's state of mind at the time, I let myself become convinced. Only later did I learn of this Order scheme."

"Look, I understand what you're saying," Draco admitted, though he still looked angry. "But it's not right! Pansy's dead because the Order decided to let Lucius remain free. He really should have been kissed for what he did to Harry, and if he had, I'd still have . . . well, no I wouldn't, since it turns out she hated my guts all along. But that's beside the point. Letting Lucius stay free is too dangerous. Who knows what horrible thing he'll do next, Severus?"

"The Order has determined that to be risk worth taking, Draco."

"Well the Order can just go fuck itself, then!" screamed Draco, jumping up. "I'll go report this myself, including the ethics of certain Aurors, if I have to! And don't think I won't have proof. There's the Portkey Nott went on about--"

"Albus cleansed it of magic," said Tonks, popping a new stick of gum into her mouth, even as she tapped her wand to the wad sticking to the table. It vanished with a slight hissing noise. "And even if he hadn't, all it proves is that your . . . er, Lucius wanted you to have a way to return to him. He'll say"
it's older than this year, and he gave it to you when the two of you were still getting on."

"Getting on," muttered Draco. "Oh yeah, we used to really get on. Makes me sick to think about it."
He glared at Snape. "I guess I should take it for granted that Nott and Torquay and Greezer aren't going to remember a thing about Lucius by the time they make it to Azkaban."

"Kingsley is seeing to it," Snape mildly agreed.

Draco looked from Snape, to Harry, to Tonks, shaking his head all the while. "If you ask me, you're all twits. Do you think Lucius is just going to stand idly by while some Order wizard makes him look bad to the Dark Lord? He probably knows already that something fishy is going on. Or do you think he doesn't wonder why he hasn't been charged for a thing, yet?"

"He likely believes his influence and riches are protecting him. As they have before."

"Or he wouldn't be a governor still, right. He should never have been reinstated." Draco sighed and pushed his hair out of his eyes. "I still say he must suspect something more than that. But I don't delude myself that I can influence Order policy, even if this whole thing is riskier than you lot seem to realise." He closed his eyes. "Whoever's impersonating Lucius is going to get caught. And when that happens, what Lucius did to Harry will look like a fucking joke. Mark my words."

Harry felt a chill sweep over him. "I think the . . . uh, impersonator must be being really careful . . ."

Draco gave him a look that said, loud and clear, how much he pitied anybody that deluded. "You think Lucius is stupid? He'll figure it out."

Harry swallowed hard and tried not to believe that. Of course what Remus was doing was horribly dangerous, but it would all work out, right? It had to.

Draco stood up and glanced around, seeming to only then remember to put on his company manners. "If you'll excuse me, then--"

"Just a second," said Tonks as she rose to her feet, too. "Look, Malfoy-- Draco. I'm sorry I didn't realise last time where you're at these days. I didn't know what you were up to, but I couldn't believe your heart was in the right place--"

Draco gave a dry laugh. "You couldn't believe I had a heart, you mean."

"Yeah, that too." She gave a tremulous smile, a little more of her colour coming back, though it was nowhere near as vibrant as usual. "But, uh . . . you seem pretty interested in putting your . . . er, Lucius away, and I'm sure now you didn't have anything to do with the murder . . . so . . ." She adopted a more professional air, standing a bit straighter. "You keep your nose clean and get high marks on your N.E.W.T.s and do your best for Harry here, and when it's time for you to apply to the Aurors' program . . . well, we'll talk."

Draco's only answer was a curt nod.

Tonks stared at the bedroom door once it had closed behind the Slytherin boy. "He really doesn't have any love lost for his . . ."

"For Lucius," said Harry firmly. "And think about it. That's got to be really hard, knowing what he knows. Thanks for saying that thing about the Aurors' program, Tonks. I know that means a lot to Draco. He really wants to be an Auror."

She popped her gum, the noise so loud Harry stared. "Think he can get used to having half-bloods
and Muggleborns in charge? That'll be a new one for him, I expect. There are some purebloods in MLE, but not everybody in authority is one. I don't know if he can handle that aspect of the job."

Harry quickly walked to the table, snatched up a quill, and wrote, *He's probably listening.*

Tonks grinned and wrote back, *Well, yeah, Harry. Last time I checked he hadn't changed his whole personality.*

And then Harry understood. This was Tonks' way of dropping Draco a hint.

*Thanks,* he wrote.

Tonks just nodded, then moved on to Ministry business. "I'll need your statement as well. For the file."

Harry smiled, the expression a little wry. She wouldn't need to edit his statement. He knew what to say. All about Ron saving him because his own magic just wasn't so dependable.

But better than tip off Voldemort what he was in for if he tangled again with Harry.

------------------------------------------------------

Draco didn't say much at dinner that night, though he did perk up a little when Snape mentioned that news of the arrests would be in the morning papers. Harry figured he was thinking that the governors would see that and realise they'd blamed Draco for something he hadn't done. Of course, if they knew about the *Venetimorica* they'd definitely never reinstate Draco.

But they didn't know.

And Draco, Harry felt sure, wouldn't do something like that again.

"I wish you'd have let me be there for the rest of the interrogation," Harry said, still a little miffed that Snape had let him sleep through it.

His father merely shrugged. "You needed your rest."

"Ha. I've been through worse than what Nott did."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Well, that's probably the problem, Harry. You think it's perfectly normal to almost get killed."

"Well, maybe it is normal for me."

"Frame of reference, right. But are you really going to blame your father for doing his best to take care of you? I mean, there wasn't any reason why you had to be there when Nott spilled his guts again. You'd already heard it once."

"You said you wouldn't take it well if you were excluded, either," retorted Harry.

"Touché."
"I don't think you realise quite how pale you were," murmured Snape. He held up a hand when Harry started to say something in reply. "Perhaps a compromise is in order. A negotiation, as you're so fond of reminding me. We had agreed, if you recall, that when you went on a Hogsmeade Saturday, you would do your Potions tutorial on Sunday instead. Now, if you were too ill to attend Mr Nott's second interrogation, I certainly think you'll need tomorrow to recuperate as well."

Harry stared, taking a second to translate that into normal English. It came out something like, *If you stop whinging, I'll let you out of Potions tomorrow.*

Probably as good as it was going to get, Harry decided. "Deal."

"Harry, Potions are *fun*. You don't seem to get that," complained Draco as he glanced at Snape. "Gryffindors are just strange."

Snape didn't take the bait. He merely shrugged.

Apparently giving up on that line of thought, Draco suddenly blurted, "Where are my chocolate frogs?"

Harry was a little irritated by the question. He'd had more to deal with that day than sweets, after all. Then again, so had Draco. And if chocolate would help him through it . . . "Hmm. I bought you a whole bag but I think they got left in the room where we dragged Nott. Sorry."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "I gave you enough to buy more than one bag."

"Yeah, I have some Galleons to give back--"

"I need *chocolate*, Potter!"

"Ten points from Slytherin," sighed Snape. "Really, Draco, if you need chocolate so badly you don't have to rail at your brother. I have some in my office."

Draco huffed. "Well, I was hardly going to ask you when you're the one who cut off my special meals privileges in the first place."

"Well, have you learned not to misuse the privilege?" Snape stared levelly at his son.

"Yes, sir," said Draco, looking down.

Snape waved his wand at the mantle and a brass box appeared. Full of Floo powder, no doubt. "Then ask for what you like."

"Ha. That Dobby'll probably try to poison me," muttered Draco. "Maybe just some chocolate from your office would be better. If it's still on offer?"

"Certainly." Snape summoned some.

It turned out to be dark chocolate, which wasn't Harry's favourite. Draco liked it, he knew. Harry took some to be polite, and nibbled on it. Draco took one bite of his and made an awful face.

"Oh, ick, it's got *mint* mixed in," the Slytherin boy moaned. Harry noticed that he still ate it, though. "I like my chocolate pure!"

"Oh, stop being such a prat," said Harry. "You offered chocolate mint cocoa to Dad once, remember?"
"Well that's cocoa," said Draco in an airy voice, as if Harry really should know better.

"This does not encourage me to be generous with my chocolate," remarked Snape in a long-suffering tone.

"Well, at least it's a decent brand. Wizarding chocolate really should come from Mexico. So, good show there, Severus."

Harry and his father exchanged an exasperated glance as the magic doorbell began chiming.

Draco jumped up to check the scroll, then began to chortle. "Oh, look at this. Albus Dumbledore and Fawkes! Ha, you'll notice that Fawkes is an actual bird, yet it doesn't say pet like it did for your cousin, Harry--"

"It'd say pet for anything non-magical and you know it," retorted Harry.

"Albus, welcome," said Severus as he spelled the door open and pulled it wide. "You thought better than to floo?"

"Oh, I felt like a long walk," said the headmaster. "Clears the mind, I've often found."

Draco bounced on his heels. "Are you here to tell me that the governors have met and admitted they were a bunch of old frauds last time, and I didn't deserve to be expelled and I'm back in classes again, and back to Slytherin, and--"

He stopped when the headmaster gave a long sigh. "Ah, Draco. There's hardly been time for all that." He looked over the top of his half-moon spectacles, his eyes about as wise and all-knowing as Harry had ever seen them. "And as for your not deserving to be expelled . . ."

He let the suggestion hang in the air.

"What?" Draco looked at Snape, then back at the headmaster. "What?"

"Let us just say that your father handled it admirably well, and that will be an end to the matter."

Draco's face paled. "Oh."

Dumbledore patted Draco on the shoulder. "There, there. You're coming along, all things considered. And we all make mistakes when we're young."

"How did you . . ."

"There's very little that goes on inside the castle that I don't know, young man. You might remember that in future."

"Yes, sir," Draco said, his voice low and small. "I . . . Yes, I will."

Dumbledore smiled, the expression making him look like a kindly old grandfather. "It was good to have a chance to talk with you earlier, Draco. And even better to see your conduct during the interrogations. You handled it all with aplomb."

"I . . . thank you, sir." Draco glanced up, looking somehow shattered by the gentle rebuke and then the praise. "I have some reading to do, if you'll excuse me. I want to be prepared for when the governors . . . when are they meeting?"

"If you'll pardon a little advice, there's no guarantee they will reinstate you, my boy."
"I know." Draco cleared his throat. "You aren't going to tell them about the . . ."

"No, no, goodness no. I don't expect you'll do the like again."

"No," murmured Draco. "I won't. Well, I still want to catch up on my readings. Good night, then."

His bedroom door shut with a quiet click.

"And how are you, Harry?" asked Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling as he turned to the other boy.
"Recovering nicely?"

Harry smiled, a little ruefully. "My hand's a bit sore but it's all right."

"Excellent, excellent." The headmaster's expression became utterly serious as he turned toward the Potions Master. "A word, Severus, if you please. Perhaps in your office?"

Harry cleared his throat. "Um, actually I need to talk to both of you, too. So I'll just tag along, if you don't mind."

Snape turned to stare at him, then glanced significantly at the bedroom door Draco had just closed.

Harry nodded. The headmaster, he couldn't help but notice, looked a bit bemused.

Once they were all seated in Snape's office with the door securely shut, Harry cleared his throat again. "So, it's like this. I feel like the snake ring idea didn't work out so well."

"To say the least," agreed Snape, frowning, his gaze a little distant. He seemed to shake that off and come back to the present after a moment. "I presume from your wish to come in here that you still don't favour Draco's idea of some sort of mark on your hand or arm?"

Harry couldn't help but shudder. "Yuck. It's too much like . . . well, you know. Besides, after today, I think it's safe to say it would get noticed and attacked, the way my ring was." He winced just thinking about it. Definitely, in future it would be best not to call attention to his arm. "I wondered if we could come up with anything else. Because I can't go back to class without some sort of snake in hand, so to speak. And Sals is even more obvious than the ring, so I can't be using her like that all the time. Not to mention I'd rather not get her killed. So . . . any ideas?"

Snape rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I've hesitated to suggest any sort of Occlumency technique up until now, given that your Occlusion on Samhain was key to your survival. I'd rather not tamper with those powers. But after what happened today? A mental solution may well be indicated."

"A sound notion," said Dumbledore.

Harry wasn't so sure. "You think I won't be able to Occlude as well if I change my image to a snake, Dad?"

"I think there will be a period during which your Occlumency may be compromised."

"That's no good. I mean, there's no point at all to secrecy if Voldemort can just read my mind--"

"He can't do that from afar. However, your scar might well become active once more, and he might seek to influence you through dreams and visions," said Snape in a gentle voice.

Harry felt scrubbed raw hearing that. No matter that his father didn't intend it as a reminder of how he'd failed Sirius. "Um, yeah. So forget that plan--"
"I do believe you've already promised to come straight to me if anything in your dreams disturbs you," said Snape, his dark gaze steady on his son. "If you recall?"

"Yeah, I recall." Harry sighed. "Well, I guess it just has to be done. If I could make a mental snake work I wouldn't have to worry about today repeating itself."

"Not once you had achieved mastery." Snape steepled his fingers and tapped them together. "It's far from guaranteed, you realise. Occlumency isn't normally used in this manner."

"Well, we can work on it tomorrow but if I don't master it pretty fast, we'll need another solution for Monday when I go to class."

The headmaster took off his spectacles and regarded them gravely. "It occurs to me that as long as I wear these, I always have an image of the moon within view."

Harry shook his head at the image that popped into his head. Snake-shaped lenses?

"Perhaps a small etching," continued the headmaster. "Something barely perceptible; we could even charm the glass so that it was only visible from the inside."

"Hmm. Nott had noticed I kept looking at my ring," murmured Harry. "This would be better. Nobody's going to think it's odd I look out through my glasses. Though this would mean I'd have to wear them again! I just finally got a chance to stop!" Whinging wasn't going to help matters, though, so Harry hurriedly added, "It's better than a mark, though. Really, it's a pretty good solution. I'll just go fetch my glasses then?"

"Accio Harry's glasses," said Snape, solving that. Harry felt a little bit silly he hadn't thought of magic. But then again, he didn't have a snake at hand, not at the moment. Or his wand, not that he really needed it.

The door opened to admit the glasses, which sailed into Snape's hand. He tapped the lens that Pomfrey had charmed. "Finite Incantatem," he said, repeating the spell twice more as he turned the glasses around in his hands. "The lenses are simple glass now," he finally announced, moving to pass the glasses over toward the headmaster.

Dumbledore chuckled slightly. "Oh, no, no, Severus. I'm not the one with talent for artistry. You go ahead."

Harry had an urge then, to ask the headmaster what he knew about Hostilian Snape. Perhaps the next time they were alone? He knew it wasn't such a good idea; if Snape didn't want to tell him things like that, he'd hardly want Harry discussing them with people outside the family. But still, the headmaster might know things Harry should really know . . .

Snape was scowling a little, as though the idea of creating any art didn't sit well with him, but he went ahead, using some spell that converted the tip of his wand into a very thin blade. After a few moments of carving, his forehead furrowed in concentration, he spelled the outside of the right lens to conceal the image he'd etched.

"It's rough," he said, his voice gruff when he handed Harry the glasses.

Putting them on was an odd feeling; Harry kept expecting one side to be blocked off. But the world looked just the same as without them, except for the tiny snake he could see at the inside corner of his vision. He wanted to test a spell, though, just to be sure this solution worked. "Uh, I don't have my wand handy..."
"Albus knows you can cast magic without it," said Snape in a tired voice. "Should you be, is more the issue. Your hand is still recovering from that burn."

"Best to wait, yes," said Albus briskly. "Your father's right. Tomorrow before you return to Gryffindor, perhaps, cast a spell or two to be sure. And now, if you'll excuse us, Harry, I've a few things to discuss with Severus."

"Sure . . ."

Snape, however, had risen to his feet and crossed his arms, his robes billowing slightly. "Actually, Albus, if the matter concerns Harry or the Order in any way, I'd prefer him to stay. He does better with more information rather than less, as I believe I've mentioned to you?"

Well, that made up for missing Nott's second interrogation, Harry thought, smiling inwardly.

"It's more a matter concerning you, Severus," retorted the headmaster.

"Nevertheless, anything you'd care to say on that topic can certainly be said in front of my son."

"Fine," said Dumbledore. A little bit sharply, it seemed to Harry. He wondered what had the headmaster so irritated.

Feeling distinctly uncomfortable, Harry headed towards the door. "Oh, that's all right--"

"No, stay," insisted the headmaster, standing up to face Snape. "Are you aware, Severus, that you were needed earlier? Slytherin was all in an uproar, and you were nowhere to be found. I had to go attempt to calm your house."

Snape's nostrils flared. "As soon as Tonks and Kingsley took charge of the three perpetrators, I had business to see to in Hogsmeade. I'm sure you can fathom out what."

"Laudable as your intentions no doubt were, you were needed here!"

"My son comes first."

Harry didn't really intend to speak up at all, but that comment had him puzzled. Why had his father gone back to Hogsmeade? And the man had said Harry did better with more information, so . . . "Um . . . how's that?"

Snape sighed, his black eyes sympathetic when he looked Harry's way. "The spell Mr Nott used, Harry. It was Dark Arts. Normally when such a spell comes into direct contact with gold, the metal is annihilated. However, as Mr Nott was working far above his level of magical competence when he cast it--"

Harry's hand seemed to ache just hearing that. "Ha. Seemed pretty competent to me."

"Unfortunately, yes. I thought perhaps I might be able to summon the constituents of your ring so it could be remade. But that wasn't possible, I regret to say. All I could recover were these." Reaching into his pocket, Snape drew forth a tiny metal box and opened it. Inside, several small emeralds glinted in the light.

Harry gulped. He'd already given the ring up as gone. Now to find that the gemstones remained, but nothing else . . . it was like losing it all over again. Though that didn't make sense. He should be happy something of it remained. Somehow, though, this was more painful than losing it completely.
Maybe, because the sight of those emeralds reminded him how much else was lost.

"Thanks," said Harry, taking the box with his left hand and holding tight to it. "I . . . well, thanks for trying. I appreciate it."

Snape patted his shoulder.

The headmaster had fallen silent, but once another moment had passed, he resumed. "Severus--"

Snape rounded on him, his eyes fierce by then. "Do not attempt to tell me that I should have put Slytherin first, Albus. I won't listen. I'm rather stunned, in fact, that you would resent assuming my house duties to this degree! So you had to go calm the Slytherins and explain the situation to them! That doesn't strike me as an entirely inappropriate thing for the headmaster of Hogwarts to do."

Dumbledore's eyes could gleam fiercely too, Harry saw. "I don't bring the matter up because I was inconvenienced, Severus. I mention it because when you went missing, I had no idea in the world what you might be doing!"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "I do have a private life. What is the problem?"

"I thought you might have gone to find Lucius Malfoy and hex him within an inch --or, I dare say, beyond that-- of his life!"

Now Snape's eyes were narrowed in derision. "Oh, I think I have more self-control than that."

"Do you?" Dumbledore shook his head. "I wasn't pleased, Severus, to learn how much you'd taken on yourself today. Conducting Mr Nott's initial interrogation right there in Hogsmeade was foolhardy, to say the least. Your primary interest--as a father and an Order member both--should have been to remove Harry to the safety of Hogwarts at all speed, and get his injured hand seen to. As I understand it, it was burnt black!"

Snape fairly glowered, thought Harry.

"Hey, he cast a painkilling spell and I was just fine waiting a bit--"

Snape spoke right on top of him. "For Merlin's sake, Albus. I had already assessed the danger as minimal--"

"Prudence would have had you making that assessment here, not at the very site where Harry had just been attacked. You delayed in informing me what had occurred. Indeed, I was told nothing whatsoever until you sent Draco up to my office so that you and you alone could solve the remaining mystery by means of Truthful Dreams."

"I was in the best position to solve that mystery!"

"Perhaps, but don't you see what you have been doing in all this, Severus?"

"Protecting my sons, both of them?" sneered the Potions Master.

"I think it's more a case of trying to feel useful," said Dumbledore, very gently. Stepping forward, he looked into Snape's black eyes. "You've lamented to me, more than once, Harry's tendency toward heroics. But don't you see that your own behaviour today shows the same impulse? Questioning Nott without other Order members or Aurors there. Keeping him incarcerated by means of that spell until it suited you to bring him to my attention. Your resolve to be the one to deduce who else was involved. It all fits a pattern, Severus."
"Useful!" sputtered Snape. "How dare you suggest I've no earthly way to be _useful_ to the Order!"

"But I don't suggest that. You do, through decisions like the ones you made today. Ever since you were found out as a spy you've questioned whether you have any value to the Order--" 

"_That_," spat Snape, "is not true!"

"Of course it's not true!" said Dumbledore, raising his voice. "Your potions are _invaluable_. And your keen strategic intelligence is _not_ something many in the Order possess. Granted, you didn't use much of it today, but this desire to prove yourself to Harry is interfering with your good judgement."

Harry swallowed. "You don't have to prove yourself to me! I mean . . . God, Samhain was all the proof I could ever need. Giving up your chance to spy, putting yourself at the very top of Voldemort's list of who to _get_?"

"I'm not trying to prove myself," said Snape. "Not to you, or anyone else."

"To yourself, then." Dumbledore paused, stroking his beard as he thought. "I know it can't be easy for you that the person closest to Voldemort's inner circle now is Remus Lupin, Severus."

Snape stiffened. "I think you overestimate the werewolf. His affliction alone makes it doubtful he can always be on duty when required. But if he is the best you can dredge up . . ."

"I can hear jealousy in every word, Severus."

"Hyperbole," scoffed Snape as he crossed his arms.

"My dear boy, you can hardly endure the thought that Remus might gain stature in Harry's eyes," said Dumbledore, his voice like a spell to calm stormy seas. "But Severus, you know Harry now. I know you do. He's a boy with an enormous capacity for love. Look at how he's forgiven Draco and taken him as a brother. It doesn't mean he loves his other friends any the less. Surely you must realise that his respect for Remus doesn't diminish his regard for you. Not in the least. Severus . . . he can love you both."

Harry felt himself colouring a little. Not that he was ashamed of any of that, but still . . .

"Thank you for explaining the bloody obvious, Albus!"

"Sometimes it's the obvious that we can't see clearly," said Dumbledore softly. "Your time as a spy in the inner circle is over, Severus, but that wasn't who you were. It was only how you served."

"Atoned, you mean," said Snape, the words bitter and resigned.

"Oh, my dear boy, you _have_ atoned. Many times over. Harry's love for you is proof of that. He couldn't love that which was evil. You know he couldn't." Albus' voice went even more gentle. "Stop wishing you could be the one to help bring Voldemort down. Because you _will_ help, Severus. I have not the slightest doubt of it. But you won't help as you once expected."

Snape pressed his lips together, and nodded once.

Dumbledore went on in the same kind voice. "And you won't help as much as you could, if you continue to allow personal matters to cloud your judgment. Think about it, Severus. That's all I ask."

Snape had apparently already thought about it. He sat down, tilting his head up to look at Albus. "Perhaps lingering in Hogsmeade wasn't the very best course available. I can see that now." He
frowned. "And involving the Aurors sooner may have been advisable. Though considering the complexity of the situation, I didn't want them privy to everything about the incident." He sighed. "Harry's dark powers, for example, and his need to see a snake. I Obliviated Mr Nott before his second interrogation commenced."

"Draco mentioned that as your intention. Again, I would have appreciated being consulted, Severus."

Harry bit his lip a little. "Nott got Obliviated twice today? Once to forget I'd turned his legs to eggs and again so he'd forget Lucius Malfoy's involvement? Will he have any mind left at all?"

"Unlike some professors, I am competent to cast a memory charm."

"Um, that was only 'cause Lockhart used Ron's wand which was snapped almost in half and taped back together."

Snape smiled slightly. "Yes, I am aware. As for Mr Nott . . ." His expression became grim. "He's far more likely to lose his mind to the Dementors than to today's events."

Harry nodded. Nott deserved what he was going to get, after all. He hadn't just attacked Harry, he'd actually killed a person. A person Draco had loved, though she'd turned out to be anything but worthy of his devotion.

"You're still troubled," said Snape, peering at him closely.

"Not about him," said Harry, shaking his head. "It's just . . . I can't really imagine what this year has been like for Draco. First his father turning on him, and now finding out that the girl he thought was his girlfriend was anything but?"

"He'll feel better once he's in classes, I expect."

Harry turned to the headmaster. "Um, I was wondering about that. Is it going to be that easy? I mean, technically he was kicked out of classes long before he was expelled. So he gets reinstated. Will that automatically let him back into classes?"

"If he returns as a student in good standing, yes. I think the governors will see that Draco has more than paid for the hexing incident earlier this year."

"Including Lucius?"

"Oh, we can count on Lucius Malfoy to keep his malevolence to himself this once. He'll be too worried about his own neck, now that we've caught the students he suborned to kill Miss Parkinson."

"More likely, he'll be realising he can't get to Draco as long as Draco stays down here," realised Harry. "Shite. Oh, sorry. Um, I just meant . . . Lucius might want to see Draco allowed into classes again. Maybe it's better if he doesn't get reinstated. I mean, that'd be awful for him, but if it keeps him alive . . . ."

"I've taken steps to disallow Lucius Malfoy entrance to Hogwarts. Unless he's escorted, as he will be for future meetings of the governing board."

Harry stared. "If you can do that to a governor now, why couldn't you do it before?"

Dumbledore's smile was a bit philosophical. "Because now he won't raise any objection. We have something on him, you see. We can't use it, of course, not as long as we want Lucius free so that
Remus can impersonate him. But Lucius doesn't know about that."

Snape cleared his throat. "Very Slytherin."

"Why, thank you, Severus."

"So when will the board meet, then?" Harry gave a tremulous smile. "Draco's really sick of it down here."

"I'll call for a meeting at the earliest possible moment. Hmm . . . Yardley's still in Bulgaria, I expect . . ."

"I do hope that you can arrange matters soon indeed, Albus. I'm less than enthused with the prospect of those two . . . lovebirds being the only ones keeping an eye out for any trouble Harry might stumble into."

"Hey! Stumble into?"

The adults both ignored him.

"Duly noted." Dumbledore brushed his robes off slightly as he moved towards the office door. "I think the Slytherins might benefit from a visit from you tonight, Severus. My own visit to them was . . . well, we'll say fractious. See to it, will you?"

------------------------------------------------------

Shortly after the headmaster had taken his leave, Snape had said that Harry looked worse for wear and ought to go to bed. For his part, he had to floo to the Slytherin common room to settle his house down. Harry suspected that his father would be late in returning - the Gryffindors would be in an uproar if any of their own had been hauled away by Aurors, so he could only imagine how worked up the Slytherins must be.

Harry felt pretty tired, but he couldn't bring himself to do as his father had asked. For one thing, he suspected that Draco would immediately pump him for information on what had been discussed in his absence. What was Harry supposed to say, that their father had got scolded like a schoolboy?

Too, Harry knew he just couldn't sleep. A dark unease, almost as insidious as the ache in his hand, had settled into his gut.

"Harry! What are you doing out here?" Snape demanded a few hours later.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck with his good hand as he sat up from the couch. "I couldn't sleep." His father quirked an eyebrow at him. "Well, I thought I couldn't sleep because I had a lot on my mind so I stayed out here to wait so I could talk to you, but I, uh, fell asleep."

Snape sank down onto the couch next to his son, rubbing at his own forehead tiredly.

Harry felt a twinge of guilt for adding to his troubles. "How are the Slytherins?"

"Subdued."
Harry wasn't sure whether he was referring to their mood or if Severus had ordered them all to bed.

"I know you didn't wait up to ask me about your house mates, Harry. What is troubling you?"

Instead of answering his father right away, Harry adjusted his sling a bit. When he felt his father's hand rest reassuringly on his shoulder, he glanced up through his fringe slightly and blurted, "You think Draco's right, don't you? You think Remus is going to get himself killed!"

Snape took in a sighing breath and sat back into the couch, but his hand stayed on Harry's shoulder and gently massaged the hard knots of tension there. "I think Lupin shares your knack for dumb luck. Doubtless this will carry him through the war."

"I wouldn't call getting bit by a werewolf very lucky."

"He survived."

Harry shrugged away from his father and frowned as he turned to him. "Well, Sirius survived twelve years in Azkaban intact too, but--" He was going to say, but I got him killed anyway, but he didn't want his father to redirect the conversation towards responsibility and guilt. "But he got killed just as soon as he mixed up with Death Eaters. I know you don't think much of Remus as a spy. So, tell me the truth. Do you think he's going to get caught?"

Snape was silent for a few moments as if he were carefully constructing a reply. "I do believe that Lupin's deception will inevitably come to light. However, this doesn't necessarily mean that he will be caught, as you put it."

"So, you think they'll figure out that someone is using Polyjuice to impersonate Malfoy, but they might not know who." Harry's head jerked up in alarm. "You don't think they'll think it's you, do you?"

Snape shook his head. "My position here creates a fairly reliable alibi. Though, perhaps the Order would be better served if they did suspect me since further antagonism towards me should hardly make a difference at this point."

"That's not funny, Dad."

"It wasn't meant to be."

Harry ran a hand through his messy hair. "I hate this!" he shouted, jumping to his feet, albeit with a bit of a wobble. "Everyone I care about is at the top of those bastards' most wanted list. I've lost more than enough people already and I couldn't bear for anyone else to--" He spun to face his father. "And, I'm not just being selfish about losing people. I mean, it's not like I'm talking about a quick killing curse like with Cedric. I'm not stupid; the closer anyone is to me the more horrible their death will be, won't it?"

Snape Accio'd the Galliano and two small glasses. He quietly poured a small amount for them both. "Harry, I wish I could spare you this," he said, handing him a glass. "But the truth is that every member of the Order's life is in danger. You know this. Your friends and Draco are in danger as well. But the risk we're taking is no greater than the risk to the innumerable Muggles and Muggleborns whom we are fighting to protect." He paused to sip. "None of that is your fault and neither can you do anything to prevent it at this time."
"That's not really true. For one thing, I could stop Remus from putting himself into more danger."

"No, Harry--"

"I could! I know I could and if he does get killed I'll know that I could have prevented it! How can you expect me to live with that? All this time I could have gone to the Ministry and had Lucius put away -- probably kissed. And don't use the alibi excuse; we could make it stick. If we all testified, we could make it stick and then you and Draco and Remus would all be a lot safer."

Harry sat down. He felt flushed and out of breath from his outburst. Snape sat down next to him and pulled him into a gentle embrace. "Harry, we cannot do that."

Harry shrugged his way free. "I could! Everybody knows Voldemort is back now; I could get the press on my side and--"

"Ah," said Snape in a rueful voice. "I see, now."

"What, that Lucius deserves to be put away forever?"

"I saw that long ago. But now I see why Albus decided you might as well hear him taking me to task."

Harry sat back and sighed. "Yeah, that was pretty strange. So why would he?"

"Because if I, an autonomous, responsible adult must take more care to seek counsel, then how much more ought you do the same?"

"I . . ." The question didn't sap Harry's anger, but it did take him aback. In threatening to go his own way no matter what anybody thought, he was doing the same thing the headmaster had just criticised about Snape. And Snape had practically admitted, there at the end, that he'd been wrong . . . or at least that he might not have been right.

His anger sapped by then, Harry looked up in misery. "But we could save Remus and put Lucius where he belongs. We could protect Draco, Dad!"

"Believe me when I tell you that I'd like nothing better, but it would be wrong."

"How can it possibly be wrong?" Harry asked, his voice wobbling just slightly.

"Because loath as I am to admit it, what Lupin is playing at is saving lives."

"How do we know that he's saving more lives than Lucius is taking?"

His father sighed again. "We use what information we have and put our faith in Albus to make the right decisions. Believe me Harry, he wouldn't put any of us in danger without good cause."

"But you know he's not always right. What if he's wrong about this? I--"

"Harry, let me attempt to explain this with a new approach. I said before that every Order member is in danger. But the greater point of this is that each has chosen to be in danger. All of us who stand against Voldemort have done so of our own free will. Lupin and I both did so years ago. Draco, too, has made his choice. Before he was your brother, even. You bear no responsibilities for those decisions."

Snape paused to take a breath. "Your problem, I must think, lies in your 'saving-people' impulse. You've been led to believe that you are the saviour of the wizarding world. Let me assure you that
you are not. You may be destined to face down Voldemort, but every human being is responsible for saving himself. Sometimes that requires sacrifice. But you are no one's guardian, Harry. It is not your place to take that choice away from anybody."

Snape's dark eyes were sympathetic, yet resolute. "Nor, Harry, is it your right to do so."
Harry sighed as he sat down to Sunday lunch with his family. He'd spent the whole morning working on his Occlumency, but he hadn't made any progress at all. After his success at mastering it earlier that year, Harry had been sure that he'd be able to switch from using a fire-image to some sort of snake. Maybe a trail of fire that looked like a snake. *Something.* All he needed was a little guidance. His Dad inside his mind again, showing him how to make it work.

But it hadn't worked. Not at all, and Harry felt miserable. And not just that, but hot and sweaty as well.

"I'm no good at Occlumency either," Draco glumly confided. "At least you know how to do the usual kind. I can't even get that down."

"Stop exaggerating, Draco," Snape said as he joined them at the table. He looked as worn out and frustrated as Harry felt. "Your skills are coming along."

So . . . apparently Snape had taken Harry up on his suggestion that Draco should learn to Occlude. That was nice. He wondered why they hadn't mentioned it to him, but figured it didn't really matter. Maybe Draco hadn't wanted to say anything until he was pretty good at it. In that case, his saying something now, just to make Harry feel better . . . well, it was brotherly.

But then again, so was Draco. Sometimes, at least. The rest of his comments during lunch on Sunday made that clear.

"I've been considering your glasses-solution," he said, glancing pointedly at them before he began poking at the cheese topping on his French onion soup. "And really, I think it's a disaster in the making. You don't wear those monstrosities all the time, for one. What if next time you're attacked in the shower?"

"I suppose I won't shower in Slytherin. How's that?"

"Not very funny, considering how much your father trusted Wormtail when he shouldn't have."

"My friends are a whole lot more trustworthy than Wormtail!"

"Even the fifth-years? Even the seventh-years? How well do you know them, Harry?"

Well, Draco probably had a point there. Not that Harry thought he was right, but still . . . he paused to think a moment. "Oh. Well, my vision's not *that* bad, you know. I bet I could look down and see . . ."

Draco was busy pushing his cheese down into the soup by then, but that had him looking up.

"Something . . . *ah*, snakelike?"

"Sals on the floor, I was going to say!" exclaimed Harry, blushing.

"You shower with her?" asked Draco in a haughty tone.

"No, but I will. And I'll keep her box on my night-table so I can look at her if my glasses are off at night, all right? Not that I expect to be attacked in my bed."

"I still say, a tattoo's the way to go. Look, we could charm it with something really powerful so the
Harry folded his arms, obstinate. "Severus found a way to get around the Dark Mark, Draco. The Dark Mark Voldemort himself applied. I think that establishes pretty clearly that a mark can be messed with no matter how it's warded. No way am I getting one."

Draco shoved away his bowl. "Listen, Harry--"

"Why aren't you eating the soup you ordered?" Harry crossly interrupted. "I don't think you've even tasted it! After all your whinging about the boring food they serve in the Great Hall, too!"

Draco narrowed his eyes like he hadn't overlooked the change of subject. "It smells wrong."

"What, off?"

"No, wrong. Like Dobby's had a hand in." Draco sighed. "Nothing I order tastes right. I noticed it at breakfast as well--"

Snape put down his forkful of quiche and pulled Draco's soup bowl towards him. "It smells like caramelised onions and Gruyère cheese, Draco."

"There's something else in there," the boy insisted. "And the cheese! It's just a little bit too yellow, don't you think?"

"I think you're paranoid," Snape said bluntly. "Eat."

Harry thought Snape was a fine one to talk after he'd skipped meals for months, but then again, someone actually had been trying to poison the man. Whereas Draco suspected Dobby for no good reason at all.

Well, except a guilty conscience. Actually, that Draco could have one was encouraging.

Harry got up from his meal and yelled for Dobby.

The elf appeared in the wink of an eye, wearing several baggy sweaters and a top hat. "Harry Potter is needing Dobby?"

"Yeah." Harry stopped to think, something he probably should have done a minute earlier. Snape's expression said he thought so, too. "Um... you'd do me a favour, wouldn't you, if I asked?"

Dobby's hat jiggled as he bounced on the balls of his feet. "Oh, yes, Harry Potter! Yes, yes!"

"Well, Draco feels bad about the whole fairy cake thing. You remember. He's worried the elves are still mad about it and might put something in his food."

Dobby's eyes, huge in any case, got even bigger than usual. "House-elves?" He turned to Draco then and shook his head in emphatic denial. "No. Oh, no, no, no! Dobby must punish himself, now!"

"No!" yelled Harry, grabbing both Dobby's wrists before the little elf could start. "He didn't think you were doing it," he said, giving Draco a warning glance that he'd better not contradict him. "And I don't want you to tell the other elves, because I know they aren't doing anything wrong, all right? Draco's just upset. What I wanted was just a promise. I know you'd keep any promise you make to me."

"Oh, yes of course, Harry Potter sir!"
Harry let go of Dobby's wrists and turned to his brother. "And you, you'd believe Dobby would keep his promise?"

Draco curled a lip. "In general? Ha. But since he worships you, yeah, I suppose."

"He does not worship me!"

"He'd promise you anything."

Harry couldn't really dispute that, so he stopped arguing and tried to figure out how to word it. He didn't want to add to Dobby's food tasting duties. Actually, whenever he thought about those he still felt faintly ill. "Promise you won't let any elf... well, or anybody else, put anything harmful in Draco's food."

"I promise Harry Potter," said Dobby in a solemn tone. "Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye. Poke a dagger through my toe, shove rocks where they should not go. Peel my skin back from my arm, do myself all sorts of harm--"

"That's enough promising," Harry interrupted.

"Yeah, how can you say stick a needle in my eye to Harry after Samhain?" demanded Draco. And then, to Harry. "Besides, you told me that was a Muggle oath."

"I thought it was." Harry cast a questioning glance at Dobby, who blushed a bright green.

"Dobby overheard a Muggleborn child and thought it would be making a fine elf-oath."

Harry had to repress an urge to shudder at the way Dobby had added to the original rhyme he must have heard. "All right. Well, that's all I needed, Dobby. Thanks for coming so fast. I'm sure Draco feels loads better now."

Dobby turned toward the Slytherin boy, but didn't say anything. He snapped his fingers and was gone.

"Well, that was awfully brusque," said Draco in a petulant tone.

"Do you feel better?"

Draco brandished his borrowed wand and banished his soup, then got up, tossed Floo powder into the grate, and ordered another identical bowl. "Some," he finally admitted as he began to eat. "But there's too much salt."

Harry laughed a little, buoyed not only by the humour but also by the casual way Draco had pulled his wand from his pocket, as if he was used to carrying it around, now. Yet another restriction Snape had lifted, it seemed.

But that made sense. If Draco was going to come back to classes, he'd have to have a wand to carry about.

"Yes, Ron," said Seamus on Monday morning. "We know you rescued Harry. We know all about it.
We read the papers, too, you know."

"Not to mention you've told us the whole story about twelve times," added Dean.

"And it just keeps getting better each time!" Seamus turned to Harry, the pumpkin juice in his goblet sloshing as he pointed with the hand holding it. "Did Nott really threaten to hex Ron to a puddle of mush if he didn't back off, and did Ron really reply . . . how did it go . . . Do your worst. I can take you any day of the week . . . well, Harry?"

Harry caught Ron's eye and grinned. "Hmm. Odd, I don't really remember that."

"Ha!" shouted Seamus, setting his goblet down with a thud.

"But then again, I don't remember much. It's all a blur," added Harry. He had to work hard not to laugh at the visible sigh of relief Ron gave to that.

"You shouldn't encourage him," said Hermione later on their way to Charms. Ron was walking a few steps behind, impressing some second-years with tales of his bravery. "He really is . . . milking this."

Harry shrugged. "Hey, the story in the paper yesterday morning was very complimentary."

"Ha. It was very inaccurate," said Hermione, tossing her hair.

"Hermione," warned Harry, giving her a strong glance. They were all supposed to support the cover story.

"That Skeeter woman said that Lavender Brown was his girlfriend!" she explained indignantly.

"Oh, that." Harry somehow managed not to grin.

"He should be up here with us, anyway, instead of basking in . . . Ron!" she suddenly shouted as she looked over his shoulder.

He jogged to catch up. "Sorry, Harry."

"You know, I'm not as helpless as all that," said Harry in an undertone. "I bet, if you hadn't . . . er, come when you had, I'd have been just fine, eh? Think you can tone it down a bit? The braver you get the stupider I look!"

Ron dropped his voice to a whisper. "Yeah, but that's good, I thought."

"Yeah, I know," said Harry, his own voice pitched equally low. "Oh well, doesn't matter. I just don't get how anybody could actually like so much attention. It came to him then that really, it was just as well that the press was giving all the heroics to Ron. Goodness knew, Harry didn't need or want any more acclaim.

And for all the things that were untrue in the article, the important things had come across nicely. Skeeter had even got Draco's name right. Phrases like fully exonerated, expelled without a shred of real proof, and innocent all along had made sure that the Prophet's readership knew what a raw deal Draco Snape had got.

Harry had been pretty surprised to see the article have such a tone. He'd expected Lucius Malfoy to interfere with the reporting. The fact that he hadn't was pretty scary, actually. Did he want Draco reinstated so that he'd be easier to snatch? His whole plan to force Draco out of the castle had failed
miserably, after all.

But Dumbledore had that angle covered. Lucius couldn't enter the castle without an escort, now. Hmm, maybe Harry should mention that Draco really ought to start wearing his amulet again, so he'd know if Lucius was anywhere around . . .

"Harry?" Hermione poked him in the shoulder.

Only then did Harry realise he'd been wool-gathering. They were in Charms class by now, and the whole class was staring at him. So was Flitwick.

Realising he must have been asked a question, Harry went with a wild guess. "Um, four?"

"Excellent!" said Flitwick, nodding. "Two points to Gryffindor. Now, Miss Lovegood. How many different kinds of communication charms are there?"

Luna's breathy voice came from somewhere behind Harry and seemed to drift over the whole class like a slow-moving fog. "Well," she said, "it depends. When all it takes is hurlyburly to draw you into the zone of total silence . . . I had a hurlyburly whisper in my ear, once . . . Why, I couldn't even speak for days . . ."

Meanwhile, to Harry's left, Ron was whispering to Padma that no, he hadn't been scared in Hogsmeade. "There was no time for fear," he said, nodding sagely, just as if he really had fought Harry's battle for him.

Grinning, Harry wondered if Luna knew where he could hunt up one of these hurlyburlies.

------------------------------------------------------

Care of Magical Creatures that afternoon was down by the lake. Nott wasn't there, of course, but the rest of the sixth-year Slytherins were. They glared at Harry like they'd like to drown him.

As if it was Harry's fault that Nott had turned out to be a murdering bastard! Pansy had been one of their own; didn't they even care that Nott had killed her?

It made Harry sort of worried about how Slytherin was going to treat Draco.

When Hagrid finished talking about the tiny waddlepaters that inhabited the waters lapping the shore, he told everybody to take off shoes and socks so they could wade in and collect some. Harry paired with Ron and soon they had their trouser legs rolled up past their knees.

"Now, see yer nice 'n careful collectin' yer waddlepaters," cautioned Hagrid as he lumbered around the groups of students, his meaty legs raising waves that lapped past Harry's knees. "Professor Snape needs 'em whole and wrigglin'."

Harry hadn't realised they were collecting the big-eyed bugs for potions ingredients, but he mentally shrugged and found a couple more to scoop into his pail.

Suddenly, something shoved him from behind and he found himself sprawling forward into the cold lake water. His glasses fell off but he grabbed them quickly and shoved them back up on his nose.

As Harry climbed to his feet once more, drenched and shivering, Ron took up a position as though to
guard him, his wand out and waving. "All right, who did that? Which one of you pushed Harry?"

One thing was sure. Whoever had done it had used magic. Nobody but Ron was anywhere near him.

"I'll not have any roughhousin' in my class," bellowed Hagrid, his burly arms crossed. "That'll be ennuf a' that, it will!"

Hermione began edging closer to Harry, her partner Parvati trailing behind. Ron and Hermione kept a closer lookout after that, but nothing else happened.

It had just been a simple shoving hex, Harry told himself. He'd got wet, that was all. And he wasn't even wet for long, what with the drying charm Hermione cast over him as soon as she got close enough.

But still, the incident had unnerved Harry a little.

He was just glad he wasn't Draco, who had to go back to live among the snakes.

"So when can we expect your brother back in classes?" asked Hermione brightly that night at dinner.

Harry put down his milk and wiped his mouth with his sleeve before he answered. "No idea. The governors have to meet first." He wondered if he should go ask Dumbledore if he'd managed to arrange anything yet, then decided it was way too soon to expect as much.


"I'm more worried about how Slytherin will treat him than anything else," admitted Harry. "And don't say again that he's going to bribe them to like him again, Ron. I think this has gone beyond that."

Ron closed his mouth, but the look in his eyes spoke for him.

Harry almost sighed. "Do I have to give you the same lecture I gave him? The one about how a person can have more than one friend?"

"Nah." Ron finished chewing his chicken leg. "Sorry. I'll just think of him as your Percy."

"I sure hope we don't have to use the waddlepaters today," said Hermione the next afternoon as she pushed open the door to the Potions classroom. "When I plucked mine from the water, they just looked up at me so helplessly. Like they knew they were going to end up being boiled alive!"
"Potions class is no place for sentimentality," drawled Draco from a work table a short distance away. "I'd have thought you'd know that by now, Hermione." He inclined his head as the other Gryffindors trailed in. "Ron."

"Mal . . . Draco," Ron said, gritting his teeth slightly. He made as though to move on by, but Harry stopped by Draco, which made Ron stop as well.

"What are you doing here?" asked Harry.

Draco leaned on one hand, his posture laconic. A pose, Harry recognised. "Governors met this morning. Granted, they didn't apologise the way they should have for their appalling lack of judgment, but they did vote me back in."

"Why didn't you come join us for lunch?"

"Oh, Severus and I had to get my new wand registered." When Draco brandished it slightly, Harry saw it wasn't actually a new wand. That phrasing was probably just for the other Slytherins to hear. Severus had let his grandfather's wand be registered to Draco. That was nice.

Harry lowered his voice. "Did Lucius have to return the other one? I mean, I know you couldn't use it any longer now that your name has changed, but . . ."

Draco's hand clenched on his wand, which made Harry sorry he'd asked. "I'm sure he has it, still. That would be like him. Anyway, I've got this one officially, so I'm all set. So, how about you partner with me today?"

Harry glanced sideways at Ron. "Well, with Nott gone I sort of thought I'd work with Ron."

"Severus wants inter-house pairs today. He told me so."

Ron snorted. "Harry can work with me then, or have you forgotten he's in Slytherin?"

"Is he more Slytherin than Gryffindor?" Draco raised an eyebrow. "You aren't going to answer?"

"Listen, if you think you can just sail back in here and take over, you've got another think coming--"

Draco turned to Harry, and in that instant, Harry saw something he hadn't expected to see. Nervousness, lurking in those silver eyes. It came to Harry then that the last time Draco had been inside this particular room, Pansy had loosed a snake on him. He was probably worried that his remaining house mates didn't want him back and would try something. Clearly, he'd feel better with Harry by his side.

"I'll work with Draco," Harry said. "It's his first day back, and he's my brother. All right, Ron?"

"Yeah, all right."

Ignoring what Draco had said about Snape's wishes, Ron went to the table behind Harry, where Hermione was already setting up her cauldron.

When Snape strode in from his adjoining office, the door clanging behind him, he put an end to that. "Inter-house pairs today, ladies and gentlemen," he barked out. "Mr Zabini, has Miss Greengrass been re-sorted into Gryffindor? I thought not. Find yourself a partner!"

Once the students were paired to his satisfaction, Snape resumed speaking. "You will not have read this in the *Prophet* yet, but Draco Snape has been reinstated into Hogwarts as a student in good
standing. I am sure he will do Slytherin credit."

Harry noticed then, that Draco's cloak once more boasted a snake crest. He told himself he wouldn't look at it if they had to do any charmed potions; he was going to get used to focussing on the snake etched into his glasses lens.

Snape waved his wand toward the blackboard to reveal instructions. "Avail yourselves of the student supplies as needed."

"Oh, this'll be a snap," whispered Draco when Snape turned his back.

Harry didn't think so; the potion had about a hundred and twelve steps. Or seemed like, anyway. At least this particular potion didn't have to be charmed. That was good. It was never very fun having to figure out new spells, though by now he was used to it.

"I'll just go get the live leeches," said Draco as he glanced over the dried and bottled ingredients Harry had lain out from his sixth year potions kit.

He stumbled on the way, which was so unlike him that when he got back, six fat leeches in his mortar, Harry quietly asked, "Everything all right?"

"Oh yes, certainly," said Draco brightly. A lie if Harry had ever heard one. He thought then that somebody must have cast a sneaky tripping hex that Draco hadn't quite managed to avoid. It struck him then that Draco was keeping his wand out, most often in hand, just like he was ready to defend himself if it came to that.

Harry hoped it didn't. Draco's idea of self-defence, after all, was what had got him kicked out of classes in the first place.

"Would you like to pulp the leeches or shall I?" Draco asked, still in that same over-bright tone.

"Ugh. You."

"Very well. You make the base. Mind you don't overheat it."

Harry could have done without being bossed around quite so much, but since Draco was already enough on edge, he didn't mention that. And really, it wasn't as though his brother was being completely overbearing. He'd practically volunteered to mash the leeches.

Snape began walking up and down the rows, commenting on the potions in progress. "More oil-of-clove, Mr Longbottom," he said in a level tone as he passed a few rows behind Harry. "Miss Greengrass, your base is about to scorch."

Harry was pretty impressed that none of Snape's comments were laced with insults. He was less impressed when he realised that Snape was merely saving up his ire.

For Hermione.

His deep voice came closer, a dark undertone in it when he spoke next. "Miss Granger. Your own base is decidedly too subfusc. Almost caliginous, in fact. Correct it at once."

_Uh-oh._ Harry could tell from the silence behind him that Hermione hadn't understood. And no wonder. _Subfusc? Caliginous?_ He wasn't sure those were really words. Though goodness knew, Snape had an impressive enough vocabulary that he didn't need to make words up.
"How do I correct it, sir?" asked Hermione in a low voice.

"I'm surprised you have to ask, being as it's so very obvious. Surely you of all people can come up with the answer, Miss Granger."

When Hermione remained silent, Snape gave a loud sigh. "To correct it you must adjust your brewing technique to effect a more lambent appearance." His tone that would sound reasonable to anyone else, but Harry could still hear an angry edge in it. This was about Snape getting even for what had happened in Hogsmeade. He hadn't forgotten that Harry had been attacked while Ron and Hermione had been busy kissing.

Hermione cleared her throat. "I . . . lambent, sir? I'd appreciate more of an explanation. Please?"

"Didn't you come to class prepared, Miss Granger?" asked Snape, raising his voice so everyone could hear. "Of course, you are a Gryffindor. It's been my experience that Gryffindors hardly ever do the alternate readings--"

Draco strangled a laugh.

"See to your potion, Mr Snape," said the Potions Master. And when Draco didn't respond, "Mr Snape, when I give you an instruction in class it would behove you to reply to me!"

Draco still didn't say anything. In fact, he had a strange look on his face, like he was completely confused by the way Snape was talking. For a second, Harry was pretty sure one of the Slytherins had managed to cast Confundus without Snape noticing. But then, he realised what the real problem was.

"He means you," Harry hissed, voice pitched low. "You're Mr Snape, now."

Draco coloured, his fair skin flaming. "Oh." And then, a bit louder. "Yes, sir."

"Very good, Mr Snape," said their father, laying a little bit of extra stress on the name. Evidently he'd had enough of baiting Hermione, for he proceeded to tell her in normal English that her base was too dark and needed to be quite a bit brighter. "Stirring with a glass rod should prove efficacious, Miss Granger."

"Yes, Professor."

Draco waited until Snape had moved to the far side of the room before he spoke again. "Well, that was certainly refreshing. Little Miss Perfect put in her place for once."

"Actually my favourite part was you forgetting your own name," retorted Harry as he poured a small measure of water into their cauldron. "Didn't they call you Mr Snape at your reinstatement hearing?"

"What hearing?"

Harry turned to his brother. "Didn't you and Dad go to the meeting?"

"No. I got a letter through the Floo. From the headmaster, saying that I'd been cleared to return to classes. Then a few minutes later Severus came down and we went out to settle the matter of my wand."

"Dad went to the meeting without you?"

Draco shook his head. "He wasn't invited either. Don't you see? The governors didn't have the guts
to face either one of us. It's a wonder they included the headmaster," he scoffed. "But of course with him they had no choice. Just as well, really. I didn't want to see Lucius, did I?"

Harry remembered that scene in the hallway from after the expulsion. Lucius making those horrible, creepy threats. "Yeah, just as well," he murmured.

"I should be hearing nothing but bubbling cauldrons," snapped Snape from across the room.

Well, that was better than him taking points, Harry thought. From then on, he and Draco only discussed the potion. It paid off, too. Near the end of class, when Snape made his usual survey of the cauldrons, he dispensed scorn and criticism to Gryffindors and Slytherins alike. But when he reached Harry and Draco's table, he raised an eyebrow.

"Promising, Mr Potter, Mr Snape. Good colour, not too dark . . ." Leaning over the cauldron, he inhaled deeply. "Adequate balance of components. This brew, I do believe, is worth testing."

_Uh-oh._ Right before his father spoke next, Harry had a sudden feeling he knew what was coming.

"Mr Weasley!" called Snape. "I'd like you to test your classmates' potion."

"Me?" The question came out in a squeaking tone. Ron gruffly cleared his throat and tried again. "Me, sir? Why not them? They made it!"

"Yes, and a poor reward it would be for their excellent work, to subject them to this particular potion." Snape's dark eyes gleamed. "Or is the hero of Hogsmeade, as I hear you are called now, afraid of a mere brew?"

Seamus and Dean started laughing, though they cut it out when Snape flicked a glance their way. The Slytherins, strangely enough, weren't even tittering. Harry figured they were still trying to decide how to act around their Head of House after the whole Nott incident. It made him wonder what Snape had had to do that night, to subdue them.

"I'm not afraid of it," insisted Ron, his tones staunch even if his skin was looking a little pasty. "You're sure they made it right?"

Snape shrugged, his robes fluttering. "As I believe I mentioned to you once, I haven't had a student die in class, yet."

"That's encouraging," muttered Ron as he took the vial Snape had ladled from Harry and Draco's cauldron. "Well . . . here goes nothing."

Harry had to give his friend credit for guts. Ron tipped the whole thing into his mouth and drank it straight down.

For a moment, nothing at all happened.

And then, in a puff of smoke, Ron shrank down to the size of a mouse.

"I think it worked," he said, his voice even higher and squeakier than before. And then, in tones of awe, "You lot are huge."

Harry bent down and scooped him off the floor before he was trod on, and settled him carefully down onto their work table.

"Fifty points to Slytherin," announced Snape, nodding at Draco. "And another fifty for you as well,
Mr Potter." He lifted his chin to address the class as a whole. "Everyone else may submit a sample of your potion so I can mark you. Needless to say, there will be no other Outstandings awarded for this work session. For next time, please read chapter nineteen in your principal text and write twelve inches on the standard variants of shrinking potions. That will be all. Class dismissed."

He began to walk away, leaving a tiny, irate Ron jumping up and down on the work table. "What about me?"

Turning back so quickly his robes flared into a semicircle, Snape smoothly answered, "If you'd read your text you'd realise that it will wear off in five to ten hours. I'd estimate nine, given the quality of this particular batch of potion."

"Nine hours!" squeaked Ron. "We have Quidditch practice!"

"I can shrink your broom down," put in Draco, his eyes amused even if his tone was bored. "Though a Bludger would make quite a mess of you, in your . . . condition."

"Shut up, Mal . . . oh, just shut up."

"Oh, come on, Professor," said Harry. Most of the class was gone by then, so he figured it would be safe enough to presume a little. "I'm sure you have an antidote around."

"Oh, very well," sighed Snape, withdrawing a vial of orange fluid from his robes. He handed it to Harry. "One drop atop his head. And I'd strongly advise you place him on the floor again, first."

The minute Ron went back to normal, he shook himself all over like a dog trying to shed water. "Oh, ewwww."

"Just be glad I didn't partner you," said Harry, laughing a little. "I might have let Sals out of my pocket in that case. Just imagine how big she'd have looked to you."

Ron made a face, but was in good enough spirits to counter, "Harry, if you'd have partnered me our potion wouldn't have been good enough to test like that."

"Yeah, but Draco's would have. And Severus . . . I mean, Professor Snape, he'd have made you drink it. And it would have worked."

"Well, it worked but it wasn't worth any seventy-five points to Slytherin," said Ron, glaring at Snape's retreating back. "That's just unfair."

"Oh, stop your whinging," said Draco as he waved his wand to clear away the work area he and Harry had used. "So he was a little generous to Slytherin. It's not like we can win the House Cup now, is it?"

The last time Harry had seen the house counters, Slytherin hadn't been significantly behind. "Huh?"

Draco hefted his school bag over his shoulder. "Oh, you didn't know? Severus took a thousand points from Slytherin."

Harry's eyes widened. From behind him, he heard Hermione gasp. Ron was simply speechless.

"Yeah, for Nott," added Draco.

Ron recovered first. "And you aren't mad about that . . . er, Draco?"

"I'm not thrilled," said Draco dryly. "But he had cause. Or did you think I'd believe points are more
important than Harry? I don't know if anybody's mentioned this, but we are brothers."

"It's been mentioned!"

"You were right. He doesn't do subtle," Draco said to Harry. He turned to Ron and Hermione to add, "It's called sarcasm. For the vocabulary-deficient among us, that means--"

"Behave!" said Harry, laughing. "You'll have to excuse him," he said to his friends. "He's overcompensating because he's been alone too much lately."

"Let's just get to dinner," growled Ron.

"Ah yes, dinner with Slytherin House. What a lovely prospect," said Draco brightly, a smile plastered on his face.

Harry knew then what he had to do. "Yeah, I'll sit with you, I think."

The classroom was empty by then, except for their little group. "I don't need that, Harry," drawled Draco. "Slytherin may be a pit of snakes but--"

"But you fit in just fine?" supplied Ron.

"Ron and I will wait for you outside," said Hermione as she tugged on Ron's arm. Ron grumbled, but went without much of a fight.

"As I was saying," continued Draco in a condescending voice. "Slytherin may be a pit of snakes but at least it's my pit of snakes. I don't need you to sit with me."

"So I'll eat with Gryffindor?"

"Well, that's not to say I'm refusing your company," said Draco, backtracking. "And it's not lost on me that you're a Slytherin, too. I think you ought to do a lot more eating with Slytherin. Severus said you didn't do it very often, really. Oh, but he wasn't complaining, Harry. Just talking."

"So I'll eat with Slytherin tonight."

"Good, then that's settled." Draco lowered his voice. "And afterwards, if you wanted to come with me to the common room to help me . . . ah . . . arrange things in my dormitory, I wouldn't object to that either. After all, you are my brother."

Want me to sleep over, too? Harry almost joked, but he stopped himself in time. It meant a lot that Draco could admit to feeling vulnerable and needing support, even if he had to do it in such a roundabout way. "Who's going to walk me home when I need to get back to Gryffindor?"

"Oh, I'm sure Severus will be in and out a few times to check on the house. You know, he's a bit worried they'll . . . ah, do something to me. You can just ask him."

"All right," said Harry, chewing his lip. Severus wasn't the only one worried about the Slytherins doing something nasty to Draco.
Harry expected dinner with the Slytherins to be horribly tense. He even half-expected a fight to break out. How likely was that, though, with Snape's eagle-eyes trained on the table as Harry and Draco approached it? The Slytherins knew well enough to behave while their fearsome Head of House was watching.

And anyway, there was something else important that Harry knew he needed to remember.

*These students were Slytherins.*

If they were angry, they were far, far more likely to hex Draco behind his back than challenge him to his face.

In fact, if they were itching to hex him, they might well be *friendly* to his face.

Just like Nott.

Yeah . . . the one and only Slytherin who had made a real effort to get on with Harry . . . and *he'd* turned out to be in league with Lucius.

So it really gave Harry the creeps when Blaise Zabini saw Draco coming and shifted over to make room for him.

It seemed, though that Zabini might have another motive in mind than betrayal. As Harry found a seat on the other side of the table, next to Goyle, the black boy leaned over toward Draco. "So, are you fully reinstated, Malfoy? No restrictions?"

"It's Snape," said Draco, though without much heat. "You know it's Snape, so don't be a git."

"Touchy, touchy," said Zabini, throwing his hands up in the air theatrically. "How are we supposed to remember your new name when you don't answer to it, eh? And anyway, *Snape*, you didn't answer my question."

"Yes, I'm fully reinstated." Draco served himself a healthy pile of mutton and vegetables, though he grimaced. Harry knew it wasn't his favourite.

"Have you thought about Quidditch, then?"

From several seats down, Millicent Bulstrode leaned forward to listen.

"Haven't given it a moment's thought," said Draco breezily. "Though it's not been lost on me how poorly Slytherin's faring this year. Right pathetic, it is. At least there's only one game left this year. The utter humiliation will be over soon--"

"We're going to *win* this last game," snarled Zabini. "All we need is a Seeker worth his salt."

"Oh, is that all you need?" Draco shrugged, evincing not the slightest interest in the position practically being dangled in front of him. Harry didn't have any doubt Draco was dying to play Quidditch again, so he figured his brother must think it best not to look too eager over the matter.

"Yeah, *Snape*. You know it is. So, how about it?"

Draco raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry. I must have missed the question."

Bulstrode had had enough. "Will you play ruddy Seeker?" she shouted from five seats away.

"Oh, you'd like *me* to play Seeker," drawled Draco. "Imagine that. Well, I haven't had much chance
to practise of late. Perhaps you should ask my brother. My understanding is that his afternoons aren't booked, either."

"Brother?"

"You do all realise that Harry Potter's my brother," said Draco, looking around. "I'm sure you must. Severus did adopt us both, after all. And I know you're aware he's in Slytherin as well as Gryffindor. He could play for either team, as I reckon it."

A frown creased Zabini's forehead. "Well, we did ask him, yeah."

"You did." Draco glanced across the table at Harry. "You must have forgotten to mention. How remiss of you."

Harry shrugged. "I didn't think I could do the team justice. You know."

"Yes, we know." Zabini barked a short laugh. "You never know what to believe if it's in the *Prophet*, but is it true, Potter, that you had to have Weasley rescue you from Nott? *Weasley?*"

"Yeah, that's true." Harry ignored the stares that got him, and started eating his mutton.

"Just imagine how many points Slytherin would have lost if Weasley hadn't rescued him," said Draco, surprising Harry. "A thousand's bad enough."

Well, maybe that was Draco's way of reminding everybody that Severus would be out for blood if anybody actually managed to abduct his son. Either one of his sons.

"Yeah, Snape's got a nerve taking a thousand points off Slytherin!" erupted Bulstrode, pounding her meaty fist on the table.

"Yeah, Nott should have got a medal for trying to hand me over to be tortured and killed," said Draco, surprising Harry. "A thousand's bad enough."

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"Yeah, Snape's got a nerve taking a thousand points off Slytherin!" erupted Bulstrode, pounding her meaty fist on the table.

"Yeah, Nott should have got a medal for trying to hand me over to be tortured and killed," said Harry sarcastically, glaring a bit at Bulstrode and then the rest of the nearby Slytherins. "Is that what you think? *Is it?* What did you expect Severus to do, overlook somebody attacking *one of his own house*?"

"Well, you're only sort of Slytherin, aren't you?" snarled Bulstrode.

"And what about Pansy Parkinson?" retorted Harry. He was sorry to bring her up in front of Draco, but this had to be said. "Nott, Torquay, and Greezer killed her! Was Snape supposed to just ignore that, too? I know you all resent him right now, and me and Draco too, probably, 'cause we don't worship that racist piece of shite the rest of you think is the best thing since sliced bread, but come on--"

"I think we're getting a little far from the topic of Seeker," interrupted Draco in a smooth voice. His glare at Harry, however, was anything but smooth. It was a blunt, *shut up, you're out of your depth here*, glare.

But Harry was on too much of roll to stop it just like that. "Severus might have taken a thousand points from each of Parkinson's killers," he went right on, his voice heated. "And the house would have deserved it!"

"Three thousand points from Slytherin!" shouted Crabbe, who up until then hadn't said a word.

Draco gave Harry one last dose of *death-glare*, then wiped his expression clean, nothing but polite surprise on his face as he turned to Crabbe. "I didn't know you could multiply."
"Can't. Added," said Crabbe around a half-roll he'd just bit off.

"Ah."

Everybody nearby laughed a little, except Goyle, who just shrugged.

Harry got the point. Draco knew best . . . at least when it came to managing Slytherins.

"If you think I can help the house recover some of the points recently lost, I'm more than willing to join the team," Draco then announced, his tone making it sound like he was granting a favour, but graciously. "When are practises?"

He listened as Zabini detailed the lengthy schedule, then nodded. "Fine, fine. Now, let's discuss strategy. Because the Snitch is only worth a hundred and fifty points, and with Slytherin over a thousand down, what we need is a way to make sure the game doesn't end too soon. Well, we need that and goals. Loads and loads of goals."

"You sure you want Potter there listening in on all our ideas?" asked Zabini.

"Why not?" Draco smiled, the expression a bit thin. "It's not as though we're playing against Gryffindor."

"Next year--"

"We'll let next year take care of itself."

Zabini looked disgruntled, but he nodded.

There was a bit of a fracas after dinner. Harry told Ron and Hermione he was going to go see Draco's room in Slytherin. Ron took it pretty well, all things considered, but insisted that he and Hermione should walk Harry down to the dungeons.

Draco pushed off from the wall he'd been leaning on. "Are you planning to follow him into Slytherin and then right up into my room as well?"

"Like I want to see your nasty common room again!"

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Again? Do tell--"

Hermione interrupted. "Listen, you know perfectly well why we're supposed to go everywhere with Harry."

"Yes, I know," Draco drawled. "I might know more than you do. Severus specifically told me, earlier today, that Harry could visit me in Slytherin. I'm certain he didn't mean you lot had to come along. Therefore, I'm competent to keep our boy here safe, oh hero of Hogsmeade. And if I can keep him safe once we're in the dungeons with all the other snakes, I'm sure I can manage to not get him killed on the way there, as well. So, get lost." He made a shooing motion with his hand, just as Snape had that once.

From Draco it looked a lot ruder, though.
"He's right, you know," said Harry apologetically. "Thanks for the offer, but Draco can . . . er, look out for me now that he's back. I mean, sometimes."

"At least I won't go kissing anybody when I should be watching out for Harry," added Draco.

"Yeah, well you don't have anybody to kiss, do you now?" snarled back Ron.

"Ronald!" shouted Hermione, clearly appalled. Harry thought she must be remembering how Pansy had played Draco false. Definitely, now wasn't the time to mention his lack of girlfriend.

Ron had the grace to flush, as if realising that his mouth had been running ahead of his brain. "Sorry," he mumbled. "That was uncalled for. Especially considering . . ."


Ron and Hermione still looked uncertain. Harry thought they'd grown too used to being his constant bodyguards. "Go have some fun," he said, wondering if they'd end up kissing each other like they had in Hogsmeade. Something deep inside him remembered, then, how he'd felt about Cho. But the feeling seemed distant, and it came to Harry that he hadn't liked anybody since, not that way. Not even close. But . . . he didn't want to. He had enough to be going on with. "I'll be fine with Draco."

As it turned out, dinner with the Slytherins had given Harry an exaggerated view of Draco's ability to finesse his house mates. Now that he'd agreed to be their Seeker, his brother had lost whatever advantage he first possessed.

Draco tripped three times on his way across the common room, once so badly that he nearly sprawled flat on his face. Worse than that, perhaps, was the way the other students just ignored him. Like he was made of air, literally. They ignored Harry, too, even though it must have been obvious Harry was trying to figure out where the tripping jinxes were coming from.

"Don't worry about it," said Draco once he was in his dormitory. Funny, Harry had always thought the Slytherins would have bigger rooms than the other houses. But they didn't. The room for the sixth-year boys was about the same as his own, only without windows since it was underground.

"Don't worry about it?" Harry shook his head as he sat down on the bed he guessed was Draco's since it had the fanciest covers.

"No, that's Greg's," said Draco, pointing. "Sit over there."

Harry wasted no time in moving to a bed covered in a simple dark green bedspread.

"So, I didn't have time to unpack before," said Draco, swishing his wand to and fro. His new trunk, which Severus had bought him, flew open, as did the doors of a nearby wardrobe. Folded clothes began drifting through the air and tried to hang themselves up, but they ended up practically strangling the hangers.

"You haven't really broken in your new wand?"

"I never did have that spell quite down," said Draco, shrugging. "Oh well. The elves'll put it right."
"It wouldn't hurt you to--"

"Yes, it would."

Deciding he had better things to talk about, Harry switched gears. "So, about the way somebody in Slytherin keeps tripping you . . . Um, I'm sure if you told Severus about that, he'd find a way to put an end to it."

"I need Zabini healthy enough to play Quidditch."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "You know it's him?"

"Well, I don't know, but I know, Harry," drawled Draco, still flicking his wand to make his things go where he wanted. "There's no need for alarm. I have it under control. Zabini needs me healthy enough to play Quidditch too, you see. So he won't go too far."

"Until after the game."

"Weren't you paying attention to my strategy talk earlier? We're going to win this game by so many points that the house'll forget how much they hate me." Draco grinned, though the expression was somehow grim. "I'll be the hero for once, just as soon as I catch that Snitch."

Harry hated to be the bearer of bad tidings, but . . . "Uh . . . yeah, but what if you, you know . . . lose?"

Draco made a scoffing noise as he sat down next to Harry and swung his legs. "Oh, please. We're playing Hufflepuff."

"Hey, they have good players sometimes!"

"Not that I ever noticed."

Harry let it go. "What makes you think it's Zabini tripping you?"

"It's obvious, isn't it? Once I was out of the way, Nott more or less took over as a leader of the sixth-years. And then Nott gets himself thrown into Azkaban, and Zabini starts thinking that now the others will have to look to him, right? Except, straight away I come back. He's trying to make me look foolish and inept so I can't step back into my old role here." Draco shrugged. "Besides, Greg wouldn't do that to me, and Vincent isn't stealthy enough. Zabini is the only one left. Ha, I'm sure he'd have found a way to keep me off Quidditch if he could, but people would have questioned that."

Draco's smile grew wide. "I'm just too good."

Harry smiled too, glad to see Draco a little bit happy about something. Though he did feel he had to point one thing out. "Maybe it's a girl tossing hexes your way."

"Maybe," Draco allowed, but he looked like he was just saying it to end the conversation.

He needn't have bothered. Almost as soon as he'd finished talking the door was slamming open and Zabini, Crabbe, and Goyle all came in, talking loudly. They stopped when they saw Harry.

"You're still here?"

Draco rose to his feet. He didn't brandish his wand, but it was still in his hand from earlier. "He's going to be here as much as I please. Deal with it."

"Didn't know you had to hide behind a Gryffindor, Mal . . . shite, don't know what to call you."
Zabini grinned then, the expression just plain mean. "On the other hand . . . Malshite actually works. Yeah, *Malshite*. Oh what, you don't like it? Are you going to run crying to Snape?"

Draco had looked angry at first, but by the time Zabini stopped speaking, his expression was under control. He looked mildly amused, in fact.

"Malshite's pretty accurate, actually. For Lucius, I mean."

Goyle laughed and came the rest of the way in, then settled onto his own bed, propping himself up on his pillows. When he kicked off his shoes, Harry struggled not to make a face. But the stench! It really ronked.

Crabbe was laughing too, but not as much as Goyle. Zabini glanced at them both crossly, as if this wasn't going the way he'd planned. His gaze caught on Draco's wardrobe, still open.

Sauttering forward, he ran his hand across the clothing hanging askew. When he turned around, his smile was simply malicious. No other word for it. "What happened to all your things, Malshite?"

"Snape."

Zabini wanted answers enough to play along, apparently. "Yeah, *Snape*. So where's all your stuff? You had loads more than this." He walked over to peer down into Draco's open trunk. "Looks like you're all settled in. What happened, your rich daddy took back all the things he'd ever bought you?"

Draco's silver eyes glinted, though his voice remained calm. "Something like that."

It was Goyle who spoke next, his own voice thrumming with concern instead of malice. "But what about your private vault, Draco? You can just buy a bunch more stuff to replace what your father took from you, can't you?"

"Professor Snape's my father," answered Draco.

Goyle blinked slowly. Three times in a row. After than he nodded. "Uh-huh. But what about your private vault?"

Draco's whole body relaxed, his grip on his wand actually becoming slack as he gave a careless shrug. Even his eyes stopped glittering. Harry thought it was one hell of a pose. Apparently his brother *could* lie when it suited him. He just wasn't so good at verbal lies.

"Ah. Well, I lost that too. Long story, Greg."

Zabini, it seemed, was just as dense as Goyle at times. Of course, he just couldn't believe his ears. "You're poor? *You?*"

Draco just stared at him, a pleasant smile on his face, one eyebrow raised as if to say that yes, poor was actually the opposite of rich.

Zabini exploded in laughter.

Crabbe glanced from Draco to Zabini, clearly deciding whose side to take. In the end he laughed a little, the sound of it uncomfortable. Goyle, on the other hand, shook his head.

"That's too bad, Draco."

Draco's smile became something a little more genuine. "Yeah, but even mountains of Galleons aren't worth all that much if you end up a slave to the Dark Lord. I'm better off now."
"Better off," gasped Zabini, holding his side now, he was laughing so much. "Oh, Merlin. If only Pansy could have seen you brought to this, she'd have got over her weird fixation--"

That was all it took for Draco's control to snap. In less than an instant, his wand was pointing at Zabini's throat. "Don't speak ill of the dead."

Harry jumped up, his mouth going dry. This was all they needed, Draco hexing somebody on his first day back . . .

"Touchy, touchy," sneered Zabini. "If you want to duel, Malshite, just name the time and place. But make it after the Quidditch match, not before."

"Yeah, Malshite," echoed Crabbe, who'd apparently chosen sides by then.

Goyle closed his eyes like he just wanted to go to sleep.

"Come on, Vince," said Zabini with one last, contemptuous glance at Draco's raised wand. "We have better things to do than hang around with the poor boy and his Gryffindor brother. I can't decide which would be worse. Being poor, or Gryffindor!"

Once the door slammed behind them, Goyle opened his eyes. "Gryffindor is worse."

The comment broke the tension. Draco lowered his wand as Harry laughed a little.

"I need help in Defence," Goyle went on. "Think you could, Draco?"

"Sure." Draco summoned his book and went over to sit at the end of Goyle's bed. "You want me to read you the chapter we're in, or start in on the next one?"

"One we're in."

Draco nodded like he'd been expecting that.

"And I need help with spells, too," added Goyle, sounding a little worried.

"I'll partner you tomorrow," promised Draco. "Thursday too."

That was when it hit Harry. Draco was going to be in Defence class with him. Draco was going to see Aran spewing all his rubbish about Parseltongue being too evil to be allowed in class . . .

_I'd better warn him_, Harry thought. _Otherwise, with his impulse-control problems . . ._

Yeah, the last thing they needed was Draco attacking a professor. He'd get expelled for good. After what Harry had just seen, he didn't have much reason to believe that Draco wouldn't pull his wand when he got angry.

Harry bit his lip. He didn't want to explain about Aran, because he knew full well what Draco was going to say about the matter. _Tell Severus, Harry_. On the other hand, though, Draco would probably understand why Harry didn't want to do that. The Slytherin boy wasn't going to bring his problems with fitting in to his father, after all. He'd looked contemptuous when Zabini had suggested he might. Draco was going to handle things himself.

So yeah, he'd probably would see why Harry needed to do the same. Well, hopefully . . .

Realising he was biting his lip, Harry cut it out. "Um, Draco? . . . We need to talk."
Harry was halfway through his waffles the next morning when Ron turned to him. "So, is it true, then?"

"Is what true?"

"About Mal . . . Draco. Your brother. Is it true he's poor after all?"

_Uh-oh._ The look in Ron's eyes was nothing short of malicious. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Seamus said Dean said Parvati told him Lavender had overheard some Slytherins in the hall laughing about how Draco doesn't even have a pot to piss in. Is it true?"

Harry decided there was nothing for it but to put a good face on the matter. "Yeah, it's true."

"You told me he'd got himself another fat vault and he might be richer than ever!"

"He did, and he might have been!" Harry felt a bit stung by Ron's tone. "But it didn't work out. Legal stuff, inheritance law. It's complicated," Harry added, though it wasn't, really. But the details really weren't his to spread around. "Ron . . . you're above making fun of someone for being poor, aren't you? Even if it's Draco? Who . . . uh, probably deserves some payback?"

"Hell yes, he deserves some payback! The only thing that'd make this more perfect is if he'd turned out to be some Muggleborn switched at birth!"

Harry almost flinched. Did Ron somehow know about Draco's great-great uncle's shady business dealings? "What makes you say that?"

Ron's forehead wrinkled up. "What, about Muggleborns switched at birth? Everybody says that. Oh, not about _him_. I mean, everybody wonders if it happens, see? You hear stories but you never know."

"Urban legend," supplied Hermione as she bit her croissant and crisply turned a page. "Wizard legend in this case."

Harry nodded that he understood, and lowered his voice. "Oh, come on, Ron. Be a mate here. Draco's absolutely miserable after the whole Pansy thing. And now Slytherin's giving him an awfully hard time. You've heard what they're calling him."

"Yeah, Malshite." Ron rolled the word around his tongue like it was a sweet or something. "Yeah, Malshite." Ron rolled the word around his tongue like it was a sweet or something.

Harry clenched his fists under the table. "Don't make it even harder for him to stick by me, Ron. He's my brother."

Ron sighed. "Yeah, all right. I do get that, you know. I just don't much like it." His eyes began glinting. "Tell you what. I'll be magnanimous and gracious about the whole thing. You know, show him how it's done."

"Don't be too smarmy about it."

"I said _gracious_, didn't I?" Ron waggled his eyebrows a little, reminding Harry of Fred. Or maybe George. The comparison didn't exactly set his mind at ease, but at least Ron was willing to try. "Thanks," he said, climbing over the bench to get up. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Draco rising to his feet, too. Like he'd been waiting for a cue.
Harry could just barely make out the voices over at the Slytherin table. *What's the matter, Malshite? Where are you going, Malshite? Not going to finish your eggs, Malshite?*

Harry clenched his fists. Even Snape's hearing probably couldn't pick up on the insults, since he was ten times farther away than Harry. But that made sense. The Slytherins probably knew how far their Head of House could hear. No way would they be calling Draco that if Snape was in range.

By the time Harry had reasoned all that out, Draco was at the doors of the Great Hall, waiting for him so they could walk to Defence together. Ron saw that and made what was almost a grunting noise, but didn't otherwise comment.

"Ron. Hermione." Draco greeted Harry's friends, his silver gaze calm. Another pose, Harry thought. Draco had to be angry over the way Zabini had got almost everyone in Slytherin to start calling him *Malshite*, both behind his back and to his face. About the only place he was probably safe from it would be in Potions class . . . but they didn't have that again until Friday.

"Draco," said Ron, in just as level a voice.

Harry couldn't help but be proud of his friend for rising to the challenge.

"Good morning, Draco," said Hermione brightly, her own tone clearly intended to cheer him up. "Have you managed to keep up with the Defence curriculum?"

"Not much to keep up with," drawled Draco, stepping in beside her and letting Ron and Harry walk ahead of them. "Aran being . . . well, representative of the level of Defence instruction we get at this school."

"Hey, Remus was a really good teacher!" Harry immediately glanced back to object.

"Hmph. For you, sure. Teacher's pet and all, special lessons--"

"I needed them considering somebody was going to pretend to be a Dementor!"

"Yeah!" added Ron, turning around and glaring. "That's right, you've spent years being horrid to Harry--"

"Water under the bridge," Harry quickly said before a fight could break out. He really did want all his friends to get along. "Come on, we'll be late."

"I suppose you can't partner me in this class either," Ron said, his tone somewhere between resigned and sour.

"Thought I would, actually."

Ron seemed to relax a little then, though he still kept up a stance of watchfulness, as if he expected the Slytherins to try anything to get to Harry. Personally, Harry thought it was a lot more likely that they'd attack Draco. But even that wasn't very likely . . . until after the Quidditch match, at least.

Aran started class that morning by having them all spend about an hour reading about *caninae*, which turned out to be magical guard dogs. To Harry's surprise, it was a new subject and even sort of interesting. He wondered if McGonagall had said something to Aran about not repeating the previous years' topics any longer.

"Now, *caninae* are strictly a defensive measure," said Aran when he began to lecture them. "They won't attack on command, and they certainly won't kill. They will, however, launch themselves at
the source of jinxes, hexes, curses and the like, and incapacitate the one casting them."

All right, it had been too much to hope that Aran wouldn't repeat everything they'd just spent an hour reading about.

Aran walked up and down the rows of desks as he talked. When he stopped, he was right alongside Draco. "Mr Malfoy--"

"Snape," interrupted Draco with a glare.

"Malshite," said Zabini in a stage whisper.

"I'll tolerate no filthy language in my classroom," said Aran in rebuke. He was looking at Harry as he said it, though. Hmm, well Harry had sworn at him that one time. But Aran probably wasn't thinking of that. Most likely, he had Parseltongue in mind. It was all Harry could do not to throw something at the stupid man. Needing to vent his anger somehow, Harry beamed a big, bright smile.

He felt a little better when Aran scowled in response.

"So, Mr Snape," continued Aran, sneering the name. "Why is the conjuring of caninae not taught below the sixth year?"

That hadn't been in the reading at all, but Draco did his best to answer anyway. "Hmm. It requires a good deal of magical control, I would think."

"Precisely." Aran cast his gaze around the room. "There is, of course, one student present whose magical control is simply not up to the task, since he can't even incant normally. You shouldn't even be taking this class, Potter."

"Funny, my official interim mark was Exceeds Expectations," retorted Harry. He knew why Aran had graded him that way, of course. The man was afraid of Severus. He certainly didn't want to have a parent-teacher conference, and Snape would definitely demand one if Harry's marks fell. Aran probably wanted to give Harry a grade of Troll, but he didn't dare.

"There's more to learning than marks," retorted Aran, flushing. "If you can't conduct yourself decently, you shouldn't be at Hogwarts at all!"

Neither should you, Harry almost said. What stopped him was Draco going tense, his eyes glittering in a way Harry recognised as dangerous. Definitely, escalating the situation would be a bad idea.

"Yes, Professor," Harry only said.

Draco turned and just stared at Harry. He mouthed something. Looked like, Yes, Professor? Are you fucking having me on? After a moment he turned back to face Aran, who was still lecturing. The look on Draco's face still had Harry worried, though.

Working quickly, he scribbled out a note. So Aran's rude. Term's almost over, anyway. It doesn't matter. When Aran's back was turned, Harry wadded the parchment up and tossed it over to Draco.

A minute later, a little parchment bird came fluttering his way. It landed gracefully on Harry's desk and proceeded to unfold itself. What are you, a Muggle, throwing notes now? Aran's got you so cowed you're afraid to even whisper an avian charm in Parseltongue? You stood up to the Dark Lord himself! And now all you can say is "Yes, Professor?" Who are you and what have you done with my brother?
Harry held in a grin at that last sentence, and wrote on another scrap of parchment, *And you call Hermione a show-off... I don't know any avian charms in Parseltongue, all right? And like I said, term's almost over.* He tossed that one over, too.

Draco didn't reply again, but his eyes were narrowed as if he still had plenty to say.

"Pair up, now," Aran announced when he'd finally finished lecturing. Harry moved to work with Ron, only to hear the teacher order, "Oh, no, no, that won't do. Potter, you're with Zabini."

*Uh-oh...* It was bad enough being paired with Ron, who did his best to throw only the mildest spells Harry's way. Harry did his best to steer clear of the Slytherins in Defence. Well, except Nott, who'd been trying to get on Harry's good side. The other Slytherins, in contrast...

Zabini was grinning ear to ear.

Draco threw Goyle an *I'll-explain-later* look and said, "If you want Inter-house pairs, sir, I'll work with Harry--"

"I think you'd be better off not," said Aran with a dark look at Harry. "Well? Begin!"

Knowing it had to be faced, Harry walked to the far end of the classroom where Zabini was waiting. The other boy was twirling his wand. And practically leering in delight. Harry felt his stomach drop, even though he told himself that Zabini's antics were intended to scare him.

"Ready, Potter?" drawled Zabini. "Awww, what are you, worried? All you have to do to stop me is conjure some *caninae*. You remember the incantation, right? *Canis horribilis...* how hard is that?"

"Shut up," said Harry, holding his own wand out. This was going to be bad, he could tell. Even if he broke Aran's stupid rules and spoke Parseltongue, he hadn't had a chance to figure out the spell, yet.

"Jinxes only," cautioned Aran as he began to walk around. "Remember, your partner will need a few times to practice the *caninae* spell. Hexes and curses are too dangerous to begin with, so I'll expect to see none today..."

Apparently it really did take practice. At the far end of the room, Ron had managed to get a large, shaggy dog to appear, but it was laying down at his feet, apparently asleep. Off to Harry's side, a tiny translucent poodle was yipping as it scampered in circles around Luna. She sighed in delight, then scooped the puppy into her arms and gave it a hug.

"It's supposed to *attack* me," said Parvati impatiently. "Come on, Luna, get rid of it so we can try again."

Luna just crooned.

Zabini laughed scornfully. "Potter, you'll soon wish you could make so much as a poodle. So, jinxes. How about *this*?"

A blue cloud launched itself at Harry. *Uh-oh*, the Jelly-Brain jinx. Harry waved his wand and said the spell they were supposed to practice—said it in Latin, like Aran wanted— but the cloud just kept on coming. It surrounded his head and soaked through his skull and after that, it was like the whole room started to wobble. But it felt wonderfully warm, and so *nice...* 

Harry fell to his knees and began wondering what the Great Hall would be serving for lunch that day. Carrots sounded good. Yeah, with that honey glaze the elves sometimes made...
"Finite Incantatem," he heard someone say, and looked up to see both Ron and Draco standing over him. He wasn't sure who had ended the jinx, but it was Draco who extended a hand and pulled him to his feet again.

"Should have known you'd have Malshite here to protect you," sneered Zabini. "Or the hero of Hogsmeade, take your pick." He raised his voice. "Professor Aran! Draco Snape won't let me practice!"

"You hurt Harry and you'll get yours," Draco said in a low voice. "Count on it."

"Just get back to Goyle," said Harry, giving Draco a little shove. He didn't want Draco getting kicked out of classes again.

"Yeah, go work with Goyle," laughed Zabini. "And good luck learning the spell, Malshite. Goyle's not going to jinx you, is he now?"

In the next moment he was already casting another spell. "Diffindo," Zabini said, lazily flicking his wand. Harry stepped back and cast Canis horibilis again, not that it did him much good. His robes still ended up torn.

"This could be rather amusing . . ." Zabini moved forward and flicked his wand several more times, until Harry's robes were in ribbons and his shirt beneath was torn, besides. "Think I should strip you naked?" menaced Zabini. "Or will Malshite run over here to protect you?"

Draco was watching, Harry saw. His brother looked like he was on the verge of deciding to come back over.

"*Diffindo* isn't much, though. Maybe a finger-removing spell . . . or no, better . . . *Furnunculus!*"

Zabini's spell didn't hit Harry, though. A shield charm blocked it when it was still more than a foot away. "That's it," yelled Draco from across the room. "You aren't covering Harry with festering boils. And while we're at it, *Reparo!*"

Harry's clothing repaired itself.

"Ruin my fun, will you?" yelled Zabini, immediately casting a Blasting Curse. Not at Harry, though.

"Ha! Canis horribilis!" Draco called back.

A huge black dog with enormous teeth sailed out of Draco's wand to launch itself at Zabini.

As it flew past, Harry could almost see through it. Not quite, though.

It knocked Zabini flat on his back and held him down. When Zabini tried to move, the dog growled.

Draco made his way across the room and knelt down next to Zabini. "And just think," he lightly snarled. "I can't even get in trouble, not this time. All I'm doing is the assignment."

"Fuck you, Malshite." Zabini shoved again at the huge dog pinning him down, but stopped when the conjured animal opened its jaws wide and set its teeth around his throat.

"Well done, well done," said Aran. "Your father said you were a quick study."

Draco blinked. "He did?"

Aran took a sudden step back. "Er . . . well, yes. But he didn't want me to tell you, so you'll keep it
to yourself. There's a good lad. Now, if you'd just remove your caninae?"

Draco still appeared a little stunned. "Finite," he said, waving his wand toward the dog holding Zabini down. It turned transparent, then vanished into fog.

"I think that's enough practical for today," said Aran. "Return to your desks and re-read the chapter."

"Re-read?" Ron groaned.

Harry, on the other hand, was quite relieved to go read some more. Defence practicals for him were nothing short of target practice, with him as the target. All in all it hadn't been too bad, he supposed.

"Sorry I didn't get ahead of that Furnunculus," Ron glumly whispered once the class had settled down again.

"Don't worry about it. Draco had me--" Too late, Harry realised that wasn't going to help Ron feel better.

"Yeah, Draco. The only one who could cast a decent caninae . . ."

Harry sighed. Snape had been right; Draco did have an intuitive grasp of magic. There was no sense in being jealous of that.

"Did you notice how his caninae looked a bit like--"

"Yeah," interrupted Harry, not wanting to talk about it. He made a show of burying his nose in the book so Ron would get the point.

"Do you think he tried to make it look like--"

"Ron, I'm trying to read," Harry hissed.

"Detention, Potter," announced Aran from the front of the class. "No talking."

Harry almost slammed his book shut, he was so frustrated. Instead, he slouched down in his seat and kept reading.

Until, that was, Draco began talking to Goyle in a loud voice. "This class has certainly gone downhill since I've been gone. Aran assigns detention for chit-chat but completely ignores the fact that he said jinxes only and one of his students started casting curses instead? A Blasting Curse, even!"

What was Draco doing, trying to get Blaise Zabini into the same detention as Harry? Harry turned and glared.

Draco just looked nonchalantly back, then almost smirked when Aran shot to his feet. "Question how I run my class, will you? There's been too much of that, this year! Detention for you as well! Straight away after class, and if you miss lunch it'll be on your own head! And furthermore, Mr Snape, that'll be ten . . ." Aran abruptly cleared his throat. "That'll be a detention," he finished.

Draco waited until Aran wasn't looking his way, then grinned over at Harry.

"Yeah, look at him crow," grumbled Ron. "Aran won't take points off him, either. He's too scared of Snape."

Harry chewed a bit on the end of his quill. "Um . . . yeah, maybe that's it."
"Maybe? What else could he be so happy about?"

"I think . . . I think he got us a joint detention on purpose," Harry whispered. "So he could be here to watch out for me."

"Hermione and I always stick around!"

"Yeah, but I didn't mention that when I was warning Draco what Aran was like. I just said he almost always gave me a detention, but he didn't like using Filch. Probably too worried Severus would hear about it."

Ron still looked grumpy, but after that he let Harry read.

Aran often just told Harry what to do in detention, then fled up the short staircase to his office. This time, though, he stayed in the classroom. It was soon easy to see why. He was trying to keep Draco and Harry apart.

Assigning them a detention together seemed an odd way to proceed, Harry thought. But then again, Aran never had been very strong in the brainpower department. He sat them down in different parts of the classroom and watched them like a hawk. And it did look like he'd keep them straight through lunch, but Draco put an end to that. After only twenty minutes of practicing quiet reading, of all things, Draco gave a theatrical sigh and rubbed his stomach. "I sure hope Severus doesn't notice we're missing from the Great Hall," he said loudly. "Can you imagine how angry he'd be to hear his own sons are being starved by another teacher?"

Aran looked up and growled. "Go. Get out. Both of you."

Harry almost hooted with glee.

That feeling was short-lived, however. Almost as soon as he and Draco were out in the hall, Draco was yanking him down a side corridor and then into a small, empty room.

"Hey, what about lunch?"

"Lunch can wait," said Draco, flicking his wand to close the door. He murmured some other spell, one Harry didn't recognise. Probably something to give them privacy. "This can't. Harry . . . look, I know I promised last night to let you handle the whole Aran thing yourself, but you didn't really tell me how bad it was, did you?"

"It's not that bad--"

"No? He just pairs you with students who hate your guts, and lets them fire off nasty spells at you while you're forbidden to so much as defend yourself! No, that's not bad at all!" Draco abruptly snapped his fingers right in front of Harry's eyes. "Wake up, for Merlin's sake! What does he have to do to make you tell Severus about it, stab your eyes out like Lucius did?"

"Oh, thanks for reminding me. I love thinking about that every day!"

"I'll say whatever you need to hear--"
"Who do you think you are, my father?" Harry shoved past Draco then, only to find that the other boy hadn't been casting a silencing charm before, after all! He'd sealed the room so Harry couldn't get out.

"I think you should tell your father!" Draco snapped back.

"Oh, fuck you." Harry twisted his lips. "What do you know? I've been handling Aran's shite for weeks. You've been back for two days. It's all under control."

"Really?" Draco's crossed arms tightened. "Well, I don't think so. If you can't see it, fine. I'm meeting Severus tonight to go to my therapist, and I'll just tell him myself how Defence is going this year."

"You promised not to!"

"Oh, please. I promised Lucius I'd take the Dark Mark, you know. Want me to keep that one, too?"

"That's hardly the same thing!"

"It certainly is," said Draco coldly. "Circumstances change, and promises have to change along with them. Deal with it, Harry."

Harry had a strong urge to hex Draco, but then a better idea occurred to him. "You tell Severus about Aran and I'll tell him how Slytherin's treating you. Yeah, I'll tell him they all call you Malshite. How do you like that, eh? Or do you want to handle things yourself, too?"

Draco opened his mouth to retort, but obviously thought better of it. He spent a moment thinking, instead. "Fine, fine. I won't tell Severus about Aran, but only on one condition."

"Condition?"

"Yeah, get your head out of your arse! Crap, I can't believe I even have to tell you this. Stand up to Aran! Stop letting yourself get stomped on in class!"

"Refuse to work with anyone but you or Gryffindors, you mean?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "I mean you ought to use Parseltongue, you blithering idiot. What's he going to do about it? Expel you? Which brings me to something else. Why the hell do you serve his stupid detentions? He's not going to take points from you or me; that's pretty obvious. And what else can he do, since he's sure not going to go complaining to Severus?"

"Ron said something like that," Harry remembered.

"Well, good for him," Draco only said. "Harry. . . why have you been putting up with this? It's rubbish! You. . ." Draco shifted on his feet. "You don't still think, deep down somewhere, that Aran's views on Parseltongue have any merit, do you?"

"No!" exclaimed Harry. He meant it, too. That wasn't what was going on.

"Then why? You must have had a motive."

Harry thought then that Draco was definitely learning things from Marsha.

"I. . . I guess I thought he'd go to McGonagall to complain, and she'd go to Severus. And you know, he'd demand a parent-teacher conference like I'm eight years old! Come to think of it, though, I'm pretty sure now that Aran won't bother complaining about me to McGonagall at all. She practically told him to his face he was being unfair to me. Hmmm."
"Nothing to worry about there, then."

Harry smiled. "I guess not."

"So you'll start casting in Defence?"

Chewing his lip, Harry thought about it. Aran couldn't do much except yell insults, and he did that anyway. He wouldn't even give Harry poor marks for using Parseltongue, not when it would only bring Severus into his classroom.

He probably should have thought of all this a lot sooner, Harry decided. Maybe he would have, if every other year he'd spent at Hogwarts hadn't more-or-less trained him that teachers were the ones with all the power. Even mean, unreasonable teachers. Not just Snape, either. Umbridge had been even worse.

"Yeah, all right." Harry shrugged. "I'll give it a go, at least. And when Aran starts to scream, I'll . . . I guess I'll just let him. And I won't serve any more stupid unfair detentions. Yeah, that should be all right."

"That's settled, then." Draco blew out a breath. "Good. Let's get some lunch before Severus really does come looking for us."

They hurried down the corridor and were almost at the Great Hall when Draco asked, "Say, what was with the poodle-girl? She's not in Slytherin . . . I didn't think she was in Gryffindor, either. What was she doing in our class?"

Harry laughed. "Oh, Luna. Yeah, she's a good sort, but a bit odd at times. A little while back she started showing up in whatever class she felt like."

"And the professors just let her?"

"Well, I haven't seen her try it in Potions," Harry dryly said. "Severus would put a pretty quick end to it, I'm sure. But everyone else . . . see, it's like this. Luna started going on about how she has to follow her stars. And apparently Trelawney blathered on to everybody about how Luna was a free spirit and mustn't be stifled, something like that. So . . ." He cracked a grin. "The teachers decided it was easier just to let her come and go, I guess."

"She's going to fail all her N.E.W.T.s."

"O.W.L.s, actually. She's only a fifth year."

Draco rolled his eyes. "And she's popping into sixth-year classes? That's ludicrous!"

Harry's grin widened. "Nah. That's just Luna."

"First time in a while I've looked forward to Defence," said Harry the next afternoon as he and Draco walked into the classroom together, Ron and Hermione close behind. "Say, I have an idea. You noticed how Aran seemed to want to keep us apart yesterday? Let's work together no matter what he says!"
Draco’s eyes gleamed. "Oh, you are a bad boy, aren't you? Going to push the owl as far as it can go?"

"Yeah," drawled Harry, rubbing his hands together. Hermione saw that and gave him a disapproving look.

_Good thing we warned all the sixth-year Gryffindors what to expect_, Harry thought. They deserved it, after the way they'd stood up for him when Aran had first decided to be such a git. The Slytherins, though . . . Harry almost laughed, thinking of how they might react to what he and Draco had planned.

"Good afternoon," said Aran in a breezy voice as he entered the classroom from his office at the front. His gaze swept the assembled students, honing in on Harry and Draco almost at once. "Potter, you'll be working with Blaise Zabini again."

Harry had to work hard to school the wicked humour out of his expression. "No," he said, the word loud, clear, and distinct.

Aran stopped in mid-step, his eyes widening. "What did you just dare to say to me, Potter?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," answered Harry in an innocent voice that time. "I meant, No, Professor."

"No, Professor?" shrieked Aran.

"Madam Pomfrey can probably help out with that hearing problem, you know."

Aran stomped up to Harry and Draco's desk and leaned both his hands on it as he leaned over Harry menacingly. Actually, it _would_ have been menacing coming from someone like Snape. From Aran it just looked sort of pathetic, since his eyes were panicked and his arms shaking a little bit. "Potter, you'll do as I say and you'll do it at once."

"No, I won't," said Harry with a smile. "I'm staying right here." He made a show of busying himself, then, getting out books and parchment and quills and such.

"Mal . . . Snape, you'll change seats, then."

Draco just shook his head as he leaned back, indolent, in his chair.

Aran stared. "Detention after class," he finally hissed, clearly at a loss.

"Sure," said Harry without glancing up. "Like usual. Got it."

Draco didn't bother replying.

The professor huffed, then whirled around and glared at the class. "What are all of you looking at, eh? Get out some parchment and write me a summary of what we learned yesterday about _caninae_!"

"Well-played," said Draco under his breath.

Harry thought so, too. It took him about ten minutes to finish the write-up Aran had demanded. He didn't think Aran really read too much of their work, especially classwork, and he wasn't brave enough to grade Harry harshly anyway, so Harry was pretty careless about the assignment. He'd started off with some details about the guard-dog spell, mostly because he was in the habit of doing what teachers asked, but after about a paragraph, he'd realised it didn't matter what Aran thought of his work.
No more than it mattered what Aran thought of his class conduct.

So he'd started getting creative.

*Caninae are called that because they come in cans, he'd written. The hardest part of the spell is actually the can-opening phase. Many wizards over the years have died horrible, messy deaths when resentful caninae got trapped for too long in their magical cans. Eventually the dogs break free, see. And when they do, they're really, really upset.*

Re-reading his summary now, Harry couldn't help but chortle. It was too good to keep to himself, so he passed it over to Draco.

His brother didn't so much as smile, though. "What's a can?"

"Oh, for pity's sake!" exclaimed Harry. A little too loudly, but Aran had already assigned them a detention, so what was he going to do, lay a finger on one of Severus Snape's sons? The man couldn't do a thing to them, not one thing! "A tin! Like the biscuits come in!"

"The lids pop right off those. Why would the caninae have trouble--"

"No, a food tin, like for tuna!" Draco still looked blank, so Harry quickly sketched one and explained how they'd keep food fresh for a long time. Draco made a face like the whole idea of tinned food was revolting.

"Ask Marsha to serve you some canned pears or something," Harry finally said. "I like those well enough."

"I don't go to Marsha for lessons in Muggle cuisine," said Draco scornfully.

"All right," said Harry, shrugging. "How's that going, anyway? You saw her again last night?"

Draco laughed a little. "She likes us to play board games while we talk. She thinks it helps me loosen up and say stuff I'd keep from her if I was less relaxed. It's really all kind of stupid. I mean, the games part. But in general . . . yeah, it's good. I--"

Before Draco could say more, Aran was snapping at them from the front of the class. "Potter, Mal . . . Snape! If you're quite through discussing your personal lives--"

"But we aren't," interrupted Harry as he kept leaning over toward Draco. "We'll let you know when we're done."

"Harry!" hissed Hermione from behind him.

Harry was having fun, but he didn't particularly want to have to listen to Hermione rail at him later, so he glanced up at Aran, then. "All right, all through."

Aran's face was red. From behind him, Harry heard students holding in laughter. Some of them weren't doing too well at that, actually. As the teacher looked around, Harry had a sudden flash of intuition that Aran might start taking points off his friends just to get even with him, the way Severus had that time.

But Aran wasn't as cagey as Snape. Not by half. He obviously didn't know what to do about Harry's rudeness. Or Draco's. And if he was angry now . . .

"Pair up," snapped Aran, shooting to his feet. "We'll practice standard blocks today, since only one
student here could competently manage the *caninae* spell yesterday."

"Yeah, did you get any points for that, Draco?" asked Harry loudly. "I think you should talk to Severus about it, really. The *only* student who does a bang up good job on the assignment and you didn't get even one measly point for Slytherin?"

"Oh, Severus would be furious," Draco blandly agreed as he brandished his wand.

Aran made sort of a squeaking noise in the back of his throat and hurriedly walked the opposite direction from where Harry and Draco were preparing to duel.

"Hey, worth a shot," said Harry, shrugging. Now that the time had come to use Parseltongue in defiance of all Aran's rules, he was surprised to find himself a little nervous. Or maybe it was just elation. Of course, he'd still have to be careful to appear a bit inept at the whole thing.

Draco flashed him a look that was evil and playful all at once. "Scared, Potter?"

That helped him relax a bit. Harry laughed. "You wish!"

And with that, he cast the first spell. Nothing serious in the least, just a simple Toenail Tickle. The only difficult bit was remembering to focus on the corner of his glasses lens as he cast, but Harry was slowly getting used to that.

Draco blocked it easily, his spell twirling itself around Harry's and choking the life out of it.

"Show off," accused Harry.

"Parselmouth," said Draco back.

Aran didn't hear that, though. Or Harry's spell. Unless he was pretending not to.

So Harry and Draco kept on duelling.

It only took a couple of minutes for Aran to finish the conversation he was having, and notice what Harry was doing.

"Potter!" His voice sounded nothing short of scandalised.

"This is really getting old, Harry thought.

"Yes, Professor?" he asked, looking up as if nothing in the world could be wrong.

"Stop that filthy language at once!"

Somehow, baiting Aran had lost its charm. Harry just wanted to be left alone. "No," he said shortly, resuming a duelling stance. "I need to practice, just like everyone else."

"You promised me that you'd practice out of class!"

Oh, that was low, throwing their agreement in his face. "Circumstances have changed," said Harry, remembering Draco saying the same thing. "Deal with it."

Aran's red face looked like it was throbbing. Harry was surprised there wasn't steam pouring out the man's ears.

"Get out," he growled in a low, furious voice. "Get out right now, and don't you dare come back!"
"We've been through this," yelled Harry, his patience snapping. "What am I supposed to do the next time Voldemort tries to kill me, eh? Well, you can just forget it. I'm not leaving and you can't make me! I'm entitled to an education, the same as everyone else here! And for me, that means Parseltongue, so deal with it, like I said!"

Aran whipped his wand out and levelled it at Harry. "You'll leave when I say or you'll suffer the consequences of defiance, young man!"

"Oh yeah, sure I will." Harry took a step toward Aran and laughed. "I don't believe you actually have a death wish, Professor. Do you think Severus won't kill you? It's not like I'm doing anything wrong with the Parseltongue! I just want to do your stupid assignment!"

"Detention," hissed Aran, lowering his wand.

"Yeah. I heard you earlier." Harry turned back to Draco and ignored Aran completely as he resumed their duel, Parseltongue and all.

But the best was yet to come. When class was over, Harry and Draco grinned at each other and packed up their things to go.

"You'll be writing lines today," Aran announced in a frosty voice. "Sit at separate tables and get your parchment back out."

"Sorry, I have places to go, people to see," Harry said, zipping up his book bag.

"As do I," drawled Draco in his haughtiest tone. "However, if you truly wish our presence you can arrange it with Severus. I know he manages my social calendar. Yours as well, Harry?"

"Yeah, mine too." All of a sudden, Harry felt better than he had in ages. It was like he'd been carrying the whole world around and now, all that was just gone. He slung his bag over his shoulder and tucked his wand away in his cloak pocket. "So, that's that then, Professor. See you Wednesday."

They left Aran sputtering with incoherence, their heads held high.

All their poise vanished as soon as they made it to the hallway. Harry collapsed against a wall and howled with laughter. Draco was a bit more restrained, but not much.

Ron joined in while Hermione tapped an impatient foot.

"Did you see the look on his face?" crowed Ron, slapping Harry on the back. "That was brilliant, mate! Absolutely brilliant!"

"Draco's idea," said Harry, gasping for breath.

Ron stopped laughing. "Hey!"

"Actually, Harry said it was your idea first that he ought to stand up to Aran," admitted Draco, nodding. "There, that's one more thing we can agree on."

"What he ought to do," said Hermione, "is tell his father about this."

"I agree with that too," answered Draco, smiling a little. "But he won't, so . . . All right then, Harry. I'll see you tomorrow. I have to get to Quidditch practice."

"Now?" Harry laughed. "What is that, some strange Slytherin training technique? You practice right through dinner because you play better when you're hungry?"
Draco smirked. "Oh, dear. Your Head of House hasn't ever arranged for the elves to cater something nice out on the pitch, I see."

"Are you serious?"

"Mmm. We get more practice time in, that way. Not to mention, better food." Draco turned to Ron and Hermione. "You two watch out for Harry. No more snogging when you're on duty."

Whirling on a heel, his robes flaring in a fair imitation of Severus', Draco turned and left.

Harry nibbled his lip as he watched him go. "I hope Severus is going to be out there to keep an eye on things. But probably Slytherin won't want to give him broken bones or anything, not before the match. Um, I guess I have to tell you something. I'm going to sit in the Slytherin stands on Saturday. With my dad. To watch Draco, you know. And . . . er . . ." He winced, just a bit. "Cheer for Slytherin."

Hermione and Ron just looked at each other like they'd seen that one coming long before Harry had. Then together, the three of them headed for the Great Hall.

The morning of the last Quidditch game dawned muggy and grey. The rising sun merely lightened the sky to a featureless whiteness that seemed to bleach all other colour into boredom.

"I'd bring along some sweets if I were you," said Harry, gazing out the window of his dormitory. "I have a feeling this'll be a long, long game."

"You know something I don't?" Ron asked, his voice was a bit muffled as he was half-way beneath his bed groping about for his missing trainer.

Harry smiled. "No, I just have a feeling. It's cloudy out, no sunshine glinting off the snitch." He turned away from the window. "You mind if we head down to the pitch a little early? I wanted to, uh, talk to Draco about something."

"Ow! Blasted, crummy bed," Ron grumbled. Standing, he rubbed his head with one hand while the other clutched his errant shoe. He did not look happy, but Harry couldn't tell whether it was from bumping his head or the request to see Draco.

"Harry, the Slytherins'll be having their team meeting by the time we get down there. Can't you talk to sodding Draco after the game?" His frown turned into a glare. "Unless you're planning on coaching him on brilliant Seeker moves."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yes, Ron, and I'm bringing them our playbook, too. Look, if you won't walk me then Hermione will. I'm pretty sure you don't want her going down to the Slytherin changing rooms."

"Oh, fine," Ron said. He tried shoving on his shoe without untying it, but gave up and cast *denudare* to get rid of the knots in his laces. "You don't have to be such a prat about it."

Harry sighed. "I'm just nervous about how Draco's doing with the Slytherins. He's convinced they
won't try anything until after the game, but I'm not so sure." Harry shrugged.

Ron was correct about the timing of the Slytherin's team meeting. Interestingly the door to the locker room admitted Harry but Ron was blocked by an invisible force.

*Must be spelled to only admit Slytherins*, Harry mused.

"Out!" Erik Vanvelzeer shouted. "No Gryffindor spies!"

"Yeah! Team members only!" called Zabini.

The whole of the Slytherin Quidditch team stood glaring at Harry. Draco, he noted, looked mildly horrified at the intrusion, as well. Harry suspected he'd be getting a lecture on social cunning later.

"Obviously I'm allowed or the door charm would've kept me out. Besides, Bulstrode's here and she's not on the team this year."

"She's . . . er, special," Vanvelzeer defended.

Harry thought *that* was certainly interesting. "Ron's not staying," he said to mollify them. "I just wanted to have a word with my brother and wish my house team good luck." He gave Ron what he hoped was a meaningful look.

Ron didn't appear to notice it, but before Harry could say something a bit more obvious, Zabini was swaggering forward, his eyes narrowed hatefully.

"Malshite, tell your brother that he's interrupting a team meeting. Ha, he's forgotten how Quidditch matches work. No great surprise there, since Gryffindor won't even let him play."

"As I recall, you wanted him to play," Draco returned coolly. "And I have it on good authority that he hasn't decided which team to play on next year. So, if you still want him I'd suggest you make him feel welcome."

Harry wasn't really sure what Draco was playing at with that comment. Ron certainly took exception to it. "Merlin'll cough up fur balls before Harry ever plays with you snakes!" Ron shouted from beyond the door.

Draco crossed his arms and walked toward the doorway. Harry could just imagine the kind of glare Ron must be receiving. "Weasley, why don't you be a gentleman and go escort Granger to the stands? Harry can hang about here until Severus comes by."

"Fine. See you later, Harry."

As he turned back to the team, Draco flashed Harry a hard look. "Stand by me and don't say a word," he whispered.

The Slytherins were clearly unsettled by Harry's presence, but Draco ploughed ahead reviewing their game strategies. Or tried to. Zabini interrupted him after a few seconds, and did his best to take charge of the team meeting, rattling off instructions quickly and loudly, as if he was worried that Draco would cut in the way he just had. By the time he stopped for Agnes DeMolay, the statuesque seventh year chaser, to deliver a report on the Hufflepuffs' strengths and weaknesses, Harry thought Zabini was actually a bit winded.

"All right team," Zabini resumed. "We just need to get through this one last game. Now I know this has been a rotten year and we've had a bunch of bad breaks, but that's not our fault. We're Slytherins,
damn it! And no matter what the counters say, Slytherins are not losers! They think because our so-called Head of House took away all our points that we don't have any points!"

"We don't!" snarled Bulstrode.

Zabini gave her a nasty look and kept right on talking. "When we're all out there on the pitch, just remember this one thing. When you mash up a pumpkin, what do you get? You don't get pumpkin juice. You get what's inside. They can mash us up but they're just gonna get something better out of us."

An uncomfortable silence descended. Harry was just as confounded as the Quidditch players. What the hell was Zabini going on about? After a few seconds Vanvelzeer spoke up. "But isn't pumpkin juice what's inside?"

"I thought it was," said DeMolay in a confused-sounding voice. "Isn't that how you make it? You mash the pulp?"

"Strain it, I think," said a younger Slytherin. Harry didn't remember his name.

Draco shot to his feet. "Oh for Merlin's sake, Zabini! Is that your idea of a pep talk? No wonder the team's been losing! You make about as much sense as Trelawney after she's been guzzling her so-called medicinal tea!"

"Oh yeah, Malshite? At least I've been here this year, leading this team!"

"Leading it into the ground, sounds like! Why don't you just tell them that no matter how bad gets out there, it'll all be over soon?"

Zabini gave a sarcastic wave of his hand. "Oh, and you think you can waltz in here and do better, do you, Malshite?"

Draco's own gesture was dismissive if not contemptuous. "Listen, Weasley could've stayed and done better than you."

"That's enough squabbling," Harry cut in, a bit surprised to find himself talking at all. "I think what Zabini was trying to say is that you lot have got a raw deal what with the points and all. And, I know you blame me and think that I'm glad for what my father did--"

"Yeah, and aren't you?" Zabini crossed his arms, glowering.

Harry glared. "As far as I'm concerned, it's rotten that the entire house has to suffer just because a few money-grubbing morons decided to murder one of their own and frame another member of the house. Slytherin's in last place point-wise, but at this point that hardly matters. The other houses all thought you were a bunch of losers well before Severus took those thousand points away!"

"Losers, are we?" shrieked Bulstrode.

While Harry had been speaking, Draco had moved over to his side, but not to support him. Not even to defend him. No, what Draco apparently wanted was to be close enough to shut Harry up. He pinched Harry's arm. Hard.

Harry ignored the flash of pain near his elbow.

"Yeah, losers," he said, raising his voice. "And you know why they all think that of Slytherin? It's because those three arseholes broke the ultimate rule. And I don't mean that they were working for
Voldemort. They killed a member of their own house! And here the rest of you are going around calling Draco Malshite, turning on him the same way they did! What do you expect the other houses to think of you, eh? Does Slytherin brotherhood means less than nothing? Is there even any such thing? I'll tell you what the other houses all think! If you'd stab one another in the back just to get ahead then you're all worthless!"

Another pinch from Draco. Ouch. That one was going to leave a bruise. Better get to the point, Harry thought.

"But look, we all know that nothing in the world takes more strategy and cunning and skill and teamwork than a really, really good Quidditch win. And Draco's set you up for one! You know, he could just get out there and catch the snitch as fast as he could to prove that he hasn't lost his touch despite being unfairly expelled and all. But he's putting Slytherin first by coming up with this strategy to give you all the chance to earn as many points as you can. And by Merlin, you ought to go out there and show everyone that Slytherins aren't a bunch of short-sighted opportunists. Show them that when you all work together, you're a force to be reckoned with."

Silence descended on the locker room once again and for a few moments, Harry thought he'd just made a total arse of himself. Strangely enough, it was Millicent Bulstrode who first set his mind to rest.

"Hell yeah!" she hollered, jabbing a meaty fist into the air.

Vanvelzeer echoed her, and then DeMolay, and soon everyone but Zabini was chanting victory cheers.

During the hubbub, Draco managed to pull Harry aside. "Brilliant! Just brilliant, Harry!"

Harry chuckled. "Well, it was better than the juice lecture, anyway."

"I thought you'd gone completely barmy at first, but you really brought them 'round. Um . . . sorry about your arm, then."

"Sorry you tried to puncture it with those bony fingers, you mean?"

Draco grinned and flexed his hands inside his Quidditch gloves. "Long and slender, you mean. But anyway . . . yeah, good speech. I guess I owe you for that one."

Harry couldn't have asked for a better opportunity. "Good. 'Cause see, I want you to start wearing this again." Digging into his cloak pocket, Harry pulled out Draco's turquoise protection amulet. "Severus got it back from the Aurors the other day and he gave it to me."

Draco snatched the amulet from Harry's hand, but didn't look up to meet Harry's eyes. "Did he! Well, I like that! It's mine, not yours!"

"I think he thought you might . . . er, tip it in the rubbish," Harry admitted. "You know, bad memories. But once I had it, I got to thinking about how dangerous Quidditch can be, not to mention, er, your house mates. And this worked so well last time. Too well, you might say, but still . . ."

Draco snatched the amulet from Harry's hand, but didn't look up to meet Harry's eyes. "Thanks. I'll tuck it under my uniform, then. Just to make you feel better, of course."

"Oh, of course."

Draco looked at him, then, his eyes glinting with suspicion. Probably at Harry's dry tone. "Well, I
can't have you following me out onto the pitch, can I?"

Harry laughed. "What makes you think I would?"

Adopting a light tone, Draco murmured, "Oh, just what happened the last time I wore this. Do me a favour, eh? If it looks like I'm in a tight spot, Seeker-wise, don't go firing off any overwhelming feelings of love at me, all right?"

"Yeah, it's awful when something startles you enough to make you fall off your broom." Harry gave Draco a meaningful look. Unlike Ron, Draco got the point at once.

"Are you ever going to forget my little Dementor trick, Harry?"

Grinning, Harry fished a Jelly Slug from his pocket and popped it in his mouth. "Probably not."

"Prat."

"I'm the prat?" Harry's grin faded. "You just go out there and do Slytherin proud, Draco."

Draco's silver eyes gleamed as he nodded and re-joined his team-mates.

Snape didn't come to the Slytherin changing room until a few moments before the game was due to start. Harry didn't know why he was cutting it so fine, but as they hurried up the stairs to the Slytherin stands, Snape said he'd been checking over the pitch and equipment to be sure everything was in order.

"We don't want the Snitch charmed to become a Portkey," he added with a grim look in his eyes.

Harry shivered, wishing he'd had somebody back in fourth year to look out for him the way Snape was looking after Draco.

They missed Draco's entrance into the stadium; the teams were already flying practice loops around the pitch when Harry and Snape took their seats.

Just a few moments after that, though, Madam Hooch blew her whistle and the match began.

Old habits had Harry's eyes trained on the Snitch as it hovered tauntingly between the two Seekers and then leapt out of their reach. Higher and higher it went, until Harry lost it in the murk of the sky.

Snape tapped his shoulder. "Your brother's over there," he said, flicking his hand in gesture.

When Harry looked in the direction indicated, he saw Draco and the Hufflepuff Seeker speeding along at almost ground level. Every time the other Seeker tried to lever herself upward, away from the grass just below, Draco got in her way and forced her back down towards the ground.

Meanwhile, above him, the Quaffle was in furious play.

"...and Slytherin scores yet again!" announced the loudspeaker.

The Hufflepuff Seeker broke free, flying nearly vertically, Draco hot on her tail. Managing to get
ahead of her, he tried to force her back down to the ground, but she spun her broom upside-down and neatly escaped by flying beneath him. Draco gripped his broom more tightly and fell into a pursuit.

"And the battle of the Seekers continues!" shouted the announcer. Harry didn't recognise the voice, though when he squinted it seemed like the distant commentator was a short girl wearing Ravenclaw colours. "Draco Malfoy seems to think the object of the game is to pin down Seraphim Sellberg! Somebody ought to tell that boy that he's supposed to be hunting up the Snitch!"

_Somebody ought to tell you that there's such a thing as strategy,_ Harry mentally growled.

"She called him Draco Malfoy," Harry complained. "Are people dense, or what?"

"I'll have a word with her in Potions," said Snape with a grim look.

_Uh-oh._ Harry was glad he wasn't in the announcer's place.

"Oh, it looks like Malfoy has spotted the Snitch after all!" the Ravenclaw girl suddenly shouted. "And Sellberg's following close behind. The score stands at Slytherin 80, Hufflepuff 20. Either team could win depending on who gets that Snitch in hand first! They're up, up and away!"

_Must be a Muggleborn,_ Harry absently thought as he listened and peered up at the greying sky.

"And now they're lost in the clouds. Rotten luck we can't see the action." A loud bell clanged. "And Slytherin scores again! Agnes DeMolay is certainly having a banner morning. She's already got the Quaffle again--"

Harry saw the Snitch then, and it wasn't up in the clouds with the two Seekers. It was hovering, nice as you please, just a few feet away from Snape. Harry's fingers started itching, they wanted so badly to reach out and snatch it. He had to sit on his hands to keep them from darting out.

Snape gave him a knowing look, then resumed watching the action.

If the Snitch was way down here, Draco's flight up into the clouds was a feint designed to prolong the game by leading the other Seeker on a wild goose chase. Harry had sort of wondered, but he'd also thought it was possible Draco had noticed the other Seeker spotting the Snitch. In which case he'd have to get in her way . . .

The Snitch buzzed away and started more-or-less taunting players by circling around their heads.

"Seraphim! Seraphim!" screamed a Hufflepuff Beater. "It's down here! Down here!"

". . .and yet another goal for Slytherin!" said the announcer, a little bit bored sounding, now. Her voice perked up though, when she said, "Wait! There seems to be a bit of a hubbub on the pitch. The Hufflepuff Beaters are ignoring the Bludgers completely and having some sort of conversation. And now they're both yelling something. Sounds like they're calling for their Seeker--" _Clang._ The announcer ignored the goal for Slytherin. "No sign yet of Seraphim returning . . . wait, there she is! But Malfoy's forcing her back up into the clouds, flying a tight spin around her--"

"Play fair!" some loud voices from the next stand over started yelling. Hufflepuffs. Harry felt a bit bad hearing that. Probably what Draco was doing wasn't so sportsmanlike.

_Clang!_

At the edge of the murk, it looked a bit like Draco and Seraphim were having a Muggle-style fight,
now. Harry couldn't be sure, but he could almost swear that Draco put a hand on the girl's broom, and she gave him an almighty kick that sent him hurtling backwards.

_Clang!_

And then Seraphim was steering her broom into a steep dive, headed straight for the Snitch. Her hand stretched out, her fingers straining, she swerved right and left, matching its movements. Draco was headed downward too, headed for _her_, but he was too far away.

Seraphim was going to get the Snitch before Draco could get to _her_.

_Clang!_

"No," Harry said under his breath, his throat feeling tight. Slytherin would never start treating Draco right if he lost this match!

But somebody else was saying _no_, too. Shouting it, actually.

"No, Seraphim, _no_!!" screamed the Beater who had called her down in the first place. "We're too far behind on points! Slytherin'll win! Let us catch up, first!"

She didn't seem to hear at first, but then her head tilted sharply to the side and she braked her broom slightly, letting the Snitch edge away.

Draco didn't see the change until too late, and barrelled straight into her in his effort to keep her from catching the Snitch.

Down and down and down they fell, a multicoloured tangle of Quidditch robes as they spun.

Harry shot to his feet and leaned out over the railing to watch Draco fall. "Do something!" he yelled at Snape. "_Arresto momentum_ or something!"

_Clang._ Ignoring everything else, DeMolay was continuing to score goal after goal.

"Draco's not unconscious," said Snape calmly. "And he's a good enough flyer not to appreciate my interference."

Sure enough, Draco was the first to recover from the dive. As soon as he was stable, he circled around in a sharp downward loop and put out a hand to steady Seraphim's broom, too.

"Well, would you look at that!" exclaimed the announcer. "Draco Malfoy's certainly being uncharacteristically gentlemanly. Helping out a fellow player in need. Now that's the true spirit of Quidditch!"

Harry almost guffawed, and not just with relief. How wrong could you get? In the first place, that _wasn't_ the true spirit of Quidditch. It wasn't anything to do with Quidditch! And in the second place, Draco had kept the other team's Seeker from crashing for one reason only -- to keep the game from being called.

Though it was probably just as well if everyone thought he was doing it from higher motives.

"And the Seekers are off again!" continued the announcer. "If Seraphim catches the Snitch now--the score stands at Hufflepuff 40, Slytherin 210--she'll cement a win for Slytherin. Bit of a dilemma, there. She needs to keep Draco Malfoy from ending the game--"

_Clang! Clang! Clang!_
Harry's ears were starting to hurt a bit from all the frantic noise. Quidditch matches could last an awfully long time, of course. They just usually didn't.

This one began dragging on, and on.

And on.

The announcer stopped mentioning goals unless they were by Hufflepuff. But that was pretty rare. She even stopped reporting on the Seekers' antics. Draco didn't have to stop Seraphim from catching the Snitch any longer. She had no interest in it as long as Hufflepuff was so far behind. She'd begun helping out her team by trying to get in Agnes DeMolay's way. At one point she even grabbed a Beater's bat from an exhausted looking team-mate, and had started whacking Bludgers toward the Slytherin chaser.

Meanwhile, Draco was doing his best to stay in the way of anyone who might get in DeMolay's way.

Harry didn't think he'd so much as glanced around for the Snitch in ages.

"Come on, now," shouted some Gryffindors from a few stands down. "We're dying of boredom, here!"

The announcer kept on talking in the vein she'd been in for quite a while. "It looks like Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones have begun playing patty cake. Several students in the Ravenclaw stands appear to be asleep. Oh--" The announcer leaned over and listened to something Dumbledore was whispering in her ear. "The headmaster would like everyone to know that conjured pillows have a nasty habit of disappearing right soon as you've got properly to sleep, so let's be careful with those . . ."

Apparently just as bored as all the spectators, the Snitch landed on the handrail right in front of Harry and began grooming itself, using one wing to brush off the other one.

"It appears to have an affinity for you," said Snape. "Perhaps that's the secret of your vaunted success on the pitch, eh?"

Harry smiled a little. "I think it just knows that if I were playing, I wouldn't mess about like this."

"Oh, indeed. You never check the score before you catch it?"

Harry glanced over at the scoreboard. "Well, when Gryffindor's six hundred points ahead I don't tend to drag things out even further." He cleared his throat and met his father's eye. "For some reason, Draco wants Slytherin to earn at least a thousand points today."

"Imagine that," murmured Snape.

"Yeah, that whole points thing was . . . um, very fatherly," Harry forced himself to go on, though considering they were surrounded by Slytherins, he lowered his voice. "Choosing me over your house, I mean."

Snape swivelled his head away and sought out Draco with his gaze. "Well, there's house and then there's home," he murmured, and then, with a sidelong glance, added, "Don't you dare thank me."

"Wouldn't dream of it," laughed Harry.

". . .Slytherin 850, Hufflepuff 70," said the announcer, sounding like she could barely keep her feet
any longer. Someone behind her was actually snoring.

"This is rubbish, rubbish!" screamed someone in the Gryffindor stands. "Draco Snape's not even trying!"

"Neither is Sellberg, you twit!" screamed Bulstrode back.

Snape winced and covered his ears for a scant second. Then he shrugged. "At least it appears you've convinced your dorm mates as to your brother's name."

"Don't you dare thank me," laughed Harry.

Clang!

Clang!

Clang!

"This actually is getting boring now," said Harry. The Snitch had curled its wings around its body and gone to sleep, by then. It was still sitting just two feet from Harry. The urge to snatch it up was getting stronger and stronger, but boy would that get him in trouble with Slytherin, Harry thought.

"We're bloody starving!" screamed a voice to the far left. "It's gone one, already!"

After a moment, a chorus of voices from that box took up a chant. "WE. NEED. FOOD. WE. NEED. FOOD. WE. NEED. FOOD!"

The demand spread like wildfire from stand to stand, until even the Slytherins all around Harry were screaming it too. Even though they wanted the match to go on until Slytherin had caught up on points.

Dumbledore stood up and waved his wand a few times, then whispered at the announcer again.

"Lunch will be provided in your seats in a few moments," said the announcer, sighing. "Dinner, too, I'm informed. And if the match goes past 10 p.m. we're all promised hot cocoa . . ."

Harry munched happily when his lunch came, glad to have something to do besides watch the monotonous action on the pitch. Goals weren't very exciting when they came pretty much non-stop for hours. The Hufflepuffs by then seemed almost resigned to their fate. When they tried to stop DeMolay at all, it was a pathetic, half-hearted effort.

Most of the time they just hovered in the air, their eyes glazed, and watched her score.

Clangclangclangclangclang.

Some of that wasn't DeMolay; Harry's ears were ringing.

"Mmm, fried chicken," said a voice just above him. "Don't mind if I do."

Draco lowered his broom slightly and came into view just in front of Harry, then proceeded to help himself to a drumstick which he ate with obvious relish, even licking his fingers as he hovered there, completely ignoring the game behind him.

"I thought it was rude to help yourself to food from a dining companion's plate," jibed Harry.

Draco shrugged. "Not at a picnic. Is that chocolate milk? Hand it over." Once he had finished the
entire glass, Draco rubbed his stomach and grinned. "Enjoying the game?"

Harry leaned forward. "How long are you going to keep this up? Slytherin's way ahead already!"

"Well, now that I know I can zip by here for meals, there's really no reason to end it--"

"Draco," interrupted Snape. "You have met your goal, I do believe."

"Yes, but what's one thousand when we could have two? Or five? Or--"

"He's gone mad with power," said Harry.

"Can I have a roll?"

"Draco!"

"Oh, all right," groused the boy. "I did see it, you know."

Draco manoeuvred his broomstick until the end of it was pointed at the Snitch sleeping on the handrail. "Pssst!" he hissed. "Yeah, you! Wake up!"

The Snitch lifted one wing as though peeking out from under it, then appeared to give a little stretch.

"Fly, you lazy little bugger," said Draco, laughing. He poked at it again. "Go on, now--"

The Snitch jumped up and hovered over the handrail, buzzing indignantly.

Reaching out a hand, Draco calmly closed his fingers around it.

The Slytherins all around Harry and Snape exploded with the noise of a celebration too long delayed.

"...a commotion in the Slytherin stand, it seems. Draco Malfoy's over there, not sure what the problem could be..."

"Oh, for Merlin's sake," muttered Draco, whirling his broom around and heading for the announcer as he held the Snitch aloft.

"...Oh! It seems that Draco Malfoy has finally caught the Snitch--"

"Draco Snape! Draco Snape! Get it right, for Merlin's sake!" shouted the boy as he circled the pitch in what looked like a victory lap. The Slytherins roared with cheers, but everybody else pretty much looked bored. Except the Hufflepuffs. They were seething.

When Draco landed, his team rushed up to him. Harry couldn't hear what they were saying, but it all looked very positive. Congratulations, something like that. They even lifted him up and carried him off the pitch on their shoulders, though it wasn't like he'd performed some daring stunt to catch the Snitch.

He had, however, held off long enough to get them their thousand points. And more.

The final score stood at Hufflepuff 130, Slytherin 1260.

Harry saw his father staring at the scoreboard. "Pretty good, eh?"

Snape's lips quirked upward. "It's not enough to put Slytherin in first place, but it is a start."
"Three weeks left in term," Harry reminded him. "That's not much time to catch up the rest of the way."

"Gloating that Gryffindor may well win yet again?"

Harry felt his ears burning. "No--"

Snape laid a hand on his arm. "I spoke in jest, Harry. You have done quite well, really, balancing out your responsibilities to both your houses. I don't imagine it's an easy task."

"Not easy, no," said Harry, remembering what Draco had mentioned about Harry still deciding what team to play for next year. If he played at all. "Come on, Dad. The crowd's thinned out. Let's go down and find Draco."

The Slytherin changing rooms were stuffed with people now, every one of them talking fast. Harry could hardly catch a word, though he did notice that the name Draco figured prominently. Sometimes even, Draco Snape.

One other word stuck out as well.

"Malshite," drawled Zabini in about as nasty a voice as Harry had ever heard. The room went silent. "You think this makes you some sort of fucking hero, Malshite? Because you can fly around in circles for hours while the rest of the team does the hard work of scoring goals? Well, if you think this makes you one of us again you can--"

"Shut up, Blaise," ordered Agnes DeMolay. "So it was an unconventional kind of match. Doesn't take a thing away from our Seeker. If Draco hadn't stopped Sellberg from getting the Snitch early on, we wouldn't have all those points."

"Yeah, so stop calling him Malshite!" ordered Erik Vanvelzeer.

"Yeah!" echoed Millicent Bulstrode.

Ignoring Bulstrode, Zabini turned his ire on Vanvelzeer. "You're the one who testified he was a murderous little bastard!"

"I was memory-charmed, you complete arse," spat Vanvelzeer. "Draco's done us a good turn here today, and the way you've been treating him, it's a wonder he wanted to bother! If I hear you call him Malshite again, I'll shove a hex so far up your nose it hits brain. Got it?" He raised his voice still further. "And that goes for the rest of you as well!"

"Yeah!"

Bulstrode again. Harry had figured out by then that she was either dating Erik, or sweet on him.

"Well said, Mr Vanvelzeer," said Snape, emerging from the shadows. The way nobody had noticed him, Harry thought he must have cast a silent Disillusionment charm. Over both of them, maybe. But it was gone, now.

"Harry!" cried Draco, grinning. "Didn't see you there!"

Snape resumed speaking in a deep, serious voice. "Ladies and gentlemen. In case you've forgotten, we are Slytherins. That means more than mere cunning. It also means we can learn from our mistakes. When it is clear that a previous allegiance is indeed an error in judgment, a Slytherin will not cling blindly to the past in some vain hope that it will all work out for the best. A true Slytherin
will think the matter through and make a new choice, the one most likely to serve his ends.

"Draco has done this. The cost to him was high, as I think you know. But the cost of holding to his previous course would have been far higher, still." Snape's voice took on a booming tone. "Which of you here aspires to be a slave? Come, speak! I wish to know!"

The room remained silent, a slight chill settling over the students. Harry shivered too, even though he knew this speech wasn't really for him.

"I see your thoughts in your eyes," continued Snape remorselessly. "You think--some of you, at any rate--oh, but it won't be like that. Not for me. Idiot children. Can you possibly be more naïve? I was in your place once. I know whereof I speak! There is no security or freedom under Voldemort, and precious little reward. There is only pain, and abject service, and this."

With that, Snape held his left arm out and tapped it to vanish away all the fabric covering it. Even the bandage he habitually wore faded away.

A collective gasp--or maybe more of a groan--washed through the students as they crowded closer for a better look, then shrank back.

"I was in his inner circle," stressed Snape. "One of his most trusted confidantes. And I was a slave all the same, ladies and gentlemen. You have heard this before, but perhaps now you're ready to listen. Think on it. Think on it long and hard."

Harry thought their father was through, then, but Snape had one more thing to say. "Mr Zabini. Public use of foul language is, as I do believe you know, strongly frowned upon at Hogwarts. See me in my office this evening at 6 p.m. We will discuss whether ten thousand lines will be sufficient to deter you in future--"

"Ten thousand lines," shrieked Zabini. "Just for saying Malshite?"

"Ten thousand per incident, perhaps," drawled Snape with a hard glare. That shut Zabini up, Harry saw.

It made someone else gasp, though. Ron was standing at the door to the changing room, looking in, Hermione's hand clasped in his.

Harry rushed over. "Hey. What are you doing here?"

Ron's expression was something between a grin and a grimace. "Well, the old ball-and-chain here--"

Hermione yanked her hand from his grasp and huffed.

"Sorry," Ron said, sounding cheerful, then. "Hermione convinced me that seeing as Draco's your brother and all, and you're our best mate, the done thing to do would be drop by and offer him a quick congratulations. So, you tell him for me, all right?"

"Ronald!"

"She's not going to let you off," said Harry, good-naturedly. "Draco! Come on over here for a minute."

"What is it?" And then, with a bit of a scowl at Ron. "Oh. Him." Draco glanced back at the crowd. "Let's get some fresh air." He led the way outside. "Well?"
"Congratulations," said Ron, the word muffled even though there was nothing in front of his mouth.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "I beg your pardon?"

"Congratulations!"

"Yes, I should be fêted," agreed Draco, beaming a bright smile. One of those fake, not-sure-how-to-handle-this smiles, no less. "That really was quite some playing I did. Saving Sellberg, now that was above and beyond. Surely it's worth a little kiss from the lovely lady at your side?"

"Draco!" yelled Harry. "Sorry, he gets like this. Giddy. We think it's a psychological problem. Um, overcompensating--"

Ron curled a lip, his face flushing red. "Yeah, for being even poorer than I've ever been!"

"Ronald!"

"Oh yeah, that was magnanimous and gracious, all right!" Harry said, crossing his arms as he glanced at Draco, whose posture was suddenly . . . off. He was posing again, Harry sensed. Bracing himself for the rest of the ridicule Ron clearly had stored up.

Ron though, looked about as horrified as Hermione at the words that had come out of his mouth. "I didn't mean to say it like that!" he exclaimed. "I . . . Listen, Draco, you shouldn't threaten to kiss Hermione!"

"I didn't threaten her, you moronic lack-brained twit. And even if I had, the girl knows how to defend herself. And besides, it's not me she goes off snogging with in dark corners when she's supposed to be--"

Draco stopped speaking.

Ron shifted nervously on his feet. "Right. Look, it's just been on my mind, all right? I could hardly miss the gossip. And I just wanted to say . . . Um."

"Articulate as ever, I see."

"Shut up," said Ron, but without much heat. "I know being poor must be hard on you. That's what I meant to say about it. I mean, I'm sure it's a lot more difficult to . . . er, lose all those Galleons, than be like me, who never had them."

Draco gave a studied yet nonchalant shrug. "I suppose it would strain credulity to deny it."

Ron nodded. "And . . . you're sticking by Harry anyway, and . . . well, it's good to see. I thought for the longest time you'd double-cross him. But . . . um, here you are poor, and still here, and . . . well, I guess you're in it for good."

Draco considered that for a long moment. Then, flipping out his wand, he extended the handle towards Ron. "Truce, we'll say."

"We're not at war. That's what I meant."

"It's a gesture, you imbecile."

Ron still just stared at the wand, until Hermione gave him a little push from behind. "All right, then." He drew his own wand and holding it backwards, touched it to Draco's.
Hermione bounced on her toes a little, and kissed each of them on the cheek.

"Knew I'd get a kiss in the end," said Draco when he pulled his wand back.

Harry had to hand it to him. If Draco was disgusted to have been touched by a Muggleborn, he sure didn't let it show. Maybe Marsha had been better for him than Harry knew. Or maybe he was just being a Slytherin and not admitting how prejudiced he still really was.

And speaking of being Slytherin . . .

"Now that Severus knows about that Malshite business," Draco mused, "your charming little hold over me is gone. Finito. There's nothing to stop me from telling Severus all about Aran. Isn't that right, Harry?"

"Nothing to tell any longer," said Harry, refusing to be drawn. Draco wasn't going to run to Severus; Harry could tell. "Not now that I'm doing what I should have done from the first."

"You think you should have been insufferably rude from the first?" asked Hermione.

"I'll tone it down," said Harry. "A little. Maybe. If I feel like it . . ."

Draco practically snorted with laughter, but cut it out when Snape emerged to join them. "Something amuses you, Draco?"

Harry could see Draco thinking fast. "Ten thousand lines for Zabini. That's like aquamenti to a dying man, Severus."

"I think it's right fair of you, Professor," Ron put in, nodding. "So Harry, are you going home for the weekend, then? Hermione and I will see you later."

Once Harry was alone with his family, Snape turned to Draco. "Congratulations on your fine win," he said dryly. "The sheer suspense of that match truly numbed the mind."

Draco didn't quibble with that. "I want more chicken! And that roll! And I want to go look at the point counters! And I want to go to Hogsmeade for my chocolate frogs that somebody left behind! Can I have my allowance, Severus? Can I have a bonus for getting Slytherin all those points?"

As Draco headed back up to the castle, babbling up a storm, Harry and Snape exchanged an exasperated look.
" Seems like your brother's pretty popular these days, " said Ron on Wednesday at breakfast as he shoved a muffin in his pocket for later. " How do you like that, him getting so much attention for the most boring Quidditch match Hogwarts ever saw?"

Harry glanced over toward the Slytherin table. Not every Slytherin had welcomed Draco back, of course, but enough had that he was really in his element again. Zabini still hated him, but with ten thousand lines to complete, he wasn't about to do anything to anger Snape yet further.

" At least the match gave me a chance to catch up on my reading, " said Hermione, a little bit primly.

" You brought a book? "

" Tucked away in my pocket. " Hermione lifted an eyebrow. " Ron warned me you'd said it would be a long match. And since I knew how many points Draco would want Slytherin to make up . . . " She shrugged. " It was pretty obvious which way the wind was going to blow."

" She read about history of magic, " said Ron. " And I was so bored out of my skull that I read over her shoulder!"

" That's bored, " said Harry, laughing. " So then, who's up for another fun-filled session of Double Defence? Personally, I can't wait. " He rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

" Harry, " chided Hermione. " Enough is enough, all right? Speak in Parseltongue when you need to; that part I understand. But as for the rest? You don't have to be . . . well, a jerk for the sheer sake of it."

" Sure he does! " said Ron. " Um, I mean, Aran deserves it. He's been a jerk, hasn't he?"

" Two wrongs don't make a right, Ron."

" No, they make a left, " said Harry, chortling.

" Actually, it takes three rights to make a left, " Hermione stated, her head held high as she walked away from the table.

Harry and Ron had to hurry to catch up. " Oh, come on, let's not fight. Aran's not worth it."

Hermione pursed her lips but didn't say anything further as they headed toward Defence. Draco didn't walk with them that time. More at ease with his own house, he hung back to talk to his friends in Slytherin.

Once in class, though, he stopped by Harry's table. " Today I really do have to work with Greg. He's getting a bit desperate."

" Sure, " said Harry, shrugging.

Aran wasted no time getting class started once he came in from his office at the front. " Wands away. Since some students here can't follow instructions about acceptable forms of magic, we won't be doing any whole-class practicals. I'll call students up here for individual instruction. When I call your name, you can fetch your wand out and join me to practise conjuring caninae. In the meantime, everyone is to read chapter twenty-seven and outline it. Once you're done with that, prepare a test on
the material. Begin."

A collective groan rose up from the students, Slytherin and Gryffindor alike. Only the Slytherins, however, added muttered commentary to the effect that this was all Potter's fault.

"Potter's a Slytherin," said Draco in a hard voice. "Remember Quidditch? Before the game? I thought we were going to stop turning on each other."

"Miss Bulstrode," Aran interrupted. Loudly. "Please bring your wand to the front."

Harry scowled as he got out parchment, quills, and his book. So that was Aran's new game. He'd keep Harry from speaking Parseltongue by never calling on him to do any practical work.

A little bird landed on his desk and unfolded itself, just one word written across it. Plans?

Harry huffed and started scrawling out an answer. Well, I suppose I could just shove my way up to the front and demand my turn! But the ugly arsehole won't cast against me, so what good is that?

He crumpled the note up to toss it over, but then he had a better idea. He might not know an actual avian charm, but he did know how to levitate things. Slipping his wand out of his pocket, Harry held it over the wadded note. Magic sure took a lot of coordination these days, he thought. He had to look at the right part of his glasses, which was still a little bit awkward, and make sure none of his power flowed through his wand.

"Take wing and fly!" he hissed, moving his fingers in a way that would direct the note to float over the top of students' heads until it was hovering over Draco's desk.

Draco grinned as he caught it.

"Potter!" said Aran loudly. "I said wands away!"

Harry met the teacher's angry gaze and gave a lazy grin. "Sorry," he said, liking the way he sounded completely insincere. "I had to tell Draco something. I won't use it again unless I need to pass another note."

"Detention!" snapped Aran, swinging his wand around. "You admit to passing notes, do you? Accio note!"

He was fast, but Draco was faster still. "Incendio!" he cried.

The note burst into flames when it was half-way to Aran.

The teacher glowered. "Detention for you as well, Mal-- Snape."

"Why do you even bother?" asked Harry, loudly. "You know perfectly well--or you would, if you had half a brain--that neither one of us is going to stay. And you know you're not going to do a damned thing about it!"

"Oh, you'll stay, Potter!" Aran glared at him, then turned the same expression on Draco. "You'll both stay."

"I guess he doesn't have half a brain, after all," said Draco. "Or perhaps the problem is . . ." He lifted a finger to make a twirling motion near his ear. Apparently the Muggle and Wizarding worlds shared the same symbol for, He's barmy as a bat.

The class had been more or less just staring up until then, but that made them break out into laughter.
Amazingly enough, Aran didn't look like he was going to explode. "Everyone will get back to work," he only said.

Harry exchanged a puzzled glance with Draco, who just shrugged.

Sighing, Harry flipped open his book to the right chapter. Draco did the same, he noticed, but instead of just reading, he quietly talked the chapter through with Goyle. Aran didn't say anything about it, but of course he'd already assigned detention. He was busy anyway now, coaching Parvati through the guard dog spell. After a while, Parvati managed a very creditable St. Bernard. It wasn't terribly ferocious, but it did bound over to Aran and try to knock him down.

Harry started reading, taking notes as he went. It wasn't quite as boring as Saturday's Quidditch match, but it ran a close second. He managed to keep to the assignment all the way through his outline, but when it came to writing his own test on the chapter, he started to get irritated. Was Aran so lazy he couldn't even write his own exams? It was unfair! And stupid!

"Mr Mal . . . Snape," called Aran. "Your turn."

Draco raised an eyebrow as though he hadn't been expecting to be called up. His *caninae*, after all, hardly needed work. Harry flinched just thinking about it. That huge dog had looked so very much like Padfoot . . .

His hand clenching on his quill, Harry tried to concentrate on his work and ignore whatever was happening up at the front of the class. That got a little difficult when Draco started yelling.

"Ow! Ow!"

Reaching under his robes and beneath his shirt, Draco fumbled to undo the clasp of the simple silver chain he was wearing around his neck. He pulled the amulet out, and gave Harry a bit of a glare.

*Enough with the brotherly love,* Harry could almost hear Draco saying, a sneer in his voice.

Harry shrugged to show he hadn't done anything. He hadn't even been paying attention. He'd been trying to work on his assignment!

"Accio pendant!" snapped Aran. He caught it by the chain and poked a finger at the turquoise. "Burned you, did it? Why are you wearing an amulet like this during Defence class? This sort of thing uses very simplistic magic. It can't tell if you're being hexed for real or as part of a practise duel! You ought to know these things, Mal-- Snape!"

Apparently Draco was taken aback enough to forget to be rude. "Sorry, sir. It never used to do that when Severus and I would . . . never mind. I think I'm sensitised to it, or something. I'll stash it in my pocket--"

Instead, Aran popped it into his. "You can have it back when your detention's been served," he said, a bit smarmily.

A dull flush came up under Draco's skin. He lifted his wand. "Accio amulet!"

"Oh, I've long since warded my person against students trying anything like that. The mood you're in, it's probably best if we forego the *caninae*, so you may return to your seat--"

"Give it here!" yelled Draco. Harry wasn't sure whether he was more angry to have had the amulet taken away, or because the whole class had just seen Aran best him, but his lack of impulse control was definitely at work. Otherwise, Harry didn't think Draco would have gone on, "It was a present
from my brother!"

"Oh, him," said Aran, his lips twisted. "In that case you're lucky it's not Dark."

"Harry's not a Dark Wizard, you pompous, opinionated, fat, rat-faced prick!" And then, "Yeah, yeah, I know. Detention."

"And you'll serve it if you want your amulet back!" called Aran as Draco went to sit down.

The class was sort of abuzz after all that, but students got back to work as soon as Aran called up the next student.

Harry glowered down at his parchment, his fingers twitching, he was so angry. He wanted to lift them up and lash out at Aran with both hands, but there was no way Severus wouldn't hear about something like that. But still, roiling thoughts crowded his mind, tumbling over and over like a potion set to a furious boil.

_Dark wizard, am I? Just because I can talk to Sals! Just because I gave my brother something to protect him. Ha!_

Standing up and yelling, though, was just going to make him look like he had to refute it. Like he half-believed it, himself. But still, Harry couldn't bear to just go on writing out his stupid assignment, not after that. He had to do something.

All right, fine, he thought, dragging out a fresh sheet of parchment. Time to write the test Aran had demanded. Harry could think of some good questions to ask!

1. **What makes you such a complete fucking moron?** he scrawled, jabbing the point of his quill into the parchment so viciously that droplets of ink spattered.

2. **And why do you hate Parseltongue so much? Did a snake attack you as a child? Too bad it didn't kill you.**

3. **I heard you weren't married. Is that because nobody can stand being around your fat arse for more than five minutes at a stretch?**

4. **In case you never realised, this class is called Defence. Have you ever thought about actually teaching that subject? Because you seem to think you were hired to run a study hall.**

5. **Oh, by the way, you're too stupid to notice this, but Zabini isn't doing the assignment. He's got his book open and he's hiding behind it, writing lines for Severus. Yeah, that's right. Some teachers can make their students do the punishments they've been assigned. Not you, though. You're completely incompetent.**

5. **You're also a right git, I hope you know. And furthermore--**

"Pass in your papers," announced Aran.

Wow, time really had flown. Harry took great satisfaction in writing his name in large letters at the top of the page he'd been working on. Rolling it up, he stood up and threw it at Aran's desk, then plunked himself back down on his chair.

Aran walked up the aisle, his wand held in his hand. He seemed to be muttering something, and flicking his wand a bit._Barmy old bastard._
"Class dismissed," said Aran, then.

"About time," said Harry, loud enough to be heard. He started slamming books into his book bag, but when he tried to get up to leave, he found that his trousers were glued down tight to the chair. And not just his trousers, but his arse as well! "Hey!" he yelled. Glancing over, he saw that Draco was equally stuck.

"And in case you're thinking of trying an unsticking charm," said Aran, smirking, "the spell I used is obscure. You will be staying for your detention, make no mistake."

Some of the Slytherins laughed. The Gryffindors just looked like they thought Harry'd got a tough break. Except Hermione, who had that I-told-you-so look in her eyes.

Aran waited until the door clicked behind the last of the students leaving. "Now, get out quill and parchment and do those lines you refused to do last week!"

"No," said Harry and Draco, both at the same time.

"Yeah, maybe you can make us stay," Harry went on, "but you can't make us do anything."

As if to prove the point, he slouched down in his chair. Well, as much as the sticking charm would let him, anyway.

"And if we go hungry you know we'll tell on you to Severus," added Draco in a taunting voice. "I think I'll tell him about this sticking charm, anyway. It's practically assault, you know. You aren't really allowed to cast spells on students, are you, unless it's strictly needed for the curriculum?"

"I'm sure Professor Snape would be interested to know why I needed a sticking charm! And if you don't behave yourself, young man, you'll not be getting back the amulet your brother gave you!"

Aran sneered the last.

_Uh-oh._ It was sort of like a standoff, now.

Aran picked up the assignments on his desk and began unrolling them. One by one he tossed them aside after only looking at the name. When he came to Harry's, though, he stopped to read it, his face getting redder each second.

"You sure are a slow reader," muttered Harry in a low voice. Not low enough, though.

"And you're a sight more dim-witted than I'd expected," barked Aran back. "I hadn't gone to the headmaster before this because frankly, he makes it pretty clear you're his golden-boy who can do no wrong! But he won't be able to ignore incontrovertible evidence, written in your own hand, of just how nasty you've turned, will he now?"

"Incendio!" yelled Harry and Draco, both at once.

Aran just shook his head. "I'm holding it. Didn't I just mention the warding?" He kept it the scroll in hand as he flicked his wand and sent a silver message spinning from it. Ha, his _Patronus_ form looked a lot like a snake to Harry. Wasn't _that_ ironic?

"Do something!" Draco whispered to Harry.

"I suggest you do something," said Aran in a cold tone. "Your lines, for example, while we wait for the headmaster. Let's start with five hundred repetitions of _I will be polite to my professors and do as they say_. Yes, that'll do."
"Oh, fuck you," snarled Harry.

"Do something a little more helpful than that, Harry!"

"I don't think you're likely to tell your father about this, either, Potter," snarled Aran. "Considering what makes it necessary! Bocalavare!"

Harry abruptly found himself with a mouth full of soap suds.

"Blech!" He tried to spit them out, but they kept foaming up, oozing all over the place. Some of them slipped down his throat. Ouch, that stung. And they tasted awful.

Harry grabbed the bottom hem of his cloak and sort of stuffed it in his mouth, trying to wipe the suds out of it.

It didn't help his mood that Draco was holding back laughter.

"Will you watch your language?" asked Aran.

Harry resentfully nodded, but that didn't seem to be enough. The suds kept bubbling up to fill his mouth with foam. "Yes, sir," he managed to say through the lather.

"See that you do. Finite Incantatem."

Harry swabbed out his mouth again and turned a glare on his brother. "You might have done that, you know. Helped me out. You think?"

"It was funny!"

"Oh, thanks a lot!"

Draco pointed. "You've still got a bit of soap there. And there."

"Shut up!"

"Ehem." A new voice kept Harry from saying more. Turning--well, as much as he could while he was stuck down--Harry saw the headmaster, dressed in garish pink and purple robes, quietly closing the door behind him. Dumbledore's voice, when he spoke, was very mild. "Problem, Professor Aran?"

"I should say so. Potter here's been influencing Draco Malfoy for the worse--"

"Draco Snape," corrected Dumbledore in a soft voice. "He has changed his name, as I believe you were informed? When he was adopted?"

"Yes, well, perhaps that's part of the problem. When I had him in classes back in September he was a perfectly polite, personable young man--"

Harry almost choked, hearing that. Was Aran's memory as bad as his teaching? Draco had been his usual bratty self back at the start of term!

"And now he's practically a hellion! And it's that one's fault!" Aran pointed his wand at Harry.

By that time Dumbledore was right alongside the other teacher. The headmaster put a hand on Aran's arm and gave it a gentle push down. "Manners, Professor," he said in a low voice. "I think it's a bit much to attribute Mr Snape's behaviour to another student," he added as he peered critically at Harry.
"My boy, are you quite all right?"

Harry used his sleeve to wipe again at his mouth and face. "Yeah, fine."

"What you see are the remnants of sudsing spell made necessary by that boy's absolute *urinal* of a mouth!"

Dumbledore raised both his eyebrows. "Really. I've seen Harry in quite a lather, if you'll pardon the pun, and he still managed to restrain himself from any truly untoward behaviour."

Harry thought that a pretty big exaggeration considering he'd wrecked half the man's office, but he appreciated the support, he really did.

"Perhaps you should have a look at his day's work," said Aran, looking triumphant. He thrust the parchment in his hand toward Dumbledore.

The headmaster's eyes wrinkled as he began to look it over. "Oh, Harry."

"I was angry," Harry muttered, struggling to remember just what he'd written. When his exact words came back to him, he wanted to crawl into a hole. Instead of doing that, he raised his voice. "I had good reason to be angry! He calls me a Dark Wizard! In class! In front of everyone!"

Dumbledore looked about to say one thing, but then appeared to change his mind. "Professor, since you've summoned me, I can only imagine you would like me to take charge of the matter? Come Harry, come Draco. We'll deal with this in my office."

Harry tried to get up, but he couldn't.

The headmaster cleared his throat and spoke a little more forcefully. "A word, Harry, if you please."

"I can't get up, sir!"

"Ah." Dumbledore turned a critical gaze on Aran. "Was that truly necessary?"

"They refused to stay for my detentions!"

The headmaster's gaze, disappointed now, swung back to Harry and Draco. "I must say, that was very childish of you, my boys." He waved his wand, his lips moving slightly as he made short work of the sticking charm. "Now we'll all go to my office and you'll serve your detention with me." He nodded towards Aran, the bright pink wizard's hood on his head flopping a bit. "Good day, Professor."

Feeling like that was a bit of a hint, Harry echoed, "Yeah, good day."

Aran just harrumphed.

------------------------------------------------------

A fire was blazing in Dumbledore's grate, the cheery dancing flames in direct contrast to Harry's glum mood.

The headmaster laid Harry's assignment on his large desk, but didn't take his usual seat. Instead, he
summoned three chairs into a circle and conjured a little table to sit in the centre. Gesturing, he merely asked, "Shall we?"

More than a little nervous, Harry took a seat. Draco did likewise, though he didn't look nervous in the least. But then again, Harry could tell it was a pose.

"Am I correct in thinking the two of you haven't been to lunch yet?"

"Yeah, and Severus'll be wondering where we've got to," Harry said, the words tumbling over one another. "So we really should dash down to the Great Hall--"

Dumbledore smiled. "Oh, he has a lunch meeting in his office. With a seventh-year interested in an apprenticeship. Your father mentioned it during yesterday's staff meeting."

A dark thought crossed Harry's mind. So that was why Aran had suddenly developed some guts. The Defence teacher had known that Snape wouldn't notice Harry and Draco's absence from the Great Hall!

Clapping his hands together, Dumbledore summoned a meal to the small table, complete with plates and cutlery, and even a glass of orange juice for Harry. Draco got chocolate milk, which Harry thought was a veiled reference to the Quidditch match. "There, that looks like a lovely luncheon. Let's all relax and eat, shall we? We can deal with other matters, afterwards."

Harry ate, but it would be a stretch of the imagination to say that he relaxed. His stomach felt twisted into a knot. Besides, every bite tasted like it was coated with soap. It had been a long time since he'd enjoyed a meal less.

Draco, in contrast, was making polite chit-chat just as though they were at a Ministry dinner and the headmaster was someone he wanted to impress. Dumbledore took it all in stride, nodding and smiling where appropriate, but his wizened old eyes said he wasn't being lulled by Draco's charming manners.

From time to time Draco tried to draw Harry into the conversation, but Harry wasn't having it. He mumbled a few syllables here and there, just wanting this to be over.


"Biscotti," said Draco. "And a spot of Oolong, if it's available?"

"Oh, certainly." An elf appeared with a steaming cup of tea and the biscotti, just a moment later.

Harry had no appetite for tea or dessert. "I'm pretty sure we're up here for more than a meal," he said, sighing as he shoved away his half-finished plate.

Dumbledore waved his wand over the table to banish all the food except Draco's request, and sat back in his chair. "Yes, indeed. I'd like you to read what you wrote on your assignment, Harry, paying particular attention to number three."

"Out loud?"

"No, to yourself will do admirably well."

Harry didn't much feel like doing any magic, so he got up to fetch the parchment. Looking it over as he'd been told, he almost groaned when he saw what he'd written for his third "test question."
"I heard you weren't married. Is that because nobody can stand being around your fat arse for more than five minutes at a stretch?"

"You do realise whom else that statement could apply to," gently prompted Dumbledore.

"Severus isn't fat," Harry muttered. "But . . . yeah."

"How do you think your father would feel were I to show him this?"

Harry winced, but rallied quickly enough. "What about what drove me to it, eh? Aran, complaining constantly about how evil Parseltongue is and how I must be evil just because I know it!"

"The issue here isn't Aran."

"Yeah, it is!"

"No, it is not." Dumbledore didn't raise his voice, though it somehow got a whole lot more commanding, all the same. He gentled it, though, to ask his next question. "Harry my boy, the year the Chamber was opened, nearly everyone in the school was saying the same things about you. Dark wizard, all that. And you bore it with grace and fortitude. And then later, when your character was smeared yet again, this time in newspapers circulating all 'round Wizarding Britain, you weathered that equally well. So why does the opinion of one narrow-minded teacher now cause such an uproar?"

Harry slouched down in his chair. "I don't know."

Dumbledore peered over the top of his half-moon spectacles. "Really, Harry, I thought you more mature than this. In point of fact, you've repeatedly been far more mature than this when it came to dealing with difficult professors."

"Well, maybe it's his time to vent," said Draco, crossing his ankles in the same way Severus sometimes did. "It's probably healthy. You know, all those years repressing rage can't have been good for him--"

"Thank you, Draco," said the headmaster with a smile. "I happen to believe there's a bit more than that going on. Well, Harry? Why does what Professor Aran says disturb you so much?"

"It doesn't!" exclaimed Harry. "I mean, until recently I was just ignoring all his insults."

"And what changed that?"

Draco, Harry thought, but he didn't say so.

"Let's examine the matter from another angle, Harry," continued the headmaster. "Even when you were ignoring him, he still made you angry, I think?"

"Not just because of what he would say, though," said Harry, sitting up more. "Aran's been--"

"Professor Aran, Harry."

"Fine. Professor Aran's been completely unreasonable. He can think what he likes of Parseltongue, but you know that's the only way I can do magic, and he won't let me speak Parseltongue in class! How fair is that?"

"Oh, it's thoroughly unfair," said Dumbledore, popping a lemon sherbet into his mouth. He extended a little dish of them. "Hmm?"
Harry sighed. "This is the part where you tell me that life isn't fair, I guess."

"I wasn't going to say anything of the sort. You of all people would already know that life isn't fair, Harry. Let me understand the situation, then. Professor Aran has refused to let you learn properly. At first you acquiesced to his restrictions, but of late you've been defying them, instead. Not to mention, expressing your displeasure in quite a spectacular fashion."

Harry sat up a little bit straighter. "Yeah, that's about right."

"Because Defence, especially for you, is in no way an optional course of study."

"Exactly!"

"Your life could well be in jeopardy if you don't learn it properly."

Harry nodded emphatically.

Dumbledore popped another sweet into his mouth. "I'm a bit surprised Severus would have allowed this to go on. You did inform him at once, I trust?"

Harry scowled then, seeing too late that he'd been led into a trap. Though in all fairness, it was most likely a trap he couldn't have avoided. His fate had probably been sealed as soon as Aran called Dumbledore. Or really, as soon as his brother had convinced him to stand up to Aran. That was really what had set this whole thing in motion.

When Harry turned his glare on Draco, the other boy gave a little shrug. Like he'd known it would come to this. Like he'd seen it coming, even if he hadn't planned it.

"No," said Harry shortly, finally answering the headmaster's question.

"You didn't tell you father at once?"

It was all going to come out now, so Harry decided to get it over with. "I didn't tell him at all."

"Oh, my dear boy," crooned the headmaster, folding his hands across his lap. "I am so very sorry. You and Severus aren't getting on, then?"

"No, we get on great--"

"But you don't feel you can trust him with this."

"Of course I can--"

Draco's cup and saucer clattered as he set them down. "Can you stop leading him around by the nose and just say what you want to say, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore glanced at Draco, his old eyes a little bit bemused. When he turned back to Harry, though, his expression was perfectly serious. "I'm sure you can tell me any number of reasons why you didn't take this to your father, Harry. You're sixteen, which is old enough, surely, to handle the matter on your own. Though I will say you haven't acted your age, today. And you don't care for special treatment, not even on account of having a father on staff. And so on and so forth."

"Oh great, I have to ratchet up my Occlumency again!"

"No, no, certainly not with me, my boy. I haven't pried into your thoughts. I merely flatter myself that I know you, in some small measure at least. As I should hope I would, after all these years."
Dumbledore smiled, looking every bit like a loving grandfather. His eyes weren't twinkling, though. They were still profoundly sad. "And because I know you, Harry, I know you had another reason for neglecting to mention your problems in Defence to Severus."

"No, I didn't."

"To Professor Snape, I should perhaps say?"

Harry stiffened. "I don't think of him that way anymore."

The headmaster's voice softened still further, his tone gentleness itself. "Do you not?"

"No!"

Dumbledore slowly shook his head. "Oh, Harry. If you were being unfairly treated in a class of little importance to your future, your justifications might be believable. But not when it comes to Defence against the Dark Arts. Of all your courses, that is the one most key to your very survival. And you expect me to accept that you let petty concerns about seeming childish or privileged keep you from asking your father for help?" Pausing, Dumbledore drew in a breath. "Harry, you are simply not that silly."

Shifting in his chair, not liking this conversation at all, Harry raised defiant eyes. "I told McG-- I mean, Professor McGonagall."

"Yes, when you needed someone to mark your practical. Don't you suppose that your father would have been the more qualified choice? And yet you didn't go to him."

Harry flinched slightly. "You knew how Aran was treating me, then! You knew I needed help, and you didn't offer any!"

Dumbledore smiled. "I knew that you had a father more than willing to help you through any difficulty. And Harry, you are the one who made it clear to me, earlier this year, that you preferred his counsel to mine. So why did you never once seek it? Hmmm?"

"I go to him about plenty of other stuff!"

"But not this." Dumbledore sighed. "Harry, do try to be honest with yourself. Why would you be so very reluctant to bring this particular problem to Professor Snape?"

Again with the man's school title. Harry couldn't help but feel he was being given a large hint, there. It wasn't one he could exactly miss, either, considering the way the headmaster had stressed the word particular. "I . . . uh, well . . . look, I wasn't thinking about it that way at the time, honest."

"I'm sure you weren't," agreed Dumbledore, nodding amiably. "At least, not that you were aware of."

"Subconscious motivations, that's what Marsha calls them," said Draco, his silver eyes searching Harry's expression. "But I don't follow. What were yours?"

The knot in his stomach suddenly grew a lot worse, so much so that Harry began wishing he hadn't eaten anything at all. Strange how he hadn't realised earlier just why he didn't want to bring his problem with another teacher to Snape.

Turning to Draco, he tried to explain, but the words got stuck in his throat. Dumbledore conjured him a cup of tea and pushed it over. Harry sipped at it for a moment, then tried again.
"I guess I didn't want to bring Aran up to Snape because... um, you know. Apart from Umbridge, Snape is the teacher I would have been complaining about every other year here! I mean, if I'd had a family to complain to."

"So?"

Harry sighed. "So, when he adopted me we sort of agreed that it was all over, but we never really talked very much about how he used to treat me. And I didn't want to talk about it. It's better just to push it behind and move on."

Draco's eyes narrowed. "Oh, please. You can't compare Severus to Aran!"

"Can't I?" Harry's lips twisted. "At least Aran has a semi-coherent reason to resent me. He's afraid of Parselmouths. Stupid as that is, it's something, at least. What reason did Snape have to single me out that first day of class and humiliate me, and keep it up for five straight years? He knew I was Muggle-raised and wouldn't have the first idea about monkshood and Wolfsbane or whatever! And everybody expected me just to deal with that all on my own, so why would I go to Snape with this? For him to go to Aran complaining about somebody mistreating me... ha, talk about the pot calling the kettle black--"

"All right, all right!" interrupted Draco, holding up his hands. His silver eyes looked a little bit panicked. "I understand! There's obviously still some... er, resentment there."

"I don't want there to be," sighed Harry. "So, I try not to think about it... ever. I guess maybe that's why I thought I'd just handle Aran myself."

Draco grabbed a sweet from the dish still on the table. "Marsha calls that avoidance."

"Yeah, well it was working out fine until you decided I ought to--" Harry abruptly stopped talking. "Never mind."

"So Professor Aran is mistaken about who was influencing whom. Well, no matter. Harry, what do you intend to do now?"

Harry blinked. "What, you mean I get a choice? I pretty much figured you were going to show that," he pointed at the assignment he'd dropped on the small table, "to Snape and let him decide how to punish me."

"Oh, no. No indeed." Dumbledore whispered a spell and the parchment dissolved into ash. "I don't think we need to go to quite those lengths, not now you've realised about your... what was that clever word? Ah yes, avoidance."

"Last time, when I was having seer dreams, you blackmailed me into talking to him."

"Yes, but I don't think that will be necessary this time. Now that you've thought it through, I think you know what you need to do, Harry."

Harry hung his head in his hands and spoke through his fingers. "Yeah, yeah. Talk to Snape. Ugh."

"Will you stop calling him Snape?" asked Draco. "You said you didn't think of him like that any longer!"

"Yeah, well I can't help it now, can I? This is why I didn't want to talk to him about any of this!"

"Harry." Dumbledore waited until the boy had raised his head and looked at him. "You love
Severus. That was made very clear to me earlier this year. I'm certain you don't want the past to interfere with your relationship as it stands now. But don't you see? By denying him the chance to act as your father in this matter, you are letting the past influence the present."

"Yeah, I get it," said Harry, grumbling. "I'll talk to him, fine. I just . . . well, how am I supposed to bring it up now? He's not going to be so pleased that I didn't come to him sooner."

"Today's Wednesday," said Draco, a remark which seemed a little out of place until the boy went on. "How about this? We'll go down later to have dinner at home, right? Severus'll like that. And while we're there, you er . . . break the news. If you don't mind me being there, I mean. But see, this way, if things don't go well, I'll say that you should come along to Marsha's and you and Severus can have my therapy session."

Harry frowned. "I don't want to take you away from your therapist."

"It's one session! And uh . . . no offence, but not telling Severus all about Aran was actually pretty mental of you. You probably need the therapy more than I do."

"Prat."

"Basket case."

"Seeker who lets the Snitch snooze--"

"Boys," interrupted Dumbledore. "I think that's a fine solution as long as Harry is amenable to it." Drawing his wand, he cast a quick Tempus. "Hmm. We seem to have talked quite a bit longer than I had in mind. Your after-lunch classes are shortly to draw to a close. We don't want you missing the one following as well, so off you go."

"That's it?" asked Harry.

"Yes, my boy, that's it. I have every confidence that you'll do the right thing as soon as an opportunity presents itself."

As soon as. That was a pretty blunt hint. "Tonight, then," said Harry, sighing. "Might as well. It's actually a good idea, Draco."

The Slytherin boy raised his chin a notch. "Do I ever have any that aren't?"

Harry thought of the fairy cakes . . . among other things. "Yes, actually."

"So where are you headed?" asked Draco as they rode the stairs down from Dumbledore's office. "I have Charms next."

"Transfiguration."

Draco nodded. "I don't suppose you'd come with me back to Aran's for a second? That stupid git still has my amulet."

Harry didn't exactly want to see the Defence teacher again, but he did want to make sure Draco got
his property back. "All right. He can't claim you haven't served your detention yet, anyway."

"Some detention. Lunch and a chat?"

"I'd rather have scrubbed cauldrons," grumbled Harry.

"Severus can arrange that, I'm sure, if you'd like me to tell him about your urinal of a mouth--"

"Ha, very funny."

"Just make sure you come down for dinner," said Draco, serious once again. "Have Ron and Hermione walk you down to Severus' classroom right after your last class so we can waylay him before he leaves for the Great Hall. All right? I'll meet you there."

"Yeah, all right."

"If you chicken out and skive off it'll just be harder--"

"Yeah, all right," Harry repeated.

By then they were almost to the open door of Aran's classroom. Nobody was in sight. "He must have a free period," said Draco, shrugging. "Accio amulet!"

Nothing happened.

"Worth a try . . ."

"Probably still has it in his pocket," said Harry. "You'll have to actually ask him. Sorry."

"Time to put my perfect manners on display, then." Draco beamed a completely fake smile all around, just like he was accepting an award for Seeker of the Year.

"A little less perfect."

"I can't be that," said Draco, grinning. His smile faded just a bit in the instant before he turned to step inside the Defence classroom, but his voice was still smoothly polite as he called out toward the office at the front, "Professor Aran? Might I have a moment of your time?"

For a moment, his request was greeted only by silence.

But then, the heavy door to the classroom swung shut. Right in Harry's face.

Harry was startled, but not too alarmed at first. Aran probably just wanted to talk to Draco alone. And while technically Harry wasn't supposed to be out in the hallways by himself, he didn't think it was much of a problem, really. Ever since the Quidditch match, most of the Slytherins tolerated him pretty well. Besides, classes wouldn't even be out for another ten minutes or so. Draco would be back by then.

Still, though, maybe it wasn't the best idea to flout his father's rules today of all days. All he needed was for Snape--Severus, he reminded himself--to come strolling by and see him out here unprotected.

Yeah, best to go in, Harry thought.

Except, when he pushed on the door, it seemed stuck fast to the jamb. Oh, no! Was Aran angry enough to try something truly nasty? It wasn't like he had to worry about losing his job. After the things McGonagall had said, he had to know he was soon to be sacked, anyway.
Worried, Harry pressed his ear to the wooden door and strained to make out what Aran or Draco might be saying.

That was when he heard a voice he'd hoped never, ever to hear again.

*Lucius Malfroy,* his words sort of oozing, they were so smooth.

But wait -- Lucius Malfroy couldn't be wandering around Hogwarts! The castle was warded so he had to be escorted at all times. Dumbledore had said so. So maybe this was Remus?

Of course, Harry didn't have any idea why Remus would need to speak to Aaron Aran, and do it while pretending to be a school governor, but then again, he didn't have any idea why the real Lucius Malfroy would be saying the kinds of things Harry could make out through the closed door.

Lucius *hated* Draco.

Didn't he?

"Draco. What an unexpected delight." A slight chuckle. "You're looking well. More so than the last time I saw you, at any rate. And you're back in classes again. You must be enjoying that."

*Yeah, that just had to be Remus,* thought Harry. The first words out of Lucius' mouth would be *Crucio,* not these casual remarks that smacked of . . . well, caring.

But did Draco know that? Harry couldn't be sure, especially when he heard the slight waver in his brother's voice. But then again, Draco *did* know about Remus impersonating Lucius. Maybe he didn't want to give the game away, especially in front of an idiot like Aran, who could hardly be trusted to keep Remus' secret.

"Father," the boy said, his voice just loud enough for Harry to hear it. Harry tensed. He knew Draco pretty well these days, and that strained tone said loud and clear that his brother was scared to death and trying not to let it show. "What . . . I-- I didn't expect to see you here."

"I didn't expect to be summoned, Draco. But your instructor, it seems, has some complaints about your conduct." Harry heard footsteps coming closer, along with what sounded like a person actually bumping against the door.

And then, Draco's voice, pitched higher than usual. "My . . . my next class'll be starting. Ch . . . Charms. I'd better get there--"

"Accio wand," said Lucius, very calmly. "You'll stay and listen to me, Draco. After all, it wouldn't do to arrive at Charms without so much as a wand, would it?"

Harry felt as if his stomach had fallen to his feet. Not Remus, then. He barely registered that he'd drawn his own wand.

In the meantime, Lucius had continued speaking to Draco. "Now, now, don't look so alarmed. I wish nothing more than a few words with you."

Harry's mind was racing. What should he do? Taking care of Lucius--for good--using dark powers would only advertise those very powers to Aran, as well as to the students who would be streaming into the hallway soon. And they *couldn't* *all* be Obliviated. The side of Light would lose the advantage of surprise if Harry acted rashly.

Besides, Severus wouldn't want Harry dealing with this all on his own. He'd want Harry to get help.
But how? He couldn't leave while Draco was in there with Lucius!

But surely Lucius wouldn't do anything to Draco with Aran standing right there, not if he was putting on this fatherly pretence!

"Y- y- you've no right to speak with me," Draco was saying by then, his voice gaining confidence with every word. "I'm not your son any longer! And why's that? You wanted to kill me! You wanted to torture me--"

"Oh, Draco," said Lucius in a tone halfway between outrage and empathy. "How can you say such things? But of course I know the answer to that perfectly well. I know whom you've been listening to all through this year. They've turned you against your own father, your very own flesh and blood. For shame."

"That Parselmouth's to blame," spat Aran. "You were right, Mr Malfoy. I've seen it myself. Draco was a fine student before. But after spending months below stairs surrounded by Dark Wizards--"

"They aren't Dark Wizards!" yelled Draco. "He is! Are you so stupid that you can't see that?"

Lucius chuckled. "Now, now, Draco, you simply must be more respectful. Professor Aran, I do apologise. Draco always did have a lamentable tendency to be less than polite to his Defence instructors."

Harry started. That was certainly something Remus would say. Maybe it wasn't Lucius in there, after all.

"That may be, but being around a Parselmouth so much has taken a toll," announced Aran. "Draco's come back to my class as rude and arrogant a student as ever I met, except one. Even wore a protective charm to my class, as if Potter's got him convinced that I'd try to hurt him!"

"My son needs a few lessons in proper deportment," said Lucius, sounding like he was tapping his cane against the floor. "And he'll get them, make no mistake."

Hearing that, Harry could only imagine how vulnerable Draco must be feeling. Without so much as a wand! His uneasiness returned. Why would Remus have taken Draco's wand like that? Remus didn't enjoy terrifying people!

Draco clearly was terrified, too. So much so that he chose that moment to cut and run. Harry heard the doorknob being jiggled frantically, heard someone shoving and pounding on the door, but the sticking charm held tight.

Lucius would know a good sticking charm, Harry thought with horror. That was where Draco had learned his from.

Harry's blood ran cold, because in that instant he knew the truth. There was no way that was Remus inside that room.

"Let me out!" Draco was panting, the words sounding completely unhinged.

Horrified, Harry did what he should have done thirty seconds earlier. Whipping out his wand, he hissed in Parseltongue, "I confidently expect a saviour!" while thinking fixedly of his father standing in his classroom, peering into cauldrons.

His Patronus form, a ghostly stag, leapt forth from his fingers--not his wand--and galloped down the empty corridor, heading towards the dungeons.
"You are my son," Harry heard Lucius quietly saying, his voice also against the door now. Harry shivered. He couldn't leave Draco, so he stood there, stock still, staring at the planks of wood separating him from the man who'd sat atop him and taken such delight in stabbing his eyes to shreds. "I've seen the official record of your adoption, Draco. I know what you did. Exactly what you did. And I must say, it was a half-measure, at best."

"I . . . that was . . ." Draco's voice sounded strangled. "I couldn't give it up."

"Oh, of course you couldn't, my Dragon." Lucius' voice was so loving! Or rather, Harry thought it must sound that way to someone like Aran. To Harry it was the stuff of nightmares. To Draco too, he knew. "This year has been . . . difficult, but the breach between us isn't irreparable. You're still a Malfoy. Aren't you, now?"

Harry knew what Draco was going to say . . . but Draco didn't say it.

Instead, his answer made Harry's heart drop.

In a low, low, voice, Draco said, "Yes, Father."

"No! Harry wanted to cry out. Don't let him frighten you into saying that, Draco! Stand up for yourself the way you told me to! Severus will be here soon!"

But Draco, of course, would think he was being Slytherin to play along, Harry knew. He just hoped Draco realised what a dangerous game that was. But who better than Draco to know that? He'd grown up watching Lucius manipulate people.

"Yes, I knew you were still a Malfoy," oozed Lucius. "And I thought you would want this back, in that case."

Silence. And then Draco's voice again, this time surprised. "You'd give me back my wand?"

"Oh, yes. But I have enjoyed holding it for you, Draco, until we could talk. This wand is protected by quite a lovely lineage spell. Your own work, I think?"

Draco didn't answer, but Harry thought he must have nodded.

"Advanced magic, very worthy of a Malfoy. Severus likely didn't approve?"

"No, he didn't." Draco cleared his throat, the sound so loud that it made Harry jump back a little. "Father, would you let me go now? My next class starts in scarce five minutes."

"You'll need your wand," said Lucius. "Here, Draco. Take it."

For a moment, Harry heard nothing but the pounding of his own heart. And then . . .

"I need the other one."

"You may have it as well," said Lucius, his voice rich with promise. "But first, take this and tell me you don't miss it, Draco. This is the one you've used since you were a child. This is the one that sings with your magic--"

No, Draco! thought Harry. Those instincts that Snape had praised were screaming inside him. He just knew there was something wrong with that wand. And Draco was going to take it, he knew that too. Even though the wand was now useless to him, since the lineage potion meant it could only be used by wizards named Malfoy, Draco would still want it.
After all, he hadn't ever wanted to give it up.

There wasn't time to worry about what Severus was going to say about Harry's saving-people thing. There wasn't time for anything except an *Alohomora*. A wanded one, so he could be sure it overcame whatever sticking charm was holding the door closed.

"*Get out of my way!*" Harry hissed at the door.

And it did, flying open on its hinges so violently that it the wood cracked when it collided with the stone wall that stopped its swing.

And then Harry was looking straight at Draco, who had his hands shoved deep into his pockets.

The other boy's mouth dropped open in horror. "Get away!" he screamed, just before he yanked his hands out and reached for the wand Lucius was offering.

The minute he touched it, an awful sound filled the whole room. *Whooshing, sucking . . .* the noise of a young man being borne away against his will.

The noise of a Portkey.

"No!" screamed Harry, stumbling forward, his hands out as though to grab hold of Draco. It was too late, though. Draco was gone, and Harry was left staring into the cold, grey eyes of Lucius Malfoy.

"Well, well, would you look at that. The Parselmouth himself."

Fear washed over Harry, his eyes stinging with the memory of what this man had done to him. Behind all that, though, another sensation was building inside him.

His hands began to burn, his bones blazing hot with anger, the pain of it spilling out into his flesh. He was still holding his wand, but he didn't need it, not for this. This was raw energy, and he would hurl it straight from his soul.

Lucius must have sensed that something was wrong. That *this* Harry, perhaps, wasn't the helpless boy he'd tortured all those months ago. "*Crucio!*" he yelled, and Harry saw the spell sizzling towards him.

His anger lashed out to meet it. No words, just pure power, launching itself like a *caninae* at the source of Malfoy's spell. The *Cruciatus* vanished like so much mist under the force of Harry's magic, but Harry's powers kept streaming out, gold and burgundy lightning bolts that lit the whole room up.

Lucius made an awful noise as the silver snake handle of his wand abruptly melted and the wand itself began to smoke.

"Why, you--!"

Malfoy didn't say anything else, though. He couldn't. Harry's rage had reached a new peak by then, and the energy pouring from his hands was surrounding Lucius and making him twist and writhe. And *scream*. His wand, a charred useless stick, had long since clattered to the floor.

Harry started hearing his father's voice inside his head. Words about revenge and retribution and how Harry mustn't become like Voldemort, filled only with hate and anger and a desire to hurt.

Harry couldn't listen to it, though. *He* hurt, all the way through. And the only way to stop it was to destroy Lucius Malfoy.
"Petrificus totalus!" he suddenly heard from beside him. Aran's voice. He'd forgotten about Aran.

Harry tried to yank himself out of the way, but the energy pouring from his hands had a force all its own, a force that held him in place, like a great magnet against which he couldn't hope to move.

He felt the *Petrificus* hit, felt his whole body snap stiff and begin to fall backwards.

Smashing against the stone floor was like shattering into a thousand pieces without actually breaking at all, and as he hit, a new sort of anger took hold of his mind. Stupid, stupid Aran! He'd just seen Lucius abduct a student! He'd seen Lucius try to cast an Unforgivable at Harry! And still, he'd taken Lucius' side in the duel.

Because he hated Parselmouths.

Harry wanted to sick up right on him.

Then he wanted to sick up for other reasons. He was dragged inside, Lucius practically growling the spell.

The door clanged shut behind him.

He could see above himself and hear; he just couldn't react. Unless he could break the hex, the way he had before. He'd had Sals then to help him focus his powers. No Sals with him today, but he had his glasses.

*Thank God for the headmaster,* Harry thought. If he'd gone with a tattoo, he wouldn't be able to lift it before his eyes. But his glasses were still right there.

Harry concentrated on the snake image in the corner of his eye. Stared at it, harder than ever before, and thought about how much he needed to break free. Draco was in danger, and he loved Draco . . . Concentrate, he told himself. *Concentrate on breaking out so you can help Draco.* It had worked before, to break the hex.

It had to work again, it just had to!

And it was. Harry could feel it, power crowding up inside him, pure raw energy building up to a point that no mere *Petrificus* would be able to withstand . . .

"Thank you, Professor," he could hear Malfoy say as though from a long, long distance. The man sounded like he was trying not to pant. "Potter truly is vicious."

"Attempting to kill a *school governor,*" said Aran, practically sputtering. "And with such . . . unnatural magic! Shocking, shocking behaviour!" The Defence professor cleared his throat. "But as for your son, Mr Malfoy. A Portkey? We never discussed anything of that nature!"

"I'm afraid it really was the only way to remove him from that boy's horrid influence," said Lucius, his voice satisfied now that he'd caught his breath. "Surely you agree, hmmm?"

"You told me you merely wished to talk to him so you could get past your misunderstandings!"

Lucius gave a low laugh. "Precisely. And I hardly think he'll listen to me here. But don't fret, Professor. I'll have him back to Hogwarts safe and sound before breakfast tomorrow. And trust me, he won't be associating with Harry Potter any longer."

From where he lay, Harry could barely see Malfoy dusting himself off as he spoke. Then picking
something up. A scent drifted over Harry's face. Ashes. Charred wood.

"Shall I summon the Aurors to take Potter away?" asked Aran. "Or would you prefer to file charges, yourself?"

"I hardly think it will help my social standing for it to be known that a slip of a boy nearly melted me," drawled Lucius as he reached inside his robes for something.

"Oh. Well then, you can rely on my discretion. I'm pleased I could be of service," said Aran. "You'll remember it when the board meets to consider next year's appointments?"

"Actually, I'm afraid your service to me is at an end." Smiling, Lucius extended Draco's new wand, a spell already on his lips. One Harry didn't recognise.

Harry didn't see or hear what happened next; he was too busy redoubling his efforts to break his way free. He felt the spell binding him begin to crack. The snake in the corner of his lens was nodding at him, now, encouraging him, and Harry pulled on his deepest reserves, right down into his very heart, and summoned forth *all* the love he had. Not just for Draco, but Severus as well. And Sirius. And his parents. And even Dumbledore--

His glasses were abruptly plucked off his face and removed from his view.

The snake vanished.

And with her, every last trace of the power Harry had managed to summon forth. He felt like a slab of stone now. Lifeless, inert.

Yet he could see and hear. In fact, he had no choice *but* to. He couldn't close his eyes.

And Lucius knew it.

"Such a pity you still need glasses," said Lucius softly, his face so close Harry thought he must be kneeling alongside him and leaning over. "Your dear father couldn't restore you completely after our fun and games last time? Ah, well. No reason why we can't resume, eh? And these glasses would only have got in the way."

As Lucius stood up, Harry heard a cracking, crunching noise and knew his glasses were being crushed to dust beneath the man's heel.

Then Lucius was kneeling again, back at his side. He ran the pad of his thumb across the surface of one of Harry's open, frozen eyes, his touch lingering before it moved on to the other one. "Still, this truly is some of the loveliest healing work I've ever seen. Severus must be quite proud of your eyes. I must be sure to return them to him once I've plucked them from your head. Do you think he'll display them in one of his jars with his other collected oddities?"

It was all Harry could do not to squirm in disgust, but of course, he couldn't squirm. He couldn't do a damned thing!

"Well, we must be off," said Lucius. "Your charming little spell was probably something to summon Severus? My, he is slow to respond. I wonder what that means. At any rate, it really was delightfully stupid of you to advertise your presence like that. Didn't you learn from what happened last time that I keep an ear out for Parseltongue? So then, come along."

Using Draco's wand, the man flipped Harry's petrified body upright and floated it over to the Floo.
"You know, I find it amusing that it was Draco's revulsion for snakes that led to him discovering
your Parsel ability in the first place. He thought casting that viper at you was the most vicious thing he could do."

Stepping in beside him, Lucius leaned over to croon in Harry's ear. "Brothers, are you now? I wouldn't count on that lasting. Draco won't ever want to see you again, not after the punishment I've devised. I do hope that living in such close quarters with a Parselmouth hasn't assuaged his irrational fears. It would be such a pity if the new room I've had the elves make for him was put to waste. Though I'm sure that room isn't really the appropriate term. It's more a pit. A snake pit."

Lucius laughed. "Yes, he's there right now. And by the time I'm ready to allow him release . . . oh, yes. He'll have reconsidered his strange obsession with you. He'll reverse the regrettable choices he's made this year. All of them."

With that, Lucius threw down a pinch of powder.

Harry's world dissolved into flames.
Harry spun out of the flames and into a large room almost as grand as the Great Hall.

He had no more than a moment to stare unblinking at it, though. A sick wash of feeling began to fill him from the outside in, the sensation one he recognised. One he was even used to, after all the times he'd Apparated with his father. He'd never done it while under Petrificus, though. That made a big difference. It seemed to take forever. Harry couldn't tell if that was just his senses fooling him, or if Lucius was doing it on purpose.

Or maybe it was just more difficult to Side-Along with someone who was already under a powerful spell.

The room dissolved around him and through him, and stayed that way for long moments, until Harry's head felt muzzy and he could barely think. He wanted to sick up but it wasn't possible under Petrificus. His stomach wasn't even churning, not truly. It just wanted to. Somehow, that was worse.

Finally, the world came back into focus and Harry emerged into a smaller room, though it was just as lavish in its own way. Dark woods everywhere, and the glint of crystal. That was actually so disorienting that Harry nearly toppled over. Lucius' hand steadied him.

Harry would rather have fallen than endure that touch.

But he was going to have to endure it, wasn't he? As long as he was held bound like this, he didn't have much choice. And unlike on Samhain, this time Harry had no seer dreams to guide him, to tell him that no matter what happened, he'd come out on the other side alive.

Harry would have clenched his jaw, if he could. Resolution seemed to fill his lungs. He might not have a promise given in a seer dreams, but he did have other things to get him through this. Things Lucius didn't know about.

Couldn't know about . . . unless Nott had told him.

Harry felt his stomach sink right down to his toes.

But then he gave a mental shake of his head. Nott didn't know it all. Oh, sure, by the end he'd seen Harry's dark powers firsthand, but that had all been obliviated, right along with his knowledge about Harry needing a snake in order to be able to cast magic. And he never had learned that Harry could do wandless magic.

And really, there was no reason to think that Nott had told Lucius about Harry needing a snake. He might not have had a chance. And even if he had, didn't Slytherins like to use information strategically? Harry could easily imagine Nott holding out on Lucius until some later time, so he could sell the information to Lucius even if he couldn't sell Harry himself.

At any rate, the snake thing . . . that couldn't have been why Lucius had destroyed his glasses. The little snake wasn't visible except on the inside. Nobody except his family and the headmaster knew it was there.

Well, his glasses might have been destroyed, but that didn't mean Harry was helpless. All he needed was one good look down at his crest. Harry kept straining, trying to see it, but it was impossible as long as he was held under Petrificus, his chin parallel to his feet.
That would end, though. Sooner or later. If Harry was sure of anything, it was that Lucius wouldn't torture him while he the magic held him in this rigid position.

He'd want to see Harry scream and writhe.

Like before.

Oh God, the needles. All at once, Harry felt like he'd eaten five pounds of rocks for lunch. Rocks that had half-turned to thick, sluggish acid. He couldn't even imagine how Draco must be feeling, trapped in a pit full of snakes crawling all over each other. And him.

Harry tried his best to wing him a thought, though he had no reason in the world to suppose it would work. But at least it was something. He had to do something!

*Stay strong, Draco,* he thought, propelling the words as forcefully as he could. *You're stronger than you know. And braver, too. And we'll get out this somehow. I promise!*

Harry couldn't help but remember, though, something Draco had said to him. *I'm not strong like you, Harry. I'd break under torture . . .*

*No, no you won't,* Harry thought fiercely, again trying to send the conviction out to where Draco could hear or feel it. *You won't break. You won't. You can't. I need you to stay strong . . .*

Lucius suddenly clapped his hands, a single imperious blast of noise that Harry could feel vibrate straight through him. "Gibby," the man said to the trembling elf who appeared before the sound could die away. "This is Harry Potter."

The elf's eyes went wide and accusing. *The Harry Potter? That was giving clothes to poor deluded Dobby and casting him forever and ever into shame?"

"Don't interrupt me!" roared Lucius, swiftly kicking the creature in the stomach. The blow sent Gibby hurtling back several feet. The elf pounded its own head on the floor before crawling back to Lucius and looking up with sorrow-filled eyes.

"I know how you house-elves love your gossip," said Lucius in a tone only marginally calmer. "So I'm sure you know how . . . vicious, this particular young man can be. Samhain, yes? Now, you're to look over his magic and tell me what you can divine."

*Uh-oh.* Elves had strange powers, Harry knew.

He felt a coldness seep all through him, like he was being dunked in icy water. That sharp biting pain of being too cold--

And then it was gone.

"Harry Potter is having strange magic inside him, Master."

"I know that much, you fool!" snapped Lucius, raising his hand. He didn't strike, though. Maybe Gibby cowering back was enough to satisfy him. "Find out why, or how, or what!"

Again Gibby probed, his spindly elf hands held out this time as he sent the horrible cold washing through Harry. "G- G- Gibby cannot be finding out," the elf finally whispered in defeat, head bowed as his arms dropped to his sides.

"You're utterly useless! Can you at least tell if the *Petrificus* is firmly anchored?"
"Oh, yes, Master," said Gibby, big eyes earnest. "Yes, he is being bound tight, yes. Harry Potter, he is going nowhere--"

Lucius interrupted with a wave for Gibby to fall silent. "You're to watch him for a moment, then. Summon me at once if anything . . . unusual should happen."

"Yes, Master, yes," panted Gibby, ears flapping with the force of a vigorous nod. "Yes, as Master is wishing, yes, anything."

Lucius made a noise of vicious satisfaction and strode toward the door, leaving Harry's range of sight. His footsteps stopped, though, and his voice echoed again in the over-decorated room. "How fares Master Draco?"

"Ooh, the snakes is biting him something awful--"

"You did summon his wand away from him, I trust?"

"Oh yes, Gibby is always doing just as Master Lucius is wanting, yes, yes, yes. The elf started bowing, over and over, bobbing up and down like Lucius Malfoy was some sort of eastern king. "Gibby was banishing Master Draco's wand to Master Lucius' bedroom right away, yes, yes."

After that, there was nothing but silence. Harry didn't know if Lucius had left the room or not, but Gibby did seem to relax a bit. Not that it helped Harry any. He couldn't talk to the elf to try to enlist his help. And even if he could, Gibby didn't seem to be like Dobby, wanting freedom.

He concentrated on imagining his crest again, struggling to see it perfectly inside his mind's eye so that he could focus on the snake and break free from the spell that held him captive. Bugger all, he could imagine a snake! He'd always been able to do that. But it didn't help! As long as the snake was only a mental image, his powers refused to latch onto it and break free!

"Ah, still here," drawled Lucius as he came into Harry's line of sight again. He was wearing different clothes and robes now, and smelled of sea breezes. Just like Draco after he'd freshened himself with a charm.

Harry couldn't help but remember what Severus had said, about Draco being more like Lucius than any of them probably knew.

"Gibby, go watch Master Draco," instructed Lucius, before turning his attention to Harry. "I do fear you're overdressed, though," said the man in his smooth, condescending drawl. "The work on your eyes is so stunning that I simply must see how well Severus healed the rest of you. We'll start with your chest and work our way down. You don't mind, do you, Harry? After all, considering the . . . entertainments I have planned, clothes can only be a hindrance."

He held Harry's wand up before his eyes.

"Such a pity you dropped it, but then again, after the dear professor dealt you that blow, it was rather inevitable that I would take it from you. I shall present this to the Dark Lord as I intended to do all those months ago." Lucius' smile looked dangerous, now. "But first, there's another matter in need of attention. I've no intention of your taking my Lord by surprise once again. So, before I call to him, I think I shall have to find out just what you can and cannot do, eh? Especially considering . . . "

Another smile, this one both cold and inquisitive. "Rumour has it that your magic is oddly weak, these days, Harry . . . And yet you cast such an awful spell on me. It really is quite the mystery. But I intend to unravel it."
Lucius took two steps back, then waved Harry's own wand at him, his voice low and determined. "Imperio!"

Harry felt the familiar wash of the curse sliding over the surface of his brain, the sensation so more disorienting than it had ever been, before. Was that because he was under Petrificus? Or did it have to do with all that wild magic from before draining him? Or the long DisApparition?

All Harry knew was that the hum of Lucius' voice, inside his mind this time, was like a brightly glowing beacon inside the fog of his thoughts. And pleasant sounding, so very pleasant.

"When I release the binding spell, you won't attack me, Harry. You will disrobe, instead," the voice said, the sound of it worming its way into every crevice of his brain.

No, thought Harry, trying to Occlude. That should help, right? He still had enough of his own mind left to realise that much. To realise that Lucius merely wanted to shame him, so he'd be all the more likely to break under the tortures sure to come . . . No, no, I won't--

But the voice inside his mind just kept on, insidious, telling him what to do, making him want to do it. So focussed was he on his desire to obey, he barely took note of the actual spoken words that suddenly set him free from the Petrificus.

"Finite Incantatem," said Lucius, waving Harry's wand.

The voice inside was more important. "Disrobe, Harry. Start with your cloak. That's it . . . raise your hand to the clasp. Yes, like that. You're doing very well, Harry . . ."

It seemed so natural to just do it. Whatever he was told. Whatever that lyrical voice wanted . . .

But wait . . . his cloak? Wasn't there something special about his cloak? Something he really should be able to remember if he tried hard enough?

Something flickered, deep down at the base of his brain. A small flame. Nothing to it, really. It was barely an ember. But when Harry focussed on it, he remembered.

His cloak. His crest. If he could only get a good look at his crest, he'd get stronger, wouldn't he? He'd be able to reach down into his magic and throw off this spell that was so smothering he could hardly breathe . . .

Fighting the Imperius was like trying to swim through a vat of treacle. Harry's limbs were sluggish, slow to catch up to what he really wanted from them. His cloak was dangling from his hand now; he hardly remembered unclasping it.

No, no, the bad idea was doing what Lucius was demanded. Harry jerked his head down, trying to see his crest. When the folds in his cloak were hiding it, he began shaking his hand to make them go away. There it was, snake and lion standing side by side. Harry stared at it as he struggled to fight the Imperius. He could feel the magic inside him now. Coiled, poised to strike.
He was opening his mouth, the leading edge of a hiss rushing past his teeth when suddenly, the garment was ripped from his grasp.

Harry's view of the crest vanished as Lucius Malfoy raised the cloak up, holding it bundled in his hands.

"So you can resist Imperius, eh? Feebly, but still . . . And you want something here? I wonder what could that be."

Harry struggled to step forward, to claim the cloak back. The longer he fought the Imperius the easier it became, as if despite this terrible exhaustion, his mind and body were remembering who he really was. He knew how to do this, he did . . .

"This crest, perhaps?" snarled Lucius, poking a long finger into the mass of black fabric. Lucius made a scoffing noise. "Oh, yes, I know all about the provision in the Hogwarts' charter, but that's not why you wear this crest, is it? Theodore mentioned you could only cast magic in Parseltongue these days. Was that hissing I heard as you stared at this? Could it be you need to see a snake, Harry? Well, well, well."

For a long moment, Lucius just stared at him, a cruel smile hovering on his lips. And then, his teeth glinted. "Incendio insignia."

Harry longed to scream as his crest went up into flames right before his eyes. Smoke wafted all around him. Lucius didn't drop the robe until the flames were nearly at his hands. By that time, the crest was long since reduced to ashes.

His snake was gone, Harry thought dully. Some part of him wanted to curl up and just give in to the Imperius. What did it matter now, anyway?

The greater part of him, though, knew better than to listen to thoughts like that.

He struggled the rest of the way and finally managed to throw the mind-control spell off completely. The effort of that was enough to make him want to curl up again. He didn't think he'd ever felt this tired. But then again, he'd never had to fight Imperius just after he'd already drained himself by using wild magic, or dark powers, or whatever it had been.

He stood stock still, trying to get his breath. Not mention his bearings.

And all the while, he could still hear and feel Lucius inside his head, trying to control him. "Come now, Harry. Your little defiance has got you nothing. Now it's time to do as you were told. DISROBE. My guests will expect a good show . . ."

Harry clenched his muscles, readying himself to lunge at Lucius, when all at once, he remembered the things his father had said about the advantages of surprise.

Better to make Lucius think he'd won.

After all, it wasn't as though Harry had much chance of besting Lucius at the moment. He had to concentrate on calling up wild magic again . . . though he didn't know if he could produce another blast so soon after the first, or at will, for that matter. He didn't know how to summon it, not consciously.

So, better to play along. For now.

Groaning as though in defeat, Harry hung his head and let his muscles relax.

Harry felt sick to his stomach at the thought of baring himself before the likes of Lucius Malfoy, though really, he knew it outhn't be so difficult to obey. What did it really matter? It only proved what a sadistic arsehole Lucius Malfoy was.

Or, it proved that he had misjudged Harry. Lucius wanted answers, he'd said. He probably thought that humiliating Harry would get him some. Idiot. Samhain alone should have told Lucius that that wouldn't work. But then, Lucius never had been the sharpest knife in the drawer . . .

Moving sluggishly--like the monster in the Frankenstein movie he'd once caught on the telly--Harry lifted his fingers to his school tie and began to fumble with it.

Lucius laughed, low in his throat, Harry's wand almost dancing through the air as he directed Harry's every action.

Or so he thought.

The tie fell, snakelike, to the ground. Harry wished with all his heart that it was a snake, but he knew from experience that a substitute would do him no good at all.

And even looking too fixedly at it would probably alert Lucius to the fact that Harry was only pretending to be caught in the grip of Imperius.

He started to undo his buttons, fumbling over those as well, his every motion somewhat slow-witted.

"Such work Severus went to," breathed Lucius in mock awe as Harry's chest came into view. "Who would have guessed that just a few short months ago, you were skewered -- straight through in some places? Why, your skin looks perfect, Harry. A shame it was all for nothing." He flicked Harry's wand again. "Take that shirt off completely."

Lucius kept speaking as he watched Harry obey him. "Now, your Parseltongue magic being dependent upon a snake, that's very interesting, but I doubt it's the only secret you possess. And I will know your secrets, Harry, all of them, before I inform the Dark Lord that I managed to lay hands not just on Draco, but you as well. Oh yes . . . it wouldn't do at all to have him subjected again to those bizarre bursts of magic you seem so prone to." Stepping forward, Lucius tapped the tip of Harry's own wand all along the boy's bare shoulders. "I can see why your uncle thought you a freak. I can see why he locked you in that cupboard."

I could grab that wand right now, thought Harry. I could grab it and turn it on him . . .

Without a snake to cast with, though, what good would that do? Lucius would simply overpower him and grab the wand back, and Harry would have lost the precious advantage of surprise. So he simply stood still, his expression slack-jawed and brainless, as Lucius taunted him about his helplessness.

"Nothing to say, Harry? You were quite vocal on Samhain, as I recall. But then again, you're under a powerful curse. I suppose I shall have to release you from it if I want some answers. Pity I haven't any Veritaserum on hand. Lost my supplier, don't you know. Hmm. Well, no matter. If you won't tell me what I wish to know, Draco most certainly shall. And speaking of Draco . . ."

Lucius traced the wand along the waistband of Harry's trousers. "I suppose it would discomfit him too much if you were to disrobe further. Pity. But, there's time enough for that later. Mmm, yes, I'll save that performance for the Dark Lord's pleasure. In the meantime, I cannot have you misbehaving while I converse with Draco."
Lucius flicked the wand toward a high-backed chair in the corner. "Sit down, Harry," Lucius' mind voice urged. "Just have a seat and pretend you aren't a filthy little half-blood with no notion of proper manners . . ."

Harry struggled against the voice even as he obeyed it, fearing that in his pretence he might actually fall too deeply under the real spell. Focussing on his Occlumency should help, he thought. The fire would ultimately keep his mind free. Free to strike when the moment was right.

"Oh, how marvellous," said Lucius, smiling. "We can get along."

Lucius seated himself and crossed one leg over the other, the pose careless. But it was a pose; Harry sensed that at once. He'd seen Draco do this too many times . . . pretend to be at ease when he wasn't.

"I suppose it's fortunate that Draco's insipid betrayal has you following him around like a puppy. Though, I admit that when Aran firecalled to complain about my son, I'd no idea fate would favour me so completely as to deliver you both into my hands."

Lucius smiled smugly as he flicked Harry's wand. An elaborate porcelain cup of fragrant, steaming tea appeared at the end of the large, low table. He sipped at it delicately.

"I should have known that I could count on Dumbledore's utter ineptitude to supply me with an ally in the form of a ridiculous Defence professor. Thank Merlin some traditions don't die. So convenient having a sympathetic ear inside Hogwarts, especially when I need an escort to so much as enter the place. Aran serves very nicely indeed. Yes, the wards raise no objection to my presence just so long as a professor has invited me to floo through." Lucius suddenly laughed.

"Once again, you and Draco have been most helpful. Did you imagine that your silly defiance in Defence class would cost your your life, Harry? It's all turned out so well, I almost feel guilty punishing Draco." Lucius smiled in a way that showed Harry he wasn't regretting it in the least.

"Alas, he certainly didn't meant to be helpful when he betrayed me on Samhain, so I'm letting him consider his choices carefully. Dear me. I do hope he doesn't become too terribly ill from all those bites."

Harry hoped he didn't mean venom when he said that.

"But he's likely had enough time by now," drawled Lucius. He clapped his hands once more and the elf appeared. "Gibby, go fetch Master Draco from the pit. But as I'm certain he's soiled himself, get him into clean clothes. And not by just freshening the ones he's in. In fact, destroy those clothes." He smirked at Harry. "It wouldn't do at all for him to arrive with a Slytherin crest. Gibby, shrink some of my things to fit him, but take care to select nothing with a snake -- no embroidered borders or embossed buttons."

"Yes, Master Lucius," Gibby gibbered before disappearing once again. "Exactly as you wishes."

"Poor Harry," drawled Lucius. "You're like a helpless babe, aren't you? You've no magic unless a snake is at hand. Or a drawing, even. Such a pity we didn't conduct this little interview at the Manor, where all my best art is."

His tone was entirely conversational, as though they were chatting about nothing more serious than the weather in Wiltshire this time of year.

Harry pressed his lips together and kept a carefully neutral expression on his face while he Occluded.

"But then, there was that wild magic you exhibited earlier," mused Lucius, the fingers of one hand
stroking his own chin. "Most odd. I didn't see any snake images nearby then."

"No matter. Draco will tell me what I want to know," he went on after a moment. "Draco Snape, of all things. Honestly. What is the world coming to?"

Lucius sipped at his tea, though he kept Harry's wand pointed all the while. "No doubt you're sitting there thinking noble thoughts of Draco. Or would, if you could think past the power of my spell, that is. Ah, Harry..." Lucius made a tsking sound. "I happen to know Draco a great deal better than you ever will. His running off to Dumbledore after Samhain was really very predictable, when one considers it. It's all quite simple: you looked like the better prospect at that moment. But now? Oh, you don't look like a good prospect at all. Do you, now?"

Banishing his empty cup, Lucius went on. "And to think, you most likely believed that Draco was entirely on your side. Now, how Slytherin would that be?" A slight chuckle accompanied the man's condescending smile. "I almost pity you for not suspecting. You see, Harry, Draco wanted to be able to come back into the fold should your star fail to rise ascendant. So when he allowed himself to be adopted, he kept 'Malfoy' as part of his name. Draco Alain Gervais Malfoy Snape. You didn't really think he would turn his back on all this, did you?" Lucius added with a laconic wave about the room.

Harry remained silent though it took effort to do so, it really did. He knew he must appear to be held captive by the Imperius curse, but he wanted nothing more than to wipe the smirk off Lucius' face. To shout his defence of his brother's motives. Because what Lucius was saying couldn't be true, could it? Lucius is lying, he told himself. That's what he does. He lies.

"You do understand how lineage potions link to names, Harry?" mocked Lucius. "You'll know soon enough. Ah, and here he is now."

Lucius stood up. "Dragon. How good of you to join us."

Draco looked a wreck. His skin paler than parchment, his eyes fever-bright and glittering with stress above cheekbones dotted with crimson bite marks oozing pus. Small tremors were coursing through him from head to toe.

All in all, he looked like a stiff breeze might blow him over. Or blow him apart, perhaps.

Draco cleared his throat, then said in a croaking tone, "Hallo, Father."

"Hear how he calls me Father," said Lucius, his voice smarmy with satisfaction.

"Draco's just being Slytherin, Harry told himself. Playing along. Like I am. Nothing is what it seems. We both of us have one aim, and it's to fool Lucius long enough to find a way out of this mess..."

It bothered him, though, that his brother wouldn't meet his eyes.

Even worse, Draco's school robes were gone, and with them, the Slytherin crest. He was wearing thick velvet robes now, in emerald green, with buttons that sparkled like they'd been freshly polished. He looked like royalty... and also like he belonged.

Lucius made Gibby take his clothes, Harry told himself, almost frantically. Draco would want me to have a snake, he would. He can't help it that he's not wearing his crest any longer...

"We've been waiting for you, Draco," said Lucius. "I meant what I told you. The breach between us isn't irreparable. You can still come back to your rightful home and family. To your heritage. You can be presented to the Dark Lord tonight, to take his mark."
Draco's lips twisted. "Oh, is he so forgiving?"

"Forgiveness is . . . overrated," said Lucius. "The Dark Lord believes that if a man can't control his own son, he can't be trusted as a leader. It's important to our family that he sees you behaving properly. He may not forgive you, but he will accept you, if you can convince him you've seen the error of your ways."

"And you?" asked Draco, shoving his shaking hands into the pockets of his velvet cloak. "Accepting too, are you? Is that why you Portkeyed me into a pit full of vipers?"

Lucius shrugged. "Gibby spelled a purging potion into you. On my orders, so don't say I never did anything for you, Draco. Though you do look a bit . . . peaked. Gibby! Master Draco is all right, I trust?"

The elf began shaking as though in fear of a beating. "Gibby is not knowing! Gibby g- g- gave him the potion, of course, Master Lucius. B- b- but . . ."

"But what?" Lucius' glare caused the elf to find his tongue at once.

"Master Draco is being crazed!" said Gibby, yelping. "He was killing a snake and taking it out of the pit with him! But Gibby was finding it stuffed in his pocket! Gibby is thinking that Master Draco is not well at all--"

Harry had to struggle not to raise his eyebrows in respect. Or maybe even awe. *Draco had killed a snake? And tried to smuggle it out?* He couldn't imagine how hard that must have been for someone as terrified of snakes as Draco was.

Lucius' face flushed with anger as he rounded on Draco. "So, you know his secrets, do you? And you thought to help him. Him! Oh, yes, Draco! I know about Harry Potter and snakes. Did you really think you could deceive me?"

"Father, I-- it crawled in my pocket by itself!" said Draco, gasping, suddenly looking just about as crazed as Gibby had said. His cold anger and his poise vanished completely before the potent threat in Lucius' words. "I killed it because it was biting me, not because--"

"Silence!" roared Lucius. "You're lying even now! I always know when you lie, Draco! Remember that!"

Calming, Lucius continued in a cold tone. "It's quite clear that you know things, Draco. Things the Dark Lord would like to know as well. So, you'll talk now. You'll tell me about Potter's wild magic to start with."

"I don't know anything!"

"A pity I don't believe that. Why do this to yourself, Draco? You know you'll talk, sooner or later. You never could defy me."

Draco's legs were shaking so much by then that Harry though the boy would collapse as he said, "I-- I can't tell you things I don't know. Father, please--"

"We'll start with a wizard's beating or two and go from there," said Lucius in a cold voice as he thrust Harry's wand out in a threatening manner. "Flagarentum!"

Harry swallowed a gasp as his hands clenched in involuntary protest, but Lucius didn't seem to notice anything amiss.
Hearing the horrid spell, Draco flinched back, stumbling, almost tripping on the ornate rug. Harry expected screams any second. Screams, and pleading. But all Draco did was slowly right himself, blinking for a moment until a hard look crept into his eyes. "Wrong wand, Father. What happened to yours?"

Lucius gnashed his teeth. "You're foolish to challenge me like this. And over a half-blood . . . But then, you never were anything but foolish, Draco. There's no reason I can't send you right back into that snake pit. Perhaps I'll charm the snakes to be even more vicious. You can't kill them all."

"No, but they could well kill me," said Draco, still standing straight, though mention of the snakes had made his breathing laboured. He sounded like he was forcing himself to keep talking. "How many times in a row will the purging potion work? And how much will I tell you after I'm dead?"

"Foolish but he thinks he's clever," spat Lucius. "The same as ever. But you're helpless here, Draco! It's time you realised as much. The pit was charmed, you stupid, stupid boy! To track the bites so they could be inflicted again, as needed, without venom or the bother of throwing you back to the snakes. And Gibby has collected the spell. Gibby? Cast Mordesco."

Harry's mind raced as Lucius spoke. He couldn't let Lucius do this to Draco! Perhaps he was helpless to use magic without a snake, but Draco wasn't. Draco only needed a wand—something which Lucius had. Something which Harry could get for him, if Lucius was distracted enough . . .

The elf looked a bit ill, Harry thought, but he didn't hesitate to raise his hands and send an invisible curse towards Draco. Draco looked ill, too, even before the spell struck. He looked like he was regretting his defiance, in fact. Like he knew he'd break sooner or later, and it was foolish to provoke Lucius like this.

That was enough to push Harry over the edge. Focussing his mind, he felt the Imperius shatter completely. Again, Lucius didn't notice anything wrong, so completely was he caught up in watching his son cower.

As the invisible spell reached Draco, the boy convulsed, his features twisting in a horrible mixture of pain and disgust. Draco screamed, falling to the rug, his hands scrabbling against his legs and arms, moving frantically as though to rip snakes away from his body, over and over.

"He even sees them, I suspect," said Lucius in tones of pure enjoyment. "Pity you can't, eh?"

Lucius turned toward Harry just in time to see the youth lunge from his chair, hands outstretched to tear the wand from his grasp and toss it to his brother. Unfortunately, Harry was still exhausted. His muscles trembled, uncoordinated after the strain of the wild magic he'd done earlier. He lunged awkwardly for his wand, intending to toss it to Draco, but Lucius quickly yanked it out of reach, his other hand delivering a blow that glanced off the side of Harry's head.

In Harry's weakened state, though, even a mild blow was enough to send him reeling to the floor. Lucius growled, then sent a series of stinging hexes at him as he lay there. The pain so fierce it was almost crippling, Harry gasped to gain his breath.

And all the while, he could hear Draco screaming.

Another wave of the wand, and Harry was thrust back into the chair. Its wooden arms curled inward, towards his lap, tightening against him until he could barely even shift from side to side. Even his
arms were caught, held by the wrist at odd angles.

The more he struggled, the more the chair contracted.

"So, your brother's pain gave you the impetus to break free of my Imperius. How like a Gryffindor. So pathetically noble."

"You're sick! Stop it! Let him go!"

"I think not. I think your pathetic little stunt has just earned him even more pain. Gibby. Mordesco again."

Draco's screams took on a higher pitch as he writhed and twisted on the floor, trying to get away from the phantom snakes attacking him.

"Stop it! Stop it now!" Harry shouted. God, where was his wild magic? It ought to be flowing by now. He was angry enough . . .

**Angry enough.** Was that Draco's plan, then, to let himself be tortured until Harry's wild magic snapped free?

"No!" yelled Harry, trying to stop him. It wasn't going to work; he could tell! He couldn't make his wild magic lash out, not even to save Draco.

"Oh, so you'll talk, will you?" crooned Lucius. "To help your dear brother?"

"Yes!" screamed Harry, though of course he had no intention of telling Lucius anything useful.

"That will do for now, Gibby." Lucius drew a handkerchief from his pocket and wafted it over to Draco. "Wipe your face. You look a mess."

Draco sat up on the rug, his hand shaking so much he could barely lift the handkerchief.

Lucius took a step back and brandished his wand in a way that encompassed Harry and Draco both. "Well? Talk, Potter. Or it will be Cruciatus next, for Draco."

"I can do wild magic," said Harry. No harm in revealing that, right? Lucius knew it anyway. He'd want details, though, so Harry forced himself to go on. "It's the same as accidental magic. My uncle told you I could always do strange things without meaning to. It's just more of the same."

Draco sat up more, sitting cross-legged, panting, his head hung over his knees. He looked like he was struggling not to sick up.

"Your wild magic as I have witnessed it, is hardly more of the same," said Lucius, sneering. "It's bizarrely strong. What changed it?"

"You did, with all those needles!" spat Harry. Maybe it would make Lucius think twice about repeating the same tortures. "But don't ask me how. You think any of us understand the things that happen to me?" He barked a laugh. "I've always been, what's that word, an anomaly."

"Anomaly." Lucius' stare seemed to pierce right through him. "There's more, though, isn't there?"

"No, there's nothing more," Harry insisted, clenching his hands as he hid his true thoughts inside the fire. "Nothing you don't already know."

"Oh, but I think there is. Since nothing is in fact precisely what you've told me." Lucius' lips curled
in a grim smile. "So, what would make Draco suffer the most, Harry? Cruciatuus, or yet more bites? Perhaps both at once. Gibby--"

"No!" screamed Draco, shaking his head wildly as he jumped up, uncoordinated. Sweat had plastered his hair to his head. "No, no more, Father! I'll tell you! I'll tell you! Anything!"

"Ah. At last." As Lucius flicked the wand again, Draco stopped trembling. "There. The truth then, Draco. The whole truth."

But Draco didn't say a word. His eyes still screamed panic, but apart from that, he had a cagey look on his face as he stared at Lucius. "The truth . . . yes. I will tell you, fine. But . . . not until I know I won't just end up dead tonight, eh, Father?"

"I told you, the Dark Lord will welcome you back if you are truly penitent--"

"Bugger the Dark Lord!" snarled Draco, fists clenched. "I can tell when you're lying, too, you know. The only reason you want to take me to a meeting is so he can kill me himself. After the requisite torture, of course. And if that's to be my fate, I'd just as soon not provide you with the satisfaction of seeing me turn on Harry."

Lucius raised an eyebrow and gave a cool, calculated laugh. "Draco, you have done exceedingly wicked things this year, and disappointed me more than I can say. But you have been punished for all that, already. It isn't my intention that the Dark Lord kill you."

"Yeah, right. And the moon really is made of green cheese. I'm not exactly falling all over myself to believe in your good will towards me, Father. Want to guess why?" Draco yanked his robes and shirt down a bit from his neck to show a row of bite marks.

"You have picked up very vulgar manners." Lucius paused. "Very well then, Draco. You doubt my word, and in the circumstances I suppose I can hardly fault you. What would convince you, then?"

"Nothing." Draco shifted on his feet. "Even if you took an Unbreakable Vow not to let the Dark Lord hurt me, you couldn't really stop him, could you? I'm dead if I go anywhere near him, and I know it."

"Perhaps then . . . you needn't go near him, after all," said Lucius slowly. "Tell me something truly, Draco. Do you want to serve him?"

"No."

"Best I don't present you, then. You'd probably only endanger the family name, yet again. Disgrace that you are . . . What if I were to let you simply leave?"

Draco stared. "Come again?"

"You heard me." Lucius smiled, the expression thin. "Is an Unbreakable Vow surety enough for you? I shall promise not to take you before the Dark Lord, ever. Or encourage him, in any way, to come after you. But, I will need a vow from you, as well."

"It's a trick, Draco!" shouted Harry.

"Silencio," said Lucius calmly.

"What vow?" asked Draco, his tone suspicious . . . but intrigued.
"Tell me everything you know about Harry Potter."

Draco curled a lip. "Don't you think the terms are a bit vague? The vow would kill me if I forgot to mention what flavour of toothpaste he prefers!"

Lucius smiled. "Perhaps you could vow to tell me whatever I ask in the next . . . ten minutes?"

Draco narrowed his eyes, clearly thinking that one through. He opened his mouth to reply, but Lucius interrupted him.

"Oh, and I shall need one more thing from you. Surely you remember. Or were you so busy fending off the snakes that you couldn't attend to what I told you while you were in the pit?"

Draco blew out a breath. "That's asking . . . a lot. He's my brother."

"He's so much your brother you were ready to give him up," scorned Lucius, "until it occurred to you to bargain for more than a cessation of pain!" Lucius' tones grew smooth as butter, then. "If you won't do as I ask, I won't be able to trust you. I'll have to take you to the meeting, after all. And you are quite right about the Dark Lord's temper. Tell me, Draco . . . is there really any sense in both of you dying?"

*Don't listen to him, Draco!* Harry shouted, but the silencing wards around him swallowed the words.

"No. No sense us both dying." Draco's glance at Harry said that he was sorry, but not sorry enough to change course. "So, who's to be our bonder? I don't think an elf can do it."

"The familial form of the Vow, Draco," said Lucius in a chiding tone. "How much you've forgotten. You must watch your acquaintances from now on, as the wrong sort will make you less a wizard. Come now, kneel with me."

Harry watched helplessly as Lucius sank to his knees on the rug. For one moment, he hoped against hope that Draco was just bluffing somehow. This could all just be a ruse. Draco's true intention could be to grab something hard and heavy, and smash his father over the head with it.

But Draco knelt as well and bowed his head, looking down at the hand Lucius was holding out. After a moment of what seemed indecision, he sighed and extended his own, laying it at a slant across the other man's wrist.

Using Harry's wand, Lucius tapped their joined wrists three times in succession, murmuring something all the while, then looked up at Draco in clear expectation.

The boy shuddered, but began to speak, all the same. "Are you blood of my blood?"

"I am."

"Then I will answer your questions about Harry Potter during the next ten minutes, and I will--"

"Truthfully," said Lucius in a dangerous voice. "Amend your vow."

Draco made a slight face. "Then I will *truthfully* answer your questions about Harry Potter during the next ten minutes. And I will cast an attack spell against him. May I keep this vow, or die."

Lucius nodded as though satisfied. "And you, are you blood of my blood?" he asked.

"I am."

"Tell me everything you know about Harry Potter."

Draco curled a lip. "Don't you think the terms are a bit vague? The vow would kill me if I forgot to mention what flavour of toothpaste he prefers!"

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Lucius nodded as though satisfied. "And you, are you blood of my blood?" he asked.

"I am."
"Then I will never bring you before the Dark Lord, or cause him to seek after you. May I keep this vow, or die."

Lucius and Draco looked up then, together, and incanted the final part of the vow together. "This, we so swear."

A fiery cord appeared to bind their hands together for a moment, before flashing out of existence.

"Now," said Lucius as he pushed to his feet, his hand reaching out to help Draco as well, "tell me about his wild magic."

Harry wanted to shout at Draco not to, but of course he couldn't, and not just because he'd been silenced. The Unbreakable Vow . . . Draco would die if he didn't talk.

Harry blinked back tears. Oh, Draco, he thought, his heart breaking apart inside him. Don't you see? He only promised not to take you to Voldemort. He didn't say anything about not killing you, himself. And the minute you've told him what he needs to know, the minute he's made you hurt me, his cruel game will come to an end and you'll find yourself at the end of a blast of green light---

Draco nodded as he began to speak. "Potter lies. It wasn't the needles that sparked his wild magic. Not your needles, at least. It was Muggle medicine. Bone marrow. They removed some of his, and gave him healing potions that burned his magical core out--"

Horrified, Harry yanked himself so sharply in the chair that he made it jump up and crash back down. Angry at that, the chair squeezed him even harder.

Draco didn't appear to so much as notice Harry's desperation. Or Harry himself. Perhaps taking that vow had distanced him, and he no longer cared what he had to do to fulfil it. "The Healers said that Potter had no magic left, but then you saw what he did on Samhain. Dark powers, we figured that out, but he couldn't call on them when he wanted. He doesn't have any light magic, Father. But he learned, finally, that if he cast in Parseltongue he could reach his dark powers. But for that, he needs to see a snake."

Harry shoved again at the wooden arms holding him in the chair. Where the hell were his dark powers?

"No light magic at all? Interesting . . . Another question, Draco. When Potter caught sight of his crest, he started hissing. Yet he didn't have a wand in hand. Do snakes do his bidding, is that it? The way Nagini bends to the Dark Lord's will? But Potter can affect even a drawing?"

Draco swallowed, hesitating. Fighting the vow, after all? But in the end it seemed more powerful than his will. "No, that's not it, Father. He was trying to cast magic against you. You see, he doesn't need a wand any longer. All he needs is a snake. You'd best not let him see one. The second he does, he's dangerous. Wand or no."

Once he'd said it, Draco bit his lip and looked away, a guilty flush coming up under his skin. He began lightly rubbing his hands against the velvet cloak as if they were sweaty. Harry noticed that Draco's hands were covered in bites, the normally graceful fingers red and swollen.

"You've done well, Draco," said Lucius, nodding, his voice warm. "I think we ought to put an end to his magic by denying him his sight, once and for all. Don't you agree? There'll be nothing left to heal, not that Severus will have any opportunity to try . . . Gibby! Fetch me a silver spoon!"

When it appeared in Lucius' outstretched hand, Draco shivered.
"Do it," said Lucius, holding it out. "Gouge out his eyes."

Draco visibly squirmed, and made no move to step forward and take the spoon. "That wasn't part of the vow."

"No, but I never said that I wouldn't hex you again for disobeying me, now did I?" His voice hardened. "Take the spoon, Draco."

"I've always been squeamish, Father--"

Lucius laughed, the sound very slight. "And you think you'll be able to dredge up enough will to cast Cruciatus? If you can't even do this, you'll die of broken vow!"

Draco drew in a deep breath. "I . . . I know you're right, b- b- but--"

"You're lucky I'm letting you work up to it!" roared Lucius. "Do it, Draco! Or everything you just told me will have been for nothing, do you understand? You will die!"

"Y- yes, Father." Draco walked to Lucius then, his steps shaky. He started babbling again, as though convincing himself. "I know I have to. Cruciatus and all, just like you said. And he'll be dead tonight anyway, so what does it matter . . ." Spoon in hand, Draco turned towards Harry. 'H- h- hold still, Potter . . . that chair'll just h- hurt you more if you struggle . . ."

"Draco," breathed Harry, appalled on so many levels he thought he'd faint from it. From somewhere, he dimly registered that Lucius must have lifted the silencing spell. The better to hear his screams, no doubt. "No, Draco. Fight him, for God's sake! It's not like you're under Imperius! You don't have to do a horrible thing like this--"

Instead of answering, Draco brought a hand up to rest atop Harry's skull, his swollen fingers weakly struggling to hold the other boy's head in place. His other hand awkwardly gripped the spoon. Draco's face twisted into a grimace as if the task literally pained him. Still, he placed the spoon up at the base of Harry's left eyeball and began to shove.

Harry thrashed and tried to throw the other boy off.

"Enough!" barked Lucius.

Draco kept the spoon in place, though he eased off the pressure as he looked over his shoulder. "Father?"

"I can't tell you how pleased I am," said Lucius, looking almost warm with affection. "Very gratifying indeed. However, we'd best not damage his eyes. For now, at least. The Dark Lord may want to . . . experiment with his dark powers. Not to mention, read his thoughts right down to the bottom of his soul. Hmm, but neither can we let him keep his sight, considering the Dark Lord may well bring Nagini when he comes . . ."

"Vendo Oculi Utriusque?" suggested Draco, almost diffidently as he stepped back. "That shouldn't interfere with whatever the Dark Lord wants to do, later."

"Oh, that will work admirably well." Lucius pointed Harry's wand and repeated the Latin words Draco had just said.

And that was the last thing Harry saw. Darkness descended like shutters over his vision, snapping shut, blocking out all hope of sight. Enraged, he struggled against the chair still holding him in place, curses breaking over his teeth as he strained with all his might.
"Should we let the blind boy up?" Chuckling, Lucius didn't wait for an answer. "I think not, considering all the trouble he's put me to this year. Look at him! Entirely too defiant. Well, that will soon change. Time to fulfill the rest of your vow, Draco. Just as well, really. The Dark Lord didn't appreciate his spirit, last time. Yes, it would be wise to... soften Potter up a bit. And really, Muggle tortures are so very tedious. *Cruciatus* is in order."

Draco's laugh was curt. "And you've arranged it so I have no alternative. Clever, Father."

"Potter's entirely too soft-hearted," spat Lucius. "It's ten times more likely to break his spirit when it comes from a friend. A *brother*. So of course it had to be you."

"Of course," said Draco dryly. "Will once be enough, do you think?"

"Don't be cheeky, Draco." The man's voice hardened as he went on speaking. "To practical matters, then. I know you can't help but resent my stratagem with the Portkey. So while I know you must of course attack Potter or die, I've taken measures to be sure that's all you can do. I've had your wand for weeks, you understand. You aren't the only Malfoy who can brew a potion restricting its use. I assume I make myself clear?"

"Very," said Draco, a little bitterly. "I noticed how well it worked against the snakes, Father. I'll need my other wand before I go, you realise. One that works only against Harry Potter isn't terribly useful in the greater scheme of things."

"You will have it, as soon as you've shown *him*, and me, that you hate him, after all. *Cruciatus* requires intent, don't forget. Of course, you should hate him. You should have, all along."

"How could I?" asked Draco, his voice thrumming with anger. "I needed him! What did you expect me to do? You were trying to kill me!"

"You deserved as much after betraying your blood for a half-blood!" said Lucius in a low snarl of a voice. But then his tone became gentler. Almost... fatherly. "Besides, Draco, I was never truly going to kill you. I merely wanted to get you home so I could make you see sense."

Draco's voice, almost cracking with stress, seemed to be made of nothing but desperation and pain. "I see it, all right? At this point, it would be hard to miss! Potter's magic is unreliable at best, Dumbledore's a fool, and Snape couldn't protect me, after all. He probably hasn't even figured out yet that we're in France. I'll do better making my own way from now on."

Lucius made a clicking noise. "Oh, Draco... you know, I could still tell the Dark Lord that you've seen the error of your ways. I can't bring you before him now, of course, but if you came on your own, at his invitation...?"

"To be killed?" Draco's brief laugh sounded bitter. "I don't think so."

"Ah, well. If you're determined to live without allies, then so be it. Gibby? Give Master Draco his wand."

For a moment, Harry heard nothing but silence. And then Draco's voice echoed in the room, his tone all of a sudden almost... *loving*.

"You were right, Father. It does sing with my magic."

Lucius' reply rang with confidence. "Potter there doesn't believe you can cast with it, you know. *He* thinks you aren't still a true Malfoy. I suppose he'll soon know differently, eh?"
"Yes." Harry heard footsteps approaching him, and the swish of a wand being waved in practise strokes. And then, Draco's voice again, his tones cruel, his words mocking. "Scared, Potter?"

The question threw Harry back in time. He blinked, startled, trying to believe what it seemed like he was hearing. It was more than a little difficult, after Draco had taken an Unbreakable Vow to hurt him, and spilled his secrets, and almost thrust a spoon beneath his eyeball, and then, if that wasn't enough, been the one to suggest a blindness spell!

It was hard to have faith in anything, after all that.

But what if it had all been one long feint? What if Draco had been working towards this end since the moment he'd entered the room? Angling, manoeuvring, saying and doing anything Lucius required, as long as it would bring him to this moment, when he could stand before Harry, a wand in hand, and taunt him with that very question?

So that Harry would understand, and be prepared.

And Harry was prepared. "You wish," he spat back, keeping to the code Draco had adopted.

So his brother would know he was ready.

He heard the wand moving in a violent arc, and then, the most welcome word in the whole world.

"Serpensortia!"

Harry couldn't see the snake, but he could feel the air rushing out of the way as something flew towards him, landing right in his lap. And the moment he sensed the snake, real and heavy atop his legs, Parseltongue bloomed inside him like a flower straining towards the light.

"Give me my wand and turn to stone!" he hissed, thrusting both his hands up in the direction Lucius' voice had last come from. Bound as he was, it was awkward, but then again, aim probably didn't even matter very much. He'd keyed the first spell to his own wand, which Lucius would still be holding onto. The second spell couldn't help but follow in the wake forged by the first.

Harry's wand sailed into his right hand, though his arms were still held fast by the horrible chair.

He heard another noise then. A thud, something heavy hitting the hard floor, the noise only slightly muffled by the opulent rug. Then all was still and quiet. Eerie. Like a tomb.

Harry ran a hand along the snake's back, murmuring assurances to the viper that he was no threat. He was soothed by the smooth feel of the snake and it seemed that his words soothed the snake as well. It became docile, its muscles relaxing against Harry's legs.

That done, Harry twisted his hands to point his fingers at the arms of the chair keeping him in place. "Release me," he hissed.

But the chair didn't react.

Draco made a strangled noise, his voice emerging weak and shaky, like he was just about ready to collapse. "What are you saying n- now? Lucius looks g-good and fr-frozen . . ."

"I'm talking to the chair," said Harry, focussing on Draco's voice to help him shift back into English.

"G- G- Gibby, make the chair let Harry Potter g- g- go."

Harry heard agitation and squeaks as Gibby insisted that the chair had been spelled by the master
himself and wouldn't do the bidding of a house-elf.

"I- it'll listen to me, I think," said Draco. "Let me just . . . oh, shite. This fucking wand can't do anything but cast nasty spells at you! It wasn't even any use down in the pit, not that fucking Fibby there let me keep it for very long. Hold on, Harry . . . I have to go get the other one . . . from h- h-him."

Footsteps, barely audible against the rug, crossed the room.

Harry felt like he might scream. What was taking so long? He struggled against the chair, only to feel the wooden arms dig sharply into his thighs. He was pretty sure he must have an interesting collection of bruises by now. Thank God for the snake in his arms; petting it was about the only thing that helped calm him.

"Here," said Draco after a moment, his voice right alongside. Distracted, Harry hadn't heard him approaching. "Liberslui."

The chair unwrapped itself from Harry, who scooped up the snake as he moved to get up. The viper resisted Harry's admittedly clumsy attempt at blind handling, hissing all the while about the condition of the other boy's face, asking why so many snakes had bitten him.

Harry winced in sympathy as he responded. "I'm sorry if I startled you, before," Harry told the snake, trying to soothe it. Best not to mention the snake Draco had killed, probably. "That's my nestmate, Draco. The big man who has stopped moving threw him into a hole full of snakes. It wasn't Draco's fault he frightened the snakes and they bit him. He cannot speak to snakes like I can. He won't hurt you, but you frighten him. Could you be still for a while?"

"A-are you trying to do a spell to see?" Draco asked tentatively. He seemed willing to move a little closer now that the snake was still and quiet. "Let me remove the spell on your eyes, Harry."

Something pointed and hard touched Harry's face, just beneath his left eyebrow. Harry couldn't help but flinch wildly, though he kept enough presence of mind to hold fast to the snake with one hand while the other lashed out. The viper started hissing as Harry's wand hand, clenched into a fist, connected with something solid.

"Ow, Harry!" yelled Draco. "I'm sorry about before, all right? I had to! But now I'm just trying to remove the blindfolding spell!"

Glowering, Harry lowered his fist. "Blindfolding spell? That wasn't a blindness spell, then?"

"It's used for children's games, for Merlin's sake! Easy to reverse," said Draco, sounding panicked still. "Look, I'm really sorry, but if I hadn't suggested it, Lucius might have thought of something a whole lot worse!"

Since the hissing snake wasn't helping the other boy's state of mind, Harry went back to petting it, trying to make it relax. Too bad it wasn't as easy to calm himself. He could hardly stand the thought of anything near his eyes. Draco only meant to help him; Harry knew that. But still, he couldn't help feeling pretty insecure about his eyes at the moment. It wasn't just what Draco had almost done. It was all the things Lucius had said, and how his evil threats had made Harry's memories of Samhain look large in his mind. But surely the best way to banish them would be to get his eyesight back.

Teeth clenched, Harry nodded for Draco to get on with it.

"Just make sure that damned viper doesn't bite me--"
"It won't," Harry ground out, irritated until it came to him that the snake coiled there sort of made them even. Draco didn't want to come near it, just as much, probably, as Harry didn't want to be touched. But they were both stuck.

Harry couldn't help but sigh. "Just hurry up and do it, would you?"

He heard Draco moving towards him again, but then he heard something else as well. A shuffling, scrabbling noise, coming from the direction where he'd heard the thud.

Lucius, trying to get up.

Harry didn't have time to think about how to react. Pure instinct shot through him like a bolt of lightning, thrusting his wand hand up and toward the sounds, even as his full concentration returned to the snake resting against his other hand. Feeling Parseltongue blooming inside him again, he screamed, "Turn to stone and stay that way, this time!"

He felt the spell burn up from his gut before exploding out through his wand.

A single shriek of unbearable agony echoed in the room, and was suddenly cut short. Another thudding noise, this one much louder than before, broke the silence. From beside him he barely registered the gasp that interrupted the similar spell his brother had just begun to cast.

Harry eyes suddenly filled with a harsh burst of light, white and yellow starbursts that slowly resolved themselves into normal vision. The first thing he saw was Draco, standing right alongside, looking almost as if he was the one who'd been petrified. He was working his jaw, obviously trying to speak but having trouble forming the words.

Gibby had the opposite problem. "M- M- Master Lucius is, M-Master Lucius is turned to stone!" the elf shrieked, beginning to tug at his ears like he was trying to rip them off. "Gibby was not doing enough to protect Master Lucius! Gibby had better be punishing himself!"

"Gibby had better be quiet!" snapped Draco.

The snake in Harry's lap raised its head and flickered its tongue in Draco's direction. Draco leapt back about a yard.

The viper nodded, then settled down against Harry's legs.

Harry looked up at Draco, who cleared his throat as he stepped back several paces, his wand still drawn on Lucius, his turquoise amulet dangling from his other hand.

"Best put that on until we're back home safely," Harry said.

"Yeah, it was in his pocket with---" Draco's eyes widened, as he jerked his face toward his brother. He looked mildly ill, which made sense considering all the bites. What didn't make sense, though, was how he was losing more colour right before Harry's eyes. "You can see again?"

Harry nodded, trying to smile. It was hard, though. He just felt . . . drained. And not just because of the wanded magic. It was because of everything else, too. Lucius' awful threats. Draco's pretended betrayal. Being blinded and thinking he was dead for sure, since he couldn't see a snake in that condition.

Draco had remembered, though, that touching one--even an invisible one--could also help Harry shift into Parseltongue. If not for Sals and the camouflage potion . . . a little shiver coursed through Harry. Luck had really been with them, all along. When he thought of what might have happened . . .
Remembering the snake, Harry gently lowered it to the floor as he stood up from his chair. As if sensing the tension in the room, the snake silently slithered around in a circle, coiling itself. "Now that I can see I'll try not to disturb you again," Harry hissed at it. "Can you try to sleep?"

"Are you sure?" asked Draco, interrupting his thoughts.

It took Harry a second to catch his meaning. "Am I sure I can see? Well, yeah, I'm pretty sure!"

Draco blew out a breath, looking . . . well, Harry wasn't sure. Sort of closed off. Like too much had happened, and he wanted to just wall himself off from it. His eyes lost almost all expression, and when he talked, his voice was perfectly flat. "Oh. Well, then, I think you must have killed my-- I mean, I think you've killed Lucius."

Harry took a good look at Lucius. He'd glanced that direction before, just long enough to check that Lucius had snapped into the rigid position of Petrificus and fallen harmless to the floor, but he hadn't really thought about what he'd seen. Or, not much. He certainly hadn't believed the man dead.

But was he, really?

Harry edged forward to look more closely. Lucius Malfoy was lying arms straight by his sides, legs straight and feet pointed up. Only his hair and clothes were splayed about a bit. But he was white. Not white like Draco was . . . no, this colour wasn't a flesh shade washed clear of blood. Lucius was absolutely stark, blazing white, clothes and all. The colour of the paper envelopes Uncle Vernon had used for business . . .

When Harry looked closely, though he could see that the white was shot through with spidery veins of palest grey. Exactly like marble.

"Oh my God," breathed Harry. "He's-- he's a statue. And . . . you think you actually think I've killed him? Are you sure?"

Draco nodded, the motion stiff, his voice carefully level. "The blindfolding spell vanished. And it would, you know, at the moment of . . ."

Harry pressed his lips together and shook his head. "But . . . but wasn't that was just a temporary spell, anyway?"

"Yes, but it still requires a counterspell to be lifted. Now, it can be cast with a time limit for specific games and such, but Lucius didn't use one. Though I believe the standard spell wears off in about 24 hours if not removed."

Harry moved away from the marbleized form on the floor. "Well, you know I broke out of your Petrificus on my own that time. Maybe since this was so harmless I broke out of it on my own without even meaning to. And . . . and besides aren't there still wards and such up?"

Draco paused as if to try and sense them. "Yes, but there would be. Temporary spells are just different from permanent charms and wards, Harry. And it's an awful coincidence that you'd break the spell the moment Lucius turns to stone." Draco hugged his robes more tightly around himself. "Maybe Severus will know for certain, but . . . I'd say he's, um, dead."

Harry's legs quivered alarmingly. To keep from falling over, he hurriedly sat down, but he was careful to avoid the chair he'd been trapped in for so long. Actually, he didn't trust any of the chairs, so he sat down on the floor, right next to the sleeping snake. He kept his hands out and ready, though, just in case the rug attacked him next.
Shaking his head didn't really help clear it. He just couldn't really believe it was all over, that Lucius could never hurt him again. It was too much to take in. "Um, maybe he's dead at the moment, but it's like uh . . . suspended animation, maybe. You think?"

Draco looked at Harry as if he was barmy. "What?"

"I mean I could probably undo it," Harry answered in a rush. "Not that I want to, all right? But look, you didn't see what happened with Nott. It was pretty bad but when I ended the spell he was good as new."

"Harry," Draco drawled, "Nott was never dead." He paused to pluck at the fabric of his robe like it was uncomfortable against his skin. "I suppose now you're going to tell me that you're powerful enough to resurrect people?" he added, his glare challenging Harry to make that claim.

Gibby's voice, high-pitched and keening, broke the silence. "M- M- Master Draco? What should Gibby be doing now? Should Gibby be returning to the manor? Should Gibby be informing the other elves? Should--"

"Gibby should go throw his worthless self into the snake pit," announced Draco in a voice that was arctic, it was so cold. "And Gibby? Do be sure to key the Mordesco spell to inflict bites only on you from now on."

"Draco--"

"Shut up, Harry. I know what I'm doing."

"No, wait," Harry insisted. "Gibby, did Lucius have something on hand for snake bites? You know, a real antidote, not just a purging potion?"

Gibby just wrung his hands and looked mournfully at Draco, as if afraid to give any reply at all.

Draco glared down at the elf. "Well, Bibby? Answer him, you little green shite!"

"Master Lucius was keeping more potion that would be fixing snake bites better--"

"And you were planning on telling me this precisely when?" drawled Draco in a voice that gave Harry chills from head to toe.


"Quit wasting my time and bring it to me! And while you're at it, get me the baume curatif!"

A tall bottle and squatty jar appeared on a nearby side table with a small pop. As Draco began to examine them, Harry retrieved his shirt and put it on while addressing Gibby, who had gone back to thudding his head against the floor. Draco either hadn't noticed that, or didn't care.

Probably the latter, Harry decided.

"Gibby, stop punishing yourself and answer these questions; they're important. Is there anyone else in this house with us right now -- elves or wizards or anyone? Are there any owls here? And, were you given instructions to make preparations for any guests aside from Draco and me? Or for any meetings to be held here?"

Gibby ignored Harry.
"Tell us!" growled Draco. "Tell us everything, or I'll do a lot worse than throw you to the snakes!"

Gibby remained crouched on all fours on the floor but stopped bashing his head as he looked up. "Harry Potter and Master Draco and . . . that," his glance flicked toward the marble form of Lucius Malfoy, "is the only wizards here. No elves but Gibby. No owls, but there is 127 snakes in the pit . . ." Gibby looked over to Draco nervously. "Should Gibby be preparing for company? Master Lucius, he only was telling Gibby to look after Master Draco--"

"Look after?" Draco spat. "Ha, very funny, Wibby! What are you still doing here, eh? I thought I told you to throw yourself in the snake pit! Well? Get going!"

Gibby Disapparated with a pop. One look at Draco, and Harry didn't bother to argue about it, though he couldn't help but clear his throat sort of loudly. Funny, that really hurt. He hadn't screamed that much in Parseltongue. Which reminded him . . .

"Um, what are we going to do with . . . uh, him?"

Draco's eyes glittered, hard silver without remorse. "Personally, I'd like to take a hammer and chisel to him and knock out his eyes. But I suppose that would occasion a long lecture from Severus. Revenge is bad for the soul. Like I give a flying fuck--"

"Severus," Harry interrupted. That was what mattered. "How are we going to get him here? Floo?"

"Oh, please! If this place was on the network don't you think I'd have tossed in some powder by now?"

"No owl either," added Harry, thinking. "We could walk until we reached a Floo, I guess. Not that I know where we are or where to look."

"We're in France, like I said. At Lucius' summer house. Harry, the nearest Floo is at least a hundred miles away and since Lucius would just Apparate everywhere, he didn't keep any brooms here."

"All right, then I guess you'd better Apparate us both back to Hogwarts and--"

"Did I ever claim I could do Side-Along?"

"Then just go alone," said Harry impatiently. "Get Severus!"

"Yeah, well you might be used to the idea that sixteen-year-old wizards can do any damned thing, Harry," snapped Draco, "since you apparently can, but I can't make it that far, all right? I'll end up splinched in the English Channel! And besides, I'm not mental enough to leave you here all alone with that."

Draco suddenly picked up a vase and chucked it at the still, stone-like form of Lucius Malfoy. The statue didn't react in the slightest.

Harry waited until Draco's breathing slowed down. "I think I can manage to guard him," he said then, lifting his wand a little. He didn't want to brag, really; it was just the truth.

"Yeah, well we still don't know whether Lucius told anyone that he was bringing us here," muttered Draco. "Though that seems unlikely. He couldn't have known I was going to drop by Defence like that. Still . . . Oh, hell. I guess with the Dark Lord roaming France these days it would be stupider to leave the wards than stay. So we need to get Severus here. Hmm."
Draco lowered himself into a richly upholstered chaise lounge, the jar of ointment in his hands. "All right, I've got it. It really used to irritate me, but now I suppose it's just as well you do such an impressive *Patronus*. So, you send Severus a silver message and--"

"I did," said Harry, a little sourly. "When I heard you in the classroom with Lucius. And he never came! I don't know if my message got lost, or what."

"It's a ten minute walk from Defence to Potions," said Draco with a pointed stare. "Just how fast do you think your stag runs? You aren't Merlin himself, Harry!"

"Yeah, well still," said Harry.

Then he looked at Draco, who just snorted and rolled his eyes in exasperation. Harry couldn't help but smile a bit, though he wasn't sure what was funny. Or maybe nothing was. But he felt so relieved that Lucius was no longer a threat, and if their worst problem was finding a way to get in touch with their father . . . well, that wasn't so bad.

All of a sudden, Harry started feeling an odd urge to laugh, though he still would have sworn that nothing was funny. He actually had to bite his lip to stop from giggling. What on earth was wrong with him? Here Draco thought that he'd killed Lucius! Even if Draco was just as relieved as Harry about the whole thing, laughter was hardly appropriate.

At any rate, the strange urge faded when Harry noticed Draco gingerly removing the opulent robes he'd been given to wear. He moved like he was in some amount of pain, and no wonder. Bite marks, puffy and red, were strewn up and down his brother's arms. Harry felt slightly queasy just looking at them, and the feeling only got worse when he took a closer look at Draco's swollen, dusky coloured fingers. How on earth had Draco managed to hold his wand straight?

"Do you, ah, need any help?" Harry asked, his voice quivering a bit more than he'd like. He couldn't help but remember how he'd felt recovering from all those punctures after Samhain. Of course, he hadn't much wanted help, had he? Madame Pomfrey's fussing had been enough to drive him mad.

"I think I can reach everything," Draco snapped. "And it's not like you need to watch either, unless you're wanting to gloat that I got to experience some of that Death Eater attention that I used to be so keen to see you endure!"

"No!" Harry protested, torn between looking away to give him privacy, or meeting his gaze to reassure him. "Draco, that never even crossed my mind, I swear! I wouldn't have wished this on you in a million years. It looks like it hurts like bloody hell and I just feel like shite because it's all my fault!"

"My father being a sick, sadistic arsehole is your fault exactly how?" Draco's glare faded as he sighed. "Look, I shouldn't have said you'd gloat. I bet Gryffindors don't even know how. I'm just--feeling a mite tetchy, yeah? And some of these itch like hell and . . ."

Harry shrugged. "S'all right. Um, maybe you should try that antidote, then? You seem a bit shaky still." Actually, *shaky* wasn't really the word. Draco seemed like he needed an emergency session with Marsha. His moods were swinging so wildly Harry felt dizzy just watching. But he didn't think it would help much to say so.

Draco began frowning as he examined the tall bottle on the table. "I don't recognise that potion and I'm not about to poison myself by taking too much. I think I've a bit of a fever, but it's not too bad, so I'll just settle for the balm." He slanted a wry look at Harry. "Besides, there's no telling what Lucius could have done to the contents of that bottle."
"Then what makes you think that the balm is safe?"

Draco motioned to the jar's label. "Well, that's written in Severus' hand. If he made it, it's safe."

"But Lucius could have--"

"Yeah, he could have, but he didn't," interrupted Draco. "This isn't even for snake bites, see? He wouldn't know I'd ask for it. It's just a painkilling salve I've used lots of times." Another wry glance. "Anyway, the way these are hurting worse all the time, I think I'll just take the chance."

With that, Draco began smearing salve across the bite marks dotting his face, chest, and arms. No doubt there were others, lower down.

Harry turned away to give Draco some privacy. Collecting his robe from the floor, he busied himself with poking at the hole left when Lucius destroyed his crest. Hmm, too bad his spare ones weren't still stashed in the pocket.

Glancing at the sleeping snake, Harry tried a few wandless \textit{Reparo} spells and gradually got his cloak looking presentable.

After a while he heard Draco sigh. When Harry glanced over, the other boy was doing up the buttons on his shirt, again. "There, that's better. Well, some. So Harry, I think I'm just going to rest for a bit. Just in case I have to try Apparating after all. I mean, I don't like the idea, but what else is there? Severus doesn't know about this place; we can't just grow old waiting here for him to figure out where we are . . ."

Harry absently rubbed at some of the bruises the chair had left on his arms. He kind of wanted the healing cream too, but not enough to actually use it. He still thought Draco had been mildly insane to take the risk. Definitely, they needed to get his brother to Marsha.

When he thought of what Draco had just been through . . . but the important point, he supposed, was that Draco had \textit{come} through.

For Harry.

"Thanks," Harry said, walking towards his brother. "I mean it, Draco. You could have decided there was no way out and you'd be better off . . . um, leaving me to my fate."

Draco looked down at his hands, then suddenly shoved them in his cloak pockets. "No, I couldn't."

"Well, probably not," admitted Harry. "I was pretty sure Lucius was going to get around his vow by killing you himself. But I wasn't sure if you knew it."

"I knew it," said Draco, looking up, his gaze steady on Harry's face.

Harry couldn't help but flush. "I . . . um, I hope you can forgive me. Because . . . well, I'm pretty ashamed of myself, but for a minute or two there, I sort of thought I . . . um, couldn't trust you. I'm really sorry. I mean, I'm \textit{really} sorry--"

Draco twisted his lips. "What, you doubted me? Just because I told Lucius about your wandless magic and took an Unbreakable Vow to attack you? Not to mention, almost popped your eye out?"

"Yeah that would do it," said Harry thickly, shuddering as he thought about that spoon. "Look, I . . . um, I understand now, that you had to get into Lucius' confidence so he'd hand you that wand but . . . \textit{God}, Draco! What were you going to do if he hadn't called a halt to the eye thing?"
"I knew he would."

"But what if he hadn't?"

"I knew he would."

Harry raised his voice. "Yeah, well what if he damned well hadn't?"

"What do you think I would have done, Harry?" asked Draco, his pale cheeks spotted with colour, now. "Gouge out your eyes to prove myself to Lucius? Thanks! Thanks a whole fucking lot!"

"You were pretty damned convincing!"

"I had to be convincing, you nitwit!" Draco took a deep breath. "I mean why else would I have put myself through the agony of resisting at first? You think that was fun for me, letting myself get hexed? With Mordesco? Well, it wasn't! But after everything I'd done this year, Lucius wasn't going to believe I'd betray you just like that!" Draco snapped his fingers.

Harry actually hadn't thought of that. Draco's bravery at first, his resistance . . . that had all been part of the plan? "Um . . ."

"Oh, just listen," snapped the other boy. "I wasn't going to hurt you, Harry. I just wasn't! I knew Lucius would stop me. There was no way he'd deny the Dark Lord the chance to Legilimise you. Not to mention that last time, he punished Lucius for just roughing you up. But if he hadn't stopped me," Draco raised his voice when Harry opened his mouth, "I was damned well going to mention all that myself, all right? I was waiting until the last second because it was better for Lucius to be the one to call it off. And if you can't see that, then you're just a complete twit, aren't you--"

"I can see it!" Shaking his head, Harry tried to calm down. "I mean, I can see it now, all right? But not then. And I am sorry I doubted you. I . . . I hope we can, um, go back to the way we were before this all happened . . ."

"No Potter, I have to hate you forever and ever now," drawled Draco.

Harry scowled. He didn't think that was very funny.

"Look, Harry," said Draco in a more normal voice. "You were supposed to believe I was giving you over. I did everything I could to make you believe it. Because if your reactions weren't . . . right, then Lucius would have known something was up. You did exactly what I wanted. Exactly what we needed. I'm not about to hold it against you. So . . . just get over it, all right?"

Harry nodded, then. "All right." Shivering a bit, he pulled his school robe tighter around himself. "And for the record I'd have forgiven you. You know, if you'd had to hurt me as our only chance of escape."

"Harry, I wouldn't have. At least I wouldn't have done anything really bad. I couldn't."

_Dad would have. He did on Samhain, because it was the only way he could be in place to save me._ . . Harry shook his head a bit. So Draco wasn't quite as strong and ruthless as their father was. Not many people were.

Dismissing that thought, Harry crossed his arms. "Well, I do wish I hadn't doubted you. But in my own defence, I'd like to point out that you're supposed to be a bad liar! What ever happened to that, eh?"
"Occlumency, that's what happened. Good thing you told Severus to teach me." Draco shrugged on his cloak, the velvet billowing slightly. "I'm not very good at it, really, but it does help me focus on what I want to . . . er, project, I guess, Marsha would say. Not that she approves of lying. Anyway, Severus could see straight through me when we practiced, but then again, he's a much stronger Legilimens than Lucius was ever going to be."

Draco sank back against cushions. "Harry . . . I can't blame you for thinking what you did. I mean, when I first switched sides, it was because I thought I'd be better off with you. So I guess it's not so surprising that you'd think I might change my mind again. You even told me back at Christmas that you worried about that very thing. But I want you to know . . . everything's different now, all right?" The boy cleared his throat, but he didn't look away. "I knew when I was down in that snake pit that I had to stick with you even if things got . . . ugly. Anything else . . . it just wasn't on."

"So you tried to bring me a snake," said Harry. He had to smile at the thought. For Draco to even attempt that . . . it said a lot. An awful lot.

"Not at first, I didn't. I figured you'd defeat Lucius and all I had to do was not go mad while I waited for you and Severus to find me." Draco's nostrils flared. "What happened?"

"I almost cooked Lucius with wild magic. But then Aran snuck up and cast a body-bind on me."

"What an arse! After he saw me Portkeyed out, too. Arse isn't the word." Draco gave a little shudder. "I knew something had gone wrong when Lucius stopped by the pit for a moment. He said he had you, and in case they traced the Floo, he'd laid a trail to the Manor. Boasted that by the time Dumbledore broke through the wards, and found you weren't there, you'd be dead. And that was when I started thinking about how to get us both out. Lucius didn't know about your wandless magic, so I thought we'd have the advantage of surprise if I could just get you a snake. I figured your glasses and crest must be gone already, but I had my crest, and once I'd killed that snake I had a back-up plan as well. But then stupid Gibby took them both away and I realised that Serpensortia was probably our only chance."

Draco sighed. "I wasn't expecting Lucius to make me vow to tell your secrets. I wouldn't have done it, except it went along with promising to attack you, and I knew that meant I'd get my wand. I figured you'd incapacitate him, and afterwards we'd get Severus to Obliviate him so the wandless magic thing would still be a secret."

Harry chewed his lip for a minute as he thought all that over. "Well, if he's not dead we'll make sure he gets a thorough Obliviate, yeah . . ."

"Harry, he's dead!"

Harry sighed. "He couldn't be sure if Draco just wanted to believe that, or if it was really true. But Severus would help them sort it all out, so Harry stopped worrying about whether he was a murderer now or not. Something else was bothering him. Had been bothering him all along, in fact. "Draco . . . why on earth did you touch that wand back at Hogwarts? When I burst in your hands were in your pockets, like you knew it had to be a Portkey!"

Draco made a scoffing noise. "Oh, please. He was holding it! In his bare hand, Harry! I know Lucius favours Portkeys, but he doesn't go about holding them after they're made. So it just never occurred to me. I should have known that if a lineage potion could key the wand just to Malfoys, Lucius could have done something to key the Portus on it just to me." Draco rolled his eyes. "Besides, the mere fact that he wasn't wearing his usual gloves should have told me something. He was trying to lure me in. If I'd had more time to think, I would have figured that out."
"If you weren't afraid of it, then why were your hands in your pockets, though?"

"Oh, I was afraid of it," said Draco, looking away from Harry again. "But not that way. I was afraid because I wanted it. I knew I shouldn't. It really has cast a lot of... um, dark spells. But I knew better than to let myself get sucked back into that life, so I was just trying to... ward off temptation, I guess. But then you burst in like that, and all I could think of was protecting you from Lucius."

"Oh, God. See, it is my fault you ended up with hundreds of snakes--"

Draco shrugged. "Not hundreds. Harry, where I ended up is my fault. I should have known you could take care of yourself."

"You're sure you don't blame me?"

"Even if I did, Harry, I'd get over it. Like I did with the burn, right?" Draco frowned, his forehead creasing. "You are my brother, after all. For real. I mean, you were right when you said it wasn't the paperwork that made it so. It's... something else. I should probably tell you, I guess. I... er... I... well, actually I did already tell you. So you know, so that's all right."

Harry blinked. "Tell me what?"

Draco looked away. "In Devon, remember? I told you... um, you know, with all my heart. That bit."

"Oh, that bit." Harry wanted to smile, but he hid it as Draco turned back to him. He wouldn't want Draco to think he was making fun. "You're sure you don't blame me?"

"Yeah, I remember. But you didn't mean that. Not really."

"Well, now I do!" Draco raised his chin, sounding a little bit offended. "I love you. I just do, all right? What sort of brother wouldn't? And look at you -- you don't believe me, do you? Again!"

"I believe you." Harry took a step forward, wanting to hug Draco. But it felt awkward, and Draco looked a bit alarmed, as if he'd read Harry's mind and didn't like the idea. So Harry just nodded to show that he understood.

Draco's posture relaxed a bit. "Well, now that's all cleared away... good, then. I sort of kept thinking I should maybe mention it. You know, to be brotherly."

"Oh, well, if we're going to get brotherly," challenged Harry, "How about you explain your name, eh? Draco Alain Gervais Malfoy Snape! Malfoy! And Severus knew, didn't he? I remember a weird conversation now. He wanted you to tell me, and you wouldn't!"

"I didn't think you'd understand!"

"Yeah, well maybe I don't," said Harry. He was startled when he heard how loud his own voice was getting. "You swore you'd given it up!"

"Potter, you ought to get down and kiss my toes that I didn't! Or that wand wouldn't have worked, and where would you be then, eh?"

"He'd just have given you a different wand to use. Mine, maybe!"

"It was only the lineage potion that let him attach the new spell delimiting how the wand could be used!" said Draco crossly. "He wouldn't have trusted me with one that I could have turned on him. Oh, just... Look, Harry, I know what sort of people raised you. I was positive you wouldn't have the background to appreciate--"
"A heritage of evil wizardry?"

"No, you idiot! Wards, family spells, elves! Why do you think Gibby started to obey me once Lucius was gone? I'm the eldest Malfoy in the dwelling at the moment! It's not just the bloodline that matters; I have to have the name as well! It's a weapon, me having that name!"

"Oh." Harry blinked. "Well, you could have explained that."

"Severus said you'd understand, like with me being at Samhain. But . . ." Draco looked away. "Don't you get it? I didn't want to talk about it! I wanted to be Draco Snape! To you, to everybody. No more Malfoy."

"I understand not wanting to talk about things, yeah. All right."

Draco rubbed his temples as if the conversation had given him a headache. "Good, because we're doing far too much bloody talking right now. Merlin, I'm tired. I really should rest, but we still need to figure out how to get Severus here--"

Draco suddenly sat bolt upright and clutched his wand, a glazed, far-off look in his eyes, like he was listening to something Harry couldn't hear. When he spoke again, his words were a slur of noise. "Yes, all right. Right now . . ."

"What's wrong?"

Draco looked like he was concentrating too hard to answer. Or maybe he hadn't even heard the question. He was already lifting his new wand, his arm stiff as he waved it in swirling patterns, his lips murmuring complex incantations full of sounds that seemed to loop back on themselves. Strange, strange stuff.

But then it came to Harry what Draco must be doing.

He was lowering the Malfoy wards.
The very moment Draco stopped speaking, three figures began to shimmer into existence in the room. As soon as he heard the first pop, Harry tensed and raised his wand, moving so that he could keep the sleeping snake in view.

But it was Severus, Dumbledore, and Remus, who were Apparating in. Harry slumped in relief, his glance flicking over to where Lucius Malfoy lay so still and cold. Not dead though, Harry thought. The man couldn't be dead.

It couldn't be that easy to kill someone.

Could it?

The minute Harry asked himself that question, a spectre of Cedric Diggory rose up to haunt him. How much time and effort had Wormtail put into his Avada Kedavra that night in the cemetery? Harry shuddered.

Snape emerged first from the haze of Apparition, his wand drawn, his whole stance tensed as though for battle, his head whipping from side to side to assess the room and its occupants. An instant later, Dumbledore finished Apparating, and Remus soon after him, but Snape paid no attention to either one of them. Rushing forward to where Harry and Draco were standing together, he gathered them both in his arms and hugged them tightly against him.

Harry figured his dad must already have seen the state Lucius was in. Well, of course he had. Otherwise, Snape's first order of business would have been to protect his sons, not embrace them.

Snape didn't say anything, not for several seconds, but perhaps he couldn't. His breathing was rough and laboured. He trembled slightly as he hugged Harry and Draco close, holding onto them even after he dragged in a final harsh breath and began to speak. "You're all right, aren't you? Both of you?"

Snape clearly meant the question, but he gave neither boy a chance to answer, suddenly yanking them so firmly against him that Harry couldn't breathe. That was all right though. He liked the warm feel of Snape's cloak beneath his cheek. He even liked the slight scent of potions clinging to the fabric, because . . . well, that was what his dad smelled like most of the time, wasn't it?

Of course his father was aggravating all of the bruises Harry had just got from that dreadful chair, but he didn't mind. The slight pain just made everything more real. His dad was there. They were safe. Harry didn't know how his brother felt about being squished like this, but one thing said a lot: even though Draco must be in some amount of discomfort due to all those nasty bites, the other boy wasn't struggling, either. Not at all.

After a little while longer though, Harry pushed at his father a bit. This was all well and good, but he did need air sooner or later. He sucked in one huge breath, and then another, and then he felt able to speak.

"I'm fine, Dad. Just fine. But Draco got snake-bit-- a lot, by--"

Snape set Draco away from him and stared into his son's face, his black eyes riveted, his lips tight with distress. One long index finger reached out to trace the bite marks on Draco's face. It came away smeared with the healing balm Draco had applied. "Lucius set snakes on you?"
Since it wasn't like Snape to ask something so obvious, Harry took it as a sign of just how unnerved their father was. Rattled, even.

Draco nodded, the motion looking sort of shattered. "P- p- portkeyed me into a p- p- pit full of . . ."

"Oh, Merlin," With a sharp indrawn gasp of horror, Snape pulled Draco close again, making a patting motion all over the boy's back, as though to reassure himself that his son was still in one piece.

"The pit must have been awful, but Draco killed a snake to try to bring it to me," said Harry, so proud of his brother he felt like he'd burst with it. "And when it got taken from him, he cast Serpensortia instead to help me out."

Going still, Severus flicked a glance to the snake sleeping on the rug not far from them. "Ah." Then he looked more closely at Harry. "Your glasses. Your crest."

The words sounded like statements, but Harry thought his father was probably trying to ask questions instead. "Lucius smashed my glasses just for spite, to taunt me about my eyes and how he was going to--" Harry shuddered, unable to voice the rest. "But the crest . . . I was trying to use it and Lucius realised, and put it all together, figured out I needed a snake to incant . . ." Harry felt himself blush a bit. He knew how incompetent that must make him seem.

Snape narrowed his eyes. "I think you'd best tell me everything from the beginning."

That was probably a good idea, but Harry didn't really feel up to it. He was afraid his father would insist, though, so he raised his voice a little. "Dad, those snakes weren't just snakes, they were vipers! And Draco was bitten by dozens of them! He's still got a fever and everything. He needs to see Pomfrey straight away, don't you think?"

"Vipers! Why didn't you say so at once, you idiot child?" Snape's eyes frantically scanned Draco as he put his hand to his son's forehead.

"Oh, don't get your wand all in a twist," said Draco, pushing away. "I had a purging potion. And besides, I simply cannot go anywhere until we've got Lucius sorted out."

Snape flicked a glance toward the marble form of Lucius, lying still and cold. "I fail to understand in what sense he still needs to be 'sorted out,' as you put it."

Draco tensed from head to foot. "Just this. Harry here thinks he can reverse the spell and Lucius'll come out of it right as rain. On the other hand, I think that Lucius is dead for good now, no matter what Harry does. And I'm not going anywhere until I know for sure."

Dumbledore contemplated both boys, not looking at Lucius as he slowly nodded his head. "Quite right, Draco. We do need to know for certain. Hmmm. This really is quite an impressive Petrificus."

Harry wasn't sure what that meant. "Will it hold?" he asked, suddenly worried. "I mean, I did a regular Petrificus first and it sort of . . . glanced off him, I guess. 'Cause after a while he started to get up again. So I, uh, made it as strong as I could the second time." He shrugged helplessly. He'd used wanded magic without really thinking about it. Just like in that alley with Nott.

He felt a slight surge of guilt burning within him. It wasn't that he regretted what he'd done to Lucius, but he hadn't really thought about the end result before he'd cast. How many times out in Devon had his father lectured him about that?

"Oh, I would say without a doubt that it will hold," murmured Dumbledore.
"Harry, good to see you," said Remus warmly, his brown eyes saying how much he meant it. Harry had the feeling he'd have said something sooner, but hadn't wanted to interrupt Severus' moment.

"I am actually here too, you know," said Draco petulantly.

"Yes, of course. It's good to see you as well, Mr Snape," added Remus at once, the words that time polite but not nearly as warm. "Congratulations on your adoption."

"Severus just told you?"

"No, I've had to stay apprised of matters of concern to your . . . to Lucius Malfoy," amended Remus when Snape shot him an impatient glance. "In order to impersonate him."

Stepping away from his father, Harry flopped down into a chair. For one second he wondered if the furniture would attack him, but then he figured it wouldn't dare, not with Severus and the headmaster both there. "Well, thank God this'll put an end to that at least. Your spying, I mean. I'll unfreeze Lucius and we'll make sure he gets locked up where he can't get out, and that'll be that."

Draco sighed loudly as he walked across to the marble body on the floor. After staring down for a moment, he turned a beseeching glance toward his father. "How are we going to convince Harry that Lucius is really dead?"

Snape squeezed Harry's shoulder lightly, as if to give him courage, then joined Albus and Draco. Meanwhile, Remus pulled a chair up near Harry and sat down. Harry appreciated that, but he couldn't really even look at Remus. His worried gaze was focussed completely on the wizards standing around the marble figure on the floor. Wands out, they appeared to be casting silent spells.

After a moment, Snape frowned. "Albus?"

The headmaster's eyes blazed slightly as he stared down at the body. Legilimency? Harry wasn't sure.

"I sense nothing whatsoever," Dumbledore said at length. "But in this state, I'm not sure there would be anything to sense."

"My conclusion as well," said Snape.

From beside Harry, Remus murmured agreement.

Think, Harry told himself. Think hard. "Well . . . you know, the house-elf here did something to me to sense my magic," said Harry. "Maybe he'd know about this as well. It's worth a try."

"Oh, like I'd trust Lucius' elf," scoffed Draco. "I'd have sent him to get Severus if that were the case. But I thought the minute he was in England he might go ask Narcissa what to do."

"Well, you're still the eldest Malfoy here in this house," Harry reminded Draco, ignoring the sharp glance his father gave them both. "As long as we stay here, Gibby has to do what you say, right? So get him back here--"

"Where is this house-elf and what did he sense about your magic?" interrupted Snape as he glanced expectantly from Draco to Harry and back.

"He could tell it was odd, that's all," said Harry, just as Draco answered in airy tones, "I sent him to wait in the snake pit. All right?"
"You sent him to wait in the snake pit," repeated Snape in a low voice. Clearly, he did not regard that as all right.

"Yeah, well, I was a tad upset that he'd just cursed me over and over." Draco shifted on his feet. "Besides, I thought it would keep him busy so he couldn't meddle. I-- uh-- Look, he saw Harry turn Lucius to stone, so I figured he'd need to be Obliviated anyway."

When Snape said nothing, but just stared with implacable black eyes, Draco crossed his arms. "Don't look at me like that! The fucking elf isn't even going to remember the snake pit. Which is more than you can say of me, eh?" By the end, the boy's chin was lifted in challenge.

"We'll discuss it later," said Snape, shaking his head. "Since I wouldn't believe whatever this elf had to say to be conclusive, I see no point in asking him to examine Lucius. Draco . . . where is this snake pit?"

Draco looked slightly ill as he pointed. "About a hundred yards into the forest, something like that."

"Lupin, would you go immobilise the elf and all the snakes? We'll memory-charm him before we leave. Or should he be returned to Wiltshire, Draco?"

"No, Dribby usually kept this place ready for Lucius."

Remus stood up, giving Harry an encouraging final glance before Disapparating with a slight pop.

Albus waved his wand once more over the statue of Lucius, his old features wrinkled. "I can find nothing here of any life-force. I detect nothing but . . . stone."

"Well, sure he's dead now," Harry blurted. "But, the question is whether he would be if I reverse the spell. And there's really no way to know, is there?"

"I suspect there is, in point of fact, only one way to find out," said Severus, walking over to chair where Harry was sitting. He crouched down to meet his son's eyes. "I regret needing to ask this of you, but I think you had better reverse the curse so we can see what comes out: a living man or . . ."

He left the sentence unfinished.

Harry felt sick at what hadn't been said. As much as he hated Lucius, he truly didn't want to watch a corpse come falling out of his spell. Too much like what had happened to Cedric, right before his eyes.

Besides, it would be awful for Draco to see a thing like that.

Harry rubbed his eyes, which were burning a bit. He noticed for the first time that his head was also throbbing. Probably just the strain of the moment. He'd been telling himself all along that Lucius wasn't truly dead, but now . . . "It's probably all right," he said in a shaking voice. "I mean, we don't really need to know, do we? As long as he's stuck for good as stone, what does it matter?"

"I need to know, Harry," said Draco, his eyes narrowing like he had a lot more to say. When Snape waved a hand, however, the boy fell silent.

"Harry," said Snape softly, laying his hands over his son's as he crouched before him, "I will never quarrel with what you have done here today. Ever, do you understand? You need have no regrets. But how can I allow you to believe that a wanded Petrificus is reversible if it is not?"

Harry gulped. For some reason, what his father was saying was making him feel worse, not better. "I won't do it again," he whispered, closing his eyes. "Ever. I'll never use another wanded Petrificus.
"That way I won't need to know what it does."

"You may need to use the spell again. Harry, look at me," He waited until the boy did. "You must comprehend the extent of your own powers. You can't go forth in ignorance, not when you have magic such as this at your command. Surely you can see this."

Harry nodded glumly, feeling sick deep inside. "All right, I'll just-- oh, yech. I'm still not sure he's dead, you know, but if he is, this is going to be gross."

"Wait," said Draco suddenly, his voice excited. "I should have thought of this sooner! There's a portrait of Lucius upstairs. It's never spoken or moved or anything, not that I've ever seen. And it shouldn't, right? Unless . . ."

"An excellent notion," said Dumbledore, beaming a smile at Draco. The old wizard flicked his wand toward the doorway to the room, and a few moments later, a large gold-coloured frame came sailing towards him. It was moving so fast that Harry couldn't properly see the painting until the headmaster deftly caught it and set it on the floor, leaning it up against one wall.

Lucius Malfoy glared out from the canvas, rapping his cane right and left and up and down in a clear effort to escape the frame. "Where is that worthless spawn of mine?" he roared, throwing his head back. His stance reminded Harry an enraged jungle cat. "Serpensortia, is it? I'll show you a Serpensortia to curl your toes!"

As soon as he caught sight of Draco, he yanked his snake-headed wand from his cane and pointed it directly at the boy.

Draco leapt back in panic, but when nothing happened, he stood up straight and shouted. "Ha! Your wand was destroyed before you died, which means you're one-hundred percent without magic!" He paused, smirking. "Oh, did I mention you were dead? Yeah, dead. And good riddance!"

"I'll make you wish you were dead, I will, you worthless good-for-nothing ingrate excuse for a son!"

Draco leaned laconically against the edge of a divan and smiled like a cat lapping cream. Or perhaps, like a young man who suddenly didn't have a care in the world. "You know, Father, I think you must have been keeping the wrong sort of company. You certainly do seem less a wizard."

"Why, you--" Panting with fury, Lucius grabbed the edges of his portrait with both hands and did his best to leverage himself out of it.

Draco walked right up to the portrait, leaning over to meet Lucius' painted glare at eye level as he spoke very softly. "I bet you wish you hadn't gone to such extreme measures to teach me to conjure snakes. Eh? What, nothing to say?"

"I'll get you for this, Draco Snape!" screamed Lucius. "Just see if I don't! You'll never get so much as a Knut from my holdings! And don't think your mother will ever help you. I knew she might want to someday, so it's all been settled elsewhere! Irrevocably! My fortune and hers both. Everything!"

"Well then it's a good show I'm not like you, thinking that money and power matter more than family," retorted Draco. Standing, he turned his back on Lucius.

"Family!" bellowed the portrait as Draco walked away. "You betrayed your family, your real . . ."

"Lucius." Severus interrupted the exchange in a voice that was calm, yet deadly. "You are nothing now. Nothing but a painted shadow of your former self. You will never again harm my sons. Or anyone else."
"You can have him!" ranted Lucius. "I'm well rid of him! I should have replaced him long ago with one more worthy, one who wouldn't let a filthy Mudblood best him time and again, one who would respect his family lines and heritage--"

Draco spun on a heel and levelled his wand at the portrait, but before he could cast Incendio or something equally destructive, Albus stepped in front of him and flipped the portrait so it would face the wall. Quickly, he cast wards around the portrait, both silencing it and preventing it from hearing as well.

Scowling, Draco lowered his wand, his entire posture deflating a little. Harry suspected that heavy emotions were the only thing keeping his brother on his feet.

"Best to keep our options open," Albus said, his tone conciliatory. "The late Lucius Malfoy knows things that may prove of use."

"Of course," said Draco, lifting his chin. "I'm not sure how you'll get him to talk, though."

Another pop announced Remus' return to the room. "Gentlemen, I'm afraid we have a problem," he announced without preamble. "I did not find a house-elf in or anywhere near the snake pit, though I searched the vicinity quite thoroughly."

"What?" Losing him composure completely, Draco actually squawked. "Dribby! Fibby, Gibby! Oh, whatever the blazes your name is, you come to me this instant!"

The wizards all waited expectantly but no house-elf appeared.

"That's weird," Harry said after a few moments. "He certainly seemed to obligated to obey you before. Do you think the snakes did him in? Maybe house-elves disappear when they die. Well, when it's not of natural causes," he added, thinking of the elf heads that used to decorate Number 12 Grimmauld Place.

"They most certainly do not," said Severus, his voice taut and grim. "Furthermore, it would take more than snake venom to kill one. It takes Dark Arts, as I do believe I once mentioned."

Dumbledore nodded agreement, even as he added, "The magical laws governing the relationships between house-elves and wizards are complex -- even nebulous at times. Perhaps, your bloodline and your name were not enough to supersede your disinheritance after all, Draco."

The blond boy flushed slightly. "You knew I'd kept Malfoy as part of my name?"

Albus smiled, very gently. "Oh, of course, my boy. You surely didn't think my teas with Severus concerned only Harry, did you?"

Draco obviously had, since he shrugged defensively. Or maybe he was defensive because of what he was about to say. "Um, this is probably going to sound fairly daft but . . . um, I might have freed him, I'm thinking."

Harry gaped. "You freed an elf? You?"

"Well, yes." Draco shifted his weight and looked around the room as if he didn't know whom to look at. Or whom to avoid. "See, back when Gibbery was putting me into Lucius' clothes, I handed him the shirt I'd just taken off and tried to free him. Draco crossed his arms. "I thought maybe the wretched little bugger wouldn't hurt us if he wasn't under Lucius' control. But he protested that I couldn't free him since I wasn't his master. But now I'm thinking that when Lucius died and I became the eldest Malfoy in the dwelling, maybe it took, right? After the fact."
"Nebulous indeed," murmured the headmaster.

Severus gently tugged on Harry's arm, urging him out of the chair. "Come along," he said. "Whether the elf was freed then and lying about it, or became free at Lucius' death, it's clear that he's gone and is most likely reporting on all that has happened. We are no longer safe in this location."

"Oh no," Harry groaned softly as he lumbered to his feet. "My magic! He'll tell what I did to Lucius! After all we've done to keep it secret." He shook his head ruefully.

In the meantime, Albus shrunk the warded painting and slipped it into a pocket of his robe. "As you may have surmised, Remus, we have confirmed that Lucius Malfoy is, in fact, deceased. Draco recalled that Lucius kept a wizarding portrait upstairs and it is now quite active with the late Malfoy's essence."

"Has he any others?" Remus asked.

Draco both shook his head and shrugged in answer to the question. "Not that I know of, anyway."

"We'll thoroughly ward the painting to make him stay in this frame, all the same--"

"Harry, are you all right?" asked Severus.

"Me? Oh yeah, fine," said Harry. "It's not like I'm going to be Apparating myself out of here anyway, eh? I'm just tired. I don't even think I need to see Madam Pomfrey, to be honest--"

Severus pursed his lips and gave Harry a look that said they'd discuss the matter later. Both matters, actually. Because he hadn't been asking about Harry's physical condition, and Harry knew it.

Harry pulled his school robe around himself tighter, hoping that no one had noticed the trembling that had suddenly crept upon him. He felt as if he'd woken to some sort of nightmare. Far too many things had happened far too quickly today. And he simply couldn't have killed Lucius Malfoy. He just couldn't have!

When Harry closed his eyes and rubbed them again, it seemed like they were full of sand or something. He felt his father gently pull his clenched fists away from his face, but he didn't open his eyes. Not only did the light in the room hurt, but he didn't want to see the concerned expression in his father's face. The concern was misplaced because Harry knew he was fine. It was embarrassing really, having his father fuss over him when Draco was the one needing their support.

As if on cue, his brother spoke up. "Can we just go?"

"Fine, fine," said the headmaster in a soothing voice. "Remus, would you be so good as to take young Mr Snape to the hospital wing? I'm afraid Harry and Severus and I need to keep talking, but I think it best we not delay treatment for his injuries any longer."

"I thought we needed to get out of here since Gibby's on the loose," said Harry.

"Oh, I think that Severus and I can protect you quite adequately for a moment more, should anything unforeseen occur--"

Draco sounded exasperated when he blew out a breath. "I'd appreciate a little honesty here. You're trying to get rid of me, aren't you? You need Harry to reverse his spell so you can destroy Lucius' body, and you don't think I ought to be here to see you do it!"

Harry felt a sour taste rise up into his mouth. "But the portrait! I . . . I thought I wouldn't have to
undo my *Petrificus* now." Feeling like he was out bobbing on the ocean or something, he looked up into his father's dark eyes, hoping they would steady him. "And . . . well, he's obviously really dead, but what if he does come back when I reverse the spell?"

Snape kneeled down in front of the chair, putting his face almost on a level with Harry's as he spoke in a quiet voice. "Given the way that portrait behaved, I'm confident that Lucius Malfoy is indeed dead. Harry . . . "

"But what if my magic is different? People come back from being dead all the time." He nodded enthusiastically despite the dismayed look his father was giving him. "I'm not mental. Listen, Muggles do it with CPR and such." Harry clenched his hands together. "What was the point of that essay you set me, if not to teach me that my peculiar powers are unpredictable, eh? What if there is chance my to bring him out brings him back? I'm certainly not going to kill him again, just because I can!"

Harry found himself pulled without warning into his father's embrace again.

"No one would ask that of you," said Severus against his ear as he knelt, hugging Harry. "But we need you to reverse your spell all the same. If we've any hope of undoing whatever damage that house-elf may have done with his escape, this evidence will have to be dealt with."

Harry nodded. He could see the sense in that. "All right," he said, his voice still thick. As his father released him and rose to his feet, Harry looked over at his brother. "Um, Draco? I . . . I don't think you've ever seen the thestrals, but after this . . . I mean, the first time I saw someone dead it was really a big shock."

"Now that I'm sure he's dead, I don't need to see," said Draco flatly. "I'll just go to the hospital wing and wait for you there, Harry. Don't be long."

Draco glanced at Severus as though asking for permission, and then cast some spells, obviously re-establishing the wards. Harry figured they must not prevent anyone from Apparating out, only in.

"I can't make it all the way to England on my own," the boy suddenly admitted in a low voice as he glanced uncertainly at Remus. "I . . . if Severus is staying here then I'll need you to . . . er, help me, Professor Lupin."

"Don't sound so appalled by the prospect," advised Snape in a dry voice. "Lupin is the reason we found you at all. We'd still be breaking the wards at Malfoy Manor if not for his timely report that the privacy spells here had been significantly strengthened."

"Timely!" Draco rolled his eyes. "We've been missing for hours!"

"Ah, but in the hope of Voldemort not learning that Lucius had snatched you, we kept all word of that from leaving Hogwarts," said Dumbledore. "Professor Lupin's report was a routine matter, as far as he was concerned. He waited the standard amount of time for a reply, but when he received no acknowledgement of his information, he Apparated to Hogwarts to report in person. That was when he learned that you were missing and that Severus and I were at Malfoy Manor, unable to receive messages there due to the spells layered about the surrounding countryside."

"You'd have to be named Malfoy," said Draco with a slight glance at Harry.

*Yeah, I get it,* Harry almost said, but decided he didn't want to interrupt the story.

"Professor Lupin Apparated to join us," explained Severus. "And so we discovered that you had likely been taken to France."
"I guess I should thank you, then, Professor Lupin," said Draco slowly. "Though I know you wouldn't have bothered if not for Harry--"

"You're quite wrong," said Remus, shaking his head. "You're a student at Hogwarts, not to mention an Order member's son. Do you think I could ignore all that simply because you don't like werewolves?"

"I . . . er . . . Let's just go," Draco said stiffly, holding out his arm. He shuddered when Remus touched it.

"See you later," said Harry, trying to smile. It was hard, though. He didn't have much sympathy for Draco's blatant prejudices. Not to mention, he had unfreezing Lucius to look forward to.

"We will be along shortly, Draco," said Snape, walking over to him and laying his hand gently on his son's shoulder. "Lupin will see you to Hogwarts and stay with you until we arrive." The Potions Master stared rather grimly at the werewolf as he said this. Harry knew what he was thinking about: Harry's abduction the previous autumn. After that, it must be pretty hard for his father to trust Remus with one of his sons.

But maybe Severus had finally forgiven Remus.

Either that, or he just didn't have much choice but to trust him at the moment.

As Draco sighed impatiently, Remus held his former schoolmate's gaze with a look of determination before Apparating himself and Draco out.

Harry closed his eyes, wishing he was being taken home as well, but there was no hope for that. He had to face what he'd done. "All right, so I'll try to undo it--ha, not even sure I can--and then you two can do . . . ugh, whatever. Just give me a moment. I'm still pretty tired."

"Of course, my boy," the headmaster said. "But time is of the essence. Is there anything we can do to help you? A glass of water? Pepper-Up?"

Harry shrugged without bothering to open his eyes. "Nah." He concentrated on his powers, visualizing the magical core within him and willing it to gather strength. At the same time he braced himself to face the reality of what he'd done. He'd killed someone. Regardless of whether or not the condition was reversible, he had ended Lucius Malfoy's life.

He had felt responsible for deaths before--technically, he had killed Professor Quirrell, although that had been a completely passive act and Harry had never really felt guilty for it. Then there was Cedric. And worst of all, Sirius, for whom he did feel tremendous guilt. Still, even if Harry's stupidity had led to Sirius' death, he hadn't been the one to cast the spell.

This death was something altogether new for Harry. He had cast the spell and he had to admit that while he hadn't thought for a moment that he was casting something fatal, he had been aware that his wanded magic was potentially lethal. But in those fleeting moments when he'd let the magic flow through his wand, Harry hadn't cared. He'd been blind and hurting and afraid and angry and he'd just wanted the danger to stop -- he'd wanted Lucius to stop. And he had stopped -- permanently.

"Harry?"

Opening his eyes and then squinting against the light, Harry saw his father crouching beside his chair once again. Harry's mouth twitched a bit. "Are you aware you're hovering?"

His father stiffened a bit. "Well--"
The statement remained unfinished as a thudding noise echoed in the distance. Harry felt his blood run cold. "What was that?"

"Someone is at the door," the headmaster and Snape both stated at once.

"What do we do?" Harry asked, gripping his wand and stiffly raising himself from the chair.

"We remain calm," his father replied as he rose to his feet. "I hardly think that Voldemort would knock, Harry. It may be no one of consequence."

In the meantime, Dumbledore had grown silent, his eyes closing as he appeared to concentrate deeply. When his eyes opened again, they were twinkling. "I would estimate our visitor to be someone we should see. He's projecting one Hogwarts' password after another, though it seems he can't cross the wards your brother raised. Wait here . . ."

Harry did wait, but he fingered his wand nervously all the while. He strained to hear what he could. The front door swinging open? A crackling like popcorn?

Then that noise came into the room where he and his father were waiting. Dumbledore and two house-elves appeared. Harry's mouth dropped open in shock. "Dobby? What are you doing here?"

"Harry Potter sir," Dobby cried, wringing his wrinkly hands together. "Dobby is bringing Gibby here to stop him from telling on Harry Potter!"

Sure enough, it was Gibby standing behind Dobby. The house-elf couldn't seem to decide between looking contrite or sullen.

"From what I was able to gather, Gibby turned up at Hogwarts for Dobby's counsel when he found himself freed," Dumbledore supplied, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "Quite fortunate for us really. Perhaps, you should tell us exactly what happened, Dobby."

As Dobby nodded vigorously, his large ears flapped like bat wings. "Dobby was working in the kitchens with the other house-elves when Gibby come looking for Dobby. All upset and panicking, Gibby was! Gibby was saying that Master Malfoy had forced Harry Potter and Draco Snape away from Hogwarts to be hurting them bad. To be killing them! Dobby was fetching the headmaster right away, but then Gibby was saying that Harry Potter was already turning Master Malfoy to stone! Then Gibby was saying that Draco Snape is still a Malfoy and was giving him clothes! And now Gibby is a free elf but he was deciding he would be ignoring the clothes. But then he was told to be jumping in with snakes, so he was running away to Dobby because Dobby is the only free house-elf Gibby is knowing, and--."

"How many people did Gibby tell about Lucius being turned to stone?" Severus demanded.

Dobby looked at Gibby and then back to the Potions Master. "Gibby was just telling Dobby, Harry Potter's father Professor Snape sir, but many other house-elves was overhearing him. But Dobby is telling all house-elves to keep quiet. Hogwarts' elves is loyal to Harry Potter and will be cutting out their tongues before they is saying things that is sending Harry Potter to prison!"

"Prison!" Harry's voice squeaked higher than normal. The thought of going to prison for Lucius' death hadn't really occurred to Harry. He'd been too busy worrying about Voldemort and getting home. He knew that what he'd done was self-defence, but with untrustworthy idiots like Fudge running the Ministry, that might not matter at all. "Oh, God," he said thickly, his mind spinning back to that horrible inquisition he'd been put through after the Dementor attack. "I'm not going to have to go on trial for this, am I?"
Snape's voice was resolute. "No. This will never come to the attention of the Ministry, Harry. I think you know the measures I am prepared to take to protect my sons."

"Yeah, Argentina."

"Now, now," said Dumbledore gently. "That won't be necessary. Dobby, are you quite sure that Gibby spoke to no one outside of the Hogwarts kitchens?"

Dobby prodded Gibby who answered, sniffing all the while, "Gibby is cast into shame now that he is being free. Gibby can never be telling nobody but Dobby! Because Dobby is already shamed!"

Just then, Harry noticed that the headmaster and his father were looking at one another in a strange, intense way. Communicating silently, no doubt. He felt a little irritated by that, even though he knew they were probably trying to hide things more from Gibby than from him. He wished he knew some Legilimency so he could join in.

"Done?" he asked, a bit snidely, when they finally broke off eye contact.

His father twisted his upper lip, "Your rather unique situation makes you difficult to include. Why else do you think I alerted your brother to our presence and not you?"

"Oh," Harry said aloud. Of course his constant Occlumency would make it impossible for anyone to communicate with him telepathically -- not that he was aware that this was something wizards did. He felt rather sheepish that he hadn't realised that before when Draco was lowering the wards.

"Gibby, follow me," Severus ordered. The elf looked uncertain until Severus pointed his wand and ground out, "I'm not ordering tea, you realise. I'm attempting to enact an alternative to killing you. I sincerely suggest that you. Come. With. Me."

Harry couldn't help but smirk a bit at Gibby as scrambled to follow the Potions Master out of the room. "I assume he's to be Obliviated?"

Dumbledore nodded. "When the house-elf wakes he'll be lacking any memory of this day, but he'll be led to believe that his memory lapse is due to head trauma from punishment inflicted by Lucius. He'll never know that you and Draco were here at all."

Or that he was free, Harry thought, but he didn't say it.

Dobby was nodding his head up and down. "Oh, yes. Yes yes yes. Master Malfoy Senior, he was always kicking poor house-elves in the head, yes yes. Master Malfoy Junior as well, sometimes--" Without warning, Dobby suddenly began chomping on his own fingers, screeching in between bites, "Dobby was speaking ill of Harry Potter's brother! Harry Potter must hate Dobby now! Dobby is being a bad, bad, wicked elf, even if it is being true that Draco Snape is not a nice boy--" Dobby hopped up and down in agitation. "Aaaaargh! Dobby was speaking ill again--"

"Dobby, you're free!" Harry shouted. He bent down when Dobby stopped chewing his fingers. "I wish you'd really believe that. You don't have to punish yourself, whatever you say. All right?"

"As Harry Potter is wishing," said Dobby frenetically. "It shall be done, yes, yes, yes--"

Harry sighed a little bit, wishing he wasn't quite so . . . adored by Dobby.

The headmaster smiled in understanding as he took a seat on a brocade divan. He gestured for Dobby to hop up and sit beside him. Dobby looked like it was a signal honour. Once the elf was settled, Dumbledore began to speak. "Dobby, you have a very important role to play now."
Smiling as the elf nodded, the old wizard continued, "You will return to Hogwarts and relay the following story to anyone who may have overheard Gibby's story. Tell them that when you returned Gibby to his employer, you found Mr Malfoy alive and well. He was clearly displeased with Gibby and you do not know whether Gibby was ever actually freed or not. However, when you told him what Gibby had said about him turning to stone, he laughed and said that Gibby had heard him complaining about Harry Potter. Just then, Mr Malfoy Flooed to Hogwarts, leaving behind a lifelike statue that Mr Malfoy had intended to send to Hogwarts to, ah, enhance the artistic holdings."

Dobby looked thoughtful. "Dobby is thinking that this house here is never connected to the Floo network, Albus Dumbledore Headmaster sir, but aha -- no elves at Hogwarts is knowing that. Dobby will be telling them just as you is saying, yes, yes." All of a sudden, though, the elf looked fearful and wrung his hands together. "But, sir, to be seeing a statue and thinking it is Mr Malfoy turned to stone? Dobby is begging your pardon, sir, but house-elves is not that stupid. The others will never be saying anything against Harry Potter, sir, but they may be guessing that Dobby is lying."

"Never fear, Dobby," the headmaster replied. "We shall provide evidence to support your story perfectly." Harry distinctly disliked the twinkle in the old man's eyes. "The other elves will readily be able to believe that Gibby has become . . . ah, rather unbalanced."

A sly look slid into Dobby's large eyes. Or maybe it was a smirk. With elves it could be hard to tell. "With Gibby saying like that, that *Draco Snape* had been freeing him . . . Dobby is thinking it will be easy for the other house-elves to believe that Gibby is not thinking so straight. They is hearing many times about Dobby's sufferings in that house--"

"I thought you couldn't speak ill of wizards," Harry broke in.

Dobby looked sly again, but abashed as well, this time. "Not to wizards, Harry Potter sir."

Harry laughed then, just a little.

As soon as Dobby had Disapparated back to Hogwarts to begin spreading his tale, Harry turned to the headmaster. "You can't be thinking of doing what I think you're thinking of doing."

"Merlin's ear, that house-elf's grammar must be rubbing off on you," drawled Snape as he re-entered the room.

Harry ignored his father. "Sir," he said, still addressing the headmaster, "you can't use Lucius' . . . er, body, as evidence. Nobody is going to believe he's a statue, not when that thing looks just like someone under *Petrificus*. There's no way Lucius Malfoy would commission a statue of himself under a curse!"

"Well reasoned, Harry," said Severus, nodding. Harry was hardly appeased, especially considering what his father said next. "You've determined to display the statue then, Albus? Regrettable, but necessary considering the other elves surely overheard Gibby's wild claims. Unless you'd permit me to *Obliviate* them all? No? Well, then, I suppose the only thing to do is pose it."

Harry glanced at the ramrod straight figure on the floor and grimaced at the very thought. "What's the point? *Petrificus* will just snap him into a line again when I recast the spell, won't it?"

"The spell doesn't have that effect on dead flesh, no."

Harry had to swallow a couple of times. "You've done this before, you mean."

"I've seen it done," said Snape in a tight voice, his features paling slightly. Harry hadn't meant to sound critical, exactly. He just didn't like to be reminded of his father's ugly past.
In fact, it was all he could do not to shudder. He didn't need to hear details to guess just why Snape had seen a thing like this done. It must be a Death Eater trick, a way to pose bodies in order to mislead Magical Law Enforcement. And now Harry was supposed to help them do the same thing to someone else.

If anyone deserved to have his own evil come back at him, though, it was Lucius Malfoy. On the other hand . . .

"I don't know," said Harry slowly. He knew he was both stalling and stating the obvious even as he said it, but he felt it needed to be said. *Probably a Gryffindor trait of mine,* he mused. "I mean, we can't trust the Ministry back home to treat me fairly if they found out about an attack spell like this, but maybe we could tell the Ministry here in France? Isn't this their jurisdiction? Covering it all up just seems . . . I don't know."

Snape and Albus looked at each other, clearly discomfited by Harry's observation.

"Quite right, my boy," the headmaster replied, stroking his beard with one wrinkled hand. "But these are troubled times. What you did was self-defence and entirely permissible under our laws, but even if we were willing to trust the Ministry either here or back home to proceed rationally, releasing this information to those outside the Order could result in Voldemort learning of your enhanced powers." As Harry started to speak, Dumbledore held up a hand to forestall him. "And not only that, Harry. Were Lucius were known to be dead, we would once again lose our only spy among the Death Eaters."

Harry frowned. Dumbledore meant for Remus to continue spying after this? That was a reason to not pose the statue, as far as he was concerned. "Look people may not know that Lucius is dead, but they'll sure notice when he's never at home, right? How can Remus keep spying?"

Once again, both of the adult wizards looked at each other, their expressions grim. "We'll discuss specific plans with the Order," Dumbledore answered. "Clearly, our future course of action is contingent upon his willingness to oblige."

Harry frowned, suspecting that Albus Dumbledore could talk anybody on their side into anything.

"Regardless of what Lupin decides, Harry," said Snape quietly, "we must prepare for all contingencies and then be gone from here. I want you safe with your brother post haste. Will you do as I ask?"

Put like that, it was hard to simply say no. Taking a deep breath, Harry walked toward the marble corpse on the floor. But then he hesitated. "How can I do this? If Remus gets hurt or killed impersonating Malfoy then it'll be my fault. Just like with Siri--"

"Harry, we have discussed this matter before," said Severus, sighing. "You are not responsible for the actions of grown wizards with minds of their own." As a hand settled on Harry's shoulder, he turned to face his father. "You and Draco matter to me more than anything, Harry, but the hard truth of the matter is that winning the war is the best way to keep you both safe. Hence, we need the advantage of insider information. But it is to minimise the risk to Lupin that I ask you to allow us to pose Lucius' dead body. Any house-elf gossip must be quashed. And too, we require the key ingredient for Lupin's Polyjuice Potion. Will you do as I ask?" Snape said, repeating his earlier question.

"Ha,* Harry thought. *Dumbledore isn't the only one who can talk anyone into anything.*

"Perhaps we can take the statue to a secure location and Harry can make the necessary magical
"No, I'll do it now," Harry answered, albeit with no enthusiasm. It wasn't like he could protect Remus, anyway. If Dumbledore wanted the man spying, then the Order would simply find a way to make it happen. Remus might be in even more danger if Harry didn't help them obtain plenty of hair for the Polyjuice.

Besides, his concern for Remus, true as it was, was just an excuse in the end. The real problem was cowardice. Deep down, Harry was starting to believe he'd killed Lucius. He really ought to face up to it, right?

Without giving himself time to dwell on the matter any further, Harry swiftly walked until he stood directly above the prone marble figure. The motion created a disorienting head rush. For one instant, Harry went almost blind. He staggered slightly, his balance all askew. He must be more tired than he'd thought.

"Harry?"

"I'm all right." A moment's pause helped him regain his equilibrium. His gaze settled on the sleeping viper on the floor. Muster as much will and strength as his exhausted body could supply, Harry pointed his wand at the statue and hissed, "Go back to the way you were."

When nothing happened, Harry frowned and thought for a moment. "Stop being stone and be flesh and bone," he commanded.

This time he felt the magic swell forth. He hadn't really wanted to see the corpse, but found that against his will his gaze was drawn to the transformation unfurling at his feet. An odd memory rose to the surface of his mind. *The Wizard of Oz*, that scene when everything went from black and white to sparkling colour. It was just like that.

Instead of white tinged with veins of grey and blue, Lucius Malfoy was suddenly taking on a myriad of hues: palest gold-tinted hair, silver and purple embroidery on the trim of plum-coloured robes, flesh tones—an angry flush fading from the aristocratic face right before Harry's eyes. There was no doubt in Harry's mind that the man on the floor was dead. The absence of life in those silver eyes was unmistakable. For a fleeting moment Harry thought of Cedric, but the thought fought against a stronger emotion that Harry couldn't quite define.

Moments before dying, Lucius Malfoy had been seething with anger. He'd just broken Harry's clumsy curse and had probably intended to murder his own son. He'd been so sure of himself, and yet moments later, he was dead from a simple defensive spell.

Harry clamped both hands over his mouth and bit his lip. He was dimly aware of his father saying something supportive, but the words were nothing but a soothing buzz in his ears.

Harry didn't need soothing, though. He wasn't distraught. What he hid behind his hands was nothing short of a grin. His furious swallowing wasn't to prevent sicking up, but to stop the peals of laughter threatening to leap out from his throat.

Lucius, dead beyond all doubt.

Harry was so happy he was almost giddy with it.

It wasn't appropriate to burst out laughing though, and he knew it. Reaching inward toward the fortifying fires of his Occlusion, he somehow managed to fight back the urge to giggle. He didn't want his father to think he was cruel. Or hysterical. Or barmy.
"Well, I guess all of you were right about him being dead," Harry said from behind his hands, his voice tight with self-control. "You don't need me here to, uh, pose him, right? I need to use the loo."

As Snape gently pulled Harry's hands from his face, the boy clamped his lips into a thin line. "Are you well, Harry? I know this must be terribly distressing for you. It's all right to feel upset--"

"I, uh, just need a few minutes to myself, yeah?"

The minute Snape nodded, Harry fled the room. Of course he had no idea where he was going in this house, and he certainly didn't want to wander it. Choosing a door at random, he ducked inside what turned out to be a small library. Harry leaned against the closed door, shaking with exhaustion, as he let the grin he'd been repressing split across his face. *Ha! Lucius was dead! Forever and ever and ever.* Harry couldn't help it; he started laughing quietly.

Part of him knew this just wasn't right, of course. He wasn't supposed to be delighted that he'd killed a man. Killing wasn't supposed to feel good.

But it did. Or at least, knowing that Malfoy was dead felt good. The entire situation was surreal. He never had to worry about this man again. He and Draco were both safe--Severus too--from anything Lucius Malfoy could cook up. It was an overwhelming relief. He saw again in his mind's eye that vision of Lucius turning from stone to dead flesh.

*Ding Dong, the witch is dead,* he thought to himself, the words following the tune from the song. *Well, not a witch, but wicked wizard doesn't quite work.* Laughing a little, Harry started singing softly, making up words as he went along. "*Ding Dong, the wiz is dead, the wiz is dead, the wiz is dead. Ding Dong, the wicked wiz is dead . . ."*

Pushing off from the door, Harry did a clumsy approximation of a little jig before slumping into one of the small upholstered chairs surrounding a long table.

The chair moved a little as he sat. For one instant, Harry was afraid it would attack him. But then he realised that it had merely swivelled 'round a bit. Since he was too tired to dance for joy, he decided to expend his giddiness that way. Pushing with his feet, Harry set the chair to spinning as fast as it could. Dizziness overtook him as he hummed the cinema song again and again.

Yes, Lucius Malfoy *was* dead. The sadistic bastard would never again grin as Harry screamed in pain. He wouldn't get to humiliate Harry before a leering audience. He'd never blind him, or burn him, or make him bleed He wouldn't torture Draco either, or warp him into a dark wizard, or feed his prejudices, or manipulate his fears. Lucius Malfoy would never again infiltrate Hogwarts with his evil, or bend the Board of Governors and the Ministry to his malicious will. He'd never threaten Severus or even kick another house-elf. The evil bastard was dead, dead, dead.

*Ding Dong, the wicked wiz is dead . . .*

Harry wasn't sure how long he spent all by himself in the library, but by the time he heard his father calling for him from down the hall, he felt more than a little high. Stopping the chair at last, Harry closed his eyes against the image of the room still spinning around him. His heart was hammering like he'd been playing Quidditch all day. He staggered toward the door, waiting until his balance returned before he opened it.

Snape was pacing in the hallway. When Harry stepped out, the man looked at him appraisingly, one eyebrow raised in question.

Harry felt his face heating a bit. "I . . . uh, couldn't find the loo."
"Yes, it would be difficult with all those books in the way," drawled Snape.

Pushing past his father, Harry muttered that he'd just needed some time alone. Then, hoping to get off the subject, he added, "Are you all done with Malfoy?"

"We are," said Snape, falling in beside him as they walked. His voice still sounded concerned, but Harry figured his lack of any comment about that meant he was respecting Harry's need to drop it. "All that remains is for your wanded *Petrificus* to be reapplied."

When Harry returned to the small parlour with his father, he was surprised to see Lucius standing. The dead wizard appeared to be staring into the distance, his chin held high but his face completely passive. He was now wearing a hooded cloak which completely concealed what Harry suspected was quite a severe haircut.

Malfoy appeared to be holding his cane, but one side of his cloak covered the top of it, along with his right hand. Of course. Harry had destroyed the wand that used to sit in the top of the cane. No silver snake-head. Rather than try to fashion one that might not fool an onlooker who knew what Lucius' cane looked like, they'd hidden the top of it.

Well, if they had to do this, they might as well make a good job of it. Harry appreciated their attention to detail, but was a bit confused to see that Lucius' other hand was reaching forward, extending a thin book as if in offering. He couldn't help but think of Tom Riddle's diary. Snorting slightly, he decided not to ask.

"If you're ready then, Harry," said Snape in a calm voice, "we require your special skills for the final transformation."

Harry wondered about that, remembering Draco changing his textbook to a small rock and back. And if his brother could manage that trick, then surely . . . "Can't you do it, Dad? You can transfigure stuff to stone, can't you?"

The Potions Master frowned. "Volume is an issue in this case. As well as simultaneity. I haven't the requisite talent to transfigure body, clothing, and props all of different base materials, at the same time. Nor to do it with the thoroughness and permanence your spell would have."

Harry blushed a bit, unsure why he was the one embarrassed. It seemed odd having power greater than his father's. But then again, if they were powers the Dark Lord himself knew not, it was a bit much to expect Severus to have them. "Um . . . what about the headmaster?"

Dumbledore's beard swayed as he shook his head. "Alas, no, my boy. Traditional transfiguration is notoriously unreliable for transforming deceased individuals. Were this not so, this type of artistic memorial might even be commonplace."

Harry had to fight back an urge to say *Ewwwww.*

The headmaster gave him a knowing glance. "Even more likely, the skill would be used to cover up murders on a regular basis. Light magic does not allow for such activities. Therefore for me to duplicate what you accomplished with ease would require a lengthy and difficult Dark Arts endeavour."

That information was certainly sobering to Harry. He felt he'd eventually have to contemplate the implications of his magic in connection with what had happened, but now was not the time. Harry suspected he really would become hysterical if he thought too much about how much like Dark Arts his peculiar powers could get.
Harry pointed his wand to where Lucius stood. Then he hesitated. "Um . . . can you two get behind me? I'd sure hate for a stray spark to . . . yeah."

"A very sound notion, I would think," murmured Snape as he and Albus moved back.

Harry looked at the sleeping viper, not at Lucius, as he cast. "Turn completely to stone and stay that way," he hissed fiercely.

Magic surged up from within him and poured out through his arm and hand and fingers before shooting through his wand. The sensation was strangely overwhelming. Harry felt a flutter in his chest --like his heart had skipped a beat and tried to make up for it with three quick ones. Worried that the strange feeling meant something was going wrong, Harry did look at Lucius, then. He was relieved to see the glistening sheen of polished marble replacing the flesh and cloth. Or at least he thought that was what he was seeing. His vision was growing foggy, and strangely dim. Harry let out the breath he was holding, his arm trembling with the effort it took to keep his wand pointed at Malfoy, just in case something was going wrong.

Without warning, his legs gave out from beneath him, but he didn't hit the floor. For a second, he wondered why it was taking so long. Then he became vaguely aware of something black and soft surrounding him. Someone he could trust to hold him.

Relaxing then, Harry let himself dissolve completely into his father's arms.

Sensations surrounded him. Floppy-feeling muscles, his father's close embrace, Apparition, motion, the smell of Floo powder. However, Harry didn't jolt back into full awareness until the Potions Master shouted for Poppy Pomfrey while in close proximity to Harry's ear.

Frowning, Harry tried to make a sarcastic comment about not being deaf, but only managed a somewhat annoyed whimper.

"What the hell happened?" Draco shouted from across the room. "You lot dawdled for ages!"

"Mr Snape, calm yourself at once. Professor, lay Mr Potter down here."

Becoming more lucid, Harry struggled against his father's gentle grip. "I'm not an invalid! I can walk." Pleasantly surprised when Snape actually let him go, Harry squinted blearily around the infirmary as he made his way to the bed Madam Pomfrey was pointing at. He sat down heavily, rubbing his eyes and blinking as he struggled to clear his vision.

"What seems to be the problem?"

"Magical exhaustion at the very least," said Snape in clipped tones. "However, Harry may well have sustained injuries which he and his brother have failed to mention."

Harry cringed a bit as the accusation hit home. "Oh . . . um, I think the magic on my eyes has been mussed a bit. I didn't really figure it out until just now, though," he added defensively.

"Fuck," Draco muttered.

Moments later Madam Pomfrey was shining wand light into Harry's eyes and commenting that she saw a small amount of scarring in both. After a series of incantations, she also confirmed what Harry already suspected: his eyesight was no longer magically corrected to perfect vision.
"Damn it! I should have transfigured a blindfold," Draco said. "Harry, I just didn't think! Well, I mean, I did, but I didn't have any time. Shite. I am so, so sorry."

"S'ok," Harry sighed, more than a little depressed. No point in upsetting Draco, though. He hadn't meant any harm. "I'm sure they'll fix it."

"I don't appreciate this cavalier attitude about your sight, Harry," announced Snape in a hard tone. "Now, what is this about a blindfold?" When neither boy answered, the Potions Master's voice became even more insistent. "Which of you is going to tell me everything that took place in that house?"

"Draco will," Harry answered. Probably he should have offered to explain it all himself, but he just didn't feel like it. And he figured he was entitled to a little selfishness, after all he'd been through. Of course, Draco had been through a lot as well, but then again, he'd already been treated and had got a chance to rest. "Can I just go to sleep?"

Before anyone could answer Harry's head was hitting the pillow. He was so tired he could barely drag his legs atop the bed. He closed his burning eyes, wishing he could sleep for a week, and didn't even open them when he felt someone pulling off his shoes. Harry batted the hands away, though, when they started tugging on his school robe.

"You'll be more comfortable with it off," said Remus' soft voice.

"Then I shall assist him," Snape announced, a little huffily to Harry's ear. "He is my son, you realise."

"Yes, I realise, but I knew him well a lot earlier than you did, Severus--"

"Gentlemen," Pomfrey announced, her voice a shade amused. "Allow me."

The mediwitch swiftly spelled him into soft pyjamas. As she began murmuring diagnostic spells, Draco recounted their entire misadventure from the time they'd gone to fetch his amulet.

Harry didn't want to answer any questions, so he lay still and quiet, feigning sleep. Draco's embellishments made it a bit difficult, though. Hundreds of snakes became thousands. Then Draco said that he'd known all along that his old wand was probably a Portkey. He'd bravely risked the danger in order to defend his brother, he claimed.

Harry couldn't help it. He snorted.

"Problem?" said Snape quickly.

"Uh, no. Just something up my nose," said Harry, just as quickly.

He turned his head into the pillow and grinned while their father proceeded to scold Draco for doing something so "Gryffindor."

Draco was just getting to the part about Gibby taking away the snake he'd so bravely killed when Pomfrey lifted Harry's head and helped him drink a sickly-sweet potion. After that, blissful sleep descended, sending Harry into a place that was dark, but safe.

After sleeping for what felt like days, Harry was aware of his father coming to his bedside and gently shaking him awake to tell him he must wake to answer some questions about Aran. Harry vaguely
nodded, but he didn't have the strength to break the potion's effect and was quickly back to sleep.

When his father came a second time it was to tell him that Harry needed to eat and that his friends were driving him mad begging to visit him. This time Harry didn't even bother trying to wake. He felt like he was back in the Second Task. It was like being just below the surface of the water and wanting to swim up with not being able to do so.

The last time someone tried to wake him, Harry managed to open his eyes. Everything looked hazy, but as Draco's face came close, he could see well enough to make out his features. "Hey," whispered Harry. "Your bites are gone."

Draco smiled. "Yeah. No more hideous and disfiguring scars, eh? How are you feeling?"

"Uh . . . sleepy, I guess." Rolling slightly on his side, Harry went right back to sleep.

Much later, when Harry finally surfaced from his slumber and squinted over at the other bed, Draco appeared to be asleep himself. It didn't seem like it was night, though, not really. The fuzzy form of Remus was sitting on a chair beside his bed.

Harry's mouth felt like it was full of cotton wool. Reaching awkwardly for the glass of water on his night table, he took a few gulps. There, that was better. "Hey, Remus."

A warm smile lit up the other man's brown eyes. "Good to see you awake, Harry. Are you feeling better?"

"Yeah," said Harry, stretching. "Kind of tired and bleary, but good. Oh no, bleary . . ."

Apparently understanding his difficulty at once, Remus leaned over and spoke in a low voice. "Severus has owl-ordered you some replacement glasses. Proper wizarding ones, this time."

Harry didn't know quite what that meant, but he found it discouraging, all the same. Weren't his eyes ever going to stabilise? He didn't want to whinge about it though, not with Draco in the other bed. No telling if the other boy was really asleep, after all.

Remus smiled at him, apparently misunderstanding his wan expression. "It's all right, Harry, what you did back in France."

Harry glanced left and right, a little bit startled.

"Poppy's out for the moment and the room is warded," added Remus, that time figuring out just what Harry was thinking. "We can speak freely. And truly, Harry, it is all right. You shouldn't be feeling guilty."

Harry wasn't, actually, but something struck him then. "You didn't seem very surprised to see what I'd done to Lucius Malfoy," he said, a thread of suspicion running through his voice. "I didn't think you knew . . . er, just how unusual my magic can get these days."

"Oh, I didn't know," Remus admitted, smiling still. "Not until Severus mentioned it just prior to the three of us Apparating to rescue you. He didn't say much, of course. Just enough to make me aware of a few things."

"What, exactly?"

Remus chuckled softly. "I believe his exact words were to keep out of your way if you were casting, as one could never quite be sure what might come out of your wand. Also, he said not to stand in
front of him at any time, as you might need to see his Dark Mark. I'll admit I was puzzled by that until you mentioned Serpensorlia having been so crucial. And of course, seeing the state Lucius Malfoy was in helped me understand the other comment."

Harry nodded. "Huh. If that's all the warning you had, you took it pretty well. I mean, it's not every day you see . . . yeah."

"Well . . ." Remus' brown eyes began twinkling with humour. "Perhaps I ought to mention that you were in no position to notice that my jaw had hit the floor. At the time, you were busy being smothered by your father."

Harry couldn't help but laugh, though he said. "Bit embarrassing, really. At my age?"

"No," said Remus, all at once serious. "Don't think that. It's good that you have someone."

Harry thought so too, but he still felt a little embarrassed, so he covered it by asking, "Anyway, where's my dad now?"

"Making Eyesight Elixir." Remus started smiling again, the expression tolerant and amused all at once. "Poppy informed him she still has plenty in her stores, but Severus absolutely insisted you have fresh."

That didn't embarrass Harry the way remembering the hug had. A warm feeling stole over him, like a blanket made of soft fuzzy wool had just been draped over bare skin.

"And before you ask," added Remus, "the headmaster is talking with Professor Aran."

Harry hadn't been going to ask, but instead of saying that, he sat up a little in excitement. "That stupid git is sacked, right?"

"I don't think so," said Remus, shaking his head. "I've no idea what's to be done. Severus and Albus were speaking in rather cryptic terms. It seems there's a plan. I don't think Albus liked it, but Severus was applying a fair measure of guilt to get his way."

Harry sighed. "All right. Well, it's so close to summer I don't suppose it matters, really. I just wondered what was going to happen." He scowled thinking about what Aran had put him and Draco through. "Lucius cast something at Aran. Some kind of horrible hex, right?"

Remus shook his head. "It was a forgetfulness spell, Harry. Aran's lost about the last three or four weeks. But it's only recently we learned that much. When you and Draco first disappeared, Aran was out cold and of no use at all. Severus and Albus traced the Floo to Malfoy Manor, though of course that was a false lead, as we know now."

A knock on the closed door interrupted them. And voices. Ones Harry would have known anywhere. "Harry!"

After Remus unwarded the doors and allowed them to open, Harry smiled to greet his friends. "Wow, seems like forever since I saw you. Um . . . I've been asleep a while. What time is it, anyway? Heck, what day is it?"

Hermione's eyes filled with concern. "It's Saturday before breakfast, Harry. Just what happened to you? All anybody here was told was that you'd gone missing. And it obviously has something to do with Professor Aran. When his class arrived on Thursday, your father and the headmaster were in with him. They wouldn't say what was wrong, but they told the students to go have a free period."
"Yeah." Ron stepped closer to the bed. "I don't suppose you got even with him once and for all, like with a certain dung beetle, something like that?"

Harry had no idea what to say. He didn't mind his friends knowing everything, but they wouldn't have been included in the wards Remus had mentioned a few minutes ago. Harry gave his old professor a pleading look, but Remus shook his head slightly and began to speak. Apparently, the adults had anticipated that a cover story would be needed.

Eventually, anyway.

"Actually, we've asked the boys not to discuss the matter," said Remus. "There was apparently some sort of altercation and it's under investigation. Until we know more, I'd ask you both to avoid speculation."

Hermione frowned, her eyes glittering with suspicion.

"I'll tell you the whole thing when I can," Harry said, hoping to mollify her.

"We've heard that one before, mate." Ron held up his hands when Harry shot him a scowl. "Not to worry! I didn't mean I didn't believe you."

"What are we supposed to tell Gryffindor, though?" pressed Hermione. "Some other students wanted to skip breakfast to come see you. They know you went missing, Harry. And now you're back but in hospital . . . they're going to want to know what we found out, since we were the only ones allowed to come here."

"Who stopped the others?"

"McGonagall said that you needed rest and you were limited to two visitors only."

"Tell the others," said Remus in a slightly impatient voice, "that there was apparently some sort of altercation and it's under investigation."

Hermione sniffed, but finally nodded.

She and Ron pulled up chairs and settled in for a chat. As Harry talked, he was careful not to explain any details of what he'd been through. However, once Remus went to Pomfrey's office to ask about getting breakfast for the three of them, Harry made sure to tell his friends that Draco had done him a really, really good turn and he'd personally punch anybody who doubted his brother's loyalty ever again.

Ron paled a little, hearing that.

"Out loud, I meant," Harry generously added.

Proving that he'd been eavesdropping all along, or at least for a while, Draco chose that moment to sit up in his bed. "I'm as committed as you lot to keeping Harry safe, and if I hear you say otherwise, you'll get a good deal more than a Mugglish sort of trouncing!"

"Yeah, that's the way to win over my friends," said Harry, glaring a little at Draco. "Threaten to hex them."

"Did I say hex?" Draco raised an eyebrow in a bad imitation of innocence.

Remus came back then, three trays floating behind him.
"Left out as usual." Draco sniffed. Loudly.

"Oh, do stop being so silly, Mr Snape," said Pomfrey as she bustled over. "Mr Potter, you tuck in. You need to keep your strength up." She cast a spell over Draco, clucking like a hen all the while. At least, it sounded that way to Harry. "All right, your system seems clear... Mr Lupin, if you could fetch another tray?"

Remus nodded and went back toward Pomfrey's office.

"His system's clear of what?" pressed Hermione as soon as Remus was gone again. "Just what happened to the two of you?"

"Merlin's head, you're dense," said Draco. "Like a crazed kappa, you just won't let go, will you? There was apparently some sort of altercation and the matter is under investigation."

"It's not nice to eavesdrop," retorted Hermione, going a little red in the face. She did stop her questions after that, though.

Harry was about to tell Draco not to talk to his friends so scathingly, but when Goyle walked in the moment was lost. Just as well, really. Harry was tired of playing referee. Why couldn't they all just get on? Or at least pretend to?

Draco turned on his side away from Harry and spent some time quietly talking with Goyle. About what, Harry didn't know. Unlike some people, he didn't constantly eavesdrop.

When Remus came back with a fourth tray, Goyle looked up, a big smile on his face. "Oh, breakfast. Great! I had to skip the Great Hall to come up here--"

Draco laconically picked up his wand from the night table and waved the tray over to his friend, then looked at Remus expectantly. "I'm starving here."

Remus' voice was a shade irritated when he answered. "Then perhaps you shouldn't give away your food."

Goyle spoke through a mouth full of half-chewed bangers. "Oh, was this yours? Sorry, Draco. Want it back?"

"No, thank you," said Draco pertly, turning a smile his way. It faded when he resumed talking to Remus. "Well? Hop to."

"I'm not your house-elf, Mr Snape."

"Well, if you were," said Draco, "I wouldn't trust any food you brought me. Eh? You ought to take it as a compliment that I'd eat anything a werewolf handed me--"

"Werewolf?" gasped Goyle, the glass of milk in his hand shaking so much that droplets flew everywhere.

Draco put a hand out, steadying Goyle's wrist. "Don't you remember Professor Lupin? Third-year Defence?"

Goyle peered intently at Lupin, scrunching up his face in an apparent attempt to dredge up things long forgotten. "Oh, you," he said at last, scowling. His voice dropped to an undertone as he said to Draco, "I already ate a banger and half a crumpet. Are you sure it's safe?"
"Yes, I'm sure." Draco sighed a little as he let go of Goyle's wrist and turned to Remus again. "Would it kill you to bring just one more little tray?"

"Would it kill you to ask politely?"

"Look, you lycanthrope, I'm bloody hungry and I know your . . . condition isn't catching at the moment--" Draco broke off and then resumed in calmer tones. "On the other hand, there's nothing wrong with being a little Slytherin. So, fine. Ple--."

"Is Mr Snape still waiting for his meal?" called Pomfrey from the desk in the far corner where she was scrawling something. Her voice was shrewish. "He needs to keep his strength up, Mr Lupin!"

"I'm just fetching it now," said Remus, sighing. Draco beamed a smarmy smile and waved for him to get on with it, then.

"What happened to your perfect manners?" hissed Harry as soon as Remus had gone off to once more communicate with the elves. He'd have said something sooner, but thought it might humiliate Remus. "You don't have to like him, but you do have to be civil, Draco. Haven't we talked about this before? He's one of the good guys. Just like you, eh?"

"Ha. He may be one of the good guys, but he is not just like me."

Still, Draco was less obnoxious when Remus returned. He nodded politely as he took the tray.

Remus left then, to speak with the headmaster, he said. Harry sighed, thinking of this idea that Remus should keep right on spying. But since Ron and Hermione didn't know about that at all, Harry certainly couldn't voice his objections in front of them.

Not to mention that Goyle was in the ward too, now.

Maybe Remus will tell the headmaster it's a daft plan, he thought. And if not, I'll find a way to talk to him later.

As breakfast progressed, Harry chatted with his friends while Draco talked with Goyle, all their conversations sprinkled with the noises of munching and swallowing. Goyle was the first to leave, mumbling something about how one tray just wouldn't do it and maybe he could still catch a spot of breakfast in the Great Hall.

Once he was gone, Draco sighed loudly. "Granger," he said, interrupting Harry and Ron's argument about which wizard's chess set was the best. "Hermione, I meant," he said after a moment of silence. "Yes?"

Draco cleared his throat, obviously nervous. "Er . . . do you think you could take time away from your busy studies to help Greg a little with Defence during the next few days? The textbook is hard for him, so he needs somebody to read it to him out loud. And a talking quill just won't do it. You have to talk him through it, if that makes sense."

Hermione's eyes went wide. "I don't have to do anything at all, Draco. If Goyle needs help so badly, why don't you do it?"

Draco's features hardened. "I have been. Ask Harry if you don't believe me. But I promised to help Greg more this weekend and that's just not on now, is it?"
Harry blinked, a little bit alarmed. "We're not going to be in hospital all weekend, are we?"

"Oh, right. You were asleep." Draco pushed his tray off his lap and with a flick of his wand, set it floating across the room. "Severus said that as soon as we were released, he was going to take us away from the castle for a bit of a holiday. I'm sure you can guess where."

"Oh, to--" Harry couldn't say it, not with Fidelius shutting him up in Pomfrey's presence.

"Yeah, there. So I won't be here to help Greg and he needs it in the worst way." Draco looked up at Hermione again, a smile plastered on his face. A fake smile, but at least not one that was horribly sarcastic. He just looked like it was hard to ask a Muggleborn for anything, and Hermione Granger above all.

"I'm sure there are Slytherins who know Defence at the level we're learning," she insisted, her arms crossed stubbornly over her chest.

Draco's smile faded. "Well, yes. But they're all rather . . . supercilious, you know?"

"Yes, I know," Hermione put in dryly.

Draco swallowed, like this was getting harder and harder and he'd just as soon give up. Instead, he soldiered on. "They'll lord it over him--"

"Like you don't?"

"He's comfortable with it from me, though." Draco began to huff. "Look, if you won't do it, just say so. I thought you'd just love a chance to show off your pumpkin-sized brain to someone new, but noooo--"

Harry stepped in before a full-scale squabble could erupt. "Draco, haven't you ever heard that you can catch more flies with honey than vinegar?"

Draco's eyebrows drew together in what looked like genuine confusion. "No, and why would I want flies? I mean, unless I was brewing?"

Hermione stifled a laugh.

"And you," said Harry in a hard voice as he turned to her, "haven't you ever heard of an olive branch? Because that was one, Draco asking you for help, even if it's help for Goyle. I really would like it if all of us were less at odds."

"Oh, very well." Hermione took three steps toward Draco's bed. "I guess I'm actually impressed you seem to care about someone other than yourself--"

"Seem to?" Draco clenched his teeth. "Listen, you waddlepated twat, I care about Harry! Plenty!"

Immediately upon saying it, he coloured scarlet and yanked his face to the side.

Draco's obvious sincerity seemed to get through to Hermione. "I apologise," she said a bit stiffly. "You can tell Goyle I'll tutor him, yes. Library, tonight, seven p.m."

"Make it seven-thirty." Draco made a random motion with his hand, his colour still high. "Greg needs lots of time to eat."

"I can see that," said Hermione, in a tone just as dry as before.
Draco smiled. "Good, then. And since I wouldn't want to be *uncivil*, I'll even say 'thank you.'" He glanced over at Harry. "See? Told you I had perfect manners."

Hermione giggled slightly. In the next instant, Ron was on his feet at her side. "We'll both help Goyle," he said staunchly. "Be glad to. Yeah?"

Harry tensed, sure that Draco would come back with some sort of sarcastic rejoinder about Ron's brains. But his brother just smiled faintly. "Fine. You protect your lady-love from the big bad Slytherin. But Greg knows better than to treat Hermione badly, anyway. I told him she was all right."

Hermione gaped.

"For a Muggleborn," Draco added. He seemed irritated when Hermione still looked stunned. "What's the big surprise? I told you to your face that you were clever, didn't I?" His silver eyes began to sparkle with mischief. "And I told Harry you were a bit pretty, once. Just a bit, though," he added as Ron's fists clenched. "I mean, you're hardly my type, are you now?"

"We need to be going, Harry," said Hermione faintly.

"Good idea," muttered Ron.

As if to make up for the boorish comment, Hermione added, "We'd like to stay longer, really. But Ron has Quidditch practice and I'm leading an Arithmancy review that I'm almost late for."

The two of them said a quick good-bye to Harry; Hermione said one to Draco as well.

Ron made a point of scowling as he walked out.

Draco chuckled softly when they had left. "Weasley... oh, do pardon me, *Ron*, should really have more faith in his girl. If she *is* his girl, that is. Did you see the way she was looking at me, there at the end? I bet I could get her to leave him for me."

"Draco!"

The other boy lifted his shoulders. "Did I say I was going to? Relax!"

"Why would you even want to? You can barely stand Hermione!"

"But I thought you wanted to see us getting along much, much better." Draco waggled his eyebrows, and when Harry fumed, laughed. "You're almost as easy to manipulate as Ron Weasley. I don't want to, Harry. The only reason to do it would be to see Ron's face turn purple. But in the interests of amicable friendship all around, I'll desist."

"Yeah, you'd just better," muttered Harry, flopping onto his back.

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After giving both boys one final dose of potions, Pomfrey pronounced them fit to be released, though she told them to stay put until she had a chance to talk to their father, who was supposed to be bringing Harry's Elixir shortly.

After about twenty minutes of cooling their heels in the infirmary, Draco said they ought to just go
find Severus. "Come on, Harry," he urged. "Pomfrey's not even in her office any longer. Didn't you hear her close her door and go down the hall?"

"Easy for you to suggest we should traipse our way down to the dungeons. I can't see so well, so, enough said. I'll wait here for Dad."

"We could always Floo," said Draco in a wheedling voice. "I bet I could figure out where Pomfrey keeps her powder."

Harry was saved from answering by Remus returning from his talk with the headmaster. The man had a grim, determined look about him. That was enough to tell Harry all he needed to know.

"You're going to do it, aren't you?" asked Harry.

"Yes--"

"Do what?"

*Oh, yeah.* Draco didn't know. Harry didn't know exactly how to tell him, either.

Remus obviously thought that Draco deserved the truth, however. Walking over to the other boy, he spoke in a quiet voice. "I think Harry's already told you about the work I've been doing for the Order. Well, with this latest development, I'll be able to impersonate Lucius Malfoy . . . ah, 'round the clock, as it were."

Draco's eyes went wide. Stiffening, he looked completely dumbfounded. "You're planning to live in the Manor? With my *mother*?"

"Well, except for when the full moon intervenes," said Remus. "I'll have to go on business trips or some-such at those times."

"Oh yeah? Well, what if you're summoned at those times?" demanded Harry.

"I'll deal with contingencies as they arise."

"I'll give you a contingency," said Draco, his voice pitched loud and sounding higher than usual. "You filthy half-blood half-breed! If you think you're going to just take over and be him, then you're going to get a hex shoved straight up your arse, because I'm not standing for this, is that clear?"

"Draco!"

Harry hadn't heard the door swing open, and evidently neither had Draco. But there was Snape, closing it behind him and warding it several times over before he strode forward to glare down at his son. "You're not to speak to Lupin in that manner, ever again!"

Draco's lips twisted. "Oh, please. What is he, your new best friend?"

"He's your elder and an Order member," said Snape in a cold voice. "Whatever my own differences with him, they do not excuse you from treating him with respect."

"Respect, is it?" By then, Draco was practically screeching. "Look at him! He's salivating! He can't wait to get his paws on my mother!"

When Harry glanced over at Remus, he saw that the man was standing perfectly calm and still, though deep in his eyes there glimmered a little bit of surprise to hear Severus Snape coming to his defence.
Snape clicked his teeth together. "That is more an insult than the things you just said a moment ago. I quite assure you, whatever his other faults, Lupin will not be attacking your mother."

"Ha, attacking her. Yeah, I'm sure he won't. Well, let's just be clear here. He'd damned well better not start sleeping with my mother, that's all I can say! Because I'm not having a nasty werewolf putting his hands--or anything else--on her; I'm just not!"

Harry's mouth dropped open. Suddenly, he could understand why Draco was all but foaming at the mouth.

"Ah," said Severus, the penny obviously dropping for him, too. "Lupin?"

"Oh, Draco," said Remus slowly. He sounded like he was trying hard to keep his voice level. "Yes, I can see why that idea would alarm you. But truly, I've no intention of sleeping with your mother."

Draco crossed his arms, a trollish expression on his face. "Ha. Sure. Everybody knows werewolves are primal about things like that. And you're no different from the rest of your kind, are you?"

"Whether I am or not is no concern of yours," retorted Remus. "This perhaps is, though, so I will tell you that Narcissa Malfoy leaves me utterly and completely cold. I can't think of anyone I'd rather sleep with less."

If anything, that information seemed to offend Draco all the more. "My mother's beautiful! She's gorgeous!"

"Yes, she is." Remus' voice was calm again, now. "So is a rose in full bloom, Draco. It doesn't mean it excites me, if you take my meaning?"

Harry hated to make things worse, but he'd hate it even more if Remus got killed, so he went ahead and made his objection. "Um, no offence, but won't Mrs Malfoy find all that a little strange? I mean, if you're going to pretend to be him, won't she expect . . . er?"

Surprisingly enough, Draco took that well. "Actually, I don't think she will." His voice got a little bit snooty. "My mother's a lady, I hope you realise. I can't imagine her being the one to demand anything. Well, maybe once a year on their anniversary . . . ."

Harry caught a look of mirth on his father's face. Actually, Remus looked amused as well, though when he spoke, it was in a level voice.

"You're correct, Harry. It won't be possible to deceive Narcissa completely. She simply knows her husband far too well. Albus and I have been discussing a solution. I'll make up a story about being cursed from behind to explain why Lucius is not quite himself these days and can't remember simple things such as his wife would expect him to know. Draco . . . this same story can be used to explain a lack of interest in, ah, bedroom matters."

"Well, the more you know the better, I suppose." Draco sighed. "Guess I'll be skipping that holiday so I can fill you in on everything you ought to know."

"We'll see to that later," said Snape. "Lupin won't begin his assignment for a few days, the better to lend credence to his story of having been cursed and left for dead."

Harry sighed. "And me hating the idea from start to finish, that counts for nothing, I suppose?"

"Lupin?" said Snape, his voice strained.
"I wouldn't say it counts for nothing," said Remus quietly. "But your reasons for wanting me to desist...they are personal, Harry. This is more important than our individual feelings."

"I have good instincts," Harry insisted.

"And what are they telling you?" asked Snape. "Be honest."

Harry pursed his lips. What _were_ they telling him? Mostly, that he didn't want Remus to place himself in danger. But that was personal, as Remus had said. He tried to push that aside and listen to what his instincts for the war might be saying. "You might get us some really good information," he finally said, sighing.

It was hard ignoring his personal feelings. Harder than he would have thought. But then again, that's what Snape was doing, wasn't it? _He_ had every reason to resent Lupin displacing him as the Order's most important source of information. But unlike at first, he seemed to be taking it well these days.

And if his father could, then so could Harry. "Be careful," he said in a low voice.

"I will." Remus said good-bye, then, including Draco in the farewell. Draco nodded, his features impassive. That was better than him being rude, Harry supposed.

Fishing a pair of glasses from his pocket, Snape turned to Harry. "These ones should be self-adjusting. If there's nothing further, we'll see to your Elixir and be on our way."

"Actually, Madam Pomfrey said she wanted to talk with you--"

"No doubt." Severus' voice was a tad grim. "Open your eyes wide, Harry, and tilt your head back."

Once the Elixir was in, Harry put his new glasses on and shoved his hands in his pockets. "You know, this yo-yo routine is really getting old."

"Yo-yo?" asked Draco.

"Oh, Muggle toy. I just mean, one minute I can see, the next minute I can't...I swear, I'm to the point where I don't even _care_ where it settles. I just want to stop switching back and forth!"

"It must be frustrating, yes," said Snape. "There is nothing to be done, however. If it's any consolation, I do intend you to have an enjoyable few days as we all...recover, from recent events."

"Yeah, Draco mentioned that." Something about his father's phrasing startled Harry, though. "Wait, few days? Just the weekend, I thought."

Snape shook his head. "We may be back on Tuesday, possibly Wednesday."

"Better get my books then--"

"No. Absolutely no books," said Snape, no glint of humour about him. "Or at least, no schoolbooks. You're not to study until we return. This is not negotiable."

Harry laughed a little bit. "We'll fall behind, you understand."

"Your health is more important than your studies, Harry."

"But I feel fine--"
"The boy doesn't know to quit when he's ahead," said Draco dryly. "I, for one, will be only too delighted to enjoy a brief holiday after all that's happened."

*All that's happened.* Harry shuddered a little as a series of horrors flashed through his mind. He almost hated to ask with Draco there, but he couldn't quite resist. "Um, the snakes, the pit? Are they still there? I'm kind of worried some Muggle child might fall in. I mean, it's just the sort of thing Lucius might think was amusing, so I doubt he'd ward it properly."

"Albus dealt with the pit. I believe he banished the snakes back to the jungles from which Lucius had summoned them to begin with. And I, of course, erased the elf's memory that such a thing had ever existed."

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Draco make a face. That was enough to settle his mind about Devon. "I guess I won't bring Sals on our holiday," he said, shrugging.

Draco flashed his teeth, his disgruntled expression fading. "That's considerate of you, Harry. But you know, I think I'm getting over the worst of my morbid fear. Something about facing it down, eh? If I can kill an enormous poisonous snake with my bare hands and without even using magic then yes, I think I can cope with your pencil-thin wisp of a pet."

"*Enormous* poisonous snake?" asked Snape, one eyebrow raised.

Draco held his father's gaze for a moment. "Well, medium-sized, we'll say."

"Medium-sized?"

"Oh, fine!" snapped Draco. "The one I killed wasn't a whole lot bigger than Sals, if you want the truth. But I think the principal still applies, *n'est-ce pas?*

"You were very, very brave," Harry said with a straight face. Since he couldn't nudge his father with his elbow without Draco seeing, Harry tried to give Snape a look.

"Yes, very courageous indeed," said Snape after a moment's pause. "In fact, rather than *Evanesco* your *Serpensortia* snake, Albus sent it to a good home as well. In tribute to your courage and loyalty. I am exceedingly proud of you. Of both of you. I could not ask for a finer pair of sons."

Draco grinned. Clearly he needed to hear *well done* just as much as Harry did.

"Shall we be off?"

Harry nodded. "All right, then, I'll just pop up to the Tower to fetch Sals--"

"No need." Fishing in the pocket of his robe, Snape pulled the little snake out. "With your permission, Harry, I'll prepare her for the Floo journey."

Feeling a bit mischievous, Harry said, "Maybe Draco wants to hold her first. No? Are you sure, Draco? Oh, very well then. Get her ready."

"Very funny, Harry," growled Draco as they stepped into the large Floo in the hospital wing.

Harry fingered his Sals-bracelet, then pulled his sleeve down over it. "I thought so."

"Just one moment!" said Pomfrey as she bustled in. "Where are you going, Professor Snape? I need to speak with you!"

Harry caught a strange look on his father's face. He wasn't quite sure what it meant, except that
Snape didn't want to talk to Pomfrey. Or perhaps, he didn't want to listen to her.

Harry had a feeling it was only to set a good example for his sons that Snape stepped out of the Floo and faced the mediwitch. "Yes, Madam Pomfrey?"

She glanced uncertainly at Harry and Draco, who were still standing in the Floo. "Perhaps my office would be a more appropriate place to hold this discussion?"

"I can't imagine why," said Snape mildly. "I do believe my sons may hear whatever you wish to say."

"Well then, here it is," said Pomfrey in a voice that was a good deal more frosty. "Mr Potter is delicate, as you well know, or should, after the kinds of injuries he suffered earlier this year. And now you have permitted him to become magically exhausted--and not just that, but to suffer impairment of his vision once again. You simply must take better care of him. He is fragile."

"Oh, I am not!" You barmy old bat, Harry almost added. He probably would have, if it wouldn't have been such a terrible example when he was trying to encourage Draco to be more polite to Remus.

"I will take better care of him," said Snape smoothly, nodding.

The mediwitch huffed. "See that you do. And then there is the matter of Mr Snape. He was poisoned! Is that any way to care for him?"

For one horrible second, Harry thought she meant the time that Snape had convinced Draco to take Venetimorica. How had she found out? But as it turned out, she meant the snakes.

"I will take better care of him, as well. I take it my proposed holiday for both the boys is a sound notion, in your view?"

Somewhat mollified, Pomfrey nodded.

"Excellent. Then we'll be on our way." Snape stepped into the Floo with Harry and Draco and fetching a pinch of powder from a vial in his pocket, sent them hurtling down to his quarters to pack.

Once his duffel was ready, Harry went back into the living room. "You didn't agree with her, did you? You don't really think I'm . . ." he grimaced. "Delicate?"

"I'd prefer you not tangle with Death Eaters again until you're ready, but you're anything but delicate," said Snape. "Agreeing was simply the most efficient way of silencing her tirade."

"Right, Slytherin." Harry thought that was fine. "I'm pretty sick of bed rest. I was worried you'd make me, you know, take it easy in Devon."

"Actually, I have something else in mind," said Snape, smiling a bit cryptically.

"What?"

"Ah, here is your brother, ready to go." Snape ushered both boys into the Floo. They took their usual route to Devon, Flooing to Grimmauld Place and from there, Apparating.

"Nice to be home," said Draco, sighing as he flicked his wand to make the front door of the cottage fly open. And then, in defensive tones, "Well, it is, you know. Mine as much as yours now."

"I know," said Harry, smiling a little.
Severus closed the door once he and the boys were inside. "Would either one of you care for something to eat?"

"Harry would," said Draco with a straight face. "He needs to keep his strength up. He's fragile."

Harry laughed. "I think I can hold out until I'm actually hungry, though."

Draco'duffel floated behind him as he made his way to the room he and Harry shared. Harry followed, tossing his own duffel atop his bed. Draco was standing in the middle of the room, wand out, but he wasn't casting. He didn't speak until they heard the click of their father's door closing.

"What are we going to do out here for several days?" Draco asked, raising his shoulders. "There's always Severus' room . . . it still needs some work, I think, though I suppose it's habitable."

"I think Dad has some idea of what we're going to do."

"I'm quite good at lazing around," suggested Draco, smiling. The expression faded as he went on. "But in this case I'd rather not have time to think."

"Yeah. I know what you mean," muttered Harry. His Sals-bracelet feeling heavy on his arm, he took it off and laid it on his bed. He wondered if Draco would tolerate Sals better in future. Awful as it must have been, he'd faced down his fear of snakes, well enough to not just kill one, but perhaps more importantly, to stay in the room with the Serpensortia viper for quite some time.

Even if the snake had been asleep most of that time, Harry was still impressed.

A moment later, Harry heard their father's voice, calling them into the front room.

When Harry went back out, he saw Snape standing before the hearth, two fine racing brooms in his hands.

"My Firebolt!" exclaimed Harry, at the same time Draco said in awe, "A Firebolt XL!"

Sure enough, the shinier broom was the newest model of Firebolt. Harry had never seen one up close. "Wow," he said, eyes bright as he stared.

Snape's lips quirked a little. He handed the newer broom to Draco and gave Harry the Firebolt.

Draco blinked. "This is for me? I . . . " He seemed at a loss for words. Harry almost laughed, after all the times he'd seen his brother be greedy and graspy. "I already have a Nimbus 2001, you know."

"Yes, I know," said Snape. "But when you were playing Quidditch last, Harry obviously wanted to join in. I've no doubt he'll want to play next year. And in order to challenge him to his utmost as the two of you practice, I thought you ought to have a broom even faster than his."

"You expect me to help him hone his skills so that Gryffindor can beat us cold next year?"

"No, I expect your regard for your brother to be a thing apart from house loyalties."

"Well, there is that," murmured Draco, running his hands up and down the broom handle. "Oh, this feels good. But still, Severus, the Cup--"

"If you'd rather not present Harry such a formidable challenge, I can certainly take the XL back to the shop," murmured Severus.

"No, no, that's all right!" Draco said quickly. "I'll keep it."
"Yes, I thought you might. I hadn't intended to give it to you until summer, but it's nearly that now."

"And I need the distraction," added Draco, grinning. "I'm going to wipe the floor with you, Potter."

"Ha. Like you've ever wiped a floor at all," retorted Harry.

"Touché."

Harry smiled, happy for his brother. "It's a beautiful broom."

Snape cleared his throat and waited until Harry looked at him. "I would not have you feel neglected, Harry, but my . . . ah, finances at present could not stretch to two such brooms. And I rather thought that you'd prefer to keep using your Firebolt in any case. I understand it has great sentimental value."

"Yeah, it does," said Harry, nodding. "Don't feel bad, Dad. I don't, not at all. You've done a lot for me, too." He lifted a hand to touch the glasses Snape had given him. Except for being self-adjusting, they were the same as his old ones, right down to the etched snake and the spell to keep the drawing visible to him alone.

"Thank you, Harry," said Snape softly.

"Oh, yes. Thank you," piped up Draco, who'd obviously forgotten his perfect manners.

Harry and Snape exchanged a look.

"Well then," said Severus, "off you go, both of you. You'll find a practice Snitch out in the meadow, already dashing about. It's spelled to stay within the unplottable area, so you need have no fear of chasing it. I don't want to see either one of you inside again until you're ready for luncheon."

"I always knew you were a hard taskmaster," said Draco, shaking his head. "Haven't you ever heard of saying, Just go have some fun, eh?"

Severus reached out his hands to grab Harry and Draco each by one shoulder, propelling them toward the front door as he spoke. "Just go have some fun."

"See, slave driver," joked Draco. "Come on, Harry. Let's see how fast an XL really goes. And after you admit I'm the better Seeker, I'll even let you have a turn on it--"

"Ha, I'll trade you the Snitch for it," retorted Harry, laughing as he headed out.

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One-on-one Quidditch was even better than Harry remembered, but maybe that was because Draco's new broom really did make Harry try his absolute very best. He caught the Snitch once to Draco's twice. Harry figured he was a bit out of practice and he'd do a lot better after he had all summer to fly around.

His dull, horrible holidays at the Dursley house seemed like a distant memory now.

After the first round, which Draco won, Harry spent a little while floating high above the cottage, admiring the countryside. Draco tugged his broom skyward and joined him. "Tired?"
"No, and I am not fragile," retorted Harry. "Actually, I was thinking about my family before compared to my family now, and that sort of reminded me I never got that chance to talk to Severus about Aran."

"Ah, Aran."

Harry gave his brother a suspicious glance. "What's that supposed to mean? After you finished explaining about the thousands of snakes, did you tell Dad how Aran's been treating me?"

Draco's hair fluttered in the breeze as he shook his head. "All I said was that Aran took my amulet because it was interfering with spells in class, and that's the only reason we went down. I don't think the headmaster said anything, either. I mean, Severus wasn't asking any leading questions, though he did seem to know that you don't much like Aran. But you've made that plain all year."

"Oh." Harry thought that over for a second. "All right. Thanks, then."

"The only reason I didn't tell him everything was because you ought to," added Draco. "Plus, it wasn't the right time. Severus hadn't calmed down yet from what Lucius did to us. I was afraid that if he heard about Aran too, he'd go kill the man. Not that I'd care, but I'd rather not have to go visit Severus in Azkaban."

Draco paused, but when Harry said nothing, pressed, "But he's calm now. Time to tell him."

"Yeah," said Harry thickly. "Tomorrow, I guess. Or the next day."

"Harry--"

"Where's the Snitch?" interrupted Harry. "Let's play another match."

Draco gave him a look like he knew Harry was changing the subject, but instead of arguing, he opened his fist and tossed the Snitch high.

Much later, Harry touched down on the XL and wiped his face with his sleeve. "Whew. I'm starving."

"I think that was the idea," said Draco dryly as he traded brooms and began to walk back to the cottage. Harry almost expected his brother to pester him again about telling Severus, but Draco had something else on his mind by then. "There, did you see? That flash of black in the window." He pointed. "Severus has been watching us the whole time, but he doesn't want us to know so he just now turned away. Ten to one he pretends to be reading or something when we go in."

Harry jumped on the change of topic. Anything rather than think about his problems with Aran. "Ten to one I can get him to 'fess up."

"Oh, the boy thinks he's Slytherin--"

"Just follow my lead. Start limping now."

"What?"

Harry ignored his brother and pulled the door open. "Dad, come quick! Draco crashed something awful--"

Snape flung a book aside and rushed to his feet. "I didn't see any crash!"

"Ha, you were watching us," said Harry. "I knew it!"
The Potions Master glowered. "That is singularly not amusing."

Harry had the grace to look a little abashed. "Yeah, all right. I just meant, you don't have to pretend you weren't watching us." Thinking a new subject might be a good idea, he said brightly, "What's that I smell? Soup?"

"Gizzard soup with dumplings made of \textit{paté de foie gras}."

"That's goose liver," said Draco.

"Ewww." Harry made a face. "Oh, yuck. Can I have a grilled cheese sandwich instead? Please?"

Draco scoffed. "For Merlin's sake, Harry, he's jesting. Though if you tell him I've crashed again when I haven't he might actually serve it. Not that I'd mind the \textit{paté}; it sounds lovely. Gizzard soup is a bit plebeian, though . . ."

Draco sat down then, cradling his new broom in his lap. For a moment he just caressed the fine, dark wood, but then he started examining every straw like he had to be sure the XL was still in perfect condition. When Harry and Snape sat down at the table to eat the beef-and-barley soup the elves had sent, Draco didn't even look up.

"Draco, if you could desist from worshipping your broom for five minutes?" hinted Snape.

"I'll be there in a second--"

"Now."

"Ha. Slave driver's right, all right." Grinning, Draco joined them at the table, but not before he'd carefully leaned his broom alongside Harry's.

After lunch was over, Harry didn't have to be ordered outside again. By then, he'd figured out that their father really did want them to relax. Instead of Quidditch, though, Harry and Draco decided to test the XL against the Firebolt and see how much of a speed advantage it had. They traded brooms halfway through to see if a different rider would affect the results.

All the while, the Snitch buzzed around playfully, trying to tempt them. At one point it even stuck a wing in Harry's ear as he hovered. "Go away," laughed Harry, batting at it.

Draco pulled up to hover alongside him. "I think the XL's advantage shows up more in sprints than long flights."

"Well, Quidditch has both kinds of flying." Harry glanced sideways and down. "Hmm. He's watching us again. You don't suppose he thinks anything could happen to us out here, do you?"

Draco considered that for a moment, his silver eyes looking all around to survey the empty Devon countryside. "I think he's just feeling fatherly after . . . er, nearly losing us," he finally concluded.

"Yeah, it could have been bad. But you were great, Draco. I don't even really know how to thank you--"

"Don't make me listen to your thanking-people thing, that's how." A sudden breeze pushed Draco's hair back. "You already thanked me, anyway, Harry."

"All right." Harry started heading down, looping in slow circles as they descended.
Dinner that night was a less than festive affair, and not just because by then Harry was feeling pretty tired after so much flying. He kept trying to figure out how to tell his father about his problems with Aran. Putting it off wasn't going to help anything, he knew. But since he didn't really want to ruin their holiday, either . . . he just kept putting it off.

As it turned out, Snape was the one who brought it up. Though, like a Slytherin, he took his time getting to the point.

"So, I don't have as much time with you both as I used to," he began, sipping at his wine and looking over the top of the glass at both of them. "I miss chatting each night about your progress in your studies. How are your classes going?"

Draco gave Harry a tell him look, but Harry ignored it. Setting down his emptied wine glass expectantly, Draco grimaced when it refilled itself with sparkling water instead of a second glass of wine.

"Neither one of you has anything to say about your classes?" asked Snape.

That time, Draco didn't even bother glancing Harry's way. "Well, McGonagall's lectures are as dry as ever. I don't suppose you'd speak to her about that, Severus?"

"No, I don't suppose I would."

"No matter. I can only understand one word in four anyway, on account of her lowbrow accent--" Harry wished Draco would cut out the snobbery, but after his brother had jumped in like that with an answer to their father's question, he didn't have the heart to rebuke him. Of course, Snape didn't let Draco's diversion divert him for long.

"Are you still struggling in Transfiguration, Harry? I recall it's not your area of greatest strength."

"No, it's not, and having to figure out every incantation on my own doesn't help."

"What about Defence, though?" asked Snape in a voice that was, perhaps, just a little too smooth. Harry couldn't be sure. "That must make up for your difficulties in Transfiguration, since you're naturally disposed to the subject."

Harry smiled and nodded. Snape couldn't know anything, right? Aran had forgotten all about Harry's defiance, and the headmaster wouldn't have said anything, not when the far more important matter had been getting Harry home safely. "Oh yeah, Defence is great. Aran's an idiot, of course. No doubt about that at all. Letting Lucius Malfoy into Hogwarts for a parent-teacher conference when even the Prophet got it right that Draco's not his son any longer! You told the headmaster to leave him to you, though. What are you planning to do to him?"

Snape smiled very thinly as though he knew Harry was changing the subject. As though he knew why.

Harry felt like somebody had just walked over his grave. He shivered, and tried to conceal it by snatching up a knife and buttering an entire slice of bread.

"I've told him," lamented Draco. "One bit at a time, but will he listen?"
"Quiet, Draco," snapped Snape. "Harry, you'll find out in due time how I plan to proceed with Aaron Aran. So then, Defence is great, is it? You aren't having any problems acquiring the material?"

Harry forced a laugh. "Problems? Well, the Parseltongue spells are a pain as much there as anywhere else, but apart from that Defence is a snap. You know me."

"Yes, I know you," said Snape in what Harry could only think as an ominous voice.

From across the table, Draco was giving him a stern look now, like Harry should really catch a clue and start talking.

"You'd come to me if you had questions the resources in the library couldn't answer, I would hope," added Snape.

"Oh yeah, I'd come right down," said Harry, relaxing a bit. It didn't seem like his father was really on the right track.

"Really," drawled Snape, shaking his head. "In that case, I can only conclude that you are very confused indeed as to the particulars of certain advanced defensive spells."

"No, I'm not--"

"Then how do you explain this?" asked Snape, drawing a parchment from the inside of his robes. For one horrible second Harry thought it was his test, and he was ready to have it out with the headmaster who must have restored it from ashes after Harry had left his office. But no, it wasn't the test at all.

Snape began to read out loud. "Caninae are called that because they come in cans. The hardest part of the spell is actually the can-opening phase. Many wizards over the years have died horrible, messy deaths when resentful caninae got trapped for too long in their--"

"All right, that's enough," interrupted Harry, suddenly feeling not just tired but exhausted.

"One would hope you were being facetious."

"Yeah, well I'm not as dim as that makes it sound," grumbled Harry. "Where did you get that, anyway?"

"That's not exactly the most salient point at issue, but in fact I found it while Albus was attempting to rouse Aran from his stupor. All we knew was that your Patronus had led me back to the Defence room and that there appeared to have been foul play. I began looking through your teacher's papers for any clue I could find. Imagine my surprise when I found drivel such as this." Snape tossed the parchment onto the table and glared at Harry. "Have you any coherent explanation?"

"I was out of sorts."

"Obviously. And the cause?"

"Er . . ."

"Harry, just tell Dad!" Draco shouted.

Severus leaned back as though startled. Then an expression that looked almost . . . smug, stole into his half-closed eyes. It took Harry a minute to put it together. Oh. Draco hadn't said, tell your Dad,
he'd said, *tell Dad.*

*His* dad, too.

Harry swallowed, thinking about that. He remembered how hard it had been for him to try calling Severus his father. How his throat would clench up to stop him from saying it. And Draco had maybe more reason than Harry, even, to be skittish about things like that. Look at how horrible his birth father had been!

So if Draco could get past all that and screw up the courage to say it . . . well, then Harry could do the same, and tell his father why he'd written an essay like that.

He was just glad Severus hadn't seen the test as well.

"Um . . ." Harry took a deep breath. Starting was hard, but once he did, the words seemed to just pour out him. "Professor Aran really hates Parselmouths, sir. Ever since I've been back in his class he's been calling me a Dark Wizard and refusing to let me cast any spells because I'd have to do them in Parseltongue and he won't have it in class, he says. He calls it filthy language and unfit for decent people! At first he wasn't even going to let me take any practicals but I got him to agree that I could come in and do them privately, and then he wasn't even going to stay and watch me test, but McGonagall pretty much insisted and after all that, yeah, you can believe I had a reason to be out of sorts. I was tired of his shite! Oh! Sorry, sir."

Harry thought he might have said more except he needed air.

Once he'd stopped it was hard to start again. Then again, what was there left to say? He wasn't going to tell his father that he'd sworn in class and been openly defiant and such . . . unless he had to.

"That's quite a catalogue of complaints." Snape's eyes were blazing with anger, the black so dark it looked almost demonic. Dangerous, that was it. For once, Harry didn't care so much about his father's Death Eater past or the rest of it. He was angry enough at Aran to hope Snape cut the man no quarter.

Besides, he knew that Snape wasn't actually going to kill Aran over this. Or . . . he was pretty sure.

"And this began as soon as you resumed classes, did it?"

*Uh-oh.* Now that dark tone sounded more directed at Harry than Aran. Because this was the ugly heart of the matter, wasn't it? What Aran had done was nothing compared to the fact that Harry had kept it a secret for so long.

"I do believe my hair could use a wash," murmured Draco, pushing back his chair. "If you'll both excuse me . . ."

Snape suddenly whipped his wand out and pointed it at Draco. "*Comalavare,*" he said, his voice intense. "*Et secare.*"

Draco sputtered as his hair suddenly filled with lather and then just as suddenly went dry as straw. When it was all over, he looked awful. Definitely, that wasn't the way to wash hair.

Part of Harry couldn't help but feel that Draco had that coming for laughing when Harry had got *Bocalavare* during Aran's detention.

"Now you're clean," drawled Snape. "And while I'm sure Harry appreciates the attempt at decorum, you'll stay because you're involved in this matter too. Unless Harry insists we speak alone, that is."
"No, it's all right," murmured Harry. Draco had heard it all anyway, during that lunch with the headmaster.

"Excellent," snapped Snape. "Aaron Aran's prejudices are one matter. He shall be dealt with, make no mistake. What I fail to comprehend is why the two of you neglected to alert me to this problem. Well?"

Harry coloured. But he didn't want Draco in as much trouble as him, not when it wasn't fair. "Draco told me to come to you," he admitted, "as soon as he came to classes and saw how bad it was. And when I didn't want to he said he'd tell you himself--"

Snape leaned forward. "I can't seem to recall any such conversation!"

"Severus, I--"

"Let him speak," thundered Snape. "Yes?"

"I wouldn't let him tell you," quietly admitted Harry. "I more-or-less blackmailed him into keeping quiet."

Snape shoved his plate away, his dark eyes turbulent, now. "Merlin preserve me. What has he done that you could blackmail him? More Venetimorica?"

Harry gasped. "I wouldn't hide a thing like that!"

Draco snatched up his glass of water and threw the contents at Snape's face. "Thanks! Thanks a whole fucking lot!"

Snape had quick reflexes though; he moved to the side in time. Then he glared at Draco.

"Sorry," said Draco, mumbling. "Um, impulse control. Maybe I should . . . um, go to the bedroom after all?"

"Yes, maybe you should," said Snape. "I'll deal with you later."

Draco grimaced, but his hand under the table gave Harry's a quick squeeze before he left.

"It's all my fault," said Harry, sighing. "And I didn't blackmail Draco over anything he'd done, all right? I just threatened to tell you that Slytherin was calling him Malshite. Which they've stopped. But you know all about it now, so I don't suppose it matters if I mention it."

Snape's eyes narrowed. "Wonderful. Now I have not one but two sons intent on concealing their problems from me. Though in Draco's case I can perhaps understand. His relationships with his peers, as long as they don't become hazardous, are best left in his hands. I do not think the same of your relationship with a biased professor."

_Biased professor._ Wasn't that the pot calling the cauldron black.

"It just didn't seem that serious," murmured Harry.

Snape pointed to the essay still on the table. "I beg to differ. I've seen you struggle with anger in class, and still manage to comport yourself tolerably well. To do _that_, I'd say you were more than 'out of sorts.'"

Well, Harry couldn't have asked for a better segue, could he? "Um, that's pretty much why I didn't tell you, Professor. Because er . . ." Anger came roaring in to loosen his tongue. "Because right up
until you decided to actually see me instead of James, you were the most biased professor the world had ever seen! You treated me worse than Umbridge! You--"

"I most certainly did not treat you worse than Umbridge! Show me a single scar I ever gave you, Harry!"

"Ha, I can't! And you want to know why I can't? They're inside! And those are worse!" Harry pulled in a breath so fast that it felt like his lungs were burning. "And I'd like to know why, anyway, everybody assumes that if I had a problem with a teacher I'd go whingeing on about it! I learned early on that there was no use complaining about you, didn't I?"

"Harry, I--"

But now that Harry had started to vent, he felt like a steam pipe that had split open. "I couldn't do anything right in your class, oh, but all of a sudden I'm your son and you can stand me, suddenly I'm a decent student! But no, for years and years before that, it's your potion is too thick Potter, start over when it looked exactly the same as ten other students' work! And that's when it wasn't what's the matter, does that scar go all the way down to brain? or do you need new glasses, Potter? Because you can't seem to see what's right in front of your nose, and accusing me of stealing all the time, too! And that's not even counting detentions! You gave me about five million detentions, every single one of them undeserved, and--"

"Every single one, Harry?"

The quiet question stopped Harry's tirade. "No, not every single one," he muttered. "Most of them, though. And before you pick apart the rest of my words, I guess there weren't five million. Don't you get it, though? I feel like there were!"

"Yes, I see that," murmured Snape. "I did in fact apologise for all this, if you recall."

"Yeah, I know." More exhausted now than angry, Harry put his head down on the table and piled his arms on top of his skull. "I guess I'm not . . . er, as over it as I used to think. And I think deep down I knew I wasn't, and the whole Aran thing just . . . I don't know. I wanted to handle it by myself. I'm used to handling arsehole teachers by myself. Oh . . . sorry, Professor."

"For calling me Professor or an arsehole?" Snape dryly asked.

Harry blearily looked up. "Dunno."

Snape laid his hands on the table, almost as though to reach for Harry, but after a moment's hesitation, ended up just lacing his fingers together. "Harry, I am most sincerely sorry I used Potions class as a means to torment you. I know it wasn't well done of me. I--"

"Ha, not just Potions," said Harry, sitting up again. "How about hallways and in the Great Hall too? You practically knocked my head into Ron's fourth year during homework time!"

"You were talking."

"Half the hall was talking! How many students did you attack?"

Attack was probably strong, Harry thought the moment he'd said it, but Snape didn't dispute the word. "Only you. How many apologies do you need?"

"Maybe I need you to write ten thousand times I will not torture my students," said Harry caustically. "No, considering what you assigned Ron, it ought to be more like, As I hold a position of . . . er,
great responsibility over the lives and hearts of innocent children, I will earnestly endeavour to . . .

uh, not sure. Something long-winded."

"You've very angry."

Harry stared. "Well, duh."

"You said to me at one point that that was all over."

"It is." Harry leaned back, wishing this wasn't so hard. "I mean, I know you won't treat me like that again. And I've even noticed how lately, you've been less totally unfair to Gryffindor. I guess because of what you said, how you can't love me and still hate Gryffindor, or at least not like you did before. I don't know why I let all the old stuff still bother me. I mean, as long as I didn't think about it, I was fine! But then Aran started his rubbish and I just kept remembering you dropping my assignment that time I was sure I'd brewed a perfect potion and . . ." Harry shrugged and looked away.

"You had just violated my memories, Harry," Snape reminded him.

For Snape to put those two things on a level made Harry see red. "Yeah, I had!" he said, his anger surging back so strongly that he heard himself yelling. "But it's hardly the same thing! I was fifteen -- how old were you, eh? Old enough to know better, you think? And I wasn't trying to find out about your private business, anyway! I just wanted to know about the secret weapon at the Ministry and I ended up seeing all that other stuff by accident! And I damned well kept it to myself. Even Draco doesn't know you were hoisted upside down by my father so the whole school could see your pants--"

"Yes, thank you for your discretion," Snape interrupted, his voice a little caustic. "I'm sure Draco will continue on in total ignorance of the event."

Harry felt his collar heating. What his father meant was that even if Draco wasn't trying to eavesdrop, which was pretty unlikely considering they were talking about Draco, there was no way he could have missed Harry's shouting. Defensive, Harry crossed his arms in front of him. "Well, anyway, what you did to my potion that day wasn't on accident or for a good reason or anything. It was just petty revenge."

"It was ill-done of me," agreed Snape. "Which I have said before, although perhaps not in reference to that specific event. What can I do about it now, though, Harry? It's done and I have apologised. Yet you still bear me ill-will?" His voice by the end sounded pained.

"Not ill-will exactly." Harry's arms fell to his sides as he met his father's gaze. "I love you a lot, Severus. I think you know that. And that . . . it hasn't changed or anything. But how you used to act . . . it still does bother me some, I guess."

"Shall I write you those ten thousand lines to prove I do indeed regret the past?"

Harry almost said yes, just for spite. Or maybe to see if Severus would actually do it. Though he was pretty sure Severus would cheat on them, anyway.

"No," he slowly said, resting his hands on the table again. "That's just going to . . . er, keep us stuck in the past all the more. And that's the whole point, Professor. I didn't come talk to you about Aran because I knew it would get messy. And I don't want the past to stand between us. I really like being your son and getting on with you and having a home besides the Tower and . . . all."

"I like having you for a son," said Snape gently. "And I'm very pleased to provide you with a home."
Harry . . . until I began to truly know you, I was a seething mass of anger over wounds which should have healed long before. You bore the brunt of it. If I could go back and get to know you from the first, I would. But at that time, I simply was not capable, and for that I am most sincerely sorry."

Harry swallowed. "Yeah. I . . . uh, I actually was going to, er, bite the bullet and come talk to you about Aran on my own. I'd been putting it off because I didn't want to dredge all this up. I mean, I didn't want you to think I still hated you for all that stuff, 'cause I don't. Honestly! I guess it's better that we talked it all over."

"Definitely, that is better. Harry, if you have a serious problem with another teacher or anything else, I want you to come talk to me. Even if you think that so doing will hurt me. How else can I be your father?" Reaching across the table then, Snape clasped Harry's twitching fingers in his large, warm hands. "Though I will admit it buoys me to know that in the end, you were intending to bring this matter to my attention."

Harry felt a little guilty then, remembering that it was only the headmaster's insistence that had made him decide to talk to Snape. On the other hand, though, Snape wouldn't enjoy knowing that Harry had discussed all of this with Albus Dumbledore first, so . . . He moved his fingers to hold hands better.

"You're growing up and it's good to see," Snape continued, squeezing his fingers lightly. "Do you recall, Harry, when we went to Surrey near the beginning of this year? I complained that you didn't ask for help, and you retorted that you didn't ask for things you wouldn't get. But now, I think you know there is help for you. In any respect. Really, you can come to me with anything." His dark eyes glimmered. "Even if it necessitates your calling me an arsehole."

Now Harry felt ten times guiltier. He didn't deserve this praise, not when he hadn't been grown up enough to talk to his father on his own. The headmaster's poking and prodding had basically forced the issue.

Harry grimaced. Snape talking about the beginning of the year made him feel just awful. Because he remembered deciding way back then to be more mature. And the way he'd handled his problem with Aran . . . that hadn't been mature at all. "I feel bad I didn't talk to you about all of this when it first began," Harry murmured, ducking his head.

Snape let go of his hands and leaned back. "Yes, that is a concern." When Harry glanced up, his father's keen, penetrating gaze was assessing him. "Am I correct in thinking that Aran's odd desire for a conference with Lucius instead of myself, as Draco's father, had something to do with this ongoing conflict over Parseltongue?"

Definitely, Snape was too smart by half. Or maybe something else was going on. "No fair reading my mind like that. I'm too tired to Occlude right now!"

"I wasn't using Leglimency."

"Oh." Harry's lips twisted. "No fair tricking me, then. Though I guess you weren't doing that either, really. Anyway, yeah, you're right. Aran was fed up with my lousy attitude and that pretty much led to the whole Lucius thing happening."

Severus flicked a glance at the parchment. "I fail to understand why your attitude would reflect on Draco, though. Perhaps you could help me circle the pitch, as it were?"

Harry was pretty impressed with the Quidditch analogy. Maybe that was what had him admitting the truth, though he was careful to put it in a way that wouldn't get his brother into trouble. "Oh, yeah.
Well, Draco was standing up for me. Actually he told me to stand up for myself, which I think I needed to do. I started using Parseltongue in class whether Aran approved or not, and Draco backed me, and Aran knew you'd support the both of us on that. I mean, he was so scared of confronting you that he wouldn't even take points from Slytherin. So he firecalled Lucius to complain about Draco."

Severus nodded. "You realise then, that by not coming to me so that I could straighten this out with your teacher, you opened the door for him to summon Lucius Malfoy into Hogwarts."

Harry stiffened, even though his father had spoken in a calm voice. "I wasn't intending for that to happen!"

"No, but you made it possible."

"Look, it's not very fair of you to try to make me feel guilty, when half the reason I didn't come talk to you was that I didn't want to make you feel guilty for all those years of shite!"

Snape's smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "Were you under the impression that I was disposed at all times to be fair?" He didn't wait for an answer. "In this case the consequences of your reluctance to talk to me led to extreme hazard for yourself and your brother."

Harry made a face, but since his father had a point, he didn't argue further. "All right, then, fine. Speaking of consequences, what's mine to be? And don't forget I let you off the ten thousand lines I could have said I wanted you to write."

The attempt to joke fell flat. His father just stared at him. "Sorry. I know it's serious," Harry finally said.

"I rather think events as they already unfolded were traumatic enough," answered Snape. "However, even if Lucius Malfoy had never set foot in the castle yesterday, I would have no intention of punishing you. You either trust me enough as your father to come talk to me when needed, or you don't. The suggestion that I would chastise you on that account is anathema to me."

Harry wasn't sure what that last big word meant, but given how offended his father sounded, he could guess. "I didn't mean you'd punish me for that," he thought he'd better explain. Even if it wasn't so Slytherin of him. Snape's feelings were more important than strategy. "I meant for . . . um . . ." He made a vague gesture at the parchment.

"Incendio," said Snape calmly. "You do actually understand caninae, I think. And if you can't yet conjure them we'll work on it over the summer. So, enough of that."

The Potions Master's eyes narrowed. "You have another concern."

"Draco and the water he threw," said Harry, leaning forward as he spoke very quietly. "Don't punish him for that. Please, Dad. I mean, you accused him of something really evil when just yesterday . . . er, or the day before, I mean, he was tormented by someone who should have loved him, just because he was doing the right thing, fighting as best he could for the side of Light. For me. I mean, he suffered to save me. That's got to be more important than one glass of water."

Snape nodded. "I do believe it is."

As long as he'd won that point, Harry figured he might as well go on. "For that matter, I don't think we should be bringing up Venetimorica again. He's learned his lesson. Don't you think?"

"Anything else?" asked Snape, a little sarcastically. "Since you appear to believe you know more about raising him than I do?"
"Nah." Harry grinned. "You're doing all right. Especially with the XL. I think Draco needed something like that to get him up out of the doldrums."

"I think you're playing the good son again."

"What?" Harry thought about that for a moment, then lowered his voice again. "No, I'm actually really happy you did that for Draco, Dad. I'm just not as . . . um, acquisitive as he is, I think. I mean, if I really wanted an XL I could go buy one. Well, assuming you'd give me my key for something like that. But I'd rather stick with the broom Sirius gave me. You were right about that."

"Yes, I know that things other than material goods mean the most to you," said Snape, nodding. "When I bought the XL I fully intended to give you something you would find just as valuable. Hence, your friends will be most welcome to visit here during the summer, Harry."

Harry smiled. "Oh, that's really great news. Why didn't you mention that earlier?"

Snape shrugged. "At that point I wanted you and your brother outside enjoying yourselves. I thought Draco would protest."

"Oh, thanks," came a sarcastic shout from the bedroom. A moment later, Draco strolled out. He looked as though he'd washed his hair properly. "Haven't I been sweet as canary creams to your irritating friends?"

"No," said Harry, laughing. "You have been decent, though. So that's all right."

"To have Granger and Weasley ruining my summer though?" Draco made a face. "I'll put up with it, I suppose, but only because you're my brother."


"And for the record, I am not acquisitive," Draco went on, tossing his head. "I merely have sufficient good taste to appreciate the finer things in life. I shared the XL with Harry, didn't I?"

"Yes, you were perfection itself, Draco," said Harry, grinning. "There, all better? You really shouldn't eavesdrop unless you're prepared to hear yourself discussed, you know."

"Well, if the two of you wouldn't gossip like a pair of witches in a froth, I wouldn't eavesdrop," retorted Draco. "Now, how about some cocoa?" He grinned. "I bet we could even persuade Severus to let us have it with some lovely crème de menthe. You know, so we'll sleep soundly in our beds."

Snape shook his head. "Dreamless Sleep will see to that. However, I do believe a nightcap may be in order. We haven't any mint liqueur but I did think to pack a bottle of Galliano."

Harry blinked. "You'll let us have a nightcap with you?"

"Certainly."

After the drinks were poured, Draco began to press Snape for information. "Aran, Severus. What are you going to do about him?"

"You leave that to me."

"It's more than his hatred of Parseltongue at issue now," insisted Draco. "He crossed the line into something else entirely when he hexed Harry! And don't forget, that was after he'd seen Lucius abduct me. And he still not only helped Lucius out, but attacked a student to do it!"
"Aaron Aran shall be dealt with," promised Snape. "But you will leave it to me."

And that was all Snape would say on the subject, no matter how Harry and Draco needled him.

Later, when Harry went into his bedroom to get ready for bed, he couldn't help but remember that it was here in this very room that he'd first known he was going to kill Lucius Malfoy. True, he hadn't done it by burning the man alive, though he'd come close in the Defence classroom. But he had done it. And he hadn't really said anything about it to his brother. That didn't seem right.

"Draco," said Harry, putting down the potion he'd been about to take.

"Hmm?" Draco turned after he finished putting on his pyjamas. His silver eyes glimmered as soon as he saw Harry staring at him. "Oh, for pity's sake. If you thank me again for Serpentortia I just may have to smack you. I was saving myself as much as you, you know."

"I know. That's not it." Harry sat down on his bed and stared straight ahead at the opposite wall. "It's just . . . I killed Lucius and as horrible as he was to you, he was your father before Severus was, and . . . well, I can't really say I'm sorry, exactly, but-- I guess I just mean, if you felt upset with me I'd hardly blame you."

"I think I'd be upset with you if you hadn't killed him, Harry," said Draco, sighing. After a moment he came over and sat next to Harry on the bed, twisted sideways with one leg bent atop the coverlet. "Look at me."

Harry turned his head.

"He wasn't going to stop, Harry," said Draco, no trace of humour in his eyes, now. "Ever. And after everything that's happened, I wouldn't trust Azkaban to keep him confined. Lucius was going to come after us again and again and again until he killed us both. I know you weren't trying to kill him when you cast your Petrificus, but really, it's just as well that you did."

"I know all that," murmured Harry. "But I thought you might feel, I don't know, something else."

Draco shook his head. "Whatever I might have felt was burned out of me this year, Harry. A warrant on my life, death threats made to my face, expelling me, arranging to frame me for murder? Not to mention it was my girlfriend who . . . yeah. He stopped being my father long before Severus adopted me. In the end, he was just a horrible man out for my blood. And yours. And I can't be sorry that he's gone."

Harry thought about that. Before he could reply, Draco was speaking again.

"I think you think I should be sentimental because you missed having a father at all when you were growing up. But I don't have any reason for regret, Harry. Really."

Harry smiled then. "All right. I just thought . . . yeah. I understand."

"Good, because I'm beat," said Draco. Making his way over to his own bed, he grabbed the vial of potion Snape had given them and downed it, then fell straight into bed. "Bet we get to sleep in," he mumbled. "Mmm, sleep."

Harry grabbed his pyjamas and took them into the bathroom so he could change into them after his shower. When he got back out to their bedroom, Draco was softly snoring, his features so peaceful it seemed he didn't have a care in the world.

For his own part, Harry didn't expect to sleep so soundly, potion or no. It wasn't that it bothered him
to have killed Lucius. No, it bothered him that it didn't. He should feel bad about it, shouldn't he? He'd tried his best to feel bad on account of hurting Draco, but Draco had refused to let him. So now Harry was left feeling like he had no reason at all to feel bad. And that was just wrong, wasn't it? He'd killed somebody! He was pretty sure he wasn't supposed to feel . . . well, fine about it.

Or more than fine. When he really thought about what he'd done to Lucius, he mostly felt happy. The man had had a heart of stone. Had been cold, clear through. The fact that he was marble now, and stuck that way forever, seemed a fitting end.

Still, though, Harry'd never wanted to kill anybody. Not even after hearing the prophecy. But now he had. So why didn't that bother him?

Sighing, Harry took his own portion of Dreamless Sleep, then lay down in bed and tried to rest.

On Sunday afternoon, Snape called the boys in early from their flying. "There's to be an Order meeting tonight to discuss recent events."

Harry sighed. "We'll save you some dinner, then. Or will you eat there?"

"Actually, I've an offer to extend. I think that those who experienced the events which precipitated this meeting should be in attendance."

It took Harry a second to work that out. "You want us to go? Seriously?"

Snape gave a brief nod. "Excluding you from the Order is, in my view, a pointless endeavour. I've prevailed upon Albus to this end. As of tonight, you'll both be considered members in full standing. However . . ." Here, his voice became stern. "I fully expect you to approach your Order duties with responsibility beyond your years. You will follow orders, you will respect the chain of command, and you will not use Order information to involve your friends in any hare-brained Gryffindor heroics." Snape snorted slightly. "Not even if the situation seems dire or the adventure seems foolproof!"

"I think that last bit's meant for you, Harry," Draco quipped in a stage whisper.

Harry folded his arms. "Well, speaking of friends, I think Ron and Hermione ought to get to join too! And Neville, and Luna. And Ginny--"

"And the Snitch as well?" asked Snape snidely.

"They've been there for me."

"I won't ask Albus to allow any additional underage members. In any case, the issue is moot without the blessing of their parents."

Harry frowned knowing the unlikelihood of Molly Weasley actually consenting to let any of her younger children put themselves directly into danger.

"Harry, leave it," said Draco. "It was probably a close thing them letting me in."

Severus didn't reply, but the look on his face spoke for him. There were clearly Order members with reservations about Draco. Harry supposed that was only to be expected, considering. It would
probably be a long time before he'd proven himself. And some members, like Moody, might never
trust him, even so.

Ha, would never trust him. Look at everything Snape had done for the Order!

The three of them ate an early dinner together, and then were the last to arrive at the Number 12
Grimmauld Place. Harry wasn't sure if this was due to his father's preference for dramatic entrances
or if he merely wanted to give the headmaster a chance to handle any arguments against the boys'
attendance.

The meeting was conducted in the kitchen, which seemed odd to Harry, considering the number of
people in attendance. Why transfigure a larger table and more chairs in here when there was a
spacious parlour available? Even the formal dining room would have ample room for everyone who
had come. But the kitchen?

Well, I always did feel most comfortable in here. Maybe this room's been more thoroughly purged of
the Dark Arts than the rest of the house has, Harry mused. Part of him knew, though, that Snape and
Remus had got rid of every trace of Dark Arts in the dwelling, months and months ago.

Harry was fairly sure that the entire Order was rarely in attendance at any of these meetings. For all
the crowd around the kitchen table, tonight seemed to be the same. He didn't spot Bill or Charlie
anywhere, or several other people he thought were likely in the Order.

Remus, seated to one side of the headmaster, smiled at the boys straight away. Or maybe just at
Harry; it was hard to be sure. Professor McGonagall, on Dumbledore's other side, looked like she
tasted something sour, however.

"Wotcher, Harry," Tonks said, grinning. And then more pointedly, "Wotcher, Draco!" She snapped
her gum and grinned even more widely when Draco, clearly discomfited, stammered, "Er, hallo,
Miss Tonks."

Tonks was flanked by Mad-Eye Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt. The black Auror looked calm
enough, but Moody was staring at Draco like--well, like mad. He was practically frothing at the
mouth, his magical eye almost popping out of his head, just as if he thought he could see through
Draco if he tried hard enough.

Sighing, Harry told himself that the two would probably never get on, even if this Moody wasn't
really the one who turned his brother into a ferret in fourth year.

On the other side of the table, Molly Weasley was busying herself by slicing some homemade
pumpkin bread. Arthur sat next to her. Harry's survey stopped cold, then, since next to Arthur there
was an elderly woman whom Harry had never seen before.

It might not be polite to stare, but Harry did, racking his brains to try to figure out who she might be.
The woman stared back at him, her mouth neither smiling nor frowning. Cool, that was it. But her
eyes were a warm, kind brown.

Just like Remus' eyes, actually.

Without a word, Harry slid in next to the new woman. Not that there were many free chairs
available. Meanwhile, Draco raised his chin, a clear sign that he was feeling out of his depth and
hiding it. As he seated himself by Kingsley Shacklebolt, he nodded rather regally at several people
around the table, though he ignored Moody completely.

Snape took the end opposite the headmaster, who appeared unflustered by the boys' presence.
"Before I get on with the purpose of tonight's meeting," the headmaster began, "I'd like to introduce Lucinda Lupin, who has been working with Professor Snape on our werewolf project."

"Werewolf project?" Several people around the table asked the question at once.

Dumbledore merely curved his lips in one of those inscrutable smiles he favoured. "Yes. Lucinda?"

The old woman stood up as she introduced herself. "As Remus' aunt, I became interested long ago in lycanthropy. Ever since he was infected, I've been researching the ailment in an effort to understand it, and hopefully, learn how to reverse it. The development of the Wolfsbane Potion, which Professor Snape and I were both involved in," here, she gave Snape a respectful glance, "was a great boon to my nephew and others so afflicted. However, I have long felt that more could be done. My research indicates that a potions-based treatment to repress the transformation should be possible. My personal goal is surely obvious, but if we succeed, the benefit to the Order will be significant. Our goal is to win the werewolves over to our side rather than allowing them to ally themselves with He Who Ought Not Be Mentioned. Any breakthrough in lycanthropy treatment would be a huge enticement."

"How's that coming along?" Tonks asked.

"Not very well, I'm afraid," Lucinda answered. "The Professor's priority this year has been his new family. More significantly, perhaps, is that Remus has been largely unavailable due to his recent assignment."

Again, a buzz of noise circled the table. Several questions echoed all at once.

"Assignment?"

"Why would recruiting the werewolves impede him from participating in this research?"

"Unavailable? How's that?"

Dumbledore waited until the Order members quieted down. "Remus has been abroad, impersonating Lucius Malfoy via Polyjuice whenever possible, in order to secure information from Death Eaters and also, to foment ill Feelings within the ranks."

"Divide and conquer," said Moody, nodding sagely while the others either looked nonplussed, or stared at Remus with new respect. "Yes. Good."

"Due to several factors then," continued Lucinda briskly, "the werewolf project has largely stalled. We haven't developed any new approaches or theories in months."

"Well that's no good," Moody declared, his mood shifting like quicksilver. He actually began thumping the table with his fist. "Snape there may be enjoying his retirement from active duty, lollygagging about without a care in the world now that braver wizards have taken on his danger for themselves, but he ought to be accomplishing more than cozying up to Potter!"

"In point of fact, Alastar," said Dumbledore rather mildly, "there is nothing Severus could be doing that is more important than providing young Harry with a stable, loving home environment. We will need Harry's strength in the times to come, and there is more to strength, you realise, than how fast one can fly upon a broom."

"Wow, he sure has changed his tune, thought Harry, a little stunned by the blanket endorsement of
Snape-as-father. Of course, he didn't much like being called "young Harry," and he was pretty sure those splotches of red on Severus' cheekbones meant he didn't appreciate everyone knowing about the "loving home," he was providing, but still . . .

A lot of Harry's resentment of the headmaster faded away, right then and there.

"But neither is he quite committed to the werewolf project," Moody grumbled, turning his head to stare Snape down. "You've made it more than plain how you feel about Lupin here."

"Indeed." Snape's cheeks resumed their usual pale shade as he spoke in a voice dripping with sarcasm. "Yes, that's right. I'm so consumed by my personal dislike of Lupin that I've resolved to forego the inevitable fame and fortune that would result from curing the incurable. How very Slytherin of me."

As Harry glanced across the table at his brother, the two of them could barely repress their snickers of laughter.

Moody harrumphed but didn't say anything further.

"Gentlemen," Dumbledore quietly resumed, "although the project has been neglected these past months, I'm pleased to announce that we anticipate renewing our efforts this summer, since Remus will be completing his mission closer to home. That is, in fact, the main focus of tonight's meeting."

He paused briefly until it seemed he had everyone's full attention. "The Order has been given an unexpected boon. Lucius Malfoy is dead."

A chorus of shocked exclamations rang out, ranging from "Why wasn't I told?" to "Good riddance!" to "Well, it's about damned time."

A lot of the comments were pretty insensitive, Harry thought, considering Draco was sitting right there listening. Sure, Lucius had been an awful person. It didn't mean Draco wanted to hear just how much everybody hated him, did it?

One person stood out though, as the compassionate motherly-type she was. "Oh, you poor, sweet dear," crooned Molly Weasley as she leaned forward, hands extended. Her expression and posture both oozed sympathy. "Are you quite all right?"

For the first time, then, Harry thought he saw Draco's attitude toward the Weasleys waver. Just for a moment, Draco held Molly's gaze. He nodded, but the bleak look in his eyes told another story. No, he wasn't quite all right. He was ashamed to be related to Lucius.

Harry knew how it felt to be ashamed of your relatives.

The moment passed quickly though. Recovering his composure, Draco raised his chin, sniffing a little bit before insisting that he'd never been better.

Once the general excitement died down, the headmaster, assisted by Draco and Harry, informed the Order of the details of the boys' abduction and Malfoy's subsequent death. It wasn't wanded magic that had killed Lucius Malfoy though, not in the version Dumbledore told. He claimed that Harry had got so angry seeing his brother tortured that his wild powers had exploded again, just like on Samhain, but with even more devastating results.

"Turned. To. Stone," said Moody slowly, cackling, rubbing his hands together. "Now there's a fitting end for all Death Eaters."

He glanced at Snape as he said it.
Everyone else around the table seemed to have realised, from Molly Weasley's example, that Draco just might have feelings. They carefully refrained from any comment.

"You're positive the house-elf's story was contained?" asked Shacklebolt, smoothly moving the Order back onto what really mattered. "And nobody else ever knew that Lucius had the boys?"

Draco was the one who answered, his voice almost dead. "Lucius made it pretty clear that he hadn't told anyone about us being there. He was going to break us and then gloat about it."

"More to the point," Harry added, "he was afraid to present me to Voldemort before he was sure that I wouldn't be able to escape with more wild magic. Kind of ironic, considering what happened in the end. Besides, it wasn't like he'd planned to snatch us that day. It was just his good luck that we crossed paths. Well, his bad luck, I guess, considering."

"It's just terrible what that man put you through. Both of you." Molly glanced from Harry to Draco and back, her concern clearly encompassing both of them. "Are you bearing up, dears? I feel just wretched. Such horrible things you've seen. But the best balm for all of it is a loving home, of course, and I've no doubt that Severus is providing you one." By the end, she was smiling.

Snape wasn't. Those twin splotches of colour were back in his cheeks.

"We're having a bit of a holiday for a few days," said Draco.

"Oh, I'm sure you need one, dear--"

"Your attention, please," interrupted the headmaster. "The primary purpose of tonight's meeting was to inform you all that Remus will soon begin to impersonate Lucius Malfoy on a full-time basis. He is to be our key contact in Voldemort's inner circle. We are allowing a small span of time to elapse before this begins, so Remus can claim to have been attacked by Order members and injured. This will allow him some excuse as to why his speech, memories, or behaviour might not perfectly match those of the real Lucius Malfoy."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Normally this information would not be known by so many Order members. In this case, however, you must all understand that from this point forward, 'Lucius Malfoy' and indeed, Malfoy Manor itself, must be left strictly alone. Please observe this with the utmost care."

Moody snorted. "Right you are about that. Be a shame to finally kill that no-good bastard at last only to find out we'd actually eliminated our best advantage."

"It'd be a shame to accidentally kill Remus, you mean," said Harry fiercely, his fists clenching atop the table.

"That too--"

"Harry," said the headmaster quietly, "I welcome your participation in the Order, as well as your brother's, but both your memberships are on a provisional basis. You must watch your temper."

Harry didn't see why he had to, when it seemed like nobody else did, but then again, nobody else had wild magic like his. So, maybe Dumbledore had a point.

"All right," he said, trying not to sound too petulant.

"Order members not present will also be informed to make no moves against Lucius Malfoy," continued Dumbledore.
"Or my mother," interrupted Draco.

The headmaster nodded. "Yes, yes of course. Thank you for clarifying that, Draco. Though I'm sure it was understood already. Narcissa Malfoy will also be left strictly alone for the duration."

"The duration!"

"Draco, we will discuss the matter later," said Severus calmly. "I know you must want the best for your mother, but there is nothing to be done now save allow Lupin to proceed."

Sighing, Draco nodded, slumping a little in his chair.

"I believe that is all," said Dumbledore. "Unless anyone has any questions?"

There were a few, but nothing very significant, in Harry's view. Actually, they reminded him a little of some of the questions he'd heard asked in class. Apparently, some adults were a little like students when it came to listening and paying attention.

Harry had expected everyone to leave when the meeting ended, but first there was the sort of socializing that reminded him of the common room after a Quidditch win. Well, maybe not as rowdy, though at one point the grown-ups came close. Tonks, laughing hard at something Dumbledore had said, accidentally flung her coffee into Moody's lap. The sudden burn had caused him to start so badly that his magic eye had fallen out and had begun rolling along the kitchen table, finally to sail straight into Mrs Weasley's bosom as she leaned forward to give Tonks her handkerchief.

Harry died with laughter, but tried not to show it. Well, not much.

The Aurors were the first to leave, followed by the Weasleys, who had loitered for an additional quarter of an hour while Molly fussed over "the poor, dear children." The headmaster and Professor McGonagall were just leaving now, having just worked out a new class schedule with Snape. Harry wanted to know what that was all about, but Snape was currently engrossed in conversation with Lucinda Lupin.

Harry wandered over there, deciding that even if he couldn't ask about the class schedule, he could at least get to know Remus' aunt a bit. After 10 minutes of listening to his father and her discussing the cumulative affect of various potions ingredients on curses, though, he felt ready to cry from boredom.

He decided that a better way to kill time while he waited for Snape to take them back to Devon would be to take Draco on a tour of the house. Maybe he could even entice Draco to take a little interest in the Black inheritance.

As it turned out, though, his brother was deep in conversation with Remus. When Harry saw Draco conjure a quill and parchment and begin scribbling furiously, he knew they'd be at it for an hour at least. It was nice to see, anyway, Draco and Remus working together to make sure all would go well at Malfoy Manor.

For lack of anything else to do, Harry decided to go have a look around Sirius' library. After two days of almost constant flying, some time with a good book might be just the thing. Short stories, maybe, something like that. Or adventures like Lockhart's, only ones that weren't total lies.

When he crossed the threshold to the book-lined room, Harry heard something that made him stop cold.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the conquering hero. Come to gloat, have you, Potter?" asked Lucius Malfoy.
Harry whirled to the side, wand out. Even though he knew better, he half expected to see Malfoy lounging in a library chair. In actuality, it was the portrait that had spoken. Propped up against a bookshelf, the painted Lucius looked a lot calmer than the last time Harry had seen him. The image wore a sneering expression and had its arms crossed.

Harry knew what he ought to do: turn on his heel and walk out of the room without even speaking to the portrait. He actually tried to do just that, but he found he couldn't. It wasn't a matter of gloating; it was something else entirely.

Everyone seemed to think he should feel bad for what he'd done. Oh, they said he shouldn't, but they all assumed that he did. Which meant they thought that any normal person would feel awful to have caused a death like that. But Harry didn't feel awful in the least. And he sort of wanted to see if he could. Maybe speaking with the portrait would drive it home to him what he'd done. Maybe then, he'd be able to feel some remorse.

"I didn't know you were in here," Harry said calmly.

"Just come to do a little Dark Arts research, then?" the portrait mocked.

"There aren't any books like that in here," said Harry. He thought there might have been once, considering the Black family history, but his father and Remus would have cleared all those away when they'd purged the house the previous autumn.

"Oh, that's right," drawled Lucius. "A boy like you would only be interested in Quidditch and fabled heroes. Or at least you'd like to believe that's all that interests you, eh, Potter?"

Harry didn't know what he meant. "Maybe if you'd read a few more decent books in your life you wouldn't be dead now."

Lucius smiled, the paint across his lips momentarily cracking and then healing itself. "Oh, is that why I've been shunted to the library? Does that fool of a headmaster expect me to believe he'll take a rare tome and read aloud to me if I cooperate?"

"Maybe he's put you in here to bore you to death. Oh, but you're dead already, aren't you? Yeah, well you deserve to die more than once, don't you now?"

The painted Malfoy smirked. "Planning to murder me twice then, boy?"

Harry shuddered, that word resonating somewhere deep inside him. "I didn't murder you. It was completely an accident. I never meant to do it."

Malfoy made a show of disinterestedly fingering the snake on his wand. "Oh, really. Well then, the done thing to do would be to apologise."

Harry couldn't help but sputter a bit. "Apologise? I like that! Apologise to paint and canvas! You're not even a real person, you know."

"Yes, I do know. And that was my point. Or rather it was yours." As Harry just stared, Malfoy rolled his eyes as if he found it onerous to have to explain something so simple. The mannerism was so like Draco that Harry felt a little nauseous.

"You said that you never meant to kill me. Lack of intention implies you must be sorry that you did. Etiquette dictates that you tell me so."

Harry barked with laughter. "Just because I didn't mean to do it doesn't mean I'm sorry!"
"Ah." Lucius nodded sagely. "Yes, I suspected as much. You're glad that you killed me."

Harry was, but couldn't quite bring himself to admit it out loud. "Well, I'm certainly glad that you won't be popping out my eyeballs. You think? And I'm glad I don't have to worry about you coming after my brother. Draco. You know him, I think?"

Lucius ignored the jibe. "So, your intention all along was for me to die."

Harry frowned. "My intention was to immobilize you and escape, and you know it."

"Oh, please. You were going to let me share all your little secrets with the Dark Lord? I think not."

"Obliviate," said Harry, one eyebrow raised in challenge.

The portrait smiled in a smarmy way. "It's so good I still have all my memories of dear Draco. Lovely things to contemplate. Did you know he begged, when he was down in that pit? Begged and pleaded, grovelled on his hands and knees. Kissed my boots, Potter. You think he'd have learned at some point that begging doesn't move me in the least. Well, not toward pity."

Harry didn't know if the portrait was lying about Draco, but he also didn't care. Draco had done all right, and that was all that counted. "You shut up!"

"Ah, but let's not forget you, Potter. Do tell . . . at what point did you break my Imperius Curse? Before you took off your shirt, perhaps? Did you like stripping for me, Harry? Do you wish I'd demanded more than a mere shirt? Do you--"

Harry had had enough. He realised he had been a fool to speak to the wretched painting at all. Clearly the dead wizard was having a grand time goading him. Without a word, Harry turned and, head held high like he imagined Draco might do, walked toward the door.

"You do know that the Dark Lord has it all wrong, don't you?" Malfoy called out.

Harry stopped. He didn't trust anything that came out of the painting's filthy mouth, but he knew this might be important. He was an Order member now, wasn't he? He had a responsibility to listen and report anything he learned.

"Wrong how?"

Lucius sighed and seemed to lean back into the canvas, away from Harry. "Wrong about you, of course. He's this notion of you as a champion of the Light. He thinks you have some sort of selfless power from your mother's sacrifice that will trump his own if not snuffed out."

The painted lifted its chin haughtily. "But I've observed you more than he. I met your vulgar relatives--did you a good turn killing that disgusting fat creature, by the way. I know very well the company you currently cling to, and the sort of nurturing they're likely to provide."

"You don't know anything," said Harry, but his voice was shaking.

"Oh no? I know what I see in your eyes. Pain, hatred, defiance. You know what I don't see there, Harry? Regret. You wanted me dead all along and now you're just thrilled that you were able to do it -- and in the guise of defence, no less!"

"So what?" Harry ground his teeth together. "It doesn't matter how I feel because I didn't do it on purpose!"
"Oh pish. It's what's down at your core that matters--your deepest, darkest feelings. I know what's in yours." He made a show of picking some lint off his sleeve.

As if the artist would have painted lint on him, Harry thought.

"I don't know what Dumbledore thinks he's doing, playing with fire like you. But he really is an instrument of the Light--makes him blind. That's a metaphor the Dark Lord loves, by the way." Lucius' voice went silky. "But I'm not blind, Harry. Your so called wild magic? It's dark, all the way through. When you saw me in that classroom you didn't set forth beams of radiance to whisk me safely away from you, did you? That wasn't about protection! You tried to burn me alive. You melted the wand right out of my hand."

"I can't control that," Harry whispered, feeling flayed. "It's just my magic trying to protect me."

"Your magic lashing out, more like. Mark my words, boy, you are the Dark Lord's equal. If you manage to kill him, you'll merely take his place. You are a Dark Wizard, Potter. How could you be anything else?" The image of Lucius gave a start of mock alarm. "Oh, dear me. Is that anger I see? Am I upsetting you?"

Yes, you are, and if you don't watch out-- Harry started too, suddenly feeling himself begin to burn with the very magic Lucius had spoken of. It was bubbling beneath the surface, heating his skin, demanding to be poured out.

He turned to go, fearing what he might unleash.

Lucius called out once more. "You know, I wonder if dear Severus will actually put you down himself when you turn? I rather think he will. He's certainly got it in him. Has he ever told you about--"

Harry never heard the rest. Running from the room, barely registering what he was doing, he found himself upstairs in Sirius' old room. He flung himself on the bed, and lay there hugging himself, shaking.

Oh God, what that painting had said made so much sense.

Maybe he's right, Harry thought. Maybe there's some core of evil inside me. The Dursleys--maybe they saw something that no one else has wanted to believe. There was black energy in the cupboard under the stairs, and it was coming from me. Severus said so! And just look at the company I keep. The only people who have ever really wanted me--Sirius, Severus, Draco--they're not exactly pure as the driven snow, are they? It's like we're--what's the word--kindred.

Sitting up, Harry wiped at his eyes a bit.

I wasn't always like this was I? I mean, I was sorted into Gryffindor--I wielded Godric's sword. It takes a true Gryffindor to pull that out of the Sorting Hat.

So, there was hope then. There was good inside of him, too. He wasn't fated to turn into a new Dark Lord. He just had to keep himself from unleashing that horrible dark, wild magic again.

And just why had he burned Malfoy like that? Why had he burned the mask and robe back before Christmas?

Fear, that was it.

Harry lashed out when he was afraid.
And that's not right! Harry thought, the words frantic inside his own mind. *I'm meant to be a Gryffindor. I can't be afraid all the time. Look at Draco, he faced his worst fear and came out of it looking for a way to help me. Every horrible thing he's been through this year has just made him stronger. From Pansy's death to Venetimorica to the snake pit and finally defying his father to his face, all of it has made him more committed to the Light.*

*And Dumbledore just said that they need me to be strong as well. I have to stop being so afraid.*

Scooting back to lean against the headboard, Harry closed his eyes. The longer he thought about it, the better he understood what he had to do. The key to stop being afraid was to face his fears, the way Draco had done.

But how? Lucius was dead and challenging Voldemort wasn't exactly prudent. Not to mention, his father would kill him. So how could he possibly face down his fears and overcome them?

*Needles,* that was it. That was what he'd been afraid of the longest. That was what had started all of this, anyway. Needles during the transplant, needles at Samhain. If not for needles, he'd never have lost his light magic at all.

It was time to stop being afraid of them.

Snapping his eyes open, Harry darted his gaze about the room. No needles here, of course, but there on the bedstand stood a candle. There were matches for it in the drawer below. Or used to be, anyway, from back when Harry couldn't do *Incendio.*

Harry summoned them, not even bothering to pretend to use of his wand.

He drew out a single match, remembering first year, when he'd learned the spell. Such a simple incantation. It wasn't in his spell lexicon, as he'd never thought he'd actually *want* to conjure needles, but the Parseltongue shouldn't be too hard to figure out.

Even if there wasn't any word for needles.

Glancing through his glasses at the snake etched into the lens, Harry held the match and hissed what that particular spell had always meant to him. "Turn yourself into my sharp, metal fear . . ."

And just like that, he held a gleaming silver needle in his hand.

Poking it into himself was a whole lot more difficult than he would have expected. And since he'd expected it to be pretty damned hard . . . Harry shuddered. It hadn't bothered him so very much to handle the needles he'd transfigured back in first year. But of course he'd known that those weren't going to be stabbed into him.

Nothing for it though, right? He had to face his fears.

Sucking in a huge, bracing breath, Harry adjusted his hold on the needle and pressed its sharp end to the palm of his left hand. Even that was enough to make him feel a bit woozy, but he clenched his teeth together and told himself to stop being such a baby. It was just a needle! He'd suffered them before, and a lot worse than this. Wincing in anticipation, he pushed a little. Then harder.

The needle poked into his skin, making a depression, but didn't pierce it.

Instead of shoving harder and trying to break through, Harry thought strategy. The skin of his palm was awfully thick, really. Maybe he should start with someplace easier.
With another shudder, Harry pushed up his left sleeve and turned his forearm over. A pinch to the flesh on the underside told him that this skin was softer. More tender. Easier to prick. Of course, that probably meant it would hurt more here. A lot more. But what did that matter? At least he’d be able to shove the needle in.

Careful to avoid the blue veins that were visible here and there, Harry bit his lip, steeled himself further, and began to push again.

When the needle broke through his skin, it really stung. Harry almost yelped.

Instead, he held his breath and pushed again, harder, angling the needle to pass beneath his skin and parallel to his arm. The gleaming metal began to sink beneath his skin, bit by bit, the sight of it absolutely sickening, but somehow hypnotic at the same time.

There was hardly any blood at all. Noting that helped Harry feel a little more detached. Once he got over the first, worst part, it was almost like watching this happen to someone else.

Harry pushed farther still, watching as the needle made a white furrow in his skin.

Finally, it broke through the other side.

Blowing out his breath, Harry stared at the needle pierced through the skin of his forearm. What had he been so afraid of? This wasn’t such a big deal, after all. *Children get shots,* he told himself. *A lot of girls in Surrey have pierced ears. Muggles even get stitches, and think nothing of it.*

Still feeling detached, Harry took a moment to think about the pain as he continued to look down at the needle. It wasn’t overwhelming, not at all. Just a nagging hurt. Easily ignored.

Pulling the needle out was easier. Harry blinked as twin beads of blood welled up. Scarlet, like Voldemort’s eyes. But that was all right. That was why he was doing this, so he wouldn’t be afraid any longer. So he wouldn’t unleash any more wild, dark magic. So when the war was over, he’d be just Harry still, not another Dark Lord.

This was a good start to all that. He’d proven he could do it. He was stronger than needles, and going to get stronger still. Because one wasn’t enough, was it? He knew he’d still be afraid if he was faced with the likes of Samhain again. So he needed more, a lot more. And he needed to do it faster, instead of dithering.

Harry tried again, this time jabbing himself with more force. It hurt more, but at the same time, it was somehow more satisfying. Wiping away the blood, Harry tried again. And then again.

And again.
For a while, as he pierced himself over and over, Harry almost felt like he was suspended in a world where there was nothing but his arm, and the needle, and the pain of one pinprick after another. He wasn't aware of time passing. He couldn't have said if he kept it up for one minute or ten. Or twenty.

Eventually, though, a series of noises roused him from his daze. Footsteps on the stairs. Voices calling his name. Severus . . . no, Severus and Draco both.

"Harry?"

"Where have you got to, Harry?"

"Oh, come on, Harry! Severus says he'll take us out for trifle!"

Like a drowning man suddenly breaking through the water's surface, Harry's trance abruptly shattered. He grimaced when he looked down at his arm, covered in pinpricks, some of them still welling blood. No time to heal them, not that his self-healing spells were very good to begin with. No matter, though. The injuries weren't that serious. Harry yanked down his sleeve and buttoned his cuff, then swept his cloak back on for good measure.

There. Now nobody would see his arm and grow alarmed. Which was all well and good, since there was nothing to be concerned about. He was just getting over his fear of needles. And it was kind of personal, that was all, so there was no need for his father and brother to know about it.

The needle he hastily transfigured back into a match, which he then shoved into a pocket. This way he'd always have the match for when he was ready to practise again. Or train, rather. That's what he was doing, training his mind and body to get over his fears.

He felt better knowing the match was in his pocket for the next time he wanted it.

"Up here," he finally called out, just as the door swung open and Snape and Draco entered.

"What are you doing all the way up here?" asked Snape, glancing around. "As I recall, you never much cared for this room."

That was true. When Harry had lived here back in the autumn, he'd taken up residence in another room. "I guess it's all right," said Harry, ignoring the first question. "I still miss Sirius something awful sometimes, but maybe avoiding his room was a little silly. I just wish I could have had a chance to know him better."

Snape nodded, his expression hard for Harry to assess. And no wonder, considering what the man was thinking. "Harry . . . if I knew of any way to bring him back through the Veil, I would do it, for you."

Harry's eyes widened. "Really?"

Snape nodded again. No hesitation in the gesture. "Yes. Really."

Harry couldn't help but think about how that would likely go. "Sirius . . . hmm. You know, he might not take it so well that you're my father. He'd probably have some choice words on the subject."

Snape's eyes began to glitter. "I imagine he would. However, I think you and I are at a place where
we could weather even that storm."

"Yeah." Harry nodded. That was a nice feeling, knowing his new family was just there, no matter what. Not that Sirius was coming back. Harry knew well enough that it was impossible. But Snape offering, even if he knew it was impossible too . . . well, that was really something.

Harry got up off the bed. "So, trifle sounds good. And then are we having some more time in Devon? Or is it back to Hogwarts? We have classes tomorrow, you know."

"I'd completely forgotten. Classes on a Monday? What can the Governors be thinking?"

"Ha, very funny." Something occurred to Harry, then. "Oh, that's why you were discussing teaching schedules a while ago. You were arranging for people to take your classes."

"Among other things," said Snape in a dark voice.

Draco hadn't said anything for a while; he'd merely been looking around the room, his gaze assessing.

"I know, it's small as houses go. By your standards," sighed Harry.

Draco's silver eyes met Harry's, but only for a moment. "It is, but that wasn't what I was thinking, actually. It's just . . . I'll talk to you about it later."

"All right."

"Shall we Apparate, then?" Snape looked from Harry to Draco. "I know of a pastry shop in Butterleigh with a secluded alley behind it. We won't be seen arriving there."

Harry drew his wand and cast Tempus. "Will it still be open, this late on a Sunday?"

Draco made a face. "What is it with Muggles and Sundays, anyway?"

Harry shrugged. He wasn't exactly sure, though he thought it had to do with it being the day churches met. "Superstition? We have them too."

"I think it will still be open."

"I'll just pop downstairs to say good-bye to Remus, then--"

Snape held up a hand. "I do believe that Lupin is unavailable. He was doing some research before the meeting interrupted him, and mentioned wanting to finish. In fact, he said to tell you both not to go into the library at all."

Oh, Remus must have been seeing what information he could get out of that rotten portrait, Harry realised. He definitely didn't want to see it again, not even in order to tell Remus good-bye. Not that Remus would want to be interrupted, anyway. "All right, let's just go."

Snape pulled Harry and Draco both against him and they Apparated away.

------------------------------------------------------
They spent two more days in Devon. This time, Harry was actually bored, but that might have had a lot to do with the fact that Severus and Draco were pretty busy compiling information for Remus to have. They spent hours bent over the small dining table together, racking their brains for facts and details that Narcissa would expect her husband to know. They didn't mean to exclude him, Harry knew, but since he didn't have any information about Lucius Malfoy save that he'd been a horrible person, he didn't have anything to contribute.

So Harry went flying alone, borrowing the XL at times, but even that palled after a while. One-on-one Quidditch just wasn't that much fun. He worked a little bit on his spell lexicon since there was always more to translate. And he chatted with Sals, who'd been neglected for a while.

But mostly, he found time to be by himself, way out under an old tree at the edge of the property, where he'd roll up his sleeve and continue his project of getting over his fear of needles.

It was working, too. He could stab himself without even flinching much, now. Sometimes, as he drove the needle through his flesh over and over, he could feel himself descending into a kind of trance . . . like sleeping without closing his eyes. He tried not to fall into it too far, though. He didn't want to miss hearing Snape or Draco calling him again.

On Tuesday evening after dinner, Snape announced that they'd been gone from Hogwarts long enough and would return early the next morning.

"Just in time to go to Defence," said Harry, frowning. "Um . . . Aran's not still going to be teaching it, is he?"

"Actually, he is."

Harry's mouth dropped open. "You have got to be kidding. He attacked a student! Namely, me!"

"And he'll pay for it," said Snape darkly. "I don't want him sacked. It would only make it all the harder to deal with him properly."

"Oh, fine," said Harry sarcastically. "Inflict him on me again, why don't you? Haven't I put up with enough? Weren't you listening at all, the other night when I told you how bad it was in class with him?"

"It won't be like that again."

"Sure it won't. You think just because he's forgotten the last three or four weeks, he won't remember how much he hates Parselmouths?"

Snape gave Harry a stern look, as if he'd had quite enough argument. "I think he won't dare indulge his hatred again."

"Yes, sir," muttered Harry.

"What's to stop him?" asked Draco, taking over when Harry said nothing more.

Snape's lips curled upwards in a thin, grim line. "Me. Did I neglect to mention that I'll be supervising his classes until the end of term?"

Harry thought it was a good thing he didn't have a drink, because he was sure he'd have spewed it, he guffawed so hard. His irritation with his father vanished completely. "Oh, that's brilliant, it is! Ha, did I neglect to mention he's scared witless of you? I bet he'll get all tongue-tied and make even more of a fool of himself than usual!"
Snape raised one eyebrow. "Oh, surely not." His voice sounded innocent. Far too innocent. "I'll merely be there to ensure he treats all students with the respect and even-handedness to which they're entitled."

Like Snape was the best example in the world of respect and even-handedness towards his students. Harry almost laughed again. But since this was Aran they were talking about, he ignored the irony and moved ahead to what he really wanted to know. "You're just going to supervise the sixth-year class?"

Snape's eyes glittered. "Now how even-handed would that be, Harry, showing such blatant preference? I think in the interests of fairness I have to be present throughout all his classes, don't you?"

"You mean you want to humiliate him in front of every house and form," said Draco.

Again with the innocent voice. "Would I do that?"

"Well, this'll make Defence a lot more interesting," said Harry.

"Entertaining, one might even say--"

"Enough of that," interrupted Snape in a more normal tone of voice. "I actually didn't intend to explain in advance what I had in mind for Aran. You two really are quite persistent. Rather, what we really need to discuss is what sort of story will circulate to explain the events of last Thursday."

Harry nodded. He'd been thinking about that too. "Right. We can't let Voldemort learn that Lucius Malfoy snatched us. He'd take it out on Remus."

"In excruciating fashion," said Snape in the tone of one who knows from firsthand experience. His voice became brisk as he continued. "I've been in touch with Albus and we have developed what we feel is an acceptable story. I must say, Harry, it simplified matters considerably that when I spoke with him I already knew of your troubles with Aran."

Harry felt himself colouring.

His father didn't let him dwell on it. "Your classmates noticed you were missing from lunch onwards. They assumed that Aran had extended your detention into his free period following Thursday lunch. We will build on that and say that at the close of your detention, Draco requested the return of his confiscated amulet. Aran refused to yield it on the grounds that coming as it did from the hazardous Parselmouth..." Snape's lips twitched. "It was most likely dark and would harm Draco."

"That sounds like something he'd say," murmured Draco, reaching beneath his shirt to finger his amulet. He hadn't taken it off since he'd retrieved it from Lucius in France. "Actually, he more or less did say that in class."

Snape's eyes looked angry, but his voice was calm enough. "When Aran refused to return your property, Harry demanded to use the Floo to contact me, but Aran refused that as well. In a burst of Gryffindor obstinacy, Harry cast a silver message to summon me. This will explain the Patronus to anyone who might have seen it galloping through the halls."

"Good thinking," said Harry, ignoring the way Draco was grinning at the slight to Gryffindor.

"Aran, of course, could not understand Harry's Parseltongue," Snape went on. "He panicked and cast Petrificus on Harry just as the silver message was launched. Draco was quite understandably alarmed by this, and attempted to Petrificus Aran before the man could do additional harm to Harry--"
"Attempted!" exclaimed Draco.

"Yes. You missed."

"I did not!"

Harry laughed. "It's a story, Draco."

"It makes me look inept!"

Harry slanted him a glance. "Welcome to my life."

Draco sighed theatrically. "Very well. If you can put up with it then so can I."

Snape waited until his sons had quieted. "To continue, by then Aran had recognised the silver message. He knew I would soon be coming. Rather than Petrificus you as well, Draco, and have twice as much to explain, he then attempted to memory charm you. However, because he still had the amulet in his possession, an amulet designed to protect you, the spell backfired on him and knocked him out."

"Would turquoise normally do that?"

Snape shrugged. "No, but as Draco has worn it for some months it's credible that it could have bonded to his magic. Particularly considering the burn it once induced."

Harry nodded. "All right, then. I think people could believe the bit about the spell rebounding. It is just like what happened to Lockhart. Well, almost."

"Now, to explain your and Draco's disappearance. As soon as Aran posed no more threat, Draco realised that there might be an investigation and his wand as well as Aran's would reveal a Petrificus. Understandably, he lacked faith that the Governors would listen to his side of the story. Remember, at this point Draco did not know that Aran's memory had been affected; he knew only that the man was unconscious. In panic, then, Draco retrieved his amulet and summoned some Floo powder."

"Impulse control," said Draco dryly.

"Exactly. You flooed away with Harry to Diagon Alley and immediately Apparated him to a secure location I had provided you in case of emergency. However, once there you had no way to contact me, as it is so very secure. In the confusion of the Patronus and finding Aran unconscious, Albus and I suspected foul play and it took some time for us to realise what really happened."

"Wait, back up a bit. There's a problem. Aran's wand won't show a memory charm. I'm pretty sure Lucius must have hexed Aran using Draco's, or maybe mine, because his own had been destroyed at that point. But I know a priori wouldn't show it on Aran's."

Snape favoured the boys with a feral grin. "It will now."

Draco quirked an eyebrow at his father. "But we only just now came up with the story."

"Ah, but Albus has had Aran's wand all this time and will not be returning it until the investigation is complete."

Draco wasn't satisfied yet. "How can he possibly keep teaching? Don't get me wrong, I'm all for public humiliation." He rubbed his hands together in gleeful anticipation. "But memory charms aren't
exactly sanctioned by the Board, you know."

Severus gave Draco a condescending glare. "Clearly the headmaster doesn’t always report things to the Board or I’d have been sacked for Obliviating Nott. Furthermore, Aran’s hardly going to insist the Board hear of his abysmal judgment."

"And even if he did," Harry added. "Lucius Malfoy has suddenly become a very cooperative board member."

"Precisely," his father answered.

"Hmm." Harry sighed. "So, all that works, I guess. Did Draco Finite my body bind before we flooed away?"

"I think not. He knew you would have insisted on waiting for me to arrive. Considering he’d already been unfairly expelled once this year, he felt a strong urge to leave the scene so he could claim he’d never been there at all."

"And the reason we were both in hospital?"

"Flooing while under Petrificus drained you."

"Yeah, me being so fragile."

Snape nodded, though the look in his eyes was apologetic.

"And just why did I need medical treatment?" asked Draco.

"Performing Side-Along was too much exertion for you."

"Pomfrey knows I was snake-bit all over."

"Albus has instructed her to say nothing of that."

Draco sighed. "All right, fine. I'm going to get in trouble for Apparating without a license, though."

Snape waved that matter away. "Nothing will come of that. The Aurors have already agreed that there were extenuating circumstances."

"Order Aurors, in on the plot." Draco nodded. "Nothing like having well-placed friends. Am I to be excused for obviously having practised Apparition prior, though? Or are you going to claim that on my very first attempt, I not only made it without splinching myself, but also managed to bring Harry along?"

"You were learning Apparition from me. There's nothing wrong with that."

Harry grimaced. "And the reason you didn't teach me as well was my once-more fragile magic, I suppose?"

"Yes." Snape shrugged. "I know it is hurtful, Harry, but the more we can lull the enemy into thinking you helpless, the better our advantage of surprise."

Harry was well used to it all by then, so he nodded.

"Are we all agreed, then? This is the story you will circulate when asked for any details."
"Ron and Hermione included?"

Snape shook his head. "They may be privately told the truth, since they are so intimately acquainted with your true magical state and all the rest."

Harry smiled in relief. "Good. Thanks, Dad."

"I wonder if she really helped Greg at all," said Draco, his head tilted to one side.

"Hermione wouldn't say she would and then not do it."

Draco didn't look convinced, but he didn't say anything more about it.

One thing about the cover story still struck Harry as a bit off. "Look, if we spread this story around, all the other students are going to believe that after Aran hexed me, he tried to cast a memory charm! I think it'll seem awfully strange that he's still allowed to teach, even if he is being supervised while he's at it."

"In the story he thought he was hexing you in self-defence," Snape reminded him. "Which shows lamentable lack of judgment, though not true malice. Therefore, supervision is an appropriate consequence. And as for the memory charm, you can point out that he didn't successfully cast it. That should create enough of a legal loophole to settle the matter."

"Loophole!"

Snape shrugged as if to say that Ministry regulations never had made a great deal of sense.

Personally, Harry thought Aran deserved a lot worse. He almost said so, but knowing Snape, the man would get worse. Harry could hardly wait. That sentiment, though, seemed a bit dark, so he tried to repress it, even as he wished he were alone so he could have more time with his needle.

"Who's been supervising him while you've been here with us?" Draco thought to ask.

"His first teaching day will be tomorrow, since Lucius--or the amulet, depending on which story one has--injured him."

"And who's going to teach Potions while you're watching Aran teach Defence?"

"A rather complex rotating schedule is being worked out."

For Snape to allow someone else to cover his classes said a lot, Harry thought. He was pretty sure his father didn't really think the other staff could do a decent job teaching Potions, especially not the advanced levels.

"Thanks," said Harry. It felt good knowing he wouldn't be alone with Aran again, even if the man did deserve to be sacked.

Snape didn't ask for what. The dark look in his eyes said he knew.

Harry didn't know how things were going at the Slytherin table, but when he showed up to breakfast
early Wednesday morning, nobody in Gryffindor seemed to find the cover story odd. Of course, students at Hogwarts were pretty used to barmy Defence teachers, and one of them attacking Harry outright wasn't too different from what Umbridge had done. A few people did voice the opinion that he should be sacked straight away, but reasoned that as it was so close to the end of term, it probably didn't make much difference.

Ron staunchly announced that the man belonged in Azkaban, attacking one of his mates like that, and if Ron had been there his hex wouldn't have missed. He'd taken out Nott, hadn't he, he asked several times while munching his way through rasher after rasher of bacon.

Harry almost sighed. The so-called Hero of Hogsmeade was going to be disappointed when he found out Draco actually wasn't inept.

"He should absolutely be sacked!" said Hermione furiously.

Harry used Snape's line, then, to say that Aran had thought he was acting in self-defence. Which made him a perfect idiot, of course, but that was Aran for you.

Everybody had a laugh at that one. Except Hermione, who pushed her plate away, she was so upset.

The one thing Harry didn't mention was the part about Snape supervising Aran from now on. He wasn't sure how the other Gryffindors would take news like that. A lot of them still didn't like his father very much, which dismayed him, though he could understand it. Better than before, actually, now that he wasn't trying so hard to ignore just how Snape had treated him throughout most of his school years. So yeah, he could see how Dean and Seamus and Neville and Parvati might not like the idea of having Severus Snape hanging about in Defence class.

Though they might like it that someone else would be teaching Potions for once. Harry wondered which teacher they'd get.

Still, Harry didn't mention anything about Aran being supervised. His mates would know soon enough anyway. They all had Defence straight away after breakfast on Wednesdays. Harry almost didn't want to go.

He felt, deep in his trouser pocket for his match. Somehow, having it with him made him feel better.

He almost panicked when it wasn't there, and all he could feel was Sals crawling in between his fingers. But the match turned out to be in his other pocket, so that was all right.

"Come on," Hermione said, standing up and smoothing her skirt down before she scooped up her books. "We don't want to be late."

"Yeah, because Snape'll be there to see," thought Harry. Odd . . . when his father had first mentioned being in Defence class, Harry had thought the prospect brilliant. Now, though, he was dreading it. He wasn't sure why. It couldn't just be because of how the Gryffindors might react, could it?

Harry slowly pushed to his feet. Draco was waiting for him at the doors of the Great Hall, his eyes sparkling with anticipation. "Ready?" he asked. "This ought to be good."

"What ought to be good?" asked Hermione, looking from Draco to Harry and back.

"Defence is always good," said Draco, grinning. "Don't you think so, Hermione?"

"Yeah, we do think so," said Ron, taking Hermione by the arm.
Draco's eyes were still glinting, but he stopped trying to get a rise out of Ron, then.

When they arrived at the Defence classroom, Snape was already there, standing in the shadows in one corner, his arms folded across his chest. He looked almost like a giant bat lurking there, Harry thought. Most of the students hadn't even noticed him. Aran knew he was there, though. He kept glancing nervously to the side, then quickly averting his gaze. His face was redder than usual.

*Good*, thought Harry. *You humiliated me and called me dark and wouldn't let me fight back when the Slytherins used me for target practice. Your turn to be embarrassed. Everybody will know that Dumbledore doesn't trust you alone with students now!*

As it turned out, though, that was to be only the smallest part of Aran's humiliation.

"Your attention," Aran said in a diffident tone as he tried to start class. Clearly, Snape standing there was making him nervous. Aran's voice wasn't loud enough to carry; all the students kept right on talking.

Snape took a step out of the shadows and spoke in quite a loud voice himself. "Are you always so unable to control your classes, Professor? Attention!"

The sixth-year Slytherins and Gryffindors fell silent at once, just before a hushed whisper swept through the class, the comments ranging from *What is he doing here?* to *Who's teaching Potions, then?*

Snape merely raised an eyebrow at the noise, which made it drop off straight away.

Aran's face had turned brick-red as he stood there in front of the class, his fists clenched. He did try to soldier on, though. "Open your books to the chapter on the limitations of *caninae,*" he said stiffly. "After you've all had a chance to digest that, I'll call up the students who are still having trouble conjuring them--"

"Excuse me, Professor," said Snape, stepping out of the shadows still more. Everyone's attention was instantly riveted on him. "Since these are sixth-year students--"

"I know that!" snapped Aran.

Snape continued as though he'd never been interrupted. "I'm quite certain they're capable of reading the text on their own time. Shouldn't valuable class time be reserved for the practical application of skills under the eye of a trained professional?"

Aran went even redder, though Harry wouldn't have thought it possible. "Look here, Snape, this is my class and I'll run it as I see fit!"

*Mistake,* Harry thought, even before his father responded.

"Apparently you won't, since the headmaster has personally asked me to oversee all Defence sections from now until the end of term," said Snape calmly.

Another ripple of noise spread through the classroom. *Oversee? All Defence sections?* And Hermione, predictably, tugging on Harry's sleeve from where she sat behind him. "What about Potions?"

Harry threw the words over his shoulder in a low whisper. "We're getting a substitute."

"You're here to watch only!" sputtered Aran, his fists shaking even as he clenched them.
"And intervene as I see fit," smoothly added Snape. His own level voice only pointed out how . . . emotional Aran was getting over the matter. "I do believe that was made clear to you?"

It obviously had been. Aran had no reply.

"Excellent," said Snape, his voice actually purring over the word. "So, instead of asking the students to read, you'll begin the practical application right away. I understand from your earlier comment that some of your students are still having trouble conjuring *caninae*?"

Aran gave a stiff nod.

Meanwhile, the class had gone silent once again, everyone's gaze trained on Aran, then Snape, then Aran . . . Harry thought the students looked like they were watching Beaters batting a Bludger back and forth.

There was no doubt about who was going to win this verbal battle, though.

"Am I to understand that you propose to call up the students in difficulty and assist them one-by-one?" Snape's eyebrows drew together. "You've been working on *caninae* for some time, Professor. Don't you think it would be more efficacious to provide additional demonstrations before asking the students to make another attempt?"

Draco raised his hand. Aran ignored it, of course. That only gave Snape all the more fodder for criticism.

"Is it your practice to disregard your students when they are attempting to garner your attention?"

"Mr Mal--"

"Mr Snape," corrected Snape in a chilly voice. "It really is quite offensive that you neglect to acknowledge my son by his rightful name. I suggest you rectify your habits of speech at once, Professor."

Aran's angry flush faded away, to be replaced by a sickly pallor. He might be stupid, but he was smart enough to hear the threat underlying Snape's words.

"Mr Snape has already mastered *caninae*," Aran said, taking a step back, away from the Potions Master.

"That doesn't mean he has nothing to contribute. Yes, Mr Snape?"

Draco stood up, probably so his voice would carry better, Harry thought. "I thought you should know, sir, that Professor Aran never did provide us with any demonstration. He just told us to read the text and expected us to start conjuring straight away."

Snape turned shocked features toward Aran. "Indeed? Most unsound practice, Professor."

Harry thought that a laugh considering Snape's own *learn by experience* obsession. He could count on two hands the number of potions Snape had ever demonstrated before expecting his students to start brewing them.

"Well, let's rectify that matter as well, then," said Snape briskly. "*Caninae*, if you would, Professor."

For some reason, Aran hesitated. And tried to balk, actually. Snape was implacable, though, finally asking in a mocking tone, "Are you incapable, Professor? Is that the problem?"
Aran bristled. "Certainly not! Miss Patil, if you'll come up here to cast against me--"

Snape pretended astonishment. "Why, Professor, I am right here in front of you. Wouldn't it be simpler for me to hex you?"

"Miss Patil will do."

From further behind Harry, Seamus began to make a noise that sounded suspiciously like a chicken clucking.

Aran pretended not to hear it. When Parvati threw a mild Stunning Hex his way, he waved his wand. "Canis Horribilis!"

A small ball of fur, semi-transparent, erupted out the end of Aran's wand. When it landed and began yipping at Parvati, Harry could see it was no more than a puppy.

A Pomeranian puppy.

Parvati couldn't help it. She laughed.

And then the whole class laughed.

And then Snape as well, just as though he found Aran's caninae so completely ridiculous that professorial decorum could go straight out the window.

Harry had seen his father laugh before, but the other students hadn't, except Draco. They all went still and silent, shocked.

Snape did know how to play up a moment, Harry had to admit. His father fished in a pocket for a handkerchief and dabbed at his eyes as he continued to chuckle. "Oh, Professor. Is that the best you can do? The very best?" And then, in a lower voice but still audible to everyone in the room, "No wonder your students are having such trouble."

Anger apparently made Aran reckless. "I suppose you can do better?"

Snape took a half-step forward, his posture all at once hardening into something resembling a duelling stance. "Canis horribilis!"

The thing that emerged wasn't even a dog, not that Harry could tell. It was more like a huge, vicious wolf, all claw and fang, leaping forth toward Aran in a blur of fur that already looked bloodied. It wasn't even transparent like everyone else's caninae had been.

Aran screamed and scrambled backwards, tripping over his own feet, ending up lying flat on his back. Parvati fled too, but had enough presence of mind not to fall over while trying to get away.

Snape's caninae circled the downed professor, growling, as the class sat shocked, but not silent.

It's going to eat him! . . . Merlin's wand, did you see? Snape didn't even have any curse to cast against! . . . How did he conjure it, then? . . .

"Professor Snape is the correct way to refer to me," said Snape with a slight glare directly at Dean.

And then, with another glare at the Slytherin half of the room, "Mr Zabini, if you write one more line during class time you will certainly regret it."

Zabini hurriedly shoved his ink and parchment away and sat with his hands folded atop an empty desk.
Meanwhile, Snape's ferocious wolf-dog was still circling Aran like a shark scenting prey. When Snape flicked his wand slightly, the *caninae* backed away.

But then, it rushed the Pomeranian still bouncing and yipping in front of the class, and gobbled it up in one bite.

"Oh, no!" said Lavender.

"The strong will vanquish the weak," said Snape, stepping over to Aran and looking down at him. His next word emerged softly. Somehow, that made it all the more chilling. "Always."

Snape looked up and surveyed the class, then. "Remember that, ladies and gentlemen. The strong will vanquish the weak. You are in this class in the hopes that you will acquire the tools to become the former instead of the latter." He gestured toward his *caninae*, which was sitting on its haunches, licking its chops. "You see what is possible when one has both skill and resolve. Now, choose a partner and practise. Rotate through several pairs as the class progresses. Anyone who has yet to conjure a successful *caninae* may come to the front for personal instruction."

Nobody made a move to approach Snape. Or at least, not until he waved his wand to vanish away the hulking ugly wolf-dog sitting on the instructor's platform.

But then, a line began to form. And it wasn't Aran's help the students wanted.

Harry couldn't help but smirk, just a little. He still needed help learning to conjure *caninae*, but he knew that Snape could always tutor him over the summer. If his classmates were going to get some quality instruction, they needed to get it here and now.

It was nice to see that good teaching was available, for once.

And from Snape.

Harry didn't know whether to grin or laugh.

There was only one topic of conversation in the Great Hall that night, and it was what a brilliant Defence instructor Snape was. Not just the sixth-years, but the other forms too, were saying the same thing. Even Neville was enthusiastic about having Snape in Defence class. Harry could hardly stop grinning. He knew that Percy had been wrong all those years ago, and Snape didn't really want the Defence job at all, but it was still nice to think that whatever happened with next year's disaster of a Defence instructor, at least this week and the next two they'd be getting a decent education in the subject.

"Dumbledore should just hire him for next year and be done with it," said a fifth-year sitting close to them, at one point.

"He can't. The job's probably cursed," said Harry. "That's why we never get anybody who lasts."

"Rotten luck . . ."

Ron was the one who asked what a lot of people were probably thinking. "Why can't he teach
Potions like that, then? Let us work with anybody we want, and have enough time to get one thing down before we go on to the next, and . . . right?"

Harry shrugged. He'd been wondering that, too. "Well, I guess one reason he's stricter there is because Potions is really a lot more dangerous. And also . . ." He lowered his voice so only Ron and Hermione would hear. "He was trying to show Aran up, you know? Maybe competition--ha, not that Aran provides much of it, but still--brings out the best in him."

"Yeah, I guess so."

Hermione pushed her plate away and stood up. "I'm just going to go tell Draco how it went with Goyle. He's going to need a lot more help with his readings--"

Ron's eyes just about bugged out as he leapt to his feet. "You're going over to the Slytherin table? Not alone, you're not--"

"I can take care of myself, thank you," said Hermione pertly, walking quickly away.

"She can," said Harry. "And even if she couldn't, do you think Draco would let anything happen to her? With me watching?"

Ron sat back down, but turned his neck and watched Hermione the whole time as she talked to Draco and handed him what looked like a long list written on parchment.

------------------------------------------------------

After dinner, Draco got Harry by himself and said that his Marsha session had been postponed. He asked Harry to come back to Slytherin to visit, but Harry really wanted to be alone. Out in Devon, he'd got used to having several needle-sessions throughout the day. Now, after a full day of being with people almost every instant, he felt sort of itchy inside.

"It's the Dark Magic trying to come out, he reasoned. I need to work some more on conquering my fears.

"Sorry, I need to talk to some people in Gryffindor," said Harry. "I'll see you in class tomorrow."

Draco nodded and turned away.

Once he was up in the Tower, though, Harry told his friends that he was tired and was going to his dormitory to have an early night.

"But I have notes for you from the classes you missed!"

"I'll have a look at them later." Harry faked a yawn. He knew that keeping up with his studies was important, but so were other things. And Snape would have to agree, otherwise he'd never have let them have a holiday while classes were in session.

"It's pretty early," said Ron doubtfully.

"What, you think I can't get tired until midnight?" Harry was starting to feel even itchier. He needed to get on his own. Immediately! Why couldn't his friends just get out of his way?
"All I meant was that you might need a potion to drop off," said Ron. "Do you still have some?"

"Oh, yeah. I do," lied Harry. He was actually out, but that hardly mattered. Sleep was the last thing he wanted. "See you in the morning, then."

Once he was on his bed, curtains drawn, needle in hand, he started to feel better. He wouldn't trust a silencing charm, considering the way Ron and the others had spelled the room months and months ago. He wasn't sure if the enchantments had ever been removed. But he didn't need a silencing charm, anyway. He was getting stronger all the time. He could slide the needle in and out of his flesh without making any noise.

When he pushed up his left sleeve and stared at his arm, it was like he was looking at it through two completely different pairs of eyes. It looked alarming, and even slightly disgusting, covered as it was with red dots, some of them festering slightly, the flesh bruised in places. But at the same time, it looked good to him. Because these were battle scars, weren't they? Harry was fighting his fear, and winning. There was nothing to be ashamed of.

He pierced his arm a few times, gritting his teeth, but not hesitating. That was good. But of course, the people who wanted to hurt him, people like Voldemort, would make it as painful as possible, wouldn't they? Harry was just getting too good at stabbing himself. It didn't hurt like it really should.

Maybe left-handed, he thought, switching the needle into his other hand and rolling up his right sleeve. The flesh on the underside of that arm was soft and unmarked.

It looked incomplete, somehow, to Harry.

He set to work on it, thrusting the needle through again and again, fumbling with it since his left hand was so uncoordinated compared to his right. Harry ended up biting his lips against the pain, now. It was worse, on this side.

But somehow, worse was better.

He didn't transfigure his needle back into a match until much, much later when he heard his friends coming up to go to bed.

The more times a day Harry could snatch a few moments to himself, the better he felt. Getting up early, he found, was a good way to get some time alone with his needle. Lingering in the loo worked too, though he knew he had to keep an eye out for ghosts. So far, none had appeared.

He also had to be careful about dressing and undressing, he soon discovered. He'd used some healing charms after his last few training sessions. They did help, some, but they also left a lot to be desired. Anyone who saw his bare arms would know that something odd was going on. Of course, they'd probably assume he'd caught some kind of pox, but he'd have a hard time avoiding Madam Pomfrey once word got out that he was ill.

It was too bad he didn't know anything about the Muggle remedies Severus had used on him after Samhain. Harry scowled. He might know about one or two if Aunt Petunia had ever bothered herself to treat his cuts and scrapes the way she'd fussed over Dudley's. But no, most of his had been caused by Dudley, which meant she'd ignored them completely, since her precious boy couldn't possibly
have done any wrong--

Harry snapped himself out of that thought. It was over and done with. Aunt Petunia was dead, and the old Dudley might as well be, he was so changed. And none of that mattered now, anyway. He had another family, now. And plenty of friends, unlike when he was younger and Dudley drove them all away.

What mattered now was getting over his fears so he could protect that family, protect those friends, when the time came. So he made sure that nobody saw anything they could question. Once he put his mind to it, it wasn't that hard to arrange.

Defence continued to be nothing short of wonderful. Snape belittled Aran at every turn. That alone would have buoyed Harry's spirits. It was even better to see the other students coming to see Snape as a teacher instead of just some form of tormentor.

And then there was Potions class. Some forms had Sprout filling in for Snape; some had McGonagall. But Tuesdays and Fridays after lunch, the sixth-year Slytherins and Gryffindors had Albus Dumbledore come to instruct them.

He was teaching them to make sweets.

It reminded Harry of Snape's joke from a long time ago. And sure enough, sherbet lemons were the first thing the headmaster taught them how to make. It was almost like a party in there, everyone bent over glass pots instead of cauldrons, breathing in the smell of melting sugar and citrus juices boiling down and down and down. And then dribbling droplets onto paper they'd waxed themselves.

Harry was almost afraid to tell Snape about it, when he went down for dinner on Saturday night. But he didn't want to keep secrets from his father, either, so when Snape asked how their classes were going, he told the truth.

"Mmm, and next week I do believe you'll be learning fudge," Snape said.

Harry's mouth all but fell open. "You knew?"

"No, Harry," Draco said. "It was a lucky guess."

Harry ignored his brother's snark. "I don't understand why you'd let him do that with your classes."

Snape shrugged. "I doubt quite seriously that I could dissuade him, and it's a small price to pay in order to be present during Defence. But primarily, I suppose I can withstand it because we had in fact already started seventh-year material."

"Seventh-year!"

A steady, unflinching glance. "Yes. I push my students as far as they can go."

Harry decided that if ever there was an opening, this had to be it. "We all love the way you teach Defence," he ventured.

Before he could continue, Snape frowned. "I most certainly do not teach Defence. As I have no desire for the curse to cause me to leave Hogwarts, I am merely supervising the Defence teacher."

"Right. Of course, of course." Harry took a breath and started over. "Well, we all love the way you supervise, and--"
"I think you all enjoy seeing an incompetent put in his place."

"Well, yes, but honestly, I don't think Lavender ever was going to learn half the spells, not from Aran. But you give us more help, and individual attention, and you aren't even sarcastic about it. Well, not most of the time, anyway, and I really think the same kind of approach would work wonders in Potions class. Don't you?"

Harry held his breath and hoped.

His father merely stared at him for a long moment. "I'll consider the matter over the summer," he said at last.

Draco scoffed slightly. "You don't need to change, Severus. I've certainly never had any trouble learning in your class."

"You're gifted in Potions!" said Harry. "Not everybody is."

"And Severus should adjust his teaching to the lowest common denominator, is that it? What sort a way is that to foster excellence?"

"Maybe he shouldn't be aiming for excellence in one or two people at the expense of competence for everybody else!"

Snape held up a hand. "I'll consider the matter, as I said. Now, shall we play a round of Wizard's Scrabble before bed?"

Harry started slightly. "Oh. Um, you didn't think I was staying over, did you? I kind of need to get back up to the Tower for some house stuff. For his needle, that was what he meant. Not that he really needed to go to the Tower for it; he'd taken to keeping that match in his pocket at all times. He couldn't work on overcoming his fears down here, though, with his father and brother so close. He needed more privacy than that.

Draco blew out a breath. "I'm staying over and I told Severus you might do the same."

"Well, you told him wrong then," said Harry. "I have to get going."

"He already let you out of your Potions lesson earlier today, and you can't even bother yourself to stay over and visit?"

Snape gave a light shrug. "Potions is effectively over for the term, be it in class or on Saturdays. Besides, Draco, that was arranged as a punishment. I think it's time to end it, though of course I still do plan to aim for excellence in your Potions skills, Harry. Perhaps over the summer I'll help you master another few brews."

"You know," said Harry slowly, "if you'd let me pick what I wanted to learn to make, that might make a big difference."

"Agreed." Snape's eyes narrowed, and Harry had a strong feeling his father was thinking something like At least I need have no worries that you will wish to brew something like Venetimorica . . . The words were left unsaid, though.

That was good.

Draco didn't seem to have sensed the undercurrents in the room, but he definitely wasn't happy. "Can't you just stay an hour, Harry? Please?"
A funny kind of shiver ran across Harry's spine, then. It probably had to do with the strangely intense way Draco was staring at him. Like . . . he knew something? Like he had something to say and he really, really wanted to talk to Harry.

But that, of course, only made Harry want to be all the more secretive. He pushed back his chair. "Who's walking me back, then? Because I really do have to get back to Gryffindor."

Snape nodded and stood up.

Harry couldn't help but notice as he left that Draco looked mildly frustrated about something.

------------------------------------------------------

With the end of the year fast approaching and Potions class focussed on candy-making, those students not taking O.W.L.s or N.E.W.T.s had very little academic stress. Harry's classes had become much more relaxed and even fun. The one exception, though, was Transfiguration. McGonagall seemed determined to make up for the levity outside her classroom by making sure that her students worked extra hard within it.

Harry didn't mind so much, though. As long as the Gryffindor Head of House wasn't intent on singling him out, he could cope with the challenging practicals and long essays. However, when the professor asked him to stay after class, Harry felt a moment of panic. He'd been fingering his match, wishing it was a needle, while struggling to translate a new spell into Parseltongue. But McGonagall couldn't have known that, could she?

"Mr Potter, I've been asked to inform you that a visitor has requested your presence in the headmaster's office. The password this week is *Heavenly Hash.*"

Harry frowned. "A visitor, ma'am?"

A ghost of a smile crossed the stern witch's face before she answered, "An old friend recently back from the continent. He needed to pick up some job related research."

Remus. Harry's face split into a grin for a moment. But only a moment. In the next instant, panic gripped him and his heart began racing. "He wanted to talk to me, specifically?"

"Yes, is that so strange? Now run along; he's a busy man and hasn't got all day. Neither do you if you want to have your spell work sorted out before next week."

Harry took his leave and headed for the headmaster's office, but the feet that carried him there were heavy. Remus had been talking to that painting. A lot, probably. *No telling what that bastard has told him.* Harry gulped, despair almost making him wilt, he was suddenly so exhausted. *Oh, God. Lucius must have said I'm turning dark. And Remus has probably come here to make sure I'm not itching to turn more Death Eaters into statues . . .* Harry couldn't help the thoughts that came next. *I wouldn't mind doing just that, either, to Bellatrix Lestrange or Peter Pettigrew.*

Suddenly feeling so itchy he couldn't stand it, Harry dove into an alcove and turning his back to the hall, quickly got his match out so he could transfigure it. A few quick jabs and his breathing steadied. There, that was better.

Yanking his sleeve back down, Harry continued on his way.

Once he was up the spiral staircase and knocking on the heavy wooden door, he started wishing he'd
taken more time in the alcove and done a more thorough job with the needle. It couldn't be a good
sign that Remus wanted to speak to him privately, could it?

"Come in," said a voice Harry recognised. Smiling nervously, Harry pushed the door open. The
sight that greeted him was familiar and bizarre all at once. The face was Remus', all right, but the
clothes weren't remotely similar to his usual well-worn robes. Harry didn't have much idea what to
say, about the clothes or anything else, so he made light of the situation as he thought Sirius might
do. He closed the door first, though. "Well, well. I'm not sure I like the new look."

Grinning slightly, Remus struck a pose for a moment. Malfoyesque, it looked all wrong with Remus
doing it. The robes looked wrong on him, too. The cut was perfect, the heavy silk falling in clean
lines to the floor, but the steely grey shade made Remus look sort of sickly. Or maybe that was
because the garment hung a little large on the werewolf's frame.

Harry could see how well it would suit Lucius, though. It was the exact colour of his dead, cold
eyes.

"I arrived in costume, so to speak, this morning, but I wanted to let the effect wear off before seeing
you," said Remus quietly, no grin about him, now. "Should I have transfigured the clothes?"

Wonderful. Now even people who ought to know better were thinking him weak.

"I can handle it," said Harry dryly. "I've seen you actually be him, remember. And I did all right,
after I got over the shock."

Remus smiled, the expression sympathetic. "I still wish I'd brought a change of clothes. Well, enough
of that. Your father and I are testing a new batch of potion. Severus is working some final kinks out
of the formulation."

Harry frowned slightly. He could easily imagine what those kinks were. "Yeah, I was kind of
wondering how this was going to work. Hermione once said that you couldn't use Polyjuice to
impersonate someone who's dead."

"Ah, traditionally that would be true," Remus answered. "But this is Severus' own variant of the
potion, as I believe you know. A little less aconite; more heat throughout the entire brewing process .
. . " Remus' ran a hand through his grey-streaked hair. "Enough with the Potions lesson. I'm sure you
get more than enough of those at home."

"You know, I don't get as many as you'd think." Huh, now that he thought about it, it was actually
pretty impressive that Snape had cancelled the rest of his Saturdays. Not that there were many left.
And of course he'd hinted about more lessons during the summer, but all in all, Harry had to admit
that his father hadn't been too unreasonable. "Um, so do you need to see Severus? He's in Defence
with Aran. I think they've got the fifth year Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff class right now, but I'm not sure. I
could check."

"No, no. Everything seems well in hand."

Harry sat on a soft chair near the fire and crossed his

legs. "I wanted to talk to you for a bit, Harry."

Harry sat, trying hard to relax since he felt so stiff inside. What could Remus need to discuss? He
hadn't mentioned the portrait yet. Maybe he wasn't going to. Harry could hope, anyway.

"Talk? Nothing much has happened since you saw me at Grimmauld Place."

"I suppose classwork is a relief after what you went through," Remus' soft smile clearly told Harry
that the comment was intended to be an opening. Remus didn't just want them to talk. He wanted
Harry to talk.

So, Harry did. "Oh, lots of my mates are starting to whinge on about how they're dying for the summer hols and all that, but I'm not too anxious. After all, I did miss a lot of the school year." He couldn't help but add the next bit. "Nobody's complaining about Defence now, though. Did you know Severus is supervising Aran? It's amazing -- we haven't had this much fun since you were teaching!"

Remus started slightly. "That's certainly unexpected. I don't think any of you felt that way when Severus would substitute for me on my moon days."

Harry blushed, just a little. "Oh. Well, he's trying to humiliate Aran. By being a better teacher than he is, among other things. When he would fill in for you he had another . . . uh, agenda."

Remus nodded. "I truly can't imagine what Professor Aran must be going through with Severus right there in the room. I almost feel sorry for the man. Almost."

It seemed like a good opportunity, then, to tell Remus about a few of the most colourful incidents in Defence class -- some he'd witnessed himself and others he'd heard about in the common room or the Great Hall. The longer Harry talked, the better he felt. There was nothing to worry about. Remus had just needed some reassurance that Harry was doing fine.

As it turned out, though, Remus was a little bit more perceptive than Harry had anticipated.

After their laughter faded, and Harry had run out of stories about Defence, Remus leaned forward and touched him lightly on the shoulder. "Harry, are you truly well? I know you've never liked to make a fuss about the terrible things that have happened to you, but . . ." Remus sighed. "You shouldn't just sweep them all aside. Particularly not this time, after such an extreme trauma."

Harry flinched away from Remus' gentle fingers. Words like extreme and trauma tended to lose their meaning, he thought, when so much of your life was made up of them. "You think that was worse than seeing my own blood used to raise my parents' assassin to life? You think it was worse than losing my eyes?" Harry could feel himself getting angry, and tried to damp the feeling down. A calm voice, that was it. "Honestly, Draco had it a lot worse than I did."

Remus waited until Harry had met his eyes. "I don't think so, Harry. You've never killed anyone before."

That's not precisely true, Harry thought, guilt going around in circles in his mind. "Look, you're worried for nothing, all right? I know it was an accident! And I know not to use that spell again. So, problem solved."

Remus shifted in the chair, his fingers plucking at the rich fabric of his robes. "I think I know you better than that. You must be terrified." Remus' voice dropped a notch. "I know I was."

Harry looked up, startled. And horrified, in a way he'd never thought to be.

"Oh no, no," Remus said gently, his hand held up as if to forestall Harry's thoughts. "I didn't mean I was frightened of what you did. Or of you. I meant that I was terrified, too, when I realised how easily I could kill a person. I know what it's like to have powers you can't always keep under control. I know what it's like to fear you'll do great harm without intending to."

"Oh," Harry answered. If his thoughts had been spinning before, now they were in a complete whirl. Yeah, Remus would know, wouldn't he? He'd know all about living with the monster within.
All at once, Harry felt sort of dirty, like he was something low and awful. Not that he felt that way about Remus being a werewolf, but this was worse, wasn't it? It wasn't like he'd been bitten and had caught a dread disease. Remus couldn't help transforming under the force of the moon. But Harry ought to be able to keep from letting his dark magic have its way. He inwardly nodded, more grateful than ever that he'd hit upon a method to help get it under control. He just needed to step up his needle plan some. Find more ways to be alone so he could work on it.

Realising he'd been silent for a long while, Harry cleared his throat and struggled to say something that would ease Remus' worries. "It's good of you to come talk to me. But, you know, I'm really not so bad off. I mean, as long as I'm careful like Severus trained me to be, I can keep my wanded spells in check. Everything's fine."

The werewolf sighed. Loudly. "It's more than a river in Egypt, Harry."

"Come again?"

"Denial," Remus answered, his eyes going dark with memories. "That's what your mother always used to say. 'Denial is more than just a river in Egypt.' She told me that more than once. She used to roll her eyes and say that we 'ridiculously stubborn boys' couldn't admit how we really felt if we drank Veritaserum first."

That got a true smile from Harry. Well, a half-smile, anyway.

"Obviously she had a fondness for hyperbole, but she was right about one thing, Harry. It's no good to hide away what you're feeling. Merlin knows I have done, and I've always regretted it in the end."

"I'm not hiding," Harry insisted. But you are, aren't you? The sly voice inside just kept going. You're hiding morning, noon, and night so you can jab yourself with needles.

Another voice inside his head argued back. Because I have to!

"I'd like to think I know you," said Remus, his voice compassion itself. "I do know you, Harry. You're a kind, wonderful, loving boy. You must be feeling tremendously guilty about what you did to Malfoy. But, please, please believe me when I say that you didn't do anything wrong. It's not your fault that your magic is so strong. You can't help being who you are. I know that Severus is your father now, but you'll always be James' son, too, do you understand? I love you, Harry, just the same as before."

All at once, Harry felt like he couldn't breathe. He'd been all right before, when Remus had mentioned his mother, but now, thinking of his father too, thinking of them both together, he thought he might sick up. I never even thought once of what my mum and dad would think of what I've done. Would my mum have given up her life to save me, if she'd known in advance how I'd turn out?

"Harry? Are you all right? You look a little ill."

Only a little? Harry almost asked. Everyone expects me to feel horrible about what I did. They think it must be eating me alive. What would they think if they knew just the opposite was true? Would they really still love me then?

"It's all right, you know, You can tell me, Harry," urged Remus, so sincerely that Harry suddenly just wanted to kick him. "There's no shame in being upset."

But Harry wasn't upset, and that was the whole problem, wasn't it? Instead of the regret everyone thought he should feel, he was just cold all over, like he was somewhere far away. Or like he was someone else, maybe, watching himself talking to his parents' friend. And there was really only one
thing to say, wasn't there? He couldn't admit how much of a monster he was. He had to pretend he still was what they thought he was.

"You're right, Remus," Harry said slowly. "I-- I do feel just awful about what I did. What I had to do, I mean. But I didn't want to say anything and worry everyone."

Remus nodded as though he understood, when really, he didn't understand anything. Nobody did. Harry was all alone.

"I mean . . ." Harry gulped, trying to think what else Remus would expect to hear. "I know I have to, uh, kill Voldemort and I didn't want the Order to think I wasn't up to it. It's a war, and I just wanted everyone to know that I know that. But really, I feel just rotten about what I did to Malfoy. Oh, not so much that he's dead, but what it means about me, like you said. The uh . . . " Harry thought too much of Remus to say out loud the monster within. "But anyway, I do know that killing Malfoy was an accident. I don't exactly blame myself. I . . . uh, just need a little time. All right?"

"Time will help," Remus said, smiling kindly. "And about the war, Harry. You shouldn't even be thinking about that, not yet. Not until you're much, much older. Of course, you should never have had to deal with any of this. I wish there was somehow we could just take it all away. At least know that you're not in this fight alone. We're all in this with you."

Harry nodded jerkily. He wanted to get out of the room as soon as possible. He itched all over and he knew that only one thing would make these awful feelings go away. He needed to practice. He needed to practice fighting his fear because when it came down to it, he ought to be in this alone. Just him and Voldemort and no one else because he didn't want anyone else dragged down with him. And that's precisely what I'm allowing to happen, letting Remus masquerade as Lucius, right there in the man's own house. Remus'll be dragged down so deep, it'll probably kill him one way or another.

Harry closed his eyes in an effort to make the sudden dark thought go away.

"Harry?"

The boy snapped his eyes back open and tried to look and act like everything was fine. "Thanks for coming to talk to me, Remus, but really, I need to get going. I've got a class starting soon . . ." He reached for the books at his feet.

"There's a good lad. We wouldn't want Gryffindor to lose points for tardiness."

"I'm in Slytherin too."

Remus smiled again. "Of course you are, yes." Reaching into an inner pocket of his elegant robes, Remus drew out a vellum envelope. "Take this, Harry. For my own peace of mind, if for no other reason. If you need to talk about anything, anything at all, you can floo me at Grimmauld Place, right up until my new mission begins."

Nodding, Harry took the envelope and stuffed it into a book. He couldn't meet Remus' eyes as he thanked him. How could he face someone who believed in him so blindly? Who thought he was a kind, loving boy, when in fact he wasn't even the slightest bit sorry that he'd killed?

Harry was just glad that he knew what to do. He fled directly to the nearest empty loo and spelled it for privacy before he got out his match and transfigured it, applying just a touch of wanded magic to make the change solid and permanent. Best to keep it as a needle from now on out, he decided. He had to be ready to use it at a moment's notice.
This time when Harry positioned the needle against his forearm, he made sure to find the spots that hurt the worst.

All of them.

Three times over the course of the next few days, Draco tried to get Harry alone to talk to him, but Harry kept putting it off. Draco didn't know anything. He couldn't. Nobody had seen Harry using the needle, not even a ghost. Harry'd been careful about that. But still, Draco obviously thought that something was wrong with Harry, or else why would he want to talk to him so urgently?

Harry started avoiding Draco as much as he could, and tried not to let it bother him when Ron obviously approved.

The following Thursday as Defence was winding to a close, Harry rushed to pack up his things and leave. Draco was faster still, though, placing himself in front of Harry before Harry could make it to the classroom door. "Let's go have dinner with Severus," he said.

Harry shook his head. "Sorry. I'm still trying to catch up on work from that little holiday we took."

Draco made an exasperated noise. "Harry, I know how much work we missed. You can't still be bogged down in it. Come on, all right? I really need to talk to you about something." His gaze swept over the Gryffindors milling about. "And I'd rather we have some privacy, all right? It's a bit of a . . . sensitive subject."

If anything, that overture only panicked Harry worse. He wasn't going to get within a mile of a Draco who needed to talk to him about a sensitive subject, not if he could help it.

"Can't it wait?"

"I've been waiting," Draco exclaimed.

"Yeah. Um, well, I'll try to find some time." Harry knew he was being a bit of a git, but he didn't know what else to do. "See you later!"

He tried not to let it bother him that Draco whirled away and headed straight for their father, who was up at the front loudly taking Aran to task for ineffective teaching techniques.

Harry didn't know exactly what Draco might have said to Snape, but the next day, Snape stopped by the Gryffindor table at lunch and asked Harry to join him in his quarters for dinner that night. Harry tried to beg off, but his father was implacable.

Oh God, what if Draco somehow realised exactly what Harry was doing? And when Harry had refused to discuss it over and over, he'd gone to Snape with his suspicions? Of course, it was difficult for Harry to believe that was what had happened. Surely, if his father knew what Harry was doing to his arms, he'd have dealt with it right away, and not waited until dinner! Then again maybe Snape could understand the training for what it was and approved.

For all that, though, Harry found he couldn't enjoy his Friday Potions lesson at all. No matter that they were making homemade marshmallows to eat with the fudge they'd cooked on Tuesday.
Feeling jittery and full of dread, Harry did the only thing he could think of to calm him down. He snuck into the ingredients cupboard for a quick jab into both arms. There, that was better. He yanked his sleeves back down and buttoned his cuffs, weaving the needle back into the seam where he'd been keeping it.

It was working out really well to have it ready for use at all times.

As it turned out, though, the supply cupboard might not have been the most brilliant place to use the needle. When Harry turned around, Draco was there, right behind him. Harry couldn't tell how much his brother might have seen. Or understood, maybe.

Draco looked puzzled, but concerned as well. It gave Harry a horrible feeling, deep inside.

"What are you doing in here?" asked Draco, looking Harry up and down as if trying to figure something out. "We don't need any real Potions ingredients for marshmallows."

"What are you doing in here, then?"

Draco eyes narrowed, probably at Harry's annoyed tone. "In point of fact, I followed you. I've been trying to talk to you, in case you've yet to notice." Draco's voice grew even more petulant as he went on. "I just wanted to know if you're going to come down to dinner tonight, Harry. Severus did ask you, didn't he?"

Harry gritted his teeth. "You know he did. You put him up to it!"

"Yeah, because you're avoiding both of us! Did you think we wouldn't notice?"

"Just because I've been a bit busy lately--"

"Harry, I need to talk to you! As I believe I just mentioned?"

"Boys," interrupted a third voice, a blend of kindness and age. "I think that tasting has begun at your respective work-tables. Was there something in here you needed?"

"Just my brother," muttered Draco. "He seems to have gone missing."

Harry could only think that was a way of saying he wasn't quite himself. A reference to the needles?

"Maybe I know what you want to talk to me about," he retorted, the words so cool that he felt chilled just saying them. "Ever think of that? Maybe I'd rather not discuss it. Maybe my mind's made up!"

Draco's silver eyes hardened to grey. "Yeah, maybe it is. You know, I really did think I knew you well enough to . . . well just never mind, then!"

"Fine," said Harry, pushing past Draco to get out of the cupboard. "Never mind is fine by me!"

"Draco, my boy," Harry heard the headmaster say behind him. "Is everything quite all right?"

He tried to hear what Draco said in reply, but by then Hermione was at his side, pressing a freshly cut cube of marshmallow into his hand and chattering on about how she thought they might have used a touch too much orange-blossom water in their batch.
Harry didn't want to go down to dinner at all, not after the argument in Potions class, but he didn't fool himself that he had any real choice. If he cried off, Severus would come find him.

And it wasn't like Harry had much chance of hiding from his father, not when Severus was the one who had the Marauder's Map, these days.

Harry scowled. Why hadn't Severus ever returned it? It wasn't like anybody needed to study it for evidence exonerating Draco any longer, now was it? Maybe Harry would just ask for the map back. He could use it to know if anybody was coming when he was using his needle in the loo.

When Harry arrived in the dungeons later that evening, his father was alone.

No Draco yet. Harry was a little ashamed to feel so relieved about that. He hoped Draco wasn't joining them at all, in fact.

Snape nixed that hope, though. "I told your brother I'd like a few moments alone with you," the man said as he led Harry back to his office and gestured for him to sit down. Snape had evidently just got home; he took a moment to sweep off his teaching robes before settling into the armchair opposite his son.

Harry was reminded of all the times he'd come in here to talk to Snape, just before and after his adoption. All the long chats they'd had, talking about everything and nothing. Just getting to know one another, really.

He'd kind of missed those since he'd moved back to the Tower.

But this wasn't going to be a chat about nothing. Snape made that clear from that start. "So," said the man as he crossed his long legs and peered intently at Harry, "I get the feeling you've been avoiding me."

Harry stiffened. "You get the feeling, or Draco's been saying so?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "I happen to know that Draco senses something bothering you, yes. However, quite independent of that, I've noticed you moving to the opposite side of the room from me, all through each Defence class."

Harry hadn't been doing that deliberately. He hadn't even been aware of it. "Oh. Well, you do want us to rotate through several partners," he said, wincing at how feeble that sounded.

"Perhaps that's why I prefer to teach Potions. Much more difficult for the students to run away."

Sensing that had been an attempt at a jest, Harry made an effort to smile. "Sorry," he added. "I wasn't trying to run away. I think I'm just, you know, under some stress."

"Yes, I can see that." Snape gave him what Harry felt was a longish stare. "It occurs to me that when Draco recounted all that transpired at Lucius' house in France, he in fact could not tell me everything that had happened to you. He wasn't with you until Lucius released him from the snake pit."

Snape waited again, probably for Harry to respond in some way. Harry started to get the feeling that his father would wait forever, if need be. "Oh. Well, it wasn't so bad. I mean, it wasn't outright torture like Draco got." Harry swallowed. It was hard to talk about it, but he didn't want his father to know that. "Um, he just made a lot of really creepy threats about my eyes, and ended up destroying my crest, and made me undress--"
"Made you undress?"

That tone, just short of an outright roar, was enough to tell Harry that his father was getting entirely the wrong idea. "No, just my shirt!" he rushed to say, blushing at what Snape must be thinking. "And it was only to humiliate me, you know? It's not like he . . . uh, touched me or anything."

"Just your shirt."

Now Snape's voice was flat, like he found it hard to believe that Lucius Malfoy would stop at a shirt. A good point, considering. Harry figured he might as well explain the rest. "Well, he did threaten to make me undress some more. For his guests, he said. But then he decided he didn't want to alarm Draco. Lucius thought he could get him to switch sides, you know? But of course he was going to double-cross him afterwards."

Snape drew in a long breath, then blew it out so strongly that it made a stray lock of his hair waft upwards. "I am sorry the man abused you so."

Harry shrugged, trying not to think dark thoughts about how glad he'd have been at the time to loose his wild magic and burn Lucius to a crisp. "Well, technically, he didn't get around to any real abuse, Dad."

"You only think so because you have suffered far too much in your short life."

Probably true. "Well, I wasn't going to let him do anything really nasty. See, Lucius thought he had me under Imperius. I let him think that so I could wait for my best chance to do something to help Draco. You'd have been proud. I was being Slytherin."

"You are mistaken if you think I have pride only in your Slytherin tendencies," said Snape. "I told you from the start that your Gryffindor virtues have their uses as well."

Harry hadn't thought of that in a long time. The memory warmed him a bit, and helped him feel less fractured inside.

"Lucius' behaviour . . . is that why you withdrew so much in Devon, Harry? I assumed you simply didn't care to listen to Draco and me compile that dossier, but it seems there was a good deal more on your mind."

That warm feeling Harry'd had a second ago got worse, but now, not in a good way. His collar felt hot, all of a sudden. And his face felt damp. Sweating, that was it. Because he had a lot on his mind. Dark lords, his own awful powers, needles . . . Just as well he could blame it all on Lucius making him undress. "Yeah, I, uh, had things to think about, like you said. Being alone with Lucius was pretty horrible, but I didn't want to talk about it. You can understand that, right? I mean, after you came back that time from the . . ." He cleared his throat. "Death Eater meeting on Halloween, you didn't want to tell me about it. You said living through it once was more than enough."

"True," said Snape slowly. "But I am not convinced that we are similar in that respect, Harry. You might do better to talk through your troubles."

_Uh-oh._ This was heading into dangerous waters. The last thing Harry wanted to do was discuss what was really going on with him. He sighed, thinking that what Snape needed was a good distraction. "You know, you're a lot like Remus. Just a few days ago, he was trying to get me to talk, too."

Snape's expression was hard to read. "Was he?"

Too late, Harry realised what his father was probably thinking. "No, it's not like that," Harry quickly
said. "He knows you're my father, and he's fine with it. But he just, you know--" Harry didn't want to say *loves*. "He's fond of me too. Because I'm always going to be James' son, he said."

Snape appeared to relax marginally. "I'm certain Lupin has more reason than that."

Harry nodded slightly, even though it made him feel a bit of a fraud. Sure, Remus had all sorts of reasons. Hadn't he said Harry was such a loving, compassionate boy? What would he think if he knew more about what Harry was really like inside?

Unable to stand thoughts like that for long, Harry jumped to another topic. "I want the Marauder's Map back," he blurted, a little embarrassed when he heard how demanding he'd sounded. "I mean, you were keeping it so the headmaster could try to figure out how it was tricked, right? But we know all about it, now. Why didn't you return it to me right after Nott confessed?"

Snape tapped his fingertips together. "Albus has been attempting to copy the document, as it could be invaluable to the Order should Hogwarts' defences ever be breached. However, he's all but concluded by now that it can't be copied."

"The Order can always get it from me when they need it." Harry didn't want to be selfish, after all. "But, you know, I would like to be the one to keep up with it, since my dad worked on it, and all."

*But that's *not* the real reason*, said a voice inside Harry. *You're lying. Lying to Severus, and invoking the memory of James to make your lie convincing. How dark is that?*

Harry fought the voice. He *needed* the map, after all. Needed it for a really good reason, too. He was trying to stop the darkness inside him.

"I will retrieve the map from Albus at the first opportunity," said Snape calmly. "Perhaps now we could return to the matter at hand?"

Harry had been sort of hoping they wouldn't. That was clearly hopeless, though, so he gave a brief shrug.

Maybe Snape had wanted more of an answer than that, since he sighed, and leaned forward again. "A moment ago you just said that you had been a bit distant because you have things to think about, but Harry . . . I suspect that you're trying your best *not* to think about any of them."

When Harry didn't know what to say to that, his father's dark eyes glimmered with sympathy. "I would never compare what you did last week to any of my own experiences, as your action was entirely justified and right, by any standard. My own past is far murkier, as I think you know."

"Yeah," said Harry thickly.

"But for all that, I do know what a shock it can be to realise one has taken a life," said Snape quietly. "You didn't want to believe you'd done so, in fact. And then I think you accepted it, but it's plain to me that you're deeply troubled, Harry. Ever since Lucius' death was acknowledged at the Order meeting, you've become more and more withdrawn. Even your friends have noticed that you are keeping to yourself to an extraordinary degree."

"My friends told you that? Some friends!"

"They are. They're concerned." Snape tapped his own temple.

Oh. Occlumency. Ron and Hermione wouldn't stand a chance. Wouldn't even know they'd been subtly probed. "I just needed some time alone," he exclaimed, starting to feel hot and sweaty again.
"Is that such a crime?"

"No, but it's likely a mistake. You were the one who took such pains to convince me that you need your friends. And I think in that you were quite correct, Harry. You do need them."

"Look, I'm just going through a bit of a rough patch. I'll get over it." Harry tried to firm his voice. "The best thing you can do is just let me, all right?"

Snape studied him for a long moment. "You'll come to me if you need help?"

Harry did his best to smile. "Yeah, of course I will. Oh, and thanks for raking Aran over the coals like that. It's nice to not have to dread Defence."

Harry was pretty sure his father had noticed the change of subject. But this time, he didn't challenge Harry on it. He merely inclined his head, his dark eyes thoughtful.

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Dinner was a little bit tense, since Draco still seemed to be in a huff from earlier. Snape must have noticed that, and reasoned that his sons needed time to work it out, for shortly after dessert he claimed he had work to do up in his classroom office.

For someone who'd been so insistent that he had to talk to Harry, Draco sure was silent once their father had flooed off, Harry thought. That was actually good, though, right? It explained why Snape hadn't seemed to know anything at all about Harry's needle. Obviously, it was a hard subject for Draco to broach. Not that Harry wanted it broached, but he supposed he might as well make sure Draco continued keeping it to himself.

Harry took a moment to think, ignoring the way Draco was staring at him so resentfully. "Look," he finally said. "You know that thing you wanted to talk to me about?"

Draco's upper lip curled. "Oh, yes. The thing you'd already made up your mind about."

"Yeah, well my mind is made up," said Harry, nodding. He didn't care what anybody thought about his needle; he knew that conquering his fears, whatever it took, was the right thing to do. "So, I just wanted to say, don't mention it to Dad, all right?"

Draco crossed his arms. "You think it's funny, do you?"

Harry wrinkled his forehead. "Selfish?" It didn't seem like that to him, but maybe Snape had said something to Draco, too, about Harry needing to talk things out? "Listen, when talking isn't going to change anything, I just don't see the point."

"Yeah, well you talked plenty before, didn't you? Said you didn't even want it!"

"Didn't even want it . . . I" Harry started, realisation sweeping over him. Draco didn't know about the needle at all. Whatever he wanted to talk about, it wasn't that. The relief was so great that he couldn't help but laugh.

"So you think it's funny, do you?"
"No," said Harry, schooling his expression. "Look, I misunderstood before. So, there was something you wanted, then? A favour?"

Draco lifted his chin. "I think we agreed earlier to just forget it."

"Oh, come on. Honestly, I misunderstood." Harry sighed, knowing this was mostly his fault. "What was it that you needed, anyway?"

Draco’s entire posture seemed to stiffen. "Please, I don't need anything from a self-important prat like you."

That was a bit much to let pass without comment, considering the reason Draco had switched sides in the first place. "I thought you needed me to keep you out of Azkaban."

"I'm in the Order now, Potter. I may not be universally trusted, but I'm through the door. Now, you may not be able to look past the fact that I look a lot like him--"

"What?" Harry could hardly believe his ears. "I got over that months and months ago, and you know it!"

Draco leapt to his feet, his lips pulled back in a snarl. "I'll tell you what I know! Ever since we got back from that holiday you can hardly stand to look at me! You'd never even know I saved your stupid life!"

How many times had Harry already acknowledged that? "I thought you didn't want to listen to my thanking people thing!" he shouted as he shot to his feet. "And anyway, I thought you were saving yourself, just as much! So it wasn't for me at all, was it? You were just being Slytherin!"

"Listen, you Gryffindor, I'm the one who got tortured!"

All of a sudden, Harry felt like the top of his head would come off, he was so angry. "You think I don't know that? You think I could see that and just forget about it? Well, maybe you do! Unlike some people, I never have thought it would be great fun to watch somebody get tortured!"

Draco gave a low, bitter laugh. "Oh, of course not. You're pure, perfect Potter! You're better than me, better than Severus. And that's why you're acting like you'd rather drop dead than be anywhere near us--"

"Well, I sure don't want to be near you when you're in a mood like this," retorted Harry as he reached for the mantle. Thank goodness his father had put his Floo powder out within easy reach, again. "You can tell Severus I found my own way back to the Tower!"

Draco ground his teeth together. "Oh, and now you're above the rules, too! Severus said not to use his Floo for that!"

Harry stepped over the grate. "You're a fine one to talk about being above the rules! When's the last time I ever poisoned anyone, eh?" He didn't wait for an answer, but flung down his powder with as much force as he could. "Gryffindor common room!"

Draco, red-faced, started to yell something else, but Harry couldn't hear it above the rush of the Floo whisking him away.
Harry emerged shaking with anger into a room full of Gryffindors. "Harry!" exclaimed Hermione, "What's wrong?"

Dusting ashes off his shirt and trousers was a good way, he found, to conceal how much his hands were trembling. "Nothing. I went down for a visit and now I'm back."

Ron was the one who said what everybody was probably thinking. "But somebody always walks you back." He sounded a little jealous. "You get to floo around the castle, now?"

"Look, Severus wasn't home and Draco was getting on my nerves," Harry snapped, "so I left. All right?"

Ron held up his hands, grinning. "Draco was getting on your nerves, eh? Imagine that."

"Ronald!" Hermione sounded absolutely scandalised. Harry might have found that funny in other circumstances, but after the past few minutes, he couldn't be anything but angry. And depressed. He wasn't even sure what had gone so wrong with Draco, though he was sure that throwing Samhain in his face hadn't been a stroke of brilliance. Let alone Venetimorica.

Had it really been just a few days earlier that he'd been the one telling Severus to stop bringing up Draco's past mistakes?

"Harry, sit down with me for a while," said Hermione softly. "You look almost ill."

The other Gryffindors seemed to sense that Harry might need some room. Except Ron, but he no longer looked so gleeful over Harry's fight with Draco. Now, he just looked concerned. The other students drifted away, though, leaving Harry and his closest friends alone.

"You need some water, mate?"

Harry shook his head. What he needed, he thought, was to go back down and work it out with Draco. He didn't realise he'd said so out loud until Hermione answered him.

"You'll see him tomorrow anyway, won't you? For your Potions Saturday? Wait until then."

"Oh. Severus said those were over and done with."

Hermione smiled. "Good for him. But you can still go down, right? Ron and I will walk you. But wait until you're bit calmer before you go work it out with your brother."

That sounded like good advice, especially considering how much Harry was dreading seeing Draco again. He'd said such terrible things, and without even meaning to! He must be a horrible person inside.

Just like the portrait had said.

Harry blinked as he sat there, thinking that through. When he'd wanted to hurt his brother, Samhain had rushed into the forefront of his mind. Was it darkness bringing the thought forth, or something else?

You have good instincts, his father had told him, more than once.

So why had he thought of Samhain like that, if not because of all the efforts he'd been making to get over his fear of needles? His instincts were trying to tell him something.
Namely, that the needles he'd been tortured with on Samhain were nothing like the slender, tiny one he'd been using to get over his fears. He'd still be afraid if faced with larger needles, right? What good was it to get used to needles if he didn't get used to the ones that really mattered?

He could try working out some sort of enlargement spell, he supposed. Then again, sitting right next to him was someone who probably already had what he needed. Not that he was planning to ask Hermione for a yarn needle. What was he going to say to explain that? He'd taken up macramé?

He shouldn't need to ask, though. He could see from here that Hermione's wicker basket of yarn and oddments was in the common room as usual, shoved into a corner, the whole thing covered with just a little bit of dust. The elves were cleaning the Tower again, but they left that basket strictly alone.

Harry nodded to himself, a plan forming in his mind. He'd wait until everyone was asleep. Until the coast was clear, so to speak, and he could come down here and get a needle. As he remembered, Hermione's big ones were plastic, but the become my sharp metal fear spell ought to take care of that. Might even sharpen them up nicely, too.

Hmm, probably he ought to ward the common room and stay down here to use the needles. He wasn't sure how quiet he could be using a big needle for the first time. So yeah, he'd use the common room, along with his strongest privacy spells. Just to be extra sure nobody would see what he was doing, he'd sit with his back to the staircases, and bring his books down so he could claim to be studying if anybody happened upon him. But he'd leave things until late enough that he probably wouldn't be disturbed.

So that would all work, then.

His arms were sort of itching, wanting to get on with it, but for all that, Harry felt better now that he had a plan. He gave his friends a lopsided grin. "I guess it's a bit much to expect I'll never fight with Draco. He's been in a bit of a mood lately, but that's not hard to figure out. I mean--" Harry lowered his voice. "Think of what he just went through."

Hermione nodded, and even Ron looked a little bit less delighted that Harry and Draco had had a fight. Both of them knew the full truth now, of what had happened the day Harry and Draco had gone missing.

"I'm sure we'll get through it," Harry went on.

Hmm, Ron and Hermione still looked concerned about him. It reminded him of what his father had mentioned, about sensing their worries. Best to let them know that everything was fine, he thought. That he wasn't withdrawing as much as they'd started to think. "How about we have a game of Wizard's Chess, then? Hermione can play the winner. Oh, by the way, Severus said you two were welcome to visit during the summer. I want you to challenge my dad to a match, Ron."

Ron's grin looked a little bit wicked as he summoned the game board and watched the pieces hop into their places. "Just think how I could lord it over him if I won!"

"He might be the one to win, you know."

Ron actually laughed, then. "Yeah, but if he does, so what? He's got twenty years' experience on me, something like that. But if I win, that'd really be something!"

Harry couldn't argue with that. For the rest of the evening, he spent time with his friends, making sure they knew that he was all right. That really, everything was perfectly fine.

But the whole time, his gaze kept straying toward the yarn basket across the room.
Just how long could it take the other boys to go to sleep? Harry rolled over--again--and punched his pillow a little for good measure. Every time he thought it would be safe to sneak out, some small noise or other would prove that Dean or Seamus or Neville was still awake. At least Ron was snoring. The noise usually irritated Harry slightly, but not tonight. He wished they’d all snore, because at least then he would know that nobody would notice when he slipped out of bed and padded over to the door.

More minutes passed. And then still more. It must be past one by now, Harry thought, exasperated. He was on the verge of casting some kind of sleepiness spell, no matter that he didn't really know one, when finally, the room lapsed into a lasting calm and quiet.

Well, except for Ron, who was muttering in his dreams, now. Something about Hermione. Harry didn't stay to listen.

Quietly sliding his feet into the slippers he'd laid out earlier, he scooped up the pile of books on his night table. As he tiptoed to the door, every small noise he made seemed deafening. Worse, the door creaked when he opened it. Harry froze, barely breathing, but nobody seemed to react to the sound.

Stepping over the threshold, he carefully edged the door closed again, holding his breath the whole time.

Once he was down in the common room, privacy spells surrounding him, he felt a lot better. Or maybe he felt better because now, he was just moments away from getting what he needed. His arms were itching something awful by then, but the yarn basket was only a few steps away. Thank God for S.P.E.W.

Now there was a thought he'd never expected to have.

It only took a minute's digging through the basket to find a thick, stout yarn needle. This one was even metal. Perfect . . .

It really was, too. The sight of it threw him straight back to Samhain, since it looked so similar to the needles Lucius Malfoy had used on him then. When Harry tentatively poked it against his palm, he found out that it was dull, though.

Become my sharp metal fear took care of that.

Once the needle was ready, Harry found a seat and spent a moment arranging his books and such so it would look like he was studying if anyone stumbled across him. Hmm, too bad he hadn't thought to grab his invisibility cloak from his trunk. It would have come in handy . . . but since Harry didn't want to risk waking his mates, he decided he'd better not go back upstairs for it, let alone risk an Accio. Summoning charms could be awfully noisy.

His back facing the staircases, then, Harry angled the razor-sharp yarn needle against the skin of his left forearm. The skin was bruised purple in places, at some points pierced raw. But that made sense. Harry had given up on healing charms by then, since they'd stopped working at all. He thought that must have to do with the way he kept on attacking his own flesh, day in and day out.

Healing magic obviously didn't care to be mocked.
The scabs and bruises didn't bother Harry, though. The more times he had to look at them, the more normal they appeared. Not to mention, they were proof of his bravery. Something to be proud of, though of course he couldn't show them to anyone, ever.

When the needle touched his arm, Harry flinched. Huh. He'd thought he was getting over his fear, but it seemed like that only really applied to the tiny needle he'd been using up until now. This new huge one was something else entirely. Harry stopped breathing, his thumb and forefinger trembling, his hands going slick with sweat.

How could he stab himself with such a big needle? It was too much, too fast--

_No_, he told himself sternly. _I've come so far. I can't let fear stop me, not now. I can't let fear be stronger than I am, I just can't._

_The strong will vanquish the weak_, Harry heard his father's voice saying. _Always._

He wasn't going to be weak, he decided, nodding in resolution. Drawing in a deep breath, Harry clenched his eyes shut and plunged the needle downward, straight beneath his skin and into his arm.

Not watching turned out to be a mistake. Or maybe the problem was that his motion had been so sudden. So vicious in intent. At any rate, he'd been holding the needle at a far steeper angle than he'd intended. Instead of skimming beneath the surface of his skin, a sensation he'd more-or-less got used to, this big needle had stabbed through skin and into muscle.

Harry had braced himself for the pain, though, so he did manage not to scream. Severus would be proud of him; nothing more than a whimper escaped his lips, pressed tightly together. As whimpers went, though, that was an awfully loud one.

_Bloody Hell, that hurt_, Harry thought, his arm still throbbing with pain. It was like Samhain all over again. But that was good, right? Harry kept his eyes closed, riding the wave of pain out until it began to fade away. Some, at least.

He could handle this, he told himself, nodding. The first time with the little needle had been the worst, after all. This was bound to be the same.

It wasn't, though. When Harry opened his eyes and saw the needle sticking out of his flesh, that was when the real shock of what he'd done hit him. The thing was enormous. The room seemed to swim around him as he stared at the horrible sight. He went dizzy. For a moment, he actually thought he might pass out. Or sick up. One thing was sure. If he kept pushing on this needle, the way he had on the other one, he'd end up shoving it straight through his arm. And that just wasn't on.

Or at least, not yet.

Clenching his teeth against the pain, Harry pressed his fingers to the needle to pull it out. Twice, his sweaty fingers slipped on the slick metal. The jolt of pain that produced was absolutely sickening. His arm was throbbing again now, worse than before. In fact, it hurt so much that Harry started wondering if he'd stuck the needle into a bone.

Grimacing, he wiggled the needle about a bit to loosen it. _Shite, that really hurt!_ For a moment his vision darkened, but then he managed to blink his way back to full consciousness. For a while he sat there, shaking slightly, trying to recover. And then, trying to figure out what he was going to do. Perhaps a numbing charm . . . he hadn't intended to sink the needle this deeply, after all.

But no, a numbing charm was no good at all! This was _supposed_ to hurt, right. If it didn't hurt, what was there to be afraid of? And the whole idea was to conquer his fears.
And anyway, so what if it hurt? So what if it was excruciating? It wasn't like Voldemort was going to go easy on him, was it? Besides, just how much pain could one needle cause? *This probably doesn't hurt any more than those snake bites Draco had to deal with. He didn't only suffer fangs, he had to put up with poison as well.*

Harry gave the needle one last twist, whimpering again as he did so. Remembering Draco had really helped him focus. Because those things he'd said downstairs--that had been his dark, evil side coming out, right? He had to squelch it, he just had to! With a final, agonized gasp, Harry yanked the needle free.

Blood trickled from the hole left behind. Then the trickle became more of a flow, a thin crimson rivulet coursing across his arm.

Shaking, Harry swore as he hurriedly pulled his pyjama sleeve down and used it to stanch the flow. By the time he got the bleeding to slow, his sleeve was a mess.

No doubt his arm didn't look so great, either. Harry didn't look. He didn't want to see.

*I've got to find a way around the healing problem or my training will be over before it's really even got underway,* he thought frantically. *Especially since I'd better keep on with the big needle. Am I always going to bleed like this? What if I get an infection? Maybe I could nick some healing salve from somewhere.*

Where, though? Severus probably had some in his classroom office, for accidents and such. For that matter, he had some at home, too. It would all be warded, but Harry could probably break through the protective spells. But no, there were monitoring spells too, and he didn't know how to disable them. His father would know what he'd done.

Damn, Pomfrey probably kept her stores well-guarded, too. Harry blew out a breath in frustration, as he looked down at his messy sleeve. He'd just have to hope for the best.

At least his cleaning spells were up to par, he thought. *I'll just use Lavare to get the blood out of the fabric. Can't let the elves know what I've been doing. Oh, good, there's no blood on the rug or the sofa. The others can't know. Nobody can know . . .*

All this secrecy . . . hiding things from his closest friends, it just wasn't like him at all, Harry abruptly realised. He didn't like it, but it had to be done, right? Hermione certainly wouldn't understand. She barely tolerated Harry getting knocked about in defence training--even after she'd started coming to Devon to see that nobody was abusing him.

But why was he keeping this from everyone else? His dad knew the importance of Harry's training, after all. His throat started feeling tight as he thought about it. Harry tried to swallow and couldn't quite manage it. Because Draco had been right after all, hadn't he? *I have been avoiding them. Why would I do that? Was it because of what that portrait said? Did I really believe that rubbish about my new family corrupting me?*

That last thought had Harry flinching again, the reflex even fiercer than when he'd tried to stab himself. All at once, it seemed like he'd been dreaming for the longest time, and he was only just now waking. Why had he listened to what that painting had to say, when he knew the wizard it represented had been nothing but a sadistic liar out to hurt Harry in any way he could?

But then he remembered all the evidence he'd thought about when he'd fled upstairs to Sirius' room. Evidence that something must be wrong inside himself. The black energy Snape had sensed back in Surrey. The violent wild magic he and he alone could do. And worst of all, being *so happy* to have
killed someone! It all fit together, it did!

*But if I'm really dark inside, how do I know that doing this is making it better and not worse?*  
*Hiding, lying, sneaking around. Thinking about stealing--from my father who loves me! How can any of that help me find my way into the light?*

Sighing, Harry thought his way through the last couple of weeks.  
What he realised was just awful. All this practice with the needle... was it really practice at all? Or was it more like an addiction? It seemed incredible now that he'd lain awake for hours, waiting for a chance to sneak off so he could be alone. He'd thought he needed privacy, but now it seemed more like secrecy. Dishonesty.

He'd been dishonest a lot, lately. Pretending, acting like there was nothing on his mind while he'd played chess with Ron and Hermione, when all the time, he hadn't been able to stop thinking about needles. Actually, he spent most of each class, most of each meal, thinking about them. And now he was thinking about stealing supplies!

*Technically, I suppose I've already stolen from Hermione,* he realised, looking down at the yarn needle in his hand.

If what he was doing with the needles was all right, why was he acting like he was so ashamed of it? There were probably safer ways to confront his fears. He could always use a boggart instead.

*But when he'd confronted a boggart, ultimately it hadn't become Lucius with the needles, had it?*

A dull sort of horror washed over Harry, then. Needles weren't his greatest fear after all, were they? So why was he getting so obsessed by them?

His bloody sleeve answered that for him. That, and the pain he could still feel.

*Because the needles are what I deserve, aren't they, for being a killer and not even regretting it. They're a way to hurt.*

Harry gulped, a new kind of pain coursing through him. Raw pain. Because he didn't understand how things had spiralled so far out of control! All he'd wanted was to conquer his fears. To be strong instead of weak, like his father had said.

But now, he was standing in the middle of the common room, all alone at almost two in the morning, his arm still slowly bleeding, and a gigantic needle in his hand! And the worst part of all was that he wanted the needle again. As much as it had hurt, as much as he'd hated it, he felt like he needed to stab himself again.

In that instant, fear coursed through Harry, leaving him shaking on his feet. He was out of control, so much so that he didn't trust himself, didn't know what he might do next. His fist clenched around the needle, the sharp tip of it piercing him.

An accident, this time. But it both hurt and felt good, and that frightened Harry more than anything that had passed before.

His thoughts fled frantically ahead of him. What was he going to do? He couldn't keep on like this, could he? What if he wanted a thicker needle next? What if he got an urge to stab himself someplace where it would really hurt? Someplace where he might do himself real harm?

He needed help! He needed Severus.
But his father wasn't going to understand this, was he? It was sick. It was twisted, what he'd been doing. Those marks on his arms weren't battle scars at all. They were proof of one thing only: that Harry was all messed up. On the inside, too.

Shivering, Harry looked down, his gaze slipping past his bloody sleeve to the table so near. His books were laid out there, proof of how far into deceit he'd fallen.

But Harry wasn't really thinking about that any longer. He'd noticed the corner of a vellum envelope poking out from between the pages of his transfiguration journal. The envelope . . . the Floo powder. Remus had known that Harry might need to talk to someone. Remus had given him a way to get to help.

Quickly, before he could lose his nerve, Harry snatched the envelope and broke the seal.

More words echoed inside his head as he stepped into the cold grate in the common room, the open envelope clutched in blood-stained fingers. Things Severus had said, but this time, not things about strength and weakness.

*If you have a serious problem, I want you to come and talk to me. How else can I be your father?*

And then, one thing more.

*You either trust me enough as your father to come to me when needed, or you don't.*

Harry tossed the powder and watched the flames flare green.

Struggling to speak around the lump in his throat, he admitted, "I need . . . I need to go home."
Snape's quarters were cold and quiet when Harry whirled out of the fire and into the living room. Harry frowned at the silence; some part of him had been hoping that his father would sense him coming and rush out to meet him. Actually going to get Snape was harder, but since the Floo wasn't warded against Harry at all, no one had been alerted to his arrival.

Sighing, Harry dropped the envelope he was still clutching, and wrapped his fingers around his sleeve instead, just over the wound. Yuck. The fabric was damp and cold, and that wasn't even counting what it would look like once the lights down here were spelled on.

Harry shuddered and almost flooed right back to the Tower. How on earth was he going to face his father? What would he think when he saw Harry's blood-soaked sleeve? When he learned what Harry had done to himself?

Nothing for it, though. He either trusted Snape to help him, or he didn't; it was as simple as that.

And Harry trusted him, he really did.

One bracing breath, then two. At which point Harry realised he was still waiting for his father to come out and find him. But clearly, that wasn't going to happen.

It was up to Harry to decide if he wanted Snape's help enough to go and ask for it.

But that's just the problem, his father's voice echoed in his head. You don't ask!

But that's what this year had been all about, Harry suddenly sensed. Learning that he could ask. That he did have someone he could trust with anything. Even this.

His feet seemed to move on their own as Harry made his way to Snape's bedroom door. Then it was just a matter of knocking. To do that, he had to stop clutching his arm. Strange how hard it was to uncurl his fingers from his sleeve and raise his fist to the stout wood.

It suddenly occurred to him that he needed to be quiet. Because otherwise, he'd end up waking Draco as well as Snape. Drawing in another rush of air, Harry carefully rapped his knuckles against the door, three times in quick succession. Then he held his breath. And strained his ears.

Nothing. Not a whisper of sound, not even so much as a rustle. Harry was on the verge of panicking when the door abruptly swung open.

"Harry?" Snape squinted at him in the dim light emanating from the wall sconces above his bed. "I thought it must be Draco needing something. I didn't expect you back tonight."

Obviously, it was too dark for him to have noticed Harry's stained sleeve.

Harry bit his lip. Now that the moment was here, he didn't know how he was going to explain. Or even start.

"Uh . . . um . . ."

Snape had good instincts too. He could tell something was wrong. Reaching out, he laid a gentle hand on Harry's shoulder. "Come in and tell me about it."

That was enough to loosen Harry's tongue, but not because of the caring he could both hear and feel.
It was more the fact that his arm still really hurt. In fact, the longer he stood there, almost frozen by both the chill air and his own reluctance, the more it throbbed.

"Y-- you don't have any healing salve in there, do you?" he half-gasped, all at once so close to tears that he felt instantly ashamed. Or maybe he felt ashamed for another reason entirely.

"Healing salve?" Snape reached into a fold in his dressing gown.

Harry knew what was coming, but he flinched all the same when his father's wand came into view and he heard the illumination charm. Harry squinted his eyes against the brightness. Or maybe, against the look sure to cross Snape's face when he saw just what Harry had been doing to himself.

Snape saw, all right, but he didn't understand. Or at least, not at first, when all he could see was a sleeve drenched in blood. With a harsh intake of breath, he snatched Harry's hand and shoved the fabric up past his elbow.

Harry couldn't help but look down then. His arm looked absolutely awful. Pin-pricked and festering. Bruised. And worst of all, the large puncture a few inches above his wrist, still oozing blood.

Harry felt sick just looking at it. He couldn't imagine how his father felt.

Snape said nothing for a long moment. He merely looked at Harry's arm, his dark eyes steady. After a moment that seemed to last forever, he searched Harry's face.

Harry looked away.

And then, his father spoke.

"You were right; you do need some salve. Let's get this seen to, and then we'll talk."

Talk. Harry didn't know how he could. No matter that his father already knew the truth. He did know. Harry could tell. He'd seen it in the man's eyes in that instant before Harry had looked away, mortified. He'd seen it all. Horror at the truth. Panic, quickly damped. And resolve to help him, whatever it might take.

"Come with me," said Snape calmly, placing his hand on Harry's shoulder again. One gentle nudge, and he was manoeuvring the boy towards his laboratory.

Harry felt dazed. Exhausted. Like he might trip over his own feet as they walked the short distance. Well, it was probably past two in the morning. That wasn't the problem though, and he knew it. He just didn't want to face what was coming.

Explanations.

But he couldn't explain really, could he? He knew why he'd transfigured that first needle, but trying to explain how it had got so far out of control . . . he understood it, but he didn't think anybody else could. There just weren't words for all the horrible thoughts that had been spinning through his head lately.

He started talking so he wouldn't even have to think about them. "Um, are we in your lab so you can brew me some salve? I thought you'd have some already made up."

"And so I do," said Snape, opening a cabinet mounted high on the wall. As he stretched an arm up to reach for something on the top shelf, his dressing gown was pulled up a bit, and Harry saw that his father's feet were bare.
A small detail, but somehow, it got to him. Harry gulped, feeling guilty. He could have waited until morning. He didn’t have to drag his father out of bed at an hour like this, and in the dead cold of the dungeons at night.

"Some of those wounds are festering." Snape’s voice was matter-of-fact. "You need more than a standard healing salve. But first I think you’d better take off that top, Harry."

_Oh._ He meant so that his arm could be properly cleaned, probably. Harry gave a shaky nod, his fingers moving to fumble over the buttons at the front of his pajama top. He wasn’t surprised when he saw Snape draw his wand, but it did startle him when the man merely used a soft _Aguamenti_ to moisten a bit of cloth.

Snape began gently wiping the dried blood from Harry’s skin.

"Can’t you use magic?" asked Harry, wincing. It wasn’t that it hurt so badly, though the one spot still did throb. It was more that he hated how long this was taking. The more time it took, the more guilty he felt about what he’d done to himself.

"Sometimes the direct method is best," murmured Snape as he continued working. When Harry’s arm was clean, he opened a wide, squat jar and scooped out a portion of glistening olive-coloured goo. Harry wrinkled his nose at the pungent smell, which resembled both overripe cheese and strangely, toothpaste. Well, it could be worse. The stuff could be a potion he’d have to drink, instead of an ointment. He didn’t say anything as his father dabbed the salve carefully against each mark on his arm, but when Snape moved as though to cap the jar, Harry gulped again, and twisted his right arm so the underside of it was visible.

"This one too," he said, wishing more than almost anything that he could avoid admitting it.

Snape’s hair swayed as he nodded, his features impassive. Harry couldn’t believe his father didn’t care, but the way he was reacting . . . the way he was _not_ reacting, actually, was beginning to be really worrisome. "Aren’t you angry?" he asked as Snape set to work dabbing salve once more.

The man’s black eyes flashed something as he looked up and met Harry’s gaze. "I’m not pleased," he said, the words so dry they felt cutting. But not hurtful, which was odd. "However, I hardly think that what you need at the moment is more drama."

That made sense. Actually, it made so much sense that Harry felt himself nodding. "I . . . yeah. All right."

Snape finished treating Harry’s other arm. This time, before capping the jar, he asked if Harry needed salve anywhere else. That question was almost harder to bear than all that had come before. Harry hung his head even as he shook it.

"Come, then," said Snape.

Harry scooped up his shirt from where he’d laid it on the counter, and followed his father out. He sort of expected they’d be going to Snape’s office next, to talk, but the man stopped in the living room and turned to face Harry, who was shivering by then.

Snape frowned, and flicked his wand to cast some heating spells.

"Thanks," said Harry, his teeth chattering, but not with cold. Nerves, that was it. He moved the hand holding his bloodied top. "Um, I don’t really want to put this back on. Clammy—" As he followed that thought through to its logical conclusion, his stomach seemed to sink right down to his toes. He whispered the rest of it. "But I d-d-don’t want to go get something and wake Dr- Draco . . ."
"I'll lend you something." Snape disappeared down the hall before Harry could remember to tell him to put on some slippers. For a moment, Harry just stared after him, a little surprised that his father hadn't *Accio'd* whatever he had in mind. It dimly occurred to him that perhaps Snape's summoning charms were just as noisy as his own.

Realising he was still holding his bloody pyjama top, Harry shuddered. It was horrible and disgusting, proof of how badly he'd messed up. He wanted to banish it, but his wand was still up in the Tower, and it hardly seemed like a good time to start openly using wandless magic. Harry dropped the top to the floor and tried to pretend it wasn't there, staring up at him.

When Snape emerged, a soft grey jumper in his hands, he was no longer dressed for bed. He'd changed into black slacks and a dark green shirt, and he'd put on some shoes.

Harry took the jumper and slipped it over his head. It was too big for him and hung loose, but Harry didn't mind that, even if it did remind him of the kind of clothes he'd had to wear while growing up. This was different, now. Dudley's cast-off clothing had meant he was unwanted at home, but this... this meant he was loved.

Though he was pretty surprised Snape had a jumper like this to start with. It didn't quite seem his style.

"Molly Weasley," said his father when he mentioned it. His voice grew dry as he continued. "A belated Christmas present. I suspect I may be on her list from now on out."

"Yeah, I have a whole collection of jumpers. Gryffindor colours, mostly. I bet Draco will start getting them too, now. Only his will probably be green, I guess." Harry was aware he was babbling, but Snape didn't seem to be objecting. "Um, speaking of Draco, did he mention our row?"

Harry braced himself. He couldn't imagine what Draco might have said, but it wasn't likely to be flattering towards Harry.

"I could tell you must have rowed." Snape sighed. "Draco's mood was foul, to say the least."

Harry knew it wasn't very Slytherin to ask, but he couldn't help it; he had to know. "Did he tell you I'd flooed back to the Tower?"

Snape's frown reached his eyes. "I asked you not to do that. But to answer you, Draco merely said you'd gone back early. In fact, he all but implied that he'd walked you to the Tower."

*Oh.* So Draco hadn't badmouthed him to Snape. Harry felt bad now that he'd thought the opposite. In fact, he felt so bad that his arms started to itch something awful. He started rubbing his hands up and down his arms, the motion almost frantic.

Snape, he noticed after a moment, was staring.

"Itchy jumper," said Harry to excuse himself.

"I seriously doubt that." Snape waited a moment, his dark gaze steady on Harry, then finally spoke again. "Are you ready to talk about it, now?"

Harry tried to nod, but it came out more like a circular motion. Because he wasn't ready, not really. He *needed* to talk, but that didn't have anything to do with being prepared to. "Um..."

"Let's sit down," said Snape quietly, moving to seat himself on the couch.
Harry looked longingly back at the Floo. He wanted to go back up to the Tower and go to sleep and pretend he'd never come down here like this. Snape deserved better than a son who was so mental that he--

He couldn't even complete the thought. No wonder he couldn't start talking like his father obviously wished.

"I left my wand in the common room," he said, stepping towards the fireplace. "I . . . uh, I'll just go get it, all right?"

"It is absolutely not all right," said Snape in a harder voice. "I'll collect it for you after we've finished here. Until then, I'm certain no one will disturb it."

"I guess I'll get it when I go back up," Harry said dully. He felt defeated. Clearly, Snape was going to make him talk. No ifs, ands, or buts.

"You're mistaken if you think you're going back up." Snape shook his head as he spoke. "You can't return to your dormitory tonight, Harry. It's far too likely that you'll hurt yourself again."

Harry flinched. Apparently Snape didn't have any trouble putting Harry's problem into words.

"I . . . yeah." Harry flopped down onto the opposite end of the couch and tried to find some words of his own. "$I . . . I came down here to talk, 'cause it seemed like it was just . . . getting out of hand, but . . ." He shrugged, uncomfortable.

"It's good you realise that it's got out of hand," Snape said slowly. "I hope you also understand, however, that there's no possible way something like this can be in hand. Yes?"

Harry opened his mouth, but it had gone so dry that he couldn't speak. Literally. He gave a shaky nod, instead.

Proving once again how perceptive he could be, Snape conjured him a glass of water and leaned forward to hand it to him.

Harry sipped some. He wanted to quaff the whole glass but even a little bit made him feel sort of queasy. Too much tension. He was starting to feel desperate. He'd been down here for who knows how long, and he still hadn't managed to say anything that mattered. And it was looking even less likely than before that he'd ever manage it.

"How did this start, Harry?" Snape quietly asked, plucking the glass from between his fingers and setting it down.

"I . . . uh, the snake pit, and fears, and I just wanted to be strong like you said--" Hearing how much like a nutter he sounded, Harry tried again. "I don't feel bad, see? And so I had to."

God, that wasn't any better.

"I can't!" he cried, balling his hands into fists. His fingernails dug into his palms. It wasn't quite like the needle, but it was something, at least. "I mean, I know how it started, but it's not going to make sense to anyone else, all right? Not even you! Because you've been through horrible, awful things in your life. I know you have. But you've never done something like this, have you?"

Harry hated the fact that his voice near the end sounded so hopeful. He wouldn't wish this on anyone, and it was sick that he sounded like he would. But if his father ever had hurt himself, as he'd put it, then maybe he could understand what had driven Harry. Right?
If it was a hope, it was a forlorn one.

"No, I haven't," said Snape. "But that doesn't mean I can't be of some help to you, Harry." Snape paused. "I'd like to understand what things just now are like for you, and why this seemed a . . . viable option."

Harry grabbed his glass of water and took another sip, even if it did make him feel vaguely sick. He was sure the water was fine, but it tasted brackish to him. With a grimace he set it aside once more. "I . . . I don't think I can explain. It's just . . . twisted, all right? It makes sense inside my head, but . . . well, why do you think I didn't just use my needle in front of everyone? I knew how it would look! Same way it's going to look to you, I bet," he added, muttering the last.

"Are you expecting me to judge you and find you wanting?" Snape reached out again and caught Harry's hands in his own. "Harry. I told you once that I admire you, do you recall? That hasn't changed."

"How can it not have?" gasped Harry, tugging on his hands. His father didn't let them go.

"Because no one can be strong all the time," said Snape simply. "And you are strong, Harry. It's part of who you are. But for all your inherent strength, for all your fearsome powers, you aren't beyond human. Nor should you expect yourself to be."

"But you've never done this," cried Harry, almost in tears. He didn't want praise like that from Snape. He wasn't strong! Wasn't that obvious by now? He wasn't strong, and the needle wasn't going to help him get that way!

"I've done worse," said Snape bluntly. "I turned my doubts and rage on others. I don't recommend that course, either."

Harry's mouth dropped open slightly. He hadn't thought of things like that, before.

"Harry, you are sixteen years old, but you've endured more dreadful experiences than most adults suffer in nightmares, let alone waking life. It's frankly exceptional that you aren't an inpatient at St. Mungo's by now. That you are now having trouble . . . coping, comes as no surprise to me. Didn't I say earlier that I'd already divined as much?"

His bottom lip hurt. Harry was slow to realise that was because he'd been chewing on it for the last little bit. "You did, but . . . this?" Freeing his hands from his father's, Harry held his arms out, palms up, though of course the warm, soft jumper covered every mark that marred his skin.

Snape sighed. "Harry, if you think I will love you any the less for being troubled . . . I'd like to think you have more trust in me than that."

"I . . . I do trust you," Harry murmured. "That was why I came. To you, not to Remus, even though Remus was the one who gave me the powder. But . . . it doesn't matter, Dad. I'm just too mixed-up to . . ." Harry lifted his shoulders, feeling about as useless as he ever had. He couldn't even talk coherently.

Snape took a long moment to consider that. "Don't mistake me," he finally said in a level, yet intense voice. "You aren't like me, as I said before. I think you need to talk things out. But if you can't begin to, yet . . . perhaps there is another way. Do you want me to understand this, Harry? The way you do?"

"Yes," said Harry fiercely. "But don't you get it? I can't explain--"
"Hush, you idiot child," said Snape softly. "I'm not asking you to. Not in words, at any rate."

Harry felt something then, pressing against the edges of his mind. A sensation of warm waters that would cocoon him and hold him afloat. "Oh. Yeah, that might work."

"You're Occluding."

"I'll stop--" Harry drew in a breath and concentrated on damping down the fire that flared continuously at the back of his mind. It should have been easier, considering Snape's waters were so near, just waiting to be admitted. It took effort, though. He'd just grown so used to constantly keeping up his Occlumency. He hardly even noticed it, any longer. Finally, though, the fire was gone, and Harry's mind was unguarded.

For a split second he wondered if Voldemort would attack him from the inside out, like before.

But almost at once, Snape's waters were streaming into his mind to fill it. Harry's fear dropped away. He knew his father would protect him. Would die to protect him, even, not that Harry would want that.

Harry relaxed, leaning back against the cushions, his hands falling to his sides, and let himself drift atop the waters. It was good to know he was safe. That his father was with him, and would stay with him through anything. Even this. Even knowing how messed-up and confused Harry was. Harry let go of all thought, completely, and closed his eyes, giving his father free reign to see what he wished.

It was over sooner than Harry would have thought, but that was because Harry didn't really understand a lot about Legilimency.

"Harry," Snape said, the word snapping him out of his trance.

"Hmm?"

"I can see what you've been doing, but not so much your reasons why."

Harry felt like he'd been doused with a bucket of cold water. "Oh. Shite. Yeah, Legilimency unlocks memories, not psyche. Crap."

"That was certainly true when I sought to understand your uncle. But your mind recognises mine, Harry, and I know you quite well--"

"Not as well as you thought, though," said Harry bitterly.

"I know you quite well indeed," repeated Snape in a firm tone. "I think I can sink far enough into your memories to sense what you were thinking, but the experience will be more intense than regular Legilimency."

"Oh, great. I get to get knocked on my arse like when you were first teaching me. But fine, if that's what it takes--"

Snape got up from the sofa. "I have something else in mind." Harry's eyes widened when the man waved his wand at the stone floor, transfiguring the surface into a soft, plush rug. Green, of course. Snape sat down on it, cross-legged, and crooked a finger for Harry to join him.

Harry hesitated.

"I expect it's a good deal less daunting than formerly," said Snape, smiling a little. "You're more at
“Yeah, of course,” said Harry, moving to sit down on the floor as well, his back to his father. He wasn't even sure why he was reluctant, really.

Snape straightened his legs and stretched them out to either side of Harry, then scooted forward a bit and pulled Harry back against him. “All right?”

Harry made a conscious effort to sit less stiffly. His father's fingers carding through his hair helped, reminding him that he'd been scared of this before, but it had been fine, really. More than fine. "Yeah, all right."

Closing his eyes, Harry felt waters washing into his mind once more. It wasn't like fifth year at all, he found, and not just because Snape wasn't attacking him. No memories flashed through his mind. Just peace, and yielding, and feeling himself melting backwards into the strength of the man behind him. The whole world turned warm and wet, and Harry was adrift in it.

Adrift and floating, but not alone. Never alone.

"Let yourself go limp," whispered Snape, and Harry couldn't tell if the voice was entering through his ears, or if the waters themselves were speaking. "Lean on me. Don't think of anything, Harry. Just be."

Harry sank even deeper into the water and felt it going over his head. He should be drowning now, he knew. But he wasn't; his father was with him.

Emotion began to whip through him, then. Tiny glimpses of emotion, gone before he had much chance to sense and understand them. Snape's emotions, he slowly realised. His father was responding to whatever he was seeing as he delved ever deeper into Harry's memories, and then his thoughts. Seeing things the way Harry had seen them.

*This is making me stronger. I won't be afraid of needles when I'm through, and if I'm not afraid, I won't unleash dark magic again. I won't turn into a dark wizard--*

Harry felt sorrow then, but not his own. A yawning chasm of sadness and regret that Harry could ever think like that about himself. A conviction that it wasn't true. And guilt. Terrible guilt that he hadn't done enough as a father and a teacher to keep Harry from even worrying about something like that.

Harry struggled, trying to raise his mental barriers and shield Snape from any more contact with his mind. He didn't like hurting his father.

More memories began to whip through Harry. More thoughts, feelings, impressions. More of himself. Harry fought it for a moment, but then something inside him broke apart. Why had he come down here if not because he needed help? He could trust his father, he *could*, even if it meant letting him know every last ugly thing.

Harry slumped, relaxing, and let his father's waters wash all the way through him, then, extinguishing every trace of his fire. Every ember, every spark.

*So what if it hurts? Harry felt himself thinking then. My training out in Devon hurt too. Plenty. But it was for my own good, and so is this. I can't let myself turn dark, I just can't...*

"*Why would you fear that, Harry?*" asked Snape, his voice made of pure water, pure thought. Harry felt lost in it. Lost, but not alone. He couldn't feel alone, not when his father's arms were tight around...
him, just as if he realised how much reassurance Harry needed.

But perhaps he did. Because he knew Harry . . . just as he had said.

And that was enough to tip Harry's memory back to Grimmauld Place.

A phantom image of the portrait began to form itself out of the waters, Lucius' features made of blue and green waves, his mouth open and moving. Horrid words reverberated through the ocean making up Harry's whole world. "I know very well the company you currently cling to, and the sort of nurturing they're likely to provide . . . Your so called wild magic? It's dark, all the way through . . ."

Harry flinched when he heard that again. The first time had been bad enough. This time, though, he was safe and warm and held, his father's love surrounding him and giving him strength.

The portrait kept speaking, on and on, Harry holding nothing back as he let his memories flow into the waters binding him to his father. Every last insult and sneer and innuendo, right down to the final, awful suggestion: You know, I wonder if dear Severus will actually put you down himself when you turn? I rather think he will. He's certainly got it in him. Has he ever told you about--

Blinding anger suddenly poured through the waters, a deluge that plunged Harry down and down and down. Severus' anger. But it wasn't Harry he was angry with.

The feeling was gone in little more than an instant, Severus' thoughts plunging into the depths to make room for more of Harry's.

Harry hesitated, fire flaring in the distant waves, but he didn't let it last. Severus hated Lucius. More than Harry did, perhaps. Severus would understand.

Harry saw himself running then, fleeing the library in Grimmauld Place and throwing himself atop Sirius' bed.

And then, Harry's worries took voice inside his mind, a blend of what he had thought at that moment, and all the things he'd contemplated since. Dark magic . . . and there's darkness inside me, or at least there could be if I don't do something to stop it. Even my father said I'd be a new Dark Lord if I kept thirsting after revenge . . .

"Yes, I did," said Snape inside Harry's mind, his voice now so decisive that it made the way he'd been speaking to Aran sound almost whimsical. "But that's not what you've been doing, you foolish child. You didn't hunt Lucius down to kill him! He came to you, more fool him. Self-defence isn't revenge, Harry, and satisfaction at a monster's death isn't evil. And neither are you."

Harry felt like gulping. He wanted to believe what Snape was telling him. Wanted to desperately, with his whole soul. How could he, though? "But . . . but . . ."

Snape's arms tightened around him, his voice radiating conviction so strong and bright it lit up the waters and tinted them a burnished gold. "Oh, Harry. Don't you know that your most shining trait is love itself? Think of what you told me out in Devon, about how you felt about those years of torment I put you through. And yet for all your lingering resentment, you've forgiven me. I know you have. You loved me enough to want to be my son. There's no darkness in you."

"But you said there could be--"

"There could be in anyone. For all your vast powers, you're human too, you know. But you haven't fallen into darkness. No, far from it. Voldemort loves only himself. But Harry, you're overflowing with love for all the rest of us. So much of it that you would protect us even at the cost of hurting
yourself. Your needles . . . you mustn't do that again. But the fact that you resorted to them in the first place proves you are in no way dark."

The words were like a healing balm soothing his wounds, and as Harry basked in them, he felt the waters surrounding him begin to recede. As he emerged from the Occlumency, he let himself dissolve into his father's embrace instead.

Safe, that was it. He felt safe now.

Until, that is, he opened his eyes and saw Draco sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of him, not four feet away.

Startled, Harry yelped and flinched back, almost knocking Snape over.

"It's just your brother," Snape said wryly as he shifted back and then to the side.

Harry ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, I know." And then, a little belatedly, to Draco, "Did we wake you?"

Stupid question; of course they had. Harry expected one of Draco's usual sarcastic answers, something like, No, Potter. I come and sit on the floor out here every night of the week.

But that wasn't what Draco said at all. Because by then, Draco wasn't even looking at Harry. His silver eyes were trained on the bloody pyjama top, lying on the floor just a short distance away. Then his gaze flicked back to Harry, and he spoke in a low, cold, utterly controlled voice.

"I'm going to kill whoever did this to you, Harry."

Harry felt like his throat was clogged as he tried his best to reply. "I . . . um . . ." Just like with his father, it was easier to show him than speak the words. Harry shoved up the sleeves of the jumper he was wearing, and did his best to shrug.

Draco stared. "What the hell kind of hex does that?" His eyes narrowed. "And why aren't both your sleeves bloodied?"

Harry craned his neck to look back at his father. "I don't suppose you'd . . . er, tell him for me?"

Snape gave a tiny, imperceptible shake of his head.

"Well . . ." Harry's voice almost cracked over the words. "You know how you said you were going to kill whoever did this? You . . . uh, I have a pretty good idea that you don't want to kill me, so . . ."

It took Draco a moment to put that together. And even when he did, he came to the wrong conclusion. "You did this to yourself, Harry?" The boy furrowed his brow until his eyebrows looked like straight lines. "This is bad. I know you can break out of Imperius but this must be some new variant . . . can you at least tell us who hexed you?"

"Nobody hexed me, Draco."

"Are you sure? You might be Confunded--"

"I'm not--"

"If you were, you wouldn't know it," said Draco in a reasonable voice. "Severus, have you checked him for spell residue?"
Well, Draco's conviction that someone else was responsible did have the advantage of loosening Harry's tongue. "Draco, I did this to myself, all right? And not because I was hexed! I wanted to do this!"

The truth finally dawning on him, Draco reared back in shock. "You wanted to? Why, for Merlin's sake?"

Harry thought of what he'd just gone through to get Snape to understand. "It's hard to explain," he said, sighing deeply as he yanked the jumper's sleeves back down.

Draco stared at him, just stared.

"I'm not a flobberworm on display," Harry finally snapped.

The statement seemed to snap Draco out of his thoughts. "No, you're not. You're a textbook case right out of The Road to Recovery."

Harry couldn't help it; he gaped. "What?"

"Lucius Malfoy deserved what you did to him!" Draco cried, raising his voice in what sounded like frustration. "He was going to kill me, you know, and torture you, and hand you over to the Dark Lord! It looks to me like you feel you need to be punished, but that's like the Ministry feeling guilty because they convicted a guilty man! You have nothing, nothing to fault yourself for. And if I can say that, you know it must be true!"

"That's not the problem," Harry said fiercely. "I don't fault myself, all right? Is everybody listening? Because I'm getting pretty sick of people thinking they know how I feel when they don't. Lucius Malfoy was a sack of shite and I'm glad he's dead, got it? Glad! And I'm glad I was the one who killed him! And I don't feel guilty, not one bit! Are we all goddamned good and clear on that now?"

Draco's eyes were huge in his face. "Clear as Lubaantum."

"And as long as we're clearing things up, I don't look at you and see Lucius! I was avoiding you because I thought you knew about this--" Harry gestured towards his forearms, "and I didn't want to talk about it, all right?"

"Oh, this is what you didn't want to talk about," murmured Draco, nodding. For a moment, something shined in his eyes, but then the moment was gone, and the boy was demanding, "If you don't feel guilty then why are you hexing yourself? And please don't tell me you did something as daft as use a wanded spell."

Trust Draco to think like a wizard no matter the circumstances. "I didn't use a spell at all," Harry said baldly. "I stuck myself with a needle over and over."

When Draco blanched, Harry wished he'd thought of another way to break the news.

Then again, Draco didn't blanch for long. His gaze flicked to the bloodied pyjama top. "Brandish the other wand, Harry. A needle wouldn't cause a mess like that."

"A big enough one would."

Then, Draco really blanched, his skin going pasty. "But you hate needles!"

Harry gave him a look as if to say, yes, I do seem to recall that . . .
Draco's nostrils flared. "Well, forgive me for being a bit out of my depth, Harry. Do you think you could answer my question now? What would make you want to torture yourself, Muggle-style, no less?"

Strange. He hadn't been able to tell his father, not in words, but now he could say it. Part of it, at least. Maybe the Occlumency had really helped. "I felt guilty that I couldn't feel guilty."

Draco crossed his arms, his voice emerging even more scornfully than before. "Oh, that makes perfect sense, Harry. Do you feel sad when you can't feel sad? Or happy when you can't feel happy? Or hungry when you can't feel hungry?"

Harry felt his fist clenching. "Thanks! It really helps loads to have you making fun!"

Snape moved so that he could look into Harry's eyes. And then he spoke, his voice insistent. "Your brother isn't ridiculing you. He simply doesn't understand, yet. But I do, and I must tell you: a sense of satisfaction, or even joy, at Lucius' death does not make you a terrible person. No less a great wizard of the Light than Albus Dumbledore himself feels the same. And I dare say you'd never call him dark."

"Dark?" gasped Draco. "You can't possibly think you're turning dark, Harry! Just because you don't feel guilty? You don't have anything to feel guilty for!"

Ignoring his brother, Harry focussed his gaze on his father's face. "How do you know how the headmaster feels? I mean, has he actually said he's happy?"

"Oh, he has more decorum than that." Snape's lips curled up slightly. "I do believe, however, that I can deduce his thoughts on the matter from the way he chuckled while we were dealing with Lucius' body. Chortled, even. He was in most excellent spirits. Will you now condemn him as evil?"

Harry swallowed. "No, but he's not the one who did anything, is he?"

"He killed Grindelwald, you twit!"

No ignoring that jibe. Harry ground his teeth together in irritation. "Listen, you aren't me, Draco. You don't know what it's like inside my head, so don't you dare call me names--"

"Gentlemen," interrupted Snape. "I think perhaps any further analysis of the situation can wait until morning."

"Easy for you to say," muttered Draco. "You were in his head, so you know exactly what's going on with him. Well, some of us can't perform feats of wonder with our mental powers. Some of us have to rely on speech--"

"Some of us are dead tired and don't want to blather on for another hour," interrupted Harry. "We can talk in the morning. Ha, if I feel like it. And that's that."

Draco abruptly nodded, though he couldn't quite bring himself to drop it entirely. All annoyance was gone from his voice, however, when he ventured, "You... you aren't going to do it again, are you?"

Harry opened his mouth to say he wouldn't, but the word wouldn't quite emerge. The truth was, he didn't know for sure if he wouldn't. He could see himself wanting the needle again. It wasn't even difficult to imagine that, though at the moment his arms weren't itching.

"No, he isn't," Snape answered for him. "But based on your hesitation, Harry, I think you'd better move back to the dungeons for the rest of term." He held up a hand when Harry would have
protested. "It's only another couple of weeks before you'd move back in any case."

True, so Harry let it go. "But aren't we going to Devon for the summer?"

"Not straight away." Snape moved to a vantage point where he could look Harry in the eye. "We'll decide tomorrow how best to handle the final weeks of classes. But I must make one thing clear at the outset. If you feel at any point that you're in danger of succumbing to an urge to stick yourself, you must contact me at once. At once, Harry. I don't care if I'm in a meeting with Salazar Slytherin himself, you're to interrupt. Yes?"

Harry nodded.

"Now, to particulars," said Snape. "Where is the needle you've been using?"

Harry blushed, feeling like he was about five years old. "You saw, I think. I've been keeping it in the seam of whatever shirt I had on. I don't have it with me. And the yarn needle is upstairs in the common room. I think I dropped it. On the table where I left my books? Well, somewhere, anyway."

"I'll go and fetch your wand as well as return your common room to rights," said Snape. "And to avoid the inevitable hue and cry in the morning, I'll inform Mr Weasley that you've come home for the night."

"Don't tell him why," Harry pleaded. "I . . . well, I know I can trust Ron and Hermione, but this is just . . . no, all right? I'd rather just get over this, somehow, and not ever let them know what I was doing."

"I shall inform him your vision took a turn for the worse and I am treating you with a new, nocturnal Elixir which requires you be monitored while you sleep," said Snape.

Harry wasn't exactly happy about any of this, but he still felt his lips curling into a smile. "You really can think up stuff fast, can't you?"

Snape didn't answer that. "You should reconsider the matter of telling your friends, however. It goes back to what we discussed earlier tonight. But you needn't think about it now. Later, when you feel more able to . . . cope. All right?"

Harry couldn't even nod in answer. Thankfully, he didn't have to.

Snape pushed his way to his feet, his bones creaking a little. He gave Harry a hand up. "I'll see to matters in the Tower, then."

"Don't scare Ron half out of his mind when you wake him."

Draco stood up as well, a little bit of a smile hovering near his mouth, though his eyes still looked troubled. "The Hero of Hogsmeade? Afraid?"

If Harry had been less tired, he'd have stuck out his tongue. As it was, he just kind of stared, bleary-eyed, at Draco.

His brother had the grace to flush, just a little. "Sorry." He glanced at Snape, then. "Go, Severus. And make sure you summon that needle out of his sleeve or whatever. We wouldn't want Harry getting stuck by it later."

Harry yawned, too exhausted to even take exception to Draco's high-handed manner. He knew Draco meant well, anyway. "Night--"
Snape caught him by the arm, his other hand reaching into a pocket to pull out a packet of much-folded parchment. "I went to collect this for you earlier. Perhaps having it again will help you begin to feel better." He pressed the parchment into Harry's hands.

*Oh. The Marauder's Map.* Harry blinked, feeling his eyes begin to water. He'd complained he wanted it, and his father had gone straight away to get it for him . . . "You said you had work to do in your office!"

"I did. But I also took the opportunity to visit Albus." Snape patted him on the shoulder. "I'd have told you in advance, but I wasn't entirely certain he'd be ready to relinquish that map. You're not to misuse it, though. Do you understand?"

Guilt instantly swamped Harry. *You're not to misuse it.* Snape was thinking of one of his "Gryffindor adventures," no doubt, but what Harry had wanted it for was something much, much worse. He didn't want to let the map go again, but how could he keep it, knowing as he did that he might get an urge to make another needle, and the map could help him make sure he wouldn't get caught?

"I . . ." Realising he'd been practically hugging the map to himself, Harry made a conscious effort to hold it out. "You'd better keep it, sir. I . . . I wanted it so I could . . . um, see who was coming when I was . . . yeah."

His father's jaw clenched as he took that in, but he seemed to calm after a moment. "Ask for it again when you feel stronger, then," said Snape as he took it and tucked it back in his pocket. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Yeah. Night." Sighing, Harry turned away to go to his room. Draco didn't follow; he was obviously going to talk to Snape for a moment or two. About Harry, no doubt. Harry was too tired to care. He just wanted to sleep and forget about this. All of it.

That soon became impossible, though. Harry had long since stopped noticing the melted surface of the walls in his room, but when he went in this time, they seemed to leap out at him. *Wild magic.* Lucius' horrid words floated to the surface of his mind. *You're dark clear through, Potter . . .*

Harry gasped, hating the way that claim seemed to just resonate inside him. *It wasn't true,* he told himself frantically. *It wasn't.* But if that was so, then why did it bother him so much?

Draco's voice broke through his thoughts. "Harry?"

"I need you to spell off the lights," said Harry without turning around. "I don't have my wand."

"You have your fingers," said Draco dryly. "But yes, you're not supposed to get used to using them without cover." He cleared his throat. "Do you want to sleep in Severus' jumper? Because I . . . er, I cleaned your pyjama top for you."

That had Harry turning around. "You did?"

*Lavare* is well within my talents. And I didn't think you'd want Dobby to catch sight of this and come around offering to bleed for you, or something." Draco held out the top.

Harry shuddered. He couldn't look at it, let alone wear it. Ever again, probably. Besides, he didn't really want to change. He liked the feel of his father's jumper against his bare skin. He shook his head. "Banish it, I think."

"Ah. Yes, all right." Draco fetched his wand from his night table, and a moment later, the pyjama top was gone forever.
Harry was turning down the covers on his bed when Draco spoke again. "Harry? It'll be all right. It really will."

Harry didn't reply. He didn't know what to say.

A tap on his shoulder had him turning around to find Draco right behind him. "It will, Harry," the other boy said earnestly.

That time Harry tried to reply, but before he could, Draco was pulling him into a hug, his arms wrapping around Harry's shoulders to yank him close. "Severus and I will get you through this," Draco said, the words sounding fierce and loving, all at once. Protective, that was it. "I swear we will. I swear by Merlin's wand."

Draco started patting Harry's back like he was trying to offer comfort.

It was only then that Harry realised how hard he'd been trying to be strong. To not let Draco see how weak and frightened he felt. But all at once, he knew that his brother wasn't going to reject him, any more than his father would. No matter the horrid words he and Draco had exchanged after dinner. That was all forgotten now.

Harry wrapped his arms around his brother and hugged him back, letting himself lean on the other boy. Letting himself rely on him. Draco would help him get through this. Harry knew that, now. He had help.

He had a family.

Harry pulled in a breath, sniffling a little.

Draco let him go, then, and stepped back, his silver eyes worried. "Shite. I wasn't trying to make you cry, Harry."

"I'm not crying, you prat!"

Draco studied him for a minute longer. "All right. Er . . . are you for bed, then? Or did you want to tell me about it, now?"

"Bed." Harry yawned. "Oh. Sorry about before. I didn't think I was better than you and Severus. I just wanted to be alone so I could . . ."

"Sorry I called you self-important and selfish." The pain in Draco's voice matched his expression. "I didn't know you were . . . er, taking things so hard, Harry."

"Yeah, well don't feel bad about that." Harry slid between his sheets, and sighed. They felt like home. "How could you have known? I was keeping it all from you."

Draco hadn't moved; he was still standing right beside Harry's bed, a strange look on his face.

"I don't have a needle now," Harry felt he'd better mention.

Draco didn't point out that with wandless magic, Harry could make one, anytime. Perhaps that's why the other boy was looking so much like he was standing guard.

Or maybe it was due to something else, Harry belatedly realised.

"Um . . . what was it that you wanted to ask me, anyway?"
In the instant before Draco turned away, Harry saw his features flush. The other boy flicked his wand to spell off the lights, then, judging from the noises the followed, climbed into the bed across the room. "It's not important, Harry. I shouldn't have been even thinking about it, not when you were having such problems of your own."

Harry yawned. "But something was really bothering you, I think. Just because I have problems doesn't mean you don't have them, too--"

Draco gave a short laugh. "We all have them, Harry. Let's just go to sleep now, all right? Merlin, in just a few hours it'll be time to get up! Severus'll probably let us sleep in, though."

"Mmm." Harry rolled over to face the wall, his mind swimming in exhaustion. Good thing, though. He didn't want to lie awake thinking. Or wishing he had a needle.

He told himself that tomorrow, he'd get Draco to tell him whatever had been on his mind these past couple of weeks.

------------------------------------------------------

Harry was alone in his room when he woke up. He sat up and stretched, snatches of the previous night's conversation coming back to him as he got dressed. Oh, God. He didn't want to go out into the living room and endure yet more questions from Draco. He hadn't even been able to endure them from his father, really.

Thank goodness for Occlumency, Harry thought, and then almost laughed. He and Snape really had come a long way since last year.

Feeling a little more confident, he left the room to find his family.

Snape was alone at the dining table, a cup of tea in his hand. A plate was waiting for Harry, heaps of food piled on it, a slight haze proving a warming charm was in effect. His wand was lying neatly beside the plate, almost as though it were a piece of silverware.

"Thanks," said Harry, pocketing his wand before sitting down to tuck in. For some reason he was absolutely starving. Maybe because of all the stress the night before. "Where's Draco?"

Snape laid aside the parchment he'd been reading. Huh. Some Ministry proclamation, from the look of it. Oh, about the need for more Aurors. Harry felt his heartbeat increase, just a little. But then it slowed. Who was going to want an Auror with problems like his?

"Your brother has gone to Slytherin to collect his things."

Harry swallowed the bite of porridge in his mouth. "Oh. He's going to move back early, too, I guess. Is that wise? I mean, his house mates might think he can't tough it out."

"Ever since the Quidditch match, Draco has regained much of his former status." Snape shrugged. "If you must know, I expressed the same concern. Draco pointed out that as term only lasts two more weeks, his absence wouldn't be terribly significant. He was adamant however about being here for you."

That was kind of nice, Harry thought.
"You will find your own things returned to your trunk," added Snape. "The trunk I lent you is back in storage. If you would like to use it again next year, you need merely let me know."

All at once, Harry lost his appetite. "What's that, some sort of positive thinking technique you got from that book? Why would I need a spare trunk next year? I'll still have to live here!"

"You most certainly will not. We'll resolve this issue long before then."


"You might be surprised," murmured Snape, the words just a little dark. "My first year teaching here, I had a student in class who was similarly distraught."

_Oh..._ Harry could feel his ears perking up. "Um, did he get better, then?"

Snape gave him an odd look. "She, Harry. I don't believe this particular... response to stress is limited to young men."

Huh. Harry had sort of figured it was, but he couldn't have said why. "So what happened to her?"

At that question, Snape sighed. "I don't know. Albus and I both tried our best to help her, as well as the then Head of Slytherin. They with more success, no doubt, as I was myself not in the best frame of mind that year."

Harry knew what that meant. If it had been Snape's first year teaching, it wouldn't have been long since he'd given up being a Death Eater in every sense of the word. "How can you not know what happened to her, though?"

"She never returned the next year. I believe Albus made inquiries, but the family had left England. They had been informed, of course. Whether they went abroad to get her expert help, or for some other reason, I have never known."

_For some other reason..._ Harry had a horrible feeling that he knew what that meant. What if this girl had done what Harry was afraid he'd accidentally do? What if she'd hurt herself so badly that she'd bled to death before she could get to help? He gulped, all at once feeling frantic. "No offence, Dad, but if you never managed to help her, then what makes you think you can help me?"

"I care more about you," said Snape bluntly. "I'll stop at nothing. As well, I'm in a better position to help, these days. But in point of fact, Harry, I don't propose to deal with this alone. Just as you came to me for assistance, I too will need help."

That made sense, but still... "Not the headmaster. I don't want him to know!"

Snape looked as though he might dispute that, but in the end, he merely lifted his shoulders. "You're nearly of age. I suppose you're old enough to decide with whom you share personal information. I wasn't thinking specifically of Albus, though."

"Oh. Marsha." Harry grimaced, his gaze drawn to the parchment lying on the table.

"There's no shame in seeking expert help," insisted Snape, misreading his expression. "I don't believe you think ill of Draco on account of his sessions."

"No, it's not that." Harry gulped. He'd never considered before how the therapy might affect Draco's chances of becoming an Auror. Now, it sort of looked hopeless for the both of them.
Snape's voice was impatient. "What, then?"

"Well, the Ministry does a pretty thorough background check on anybody who wants to work for MLE, don't they? You might say there's no shame in . . . whatever, but I'm Harry Potter! I mean, you know how the name thing works. I can't have people convinced I'm mental. It was bad enough fourth year with Rita Skeeter making me out to be some kind of nutter. But now I want to go into the Auror Corps. How many strikes against me do you think they'll put up with? I'm already pretending to be a dunce at magic!"

"I see your point," murmured Snape. "The Aurors deciding your application will obviously be informed of the ruse we've been employing. It won't keep you out of Magical Law Enforcement."

"Oh, and Voldemort's going to just believe that the Ministry takes weak wizards on as Aurors?"

"He'll think you were accepted on your name. Or possibly to protect you by keeping you in the company of Aurors a good deal of the time."

"Oh."

"Getting back to your concerns about meeting with Dr. Goode, however, what makes you think that the Ministry will ever know?"

"Magic," said Harry, staring. "They probably monitor . . . everything!"

"I'm astonished you could believe the Ministry so very competent," said Snape dryly.

"I don't, but--"

"The good doctor is, as I believe you know, a squib, Harry. I can assure you with every confidence that the Ministry is not monitoring her office."

"Rita Skeeter used to like to follow me around, though--"

"Harry, I will accompany you to every session, as I do for Draco. If any reporter thinks to make capital out of your presence in her office, I will claim the sessions are entirely for me. Will that do? Or have you some new objection?"

"I don't object." Harry sighed. "I just don't want it to kill my career plans, all right? Those matter to me. Auror's all I've wanted to do, ever since I found out there was such a thing."

Snape didn't look too happy to hear it. And no wonder, considering his opinion of Aurors. But Kingsley Shacklebolt was a good one, and so was Tonks. And Harry and Draco would be, too. Their father would be all right with them doing that for a living.

Harry hoped.

"So, Marsha," he said, nodding. "All right. I just hope she doesn't stare at my scar so much this time. That gets old fast."

Snape's lips twitched. "I've no doubt that by now, your brother has acquainted her with all the less than salutary aspects of your personality. Doubtless she'll be able to regard you as less of a hero, now."

"Just Harry. That's all I want. I hate people making a fuss over me--"

"I know," said Snape gently. "Now, to practical matters. Shall I arrange for you to see the good
doctor today?"

Harry arms started itching as he shook his head. "It's Sunday."

"I'm sure she'll see you--"

"Yeah, I'm sure she will. But I want to be just Harry, remember? Not some celebrity she makes special arrangements for."

"Draco's evening sessions are just such an arrangement and he's hardly a celebrity."

Harry latched onto that idea at once. "Draco's session, right. Let's schedule mine right after his. Or before, so we only have to go out to Surrey once a week."

"You needn't worry about inconveniencing me, Harry--"

"It's not that. I'd just rather, all right? And besides, this'll let me try a few days without . . . er, needles. I'd like to see how I do."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Very well, but remember what I told you last night. If at any time you feel that temptation is getting the better of you, you're to come get me at once. Yes?"

"Yes," said Harry, relieved. The itch in his arms subsided a little, becoming more like a dull, dry ache. He was a little worried it would become worse the closer his appointment got, but for the moment he thought he could manage.

"Now, there is something else we should discuss," said Snape. "From what I gleaned from your thoughts, it seems you've been ignoring my request that you never walk the halls unaccompanied."

"No, I haven't!" The moment he said it though, Harry remembered something. "Oh. Yeah, when I went to talk with Remus."

"And?"

"That's it, sir. I swear," Harry looked his father in the eye. "I admit I was sneaking off to the loo alone and such, but walking the halls? That's the only time."

"I'm disappointed in your friends. Draco would not have made such a mistake."

Harry hadn't thought about it before; he'd been too glad to have a chance for a moment alone with his needle. "Well, I guess Ron and Hermione must have thought I was in for a long conversation with McGonagall and she'd walk me to the Great Hall afterwards. I don't blame them -- I'm sure they thought that when they weren't out there, I'd be responsible enough to ask, right?"

"No doubt they went snogging down dark alleys again."

_Uh-oh._ His father sounded a little more than merely disappointed. "Probably they just went to eat. Look, what I was doing was my doing. Don't take it out on them. Please?"

Snape stared at him for a moment, then gave a curt nod. "However, you will be more careful in future. I know it's not enjoyable, pretending to be so much in need of protection, but the feint may well keep you alive in the final battle against Voldemort."

Harry chewed his lip. "Hmm. Maybe Remus will find out that Voldemort already knows I'm strong, anyway, and then I can give it up."
"Perhaps," said Snape, though he looked like he found that scenario doubtful.

The noise of the door opening distracted Harry from wondering if his father doubted Voldemort's information or Remus' ability to play Lucius.

"Ah, good. You're up," said Draco as he walked in, his trunk floating behind him. "Too much sleep is a sign of depression, Harry, and we can't have that--"

Harry sighed. "If you go back to acting like you think you're some kind of psychiatric expert--"

Draco held up his hands. "All right, I'll watch it." He looked from Severus to Harry and back. "So, any news?"

"I'll be contacting Dr. Goode about scheduling therapy for Harry on Wednesdays."

Draco waved his wand a little to send his trunk sailing into the bedroom. "Harry can have my session."

"The fact that I allowed you to postpone it one week does not mean I believe you have no further need of it."

Shrugging, Draco turned away. "All right. Well, I'm going to go settle in, then."

Harry stood up from the table. "Wait. What did you tell Slytherin to explain moving out early?"

"Oh, the Elixir thing, like Severus said. We share a room so I'm helping to monitor you." Draco grinned. "I'm not such a bad liar now, Harry. Not as long as I Occlude. Though I can't fool Severus. Maybe with more practice, eh?"

Snape gave Draco a bit of a hard look.

"What? Don't you want me to become thoroughly competent?" Laughing, Draco went into his room to unpack.

"I'll need to inform Albus of the new living arrangements," said Snape, shaking his head as he walked over to the Floo. "Rest assured, I'll only say that we have some family problems to work out."

As Snape's hand reached for the powder, it stilled, his dark eyes returning to Harry's face. "Ah, yes. I think it best for the time being if you don't have access to any Floo powder, Harry. You might, in a moment of weakness, decide to use the network to find privacy. I trust you understand my meaning?"

Harry nodded. He understood, all right. It was the same reason, basically, why he hadn't taken his map when he'd been offered it. "Keep it out of reach, sure." His forehead creased. "I hope we don't have some emergency, though."

"A wanded Accio would certainly bring you what you ask, but the destruction to my wards would be quite evident."

"In other words, I couldn't hide that I'd gone off somewhere." Harry felt both better and worse, hearing that. He didn't like the feeling that he was being watched. But his father was doing what was best. Harry knew that.

Mention of the Floo brought the previous night to mind, anyway, when he'd flooed off after that fight
with Draco. Stupid fight, as it turned out. Draco had just wanted to talk to Harry, and not about
needles, and it was no wonder he'd got a bit irate when Harry kept ignoring him like that.

It made Harry wonder exactly what Draco had wanted, anyway.

"So, you wanted to talk to me," Harry said as he sat down on his bed, one leg bent underneath the
other. "I think there was something you wanted? I'm really sorry I wouldn't listen to you before."

Draco turned a page in the book he was reading and kept his gaze focussed straight down. "Not a
problem."

"So, what was it that you wanted to talk about?"

The other boy glanced up. "Forget it, Harry. It wasn't anything very important."

"Of course it was," exclaimed Harry. "You got really upset--"

"Well, let's just say I've had a paradigm shift," said Draco calmly. "What matters now is helping you.
You haven't had any urges to . . . er, stick yourself, have you? This morning?"

His arms had itched some, but not more than he could stand. "Not really."

"Good. Let's keep it that way." Draco went back to reading his book.

It took Harry a minute to realise he'd been outmanoeuvred, the subject neatly changed. "All right,
back to you," he said in a decisive tone, going over to sit on the edge of Draco's bed instead. "Don't
tell me it wasn't important. It obviously was important to you. So, out with it." When Draco ignored
him, Harry reached out and plucked the book from his hands. "Come on!"

Draco grabbed it back. "You don't take a hint, do you?"

"What do I have to do, beg?"

Setting his book down, Draco crossed his arms. "I should never have brought it up in the first place,
Harry. You have enough in your cauldron."

Harry drew in a deep breath. "Fine, I'll beg. Draco, please tell me what it was you wanted--"

"No."

The refusal sounded so emphatic that Harry stopped to think. Gryffindor forthrightness wasn't getting
him very far, so maybe he needed a more Slytherin approach. "Well, I suppose for all your denials
you must be upset with me after all, then. If you won't treat me like your brother and tell me what's
on your mind."

Draco looked up, his silver eyes narrowed. "That's low."

Harry shrugged and tried his best to make sure his own eyes were hard. "I'd like to think you trust
me enough to tell me anything--"
"It's not a matter of trust, you arse! Some things are just . . . just . . . personal!"

"You have to remember to Occlude when you lie," said Harry dryly. "Sure it's personal. It's so personal that up until today, you were practically begging me to let you say whatever it was."

"I was not!"

"Were too!"

"Was not!"

This was rapidly turning into a farce, Harry thought wryly. "Just tell me, Draco!"

The other boy sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. "Fine. Don't forget you begged me, though. Because it's going to sound pretty self-centred, bringing it up after what I found out last night. And I didn't want to, and you'd just better remember that--"

"You're perfection itself, all right? Just tell me!"

Draco flushed. "No, I'm not. But you wanted to know, so . . . it's just . . ." He clenched his hands together on his lap, his whole body tensing. "Well, you remember how there was a time a while ago when you tried to . . . er, give me the vault and house you had inherited from Sirius Black?"

Ah. All at once, several things clicked in Harry's mind. The almost appraising way Draco had been looking around in Grimmauld Place. The mention of something Harry didn't even want, anyway. Draco calling him selfish . . .

"You said you didn't want charity," Harry murmured.

Draco drew himself up a little. "I don't. But . . ." He cleared his throat, clearly ill at ease. Or maybe out of his depth. "Listen, at the time that's what I thought you were doing. I mean, you were trying to be nice, but it was pity motivating you."

"No, I was being a good brother," corrected Harry. "Or trying, I mean. I didn't know you'd take it like that. I should have. Severus did warn me."

Draco smiled slightly. "He mentioned that when he told me not to get too angry. But the thing is, I didn't understand before how things work between brothers. But now that I . . . er, feel the same way about you, I can see how it must have been. I mean, if you were down and out I'd do what I could to help you, right? And I wouldn't hold it against you that you'd taken something from me. And once I realised that, I started thinking it wouldn't be so terrible to let you give me something. If you still want to, that is."

"Oh, I still want to." Harry smiled as well, feeling like the expression was reaching all the way down inside him. "See, I feel like the vault and house really ought to be yours, Draco. You're a Black. A blood relation of Sirius. And I know he'd be so proud of what you've done this year. He'd want to help you, I'm sure of it." Harry blinked, still happy, even through the pricking feeling in his eyes. He didn't like dwelling on the fact that Sirius was dead and gone. "It's . . . I feel like I can honour him by being there for you when he can't, that's all. It was never charity."

"I know. And I don't remind you of Lucius. Sorry I threw that at you. I think I knew even when I said it that it wasn't true."

"No, it's not," said Harry. "You look just like him, and if you grew your hair longer the resemblance would be even more startling, but I don't even think of him when I look at you now. I just see my
Something deep inside Harry seemed to wake up and stretch, then demand to be heard. It took him a minute to figure out what the voice inside him was saying.

Oh.

His father felt the same way, that was it. He didn't look at Harry and see James. Harry had known that, of course. He'd known it for a long time.

But now, he could really, truly believe it. When Snape looked at Harry, he just saw his son.

And knowing that all the way down to his deepest core seemed to heal something. A wound Harry had never even known was there. He felt more whole than he'd ever been. His arms stopped itching.

Harry didn't fool himself that he was over his problem for good, but for the moment . . . yeah. He felt all right. Accepted.

"Are you all right?" asked Draco, leaning forward. "You look a bit odd. You aren't . . . er, thinking about conjuring another needle, are you?"

"No," Harry jumped up. "I want to do something fun. Let's have that game of Wizard's Scrabble Dad wanted last night. I bet he'd play with us."

Snape wasn't back yet from talking with the headmaster, though.

No matter. Harry and Draco went ahead and played on their own.

Snape was in a foul mood when he returned from speaking with Albus. He whipped his robes off, the edges of them slapping the wall as he turned to hang them. His expression was nothing short of thunderous.

"The headmaster said we can't move back?" asked Harry, though he couldn't really believe that was the case.

Snape took several deep breaths, looking like he was trying to calm himself. "You're my sons, so the matter of your domicile is not within in his purview, but that cursed portrait is."

Something clicked for Harry, then. "Oh. You went to Grimmauld Place."

"Yes," grated Snape, his fists clenching.

Draco looked from Harry to Snape, his silver eyes reflecting curiosity. "What's this about the portrait?"

Harry glanced at his father, but like the night before, Snape was apparently going to make Harry do his own talking. Which was probably healthy, Harry thought with a slight grimace.

"Um, I sort of had a chat with Lucius. I mean, with the portrait. He said I was . . . er, turning dark, and that's kind of how it all started."
Draco shook his head. "Why would you believe a word Lucius said? You didn't believe him in France when he said he'd let me leave in peace if I would just betray you."

"Um . . . well . . ." Harry slanted a glance at Snape. "See, Dad had sort of said something similar earlier--"

"He did not!"

"One of his revenge-is-bad-for-you speeches."

Draco made a face. "Oh, those. Yeah."

Harry didn't want to seem like he was blaming his father. "It goes back before that, though."

Draco looked blank for a second. Then he nodded. "The Parseltongue thing second year, everybody calling you a dark wizard."

"Back before that, even," murmured Harry, thinking it through. "I mean, when I was three years old I was hearing how horrible I was. I know now that my aunt and uncle had issues of their own, but . . ." He shrugged.

"Hurtful things heard in childhood still do have an impact," said Snape.

Harry nodded, figuring his father would know. "But you had sensed dark magic from me in the Dursleys' house way back before you even liked me."

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose as if fighting a headache. "Which I've explained before does not make you dark. Neither does your access to your deeper magic. Calling it dark is just an expression."

"So what happened with the portrait, then?" Draco interrupted. He clearly didn't want Snape to take the conversation in a new direction, leaving his questions unanswered. "I take it the Order is keeping it at Grimmauld Place."

The Potion Master's anger flared back to life. "Nothing happened to it!" he practically spat. "Thanks to your lack of impulse control, I've been prevented from destroying the last trace of Lucius Malfoy's essence here on earth!"

"And that's supposed to be my fault?" Shooting to his feet, Draco glared.

"Albus warded it to protect it from you, I do believe," sneered Snape.

"Yeah, well at least you think I had the right idea blasting it to hell, then."

Snape dropped into a chair. "You did. That portrait is a malevolent force, but Albus insists that gleaning information from it is of the utmost importance." The Potions Master's lips turned down. "We just had quite a row."

Sighing, Harry pushed the game board away and scooted over to the edge of the couch. Closer to his father. "Oh, no. You couldn't convince him you were right because I wouldn't let you tell him about the needles?"

"As if that would make a difference," said Snape, clearly disgusted. "Harry, the headmaster knew about the needles on Samhain. And he was the one who insisted that Lucius mustn't be charged. This is more of the same. Lupin's precious mission, again!" Snape began to mimic the headmaster's jovial
tones, only he did it with a snarl. "The portrait will remain in Grimmauld Place, Severus, and that is an end to the matter. Sherbet lemon?"

"Well, it's my house," said Harry fiercely. "I ought to have the final say in what can and can't go on inside it!"

Draco cleared his throat. Ostentatiously.

Oh, right. Harry flicked a glance toward his brother, then returned his gaze to Snape. "By the way, Draco and I worked out the inheritance thing. He's going to take the house and Sirius' vault as well, so I guess it'll be up to him if the portrait can stay. We . . . uh, we'll probably need help with the legal end of things. Can you get us a solicitor?"

Snape looked from Harry to Draco. "I suppose it's my destiny to be the poorest one in the family."

Harry gulped. He hadn't thought of it that way. "Um, well I wouldn't mind sharing with you, but I can't possibly give you Sirius' things. He wouldn't have liked that--"

"Harry," said Snape dryly, "my remark was a poor attempt at humour. Very poor, as it turns out. I'm hardly in financial straits."

"Wouldn't know it from the paltry allowance we get," said Draco, his grin proof that he was joking as well.

"You'll have to forgive me if I wished to teach you to budget. Particularly you," stressed Snape.

"But is it all right for me to sign it all over to Draco? Last time I wanted to give my inheritance away, you told me to wait and I'd thank you later."

Snape inclined his head as though remembering. "You didn't so much wish to give it away as to rid yourself of it. There is a difference."

There was. Harry could see that. "I'm still thanking you, though. I'm really glad you didn't let me dump it all just because it was a reminder. This is a lot better. I just know Sirius would be proud of Draco."

"Yes, I do believe he would," said Snape slowly. A sardonic light entered his eyes. "Though as he always was a stubborn cur, it might take you quite a while to convince Black that you were truly on Harry's side, Draco."

Draco moved his hand in a familiar arc, though he had no wand in hand. "Serpensortia! There's my proof!"

"Yes, you did well," said Snape. "I'll arrange for a solicitor, of course. Now, back to the portrait. Since it can't be destroyed except by Albus, Grimmauld Place is likely the best location for it. However, you're not to be alone with it again, Harry."

"Ha. Like I'd want to." Shuddering in memory, Harry began running his hands up and down his arms.

Draco and Snape both noticed, Harry thought. His father stiffened and opened his mouth to say something, but Draco beat him to it.

"Let's go back to Grimmauld Place right now and have Harry Lumos the stupid portrait," said Draco, pacing by then. "A wanded Lumos. I'd like to see the headmaster's spells resist that."
"I'd like Order Headquarters to remain standing," retorted Snape. "As would you, I presume, since the house is shortly to be yours. Any contest between Harry's magic and Albus' is like as not to be cataclysmic. I think for the time being we must endure the fact that the portrait will continue to exist." His dark gaze flicked to Harry's face. "I hope you're paying attention. I feel no reluctance or compunction whatsoever over the prospect of killing what remains of Lucius. And I quite assure you, should I have succeeded, I would not feel guilt over my lack of guilt."

"That's different," murmured Harry.

"Oh, indeed. Because I am a Slytherin?"

Draco turned on a heel to stare at Harry.

"No, because it's a portrait!"

Snape nodded briskly. "Be that as it may, in a certain sense it is also Lucius. Have I your word that you'll avoid the portrait in future?"

"God, yes."

"And yours, Draco? Even if it hangs in your house?"

Draco gave a careless shrug. "Oh, I can handle anything Lucius wants to throw at me."

"All the same you're to stay clear of that portrait!"

The boy narrowed his eyes. "Remus Lupin might need me to coax information out of it at some point, you know. Lucius is more likely to spill when he's really angry, and who better than me to rouse that feeling in him?" Draco executed a sweeping bow.

Snape's nostril's flared. "You're not to be alone with the portrait, all the same. If Lupin really needs your assistance, he can talk to me, and we'll arrange something. No doubt using a certain invisibility cloak."

Draco beamed a smile. "That'll work."

Harry was tired of hearing about the portrait. He just wanted to forget the thing existed. "I'm tired of Scrabble. Let's all order whatever suits for lunch."

What suited Harry turned out to be a juicy steak. It came with a bone-handled serrated knife.

Draco put his hand over Harry's when he saw it. "Better use this one," he said, passing over his regular knife instead.

"Oh, for pity's sake--"

"The other one's got a sharp point."

"So does my quill when it's in good shape!"

Snape cleared his throat. "Draco... your interest in your brother's welfare is laudable, but I don't think Harry's... compulsion is quite that generalised."

"Yeah, I started using a needle because I wanted to get over my fear of them. So they couldn't be used against me again."
Draco drew his hand back. "Oh. Well, that wasn't clear. All right. Enjoy your overcooked filet. I don't know why you can't order it medium-rare--"

That was a pretty stupid complaint, considering Harry hadn't ordered it at all. He'd got exactly what suited him. Steak and chips, with lots of ketchup slathered over the top of both. Draco called it a travesty of a fine cut of meat. Harry told him to shut up and eat his snails.

------------------------------------------------------

Late that same evening, Harry yawned and laid his book aside.

"Not keeping your interest?" asked Snape as he entered the room, a tray floating behind him. The scent of hot cocoa rose into the air.

"Well I was trying to stay awake until Draco finished his shower, but I'm starting to think he must want to be a fish." Harry sat up a little bit and took the cup that gently sailed his way. "Cocoa sounds awfully good, though. Thanks."

Snape picked his own cup off the tray, then sat down on the edge of Harry's bed. The ebony tray didn't seem to like levitating empty. It started spinning slowly in place.

"So," said Snape, his face slightly obscured by the steam rising from his cup. "It occurs to me that there are some additional things we ought to discuss."

Harry gulped some cocoa even though it was really too hot to drink fast. "Oh. Well, I don't think I'm over it or anything, but today wasn't too bad, really. I kind of wanted to make a needle a couple of times but I managed to distract myself somehow or other."

"I am glad to hear it, but that's not what I want to talk about at the moment." Snape paused, then resumed. "Have you given any thought to the health implications of what you were doing?"

Harry scooted back on the bed, and was a little startled when all that did was make his father scoot forward. "Well?"

"Um, some," said Harry slowly. "When I used the really big needle I bled a lot. I realised then that if I kept going I might bleed to death. I . . . I thought that healing spells would take care of that but the more I used them, the less they worked. Not that they worked all that well in the first place."

"Self-healing is self-limiting in a case like this," said Snape, nodding. "The essence of the spell is to provide aid. If the magic begins sensing that provision of such aid is only leading to further harm, it will cease to function well. But Harry, blood loss is not the only danger you were courting when you plied your needle."

"Yeah, I worried about infection too. I was trying to figure out how to get some salve and still keep it all a secret."

"Your arms were in fact infected when I treated them last night. Do you know what can happen when an infection is allowed to take root, Harry?"

Harry didn't, but he had a feeling he was about to find out.
"It's a bit more serious than a scab that won't heal over properly. Wounds can turn septic. Gangrene, Harry. Have you ever heard of it?"

Suddenly his cocoa didn't taste very sweet. "Yeah."

"Magic can heal a great many things, as you know. But it's not a cure-all, Harry. You only need to think of Moody to realise that."

"Well, I'd have come to you before I got gangrene," Harry said, a little bit offended. "I did come to you, let's not forget."

Snape's dark gaze didn't leave Harry's face. "Are you qualified to judge the severity of an infection? Are you aware that sepsis can cause its victims to become irrational? You might think you didn't need help when in fact you did."

"I think by the time my arm was rotting off I'd have figured it out!"

"I think that by then it might be too late to save the arm!" Snape glanced down. "Were you aware that you'd already developed an infection?"

"Just a little one. It was under control--"

"And so we come back to your extensive training in the art of mediwizardry," said Snape dryly. "I expect you're oblivious to this, but last night you were running a low-grade fever. And that's not the only danger you've been courting. What about actual poisoning, another possible result of inserting foreign objects into your bloodstream?"

Harry didn't like the way this was going. He hadn't done anything all that dangerous. "Listen, I've had loads worse cuts and scrapes than that and no one even blinked. You're going on as if any little drop of blood could be my death and we both know that's not true! Besides, is it any wonder I might feel the need to make myself stronger? Maybe I'm sick and tired of everyone acting like I'm some delicate flower! Not to mention incompetent!"

Snape's voice went gruff. "You are far from incompetent, Harry. Someday the world will know as much--"

"Oh, great. Like I want more acclaim!"

"Now you're just being difficult." Snape sighed. "Harry, you may have thought you were getting stronger, but what you were doing was in fact serving to weaken you physically. Even if the infection never truly became dangerous, don't you think it could have affected your control of magic when casting? What if you began to accidentally channel magic through your wand and you ended up causing injury to someone? Isn't that exactly what led to your self-doubts in the first place?"

_Good point._ Feeling himself flushing, Harry concentrated on blowing on his hot chocolate. He kept expecting his father to say something else, but it seemed like Snape was determined to make Harry reply before they moved on. Finally, Harry looked up through his fringe. "I hadn't thought of something like that happening," he murmured.

"Obviously."

"I'm sorry. Is that what you want to hear?"

Snape sighed. "I'm not trying to make you feel guilty, Harry. I'm just trying to make you understand that even such an innocuous injury as pinpricks can have consequences. And I assume it goes
without saying that the larger needle you used most recently, was simply beyond reckless."

Harry started to nod, but this time it seemed like Snape wasn't waiting for a reply.

"You could have severed a vein with that implement, you idiot child. As it was, you delved too deeply for a topical salve to completely reach. I shudder to think of the consequences had you developed an infection that deep within your arm. And even aside from infection, the injuries themselves could still cause harm to your magic flow and your ability to defend yourself physically."

Another factor he hadn't considered. Harry swallowed his cocoa abruptly.

"Imagine the disadvantage you'd have been at if, whilst wandering the halls alone, one of your less moral schoolmates had decided to attack you. What if someone had grabbed one of your arms or twisted your wrist to make you drop your wand "�"

"I don't really need my wand."

Snape gave him an impatient glance. "I do believe I've noticed that. But casting without it would have given away the important advantage of secrecy. We'd once again have been forced to Obliviate all the witnesses, risking the Board of Governors sacking and expelling everyone involved should anyone find out."

Harry frowned. His father was making him feel just awful about what he'd done, but what was even worse was the fact that the worse he felt, the more his arms itched. He knew in his mind that using a needle ever again was a terrible idea, and yet there was a little part of him that wanted one all the more because of it.

He certainly didn't want to admit what was happening, but his father had made him promise to tell him if he had such impulses. He squeezed the mug in his hands, willing the heat to be enough chase away the desire for pain and blood. It also served to keep his hands from shaking. "Dad, I'm not trying to weasel out of this lecture. Honest, I'm not. I know you're right and all, but when you make me feel bad, I start to . . . er . . ."

He didn't need to finish because his father deftly plucked the mug from his hand and pulled Harry into an embrace, holding him close and tight. The itching in Harry's arms subsided slightly. If he pretended hard enough, he could tell himself that it was just his sleeves feeling scratchy. Sighing, Harry relaxed and just enjoyed the feeling of being loved.

Snape didn't speak, not for a long moment. Then, his voice low, he resumed their discussion.

"You're feeling an urge to hurt yourself again." The simple statement was etched with sadness.

Harry nodded against his father's chest. "You said to tell you."

"Yes." Harry felt his head being patted, and then his back stroked. He felt a bit like a baby, being treated that way. But it felt good. Really good, so he didn't complain.

After a few moments more, though, he reminded himself that he was sixteen, after all. Sighing, Harry pulled back a little bit. "Thanks."

His father seemed reluctant to let him go. "I suppose this is why we need the good doctor's assistance. I'm doing the best I can for you, Harry, but in this I seem to have failed."

He didn't want to make his father feel bad, he really didn't. "You haven't failed, exactly. It's just that this is all new to you, right? You never planned to be a father. And even if you had, our problems are
just bizarre compared to the ones normal families have. Even wizard families. I mean, how many parents have to think about hiding wandless magic or being prepared for constant attack? I know you've done your best, but you can't think of everything."

Snape's lips twisted. "I do try. To do otherwise would be less than Slytherin. But this . . . no, I don't believe I could have anticipated that you'd turn towards self-injury. Not when you'd never done so in the past, despite all your various traumas."

Harry nodded. "I'm not defending what I did with the needles, but you can't blame me for not worrying about it making me weaker. That never bothered you before when we were training in Devon. I just looked at it as more of the same."

The Potions Master stiffened as he held his son. "Yes, you mentioned as much last night. The analogy is flawed, however. You've been hurting yourself intentionally of late. Your injuries out in Devon, however, were an indirect result of our activities. The goal was to improve your Defence skills. Surely you understood that."

Harry had. "I knew you weren't trying to hurt me, sure. But the needle thing . . . well, I had a goal there too, you know. Get over my fears. I thought if my arms got too bad I could . . . uh, you know, nick some salve somehow, since the healing spells weren't working."

Snape made a disgusted noise. "Obviously you understood the consequences of your training in Devon even less than I'd thought. You learned absolutely nothing."

Harry frowned. "I learned that Wizarding Family Services likes to stick its nose in, so we can't let there be any evidence of . . . Oh, shite. I didn't think about how this might look if they'd found out."

Snape's drawl sent shivers down Harry's spine. "Indeed. I dare say we'd have another lovely notation on our record."

"I'm sorry--"

His father shrugged off the apology. "In any case, I wasn't referring to the authorities when I mentioned consequences. Cast your mind back to Devon. Can you recall the reason why I didn't do more to treat your injuries after our duels?"

Harry thought back, and slowly nodded. "Yeah. You didn't want me getting dependent on the potions involved."

"Or the spells," corrected Snape. "I never condoned your suffering as some sort of lesson."

"I didn't think you did--"

"No?"

"Um . . . well, I guess I did think that if I could just get better control of my magic then I wouldn't end up hurt."

Snape sighed. "So you did misunderstand, at least on some level. I should have discussed the matter more clearly with you at the time. I should not have been so selfish."

"Huh?"

Snape smiled grimly. "It pained me to know that I was hurting you, Harry, especially in light of what I'd been forced to do to you on Samhain. I wanted to think on it as little as possible. I had to remain
objective or else I'd never have been able to teach you properly. Too, if I'd dwelt on it i6;" The
Potions Master's mouth closed into a firm line.

"What?" When Snape said nothing, merely giving a tiny shake of his head, Harry poked him in the
shoulder. "Hey. It's not fair, you know, for you to want us to go to you with everything when you
won't do the same."

His father arched an eyebrow. "And life is fair, is it?"

Harry wasn't letting himself get guided down that garden path. "Spill it."

Snape's eyes seemed to darken. "It may help us to understand one another better, I suppose. I
presume you recall me speaking of the nightmares I suffered after Samhain. Your defensive training
unfortunately necessitated me hurting you again, which caused highly unpleasant memories to
surface." The man paused, pinching the bridge of his nose. "That proved particularly problematic as
I'd realised by then that the Truthful Dreams potion was becoming less effective in dampening the
emotional impact of my dreams. My efforts to reformulate it, in fact, are what made me aware that I'd
developed a problem."

This time Harry was the one who hugged his father. "Oh, Dad! I never thought of that. I've gone and
put you through that all over, haven't I?" He gasped. "You haven't taken any more Truthful Dreams
have you? On account of me showing up like I did last night?"

Snape frowned. "No, I have not. And my well-being is not your responsibility in any case--quite the
opposite is true. I simply wanted you to know that I understand how easy it is to let a situation slip
beyond your control. I'd be a poor father, indeed, if I allowed that to happen to you. And now we're
well off the subject I'd originally broached with you."

Harry sighed. "Is there still more to say?"

His father brushed the hair from Harry's eyes. "Perhaps not tonight. Just remember this, regardless of
the emotional factor, which we will discuss later, I assure you. I don't ever want you to willingly put
yourself into harm's way, no matter how slight the danger may seem."

Harry twisted his fingers together. "Is that on general principle or just for me? I mean, I understand
that what I was doing was dangerous because it was becoming compulsive and I wasn't caring for
myself properly and even if I was, you can't just heal things over and over, but what about what you
did to Draco?" argued Harry. "$\text{Venetimorica}$ weakened him something awful even if it was only
once. But the payoff was that he was stronger in the end. Morally, I mean. Are you going to say that
wasn't worth it, now?"

Snape's eyes narrowed as he sat there. "$\text{That}$ was carefully supervised, as was your training out in
Devon, for that matter. And neither of you were allowed to wander into harm's way while you were
in a compromised state of health. Sometimes suffering does bring strength; I am not one to deny that.
But to endanger yourself in secret, with no one to catch you should you fall too hard and fast . . . that
is another case entirely."

"Besides," said Draco as he emerged from the bathroom, his hair slicked back from his forehead, "$\text{The Venetimorica}$ was a punishment, Harry. Which goes back to what I said last night. You
shouldn't be punishing yourself for what you did to Lucius. It needed doing, regardless of whether
you meant to do it."

"I thought the needles needed doing, too," muttered Harry. "But yeah, they weren't such a good
idea."
"No, they weren't." Snape's dark gaze met his again. "There's a reason why potions are ingested or applied topically, Harry. Wizards learned long ago that puncture wounds were by their very nature problematic, even considering the magical remedies we have at our disposal."

Harry remembered then, his father's distress at the idea of immunisations. His horror when he'd heard about how Harry had been supposed to get shots as a small child. And this was done to you? This injection of potion?

He supposed that this wizarding attitude towards needles was actually an overreaction or some sort of superstition, maybe based on some bad experiences with Muggle medicine that weren't completely understood. Still, Harry did see the truth in what his father had been telling him. Harry did understand the basics of health and first aid yet he had never made any effort to sterilise his needle. Even understanding as little as he did about Muggle medicine, he knew that doctors and nurses were supposed to do that. Gangrene still struck him as wildly ridiculous, but . . .

Peeling back his sleeves, he took a look at the marks that were left. Yeah, magic couldn't instantly solve everything. You could tell that something had happened to his arms.

"I'm sorry," he said, hanging his head. "Um, so do you think these need more salve?" Before his father could answer, Harry drew in a deep breath. "I promise not to do this again. But the same goes for the two of you. No more horrendous punishments for Draco, all right?" He looked at his father. "And you won't take any, er, harmful potions ingredients."

Draco nearly snorted. "I'm fairly certain that Marsha would skin Dad alive if we did something like the Venetimorica again, and I've been practically an angel ever since so it's hardly an issue. And I know all about the purple loosestrife. Honestly, I think Severus is overreacting to the whole thing. He ought to just take it if it makes him feel better, but he's got this whole ethics issue with potions ingredients. Trust me, you don't want to get him started."

When the Potions Master in question opened his mouth to reply, Draco raised his hand as if to stop him. "If you start a whole new lecture now, I'll be the one owling WFS to report you for abuse." The boy grinned. "Verbal abuse. We can only take so much at a time."

"That is singularly not funny," said Snape, glaring.

"I just think we've heard enough lectures for one night, Sev-- I mean, Dad."

Snape's glare faded, to be replaced by an expression that was wryly amused. "Perils of eavesdropping, Draco. Now, as you two have classes tomorrow, it's time you were asleep."

Draco slipped into bed, yawning. "Two more weeks. I'll be so glad of a holiday . . . Mmm, sleeping until noon."

"I've no intention of inculcating bad habits in you over the summer," said Snape, flicking his wand to plunge the room into darkness. Harry heard the cocoa cups settle onto the tray. "Good night." The door closed with a slight noise.

Draco waited to complain until their father's footsteps had faded away. "I like sleeping until noon!"

Harry had a hard time reconciling that with the stories Draco had told him of gruelling summer studies. "Lucius really let you?"

A grumbling noise. "No, but my mother would. Whenever he was away."

"I'm sure our holiday will be brilliant." Harry rolled onto his side to face the wall. "'G'night, Draco."
With only two more weeks to go until summer, the time seemed to fly past. It was a bit of an odd experience for Harry. In previous years, he'd always dreaded the approach of summer. Now, he could hardly wait. The holiday ahead stretched out like a beacon, welcoming him. For once, he wouldn't have to spend the time away from school being worked like a house-elf. When he felt like studying magic, he wouldn't have to be afraid somebody would see. He could arrive at school with his homework done, for once.

And nobody would yell at him and tell him he was worthless.

Gryffindor seemed to understand about his eyes. Or the lie about his eyes, really. He wasn't having any problems with the Elixir; his eyesight was getting steadily better. Again. He still felt a bit like he was on a see-saw, and wished his vision would just stabilise.

Neville said it was great that Harry had a father who cared so much about him. And even Seamus had to agree. So that all sorted well.

Most of his classes continued to be a hoot. In Potions they were having an ice-cream making contest with prizes for most delicious and most creative. Harry was a little bit worried about the tasting coming up next week, since some of the more creative concoctions he'd heard discussed sounded kind of disgusting, actually. Who really wanted to eat peppermint pumpkin pistachio, after all?

Draco insisted that ice cream was common and he was making gelato, instead. Nothing Harry said could dissuade him, so Harry was working with Ron on a triple chocolate coconut flavour. They tried to include Hermione in their team, but she declared that she wanted to make gelato, too. Ron had glared about that, and no wonder. Something besides lemon-lime gelato was clearly going on over at Draco's table. He and Hermione seemed to be having some awfully intense discussions about something. It looked like they were disagreeing a lot, too.

As much fun as Potions was with Dumbledore in charge, however, Harry would have to say that his favourite class was Defence. Snape continued to torment Aran at every turn, insulting his teaching methods, demonstrating his own vastly superior skills, even critiquing the man's hygiene at times.

Harry thought he'd die laughing when his father actually had the nerve to complain that Aran needed to wash his hair! The whole class had had a similar reaction, sputtering and trying to hide it.

Aran had turned red--but then again, he was red a lot these days--and opened his mouth to make some sort of blistering reply. But cowardice kept the words inside, and all he ended up doing was snapping his mouth shut and turning away.

Like a dog with its tail between its legs.

Harry was sure then, absolutely positive, that Aran's true punishment was supposed to be something more than utter humiliation. Snape was trying to provoke the man. He wanted him to fight back.

*Why* Snape wanted that was another question. One the Potions Master wouldn't answer, no matter how Harry pestered him.
Wednesday evening was Harry’s first therapy session with Marsha. In order to fit Harry into her schedule, the three of them had to leave Hogwarts during supper rather than after, so each of them had a quick sandwich at home with a promise of pudding later if the boys behaved. Perhaps they could have had time to eat properly, but Harry had wanted a short visit with Mrs Figg and maybe to dash over to see Dudley for a few minutes now that he had moved into the rebuilt Number 4 Privet Drive.

Perhaps it was all the soul-searching that he had forced himself to do lately or maybe it was simply the act of coming to Surrey at this time of year, but Harry was thinking about his “Muggle life” a lot these days. Although he was still quite annoyed with Mrs Figg for never having alerted Dumbledore to how wretched the Dursleys were, Harry did feel grateful to her for being a kindly respite from the virtually unmitigated hatred he’d suffered throughout his childhood. Plus, she was letting them use her Floo, so Harry brought her a nice little box of chocolates.

During their brief visit, Harry mentioned wanting to see Dudley, but Mrs Figg informed them that he’d got a night job as a security officer and was probably already out for the evening.

As they walked to their appointment, Harry felt nervous. Strangely, he was more anxious about what he was not going to tell the doctor than what he was. Dr. Goode had been given yet another version of events surrounding the boys’ recent disappearance. She was told that during the altercation with their DADA professor, Lucius Malfoy had firecalled Aran regarding a statue he was having delivered, but had then taken the opportunity to hex their teacher and abscond with the boys. The rest of the story was the same except that Harry only seriously injured Draco's father, not killed him. The man was later Obliviated because he'd learned about the Venetimorica incident in questioning the boys. They'd feared he would use the information to get Draco expelled and Severus' custody revoked.

There simply wasn't a decent explanation for why they weren't pressing charges against Malfoy, but that was already true regarding all the things he'd done earlier in the year. Dr. Goode knew about his crimes from Draco's prior sessions. She'd already been told that there was a reason why Lucius couldn't be touched and it was secret.

Part of Harry wanted to tell his therapist everything, but he could see what a bad idea that would be. Precautions needed to be taken in case Dr. Goode was ever compromised. Their father had been willing to risk Voldemort's anger for the sake of his son's therapy by telling her about the abduction, but they couldn't risk the existence of their new spy by telling her of Lucius' death. Harry tended to think the half-truths made the entire venture rather pointless. "I won't be able to tell her the most important parts!" he complained when they'd coordinated their stories. "What if she just thinks I'm a nutter because she doesn't have all the facts? She might not be able to help me at all."

His father agreed that it was regrettable but pointed out that he had his family to confide in and if that wasn't enough he had his closest friends and the headmaster. "I'd even consent to you talking with the werewolf if I thought he could actually make the situation better rather than worse for once," he'd said.

Despite the tangled web of half-truths, his first session with Marsha had gone pretty well, all things considered. For starters, she hadn't stared at his scar at all. Harry didn't know if that was because she'd heard all about him from Draco by then, or if Snape had said something to her. He'd expected her to launch right into talking about the needles, and why he’d done a thing like that, and why he mustn't do it again, but instead, she was letting Harry talk. About whatever he wanted, actually.
Obviously she thought they ought to get to know one another a bit. But that made sense. How could Harry discuss personal things with someone he hardly knew?

So he talked about Quidditch some, and told her what it was like to fly at really fast speeds. Then he felt bad because she looked a little bit jealous from time to time. He couldn't imagine what it must be like for her, to know all about the magical world but be forced to stand outside it.

Or maybe he could, since he'd been all but a squib for a good part of this year. At least he'd had Draco and Snape constantly reassuring him that his magic would be back someday. Marsha knew for certain she'd never have any magic at all.

He hoped Draco didn't rub that in, too much.

When Harry couldn't think of anything more to say about the difference between a Firebolt and an XL, Dr. Goode gently asked how the week had gone so far. Harry knew what she meant by that.

"Well, when I start to feel upset, I get this itchy feeling in my arms," he began. "And . . . well, I guess you know why I'm here."

"What sorts of things have you been finding upsetting?"

Harry paused for a moment to collect his thoughts before answering. He told her about feeling guilty that his brother had got more hurt by Lucius than he had. Surprising himself, Harry soon began venting about the fact that everyone seemed to think he was fragile and incompetent and stupid. He found himself talking on and on while she just listened.

When his session was over and Harry went out to the outer room where Snape and Draco were waiting, he found them deep in conversation.

"I only mentioned it so you'd know how annoying that girl can be," Draco was saying. "And because I needed something to alleviate the boredom. The magazines here truly are the most worthless drivel I've ever seen. Honestly, Muggles must be positively brain-damaged--"

He glanced up as Harry cleared his throat, and flushed a little. And no wonder; Dr. Goode was standing right alongside Harry.

"I thought we were working on tolerance," she said softly.

"I am," said Draco staunchly, his colour still high. "I all but implied that Muggles have brains. That's tolerant, isn't it?"

Dr. Goode merely looked at him. A longish stare, her lips pursed.

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Draco looked down. "Sorry."

The doctor turned her attention to Snape, then. "I would say that Harry and I had a very productive first session, Professor Snape. I think that at some point in the future, another gathering with the three of us could prove of use, but for the moment I'd prefer to continue seeing each boy alone."

Snape rose to his feet, nodding his thanks. Harry expected them to just go, then. He and Draco had both already had their therapy, after all. But his father had another matter on his mind.

"I've just had it brought to my attention that one of my students might be suffering from . . ." He glanced back at Draco. "What was the term Miss Granger used?"
Draco stood up as well, his features a little mulish. "Dyslexia. Merlin knows I've heard the word enough over the past few days. As if she would notice more about Greg after an hour's studying than I've learned in years and years!"

"Yes, dyslexia," said Snape, ignoring Draco's outburst. "I'd like your professional opinion as to the likelihood of such a condition in a young man nearly grown."

Dr. Goode smoothed her hands down over her skirt. "Oh, dyslexia is by no means limited by age, Professor. Adults can suffer it." She paused slightly, her voice a little hesitant when she resumed. "I take it the young man in question has never learned any compensatory strategies to help him read?"

"It's been widely assumed he was merely . . ." Snape's own voice was gruff.

Dr. Goode had no trouble saying it. "Stupid? That's unfortunate, to say the least."

"But reversing letters?" Draco shoved his hands deep into his pockets. "It's ridiculous. I didn't even believe Hermione when she said it!"

"Brain chemistry--Muggle and wizard brains both," she added dryly, "is a very complex matter." Her look took in Snape, Harry, and Draco. "Does he reverse letters when he writes?"

Harry shrugged. "I wouldn't know."

Draco raised his chin a notch. "I thought it was just bad spelling."

"Professor?"

"I assumed he wasn't putting much effort into his work," Snape admitted. "And that he was . . . slow."

The doctor made a slightly impatient noise. "For goodness' sake. Didn't your course of preparation for teaching include even a rudimentary overview of learning disabilities?"

Snape folded his arms over his chest. It would have looked intimidating if he'd been wearing his robes, Harry thought. In Muggle clothing it just looked defensive. "I'm afraid that education in the wizarding world does not follow Muggle norms," he admitted. "For example, my only course of preparation to teach Potions was to be shown to my classroom. I have a natural affinity for the subject."

Dr. Goode stared at him. "Then how did you learn to teach?"

"By experience."

Harry almost sighed. So that was where Snape's learn-by-experience obsession had come from. Well, at least he seemed to be backing off from it a bit lately. He was brilliant at teaching Defence, even when he wasn't baiting or belittling Aran.

"Hogwarts obviously needs to be brought into the modern world," said the doctor crisply. "However, I don't delude myself that my opinion will carry much weight."

Snape had the grace to flush, just a little. "Have you a book on dyslexia? I'd like to educate myself. There may be other students similarly situated."

"Without a doubt," murmured the doctor. "One moment."

Draco practically gnashed his teeth after she had left. "I don't believe it! That insufferable little know-
it-all is right again? Well, just how was I supposed to know Greg wasn't stupid, eh? I mean, it's not only reading! He acts stupid all the time!"

"If he's been treated as though he is," said Dr. Goode calmly as she stepped back into her waiting room, "then that's understandable. He'll be suffering from a lack of confidence, among other things." She extended a thick tome towards Snape. "Perhaps this will help you work with him."

Draco was the one who reached out and took the book. "I want it first. I tutor him. Or try, anyway. He's my friend."

The doctor smiled. "If you have any questions you can ask me next Wednesday. Now, if you will excuse me, I'm late for dinner with Michael."

Harry waited to speak until they were walking down the street. "I didn't know Marsha was married."

Draco laughed. "She's not. Michael's her dog."

"And there I was thinking she was too modern to wear a ring," Snape said in a slightly sneering tone. Obviously her criticism had rankled even if it was somewhat justified. That wasn't what interested Harry, though.

"You noticed her ring finger?"

Snape shot him a quick glance. "My life thus far has trained me to observe small details."

Draco whistled low under his breath. "Sure, Severus. That's all it was. We believe you. Every word. Right, Harry?"

"Oh, do grow up," said Snape, his tone short.

---------------------------------------------

True to his word, Severus arranged for a solicitor, a rail-thin man who met them later that night in Dumbledore's office. Harry was a little surprised they just weren't handling the matter in the privacy of their own home, but then it turned out that the paperwork needed to be witnessed by two people outside the family.

Amaelia Thistlethorne was there, too, and not just as a witness. Harry was a minor, she explained, and though he'd been adopted, Wizard Family Services was still charged with assuring his welfare. He couldn't sign away his property until she believed he was acting of his own free will and not under any undue influence.

Harry took all that to mean that she was afraid the Slytherins in his family were ganging up on him.

So, he explained about Sirius, and how he'd turned his back on a family heritage of evil to do what was good and right. And how Draco had done the same, and since they were both Blacks, the money was sort of more rightfully Draco's than his, anyway.

To say that she was shocked would be an understatement. The wizarding world at large still thought of Sirius Black as the one who'd carried out a massacre of Muggles, after all. Harry didn't think she really believed him about Pettigrew being the one responsible for that. Well, not until Dumbledore
backed him up on it.

But then, finally, she seemed to understand that Harry had loved Sirius and felt he was acting in his stead, by passing the inheritance along to his brother.

She signed the paperwork with a flourish, and so did the headmaster. It seemed kind of backwards to Harry. He'd have thought that he and Draco would be the first ones to provide signatures. Instead, they were last. Severus had to sign his consent, first. And then Harry was finally allowed to sign over his deeds to the vault and house, including *all contents thereof*. That last phrase almost made him hesitate, since the house still did contain some things he wanted. Sirius’ old school wand, for one. And those books down in the basement that he'd never been able to open. He wondered if they were diaries, maybe. Old journals of Sirius’.

Harry signed anyway, and touched his wand to the parchment when directed, because he knew he could trust Draco to give him those things. All he had to do was ask.

Draco signed last of all, and then they were done.

With the solicitor, that was. Amaelia Thistlethorne had something else in mind. She actually had audacity to shoo Dumbledore out of his own office--Snape as well--so that she could have a private chat with "the boys" and see how they were doing. It was past time for her to check on their placement, she said. For a few moments Harry nearly panicked, worried that she'd somehow manage to find out about his needles, but the witch was babbling on about end of year exams and holiday plans so he relaxed. Honestly, Harry thought the entire conversation was frankly ridiculous. He and Draco would both be of age before the summer was out. They'd be adults.

Well, at least all this WFS rubbish would be behind them, then.

Or so he hoped. He never had forgotten that vaguely menacing letter Richard Steyne had sent to Snape.

But he and Draco both nodded and smiled and talked until the casewitch seemed satisfied. She left by Floo, the green flames against her orange dress a hideous sight.

Harry stood up to go, but Draco shook his head and said they were staying right there until Dumbledore returned. He wasn't leaving, he said, until he had the key to his vault. He wanted to write away for an accounting.

------------------------------------------

Harry found out on Thursday during Defence class that magical transfers of property took almost no time at all. Well, when they weren't being held up by the terms of a will or something like that. Draco had already received his accounting. Ever since the Gringotts' owl had arrived during lunch, he'd been poring over a scroll filled with densely packed text. Harry tried not to look at it, even though he was sitting next to Draco. Well, he had plenty to distract him. Up at the front, Snape was doing an even better job than usual of berating Aran.

For all that though, Harry couldn't help but notice how Draco kept scratching numbers on spare bits of parchment as he murmured spells Harry had certainly never heard before. The numbers would add themselves up, or sometimes, multiply, but they weren't nearly as well-behaved as uncharmed numbers. When the ones column had to borrow from the tens, things got fairly violent. Harry saw a
six actually burst into tears when it was shoved out of the way too hard.

Draco quickly drew in a little picture of a handkerchief, so the six could dab itself dry before the whole problem became nothing but runny ink.

Finally, he sat back and rubbed his hands as though satisfied.

Harry couldn't help himself, then. Leaning over, he spoke in a low voice. "So what's the total?"

"Oh, I haven't figured that out yet. I was just checking that the goblins hadn't cheated the vault. It *was* left untended for a long time, and you can't be too careful." Draco's teeth flashed as he smiled. "I won't know the grand total until I have some of the property in here properly assessed. But the Galleons alone . . ." He whistled, low under his breath. Snape would probably have heard it if he wasn't so busy lecturing Aran on classroom management. "Let's just say, they should be enough to keep me in silks for a long, long time."

Harry nodded, feeling better than he had in a long while. Maybe he was finally accepting that Sirius was gone. There'd never been a gravesite he could visit. No body to help him understand, deep inside, that falling through the Veil really was final. That the loss was permanent, and couldn't be undone.

But giving away the bequest . . . it felt like a chapter in his life had finally been closed.

"I don't think I ever actually said thank you," murmured Draco, leaning toward Harry. "You really are a good brother."

Harry chuckled a little. "So are you. Just . . . keep making sure Sirius would have been proud of you, all right? That'll be thanks enough."

Draco sat back in his chair, his silver eyes gleaming as he nodded.

By Friday morning, Harry was feeling exasperated. All he'd heard since the day before was how they ought to spend the summer redecorating Draco's house. *My house*, Draco liked to call it. Which was all right, Harry supposed, even if it was a little bit hard to hear. To him, number 12 Grimmauld Place would always be Sirius' house.

Maybe that was why he was finding Draco's chatter about it so annoying. It was going to be their very first summer together! You'd think they could talk about that, a little bit at least.

Draco, oblivious to Harry's mood, turned to him at the doors of the Great Hall. "So, what do you think?"

*You did ask*, Harry thought.

"I don't think redecorating sounds like fun at all. And you know Dad will say we have more important things to be doing. And besides, even if he didn't say no, the house is sort of being used right now, right? I don't think the . . . uh, old crowd would appreciate your charming everything in sight Slytherin green."
Draco raised his chin a little bit. "Oh, please. Just because I exhibit a little house pride in my décor at school doesn't mean I plan to live my entire life surrounded by silver and green. And the, er, people using the house ought to be thrilled to have the place spruced up. It's like a mausoleum in there--an out-of-date one at that. And--"

All at once, Harry felt prickly all over. Sirius had once said something like that about Grimmauld Place. Harry sucked in a breath, a sense of déjà vu spinning through him as tears pricked his eyes. What had happened to yesterday's feeling that he was finally moving past his mourning?

"Are you all right, Harry?" Draco more-or-less dragged him into a side corridor. "I'll stop talking about the house if it bothers you so much. I mean, I didn't ever really know the man, but I do understand that the two of you were . . . close."

"We never had a chance to be, really," said Harry, blinking. "Not like I wanted. But I'm all right. Let's just go get breakfast with everybody."

Draco didn't move, though he did lower his voice. "Maybe you should give me all your quills, Harry. You can borrow one from somebody in class."

"Huh?"

"You did say they were sharp enough to--"

Harry pushed off from the wall he'd been leaning against. "I'm fine, and a quill wouldn't do, anyway. Trust me on that."

Draco was still eyeing Harry's school bag. "If you're sure . . ."

Instead of answering that, Harry walked past him and on towards the Great Hall. Draco caught up with him and looked about to say something else, but just as they stepped through the doorway, Hermione appeared out of nowhere and shoved a book and a thick roll of parchment into Draco's hands.

"I've been playing around with some charms to change the arrangement of letters and words and such," she said, speaking so fast her words tumbled over one another. "I think that might work to counteract Greg's dyslexia, but I'm not quite sure of exactly how he tends to see things. Do you think you could get him to explain it to you? Maybe write out some examples for me to test?"

"Good morning to you, too, Hermione," Draco drawled, slinging his school bag over his shoulder so he could put his hands in his pockets. "No, of course you're not rudely interrupting a private conversation with my brother."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Honestly, the two of you can talk anytime! I've only got one week left to solve this problem for Goyle!"

"Who asked you to solve a thing?" Draco demanded, his voice pitched just slightly high. "He's my friend, not yours. I might have asked you to tutor him while I was going to be away, but I'm back now and I'll be the one to help him."

Hermione sniffed and tossed her head. "Well, what have you been doing to help him, then?"

"More than you'll ever know," sneered Draco. "Besides, this Mugglish method of flipping letters around on parchment is just . . . rubbish! Why not determine the problem with his brain chemistry and then brew a potion to fix it?"
"Why take weeks or months or years developing a potion?" retorted Hermione. "He needs help now. Actually, he needed it years ago, but--"

Draco suddenly looked past Hermione's shoulder. "Ron, can't you entertain your girlfriend in the evenings so she doesn't spend all her time making life more difficult for the rest of us?"

While Ron turned a predictable shade of red, Hermione looked ready to launch into a tirade, herself. Draco nudged Harry with his shoulder and politely bid his brother good day, smirking a little as he left Harry with the problem he'd created.

Just like a Slytherin.

"Don't mind Draco," Harry said as he headed for the Gryffindor table. "He's just miffed that you're the one who figured out Goyle's problem. He's been helping him for years and never noticed. But then, how could he? He'd never heard of dyslexia."

"Well if the Wizarding world would simply keep abreast of Muggle breakthroughs in the sciences and whatnot, I'm sure they'd discover a plethora of problems they could solve."

Hoping to head off another lecture, Harry asked Ron about the Chudley Cannons as they sat down and began loading their plates with the usual breakfast fare. The boys were still talking Quidditch when the owl post arrived. After washing some beans down with pumpkin juice, Ron said, "Hermione, hand me the Prophet, would you? We need to see the latest scores."

When Harry glanced over expectantly, he saw Hermione staring at the paper aghast, her hand covering her mouth.

"What is it?" Harry asked, the back of his neck prickling. At least it wasn't his scar, but still . . . "Voldemort? An attack?"

He reached for the paper but Hermione merely hugged it closer to herself. That was when Harry began to hear the whispering. Looking up, he saw something that made his bones go chill. All over the Great Hall, everywhere that a student had a copy of the paper, other students were gathered around whispering furiously as they read over shoulders.

In between sentences or paragraphs, almost all of those students were turning to scan the Gryffindor table, but their gazes would stop when they found him.

He ought to be used to the whole school staring at him, Harry thought. But he wasn't. His entire breakfast seemed to turn to rocks inside his stomach. Someone's found out about my needle! Oh Merlin, what if Skeeter or someone else was lurking about when I thought I was alone?

"Let me see that paper, Hermione--"

He never got to find out if she would have handed it over. Just at that moment, Warren Worthington, a seventh year, came up beside Harry. He shoved a copy of the paper into Harry's hands as he clapped him on the shoulders. Harry couldn't help but flinch, though he didn't know if the reflex was caused by the unexpected jostling or the glaring headline that seemed to leap off the page to meet his eyes.

**Harry Potter: Dark Wizard? Boy-who-Lived Openly Using Dark Arts at Hogwarts**

The minute he saw the headline, Harry's arms began to itch like mad. Someone has figured it out, he thought. Someone knows that my magic is dark and now they'll all turn against me again.
He dropped the paper as if it had burned him.

Worthington squeezed Harry's shoulder. "Don't you worry, mate. We've been down this road before, and this time the house'll stand behind you to a man." He gestured toward the paper atop Harry's plate. "As for this rubbish? Stupid git's just peeved he's getting sacked. Article ought to mention that, you think? I've half a mind to owl in a letter to the editor, mentioning as much!"

"Thanks, Warren," said Harry weakly.

The older boy nodded and went on his way.

Dreading it, but knowing he had to, Harry looked down at the Prophet. Without him even trying, his hands found their way up inside either sleeve of his school robes so he could scratch at his arms as he read.

*Harry Potter, Dark Wizard? The wizarding world has long had cause to wonder. No need here to detail his suspect entry into the most recent Tri-Wizard Tournament, or the fact that he's more than once escaped reprisals for violating the laws controlling underage magic. Events surrounding Potter have long been suspiciously fishy. Now, however, the Prophet has proof of what we all suspected.*

*According to an anonymous source from within Hogwarts itself, Potter has been incanting in nothing but Parseltongue ever since he recovered from his encounter with He-Who-etc. and his followers this past November. Even more shocking, any professor at Hogwarts who tried to discourage the practice has been threatened with dismissal.*

Harry started skimming, looking for the most damning bits. There actually wasn't much substance to the story; much of the space in the article was taken up with background that everyone knew and with old pictures of Harry from the Tri-Wizard Tournament.

"That ungrateful bastard!" Ron exclaimed as he read over Hermione's shoulder.

"Ronald!" she admonished.

"Well, it's true," Ron whispered furiously. "Harry could have had Aran brought up on full charges for what he did, not to mention humiliate him in front of the whole Board of Governors and make it so that no one would ever hire that git to teach again. And then he turns around and does this!"

Harry hadn't noticed any proof that Aran was behind the article, but Ron seemed sure and Warren had also insinuated as much, so he read on, looking for some.

*Our source inside Hogwarts, who would speak only on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals, said that he believes Potter and his adopted brother, Draco Snape, formerly Malfoy, learned the Dark Arts from their adoptive father, Severus Snape, a former Death Eater spy.*

'Just look at the facts,' the source said. 'They're as plain as the nose on Snape's face. Potter and the Malfoy boy [sic Draco Snape] were down in those dungeons with that man for months. They weren't seen by a single soul during all that time. Even the headmaster was barred from entry. And then the next thing we know, Malfoy [sic Draco Snape] was accused of murdering a girl! I don't have thing against either one of
them; they were both fine boys before Snape got his hands on them.

'But apparently the staff here thinks whatever Snape taught them is fine. When they came back to classes, Potter was using that filthy dark language for all his spells and nobody said so much as a word of objection. You never know what it is that he's actually casting. He might be pouring hexes left and right, for all we know. But the boys act like it's just fine and proper and they've corrupted the other students into thinking the same! It's time the public knew just what sort of school Albus Dumbledore has been running. He could have taken the lead here in condemning these aberrant magical practices. Instead, he's been rewarding Potter and Malfoy [sic Draco Snape] with ice-cream parties! It's an outrage, through and through!'

The source also said, off the record, that he caught the brothers cheating with a dark artefact and that they attacked him when he tried to take it away. The incident was then covered up by the school and ever since, the source has been constantly watched and threatened to prevent him from saying anything.

"I thought 'off the record' meant something wasn't going to be printed," Harry mumbled.

"Well, clearly Aran is a fool to have trusted Skeeter at all," Hermione put in. "But we'll show her--"

Harry pretended to study the article while he thought about that. "Um... brilliant idea, but don't you think she's got herself registered by now?"

Glancing around to see if he was still being stared at, Harry noticed Draco stomping his way over from the Slytherin table.

"She must have," said Ron, his hands balling into fists. "Otherwise she'd never have had the nerve to print that big bloody load of lies, would she now? Just look at it! Facts all screwed up, a right ugly headline over the whole thing, and just like before with Malfoy, a so-called source whose head is stuck straight up his arse!"

Draco had arrived by then, but he didn't react to Ron's comment. Instead, he shouldered his way in next to Harry and dropped a roll of parchment on top the newspaper as he sat down. "Good thing Severus got us that solicitor, Harry. Have Hedwig deliver this, will you? We'll sue Skeeter, the Daily Prophet, and Aran for libel!"

Harry sighed. He knew that his brother meant well, but this was clearly another instance of his impulse control issue. They couldn't bring anyone to court without revealing things that needed to be kept secret.

"What do you mean you've both got a solicitor?" asked Ron, his eyebrows drawing together. "What would you lot need a solicitor for?"

Uh-oh. Harry's arms started itching even worse. Unable to stand it, he gave up scratching and started more-or-less clawing at one spot on his left arm. He'd have given his vault for a needle right then, but now it seemed like every eye in the Great Hall was on him. He certainly wasn't going to transfigure anything using Parseltongue. Even though no one would know what he was doing, they'd stare at him simply for doing it!

"My fortune's been restored to me, and more than that you don't need to know," said Draco calmly.

It was one thing to say that, but sooner or later Ron would have to know, Harry supposed. How was
Ron going to feel to know that Harry had had loads of money to give away, and he'd given it all to Draco?

After a few moments another hand stilled his. Harry looked up, a little bit alarmed, but no one else seemed to realise that his brother had reached under the table and grabbed his wrist.

"Harry," said Draco in a low voice. "I think we'd better go find Severus."

Harry nodded shakily and reached out to grab the newspaper so they could bring it along. He noticed there was actually blood under his fingernails. Draco saw it too, he thought.

But nobody else, thank God.

Harry and Draco had almost reached the front of the hall when a commotion at the head table grabbed everyone's attention. Snape was stalking toward Aran, a copy of the *Prophet* clenched in his hand. He looked for all the world like some apocalyptic angel of death. Robes flapping behind him, boots clicking ominously on granite, his face was contorted into a mask of rage the likes of which Harry hadn't seen since Snape had caught him poking into his private memories the year before.

Harry wondered if he'd looked as frightened and ready to bolt as Aran did, now. The man jumped to his feet, but then seemed to realise he had no hope of getting away. In the next moment, he actually closed his eyes, just like a small child who thought that if he didn't see the monster, it couldn't see him.

Severus Snape saw him all right. His angry black gaze was focussed on nothing else. Walking straight up to the man until he stood just a few feet away, Snape raised his wand and held it levelled at Aran's throat.

*Oh, God.* Harry started to hold his breath. His father was going to kill Aran. Right here, right now, in front of hundreds of witnesses. Draco must have thought the same; he cried out with a strangled sort of squeak.

Snape's stance remained rigid, his wand arm not wavering in the slightest as he called out in a booming voice, "Aaron Alexandros Aran! You have publicly slandered me! You have cast dishonour upon my good name! You have reviled my son for the world at large to see! In front of all these witnesses, I demand satisfaction as is my right!"

Aran's eyes snapped open. "What? You-- I-- I did nothing of the sort!"

Snape took the paper clenched in his other hand and stepping forward two quick strides, smacked Aran in the face with it. "Do you deny being the scurrilous source for this disgusting rag of a periodical?"

His furious gaze clearly promised murder no matter what Aran said.

"I-- I--"

"Answer me, you knave!" roared Snape. "Answer me or I swear by Merlin's beard I'll silence you now and forever!"

"Of course I wasn't the source!" said Aran in a shaking voice. "I wouldn't do that to Hogwarts. Albus, tell him I wouldn't do that!"

The instant Aran denied Snape's accusation, Harry could feel magic tingling in the air. A rush of icy wind flew through one of the high windows in the Great Hall. Instantly, the temperature in the large
room dropped several degrees. As visible as a dense fog, the gust of wind swooped down and looped itself several times around Aran and Snape both, binding them together in a sort of hazy cocoon.

"No," gasped Aran, his mouth dropping open in unmistakable horror. "No."

"Yes," said Dumbledore quietly as the icy wind stopped moving. "The elements themselves have spoken." A crackling sound accompanied his words. Harry saw icicles beginning to form on the strands of his father's hair and on Aran's fringe.

"What the bloody hell is going on?" Harry asked, his voice pitched to a low whisper.

It was Ron who answered. Harry hadn't even realised his friend had followed him to the front. "It's a duel, it is!" he said, bobbing his head up and down. "I don't think there's been one in ages. Harry, your father's going to wipe the floor with that git."

Harry frowned. There were duels all the time at Hogwarts, but they didn't usually come accompanied by freezing winds. Clearly his confusion was written all over his face, since Draco took it upon himself to explain.

"It's a formal duel, Potter," the other boy drawled. "This isn't a game, or sport, or practice. This is the real thing. See that fog? It means that Aran has accepted. Now, he has to fight Severus, like it or not. Because if he won't..." Draco's grin was positively evil in delight. "Severus is allowed to kill him outright, and not even the Ministry could do a thing about it. Ancient magic."

Harry's mouth dropped open just as Aran's had the moment before. "Why on earth would Aran accept a challenge like that?"

"Challenge spell accepted for him," said Ron in a voice that said Draco wasn't the only one who understood pureblood customs. "'Cause he lied, see? When a wizard invokes a duelling challenge against you, he has to lay down specific charges. You can admit your guilt and avoid a duel, if you like, but if you deny a charge that's actually true, the spell will make you go through with the duel. That way, the challenging wizard gets satisfaction, one way or another."

"But why would he be stupid enough to lie, then?"

"Because he's Aran?"

"And because he doesn't know any more about ancient wizarding law than he does about Defence," added Draco. "He's probably just as confused as Harry. No offence, Harry."

By then, the headmaster had made his way over to the wizards bound by the challenge spell. Looking at the icy strand joining them, he nodded brusquely. When he spoke, his voice rang out with authority. "A challenge has been issued and accepted."

"I didn't accept!" squeaked Aran, beginning to shake all over. Small shards of ice rained down on the floor as they broke free from his hair.

Dumbledore ignored him completely. "A challenge has been issued and accepted," he said again. "The spell is cast and cannot be recalled." Lifting his wand, he cut through the foggy strand with a sharp chopping motion. Instantly, the noise of a gong reverberated through the hall.

The challenge spell fell to Snape and Aran's feet, the icicles vanishing clean away.

"Before this time tomorrow, the combatants must face one another in a wizards' duel," pronounced
the headmaster. "All those present are called upon to serve as solemn witness!"

His voice changed then, to one far less formal as he glanced from side to side. "Might I suggest the Quidditch pitch? Things are bound to get messy and the house-elves really do already have tasks enough."

Harry almost burst out laughing.

"But, but, this is barbaric!" Aran stammered. "Headmaster, you can't let this happen!"

Dumbledore shook his head and raised his hands as if in defeat. "As you must surely have realised by now, Professor Aran, the matter is completely beyond my control. Powerful magic is at play, and it must be satisfied."

Aran's looked like he might pass out, by then. "But it'll be murder!"

"Oh, surely not," said the headmaster, his kindly blue eyes twinkling. "I have great faith in my Potions Master." Dumbledore's voice grew deadly serious, then. "And contrary to your allegations, he is not by any means a dark wizard."

"Indeed not," drawled Snape. "Though that should hardly ease your mind, Aaron. After all, one needn't be a dark wizard to follow through on the ancient form of the duel."

"To the death," whispered Draco. Harry shot his brother an irritated glance. He could have figured that one out, himself.

Aran visibly gulped.

The headmaster spoke up one more time. "All sections of Defence Against the Dark Arts will be dismissed for today so that the professors might have time to prepare. The duel will commence tomorrow morning before breakfast. Please, everyone, continue your meal."

Aran definitely wasn't going to continue his. In fact, he looked rather green.

Snape turned in a swirl of robes, his dark gaze studying the crowd below the high dais on which stood the head table. He was looking for his sons, Harry felt sure.

But something stopped him from coming down to them straight away.

"Oh, Aaron," said Snape in a sneering tone as he whirled back to face the other teacher. "One more thing."

As soon as the Defence professor looked up at him, Snape punched him squarely in the face.
A Fitting End

After Snape swept out of the Great Hall in a majestic swirl of billowing robes, Harry and Draco were left gaping at one another.

"So much for revenge being bad for you," the Slytherin boy finally whispered in an awed voice.

Harry flicked a glance to where Aran lay unconscious. "Yeah, but just think of what Dad could have done."

"Think of what he will do," said Ron, rubbing his hands together.

Draco huffed, ever so slightly. "Well if he does what he just threatened, I'm never listening to his lectures on vengeance again, am I?"

Personally, Harry thought that factor was probably what would stay Snape's hand. Then again, the man had done some pretty awful things in his life, hadn't he? He felt bad about them, though. Harry still remembered his father's anguished voice from months ago.

*I can't save them, Harry...*

So how likely was it that he'd kill Aran in cold blood, and in front of a school full of children, no less, including his own sons? Harry nodded to himself. Probably that theory explained the punch they'd just witnessed. Snape had a temper, after all. He had to do something about that horrible newspaper article.

"Well, I'm glad I have someone to stick up for me," said Harry. "It makes for a nice change."

"Hey, I always stick up for you!" Ron immediately said, his face flushing a bit.

At the same moment, Draco rounded on Harry. "Serpensortia," he said in an undertone, speaking right over Ron's words.

Harry smiled at both of them. "I know. I meant the adults."

"Oh," said Ron and Draco in unison. They both looked irritated about it afterwards. Actually, Ron looked irritated and Draco looked put out.

"You'll get used to agreeing," said Harry, laughing. "And that'll make for a nice change, too."

The teachers at the head table had merely stared, round-eyed, at the scene they'd just witnessed, except for Dumbledore who had formalised the duel. Now, they were beginning to come out of their shock. Pomfrey rushed over to Aran's side and after a cursory look at the unconscious professor, cast Mobilicorpus to move him.

Harry almost laughed again at the sight of Aran's body hanging like a limp marionette as it bobbed its way between the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor tables and out the doors of the Great Hall. Pomfrey was making a clucking noise as she followed it. Harry hoped that didn't mean she was planning to lecture Snape about not knocking the other teachers unconscious.

Ron started heading back to his seat, saying something about grabbing a few more bites before they had to head to Charms.

"I'll catch up with you there," said Harry quickly. Suddenly things didn't seem so funny, any longer.
Charms involved a lot of wand waving, after all. His sleeves might slide up. And that was all he needed after that horrible article, people wondering how his arms had got so scratched up.

"Ha. Not likely," said Ron, turning around, a scowl on his face. "I'm not having your father blast me, again, about leaving you to walk the halls alone."

"When did he talk to you?"

"Didn't. Sent a Howler to me and Hermione. Through the common room Floo. I don't think teachers ought to be allowed to do a thing like that!"

_A Howler._ Harry knew it was probably wrong of him to almost like that. But it _was_ nice to have an adult who would stick up for him. A father. A real father. "Um, so what did it say?"

Ron grimaced. "That we were prefects and ought to put others ahead of ourselves. That you weren't to walk the halls alone and we knew it, and if we left you again to conduct _our pitiful little love-lives_, he knew a hex that would shove our tongues down our throats and glue them there."

Harry just about gaped. "He didn't!"

"He sure as shite did. So Hermione and I are walking you to Charms and that's that."

"Draco can walk me to class before he heads to Transfiguration, all right? I have to talk to him about something."

Ron hesitated a moment. "Yeah, all right," he finally grumbled.

Draco raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything until he'd followed Harry out of the Great Hall and down the corridor. "What?"

"Just a second." Harry pulled open a door and glanced into a dusty storage room hung with cobwebs. Toward the back there was a huge freestanding mirror so coated in grime that Harry could barely see his own reflection. He wondered for a second if it was like the Mirror of Erised, but then Draco followed him in and more pressing problems surged to the forefront of his mind.

Sighing, he warded the room and then shoved up the sleeves of his robe. He wished he'd worn a long-sleeved shirt today; it would have been that much harder to get under cloth to skin.

Draco drew in a tight breath when he saw the furious red scratches covering both Harry's forearms. Long lines of scratched-raw skin had formed angry red welts flecked with an occasional dot of blood. One small spot in particular was gouged all the way through and was still oozing.

"I can't go to Charms looking like this, not with all the casting we do in there. So . . . er, would you?"

"Would I what?"

"Um . . . heal them? My own spells . . . well, I can't really do it myself."

Draco's arms were crossed, Harry noticed. "And why is that? Have you given it any thought?"

Oh, God. Draco was going to make this difficult. "Look, I know why it is. Dad and I had a long talk about it."

"Good. Because if you think I'm going to be your . . . your enabler on this, then you can just--"
"Enabler!"

Draco's chin lifted a fraction. "Marsha uses the word all the time. It means people who help you do things that aren't actually very good for you."

"I'm not asking you to help me do— look, I just don't want everybody in class to see, all right?"

"I should make you go ask Severus."

"Draco—"

"Oh, all right," drawled the other boy. "This once."

Harry blew out a breath in relief. "Good."

Draco wasn't finished. "But I'm telling Severus all about it, first chance I get."

Harry felt his fists clenching. He'd rather his father thought he was mostly over his problem. It had been almost a week since he'd flooed down to talk to him, and in all that time, he hadn't once conjured a needle! Snape was proud of him for that; Harry just knew it. And Draco was going to ruin things! "That's just nasty, it is."

"It's not. I have to. If you were on my broom, you'd know why."

"You just want to be the good son for once!"

"Like I'm ever going to be that," muttered Draco. His eyes were blazing when he looked at Harry. "I'm not trying to get you in trouble, so don't be a total prat. I just can't have you thinking you can hurt yourself and I'll help you hide it."

"Just get on with it," said Harry, stretching out his arms. He could tell by then that Draco wasn't going to change his mind.

Draco's wand touched the ugly red marks, very gently. And then he cast a cleaning charm across Harry's fingers. The blood under his nails disappeared, but Harry still felt irritated by the whole situation. He felt like saying, thanks for nothing, but it wouldn't be exactly true, so instead he just slammed out of the storage closet and stomped down the hall.

Draco ran to catch up with him and walk at his side, but Harry didn't speak to him until they were at the Charms classroom. And even then, all he did was mutter a good-bye.

In Charms that day, they ended up having what Flitwick liked to call an open-ended review, which basically meant they were allowed to pair off however they liked and practice anything they'd learned. Or just chat, actually, as long as they kept waving their wands every so often.

Barely ten minutes in, however, the classroom door opened to admit Snape. "Might I have a word with my son?" he asked without preamble.

Harry's arms started itching. So Draco had gone to Snape already, had he? Nice!

The Ravenclaws and Gryffindors made sort of an awed noise as Snape stepped inside the classroom. And no wonder, considering what they'd just seen at breakfast.

Flitwick nodded his head enthusiastically as he bounced on his heels. "A real duel here at Hogwarts! Jolly exciting, isn't it? I'm sure you'll put on a rousing good show!"
Snape's lips looked very thin. "I'll do my best," he said dryly. "Now, if I might speak with Harry for a moment?"

"Certainly, certainly." Flitwick motioned for Harry to go.

Snape didn't say much as they walked back down to the Great Hall and flooed to his office. And Harry was fuming too much to make small talk. Once they were alone in the Potions office, it was Snape who opened the conversation.

"I wanted to speak to you before breakfast ended, but it seemed best to wait until we could have some privacy. That article was nothing short of vicious. You didn't take it seriously, did you?"

"Oh, no, no, Harry wanted to say. Of course not.

But he couldn't claim that, could he? Not considering that Draco was going to tell Snape what Harry had done to his own arms. Clearly, Snape didn't already know. Which meant Draco hadn't ratted him out. Yet.

But he would; Harry didn't have a single doubt about that. So the best thing to do was probably tell Snape himself, before Draco got a chance to. "Um, well, I sort of did take it seriously, actually."

Snape leaned forward across his desk. "Harry," he said, his voice dark and chiding all at once. "You aren't evil. Aran is."

Harry blinked. "He's petty and small-minded, but I don't know that I'd actually call him evil."

"His is a self-serving, pedestrian sort of evil." Snape shrugged. "I've offended him and his way of getting back at me was to strike out at my children. No doubt he didn't expect a challenge in return."

Harry couldn't help but snort a bit at that. He wondered whether Snape looked at this as some sort of atonement for the way he'd treated Harry for years. He almost said so, but since they'd more or less agreed to put all that behind him during their talk out in Devon, Harry held his tongue and commented on his other epiphany. "You've been angling to duel with Aran all along," he said, a little surprised that his voice came out sounding almost accusing. "That's why you were being so obnoxious while you supervised his classes!"

"Why I suggested supervising his classes to begin with." Snape's dark eyes glimmered. "Albus had in mind to simply sack him, but I wanted more satisfaction than that. I was trying to get Aran to challenge me."

"He's scared to death of you!"

"Yes, I did notice that," drawled Snape. "And so he took a coward's revenge in venting his spleen to Skeeter. But enough of Aran, Harry. I'll take care of him tomorrow. What concerns me now is you. How much did the article bother you?"

Harry knew what that question really meant. "Well, I didn't conjure a needle, but . . ." He sighed, loud and long. "I'm worried everybody'll think I am going dark, now. Parseltongue really isn't very well thought of, you know. I wasn't trying to hurt myself, but I, er, scratched my arms up something awful."

"With?"

"Huh? Oh. My fingernails."
"Let me see your arms."

"If you want, but Draco healed them for me before class so there's not much to see--"

Snape's expression grew thunderous. "He did, did he?"

Harry made a face just thinking about it. "Yeah."

Snape studied him for a long moment. "You're angry at your brother. Why?"

"'Cause he swore he was going to tell you, soon as he could, about the scratches and him healing them!"

"Ah. Were you not planning to mention the matter on your own, then?"

"I--" Harry swallowed, not wanting to lie to his father. "I don't know for sure, sir."

"Then Draco is to be commended," said Snape calmly. "He doesn't have a great deal of experience at being a friend, let alone a brother, but his telling me would be the right thing to do. You do understand that, I hope."

"I--" Harry grimaced again, but not in anger this time. He could see what his father meant. "Yeah, all right. I'll have to apologise to Draco, I guess. Ugh."

"I'm sure you two will work it out." Snape was silent for a moment. "It concerns me that you aren't certain you would have told me about hurting yourself again. I thought we had an agreement."

"That I'd come get you before needle-cravings got to be too much to handle. But this wasn't quite like that. I was just upset reading the article, thinking that everybody would turn on me again."

"They won't," said Snape in a confident voice. "The mood in the hall this morning was generally one of outrage on your behalf."

"Yeah, well it helps that I have a... er, a champion this time."

Snape frowned slightly. "You'd have weathered the storm fine on your own, Harry. It's one of your talents."

"I know." Harry reached out and took his father's hand. "I was just trying to say thanks. You know, without actually saying it."

"Ah. Slytherin."

"Something like that."

"About these scratches, then." Snape's dark gaze seemed to bore into him. "You don't feel your compulsion is becoming more generalised?"

Compulsion. Harry didn't like that word very much. He let go of his father's hand. "Well, sometimes my arms start feeling itchy, but I don't really want to scratch them, not the way I would want the needle. This was sort of a special case because that article was so vicious and I couldn't get to a needle." Harry swallowed. He'd wanted to keep reading the article so he'd know the worst, but looking back he could see this was a case when he should have gone to get his father. Straight away.

"It won't happen again, sir," he said in a low voice. "I promise. I'll come to you before it can. This time... I'm sorry."
"I don't want you to be sorry," said Snape, leaning forward. "All I want is for this to get better."

"It is!" Harry ran a hand through his hair, realising only afterwards that he'd seen that exact gesture from Snape. Weird. "Look, it was just that article, all right? It got to me."

"Unfortunately, you must learn to expect that sort of thing from the Prophet."

"I know."

Snape's voice suddenly went dry. "You do realise what this is going to do to Draco's overprotective tendencies."

Harry grimaced. "He'll want me to cut my nails down to the quick."

"Without using anything sharp, no doubt."

"Maybe he'll teach me one of those manicure spells he likes so well, then," joked Harry.

"A son of mine who favours manicure spells." Snape was the one who grimaced, then.

Harry laughed. "Hey, the way I hear it, this September during Herbology practicals he wouldn't shut up about how his dragonhide gloves were chapping his skin!"

"He wanted to send a house-elf out to buy fresh. During class, no less." Snape's lips curled upwards. "As I recall, he was quite put out when Professor Sprout lent him another pair. Used."

"Draco wouldn't like that at all."

"No, certainly not. Getting back to the issue at hand, however, I should tell you that just this morning, your brother was trying to persuade me that I should ward the drawers in your potions desk."

"Huh?"

"He felt there were, as he put it, 'simply too many sharp objects available there.'"

"Oh, nice! I wouldn't be able to do my work."

"Well, he did say you wouldn't need the implements for making ice cream."

Harry huffed a little in irritation, but the feeling was quickly swamped by thoughts of the taste-testing they were supposed to have on Tuesday. "I'm sure you don't want to hear this, but . . . uh, Potions is really fun now. No offence."

"I imagine a sweets-based curriculum would be," drawled Snape, his voice rather dark considering he hadn't been terribly upset about the matter before. "No doubt the Ministry, always the soul of wisdom, whole-heartedly approves. No matter that the lot of you will be needing an insulin potion next--"

Harry blinked. "Something wrong, Dad?"

Snape waved a hand. "Perhaps the duel merely has me on edge."

"Not a duel with Aran," said Harry, laughing. "I had a question, though. Who's going to be your second? The headmaster?"
"I don't need a second."

"I thought it was traditional."

"But not required. In any case, there's no-one I would want for that save Albus, and he's constrained by his position of authority here." Snape stood up, briefly touching Harry's shoulder as he made his way to the door. "I do believe you should return to class, now. If anyone asks what I needed you for, you may merely say we were discussing what to do about Ms. Skeeter. In fact, be sure to mention that." His dark eyes glimmered in a way Harry recognised.

"What are you going to do about her?"

"I have no immediate plans."

"Then why say--" Harry caught on before he could finish the question. "Oh, you want to get her nice and worried. You're going to drop hints all over to drive her batty. And you want me to help you."

The man's eyes were gleaming now. "Well-reasoned, Harry. Now, let's get you back to Charms so you may begin."

----------------------------------------------

At lunch, Harry sat by Draco so he could apologise. Part of him didn't really want to, not in front of the other Slytherins, but he knew it was probably for the best, all around. Draco had moved out of Slytherin to help Harry, which meant he'd given up at least some chances to solidify his own leadership position in his house. But if Harry let the other Slytherins overhear him saying he was sorry about something, it might help Draco save face.

Draco didn't look at him when he sat down. Harry took that as a bad sign, even if the other boy was in the middle of a conversation with Crabbe. A few seats away, Zabini was working on his lines, but he was watching Draco and Crabbe chatting, and he looked none too happy about it. Harry wished he was close enough to see what number Zabini was on.

"Draco," said Harry, a little loudly, when there was a break in the conversation.

"Hmm?" The other boy's silver eyes were cool and disinterested, but his gaze did drop to Harry's fingernails for a moment, as if checking that Harry hadn't scratched himself again.

"I was a prat before and I'm sorry," said Harry. "Will you accept my apology?"

Draco raised an eyebrow. "A prat, were you?"

Feeling like he was being led, Harry nodded. "Yeah. A total prat, just like you said. I should have thanked you. I mean, for all of it."

"Well," drawled Draco, "in my experience Gryffindors often are total prats. Good you know it, though."

Harry figured that was Draco's way of accepting his apology without actually saying, in front of the other Slytherins, that he'd done something as soft as forgive someone.

"And at least you're part-Slytherin," continued Draco, as though he were a lord granting favours.
"That makes you somewhat tolerable, I suppose."

He was grinning by then, though, so Harry didn't take him too seriously.

"What do you think Snape'll do to Aran in the duel?" asked Goyle, talking with his mouth full.

"No idea," said Draco.

"What about you, Harry?"

Harry almost choked on his egg salad, hearing Goyle call him that. Hmm, probably Hermione had badgered him into it when she was tutoring him.

"I don't know, either." He shrugged to show he really didn't.

Goyle's voice dropped a bit. "Was that article right? Has your father been teaching the two of you some Dark Arts?"

Draco managed to answer that without giving a definite yes or no answer, but it opened up a real can of worms. Skeeter's fault. The implication that Harry might have learned some Dark Arts from Snape apparently fascinated the Slytherins. Draco tried to shut them up, but without much success.

It wasn't until they were on their way to Potions that Harry managed to get Draco alone. Walking ahead of Ron and Hermione, he mentioned that he'd already seen Snape and told him everything.

"Good," said Draco, nodding. "But I still have to tell him as well. And no, I don't think you're lying. It's the principle of the thing."

Well, it was probably a good thing for Draco to stick to his principles. This one at least. He did mean Harry well.

"All right. So how's the gelato coming along?"

"Hermione wants to add far too much sugar," complained Draco in a slightly peevish voice. "As if she doesn't know proper citrus should be tart. Must be a Muggle thing, wanting everything so sweet it's cloying."

"You balance tart with sweet to get a pleasing flavour," Hermione said from behind. Harry wondered how long she'd been listening to their conversation. "It's not a Muggle thing at all!"

Draco turned back slightly. "Harry was Muggle-raised. We'll let him decide--"

"No way," said Harry, dropping back to walk with Ron. "You two work it out on your own."

------------------------------------------------------

Saturday morning dawned bright and clear, from what Harry could see in the enchanted picture frame. It continued to display nothing but the Whomping Willow, but at least it seemed to show the current weather.

"Nice day," he commented as he sat down to an early breakfast with his father and brother. "Do you feel ready for later?"

"Hey, just asking," said Harry, laughing. Then, remembering the day before, he hinted at something he'd been meaning to ask. He'd have talked to his father about it the night before, but Snape had been busy with paperwork. For what, Harry had no idea, but the man had been furiously writing something, his brow so wrinkled as he sat in his office that Harry hadn't wanted to ask him *that*, either.

"So, the duel. I suppose you already have it all planned out. Strategy, not that you'd need very much to best Aran. But what are you planning to do to him?"

Snape's voice went dark. "Make him regret the way he's treated you."

"How?"

"Why don't you wait and see?"

A little stunned, Harry protested, "You mean you won't tell me your plan?"

"It's bad form to discuss it in advance," explained Draco as he spread pumpkin butter on a toasted crumpet.

"Even with your own sons?" Harry sighed. "All right. Proper wizarding behaviour. Fine."

"I doubt you'll be disappointed," drawled Snape.

Still that ominous tone. "Just tell me you aren't going to kill him."

"I'll tell you no such thing," said Snape grimly. "Though I will state for the record that there are worse things than death."

Hearing that, Harry couldn't help but shiver. He trusted his father to do the right thing, really he did. Still, the man *had* been a Death Eater once. He knew some awful, *awful* hexes and curses. Harry was sure of it.

The walk down to the Quidditch pitch was largely silent. Uncomfortable, Harry tried to start up a conversation, but Draco quietly told him that they ought to let Snape concentrate.

All of Hogwarts was already assembled on the grass below one set of goal posts, the students milling about in a long haphazard row vaguely sorted by houses. As Harry, Snape, and Draco began to walk in front of the students, they hushed into an eerie silence, but as soon as they'd gone a few feet, whispers started up behind them.

A few yards away a second row composed of teachers and other staff faced the students. Unlike the students, they were seated in chairs. Pomfrey was glaring at Snape as if to warn him she didn't want a mangled Aran to care for. Harry noticed his father's eyes glinting in response. Most of the teachers seemed fairly relaxed, though. McGonagall was chatting with Hooch about the tartans she'd seen in Hogsmeade. Both women fell silent as Snape passed by.

Talk about relaxed -- Harry could have sworn he saw Professor Vector actually *wink* at them as they began to walk in between the two rows.

"What's that about?" whispered Harry.

Draco spoke out of the side of his mouth. "Tell you later."
Snape, Harry noticed, gave Draco a rather exasperated glance.

It was all a mystery to Harry, but there was no more time to ponder it. They'd reached the far end of the duelling field by then. Snape took his place there, turning around to look down the recently levelled ground. He swivelled his gaze to look at the students first, and then the staff, then stood composed, a slight breeze ruffling the duelling robes he was wearing. Less flowing than his usual attire, they were obviously designed for this.

"What's this, now?" asked Draco, frowning as he strode up to the Slytherin students, who were mostly in a clump to Snape's left. "Standing about randomly like a bunch of Hufflepuffs. Whose idea was that? Show your Head of House some respect, now! Neat rows, seven deep. First-years in front and second years behind, and so on. Well? Move! Yes, like that. Good--"

"Who put you in charge?" Zabini said, standing his ground in the front row. He looked ridiculous, towering over the smaller students.

"I took charge," Draco calmly replied. "You could have done it, but you didn't. Now, get into place, Zabini."

The other boy made a contemptuous gesture, but must have figured that now wasn't the time to dispute Draco's authority. Harry was actually impressed that nobody else balked at following Draco's directions--not even the seventh-years. It looked to him as though his brother had regained a good deal of his former standing with his house mates. And that all sorted well, didn't it? Maybe together, they'd be able to keep a good many of the Slytherins from making the same mistake Snape had made when he was their age.

Harry felt a little bad that he'd walked right past Gryffindor without a word, but it wasn't like he could go back and stand with them. He might be a Gryffindor and a Slytherin both, but above all that, he was Severus Snape's son, so his place was clear. Harry started making his way over to the back rows of the Slytherin lines.

"No, we're in front," said Draco, taking him by an elbow and steering him to a place alongside the first-year Slytherins, only a short distance from where Snape was waiting. "As aggrieved parties. That article didn't only slander Severus, you realise."

Harry was glad then that his brother knew so much about pureblood traditions.

A slight jostling to his side had Harry glancing down to see a familiar red-haired girl. Before he could greet Larissa, however, Draco stepped between them. "Back over there where you were," he told the little girl, bending down to speak to her. "I told you, didn't I?" Glancing up a bit, Draco addressed all the first years. "Harry doesn't like people fawning all over him just because he's the Boy Who Lived. Show some proper Slytherin decorum."

Larissa's eyes grew wide. She didn't exactly look like she was about to burst into tears, but she sure didn't look happy. "But Drakey--"

"I told you not to call me that!"

"I don't need you protecting me from the first-years, Draco," said Harry. Well, at least now he knew why Larissa had never come up to him again. He was a bit irritated with his brother about that, but Drakey . . . that made it hard to hold onto the feeling. "Larissa, you come stand by me."

Larissa threw Draco a smug look as she shouldered past him. It didn't last long, though. As she looked out at the duelling field, her little face turning to stare at Snape and then at Aran's empty
space, she started to look worried. Her eyes clouded over as she pressed her lips tightly together.

Well, Snape had given everyone the clear impression that he intended to kill Aran. And Slytherin or no, Larissa was just a first-year. Eleven or twelve -- even Harry hadn't seen anybody killed in front of him until he was older than that. Except his mother, but he remembered that like something in a mist. For most of his childhood he hadn't been able to remember it at all. Larissa was old enough to understand what she would see here today.

Harry bent down a little bit. "It'll be all right. You'll see--"

Larissa's voice quavered as she shoved her little hands into her pockets and whispered, "Why won't Drakey let me stand in back? I don't want to get splashed by all the bl- bl- blood."

"Your Head of House has better aim than that," Draco said dryly.

"Draco!" Harry turned to face his brother. "She's scared!"

Larissa was tugging on Harry's robes. "I'm not scared!" she objected, though her voice trembled.

"That's the Slytherin spirit," said Draco, nodding.

"I'm not scared," she insisted again. "B- but, it's just that everyone else was talking this morning about all sorts of horrible curses--"

"Here, I think you wanted to hold Sals," Harry said, fishing the snake out of his pocket.

On his other side, Draco stiffened. "You're not supposed to play with pets at a duel, Harry," he said in a low voice.

"I'll put her away before it starts. Look, it's a distraction."

Draco gave the little girl a hard look, but then shrugged.

Meanwhile, Larissa was beaming as she held the snake. "What was my name in Parseltongue again?" After Harry hissed it, she started trying to say it herself. Harry didn't think Sals could understand her, but the snake seemed very happy all the same, slithering several times around her wrist. Larissa started asking Harry questions, then. What Sals liked to eat. What Sals and Harry liked to talk about. If Harry wanted more pet snakes.

And on and on.

"Aran's late," murmured Draco after a few moments of such chatter.

Harry shrugged. "Well, even an idiot would rather cut and run than face somebody like Dad, right?"

"Severus is allowed to kill him in that case!"

"Lower your voice," said Harry, thinking of Larissa. Thankfully, she still seemed caught up in playing with Sals. Harry kind of envied her that. He couldn't think of a time when he'd been so easily able to forget his worries. Not even when he'd been her age. His own voice very low, he whispered to Draco, "Isn't Severus allowed to do that during the duel as well?"

"Yeah, but Aran'll lose his magic if the duel doesn't start before those twenty-four hours have passed. But I see what you mean. Maybe he thinks he can hide from Severus, even without magic. Pretty stupid, if you ask me."
"Well, we are talking Aran here--"

A booming voice interrupted Harry.

"Professor Dumbledore," called Hagrid as he lumbered into view, hauling a struggling Aran with him. One meaty hand on the Defence professor's back collar, Hagrid didn't stop walking until he could plunk the man down squarely in front of the headmaster, who had stood up from his chair to walk into the middle of the duelling field.

Dumbledore touched his wand briefly to his throat. "Good morning, Professor Aran," he said pleasantly, his blue eyes twinkling so much that Harry could see it even at a distance. "My, my. You look a mess. Whatever can have happened?"

"Caught 'im in the Dark Forest," said Hagrid, his outraged voice easily carrying the length of the duelling field. "Tryin' ta flee, 'e was, like the no-good scallywag 'e is! And no wonder, after what all 'e said about our Harry 'ere! As if the boy's father wouldn't 'ave a thing or two ta say 'bout that! Or me, eh! How'd you like that, Aran, an honest fight, man to man? I'll take you, I will--"

"Thank you, Hagrid, but I think that will do," said Dumbledore calmly. And then, to Aran, "Professor, honestly. You're a teacher of impressionable youth. Don't you think that trying to evade a legitimately issued challenge sets them rather a bad example?"

"You placed the wards," screeched Aran. "The Floos, the Apparition boundary! I thought it was that devil Snape--"

"Now there's a sound approach," drawled Snape loudly. "Insult me right again before we duel. Brilliant, Aaron."

Aran whirled on a heel. "That's Aran to you!"

Snape gave an eloquent shrug, as if to say, "Aaron, Aran, how can you tell the difference?"

"I set the wards," said Dumbledore, stroking his beard as he nodded. "Everywhere except the Dark Forest. So you fled through there and were caught by . . . an enraged elm, from the look of you. Well, you're here now, so all's well in the world. Shall we begin?"

"I won't duel him!" shrieked Aran. "And you can't make me!"

"Actually, I can," returned the headmaster, still smiling like he'd taken a silly potion. "You're employed by Hogwarts' School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and under the terms of the Hogwarts Charter, paragraph nineteen thousand and sixty five, subparagraph d, I'm fully empowered to--"

"I resign!"

"Oh, I really will need that in writing," murmured Dumbledore, though thanks to Sonorus his voice still carried. "The Charter again. I'm sure you understand. Pity you haven't time to write anything out at the moment, Professor--"

"You still can't make me duel," said Aran, though by then he sounded more sullen than convinced.

"Professor Aran, is it truly your wish to lose every trace of magical talent? If Severus is disposed to kill you, he'll do it whether you fight him or not. Might I point out that the one thing you can do to increase the odds of dying is to flee? Nothing annoys Severus quite so much as blatant cowardice."

"Ha," said Harry under his breath. "Nothing annoys him as much as blatant Gryffindor bravery."
Draco’s lips quirked, just a little.

Aran glanced at Snape, who was still standing perfectly composed. And then Aran threw his shoulders back as his eyes narrowed. "It's only Slytherin to choose one's battles. I'd think you of all wizards would know that, Snape."

"It's not Slytherin when you can't choose," returned Snape in a silky voice. "Are you done whingeing, Aaron? I've other things to do today, you understand."

"Fine!" Aran began stomping his way to his place on the duelling field.

Snape's upper lip curled in contempt. "Finally."

"Here, let me have Sals back," Harry said to Larissa. Really, he'd rather she play with the snake if it would keep her happy, but Draco was probably right about decorum. Harry did know how much Snape valued it.

Larissa frowned as she handed Sals over and watched Harry tuck the little snake into a pocket.

On the duelling field, Aran looked ready. "You just might be in for a surprise!" he called, sneering. "You don't know what tricks I have up my sleeve!"

"What I know," drawled Snape, "is that your sleeves are shredded. Pity you didn't come properly attired, Aaron. Shouldn't you take that off that rag of a robe before we begin?"

Harry thought he'd never seen Aran looking so annoyed as he shrugged out of his torn robe and threw it to the side, growling. A house-elf appeared from nowhere and gathered it up, then vanished.

His wand held vertically in front of him, Aran executed a stiff, resentful bow. Snape's answering bow was merely a jerk of his head. Which figured. The man had no respect for Aran, just as he'd had none for Lockhart.

"Wands at the ready," said Dumbledore in a voice that could only be described as jolly. Behind him, Harry saw McGonagall leaning forward in her chair as Snape and Aran moved to hold their wands rather like swords. "On the count of three, then. Three -- two --"

"Expelliarmus!" screamed Aran, flinging his arm out wildly.

"Cheater!" called a fair number of students.

"Well, I never," said Draco in an outraged voice.

Harry slanted his brother a wry glance. "Yeah, actually, you did."

"Shut up, Potter. I was twelve."

Meanwhile, the scarlet flash of light from Aran's wand had flown wide of the mark. Snape just stood there and watched it sail past him, a full yard to his right. He made a tsking noise as it collided harmlessly with a patch of grass.

Aran made a yelping noise and waved his wand as though to cast something else, but he looked too uncoordinated to manage any spell by then.

Snape twirled his wand, the motion almost lazy. "Rictusempra!"

"Weird," said Draco under his breath. "Why would he cast that?"
Harry was wondering the same thing as he watched the jet of silver light hit Aran square in the stomach. The man doubled up, laughing like a hyena, scrabbling at his own belly to stop the invisible hands tickling him.

"Maybe Dad's feeling playful," said Harry, though he didn't think so.

"He looks murderous," said Draco.

Next to Harry, Larissa gave a little yelp as she jumped closer to Harry. "I heard that you can actually kill someone with Rictusempra if they laugh so much they can't get their breath."

Harry doubted that was Snape's plan, though it would certainly be a humiliating way to die. "You know, you don't have to watch," he whispered to her. "Want to hold my hand?"

"I'm not a baby!"

For all that though, when Snape raised his wand again, Larissa looked pleadingly up at Harry.

He thought better than to embarrass her again by saying anything out loud. This time, he just caught hold of her hand and pulled her a little bit closer, ruffling his cloak so she could hide her face in it if she wanted.

But all Snape did that time was end the spell.

Aran rolled onto his hands and knees and awkwardly stood up, his face flushed almost purple. Harry didn't think that was just from all the tickling. He was probably feeling pretty humiliated to have been taken down by a silly hex like that one. Maybe that really was Snape's game. Pure disgrace?

Whatever Aran was feeling, he was also about as angry as Harry had ever seen. "Blasphemo Totalus!" roared Aran furiously as he gained his breath and ran forward several paces, his wand flashing through the air.

Beside Harry, Draco gasped. "Oh dear Merlin, he's calling down hellfire!"

Larissa screamed and clung all the more to Harry, who watched with horror as the flame that had shot from Aran's wand raced toward Snape.

"Helare," cried Snape, flinging his arm out fully.

Aran's fire froze in mid-air and shattered, raining down in a thousand pieces.

"Weather charm," said Draco sagely, as if he'd known it all along. "Well, Blasphemo was a big mistake. Aran's in for it, now."

He was . . . and he wasn't. True, Snape hardly let his opponent draw breath after that. Stunning hexes, a series of tripping jinxes, and then several spells to give Aran a stitch in his side. It was rapid-fire magic, but they were all children's spells. The kind of things Harry had had cast at him in Defence, week in and week out.

"This is bizarre," complained Draco.

Harry had to admit that it really was. What was his father up to?

Just then, a blue cloud erupted from the end of Snape's wand and wrapped itself around Aran, who abruptly sat down on the grass and began rocking himself back and forth.
"Jelly Brain Jinx," said Draco, obviously disapproving. "What can Severus be thinking?"

But Harry had suddenly caught on. It was all he could do not to jump up and down. "He's thinking of me! Dad's doing to Aran all the things that git let the other students do to me when I couldn't defend myself because he wouldn't let me use Parseltongue! Yeah, that first day in class when we were practicing blocks, Ron kept casting _Rictusempra_ at me! And then I got stunned and tripped and such until I was just sick of it. And then, that day when we had to practise conjuring _caninae_, Zabini got me with a Jelly-Brain Jinx first of all--"

Draco grinned. "Oh, yes. I remember. Well, then, _Diffindo_ ought to be next. Wonder how Aran'll like having his clothes torn off?"

Larissa gasped. Harry wrapped an arm around her and held her tight, only to see Draco shaking his head. "She's a Slytherin, Harry. No need to coddle her."

"She's a little girl. No way does she need to see Aran getting _Diffindo'd_.

"Point taken."

Aran was muttering something as he rocked himself on the grass. Harry couldn't make it out, but he caught a few words. Something about ducks.

Snape took his time lifting the Jelly Brain Jinx, and then watched, his lips twisted disdainfully, as Aran recovered. It seemed to take a full minute. Harry wasn't sure if this was a case of decorum or if his father was making a point. At any rate, Snape waited until the man had cast at him again, this time some spell Harry had never heard of. The incantation sounded really advanced. So advanced, in fact, that Aran was in no shape to cast it at that moment. A slight hissing noise issued from his wand as a single puff of smoke popped out the end.

The students all around Harry burst out laughing. Even the teachers looked to be chortling.

"_Diffindo!_" called Snape then, his wand slashing through the air.

Aran's shirt rent in two from his collar to where it was tucked into his trousers.

"_Diffindo!_" yelled Snape again, and Aran's shirt sleeves dropped to the ground. The same house-elf as before popped into existence and scurried about picking up bits of clothing as they fell to the pitch.

Aran's mouth fell open when great gashes appeared in his trouser legs, Snape's wand scissoring through the air to shred the garment. He didn't stop until Aran was wearing nothing but tatters, the man's trousers covering barely more than pants would.

Harry almost burst out laughing, that feeling he'd had the day before washing over him again. Someone to stand up for him. Someone who'd never let him down. He hugged Larissa to him just a little bit more tightly, grinning.

By then, Aran looked like he didn't know which way to run, though he sure seemed intent on trying to get away from the rapid-fire spells shooting out of Snape's wand.

"_Furnunculus!_" called Snape, merciless.

Draco made a gagging noise as festering boils started bursting out all over Aran's body. "Oh, ick. And I thought he looked gross before."

Harry had to admit, almost naked had been a bad enough look for Aran. Covered in scabs as well
was horrible.

Larissa took one peek and yelped, diving her face back into Harry's cloak.

The elf crossed its arms around its bundle of torn clothing, and with a slightly long-suffering look, popped out of existence again.

Close on the heels of Furnuculus, Snape threw a blasting curse at Aran.

"Hey, Zabini aimed that one for me, not you!" objected Draco.

"Maybe Dad's getting back for you as well," said Harry. Though that raised a question, didn't it? He leaned closer to Draco and lowered his voice. "Hey, how does he know all these details? Did you tell Dad about all the things Zabini did that day?"

Draco shook his head. "My guess is he got it from Dumbledore during one of those teas. That man knows everything. Remember how he seemed to know about--" He didn't say Venetimorica, but Harry knew what he meant. "It's eerie." Draco shivered.

"Too bad Aran'll never know why he got this or that hex," said Harry, chewing his lip.

"Oh, I'm sure Dumbledore'll fill him in." Draco grinned. "I can hear it now. He'll use that doddering old fool's voice he likes."

"Sherbet lemon?" snickered Harry.

As soon as Snape lifted the boil blister hex—ha, funny how he'd yet to repair the other wizard's clothing—Aran tried to get up from the grass where he'd landed. He couldn't, though. Harry could see Aran's muscles straining. Literally, since so much skin was on display. Ugh. Too much skin. Aran really needed to start some kind of exercise programme.

"The sticking charm!" hooted Draco. "Ha! Take that, you worthless git!"

But Harry was already thinking ahead. "Bocalavare," he reminded Draco, a wide grin splitting his face. "This is great!"

And sure enough, that was the next spell to surge forth from Snape's wand. Mounds of soapsuds began to pour from Aran's mouth. He sputtered and spewed on them, shaking his head like a wet dog trying to dry itself. Still stuck tight to the ground, he could do nothing as the bubbles kept streaming from his mouth and even nose.

"Oh, God," said Harry, his chuckles abruptly dying. "Maybe this isn't so great. If Dad knows about Aran washing my mouth out, he probably knows why."

"If he hasn't talked to you about it yet, he's not going to," Draco glanced at Harry. "Considering all that happened, I'm sure Severus thinks anything you had to say was justified."

Harry nodded, relieved.

As Snape cast Finite once more, cancelling two spells at once, Aran got shakily to his feet. Defeated by then, he didn't even try to lift his wand.

"This is it," murmured Draco. "The grand finale."

Harry knew what he meant. One curse left, right? That Petrificus Aran had thrown at Harry, rendering him helpless right in the middle of a confrontation with Lucius Malfoy.
Petrificus was awful. Harry knew that firsthand. But still, it seemed pretty paltry compared to what Aran had put him through. It wasn't the spell itself that was the man's worst crime; it was using it in a way that would make Harry vulnerable to his sworn enemy. But still, what else could Snape do? Harry knew by then that his father wasn't going to kill Aran.

"Petrificus Totalus!" shouted Snape.

It was a little hard for Harry to watch, actually. As Aran snapped into a straight line and turned slightly grey, then toppled over backwards with a thud, he couldn't help but think of what had happened in France. He wasn't sorry Malfoy was dead, of course. And he wasn't feeling guilty--not even over not feeling guilty. Or not so much as before.

But the reminder of the kind of power he had--literally--at his fingertips, that was sobering.

Draco seemed to sense his change of mood. "You don't have any sharp objects in your pockets, do you?" he said in a bare whisper, a mere thread of noise.

Harry heard the caring in the question, but shot his brother a dirty look anyway.

Snape had walked over to Aran's still form and was looking down at him, his expression still thunderous. The teachers started tensing, as if suspecting that Snape had something unexpected planned. Not even a murmur of sound disturbed the duelling field.

Or not, that was, until Draco whispered something. "Uh-oh," he said, shoving his hands in his pockets. "I guess I was wrong about the grand finale."

"He's just going to release him and that'll be that," returned Harry, but his voice was wavering with uncertainty.

Larissa picked up on it and started trembling against Harry's side.

"Finite Incantatem," said Snape, his wand levelled at Aran as the man began to blink and sit up. "So Parseltongue is evil, is it, Aaron?"

Aran moved his mouth, obviously trying to reply in a way that wouldn't get him killed. "I . . . now look here, Snape, I know you're fond of the boy but I'm not the only one who thinks this is all a bit unnatural--"

Snape's lips twisted as he growled something long and low.

"Sweet Merlin's hair," said Draco, his voice hollow with shock. He stepped back, shuddering. "I thought that one was just legend."

Harry didn't understand, but the sight of Aran starting to change made explanations unnecessary. The man's body narrowed and lengthened, his arms and legs shrinking to pinpricks, then vanishing entirely as his head changed shape and a tail emerged where his legs used to be.

"He's . . . he's a snake," breathed Harry, fascinated and repulsed all at once.

Larissa started bouncing as she untangled herself from Harry's cloak. "Let me see, let me see! Oooh, pretty!"

She was right. Aran did make for a pretty snake. Long and slender, a milk-white streak against the grass. But how he looked, that's not so much what caught Harry's attention. It was what he was saying.
"Turn me back," a plaintive voice begged. Aran's voice, but it was coming from the snake.

Glancing at Draco and then Larissa, Harry saw that neither one of them had registered any voice at all. Of course. All they could hear was meaningless hissing.

"He's speaking Parseltongue," said Harry. Feeling Sals twisting around in his pocket, Harry gave her a few pats. Since Sals knew him pretty well by then, she stopped moving. Probably she thought Harry was warning her to hide from the other snake.

"Condemned to speak Parseltongue," Draco was saying in a shaky voice.

Harry slanted a glance to the side. "He's a ways off. Besides, I thought you were over your snake thing. Sals doesn't bother you as much, I think."

"I'm used to her. Somewhat."

Harry learned something, then. Just because you'd got a chance to face your fears didn't mean you were over them completely. He should have realised. Ron had gone with him to talk to Aragog that time, but Ron was still plenty afraid of spiders! Just like Harry was still afraid of needles, and he'd faced that fear twice this year.

"Turn me back," Aran was still begging, over and over. He started to slither forward, though as he hadn't been a snake for long he didn't really know how. Wriggling in place on the grass, he flickered his tongue at Snape, his hissing growing hoarse as he kept on. He sounded like he was trying to cry and didn't know how.

Harry kind of felt sorry for him, then. He knew what it was like to want to cry and not be able to.

"I do believe this snake is trying to say something," drawled Snape in a loud voice. "Pity I can't understand a word. Probably he's enjoying his new form and telling me how much he'd like to stay this way. Yes, so I'll leave him, then."

"Serve him right after the way he treated Harry!" Harry heard Seamus shout.

"Yeah, well it would, but Transfiguration wears off after a while--" replied another Gryffindor.

Draco made a scoffing noise. "How ignorant can one house get? That wasn't a transfigurative spell at all. It's in another class entirely, and it won't be wearing off."

Snape was turning in a slow circle, surveying students and teachers alike. "I wonder if there might be someone present with the very special talent of speaking to snakes?"

Harry wasn't quite sure what his father was up to, but it seemed like Snape wanted him to step forward, so he did, walking uncertainly into the duelling field where Aran was still wriggling in vain, his hiss almost a moan by then. "I don't want to be a snake. Change me back, change me back . . ."

"Yes, Harry?" asked Snape, one eyebrow raised. "Was there something you needed?"

Harry's eyes went wide. "You asked me to come up!"

"Did I?" When Harry just kept staring, Snape became more specific. "Ah. Are you by chance someone with the very special talent of speaking to snakes?"

Oh. Harry got it then. That horrible article had spread the lie that Parseltongue was Dark Arts, but Snape wanted Harry to spread the truth. Publicly. Confidently. Probably as much for himself as for
the others. Harry knew his Parseltongue wasn't evil by then, wasn't anything to do with evil. But he'd never declared that, really. He'd just used it and hoped his school mates would understand. Most of them had, he thought. But now it was time to show them that he wasn't ashamed at all, that he had nothing to be ashamed of.

"Yes," said Harry loudly, turning around in a slow circle to direct his words to students and teachers alike. "I am someone with the very special talent of speaking to snakes!"

"How very fortunate for Professor Aran," drawled Snape. "I dare say he'll be vastly pleased to have a fellow Parseltongue speaker on hand."

"He can't understand English right now," Harry murmured.

"They can," said Snape quietly, a slight gesture indicating the audience. "And as for him, he can understand you alone. Remember that."

Nodding, Harry dropped to one knee in the grass. "Hallo there."

The snake had been slumping by then, but at Harry's hiss, Aran's head snapped up and began swaying from side to side. "You."

"Nobody else can understand you, you know," said Harry. Feeling like this might take a little while, he shifted to sit cross-legged. "You're ssspeaking sssnake language."

Aran physically recoiled from the suggestion, his long tongue flickering like he was trying to spit something out. Stupid git, thought Harry. Should have figured it out by himself by now. "Yessss, sssnake language. Tell me, do you sssuddenly feel like a creature of darknessssss?"

Hmm, he'd been trying to say evil but probably snakes didn't really have that concept.

"Thisssss wassss done to me," hissed Aran, his body coiling in fury.

Noticing Snape tensing, Harry made a gesture to say that everything was fine. Then he returned his attention to Aran. "I know you probably have instinctssss now, but if you bite me you'll never get changed back. Think about it."

Aran subsided into the grass, his hiss becoming plaintive again. "Tell him to change me--"

"Thissss wassss done to you," Harry interrupted. "But my ssssnake language was done to me, too."

Of course, that might not strictly be true; Harry knew Snape didn't necessarily agree that Voldemort had transferred the power to Harry, all those years ago. But it might be true, so . . . "Did it make me a creature of darknessssss? You kept ssssaying it did."

"Done to you?" Gaining more control over his new muscles, Aran slithered in a circle.

"Yessss," hissed Harry, his own fury growing even as Aran's seemed to fade. "I didn't assssk for it. I didn't know I had it. And I didn't need you trying to shame me for it, or make it hard for me to learn!"

The snake blinked several times in a row. "I . . . ."

"Yeah, you were horrible," accused Harry. "And it'd sssserve you right if my father never did change you back. How would you like that, eh? A ssssnake for daysssss and nightsssss and daysssss and nightsssss?"
Hmm, interesting how *forever* had come out.

"No, pleasssse," begged Aran, his hiss low and piteous. "He hasss to change me back. I don't want to be a sssssnake. He won't leave me like this, will he?"

"Why wouldn't he?" Harry leaned forward a little. Strange how everyone was staring at him, but for once it didn't bother him. "You called him a creature of darknessss. And now you expect him not to bite you back?"

*No word for mercy, either,* thought Harry.

"Noooo." Aran slumped low in the grass. "He can't. Noooo."

"I've no idea what he'll do. But I could asssssk him, if you like." Harry waited until the snake had nodded glumly. "If you asssssk me, first."

"Pleasssse."

"Is sssssnake language a creature of darkness?"

Aran hissed in a breath, hesitating. But then he admitted, "No. I wassss wrong. I ssssshould not have ssssaid that."

Harry jumped to his feet and faced his father again.

"Well, that snake seems to have quite a lot to say," prompted Snape in a clear voice. The slight murmurings in the audience abruptly ceased. "Anything in particular?"

"For some reason," said Harry loudly, "he doesn't think Parsel tongue is evil any longer!"

"As indeed it is not."

"Hear, hear," called McGonagall from her chair. Glancing that way, Harry saw several other teachers nodding. And the students were picking up on the mood, he saw.

"Also, he wants to be changed back," added Harry.

"Imagine that." Snape lightly tapped his wand against his leg. "What do you say, Harry?"

"Um, well, it's up to you, obviously."

"No. It's up to you," said Snape. "What Aran said about me isn't terribly important in the greater scheme of things. You're the one he wronged, week after week." *You're the one he attacked, the one he unwittingly gave to Lucius Malfoy,* Snape's dark eyes said.

"Oh." Harry turned back to the white snake trembling in the grass. This time he didn't crouch down. "I get to deccccide what happensssss to you."

Aran lifted his head slightly. "Pleasssse . . ."

Harry knew he was probably being too soft-hearted, but the last thing he wanted was for this snake to hang about Hogwarts. Knowing Aran, the man--ha, the snake--would be too frightened to leave the grounds and face the wilds of Scotland. He'd be afraid of getting eaten, just like Sals still complained now and again about Hedwig. Though at least that had fallen off a lot ever since Harry had applied repelling charms to her new box.
And what if Aran did get eaten by something? Harry didn't need another death on his conscience.

"I'm doing thissss for me, not for you," he hissed, still standing. "And you're never to talk about me or my nesssst-matessss again, do you underssssstan? If you do, you'll get a lot worsssse than happened today."

"Never--"

"And I don't want to ssssee you again," continued Harry. "You're leaving here sssstraight away."

The snake nodded, the motion eager. Harry got the feeling Aran couldn't wait to be gone from Hogwarts.

"Change him back, then," Harry told his father, looking him in the eye.

Snape's lips twisted. "Now you know why I left the decision to you. I might not have spared him, but I knew I could rely on you to treat with justice even those who deserve none." The man began waving his wand in loops and swirls as he muttered in Latin.

The change back wasn't gradual. Aran popped back into existence in one fell swoop, standing with his arms crossed indignantly. A bad position, as it turned out. Harry wasn't sure where the man's tattered clothes had gone, but somewhere in the shift to snake and back, they'd vanished entirely.

Harry heard a high squeal that he recognised as Larissa's. When he glanced that way, he saw that Draco had grabbed her and was holding her in front of him, his hand clapped over her eyes. Catching Harry's eye, the Slytherin boy gave a wry shrug as if to say, I guess she is just a little girl, after all.

The students by then had broken out into raucous laughter. Aran standing there buck naked was funny enough, but the fact that he didn't seem to realise he had no clothes only made things all the more hilarious. Several students were turning bright red from laughing so hard.

"Come on, give us a show, then!" shouted Seamus.

That seemed to snap Aran out of his daze. He looked down in panic, then blushed purple. One hand shot down to cover his privates while the other began waving wildly, stammered spells falling from his lips. But he didn't have a wand any longer; it had vanished along with his clothes.

"Severus," called Dumbledore from his place in the centre of the staff seats.

"Yes, Headmaster?"

Harry had been managing to hold in his own laughter, as making fun of Aran at a time like this seemed so cruel. Especially since Harry had been displayed against his will on Samhain. Really, it wasn't funny, but his father's innocent tones were his undoing. He collapsed into giggles.

"I'm a bit concerned that Professor Aran may take a chill," said Dumbledore. "If you would?"

Feeling like he'd had enough of centre stage, Harry started to move back to stand by Draco. He was amused that his brother was still more-or-less hugging little Larissa, who had no way of knowing that Harry had returned.

"Lemme see! Lemme see!"

"Not yet, poppet."
"Poppet?" Harry mouthed at him as he took his place.

Draco shrugged.

"Very well, Headmaster," called Snape finally. He'd probably figured that Aran had twisted in the wind long enough. One complicated twirl of his wand, and Aran's own wand reappeared in the grass. Aran bent down to snatch it up, giving the students a clear view of his backside, which of course only led to another wave of hysterical laughter.

"I do believe my honour is satisfied," Snape announced as Aran scrambled to conjure some clothing for himself. Snape hadn't bowed to Aran before, not really, but now he did execute a smooth, sweeping bow, first to the students and then the teachers. "I thank you all for your witness to the redemption of my good name."

Draco seemed to recognize the brief speech as some sort of cue. Letting go of Larissa, he motioned that Harry should walk forward with him. They joined their father on the duelling field, and walked by his side as he left, striding straight past the red-faced Aran who was hopping on one foot as he tried to drag on his pants. Nobody else moved. Harry figured there must be some sort of tradition that the champion left first.

As they passed the row of teachers, Harry saw Galleons changing hands. Lots of them, but he waited to speak until they were well away from the Quidditch pitch. "I think the teachers were betting on the duel!"

Snape just shrugged.

"Well, I can't see why anybody would have backed Aran. Or . . . oh, God. You don't think they were betting on whether you'd kill him, do you?"

"I do believe the betting pool concerned the number of hexes it would take to satisfy my honour," murmured Snape. "And if you think the teachers are the only ones who were wagering . . . well, you aren't really that naïve, are you, Harry?"

"I wouldn't bet on a thing like that!"

"Me either!" said Draco in an over-loud voice.

"Really," drawled Snape. "You wouldn't be involved at all, would you?"

That had Draco back pedalling a bit. "Well, what was I supposed to do when Professor Vector sidled up to me looking for inside information?"

"You didn't know any to tell her!" exclaimed Harry.

"Well, yes, but she didn't know that, did she?"

"The terms, Draco," said Snape in a rather stern voice.

"You took something from her? You cheated money from a teacher?"

Draco twisted a lip. "Please. All I asked for was an arithmantic theorem on the random pattern disruption caused by chemical imbalances genetically inherent in the brain."

Harry turned and just stared.

"All right, her words," admitted Draco, smirking a little. "I told her a bit about Greg's dyslexia and
asked if Arithmancy as a discipline could be of help with some treatment. I'm not going to ask him to use those Muggle therapies Hermione goes on about, not if I can find something magical."

He said *magical* like it was a synonym for *better*.

Snape raised an eyebrow, obviously intrigued. "Did she have any ideas?"

"Yeah, some. I'll let you see what she gave me," Draco turned to Harry as they walked along. "You really should have left that stupid git to live the rest of his miserable days as a snake, Harry. He deserves it."

"How fortunate we don't all get what we deserve, Draco," drawled Snape. "A concept we've discussed before, hmm?"

The Slytherin boy coloured and started looking down at his shoes.

Feeling a little bad for his brother, Harry cast about for a distraction. "It wasn't really mercy," he admitted. "I was actually pretty afraid Aran would hang about here if he was stuck as a snake. Not that I'd have seen him around all that much, but still--"

Draco brightened, his eyes sparkling as he looked up. "Fifty to one Larissa would have adopted him. Her own personal snake. Like I need one living right there in Slytherin."

"*You* wouldn't have had to see him much. But she'd have brought him around to me all the time wanting to know what he was saying!"

Draco burst out laughing. "True, true."

"No doubt it would always have been variations on the same theme," said Snape.

"Yeah. *Change me back,*" said Harry. "Now I'm ten times as glad I made the choice I did."

"Well done indeed," said Snape, patting Harry lightly on the back as they entered the castle and headed for home.

-----------------------------------------------

"So, last week of term," said Ron on Monday morning at breakfast as he speared a banger from a platter floating past. "Think your dad'll let you visit the Burrow during the holiday, Harry? Some, maybe?"

Harry nodded. "I think he will. And either way, I already know I can have you out to our place. You and Hermione both. Should be good."

"Just don't invite her out without me along," muttered Ron, staring at the doors to the Great Hall.

Harry followed his line of sight and saw that Hermione was still talking to Draco. She'd stopped him on his way in with Harry, a full ten minutes earlier. "Oh, relax already. They're just talking about Goyle's reading problem."

"Yeah, well still."
Harry was saved from having to reply by the sound of a spoon clinking against crystal, the noise amplified so that it would be impossible to miss. McGonagall spoke crisply over the lingering hum of student conversations. "Your attention, please."

The hall hushed as Dumbledore pushed to his feet from his place at the centre of the head table. "As some of you may have already surmised, Aaron Aran resigned from his post as Defence against the Dark Arts professor on Saturday afternoon. With only one week left in term, it's hardly worth engaging an interim professor to handle his classes. Therefore, all sections of Defence are suspended until the new term begins in September."

For a moment, there was no reaction to that except a startled hush. Then a few whoops could be heard. And above that, the noise of Neville shouting as he stood up. Neville.

"What about Professor Snape, sir? Can't he keep teaching us?"

Once the sentiment had been voiced, a number of other students took up the cry, calling out that Snape was brilliant at Defence and had taught them a lot and could easily take over from Aran.

Hermione was nodding her agreement as she took a seat across from Harry.

It was too far to the head table for Harry to tell if his father was embarrassed by the outcry, but he thought Snape might be looking a little bit abashed.

Dumbledore let the protests go on for a moment longer, then held up his hand. "Ah, but Professor Snape has other obligations he must see to."

"Well, there goes our ice cream contest in Potions," said Ron, a little glumly. "Your dad'll come back and make us brew something ghastly to make up for the sweets, I bet. I'd rather have Snape teaching me Defence, any day of the week."

Harry smiled. "Yeah. Me too. But you know, the headmaster can't risk that. What if one week of him being the official teacher in that class somehow made the curse land on him?"

Ron made a face, but nodded.

Dumbledore seemed about to say something more, but a new noise had him closing his mouth. Clapping. Harry couldn't exactly see where it was coming from. Somewhere in Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff. Thinking it a good idea, Harry began applauding vigorously as well. Several of the Gryffindors around him followed suit.

And then the noise of applause began to fill the Great Hall.

"Best duel I've ever seen!" yelled somebody near the back.

"Best Defence classes we've had since Professor Lupin was here!" a seventh-year farther down the table called out.

Snape had been looking a bit smug--just a bit--but that comment had him making a curt gesture in the headmaster's direction.

Dumbledore, however, let the clapping and comments continue for a moment more. Then he raised his hand again. "Yes, yes. Professor Snape has done a marvellous job, all around. But I have another announcement to make." He waited until the students had fallen silent. "This Wednesday afternoon, the last class of the day has been cancelled so that you can all be present, should you so wish, for the dedication of the latest addition to Hogwarts' art collection. In recognition of his many years of
service as a school governor and his generous gifts to Hogwarts’ endowment, we have invited Mr Lucius Malfoy here to witness his statue being dedicated out on the grounds."

Ron and Hermione caught Harry's eye, the look on their faces saying that they'd understood everything that hadn't been said. They knew the truth of what had happened in France, and what the "statue" really was. They also knew about Remus.

Harry felt a chill shiver its way up and down his arms. A horrible deep chill that seemed to go all the way down to bone. If only he had a needle, he could make the feeling go away--

He didn't have one, and he wasn't going to make one, either. Of course, he couldn't make one here, in front of his friends, let alone use it. But if he could just get a few minutes to himself, maybe on the way to Charms . . .

But no. Harry drew in a deep breath, determined. What was it that Marsha had said? To avoid situations that would allow him to return to his damaging behaviour. He'd stay with his friends. That way he wouldn't have a chance to make a needle. And besides, he'd only get them in trouble if he slipped away and Snape found out.

Not to mention the trouble he'd be in for failing to get Snape himself when his . . . urge struck. He wasn't going to disappoint his father again. Best to just tough it out, Harry decided.

Some of what he was feeling must have shown on his face, he thought a moment later. Not that Hermione knew what to make of his expressions. "The headmaster said students could go to the statue dedication if they wished," she said quietly. "No-one would fault you for staying away from a thing like that, Harry."

Probably nobody would, but Harry still didn't want to be thought of as a coward. If he was going to be any kind of leader at all in the coming war, he couldn't give the impression now that he was afraid to face Lucius Malfoy. Besides, it wouldn't be Lucius Malfoy at the dedication ceremony, would it? It would be Remus, and Harry wanted to see how he was doing in his role of full-time spy.

"Draco'll be going and I need to be there for him," he said to explain.

Farther down the table, Dean leaned forward. "Why would your brother go?"

To see his mother, Harry thought. "To show Lucius he's not afraid."

Dean nodded and went back to peeling his banana.

Hermione pursed her lips. "I honestly think it might be best if Draco didn't go, Harry. How's he going to feel seeing . . . uh, Lucius after the things that man has done this year?"

How's he going to feel seeing Remus pretending to be Lucius, that was what she meant. And Hermione didn't even know the half of it. How was Draco going to put up with seeing Remus standing alongside his mother?

"He'll insist on going." Harry stood up, then, and grabbed his school bag from the floor. "Come on. Somebody walk me. Or has Charms been cancelled as well?"
As it turned out, they did get to taste-test everyone's ice cream on Tuesday. Dumbledore was still teaching Potions class. Strange . . . Harry would have expected his father to have mentioned something the day before. With Harry living with him again, it wasn't like the man had had no opportunity to talk to him.

On the other hand, Snape had seemed awfully busy. He'd spent most of the previous evening holed up in his office, writing some long document. The same one he'd been working on before the duel, it looked like. Harry didn't know what it was about. Dumbledore might, though.

Half-way through trying out all the ice cream flavours, Harry wandered to the front where the headmaster was savouring a pink cone topped with the mango wafer flavour Seamus had made. "Sir? I sort of thought my dad would be back in here this week. You said so, in fact."

"Did I, my boy?" Dumbledore's beard bobbed up and down as his lips twitched with humour. "As I recall, I merely said he had obligations."

"You knew we thought that meant Potions."

Dumbledore's blue eyes twinkled. "And so it does, Harry. So it does. The Ministry has requested that the Severus advise them on changes they've proposed to portions of the N.E.W.T. level Potions examination. It seems they'd prefer to have more Auror applicants than previously."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "So they have finally figured out there's a war on."

"Yes, and as potion-making is not the primary task an Auror engages in . . ." The headmaster shrugged. "They're thinking that perhaps such a high level of expertise should not be required. Certainly, that it should not pose an insurmountable obstacle."

"They could always staff M.L.E. with wizards who are really great at potion-making. And the Aurors could go to them when they needed something really hard or specialised made."

"Except when in the field, of course."

"Well, yeah, but--" Harry stopped to think a minute. "Would Severus be willing to make his classes easier to match a new N.E.W.T., though? I can't really see him doing that."

"He's fighting pot and cauldron against any 'dumbing down' of the subject," said Dumbledore, nodding.

"What do you think, sir?"

"Oh, I can see both sides. More Aurors would be a positive benefit, and as things stand now, precious few young witches and wizards apply. Still, one does want them to have the skills they'll need to succeed, so . . ." Dumbledore lifted his shoulders. "I shudder to think what your father will say if he's asked to revise seven years worth of curricula downwards."

Harry grinned. "He'll just say no. Well, either that or he'd revise it as asked but then just go ahead and teach what he always has."

"Unless the Ministry sees fit to place another equivalent of Dolores Umbridge here again."

Which reminded Harry. "Have you thought about another Defence teacher for next year, then? Why don't you line someone up early so the Ministry can't sneak another Umbridge in?"

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "As it happens, I do have someone in mind. I'll make a point of owling
Her as soon as possible, now that Professor Aran's departure is official."

Harry knew it was wrong of him. He knew Hermione would have a fit if she could read his mind. But still, the only witch they'd had teaching them Defence in all these years had been Umbridge. Harry couldn't help but be leery, after that. "Um . . . is she competent? No offence, sir, but you really have had a knack of . . . yeah."

The old man's eyes weren't twinkling any longer. "The position's cursed, as I'm sure you've reasoned out for yourself. And Harry, if students can deduce that much, don't you think that the wizarding community must be aware of it, as well? It's unusual for the very best teachers to want to take a position that has no hope of lasting."

Harry sighed. "So she's not competent."

"Oh, indeed I believe she is," said Dumbledore in a soft voice. "That other was said by way of apology, Harry. I have tried to do my best for you. If I haven't always succeeded . . ." Shaking his head, Dumbledore resumed in a stronger voice. "At any rate, you'll like Maura Morrighan very much, I expect. She's a shepherdess--"

"A shepherdess!"

"Well, of a sort. She has a connection to magical creatures that's truly astounding. In fact, she's been seeing to Buckbeak's welfare this past year. When Sirius died I sent Buckbeak to live with her herd of hippogriffs in Ireland."

"Oh." Something began niggling at the edge of Harry's consciousness. A story . . . something he'd once heard . . . "Oh. I think Severus told me a story about a herd of hippogriffs once. In Ireland, yeah. The name even rings a bell, I think. Well, maybe."

"Oh, Severus knows of Maura, definitely. Her empathy for magical creatures means that she's quite good at obtaining rather unusual potions ingredients."

"So why doesn't she mind the position being cursed? And what makes you think she knows enough Defence to teach it?"

"I think that's quite enough information for now," said Dumbledore briskly. "I still have several more flavours to sample, and so, I'm sure, do you."

Harry would rather have got his questions answered, but he could tell that wasn't going to happen.

But at least he'd found out some things. He'd ask his father about this Maura Morrighan. A shepherdess. Was Remus going to be the only decent Defence professor Hogwarts ever saw? More than ever, Harry wished his father could take the position.

When Harry got back to his table, he found Ron groaning a little, his hands clutched over his midsection. "Too much ice cream," he said blearily as he looked up at Harry. "Too many strange flavours."

Hermione heard that as she came up holding two small cups of lemon-lime gelato. "I told you to take just a tiny taste of each flavour, Ron. It's no wonder you have stomach-ache, the way you were gobbling down pints at every table!"

"Hermione, that hardly helps," drawled Draco from behind her.

Ron groaned again as if in agreement.
"Try ours, Harry," said Hermione, pursing her lips a little.

Lemon-lime gelato turned out to be really, really good. Just the right mix of tart and sweet. Later, when the class voted, it won the prize for tastiest concoction. The winner for creativity, however, was Dean and Neville's Jelly Slug Jiggle. Harry thought it was kind of disgusting to actually eat; the slugs felt like they kept crawling around in his stomach long after he'd swallowed. Putting chocolate cookie dust all over the top of the ice cream to imitate dirt, though, that bit was clever.

Even if Harry could have done without the chunks of liquorice pretending to be rocks.

On Wednesday afternoon, Ron and Hermione walked Harry down to the dungeons so that he could go to the statue dedication with his father and brother. Harry was a little bit startled when he walked through the door. Draco was standing in the living room, fussing with his collar, wearing new dress robes. Or at least dress robes Harry didn't think he'd seen before.

"Pleasures of ready access to Galleons," said Draco lightly.

"But when did you go off shopping?"

Draco's smile took the sting out of his words. "Owl order, Harry. We really must get you thinking like a wizard."

"But . . . " Harry took a minute to think of how to word it. "Are you sure those are, um, appropriate? I mean, they're a bit plainer than those fur-edged robes you used to have but--"

Snape's voice cut him off. "Do you want to change or go as you are, Harry?"

Harry turned to see his father dressed rather formally as well. Not in dress robes, true, but the man was wearing his very best teaching robes. They looked freshly pressed.

He was already in two minds about going at all. Nice as it would be to see Remus, seeing him looking like Lucius again didn't sound so great. Just thinking about it made him feel like he needed a needle. And now to be expected to dress up for the occasion?

"Won't that seem a bit odd?" Harry cleared his throat. "Me, acting like Lucius Malfoy coming around is a cause for celebration?"

"Then go as you are," said Snape calmly.  

Harry was starting to feel worse by the second. "I . . . er, I think I'd better not go at all, actually."

"You aren't staying here alone during the ceremony," returned Snape. "I think I know what you'll be tempted to do."

Was he that transparent? "I don't care if it's really Remus. It's sick, that's what it is, that man being honoured with a statue on Hogwarts grounds, like he's as important as the Founders! It's a farce! He killed a student, or as good as, and that's not even counting him wanting his own son dead!"

"It's entirely sickening," agreed his father. "I would never countenance it were it not for the need to persuade the house-elves that what Gibby saw was a statue of Lucius rather than the man himself"
turned to stone. We can't have rumours of Lucius' death bandied about."

Harry abruptly sat down on the couch, his stomach twisting itself into knots. "I know, but the idea of going to school here next year, with that thing out there on the grounds . . ."

"It's . . . yeah," said Draco, moving to stand at Harry's side. "I know. Not so long ago, I'd have been so proud to have a statue of Lucius standing out there. Not now, though."

"You won't ever see it unless you make an effort to." Snape's gaze encompassed both his sons. "Either of you."

Harry blearily looked up. "Where's it going then?"

Snape extended him a hand up. "Come and see."

"Oh, all right." Harry groaned as he stood up. "I'll just go use the loo--"

"Wear your dress robes, too," called Draco after him. "We must keep up appearances for the wizarding public, you know."

Just what Harry needed. The press would be there, that was what Draco meant. Probably Skeeter wouldn't have the nerve to come around, especially not with Snape dropping dire hints about her come-uppance, but still . . .

Sighing, Harry flattened his hair down with a little water and then started hunting in his trunk. His dress robes were a folded, wadded mass at the bottom. Sighing, Harry shoved them back down, his hands brushing against his invisibility cloak.

All at once, his arms began itching so badly that he could hardly stand it. Snape had just refused to leave him alone, but the cloak could give him time to himself, couldn't it? All he had to do was slip it into a pocket, and then whenever he needed a couple of quick jabs with the needle, he could step behind a tree or a wall and vanish--

Sighing, Harry bundled the shimmering, iridescent fabric into his hands. So smooth, it flowed like water between his fingers. Seductive.

He wanted to throw it over his head and disappear now, just for a second.

But then he remembered something Marsha had told him. Whenever she was trying to diet, she had to clean her cupboards out first. If she had any fattening food within reach, sooner or later she'd eat some of it.

Harry had thought it a strange story at first, and not just because he thought she hardly needed to worry about her weight. What did it have to do with him? But then she'd explained that he should clean out his own cupboard and get rid of any stray needles, or anything else that contributed to his problem.

Just like with the Map . . . this was more of the same.

Clenching his fingers around the cloth, Harry made himself march back out to where his father was waiting. Without a word, he thrust the invisibility cloak forward, towards Snape.


Draco's gaze flicked from Harry to Snape and back. "Oh . . . you wanted to use it for . . . oh."
Harry's throat felt so tight he was surprised he managed to speak. "I . . . I'm going to want it back, you know. Just as soon as I start feeling more . . . in control."

"Of course."

Draco glanced at the new watch strapped around his wrist. "You don't have much time left to change--"

"I'm going in my school clothes."

"There'll be photographers!"

Snape held up a hand. "That will be quite enough, Draco. We're asking a good deal of Harry as it is."

"It's not so bad, is it?" Harry looked down at himself. "Lots of students'll be in their regular robes." He looked at Draco, too, then. "Anyway, why would you want the *Prophet* to think you have any respect for Lucius?"

"It's respect for *Hogwarts,*" said Draco stiffly. "And I'd like my mother to think I'm doing well. Is that so terrible?"

"No," Harry should have remembered that Draco would be thinking of his mother. "Just . . . um, don't get too upset if Remus holds her hand or something."

"He'd better not," said Draco darkly. "And not just because the sight would bother me. He's going to get himself killed awfully quickly if he thinks the real Lucius Malfoy was one for public displays."

That figured. Narcissa Malfoy was basically an ice princess, as far as Harry was concerned.

"Lupin will do his best," said Snape, ushering them both out. Harry had a feeling that his father was trying to be encouraging, but his words accomplished the opposite. Harry knew what Snape thought of Remus' best, after all.

They walked the upwards-sloping corridors in silence. Just as well, since Harry was busy giving himself a pep-talk. *It won't really be Lucius,* he thought as he turned corners and climbed stairs. *No matter how evil-sounding he might be, it'll be Remus in there. Remus in a Lucius-suit. Because Lucius is dead. And it's all right to feel happy about that. Even Dumbledore did.*

For all that though, Harry's arms were itching so badly by then that he really wished he'd held onto his invisibility cloak.

It wasn't lost on him, either, how ironic it was that he'd demanded his father's things, only to give them back to Severus in the end. But that was all right, he told himself. James wouldn't want him to have the map or cloak, not if Harry was going to use them so he could hurt himself.

They exited through a side door at ground level, Snape leading them down a winding path Harry had never noticed before. He didn't really know where it led. Even when they'd reached a small clearing at the end, and Harry saw the statue mounted atop of simple pedestal, he didn't understand.

Draco obviously did. He sucked in his breath through his teeth.

At first Harry thought that the other boy must have spotted his mother in the milling crowd. But no, Draco was looking almost straight up. Harry craned his neck as well, and that was when the truth dawned on him.
The Owlery.

The statue--or Lucius himself, rather--had been erected at the base of the Owlery.

"A rather suitable location, Albus and I thought," murmured Snape near his ear.

Harry nodded, the motion feeling a little disjointed. It was true, what his father had said before. He'd never see the statue again, unless he tried to. Students didn't usually go wandering around on this part of the grounds, and for good reason. With so many owls constantly flying in and out of the tower above, anything down below stood an excellent chance of getting pelted with bird droppings.

There must be a charm in effect to route the birds away for the ceremony, Harry thought. Not a single one was anywhere to be seen. But once the dedication was finished, Albus--or maybe Severus--would remove the spell.

After that, Lucius wouldn't remain white and pristine marble for long.

"Very suitable," said Harry in as quiet a voice as he could manage. "But won't an elf make sure that the statue's kept clean?"

"As a former Malfoy elf, Dobby insisted on being assigned statue-cleaning duty," said Snape, a slight smile hovering near his lips. "You can imagine how often he'll see to such a task."

Harry smiled. That would work.

Draco didn't look as though he was following the conversation at all. His silver eyes kept scanning the crowd. He actually pushed himself up on tiptoe so he could get a better look.

"There," said Snape, nudging Draco slightly with his hand. "Passing beneath that old oak."

Harry looked too, and saw Narcissa Malfoy walking sedately forward, her steps so graceful she might have been floating. Or maybe it looked that way because her dark green robes were light and filmy, skimming along the ground as she moved. By her side walked a perfect recreation of her husband, right down to the sneering, superior expression on his face. His silver-blond hair was combed straight back from his forehead, and in his hand he held a snake-headed cane.

The Order must have recreated Lucius' wand, thought Harry. With a different core, one that would better suit Remus.

"She's beautiful," said Draco in an awed voice. "Oh, Merlin. Look at her! She's glowing. I've never seen her looking so well!"

"You just haven't seen her in a while," said Harry dryly. "You've been brave this year, but you miss her. Of course you do."

"Perhaps recent events have been good for her, as well," added Severus.

That made sense. Draco didn't talk about his parents very much, so Harry had no idea if Narcissa had really loved her husband, but if not, he wouldn't have been the easiest wizard in the world to live with, would he? Though that idea was mildly alarming. If Remus was doing a good job 'being' Lucius, then Narcissa shouldn't be noticing any difference!

Dumbledore suddenly appeared at the front of the crowd. In contrast to the other staff who, like Snape, had worn formal yet subdued clothing, the headmaster's robes were about as garish as Harry had ever seen. Mustard yellow and silver, his floppy hat hung with crimson tassels that reached
He touched his wand to his throat for an instant, and then began speaking in a booming voice. "Welcome, ladies and gentlemen. Our guest of honour has arrived, so if you'd be so kind as to clear the way." As Dumbledore motioned with his hands, the audience parted to leave an empty space leading to the front, where the headmaster stood directly in front of the statue.

Lucius and Narcissa walked up the central aisle, both of them nodding slightly to the professors they passed on the way. Like royalty, thought Harry. Except that royalty had enough class--or he thought so, at least--to avoid glaring even at people they hated. For Lucius wasn't giving Severus a reserved nod. Far from it.

Narcissa at that moment, though, seemed to have eyes only for Draco. Harry didn't think she'd even noticed Severus, let alone himself. Her sparkling blue gaze was steady on her son, her features filled with what certainly looked like love.

Too bad you didn't love your son enough to side with him against your husband, thought Harry. You renounced and repudiated him, just as much as Lucius did. You let him be emancipated, and never said a word in his defence . . .

But objecting to the emancipation would have kept Draco more firmly in Lucius' sphere of influence, Harry remembered. Maybe Narcissa had been doing what she thought best. She'd certainly tried to look out for Draco's financial future, even if her twisted idea of how to do that had been to start killing off her own relatives . . .

By then, the Malfoys had passed them by. Harry turned a bit to see how his brother was doing, and was shocked to see Draco blinking quickly, his features stiff like he was putting a lot of effort into controlling his expression. Snape's hand was on his shoulder, squeezing slightly before it retreated back into his formal black robes.

Draco dragged in a harsh breath, and kept his gaze centred on the scene unfolding at the front.

Narcissa and her husband were standing to one side of the headmaster, both of them so close to the statue that they could have touched it if they'd merely stretched out an arm. Harry felt a chill shiver straight through him. He had to remind himself that the statue was really a dead body made over into marble. Otherwise, he'd think that the flesh and blood man standing there really was Lucius.

And he couldn't bear to watch the real Lucius Malfoy receive this honour. He really couldn't.

Dumbledore was speaking from prepared notes that floated in the air before him, rearranging themselves as the speech continued. Harry tried not to listen to most of it, though Draco seemed nothing short of rapt. Harry couldn't tell if he was listening, or merely staring at his mother. Occasional phrases broke through Harry's concentration. long record of service to the school . . . improvements to the Quidditch grounds . . . new brooms for the Slytherin team . . . and the one that made Harry actually grit his teeth: meticulous attention to detail when a dangerous hippogriff endangered the life of a student at this school . . .

Finally, the speech was over and the headmaster gestured grandly at the circle of green ribbon that loosely encircled the marble pedestal of the statue.

Remus stepped forward, pulling the wand from his cane as though he'd been doing it for years. Harry was impressed at how much like Lucius it made him seem. "Cortus," said Remus, his voice perfectly matching Lucius' sneering, superior tones.
One tap of his wand, and the ribbon split cleanly in half and fluttered to the grass below.

Thinking the ceremony was over, Harry started to turn away, but he’d reckoned without one final gesture on Dumbledore's part. Or maybe his father's.

As the ribbon settled onto the grass, flowers began to sprout and bloom, starting at the base of the pedestal and then radiating outward for at least twenty feet. Purple, yellow, and white, their broad petals formed a carpet all around. By the time they stopped blooming, Lucius, Narcissa, and Dumbledore were standing amidst them.

Seeing his questioning look, Severus quietly murmured, "Pansies."

Pansies.

Harry nodded his understanding. It was an indictment. A private one, but powerful, all the same. Only a few people knew the truth, but those few would always remember this. Lucius Malfoy, condemned forever to stand beneath the Owlery, owl droppings raining down upon his head, surrounded by reminders of the girl he’d helped kill. No matter that Pansy herself hadn't been innocent of evil intentions. She hadn't been Lucius' to judge.

As Lucius wasn't yours to judge, Harry thought, remembering his father's lectures back at Christmas. But Harry hadn't been jury, judge, and executioner, had he? He’d just been defending himself.

The itchy feeling in his arms began to fade away, then.

The oohs and ahs were dying off too, and the crowd was beginning to disperse. Draco, however, seemed rooted to the spot. And no wonder. Lucius and the headmaster were talking to the press. Harry was pleased to note that Rita Skeeter was giving them wide berth and looked positively rattled whenever she glanced in the direction of the Hogwarts Potion Master.

Just as he was about to comment to his father, he noticed Narcissa Malfoy was walking toward them, her lips curling upwards in what Harry could only think was a genuine smile.

She was either the best actress the world had ever seen, or she was truly happy to see her son.

Harry tried to move away, but Snape shook his head every so slightly. Stay, his dark eyes clearly said.

"Dragon my treasure," said Narcissa, her voice throaty and warm. "Oh, my precious Dragon. I’ve missed you so much this year." Stepping close enough to touch him, she reached down and folded both his hands into her own. Her smile widened, the expression seeming to light up her whole face. It was like the sun had suddenly emerged from behind cloud cover, she became so radiant. Harry saw it then, what Draco had been going on about before. Narcissa Malfoy might be dark and ugly inside, but on the outside, she truly was a beautiful woman.

"Mother," said Draco, his own voice sounding both pained and dead. Harry couldn't even imagine what this must be like for him. He loved his mother, no doubt about that, but she’d sided with Lucius against him. He probably loved and hated her both.

"You are well?" she asked, her gaze looking him up and down. "You are happy, Draco?"

Draco seemed to relax then, but only fractionally. "Yes. Very."

Narcissa glanced back then, to where her husband was still talking with Dumbledore. And then, she turned and held Snape's gaze. Very quietly, her voice barely audible, she murmured, "I thank you,
then, Severus. I knew that I could trust you with my treasure."

"Narcissa," said Severus, the word pitched low. Harry expected him to say more, but he didn't expand on the acknowledgment.

"I regret what happened to the bequest from Walpurgis Black," Narcissa said, her hands caressing Draco's, her whisper so soft it seemed the breeze might blow it away. "I tried my best for you, my Dragon. I would give you my own fortune, if I could. But your father suspected as much, and he took steps--"

"Severus is my father," said Draco quietly, squeezing her hands as if to make her believe it. "And I'm all right, Mother. Truly. I have Sirius Black's fortune, now. And a family I can trust to stand by me even if I disappoint them."

Narcissa gasped, her small pink mouth parting. Harry didn't know if she was startled to hear her cousin's name, or if she'd caught the criticism in Draco's remark. He never got to find out, either. At that moment Remus strode up to join them, his visage hard as he took in Narcissa's hands clasped in Draco's.

Narcissa was the one who looked almost turned to stone, then. She stepped back, clearly wary of her husband's reaction to finding her with Draco. Harry thought Remus would turn and lead her away, then. Instead, the man's silver gaze bore into Draco, who stared back, his chin raised, his eyes defiant. "Yes, Mr Malföy? Was there something you wanted?"

Remus curled a lip. "Is that any way to speak to me?"

"I can arrange not to speak to you at all, if it bothers you."

Remus' eyes narrowed. "So much anger, Draco. Your mother's been trying to convince me I was too hard on you this year. She seems to think a gentler approach might have alienated you less."

"Trying to kill me didn't bring us closer, no," sneered Draco. "Did you think it would?"

Several students still straggling away began to slow their steps even further, but a fierce glare from Snape sent them scurrying down the path leading back to the castle.

"I wasn't trying to kill you, you stupid boy," said Lucius, his lips twisting as he glared at Snape and Harry both. "You need to stop listening to half-bloods and traitors, Draco. I only ever wanted you to stop and think about the danger you were courting."

"Oh, I thought about it." Draco raised his chin still higher. "You ought to do the same."

Remus' voice took on a silky, smarmy tone. "With an attitude like that, you're likely beyond redemption. But since harsh measures have clearly only caused you to become ever more deranged . . ." His gaze lingered a moment on Harry. "I wish to propose a truce."

"How very magnanimous," drawled Draco. "I notice you don't have your wand out, though. So what sort of arrangement did you have in mind? You'll stop trying to kill me, and I'll . . . do what, exactly?"

Remus leaned closer and all but hissed in Draco's face. "Think about your future before it's too late!"

"I do nothing but think of my future," said Draco coldly. "You aren't in it."

Narcissa's gentle, almost childlike voice cut across her husband's reply. "Oh, Draco. Your father's
trying. Can't you see that?"

"Severus is my father."

Remus made a noise of disgust under his breath.

"And Harry Potter is my brother," Draco went on. By then, Harry didn't know if the boy had forgotten who he was really talking to, or if all this animosity had a purpose. He should have remembered that his brother was a Slytherin. "So I have quite a distance to fly to see eye-to-eye with you again. But if you really mean what you say, about wishing you hadn't alienated me quite so spectacularly, then there is a way you can prove it."

"Oh, do enlighten me," drawled Remus.

"Greg's stuck by me this year through thick and through thin," said Draco. "If his father kills him for it, I'll know where he got the idea, won't I? Why don't you tell the man that threats and violence will only drive his son farther away from the Dark Lord's cause? Tell him you wished you'd gone about things differently, Father. Do that if you want any sort of truce."

Remus' lips had tightened. "Who do you think you are, you ungrateful whelp?"

"Now dear," said Narcissa softly. "You said yourself that it would be a pity if more young wizards followed Draco's example. Perhaps it would be a mistake indeed to allow Greg's father to repudiate his son."

"Since taking a hard line worked so very well with me," sneered Draco.

"I'll consider it," snapped Remus as he whirled away.

Narcissa threw Draco one last, sympathetic look and then hurried after her husband.

Once they were alone in the pansy-strewn field, Snape drew his wand and surrounded them with a silencing spell. Then, he merely stared at Draco.

"What?" asked the boy, his tone petulant. "What?"

"You know perfectly well what," said Snape, his voice only a step away from a snarl. "I assumed you wanted to come to the dedication so you might see your mother. I never dreamed you had a plot afoot."

Harry was a bit lost until Draco crossed his arms and erupted, "So I'd prefer Greg not be skewered and roasted over the holiday! You know his father! He'll listen to Lucius!"

"Oh, he no doubt will. But why did Lucius stop by to offer a truce, that's what I'd like to know! Don't you think it was a bit out of character, shall we say, for him?"

Draco drew his own wand and layered another privacy spell atop Snape's. Then he stood up straight, even though by then Snape was hovering over him like a Dementor about to pounce. "I asked him to."

"You asked him to."

"Yes!"

"And he, of course, was soft-hearted enough to accede to your request!" Snape bared his teeth. "This entire scheme is idiotic. He obviously doesn't have the intelligence of a gnat! Goyle's going to
wonder what in Merlin's name is going on!"

"No, he won't," insisted Draco. "We worked it all out. R-- Lucius will drop a few hints to Narcissa and then she'll go over and talk to Greg's mother about what a shame it was Lucius took such a stern attitude towards me, and how she hopes they won't make the same mistake she and Lucius did. It'll be fine, Severus."

"It's proof that the entire scheme is ill-considered," said Snape, his dark eyes still flashing with anger. "He doesn't have what it will take to maintain this guise!"

That was just what worried Harry. "Well, there is that story about his head injury, anyway, right? To explain any . . . er, anomalies?"

Snape huffed. "Narcissa is not such a fool as to believe that for long. I dare say her husband's yet to so much as kick a house-elf, Harry. No matter that he'd better do just that if he expects anyone to believe this charade!"

"He can kick all the elves he likes as long as he keeps his paws off my mother," muttered Draco. "It makes me sick to even think about it. Are you sure we can't warn my mother what sort of . . . thing, she's living with?"

"If you'd like to get her killed, by all means," drawled Snape. "Few in the Order would trust her to keep such information to herself, you understand."

Draco shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his dress robes. "Yeah. All right."

Snape still looked angry. "Do not involve yourself in any further plots of this nature, Draco. Not without consulting me and heeding my advice. You could well endanger your mother if you aren't more careful."

Draco gave a brief nod.

"Now if we're through here, I suggest we search out a restaurant in Surrey before your appointments with the good doctor," continued Snape in a calmer voice. "I think we all need a break from the castle at the moment."

Considering that the castle was now home to Lucius Malfoy's marbleised corpse, yeah, Harry thought he could stand to get away. He was glad summer was coming, though he knew that Snape planned to stay at Hogwarts for a couple of weeks after term ended.

"Why don't we invite the good doctor to dine with us?" asked Draco, waggling his eyebrows. "Since you took such pains to notice her ringless state last week. Really, Severus, you aren't a spy any longer. You can start forming some attachments--"

Snape laid one hand on Harry's shoulder and another one on Draco's. "I have been, you idiot child."

"Idiot children," Harry reminded him.

"Yes." Snape's expression was about as soft as Harry had ever seen. "Quite."
"I don't know why I even bother going year after year," muttered Draco on Friday night. "Leaving feast, shmaving feast."

"Oh, don't be a sore loser just because Slytherin's behind on points. After that last match you've already got the Quidditch Cup. So Ravenclaw wins the House Cup this year. You'll survive." Harry ran the comb through his hair one more time, then gave it up as a lost cause.

"Ravenclaw, right. Oh sure, they're ahead right now, but the headmaster'll hand it to Gryffindor on a silver platter, just like always!"

"Draco, it doesn't matter!"

"Says the Gryffindor."

Harry sighed. "I'm in Slytherin too, you prat."

Draco perked up slightly. "Going to sit with us?"

"No. I miss the Tower and I'm sitting with my mates," said Harry firmly. "Now let's go. We'll miss dinner completely at this rate."

"Dinner, schminner," grumbled Draco, but he did follow Harry out of the bedroom and into the corridors.

When they got to the Great Hall, the room was glowing from the thousands of candles hanging overhead. Harry said a quick goodbye to his brother and headed for the Gryffindor table, where Ron was rubbing his stomach and complaining how hungry he was. "Why can't we just have dinner at the usual time on the last day of term?"

"Honestly, Ronald." Hermione's frown disappeared as Harry sat down on the bench next to her. "We'll miss you tomorrow on the Express."

Harry was a little bit sorry he'd miss the train trip with his friends, but he wasn't sorry about any of the rest of it. "Yeah, I'll miss you too. But I'm happy, you know."

"I know," said Hermione, her eyes sparkling. "Really, Harry. I do know that now."

"Yeah, me too," admitted Ron. "It's been a really good year for you. I mean, not counting certain things."

"I like having a brother," Harry said coolly.

"I meant Samhain! And um . . . me, that time, you know . . ."

"Oh." Harry felt foolish, then. "Sorry."

Food started appearing, then. Platters piled high with mounds of roast beef. Enormous bowls of mashed potatoes swimming in butter. Olives hopping over each other as they made their way onto plates.

And in front of Harry, a glass of orange juice with a frosted rim.

"Dobby," said Harry, grinning as he drank it down.

All too soon, the food was gobbled down, desserts included. When Dumbledore stood up, Ron grimaced. "Here we go. Ravenclaw."
"You're as bad as Draco, whingeing on about the House Cup," said Harry.

Ron looked pretty horrified at the comparison. Harry just laughed. Then he thought of something that might cheer up his mate. "Oh, come on. You're the *Hero of Hogsmeade*, remember? You saved Harry Potter! I'm sure you'll get some recognition for that."

"Happened off school grounds," muttered Ron. Hmm, probably his way of saying he didn't think Dumbledore would award points for something that had never really occurred at all. Good point.

"Well, you got a nice write-up, anyway," said Harry.

"Shhh," said Hermione.

"And so once again we mark the passing of another year," said Dumbledore, stroking his beard as candles floated all around him. "And such a year has it been. Tribulation in equal measure with triumph, successes tempered by sorrow." He lifted his glass. "We here tonight pay final tribute to a life cut short. To Pansy Parkinson."

"To Pansy Parkinson," echoed the students all around. It sort of gave Harry the creeps, knowing as he did what a nasty piece of work Pansy had turned out to be. Decorum, though, had Harry lifting his glass as well, even as he craned his neck to see how Draco was holding up.

Over at the Slytherin table, his brother's expression looked perfectly cool as he toasted the girl he'd loved.

"But we must celebrate our triumphs, too," continued Dumbledore, setting his glass down on the head table. "And that brings us to the House Cup! Ravenclaw leads Slytherin by one hundred twenty points, with Gryffindor eighty points behind that, and Hufflepuff a very respectable five points further behind. But, as often happens, there will be some last minute adjustments to the counters."

Harry was still watching his brother, who appeared to say something like, *Here we go again*, to his friends in Slytherin.

At the head table, Snape looked equally disgruntled by the headmaster's comments. Harry sighed. He supposed his father would rather see Ravenclaw win than Gryffindor. That was a bit depressing.

"First, to Mr Ernie Macmillan, for his tireless efforts to catalogue the lesser-known ghosts of Hogwarts, fifty points!"

The Hufflepuff table erupted into cheers and shouts as Ernie blushed slightly and looked from side to side.

"Next, to Miss Laura Madley, for her quick thinking when her friend and classmate fell suddenly ill out at the lake, twenty points!"

The Hufflepuffs got even louder, hooting and hollering like they didn't even know that only brought them up to third place.

Harry wasn't the only one keeping track. "Gryffindor's in last place now," said Ron mournfully.

"He's not done, is he?"

"To Mr Euan Abercrombie, for his Marshmallow Madness toffee, truly the most delightful thing to cross my tongue in lo these many years, five points!"
"See, he's a Gryffindor," said Harry bracingly as his house mates began cheering.

All of them except Ron, who was moaning. "Five measly points!"

"I didn't know the lower forms were making toffee," said Neville, looking about for the younger boy. "I wonder if he still has some of that. Sounds good."

"To Miss Hermione Granger--"

Beside Harry, Hermione drew in a quick, excited breath.

"For her keen insight into how the Muggle world can help us address learning difficulties right here at Hogwarts, one hundred points!"

Ron whooped and threw his arms around Hermione as up and down the Gryffindor table, students exploded into screams and cheers. He kissed her, right there, on the lips.

Harry glanced at the head table and saw Snape giving the pair a rather critical glare.

Draco looked like he was rolling his eyes. Probably at such a large award of points, not at the kiss, Harry thought.

"We're second now!" Ron said when he broke it off. "We're ahead of sodding Slytherin!" Then he glanced down at Harry's crest. "Oh. Well, you know."

"Yeah, I know," Harry said wryly.

"And finally," continued the headmaster, "I have one last student to recognise. To Mr Draco Snape--"

Harry's friends gasped. Even Snape looked a bit pole-axed, Harry thought. And Draco looked like he couldn't believe his ears. "For having the courage of his convictions and using every shred of his considerable magical strength, cleverness, and cunning to help a friend in need, one hundred fifty points!"

The Slytherin table became absolute pandemonium. Students knocked over benches as they jumped up, howling with glee. "It's a new era!" someone shouted. "Long live Slytherin!"

"No, it's the return of an era. Slytherin again, Slytherin forever!" screamed Millicent Bulstrode. "Way to go, Draco!"

Harry started cheering too. He couldn't help it. He was Slytherin as well, and that was his brother who had taken them over the top.

Not every Slytherin looked completely overjoyed, though. Zabini seemed torn between elation and annoyance. Reaching across the table, through the throng of screaming students, he brusquely shook Draco's hand.

When Dumbledore clapped his palms together, the noise faded about halfway. It died completely when Snape stood up at his place. Decorum, Harry thought. Snape hadn't broken out into cheers and screams, but then, Harry wouldn't have expected him to. It was enough that he looked quietly pleased.

"A change of decoration is in order," said Dumbledore. He lifted his arms high, and the banners overhead became silver and green. "I wish you all a most happy summer! I will see you come
September first!" The headmaster nodded at each of the house tables, and then collected Fawkes from the perch behind him. Oh his way out of the Great Hall, he walked alongside the Slytherin table, congratulating them and shaking hands. When he reached Draco he beamed a bright smile and stood talking to him for a moment.

"Harry." Realising that Hermione was shaking his shoulder, Harry turned back to his friends.

Ron snorted. "Oh, look at you. Almost as happy as they are!"

"Well, it's about time my other house won, don't you think? Besides . . ." Harry leaned forward. "Listen. Draco's just the first, all right? He and Snape and I are going to turn more Slytherins toward the Light. And this is a great start. Don't you see? They can't keep feeling like they never get a fair shake from Dumbledore."

"Oh, so that's why he did it--"

"No, that's not why he did it," said Harry in a low voice. "You know what Draco did for me. Are you really going to tell me that Slytherin doesn't deserve those points? Well, are you?"

Ron didn't answer until Hermione poked him. Hard. "Ouch!"

Her own voice was practically a hiss. "Ronald Weasley, you and I have made some pretty bad gaffes this year. But enough is enough. House points are just . . . points! This is bigger than that, and if you don't do right by Harry and his brother--"

Ron threw up his hands. "All right, all right!" His lips a tight line, like he was fighting a tremendous headache, the boy drew in a breath through his teeth. "So fine, Draco does deserve those points. He really was a hero this year."

"And unlike some people, he didn't get to be known for it," added Harry, giving Ron a significant look. When the other boy looked down, Harry softened his voice. "So stop begrudging Slytherin the Cup. It's not like we've never had it, you know."

"Yeah, yeah." Ron still sounded grumpy, but when he looked up, he smiled a bit. "Well. Seeing as he is your brother, I suppose the done thing would be to go congratulate him. Like after the Quidditch match."

Harry clapped Ron on the back. "Thanks, mate."

Ron nodded, but turned to Hermione before he took a step. "No kissing, though."

"Oh, honestly, Ronald."

By the time the three of them arrived at the Slytherin table, Snape had already reached Draco. "Well done," he was saying, his voice warm and fatherly. "Well done indeed."

Draco grinned. "You forgot the idiot child part, Severus-- Oh, hallo, Harry. How's it feel, losing to Slytherin?"

"Losing to myself, you mean?"

"Well, I can't help it if you have a split personality." Clearly in an expansive mood, Draco beamed a smile all around. "Ron, Hermione. I'll be gracious and magnanimous and not ask how the two of you are feeling at the moment."
"Congratulations, Draco," said Hermione, stepping forward. "I'm proud of you."

Draco's jaw dropped. "You're... proud of me?"

"Of course I am. I should have told you so before." Hermione's smile reached her eyes. "And I don't just mean the... er, French connection. It's everything, Draco. Turning your back on the way you were raised, that is."

"I guess you'd know about that."

"Me?" Hermione laughed. "Oh, no. I'm still a Muggle at heart."

Draco made a face, but to his credit, didn't insult her out loud.

"I'm proud of you too," said Ron gruffly. "For... yeah, that. And helping Harry when it really counted."

"Why Ron, I didn't know you cared--"

"But you're still a Slytherin prat."

Draco grinned. "And you're still a Gryffindor git. So that all sorts well."

"Congratulations to you as well, Professor Snape," said Hermione politely. Harry figured she was still trying to make up for that letter she'd written to Wizard Family Services. Or maybe for leaving Harry alone in Hogsmeade. But maybe Snape was ready to forgive her, finally.

"Thank you, Miss Granger," he said, inclining his head.

"Can Harry come stay in the Tower tonight?" blurted Ron. "I'll put in his Elixir, sir, and make sure he doesn't blink it away."

"I think not," said Snape solemnly.

Ron looked up a bit more. "Please, sir? It's the very last night of term, and--"

"Arguing with a professor?" Snape interrupted. "Pity I can't take points again until September."

"Not very Slytherin to admit it, though," said Harry, laughing. "You just lost a lot of leverage for the summer."

"Oh, I shall have leverage enough," murmured Snape. "Your miscreant friends will be invited to visit only if they behave."

"Yeah, so behave," said Harry in a stage whisper. Then louder, "Snape and Draco and I have to celebrate tonight anyway, Ron. But I'll see you off tomorrow. How's that?" He turned to his father. "You'll take us down to the station?"

"Certainly."

Harry waved at his friends as they left, then turned back to his father and brother. He hardly knew what to say. With the close of the leaving feast, term was officially over, and old habits were trying to assert themselves. Memories, that was it. Bad memories, and all the emotions that went along with them. Depression. Anger. Wishes that he could be like everybody else, and have a family who really cared about him.
But of course, he did.

Snape was staring at him, his dark eyes like endless tunnels again, but they weren't fathomless to Harry now, and never would be again. Those eyes were filled with love. Nobody else would recognise that, except Draco and maybe Dumbledore, but that didn't matter. Harry knew what he had.

"So, a celebration, you said." Snape's gaze encompassed Draco as well. "Shall we go out flying? All three of us?"

That sounded brilliant, but it wasn't quite what Harry had in mind. "No," he said softly, taking his father and brother by the arm. "Let's go home."

Draco started to object, but then he saw the look on Harry's face. Harry thought his brother understood, then.

"Yes," he said, nodding. "Harry's right. Let's go home."

Snape smiled at them both, and then the three of them walked from the Great Hall together, side by side.
Epilogue: Severus

Severus folded his arms over his chest as the summer breeze billowed his robes. Quite likely, Harry and Draco didn't need him to stand here watching them say farewell to their friends, but Severus had spent too many years as a spy to completely give up his habit of observing everything around him.

He turned his attention to Harry. Black hair, mussed as always, the boy leaning in close as he spoke with Granger and the Weasley boy. Harry's expression was animated, his hands gesturing wildly, his eyes delighted. Severus couldn't hear what his son was saying, not over the general student hubbub, but it must have been amusing. A moment later, all three Gryffindors burst into laughter.

In direct contrast was Draco, his hair nearly white as the sunlight caught it. Impeccably groomed, not a strand out of place despite the breeze, Draco stood ramrod straight, nodding politely at the other Slytherins as they passed him to board the train. When Goyle walked past, however, Draco stepped forward and drew him farther down the platform. His expression earnest, his own gestures carefully modulated for maximum impact, Draco remained cool and composed as he quietly talked with his friend. Telling him, no doubt, what to expect from his summer.

Severus shook his head, watching all this. Sometimes Harry and Draco were like night and day.

On another level, though, his two sons were much the same. Wounded. Insecure. Reluctant to trust.

But all that had faded before Severus' eyes over the course of the year. Harry and Draco were coming along quite well, he thought. As well they should, for now they finally had . . .

Severus suddenly scowled as he stood there. They had, in fact, what he'd never had himself -- a father who truly cared about them. Loved them. Accepted them, flaws and all, and tried to help them grow past their failures into strong, responsible adults. What would his own life had been like, if he'd had a father like that to help him mature?

Would he have ended up a Death Eater?

Would you have been there back in November, Portkey in hand, waiting for a chance to rescue Harry? Would you have known what to do when your other idiot son brewed Venetimorica?

Smiling ruefully, Severus shrugged the past away. It couldn't be changed, short of using a time-turner, but considering how things had all come out, he wouldn't use one regardless. It was true, what he had told Harry back when they'd first gone to Surrey together. Even the most unfortunate of decisions can turn out well, when one takes a longer view of things.

Severus had believed that at the time he'd said it. He'd known full well that it was true. But now, he could feel that truth right down to his bones. He'd been to hell and back, as Draco had put it. He'd suffered, but now he was the stronger for it. Strong enough to help Draco resist the evil he'd been steeped in until just this year. Strong enough to guide Harry down the narrow path that separated justice from vengeance. Harry, who for a year now had carried the terrible burden of that prophecy . . .

Of course, Severus didn't fool himself that he knew every last thing his boys might need. Just look at how he'd erred in not insisting earlier that Harry get some outside help.

But by and large, he felt that his own past, ugly and vicious as it had been, had helped to make him into the kind of father Harry and Draco needed. And too, Harry himself had helped with that. Severus' old wounds had ceased to fester. Not all of them, true. But . . . enough.
If Severus couldn't quite forgive Hostilian, or himself, now he could at least look forward instead of back.

Harry was smiling as he waved a final goodbye to his friends. A brave smile, Severus thought it, for when the boy watched them climb aboard, he began to look a bit troubled. *I need my friends,* Severus remembered him saying, months ago. Severus hadn't believed it then, not fully. He hadn't wanted to. Fresh from the trauma of Samhain, exhausted from brewing 'round the clock, and ill-at-ease that he'd begun to care about the boy instead of just the war . . . Severus hadn't wanted Harry to need anyone but him.

But now, he understood more about his son's incredible capacity to love. And with that, he'd begun to understand more about himself.

*Some of Albus' lectures must have taken root, after all,* Severus thought. *Spending time with Harry will be good for you,* the headmaster had said as far back as October. And when Severus had scoffed, Albus had placidly continued, *I know that your Occlumency lessons didn't go well last year, to say the least, but perhaps that's just the point. We all need second chances, Severus . . .*

A second chance . . . yes, Harry had been that and more. No doubt Albus hadn't meant things to go quite the way they had. He hadn't intended for Severus to take Harry for his son, or for Harry to place his highest loyalty in his new family instead of in the headmaster himself.

And he certainly hadn't expected Severus to adopt not one but two boys, much less bond Harry Potter in brotherhood with Draco Malfoy, now Snape. But for all that Harry finally had a friend his own age with whom to spend the summer, he looked strangely bereft as the train's door slammed shut and he walked back to join his father on the platform.

"This won't be like your other holidays," said Severus. He wanted to lay a hand on Harry's shoulder, but out in public like this, it seemed best to remain reserved.

"I know." Harry sighed. "Just think, for once I actually want to see Dudley. It's a pretty strange feeling. I need to get my hands on another phone so I can ring him. Tell him we're in Surrey every Wednesday . . . uh, do you think the number'll be the same one as before?"

Severus raised an eyebrow, amused.

"Oh. I guess you're not exactly the right bloke to ask."

"I wasn't thinking of your cousin, in any case," said Severus. "I meant your friends. I know how important they are to you. You'll be able to owl them as much as you please, though as before, our post will go through Hogwarts rather than directly to or from the cottage. And you know already that your friends are quite welcome to come visit."

Harry glanced up, his mood changing like quicksilver, his eyes sparkling in a way that Severus recognised. Harry was about to throw out an idea he thought was brilliant. One Severus wouldn't much appreciate.

"Even Neville?"

Severus blinked. He'd braced himself, but Harry had still managed to startle him. "Neville. Longbottom."

Harry lowered his voice. "Yeah. Listen, with *Fidelius* and all, I know he can't come out to . . . uh, your place, but I thought--"
"Our place."

"Right. Our place," said Harry, grinning from ear to ear. "I like that."

So simple, Severus thought, to give Harry Potter what he needed. A real place to call home. A real family.

"Are you mental?" asked Draco as he strolled up. "Longbottom's not coming out to our place."

"Well, of course not. I just said he can't. But maybe we . . . er, I mean I, can go and visit him at his grandmother's, something like that."

"As if Severus and I would let you traipse off on your own. Honestly, Potter, haven't you learned anything this year?"

"Ehem," said Severus. "I do believe that Mr Longbottom has plans of his own for the summer. An extended trip abroad, in fact."

Harry looked suspicious. "Funny, he didn't mention any trip."

Severus could well imagine why. "He has, I understand, been rather supportive of your new family ties. Perhaps he was merely being diplomatic."

"Huh?"

Severus kept his voice casual. Smooth. "Well, Mr Longbottom certainly had complaints enough for my ears earlier this week. I've arranged for him to receive Potions tutelage from someone whose teaching style may be . . . more what he needs. In Austria, in fact. When I lent him several weighty texts to complement the instruction, he claimed I was trying to ruin his summer." Severus lifted his shoulders. "As if I would do any such thing."

Harry's jaw dropped. "You . . . helped . . . Neville?"

It wasn't wicked to enjoy that dumbfounded expression, was it? Severus almost smiled, but managed to hold the impulse in check. "Well. Perhaps there's a trifle more to education than learn by experience, after all. You should have heard the good doctor on the subject."

"Yeah, but . . . Neville?"

Severus did smile, then. Briefly. He felt, perhaps, the way Harry did when hearing he'd done well. "All his melted cauldrons aside, he was a great help to you last year. In the thick of battle, no less. I helped him in the hope that he might prove of use to you, again."

"To us," said Harry.

"Ah. Yes, to us."

Draco had been staring at the train as it pulled away. Now, he turned back to face his family. "Greg's going to join us, too," he said in a low, fierce voice. "He has to. I'm not going to let the Death Eaters have him."

"Draco has a saving-people thing," said Harry in a stage whisper, nodding sagely.

"Shut up. I do not."

"Do so--"
"For your information, I'm going to spend the summer lazing about and owl-ordering whatever my heart desires--"

"Are you?" asked Severus sharply, amused when Draco coloured slightly.

"Well, some," the boy backtracked. "But I'm also going to teach Harry to Apparate. No brother of mine is going to fail his license test. And we'll work on his spell lexicon. There's still a lot he needs to know."

"He's standing right here," said Harry dryly.

"Because you can't Apparate!" said Draco, flashing out of existence and appearing on Harry's other side.

It was good to see Draco laughing, Severus thought, and even better to see Harry join in.

"So, lunch?" asked Harry. "I know. Let's ask for some Cornish cream teas--"

"Speaking of tea, I do believe I'm late for mine with Albus."

"Good!" said Draco promptly. "Harry and I will be glad of a chance to wander the village a bit, eh?"

"You'll walk back to the gates with me and stay on the grounds. Hogsmeade can wait until we can all go together."

Severus turned his back, only to hear Harry sniggering. Quite likely, Draco had stuck out his tongue. Idiot child.

"Let's go explore the castle while Dad and the headmaster gossip about us over tea," said Harry.

"We do not gossip. We discuss," called Severus.

"Maybe it's Marsha he wants to discuss," called Draco in a sing-song voice.

Severus had heard enough of that sort of nonsense. He stopped walking until his sons caught up.

"Would you rather explore the castle, or write the essay I'm tempted to set you?"

"Hey, I didn't say anything!"

"I knew having a teacher for a father was going to be an awful trial," said Draco, sighing theatrically. He actually crossed his hands over his heart. "But I'll bravely struggle on despite the blatant unfairness of--"

"Draco!"

"Explore the castle, of course."

Severus nodded. "Harry, as long as you stay with your brother, I would think there's no reason for you not to use that map."

Draco's eyes started gleaming. "Sounds good to me. Harry?"

Harry appeared to think it over for a moment before nodding. "Yeah. Thanks, Dad."

They'd reached the grounds of Hogwarts by then. "You'll find it on the mantle. Now, if you'll excuse me--"
"You knew we'd want to explore the castle straight away?" Harry looked up at him. "You left the map out in advance?"

"I know you," said Severus. No-one was around now, except Hagrid in the far distance, working in his garden. Severus laid a hand on Harry's shoulder, and another one on Draco's. "I really am late for my tea with Albus. I'll see you both for dinner later."

"All right." Harry nodded.

Draco just smiled a little.

"Be good, then," said Severus, turning down the path to a side entrance of the castle.

He heard both boys chuckling as he walked away.

"Severus, right on time," the headmaster declared.

The Potions Master abruptly cast *Tempus*. "Albus, I'm just over twenty minutes late."

"Nonsense, my boy," Dumbledore replied with a wave of his hand. "I naturally allowed for the departure time of the Express and the time it would take for you and the boys to stroll back to the castle."

"Naturally," Severus murmured as he took his customary seat. The elderly wizard filled their teacups with a flick of his fingers. Severus inhaled the aroma and quirked an eyebrow. "Mint?"

"I thought something invigorating was in order. We're not merely celebrating the successful conclusion of another year. You're trading your usual summer of quiet research for family holiday with two teen-aged boys--soon to be men." Albus raised his teacup in salute. "This shall truly be a summer like none other."

Severus rolled his eyes. The headmaster had no end of hackneyed phrases. "This entire year has already been . . . singular, to say the least."

As Albus chortled his agreement, the two men drained their cups in contemplative silence.

Soon, however, the headmaster snapped his fingers. At once, the pretence of a simple tea was dropped. In addition to a lovely fruit salad that winked into existence, finger sandwiches appeared, neatly arranged on a silver platter. But these sandwiches contained heartier stuff than cucumbers or watercress. Severus was pleased to note his two favourites – lemon chicken salad and tiny meatballs with olives. In addition was a real treat – a frosted crystal bowl of shrimp remoulade.

Both men knew the real purpose behind these meetings. Now that Albus was proceeding to "feed him up," as he liked to put it, Severus complied by loosening his tongue.

"You've outdone yourself today, Albus." Severus smiled as he filled a china plate, edged in silver and green no less. "Another tribute to Slytherin? You're even wearing green."

"Ah, yes. I do so love new robes. Wang Ping included them as a thank you gift with our last order of tea leaves for the school. She's such a pleasure to do business with."

Severus hid a grimace as he said in a diplomatic tone, "She truly knows your style."

Dumbledore actually preened a bit. No matter that the robes were a ridiculously vivid emerald green.
The Mandarin collar and frog closures weren't too extravagant, Severus decided, but the elaborately embroidered dragon frolicking with a matching phoenix amid colourful swirls of flame . . . the whole thing glowed so brightly that he had to avert his eyes from the shiny display.

"There is another colour besides black, you know, Severus."

The Potions Master merely lifted his chin. "As you know, I'm planning to stay on at the school for a short while. Normal end-of-term tasks have been neglected due to the Ministry's insane ideas about how to ruin my perfectly sound Potions curricula." Severus sighed. No point in going over all that again. Albus knew his views. "Originally, I'd thought to use the first two weeks of summer to complete my notes on the progress of the students in my house."

"Originally? You've changed your mind, then?"

Severus nodded. "I think it might be best to bring the paperwork to Devon. You'll have it much later than usual, but this way, I can work on the Wolfsbane project while I remain in residence. I anticipate inviting Lucinda to join me here. Her latest research shows promise."

"Splendid idea, my boy! I'll have some rooms prepared for her straight away." Albus tapped his fingers together. "Do you suppose she'd prefer a view of the forest or the gardens? Then again, maybe she would want to stay in the dungeons. They're cooler for the summer and she wouldn't have to walk far to your lab. I could conjure a direct link with the library. She'd like that, I think. Oh, and I shall have to invite her up for tea--"

"Why don't you just lodge her next to you?" asked Severus in a dry voice. "Since you appear intent on flirting with the woman."

"No such thing, my boy, no such thing. But you know, the castle's largely deserted over the summer. I wouldn't want Lucinda getting lonely. Oh, no indeed . . . ."

"Albus, I'll not have you mucking up my research time with this nonsense! Besides, I haven't even owled the woman yet. She might be busy."

"Bah," Dumbledore grinned, his whole expression radiating anticipation. "Never too busy to help Remus. And by the way, there's a difference between flirting and merely being a charming and gregarious host. Oh, but as you've never once put yourself out to be a charming and gregarious host--" The headmaster smothered a laugh. "No, no, I shouldn't say that. You've worked wonders with those boys of yours. And dare I say, they've done the same for you?"

The Potions Master snorted. "Why not? You say it every time."

"Good. Then we're agreed." Albus rubbed his hands together. "Lucinda. It will be good to see her again."

"Just don't let Draco and Harry witness your . . . exuberance," warned Severus. "Those two have developed an insidious obsession with match-making."

The headmaster beamed. "Oh, that's quite understandable. They do both love you. Surely you can’t begrudge them the desire to see their father happy."

"I am perfectly happy," said Severus, ignoring the way the word set oddly on his tongue.

"Or their longing for a mother," Dumbledore prattled right on.

Severus felt like he might choke. Longing for a mother? Honestly! "Draco has a mother, Albus," he
pointed out. "I doubt he wants another."

The headmaster just kept beaming. "Perhaps you should follow their cues, Severus. It wouldn’t hurt-"

Severus bared his teeth, seeing now what he should have seen before. “I knew it!”

"Knew what, my dear boy?"

"Your meddling truly knows no bounds, does it? Harry mentioned that you’d engaged Maura Morrighan to teach Defence next year. I honestly couldn’t imagine why." His voice went dark and menacing. "Until now, that is."

“Why, whatever can you mean?” Dumbledore, Severus noticed, was doing his best to look innocent. "As I recall, you were the one who first suggested that Maura could prove an asset to the Order."

"She’s a fine asset to the Order. That doesn't make her fit to teach." Severus' nostrils flared. "Honestly, Albus, I’m not altogether sure the woman is even literate!"

Dumbledore chuckled. "Oh, that's just professional jealousy."

"You know perfectly well I've no real interest in teaching Defence. I wouldn't want the post even if it wasn't cursed." Severus paused. "Is Maura aware of the curse?"

"See for yourself. Accio Maura’s letter." Dumbledore handed a roll of parchment to Severus, who held it in one hand while eating.

"You see, she has indeed put quill to parchment before," Dumbledore teased when the other man looked up.

After skimming the missive, Severus tossed it onto the table. “She misspelled attributes and sincerely.”

"Perhaps you could tutor her in the evenings in the privacy of your quarters. I'm certain the two of you have a good deal in common . . ." Albus' voice drifted off, his eyebrows raised. "Mmm?"

Severus didn’t dignify any of that with a reply. Best to simply get off the topic, he decided, though he was so annoyed that another didn’t occur to him until he’d finished the last of the shrimp.

"So, Lupin. One must hope his dangerous masquerade will at least yield something in the way of useful information. And so?"

Serious again, Dumbledore leaned forward. "All indications point to a quiet summer, even on the Continent. In fact, Remus has communicated the most interesting tidbit to me. It seems that Voldemort intends to subject himself to Muggle medicine."


The headmaster shrugged. "From what Remus has been able to gather, it doesn't sit well with Voldemort that Harry produced that blast on Samhain. He does realise it was Harry's doing, now, quite likely based on the way Harry ejected him from his mind that once. He must suspect that something's happened to transform Harry's magic."

"And thanks to that horrible uncle of Harry's, he knows all about the extraction." Severus shook his
"I did think that Voldemort might put two and two together eventually, but given that he knows Harry was without his magic for an extended time . . . I find it hard to imagine him taking a risk like that."

"Yes, well, he's never been known for sane thinking, really," murmured Dumbledore. "By the way, Remus asked me to tell you that his mark shows no sign of diminishing in power or appearance, let alone spilling magic."

Severus thought of the vat he'd drawn it from, all those extra marks he kept growing and slicing off his arm. "Well, if he begins to think it's losing potency, I certainly have more I can part with. And as for spilling magic, once it was merged into his skin--that was a rather tricky bit of magic--"

Dumbledore acknowledged the unspoken thanks with a mere smile. "The mark seemed to stabilise well enough." Severus' own smile was grim. "Imagine it. We could arrange for several more false Death Eaters, should we wish. I've quite a few marks stored away by now."

"Ah, but that would be terribly wrong. Not everyone is as strong in the Light as Remus Lupin. The temptations alone . . ."

Severus quietly snorted. "You want me to laud Lupin, now? You're as bad as Harry."

"Severus, he was just a boy when he nearly attacked you, and that wasn't his fault in any case. Not one bit of it. Isn't it time to let that go?" Dumbledore gentled his voice still further. "And he has been an asset to us, all along, doing his part. You know that, now."

_Time to stop letting old wounds fester . . ._ One more, at least. Severus did his best to make his shrug seem unconcerned. "Very well. I suppose that Lucinda will work much better with me if I seem less antagonistic toward her kin."

"Seem?"

At that, Severus glowered. "Don't push it, old man."

Dumbledore laughed. "You always did have a delightful sense of humour, Severus. But actually, I thought that thinking through the ramifications of Remus' present mission might assist you to write the curriculum for your new course. How is that coming along?"

"It isn't," said Severus, his tone blunt. "But I will get to it in the summer. You know my views. It's high time we offered such a course to the seventh-years."

"You just want to have your sons in class twice as often."

Severus' voice was droll. "Yes, and Longbottom as well."

Dumbledore beamed. "Ah. Well, there is that. It's good of you to take it on, in that case. But Severus, don't spend _too_ much of your holiday writing summaries of the Slytherins or preparing your for your new class. Find some time to spend with your boys. I think you'll find . . . they just grow up so fast."

The Potions Master nodded thoughtfully. “Oh, I have plans in that regard. With Voldemort likely to remain relatively inactive while he heals . . . I suppose that all sorts well. I'd have hated to keep the boys hidden away for their entire break. Though, I still think it wise to avoid exposure in any wizarding communities. I do believe that we shall make some excursions into Muggle Plymouth, as that area is virtually devoid of magical interaction."

“Exeter would be even safer, or perhaps one of the smaller towns.”
"True, but Harry has commented more than once that he'd appreciate some outings to the seaside. He'd like to learn to swim properly--" 


"Actually, he does. He speculates the Gillyweed helped him avoid drowning on that occasion, Albus. He's never had a swimming lesson in his life." Severus' voice grew scathing. "His relatives were hardly going to part with money to provide such a thing. Not for him."

Albus slowly blinked. "I see. A pity. A terrible pity. I wish I could have done things differently, Severus. I had only the best intentions."

Severus knew that. Nodding, he brusquely continued, "At any rate, Harry has dropped several enthusiastic hints about the attractions in Plymouth. The beaches are likely the least of them. I think we'd all find some enjoyment there, though I'll no doubt have to brew a rather strong sunscreen potion for Draco."

The headmaster smiled, very slightly. "Speaking of enjoyment, I've saved the best for last. We'll finish our tea with a very special treat."

Severus rolled his eyes, but smiled behind his napkin. "Albus, you know I've no taste for your impossibly sweet confections. Most of them are hideous."

Dumbledore cleared the table and materialized the dessert with a flourish. "Ah, but this isn't my confection. Draco and Hermione deserve all the credit. I must say, that those two make quite the team."

Severus absently wondered if that was Albus' own attempt at matchmaking. No doubt, it would do Draco good to find someone who could help him forget the trauma of loving and losing Pansy this year, not to mention the heartbreak of knowing the girl had never really loved him at all. Still, the idea that Miss Granger could be the one . . . that was laughable at best. She was stuck like glue to the Weasley boy. And for all Draco's growth away from strictly pureblood ideals, he was hardly a liberal thinker in that area. Severus frankly couldn't imagine Draco falling in with a Muggleborn witch.

Dismissing that matter, Severus looked down at the small bowl before him. The presentation was clever – a hollowed peel of a lime had been partially transfigured into the form of a gelato dish. When Severus lifted the spoon up, he found that that bottom half of the utensil was fashioned from a smooth, hard piece of a lemon sherbet.

Severus' eyebrows quirked. "How very Slytherin of Draco, incorporating his professor's favourite candy into his . . . Potions project." By the end, Severus' voice had gone just a trifle dark.

Dumbledore appeared not to notice that. "Well, we're all a mix of houses, you know. So it shouldn't shock you too much that the spoon was Miss Granger's idea. And what a lovely idea it was. The gelato is delightfully tart at first bite, but with that spoon to counter it . . ." Smiling in appreciation, the headmaster picked up his own bowl of dessert.

The Potions Master tasted a spoonful and nodded thoughtfully. It was quite good. He thought to himself that it might be amusing to ask Draco to prepare a dessert now and again. "Speaking of Draco, I did want to thank you for awarding him those points at the Leaving Feast. Not just on behalf of Slytherin, either. I do believe that rewarding him thusly will encourage him to continue to follow the new path he's forged this year."

Dumbledore looked a little abashed. But then again, it wasn't every day that words of thanks
emerged from Severus’ mouth. “I know that I was sceptical at first, Severus, but I’ve come to expect
great things from Draco. He has much to offer and he appears to be fiercely loyal.”

Severus couldn’t help but sigh softly. He’d hoped the headmaster would come to see both his sons as
more than just assets to the war.

As if reading his mind, the headmaster added, “And too, I must admit I’ve grown fond of the boy.
He has quite the rapier wit. And his bent for sarcasm . . .”

The Potions Master smiled, knowing his son’s tongue was nearly as sharp as his own. “I was
surprised you didn’t reward Harry as well. Not that I’m complaining.”

Dumbledore shrugged. “I knew he wouldn’t begrudge Draco his triumph, whereas Draco would
have been terribly disheartened to have his deeds this year overshadowed.”

“Indeed. I do believe you must have been reading my Muggle psychology book.”

Dumbledore laughed. “No, just remembering what it was like to be young.”

As the two men enjoyed a companionable silence for some minutes longer, Severus found himself
reflecting on what youth was like. For once, though, he wasn’t focusing on traumas and regrets as he
thought about Harry and Draco. Instead, he was wondering just what part of the castle they might be
exploring.

“Am I keeping you from something, my boy?”

Severus felt heat rising to his cheeks. “Not at all, Headmaster. It’s only . . .” He paused, feeling
foolish.

“I understand,” said Albus, nodding sagely. “I hope I’ll see you soon. All of you.”

Severus rose from the table, but paused halfway to the door. “Albus . . . I don’t suppose you know
where my sons are at the moment?”

“I suggest you ask the portraits and after that let instinct guide you. That’s what I always do.”

After following the directions of six paintings and a tapestry, Severus was delighted to hear familiar
voices echoing down a dark hall. His face split into a relieved smile. It wasn’t that he was worried
about his sons being on their own in the castle – far from it. The truth was both simpler, and more
profound.

Rediscovering the dusty secrets of the castle with Harry and Draco and the map . . . it was simply too
much fun to resist.

The End.
Giving Credit where Credit is Due:

Once upon a time, there was an avid Harry Potter reader who became absolutely fascinated by two marvelous fanfics, then both Works in Progress: *Resonance* by Green Gecko and *Blood Magic* by Gateway Girl. Waiting for updates on both of them was absolute torture, because they presented the reader with a work of wonder the reader had never dreamt of before: Severus Snape coming to love and care for Harry Potter as his very own son. The first story featured an adoption and the second theorized that Harry was Snape's biological son, but the common thread that ran through both was an examination of how two characters usually so antagonistic to one another could come to form a family.

The avid reader used to chat all the time with a good friend of hers named Mercredi, who was also reading both of those stories.

One day, the avid reader said that as much as she enjoyed *Resonance* and *Blood Magic*, she thought that Harry's childhood experiences would strongly influence his ability to accept Snape as a father, and that she'd like to read a story that more heavily emphasized a psychological take on the adoption scenario. Mercredi replied, "Why don't you write one?" And thus, *A Year Like None Other* was born . . .

Thank You

Many thanks to my friend and beta, Mercredi. She wrote sections of Year, inspired me to keep going, and was a never-ending fountain of advice, suggestions, and editing during the two years it took to complete this alternate sixth-year novel.

Thanks also to the many fine and talented artists who have read Year and contributed to my artwork site located at http://aylno.dreamingillusions.net/.

Works inspired by this one
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!